

# THE SEARCH FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY AND THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM

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## INTRODUCTION

The Northeast of late, has come to the limelight and media attention because of the movements for autonomy, in some cases demanded for independence. The ethnic movements in the Northeast are in a way very complex. The main thrust of the paper is the search for the identity, which has led to violence in the Northeastern states of India. Many ethnic movements have come up in the region in the recent decades and some have turned to be violent.

However, what is fundamental in all these movements is the basic human search for identity for which every human being aspires. An identity is constructed when a group of people decides to live in one identity, for identity is not a ready-made thing. It is constructed in and through the interaction of the people, in the given socio-economical context, taking into consideration what is preserved in history and tradition in a given culture. The basic question is, how can the people of Northeast preserve their cultural identity, their unique ethnicity within the Indian Union, which is dominated by Arya-Dravidian political cultural forces? Hence, my search for an understanding of this long-standing problems. This paper is an expression of my personal commitment to the people of the Northeast India.

Chapter one presents a brief introduction of the Northeast India. Often people do not know where to look for the Northeast in a map of India. The Northeast India is comprised of the seven states, commonly known as the 'Seven Sisters'. These seven states have characteristics and lifestyle that are different from those of the rest of the India. The Northeast is the abode of a large number of tribes and other ethnic groups. Today, the face of the Northeast is fast changing and it must be remembered that the region is the meeting ground of different cultures and ethnic lifestyle.

Chapter two gives a brief outline of Assam, its origin, and history. Assam was never a part of India. The chapter focuses on the uniqueness of the people of Assam, their culture and practices distinct from the rest of the India. It shows how down the ages the different political forces have governed Assam. It also highlights the interests of various groups in governing Assam. Assam is blessed with lot of natural resources and so often down the ages various outside groups have tried to take advantage on these natural resources.

. Chapter three deals with the problem of illegal migration from Bangladesh. It shows how the British encouraged migration and how it is sustained till today. The chapter proposes to look at the issue of migration in historic and contemporary perspective of land settlement and related political questions, pressure on natural resources and the question of sustainable development of Assam. The presence of illegal migrants poses various threats to the socio-cultural, politico-economical development of the region.

The later part of my dissertation deals with following questions, Why there is ethnic unrest in Assam? What are the reasons for ethnic movement and how ethnic movement originated in Assam, what is the present situation of Assam? It deals with how the illegal migration has come to threaten the ethnic identity and loss of the culture of Assamese. It also highlights the stand of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in the ethnic movement.

It raises the question of violence and why the issue of identity has turned to violence. It shows how violence is used as means in search of identity in the Northeast

region. Democratic means of acquiring peace have failed in the Northeast and that has led people of the Northeast to take up violence and armed struggle against the existing forces. The chapter raises a fundamental question. Can violence be justified in search of identity? And to what extent can violence be used as a means to achieve the desired end? It also shows how and who uses violence as a tool for suppressing the other and also how the struggle of the oppressed lead to violence in order to restore their humanity.

Finally, the paper draws attention towards the Central government's stand on the problems of the Northeastern region. It shows how the Centre regarding various issues and problems treats the region. It highlights the step-motherly attitude of the Centre to the problems and issues of the Northeast. It shows how Northeast remains an isolated part of the country in development till today.

# Chapter I

## THE SEVEN SISTERS

India's North-East was divided into seven states, at different time and in various ways, after India's Independence. It is surrounded by Tibet, Bhutan and China in the North, Myanmar (Burma) in the East and Bangladesh in the South. Geographically it is isolated from the rest of the country. It is linked with the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometers wide at its slimmest, which is referred to as the Chicken's Neck, between the foothill of the Himalayas in the North and Bangladesh in the South. And the seven Northeastern states are described as the "Seven Sisters", situated in the extreme east of India.

Before proceeding to the main discussion on the topic, we shall have a glance on each one of the states and their uniqueness.

### **1.1 States: the Seven Sisters**

The Seven Sisters refer to the seven states of the North East of the Indian Union. They are:

#### **1.1.1 Arunachal Pradesh**

Arunachal Pradesh, literally means the 'land of the rising sun', the first Indian soil to greet the morning sun. Arunachal Pradesh was formally North East Frontier Agency. It became a Union Territory in 1972, and a state in February 1987. Arunachal Pradesh has Itanagar as its capital. Itanagar is the name given after *Itafort*, meaning the *fort of bricks* built in 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Arunachal Pradesh: the land of Dawnlit Mountains, lies on the North Eastern tip of India. Evergreen forest covers more than 60 per cent of the state with numerous turbulent streams, roaring rivers, etc. The state is proud of having more than five hundred rare species of orchids and has 18 important festivals, which are celebrated

on different occasions through out the year. Arunachal Pradesh is a home of more than twenty tribes.

### **1.1.2 Assam**

Assam included the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Meghalaya until the re-organization of the states, which took place in 1972. Geographically, Assam is spread beneath the foothills of Eastern Himalayas, sharing the boundaries with all the North Eastern States. The mighty river: Bramaputra overshadows Assam. Behu is one of the greatest festivals and is celebrated every year in the month of April. Assam has Guwahati as its capital.

Assam is the homeland for the Assamese, Bodos, Karbis and the like. Today, Assam in particular faces lots of problems and has become the battlefield between the militants and army, locals and non-local; the immigrants either from Bangladesh, Nepal, Bihar and other states.

### **1.1.3 Manipur**

Manipur is the land of Jewels, sheltering the Meeteis (Manipuris) and over two-dozen tribes. Meeteis are worshippers of Lord Vishnu, settled in the valley. The tribals are mostly Christian, settled in the hill regions. Chivalry was a part of life in Manipur especially of the Meeteis, from where *the royal game of polo* originated popular in the world. Manipur was a princely state and continued to maintain its sovereign existence until October 1949.

Geographically, Manipur is divided into mountainous hills, which surround a center plain; the valley of the Manipur river. At its center is Loktak Lake having the largest fresh Water Lake in the Region. Manipur became a state in 1972 with Imphal as its capital.

### **1.1.4 Meghalaya**

Meghalaya the 'Abode of Clouds' is the home of the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos tribes. They are descendants of the very ancient tribes having a distinct cultural

trait and ethnic origin. Meghalaya got statehood in 1972. It is an area of great scenic beauty with Shillong as its capital.

The Khasis of the Khasi Hills and their fellow tribes, Jaintias and Garos, were exposed to Christian Missionaries in the nineteenth century. Over the years, under the benign eye of successive British governors, networks of Christian missionary schools and hospital as well as colleges among the best in the country were set up.

In the state the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias are matrilineal societies where women are influential and the youngest girl in the family inherits the property. Thus Husbands go and live with their wives and children take the surname of the mother, not of the father.

### **1.1.5 Mizoram**

Formally Mizoram was called the Mizo Hills (or the Lushai Hills) District of Assam. It was a Union Territory in 1972 and got statehood in 1987, with Aizwal as its capital. It is the home of the Mizos. Mizos are mostly Christians, having the highest literacy rate in the region and ranking second place in the whole of the country.

Mizoram is now in the process of accelerated economic development. A state, which was troubled for more than twenty years, is now an abode of peace in the region. Their enthusiasm for fast social and economic development has created a new ethos in Mizoram. If this enthusiasm of the Mizos were sustained, it would soon emerge as a strong sentinel in the North Eastern border.

### **1.1.6 Nagaland**

Nagaland is home of many Naga tribes and is one of the smallest Indian States, which adjoins Myanmar. Formally Nagaland was called Naga Hills District of Assam and part of former North East Frontier Agency. Nagaland was made a separate state in 1963. Kohima, the capital of the state became famous in World War II, as the place where the Japanese advance was halted by the Indian and British forces. Today Kohima boasts of a war cemetery and a Japanese War Tank.

Dimapur is the main commercial center, which is 74 km away from the state capital, and has a railhead and airport in the whole of the state. Society is

predominantly tribal and many traditional customs are maintained. Women have relatively high status and influential positions in tribal council.

After 1947 an armed struggle emerged and claimed that Nagaland was a sovereign state. In 1957, following violent incidents, the Indian government established a single Naga administrative unit under Indian rule. In 1960 the Indian government agreed to make Nagaland a self-governing state within India. The state of Nagaland was formally inaugurated on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963. However Naga separatists continue to show violent opposition and Naga militancy is considered to be the model of the insurgent groups in the Region.

### **1.1.7 Tripura**

Tripura formerly was one of the three princely states, ceded to the Indian Union in October 1949 and attained statehood in January 1972 with Agra-tala as its capital. Tripura was never isolated but always had a constant touch with the outside world, particularly with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). And during the reign of Maharajas; the chiefs (even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the Bengalis were welcomed in the princely state, since the Bengali culture and economic structure were considered to be superior. At that time the density of the population was very low and they lived in harmony for several years. This welcome gesture of the Maharaja in the 1930s, laid the seed of demographic imbalance. The tribals; the sons of the soil were 'ninety-three per cent in 1947, by 1981, they had been reduced to a pathetic minority of just 28.5 per cent' (Hazarika S 123).

## **1.2 Geography**

Geographically most of the North Eastern states are mountainous in terrain with two major plain areas that is in the Assam plain of the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak river valley. The topography of the hills is generally rugged and vast areas are inaccessible. Another important characteristic is that all the North Eastern states

share international border, either with China, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

### **1.3 People**

The people of the North-East India in general have unique features of their own. They belong to different caste groups and tribes. Each one of them has their own culture and custom, which is different from the others. Each tribe speaks a different language, and majority of the population of the North East India belongs to the Mongoloid stock (race), speaking the language of the Tibeto-Burmis family. There are also people of non-Mongoloid origin. There is a marked difference between Mongoloid and the others. Mongoloid segment of population belongs to a large number of tribes, mostly settled in the mountain regions. The non-Mongoloid section of the population belongs to different castes and tribes living mainly in the plain and river valley. The non-Mongoloids have their own scripts like Assamese, whereas the Mongoloids follow oral traditions as a result they do not have scripts of their own.

There are number of ethnic movements in the region based on culture, language and customs trying to consolidate their identity. This study will make a special focus on ethnic movements in the Northeast, however, before proceeding further, the nuances of the related terms, particularly how violence is used as a weapon in search of identity, and the concept of identity and ethnic group will be explained in the next two chapters, which will be the basis in the argument in the proceeding chapters.

## **Chapter II**

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF ASSAM**

(Historical Backdrop)

*“Our identity is what allows us to define what is important to us and what is not.”<sup>1</sup>*

**Charles Taylor**

#### **2.1 Assam at a Glance**

The term “Assam” is derived from the word “Ahom”, a shan tribe. Assam is the land of blue hills and red rivers. It is spread beneath the foothills of Eastern Himalayas. The mighty river, Brahmaputra, covers the whole state of Assam. Assam is much more developed state then the rest of north-eastern states.

Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal in the north, Nagaland and Manipur in the east, Bangladesh, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram in the south. The land of Assam consists of valleys and hills and mighty rivers like the Brahmaputra and Barak. The principle language of Assam is Assamese although a large number of other languages are spoken such as bodo, karbi, rabha and dimasa.

Assam is an agricultural state. Agriculture accounts for the livelihood of about four-fifths of its people in Assam. The principle food crop is rice. Cash crops such as jute, tea, cotton oilseeds and sugarcane are also grown. It is also known for its forest wealth with varieties of flora and fauna. With its vast hills and forests, Assam is the home for a variety of medical herbs and plants. About 300 types of medicinal herbs and plants are known to exist in abundance in the state. Tea production in the state is the most important agro-based industry. Assam contributes about 15% of the world’s entire tea production. The state is also rich in petroleum and natural gas resources. It is the first state in the country where in 1889 oil was struck at Digboi. However, it should be noted here that Assam is industrially backward by Indian standards as it has

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self- The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 124.

a few agro-based and mineral-based industries. Assam has large reserve of coal too. The state is said to contain about 1200 million tones of coal reserves.

Assam is a land of fairs and festivals. Most festivals celebrated in Assam have their roots in diverse faith and belief of her inhabitants, but the spirit of togetherness and accommodation characterize the celebration of all the festivals. The major festivals celebrated in Assam are Bihu, Baishagu, Ali-Ai-Ligang, Baikho, Rongker etc. Among all these festivals Bihu is the most important festival of Assam. It is celebrated with joy and abundance by all.

## **2.2 A Brief History of Assam**

Assam is a land with an illustrious recorded history going back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Assam was an independent kingdom throughout all of history till the end of the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British conquered the kingdom and annexed it to British India. Thus, the history of the Assam has developed differently from the rest of the country.

### **2.2.1 The Ahoms**

The Ahom, a Shan tribe from which the name of Assam is probably derived, crossed the Patkoi Mountains from Burma in 1228 AD and by the sixteenth century had absorbed the Chutiya and Kachari kingdoms of the upper Brahmaputra, subdued the neighboring hill tribes, and integrated Hindu rajs into the administrative apparatus of a feudalistic state. The Ahom kings lived independently of the rest of India. They were neither vassal states nor conquered by any invading Indian power from northern or central India. The Ahoms were broadminded and married into the local Assamese community. Their administrative setup was smooth, their revenue collection just, and their council of ministers efficient.

Hem Barua, one of Assam's best known political figures in the post-independence era, said that the Ahoms were so impressed by the natural abundance of their conquered state that they called it "Land of Golden Gardens"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hem Barua, *The Red River and blue Hills*, (Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1954),p. 48.

Thus, between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries the Assam was built around the Ahoms, their succession and failures. They held out against outside invaders for virtually 600 years.

However, at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the Ahom kingdom became weak. In the beginning of the nineteenth century it completely collapsed. There are many reasons for its sudden collapse such as, succession of weak rulers and fierce Burmese invasions, which shattered the local governance of the Ahoms.

### **2.2.2 The Burmese Invasions**

The Burmese took the advantage of the internal chaos in the Ahom kingdom. The succession of the weak Ahoms rulers in the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries could not stand against the fierce Burmese invasions. Thus, the internal rivalries between the Ahom rulers, lavish life style, heavy taxation and many other factors played a vital role in succession of the Burmese establishment in some parts of the Ahom kingdom. During the reign of the Burmese they killed many Assamese to lay down their empire. They also imposed their religion and religious practices over the locals. All these made the locals bitter against the Burmese.

### **2.2.3 The British Raj**

The Burmese occupation of many of the Ahom kingdoms did not last longer. The Burmese tried to invade the territory controlled by the British East India Company in search of fugitives. As a result, retribution was swift. The British routed the Burmese in a series of military encounters. They were pushed out of Assam and ceded all rights to the area in 1826 by accepting the Treaty of Yandaboo. Soon the Ahoms, who were softened by decades of easy living, were swiftly taken over by the British who turned their attention to exploiting the natural resources of this abundant land.

The British encouraged migration that changed the face of Assam society. The British brought lot of people from across the boardses as well as from within the India. During the British Raj, the migrants came, “almost every train and steamer.

And it seemed like that their march will extend up the valley and away from the (Brahmaputra) river before long.”<sup>3</sup>

As British officials watched this inexorable long march, the economy of Assam also changed rapidly because of the colonial interests of exploiting oil and tea resources. Within a few years of the British conquest of Assam, Bengali became the language of the courts and remained the official language until 1873. Assamese was passed off as a poor relative. The schools were in Bengali and in the race for jobs, the Bengali had a major advantage: his home state, the first to be colonized by the British, had English language schools and colleges.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the ultimate aim of the colonial rulers of the British India was to exploit the socio-economic resources of the region and drain them off the country to make the British Empire prosper. With this aim in view they subjugated most of Assam and spread their network of capitalist consolidation and expansion in every nook and corner of the Assam. The consolidation and expansion of colonial exploitative system set different forces free to exploit the economy and brought it into the orbit of ‘world capitalist order’. Thus, in Assam the chieftains were either crushed totally or co-opted by the British through concessions.

#### **2.2.4 Assam in Post-Independence India**

The convention of the All India Congress Committee (AICC), which was held in Guwahati in 1926, marked a turning point in Assam’s involvement in the independence movement. Tarun Phookan became the first Assamese to be elected to the Congress Working Committee. Soon one of the most important figures of Assam, namely, Gopinath Bardoloi too became the member of the Congress party. The power of Mahatama Gandhi weaned Bardoloi toward anti-British struggles. During this period the Muslim League too was very active in Assam. The League was represented in Assam by a man called Sir Syed Mohammad Saadulla. Bardoloi and Saadulla were

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<sup>3</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika , *Strangers of the Mist*, (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.45.

thus rivals in Assam. The members of both these parties had different ideologies and different agendas. “The battle between Saadulla and Bardoloi was first fought in 1937’s voting to the provincial legislature which was contested by both the parties. However, the congress won convincing victories in the majority of the provinces, the League captured a handful.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus the Congress easily formed the government. However, personal rivalries and jealousies surfaced during the Congress ministerships. There was also a talk of corruption and nepotism about the Congress party. This led to a fall of Congress government in Assam soon. Saadulla took advantage of Congress internal chaos and formed the government in Assam. Hence, “the first Saadulla ministry was sworn in on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1937.”<sup>6</sup> But Saadulla’s government too did not last more than a year due to internal rivalries and backbiting within the League. Thus, his government fell in August 1938.

Thus Bardoloi found government in 1938.

However, Bardoloi’s first ministry and Assam’s first Congress did not make much headway. It inherited a financial mess from Saadulla and chronic labour unrest. The strike in Digboi oilfields in 1939 involved a several thousand workers demanding wage increase and a forty –four hour week. Conciliation efforts failed; there were police firings, many workers were killed and injured in the police firings, to make the matter worse more than 3,000 workers were sacked and the government expelled many senior union leaders. Thus, it was too much for Bardoloi’s government to handle and thus ultimately under the pressure Bardoloi resigned in 1939.<sup>7</sup>

“Bardoloi’s resignation cleared the way for Saadulla’s return to office. Within two days of Bardoloi leaving the top post, Saadulla was reinstalled as Premier of

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<sup>5</sup> Hazarika, p.50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.52.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Gordon, *The Nationalist Movement, 1876-1940*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 125

Assam on 17 November 1939.”<sup>8</sup> Saadulla was the puppet of Muslim League. He had to work and function at the whims of the League. The major task given to him by the League was to increase the number of Muslims in the Assam by immigration from the West Bengal. Thus, Saadulla announced, in July 1941, a “Land Settlement Policy that opened the floodgates to immigrants, allowing them to settle on government land anywhere in Assam and enabling to seize as much as thirty bighas of land and more for each homestead.”<sup>9</sup> In a 1945 letter, Saadulla boasted to Liaquat Ali Khan, the then M.A. Jinnah’s second –in command in the Muslim League, that “In the four lower districts of Assam Valley, these Bengali immigrant Muslim have quadrupled the Muslim population during the last 20 years.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Saadulla openly encouraged to his Muslim politicians to increase the number of the Muslims by his slogan “Grow More Muslims.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in a bid to strengthen his tenuous hold on Assam’s politics, he openly encouraged immigration from the East Bengal, helping Jinnah when he sought to claim Assam for East Pakistan.

The Quit India movement launched by the Congress paved a better time for Saadulla to increase the number of Muslims in Assam. The entire Congress leadership in Assam was picked up by the police. In the absence of the Congress opposition Saadulla assails Bengalis in hundreds to Assam. These migrations were laying the foundation for a demand by Jinnah for Assam’s inclusion in future Pakistan, by emphasizing the size of Muslim population and its close link with East Bengal.

Bardoloi feared the heavy consequences of the Land Settlement policy on native Assamese. Thus, the release from the jail of Congress members was very important; who were concerned about the way the Saadulla ministry was encouraging immigrants from East Bengal to pour into Assam.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 128

<sup>9</sup> Hazarika, p.58

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.58

<sup>11</sup> Penderel Moon, ed, *Wavell: The Viceroy’s Journal*, (London: OUP, 1973), p. 335.

Meanwhile, the students in Assam marched a protest rally against the widecast arrest of the Congress leaders. This led to a clash between the students and the police. More than two thousand students were injured, many of them badly. Soon the British Government released the Congress leaders.

Meanwhile, Saadulla government faced a problem. One of his Hindu Minister for Education, Rohini Kumar Choudhari, resigned when a no-confidence motion was tabled against the government. Gradually, several other legislators too abandoned Saadulla. This paved a way for Congress to form the government. The Congress government fought against the illegal immigrations of Muslims from the East Bengal with support of the students. Bardoloi also got support from the Gandhiji, who was also very much perturbed by Saadulla's pro-settlement policies. Gandhi's concern was translated into a ringing call to the Assamese people by a statement, "If people feel that the present policy of the Government on settlement and immigration is oppressive and anti-national, let them fight it non-violently, or violently, if necessary."<sup>12</sup>

#### **2.2.4.1 Cabinet Mission Plan**

The winter of 1946, as a tragedy of epic proportions—the Partition of India—was rapidly moving to its horrific conclusion. Feeling the pulse of the time Gopinath Bardoloi, the then Congress Premier of Assam, met the Mahatma at his camp in Noakhali, East Bengal.

The issue was simple: opposition to the Cabinet Mission's recommendation that India be grouped into three Sections, A, B and C. These were to include states as diverse as Bombay, the Northwest Province, Bengal and Assam, all of which had mixed religious populations.

The Mission clubbed Bengal, which was a Muslim-majority province, with Assam, a Hindu-dominated state. According to the Mission's dispensation, the Sections would frame the constitutions of these areas; a province with a numerical superiority like Bengal could force its views down Assam's throat.

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<sup>12</sup> Hazarika, p. 9.

Bardoloi's pleas against pushing Assam into Bengal's arms was dismissed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel who though first backed Bardoloi, but then, he too changed his position and took the Nehru line.

Bardoloi opposed the grouping scheme calling it "sinister." Bardoloi warned the Central leaders that his state would regard it as a 'great betrayal' if they went along with the scheme. Bardoloi feared the scheming of the Assam with the East Bengal because he realized that this would lead to a total disaster of Assam. The Assamese caste Hindus were also afraid that this scheme might lead them to losing their lands and their ethnic identity. The Muslims would play the dominating role in Assam politics.

Thus the centre's deaf ear to the pleas of Bardoloi and the concerns of the Assamese people led to the major outcry between Bengladeshi Muslims and Hindus in Assam.

The outcry was instantaneous and furious across Assam. In Assam students and masses protested because their population was far less than that of the Muslims and they would have had little say in conducting their own affairs. Thus the bloody Hindu-Muslim riots exploded in Assam and hundreds of migrant Muslims were massacred in these riots.

Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy, summoned Jinnah in an effort to improve relations between the two major parties. But Jinnah did not agree with the idea of losing Assam as not being part East Bengal. The British Government failed in reconciling the two parties. The Muslim League was adamant on Assam to be grouped into East Bengal province.

Thus, the British Government in desperate efforts pronounced that in the Sections of Provinces proposed, issues could be settled by simple majority of votes. But then Bardoloi and other congressmen of Assam feared this proposal of British Government, because this would prove fatal for Assam since Assam had more Muslim populations than the local Assamese in some of the districts.

Nehru and other Congressmen at the centre agreed to decide the fate of Assam on the basis of simple majority vote. Nehru and other Congressmen thought that the whole of India cannot be plunged into a civil war for the sake of Assam. When the AICC members met Nehru and asked whether he was not letting down Assam after giving high hopes to the leaders of that province, Pandit Nehru gave a curt reply saying that, “Assam could not hold up the progress of the rest of the India.”<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the Congress leadership, barring the Mahatma Gandhi and the Assam leaders were prepared to sell Assam out to the Muslim League and Pakistan.

According to Nirode Barooah, “the Cabinet Mission Plan was aimed at satisfying the Muslim League. Instead of conceding Pakistan as such, a half way house was created by grouping the provinces in such a way that at least two Muslim-predominated areas were emerged, representing the, “Muslim Nation.”<sup>14</sup>

#### **2.2.5.2 The Gandhi Card**

Bereft of support from the national leadership and worried by the Muslim League’s open declaration that the Cabinet Mission’s Plan meant that the “germ and essence of Pakistan”<sup>15</sup> was there, Bardoloi turned to his last resort: the Congress Party of Assam and the Mahatma. The Congress Party was popular in Assam especially since the State had been a keen participant in the independence movement. And the Mahatma’s support would be crucial to turn the tables against the Mission Plan and give the State Congress the support it needed

Bardoloi thus, along with his trusted emissaries and lieutenants, Bijoy Bhagawati and Mahendra Mohan Chowdhury, went to meet Gandhi who was then at a tiny village called Sewrampore.

Gandhi urged Assam to defy both the central leadership of the Congress as well as the Government of India and what can now be seen as a clear call to secede. He then advised the Assam in following words,

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<sup>13</sup> Hazarika, p.74.

<sup>14</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi, *Eight Lives: A Study of the Hindu-Muslim Encounter*, (Delhi: Roli Books, 1986), p. 158

<sup>15</sup> Hazarika, p.71.

If Assam keeps quiet, it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do. It must stand independently as an autonomous unit. It is autonomous to a large extent today. It must become fully independent and autonomous. Whether you have that courage, grit and the gumption, I do not know. You alone can say that...you will have to forget petty jealousies and rivalries and overcome your weaknesses. Assam has as many weaknesses as it has strength, for I know my Assam. We look to the Congress and then feel that if we do not follow it slavishly something will go wrong with it. I have said that not only a province but even an individual can rebel against the Congress and by doing so save it assuming he is on the right. I have done so myself...I have given you all this time to steel your hearts, to give you courage. If you do not act correctly and now, Assam will be finished. Tell Bardoloi I do not want Assam to lose its soul. It must uphold it against the whole world. Else I will say that Assam had only manniken and no men. It is impertinent to suggest that Bengal should dominate Assam in any way.<sup>16</sup>

Backed by those ringing words, Bardoloi stood up to the pressure of the Congress High Command as well as of the British Government and the Muslim League. Thus, the Mission's Plan fell apart. In July 1947, just barely one month before independence of India and Pakistan, Assam won its first major victory as an integral part of India.

#### **2.2.4 Assam after Independence**

Following Indian independence in 1947, the Assamese won control of their state assembly and launched a campaign to reassert the pre-eminence of Assamese culture in the region and improve employment opportunities for native Assamese. In addition, many in the tribal districts were demanding independence from India. Thinking it would satisfy the tribals, the Indian Government partitioned former Assamese

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<sup>16</sup> Gopinath Bardoloi, *A Note on Assam's Stand vis-a-vis-British Government Statement of 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1946*, (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum), p. 145.

territories into the tribal states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh over the next twenty years. Assamese leaders saw this as a deliberate division of their constituency.

During 1971 civil war of Pakistan, nearly two million Bengali Muslim refugees migrated to Assam. Their illegal settlement and then their electoral support for Indira Gandhi's Congress government further aggravated Assamese fears of Bengali cultural domination and central government ambitions to undermine Assamese regional autonomy.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were persistent disputes between the government and Assamese students and some Assamese political factions over the rights of illegal immigrants to citizenship and suffrage. However, the centre has always turned its deaf ear to the issues of the Assam. This led to the rise of the militancy in the region in the form of The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The 1990s have seen the demand for the independence of Assam from the centralized Indian government by organizations such as the militarized group called ULFA.

In elections of 1985, student-led government, which was named as the Asom Gana Parishad party came to power. There was a lot of expectation among the people. But, internal bickering and charges of corruption led to the downfall of the Asom Gana Parishad Ministry in 1990 although they came back to power later.

Many other groups have come up demanding autonomy or independence. The Indian government has responded with widespread use of extra-ordinary force and other measures. There have been many armed encounters between the Army and the groups seeking independence.

## CHAPTER III

### IMMIGRATION SYNDROME IN ASSAM

*“The paramount goal of human action is self preservation.”*

**Thomas Hobbes**

#### **3.1 Immigration from Bangladesh**

The immigration from Bangladesh in Assam began as early as the end of the last century, and then surged in 1930s before growing again in the 1950s. Since then the trend is inexorable.

As far back as 1921, C. S. Mullen, the Census Commissioner for Assam wrote in a Census report:

Whither there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghians. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam Valley during the past twenty five years. It looks like marvel of administrative organization on the part of government, but it is nothing of the sort: the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of huge body of ants.<sup>17</sup>

There are two basic factors that favour an immigrant moving from Bangladesh to north-eastern India. One is that the migrant speaks Bengali, a language that is spoken by more than 170 million people in the region, making the Bengalis one of the largest linguistic groups in the world. Language gives access to jobs, property, and education. A second factor is that many migrants have relatives on the other side of the border.

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<sup>17</sup> Hazarika, p. 7.

Out-migration has been a perennial feature of East Bengal since before the end of the British Raj and it continues even today from Bangladesh. More than anything else, the migrants are fleeing the poverty-related degradation of their lives that have given them little choice but to leave their homes for another land.

The factors responsible for this mass migration from Bangladesh is due to various geographical, topographical and socio-economical reasons, such as, an unending cycle of poverty, overpopulation, unemployment, landlessness, unfriendly environment, and hopelessness of life etc.

### **3.2 Root Causes**

Let us now look at the issues of land, demographic pressure and environmental scarcity, which underpin the problems of migration from Bangladesh.

Why are migrants coming from Bangladesh and earlier from East Pakistan? What are the push and pull factors? Is land scarcity a major problem? Where are they coming from? And where are they going?

#### **3.2.1 Over Population in Bangladesh**

In numerous respects, Bangladesh represents the Malthusian nightmare: too many mouths to feed and too little food or too many people on too little land. “The population of 115 million continues to grow at an estimated pace of between 2.2 and 3 percent per year. It has doubled in the past thirty years. Its family planning programme has slowed: the government wanted to reduce the annual population growth rate from 2.4 percent to 1.8 per cent in the third Five Year Plan (1985-1990).”<sup>18</sup> The country’s population density of over 800 per square kilometre is the world’s highest.

Thus, the attraction of more thinly populated lands across the borders are immense. The density of population in India’s north-east is far less. For example the density of Assam is 284 per square kilometre; 78 for Meghalaya, 262 for Tripura, and 33 for Mizoram. According to Shaukat Hassan, “Historically, the relatively

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<sup>18</sup> Hazarika, p. 23.

unpopulated state of Assam has long attracted Bengali Muslim migrants in search of land”<sup>19</sup>

Bangladesh maintains officially that its nationals prefer to go to the Gulf where there are opportunities, rather than to India, which can offer little. Yet, most do go to India because as unskilled labourers, they find a ready market in the subcontinent for maids, building workers, and porters. Bangladesh journalists and officials privately acknowledge the fact of continuing out-migration. While economic conditions in the bordering Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya may not be ideal; but they are better than the conditions in Bangladesh.

### **3.2.2 Unfriendly Environment for Agriculture**

Bangladesh is also the fourth largest peasant society in the world but its landlessness is rising at a faster rate than its population growth, forcing migration that spills over into India.

Nearly 80 percent of the agricultural land is already covered by rice, and nearly 60 percent of the country’s investments are financed by foreign aid. The growth in population has led to a situation where the average farm holding is less than one hectare (or less than 2 acres). Despite their lower costs, high-yielding modern varieties of food grains have not been introduced to all areas where they would increase productivity.

The floods are perennial problems in Bangladesh. The flood lands of Bangladesh, fertile though, they are no longer able to sustain in the people who live on them. Floods cover the countryside like a vast sheet, often a metre or two of water. According to estimate “one-third of Bangladesh is covered by floodwaters every summer. This makes it impossible to grown even tall variety of paddy crop. In Bangladesh, floods have killed more than one million persons since 1961.”<sup>20</sup>

“The annual storms between April and June and again between September and December have enormous capacity for agricultural destruction. The cyclone and tidal

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<sup>19</sup> Shaukat Hassan, *Environmental Security in South Asia*, (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1990), p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

waves of 1987 carried away not less than 40,000 person, including entire island communities at the mouth of the Ganges. These crisis caused by weather also play important role in flooding the people into neighbouring countries, specially into the North East of India.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Dr. Mahabub Hossein, “ The economic viability of Bangladesh has long been in question because of its over population, poor natural resources base, vulnerability of natural disasters and undiversified economy dependent on the production of two crops, rice and jute”<sup>22</sup>

### **3.2.3 Poverty**

“Bangladesh is one of the poorest nations in the world, with a per capita income of less than 170 dollars per year, half that of India. The country has struggled to increase its per capita income, but in 1986, half of the population still had inadequate energy intakes and 58 percent of rural children and 44 percent of urban children suffered from chronic malnutrition.”<sup>23</sup> The infant mortality rate was about 110 per thousand, one of the highest in the world.

The poverty of Bangladesh is in no small way attributable to the region’s vulnerability of natural disasters. Bangladesh seems to move through an unending cycle of floods, cyclones, devastation, death, drought and famine. Marauding rivers burst their banks and change course with impunity, and heavy silting raises the level of river beds and increases the size of the flood plains, wiping out entire villages and reducing even the moderately affluent to penury. “More than one million people have been killed by floods since 1961. And the 1988 floods, the worst in recent memory, reduced rice production by 1.6 million tons and caused 1.3 billion dollars’ worth of damage to roads, railroads, houses and industrial machinery.”<sup>24</sup> Dire poverty in the country is one of the most important factors for the migration of people from Bangladesh to neighbouring countries.

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<sup>21</sup> Hazarika, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Mahabub Hossein, *Briefing Paper on Bangladesh*, (London: Overseas Development Institute, 1990), p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Hazarika, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Hossein, p. 238.

### 3.2 Demographic Data Available on Migration

A significant study by Sharifa Begum, of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in Dhaka, represents the first semi-official acknowledgement by Dhaka of the size of the migration problem.

According to Begum,

Between 3.15 and 3.5 million people migrated from East Pakistan to India between 1951 and 1961. And between 1961 and 1974, another 1.5 million migrated. A national census was conducted in 1961 and 1974. The 1974 census was the first in independent Bangladesh. The latter figure is based on census figures and incorporates estimates of deaths from the 1970 cyclone and from the Bangladesh liberation war. But it appears to be a conservative estimate for it does not take into account the 10 million who fled the repression of the Pakistani Army in 1970 and 1971 before an Indian military victory allowed them to return home. Most of the migrants returned; yet nearly a million (believed to be mostly Hindus) stayed in India, apparently blending into the countryside. All this adds up to an outflow of 6 million in the 23 years between 1951 and 1974.<sup>25</sup>

Begum further states that, “although statistics for migration are not available after 1974, there is no valid reason to suggest that migration ceased at that time. There are indications that Bangladesh lost a substantial proportion of its population from 1974 to 1981 due to migration and famine.”<sup>26</sup>

“Though Bangladesh persists in its proclamations that it has no illegal aliens in India, Bangladesh communities have sprung up in New Delhi and Bombay. While the

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<sup>25</sup> Begum Sharifa, *Birth, Death and Growth rates in Bangladesh 1951-74*, (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute for Development studies, 1979), p.123.  
<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 125.

Government of India declares that there are about 100,000 Bangladeshi migrants in Delhi, intelligence estimates say the figure is actually closer to 200,000.”<sup>27</sup>

“The Border Security Force that patrols the Indian side of the international frontier says that it detained more than 56,000 Bangladeshis trying to cross into West Bengal in 1990.”<sup>28</sup> Detentions and deportations of people held at the border in Assam and Tripura were far less, estimated at several hundred. The rule of thumb in this game is that for every illegal immigrant caught, at least four get through, especially if they’re Hindu. The issue is raised at virtually every Indo-Bangladesh meeting of officials, diplomats and politicians, but illegal migration remains the unfinished agenda of every dialogue, the unresolved issue. It’s really a dialogue of the deaf: we tell Dhaka these people are coming in, Dhaka says they’re not Bangladeshis, they’re Indian smugglers or citizens returning after illegally visiting relatives or friends in Bangladesh.

### **3.2.1 Statistics on Migration**

To bring us up to date, it is important to reflect on the latest statistics, which paint a grim picture of what is in store for Assam.

According to the Census of India, “1991, Assam’s population grew from about 15 million in 1971 to 22.4 million in 1991.”<sup>29</sup> There was no head count in 1981 because of the turbulence in the valley. Hindus were 15 million or 67.13 percent of the population.”<sup>30</sup> “Muslims were 6.3 million or just over 28 percent of the population.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1971, Assam had two Muslim majority districts: Hailakandi in the Barak valley and Dhubari. But “in 1991, there were two more Muslim-majority districts: Barpeta and Goalpara. The percentage of Hindus and other non-Muslims in Barpeta

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<sup>27</sup> Hazarika, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Ashok Mital, *The Demographic Year Book –1980*, (Delhi: Registrar- General’s Office, 1980), p.73.

<sup>29</sup> . *Census of India, 1991, Paper-2 of 1992*, Final Population Table, (New Delhi: Registrar General of India, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.26.

dropped from 51.19 percent to 40.26 percent.”<sup>32</sup> “The Muslim figure grew by eight percent: from 48.58 percent to 56.07 percent.”<sup>33</sup>

This set of statistics raises many questions: how did the 10 percent drop in the Hindu population take place? Was there out-migration? If so, to where? Is the Muslim growth a normal growth at about four percent per decade? Is there in-form migration and if so, from where? West Bengal or Bangladesh? The latter has a border with Barpeta and Goalpara as well as Dhubri and Cachar, all with substantial Muslim populations.

Take the case of Goalpara; “here the increase is even steeper—the Muslim population grew from 41.46 percent to 50.18 percent.”<sup>34</sup> “The Hindu and non-Muslim population dropped from 50.17 percent to 39.89 percent.”<sup>35</sup> Again this raises more questions than answers: are these natural growth patterns? What are the fertility/birth and death rates? Where are the Hindus going? To other districts? If so, to which ones?

Let us turn here to the overall demographic pattern in Assam. While the Hindu and non-Muslim population grew at the rate of 45.39 percent in the two decades, the Muslim population grew much faster at 77.42 percent.

Clearly, a better number crunching exercise is required than is possible in this limited paper. But such an exercise is a must because the apprehension of the Assamese, that they could become a minority in their own land, has suddenly become starkly real. It is no longer an emotional issue.

### **3.2.2 Data of Election Commission on Migration**

For years, the Election Commission and the Assam Government for years have had a stand off on the question of illegal votes on electoral lists. In January 1994, the Commission defined 40 assembly constituencies (out of 126) as places where an abnormal growth of votes was noted.

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<sup>32</sup>. Report in Sentinel-Home Link, 30 December 1995,p. 110.

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid, p. 111.

<sup>34</sup>. Ibid, p. 112.

<sup>35</sup>. Ibid, 112.

In sensitive districts such as Barpeta, Silchar, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Mangaldoi, Nowgong (Nagaon), Dibrugarh and even Lakhimpur, the Pattern is the same

“Between 1991 and 1992, the number of electors in Assam grew from 1,18,92,068 to 1,36,29,993.”<sup>36</sup> “This figure fell to 1,29,15,013 in 1993 and further to 1,18,00,678 in 1994.”<sup>37</sup>

Take the examples of Barpeta and Goalpara assembly seats alone (we referred earlier to the census figures that point to demographic growth here):

Table I<sup>38</sup>

	1991	1992	1993	1994
Barpeta	106,292	118,179	105,521	91,712
Goalpara East	95,520	111,520	109,593	89,824
Goalpara West	84,242	90,397	86,177	74,901

Clearly it is time that the Assamese heed Gandhiji’s advice to Bardoloi’s emissaries: “If you do not act correctly and now Assam will be finished. Tell Bardoloi that Assam must not lose its soul. It must uphold it against the whole world. Else I will say that Assam had only manniken and not men”.<sup>39</sup>

Without an intensive revision of the rolls, no election in Assam—given the demographic changes that have taken place—can be either free or fair. Indeed, if held, balloting is likely to be accompanied by the kind of violence that visited the state in 1983. And that would be an even greater tragedy.

Anti-settler feelings are not new in Assam. There has been a long-simmering dislike of the Mymensinghians or miyahs as the Bengali-speaking immigrant is called,

<sup>36</sup> *Informal Note, Election Commission of India*, (New Delhi, 1995), p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.28.

<sup>38</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, “*Environment Degradation, Migration and Ethnic Conflict: Bangladesh and Assam*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 104.

<sup>39</sup> Gopinath Bardoloi, p. 126.

especially among the Assamese caste Hindus and the plains tribals. This has found expression in many forms: confrontations and violence and more recently in the shape of a student-led, anti-migrant agitation that rocked the valley in the 1980s.

In June 1979, the All Assam Students Union, the traditional torch-bearer of agitations in the Assam Valley, allied with other organizations to launch a movement against settlers. AASU leaders estimated the number of such foreigners or Bangladeshis as they described them, at four million. “We demand our constitutional rights and that foreigners be deported and detected to save Assam and the Assamese,”<sup>40</sup> said Pradulla Kumar Mahanta, the ASSU president. It demanded the deportation of foreign nationals. Other powerful organizations, including the tea garden workers, teachers, the state government employees and even the local unit of the All India Sikh Students Federation announced their backing to the agitations. The agitators demanded that without the revision of the electoral rolls and the deletion of foreigner’s names, they would not allow the government to function. The consequences of that agitation are still being felt: it threw the region into turbulence, created deep divides among the communities and led to conflicts and wounds that have not healed but are being opened again.

The anti- alien agitation underline the fact that the Assamese especially the middle and upper caste Hindus, were as concerned about the potential loss of political power as they were about their cultural heritage.

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<sup>40</sup> Hazarika, p.148.

## **Chapter IV**

### **ETHNIC MOVEMENT IN ASSAM**

*“In the animal kingdom,  
The rule is;  
You eat or be eaten.  
In the human kingdom,  
Define or be defined.”*

**Thomas Szalsa**

The Preamble of the Indian constitution starts with the statement, “We, the People of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into (Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic) and to secure to all its citizens: Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation”. And India often boasts of unity in diversity. Truly, India is a multi – ethnic, multi–cultural and multi–linguistic nation. It is also true that the Indian society is made up of various elements drawn from diverse origins. And the social groups with diverse ethnic and linguistic origins represent various racial stocks and social status.

In order to make a real democratic nation (a true integrated nation) each social group should have representatives both in the state and national levels. Over the years, the policy (decision) makers and planners in India have failed to respect the diversity of the country and this has given rise to the multiplicity of ethnic movements in the country, such as Gorkhaland movement, Bodoland movement, Uttarakhand movement and many other movements in different parts of the country. Ethnic movements in India are minority movements, of those who have distinct culture, language, etc. Who feel that they are geographically isolated, socially and economically marginalized and politically ignored.

Ethnic movements and ethnic conflicts are a wide spread phenomenon, found in many parts of the world, because many modern nations included many distinct ethnic groups within them. But, when a nation fails to integrate, ethnic groups conflicts arise.

In India, particularly in the Northeast, we have a large number of movements, resorting to violence, which affect the social and economic life of the people. And New Delhi's ad hoc policies towards the people of the Northeast are making the situation more complicated.

#### **4.1 Identity**

If human beings are self-interested animals, the search for a common identity is an intrinsic value for human beings. As human beings defined their existence as social beings or as a community they thereby transcend the individuality, and consciously work for security. "The search for the identity can be seen as an adventure and uncertainty, and adventure in quest of oneself and an uncertainty over satisfaction with oneself. Both are questioning self-fulfilment and self-satisfaction as the identity of the knowledge and being."<sup>41</sup> It only in relation to another being that the person finds fulfilment and as long as that is not meant the discontentment will be always in the psyche of human being

Etymologically the word identity is derived from the French word *identite*, and from the Latin *idem*, which means "the same". Identity is that quality / personality, which belongs to an individual in a unique way, with distinct character. In general, it refers to who or what one is, to the various meanings attached to oneself and others. Within sociology, identity refers both to the structural features of group membership which individuals internalise and to which they become committed, for example, various social roles, memberships and categories, and to the various character traits that an individual displays on the basis of his/her conduct in particular social settings. Identity can be defined as follows.

1. Who or what somebody / something is,

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<sup>41</sup> Luiz Susin, *A Crique of the Identity Paradigm*, (London: Macmillan Preference Books, 2000), p. 78.

2. The characteristics, feelings or beliefs that distinguish people from other: *a sense of national/cultural/personal/group identity*,
3. “The state or feeling of being very similar to and able to understand someone / something.”<sup>42</sup>

The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy defines it as; “The relation each thing bears just to itself. The identity of *a* and *b* implies and implied by sharing of all their properties...”<sup>43</sup>

In simple terms *identity* can be understood as something that is unique to a person. It is also understood as distinct and recognizable nature of an individual, which results from a unique combination of characteristics and qualities. And every human being in general has a longing and wants to be recognised as some one different from the other. Thus in case of an individual, we speak of individual identity and in the case of the group, we speak of ethnic identity, cultural identity, tribal identity, religious identity, etc, based on something that is common to them as a group.

## 4.2 Ethnic Group

The term *ethnic group* is derived from the Greek word *ethnikos*, the adjective form is *ethnos*, which literally means *a nation or people or race living together*. Formerly, the word ethnic group was used to denote a tribe or a simple society. In the course of time, the sociologists used the term *ethnic group* in a broad sense and defined an ethnic group as a cultural group based on race, language, territory, religion, customs and beliefs.

Encyclopedia Americana International defines an ethnic group as,

Any group of people distinguished by common cultural, and frequently racial, characteristics. The members of most ethnic groups have a sense of group identity and the larger culture within which they live and recognised them as a

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<sup>42</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 1998

<sup>43</sup> Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995

distinct aggregation... And a number of internal and external forces that keep them as group united and reinforce their cultural distinctiveness.<sup>44</sup>

According to the Encyclopaedia of Social science, “an Ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such a group are, or feel themselves, or are thought to be bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture.”<sup>45</sup>

From the above definitions an ethnic group is understood as a distinct group of people who share common physical and socio-cultural characteristics.

### **4.3 Ethnic Identity & Ethnic Movement**

An ethnic group is said to have their own identity called as “ethnic identity.” It consists of the objective uniqueness of the group, which is distinct from others. “Ethnicity” is generally understood as an objective and subjective expression of ethnic identity.

Today we find ethnic movements, where ethnic groups are trying to consolidate their identity. This arises when the dominant group imposes restrictions on the smaller group or groups making the ethnic groups feel threatened, insecure and discriminated.

We have number of examples of ethnic movements, “who” (ethnic groups) are in search of their identity and fight for their survival, which leads to violence at times. We find such movements in United Kingdom (Scotland and Wales), in Spain (Basque) etc. We also find ethnic movements in the African countries and also in Asian countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, etc).

As we have seen India is a country, with immense racial, cultural and linguistic diversity, it is not surprising, and that ethnic movements and conflicts are widespread in India. There are conflicts between different ethnic groups. There are also conflicts between ethnic groups and the large society and the nation-state. And these ethnic

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<sup>44</sup> Encyclopaedia of American International, 1998

<sup>45</sup> Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, 1995

movements and ethnic conflicts are mostly the minority groups, who desire to preserve their unique culture, language, etc.

The search for identity is not merely a sub-continental phenomenon but a global phenomenon with its present form having its inception in the postcolonial period. Each community or ethnic group tries to assert when they reach a self critical, self-analyzing and self-identifying stage.

#### **4.4 Ethnic movement in Assam**

In the Northeast, ethnic movement is a common phenomenon and the movements in general seem to have been mishandled at the early stage, by the Indian leaders who failed to understand their complexity. We shall discuss here how ethnic movement started in Assam and what are its demands and expectations.

##### **4.4.1 Ethnic Movement at Initial Stage**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were persistent disputes between the government and Assamese students and some Assamese political factions over the rights of illegal immigrants. The natives considered it as a war for survival against the onslaught of uncontrolled migration of millions from Bangladesh and elsewhere.

The politically conscious Assamese led by an emerging middle class felt that others were enjoying the opportunities, which were their rightful share. They also feared a cultural invasion from the Bengalis that would reduce the Assamese-speaking people to a minority in their own homeland. “The possibility of being politically orphaned and culturally eclipsed remains a nightmare. The issue of foreigners and outsiders, though sought to be kept apart, has sometimes go emotionally telescoped.”<sup>46</sup> thus in order to preserve the distinct Assamese identity and Assamese culture people organized a movement against the settlers.

In the beginning, the people adopted the democratic means of protest such as public demonstrations, rallies, dharna, etc, against the illegal migration of Bangladeshis. But this did not help in achieving their end. The All Assam Students

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<sup>46</sup> Yogendra Sing, *Cultural Change in India: Identity and Globalization*, (Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2000), p. 295.

Union (ASSU), the most powerful organization of students in the state launched the Assam agitation in 1973, and demanded the removal of names of the refugees from the electoral roll and the deportation of foreign nationals.

But the Congress party which was then at the centre, did not want to remove the names of the illegal migrants because removing their names from the electoral roll means losing a big vote bank for the Party. Hence, it did not pay much attention to the protest movement of the Assamese people. In the beginning the Congress Party gave some assurances that the Congress government would take necessary steps to remove the names of the illegal migrants and thus deport them. But the Congress Government never put these promises into practice.

#### **4.4.2. The Birth of ULFA**

This attitude of the Centre made the Assamese people very angry and hostile towards the centre. Thus, soon the movement became widespread through out Assam. The Assamese youth began to harass Bangladeshis in the state and killed many Bengalis (Bangladeshis). The next target was oil pipeline, which would hurt the Government of India and the economy. However, the state government and government of India responded to this with force to suppress the movement. The Assamese youth began to feel that the Indian Government had failed to understand their struggle. It was at this juncture that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was formed emerging from All Assam Students Union to revive Assam's lost cultural glory and to consolidate the Assamese Identity based on the principles of socialism that aimed at equal opportunities for everybody. Later, the youth movement (ASSU) was divided into two groups, namely, ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) and AGP (Asom Gana Parixad; political wing).

Paresh Baruah, the founder of the ULFA movement, and a former spoke person of the All Assam Student Union (AASU) proposed that mere agitation against the immigrants would not work. According to him New Delhi would not listen to mere satyagrahas. He instead suggested a militant movement and "under his leadership the '*United Liberation Front of Assam; ULFA*' took its birth on April 7<sup>th</sup> 1979, as a

‘strong revolutionary political organisation, aiming to create an independent, Socialistic Assam exploitation-free, classless, healthy, progressive, with disparity’ as translated from ULFA documents.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, they (ULFA) talked of the need for a free Assam, where ‘scientific socialism’ would be the way of life and where its (Assam) natural resources would be exploited for the benefit of its own people, including the immigrants- and not to benefit unscrupulous power elites in Delhi (Hazarika, 168). ULFA considered Delhi’s rule as colonial occupation and exploitation and a threat to the national identity of the people of Assam.

In 1985 election, in which a very youthful, student-led government by the Asom Gana Parishad party came to power. The Asom Gana Parixad was the political wing of the AASU. The Asom Gana Parixad was supported by both the ASSU as well as ULFA. When the Asom Gana Parixad won the elections in 1985 there was a lot of expectation among the people. But, internal bickering and charges of corruption, led to the downfall of the Axom Gana Parixad Ministry in 1990.

The 1990s have seen the demand for the independence of Assam from the centralized Indian government by ULFA. Many other groups have also come up demanding autonomy or independence. The Indian government has responded with widespread use of extra-ordinary force and other measures. There have been many armed encounters between the Army and the groups seeking independence.

Thus the unarmed peaceful movement against the influx and economic exploitation transformed to an armed national liberation struggle. The main intention of this military operation is to suppress the legitimate aspiration of the people of Assam, and their basic and fundamental human rights i.e., national self-determination. There are endless lists of gross human rights violations during this period by Indian occupation forces. They have killed hundreds of innocent people, hundred more have disappeared in their custody and many of our womenfolk have been raped while many more hundreds have been severely tortured to become handicapped. It is the reflection of direct consequence of colonial repressive policy of India. Today, Assam is an

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<sup>47</sup> Hazarika, p. 168.

occupied country under Indian's martial law and an undeclared war inside Assam is running on. Any thing may happen at any time inside this war theatre. Colonial India's this repressive policy compels to the freedom fighters of Assam to take up arms for self-defence. So, armed national liberation struggle of Assam is a democratic struggle for the survival of a Nation without any doubt.

#### **4.4.3 Aims and Objectives of ULFA**

- Assam was never a part of India at any point of time in history. The fact is independent Assam has been occupied by India, and deploying occupation forces they are oppressing our peoples and persecuting them. ULFA and all freedom fighters of Assam are neither planning nor conspiring to break up India! Freedom fighters of Assam (ULFA) are only trying to overthrow Indian colonial occupation from Assam and demanding the independent Assam.
- In economic sphere, India has been engaged in large-scale exploitation. Despite its rich resources, Assam remains one of the most backward states. Therefore, the question of real threat to the national identity of the people of Assam under the colonial occupation and exploitation of India has become the basic problem. As a whole, the problem has become a question of life and death to the people of Assam. Thus the aim of ULFA is to fight against Indian exploitation of Assam and rebuild Assam on its rich natural recourses.
- For years people of Assam have complained against the illegal migration of Bangladeshi Muslims in the region but the Centre has not paid any heed to their problem. Thus, the aim of ULFA is to overthrow the illegal immigrants from Assam and thereby preserve its heritage and past glory. Hence, ULFA stands against this gross injustice done to the region by the Central Government. It works for the reaffirming of its peoples' distinct identity.

- One of its aims also was to through out the Muslim MLSs and politicianations who were encouraging the migration syndrome to sustain their political power.<sup>48</sup> (These Muslims MLSs and Politicians were actually from Bangladesh who in course of time had stated taking part in politics)

#### **4.4.4 Change in Horizon of ULFA**

The ULFA movement began with good ideals to root out the illegal migrants from Assam, to fight for Assam's economical development, and to preserve Assamese heritage and culture. Hence, at he initial stage the movement had a very clear vision and goal. It projected the demands of the local people. The locals supported the movement as it stood for the benefits of the locals.

However, in the beginning of the 90s if failed to sustain that initial focus and zeal. With the capturing of the political power in 1985 and later in 1994 by Asom Gana Parishad, the movement began to change its colour and candour. The Asom Gana Parishad was supported by the ULFA, and so many ULFA activists began to relay on political power. The ULFA activists began to take acute interest in the politics for easy money. Moreover, in order to strengthen its activities against the government and Bangladeshi Muslims the movement needed money; the funds were provided by the AGP. Soon this led to corruption and nepotisms in the AGP party. The demand of the ULFA activities for more money led to division in ULFA and AGP.

Thus, in 90s, in order to raise funds, the ULFA began to abdicate political leaders, businessmen, etc. "In 1995 it demanded a millions of rupees from the various tea estates, such as Brookbond, Tata Tea, Doom Doom Tea estate etc of Assam."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See <http://www.northeastvigil.com/facts/nedocs/nedocs.htm> (date:02/02/05)

<sup>49</sup> Hazarika, p.192.

Soon it became an icon of terror in the region. It began to extract money from the middle and upper class local people. Those who did not meet their demands were either harassed or killed. People could no more talk of ULFA in the open and talking or criticising ULFA activities meant sever consequences for the person.

Situation became so bad that Indian Army had to intervene in the matter. Extortion of money, harassment to locals, threats to political parties and killing of innocent people forced the army to take immediate action against the movement. The Indian Army declared the ULFA activities as terrorist activities.

In 1990 the Operation Bajurung and was carried out in Assam to crackdown the ULFA activities and to destroy their hideouts. However, this operation did not make much impact on ULFA. Consequently in 1991 another operation, namely, Operation Rhino was carried out. During fierce battles between the Indian Army and ULFA lot of people were killed both the sides. The ULFA activists took shelter in neighbouring countries since then. Today the ULFA is helped by many neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, China, and Burma to fight against the Indian Army.

Thus it can be said that, “the search for identity involves a growing awareness among the people that they belong naturally together, that they share common interest, a common history and a common destiny.”<sup>50</sup> The quest for totality and identity holds a, “great promise of happiness purpose and ultimate meaning of human existence, the lost paradise for whichever human being longs.”<sup>51</sup> The famous dictum of Sartre summarizes the philosophy of human existence “Existence Precedes Essence.” According to him we create our own selves through our choices, and so the future is in our hands. Since we are human, our existence does not mean just being alive, but conscious of our own being we move toward our goal. Stone and animals have only being in itself but human are beings for themselves. “This is based on consciousness;

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<sup>50</sup> Roger Scruton, ed, *A Dictionary of Political Thought*, (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 213.

<sup>51</sup> Susin, p. 78.

a consciousness of something, for there can be no consciousness without affirming the identity of oneself. It is through this self-consciousness we create who we are now and who we will be in future.”<sup>52</sup>

In various part of the world the search for political identity has become a prominent issue today. This manifests the inherent human desire to be recognized, the fundamental desire to be and to be a person. Thus the will to be a person is at the centre of every being which invariably look for happiness and fulfilment either individually or collectively. But the quest for fulfilment can be realized in the context of freedom of expression within a given autonomy. The indigenious people find themselves denied of this opportunity and constantly pushed to the periphery. The experience of the Assames bare witness to the same reality. The experience of the indigence people of the world is not different from the experience of the Assames.

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<sup>52</sup> Joan Price, *Philosophy Through the Ages*, (Stanford: Wordsworth, 2000), p. 470-1.

## **Chapter V**

### **VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY**

As we have seen earlier, the people of Northeast employed democratic means to assert their ethnic identity. However, these means failed to achieve desired result. Thus in sheer frustration many groups in Northeast took up armed struggles against the Indian Government.

Thus, the unarmed peaceful movement against the influx and economic exploitation transferred to an armed national liberation struggle. The main intention of Government of India many military operations is to suppress the legitimate aspiration of the people of the Assam, and their basic and fundamental rights. There are endless lists of gross human rights violations during this period by Indian occupation forces. They have killed hundreds of innocent people, hundred more have disappeared in their custody and many of our womenfolk have been raped while many more hundreds have been severely tortured to become handicapped. It is the reflection of direct consequence of colonial repressive policy of India. Today, Assam is an occupied country under Indian's martial law and an undeclared war inside Assam is running on. Any thing may happen at any time inside this war theatre. Colonial India's this repressive policy compels to the freedom fighters of Assam to take up arms for self-defence.

#### **5.1 Concept of Violence**

Violence is multidimensional and complex in nature. In everyday life we find the presence of violence. It ranges from agrarian violence to caste and class violence, communal violence to ethnic violence, student violence to trade union violence and Naxal violence to terrorist violence. Violence can be understood in different contexts in different ways. Violence can be either physical or psychological. Physical violence would mean physical injuries even to the point of eliminating the other. It also causes psychological and emotional imbalance through assault, etc. Thus violence is the

expression of hostility towards the other through force. For further clarification we shall see the meaning of violence as given by different Dictionaries. They are:

*The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines violence as; “The use of force cause physical harm, death, destruction, the causing of severe mental, emotional harm as through humiliation, deprivation or brainwashing...”<sup>53</sup>

*Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology* defines violence as;

The expression of hostility and rage through physical force directed against person or property. Violence is aggression in its most extreme and unacceptable form and most investigator believe it has no therapeutic justification, since there are more constructive and human ways of expressing anger.<sup>54</sup>

Violence therefore, in simple terms, is force, aggressive in nature, which causes physical and psychological injuries. There are different types of violence, such as political violence, social violence, etc. Particularly in political and social violence, has a cause, if someone uses violence as a tool of oppression, the response of the oppressed turns out to be violent in responds to the violent nature of the oppressor.

## **5.2. Colonialism and Violence according to Fanon**

Fanon in, *The Wretched of the earth*, says, “The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police station. In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression.”<sup>55</sup> The colonizers (the settler) have everything, including power and facilities. For the native, the government speaks the language of pure force. “The colonial world was divided to compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. In the colonies, the foreigner coming from another country imposed his rule by means of

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (London: CU, 1995)

<sup>54</sup> Manjula Bhasi, *Encyclopaedic: Dictionary of Psychology*, (London: CU, 1992)

<sup>55</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 38.

guns and machines.”<sup>56</sup> The natives have no ‘say’ in politics and in economy. The only thing they can say is ‘Yes’ to the master; the colonizer, whether they like it or not. The natives are considered and treated as with labour force, slaves or commodity. The natives can be eliminated any time whenever the colonizers feel like. That is why the dreams of the natives are always of muscular prowess; their dreams actions are of aggressive (Fanon 52) and his muscles are always tensed. He is in fact ready at a moments’ notice of exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter. Thus through the process of colonization, the colonizers sow the seed of violence\* in their relationship to the colonized.

### **5.2.1. De-colonization and Violence**

“National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, de-colonization is always a violent phenomenon. De-colonization is the process of breaking the system and structure of the colonial world. It is the process of replacing of certain “species” of men by another “species” of men.”<sup>57</sup> It is a process of replacing with a new system and a new order. De-colonization is the meeting of the two species of men.

Since the natives had lived under the rule of violence, their challenge to the settler is neither a rational confrontation (Fanon, 41) nor a question of competition with the colonizer. “But for the natives, violence represents the absolute line action. This violence is to sweeps away the colonial regime—that same violence fulfills the natives a role that is not simply informatory, but operative. Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.40.

\* see Fanon, pp 71; let us return to that atmosphere of violence, that violence which is just under their skin.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

De-colonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, or of a natural shock, or of a friendly understanding. De-colonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. De-colonization is the meeting of the two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owes their originality to that sort of sub-stantification, which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies.<sup>59</sup>

Thus de-colonization is always a violent phenomenon.

Through the process of de-colonization, the oppressed are freed, but been under the violent rule of the oppressor for years, the oppressed turn out to be violent and become the oppressors of their own people.

### **5.3 The Conflicts and Tensions of the Northeast**

India's Northeastern region has never been out of news totally. Armed conflicts, problems of refugees from the neighboring countries, the demand for separate States, fighting among tribal groups and guerilla warfare with the Indian army etc. have claimed thousands of lives already.

### **5.4 Ethnic Conflicts and Violence of Northeast**

Killing, violence and extortion are one aspect of life in the Northeast. Due to the problem of immigrants from across the border, the people living in the area feel that they are marginalized and the people from other States, or "foreigners", are taking over local resources. The ethnic identity is threatened especially in Assam, Tripura and in other states in the region. This causes an additional conflict, which frequently results in blood baths.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

Such violence would be the massacre of 1,800 people in Nillie and other villagers in Assam in the 1980s. The victims were suspected to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Similarly there is frequent violence in Tripura, targeting innocent civilians (mostly Bengalis) as well as the security forces. Because of the influx of Bengalis, original tribal population is gradually reduced to a minority and they are deprived of their dominant status. This leads to armed ethnic conflict. Biswendu Bhattacharjee, reporting from Agratala to Deccan Herald on May 18, 2003 reports, “More than 3,000 people including 158 school teachers were kidnapped and 1697 people (including security personal) were killed between April 1<sup>st</sup> 1993 and February 15, 2003.” This sort of violence against the outsiders exists even today. The recent violence in Assam against Beharis would be the latest one of that sort.

In Manipur, the Naga-Kuki conflict was even worse; it made more than 10,000 people homeless in less than a month in the mid 1990s. The ethnic violence between the Bodos and Santhals during the same period in Assam affected the normal life for several months in the camps and many were killed in the conflict. Similar violence still exists between the Kukis and the Paities in Manipur, Hmars and Demasa, Kukis and Karbis in Assam. Manipur is the worst affected among the seven states in the region, where killing each other has become part of everyday life.

### **5.5 Demand for Homeland**

The Nagas, the Kukis, and the Assamese are not the only ones who want separate homelands. Most people in the region talk of colonization by India. Every state has an armed group, dreaming about a separate state whether within the Indian Union or outside of it.

In Manipur, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) is fighting to throw off what they perceive as colonial rule of India. The Indian army is like an “army of occupation”.\* Conflicts and violence particularly in Manipur is rooted in the poor treatment of the Manipuris (Meiteis) at the time of independence and the later

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\* see Competition Master, November 1997 (the Conflict and Tension of North-East)

accession of the Kingdom to the Union of India. The general feeling is that, Manipur was not given a decent treat in the deal. Therefore the ultimate demand is for abrogating the accession of Manipur to the Indian Union.

In Nagaland, even with the creation of the state with special provisions for autonomy has not satisfied the Nagas and the demand for sovereignty continues and results in a series of violence.

Thus, the whole of the Northeast has become an area of conflict and violence. Centre believes that it can destroy the resistance through violence, but this has failed to achieve its end so far, it has brought only more violence.

## Chapter VI

### NEW DELHI'S RESPONSE

The Northeast remains in the periphery of the peripheries of the union of India for many reasons. Indian historians have ignored North East history for decades. Sajal Nag in his *India And North-East India (Mind, Politics and the Process of Integration 1946-1950)* says, “Not even in recent book on Modern India, or the truly national history of India written from the perspective of History from below. The section dealing with States people movement does not include Manipur or Tripura. There is a proud depiction of pressure from the masses for integration with India but there too the hills of Mizoram were not discussed. The signing of the Instrument of Accession by the Khasi states or the events led to the signing and fiasco of Akbar Hydari agreement with the Nagas are nowhere mentioned.”<sup>60</sup> Erickson also pointed out that the, “Indian history has failed to incorporate regional histories in the broader framework of the Indian history.”<sup>61</sup>

The series of struggles of the Assamese, Khasis, Jaintias, Nagas, Manipur and Mizos, etc against the British were ignored, which should be part and parcel of the history, if it were to be Indian History. Today even after 57 years of independence, the Northeast still remains foreign to most of the people in the country. As a result the people have no idea about the region except that of violence and terror taking place in the region. That is only one aspect of the reality.

We shall discuss further, how New Delhi has treated the region with her military power and her policies which made people anti-Indian even today.

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<sup>60</sup> Sajal Nag, *India and North East India- Mind, Politics and a Process of Integration 1946-1950*, (Delhi: Manohar Publishing House, 1998), p. 6

<sup>61</sup> Erick Erickson, *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 229

### **3.2 Militarization of the Region**

When India got independence, the process of integration began to take shape and the leaders of the young Indian nation launched the unification of India. It was then Zapu Phizo and his men, the champions of the Naga cause, opted to remain outside Indian control and declared Naga Independence. However, this was not taken seriously, because most Indians felt that the reins of government were simply handed over by the Britishers to Jawaharlal Nehru (Dougel 2004). And Nehru himself seemed to have claimed that the sovereignty of India was transferred from the British Government to the Indian Government, when he met the Naga delegates in 1951(Nag 2002; 227).

At this time, Manipur already had a constitution of its own having a House of Representatives with the King as the titular head. The House of Representatives opposed the merging of Manipur with India. Similarly in Tripura (Twipra) the monarchy had been recognized as a sovereign. However, Manipur and Tripura were annexed by means that were questioned even then. The Naga areas were strafed with artillery shells. The political structures that replaced the colonial administrations were not different, it was recycled colonial rule. For example in 1970s the Mizo areas faced a large-scale starvation and famine. The disgruntlement of the Mizo people led to a large-scale rebellion against Indian authorities. In response, the government of India and its army devastated the Mizo Hills, tore asunder villages and aerial bombed the whole area. Finally, the Naga rebellion that initially appealed to reason and democratic values was driven underground.

In Assam, the agitation against uncontrolled immigration and loss of indigenous identity led to a brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. The Assam Rifles converted Manipur's royal palace into a paramilitary barrack. Likewise, the other states in the region were also coerced into accepting the military's permanent presence after Indo-China conflict, 1962. It was clear that the Indian government was repeating the colonial policy of linking development with defense.

In order to aid this process of militarisation, several draconian laws were passed. In 1952, the Assam Maintenance of Public Order (Autonomous District) Act was passed to “contain Naga rebels”. Later, the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) special Powers Act was passed in 1958. This Act, even more draconian than the colonial Armed Forces Ordinance, continues to be legal veil that gives absolute impunity to the armed forces in the Northeast. Provisions in the Acts allow, even a warrant and non-commissioned officer of the army, to kill anyone he suspects of being a ‘threat to law and order’. Most notable among them are Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967; Disturbed Areas Act, 1976 and National Security Act, etc\*.

### **3.3 Isolation of the Region**

Besides militarizing the region, Northeast has been isolated for decades, particularly with the partition and independence of this country. The region in particular has suffered heavily in terms of lives. There is hardly any infrastructure to links it with the mainland. This gave rise to geographic isolation, which in turn has given rise to other problems. While people in the other parts of the country consider the Northeast as remote and inaccessible, the people of the Region feel alienated.

Nitin Gokhale in *Outlook, New Delhi* writes, “With one stroke of his blue pencil, Sir Cyril Radcliffe isolated the region from the rest of India. As a result, the region's seven states are now connected to the main body through a 20km wide Chicken's neck corridor running through North Bengal. In the pre-partition days, residents of Tripura could reach Calcutta overnight. Today it takes a minimum of 60 hours to do the same.<sup>62</sup>” “Another grievance against the centre in terms of isolation was the broad gauge track could reach in the region only Guwahati in the 1980s, while much of the small railways else wherein India had been converted to broad track in this period.”<sup>63</sup>

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\* See <http://www.northeastvigil.com/facts/nedocs/nedocs.htm> (date:02/02/04)

<sup>62</sup> Nitin Gokhale, *OutLook*, New Delhi, May, 22, 2003

<sup>63</sup> Hazarika, p. 258.

Even after 57 years of independence, six of the seven state capitals do not have railway connection. Itanagar, Kohima and Shillong do not have proper airports even now. If the Centre can pass so many draconian laws such as special Powers Acts, etc, why can't the Centre bring the facilities that connect them with the rest of the nation?

### **3.4 Economic Deprivation**

The Northeast is blessed with natural resources such as, Oil, Coal, Natural Gas, Limestone, Tea, Timber and other resources. But its people are deprived systematically of their resources. The Northeast is treated as a supplier of raw materials of petroleum, tea, and coal to the rest of India.

Tea grows naturally in the Upper Brahmaputra valley, which was the main attraction of the British to invade Assam in 1820s. Today tea is grown in both in Brahmaputra and Barak plains, producing 56 per cent of India's tea and 25 per cent in the world's total. Besides tea the region also produce millions tons of oil. Hazarika writes, 'Assam produces more than one quarter of India's total oil production, or about ten million tons. With these gifts of nature, the region cannot be poor, if the resources are utilized properly.

However, this notion of prosperity remains only a dream. "The exploitation of its Oil, Natural Gas, the trade of the Tea products by the Center etc, have failed to give a fair share to the local people. Most of the crude produced are sent out of the region to Barauni refinery in Bihar."<sup>64</sup> This very act itself denies job opportunity for the people in the region.

Now the question arises *was it not enough for the Center that had profited from the region's products? Was the region contribution too less for the country?* Look at the job opportunities in the region. "What do you think, when the much-awaited Loktak Hydro Electric Project in Manipur generates employment to outsiders and not to the local people. They are denied on the ground that they are not eligible. The

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<sup>64</sup> Ibd, p. 265.

erstwhile director of North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology (NERIST) in Arunachal Pradesh is an outsider.”<sup>65</sup>

The Beharis or Marwaris owns the tourist buses plying in the Northeast, and in order to promote its business, a Punjabi businessman is nominated as Member of Parliament (Rajay Sabha) from Assam when the region is badly in need of more MPs.

Besides, there is a large-scale misuse of central funds, that widened the gaps between the haves and the have nots, resulting in frustration among the youngsters. This frustration has often found expression in swelling the ranks of militant organisations.

### **3.5 New Delhi's Double Standard towards the Region**

Out of sight, out of mind. That's the attitude New Delhi seems to have adapted for the North-East, going by the reaction, or the lack of it, displayed by the Centre in the last few decades to the events in the region. Be it the killings in Tripura or in the recent conflicts in Assam, Manipur or elsewhere in the region. Apart from these, there have been scores of killings, however the Union Home Ministry has not taken note of it and not even send an official to study the problem.

In contrast, take the case of Jammu and Kashmir. The moment Nadinmarg massacre took place in Jammu and Kashmir, the Union Home Minister, L.K Advani himself rushed to the place to placate and commiserate with the people. The standard excuse given by Delhi is that the situation in the Northeast is not serious as in Jammu and Kashmir and it is termed an inter-ethnic rivalry, which is only a half-truth (Gokhale 2003).

Now, the question arises here, is the people of Northeast lesser human beings? Don't they have equal human rights like the people of Jammu and Kashmir or elsewhere in the country? If such a killing were taking place in Jammu and Kashmir or elsewhere in the country, the Centre would have moved heaven and earth. But, in Northeast, who went? Nobody!

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<sup>65</sup> K. Zou, "We the People of India's Northeast Forum, Delhi" Kuknalim, 20 Nov, 2003.

Take any of the ethnic movements in different parts of the region, be it, the Bodoland, the Naga rebels, or MNF in Mizoram. In all these, the Centre has taken steps only after the rebellious movement and turned against the Indian government. The Central government had not bothered as long as they were demanding their rights through democratic means. It looks like that the Centre government wants the people of the Northeast to act violently. This shows that the Centre is not taking serious about the problems of the Northeast Region.

Take the recent violence in Assam. The leaders at the Centre, including Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister have often been saying that lack of employment opportunities has been the most important factor behind the youth unrest and insurgency in the region. The editorial of North East Frontier Magazine writes;

The modern forces of social and economic change have been contributing to unrest in certain segments of tribal communities in the Northeast... Due to agricultural, industrial and infrastructural backwardness of the region, the level of unemployment remains very high. The frustrated and unemployed youth becomes victims of home affairs, government of India has said in an “overview” in the annual report of the ministry for the year 2002-2003.

Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani on the other hand, has been on record as saying that “lack of employment opportunities other than in the government sector has fuelled the influx of neo-literate youth into insurgent groups as an act of frustration. Advani had said this at a meeting of the Consultative Committee attached to the union home ministry on December 12, 1998. He also went on to say that, “the ethnicity aspect, namely feeling of being different from the mainstream Indians, is pronounced in the Northeast. The people suffer from a feeling of ‘neglect’ by the authorities

Now, despite the feeling that the union home ministry has an understanding and knowledge about the basic reason for discontent, frustration, youth

unrest and militancy, how come they it allows central government organizations like the railways to throw open low-level group “D” vacancies in the Northeastern region for candidates from all over the country just because one supreme Court order had said that the vacancies should be thrown open to the entire country?<sup>66</sup>

If New Delhi is really interested in solving the problems of the Northeast, the leaders of the nation should have avoided the incident, rather than bringing divisions among the people in the region.

Take another case of Assam and see the double standard of Delhi, particularly dealing with the Naga peace process. The Centre would say, the peace process is moving in a right direction and moving closer to the permanent solution to the five decades old problem. Contrary to the statement, Vajpayee (PM) took the middle path on the Assam integration issue during his three days visit to Assam in October 2003. He even refused to explain the meaning and the status of the parley. Even after seven years of truce and concurrent talks, the outcome remain shrouded in deep mystery for the common people.

I think it is high time that the Centre should be more assertive and transparent in its stands towards the Assamese issue and other ethnic movements in the North-East Region.

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<sup>66</sup> L.B. Sing, *The North East Frontier Magazine*, (Guwahati: Dec. 2003), p.36-37.

## CONCLUSION

An identity is constructed when a group of people decides to live in one identity for identity is not a ready-made thing. It is constructed in and through the interaction of the people, in the given socio-economic and historical context, taking into consideration what is preserved in history and tradition in a given culture.

The Assamese are opposed to the Arya -Dravidian identity that is generally considered the Indian identity. That is why they are reaffirming their history and cultural identity. One may wonder why the central government is so keen in retaining the few million people even though they do not contribute to National economy substantially. This is because the population forms a basis for national power. So to preserve the national power, the ruling class in India would never allow the ethnic communities for self-autonomy. For more than fifty years since independence of India, the ruling class has been the upper caste and they have dominated every sphere of political and economical life. They have also determined what Indian identity is. However, this identity is predominately Brahminical with some concession to the Dravidians but excludes the minorities, Dalits and the tribals. If Indian identity could reinvent itself, as an inclusive of every sections of the population, that is Aryan, Dravidian, Mongoloids, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and all other religions then people belonging to each and every sections would feel at home in India.

As we have seen, the ethnic movement in Assam is geared to preserve their distinct identity, their culture, language, and religion. Since independence there has been a tendency of assimilation rather than respect the diversity. Today Hindutva ideology that propagates that to be Indian is to be Hindu. As a result, the cultural identity of the minority ethnic groups is threatened. There is also lack of democratic space, corruption, use of force and violence of the government, has made the ethnic groups to resort to violence in their approach.

*Can violence achieve what these groups want to achieve? Is it a legitimate means to protect and preserve their identity?* These are relevant questions at this juncture. The seeds of violence that has been planted by the oppressor never dies, but it comes to life and it takes its own time. And in the fullness of time there will be series of violence on both sides. According to Fanon, “the oppressed find freedom only through violence and violence is a cleansing force.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, violence for the oppressed is a must. It is a natural response to the violence perpetuated by the oppressor.

The violence in Assam is not different from the violence that Fanon speaks of. For the natives in the colonial Africa, the oppressor is the white man - the settler. In Assam, the oppressor is the Government of India which first used violence to suppress the ethnic movement by implementing the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

The Government of India has failed to understand the problem of the Northeast India. It has mishandled the issues and problems. Instead of addressing the real issue, the Central government has dealt with it as a Law and Order Problem. The violent approach carried out either by the Government of India or the ethnic groups have not achieved their desired ends. Rather violence has brought destruction to life and property, affected the socio-economic life for decades.

If we look at the nature of problems in the region, it is very complex, however, violence, has not brought solution to the problems. Rather it has brought enmity and divisions among the people. Thus violence cannot be used as a means to bring peace and stability. Violence cannot be used to build a society. One may assert one’s identity through violence for a short time but no lasting identity can be built through violence. The need of the hour is the creative dialogue and negotiation on both sides. It is through this constant dialogue and negotiations that one can expect some good results on both sides.

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<sup>67</sup> Fanon, p. 86.

Today, people in the Northeast in general are fed up with violence. There is a cry for peace. They want to live in peace. Violence can never be a means of peace in the long run.

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