

GRASS-ROOTS NATIONALISM : A STUDY OF MASS-RESISTANCES IN THE  
DISTRICTS OF DARRANG AND NOWGONG OF ASSAM, 1937-47.

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

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### GRASS-ROOTS NATIONALISM : CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

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The period of British Rule in India was an awful historical reality. The multi-facet exploitation and oppression of the Alien Rule and colonial machinery not only transformed a self-sufficient India to a land of subsistence but caused all-round devastations. The strive for liberation from the colonial yoke by the Indian masses was, therefore, not only an inevitable consequences but also a part of world-wide struggle against Imperialism. The growth of national consciousness had shaken each and every fabrics of Indian minds. The participation, dedication and sacrifice of the freedom loving masses are unquestionably significant. The study of nationalism, consequently, depicts the heroic struggle of the people against the colonial bondage and their emancipation as an independent nation. On the other hand, the legacy of the Alien Rule also has left tremendous undesirable impact on the Indian masses in general. It had sown

seeds of mistrust among the different communities, legitimised its 'divide and rule' policy, accelerated the uneven economic growth resulting regional imbalances and inconsequences weakened the age-old unity among the different groups of nationalities, tribes and other communities in India.

Several studies have been conducted on the development and character of the Indian nationalism. Despite a common and wide agreement on the concept of nationalism as an 'Idee-Force' in the political-cultural and economic life of a nation<sup>1</sup>, one will find it difficult to characterise Indian nationalism. Very often, we come across terminologies like pseudo-nationalism, sub-nationalism, proto-nationalism, regional nationalism and many other varieties being used in the studies to cover the degrees of national consciousness in India. These terminologies, no doubt, reveal a multi-facet character of Indian Nationalism and justify varieties of its trend. Surprisingly it is noted that even after several decades of national historiography in India, still, there is no common agreement on the concept and character of Indian nationalism.

The character and nature of nationalism in India, in fact, never remained static and homogeneously concentric. It had been changed at the various stages of historical development. The dynamics

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1. Philip P. Weiner, (Editor-in-chief), Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Vol III, Charles Scribners Sons, New York, 1973, pp. 324-25.

of their various changes at different stages lie in its continuity of its strategy<sup>2</sup>. The strength and mobility of Indian nationalism became more and more stronger and wider with the emergence and involvement of the 'new classes, off-springs of the new economic structure and living under the same state regime'<sup>3</sup>.

The problem involves, basically with the stereo-typed model of homogeneous society that has been used to study nationalism in India. The complexity of Indian nationalism lie in its plural character. Ignoring this reality, most of the scholars intend to glorify Indian nationalism as an 'Unity in Diversity', or 'Symbolic Unity' or 'Uniqueness of Subjective Unity'. Sometimes, they either overlook or underestimate the roots of Indian plural society where poly-centric and ethno-centric nationalism exist side by side. Most striking examples of it can be witnessed in the dominantly emergence of recent movements for Khalistan, Jharkhand, Udayachal, Gurkhaland etc. In most cases, though these movements initially aimed to secure self determination in the name of ethnicity, religion, caste or language, have also reflected a tendency to secession and indulge in nonsense violence killing innocent people and mass-terrorisation. Question therefore

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2. Bipan Chandra, 'Elements of continuity and change in early Nationalist Activity' Paper presented at the Symposium during the Indian History Congress held on 27-29 December, 1972
  3. A.R. Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 4th edition, 1966, p. 384.

arises, are these features of poly-centric and ethno-centric nationalism originated in the post-independence period or had its socio-economic roots in the historical background? The issue also raises questions - does Indian nationalism consist of several varieties as component keeping inner consistence and homogeneity in the structure of the former? If so, what is the basic function of these components? Why these components are inclined to exert centri-fugal forces at present? How did the cohesive character of the structure of Indian nationalism remain so long unaffected? Such questions, certainly demand serious attention. The answer of it, definitely lie in the understanding of the Indian plural society and its stages of historical development. The problem therefore, involves <sup>also</sup> with the concept <sup>of</sup> nationalism and the issues involves in its manifestations in Indian perspective.

Nationalism, purely a modern concept, is a principle or an ideology of a nationality which has been developed historically. Its connotation implies multi-dimensional meaning. It manifests as a patriotic feeling as well as principles or efforts or policy of national independence<sup>4</sup>.

It also expresses a degree of socio-economic and political consciousness. So far the definition of it concerned, several attempts have been made by numerous scholars. Carlton Hayes, the father of scholarly American Study of Nationalism defines it as

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4. J.B. Sykes (ed), The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, Oxford University Press, 7th edition, Reprint 1985, p. 674.

'a modern emotional fusion of two very old phenomena-nationality and patriotism as well as the paramount devotion of human beings to linguistics and cultural nationality.' Han Kuhn, the most prolific authority on the subject attempts to define it 'as a state of mind or an act of consciousness of a large majority of a people which recognised the nation state as the ideal form of political organisation and the nationality as the source of all creative cultural energy and of economic well being'<sup>5</sup>. These definitions though outline the basic features of nationalism, do not reveal the conditions under which the such consciousness of a nationality grow. The limitation in defining nationalism, originates from the concept of nationalism itself and its formation. In addition to above attempts of the scholars to define nationalism, the endeavour of J.V. Stalin of course appears to be comparatively well-defined. According to Stalin, 'nation is a historically formed permanent community of people which succeeds nationality and came into being in the process of nation's formation with the liquidation of feudal disunity'<sup>6</sup>. A nation is 'distinguished first of all by common material conditions of life, common territory and economic life, common language and certain traits of national character manifested in the national peculiarity

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5. Boyed C. Shafer, Faces of Nationalism, New Realities and Old Myth, Harcourt, Brace Jovenovich, New York, 1972, p. 11.

6. J.V. Stalin, Marx bad-O-Jati-Samashya, NBA, Calcutta, 1986, p. 283.

of its culture'<sup>7</sup>. The concept therefore includes nationality, nation and the degree of historical development and their corresponding co-relation in the process.

Nationalism, as a consciousness and an ideology, first appeared in the Western Europe. It was basically an anti-feudal consciousness among the artisans, peasantry, petty-bourgeoisie classes under the backdrop of feudal bankruptcy. The young capitalist groups who were 'involved in the process of eliminating feudalism', raised the degree of such consciousness by uniting the masses through opening up of new market avenues. In the process, the dominant emergent bourgeoisie class idealised the consciousness with the cause of nation and championed the issue of language 'as a means of inter-dialectical communication'<sup>8</sup>. It is historically evident that nationalism is a 'principle of bourgeoisie ideology and policies expressed in the advocacy of national isolation'; to secure free-market from the dominant nationality or nation states. Since its emergence, nationalism has always been a powerful ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie in expanding its market and dominance over other lesser developed nationalities. Its nature also changes with the change of its market. As Guha stated, nationalism could be 'unitary or federal

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7. J. Frolov (ed), Dictionary of Philosophy, Progress Publishers, Moscow, Second Revised edition, 1984, p. 283.

8. Amalendu Guha, 'The Indian National Question : A Conceptual Frame, Occasional Paper No. 45, CSSSC, p. 2.

in spirit, authoritarian or democratic, expansionist or self-contained, aggressive or defensive depending on the specific circumstances of that process<sup>9</sup>.

✓ In Indian perspective, it is extremely unfortunate that in contrast to western experience, the concept and manifestation of nationalism emerged and developed under the colonial rule and economy. In the pre-colonial period, the growth of Indian nation was on the process and the existence of numerous tribes and nationalities headed either by chieftains or petty-monarchs with underdeveloped production system was a pre-dominant feature. Under the back drop of feudal dis-unity, the European traders entered into India and gradually the English agents of this trading companies virtually succeeded to enforce its political power. The network of colonial rule and exploitation through the introduction of railways, communications, post and telegraphs and opening of trade relations with the external markets, helped in subjugating the whole country later on under one political system and economic structure. This development finally led to the unification of the country. The growth of Indian capital was thus threatened by the colonial policy of de-industrialisation, resource drain and overall extensive investment of British capital. The indigeneous capital thus, could not expand its network of rule all over the country. In short, the process of feudal disunity and formation of capital in India was disrupted heavily by the pene-

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9. Amalendu Guha, Occasional Paper No. 45, op.cit.

tration and aggressive colonial economy and dominance. The corresponding process of nation's formation too, had to face a jolt. But the unconsolidated native bourgeoisie and the feudal lords, instead of resisting, sided with the Alien Rule and colonial finance with an objective of securing more concessions in the matters of trade and business. Analysing the situation, Sumit Sarkar remarks - 'the post-1857 years had seen the renewal and consolidation of links with princes, Zamindars and variety of urban and rural notable and the 662 Indian native rulers in particular were to remain the most loyal bulworks till the very end'<sup>10</sup>. The native bourgeoisie also tended to interlock themselves with the 'reactionary landlord and money lending classes'<sup>11</sup>, as dependable. On the other hand, the initial reaction of the Indian masses was undoubtedly violent and bursted out in the series of armed resistance struggle against the British Rule throughout the nineteenth century. These movements had shaken the very difference of caste, language and religion etc existing among the different ethnic groups and thereby paved the way for national consciousness at the grass roots level atleast subjectively.

By the end of the 19th century, the Indian bourgeoisie could make its substantial consolidation in few pockets through colla-

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10. Sumit Sarkar, Modern India, 1885-1947, Macmillan India Ltd. 1983, p. 2.

11. A.R. Desai, Op.cit. p. 126.

poration with the British capital<sup>12</sup>. The dissatisfaction against the colonial pressure started found expression in the first decade of the twentieth century. The urge for economic freedom compelled the native bourgeoisie to articulate the concept of nationalism to unite the Indian masses in favour of their own class interests. The anti-partition movement in Bengal of 1905 was thus transformed into a 'Swadeshi' movement with the slogan 'boycott of Alien goods'. The concept of 'Swadeshi' and 'Swaraj' thus, came into being in Indian polity. Though insignificant, in comparison to British capital, the process of indigenous bourgeoisie class-formation in India generated an uniting force in the emergence of Indian nation. Of course, there emerged simultaneously two streams of national consciousness - one Pan-Indian and other regional. According to Professor Guha -

The former was professedly based on observed pan-Indian homogeneities of culture-such as common all India tradition and history, economic life and psychological make-up and the accepted unifying role of Sanskrit, Persian, English and Hindusthani by turn - and also calculations of advantages of an India-wide market. The other consciousness was professedly based on the relevant regions distinctive homogeneities and demands for substantial or exclusive control by the sons of the soil over its resources and market facilities<sup>13</sup>.

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12. Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 330-335.

13. Amalendu Guha, Op.cit., p. 8.

The roots of regional nationalism lie in the uneven economic growth and development. In the absence of viable class of regional bourgeoisie, the traditional baniyas, petty traders, and the big land holders played the key role in moulding the consciousness at the regional level. At this level, language and religion were the basic issues. Their natures were, therefore, either linguistic or religious. Of course, it does not mean that the Pan-Indian nationalism and regional nationalism always moved parallelly. The Indian nationalism - as Guha pointed, 'in form and content, by and large remained federal in spirit', though there was also a 'parallel trend of Pan-Indian Hindu and proto-nationalism of muslims respectively'.

Nationalism in India was, thus, articulated and developed through different stages. The strength of national movement became more and more stronger with the involvement of new classes, particularly the workers, peasants and the radical nationalist middle classes. The nature of the movement at the grass roots level was militantly anti-imperialist and anti-feudal. Contrast to it, the movements at the national level was surprisingly moderate. It were neither anti-feudal nor anti-capitalism. The national leadership, particularly the dominant section of it adopted the strategy of 'pressure-compromise-pressure'. They also opposed to all sorts of revolutionary action of the other classes. To quote Bipan Chandra, 'Ignoring the basic features of agrarian

structure, the national leadership on the whole curbed the anti-landlord struggle ... they opposed all anti-landlord agitations by the peasants in the name of non-violence and unity of the anti-imperialist struggle,<sup>14</sup>. The strive for national liberation under this leadership at the national level was, therefore aimed not for eliminating feudalism and imperialism but to secure constitutional concessions from the colonial counterparts.

The pro-feudal policy of the dominant nationalist leadership, instead of liquidation, helped in surviving the ugly features of casteism, communalism and fundamentalism. Their untired effort to channelise the freedom struggle into constitutionalism also, widened the gap between the pan-Indian nationalism and the proto-nationalism of the muslims leading to the partition of the nation. All these are no doubt, undesirable negative features of Indian nationalism but have left serious consequences. The issues involve with these problems are not of less importance.

The problem also involves with the elitist domination over the historiography, both ideological and methodological. Professor Ranajit Guha has rightly pointed out that 'the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism -colonialist elitism and bourgeoisie nationalist elitism',<sup>15</sup>.

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14. Bipan Chandra, Op.Cit.

15. Ranajit Guha, 'Introduction', Subaltern Studies, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982.

These historians have been viewing Indian nationalism persistently as 'pre-dominantly elite achievement'.

The Indo logists like Paul Brass, George Baker, David Washbrook, F.G. Bailey and Oscar Lewis on the other hand, with enormous patience and clarity had tried to locate Indian nationalism in 'Factions and Factionalism'<sup>16</sup>. 'Factions, it is believed, link the lowest in the land to the highest' - or link the local factions with the provincial factions to national factions. These studies justify factions, not as an ideology but as the link force in Indian nationalism. The hypothesis advocated by R.J. Moore is not only far from objective but also biasly motivated. Mr. Moore has attempted to show the growth of Indian awareness and mass-mobilisation for achieving Swaraj as meaningless. He argues that the British government, both in India and England, had its honest desire to declare the independence to the people of India long before 1947 through enactment of Government of India Act of 1917

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16. Ranajit Guha, Op.Cit.

Paul Brass, Factional Politics in an Indian Society, the Congress Party in U.P. Oxford University Press, 1972.

George Baker and D. Washbrook, South India : Political Institutions and Political Changes 1880-1940, Oxford University Press, 1975.

Oscar Lewis, Village Life in Northern India

F.G. Bailey, Tribe, Caste and Nation : A Study of Political Activity and Political Change in Highland Orissa, University of California Press, 1963.

but delayed due to the crisis of unity among the various segments of Indian society and Hindus and Muslims in particular<sup>17</sup>.

These approaches to the study of Indian nationalism reveal two facts : in the first place, the Indian nationalism has no dynamism of its own. It was just a product of 'Stimulus and Response', under the colonial rule. In the second place, it reveals that whatever the achievement it could secure in the mobilisation of the people are resultant gift of elite leaderships. The vast majority of the Indian masses had nothing to do with it, but to follow without any questions, sometimes with selfish motives to gain economically from their patron elite leaders.

Certainly, the role of the elites cannot be either denied or under-estimated. As the struggle for freedom was urged for national liberation, <sup>it</sup> was of bourgeoisie democratic in character. Under the colonial yoke, the entire Indian masses, representing all classes including the capitalists had strived for freedom. But the question - 'had the elites alone generated the dynamics of the freedom struggle' cannot be ruled out. Mr. Broomfield characterises the role of the elites or the Bhadralok of the twentieth century Bengal as 'constitutional nationalist who made 'tall talk and low performance'<sup>18</sup>.

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17. R.J. Moore, The Crisis of Indian Unity, 1919-1940, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974, p. viii.

18. J.M. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society, Twentieth Century Bengal, University of California Press, 1968, pp. 82-89.

The emergent elites who looked to the West as their model, did not close the link with the feudal bases. The mental make-up of the elites were shaped in the British system of education and limited constitutional infra-structure. 'A students' encounter with the West had, therefore, elements of comedy and excitement', comments Francis G. Hutchins. He also, calls the nineteenth century elites as a 'manipulative family'. Almost all the prominent leaders of the nineteenth century like K.P.S. Menon, S.C. Bose, Sardar Patel, S.N. Banerjee, B.C. Pal, Jawaharlal Nehru even Gandhiji at their early careers, were Pucca-Saheb'. Born in a typical conservative family system, the Indian educated middle class, were turned Anglicised peoples' leaders in the new Western set-up. 'The cultural expression of the Anglicised Victorian Indian reflected the basic ambiguity of an essentially initiative enterprise'<sup>19</sup>. These educated elites were, though a 'microscopic minority' enjoyed most privileged importance in the society in comparison to its size<sup>20</sup>. The initiative and the efforts of this Anglicised Indian elites, were always of double standard. In one way, they indulged in manipulation for collaboration, on the other hand, urged for modernisation. The renaissance, which they brought in Indian soil 'not a spontaneous borrowing from one's own ancient

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19. Francis G. Hutchins, Spontaneous Movements : The Quit India Movement, Monohar Bokk Service, Delhi, pp. 69-76.

20. Sumit Sarkar, Op.Cit., p. 66.

traditions seen in a vital perspective but a result of an attempt by a dominant elite to encourage imitation among its dependents,<sup>21</sup>. This elites, in course of their expansion and acquired strength, became the policy makers of the Indian national movement. The 'interest groups',<sup>22</sup> consisting mostly bureaucratic and business elites, among the Indian elites in general, later on favoured constitutionalism more and more instead of complete independence. The ideological conflicts within the national movements are the best reflection of these interests.

The national question and the national movement are closely linked with the question of classes and the class struggles. J.V. Stalin has analysed the role of different classes as follows -

The strength of the national movement is determined by the degree to which the wide strata of the nation, the proletariat and peasantry, participate in it<sup>23</sup>.

The dominant ideas are the ideas of the ruling class and an ideal expression of the dominant material relationships. The study of

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21. David Kopf, Quoted in Hutchin's Spontaneous Movement : The Quit India Movement, Op. Cit., p. 78.
  22. Robert Presthus, Elites in the Policy Process, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 243.
  23. J.V. Stalin, Marxism and the National Question, Mass Publication, Calcutta, 1976. p. 23.



nationalism in India as ideas, therefore, demands importance of study of the nature of the material relationships as well as the class conflict existed during the period under study. As discussed earlier, the elites or the bourgeoisie elites developed the policy of nationalism in India through the concept of Swadeshi and Swaraj by advocating lessaiz-faire theory in the nineteenth century and 'boycott foreign goods' in the twentieth century. The legitimacy of this formulation cannot be ruled out. Though, the above formulations were basically in accordance with the class-interest of the dominant Indian bourgeoisie. It also expressed a common interests of the entire masses. Justification of such 'common interests' comes from the fact, which Karl Marx has analysed very clearly. To quote -

The class which makes a revolution appears from the beginning not as a class but as the representative of the whole of society; simply because it is opposed to a class. It appears as the whole mass of society confronting the single ruling class. It can do this, because, at the beginning, its interest really is more closely connected with the common interest of all other non-ruling classes and has been unable under the constraint of the previously existing conditions to develop as the particular interest of a particular class<sup>24</sup>.

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24. 'Materialist Conception of History' Theories of History, Gardiner, P. (ed.), Oxford University Press the Free Press, 1959.

✓ The concept and theory of 'factions and factionalism' comes out of the influence of Behavioural School of Thought and the English School of Constitutionalism. These schools hold that the Indian nationalism is a product of the Colonial Rule, resulted out of 'Stimulus and Responses'. It argues that the introduction of constitutional facilities and institutions like committees, municipality, local and district boards, provincial and central legislature etc, which acted as stimulus to facilitate the resultant responses of the Indian masses, the elites in particular, leading to the growth of national consciousness. While most of us believe that nationalism in India grew up under the Colonial Rule, no one can say with exact date, since when it emerged. Problem arises out of the question - when did India go under the Colonial Rule? Was it in 1757 or in 1858 or long back in 1615 when Sir Thomas Roe got the firman from the Mughal Emperor Jahangir? The victory at the battle of Plassey (1757) could not declare the English East India Company as the supreme and the sole political authority over the Indian masses and the states. Even the proclamation of Queen Victoria on November 1, 1858, also did not carry recognition of the crown's supremacy over the loyalty of the Indian masses. In reality, it took long time for the English Imperialist to bring India completely under its subjugation. If nationalism means 'love of the nation or people, zeal for its true interests, loyalty to the state, affection for the homeland or similar to patriotism', it existed in India long before the Colonial Rule.

The love for the homeland is not an elite's achievement but an inherent instinct of the human kind. Indian nationalism is historically evolved national aspirations and consciousness resulted out of the 'action and interaction of the numerous objective and subjective social forces and factors' developed as a process and consolidated during the Colonial Rule<sup>25</sup>. It is therefore, wrong to say - Indian Nationalism as a counter product of the Colonial Rule. The real aspiration or the urge for equality and liberty were predominantly existed among the Indian masses, mostly peasants as an under current. The existence of such under current reflected in the numerous anti-feudal, anti-colonial uncomprising armed movements long before the (so called) national movement of the late nineteenth century. Some scholars have inclined to term these movements as traditional resistance movements. What ever might be, once these resistance movements upheld the people's urge for freedom, cannot be kept in isolation or under estimated in the name of localisation. In fact, the real dynamism of Indian nationalism lie in these resistance struggle.

To sum up, the problem, therefore, involves both with the methodological and ideological limitations. Ideologically, Indian historiography is biased and confined by the domination of the bourgeoisie elite historians. Methodologically speaking, the

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25. A.R. Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 4th Edition, 1966, pp. 384-5.

legacy of constitutional historiography of Britain makes the scope of Indian historiography limited. The glorification of English constitutionalism still attracts Indian historians only because of the fact that it suits their ideological positions of their own-class-interest. The problem of overcoming this limitation of the approaches definitely lie in the study of history from the below in terms of class.

#### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND CONCEPT

It is noted that the recent trend in writing of history has shifted towards focussing importance on the grass-roots. The word grass-root or grass-roots, though, generally 'used specifically to describe the rank or file of the electorate or of a political party', the actual meaning of it is the 'source or origin or the fundamental level'<sup>26</sup>. The grass-roots study, is, popularly termed under various title like 'history from below', 'People's history' or 'History of the people'. This trend does not mean a contrary to earlier historiography but 'just the enlargement of the scope of history' as commented by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya<sup>27</sup>.

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26. R.W. Burchfield, A Supplementary to the Oxford English Dictionary, Vol A6, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 1286.

27. S. Bhattacharya, 'History from Below', Social Scientist, Vol II, No. 119, April, 1983.

The word 'people', though usually means the population, 'the concept, actually includes as its main components, the direct producers i.e. the working people and the non-exploiting groups of the population'.<sup>28</sup> While the classes and the social groups are part of the people, the concept of it 'cannot always be reduced to classes and sections'. The masses or the people constitute the lower order of the classified society and certainly form the majority in numbers and exist horizontally in the societal structure. They are also historically changing community of people who had always been unleashed the decisive force in history. The decisive role of the masses, of course, not because of its numerical strength but due to its labour power 'to create all the material and the bulk of the spiritual wealth'. The process, thereby, ensures the decisive conditions for society's existence, development of production and corresponding changes in the production system and the social life.

The peasantry, during the period under study, constituted the enmasse of the people and the main oppressed social groups. The other working classes including the industrial, plantation, and factory labourers, artisans, craftsman etc were numerically small but deeply oppressed under an acute antagonistic system of Colonial Rule.

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28. I. Frolov, Dictionary of Philosophy, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1987, p. 313.

The involvement of the people in the mass-movement was a great incentive to the national struggle. The participation of the masses, however, was not always of one sided result. It was both spontaneous and organised.

The Indian society, particularly the society at the grass-root level, was severely affected by the British land settlements, heavy land revenue demands, the judicial system and the commercialisation of agriculture. Consequently they were compelled to take the path of prolonged struggle against their oppressors consisting of the zamindars, landlords, money lenders and the Alien Rule. Thus, the Indian masses showed their first historic resentment spontaneously against the dominant class and the class powers without elite leaderships. Prior to 1857, spontaneous peasant uprisings sprang all over. Most important of these upsurges, the Santhal rebellion of 1856 which continued up to 1859 is worth to be mentioned. It is also important to focus that it was the lower strata of the Indian masses who led all these spontaneous armed uprisings. Among other numerous peasant struggles of the nineteenth century, the Indigo Plantation peasant's revolt of 1860, struggle of the Maratha peasants of Ahmedabad and Poona in 1875-76, Moplah uprisings of 1836-1896, the uprisings of Bengal peasants in Bogra and Patna in 1872 are to be mentioned specifically for their intensity and influence<sup>29</sup>. The nationalist leaderships were not involved with these peasant movements.

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29. L. Natarajan, Peasant Uprisings in India (1850-1900), PPH, Bombay, 1953, p. 3.

But, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the nationalist leadership, from their own experience, could well realise that 'the Indian realities - its many languages, two major belief systems, many tribes, imperialist intrigues, above all, weak bourgeoisie formation'<sup>30</sup> will not help them to achieve swaraj without the peasant mobilisation. Thus, since around 1917, the Indian National Congress, the leading political party started adapting agrarian policies to press the demands of the peasantry. The Gandhian peasant movements in Champaran in North-West Bihar, Kheda in Gujarat and Bordoli in Surat district were thus organised under the pressure from below. The radical groups and individuals also, by the same time, started organising the working classes. In a letter to Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta, on 20 August, 1921, V.I. Lenin, advised him to follow his 'Thesis' on - National and Colonial problems. He also requested him to send documents regarding any peasant organisations, if ever existed in India. According to Dr. Dutta, it was not before the receipt of Lenin's letter that Indian radicals had ever thought of peasants role in the struggle for freedom. The attitudes of the middle class and the bourgeoisie was, definitely against the peasant mobilisation, however, very few of them were pro-peasants. The necessity of peasant-workers' alliance was also out of question in their mind<sup>31</sup>. In course of time, a substantial number of nationalist intelli-

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30. Amalendu Guha, Op. Cit., p. 11.

31. Bhupendra Nath Dutta, Quoted in 'Adhunik Itihashe Krishaker Bhumika' by Nirmalya Bagchi, 'Mulyaan' Puja Special Issue, 1984.

gentsia turned revolutionary, most of them with left ideology and dedicated themselves in organising the masses at the grass-roots level. By the thirties of this century, peasant organisations were formed by the socialist and the leftists. The peasant movements gathered strength and developed into a new direction towards internationalism and socialism. 'Since 1940's several armed peasant uprisings broke out under the communist influence'. These have been a continuation as well as changes between the earlier revolts and the modern communist one<sup>32</sup>. The peasant struggles in Malabar, Telengana and the Te-bhaga peasant struggle are to be pointed precisely. All these movements focussed attention on the burning issues of land revenue burden, land settlement system, and thereby demanding end of zamindari, the money lending and the colonial system.

The mobility of the people at the grass-roots level, therefore, horizontally extended and thereby generated tremendous upward pressure which infused extraordinary militancy in the national struggle for freedom. The grass-roots study is thus relevant and most important.

The study of 'Peoples' history', of course, is not a new trend in India, though the emphasis on it is made very recently. In the opinion of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'in the Indian historio-

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32. Kathleen Gough, 'Indian Peasant Uprising' in Peasant Struggle in India A.R. Desai (ed), Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 95.

graphy, the term 'history of the people' is branded about right, left and centre. Since Sir William Hunter to the present historians, it has been attempted to write history of the people based upon archival sources mostly. While the rightist historiography has been attempted to project people minus their politics of action, the leftist historiography has been insisted to see the dynamics in the production relations and the corresponding degree of class-conflict or antagonism; while the centrist historiography have followed the ideology of the nationalist and considered 'people' as the follower of the elite leaderships. Methodologically, the recent writing of peoples' history has focussed more on the inter-disciplinary approaches based on empirical study. Professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has rightly pointed<sup>out</sup> that 'the strength of the methods of 'history from below' lies in the micro-level in depth investigation'.

To sum up, it may be concluded that the practice of grass-roots study of nationalism in India, is the only way to examine the cross-fertilization of Indian nationalism. It will also equip us to evolve a methodology to write total history of the people not only of the colonial period but in its true perspective of the situation in retrospective.

The present study is intended to have an in-depth investigation of mass-nationalism in Assam during 1937-47 with special reference to the districts of Darrang and Nowgong. The study is

conducted with an objective of bringing into focus the grass-roots of mass-resistances and the areas of conflicts between different social groups and community. It is also attempted to reveal the nature and trend of Pan-Indian as well as regional nationalism in the relevant areas during the specified period.

The reasons behind the selection of these two areas lie basically in two facts. In the first place, the tradition of grass-roots organisation and its role had marked its more effective continuation in these areas. Secondly, the growth and assertion of mass-nationalism had its strong headway and intensive character in these two districts specifically so far the province of Assam is concerned.

So far the period under study is concerned, it was influenced by several historical developments; as a result of which, mass-nationalism, not only at the national level but at the village level too, emerged dominantly. The period followed by the first general election in 1937 provided the Indian National Congress, the leading political party, an expansive network of bases as well as widening of the gulf between the forces of action and reaction. The trend of left nationalism too, gained its momentum with the passing of the resolution at the Lucknow Congress in 1936, against fascism and thereby showing solidarity and sympathy towards socialism, including a resolution to incorporate kisan-sabhas and the working class unions under the perview of the Indian National Congress programme for the first time in its

history since its inception. The formation of the All India Congress Socialist Party, All India Kisan Sabha, All India Progressive Writers Association, All India Students Federation in 1936 and their strong advocacy for socialism, demand for abolition of zamindari system and the policy of upholding the down-trodden in addition to the communist ideology and its movement also marked by historical significance. All these developments provided an ideological basis as well as support of the revolutionary intellectuals to the Indian masses in their struggle for survival and fight for freedom.

Of course, since 1923, the politics of India had been taking a different shape with the growth of series of peasant upheavals in Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Malabar, a majority of them violent armed struggles not only on economic grounds but also on political demands, parallel to the non-violent Gandhian movement.

Under this historically significant background, the study intends to examine the extent and impact of the peasant nationalism in the relevant areas.

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## EPILOGUE

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In the fore-going chapters, we have traced the course and development of Indian Nationalism in Assam with special reference to the districts of Darrang and Nowgong since 1937 till 1947. We now generally agree, that nationalism as a 'political doctrine' or as a 'system of political ideas' and as a 'social movement'<sup>1</sup> is conditioned by the material development as well as the degree of social consciousness. The material condition on which the social consciousness of the masses in general and the peasantry in particular emerged and developed in India was instrumental to produce social unrest<sup>2</sup>. It was the colonial rule with its multifacet exploiting systems which radically transformed the socio-economic basis of the Indian society. The peasantry was subjected to land settlements with heavy land revenue demands, 'judicial system loaded against the peoples' interest' and an Alien political system with repressive nature. All these factors completely ruined the Indian economy resulting improverishment of the entire people. The material condition based on inequality and exploitation thus provided the ground to the rise of social consciousness.

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1. E.K. Francis, Inter-Ethnic Relations, An Essay in Sociological Theory, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 1976, p.3.
  2. Andre Betleille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1974, p. 188.

These consciousness reflected in various forms suiting the interests of various classes constituting the people of India. But, the common interests which formed the basic dynamics of Indian Nationalism was its strive for national independence. But, its nature was not out of class-interests. These class-interests determined the character of social consciousness at various level. The course of national movement in Assam reveals these class interests at different level particularly in its strategy and tactics - determining the nature and character of mass-nationalism.

The study was conducted to examine the nature and character of grass-roots nationalism in Assam in the relevant areas with special emphasis on the mass-resistances. It was intended to focus into the grass-roots of mass-nationalism and the areas of conflict between different social groups, classes and communities. It has also been attempted to focus on the nature and the trend of Pan-Indian as well as regional nationalism.

The introduction of the Government of India Act of 1935 and subsequent establishment of provincial government in Assam, no doubt helped in developing constitutional consciousness among the masses. The election process helped the APCC to extend its base to the remote villages, of course, predominantly of Hindus. But at the same time it should also be admitted that various types of petty consciousness in the form

of proto-nationalism of immigrant muslims, protectionism of the indigenous Assamese middle classes also found expression during the period. These petty consciousness, in one hand, helped to rise social tension and resultant social conflict; on the other hand, stood on the way of mass-consolidation for national freedom. Despite these development, the mass-nationalism during the period under study developed significantly. The grass-roots consciousness had provided the strength of mass-nationalism.

The Congress party in Assam was of moderate character. It was dominated by the landed gentry<sup>and</sup>/middle class elites. With a few exceptional cases, the Congress party in Assam never adopted any pro-peasantry programmes. The nationalist movement was confined to programmes like hand-spinning, anti-opium eating campaign and 'peaceful' picketing. It was the grass-roots organisations that existed long before the formation of APCC in 1921 which exerted tremendous upward pressure upon the nationalist middle class leaders to give importance on the agrarian problems. The most important demand of it was to reduce land revenue by 50 percent. During the thirties, some Congressmen like Omeo Kumar Das, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Lakshmidhar Sarmah, Krishna Sarmah and others took keen interests on the agrarian issues. They also tried to understand the potentiality of the peasants' involvement in the struggle for freedom. Taking pro-peasant stand, they started attending rayat sabha conferences and helped to organise the peasants on

socio-economic and political demands. During the thirties, the emergence of numerous rayat sabha reflects the growing social consciousness of the peasants. Most of the rayat sabhas were formed spontaneously under the leadership of grass-roots people. Later on, the APCC and the left individuals took initiative in organising the rayats). The extensive network of grass-roots organisation helped the Congress to mobilise majority of the Hindu peasants into the fold of national struggle. The support of peasantry provided the Congress party to win over the electoral battle held in 1937. The success of the Congress victory in the provincial election was more or less due to their promise to reduce land revenue by 50 percent. The Congress during its period of ministry reduced the land revenue according to its promise and also imposed income tax upon the tea-planters. Thereby the Congress established its hegemony over the Hindu peasants and brought them under the bourgeoisie nationalist ideas of 'revolution from above'<sup>3</sup>. Since 1937 till 1939, there was no peasant struggle as such except their involvement to defend the Congress party in the Assembly. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and the resignation of the Congress Ministry on principle, the mass-nationalism was found to be revived. The APCC, too, shifted its activities from the Assembly floor to the public platforms. The anti-War demonstrations formed the basis of

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3. P. Anderson, quoted in Gramsci and Italy's Passive Revolution, edited by John A. Davis, Barnes and Noble Books, New York, 1979, p. 40.

mass-resistances during the period. It was the grass-roots mass-organisation which infused militancy in mass-resistances leading to Quit India Movement. The Quit India resolution was in fact, carried out into practice by the grass-roots masses despite leaderlessness and ruthless repressive measures of the government.

The involvement of the masses of the districts under study in the Quit India Movement is significantly notable. It were the days of mass-resistances. So far the nature of the stir was concerned, the chronology of the movement reveals three phases. In the first phase, the movement started as usual peacefully taking out protest rallies, shouting slogans, hoisting the tri-color in all the Congress offices etc. This phase continued till the third week of August, 1942. The large scale campaign programme to educate the masses on the strategy and tactics of non-violent movement was one of the features of this phase. The most striking second phase started in reaction to the repressive measures of the Government. Being disgusted with the non-violent principle, a group of radically minded youths went underground and indulged in attacking government buildings, damaging means of communications to stop military movements. Soon, this type of underground activities confined to the sabotage programme only because of their isolation from the masses, and lack of radical ideology. Result was that the sabotages turned

terrorism arousing mass-confusion, frustration and inviting heavy police oppression upon the innocent masses. The third phase started around September, 1942. In view of the growing frustration among the masses as well as the tide of terrorism, the second grade Congress leaders planned to revive the confidence of the masses to re-assert mass-resistance. It was decided to hoist tri-color on 20 September in all the administrative units and district offices. Several large organised processions were brought out in Gohpur, Dhekiajuli, Sootea, Jamuguri, Barhampur, Hati-sung, Puranigodam and many other places leading to paralisation of local administrative units.

The most striking feature of this phase was the establishment of parallel government in many places. The structure and function of the parallel government was unique in character though lasted for a shorter period. The parallel government or Peoples' Raj had left its historical significance. It laid the basis of Panchayati Raj in Indian soil.

The August movement generated an unprecedented revolutionary upsurges though it could not be prolonged. The revolutionary firement cooled down within a short period, to mention before December, 1942. It was virtually ended in failure but left historical marks so far the sacrifice, dedication and involvement of the masses were concerned. Almost

all the persons who sacrificed their life facing heroically all sorts of oppression of the Government were grass-roots youths, peasant and workers. Most of the martyrs\* were young and poor.

The indigenous tribal peasants also played an important role. They not only faced sufferings but also dedicated their life for the cause of freedom. The plain tribal peasants (Lalung, Kachari, Karbis and Garos) including Karbi hill tribal peasants joined the mass-resistance struggle enmasse. Mahendranath Hazarika, the revolutionary nationalist along with his comrades in arms, who led the terrorist movement, maintained his underground life in the tribal dominated areas under Marigaon mauza of Nowgong district. Lakshmiprasad Goswami, another underground revolutionary nationalist did organise terrorist violence from the areas predominantly of Hill Karbi tribes.

The Muslim population, however remained outside the mass-resistance movement. The districts under study are composed of mixed population, majority of which indigenous Assamese, both tribal and non-tribal poor peasants. It is also in this districts that the settlement of immigrant muslim poor peasants was made extensively since 1920. The immigrant muslim peasants, under compelling situation, were more concerned with their immediate settlement than independence of the country. The majority of them, therefore remained passive throughout the period. They involved enmass only in the electoral process in 1936-37.

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\* See Appendix A

Though divided and organised under several Muslim political parties, the indigenous and immigrant muslims of the relevant areas were Pan-Indian in spirit till 1939.

It was during the Congress-Coalition Ministry that the muslim population in Assam turned to incline with the Muslim League to fight back the protectionist move of the Assamese chauvinists who played a pressure-politics to pursue a policy to evict the immigrant muslims. It was under such situation, the majority of the muslim population remained outside the mass-upsurges in 1942. In some places, the government organised a section of them to counter the movement. The Hindu-Muslim relation was further strained with the provincial legislative election which was so far been held pending due to the war situation. The Assam Legislative Assembly was dissolved by a notification No. GS/MS/21/45/7 by the Governor dated 24 September with effect from the forenoon of October, 1945<sup>4</sup>. A fresh election was announced in 1946. All the political parties, namely INC, ML, CPI, regional parties like Ahom Association, Tribal League, and religious group like Jamiat-ul-Ulema geared up election campaign since September, 1945. The Congress party could secure a seat adjustment with the regional parties and thereby put up 32 candidates in the general constituencies, 16 candidates in the special constituencies (of which one in labour, 3 in hills tribal and 2 in plain tribal constituencies).

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4. Report of the Working of the Assam Legislative Assembly, 1937-45, Shillong, 1946, p. 105.

Fakruddin Ali Ahmed of Congress was put in the Muslim constituencies<sup>5</sup>. The Muslim League contested in all muslim constituencies.

The result of the election reveals a landslide victory of Congress securing 50 seats out of total seats of 108. It secured support of few other legislative members and thereby assumed an overwhelming majority. In the districts of Darrang and Nowgong, all the Congress candidates were elected<sup>6</sup>. The victory of Congress was greeted with great 'hope and expectation'. The Congress party 'took office in Assam on 11 February 1946 with 7 of its members as Ministers and Gopinath Bordoloi as the Premier<sup>7</sup>. The Bordoloi ministry immediately took steps to release all political prisoners, refund collective fines imposed and return of seized guns, bicycle etc. But its eviction policy for 'eviction of trespassers from the Professional Grazing Reserves was the burning topic of the day', leading to controversial debate all over the state<sup>8</sup>.

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5. Institutional Collection, AICC (PCC, Assam), F. No. 3/1945.  
NMML. (New Delhi)

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. Annual Report of the Assam Congress Parliamentary Party Feb - 1946 - Feb, 1947 and other notes on Economic Problems, F. No. ED-I, 1946-47. NMML (New Delhi)

8. Ibid.

It was observed that 'instead of half hearted measures like last time, now the government proposed to take strong action to evict'. The 'Assam Tribune', an English daily dominated by an Assamese Hindu family suggested the government to employ military force if the state's police force seemed to be insufficient and inadequate<sup>9</sup>. In a telephonic message, the Intelligence Bureau noted that 'as the most of the immigrants are muslims, there is a possibility that trouble may break in Southern Assam which is pre-dominantly Muslim'<sup>10</sup>.

The eviction policy was carried out in the Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang district and Marigaon sub-division of Nowgong district. By the month of May, the eviction was carried out successfully but since June there was a 'show of resistance to eviction at some places of Mangaldai'<sup>11</sup>. The communal tension thus flared up, resulted in the occurrence of few assaults, arsons. In both the districts, the conflict was between the Assamese peasants including Kacharis, Miris and Lalung tribals and the immigrant muslim peasants. Under this situation, both the Congress and the Muslim League are reported 'to be trying to build up bodies of volunteers'. The Muslim

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9. Extract from fortnightly report, No. 20/46 on the political situation in Assam for the second half of October, 1946  
F. No. 119/46 Poll(1), Home Deptt. N.A.I.

10. Telephone Message from the Headquarter, Eastern Command, on 14 Nov. 1946. F. No. 119/46 Poll(1) Home Deptt N.A.I.

11. Report on Communal Situation, F. No. 57/12/46 Poll(1)  
Home Deptt. N.A.I.

League, as reported, attempted to 'raise a band of 1,00,000 volunteers to protect the interests of immigrants'<sup>12</sup>.

Since October, the communal tension had 'grown to new heights' partly due to the influence of the outbreak of communal riots in East Bengal. In spite of such situation, the Bordoloi Ministry was determined to carry out its eviction policy. It declared ban on the movements of the provincial league president and the secretary. Reacting sharply to Bordoloi Ministry's eviction policy, the M.L. declared an open fight to resist eviction and observed a hartal in retaliation of its earlier decision on January 3 all over the state against present Congress atrocity<sup>13</sup>. There were reports of armed clashes between the immigrants in resistance and the police force in operation<sup>14</sup>. Thus the Hindu-Muslim relation was strained.

The relation was further worsened with the coming of the Cabinet Mission and its proposal of grouping. The Cabinet Mission sent by the British Parliament in March 1946 'to promote in conjunction with the leaders of Indian opinion, an early realisation of full self-government in India', arrived

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12. Report on Communal Situation, op.cit.

13. Extract from the fortnightly report, No. 24/46 of C.I. Officer, Shillong, for the second half of October, 1946  
F. No. 119/46 Poll(1) Home Deptt. N.A.I.

14. Note by Deputy Director, Intelligence Bureau, dt. 24 March, 1947, ibid.

in India on 23 March, 1946. The Mission did hold negotiations with the national leaders and entered into deliberations on the issue of India's independence. The Mission also held talks with Gopinath Bordoloi, Premier of Assam and Sir Saadulla, the Ex-Premier and the leader of the Assam Muslim League. In spite of these series of discussions, there could not be a concensus. The serious controversy arose out of the Mission's proposal of grouping. The grouping included provincial representation to the constituent assembly. The representations however classified under three groups - A, B and C. The province of Bengal and Assam was placed under Group C according to the proposal<sup>15</sup>. The grouping was strongly opposed by the majority of Hindus under the leadership of APCC. The opposition was due to the apprehension that the very proposal might be designed to convert Assam into a muslim majority province. The apprehension was not out of justification. The figures<sup>16</sup>(Table-3) of muslim and non-muslim population of the two provinces reveals the very motive of the proposal. But, the Assamese chauvinists handled the situation in such a manner, that the fight against the proposal was turned not only anti-muslim but against all non-Assamese residents. The chauvinists under the cover of Quit Assam Party, served notices to all non-Assamese

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15. Home Poll File No. 51/2/46 Poll (1) N.A.I.

16. Ibid. Statement by the Cabinet Delegation and His Excellency the Viceroy

TABLE-3

North-Eastern area	Muslim	%	Non-Muslim	%
Bengal	33,005,434		27,301,091	
Assam	3,442,479		6,762,254	
Total	36,447,913	51.69	34,063,345	48.31

speaking, so called, 'foreigners' and circulated pamphlets.

In a pamphlet<sup>17</sup> the Quit Assam Party wrote -

Quit Assam Quit Assam Quit Assam  
To all Marwaries, Punjabis, Bengalis  
and other foreigners

We do not want to see any foreigners in Assam.  
 You all are sucking our blood, in any way.  
 Go back to your land or you will loose your  
 life and properties. We will drive you out  
 from Assam like dogs as the Burmese did.

In reaction to this trend of protectionism, the proto-nationalism with seperatist tendency of the muslim population of Assam found expression in their demand for Pakistan and support in favour of inclusion of Assam under grouping number C. To counter M.L.'s move, the Hindus under various shades like Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha, Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, Assam Kachari Association rallied behind the Congress<sup>18</sup>.

17. Institutional Collection, AICC (P.C.C. Assam)

F. No. Cl-22/1946-47, NMML.

18. Political History of Assam, Vol III, op.cit. pp. 293-322.

The mass-nationalism, so far developed, was thus divided sharply. The whole issue assumed communal, racial and linguistic complications. In spite of such polarisation, the most significant fact is that the social tension could not turn into major communal riots during the period under study. There was no major untoward incidents or communal clashes in the districts of Darrang and Nowgong. The reason can be located in the strength of grass-roots nationalism which was despite of differences, overall remained Pan-Indian in character promoting Hindu-Muslim unity based on mutual understanding and trust.

The mass-resistances during the period under study, though significantly militant was never radicalised nor did it assumed the character of an armed struggle except few stray cases. Our assumption was that the peasantry, who constituted the grass-roots of nationalism had played independently throughout the period armed with revolutionary urge to have a radical change in the production relation. But the study reveals that inspite of the repeated efforts, the peasants were all along influenced by the bourgeoisie nationalist ideas of 'revolution from above'. As a result, they could not emerge as 'class for itself'. It was definitely due to the limitation of ideology that guided them. The left ideology started spreading in the select districts late in the forties. The left organisations so far developed was confined to a limited pockets and therefore had little influential capacity. The grass-roots

nationalism was therefore, of the character of mass-nationalism directing against the colonial rule only. The concept of 'revolution from below' through elimination of the feudal and capitalist system and exploitation could not effectively influence the masses. Whatever the achievement the masses could secure in the form of asserting their socio-economic and political rights, was due to their own initiative at the grass-roots level exerting an upward pressure upon the elite leadership.

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