

**ASSAM MOVEMENT AND ITS POLITICAL DYNAMICS:
A HISTORICAL STUDY (1979-1985)**

A Dissertation Submitted

To

Sikkim University



In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the
Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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I, **Ankita Devi**, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled "**Assam Movement and Its Political Dynamics: A Historical Study (1979-1985)**" submitted to Sikkim University for the award degree of **Masters of Philosophy**, is my original work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

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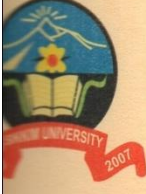
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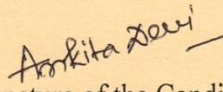
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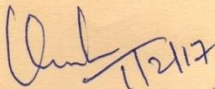
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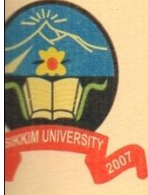
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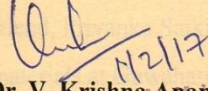
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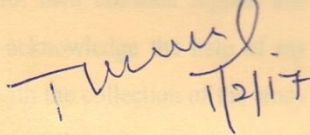
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This is to certify that the dissertation titled “Assam Movement and Its Political Dynamics: A Historical Study (1979-1985)” submitted to Sikkim University for partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of **Masters of Philosophy** in the **Department of History**, embodied the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Ms. Ankita Devi** under my guidance and supervisor. No part of the thesis has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by her.


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- **Ankita Devi**

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Abbreviations

- AAGSP : All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad
- AASU : All Assam Student Union
- ABSU : All Bodo Student Union
- AGP : Asom Gana Parishad
- AIUDF : All India United Democratic Front
- AJD : Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal
- AJYCP : Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad
- BAC : Bodoland Autonomous Council
- BLTF : Bodo Liberation Tiger Front
- BPAC : Bodo Peoples Action Committee
- BTAD : Bodoland Territorial Area District
- BTC : Bodoland Territorial Council
- CPI : Communist Party of India
- MoU : Memorandum of Understanding
- NDFB : National Democratic Front of Bodoland
- NSCN (IM) : National Social Council of Nagaland (Isak- Muhiva)
- NSCN : National Socialist Council of Nagaland
- PLP : Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad
- PTCA : Plains Tribal Council of Assam
- SULFA : Surrendered ULFA cadres
- ULFA : United Democratic Front of Assam
- UMF : United Minority Front
- UNLFM : United National Liberation Front of Manipur

Introduction

Looking back into the history of Assam, the region was rich in its culture, people and society. The six hundred years long rule of the Ahoms is one of the significant periods in the history of kingdoms of India. Neither did the great Mughals rule nor did any of the other greatest dynasties in India ever rule for so long. The next important phase after the Ahom rule in Assam was the signing of a treaty between the British, on the behalf of the people of Assam, and the Burmese royalty. The Yandabo treaty of 1826 between the British and the Burmese king, serves as the starting point, in so far as influx of `foreigners` in Assam is concerned. In the century after that, the indigenous people living in Assam witnessed foreign rule as well as the atrocities imposed upon them. Before the coming of the British, the concept of a pan-Indian identity was alien to the people of Assam. The British rule united the Indians as well as the Assamese people realizing them to be a part of a nation. It was during the colonial rule that large scale immigration into Assam took place. The immigrants, brought by British government from Jharkhand and Bihar, played an important role in the incorporation of Assam into the British Empire. But it was during the post-colonial period that the Assamese people began reacting against the Bengali dominance in the state. And among the key factors that contributed to the `nationalist` aspiration was the economic exploitation and the non-recognition of `Assamese` language.

The first instance of the demand of identification and deportation of foreign nationals was in the 1950s. There were the people of Bengali origin, who in the long term, were included in the electoral rolls of the state. Therefore, there was the demand for identification and deportation of such `illegal` immigrants. Since then, the demand

for 'identification and deportation' of foreign nationals from the land of Assam was voiced repeatedly. However, it was during the late 1970s, in the event of by-election to the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha Constituency, that the demand caught the attention of the nation and the six years long movement began since then. The initial years of this movement did not have much effect on the society. It was only a few regional organizations which vehemently demanded the identification and deportation of foreign nationals that raised the issue. They even requested the people of Assam to boycott any elections to be held in coming times unless deletion and deportation of foreign nationals was conducted legally.

But soon, the Assam Movement turned into the platform for the emergence of separatist ideology among different communities living in the state. Even after 1985, when the Assam Accord was signed, Assam did not remain peaceful. Soon after the movement, the terror of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) began. The sole purpose of ULFA was achieving a sovereign and independent 'Asom'. To reach those goals the ULFA militants used violent means. In the decade, after the Accord, violence remained the new face of Assam. Several people were abducted and killed in the process. In the beginning, it managed to gain the support of the common people as the nationalist aspirations were high. Over time, its ideological degeneration, terror tactics, extortion, external linkage and acceptance of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam eroded its popular support. Thus the, influence and the strength of ULFA began to decline.

The Bodoland Movement which started against the Assamese oppression based on racial ethnicity is also of similar nature. Unlike the ULFA, their demand was to divide Assam into 50:50 between Bodoland and Assam. The All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and such

organizations that advocated such theories also used violent means i.e. organizing several blasts and killing innocent people. The demands which these organizations made have its root cause in the Assam Movement itself.

In addition, to that, the movement 1979-1985, was also the reason for the instances of harassment of the Muslims even after the movement came to an end. The reason behind the emergence of such separatist movements by the different tribes of Assam was the threat that the Assam Movement posed questioning their right to the state and generation. Not only did ULFAs and the Bodos laid their claims to the land of Assam, the Karbi's also claimed a separate share of Assam for the Karbi's living in the north-eastern part of Assam.

Other important issues such as the problem of char land and emergency problems also contributed heavily to the outbreak of the movement. However, these topics are not discussed in the coming chapters in elaborate details. The study is restricted to the 1979-85 movement, the Bodos demand, the ULFA and the emergence of the Muslim identity in the Assam's political discourse.

Research Problem

The Assam movement, when it began, had political as well as social dimensions to it. However, during the shift during the 1980s, it fully took a communal form. The movement actually started out as one for the protection of the rights of the Assamese people against the Bengali dominance in many respects. But later, it turned into a communal campaign, violent many a times, against Muslim immigrants of East Bengal (Bangladesh) origin. If we look closely, this whole idea of 'anti-foreigner' movement can be traced back to the idea of nation-state. As argued by Benedict

Anderson, nation is an imagined community¹. As slowly the nation state emerged, the dominant groups formed their nation on the basis of their own identity and in the process different linguistic groups and ethnic groups showed their loyalty to a larger or dominant community. Similarly, the idea of nation based on religion, language and ethnicity is not new. Migration and immigration are important characteristic of a modern state. The migration hence, which during the colonial rule did not affect the then Indian society, began to assume other dimensions during the 1950s and the spectre of the foreigner began to haunt them. The demand and the protests were going on for the next two decades. Meanwhile, the language movement and the food movement had stirred up the entire state and thus the nationalist feeling had a strong hold upon them. But the demand for the identification and deportation of foreign nationals gained momentum when there was the by-election for Mangaldoi constituency in 1979.

The question of Assamese identity was the main reason for the discontentment among the people of Assam. Even before the independence struggle, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, spoke for the organization and uniting Assamese people on the basis of their culture and for its protection. It was the first instance where the idea of an Assamese identity was found. However, after independence, demands were going on for the recognition of Assamese language as official language of the state. Protests were organized on this regularly. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) which played a very important role in phase of Assam's turbulent years (1979-85), took part in the Language Movement. And finally, in the year 1972, Assamese was recognized as the official language in the state. However, the quest for Assamese identity did not

¹ Anderson Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities*. Verso, London. p16.

end there. It helped, during the period of entire Movement, to gather support from the masses.

The main demand of the Assam Movement (1979-1985) was identification and deportation of foreign nationals from the land of Assam. But here the question arises as to who were the foreign nationals and who were to be deported. There is no doubt that there were a large number of illegal migrants that have been illegally living in the state. The demand of such kinds was going on since 1950s. As mentioned before, it was during the time of by-election for the Mangoldoi Lok Sabha Constituency, after the sudden death of its M.P, Hiralal Patowary. The electoral rolls found that more than 70,000 non-nationals were registered as voters in the voter lists². This incident served as the breaking point of the Movement. During the year 1979-80 a large number of people were deported. The migrants were basically the Nepali's from Nepal and the Bengalis from Bangladesh. While deporting, it was reported that, the official in-charge did not proceeded legally. They chose people solely on the basis of their language and religion. And thus the course of the movement changed.

The All Assam Students Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad played a very important role in the movement, from leading it to gathering the mass support. There were also the regional parties that extended their support to the movement. Regional parties such as Purbanchalia Loka Parishad, Assam Sahitya Sabha, though did not take active part in the movement; they helped fully in shaping the opinion of the common people in support of the movement. Coming to national parties, neither the Congress nor the Janata Party, during their respective rule took a clear stand on such matter. It was only the CPM who was totally against the Movement and tried

² Hussain Monirul (1993). The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity, Manak Publications Limited, New Delhi. pp 101-102.

their best, in order to safeguard the right of the people who were unlawfully treated and deported.

The question of identity which marked as the starting point of the movement thrived so deep among the common people that it became the reason for disturbance even after the end of the movement. The idea of nationalism that flourished and united the people of Assam in 1979 it became the reason for the fractures in this unity. On the basis of the nationalism many organizations came up demanding the separate state based on its identity. Therefore this study deals with this process in some details.

Literature Review

Many works have been done regarding the movement. Some support the very cause while some oppose it. Clearly there is bias among the writers regarding the event. However, the aim to choose the event is to study the past and understand the present situation and the problems which are somehow attached to past events. The migration problem still persists and surface periodically. Moreover, the books which are available are not free from bias and lack scholarly explanation. The attempt here is to unravel the real agenda and other aspects of the movement.

Monirul Hussain begins with defining Assam Movement as a social Movement. The decline of Ahom Aristocracy, the colonial policy which encouraged immigration, the competition between Assamese Middle Class and Bengali people is discussed in the book. He points out that the demographic change resulted in population change. Hussain emphasizes the emergence of middle class and the role it

played during the unrest from 1979 to 1985³. The political issues and the course of the movement are broadly elaborated in the book as well as economic factor.

Sanjib Baruah is all about the idea of nation and its formation. Just like any other book he also writes about the background on how at first Assam was frontier land and how it became a province. The demographic change how later led to the formation of Assamese Nationalism which he termed as Assamese Sub-nationalism. The politics of Assam prior to the movement and the era of movement are discussed in the book alongside the insurgency that began at the same time. The idea of Assamese sub-nationalism here describe in the book gives the whole information on how the concept of Assamiya came to existence which later during the time of the movement took a violent form and was core reason on the outbreak of the movement. Unlike others the aggression and the violence that took place during the year of 1979-1980, he certifies it just as an act of so called Assamese Sub-nationalism⁴. It also discusses how the separatist movement began on the ground and therefore which was the beginning of a series of tensions among the people of Assam.

Sivnath Barman, in Assamese language, deals with pre movement issues. The book mainly focuses on the immigration problem. Beginning from historical background he touches on every kind of immigration that took place in Assam. The result of such immigration later, according to him, led to language problem, communal problem as well as economic problem⁵. Such problems lead to language riots and also paved the way for communal violence in the later part of the movement. It also provide us with an elaborate details on the immigration problem and later how

³ Hussain Monirul (1993), op. cit. pp. 63-65

⁴ Baruah Sanjib (1998), *India Against Itself and the Politics of Nationality*, Oxford University Press, New Dehi. p 3

⁵ Barman Shivnath (1980). *Swadesh Swamat*, Bandhav Ranjan Sharma, Guwahati. pp 14-15.

this problem became a massive issue and became the primary cause for the outburst of the movement.

H. N. Rafiabadi, emphasis on the main event i.e. when the agitation began in the year 1979 to the accord 1985. In this book the author explains the movement against the Bengali's in general and tries to highlight the presence of RSS element in it. He also highlights the concept of Muslims in Assam and what were the reasons for the large scale immigration of Muslims to Assam, how the alienation process began for the Muslims. In the end he delivers a standpoint exclaiming that the problem of foreign nationals was a pretext made by the upper caste Hindu's to gain control over the movement and formed the government⁶.

Ghanashyam Shah, deals with the different movements that occurred in India at Different times. Student movement is one of the social movements. Regarding the Social Movements, he is of the view that, it is a new concept and mostly ignored political analysts and historians. According to him Social Movements are committed to change, individuals act collectively to bring out the embodiment of believed ideologies⁷. On student movement Shah tries to offer an all India picture that different student organization had dealt with, varying from educational problems to political issues. On the participation and the leadership, among the students, are the one, who are protected by wealth or influence. Coming back to the concerned topic, the Assam Movement was also led by the students and therefore, it helps to get a closer observation on how the issues were handed.

⁶ Rafiabadi H.N. (1998), From Agitation to Accord. Genuine publication and Media Pvt Ltd, New Delhi. pp. 19-21.

⁷ Shah Ghanashyam (2002), Social Movements in India. Sage Publication, New Delhi. p.7

Bernard D' Sami gives us a general idea about the student Movement highlighting its characteristics, problems and limitations faced by the student movements. It also gives clear idea on the origination of the student federation and such in pre-independent India. The book also clearly discusses various student movements that were organized in the past. On Assam Movement and the Bodoland Movement it contends it to be product of national integration. The Assam Movement was an anti-foreigner agitation which later led to the riots involving various ethnic communities in Assam. As a result Bodoland Movement began against the Assamese chauvinism⁸.

Amalendu Guha mostly emphasized on the colonial regime of the British rule in India. The demographic changes led to the increase in the figure of Assam's population. It also addresses the immigration issue in a form of detailed idea on the tea plantation of Assam⁹. The basic idea to the background of the Assam Movement one can acquire from the book.

Makiko Kimura examines the Nellie Massacre riots thoroughly the reason behind it and the consequence of the so called massacre. According to her the rioters were the common people mostly belonging to the Tiwa community who were basically terrorized by the spread of the movement that these peasants would occupy their land displace them from their own land¹⁰. In her book Kimora also have records of the victims and the witnesses of the massacre which shows a very gruesome picture of the movement that was taking place at that point of time.

⁸ D Sami Bernard (1998). Students Movement in Indi. AICUF publications, Chennai. p. 80.

⁹ Guha Amalendu (1997). From Planters Raj to Swaraj ; Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947. Tulika Books, New Delhi. p.19.

¹⁰ Kimora Makiko (2013). The Nellie Massacre of 1983; Agency of Rioteer, Sage Publications, New Delhi. pp.17-18.

Objectives

- To understand the historical background of the ‘anti-foreigner’ agitation in Assam. What social and historical forces converged to ignite this agitation in 1979
- To find out how the movement against the infiltrators and foreigners became completely a regional and linguistic affair.
- To study how the idea of Assamese nationalism which initially united the Assamese people later helped in the creation of several other sub-identity politics in Assam.

Methodology

The study follows qualitative research methods. Both primary as well as secondary sources have been taken into account in order to analyze the event. Primary data such as Census Reports, Police Records i.e. Daily Situation Reports from the year between 1979- 1983 are collected from the Assam State Archives. Along with that, Contemporary Newspapers are also be taken into account for the study. Besides secondary sources such as books written by various scholars, newspaper articles and journals, regional magazines and booklets were relied upon to see these in perspective.

Chapterisation

Introduction

It gives an overview of the study area i.e. the Assam Movement, the grievances of the Assamese people against the outsiders, problems of the research, literature reviews, objective of the study and an overview that which is dealt on the next chapters.

Chapter I: Anti-foreigner Propaganda; Beginning of the Movement

- This chapter deals with the historical background from coming of the Ahoms to the British invasion.
- Pre and post Independence economic and political condition of the state.
- Reasons that led to the fueling of the movement.
- Leadership and the mobilization and mass participation.

Chapter II: The Turbulent Years

- This chapter begins with the political condition while the movement began.
- The issue of Bohiratos which was the issue initially changed into the foreigner problem.
- The three phrase of the Assam Movement is discussed elaborately in it. And
- The aftermath of the movement- Accord and the coming of two new parties- AGP and UMF are also discussed.

Chapter III: Assamese Nationalism and the Emergence of Separatist Ideology

- This chapter deals how idea of Assamese nationalism served the ground for the creation sub-identity and separatist politics in Assam.

- It will briefly discuss the course of separatist movement propagated by different organs after the movement. I.e. ULFA and the Bodoland Movement.
- The crisis faced by the Muslims after the end of the Movement is also discussed in this chapter.

Conclusion

It is an overview of the entire study discussed in the various chapters.

Chapter - 1

Anti Foreigner Propaganda: Beginning of the Movement

The year 1979 to 1985 holds a very important phase in the history of Assam. Its people witnessed an upheaval which shook the very foundation of the Assamese society. Protests, riots, mutual hatred towards other communities, mass killing and many more incidents were the characteristics of that period. People from all sections of the society came together and took an active part in the movement. However, before digging deep into the events that paralyzed Assam for straight six years let us look into the long history of Assam itself in as brief a manner it is possible.

The history of Assam is recorded only after the coming of the Ahoms in 1228 AD. For several hundred years previously some scattered facts may be gleaned from a few ancient inscriptions and from the observations of a Chinese traveler¹. The Ahoms ruled the state for almost six hundred years since 1228. Its founder Sukapha, a Tai, migrated from Upper Burma, crossing the Patkai mountain range and settled in the Brahmaputra valley. And slowly the kingdom was extended by his successors. Under Ahom rule, the whole 'country' was prosperous. Trade, agriculture and industry flourished which resulted in turning the country rich and self-sufficient. There was also a well organized central authority. That there was great economic progress has been attested to by the Muhammadan writers and the later British captains².

The glorious years of reign of the Ahoms came to an end when the Burmese frequently began to attack the kingdom and the British intervened and finally incorporated Assam into their empire in 1826. Present Assam constitutes the landmass

¹ Gait Edward (2008), A History of Assam, Surjeet Publication, New Delhi. p.1

² Ibid. p.268

which is divided into two distinct regions namely; the plains comprising the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley mainly consisting of the hilly regions and the Cachar district. To begin with, the entire problem of immigrants in Assam began with the coming of the British in the region. With their entry into this land labourer, traders and merchants came along with them from the rest of India. Among those were the Muslims, whose presence was unheard of in Assam until then.

To understand the entire Bengalee-Muslim immigration and its consequence let us look back into the background of Assam in the specific context of the foreigners during the British and the coming of the British into the state.

The Burmese War

The raid and the plunder of the Burmese were already taking places in Assam even before the British intervened. It was during the reign of Chandrakanta Singha, also known as Sudinpha (1810-1818), that Assam witnessed the first Burmese invasion³. The Burmese army is said to have advanced towards the Ahom Kingdom towards the end of 1816. The Burmese army marched crossing the state of Manipur pillaging and burning the villages that came its way. After defeating the Assamese army in several engagements, and when the invading forces reached Jorhat, Badan Chandra Barphukan, one of the nobles became all powerful and retained Chandrakanta Singha as the king. In return, the Burmese were paid a large indemnity as the expense for the war. The second Burmese invasion was witnessed soon in 1819. For the next five years, the Burmese forces killed and plundered the country

³ Charat Chandra Singha became king at a very young age as the Buragohain nominated him as a king. As a result most of the power remained in the hands of the BurhaGohain as the new king was very young. It was him who transacted every decision without consulting the king or other nobles involved. As the young king grew up he began to fret the influence of Burhagohain. Moreover the friction between Purnanda Buragohain and the newly appointed Badan Chandra Barphukan led the later to ask the Burmese king to intervene to free the people of Assam from his misgovernment. And as per the request the Burmese king promised to help.

committing atrocities upon its subjects. Meanwhile, Chandrakanta Singha tried to resist and fought the Burmese but failed miserably. Therefore, he escaped to the border and took shelter in the British territory.

The hostile army threatened and therefore plundered the Goalpara frontier of Bengal demanding the surrender of Assamese refugees including Chandra Kanta Singha, and his supporters. Even the border conflict with the East India Company in the Chittagong frontier with the Burmese empire did not turn out to be good. Anticipating a threatened invasion of Bengal, the prized possession of the Company in India, Lord Amherst, the Governor General decided to declare war on Myanmar (Burma)⁴. War was declared on the 5th of March 1824. For the next two years, the war with the Burmese continued and finally the king of Ava came to seek peace and on 24th of February, 1826 the treaty of Yandaboo was signed. As the treaty goes, the Burmese king was to renounce his claim on Assam and furthermore not to interfere in any affairs of the state. This gave the East India Company monopoly in claiming the supremacy over the state of Assam and it was for the first time in history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan Indian imperial formation⁵.

Consolidation of the British Rule (1826-1874)

After 1826, the East India Company slowly annexed the kingdom of Jaintia, Cachar, Manipur, Khasi Hills and the Naga Hills and made them into tributary states. In case of the Brahmaputra Valley, it was brought under the direct administration, as the province of the East India Company. Its management was entrusted to David Scott

⁴ Assam State Gazzeter Vol I (1999), The Editor In Chief, District Gazetteer, Govt of Assam, Guwahati. P.140.

⁵ Sanjib Baruah (2008). India against Itself; Assam and the Politics of Nationality, Oxford University press, New Delhi. p.21.

who had been appointed Agent to the Governor General for the whole of the eastern frontier, from Cachar and Sylhet in South to Sikkim in the North⁶. In the next few years, the old aristocrat tried to overthrow this alien rule but was all in vain. Those attempts were suppressed by the mighty British power. And until 1857, no records are found of any resistance to the foreign rule in the state.

The fire of the revolt of 1857 spread wildly in Assam, just like it did in other parts of the nation. With the efforts of Maniram Dewan and Peali Baurah, the uprising took place in Assam; these two ended up as the very first martyrs of the state⁷. With the help of some of the revolutionaries from Bengal, Maniram Dewan secretly planned the restoration of the old system and the king. However, the British got wind of the conspiracy and captured the people responsible for it. A lot of civilians were arrested along with Maniram Dewan and Peali Baruah and the two of them were sentenced for death and the rest were sent for long terms in jail. With this, the revolt too came to an end and no further attempts were made in this direction.

On the part of the administration, the British government, in lieu of protection and security extracted a huge amount of revenue from the inhabitants. Even after the restoration of Purandar Singh, as the king, he was obliged to pay a yearly tribute of Rs 50,000 out of estimated revenue of Rs 1, 20,000⁸. Poll tax, plough tax and the khelwari system of revenue were some of the taxes collected by the government.

The discovery of tea plant in Assam was the significant and important discovery of British as it had lost its trade monopoly in China after the charter of 1833. It resulted therefore converting most of the areas which was the wasteland into

⁶ E.A.Gait. op.cit. p.342

⁷ Baruah S.L. (2007). A comprehensive History of Assam. Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher Pvt, New Delhi. pp.273-275

⁸ Ibid. pp.348-349

several tea plantation sites. The growth of tea industry also boosted the encouragement of trade and opening of new markets in the entire province.

Another step to consolidate the empire was the improvisation of the communication system. When British occupied the Brahmaputra valley, the communication system of Assam was in the worse condition. There were no adequate transport facilities. Transportation via the waterways was preferred over the roadways. The conditions of the roads were bad constructions of the roads and the railways by the government were taken up only after 1865 and 1881 respectively. Construction of those was very difficult because of the climatic condition of the state and the terrain. More than half of the year the country was ravaged by the heavy rainfall and the thick virgin forests made it even worse to bring any labourers to work. It can be said that the transport facilities grew only with the expansion of tea industry⁹.

Frontier to Province (1874-1905)

The year 1874 marks the most important landmark in the history of Assam. In 1874, Assam was made into a new province of the British India which included East Bengali district of Sylhet, and the Cachar. And these two districts remained a part of Assam for the entire period of British rule till 1947. The main aim of making Assam into a new administrative unit was entirely a political call so that it could be administered in an effective way and most importantly the collection of revenue was viable. However, until then, Assam was considered to be the frontier of the British Empire in the north-east. It paid no heed for any sort of development in the area. The new province now was the amalgam of four different regions. I) The Brahmaputra

⁹ Goswami Priyam (2012), The History of Assam; From Yandaboo to Partition, 1826-1947. Orient Blackswan Private Limited, Kolkata. p.184

valley consisting of five different Assamese speaking districts, 2) the hilly area of myriad tongue people, 3) The Goalpara district of the British frontier and 4) The two Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar.

After the creation of the new province, the demography of Assam changed. The district of Sylhet which was predominantly Bengali speaking people, alone constituted with a population whose size was equal to that of the Brahmaputra valley. The two valleys- the Brahmaputra valley and the Surma valley had their distinct identity. Practically, no Assamese speaking soul ever lived in the Surma valley. Whereas, the majority in the Goalpara district of Assam were also the Bengalis. Therefore, it can be assumed that after the creation of the new province the number of Bengali speaking people increased.

Although the population as such was growing rapidly, it could not be denied that natural calamities stagnate the rapid growth of population for the next two decades. The earth quake of 1897 created havoc and caused the death of many likewise, the epidemic of black fever that broke in the Goalpara district of Assam gradually decreased the population growth for decades since then.

Nevertheless, the demographic change was not the only reason for the increased population. Instead, it paved the way for migration. Development of the tea industry demanded the entire bulk of indentured labour from outside the state. Another important factor that attracted a large number of immigrants was a large amount of wasteland in the Brahmaputra valley. A large number of peasants from Mymensingh district predominantly Muslim, migrated there. After all, it was the result of imperial designs to boost the agricultural productivity and strengthen the revenue collection. The migration issue will be dealt elaborately in the next section.

Swadeshi to Partition (1905-1947)

Assam also bore the brunt of the effects of the partition. The partition of Bengal, in 1905, added Chittagong district into the province of Assam. Behind the decision were two probable causes; if the Chittagong division was tagged on to the province, the traders and the planters would face no difficulty in future regarding communication system as there was a port in the Chittagong district itself and the second reason was the divide and rule policy of the British, Bengal at that point was the only region that had fiercely opposed the British government¹⁰.

Sparks of the Swadeshi movement was also felt in Assam but only in the Surma valley among its predominantly Bengali speaking people. Protests were organised against the partition and boycott of British goods were carried out in the entire Bengali speaking area. During the movement, the entire Surma Valley rose in revolt. Even Silchar was caught in the whirlwind of the movement. But the Swadeshi movement was not that popular in the rest of the Assam. The protests in Bengal and the Surma valley were still continuing and finally in the year 1911, when partition was reversed, by a royal declaration and Assam, Sylhet inclusive were reverted to its old status as Chief Commissioner's province with effect from 1st April 1912¹¹.

Although Assam had played a significant role in the struggle for freedom in the earlier phases, her political development was too slow due to want of intellectual contact with the rest of India as a result of the backwardness in English education and lack of communication¹². When people of Assam took active part in the Non Co-operation leaders like Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Tarunram Phukon went door to

¹⁰ Guha Amalendu (1977). *From Planters Raj to Swaraj; Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Tulika Books, New Delhi . p.57.

¹¹ Ibid. p.66.

¹² Assam State Gazzeter. Op.cit . p.155.

door and mobilized the public opinion and rallied the people to join in the non co-operation movement, the students and the lawyers association were the one that responded to the call. In response to the All India Congress Committees call, Assam also followed the footsteps of rest of the country. Passive disobedience, boycott of foreign goods, picketing and *hartal* were organized in the Brahmaputra valley. The satyagrahis were mostly the youths, particularly students. Stern actions were taken to suppress the movement by the government. Most of the satyagrahis were arrested including women and children. Meanwhile, the involvement of the people in the struggle for independence explains the emergence of Pan-Indian identity among the people of Assam. Hence, it may be argued that the coming of British helped the people of Assam to realize the idea of nationalism and embrace the Pan-Indian national identity.

Post-Colonial Period

The end of the British rule came with a heavy price of partition. India was divided into two; India and Pakistan. Pakistan was geographically separated into two different wings West Pakistan and East Pakistan. East Pakistan, which was created amidst the partition, comprised one of the thickly populated Bengali, dominated districts of Sylhet. During that time, as widely known, partition was based on the basis of a referendum. And on that basis only 43.3 percent voted for joining India whereas 56.5 percent voted against it. Hence, Sylhet became a part of the newly created country. And it therefore resulted in the decrease in the number of both Muslims and the Bengalis in Assam from what it was under British rule.

Even after the huge geographical change the trend in population of Assam did not change. The land was abundant, however, over the years, it transformed from

being thinly populated state, to thickly populated state. As mentioned by E.A. Gait after British occupied the land about one fourth of the land was taken by the tea planters and about a million and a third of the total population of the province were the immigrants and their descendents.

Economic Aspect

The economic condition of Assam, in the post-colonial period, was in a dilapidated condition as it was in the colonial rule. Even the independent Indian government continued British's policy of exploitation. Assam had abundance of natural resources; the state was one of the largest tea producers in world, natural oil, forest products and plywood, but was still the poorest and industrially one of the most backward states in India. This unfair treatment on the part of Indian government was one of the causes for their grievance. 23 percent of the per capita income in Assam was spent in buying consumer goods outside the state¹³. Most of the industries in Assam were started by British capitalist and in the post-independence period it was the outsiders who invested in those industries.

Political Condition

Even though the freedom struggle came to an end, the political situation of Assam still was restive. The Northeast, which was held together during the British rule, began to disintegrate. The repetitive demand for the separation of the Naga Hills as well as other territories led to the creation of new states in the region from the period between 1963 and 1975. It also witnessed the Chinese aggression during the Sino-Indian war in 1962. Arunachal Pradesh, also known as Northeast Frontier

¹³ Mishra Tilottama, (1980). Assam: A Colonial Hinterland. Economic and Political Weekly (EPW). Vol. 15, No. 32. pp.1357-1364.

Agency and then a part of Assam, was claimed by China as a part of Tibet. The conflict between Assamese and the Bengalis on the status of language led to the riots in 1960. The political mobilization began to take place on the basis of language, tribe, caste, ethnicity and class¹⁴. Later, in 1972 the problem was again stroked. And the language movement broke out with demands for making Asamiya as the sole medium of instruction in schools and the colleges instead of Bengali. The movement was organized by All Assam Student's Union, which in the later period became an important organization and played a crucial role in the Assam Movement, which is the subject of this thesis.

The Movement

The six years from 1979 to 1985 Assam witnessed chaotic unrest on the issue of foreign nationals living illegally in the state. The main reason behind the Assam agitation was against the inclusion of the foreigners in the electoral rolls. The issue of illegal immigration had already surfaced in the scene of Assam politics since the 1950s but it was in 1979 that it became strong and the massive protests against the illegal immigrants started. The rationale behind the Assam agitation can be said to be the question of mere existence. The Assamese middle classes, who were mostly active in this movement, were afraid of losing their identity to whom they described as foreign nationals. And by then, the leaders of this movement were successful in organizing the support of the common masses. The main demands were to stop the illegal immigration of foreign nationals into Assam from neighbouring countries; to prevent the participation of such foreigners in the electoral process in the state; Deportation of all the foreign nationals living illegally in Assam and help the people

¹⁴ Hussain Monirul (1993), *The Assam Movement; Class Ideology and Conflict*. Manak Publication Limited, New Delhi. pp.88-89.

of Assam in order to protect their identity from the threat foreign nationals¹⁵. There were incidents of violence recorded between the indigenous and so called immigrant communities. This campaign also led to friction between ethnic Assamese and some of Assam's 'plain tribal' group- the Bodo Movement that continued afterwards was an outgrowth of the Assam movement¹⁶.

In 1979, Hiralal Patwari who had represented Mangaldoi in the Lok Sabha constituency, died causing the need for a by-election in the constituency. It was revealed in the process, that among the registered voters in the electoral rolls there were more than 70,000 persons, against whom complaints were raised, who were mostly Muslims of Bengal origin and have migrated through the years to Assam. Hence, AASU called for a boycott for the election of 1979 and demanded for the revision of the electoral rolls. They also demanded the deportation of all the illegal immigrants from Assam. Thus started the six year long movement; known as the Anti-foreigner movement. The movement began to gain mass support in the later part of 1979. In the early 1980s, several rounds of talks were held on the status of illegal migrants at various levels including the then prime minister of India. Several such talks failed because both sides could not come to a mutual agreement to fix the year of cutoff for the deportation of the immigrants. The movement, in the beginning, was very peaceful. The protests were non-violent in character. However, later it became repulsive and violent. There were many incidents of violence and gruesome attacks on innocent people. People were kidnapped, murdered and burnt to death. One such example was the incident at Nellie. In that incident people of an entire village were killed by the unknown attackers and more than thousand people died. Peace was finally restored in the state when the Rajiv Gandhi government signed the Assam

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ Sanjib Baruah. op.cit. p.117.

Accord with the leaders of the movement in August, 1985. After the accord was signed, fresh new elections were held in the state where Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) came to power with a thumping majority. Although the Assam Movement broke out largely because of the migration issue it was not solely responsible for such outburst and the support it received from the masses. There were some deep rooted social as well as political causes that caused grievance to the entire Assamese community. The causes that triggered the outbreak of the movement will be discussed in the following section.

The Immigrants

The first instance of migration into Assam was recorded during the time of colonial rule. At first immigration was promoted because of indentured labour. The economic transformation that began with the introduction of tea plantation set off economic forces that gave further impetus to immigration and turned the colonial vision of Assam as frontier land into a reality¹⁷.

The people of Assam had their own land and liked to work independently. They were least interested working under foreign planters. For that reason the government was required to bring labourers outside the state. The labourers were mainly coolies that were brought from Jharkhand, Orissa, Chota Nagpur, Dacca, Chittagong and Bihar. They were brought in large numbers for tea plantation and the construction of road and the railways. According to E.A. Gait ‘the tea gardens gave employment in 1923 to 527,000 laborers’. And in the process some of those who came to Assam to work in tea gardens later settled here as cultivators. And around 263,000 acres of land was held by such workers in 1923.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.64.

The peasants from East Bengal, especially from Mymensingh district migrated to the Assam wastelands. Such migrations, during the days of British were endorsed and it helped in the increase of colonial revenue and agricultural production. Most of the peasants who immigrated were Muslims. The motivation of colonial rule for such endorsement was basically balancing the Hindu-Muslim population. There were also the educated Bengalis who migrated into Assam in search of government jobs and other administrative services. Besides, there were also the Marwari and Bihari who came in search of livelihood in petty jobs. Most of the Nepalis also came to Assam during the British rule. As for the Nepali migration Leo Rose observed;

“The first major Nepali migration was into the virtually unpopulated areas in Darjeeling district in Bengal, and from there, into the south west of Sikkim in the late 19th century. This input of Nepali was sponsored and, indirectly at least, organized by the British who were then in the process of establishing tea plantations in Darjeeling that required a labour force capable of working in a steep hill area, as well as a non Buddhist community in Sikkim that could serve as a counter to what the British perceived to be a pro-Tibetan Buddhist polity in that state that would not co operate with British policies designed to ‘open up’ Tibet. The Nepalese fitted both criteria admirably and became the critical factor in the tremendous expansion of both the Darjeeling and Sikkimese economies from the mid 19th to the mid-20th century. By 1900, Nepalis had become the majority community in both Darjeeling and Sikkim, although not the dominant force politically”¹⁸.

The above quote implies that such communities were designed to inhabit the unoccupied free wasteland and turn the barren land into cultivable revenue generating land.

Before partition, when India was under colonial rule, such kinds of migrations were legal but after the partition, similar migration of people was counted illegal.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 63.

However, it must be noted that the Bengali Muslim peasants, who in the Assam movement, were considered as foreign nationals were already living in the mainland of Assam for centuries. Of course, number of small migrations continued. Especially after the liberation of Bangladesh more than a million refugees took shelter in Assam as well as in other parts of the country. Among them, few went back to but most of them remained. Later it helped in mobilization of the masses against these people who had inhabited Assam for a long period of time.

One of the major causes of the Assam movement was the number of growing foreigners in the state. It apparently began in order to stop participation of those foreigners in the electoral process and their deportation from the state. Although the movement continued for six years, none of the leaders or the government officials were able to determine the actual number of foreign nationals living illegally in the state. Nevertheless, figures were dished out, inconsistent and determined without any basis. While some said it ranged from 2 Lakhs to 77 Lakhs, the Purbanchallya lok-Parishad and Assam Jatiyadabadi Dal estimated it to be 13 Lakhs and 40 Lakhs whereas All Assam Student Union reported it to be around 45-50 lakhs out of total 1.46,25000 populations¹⁹.

Emergence of Assamese Nationalism

It was Anandaram Dhekial Phukon who for the first time talked about the Assamese nation, making language one of its tools for unifying national consciousness. The idea of nationalism developed among the people of Assam when it became a part of the British dominion in the 19th century. The main reasons behind it were- the pan-Indian identity, the cultural homogeneity that the people of India

¹⁹ Hussain Monirul . op.cit. p.134.

experienced against anti-imperialism that they shared in common and the second was regional, which was based on regional cultural homogeneity. Though Assamese nationalism began to take place since 1850's it emerged strongly when the Assamese society was mobilized by the Assamese middle class on the language and the employment issue. However, since 1920's it began to develop comprehensively as an ideology. For example in 1927 Tarunram Phukan in one of the conferences of the Assam Sahitya Sabha said

“We Assamese are distinct nationality amongst Indians. Though our language is Sanskrit based, it is a distinct language. A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others. Alas! It is otherwise (with us) we are incapable of self defense today. We are not only dependent but even a dependent neighbor is trying to swallow us, taking advantage of our helplessness. Brother Asamiya, recollect your past glory to have an understanding the present situation”²⁰.

However, before 1947 there is no evidence of language or racial riots as the Assamese nationalism was not generated as a powerful weapon. According to Guha the Assamese middle class emerged more powerful and ambitious when Sylhet again became a part of East-Pakistan. He further adds that the nationalism that emerged degenerated into chauvinism and minority enticement.

The Assamese middle classes played a significant role in mobilizing mass support to the movement. It is also said that emergence of nationalism was a middle class phenomenon. The Indian society is divided into three strata. At the top were the foreign capitalist and big landlords and the peasants, workers and artisans were at the bottom. Therefore it was the traders, industrialists, and various sections of petty

²⁰ Guha Amalendu(1980). Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist; Assam's Anti-foreigners Upsurge, 1979-80. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol.15, No 41/43, October. pp. 1699-1720

bourgeois, both in urban and rural areas that held the second position. Therefore it was the middle classes who for their own interests politically mobilized the struggle projecting it as a interest of a larger group.

The Purbanchaliya Lok Dal (PLP), Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD), Assam Sahitya Sabha were some of the organizations fully supported the language movement and the issue concerning the foreigner and hence promoted the idea of nationalism in the later part of 1960s. They had many branches across the state and were able to mobilize the common masses as many of the citizens used to attend its meetings and conferences. The All Assam Student Union represented the students of the state and was also active in the language movement, food movement etc. The lack of jobs for the educated local Assamese people was also one of the reasons that agitated people against the outsiders and helped to form the sense of nationalism across all the section of the society.

There were many other poets such as Ambikagiri Rai Choudhary who always demanded for the separate identity for Assamese. According to Sanjib Baruah, popular singer, Bhupen Hazarika through his songs also helped in building the idea of nationalism among the people of Assam.

Grievance towards the Bengalis

Since the colonial times, the Bengalis settled in Assam occupied the dominant positions in government service especially the teaching jobs and other modern professions and also in higher posts of the public and the private sector. Lack of job opportunity, the significant role of outsider in Assam industry and trade and the fear of being culturally dominated produced a sense of deprivation in the mind of middle

class Assamese²¹. This led to resentment among the Assamese people against the Bengalis that living in Assam.

To set the records straight, the roots leading the outburst of the movement are interrelated. One of the main reasons for the creation of Assamese nationalism was the dominance of Bengali migrants in the government offices. Although a large number of Bengalis were present in 19th and the early 20th century during that time it did not caused any resentment among those people. Surprisingly Bengal at one point was the centre which was associated with modernity. Its language and culture was followed by the lot of the people of Assam²². Even for the Assamese youth, the only place for higher study was Calcutta. As time passed the lack of opportunities for growing number of Assamese youth over Bengali natives compelled them to detest what they admired before.

There was a great commotion among the Assamese against Bengali being the medium of instruction in the schools and the colleges of Assam. In 1960 and 1961, the notorious language riots took place in Assam. However, at the intervention of congress leader Lal Bahadur Shastri the riots came to an end. But again in 1972 the riots broke out when Gauhati University decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction under its jurisdiction. The Bengalis on the other hand did not want Assamese to be the language of college education. Most of the Bengali organizations opposed this decision which resulted in the outbreak of some ethnic violence. A large number of Bengalis were attacked and their houses were looted and burnt. The educated Assamese youth demanded Assamese as medium of instruction

²¹ Chandra Bipan (2007), *India Since Independence*, Penguin India, New Delhi. p.402

²² Sanjib Baruah, *op.cit.* pp.59-60.

and finally in 1972 Assamese was made sole medium of instruction. The movement was organized and led by All Assam Students Union.

Economic Cause

As mentioned before Assam lagging behind the development in the economic aspect. In 1834, British began tea cultivation in Assam. Initially it became successful and in 1840 Assam Tea Company was established. The British tea planters enjoyed tax free land where as the poor local peasants paid 2-3 Rs as tax for their lands. Slowly because of the introduction of new land rules, the owner of the tax free land enjoyed permanent, heritable and transferable rights on their lands. The aspiring Assamese tea planters were discriminated against and were pushed to the level of discontentment. The British made huge profits from the tea industries in Assam. It was for plantation, a large number of wage labourers were brought to Assam from Bihar, Orissa and Madras presidency. The immigrant labourers were exploited and ill-treated. For the fear of revolt no local people of Assam were employed as labourers in the plantations. Even in the post colonial period the Centre was depriving Assam of its due share of revenues from its natural oil. The carrying of natural oil outside the state also played an important role in building the sense of unity among the people during the time of the movement.

The Leadership of the Movement

The All Assam Student Union, popularly known as AASU, that led the movement for six years was merely an apolitical platform. It was AASU which successfully led the language movement and made Assamese the only medium of instruction for schools and colleges in 1972. However, at that point of time it was not capable of organizing the mass support; the AASU was not at all popular in the early

1960s as it became in late 1970s. After 1951, the issue of foreigners resurfaced again in 1979, at the sudden death of a MP and at that moment AASU began to protest against the holding of election. They demanded the postponement of the election till the revision of electoral rolls were completed. When the election commission and the state government paid no heed to their demands they then decided to boycott the upcoming assembly election.

While mobilizing the masses there was also the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad that helped the student union in gathering the support from the masses. It was the Gana Sangram Parishad that mobilized and brought together for the cause. There were various branches of this organization across the state which helped in grooming the public support. The AASU also had its branches across the districts of Assam. The Assam Sahitya Sabha which was very popular among the masses also extended its full support to AASU. Besides, the Assamese press also helped AASU in consolidating its position among the common people. They tried to legitimize AASU with the aspiration of the people of Assam and expressed their determination to fight for the cause of Assamese people.

Along with that, there were other communal parties such as Asam Jatiyadabadi Dal, Purbanchalya Lok Parishad, which all along the six years, co-operated with AASUs programme and demands.

The fear of losing their identity to the foreigners, as well the political, economic and other dominant factors mentioned above provided the background in contributing to the event which resulted in six year long Assam Movement.

The next chapter will deal with the main events that took place during the movement i.e. 1979-1985. The various issues that prompted the common people to come forward and participate in the struggle that continued for six long years.

Chapter - 2

The Turbulent Years: Agitation to Accord

In a democratic nation, agitation plays an important role as it actually helps to check if democracy stays alive. It reflects the discontent of groups of people on a particular issue and in general, agitations are not of anti-government nature. In fact, it tries to make the government aware of the situation and to find out measures to solve national problems. The Assam agitation or the ‘anti-foreigner’s’ agitation between 1979 and 1985 was one such instance where the people were demanding betterment of their economic condition and were trying to protect their language, culture and identity in the face of the dominant, aggressive and ever increasing number of ‘foreigners’ in their midst. The agitation was started by a student’s organization and very soon it won the support of the masses that spoke different languages, followed different religions and belonged to different ethnic groups.

The common enemy was the ‘outsider’ who spoke Bengali and came from several parts of Bangladesh. The leadership of the movement demanded that 1951 be the base year and those who crossed the border after that year should be expelled from the state. The six year era began in the context of the political instability, but took a turn where masses rallied against each other making it completely a communal affair. As mentioned before in the previous chapter the question on foreigners had remained an issue since the 1950s. According to Myron Weiner, the Assam Movement was the result of the struggle between the emerging middle class, who claimed themselves to be the ‘son of the soil’, against the so called ‘encroachers’.

When a demographic change lead to population growth whether be emigration or immigration the previous prevailing political arrangements are somewhat

disrupted¹. And such incidents occurred not only in Assam but also in Northern Ireland, Malaysia, Cyprus, and Lebanon.

The Immigration Act (Expulsion from Assam) 1950, which provided for the expulsion of certain immigrants from Assam clearly states that such persons can be removed directly by the state² (see Appendix 1). Nevertheless the law was repealed in 1957. In course of time, it was clear that the government of Assam could not act accordingly on the alarming growth of the population in the state. Several measures were taken to counter the problem of continuous infiltration. To detect and differentiate between the immigrants and the indigenous people, the National Registration Certificates were promised to be issued. However, this law also failed with regards to determining the foreign nationals living illegally in the state. All the attempts failed and the one who demanded sharp actions became doubtful of the government and decided to take actions accordingly.

Infiltration

Before getting into the main events, let us look into the constant migration that continued till the outbreak of the agitation. Even after thirty years after the partition, the wave of infiltration existed in many states of the bordering areas from Bangladesh. It was from different parts of Comilla, Sylhet, Chittagong, Mymensingh, Tangail, Rangpur and Dacca district of Bangladesh. In the early month of 1979 the main cause of such infiltration was the socio-political condition that prevailed in Bangladesh. Poor economic conditions and search of employment compelled them to come to Assam, whereas during the later months of 1979 encouragement from

¹ Weiner Myron (June 1983), The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigration Movement; Population and Development Review, Population Council. Vol. 9, No. 2. June. P.279. JSTOR.

² The Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act 1950. URL- <http://www.assam.gov.in>.

different quarters for political reason led to increase in the population of their respective communities in Assam as well as to encroach the forest reserve or vacant government land or the railway land³. The infiltrators worked as agricultural labourers, day labourers or the domestic servants and also did petty business, cultivation on encroached land etc. All these imply that such migration was very much encouraged as such kind of infiltration began since 1971 the year when Bangladesh was born after the liberation from Pakistan⁴.

Political Condition

With the Janata Government in the centre, the popularity of the Congress declined in the state making the Janata party an alternate to the Congress in the state as well. As a result, during the assembly election of 1978 in Assam, the Janata party came to power in a coalition with the Left and the Plains Tribal's Council of Assam (PTCA), making Golap Borbora the head of the state. In the coming years, Assam witnessed mayhem and chaos. Several governments came and went. However, in the year in 1979, an M.P named Hiralal Patwari died, causing the need for a by-election at Mangaldoi constituency. One of the remarkable statements concerning both the immigrants and the election came from Chief Election Officer, S.L. Shakhder, in the conference held at Ootacamund on 24th October 1978. He quotes-

‘I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some of the states, especially from the North Eastern region, wherefrom reports are coming regarding large-scale inclusion 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 figures was attributed to the influx of large number of persons from foreign countries. The influx has become a regular feature. I think it may not be a wrong

³ Weekly Infiltration Report of Assam on Infiltration; January 1979- December 1979. File No Lib/RO13/S1/01. Assam State Archives (ASA), Guwahati.

⁴ Ibid.

assessment to make that on the basis of increase of 34.98 percent between two census , the increase would likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100 percent over 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached 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'⁵.

The above quote clearly states that the population of Assam was no doubt growing in a large scale and despite several laws that were introduced in order to check the population growth and the flow of migrants from another country, could the wave of immigrants coming and settling into the state did not cease. Both the Indian government and the state government could not take adequate measures to stop the migration.

Issue of *Bohiragator*

The word *Bohiragator* means the outsiders in Assamese; it however implies not only the foreign nationals but also those coming from the other states of the country. During the time of the assembly elections in 1978 the '*Bohiragator*' issue was made into a major political statement by some of the regional parties of the state. The grievance of the Assamese people against these outsiders merely was of cultural and linguistic in nature. The attitude of these outsiders not to assimilate culturally with the existing Assamese society, though living in Assam for long period, made the Assamese people conscious about the unity and homogeneity of their native land.

The Assam Jatiyadabadi Dal and Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad were such parties that endorsed the '*bohiragator*' issue on the eve of the assembly election in 1978 and were the one that also contested in the 1978 assembly election on that issue. However, they lost totally not even winning a single seat. Even after their dreadful

⁵ Baruah Sanjib (1998), *India Against Itself; Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Oxford university Press, New Delhi. p.120.

defeat in the election of 1978, both the parties continued their anti-*Bohiragator* campaign. The campaign, although against the delicate issue regarding the outsider problem of the state, could not gather popular support from the masses. Recalling the past experiences on the riots against the Marwari and massive failure on the part of the rioters to drive out the outsiders from the state, made them realize that the Assamese masses did not respond positively to the anti-*Bohiragator* campaign and began to look for an alternative issue in place of *Bohiragato* transforming the genuine problem of general masses into a national problem promoting the interest of Assamiya middle class⁶. Let us discuss elaborately the events that characterize the six year long movement.

The Breakdown: Beginning of the Movement-

It was in the March of 1979, when the sitting M.P of the Janata Party named Hiralal Patowary of the Mangaldoi constituency (Darrang District) died. Therefore the election commission decided to hold the by-election in the constituency. But because of the continuous migration into the state and the heavy concentration of Muslim voters of the Bengali origin in the area, there was a huge outcry demanding the revision of electoral rolls. Thousands of complaints were registered in this case. According to many reports, the population of Mangaldoi was growing phenomenally. The AASU, who were protesting against the illegal immigration from the very beginning also, pressurized the government to take necessary actions regarding the matter. Out of 600,000 names complaints were raised against almost 70,000 voters

⁶ Hussain Monirul (1993), *The Assam Movement; Class, Ideology and Identity*, Manak Publications Limited, New Delhi. pp.101-102.

The riots against the Marwaris began in the late 1960s in Guwahati which failed to drive out a single Marwaris from the state, only causing destruction of their properties.

who were registered in the list⁷. Among those the High Court affirmed that 45,000 voters were immigrants which implies in a single constituency even the court found such large numbers of foreigners registered as voters.

Therefore this episode provides as the immediate cause to the movement. It was the All Assam Students Union (AASU) who came forward and took up the responsibility to drive out the foreign nationals from the state. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the AASU proved itself to be successful in the language movement. The AASU, therefore, on the 8th June, 1979, called for a twelve-hour strike all over the state demanding the ‘detection disenfranchisement and deportation’ of foreigners from the state. When AASU launched the movement, during the period, it was fairly popular among the masses. AASU worked with the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, which helped it to achieve support and sympathy from the masses. Another important organization during that period of the movement was Assam Sahitya Sabha, a non political organization, which was very much popular and influential among the public. It therefore played an important role in molding the perception of the Assamese masses. Although it did not take an active part in the movement, it extended its full support for the cause. It is however very much important to mention that at this point several minority and tribal organizations also came together united. Besides these the Sadou Asom Karmachari Parishad, North Eastern Regional Student Union also supported the movement.

Prior to the beginning of the movement, in the fifth annual conference, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was elected as the president, Bhrigu Kumar Phukon as Secretary, Girindra Kumar Baruah as General Secretary and Lalit Rajkhowa and Lachit Kalita as the advisor of the All Assam Student Union. In the same annual

⁷ Mohanty P.K.(2006). Encyclopedia of North East India, Isha Books, New Delhi. p.101.

conference, held from 8th to 10th March, 1979, the AASU decided to organize a twelve-hour bandh on the 8th of June 1979. According to the call, bandh was observed all over the state except the Cachar and North Cachar Hills⁸. Nevertheless, some of the city bus and government offices worked. Many of the picketeers got aggressive and tried to stop buses that were plying and as a result, as many as 112 picketeers in Guwahati itself, 395 in Goalpara District. 155 in Lakhimpur district and 35 in Dhemaji district were arrested; these were mainly students. This is the first instance of the students coming together in a large scale from different districts of the state. On behalf of the picketeers who were arrested, the general secretary of AASU met up with the Chief Minister of Assam and demanded their unconditional release⁹. Hence, the prisoners were released within a short period of time. This event implies that the organization, within short period became very powerful.

Political Condition

The period of 1978-79 was very subtle in the Indian politics. The government of India was very unstable in that period. Amidst the crisis and faction feuds within the Janata party, the Janata rule in the centre collapsed in July 1979. And the direct impact of the downfall of Janata government in the centre also resulted in the crisis in the states. As soon as the first phase of the movement began, the rule of the Borbora ministry also came to an end. On the 4th September of 1979, Borbora submitted his resignation and the Janata Government collapsed in the state. Just like in centre, Jogen Hazarika defected from the party and formed the government along with the dissident members of the party. A new government was formed making Hazarika the head of the state on the 9th September along with the eight members. However, within three

⁸ Daily Situation Report of Assam, 1st January to 31st June 1979, (Dated 8th & 9th June 1979). File no-Lib/R013/S1/03. ASA, Guwahati.

⁹ Ibid.

months of assumption of the office, this newly formed coalition ministry too collapsed. The fall of both the Borbora and Hazarika ministries was not only the result of defection within the party. In the wake of the Assamese masses and the movement gaining momentum it divided the party.

First Phase of the Agitation

After the state-wide twelve hour bandh and the positive response to its demand, the AASU along with AAGSP, gave a call for mass squatting in front of the District Commissioner's offices on the 6th and 7th September 1979. In the executive committee meeting held on the 26th August, the AASU adopted resolutions demanding that the government of Assam stop outsiders entering into Assam. The Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad, Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad and Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal extended their support to the call. The students abstained from the classes and staged squatting in front of local administrative offices at Tezpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, North Lakhimpur, Nowgong (now Nagaon) and Gauhati. Their main demand was detection and deportation of foreign nationals from the state and they also pleaded the people not to allow the holding of the ensuing mid-term poll in Assam till the names of all the outsiders were deleted from the electoral rolls. The AJD even circulated printed hand bills indicating their demands such as, full autonomy, dual citizenship and 100 percent jobs in central and state government offices to the local youths¹⁰. Slogans such as “ *Brihattar Banglar sapun Dhanka Hauk*” (Dream of Greater Bangla be Shattered) and “*Bahiragatak Loi Nirbachan Nachalibo*” (No Election with Foreigners as Voters) were raised by the squatters.

¹⁰ Ibid. dated 6th September 1979.

The first day of the mass squatting ended peacefully with meetings presided over by various leaders of the leading organizations. But on the second day, it was observed with *hartals* and protests. AASU again, from 12th to 14th September called for mass picketing in front of all the government offices of the Brahmaputra valley districts reiterating their demands. This time, the action severely affected all the functioning government bodies including railways, banks and post and telegraphs. Though these picketing and squatting were peaceful in nature there were some incidents of clashes and hostility between the police and the picketeers¹¹.

The AASU, on 25th September 1979, organized a mass rally in all the districts and it was decided that from 26th September to 10th October two representatives of every districts union will resort to a token hunger strike for 12 hours daily in front of the offices of DC and SDO. As usual, the rally was successful in the Brahmaputra valley region. The protests continued and one week long mass picketing was again launched in front of all the government offices throughout the state from 10th to 18th October 1979. Almost about a lakh people participated in the movement¹².

Meanwhile, the Government of India announced the dates for state Legislative Assembly elections which were to be held from 14th to 21st February 1980, for twelve unfilled parliamentary seats out of fourteen¹³. The Chief Election Commissioner therefore directed revision of the electoral rolls for the polls that were to be held in 1980. The leaders of the movement were constantly urging the local people not participate in the elections until and unless the complete revision of the electoral rolls was completed and every foreign national living illegally were deported from the state. By now, all the political parties had expressed their concern on the issue of the

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Weiner Myron, *op.cit.* p280

foreigner. The national parties such as CPI and Congress on many occasions, expressed that those who have entered Assam after 1971 should be deported whereas regional parties were demanding the base year of deportation as 1951.

The process for revision of electoral rolls began in this context and several setbacks were witnessed. A large number of people, claiming to be Indians, failed to produce adequate documents during the process of verification. A large number of people were deported in the process. There are also many instances where the personnel who were in-charge of verification harassed the locals. The CPI, in many instances, claimed that these officials without proper authentication, on the basis of their name and religion labeled them as foreigners¹⁴. All this implies that the ongoing movement had already influenced a large number of people. Writings such as “Do you support us? If you do then, fight for Indians. Deport foreign nationals without linguistic and religious discrimination, enlighten fellow Indians, press centre for justice, we demand justice.” This tells us that innocent people were truly discriminated and atrocities were heaped up; on the people. It also clearly indicates that the claim CPI made were indeed true and the Indian nationals were deported in the name of the foreigners, based on their religion; i.e. when they happened to be Muslims.

AASU once again raised their constant demand for the deletion of the names of the foreigners from the voter lists and their detection and deportation. It further requested the entire student to participate in the Gana Satyagrah Movement which was scheduled to start from 12th November¹⁵. The satyagrah was successful as a large number of people including students, government employees and general people

¹⁴ Daily Situation Report 1st May to 31st August 1981. File No- Lib/R013/S1/09. ASA, Guwahati.

¹⁵ Daily Situation Report of Assam 1st August to 31st December 1979,(dated 11 November 1979). File No- Lib/R013/S1/04, ASA, Guwahati.

participated. Large numbers of people courted arrest too. Total numbers of arrest recorded in the entire week are as follows-

Table2.1. District wise data of the people who courted arrest during the satyagrah programme.

| Districts | 12-11-79 | 13-11-79 | 14-11-79 | 15-11-79 | 16-11-79 | 17-11-79 |
|-------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Kamrup | 10,842 | 8363 | 7941 | 25,500 | 61,415 | 96,145 |
| Goalpara | 1137 | 450 | 1910 | 1501 | 1415 | 3839 |
| Darrang | 2756 | 5367 | 8447 | 14,017 | 21536 | 52,804 |
| Sibsagar | 6675 | 7812 | 10,792 | 27620 | 35077 | 19,905 |
| Nowgang | 4256 | 2125 | 15738 | 17349 | 52898 | 94,818 |
| Dibrugarh | 1235 | 2643 | 3547 | 10,477 | 9834 | 36,162 |
| Lakhimpur | 2866 | 1901 | 717 | 3525 | 7689 | 17,325 |
| Karbi- Anglong | --- | --- | --- | --- | 801 | 1476 |
| N.C.Hills | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Cachar | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ----- |
| Total | 29,767 | 25,666 | 50,454 | 1,11,183 | 161,261 | 322,474 |

Source: Daily Situation Report 1st August-31st December, 1979. File No-
Lib/RO13/S1/04. ASA.

The above data show that for the first three days response was not as overwhelming compared to the last three days. In the last few days of Gana Satyagrah people participated more in numbers. The number of people courted arrest in that week was in billion. Which implies the movement was popular among the people. The state government constructed many temporary jails and even these jails fail to accommodate the rising tide of Satyagrahis¹⁶. However, it is very important to note that the numbers of the people participated and arrested in the Satyagrah belong only to the Brahmaputra Valley as because the Barak Valley regions; the N. C. Hills and Cachar districts were unattached to the movement.

The next phase of the movement began with the AASU and GSP declaring to call for a thirty-four hours bandh from December 3rd and mass picketing before all central government, state government and semi government offices and decided to continue picketing if election officers were found working and to gherao any prospective candidate who intended to fill nomination papers. The bandh this time was observed in the Brahmaputra valley and Karbi Anglong districts. As a result the rail and air traffic across Assam were suspended; public traffic was off the road and employees in most of the offices didn't turn up; some of the picketeers were arrested during the picketing. The successful three day Non-cooperation with the government was also observed from 27th to 29th December 1979. One of the major reasons for the discontent among the Assamese people was pumping of crude oil from the state and the leaders therefore decided to stop the flow of oil from Assam outside the state. Vehicles that were supposed to transport oil were blocked. The number of supporters that came forward in the blockade as picketeers was overwhelming. Supporters came from distant places by bus and some by foot and stayed day and night and in many

¹⁶ Hussain Monirul op.cit. p.111

cases the workers did not show up to work making the blockade a success¹⁷. This blockade managed to draw the attention of central government and pressurized the central government to take serious actions on the matter.

By this time Assam was completely turned in lawlessness and disorder. The Hazarika government collapsed leading to the imposition of president rule in the state. Continuing their protest, the leadership of the movement carried along their talks with the government of the state. But all their attempts failed. The leaders vehemently protested the holding of the election simultaneously with the rest of the country until the names of the foreigners were deleted from the voter list. But the Hazarika government decided to go ahead with the poll. Meanwhile all the political parties had decided to submit their nominations for the election. On the last date of the filing the nominations, AASU called for a statewide bandh which was very effective and none of the candidates could file their nominations as the supporters of the movement had constantly gheraoed them for days. Because of that 1 out of the 14 seats of Lok Sabha from Assam remained vacant; elections in the whole Brahmaputra Valley was postponed. But in the Barak Valley, in the remaining three constituencies, the nominations were filed and henceforth to prevent the holding of upcoming election all the AASU and AAGSP leaders decided to hold squatting in front of the Raj Bhawan, Shillong. Doing so the leaders were successful to force postponement of election in the autonomous hill districts, whereas in the remaining two seats elections were held on 3rd and 6th of January 1980 as scheduled.

¹⁷ Daily Situation Report op.cit.

Negotiations

For the next two months i.e. January and February 1980, the protest continued in the form of bandh and picketing. It was the time when all the organizations including All Assam Central Government Employee Parishad and State Government Employees too joined the movement. While in the centre the revival of the congress and its victory in the election put an end to the instability and confusion that shook the nation. After the revival, Indira Gandhi came to power and became the prime minister of India once again. After coming to power, Indira Gandhi sent her emissaries to Assam to talk with the leaders of the movement. The AASU therefore submitted a written memorandum on 2nd February to the prime minister, stressing their demand and problems faced by them. According to the leadership of the movement:

“The main cause behind this mass upheaval in Assam was the monstrous problem of infiltration by illegal foreigners, mainly from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Nepal and to less extent from Bhutan and Burma. This has led to an abnormal increase in population to the tune of 40-50 lakhs, over and above the normal increase in population. (Incidentally, Assam has won quite a few prizes in family planning). That this abnormal increase in population has been due to infiltration is an irrefutable fact, agreed to even by most biased critics and detractors of this peaceful non-violent movement.”¹⁸

The demands made by AASU and AAGSP were as follows¹⁹-

1. Foreign nationals must be detected and deported from our country.
2. Name of foreign nationals must be removed from the concerned electoral rolls before holding any elections in Assam. (inclusion of names of foreign nationals in electoral rolls in future must be made impossible with the help of adequate and strong election machinery)

¹⁸ Hussain Monirul, op.cit. p.117.

¹⁹ ibid. pp.117-118.

3. Borders of India with neighboring countries must be fully protected to effectively check infiltration.
4. Indian voters residing in Assam should be issued identity cards with photographs affixed.
5. Necessary constitutional safeguard should be provided to the people of North-East region for next 15/20 years by making necessary constitutional provisions for the protection of the identity of the indigenous people of the region.
6. The government of Assam should be free to reject any (citizenship) certificate issued by the district authorities of West-Bengal and Tripura.
7. We demand that, the authority to grant citizenship certificate delegated to the state government, should be withdrawn by the central government from the state governments, so that those foreigners who are detected and deported from Assam do not come back armed with citizenship certificates issued by other states.

The leaders also demanded fresh nominations for Karbi Anglong and North Cachar after the detection of foreigners and their deportation. They also proposed²⁰-

1. The nationals register of citizen (NRC) of 1951 should be made up to date by taking into consideration the additions to the number of each family since the time of compilation of the register.
2. The comparison of the NRC of 1951 with the successive electoral rolls since 1952 will also be helpful in making it up to date.
3. A free zone devoid of trees and houses should be created all along the border and any one crossing it without valid travel document from either side must be

²⁰ *ibid.* p.118

shot at. We attach great importance to this suggestion. We have reached a state when threat to the state of Assam and to the country can no longer be ignored.

4. Birth and death registers at all levels in blocks, villages, towns etc should be strictly maintained in order to prevent further infiltration into the voter lists.
5. The number of the check posts should be increased so as to enable one check posts to be visible from the other.

The above mentioned were the demands that the AASU put forward, through its memorandum, was now before the Prime Minister. Though AASU was strongly opposing against the foreign nationals, they did not have the exact estimation on the number on the foreign nationals that were illegally living in the state. Though throughout the movement they demanded the deportation of the foreign nationals from the state, they could not precisely define who these foreign nationals were. For them, those who came after 1951 were the foreigners in the state. Hence, to them foreigners description included the refugees from Bangladesh, who migrated in large numbers during the time of the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 too. The first round of talks held between the government of India and the leaders of the movement failed as the union Home Minister advised the leaders to call off the agitation and create a normal atmosphere and enable the central government to initiate action against those foreigners who entered India after March 1971. Hence, the leaders could not agree to the idea of 1971 being the base year for the cut off year.

On the serious issue involving the north-east, Indira Gandhi invited the leaders of the movement for discussion on the situation in Assam. The invitees included members of the AASU, PLP, AJD, Asom Sahitya Sabha but Gana Sangram Parishad were not invited. When the leaders decided to accept the invitation initiated by Indira Gandhi rift was noticed between the AAGSP and AASU when AASU decided to

suspend the agitation until the talks, the AAGSP decided to continue the picketing holding that the talks were not endorsed by them. Nevertheless, some of the delegates of AAGSP left for Delhi on 9th March to participate in the discussion which was to be held on 10th March.

Subsequently a series of talks held between the Government of India and the leaders of the movement to agree on the cut off year failed miserably. The leaders of the movement were adamant not to accept 1971 as the base year for the detection of the foreigners and the Government of India sticking to 1971 electoral rolls for the detection of foreigners in the state. Throughout the year the agitation continued in the form of picketing, rally, mass Satyagrah and bandh²¹. However at the end of the year, the picketing in the oil fields and the blockage of oil movement were lifted partially and supply of oil within the state was permitted but outside the state it was still blocked. The All Assam Minority Student Union was formed which tried to include Bengali both of Hindu and Muslim origin under its umbrella. The organization demanded that those immigrant who came before 1971 must be granted formal citizenship in the state. Doing so, AAMSU won the favour of the Indian government and was now onwards invited to talks related to the movement along with the leaders.

Momentum

Another phase of the movement began in December 1980 when a new government came to power in Assam under the leadership of Anwara Taimur of Congress (I). The government was formed as a result of defection to the Congress (I) from other parties. This government, however, could not last more than six months resulting in imposition of Presidents rule in the state from June 1981.

²¹ Daily situation Report of Assam 1st January to 30th April 1980. Lib/RO13/S1/07. ASA, Guwahati.

After Taimur's coming to power, the condition of the state became worse. To control the movement it adopted the process of De-Assamization of the state bureaucracy and reinforced the fear of Assamese minorization and of immigrant power which resulted in the increase in the number of violence²². The government officials and also the Bengali Muslims were frequently attacked. People of different communities were seen engaged in different forms of violence against each other. Harassment and assault on each other were frequent at that point of time. This dimension of the movement, where people clashed with each other on denominational lives, was distinct from the earlier part when it was the people against the state machinery. The period since then was marked by burglary, dacoity, criminal trespass, rioting, arson and extortion, robbery which became regular events of those days²³. In some places the houses were also set on fire. Bomb explosion, sabotage of the railway lines occurred during this period. The New Year followed with AASU making plans to make aware the Assamese people by holding meetings in rural areas. Moreover, border conflict began with Nagaland and Meghalaya, its neighboring states made the people of Assam more outraged against the ongoing political situation of the state. With the imposition of National Security Act many of the leaders such as Bharat Narah, Prafulla Mahanta etc were arrested and detained²⁴. The agitation however continued and several rounds of talks failed. Meanwhile, the leaders of the movement changed their attitude coming to a point agreeing that those who have entered in

²² Baruah Sanjib, op.cit. p.129

²³ Daily crime report of Assam 1st January to 31st June 1981. File No- Lib/RO13/S2/04. ASA, Guwahati.

²⁴ National Security Act is a act enacted by parliament of India which provides preventive detention in certain cases which helps the government to detain a person who pose any threats to the country.

between 1951-61 should not be deported and the immigrants who entered Assam post 1971 must be deported²⁵.

In January 1982, again a new government under the leadership of Keshab Gogoi came to power. This ministry also couldn't last more than two months. Hence, Presidents rule was imposed in the state from March 1982 and the state assembly elected in 1978 was dissolved and this paved the way for fresh elections in the following year²⁶. During the president's rule, the condition of Assam worsened. Across the Brahmaputra valley army and the CRPF personnel were posted. There were reports of these personnel involved in atrocities against the Assamese women and girls in the various places Kamrup district²⁷.

It is important to mention here that the Tribal Association and Muslim communities of Assam were supporting the movement and its leaders. But as mentioned, the movement in the beginning was non violent. In the first phase of protest against the state government, the leadership called for state wide bandh, picketing of electoral centre's, processions with black flags etc., but in the following years i.e. post 1980, there were many incidents of petty violence. Killing of people became the centre of all politics and the movement. At first, people from all the communities joined and boycotted the election. But gradually the protest movement took a communal character. Muslims of Bengali origin were generally targeted. There were many cases where lots of Muslims were killed across the state. Nevertheless, the Assam movement cannot be considered as communal. Although there were incidents of killings of many innocent Muslim peasants, many people belonging to the Hindu

²⁵ Hussain Monirul, op.cit. p 123.

²⁶ Baruah Sanjib op.cit. pp128

²⁷ Daily situation report of Assam 1st September to 31st December 1981. File No-Lib/ro13/s2/08. ASA, Guwahati.

community were also killed in many places. And these killings were mostly guided politically to suit the need of the political leaders of that time.

1983 Assembly Elections

The government of India was determined to hold elections to the state legislative assembly election and the remaining twelve Lok Sabha Constituencies in the year 1983 in Assam on the basis of electoral rolls which were prepared in 1979 without solving the foreigner's issue²⁸. The leaders of the movement therefore opposed elections by staging poster campaigns and bandhs and educating public on the foreigner issue. The leaders and their supporters tried their best to mobilize the people against the upcoming election. The leaders again left for Delhi to participate on tripartite talk on 4th January 1983. While returning from one of their unfulfilled round of talks the leading figures of the movement such as Prafulla Mahanta, Bhriku Phukon, were arrested and the dates for the upcoming elections were announced to be held on 14th, 17th and 20th February, 1983. There was also an instance where the government of India ordered the two leading newspapers, Assam Tribune and Dainik Asom to restrain them from publishing any issues relating to the ongoing movement²⁹.

Even after the arrest of its top leaders Nagen Sharma, Nurul Hussain, etc; other figures of the organization came forward to lead the movement. The leaders of the movement organized anti-election campaign and tried all means to stop the candidates from filing the nominations and by preventing access to polling booths. This time, the roads were blocked, the bridges were burnt down, processions were taken out wearing black badges, bandhs; Janata Cerfew was called for. In some places

²⁸ Baruah Sanjib op.cit. p.131

²⁹ Kimora Makiko. Op.cit. p. 66.

there were reports of kidnapping of some of the candidates and their relatives in order to intimidate the contestants. These abductions in some places were carried out with the help of police³⁰. At this moment, a large number of people were injured and killed as a result of the communal violence, arson and bomb explosions. The main aim for all these was to disrupt the communication system. Because of it, the law and order in the state continued to be disrupted. The communal violence in the state was at its peak. Many reports records that the average number of such communal violence were recorded to be thirty or so in a day³¹. For the records, this phase of the movement is claimed to be the most violent one. According to the Tiwari Commission, which was appointed as the official commission of enquiry on the election disturbances in July 1983, there were – 545 attacks on roads and bridges from January to March; 140 kidnappings; 193 attacks on the election staff and candidates, their relatives or political workers; 274 bomb explosions or recoveries of explosives and so on³². As mentioned before, AASU tried their best to stop the holding of elections. They were successful in persuading the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Janata party not to fill the nomination papers and boycott the elections. But the remaining parties, namely the CPI, CPI (M), Congress, Congress(S), and the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) went ahead and decided to contest the election.

The Anti-poll agitation launched by AASU and AAGSP was marked by bandhs and blackout at various places. They also called for bandhs in various places where the Prime minister paid her visit in connection with the election meetings. Such calls had no impact as the minority communities of the Brahmaputra valley attended

³⁰ In one of its joint meeting AASU and AKDSU adopted resolution by mentioning that those who filed the nomination rejecting the request of the Student Union would abduct the family member of such candidates with the help of police. (Weekly Intelligence Report of Assam 1983, dated 10th January. Lib/R013/S3/11. ASA, Guwahati.

³¹ Weekly intelence report of Assam, 1983. Op.cit.

³² Kimura Makiko (2013), The Nellie massacare of 1983; Agency of Rioteers. Sage Publications, New Delhi. pp 66-67 The Tewary Commission Report 1984 (424-425)

and participated in those meetings. On the day of election, AASU gave a call to the government officials to boycott their offices and a 35 hour bandh followed. The agitators, on the day of elections, burnt the effigies of the Prime Minister and Chief Election Commissioner at some polling booth. Sensing trouble that could disturb the voting procedure, the government provided 55 battalions of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), 36 battalions of the Haryana Armed Police, the Rajasthan Armed Constabulary, and the Provincial Armed Constabulary of Uttar Pradesh into the state in order to conduct elections³³. The government also brought 8000 officers from outside for polling duty as a large numbers of government officials stayed at home on demand of the AASU leaders.

During the week of election, a large number of communal violence and group clashes occurred in various places of the state leaving in its trail large scale death and destruction in form of murder, arson, assault, etc. Disturbance was observed in the Brahmaputra Valley Districts mainly Goalpara District, Sibsagar, Kamrup, Darrang and Dibrugarh. Incidents such as burning down of polling centre, assault on the polling officers, road blockade, gherao and snatching away the ballot papers were reported. There were also episodes of firing gun shots by the miscreants, violent mob attack and the throwing of bombs.

One of the most interesting outcomes of the elections was the participation of minority communities in the elections. The minority communities, who from the very beginning supported the movement, were becoming uncertain about the leaders of the movement on the foreigners question. They were threatened on the status over their claim on the state. Therefore, they decided to participate in the elections in order of have a government that would make an effort for their well being and security. This

³³ Kimura Makiko, *ibid.* p. 67.

led to a series of tensions between the local Assamese people and the other communities in different regions of the state.

Following the tension, clashes began to take place in large numbers from 11th February, the first violence being reported from Gohapur of Darrang district. Then it was the Nellie massacre where a large number of Muslims were killed in several villages around Nellie. The notable aspect of the post election violence in the state was that most of the killings took place in rural areas such as Nellie, Gohapur, Chaolkhowa, etc.

The Nellie Incident

The decision to hold the election by the Government of India in 1983 was the reason for large scale violence and disturbances across the state. As mentioned earlier, there were many incidents of communal disturbances in the state from the beginning of 1980 but in 1983, after the legislative assembly elections, the number of violent incidents between different communities rose extremely high. Moreover, the leadership knew well about the intensity of violence and the persons involved in rioting and killing and tried to black out the information of the North Kamrup happenings³⁴. And it helped in encouraging the miscreants and the attackers to carry on with these attitudes and execute such massacre in larger scale. In case of Nellie, the villagers who participated in the attack were ordinary peasants who worked hard for their basic needs. These communities inhabited the Brahmaputra valley with an unquestioned legitimacy within the state. However, they participated in the attack and massacred 2000 neighbours in one day.³⁵ Monirul Hussain has likened the Nellie

³⁴ Hussain Monirul, *op.cit.* pp.140-141

³⁵ Kimura makiko, *op.cit.* p. 4

massacre with ‘aphasia’ for the Assamese people. He has also quoted in his book ‘The Assam Movement; Class Ideology and Identity’, the observation of a scholar-

“Some were delighted by these killings of women and children and thought it nice that such killings take care of the problems of the descendents....what kind of mentality is that can organize this kind of killings? According to an eyewitness account, a man spots children huddling in a corner trying to hide after their parents have been killed. He takes a swig from his bottle and slices up the kids in one stroke. Another person, after killing quite a few people in an intoxicated state, commits suicide by leaping into river”³⁶.

Nellie, a village in the district of Nagaon which was an agrarian village and the villages around it were also mostly agrarian. The Tiwas, Assamese Hindus and the Muslims of East Pakistan origin, were the inhabitants of adjoining areas of Nellie. There were already Muslim migrants in the area that migrated during the days of the British; nonetheless it was because of the liberation of East Pakistan that immigration had increased and the Muslim population was growing. The indigenous Tiwas and Assamese people were residing in the area even before the advent of the British. Earlier, the Muslim immigrants were settled in the north of the Brahmaputra River, in the district of Nagaon. Later, they began to settle even in the other parts of the district, especially the area adjacent to Nellie, where both the indigenous communities and the immigrants lived peacefully. Because of the communal disturbances that were going on in the state regarding the boycott of the election clashes took place between different religious and linguistic communities. As the minority community that inhabited in that area participated in the elections of 1983, hence tension increased between the Muslims and the Tiwas of that area.

³⁶ Hussain Monirul, op.cit. pp.140-141

It was early morning on 18th February, a village name Borbori was attacked, which was followed by attacks in the Muslim villages to the south of the Kopili River. The attackers surrounded the village and began to burn down the houses. After that, they began killing the Muslim villagers. Many were dead and hamlets were left with no survivors. Among the victims, 70 percent were women, 20 percent were elderly and 10 percent were men³⁷. Only the people who ran towards the west, where the CRPF camp was located, were able to save themselves. It was only when the CRPF troops reached the site that the killings stopped. It was later revealed that the report of the attack had already reached the Jagiroad Police Station but the Officer-in-charge did not bother to take action against the report³⁸.

Post 1983 Elections

After the seventh assembly election in 1983 Indian National congress came to power and Hiteswar Saikia became the chief minister. His ministry comprised of the representatives of all the communities living in Assam. The first and the foremost thing the government did after assuming the office was providing relief and rehabilitation to the victims of the violence during the time of agitation, mainly the assembly elections of 1983. The approach of this new government to deal with the movement was to suppress it with the use of political tactic. The new government tried to legitimize its rule with the movement and the people of Assam by claiming it to be the government led by an ethnic Assamese³⁹. On the immigration issue, it declared that it would stop such immigrations in future and laid emphasis on removing the names of the illegal immigrants who have entered Assam after 1971

³⁷ Kimora Makiko. op.cit. p 73.

³⁸ Ibid. p.73.

³⁹ Hiteswar Saikia was an Ahom by caste which is regarded an one of the ethnic group of the Assamese community. They also believed that though the movement was widespread among the ethnic Assamese it would calm the majority of people who were raged over the foreigner issue.

from the voter list. It tried to bring reforms in the administrative system by creating sub-divisional and administrative districts across the state. It was during Saikia's rule that Gauhati was changed into Guwahati. To some extent, the government became popular but because of the rift that had already weakened the Assamese society, the tension among the Assamese society that consisted of all the different tribes and indigenous groups prevailed.

The election of 1983 was the most violent elections of Assam. As per the reports of the government, about 4000 people died during the election period. On the contrary the non-government reports claim it to be more than 7000. However, before the 1983 elections, only about 500 deaths were accounted including the police firing and political assassinations⁴⁰. The police also played a crucial role while dealing with the riots. The ignorance of the police was one of the reasons that the massacre at Nellie took place. As discussed earlier, the police already had the information on the violence that was taking place, but the officer in charge did not take any action against it. If the police had intervened a large number of deaths of the innocents could have been stopped⁴¹.

In the 33 months of its rule, members of the Saikia government were greeted with strikes, boycotts, blackouts and protests. The leaders of the movement refused to recognize the government. From the very beginning they called the election illegal and tried to challenge the validity of last election in the court. The situation in the state continued to be the same despite the introduction of a new approach by the government of Assam. Hence, in the end of the year 1984, the central government decided to have another round of talks with the leaders of the movement.

⁴⁰ Hussain Monirul. op.cit. p.150

⁴¹ Kimora Makiko, op.cit. pp. 73-74.

The last phase of negotiation between the government of India and the leaders began in 1984. This time leaders of the movement were optimistic in negotiation that took place involving the Prime Minister and the movement leaders as they were the sole representatives from Assam as the Saikia government was left out for the discussion. In the mean time, while the revision of the electoral rolls was going on, the election officials were working by taking AASU into their confidence. Moreover, the assassination of Indira Gandhi generated disorder in the centre which provided much hope to the leaders. Soon after the assumption of office, Rajiv Gandhi signed the Punjab Accord with the Akali leaders in 1985. The condition of Assam and Punjab resulted in the crisis in the north and north-east of the country. Therefore, the Indian Government was forced to seek compromise with the leaders of the movement.

Assam Accord

Finally after eighteen months of continuous negotiation, the government of India and the leaders came to an agreement. An Accord was signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and leaders of the Assam Movement on 15th August 1985 putting an end to the six year long movement. It is pertinent to quote the operative part of the accord here:

“That whoever entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 would be disenfranchised for 10 years and those who came after March 1971 would be deported. The government of India also agreed to offer constitutional legislative and administrative safeguard to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and the heritage of the Assamese people. The government also agreed that the state government which was formed after the election of 1983 would resign, the state assembly would be dissolved and fresh elections based on revised electoral roll would take place in December 1985. Moreover the government of India also promised to prevent the future infiltration by erecting physical barriers like wires and barbed wire fencing. Furthermore, in

November 1985 an amendment was made by the parliament that non citizens who were found to have entered Assam between 1961 and 1971 would enjoy all rights of citizen except the right to vote for ten years. It was because of the Assam Accord the leaders of the movement agreed to call of their six year long movement and assured full cooperation and dedication towards the development to the country. The Government of India also withdrew the cases against the employees of the student organization for their participation in the movement. The government also declared the relaxation of the age limit of candidates for all UPSC examinations. In addition to this the Government of India also agreed to set up a new Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and a refinery in the public sector of Assam. It also agreed to request the election commission to ensure the preparation of fair electoral rolls. These were the provisions of the Assam Accord of 1985".⁴² (See Appendix II)

As a result of the accord two regional parties emerged in the state; the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) formed by the leaders who led the movement and the United Minority Front While the AGP wanted full implementation of the accord, UMF opposed and demanded the accord to be scrapped. In the upcoming election, AGP won 64 seats while the Congress (I) won 25 seats and the UMF won 17 seats.

Aftermath of the Accord

As per the accord, fresh elections were to be held in the state. Hence, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and other members of the AASU formed a new political party named Asom Gana Parishad on 1985. 10th October. Most of the leaders that took active part in the movement officially left AASU and joined AGP. The AJD and PLP also merged with it and began to prepare for the upcoming election which was scheduled to be held In December 1985.

In the beginning, the AGP was popular not only among the ethnic Assamese but also among other ethnic groups of Assam. And that helped the party register a

⁴² Ibid. p. 154

remarkable victory in the elections of 1985 winning 64 seats in the house of 126. Several independent candidates also supported it and raised its strength to 71. After that, the AGP also won 7 seats at the Lok Sabha elections out of 14 seats. Because of the emergence of UMF, the Asom Gana Parishad had no support in the Barak Valley; despite that AGP won the elections of 1985. They were mainly supported from the constituencies of the Brahmaputra Valley, i.e. Kokrajhar district, Karbi-Anglong district, Lakhimpur and Sonitpur district. It was also successful winning the support of the tea plantation workers who were mainly from Bihar, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh. There were also many Muslim candidates in AGP which implies that despite Hindu Muslim communal violence during the movement there was still strong support of ethnic Muslims to AGP. The AGP won with huge margin in both Barpeta and the Nagaon constituency where Muslims had an upper hand.

After the assembly elections, the Asom Gana Parishad came to power and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta became the chief minister of Assam. His colleagues who both led the movement and became a part of the newly formed party also became the members of his cabinet. In the election of 1985 Congress won only 23 seats. The reason behind the emergence of these two regional parties indicates the ethnic polarization that prevailed in the society because one emerged on the basis of ethnic Assamese identity and other evolved to counter the threat posed to them (minority communities) by the movement.

After coming to power, the AGP did not represent all the major social groups in Assam⁴³. Not a single Hindu Bengali from both the Barak and Brahmaputra valley was represented the new government. Even the non Assamese Muslims were excluded from the government. The new government neither represented the social

⁴³ Hussain Monirul op.cit. p.157.

group nor secular elements of the Assamese ethnic group. This attitude of the government reflected the 'narrow social base' of the party. Hence, the party became weak. The attitudes adopted by many of its members made many of its supporters have doubts in their minds. Because of this, many of its supporters left the party. Because of its inconsistency nature and lack of ideological commitment the party became weak and corrupt. None of the victims who suffered from the movement were entertained nor were the culprits presented before law. The spark of the new government gradually declined. Moreover, the immigration problem that the AGP leaders stressed upon the entire period of the movement, could not effectively deal with it even in power which made the government very unpopular.

The following chapter will emphasize on idea of Assamese nationalism which served the ground for the creation sub-identity and separatist politics in Assam. It will briefly discuss the course of separatist movements propagated by different organisation after the movement.

Chapter - 3

Assamese Nationalism and the Emergence of

Separatist Ideology

The emergence of the idea of Assamese nationalism was the result of exploitation by British and the independent Indian government respectively before and after independence, in Assam. The theory of 'drain of wealth' formulated by Dadabhai Naoraji perfectly fits in the context of Assam during post-colonial period. The drain of oil and natural gas from the state was one of the main reasons for grievance among the Assamese people. There were many reasons that led to the emergence of Assamese nationalism among the people of Assam which have been discussed in the previous chapter. The concept of Assamese nationalism that became the root cause of mass participation in the Assam movement (1979 -1985), as put forward by, Sanjib Baruah, fits in as Assamese sub-nationalism¹. Nevertheless the concept of Assamese nationalism or sub-nationalism that in the beginning united the people of Assam as a whole against the immigrants in the later period became the reason for the emergence of sub-identity and secessionist politics in Assam. Demands were put forward by different ethnic groups for recognizing of their homeland as a separate state carved out from the mainland of Assam.

A separatist movement generally demands separation from a larger group on the grounds of political, religious or cultural basis. These are usually carried out by some ethnic groups of a particular society that believe that it is being continuously

¹ Sub-nationalism is a term which means a pattern of politicization and mobilization that meets some of the criteria of nationalism, but is not committed firmly to the idea of separate statehood. See Sanjib Baruah (1998), *India Against Itself; Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

and completely being deprived of power, status and justice. There are many episodes across the world where ethnic groups have demanded a separate state or a nation on the basis of ethnic, cultural or linguistic basis; some of them have succeeded while others were not that powerful. In India, we can see a number of secessionist movements, which has, from time to time, surfaced in the political scene. Where some of them were crushed some of it succeeded in fulfilling their demands. The burning issue on Kashmir's sovereignty is still brewing high and no party stands back for compromise from either side.

One of the most remembered secessionist movements in India since independence was the Khalistan Movement that had a large effect on the people of Punjab and also across the country. The movement in Punjab was active in the 1980s led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, whose main demand was a separate nation for the Sikhs. Many innocent lives were lost. It was during this period that the gruesome anti-Sikh massacre was carried out in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. A large number of people were taken as hostage on the holy shrine of the Sikhs at Golden temple in the wake of operation Blue Star. Therefore, as a response to the central government sending the Indian army and this too resulted in the death of thousands of people and destruction of the Akal Takth. This later directly led to the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the Anti-Sikh riot in India. The Kashmir issue can be stated as one of the big secessionist movements of all times. The demand for a separate sovereign Kashmir was the result of a constant war between India and Pakistan over their claim for this Muslim inhabited state. Therefore, in late 1980s led the separatist movement in Kashmir, demanding a separate sovereign land for the people of Jammu and Kashmir, stating that it would neither like to merge with Pakistan nor like to be a part of India. Not getting into further details, the internal

tension within the Kashmir, the killing of the Kashmiri pundits, rise of terrorism and insurgency, mainly sponsored by Pakistan, resulted in the imposition of AFSPA, which is condemned by most of its people. The present condition of the state remains the same as separatist demands are still going on, disrupting the social and political environment of the state.

Even in the North-East we see a number of separatist demands from the creation of separate Naga nation. North-East, which in the beginning was united under the British rule, after the independence, witnessed a series of creation of separate states. The main reason behind the separatist demand lay in the affirmation on ethno-nationalist identity. In the entire North-East region, this ethno-nationalist identity was the main reason behind such demands for separate homelands by various tribes. Among them is the separatist movement for the creation of separate Naga nation for the Naga people. After independence, in 1950s, the idea of separate nation gained momentum in Nagaland. After quite a long struggle, the government of India agreed to the creation of a separate state and Nagaland was created in 1963. But the series of conflicts didn't end there. The armed conflict between the government of India and political organization NSCN didn't end there. The party further got divided into NSCN- and NSCN (IM), one fraction led by Thuingaleh Muhivah and Isaak Chisi Swu and other by S.S. Khaplang. The split in the party was the result of internal differences of the two tribes and its members. However, the fight between the government and the NSCN (IM) continued till 1997². The Naga community is an amalgamation of various tribes living in Nagaland as well as the adjoining areas of Assam and Manipur. Therefore, their main demand was the creation of a greater Nagaland including various parts of Assam and Manipur. This created tension and

² Baruah Sanjib (2005), *Durable Disorder; Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. p.98.

conflict in the three states, especially Manipur as the state government was adamant not to give up their territorial limits to a newly created state.

In Assam, after independence, the first such separatist demand was made by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) when the Assam Movement was at its peak. Then we see a demand for a separate Bodoland, mainly consisting of Bodo habituated area of Assam. There are also ongoing struggles for a separate Karbi state. One of the most important things that marked the outcome of the massive Assam Movement was the question of Muslim identity. Therefore after the movement many organizations came up among which All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) is prominent. In the present political scene this organization play a very important role as it is nearly impossible to form a government without taking it into account. However, in this chapter we will basically discuss about the struggle of the ULFA militants and the demand for a separate land for the Bodos and the status of Muslim identity in the politics of Assam.

United Liberation Front of Assam

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was founded in the early months of 1979 in Sivsagar at Rang Ghar, a historical site constructed during the days of Ahoms, which holds great sentiments in the hearts of the people of Assam. The organization was founded by Paresh Baruah, who was also commander in chief of this militant group. Other prominent leaders of this group were Arabinda Rajkhowa, Pradip Gogoi, Anup Chetia, Raju Baruah and many more. The main demand of ULFA was to attain a sovereign independent Asom which was colonized, according to them, by the government of India. In the North-Eastern region, it was one of the biggest secessionist movements ever witnessed. It shook the entire state for a decade or so.

Killing, extortion, kidnapping were frequent during the late 1980s in the state. This militant organization was, by the time, already declared a terrorist group by the government of India. Hence, in 1990 the government of India banned ULFA under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act³. The government of India conducted many operations such as Operation Bajrang, Operation Rhino, against the ULFA militants which were successful. The militants were offered some kind of reward by the government in return to their surrender to the police. The surrendered militants are known as SULFA (surrendered ULFA cadre). Thus, many of the militants had renounced the path of armed struggle and returned to a normal life leaving behind the idea of a separate Asom.

Rise to Power

According to the ULFA, the treaty of Yandaboo in 1926 between the British and Burmese government was the event that incorporated Assam into British India. They believe that before the treaty Assam was never a part of India; therefore the main objective of ULFA was the attainment of a sovereign, independent Asom. The ideology of ULFA, as it claims, is ‘scientific socialism’⁴. Although it was founded alongside the Assam Movement, it did not emphasize the migration issue as much. Unlike the movement, it considered all the people living in Assam who regarded Assam as their motherland, regardless of their origin, as the people of Assam. The rise of the secessionist demand by ULFA was also encouraged by the Assam Movement of 1979-1985. As discussed in the previous chapters although the movement was based on the immigration issue and shook the state for the six years

³ Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act was passed in 1967. It makes it a crime to support any secessionist / Separatist movement, or to support claims by a foreign power to what is claimed as the territory by India.

⁴ Prabhakara M.S. (2007). Separatist Movements in the North-East: Rhetoric and Reality. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol.42, No. 9. March 3-9. pp.728-730.

and also provided the larger platform to mobilize the public opinion in the favour of such separatist demands. Basically it helped in strengthening the sentiment of Assamese nationalism among and the leadership developing it into a radical and militant outlook.

ULFA came to prominence in the waning phase of the Assam Movement. When the political agitation could not fulfill the aims of the movement, the armed struggle came to be seen a viable alternative. It was mainly after 1983 assembly elections, when the Hiteswar Saikia government came to power. There were many incidents of violence during the course of the movement. The armed militants were, therefore, a branch of the movement, and colleagues of the leaders who later became ministers of the AGP government in Assam⁵. Meanwhile, the ULFA cadre was very popular among the masses. Many of the journalists were intrigued by ULFA's popular appeal. Many people legitimized the war fought between the leaders and the government. Many of the media platforms of that time helped the militants to reach their voice to the common people⁶. The legendary singer of Assam, Bhupen Hazarika also in his songs inspired to go on a war. Some of the lyrics to his songs goes- "*Bohagot Jatiye snan kore, Molin bostro xolai; xongrami jiwon tu rono prerona diye bordoi silai*" etc.

The praise from the leading members of the Assamese society was not the only reason of mass support towards the ULFA. They also administered public works that helped them to attain the goodwill of the common people. It can be said that during the Assam Movement, Assam was economically lacking and this became one

⁵ Phukan Niranjana (1993). Decline of ULFA. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 28, No 38, 18 September., p. 2014.

⁶ For example the editor of an Assamese magazine Aami (We) sympathized with ULFA by writing as "ULFA did not drop from the sky, nor is a wild animal. ULFA is our child (the members of ULFA) are our brothers, they are our kin. (we must understand) why they have chosen the path of jungle".

of the reasons for the resentment among the masses. ULFA, which believed they were the one to rescue Assam and its people from the colonial atrocities of Indian government, began to construct roads where none existed. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the communication system in the state was very poor when the British occupied it. Although they built some roads, it was not for the welfare for the people living there but for their own sake to carry out their administrative and industrial benefits. The ULFA also honoured artists and writers, banned wine drinking and chastised local thugs and hoods⁷.

It also engaged it in conducting trails of the people who were mostly involved in drugs and prostitution. The corrupt government officials were also punished and those who neglected their public responsibilities were also treated as lawbreakers and penalized.

The next step ULFA took in order to attain its goal was to establish good relation with the NSCN. It also set friendly ties with United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLFM) and the Burmese insurgent organizations. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between these militant outfits to establish an independent state comprising the North-Eastern states of India and northwest Burma⁸. The ideology that ULFA carried was of Assam not being a part of India and this was pursued further when all of the above mentioned outfits building up a common organization, as it all were secessionist groups that sought separate states on the basis of their language and identity. The organization was named Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front, clearly stating the people living in those areas belong to same racial stock and they were separated culturally and historically.

⁷ Gohain Hiren (2007) *Chronicles and Violence of Terror; Rise of United Liberation Front of Asom*. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol 42, No 12. 24-30 March. pp. 1012-1018.

⁸ Baruah Sanjib op.cit. p.152.

Stroke of ULFA

The picture of ULFA loomed large during the AGP government's rule, when Prafulla Mahanta was the Chief Minister of Assam. The emergence of ULFA was largely associated with the rise of the Assam Movement. Although their goals differed with each other, they carried the same sentiments that evolved and became the reason of sympathy towards them from the common people. The coming of the All Assam Gana Parishad to power was the result of the political instability that shook the society for six years. The members of the AGP government were the student leaders that led the movement for almost half a decade. After coming to power, the AGP government could not deliver what they promised. Even more, the reason they began the movement, in the first place to detect and deport the foreign national from Assam, those deported after their assumption of their offices were only a thousand in number. This was lesser than the number of deportees as compared to previous years during the time of the movement⁹. Even the corruption of ministers in office demarcated the popularity of AGP ministry and outshined the ULFA militants.

However, this period also witnessed political assassinations, abduction of common people for hefty ransom; extortion and intimidation were frequent events that occurred in the state for a decade. The local businessmen were tortured by the ULFA men in order to extract money. In the process the common people were harassed and their rights were abused by the ULFA militants. The forceful abduction of persons and intrusion of their property were committed by the members of ULFA. Even the journalists who reported such kind of abuses were arrested by the ULFA militants. Therefore, all these violent activities made it clear that the ULFA militants

⁹ As according to the Weekly Intelligence Reports on Infiltration from 1978-1983 it clearly shows as the movement was going on everyday 10-15 person were deported. On that basis it is obvious that after the movement ended the deportees deported were lesser in number compared to the previous years.

were accused of Human Right violation and infringement. It was also accused of killing some of the political leaders, including one of the members of Saikia government of 1983. The Governor's Report of 1990, which recommended president rule in Assam, also mentioned the number of people killed by ULFA. India Today, the leading magazine in its March edition, 1991 estimated that in four months the members of ULFA had killed 97 people including twenty five Congress (I) party leaders and members¹⁰.

The attitude of the Assam government towards the atrocities by ULFA was rather lenient. As we know both the Assam Movement and the ULFA rebellion worked side by side and therefore the government was acquainted with the top militant leaders. The indulgent view towards the activities of ULFA was guided by a hope to use them in order to intimidate the AGP's political rivals¹¹. According to Hiren Gohain "it is very common in the North-Eastern states to find Chief Ministers and leaders of certain powerful parties, not excluding the Congress, supporting militant armed groups in return for political insurance". From all these we can draw a conclusion that ULFA rule ran parallel to AGP government in Assam.

The fall of the coalition ministry of V.P Singh in the centre in November 1990 changed the attitude of the central government towards the terror of ULFA in the state. A newly formed government came to power with the support of Congress (I) and Chandra Sekhar became the Prime Minister of India. The Congress (I), when in opposition was deliberately questioning the status of ULFA and the handling of the issue by the V.P Singh government. Hence, after coming to power in 1991, the Assam government was dismissed and President's rule was once again imposed in the state.

¹⁰ Sharma. J.K, Pegu A, Devi N (2008). ULFA Versus State- Unresolved Issue of Sovereignty; A Human Rights Perspective. Indian Political Science Association. pp.825-831.

¹¹ Gohain Hiren op.cit.

The newly formed government also decided to launch anti-insurgency campaign in the north-eastern state of Assam.

The first anti-insurgency campaign that was launched on 27 November 1990, against the ULFA, was named Operation Bajrang. Although the operation was unsuccessful, it resulted in destruction of major training camps of ULFA and arrest of many ULFA cadres. The operation was then called off in April 1991. The number of militants arrested in the operation was low and the higher level members of this militant outfit fled. The next step that the central government adopted to cope with the situation of Assam was the announcement of assembly election in the state in June 1991. In the 9th assembly election the Congress (I) emerged as victorious party and once again Hiteswar Saikia became the head of the state defeating AGP. The center thought Hiteswar Saikia was fit in dealing with the ULFA as he was once the head of the state while Assam was facing political instability during the days of Assam Movement.

After assumption of this government, the ULFA kidnapped more than ten people including the officials of the Indian government owned Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC), civil servants of the state and a Russian engineer. ULFA thereafter demanded the release of the arrested ULFA members in exchange for the hostages. The government therefore agreed to their demands and released around four hundred prisoners. Even after the release of the prisoners, the condition of the state remained unstable. The common people, such as social activists, Hindi speaking migrants from Bihar, were also caught in the cross fire amidst the tension between the government and militants.

Again on 14th September 1991, another operation, Operation Rhino was launched against ULFA. During the time of the operation Assam was essentially placed under military rule by provisions the Assam Disturbed Areas Act of 1955 and the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act 1958 (as amended in 1972), which give the army virtually unrestricted powers¹² The government embraced a militarist view towards the militant outfit rather than having talks. The government sat on a few talks that failed miserably. The operation continued for four months from September to January 1992 and was suspended temporarily as talk between the government and the ULFA leaders seemed workable. Nevertheless, the operation again continued from April in the six districts, specially targeted, because the local ULFA leaders were against the surrender of arms and negotiation¹³. In the month of April 1993, the operation was again re-launched in May 1996 as a result of alleged killing of two candidates by ULFA. Assam, since 1991 was turned into a military and paramilitary ground that fought the battle against the ULFA militants for years.

Nevertheless, the torment of Army was not only limited to the ULFA militants. Common people also suffered equally. As the army conducted search operations in villages in many districts of Assam, the villagers were threatened, raped, harassed, sometimes killed and assaulted in order to frighten them into identifying suspected militants. There were also many deaths in custody as the result of torture

Decline of ULFA Power

Talks between ULFA and government never took place as the top leaders of ULFA were opposed to it. However, by the end of the 1990s the ULFA militants

¹² Sharma J.K, Devi N and Pegu A. op.cit.

¹³ Baruah Sanjib (1998), *India Against Itself; Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. p.158.

expressed intention to have talks with the government. To sit in the table, ULFA put forward a few pre-conditions before the Indian government. The pre-conditions were- 1) The talks should be held in a third country; (2) the talks should be held under United Nations supervision and (3) the agenda for the talks should include the 'Sovereignty. The government however rejected those conditions particularly because their demands included the sovereignty question as government was not in a mood to entertain any claim over the sovereignty of India and its relations with the states.

Moreover, the operations that the Indian army undertook against the insurgent faction forced them to flee and take shelter in the neighbouring countries of Burma and Bhutan. After that, Burma and Bhutan became the base camp of the militant outfits and they began to operate from there.

Even when the AGP government was in power under the leadership of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, a number of family members of ULFA leaders were killed. With the fall of the AGP government following the elections in 2001, the secret killings stopped. Investigations into the killings culminated in the report of the 'Saika Commission' presented to the Assam Assembly on November 15, 2007. The report provides details about the killings, which were organized by the government itself and executed by the police with cooperation from the Indian Army. According to the report, the actual killers were the surrendered elements of the ULFA (SULFA), who would approach their targets at home, at night, knocking on the door and calling out in Assamese to allay suspicion. When the victims answered the door, they were shot or kidnapped. With the imposition of TADA in the state, the army could easily arrest

any person whom they doubted to be having links with ULFA¹⁴. Hence a large number of people were arrested in this connection and tortured.

It is also evident that the ULFA cadres those who were arrested during the operation or the massive search convention carried out by the Indian army, included the common people and the interrogation were so violent that those who were released were left crippled for life or died shortly after their release from the camps¹⁵. Many of the ULFA cadres also surrendered while the manhunt continued. The state government also encouraged surrender as this offered complete rehabilitation to the surrendered ULFA militants offering them government jobs and financial rewards.

The encounters between the army and the ULFA continued for a decade and so did the terror of ULFA. In 2004 seventeen people were killed in a bomb blast, among them sixteen were school children at Dhemaji. Likewise, blasts and killing continued in the several districts of Assam. All these actions resulted in resentment among the masses that supported the ULFA cause in the beginning. For example, when an encounter took place between the army and the ULFA militants in Netaipukhuri in 1993, some of the front ranking leaders were killed and there was no sign of protest or demonstration among the masses. In the words of Udayon Mishra, killing of so many ULFA hardcores would have led to a wave of protests in the state, compelling the administration to come out with an explanation, however tenuous¹⁶. This did not happen now.

¹⁴ Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, commonly known as TADA, was an anti-terrorism law and was in force between 1985 and 1995.

¹⁵ Gohain Hiren (1996), Extremist Challenge and Indian State; Case of Assam. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol.31, NO.31. Aug 3. pp.2066-2068

¹⁶ Misra Udayon (1993), No Tears for Liberators. Economic and Political Weekly. VOL. 28 NO.32/33, Aug 7-14. pp.1635-1636.

The government of India, with the help of the Bhutan Royal Army and Burma government, continued their hunt for the ULFA who were camping in the neighboring countries. In case of Bhutan, the Bhutan government tried to have talks with ULFA militants. For six years, the royal government was involved in five rounds of talk with the militants outfit demanding the shutdown of those camps set by them. Despite their agreement, ULFA was unable to put down the camps in the soil of Bhutan. In fact, after establishing camps in foreign soil, it was easy to acquire arms and ammunition required for the continuation of their 'revolution'. The Bhutanese army, in order to prompt the militants to leave their base camps, engaged themselves in talks with the insurgents and also by curtailing supplies to the camps, and prosecuting of Bhutanese citizens who assisted the insurgents. Further, if such groups refused to close down their camps, they would take military action against them. The Indian government proposed a joint army operation to root out these camps but the royalty of Bhutan was reluctant in letting the foreign army in their soil. The Delhi government was also keen in supplying weapon needed by the Royal Bhutan Army in order to launch a crackdown¹⁷. Finally, in the year 2003, the Bhutanese army launched operations against the insurgent camps destroying thirty of such camps and killing at least ninety of the insurgents.

Similarly in Bangladesh, several camps were set up by the ULFA militants after the Indian army chased away insurgent groups from North-East. The 28th Battalion of ULFA had its headquarter in Myanmar, the capital of the country. The ULFA also carried its operation in Bangladesh killing many of the Bangladeshi nationals. An operation was carried out to wipe out the militant camps by the Bangladeshi government capturing most of the members of ULFA.

¹⁷ Majumdar Arijit (2005), Bhutan's Military Action Against Indian Insurgents. University of California Press. VOL. 45, NO.4 July/August. pp. 566-580.

The fugitive top leader of ULFA, the commander in chief, Paresh Baruah, who was harboring in the bordering area of China-Myanmar was finally arrested in Bangladesh and was sentenced to death. Other officers who were captured by the Bangladeshi army were deported to India; while some are out on bail, some are still in police custody. Finally peace has been restored in Assam ending the two decade long insurgency and terrorism faced by the people of Assam.

Rise of Bodoland: Demand for Separate Land for Bodos

Separatists demand on ethnic lives in Assam was the result of political and cultural rebellion by the different tribal communities living in Assam and one of them was the demand for a separate Bodoland. The separatist demands that were raised by other tribal communities after the Assam Movement came to end. One of the most significant traits of the Assam Movement was the emergence of Assamese sub-nationalism. Almost all the sections of the society then came together, united and fought for the rights of Assamese people. Yet as soon as the movement ended it sowed the seeds of distinction among the tribes that lived together in harmony.

The Assam Movement, in its six years course, changed its goal from deporting the foreign national from the state to killing and terrorizing all the minority communities that were living in Assam since centuries. Therefore, one such demand for a separate nation state was the demand for a separate Bodoland. The Bodos are very clear on what ground they raised their demand for a separate state. The fear of losing their age old homeland and the identity to the rising Assamese nationalism led the Bodo to demand a separate territory for their people. Another cause for the resentment of Bodos towards the Assamese state was the negligence and discrimination of AGP government officials towards the minority communities of

Assam. Despite all their efforts to assimilate into the Assamese society, the Bodos were extremely poor and backward. The fear of losing their cultural and linguistic independence frightened the Bodos.

The demand for a separate state was raised by All Bodos Student Union (ABSU) in 1987. The political party that was formed by tribal people in 1967 was called Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and launched a popular movement for a new state to be called Udayachal to be carved out of Assam¹⁸. It incorporated territory encompassing the Bodo-dominated areas of Assam for both the Bodos and the Plains Tribal's. The All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) was also formed in the same year as the PTCA was founded. Later the ABSU carried forward the demand for a separate Bodo state.

After the Assam Movement, when the AGP government came to power and passed a law namely The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, legitimizing the eviction of unauthorized persons staying in the forests and other reserved lands. As a result, the tribal's were forcefully evicted, mercilessly beaten and their houses were burnt. Thus, due to land alienation, most of the Bodos have been pushed deeper into poverty, unemployment and perpetual debt-trap. There were also a vast number of unemployed people among the Bodos. Mention may be made in this connection that the AGP Government, invariably, insisted on knowledge of Asamiya as an essential qualification for appointment in government services which was strongly resented by the Bodo leaders¹⁹.

¹⁸ Gohain Hiren (1989). Bodo Stir In Perspective. Economic and Political Weekly. VOL. 24, NO. 25. June 24. pp.1377-1379.

¹⁹ Das Jogendra. K. (1994). The Bodoland Movement in Local and National Perspective. Indian Political Science Association. Vol 55, No 4. October- December. pp. 417-426.

The Movement

The ABSU began the movement in the year 1987 along with the Bodo Peoples Action Committee (BPAC), demanding the establishment of a separate Bodoland apart from incorporating the PTCAs demand for allocating it with a status of a Union Territory for the plain tribal's of Assam. The leader of the movement was Upen Brahma. The slogans put forwarded by ABSU was 'divide Assam fifty-fifty'. The movement continued for six years from 1987 to 1993.

Contemporary to ULFA, the ABSU began to raise their demand for a separate state for the Bodos incorporating the territories inhabited by the Bodo community stretching from the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley to the border of West Bengal. Other demands of the ABSU were i) inclusion of Bodo- Kacharis of Karbi Anglong in the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution and establishment of a Central University at Kokrajhar²⁰. The similarity between the Assam movement and the Bodoland movement is that both evolved from the fear of losing its identity to the other community. It was also motivated by unemployment and underdevelopment of the Bodos. As the government of Assam paid no attention to the demand for a separate Bodoland, as both the governments of India as well as the state government were against any further division of Assam. The movement turned violent, killing and intimidating people. In the beginning phase, the movement was marked by prolonged bandhs and disruption of communication system of Assam and the rest of the north-eastern region. Most of the agitation activities by the Bodo activists were carried out from Meghalaya.

²⁰ D' Sami Bernard (1998) (ed), Student Movement In India. AICUF publication Chennai. p82.

The ABSU also played a critical role in mobilizing and bringing a number of political and cultural organizations together. The measure adopted by one of the militant organizations National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) was very aggressive. The NDFB was a part of the Bodo Security Force, a private militia, whose aim was creating a separate Bodoland through armed struggle. However, soon in 1987, the ABSU split into two different units as ABSU (Ramchinary group) and ABSU (Upen Brahma group). The Upen Brahma faction of ABSU adopted radical measures to fight for their demands. After the death of Upen Brahma in 1990, Rabindra Sharma and Sansuma Khungar Basumatary led the agitation. In the later years, it turned violent which resulted in bomb explosions, large number of loss of life and destruction of the public property. A large number of non-Bodo, non-tribal people were harassed and tortured in the process by the Bodo militants in the Bodo dominated areas and thus peaceful normal life in Assam was completely shattered.

Just like the ULFA, the NDFB also had set up their camps in Bhutan. The operation undertaken by the Indian army against the ULFA militants also forced the NDFB militants to take shelter in Bhutan and Bangladesh. Therefore, when the Bhutanese Royal Army undertook operations against the insurgents from India, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Bhutanese Army destroyed twelve NDFB camps and arrested several militants of this group and handed them over to India. Among them was Bhimkanta Buragohain, Benjin Rabha, Robin Neog, Biju Deka and others of ULFA and Mithiga Daimary and B. Erakdao from the NDFB camp. The top leaders of NDFB were captured in the operation and thus the NDFB lost its significance compared to ULFA. Even the founder of NDFB, Ranjan Daimary was captured in Bangladesh and handed over to India.

Period of Negotiation

In the year 1989, the central government proposed to have talks with the Bodo leaders on their demands. The tripartite talks, in which the state government of Assam was also involved, didn't succeed in the first round and a series of talks were held subsequently. Finally, in the year 1993, both the parties came to an understanding and an accord was signed between the government and the Bodo leaders in the month of February 1993. During the talks, the Indian government proposed to introduce the panchyati system which would provide more powers to village and district level authority in the Bodo inhabited areas. But the ABSU and BPAC refused to accept the offer and stayed adamant for having a separate Bodoland state.

In between the talks, the protests continued both in the form of demonstration and intimidation. In the year 1990, the central government constituted a three member committee to identify the areas where majority of Bodos resided to extent the autonomy but the state government refused to accept the offer²¹. And finally when the accord was signed it was decided that an elected body called Bodoland Territorial Council was formed. In the accord, it was also agreed upon that the Bodos were provided with maximum autonomy for their social economic, cultural ethnic and educational advancement²². As per the accord, a forty member Bodoland Autonomous Council was to be formed where five members were nominated by the governor of Assam. The jurisdiction of BAC extended from the Sankoch River to Majbat Panchnoi on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The area covered two hundred villages and twenty five tea gardens. Meanwhile the Bodo Peoples Party was formed

²¹ D' Sami Bernard op.cit. p.84.

²² George J. Sudhir (1994), The Bodo Movement in Assam. University of California Press, Asian Survey. Vol.34, No 10. October. pp. 879-892.

by the members of ABSU. Following the agreement to create BAC some of the Bodo militants surrendered except the NDFB militants. The BAC however was not formed.

Though the accord was signed between the government and the Bodo activists, the environment of the state did not return to normal. Those who did not support the idea of the creation of BAC threatened to resort to violence. Riots broke out in 515 villages of Kokrajhar where a large number of people were killed including the minorities. Thereafter, a series of killings took place in several parts of Assam. Hundreds of people were killed and a large number of properties were destroyed. And when some people struck back, some 3,500 Bodos were evicted from their homes. In all, about 70,000 people have been displaced and are seeking refuge in crowded relief camps²³. Meanwhile, the Indian government launched Operation Kranti in the district of Barpeta in order to wipe out the insurgents who had been violating the laws. The operation partially succeeded in getting rid of the insurgents for the time being.

By 1996, most of the group that was active and working for the separate Bodoland gave up their demand. Yet other two militants groups; Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) and Bodoland Army, emerged as these groups were dissatisfied with the result that came after the signing of accord. United Democratic Front, a leftist party also emerged as a result of the accord of 1993.

Recent Activities

A memorandum of settlement was signed in New Delhi on 10th February 2003, between the two parties where the creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council was confirmed. The prolonged agitation for a separate state, somewhat directed to one step towards success for the creation of Bodoland. The BLT and ABSU were in

²³ Ibid.

charge for the continuous demand for a separate Bodo state when they signed the agreement. The memorandum was signed by Hagrama Basumatary, the BLT chief from the side of the Bodos. Although those leaders were busy forming a political party, others opposed the memorandum of settlement²⁴. The Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti along with eighteen other non-Bodo organizations was the one that from the very beginning opposed any development on the creation of Bodo nationalist matter. The sternest opposition came from NDFB to the agreement. The NDFB that was committed to the idea of creating a separate Bodoland made them against the settlement. However, the BTC was supposed to be created out of Kokrajhar, Chirang Baska nad Udalguri districts of Assam. According to the settlement, the BTC was to comprise of 3082 villages. The BTC soon came into being after the surrender of BLTF making Hagrama Mohilary the chief executive member of BTC. The territorial area under BTC is popularly known as Bodoland Territorial Area District which constitutes 35 percent tribal communities.

The NDFB continued their demand even after the creation of BTAD in the form of violence. Although most of the brutal violence took place in Kokrajhar district, other areas were equally affected by the actions of Bodo separatist organization. The terror of NDFB militant's shook the common people mainly those who lived in the Bodo inhabited area. Killing, kidnapping for money, extortion and intimidation are frequent events in this region. Not only Assamese upper class or the people from Muslim community the Bodos also had their differences with the other Adivasi people living in Assam. There are many incidents recording the tension between the people of other Adivasi community and the Bodos. The larger picture that comes out of the demand for a separate Bodo state is that the harmony and peace

²⁴ Prabhakara M.S(2012), Looking Back into the Future; Identity and Insurgency in North-East India. Routledge Publication, New Delhi. p.135.

that existed among the different tribes living in Assam is lost and tension among them is now the normal.

Muslim Identity

The Assam Movement jeopardized the legitimacy of all the minorities living in the state including the Muslims who were living in the state since many centuries. Tension between almost all the communities appeared after the movement ended. Among all the questions the Muslim identity and their safeguard is the main concern of the Muslim political party of the state. One such party that plays a very important role in the present day politics in Assam is All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). The party was formed in 2005 under the leadership of Badaruddin Ajmal which has support of majority of Muslim community of Assam; they were traditionally supporter of the Congress.

Since the invasion of Muslims in the medieval age, the Muslims settled in Assam and were living there since then. From Muhammad Bhaktiyar Khilzi to Mirjumla tried to invade Assam but failed miserably. However, those who came to with them stayed back and settled there. From the very beginning the Muslims settled in Goalpara and Kamrup district of Assam. As a result of the Mughal invasion the Nagaon district and the Darrang district came in contact with the people and it became the part of Muslim dominated areas in the state. Moreover, the inclusion of Sylhet and Cachar district in Assam by the British, in order to ease the administration, as mentioned in the previous chapters, was also a reason a large number of Muslims became a part Assam. Another reason for the increase in number of Muslims in Assam was the migration especially of peasants from Mymensingh district even before Assam was created as a province in 1974. The main reason behind such

migration was the economic condition. The peasants were unable to support their families in the small plot of land they possessed. Therefore the wave of migration began and by 1911 the total number of Muslim migrants in the Brahmaputra valley was 2, 58,800²⁵. All these by the course of time blend in with the natives and adopted the culture and called themselves Assamese.

Hence, the bitterness towards Muslims continued. Since 1951 the people of Assam raised their voice against the Bengalis that were living illegally in the state. Even with the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, a large number of refugees came in to live in the state as well as the country where some of them never left. It therefore resulted in greater remorse of the Assamese people towards the immigrants that came from Bangladesh and they belonged to Muslim community. And when in 1979 Assam Movement broke out the reason behind the movement was the detection and deportation of foreign nationals from the state.

The people from different section came together in the beginning of the movement and fought for the common cause. Later as the movement flourished it turned communal and violent. The Bengalis were mainly targeted but the people of Muslim community were harassed more. However, it is important to understand that the movement was mainly spread out through the Brahmaputra valley the immigrants living in the Valley were the Bengalis of Muslim origin where as the majority of Hindu Bengalis were living in the Barak Valley region. Therefore, a sense of hatred developed among the people of Assam against the Muslim community.

One such incident that clearly demonstrates the growing communalism among the people of Assam was the Nellie incident of 1983. Nellie was a small village in the

²⁵ Kar M (1980), Muslim Immigration to Assam. Social Scientist. Vol 8 No 3. pp. 67-77.

Nagaon district where mostly immigrants Muslims were settled. As mentioned in the previous chapter, along with them the Tiwas and the Assamese people lived in harmony. But when these people casted their votes even when the leaders of the movement decided to boycott the assembly election the indigenous assamesized people became enraged and attacked a number of villages where mostly Muslim people were inhabiting. Thousands of people died in the attack. This incident was the most gruesome attack ever happened in independent India.

The Nellie massacre of 1983 made the people of Assam realize that the movement against the foreigners had changed its nature and was fully communalized against a set of community that the leaders of the movement didn't recognize as the habitants of the state. The Muslims' those who were mingling with the people and identifying themselves as Assamese now began to fear their survival. The people of Muslim community were frequently attacked and harassed even after 1983.

The atrocities in towards the Muslim community in Assam didn't end with the end of the Assam Movement (1979-1985). The violence against the Muslim continued even when the ULFA was rising and amidst the demand for Bodoland. For example in the month of July in 1994, a series of massacres took place in the Barpeta district of Assam against the Muslim peasants of East Bengal origin. In the massacre around 1000 people mostly women and children were killed, thousands were injured and about sixty villages were burned down²⁶. The killings however didn't end there. The militants who carried out the massacre were the Bodo militants. There is always a rift among the minority communities living in Assam the main reason behind all kind of

²⁶ Hussain Monirul (1995), Ethnicity Communalism and State; Barpeta Massacre. Economic and Political weekly. Vol 30, No 20. pp. 1154-1155.

aggression was the growing insecurities among the people and the development of the sentiment of communalism which was the direct result of the Assam Movement.

The violence against the Muslims especially by the Bodos in the state is one of the major political issues that need to be addressed properly as the disturbance in these areas continues. Dhuburi, Barpeta, Hailakandi and Karimganj are the most Muslim populated areas in Assam. The violence between the Bodos and the Muslims still persists. In the recent event in 2012 in the violence in Chirang and Kokrajhar district more than a hundred people died and a large number of people which were mostly Muslims were displaced. Again in the same year some innocent Muslims were shot to death in the BTAD areas which were the result of retaliation by the Bodo militants as the people of non Bodo communities put forth their candidates against the Bodo candidates.

Because of all such above mentioned incidents it is clear that Muslim community always remained the target of assault by the Bodos then and now. In the recent event where the Muslims living in the district of Kokrajhar were targeted by the Bodos were called the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The Muslims who are peasants and daily wage earners are harassed and abused by the people of other community and are branded as immigrants and Bangladeshis. Because of the ill treatment the Muslims, under the AIUDF, came together as a powerful community capturing seats in the assembly elections and also position in the state government.

Conclusion

The Assam Movement (1979-1985) is regarded as one of the most important mass movements in independent India. It organized and reorganized all the sections of the people living in Assam together and the tribes respectively fighting for their identity. It was a call of the Assamese middle class people against the outsider who became permanent residents of the state. After the movement came to an end in 1985, its leaders who led the movement formed a political party that became one of the powerful regional parties in the politics of India and won elections to form the government in the state.

In the second half of the 20th century India witnessed rise in a number of regional parties across the country. It is assumed that the reason for the rise of such parties was the aversion of the local people against the national parties that in most of the cases were run only for the sake of winning elections or in some cases the people realized that their interests had been neglected by the center in some aspect; be it political or economical. Some of the parties that emerged strongly as the regional parties overthrowing the national parties in the various states were the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, Telegu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam. The DMK, though emerged in 1950s, was formed by C. N. Annadurai in 1949. The DMK in the following years articulated a consciousness on Tamil language and culture reflecting anti Brahmin, anti north and anti Aryan sentiment¹. Though in the beginning it endorsed the secession of the region from India, later became fully devoted to the national cause.

¹ Chandra Bipan, Mukharjee M and Mukharjee A (1999), India Since Independence. Penguin Books, New Delhi. pp. 392- 393.

The DMK began its political career in the elections of 1957 and became the ruling party in 1967.

Likewise, the formation of Telugu Desam Party of Andhra was the result of dissent against the Congress. The TDP also rose to popularity as did DMK made place among its people. The Asom Gana Parishad had too the same story but it rose to power after an end was put the long drawn movement. The TDP and the AGP were products of 1980s and their emergence and rise was meteoric.

The aim of this study was to understand what the reasons were that led to the outbreak of the Assam Movement and its consequence. Hence, the problem of migration, the issue of unemployment and the economic exploitation of the state that caused the aggravation among the people of Assam have been taken up. The movement that rose in popularity while nurturing the nationalist feelings among the people of Assam also became the reason for the split in the unity among the different tribes of Assam. Again, the identification of the so called foreigners completely turned into a communal affair as the Bengalis were having the fair share of profit at the different aspects of society.

The decline of the Ahoms and the coming of the British introduced the coming of outsider to Assam; Assam then was contiguous with Bengal and the physical links with India became virtually thin (through the narrow of Silliguri) after partition and independence. At first it was the British who began to import labourers from the other parts of the country to the newly acquired land to work on their new projects and investments. The demographic changes also contributed a lot in the change of the population chart of the state. The first 50 years of the 20th century shows quite a remarkable change in the number of people in the state. between 1901 to 1911 the

growth was 16.1 percent compared to its last decennial growth². In the next ten years, the growth continued as the tea industry expanded where almost 7.69 lakhs laborers were imported. However, the epidemic of 1918-1919 killed almost 2 lakhs of people. Thus the balance remained intact. The 1920s show only 10 percent of population was formed by the immigrants. During the 1930s, the population increased by 17.9 percent as bonded laborers were still brought from outside the state. In the 1940-1950s the population decreased due to the partition as a large portion of Assam was merged with the East Pakistan. From this we can say that though the population in Assam increased at the end of the British rule, the number remained almost the same.

The movement which broke out seemingly because of the immigration problem, when studied deeply, was not at all caused by the outsider issue. The tea garden laborers and the Muslim peasants of East Pakistan since the days of the British rule migrated to different parts of the nation. Moreover, the migration to Assam of the Muslim peasants was encouraged by both the Zamindars of Assam and the British officials. These people, in due course of time began to see Assam to be their native land. But after the independence, when the movement broke out, those people were challenged of their existence on the basis of race and religion. Indeed, in the 1970s after the liberation of Bangladesh, thousands and thousands of refugees came to live in Assam and India and returned to their homeland after the situation became normal in Bangladesh.

The development of the consciousness among the people was also an important phenomenon. The economic exploitation, the immigration and the job shortage would not have caused any problem if the consciousness would not have

² Census of India 1951, Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Vol- XII Part 1-A. LibR049/S4/16, ASA, Guwahati. p31.

emerged in the minds of the Assamese people. Moreover, many prominent scholars also point out to the discontentment of the middle class is from among the Assamese against the Bengalis as somewhat responsible for the outburst of the movement. As Shah points out, the student movements are caused by the protected students who mainly belong to the upper and middle class people³ However, the aspirations of the middle class people become the reason for the discontentment against the government or the condition prevailing in any state. Similarly, in Assam the lack of job opportunities and the deteriorating economic condition of Assam provided them all the reason to the outburst of their anger against the immigrants in Assam. Here, the press and the media also worked and backed the movement legitimizing the grievances faced by the people of Assam.

The leadership of the movement is an important subject because it played a vital role during the movement, prior to it and the post the movement. The AASU and AAGSP equally took active part in mobilizing the masses and the movement. However, by the end, only the AASU became the prominent organ from which the powerful regional party the AGP came to power in Assam in 1985. The important fact of the leadership of the movement was that when the Assam Movement began, the student organization in Assam was not that influential. It was the Gana Sangram Parishad that put together the masses and mobilized them. Nevertheless, the AAGSP never took to the forefront of the movement. The Asom Sahitya Parishad, also a popular organization as mentioned before extended its full support to the movement which also helped it to gain the sympathy and support of the common people towards the movement.

³ Shah Ghanashyam (2002) , Social Movements In India. New Delhi. Sage Publications. p.108.

The movement, as claimed by the leaders, was peaceful but soon it turned violent. The support the movement received at the beginning from a cross section of the people was exceptional. The communal turn the movement took was astonishing. All the tribal communities, indigenous people and people of all the religions took active part in the protest rallies and so called *hartals*. But as the movement continued, the hatred against other communities developed, and it became a continuous event of assault and harassment against each other. The movement demanded the detection and deportation of foreign nationals from the state. Therefore, the question arose as to who the foreigner was? Even after the independence a large number of people from not only Bangladesh but also Nepal and Bhutan entered the state. There were events where people from Nepal and Bangladesh were deported daily as the movement continued.

The Assam Movement that continued for six long years had immense effect on the society and the people of Assam. It changed the way that people lived for centuries. One community began to detest another. The structure and the composition of Assam changed because of the movement. The agitation resulted in antagonism between ethnic groups and led to incessant conflicts in Assam. The demand for Bodoland can also be said to have emerged from the insecurities and the threat posed by the Movement. The ULFA cadres terrorized and legitimize their demands saying that Assam never belonged to be the part of India which in the beginning was supported by few but the strict attitude and determination of the Indian government led them to further their dream of independent Asom and subsequently to a realization that it could never become a reality, which made them to give up the arms.

During the movement, the attacks on Hindu and Muslim Bengalis provided the reason to build up the identity politics of the Muslims as well. While the movement

was going on the United Minority Front represented the interest of the minorities. The emergence of AIUDF in the politics of Assam changed the continuing support of Muslims towards the Congress. The Muslims who were the vote bank of the Congress party in Assam till the 21st century now belong to AIUDF as it is built on protecting the rights of the Muslim community in Assam.

The imposition of the emergency by the central government (1975-1977) prior to outbreak of the Assam Movement also provided much rage among the people of Assam. Chaos and anarchy prevailed all over the state. The scarcity and the shortage of essential products made the people upset and frustrated. Moreover, various other small organizations such as Teachers Association, Government Employee Association and such others also were discontented as their long standing demands were not taken care of. The only community that kept aloof from the movement was the tea garden community. In conclusion, it may be held that Assam movement that began on the idea of building an Assamese identity in its course ended up rendering the society and polity into one that it fractured and fragmented on ethnic, religious and linguistic lines.

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The Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam)

Act, 1950

(10 of 1950)

[1st March, 1950]

An Act to provide for the expulsion of certain immigrants from Assam.

1. Short title and extent- (1) This Act may be called the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950. (2) It extends to the whole of India.

2. Power to order expulsion of certain immigrants- If the Central Government is of opinion that any person or class of persons, having been ordinarily resident in any place outside India, has or have whether before or after the commencement of this Act, come into Assam and that the stay of such person or class of persons in Assam is detrimental to the interests of the general public of India or of any section thereof or of any Scheduled Tribe in Assam, the Central Government may by order--

(a) direct such person or class of persons to remove himself or themselves from India or Assam within such time and by such route as may be specified in the order; and (b) give such further directions in regard to his or their removal from India or Assam as it may consider necessary or expedient; Provided that nothing in this Section shall apply to any person who on account of civil disturbances or the fear of such disturbances in any area now forming part of Pakistan has been displaced from or has left his place of residence in such area and who has been subsequently residing in Assam.

3. Delegation of power - The Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, direct that the powers and duties conferred or imposed on it by section 2 shall, subject to such conditions, if any, as may be specified in the notification, be exercised or discharged also by--

- (a) any officer subordinate to the Central Government;
- (b) the [Government of Assam, Meghalaya] or any officer subordinate to that Government.

State Amendment

Nagaland: In Section 3, for the words ‘Government of Assam’ in Clause (b), substitute the words “Government of Assam or Nagaland” State of Nagaland.

[(A.L.U.S.) Order. 1965 (G.S.R. 1761, dated 29-1-1965) (w.e.f. 1-12-1963)].

4. Power to give effect to orders, etc.- Any authority empowered by or in pursuance of the provisions of this Act to exercise any power may, in addition to any other section expressly provided for in this Act, take or cause to be taken such steps, and use or cause to be used such force, as may in its opinion be reasonably necessary for the effective exercise of such power.

5. Penalties. Any person who--

- (a) Contravenes or attempts to contravene or abets the contravention of any order made under section 2, or
- (b) fails to comply with any direction given by any such order, or
- (c) harbours any person who has contravened any order made under Section 2 or has failed to comply with any direction given by any such order, as/line shall be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.

6. Protection to persons acting under this Act- No suit, prosecution or other legal proceeding shall lie against any person for anything which in good faith done or intended to be done under this Act.

7. Repeal and saving.- [*Rep. by the Repealing and Amending Act, 1957 (36 of 1957), sec. 2 and Schedule 1 (17-9-1957).*]

State Amendment

Nagaland : After Section 6 insert the following :-

“7. Construction of reference to Assam. – In this Act, except in Section 3, references to Assam shall be construed as including also a reference to the State of Nagaland”.

[(A.L.U.S.) Order, 1965 (G.S.R. 1761, dated 29-11-1965) (w.e.f. 1-12-1963)].

NOTIFICATION

Delegation of powers of Assam Government and certain officers subordinate to it

No. F. 17-1/50-Pak. III, dated the 20th March, 1950 – In exercise of the powers conferred by

Section 3 of the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 (10 of 1950), and in supersession of the Notification of the Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs No.F.12-27 / 49-Pak.-III, dated the 30th January, 1950, the Central Government is pleased to direct that the powers and duties conferred or imposed on it by Section 20 of the said Act shall be exercised or discharged also by the Government of Assam or by the Deputy Commissioners, Commissioners, Additional Deputy Commissioners, Sub-Divisional Officers and the Superintendent, Lushasi Hills subordinate to that Government.

Assam Accord

15th August, 1985

**(Accord between AASU, AAGSP, Central and State Government
on the Foreigner Problem Issue)**

MEMORANDUM OF SETTLEMENT

1. Government have all along been most anxious to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of Foreigners in Assam. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) have also expressed their Keeness to find such a solution.
2. The AASU through their Memorandum dated 2nd February, 1980 presented to the Late Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi, conveyed their profound sense of apprehensions regarding the continuing influx of foreign nationals into Assam and the fear about adverse affects upon the political, social, cultural and economic life of the State.
3. Being fully alive to the genuine apprehensions of the people of Assam, the then Prime Minister initiated the dialogue with the AASU/AAGSP. Subsequently, talks were held at the Prime Minister's and Home Ministers levels during the period 1980-83. Several rounds of informal talks were held during 1984. Formal discussions were resumed in March, 1985.
4. Keeping all aspects of the problem including constitutional and legal provision, international agreements, national commitments and humanitarian considerations, it has been decided to proceed as follows:-

Foreigners Issue:

- (1) For purpose of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1-1-1966 shall be the base date and year.
- (2) All persons who came to Assam prior to 1-1-1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections, shall be regularized.
- (3) Foreigners who came to Assam after 1-1-1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1939.
- (4) Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939.
- (5) For this purpose, Government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the governmental machinery.
- (6) On the expiry of the period of ten year following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the electoral rolls shall be restored.
- (7) All persons who were expelled earlier, but have since re-entered illegally into Assam, shall be expelled.
- (8) Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance with law. Immediate and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.
- (9) The Government will give due consideration to certain difficulties express by the AASU/AAGSP regarding the implementation of the illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983.

Safeguards and Economic Development:

6. Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as many be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

7. The Government takes this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on the education and Science & Technology through establishment of national institutions.

Other Issues:

(1) The Government will arrange for the issue of citizenship certificate in future only by the authorities of the Central Government.

(2) Specific complaints that may be made by the AASU/AAGSP about irregular issuance of Indian Citizenship Certificates (ICC) will be looked into.

(1) The international border shall be made secure against future infiltration by erection of physical barriers like walls barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places. Patrolling by security forces on land and riverine routes all along the international border shall be adequately intensified. In order to further strengthen the security arrangements, to prevent effectively future infiltration, an adequate number of check posts shall be set up.

(2) Besides the arrangements mentioned above and keeping in view security considerations, a road all along the international border shall be constructed so as to facilitate patrolling by security forces. Land between border and the road would be kept free of human habitation, wherever possible. Riverine patrolling along the international border would be intensified. All effective measures would be adopted to prevent infiltrators crossing or attempting to cross the international border.

10. It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws.

11. It will be ensured that the law restricting acquisition of immovable property by foreigners in Assam is strictly enforced.

12. It will be ensured that Birth and Death Registers are duly maintained.

Restoration of Normalcy:

13. The All Assam Students Unions (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) call off the agitation assure full co-operation and dedicate themselves towards the development of the Country.

14. The Central and the State Government have agreed to :

a. Review with sympathy and withdraw cases of disciplinary action taken against employees in the context of the agitation and to ensure that there is no victimization;

b. Frame a scheme for ex-gratia payment to next of kin of those who were killed in the course in the agitation.

c. Give sympathetic consideration to proposal for relaxation of upper age limit for employment in public service in Assam, having regard to exceptional situation that prevailed in holding academic and competitive examinations etc. in the context of agitation in Assam:

d. Undertake review of detention cases, if any, as well as cases against persons charged with criminal offences in connection with the agitation, except those charged with commission of heinous offences.

e. Consider withdrawal of the prohibitory orders/ notifications in force, if any:

15. The Ministry of Home Affairs will be the nodal Ministry for the implementation of the above.

Sd/-
(P.K. Mahanta)
President
All Assam Students' Union

Sd/-
(R.D. Pradhan)
Home Secretary
Government of India

Sd/-
(B.K. Phukan)
General Secretary
All Assam Students' Union

Sd/-
(Smt. P. P. Trevedi)
Chief Secretary
Government of Assam

Sd/-
(Biraj Sharma)
Convenor
All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad

In the Presence of
Sd/-
(Rajiv Gandhi)
Prime Minister of India

Date : 15th August, 1985

Place: New Delhi

1. Election Commission will be requested to ensure preparation of fair electoral rolls.
2. Time for submission of claim and objections will be extended by 30 days, subject to this being consistent with the Election Rules.
3. The Election Commission will be requested to send Central Observers.

Sd/- Illegible
Home Secretary

1. Oil Refinery will be established in Assam
2. Central Government will render full assistance to the State Government in their efforts to reopen.
 - i) Ashok Paper Mill
 - ii) Jute Mills
3. I.I.T. will be set up in Assam.

Sd/- Illegible
Home Secretary