

The 1983 Assembly Poll in Assam : An Analysis of its Background and Implications

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In this joint paper a geographer and a historian combine to make a post mortem of the controversial 1983 Assam elections, down to their constituency levels and looking forward to coming elections within the current year. Demonstrated by maps and poll statistics which bring out the significance of the ethnicity factor in the 1983 bloody elections, the authors conclude that although the voter turn-out was just half of what it was in the preceding 1978 Assembly poll for the State as a whole, there was normal to high polling in 40 per cent of the 105 constituencies where elections were contested and could be completed. These normal-to-high poll constituencies are, by and large, coterminous with seven of Assam's sixteen districts. The authors believe that the latest electoral rolls published recently did take care to eliminate suspected foreigners' names, as far as possible, without violating the Constitution and justice in the given tangled situation. To avoid another break-up of what is now Assam on an ethno-linguistic basis, the Assamese need for their self-preservation various guarantees other than expulsion of pre-1971 settlers. This is one lesson that the Assamese public opinion is now increasingly adjusting itself to.

THE PURPOSE of this study is to assess the verdict, if any, of Assam's controversial elections which were held in February 1983, under conditions of widespread violence and obviously incompetent official arrangements of electoral facilities. Hence their credibility came under question. Though there were diverse opinions as to the validity of the elections, most people now agree that they were neither free nor fair.¹ Nevertheless, since electoral responses and conditions widely varied from region to region within the State it is worth studying this variation and its implications. Under the

given circumstances all usual election issues lost their relevance. The only real issue forcefully brought before the electorate by the situation was that of the poll boycott. The verdict given in this respect needs therefore an analysis. For, lessons drawn from it have a relevance to the constitutional requirement of drawing Assam once more into the electoral process, this time to complete the last year's national parliamentary poll.

The main focus of this paper is on the Brahmaputra Valley, the hot-bed of the so-called anti-foreigner agitation. At the time of the elections under review, the State of Assam had 10 districts and, of these, seven were in the Brahmaputra Valley. But after a re-organization, now it has 16 such districts - 12 in the same Valley, two in the Barak Valley and two in the hill region. Throughout this paper all references are to these new districts, unless otherwise stated. We propose to introduce briefly the background and immediate antecedents of the elections first, and then proceed with the analysis of their results.²

I

For the last five years, Assam is in the grip of an organized mass agitation which while having its periodic peaks and troughs, has not yet died out. Detect, Disenfranchise and Deport or Disperse all 'foreigners' - these are the main slogans around which the agitation was built up and is still sustained by a united front of several local organizations, with the backing of the local press media.³ The blanket term 'foreigner' includes *inter alia*, mostly the non-Muslim displaced persons from erstwhile East Pakistan who came over to Assam in their thousands during 1951-1971 and were treated as *bonafide* refugees even under the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950. They are now being asked to get out, irrespective of their stage of assimilation and naturalization, together with other foreigners.

If the agitation leaders are to be believed, then a quarter of Assam's population, today, is composed of such 'foreigners', of all brands. Because of the anti-foreigner campaign rising to its peak in late 1979 and early 1980, every fourth man in Assam became a suspect and remains so in the eyes of the indigenes. This resulted in the harassment of even pre-1951 old settlers of Bengali origin, both Hindus and Muslims. They as well as the settlers of Nepali

origin were subjected to frenzied foreigner-hunts from time to time. The fear of loss of national identity on the part of the majority community thus led in its turn to the fear of loss of citizenship, hearth and home on the part of the minority communities of Bengal and Nepal origin. Means adopted by the agitationists to achieve their ends were, from the very outset, both violent and non-violent. They tried to coerce minorities to join their ranks and declared that no counter agitation by all-India political parties or by regional minority organizations would be tolerated. All-out poll boycott until settlement of the foreigner issue emerged as the major agitational plank since mid-1979, and it remains so till date. Consequently, the routine revision of the electoral rolls had remained long suspended until its recent resumption during 19 November—31 December of 1984, after these were for the last time intensively revised in September 1979. The agitation continues to have several other dimensions as well, but the focus of this paper is limited only to its electoral aspects, particularly in respect of the Assam Legislative Assembly.

The Assam agitation was at its height during the critical juncture of political uncertainties and drift that came in the wake of a chain of disturbing events in quick succession in New Delhi and Dispur. After the collapse of prime minister Morarji Desai's Government the next prime minister Chaudhuri Charan Singh, too, had to resign. The sixth Lok Sabha was dissolved on 22 August 1979; fresh parliamentary elections were announced; and Charan Singh's Government at the Centre continued meanwhile only as a caretaker one. The State Government of Assam, too, was caught into a political crisis, following the fall of Golap Borbora's Janata ministry on 8 September 1979. From this time onwards till 14 January 1980, when Indira Gandhi resumed power at the Centre, the agitationists were practically in control of Assam's administration. The police, the bureaucracy, the lower echelons of the judiciary and even the Guwahati Broadcasting Station of the AIR - All were found colluding to boost the agitation. An intensive revision of the electoral rolls on the basis of house-to-house enquiries, in preparation of the Seventh Lok Sabha poll of 1980, was indeed undertaken. But in the midst of incessant bandhs, blackouts, satyagrahas, boycott, strikes and other obstructions, these could be revised and finally published on 2 December 1979 amid confusion only with great difficulty. Because of road blockades, gheraos of prospective election candidates and other coercive measures adopted by the agitationists, no nominations could be filed in 10 and no election

could be held in 12 of Assam's 14 parliamentary constituencies. The Government silently accepted this election fiasco as a *fait accompli*, not to be disturbed by a fresh electoral process. It was decided so, despite Assam's remaining largely unrepresented on the body of the Seventh Lok Sabha. This policy however hardly secured peace.

Upto the end of 1979, there were only a few stray cases of suspected foreigners or their alleged abetors being killed by assailants. But in the first week of January 1980, there followed large-scale massacres of settled linguistic and religious minorities particularly in North Kamrup where the situation had to be brought under control by calling out the army.⁴ After Indira Gandhi had taken over, there was yet another spell of massacres of the minorities in the last week of May, particularly in the district of Nowgong, when they tried to take their counter-agitation to the streets. Despite efforts from every quarter since then towards finding a solution to the foreigner problem and despite long-drawn bipartite and tripartite talks, no tangible solution was indeed ever in sight. Pending settlement, the Government wanted to go ahead meanwhile with the work of detecting at least the post-1971 foreign immigrants about whose foreigner status there was no controversy, and then of deleting their names from the electoral rolls. But as the agitationists would not listen even to this interim proposal, the Government did not further pursue the matter seriously and allowed the stalemate to continue.

Even as the negotiations dragged on for long three years, the over-all situation did not remain wholly peaceful.⁵ The State Assembly having been dissolved on 19 March 1982 the permissible span of President's Rule in Assam was fast coming to its dead end, thereby threatening to bring in its wake a constitutional deadlock. Some Opposition parties approved of an amendment to the Constitution at this stage, so that President's Rule could be extended for one more year to avoid the other alternative of going ahead with the 1983 polls, then fraught with the danger of large-scale inter-ethnic clashes. But they were not prepared to extend *timely* assurance of parliamentary support that the ruling party needed for the purpose. In any case, the left parties were in principle opposed to such an *ad hoc* measure. Under the circumstances, constitutional compulsions prevailed. The Government broke off the Delhi talks rather late on 5 January 1983 and, next day, the decision for holding

elections in Assam to fill up the twelve vacancies in the Lok Sabha and to reconstitute a new Legislative Assembly was announced.

The electoral process started with the validation of the 1979 rolls for the 1983 poll. The process faced mounting resistance after the talks were broken off and agitation leaders returning from the talks were arrested. The no-poll campaign combining both violent and non-violent tactics was emotionally surcharged, well-organised and widespread. In contrast, the pro-poll political parties failed to launch regular campaigns in most parts of the State, because of the angry and violent mood of a section of the people. Some prospective candidates even failed to submit or had to withdraw their nomination papers for the same reasons. For instance, a candidate of the Left and Democratic Alliance (LDA) withdrew his nomination after his minor son was kidnapped and held to ransom. The proposer of a Congress (I) candidate was hacked to death. Such violent incidents were many.

Nevertheless, unlike in 1980, the nominations were not numerically unimpressive. Altogether 628 nominations were filed for the 126 Assembly seats as against 1060 in the previous Assembly poll of 1978 ; and of these, 527 survived rejections and withdrawals as against 938 five years before. About 9000 government employees, including IAS trainees, were inducted—they were mostly air-lifted from other states to run the polling machinery, as local employees had refused to cooperate, this for fear of reprisals in many cases. Draconian laws were passed and the press was gagged to control the agitation. Para-military forces were detailed heavily all over the disturbed areas. Since the ball was now in its court, the Election Commission alone could have, on its own, cancelled the election process at this stage on grounds of breakdown of normal conditions for a free and fair election. But it did not. There was outbreak of fresh spells of large-scale violence and communal clashes even before the polls took off.

Elections to 62 Assembly seats were held on 14 February, to 37 on 17 February, to 16 on 20 February and to 11 on 21 February—all this in a staggered fashion to minimise the risks of dislocation due to outbreak of violence. Only a week before the poll started, the pro-poll Opposition parties had complained of being severely handicapped in their campaigns. All motor vehicles available for hire, they said, were found either requisitioned by the Government or already booked by the ruling party. Neither could they freely move in the constituencies for lack of protection. Yet they did not with-

draw from the polls they had begun by then to describe as farcical. The six-party Left and Democratic Alliance (LDA) - consisting of Congress (S), CPI (M), CPI, RCPI, RSP and SUC--tried to project an alternative to the Congress (I). The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), CPI (ML), Forward Block and a number of independents were also in the fray. The BJP, the Janata, and the Lok Dal, however, actively supported the call for poll boycott.

The elections, held on a war footing, got drowned in blood in many areas. Some 150 agitators died of police firing when they tried to attack polling booths, destroy bridges or cut up roads with a view to preventing voters from exercising their franchise. Agitators led attacks on pro-poll individuals and villages and, in turn, faced retaliatory counter attacks. Clashes, which were essentially of political nature to begin with, thus ended up largely as communal massacres—even genocide at Nally for instance—as it had happened on a smaller scale even before in North Kamrup in the early part of January 1980. The outburst of violence both then and later had apparently some prior planning behind them. Clandestine leaflets were in circulation in thousands, instructing people how to act, and there is evidence of large quantities of arms and ammunitions having been piled up and put into use by the extremists. As a result, the 1983 polls could not take place on the same dates as were originally fixed, in respect of as many as 43 constituencies. In such cases polls were adjourned to subsequent dates not later than 21 February.

The message of violence was carried even in the State's premier daily newspapers. On the election day of 16 February 1983 when the Brahmaputra Valley was burning, the *Daily Assam Tribune* of Guwahati, for instance, carried a significant quotation under the caption "MESSAGE FOR TODAY" on the top of its editorial column. It was as follows : "The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence. —ADOLF HITLER". "MESSAGE FOR TODAY" appeared in the same paper and in the same place, again, on the last day of the elections i.e. on 21 February, in the form of yet another quotation. This time it was from BENITO MUSSOLINI : "There is a violence that liberates, and a violence that enslaves ; there is violence that is moral and a violence that is immoral". Such messages were not missed by people those were meant for.

The gruesome stories of Nelli, Gohpur, Goreswar-Khairabari, Silapathar, Chamaria and Dhula are too well known to be repeated here. According to official estimates, no less than 4,000 men, women and children mostly of the religious and linguistic minority communities died as a result of the organised armed attacks and arson triggered by the agitation.⁶ More than three lakh people of both majority and minority communities were turned homeless and had to be given temporary shelter in government relief camps.

II

The poll results were as could be expected under the given circumstances. In as many as 13 Assembly constituencies no poll could be held at all and in three, though partially held, the poll could not be completed. In one constituency, Biswanath, the election was countermanded as the Congress (I) candidate was killed by a group of agitators when he was addressing an election meeting. Thus, because of the fierce opposition from a major section of the electors of the Brahmaputra Valley, there was no poll in as many as 17 constituencies. In another four constituencies of the same Valley, Congress (I) candidates got themselves elected unopposed as the agitators succeeded in forcibly preventing the other candidates from filing their nominations. People had therefore opportunity to actively exercise their franchise only in the remaining 105 constituencies, representing altogether 7,302 thousand voters out of the State's 8,682 thousand strong electorate.⁷

In all 2,385 thousand voters or 32.7 per cent of the electorate of the contested constituencies cast their votes.⁸ This was an all-time record low poll in percentage terms for any state-level general elections in India (except for Nagaland). For, the previous State averages had ranged between 45 and 67 per cent ever since the introduction of universal adult suffrage in 1952. Yet it is of no small significance that as much as one-third of the voters, who had an opportunity to vote, were able to assert their franchise in defiance of the boycott call, backed by organised violence. In 23 of the 105 constituencies, the polling rate was above 60 per cent (Table I).

The regional variation pattern in the voting behaviour comes out sharply when we take up constituency-wise details. In the four contiguous districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Dibrugarh - all in the geographical region of Upper Assam - the respective highest constituency-wise per centage of polling rates were 9.6;22.6;13.7 and

26.1. The corresponding respective lowest rates were 0.4; 1.4; 1.5 and 6.3 per cent. The district averages were, accordingly, as low as 4.4 percent, 8.6 percent, 3.5 and 16.8 percent, respectively. In the adjoining district of Sonitpur, which is also geographically very much a part of Upper Assam, the average polling rate was as low as 24.8 per cent. Polling there could however be held only in two of its eight constituencies, Tezpur and Rangapara where the polling rates were 10.5 and 40.1 per cent, respectively. However while the polling was very low in some parts of the State, it was high to medium in other parts.

In the central districts of Darrang and Nowgong the comparable district average rates were 49.5 and 28.0 per cent; respectively. In Darrang, the highest constituency-wise polling rate was 66.6 per cent at Dalgaon and the lowest, 26.3 per cent at Panery. Darrang district is indeed geographically very much a part of the Lower Assam region. In Nowgong district, the highest constituency-wise polling rate was 54.4 per cent at Dhing and the lowest rate was 1.9 per cent at riot-torn Marigaon. Darrang and Nowgong saw more of poll-time communal violence in 1983 than other parts of Assam.

In terms of Assembly seats, Kamrup of Lower Assam is now the State's largest electoral district with 16 seats, and there was electoral contest in 14 of these. The district's highest and lowest constituency-wise polling rates were 50.2 and 0.4 per cent - recorded respectively at Tamulpur and Dharampur. The polling average in Kamrup was 12.3 per cent, while in the adjacent district of Barpeta it was as high as 48.3 per cent. There the constituency-wise polling rates ranged from as high as 70.9 per cent at Baghbar to as low as 28.4 per cent at Bhawanipur where from hailed the agitation's first 'martyr' as far back as in December 1979.

Coming to the other districts of Lower Assam, one finds the average polling rates to be respectively 64.0 and 67.7 per cent in Dhubri and Kokrajhar districts, but only a low 38.7 per cent in Goalpara district. The constituency-wise polling rates ranged from 44.4 per cent at Bilasipara-East to 79.4 per cent at Mankachar in Dhubri district and from 62.6 per cent in Sidli (ST) to 73.4 per cent in Kokrajhar-West (ST) in Kokrajhar district. However in Goalpara the poll rates ranged between two extreme poles - 13.4 per cent at Dhudnoi (ST) and 65.7 per cent at Jaleswar. The last-mentioned constituency bordered on the Dhubri district,

Number of Constituencies Grouped District-wise according to voting turnout

No. of constituencies in which % of votes polled was

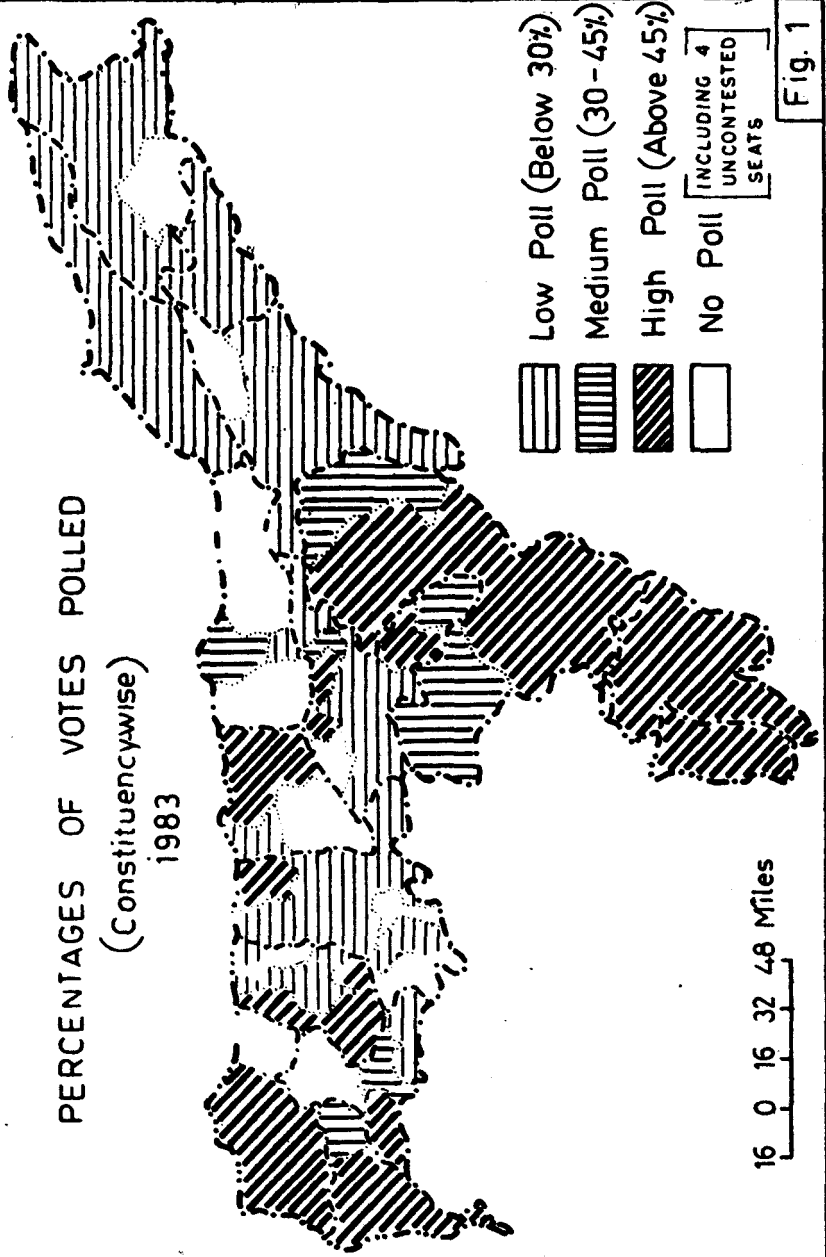
District	Average poll %	Less than				10.1 to 30.1		30.1 to 50.1		50.1 to 60.1		More than 60.1	Contested	Unopposed	Deferred	Total
		10.0	30.1	50.1	60.0	60.1										
Dhubri	64.0	—	—	1	1	5	7	—	—	—	—	7	—	—	7	
Kokrajhar	67.7	—	—	—	—	4	4	—	—	—	—	4	—	1	5	
Goalpara	38.7	—	1	2	—	1	4	—	—	—	—	4	—	3	7	
Barpeta	48.3	—	1	2	2	2	7	—	—	—	1	7	1	—	8	
Kamrup	12.3	6	7	—	1	—	14	—	—	—	2	14	2	—	16	
Darrang	49.5	—	1	1	1	1	4	—	—	—	1	4	1	2	7	
Sonitpur	24.9	—	1	1	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	2	—	6*	8	
Nowgong	28.0	3	4	2	4	—	13	—	—	—	—	13	—	1	14	
Jorhat	3.5	8	1	—	—	—	9	—	—	—	—	9	—	1	10	
Sibsagar	8.6	4	2	—	—	—	6	—	—	—	—	6	—	—	6	
Lakhimpur	4.4	6	—	—	—	—	6	—	—	—	—	6	—	—	6	
Dibrugarh	16.8	2	7	—	—	—	9	—	—	—	—	9	—	3	12	
Brahmaputra Valley	21.2	29	25	9	9	13	85	4	17	106						
North Cachar Hills	55.9	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	
Karbi Anglong	40.7	—	—	3	1	—	4	—	—	—	—	4	—	—	4	
Karimganj	58.4	—	—	—	3	2	5	—	—	—	—	5	—	—	5	
Cachar	64.5	—	—	1	1	8	10	—	—	—	—	10	—	—	10	
ASSAM	32.7	29	25	13	15	23	105	4	17	126						

* In one of these election was countermanded.

Source : Same as n. 2 and Report on the General Elections to the Legislative Assemblies of Andhra Pradesh, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, 1978, Statistical Commission of India, New Delhi, 1978).

Note : The obvious printing mistakes in our basic statistical source have been corrected by way of internal cross-checking. There still remains a small discrepancy of 90 votes, in the total votes polled.

PERCENTAGES OF VOTES POLLED
 (Constituencywise)
 1983



- Low Poll (Below 30%)
 - Medium Poll (30 - 45%)
 - High Poll (Above 45%)
 - No Poll
- INCLUDING 4 UNCONTESTED SEATS

16 0 16 32 48 Miles

Fig. 1

In the hill district of Karbi Anglong, which enjoys a measure of autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of our Constitution, the average polling rate was 40.7 per cent, while the actual polling rates of its four constituencies ranged between 30.8 and 51.7 per cent. In the other hill district under the Sixth Schedule, the North Cachar Hills, which had only one constituency, the polling rate was 55.9 per cent. In the two districts of the Barak Valley, i.e., Cachar and Karimganj the respective average polling rates were 64.5 and 58.4 per cent as against 59.7 and 61.4 per cent of the comparable 1978 poll. The constituency-wise polling rates in these two districts ranged from the highest 75.6 per cent at Sonai to the lowest 46.9 per cent at Dholai (SC). Cachar is the State's only district where, in fact, an increase in the average polling percentage over the last Assembly elections was recorded.

Because of the abnormal political situation, polling was in general depressed, as compared to 1978, all over the State barring the Barak Valley. In fact, with the exception of a lone constituency (South Salmara) in Dhubri and another (Baghbar) in Barpeta, everywhere outside the two Barak Valley districts the constituency-wise polling rate was lower than what it was in 1978. Even in the latter two districts, five out of their 15 constituencies recorded lower rates. However, the decrease there was small and it had nothing to do with any anti-poll agitation. As can be seen from our constituency-wise detailed statistical analysis reproduced elsewhere (Occasional paper No. 72, CSSSC, Calcutta, 1985) the polling rate was below 50 per cent in as many as 67 constituencies of Assam in 1983, as against only one in 1978; and below 45 per cent in as many as 63, as against none in 1978. (See Fig. 1).

The average polling rate for the State which was 66.9 per cent in 1978 came down to slightly less than half of it in 1983, i.e., to 32.7 per cent. The polling rate in any individual constituency never exceeded 85 per cent in Assam, whether in 1983 or in any previous election. For instance, the highest such rate was 79.4 per cent in 1983 as against 83.4 per cent in 1978. So, if 85 per cent polling was the maximum realizable for a constituency or even for the state electorate as a whole under any circumstances- in fact either average had always been much lower than this - and given the normal level of voters' apathy, the divide to determine whether a majority of the active voters in a constituency had voted or not could then be set at half this realizable ceiling, i.e., at 42.5 per cent. To be on the

safer side, we propose to take still a higher figure, i.e. 45 per cent, as this divide to cut off high poll areas from the rest.

Altogether 42 constituencies in 1983, on this criterion, constituted the high poll area. In 23 of them polling was above 60 per cent and in 19 it was from 46 to 60 per cent. Constituencies voting from less than one to 30 per cent may be called low poll areas. Altogether 54 such constituencies were there. In 21 of them polling was up to 5 per cent and no more ; in 19 from above 5 per cent to 15 per cent and in 14 from 15 to 30 per cent. Finally, constituencies within the voting range of 30 plus to 45 per cent, numbering 9, may be called medium poll areas under the given abnormal circumstances. This threefold classification into high, low and medium poll zones may be somewhat arbitrary but, as we shall see soon, it helps encapsulate the situation neatly and intelligibly on a map (Fig. 1). In this classification, we could have as well used the word 'normal' for 'high'.

The constituencies classified into three zones - high, low and medium - do not, however, form as many compact areas when shown on the map. Nor are they formed of whole districts or subdivisions as such. Nevertheless, these zones reflect more precisely the regional voting patterns which have already emerged from our preliminary district-level approach. One or two constituencies here and there, however, break the contiguity or compactness of an otherwise uniform area. Besides, the 21 (17 + 4) no-poll constituencies also clumsily intervene and interfere with our classification.

In the high poll zone, as defined, are included the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, North Cachar Hills and Kokrajhar. So are half of Karbi Anglong district, covering the two constituencies of Howraghat (ST) and Diphu (ST) and the whole Dhubri district with the exception of one constituency, Bilasipara-East. Jaleswar and Goalpara-West of Goalpara district ; Sorbhog, Jania, Baghbar and Chenga of Barpeta district ; Tamulpur of Kamrup district ; Dalgaon, Udalguri and Majbat of Darrang district ; and Dhing, Rupahihat, Jamunamukh and Hojai of Nowgong district - these 14 scattered constituencies also belong to the high poll zone.

On the other hand, the low poll zone included the four contiguous districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Dibrugarh as well as the Tezpur constituency of Sonitpur district - all in Upper Assam. The whole of Kamrup district with the exception of Tamulpur (polling 50.2 per cent) and its two no-poll constituencies ; Jagi Road

(SC). Marigaon, Batadrava, Nowgong, Barhampur and Kaliabor - these six constituencies of Nowgong district ; Bhabanipur constituency of Barpeta district ; Panery of Darrang and Dudhnoi (ST) of Goalpara district - all these were also included in the same. Altogether, as said, there were 54 low-poll constituencies. The 21 no-poll constituencies - six in Sonitpur, three each in Darrang, Goalpara and Dibrugarh, two in Kamrup and one each in Kokrajhar, Jorhat, Barpeta and Nowgong districts - these were *terra incognita*. Nothing can be said of their voting behaviour, unless the forced vacuum in these constituencies be interpreted as sign of their negative political will rather than as measure of the striking power of some organized sections of the relevant constituencies. In any case, they were hardly expected to yield high poll even if they were exposed to voting, given their mixed social compositions and disturbed conditions. This will be soon explained.

Finally, the nine constituencies of the medium poll zone included Rangapara of Sonitpur, Samaguri and Lunding of Nowgong district, Bilasipara-East of Dhubri, Goalpara-East of Goalpara, Barpeta and Sarukhetri of Barpeta district, and Bokajan (ST) and Baithalangso (ST) of Karbi Anglong. The medium poll areas were relatively scattered as compared to the areas of high and low poll zones.

Before we pass to the next section to correlate the voting behaviour to ethno-demographic factors, let us examine the question of rigging, which was complained of and was not impossible under the given circumstances. In the face of fierce resistance, many polling stations had to be shifted at short notice ; there was chaos and confusion all round. Even booths set up hardly functioned on time. Scores of Ballot boxes went empty. Under such circumstances and given the large-scale absenteeism on the part of candidates' polling agents, authorities were said to have manipulated votes. This was the nature of the alleged rigging in the highly disturbed areas where public vigilance was made impossible by the situation and where voting in any case remained extremely low. In one case, the LDA candidate failed to get a single vote - even that of his own - as he could not locate his own polling station in the Dharampur constituency. The particular station perhaps existed only on paper or was a mobile one. In as many as five cases, respective candidates of both ruling and Opposition parties could get themselves elected because somehow each of them could altogether mobilize from 266 to 700 votes each. In low and medium poll zones even hard-core

party cadres were too obviously afraid to turn up to cast their votes. Rigging, if any, however could not have in any case compensated the pro-poll parties for the total votes they lost in the process.

So far as the high poll zone is concerned rigging was not necessary at all for returning the ruling party candidates, given the panic-stricken swing of the minorities in its favour under the prevailing conditions of the anti-foreigner agitation. All said, since our purpose is to assess regional variations in the response to the poll boycott rather than to the party wise distribution of votes as such, the question has little relevance to our analysis. There does not seem to be any strong reason to believe that the inter-regional variations within the state were affected by any factor such as 'rigging' distinguishable from the general situation of abnormality.

III

We shall now make an attempt to explain the regional peculiarities of the voting behaviour with a reference to religion, language and tribal/non-tribal identity - the three variables which had considerable influence on it. In 1983, in particular, these community ties played obviously a larger than usual role in Assam. But before we do so, let us first look into their respective magnitudes in the population of the State as such and its several districts (Table II). Fig. 2 shows the distribution of languages and the scheduled tribes police station-wise. Religion-wise population data are available for the old census districts only as these districts were constituted from time to time up to 1971, and not for units below this level. So, for the new districts as such, no religion-wise distribution of population can be shown.

In the census of 1971 (the last one for Assam till date) the Hindus accounted for 72.5 per cent and Muslims 24.6 per cent of State's total population. These percentages were, more or less, the same also in the censuses of 1951 and 1961. The proportion of Muslims in the combined population of the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Goalpara was 42.9 per cent in 1951 ; 43.3 per cent in 1961 and 42.3 per cent in 1971, In Cachar and Karimganj districts taken together, the corresponding figures were 38.5 per cent, 39.2 per cent and 39.9 per cent respectively. This proportion of Muslims remained, more or less, steady around 29 per cent in the combined population of Kamrup and Barpeta, and at 40-41 per cent in Now-

gong over all these census years. In the old district of Darrang (inclusive of Sonitpur), this proportion first rose from 17 per cent in 1951 to 19.4 per cent in 1961 and then came down to 16.2 per cent in 1971. It was negligible in every other district ; in the four Upper Assam district of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Dibrugarh, taken together, no more than 5 per cent and in the two hill districts still less. Over the three decades ending 1971 the proportion of the Muslims in the population, both at the State and district levels, thus tended to fall slightly while that of the Hindus tended to rise.

Like the distribution of religion, that of language too, is interesting. As per 1971 census, people with Assamese as mother tongue accounted for 61 per cent, Bengali-speakers for 20 per cent, Hindi-speakers for 5.4 per cent and speakers of indigenous tribal languages for about 8 per cent of the State's population. These percentages were not much different from those prevailing in 1951 and 1961 the variations being limited within one per cent range. For instance, Assamese-speakers ratio to the state's population constituted 62 per cent and Bengali-speakers 21 per cent in 1951. Languages, however, were not evenly distributed over the State. Concentrated almost entirely within the 12 districts of the Brahmaputra Valley and accounting for about 71 per cent of its population, Assamese-speakers remained as it still remains the dominant linguistic community not only there as a whole but also in each of its districts throughout 1951-71. In 1971 the ratio of Assamese-speakers to district population ranged in this Valley from the lowest, 61.2 per cent in Lakhimpur to the highest, 87.9 per cent, in the new district of Sibsagar. Compared to Assamese language, Bengali had a wider distribution. Half of the State's Bengali-speakers lived in different districts of the Brahmaputra Valley and accounted for 12 per cent of its population. The other half, concentrated in the Barak Valley, accounted for 77.7 per cent of its population as against 0.5 per cent accounted for by Assamese-speakers.

These two distinct linguistic regions apart, there is a third linguistic region - the twin hill districts of North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong - where their own tribal languages dominate. Assamese and Bengali-speakers together accounted for only 22.4 per cent of this region's population in 1971. Assamese accounted for 12.6 per cent in Karbi Anglong and only 2.8 per cent in North Cachar Hills while Bengali accounted for 9.7 per cent in the former and for 14.4 per cent of the total population in the latter district.

TABLE II

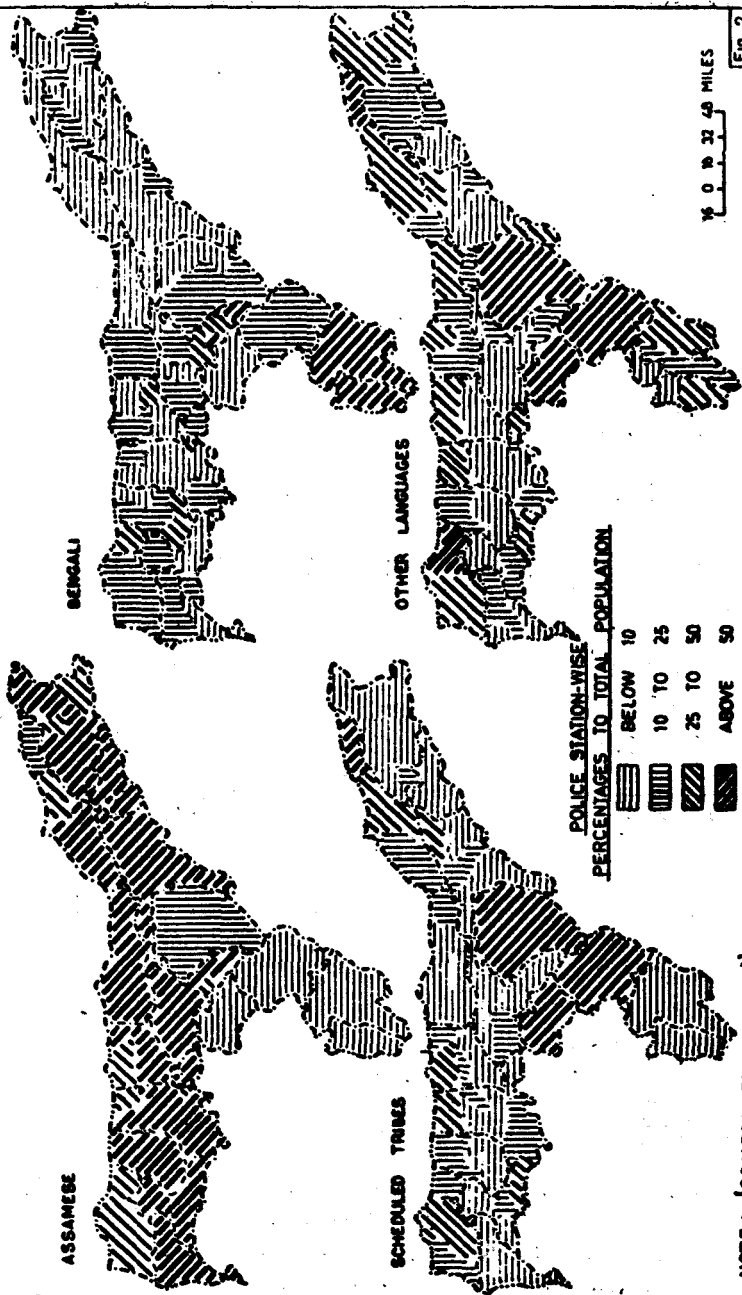
DISTRICT	Total Voters	Number of Voters in Active Constituencies	Votes Polled	% Votes Polled	
				1983	1978
				1983	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Dhubri.	474924	474924	303987	64.0	79.3
Kokrajhar	324676	264057	178770	67.7	79.7
Goalpara	449764	256646	99401	38.7	69.3
Barpeta	522311	444533	214942	48.3	70.2
Kamrup	1093227	947009	116316	12.3	66.9
Darrang	438337	230283	113911	49.5	69.2
Sonitpur	469251	115737	28847	28.0	73.7
Nowgong	1086019	1012024	283327	28.0	67.3
Jorhat	695629	631706	21833	3.5	63.7
Sibsagar	408868	408868	35123	8.6	62.7
Lakhimpur	444089	444089	15776	4.4	66.5
Dibrugarh	788737	586186	98513	16.8	69.5
Brahmaputra Valley	7195832	5816062	1510746	26.0	68.2
North Cachar Hills	52161	52161	29201	55.9	64.2
Karbi Anglong	223903	223903	91193	40.7	57.7
Karimganj	426879	426879	249127	58.4	61.4
Cachar	783357	783357	505003	64.5	59.7
ASSAM	8682138	7302602	2385270	32.7	66.9

Total Population	% Religions		%	% Speaking		
	Hindu	Muslim	Scheduled Tribes	Assamese	Bengali	Others languages
1971						
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
851,045	53.9	42.3	2.4	80.2	12.8	7.0
710,066			28.7	36.8	18.4	44.8
663,992			12.7	70.9	13.1	16.0
971,037	70.0	28.9	8.0	77.1	16.7	6.2
1,882,446			11.7	76.5	10.1	13.4
834,544	45.4	16.2	15.4	63.4	14.7	21.9
901,614			6.3	62.3	12.0	25.7
1,680,895	59.7	39.4	7.4	73.7	19.3	7.0
1,062,869	92.2	5.3	8.1	84.2	3.9	11.9
774,560			5.1	87.9	3.4	8.6
711,600	91.4	4.9	28.8	61.2	5.9	32.9
1,411,119			5.8	64.2	11.0	24.8
12,456,477	69.2	23.3	10.7	71.0	12.1	16.9
76,047	77.0	0.9	69.1	2.8	14.4	82.8
379,310	90.3	1.3	55.4	13.6	9.7	76.7
582,108	59.9	40.0	0.1	0.3	83.0	16.7
1,131,210			0.3	0.5	75.1	24.4
14,625,152	68.7	24.6	10.9	60.9	19.7	19.4

Source : (1) Same as in Table I and (2) Census of India, 1971, Series 3, Assam, Part II-A General Population Table, pp. 148-203, Assam, Part 2c (i) Social and Cultural Tables, pp. 4-5, Assam, Part 2c (ii) Social and Cultural Tables, pp. 96-120.

LANGUAGE GROUPS AND SCHEDULED TRIBES

ASSAM 1971



ASSAMESE

BENGALI

SCHEDULED TRIBES

OTHER LANGUAGES

POLICE STATION-WISE PERCENTAGES TO TOTAL POPULATION

- ▬ BELOW 10
- ▮ 10 TO 25
- ▨ 25 TO 50
- ▩ ABOVE 50

0 10 20 30 40 MILES

FIG. 2

NOTE: 'SCHEDULED TRIBES' AS ADMINISTRATIVELY DEFINED IRRESPECTIVE OF LANGUAGE SPOKEN

As regards our third variable, what is in our mind is caste and tribal solidarity. In 1971 scheduled castes constituted only 6.4 per cent of the State's population and caste feelings as such have generally always remained on a low key as compared to other States. For some years preceding the agitation, Assam was indeed under the shadow of caste politics in a novel way. People of intermediate castes, labelled as Other Backward Classes or Communities (OBC), successfully combined on various political platforms to oust higher caste Hindus, such as Brahman, Kayastha and Kalita, from their niches of power. Data on different non-scheduled castes are not severally available for any census year after 1931. Besides, the division between the OBC and the higher castes ceased to be a factor after the phenomenal rise of the anti-foreigner united front, well until the 1983 poll. So the caste factor may be overlooked, but not the tribal factor for purposes of our analysis. The scheduled tribes accounted for almost 11 per cent of the State's population in 1971 and had their heavy concentrations in the districts of North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, Lakhimpur and Kokrajhar. There they constituted 69.1 per cent, 55.4 per cent, 28.8 per cent and 28.7 per cent of the corresponding relevant populations. While fully sharing the anti-foreigner sentiments, the tribal populace was divided on the question of giving support to the agitationists' anti-poll stand. Since they suffered from the fear of being culturally swamped also by the non-tribal Assamese, they remained lukewarm towards the call of the AASU and its allies.

The above ethno-demographic profile needs some further clarification. Large-scale migrations from time to time in the past were responsible for its heterogeneity. Historically it is observed that both autochthonous (tribal) and migrant linguistic groups gravitated over the centuries towards the Assamese (Asamiya) language and tended to adopt it in due course. This *Asamiyatization* process is still active resulting in a very fast - indeed fantastically high - rate of growth of the Assamese-speaking population over the last half-century.⁹ Linguistic converts of tribal and migrant origin of this period, most of whom still continue to be bilingual, thus account for a sizeable proportion of the censused Assamese-speakers and complicate the situation. Muslims of East Bengal origin predominate among these linguistic converts in the central district of Nowgong, as well as, in Lower Assam. Non-Muslims of immigrant tea labour origin and Ahoms predominate, on the other hand, among the linguistic converts in Upper Assam.

On the foreigner issue, it is likely that no neo-Assamese of Bengali and Nepali origin share the fear complex of the autochthonous Assamese. On the contrary, they may have even sympathy for the post-1951 immigrants of their own respective ethnic stocks. The neo-Assamese linguistic converts from tea labour communities, on the other hand, are likely to be by and large, somewhat indifferent to or at least less involved in the whole question. In any case, they have generally remained aloof from the action programme of the agitation, though not explicitly opposed to it. Bengali Hindu refugees and Nepali settlers have generally retained their languages, but not all of them. On the whole, a considerable number of them, Muslim immigrants from East Bengal in general and about half of the plains tribals of the Brahmaputra Valley appear to have firmly adopted Assamese as their first language. So have the indigenous Rajbanshi community of Lower Assam who used to be generally returned as Bengali-speaking in the old district of Goalpara upto 1931. In Assam they are recognized as a 'backward community' today, whereas in West Bengal they are a scheduled caste and their mother tongue is returned as Bengali.

While analyzing the poll performance within the above demographic profile, some limitations are to be faced. The 1971 Census data on religion, as said, are not available below the then district level. Secondly, speakers of a particular language were not cross-classified in any census in terms of religion, nor were the adherents to a religion in terms as such also of language wise. Hence in the absence of such cross-classifications, it is not possible to ascertain what percentage of the Muslim populace were Assamese-speaking. How many were Assamese-speaking by origin and how many by choice cannot also be ascertained. Data on languages and tribal identity are available downward up to the police station level. There were 127 police stations (Thana) in Assam on 31 March 1978, covering its 126 Constituencies. But there were only 103 such police stations at the time of the 1971 census, as against the same 126 constituencies. Since police stations and constituencies were found to be coterminous by and large in most cases, their data can be correlated for our purpose. In some cases, however, the constituency involved more than one police station ; or a police station, more than one constituency. To that extent, our laboured exercise to establish correlation may be somewhat deficient, but the margin of such deficiency in any case remains insignificant.

All said, by super-imposing the map, showing the constituencies upon the map showing the Thana areas - both drawn to the same scale - one could always check the extent of their coincidence. Having pointed out our methodological shortcomings, we shall now explain, with a reference to the three chosen variables, why in certain areas poll performance was high and in others low or medium in 1983. In that poll year, community considerations in Assam came up to the surface of peoples' minds.

High Poll Zone

On the map (Fig. 1), five separate contiguous blocs represent the high poll zone. The biggest of them, consisting of 20 constituencies, covers the whole of the districts of Cachar, Karimganj and North Cachar Hills ; and it also includes the two constituencies - Jamunamukh and Hojai - of Nowgong and another two - Howraghat (ST) and Diphu (ST) of Karbi Anglong Districts. In Cachar and Karimganj taken together, the ratios of both Bengali-speakers (77.7 per cent) and Muslims (39.9 per cent) to the total population were high, and this fact sufficiently explains the voting behaviour in this region. The ratio of Assamese-speakers (0.5 per cent) and scheduled tribes (0.89 per cent) were too small there to have had significant bearings on the poll. In the North Cachar Hills, the tribal factor (79.1 per cent) was undoubtedly the deciding factor. The tribals were somewhat influenced there by the agitation, as was obvious from newspaper reports but not to the extent of sizeably lowering the district's polling rate (in 1978 64.2 per cent voted ; in 1983, 56 per cent) to keep it out of the high poll zone. The fact that the Bengali-speakers had a higher ratio (14.4 per cent) to the population there than the Assamese-speakers (2.8 per cent) only partly explains the high poll. Its main explanation has to be sought in the poll participation of the tribal voters themselves.

In the case of Karbi Anglong, the agitation had relatively greater impact than in North Cachar Hills - partly because the Assamese-speakers outnumbered the Bengali-speakers there and the ratio of the tribal to total population was also relatively lower. The latter, for instance, was 43.4 per cent in Howraghat and 55.5 per cent in Diphu. The polling rate dropped from 67.4 per cent in 1978 to 46.9 per cent in 1983 in Howraghat (ST) and from 60.7 per cent to 51.7 per cent in Diphu. What is obvious from these facts is that

the drop in the two constituencies under review here was not enough to keep them outside the high poll zone. In the district's other two constituencies, polling was of medium, rather than of low range.

Coming to Jamunamukh and Hojai of Nowgong district, we find that their polling rates dropped from 66.2 per cent in 1978 to 50.5 per cent in 1983 in the first case and from 69.3 per cent to 50.1 per cent in the second case. These two constituencies did not exactly coincide with the police stations of the same names. Jamunamukh included not only the whole area under the Thana of the same name, but also that under neighbouring Murajhar Thana as well as a portion under Kampur Thana. Hojai constituency included the whole area under Hojai Thana and one-third area of Lanka Thana. To explain the relevant voting behaviour, let us therefore have a look at the linguistic composition of the population in the above mentioned police station areas, given the knowledge that the share of the scheduled tribe population in these was insignificant.

TABLE III

Language-wise Percentage Shares in Thana Population : 1971

Thana	Assamese Speakers	Bengali Speakers	Speakers of Other Languages
Jamunamukh	64.5	26.8	8.7
Murajhar	62.5	33.4	4.1
Hojai	28.8	50.4	20.8
Lanka	57.5	30.9	11.6
Kampur	68.8	25.8	5.4

Source : Census of India, 1971, Series 3, *Assam*, Part 2c (ii), Social and Cultural Tables.

From the above tabulated data, it is apparent that Bengali-speakers' concentrations were significantly large in the two constituencies under review here. Besides, sizeable sections of the Assamese-speakers, too, were neo-Assamese - mostly immigrants of Bengali Muslim origin. Hence, both communities could together ensure a high poll.

The Lumding constituency, consisting of 66.7 per cent Bengali-speaking Lumding Thana and two-thirds of 30.9 per cent Bengali-speaking Lanka Thana, polled only 41.2 per cent. This is surprising. Assamese-speakers had a low 15.8 per cent share in the population of Lumding Thana, (where the constituency's electors were mostly concentrated) besides the scheduled tribes' share there was as low as 1.1 per cent. Why then, despite its Bengali-majority character and despite its electing once more a Bengali Hindu candidate; -Congress (I) won in place of the sitting LDA one-did the polling rate in Lumding constituency go down so sharply from 60.5 per cent in 1978 to 41.2 per cent in 1983 ? The drop was, perhaps, partly due to voters' different behaviour in the constituency's less-Bengali Lanka Thana portion and partly due to the specific law and order situation.

The high poll zone's second largest bloc, consisting of 12 constituencies, included the whole of Dhubri district excepting Bilasipara-East, the whole of Kokrajhar district excepting Bijni, where no poll could be held and only two constituencies - Jaleswar and Goalpara-West - of Goalpara district. Muslims who formed 42 per cent of the combined population of these three districts in 1971, had apparently a still larger share within this 12-constituency bloc, possibly accounting for a majority of the Assamese-speakers and even of the total population. Besides, Bengali-speakers had their sizeable concentrations in this bloc. So had the scheduled tribes in the Kokrajhar district portion of the bloc. Bengali-speakers' share was 18.4 per cent and scheduled tribes' 28 per cent in the population of Kokrajhar district. All these factors explain the high poll, ranging from 59.5 to 79.4 per cent there, even in the face of determined opposition of the local Rajbanshi community and other Assamese-speaking indigenes.

The voting behaviour in the three above-mentioned districts, which earlier formed a single district, needs a little more clarification on a couple of points. The tribal political behaviour was not uniformly pro-poll. It was very much so north of the Brahmaputra, particularly in Kokrajhar district so located. But it was quite opposite in areas south of the river. In fact, this north-south difference in tribal attitude could be generalized for the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley, excepting for the district of Lakhimpur. The reason may be sought in the differences in the degree of their *Asamiyaization*. North of the Brahmaputra, the plains tribals have, more or less, successfully retained their own languages, and they are much

under the influence of the separatist movement of the PTCA. But, south of the river, they are increasingly adopting Assamese as their language, or have already done so, as in the case of the Lalungs of Nowgong, or the Rabhas of Goalpara.

Secondly, not all Assamese Muslims were or are immigrants. Even as early as in 1881, when immigration had not yet started from eastern Bengal towards the Brahmaputra Valley, they constituted a quarter of the combined population of the present districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Goalpara and spoke the same district dialect in common with the local Hindu Rajbanshi. Even as far back as in 1809, Francis Buchanan Hamilton estimated their share in the local population at 23 per cent.¹⁰ It was only after incessant immigration during the first half of the 20th century that this share of the Muslims rose to the present 42 per cent by 1951 and that of the Hindu Rajbanshis came down from a quarter or so to much less than that. As no census data are available on castes after 1931, the latter's exact number or their percentage share in the population now is difficult to estimate. As a community, the Rajbanshis were and still are deeply involved in the anti-foreigner movement.

The high poll zone's third largest bloc, with its constituency-wise polling rates ranging from 47.6 to 66.5 per cent, consisted of five constituencies. These were Udalguri - ST (covering about half of the Paneri Thana area and one-third of Udalguri Thana area), Dalgaon and Majbat of Darrang District - all north of the Brahmaputra ; and Dhing and Rupahihat of Nowgong district, south of it. Assamese-speakers were minority in the first, but a majority in the remaining four. Related Thana-level data suggest what favoured the high poll. It was mainly the neo-Assamese Muslim factor in Dalgaon, Dhing and Rupahihat ; it was the tribal factor in the case of Udalguri (ST) ; and the heterogeneous plantation labour community in the case of Majbat. The sizeable presence of Bengali-speakers - e.g. 31.2 per cent in Dalgaon and 18.8 per cent in Rupahihat Thanas - was also favourable to high polling in the related constituencies.

The high poll zone's fourth largest bloc, where the constituency-wise polling rates ranged from 52.7 in Sarbhog to 71 per cent in Baghbar, consisted of four of the eight constituencies of BARPETA district. Of these, Baghbar was an enclave within the Thana of the same name, occupying four-fifths of its area. Chenga covered half of Tarabari Thana and a part of BARPETA Thana ; and Jania constituency was formed of portions of three Thanas, namely, Baghbar,

Barpeta and Sarbhog. In all these Thanas (Tarabari included), the concerned populations were overwhelmingly Assamese-speaking and, except in Sarbhog, also had an overwhelmingly high neo-Assamese Muslim component. This was, for example, reflected in the electoral rolls for Baghbar and Chenga constituencies. In the 1979 rolls, 98 per cent entries for Baghbar and 80 per cent for Chenga were Muslim names.¹⁷ In Baghbar and Tarabari Thanas, Bengali-speakers' concentrations were also quite heavy, being 37.5 and 31.4 per cent respectively. This also favoured high poll in Baghbar, Chenga and Jania constituencies, despite the fact of large-scale exclusion of non-Muslim Bangali refugees from the relevant electoral rolls.

In Sarbhog constituency, occupying two-thirds of the Sarbhog Thana area, the population was more mixed in social composition. Scheduled tribes represented 15.1 per cent of the related Thana population. Among the Assamese-speakers accounting for 71 per cent of the same, autochthonous elements apparently outnumbered the neo-Assamese Muslims. Bengali-speakers' comparable share, on the other hand, was 15 per cent. The polling rate in Sarbhog dropped from 73.9 per cent in 1978 to 52.7 per cent in 1983, but the sitting LDA candidate (an Assamese Hindu) was able to retain his seat by retaining support bases within all communities. In this constituency, voters' political considerations were not totally lost in the rising tide of community consciousness.

The voting behaviour of Tamulpur, the lone high poll constituency of Kamrup district, has also to be understood in terms of its highly mixed social composition. Within the Thana area of the same name, 46.4 per cent of the people were Assamese-speaking, 16.6 per cent Bengali-speaking and the remaining 37 per cent speakers of tribal and other languages. Ethnicity-wise, 25.1 per cent of the Thana population belonged to scheduled tribes. In Tamulpur, the polling rate was as high as 73.5 per cent in 1978. It dropped sharply, but not below 50.2 per cent, because of strong pro-poll attitudes of the tribals here in general and also of other speakers of non-Assamese languages.

Low Poll Zone

In the low poll zone, as shown in the map, we find 53 constituencies forming one continuous large bloc. Of them 30 are in the four eastern most Upper Assam districts ; 7 in Nowgong ; 13 in

Kamrup and one each in Sonitpur, Darrang and Barpeta districts. Besides, Dudhnoi (ST) also stands out in the map as the lone low-poll constituency of Goalpara district.

Though the presence of Muslims was not electorally significant in Upper Assam except in one constituency (Naobaicha of Lakhimpur district), that of non-Muslim immigrants of plantation labour origin was. In one of the district, Sibsagar, the Ahoms (13th Century migrants from Burma long Assamiyaised) - an Assamese caste recognised as 'backward community' - were sizeable in number and dominant. In another, Lakhimpur, 28.7 per cent of the people were tribals, mostly belonging to the Mishing tribe. Again, the three industrial townships - Tinsukia, Digboi and Margherita - of Dibrugarh district had a multilingual character, in none of these did Assamese-speakers constitute an absolute majority. This could be seen from the following Thana-level census data of 1971.

TABLE IV

Language-wise Percentage Shares in Thana Population : 1971				
Thana	Assamese Speakers	Bengali Speakers	Hindi Speakers	Speakers of other languages
Tinsukia	45.9	23.6	21.3	9.2
Digboi	41.4	17.1	14.9	26.6
Margherita	35.4	19.9	12.0	32.7

Source : Same as in Table III.

It is interesting to note that in Upper Assam, too, the population was highly mixed, but in a different way. Here, tribal people generally backed the no-poll stand as did the Assamese-speaking indigenes including the Ahoms. Besides, if some of the voters of the plantation labour community abstained under duress from voting, others did so voluntarily out of sympathetic feelings for their agitated neighbours. In Upper Assam, therefore, the boycott campaign

was most successful in depressing the poll participation in the active constituencies.

The next arena of success for the boycott campaign was the districts of Kamrup and Nowgong. There, too, in as many as 20 active constituencies, as has been said, dominant Assamese-speaking indigenes could depress the poll participation to a fantastically low level, despite the presence there of sizeable pro-poll minority groups. Take, for instance, the four urban constituencies (Greater Guwahati which includes also Dispur) under the two police stations of Jalukbari and Guwahati. Bengali-speakers constituted a quarter of the relevant combined population and, in many polling stations, even an absolute majority. But Assamese-speakers who constituted half or almost half of the said population, were much more intensely involved in and much more organized for the no-poll campaign than were the minorities for their counter-stand. The former were able to neutralize many and create a grim atmosphere in which others could come out to vote only at the risk of their lives. The result was an average 7.3 per cent polling in Greater Guwahati.

Let us also look for the reasons of the low 13.4 per cent polling in Dudhnoi (ST), a rural constituency coterminous with the Dudhnoi Thana. There scheduled tribes accounted for 38.2 per cent of its population ; and Assamese-speakers-most of them apparently indigenes - for 33.7 percent. As elsewhere south of the Brahmaputra, the tribals there were as much involved in the anti-poll agitation as their non-tribal Assamese-speaking neighbours. Hence, with mass support to their violent and non-violent action programme, the agitationists could establish hegemonic control in Dudhnoi (ST) which only five years before in 1978 was regarded as a leftist strong-hold. The leftists, though divided, were in 1978 able to secure between them 29.4 per cent of the total votes on the rolls and 46.3% of valid votes cast. But in 1983 the defeated LDA candidate could mobilize despite left and democratic unity, only 2.1 per cent of the total votes on the rolls and 16.5 per cent of the actual votes cast. This was because of the divisive and explosive situation.

Medium Poll Zone

Of the nine constituencies in the medium poll zone, some were almost at the margin of the low poll areas, e.g., Goalpara-East (31.7 per cent), Sarukhetri (33.8 per cent) and Baithalango-ST (30.8 per cent). Some were nearer the high poll margin such as Bilasipara-East (44.4 per cent) and Lumding (41.2 per cent), while

others like Barpeta (37.1 per cent) ranged in between. In such constituencies the poll tended to be neither low nor high because of organized pulls in opposite directions, given the mixed social composition and feelings of insecurity. The settlement pattern and location of polling booths, the numerical inter-community balance, the specific situation of law and order and such other factors determined the actual extent of polling in a complex manner in each case. The specific conditions prevailing in Luming have already been explained in this context in an earlier section.

No-Poll Zone

What would have been the extent of voting in the 21 no-poll constituencies had the polls not been uncontested or adjourned *sine die*? The outcome would have then depended, again, on the social composition in each case, the pattern of settlement, the location of the polling stations, the numerical balance of various social groups, the intensity of group feelings on the issue, their organization and such other factors.

In most of these 21 constituencies, the organized tea labour was a force, having the capacity to resist pressure in their own tea garden campuses, if they had a will to exercise their franchise in defiance of their neighbour's strong feelings. But, though not involved in any action programme of the agitation, it appears that, in general they had a preference for avoidance of confrontation with their neighbours. In the no-poll area under the Behali and Gohpur Thanas of Sonitpur district, for example, where speakers of non-Assamese/non-Bengali languages accounted for about 46 per cent of the population, because of the presence of tea gardens, medium polling was a strong possibility had the polls not been adjourned there.

Again, in Bijni of Lower Assam, tea labour was no factor and Muslims constituted there a sizeable proportion of the Assamese-speakers. Hence, as non-Assamese languages accounted for 53.3 per cent of the relevant Thana population and as there was also a strong minority organization (Citizens' Rights Protection Committee), there was a probability of high polling had the polls not been adjourned. Though polling could be completed in 49 out of Bijni's 76 polling stations, the election in that constituency was allowed to remain incomplete and lapse, because of outbreak of arson and violence.¹² There is no use speculating further in this manner

over what could have happened in the area we have already called *terra incognita*.

IV

A Summing-up and Conclusion

While in the Post-Emergency 1978 polls, the electors were mainly seized with political issues of national importance and they sent new political forces to the Assembly, in the 1983 polls divisive and parochial issues seized and led them into widespread communal frenzy and violence. In 1978, the Congress (I) party in Assam got only 8 seats ; in 1983 it got 91. In 1978 the left parties, even though fighting against each other, got altogether 24 seats. But, in 1983, despite their forging a left and democratic alliance, the left parties and their ally, Congress (S), got in all only 5 seats, another going to the CPI(ML). All this could happen only because of the poll boycott campaign of the anti-foreigner front. The front succeeded by and large in mobilizing the Assamese-speaking indigenes against poll participation. But it alienated the religious and linguistic minorities, as well as large sections of the tribals by its ambiguous and sectarian slogans, to the extent of pushing them towards the 'protection' of the ruling party.¹⁵

After the 1983 election, even as the agitationists branded both the newborn Assam Legislative Assembly and the Congress (I) State Government as illegitimate and demanded their dissolution, the latter utilized every opportunity to split the agitation by its divide-and-rule policy. The support the agitation received from a section of scheduled tribes and indigenous Muslims at its peak gradually eroded, and the united front it built split into factions. The sweep and grip of this once-powerful agitation is now much reduced, its area of influence having shrunk both geographically and socially. Even the Ahom Community of Upper Assam is now retracing its steps in a big way to rally behind Assam's first-ever Ahom Chief Minister on a stable basis. The community, which had migrated to Assam long six centuries ago and had lost its language is currently gripped with a revivalist ethnic movement.

More serious than that, the plains and hill tribes in their pockets of concentration, have once more raised the bogey of their cultures being at stake by Assamese aggressiveness and have renewed their demands for separate states within the Indian Union. There

is also talk of separating Bengali-speaking Barak Valley districts from the State of Assam to make the latter ethno-linguistically more homogeneous. Further more there is also now as was never before since Independence a growing tide of fundamentalism, among both Assamese and neo-Assamese Muslims, even as the Hindu communal approach is, for the first time, getting a foothold in both the Valleys of Assam. Thus the agitation and its call of poll boycott have opened up a veritable Pandora's Box.

The regional variations in the 1983 poll verdict as reflected in Fig. 1, seen together with Fig. 2, suggest that any solution by putting the clock of history back beyond 1971, as demanded by the AASU and its allies for determining citizenship of migrants from neighbouring countries, will not be acceptable to the major linguistic and religious minorities of the State. If such a solution is insisted upon and imposed, Assam may ultimately face yet another vivisection on an ethno-linguistic basis, as it did earlier during the period 1957-72 when, in the wake of the language movements, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram slipped out of it one after another. In no case is such an eventuality of once more going into pieces desirable.

If the essence of the agitation's demand is preservation of the "small composite nationality of the Assamese" as one of its top leaders put it to a press reporter, then even 1971 as cut-off year is not too late for the purpose.¹⁴ The linguistic and religious community-wise balances as per census figures for the State as a whole, remained almost the same in 1971 as it was in 1951 or 1961. This observation is also true of the situation in the Brahmaputra Valley, the historically evolved homeland of the Assamese as such.¹⁵ Since further delay or procrastination in the matter of finding a solution will only complicate the task of foreigner identification, what could be achieved immediately is to sanctify 1971 as the cut-off year by common consent, identify foreigners on that basis and disenfranchise them through a judicial process and then keep a strict watch on the international frontiers to halt further infiltration. It is our hope that a political settlement of the problem will be made on these lines before the deferred parliamentary elections in Assam are once more held, together with the overdue by-elections to the Assam Assembly. The publication of draft electoral rolls this year in March on the basis of last year's fresh house to house enquiry by the Election Commission progressed so far without any obstruction from the agitators. This has raised our hopes regarding a compromise solution within this very year.

The Union Home Minister S. V. Chavan reportedly had frank discussions with the AASU and its newly-formed rival, the All-Assam Elected Student Representatives' Union in Shillong on the controversy now pinned down to the 1961-71 decade. Despite non-committal, AASU is no more as firm as it was before on the issues involved. On the other hand, the rival student organization in its memorandum to the Union Home Minister held both the Government and the AASU responsible for the failure of the talks - the Government for its inability to "correctly appreciate the sentiments of the people and students of Assam" and "the self-styled leaders of AASU" for their "continued rigidity of outlook and irrational behaviour".¹⁶ Both the agitators and those opposed to them are vocal in protest against all sorts of omissions and commissions in the latest draft electoral rolls on display, but all the same, the prospects of the coming elections being peacefully held are brighter now than ever.

Notes & References

1. In its judicial verdict of 28 September 1984, the Supreme Court of India upheld the Assam polls of 1983 and the related 1979 electoral rolls as legally valid. See the *Statesman*, 29 September 1984. Whether the conditions prevailing were congenial to free and fair elections, in general, was outside its consideration.
2. The coverage of the Assam polls of 1983 by the national press was devoid of clarity and accuracy. We have, therefore, throughout this paper, used S.L. Khosla, Chief Electoral Officer of Assam, compiled, *The 7th General Election to Assam Legislative Assembly-1983 and Elections to Fill up the Twelve Vacancies in the House of People - 1983 : Statistical Analysis* (Gauhati, 1983), for the relevant poll statistics.
3. The All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad was formed on 26 August 1979 and, on its executive body, were represented the All Assam Students' Union (AASU : established in 1967), the Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP : estd. in 1977), the Assam Jatiyatavadi Dal (estd. in 1977), the Assam Sabitya Sabha (estd. in 1917) and five other bodies of lesser importance. The AASU took initiative in the formation of this united front and remained its accredited leader until serious intra-front difference broke out in August 1984 on such issues as that of the AASU's unilateral secret negotiations with the ruling Congress (I) party for a deal facilitating its participation in the coming elections.

- *4. For the nature and extent of the January 1980 massacres, see the report of the fact-finding committee of the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), New Delhi, as fully serialised in *Mainstream* 8 March 1980 and subsequent issues. The committee, consisting of three professors of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, toured the affected area for a week during 9-16 February 1980 and listed the fatal casualties. Some 80 dead bodies were found till then in different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley, while many more were missing.
5. The death roll relating to the anti-foreigner agitation increased to 226 by 24 December 1980 and to 340 by 7 October 1982, according to statements respectively made in the Raiya Sabha and the Lok Sabha by the then Home Ministers. — *The Statesman*, 25 December 1980 and *Anandabazar* (Bengali daily), 8 October 1982. The number went on increasing, as fresh assassinations took place and dead bodies of missing persons were from time to time discovered. Thus, even according to the Government's own conservative counts, the deaths caused by the violent agitation during the three and half years preceding the 1983 election process numbered some 500 in all. The figure of course also includes deaths from police firings on agitators and cases of assassination of pro-poll political workers.
6. According to the chief minister of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia, "more than 4000 lost their lives over the 1983 Assembly elections" — *The Statesman*, 14 September 1984. Non-official estimates of the deaths far exceed this latest official estimate. According to the Union Home Minister, P.C. Sathi, as many as 312 companies of paramilitary forces had to be deployed in the state at the peak of the poll boycott agitation and out of those 275 were still stationed there even as late as May 1984. See the *Hindu*, 9 May 1984 for its editorial. 'Assam carnage : need for judicial probe.'
7. These figures are from our basic primary sources, as mentioned in n.12. For constituency-wise detailed computation and analysis based on this source, see our mimeographed Occasional Paper No. 72 (CSSSC, 1985).

In yet another official publication, *Report on the General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Assam 1983 (Narrative)*, published by the Election Commission of India, the aforesaid two figures are respectively, given as 7245 and 8655 thousand voters. The anomalies remain unexplained, as this latter report does not give constituencywise breakdown of figures. Hence, we have not used this latter report.

8. This figure of the total vote polled in the contested constituencies is, however, the same in both the official sources.
9. The process has been discussed in greater details in Amalendu Guha, "Nationalism : Pan-Indian and Regional in a Historical Perspective" (Presidential Address to the Modern History Section, Indian History Congress, 44th Session, Burdwan, December 1983) in *Social Scientist*, February 1984, pp. 53-61.
10. Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *Account of Ronggopur*. (Manuscript, India Office Records, London), - Book 2 and appended statistics. His estimate was for an area covering the present districts of Dhubri, Goalpara and a part of Kokrajhar district.
11. Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia's statement reported in the *Statesman*, 11 August 1984.
12. Thousands of houses were set on fire in the Bijni and its adjacent Abhayapuri constituencies. which had remained relatively calm earlier, as a result of the communal frenzy of 1983. Private houses, schools and office buildings were reduced to ashes by way of sabotage. In the town of Bijni itself, the destruction of the impressive building of the Assam Government's Flood Control Department on 10 February 1983 and of the Bengali-medium Higher Secondary School this year on the 29th January by midnight arson - such instances indicate the nature and persistence of the widespread sabotage method and the role it played in course of the movement. Such cases of arson regularly took place since 1979. See *Janajivan* (Assamese Weekly, Gauhati), Vol. 4, 26 February 1985 and its earlier issues.
13. See "Historian takes close look at Assam Crisis", the *Hindu*, 14 April 1983.
14. The quote is from Shri Bhrihu Phukan's reply to S. Gurudev, *The Statesman* (1 October 1984) in course of an exclusive interview.
15. Assamese-speakers' percentage ratios to the total populations in the six old districts of the Brahmaputra Valley during 1911-71 were as follows :

District	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971
Goalpara	14.2	18.2	18.3	62.0	66.1	63.5
Kamrup	79.2	75.5	66.5	79.0	80.8	76.7
Darrang	44.4	36.6	32.9	77.4	65.1	62.8
Lakhimpur	33.8	29.8	30.4	64.1	63.0	62.9
Newgong	64.4	52.9	42.2	69.1	76.8	73.7
Sibsagar	56.7	52.3	54.0	84.4	85.5	72.6
Total	49.2	44.6	42.0	73.2	73.3	71.0

Source : Worked out from census data. There was no language census in 1941 and no census in Assam in 1981.

16. Report dated 31 March from Special Representative, *The Statesman*, April 1, 1985. The said rival student organization should not be confused with the AAMSU, which claims to represent students of minority communities only, but it has emerged as an organized challenge from within the base and heritage of the AASU involving elected Union Societies of schools and colleges.

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