Militancy and Identity Politics in Assam

With the state getting tougher and the public turning against them, the militants in Assam are clearly on the defensive today. Militancy in Assam is not a mere law and order problem but a reflection of a deeper malaise affecting the whole society. Neither can it be dubbed as radical politics of the marginalised communities against hegemonising forces. Politics of identity in Assam is basically trapped in the world of appearances, fighting imaginary enemies, and drawing strength from prejudices and misconceptions of groups about themselves and others. Without an understanding of the material and ideological roots that gives birth to militancy, restoring peace in Assam would be an uphill task.

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When militants blew up a car in Nalbari and assassinated Nagen Sharma, Minister of Assam on February 27, many thought that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was back with a bang. Even the police and the army officials apprehended more strikes from ULFA. Surprisingly, a week after the ghastly incident more than 400 militants belonging to ULFA surrendered to the government. It was ironic that the surrender took place three days before the foundation day of ULFA and that too at the historic Ranghar in Upper Assam, where six Assamese youth took a vow to fight for independent Assam and floated the militant organisation, ULFA, in 1979. The organisation, which inspired and attracted thousands of youth in Assam and kept the politicians and army officials busy all these years, now finds itself in disarray.

Once it started became clear to them that their dream of 'Swadhin Asom' could never become a reality, more and more ULFA militants are giving up arms. Many cadres belonging to other militant outfits like National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Karbi National Volunteer (KNV), Rabha National Security Force, etc, have also surrendered to the government along with ULFA militants. In April, Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), a militant outfit fighting for a separate Bodoland state, declared unilateral suspension of its operations for facilitating dialogue with the government of India. In recent months the Unified Command was successful in busting several militant hideouts. Many important militants were either arrested or killed in the military operations. Public demonstrations against army operations and protests condemning fake encounters have become rare phenomena. Contrarily, the people are seen participating in large numbers in the government-sponsored seminars, conventions and peace rallies directed against terrorism. These days the citizens ignore ULFA's boycott call at the time of elections. Interestingly even the intellectuals, who directly or indirectly supported ULFA and Bodo militants initially, openly voice their resentment against the mindless violence resorted to by the militant outfits. The regional press is coming out with numerous articles and editorials criticising the negative effects of militancy. Giving up their old practice of holding Indian state and central government responsible for the backwardness of the region, all the ruling party leaders in the north-eastern states have begun to project insurgency as the stumbling bloc in the path of development and progress of the region. They have appealed to the union government to declare insurgency in the north-east as a national problem and the central government has responded with several packages for dealing with militancy in the region.

With the state getting tougher and the public turning against them, the militants in Assam are clearly on the defensive today. However, it would be premature to declare the death of insurgency and celebrate the dawn of peace and harmony in Assam. If militancy is merely a law and order problem and the militants only misguided youth, what the army and the government have been doing could be considered sufficient to restore peace in the state. But the fact is militancy in Assam is a reflection of a deeper malice affecting the whole society. All militant outfits active in Assam are the offshoots of identity politics that continues to dominate the politics of north-east India. Without fighting the ideological and material roots that give birth to the politics of identity, one cannot dream of putting an end to militant activities in the state.

I
Ethnic Composition of Assam

Assam, considered as the gateway to the north-east, is connected to the mainland India by a narrow patch of land measuring 28 km on its western side. It is connected to six other north-eastern states and has a long border with two neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh and Bhutan. In many respects, Assam is a mini-India with different national, ethnic, religious and linguistic and tribal groups living together in the region for centuries. It was never a monolingual or single nationality region at any point of time. The population of Assam is a broad intermixture of Mongolian, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan races [Das 1987:60-63]. A considerable number of people speaking Bengali and other languages and dialects also live in Assam. While the Assamese people are concentrated in the Upper Assam, the Bengalis form the majority in the three southern districts of Assam, namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The Hindus constitute a majority (58 per cent) and the Muslims 24 per cent of the total population. Although a majority of Muslims are Bengalis, there are many Assamese-speaking Muslims in Upper Assam. The Muslims are in substantial numbers in the districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Nagaon and Cachar. Officially the tribal population of the state is around 13 per cent of the total population. The Karbis and Dimashas live in the hilly districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills. They have their own dialects and cultures and they do not identify wholly with the Assamese people. Besides these hill tribes, there are many plain tribes spread throughout Assam. Although plain tribes, like Deuris, Tiwas, Sonowal, Kacharis, Mech Cacharis, etc, are assimilated into Assamese nationality,

a few like Boros, Rabhas, Koch Rajbamshis, etc, maintain their separate identity vis-a-vis the Assamese people [Bhuyan 1989:55-56]. There is also a mixed tea garden population composed of people originally speaking Hindi, Santhali, Mundari, Oriya or Tamil language/dialect. Having lived for several decades, the tea garden population has developed its own distinct character and identity in Assam [Kar 1989:80-95]. Although class formation has taken place in all these communities, the people in Assam continue to live and think along ethnic lines. The reasons for the perpetuation of national, tribal, religious and linguistic identities in Assam cannot be understood without comprehending the complex history of immigration into Assam.

The migration of foreigners into Assam is not a recent phenomenon. It is very difficult to say who actually constitute the indigenous population, for almost all groups living here seem to have come to this region from different places, at different points in time. It is said that the migration of different races to Assam began 200 years before the birth of Christ. It is believed that the Karbis, the descendents of Austric race, were the first to enter the region. The Kirats belonging to Mongoloid race had migrated from the western part of China and speak Sino-Tibetan language. The tribes like Bodo, Garo, Rabha, Deuries, Misings, Morans, Chutias, Dimasas and Koches (Rajbongshi), Lalung, and Hajong belong to this race. The Kaibartas and Banias from Drabirian race came to Assam from the Mediterranean coast. The Aryans from Cocasian race are said to have migrated through the Gangetic Plain to this region, as early as in the 1st century AD, when the region was called Pragjotishpur and was under the rule of Mongoloid kings [Acharyya 1992:272-73]. The Barman rulers (350-650 AD), under whose rule Assam was called Kamrup, invited Brahmin priests and converted themselves to Hinduism. This process continued even during the Salastambha dynasty (650 AD to 790 AD) and Pal dynasty (up to 1142 AD). In the second decade of the 20th century, the Ahoms, who belonged to Tais of Mongoloid race, came to upper Assam through Burma. The Ahoms had to face stiff resistance from the local kings and the tribal chiefs trying to establish their rule, first, in Upper Assam. At that time Lower Assam was under the Koch kings, while a considerable part of what is today called south Assam was ruled by the Cachari kings.

It was only in the 17th century that the Ahoms clearly established their supremacy over the other kings or chiefs in the Brahmaputra valley and drove the Cachari kings to further south of Brahmaputra valley. It is true that the Ahoms could ably resist and protect their kingdom from the Mughal and other Muslim invasions, but at no point of time remained aloof from the rest of India. Cultural and religious interactions with the rest of India continued even during the Ahom rule. Apart from encouraging the migration of their own brethren from the eastern side, the Ahom rulers invited artisans, scholars and other religious persons to Assam. Like Koch and Cachari kings, the later Ahom rulers converted themselves to Hinduism. Many of them took Hindu names, alongside their Tai names. The brahmins exercised enormous influence on the ruling elite and they were successful to some extent in introducing caste system in Assam. Many Muslim prisoners captured during the war married and settled in Assam. At the end of the 18th century, the British came in contact with the Ahom rulers and entered into an agreement with the king to promote commercial activities [Kalita 1992:51-60]. At the end of the 18th century the Ahom kingdom, which until then withstood the Mughal invasions and established its authority over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, began to show cracks due to internal contradictions of its feudal structure. Religious wars, palace intrigues and misrule further weakened the Ahom authority and paved the way for Burmese invasions. At about the same time even the Cachari kingdom was in a crisis due to the Manipuri conquest and the Burmese intervention.

From 1822 to 1826 the whole of Assam was virtually under the occupation of the Burmese invaders. Taking advantage of the political crises in the region, the British intervened in the name of restoring peace and authority. With the support of the people, the British army defeated the Burmese invaders and concluded the Yandaboo Treaty with the Burmese general in 1826. Thereafter, the British reinstated puppet kings in Cachar and upper Assam. Later on, taking advantage of the weakness of these rulers, the British annexed both Ahom and Cachari kingdoms and brought the whole of Assam under their administrative control. Subsequently other hilly areas in the north-east, inhabited by tribal people, were also brought under the British rule, while the entire region was placed under the administrative umbrella of Bengal Presidency. In 1874 the British, for administrative convenience, carved out a separate Chief Commissionership of Assam. It covered, along with the erstwhile areas under the rule of the Ahom and the Cachari kings, the adjoining hills inhabited by the Nagas, Kukis, Mizos, Garos, Jaintias and Khasis. For financial viability the Sylhet district in Bengal, which was never under the control of any Ahom or Cachari kings, was also merged to create Assam province [Gait 1992:318-19]. The British decision to incorporate Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet districts, inhabited by the Bengali population, into the Assam province created problems for both the Bengalis as well as the Assamese at a later date.

The integration of entire north-eastern region into the British India gave a new direction to the process of immigration. The British rule encouraged the immigration of people of different provinces into the region for its own reasons. As the Assamese were initially reluctant to learn English, the British brought along with them many English knowing Bengalis to work as clerks, lawyers and other professionals [Guha 1977:56-64]. With the blessings of the British government, many European planters started tea plantations in the region. As the indigenous people were not willing to work in the tea plantations, the planters brought labourers, mostly tribals, from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and Madras. They inhabited mainly in Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Cachar districts. Many Marwaris also came in search of economic opportunities and settled in trade and business activities. With the objective of increasing state revenue and bringing barren lands under cultivation, the British government, with the support of the Assamese zamindars, encouraged the Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal to migrate to the Brahmaputra valley. Compelled by poverty and overpopulation, lakhs of landless peasants, mainly from Mymensingh district of East Bengal, migrated towards Brahmaputra valley in search of greener pastures. These poor and hardworking immigrants cut the jungles, withstood the natural calamities, cultivated the wastelands and turned the valley into rich granaries [Kar 1997:6-7]. They settled mostly in Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang and Lakhimpur districts. These Muslim immigrants constitute about 15 per cent of the total population of the state and about 60 per cent of the total Muslim population in Assam. Although Bengalis by birth, the Mymensinghia Muslims allowed themselves to get Assamised and even declared Assamese as their mother tongue. The influx of Muslim peasants, which peaked during the first three de-

cades of the 20th century, came to an end with independence.

Albeit a section of the Muslims in Assam, led by Jamiat-ut-Ulema-E-Hind, aspired to remain in India, the dominating influence of Muslim League necessitated a referendum in Sylhet district. Subsequently Sylhet district had to be partitioned and the Bengali-dominant region in Assam got truncated as the majority of the Bengali Muslims in Sylhet district decided to join Pakistan [Kar 1990:325-41]. Although Assam had to suffer the trauma of partition, the Assamese leaders felt the partition as a blessing in disguise, as the process had enabled Assamese to emerge as the dominant nationality – in Assam. They also expected that the immigration would come to an end with the partition. But contrary to their expectations, owing to the communal riots that followed the partition, about 15,00,000 Hindu-Bengali refugees from East Pakistan came to Assam during the 1950s and 1960s and settled in Cachar, Nowgong, Goalpara and Kamrup districts [Nag 1990:170]. The majority of these Hindu immigrants are currently engaged in the service sector and in small business. There is not much evidence to prove that Muslims from East Pakistan came and settled in Assam during this period [Dass 1989]. It was only during the Liberation War in 1971 that lakhs of refugees from East Pakistan took shelter in Assam. Although many of them returned after the formation of Bangladesh, the Assamese people believe that lakhs of Bangladeshi refugees have stayed back in Assam. They also fear that even today thousands of Bangladeshi Muslims are crossing over to Assam through the porous borders [AASU 1980]. Apart from these major categories there are the second world war evacuees from Burma and the Nepali immigrants from Nepal. There are also a few lakhs of people from all other states in India, who came to Assam after independence for employment or business purposes. Finally, there are numerous tribal people who have migrated from bordering states and neighbouring countries, namely, Bangladesh and Burma for different reasons. The last category of migrants is usually ignored in the discourses on immigration, but it appears that they also count for the growth of the population in Assam in recent years, i e, after 1971 [Nandy 1997:21-31].

II
Impact of Immigration

The history of immigration into Assam stands in sharp contrast to the experience of the Frontier Expansion in America. The Anglo-Saxon community, which took the lead in the formation of American nation, did not feel threatened by the immigration of millions of people of different nationalities into the American continent. Progressive capitalism of that epoch, existence of vast tracks of unexplored land and unrestricted scope for development of agriculture and industry provided opportunities for all communities, ready to work hard and take risks. The collective struggle of different groups of immigrants in America created the conditions for assimilation and integration of several nationalities and ethnic groups into a mighty nation. Although several recent immigrant groups in the US continue to stick to their racial, religious and national roots, this limitation did not come in the way of development of harmonious working relations across the groups [Gordon 1978:182-83].

But the history of immigration into Assam is completely different. Unlike in the US, where the immigrants almost wiped out the aboriginal community and built up a new nation, every group of migrants entering Assam had to accommodate and adjust with the 'natives', the people who were already settled. The early immigrants into Assam were tribals and in terms of development they were not qualitatively different from the settled population. There was no compulsion on the part of any group to give up its lifestyle, due to the absence of any hegemonyforce. People continued their traditions and customs, to the extent they felt it necessary, and did not hesitate to borrow from other groups [Bhuyan 1985:4-5]. Even the mighty Ahoms, who had established their rule over all communities living in Brahmaputra valley, assimilated local customs, traditions and religious practices. The Brahmins, no doubt, represented a superior religion and civilisation of the Aryans, but have always played second fiddle to the native kings and never took upon themselves to change the socio-economic structure of the predominantly tribal society. The topography of the region with its mighty rivers, steep mountains and deep forests, the predominance of subsistence economy along with a low level of technology and the absence of transport and communication facilities, obstructed the process of integration and assimilation of these ethnic groups into a common nationality.

The Ahom rule, which continued uninterruptedly for six centuries, did help in creating some kind of homogeneity among certain tribes. However the expansionist nature of the Ahom kingdom had led to conflicts with other kings and tribal chiefs in the region. Certain groups and sects, who suffered under the Ahom rulers, asserted their identity and revolted against the Ahom kingdom from time to time. Whatever be the impact, positive or negative, the Ahom rule made its presence felt throughout the Brahmaputra valley. But this cannot be said of other parts of present day Assam. Till the British took over the North Cachar, Karbi-Anglong hills and a part of the Cachar plains were under the Cachari kings. The Barak/Surma valley region was never under the Ahom rule at any point of time [Gait 1992:261-65]. It was, therefore, natural that the people in south Assam could not emotionally identify themselves with the Ahom rule and continued to maintain their separate identities.

It was only during the colonial rule, when the whole of north-east became a part of British India, material conditions facilitating structural change in Assam opened up. Penetration of foreign capital, growth of tea plantations, development of railways and roadways, introduction of English education, emergence of private property in land and common subjection to a highly centralised political authority, brought drastic changes in its socio-economic structure. It was during this period that lakhs of migrants, some representing more advanced nationalities and ethnic groups, settled in Assam. Earlier migrations at times did generate religious and racial conflicts, but as far as livelihood was concerned nature had enough to give to everyone. Since most people were living at subsistence level, there was no need for any community to feel excessively insecure or jealous. But the migrations that took place during the British period, apart from creating the ground for cultural and linguistic conflicts, generated competition among different groups for new economic and political opportunities thrown open to the public by colonial rule. At that point of time the 'natives', all ethnic groups existing prior to the British rule, did not feel threatened by the tribal people from other provinces who came to work in the tea plantations as wage labourers. But they became highly apprehensive of the educated Hindu Bengalis, the hardworking Muslim Bengali peasants and the enterprising Marwaris, who entered the bureaucracy, agriculture and business respectively. The 'natives', who could not compete with the new immigrants, began to worry about domination by these new immigrants in all spheres. Their sense of insecurity and feeling of alienation made them conscious

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of their own identity vis-a-vis the Bengalis. The English educated Assamese middle class gave political expression to the collective fears and suspicions of all the 'natives'. By projecting the Bengalis as enemies, the Assamese leaders attempted to promote Assamese nationality consciousness amongst other tribes living in the Brahmaputra valley. Overshadowed by the fear of new immigrants, other 'native groups' also supported the Assamese leaders' crusade against the Bengalis. The Assamese leadership, in turn, did not take positive steps to rid the tribal people off their fears and ethnic prejudices. As a result, internal differences and conflicts among the tribes and between the Assamese and other 'native' ethnic groups remained unresolved.

Historically Assamese language developed as a result of interaction among different tribal groups in Assam. It was during the Ahom rule that Assamese became the lingua franca of the Brahmaputra valley. But Urdu British rule, the colonial rulers imposed Bengali as the official language of Assam. Projecting it as a deliberate attempt on the part of all the Bengalis to dominate the Assamese people, the Assamese middle class leadership mobilised the Assamese people and demanded that Assamese should be made the official language of the region. Simultaneously efforts were also made to develop Assamese language and literature. Many tribes like Deuris, Tiwas, Sonowal, Kacharis, Mech Kacharis and others, got Assamised. As mentioned earlier, even the Mymensinghias settled in the Brahmaputra valley accepted Assamese as their language. If allowed to have its natural course of development, Assamese could have become the state. However the process of assimilation was obstructed because of certain historical and political factors. Apart from the Bengalis living in the Barak valley region, who are proud of their rich language and culture, certain tribal groups like Nagas, Khasis, Boros, Karbis and Mizos, who were suspicious of the Assamese elite, were not prepared to accept Assamese as their mother tongue. Reviewing the situation, the political leadership should have kept the language issue in cold storage for some time, and made efforts to integrate the people by initiating simultaneous development of all regions and all communities in Assam. The leaders should have firstly aimed at creating an atmosphere of trust and understanding, wherein condition for voluntary assimilation and integration become possible. After independence the Congress government, led by the Assamese leadership, had ample opportunities to integrate different ethnic groups by initiating policies and programmes for the overall development of the state. But blinded by the fear of Bengali domination and in a hurry to make the Assamese a majority community in Assam, the leaders overemphasised the language issue and tried to Assamise all linguistic minorities in the state. In 1960 when the Assam government made efforts to impose Assamese as the official language in the plains, the Bengalis in the Barak valley region fought against the move. Subsequently, the government was forced to recognise Bengali as official language and also as a medium of instruction in the Barak valley region. Even in the Bodo dominated areas, the Bodo language had to be given the status of an associate official language and the medium of instruction at schools [Dutta 1993:259-60].

The hasty move of the government to impose Assamese language on the Bengalis created apprehensions in the minds of the hill tribes as to the real intentions of Assamese leaders {Chaubey 1999]. Driven by the feeling of neglect and the fear of domination by the Assamese, the hill tribes raised the demand for separate hill states. The desperate attempts of the Assamese elite to keep the hill tribes within Assam failed, leading to the formation of separate states of Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland [Nag 1993]. Of all the hill tribes in united Assam, only the Karbis and the Dimashas could be convinced to stay in Assam on condition that they would be given autonomous status within the state.

Owing to the combination of several factors such as the geographical location of the state, neglect of the central government, incompetence of state leadership, weakness of the regional bourgeoisie and unwillingness of the Indian monopolies to set up industries in the north-east, Assam remained basically an agrarian state, with nearly 90 per cent of its people living in the villages. As alternative sources of employment were very limited, the demand for cultivable lands and government jobs started mounting up. The people at large were dissatisfied with the Congress rule. In the mid-seventies the left parties could successfully mobilise the discontented people in mass democratic movements against the misrule of the state and central governments. The growing popularity of the left parties irked the upcoming regional bourgeoisie and lobbies. The Assamese chauvinists tried to use this situation to whip up anti-Bengali sentiments. Moreover, the defeat of regional parties and the victory of the leftists and the minorities in 1978 elections compelled them to think of a new strategy. It was then they started raising slogans about culture and identity, which was at stake due to Bangladeshi refugees settled in Assam. By attributing a high rate of growth of population in Assam due to foreign immigration and by creating a bogey of the Assamese people becoming a minority in their own land, the leaders of the so called Assam agitation were able to mobilise lakhs of people in the Brahmaputra valley in support of their demands (AASU, AAGSP 1980). While a moderate section of the leadership demanded detection and deportation of all foreigners settled in Assam, the radicals who later formed the militant outfit, ULFA, tried to direct the movement against the Indian state. Many Assamese intellectuals lent support to the movement, justifying it on grounds of nationality, federalism and internal colonialism [Tilottama Misra 1980; Udayan Misra 1984, Baruah 1984, 1994]. The leading role of the students and youth in the movement and their apparent patriotic slogans, attracted public attention and sympathy even outside Assam. But from the violent assaults on the Bengalis and the leaders' initial opposition to accept 1971 year as the cut-off point for the detection and deportation of the foreigners, it was apparent that the Bangladeshis were not the only targets of the agitators. The leftist parties, who realised the anti-Bengali character of the movement, opposed the agitation. But the Assamese people in Brahmaputra valley, who really believed that their identity was at stake due to large-scale migration from Bangladesh, lent all-out support to the movement and braved the police lathis and bullets. The agitation continued for about five years and came to an end with the Assam Accord in 1985. After an all-party agreement, the parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act (IM (DT) Act) for detection of the foreigners settled in Assam. Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), a political party floated by the leaders of Assam agitation, came to power in the subsequent elections in 1986.

With the Assam Accord and the victory of AGP, it appeared as if the Assamese won the battle. But within a few years, the Assamese found their hopes shattered. The AGP government could not solve any of the basic problems of the people of Assam. The new leaders proved that they were as inefficient and corrupt as their predecessors. As the AGP came to power on the foreigners' issue, detection and deporta-

tions of the Bangladeshi immigrants was on its priority list. Despite hectic combing operations during the AGP rule, only a few lakh people could be identified as doubtful citizens. Unable to explain where the Bangladeshi refugees had gone, the AGP leaders are now blaming the IM (DT) Act for coming in the way of detection and deportation of foreigners settled in Assam.

From the time the Assam government attempted to impose the Assamese language, the Bengali citizens in the Barak valley started looking at every move of the people in Brahmaputra valley with suspicion and caution. The attacks on the Bengalis during the Assam agitation has only helped in further widening the gulf between the people of Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley. Far from supporting the so called anti-foreigners movement, the leaders in the Barak valley criticised the ongoing attacks on the Bengali students and teachers in Guwahati university and expressed their resentment over the disruption of the academic schedule. Their opposition to the Assam agitation took the form of the students agitation for a separate central university in the Barak valley, which subsequently materialised in the year 1994 [Singh 1987:95-100; also Dass 1989:55-61]. After coming to power, the AGP government through the secondary education board of Assam (SEBA) sought to impose Assamese as a compulsory third language at school level and knowledge of Assamese, a pre-requisite for government jobs. But in the wake of opposition, this time, not only from the Bengalis, but also from different tribal groups, the government had to retreat and repeal the order [Bhuyan 1989:83-84].

Further, the attacks on Hindu and Muslim Bengalis during the Assam agitation gave birth to United Minority Front (UMF) representing the interests of the minorities [Biswas 1992:47-74]. With the Bangladeshi immigrant issue gradually turning communal, several communal organisations seeking to fight for the cause of the Muslims made their appearance in recent years. The growth of Muslim, communal organisations came as

handy to the BJP to extend their control over the Hindu votes by creating a bogey of Muslim fundamentalism [Srikanth 1999]. More than these repercussions, what worries the Assamese people most, today, is that their assertion of identity vis-a-vis the Bengalis has turned against them. Different ethnic groups, like the Ahoms, the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Koch Rajbamshis, etc, who at one time supported the Assamese cause against the Bengalis, have now begun using similar slogans, but against the Assamese people. The Bodos began claiming that they were the indigenous people of the land and demanded a separate Bodoland state for protecting Bodo identity, language and culture from extinction [Dutta 1993; Choudhury 1995]. With the demand for an autonomous state picking up in North Cachar and Karbi Anglong Hills the plain tribes like Rabhas, Mishings and Koch Rajbamshis became conscious of their own identities [Hussain 1994:242-73; Bhuyan 1989:83-90]. Even the Ahoms, who were instrumental in creating an Assamese identity, express their regret over losing theirs and are urging the government to recognise them as a scheduled tribe. Far from ensuring the unity of tribes, the growth of ethnic identities has aggravated intra ethnic fears and prejudices. The Koch Rajbamishis refuse to identify themselves as Bodos and the Dimasas continue to be apprehensive of the Karbis [Baruah 1994:272]. The Assam agitation has resulted in exasperated inter and intra ethnic tensions and conflicts in Assam.

III
Growth of Militancy

By provoking national and ethnic identities, the Assam agitation has prepared the ground for the rise of militancy in Assam. The dreaded ULFA, which dared to challenge India's sovereignty over Assam, was only an offshoot of the Assam agitation. The birth of ULFA showed the way for other ethnic groups to float their own militant outfits to realise their demands. Today in addition to ULFA, many other militant organisations like BLTF, NDFB, Karbi National Volunteers (KNV), Dima Halam Daoga (DHD), United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Koch Rajbamshi Protection Force, Rabha National Security Force, Muslim United Liberation Tigers Association (MULTA), etc, are active in Assam. Apart from these Assam-based militant outfits, a few other militant groups active in the bordering states, such as NSCN (K), NSCN (I-M), People's United Liberation Front (PULF) and National Liberation Front (BNLF), also have their bases in Assam. All outfits claim to be working for protecting the interests of their respective communities. Their avowed goals range from protection of the interests of the 'natives' from foreign immigrants to formation of autonomous district/state and creation of a separate state within the Indian Union to complete secession from the Indian Union. Initially many of these organisations maintained close relations with the communities they claim to represent. But in course of time they moved away from their own people, their activities having nothing to do with the interests of the people they claim to serve. The earlier recruits to the extremist organisations believed that their activities were meant to promote the interests of their people, but many are taking to militant activities either for adventure or for making quick bucks. These militant outfits resort to all kinds of methods, including abduction, killing, extortion, etc, to collect money for conducting their activities. Usually it is the businessmen, tea garden managers and big contractors who become their targets. But at times even school teachers, petty businessmen and government employees were kidnapped and lakhs of rupees were demanded from their family members or employers. Some served illegal eviction notices to several poor immigrant peasants. There are many incidents where certain militant outfits, if only to prove their existence and get public attention, were involved in destruction of public property and killed innocent Nepalese, Biharis and Santhalis. In North Cachar and Karbi Anglong areas, all government employees, from peons to officers, are forced to pay 10 per cent of their basic pay as tax for the cause of militants. It is alleged that even the surrendered ULFA (SULFA) militants involve in different unlawful activities to make quick bucks. Bodo and ULFA militants are involved in terrorist activities like blasting the pipelines and exploding bombs in the trains and other public places. Because of their inhuman and unjustified activities, the militants are gradually losing public support in the recent years.

IV
Government's Policy Towards Militancy

It was an open secret that AGP leaders initially had good relations with ULFA militants. Even the Assamese bourgeoisie used ULFA for some time to extract concessions from the central government. But when ULFA chose to go ahead with the slogan of independent Assam, both AGP and the Assamese bourgeoisie turned cold to ULFA. With many other militant outfits raising their heads in Assam, the AGP government found it difficult to curb their activities and thought it wise to lend support to the operations of the Unified Command. At present the army, the paramilitary forces and the state police are working together

to suppress the militant activities in the state. The electoral victory of BJP and its allies at the centre and the appointment of former lieutenant general, S K Sinha as the governor of Assam gave further boost to the anti-militant operations in the state. The government started following the Machiavellian policy of the lion and fox to deal with the militants. Combing operations were intensified to bust militant hideouts and several leaders and cadres were either arrested or killed. Taking advantage of the upsurge of nationalist feelings in the aftermath of the Kargil crisis, the army and the government managed to tarnish the image of ULFA and NDFB by projecting their links with ISI. To escape from the operations of the Unified Command, the ULFA and NDFB have shifted their camps to Bhutan and Bangladesh, directing their operations from there.

While going ahead with the army operations, the government is also coming out with sops to wean away both militants and the people from the insurgent activities. To project a humane face, early this year, the government made a shrewd offer of safe passage for militants who wished to see their family members. By calling militants as misguided youth, the governor appealed to shun violence and join the mainstream. According to official sources, 957 militants had surrendered to the government between 1996 and 1999 (*The Telegraph*, March 28, 2000). This year, about 700 militants, majority of them from ULFA, have laid down their arms. The government has promised suitable rehabilitation packages for the surrendered militants. The army has come forward to offer technical training to the surrendered militants. The AGP leaders have given an open invitation to the ex-militants to join their party. The army with the help of the district administration conducted several seminars in the insurgency-affected areas on the impact of insurgent activities on women and children. Apart from army officers and bureaucrats, the government was able to involve UNICEF officials, NGOs and intellectuals in these seminars (*The Assam Tribune*, March 12, March 27, April 5, 2000). Several peace rallies were organised to rally the public opinion against insurgency.

The NDA government, led by Vajpayee, has been taking a keen interest in the affairs of Assam and other north-eastern states. In addition to offering economic packages for the development of the north-east, the central government has started reimbursing security-related expenditure to all the north-eastern states. It has also taken steps to fence the Bangladesh borders to stop immigration. While welcoming cease-faire offer of BLT and Kaphlang faction of NSCN, L K Advani, the home minister, made it clear that the discussions with militants would take place only within the confines of the Indian constitution and that the government would not consider any militant outfit that entertains the idea of secession from the Indian Union and demands third party interference (*The Assam Tribune*, March 15, 2000). The central government has been exerting pressure on the governments of Bhutan and Bangladesh to take action against different insurgent groups operating from their territories.

Recent events indicate that for the moment, the Indian state has gained upper hand over the militant groups in Assam. The militants appear to be fighting a losing battle. But one cannot conclude from these developments that militancy would come to an end in the near future. Army operations and government sops may help in containing the militant activities to some extent, but they alone cannot ensure peace and harmony. It is true that militants involve in violent activities. But they are only the instruments of violence, not its cause. Without understanding the historical and material roots giving birth to militancy, it is not possible to put an end to militant activities in the state.

Historically, Assam has inherited a fractured society, divided along national and ethnic lines. The growing competition for limited social and economic space has further intensified the hostilities and prejudices among the ethnic groups since the colonial period. As in other parts of the country, in Assam too the English educated Assamese middle class, while taking active part in the Indian nationalist movement, gave voice to the subnationalist aspirations of the people. But the leadership, instead of making positive efforts to fight out prejudices and integrate all national and ethnic groups living in the region into a homogenous nationality, relied heavily on anti-Bengali sentiments among the people to build up Assamese national spirit. Obsessed with the fear of Bengali domination, the leaders overemphasised language and immigrant issues and did very little to win over the confidence of the tribal people and involve them in the nationalist movement. Because of this limiation, certain tribal groups could not fully identify themselves with the Assamese or with the Indian nationalist leadership. Not surprisingly, the degree of commitment and support of different national and ethnic groups both to Indian nation and to the Assamese nationality differed from community to community.

After independence the Assamese leaders, who got hold over the state Congress and took over the reigns of government in Assam, tried hard to make Assam a monolingual state. Their efforts to extend Assamese hegemony over other national and ethnic groups living in the state through Assamisation, however, back-fired, leading to the strengthening of other linguistic and ethnic identities in the state. The Congress governments, both at the centre and the state, did very little to develop the economy of the state. Thanks to their nonperformance, even after five decades of independence, Assam continues to remain predominantly an agrarian state. Owing to limited industrialisation, low level of urbanisation and weak transport and other basic infrastructure in the state, alternative avenues for employment for people are severely restricted. The economy of the state has reached a point where the government finds it impossible to create any more posts in bureaucracy and public sectors. In such circumstances, land becomes the main source of livelihood for the majority of people. As long as there was excessive land in the state for cultivation, immigration did not result in a clash of material interests. But once the optimum level was reached, there developed competition and conflicts amongst groups for control over limited resources and opportunities. In other words, it was not immigration per se, but continuation of immigration in a situation of stagnation and underdevelopment that generates competition and hostilities among different ethnic groups. It is not difficult to realise that behind all talk of threats to language, culture or identity, every national or ethnic group evinces, simultaneously a strong desire to grow and a fear of losing control over the limited resources that they already possess. In pursuit of its interests, every outfir has produced its own pressure groups. Long before the militants appeared on the scene, some ethnic groups already had their political parties, articulating demands. Militant groups, which came later, took up those demands and gave a radical twist to them. Although there are differences in the style of functioning, in substance, there is little difference in the ideology of the militants using non-constitutional methods and those of regional or ethnic based political parties and pressure groups taking recourse to parliamentary means. They from two sides of the

same coin, indulging in politics of identity and thriving on the ideology of the 'other'.

For creating and consolidating its respective identities, every group makes efforts to construct its 'other'. Initially the 'other' was the Bengali, later the Bangladeshi immigrant and now it could be anyone, an Assamese, a non-tribal, a Muslim, an officer from Guwahati on a trip to the Barak valley or even a resident of Lakhimpur trying for a job in Sivasagar. As the number of identities increases, the list of 'others' also multiply. The logic of the 'other' never looks at a person as an individual. He is always seen in relation to the community to which he belongs. According to the logic the 'other' is not just someone different. He is one who has come to 'dominate and exploit'. He is the enemy to 'our identity and interests', the 'cause of our problems and suffering'. When he keeps himself aloof, it clearly shows that he has 'no concern for the community'. But if he actively involves in local affairs, it only means that he has 'some vested interests'. Hence he is not be treated as a friend or even a by-stander. He needs to be watched, controlled and disciplined. Since all that his community earned was only through foul means, there was nothing wrong in taking away the money or property of the 'other'. The 'other' should always be submissive to the 'natives'. If at any time the 'other' protests and refuses to submit, he needs to be killed or at least deported to his original land. This, in substance, is the ideology of the 'other' that motivates and guides identity politics in Assam.

Contrary to what the postmodernists would make us believe, the experience of Assam shows that identity politics need not necessarily be progressive or a radical politics of the marginalised communities against the domination of hegemonising forces. More often than not, the much claimed struggle against exploitative Indian state or indifferent central government ends up as fratricidal conflicts with other communities living in the state. Hence it is more apt to say that the politics of identity in Assam is basically the politics of philistines, trapped in the world of appearances, fighting imaginary enemies. It draws its strength from prejudices and misconceptions of groups about themselves and others. Its ideology masquerades class exploitation and ignores the material structures and forces responsible for their problems. Feeding on the fear of the 'other', it pits one community against the other and mobilises the people along ethnic lines. Trying to project itself as a hapless victim of the 'other', every group tends to interpret history to suit its convenience and necessities. While emphasising certain facts that justify its stand, each group conveniently ignores numerous other evidences that contradict its basic assumptions and arguments. Electoral politics in a society dominated by identity politics, instead of ironing out differences among groups, further consolidates ethnic loyalties and identities. Not only regional and ethnic groups and parties, even national parties like Congress and BJP, which have no solutions to offer to the real problems of the people, encourage identity politics to the extent it serves their narrow political objectives. In a society where identity politics becomes the norm, there will always be people tempted to take recourse to militancy, when their demands against the 'others' could not be met within the legal and constitutional framework. Seen from this angle, militancy in Assam is only a by-product of the politics based on identities. It is, therefore, of little use condemning militants alone for the violence and disharmony. As long as identity politics dominates, with the material base reproducing the ideology of the 'other', society continues to breed insurgents of one or the other kind. Even if one group of militants gives up arms and surrenders to the government, there will always be others taking to arms in the name of protecting their community interests. It is only when the toiling masses of Assam identify the material roots of their insecurity and alienation and involve in common struggles for the elimination of poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment, can it be possible to ensure economic development and promote peace and harmony in the multi-ethnic and multi-national state of Assam. EPW

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