

Student Movements in Assam

Meeta Deka

The book is a pioneer attempt at a comprehensive study of student movements in Assam, covering a time-span of over a century, 1853-1985. Student movements of Assam occupy a unique place in world history having a record of sustenance for a six-year period, 1879-84. The book highlights both the non-violent nationalist and the Leftist trends, within colonial situations and without, using oral history as a basic tool to fill in certain blanks or to corroborate facts. The work analyzes the political, cultural and socio-economic roots of such movements.

A multi-disciplinary and a comparative approach has been adopted to study such a complex problem; the attempt to study student organisation and their movements, with the help of an integrated systems approach, has never been adopted in earlier historical writings.

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Meeta Deka has worked extensively on the student movements of Assam for both her M.Phil and Ph.D degrees, completed under the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya. She has presented a large number of papers in seminars and has published articles in various newspapers and journals of the northeast. She is presently teaching at St. Anthony's College, Shillong.

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Printed at Ramprintograph, Delhi-

To my parents

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Meeta Deka

Preface

Of late, there has been a demand from historians that history must become broader, more inclusive and more concerned with the deeper aspects of human experience, followed by a reconsideration of the purposes and methods of history. Such a demand, however, does not diminish the historian's role in society and as long as society seeks knowledge of the past, the historian must accept his responsibility to society, without violating his responsibility to the past. With this in mind, the main objectives of this work include:

- (i) An analysis of the political, cultural and socio-economic roots of student protests in Assam;
- (ii) Identification of the factors that motivated them into political action;
- (iii) Highlight the intensity, continuity and special features of student movements in Assam and compare the same with student movements elsewhere in the world.

Again, student movements have developed into a world phenomenon attracting social scientists and national policy-makers to this field of study. The fact that student movements have been variously termed as student unrest, student indiscipline, student revolt, student power, students under stress, student protest, etc., implies the complexity of such a study and as such, demands a multi-disciplinary approach with the objectivity of a historian; a purely historical analysis would be inadequate. The present work is an attempt towards the fulfilment of such a demand.

A study of students protests and movements in both developed and developing countries, within colonial situations and without, reveals that Assam's case is unique. This is substantiated by the fact that it is only in Assam that a student organisation formed a government after a six-year prolonged mass movement of enormous dimension (1979-84).

This study is limited to the student movements of the Brahmaputra Valley for three reasons:

- (i) The students of the Surma Valley largely belonged to the Bengal Congress or to the All Bengal Students Union;
- (ii) The Asom Chattra Sanmilan mainly covered the Brahmaputra Valley districts; and
- (iii) The Indian National Movement had little or no impact on the hill regions while the post-independence period saw a breakaway of the hill areas from Assam.

While Chapter I deals with the various approaches to the study of student movements in general and the approach accepted in this work, the other chapters are arranged in chronological order based on dates that are historically significant in the history of Assam:

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Period</i>
II	1853-1905
III	1905-1930
IV	1930-1947
V	1947-1960
VI	1960-1972
VII	1972-1985

I have tried to take care in presenting the facts without bias; if any has apparently crept in, it is unintentional. The opinions or inferences drawn are entirely mine without ill-will to any person or organisation, living or dead.

Meeta Deka

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Student Movements

In recent decades, student movements have been recognised as a world phenomenon and the fact that such movements have become more organised, more widespread and even violent, having a great impact on policy-making, educational as well as political, in many countries, especially in the developing nations, has drawn the attention of governments as well as social scientists. An analysis of student movements in both the developed and the developing nations, not only focuses on the students and their movements as a dynamic force for change, be it educational, social, economic or political, but at times as “a reactionary force upholding traditional elements in the society,”¹ as Altbach puts it, and in so doing reflects the larger social system, of which the student is an integral part.

In Assam, however, we seldom find instances which may ascribe the students as a reactionary force. Some Leftists have proclaimed student organisations in Assam as being reactionary in the sense that they take up issues like linguistic and cultural identity, which according to those Leftists, strengthen divisive forces and thus act as a stumbling block on the path of unity of progressive forces. Even this is questionable because if we visualise regional and cultural identity as progressive, then even such positions cannot be termed ‘reactionary’.

The frequency and intensity of student movements has stimulated various approaches to the study of its causes, nature and future trend from the individual to the organisational behaviour pattern, from the

sociological, educational, economic, political to the psychological and philosophical perspectives.

A sociological approach defines student movements as “a deeper problem of social change”. Cormarck, for instance, states that any attempt to isolate the antecedent variables of student indiscipline must fit into the psycho-cultural gestalt or a sequence of life experiences extending to socio-economic changes, changes in structure of family, marital problems, religion and politics. In fact, Cormarck symbolises these changes that are taking place in India as “the struggle between *Lakshmi* and *Saraswati*”. She believes that India’s problem is not “student indiscipline”, “corruption” or “party politics”—it is the deeper problem of social change. In stable societies, culture largely makes the man, and in societies undergoing social change, man largely moulds culture.² Such an approach may be suitable to Indian conditions but at the same time, the historical roots would be ignored. Moreover, it would not suffice to explain the rise of student movements in stable democratic society like the UK or USA.

On the other hand, advocates of the Parsonian framework, Clark & Clark, for instance, hold that earlier theoretical formulations about the social and psychological sources of student movement, apparent in the works of Parsons,³ are important for understanding the emergence of self-conscious oppositional youth cultures and movements. Clark & Clark state that at first glance, these theorists, who tend to see American youth as relatively well-integrated into the larger society, would seem to be unhelpful in providing a framework to explain the emergence of a radical student movement, yet “in developing our own hypotheses we have drawn freely on their work”.

The main lines of the argument made by Parsons and Eisenstadt is that self-conscious sub-cultures and movements among adolescents tend to develop when there is a sharp distinction between the values and expectations embodied in the traditional families in a society and the values and expectations prevailing in the occupational sphere. “The greater the disjunction, the more self-conscious and oppositional will be the youth culture”.⁴

In the same context, Richard Flacks interprets two sets of interrelated conditions:

When they (students) have been marginal in the labour market because their numbers exceed the opportunities for employment commensurate with their abilities and training. This has most typically been the case in colonial and underdeveloped societies; "When they found that the values with which they were closely connected by virtue of their upbringing no longer were appropriate to the developing social reality. This has been the case most typically at the point where traditional authority has broken down due to the impact of westernisation, industrialisation or modernisation.

Flacks emphasises that the case of breakdown of traditional authority is most typically the point at which youth movements have emerged and historically he identifies a second point of time when intellectuals were radicalised.⁵

Such an approach would be inadequate to explain the emergence of student movements in the absence of the above factors. In fact, Baruah argues that if such be the factors, students movements ought not to occur in more stable democracies like the USA, France, England, while they ought to be more frequent in the developing countries. However, history has proved otherwise. He further argues that this perspective fails to account for the fact that student movements emerge not only in the countries where such factors are present but also in the ones where they do not exist. It also falls short of explaining why in particular societies students agitate over issues not relating to the occupational structure or to the problem of discontinuity of values and role expectations. More important, it does not explain reasons that enable them to mobilise mass support.

Such inadequacies, Baruah maintains, can be overcome by the Marxist framework. But then again, since such a framework examines all social questions from a class perspective and since students do not constitute a class by themselves, it will be difficult for the Marxist perspective to explain student movements.⁶

In the Marxist view, the students represent the various classes they come from and their social and political activities are guided largely by their class interest, but they might even overcome the class constraints in the intellectual environment. The origin of 'consciousness' lies in socio-productive activity of people which involves social relations with one another. Hence all social consciousness, including those of students

are closely related to the legal and political super-structure which is founded upon the production relations of that society. These relations of production lead to a division of society into classes. The position of each class and their consciousness in the final analysis, are determined by the position of these classes within the process of production. Baruah points out that the students belonging to various classes in a society cannot, therefore, have similar consciousness. The consciousness of a student from a bourgeois socio-economic background will be different from a proletarian or peasant background.⁷

Baruah affirms that the explanation of such situations are enfolded into what Gramsci called the "hegemony". Gramsci maintained that by hegemony of the dominant classes in civil society meant their ideological predominance over the subordinate classes. The students as receptive members of the intelligentsia, are exposed to this hegemony. It would, therefore, be necessary in the study of the student movements not merely to locate the class which apparently rules, but also to locate the class which exercises hegemony in that particular society at that particular phase in history.⁸

Such a perspective underlines the hegemonic influence as imperative to the growth of any student movement. Student movements have often occurred independently and have developed into autonomous revolts. This approach may not explain norm-oriented agitations relating to campus issues. For instance, the agitation for the establishment of a university in Assam is an issue which is not determined by class interests but students often get involved in such movements. An analysis of such struggles or movements would be possible from neither the Marxist perspective nor the Gramsci model.

The recognition that student movements reflect the larger social system does not necessitate a study of such movements as operating within two structures, namely the educational structure which is within the administrative power structure of the society, whose norms, values and aspirations shape and guide student behaviour patterns to a large extent.⁹ In fact, a study confined to interactions within the two structures would expose the inadequacy of the approach to explain situations in which students take up issues not connected with these structures. Hence such approaches give one-sided pictures which need to be integrated into a total image.

Nagel conceptualises the integrated total image within a framework of a 'world cultural revolution', identifying similar features in the specific situations in which students all over the world operate.¹⁰ Baruah rightly argues that such a framework ignores the determinate situations in which students of determinate societies operate— "the approach therefore interpolates the idea in the place of historical phenomena. It substitutes the concrete determinate society with society in general. And thus it enters the realm of metaphysics". He further states that although science and technology have made the world smaller and as a result events in any part of the world may have a direct influence on another, the determinate societies and the specific situations cannot be considered irrelevant.¹¹

Similarly the comparative approach to the study of student movements as utilised by S.M. Lipset, Ailem Ross, Philip Altbach in his later works. Others have helped in the establishment of generalization all over the world, with sharp distinctions in the developed and developing countries. Such a general and comparative study no doubt is interesting, but may however over/look the regional variations and fail to explain why certain features emerge in totally adverse situations. At the same time, such a study may be essential as a backdrop to the understanding of the regional variations itself.

Systems Analysis has been one of the most dominant methodological trend in social sciences; almost all branches of social sciences have come under its influence. While systems studies in sociology, economics and political science have become rather common, such a use in History is rare. Therefore an attempt is made to study student organisations and their movements as an Open System, the basis of such a model being the dynamic interaction of its components.

Bertalanffy had stated that while sociology and presumably history, deal with informal organisations, another development made by W.G. Scott in 1963¹² is the theory of formal organisations, that is, structures instituted in a planned manner, such as those of an army, bureaucracy, business enterprise, etc. This theory is 'framed in a philosophy which accepts the premise that the only meaningful way to study organisation is to study it as a system', systems analysis treating 'organisation as a system of mutually dependent variables'; therefore,

'modern organization theory leads almost inevitably into a discussion of general system theory'. To quote Ackoff:

Systems, of course, have been studied for centuries, but something new has been added The tendency to study systems as an entity rather than a conglomeration of parts is consistent with the tendency in contemporary science to no longer isolate phenomena in narrowly confined contexts, but rather to open interactions for examination and to examine larger and larger slices of nature.¹³

Hence, based on Bertalanffy's definition of a system as a "complex of elements standing in interaction There are general principles holding for systems, irrespective of the nature of the component elements, and of the relations or forces between them",¹⁴ student organisation may be considered as a totality of many, inter-related, inter-dependent parts or sub-systems put together to achieve the organisational objectives, and therefore as a system. Its various divisions and departments are its sub-systems and at the same time it is a sub-system of the environmental system within which it operates. The environment itself consists of social, economic, political, cultural, legal, etc. sub-systems.

Social scientists have developed various frameworks, based on the systems approach to study particular realities concerning respective areas of interest. One such attempt in the field of political analysis is found in the writings of David Easton. The general premises of David Easton's Systems frame¹⁵ may be helpful for this particular study and for the construction of a model. Firstly, it is useful to conceptualize student organisation as a system for the purpose of analysis. Secondly, the existence of an environment of which the student organisation is a sub-system and which affects a direct and constant interaction between the two. Thirdly, what Easton characterizes as 'Response' may be related to the process or operation by which the sub-systems relate to one another and by process is meant those planned activities which affect the performance of the entire system. To quote Easton :

Variations in the structures and processes within a system may usefully be interpreted as constructive or positive alternative efforts by members of a system to regulate or cope with stress flowing from environmental as well as internal sources.¹⁶

FIG- 1: STUDENT ORGANISATION AS AN OPEN SYSTEM

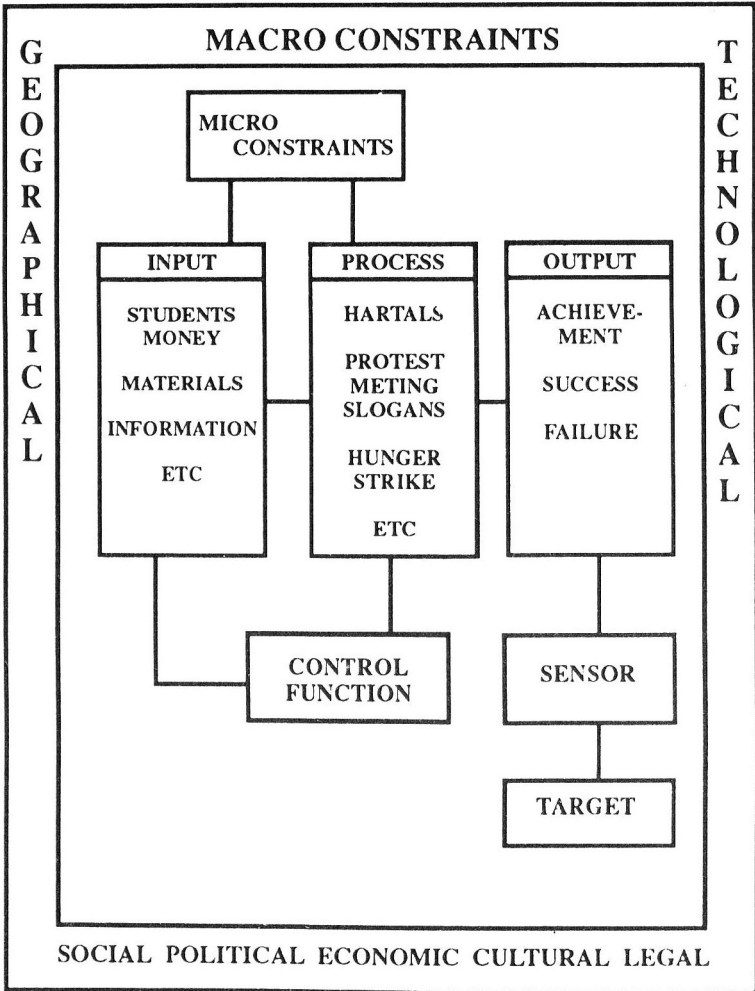


Fig. 1

Fourthly, the feedback mechanism exists to ensure the capacity of a system to persist in the face of stress. A system always seeks an equilibrium state, that is, where all the sub-systems are at the optimum level, in tune with each other, and the desired output is achieved. In an open system, this level of equilibrium is never static but always dynamic. This is because the environment is always changing and since the open system is interacting all the time with environment, what may have been an equilibrium level today, may not be so tomorrow.

Figure 1 illustrates student organisations and their movements as a system, which is again a sub-system of the environment which itself consists of many sub-systems. The input may be considered as a direct impact of environment which could be defined in terms of students, money, materials, information, etc., the most important of which is the flow of information as far as student movements are concerned. The processes could be defined as the activities or operations involving student movements such as *satyagraha*, *hartals*, protest meetings, processions, slogans, hunger strikes, etc. The sensor identified as the state executive body or the advisory committee evaluates the output and the target with feedback for corrective action for the next input. The control function could be identified as the government, the police or public opinion in which case the sensor would be the Police, C.I.D., etc. The Inputs and the Process function within constraints which may be of two types : (1) micro-constraints and (2) macro-constraints.

Micro-constraints affect the immediate or direct environment with which the students are concerned, for example, obligation to parents—since they are dependent on them financially, institutional rules and regulations and arrest of leaders, government orders, circulars, etc. in times of crisis. Macro-constraints imply the constraints of the larger social and cultural set-up, legal, political, technological, economic and geographical sub-systems within the environment. The micro constraints determine to a large extent the severity and sustenance of a particular movement.

However, an examination of this approach points out the incapability of the systems frame to envisage the student within a microscopic macroscopic range. By outlining a boundary, even if at the conceptual level, we cannot study student organisations and their movements in the national and international settings. Moreover, it

implies the danger of oversimplification by reducing reality to a conceptual skeleton of a complex phenomenon as the students movements in Assam. In fact, the systems frame has its own inherent weaknesses in that, as critics pointed out,¹⁷ it is incapable of explaining social conflict or particularly the processes of fundamental social change—it assumes the existence of an equilibrating mechanism in the systems under study. If the systems model cannot handle change it implies a status quo and, therefore, in any social analysis this may lead to a distorted picture of the reality. To quote Allen :

There is a qualitative difference between perceiving reality as consisting of systems pervaded by consensus with given structures capable of experiencing only limited changes in their superstructures, on the one hand and perceiving it as an interrelating entity, beset with contradictions which are capable of transforming it.¹⁸

The systems approach may also be incapable of highlighting the transitory nature of student movements, a feature that characterises student movements in both the developed and the developing nations :

Regardless of the type, function or size, student groups are unstable. This is due to the rapidly changing nature of the student population, but also to the changing interests of the students themselves... In the last analysis, the transitory nature of the student groups is one of their dominant characteristics and a key element in the understanding of the student community.¹⁹

Systems Analysis would fall short of explaining the Leftists orientation of student movements or the establishments of terrorist organisations like the *Mrytu Bahini*, for example. The open systems model, therefore, while it fails to explain the historical truth, stands as a mere illustrative model to emphasise the interaction between student movements and environment and the constraints within which they function.

Hence student movements and their organisations will have to be understood against the backdrop of the entire environment, encompassing the educational, political, social, and economic situations. In a still broader perspective, this study should envisage the student not merely in the environment or society but also in the national and international setting; a microscopic - macroscopic range of study.

Viewed thus, student movements of any state or country cannot be treated in isolation, or studied strictly from the historical point of view. To quote Bakke:

If one were to follow wherever the problem (student activism) led, even with respect to the interpretation of student activism as a group phenomenon with societal consequences, he would have to be trained at a minimum as a social psychologist, a cultural anthropologist, a sociologist, a political scientist, an institutional economist, a historian, and from time to time as a philosopher.²⁰

Bakke's position is a justification of why a phenomenon like the student movement should involve multi-disciplinary concepts and approach. Similarly, Altbach considers it to be "a mistake to suggest that psychological and sociological methods are the only valid means for analyzing student movements, just as a sole dependence on historical analysis would be inadequate".²¹

The emergence of the student community as a new social force, with an environment serving as stimuli to student movements suggest the occurrence of various types of student activism in Assam. The types of operation may be classified as Smelser had done into "norm-oriented and value-oriented movements". Norm-oriented student movements are generally concerned with a specific grievance or a goal, and do not often have a broader ideological overtone. The norm oriented movements take up campus issues like the reduction of fees, hostel facilities, attendance percentage, participation in university administration, etc. The norm-oriented movement is unlikely to maintain itself after its goal has been attained, although such movements often provide an impetus for further operations.

On the other hand, the value-oriented movements are concerned with broader ideological issues and when they are involved in concerted actions, these activities are usually linked directly to a broad concern.²² Value-oriented movements take up socio-economic or political issues and hence the movements for the independence of India may be classified as value-oriented issues. Issues like the language issue, West Bengal's claim before the State's Reorganisation Committee, the refinery movement, the Federal Plan, the food crisis, medium of instruction and the agitation against the foreign nationals, are other examples.

Smelser has been strongly criticised for his rigid separation of norm-and value-oriented movements. Paul Wilkinson stated in his "Social Movement" that "the norm / value distinction is helpful only if it is both precisely defined and meaningful in its application to real movements. In practice, one movement's norm may be another movement's value. In the deep American South the existence of discrimination against Negroes has for long been a norm. To the Negroes seeking the abolition of such discrimination the achievement of civil rights and social equality has become a value".²³

Moreover, M.S.A. Rao argues that ideology is an important component of a social movement as it distinguishes it from the general category of movements involving collective mobilization and is oriented towards change; "for example, a student strike involves collective mobilisation and is oriented towards change. But in the absence of an ideology, a strike becomes an individual and isolated event, and not a movement. On the contrary, if a strike is organised by a student organisation with a defined ideology, it becomes an event in that student movement."²⁴

Hence, for the purpose of the present study, recognising the fallacies of Smelser's norm/value classification, the terms have been used in this study in the context of Philip Altbach's application.

Altbach points out that while norm and value orientation offer some useful models for the study of student movements, student movements often do not function within the tight compartmentalisation of either category. What may start as a norm-oriented movement aiming at particular campus changes or the like, could eventually become a value-oriented one, extending to the broader society and committed to doctrines of Marxism, Hinduism and other ideological aspects. Similarly, it is possible for a norm-oriented leadership to be supplanted by students interested in capitalising on a particular movement for broader issues. Moreover, a value orientation does not prevent students from participating in limited campaigns or agitations, although such participation is usually done for reasons transcending the specific objectives. So far as student movements are concerned, value orientation has a more important and longstanding impact and is often a leading element in apparently norm-oriented actions. The two aspects may co-exist, overlap and therefore it is difficult to categorise them.

This is so especially because the leadership of a seemingly norm-oriented group may be ideologically sophisticated and able to channelise the attention of the participants of the protest or agitation to broader issues.²⁵ In a review of student agitation all over India, the cases of Gujarat and Bihar, for example, clearly show that at certain historical times, student movements that began as norm-oriented eventually transformed into value orientation. Such instances have been rare in the history of student movements in Assam. The students are generally unaware of such distinctions, but for the convenience of the study of students movements these two sets of criteria should be clear—first, because they are a valuable tool in understanding a specific student movement and secondly, because it is possible for student movements to manifest different orientations over a period of time.²⁶ Hence, in studying student movements in Assam for the entire span of almost a century, the classification of issues may be extremely helpful although in most cases we find the overlapping of the two, or one followed by the other in succession.

Although generalisations of student movements cannot be inferred, since situations and conditions giving rise to such movements or agitations vary from country to country, and state to state, a general and comparative study of the student movements all over the-world is essential to understand the nature and character of student movements of any state or country. This is more important in the case of Assam considering its unfavourable internal conditions and its strategic location, and the birth of historical and sociological factors by virtue of its location.

In the developed countries students movements have often been described as a form of adjustment to conditions brought about by the new affluence, while in the developing countries, although conditions are contrary—the reverse of affluence—yet student movements could also be explained as forms of adjustment to changes brought about by the transformation from traditional life to modernity. Ross points out that in large countries, students may be attracted by many issues and cites the example of the United States where students have been oriented towards the Civil Rights Movement, some towards educational reforms and some towards the war in Vietnam. However, she identifies diversification in developing countries too. In Nigeria from January

1959 to June 1960, Nigerian students protested against Prime Minister Harold Macmillan for the United Kingdom's passive attitude towards apartheid and African nationalism, against the South Africans for the Sharpsville shootings, against the French for testing atomic weapons in the Sahara, against the Eastern Regional Government for a pension bill and against the Western Regional Government for a Housing bill.²⁷ This is also true of student movements in Assam where students take up not only campus issues but also issues relating to the socio-economic problems in the region, particularly in the post-independence era.

Michener identifies a tendency of student movements in both affluent and developing nations towards violence arising when a country is going through a political crisis, an example of which is the role of Hungarian students in 1956 against Russian invasion. The students spearheaded the rebellion, destroyed buildings, burned propaganda and newspaper offices, commanded teams of young boys and girls, and tackled Russian tanks with handmade bombs.²⁸ The case of India too represents this tendency among a sizable number of the student community, the political crisis being the struggle for independence. In fact, a study of the student movements in the Brahmaputra valley in the colonial period exposes two conflicting tendencies.²⁹ While the general tendency is to opt for non-violence, there is a simultaneous and obvious tendency towards violence. The tendency towards non-violence is peculiar to any colonial society. Fanon explains this in the Algerian context where he marks the tendency of a colonial society to take up non-violence or a policy towards collaboration with the foreign rulers to seek their own ends, for the reason that the bourgeoisie or the elite, speculates in the unleashing of violence, a threat to their own status.³⁰ When the non-violent methods prove ineffective, rise of extremism or violence is certain. In fact, while Gandhi intended to sway the young people or the student community from violence to non-violence, he had actually introduced the growth of revolutionary ideas in an intense degree. The two conflicting tendencies are apparent in the students movements of Assam as not necessarily succeeding one another but even co-existing. The existence of these tendencies, however, are not conspicuous in the

post-independence era, although spurts of violent incidents did occur during particular times of crisis.

These conflicting tendencies can also be seen in the French student movement "Liberte", founded in 1937, for whereas in certain circles there has been a display of "pacifism at any price", there has also been a tendency towards a policy of firmness, for all those who realised that it was the only solution for French security.³¹ In later years, however, French Student movements showed strong inclination towards the extreme left. The Student revolt of May 1968, led by Daniel Cohn Bendit against the regime of General de Gaulle is an example.

Curiously enough, a tendency towards non-violence was identified even in West Germany after two of their ranks were killed in the riots and Rudi Dutschke was in a critical condition. Anthony Terry from Berlin stated "From the deadly havoc of riots, militant West German students this week salvaged a wish to try the non violent way of protest" . This crucial issue was debated upon by 2000 students at the Auditorium Maximum of the Technical University and in the student leaders' "Cabinet Room". Non-violent ways meant ban on brick-throwing, window-smashing and Molotov cocktails and "new tactics, more like India's Civil Disobedience Campaign" were to be tried. Such methods did not find expression: firstly, because of police strong counter measures and, secondly, because a great majority of West Berlin University students were hardcore communists who fled East Germany and were trained in communist "Free German Youth ". Only a small group was Maoist. Rudi Dutschke, a West Berlin refugee from East Germany, was sharply critical of Russia as a reactionary country and argues that violence in western countries is unnecessary "because the gentlemen who rule us are merely functionaries, replaceable at any time by new mask-like bureaucratic figures ; we cannot even hate them, they are prisoners, and victims of the oppressive machinery of the capitalistic exploitation process."³²

George Gross described the French student movement as one that acted as a detonator and catalyst of a chain reaction which eventually brought millions of workers out on strike, thus precipitating an unprecedented situation. It represented a new political united front with strong connection with the French Communist Party, consisting of the farmers, the working class and the students in the face of disintegration



of the power of the Gaullist Regime.³³ The students in Paris carried banners on which they inscribed : “Etudiants, Enseignants, Travailleurs Solidarisent” (Students, Teachers and Workers Unite).³⁴

Gross explained that confronted with the problems of society as a whole, where conflicts are already largely institutionalised as a result of trade union activity and state intervention, the student-worker alliance faces problems of a quite different order which require organisation of a much more intensive kind. Nevertheless, the achievements of the student-worker alliance in May, however short-lived, were the first moves in a long term struggle.³⁵

This trend was apparent also in the German student movement of 1968, consisting of varied political groups ranging from the Christian Democrats (RCDS) to the Liberal Students (ISD), the more moderate Socialist Students (SHB) and the radical Socialist Federation of Students (SDS), organised by hardcore radical Leftists like Rudi Dutschke, which sought to overthrow the establishment by violence, which to them was autocracy in the guise of liberal democracy. Initially the entire revolt started as a demonstration in Frankfurt against higher public transport fares.³⁶ Eva Weller and Wilfred Van der Will pointed out that although students reject heroes and leaders as yet another kind of authoritarianism, yet some of their speakers, Rudi Dutschke for instance, were hailed as symbolic figures of revolt created by the personality cult of the mass media. They explained that on the basis of a Marxist analysis of advanced capitalism, both the radical democrats and the socialist groups accept Marcuse’s concept of revolutionary change in highly industrialised countries.³⁷ The SDS considers the students as potential revolutionaries, not taking the place of, but stimulating and supporting the repressed classes on which Marx and his followers based their theory of social change. Weller and Will suggest that this solidarity between students and workers, in a sense presuppose a revolution and instances of which are their rejection of “emergency laws”, May Day demonstration, etc.³⁸

What is significant in the history of student movements of Assam is the fact that a student-worker alliance, as has been traced in the highly industrialised countries of Germany and France, has also been identified in Assam, a small economically backward state in a developing country, from the late 1930’s and have developed into a

tradition in recent times. This feature has been highlighted from chapter 4 onwards.

The realisation of the limitations within which the ruling authority operate hindered student movements in Great Britain. Joseph Newman analyses that the mobilisation of students in Great Britain has been chiefly over issues in 'which the liberal idea contradicted the technocratic reality'. He points out that the student movement at Essex uncovered "the circumscribed limits within which Bourgeois toleration and free speech operate"; as well as "the limits imposed by meritocratic rationale on effective student participation, a rationale whose norms and measures cannot be questioned". The formation of student action committees in Great Britain was a preliminary step towards mass mobilisation & politicization of the students, but such ends had been rarely achieved and this explains why movements in Great Britain could never really take root and gain momentum.³⁹

Like in France and even West Germany, students of the United States have played the role of catalysts for powerful social movements, the anti-Vietnam war movement and the movement for civil rights for example. American students in the early 1960's concentrated interest on arms race and nuclear testing, and when in 1963 the test ban was achieved, students turned to Civil Rights, problems of the poor in urban slum ghettos, the war in Vietnam, conscription etc.⁴⁰

The Left influence in the US saw dramatic student political activity at the Berkeley University in 1964. About 50 Berkeley Negro students spent several hours a week tutoring Negro students in local secondary schools, motivating them to become college students like themselves. In addition, Berkeley students voluntarily taught in a local prison school, spent four to six weeks in the summer teaching and directing recreation in a school for children of poor farm workers, helped juvenile delinquents, raised thousands of dollars in contributions to help students in other countries and tutored pre-school students in slum areas. More than 1500 Berkeley students were actively engaged in Community service projects.⁴¹

Lipset stated that while Berkeley and its repercussions have been discussed in detail in a political context, the fact is that Berkeley acted as a catalyst not only for students activity, but also for scholarly interest in student agitation and political organisation.⁴²

Altbach described student movements in America as catalyst for powerful social movements.⁴³ Flacks indicated that the Berkeley student movement represents a social phenomenon of considerable significance for two reasons. First, it had an important direct and indirect impact on the larger society; second it emerged as a phenomenon that was unanticipated even by the professional social scientists themselves.⁴⁴ The Editorial on the student revolt in *California Monthly*, February 1965 read :

It is quite frightening that force, intimidation and deliberate violation of rules all occurred on the campus of one of the country's most distinguished educational institutions.

The editorial referred to "the tragic events" that had occurred and declared that the situations had developed into a "virtual civil war without arms".⁴⁵

In 1960, the militant organisations of Japan, *Zengakuren*, launched a successful campaign and forced the resignation of the Kishi Government.⁴⁶ *Zengakuren's* politics had been consistently militant and oppositional in nature, attacking the ban of Leftist teachers in the schools, demanded increased democratisation of education and of course better conditions for the student themselves. *Zengakuren* developed as an independent political force. In 1960 the demonstrations against the US-Japan Security Treaty stimulated a major political crisis, and although the treaty was eventually signed, the Kishi Government was forced to resign under student pressure.⁴⁷

In the developing countries, student movements have had direct political and social impact but are not uniformly Leftist in their orientation. Indonesian students through the organisation known as PPMI (Perserikatan Perumpulan 2 Mahasiswa Indonesia) took effective participation in the revolutionary army that achieved Indonesian Independence.⁴⁸ Following independence, the Indonesian student movement, KAMI, was instrumental in toppling the Sukarno Regime in 1965. This very crucial participation of the Indonesian students was a reaction to the Leftist orientation of the ruling authorities at that time.⁴⁹

Student revolts were active during the last century of the Ottoman Empire, particularly from 1850 to 1920. Between 1960-61, the National

Turkish Students Federation (TMTF) and the National Turkish Students Union (MTTB) had been supported by funds from the National Budget and in 1968, student movements in Turkey took a violent turn. In fact it had been stated :

The importance of student organisations was dramatically demonstrated most recently in Turkey and Korea, where totally corrupt and dictatorial regimes capitulated under concerted and courageous student pressure. These two events, in April And May 1960, were important to the World Student Community and to the World Community at large for the clear demonstration they provided that students, with their conception of societies free from oppression, were not mere idealists to be relegated permanently to the social and political sidelines, but rather a key element in society intent on eliminating oppression wherever it exists.⁵⁰

The Democratic Student Organisation of Burma, dominated the student political life until 1952. However from 1955 to the military regime of power in 1962, the Rangoon University Students' Union (RUSU) and the All Burma Students' Union (ABSU) were controlled by the Burma Communist Party. In 1962, the RUSU organised a protest against the invasion of student freedom by the new government and the demonstration degenerated into a riot, after which the government took stern measures to curb student political activity and organisation.

The two neighbouring countries of East Pakistan and West Pakistan have also experienced series of student revolts, often suppressed by police intervention. For instance, on November 9, 1968, West Pakistan students demonstrated against President Ayub on his visit to Peshawar as a consequence of which the police tear-gassed the crowd. The same day about 3000 students defied a ban on public meetings to welcome Z.A. Bhutto, the former Foreign Minister. Again the following day student violence erupted in Rawalpindi in West Pakistan when police opened fire on students who were suspected to have been instigated by Bhutto. These demonstrations were a key element causing Ayub Khan's resignation in 1969.⁵¹

The historical roots of student movements in India lies in its relationship with the larger political protest demonstration that have transformed India from colonialism to a democracy. In the post-independence era student movement in the different states were

triggered by issues such as price rise and corrupt government as in Gujarat, or a demand for the reorganisation of the educational system in Bihar, corruption on the anti-Hindi language issue in Madras or the demand for the abolition of the detention rule of the first years of the three-year course in Hyderabad, or the anti-tramfare rise agitation of Bengal.

The pre-independence student movements of Bombay, as in any other state of India, followed a set pattern dictated by the upsurge of the Indian National Movement. Hence the organisational pattern of the student movements in Bombay during this period, reflects broader trends in Indian politics. The Leadership of the movement remained in the hands of the upper class politically oriented students, who began to experiment with agitational politics and with ideological issues during this period. Western political ideologies from Marxism to liberalism, had a strong impact on politically minded students. In the late 1930's to early forties, Altbach points out the politicization of the student movement. The transformation of the Congress into a broad based mass movement, attracted the student organisations beyond local campus issues, and in fact even campus issues became linked to outside political and national issues.

The Congress, the Congress socialists and the communists each looked upon the student community as the recruiting ground, which eventually caused a split at the Nagpur Session in December 1940 within the student organisation into the All India Students Federation (AISF) consisting of the communist majority and the All India Students Congress (AISC), consisting of the socialist-Gandhian group.⁵² In 1945, the student organisation was reconstituted under the All India Students Congress with the Nationalist AISF, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (the last two camps centred in Bengal), at the eighth session of the AISF in Bombay, with Headquarters at Bombay. The decline of the student movement was identifiable after 1942, more so, as the British authorities became more amenable to Indian self-government with the close of World War II.⁵³

The post-colonial period marked the tendency of the student organisation to alienate itself from the Congress, which has now become a political machine, and proposals for reforms were made in the interest of politics rather than of the educational system.

One of the major student movements of the post colonial period was that in Gujarat, 1973-74. The agitation started with a protest against the mess bills in the college hostels by students of the C.D. Engineering College of Gujarat University, developed into a widespread agitation against price rise and corruption, and culminated in a fight to overthrow the Ministry and secure the dissolutions of the Assembly. On the occasion of the two convocation addresses of Gujarat University held at Ahmedabad in October 1973 and of Saurashtra University in November students raised slogans like " We want jobs! Not merely degree certificates!". This clearly indicates the rise of student movements out of the growing unemployment in Gujarat.

Meanwhile, there occurred widespread discontent on the steep price rise resulting in *morchas*, *dharnas*, processions, public meetings and a widespread programme of *bandh* in different towns. Even after the bumper crop of groundnut oil in October, the price of groundnut oil did not decline. The government's failure to control the oil prices created suspicion among the people, and hence suspected corruption at the government level. In December the farmers agitated and violated the government levy rules on paddy and *bajra*. This was followed by widespread arrests. Soon the agitation turned into an anti-government movement in January 1974.⁵⁴ On January 25, a Gujarat *bandh* was observed and violence occurred the following day. This led the Chief Minister, Chimanbhai Patel, to go to Delhi and ask for provision of sufficient food grains to Gujarat and to hand over the Ahmedabad city to the army as the police had failed to control the situation. Ministers like Amul Desai, Divyakant Nanavati, Amar Singh Chaudhuri and Navin Chandra Navani made a fifteen point accusation against the Chief Minister, demanding his resignation within 48 hours or they would resign from the cabinet.⁵⁵ The students carried out anti-government campaigns in the by-elections to the Lok Sabha from the Sabarkantha district in December. They formed groups and went from village to village exhorting the voters to vote against the ruling party candidate. P.T. Kuriakose, Director of Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, stated that the importance of the Gujarat agitation lies not so much in the fact that it resulted in the change of government, but far more in the fact that a group of highly motivated young people could mobilise the whole population to struggle for a just cause, keep up the tempo, and even

increase the extent of popular participation in the face of stiff police action. "It was in fact", he believed, "a successful demonstration of youth power as an instrument of social change"⁵⁶ Sushila Mehta in a study of the Gujarat situation questions why students took up the challenge of controlling inflation and corruption at high levels, how they succeeded in toppling a government and if their success pertains to the rise of a new social class in the form of students' union to hold balance between various estates of power and privilege in the changing Indian society or if it bears no relation to the basic social structure.⁵⁷

The Gujarat agitation had an immediate influence on student movements in Bihar. On March 4, 1974, the Bihar Students Action Committee declared - *Gujarat ke jeet hamari hai, ab Bihar ke bari hai* (Gujarat's victory is ours, now it is the turn of Bihar). However, it was on February 17 and 18, 1974, that the State Student Leaders Conference held under the auspices of Patna University Students Union, inaugurated by the Vice-Chancellor, Patna University and presided over by Laloo Prasad Yadav, the then President of the Patna University Students Union, prepared an agitational approach to the prevailing problems. The leaders criticised the educational system and demanded its reorganisation to inculcate nationalism and economic and social consciousness among the students. They demanded the need for job-oriented education, lowering of the voting age, eradication of corruption and punishment of corrupt politicians and officers, equitable distribution of essential commodities, check on price rise of essential goods, solving the problem of unemployment of educated youth and also subsidised food in hostels, more hostels, more poverty-cum-merit scholarships, transport facilities and cheap stationery. The students resolved to launch a strong mass agitation for the fulfilment of the above demands at a conference.

The conference formed a Joint Action Committee to carry out its programme with Jayaprakash Narayan as their guide and advisor. They formed 'Students' Flying Squads' to check distribution of essential goods, and alerted the people against black-marketeers, hoarders and adulterators. The Bhagalpur University students also held a rally and threatened that "a river of blood will flow" if essential commodities were not made available at reasonable rates. The Bihar Student Movement soon became widespread with the demand of the resignation

of the ministry. J.P. Narayan issued the first demand for the resignation of the Chief Minister for his “monumental failure” on March 18, the very day the movement had started making impact on the first session of the Bihar Assembly. Outside the Assembly, there were cases of arson and the petrol pump near the assembly was burnt. The Institute of Engineers, the Patna Municipal Corporation office, restaurants and a number of commercial establishments remained closed. The old and the new secretariats and the Raj Bhavan were barricaded on the eve of the Assembly Session.⁵⁸

In January 1965 students in Madras had led anti-Hindi language riots and again in 1969, supported by the DMK (Dravida Munetra Kalagazam), students started anti-Hindi agitation by demonstrations, slogans, bandhs and gheraos. According to a research study conducted by Dr. E.M. George of Kerala University, 84 per cent of students and teachers interviewed affirmed that the main reason for such an activism is the affiliation of students union with political parties.⁵⁹ Students of Mysore and Bangalore organised a day of protest against the occupation of Indian territory by Communist China in 1962. Pamphlets were printed and on the protest day, students marched in a procession from their respective colleges to the central meeting place, Mysore Bank Square, shouting slogans against China. About 3000 students joined in and at the square they pledged “to fight to the last drop of our blood to save India”. They also organised strikes on various other issues such as the one in December 1963 which lasted for 37 days against the raise of tuition fees.

The developments in Bengal are important for the study of student movements in Assam, Bengal being her immediate neighbour. Around the 1870s, Ananda Mohan Bose established the Students’ Association in Bengal and when Surendra Nath Banerjee returned from England in 1875, Banerjee joined the Metropolitan College as a lecturer in English and began politicising the student community. On May 5, 1885, S.N. Banerjee was tried for contempt of court, convicted and sent to jail for two months. The students under the leadership of Ashutosh Mukherjee, went on a strike the day he was tried in Court.⁶⁰ The Bengal students were greatly attracted by the revolutionary groups like the *Anushilan* and *Jugantar*, rather than by the Indian National Congress in 1885. They were greatly influenced by Margaret Elizabeth Noble, later

known as Sister Nivedita, who came to India in 1898 and encouraged them to train themselves in the manufacture of bombs in the research laboratories of Jagadish Chandra Bose and P.C. Roy in Calcutta. Shortly after, in 1905, Curzon announced the partition of Bengal and this obviously made a great impact on Bengal and caused the students to actively participate in the fight for independence.

The tendency towards revolutionary terrorism in Bengal was very great and this was especially due to the coming together of Aurobindo Ghosh and Bankim Chandra. Aurobindo Ghosh's *Bhawani Mandir* and Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath* were privately circulated and they did much to inspire the revolutionary groups. This spirit continued between 1906-1918 and heightened in 1930 with the Chittagong Armoury Raid. The first effective students organisation in Bengal was the All Bengal Students Association, formed in 1928. The post-independence period saw Bengal students involved in the "anti-tramfare rise" agitation in July-August, 1962, participating in demonstrations and violence. Travelling without tickets in trains, trams and buses by a section of students had resulted in altercations between the students and the ticket checking staff culminating in strikes and demonstrations. In 1962, a number of trams went up in flames as a result of a clash between the employees of Calcutta Tram Company and a student travelling in a tram without a ticket.⁶¹ Repercussions of student movements in Assam is identifiable in Calcutta, an example of which among many instances, is the hunger strike by the students of Calcutta. On July 22, 1960 students like Madan Mohan Dobri and Krishnapada Bhakta had been on hunger strike at Ulubaria to express their resentment against atrocities in Assam regarding the language issue and demanding Central Government intervention to restore peace and security in Assam.⁶²

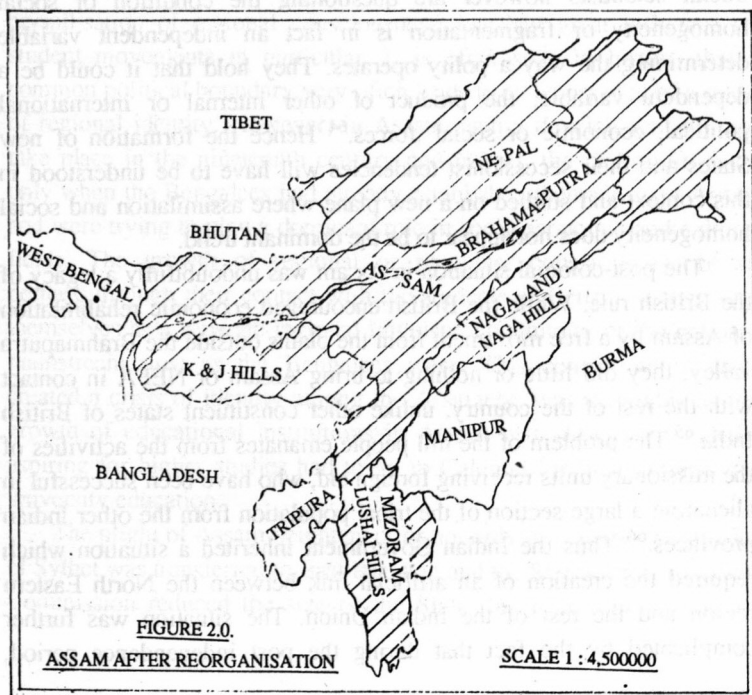
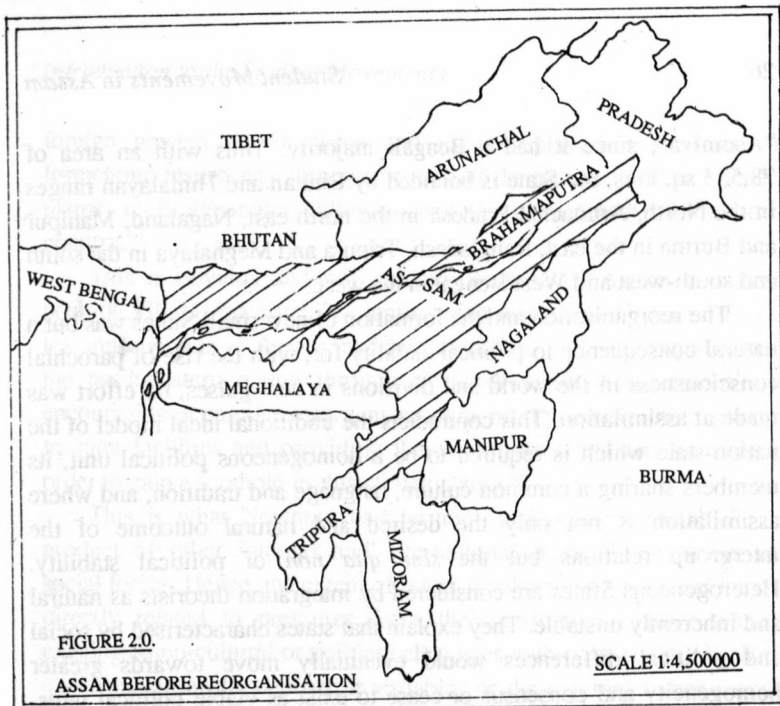
The case with student protests in Assam is strikingly different and a study of such movements cannot be made in isolation from its environment, especially when we consider the student as part of the educational system, which is itself within a larger social system. It is the geo-political history of Assam and its environmental influence which makes the history of student protest in Assam a unique one.

Assam occupies a position of great strategic importance in the map of India, sharing international borders with Bangladesh, Burma, China

and Bhutan, a factor responsible for making great impact on student movements in Assam. Despite her geographical isolation, Assam was never wholly isolated from the rest of India. The *Puranas*, *Tantra*, the epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* incorporated Assam as an integral part of India, where Assam is referred to as Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa. It was the Ahoms who wrote their *Burongis* or historical chronicles and gave the name "ASOM", referring to the uneven topography of the region in contrast to the adjacent plains of Bengal.

Politically, Assam was an independent state till its annexation by the British in 1826, terminating six hundred years of Ahom rule. It then included, besides Assam proper or the Brahmaputra Valley, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Cachar, Manipur, Naga Hills, Garo Hills and the Lushai (Mizo) Hills. Engulfing the whole of North East India with its many based languages and tribes, it was included in the presidency of Bengal and its importance did not rise to prominence. This was perhaps because of Calcutta's imposing fame as a port and jute milling centre, a "cosmopolitan enclave in a foreign land", as Broomfield puts it,⁶³ and also as the historic capital of India and Bengal, that it overshadowed the importance of its neighbour, Assam. In fact, since the birth of Calcutta as the major port and industrial capital during the early years of the East India Company's rule, the rest of Eastern India including the North East, served only as the hinterland for the growing Metropolis. In 1874 Assam was disintegrated from Bengal on grounds of overpopulation and administrative inconvenience and economy, rather than on regional homogeneity and made a Chief Commissioner's province under the direct control of the Governor General in Council. Thus except for a brief period, 1905-1912, when East Bengal was tagged with this province, the boundaries of Assam remained more or less the same from 1873-1947.

However, since 1947 boundary demarcations have been altered a number of times on racial and linguistic grounds so that by 1972, Nagaland was recognised as a separate State (1963), Meghalaya constituted into a State comprising of the Khasi and Jaintia hills and the Garo hills (1972), Manipur and Tripura became Union Territories and later States, and Mizoram, a Union Territory. Mikir hills and Cachar hills were recognised as autonomous districts and the district of Cachar was allowed to retain "Bangla" as the official language in place of



Map of Tibet

“Asomiya”, since it had a Bengali majority. Thus with an area of 78,523 sq. kms, the State is bounded by Bhutan and Himalayan ranges in the North, Arunachal Pradesh in the north-east, Nagaland, Manipur and Burma in the east, Bangladesh, Tripura and Meghalaya in the south and south-west and West Bengal in the west.

The reorganisation and the formation of new small States was but a natural consequence to political stability for, with the rise of parochial consciousness in the world and divisions in new guises, no effort was made at assimilation. This contradicts the traditional ideal model of the nation-state which is required to be a homogeneous political unit, its members sharing a common culture, language and tradition, and where assimilation is not only the desired and natural outcome of the intergroup relations but the *sine qua non* of political stability. Heterogeneous States are considered by integration theorists as natural and inherently unstable. They explain that states characterised by social and political differences would eventually move towards greater homogeneity and consensus or cease to exist as viable political units. Social scientists however are questioning the condition of social homogeneity or fragmentation is in fact an independent variable determining the way a polity operates. They hold that it could be a dependent variable, the product of other internal or international political, economic or social forces.⁶⁴ Hence the formation of new States and their secessionist tendencies will have to be understood in this context and studied on a new plane where assimilation and social homogeneity does not appear to be the dominant trend.

The post-colonial situation in Assam was undoubtedly a legacy of the British rule. While the British encouraged economic rehabilitation of Assam by a free movement from the plains outside the Brahmaputra valley, they did little or nothing to bring Assam or NEFA in contact with the rest of the country, unlike other constituent states of British India.⁶⁵ The problem of the hill people emanates from the activities of the missionary units receiving foreign aid, who have been successful in alienating a large section of the tribal population from the other Indian provinces.⁶⁶ Thus the Indian Government inherited a situation which required the creation of an artificial link between the North Eastern region and the rest of the Indian Union. The situation was further complicated by the fact that during the post independence period,

foreign powers nearer home and abroad, played a vital role in forming insurgency among a section of the frontier tribe in hills and plains, in Brahmaputra valley against the government of their own country.⁶⁷

This is obvious and not unlikely because of Assam's strategic position. Shukla specifically mentions the interest of China in the oil, tea and minerals of Assam, and her attempt to unite the population of the north-eastern region through a 'pan-Mongoloid movement' and encouraging separatist insurgent movements by giving them guerilla training facilities and providing them with arms and ammunitions in order to gain a foothold in this strategic area.⁶⁸

This is what Newman had termed "a dependent variable", the product of other internal and international political, economic and social forces. Hence, the extent of internal cohesion or divisions may be directly related to pressures from the environment rather than of existing ethno-cultural or political cleavages within the society itself.⁶⁹

Apart from the dependent variables or the external forces making its impact on the history of Assam, internal factors like the crystallisation of regional consciousness, has had great influence on student movements in particular. It is often seen in history that a common political boundary very often leads to an emergence of a sense of regional identity. However, in Assam such a development did not take place in the nineteenth century and in fact, the realisation came only when the Bengalees had already established themselves in Assam and were trying to play a dominant role in socio-economic and cultural fields. The growth of regional or parochial consciousness began perhaps through their contact with the students of Bengal, recognising themselves as a separate regional linguistic community of the national mainstream, just as the Bengalees were. This contact which later created a crisis of identity among the Assamese, was inevitable as the growth of educational institutions in Assam was slow, and students aspiring for higher studies had to go to Calcutta for their college and university education.

The plight of Assam heightened for not only the prosperous district of Sylhet was transferred to East Pakistan and the States Reorganisation Commission reduced the size of the State, but a constant inflow of

migrants of refugees as well as people from other states of India and Nepal settled in the State, changing the entire demographic character of the region. Since the early twentieth century, some economic development did take place and around 1905, a considerable number of peasants and workers from neighbouring Bengal, particularly the Bengali Muslim peasants, were employed in the agricultural fields, mines and plantations. It is this influx of migration that subsequently increased the population of Muslims in the Brahmaputra valley from 10 to 23 per cent between 1905 to 1941.⁷⁰ This inflow of migrants is best illustrated by Goswami and Gogoi by showing that the 1901 population figures include a large number of migrants from the neighbouring States, rather than of indigeneous people. There have been four large-scale streams of migrants. First, the tea garden labourers from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Central Provinces (MP), Orissa, recruits for the British plantation industry. Second, the land hungry Muslim peasants from the East Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur, who to escape oppression in their homeland, readily moved on to the virgin and fertile lands of Assam, Third, following the Bengal famine of 1943, there was a great influx of Bengalee Hindu refugees, particularly to the districts of Goalpara and Cachar. The fourth stream of migrants were the Nepali graziers settled in the hill slopes of Assam.⁷¹

As per the 1931 Census the Assamese people continued to be a minority linguistic group, constituting only 23 per cent while the Bengalees constituted 42 per cent.⁷²

In the light of this, one can visualize "a plural society" or "cultural pluralism" where two regional communities exist side by side, Assamese on one hand and Bengalees, on the other combining for a unified response to British imperialist impact at the national level, and yet mutually competing with each other at the regional level, in socio-economic, political and cultural spheres. This not only proves the inadequacy of the assimilationist model in segmented societies to explain and predict the dynamics of group relations, but also the importance of such relations for the structure and functioning of the State.

Neuman states that theorists are unable to explain why parochial identity becomes important at different historical periods and questions

why groups begin to feel separate from each other at one point of time and united at another and why in some countries are divisions highly politicised to a degree that threatens the survival of the political unit or the groups themselves, while in others political tension or conflict between groups do not seem to rise.⁷³

In the Assam situation, the feeling of unity between the two groups under the pressure of British imperialism is obvious, common grievances and a common colonial enemy are two major factors leading to such cohesion. The emergence of parochial consciousness is also not unexpected and it may be looked upon as the result of the socio-economic struggle between the two groups. This parochialism was highly evident when the *Asomiya Deka Dal* demanded the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, total ban on Bengalee immigration to the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of twenty years, strict naturalisation laws for resident Bengalee immigrants, outlawing all anti-Assamese organisations in the Brahmaputra Valley.⁷⁴ What began as mere parochial consciousness in the pre-independence period, became highly politicised, threatening the survival of the groups themselves in the post independence period at certain historical periods, say 1960s, for instance, and a study of the student movements in Assam would clearly expose this.

An explanation for this is that in the colonial period, the target was one - namely, the overthrow of British imperialism, whereas in the post colonial era, the target being removed, it resulted in a period of self-assertion, a fight for one's rights and a struggle for survival. It is in this context that the student movement in the colonial and post colonial period will have to be understood. Hence student movements in Assam from 1905-1947, emerged as movements at the regional level, arising primarily from socio-economic problems of the Assamese society, and later finding expression in the Indian National Movement, spellbound by the patriotic fervour to free the nation from alien control. This suggests that beneath the apparent nationalism, there were various local movements arising to secure particular goals. Anil Seal in his book maintains that what appears to be a united force of Indian Nationalism, was in reality a coalition of local movements with different aims.⁷⁵

During this period, the student movements of Assam did not emerge as movements themselves, but were part of Indian Nationalism combined with a sense of regionalism. However, in the post-colonial period they emerged as independent movements linked with socio-economic problems of the State.

The so-called "cultural pluralism" existing in the Assamese society can also be identified in Guyana (South America). The conflict there was between the Indians and the Africans, arising out of its lopsided demography. Descendants of Indian immigrants constituted a majority of the population and the competition for jobs and political office that marked the first phase of post colonial development and had been interpreted in terms of race, is in reality, Raymond T. Smith maintains, the legacy of colonial rule. This legacy at the same time is a barrier in the way of creating an integrated national society, not a perfectly homogeneous social and cultural entity, but one in which social differentiation and cultural diversity are contained within an institutional structure providing sufficient communicative efficiency to ensure that conflict over national objectives is controlled and informed. He further states that neither racial differences, nor cultural pluralism nor even primordial sentiments stand in the way of Guyanese integration. It is the whole complex of factors inherited from the colonial past, including the system of concepts that asserts the existence and significance of races and makes them available for the integration of social reality. "One dilemma is that it is impossible to transcend the colonial past by ignoring it, but the interpretation of that past becomes at the same time the charter for the future"⁷⁶

The disturbance of the socio-economic structure of Assam by the influx of migrants into the state increased the apprehension of the Assamese middle class for they realised that their cultural identity and economic structure was in danger. Thus Assamese nationalism began to take roots and the Assamese middle class who rallied the peasantry undertook the task of awakening "self-consciousness" among the Assamese community so that through its mobilisation, it could be transformed into a nationality to achieve goals of socio-economic, political and cultural significance.

This structural strain is therefore an important sociological factor encouraging student movements in Assam. It conforms to Neil J. Smelser's analysis of social movements. According to Smelser, a society must be structurally conducive to the development of the type of elementary collective behaviour that will lead to a social movement before one can arise. In other words, the conditions of the society must be such that new types of behaviour are possible, or are likely to appear. If, for example, a society is divided into competing groups on an ethnic, religious or socio-economic basis, it will "form a set of structurally conducive conditions for the flow of hostility". Thus according to Smelser, the factor that must be present is the structural strain, accompanied by the feelings of anxiety and frustration. Smelser states that the strain is institutionalised, however, in economic, political religious or other social relationships and before it can lead to more than individual deviant behaviour, the idea of action must spread through the group. In other words, the situation must have a common meaning for those who share the strain, so that they are willing to act together. Such are the conditions that will determine collective action will arise, and it will continue until it gradually turns into an organised social movement integrated into the structure of society. At every point in this development of action, the instruments of social control, such as the government, the police or public opinion, may play decisive roles in lessening or increasing the activity.⁷⁷

Such conditions suggested by Smelser are characteristic of Assamese society and hence students movements are expected. Student protests in Assam necessitates its study using Smelser's analysis of social movements. "A set of structurally conducive conditions for the flow of hostility", the geopolitical history of Assam coupled with cultural pluralism arising out of Assam's colonial historical roots the dependent variables and a comparatively economic backwardness for which the Centre is held responsible and the subsequent growth of regional consciousness provide a congenial environment for the rise, growth, sustenance and frequency of student movements through the early decades of the twentieth century upto the present times in the State. It is again environmental constraints—the instruments of social control such as the government, police or public opinion, which

determines the severity or sustenance, the lessening or increasing of student activities or operations.

Generalisations cannot be made in the study of student movements of the world, between the developed and developing countries since situations vary from place to place. In developed countries, student movements are marked by direct Leftist influence although the rise of Nazism and Fascism had strong student support, while in developing countries, they display an interplay of various ideologies, not necessarily the Leftists. However, certain similarities are brought to light, for instance, student movements are generally organised to bring about changes at either the educational, social, economic or political level, the diversification of issues etc. The case of Assam is distinctly different from the other conditions and operations of student movements in other parts of India. This is so, partly because of its geographical location or more specifically, its geopolitical history—a State experiencing expansion and contraction throughout the centuries, and largely as a legacy of British colonial policy towards the State.

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Chapter 7

Epilogue

The discussions in the foregoing chapters attempted to focus on the origin and growth of the student movements in Assam in colonial conditions and in the post-independence period. In the primary societal conditions under colonialism, the Indian National Movement played a significant role in moulding student movements in Assam. Students had actively participated in the independence movement and politics became an accepted part of campus life. Students often saw the movements of agitations both as an end itself as well as the means for later political involvement, Altbach describes them as “an incipient elite”, a small group being trained for positions of authority in the society and they claim authority for themselves on the basis of their perceived future status.

The post independence period saw student movements in Assam struggle for the triumph of regionalism and economic development borne out of “a feeling of neglect” by the Centre and out of the realisation that no change or development, whether social, economic or political, in the State, could be brought about without resorting to agitations and movements, of which the student class formed the nucleus. The significant development in the post-independence era was the gradual organisational maturity attained by the student movements particularly the formation of All Assam Students Union (AASU) in 1967 with a regular constitution and a five-tier organisational network of its own. What may be traced as a legacy of the Indian National Movement was the non-violent methods of agitation, which continued

to be popular and effective until recent times; the AASU agitation of 1979-84 is a manifestation of this.

Moreover, in the post-independence period, student movements in Assam marked its adherence to the quintessential characteristics of social movement as identified and defined by Wilkinson as a precondition of social movement :

- (1) A social movement is a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into 'Utopian' community;
- (2) A social movement must evince a minimal degree of organisation, though this may range from a loose, informal or partial level of organisation to the highly institutionalized and bureaucratized movement and the corporate group ;
- (3) A social movements commitment to change and the *raison d'être* of its organization are founded upon the conscious volition, normative commitment to the movements' aims or beliefs, and active participation on the part of the followers or members.¹

The recognition of student movements in Assam as social movement, however, does not diminish their importance as historical movements. The roots of the major six year student movement (1979-1984) over the foreign nationals' issue were thus deep-rooted, not merely in its long tradition of agitation but also in the unstable environment which gave rise to them and the problems peculiar to Assam alone have made student movements in Assam unique and, therefore, was brought to the international limelight.

The instability in the environment was largely created by the inflated demography of the State to the extent that by 1979, the electoral rolls contained the names of several lakhs of "foreigners". It was the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) that put up the strongest opposition and started an agitation which was to last for six years and finally put the student leaders on the seats of political power.

The inflated demography that was responsible for the unstable environment arose chiefly out of the problem of migration from East

Bengal, later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh. Assam's population constituted 1.38 per cent of India's in 1901 and increased to 2.22 per cent and 2.67 per cent upto in 1951 and 1971 respectively as already cited in chapter 1; and the rate of the inflow of migrants was maximum during 1911-1931, to the lowest level during 1931-41, but increased greatly in the next three decades 1941-71.² In 1905, when Bengal had been partitioned and the Muslim-majority East Bengal was joined with Assam to form a new province of East Bengal and Assam, large scale Muslim immigrations from the East Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur, poured in. The Census Report of that year described the situation in Assam as 'alarming' especially in the Goalpara region which registered an abnormal increase of population from 1.4 per cent to 2 per cent in 1901 to 30 per cent in 1910-1911.³ This immigration became so large by 1931 that the Superintendent of Census C.S. Mullah, wrote in his report :

Probably the most important event in the province during the last 25 years, an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization, has been the invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of eastern Bengal and in particular from Moymensingh. The invasion began sometime before 1911, and the Census Report in that year is the first report which makes mention of this advancing host by 1921 the first army corps had passed into Assam and had practically conquered the district of Goalpara. It is sad but by no means improbable that in another 30 years Sibsagar District will be the only part in Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staff, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam valley during the last 25 years.⁴

In 1937, Nehru, in a letter to Bishnuram Medhi, who returned his "Tamrapatra" as a protest against the indifference of the Central Government to the problem of Assam, had stated that he realised the gravity of the situation caused by the Muslim immigration in Assam and had urged the government to put a stop to it. M.A. Jinnah strongly

objected to this for he wanted Assam to be incorporated in his proposed Pakistan.⁵ However, Saadulla's Government tried to manipulate the Census of 1941 to strengthen the case of the Muslim League.⁶ The Census Report of 1941 read :

The most noticeable rise in the muslim population in Assam once again represents immigration from Mymensingh and east Bengal generally. The policy of colonisation of Assam by Muslims of Bengal was continued under the joint auspices of Sir Saadulla in Assam and Nazimuddin in Bengal.⁷

Saadulla wanted to settle the immigrant Muslims in Upper Assam under the pretext of "Grow More Food" campaign and wanted the line system, which prevented their settlement in Upper Assam, to be abolished. Wavell turned down the proposal on grounds that the Assam government wanted to "Grow More Muslims!". In 1944, an Assamese delegation met Gandhi at Panchgani, where Gandhi stated:

Bordoloi has referred to the problems of unrestricted Muslim immigration to Assam under the patronage of the Saadulla Ministry. The Assamese people should never accept this policy. If unrestricted immigration to a small province like Assam from a neighbouring province is allowed to continue, and if as a result of this the existing people are likely to be reduced to a minority then the State has a right to take proper steps against this... Assam must not lose its soul.

The Bordoloi Congress Ministry rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan and Gandhi supported the cause of Assam on 18.1.47 (8). While on the other hand, the designs of Pakistan were clear. M.A. Jinnah on the eve of the partition of India promised to his Private Secretary, Moinul Haq Choudhury, who later opted for India and joined the Congress Ministry: "Wait for 10 years, I shall present Assam on a silver plate to you". Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in his book: *Eastern Pakistan: Its population, Determination and Economics*, stated:

Because East Pakistan must have sufficient land for its huge population and Assam will give it full scope for expansion and because Assam has abundant forest and mineral resources, coal, petroleum etc. Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong.

Again, Z.A. Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan wrote in his book *The Myth of Independence* in 1968:

It would be wrong to think that Kashmir is the only dispute that divides India and Pakistan, though it is undoubtedly the most significant.... One at least as nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute—that of Assam and some districts of India, adjacent to East Pakistan. To these, East Pakistan has very good claims, which should not have been allowed to remain quiescent.⁹

Pakistan flags were hoisted in Assam in 1962 during the Chinese aggression on India, and Bangladesh flags and portraits of Mujibur Rahman were displayed with “Joi Bangla” slogans on March 26, 1980 at Howly, Barpeta, in a demonstration by the infiltrators.¹⁰

Hence it was not surprising that when B. P. Chaliha, the Chief Minister of Assam, intensified the drive for the deportation of the Pakistan infiltrators in the late 1960s and early 1970s, both F.A. Ahmed and M.H. Choudhury pressurised him to stop deportation and convinced the Central Government to close down the Foreigners Tribunals and all cases against foreign infiltrators were transferred to ordinary courts of law.¹¹

The partition of India did not “assuage the land hunger” in East Pakistan. The new international boundary was not marked and was unguarded resulting in the interplay of economic forces despite partition and :

large number of Muslims from East Pakistan continued to move across the open frontier into Assam, Tripura and West Bengal—for land, work and opportunity. Their passage was illegal, but economic forces proved more potent than passport and visa regulations.

The Influx further described East Pakistan as

Demographically... an overloaded area... Thus the traditional migration from East Pakistan continued even though the new political frontier had come into being¹²

As a result, the economic conditions of Assam deteriorated greatly. Since 1957, Assam has been suffering from under-production of food for while the land under cultivation has not increased, population has doubled. What seriously affected the deteriorating economic

conditions, the standard of living, efficiency and productivity, of the indigenous unskilled labourers was that the daily wages of the agricultural labourers in the areas of high concentration of immigrants such as in Goalpara was merely Rs 3 as compared to Rs 8 per day in Sibsagar District where immigrants were scarce.¹³

Considering the low rate, the people definitely opted for immigrant labour. The growing intensity of the Foreign Nationals issue and the lack of alacrity on the part of the Government of India to enhance the economic development of the State had compelled the Assamese people to feel "neglected" and this has been expressed even by writers other than Assamese.¹⁴ It was perhaps this feeling of neglect coupled with the urgency of the situation that instigated the students in 1978 to start a movement on the Foreign Nationals issue. The urgency was genuine as the following tables show:¹⁵

Table 1

<i>Election Year</i>	<i>No. of Voters</i>	<i>Increase of Voters</i>	<i>% Increase of Voters between Elections</i>
1952	4,066,940		
1957	4,496,357	4,26,417	10.5 (In 5 Yrs.)
1962	4,942,816	4,49,459	10.0 (In 5 Yrs.)
1966	5,585,056	6,42,240	13.0 (In 4 Yrs.)
1970	5,701,805	1,16,749	2.1 (In 4 Yrs.)
1971	6,296,198	5,94,393	10.4 (In 1 Yrs.)
1977 (March)*	7,229,543	9,33,345	14.8 (In 6 Yrs.)
1978 Feb. (Nov '77)*	7,924,476	7,44,933	10.3 (In 8 Mths.)
1980 Jan. (Sept '79)*	8,537,497	5,63,021	7.1 (In 21 Mths.)
Draft			110.0 (1952-1979)

* Month in which voters' list was prepared.

Table 2
Increase in Population in Assam and India¹⁶

Year	Pop.of Assam	Decadal Pop. Increase	% Increase In Assam	Pop of India	% Increase In India
1901	3,289,680		(1.38)	238,396,327	
16.9					
1911	3,848,617	5,58,937	(1.51)	252,093,390	5.7
20.4					
1921	4,636,980	7,88,363	(1.85)	251,321,213	-0.3
20.1					
1931	5,560,371	9,23,391	(1.99)	278,977,238	11.0
20.4					
1941	6,560,371	1,134,419	(2.10)	318,660,580	14.2
19.9					
1951	8,018,856	1,334,666	(2.22)	361,088,090	13.3
34.9					
1961	10,837,329	2,808,473	(2.47)	439,234,771	21.5
35.0					
1971	14,625,152	3,787,823	(2.67)	548,159,652	24.8
1981					
EST				683,810,051	24.75
			36.0		
Conser- vative	19,890,000	5,265,000	(2.91)		
			56.6		
HIGH	22,908,000	8,283,000	(3.35)		
46.3					
Average	21,399,000	6,774,000	(3.13)		

Although the agitational period is marked from 1979 to 1984, it had its beginning in 1974, when the All Assam Students' Union drew up a *Charter of Demands*, in which the infiltration question got first priority. The charter demanded:

- (1) stopping the dangerous infiltration and expulsion of the infiltrators from Assam;
- (2) reservation of 80 per cent of jobs for local people and recruitment of local people for jobs below Rs 800;

- (3) shifting of the headquarters of the government and private industries located in Assam, to Assam;
- (4) agreement to the demands of the Assam Engineering Students Association;
- (5) establishment of a fertilizer factory in Mezanga, and jute mills at Guwagacha and Dolgaon;
- (6) establishment of a divisional office of the North East Frontier Railway (N.F. Railway) at Rangiya;
- (7) that the Central Government solve the flood problem permanently and demanded sufficient flood relief in times of flood;
- (8) reduction in the prices of essential commodities to help the general public;
- (9) giving sufficient compensation to those Pre-university students who could not sit for the examinations due to the last agitation, and relaxing age bar by one year for jobs;
- (10) that the government acquire the publication of textbooks of all kinds and supply textbooks regularly to the students and stop changing of textbooks frequently;
- (11) withdrawal of the cases against students participation in the agitation;
- (12) an enquiry into the causes of death of martyrs like Gajen Ingty, Keshab Sharma, Golap Sarma and Putul Saikia's "mysterious death", and the death of ex-member of the State Executive of AASU, Parimal Roy, Harmohan Das who were killed in Dhumarku. It also demanded sufficient compensation to the family of Sukleswar Kalita and punishment to the culprits;
- (13) conversion of the Jorhat Science College into a full fledged Technical and Applied Science Institute ;
- (14) the medium of examination of APSC (Assam Public Service Commission) be made Assamese and Assamese should be made compulsory for all educational institutions in Assam. Moreover, all official works should be in Assamese for all government and non-government offices.¹⁷

This Charter of Demands was popularly known as The Economic Charter, the theme being on economic lines; specifically, the economic development of Assam. On 1978, representatives of the AASU met at the Jorhat Science College, where they included 'identification of

foreigners' and 'expulsion of foreigners' as two separate demands. The agitation thus started with 16 demands.

The success of the agitation lay not only in the well-defined organisational structure of the students organisation but also in its well-planned programme, initially called out for eight months and carefully executed. The programme started on August 8, 1978 with picketing at every district headquarters office, followed by *satyagraha*, hunger strike, Assam Bandh and 'Fast unto death' by the executive body of the AASU. On December 23, the AASU leaders were compelled to have discussions with Government of Assam at its request but were soon determined to carry out their programme due to the government's indifference.

On June 30, 1979, at the invitation of the Shillong Socio-Cultural Organisation, the North-Eastern Regional Students Federation was formed. It resolved:

We, the students of the North Eastern Region, farmers and industrial workers and youth adults are united here to resolve to bring back the old unity and cooperation. We bury our differences of opinion inspite of living separately in hills and plains. We are members of the same family and our problems are problems of the entire North Eastern region. We do not want to live as in valids but as active citizens.¹⁸

The promise of solidarity from the students of the entire North East region was important and necessary for the agitation to be a success.

On August 25, 1979, the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) was formed in Dibrugarh at Kanoi College by the executive body of the AASU. With the formation of this new organisation (AGSP) the agitation gained momentum and revitalised the programme by mass sit-in strikes (Gana Abasthan Dharmaghat), *satyagraha*, mass rallies, mass-signature campaign, etc.. A central mass rally on an all Assam basis was held at the Judges Field at Guwahati on November 6, 1979. From December 3 to 11 time was given for the filing of nominations for the 13 Parliamentary constituencies of Assam, and this was followed by a 34 hours Assam Bandh (December 3 to 4) and December 5 to 8 there was mass picketing in front of all polling offices where nominations could be filed.¹⁹

It was at this juncture that Khargeswar Talukdar was killed in police firing and his death had a great impact on the students movement. Out of 14 seats, 12 could not be held, the two being Cachar and North Cachar. Abida Ahmed tried to file nomination from a place called Bhawanipur, near Pathsala with police escort. On December 7 about 700 trucks, organised by the Guwahati University and Guwahati Engineering Students prevented her from going out of Guwahati. On December 9 when she finally moved out at night escorted by G. S. Gill, DIG, a few students like Nakib Zaman and Khargeswar Tulukdar followed them to Bhawanipur, where due to police atrocities Khargeswar Talukdar was killed and many were severely wounded.²⁰

A programme of non-cooperation was carried out from December 24 to 31. The new year 1980, began with a 58 hour Assam Bandh and on January 3 Dilip Hajari was killed. From January 8 mass picketing in Assam's oil field was carried out to stop the flow of crude oil outside the State. On January 18 police fired at several students, Ajit Neog, Nagen Deka, Nripen Bora and Kumud Gogoi to name a few. Black Day was observed on January 21 at North Kamrup and Duliajan as a mark of protest against the police firing at Duliajan.²¹

Thus began the several rounds of discussions between representatives of the AASU and AAGSP and the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. On February 2 1980, the AASU submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister and conveyed their profound apprehension regarding the voters' list and the continuing influx of foreign nationals. Subsequently, talks and discussions were held at the Prime Ministers' and Home Ministers' levels during the period 1980 to 1983 while the agitational programme did not die in spirit and continued successfully. Several rounds of informal talks were held during the year, 1984. In March 1985, formal discussions were resumed.

The six year old movement culminated in the Assam Accord, which was announced by the next Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in his Independence Day address to the nation from the ramparts of Red Fort, on August 15, 1985. The Assam Accord was followed by the formation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), by the former leaders of the AASU. Elections were held and the A G P Government was formed with the former AASU President, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and General

Secretary, Bhrigu Kumar Phukan as the Chief Minister and Home Minister of the State respectively.

What was unique about the mass movement organised by the AASU was that it was largely peaceful and democratic and therefore, constitutional, with a few exceptions. Its remarkable strategy was the successful economic blockades. This movement is popularly known as the "People's Movement" rather than a mere student movement for the students had the full support of the general public and even of the rural areas, including women and children.

The movement had worked within severe macro as well as micro constraints for the Central Government tried every possible way to sabotage the popular movement by deploying the army, suspension of officers participating in the agitation, withdrawal of scholarships from students, as well as the call for discussions which in reality were intentions to divert their attention and win them over. Despite such constraints the movement survived and this survival explains its diverse historical roots.

Tracing the history of the years of student protest from the very early times when the environment itself could not provide a ground for student protests since Calcutta was the centre of higher education then, up to the almost recent times, certain special features are highlighted. These special features also explain the roots of student protest in Assam.

An obvious and most significant feature which provided strong grounds for the rise of student protests in Assam was its historical tradition, which had reasserted the fact that students are a dynamic force for political, educational and socio-economic historical tradition is a necessity for any student movement. Lipset had stated:

It is important to note that the campus has not suddenly exploded, that there is a substantial tradition of student political concern and activity, and that students have played an important role in revolutionary movements through the years.²²

The students of Assam from the start in the 19th century for instance, had taken up economic demands, fought against colonialism and its aftermath problems, closely connected with the socio-economic development of the state and a quest for identity. This long continuous

process no doubt gives lessons to new student protests, agitations and movements and also explains the success of the six year student movement (1979-1984), spearheaded by the All Assam students' Union on the Foreign Nationals Issue. A more recent student movement which exposes the importance of a historical tradition is the Chinese students' protest at Beijing Central Tianamen Square on May 4, 1989 urging for democratic reforms and an end to "rule by old men". The Chinese students claimed that "they were keeping alive the spirit of the May 4th movement, a campaign for democracy and modernisation begun by students demonstration in the capital exactly 70 years ago."²³

Lipset has described Chinese students as "key elements in the revolutionary upsurge of the early twentieth century and caused much of the intellectual ferment, as well as supplying the cadres, which contributed to the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty and to later political developments in China upto and including the communist last thrust to power in 1945-1949"²⁴

This continuity in the tradition of student movement explains the blow to the authority of the Chinese Prime Minister, Mr Li Peng in the form of opposition to martial law in Beijing by 100 military officers and the declaration of Peoples Liberation Army's support to the students and their demands on May 22, 1989.²⁵

Closely associated with the existence of a long historical tradition another special feature which influenced and gave rise to student movements in Assam is the great impact of the geo-political history of the state; a history of expansion and contraction since its annexation by the British in 1826, by a series of rearrangement of boundaries. With the British annexation of Assam, Assam was tagged to Bengal administratively. In 1874 Assam was disintegrated from Bengal on grounds of over-population and administrative inconvenience and economy, and made a Chief Commissioner's province under the direct control of the Governor General in Council and three Bengal districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara were transferred to Assam. For a brief period from 1905-1912, East Bengal was tagged with Assam. In 1947, a referendum was held in Sylhet as a result of which Sylhet, except Karimganj, was transferred to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

Again, based on racial and linguistic grounds, further reorganisation of boundary demarcations were made to the effect that

by 1963 Nagaland was recognised as a separate State; in 1972 Meghalaya broke away while Manipur and Tripura had become Union Territories to subsequently become States, and Mizoram, a Union territory. This fragmentation of the North-east has been described as a natural consequence to political stability in chapter I for heterogenous societies when attempts at assimilation tend to be unstable and where dependent variables operate. Thus this geo-political history creates a dynamic environment which in turn gives rise to new kinds of problems which demand the attention of the students.

An obvious problem is that of migration and the following quotation makes the point clear:

The presence of these migrants have shaken the foundations of the Assamese social structure and created solidarity among the Assamese even while generating cleavages between the indigenous Assamese and the indigenous tribals. It has experienced the educational, social, economic aspirations of countless Assamese, determined their central political concerns, and became a decisive factor in the periodic restructuring of the states boundaries. Migration into Assam has also given rise to powerful assimilationist native sentiment and backlash separatist agitations, to massive conflicts over language, education, and employment policy, and to political cleavages that have not only led to the intervention of Indias' Central Government and the use of the Indian Army, but have also affected Assams' relationship to neighbouring Bangladesh, formerly East Bengal, and hence India's relationship to Pakistan . In short, migration has been a force for social, cultural, economic and political change in Assam.²⁶

However, while Weiner explains migration as a force for change in Assam, it may be explained that while migration emerged and posed as a vital problem to Assam the students in Assam adopted it as a strong issue for agitation and thereby reacted as the force for change.

Student movements in Assam thus had their roots in an unstable society, where the absence of assimilation have led to cultural pluralism, which has been compared to that of Guyana (in South America) in chapter I, a socio-economic structural strain, created by migration and an inflated demography. Such roots have been identified from Smelsers' analysis of social movements, in which he believes that the existence of "a set of structurally conducive conditions for the flow

of hostility"; and where "the new types of behaviour" surface constantly to produce them. Besides, the unstable society coupled with the neglect from the Central Government created an identity crisis, which has generally been looked upon as the insular attitude, regionalism, parochialism or chauvinism.

Student movements in Assam have been popularised over the years and this popularisation has its roots in that the problems and issues that the students adopted to organise protests, agitations and movements were genuine and their programmes were well-defined to be specific. It was the ambiguous use of legitimate issues by a core group of radical students that mobilised mass support. The students are attracted by the largely value-oriented programme which have opened up new vistas for future political involvement or by the mere reason that they are often action-packed and even adventurous programmes for the young and enthusiastic spirits.

A chief feature of the student movements in Assam lay in its attainment of organisational maturity and the subsequent formation of a five-tier structure. Tracing its beginning in the Asom Bhasar Unnoti Sadhini Sabha at Calcutta in 1985 the organisational structure developed into a well established one, which would explain the success of the 6-year mass movement.

The All Assam Students Union (AASU) had its roots in the *Asomiya Bhasar Unnoti Sadhini Sabha*. This organisation developed into the Assamese Students Literature Club at Calcutta with branches at all the five districts although at places like Tezpur the original name was used. By 1905, an *Ekata Sabha* was established at Guwahati, which functioned as a college students union. Very soon Ekata Sabhas were established in schools in the four other districts.

A significant development took place in 1916 when the *Asom Chatra Sahitya Sanmilan* was formed at Guwahati but at the same conference the name "Sahitya" was dropped and the organisation was renamed *Asom Chatra Sanmilan* which very soon had branches at the school level, village level and at the district level. It is this organisation that moulded the student community into a new social force although it did not formally participate in various student protests, agitations and movements, it organised them into action.

The 1930s saw the history of student organisations being tilted more towards the Left, although it was the Congress programme that dictated the direction of the students of the *Asom Chatra Sanmilian*. The tilt towards the Left began with the formation of Byam Sanghas which was first established in 1935 at Guwahati and branched out to the district as well as the village level. The Left tilt found expression in the All Assam Progressive Youth Conference in October 1939; the final split of the *Asom Chatra Sanmilian* came at the Nagpur Session, 1940. The final split divided the *Asom Chatra Sanmilian* into the All Assam Students' Federation affiliated to the All India Students Federation affiliated to the CPI, and the *Asom Chatra Sanmilian* or the All Assam Students' Congress affiliated to the All India Students Congress affiliated to the AICC which was formally recognised at the Bombay Session, 1945.

In 1955, the AASF was affiliated to the AISF which was in turn affiliated to the National Union of Students (NUS), which at its higher level was affiliated to the International Union of Students (IUS). From 1939 to the early 1950s, the AASF was more active than the AASC. Very soon the students of Assam felt the need for a single organisation in Assam without any political application.²⁷ Thus was formed the All Assams' Students' Association in 1958. The All Assam Students' Union (*ad hoc*) was formed in early January 1967 and at the Tezpur session of August, 1967, established itself as a formal organisation and adopted its Constitution. Figure (5) illustrates this evolution of student organisation in Assam.

Clause 8 of the Constitution defined the organisational structure as a five-tier organisation :

- (1) The Local or Primary Student Union;
- (2) Zonal Students Union;
- (3) Subdivisional Students Union;
- (4) District Students Union; and
- (5) The State Executive Union.

The Local or Primary Students' Union is formed out of the AASU members of each educational institution, and is under the control of the Executive committee, elected by the members themselves.²⁸

FIG 5: EVOLUTION OF STUDENT ORGANISATIONS IN ASSAM

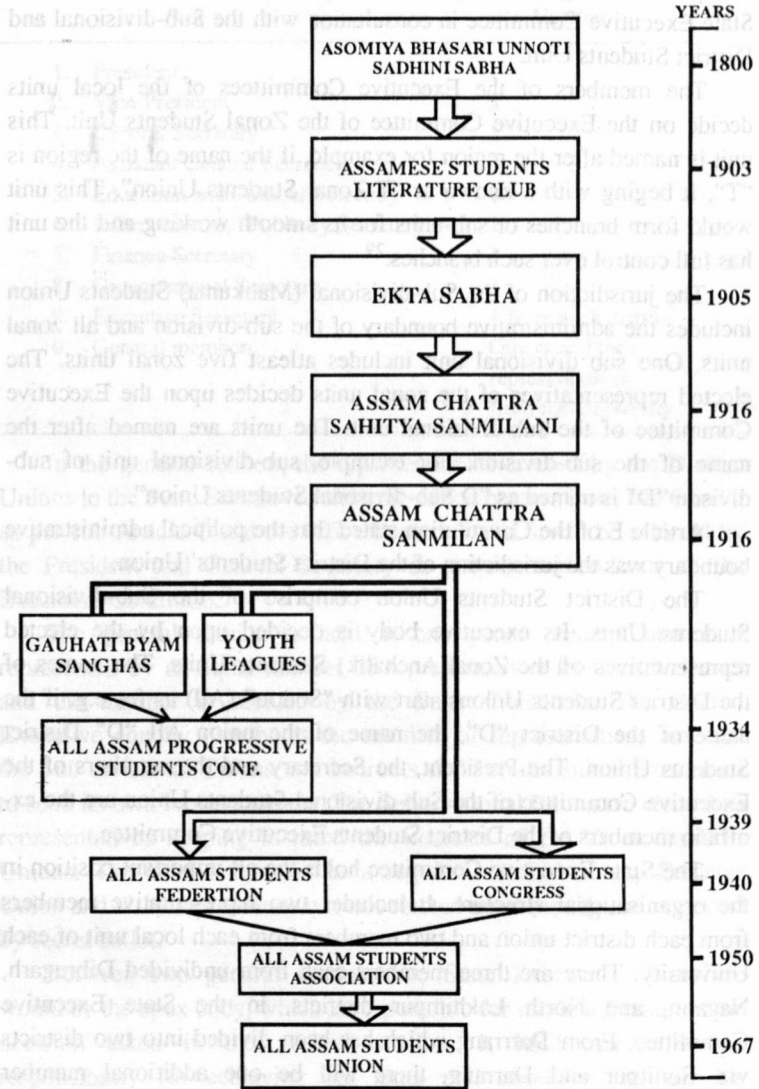


Figure 5
Evolution of Student Organisations in Assam

The Zonal (Anchalik) Students Union comprises of the local units of a particular region. The jurisdiction of such units is decided by the State Executive Committee in consultation with the Sub-divisional and District Students Unit.

The members of the Executive Committees of the local units decide on the Executive Committee of the Zonal Students Unit. This unit is named after the region for example, if the name of the region is "T", it begins with a known as "T Zonal Students Union". This unit would form branches or sub-units for its smooth working and the unit has full control over such branches.²⁹

The jurisdiction of the Sub-divisional (Mahkuma) Students Union includes the administrative boundary of the sub-division and all zonal units. One sub-divisional unit includes at least five zonal units. The elected representatives of the zonal units decide upon the Executive Committee of the sub-divisional unit. The units are named after the name of the sub-division. For example, sub-divisional unit of sub-division "D" is named as "D Sub-divisional Students Union".

Article E of the Constitution stated that the political administrative boundary was the jurisdiction of the District Students' Union.

The District Students Union comprise of the Sub-divisional Students Units. Its executive body is decided upon by the elected representatives of the Zonal (Anchalik) Students Units. The names of the District Students Unions start with "Sodou" (All) as for e.g, if the name of the District "D", the name of the union All "D" District Students Union. The President, the Secretary and the members of the Executive Committee of the Sub-divisional Students Union are the ex-officio members of the District Students Executive Committee.

The State Executive Committee holds the all important position in the organisational structure. It includes two representative members from each district union and two members from each local unit of each University. There are three members each from undivided Dibrugarh, Nagaon, and North Lakhimpur districts, in the State Executive Committee. From Darrang which has been divided into two districts viz. Sonitpur and Darrang, there will be one additional member alternatively as per advice of the State Executive. Members from the district units may be varied, increased or decreased, according to

administrative and organisational requirements. The posts amongst the members of the committee were as follows :

<i>Post</i>	<i>Number</i>
1. President	1
2. Vice-President	3
3. General Secretary	1
4. Assistant General Secretary	3
5. Education and Cultural Secretary	1
6. Information and Publicity Secretary	1
7. Finance Secretary	1
8. Organisational Secretary	1
9. Executive Secretary	1 from each district
10. General members	Others and the representatives from the University

In the general session, the representatives elected by the District Unions to the State Executives elect the office bearers from 1 to 6 and 9 as per sub-Article C and the office bearers 7 and 8 will be selected by the President and General Secretary as per recommendation of the Executive Committee.

The general session is held at one years' interval and it is represented by an equal number of representatives from each district and the number is decided by the State Executive. The District Executive equally distributes the number of representatives amongst the Sub-divisional Unions and instructs the Sub-divisional Executives to send its own representatives. The Subdivisional Executive elected its representatives keeping in mind the interests of the Zonal Students Unions. The candidate, must be a regular member of any Students Union and if the representative is not elected unanimously, he is elected by secret ballot.

Between two general sessions the State Executive Committee would be the apex body, which is responsible for implementation of the decision taken in the general session. It holds the collective responsibility for achieving the aims and objectives as per the constitution . It has to liaison between the District Unions. It also has to

settle complaints received from general members of Primary, Zonal or District Unions.³⁰

The recognition of the student community as a new social force is based on the exponential growth of the student population as discussed in Chapter 2, and if such recognition projects as one of the marked feature of student movements in Assam, it may be also considered as one of the roots that help to sustain them for this social force has several advantages. The advantages lay in the fact that it acquires sympathy of the public and is generally considered as being free from political or any other vested interest. Hence very often social or political movements all over the world are spearheaded by this social force. Students in Assam, may thus be termed as Altbach puts it, “an incipient elite”, since they shoulder political responsibility as students. The aspirations of this “incipient elite” are contained within the “regional counter - elite”, a term used by Inayatullah, for the elite that perceives a given region within a nation as its political constituency and struggles to protect the interests of that particular region, by demanding changes in the policies of the “national elite”.³¹

The most striking feature of student movements in Assam is its mass rural base, and therein lay its roots. In the colonial as well as in the post colonial period, student agitations or movements quickly forms Student Action Committees which percolates into the interior villages for organisation and which poses as an important step towards mass mobilisation. Student leaders of student agitations and movements at different historical times have all agreed that the greatest support had always come from the vast rural areas and have described them as more militant and therefore had often played vanguard roles.³²

A comparative study of student movements in Assam and of other states of India, as well as in developed and developing countries, helps to identify similar and features of contrast found therein. While James Michener identifies the tendency of student movements in both affluent and developing nations towards violence when a country is going through a political crises, citing the example of the role of the Hungarian students in 1956 against Russian invasion, we have tried to identify the presence of two conflicting tendencies—a general tendency is to opt for non-violence and the other, a simultaneous and natural tendency towards violence, in the student movement of Assam, which

were conspicuous in the fight for independence but which became less prominent in the post independence era. The presence of these conflicting tendencies can be seen in the case of the French Student Movement "Liberte", founded in 1937. Towards the 1960s, however, the general tendency in France was towards violence, when students began to organise farmers and workers for demonstrations, etc.

Another feature of great importance that marked student movement in Assam is the student-worker alliance which has been identified only in the highly industrialised countries like in West Germany by Eva Weller and Wilfried van der Will or in France by George Gross. In Assam the student-worker alliance had its beginning in the late 1930s with the Digboi Oil strike, which G.S. Bhattacharjee calls "the fraternisation with the militant working class".

This new feature marks a break in the trend of institutionalised trade-union agitations and its significance lies in its intensive and extensive organisation. This alliance was also seen in the post-colonial period when on June 12, 1947 a meeting was held under the auspices of the Students Congress at Tinsukia, at which the Vice President, Matasin Ali, of the Assam Oil Company labour Union was present. The meeting discussed the labour strikes and Matasin Ali informed the students of the next course of action by the labourers if their grievances were not met. This exposes the strong bond of the student-worker alliance. This bond again became manifest towards the end of May 1948, as mentioned in chapter V. A District Committee was formed by the ASF which enlisted 15 militant members from Lumding, Chaparmukh and Nagaon and formed cells to revive the language problem in Assam. By September 28-30, 30 cells were formed, of which 65 per cent were students, 20 to 25 per cent were labourers, and the rest were peasant youths.

The Jorhat Students Federation Conference of Nov 1948 was well attended by the workers of Jorhat Match Factory and the Electrical Engineering Works. At such conferences it was resolved to organise the students and to educate the workers in party politics. The need for studying Marxism and Kisan problems was also emphasized. Joint Fighting Committees and "Publicity Squads" with labourers, peasants and students were also formed. The "Democratic Youth Sanghas" were also organisations which identified the cause of the students' struggle

with that of the labourers and peasants. Another striking example of the student-worker alliance was seen in the publication of hand bills by both the ASC and ASF in support of the railway strike in 1949 when many students were arrested. On August 6 a meeting was held under the joint auspices of Leftist parties including the ASF, Press Workers' Union, Assam Railroad Workers' Union, after which a procession of the railway employees, students and press-workers paraded the main streets with slogans demanding the release of the arrested students. This alliance is also found during the food crises of 1967 and the foundation of SAP (Sanyukta Andolan Parishad) and even in 1979 when at the invitation of the Shillong Socio-cultural Organisation the North Eastern Regional Students Federation was formed, it resolved thus: "We the students of the north-eastern region, farmers and industrial workers and youth adults are united here to resolve...."

What is unique here is the identification of developments in student movements in highly industrialized countries in a small and economically backward state of the Third World. The large economic content in the demands of the students over the years has drawn the support of the general public, the press particularly the workers and the peasants. The Charter of Demands in 1974, better known as the Economic Charter, is an example.

A feature of contrast that may be pointed out here is that while we find the socio-economic structural strain as a vital factor initiating student movements in Assam, in the industrialized nations, it is just the opposite. While the economic growth and prosperity of the 1960s encouraged student activism in the developed countries, the 1970s marked a decline, reasons being attributed to the economic turnaround.

Another remarkable feature that was more striking in the post-colonial period was the solidarity campaigns supporting the cause of students in Vietnam, Goa, Kerala, Bombay or Manipur for instance, which are in keeping with Article E sub-clause of the Constitution of the AASU which stated the establishment of friendly and cordial relationship with student organisations of other states. The establishment of such relationship becomes necessary to draw sympathy and support of the student communities and other states in times of crises. Students whether of the state, country or world

recognise themselves as a community although the problems and issues with which they may be concerned may be totally different.

The solidarity campaigns also explains the influence of other nations and states on students movements in Assam. This influence is also evident from various speeches given by student leaders on different occasions. The statement of the Bihar Students' Action Committee on March 14, 1974: "*Gujarat ki jeet hamari hai-Ab Bihar ki bari hai*" (Gujarats' victory is ours, Now it is the turn of Bihar,") is indicative of inter-state influence. The rise of revolutionary terrorism and guerilla activities in Assam in the 1930s and 1940s is a manifestation of the inter-State influence.

Another aspect of student movements in Assam and its success in most programmes and operations lies in the unity of different student organisations in times of crises, although ideologically they may be drifted away. This unity could be traced throughout the different phases of agitations. The formation of the AASU in 1967 and its survival as an umbrella- organisation is a clear example of this unity.

An analysis of the student movements in Assam thus represents a dynamic force for change in an unstable society, a society which requires the dictates of regionalism or the insular attitude in its struggle for survival and quest for identity as a state. A State concerned about its own survival and development cannot see into the broader aspects of national integration, and may consider it as rather remote.

Inayatullah provides three sets of variables³³ and their interaction which needs to be considered for an adequate analysis of national intergration, which in general implies a homogenous political unit within a given territory or territories and a homogenisation of diverse cultures and tradition.

The first set of variables contains the initial primary conditions such as a society's geographical characteristics, degree of unity and diversity of culture, patterns of social structure, integration and composition, and character of power structure. In relation to Assam, these primary societal conditions are unfavourable and hence do not permit any homogeneity, which could be achieved only through assimilation, which is lacking in the state. Hence this first set of variables not only has given rise to student movements but also the

absence of these conditions and presence of contrary conditions have favoured a low level of integration, malintegration or disintegration.

The second set of variables include the dynamics of demand and policy interactions between "the national elite and the regional counter elite within the local and international setting", and the consequences of national integration. In the case of Assam, the national elite has always attempted to absorb and contain the aspiration of the regional counter- elite, which are represented through the students movements or the "incipient elite". This is done through various policies that rely either on an ideological appeal or a sharing of political power, or a distribution of economic or utilitarian rewards, or on coercion or a combination of all or some of these. These policies do not comply with the demands of the regional counter-elite for the national elite generally fails to recognise such demands or the internal primary societal conditions and external setting.

The structure of international power and the society's place in this structure is the third set of variable put forth by Inayatullah. This third proposition is of extreme importance to the problem of Assam which shares international boundary with Bangladesh, Burma, Tibet, China and Bhutan, and which has produced great impact on student movements in Assam.

In Assam, the assimilationist model has proved inadequate to the task of explaining and predicting not only the dynamics of group relations but also the significance of those relations for the structure and functioning of the State. This has required the need for new approaches to the study of integration, especially in Assam.

Newman has defined integration as a measure not of social homogeneity but of the ability of a political unit to function without disaffecting larger bodies of its constituents. The focus is then upon:

- (1) the roles various internal institutions, such as the Government, the economy, the educational system and religion play in altering or accommodating important parts of the population and
- (2) the impact internal events and forces have upon these processes.³⁴

In this context the role of the student movements in Assam is vital, not merely in strengthening parochial identity in order to survive, but also in alienating or accommodating different parts of its structure to

form an integrative circle. Hence the various educational reports on student indiscipline,³⁵ and the question on suggestions for its remedies and chalking out programmes to divert their attention does not arise in the case of Assam. The question lies at the national level; had the regional demands been accommodated in the national policies at an early stage, the student community would not have to take up issues relating to the political and socio-economic problems of the State.

Student movements in Assam strengthen social change in the very society that produced them. The unfavourable internal and external conditions coupled with a repressive response to the manifestation of regionalism by the Centre have integrated student movements into the very political and socio-economic structure of Assam. This necessitates the importance of understanding the factors underlying the growth of student movements and examining the results of such action. Student movement in Assam have thus contributed much towards socio-economic change in the State and have drawn the attention of the national government in policy-making on educational, political, economic and social issues that might otherwise have been ignored or neglected.

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