CHAPTER I
SOME CONCEPTUAL ISSUES ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY: ASSAM IN PURVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity is the identity which is carried by every community, even in the face of changes and challenges occurring over time. Every community makes efforts to preserve its identity confronting pressures from external forces. The members of a community share a sense of belonging with each other. ‘Similar’ symbols like language, dress, food habits, manners, lifestyle, etc., characterise the ‘culture’ of a community. These attributes give face to a community and are imbibed by its members as norms and are valued with traditional significance. There may be some alterations in expression and practice of norms but the core value remains integral.

Although cultural identity has a character and quality of its own, it cannot develop in isolation; it develops through a process of interaction. It is the culmination of moral, social, aesthetic and spiritual accomplishments that the community experiences in the pursuit of its meaning of existence. A community cannot survive without recognition or acceptance not only from its own members but also from other communities. When there is a threat to the community’s very existence, when it is not getting due recognition or when it is pushed aside by vested interests, then the dilemma of identity assertion takes en route.

The community’s interdependence with other social groups/communities draws it into a web of relationships – social, economic and political. This entails vital sharing of space and resources. The needs and interests of various groups may be common or different from each other and hence there is a constant struggle for fulfilment of opportunities. In this struggle, the community is made conscious of its apparent existence, more by threat from outside forces than its own self-realisation. The actions and responses corresponding to the consciousness may be deliberative or inadvertent efforts by the community to establish its dominance over other cultural groups, asserting its cultural identity to resurrect its existence that it presumes to be under threat. The cultural practices and institutions may be vigorously promoted by the community to defend its entity, more as a political group than as a cultural or social group.
Many studies have laid emphasis on how culture may intersect with structures of power and also on political struggles that may take place in the sphere of culture. It helps one to understand how culture provides a negotiating skill in the political space. Culture, which provides a set of shared meanings and symbols, contributes to modifying and sustaining the structure of power and dominance within political parameters. In the past, study of culture was within the purview of the sociologist or anthropologist and political scientist were less concerned with this subject. But, recent studies have brought many aspects of culture into the subject-matter of political studies. This is not to say that political scientists were unaware or totally ignored the influence of culture in political action.

Culture and politics are linked with each other on the pretext that both emits from the relationship of individuals living within the commune. An emphasis upon community has been a recurrent theme in political thought and can be traced back to Aristotle's assertion that human beings are political animals. This suggests that human beings posses a strong collective identity along with an individual identity based upon the bonds of comradeship, loyalty and duty. The collective identity often takes an ethno-cultural dimension. It means that persons belonging to particular ethnic community are aware of their cultural identity; they recognize and value their common occupancy, share common culture, and therefore have a common interest in maintaining the association.

Girin Phukon says, 'identification with a group is a universal phenomenon. It is determined by certain symbols which tend to vary from period to period and area to area. Such identifications with distinct symbols are aimed mostly for the realisation of material benefits and rarely a psychological satisfaction.' This means that identity is not fixed to a particular value or symbol and is likely to change and at the same time, a particular ethnic group may have more than one identity. The symbol with which a group identifies itself will depend on its interest, which may be economic, political or social and the symbol may be in the form of language, religion, caste, class. It solely depends on the dominant factors prevailing in the historical sequence of events that shape the structure of identity. In Assam the Assamese language was made the symbol of Assamese identity because a connection was drawn between the Assamese language and material progress of Assam. The effort to control resources was basic to the conflicts in the region amidst

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unequal power relations between various communities of Assam. From this point of view, it can be said that identity is not intrinsic in the community. This point has been elaborated by Manorama Sharma in “Identity: Inherent or Evolved?”, while examining the features of group identity.

Sharma states that identity is not inherent to a community/group by the fact of its mere existence. The phenomenon of identity evolves through a process of development. In other words, the question of identity emerges only when the community/group has already reached a particular stage of development. Identity has to be viewed from historical perspective. As the community/group undergoes changes, the character of its identity will also undergo changes. In the manifestation of identity by a community or group, socialisation plays a crucial role. Therefore, identity has to be first historically located not only in the evolution of a group or a community but also in its various manifestations depending upon the dominant or hegemonic influences during socialisation process. As an illustration to this point, she takes up as an example the two group identities of Assam—the Assamese and the Bodo identity.

Although the Assamese community has been historically present for long, yet the question of identity emerged only at the end of the nineteenth century, which further intensified in the twentieth century. Due to changes resulting from transformation in land and economy initiated by the colonial forces, a new force emerged within the Assamese society i.e. the Assamese middle class. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the Assamese middle class grew in numbers the cry for ‘Assamese’ identity became louder.

'This particular stage of development was the point in the historical evolution of the Assamese society when an educated elite and subsequently a middle class came into existence, and this middle class, in the process of achieving its own class interest became aware of its own identity and propagated the idea of Assamese identity partly in order to attain its own class interests and partly in its sincere belief that such an identity was necessary and real. This idea of identity gradually began to permeate the whole Assamese society because the middle class, through exercising its hegemony had been able to make its values the most dominant values in the socialization processes of Assamese society.'

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3 ibid, pp. 21-22
The dominant position of the Assamese elite remained almost unchallenged until the second and third decade of the twentieth century because other communities had not reached that stage of development where an identity could emerge. But, from 1930s onwards, the situation began to change there was gradual emergence of Bodo educated elites due to development process that had already began to take place in the socio-economic set up of the Bodo community. Slowly this group of elites consolidated their position. As in the case of Assamese, the Bodo elites also started playing a pivotal role in the evolution of Bodo identity. The above analysis shows that identity evolves through a specific process of development and that identity is a constantly evolving concept rather than a static one. The concept of identity that a community professes is related to various political and social dimensions. The scope and magnitude of identity can only be understood with reference to the interests of elite groups and its forms of manifestations. Shanti Swarup, while discussing Assamese identity and its manifestation held that the issue of identity was coupled with the urge for leadership in the region. Authors like Paul Brass in his book *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (1991) have also explained that ethnic identities are to be seen as a process of elite competition within boundaries determined by political and economic realities.

To understand assertion of ethnic identity in Assam, one has to analyse as to why Assam could not develop a sense of trust towards its fellow members and the Indian state? A number of factors which had a bearing on various communities were multiplicity of language groups, geographical isolation, scarcity of resources, scope for economic development, political and cultural representation. A healthy socio-political order could never develop in the region and a sense of relative deprivation among the communities was apparent. The elites of this region faced stiff competition from each other and each tried to emasculate the other by mobilizing its mass to organize themselves under the banner of cultural identity. Language provided an impetus to identity movements in Assam.

Here the concern is not just with the evolution of identity but also its manifestation which is premised on group consciousness. The elites cannot single-handedly shoulder the assertion. In order to gather the strength, the community or group has to be made

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conscious of its identity. When the mass becomes associated with the identity manifestation, it often takes the shape of movement. The chapter will delve into how group consciousness evolves and what are the dynamics of social movement. It will discuss how social scientists and thinkers have dealt with the concept of elites and the growth of elites in the context of India and Assam. The aspect of cultural assertion will be a constant probing in this study; therefore, understanding 'culture' conceptually, drawing a paraphrase from other studies is also crucial.

CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND ITS DIMENSIONS

Raymond Williams has remarked that culture is a very complicated term. Many other scholars/authors have also treated culture as a very vague and complex concept. E.B Taylor introduced the concept of culture to anthropology as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.' Quest for its meaning became an extensive exercise, as evident in the works of Clyde Kluckholn and Alfred Kroeber, who as cultural anthropologists reviewed one hundred and sixty four definitions of culture and then categorized them as historical, psychological, descriptive, normative, structural and generic. The definitions were categorized taking into account the core implications of the statement. C.S. Ford presented culture in terms of its psychological implications, as a means of satisfying needs and solving problems. Whereas Ralph Linton emphasized on the historical feature of culture such as social inheritance or social tradition. Franz Boas gave a descriptive definition that 'Culture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the products of human activities as determined by these habits.'

Kluckholn and Kroeber however, tried to pull a common thread that runs through these definitions. According to them 'Culture consists of patterns, explicit or implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional(i.e. historically derived) and selected ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as

6 ibid.
products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. Kroeber had adopted an organic approach to culture, assessing it to as greater than sum of its parts.

Researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham have explained culture as codes through which meanings are constructed, conveyed and understood. The system of meanings and values is made concrete through patterns of social organisation. So, culture is not only the way through which social relations of a group are shaped but also the ways in which the shapes are experienced and interpreted. Culture has also been defined as the human agency endowed with freedom, creativity and rationality appropriated in the open-ended quest of the ultimate meaning and value of life.

These definitions are attempts to focus on qualities of culture characterized as patterns, behaviour, symbols, traditions, meanings and values. From these definitions, we can induce that there are two varied explanations of culture, one that represent culture as fixed and rigid system of traditions carried over from generation to generation and the other is endowed with dynamic aspect, as a quality of human creativity. The first explanation theorises culture as associated with certain beliefs, customs, attitudes, rituals, etc. that remains constant throughout in all their application. This means that the culture of an individual depends upon the culture of a group/community and the vice-versa, i.e. the culture of a group/community also depends upon the culture of an individual. The group/community influences the individual as in the same way as the individual influence the group/community. This does not mean that the individual does not have a separate identity from the group that he/she belongs to, and this notion of culture strongly adheres to approach that it is greater than the sum of its parts.

The dynamic concept relates to the changing nature of culture. Culture is not a permanent static entity conferring some indispensable identity upon an individual through the community. It is a movement, a quest that progresses by conflicts and virtues of self-assessment. In this respect, the culture of an individual is different from the culture of a group/community and the culture of a group/community is different from that of an individual. Similarly, culture of a group/community is different from the culture of

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8 ibid., p.23
another group/community even if they share territorial locations. This does not specify that there cannot be common elements of culture among groups or individuals. For example, the Naga community is different from the Khasi community but they may share certain common elements like the element of religion.

However, there cannot be a sharp distinction between the two notions of culture. The very concept of culture is grounded in the human nature, which always strives for the fulfillment of needs and desires. Such fulfillment is only possible through interactions with other individuals or society. The cultural properties are not inborn properties. These are acquired properties which the individual members or the group posses through the interactivities or functions. It is a way of life that is built up individually as well as collectively through interpersonal relationships. Through the interpersonal relationship, culture is promoted and transmitted from one generation to another. But, culture cannot be static; it also allows dynamism in the form of changes, adjustments and modifications. Moreover, there are several examples where individuals have brought changes to the culture.

Individuals cannot remain indifferent to the culture of society to which he/she belongs. Individuals may be influenced by the norms of society and individual members may also influence the society by changing and modifying social practices through their creative and intellectual activities. Our Indian society is full of such personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Gautam Buddha, Mahabir, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and many others. Whatever might be the case, cultural properties are acquired through interactions, cultural phenomenon is not isolated phenomenon, and they are inter-connected. Each culture influences and is influenced by another culture related to it. Since, culture is a cooperative activity, it must admit the virtues of self-assessment and openness, because closed and isolated cultures lacking respect for other cultures are prone to decadence.

New ideas have grown around the central concern of the concept ‘culture’; without going into the details of these refinements, it must be admitted that the concept of culture not only varied according to the aspects emphasized by various scholars, who studied the subject but also according to the time it has passed through. There are endless debates over whether it is value-free or value loaded, society specific or universal, hierarchical or

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differential, process or structure, material or non-material. In the humanities, traditionally, culture appears as a unitary notion. The unitary notion considered culture as the intellectual and artistic product of a select group. Later on, it started focusing on the radical plurality of culture. Once we break loose of the unitary notion of culture, the relation of culture with politics becomes glaringly evident. The plurality logically implies the political. For, surely, in multicultural, diversified societies of today, meanings will be determined and contested according to the interests of all those who belong to it.¹⁰

In a diversified society, cultures of various groups interact and hence they add several dimensions to the meaning of culture. Culture is inextricably linked to the concept of ethnic identity because in multi-ethnic societies, culture becomes a tool to distinguish groups and define the features of identity. At the same, certain expressions of culture may become the bone of contention between cultural groups, like language in Assam has always fuelled ethnic reverberations. They may add political dimensions to culture, bringing in an atmosphere of conflict. Here, we have first tried to trace the link between culture and politics before we move on to explain its other dimensions.

**Relationship between Culture and Politics**

The concept of culture has been accorded considerable importance in contemporary political analysis. It is felt that the cultural context can help understand the framework of meaning within which political processes take place. It marks a major shift from the kind of studies that were dominant in the early part of the 20th century, when the positivist/empiricist methodologies made it difficult to study the cultural dimension of reality. The tendency was to confine culture to the sphere of 'values', it was not considered a subject worth of objective-scientific analysis.

Marxist theory did recognize the political importance of culture but under the influence of positivism, reductionist notions of ideology and culture prevailed for many years. It was only with the work of Lukacs and Gramsci, and the translation of their work into different languages in the post-war period – that the concept of culture acquired importance in Marxian analysis.¹¹ Discussion and debates among Marxists on the problems of culture and consciousness have remained within the reductionist- non-

¹⁰ op.cit., no. 7, p.24
¹¹ Sarah Joseph, "Culture and Political Analysis" Social Scientist, October 1991, p.48
reductionist syndrome. Drawing upon Marx’s formulations in the ‘German Ideology’ and ‘The Preface to the Critique of Political Economy’, and later explanations of Engels on structure-superstructure relationship, it is a commonly accepted that there is an interaction between all the three levels – the material base, the political and legal superstructure and the ideological and cultural superstructure. Yet, the basic assumption is that economic necessity is what asserts itself and is the ultimate determining element.

In a letter to H. Starkenburg on 25 January 1894, Engels wrote, ‘Political, juridical, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic basis. It is not that the economic condition is the cause and alone active, while everything else has a passive effect.’ Despite this early recognition of the importance of superstructure, the dialectic of intra-superstructural relations has been a relatively neglected area of Marxist concern. 12

Marx as well as Weber had dealt with general and particular levels of culture, but Weber explained the political, social and economic setting by referring to a somewhat autonomous culture shaped by individual orientations of self-interest, whereas Marx explained culture in terms of its dependence on the political, social and economic setting of the society at large. Even though Marx had not fully developed the aspect of culture and only merely outlined it in his writings yet enough materials could be drawn for developing an analysis of culture and defining its importance in the evolution of social consciousness. A large number of Marxist thinkers, starting from Antonio Gramsci and George Lukacs to E.P.Thompson, Raymond Williams and Lucien Goldmann had tried to direct the focus of Marxism from the infrastructure to superstructure. They have tried to confront the traditional Marxist critique of political economy with the concept of conscious experience, not in a negating manner but in a complimentary one, incorporating the socio-cultural dimensions neglected by mechanical materialism. 13 For example, Antonio Gramsci’s concept of socialist revolution is that they are product of mass consciousness; such consciousness is nothing but the result of a long process of cultural emancipation of popular masses from the political and cultural hegemony of the capitalist classes.


13 ibid. p.18
Gramsci's reinterpretation of Marxist theory conforms to the view that ideology is the thinking of a class or group and that it encompasses relatively the whole sphere of culture. This gives rise to the notion of dominant and subaltern cultures co-existing within the society, and the struggles between classes and groups in the sphere of culture. With Foucault and other post-structuralist thinkers like Derrida and Lacan, further extent of interaction of culture and politics-as a site of power struggle was opened up. They have drawn attention towards studying culture in action on how cultural meanings have helped in constructing identities and how politics is about contestations over meanings. Not only in the studies mentioned above but in many other studies and interpretations, there has been a growing sensitivity towards the issues of culture, and how it is being adopted to analyse political meanings, structures, processes and struggles.

Sarah Joseph illustrates in *Culture and Political Analysis in India* that there are two major ways through which the concept of culture is introduced into the contemporary political analysis in India. In one way, purity of the culture against external influences becomes the political project of the community. This strategy was adopted in the nationalist movements, where the assertion of the indigenous culture became a political necessity. National identity was projected as the political expression of a pre-existing cultural community. The concept of a pre-existing cultural community, which was so vibrantly articulated in the nationalist movement against colonial forces continued even in the post-independence era and influenced the mode of political thinking. A strong belief in indigenous practices and institutions has been put forward to defend a conception of political identity and evolution within cultural parameters.

Another way in which culture is treated in the contemporary political analysis in India is by focussing on culture as a site of political struggles. The emphasis is laid on revealing not only how culture may intersect with the structures of power and sustain them but also on studying the political struggles that may take place in the sphere of culture. Such studies have dealt with ways in which culture has helped to reproduce structures and also on how individuals may negotiate such structures through their action. New social movements like the feminist movement or other movement of the marginalized has given

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14 op.cit., no.11, p.49
much scope to this form of political analysis since they have paid attention to deconstructing dominant conceptualizations which help to sustain hierarchies of power.

Besides the above mentioned two distinct modes of analysis, Joseph holds a similar connotation that culture is concerned in different ways with the issues of power. Andrew Heywood says that in a sense all politics is about power. The practice of politics is often portrayed as little more than the exercise of power, and the academic subject as, in essence, the study of power. The dominant operate through a regime of power, which is invested, reproduced and circulated through various forms of hegemony and the subjects thereby are turned to be marginal or peripheral entities. Cultural domination is a major aspect of domination and culture is, therefore, a major site for resistance.

The colonial paraphernalia was carried forward to the post-colonial phase but a parallel movement also started which sought to liberate the disempowered subjects. The relationship between culture and politics assumed greater significance with the nationalist movement against colonial forces. However, the dominant nationalist intelligentsia was interested in keeping politics and culture divorced of each other. Rather they were also keen to assign precedence to one over the other. In spite of being conscious of the cultural question, the intelligentsia did not try integrating it with the political programme, rather they tried to infuse a distinct gap between cultural and political consciousness. It was assumed that there was a coincidence between cultural boundaries and the boundaries of the political unit and political representation were given precedence over cultural representation. They tried to institutionalize nationalism by looking for and developing unitary cultural community. The fact remains that so many different cultural practices had invoked the nationalist claim that the unitary tone remained obsolete practice.

When the Indian state came into existence, how so ever hard it tried it could not suppress the divergent nationalist claims and the historic task of nation-building remained incomplete. There was no cultural cementation of the myriad sub-nationalities and ethnic groups. It resulted in discontent, dissention and disapproval among various groups which thought that the dominating 'centre' was swallowing up their culture and tradition. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee says that though V.S. Naipaul in his book, India: A Million

Mutinies Now holds a very optimistic picture whereby he celebrates the theme of contrast and holds the idea of a central will, a central intellect and a national idea for India, but for an average Indian this centrality is either an Utopia or a site of oppression. The centre is to be decentred to liberate the oppressed subjects from the currents of the dominant discourse of ‘a central intellect’, and ‘a national idea.’ A movement emanated in theory and action to decry the institutionalization of ‘nation’ and fulfill the promise of emancipating the marginalized.

The discourse of ‘Nationalism’ itself was viewed by scholars as a project estranged from the masses though it represented in form as a mass struggle. Ashis Nandy opined that nationalism as a homogenized universalism was a product of uprootedness and deculturation brought about by British colonialism in India. It spawned an estranged elite unable to speak for the people. And, Partha Chatterjee characterized ‘nationalism’ as a derivative discourse, highlighting the western roots of knowledge underpinning nationalism. He elaborates on how through a devious route the bourgeoisie was able to imprint its ideas upon the body politic and sought to create a state in its own image. The task of nation-building, forming from the rubbles of nationalist struggles thus failed to encompass the masses and which meant large section remained outside its ambit. Strengthening of India as a single political entity by establishing a dominant political centre and representing the diverse cultural people through the institution of parliamentary democracy, federation and secularism came to be assessed by various ethnic groups and communities as distortion and deformation of their cultural entity.

The wide-spread discontent manifested in assertion of ethnic identity by various cultural groups accelerated the politics of representation. The ethnic groups and communities felt that their cultural needs were gripped in political vacuum and were not represented adequately in the Indian mainstream. The ethnic groups stressed on the distinction of their socio-cultural life through burgeoning of activist politics and voicing their sub-nationalist agenda. It marked a shift in the meaning of culture from a ‘whole way of life’ to a ‘whole way of struggle’.

Culture and Ethnic Identity

Culture is perhaps best illustrated as a system of symbols in constant conflict within and with other cultures in contact. And the ethnic identity can be explained as a symbolic use of certain elements of culture by a group/community to differentiate themselves from other groups/communities. Conflict and differentiation with other groups/communities become the expressed pattern of interaction in a situation where a particular ethnic collectivity becomes conscious of its ethnic identity. Here, we state briefly the alluring controversy in the social science writings between the primordialists and the constructionists on the collective consciousness of ethnic identity. The intellectual origin of primordialists can be traced back to Weber. Those who agree with this perspective stress that ethnic identity is a latent phenomenon present everywhere, which is invoked by deprived communities at an opportune moment when they experience denial or are at a loss of their long-standing privileges. Such viewpoint does not appeal to the constructionist like Anderson, Hobsbawm and Ranger who, on the other hand, argue that ethnicity and its related cultural content is the product of historical conjunctures. The supposed dichotomy between the primordialist and constructionist, to some extent becomes obscure. This is so because the constructed identity becomes acceptable mainly because it contains a primordial element, which is read as ethnic by the collectivity concerned.

In simple terms, we may define 'ethnic group' as one that share fundamental cultural values and is a social category. Therefore, it is the common ties of culture that may bind the members of the group having bearings on group-relations. Different thinkers have tried to conceptualise ethnic group and ethnicity. Francis has conceptualized ethnic group as one sharing common culture and tracing its descent to a common ancestor. Glazer and Moynihan have viewed ethnic groups as interest groups competing for benefits from the welfare state. Horowitz considers ethnicity as an identity seeking instrument by the peoples of multi-racial and multi-cultural societies. Devos and Ross have emphasized that ethnicity is a device through which people seek a profound psychological unity, often based on common origin.

Culture and ethnic identities are closely related but should not be identified with one another, since they are two separate, distinct and specific terms. Culture may include
within itself features such as religion, language, customs that may be symptomatic or constitutive elements of ethnic collectivity. The core and the necessary factors of both the culture and ethnic identities are ascription of certain characteristics and plurality. But the marked difference between culture and ethnic identities is that all ethnic groups may symbolize themselves with a common culture but not all ethnic groups may collectively assert ethnic identity. Also, culture may not be the necessary or natural indicator of ethnic identity.

Culture is not a necessary indicator as we see in the case of Nagas, who seek a collective identity not based on features of common religion, language or customs; which are strong elements of culture, rather they associate themselves in a common identity based on commonality of history, race and geographical origin. They consists of many tribes, which have their own distinct culture yet they assert a common ethnic identity. And, if we take the example of Blacks of America, culture is not a natural indicator of their ethnic identity. They associate themselves in an ethnic collectivity based on the features they share like commonality of colour and common experience vis-a-vis the Whites and at the same time, they also associate themselves with their common American culture which is not distinct from the White Americans. Here, the commonality of culture is not a natural indicator but based on common lifestyle that ethnic collective has acquired. An ethnic group can hold one or a conjugation of common history, descent, collective experience and memory, and common culture and lifestyle as indicators of their collective identity.

Ethnic identity is invoked at a stage when the ethnic group has slimmed down as deprived collectivities both in symbolic and material terms. Assertion of ethnic identity is basically a combination of both the instrumental condition emanating out of material deprivation and the symbolic which is based on the anxiety to preserving one’s cultural identity. Deprivation stemming out of inequality or denial of identity may or may not crystallize in the demand for separate political entity. Such demand is probable only if ethnic identity institutionalizes its interest into a collective whole and asserts its particular ethnic identity for securing benefits, political, economic and cultural. The demand for a separate political entity may range from acquiring political representation to political independence i.e. demands for a separate state.
The appeal of culture and the resultant consciousness of identity may further generate the concept of nation. Here we attempt to explain the concept of nation. Both Gellner and Anderson explain nation in terms of culture and claim that nation is a conscious creation. According to Gellner, two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating.\(^{18}\) Benedict Anderson sees a nation as imagined community. Like culture, the nation is not given but consciously created. Anderson writes, ‘the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of communion.’\(^{19}\) Gellner makes a comparable point when he rules that nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist.\(^{20}\)

Social scientists like Partho Chatterjee talk of Indian nationalism as derivative discourse, highlighting the western roots of the apparatus of knowledge underpinning nationalism. He argues that the idea of an Indian nation was not a self-perpetuated idea by Indian masses. Since the time of Indian national movement till date, the task of nation-building remained the most important arena of conflict. Social Scientists like T.K. Ooman, Rajni Kothari, Rasheedudin Khan and M.N. Srinivas are convinced that the establishment of a dominant centre could be the most successful measure for taking care of the multitude and diversified interests. Such perspective only emphasized on the political aspect and overlooked the cultural aspect, whereas cultural aspect is an important criterion of identifying population as a single nation.

Culture has acquired a new meaning particularly in view of the experience of the post-colonial Indian state. The Indian state is often seen as ‘reactionary’ and ‘repressive’, which does not accommodate distinct cultural identities. It is virtually seen as the unseen patron of the dominant culture. This has penetrated deep down into the psyche of the small and marginal cultural groups who exhibit resistance to such cultural domination. The monologues of post-colonial Indian state discourse that promote cultural


\(^{20}\) op.cit., no. 18, p. 42
homogeneity with dominant value-systems only serve as a source of dissent and protest from the marginal groups. The most potent form of cultural domination as well as cultural aversion and cultural identification and grouping has been the cultural tool—language. Language as a symbol of cultural identity has severe implications in the political space.

**Language and Cultural Identity: Ramification in the Political Sphere**

Language and culture are intimately related as language is both a vehicle for and an expression of culture. Language is a basic element in all human group activity and serves as an important tool for cultural transmission because it enables human expression and understanding. Language is an ethnic indicator of cultural identity and cultural difference. Therefore, it has the potential for integrating as well as separating people because individuals and groups draw a sense of identity and rootedness from the language they use. Language, being the medium of communication of thought and feeling provides the most effective bond for uniting people, a distinctive mark of identity affiliation. History has shown time and again that language identity can arouse emotions of such intensity that it may even lead to violence. Language is often used by vested interests to promote civil strife like the British who successfully used language differences to divide and rule. At the same time, language has also aroused national sentiments. Masses could develop emotional link with nationalism through language. Language is the key tool for transforming an elitist culture into a mass culture.

Language is even more basic than religion or caste, which are also important markers of ethnic identity and part of culture. Language is very natural to every group/individual and has existed even in the most primitive times, far earlier than we could think of class, caste or even religion, though it was refined with time when the society became more organized. S.C. Daniel\(^1\) says it would be prudent to avoid using the term ‘culture’ as a generic term since it might lead some people to conflating and identifying it mistakenly with certain specific terms such as religion and language. Language and culture are closely related but culture conjoins within its ambit several other types of human behaviour and symbols apart from language, hence language and culture are not

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interchangeable words. Language, like religion or caste, has cultural significance and hence any threat to the identity of language is often presumed as a threat to the cultural identity of a community. When language draws an intimate attachment with cultural identity, it has severe implications in the political sphere.

There are immense varieties of languages spoken in India and as many varieties of dialects, styles and contexts of use of each variety of languages. The census lists approximately two thousand mother-tongues in India and, therefore, one of the important issues in post-colonial Indian state has been the controversy of language. Indian nationalists felt convinced that there must be not only one common language, but also that common language must be national or official language for all the speakers of different languages. Whereas, the protagonists of language pluralism argued that language is not a natural indicator of nationality. They held that speakers of different languages in India must be considered equally nationalistic as speakers of common or national language. The stress on common language as the official language often creates suspicion in the minds of linguistic minorities that they are subservient to language domination and hence they protest against threat to their cultural identity. The people of Tamil Nadu protested against Hindi being declared as the official or national language of India, likewise the linguistic minorities of Assam protested when Assamese was declared as the official language of Assam. There have been a lot of discussions on the issue of official language and many authors have argued against the one track view of official language that developed within the national circle ignoring the interest of minority language.

Daniel points out that the language policy of India mainly originated from Gandhi’s views. There seems to be confusion between the concepts of common language and national or official language. The confusion is due to the failure of not recognizing the fundamental difference between these two concepts. It must be noted that Gandhi pleaded for common language and also for a national or official language. Quoting from M.K. Gandhi’s book *Indian of My Dreams*, the following requirements were laid out by Gandhi for a language to be made a national language: ‘(1) It should be easy to learn for government officials (2) It should be capable of serving as a medium of religious, economic and political intercourse throughout India (3) It should be the speech of the majority of the inhabitants of India (4) It should be easy to learn for the whole of the
country (5) In choosing this language considerations of temporary or passing interest should not count.' Gandhi recommended Hindi as the common language as well as the official language.

Gandhi was of the opinion that a nation must have many things in common and one of these many things is language. Gandhi was not only in favour of a common language but also in favour of a common script. He stood for Hindustani as the common language and Devnageri as the common script and also called for abolition of all undeveloped and unwritten scripts. This would generally mean that certain languages need to be sacrificed in the interest of commonality and those dialects that are undeveloped or unwritten are not to be considered language at all. This then creates a problem for the people of North-East, as this part of the country is full of with undeveloped or unwritten dialects. Daniel rather proposes that instead of making the common language as the national language, it would be in the interest of the nation if language which is least common to all Indians should be promoted as the national or official language. Such suggestions are not at all easy to implement because there are practical difficulties in incorporating because the question is, how to choose which uncommon language should be made as national language and whether this uncommon language will be accepted when even a common language is not easily accepted as national language?

The issue of accepting an official language may just mean standardizing a particular language formally for official purpose, but in a multi-lingual state such issues are mostly met with resistance because it is generally felt as a threat to opportunities which will be mostly seized by the community whose language is represented as official. Language, therefore, gets a new identity in the politics, it comes be identified by the majority-minority parlance. The elites of Assam saw language as a vehicle of getting or losing opportunity and have tried to arouse mass sentiments on the issue of language identity. Elites have played an important role in identity assertion and using tools like ‘language’ to mobilize the masses for solidifying as an ethnic group. Here, we have elaborated on the concept of elite and examined the concept in relation to Assam.

\[\text{op.cit., no.21, pp.54-55}\]
THE CONCEPT OF ELITE

In common understanding, the word ‘elite’ signify ‘man at the top’; it is generally used for men or group of men who have money, power and prestige in society. The word is often used in subjective sense, without much thought given to use in day to day discussion. However, the word is not as easily understood in terms of social science terms; it has been explained in different perspectives and has several usages like ‘power elite’, ‘governing class’, ‘ruling class’, ‘middle class’, ‘influential’, ‘decision makers’ etc. Sometimes, they are used synonymously and sometimes they are opposed to each other. In the 17th century the word ‘elite’ was used to describe commodities of particular excellence and later on referred as superior social groups. Subsequently it was widely used in social and political writings in the late 19th century Europe, notably in the writings of Pareto and Mosca. It is important to mention the views of some eminent social scientist.

Vilfredo Pareto explained that assuming in each branch of human activity each individual is given an index which stands as his/her sign of capacity; so the class of people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity is given the name of elite. Pareto emphasises on the inequality of individual capacity in every sphere of social activity. He says there are basically two strata – lower strata and higher strata. The elites fall in the category of higher strata, which he further divides as governing elites and non-governing elites. The governing elite comprise individuals who directly or indirectly play some considerable part in the government and non-governing elite comprises the rest. He came to the conclusion that elite show highest ability in their field of activity whatever its nature might be, while masses are characterised by the lack of qualities of leadership and fear from taking responsibility. They feel safe in following the direction of the elite.

Gaetano Mosca was the first to make a systematic division between the ‘elite’ and the ‘masses’; in every society whether the less developed or the advanced, two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The elites are the less numerous class that monopolizes power and the most numerous class i.e., the mass are controlled by the first. Both Pareto and Mosca are concerned with elites in the sense of group of a people who either directly exercises or in a position to influence power-
especially political power. Mosca explains the rule of the majority by minority, that
the minority is organised and obeyed by the unorganised majority. Apart from the fact
that minority which is called as ‘political class’ or ‘governing elite’ rules over the rest
of the society, both Pareto and Mosca contend that membership of the governing elite
undergoes changes over a period of time, sometimes by new recruitment from the
lower strata or by complete replacement by a counter-elite and this phenomenon is
called ‘circulation of elite’. The elitist view therefore presumes that there exists in a
society a minority of population, which takes the major decisions in the society.

Michels propounded his famous ‘iron law of oligarchy’ which implied that every
organisation- whatever its original aims – is eventually reduced to an ‘oligarchy’ that
is rule of the chosen few. Majority of the human beings are apathetic, indolent and
slavish and that they are permanently incapable of self-government. Burnham’s
assumption is that politics is always a matter of struggle between groups of power and
status and a small group controls the decision-making process of the society. He
believed that social change takes place with the shift in composition of elites and that
classless society is impossible. Miller while studying the recruitment of elites in 14
countries found that there is no historical evidence showing social mobility from the
manual strata of population into the upper levels. Hunter while interviewing people in
the United States found that elite tended to be economic, political and social leaders.
Their exercise of power in one area was related to having power in another area. He
concluded that the structure of society is a pyramid with the leadership forming the top
most part. Similarly Pareto had explained in his *Cours d' economie politique* that if
individuals were arranged according to their degree of political and social power, it
would be found in most societies that the same individual occupied the same place in
this hierarchy as in the hierarchy of wealth. The so-called upper classes are also
usually the richest.

There is not just a single concept, apart from the Elitist view there are the Pluralists
and Marxists views of the elites. The elitist view that concentration of power, wealth
and status in one single group or closely integrated groups (most of the elitist were
concerned with theorising the political elites) is criticised by the pluralists, who
believe that there is not just one elite but different elites in a pluralistic society. For
instance, Manheim while defending modern democracy specifies various types of
elites and their functions in Western democracies. He distinguishes different types of elite as -the political, the organising, the intellectual, the artistic, the moral and the religious. Almost similar views can be seen in the writings of Aron, Lasswell, Dahl, Lipser, Bell, Truman, etc. Laswell drawing away from the concept of Pareto and Mosca says that political elite is different from other elites which are less closely associated with the exercise of power and that they may have a considerable social influence. He introduced the concept of influentials and explains that the influentials are those who get most of what is available to be achieved. Those who get the most are elite, the rest are the masses. By elite, Raymond Aron means the minority which in each enumerated professions has succeeded the most and occupied the highest positions. He however, makes a distinction between elites and classes unlike Lasswell who assumes elites as synonymous with ruling class.

Dahl in *Who Governs* has argued that power does not reside in individuals. Instead, different groups are able to exert influence at different times depending on the particular issue. He explains that no single leader or group is likely to be concerned with the entire range of issues that might come up in the community. Other pluralist writers have contended that the elite influence and relationships are highly situational. Reisman talks of power dispersed among many marginally competing pressure groups. The great number of pressure and veto groups in a country invalidates the notion of an exclusive and stable ruling class. Thus, according to the pluralists, authority is diffused and decentralised.23

The Marxist theory is in sharp contrast to the elitist theory, though both agree that so long as the society is divided into the ‘ruling’ and the ‘ruled’ classes, real political equality cannot be secured through a democratic form of government, but they disagree on the nature of social division, social change, etc. The elitist holds division of society into rulers and subjects whereas the Marxist views the division of society into the dominant and dependent. Marxist holds that since the political and legal superstructures are always raised on the economic sub-structure the class holding economic power enjoys political power concurrently whereas elitist says that the elites manage to maintain their political power because of natural differences in capabilities

and aptitudes with the masses. According to the elitists, masses are a passive lot whereas Marxist envisages an active role for the masses whereby the scope of social change rests on the masses. The working class has the capacity to organise its strength and overthrow capitalism which will eventually usher in classless society; true democracy is possible only in a classless society.

For the elitists social change is confined to circulation of elites. There is no scope of changing the division of society into elites and the masses. The elitists do not believe in classless society and democracy can be partly realised through an open elite system by giving ordinary people an opportunity to choose. The Marxists therefore, came to view that the state represents the most general interests of the ruling class and that the ruling class is a cohesive group with common positions in the organisation of production having common interests and consciousness. The conception of state as an instrument for upholding the dominance of the ruling class over subject class(es) appeared in almost all writings of Marx and Engels. Marxist considers state as primarily an organ of class rule with little autonomy of its own. Both Marx and Engels have considered the social relations of production as sufficient conditions for understanding specific phenomenon of political power, so leadership formations come from the propertied class.

The term elite has several connotation, but now it is generally applied to functional or mainly the occupational group which has high status in society. There are several studies on elites in the Indian context that focuses on the size of the elites, the relation between the elites, the nature of their recruitment and degree of mobility between elites and masses. Often in these works, the term elite implies nothing more than man at the top. In India, the caste and kinship factors also determine the power structure. Apart from the traditional factors, education and wealth also play an important role in determining the elite recruitment and degree of mobility.

Meisel comments that elite was originally a middle class notion. The existence of elite was distinguished by his three C’s group- Consciousness, Coherence and Conspiracy. But Meisel says that it is not always clear in the language of elite theorist whether 'class' refers to a grouping from which those occupying the elite positions are drawn.

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or recruited or only to those actually in those positions at any point of time.\textsuperscript{25} Here we shall focus on the middle class which has perpetually given leadership to social and political set-up. This context especially applies to the study of leadership trend of identity movements in Assam. Before we move on to Assam, we briefly discuss the growth of Indian middle class.

The Growth of Indian Middle Class

B.B. Mishra\textsuperscript{26} emphasises that social division proceeds from inequalities and differences of man in society, which may be natural or economic. It is primarily the economic inequality of man that influences if not wholly determine the social differentiation. Society is thus divided into classes and each class forms a hierarchy of status according to varying quality of social prestige and power expressed through the standard of living, nature of occupation and wealth. Historically speaking, prior to the Renaissance and Protestant movement in Europe the social inequality of man was regarded as something immutable founded on religious consent but the Renaissance questioned the validity of social order based on religious consent.

The American and French Revolutions were also anti-feudal and secular in character. They introduced the \textit{laissez-faire} principle whereby the elite who occupy the high social and political grades rose to that position by virtue of wealth, education and power and not through religious sanction. Another important element that emerged from the eighteenth century revolution was that of self-consciousness, which was the result of intellectual thinking and progress of secular education. Therefore, to become member of middle class it was usual not only for individual on the basis of these values to feel himself so, but likewise to be felt so by others. In India, the advent of British provided a conducive atmosphere for the growth of middle classes, because prior to British land economy, limited education and backwardness of technology did not provide a proper ground for the development of ‘class’ society.

The British brought radical changes to the political and economic system by transforming the traditional system to fit in their own form and principles of

\textsuperscript{25} op.cit., no. 23, p. 11
\textsuperscript{26} B.B. Mishra, \textit{The Indian Middle Classes : Their Growth in Modern Times} (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.1-4
attempted to create a class comparable to their own so that it might assist them in the administration of the country and help in the development of its internal resources. The idea of middle class social order was imported to India, it did not grow from within. The Indian middle class, which the British aimed at creating was to be a class of imitators and not originators of new values and methods. The progress of education and the advancement of technology were leading towards the growth of a middle class society. However, the mercantile and industrial elements which otherwise dominated the Western middle classes have been a minority element in the composition of Indian middle class. The British were more interested in finding learned men to assist them in administration rather than making entrepreneurs who can challenge the British economic monopoly. Hence, new business class did grow but not so rapidly as the literary class. From the circumstances of their growth, the members of the educated profession like government servants, lawyers, doctors and teachers constituted the bulk of the Indian middle classes.

The growth of commercial and industrial groups in India also cannot be ignored since the concept of middle class society began with the rise of bourgeoisie capitalism but the Indian situation differed very much from that of the Western. The economic and commercial policies introduced by the British helped in slow but steady growth of organised industry and joint-stock business. It was slow in the beginning because of East India Company’s interest in retaining the traditional artisan production which from its cheapness and excellence brought considerable profit to the European markets. The end of the Company’s rule in 1858 resulted in steep and steady rise of India’s external trade which created capital resources for industrialisation. The flow of British capital and skill contributed to the growth of agricultural and manufacturing industries and also contributed to expansion of more and more industrial units. But, the horizontal expansion and growth was also restricted by vertical integration under the direction and management of the pioneering firms. The financial integration therefore restricted the growth of the Indian industrial middle class to a few in numbers. Moreover, the tendency towards limiting the selection of business administrators was based on caste and regional criteria. The concentration of capital in few cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Ahmedabad and Jamshedpur concentrated the growth of industrial middle class in these areas and also the business
administrators were generally selected from those castes and communities that controlled the business.

Caste formed important selection criteria in the growth of the Indian middle class. The traditional Hindu emphasis on literary education as a virtual monopoly of the upper strata of the Hindu society also initiated men from the upper castes to take on to the new system of education. The traditional monopoly of caste prevailed in class determination because upper castes which had monopoly over land and resources could easily utilise the opportunity of education and other benefits of capitalist system thrown open. Hence, the criterion of caste was relevant to the composition of the Indian middle class. B.B. Mishra\textsuperscript{27} has considered the following groups as the Indian middle classes. They are the body of merchants, agents and proprietors of modern trading firms including active partners and proprietors of manufacturing and financial concerns, bulk of salaried executives, body of civil servants, members of recognised professions like doctors, lawyers, lecturers, etc., middle grades of proprietary tenures of land, rural entrepreneurs, well-to-do shopkeepers, students, body of clerks and other non-manual workers, secondary school teachers and the officers of the local bodies, social and political workers. It was the British system of law, administration and economy that led to the growth of the Indian middle class.

The introduction of land policies by the British also encouraged the growth of middle class. The new revenue system and tenancy reforms resulted in the growth of money-lenders and also led to unprecedented increase in the volume of litigation to authenticate disputed claims, which further led to the growth of public officials to manage the land policy system on one hand and on the other hand to litigate the cases it led to the growth of lawyers. Therefore, the gradual substitution of customs by law and centralised administrative apparatus not only encouraged the growth of the middle class but it also opened gateways for the middle class to take over duties that were earlier performed by only village headmen or large landholders; so it led to the dissolution of the old social order. However, it was the body of civil servants which in fact became the most powerful of the new social forces. The middle class came forward as the representatives of the citizenry and stepped into social vacuum caused by the disintegration of the old social order. With the growth in numbers of the

\textsuperscript{27} op.cit., no.26, pp. 12-13
The middle class in Assam shared with its Indian counterpart similar experience of growth that pointed to the advent of British rule and changes initiated in the economic and administrative set-up. However, there are certain dissimilarities in the situation of background to the growth of the middle class. The background of every region of India differed. In Assam the growth of middle class and the role that it played was influenced by a particular trend of events.

**Growth and Role of Elites in Assam**

In medieval Assam the power of the royalty was by and large supreme; there were hardly any social elite. Later on, there developed the culture of commune, which exercised authority of collective decision-making over socio-economic matters. These were institutionalised into the village lives and were popularly known as *Raijmel*s. The existence of *Raijmel*s, in which all important matters were discussed, prevented the growth of any elite class. The Ahom rulers who had brought the priestly caste, Brahmins to perform religious rites initiated caste division into society. However the caste divisions in Assam could not create a sharp distinction due to the Vaishnavite movement carried by the Sankardev school of thought. It educated people to adopt a liberal outlook towards caste distinction and the Vaishnavite school gave birth to the new set of social leaders. The Vaishnavite cult led to the formation of new socio-religious institutions like *Namghars* and *Sattras*. These institutions became a source of social power and

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28 Namghar is a holy place where songs of Lord Krishna or God are recited with solemn prayers. By introducing Namghar, Sankardev established unity among various castes in the community. Namghar played an important role not only in the sphere of religion but also enriched the Assamese life socially and educationally. Excerpts from Mrigendra Nath Das, “The Place of Namghar in the Village Community in Assam” in S.M. Dubey (ed.), *North East India: A Sociological Study* (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 181-187

29 The Satra institutions came into existence in the first part of the 16th century. The Vaishnava movement evolved the institution of Satras that only served as the instrument of spreading faith but became an indispensable part of Assamese social and cultural life. Like Buddhist Vihar and Hindu Math, Satras spread and indoctrinated religious values. When the Satras evolved it meant only religious sitting, but by the second half of 17th century it developed the organizational aspect by applying the principle of division of labour. Later on royal patronage placed the Satra on a sound economic footing. Excerpts from M.C Goswami, “The Institution of Satras in Assam” in S.M. Dubey (ed.), *North East India: A Sociological Study* (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 189-193

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educated class, it enabled them to challenge the alien rule and take the leadership of the masses in various political and social movements of the 19th and 20th century and most apparently, the freedom movement. Exposure to western ideas of freedom, nationalism, law and social justice gave the middle class a bargaining power to confront the alien rule.
prestige. Soon the royalty began to bestow large grants of estates to the Satras leaders which brought them honour and comfortable living. The masses were beholden by these institutions because it gave them ideological solace.

When the British introduced their own economic policies, excess land resources were taken away from the Sattra leaders. The abolition of old socio-economic order impoverished their economic condition however they had to reconcile to the new system so they took on to education as a means of retaining the status of social elite. Apart from the Sattra families, the next line of elites came from the Ahom bureaucracy. The Ahom nobility was decimated in the colonial take-over owing to the withdrawal of grants and termination of hereditary appointments. At the same time, new revenue system required revenue collection officers, so these positions were filled in mostly by the members of Ahom bureaucracy. The vacuum of leadership created by the extinction of Ahom nobility was taken by the bureaucracy. Since, these levels of jobs required the necessity of English education, the bureaucracy families sent their wards to receive Western education in Calcutta and so did the Sattra families. Fascinated by the Bengal Renaissance, the group of students who came from influential families of Assam also started regeneration of Assam in all spheres of society. They initiated literary and cultural movement which earned high recognition and they were looked up as social leaders and elites of the province. The members of Assamese middle class of the modern Assam were therefore a group of progressive intellectuals.

The main concern of the Assamese middle class was the establishment of linguistic patriotism. This was simply because by the time the Assamese middle class had strengthened their position by the end of the nineteenth century, this class had to face stiff competition from the Bengali middle class at both economic and cultural front. The Assamese middle class could conquer the mass ideology by its campaign to reinstate the lost glory of the Assamese language and establishing a separate identity of the Assamese language. The attachment to Assamese language and its articulation slowly converted into Assamese nationalism, most prominently in the post-independence period.

The middle class demonstrated its strength and led a series of popular movements after 1947 like recognition of Assamese as the official language and its introduction as the medium of instruction at the college level, establishment of refineries to refine the crude
oil produced in Assam and protest against immigration of foreign nationals. In each one of these movements while articulating the specific demands the issues connected with Assamese identity and its protection were raised again and again. All economic and cultural demands were articulated in the context of the grievances of a small neglected nationality. The growth of so called regional nationalism among the smaller nationalities has become an all-India phenomenon. It is, of course, debatable whether we can call regional middle classes small bourgeoisie but there is no doubt that it is these social forces which patronized the nationalist aspirations of the small nationalities and sharpened the contradictions between the Indian ruling classes and the regional middle classes of various small nationalities of India. Assamese nationalism led by the Assamese elites has been able to mobilize the Assamese masses not only because it occupied a dominant position in the Assamese society but because it had strong rural links. Right from its emergence, the elites have remained concerned with grievances of the peasantry and drawing support from the masses, the Assamese elites articulated their own grievances. And such grievances mostly emanated from cultural, political and economic insecurity of the Assamese elites. Similar adaptations were also noted among the other ethnic communities of Assam like the plains tribal communities.

Educated elites had also emerged from the tribal communities due to spread of western education and capitalist economy. Just as in the late nineteenth century Assam, antagonism had developed between the more advanced Bengali middle class and the less advanced Assamese middle class, similarly tensions developed in the post-independence era between the more advanced Assamese middle class and the other nascent middle classes of Assam belonging to tribal communities like the Bodos. As the Assamese elites spread its ideas, values and culture in Assam, other smaller identities began to feel the pressure of Assamese identity. The Assamese elite’s pressure on all ethnic communities to adopt the Assamese language and script as official language and script forced the tribal educated elite to resist the Assamese expansionism. The tribal elites also started playing a crucial role in advancing their own ethnic aspiration for the protection of their cultural and linguistic identity. Similarly within the tribal communities those who had experienced early resurgence of the identity phenomenon tried to pressurize the less

advanced with their cultural resurrection initiating protest from the less advanced section. The elites of the relatively more advanced communities will invariably try to dominate the comparatively less advanced communities. Since, Assam has population of mixed ethnic identities, it led to proliferation of identity threats from each other, resulting in political and cultural struggle among the various identities.

THE DILEMMA OF IDENTITY ASSERTION IN ASSAM

The expressions of ethnic identities are to be seen generally as a process of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities. The assertion of identity can be explained as a reaction developed in the process of modernization. The British rule in Assam brought modernization and class distinction, providing economic avenues and advantage to accrue opportunities to only those who belonged to culturally more advanced communities. Assamese language was considered as more advanced language in comparison to tribal languages so those who spoke Assamese language became the most important beneficiaries of the economic advantage. This phenomenon of language superiority has historical undertone. The Assamese elites while still in its nascent form had faced stiff competition from the more advanced Bengali elites and, therefore, made every effort to outdo the Bengali elites by working towards the advancement of the Assamese language. When India attained independence, the Assamese elites pursued with the policy of making Assamese language as the state language and the plains of Brahmaputra valley as their cultural and political hub to dominate all other ethnic groups of Assam.

At the same time, the national elites were strongly professing to bind India with a strong centre. The post-colonial India not only administered the North-East with Assam as its pivot, but also developed an Indian core with the North East as the peripheral region. This had both politically and culturally implications; the North-eastern states not only failed to identify culturally with the Indian mainstream but had felt politically estranged from the Indian core. The North-east remained distant and vague to the mainstream because the core could never draw a consensus with the periphery and the limitations imposed by enormous heterogeneity were sharpened further with the relationship between the Indian state and the North-east evolving into a dominant-subordinate relationship. A.C. Sinha examines the issues surrounding the concept of the core and periphery in the Indian national context. He says that India has preferred to adopt the
polito-cybernetic model of state power, whereby the extensive territorial entity of India is nothing but a hierarchy of power centres branching out to a seat of ultimate decision-making power. Whereas, he points that it would have been ideal to look for the normative model, where the concept of state power is replaced by the concept of collective consensus on shared values and norms. Such relation also developed between Assamese core and its peripheral tribal units. Assam’s territorial size in the new political arrangement, in the post-colonial era, exceeded the limits of Ahom empire and the loss of markets, trade routes and transit points as a result of partition was more than the opportunities provided to Assamese elite in its new role as overlords of the North-east.

The Assamese elites who wanted to keep secure its own position tried keep the North-east region intact because in a strong centre, the voices of the big provinces would always count more and the interest of the smaller provinces might be ignored. To contemplate the intactness, the elites tried to formalize Assamese language as the common language of all ethnic groups residing in Assam. However, the region ‘North-East’ was a concept that was evolved by the British and how could it be kept intact by a language that was foreign to most of the tribal communities that resided in the region?

The British were the first to use the concept of a north-east frontier for their Indian dominions after they conquered Assam and other tribal lands located between Bengal and Burma towards the end of the nineteenth century. Once having secured the area the British were content to administer this frontier rather loosely, more as a territorial appendage rather than as an integral administrative unit of the empire so long as the strategic interests of the empire were protected. The imperial economy had included only Assam in its ambit as Assam served the empire with tea and oil production and as a result of which Assam benefited some infrastructural development like construction of railways. Tripura and Manipur were left to survive as princely states and the rest continued as tribal dominion. The Government of India Act, 1935 recognised some of the hill districts as ‘Excluded area’ and some as ‘partially excluded area’. This meant that the

33 ibid., p. 310.
colonial power did not want to interfere with the customary laws of these areas unlike the rest of India. However, the Second World War brought self-importance to the region because, for the first time, the region realized its potentiality of serving as the frontier. As the imperial retreat commenced and the process of partition began, the region got more and more isolated. After the formation of East Pakistan only a narrow stretch of corridor linked it with the Indian mainland. There was an instant urge of regional aspirations among the various ethnic groups to secure their share of interests in the fringed area.

The Assamese were not the only elite groups, the Missionary education had created new elites in the region i.e -the tribal elites. The Missionaries not only provided education but also provided this emerging middle class with fresh aspirations. Obviously, most of the ethnic groups realized that the monopoly of the dominant section of the Assamese was bound to restrict the realisation of their aspirations and efforts for development. However, the Assamese elites without much consideration of other’s aspirations went ahead with formalizing Assamese identity as the identity of the all the ethnic groups residing within the territorial boundary of Assam. Loyalty to Assamese language was seen as the sole criterion in establishing one’s Assamese identity. The Assamese middle class leadership had taken it for granted that the tribal composition of Assam would accept Assamese as their official language. The struggle to secure Assamese its rightful place in the comity of Indian languages so dominated the Assamese mind in the period after independence that they could not assess the fall back of tribals from the composite Assamese identity.

The Constitution of India tried to tone down the voices coming from elites of this regional quarter of India by accepting the respectable customary laws of the tribals and providing a tool for protecting their cultural identity in the form Schedule VI. But, the hill districts had developed an immense sense of insecurity by the urge of the Assamese to maintain linguistic domination in Assam and further with the Chinese aggression of 1962, the limits of the Indian military were exposed. A healthy socio-political order could never develop in the region and a sense of relative deprivation among the communities was apparent. The crisis in Assam accentuated with the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 and again a fresh exodus of refugees trickling the region. The region had to bear more strain than its infrastructure was capable of sustaining.
The sense of deprivation and exploitation by the plains reached its extreme point in the minds of the hill people. The hills people complained to the State Reorganisation Committee that, "The Assamese who happened to be the single majority community in a heterogeneous state try not only to dominate others in all affairs of administration of the state, but also try to impose their language on the non-Assamese." To counter-act the trail of misgivings of the people of the hills, the Indian state tried to secure it with statehood arrangements. The Naga Hill District was separated from the State of Assam in 1963 and was made a full fledged state. The post 1971 era witnessed the emergence of ethnicity as the accepted principle of political reorganisation. Negotiations with hill tribes gave way to the birth of Meghalaya in 1972 and in subsequent years to Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, but these arrangements turned out to be a temporary measure for subverting the misgivings and fear of the people of North-East.

The region was gripped in the complex web of identity assertion with even the smallest communities demanding self-composed homelands with distinct boundaries. Assertion of ethnic identities complicated the politics in North-eastern India. Demands for separate states, autonomous regions or councils, even for re-organisation of districts and tribal blocks within states had multiplied. The feud between the smaller and the bigger ethnic groups accentuated because the bigger ones were reluctant to accommodate the aspirations of smaller ones. The small ethnic groups never felt that they were adequately represented in larger nationalities. The feeling of oneness could never come instead the smaller identities apparently withdrew their membership from the larger nationalities and the feeling of 'otherness' gripped their mind. Conflicts and contradictions become the mainstay of drawing relationship between different ethnic groups, and the most discernible conflict remains in the realm of culture.

Balkanisation of Assam could not prevent emotional outpourings about the tribal and non-tribal unity within the Assamese nationality and there has been an almost continuous quest of the Assamese to resolve this contradiction. The major impediment in this arrangement has been the hegemonic status of the Assamese middle class. The plains tribals after the separation of hill districts from Assam organised themselves to maintain their distinct lingo-cultural identity. The Bodos started identity movement and raised

\[34\] Memorandum of the United Mizo Freedom Organisation, Lushai Hills submitted to the Secretary of State Reorganisation Commission, New Delhi on 28th May, 1954
protest for protection of their socio-cultural identity, development of their language, continuation of English as medium of instruction, economic development and so on. Subsequently these culminated into political demands. The demand for separate and autonomous state for the Bodos follows from this trend. These protests were also mixed with other problems that the tribals were facing like land alienation, unemployment and discrimination with respect to their rightful share in society. The other plains tribes like the Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings, etc also asserted their cultural separateness from the Assamese and demanded protection of their respective identities. The ethnic groups of Assam began to organize their communities with full vigour. The whole of Assam came under the grip of identity movements.

Girin Phukan\textsuperscript{35} says, strange though it may seem, while the Assamese elite wanted to protect themselves from the dominance of others, they at the same time wanted to make the Assamese as the sole language of the multi-lingual state. The imposition of Assamese language, backed by the movements for ‘Assamese as the Official Language in 1960’ and ‘Assamese as the sole medium of instruction in two Universities of Assam in 1972’, made the tribals suspicious of the motive of the Assamese. Inspired by the identity consciousness of the Assamese, the tribals also became conscious of their distinct identities. They started reviving their language and projecting it as their symbol of identity. Thus, it appears that the lingo-cultural movements for asserting Assamese identity led by the Assamese elites had given birth to several other identity movements in Assam. This shows that considerable deprivation in relation to the dominant ethnic community has triggered the identity movements in Assam.

The resonance over identity has been an inherent historical phenomenon of ethnic collectivities. Such assertions of identity and the subsequent generation of conflicts manifest as social movements. Identity assertions are collective mobilisation but not all collective mobilisations may culminate in social movement. Such mobilisation will result in a movement only when it includes in its salient features a shared value system, a sense of community, norm of social action and an organizational structure. It is, therefore, important to understand the dynamics of social movements.

\textsuperscript{35} op.cit., no.1, p.129
DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Blumer defines social movement as ‘collective enterprise to establish a new order of life’\textsuperscript{36}. Hans Toch has placed more emphasis on the psychological aspect of the social movement saying, ‘an effort by a large number of people involve collectively in a problem they feel they have in common’\textsuperscript{37}. According to Cameron, social movement ‘occurs when a fairly large number of people are bound together in order to alter or supplant some position of existing culture or social order or to redistribute the power of control within a society.’\textsuperscript{38} Paul says that mere existence of a large number of people will not lead to movement. For example, a panic hostile crowd, unorganized with no affiliation to ideology, will not lead to a social movement. Social movement requires mass mobilisations and also not all collective mobilization will qualify to be conceptualized as social movements. Social movement entails that ‘the members of the movement must have common norm, an ideology which binds them together for a collective action or they identify themselves with it’.\textsuperscript{39}

T.K. Oommen has defined some features of the social movements. These are: a movement is a conscious effort on the part of a group to mitigate its deprivation and secure justice; a movement is conditioned by the factors in the social structure; a movement is perhaps the chief mechanism through which the deprived section demonstrates its power coupled with an ideology to redress the evils of grievances.\textsuperscript{40} The motivation of the movement may range from rational belief in movement’s aim to pure opportunism. It must be noted that social movements of historical significance have specific goals and attract more groups of persons and it aims at comprehensive and fundamental changes in the social order.\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, all social movements have political implications even if their members do not strive for political power. Social Movements have been studied through various theoretical orientations. There are several theories that explain the structural conditions and motivational orientations which give rise to movement.

\textsuperscript{36} Herbert Blumer, \textit{From New Outline of the Principles of Sociology} (New York: Barnestand Noble, 1951), p.1
\textsuperscript{38} W.B Cameron, \textit{Modern Social Movements} (New York: Random House, 1967), pp.7-8
\textsuperscript{40} ibid., p. 33
There are two important theories that apply in the context of Assam – the Revitalisation theory and the Relative Deprivation theory.

Wallace, who championed the revitalisation theory, explains that social movements develop out of deliberate, organised and conscious efforts on the part of the members of the society to construct a more satisfying culture. Society is regarded here as a definite kind of organism and its culture consists of patterns of learned behaviour. Revitalisation is a special kind of cultural change phenomenon. Wallace argues that the persons involved in the process of revitalisation must perceive their culture as a system which is unsatisfactory and the need to invent new cultural system. The change does not depend on deliberate intent by the members of a society but rather on a gradual chain-reaction. The main focus of this theory is on the cultural aspect of the social structure. Under two conditions revitalization movement can occur – when there is high stress on individual members of society and when people are disenchanted with the distorted cultural gestalt.\(^{42}\)

The approach of Wallace places emphasis not only on the sociological dimension of the problem such as social mobilization but also on the innovations of new cultural elements. This type of movement is essentially organized on religious aspects to construct a more satisfying culture, which may take the form of revolutionary or nativistic forms of movement to establish some satisfying order in the society.\(^{43}\) McLaughlin says that the revitalization movement is oriented more towards revolutionary than the reform end of the continuum, whereas Rao says it is a sort of reform movement.\(^{44}\) Fuch\(^{45}\) elaborately discussed revitalization movement in Indian society among the Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward classes. Like the Hindu reform movements among the Bhils of Madhya Pradesh, the Pulayas and Parayas in Kerala and the Madigas in Andhra Pradesh and also among the Mohammedans and Sikh converts from lower caste of Hindus. Examples can also be drawn from reform movements among the Bodo tribe of Assam like the Brahma Movement.

\(^{42}\) op.cit., no. 39, pp.24-25  
\(^{43}\) Bipan Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India (New Delhi: Inter-india Publications, 1979), p.6  
\(^{44}\) op.cit., no. 39, p.26  
\(^{45}\) N.C. Dutta, Land-Problems and Land-Reforms in Assam (Delhi: S.Chand, 1968), p.11
The Brahma cult tried to revive the monotheistic faith of the Bodos, which was under threat of Aryan influence. Kalicharan Brahma had stepped in to spread the Brahma faith—a religious movement with emphasis on reformation and education. Kalicharan Brahma started his missionary activities from 1906 and continued doing so till his death in 1940. His mission was not confined to the propagation of the Brahma faith but also undertook other missions like founding of schools, social reformation, founding of rest houses in towns for the Bodos, enactment of reformatory laws for the Bodo society, founding of students union, revival of Bodo culture and language, resurgence of Bodo handicrafts and weaving, etc. His missionary activities extended even to political and economic spheres. He inculcated among the Bodos a vision of political awareness and developed the need of being economic self-reliant. The Brahma faith was influenced by the Brahma cult of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Kalicharan Brahma was the disciple of Srimat Sibanarayan Paramhansa of Calcutta (Kolkatta).

The relative deprivation theory has two explanations, one propounded by Merton and Runciman and the other by Karl Marx and Engels. Relative Deprivation is perceived by a group of people in respect of their economic, political, educational and ethnic positions. Relative deprivation acts as the bedrock of movements. The theory propounded by Merton explains relative deprivation in relation to social structure and mobility whereas the theory of Marx explains relative deprivation in relation to social conflict, i.e., the dialectical approach. Merton developed the concept of relative deprivation to analyse social mobility in relation to reference group model. Reference group theory assumes that individuals comparing their own lot with that of others have some knowledge of the situation in which others find themselves. Later on Runciman further developed the concept of relative deprivation in relation to reference group behaviour and problems of inequalities and social justice.

Karl Marx and Engels studied the concept with emphasis on the element of conflict and social change which gained considerable importance in the study of social movements.

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46 Srimat Sibanarayan Paramhansa is a slight variance to that of the original faith and practice of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore. But, the salient features are the same—(i) reformation of the self (2) reformation of the society (3) revolutionary changes of outlook (4) spread of education (5) rights, privileges and dignity of the community as a people (6) enlightenment of the self and society (7) prayer to the only God who is omnipotent and omnipresent and no one else. Excerpts from Sobha Brahma, “Bodo Sahitya Sabha: Appraisal in Retrospect” in Praban Bargayary (ed.), The Bodo: Mouthpiece of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha’ (Korajhar: Bodo Sahitya Sabha, 2002), p. 35
since 1940s. Marx and Engels recognized that dissatisfaction with the status quo was not

determined by absolute social condition but by relative expectations. Dissatisfactions

here are due to unequal distribution of wealth, property and other means of existence.

This may give rise to ideology of movements which may be double edged – expressing

the feeling of dissatisfaction and protest with the existing situation (with deprivation) and

finding out a positive action programme for ultimate redressal. The awareness of
degraded positions in society accompanied by the deprivation of socio-economic needs
instigates the deprived to generate movements. This theory is based on the basic

postulation of Marx that the basis of the society is the mode of production, and the

relations of production into which men enter and the history is founded on different

stages of development of the modes and relations of production. Movement is, thus, the

vehicle through which new social relationships eventually emerge.

The crux of this theory lies in the assumption that it is not the mere existence of
depprivation, but the awareness or consciousness of the contradictions in the material life
which provides sufficient reasons and impetus to movement and the movement plays an

important role to bring a fundamental change in the existing order. It also adds that it is

not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence

that determines their consciousness. To Marx, it is only the material phenomenon that can

serve as the starting point. However, the later Marxist thinkers like Gramsci, Lukas,
Raymond Williams and others have tried to incorporate socio-cultural dimensions that

were previously absent in pure Marxian analysis of mechanical materialism. The identity
resurgence movement in Assam can be analysed from the relative deprivation

perspective.

Assam relatively compared itself with itself with other states of India, and found that it
stood nowhere though the region had rich natural resources. Rather, it's natural resources
and raw materials were squeezed out to feed industries outside the state. Assam's linkages
with the outside market were opened with the establishment of the tea industry by the
British. Afterwards, natural oil, coal mines, forest development were promoted but, the
assurance of economic upliftment did not come along with these development. Over the
years, since independence the feeling of being an exploited region has gripped more
severely the mind of the Assamese people. It saw itself as a neglected fringe of the centre.
Successive waves of outsiders to this region, has also added to the annoyance that these aliens were extracting all benefits of which the natives had a rightful share.

The development process had, however, given rise to the emergence of new social, political and economic forces and institutions. One such force was the emergence of the Assamese literate elite which suffered from frustration of facing stiff competition in its native land. The Assamese elites thereby became apprehensive of protecting their cultural identity. The stature of cultural identity, symbolized by 'language' has been forwarded fundamentally to strengthen the role of the Assamese community vis-à-vis other communities and thereby to create a political space at the national level. The Assamese middle class took up language identity as the pride of the Assamese nationalism, which they pledged to protect under any circumstance. The pent-up feeling spurted out in Assamese identity movements in the form of Official language Movement in 1960 and Medium Movement in 1972. The Assam Movement of 1979-85 had the value premises of both the socio-cultural and politico-economic issues. Though many would not acknowledge the Assam Movement as social movement, rather they see it as a political movement because the leaders of the movement had political motivation and soon after the movement contested elections to form the government. But, as Paul says the essential characteristic of social movement is that it is oriented to a certain definite goal or objective to achieve.

A social movement is essentially a phenomenon of mass mobilization on specific issues or problems concerning social life. Social movement must develop sooner or later a comprehensive ideology which should be convincing to the participants of the movement. The movement may be a component of a political party and when a movement accomplishes its goal, it dies off but the party stays on or certain movements may gradually turn into political parties. The Assam Movement led by the student intellectual forum was a mass democratisation process of political articulation and an ethno-national expression of the inhabitants. This did encourage other ethnic groups, particularly the Bodos to pursue similar strategy.

The Bodo identity movement is also co-related to the relative deprivation faced by the Bodos vis-à-vis Assamese identity. The relative economic deprivation of the Bodos and

\[ \text{op.cit., no.39, p. 19} \]
other plains tribes had its roots in the plight of people whose traditional entitlements to lands suffered when the British introduced new land policies. The policy encouraged settlement of outsiders and slowly the tribals were alienated from their own lands, this continued even after independence and the clause of protection in the form of tribal ‘belts and blocks’ did not serve any specific purpose and the alienation of land continued. Furthermore, large tribal areas were detribalized for public purposes. The plains tribal did not get the required protection from outsiders because their areas were never protected constitutionally under the Schedule Acts like the hill tribes.

The relative deprivation was also due to inadequate share in modern occupations, inadequate public recognition given to Bodo language in Assam and inadequate political representation, a condition that the Bodos attribute to discrimination by the ethnic Assamese. The emergence of educated elites and their aspirations to challenge the unequal equation between the Bodos and the Assamese ethnic groups has spearheaded Bodo identity movements that incorporated in its project cultural as well as economic and political demands. The Udayachal Movement that started in 1973 called for political settlement of Bodo homeland because only a Bodo homeland could guarantee the achievement of Bodo cultural and economic goals. There had been several mass movements that urged for protection and promotion of Bodo language identity like Bodo language as medium of instruction in 1968 and Script Movement of 1974-75.

An essential feature of social movements is the presence of organizational structure. Movements cannot be accomplished without goals, strategy, and affiliation to ideology and, at the same time, it requires leadership backing and organizing the mass. Therefore, the identity movements in Assam had evolved from elite led mass organisations, which framed the goals and strategies of the movement. These organisations have been a phenomenon since the colonial times, however, it became more streamlined in the post-colonial era. The Asom Sahitya Sabha and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha’s role will be discussed in the following chapter, which will explain the assertion of two most contested identities i.e. the Assamese and the Bodo identity.

CONCLUSION

The power relations between the two communities, the Assamese and the Bodos are on unequal terms, hence the balance may sway from one side to the other. Assertion of
identity may be positioned in both the groups. Depending on circumstantial conditions each may have been dominant over the other in different situations. This mostly depends on how elites are able to get their demands conveyed and fulfilled. In Assam, cultural identity based on the issue of language, became a contentious question between these two communities and was found to be related to other socio-economic and political issues time and again over a century. Therefore, in this chapter we enquired certain concepts related to culture and identity, their relations and how these concepts could be placed in the context of Assam. We have tried to draw inferences from general to particular; hence we began with discussing the general views presented in various studies by social scientists.

The concept of culture is ambiguous that varies according to the aspects emphasized upon. Social scientists have defined it from various perspectives—psychological, historical, descriptive, normative, structural and generic. M.M. Agarwal comments that Kluckholn and Kroeber could not fully provide a satisfactory explanation despite of making an extensive analysis of so many definitions. He says that, their super-organic approach to culture is itself self-defeating. They have rather put culture in a metaphysical realm as dormant systems, whereas Agarwal says that culture are not inert or dormant system. Therefore, he adheres more to the dynamic concept which explains that culture is not simply a system of meanings and values carried around by communities but are codes through which meanings are constructed and the world is made intelligible. However, without going much into details we have discussed the relationship of culture with politics. These are also not estranged from each other, politics is here referred as the study of power and culture in an acute form through which the dominant exercise its power upon the marginal entities.

The later Marxist analysis has discussed the struggles between classes and groups in the sphere of culture. Though Marx had not fully developed the aspect of culture, but in the later interpretations, in the writings of Gramsci, a framework could be created on the analysis of culture and its importance in the evolution of social consciousness. With the post-structuralist writings relationship between culture and politics became more defined. Therefore, culture is basically defined as a system of meanings and politics is about contestations over meanings. India’s nationalist movement and the new social

48 op.cit., no.7, p. 22
movements of the marginalized are two different examples of the relationship between
culture and politics. The nationalist movement constructed dominant conceptualizations
of culture which help to sustain hierarchies of power and the movement of the
marginalized deconstructed the dominant conceptualizations of culture. In the nationalist
movement the mainstream intellectuals tried to maintain their dominance by basing the
movement on a common cultural heritage and later with the emergence of the post-
colonial Indian state, the similar adaptations were carried forward and focus was laid on
strengthening India as a single political and cultural entity. They expected the marginal
and smaller nationalities to assimilate in the Indian nationality, where the Indian
nationality stood for meanings that were defined by the dominant nationality. However,
the movement of the marginalized evolved in challenging the dominance of larger
nationalities because they failed to get their cultural and political representation within
the designed arrangements. Therefore, many authors have explained nationalism as a
project alienated from the masses.

The Indian masses were never a homogenized unit; they constituted the multitudes of
ethnic groups who asserted their ethnic identity to make some gainful bargaining by
projecting their experience of deprivation. The ethnic group has been defined by many
scholars but fundamentally ‘ethnic group’ is considered that which share elemental
cultural values. Therefore, assertion of ethnic identity, as we have already mentioned is
basically a combination of both instrumental condition emanating out of material
depprivation and symbolic based on the anxiety of preserving one’s cultural identity. In
Assam, the deprivation syndrome was intrinsically linked with the cultural identity of
language. The identity assertion has revolved around the issue of language.

Language has remained in the post-colonial Indian state as a project for assimilation and
as problem of resistance to assimilation. Therefore, the opinion prevailed that out of
many things that should be common for building a nation, one of these has to be
language. To draw the commonality, the common language was also purported as the
official language. Such consideration was likely to evoke assertion of cultural identity.
Language became so much associated with identity that any threat to the identity of
language was often presumed as a threat to the cultural identity of a community.
Language was seen as promoting cultural homogeneity, which did not seem to provide
accommodation to distinct cultural identities. Therefore linguistic minorities assumed
such policy as threat to opportunities which would be mostly seized by the community whose language was represented as official. Such issues are particularly intense in multi-ethnic regions because here respective elites of linguistic groups engaged in conflict over the allocation of benefits. On the basis of such contentions the elites arouse mass sentiments to further consolidate their position. This argument is very much prominent in Assam, where elites of several linguistic groups put the issue of language to draw benefits over limited available resources.

Here we have also discussed briefly the concept of elite to understand its composition and its difference with the concept of mass. Pareto has explained elites in terms of higher individual capacity and ability to lead, whereas masses are characterized by the lack of abilities and having an inherent tendency to follow. Mosca has differentiated elites and masses as two classes of people; elites are a class that rules and the masses are a class that is ruled. Elites are a less numerous composition of the society, a group of people who exercises power directly or indirectly. These elitist theorists have more specifically explained the political elites. Several other interpretations on the concept have developed like the Pluralist and the Marxist. The Pluralists do not believe that there is just one type of elite i.e., political elites as described by the elitist but different elites in a pluralistic society and the Marxist have diverse concept on the issue of elites and the masses. The elitists see the masses as passive, whereas Marx visualizes an active role of the masses and also see the scope of developing a classless society. The elitists do not believe in classless society. Whatever might be the differences between the elites and the masses, we cannot deny the fact that the survival of elites are dependent on masses, rather both elites and masses complement each other.

In the Indian context studies on elites have been seen from caste and kinship factor, apart from class. These elements definitely play an important role in determining the power structure and also the composition of Indian middle class which have led several social and political movements. The advent of British in India provided a favorable atmosphere for the growth of middle classes. Unlike the Western middle class that mostly consisted of industrial and commercial section, the literary and educated section largely constituted the Indian middle class. The Indian middle class were English educated intellectuals who learnt the techniques of freedom, law and justice. These techniques gave them full opportunity to test their leadership because the masses were looking forward to leaders
who could emancipate them from the British rule. The Indian middle class played a prominent role of leader in the India’s nationalist movement. But, every region in India had their own middle class section which led the anti-imperialist movement at the regional level and, therefore, with independence there were outbursts of voices for representation of regional elites in the national mainstream. Without going much into details of relations between the national and regional bourgeoisie, we simply shifted our focus to Assam.

During the colonial rule, due to advanced positions of the Assamese caste Hindus in the Ahom administration, the growth of middle class was first experienced by the Assamese language group. The members of Assamese middle class were a group of progressive intellectuals whose main concern was the establishment of Assamese linguistic identity in order to maintain the dominance of Assamese language group among the multiple ethnic groups which constituted the composite population of Assam. At the same time, through the establishment of linguistic patriotism, the Assamese middle class could conquer the Assamese mass ideology. But, the situation changed slowly by the time independence came. Educated middle class also emerged from the tribal populace which tried to challenge the dominant position established by the Assamese middle class by forming their separate identity parlance. The idea of separate identity touched upon both cultural and political aspect. The Assamese middle class being insecure to the threats and fear of losing their representation at the national level tried to keep the political boundary of Assam intact and gave slogan of similar cultural affiliation with other ethnic groups. But, such phrase was not accepted and Assam came under the grip of several identity movements.

These idioms of identity are sometimes nothing but expressions of insecurity of elites who, in an effort to establish their position among the other elite groups, they educate the mass to collectively mobilize as an ethnic group. A sense of relative deprivation among the communities was apparent which they thought could only be thwarted by mobilizing themselves under the pretext of ethnic identity. Such mobilization sometimes takes the shape of movement. And as we have already discussed that the relative deprivation may not be wholly economic like in pure Marxist terminology, but may also incorporate socio-cultural dimensions. In the Indian context as well as in the context of Assam, cultural emancipation was more important than economic emancipation because unlike
the society perceived by Marxists that may be aroused by the sentiments of class conflicts in India conflicts of culture took precedence over any other forms of conflicts due to both historical reasons and modern developments. Therefore, culture of ethnic group and its identity are concepts that have kept the political cauldron burning with issues like deciding political boundary of states, official language of state, sharing of economic resources or even voting pattern of elections. The question of identity has been very much vibrant in the multi-ethnic state of Assam. The following chapter focuses on the historical set-up of Assam that brought an awareness of preserving identity and developing a new trend of forming associations.