CHAPTER III
MANIFESTATION OF ASSAMESE IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF ASOM SAHITYA SABHA

INTRODUCTION

'Language is primarily one of the most important aspects of human life. It can help in uniting the people of a society and encourage the people for literary pursuit.'\(^1\) The Asom Sahitya Sabha has always stressed on the social aspect of development, in which language gets the primary focus because of certain difficulties which were encountered during the progress of Assamese language in history. The issue of language captured the minds of the people of Assam far earlier than the birth of the Asom Sahitya Sabha. The introduction of the capitalistic mode of production since the advent of British to Assam in the 19th century brought forth the issues of development. Language had often appeared as a hindrance to that progress. Therefore, the progressive minds in Assam made the development of Assamese language as the benchmark to all progress. They had been working in this direction ever since the times of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. This venture achieved much larger platform with the birth of several literary and cultural organisations by the end of the 19th century; the Asom Sahitya Sabha took the road ahead since its inception in 1917.

The relationship of language with the people no longer remained a simple mode of social recognition, but became an economic determinant and hardcore expression of political will. The British had sown the seeds of modernisation—especially education and urban employment—that has led to the awareness of distinctive identities and instilled a fierce competition of asserting this distinctiveness and autonomy as a means of surviving the system. In the anti-colonial struggle, identity politics became more prominent rather than being subsided by the wave of nationalism because of the underlying characteristic of heterogeneous society which the nationalist movement was representing. Language began to play a comprehensive role in fermenting the minds of the people of Assam towards seeking alliance for adequate representation.

No one can say that such alliance was uncommon in other parts of India; there was constant pressure on the national leaders to accommodate language identity in the Indian

\(^1\) Kanaksen Deka, President, Asom Sahitya Sabha, Interviewed on 12th March, 2005
politics. However, Assam presented a unique example of identity politics expressions; here, language was juxtaposed with cultural nationalism sans religion, caste affinities, that were so important markers of identity in other parts of India. Punjab had also experienced language based cultural nationalism but here religion was providing the flesh and blood. The Punjabi Hindus identified pan-Indian nationalism and Hindi language, Punjabi Muslims identified with Muslim nationalism and the Urdu language and Punjabi Sikhs identified with Sikh religion and Punjabi language written in Gurmukhi script. Likewise, Tamil speakers had caste underlining to their language identity, the upper caste identified itself Sanskrit origin of Tamil language and the Dalits identified themselves with Dravidian origin of Tamil language. But in Assam, all other expressions of identity were sidelined and only language remained the lone aspect of identity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, language became the corner-stone of political recognition surpassing all other cultural traits, owing to historical circumstances surrounding its development. There were many facets of colonial history that have influenced language to germinate as the binding force of politico-cultural assimilation; for example recruiting officials from Bengal for colonial administration in Assam ignoring the Assamese noble class, allowing migration from Bengal for filling up the wastelands to earn higher revenue for British exchequer and the most important of all replacing Assamese language with Bengali in courts and school education in 1837. The policy of recruiting Bengalis was being followed from the time of David Scott. In fact, with the introduction of Bengali, the services of Bengalis became indispensable in the government offices and schools, whether Anglo-Vernacular or vernacular, as local teachers were inadequate and incapable of imparting education in Bengali.2

The imposition of Bengali language brought a rudimentary consciousness among the Assamese that they could become a ‘nationality by themselves’ by virtue of their language. But this realisation was confined to only a few individual middle class members until 1850s when the middle class was still emerging. Various classes were affected by the language policy as a ‘class’ but not as a nationality at that point of time. In the absence of a middle class, who could have channellised these class discontentments, the potentialities of a language

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movement deterred out. The Assamese middle class had not yet emerged strong enough to lead the Assamese.\textsuperscript{3}

Language was used by the Assamese middle class as the most potent weapon to cut down all hurdles that came its way. Though the language based cultural nationalism would have benefited only a small section, yet it could generate a mass appeal. This small section of English educated urban middle class Assamese could gather support in its assertion from the rural Assamese peasantry and also plains tribal, who at a much later stage carved a separate niche from the Assamese.

The first move was made by Anadaram Dhekial Phukan who petitioned to Sir Maffat Mills in 1852 against instruction in Bengali language in vernacular schools. In 1855, he published a small booklet disproving the thesis that Assamese and Bengali were the same language, an opinion that seemed to have dominated the British minds. His petition reflected the Assamese cultural pride of not accepting an alien language, it could be termed as only a reaction to the language policy of British and not cultural nationalism.

The first remarkable achievement in the history of Assamese cultural nationalism was the formation of Axomiya Bhaxa Unnati Sadhini Sabha in 1888, whose establishment is said to be 'a landmark in the history of Assamese language and literature.'\textsuperscript{4} As the meaning of this name denotes 'Association for the Development of the Assamese Language', that its major concern was to see the progress of Assamese language. To accomplish such tasks it took up projects like standardisation of the Assamese language, creating awareness and encouraging participation of Assamese youths to take the Assamese language on the path of development. This generation of intellectuals were mesmerised by the new ideas about modernity and progress. Among the renowned ones was Lakshminath Bezbarua who had elaborated that his generation saw the development of Assamese language as the path to tread on for the material progress of Assam. The goal of the Sabha, he wrote was to help the 'tender mother-tongue grow up to maturity', to enable the mother tongue 'to reach the heights of other rich and prosperous languages of the world and illuminate with glorious rays the face of...poor and backward Assam.'\textsuperscript{5} Following the same path of the Axomiya Bhaxa Unnati Sadhini Sabha, in the 20th century, the Asom Sahitya Sabha took the torch

\textsuperscript{3} op.cit., no.2, p. 460
\textsuperscript{5} ibid., p.72
of cultural nationalism. It held its first session in 1917 and its motto was - ‘My mother language- my eternal love’.

One cannot single out the fact that Asom Sahitya Sabha is an organisation that works only for the protection of Assamese cultural nationalism. It would be unfair to overlook the immense contribution that the Sabha has made in the sphere of education, art, ethnic solidarity, literary motivation, socio-economic improvement in the lives of the people, etc. The Asom Sahitya Sabha became the mouthpiece of the Brahmaputra valley and the intellectuals expressed their vision through the Sabha. The Sabha cannot be said to be just an alliance or network among the people who are like-minded, rather it is highly organised and formal in its presentation. It is truly an organisation that has well defined objectives and aims. Since its membership is voluntary and it assists as an intermediary link between the individual and the state, it falls within the broad contours of civil society. The image of the Sabha never remained alike; its attitude over many decades has been conservative and reactionary as well as liberal and modern. Some authors would also argue whether it can be called a non-political literary-cultural organisation or is this image a cover-up for its political persuasion?

The Sabha is a product of the intellectual movement that swept across Assam during the colonial times. They were these intellectuals who came to the forefront for staging revolt against the colonial administration. Asserting the distinction of Assamese identity through cultural nationalism was seen as the only path-breaker in the progress of the Assamese as a community. The chapter will look at how such assertions were framed by the Sabha at times before independence and also after India’s independence. It will also look at how the Sabha became an important platform of manifesting Assamese identity and assumed an intervening role in the state politics; whether the Sabha had shades of political motivation in its goals and objectives? Before we move on to discuss the Sabha’s objectives, interest, contribution in the field of literature, art, culture and place arguments of various thinkers on the role of the Sabha, we must discuss ideas that were nourished by the Assamese intellectuals which provided background to the existence of the Asom Sahitya Sabha.
LEADERSHIP IN THE HANDS OF THE LITERATI: NURTURING OF THOUGHTS THROUGH LITERARY VENTURES

The Renaissance, evolving into a new phase of political and cultural consciousness in the late nineteenth century, had set the stage for the leadership to be passed onto the hands of Assamese intellectuals from the illiterate peasant class. The Assamese people, now rallied behind the rising Assamese intellectuals who had come forward to raise awareness of the separate identity of Assamese language, literature and culture. Even after the 1873 resolution, when Assamese was re-introduced in schools and courts following the withdrawal of Bengali language, the question of the separate identity of the Assamese did not quite settle down. The sense of denial of using one’s own mother-tongue for so many years coupled with a sense of deprivation on economic front was seen as a defeat in one’s own land. The Assamese intellectuals pledged to restore Assam’s cultural pride and take the leadership to see a further progress of their mother-tongue and Assam’s growth on all fronts.

The British government’s decision of re-introducing Assamese language was taken almost simultaneously with the decision to constitute Assam into a separate province from the Bengal administration as Chief Commissioner province (6th February, 1874). Though such move reflected the selfish motive of the Government to safeguard the interest of British tea planters in declaring Assam as a separate province; yet the decision came as a boon to the Assamese educated elite who saw possibilities of fulfilling their aspirations regarding employment and other government benefits. The years 1873-74, therefore could be considered crucial for the emergence of middle class Assamese nationalism. The Assamese intelligentsia began to show increasing awareness about their separate linguistic, cultural and political existence and this awareness instilled a new sense of self-confidence into them.6

The confidence of the Assamese to re-instate the lost glory of their mother-tongue received its greatest boost when it faced challenges from the critics who were not ready to acknowledge Assamese language identity even after it began to be used as the official language. Criticism poured in from the press of Bengal that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali and the attempts to show a separate existence of Assamese language were hoax.

Among the prominent journals of Bengal were *Mrinmayee, Prabasi* and *Bharati* which linked the separation with 'divide and rule' policy of the British. To them a painful separation had come between the Bengali language and its dialects like Assamese and Oriya. Such criticism provided moral boost to the Assamese intellectuals for strengthening their capacity to lead the Assamese people and stirred up their belief that they must work harder to enrich their mother-tongue. Lakshminath Bezbarua, Hemchandra Goswami and Rajni Kant Bordoloi were among the prominent writers who had relentlessly countered the criticism of Assamese language identity.

Lakshminath Bezbarua, stated that such criticism would rather bring positive outcome. He asserted that 'truth attains greater moral strength when attacked by its detractors', like the greatest friend of the Indian National Congress were its critics because 'their attacks only infused the organisation with greater strength to resist all such attacks'; similarly the Assamese language too would achieve greater heights when attacked by its critics. He wrote in his autobiography that a renowned member of the Tagore family had published an article titled "*Basha Bicched*" in the journal *Bharti* in which he argued that 'like the dialect of Chittagong, the Assamese and Oriya were dialects of Bengali' and that Assamese and Oriya language should merge with the Bengali language in the same manner as the English language had been adopted by the people of Scotland, Ireland and Wales because the only means of developing Indian literature was to increase the number of writers and readers in Indian languages as enrichment of language depended upon the numerical strength of its readership. And since Bengali-speaking population was greater in number keeping aside the distinction of languages, intellectuals should be drawn towards enriching Bengali literature, which in a way would enrich Indian literature.

In response to "*Basha Bicched*", Lakshminath put forward his arguments in another journal of the Tagore family, named *Punya*, which was edited by his wife for a few years. He said that Anadaram Dhekial Phukan and the American Missionaries had already established that Assamese language had existed as an independent language with a distinct heritage of its own. Bezbarua also referred to of J.D. Anderson, who had published an article in the *Calcutta Review* that 'Assamese language was a vernacular of a very ancient people whose social customs differed widely from those of the Bengalis'. Quoting from the relevant writings of different scholars and linguists like Max Muller, R.N. Cust, E.A.Gait and Sir George Grierson, he wrote that 'one's love for one's mother-
tongue is not the mere outcome of a hope that great literature would be produced in that language, and, history provide instances of a weak language spoken by a few attaining the status of a great language. He also said that the author of "Basha Bicched" was acquainted with the history of Assamese language and, therefore, it was not worthwhile to talk that Assamese language is not capable of producing great literature. These arguments of Bezbarua were also put forward in the meetings of Asomiya Bhaxa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUS), where such thoughts were familiarised among the Assamese student community and given wide publicity through Jonah the mouthpiece of ABUS.

The obsession with the status of Assamese language among the Assamese students was mainly due to obtrusive attitude that was trying to deny Assamese language a right to separate existence. From the second half of the nineteenth century, the persistent note in Assamese literature, particularly in prose and journalistic writings was one that spoke intensely about cultural nationalism.

In fact, literature speaks volume not only about the culture and life-style of the people, but also reflects the progress of the society and the thought-process that seem to predominate the period in which it is being produced. For example, if we talk of ancient Assamese literature, it was dominated by themes on royal patronage, hymns to the Almighty, devotion to the guru and praise of the kings. Then, with the Burmese invasion and the Moamaria revolt darkness fell on the Assamese literature. As there was no stability in the region, literature also failed to advance. The beginning of the British rule is referred to as the age of peace. That period in the Assamese literature is accepted as the age of Maharani (Victoria).

7 op.cit., no.6, p. 162-164
8 Assam's ancient literature is said to have begun with the visit of Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang in the 6th and 7th centuries of the Christian era, in the form of oral literature, as mantras, aphorisms and folk-songs. The Caryapadas (Buddha Gan O Doha) of the eleventh and twelfth centuries composed by Buddhist Siddhacharyas may be said to be the first written record of Assamese literature, so far discovered. In the period of pre-Vaishnavite (from 13th and 15th century), great writers like Hem Saraswati, Rudra Kandali, Kaviratna Saraswati, Harihar Vipar and Madhava Kandalu made valuable contributions to early Assamese literature. Their works mainly comprised of translation from religious books, epics and Puranas and composition of Kavyas. Giti-Ramayana of the poet Durgabar, Padma-Purana by Mankar, Usha-Parinaya of Pitambar are also some of the works worth mentioning. With the spread of the Bhakti Movement in the 15th century by Sankardeva and his disciples, Assamese literature saw a wave of secular thoughts. The Bargits and the Bhakti-Kavyas of Sankardeva and Madheveda are works of distinction like Kabir and Tulsiadas. Ram Sarasswati's Bhim Carita, Sridhar Kandali's Khankhova, Anata kandali's Kumar Harana, Raghunath Mahanta's Katha Ramayana, Subhankar Kavi's Srihasta Muktavali are worth mentioning of the old Assamese literature. Excerpts from Asom Sahitya Sabha, This is Assam (Jorhat: Asom Sahitya Sabha 1958), pp.43-46
The period of modern Assamese literature started blooming when the Christian Missionaries brought ideals from the west and worked hard to accommodate into Assamese life by publishing their literary works in Assamese and slowly modern literature ripened in the hands of Assamese intellectuals who made immense contribution to nurture nationalistic thoughts. Modern Assamese literature has been divided into sub-periods and the classification of their names comes from outstanding journals published during that period. The trend of thought that developed in the literary works as discussed below, do not indicate any hard and fast arithmetical accuracy of chronological order.

The ‘Orunodai’

The first major stride in modern Assamese literature was made by the American Baptist Mission in 1846 with the publication of the first Assamese newspaper Orunodai (Dawn of Light). The Mission also published the Bible in Assamese. Literature of the Orunodai period was influenced by the western thoughts and the social structure which was under the rule of feudal chiefs, so it reflected a bonding of the old with the new. Great deal of ideas were also influenced by Bengali literature. Science, history and religion captured the writings and as the Baptist Mission was based in Sibsagar, it published its writings in the Sibsagar dialect; hence the dialect of Sibsagar came to be recognised as standard Assamese. Nathan Brown, Miles Bronson, Nidhiram, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabiram Barua, William Robinson and Jaduram Barua were the great literary contributors of that period. So both the Missionary writers and Assamese writers made contributions in the literature. It was during this period, that nationalism began to germinate in Assam’s soil through literary works and newspapers like Asam News, Assam Bandhu and Assam Bilasini. Not only in words, but also in deeds, Assam had its first experience with national movement when Maniram Dewan participated in the 1857 revolt. It was during this period (1836 – 1872) when Assamese cease to be the language in schools and courts forcing both the missionary and Assamese writers to write extensively on the status of Assamese language. Some had even joined hands in challenging arguments that favoured the Government’s language policy.

The anti-Assamese lobby, which supported the government’s language policy, was as strong as the pro-Assamese lobby. Among the ones who opposed the use of Assamese as official language was William Robison, who was initially a British Baptist Missionary.
and later on became the Inspector of Schools for Assam. He significantly wrote the first
grammar of the Assamese in English, so we cannot deny his acquaintance with the
language. He strongly advocated the government's policy saying that Assamese and
Bengali were essentially the same language and Assamese was just a crude dialect of the
Bengali similar to the dialect spoken by the Lancashire peasants which was a crude
version of Queen’s English. The pro-Assamese lobby comprised of the American Baptist
Missionary writers like Miles Bronson, Samuel Whiting, H.Danforth, William Ward and
Nathan Brown; along with the missionary personnel, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan,
Lambodar Bora, Hem Chandra Barua and Gunabiram Barua who also joined in to argue
against anti-Assamese lobby. They spoke of misconception of interpreting Assamese and
Bengali as the same language, rather Assamese was equally, if not more, refined than
Bengali language. They argued that such suppression of language would deprive the
people of learning their own mother-tongue and would also result in utter failure of
government efforts to spread education among the masses. Bronson and his colleagues
argued that it was the Assamese language that was commonly understood by the
mountain tribes as well, so Assamese language was the only language that could be the
common medium of intercourse.

Efforts of the Missionaries and Assamese intellectuals could successfully restore
Assamese language to its desired status by the 1873 government verdict, yet the
controversy over Assamese language existence as separate identity that started from the
Orunodai period became more prominent in the later years when the Assamese students
who went to Calcutta to pursue higher education faced strong criticism on the issue of
separate identity of the Assamese language. It was during this period after 1873 that
Assamese writers were encouraged to publish articles and debates in newspapers and
prose, which was enriched with western thoughts and ideas but at the same time showed
profound love for motherland. Most prominent journal at that time was Jonaki, in which
writers like Lakshminath Bezbarua wrote extensively on Assamese language identity.
This period in Assam’s history is seen as the maturing period of cultural nationalism.

The ‘Jonaki’

Cultural nationalism became a well established feature from the time of Jonaki, and this
age in Assamese literature is known as the Jonaki age. Although the first novel Kamini
Kanta was published during Orunodoi period, Rajnikanta Bordoloi of the Jonaki period is referred as the greatest popular novelist. Sonnets, ballad, lyrics, comic essays, poems, stories, novels, critical essays and informative articles came out from the hands of Raghunath Chaudhury, Jatindra Nath Dowerah, Kamalenda Bhattacharya, Lakshmi Ram Barooa, Mafizuddin Ahmed, Lakshiminath Bezbarua, Hem Chandra Goswami, Jnananath Bora, Benudhar Sarma and others. Satyanath Bora provided the modern Assamese language with a good grammar and a fine prose-style. Lakshminath Bezbarua, the great litterateur of all times, belonged to this age; he was himself an institution of literature. He wrote poems – both light and serious, dramas- historical and farcical and comic books under the pen-name of Kripabar Barbarua. His analytical expositions of Vaishnava philosophy and nationalistic spirit in writings are unparallel contribution to the Assamese people. Bezbarua’s Banhi and Padmanath Gohain Barua’s Usha through a healthy attitude of literary rivalry made valuable contributions to Assamese literature and provided materials for culture and research in the field of language and literature. While Bezbarua gave Assamese language and literature depth of thought, Padmanath Gohain Barua gave variety to Assamese literature.

Humanistic attitude and social consciousness reflected in this period. Jonaki bid farewell to didacticism and made literature humanistic. The literary movement of this period is compared with the romantic period of English literature. Individual’s love of natural beauty, the profound relationship between man and nature and, above all, love for Assam and national consciousness captured the Assamese mind from the time of Jonaki. Varied experiments in the mode of expression, employment of new rhymes and figures of speech were made possible through the contact of the western and Indian learning, culture and civilisation. The ideas espoused in this period had inspired the thought-process of the twentieth century. It is often acknowledged that journal Orunodai and Jonaki were two milestones in trend and technique of modern literature.

The period was under the influence of the ABUS and the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha (JSS). The former worked outside Assam in Calcutta. It comprised of the Assamese students studying outside Assam who were concerned about the problems at home. The JSS members belonged to the educated gentry of Upper Assam. The ABUS, in its life-span, had initiated discussions on a variety of subjects related to history, culture, language and

9 op.cit., no.8, p. 50
literature among the student community, who also benefited from older stalwarts like Dr. Golap Bezbarua, Barriater Abdul Majid and Pandit Toshadhar Sarma Bhattacharyya who were called upon to preside in its various sessions. The students who returned from Calcutta and settled in Assam after completion of their studies opened branches of ABUS in many parts of Assam. It also staged plays and its members were involved in mental exercise through its journal Jonaki and newspapers to debate on issues that were impediments to the material and cultural progress of Assam. Bijuli was another journal brought out by a rival group of Assamese students in Calcutta in 1891. It competed with Jonaki in seeking out new literary talents from amongst the Assamese intelligentsia of the period. The healthy rivalry resulted in the creation of a lively literary climate in Assam which nurtured a host of new literary talents drawn from different walks of life.\(^\text{10}\)

The ABUS was mostly engaged in public debates through its writings, whereas the JSS was mostly engaged in all sorts of public welfare programmes. The JSS strongly criticised government’s policy of high land revenue and supported agrarian Ryots. It also expressed its opinion regarding more recruitment of local youths to government posts and submitted its views to the Royal Commission in 1893, which sat to inquire into matters relating to opium evil. The Sabha also took part in Congress sessions but its stand was moderate and it was always engaged in debates, discussions and laid petitions before the government.

The ‘Awahan’

From the Jonaki times to the Second World War, age of Assamese literature was called the Awahan. A monthly magazine by that name was published during that period. The Awahan period boast of literary contributions of Omeo Kumar Das, Tyagabir Hem Ch. Barua, Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, Nilmani Phukan, Mitradev Mahanta and others. The problems in politics were discussed in this period along with insight in economics, sociology, antiquarian studies, historical dramas and social novels. Ambikaguri Raychaudhury, Nalinibala Devi and some others brought out the spiritualist element in Assamese poetry. Though mystic in form the poems carried the fire of nationalisms in its spirit. We cannot forget the nationalistic contributions made by Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, Ambikaguri Roychowdhury and

\(^{10}\text{op.cit., no.6, p.174}\)
Prasannalal Choudhury through their writings which inspired the youths to take part in the freedom movement. This period was influenced by the freedom struggle, hence, the litterateurs gave their soul and heart to write themes that inspired the people of Assam and, at the same time, since the movement had shed its moderate tone, the writings also reflected forcefulness in attitude.

Art form of Assamese literary movement became prominent during this period through music, drama and picture. Ambikaguri Roychowdury had given inspiring poems and music known as Kara-Sangit (Songs of the Cell). Patriotic songs of this period by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala are all-time popular and even today, songs penned by him are sung with great devotion. Nakul Chandra Bhuyan’s collection of Assamese Bihu songs called Bohagi became very popular. Atul Chandra Hazarika and Prabin Phookan’s dramas provided materials for the Assamese stage. Historical dramas Bamuni Konwar and Kumar Bhaskarvarman were staged. It was the period when motion picture was born in Assam. Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla made the first Assamese motion picture Joymoti. Here it must be mentioned that though Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla was not Assamese by birth, but his love for Assam reflected in his writings.

The ‘Jayanti’ and ‘Surabhi’

There was no trace of mysticism in the Jayanti and Surabhi period. It was predominated by realistic poetry and prose. It was a period of haphazard literary activities in the backdrop of horrors of the Second World War and its consequences in the form of food shortage, refugee migration from Burma and the political mass revolution. Amrit Mahanta, Amulya Barua, Keshab Mahanta, Maheshwar Neog, Madhab Chandra Bezbarua, Hem Barua, Mahesh Chandra Dev Goswami and others who were the famous writers of that period and their writings brought a ‘progressive movement’ in Assamese literature.

The bold style and realism created an incentive to new literary enterprises. Daiba Ch. Talukdar, Pratap Talukdar, Sadananda Das, Jamiruddin Ahmed, Sitanath Brahma Chaudhury and Prabha Saikiani command considerable attention for their contributions. Lakhminath Phookan, Nidra Chandra Bhuyan, Satish Chandra Kakati, Harandra Nath Barua and such other journalists contributed many leading articles.
Magazines such as *Pachowa* and *Ramdhenu* were also able to extend influence in the literary society. These magazines kept alive the progressive movement of Assamese language and literature after independence. And after the setting up of a Radio Station in Guwahati, Assamese language and literature obtained a medium for speedy growth and commercial footage.\(^{11}\)

**Contemporary Age**

A number of new experiments have been initiated with respect to Assamese language and literature. As new writers were born, readership also increased and new thoughts and ideas appealed to the literate section of the Assamese population. Mythological, historical, social and political dramas, music, folk-tales and folk-culture were gaining popularity now not only through newspapers and journals but also through other medium of mass communication like radio and in the later years through television. Therefore, the age classification by its outstanding journal remained no more significant in the contemporary times.

At the time of partition of India and also at the time of the States Reorganisation Commission's visit to Assam, a large number of essays and criticisms came up in Assamese and English. Harendra Nath Barua, Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati, Madhav Chandra Bezbarua and Jogen Saikia are some of the names who have written on the problems of Assam and India during that time. Translation from other literature, wide world views, cultural intercourse between Assamese writers and writers of other Indian languages and venturing of Assamese writers into English language speak volumes of the wide perspective gathered in the journey of Assamese literature. Novels were being inspired by European, Russian and American literatures. Children stories, short stories, personal essays, humorous stories, books on technical subjects of music, sports, photography and dance, dramas and stories that depicted tribal life and culture have gathered a noteworthy place in the field of Assamese literature. Women writers also found considerable place in the contemporary age. It is not possible to discuss in detail the vast contribution of writers, but we must definitely discuss in brief how the contemporary age has evolved from earlier times, the change and the continuity.

\(^{11}\) op.cit., no.8, pp 52-55
Modern Assamese literature has changed considerably with the expectations of time. The Assamese litterateurs through their writings and thoughts have given new direction to the Assamese identity. However, there is certain sense of continuity in the themes that were generated in the colonial times and the post-colonial writings.

Assamese ‘cultural nationalism’ that began in the mid-nineteenth century as an assertion of autonomy and distinction of Assamese language has been a continuing theme in post-colonial period. However, Assamese identity began to be challenged by tribal identities from the 1960s onwards. Therefore, Assamese cultural nationalism began to talk of Assam’s multiculturalism and a trend towards cosmopolitan modern outlook in Assamese literature was evident. Assamese writings reflected a determination to keep unity of the Assamese with other small nationalities.

Immigration problem was the recurring theme that continued to hold attention of Assamese intellectuals. Gyannath Bora published the polemic *Asomat Bideshi* (Foreigners in Assam) in 1923. He stressed that the gravest danger that the Assamese faced was the problem of foreigners in Assam and that it was the duty of all Assamese to free their motherland from their vicious grip.¹² Plenty of literature were written on the immigrants threat to the Assamese identity e.g. *Apurna* (1930, Daibo Chandra Talukdar), *Herowa Swarga* (1952, Muhammed Piyar), *Ashirwad* (1950, Prem Narayan) and *Mati Kar* (1957, Hitesh Deka). The political turmoil in Assam during 1979-85 centred on the question of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Many writers wrote on the Assamese fear of becoming minority in its own state.

The economic underdevelopment of the state of Assam has been a major cause of concern in the literary works of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and even in the contemporary times. But unlike the early twentieth century writers who reasoned that Assam was unable to prosper in spite of its abundant wealth of culture and dignity because the Assamese remained unaware of the abundant wealth, the 1960s and 1970s generation writers began to explain Assam’s backwardness in terms of perceived powerlessness felt by the Assamese. ‘Weakness of will’ was an important theme in the contemporary writer’s perception of the sources of Assam’s problems. For instance, if we compare the writings of Lakshminath Bezbarua and Bhupen Hazarika, who wrote in the

60s about Assam’s fate, Bezbarua wrote a song which says, ‘We Assamese are not [culturally] poor. In what sense are we poor? We had everything and we have everything but we do not know it and we do not take stock of it.’ Whereas, Hazarika referring to Bezbarua wrote a song which reads as ‘It won’t do to take solace in the words that we Assamese are not poor; today’s Assamese must know themselves [become self-aware as a people] or else Assam will be doomed. Today’s Assamese must save themselves otherwise they will become destitute in their own land.’

The 20th century literary works showed reflections of middle class thoughts. Lakshminath Bezbarua had depicted the social life of the Assamese peasants and the middle class in a changed scenario in Suravi (1912) and Jonbiri (1913). The modern Assamese literary movement had inspired the formation of middle class led mass-organisations. The ABUS and the JSS are the pioneer organisations. Other such organisations like the Assam Association, Assam Chattra Sammillan and Asom Sahitya Sabha made deep impact on the Assam’s socio-political life. The broad characteristics of these organisations were different as the Assam Association could be said to be a political organisation, the Assam Chattra Sammillan was a student organisation and the Asom Sahitya Sabha was a literary organisation. Nevertheless, their basic features were common; they all drew members from the educated middle class and participated vigorously in the national cause of Assam. Therefore, with the growing strength of the middle class, leadership went in the hands of the literati, who tried to organise themselves in order to play a vanguard role for the progress and development of their land and culture.

The educated elite could take the lead because it could raise issues that concerned all sections of the society and it could bring the society in motion. In earlier times, when the upper class led the nationalist movement it was merely concerned with reinstating power in its hands, whereby the peasants think beyond securing their own benefits because of their pitied state of poverty. It was only the middle class, which had all the resources of knowledge and monetary strength, and which was capable enough to decide Assam’s future course of action. Therefore, it is important to discuss the emergence and characteristics of the Assamese middle class.

ASSAMESE MIDDLE CLASS - SOCIAL ROOTS AND CONCERNS OF THE CLASS

Manorama Sharma has stated in 'Discourses on the Concept of Middle Class' that there are a few social scientists who have tried to discuss 'Middle Class' in India and out of these some have tried to borrow the concept from western ideas and applied it in the Indian context. For instance, B.B. Misra, whose work does not truly reflect the Indian reality and his writings have been mostly inspired by G.D.H. Cole's work "Studies in Class Structure". Even Cole had admitted that his concept fits into only a highly industrialised country at a middle stage of capitalist development. Sharma and few other scholars have conducted region-specific study by streamlining the concept of 'middle class' in the context of Assam. This is especially significant because it was the Assamese middle class who advocated the very concept of Assamese identity.

Scholars like Hiren Gohain and Amalendu Guha have adopted a Marxist position in discussing the Assamese middle class and have placed it at par with the bourgeoisie. Whereas, Sharma says the Assamese middle class has a separate class position in the society and cannot be equated with the bourgeoisie. But she adheres to the Marxist definition of class that classes are not mere economic entities (as explained by Weber and C. Wright Mills), but are a social formation where the economic group was numerically viable, is aware of its own interests and is ready to wage a political struggle in defence of these interests. According to this analysis, though economy plays the role of a principal agent in determining social classes, the classes are not mere economic groups. The concept of class has to be viewed in totality, where apart from economic situation, ideological and political aspects also play a viable role.

The main criterion which defines a class as 'class' distinct from the 'mass' is that it has the capacity to organise itself and is conscious of its class position. While discussing the Assamese middle class, such consideration has been kept in mind by Sharma that a few unorganised individuals cannot form a class so the activities of Maniram Dewan or Anandaram Dhekial Phukan cannot be termed as the activities of middle class. A class has to be numerically viable and, therefore, the existence of the Assamese middle class


15 ibid., p. 246
can be taken into consideration at a certain stage of historical development of the Assamese society, from where it has started playing a significant role.

There is also ambiguity among social scientists as regard to the period of the formation of the Assamese middle class and the role played by this class, particularly in the colonial period. Apurba Kumar Baruah,\textsuperscript{16} points out the contradiction in opinion of scholars on the formation and role of the Assamese middle class. There are two diverse viewpoints on this issue: one school of thought opines that that middle class in Assam had emerged in the early British period and played a collaborative role with the imperialist in its early years, unconcerned with the problems of the masses. Whereas, the other school of thought says that middle class in Assam had emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and from its early days has been able to identify itself with the problems of the masses. Eminent scholars like Hiren Gohain, Prafulla Chandra Mahanta and K. Deka belong to the former school of thought and the second school of thought is represented by Manoroma Sharma and Jatindra Kumar Borgohain.

Hiren Gohain has argued that the middle class in Assam can be traced to as early as from the British taking over the rule in Assam. According to him, it would not be wrong to suggest that the middle class existed in the last days of the Ahom rule. Gohain calls Dinanath Bezbaruah as an elite of the new middle class, who was one of the officers of the Ahom King Purander Singha and later on entrusted with the administrative responsibilities during the initial days of the Company rule. It shows that Gohain admits the existence of the Assamese middle class even in the Ahom days from where it transcended to the British times. He says that the Assamese middle class had a mutual understanding with the British forces initially, marking the activities of Maniram Dewan, but the dire consequences faced by Dewan at the hands of the British forced antagonism in the middle class minds against the British. Moreover, he also claims that the British adopted the ideals of Assam's old middle class culture. Prafulla Chandra Mahanta also mentions the names of Dinanath Bezbaruah and Maniram Dewan as members of the middle class. K. Deka identifies the middle class in the Ahom era as those strata of

people who were in-between the nobles and the labouring paiks. H.K. Barpujari also claims the existence of the middle class in the initial days of the Company rule.

Manorama Sharma posits that the conditions prevailing during the initial days of the British rule were not suitable for the growth of a new class, and it was only during the end of the nineteenth century and towards the early twentieth century that middle class had emerged. Jatindra Kumar Borgohain also noted that it was only after the peasant revolt that leadership went into the hands of a class that was western educated and this class was the middle class, who was trying to establish its political and cultural leadership.

In the medieval Assam, the presence of any other social class to counter-balance the royalty was not evident. Rather, class distinction was not prominent and even during the time when raijmels developed, they comprised of all inhabitants residing in the area. Here, common man was supreme, so all decisions taken were of the raj, i.e the people. There was no possibility of the growth of an elite class. Then how did the middle class in Assam emerge? Whether the advent of British automatically led to the growth of this class or some other conditions prevailed that led to the emergence of the middle class?

Social Roots of the Assamese Middle Class

According to Manorama Sharma\(^\text{17}\) the middle class have neither emerged from the agrarian sector nor from the commercial sector, and the possibility of the industrial development to bring about a new class was totally absent. There was no significant polarisation of land holdings during the early decades of the British rule as the agrarian economy was almost stagnant that could have heralded the growth of new classes from the agrarian sector. There was no indigenous merchant class and therefore there was no scope for the middle class to emerge from the commercial sector either. Then who were these middle class?

Sajal Nag\(^\text{18}\) says that the middle class leaders were the offspring of primarily two sections of Assamese people: the members of Ahom bureaucracy and Vaishnava Sattra families. Manorama Sharma has also stated this while tracing the social origins of the Assamese

\(^{17}\) Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1990), p.113-4

\(^{18}\) op.cit., no.12, p.112-4
middle class. In the absence of rich Zamindars or a class of merchants who had the money to take advantage of the new colonial set up, it was the families of the British who created high revenue officers and the traditional Satra institutions of Assam which had the resource to give western education and make them qualified to take part in the colonial administration.\textsuperscript{19}

When the British took over Assam, members of the Ahom bureaucracy were given influential positions in the British administration. The British appointed the high officers of the Ahom government like the Baruas, Phukans and Rajkhowas in high ranking post because they were the most influential people in the Assamese social life and it was natural that since they held influence over an area as Ahom officers they would carry forward the same influence in the British rule. They were appointed as Chaudhuris or Mauzadars, who were responsible for the collection of revenue and thereby exercised considerable power over the mauza or circle of villages. Their opinions were respected by the masses and the authorities. Moreover, the Mauzadar also had to be wealthy having some landed property which could provide them security in running the Mauza. This was possible only for the members of the Ahom bureaucracy to stand in this position.

The Mauzadars also had good earnings, as they received ten percent commission on the first ten thousand and five per cent on the balance of revenue paid by them and they generally invested their money in some business activities so their economic position remained affluent. There were around 300 Mauzas in 1894 in the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. Because of their lucrative position, social status and influence and the British pressure to extract revenue, it was much expected that feudal attitude and manner of living would develop in Mauzadars’ style of functioning. They had the resources to give their children western education and send them to Calcutta for higher studies. Therefore, the early educated elite had their roots in this genre of the Assamese people because of their numerical strength, affluence and social importance.

Another line of social roots of the Assamese middle class has been traced to the Vaishnava Satra families. Satra, were institutions through which the faith of Vaishnavism was propagated. Initially, the Satras were religious congregations but later on they became more institutionalised and structured with the spread of Vaishnavism. Soon, the

\textsuperscript{19} op.cit., no. 14, p.116
Ahom kings began to patronise these Satras and bestowed large grants of estates; the Satras began to economically prosper and grew in power and influence. The Satras grew so much in power and influence that they began to be considered dangerous to the Ahom monarch. In fact, wealth and land aplenty prompted the Satras to develop their own system of administration. They became almost like states within the Ahom state. The system of administration in the Satras was similar to the paik system of the Ahom kings, but here unlike Ahom system of giving personal services, the paiks had to pay rent. The feudal tendencies in the Satras were stronger than Ahom monarchical system.

When the British took over, they enquired into the grant deeds given by the Ahom monarch and those Satras which could produce their original grants retained their earlier status and wealth, whereas some Satras lost their land, which were unable to produce original deeds. The British also maintained cordial relations with the Gossains, seeing their power and influence. The families of Satras were already an intellectual class, who took to western education very easily. The Satras being educated and wealthy gave money to set up schools and also established printing press. Therefore, it was quite natural that the educated elites had emerged from the Satra families.

The middle class has emerged mainly from direct descendents of the high revenue officers and Satra institutions or those families which were supported by them. The social roots of the middle class, whether from the Satras or from the other affluent section, highlight one important fact that the Assamese middle class had strong rural links. Further, there being very few other avenues of fruitful investment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Assam, whatever savings the middle class accumulated from their jobs, the first investment would be in the purchase of a plot of cultivable land in the village. Therefore, unlike other middle classes in a totally urbanised capitalist system, the Assamese middle class had rural roots, hence, it could garner support for its causes from the rural peasantry and soon rose to a dominant position in the Assamese society.

Concerns of the Assamese Middle Class

The role played by the Assamese middle class was inclusive of the rural interest and it reflected a sense of cultural nationalism. It had come to play a very important role from the twentieth century in the socio-economic and political developments of Assam. This

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20 op.cit., no.17, p.133
class started emerging strongly from the late nineteenth century and its presence was felt in the peasant revolts of that period. It rather changed the whole character of peasant movements in Assam. The movements ceased to be spontaneous uprisings and rather became protests through petitions and memorials sent to the government. The middle class introduced a method of constitutional agitation that was seen nowhere before 1890s because before that the traditional leaders from the peasantry took the lead, who were not educated to write such well argued petitions against government enforcements. With the coming of the middle class, traditional leaders were pushed to the background and middle class came to dominate and Ryot Sabhas took the place of Raijmels.

The middle class was sympathetic towards the grievances of the rural peasantry because of two important factors: firstly as the middle class was still in the nascent stage, it required the support of the peasantry; and secondly, the middle class had strong rural links. The middle class in Assam was not an urban phenomenon; it came up from the rural background, from the affluent section of the Mauzadars and Satras and, therefore, it was easier for it to gain confidence of the peasantry and to inspire them to take part in their movements.

The Assamese middle class grew up in constant conflict with its Bengali counterpart on all fronts -economic, political, social and cultural. Therefore, ethnic and cultural affiliations and common interests brought the middle class together. British administration opened the flood gate of migration, and these immigrants came to dominate the economic life of Assam due to British patronage. Some scholars point out that if the Assamese middle class would have been in fairly organised form then in the initial stage itself such British policy would have met with stiff resistance. But in the period from 1826 to 1900, the resistance was not plenary, only some intellectuals had reacted to the immigration process started by the British. With the turn of the 20th century, immigration increased tremendously, more so with the partition of Bengal. Of all the immigrants into the valley, the Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims, were most numerous and unwanted mainly because as R.C. Kalita says, the Bengali Hindus were a direct threat to prevalent employment avenues and the Assamese feared of losing their language and culture in their own land; secondly there was also the fear of Assamese

Hindus being turned into a religious minority by the Bengali Muslim immigrants. The class was quick to realise the threats inherent in the incessant immigration and offered organised resistance to it. It articulated the aspirations and the right to self-assertion of the Assamese.

This fear of dominance by the immigrants might have been one of the motivating factors which led the Assamese middle class to play an important part, it did, in the emergence of Assamese national consciousness. In the early stage of its emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, representatives of this class kept on trying to arose the national consciousness of the Assamese people.

The value premises of the Assamese middle class slowly began to be accepted by the Assamese society. Authors like Manorama Sharma and Apurba K. Baruah call this trend of dominance of the middle class as the hegemonic disposition of that class. The middle class opinion reflected in all important developments in Assam. It was concerned and felt affected by the social issues of the day. It successfully worked for the reinstatement of Assamese language and demolished the theory that Assamese was a Bengali patois. It provided the Assamese language with a rich literature which helped establish its separate identity.

Social scientists have often speculated that when the Assamese middle class talked of separate identity of the Assamese, whether it claimed allegiance of its ethnic existence only to the Assamese language speaking community or did it embrace other ethnic language speaking groups of Assam, especially the plain tribes?

To some social scientists the word 'Assamese' would mean all ethnic communities of Assam and when one talks of 'Assamese middle class' it includes within its ambit other language-speaking groups of Assam like the Bodos, Mishing, Karbi and others. They consider them to be a part of the composite Assamese culture unlike the word 'Asomiya' which is used to refer to the Assamese speaking community. Apurba Kumar Baruah says that till independence, the Assamese led by its middle class did not show much interest in the cultures of these tribal communities of Assam, but from the time of

23 ibid., p. 269
When the middle class started emerging from these communities, it began to show awareness of the distinct existence of the tribal communities and its initial response was to preach assimilation. However, the Assamese middle class remained in constant threat of becoming minority in its own land, so in an attempt to consolidate its position it became sometimes intolerant towards the aspirations of other ethnic communities of Assam.

The attitude of the Assamese middle class towards the protection of the Assamese identity sometimes became so aggressive that many branded this attitude as chauvinist. The same attitude, thereby, reflected in the work of organisations like Asom Sahitya Sabha that were led by the middle class. The middle class also provided leadership to the freedom struggle through organisations like the Assam Association and the Congress. Rather in the period after 1910 the dominance of the middle class was more visible when the Congress became well established. By and large, middle class interests and ideology came to be accepted as those of the Assamese society. This dominance had some progressive elements in it, but it also had serious conservative and reactionary undertones in keeping with general middle class attitudes and ideological preferences, which have created serious problems in the healthy development of the Assamese society. 24

The concerns of the Assamese middle class paved the way for the birth of organisations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha. It has already been discussed that organisations with definite socio-political programmes began to gain ground in the twentieth century. The middle class Assamese litterateurs led the Asom Sahitya Sabha and like other middle class organisations of Assam, the Asom Sahitya Sabha had a mass appeal. Though it was premised on the literary and cultural background, it was different in character from purely literary organisations like the Gyan Sabhas of the nineteenth century. The main concerns of the Sabha included development, promotion, preservation and protection of the Assamese language, literature and culture. However, since the Sabha had flair of middle class interest, it could not keep itself away from socio-political issues that gripped Assam. The presence of Sabha continued even after India gained independence and according to the needs of time the Sabha has raised matters in the public forum and even confronted the government several times.

24 op. cit., no. 17, p. 146
OBJECTIVES AND CONCERNS OF THE ASOM SAHITYA SABHA

The Asom Sahitya Sabha or Assam Literary Society has grown with times. It was formed in 1917 and since then for nearly nine decades it has contributed towards the growth and development of the Assamese society. The Sabha was constituted by like-minded Assamese intellectuals who wanted to change the face of Assam by giving priority to the language, literature and culture of Assam. The Sabha has opened its branches at the state as well as district level. It is popular even in the remotest area of Assam. Through all these years, the Sabha continues to hold on to its value.

The Sabha is composed of three parts – the General Conference, Affiliated Association and Recognised Association. The criteria for eligibility for membership require that person should be above 18 years of age and should have aptitude for the development of Assamese language, literature and culture. The Constitution of the Sabha states that the leader of the organisation shall be known as the President. Prior to 1939, the President was elected on the basis of mutual understanding and voted unanimously. The issue of the election of the President was raised for the first time in 1944 and campaign for the introduction of the election was conducted through local dailies. The President thus came to be elected through secret ballot. The Sabha derives its revenue from various sources viz., donations, endowments, funds, grants-in aid. In the course of the proceedings of the first session in 1917, Dr. Harekrishna Das donated Rs 10,000, which was the first income of the Sabha. The various endowment funds constitute a major source of revenue and sanctions from the government are also a very important source of income. The central government has also aided the Sabha at times.

The objectives laid in the Memorandum of Association25, signed on 17th March, 1924, clearly states that its first and foremost duty is to carry forward the improvement of the Assamese language and literature and to bring this in effect, the Sabha is required to revise and bring up-to-date Assamese dictionary and grammar; it will encourage research and study of ancient Assamese literature; to encourage publication on subjects in which Assamese literature is generally poor; it will provide assistance to those authors for publishing work who cannot afford to do so; and to popularise the study and research in Assamese literature among the general public.

25 See Appendix V
The arena of work of the Sabha has expanded much beyond these objectives. The main areas of work over the years have been – publishing books on linguistics, culture, literary criticism, tribal life and culture, science, dance, music, film, and sculpture in Assamese language; publication of children’s novel; publication of grammar and dictionary of different tribal groups of Assam; publication of rare historical collection; translation work; conducting workshop with great writers; organising seminars and workshops on linguistics, lexicography and drama performance; organising programmes on children’s day, Shilpi Divas; developing trusts to give prizes to reputed/young writers in fiction, science, literature and culture through cash money; arranging fellowships for matriculation students and distribute prizes among students who have fared well in higher secondary and high school exams. The Sabha has also been expressing its views and opinions and making public appeal on different issues that are important for the socio-economic development of Assam.

The Sabha has been popularising Assam's cultural heritage not only in the national forum but also at the international level. Within India, the Sabha has been working in places like Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and in states of North-East and outside India in Great Britain, America and South Africa. The Sabha organises seminars, birth centenaries of Sankardev, Bishnu Rabha, etc., in places outside Assam. Sabha also invites renowned litterateurs of Indian languages to participate in its seminars and annual sessions etc organised in Assam. The Sabha has published books in English and Hindi, translated important books from other languages and has launched its own website. The Sabha tries to draw inspiration from literature and culture of other Indian languages.

In the Constitution of the Sabha, there is a clause that requires the Sabha not to discuss any political subject and to consider itself a non-political organisation, having no affiliation to any political party. However, in democracy economic and social dissatisfaction quite often comes out in the form of political expressions. As the Sabha has been involved in the socio-economic life of the people, it cannot thoroughly disassociate itself with the political matters. It was involved in several movements like the state language issue, medium of instruction issue, state reorganisation issue, the foreigners problem issues. Though it has been associated at certain level with the political matters it has always acted independently on its own principles and policies without being subservient to any party principles. The Sabha’s work has not changed in substance
but its texture has changed considerably with times and challenges. Changes in the concerns of the Sabha came along with the developments that were taking place in Assam's socio-political life.

Changes could be seen in three stages – 1917-1947, 1947-80, and 1980-2005. During the period 1917-47, the Sabha was able to attract almost all the people of Assam. Between the years 1947-80, many new political developments took place. The Sabha was pressing for the introduction of Assamese as the official language of Assam and, thereby, made an appeal to the Assamese society to come forward and join the language movement. The Sabha could not predict the consequences of language movement. This phase was giving way to an anti-Assamese feeling because in defining the 'Assamese', the Sabha failed to create space for other ethnic groups of Assam. The ASS has failed in its duty due to lack of vision. In the period 1980-2005, anti-Assamese feeling developed especially among the Bodo community, which forced the Sabha to start working on the value of integration.26

Sabha in the Pre-independence Days

In the initial phase of formation, stress was laid on the organisational development of the Sabha. In the very second year of its formation, during the annual sitting at Goalpara in 1918, the Sabha had made its intention very clear that it would work in earnest for all-round development of Assamese language and literature. In the annual sitting of Sabha in Goalpara, two important proposals were put forward. The first proposal stated that along with imparting education in Assamese language in Cotton College, it was also necessary to preserve the precious old Assamese literature and for that purpose a permanent post should be created by the government within the Assamese language department. The proposal was put forward by Sri Jatindranarayan Chaudhury, seconded by Ramakanta Barkakoty and approved by Hariprasad Nath and Pramathnath Chakraborty. Another proposal put forward by Hon'ble Rai Phanidhar Chaliha Bahadur requested the Government that while selecting courses and books for students, a nominee of the Sabha should be present during such meetings. This proposal was seconded by Chandranath Sharma and approved by Maulavi Fakiryar Rahman.

The Sabha was not reactionary with respect to the British government; rather it was grateful to it in the sense that it helped building up the organisation for the development

26 Suresh Kumar Nath, General Secretary, Guwahati City Committee (68th Session) Asom Sahitya Sabha, Interviewed on 5th March, 2005
of Assamese language. In the same sitting of Goalpara, the Sabha paid homage to Colonel P.R. Gurdon, the Hon'ble Deputy Commissioner, who had been a support to the formation of the Sabha, expressing that ‘the Sabha is grateful to the Commissioner for showing interest for the development of Assamese language and hopes that in future also he will show his affection towards Assamese language.’ When Edward VIII was crowned in England, the Sabha welcomed his crowning and referred him as ‘India’s new monarch’. The mode of request and gratefulness in the tone of Sabha shows that the Sabha intended to work for Assamese language in collaboration with the government.

The collaborative tone of the Sabha was not only towards the British government, but also towards all ethnic communities. On 18th February, 1919 at Tezpur, the Sabha clearly stated that the house of the Sabha would be open to all, for discussions irrespective of community-religious affinities. Herein, the Sabha also propose to acquire its own building from where its activities could be initiated. It thanked Dakshin Patiya Satradikar Goswami for donating five thousand rupees for that purpose. The Sabha had to run its activities mainly with the financial aid from people who supported the Sabha's cause. For instance, in 1923, Rai Bahadur Handique donated 25,000 rupees, and Radha Goswami provided 2000 rupees. The Sabha also decided that in every two successive years, the Sabha would award authors engaged in writing literature for children.

The Sabha was very much concerned with the education of the masses and made every effort to help the young people. The Sabha tried to advocate that the Assamese was the language of the masses, hence it should promote the use of Assamese language. At its Sixth Session in 1924, at Dibrugarh, the Sabha took the responsibility for making arrangements for girls and boys to pursue studies in Assamese keeping in mind the eagerness shown by their parents and made financial arrangements for the same. The Sabha also decided in that session to request the government to use ‘Assamese language in forms and notices issued in court, post office, railway station and steamer ghats.’ In 1924, the Sabha bestowed the working committee of the Sabha with the responsibility for publishing a quarterly journal by the year 1926 that would serve as its mouthpiece. The Sabha was trying to promote its objective among larger sections of the Assamese community.

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28 ibid., p. 55
At its eight session, the Sabha requested the Koch Behar royal highness to appoint one Assamese teacher to teach Assamese language in the Kooch Behar College. In Dubri, 1926, the Sabha contemplated appointing persons who could carry on propaganda of education in Assamese language among the Assamese people of Cacher valley and Surma foothills. In 1929, it announced an award of 100 rupees for music composition in the interest of Assamese language. To promote the Assamese language and people, Sabha had placed forward many proposals from time to time.

On 16th December, 1926, the Sabha decided to request the Calcutta University to introduce B.A. Honours in Assamese language. The Sabha lamented that the University had not given thought of introducing Graduate course in Assamese language and the Sabha was eagerly waiting to come forward to provide help in the selection of the catalogue of books and literature for the course. This move was probably aimed at helping the students who went to Calcutta to pursue higher education; the percentage of such students was considerably high. Later, Calcutta University did introduce higher education in Assamese language. Although the Sabha was pleased that the Calcutta University had allowed students to give M.A. examination in Assamese, yet proper arrangements to impart education in Assamese language were not made. Therefore, in 1938, the Sabha decide to make an appeal to the government to introduce post graduate course in Assamese language by July 1941 in Cotton College, so as to address the problem of the seclusion of the Assamese people from their own language. In 1940 the Sabha also proposed the introduction of Assamese as an optional subject in the Indian Civil Service examination and for that purpose it asked the Assam government to put forward its demand to the Indian government.

The Sabha had always shown its concern for the people of Assam and tried to take note of their views and opinions. In 1936, the Sabha stopped publication of its two novels namely ‘Sri Sri Debodamodar Charitta’ and ‘Sri Sri Banomali Deb Charitta’ because they were causing enough grief to the Assamese people and the Sabha never intended to disregard people’s views and to create misunderstanding.

The Sabha had always shown respect to litterateurs of Assam, whose inspiring works formed its base. It had requested the government in 1936 to pay pension to the great litterateur of Assam, Sri Lakshminath Bezbarua, as his contribution to Assam and its
people was immense. It had also declared in 1953 at its session in Shillong that it sought to bestow title upon renowned litterateurs of Assam for their contribution in the field of Assamese language and literature. The Sabha was much concerned with preserving the ancient Assamese literature. It appealed the Government of Assam to write to the West Bengal Government to bring back the Assamese books that were lying in Cooch Behar museum to Assam so that the Assam Government could make arrangement for the preservation of those books.

Asom Sahitya Sabha took a decision in 1940 to prepare a dictionary of translation made from different languages of Assam to Assamese language. In the proposed lexicon, it also intended to highlight the similarities between Assamese language and other languages. The Sabha had made efforts from time to time to bring out some sort of affinity of different languages of Assam with the Assamese language. That suggested that the Sabha was not blind in showing concern to foster an understanding between different cultures of Assam. But, threat to the Assamese language compelled the Asom Sahitya Sabha to adopt a reactionary stand and to become rigid in its attitude.

The Asom Sahitya Sabha had shown considerable change in the post-independence period as it had shed its moderate tone and became very rigid on the status of Assamese language. This change was expected because even after India’s independence the Assamese could not make its stand clear and threat to its language still haunted the minds of the people. The question of Assamese identity remained a matter of concern for the Assamese middle class. This threat became more prominent when Jawaharlal Nehru had proposed in the Lok Sabha on 19th December, 1955 to divide India into five zones. This move was opposed by the Sabha saying that it would subjugate Assamese language, literature and culture.

**Sabha in the Post-Independence Days**

In 1954, as published in the news, a Lok Sabha member from Assam Sri Debkanta Baruah Deb, who was also a member of the Congress Working Committee, stated in the West Bengal Political Conference that Bengali should be the national language of those living in eastern India. He said, ‘in fact, Bengali has achieved the status of some kind of a
Lingua Franca in Eastern India. 29 The Sabha expressed its grief that being a responsible person; he should have refrained from using such remarks. In 1954, the Sabha expressed that Hindi could not be the link language in the North-East, rather it proposed that Assamese should be made the link language and should be introduced at all levels of education.

In the year 1958, the Asom Sahitya Sabha expressed its concern over the medium of instruction used in educational institutions run by the railway department. It objected that since Assamese was not used as the medium of instruction it became difficult for boys and girls of Assamese speaking railway employees. Thereafter the Sabha demanded the introduction of Assamese as medium of instruction in railway schools. Again in 1970, the same issue was raised because the railway department had not paid heed to the Sabha’s demand. The Sabha stated that the railways had established schools in medium other than Assamese and had not taken any initiative to introduce schools in Assamese medium. By raising the issue again, the Sabha had been trying to attract the attention of the Assam government and the central government. This move was taken by the Sabha because Bengali medium railway schools were already established whereas Assamese medium schools were yet to be introduced. Therefore it demanded the establishment of Assamese medium railway schools in Assam.

The Sabha also demanded in 1959 at its Naogoan session that the education department of the Assam government should make Assamese compulsory in all non-Assamese schools and colleges. The Sabha, in the same session, expressed that "it is perturbing fact that Assam Government has not taken any firm decision regarding the state language." 30 It discussed the matter and conveyed its opinion through the session that "Assamese" should be made the state language of Assam.

On 19th April, 1960, the Sabha made its objective very clear that it wanted Assamese to be made as medium of instruction in Gauhati University. Its decision was based on two reasons: firstly, after independence, development of regional languages should be promoted and secondly, the difficulties faced by students due to the use of English language as medium of instruction should be removed. The Sabha came up with another proposal on the issue of English language in 1961, claiming that for students of Assamese

29 op.cit., no.27, p. 59
30 op.cit., no.27, p. 63
medium, English language was frequently used in examination papers which made it difficult for them to understand questions. The Sabha, therefore, demanded that the examination paper should be set only in Assamese language for all subjects till higher secondary level for Assamese medium students. English should be used only in English subject paper. The Sabha further observed that most of the research in the Gauhati University was carried in English medium. At its Nalbari session in 1965, the Sabha appealed to the Gauhati University to encourage research in Assamese language as well. In the same session, the Sabha took many initiatives regarding preparation of memorials in the name of Lakshminath Bezbarua and to establish its own publication house.

The Sabha made every effort not only to promote but also to preserve the dignity of Assamese culture. It raised objection with respect to the pictures of Sankardev which were published in the book titled 'Sankardev' by the National Book Trust of India and in an Assamese book 'Akashi' in 1969. It found both the pictures defamatory to the great saint.

The proposals made by the Sabha in the 1950s and 60s show that the Sabha was becoming very assertive regarding Assamese language which it wanted to be introduced as medium of instruction and as the state language. The Sabha’s proposals in these years became very forceful; it used more words like ‘demand’ than ‘appeal’. In the 1970s, the Sabha became more rigid in its stand, as it realised that Assamese was losing out from other communities of Assam, especially the Bodo community. On 29th March, 1975 the Sabha raised its voice against the change in the Bodo language script from Assamese to Devnagri script. It opposed the recommendation of the Kothari Commission appointed by the central government. The Commission suggested the use of Devnagri script for Bodo language rather than Assamese. The Sabha demanded that the central government should not consider the recommendations of the Commission and also expected the Assam Government to register protest on such a move of the imposition of Devnagri script. The Sabha’s work was focussed on protection of Assamese language, literature and culture. It made every effort to popularise it not only among the Assamese language community but also among other indigenous culture and communities of Assam. However, with consciousness for a separate identity brewing among the Bodo community, the Sabha realised that other indigenous communities of Assam would cooperate if only the Sabha takes up their interests as well.
The Sabha tried to change its dominant attitude and became more conscious and concerned for other indigenous communities, apart from Assamese. When in 1974, the Bodo community started a movement for the use of Roman script for its language, the Sabha tried to sort out the matter. It tried to provide a platform to the Bodo community to discuss on why such demand has been raised and whether the use of Roman script would bring development to the Bodo community? The Sabha called upon both the Assamese and Bodo writers to discuss the issue in the Writer’s Group-discussion, organised from 6th to 9th November, 1975, in Guwahati and also brought out a booklet, ‘Asomor Lipi Samashya’. Dr, Mahendra Bora, Dr. Upendranath Goswami, Ram Das Basumatary, Gagan Chandra Sonowal and Nirupama Hagjer were among the participants. Such group discussions had become a part of Asom Sahitya Sabha and were organized annually at different places of Assam; the first one was organized in 1973, where writers held discussions on past and present work of novels, story-writing and theatre, and also expressed opinion on status of minority languages in Assam. In such discussions writers were invited to express view on important issues having a bearing on society, art, culture, language and literature.

The Sabha had also put forward other proposals before the State government apart from the issue of language identity in the post-independence phase. For instance, it suggested the name ‘Saraighat Bridge’ for the bridge which was build over the river Brahmaputra in Guwahati. It also suggested that sacred lines of Srimanta Sankardev be included in the postage stamp bearing his picture; to establish national library in Assam; and to appeal to the Cooch Behar government to provide copies of the old Assamese literature kept under its custody so as to preserve them in the form of microfilms and Photostat copies. To promote and preserve the culture, the Sabha proposed to the state and central government that they should consider making ‘Radhakanta Handique Bhawan’ as centre for learning of language and cultural studies. It also proposed to the state government that in Majuli, the epicentre of Vaishnavite culture, a cultural centre should be established to impart instructions on folk culture of Assam. It also proposed to build a museum under the research support of Dibrugarh University to preserve the cultural heritage of various communities of Assam.

The Sabha slowly moved on to bring out the essence of cultural life of Assam that included contribution not only of Assamese but also of other indigenous communities.
The Asom Sahitya Sabha President, Jatindra Nath Goswami, in March 1980 in his address to the Sabha, urged the Sabha to respect the mixed nature of the culture of Assam and emphasised on treasuring the age-old folk songs of Assam and to make a compilation of such assets. He also said “The Sabha accepts that it should take up definite objectives for the development of Bodo, Mishing, Karbi and other communities languages... the crux of the matter is- the Sabha should care for the growth and development of their language.”

The Sabha’s President Dr. Rabindra Kumar Bhattacharjee in 1983, at the 50th annual session at Bongaigoan, said that to picturise the folk-culture and history of North-East there was a necessity of creating graphic museum. He also said that there is lack of a common platform for cultural performances and so there should be theatre ground, cultural institution and art gallery to provide this common platform. The Sabha also congratulated the Bodo community when the government made Bodo as the second official language of Assam. The Sabha expressed its pleasure to see such developments.

The Asom Sahitya Sabha had been considerably trying to make a mutual approach towards other communities of Assam. In 2005, at Siphajar session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, the Sabha’s President Sri Kanaksen Deka invited the Presidents of different Sahitya Sabhas of Assam in the Sabha’s rally. It seemed the motive behind this was to create a peaceful atmosphere where all language groups are given place.

Kanaksen Deka was not only positive towards bringing a conducive atmosphere among the different communities of Assam but is also positive that the present generation is keen towards learning Assamese language and literature, an area, which the Sabha has been making efforts to preserve and promote among the common people of Assam.

The Sabha is concerned with young people and works for their enlightenment by publishing literature of their interest. However, the question that has been asked again and again is that why the young generation is not so eager to learn Assamese literature? The President, in answer to the question in the Sipajhar session said, “I won’t agree that the present generation is not eager to learn Assamese literature, on the other hand, not all of them are interested. As the society needs youth who are eager to learn literature, the society also needs youth who are interested in sports, business agriculture, etc. Seeing

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31 Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Sanskritiki (Guwahati: Director, Cultural Affairs, 1990), p. 31
32 'Asom Sahitya Sabha Barta', Second Issue, February, 2005
from that viewpoint, the number of youth who are interested in literature is not a small number."  

While commenting on the role of the Sabha, various authors and analysts have taken different positions; some have regarded it as an elitist organisation and others call the Sabha a populist organisation. It has functioned for nearly ninety years as a pressure group, as a civil society and as public forum. The role of the Sabha has been highlighted in the following discussion.

**CONSERVATIVE APPROACH OF THE SABHA: ETHNIC PROTECTIONISM**

Benudhar Rajkhowa in his Presidential address at the annual session of Asom Sahitya Sabha said, "Let all nationalities (jati) of India follow their own path. The Brahmaputra, the Ganga, the Yamuna, the Kaveri, the Sind; let all of them go on and flow along their respective courses. Let there be no attempts to merge one with the other."  

Tarun Ram Phukan, in his presidential address at the Assam Sahitya Sabha session in Dubri, 1927 said; "We Assamiyas are a distinct nationality amongst Indians. Though our language is Sanskrit based, it is a distinct language. A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others. Alas it is otherwise; we are not only dependent, our neighbour is trying to swallow us taking advantage of our helplessness. Brother, recollect your past glory to have an understanding of the present situation."  

Such remarks were an apparent portray of the Sabha that it followed an exclusive recognition of only ‘Assamese’ as the identity of its people, whom it was representing and whose identity protection, it believed to be its prime duty. The Sabha was giving voice to the fear of the middle class that it would lose its land, people and job. Apurba K. Baruah says that the fear of dominance of the immigrants might have been one of the motivating factors which led the Assamese middle class to play the important role it did in the emergence of Assamese national consciousness. The leaders often talked about Assam’s glorious past and rich culture to awaken Assamese consciousness. While one section of the Assamese middle class fought in the political arena through organisations

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33 op.cit., no.32  
34 op.cit., no. 12, p.131  
35 ibid.  
36 op.cit., no.22, p.260
like the Assam Association, another section started a social movement in Assam through the Asom Sahitya Sabha in protection of the ethnic identity that seems to be under threat. These protectionist middle class leaders adopted a two-pronged approach: (i) rallying the entire Assamese society behind the protectionist ideology by raising nationality consciousness in every small unit of the province; (ii) creating of a situation which would encourage the immigrants to be assimilated with the Assamese nationality. 37

The Assamese middle class had a clear imprint of the four decades of language subjugation in the colonial period. So when it took the leadership in its hand; it became very rigid in its actions and thoughts. It was not just the language threat, territorial threat also gripped the minds of the Assamese when Assam was merged with Bengal (1905-1912). The territorial threat again came into the scene when the zamindars of Goalpara agitated for the transfer of Goalpara district of Assam to Bengal. The demand was primarily due to economic reason; the zamindars saw their monetary interest in merging with Bengal which would have given them benefits of permanent settlement while staying in Assam would have compelled them to follow the ryotwari system. The social reason was secondary; the district had large Bengali speaking population that provided them another reason to ask for transfer to Bengal. The Assamese middle class began to articulate its interest to assimilate all other nationalities into Assamese.

At the North Lakhimpur session of the Sabha in 1933, Gunabiram Barua outlined the task: "The district of Goalpara is our own. But some groups of people of the district do not speak in Assamese language. They speak in Bengali. This is very unfortunate. The first task of the Sahitya Sabha now is to completely Assamesise the six districts... and to keep a watchful eye on Goalpara-Dubri....Assamese language has to be propagated amongst them. Especially, in the schools meant for immigrants, Assamese should be made the major language. 38"

After independence, the Sabha became more vocal regarding the status of Assamese language. It began its systematic campaign from 1950 onwards to secure recognition for Assamese as the official language of Assam. It placed its demand before the government of Assam. The Sabha also desired the introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction in all the districts of Assam including the hill districts. 16th July, 1951, was

37 op.cit; no.12, p.130
38 ibid., p.133
observed for the first time as the State Language Day by the Sahitya Sabha. It also appealed to all sections of the public to cooperate with the government of Assam\textsuperscript{39} in their efforts to introduce Assamese in all educational institutions in the state.\textsuperscript{40} The Sabha was upset over the policy of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) administration, which was trying to replace Assamese with Hindi in the schools of the centrally administered territory. In 1956, the Sabha observed ‘Assamese, Language in NEFA Day’ and delegations were sent to the NEFA to convince the tribal leaders of the need to retain Assamese as the link language.\textsuperscript{41}

Therefore, the Sabha’s proposal extended to all ethnic communities residing within the state of Assam and it cannot be denied that at some point it arbitrarily decided upon such important issue without taking into consideration the interest of other ethnic communities. Social tensions were evident and the 1960s saw tension reaching a breaking point. A movement was launched for the recognition of Assamese as the official language of Assam in which the Sabha played a major role.

The Sabha vigorously called for adopting Assamese as the state language. Some excerpts from Trailokyanath Goswami’s ‘Assamese, the official language of Assam’ can be pointed out. The arguments are:

- Prior to British rule, the people of the plain had good trade and other relations with the different adjacent hill tribes of the state and the problem of isolationism was the result of British administration that sedulously kept them away from their brethren in the plains.

- In the district of Cachar, the concentration of Assamese was 13 per cent, who were the original inhabitants, the rest comprising of Manipuri and Bengali settlers have migrated after partition.

\textsuperscript{39} The Assam Government Education Department issued circular to all Inspectors and Deputy Inspectors of schools directing them to take steps for making Assamese the compulsory medium of instruction in all schools of Assam valley. Excerpts from Sandhya Goswami, Language Politics in Assam (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1997, p.32

\textsuperscript{40} ibid., p. 34

\textsuperscript{41} Udayon Misra, North East India- Quest for Identity (Guwahati, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1988), p.122
Like Cachar, the Brahmaputra valley also contained people, who were non-Assamese by origin, but most of them, being permanent settlers had identified themselves with the children of the soil.

Assamese, which was spoken by more than 60 per cent of the total population and understood by large section of hills and non-Assamese people, had been enriched by the process of assimilation of many ethnic groups.

The Bodo-Kachari and the Ahom-Chutiya rulers of Assam realised the importance of a common language for administrative facilities and cultural enrichment of the people, hence they adopted Assamese as court language.

The different Naga clans, who spoke different dialects of their own, communicated among themselves in Assamese. These arguments implied that the Assamese had been used in the past as a means of communication between the hill tribes of the province; Assamese was a major language of the province as a cementing force and it was a myth that Bengalis, including those of Cachar, did not identify with Assamese language; therefore, there was no reason why Assamese should not be the state language. Such hard attempts resulted in agitation by a section of Bengalis and the hill tribes also began to assert their separate identity. The 1959-61 agitation of the Sabha to give recognition to Assamese as the official language of the state led to violent incidents in the state.

In 1971-72, the Sabha demanded that Assamese should be made the medium of instruction at the college and university level. Both the Gauhati and the Dibrugarh Universities adopted Assamese as the medium of instruction. In the process, the fears and apprehensions of the plain tribal people further enhanced. They demanded that English be retained as the medium of instruction and they must be given education at the primary level in their own mother tongue. The Sabha’s concept of broad Assamese identity was not received well, it rather spurt tensions not only between hill tribes and the Assamese but also between the plains tribal and the Assamese. The plain tribal’s discord and suspicion grew to full bloom in the eighties when the Assam Movement was at its peak.

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Even today, when the Asom Sahitya Sabha talks of Assamese to be used popularly, there is a common assumption that the Sabha only talks of promoting the interest of the Assamese-speaking population. “Assamese is not only the link language but also the major language in north-east, so we have stressed on Assamese to be used as official language. We are again stressing on Assamese to be the medium of official dealings.”

Such intentions of the Sabha have often been assumed to be hegemonic, chauvinist and elitist. It was felt that the Sabha, while trying to mobilise the Assamese community and to articulate the Assamese national interest was rather expressing middle class aspirations and terming them as mass appeal. The Sabha has been labelled by scholars as middle class organisation.

In the 20th century when the middle class aspired to take a dominant role, it was not unlikely that the Sabha would not act hegemonic. Since hegemony is not possible without mobilising the consent of the subordinate classes, it becomes necessary for all dominant classes aspiring to exercise hegemony to articulate at least some of the interests of the strata below them. Articulation of ‘national’ interest by dominant classes or aspirants of such domination often seems to fulfil this requirement because national interest is defined by their propagators as the interest of the entire community and the cultural, economic and political demands embraced by such interest are publicised as demands for the entire community.

Amalendu Guha described the whole argument of Assamese nationalism as chauvinist, called the Assam Movement as a chauvinist upsurge and that the Asom Sahitya Sabha had also shown shades of chauvinism. He termed the Assamese nationalism as ‘little’ because of failure of identifying such nationalism with the masses. The Asom Sahitya Sabha seemed to have considered only the middle class interest and talked of protectionism of Assamese language without ever considering the interest of the tribal population.

But most of the Sahitya Sabha members do not accept that by stressing on the use of Assamese language they intend to be chauvinist. Rather, they claim that their stand accommodates interests of other ethnic population of Assam, apart from Assamese. S.K. Nath clarifies, “ASS recognised Assamese as a modern independent language of India.

43 Dr. Jagdish Patgiri, General Secretary (2003- onwards), Asom Sahitya Sabha, Interviewed on 12th March, 2005
44 op.cit no.22, p. 245

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Assamese language should be the main and link language among the people of Assam. ASS gives all languages respect, will work for its development, does not intend to work for any imposition and dominance of Assamese language." 46 So, there are other explanations as well that clarify that Asom Sahitya Sabha is not wholly an elite organisation and it seeks to represent the other ethnic groups of Assam.

THE POPULIST IMAGE OF THE SABHA

'A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others' is a misinterpretation of the original Assamese version, "Uti aha jatir jibanar cin kaise parar uparat prabhava bistar kara" of the Presidential address of Tarun Ram Phukan at the 1927 session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha. A correct interpretation of the line would be, 'The sign of life of a rising nationality is the influence it extends over others.'47 Udayon Mishra has countered the allegation by authors who interpret the Sabha's role as chauvinist and elitist. He has written commentary on Guha's published work 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-foreigners Upsurge' and reasoned out why Assamese nationalism cannot be called chauvinism and the Assam Movement just an arbitrary disposition of the middle class.

Some of the remarks laid out by Mishra are: (i) Guha wrote that the separation of Sylhet from Assam was chiefly the result of the efforts of the Assamese little nationalists and after the separation the Assamese middle class emerged stronger. Mishra says that Sylhet was not a part of Assam till 1874 and Guha himself has agreed that historically and ethnically Sylhet was an integral part of Bengal. There was wide-scale protest in Sylhet when Sylhet was merged with Assam and the Assamese people too wanted Sylhet to be restored to its original position. So, Sylhet's restoration to Bengal is the result of the 'public opinion' of both the people of Assam and Sylhet. (ii) Guha has opined that Assamese nationalism is a gentry nationalism and not a peasant nationalism, but Mishra contradicts it by saying that the threat of immigration plagued not only the minds of urban middle classes but also the peasant masses and Assamese nationalism does have a peasant base. It would be wrong to say that the Assam Movement was anti-foreigners movement led by the elite. Mishra contends that those who support such argument fail to

46 op.cit no. 26
47 op.cit no.41, p. 69
explain the involvement of large section of Assamese peasantry, including plains tribal in the Assam Movement. (iii) Guha has accused the Asom Sahitya Sabha of fanning chauvinist frenzy. But, he has also praised the Sabha for its accomplishment in getting the folk tales of the Mymensingha, dialect of East Bengal, into Assamese. Mishra says that this explains the contradictory pulls exerted by the Sabha in different periods because it was led intellectuals of varying shades.48

The Sabha has been labelled as chauvinist because it is said to be unsympathetic to other smaller nationalities of Assam and has never tried to take interest in their problems and concerns. The Sabha's demand for the introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction was regarded as the imposition of Assamese language. Manorama Sharma has stated that Sabha's preoccupation with the development of Assamese language in the pre-independence era was mainly because other ethnic groups (tribal) were in a backward state at that time and forces were yet to emerge among these groups which could have posed challenge to the domination of Assamiya culture and language. But from the time of independence, the Sabha gradually became conscious about the surrounding areas of the Brahmaputra valley. In this period the theme that was constantly reiterated by the Sabha was that of assimilation of various hill tribes and others into the Assamiya culture and language. It was during this period that the Sabha for the first time highlighted the threat to the security of the Assamese peasants because of large scale peasant immigration from the erstwhile East Pakistan. These were definitely such issues that served the middle class interest.49

Mishra while defending the populist image of the Sabha says that even if the Sabha had shown distinct middle class culture, it was never alienated from the land. Even when the Assamese middle class attained a degree of identity and leadership in its struggle for restoration of Assamese language, this class retained its ties with the peasantry. This happened mainly because there was no strong dividing line between the various classes. The Assamese peasantry had been spared of the intense feudal exploitation as was evident in any landlord-peasant relationship. Both the peasant and the middle class retained their roots. The centre of Assamese culture had always been the village which

48 op.cit no.41, p. 67-73
could not be challenged by the middle class. In the absence of strong class division, the Assamese middle class and the peasants shared close relationship. The Sabha has been able to make its presence felt not only among the middle class but also among the rural population. As Dr. Patgiri says, “Peasant/ rural (folklore) is the pulse of the people, it is necessary to uplift and preserve the peasant culture which will help in the progress of the culture of Assam.”

Patul Chandra Nath, says, “Our preservation of culture will go by further generation, it shall come from grassroot and also among women’s group, that way we will help our society improve.” The Sabha had spoken on all issues that concerned the people of Assam. It was involved in mass movements and extended its support on language issues and economic backwardness. During the popular agitation in 1956 over the demand for a refinery in Assam, the Sabha played a major role in mobilising public opinion. Then came the demand for the recognition of Assamese as the official language of the then undivided state of Assam. The language movement of the 1960s was the Sabha’s major baptism in populist struggles and since then it has never looked back. But Mishra says that the popular struggles in which the Sabha played a leading role were confined mainly to demands directly linked with the Assamese speaking population concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley.

The Sabha leaders seemed to have gone out of their way to assuage the feelings of the tribal people and to win their confidence.

In the Presidential address at the 49th annual session in Diphu, Sitanath Brahmachoudhury while stressing need to accept Assamese as the state language in practice, also laid emphasis on the need to develop tribal languages. (The Sabha had geared up its efforts in translating and editing books in tribal languages and also the publication of depicting tribal mode of life and culture has increased considerably)The earlier nostalgia about an undivided Assam and a dominant Assamese language was absent and there seem to be a healthy acceptance of the fact that Assam is just one of the several constituents of the North-East.

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50 op.cit. no. 43
51 Patul Chandra Nath, Secretary of New Guwahati unit (2004-onwards), Asom Sahitya Sabha, Interviewed on 3rd March, 2005
52 op.cit no.41, p. 121
53 ibid
54 op.cit., no.41, p.115
Tribal leaders of Karbi Anglong (hill district of the present Assam) participated in the session and they emphasised that since the Assamese and the tribals share an equal standing there could be no question of imposition of Assamese. The Sabha had constantly reiterated the view that all the hills and plains tribal of Assam should be integrated with the Assamese. These people should not be alienated from the Assamese. The Sabha in particular emphasised that NEFA should be made one administrative unit within Assam. But later neither the Assam government nor the Sabha could stop such a division from happening.

The Sabha made several attempts to contribute to the tribal life and culture and tried to neutralise the influence of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha which had come up to challenge the dominance of the Asom Sahitya Sabha. The question that whether the Sabha had been chauvinist in its approach or populist cannot be proved subjectively, but one cannot deny that whatever might be its approach, it had been able to raise issues that were of great public interest.

Indrani Barua in her elaborate analysis on pressure groups in Assam discussed the role of the Sabha as an important pressure group. Sanjib Barua also discussed the performance of the Sabha as a part of the Assamese civil society. The Sabha, being able to capture such wide social space, definitely at some point of time might have stepped into the political space as it has taken up issues that directly influenced the politics in state. So, another dimension that needs to be explored is the political role of the Sabha.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE SABHA

While some authors have stated that the Sabha was patronised by the government right since independence or even before independence because of its non-political stance, others have seen the issue in the light of Sabha’s involvement in political affairs. Right from its inception, the Sabha showed its loyalty to the ruling government. In the period before independence, the organisation had almost kept itself independent from the Congressmen though occasionally Congress leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan were associated with the Sabha. After independence, the Sabha tilted towards the Congress government and succeeded in involving leading Congressmen and Ministers in its activities. The Sabha had never been a mere spectator to various controversial issues dominating the politics of Assam but had also actively participated in addressing those
issues. The Sabha had been involved in both the language movement and the Assam movement, but whether it is really non-political organisation remains a key question. While raising its various demands, it had adopted measures like sending resolution to the government, observing protest days, lobbying, submitting memorandum, sending delegations and representatives, organising meetings, publishing books, participating in mass protests and observing hunger strike.

In its demand for making Assamese as the state language, the representatives of the Sabha met the Chief Minister, observed the State Language Day and published a book Rajyik Bhasa Asamiya which was distributed among the Cabinet members of the Legislative Assembly. In the All Party Conference of 4-5 October, 1960, the delegation of the Sabha proposed that the Assamese should be recognised as the only language of the state and expressed strong resentment against the bi-lingual Bill put forward by the Chief Minister on 10th October 1960 in the Assam Assembly. The Sabha was able to put pressure by submitting a memorandum to the Union Minister on 4th June 1961, which clearly expressed the unreasonableness of the Shastri formula to have Bengali recognised as the second official language of the state. The movement for State language had profound impact on the government and promptly arrangements were made to introduce Assamese as the state’s official language.

The Sabha was the major organisation that could mobilise public opinion. Its resolutions during 1964-72 were related to the Assamese language, culture and identity such as – implementation of Assamese as the language of High court, concern over inadequate supply of Assamese typewriters, need for Assamese language training for non-Assamese officials, adoption of Assamese as the medium of education at all levels, concern about the availability of Assamese language text, inclusion of Assamese in the curriculum of non-Assamese institutions, introduction of Assamese language lessons through state-owned radio and celebration of birth anniversaries of major figures of Assamese cultural nationalism. The power and the influence of the Sabha has been quite visible in Assam’s politics. Its annual meetings are attended by senior ministers of Assam and the state

55 Indrani Barua, Pressure Groups in Assam (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1990), p. 155
56 ibid., p. 156
government has supported the Sabha with major financial grants and other forms of assistance.\textsuperscript{57}

Till the 1970s the Sabha had wide acceptance in the government circles and enjoyed its patronage. The 1953 session of the Sabha in Shillong was held under direct government patronage and the Governor, Jairamdas Daulatram and the Assam Cabinet were actively involved in Sabha's deliberations. Since then, the Sabha had been enjoying governmental backing and acted almost as a government organisation.\textsuperscript{58} Cabinet ministers and legislators of the ruling party attended Sabha's meetings and casual leaves were granted to those government employees who intended to attend the Sabha's annual meet; this became almost an accepted norm of the government policy. Gradually, the dividing line between the Sabha and the Congress began to disappear on several important issues facing the region. The Sabha's functionaries were given due respect by the government as an intellectual body as its presence in the region was unparalleled and for a long time it was able to maintain that stature in the region. In 1958, the Congress Committee felicitated the then President and all living ex-Presidents of the Sabha at a public meeting in Guwahati. The government grants to the Sabha kept on multiplying.

The Sabha was in a position to influence the government which became apparent from the fact that many of the issues taken up by the Sabha were conceded by the government. One way of looking at this aspect is that the involvement of the Sabha with government functionaries was not at all political rather the government gave the Sabha its patronage because it was a non-political organisation. Another argument could be that such active involvement in protests and agitation as well as strong links with the government could not be features of merely a cultural organisation.

The growing political role of the Sabha also caught the attention of the Government when during the time of intense agitation of the Assam Movement. During the 1975-89 campaign for ending illegal infiltration into Assam, the Sabha gave up its official non-political posture and formally became part of the Gana Sangram Parishad (Organisation for People's Struggle) that led the campaign. This strained relation with the government and the Sabha lost the government patronage which it called an 'indelible stain on the

\textsuperscript{57} op.cit., no. 13, p. 516
\textsuperscript{58} op.cit; no. 41, p. 114
national life of the people.\(^59\) As the Sabha became a member of the AAGSP, it lost its earlier status. When the Congress came to power it started patronising the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, whereas earlier that status was accorded only to Asom Sahitya Sabha. Initially, the involvement with the AGSP was not paid much attention when the Movement was in moderate form but slowly as the Assam Movement started becoming more forceful and the Sabha was unable to dissociate itself from the AGSP even when it tried to, made the Government suspicion of the Sabha turning into a political organisation. Just prior to the Diphu session of the Sahitya Sabha, the government decided to withhold grants because it came to believe that the Sabha was no longer functioning as a cultural organisation but had turned into a political one. The government also ended the customary leave it had been granting to its employee to attend the annual session. Exhibition stalls put up in the Sabha’s annual session by some government departments were closed down and steps were taken to prevent the Sabha from using government buildings to house its delegates. Protest against these measures started throughout the state, and many organisations came forward to support the Sabha and provided donations so that the Sabha could hold its session without the government money. The government’s action was viewed by many, including the AASU, as yet another attack on the identity of the Assamese people by ‘anti-Assamese bureaucrats.’\(^60\)

During the 1981 session, the Sabha regretted that the government suspected it of taking political leverage and deprived it of government grants in both Diphu and Tinsukia sessions. The government had also conspired to break down the public morale by not allowing the Diphu Government College to be used for the session. The Government refused to sanction any grant until the Sabha gave in writing that it shall never be involved in political issues.\(^61\)

The President’s annual address not only dealt with the problem of foreigners in the state but also emphasised that the Sabha would not allow Assam to be converted into a ‘colony of India’. Defending the rights of the small states within the Indian Republic, Sitanath Brahmacaudhury demanded the centre to take steps to prevent a situation ‘whereby small states would be wiped out or weakened.’ While asserting the right of the Assamese people to fight for their cultural and linguistic identity, the Sabha’s President accused the

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\(^{59}\) op.cit., no.13, p. 516  
\(^{60}\) op.cit; no. 41, p. 114  
\(^{61}\) op.cit., no.55, p. 149
government of trying to set up a new Sahitya Sabha 'with some litterateurs with the
government following'. The Sabha President declared that if necessary yet another
agitation would be launched 'to give a rightful place to the Assamese language and also
for its wider use.'

Many had blamed the Assamese middle class for taking a rigid stance and putting
pressure for the protection of Assamese language and culture which had led to the
formation of separate homeland for the hill tribes. The plains tribe i.e. the Bodos also
outrightly rejected Assamese cultural assimilation and talked vehemently about the Bodo
identity. Clash of identities became the main feature of politics in Assam in the post-
independence era because not only the Assamese but also the Bodos wanted their
platform to participate.

CHALLENGES TO THE ROLE OF THE SABHA: ETHNIC POLARISATION

The Asom Sahitya Sabha though originally designed to be purely literary organisation,
yet being an organisation that had members from the dominant section of society, could
not keep distance from politics due to both practical and historical reasons. To make its
presence strong it had from the very beginning emphasised on the need of assimilation of
various ethnic groups of Assam, including both the hill and plain tribes and to some
extent immigrant population, with the Assamiya culture and language. Such articulation
by the Sabha had a disturbing effect on the tribal section of the population as they saw the
process of assimilation as a threat to their own identity. Besides, as the smaller ethnic
groups began to progress, their educated elites — the hegemonic groups of these ethnic
minorities— began to consider the Assamiya middle class as the main obstacles in their
path of development just as in the 19th and 20th centuries, the nascent Assamiya middle
class had considered the more advanced Bengali middle class as the main obstacles in
their path of development. History was being repeated but the Asom Sahitya Sabha failed
to see this historical truth and went ahead with an attitude which helped to polarise the
various ethnic groups.

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62 op.cit; no. 41, p. 116
63 Sharma, Manorama; “The Assamese Middle Class and its attitude to the Ethnic Polarisation in Assam: an
Analysis of Asom Sahitya Sabha” in David Reid Syiemlieh (ed.); Proceedings of North East India History
Association: Thirteenth Session, Sillong (Sillong: North East India History Association, 1992) p. 191
The role of the Assamese middle class as a dominant player of the region was slowly rejected by the hills and the plain tribes when their own educated elites started taking the lead. The nascent educated Bodo elites were only occasionally voicing weak protest. However, they were almost absorbed by the strong presence of the Assamese middle class. The Bodo intellectuals had even identified themselves with the Asom Sahitya Sabha because the Sabha’s role in presenting Assamese identity was not aggressive. Leaders like Rupnath Brahma and Sitanath Brahma Chaudhury proudly interacted with their Assamese counterpart. But the Sabha’s chauvinist stand on Assamese language and identity in the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of middle class among the plains tribal speeded up the process of separation of a sizeable section of the plains tribal from the Assamese mainstream.

The plains tribal of the Brahmaputra valley rallied behind the Bodo intellectuals who stopped identifying themselves with the Asom Sahitya Sabha. The Asom Sahitya Sabha was criticised by the Bodo leaders as an organisation that solely worked for the interest of Assamese-speaking people. The Bodo intellectuals wanted to stand on an equal footing with the Assamese, so they conceived the idea of forming the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and thereby the Bodo identity acquired the necessary strength to resist the expansionist view of Assamese identity. The dissent of the Bodos from the Assamese was such a challenge which the Assamese middle class had never expected and such situation had put the Asom Sahitya Sabha in dilemma.

The plains tribe were also particularly influenced by the hill population who could carve out separate state for themselves. After the passing of the Language Act in 1960 through which Assamese was declared as the official language of Assam, the All People Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) submitted a memorandum to the President on 21 August 1960 urging him therein the separation of hill districts from Assam. Jawaharlal Nehru assured the hill leaders that ‘Assamese would not be imposed on the non-Assamese; that the knowledge of Assamese was not necessary for recruitment to Assam Civil Service nor in the Secretariat; that in the Legislative Assembly apart from Assamese, Bengali, English and Hindi need to be used. He assured the hill leaders an administrative set-up, the Scottish pattern, which would allow the fullest to develop and advance according to
the genius of the people and maintaining at the same time integrity of the state of Assam."  

The hill leaders rejected this assurance and also the resolution suggested by the Patasakar Commission because such resolutions would not provided autonomy to the hills. The hill people continued their demand for statehood. Soon, the hills were separated from the Assam province and separate states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram were formed. Barpujari blames the overzealous attitude of the chauvinist Assamese that had led to the dissent of the hill tribes, saying that "they could make no distinction between integration and assimilation and here lies the tragedy – the fragmentation of Assam."

The Asom Sahitya Sabha which led the movement for the adoption of the Language Act reflected such attitude. For instance, Ratna Kanta Barkakoti., President of the Sabha in 1963, said that if Assamese in the Assamese script was taught to all the hill tribes of Assam, they like the plain tribes of Assam would become assimilated with the Assamese. In the Tezpur session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1967, a resolution was passed which clearly reiterated the Sabha’s views on the need of assimilation and upheld the stand for the integration of India. The Sabha expressed that for the sake of peace, the integration of the North East was essential. The resolution came at a time when the demands for safeguarding the identity of the hill areas were at its peak. In 1968, the executive committee meeting of the Sabha again discussed the issue arising out of the aspirations of the ethnic minorities in the hills. The Sabha, of course, could not see the basic socio-cultural nature of these aspirations, instead it saw them only as demands for separate political identities. The executive committee expressed deep dissatisfaction at the central government’s attempts to cut Assam into pieces. The Sabha also opposed the centre’s federal plan for Assam. In 1969, when it became clear that the political division of Assam was certain, the Sabha in its Executive Committee meeting (2nd March, 1969) discussed the matter and accepted the division but not in good spirit. It constantly warned the central government not to take any constitutional steps which would endanger the security and integration of the North East.

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65 ibid., p. 16

66 op.cit; no. 63, p.191
The dissent of the hills tribe from the Assamese identity had put immense pressure on the Sabha to steadfastly keep hold on the plains tribe. When motivation had begun to arise amongst the plain tribes for a separate identity, the Sabha remained firm to its earlier sentiments. In the 1985 issue of the *Asom Sahitya Sabha Patrika* its editor, Samsing Hanse, wrote that even at this critical juncture when Bodos, Karbis, Mishing, etc. of Assam were not wanting to live within the political boundaries of Assam, the Asom Sahitya Sabha’s attempt to unite the various ethnic groups through goodwill and brotherhood is a laudable one. But with the emergence of new counter hegemonic groups among other ethnic communities of Assam, the Asom Sahitya Sabha had too some extent complicated the tensions by not comprehending the historical developments till they became explosive. The Sabha could have defused tensions but its attitude of overstretching the status of Assamese language had resulted in severe clash of identities.

Nevertheless, the Sabha has learnt from its past mistakes and has been trying to accommodate within its agenda the challenges of ethnic polarisation. There has been growing consensus among its members that the Sabha needs to think beyond the Assamese-speaking population. A change in its approach has been noticed as it has become more accommodative not only towards the ethnic groups of Assam but also towards the government. The Sabha members of today have adopted a new approach.

**ASOM SAHITYA SABHA’S PRESENCE IN THE SOCIETY- TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH**

The General Secretary of the Asom Sahitya Sabha assured the organisation’s presence as a mass organisation. “ASS is in the blood of every people of Assam. Recently, on 19th Feb, 2005, 10 lacs people gathered at the Siphajhar session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, where leaders of all political parties like Congress, BJP, CPI (M) came. It was also attended by the Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi.”

The Sabha feels that people’s encouragement has increased and more and more people are coming and joining the Sabha and that the Sabha has responsibility towards the people because people feel associated with the Sabha. Therefore, the Sabha has enhanced its role beyond just literary pursuits. It has focussed on problems that plague the socio-economic development of Assam like floods, terrorism and IMDT Act and has tried to

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67 op.cit., no.41, p. 435
68 op.cit. no. 43
perform the role of a coordinator. The Sabha has made appeals to terrorist groups and has been trying to coordinate with state government and central government. The Sabha’s desire to go beyond the cultural life comes from the encouragement of its presence in the society and, therefore, the Sabha seeks to cater to the crisis of Assam.

“Assamese as a nationality and as a composite culture relies mostly on one institution i.e. Asom Sahitya Sabha, particularly for the development and growth of Assamese language and identity embracing almost all the tribes and ethnic groups. ASS has been able to attract people who reside in Assam and people who are closely associated with the development of Assam. That is why ASS is not only a literary organisation, it has taken other responsibilities. This is the reason why ASS feels that it has a say on the issues involving Assam.” 69

The key question remains whether Asom Sahitya Sabha can be said to have mass appeal. Does it mean that the Sabha remains in the false impression of attracting the masses?

“Its leadership is in the hands of the middle class. It has been able to attract a few from the rich, many from the middle class and many from the lower middle class. Lower class and illiterates are emotionally involved. Before, it was irrespective of classes, now it can attract very little from rich class. Moreover, it has not been able to maintain its hold on the coming generation, who are English educated. The Sabha also could not include into its fold the tribal population and the immigrant population of the post-independence era. The population structure of Assam is very unique. It is diverse, the question of promotion and presentation of culture is not just Assamese culture but all tribal culture. Both sons of the soil and immigrants are Assamese. So promotion of Assamese people means promotion of all groups. In the 20th century, a new development had taken place that is search for identity. We should forget all other identities and work for greater Assamese identity. ASS has talked very little of this, that’s why other Sahitya Sabhas has come up with respective identity.” 70

The approach of the Sabha has changed over the years as it is trying to move ahead with a new perspective. In the formative years of the Sabha, it had been represented by the youth of Assam and it could serve as a common platform beyond cultural distinction. But, in the period just after independence, the Sabha spoke its chauvinist mind loudly. It came to be dominated by people who had an elitist approach. The Sabha at that time failed to remain a non-political organisation and kept on making political statements that affected the placid composition of the Assamese society. But in the last twenty years, the Sabha has evolved a new role for itself. It seems to have understood the fact its presence

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69 op.cit no.26
70 op.cit no.26
in the society can only remain intact when it takes the challenges arising from other small ethnic communities of Assam and play an accommodative role. The Sabha also stressed on addressing youth’s involvement in keeping alive the cultural interest of the Sabha and giving platform to other ethnic communities. The Sabha members are also aware of the fact that these perspective need to be worked upon.

“Sabha has made some efforts for integration but many things are left to be done. Methodology needs a change; previous methods have not been able to give hundred per cent result, therefore, ethnic problem have remained. ASS has only talked literary development of tribal groups but social and economic development also needs to be addressed. ASS has not been able to develop common Assamese nationality, which can be accepted by all ethnic groups of Assam.”

The Sabha members do not ignore the problem of cultural conflict and have been working for peace, harmony and integrity with tribal leaders and over the years they have also tried to accommodate the immigrant population of Assam. The Asom Sahitya Sabha has developed many new projects in collaboration with the government for the promotion of cultural interest of the people of Assam. The agenda of the Asom Sahitya Sabha setting up of the ‘Asom Sahitya Sabha Complex’ in Hangrabari( Guwahati) upon 50 bighas of land. This complex is to be built to bring affinity among all cultural groups of Assam. It would be an ethno-cultural centre of all north-east states. The Sabha has already built Rameshwar Lal Sanaria Sangathi Bhawan in Dibrugarh in one and a half bighas of complex compound for students and other groups working in the field of culture. It is a community and integrity centre, which also involves the tea-garden workers. To built this complex, the Sabha was assisted with Rs 10 lacs on the behest of Dr. Manmohan Singh. The Sabha has also opened the Assamiya Bhasha Sikhan Gyan Kendra in Cachar to encourage the people of Cachar to learn Assamese language.

The Sabha’s new approach is not to confront the Government the way it did in past decades but to work in collaboration with the government and with the people. The Sabha had remained deprived of the government grant during the period it provided moral support to the Assam Movement and joined hands with the AASU. But, now the Sabha receives grant of Rs. 6 lacs per annum from the state government, apart from voluntary funding. It also generates funds through sale of books and gets fund for publication from the state government. The Sabha has always and even today declared itself a non-political

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71 Kamal Kalita, Assistant General Secretary (2005), Asom Sahitya Sabha, Interviewed on 8th March, 2005
organisation. It seeks no affiliation to any political parties but it takes their well wishing. In its sessions, members of political parties participate and express their views. This is mainly because as Dr. Patgiri says, “If cultural identity is there, political difference will reduce. The Sabha does not accept political grounds for any issue; it works for the promotion of language, literature and culture and these issues cannot be kept isolated from the political life because both culture and politics are part of the society.”

There are some members who disagree that culture should play role in the politics of the state like Bhabesh Das, “we want a new thought, cultural identity should not play role in politics for public benefit.” The Sabha in its new perspective wants to remain politically neutral on the issue of cultural identity. They are not in favour of any undemocratic process. The earlier leaders got the Sabha mixed with political parties. The Asom Sahitya Sabha since the last twenty years has been trying to extend support and recognition to the cultural identity of other smaller ethnic groups of Assam. The Sabha’s earlier stand did not allow it to cooperate with other Sabhas like the Bodo, Tiwa, Rabha, Nepali, Karbi, and Dimasa Sahitya Sabhas.

“Any decision of Bodo society affects the Assamese society. Bodos are next to Assamese. From 1980’s tribes living in Assam have made the Assamese responsible for their lack of eco development, they blamed the Assamese language and culture. The ASS was also not accommodative. Moreover, instead of taking a stand against the centre, there should be accommodative approach.”

A positive trend can be seen which will help the Sabha to take on its future role. The Sabha has been able to withstand many challenges because it has always been working as a democratic institution. It has also been resilient to changes and adopted its approach according to the needs of time. The Assamese intellectuals provide the direction to the Sabha taking into account the interest of the common mass. The membership of the Sabha is voluntary and the members work relentlessly without drawing any financial benefit from the Sabha. The members are attached to the Sabha emotionally and gets support from the society because they portray the strength of Assamese civil society. The Sabha has a historical presence and it functions as a traditional as well as a modern institution. The Sabha has always tried to get the pulse of the people and has represented

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12 op.cit. no. 43
13 Bhabesh Das, Executive Member (2005), Asom Sahitya Sabha, Interviewed on 17th March, 2005
14 Mukul Hazarika, Asst. General Secretary (2005), Asom Sahitya Sabha, Interviewed on 10th March, 2005
the society in its crisis. The Sabha has been successful in its objective of the development of language, literature and culture. Rather, it is an institution that preserves the cultural heritage of Assam. However, it has not been wholly successful in bringing the tribal emotionally close to its cause because there is still a gap between what the Sabha says and what it actually profess. The Sabha talks of larger Assamese identity but could not explain satisfactorily how it would accommodate other ethnic groups of Assam. The Sabha leaders belong to the Assamese speaking community; no Bodo has ever attained the position of General Secretary or the President. Unless the Sabha creates space for tribal leaders there will remain a gap between the ethnic communities of Assam.

Conclusion

Manifestation of Assamese identity began to take a concrete form since the late 19th century. The Assamese intellectuals talked firmly of a separate identity of the Assamese language because even after a long struggle, the Assamese language was not willingly accepted as having a distinct identity from the Bengali language. The Assamese intellectuals remained engaged in proving the status of Assamese language, which resulted in the growth of language-based cultural nationalism and formation of organisations that supported the protection of Assamese cultural nationalism. Such ideas were taking shape in the Renaissance period when the Assamese litterateurs were emerging in the scene and with further spread of education Assamese litterateurs resolutely took the lead. After the leadership was passed onto the hands of Assamese litterateurs, it drew attention of the society towards the value of preserving, developing and protecting language identity.

However, one must not forget that the Christian Missionaries had initially started drawing attention towards the identity of Assamese language along with a few learned men from the Assamese community. They criticised the British adopted language policy of using Bengali instead of Assamese as the official language. The newspaper Orunodoi started by the American Baptist Mission brought about social revolution by initiating debates on re-introduction of indigenous language, necessity of facilities for higher education and on issues of social justice and norms like denouncement of opium, widow remarriage etc. Therefore, the advent of modern literature is credited to the period of Orunodoi writings. The Orundoi had already made the Assamese mind fertile by infusing ideas of language
identity and further interventions were carried out by Jonaki. The magazine Jonaki became a forum of interaction for litterateurs who made contributions to the society through their humanistic ideas. Jonaki was the handiwork of Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha whose major concern was to see the progress of Assamese language. It was due to the efforts of Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha and Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha affinity could be brought among the intellectuals to work for the motherland by protecting mother-tongue from any more subjugation.

Through those literary ventures ideas on cultural nationalism were brought to the forefront, be it in the form of poems, stories, novels, critical essays, informative articles in newspaper and journals, historical dramas, etc. The style of writing and expressions in them changed according to times; like in the early 1900s nationalistic aspirations were in moderate form hence writers wrote in that language and in 1930s the form of expression became forceful because nationalistic spirit adopted radical vision. Such ideas were carried forward even in days after independence; Assamese literature remained engaged with the spirit of cultural nationalism. This was mainly because Assamese society perceived a threat to its cultural security from the immigrant population. The sense of cultural insecurity emerged because the immigrant population i.e. Bengalis were more dominant on the social and economic front.

Apurba Kumar Baruah\textsuperscript{75} says that the failure to compete with the immigrants, who enjoyed the patronage of the rulers and the apprehension of losing their own national identity made it necessary for the Assamese middle class to articulate the Assamese national aspiration. Representatives of this class kept on trying to raise national consciousness in the Assamese people. Manorama Sharma, Hiren Gohain, Amalendu Guha, Sajal Nag and others have discussed in their works the formation of the Assamese Middle Class and the role played by this class. There remains ambiguity among them regarding the issues related to the time of actual emergence of this class or whether the Assamese middle class was only preoccupied with its own class interest or whether it thought of the mass? The overriding theme that can be analysed from their discussion is that the Assamese middle class were the direct descendents of the high revenue officers and Satra institution. Since the social roots of the middle class were centered in rural Assam, the concerns of the middle class were governed largely by rural interest. The

\textsuperscript{75} op.cit., no.22, p.259-60
stepping in of the middle class changed the whole character of socio-political revolution in Assam.

On the political front, Assam no longer experienced spontaneous uprisings and opposition to British policies was carried forward through constitutional agitation forwarded by organisations that sprang up to join the freedom movement. On the social front, modernity had set in and at the same time traditional ties of ethnic identity became very prominent because of its historical importance. The Assamese middle class seem to have advanced its own interest of consolidating its class position in the society by relating the issue of language identity with the development of Assamese community. The over-emphasis on Assamese language identity led to ethnic feud in politics of Assam.

The middle class made the presentation of Assamese identity very lucid through the Asom Sahitya Sabha. They emphasised on protecting the Assamese language identity from any further incursion. The Asom Sahitya Sabha’s central aim has always been to bring all-round development of Assamese language and literature and preserve the dignity of Assamese culture. However, the way of addressing these objectives changed as Assam went through various phases of socio-political developments. For example, in the period before independence, the Sabha had moderately put its explanations forward to make Assamese as the medium of instruction. This was plainly because the Sabha found itself responsible to work in the mission of education of the masses. Therefore, it stressed on the use of Assamese language as it considered Assamese as the language of the masses. In the post-independence era, the Sabha became very aggressive in its attitude because the status of Assamese language remained unclear. Hence, the Asom Sahitya Sabha began to press for Assamese to be used as the official language of the state and demanded that Assamese should be used as medium of instruction not only at the secondary and higher secondary level but also in state universities. In fact, such assertions created both positive as well as negative image of the Sabha.

The Asom Sahitya Sabha is one such organisation that has been able to mobilise public opinion to get state approval for issues like making Assamese as the state language of Assam. It acted as the mouthpiece of the masses and a link between the public and the state authorities. The Sabha’s role gained not only applause among the mass, the state itself became the most important benefactor of Sabha’s work and mission. However, the
hills tribes of erstwhile Assam and also the Bengali population of Cachar district of Assam protested against such arbitrary imposition. From there on, assertion of separate identity from the Assamese began to spread on prolifically; first it was the hill tribes which made the assertion and later on the plains tribe also went on the same track and demanded separation. Since it was the Asom Sahitya Sabha, which prepared the ground to declare Assamese as the state language resulting in ethnic separation of the tribal community, there was tremendous loss of face for the Sabha when accusation came from the tribal community that it was exercising its role to sideline the tribals.

The Sabha’s got itself involved in state politics, which reached the boiling point in the 1980s. It was at that time that the identity of the Sabha was in crisis. The government had withheld the grant for some time because it believed that the Sabha was no longer functioning as a cultural organisation and had turned into a political organisation after joining hands with the AASU to mobilise Assam Movement (1979-85). The emerging Bodo Sahitya Sabha was challenging the Asom Sahitya Sabha’s sole share of government patronage. The plains tribal started rallying behind their educated elites, who considered the Assamiya middle class as the main obstacle in their path of development. The Asom Sahitya Sabha moved into this crisis because from 1950s to 1970s, it was functioning in the moist climate of political upheavals. It must be noted that the Asom Sahitya Sabha has never functioned as a purely literary and cultural organisation; the Sabha has always remained concerned with the socio-political developments in the state. Hence, it was quite obvious for the Sabha to get politically engaged at certain points of time.

The Sabha tried to recover itself from the crisis of its image. The Sabha has succeeded to survive in spite of certain setbacks because it is resilient and democratic in nature. The Sabha has made a broad change in its purview in the last two decades. The most pertinent change that can be seen is the manner of addressing Assamese identity. The coming up of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Tiwa Sahitya Sabha, Rabha Sahitya Sabha, etc., has compelled the Sabha to change its tone of putting forward Assamese identity. It has become more accommodative and has made attempts to give platform to other identities as well. The wholesome character of the Sabha remains the same that is promotion of Assamese identity. When it could not push forward the idea of assimilation, it started talking of integration of all ethnic communities under the banner of greater Assamese identity.
The Asom Sahitya Sabha’s role has been dynamic, making immense contribution to the public and private life of the people. It has immersed its knowledge and experience to bring out the essence of Assamese society. It has worked not only as an organised civil society but has also played the role of pressure group. Although social scientists may have various opinions of Sabha being an elitist or populist organisation, it cannot be ruled out that the place that the Sabha occupies in the life of the people is extraordinary. The Sabha has shaped and sharpened the status of Assamese identity by making intellectual contribution. The Sabha has itself become a cultural heritage of Assam, having been associated with great writers, dramatists, philanthropists, musicians, film makers and even the common man crossing more than nine decades. The Sabha members are hopeful of continuing their efforts in this direction, as a member summarises that the future role of the Sabha - ‘It should continue to work as non-political literary cultural organisation, keeping an eye open to the socio-political development of Assam.’

The main flaw, however, in the presentation of Assamese identity is that it has often sounded very parochial be it through the 19th century Assomiya Unnati Sadhini Sabha or the 20th century Asom Sahitya Sabha. These organisations have worked for the development of Assamese language and it is through language that the concept of Assamese identity has been shaped up. But, still when organisations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha talks of inclusion of other indigenous communities under the banner of Assamese identity, it remains unexplained as to how the other communities of Assam would be accommodated whose language is different from the Assamese? The answer to this question is not easy; hence, there had been wide protests by the Bodos, who are the largest plains tribal community of Assam, leading to widening of ethnic gulf between the Assamese and the Bodo community. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha has been engaged in the assertion of Bodo language identity seeking representation on an equal plane with the Assamese language identity.

76 op.cit. no. 73