Chapter 1: The Assam Movement and the Contest of Citizenship

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Chapter 1

The Assam Movement and the Contest of Citizenship

The Assam movement had an impact on other northeastern states as well, where similar, but much less sustained, protest took place. One of the legacies of the Assam movement is a sustained crisis of governmental legitimacy that continues to this day. The perceived failure of the Assam movement to resolve Assam’s immigration crisis led to a radicalization of Assamese subnationalism, giving it a separatist turn. Another effect of the sustained campaign was the rupturing of the ties between a number of ethnic groups. There are episodes of violence between “indigenous” and “immigrant” communities. The campaign also led to friction between the ethnic Assamese and some of Assam’s “plain tribal” groups—the Bodo movement of today is in some ways an outgrowth of the Assam movement. (Baruah 1999: 117)

The Assam movement is marked as the most stringent mass movement in contemporary Assam. This was the culmination of dissidence by the civil society against the enfranchisement of, who they believe were, illegal immigrants. The anti-government campaign that continued from 1979 to 1985 is termed as “Assam movement”, Assam Agitation or Asom Andolon.

The movement was ostensibly an upsurge of the “people of Assam” against the foreigner, citizens against the non-citizens; indigenous against the foreigners. The native Assamese speakers, who started the movement, were supported throughout the Brahmaputra valley by tribes like the Bodo, Tiwa, Mising, Rabha etc. The various section of the population irrespective of their affiliations responded to the call and actively participated in the movement to drive out the illegal immigrants.

However, what started as a consolidated struggle, fragmented into various ethnic strands by the time the movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. Further, the developments that took place after the movement deepened the chasm among the various communities, ushering in a plethora of similar upsurges demanding cultural and political exclusivity. The “ethnic” disorder that the movement opened up raises the questions regarding the ethnic factor as the most immediate character of expression in Assam. Why did every
demand and claim percolate to ethnic interest? And why no other manner of identity assertion, other than ethnic, becomes possible in the region.

Assam movement was, at the foremost, a protest movement against what was alleged to be a *de facto* policy of the Indian government of admitting and enfranchising “foreigners”. The agitators called it as “Assam’s last struggle for survival” against the “cultural, political and demographic transformation” of Assam by the onslaught of unchecked immigrants which threatened to “reduce the indigenous to minorities in their own land”¹. In the words of Prafulla Mahanta, one of the leaders of the movement who eventually became the Chief Minister of Assam after the Assam movement ended, the “tussle” between the indigenous people of Assam and the immigrants has existed since a long time. He describes the “malady” of unchecked immigrants as follows:

> The tussle has been in existence since a long time and has gathered cancerous roots. But the position has materially changed since 1979. The usurpation has been duly noticed and the dimensions or erosion and corrosion have been fully appreciated. The avowed objectives to cure the malady have been defined and the battle lines are already drawn. The battle is going to be fought on all sectors—constitutional, legal, social, administrative and even military, if need arises. Actually, this tussle should have never occurred. But as the battle has been imposed, it shall have to be repelled with all the might that we can muster. Once it is won, it is all the better for the nation and for the people of Assam. (Mahanta 1986: 117)

The leaders of the campaign argued that immigrants from foreign countries—mostly from what was East Pakistan and then became the sovereign state of Bangladesh, and some from Nepal—unless were explicitly given citizenship status in India, were “foreigners” or illegal aliens. It was alleged that these “non-citizens” were inappropriately enfranchised and were included in the

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¹ The anxiety that stimulated the commencement of the Assam movement has been compiled through many personal interviews with participants of the movement, from the casual participants to the most ardent agitators. Some of them are:

- Dhruba Prasad Baishya (25.09.2008); Presently member of BJP, was Chairman of AGP ministry in 1985.
- Jugal Kishor Mahanta (17.12.2008), participant of the movement and surrendered ULFA member (ULFA).
- Madhab Baishya (17.12.2008), Student participant in the Assam movement who led in the oil blockade in the 1980s.
- Rukmini Choudhury (27.11.2008), student participant.
electoral rolls. Along with the cultural and political threats posed by the immigrants, the movement also was instigated by economic reasons, as the immigrant communities were believed to have attained a strong hold on the jobs and businesses of Assam. This movement is also important not only in the milieu of Assam but in the entire north eastern India as it catapulted a host of anti-immigrant strikes all over the zone.

Though it started as an endeavour of “the people of Assam” to safeguard their interest, the proceedings and trajectories that the movement covered, eventually got the movement represented as an attempt of the “ethnic Assamese” to perpetuate their hegemony in the region. The tension among the various communities, especially after the signing of the Assam Accord, surfaced and got pronounced, which still looms at the face of contemporary Assam. In this chapter we engage with the “ethnic” question that emerged during the Assam movement and analyse three key concerns: A) Why has the conflict been termed as “ethnic” conflicts, B) How was “ethnicity” articulated in the movement? C) What was the content of the term “ethnic” in the movement? The chapter will delve into the chronicles of the Assam movement, revisit it and through them will analyze the location and ways by which ethnicization of various sections of identities of Assam took place. Following this, the chapter will examine how contestation of citizenship led to fragmentation of ethnic units. The chapter argues that the difficulty that arose from the inability to distinguish between citizens and non-citizens actuated a process of employing the already existing categories as a mode of distinction.

Chronicle of the Assam movement

2 “The antiforeign movement spilled across the borders of Assam into the nearby states of Tripura and Manipur. In Tripura indigenous tribal groups launched violent attacks against Bengali settlers, who, by now, outnumbered the locals and controlled the state government. And in neighbouring Manipur, Manipuri students attacked Bengalis, Biharis, Punjabis, and the numerous and increasingly prosperous Nepali dairy cattle farmers. India’s entire northeast has been fragmented by the migrant-ethnic issue”. (Weiner 1983: 287)
Assam movement, even though, started off as a reactionary movement against the government’s inability to check infiltration, its effect was manifold. Political, economic and cultural issues were enmeshed to produce disastrous consequences. Antecedent to this anti-foreigner movement can be found traced back to the colonial times; however, the immediate event that propelled the Assam movement can be recounted as follows: the sudden demise of Lok Sabha member Hiralal Patwari necessitated by-elections in the Mangaldai constituency. During the preparation of the electoral rolls it was noticed that there was sudden massive increase of electorate. Subsequently, articles in newspapers like the *Dainik Asom* published news and statistical data over the massive influx of illegal settlers.

According to government estimates the population of Assam increased from 14.6 million in 1971 to 19.9 million in 1981, or 5.3 million (36.3 percent). The all India growth was 24.7 percent, in accordance to this Assam’s population should have been 3.6 million. Also, according to the “Sample Registration of the Government of India”, the natural population increase of Assam was .5 percent less than the all-India figures in 1970-72 and 1.2 percent less in 1976-78. On the basis of these figures, the immigration into Assam from 1971 to 1981 was on the order of 1.8 million, though these figures do not say whether the immigration had been from elsewhere within India or from Bangladesh. Also, Emigration of Assamese from Assam is virtually nil. According to the 1971 census only 0.6 percent of all Assamese-speaking people in India lived outside of Assam. The Election Commissioner in 1979 reported the unexpected large increase in the electoral rolls. According to the 1951 census, 56.7 percent of the population was Assamese speaking, in 1961 62.4 percent, and in 1971 61 percent. The Bengalis were 16.5 percent, 18 percent, and 19.7 percent, and the Hindi-speaking population was 3.8 percent, 4.8 percent, and 5.4 percent. Between 1951 and 1961 the population of Assam increased from 8 million to 10.6 million (a 35 percent increase), but the number of Assamese speakers rose from 4.6 million to 6.7 million, a 48.5 percent increase, suggesting the magnitude of language “switching”. In the 1931 census only 1.7 million people reported Assamese as their mother tongue. Between 1961 and 1971 the proportion of Assamese declined for the first time, as the proportion of Bengali speakers increased. This shift, though small, was in a direction that aroused the anxieties of many Assamese. If a large proportion of the Muslim population (24.6 percent of the population in 1971), most of whom are of Bengali origin, declared themselves Bengali, the position of the Assamese and Bengalis could be reversed. In 1961, of the 913,000 living in the urban areas of the Brahmaputra valley, 38 percent were recorded as speaking Bengali, 33 percent Assamese, and another 13 percent Hindi. In their own urban centers the Assamese were outnumbered by the Bengalis. (Visaria and Visaria 1981: 10-13)
However what affirmed the notion of unaccounted immigration, was the statement by India’s Chief Election Officer S. L. Shakdher on 24th October 1978. His views accentuated and reinforced the idea in the psyche of the people of Assam that the inexplicable rise in the electorate was purely due to the inflow of the “foreign nationals”. The statement was as follows:

I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states, especially in the North eastern region, wherefrom reports are coming regarding large-scale inclusions of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. In one case, the population in 1971 census recorded an increase as high as 34.98 percent over 1961 census figures and this figure was attributed to the influx of large number of persons from foreign nationals. The influx has become a regular. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make that on the basis of the increase of 34.98 percent between two census, the increase would likely to be recorded in the 1971 census would be more than 100 percent over 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached when that state may have to reckon with the foreign nationals who may be in all probability constitute a sizeable percentage if not the majority of population in the state. (Quoted in Hussain 1993:102)

Following this, a number of complaints were filed from members of civil society demanding a revision the electoral rolls. There were discussions and debate within the academia about the graveness of the problem. The student community took active part in generating consciousness among the masses and developing public opinion. The first organized opposition was in the form of twelve-hour general strike (Assam bandh) called All Assam Students Union (AASU)³

³ AASU, the umbrella students organization of schools, colleges and universities of Assam, has been an active political body. It commands immense influence on government and the general public. The history of AASU can be traced back to 1916 with the formation of the Asom Chhatra Sammilan, an organisation that was formed to focus on literary, social and economic development of Assam. Since its inception it has been active in the political activities centring around Assam and India, in general. Most important among them has been its active participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement during India’s struggle for independence. It had played the leading role in mobilizing the student community in the anti-Simon Commission agitation in 1929 calling for strike and non-cooperation. In 1940, Asom Chattra Sammilan divided into the All Assam Student' Federation and the All Assam Students' Congress. In 1959 they merged again and formed All Assam Student' Association, which was later renamed to All Assam Students Union in January 1967. In August 1967, it adopted its formal Constitution. (Bora 1992)

“During 1956 and 1957, students of Assam started formally organizing against the government. This was in relation to the establishment of oil refinery in Assam instead of Calcutta. Guwahati Students’ Oil Refinery Action Committee was formed. Massive spate of activities including strikes, non co-operation, and protest march were organized, and ultimately the centre had to change its policy and decided to set up oil refinery in Guwahati. The students started looking into fulfilling the aspirations of the society in a more concerned manner. In 1958, the All
on 8th June 1979. AASU demanded “detection, disenfranchisement and deportation” of the
foreign nationals; those who had entered the state after 1961 should be expelled from the state
and their names were to be expunged from the electoral rolls. On 26th August 1979 a number of
political and cultural organization came together to form All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad
(AAGSP) or Committee for the Assam People’s Struggle, which included AASU and Assam’s
premier literary body the Asom Sahitya Sabha⁴. The objective of AAGSP was to particularly
focus on the unchecked immigration issue and demand Assam’s economic development, in
general. This was the formal call for the Assam movement or Assam Agitation to begin.

The initial phase of the movement was marked by wall writings against government’s
exclusionary attitude and call for protest. This instantly saw assembling of lakhs of people. Mass

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Guwahati Students’ Union was formed, which paved the way to formally form the All Assam Students’ Association
in 1959, with the objective of a students body without any political biasness, and to work for the cultural and moral
uplift of the students community of Assam.”

http://www.aasu.org.in/about/history.html

⁴ Other organization included Asom Jatiyabadi Dal, Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad, the Sadau Asom Karmachari
Parishad, Asom Jatiyabadi Yuva-Chatra Parishad, Asom Yuvak Samaj, All Assam Central and semi-Central
Employees’ Association etc.

“The Asam Sahitya Sabha was founded in 1917 to promote the culture of Assam and its Literature. Presently it has
about one thousand branches all over Assam and its neighbouring state. Its Central office is at Jorhat .
The primary Objective of the Asam Sahitya Sabha is to make all round development of the Assamese language,
literature and the multifarious but indigenous culture of the State.

With this end in view the Sahitya Sabha is endowed and committed to the following areas:
• The publications of Dictionary, Grammar, Research works, monographs on languages,
• literature, culture, tribes and races etc., books on literary criticism, complete works of the
great writers of Assam etc.
• Publication of Assamese Encyclopedia (Bishwakosh).
• To enquire, collect and research on ancient literature of the State of Assam.
• To find out and publish the rare books.
• To recognize and award the outstanding writers, scholars and artists of the state.
• To provide financial help to the deserving writers who cannot afford to publish their books and literature
for financial stringency.
• To promote music, art and sculpture of the State.
• To publish a journal of the Sabha on regular basis.
• To bring out leaflets, pamphlets etc. in order to publicize the Assamese language and literature.
• To establish Research Centre to develop Assamese Language, Literature and Culture.
• To promote exchange plans and schemes between Literature and Culture.
• To do such work which helps in expanding development of Assamese Language, Literature and Culture”.

sit-ins, picketing, satyagraha, strikes and mass signature campaigns, black-outs at night followed soon after. The “National Register of Citizens”, 1951 was considered to be the index to locate and identify the illegal immigrants from East Pakistan (and what became the sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1971) and Nepal. AASU called days long Assam bandhs which were observed by the masses. As many as 18 lakhs people took oath to carry out the struggle until the foreigners are ousted.

The unprecedented massive civil non-cooperation, strikes and total unlawfulness resulted in the collapse of the Janata Party state government in September 1979. Leaders of the movement called for boycott of the parliamentary elections of December 1979 until the electoral rolls were revised. “No deletion, no election” was the demand. School and colleges were closed. Hundred and thousands of people came together to rally against the central government. The gazetted officers on election duty refused to co-operate with the government. Printing press refused to print the electoral rolls. Even the police were reportedly taking orders from the leaders of the movement. Assam became the first state in Independent India to not have taken part in the parliamentary elections. As a result 12 of the 14 constituencies’ seats remained vacant in the elections of 1979, which brought Mrs. Indira Gandhi to power in centre.

Crude oil from the oil fields of upper Assam was refused to the rest of the country through formation of human chain. Tez dim tel nidu (will give blood but not oil) was the slogan written in their own blood by many youth. Other natural resources such as plywood and teak were also stopped to other parts of the country. The rigid attitude of the agitators to end the movement till their demands were met and the impairing economic blockade made the centre establish President’s rule in December 1979, which continued for a year. Towards the end of 1980, the centre became more stringent in dealing with the agitation. Indian army was called to

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5 Information gathered from personal interview from participants of the movement.
break the oil blockade; the press which was believed to be sympathetic to the cause of the movement came under censorship.

As constitutionally President’s rule cannot be extended for more than a year, it became imperative for the centre to hold elections by December 1980. Sanjib Baruah (1999) states that “the decision to end central rule and form a state government in December 1980 indicated the centre’s decision to challenge the power capability of the movement and to back electoral institutions that reflected the demographic realities of the state”. The Congress (I)\textsuperscript{6} ministry headed by Anwara Taimur\textsuperscript{7} was formed. The supporters of the movement refused to accept the new government as a legitimate, elected ministry. The general hostile atmosphere and deflection of the Congress (I) by other parties led to downfall of this government within six months. President’s rule was once again imposed in June 1981. In January 1982 another Congress (I) ministry, this time headed by Keshab Gogoi, was formed. This ministry lasted even for lesser time and fell in two months and was replaced by President’s rule yet again.

“Fraud in Assam” (1983), the editorial article in \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} at the helm of the Assam movement noted the general hostile atmosphere of Assam as such:

\begin{quote}
The situation in Assam even considering that abnormal conditions have prevailed in the state since the end of 1979 when the agitation against the ‘foreign nationals’ can be said to have formally begun, is truly extraordinary. Paramilitary forces of the Centre as well as well as armed constabularies from other states have now been drafted to maintain law and order in view of the presumed unreliability of the police forces of Assam itself in performing this routine task. The cities and towns of Assam, especially those in the Brahmaputra valley, have become virtual armed camps. Gauhati streets are constantly and relentlessly patrolled by these armed personnel; there is a premium on not being an Assamese during the evening in the streets in Gauhati. The Republic Day parade was held in Gauhati in the midst of ‘Janata Curfew’ called by the leadership of the agitation, with only the officials attending and being made to sign the attendance registers. The parade marked by a show of tanks, 76 mm mountain guns, 105 mm field guns and other armaments was itself turned into a blatant display of military muscle against the citizen. (EPW 1983: 125)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{6} The faction of the Congress which was led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi
\textsuperscript{7} Anwara Taimur, an Assamese Muslim, who was elected from a constituency populated by Bengali descent was seen as a sympathizer to the immigrants by the supporters of the Assam movement.
The situation in Assam visibly turned into a state crisis. It developed into a terrain where various quarters contested with the elements of nationhood; state, citizenship, governmentality and identity. The tussle that started as a drive by the indigenous people against the foreigners soon became a greater matter of political crisis and cultural contest. State machinery failed on all accounts; Transportation, Law and Order, Health, Emergency. Holding the elections became necessary for the state to sustain its domain on the region, whereas for the agitators averting the elections till the revision of electoral rolls, determined the success of the movement. Though the centre invited the leaders of the movement for several round of talks, yet no decision was reached regarding the impasse. In such a situation the centre announced holding of the elections in January 1983. This saw a rampant violence among the various communities. 1983 witnessed xenophobic bloodshed phase of the Assam movement which until then was by and large peaceful. In the same *EPW* article the editor noted that, “Under the guise of ‘constitutional and democratic rectitude’ an enormous fraud is being perpetrated in Assam where in conditions in which the election commissioner himself conceded are far from normal, elections are sought to be held for the 126 seats and the12 still unfulfilled Lok Sabha seats” (*EPW* 1983: 125).

Around this time, the following the trail of the AASU, students belonging to the immigrant communities also organized themselves with political agenda and called themselves the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU). AAMSU which attempted to include both Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslim descent had come into existence in May 1980. By September 1980 it had become the third front to reckon with in the negotiations between the centre and the agitators. The leaders of AAMSU were also formally invited by the centre along with the leaders of the Assam movement for talks. AAMSU demanded that all the immigrants who came before 1971 were to be given full citizenship and that the state protects the interest of
the immigrants and safeguard them from unnecessary harassment. The cut off date of 1971 was not acceptable for the agitators and they continued to demand that the “National Register of Citizenship”, 1951 be the index to determine citizenship, the immigrants who have entered after 1961 are deported back. This caused immense tensions between the agitator and the AAMSU. In many places, which were supposedly stronghold of the immigrants, violent incidence started erupting since the beginning of the 1980s between the AASU and the AAMSU. However, most gruesome were the 1983 riots that took place just after the announcement of the elections.

On 18th February 1983, an indigenous tribal group Lalung (also called Tiwa), along with some Assamese, attacked the village of Nellie\(^8\) and several nearby villages with spears, swords, sticks and guns. The tribal group had long resented occupation of the tribal land by the immigrants. The victims were mainly Bengali-Muslim women and children who had mostly migrated from the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. The official record stated the death toll as 1,200 but according to journalist reports it was as high as 3,000 (Hussain 2000: 4520).\(^9\) The pogrom is regarded as one of the worst and severest that the post second world war history has witnessed. This unleashed a chain of similar mob attacks. In Chaoulkhowa Chapor of Darrang district there was similar attacks on the Bengali-Muslim immigrant population, in Silapathar of Lakhimpur district there was attacks on the Bengali-Hindus, who were ex-refugees/displaced people from East Pakistan (Hussain 2000: 4521). During the same time, members of Bodo tribal

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8 A small village by the southern bank of Brahmaputra, 45 kms away from the nerve centre of Assam- Guwahati, inhabited mostly by “Plain tribal” group- the Lalung (Tiwa). The Lalung once had their kingdom in this area much of which were encroached by the Bengali immigrants and their descendents. As Sanjib Baruah (1999: 134) notes that the British administration did not view them as “backward tribe” but as “Hinduis ed tribe” hence their land rights were not protected by the land system. Subsequently the post colonial government did not secure their traditional land through the policies restricting land transfer in “tribal blocks” which led their easy lose of the land to the immigrants.

9 Monirul Hussain (Hussain 2000: 4520) also notes that, “Notwithstanding the pogrom, severe violence and terror, the inhabitants of Nellie had refused to be displaced come what may. They had no place to go, no alternative to their existing living space. After spending only a few weeks in the state sponsored relief camps the entire people of Nellie who could manage to survive somehow returned to their normal life in an abnormal situation. Ultimately, they succeeded in resisting displacement. Of course, they had to pay a huge price, the lives of their near and dear ones”.
group, supporter of pro-poll Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) attacked Assamese at
Gohpur in Darrang district. This violent outburst demonstrated the rift between the Assamese
leadership and the Bodo support to the movement, the latter had by now grown sufficiently
suspicious of the Assamese hegemonic tendency within the movement (Weiner 1983: 279-281).
This was followed by Assamese attack against the Bodos in the same area.

The central government decided to take stern action against the law and order disorder.
Several state government employees who had boycotted the elections and refused to obey
government orders were arrested. Polling agents were brought in from other states. In this
situation of emergency, leaders of the AASU and the AAGSP who had taken part in negotiations
with the central government were also arrested.

The year saw a sanguinary phase of the movement which until now, the violence had
been restricted to attacks against bridges, government offices and police stations. Though there
had been individual killing; the bomb attack on E.S. Parthasarathy, a high ranking civil servant is
one of the most crucial murders. But the year saw organized mob violence, communities pitting
against each other, building and breaking of community allegiance. All these were easily
identified as “ethnic conflicts”.

The electoral turn out and voting pattern in the various locations within the state depicted
the tale of demographic polarisation with respect to pro-election or anti-election population. The
state elections could not be completed in 16 out of the 126 constituencies, and in one
constituency the election had to be countermanded because a candidate was murdered. Elections
could not be completed for 7 of the 12 already unfulfilled parliamentary seats. The voter turnout
in the various constituencies was marked in accordance with the population settlement and their
allegiance. The turnout was above 50 percent in predominantly Bengali-speaking constituencies
and as high as 70 percent in several Bodo-populated constituencies. But in the Assamese-populated constituencies the turnout was low; in 25 constituencies less than 5 percent of the electorate voted and in another 20 constituencies the turnout was between 5 and 20 percent (Weiner 1983:281). Mrs. Gandhi’s led Congress (I) Party was declared victorious which won 90 out of 108 declared seats, in 4 constituencies the Congress(I) candidates were elected unopposed as no other party contested their candidates.

The election led Congress (I) form the state government headed by Hiteshwar Saikia. After the assumption of the ministry, the immediate task of the Saikia government was to confront the agitation. It is alleged that the government played significant role in targeting the weak links and breaking the support base of the Assam movement. For instance Hiteshwar Saikia, himself belonging to Ahom community10, was seen to represent and reinforce a distinct identity, separate from the “upper caste” Assamese. This was to consolidate the idea which had been around that the Assam movement was indeed an assertion of the upper caste Assamese Hindus to perpetuate their hegemony by whipping up traditional fears about a huge influx of Bangladeshis and their assorted crimes, particularly through manipulation of the press and news reports. The fear was instilled by citing instances of the indigenous people of Tripura and Sikkim who had been overwhelmed by a flood of outsiders. The real interest, as many claim, was actually to retain the Assamese Hindu majority in the legislative Assembly, so that the Muslims and other community did not team up and reduce the Assamese Hindu to minority in the Assembly. The Saikia government offered patronage to the Bodo Sahitya Sabha which emerged as a rival to the Asom Sahitya Sabha, in an effort to weaken the support of the Bodo community.

10 The Ahom community is one of the dominant “tribal” communities in Assam. The Ahom rulers are believed to have ruled Assam for six hundred years during the medieval times, starting from 1228. They are believed to belong to the Shan race speaking the Tai language, in contrast to the Assamese who are believed to be Indo-Aryan speaking the Assamese language.
to the movement. It also assured general masses about its seriousness to curb infiltration and remove the names of the people who had entered Assam after 1971; this cut off date was by now agreed upon between the leaders of the movement and the centre after several rounds of negotiations. This was associated with coercive measures, especially the press was once again brought under censorship and many journalists were arrested.

The cohesion within the movement had been dwindling after the ministry was formed, headed by Anwara Taimur. The Muslim support to the movement had reduced remarkably during Taimur’s alleged dual agenda of coaxing and coercion. The Assamese Muslims had started giving second thoughts about participation in the movement after the large victimization of the Muslims in the riots. Several Muslim members within the AASU issued an ultimatum to the AASU leadership demanding a correction of a “pro-Hindu communal tilt”. Their memorandum demanded a “firm definition” of a foreigner. The movement also was gradually reducing its popularity among the general masses who had grown dispassionate after the 1983 violence. (Baruah 1999: 134-138). However, the power of the movement refused to wane with the state ministry facing constant protest. Strikes and satyagraha continued to be observed until the central government eventually called the leaders for final negotiation in mid 1984. A total of 855 students lost their life in the struggle duing hunger stike, police lathi-charge and other such measures. This was also a time when the central leadership had changed with the assassination of the Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi’s leadership began a new phase in the process of the Assam movement.

The eighteen month negotiation between the leaders of the Assam movement and the central government led to the signing of the Assam Accord on 15th August 1985. As a concession to the movement’s influential capability, the state government was kept outside the negotiation
table and was dissolved with the signing of the accord. The accord came about with many clauses and agreements to assure the leaders of the movement and the general masses. However, the same clauses and agreements are regarded as the root of the rift among the various communities residing in Assam just after the movement ended. Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) came into existence from the yoke of AASU. “Upper caste”, Assamese speaking Prafulla Mahanta became the youngest and the first student Chief Minister of the country.

Re-viewing the Assam Movement

The Assam agitation has been the most popular post Independence students campaign. It originated within the academic ambit through ample exchange of thoughts. The movement, therefore, that had generated large amount of debate and discussion within the intelligentsia today forms a vital archival source to comprehend the movement.

Marxist scholar, Amalendu Guha in his much discussed article “Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80” (Guha 1980), and also in his prior work Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947, (1977) clearly demonstrated that the Assam agitation was factually an attempt of the Assamese bourgeoisie to secure their political and cultural edge in Assam. He defined “Little Nationalism” as “a spiritual sentiment that holds together a group of people claiming a common cultural-regional identity (to distinguish themselves from others)”. Emphasizing on the “class” aspect of movement, he asserts that the prime motives of the agitation was to serve the Assamese middle class in threefold:

(i) Elimination of Bengali and other competitors

(ii) Opportunities of intensification of labour exploitation, unhindered by trade union
Unhindered control over the state administration for the creation of bureaucratic capital of which the Assamese upper classes could be made beneficiaries.

He argued that Asam Sahitya Sabha and All Assam Students Union did not represent the toiling peasants and workers but the bourgeois-landlords and petty bourgeois elements. They, through careful mediation with the communication media were able to secure a “mass” character to the agitation with the inclusion of peasants and other working sections. He insists that the ethnic outlook or the “little nationalism” that the movement assumed was indeed a manipulative political stance applied by the Assamese middle class.

This write-up published during the helm of the agitation, instigated tremendous intellectual debate. Scholars responded with immense passion; many critiqued Guha’s position, others provided rejoinders. This string of exchanges today presents an important tool in deciphering theoretical answers to the baffling multi-layered nature of the movement. Noted political observant of Assam Udayon Misra (Misra 1981) provided a sharp eight point critique to Guha. Providing statistical and analytical counter arguments, he raises the issues of assimilation and affirms the political and cultural threat posed by the immigrants. According to him, Guha’s assumption that like in the eighteenth century, assimilation of the current immigrants into the broader Assamese identity is the possible antidote to the present cauldron is impractical; as the conditions are very different under feudalism (Ahom rule of eighteenth century), imperialism (British rule) and post colonial situation. He also disapproves Guha’s reading of a speech by Tarunram Phukan, popular pre-Independence congressman of Assam, in 1927 as sowing the seeds of chauvinism in the Assamese psychic. The lines “Uthi aha jatir jibonor cin haise purar upar prabhava bistar kora” (Asom Sahitya Sabhar Bhasanawali, Vol I, Jorhat, 1955), Misra recounts have been misconstrued
by Guha and what Tarunram Phukan actually meant was, “The sign of life of a rising nationality is the influence it extends over others” and not, “A rising nationality shows signs of life by extending domination over others” as interpreted by Guha. The debate within the intelligentsia, at this point of time presents a figurative aspect of how the question of Assamese nationality was getting framed at that point of time. Gail Omvedt counters Guha on the chauvinistic dimension of the Assamese and affirms that the Assam movement indeed involves a question of nationality. Omvedt repeals Guha’s position that the Assam movement is not a nationalist movement as it does not involve the demand for secession. She recounts that from a Marxist-Leninist position the right to self-determination is fundamental and the movements of oppressed nationalities to exercise this right against an exploitative State are a crucial part of any general revolutionary movement. In the case of Assam movement, she affirms, the Indian State and the stronger Bengali nationality cannot be negated to have played an oppressive role. Finally she argues that given all the objective indicators of Assam's continuing backwardness, impoverishment and dominance of semi-feudal relations in comparison to other Indian states, the Assamese middle class, possibly, could not have suddenly become strong. Also, the immense mass support that the movement is able to generated implied that there are genuine material base (of losing land and political power) unlike other divisive bourgeoisie stirs (like the Shiv Sena that do not enjoy popularity in the Maharashtrian countryside). One more vital rejoinder came from Hiren Gohain (Gohain 1981), another renowned Marxist scholar of Assam. He agrees with Guha that the main thrust and character of such movements depend on its more stable features, on its actual programme and its class-leadership. From this point of view, he affirms the current movement in Assam definitely serves the interest of the Assamese small bourgeoisie and landlords, and is most
likely to profit the big bourgeoisie but he defies Guha on the point that the latter has failed to capture the class character of the national Congress leadership because of which the national question has not been amply dealt with and the conflicts between “great” nationalism and “little” nationalism is a failure of the bourgeoisie-democratic revolution of India.

Thus his treatment necessarily fails to throw any light on the exact relationship between the regional bourgeoisie and the “national” big bourgeoisie. Guha also fails to be sufficiently critical of the class character of the Congress leadership on the national scale. Hence, while he makes much of the chauvinist tendencies in the Assamese middleclass, he is unable to see that this can be connected with the failure of the all-India leadership to solve the national question with wisdom and foresight. The tendency to dominate and browbeat the aspirations of small national groups was there among a considerable section of the national leadership from the very beginning. Guha does not draw relevant conclusions from the data supplied by himself... For instance, on many occasions the Assam leadership failed to agree with the views of the national leadership... This may be of course considered in terms of the vested interests of the provincial leaders. But a more pertinent point is the inability of the national leadership to appreciate the difficulties of a neglected, backward and weak national group... Against such a backdrop, the fears and worries of the Assamese are understandable. Seen in this light the conflict between “little nationalism” and great nationalism... appears as a portentous failure of the bourgeois- democratic revolution in India. (Gohain 1981)

Finally contribution came from the noted political scientist Sanjib Kumar Baruah (Baruah 1981). He disputes Guha’s statement that the Assam movement was “national in form, chauvinist and undemocratic in content and proto-fascist in its methods”. Through his contradiction of Guha’s three major assumptions, he establishes that the Assam movement was indeed a sub-national movement (these he further details out in his later work India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality, 1999). The three points are: first, that Assam movement is not a struggle for self-determination in Lenin’s sense of the term. Second, the notion of a threat to the cultural identity of the Assamese is a myth. Third, and this follows from his first two points - the primary explanation for the Assam movement lies elsewhere; it is a conjuncture of crisis of the dominant economic classes in Assam, which explains the “undemocratic content” of the movement.
Baruah argues that the Assamese constitutes one of the smaller nationalities in contemporary India. Though the Bengali culture and the Bengali people do not currently enjoy the privileged position in the higher echelons of bureaucracy and official parameters as in the colonial Assam, the historical elements and sense of domination-subordination still persists and is not snapped by a cut-off date. Moreover, the recent fate that similar “frontier” people met in Tripura; of losing their rights as “basic population” to the immigrants from Bangladesh, further aggravates the danger. He quotes Lenin (whom Guha repeatedly invokes) who calls great nations chauvinistic for “treating the national movements of small nations with disdain”. Hence he negates Guha’s first assumption and affirms that the current movement is indeed a movement of self-determination and not a “picnic style movement” as some had scornfully opinionated about it.

Regarding the question of identity threat which Guha had relegated as a myth, he quotes Susanta Krishna Dass, (who has done extensive statistical study on the demographical changes and population growth in Assam and whose statistical findings even Guha had cited), “If the proportion of immigrants to indigenous people is taken as the criterion of assessing the weightage of immigration it will be found that next only to Brazil, Assam as a geographical region bears the heaviest impact of outsiders. Also among Indian States, it has accommodated the largest proportionate number of people from elsewhere”. (Baruah 1981: 677). According to Baruah, Guha’s opinion is heavily borrowed from the Census reports, which, he says has its own pitfalls. Baruah compares the immigration situation in West Bengal and in Assam and refutes Guha’s claim that though influx is similar in West Bengal too, the Left politics has kept the immigration issue under control. Baruah, on the other hand, states that unlike Assam, Bengalis in West Bengal are not culturally threatened by the immigrants from Bangladesh and the Bengali “bhadralok” have kept the immigrants away from positions of power. Baruah repeats that
contrary to what Guha believes that Assamese little nationalism has “acquired an aggressive tone” way back in the 1920s, Assamese nationalism was in fact helpless at the onslaught of cultural threat posed by uncontrolled influx in their own land. He quotes from the same lecture by Tarunram Phukan delivered in 1927, “Alas!”, continued Phukan, “it is otherwise; we are incapable of self-defence today. The latter sentence, Baruah repeats is a pointer to enquire into the context in which Assamese subnationalism was growing. The question according to Baruah is whether or not, the Assamese had to defend themselves as early as in 1927, Guha entirely misses the significance of the fact that Phukan's speech was made at a time when migration from East Bengal was reaching record levels and Assamese political protest against it had started. In regards to the class axis, Guha’s assumption that it is held by “Indian industrialist, traders, petty landlords, and various sections of petty bourgeoisie urban and rural” and that it was because of this middle class’ quest for hegemony that the “Indian nationalism as well as regional nationalism originated”. In this assumption, Baruah notes, Guha slips into the sociological theories of social stratification rather than Marxist class analysis, as he had set out to do. In order to define the middle class in Assam, Guha uses the pyramid of social stratification and strikes out the big bourgeoisie at the top, for in Assam it is held by North Indians and is in collaboration with the foreign capital. Even the next stratum is eliminated because a negligible number of the middle bourgeoisie in Assam speaks Assamese. Therefore the middle class according to Guha “virtually consists of small capitalists and other sections of petty bourgeoisie including professionals and service-holders many of whom are also simultaneously small landlords”. Guha, according to Baruah, did not pause to think if the relative backwardness of Assam, which shows up in the weakness of some of the classes, could have produced a situation different from that in other states. The Assam movement, according to Guha, was a programme lead by the
Assamese middle class at a conjunctural crisis. According to him, hard pressed by big capital from above and the rising labour and peasant movement from below, the Assamese upper classes are terribly agitated about the economic stagnation. Incapable of competing with big capital, they aspired to monopolise the small industries, petty trade and the profession and services.

Baruah cites that Guha considerably expands on his notion of the middle class when it comes to explaining the Assam movement. At places he uses terms such as “upper classes” or “bourgeois-landlord chauvinists” - terms which include, apart from the middle classes, some gate-crashers from the top stratum. Therefore, the “undemocratic content” of the movement, propelled by class bases, as established by Guha is misleading, rather, he emphasizes that this mass movement is in fact a sub-national movement.

Sanjib Baruah in his much acclaimed work on Assam *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999) has delved into the question of Assam’s identity in details. He calls the Assam movement a subnationalist upsurge. He locates the crux in the very idea of “nation” which subscribes that political entity should neatly coincide with that of a cultural formation. According to him the subnational conflicts of today are part of that bloody history of nation-building –of trying to create a global order of nation states. According to him “the fit between the formally federal structure of the Indian polity and the emotive power of these subnational narratives is hardly perfect”.

Yet these movements have led to serious and sustained albeit localized, political crisis. This has happened largely because, even though separatists may be a small or a fringe group, they have large constituencies in their region. These movements are located in historically constituted subnational ideological fields and have a dialogical relationship with pan-Indian political institution, processes and values. Regional militants often raise issues that are intertextual in the sense that they allude to are continuous with the mainstream

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11 He uses the term to refer to a pattern of politicization and mobilization that meets some of the criteria of nationalism, but is not firmly to the idea of separate statehood. (Baruah 1999: 5)
social discourse of a region. As a result there is often a pattern of complicity between insurgent groups and
may supposedly mainstream political actors.

… If nations and nationalities are “imagined communities”, subnational narratives, like national ones, are
often premised on a poetics about a homeland and its people. It is a poetics that transforms the geography
of an area into a primal, homelike, or sacred place and transforms a people into a collectivity with imagines
ties of shared origins and kinship. Historically in India, subnational narratives arose simultaneously with—
even sometimes predated—pan-Indian national narratives. Like nationalism, the cultural foundation of
India’s regional based subnationalisms was the language of the region—to be precise the language that
were emerging as, or were aspiring to become, regional standards. (Baruah 1999: Xii-8)

Baruah’s idea of two tiered nationalism; one pan-Indian and the other regional, is not different
from Amalendu Guha (1977) and Sudhir Chandra’s (1982) formulation that Assamese identity
consciousness based on regional cultural homogeneity developed along with the all India cultural
homogeneity and anti imperialism in the beginning of 19th century. Baruah however succeeds in
drawing attention to the fact that the conflicts in Assam are symptomatic of failed subnational
aspirations in Indian nation building process. He refers to instances in which movements of self-
determination have proved to be difficult12 and asserts that concept of nation is inherently
unstable. Baruah work is significant as it details an account of the colonial policies of
geographical demarcation which has today become the bone of contention among the various
communities of Assam13. However, Baruah though points out that the identities in contemporary
Assam are “ethnicized”, by means of the various movements, he does not go further to give

12 “It is not surprising that Woodrow Wilson, after proclaiming the right of nation’s to self-determination when
confronted with numerous petition of sovereignty and statehood admitted that he had no idea that there were so
many nations in the world. Granting self-determination to all these nations, he feared might have meant that a vast
number of new states would have had to be created which would have threatened the prevailing global political
order”.

“Sociologist Amitai Etzioni, in an essay published in 1990 at a time when the cold war was giving fresh impetus to
many new nationalisms, argued that it is time to withdraw moral approval from most self-determination movement.
While these movements have been a positive historical force for more than two centuries, he wrote, they no longer
have the capacity to create more democratic states. Now the thrust of many movements of self determination, he
believes, is destructive”. (Baruah 1999: 2-3)

13 This will be discussed in the following chapters
details of why and how this phenomenon has succeeded in dominating the socio-political domain of Assam.

Myron Weiner has raised pertinent questions on the Assam movement in his work *Sons of the Soil* (1978) and later in “The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement” (1983). At what point does immigration—legal or illegal—trigger a community response? Is there some numerical threshold of “overforeignization” that prompts a nativist reaction? Is there some point when a native population fears that it is being culturally overwhelmed by outsiders? Or is the triggering mechanism competition for employment and land in a society where population is expanding more rapidly than can be absorbed either in industry or agriculture? According to him, all of the factors suggested by these questions seem to have been at work in Assam, but he points out that a review of the history of ethnic conflict in the region suggests that the issue of who has control over the state apparatus, and whether that control is threatened is often the decisive factor in the forms and intensity of ethnic conflict. Weiner traces the eruption of the Assam movement from the colonial times. He marks the beginning of significant wave of immigration to Assam shortly before the middle of 19th century when the British created tea plantation in hill areas. Unable to persuade the locals to work in the plantation as menial labourers, most of whom owned their own lands, the British brought in a labour force from the tribal region of south Bihar. Together with this, there was an influx of educated Bengali Hindus into positions in the government administrative services and in the professional services. The 1891 census estimated that one fourth of the population of the Brahmaputra valley was of migrant origin. However, Weiner recounts that the largest influx took place after 1900 when Bengali Muslims moved into the Brahmaputra valley from East Bengal. Assam was sparsely populated than east Bengal. Bengali Muslims reclaimed thousands of acres
of land, cleared vast tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of Brahmaputra and occupied flooded lowlands along the river. The largest influx came from Mymensingh district, one of the mostly populated districts in East Bengal (presently in Bangladesh).

These waves of immigrants however did not create political uproar until the 1930s and the 1940s when electoral politics was introduced. Weiner describes that at this junction the numerically strong Bengali Muslims had won substantial control over the state government and attempted to use their position to facilitate further migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal to strengthen their political position and then finally to press for the incorporation of Assam into the proposed Muslim majority state of Pakistan. The British rejected this demand of the Muslim League, but agreed to partition Assam by transferring Sylhet district to Pakistan. Once Sylhet was removed from Assam, the Bengali Muslims lost their political grip on the state mechanism. After Independence, the Assamese, particularly the Assamese Hindu middle class won control over the government of the newly formed state of independent India. For the first time in hundred and fifty years the Assamese were back in power. They used that control to assert the paramount of Assamese cultural identity and to seek economic and social equality in relation to the Bengali Hindu middle classes—their rivals for jobs in the administrative services, in the professions, and in the private sector. The Assamese-dominated government of Assam made Assamese the official language of the state and established a policy of giving preference to “sons of the soil” (i.e., Assamese) in employment in the state administrative services; appointed Assamese teachers in the schools; and pressed for the use of Assamese as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges, and universities. In this campaign to assert their culture and improve the employment opportunities of the Assamese middle classes, the Assamese won the support of two migrant communities, the tea plantation labourers from Bihar, and the Bengali
Muslims. Both declared to census enumerators that Assamese was their native tongue, and both voted for the Assamese-dominated Congress party. As a result Congress easily won every one of the state assembly and parliamentary elections from 1952 through 1977. Even in the 1977 parliamentary elections, when Congress was defeated nationally with only 34.5 percent of the vote, in Assam Congress won 50.6 percent of the vote. After partition, Bengali Muslims turned to the state government for protection as Muslims did elsewhere in India. Many feared expulsion to East Pakistan, especially after the passage of the Immigrant Expulsion (from Assam) Act by India's parliament in 1950. This act, combined with an act passed by the Assam legislature declaring squatter settlements illegal, led many Bengali Muslims to fear that they could be removed from lands illegally held or expelled from the country. In an effort to dissuade the Assamese from taking these steps, Bengali Muslims sided with the Assamese on issues that mattered to them, by declaring their mother tongue as Assamese, accepting the establishment of primary and secondary schools in Assamese, supporting the government against Bengali Hindus on the controversial issue of an official language for the state and for the university, and casting their votes for Congress. This coalition of the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims remained till 1977. Though there had been major language riots between the Assamese and the Bengali Hindus in the early 1970s, the Bengali Muslims evidently sided with the Assamese. It was in 1978 that the sudden death of Hiralal Patwari necessitated by-election in the Mangaldai constituency. The process of the election drew public attention to a rapid expansion of the number of voters since the previous elections two years earlier\(^\text{14}\). As stated earlier, the influx

\(^{14}\) According to the 1951 census, 56.7 percent of the population was Assamese speaking, in 1961 62.4 percent, and in 1971 61 percent. The Bengalis were 16.5 percent, 18 percent, and 19.7 percent, and the Hindi-speaking population was 3.8 percent, 4.8 percent, and 5.4 percent. Between 1951 and 1961 the population of Assam increased from 8 million to 10.6 million (a 35 percent increase), but the number of Assamese speakers rose from 4.6 million to 6.7 million, a 48.5 percent increase, suggesting the magnitude of language "switching." In the 1931 census only 1.7 million people reported Assamese as their mother tongue. Between 1961 and 1971 the proportion of Assamese
became politically alarming when the Election Commissioner reported the unexpected large increase in the electoral rolls.

To many Assamese it appeared as if the Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims together were now in a position to undermine Assamese rule. Many feared that the census would show a sharp decline in the number of Assamese speakers as Bengalis who had previously declared their language Assamese would now officially revert to Bengali. (Weiner 1983:286)

Weiner considers realization of this demographic transformation at this junction as the impetus that launched the Assam movement. However, he marks another political transition that was enfolding in the national level which had equal impact on the interpersonal relationship among the communities of Assam. This was the break-up within the Congress party after the 1977 elections. This split within Congress ended the post independence coalition of Assamese Hindus and Bengali Muslims. Because what had attracted Bengali Muslims to Congress was the certainty that Congress would govern the state. Some Bengali Muslims subsequently shifted their support to other parties, as did some of the Bengali Hindus who had earlier supported the Congress.

The Assam movement was in many ways significant in the political and cultural milieu of Assam. However, the significant effect that it ushered in was the fissure among the various
decreed for the first time, as the proportion of Bengali speakers increased. This shift, though small, was in a direction that aroused the anxieties of many Assamese. If a large proportion of the Muslim population (24.6 percent of the population in 1971), most of whom are of Bengali origin, declared themselves Bengali, the position of the Assamese and Bengalis could be reversed. (Weiner 1983:286)

15 In Assam, as elsewhere in India, the Congress Party split into pro and anti-Indira Gandhi factions, with the result that, in March 1978, for the first time since independence Congress failed to win a majority of seats in the state assembly elections. In an assembly of 126 seats the pro-Gandhi Congress (1)-I for Indira-won only eight seats and the anti-Gandhi Congress won 26.14 In the 1978 state assembly election, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) won 5.6 percent of the vote (and 11 seats), and the Communist Party of India 4.1 percent of the vote (and five seats), more than the combined vote of 4.3 percent won by these two parties in the parliamentary elections only a year earlier. Many Assamese regarded the Communist parties as Bengali because of the dominant pro-Communist vote in both West Bengal and Tripura. (Weiner 1983: 287-288)
communities which until now had existed in political and social conciliation. The land which had
been historically described as a composite land, housing numerous “ethnic” groups now
witnessed tension among them. The agitation studied as demonstration of Assamese chauvinism
by Guha, subnationalist upsurge by Baruah and a reaction to the political and demographic
transformation by Weiner has still not been analysed for its role in heightening the “ethnic”
factor of the identities. It was during and after the movement that the identities organized,
consolidated and formulated their ethnic expression to reckon with the components of belonging
to the nation: citizenship, identity and rights. The cultural identities pronounced themselves in
the political arena contesting head on with national life. The Assam movement brought in a fresh
wave of identity consciousness among the people of Assam. This idea of identity, however, was
not new but already existent in the socio-cultural milieu of Assam.

Tracing the Genesis

The Assam movement, like all other movements, did not erupt suddenly. Glimpses of dissidence
on similar issue could be seen during the language riot in 1960-61. These riots occurred between
the patriots of Assamese and Bengali, before and after passing the Official Language Bill (which
sought to establish Assamese as the only state language in Assam) by the state Assembly,
resulting in large scale violence with deaths of youth, both Assamese and Bengali\textsuperscript{16}. The riots
broke again in 1972 when the Gauhati University decided to switch the language of instruction to

\textsuperscript{16} The tension was controlled by the intervention of Lal Bahadur Shastri who suggested the Assam Official
Language Act be amended by giving the local bodies the authority to alter the official language of their area by two-
third majority, by allowing communication between the state capital and Cachar and the hill districts to continue to
be in English, at the state level to continue the use of English along with Assamese and incorporating stronger
provisions for protection of linguistic minorities (Chakrabarty 1981)
Assamese as language of undergraduate education. However, the language question had much deep rooted concern that had been vexing the people of Assam since the colonial times.

In 1826, The East India Company annexed lower Assam and tried to establish its hegemony in upper Assam through a puppet king, Purander Singh. This setup however, did not prove to be beneficial and the Company annexed the entire territory and placed it under the Bengal Presidency. Assam was administered as part of Bengal from 1826 to 1873. In 1874, Assam was made a Chief Commissioner's province and three districts of Bengal: Cachar and Sylhet and Goalpara came under the provincial administration of Assam.

Later, the boundary re-organization done at the behest of Lord Curzon in 1905 proved crucial in opening up new vistas in the socio-political facet of Assam, which in many ways can also be marked as the beginning of the immigration issue in Assam. In accordance to this re-organisation, the British partitioned the densely populated province of Bengal into a predominantly Bengali Muslim province in the East which incorporated Assam and named the unit ‘East Bengal and Assam’ with Dacca as the capital, and a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the West: the ‘West Bengal’. Bengali Hindus reacted stringently at the partition of their province. The Assamese also strongly resented its incorporation as a portion of Bengal. This anti-partition movement of Bengal soon came to be known as Swadeshi movement. As a result of the strong opposition, in 1912 the British annulled the partition and re-established Assam as a separate Chief Commissioner’s province that included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar. These new boundaries remained intact until the partition of India. However, during the partition, Assam was included in Group C by the Cabinet Mission, this inclusion was almost agreed by the Indian

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17 This immediate crisis was suppressed by D.K. Barooah, member of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s cabinet, by suggesting a compromise formula that allowed continuation of English and removed compulsion of Assamese in colleges of Assam. (Chakrabarty 1984)
National Congress. Assam Congress leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi vehemently opposed this proposal and were successful in securing the support of Gandhi. Finally Assam was excluded from the plan and only Sylhet district was conceded to Pakistan.

The British establishment had started new industrial enterprises in Assam, significant among them were the Assam tea industry and jute trade. These new enterprises required a regular supply of labour. Thousands of labourers were annually recruited from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Uttar Pradesh and Madras, most of them did not return. Another significant stream of migration was that of peasants from East Bengal districts, 85 to 90 percent of whom were Muslims (Barua 1978: 70). Noting the apprehension of the Assamese during these times, Sandhya Barua (1978: 70-71) writes that, “Though the process of assimilation of these migrant groups was extremely slow, they aspired to be on par with the Assamese in the valley. No doubt the immigrants contributed to Assam's economy by bringing large tracts of waste land under cultivation, but their rising number made the Assamese anxious about their social and political position”.

The clear approach of British administration in settling more immigrants in the land of Assam was evident as labour legislation related to the recruitment of workers brought in to Assam, their journey to the designated districts and their status while working under contracts were passed, as early as 1863.

One of the features of British rule was to discount local languages and arrange provincial boundaries for facilitating cheap and simplified administration. In April 1831, when Assam was part of Bengal administration, the Government of Bengal replaced Bengali in the place of Persian as the Court language of Assam. The services of the Bengalis immediately became indispensable in the anglo-vernacular and vernacular schools. The preference of Bengali caused
a social dominance of the language and its speakers over the people of Assam, Orissa, Chotanagpur and parts of Bihar, where it was established as the official language.

However these areas, eventually, began to produce their own youth equipped with modern education. These ambitious youth grew eager for a share in the opportunities in their own land, which they assumed were being snatched away by the Bengalis. They attempted to redress the balance by stressing that their own languages be recognized as the languages of administration and law. Bengali supremacy was challenged by the patriotism for languages like the Assamese, Oriya and Bihari. In 1852, Assamese nationalist Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan petitioned to Moffat Mills against instruction in the vernacular schools being imparted in foreign language, that is, Bengali (Baruah 1999: 71).

Assam lagged behind many parts of India during the medieval times. Low level of economic development, geographical inconvenience and the isolationist policy of the Ahom monarchy were some of the causes for its relative backwardness which could not be recovered even with the downfall of the feudal order. The absence of native capitalist in Assam, was the main reason why Marwari merchants were successful in setting up commercial monopoly who had followed the British into Assam and diligently tapped the few opportunities for moneymaking opened by the British, like money-lending, supplying provisions to the tea-gardens, procuring mustard and jute for the market outside Assam, and meeting the demand for new cheap and mass produced household implements. This was objected to by Maniram Dewan in his memorandum to A J Moffatt Mills, during the latter's visit to the province in 1853, “Under the revenue settlement of military officers, while a number of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalees from Sylhet have been appointed to
Mouzadarships; and for us respectable Assamese to become the ryots [tenents] of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification”. (Mills 1854: 607)

The socio-political conditions that emerged in the colonial rule planted a latent fear in the minds of the people of Assam of being swamped by the Bengali-speaking people. As a consequence, “Bangali” (Bengali) became synonymous to “foreigners”. In fact the Britishers were called “Boga Bangali” (white Bengali) by the common people of Assam (Gupta 1984: 100). In 1937, during the Indian freedom movement, two leading Assamese intellectuals, Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Nilmoni Phukan, had submitted a formal representation to Jawaharlal Nehru which stated that the Congress would get the whole-hearted support of the people of Assam only if it backed effective steps to fight the influx from Bengal; otherwise, they maintained, the Assamese intelligentsia might favour secession from India. (Misra 1979:1993)

Assam movement, hence, can be seen as one more expression of the historic Assamese-Bengali rivalry that had been occupying a significant place in the sociopolitical life of Assam since the colonial period. The encouragement to immigration during the colonial period, reorganization of boundaries, language bills etc contributed in the commemoration of the Assam movement in 1979. Nevertheless, many other features had emerged and were enmeshed in the new political conditions. The Assam movement ramified the identities and positioned them in a new emergent context, the context of citizenship, ethnicization of the identities was the most significant aspect of the movement.

“Ethnicization” of Identities in the Assam Movement

*Joi Aai Asom* (Glory to mother Assam) was the call that the leaders of the Assam movement enunciated, imploring all, who identified themselves with the interest of Assam, to “save” it from
the clutched of foreign nationals. Every section of the population responded to the call; the Karbis, Dimasas, Rabhas, Bodos, native Bengali speakers, native Muslim communities overwhelmingly participated in the movement\(^{18}\). The Assam movement was a success, if success of a movement is measured in terms of incorporation and institutionalization of its ideals into the larger society. The success was embodied in the form of the central government’s assurance and promise: the Assam Accord. Yet, till the time the Assam Accord was signed in 1985, the various groups had fallen apart and Assam had become an arena of “ethnic” rifts.

Noted journalist Arun Shourie (Shourie 1983: 56), reporting on the situation of Assam in 1983 wrote that, “each community that was a victim in one place, was the predator in another”. Sanjib Baruah (Baruah 1999: 132) writes that, “The ethnic divisions along which the violence took place varied from place to place: Tiwa tribals versus Muslims of Bengali decent; Bodo tribals versus Bengali Hindus and Muslims; Bodo tribals versus the Bengali Hindus; Bodo tribals versus Assamese Hindus; Mising tribals versus Bengali Hindus and Muslims; Muslims versus Hindus; ethnic Assamese and Hindus and Muslims versus Muslims of Bengali decent”. The categories of the people hence got accentuated. For Weiner, “What thus began as an issue of illegal immigrants soon grew to a broader conflict among Assamese, tribals and Bengalis”. What were the denotations within the movement that lead to such ramification? Why did the movement, which founded itself on the cornerstone of “secularism”\(^{19}\), fracture into an ethnic carnage? Why the consolidated regional identity, “People of Assam”, propounded by the idea of “composite” Assam not able to sustain itself?

\(^{18}\) [http://www.asomganaparishad.in/swahid_list.htm](http://www.asomganaparishad.in/swahid_list.htm) (12.12.2008) a site maintained by the Assam Gana Parishad, the political party that was formed from AASU, gives the names of the 855 students who attained “martyrdom” during the Assam movement. The names include students belonging from Assamese, various “tribal” communities, native Muslim students.

To understand the trajectory of the fall out among the various communities, we need to enquire the factors that led to such confrontation, what were the situations and conditions that developed the identities, antagonist to each other; how were the identities formulated? If there was any underpinning within the formulations themselves that pitched the identities against one another? What does it mean to be “ethnic” in the context of Assam? The answers to these questions unravel a path that will facilitate an in-depth understanding of the contemporary tensions, marked as “ethnic”.

For Fredrik Barth, to comprehensively grasp how ethnic groups generate and maintain themselves, one should shift the focus from emphasizing on internal constitution and history to ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance, “…the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts” (Barth 1975: 75). Barth’s formulation supposes ethnic groups primarily as organizational bodies. Though Barth has been criticized for discrediting the cultural content of ethnicity, his pattern of analysis has served as a vital tool for understanding societies torn in ethnic strife. The boundaries delineating the communities during the Assam movement were sharpened and heightened. Mahmood Mamdani in *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (2001) applies similar mode to analyse the conflicts in Rwanda in the early 90s. To understand accumulative and institutional form of ethnic expression, we must delve into the synergy between individuals and the structure of their ethnic affiliation. As Barth points out, if the culture-bearing aspect of an ethnic group is considered to be its primary characteristic, one is caught in a presupposed belief both on: i. the nature of continuity in time of such units, and ii. the locus of the factors which determine the forms of the units. The features that are taken into
account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant. Ethnic categories provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems. They may pervade all social life, or they may be relevant only in limited sectors of activity. Therefore there is a scope for ethnographic and comparative description of different forms of ethnic organization.

In Assam, during the period of the Assam movement identities were “ethnicized”. The ethnic component, as Barth points out, necessarily did not represent the core content of the particular group but were features that got heightened and intensified at the particular junction. The three loci where marked “ethnicization” of identities took place can be recounted as: i) the election processes, ii) emergences of identity based organizations and iii) the proclamation and implementation of the Assam Accord.

i) The Elections

The two elections, within the span of 1979-1983, had become an arena where “allies” and “antagonist” were decided based upon their participation or boycott of the elections. The population of Assam formed fractions as the Assamese, Bengalis and the tribals pitched themselves against an either at different locations.

The only two constituencies out of the fourteen where polling was successful in the 1979 Lok Sabha elections were the Karimganj and the Silchar constituencies. Both these constituencies were populated by Bengali Muslims immigrants from Bangladesh, underscoring the ‘immigrant communities’ mandate to defy the poll boycott and harbour the refuge that the central government seemingly provided. In the other places there was clear stir to keep the sympathizers of the immigrants away from power. Abida Ahmed (Congress (I) candidate and
wife of former President of India, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed), had filed nomination for Barpeta constituency. Her nomination paper was cancelled by the returning officer. Immediately after this, other three candidates withdrew from the fray, as their only intention was “not to allow Mrs. Ahmed go uncontested”. In the other eleven constituencies, nominees of various political parties could not file nomination papers as they were confined to their residences or party offices for days together by the agitators (Boruah 1980: 44). In the consecutive 1983 election, turnout was moderate only in the constituencies regarded as “stronghold” of the immigrant population. The stance towards the elections, therefore, became a benchmark of affirming one’s affiliation to a particular ethnic group.

Shekhar Gupta (1984) giving an account of the 1983 poll writes that the poll boycott was effective in Assamese and some tribal dominated areas in the Brahmaputra valley. In some strong Assamese majority areas polling were as low as 0.38 percent, 0.40 percent, and 0.68 percent. In some constituencies reserved for “scheduled tribes” and considerable tribal populated areas also, the election boycott was successful. In Mising dominated areas the polling percentages were 0.85 percent (Dhakuakhana constituency), 0.40 percent (Dhemaji constituency) and 9.28 percent (Jonai constituency). In the Tiwa dominated Jagiroad constituency the turnout was 4.87 percent. However, the hill districts, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills, which were

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20 Writing on the emergence and success of two reactionary political parties- the Purbanchali Lok Parishad (PLP) and Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD), Boruah remarked on the divided situation of Assam as: “Both the PLP and AJD were floated before the Assembly elections in 1978. But neither of them could get a single candidate returned to the Assembly. Certain outstanding features of the last Assembly elections of Assam were i) failure of Congress to secure a majority needed to form a post-emergency ministry, ii) emergence of the Janata as the ruling party and iii) the return of a leftist block of 24, with 11 members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the Assembly of 126 members. With the Congress in political wilderness and Janata enfeebled by infighting, the reactionary forces of Assam pinned their hopes on the PLP and AJD. And backed by the reactionaries, the PLP and AJD started, almost from the beginning, a virulent attack on the left and democratic parties and organizations. Now, supported by AASU elements, their attack on the left and democratic parties and organizations continues unabated. Assam now is virtually under mass terrorism”. (Boruah 1980:45)
mostly unaffected by the Assam movement, the polling was normal, 39.54 percent and 55.91 percent respectively.

In Gohpur, where the Bodos predominated, the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) contested the elections, Bodo peasants had a fall out with the local Assamese peasants over longstanding land dispute. The land primary belonged to the state, part of the Gohpur reserve forest. The local Bodos had cut down trees, cleared the forest and had settled in a large area of the reserve forest. The government had evicted them and had allocated some of these lands to the local Assamese peasants for agriculture. This became the bone of contention between the Bodos and the Assamese of the area. The PTCA through contesting the elections and by the anticipated victory planned to re-allocate these areas to the Bodos. Therefore the Bodos welcomed the 1983 elections with the view that they could negotiate their demands with the new government and realized the long held dream of separate homeland- the Udayachal (Baruah 1999: 133).

The choice of Chief Ministers by the Congress (I) in both the term is also seen as a pivotal strategy of political manoeuvre. Anwara Taimur, Keshab Gogoi and Hiteshwar Saikia, three of the nominated candidates belonged to ethnic affiliation other than Assamese Hindu that the leaders of the agitation belonged to, and whose interest was the alleged dominating strand of the movement. By electing the members of the “peripheral” groups as the state’s Chief Minister the central government at one hand attempted to weaken the cohesion within the movement while on the other it conveyed its solidarity with the cause of the minority and the immigrant communities. Keshab Gogoi and Hiteshwar Saikia both belonged to the Ahom community that ruled Assam in the medieval period. Appointing them to the apex of the state was a definitive step towards incurring the substantial Ahom support to the state mechanism rather than the agitation. Similarly, choosing Anwara Taimur, an Assamese Muslim, elected from a
constituency that was dominated by immigrants of Bengali Muslim and Bengali Hindus decent affirmed the central government’s stand that the cause and interest of the movement was not acceptable. Taimur’s tenure saw a staunch coercive measure to suppress the movement; removal and arrest of sympathetic officials and bureaucrats and transformation of the Chief Minister’s secretariat to individuals belonging to Muslim community. “The process appeared to be one of de-Assamesization of the state bureaucracy, and it reinforced the fear of Assamese minoritization and of immigrant power” (Baruah 1999: 129).

The “pull and push” that emerged in the elections processes thus rendered the identities conspicuous and unfolded a vivid picture of sectarian interest.

**ii) Growth of identity based organizations**

Another significant development that took place during and just after the Assam movement was the emergence of numerous political parties, literary bodies, students organization and insurgent groups representing specific identity. Various section of Assam’s population, that until then had considered themselves to be part of greater Assamese identity, ramified into discrete identities. Here we can draw parallels with Abner Cohen’s (1981) emphasis on group organization leading to pursuance of group interest through social and political processes. The development that started during the Assam movement of grouping under a banner continues till date. Every community in Assam today, has its respective organizations that represent it in various political and cultural premises. This characteristic evinces the specific characteristic of Assam’s ethnicity, the significance of structural module to preserve and perpetuate distinct identities. The fact that the various communities of Assam did contain varying level of ethnic consciousness even before the Assam movement had commenced cannot be negated. The Bodos had got themselves
organised as early as 1939 under the Tribal League. It sought to overcome the socio-economical deprivations faced by the tribals and demanded direct participation in politics through reserved seats in the legislative assembly. The Naga people under the Naga National Council (NNC) and the subsequent Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) had declared themselves as separate national identity and demanded an independent statehood right after the Independence of India. It was through perpetual tension and negotiation with these bodies, that Nagaland was curved out of Assam in the 1960s. Similarly, Mizoram was developed into separate state through the demands of Mizo National Front (MNF) respectively. These organizations through consistent pressure and political pragmatism were able to secure consolidated states which represented their ethnic identity.

However, the form and frequency in which the identities emerged during and after the Assam movement exemplifies how ethnicity in contemporary Assam is formulated, generated and maintained.

The Mising community was among the first groups to consolidate their distinctiveness. The Mising Agom Kebang or Mising Sahitya Sabha (Mising literary body) though was formed in 1972, vehemently generated momentum in the early 1980s. Similarly, the All Mising Students’ Union or the Takam Mising Parin Kebang and Bane Kebang or the Mising People’s Conference which until now were dormant bodies, formalized themselves. These three organizations came together to place demand for the recognition and progress of the Mising language. They were finally able to secure Mising as a language of study in the primary schools in 1987. They ongoing demand is to establish Mising as the medium of instruction of all the schools in the Mising dominated regions.
The Moran-Matak who is listed as More Other Backward Communities (MOBC) in Assam has been trying to preserve and uplift their Mayamora Vaishnava heritage. The Sadau Asom Matak Sanmilan strongly came forward during the 1980s and demanded a separate tribal status for themselves citing historical fact and their present socio-economic condition. In 1979 they placed a demand in the form of memorandum submitted to the Parliamentary select committee and in a separate memorandum to the Prime Minister and Home Minister, Govt. of India, in 1980 stating there is enough historical proof that the Moran-Matak is a tribe who have been living in utter poverty and illiteracy. They asked that they should be scheduled as a tribe and not as a backward community (Pakem 1990:181-185).

One of the most potent identity centric demands that commenced right after the Assam movement was from the Dimasa community. Dimasa Jalairaoni Hosom was formed in 1972 as a non-political cultural organization devoted to protect and promote the cultural identity of the community. The basic demands were to protect Dimasa historical monuments and press for demand towards the adaptation of Dimasa language at the primary school level in North Cachar Hills. However, in 1979, Dimasa Jalairaoni Hosom obtained a political aspect when it passed a resolution to move the appropriate authority to stop settlement of outsiders in Dimasa dominated region. Likewise, Dimasa National Organization born in 1979 passed its first resolution in the general to demand proper preservation of ancient relics and monuments of the Kachari kings lying in various places of Assam and other parts of India especially at Dimapur, Maibang and Khaspur. Another Dimasa organization Nikhil Hirimba Barman Samity, put forward a political demand in 1980 for the reorganization of the Dimasa speaking areas of the North-east. This organisation believed that the Dimasa nationality is facing a danger of cultural annihilation unless all the Dimasa are brought within a single administrative unit. They claimed that their
demands are based on government documents, historical and geographical facts. They proposed that the southern part of Nowgong district including Howraghat, Jamunamukh, Dabaka, Lanka, Hojai, Namti, Jogijan and the area from Dimapur to Dhansiri should be included in the proposed administrative unit. They threatened prolonged agitation in the event of the non-fulfilment of their demand. The Dimasa leaders of North Cachar Hills demand a separate state, to be carved out of Assam. The annual conference of the various Dimasa organizations are organised in various places. Besides having an intellectual objective, they also provide a common platform for the Dimasa youths to voice their hopes and aspirations. Other activities of these organizations are to hold cultural programmes to revive the traditional folk art and culture of the Dimasas. The first Dimasa news journal, *Waimijing*, received active patronage from all these organizations.

The socio-cultural organization of the Oraon community of Assam Assam Pradesh Kurunkh (Oraon) Sangha though was formed in 1968, added a new division to their organization in 1986 after the student led Assam movement. They established students’ home for the Oroan students for supporting them and helping their all round development. Other development and fragmentation around this time was between the Rabha and the Koch communities. The literary organization of the Rabha community All Rabha Sahitya Sabha (ARSS) formed in the early 1970s had remarkable Koch contribution in the composition of members and the acceptance of literature and script. It faced tussle among the various constituent

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21 The goal of the organization was to promote all round development of the community, the following were its objective:

- Modification and simplification of social custom and rules.
- Establishment of social integrity, equality and co-ordination.
- To create interest for education and to help to spread it.
- To draw attention towards health-care.
- To educate members of the society to develop saving tendency in economic front.
- To create interest in sports, music and crafts.
- To create interest for trade and commerce.
sections in the mid 1980. Rongdani, Maitori, and Pati are regarded as major sections of the Rabha community. Of these three sections the former two have their own dialects. While the last one has already lost their language as well as have adopted Assamese as mother tongue. The tussel between ARSS and Pati who are numerically more than other two sections began in the language issue. The Pati elites vehemently oppose the move of the ARSS in implementing the Rabha medium in the schools. Meanwhile the birth of the Rabha Bhasa Parishad (RBP) led by Pati section is critical to the activities of the ARSS and the process of unity between the Rabha and the Koch. Among the more recent ones, the Sonowal Kachari community of upper Assam affiliating to Kachari Tribal Sangha are making their entry in Assam’s politics. Alongside, various representative bodies have emerged like Sadau Sonowal Kachari Jatiya Parishad, Sadou Asom Sonowal Kachari Satra Parishad, Sonowal Kachari Swasyatta Shashan Dabi Samity.

These socio-cultural groups most of the times have corresponding political counterparts. In addition to this, each of the communities of Assam today has students organization modelled on the AASU. But what has been most overwhelming within the social life of Assam is the rapid emergence of insurgent organization. The South Asia Terrorism Portal marks as many as thirty five identity specific extremist groups active in Assam. The insolent eruption and existence of identity based groups manifests the socio-political processes that Assam has been undergoing.

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22 National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)
United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA)
United Liberation Front of Barak Valley (ULFBV)
Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF)
Dima Halim Daogah (DHD)
Hmar People's Convention- Democracy (HPC-D)
Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO)
Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA)
United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS)
Black Widow (BW)
All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA)
Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF)
Adam Sena (AS)
Adivasi Security Force (ASF)
The Assam Accord was the memorandum of settlement signed in 1985 between the nascent Rajiv Gandhi led Government of India and the leaders of the Assam movement. This marked the end of six year long Assam agitation.  

The main points of the Assam Accord were - all those foreigners who had entered Assam between 1951 and 1961 were to be given full citizenship, including the right to vote; those who had entered after 1971 were to be deported; the entrants between 1961 and 1971 were to be denied voting rights for ten years but they would enjoy all other rights of citizenship. A developmental package for the economic growth for Assam, including a second oil refinery, a paper mill and an institute of technology, were agreed to be established. The central government promised to provide “legislative and administrative safeguards to protect the cultural, social, and
linguistic identity and heritage” of the Assamese people. The existing assembly was dissolved as a concession to the agitators and fresh election was held in December 1985.

A new party, Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed by the leaders of the Assam movement. It was convincingly elected to power, winning 64 of the 126 assembly seats. Prafulla Mahanta, the AASU leader, became, at the age of thirty-two the youngest chief minister of independent India. Extreme and prolonged political turbulence in Assam apparently ended.

After the accord was signed the revision of electoral roll was taken up with new fervour. However, the procedures that were implemented were not devoid of criticism. There was an accusation of a large number of legal citizens being removed from the rolls (Choudhuri 1985). The final roll, on the basis of which the December election was held, had 6,89,715 lesser than the numbers in the updated electoral roll of October 1984.

Along with the AGP another prominent political party emerged after the Assam movement was over and with the signing of the accord: the United Minorities Front (UMF), claiming to represent the religious and linguistic minorities of the state. It sought to bring all the minorities; Muslim of Bengali decent, Hindu Bengalis, Assamese Muslims, Nepalis and the tribals within its sphere. The demand of UMF right after its inception was to scrap the Assam Accord as it was not conducive towards the interest of the minorities in Assam. A clear ethnicization of identities evolved with these political parties; AGP believed to represent the interest of the Assamese people of Assam as opposed to it, UMF emerged as the benefactor of the other groups dwelling in Assam24.

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24 However Baruah (1999: 115-143) notes that the power of the Assam movement rested in the fact that it projected itself to be inclusionary. Its popular slogan Minorities are not Foreigners, AGP for all, all for AGP did succeed in gaining popularity to the political parties in regions dominated by tribals (Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Darrang districts) and Bengali Muslims (Nowgaon, Barpeta).
Sanjib Baruah (1999: 140) noting the positive impact of the accord on the citizenship status of the immigrants writes that, “Apart from disenfranchisement of significant numbers of aliens, the accord also legitimized the citizenship status of a large number of immigrants: those who came before 1966 and those who came between 1966 and 1971, who were legitimized in phases”. However, this simplistic optimism has not proved to be beneficial for the interest of Assam and its people. The cycle of policies and acts that were imparted during this phase have been a cause of tussle among the population which have continued even today. The sprint to prove the citizenship status has created irrevocable web of suspicion and rivalry among the Assamese, immigrants and the tribal population of the region that expresses itself in numerous assertions demanding autonomy or secession.

Two counter Acts that the government passed during this vulnerable time have provided an arena where the population of Assam contested their and challenged other’s citizenship status. The Illegal Migrants (Determination of Tribunal) or, IM(DT) Act, 1983 passed by Hiteshwar Saikia government at the helm of the Assam Agitation in 1983 was one of them. This was a policy measure extended to safeguard the immigrant community from the onslaught of the anti-foreigner agitation. This Act is unique to Assam as in rest of the country, The Foreigner Act, 1946 prevail in relation to immigration law. The basic difference between the two Acts is that the onus of proving the illegal status of a accused lies on the accuser in case of IM(DT) Act, 1983 whereas in the case of the Foreigner’s Act, 1946 the responsibility to prove his citizenship lays on the accused himself. The other directives of the Act were that: the accuser must reside within a 3 km radius of the accused. He should fill out a complaint form (a maximum of ten per accuser is allowed) and pay a fee of Rupees ten. However, even if a suspected illegal migrant is successfully proved, he can secure his legal status by mere production of a ration card. If the
accuser cannot produce the required document, a system of tribunals made up of retired judges would finally decide on deportation. Moreover, the act also provided the clause that “if the application is found frivolous or vexatious” the Central Government may not accept it.

This Act has been severely criticized by the citizens of Assam and the local media as an obstacle in detecting and deporting illegal immigrants. The IM(DT) Act, 1983 has been held as the prime reason why the illegal immigration influx has not been able to be dealt with. There have been many request made for it repeal. Finally in 12 July 2005, the Supreme Court of India, struck down the Act as unconstitutional. The three member bench verdicted that the rules and regulations of the IM(DT) Act, 1983 “has created the biggest hurdle and is the main impediment or barrier in the identification and deportation of illegal migrants”… (the IMDT Act) is coming to the advantage of such illegal migrants as any proceedings initiated against them almost entirely ends in their favour, enables them to have a document having official sanctity to the effect that they are not illegal migrants”. However, the immigration issue of Assam have been so politicised that repeal of the Act poses a counter threat. In the words of Walter Fernandes, “The court judgment has actually polarised Assam as much as the act had done for two decades”. (Fernandes 2005: 3237).

The other procedural measure that the government implemented which remarkably highlighted and distinguished the identities of Assam was during the reversal of the electoral rolls in 1985 after the Accord was signed. As a special measure, house to house enumeration was conducted. Then Electoral Registration Officers were asked to prepare two separate lists of the

25 In the last 22 years, five tribunals had been set up under this act in the districts bordering Bangladesh from January 1983. They registered 423,021 cases, dealt with 65,000 cases and have disposed of 23,420 cases (Editorial, The Sentinel, December 16, 2004) and have till January 2005 declared 12,424 persons illegal migrants. Only 1,538 of them have been deported (Staff Reporter, The Sentinel, July 13, 2005)
names. List I was to contain “the names of those persons enumerated whose linkage with 1971 electoral rolls could be established directly or through their parentage”. List II was to contain the names of persons whose linkage with the 1971 rolls was not established. The names of List II were thus all suspect. Patwaris, amins and junior police officials were asked to submit reports as to the whereabouts of these persons prior to March 25, 1971. If the report was favourable the name of the person concerned was to be included in list I, and if not, the name was to be dropped. The government announced that more than two lakh names were dropped out by this procedure. However, minority sections in Assam claimed that the figure was much large.

Together with this, the prescribed form for raising objection removed and a system of plain paper objection was introduced. This decision on AASU’s demand, that it was difficult to submit *en masse* objections in the prescribed form which required a counter signature of a voter of the same locality. The Election Commission also made the significant change that, “Where any objector prefers his objection on the basis of evidence exclusively in possession of government the Electoral Registration Officer then on his own should get and check the record related to such document to satisfy himself”. (Choudhury 1985: 2146). Thus, the serious job of submission of objection became a popular pastime for the youth of Assam. However, the claimants were required to submit their claims in the prescribed forms duly countersigned by a voter of the locality and the burden of proving their citizenship also laid on them. Thus, it was criticized that the developments that took place in the fervour after signing the Accord shorn of the Election Commission of its autonomy and independence and transformed into an agency of the Home Ministry (Choudhury 1985:2146).

The tussle during the Assam movement was essentially around the question of Indian citizenship. In this wake to prove and refute citizenship status, the identities got percolated to:
Assamese, Bengali and tribal identities. These ethnicized identity were used to preface the idea of citizenship vis-à-vis the issue of immigration. Which category of the population qualified as citizens of India and which were illegal immigrants, formed the crux of the tussle.

Contestation of Citizenship in Composite Assam: Fragmentation to Ethnic Units

The Assam movement was a call of the people of Assam to save it from the domination from the immigrants. The residence of Assam were dispersed into various identity groups like the Assamese, plain tribal, hill tribal, Hindu Bengali, Muslim Bengali etc during the contestation on the question of citizenship.

The immigrant communities came to be associated with two terms *bahiragota* (outsider) and *bidexhi* (foreigner). These two terms were used simultaneously and many times interchangeably. The tussle of this period between the people of Assam and the immigrants, keeping the state of India as the interlocutor, can be understood from the speech of Purbanchalia Lok Parished (PLP) chief, Nibaran Borah, “If the issue of stateless persons could be raised by Sri Lanka as late as 1965, in respect of migrants from India who had moved out a century earlier and if the Government of India could undertake to get these persons repatriated and rehabilitated in India, which the Government of India has done, we do not consider a post-1955 issue as either being belated or closed”. (Kamath 1980:9). Here, Assam has been placed on par with the independent nation of Srilanka and immigrants from other places of India have to Assam been compared with the immigrants to Srilanka. The idea of outsider and foreigner conflated in such an understanding.

The difficulty that arose with such a socio-cultural context in which illegal immigrant were impossible to be distinguished from the citizens, the Election Commission declared that
entry of name in 1971 or pre-1971 rolls, copies of National Register of Citizens and Citizenship Certificates and Certificates of date of birth of the claimants as the only three documents that can be regarded legal to claim for citizenship status.

**Conclusion**

The difficulty in identifying the citizens from the non-citizens amongst the population catapulted a process of employing the existing categories as a token of distinction. Ethnicity here became a metaphor to connote nationality. The ethnic underpinnings here were rooted in the colonial past when the formal category divide of the people took shape.