Muslims in Assam Politics

M KAR

This book is an in-depth study of Assam politics and of how Muslims, who constitute a third of the State's population, influenced and, on occasion, even determined the direction it would take.

The study begins with a brief history of Assam from 1205 to 1947 and a review of state politics, explaining the emergence of the Muslim community as a dominant political factor.

In the post-partition demographic and political contexts, It analyses the circumstances and commissions leading to the *en masse* migration of the erstwhile Muslim League supporters to the Congress under the leadership of Saadulla and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, both suspected to be Pro-Pakistan.

An elaborate and critical history of immigrant policy upto 1991, little known or studied so far, greatly facilitates understanding of the burning issues in Assam today.

The book examines the apprehensions of the Assamese Hindus of being swamped by Bengali Muslims, and the emergence of regional interests. It conducts a detailed study of the regional panties and politics.

The book concludes with a critical public assessment of the implementation of Assam Accord by the AGP Government. It has been shown how the main object and the *raison d'etre* of the party's accession to state power were sidelined and frustrated by the Government's wrong priorities.

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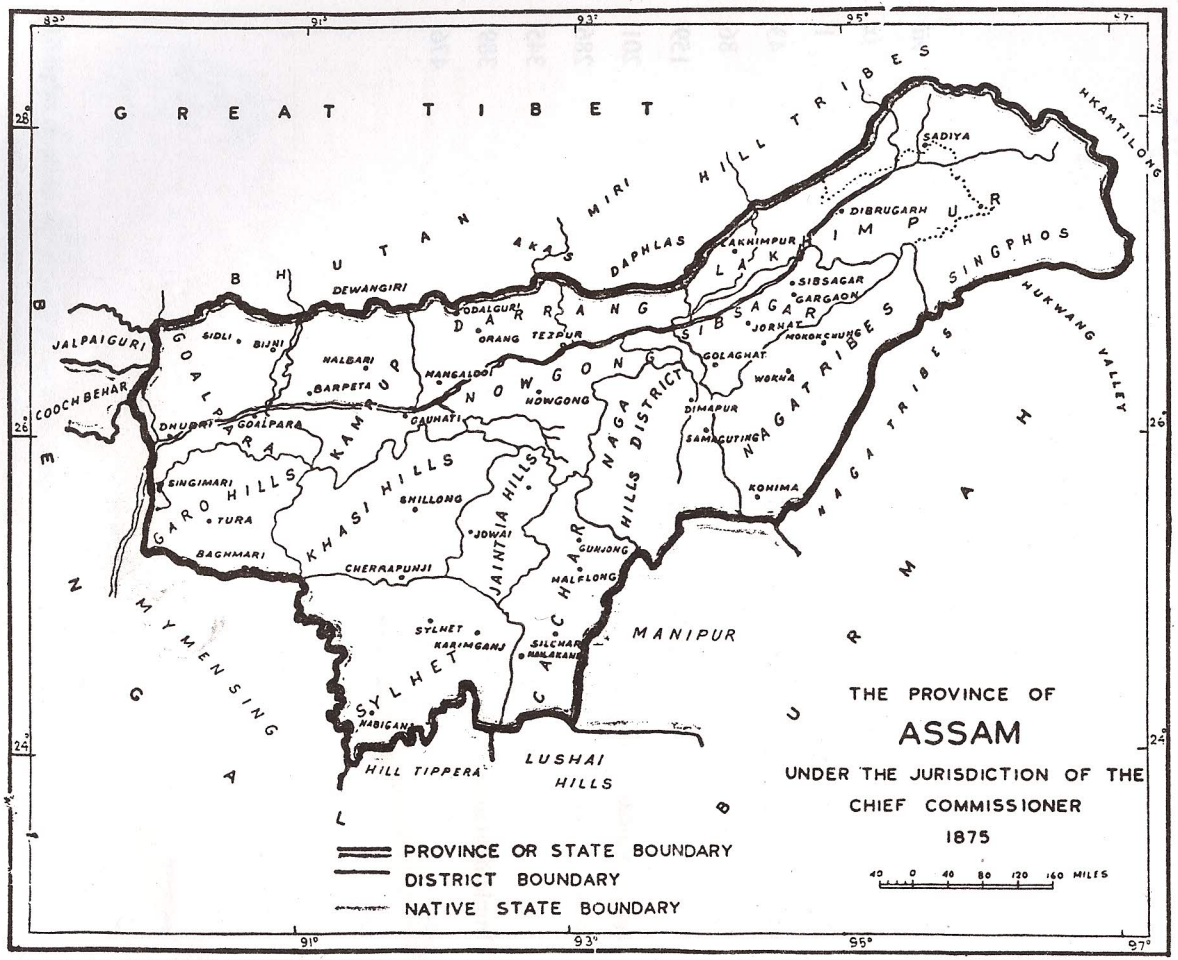

PREPARED UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF DR. TAHER

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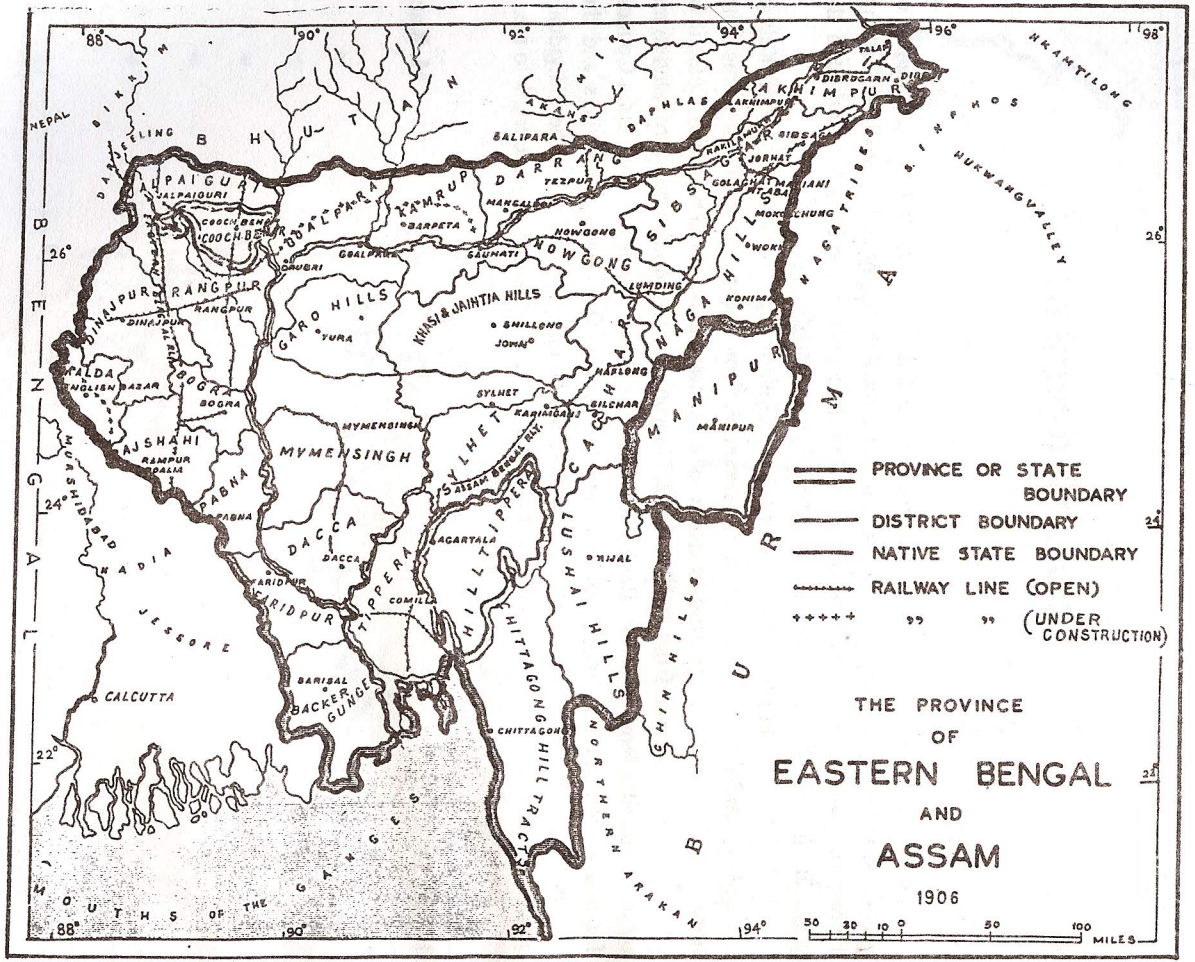
M. Kar.


PROVINCE OR STATE BOUNDARY
DISTRICT BOUNDARY
NATIVE STATE BOUNDARY
RAILWAY LINE (OPEN)
" " (UNDER CONSTRUCTION)
THE PROVINCE
OF
EASTERN BENGAL
AND
ASSAM
1906
MILES
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Introduction

The history of Muslims in Assam began almost eight hundred years ago with the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khalji from Bengal in 1205. For more than four and a half centuries, they tried to conquer the Brahmaputra Valley without success. Till 1874 the Valley had consisted of the territories of the modern districts of Darrang, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Sibsagar. In the course of their invasions, captive mercenaries and others settled in those places in small numbers. Some Muslim professionals also came on the invitation of Ahom kings. These two categories of settlers, however, could not influence the existing population in any manner.

The first Anglo-Burmese war was brought to an end by the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. Assam had been under Ahom rule for nearly six hundred years from the beginning of the thirteenth century. But from the 1770s internecine conflicts and rebellions sapped the kingdom's vitality, leading to political chaos and instability. Gourinath Singha, who became king in 1780, was compelled by his rivals to flee his capital at Gorgaon (in present Sibsagar district) and take shelter in Gauhati. There also he was haunted by insecurity. On his appeal, in 1792, Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of Bengal sent a military expedition under Captain Welsh for restoring Gourinath to his authority. Having crushed the king's enemies and recaptured Gauhati, Welsh persuaded him to sign a secret treaty granting the East India Company the privilege of trading with Assam. British interests in Assam, which were already there, began to grow rapidly. Between 1807 and 1823, taking advantage of the unstable situation and at the invitation of disaffected Ahom chiefs like Badan Chandra Phukan, the Burmese from the eastern frontiers occupied large areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. They also asked the East India Company to surrender the territories of Chittangong, Dacca, Murshidabad and Kasimbazar. To the English it was an ominous portent for their regime in Bengal. Governor General Lord Amberst declared war on the Burmese in February 1824. By 1840, the Brahmaputra Valley was annexed to the British empire and there began a closer contact between Assam and Bengal. In the interests of the expanding imperial regime, the Bengali language was introduced as the court language in the area and that created bad blood between the Assamese and the Bengalis. The Surma Valley, consisting of the districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara, all Bengali-speaking districts, had been under Muslim dominion since Akbar's reign. But these were transferred to Assam in 1874 in order to reconstitute it into a viable Chief Commissioner's province. This was followed by the Sylhet-Bengal

Reunion Movement which was initially supported by both the Hindus and the Muslims, but divergences appeared between them in the 1930s. After the Lahore Resolution of the All India Muslim League, the Muslims reversed their stand. The Hindus now wanted to remain in Assam but the Muslims desired inclusion in East Pakistan.

Muslims settled in the Brahmaputra Valley accounted for only 5.9 per cent of the total population till 1874. But the demographic profile underwent a drastic alteration with the formation of the new province. It not only raised the Muslim proportion in the total population to 28.8 per cent, but also converted Assam into a Bengali majority unit, the number of people in the Surma Valley alone exceeding that of the Brahmaputra Valley . On adding Goalpara to Assam, the Bengalis accounted for 62 per cent of the provincial population; Muslims formed 48.2 and 9.2 per cent, respectively, of the people of the Surma and the Brahmaputra valleys. The second partition of Bengal in 1905 and the creation of the Muslim majority province of Eastern Bengal and Assam brought the Bengali Muslims and the Assamese into closer contact. That was the beginning of another phase of Hindu-Muslim, Assamese-Bengali conflicts in the valley. Since incorporation into Assam, the Sylhet people, especially the Hindus, were playing important roles in Assam politics. However, public expression of bitterness was not yet noticeable.

An altogether new phenomenon of extremely far-reaching consequences was witnessed during the early years of this century. The vast expanse of cultivable wastelands in Assam attracted a large number of Muslim farm labourers and cultivators from the adjoining districts of Bengal, particularly Mymensingh, where lands were scarce. The migrants soon settled in the districts of Darrang, Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong. Within two decades their numbers rose to several lakhs and this brought into confrontation two communities and races with distinctly different ways of life. Basically economic in character, migration became an administrative and social issue, causing in the Assamese Hindu mind an apprehension of being numerically and otherwise swamped by the newcomers. But, interestingly, they refused to accept any restriction on their right to transfer land to those people.

The Government encouraged migration as a matter of policy and practical politics. To avoid conflicts between the Muslim farmers and the Assamese, the authorities introduced the Line System which would segregate the two; but that only resulted in their mutual alienation. At a later stage, the attempts of the Hindus at legislation to check or prevent new comers, and the settlement of the latter along with the rapidly widening rifts between the two communities following the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements further transformed migration into an inextricable mixture of communal, racial, linguistic, land and political animosities and controversies. Anti-migrant sentiments dominated the whole period of dyarchy and that ultimately became one of the main causes of complete community estrangement during the experiment of Provincial Autonomy.

Progress of education, political awakening and propaganda as well as the experiences of the temporary delineation, into provinces of Eastern Bengal and Assam,

made the Muslims conscious of the importance of their numerical strength and unity as a community. They then demanded a greater share in public offices, representation in local bodies and legislature, right to education in the mother tongue and to Islamic education. This aroused suspicion and apprehension in the Assamese mind - that if the Bengali, both Hindu and Muslim, were allowed continued premominance by virtue of their numbers, the province would become a part of 'Greater Bengal' jeopardising Assamese culture and other interests. Therefore, even as they entered the national mainstream, its broader perspectives failed to subdue the local problems such as racial, communal, linguistic and regional jealousies. Instead, these became more acute and found emphatic expressions, particularly in the legislature.

The Assamese disliked equally the British rule and the Bengali influence on their social, economic and cultural life. They initially disfavoured revocation of the transfer of Sylhet, as its separation might endanger Assam's status as a separate province. The British also opposed it as the new administrative arrangement was aimed at serving their economic and imperial interests. But, gradually, racial rivalry aggravated and alienated the Bengali Hindus from the Assamese and the latter began to champion the cause of transfer. They were supported by the Muslims.

Though the Assamese Hindus followed the all-India pattern of anti-British struggle, they had two home fronts to fight on. First, the urban Bengali Hindu 'bhadralogs' disseminated their cultural and political influences quite without fanfare. Second, the Muslim farmer migrants from rural Bengal were naturally more interested in land for settlement and to cultivate every inch of wasteland in the valley. The Assamese seemed to forget the former and thought it would be easier to assimilate the latter through the adoption of the Assamese language only. But the plan failed to achieve its purpose as the migrants refused to allow the obliteration of their cultural identity. Interestingly enough, they became the champions of their mother tongue. As a matter of fact, till 1950, the Muslims were aggressively vocal about their demand for a place for Bengali, for its protection and continued use in different spheres of life in Assam.

By 1930, the Muslim migrants had secured large tracts of land and their number had considerably multiplied. They now became more emphatic in raising their voices for their community interests. A turning point in Assam politics was the establishment of the Muslim League in the Brahmaputra Valley in 1938 and the appearance of the Assam Provincial Muslim League. The Muslim legislators, long divided into various conflicting groups, now sank their differences and became united under the leadership of Sir Mohammad Saadulla. While Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani had almost universal support of the Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley, Abdul Matin Choudhury led the community in Sylhet and Cachar. The Lahore Resolution had completed the Hindu-Muslim divide in Assam as in the rest of the country though Assam had always been within the ambit of Muslim geo-politics. The Assamese now awoke to the dangers of the League demand for having the province as part of what would become East Pakistan. Though opposed to the idea of partition, the Assamese advocated the transfer of Sylhet and Cachar thereto. They succeeded in respect of sylhet and accepted the retention of Cachar rather unwillingly.

The elections of 1937 had returned the Congress in Assam as the largest single party in the Legislative Assembly without a majority. But the party's central leadership decided against acceptance of office in the provinces in which they were in a minority. That policy brought Saadulla, an experienced administrator and politician under the dyarchical regime, to the forefront of Assam politics. He formed the first cabinet under the Government of India Act 1935 which introduced Provincial Autonomy. His initiation to political power as the head of the provincial Government was significant for more than one reason. With short breaks over a period about two years, he remained the premier of Assam till the elections of 1946.

First, great political clout and acumen was necessary for someone who was practically a non-party Muslim legislator to become the leader of a Government in an overwhelmingly Hindu majority province. Second, all the Saadulla-led cabinets during the period not only represented the Muslims, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Christians but also enjoyed the continuous support of the Europeans. Third, while dyarchy had worked mainly with Muslim cooperation, the successful working of provincial autonomy under an allegedly anti-Hindu Government certainly exploded the myth of the indispensability of the Congress vis-a-vis the reforms. If the first Saadulla cabinet tottered to its fall in the face of continuous Congress assaults in the form of inspiration to defects and lure of office, that party also could not stand on its own legs until after the elections of 1946.

Gopinath Bardoloi who ousted Saadulla in 1938 succeded in procuring the support of only three of 34 Muslim members of the Assembly by inducting them into his cabinet. He did not try to indoctrinate the Muslim masses in Congress ideology. His efforts and policy in breaking the first cabinet formed by a Muslim involved flagrant violation of Congress principles and invited severe criticism of no less a person than Rajendra Prasad. Some individuals, including leaders of the Jamiat-Ulema-E-Hind, supported the Congress but during the entire decade of 1937-1947, not even 500 Muslims joined the party as members despite the Mass Contact Programme. That perhaps explains why almost instantly the Muslims became the ardent supporters of the Assam Provincial Muslim League, however sincere the Jamiat might have been. More interestingly, none of the Muslim supporters of the Congress, except Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed would agree to contest the elections of 1946. Of course, he was defeated by a Muslim League candidate. Saadulla adopted the same method as that of Gopinath Bardoloi, leader of the Assam Congress Legislature Party making it impossible for the latter to secure a stable majority.

The ouster of Saadulla further widened the Hindu-Muslim divergences. Rightly or wrongly, the latter regarded this as a symbol of Congress design for the establishment of a 'Hindu Raj' in India. Moreover, a Hindu Congress Speaker of the assembly saved the Bardoloi cabinet in 1938 by abruptly adjourning the legislature sine die on the eve of a scheduled discussion of a no-confidence motion moved by the Saadulla combination. He did so allegedly on the advice of a premier-designate and not one officially sworn in. The Muslim leaders of the League camp now concluded that the Hindus would not allow them to form and sustain a Government. Further, the implementation of the Wardha

Scheme and strict application of the Domicile Rule and the Agricultural Income Tax were aimed at crushing the Muslims, they thought. Last, but not the least, the Bande Mataram, the Congress flag and the allegedly lukewarm efforts at tackling the Hindu-Muslim riots were considered by them to be a foretaste of their position in 'Akhand Hindustan'.

By the end of 1939, the Coalition Government of Bardoloi was shaken to its foundation by the Saadulla group's repeated assaults. In the meantime the central leadership of the Congress decided that its ministries should resign in protest against the British Government's unilateral declaration of India as belligerent on its behalf in World War II. Bardoloi resigned, leaving the field open to Saadulla and the Muslim League. His allegedly pro-Muslim and pro-Pakistan policy on migration and land settlement as well as the allegedly manipulated census of 1941 tore the two communities further aporto. But as Indian citizens, the Muslims claimed the right to settle on and cultivate the surplus wastelands in Assam.

Strangely enough, however, Bardoloi adopted a policy of appeasement. In 1941, during the anti-war Satyagraha of the Congress, he entered into an agreement with Rohini Kumar Choudhury, a collaborator of Saadulla and minister in his so-called Muslim League ministry. By 1945, Saadulla was being openly castigated for his pro-Pakistan policy. And yet, that very year, a Tripartite Agreement was signed by Bardolai, Saadulla and Rohini Kumar Choudhury. According to it, among other things, Saadulla would reconstitute his cabinet by including in it five members selected by the Opposition of which the main constituent was the Congress led by Bardoloi himself. This Agreement in fact gave the Saadulla cabinet a new lease of life in the crucial anti-partition struggle. His action was a political drama of the highest interest and evoked severe criticism and adverse comments from Mohammad Tayyabulla, president of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC). But at the time of the elections of 1946, the Party would face a rebellion from the President and his supporters as he openly declared that the Agreement would not be accepted by the APCC.

While Saadulla led the parliamentary wing of the Muslim League, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, himself a newcomer to Assam, commanded supremacy at the grassroot Party levels. In the elections of 1946 which were fought more or less on the issue of undivided. India and Pakistan, though with limited franchise and on the basis of separate electorate, all the General Seats and nine others of special interests were won by the Congress. Thirty-one of the 34 reserved seats were won by the Muslim League. The demand for Assam's inclusion in Pakistan was especially strengthened by the Party's spectacular success. But the All India Muslim League was not very serious about the claim on Assam as a whole. It was satisfied with the result of the Referendum in Sylhet and the district's inclusion in East Pakistan.

There was no uniform pattern in Assam politics for a number of reasons. First, the political consciousness of the Assamese community engendered by the upper caste Hindus and sectional leadership failed to permeate to other levels of their society. The Congress was not serious about creating a mass base amongst the Muslims. Second, the

both Assamese and the Bengali Hindus of the valleys considered their interests as opposed to each other's. Though the Muslims were united as a community, those of the Brahmaputra Valley began to complain of the predominance of their co-religionists of Sylhet and Cachar districts. The period of dyarchy nourished those divergences. Above all, the Hindus of both the valleys, since 1874, were not willing partners and in fact never had a common meeting ground.

The parameters of divergences and conflicts expanded after 1947. Post-independence Assam, like the rest of India, had to witness the resurgence of the erstwhile backward, forgotten and slumbering sections of the people who now began to play important and dominant roles in shaping the politics of the State. Here, however, we shall restrict our discussion to the Muslim aspect only. This community constitutes a fourth of the State's population. The importance of the numerical strength of the Muslims in respect of the psephological impact on parliamentary democracy cannot be over emphasised. It has been shown how the social, economic, political and cultural life of the people of Assam was very greatly influenced by this section so often castigated as anti-Indian and anti-Assamese. The present turmoil in Assam is very much a legacy of the past which failed to understand and appreciate the multifaceted and composite character of the population. We, however, concentrate our attention on the political aspect only.

In the recent past, different aspects of Assamese history has attracted academic and popular interests and attention. Politics dominates every sphere of life. But in the process there has been a lot of misunderstanding, partisan propaganda, partial exploration of sources of information and distortion. All this has led to purely sentimental assessments of pre-independence, inter-provincial migrations, post-independence Hindu displaced persons and immigration from East Pakistan and alleged infiltration from Bangladesh. An indepth study of Assam politics has thus become necessary. To the author's knowledge any such study has been conspicuous by its absence. His book, Muslims in Assam Politics, published in 1990, was the first attempt in that direction. It covered the period from 1200 to 1947, with particular reference to Muslims.

The multifarious dimensions of Assam politics of the British days became still more complex after the partition of the country, with the addition of an international element in the form of the allegedly large-scale influx of Muslims from Bangladesh. A further study and review of Assam politics with particular emphasis on the Muslim factor became pertinent and essential; hence the present work in that context. Much of the basic information for the purpose was provided by the earlier book. This study covers the period from 1946 to 1991. In the course of discussions, some generally prevailing notions about the Muslims were found to be historically wrong and some merely myths, which facts exploded. Hindu-Muslim relations and the activities of the Congress, the Muslim League and other allied and opposing political organisations were found to be conflicting and contradictory, making the Assam situation what it is today.

The Assamese Hindus look at each and every problem of the people from the angle of the so-called sons of the soil, language, majority, minority, Hindus, Muslims, Assamese and Bengalis. The fear of being swamped by imaginary enemies, the

'outsiders' has been created and nurtured by the politicians so much so that in fact all non-Assamese are regarded as outsiders. Assam politics has become a mere number game and the Muslim factor dominates the scene. The typical political life under continuous Congress rule was disturbed for the first time during the late 1970s. The Muslims were at centre stage. The six-year long agitation against 'Foreigners', avowedly aiming at protecting and preserving Assam and the Assamese, had ended with the much trumpeted Assam Accord, dramatically signed in the early hours of 15 August 1985. Minority politics came to the surface. Regionalism triumphed, the Assam Gana Parishad, an off-spring of the All Assam Students Union, formed a Government of the Assamese, for the Assamese and by the Assamese. What did the students-turnd politicians achieve? How far did they suceed in solving the 'foreign national' problem which endangered Assam's existence? This book is an elaborate study towards answering these allied questions. It consists of eight chapters, of which the salient features are recorded below.

CHPATER gives a sketchy history of Assam from 1200 to 1947 with a short review of politics upto independence. It also explains how the Muslims became an important political factor and what role they played till then. Reminescences of those days have been shown to have significant impact on post-partition politics.

THE NEXT CHAPTER attempts at understanding the demographic and political profiles after independence vis-a-vis the Muslim community. It analyses the circumstances and the compulsions that led to a change of attitude of the erstwhile League supporters who joined the Congress en masse under the leadership of two suspected pro-Pakistanis, Sir Mohammad Saadulla and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed. The question of Congress nominations of Muslim candidates soon resulted in a rift between the Party and Saadulla who resigned from it. But the Congress-Muslim entente, brought about on the eve of the first General Elections, survived till 1978.

The terms 'migration', 'immigration', 'influx' and 'infiltration' were used indiscriminately in Assam without care for the precise meanings of these words. Before 1947, even inter-provincial and intra-provincial movement of people, especially the Muslim farm labourers and cultivators, initiated and encouraged by the government as a matter of practical politics, was called immigration. The cry against immigrants was directed against the Muslim community as a whole. After the partition of the country such people became foreign nationals and infiltrators, though every non-Assamese was called in *bahiragata or 'outsiders'*. However, there was hardly any policy to prevent their entry into Assam, though some restrictions like settlement in specific areas were imposed; but the measure, called the Line System, only alienated the two communities, making the whole issue more complicated and insoluble. The subject of CHAPTER 3 is, therefore, an elaborate and critical study of Immigrant Policy beginning with the so-called Muslim League Ministry of Saadulla and covering the Congress regimes from 1946 to 1991 with two breaks of the Jahata and the Asom Gana Parishad period, 1978-1980 and 1985-1990, respectively.

There has been an unsubstantiated fear, politically nurtured and sustained, that the Bengali Hindus were jeopardising the Assamese culture and the Muslims were

numerically swamping them, becoming a danger to their political identity. CHAPTER 4 is, therefore, a detailed attempt at showing the untenability of those fears. The conclusion was reached after a thorough study of three Muslim attempts at consolidating their political potential in 1950, 1978 and 1985, vis-a-vis the Muslim population, electoral strength and their actual representations in the Assam cabinets and the Legislative Assembly from 1937 to 1991. No less revealing was the fact that despite the preclaimed majority, the Assamese by themselves could not expect to win more than 40 of the 126 seats of the Assembly. This was not because of the immigrants but because of the constituency-wise population pattern of other groups and communities. This was the finding of an Assamese scholar.

CHAPTER 5 of the book is a study of a new political scenario that started taking shape in the late 1970s minority organisations, post-accord minority situation, birth of a new political party named the United Minorities Front and reactions of other parties to its appearance on the scene.

The subject of CHAPTER 6 is regional politics. It covers the birth of the Purbanchallya Loka Parishad (PLP), Asom Jatiyabadi Dal (AJO), the final phase of negotiations leading to the Assam Accord and a critique thereof, reactions of political parties, tribals and others and the birth of the Asom Gana Parishad.

Detailed accounts of electoral roll politics, outlines election manifestos, election results of 1985 and the triumpth of regionalism leading to the accession of the Asom Gana Parishad to power have been given in CHAPTER 7.

CHAPTER 8 is a critical analysis of the implementation of the Assam Accord by the Government of Asom Gana Parishad. It discusses how the main object of the Accord, namely, detection, deletion from the electoral rolls and expulsion of 'foreigners' who were obviously Muslims, was apparently wilfully frustrated by adopting wrong priorities, imposition of the Assamese language on non-Assamese, large-scale eviction of minorities, mostly Muslims, in the name of encroachments and by raising untenable objections against and making unjustifiable demands for amendment of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983, which had some safeguards against harrassment of genuine Indians. All this made the operation of the Accord impossible but concealed the incapacity of the leaders who had assumed power with such fanfare in 1985. A public assessment of the Asom Gana Prishad (AGP) Government and its political culture made by Assamese leaders and media persons is also discussed. Significant and telling details of the Government's functioning during the five years from 1985 to 1990 were given in the Governor's report and have been reproduced here.