SOCIAL TENSIONS IN ASSAM

MIDDLE CLASS POLITICS

APURBA KUMAR BARUAH

About the Book :

Assamese nationalism an its consequences for the smaller communities of Assam, Assamese -Bengali relations, problems of land reforms and the nature of student movements are some live issues of contemporary Assamese Society. In these essays Baruah analyses certain critical aspects of these issues from a marxist perspective. The author maintains that all these issues can be understood only in the context of the dominant position occupied by the Assamese speaking middle class of the Brahmaputra Valley. He shows that the tensions which prevail in the contemporary Assamese Society are the results of the politics practised by the middle class, destined to play the role of the most advanced section in an area marked by near colonial exploitation and poly-ethnic demography.

ISBN No 81-7213-002-3
Rs. 100/-

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Apurba Kumar Baruah started teaching political science in 1970 as a lecturer in the Dibrugarh University Assam. From 1977 to 1981, he was Teacher-fellow in the Punjab University, Chandigarh. He obtained his Ph. D from the Punjab University for his thesis on *David Easton, : An analysis of his contribution to Political Theory*. He taught in Dibrugarh University again from 1981 to 1985 and then joined the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, as a Reader. He is at present a professor of Political Science in the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Baruah has published a large number of research papers in various journals and books, edited by prominent academics. He was one of the editors of the *North-East quarterly, a journal of Social Science Research*. He is the author of *Systems Analysis in Political Science (A Marxist critique of David Easton)*. He occasionally contributes to Assamese Journals and News papers. His current interests are student movements and nationalities question in India.

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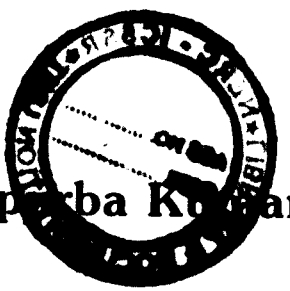
Middle Class Politics



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SOCIAL TENSIONS IN ASSAM :
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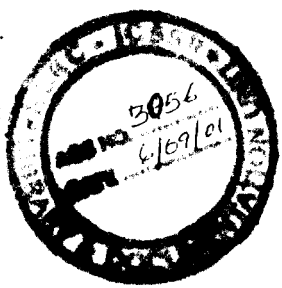
First Published April 1991



Purbanchal Prakash
G. N. Bordoloi Road, Ambari,
Guwahati- 781001

ISBN NO 81-7213-002-3
Typesetting at GLORY PRINTERS, Calcutta-9 and Printed at MANASAI PRESS, 73 Sisir Bhaduri Sarani, Calcutta- 6.

CONTENTS

THE ASSAMESE NATIONAL QUESTION

The 'Assam movement' launched by the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad and the All Assam Students Union in the late seventies and the early eighties [1] had drawn the attention of the conscious section of Indian public to the issues related to the nationalities question in Assam. However, these issues could not be understood in isolation. It is a fact that as a result of the emergence of strong regional political forces and powerful struggles launched by many small nationalities for protection of their identity the problems of political integration and the status of small nationalities seem to have acquired an unprecedented importance in contemporary Indian politics. A section of the so called mainstream politicians and opinion builders have been taking such an intolerant view of these developments that even regional forces and movements of small nationalities, like the Assam movement and the forces behind it, which seek to redress their grievances very much within the state of India have also been depicted as separatist, and at times even as

1. For discussions on the issues thrown up by the movement see, B. L. Abbi,(ed) *North-East Region, Problems and Prospects of Development,* (Chandigarh, 1984) ; Tilottama Misra, 'Assam a colonial Hinterland', *Economic and Political Weekly* (Aug 9, 1980) pp1357-65 ; A.K. Baruah, Assamese Middle Classes and the Xenophobic Tendencies in Assamese Society *Frontier* vol `14 No. 11 pp-3-6 ; Apurba. K. Baruah, Assam Movement ; Distoration in Analysis '*Man and Development* Vol. No. 4.

secessionists. This position emanates from the belief that India is a 'nation state' and the various ethnic and cultural communities inhabiting the country are in the process of getting assimilated in the melting pot of Indian nationalism. This view may occasionally condescend to recognise the distinct cultural identities of many Indian communities and mouth slogans like 'unity in diversity' but refuses to recognise these small communities as nationalities. Any attempt on the part of the smaller nationalities to assert their identity is considered as a major threat to the Indian 'nation state'. This intolerant attitude in turn breeds discontent among the smaller nationalities enabling some aggressive sections to propagate anti-Indian ideas. Continuation of this trend may lead to an acute crisis in the Indian political community.

The proponents of the melting pot theory in India seem to equate the concept of state with that of the nation. They seem to subscribe to the definition of nation and nationalism which gives a central place to the idea of state. It is true that in social science literature there is a major school which adheres to this position. Hans Kohn, for instance, defines nationalism as a "state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be the nation state."[2] Another important author Karl Deutsch maintains that nationalism is the result of relatively successful experience of political experience.[3] He defines a modern nation as "a people who have hold of a state or who have developed quasi—governmental capablities for forming, supporting and enforcing a common will."[4] It is obvious that these definitions consider the state central to

2. Hans Kohn, *Nationalism*, (New York, 1965), p. 9.
3. Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and its Alternatives*, (New York, 1976), p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p.19.

the idea of nation. It is not difficult to find empirical reference points for this approach because in many countries of Europe ethnic consolidation was closely linked with the forming of nation state and the national structures of many of these countries were comparatively uniform. So much so that in countries like Denmark, Italy and Norway there are no significant ethnic minorities. [5] Defining a nation in terms of a state means that all states will have to be 'nation states' and therefore accepting this definition of a nation would imply that in the multicultural societies which have the bond of a state the dominant nationality will either slowly assimilate the minor ones in itself or various nationalities will, over a period of time move towards formation of their own independent 'nation states' and thus a threat to integration will always be imminent in these countries. It is therefore natural for nationalists operating within this framework to attempt assimilation, even forcible assimilation, and to view the assertion of national identity of the smaller nationalities as a major threat to the integrity of the state itself. This perception overlooks the historical experience of countries which are essentially polyethnic or multicultural and where statehood and nationality are understood as two different concepts. As Krejeci and Velimsky point out, "In central and eastern Europe ... statehood on the one hand and the nation or nationality on the other, were understood as two quite different concepts, statehood implying citizenship,

5. For a discussion on this point see, Sh. A. Bogina *et al.*, 'National Processes and Relations in Western Europe and North America', in I.R. Origulevich (ed) *Ethnological Processes and National Problems in the Modern World,* (Moscow 1979), p. 245.

6. J. Krejeci and V. Velimsky, *Ethnic and Political Nations in Europe* (London, 1981), p. 44.

nationality implying ethnic affiliation irrespective of citizenship."[6]

The historical experiences of such processes have led a number of authors of various ideological dispositions to base their definitions of nations and nationalism on such factors as attachment to one's native land and a wider kinship ;[7] common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make up ;[8] or traditions, customs, language, territory, social rights, and economic interest.[9] It is interesting to note that in this perception nationalism is a cultural phenomenon with an emphasis on its ethnic dimensions and not a political phenomenon with the bond of a state. To accept this is not to deny the political dimension of nationality. Even if we accept it as basically a cultural phenomenon we must concede that in the modern world all nationalities perceive some national rights and view them selves as political groups. Many of them may have states and many others may aspire statehood yet statehood is not an essential element of nationality. But what most or in fact, all nationalities invariably claim is a homeland where they can protect their own cultural and at times even economic interests. Hence, it is not necessary to consider it inseparable from the political organization of the State. More important, it becomes possible to accept the existence of more than one nationality within a state without expecting them to assimilate with the dominant one of the state concerned or suspecting them to be working toward secession and therefore towards disintegration of the present state. However, in many multi-cultural societies, including

7. E.H. Carr, *Nationalism and After* (New York, 1945).
8. J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question,* (Calcutta, 1975).
9. Don Luigo Struzo, *Nationalism and Internationalism,* (New York, 1945).

India, this definition of nation and the attendant distinction between the state and the nation remains contentious because the opinion builders, belonging to the dominant nationality, are inclined to identify the nation with their own group. For them nation is synonymous with the state, and they believe that the interests of the nation are identical with the interest of the state. Therefore, any political interest interfering with the advantages enjoyed by the dominant nationality is promptly branded as antinational. Even at the risk of elaborating the obvious it is necessary to stress that such an opinion, prevailing in the dominant nationality does not necessarily protect the interest of all the sections of the nationality. The national interest of such communities are defined in terms of the most advanced class/classes of such communities, but if the disadvantaged sections of such communities are not organised and if the class contradictions within the community concerned have not yet sufficiently sharpended the ideas protecting the interest of the advanced classes acquire an universality, mainly because such classes enjoy a hegemonic position in these societies. Thus almost the entire population of the community come to accept the interpretations of the concepts nation and state advocated by these dominant forces. It is only natural that in a multicultural state articulation of national interest in terms of the interest of the dominant nationality and the refusal to distinguish the state from the nation generate great tensions. Over a period of time if the smaller nationalities produce classes which can challenge the hegemony of the advanced classes of the dominant community such tensions may threaten the state itself. It is of course true that the national interest of the smaller nationalities as articulated by their own advanced sections may not protect the interest of the disadvantaged section of the communities concerned but

in their fight against the prevailing arrangement which gives undue advantages to the dominant nationality they can muster support of all sections of their own nationality.

Contemporary Indian politics reflects a manifestation of this tendency. It is rather disturbing that a pan-Indian chauvinistic tendency is besetting the Indian body politic. So much so that even the proponents of multinational India also occasionally fall in line with these chauvinists. [10] Under the influence of the melting pot theory and the state centered concept of nation the assertions of the smaller nationalities to protect their identity and their struggles for equal status have come to be viewed as major threats to the state of India. The political forces with the perception are oblivious of the fact that the assertion of this smaller nationalities were so strong even during the British period that at that time Indian national congress had to resort to linguistic reorganisation. As Shankar Ghosh shows such reorganization helped the congress to derive support from different regions. [11]

The communists had of course propagated the theory of multinational India. But in the post independence period the patrons of 'Indian Nationalism' seem to have become intolerant. This intolerance is reflected in the reports of the state reorganisation commissions which repeatedly warned against linguistic reorganisation of states and advised such reorganization only as a matter of administrative convenience. It is important to note that in the preindependence period, specially after 1917 none of the major parties opposed linguistic reorganisation.

10. CPI(M) 's attitude to the Assam Movement and also the GNLF reveals this in a striking manner.
11. Shankar Ghosh, *Political Ideas and Movements in India,* (Bombay, 1975), p. 200.

Accepting linguistic reorganisation actually means accepting the cultural autonomy of the nationalities which in turn brings one close to accepting the distinction between the concepts of the nation and the state because in such a situation even if we use the term nation to refer to the entire political community of the state of India we use it in a political sense. A political community, even if it is referred to as a nation, bereft of its cultural ingredients is nothing but a state. The term nation, when used in this sense is a misnomer.

In the post independence period there was a change in the attitude of the dominant political forces. In fact, the linguistic provinces commission, appointed by the constituent Assembly reported that the work of 60 years of the Indian national congress was now challenged by narrow loyalties, petty jealousies and ignorant prejudices. The commission took a critical view of the fact that "some of the ablest men in the country" came before it to emphatically state that "language in this country stood for and represented culture, race, history, individuality, and finally a sub-nation."[12] The change in the attitude of the Congress party of course became clear in the J.V.P. Committee report which viewed lingustic reorganizaion as a threat to the political and economic stability of the country.[13] Even a section of the communists began to express their apprehensions, though for completely different reasons. In 1953, Ajoy Ghosh wrote that adhering to the multinational theory would mean

12. For a discussion on this see, Sleig S. Harrison, "The Challenge to Indian Nationalism", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 4, July 1956, p. 621.
13. See, Shankar Ghosh, *op. Cit*
14. Ajoy Ghosh, "The Movement for Linguistic States and the Struggle Against Congress Nationalism", *New Age*, May 1954.

disruption of the movement of the working class.[14] Though a section of the communists led by the CPI(M) continues to adhere to the theory of multinational India and maintains that the right of self-determination is an essential condition for unity of India yet, as we have indicated above when it comes to specific situations like the Assam Movement or the GNLF involving the nationalist aspirations of the small nationalities it fails to live upto the aspirations of the small nationalities. Except for the regional parties and a small section of the left the dominant political opinion in India today views India as one nation and perceives the concept of the state as inseparable from the idea of nation.

This change of attitude on the part of the major all India parties on the question of ethnic or nationality consolidation in India, however, does not reflect the reality. Even in the post independence period the small nationalities are not getting assimilated in the melting pot of Indian nationalism. The history of various movements and struggles launched by the small nationalities [15] and the so called regional political parties thrown up by such struggles prove it beyond any doubt that these nationalities aspire to maintain their identities. It is interesting to note that though these nationalities have been asserting their ethno-linguistic identity of their respective communities yet, with the exception of small extremist sections in certain communities like the Nagas and Mizos, [16] they have not demanded secession. In fact, most of them keep reiterating their allegiance to the indian state. In this sense they seem to be making a clear

15. For discussions on some such struggles, see, *Nationality Question in India, Seminar Papers,* (Hyderabad, 1982).
16. Though in no sense the Nagas and Mizos were a part of India in the pre-British period even they are slowly accepting the unity of India at least politically.

distinction between their cultural identity in terms of a nationality and their political allegiance to the state of India. Unfortunately, this gesture has rarely been reciprocated by what is commonly identified as the 'nationalist' forces. These forces representing Indian nationalism with the state of India as its essence, define "the core of its national character in terms of Brahminic, Hindu, Aryan, and Sanskrit derived elements."[17] There is an obvious contradiction in their approach — while most exponents of this nationalism traces india's heritage to its vedic past and therefore by definition exclude the communities, particularly the tribal communities like the Nagas, Khasis or Mizos in North East India, which do not belong to this tradition, expect them to assimilate with the so called mainstream. Historically speaking this Aryan, Hindu Indian tradition came into being as a result of the cultural unity of the Hindi speaking region comprising Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujrat. This tradition has been trying to expand its area of influence for a long time now. The glorious empires that came into existence at various stages of history used to extend to the distant areas of East, West and South India. But whenever an empire began to show the signs of weakness the distant areas like Bengal in the east and Gujrat in the west used to assert their independence.

Areas like Assam and Manipur experienced considerable religious and cultural influence but remained politically independent till the British annexation. In various stages of history a number of empires were built in Marathi, Malayali, Tamil, Telegu and Oriya speaking areas. Though these areas were parts

17. Gail Omvedt, "National Integration and National Culture in India", in K.M. Deka (ed.) *Nationalism and Regionalism in India,* (Dibrugarh 1985), p. 17.

of the Hindu religious tradition yet politically they had their own traditions. As a result of the expansion of Hindi speaking cultural tradition Oriya and the Marathi speaking areas are today linguistically close to the north Indian tradition. But Kanara, Telegu and Tamil areas have their own traditions. In such a situation if the Indian Nationalism of the Aryan-Hindu tradition tries to play a big brotherly role the environment will obviously be vitiated. But the proponents of 'Indian Nationalism' have never been able to realise that appreciation of the aspirations of the smaller nationalities specially in the matter of linguistic cultural identity will in fact strengthen political integration. We have noted above that by organizing itself on the linguistic lines Congress was able to derive support from various regions, but it is interesting to note that even during the freedom struggle, when it was trying to secure support of all sections of the people of India, the "national congress leaders" mainly from the Hindi belt were not in a position to appreciate the aspirations of the smaller communities. Pattabi Sitaramaya tells us that in the 1915 session of the Congress when he tried to move the resolution for linguistic reorganisation it was opposed and killed by the leaders from Bihar, and U.P. And in 1917 when it was finally adopted even Gandhi could not appreciate the urgency. It was passed after a long debate only because Tilak saw the point. [18] The so called Indian mainstream of the Hindi speaking, Hindu Brahminical tradition is not only intolerant to the other traditions of the Indian body politic in fact, it has been consistently following a policy of expansionism. The political and cultural practices of the state of India coupled with its policies on the issue of national language bear proof of this. This

18. Pattabhi Sitaramaya, *History of the Indian National Congress (1885-1935),* (Bombay, 1935), p. 147.

definitely creates tensions in a multicultural society like India.

In this context it is important to remember that multicultural societies do not come into existence as a result of voluntary integration of various ethno-cultural groups. Invariably such societies are formed as a result of conquest and annexation of the territories of the weaker nationalities by a stronger nationality. [19] It is of course difficult to prove that the present Indian state came into being as a result of the annexation of the territories of all the small nationalities by the dominant Indian nationality of the Brahminic Hindu tradition. But it is not possible to maintain that it came into being as a result of voluntary association of the former. It is obvious that had it not been for the British India would not be what it is today. During the British period the dominant 'Indian nationality' had consolidated its position and when the British left it was they who took over the state. It is true that during the freedom struggle and even after independence, specially in the early years, 'Indian nationalism' could spread to the areas inhabited by the smaller nationalities. But the aspirations of these nationalities to maintain their identity continued and with time even grew stronger.

II

It is now well known that in the pre-British India there was a merchant class which had the potentialities of developing itself into a bourgeoisie. [20] But this class, which

19. See, S. S. Chauhan, *Nationality Question in USA and USSR : A Comparative Study,* (New Delhi, 1971).

20. See, A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism,* (Bombay, 1976), pp. 14-17

was then at its infancy, did not have the strength to overthrow feudalism in order to usher in an era of capitalism. R. P. Dutta has put the point succinctly when he said :

> There is some reason to judge that the traditional Indian society in decomposition at the moment of the British conquest was trembling on the verge of the first stage of the Bourgeois revolution on the basis of its own resources, when the already matured British Bourgeois revolution overtook it in the phase of disorder an transition and was able to establish its domination. [21]

British administration devoured one area after another in the sub-continent and, in the process, established a political and administrative unity in the region. English education introduced by the British opened the flood gates of western influences. The dominant values of the western world began to penetrate Indian society, particularly the English educated middle class. Nationalism was one of these values. [22] During the years between 1789 and 1918 national - self determination was elevated throughout the world to a status symbol. To quote Hugh Tinker, "To be advanced, to be civilized - to achieve any sort of recognition at all - a people had to establish a claim to be called a nation ." [23] It

21. R. P. Dutta, *India Today*, (Calcutta, 1970), p. 304.

22. For a discussion on the western influences in India leading to development of nationalism, secularism, individualism, scientificism, the conception of dignity of man, and relativism, see, D. P. Mukherjee, *Diversities*, (New Delhi, 1985).

23. Hugh Tinker, 'Is there an Indian nation ?' in Philip Mason (Ed.) *India and Ceylon : Unity and Diversity* (Bombay, 1967), p. 280.

was in such a climate that Indian nationalism grew up as a reaction to aggressive British nationalism. The English system of education led to the emergence of a middle class comprising professional groups [24] and small merchants. The colonial administration could not fulfill the ambitions of these sections and as a result an anti-colonial movement began which over a period of time graduated to the Indian national movement. In the absence of an organised capitalist class in the initial stage of the national movement shattered ambitions of this class became the motive force of Indian nationalism. [25] This view need not necessarily imply that in the early phase of the nationalist movement there was no ideological content. In fact, the questions of political independence and anti-imperialism remained the central forces of this movement, though it was led by the middle class . Lajpat Rai rightly argued that the desire for political independence, the sense of shame and humiliation born of being a subject race were to be confined largely to the educated middle class.[26] It was this English educated middle class, which led the anti-imperialist Indian national movement started the process of dissemination of the ideas of Indian nationalism [27].

In the mean time a bourgeosie, though weak, was begining to take shape in India. Initially the bourgeoisie

24. For a discussion on the emergence of the professional groups, see, Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi, 1982) pp. 114-297.

25. On this point see, Barun De, 'Complexities in the Relationship Between Nationalism Capitalism and colonialism ", in D. P. Chattopadhyaya (ed.) *History and Society,* Essays in honour of Nihar Ranjan Roy, (Calcutta, 1976), pp. 479-570.

26. Lajpat Rai, *Young India,* (Delhi, Reprint, 1965), p. 91

27. See, Desai, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-200.

was not very enthusiastic about India national movement. But slowly they realised its potentialities and became its patrons.[28] By the second decade of the twentieth century the Indian bourgeoisie came to dominate the independence movement through the Congress party, [29] ideas of Indian Nationalism which spread through this movement now acquired the patronage of the bourgeoisie.

If the Indian bourgeoisie had grown more or less uniformly in the various regional and linguistic units of India, the anti imperialist Indian nationalism could have taken roots all over the country. Such a development in all probability, might have successfully integrated the entire region. But in the British India the growth of the Indian bourgeoisie was rather uneven. Some sections of people dominant, while others remained almost unrepresented. Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patnakar have pointed out that from the very beginning the Marwaris, the Gujratis and the Parsis dominated the Indian bourgeoisie. They began as monylenders but later on became industrialists. People of these influential communities spread all over the country [30].

We have already noted that the Indian middle class, as a whole, had a bourgeois outlook and acted as the ally of the Indian bourgeoisie. Even in this class some regional and linguistic communities had only nominal representation. [31] Some sections of the communities

28. Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India,* (New Delhi, 1966), pp. 746-54.

29. See, Desai, *op.cit.,* pp. 208-437.

30. Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patnakar, "Notes on National Question" *Frontier*, Vol. 10, No. 42, pp. 5-6.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

inhabiting the centres of commerce, education and administration had always been dominant in this class. In due course these communities spread all over the country. Thus the problem of consolidation of Indian nationalism did not remain a problem involving the classes supporting or opposing it but it became entangled in the issues connected with the positions of various communities in Indian body politic. The domination of relatively more advanced communities, particularly their bourgeoisie and the middle classes, in business, industry and avenues of employment all over the country including the areas inhabited by backward communities brought a communal dimension to this problem. but there was no uniformity in this pattern. In fact, in various regions of India various communities became dominant and the dominated communities nurtured grievances aginst such domination. As Omvedt and Patnakar argue the grudge of the Muslims against the Hindu Bhadraloks in West Bengal, of the non Brahmins against Brahmins in Tamilnadu and Maharastra, of the Oriyas and the Beharies against the Bengalis can be Seenas reflecting class conflicts and elite competitions. [32] I have myself shown elsewhere that the grievances of the Assamese aginst Bengalis and the non- Assamese Indians can be explained in terms of such competition. [33]

In those hey days of Indian nationalism, when the torch bearers of this nationalism, the Indian bourgeoisie and the middle classes mainly belonging to the Brahminical tradition led the struggle against British imperialism, the middle classes, and sometimes even

32. Omvedt and Patnakar, *Loc. cit.*

33. A. K. Baruah, "Assamese Middle Classes and the Xenophobic Tendencies in Assamese Society". *Frontier*, Vol. 14, No. 11, pp. 3-6, specially pp. 4-5.

nascent regional bourgeoisie, of the small nationlities accepted the ideology of Indian nationalism. One cannot, however, ignore the fact that even at that point of Indian history these nationlities never forgot their own identities. As we shall see in a discussion of the ideas of Ambikagiri Roy Chaudhury, Assamese for instance, were worried about their own identity. So were Bengalis and Oriyas. But they did accept Indian nationalism. In the post independence period the path of development adopted by the state of India perpetuated the uneven development but at the same time led to the emergence of new social forces like regional bourgeoisie, middle classes and educated elites. Since some non-indigenous communities are already dominant in the areas perceived by small nationalities as their own home-lands, these new forces enter into a situation of unequal competition. It is then that they begin to mobilize their own societies under the banner of nationalism. The protagonists of Indian nationalism were able to advance their cause by mobilizing the Indian masses against British imperilism. The newly emerging western educated elites were at the fore front of that struggle. In the same way the educated elites of the small nationalities are now launching a series of struggles against their perceived enemies. Since almost all small nationalities view the intolerant and expensionist tendencies of Indian nationalism of the Hindu Hindi-Brahminical variety as a threat to their cultural identity and also have genuine grievances against the relatively advanced communities occupying dominant position at a regional level, this battle is being fought at two different levels. But because of the urgency of the situation the battle at the regional level becomes more important and the resistance against the expansionism of Indian nationalism does become very powerful. The liberal democratic process initiated during

the British rule and carried on after independence has of course created a fellow feeling among Indians, even if only politically. This feeling embraces even those communities who are not a part of the traditional Indian culture in any sense. The political integration of these culturally non-Indian communities has been taking place mainly through their newly emerging educated elites who while getting integrated in the political process harp on the theme of separate cultural identities. It is interesting to note that it is their assertion of separate cultural identity which very often enables them to acquire considerable political power. But the compulsions of participating in the liberal democratic politics of the state of India make them accept the political reality of this state. Since the mainstream politicians use the term nation to refer even to the state of India these groups also use the term nation though they actually mean state. For instance, the Congress (I) in Meghalaya calls itself a national party with a regional outlook and Hills People Union calls itself a regional party with a national outlook. Their attitude to the Hindi language is also integraing. Because of the compulsions of the market Hindi has become almost a *lingua franca*· ven in these areas. But at the same time the elites of these communities jealously promote the cause of their own languages. It is interesting to note that even those groups who have demanded secession at some point of time are gradually beginning to accept the reality of the Indian state. [34] But such conversions need not necessarily imply that they have come under the fold of Indian nationalism. As we have argued above many small nationalities do distinguish between the state of India and

34. Secessionist organizations of Mizos and Tamils have now accepted the reality of the state of India. Quite a large section of Naga insurgents has also given up the demand for secession.

the Indian nationalism. Attempts at integrating the various communities at the cultural level under the banner of Indian nationalism will continue to be resisted by the small nationalities. Thus, while the emergence of new social forces at the regional level generates conditions for strengthening the nationalist politics of the smaller nationalities the expansionist trend of the 'Indian nationalism' and its attempt at identifying the state of India as embodiment of this nationalism give tremendous boost to the process of mobilization of the smaller nationalities. Each linguistic community in which a viable educated elite has emerged is claiming the status of a nationality, primarily at the persuasion of such elites. More and more linguistic communities of India are staking their claims as nationlities under the leadership of newly emerging educated elites. This has created a very complex situation because the so called Indian mainstream has been taking a very intolerant attitude towards these nationalities. It is in the context of this situation that the nationality question of the Assamese people will have to be examined.

III

Prior to the British conquest in 1826 Assam was politically outside all the great empires that were established in the Indian sub-continent. Before the treaty of Yndabu a large area of the Brahmaputra valley was ruled for six hundred years by the Ahoms. Though the boundaries of the Ahom state kept changing from time to time they managed to keep control over the major portions of the Brahmaputra valley. Despite fourteen major attacks by Mughals this area could never be politically integrated with the rest of India till the coming of the British. But culturally this valley had very close links with

the north Indian Hindu tradition. Assamese is the only Indo-Aryan language [35] in this region. Moreover, there is considerable amount of evidence to show that the various kingdoms that existed on the banks of Brahmaputra had cultural interactions with north India. Some historians trace this interaction back to the ancient days of the reign of Narakasura when the Maithili culture spread in Assam. It is interesting to note that Rajmohan Nath's account of ancient Assam indicates that both the Aryan and Non-Aryan cultures of rest of India had considerable influence on the ancient kingdoms of what we now call the lower Assam. [36] It is of course well known that the earliest inhabitants of Assam were speakers of the Indo-Chinese language of the Mon Khmer family, identified very often as the Austric family of languages. As B. K. Baruah says, " the date when the Austric speakers began to filter into Assam is not known, but it must have been several hundred years B. C. and certainly long anterior to the advent of the Aryans from the West." As Baruah rightly points out it is rather difficult to say how much these people contributed to the growth of the Assamese as a distinct community but their culture survives in many existing institutions of the Assamese people. Names of many places and rivers bear witness to their influence. [37] The next batch of early migrants into this area were the peoples speaking Tibeto Burman languages. While the various groups of these immigrants spread over the southern Assam the most important group of the tribes of

35. P. C. Chaudhury, *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.* (Delhi, 1987), p. 107.

36. See Rajmohan Nath, *Background of Assamese Culture* (Gauhati, 1978), particularly pp. 25-43.

37. B. K. Baruah, *A Cultural History of Assam,* (Gauhati, 1969), p. 6.

the tibeto-Burman origin known as Bodos, came to form the numerous and important section of the non-Aryan peoples of Assam, built strong kingdoms under various names like the Chutia, the Kachari and the Koch and held sway over one or another part of the region during different historical times, [38]. However, with the coming of the Ahoms from the east and the Aryans from the west there was considerable pressure on these peoples and their power and influence began to wane. During the Ahom rule a new proccéss of assimilation began and a new cultural community based mainly on linguistic affinity began to emerge. Various historians have tried to show Assams' early contact with the Aryan India by pointing out the references in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. [39] While it is possible to prove that there was some contact it is not possible to maintain that there was any significant migration of Aryans to this region prior to 6th century A. D. There is of course considerable historical evidence to show that in the early centuries of the Christian era a significant number of Aryans came and settled in the region. Some of them travelled as far as the Sadiya in eastern Assam and established settlements and brought various sections of the earlier inhabitants to their fold. As Baruah says, "The Aryan influence became so widespread, and penetrating that even minor Vedic customs and rituals became deep rooted in the life of the common people."[40] This Aryanisation led to a unification of the innumerable tribal groups particularly in the Brahmaputra valley primarily through the development

38. *Ibid.* p. 7.

39. Both Rajmohan Nath and B. K. Baruah make use of the references in the epic to maintain that Assam had close contact with the rest of India in the ancient times, See. Rajmohan Nath *op. cit.*, and B. K. Baruah *op. cit.*

40. B. K. Baruah, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

of a language which was a direct descendant of Magadhi Apabhramsa. [41] There is some evidence to show that an Indo-Aryan language distinct from the language spoken in Bengal existed in Assam in the middle of 7th century, [42] which gradually developed into the modern Assamese language. [43] Only natural that the languages which existed prior to the Aryanization contributed to the process of development of this new language. Modern Assamese despite its Sanskrit base contains a large number of words from the Austric and Tibeto-Burman languages. [44] The Ahoms came to Assam at a much later stage (13th Century). They got assimilated to the extent that they not only adopted Assamese as the court language but from the beginning of the seventeenth century also began to write their prose chronicles called Buranjis in Assamese.[45] The emergence of this new language seems to have given birth to a linguistic community in the Brahmaputra valley which embraced the various communities which were living in this area. It is of course true that many of the Austric and Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups continued to preserve their own identity but others began to merge in the Assamese

41. For detailed discussion see, B. Kakati, *Assamese Its Formation and Development* (Gauhati, 1962), p.6.

42. S. K. Chatterjee for instance maintains that Hieun Tsang's account suggests that there was one language spoken in Bihar and Bengal and only in Assam there was a distinction. See, S. K. Chatterjee, *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* Vol. I. (Calcutta 1962), p. 140

43. B. K. Baruah, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

44. B. Kakati (ed.) *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature* (Gauhait, 1953), pp. 9-14.

45. N. K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age* (Calcutta, 1970), pp. 259-60.

community. This involved a process of Aryanisation in which even some tribes like the Kacharis, The Lalungs, the Mikirs and others were converted to a new caste, the Koch. Thus the linguistic community which took shape in the Brahmaputra valley and came to be known as the Assamese underwent a process Aryanisation and in the process brought Assam culturally so close to the rest of India that by the 15th century Sankardeva took pride in the fact he was born in the 'Bharata Barsha'.

However, these close cultural ties could not completely dilute the effects political and administrative independence of Assam. Though towards the end of the Ahom rule we see some influence of Mughal India on the politics and economy of Ahom kingdom yet there was no sign of political and economic integration of this region with the rest of the country. On the eve of the British conquest the economy of Assam, in comparison to the rest of the country, was very backward. This was mainly because of the fact that during the six hundred years of Ahom rule the economy did not even reach a proper feudal stage. As Manorama Sharma says "communal ownership of land was .....the basis of the entire Ahom state, and although in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the further development of the Ahom monarchy in Assam there were some changes and modifications, the basic structure, which was primarily tribal in nature, remained unchanged. [46] The same author argues that even at the height of Ahom rule in Assam in the seventeenth and the first half of eighteenth century the basic conditions remained the same. At the political level a certain number of feudal characteristics had developed, but these could

46. Manorama Sharma, *The Assemese Middle Class : Its Ascendence to Hegemony,* Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, North Eastern Hill University, pp. 67-68.

not sustain themselves because development of economic feudalism was very difficult under the conditions which prevailed in Assam during Ahom rule. [47] The British rule too did not change the situation radically. As Manorama Sharma shows till 1900 no spectacular change had taken place in the province of Assam. There was a general stagnation in all fields except in tea plantation. The output of tea increased rapidly but almost the whole industry was in the hands of foreigners and development in that sector too did not benifit the indigenous Assamese, [48] Amalendu Guha also maintains that during the period 1826 to 1873 the British capital penetrated the economy of Assam and started building an infrastructure to sustain the capitalist set up. He points out that collaborating traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks from other Indian provinces came as camp followers. [49] It is these people, monopolising internal trade government jobs and professions, who benefitted along with their British masters from the changes introduced by the British.

British Administration in Assam opened a flood gate of migration from other parts of India to Assam. As A. K. Das points out "the non-indigenous population of Assam proper increased from less than a lac in a total population of 15 lacs in 1872 to an estimated five to six lacs in a total population of about 22 lacs in 1901 ..... non-indigenous elements came to constitute at least one quarter of the

47. Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony,* (New Delhi, 1990) p. 26

48. Manorama Sharma "Socio-Economic Changes in Assam"., *North East Quarterly*, Vol 1, No. 2, pp. 29-58.

49. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1977), p. 25.

population of Assam proper in 1901.[50] These immigrants came to dominate the economic life of Assam in such a manner that the local Assamese enterprenures found themselves in a very unenviable position Guha has pointed out that through out the nineteenth century a small band of enlightened Assamese businessmen continued to break fresh grounds for themselves; but "paucity of capital" and "of opportunities under the domination of British and comprador Marwari capital in different fields of business ..... ultimately killed this spirit."[51] Had there been a fairly organised Assamese bourgeoisie or a middle class, this trend would have met stiff resistance from them. But in the early period of British rule these classes were almost totally absent in Assam. But the policies followed by the British administration and the changes introduced by them slowly led to the emergence of new social forces which as Manorama Sharma demonstrates began to emerge as a middle class in the last decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.[52] In the meantime the migrants came to dominate not only the economic life of Assam but also began to tell upon the social and cultural life. The all pervasive dominance of the immigrants a large section of whom were Bengalis, was so great that in nineteenth century Assam social change was "more or less modelled on the inmigrant Bengali caste Hindu society of the time with all its virtues and vices."[53]

However, despite its colonial nature the British administration did bring in some changes and slowly new

50. A. K. Das, *Assam's Agony - A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 25.
51. Guha, *op.cit*, pp 60-61
52. Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam, op cit,* see chapters *V, VI & VII.*
53. Guha, *op. cit,* p 69

social forces began to emerge. As Sharma shows these new forces created by the necessities of colonial rule in Assam crystalised into a class and by the last decade of nineteenth century and early twentieth century they came to occupy an important position. [54] The roots of this middle class can be traced to two important sections of Assamese society of the British period — the revenue officials like Mauzadars and the religious institutions like the *Satras*.[55] The Mauzadars who accumulated considerable amount of wealth sent not only their own children to schools and colleges but also supported bright students from poor families to get higher education. In the *Satras* too a wealthy section was emerging who contributed to the growth of the Assamese Middle class. They encouraged some of their disciples who were in business and patronised literary and cultural activities. At times they even helped in the spread of liberal ideas. [56] From these sections initially an educated elite emerged which slowly grew into a middle class, comprising mainly the traditional and new petty bourgeoisie.[57] The newly emerging educated elite in the mid nineteenth century and the middle class after that played crucial roles in the emergence of Assamese national consciousness. People like Hemchandra Baruah, Gunabhiram Baruah and Anandoram Baruah laid the foundation of modern Assamese language and literature.[58] Others got involved

54. Manorama Sharma, *The Assamese Middle Class, op. cit.*
55. *Satras* are *Vaisnava* religious institutions which received patronage of the Ahom monarch towards the end of the Ahom rule.
56. For a discussion on the role of *Muzadars* and *Satras* see, Manorama Sharma, *The Assamese Middle Class, op. cit.*
57. *Ibid.* see, also Sharma, *Social and Economic Change , op. cit.*
58. See, H. K. Barpujari (ed.) *Political History of Assam,* Vol. I, (Gauhati, 1977), pp. 137-140

in a crusade against the imposition of Bengali language. From the year 1826, when the British took over the administration of Assam for forty years Assam was placed under the Bengal Presidency. Following the inclusion of Assam in the presidency for purposes of economy and convenience Bengali was enforced as the official language and medium of instruction in Assam. [59] Amalendu Guha aptly says that Assamese had lost its rightful place to Bengali in local schools and courts in 1837 on the false ground that it was a dialect of the later language. [60] Some members of the newly educated Assamese played a very important role in mobilising opinion in favour of restoration of Assamese. It is of course true that they received considerable support from some missionaries. But the battle was fought mainly by the English educated Assamese. [61]

As the economic hegemony of the immigratns began to tell upon the social and cultural life of the Assamese society the nascent Assamese middle class became apprehensive about the role of these immigrants. Large scale immigration coupled with the incorporation of Sylhet a populous Bengali speaking district into Assam in 1874 threatened to reduce the Assamese speaking people into a minority in their own homeland. The emerging Assamese middle class viewed this as a threat to their linguistic and cultural identity, so much so, that by the nineteen thirties an influential section of the Assamese middle class favoured secession from India so as to "save

59. For a discussion on how Assamese was adopted as the official language see, H. K. Barpujari, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

60. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

61. For a discussion on this controversy, see, H. K. Barpujari, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-142

the Assamese race from extinction."[62] The extreme step of seceding from India, however, did not get sufficient support even from the Assamese middle class. A section of this class demanded that certain definite steps should be taken to protect the interests of the Assamese. They wanted - (1) transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, (2) total ban on Bengali immigration to the Brahmaputra valley for a period of twenty years, (3) strict naturalization laws for resident Bengali immigrants, (4) out-lawing of all anti - Assamese organizations in the Brahmaputra valley, (5) a ten year moratorium on agricultural indebtedness, and (6) the exclusion of the planters' bloc from the ligislature.[63]

It is clear from these demands of the Assamese Middle class that the main cause of their apprehension was the continuous immigration from neighbouring Bengal. A part of the logic behind this apprehension is indicated by Guha when he points out that in the early British period the Bengalis dominated the professions in Assam.[64] Having acquired English education an important section of the Assamese at that period were also interested in those jobs. But the Bengalis were already occupying important positions and therefore were in an advantagious position. This might have created a sense of relative deprivation among the educated sections of the Assamese. They formed organizations to protect their own interest. For instance, the Jorhat *Sarbojonik Sobha* expressed its dissatisfaction over the fact that while there had been remarkable progress of higher education in

62. See, Memorandum presented to Nehru at Rangia on November 28, 1937, quoted by Guha *op. cit.*, p. 257.

63. See, Memorandum of the 'Assamiya Deka Dal' referred to by Guha, *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Assam since 1874 the avenues of employment continued to be closed for the Assamese. The Sabha was concerned that out of thrity two graduates of Assam in 1892, the services of 25 were not utilised. However, we must not conclude that the awakening we notice in the nineteenth century Assam was merely an expression of the desire of the educated Assamese for a share of the loaves. They definitely were concerned at the condition of their own community. They could see that all sections of their society were suffering from the problems generated by the dominance of immigrants. Like most other middle classes of various Indian communities, at the early stage of their development the Assamese middle class too did not take cudgels against British imperialism but they tried to articulate the grievances of the various sections of their community. Jorhat *Sarbojonik Sobha* for instance, was established "for the purpose of representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the government, explaining to the people the objects and policy of the government, and generally ameliorating the condition of the people." [65] It is interesting to note that even at the early stage of its emergence this class and the educated elite that emerged before it took keen interest in the affairs of the wider sections of their society. Towards the end of the nineteenth century when the Assamese peasants resisted the enhancement of revenue rates, their organizations called *Raijmels* were the most important participating units. But after 1894 middle class organizations like *Ryot Sabhas* began to articulate such grievances of the lowest

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65. For a discussion on *Jorhat Sarbojonik Sobha* see, Shrutidev Goswami, "The Jorhat Sarbojonik Sobha : Its Role in Socio - Political Awakening of Assam", *Proceedings of North East India History Association,* Sixth Session, (Agartala, 1985), pp. 316-322.

stratum of the Assamese society through petitions and other liberal democratic methods. [66] By the end of the nineteenth century this class began to weild considerable power and influence in the Assamese society when this class became aware of the cultural insecurity and also felt the pressure of immigrants on the social and economic life of Assam they began to mobilize public opinion against these evils. In fact, it was during this period that the Assamese national consciousness began to take shape. This consciousness acquired an anti-Bengali dimension because numerically Bengalis were the strongest among the immigrants. The fears of the Assamese middle class became worse when they saw that a section of the Bengali elite both in Assam and Bengal were playing a role prejudicial to the interest of the Assamese. [67] Assamese-Bengali relations in Assam never really improved after this. The Assamese Middle class, the most advanced section of the Assamese society, remained highly sensitive about Bengali dominance. It is true that during normal times the tensions remain dormant but they surface at the slightest provocation. What added fuel to the fire was the evil designs of an organized section of the Bengali immigrants who aspired to reduce the Assamese people into second class citizens in their own homeland. For instance, *The Amrit Bazar Patrika* reported on November 20, 1935, that the Bengali residents of Assam assembled in a big meeting and resolved :

> "The brains of the 5.5 lakhs of Bengali speaking Hindus, the wealth of 20,000 Marwaris, the great labour force (6,00,000 ex-tea garden coolies) of

66. For a discussion on this see, Manorama Sharma, *The Assamese Middle Class, op. cit.*, pp. 176-209.

67. In a following essay on the role of Bengali elite we discuss this point at greater details.

> Biharis, the agricultural instinct of 5.5 lakhs Bhatia immigrants, the martial spirit of 3,000 sikhs, 1,40,000 Nepalis and other settlers, if united together, these settlers would surely rule this country. The Assamese leaders must live here on the terms of the Bengali settlers who have already flooded the province."

It was therefore natural for the most articulate section of the Assamese society, the Assamese Middle Class, to view them as the greatest threat to the Assamese national identity. The failure to compete with the immigrants, who enjoyed the patronage of the rulers, and the apprehension of losing their own national identity made it necessary for the Assamese middle class to articulate the Assamese national aspirations. [68] They were under the impression that by doing so they would be able to mobilize the vast Assamese masses to check the increasing dominance of the Bengali immigrants.

This fear of dominance of the immigrants might have been one of the motivating factors which led the Assamese middle class to play the important role it did in the emergence of Assamese national consciousness. In the early stage of its emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, representatives of this class kept on trying to arouse the national consciousness of the Assamese people Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya and a number of other Assamese writers urged the Assamese people to cultivate national spirit.

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68. This point was originally argued by the present author in a paper on Indian Nationalism and Assamese national question in *North East Quarterly* Vol. 1 No. 1 (August 1982) pp. 6-14. Tilottama Misra argues on similar lines, see, T. Misra *Literature and Society in Assam*, (Gauhati 1987), pp. 148-176.

The emphasis on the necessity of being aware of the Assamese national identity turned Ambikagiri Roy Chaudhury into a crusader. His appeals to the Assamese people were so fervent and at times so aggressive that some historians have even branded him as a chauvinist. [69] But during the British period, despite the aggressive postures of a section of the Assamese middle class Assamese nationalism could not emerge as a powerful force. Two important factors were responsible for this failure. First the Assamese middle class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was too weak economically, numerically and, therefore, culturally to effectively nurse the spirit of Assamese nationalism. [70] Secondly, at a time when India's struggle for freedom, under the leadership of Indian national congress, was becoming the most important political force the national aspirations of the smaller communities like the Assamese were naturally taking a back seat. But as we have shown the fear of losing national identity and the need to develop national consciousness exercised the minds of the advanced sections of the Assamese people.

In the post-independence period with the maturing of the middle class, Assamese nationalism started gaining ground. During this period the middle class demonstrated its strength in a series of popular movements launched over issues like recognition of Assamese as the official language and its introduction as the medium instruction at the college level, establishment of refineries to refine the crude iol produced in Assam. In each one of these movements while articulating the specific demands the

69. We discuss some aspects of Ambikagiri's ideas in a following essay.

70. For a discussion on this see, Manorama Sharma, *The Assamese Middle Class, op. cit.*

issues connected with Assamese nationality and its protection were raised again and again. All economic and cultural demands were articulated in the context of the grievances of a small neglected nationality. This phenomenon is very often been referred to as regionalism or subnationalism. In fact, there is nothing peculiar about this trend. The growth of such so called regional nationalism among the smaller nationalities has become an all India phenomenon. Amalendu Guha argues that there are two different kinds of nationalisms in contemporary India — "the great nationalism grounded in a feeling of all India unity; and the little nationalism based on that of regional linguistic unity. The former essentially suited to the interest of Indian big bourgeoisie and the latter largely related to the small bourgeoisie — the regional middle classes." [71] It, of course, is debatable whether we can call regional middle classes small bourgeoisie but there is not doubt that it is these social forces which patronise the nationalist aspirations of the small nationalities. However, the point that we need to take note of is that as 'Indian nationalism' in its struggle against the British acquired an anti-imperialist character the regional nationalism too in its struggle against 'internal colonization' in India acquired an anti-colonial progressive character. The uneven development generated by the capitalist path of development has converted certain backward regions of India into a colonial hinterland. The indegenous middle classes of these regions are begining to resist this. The vocal protests of the regional nationalist movements against uneven development have sharpened the contradictions between the Indian ruling classes and the patrons of regional nationalist movements — the regional middle classes of various small nationalities of India.

71. See, Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

Assam is a glaring example of the process of internal colonization. Raw materials of this state have been continuously taken out to other regions of the country for developing industries in those areas. [72] It is interesting to note that, in the post independence India too, for each decision contributing to the industrialization and general economic development of the State the people of Assam had to resort to mass movements. Establishment of the two public sector refineries in Assam became possible only when the people launched mass movements demanding refineries. These movements were in fact a manifestation of the growing consciousness of the Assamese Middle class about the internal colonial status of Assam. As Tilottama Misra has shown in the article mentioned above even the 'Assam Movement' of the late 1970s and early 1980s was generated to a great extent by the grievances arising out of the colonial hinterland status of Assam.

We have shown above that during the British period employment opportunities in Assam were more or less monopolised by the immigrants. Dominance of the immigrants in this sphere continued after independence also. According to the third report of the employment review committee 1979, appointed by the Assam Assembly, it was found that in 28 units comprising seven public sector industries, 16 private sector industries and 5 banks, with a total strength of 29,537 employees, only 14,368 or 49% had their birth places in Assam and only 10,473 or 35% had Assamese as their mother tongue. The committee further notes that of 2095 employees in the class I and II only 762 or 36% had their birth places in

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72. See, Tilottama Misra, "Assam a Colonial Hinterland", *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Aug 9, 1980), pp. 1357-65.

Assam. [73] According to another estimate about 57% of the employees in transport and communications were immigrants. [74] Some leftist intellectuals have been trying to rationalise this state of affairs by arguing that jobs specially, lucrative ones go to outsiders because there is a dearth of specialists among the indigenous population. The claim is belied by the fact that in most cases persons occupying Class I and II jobs do not have any specialised knowledge. We have looked into the oil and Natural Gas Commission and the Plywood industry .as test cases. According to the 8th report of the employment review committee in the plywood industry out of 87 senior officers 66 persons or 76% were from outside Assam. And of those 66 persons, 60 persons or 90% had only general education and only 5 had engineering degrees, one with a certificate in Engineering trade. As regards general education 6 or 9% had master's degrees; 29 or 44% were graduates ; 12 or 18% were intermediates; 15 or 23% were matriculates and 4 or 6% were below matric standards. [75] In the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, Naizra, 148 Class I officers, with birth places outside Assam, joined during the period 1969-74. Of these 61% had no technical qualifications; 24% had degrees in Engineering and Technology, 8% were diploma holders. Of the 61% officers with general qualifications 36% had master's degrees; 35% were graduates; 21% were intermediate or P.U. passed and 8% were matriculates. [76] While hundreds of persons. with

73. See, *Report of the Employment Review Committee,* (Gauhati, 1973), p. 50.

74. Myron Weiner, "Sons of the Soil - Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India", *Demography India,* 1978.

75. *Report of the Employment Review Committee,* (Gauhati, 1979), pp. 10-13.

76. *Report of the Employment Review Committee,* (Gauhati, 1976), pp. 22-23.

general educational qualifications were being appointed in lucrative jobs from outside the state the live register of employment exchanges of Assam showed in 1973 a total of 30,391 educated job seekers. [77] This has been possible mainly because most of the recruitment centres for major public and private sector institutions and industries are situated outside Assam, and in the industries with recruitment centres in Assam itself, key positions are occupied by non-Assamese persons. Favouritism and nepotism play such a dominant role in recruitments that certain departments like the central revenue departments and the post and telegraphs are popularly known in Assam as uncles and nephews departments. The average educated Assamese thus finds it difficult to compete because other things being equal a non-Assamese candidate stands a better chance because he has a man from his own community in a key position. Localdailies in Assam keep carrying letters to the editor on this theme. With efforts of AASU and organisation like the Assam Yuba Chatra Parisad things are changing for better. But the change is not coming fast enough.

Another area of conflict centres round the question of land. This question has been mentioned in passing by Gail Omvedt.[78] It is unfortunate that important and perceptive scholars of modern Assamese history, for reasons known best to themselves, tend to dismiss this issue by merely calling the Assamese nationalism connected with land relations a 'gentry nationalism' [79] However, the fact that as

77. *Report of the Employment Review Committee,* (Gauhati, 1973), Table No. 2.6., p. 27.

78. Gail Omvedt, "Aspects of the Assamese Problem", *Frontier* Vol. 12, No. 41, pp. 4 - 6.

79. See for instance, Amalendu Guha, "Little Nationlism Turned Chauvinist" *Economic and Political Weekly,* Special Number, 1980, pp. 1699-1720.

a result of unchecked immigration of landless peasants from neighbouring areas the pressure on land in Assam has increased in an unprecedented rate cannot be ignored. According to the Rural Labour enquiry 1974-75, the agricultural labour households in Assam were estimated at 282 thousands or 59.2% of the total rural households (476 thousands) in the year 1974-75 as against 93 thousands or 34% in 1964-65. Thus during that decade there had been an increase of about 189 thousand agricultural labour households in Assam during the period displaying 203 per cent rise over 1964-65, as against 36 per cent rise during the corresponding period, for India as a whole. This pressure has become so high that in certain areas indigenous peasants had to surrender their own villages to the immigrants. [80]

These conflicts over jobs and occupation of land coupled with the fear of the Assamese of being outnumbered by the immigrants added fervour to the sentiments of Assamese nationalism. The bitterness generated by the contradictions between the autochtons and the immigrants got directed mainly against the Bengali immigrants because of certain historical reasons. Guha throws some light on these reasons when he points out that the immigrants in Assam can be divided into four groups - (1) Tea garden labourers, (2) migrants from East Bengal prior to independence, (3) Hindus who came as a result of migration, and (4) the Nepalis who came in search of livelihood. He further points out that the Nepalis and the tea garden labourers did not compete with the indigenous people for jobs and therefore there was no political controversy over these immigrants. The case of

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80. See, U. Misra, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. XVI, No. 8, pp. 290-92.

the Bengali immigrants was however, different. Guha says ".....immigrant Bengali Hindus as well as Muslims competed with the dominant Assamese linguistic group for land, jobs and local power. This led to conflict and tension." [81] While one can see some truth in what Guha says about the Bengali immigrants it is difficult to accept his assertion that migration of the tea-garden labourers and Nepalis did not generate tension merely because they did not compete with the Assamese for jobs. While the tea-garden labourers did not add to the problem of pressure on land in rural Assam because they more or less confined themselves to the tea plantations the Nepalis settled down in villages and thus there was every possibility of their coming into conflict with the Assamese peasants. But what saved the situation was that Nepalis slowly got assimilated with the Assamese. So did the tea garden labourers so much so that a new dimension was added to the Assamese culture by the tea-garden labourers. They have developed a language of communication which is commonly known in Assam as *Bagania'*. It is a mixture of various tribal languages of the communities from which the tea-garden labourers originally came and Assamese. It is obvious that the tea-garden labourers are gradually becoming a part of the Assamese nationality and hence there is no serious conflict with the Assamese.

The conflicts that exist between the indigenous Assamese population and the immigrant Bengalis in Assam are generated mainly because of the resistance of the later to the process of assimilation. It is necessary to remember that the Bengali immigrants, because of their

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81. Amalendu Guha, "Immigrants and Autochtons in a plural society : The interrelations in the Brahmaputra Valley" Unpublished paper presented in a seminar in Dibrugarh University.

numerical and cultural viability, more or less successfully resisted the process of assimilation. Today, there are many townships and villages in Assam which are inhabited predominantly by Bengali speking immigrants. Deriving strength from their numerical and cultural viability these immigrants also competed for a dominant role in the Assamese society. Under these circumstances the Assamese middle class began to consider these immigrants a threat to their national identity, specially because they had before them the example of Tripura, where the Bengalis who were once an insignificant minority came to constitute over 70% of the state's population. [82] As Gail Omvedt rightly says. "This is not because Bengalis are an oppresor nation; rather it has happened because of the particular from of oppression Bengalis have suffered from. But that does not make the danger any less real to the Assamese."[83] Such apprehensions have made the Assamese Middle class so sensitive that they have been repeatedly mobilizing all sections of their societies under the slogan of national identity which very often degenerate into anti-Bengali riots. Such mobilization became possible because the Assamese Middle class has been able to disseminate their apprehensions in the Assamese society in such a manner that in their struggle for national identity they now have the Assamese peasantry as their ally. However, it is clear that the patrons of Assamese nationalism the Assamese middle class considers the Bengali immigrants a threat to Assamese cultural identity.

Scholars like Amalendu Guha and Hiren Gohain claim that the fear of the Assamese about losing their linguistic and cultural identity is unreal. Guha even calls it a "fear

82. Gail Omvedt, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

83. *Ibid.*

psychosis". [84]. They have argued that there is a decline in the Bengali speaking population in Assam. But they conveniently ignore the fact that the decline in the Bengali speaking population in the post 1947 period is due to separation of the populous Bengali speaking district of Sylhet. At the time of separation Assam had a total population of 9 million of which 2 millions were in Sylhet. Separation of the district, therefore, resulted in a sharp fall in the percentage of Bengali—speaking population of the state. What is more important is that the growth rate of the Bengali speaking population has in recent times been higher than that of the Assamese. While the Bengali speaking population increased at a rate of 20.04% during the decade 1951-60 in the next decade this rate was 41%. The corresponding figures for the Assamese-speaking people were 36.47 and 31.26. [85] Thus during the period while the growth rate of the Bengali speaking population has doubled in the case of the Assamese it has fallen by more than 5%. Moreover, during the 7th decade of this century the growth rate of the Bengali speaking population was more than 9% faster than the Assamese speaking population. Even these figures do not show the actual growth rate of the Bengali speaking population in Assam because due to political considerations many Bengali speakers might have returned Assamese as their mother tongue. This is an apprehension commonly expressed by many Assamese. While discussing the sharp rise of the Assamese speaking population in 1951 Census Amalendu Guha had commented that it happened because the census figures for the district of Goalpara had

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84. See Guha, "Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist", *op. cit.* and Hiren Gohain, *On the Present Movement in Assam* (Calcutta, 1980), p. 10

85. See. U. Misra, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-92.

tilted the balance. Guha writes, "This was mainly because mean while, on political considerations Bengali Muslims and a section of the sons of the soil, who had earlier recorded Bengali as their mother tongue declared themselves to be Assamese speaking." [86] It is rather surprising that Guha does not apply a similar logic to the later situation. An analysis of the census figures of the immigrant concentrations may become revealing. But there is no good reason why the immigrants who came later should not resort to such tactics. It is therefore clear that the fear of the Assamese that they might be reduced to a minority in their own homeland is not merely a fear psychosis based on unreal assumptions. The threat is indeed real. The intensity of this threat is further increased, by the fact that the Assamese may very well feel the weight of the eight crores of Bengali speakers in Bangladesh and five crores in West Bengal (1970 figures). [87] There is no wonder that such a threat would generate strong ill-feeling towards its source. In this connection it must be noted that such ill feelings are not harboured by the average Assamese against all outsiders. Most of the trade and commerce in Assam are controlled by the business houses of Marwaris and Sindhis. Despite their money power they are numerically and even culturally weak and therefore, the Assamese nationalists do not consider them a threat to their own language and culture. It can of course be argued that since even the most advanced section of the Assamese, the educated middle Class, does not compete with these immigrants because it (the Assamese middle class) has not as yet been able to enter the world of business in a big way, there is no major areas of conflict. Assamese capitalists are very few in

86. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, op.cit.*, p. 333.

87. Omvedt, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

number and they have not as yet emerged as a class and therefore there is no question of their perception of the Assamese interest acquiring a degree of universality in the Assamese society. On the other hand the Assamese middle class occupies a dominant position in the Assamese society and therefore their perception of the Assamese interest comes to prevail in the entire society. It is precisely because of this that the social, political and economic opponents of the Assamese middle class have come to be viewed as the opponents of Assamese nationalism. The class interest of the Assamese middle class by and large determines the character of the Assamese nationalism and therefore, at least in its present stage, it does not have a strong secessionist dimension. The present day vanguard of Assamese nationalism, the Assamese Middle class, does realise that an independent Assamese nation state is not viable. Moreover, politically and administratively it has been a part of India for well over a century now. In the early stages of its formation, the small but dominant section of this class participated in the freedom movement. Economically, the fate of this class is tied to a great extent to the developments in Indian economy. Moreover, as we have shown, from ancient times the Assamese linguistic community had developed strong cultural links with the rest of the Aryan India. Therefore Assamese nationalism in its present from, may oppose internal colonial exploitation, demand special measures for the development of the region, and special protection for Assamese ethnic identity, but it cannot dream of seceding from India. In this sense it remains a regional nationalism.

Assamese nationalism led by the Assamese middle class has been able to mobilise a large majority of the

Assamese masses not only because it has been articulating the cultural insecurity of this small community and because the middle class occupies a dominant position in Assamese society but also because this class has strong rural links.[88] Because of its close links with the peasantry it has also been able to articulate the most important grievances of the later. In fact, the Assamese middle class has a tradition of articulating the grievances of the peasantry. From the end of the 19th century various sections of the middle class have been playing important roles in the mobilisation of the peasantry.[89] This has been possible because in Assam feudal forces have not been strong and a large section of the educated middle class has actually emerged from the rural society. It is therefore not surprising that an issue like the pressure on land has been exercising the mind of this class. The fact that the Assamese middle class has been able to mobilise the large majority of the peasantry behind it becomes obvious from the kind of mass movements it has been able to lead. In a largely rural society no mass movement is possible without the support of the peasantry. But on issues like the official language, establishment of refineries and immigration of foreign nationals Assam has seen unprecedented mass mobilisation. However, its most positive aspect today is its fight against the colonial exploitation of Assam. But an end could be brought to such exploitation only if the capitalist path of development, which results in uneven development, is abandoned. This would necessitate a complete restructuring of the Indian society. This is a task which may be proved to be impossible for the Assamese middle class.

88. For a discussion on this point see, Manorama Sharma, *The Assamese Middle Class, op.cit.*

89. *Ibid*

The problems generated by the unequal development have other implications also. We have argued above that the emergence of an educated elite which developed into a middle class has strengthened Assamese nationalism and the sense of relative deprivation of this class has given Assamese nationalism an anti -Bengali dimension because the Bengali population in Assam led by its own middle class poses a threat to the cultural, economic and political security of the Assamese. Assam has a large number of tribal and semi-tribal communities. It is true that many of these communities have been gradually assimilated in the composite Assamese culture. But with the emergence of educated elites in their respective communities some of these communities are becoming more and more aware of their own cultural and ethnic identities which in turn has generated fresh tensions. Just as in late nineteenth century Assam antagonisms developed between the more advanced Bengali Middle class and the nascent and therefore less advanced Assamese Middle class, similarly tensions are now developing between the more advanced Assamese middle class and the other nascent middle classes of Assam. As the nationalism led by the most advanced class the Assamese nationalism has spread its ideas, values and culture in this region in a manner that the other small nationalities began to feel the pressure of the Assamese nationality. Assamese Middle class organisations like the Asam Sahitya Sabha, from its inception, has been taking a big brotherly attitude towards the tribal communities. [90] The insensitivity of the Assamese middle class, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, towards the

90. See, Manorama Sharma, "The Assamese Middle Class and Integration : Role of the Asam Sahitya Sabha". *Proceedings of the North East India History Association.* (Gauhati 1988). pp.430-38

ethnic minorities had generated some resentement which led to the formation of organizations like the tribal league. However, the elites of these communities were not in a position to seriously challenge the Assamese. Till independence the Assamese led by its middle class did not show much interest in the cultures of these communities but from about the time of independence, when educated elites began to emerge from amongst some of these ethnic communities, it began to show signs of awareness of their distinct existence and its initial response was to preach assimilation. But assimilation can be propagated only from a position of strength and hence in an attempt at consolidating the position of Assamese nationality the Assamese middle class started pressing for recognition of Assamese as the official language and began to maintain that Assamese script should be taught to all the ethnic communities of the region. Such cultural expansionism should have been resisted but the nascent educated elities of the smaller communities, though occasionally voicing weak protests, were being gradually absorbed in the Assamese middle class. Leaders and intellectuals of even comparatively advanced Bodos like Rupnath Brahma and Sitanath Brahma Chaudhury were proud in the company of their Assamese counterparts. Many tribal intellectuals who wrote in Assamese were active members of Asam Sahitya Sabha. The scenario, however, began to change from the 1950s onwards. With the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Bodo educated elite were the first to acquire the necessary strength to resist the Assamese expansionism. [91] The movement for Bodo script and language indicated that the Bodo educated elite had arrived and with the acquisition of a system of writing the ethno-consolidating role of the Bodo language especially

91. B.N. Bordoloi *(et al)* ed. *Tribes of Assam - Part I* (Gauhati, U.D.), pp. 16-20.

increased which inevitably led to the emergence of a nationality consciousness and political aspirations and organizations followed.

There were important economic reasons for the Bodo educated elite for playing a crucial role in this. By that time their number had increased and it became impossible for the Assamese middle class to create job opportunities for them. They had then to compete with the Assamese middle class who had been occupying a dominant position in the services and petty trade. As in the case of the Assamese middle class the Bodo elite too in its present stage do not have the resources to compete with the big business and therefore they had to compete with the Assamese middle class only. The big brotherly attitude of the Assamese added fuel to the fire. A similar pattern is emerging among the Karbis and the Mishings also. With the formation of the Missing Kebang the Missing language has also acquiring an ethno-consolidating role. This will inevitably lead to nationality consciousness and related political aspirations.

It is important to understand that these elites realise that their interests can be pursued, in the face of the dominant position of the Assamese middle class, only if the lower strata of their respective communities are mobilised. In their attempt at such mobilization they find that the cultural and ethnic issues are intricately woven with the economic issues. The nationality question thus acquires very great importance for them. The nationality aspirations of the communities like the Bodos have obviously come into conflict with the nationality aspirations of the Assamese. The most dominant section of the Assamese have always considered these communities and their culture as a part of the composite Assamese culture. But despite the contributions they made these

communties have also maintained their cultural, and particularly their linguistic identities. It is only natural that the emergence of educated elites in these communities should sharpen their consciousness and should lead to the emergence of nationality aspirations. It is not within the powers of the Assamese Middle class to create conditions for allowing the smaller nationalities to be equal partners in the State of India; but they can definitely take a more tolerant view of these struggles. If the situation is to be eased they must at least grant some concessions to these nationalities and must not do anything to hamper their growth. It is true that history has shown that despite the concessions the Assamese Middle class had wrested from the comparatively more advanced Bengali Middle class in Assam, the problems of the Assamese are not solved. A section of this class did get certain benefits no doubt, but the problems remained and despite all facilities there is still increasing unemployment and frustrations in the ranks of the Assamese Middle class. It is therefore quite possible to argue that the concessions demanded by the emerging middle classes of the Bodos, Karbis or Mishings will not solve the problems of the Bodo, Karbi or Mishing masses. Though there is some truth in this argument yet it cannot be expected to be considered sympathetically by the elites of these communities because they would interpret it as an attempt at clouding issues raised by them. There is also a possibility of this argument being used by the chauvinist sections of the Assamese Middle class to deny these smaller communities a better deal. There is no doubt that a lasting solution to the problems of all these communities can be found only outside the path of development chosen by the state of India but that would require an united fight by all the smaller communities of India. Such a struggle should preferably be led by progressive forces of these

communities. An united stand of the small communities of the North-Eastern region of India could be a step towards this goal. But such an unity can be achieved only if the elites of the smaller communities are treated as equals by the relatively advanced Assamese Middle class. They can fight unitedly against the process of inequality inherent in the capitalist path of development only if there is no serious conflict among themselves. But in contemporary Assam the elites and middle classes of most communities are competing among themselves for dominant positions. The elites of the relatively more advanced communities invariably try to dominate the comparatively less advanced communities. The attitude of the leaders of the Bodoland movement towards the Koch Rajbangshis and the response of the later explain this rather vividly. While the Bodos claim that the Koch Rajbangshis are a part of the Bodo people the Rajbongshis vehemently oppose this. [92] A similar situation exists in Karbi-Anglong where the Dimasas are apprehensive of the 'expansionist' designs of Karbis. These apprehensions have not yet been properly articulated by the educated elites of the Dimasas mainly because they are involved in a struggle along with the Karbis against the hegemony of the Assamese speaking middle class of the Brahmaputra valley. But in any political discussion the educated Dimasas never fail to mention their separate cultural identity. The situation is so complex that it is not possible to devise any solution. It appears that each ethnic community with any distinct language or dialect will eventually claim a nationality

92. In a Seminar on "Nation Building, Development and Communication" held in Dibrugarh University in March 1987, Dr. H.N.Dutta, the then President of the Koch-Rajbangshi association repeatedly argued that they were not a part of the Bodo people and that they do not support the Bodoland agitation.

status which in turn will generate political demands. The Assamese middle class will have to face this reality and must accommodate the new social forces. If they do that the assimilation process may resume because Assamese language will remain the *lingua-franca.* But if they remain as intolerant as they are today tensions will not only continue but such tensions in the long run seriously disrupt the social and political development in the area.