

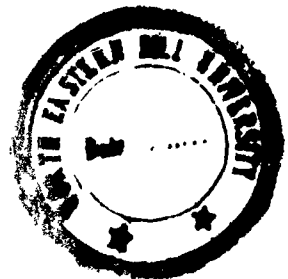
I

# IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON ASSAMESE POLITICS

By

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A THESIS

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

To



**NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY**  
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This is to certify that Miss Alaka Sharma has worked under my supervision for the thesis IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON ASSAMESE POLITICS. The thesis does not incorporate work of any person other than Miss Sharma herself. It is not submitted to any university for a degree. I recommend this thesis for submission to the North-Eastern Hill University for a degree of Ph.D.

Dated - 11/4/88

  
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**COMPUTERISED**

PREFACE

The agitation on the foreign nationals issue generally referred to in the media and intellectual circles as the 'Assam Agitation', has brought the problem of immigration to sharp focus. Students of Assam Politics are aware of the fact that ever since the early British administration, immigration has remained a theory issue in Assam economically, politically and socially. It has drawn the attention of the scholars in the context of economic development and demographic changes.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have studied this problem in the context of identity crisis and nationality question in Assam.<sup>2</sup> But no attempt has so far been made to study the political aspect of the problem in details.

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1. For an exposition of this theme, see, Atul Goswami and Jayanta Gogoi 'Migration and Demographic Transformation of Assam 1901-1971' in B.L. Abbi (ed.) North East Problems and Prospects of Development (Chandigarh, 1984), p. 60, and also S.K. Dass 'Immigration and Demographic Transformation of Assam 1891-1981' Economic and Political Weekly, May 10, 1980, p. 1350.

2. There are a large number of articles by various authors on this theme but the following sum up the major arguments.

Amalendu Guha, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist' Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number, 1980, pp. 1699-1720.

Udayan Misra, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist' A Comment, Economic and Political Weekly, Feb. 21, 1981, p. 290.

Hiren Gohain, 'Assam Cudgel of Chauvinism' Economic and Political Weekly, 1980, pp. 418-420.

#### IV

Ever since the introduction of electoral politics in Assam during the British period, the issue of immigration has been in the centre of political controversies. Political Parties like Muslim League and the Congress in the Pre-independence period and the various other parties in the post independence period have been addressing themselves to this problem. Their attitude to the immigrants and the groups that oppose the immigration has very often influenced their political fortunes. On the other hand, this theory issue has also given rise to quite a few pressure groups in Assam politics. A close examination of the impact of the issue and the related controversies on the policies and the pronouncement of these parties and groups would go a long way in understanding politics in the State of Assam. The indigenous population of Assam has recently been so worried about the possible effect of immigration on their identity that a major section of them launched an unprecedented movement which in turn brought about major changes in the power structure of the State. Thus the importance of studying the impact of immigration on Assam's politics cannot be over-emphasized. In this study, therefore, an attempt has been made to examine (i) How the issue of immigration influences the policies, pronouncements and actions of various political parties in Assam, (ii) the nature of political actions generated by interests connected with this issue, and (iii) whether this issue has a lasting impact on Assam politics in terms of generating new political forces.

As we have indicated above the 'Assam Agitation' has been an offshoot of the controversy and the problem created by large scale immigration into Assam. As a part of this study we propose to examine the nature of the agitation in the context of the crisis of identity that seems to engulf the Assamese speaking population of the State. In this context we propose to examine as to whether the problem of immigration alone was responsible for creating the conditions that led to the agitation. The agitation on the foreigners issue has often been branded as a middle class movement. The leaders of the movement, on the other hand, called it a mass movement. We propose to analyse the character of the movement including the nature of support it got from the peasantry. In view of the fact that a number of regional parties played active roles in the movement. We shall also examine, during the course of this study, the positions of these parties vis-a-vis the movement and the issue of immigration. In view of the political turmoil created by the movement and the changed political situation it would be interesting to examine the positions of the various national parties on the movement. We hope that an examination of the above mentioned issues, would enable us to have a clear understanding of the impact of immigration on Assam's Politics.

The bulk of the data have been collected from primary sources - published documents, census reports, official

reports, Government records etc. and secondary sources such as books, articles, newspapers, the Government publications and also form the publications of various political parties and interest groups in Assam.

I am greatly indebted to Dr. A.K. Baruah, Reader, Department of Political Science, NEHU, for his supervision and guidance throughout the course of my investigation.

My acknowledgements are due to authors whose works I have consulted and to the Record Keeper, Assam Secretariat Record Office for giving me an access to the materials in the Record room. I am also grateful to my fellow research scholars who encouraged and helped me in various ways. However, I am alone responsible for the views expressed or the data incorporated in the present work.

SHILLONG  
THE 15<sup>th</sup> APRIL, 1988.

*Alaka Sarmah*  
(ALAKA SARMAH)

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CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION:

A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

## INTRODUCTION: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Situated in the north-east of India, the State of Assam is connected with the rest of India by a narrow 18 mile corridor. Assam has common boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Burma. Until, a few years ago, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram were parts of Assam.

In ancient times, Assam was known as 'Kamrupa' and its capital was 'Pragjyotishpura'. King Narakasura and his son Bhagadutta were famous rulers in the Mahabharata Period, circa 1000 B.C. The 'Kamrup' kingdom was founded by Pusyavarman in the fourth century and reached its peak of strength and glory in the reign of Bhaskavarman in the seventh century. The Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang visited the country around 640 A.D. at the invitation of its ruler Bhaskarvarman. He left a vivid account of the country and its people. There is no unanimity of opinion as to how the name Assam came to be accepted. However, "In 1236 A.D., the Ahoms, a Mongolian tribe from Thailand crossed the Patkai range through Burma and conquered Upper Assam. Sukapha, the leader entered Assam with a handful of Nobles first. In the next two centuries the Ahoms defeated the Kochs, the Kacharis and other local rulers of lower Assam including Goalpara. The country was thus named Assam after the Ahoms." <sup>1</sup>

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1. P.C. Choudhury, History of Civilization of Assam (Gauhati, 1961), p. 26.

The Ahoms ruled Assam for nearly sixth centuries. The rivalry among the Ahom Princes weakened the Ahom administration. In despair, prince Gaurinath Singha accepted help of the British in 1786. The British restored peace and returned to Calcutta. After this Badan Chandra Barphukan, the officer in charge of lower Assam invited the Burmese to fight against the king in 1817. The Burmese swept over the country three times, bringing destruction and misery. At the request of king Purandar Singha, the British drove out the Burmese invaders and entered into a treaty with the Burmese. After the treaty of Yandaboo with Burma on the 24th February 1826, Assam became a part of British India.<sup>2</sup>

With the annexation of Assam by the British, the erstwhile Ahom Kingdom became an integral part of India. The present Goalpara district of Assam formed part of Bengal even before the East India Company was granted the Dewani of Bengal in 1765 by the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II. It was in 1639 that Goalpara had become a part of Bengal. Thus Goalpara was included in the British empire nearly 60 years before Assam as a whole became a part of it. It was in 1879, that with the

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2. For details of British Conquest see, H.K. Barpujari, Assam in the days of Company 1826-1858 (Gauhati, 1963).  
 (2) K.N. Dutta, Landmarks of Freedom Struggle in Assam (Gauhati, 1958; reprinted 1969).  
 (3) R.M. Lahiri, The Annexation of Assam 1824-54 (Calcutta, 1954).  
 (4) Harendra Nath Baruah, (ed) Bharatar Mukti Yunjut Assam (Assamese), Gauhati, 1972.

addition of three Bengal districts, namely Goalpara, Cachar, and Sylhet, Assam was constituted into a chief commissioner's province. With regard to the inclusion of Sylhet into Assam, Amalendu Guha writes,

"Although vast in area, this new province with its small population of 2443 thousand had a meagre revenue potential.... To make it financially viable the authorities therefore decided in September to incorporate into it the populous Bengali speaking district of Sylhet which historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of Bengal. Even with the additional 1,720 thousands people of Sylhet, the new province was only about half as populous as the central provinces." 3

The British administration, to suit its own colonial designs, made territorial adjustments and re-adjustments of Assam in the west and south-west directions. So was the case with regard to the hill states inhabited by numerous tribal groups in the north, north-east, south-east and south. These hill people were self assertive and of independent character. They were war-like people and because of this trait the British imperialist did not view with favour the contact between them and the plains people.<sup>4</sup> "To pursue their policy of divide and rule effectively they devised a plan for segregation of the hill tribal people in their habitat. And this was the system

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3. Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj (New Delhi, 1977), pp. 56-64.

4. Koustavmani Boruah, 'Foreigners in Assam and the Assamese middle class' Social Scientist, June 1980, p.48.

of 'Inner line regulation' introduced in 1873, restricting the entrance of any person beyond the line so demarcated."<sup>5</sup> These provisions prevented migration into the hills, but the British policies encouraged migration into the plains areas of Assam. The process of territorial adjustments and readjustments had its impact on the socio-cultural and economic aspect of Assam. The most important was on the demographic aspects of the Brahmaputra valley itself. A study of the 120 years of British Colonial rule in Assam will reveal that they opened the doors of Assam to the immigrants from distant places to suit their own colonial interests.

It is well known that the Moamoriya peasant rebellion in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the Burmese invasion in the first quarter of the nineteenth century had left Assam at almost half of her natural population. Diseases like Kala Azar had also swept away a large number during the early period of colonial rule.<sup>6</sup> In this way the natural growth of population in Assam was retarded. As a result, miles after miles of the valley remained uncultivated and soon became covered with deep jungles infested with wild beasts. As the cultivable land was much more in proportion to the inhabitants,

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5. See, Padmanath Borthakur's 'Swadhinata Andolanar Rengani' Assam Sahitya Sabha Bulletin (Assamese) 39th Session, Dhubri, 1972, p. 179.

6. See Hari Sankar Srivastava, History of the Indian Famine (1858-1918), (New Delhi, 1961), p.48.

and as the government did not want to be deprived of the land revenue from these lands, the British administration seemed to have encouraged large scale immigration into Assam. Hari Sankar Srivastava pointed out that during the famine of 1896-1898 a large number of people from central provinces migrated to Assam.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, with expansion of Tea Plantation in Assam, the British planters in league with the government brought cheap labourers to Assam. Guha says,

"Men, women and children were enticed, even kidnapped and traded like cattle ... absconders were hunted down like runaway slaves. Of the total number of 89,756 labourers recruited outside the province of Assam during 15 December 1858 to 30 June 1866, 103 fled away and 30,488 died on the way and the remaining 59,268 reached Assam."<sup>8</sup>

Besides Tea labourers, men of different trades and professions started coming to Assam to cater to the needs of the new administration. Guha rightly concludes that all those factors helped the rapid growth of the population of the Brahmaputra Valley from an estimated one million in 1826 to about two million by 1872.<sup>9</sup>

While the population went on increasing, Assam's pace of development remained very slow. With the coming of the

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7. Ibid., p. 24.

8. Guha, Op.cit., p. 18.

9. Ibid., p. 19.

British, English education acquired considerable importance, but the colonial administration did not strive in right earnest for the development of English education in Assam. Calcutta was the centre of British commerce and administration for the whole of India, and it became the centre of Indian renaissance. The descendants of the Ahom feudal nobility also had their early initiation into English education there.<sup>10</sup> The "Jonaki Age", a glorious chapter in the history of Assamese literature, had its origin in Calcutta. Anyway, as there was limited scope for higher education in Assam, naturally majority of the Assamese youths could not avail of the opportunity of government jobs. Competition for jobs on the basis of English education developed at a later stage. But gradually educated youths, whether Assamese or non-Assamese (mainly Bengali) began to get government jobs that were open to them. The inevitable result was the greater numerical strength of the non-Assamese, particularly Bengalis in Government service in Assam.<sup>11</sup>

Administratively, Assam was part of Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1873, although historically and ethnically Assam was different from Bengal. The British administration made it a policy to recruit educated Bengali people for government

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10. See, B.N. Borah, 'Uccha Siksa' in Hemchandra Goswami (ed.) Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki, (Calcutta, 1929), Vol. III, Part I, p. 297.

11. Ibid., p. 299.

service in Assam as they did in the case of Orissa and Bihar.<sup>12</sup> In the land revenue settlement work also men from Marwar and Sylhet were appointed in preference to the local Assamese gentry. This was objected to by Maniram Dewan in his memorandum to A.J. Moffat Mills, during the latter's visit to the province in 1853. Dewan stated,

"Under the revenue settlement of military officers, while a number of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalees from Sylhet have been appointed to Mauzadarships, and for us respectable Assamese to become the riots of such foreigners is a source of deep mortifications."<sup>13</sup>

But such arguments did not seem to influence some of the later day educated Assamese like Boli Narayan Borah, because he implored the government to bring educated people from West Bengal with enhanced pay for the educational development of Assam. He was afraid that caste Hindus might be swamped by the plains tribals of Assam.<sup>14</sup>

The policy of encouraging immigration into Assam effected the demographic situation in such a manner that "the non-indigenous population of Assam proper increased from less than a lac in a total population of 15 lacs in 1872 to an

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12. Borah, Op.cit., p. 30.

13. Quoted by A.J.M. Mills from the memorandum submitted by Dewan in his Report on the Province of Assam (Calcutta, 1854), p. LXVIII.

14. Borah, Op.cit., p. 297.

estimated five to six lacs in a total population of about 22 lacs in 1901 ... non-indigenous element came to constitute at least one-quarter of the population of Assam proper in 1901."<sup>15</sup>

In Assam, there were two phases of immigration during the period of British rule - 1826 to 1905 and 1905 to 1947. In the first phase of immigration into Assam, mainly three classes of people migrated - Tea Plantation labourers, 'Amolas' (office employees from Sylhet, Dacca, Mymensingh, Rampur and other districts of Bengal) and merchants and tradesmen from Rajasthan and Bengal. "They mostly constituted a floating population in the Tea Plantation area and in the towns. In the second phase, beginning in 1905, the Muslim peasants from East Bengal now Bangladesh started settling in rural areas of Assam."<sup>16</sup> In addition, the Bengali Hindu immigrants continued to pour into towns. By 1947, there were approximately 3 million non-indigenous people in a total population of about 7 million. The proportion of Muslims in the population of Brahmaputra Valley had increased to 23 percent by 1941 and remained the same in 1951, due to the return of some Muslims to East Pakistan. But the picture becomes clear only when we

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15. A.K. Das, Assam's Agony - A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis (New Delhi, 1981), p. 25.

16. Loc. cit.

look at the facts like "in 1911 Muslims constituted 0.1 per cent of the population of the Barpeta Subdivision but by 1941, their number increased nearly to 49 percent. The number of East Bengal settlers increased from 300,000 in 1921 to over half a million in 1931."<sup>17</sup> In addition to East Bengalis, Nepalis who entered Assam without restricted area permits either from Nepal or from Bhutan, account for a sizeable number of immigrants. The following two tables clearly show the increase of Nepali as well as Muslim population in Assam.

Table - I: Growth of Nepali Population 1951-71

Year	Persons	Decade Variation	General Variation Assam
1951	101,335	N.A.	N.A.
1961	182,925	80.51 p.c.	34.98 p.c.
1971	353,673	93.34 p.c.	34.95 p.c.

Source: Census of India, 1971 (Assam)

17. Statistical Handbook of Assam, 1971, (Gauhati, 1971).

Table - II: Growth of Muslim Population in Assam 1901-1971 (Districtwise %)

District	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971
Goalpara	27.76	35.19	41.48	43.89	46.23	42.94	43.32	42.25
Kamrup	9.10	9.66	14.61	24.61	29.07	29.29	29.36	28.93
Nowgong	4.83	5.20	17.73	31.60	38.53	40.54	41.24	29.40
Darrang	5.16	5.39	7.61	11.46	16.27	17.03	19.35	16.19
Sibsagar	4.16	4.30	4.25	4.71	4.98	5.82	5.83	5.27
Lakhimpur	3.22	3.05	2.56	3.44	4.76	4.66	5.64	4.59
Cachar	38.06	37.60	37.61	40.06	42.18	38.49	39.14	39.88
Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills	14.22	1.60	1.41	1.37	1.10	1.70	1.25	1.30
Assam	106.51	101.99	127.26	161.14	183.12	180.47	185.13	167.81

Source: Census of India, Various Reports.

The percentage increase of the Nepali population is higher by about 167 percent than the percentage increase in the general population during the period 1951-1971.

The situation came to such a stage that in the 1931 Census report C.S. Mullan, the Census Commissioner commented that during the years between 1921 and 1931, the immigration army had almost completed the conquest of Nowgong, the Barpeta district had fallen in their attack and Darrang was being invaded, Sibsagar had so far escaped completely. He wrote "It is said but by no means improbably that in another 30 years, Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home."<sup>18</sup> Writing on the same problem, he stated that the immigration of vast hordes of land hungry Bengali people from Mymensingh and Eastern Bengal would surely alter the whole future of Assam and destroy it more surely than the Burmese invaders in 1820.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad a prominent freedom fighter and who later became the President of India had knowledge of the problem in 1920's. However, he was more worried about the fact that Hindus might be reduced to an insignificant minority in Assam and even considered populating Assam with Biharis to counter the Mymensingh influx. He wrote "... The influx

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18. Census Report, Government of India, New Delhi 1931, Vol. III, Part I, (Assam).

of Muslims from Mymensing was upsetting the population ratio and the Assamese wanted to retain a majority in the Brahmaputra Valley. The influx from Mymensing could be countered only by allowing Bihar Hindus to settle down on the land."<sup>19</sup> The possibility of Muslim majority as a result of immigration has been highlighted even by some progressive historians like Guha in his article, "Nationalism Pan-Indian and Regional in a Historical Perspective."<sup>20</sup> It was an unfortunate distortion because the dominant section of the Assamese have been worried about losing their identity as Assamese (culturally) and not merely as Hindus. Assamese political leaders were not worried by the threat to Hindu religion. In fact Assamese culture was such a culture that despite the dominance of Assamese speaking Hindus in certain aspects of Assamese life Hinduism never became the pivot of Assamese culture. The Assamese national festival 'Bihu' is primarily a cultural festival with strong tribal roots. The Assamese culture has been greatly influenced by the various tribal cultures of the region. This in turn seem to have save it from being communal from religious perspective. But the problem of immigration worried the leaders of Assamese society for a various other reasons. In 1940, leading Assamese citizens like Hem Chandra Barua and Omeo Kr.

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19. Baruah, Op.cit., p.54.

20. Amalendu Guha, 'Nationalism: Pan-Indian Regional in a Historical Perspective', Social Scientist, 129 Marx Centenary, No.3, Feb. 1984, p. 32.

Das said that "Assam had already reached a point where its rule of or capacity for absorption has far exceeded its assimilation capacity."<sup>21</sup>

The immigration of the Muslim peasants from the present day Bangladesh in the first few decades of this century into Assam was clearly linked with the growth of the jute industry in and around Calcutta under the British finance capital. With the expansion of jute trade, the expansion of its cultivation also became an immediate necessity. As the area of jute cultivation in Bengal could no longer be extended, it was thought well to grow the same in the soil of Assam. Hence, the immigration of expert jute cultivators into Assam. Guha rightly states that with their superior techniques of cultivation, these East Bengal peasants taught Assam how to grow jute and several other crops. He shows that "the acreage under jute in the Brahmaputra Valley increased as a result of this great population movement from a little less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-06 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-20."<sup>22</sup>

It is of course not possible to argue that a section of the Assamese themselves did not contribute to the process of immigration. Guha and others stated that Assamese middle class

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21. Quoted in B.K. Bhattacharyya, "Assam Movement Background of History in B.L. Abbi (ed.) North East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development (Chandigarh, 1984), p. 268.

22. Guha, Op.cit., p. 102.

contributed a great deal to the influx of outsiders. Guha says, "Local Assamese and even Marwari money lenders financed the immigrants so that the latter could reclaim land and expand the cultivation of jute, Ahu rice, pulses and vegetables."<sup>23</sup> But it is hence not true that the entire Assamese middle class has been in favour of immigration. People like Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Bishnuram Medhi, Gopinath Bordoloi were very much against immigration. Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury submitted a memorandum to Nehru when the latter came to Assam in 1937. The memorandum stated:

"The Bengalee Hindu and Muslim who run at one another's throat in their own province, are all in one in Assam in this respect, not with a view to fighting for the cause of national freedom, but for establishing their Bengalee Kingdom in close cooperation with the British Government. There has been a serious set back to the process of assimilation with the Assamese. The Mymensinghi immigrants who had voluntarily come forward to identify their interest with those of the Assamese are now persuaded to give that up and are being forced to read Bengali."<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that a small section of people with vested landed interest encouraged immigration while many others who were concerned with the question of survival of the Assamese culture opposed it. So we cannot blame the entire Assamese middle class for the deeds of a few.

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23. Assam Banking Enquiry Committee's Report 1929-30, Vol.II, p. 507-17.

24. Memorandum presented to Jawaharlal Nehru, President, AICC "Jawaharlal Nehru's Assam Tour" AICC Papers, File No. 4(i)22, 1937. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Office, Gauhati.



In Assam, when the immigrants started encroaching on lands set apart for professional grazing reserves and also inhabited the plains districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong, the problem reached a most critical point. The British Government in Assam introduced the 'Line System' in 1920 restricting the settlement of East Bengal peasants on the plea that the identity and individuality of the Assamese society should remain undisturbed. But the actual aim of this system was, perhaps, to isolate the immigrants from the local people by compelling the former to live and toil in particular segregated localities beyond which they were not allowed to settle. However, the resolution was not executed when Saadullah came into power after the resignation of Congress coalition government. "He considered that the immigrants were mostly landless, and the only solution was to provide them with available lands."<sup>25</sup> The immigrants came to Assam only to acquire as much land as they can. That is why Hamid Khan, the Vice President of the Assam Provincial Muslim League encouraged immigrants to settle in the wastelands of the Assam Valley. His slogan was: "chal chal Darrang chal, jangal bhangia abad kar, patit mati dakhil kar"<sup>26</sup> (Let's march to Darrang, clear the jungle and occupy the fellow

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25. Assamiya (bi-weekly), 5 October 1940, Gauhati, p.2.

26. See 'Swadhinata Andolanar Rengani' Assam Sahitya Sabha Bulletin, (Assamese) 39 Session, Dhubri 1971, p.179.

lands). The violation of the 'Line System' made a section of the Assamese middle class to think seriously of their future. Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury organised the Assam Samakshini Sabha which was later rechristened as Assam Jaitya Maha Sabha. This Sabha strongly opposed the settlement of immigrants in Assam and viewed it as a menace to Assamese culture.<sup>27</sup> Roy Choudhury tried his best to draw the attention of the Assamese to the threat, to their language, culture and the way of life, by the continuous influx of immigrants to Assam.

The Line System in Assam created many problems. The Assamese strongly supported the system while the immigrants opposed it. There is so much of difference of opinion that to resolve the problem, an all party committee was formed under the government initiative with A.W. Botham in the chair in 1928. The committee had nine members, including N.C. Bordoloi and Saadullah. Bordoloi's opinion was for "settlement of land with the immigrants peasants in definite areas with sufficient reservation of land for further expansion of the indigenous population."<sup>28</sup> According to the colonisation scheme, "a small family was given 30 bighas of land. As a result of this, altogether 47,636 acres of land were settled with 1,619 Muslims and 441 Hindu families in the district of Nowgong upto

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27. When a section of Assamese people realised that their culture and identity is in danger, due to immigration Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury formed the Assamiya Samrakshini Sabha (Association for Conservation of the Assamese) in 1926 to propagate the Assamese cause.

28. Guha, Op.cit., p. 208.

March 1933. During the six years ending 1936, 59 grazing reserves opened up for the settlement of the immigrant peasant in the district of Nowgong alone."<sup>29</sup>

According to the census report of 1951, "in 1947 when East Bengal became East Pakistan, the influx of Muslims halted for a while, but Hindu refugees poured in large numbers. What was even more surprising, a very few Muslims of Assam had left East Pakistan. Within a year or so, a large number of Muslims of East Pakistan who should have been regarded as foreigners, began infiltrating, thus repeating the story of the pre-partition years."<sup>30</sup> The partition of India further complicated the situation. The Nehru-Liaquat Ali Pact, requiring passports for everyone crossing the Borders, did not work as far as Assam was concerned.

Every time there was a civil strife or economic crisis in East Pakistan, there was an exodus of its nationals into Assam. The influx became massive in the wake of Bangladesh liberation struggle, when the borders between the erstwhile East Pakistan and Assam, were left more or less open. There were many refugees who were registered, but it is also true that many refugees went unrecorded. During the mid-seventies

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29. Ibid., p. 209.

30. Census Report 1951, Vol. I, Part 1, p. 62.

Bangladesh was once again in social and political turmoil. The influx which then began, continues even today.

This brief account of immigration into Assam, both before and after partition of the country, includes immigration from other sources particularly Nepal which was by no means insignificant. Even so, the size and dimension of immigration from erstwhile East Bengal later turned East Pakistan and the Bangladesh, have no parallel in records of migrations. Even a cursory glance at the population growth rate in Assam, compared to that of India as a whole, points to an abnormal growth in the state population, as can be seen from the following table.

Table - III: Population Growth Rate of Assam and India

Year	Population in lakh	Decadal Variation in thousand	Percentage of Decadal Variation	
			Assam	India
1901	33	-	-	-
1911	39	+ 56	+ 16.84	+ 5.7
1921	47	+ 79	+ 20.19	- 0.3
1931	56	+ 94	+ 20.05	+ 11.0
1941	68	+ 116	+ 20.45	+ 14.2
1951	82	+ 137	+ 20.12	+ 13.3
1961	111	+ 287	+ 34.99	+ 21.6
1971	149	+ 385	+ 34.71	+ 24.6
1981	204	+ 551	+ 39.8	Not available

Estimated by Department of Economics and Statistics,  
Government of Assam, 1978.

Source: Various Census Reports.

Thus, during the 70 years period from 1901 to 1971, the population of Assam has grown more than four fold (more than six fold at the 1981 level), from 3.3 million in 1901 to nearly 15 million in 1971. The percentage growth rate in this 70 year period for Assam is over 500 percent (600 p.c. at the 1981 level) as against that of 130 percent for India as a whole. Computed at the all-India growth rate of 130 percent, the population of Assam in 1971 should have been 7.6 as against the actual population of 14.9 million. The difference of 7.3 million accounts for the population of the immigrants and their descendants. Even starting from 1951, Assam population at the All India growth rate should have been about 12.6 million, as against the actual population 14.9 million. The difference of 2.3 million, at least a major share it, is accounted for by the population of the illegal foreign settlers. And during the decade 1971-81, their number would have reached the four million mark as against the total of 20 million population of Assam.<sup>31</sup>

Such abnormal growth in population has had a crippling effect on the economy of the State. A high density of population in a state with a predominantly rural economy is bound to result in increased pressure on agricultural land. According

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31. P.S. Reddi, "Genesis of the Assam Movement" in B.L. Abbi (ed.) N.E. Problems and Prospects of Development, Chandigarh, 1984, p. 265.

to the 1971 Census, the density of population in Assam is 186 per sq.km. as against the national average of 169 per sq.km. In the plains district, the density is 223 per sq.km. The effective density, after excluding the areas not available for cultivation, varies from 357 to 548 per sq.km. which is rather high for a state without much industrialization.<sup>32</sup> As a result, there is enormous pressure on agricultural land.

There are other reasons also for the grave concern of the people of Assam over the pressure of lakhs of immigrants on their soil. It is alleged that with the negligence of the government, and the connivance of self-seeking politicians, a large number of foreign nationals have already been fraudulently enrolled on the electoral rolls. Further, there is a possibility of a certain section of the immigrant population consolidating themselves on the basis of language and religion. At the time of the 1951 Census, many an immigrant settler declared his language to be Assamese, thereby accepting the principle of assimilation with the majority community.<sup>33</sup> But now, it appears that they are being persuaded to reaffirm their original language for political reasons. The consequences of such move are ominous. The Assamese would be shown to be much less in number on linguistic as well as

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32. V.V. Rao, "Politics of Tension in Assam" The Assam Tribune, March 18, 1980.

33. Ibid.

religious grounds. In such a state, the Assamese would be reduced to the position of the Tripuris in Tripura today or the Bhutan-Lepchas in Sikkim, a minority in their own homeland. Analysing the situation a senior social scientist of the North East India says, "The critical geo-physical position of Assam adds a new dimension to the problem. In 2000 A.D. there is the possibility of history repeating itself so as to result in the dismemberment of Assam."<sup>34</sup>

It is clear from the above that the problem of immigration in Assam is not a mere economic or demographic problem. Because of the complex political issues involved with it the problem has evoked various responses from the political parties and groups which resulted in formulation of distinct policies by these forces which in turn led to political action effecting Assam's history itself. In the next chapter we shall analyse the policies of Muslim League and Congress Party on this issue in the pre-independence period.

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34. Ibid., p. 5.

CHAPTER - II

IMMIGRATION IN THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD - POLICIES OF  
THE MUSLIM LEAGUE AND THE CONGRESS PARTY ON THE  
IMMIGRATION ISSUE

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In order to understand the problem of Immigration in Assam, we must go back to the period when Assam included Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh as well as some areas now in Bangladesh. As we have indicated in Chapter I, even during the Ahom period, Assam was a sparsely populated area. There was scarcity of labour. So much so that when the Ahom Kings gave land to a person or to an institution, they had to give paiks<sup>1</sup> with it. During the British period specially in the early days of British administration vast tracts of uncultivated fertile land and jungles invited lakhs of peasants from eastern Bengal to develop agriculture and meet the requirements of the newly introduced plantation economy. In Assam Valley and specifically in Goalpara, plenty of vacant land was awaiting the plough and the British Government did take measures to bring these areas under cultivation. To quote Hunter,

"There is a great deal of spare land in Goalpara district, and in order to encourage the extension of cultivation, waste land leases are readily granted. The lands are

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1. They were the servants for three months in a year and enjoyed rent free tenure in return of such services to the state. For a discussion on Paik system see N.C. Dutta, Land Problems and Land Reforms in Assam (New Delhi, 1968).

leased out to new settlers and a remission of rent is allowed for two or three years in order to enable them to make a fair start and to settle conveniently. The remission is termed as Pail. In certain cases also money advances are made to new settlers. Under all circumstances it appears that this distribution of tenure is decidedly favourable to the cultivators. The tenure is called Pail-Patta." 2

Hunter's description also points out that there was much immigration into Goalpara upto the last quarter of the 19th Century. But there was some movement of population and in a way this movement opened the way for a large scale immigration of population into Assam Valley.

The first settlers came as agricultural labourers from across the provincial boundary of Assam, who succeeded in occupying some pieces of land out of the plenty available for occupation and cultivation and thus proved as the light houses to give hopes to the new immigrants for many coming decades. The absentee landlord system prevailing in Goalpara, where the landlords were residents of Rangpur with landed property taken care of by the tenants and labourers in Goalpara, was also helpful in showing the way to settlers. The permanently settled portions of Goalpara originally formed part of the districts of Rangpur, but were transferred

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2. W.W. Hunter, Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. 2, District of the Garo Hills, The Naga Hills, The Khasi and Jaintia Hills (London, 1879), pp. 64-65.

to Assam after "the annexation of the Valley in 1826 and under the Raiyatwari system the British created a new class of peasants proprietors in Assam. This class of peasant proprietors became increasingly antagonistic to British rule in Assam as the burden of taxation imposed on them began to increase progressively. It is significant that these peasant proprietors developed national consciousness more than those in the permanently settled estates, because their conflict was directly with the state and not with the Zamindars.<sup>3</sup> As the local inhabitants had sufficient land available for cultivation the question of their accepting tenantry or working as labourers in the lands of absentee landlords did not arise. Hence "the landlords recruited the tenants and labours from Rangpur who eventually arranged and occupied land of their own and left their tenancy holdings, and their place was taken by fresh recruits as tenants and labourers."<sup>4</sup> Thus the absentee landlord system also proved as a source of initial inspiration for emigration and settlement.

Goalpara became the first camp of these immigrants and besides being a border district, the ethnic factor was also responsible for the district being selected and settled as the first camp.

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3. Manorama S. Baruah, "Peasant Unrest in Nineteenth Century Assam, Peasant Vs. State" in Atul Goswami ed. Land Reform and Peasant Movement (New Delhi, 1985), pp. 98-100.

4. Ibid., Loc.cit.

Muslims constituted 85 percent of the immigrants and Goalpara with 28 percent Muslims, the highest in the Assam Valley, was rightly the best choice to settle without much trouble and opposition on ethnic grounds.<sup>5</sup> Linguistically, the Bengali speaking immigrants could try to assimilate easily with the 69 percent local inhabitants having Bengali as mother tongue in Goalpara in 1901. "The immigrants from Mymensingh, however did not stop here and along the course of Brahmaputra advanced upwards."<sup>6</sup> Selection of Nowgong as the second best choice for settlement by Bengali immigrants during the decade 1911-21 and why Kamrup could not become the second favourite district with the settlers during the first two decades of the century, although it was nearer to the first district of settlement, Goalpara, and connected with the river Brahmaputra can be explained by the fact that Kamrup not only had the highest density of population in the Valley, but also the highest percentage of area already under cultivation. The following table clearly proves this point:

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5. Ibid., Loc.cit.

6. L.P. Pathak, "East Bengal Immigrants in Assam Valley - An Analysis of Census Data". Paper read at the Seminar on Patterns and Problems of Population in North East India, organised by NEICSSR in Shillong, on 7-8 December, 1984, p. 6.

Table - IV : District with excess cultivable land in Assam Valley.

District	Area 1901 Sq. mile	Density sq. mile Population	Cultivated area 1901 Sq.mile	P.C. of area under culti- vation
Kamrup	3858	153 (1901)	798	20.68%
Darrang	3418	99	459	13.42%
Goalpara	3961	117	670	16.91%
Nowgong	3843	68	348	9.06%
Sibsagar	4996	120	804	16.09%
Lakhimpur	4529	82	388	8.57%

Source: Computed from the figures in Statistical Hand Book, 1980.

Between the years 1911 to 1971 there was a conspicuous increase in the Muslim population in the Assam Valley. The following table presents the decade wise proportion of Muslim population in the district of Assam Valley and indicates well, when and how the Muslim immigrants changed the ethnic structure of the Valley.

Table - V: Increase in the Proportion of Muslim Population in Assam 1901-1931.

District	1901	1911	1921	1931
Goalpara	27.76	35.19	41.48	43.92
Kamrup	9.10	9.66	14.61	24.61
Nowgong	4.83	5.20	17.73	31.60
Darrang	5.16	5.39	7.61	11.54
Sibsagar	4.16	4.30	4.25	4.70
Lakhimpur	3.22	3.05	2.56	3.58
Cachar	33.06	37.60	37.61	40.06
Assam	13.57	16.23	17.07	22.79

Source: Census of India, Various Reports.

It is observed from the above table that between 1901 and 1931 the proportion Muslim population in Goalpara rose from 28 to 44, in Kamrup 9 to 24, in Nowgong 5 to 31 and in Darrang 5 to 11.

C.S. Mullan stated that "this change is 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."<sup>7</sup>

The transfer of population on such a large scale completely changed the components of population growth in the two areas involved Eastern Bengal and Assam. The first decade of the century witnessed the involvement of only two districts, Mymensingh and Goalpara. This is also visible from the fact that Mymensingh districts percentage decadal population growth rate came down from 12.8 p.c. in 1891-1901 to 6.9 in 1911-1921. The following table shows that the decadal growth rates for all the Eastern Bengal districts went down sharply in each successive decade 1901-1911, 1911-1921 and 1921-1931 while the population growth rates for Assam Valley districts rose sharply starting with 1911.

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7. C.S. Mullan, India Census, 1931 - Assam, Delhi, Manager Publications, p. 64.

Table - VI: Percentage Increase in Population

	Mymensingh	Rangpur	Bogra	Pabna
1891-1901	12.8	4.3	11.8	4.8
1901-1921	6.9	5.1	6.6	2.7
1921-1931	6.1	3.7	3.5	3.7

	Goalpara	Kamrup	Darrang	Nowgong
1891-1901	2.0	7.1	9.7	30.0
1901-1921	26.9	14.2	27.0	31.9
1921-1931	15.8	27.9	22.6	91.3

Source: Census of India - Assam Census Reports and Districts Census Handbook.

From the above two tables it is clear that the population of Mymensingh, Rangpur, Bogra and Pabna keep on decreasing while the percentage of population of Goalpara increases to 2 percent in 1901 while in 1931 it increased to 15.8. In Kamrup it rose from 7 percent to 28 percent. In Darrang from 9 percent to 22 percent and in Nowgong from 30 percent to 91 percent.

The period which followed the Khilafat and the non-cooperation movement gradually saw the withdrawal of Muslim cooperation from the freedom movement which was started by the Congress Party. A section of the Muslims felt that they should be separated from the Congress, in order to achieve their aspirations independently. This parting of ways with the Indian National Congress was clearly asserted by M.A. Jinnah. He asked the Congress leaders not to interfere in the

affairs of the Muslims and claimed on behalf of the league that it was the only legitimate organisation represented the Indian Muslims.<sup>8</sup> However, the Congress refuted the claim of Jinnah by saying that they represent the whole of India including the Muslims. The Congress on the other hand, with a view to winning over the Muslims took special care in including a fair proportion of the Muslims who were either elected with Congress ticket, independent or pro-Congress Muslims leaguers while forming ministries. The main aim of the Congress was to win over the Muslim masses to the Congress. This made the position of the Muslim League shaky and their reaction was also quite sharp.<sup>9</sup> In 1938, the Muslim League appointed a committee to study the conditions of the Muslims in the Congress Governed provinces. The report which was published soon after contained a long list of allegations against the Congress. The main allegation was the introduction of the Wardha Scheme<sup>10</sup> of education and the compulsion which was put on Muslims to show respect to Congress flag and to sing Bande Mataram. In Assam prior to 1937 the relationship between these two communities, Hindu and Muslims, was cordial. But later on, some Muslims in Assam also opposed

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8. R.C. Mazumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol. 3, Calcutta, 1963, pp. 544-52.

9. Ibid., Loc.cit.

10. The Wardha scheme of education was introduced by Gandhi to inculcate the spirit of non-violence among the students.

the introduction of Wardha scheme of education. It must be admitted here that prior to 1937, there was no solidarity among the Muslims in Assam. The Muslim League was yet to emerge as an organized force in Assam. But when the Congress Government refused to form a ministry, it gave an opportunity to the Muslim to form a ministry in Assam.

Meanwhile the stream of immigration continued and it gathered momentum during the first half of the 1941-51 decades and specifically during the Muslim League ministry. Prior to 1937, the Muslim League had no influence in the politics of Assam. But after the 1937 elections, the United Muslim Party under the leadership of Saadullah formed a government in Assam. This government pursued a policy of patronising Muslims immigrants. "During the period between 1939-41, Saadullah government allotted one lakh bighas of land in the Assam Valley for the settlement of East Bengal immigrants."<sup>11</sup> Saadullah appeared to have maintained that the immigrants were mostly landless and the only solution was to provide them with available lands.<sup>12</sup>

When the immigrants after occupying all vacant available lands threatened to swamp land even in and around

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11. Harendra Nath Baruah, Reflections on Assam cum-Pakistan, (Calcutta, 1947), p. 67.

12. A.C. Bhuyan, S. De (ed.), Political History of Assam, Vol. III (1940-47), Government of Assam, Dispur 1980, p. 263.

Assamese village, the problem reached a most critical point. This situation was reflected in the report of S.P. Desai in 1939. The report stated,

"They came in numbers raise (sic) sheds and latter began to cultivate. The few graziers in the neighbourhood are incapable of doing anything apart from protesting and appealing to local officers. The only alternative for the graziers is to shift himself bag and baggage?"<sup>13</sup>

In post-independence days Assam had provided shelter to a large number of people from outside the state; with the resources available at the time of independence the state was not in a position to welcome further immigration. But the partition of the country compelled a large number of Hindus to migrate to West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and various other neighbouring states. Under legal process most of these refugees were rehabilitated and given Indian citizenship. But taking advantage of the presence of their own relatives or acquaintances in Assam, a large number of Hindus, and even a considerable number of Muslims farm labourers came to Assam after partition illegally. Hindu refugees came as a result of religious persecution in East Bengal and they also had the inducement to get rehabilitation grants and government assistance to start some business or profession in India.

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13. S.P. Desai, The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation (1939), Report, pp. 1-10.

At the initial stage of the influx of immigrants, the Congress Government of Assam had introduced a 'line system' early in 1920 as per suggestion of the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong. The aim of this system was to isolate the immigrants from the local people by compelling the former to live and toil in particular segregated localities beyond which they were not allowed to settle.<sup>14</sup>

Under the Line System, a line was drawn in the districts under pressure in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas specified for their exclusive settlement. The number of settlers including children born after their arrival, increased from an estimated three lacs in 1921 to over half a million in 1931.<sup>15</sup> Colonists were settling on government waste lands by families and not singly. They were better cultivators and hence, could offer higher and lucrative land prices to induce Assamese peasants to sell out portions of their holdings. As has been pointed out by Banking Enquiry Committee Report "local marwari and even Assamese money lenders financed the immigrants so that the latter could reclaim land and expand the cultivation of jute, rice and vegetables."<sup>16</sup>

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14. Report of the Line System Committee, Government of Assam, Shillong, February 1938, Assam Secretariat Record.

15. Census of India 1951, Vol. 12, Part IIA, pp. 72-73.

16. Assam Banking Enquiry Committee Report, 1929-30, Vol. II, pp. 507-17.

The line system was disliked by the immigrants, and "when pressure were put on the government, it appointed a line system enquiry committee in 1937 under the chairmanship of Hockenhuil to examine the issue."<sup>17</sup> The findings of the committee revealed that the immigrants both Hindus and Muslims, wanted immediate abolition of the Line System. But the views of the Assamese Muslims, according to the report was divided on the issue, while Assamese Hindus strongly supported the Line System.<sup>18</sup> The Congress coalition government (19 Sept. 1938 - 16 Nov. 1939) could not arrive at any concrete decision, and before it relinquished office published a notification, in Nov. 1939 whereby it prohibited settlement of land to persons who came from outside the province after 1 January 1938. "The resolution was not executed when Saadullah came to power."<sup>19</sup> The Communist Party of India also urged upon the Saadullah government to abolish the Line System and to give lands to the Bengalee immigrants. Their stand was that the "Government communiques of 1939 restricting settlement of land from 1938 was unjust and oppressive."<sup>20</sup> They also said, it should be extended upto December 1944, as the immigrants had already settled.

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17. Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Vol. I, February - March, 1940, p. 30.

18. Ibid., Loc.cit.

19. Ibid.

20. Assamiya (bi-weekly), 5 October, 1940 Dibrugarh.

The Assam Provincial Muslim League also tried for the abolition of the Line System. The Muslim League member Mayeenuddin Ahmed Choudhury argues: "Line System in Assam has no legal sanction behind as much as it is neither an act of legislature nor an enactment of his excellency the governor!"<sup>21</sup>

The Line System acquired a new dimension when the Muslim League began to champion the cause of the immigrants by launching an all out campaign in rural areas. They announced that they would espouse the cause of the landless immigrants settled in Assam."<sup>22</sup> Later Saadullah, convened a conference of the members of the legislature representing different interests in 1940 and formulated a policy known as the "Land development scheme." According to this scheme a ban was imposed on settlement of immigrants in wastelands who had entered Assam after 1 January 1938, "The main feature of this scheme was the division of wastelands into blocks for indigenous Assamese and tribal people, scheduled caste and immigrants after reserving thirty percent of the wastelands for the expansion of the existing population."<sup>23</sup> Under this scheme, a special officer was appointed by the Government to

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21. Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Vol. I, No.4, 28 February, 1940, p. 251.

22. Ibid., Loc. cit.

23. See, M. Kar, "Muslim Politics in Assam" North Eastern Affairs, Shillong, July-December 1973, p.18.

examine whether the proposed areas could be opened for settlement without any detriment to the districts normal requirements of grazing and forest reserves. The settlement was to be confined only to indigenous landless people and the pre-1938 immigrants. Besides, the flood and erosion affected people than illegally squatting in some 'lined' villages and reserves were also to be accommodated, eligible applicants were to receive wastelands in specified development areas on payment of stipulated premia, in blocks segregated for different communities as before. The government promised to put the scheme into operation as early as possible.

The declared intention of the scheme was to protect the interests of both the indigenous and immigrant population. But in practice, it was found that immigrants persisted with their unauthorised encroachment of the Assam Valley with the help of ministerial tutelage.

The various vested interests kept on pressing the Saadullah ministry to remove restrictions on the immigrants. It is interesting to note that the Bengal legislative council carried a motion on 16 July 1943, calling upon the Government of India to take immediate steps to remove all existing restrictions imposed by the Assam Government on the emigrant cultivators from Bengal. In a letter to the Secretary, Government of Assam, A.G. Patton, S. Banerjee, Secretary to the Government of Bengal wrote:

"It has been brought to the notice of the Government of Bengal that a large number of immigrants from this province, who entered Assam after the 1st January, 1938, have been refused settlement of land and are consequently in great distress. With a view to remove their hardship, the Bengal legislative council at its meeting held on the 16th July 1943 moved and carried a motion to urge upon the Government of India to take immediate steps so that all existing restrictions imposed by the Government of Assam on cultivators, from this province in getting settlement of land in Assam Valley must be reduced."<sup>24</sup>

Exactly a year after its formation, the fourth Saadullah ministry then adopted a new resolution on land development under the slogan of 'grow more food'. The salient features of this resolution of 24th August 1948 were as follows:

- i) "resumed distribution of wastelands in proportion to needs of different communities in Nowgong and dereservation of select grazing reserves for that purpose, as per Resolution of 21 June 1940;
- ii) dereservation of professional grazing reserves in Kamrup and Darrang if found surplus to actual requirements, and
- iii) opening up of surplus reserves in all the submontane areas, and in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, for settlement of landless indigenous people. The blatantly pro-Muslim and pro-immigrant policies of this Government pursued under the slogan 'Grow more food' was described by Lord Wavel as "Grow more Moslems."<sup>25</sup>

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24. Assam Secretariat, File No. RD 25/44, dated 6th March, 1944.

25. See, Assam Gazette, 25th August 1943.

S.P. Desai, a senior ICS man was appointed special officer to ascertain what portion of professional grazing reserves could be declared as surplus available for settlement. Desai reported that the "forcible occupation of grazing lands by immigrants had already taken place to a large scale even in the predominantly Assamese or tribal areas. His conclusion was that there was no surplus land available for new settlements."<sup>26</sup> Ignoring the report, Saadullah's Muslim League coalition government threw select professional grazing reserves open for settling immigrants.

The land development scheme of Saadullah's government were subjected to severe public criticism. This forced Saadullah to resign on 12th December 1941. Robert Reid the Governor of Assam who took over the administration of the province after Saadullah's exit, "bruised aside the decisions of the Saadullah ministry on the ground that there was not enough wastelands in the Assam Valley to accommodate further immigration."<sup>27</sup>

This however proved temporary because the arrest of many Congress leaders created conditions for Saadullah's return to power especially when the governor himself was keen on installing a popular ministry to combat the mass upsurge

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26. S.P. Desai, My Thirty Five Years in Assam (Bombay), 1965, pp. 66-69.

27. The Assam Tribune, 31 January, 1941.

of 1942. On 25 August 1942, Saadullah came back to power. He then threw open even the grazing and forest reserves which were earlier held to be inviolable. This resulted in innumerable clashes between the immigrants and the graziers. Public agitation was soon ensued against dereservation and settlement of land to immigrants. The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha, Sibsagar Ahom Sabha, the Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha, the Assam Kachari Association and Assam Mouzadar association criticised the action of Saadullah. "The Hindu Sabha criticised the scheme of Saadullah's Government as an insidious move towards creating a Pakistan in Assam."<sup>28</sup> Suggestion was given to Saadullah by the members of the opposition to convene a conference so that the whole question of land settlement could be reconsidered. This time Saadullah did not consult the Muslim League and held a conference from 16th to 19th December 1944. The conference was attended by the representatives from different parties and they made certain recommendations. On the basis of these the government passed a resolution on 16th January 1945 by which it was decided to keep the professional reserves intact. Reservation of thirty percent of the available wastelands as provisions for the future expansion of the indigenous people, a planned settlement of the residual wastelands with the landless sons of the

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28. See, The Assam Tribune, 24 October, 1944.

soil and the pre-1938 immigrants and a system of protection to tribal people in belts specially reserved for them. It was also agreed that the integrity of grazing reserves should be strictly maintained and all trespassers evicted. "The decisions of course were not unanimous. Two Muslim League participants both of them immigrants dissented. Despite the fact that many parties were represented the Congress party claimed apparently the outcome of the conference was the victory of the Congress."<sup>29</sup>

A proposal was also laid out to give special protection to the tribal people. But the above resolution could not be put into operation owing to opposition from both the Congress and the Muslim League. The demand of the extremist section of the League was the full accommodation of the immigrant Muslims even at the cost of the local people interest.<sup>30</sup> "The Congress on the other hand, refused to support the resolution as it gave discretionary powers to the local officers, who it was suspected would abuse their powers with regard to the allotment of land to the immigrants."<sup>31</sup>

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29. See, Assam Pradesh Congress Committees leaflet issued by Harendra Nath Baruah and Hemkanta Baruah, APCC Publicity Department, APCC Office, Gauhati, 1945.

30. Ibid., Loc.cit.

31. Amalendu Guha Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam (New Delhi, 1977), p. 65.

Because of the stiff opposition both from the Congress and the League Saadullah feared his own position and came forward to make an agreement with Gopinath Bordoloi and Rohini Kr. Choudhury. Bordoloi was ready to support Saadullah on certain conditions. The first and foremost of which was that there should be a reconstitution of the cabinet and a review of the land settlement policy. But later on, Bordoloi withdrew his support on the ground of non-implementation of the agreement fully by Saadullah. On 1st October 1945, the Assam legislature was dissolved. And on 11th February, 1946, a Congress ministry was formed in Assam headed by Gopinath Bordoloi.

But the Muslim League succeeded in establishing tremendous influence on the Muslim population of Assam by opposing the eviction policy of the Congress Government headed by Gopinath Bordoloi. The problem of immigrants who came from Bengal and settled in certain districts of Assam becoming chronic issue in provincial politics. As soon as the Congress ministry was installed in Assam, it took up the eviction issue and decided to evict the immigrants from the professional grazing reserves. This prompted the "provincial League Committee to form a committee of action headed by Bhasani on 19 February 1946 which directed the Muslim League workers and volunteers to agitate the eviction policy of

the Congress Government all over the province."<sup>32</sup> Tension generated in the reserve areas on 21 March 1946. Under these circumstances it became difficult for the government to drive out the encroachers. The more so, when Jinnah after his arrival at Gauhati on 7 April, 1946 made a remark that "if the government does not immediately revise its policy and abandon this persecution, a situation will be created which will not be conducive to the well being of the people of Assam."<sup>33</sup> At the same time the Assam Provincial Muslim League Council, in a resolution adopted on 30 April, 1946 also moved the Central Council of action for launching 'direct-action' against the Congress Government. They also made an appeal to the Muslim population to contribute generously towards an ad-hoc eviction relief fund. In 1946, Liaquat Ali Khan in his press conference criticised the government stand and stated that "to call these villages professional grazing reserves is a misnomer and was a mere excuse for eviction."<sup>34</sup> He further pointed out in his statement that it was 'brutal and barbarous', to evict the poor immigrants from their villages as they had spent time and labour to build their dwellings.

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32. See, Padmanath Borthakur, Swadhinata Ranar Sangsarsat (Assamese), Dibrugarh, p. 241.

33. Benudhar Sarmah, Kongressor Kanchiali Radat (Assamese), Gauhati, 1971, p. 26.

34. Baruah, Op.cit., p. 69.

He also remarked that "this way the Congress Government in Assam serves the poor, when they happened to be Muslims. Cruelty and inhumanity exceed all bounds in the Congress tyranny over the Muslim immigrants in Assam."<sup>35</sup>

This perspective was however, not appreciated by the Congress because Gopinath Bordoloi went round the Goalpara and some areas of Barpeta where immigrants had settled. But on his return he issued fresh instruction on 14 May 1946, to execute the earlier order of the government. The government seemed to have done a good job because as Mahadev Sharma says "from the Kumolin professional grazing reserves of Tezpur between 15 and 16 May as many as two hundred and twenty nine families were evicted successfully."<sup>36</sup>

This was highly resented by the members of the Assam Muslim League and by organising meetings and processions and hartals they registered their anger. Abdal Hamid Khan "gave a call to the evicted persons to return to the grazing reserves. He also resorted to a fast unto death in May 1946 in the evicted areas of Barpeta. His fast had the desired effect and by 6 June 1946 about one hundred and ~~sixty~~ persons

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35. Ibid., p. 70.

36. Mahadev Sarmah, Gopinath Bordoloi (Gauhati 1956), p. 42.

encouraged by their leaders advice reoccupied their holdings and reconstructed their hovel overnight." <sup>37</sup> This made the task of eviction difficult, the more so when the Muslim League members wholeheartedly supported the cause of the immigrants. To counter act this opposition the Congress Government in Assam introduced stringent measures by promulgating the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance on 18 November 1946.

The introduction of this ordinance was an indication of the firmness of the government to tackle the immigration problem. The reaction of the Muslim League leaders against the stand taken by the Congress Government was immediate. They decided to launch a civil disobedience programme in protest against the eviction policy pursued by the Congress Ministry in Assam. The civil disobedience movement was in fact a major programme which the Muslim League successfully carried out. The effect of the movement was felt in those areas inhabited by the immigrants. Later on when communal feelings were running high, Gopinath Bordoloi decided to go slow with his policy and was able to keep the province free from communal riots.

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37. D.N. Banerjee, East Pakistan: A Case Study in Muslim Politics (Delhi, 1969), p. 69.

It must be stated here that Muslim League activities in the province centered mainly on the issue of Pakistan. The enthusiasm which was generated during the popular upsurge among the Muslims in Assam was successfully channelised by the league leaders towards the achievement of Pakistan in Assam as an idea which had been receiving serious attention of the members of the league for a long time. Early in 1944, the scheme of Pakistan was approved in the third provincial Muslim League conference under the presidentship of Sahabuddin. "They believed that Assam and Bengal would form an independent Sovereign Eastern Pakistan."<sup>38</sup> During the 1935 Reforms period the Muslim League dominated Government of the province under Chief Minister Saadullah were specially bent upon bringing in more Muslims from East Bengal to Assam to outnumber the Hindus. The then Governor General Lord Wavel himself stated that the policy of Saadullah was to bring more Muslims to Assam. In 1941 Census, Saadullah suggested that population should be classified on the basis of religion. The result was that "a large number of tribal people who had earlier enrolled themselves as Hindus, Christians and Buddhists, included under the head Tribal. Thus it is clear that the Hindu tribals were shown as non-Hindus in the 1941 Census. The result was that there was a considerable reduction in the Hindu population."<sup>39</sup>

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38. Bhuyan, Dey. Op.cit., p. 289.

39. Baruah, Loc.cit.

The Congress on the other hand, realised the danger of immigration in Assam. They submitted many memoranda to oppose the policies of Saadullah government. But some section of the Congress partymen seemed to have taken advantage of the situation. They appeared to have realised that these immigrants can easily be a vote bank for them in near future. So they refused to take any action against the immigrants even at the cost of the country's security and integrity.

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CHAPTER - III

THE PROBLEM OF IMMIGRATION IN THE  
POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD UPTO 1978

THE PROBLEM OF IMMIGRATION IN THE POST INDEPENDENCE  
PERIOD UPTO 1978

In Assam, the politics of immigration persistently overshadowed many other issues. In evaluating the trend and extent of immigration one cannot ignore the geographical realities and historical facts and compulsions which had undoubtedly governed the flow of population in Assam. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the problem of immigration is not a new problem. This problem and the possible threat to Assamese identity persisted even before independence. With the partition of the country on the eve of independence the situation took a turn for the worse. The fears of unprecedented demographic changes as a result of large scale immigration was such that in March 1947 an Assamese daily commented:

"The immigrants and the Muslim League should remember that the Assamese people came out with flying colours in their trials of 1942 and administration is still in the hands, Nationalist Assamese Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and all other inhabitants of Assam should unite solidly to fight immigrants. Immigration has increased the Muslim population from 13 percent to 34 percent in Assam. This is dangerous. It must be stopped."<sup>1</sup>

The stream of immigration into Assam continued and it gathered momentum during the first half of the 1941-51 decades and specifically during the Muslim League Ministry in Assam upto

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1. The Assamiya (Weekly), 16th March 1947, p. 2.

1946. The stream of settlers continued even after partition and the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar reported that during 1948-49, hundreds of Muslim immigrants regularly travelled by the hill-section railway from Badarpur to Lunding in order to go to Assam Valley for settlement. The Census Superintendent of Assam for 1951 also reported having seen himself persons coming by train during his tenure in Goalpara district. It was estimated in 1951 Census that about 430,000 persons migrated to Assam during the two preceding decades.<sup>2</sup>

The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha which met on 8th August 1947 said that with a view to save the existence of the Assamese people in Assam from total extermination by the onrush of the alien purchaser of lands, the Government of Assam should without least delay promulgate an ordinance that any land desired for sale by any private person be purchased by the government to be supplemented afterwards by the planned system of settlement under contemplation and this ordinance should be given effect from the year 1938 in which the land settlement policy was agreed upon by the tripartite conference and all purchases and sales made with the foreigners during this period be made null and void.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Census of India (1951), Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part I (A), General Reports.

3. The Assam Tribune, 11 August 1947.

At a time when the provincial Muslim League had launched the civil disobedience movement against the eviction policy of the Congress Government of Assam, the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha undertook the task of mobilising the Assamese opinion on the issue. In an appeal, "it described the activities of the Muslim League National Guards as Hitlers storm troopers bringing succour Germans in neighbouring countries and described the decisions of the Assam Bengal Muslim League joint committee of action to send large batches of volunteers to Assam for defying the eviction order as a corollary to the bigger plan of invading Assam which the Muslim League, in its view has been contemplating since the prospect of transferring power to Indian hands became a major issue in Indian politics."<sup>4</sup>

The non-refugee immigration into Assam from Eastern Bengal upto 1951 was only for settlement on land. In their anxiety to get land these settlers have at one time or another caused a great deal of friction by squatting on Government reserves or forcibly occupying the land of the local people from which it was difficult to evict them. They are however, excellent agriculturists and most industrious and they spend money freely at any rate on litigation.<sup>5</sup>

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4. "Invasion of Assam imminent". Hearty appeal to save her. A leaflet in Assamese and English issued by Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury (March 1947), p.3.

5. Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj (New Delhi 1977), p. 65.

The 1951 Census report, "described the settlers as land-hungry. Because their hunger for land was so great that in their eagerness to grasp more land they started encroaching on Government reserves and on lands belonging to local people."<sup>6</sup>

The census data on immigration from East Pakistan since partition is no guide to the reality because the birth place data collected in the census fully reflects the information supplied by individual respondents and the enumerators have no choice but to record the information as provided to them by the respondents. The result was that almost all the non-refugee immigrants gave their birth place as Assam. The reason for concealment of the actual birth place by the immigrants as stated in the 1961 census report of Assam was that the people coming from East Pakistan into Assam had nothing to gain by giving their true birth place while Muslims definitely had advantage in concealing the identity by saying that they speak Assamese. So although the increase in population in 1961 has been most spectacular for all the decades, the figures for migrants appear to be one of the lowest in terms of percentage due to concealment of correct birth place.<sup>7</sup> However, the number of immigrants from East Pakistan

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6. Census of India (1951) Assam, Manipur and Tripura Part I, A, General Report.

7. E.H. Pakyntein, India Census 1961 - Assam: General Report (Manager of Publications, Delhi, 1964), pp.234-258.

during 1951-61 has been estimated as 220,691 including 6582 East Pakistan Passport holders, according to the calculation made by census authorities.

The ethnic composition of the Muslim and Hindu immigrants during the decades 1911-1921 was 85 and 15 percent respectively. However it is observed that during the later decades the percentage of Muslim population was quite higher than their percentage in the population of the districts from where the settlers emigrated. As we have shown in Table V in Chapter II, the proportional growth of Muslim population in Assam since 1901 to 1971 provides a fairly clear picture of the extent of their unnoticed arrival in the Assam Valley.

Communal disturbances rocked Assam in February-March 1950. In the wake of riots, Nehru-Liaquat Pact was drawn up and most of the Muslim settlers who left for Pakistan due to the outbreak of communal disturbances in East Bengal and Assam, came back to Assam in the same year. The free movement between the then Pakistan and Assam, as provided by the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, subsequently resulted in fresh influx of Muslim immigrants to Assam.

It is alleged that there was hardly any machinery to keep track of the Pakistani Muslim immigrants, most of whom eventually settled in the state posing themselves as Indian

nationals with the support of their friends and relations. This, coupled with the influx of Hindu refugees, created an unprecedented problem in Assam. As senior journalist and freedom fighter of Assam argues, "discrimination against the religious minorities by the rulers in Pakistan also resulted in a mass exodus of Hindus from the then Pakistan to Assam."<sup>8</sup> The attempts to regulate the influx of Pakistani immigrants included the introduction of the passport-cum-visa system in October 1952. But the provision of foreigners Act 1946 and the rules made there-under were not applicable to the citizens of Pakistan and hence they were not required to get registered.

The effect of the partition of the country was strongly felt in the eastern sector. One of the most important sections of the pre-partition population whose contributions and sacrifices for the freedom of the country were second to none, found themselves third grade citizen of a hostile country.<sup>9</sup> Partition brought endless misery for them and they eventually migrated to Assam.

People outside Assam believed that there was plenty of waste land available in Assam. But the actual pressure of population on agricultural land in Assam in 1951 was as high

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8. Harendra Nath Baruah, Assam Struggle for Survival (Gauhati, 1980), p.15.

9. Ibid., p. 16.

as 600 per sq. mile or 240 per sq.km.<sup>10</sup> From humanitarian considerations, the Government of Assam agreed to rehabilitate 5 (five) lakhs Bengalee refugees.<sup>11</sup> The actual number of migrants however, was much more. More than thirty three years have passed since then, but the unending human flow from across the border is yet to cease. Assam and Tripura received the largest number of refugees from East Pakistan. Their continuous influx has undoubtedly created demographic imbalance.

The influx of people from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) has continued unabated and the Assamese people began to view it as posing a serious threat to the economic, cultural and political identity of the people of the state. Government of India seemed to appreciate the problem and in the year 1950 passed the immigrant (expulsion from Assam) Act empowering the Central Government to detect and deport infiltrants from East Bengal which was then East Pakistan. In the statement of objects and reasons of the Bill presented to Parliament it was stated,

"During the last few months, a serious situation has arisen in Assam due to immigration from East Bengal. Such large migration is

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10. Census of India 1951. Assam, Manipur and Tripura Part I.A, General Reports.

11. Ibid., Loc.cit.

disturbing the economy of the state, besides giving rise to a serious law and order problem. The Bill seeks to confer necessary powers on the Central Government to deal with the situation." 12

Though the act was passed empowering the government to expel foreign immigrants from Assam, it was not taken seriously and was not implemented. Subsequently on 17th September 1957, the act was amended and certain clauses were **repealed**. Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi had advocated action against the infiltrators of East Pakistan. But there is hardly any evidence to show that he succeeded in this. After sometime Medhi resigned and Bimala Prasad Chaliha became the Chief Minister of Assam. However the Congress Party in Assam continued to be concerned about the impact of immigration. The Assam Committee of the Congress Party in Parliament in a representation dated June 27, 1962, had drawn pointed attention of the Prime Minister to the burning infiltration problem to Assam to which the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru replied on July 10, 1962, as follows:

"You refer to Pakistani infiltration. This is perfectly true. This infiltration has been taking place for a very long past. Therefore we should not look upon it as essentially a political move. Nevertheless it is true that this infiltration should be stopped and

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12. Assam Gazette, Part VI-A 1951, pp. 997-99.

effectively dealt with. I believe that much of this infiltration took place in the first five year, after independence when the border was not adequately guarded, probably it will be difficult now to deal with illegal immigrants who came before 1952. We might therefore fix 1952 as the date of our enquiry." <sup>13</sup>

This assurance was also left practically unimplemented. Because a section of the Congress party treated the minority as their vote banks. So they refused to take any action which affect the interest of the minorities. It is quite clear from Devkanta Baruah's statement that Congress depended on Muslims and Tea-Garden labourers for vote. He said that "so long as alis and coolies are with the Congress Party it did not care for anybody." <sup>14</sup> (emphasis added).

In 1962, again the people of Assam brought to the notice of the Government of India the alarming increase of population of the state as was revealed by the census report of 1961 due to heavy influx of foreign nationals especially from East Pakistan during the years posing and creating a serious threat to the security and identity of Assamese people and also creating a law and order problem in the state. Representations were made to the Government of India suggesting important and urgent measures to be taken up to check

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13. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Report, Packet No. 125, File No. MISC June 27, 1962.

14. Quoted in Bhabani Singh, Politics of Alienation in Assam, (Delhi, 1984) VIII, p. 91.

further influx of foreign nationals into the state and to deport the infiltrants expeditiously.<sup>15</sup> On 1st of May, 1962, the Union Home Minister Sri Lal Bahadur Shastri declared the informal consultative committee meeting of Parliament for Home Affairs that the Central Government agreed to take measures to check the inflow of illegal entrants of Assam from across the borders as short term and long term ones.<sup>16</sup> Some of the proposed measures were: increasing number of border check posts, strengthening of existing check posts, and the delegation of full powers under the foreigners Act 1946, to the Superintendent of Police and Magistrates in border districts for the summary deportation of Pakistani infiltrators. It was also suggested by the members of the committee that deterrent and exemplary punishment should be meted out to those illegal entrants.<sup>17</sup> But as Harendra Nath Baruah points out "no effective steps were taken for implementation of this declaration of the Home Minister."<sup>18</sup>

However no effective steps in this direction were probably taken because on 19th March 1964, the Assam Congress Parliamentary Party submitted a memorandum to Guljarilal

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15. Assam Pradesh Congress Committees Report, (MISC), June 27, 1962.

16. Ibid., Loc.cit.

17. Ibid., Loc.cit.

18. Baruah, Op.cit., p. 8.

Nanda Home Minister of India. In the memorandum the Congress Parliamentary Party stated that there has been large scale infiltration of Pakistani nationals and they have been staying illegally without being detected. There has been no effective check on the border upto now. To effectively control this infiltration, the Congress Parliamentary Party suggested that the,

"Indian East Pakistan border must be completely sealed and the area to such a depth as may be necessary from the border should be cleared. All weather road communication should be constructed for speedy movement of troops and for patrolling the border. The border check posts of the B.S.F. should also be increased to minimise the distance from one post to another."19

It is clear that despite the apathy shown by the national leadership, the Congress Party in Assam continued to feel the necessity of checking infiltration. The Party seemed to have given considerable importance to the matter.

Home Minister Gulzarilal Nanda was quite aware of the large scale infiltrations into the state. He had visited some places of tension and held personal enquiries into some incidents perpetrated by these people in those places and found them to be true. He had suggested and ordered some remedial measures. Police was given some substantial power

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19. Assam Pradesh Congress Committees Report on the Pak infiltration (Gauhati, 1964), p. 4.

to detect and prosecute foreign infiltrants and some tribunals were constituted for their trial and deportation. The then Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha was obliged to take some measures for detection and deportation of foreigners. The then Chief Secretary of the State Government, A.N. Kidwai had himself admitted "that the way the immigrants came to Assam, it will take the government about thirty years to get rid of lakhs of these people who were there in the State. He also pointed out that the number of these foreigners will not remain constant and there will also be further infiltration of their like."<sup>20</sup> Government of India's awareness of the problem was also reflected in a brochure published by the Government of India. In a remarkable display of clear understanding of the problem the brochure stated:

"long before the cry of Partition was heard in United India, the slow but steady encroachment of Assam and Tripura by immigrants from areas now in East Pakistan was already in progress. Partition did not assuage the land hunger in East Pakistan. The new international boundary was not physically marked on the ground, was largely unguarded and virtually unpatrolled. Thus the traditional migration from East Bengal continued even though a new political frontier had come into being, with East Pakistan on one side and the Indian territory of Assam, Tripura and West Bengal on the other."<sup>21</sup>

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20. Baruah, Op.cit., p. 16.

21. Influx-infiltration from East Pakistan, Directorate of advertising and visual publicity (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (Albion Press, New Delhi), August 1963, p. 15.

The partition of the country further accentuated the fears and anxieties by the Assamese elite for their distinct identity. After partition streams of Hindu refugees flowed to Assam from erstwhile East Pakistan (Bangladesh). "The 1951 census report showed the number of refugees in Assam as 274,455, of these 272,075 came from East Pakistan, 647 from West Pakistan and 1,733 from other unspecified areas. Because of its proximity to East Pakistan the Cachar district alone sheltered 93,177 refugees. The number of refugees in other districts was as follows - Goalpara 44,967, Kamrup 42,965, Darrang 18,883, Lakhimpur 13,965, Sibsagar 7,514, Khasi Hills 5,990, Garo Hills 5,072."<sup>22</sup>

In 1944, Prof. Humayun Kabir, the then Private Secretary to Maulana Azad, the Central Education Minister writing in his monthly review 'India' commented that "one can easily visualise a Bengali state, comprising of about ten million people and living in a compact area. Such a state would include the present administrative province of Bengal and some of the outlying districts in Assam and Bihar. In fact the province of Assam may be wholly incorporated in it."<sup>23</sup> Such a statement made by a person so close to Maulana Azad, would naturally worsened the fears of the Assamese elite.

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22. Census of India (Assam) 1951, Vol. XIII Part 1(A), p.337.

23. Quoted by B.P. Sukla, What ails India's North East, (New Delhi, 1980), p. 72.

There has been a steady growth of the Muslim population in Assam. In 1961, the Muslims accounted for 43.3% in Kamrup. About 1,508,000 acres of agricultural land was under their occupation. The Muslim accounted for 23.3% of Assam total population in 1961 which shot up to 24.3% in 1971.<sup>24</sup> After Jammu and Kashmir, their number is the highest in Assam. Most of them came from Mymensingh and hence are called Mymensinghias in common parlance. "In 1951-61, 2,20,690 Muslims entered India. Between 1961-71, 1,91,339 Pakistani infiltrators were detected. In 1971, in the wake of liberation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) over 1,10,00,000 refugees came to India. Most of them returned to their homeland after the creation of Bangladesh, but about a million of them remained in India. Between 1971-1978, more Muslim infiltrators came and 99,583 immigrants were detected by the Assam Police. During the decade 1978-80, an increase of 53 lakhs of people was recorded in Assam alone."<sup>25</sup>

In the post-independence period tribal belts were formed in 1948 in different regions to protect the tribal people of Assam. The Pakistan (Control) Act and the immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act were enacted in 1949 and

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24. Census of India (Assam) 1961, Part I(A).

25. Myron Weiner, Sons of the Soil (Delhi, 1978), p. 93.

1950 respectively.<sup>26</sup> The Acts provided for removing an immigrant (excepting displaced persons) whose stay was detrimental to the interest of the general public in India or any scheduled tribe in Assam. In Assam large areas in the plains district are inhabited by plains tribal people. A large number of outsiders mostly from East Bengal began to pour in large numbers into Assam. They began to spread into the areas occupied by these tribal people. The tribal people being naturally shy and unable to live in peace with these new comers, began to recede into the interior. The tribal villages were being encroached by immigrants so much so that as a result of such pressures some tribal villagers had to leave their own homes.<sup>27</sup>

The Assam Land Revenue Manual published by the Government of Assam contains the reasons behind the formation of the existing 37 blocks and belts to safeguard the economic interest of the tribal people. It stated that large areas in the plains district are inhabited by tribal people. In nature, they are simple and were living in primitive conditions. Because of the lack of education and of material advantages they could not look after their own welfare and were incapable of protecting their own interest.<sup>28</sup>

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26. Text of the Act printed in AIR Manual, Vol. XI, 3rd ed. as on 31.3.1971.

27. The Assam Land Revenue Manual (Vol. I, Chapter X of the Regulation, 1965), Government of Assam.

28. Ibid., (7th ed.), p. 65.

This official version has traced the history of immigrants into tribal blocks and belts. But the tribal continued to suffer. It attracted the minds of the Assamese so much that the All Assam Students' Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad demanded preservation of the tribal blocks and belts in accordance with the constitutional provisions meant for the tribal population of the state. In a memorandum they summed up the situation:

"The problem has badly hit the tribal population. All the 37 blocks and belts reserved for the tribal people are on the verge of extinction. Pressure on economy has reduced the sizes of the reserved tribal blocks. Forest resources are fast disappearing due to indiscriminate felling of trees and occupation of the area by the foreign nationals. The very identity of tribal population is in danger. The recent history of Tripura provides a good example to substantiate our belief."<sup>29</sup>

The Central Government have been in full knowledge of the alarming situation arising out of unabated infiltration of foreigners into Assam. In the year 1950, the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act 1950 was passed by the Parliament. Therefore the problem had been officially recognised to have existed, as early as the birth of the Indian Republic. However, as is evident from the facts available in the enormous literature produced during the Assam agitation; "no positive

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29. AASU's Memorandum to Prime Minister of India submitted in February, 1980, at Delhi.

steps were taken by the Union Government to prevent infiltration of foreigners into the north-eastern territories of India." <sup>30</sup> The Minister of State in the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation Sri Bhagwat Jha Azad in the Lok Sabha debate stated that "During 1968, on an average 394 migrants entered Assam from East Pakistan every month. During six months ending on the 29th December 1968, 2098 migrants came to Assam from East Pakistan. The Government of Assam decided to rehabilitate 12,000 families of the new migrants, i.e. those who came over to Assam from 1-1-64 onwards. Arrangements were made for the rehabilitation of those who are in excess of the quota 12,000 outside Assam. Regarding those who came recently, it was decided that after necessary screening, these people should be sent to Mana Relief Camps in Madhya Pradesh." <sup>31</sup>

In Assam, the problem of immigration has another dimension that is its impact on electoral politics. The Assamese fear that due to heavy immigration of foreigners into Assam, the indigenous population will be reduced to a minority and political power will go out of their hands. As we shall see in a later chapter a controversy over the electoral rolls for a by-election in Mangaldai constituency in 1978 led to an

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30. For information on these lines see, K. Mahanta and D. Sarmah, 'Defend Democratic Value in Assam' Economic and Political Weekly, 26 July, 1980, p. 1337-38.

31. See, Lok Sabha Debates, Vol. XXIV, No.1-5, 17th to 21st Feb., 1969, p. 107.

unprecedented movement against foreign nationals. The election commission was aware of this problem, but never took any positive steps to prevent inclusion of foreigners names in the electoral rolls. "The directive sent by the Union Government on 2.8.75 to check the electoral rools, to the state government and the union territories of the North Eastern region was also ignored by the State Government of Assam."<sup>32</sup> According to the seventh schedule of the Constitution the subject citizenship naturalisation of aliens admission and emigration and expulsion from India Passport and Visas are subjects related to the central list vide entry 17 and 19 of the said list. Therefore it is the constitutional duty of the central authority to stop influx of foreign nationals. Similarly preparation of electoral rolls is directly within the purview of the election commission. But the agencies concerned appeared to have failed to carry out their responsibilities.

The Bangladesh war of liberation of 1971 brought about a deluge in the Pakistani infiltration into the state. Assam population increased from 32,89,680 in 1901 to 146,25,153 in 1971, representing a rate of growth of 345 percent, as against an increase of 132 percent for India as a whole. Had Assam's population increased at national rate, it would have been 763,205 in 1971. Assam's actual population in 1971, therefore includes an excess of 6,993,095 representing 47.82 percent of its 1971 population. The following table shows the population trend in Assam and India:

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32. Inderjit, "Assam's Stir and Delhi's Apathy", The Assam Tribune (Gauhati, 30 Sept. 1983).

Table - VII: Population Trend in Assam and India 1901-71

Year	INDIA			ASSAM			Excess over India	Number as % of India's Population
	Number	Decadal Variation %	Year	Number	Decadal Variation %	Year		
1901	236,281,245	-	1901	32,89,680	-	1901	-	1.38
1911	252,122,410	+ 5.73	1911	38,48,617	+ 16.99	1911	11.26	1.52
1921	251,352,261	- 0.31	1921	46,36,980	+ 20.48	1921	20.79	1.85
1931	279,015,498	+ 11.01	1931	55,60,371	+ 19.91	1931	8.90	1.99
1941	318,701,012	+ 14.22	1941	66,94,790	+ 20.40	1941	6.18	2.10
1951	361,129,622	+ 13.31	1951	80,28,856	+ 19.93	1951	6.62	2.22
1961	439,235,082	+ 21.64	1961	8,37,329	+ 34.98	1961	13.34	2.47
1971	547,949,809	+ 24.75	1971	146,25,153	+ 34.95	1971	10.20	2.67

Source: Census of India, Various Reports.

Meanwhile, many of those refugees who came during the Indo-Pakistan war, stayed on illegally and began consolidating their settlements. Thousands move into riverine char or river islands where they formed tightly knit compact communities.

In Assam, infiltration was possible due to (i) mismanagement of the forest reserves and other Government lands, (ii) loose international borders, (iii) harbouring and shielding the illegal infiltrants by a section of the people. It may be mentioned here that Bengal was always a high density area in terms of population and it sought sanctuary in neighbouring lands. B.P. Sukla quotes from Muzibur Rahman's book Eastern Pakistan - Its Population, Determination and Economics which can be reproduced here:

"because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient lands 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." 33

There are some thinkers like Amalendu Guha and Sailadhar Rajkhowa who pointed out that the Assamese middle class with a view to employing cheap labour in their fields and homesteads had encouraged the influx of East Bengal men into

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33. Sukla, Op.cit., p. 12.

Assam. They also stated that the Assamese Mahajans had made the East Bengal peasants settle down in their land as well as in Government lands with the high hopes of becoming Zamindars.<sup>34</sup> But their views cannot be accepted. As we have seen in the Preceding Chapter from the very beginning leaders like Ambika Giri Roychoudhury, Bishnuram Medhi, Gopinath Bordoloi opposed immigration. Guha and others are blissfully unaware of the fact that the entire Assamese middle class was not in favour of immigration but only a small section with vested landed interests encouraged immigration. We cannot blame the entire Assamese middle class for the deeds of a few. Dr. P.C. Goswami in his 'Economic development of Assam' also stated that "some Assamese who held larger areas on annual leases, employed immigrants ostensibly as hired labourers but in reality as tenants who paid rent as a share of the crop or possibly in a few cases in cash."<sup>35</sup>

The sense of insecurity has at times been given a communal tinge. Gyanchand for instance says, "In Assam, in which the numerical strength of the minority community the Muslims, is very near that of the majority community, the Hindus. The possibility of the number of Muslims exceeding

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34. Guha, Op.cit., p. 73.

35. P.C. Goswami, Economic Development of Assam (Gauhati, 1963), p. 288.

that of Hindus in the state cannot be ruled out. In Assam, particularly the danger can loom large, owing to the illicit immigration of the Muslims."<sup>36</sup> It must be stated here that Muslim immigrants concentrated mostly on char areas and the Hindu immigrants scattered all over Assam. We shall however see in the next chapter that a large number of Assamese do not view it as a religious problem.

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36. Gyandhand, Population in Perspective (New Delhi, 1972), p. 347.

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CHAPTER - IV

THE AGITATION ON THE FOREIGN NATIONAL ISSUE:  
THE CHARACTER OF THE MOVEMENT AND THE ROLE  
OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE PEASANTRY

THE AGITATION ON THE FOREIGN NATIONAL ISSUE:  
THE CHARACTER OF THE MOVEMENT AND THE ROLE  
OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE PEASANTRY

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the problem of immigration persisted even after independence. It is a fact that there had been large scale foreign infiltration into Assam and those foreigners had managed to enter their names in the electoral rolls of the state. Mr. S. L. Shakhdar, Chief Election Commissioner of India in the conference of the Chief Electoral Officers of the states held at Octacamund from October 24 to 26, 1978, commented that,

"I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states especially in North-Eastern region wherefrom disturbing reports are coming regarding large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. In one case (Assam) the population in 1971 recorded an increase as high as 34.98 percent over the 1961 figures and this increase was attributed to the influx of a very large number of persons from the neighbouring countries. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make, on the basis of the increase of 39.98 p.c. between the two census, the increase that is likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100 p.c. over 1961 census." 1

Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Minister of External Affairs, during the Janata regime on 21.8.78 while replying to a call attention motion on the floor of the house of people on the issue

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1. Quoted in "The Foreigners Problem why a Solution is Still Elusive", A Pamphlet published by AASU Gauhati, 1983.

of influx of foreigners stated that the problem of infiltration is a recurring phenomenon and it is necessary to devise ways and means so that the north region could be made more secure.

It is quite clear from the following table that there has been an unusual increase in the number of voters in Assam.

Table - VIII: The increase in the number of voters in Assam from 1957-1979.

Year	Number of voters	Increase	Percentage of Increase
1957	44,93,357	-	-
1962	49,42,816	4,49,459	10.00
1966	55,85,056	6,42,240	12.99
1970	57,01,805	1,16,749	2.09
1971	62,96,198	5,94,393	10.42
1977 (March)	72,29,543	9,33,345	14.82
1977 (Nov.)	79,74,476	7,44,933	10.30
1979	85,37,497	5,63,021	7.06

Source: Census of India (various reports).

In a survey of voting population the 'Statesman' put the increase in the electorate in Assam in 1980 over 1977 figures at 18.85 percent, one of the highest in India. It maintains, that the abnormal increase is due to immigration.

With particular reference to the district of Goalpara and Cachar the paper says:

"An offshoot of this population explosion has been a sudden change in the composition of the district electorate. The immigrants are in absolute majority in seven of the nineteen Assembly constituencies in the district. In five more constituencies they are numerous enough to be crucial for an electoral victory. There is a similar transformation in the smaller border district of Cachar, which returns fifteen legislators to the 126 number state Assembly."<sup>2</sup>

The encroachment of foreign citizen on the electoral rolls soon became rule rather than an exception. The first official admission of such undesirable entry of non-citizens into the rolls appeared in Influx-immigrations from East Pakistan, a publication of the Ministry of External Affairs. It reported that the enlistment of foreigners in the voters lists took place at times at the instance of politically interested parties, who sought electoral support from illegal settlers from East Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> The Chief Electoral Officer referred to the extraordinary enthusiasm of the immigrant population in getting themselves enrolled as voters. The revision and preparation of electoral rolls for a bye-election, following the death of the M.P. from the Mangaldai constituency of the

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2. The Statesman (Calcutta, 4 December, 1979).

3. Influx-Immigration from East Pakistan (Published by DAVP for the Ministry of External Affairs, Delhi), 1963.

Lok Sabha in 1978, pinpointed the deluge of non-citizens sweeping over the electorate. "Out of 47,000 names of alleged foreigners, 36,000 were disposed of: out of these as many as 26,000 comprising over 72 percent were declared illegal entries by foreign nationals."<sup>4</sup>

By then the people of Assam realised that the situation is quite grave. The question is, if so many foreigners could enroll their names in the electoral rolls of a single constituency, the situation could be similar or even worse in other constituencies. The All Assam Students Union demanded a thorough scrutiny of the electoral rolls of all the constituencies.

For the Assam students, it was nothing new to launch a fight for what they believed. AASU and its predecessor the All Assam Students' Association have been in the forefront of many struggles in Assam. These included, the successful agitation to establish a university at Gauhati, the construction of a bridge across Brahmaputra, the setting up of a refinery at Gauhati, and the 1960 and 1972 agitation over the issues of official language and medium of instruction in Assam.

The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed on August 27, 1979, at Dibrugarh with representatives of the

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4. The Statesman, 28 February 1980.

AASU the Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad. Later on, the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal, Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad, Asom Yuvak Samaj, also joined the AAGSP.<sup>5</sup>

The Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. Sakdher who so boldly raised the issue of inclusion of large numbers of foreigners name in the electoral rolls of some of the constituencies, suddenly reversed his position in September 1979. He stayed the intensive scrutiny on September 11, 1979 stating that the voters list of 1977 would not be disturbed. Thus, it became clear to the people that he also, became the easy victim of political pressure. The statement of Sakdher confused the people of Assam and the AASU and AAGSP started the agitation with their demand for detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners.

The Agitation as claimed by the agitators is a mass movement directed towards the preservation of the socio-cultural and political identity of Assam within the state of India.<sup>6</sup> The identity crisis in Assam appears to be a complex problem involving social, cultural, political and economic dimensions which need to be attended to in any policy for

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5. Mahesh Joshi, Assam: The Indian Conflict (New Delhi, 1981).  
T.S. Murthy, Assam the Difficult Years (New Delhi, 1983).

6. Save Assam today to save India tomorrow: An Appeal from the people of Assam (AASU and AAGSP, Gauhati, 15 May 1980).

restoring the identity of Assamese people. But before one can take up such issues one has to examine the question whether this crisis of identity is real or not. One must however realise that even if such a crisis is not real, the very existence of such a feeling might create a serious problem for the body politic.

In a multi-lingual and heterogeneous state like India, the Constituent Units will not contribute to the process of national development unless their people have roots in society and develop a firm sense of identity. National identity and unity can be strengthened only on the basis of local and regional identities. The question at issue in Assam as pointed out by the agitators is the very survival of the Assamese culture, language, polity and economy. This crisis is on the other hand viewed as the result of excessive influx of foreign nationals into Assam. The problem of migration into Assam thus acquires unbelievable proportions in Assam's politics.<sup>7</sup>

In no other states or region of the country, does one hear of a movement which has generated so much heat and

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7. For information on the Assam movement, see the following Books. (1) B.L. Abbi (ed.) Problems and Prospects of Development in the NE Region (Chandigarh, 1984). (2) A.K. Das, Assam Agony - A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis (New Delhi, 1982). (3) Hiren Gohain, Assam a Burning Question (Gauhati, 1985). (4) M. Joshi, Assam - The Indian Conflict (New Delhi, 1981).

controversy as the agitation in Assam. The sponsors of the movement AASU and AAGSP say that:

" theirs is an open book, and their objectives are clear and simple. They are detection and deportation of all illegal foreign settlers and deletion of their names from the electoral rolls. Therefore they maintain that, what they are fighting for is what every Indian should fight for in defence of the country, the people and the Constitution." 8

On the other hand, the leftist parties led mainly by the CPI(M) argue that the so called foreigners issue is invented mainly to institute a legal cover to revive the old campaign against Bengalees, Muslims and other Indians living in Assam for generations. Thus they view the movement as anti-national, anti-Bengalee, anti-Muslims, patently chauvinistic and even secessionist.<sup>9</sup>

This problem has been studied by various scholars from an array of varying perspectives. Amalendu Guha in his article "Little nationalism turned Chauvinist" pointed out that the fear of the Assamese about losing their identity as a result of large scale immigration is most unreal. He even calls it a fear psychosis. He pointed out that there is a

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8. See, The Foreigners Problem (An analysis) a leaflet published by AAGSP, Gauhati (1980).

9. See, Bideshi Nagarikar Probajan Samparke Prastab (Assamese) leaflet published by CPI(M) State Committee, 1978.

decline in the Bengali speaking population in Assam."<sup>10</sup> This is because of the separation of the populous Bengali speaking district of Sylhet. After the separation, Assam had a total population of 9 million of which 2 million were in Sylhet. The separation of Sylhet reduced the percentage of Bengali speaking population in Assam.

However, other scholars have shown that the growth rate of Bengali speaking population in recent times is much higher than the Assamese speaking population. While the Bengali speaking population increased at a rate of 20.04% during the decade 1951-60, in the next decade this rate was 41%. The corresponding figures for the Assamese speaking people were 36.47 and 31.26. But these figures do not show clearly the actual growth rate of Bengali speaking population. Because many Bengali speakers recorded Assamese as their mother tongue due to political consideration.<sup>11</sup> While refuting Guha's argument on this issue Apurba Baruah says, "when in 1951, there was a rise in Assamese speaking population, Guha himself pointed out that this was because many Bengali speakers who had earlier recorded themselves as Bengali for political reasons declared themselves to be Assamese. So there is every chance that the immigrants would

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10. See Guha, "Little nationalism turned chauvinist", Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number 1980, pp. 1699-1720.

11. See for instance, Apurba Baruah's "Indian nationalism and the Assamese national question", North East Quarterly, Vol. I, August 1982, p. 29.

also resort to such policies. Therefore the fear of the Assamese about losing their identity may not be unreal."<sup>12</sup>

There are some other scholars like Hiren Gohain and Homen Borgohain who pointed out that the Assam movement was directed against all non-Assamese outsiders.<sup>13</sup> The AASU and AAGSP the two main organisations spearheading the movement repeatedly pointed out that this movement is not directed against all outsiders residing in Assam. This movement according to them was neither racial nor communal. On the other hand Indians from other parts of India who are living in Assam were supporting this agitation spontaneously.<sup>14</sup> They had been living peacefully and pursuing their vocation or trade as it was before the movement. As Baruah says, "Had the movement been directed against all Bengalees or non-Assamese, trade centre like Guwahati and Tinsukia would have disrupted, where most of the trade is controlled by Marwaris and Bengalees."<sup>15</sup>

The AASU and AAGSP in their publications have been reiterating that the movement is peaceful and non-violent.

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12. Ibid., Loc.cit.

13. Hiren Gohain, "Assam fall out of underdevelopment", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XV, No. 12 (March 22, 1980).

14. Save Assam Today to Save India Tomorrow: An Appeal from the people of Assam (AASU and AAGSP, Gauhati, 15 May, 1980).

15. Baruah, Op.cit., p. 30.

But there were indeed some acts of violence against the non-Assamese; these might have been caused by some anti-social elements may be with support from vested interests.

The AASU and AAGSP in their publications declared that the movement is not secessionist in nature. They stated that their main aim is to maintain the territorial integrity of India. The AASU and AAGSP declare:

"We declare unequivocally that we are not secessionist, our main aim has been to maintain the territorial integrity of India and to thwart the evil designs of those who want to create instability through infiltration .... Our struggle is only against the illegal foreigners whose presents in Assam threatens the economic, cultural and political existence of the indigenous people of Assam. It is only against non-Indians staying illegally in India and not against people from rest of India who are residing in Assam." <sup>16</sup>

It must be admitted that there is hardly any evidence to disprove the AASU and AAGSP claim that the movement is not anti-Indian. Some scholars like Tilotama Misra pointed out that the economic backwardness is the main cause behind the Assam movement. It is true that the immigrants dominated the economic life of Assam in such a manner that the local Assamese entrepreneurs found themselves in a helpless position. Raw materials of the state have been taken out to other

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16. AASU and AAGSP Pamphlet, Op.cit., p.3.

regions of India for developing industries in those areas.<sup>17</sup> The unemployment problem in Assam is also acute. Dominance of immigrants in the job market adds fuel to the grievances of the Assamese. The immigrants also enjoyed dominant positions in the key-sectors of employment. Myron Weiner has shown that even in 1961 about 57 percent of the employees in transport and communications were immigrants.<sup>18</sup> The dominant position enjoyed by the immigrants in the job market has been pointed out by the Employment Review Committee of the Government of Assam itself. In its third report, the committee submitted that "in a survey of 28 units comprising 7 public sector industries, 16 private sector industries and 5 banks, with a total strength of 29,537 employees, only 14,368 or 49 percent had their birth place in Assam and only 10,473 or 35 percent had Assamese as their mother tongue. The committee further noted that of the 2,095 employees in the Class I and II only 762 or 36 percent had their birth place in Assam."<sup>19</sup>

There were many critics who pointed out that jobs particularly the profitable ones, go to outsiders because

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17. Tilotama Misra, 'Assam a Colonial Hinterland', Economic and Political Weekly (August 9, 1980), pp.1357-65.

18. Myron Weiner, "Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India", Demography India, 1978.

19. See, Employment Review Committee (Assembly Secretariat Assam, Dispur, December 1973), p. 50.

there is a lack of specialists among the Assamese people. Hiren Gohain in his article "On the present Assam movement"<sup>20</sup> also shared this view, But this position is not tenable because as Apurba Baruah pointed out in his article "Elites in a Colonia Hinterland" in most cases persons occupying the Class I and II jobs do not have any specialised knowledge. Baruah used the Employment Review Committees 8th report figures to say that in the plywood industry out of 87 senior officers, 66 or 76 percent are from outside Assam. And out of these 90 percent have only general education and only five have engineering degrees. As regards general education, 9 percent have master degrees, 44 percent are only graduates, 18 percent are intermediate, 23 percent are matriculates and 6 percent below matric.<sup>21</sup> Baruah also pointed out that Oil and Natural Gas Commission which is a big employer, in Nazira 148 class I officers are from outside Assam. 61 percent had no technical qualifications, 24 percent had engineering degrees and 8 percent were diploma holders of the 61 percent officers with general qualifications, 36 percent had master degrees, 35 percent were graduates, 21 percent were intermediates and 8 percent were matriculates.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Hiren Gohain, On the Present Assam Movement (Calcutta, 1980), p.10.

21. A.K. Baruah, "Elites in a Colonial Hinterland" in B.L. Abbi (ed.) North East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development (Chandigarh, 1984), p.325.

22. Ibid., Loc.cit.

There is no doubt that Assam is economically very poor and that there are good reasons for the people of Assam to have a feeling of being neglected and deprived. The British had invested in Tea plantations, in timber, in oil, in railways and river transport, since then no major industries have come up in Assam. It is really a pity that until 1987 there has been only one bridge to span the Brahmaputra, and that too was secured after a long drawn agitation. The Tea gardens have their head offices in Calcutta. As much as 80 percent of the products of 40 plywood factories in Assam are proposed in depots outside the state.<sup>23</sup> The two movements for the establishment of refineries in Assam to prevent crude extracted from the oil fields of the region, from being refined outside the state, were manifestations of the growing consciousness of the Assamese middle class about the internal colonial status of Assam.

Soon after Assam lost her independence in 1826, after the treaty of Yandabo, the British began tea cultivation in Assam. The initial experiment was so successful that the British sought to establish full control and monopoly over this industry by forming the Assam Tea Company in 1840.<sup>24</sup> Special rules like the waste land grant rules of 1838, old

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23. Nikhil Chakravarty, 'Musings on the North East', Man and Development, Vol. II, No.2 (June 1980), p.102.

24. T. Misra, Op.cit., p. 1357-65.

Assam rules of 1854, Fee simple rules of 1874 and new lease rules of 1876 enabled the British planters to own large tracts of the most fertile land of Assam at highly concessional rates. Under the waste land grant rules of 1838, for instance, one-fourth of the total land acquired for a tea garden could be enjoyed free for life by the owner and even the rest of the land could be free for periods varying from 5 to 20 years depending on the productivity of the soil. Thus the British planters became the owners of almost seven lakh acres of tax free land in Assam, while the local Assamese peasants paid two to three rupees per acre of land revenue to the British masters. Aspiring Assamese planters were discriminated against and discouraged from entering into competition with the British planters. The case of Maniram Dewan who was an astute politician and a minister to the Ahom King Purandar Singh was a typical example of the extent to which the British colonialists go to prevent native enterprise in the Tea business. When Dewan started first private Tea Gardens in Assam, he had to face various obstacles put in his way by the British. "Later the main charges of inciting rebellion against the British government were brought against Dewan. There were many letters written to the Government by the Assam Company, the Margherita Company and Nakchari Company.<sup>25</sup> But it is wrong to say that the

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25. Ibid., Loc.cit.

British never encouraged Assamese planters. Once they got themselves established firmly in Tea, they began to encourage a few, among the then Assamese gentry perhaps as an attempt at placating them. As a result a small number of Assamese planters began to make a mark. Jagannath Baruah was a pioneer in the field. These planters were, however, not a threat to the British, as they were very few. Dewans success in the Tea plantation refutes the view of Hiren Gohain that monopoly of outsiders over lucrative Tea jobs, is because of a inferiority complex and the lack of local skill and enterprise.<sup>26</sup> The Bengalee Bourgeoisie from Calcutta were also on a advantageous position. They entered the tea business as shareholders with the British Colonialists, and enjoyed profits from it. It is to be noted here that "out of 11 members of the 1st set of board of directors of the Assam Tea Company were from Bengal. They were Dwarikanath Tagore, Motilal Sheel and Prasanna Kr. Tagore."<sup>27</sup>

The British made enormous profits from the Tea industry in Assam. With a nominal capital investment they kept the profits margin high by paying low wages to the labourers, brought from the poverty stricken areas of Bihar, Orissa and

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26. Hiren Gohain, 'Assam fall out of underdevelopments', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XV, No.12 (March 22, 1980).

27. Ajit Kr. Sarmah, 'Asamar cah Udyogat Bideshi Muldhan', Sadiniya Navyug (Assamese) Gauhati, 30 Oct. 1963), p.24.

Madras Presidency. Initially local Assamese were employed as labourers, but later on it was discontinued because the British found among the Assamese signs of rebellion and discontentment. So they could not risk an open conflict with the tribal population of Assam.<sup>28</sup> But the immigrant labourers could be exploited and ill-treated without much impact on the surrounding villages. The British planters never invested a single penny for the welfare and developmental activities in the state.<sup>29</sup> Instead the enormous profits from Assam's Tea Garden enriched Britain and its people. Today out of 620 Tea Gardens in the Brahmaputra Valley, only about 158 are owned by Assamese planters. Of the remaining Gardens, excluding 12 Gardens owned by Assam Tea Corporation and one owned by the Assam Tea employees industrial cooperative limited as many 248 Gardens are owned by the non-Assamese big bourgeoisie.<sup>30</sup>

In the field of oil, Assam has an estimated reserve of 70.46 million tonnes of crude oil and 23,000 million cubic metres of natural Gas. "About 43 lakh tonnes of crude oil is produced by the oil fields of Upper Assam, has a very

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28. Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj (New Delhi, 1977) p. 21.

29. Homen Borgohain, Aupanibeshik Soshanar Birudhe Asomar Sesh Sangram (Assamese), Gauhati, 1980, p. 64.

30. U. Misra, Op.cit., p. 1357.

high percentage of aromatic content, it is rated high in the world market."<sup>31</sup> The suggestion of the Soviet experts for the establishment of a large scale refinery at Silghat near Nowgong was rejected by the Government.<sup>32</sup> There could have been no other reason except vested political interest for the establishment of a large public sector refinery for Assam crude at Barauni "with an annual capacity of more than 30 lakh tonnes. Mass movement protesting against this unfair decision of the centre were staged in Assam in 1956-57, as a result of which the centre tried to appease the Assamese by establishing a small refinery at Gauhati with an annual refining capacity of about 7 lakh tonnes."<sup>33</sup>

These grievances of the Assamese people were articulated by the Assamese middle class. The sense of relative deprivation of the Assamese middle class, led to a sense of insecurity. The foreigners issue is a manifestation of these grievances. The result was that the Assamese middle class felt completely restless and deprived. They felt that unless they raise the important issue like the immigration before the Government, they would be the worst victims in their own land.

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31. U. Misra, "Little nationalism turned chauvinist", Economic and Political Weekly, 21 Feb. 1981, p. 290.

32. Ibid., Loc.cit.

33. Loc.cit.

{In Assam, the students have, for a long time, played a major role in political movement and agitations.<sup>34</sup> The students launched three important struggles for the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people. The 1960 issue over the official language, the 1972 over the medium of instruction and the third the agitation over the foreign nationals, although they have been condemned by many intellectuals politicians and a section of the national press.) Since 1826 Assamese society was a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society of petty producers, though the British monetised the economy. Neither the bourgeoisie as a class nor the landlord class evolved during the British regime, the ground however was laid for the emergence of the Assamese middle class. This class was to a large extent, the product of western education. It came into direct conflict with the Bengali middle class, which had dominated the administration during the early part of British rule.

Out of this conflict, which had strong economic roots, and which was reflected in the struggle for the restoration of the rightful place of the Assamese language, the Assamese middle class attained a degree of identity and leadership. It must be mentioned here that initially, in Assam the

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34. The students in Assam had to fight for the establishment of the oil refinery in 1957, the Food Agitation 1966, Second movement for the establishment of oil refinery in 1969. In 1974 there was the 21 point movement.

language of the court was Persian, in 1831 it was replaced by Bengali, and thus Bengali was introduced as medium of instruction. Had there been an organised middle class, this trend would have received immediate resistance. But we must also note here that in 1909 spokesman of the Assamese middle class Manik Ch. Baruah spoke about the exclusive rights of the children of the soil to the public services of their country.<sup>35</sup>

The cultural insecurity which the middle class felt, is not a recent problem. If we go back to history, we have found that in 1937, representatives of these middle classes in their memorandum to Nehru suggested that "if Cachar and Sylhet were separated from Assam, which were completely Bengali dominated area, the people of Assam would be the staunchest supporters of Congress."<sup>36</sup> In the post independence period, the people of Assam fought for the language issue. It must be admitted here that chauvinist elements did take advantage of the problem, and change the issue into Assamese versus Bengalis. But whatever be their attitude, we must not lose sight of the genuine fears of the people of Assam.

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35. See, speech by M. C. Baruah, Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council Proceedings (1909) No. 3, pp.52-62. Quoted by Guha in Planter Raj to Swaraj, p. 77.

36. A. Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, Op.cit., p. 257. Quoted by A.K. Baruah in Elites in a Colonial Hinterland in B.L. Abbi (ed.) NE Problems and Prospects of Development, Op.cit., p. 326.

The foreigner issue, to some extent, is the result of a conflict over jobs, land and cultural insecurity. As we have mentioned earlier, the grievances against the immigrants are articulated by the Assamese middle class. This middle class however continued to retain and nourish their ties with the peasantry. There has been strong links between the Assamese middle class and the peasantry which is clear from the responses of the peasantry towards the foreigners agitation.

The Assamese middle class has not been alienated from its rural roots and this has given them a strength and confidence quite uncharacteristic of their class. If we look back, we found that some representatives of the so called middle class like Manik Ch. Baruah, Dinnath Bezbaruah, Anandarm Dhekial Phukan, Nobin Ch. Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan etc. belonged either to the landed Aristocracy, Maujadar families or to Vaishnavite Satras. They had considerable landed estate and private landed property.<sup>37</sup> The middle class which is made up of educated sections of people belonging, not only to the caste hindus, but also tribal and ethnic people easily constitutes the most important class in relation to the current movement. In the absence of an Assamese bourgeoisie and the existence of a weak Assamese proletariat the

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37. Manorama S. Baruah, "The Assamese Middle Class: Its Role in the Peasant Uprising of 1893-94" in B. Dutta Ray (ed.) The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in NE India (Delhi, 1983), p. 62.

Assamese middle class along with the peasantry from the main base of the Assamese society. The Assamese middle class also came to realise that uneven development of Assam's economy has converted Assam into a colonial hinterland. As Tilottama Misra pointed out, "A positive outcome of the agitation in foreigners issue is the growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected to gross economic exploitation on a large scale comparable to, and sometimes even worse than in the pre-independence days."<sup>38</sup>

The participation of the Assamese peasantry is highly significant in the foreigners agitation in Assam. Chaitanya Kalbagh says "The Assam movement had undoubtedly acquired gigantic proportions. It was no longer confined to cities and towns but also to the villages."<sup>39</sup> There were lakhs of people in the demonstrations, this could not have been possible without active participation of the peasantry. The resistance the 1983 elections received in rural Assam also proves that peasantry did participate in a big way. It was so serious that even the unwilling Election Commission has to adjourn the poll in 17 constituencies. "The number of lowest votes cast was 267 out of an electorate of 69,309 in the Dharampur constituency in Kamrup district."<sup>40</sup>

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38. T. Misra, Op.cit., p. 1358.

39. Chaitanya Kalbagh, India's Bangladesh, New Delhi, 12 May, 1980, pp. 12-14.

40. "Assam Elections", Assam Tribune, 21st February 1983, p.1.

The participation of the peasantry in the agitation over the foreigners issue cannot be understood without taking into account tremendous pressure on cultivable land in the 1951 to 71 period. According to the national Atlas 1971, Assam was subjected to the greatest population pressure between 1961 and 1971 with the density of population rising from 138 sq.km. to 186 per sq.km. during the decade the rise of almost 35 percent. In no other state, one-third increase in population density is recorded. According to Guha, this is because of the rise of Assamese speaking population.<sup>41</sup> This view of Guha is ~~not~~ correct. As we have seen in Nowgong and Kamrup district, the local people have been eased out of their land by immigrants. "In Nowgong district where the density of population has risen from 156 persons per sq.km. in 1951 to 302 persons per sq.km. in 1971. Vast areas once held by indigenous tribals are today in almost total occupation by immigrants except the few reserved tribal blocks."<sup>42</sup>

The participation of peasants, may also have something to do with the peasant nationalism in Assam. It is evident, in Assam that peasant nationalism penetrated into the middle classes from the peasant organisations and throughout the anti-British struggle, even when led by the middle class

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41. A. Guha, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist", Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number 1980, pp. 1699-1720.

42. U. Misra, Op.cit., p. 293.

congress leaders, the rural masses played the most important role. Thus, the Assamese peasants unlike peasants in pure feudal set-up, have tradition of a strong militant national consciousness. That is why, even today, when the threat of invasion of their land by foreign nationals is held out to them, they organise themselves without much help from the urban centres. The mass movement on foreign nationals issue in Assam was therefore nothing new to the Assamese rural masses. They organised mass meetings and marched out in their thousands to demonstrate in front of the subdivisional and district headquarters. The Assamese peasants view the foreigners issue as a threat to their homeland. The return of 'Tamra-patras' by freedom fighters most of whom are from villages was also an expression of the feeling that the government of India had betrayed the interest of the people of Assam, thereby threatening their existence as a people.

In Assam, the growth of 'Raij-Mels' is an important indicator to the growth of peasant nationalism in Assam. The organisation and leadership of these 'Raij-Mels'<sup>43</sup> bring to focus many important features of Assamese society. These 'mels' were organised wholly by peasant and often had as their spokesmen or leaders the local religious heads such as the 'Dolois' and the 'Gossains'. These mels were loosely

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43. Raij Mels - It is an Assamese word. It means peoples Assembly.

organised, there were no regular membership in it. All the people of a village or a few villages would have to gather together to form the Assembly. The leadership of the Mels was in the hands of the local leaders and the important men. "As the Vaishnava Satra (Monstry) organisation played an important role in the village life, very often the Gossains of the Satras and Dolois of the temples played a leading role in the Mels."<sup>44</sup> The impact of the mels on the Assamese society was so strong that they inspired the creation of similar organisations in the urban areas under the leadership of the emerging new middle class of Assam. 'Ryot Sabhas' were organised in various towns of Assam in the latter half of the nineteenth century, e.g. the Tezpur Ryot Sabha (1884), the Nowgong Ryot Sabha (1886).<sup>45</sup> All these Sabhas had strong peasant bases and though led by the educated urban middle class, they voiced mainly the demands of the Ryots. These Sabhas were germs of the Assam Association which was formed to place before the Revenue Secretary of the Government of India, Sir Denzil Ebetson, the demands of the peasantry. The Assam Association was the only active political organisation of the Assamese people till the year 1921 when the Indian National Congress establish its branch in Assam.<sup>46</sup>

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44. For a discussion on the Rajj Mels and their role in pre-independence Assam see, Manorama S. Baruah, op.cit.

45. N.C. Dutta, Land Problems and Land Reforms in Assam, (New Delhi, 1968), p.10.

46. Ibid., Loc.cit.

In the pre-independence period when national consciousness was directed against the British, the middle class consciousness came into conflict, not only with the British imperialism but also with the aggressive Bengali nationalism. Middle class disillusionment with congress politics came soon after 1947 when the Congress leaders of Assam, instead of devoting attention to the immediate developmental programmes of the state, began to accept whatever policies the centre dictated regarding Assam. Thus the middle class congress leadership became alienated from the masses.

In Assam, the impoverishment of the peasantry led to the large scale transfer of land mostly from poor indigenous peasants, to immigrant Bangladeshis. As pressure on land increased the unchecked infiltration from across the border, became a matter of grave concern and dissatisfaction for the Assamese peasantry. Burdened as they were, with the refugees from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) and Nepal, the unchecked infiltration and occupation of land began to rouse the wrath of the people against Congress Government. The Assam Tenancy Act of 1971 made it even easier for the illegal immigrants to become permanent legal owners of large tracts of land they had already occupied. This Act gives permanent, heritable and transferable rights to anyone who occupies the land continuously for three years. The immigrants have occupied not only every available piece of land in the Brahmaputra

Valley and in the 'Char' (riverine) areas, but have also infiltrated into the tribal belts and blocks which had been especially created to protect the tribal people from a large number of outsiders mostly from East Bengal.<sup>47</sup>

The foreigners problem in Assam would not have reached the explosive situations if the immigrants had assimilated with the Assamese society. Guha has suggested assimilation which he calls 'assamiysation' as a solution to the problem. But the immigrants in general and Bengali immigrants in particular with their numerical and cultural viability resisted assimilation. The immigrants concentrated in certain pockets, which reduced their needs to culturally and linguistically assimilate with the Assamese. Today in Assam there are some villages and towns, which are predominantly occupied by the Bengalees. The Assamese middle class consider these people as a threat to ethno-linguistic identity. "The example of Tripura where the Bengalis were once insignificant, today constitute over 70 percent of the states population."<sup>48</sup> The Assamese middle class was afraid that if proper steps are not taken by the Government of Assam, Assam may convert into a second Tripura. Omvedt pointed out that this is not because

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47. See, Debo Prasad Baruah "Light on the Current Problems in Assam", Assamiya, fortnightly (Gauhati, 2 October, 1980)

48. Manash Ghosh, "The Quiet Influx" The Statesman (Calcutta, 5 January to 8 January) (Four write ups), 1981.

Bengalees are an oppressor nation, but because of the oppression they suffered.<sup>49</sup> But it must be admitted that in any way, it is not going to help the problem in Assam.

Therefore it would be wrong to dismiss this problem as a result of xenophobia. The mass upsurge centred round the issue must be seen as the outburst of a nationality which has had a long history of neglect, exploitation and suppression. As is evident from our discussion above, had it not been for the ability of the Assamese middle class, to mobilize the peasantry in the name of Assamese identity that the movement could not have acquired the massive scale it did. But the question is why should the peasants respond to the call of the Assamese middle class to save Assamese identity? There are two reasons: (i) Hope of alleviating their problems about pressure on land, (ii) The hegemonic position of the Assamese middle class. The ideas of the middle class have influenced the Assamese society. Thus the Assam movement though was led by the middle class, yet its muscle power came from the peasantry. The Assamese middle class were successful in touching a very sensitive string in the psyche of the Assamese people that is, the fear of losing identity.

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49. Gail Omvedt, "Aspects of the Assamese Problem", Frontier Vol. 12, No.41, June 7, 1980, p.5.

CHAPTER - V

THE AGITATION AND THE LEFT: AN ANALYSIS OF RESPONSE  
OF THE CPI, THE CPI(M) AND THE CPI(M-L) GROUPS

THE AGITATION AND THE LEFT: AN ANALYSIS OF RESPONSE  
OF THE CPI, THE CPI(M) AND THE CPI(M-L) GROUPS

Ever since the beginning of the Assam agitation on the foreign nationals issue, political parties at the national level have hardly displayed any depth of analysis, for reasons of their own or for their sheer inability to do so. Even the parties from which one would have expected some attempt to study the problems at greater depth because of their commitment to social change, have failed to do so. In this respect the CPI and the CPI(M) seem to have always suffered from some kind of an inertia amounting to paralysis when it comes to assessing the tricky problems raised by nationalities in India. And in the present crisis of Assam they seem to have been guided more by opportunism than anything else. In spite of all this, one finds, a few independent groups - some of Marxist-Leninist tendency - which have shown themselves to be free from the traditional categories of a euro-centrist Marxism and as a result more capable of coming to better grips with the particularities of the Indian situation. Among all the leftists some groups of Marxist Leninist tendency (M.L), seem to have been most alert on the question of Assam. The CPI(M) on the other hand pointed out that the Assam movement is directed against them. They maintained that the movement is controlled by the ruling classes to hinder the progress of the leftist party in Assam.

According to CPI(M), the Assam agitation was directed "against the religious and linguistic minorities and it posed serious threat to the unity and integrity of the country. They pointed out that the agitation was artificially raised. The agitation has been described as one of violence against minorities."<sup>1</sup>

The political resolution adopted by CPI(M) in 1982 at Vijaywada stated that its first task is to fight all divisive and secessionist forces which undermine national unity. The resolution also stated that "secessionist influence in the north eastern region including Assam is due to the backward condition of the region and denial of rapid industrial development. The secessionists have succeeded in diverting the discontent arising from mounting economic misery into disruptive channels. They have also used the fear of foreign influx to strengthen the secessionist appeal."<sup>2</sup> However, the CPI(M) completely failed to give any evidence of secessionism in Assam. They allege that adivasi areas are proving ideal ground for some foreign Christian missions to spread the message of separation from the country and again alleges that the imperialist propagandists are attempting to dismember the

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1. See, 'Bivaganar Prachna, CPI(M) View' Ganasakti (Assamese) 15 March, 1983, p. 1.
  2. The political resolution adopted by CPI(M) in 1982 (Vijaywada), pp. 52-53. Published from the office of the CPI(M) Gauhati.

country through such propaganda. However, these assertions are not backed with concrete evidence.

During the Janata Party rule both in the Centre and in the State, the CPI(M) in one of their resolution declared that "influx of people from across the border must be stopped. They demanded that border must be completely sealed. It is the duty of both the central and the state government to tackle such problems immediately."<sup>3</sup>

In 1978, the agitation over the foreigners issue moved into direct action. Within weeks slogans were raised and the movement organised for the boycott of the Lok Sabha election until the electoral rolls were revised eliminating the names of all foreigners. The Election Commissioner decided that the names of those who were on the rolls at the time of the 1977 election should not be deleted. The result was that election to twelve out of fourteen Lok Sabha constituencies could not be held. For the first time a state refused to participate in the central parliamentary polls. According to CPI(M) the unity and integrity of the country was disrupted by this action. It must be noted here that some candidates themselves refused to file their nominations when it was clear to them, that inclusion of foreigners name in the

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3. See, Bideshi Nagarikar Prabajan Samparke Prastal (Assamese) resolution adopted in the CPI(M) State Committees Meet (21 Sep. 1978).

electoral rolls is against the unity and integrity of the country. But it must be stated that, people also forced them not to submit nominations.<sup>4</sup>

The CPI(M) in the middle of June 1980 put forward a seven point proposal for a solution of the problem in Assam.

- "(1) The secessionist agitation should be withdrawn and following it, all repressive administrative measure should be withdrawn;
- (2) Steps should be taken to instill confidence in the minorities by revamping the local administration;
- (3) The centre should announce firm measures to stop all further immigration across the border;
- (4) Discussions should be started with 1971 as cut of year;
- (5) An impartial machinery having confidence of the minorities should be set up to detect foreigners;
- (6) A joint campaign by all democratic parties to explain to the peoples of Assam the vital issues at stake and win them over to protect national unity; and
- (7) An agreed programme for the economic development of Assam to overcome problems of unemployment, landlessness and poverty."<sup>5</sup>

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4. The Dailies published from Assam like The Assam Tribune, The Sentinel, The Dainik Atom were full of eye witness accounts of popular pressure on prospective candidates.

5. "Most parties do not subscribe to CPI(M)s view", Assam Tribune, November 2, 1982.

Implicit in this is that Assam agitation was a threat to national integration. But an analysis of the events and the nature of the movement as shown in the Chapter IV proves that the CPI(M) position was untenable.

The All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad from time to time criticised the ruling and the leftist parties for their narrow political interests. They pointed out that the solution was elusive "only because of the governments unwillingness to recognise the Hindus who had infiltrated into Assam in the 1961-71 period as foreigners."<sup>6</sup>

The above statement of AASU and AAGSP disproves CPI(M) allegation that the movement is against minorities. If it had been only against minorities, as the CPI(M) claimed, the leaders of the movement would have never asked for the deportation of Hindu infiltrators.

The CPI(M) along with several left and democratic parties stood firmly against the anti-foreigners movement in Assam. It saw in the 'anti-foreigner' campaign a movement directed against the linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities in Assam. The so called 'foreigners' according to them are either Indian citizens from other states or the refugees

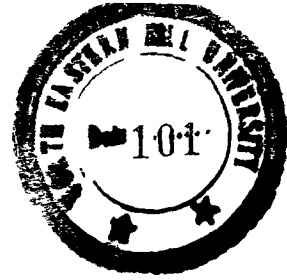
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6. "Ruling and leftist parties creating obstacles", Assam Tribune, October 23, 1982.

who have come to Assam from the territories of former Pakistan now Bangladesh. "The CPI(M) along with its left and democratic allies also sees in the anti-foreigner movement a force of destabilisation in whose creation and working American imperialism plays an important role."<sup>7</sup> The CPI(M) criticised ruling party for their policy on the foreign nationals issue and held them responsible for the deteriorating situation in Assam. Their view was that the anti-foreigner movement was directed against them, the ruling party according to them was trying to hinder the progress of the leftist party in Assam. But such assertion refused to acknowledge the fact that the massive support which the movement had received was the result of a thorough colonial exploitation of Assam and the increasing pressure on land resulting from the unprecedented migration from outside the region. It must be pointed out that there is hardly any evidence to support the CPI(M)'s view that movement is directed by the ruling party to hinder the leftist success and it appears that only as a result of CPI(M)'s unreasonable position in the early phase of the movement it turned against them. However anti-communist and chauvinistic forces in Assam did take advantage of the situation to launch an attack on the CPI(M) and other left parties.

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7. Ganasakti, Op.cit., p. 1.



Regarding refugees from East Bengal, the CPI(M) stated that "there was a large influx of Bengali Hindu refugees into all the states of north eastern region. Communal disturbances in 1951 and 1964 caused further refugee influx. A movement of fugitives across the border mostly Bengali Muslims, coincided with the East Bengal struggle for liberation from Pakistan in 1970-71. Most of them returned after the formation of Bangladesh."<sup>8</sup> This position cannot however be unquestionably maintained in the face of the data generated by various census reports. The 1971 Census had suggested that there were about 2.23 lakhs persons whose Indian citizenship was open to question.

Table - IX: Number of Inter-State Migrants and Immigrants into Assam: 1951-71.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Inter-State Migrants</u>	<u>Immigrants</u>
1951	113,617	222,925
1961	369,260	640,750
1971	236,759	440,276

Source: Census of India, 1971.

We are aware of the fact that "the place of birth information in the census reports for Assam is not reliable, particularly in the case of migrants from the then East Pakistan who constitute the most important stream of immigrants in the post independence period, as many Muslim

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8. Op.cit., p. 6.

immigrants did not return their birth place correctly for fear of deportation."<sup>9</sup> This led clearly to an underestimation of the number of immigrants. Assam, hosted during 1951-71, as many as 15.85 lakhs of foreign nationals, with or without valid documents. The then Congress Government of the State had appointed tribunals in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang and Nowgong where a large number of immigrants from East Pakistan had settled. Documents, citizenship certificates, oral evidence of affidavits of a locally well known Indian citizens, place of birth, the duration of stay in India - any of these was accepted by the tribunals as identifying a person for being termed as non-Indian citizen. According to the figures published by the Congress Government of Assam from year to year in the Assam Gazette on the basis of the decision of these tribunals, a total of little over three lakhs persons had been deported between 1962-1972. The State Government had wound up these tribunals on the ground that the work of detecting such illegal immigrants and deporting them had been completed. The Congress treated the minority as vote banks. So they refused to take any action which affect their interest.

The CPI(M) stated that all along they have been advocating a democratic solution to the problem of 'foreigners'

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9. Census of India, 1971, Assam, General Report, p. 71.

in Assam fully protecting the rights of all those non-Assamese speaking people who are either Indian citizens already or are entitled to Indian citizenship. They have all along been calling on all the democratic forces in Assam, among the Assamese speaking population and in the religious and linguistic minorities to come together to isolate and defeat the secessionist elements leading the agitation.

"The CPI(M) has always been telling the people of Assam that while they have to struggle for solution, to whatever genuine problems they have, they should not be misled into a wrong tract as wanted by the secessionists. The CPI(M) has also been sharply criticising the Government of Assam for its mishandling of the situation relying only on the bureaucracy a following line of drift.<sup>10</sup> They also repudiate the propaganda of the leaders of the Assam agitation that the General Secretary of the CPI(M), E.M.S. Namboodripad during his election campaign in Assam has directed his speeches against the local Assamese speaking population to appease foreigners. According to them some leaders of the opposition parties particularly Bharatiya Janata Party who boycotted the elections are backing the secessionist agitation."<sup>11</sup>

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10. The Election Manifesto of CPI(M), 1985, p.3.

11. "An overall view on Assam", CPI(M) Perspective, State and Society, Vol. 21, No.1, Jan-March, 1981.

Regarding the participation of the CPI(M) in the 1983 election, the Party stated that "they wanted the defeat of the ruling Congress I and the game of the separatist forces in Assam and mobilising the healthy forces living in the present State of Assam for the unity and integrity of the Indian Union, and against all the secessionist forces in Assam."<sup>12</sup> They continued to hold that the agitation was anti-national and secessionist and refused to go into the causes of resentment.

In view of the above, the position taken by the CPI(M) in the issue of immigration of foreign nationals and the movement launched by the AASU and AAGSP over this issue appear to be unjustifiable. This unjustifiable stand coupled with the irresponsible statements issued by the CPI(M) leadership in West Bengal<sup>13</sup> invited the wrath of the Assamese masses. The situation worsened mainly because the CPI(M) tried to organise resistance to the movement in minority pockets and tried to incite sections of tribals in Assam.

The CPI on the other hand suggested their own solution to the problem of foreign nationals.

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12. Peoples Democracy, Op.cit., p. 6.

13. The West Bengal Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu himself remarked in an published daily that the participation of Assamese women and children in the agitation is nothing but a well organised picnics.

- "(1) The foreigners who entered Assam after 25th March, 1971 should be detected and deported from Assam.
- (2) The Indian and Bangladesh border should be completely sealed off.
- (3) Those foreigners who entered Assam during 1961-71 should be distributed in all other states of India.
- (4) CPI also demanded that identity cards should be provided to all Indian citizens."<sup>14</sup>

Right from 1979, the CPI demanded an early solution to the foreigners problem in Assam. "According to CPI, in the name of detection of foreigners the State Government no doubt adopted some measures which went against the wishes of the Bengali Hindu and Muslim. The party alleged that throughout the agitation there had been harrassment of the minorities, many murders, forcible occupation of shops and landed property, insults and humiliation."<sup>15</sup> We know that the CPI did not consider the problem of immigration serious, but the question is why should they suggest solution?

The CPI, no doubt criticised the Assam agitation, but they completely failed to give any evidence of what they maintained.

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14. Asomar Bideshi Nagarikar Samasya aru Bharatar Communist Party, Leaflet published by CPI (Assam), Gauhati, 1982, p. 27.

15. Ibid., p. 5.

The CPI in one of their meetings in Gauhati suggested that those who come after 1971 should be divided into four categories:

- "(1) Those foreigners who were detected and deported earlier but came back again, should be deported.
- (2) Those who were settled in Government lands with the help of Government loans should be regularised and be given citizenship.
- (3) Those who were detected, but not deported by Government should be deported.
- (4) But those who settled on their own, should be detected with the help of law. The Government should no doubt deport them, but it should see the humanitarian question here."<sup>16</sup> This position was not compatible with the dominant view within the movement.

According to AASU and AAGSP the basis for "detection of foreigners should be the National Register of Citizenship (NRC) of 1951 and the 1952 electoral rolls and in accordance with the Constitution and the laws governing citizenship, Passport and the Foreigners Act. Regarding deletion of foreigners names from the electoral rolls, AASU and AAGSP stated that names of those found to have entered Assam illegally must be struck from the electoral rolls before any

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16. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

election is held in Assam. They also stated that foreigners whose names were detected in course of screening should be deported from the country. Those whom the Government is unwilling to deport on humane consideration should be settled all over the country. AASU and AAGSP refused to accept 1971 as the base year."<sup>17</sup>

When Congress (I) Government was installed in Assam, on 6th December 1980, there was non-cooperation by the people for 24 hours. The new Government headache was the anti-foreigner agitation. Their main aim was to crush the agitation. The government tried all strong arm tactics against the people of Assam. It was under these circumstances that motion of no confidence was moved. During the debate all the left parties joined the non-communist opposition in criticising the government. In a communication to the Governor, the CPI(M) alleged that during the Congress (I) rule, the democratic rights of the people were trampled upon and the right of political parties to carry on the normal lawful work became virtually non-existent. Political workers were attacked, assaulted and murdered but the state government failed to protect the life and security of its citizens.<sup>18</sup>

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17. "The Points of Conflict", Sunday 13-19 February, 1983, p. 44.

18. Biswa Goswami, "Repressive Measures in Assam", Janata March 13, 1983, p. 5.

Despite all this criticism the 23 members leftist group in the Assembly abstained from voting on the no-confidence motion and thus helped the Government to survive.

"These parties were sure that the opposition would not be able to form an alternative government. This apprehension was reflected in the statement of the CPI(M)s Nurul Huda that Mrs. Gandhi would not allow the opposition to form a government. The leftist parties probably were afraid of going to the polls and therefore allow the Congress (I) to continue its rule."<sup>19</sup>

The leftist have argued that the no-confidence motion was moved by an alliance of bourgeois parties and since they wanted to side neither with these elements nor with the Congress (I) the only course open to them was to abstain from voting. They stated that their abstention does not prove that they support Congress (I). But whatever be their attitude, their action surely created strong resentment among the Assamese people.

The National Council of the CPI at its meeting at Hyderabad on November 24 to 2 December 1982 passed a resolution on it, which was published in the 'New Age' under the caption 'Hold elections in Assam'. This resolution inter alia stated that the National Council of the CPI is of the firm

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19. A.K. Baruah, "Further Betrayal by the Left" Frontier 11 April, 1981, Vol. 13, No. 33, p. 6.

view that the undemocratic President Rule in Assam should not be further extended and election to the State Assembly and remaining seats of the Lok Sabha should be held within the scheduled time so that a responsible government can be formed in the State. It further stated:

"An elected government alone can create conditions for normalisation of the situation and help to find a final solution of the issue of foreign nationals."<sup>20</sup>

It did not stop there. It accused the Central Government and the leaders of the agitation for prolonging the talks on the issue for their own narrow political interest. They criticised the central government for their tactics which would hamper the progress of the leftist group in Assam.

It must be stated here that the position taken by the leftist parties created an opinion among many Assamese that the left was anti-Assamese. This sentiment was dominant in the pre-movement circle.

If we analyse the views of CPI(M) it is clear that they charge the movement as secessionist but they could not give any proof. The 'Peoples Democracy' asserts that the issue of foreign nationals has been magnified beyond proportions to suit secessionist interests. In an apparent attempt

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20. Quoted in 'Hold Elections in Assam', New Age, December 12, 1982.

at misrepresenting the Assam agitation to Indians outside Assam, it stated that "hopeless Hindu peasants and poor people .... Muslim peasants, immigrants settled in Assam, who have earned citizenship rights ... (and) people from Bihar, Orissa, and other states who are settled in Assam" and makes out that "others consider them as foreigners and want to drive them out of the state or defranchise them." This was certainly not true, because the movement was launched to detect and deport foreigners and not Indian citizens who settled in Assam. However, the CPI(M) could never refute the AASU claim that the Indians settled in Assam are fully aware of the fact that the Assam agitation is not aimed at nor against them. Otherwise they would not have decided collectively to abstain from voting. Instead they would have turned out massively to vote. The 'Peoples democracy' in an editorial picks out the Nellie massacre. They stated that in Nellie only the Bengali Muslims were massacred. The CPI(M)'s bias is evident from the fact that the Peoples democracy editorial said not even a single word of the ghastly massacres in Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup districts where the local people were the targets. All sections of people, immigrant Muslims, immigrant Hindus, Assamese Muslims and Hindus, Bengalees and Tribals suffered ghastly wounds during that period. But it is not without significance that the non-Assamese Indians were by and large, the only section of Assam population that did not suffer from large scale

attacks. This in fact disproves the CPI(M)'s contention that the agitation is directed against all non-Assamese, including Indians from other States of India. As Baruah summarises that "If it had been directed against the non-Indians, trade centre like Gauhati and Tinsukia would have been disrupted where most of the trade are controlled by Bengalees and Marwaris."<sup>21</sup>

The difference between the CPI and CPI(M) in their reactions to the Assam tragedy at that stage was too evident to be slurred over. It came out in their speeches in Parliament. CPI's Indrajit Gupta made it clear that while the CPI was against an amendment to the Constitution, other ways were open to the Government of India for extending President's Rule in Assam in proclamation of emergency and certification by the election commission that the elections could not be held. He referred to the support offered by the Janata Party, the BJP and the Lok Dal to the government's proposal for amending: "With the support of all these parties you would have got the two-third majority. It is for you to explain to the house and the country why you did not accept their offer." He also asked "why could they not revise the electoral rolls earlier."<sup>22</sup>

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21. See, A.K. Baruah, "Indian Nationalism and the Assamese National Question", North East Quarterly, Vol. I, No.1, August 1982, p. 30.

22. Quoted in 'Most Parties do not subscribe to CPI(M)'s View', Assam Tribune, November 2, 1982.

What is however most notable about Indrajit Gupta's speech in the Lok Sabha is that not even once did he say directly that the agitation was inspired, financed, guided and controlled by the foreign powers. On the other hand, he suggested that the "deep feeling of resentment among the youths of that region (North Eastern Region as a whole) due to the neglect by the far away central government of their aspirations and development - economic, cultural, linguistic was the basic cause of the turmoil and agitation there."<sup>23</sup> Thus the CPI was trying to sympathetically understand the problem of the people of Assam.

Both the left parties have expressed completely opposite views, when the former Chief Minister Mr. Hiteswar Saikia expressed his decision to detect and deport the post '71 infiltrants. The CPI state committee has welcomed Mr. Saikia's decision. They strongly criticised the decision of the citizens right preservation committee and All Assam minority students Union to stop the detection process. The official organ of the party Janamat in its July 4th issue condemned both these organisations for spreading communal tension in Assam. The Assam State Council of the CPI in its May 9-12 session demanded that an early negotiation between the Central Government and the student leaders is of utmost

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23. Ibid., p. 3.

necessity for solving the foreigners tangle in Assam. They also pointed out that the State Government should start detecting the post '71 infiltrants. The resolution also called for the sealing of the Assam Bangladesh border and also urged the State Government to take necessary steps for safeguarding the identity of the Assamese people, and protecting the rights of the linguistic minorities in Assam.<sup>24</sup>

The CPI(M) State Committee on the other hand opposed the State Government's move to start detection. There is no doubt that the CPI(M) supported the detection and deportation of post'71 infiltrants. But they pointed out that the government should first rehabilitate the affected people who had suffered during the agitation. The CPI(M) concern for the affected people is to be appreciated, but their stand on the question of detection has given rise to many doubts. It is a fact that CPI(M) all along been strongly opposed AASU led movement, it proved that they were not sincere about the cut-off year which they had accepted in principle.

The CPI's demand for safeguarding the cultural and linguistic identity of the Assamese must be appreciated. But it is the CPI again which in a joint appeal, along with CPI(M), R.S.P. and forward bloc, declared the agitation as

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24. The Janamat (official organ of CPI) 4th July 1983, p.4.

a CIA inspired conspiracy. As Misra points out, "According to them AASU and AAGSP tried to misled the people by saying that the identity of the Assamese people was in danger. The foreign nationals issue according to them is nothing, but it is a clever device to drive the non-Assamese. Thus it was charged against the CPI that they were working on two sides on the Assam issue, one directed at the Assamese and other at the minorities."<sup>25</sup>

The CPI(M) stand on the question of detection is quite similar to that of AAMSU and citizens right preservation committee. Both these organisations were opposed to the very idea of detection. The CRPC declared that anyone who stayed in India for more than 180 days was eligible for citizenship. "The CRPC was established after the language riots of 1960, and it is mostly dominated by Bengali Hindus, whose organisation is limited in the urban areas of Cachar and Brahmaputra Valley."<sup>26</sup> The AAMSU on the other hand, is a recent creation.

The AAMSU, CRPC and the CPI(M) tried to project the movement as anti-Bengali. But the mainstream of the movement seemed to have made a distinction between the Indian and non-Indian Bengali.

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25. U. Misra, "Trends within the Left", Economic and Political Weekly, June, 1980, p. 1349.

26. Ibid., p. 1350.

Other left parties like SUCI, RCPI and RSP are not very strong in Assam and "they stated that 1971 should be the basis for detection. The SUCI's influence is solely limited to a small Bengali speaking area in the Goalpara district."<sup>27</sup>

The non-parliamentary left comprising of the different CPI (M.L.) fractions, is sharply divided in its assessment of the Assam problem with the Bhaskar Nandy Group being totally opposed to the movement and the Vinod Misra fraction expressing its qualified support to it. These are the two major CPI(M.L.) groups functioning in the state and "organisationally both are pretty weak, yet it goes to their credit that they have been expressing their opposition to the repressive measures being adopted by the government."<sup>28</sup>

The CPI (M.L.) Vinod Misra fraction has generally taken the stand that the Assamese crisis has its roots in the nationality question that has occupied the central place in all the disturbances in Assam. Apart from non-controversial issues like linguistic and cultural rights, the nationality question has two important aspects: national liberation and self-determination.<sup>29</sup> National liberation concerns a colonised

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27. Ibid., Loc.cit.

28. Ibid., Loc.cit.

29. K. Balagopal, 'Nationality Question' Assam Frontier June 6, 1981, p. 4.

nationality and with minor qualification, such a nationality has the historic duty to liberate itself, for no internal resolution is possible without national liberation. National self determination on the other hand concerns any nationality that co-exists with other nationalities in a multi-national state, and involves a decision by that nationality to become independent. Abstractly "the right to self determination always exists, but unlike the right of national liberation, it cannot be regarded as always applicable, for example, on the morrow of victorious socialist or democratic revolution, when genuinely anti-imperialist forces are in power but not when classes whose opposition to imperialism is doubtful are in power."<sup>30</sup>

In the light of this, the CPI (M.L.) stated that, while looking at Assam, Nagaland or Mizoram, it is necessary to decide whether it is colonised nationality or merely a nationality that consists with other nationalities in the multi-national state, India. It is a fact that Assam is a producer of raw material and agricultural products like Tea, timber and oil, it is industrially underdeveloped, and such public sector units are dominated by others. Uneven development of the Indian economy generated by the capitalist path

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30. Ibid., Loc.cit.

of development has converted Assam into a colonial hinterland.<sup>31</sup>

It is a fact that in Assam there exists an unbelievable amount of popular anger and hatred against the left parties, while their leaders and intellectuals who sympathise with them have attributed this to the evil designs of external and internal reactionary forces, but some progressive people<sup>32</sup> maintain that these parties have displayed worst form of political opportunism and thereby invited the hatred of a vast majority of the Assamese masses.

It is true that, at present the left parties are not very strong in Assam politics. But it does not mean that, they would remain in the same position in future also. It is true that the lefts silence and sometimes its strong support of the repressive measures on the eve of February polls have alienated them from the people of Assam. The CPI has slowly changed its stand on the foreigners issue. "Pramode Gogoi, the CPI state committee secretary recently stated that the identity crisis in Assam is a serious problem. He urged upon government to solve the problem as early as possible."<sup>33</sup>

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31. For an exposition of this theme see Tilottama Misra "Assam: A Colonial Hinterland" Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XV, No.32, August 9, 1980, pp.1357-64.

32. For an exposition of this theme see A.K. Baruah's article on 'Left and Assam' Frontier, June 20, 1981.

33. See, Asamar Bideshi Nagarikar Samasya aru Bharatar Communist Party Baktabya (Assamese) (CPI's Office, Gauhati), pp. 13-17.

It is true that anti-left and reactionary forces are taking advantage of the prevailing situation in Assam and organising attacks on left cadres. Mere condemnation of such attacks would not help the left parties to win back the people's confidence instead they must play a constructive role which would help them to win the confidence of the people. The movement in Assam can never be understood without analysing the socio-economic realities of Assam. The opportunist section of the left in Assam by refusing to do it, has done irreparable damage to the left movement in Assam. But it must be admitted that a large number of Marxist and Leninist groups should try to understand the real cause of the movement.

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CHAPTER - VI

THE AGITATION AND THE NON-COMMUNIST NATIONAL

POLITICAL PARTIES

THE AGITATION AND THE NON-COMMUNIST NATIONAL  
POLITICAL PARTIES

The agitation over the foreigners issue rendered the national parties almost totally irrelevant in Assam Politics. If we look back at the party position in Assam Assembly elections from 1952 to 1983 except 1977, we find that the Congress Party dominated in the Assembly. It is interesting to note the percentage of poll by the respective political parties. "The Congress" polled 53 percent in 1952, 52 percent in 1957, 45 percent in 1962 and 1967, 57 percent in 1971 and 45 in 1977. In 1983, it was again the victory of Congress though marked by unprecedented violence and abnormally low polling rate. All the left parties put together polled 35 percent in 1952, 21 percent in 1957. The CPI polled 10.24 percent in 1952, 21 percent in 1957, 7 percent in 1962, 8 percent in 1967, 6 percent in 1971, 4.2 percent in 1977. Thus, there was a decline in the popularity of the C.P.I. The Jana Sangha polled 3.6 percent in 1952, 5.5 percent in 1967 and 2.46 percent in 1971."<sup>1</sup>

Although the Congress did not poll a substantial majority of the votes polled, some individual congressmen polled more than 60 percent of votes polled in their respective

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1. These calculations were made by one of the most eminent political scientist of the North East India, see, V.Venkata Rao, "Lok Sabha Polls in Assam from 1952 to 1985", Assam Tribune 16th December, 1985.

constituencies. In 1952 and 1967 two congress candidates polled more than 60 percent of the votes polled and their number rose to six in 1971.

As regards the results of the Parliamentary elections, "the congress won all the eleven seats it contested in 1952, nine in 1957 and in 1962, ten in 1967, 13 in 1971, 10 in 1977. Thus the Congress contested 76 seats and won 62."<sup>2</sup>

Assam had been ruled uninterruptedly by the Congress from independence upto 1978. The Chief Ministers were Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi, B.P. Chaliha, M.M. Chaudhury, S.C. Sinha and finally Hiteswar Saikia. The Congress lost the 1978 Assembly elections. Since then, the State has had a Janata Government under Golap Borbora, a short lived Asom Janata Dal Ministry headed by J.N. Hazarika, a long spell of president's rule than a short lived Congress Ministry headed by S.A. Taimur, another period of President's rule and a second short lived Congress Ministry.<sup>3</sup> From March 1982 upto 1983 Assam had been under President's rule. After 1983 election which was remarkable for unprecedented violence and abnormally low polling rate, Hiteswar Saikia became the Chief Minister of Assam. But after the 1985 election, the Asom

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2. Ibid., Loc.cit.

3. For details see, M. Joshi, Assam: The Indian Conflict (New Delhi, 1981), p. 3.

Gana Parishad Ministry headed by Prafulla Kr. Mahanta, the All Assam Students Union President during the movement sworn in.

Thus, the Congress had a near total hegemony over Assamese society with minor pockets of opposition. But "the Congress party was reduced to a non-entity during the 1985 elections. The party candidates could not even held meetings, their functions were boycotted."<sup>4</sup> The following table clearly shows the position of the Congress party in 1985 Assembly election results. Election for one seat was countermanded.

Table - X: The Results of the 1985 Assembly Election (Assam)

<u>Total Seats - 126</u>	<u>Secured</u>
A.G.P.	64
Congress (I)	25
U.M.F.	17
Congress (S)	4
P.T.C.A.	3
CPI (M)	2
Independents	10

Source: Election Hand Book 1986.

4. See, Assam Tribune, 4th January, 1986, p.1.

Though during the period of agitation the wrath of the agitators was directed against the national parties, particularly the Congress and the left parties, if we look back we find that Congress had not always been against raising the issue of immigration. It is this party which raised the problem of immigration in Assam before independence. Veteran Congress leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi etc. had been arguing consistently against unchecked immigration. In a letter to Mahatma Gandhi, Gopinath Bordoloi wrote in 1945, "The land settlement policy which was extremely advertised as a measure proposed to benefit the Muslim immigrants from Bengal as also the local indigenous people in the complete betrayal of the later including the innocent tribal people of the plains, schedule caste and other Hindus. All the grazing reserves which according to the notification should have been freed of the encroachers, have been allowed to be over run by the immigrants, while many indigenous people have been evicted to make room for Muslim immigrants."<sup>5</sup>

In 1964, the Assam Congress Parliamentary party in their memorandum to Guljarilal Nanda, Home Minister, Government of India stated that there has been large scale infiltration of Pakistani nationals and they have been illegally entering Assam without being detected. To effectively control

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5. Quoted in Jatin Sarmah's "What Bordoloi wrote to the Mahatma 38 years ago", Assam Tribune, August 5, 1985, p. 4.

this infiltration of foreign nationals the Congress Parliamentary Party pointed out at later date -

"Indian and Bangladesh borders must be completely sealed. All weather road communication should be constructed in the border for speedy movement of troops for patrolling the border. The strength of border security force should be increased."<sup>6</sup>

Nehru, in 1960 agreed that in Assam, infiltration of Pakistani nationals has been taking place for a long time. He suggested that 1952 should be made the date of enquiry.<sup>7</sup> But this assurance of Nehru was left practically unimplemented. Because the Congress Party treated the minority as vote banks. They were assured of their votes every five year. So they refused to take any action against them. Manorama Sharma in an article stated that "the Congress Party in Assam which took shape in the first decade of the twentieth century, was always under the leadership of educated elite and the emerging Assamese middle classes. After independence, the Congress Party in Assam failed to articulate the aims and aspiration of the Assamese middle class - the most dominant class in Assamese society. This was because the class-character of the Congress Party in Assam could not be different from the class character of all India Congress Party."<sup>8</sup> In practice, the

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6. "The Study on the Pak Infiltrants", Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (Gauhati, 1980), p. 4.

7. Ibid.

8. Manorama Sharma, "A Note on Electoral Behaviour in Assam - Pattern of Non-Voting" in P.S. Dutta (ed.) Electoral Politics in North East India (New Delhi, 1986, p. 47.

Congress does not represent the interest of either middle class or the poorer section of people. The middle class in Assam wanted economic development of Assam. They demanded that raw materials of the State should be utilized for the industrial development of Assam, e.g., the middle class started the agitation for the establishment of oil refinery in 1957 and the second one in 1969. According to them, though Assam is rich in the oil fields, but she is deprived of the major profits. The Congress, on the other hand, failed to fulfill these demands of the Assamese middle class. But whatever be the criticism against the Congress party, it must be admitted that, it is this Congress Party which first pointed at the danger of immigration in Assam. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee in one of its many memoranda made the following suggestion:

- "(1) That a target date not later than March 1965 to complete the deportation of Pak infiltrants in Assam be announced and acted accordingly.
- (2) That the citizens National Register with house numbers intended for preparation of the Census of 1951, should be made the basis for detecting and deporting Pak nationals without any delay.
- (3) That, adequate number of Tribunals be appointed immediately to achieve complete deportation of Pak nationals within the target date.

- (4) That, a strip of land with such depth as may be needed along the entire East Pakistan be cleared of all inhabitants and declared as "prohibited area for the defence of the country."<sup>9</sup>

What gave impetus and even legitimacy to illegal immigration was the anxiety of Assam's ruling elite to rely heavily on these illegal Muslim immigrants. As an eminent Assamese journalist pointed that Moinul Huq Choudhury was in the Muslim League till 1947 and he was the private secretary to M.A. Jinnah. "His induction into the Congress cabinet provided protection to the illegal Muslim immigrants. He and Fakruddin Ali Ahmed are said to have persuaded the Congress leadership to legitimise these immigrants to secure massive electoral support for the Congress leadership."<sup>10</sup>

Despite its awareness of the problem the Congress Party gradually began to take a myopic view of the problem in its own interest and did not realise at what cost to the nation it was extending support to these vote banks. V.I.K. Sarin observes, "Thus the larger interests of the country, including threat to its very security and integrity, were subordinated to serve the narrow party interests of the ruling

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9. See, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee's Report on Pak Infiltrants (Gauhati, 1964).

10. Harendra Nath Baruah, Bharator Mukti Yunjat ASom (Assamese), (Gauhati, 1961), p. 72.

elite."<sup>11</sup> The same writer further observes "Congress victories in the past for instance were shaped by the vast, unorganised peasantry, including the Muslims, indigenous and immigrants and Tea Garden labour. Though divided into two Congress (I) and Congress (S) they still rely on the same segments for support. In other words, the Muslim immigrants have become the fulcrum of power politics in Assam."<sup>12</sup>

As Manorama Sharma puts it the Congress leadership in Assam was not able to support the demands of the Assamese people openly because the political activities of any party must articulate the interests of the classes to which their party belongs and not the interests of the classes to which they themselves belong. The Assam Congress leaders therefore, by and large articulated the class interests of the All India big landowning and big business classes."<sup>13</sup> The Congress therefore failed to mobilise vast majority of Assamese people. Not only this, the party's favour to the illegal immigrants, also alienated it from the Assamese people. This is also clear from 1985 election result, where Congress secured only 25 seats out of 126 seats. The complete failure of the Congress is due to the fact that, it failed to gain the confidence of the minorities. The minorities

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11. V.I.K. Sarin, India's North East in Flames, (New Delhi, 1980), p. 36.

12. Ibid.

13. Manorama Sharma, Op.cit., p. 49.

felt, that the accord runs against their interest. They formed the United Minority Front and contested the election separately without helping the Congress party.

The Congress Party in Assam had a near total hegemony in the politics of Assam upto 1977. The Janata Party did form a ministry in Assam but with a meagre 27 percent of the total electorate while in other states, the Janata Party acquired an absolute majority, but in the Parliamentary elections that followed after the emergency, the Janata Party lost in Assam. It must be noted here that the class character of both the Janata and the Congress was the same. The election manifesto of Janata Party gave importance to the economic development of the people. "But they did not talk of changing the basic politics of production and distribution and of lessening the economic inequalities. Both the Janata and the Congress swore by the name of Gandhi. Majority of the Janata men were the erstwhile Congress **activists**."<sup>14</sup> It was the emergency excess which gave the Janata its victory in the 1977 elections. Janata Party in Assam as in the case of Congress too merely represented the interests of the All India Janata Party, that is why majority of the Assam electorate had not taken any interest in this political alternative. The Janata Party in Assam was not really an alternative to the Congress, that is why they failed to evoke any mass support from the voters.

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14. Ibid., p. 50.

At the beginning of 1978, the Janata Party in Assam seem to be siding with the Charan Singh faction of the Janata and "there were charges by some dissidents that Mr. Golap Borbora was too secular", Chief Minister agreed "that influx of refugees from Bangladesh and Nepal was assuming alarming proportions. He stated that his government had taken a firm stand in this matter."<sup>15</sup>

During the Janata Party regime, the agitation on the foreigners issue started only with the attempts to hold the Mangaldai Parliamentary by-election in the first half of 1979. The constituency became vacant when Hiralal Patowari, who had been elected to the Parliament on the Janta ticket, died on 28th March 1979. The fruits of the emotions roused by the Mangaldai election were first seen in the Assam Bandh of 8 June 1979. The situation in Assam, may or may not have stabilised thereafter, but the change taking place in the Union Government would not let it. The Morarji Desai Ministry resigned on 15 July 1979 and Charan Singh formed a new government with the help of Congress-U. The Charan Singh Ministry was unable to face the Parliament and obtain a vote of confidence. The coalition government resigned on 20 August 1979. The Janata Party in Assam found it difficult and the Chief Minister resigned from the Assembly on 3rd September 1979. The agitation on foreign nationals issue was not very

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15. Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (1978)  
23 November, p. 24.

strong during the time of Borbora. Because at that time, the agitation had started only and the Chief Minister Borbora did not remain in the office for a long time to go through the issue. After Mr. Borbora, Mr. Jogendra Nath Hazarika of Asom Janata Dal (9th September 1979 - 12th December 1979) was in power for a very short period.

The approach of the general elections again pushed the foreigners question into the background. "The chief election commissioner in the meantime had asked the electoral officers of Assam to include all names from the earlier voters list, in the draft electoral rolls."<sup>16</sup> The statement of the chief election commissioner confused the people of Assam, because in one of his earlier statement, he agreed that there was the problem of inclusion of foreigners name in the electoral rolls. Chief Minister said that the chief election commissioner's directive to treat all names in the voters list as citizens was due to the influence of some political parties who were misleading the election commission.<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Renuka Devi Barkataki a Janata leader met the President and the Deputy Prime Minister and discussed the inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. Charan Singh agreed to ask the election commission to use the 1971 electoral rolls as

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16. The Assam Tribune, 11 Sept. 1979, (Gauhati), p.1.

17. The Assam Tribune, 15 Sept. 1979, (Gauhati), p.1.

the basis and if this was not possible to use 1977 electoral rolls as the basis.<sup>18</sup>

The decision of chief election commissioner was opposed by the members of AASU and AAGSP. There were bands, demonstration, picketing in all over Assam. The Chief Minister stated that ten (10) tribunals has been set up to hasten summary trial of intruders and for their deportation.<sup>19</sup>

The Janata rule came to an end, when Congress (I) government came into power on 1979. Thus, the Janata Government had very little time to tackle the foreigners agitation in Assam. The Janata Government at the Centre was not very stable. In such a situation, they could not focus their attention on the foreigners issue.

Although the movement started in 1979, it did not take a massive turn immediately. Only after 1980, the issue started attracting a large majority of the Assamese people.

The Janata Party did try to solve the foreigners tangle in Assam. Mr. Ravindra Varma presented a formula on behalf of his party. The salient points were as follows:

- (1) Those who entered Assam between 1961-71 would be put into four categories.

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18. Ibid., Loc.cit.

19. The Assam Tribune, 17th August 1979, (Gauhati), p.1.

- (a) Those who applied for and obtained certificates of citizenship from a competent authority,
  - (b) Those who had been duly rehabilitated and resettled by the Assam Government but had not obtained citizenship certificates,
  - (c) Those who had not applied for or obtained citizenship certificates or had been resettled by the Government of Assam, and yet had their names inscribed on the electoral rolls, and
  - (d) Those who had neither obtained citizenship certificates nor got their names included on the rolls.
- (2) Names in category (a) would be retained in the rolls.
  - (3) Complaints regarding indiscriminate issue or acquisition of citizenship certificates by fraudulent means or inadequate verification would be settled by an authority under section 10 of Citizenship Act.
  - (4) Names in category (b) would be retained in the electoral rolls.
  - (5) Pending scrutiny and adjudication by tribunals. No new citizenship certificates would be issued.
  - (6) In regard to names in category (c) complaints could be lodged for their deletion from the rolls or against the inclusion therein, on the basis of the Constitution and the existing laws, stating ground thereof. The onus for providing claims would be governed by the Constitution and the existing laws, in particular where

the person concerned can involve the protection of section 2 of the Immigrants expulsion from Assam Act 1950, which gives the right of residence and generates the right to apply for citizenship under the relevant sections of the Citizenship Act.

- (7) Names of those found without valid claim would be removed from the rolls and placed in the category for dispersal."<sup>20</sup>

Acceptance of Mr. Verma's new formula would mean that only a few thousand of 1961-71 immigrants into Assam would be dispersed. The AASU agreed that those who came between 1951-61 would stay in Assam, on condition that Government would disperse all those who came during 1961-71. By relying on 1950 Act, the formula appeared to be designed to uphold the Government contention that 1961-71 Hindu refugees were eligible to become citizens. The leaders of the movement stated that if tribunals were to rule in favour of permanent stay of foreigners with voting right, on the strength of proviso to section 2 of the 1950 Act, it would mean that only those who were not even voters or those who belonged to minority community would be dispersed. The Janata Party seems to have taken a more or less balanced position on the issue of violence associated with the movement. "What has

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20. The Assam Tribune, 9th November 1982, Gauhati, p.1.

happened in Assam is neither a communal riot, nor is it a linguistic riot. It is an engineered riot. All the communities are affected, Assamese, Bengali Hindus, Immigrant Muslims and Tribals. In Nellie areas the tribals attacked but in Goalpara the tribals were attacked by the immigrant Muslims."<sup>21</sup>

The election of 1983 created an explosive situation in Assam. The election was suddenly declared without revising the electoral roll of 1979. As the 1979 electoral roll was not revised, lakhs of eligible Indian citizens name were not included in the list and lakhs of names of foreign nationals have not been deleted. The Central Government agreed during the course of discussion with the agitation leaders that those who entered Assam illegally after 1971 would be deported and their names would be deleted.<sup>22</sup> But suddenly the Government declared that the 1979 electoral rolls would be the rolls for the election, all the entrants who came after 1971 were given coverage. This was greatly resented by the large majority of the Assamese who supported movement.

The Janata Party held the Congress (I) Government responsible for the explosive situation prevailing in Assam before the 1983 Election and even after the election. Prof. Madhu Dandavate of Janata Party once stated that on the

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21. Biswa Goswami, 'Repressive Measures in Assam' Janata, March 13th, 1983 (Bombay).

22. The Assam Tribune, 23rd June, 1983, p. 1.

foreigners issue there are four important points - the detection of foreigners, the deletion of their names from the voters list, then dispersal of them and the last stage is deportation. Unless the Government discuss these points, the problem is not going to be solved.<sup>23</sup> The Janata party has supported the views expressed by the leaders of the movement. Right from the beginning of the movement, this party criticised the Central Government policies on the foreigners issue. Almost all the opposition parties were against the ruling Congress (I) Government.

Among the opposition parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party has been the most vocal and articulate on the Assam crisis. It has been accused by the centre of provoking if not systematically encouraging violence, an accusation which the B.J.P. denies by throwing back on the Centre the responsibility for the large scale violent unrest. Because of B.J.P.'s close association with the Rastriya Sayong Sevak Sangh and because of its known pro-Hindu stance its support to the Assam agitation has been interpreted in terms of its alleged anti-muslim politics. It has very often been suggested by Congress (I) that only because a large majority of the immigrants are muslims the BJP wants them deported. But an analysis of the BJP position vis-a-vis the movement shows that it did try to adopt a rational line.

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23. Madhu Dandavate 'Assam: The Congress (I) rule on the debris of the dead bodies', Janata, March 13, 1983, p.15.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee of B.J.P. announced a seven point formula for solving the Assam tangle. The seven points were as follows:

- "(1) Detection of foreigners should be done on the basis of relevant provisions of the Constitution and existing laws, making use of the 1951 National Register and other relevant documents. Appeal from the decision shall lie with judicial tribunals.
- (2) Cases of all entrants upto 1961 should be regularised.
- (3) Foreigners who came during 1961-71 should be removed from the electoral rolls. Their burden should be shared by Assam as well as other states.
- (4) Elections to the Lok Sabha and the Assembly should be on the basis of revised electoral rolls.
- (5) Foreign nationals who came after 1971 should be deported. Cases of bonafide refugees should be considered on the basis of policy pronouncement made so far.
- (6) Infiltration should be completely stopped.
- (7) All repressive measures and press censorship should be withdrawn. All persons detained in connection with the movement, should be released. All pending detention orders should be cancelled."<sup>24</sup>

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24. 'BJPs Formula and Assam', Hindustan Times, 14 January 1980, pp. 2-3.

This formula of B.J.P. is quite similar to that of the agitation leaders demands. The B.J.P., Janata and the Lok Dal did not participate in the Assam elections of 1983. They held that elections are being held on the basis of 1979 electoral rolls which they claim, contains the names of the foreigners.

The BJP has claimed that they have gained substantial support from the Assamese people. In 1982 alone the BJP unit says Bansilal Sonee, party observer for the north eastern region, gained 40,000 members.<sup>25</sup>

BJP President, A.B. Vajpayee along with Rajya Sabha M.P., Jaswant Singh visited Assam during the time of agitation. The State units Vice President Dr. Jogeswar Mahanta raised the curtain on the visit by claiming "indigenous Assamese in Nowgong district were in grave danger of being liquidated by foreigners."<sup>26</sup> BJP leaders even when they were in the Janata Party responded positively to the demand of deletion and deportation of foreign nationals.

Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee stated in 1978 that if infiltrations took place in any part of the country, whether it was Kashmir or Assam, the security of the whole nation was jeopardised and Government won't allow monetary considerations

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25. See, Organiser, Feb. - March 1983, pp. 2-4.

26. Chaitnya Kalbagh, 'New Political Development Present under Current', India Today, March 31, 1983, pp. 24-29.

to stand in the way of safeguarding the security of the country. He also stated that "this problem of infiltration is a recurring phenomenon and we must sit together and devise ways and means so that the north eastern region could be made secure and the people there should feel that their sorrows and worries are shared by the rest of the country."<sup>27</sup>

While giving a speech in the Lok Sabha on 21 February 1983, Vajpayee stated that Mrs. Gandhi announced at an election meeting in Gauhati that nobody would be deported from Assam. The Hindustan Times dated 13 February, 1983, quoted Mrs. Gandhi "should we given a false promise that they will be removed, when we know that they will not be removed."<sup>28</sup> It means that nobody would be removed from Assam, even if he happens to be a foreigner. If there are no foreigners in Assam why did the Government agreed to deport those who, come to Assam after 1971.

On 27.11.78, Mr. Vajpayee gave the following reply to a question on the floor of Parliament: "(i) It has come to the notice of the Election Commission from time to time that large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls, especially in the North Eastern Region has been taking place. (ii) In August 1975, the Ministry of Home Affairs instructed all the State Governments and the Administrations

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27. "The Foreigners Problem - An Analysis", a leaflet published by All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, Gauhati, p. 18.

28. Quoted in Hindustan Times, 13th February 1983, p.1.

of all the Union Territories that the State criminal investigation department might be instructed to take immediate steps to check the electoral rolls and if they discover the names of foreigners in the rolls, that fact might be brought to the notice of the concerned Electoral Registration Officers for getting such names deleted from the electoral rolls."<sup>29</sup> The Election Commission have also issued instructions to the Chief Electoral Officers of the State/Union Territories concerned that if it is found that a large number of foreigners have managed to get their names registered in the electoral rolls, recourse should be had to the provisions of Section 22 of the Representation of the Peoples Act, 1950, for getting the names of such persons deleted from the electoral rolls on the ground that they are not Indian citizens. The 1979 rolls were challenged in the high court. It was contended that elections could not be held on the basis of those rolls. The advocate general was asked to produce them by 4 in the afternoon. At 4 p.m. he told the Court that he would produce them the next morning at 10.00 o'clock. The next day when the high court assembled at 10.00 o'clock, the notification about the election issued the night before was produced. The high court found its hands were tied and neither **they** nor the Supreme Court could act in the matter.<sup>30</sup>

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29. Organiser, Op.cit., p.2-5.

30. Ibid., Loc.cit.

Thus it is clear from above that the problem of immigration in Assam would not have reached such a grave situation if the political parties would have shown some interest in solving the problem. These parties were mostly concerned with their power politics. The Congress Party was quite aware of this grave problem even before independence. Pandit Nehru himself admitted about the large scale foreign infiltration into Assam. Though he assured the people of Assam that necessary steps would be taken to tackle this problem, but unfortunately nothing was done in practice. As we have mentioned earlier, the Congress Party treated the illegal immigrants as their vote banks. So they definitely would never take any steps which goes against their political motive. That is why A.B. Vajpayee President of BJP stated that "In the Assam election, Mrs. Gandhi did not visit any Assamese areas, but she visited only Bengali and Muslim Pockets."<sup>31</sup>

The other opposition parties instead of trying to solve the problem, were busy criticising the Central Government. These parties were aware of the fact that Congress Party is loosing their popularity in Assam, so they were trying their best to establish their popularity in Assam. The BJP during the agitation time claimed that they have gained substantial support among the Assamese people. This statement of BJP clearly shows their real motive. But it must be

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31. See, 'The BJP's understanding of the Assam Crisis', The Organizer, 27th February 1983, p. 1-4.

admitted, that the opposition parties time and again came out with their proposal to solve the problem of immigration in Assam. But their proposal were rejected by the Central Government. Whatever these parties have said regarding the issue cannot be taken for granted. Because these statements could not be expected to be free from their partisan interests. They were guided often by the immediate political interest of their own parties which led the Janata and the B.J.P. to support the major demands of the AASU and AAGSP. By doing this they of course hoped to win support of the majority of the Assamese. But the irony of the situation was that despite all their efforts at winning the heart of the Assamese voter, by supporting the movement, the non-communist national opposition parties met almost the same fate, so far as electoral positions was concerned as their communist counterparts who opposed the movement. So far as electoral politics was concerned, both the Communist and the non-Communist opposition ~~parties~~ failed to make any headway. The Congress Party which opposed the movement invited the wrath of the people and was rendered almost irrelevant. The treatment meted out to the national political parties of all shades suggest that the movement over the foreign nationals issue was inspired not merely by a fear of the immigrants but also by strong regional aspirations of the Assamese as a small and backward nationality.

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CHAPTER - VII

THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE  
POLITICS OF ASSAM AND IN THE FOREIGNERS' ISSUE

THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE  
POLITICS OF ASSAM AND IN THE FOREIGNERS' ISSUE

It is a fact that the socially and economically backward communities and tribes of the country did take part in the mainstream of national political development during the years of the freedom movement. But after independence, what hurt these communities was that national parties did not try to solve their problems in the right perspective. This, coupled with a series of other reasons (to be stated later) seems to have given birth to a trend which came to be known as regionalism. However, there were other objective factors which helped growing of regional feelings even during the pre-independence period.

In Assam, the trends towards regionalism was evident during the time of British rule. There were many reasons for the growth of a few local parties in Assam. In Assam, the Ahoms, who once reigned supreme till the treaty of Yandaboo (1826) planned and carried out armed resistance to check British intrusion into the province.<sup>1</sup> Their plan did not work and with it their dream of reviving their lost kingdom also collapsed. But the complete failure of armed resistance, made them politically wise and experienced. This inspired a

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1. H.K. Barpujari (ed.) Political History of Assam, Vol. I, (Gauhati, 1977), pp. 18-28.

gradual process of thinking among a section of the Ahoms to tackle their problems with a more pragmatic attitude. They also felt that they were denied of their due share of administrative jobs and privileges under the British Government. They felt that considering their contribution to the history of Assam and their conspicuous presence in terms of population ratio, they deserve a proper standing in the affairs of the province. They sought to achieve this with their own political strength and through British support.<sup>2</sup> Padmanath Gohain Baruah who associated himself for years with the affairs of the Assam Association, was the prime force behind this move. The Ahom Sabha continued to function as a branch of the Assam Association. In the beginning, the Ahom Sabha did not have adequate funds to hold its function separately. Hence it used the pandals and platforms which was constructed for the annual sessions of the Assam Association. In 1910 the word Sabha was dropped and association added instead and the local branches, which till then had functioned as independent units, were asked to follow the policy and programmes as determined by the working committee of the association.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Ibid., Loc.cit.

3. See, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Gohain Baruahar Rachnavali (Assamese) (Gauhati, 1971), p. 934.

Since its inception the association maintained a pro-British stand. It also served a timely reminder to the Ahoms that they should no longer remain transfixed to their past, but should seek avenues to regain social and political credibility with the proper assessment of contemporary developments. It stood for the preservation of the separate ethnic identity of the Ahoms.<sup>4</sup> The relation between this association and the Congress was not cordial. A controversy raised over the issue of selecting a Congress candidate to contest the by-election at Sibsagar for the Assembly in 1940 further strengthened the cause of the association.<sup>5</sup> The Ahoms felt let down and sixty percent primary Congress committees deserted the parent body with their funds and joined the Ahom Association.<sup>6</sup>

Various tribal communities of Assam felt unhappy with the role of the national political parties. The feeling of deprivation among these communities fostered the growth of a number of local organisations i.e. the Kachari Sanmilan, the Koch Rajbangshi Sanmilan, Chutiya Sanmilan, the Muttok Association etc. throughout the province. Initially, each organisation worked independently and confined its activities within the community it claimed to represent. Thereafter

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4. Ibid., p. 934.

5. Barpujari, Op.cit., p. 300.

6. Padmanath Barthakur, Swadhinata Ranar Sangsparsat (Assamese) (Dibrugarh, 1968), pp. 247-50.

in the thirties they joined hands and formed the All Assam Plains Tribal League.<sup>7</sup>

The formation of the Tribal League was a step towards bringing all the mongoloid tribes and communities to a common platform. Their leaders like Bhimbar Deuri realised that by remaining divided the communities would never be in a position to exert enough political pressure to convince the Government as well as the national parties of their needs and aspirations. Their main aim was to fight the socio-economic problems of the tribals. They worked consistently for the spread of primary education among the tribals and for the eradication of the evils of opium from their society.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note that even in the early forties these organisation realised the possible threat of immigration, as an editorial of *Asamiya* pointed out "they (Kachari Sanmilan, Koch Rajbangshi Sanmilan etc.) clamoured for the preservation of the Line System without which they felt that the entire tribal economy and culture would be jeopardized by the unrestrained influx of the immigrants."<sup>9</sup> (emphasis added). That is why they accused Saadullah of being partisan and inclined towards Congress. Their attitude perturbed Saadullah so much that he left no stone unturned to win over

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7. Barpujari, *Op.cit.*, p. 311.

8. *Ibid.*, *Loc.cit.*

9. See, *Asamiya* editorial, 23 March 1940 (Dibrugarh).

their confidence. He proposed to concede to their prime demand i.e., a separate electorate for the tribals, and even attended their second session at Kokrajhar in June 1938.<sup>10</sup> However, his gesture could not restrain Bhimbar Deuri, a prominent tribal leader from accusing the Saadullah Government for doing nothing for tribal upliftment and from praising the Congress for its assurance to fulfill their major demand i.e. the restoration of the Line System, the joint electorate system with reservation of seats in Assembly and the local bodies.<sup>11</sup> He appreciated the Congress for preserving the interest of all communities and denounced the Muslim League for working only for the Muslims. These events clearly indicate that these tribal groups were very worried about the possible consequences of large scale immigration.

Gopinath Bordoloi made a proposal for a protective system of tribal belts to safeguard the interest of the tribals, which earned him co-operation of the tribal league to topple the Saadullah ministry in 1938. They even participated in the formation of the Congress coalition ministry on 20 September, 1938.<sup>12</sup> The tribal league remained hostile to Saadullah for his immigration policy which was termed as a policy of invitation to landless people from beyond the borders to stream

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10. For details see News item in Asamiya, 14 January, 1939.

11. See, Bhimbar Deuri's speech in the Assembly, Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. I, 26 February, 1940, p. 101.

12. See, Asamiya, 25 March 1939.

into Assam. The tribal league kept its option open and remained non-committal to either the league or the Congress. However, Saadullah's attempts at luring away a section of the tribals succeeded when the tribal league decided to support Saadullah and accordingly Rupnath Brahma who earlier served in the Bordoloi Ministry, joined the Saadullah Cabinet. Defending his action, Brahma said that it was impossible for the weaker section of the society, to follow the Congress policy and programmes.<sup>13</sup> Saadullah suggested that the tribals should enlist themselves separately from the Hindus in the Census operation of 1941 and argued that the enlistment of the section of the tribals as the 'Tribal Hindus' in the Census Report of 1931 was primarily responsible for the low tribal representation in the legislature and in other representative institutions.<sup>14</sup> But Saadullah's tactics could not befool all the tribals. Jogendra Nath Hazarika, the editor of the tribal league mouthpiece - Nayak, for instance, cautioned the people not to fall into the trap laid by Saadullah.<sup>15</sup>

The credibility of the Saadullah administration eroded fast, because of his unreserved support to the British war efforts and because of the repressive measure against the freedom fighters during 1942-43. His land settlement policy

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13. Ibid., Loc. cit.

14. See, Assam Tribune, 6 June 1941, p.1.

15. See, Asamiya, 14 December 1940, p. 2.

and the handling of the line system caused anxiety among the local population. The Assamese, both tribals and non-tribals, denounced Saadullah when he supported Assam's inclusion in the grouping in accordance to the Cabinet Mission's proposal.<sup>16</sup>

Within the tribal league itself the anti-Saadullah trend gradually gained momentum. In their fifth session at Mangaldai on 20 April 1945, there was almost a secession of political relation with Saadullah. Rabi Chandra Kachari openly criticised Saadullah's land settlement policy for protecting the interests of the immigrants at the expense of that of the tribals.<sup>17</sup> Sitanath Brahma Choudhury who presided over the thirteenth session of the Kachari Sanmilan a constituent of tribal league on 4th and 5th May 1945 urged upon the Government to satisfy the popular demand of Assam of the immediate separation of Sylhet from the province.<sup>18</sup> The tribal leaders were eager to stop further immigration into Assam Valley from outside and evict all encroachers to save the indigenous people of the Valley from ruination socially, politically and economically. Thus in the pre-independence period the fortunes of the two major political parties specially in the context of their support among the tribals in Assam, were considerably influenced by their approaches to the problem of immigration.

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16. See, Assam Tribune, 2nd February, 1943, p.2.

17. See, Asamiya, 5 May 1945.

18. Ibid., Loc. cit.

After independence, when the euphoria of being a free sovereign nation engulfed the entire country, the plains tribal leaders too were deeply influenced by this. Because of the spell cast by this euphoria the tribal leaders joined the Congress Party and converted the tribal league into a socio-cultural organization in the year 1953, the year after the first general elections the nation had under the new Constitution.

However, the Congress Party seems to have failed to fulfill the aspirations of the tribals. This became evident when the Plains Tribal League was renamed as Plains Tribal Council of Assam in the year 1967. This Council, right from the beginning, urged upon the Government to protect the tribal areas as there was unabated encroachment of tribal lands by the immigrants. They argue that as a result of this, there was a gradual deterioration of general economic conditions of the tribal people in spite of government developmental activities.<sup>19</sup> They were afraid that unless these areas were protected by the Governments there will be a crisis of identity among the tribal people. In the India's Constitution, the fifth and the sixth schedule deals with the development and the upliftment of the tribal people and their areas.

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19. Samar Brahma Choudhury, 'On Udayachal Movement', paper presented in a UGC and ICSSR sponsored Seminar on political development in Diphu, 1987.

The sixth schedule is meant for the people of North East Region and the fifth schedule is for the rest of the country. The members of Plains Tribal Council of Assam complained that, in the Constituent Assembly in 1947, the members who represented Assam stated that there is no separate identity of the tribal people in Assam and that the tribal people of the plains had been merged with the Assamese Society. That is why they pointed out that the fifth and the sixth schedule was not made applicable for the plains tribal people. These tribal leaders argue that plains tribal in the Brahmaputra Valley are being socially and economically exploited and hence separate political entity for them is necessary.<sup>20</sup>

A number of protective measures have been introduced for safeguarding the interest of the tribal people since independence. In this regard mention may be made of the creation of tribal belts and blocks. Even before independence, amendment of the Assam land and Revenue regulation of (1886) in 1947 was undertaken to protect tribal interests. It is however true that in spite of such measures the economic exploitation of the tribal people still persists. There have been large scale encroachment of Government waste land, reserved land in tribal areas and even on patta land through unauthorised transfers and sales. According to the findings

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20. See, Assam Tribune, 13 December, 1986, p.1.

of the Sub-Committee appointed by the Advisory Council for welfare of scheduled tribes (plains) "more than a decade back there was encroachment on 8,233 hectares of land by 11,464 persons who were ineligible to get settlement of land in tribal blocks and 2,039 hectares were transferred to 2,371 ineligible persons."<sup>21</sup> This sort of encroachment and transfer of land is still continuing.

In Assam, large areas in the plains district are inhabited by plains tribal people. Simple in nature these people were living in primitive conditions and due to lack of education and material advantages, they could not look after their own welfare and were incapable of protecting their own interest. A large number of outsiders mostly from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal) began to pour in large number into Assam from the beginning of the present century. They began to spread into areas occupied by these tribal people. The tribal people unable to live in peace with these new comers began to recede into the interior. To protect these people from the onslaught of these land hungry outsiders, imaginary lines were drawn dividing the areas occupied by these outsiders. This line system, however did not work satisfactorily, later colonisation schemes and development schemes were taken up. But these also did not give the necessary protection to

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21. Quoted by Bhuban Baruah, 'Is Udayachal economically viable?' Assam Tribune, 1st December, 1986.

these tribal people and their lands were passing into the hands of the outsiders and they were gradually driven into the interior place. In order to give them necessary protection, the tribal belts and blocks were constituted.

The Assam Land Revenue Manual published by the Government of Assam contains the reasons behind the formation of the existing 37 blocks and belts to safeguard the economic interest of the tribal people. The problem of immigration badly hit the tribal population. Nearly all the 37 blocks and belts reserved for the tribal people are on the verge of extinction. Pressure on economy has reduced the sizes of the reserved tribal blocks. Forest resources are fast disappearing due to indiscriminate felling of trees and occupation of the area by the foreign nationals. Analysing the situation Udayan Misra shows that "in Nowgong district where the density of population has risen from 156 persons per sq. km. in 1951 to 302 persons per sq. km. in 1971, vast areas once held by indigenous tribals are today in almost total occupation by immigrants, excepting the few reserved tribal blocks."<sup>22</sup>

The members of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam did realise that due to large scale immigration there is a threat

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22. Udayan Misra, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist', Economic and Political Weekly, 21st February, 1981, p.292.

to the identity of the tribal people, and the result was the large involvement of tribal people in the foreigners movement in Assam without the help of these tribal people, the agitation would not have taken such a massive scale.

As the leading political organisation of the plains tribal population, the plains tribal Council of Assam demanded that all foreigners must be deported from Assam. Mr. Charan Narzary, ex. M.P. and other leaders of the plains tribal Council stated that they fully supported the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam.<sup>23</sup> The responses of the Plains Tribal Council leaders to the Assam Accord sufficiently reflects their anxiety over immigration. According to them, there are two distinct features in the accord, one deals with the detection of foreign nationals by well devised ways and means and the other is the question of constitutional safeguards for developing and maintaining Assamese identity. But what the safeguards would be like is not spelt out. Plains Tribal members pointed out that it is necessary to safeguard the identity of Assamese people, but it is more important to safeguard the interest of the tribal people. According to them, Clause 6 of the Assam accord, made it clear that Indian Constitution has completely failed to safeguard the interest of different people of the State.<sup>24</sup>

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23. See, Assam Tribune, 1982 October, p. 1.

24. See, Assam Tribune, 19 September, 1985, p. 1.

Tribal opinion in Assam appears to be divided on the accord, while a section of them accepted the accord, others express doubts about its utility. The All Assam Tribal Students Union has alleged that some tribal organisation were trying to give a twisted account of the Assam accord. According to them, some statement regarding section 6 of the Accord did not benefit the tribals, were motivated and showed a narrow mentality. As reflected in Newspaper reports they made it clear that section 10 of the accord clearly stated that safeguards to tribals would be ensured by strict implementation of the existing measures to evict non-tribals from tribal blocks and belts.<sup>25</sup> The accord will also give the tribals opportunity to assert their existence as well as rights, the All Assam Tribal Students Union said.

The All Assam Tribal Youth Union in a statement declared that there was nothing new in the Assam accord. According to them, the existing safeguards for the protection of the tribal belts and blocks, which included the Assam Land Revenue Act, 1886 and other relevant laws have been mentioned again in section 10 of the accord.

The statement claimed that the Government had issued a directive in 1982 to all Deputy Commissioners and subdivisional officers to evict encroachers in tribal belts and

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25. 'Tribal blocks and belts protected by accord', Assam Tribune, 25 Sept. 1986, p.1.

blocks every three months. But no eviction was carried out in accordance with this directive. The foreigners of 1966-71 period will permanently reside in the tribal blocks and belts. They will lose voting right only for 10 years. So together with AASU and AAGSP they demanded that the illegal Migrants (determination by tribunals) Act should be amended. Despite the differences of opinion over the accord the political actions of the tribal organisations including the major political party the PTCA prove that their minds are exercised over the issue of immigration.

The Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad was formed in 11 September 1977. They stated that their party stands for the restoration of peace and amity among various groups of people in the north eastern region.<sup>26</sup> In 1978 Assembly election, this party, in their election manifesto, declared that foreigners names were included in the voters list. They cautioned the Government that unless proper steps were taken, this immigration would adversely affect the economic, social and cultural life of the people of Assam.<sup>27</sup>

It must be stated that geographically, culturally and socially, Assam did not have a strong link with the rest of India. Only in 1920, Assam was politically integrated to

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26. See, Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad's Bulletin No. 5, 1980, (Panbazar, Gauhati), p. 2.

27. Ibid.

India in the true sense of the term. According to PLP, Assam has been totally neglected by the Central Government. The PLP in one of their bulletins stated that from 1951 to 1961 and from 1961 to 1971, the growth rate of population of Assam was the highest. The reason they gave was the influx of people from Bangladesh and Nepal.<sup>28</sup> They declared that the immigrants have succeeded in establishing some pockets in Assam and thus influenced the political fortunes of some major political parties. They criticised those parties for taking advantages for their narrow political gain at the cost of the people of Assam.

The Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad is the first party in Assam which demanded in 1978 that for the detection of foreigners there should be a special branch and the detected foreigners should be deported and their names should be deleted from the electoral rolls. They demanded that municipalities and Panchayats should be duly empowered for the detection of foreigners.<sup>29</sup>

On the basis of Chief Election Commissioner's statement (reference before) the Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad declared the 1977 electoral rolls as incorrect as they claimed that it contained the names of illegal entrants.

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28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., p. 3.

They claimed that because of their continuous pressure the government ordered a thorough scrutiny of the electoral rolls during the time of the by-election at Mangaldai. The PLP announced that there were 47,658 illegal entrants in the electoral rolls.<sup>30</sup> Later the PLP joined hands with the Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal, Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad, Assam Yuvak Samaj and a few other organisations and formed the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad. The PLP played a very important role in the agitation over the foreigners issue. PLP seems to be the only party in Assam which has gone to the root of the problem of immigration. According to them, apart from influx from Bangladesh and Nepal, there has been the influx from other states. Mostly from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. This influx is the legacy of the British rule which continued even today.<sup>31</sup> There is a difference between AASU and PLP in this position. AASU did not mean the deportation of the migrants who came from different parts of India. But PLP on the other hand wanted deportation of both the foreigners and the other migrants. This position has led its critics to brand it as a chauvinist party. But it is interesting to note that unlike other parties PLP did not yet bogged down merely by the problem of foreign infiltration. It seems to have considered the problem

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30. See, Assam Tribune, 16 June, 1979, p. 1.

31. Ibid., Loc.cit.

in the broader context of development of the entire north east India. They were however aware of the fact that the issue of planning for economic development and material advancement was totally eclipsed by the unprecedented rate of population growth solely due to immigration. The PLP stated that land settlement regulations are favourable for the immigrants even in the case of tribal belts and blocks. As we have stated above the land and revenue regulation of the State of Assam was amended by the Gopinath Bordoloi government to constitute tribal belts and blocks - a measure somewhat similar to the tribal areas contemplated in Schedule V of the Constitution of India which schedule was not extended to Assam presumably because of the provision, despite the incidence of the plains tribals being one of the highest, e.g. 11 percent. The PLP demanded necessary protection to the tribal people.<sup>32</sup>

There is no doubt, that PLP highlighted some of the important issues. But we have seen that regional parties did not participate separately in the 1985 Assembly elections and it merged with the AGP.

The Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal, led by Mr. Nagen Hazarika came into existence on the 15 August 1977. It must be admitted that this party played an important part in the agitation over the foreigners issue. They realised

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32. Seeking an answer to Assam's ill, PLP's document No. 3, October 1978, p. 5.

the danger which lay in immigration, later they merged with the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad.

It is interesting to note that the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal is the only regional party which claims to have been formed with the specific intention of preventing immigration. In one of their leaflets, they stated that "the main intention of forming the party is to warn the people of Assam regarding the problem of immigration."<sup>33</sup> The Dal condemned the leftist parties for creating obstacle in the solution of the problem. They describe the CPI(M) as an agent of Bengali expansionism which sought to make Assam a part of greater Bengal. Mr. Pramode Gogoi, the State CPI General Secretary once alleged that the Dal had been formed with an indirect support of the Congress (U).<sup>34</sup> The Jatiyatabadi Dal is a regional party and some of its critics accuse Mr. Hazarika and Mr. Girin Baruah of fanning parochialism and cashing in on widespread anti-Bengali sentiments.<sup>35</sup>

The Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal expressed that economic and political powers must be in the hands of the Assamese people without which it will be difficult to save the people from the onrush of the foreigners. They demanded that to stop

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33. Jatiyatabadar Katha (Assamese) leaflet published by Bishnu Tanti and Niren Baruah 1979, Sonari, p. 2.

34. See, Assam Tribune, 2nd December 1979, p. 1.

35. Ibid., Loc. cit.

further infiltration the Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Nepal border should be completely sealed off, and the Border Security Force should be strengthened. An area adjoining the Indo-Bangladesh Border stretching from one end to the other be declared as a 'no-man's land'. In addition to these they demanded that identity cards should be issued to the voters.<sup>36</sup> There is no doubt that their demands are quite similar to that of the AASU and AAGSP. But it is clear that this party in addition to these, also demanded that people of Assam should be saved from the colonial hinterland status. In one of their bulletin, they demanded that the Assamese should get adequate share in the field of Oil, Tea, and other industries located in Assam. They gave a clear picture, how the people of Assam are exploited by the Government of India.<sup>37</sup> They stated that unless the people fight against this injustice, it would be very difficult for them to save their identity.

The Jatiyatabadi Dal demanded that all foreigners should be deported from Assam. Like the PLP they also expressed that migrants from other states should also be deported.<sup>38</sup>

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36. Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal Bulletin No.2 published by Balovadra Tamaly, Bokakhat, 1983, p.1.

37. Ibid., Loc.cit.

38. Jatiyatabadi a bulletin published from the Dibrugarh Branch of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal, 1980, p. 1.

It is clear from the position of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal that they were concerned not only with the problem of immigration, but also with underdeveloped condition of the entire north eastern region.

The United Minority Front (UMF) was established on November 1985 at a special convention in Hojai in Nowgong. The party contested the 1985 elections and secured 17 seats out of 126 seats. It appears that the Congress (I) which depended mainly on the minority votes, completely lost their confidence after the accord was signed. A dominant section of the minorities might have thought that the accord runs against their interest. So they refused to help the Congress Party in the election. It is interesting to note that many minority politicians who were with the Congress Party, until the Assam accord was signed, became the brains behind the United Minority Front. Though the nomenclature suggests that this party was a United Front of the minorities, in reality it became a party dominated by Bengali speaking politicians.

The U.M.F. criticised the Assam accord signed by the Central Government and the agitation leaders. They opposed the way the government made amendments to the relevant Acts for giving legal effects to Clause 5 of the Agreement declaring the persons who came to Assam after 1st January 1966 and upto 24th March 1971 as foreigners and freezing their voting rights for ten years from the date of detection.

The U.M.F. puts forward the following proposals in their election manifesto of 1985 elections.

- (1) The movement in favour of scrapping of the Assam Accord will be further intensified and appropriate steps shall be taken for the realisation of the above goal.
- (2) The political refugees from East Pakistan - Bangladesh-Bengalee Hindus and Muslims Chakmas, Rajbangshis, Manipuris, Garos, Hajongs, Khasis and others intending to permanently settle in India, shall be treated as citizens according to the national commitment made on the eve of the partition.
- (3) 25th March 1971 shall be the base year for detection of foreigners from Bangladesh and 30th July 1976 the base year for the people of Nepali origin.
- (4) All cases of alleged foreigners shall be referred to the Tribunals formed under the illegal migrants (determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983.
- (5) No foreigner so determined shall be expelled unilaterally. Appropriate bilateral arrangements shall be made with their countries of origin for deportation.
- (6) All persons entering and settling in Assam from Bangladesh or Nepal after 1.1.1966 and upto 24th March 1971 must be treated as citizens with voting rights and not foreigners without voting rights. There cannot be double standards of citizenship in India.

- (7) The electoral roll prepared through intensive enumeration under the due process of law taking 1979 roll as the reference roll as enjoyed in the Supreme Court verdict shall be adhered to and no name shall be struck off without the decision of the tribunal.
- (8) Efforts will be made for the impeachment of the Election Commission for violation of all established norms while preparing the rolls for the 1985 elections in Assam and extension of time for repeated objections and claims even after some of the rolls were published as final.
- (9) The encroachment and interference by the Legislative upon the executive functions of the government and the executive wing upon the legislative authority shall be enquired into and separation of powers shall be enforced.
- (10) An Enquiry Commission will be set up to submit a report on the majority or community biases, if any in the Indian Constitution and in other Acts, Rules, Statutes, etc., so that the real reason behind the rush for becoming or remaining a majority or thinking along communal lines can be ascertained and proper remedial actions may be initiated.<sup>39</sup>

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39. See, Election Manifesto of U.M.F., 1985, p. 2.

The fear of the minorities that the accord is directed against non-Assamese is not true. Those who have come to Assam from other states or those born in Assam are not affected by the accord. At least in the accord there is nothing of the nature. However, the misgivings of the minorities in Assam has been fortified by the statements made by West Bengal Chief Minister Mr. Jyoti Basu. According to him, the accord has made the minorities in Assam a second class citizens.<sup>40</sup> It is of course obvious that these forces refuse to make a distinction between the foreigners who migrated to Assam and the Indian minorities settled in Assam.

Clauses 5(1) to 5(a) specifically deal with the foreigners issue. For the purpose of detection and deletion of foreigners 1.1.1966 has been taken as the base date and year. Those who came to Assam prior to 1.1.1966 and 14.3.1971 shall be detected in accordance with relevant provisions of law, which should not cause any anxiety to the minorities since law will take its own course in the matter of such detection.<sup>41</sup>

Clauses 9 and 10 of the accord are in respect of international border to ensure security against future infiltration and prevention of encroachment on Government lands and

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40. See, Assam Tribune, 1st Sep. 1985, p. 1.

41. See, Assam Accord signed by AASU, AAGSP and the Government of India on the 15th August, 1985.

tribal belts. Such assurances were given by all the Prime Minister and Political leaders of the country and even legislative enactments were felt necessary, but the Government never appeared to be serious about it. Had this repeated assurance been implemented earlier the problem of immigration in Assam could not have assumed such a gravity. In an interview given to 'Sunday' the minorities leader A.F. Golan Osmani expressed his dissatisfaction regarding the eviction of people from Government and tribal belts. He was of the opinion that only the minorities were being evicted from Government and tribal belts. Golan Osmani pointed out that these people have been staying in those land for the last 15-30 years. They are landless people, so the Government must settled them. As we have seen in Chapter II that allotment of land to the immigrants had been a major political issue even before independence. The issue evokes sharp political reaction even today. Responding to Osmani's demand, Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta stated that "very often tribals decide to migrate from their land and sell the land to immigrants. Often Mahajans settled people in such areas and collect taxes. Most of these people have lands of their own. They can go back to those places. It is the political leaders who help those people to encroach on Government lands."<sup>42</sup>

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42. Quoted from the interview given by C.M. Mahanta to 'Sunday' Magazine, 28 June, 1986, p. 14.

The U.M.F. despite having 17 members in the State Legislative Assembly, still lacks the organisational strength to challenge the ruling party. Initially, it had opposed the entire accord but it has recently changed its stance and is now opposing only certain parts of the accord. They claimed that they supported the clauses about economic development which are beneficial to all the people.<sup>43</sup> It is thus clear that despite their numerical strength the immigrants have not been able to form a strong party of their own. The UMF tried to take this mantle but as the events in the post accord period shows it has failed to draw the large masses of the immigrants into its ranks.

The Asom Gana Parishad was formed only after the accord was signed. This Party consisted mostly of the leaders of the movement and it must be admitted that the leadership of the movement never went out of the hands of the Assamese middle class and the AGP which was born out of the movement remained very much in their hands. Because of this hegemonic positions in the Asamiya society, the interest of this class is given importance and by and large it came to be accepted as the interest of the entire Asomiya society.

There is little doubt that the Asom Gana Parishad has touched a sympathetic chord in the minds of the majority

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43. See, Assam Tribune, 15 October, 1985, p. 1.

people of Assam. Each section of the Assamese society have been nursing their grievances for a long time. The middle class have been facing the unemployment problem, because of the large scale recruitment from outside the region. Apurba Baruah quoted the Employment Review Committee's report in his article 'The Assamese National Question' to prove this point. In its third report the Committee submitted that in a survey of 28 units comprising 7 public sector industries, 16 private sector industries and 5 banks with a total strength of 29,537 employees, only 14,368 or 49% had their birth place in Assam and only 10,473 or 35% had Assamese as their mother tongue. The committee further notes that of the 2,095 employees in the Class I and II, only 762 or 36% had their birth place in Assam.<sup>44</sup> The Assamese bourgeoisie is also unhappy because of the colonial hinterland status of Assam.<sup>45</sup> The peasantry is also worried because of the pressure on cultivable land. This party stated that the problem of immigration in Assam is quite grave and to save the people from the crisis of identity immediate implementation of the Assam Accord is needed. The AGP contested the 1985 election and secured absolute majority.

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44. For an analysis of this data, see, Apurba Baruah, 'The Assamese National Question', North East Quarterly, August 1982, p. 25.

45. T. Misra, 'Assam: Colonial Hinterland', Economic and Political Weekly, 9 August 1980, pp. 1357-64.

It is clear from our analysis that regional parties played an important part in the Anti-foreigner agitation in Assam. The important part that the issues of migration plays in Assam politics is proved by the fact that it gave birth to a party like the AGP which seems to have established its hegemony. It must also be stated that movement on foreign nationals issue was inspired not merely by a fear of the immigrants but also by strong regional aspirations of the Assamese as a small and backward nationality.

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## CONCLUSION

### CONCLUSION

The problem of immigration in Assam is not a new problem. The problem persisted much before independence. Major leftist circles, in Assam have been claiming that the people of Assam have been opposing immigration only recently, that is at the beginning of the movement on the foreign nationals issue. But our analysis of the relevant data points to a completely different direction. As we have shown in the first and the second chapters the Congress leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi highlighted the problem of immigration much before independence. We have also shown in Chapter VII that some tribal organisations have drawn the attention of people to this problem as early as 1940s. There were of course the vociferous protagonists of the Assamese identity like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury who did try to organise Assamese opinion on the issue in the pre-independence period. As a result immigration always remained a live issue in Assam politics.

The British administration in Assam did contribute to the process of immigration. The Moamoriya Peasant rebellion in the last quarter of the 18th century and the Burmese invasion in the first quarter of the 19th century had left Assam at almost half of her population. Diseases like Kala Azar also affected the natural growth of population. But the

British Government did not want to be deprived of the land revenue from these lands, so they seem to have encouraged large scale immigration into Assam. To suit their colonial designs they made territorial adjustments and re-adjustments in the west and south west directions. They introduced the system of Inner-line Regulations in 1873 restricting the entrance of any person beyond the line so demarcated. These provisions prevented migration into the hill areas, but the British, as we have shown in Chapter II, encouraged immigration into the plains areas of Assam. To suit their colonial interest they opened the doors of Assam to immigrants.

With the growth of Tea plantation in Assam, the British planters in league with the government brought cheap labourers to Assam. While the plantation went on increasing, Assam's pace of development remained very slow not only economically, but also in areas like education. Initially the British Government as we have seen in Chapter II, did not strive in right earnest for the development of English education in Assam. The Jonaki-Age a glorious chapter in the history of Assamese literature had its origin in Calcutta. As there was limited scope for higher education in Assam, naturally majority of the Assamese youth could not avail of government jobs. But the British administration did require educated people to work in government departments and the planters required Babu's in their garden. The few schools

that the early British administration opened in Assam required teachers. Educated migrants from rest of India, particularly the Bengalees, began to pour in. The British appeared to have made it a policy of recruiting educated Bengalee people for service in Assam. As we have shown in Chapter II even some of the Assamese like Boli Narayan Borah implored the government to bring educated Bengali people from West Bengal. This plea was in fact generated by the fear that caste Hindus would be swamped by the plains tribals. We have argued in Chapter VII that this fear was baseless because the tribal people in Assam are a part of Assamese life, they can never be a threat to Assamese identity.

Our analysis of immigration to Assam in Chapter II shows that the stream of immigration in Assam continued and it gained momentum during the first half of the 1941-51 decades and specially during the Muslim league ministry under the leadership of Saadullah. He pursued a policy of patronising Muslims. Saadullah appeared to maintain that immigrants were mostly landless and the only solution was to provide them with available lands. During his time, the problem of immigration in Assam became quite serious. When the immigrants after occupying all vacant available lands threatened to swamp land even in and around Assamese villages the problem reached a most critical point. Apprehending the danger, the Congress Government in Assam introduced the line system in

1920. But when Saadullah came back to power, he even opened the grazing forest reserves for the settlement of immigrants. But later on, when circumstances compelled Saadullah to enunciate an official policy on the immigration issue, he formulated the 'land development scheme' which apparently sought to protect the indigenous interest by reserving 30% (thirty percent) of the waste land for them. As we have shown in Chapter II, this scheme was not implemented. The immigrants persisted with their unauthorised encroachment of the Assam Valley, which in turn generated a lot of resentment, among the local population.

We have shown in Chapter III that the problem of immigration and the possible threat to Assamese identity persisted even after independence specially in the face of the partition of the country. The 1951 Census report described the settlers as land hungry, because their hunger for land was so great that in their eagerness to grasp more land, they started encroaching on Government reserves and the lands belonging to the local people. During the communal disturbances in Assam in 1950, the Nehru-Liaquat Pact was drawn up. The free movement between the then Pakistan and Assam as provided by the pact, subsequently resulted in fresh influx of Muslim immigrants to Assam. In the absence of any efficient machinery to keep track of the Pakistani Muslim immigrants many of them eventually settled in the state posing themselves as Indian

nationals with the help and support of their relations. But it is not merely Muslims, as a result of partition there was a mass exodus of Hindus from the then East Pakistan to Assam.

The Bangladesh war of liberation in 1971, has once again opened the gate of Assam for the immigrants. There was a heavy flow of both Hindu and Muslim immigrants into Assam. It is only natural that continuous inflow of outsiders in such magnitude should become an important issue. In fact since the mid 19th, immigration has remained a very sensitive issue in Assamese politics.

The agitation over the foreigners issue once again brought the problem of immigration into sharp focus. The agitation as we show in Chapter IV is a mass movement directed towards the preservation of the socio-cultural and political identity of Assam within the state of India. The agitation was sparked off by a sense of cultural insecurity which the middle class has been suffering for quite sometime. As we have shown in Chapter IV this insecurity has been reflected in certain political actions of the middle class. Ever since 1937 when in a memorandum to Pt. Nehru representatives of this class suggested that if Cachar and Sylhet were separated from Assam the people of Assam would be the strongest supporters of Congress. In the Post independence period, the people of Assam have launched a series of struggles over the

issue of official language and medium of instructions. It must be admitted here that chauvinist elements did take advantage of the situation and tried to convert the issue into Assamese versus Bengalis or Assamese versus non-Assamese. However, the genuine fears of the Assamese which enabled the agitators to sustain the movement, cannot be overlooked.

The foreigners issue, to some extent, is the result of a conflict over jobs, land and cultural insecurity. As we have mentioned in Chapter IV the grievances against the immigrants are mostly articulated by the middle class which is consisted primarily of educated sections. The Assamese middle class continued to retain and nourish their relations with the peasantry. The strong ties between the Assamese middle class and the Peasantry has been manifested in the responses of the Peasantry towards the foreigners agitation. The participation of the Assamese peasantry in the agitation over foreign nationals issue cannot be understood without taking into account the tremendous pressure on cultivable land. We show in Chapter IV that Assam was subjected to the greatest population pressure between 1961 and 1971 with the density of population rising from 138 sq.km. to 186 sq.km. during the decade a rise of almost 35 percent. In no other state one-third increase in population density has been recorded.

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While analysing the role of the left parties, in Chapter V we argued that the claim of a section of the left in Assam, led mainly by the CPI(M) that this movement was directed against them and that the movement is controlled by the ruling party to hinder the progress of the left in Assam, was untenable. An analysis of the election results show that in 1971, the CPI(M) did not secure any seat, but in 1978 they secured eleven (11) seats. According to them, the ruling classes were shaken at their success. As we argue in Chapter V the success of the CPI(M) in that spectacular election should be seen in the context of the Janata wave too. We have also argued that the statements made by some CPI(M) leaders - no matter how reasonable they seem if cited without reference to the particular group psychology that exists in Assam today managed to alienate the party completely from the Assamese people. It is also clear from our analysis that the CPI(M) was greatly concerned about the sentiments of the Bengali middle class in Bengal. We have shown that the CPI(M) contentions that the Assam agitation was directed against the religious and linguistic minorities and that it posed a serious threat to the unity and integrity of the country, had not been supported by facts or reasonable arguments. Their charges against the AASU and AAGSP were polemical in nature. They seemed to have turned a blind eye to the fact that these organisations wanted a solution within the Constitution of India and that hence the agitation can't be characterised as secessionist.

We have shown in Chapter IV that AASU and AAGSP's stand on the religious and communal issues became clear from the fact that they had been maintaining that the solution to the problem was elusive only because of the government's unwillingness to recognise the Hindus who had infiltrated into Assam in the 1961-71 as foreigners. This disproves the CPI(M) allegation that the movement was against minorities. We have argued that as a result of CPI(M)'s unreasonable position in the early phase of the movement, the majority people turned against them. If we compare the views expressed by CPI(M) and the Bengali middle class in Bengal, we found that the CPI(M) in Assam was influenced by the sentiments of the Bengali middle class in Bengal. But it must be admitted that the anti-communist and reactionary forces in Assam did take advantage of the situation to launch an attack on the CPI(M) and other left parties.

The CPI, on the other hand, stated that the leadership of the AASU and AAGSP raised the false cry among the people that the identity of the Assamese nationality was in great danger and that they were being swamped by the non-Assamese. The foreign national issue was sought to be dismissed as an Assamese versus non-Assamese issue and the threat to the identity of the Assamese people posed by unchecked immigration from across the border was claimed to be non-existent one fanned by Assamese chauvinists. But if we analyse the

views expressed by the CPI it is noticeable that there is a gradual change. Pramode Gogoi, General Secretary of the CPI, himself admitted that the problem of immigration in Assam was in a grave situation, and unless adequate steps were taken by the government, the unity and integrity of the country will be jeopardized.

The CPI(M)'s stand on the question of detection is a bit close to that of all Assam Minority Students Union and the citizens right Preservation Committee. Both these organisation made clear their intention of opposing any detection whatsoever. The citizens right Preservation Committee declared that anyone who had stayed in India for a period of 180 days was eligible for citizenship. We show in Chapter V that the citizens rights Preservation Committee came into being after the language riots of 1960 and is primarily a Bengali Hindu dominated body whose organisation is limited to Urban Pockets in Cachar and Brahmaputra Valley. The All Assam Minority Students Union on the other hand is more recent creation which contested the 1985 election and secured 17 seats out of 126 seats.

Other left parties like the SUCI, RSP are not particularly influential in Assam and they have called for detection on the basis of 1971 as the cut off year. The CPI(M-L) fractions are sharply divided in their assessment of the

Assam Problem - with the Bhaskar Nandy group being totally opposed to the movement and the Vinod Misra fraction expressing its qualified support to it. These are the two major CPI(M-L) groups functioning in the state and organisationally both are pretty weak. We show in Chapter V that CPI(M-L) has generally taken the stand that the Assamese crisis has its roots in the nationality question that has occupied the central place in all the disturbances in Assam. This analysis seems to have struck a sympathetic chord in the minds of the Assamese.

It must be stated here that the left in Assam has a strong tradition of struggle but the lefts silence and some time, its muted approval of state repression particularly on the eve of 1983 has done irreparable damage to its image in the north eastern region. Fighting the election under police protection has completely alienated the CPI(M) from the Assamese people.

When the agitation on the foreign nationals issue started, it was the Janata rule in Assam and the Congress (I) at the Centre. The opposition parties mainly Janata, Bharatiya Janata Party and the Lok Dal has come out with their suggestions on the problem during the movement, but nothing was acceptable to the Central Government. If we go back to the history of the Congress Party, we find that in the

beginning the Congress Party was not against raising the issue of immigration. As we have shown in Chapter II, Congress leaders like Bishunram Medhi, Gopinath Bordoloi realised the danger which lay in immigration. They placed before Parliament petitions regarding the danger of immigration. But soon after 1947, when the congress leaders of Assam, instead of devoting attention to the immediate developmental programmes of the state, began to accept whatever policies the Centre dictated regarding Assam, the Assamese middle class got alienated from the Congress. We argued in Chapter II that an articulate section of this class felt that Congress has failed to fulfill the promises which they declared in the election manifesto. The result was that Congress had to depend on minority for their votes. This trend compelled Congress to adopt a new electoral policy in which they tried to form and mobilise small linguistic and cultural groups distinct from the Assamese. Their dependence on the 'Alis', 'Coolies', the OBC and the MOBC etc. is a manifestation of this approach.

The Janata Party was in power in 1979 when the movement started. But before they could take any concrete steps the congress party came back to power in 1980. So it was the Congress Party which faced the entire agitation. Because of the political interest mentioned above the Congress had no choice but to try and suppress the movement. In the process it got itself alienated from the Assamese people to the

extent that even after the signing of the accord, the party was badly defeated in the elections that followed.

The Regional Political Parties did play a role in the anti-foreigners agitation in Assam. But if we analyse the role of each regional party in Assam prior to the formation of Asom Gana Parishad we find that these parties were quite weak in Assam. The Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad which first realised the danger of immigration in Assam, decided to launch the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam. Later on they merged with AAGSP. The PLP declared that immigrants have succeeded in establishing some pockets in Assam and thus influenced the political aspect of some major political parties. The PLP is the first party, which declared in 1978 that for the detection of foreigners there should be a special branch and the detected foreigners should be deported and their name should be deleted from the electoral rolls. They demanded that municipality and panchayats should be duly empowered for the detection of foreigners. As we show in Chapter VII the PLP was concerned not only with the problem of immigration into Assam. It tried to focus the backward position of Assam and of the entire north east India. However it did use the issue of immigration to mobilise to large section of Assamese masses behind it.

The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (P.T.C.A.) did realise that there is a threat to the existence of the tribals in Assam. Without the participation of these tribal people in the foreigners agitation, the agitation itself would not have reached such a massive scale. The problem of immigration badly hit the tribal population in Assam. All the 37 blocks and belts reserved for the tribal people are on the verge of extinction. There was tremendous pressure on land including tribal belts. This is due to unchecked immigration of landless people from across the border. They realised that the identity of the tribal people is in danger. The history of Tripura provides a good example to substantiate their belief.

Though there is a difference of opinion regarding the support of the tribal people in the foreigners agitation, it must be admitted that besides a few, the majority of the tribal people came forward to participate in the agitation. Mr. Charan Narzmy, one of the P.T.C.As M.L.S. pointed out that their people wholeheartedly supported the foreigners agitation. He himself expressed that the identity crisis in Assam also affects the tribal population.

The United Minority Front was established on November 1985. It was primarily a Bengali Muslim dominated body. This party completely opposed the accord which was signed by the

Government and the leaders of the movement. According to them the agitation was directed against them. But what they failed to see, is the difference between the Bengali speaking Bangladeshis and the Bengali speaking Indians. But the movement leaders pointed out that the agitation was only against the foreign nationals and not against any nationals.

The Asom Gana Parishad (A.G.P.) was formed only after the accord was signed. The important part that the issues of migration plays in Assam politics is proved by the fact that it gave birth to a party like the AGP which seems to have established its hegemony. The Party's support structure is mainly the Assamese middle class. The articulate section of the class provides the leadership of the AGP. It is clear that the leadership of the movement never went out of the hands of the Assamese middle class, and the A.G.P. which was born out of the movement remained very much in their hands. Because of this hegemonic positions in the Assamiya society, the interest of this section is given importance and by and large it came to be accepted as the interest of the entire Assamiya society.

The Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal led by Mr. Nagen Hazarika came into existence during the 1978 Assembly election. This party supported the anti-foreigner agitation launched in Assam, and later on merged with the AAGSP. This party

announced that unless this immigration is stopped, the unity and integrity of the country will be jeopardized.

Our analysis thus shows that immigration has remained an important issue in Assamese politics and it appears to have sustained a communal tension, which has been throwing the Assamese society into crisis almost on a periodic basis. Despite the fact that a section of politicians have always tried to give it a religious colour, this tension is primarily linguistic, may be because the Assamese speaking community under the hegemony of its educated elite and middle class views itself as a nationality identified by a common language based culture. Their fear of being swamped by outsiders generates aggressive political action which in turn forces the outsiders to counteract.

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