

Rise and Fall of Ethnonationalist Armed Movement in Assam: A Diachronic Narrative of the Assamese Nationality and its Systemic Insecurity

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Abstract

The article examines the dynamics of state-society conflict in post-colonial Assam. While examining the discourse of Assamese nationality formation through the ethno-political narratives by the emergent elites, the article adopts a historical approach encompassing a diachronic view of history from the pre-colonial formation of ethnic collectivity to colonial exploitation and the subsequent marginalization of the ethnic group rights in the postcolonial period. It explores the root causes of ethnonational assertion of the Assamese nationality– the claim which later provides the grounds for rising armed political struggle by the United Liberation Front of Assam ULFA. Further, the article attempts to comprehend why the sovereign mind and resistance movement is still prevalent among certain section of the Assamese people despite the decline of separatist ethnopolitical armed insurgency led by ULFA in the region. The article explores the gap between the vernacular ethnopolitical narratives and statist response to such ethnonational armed conflict.

Introduction

Claiming sovereign ethnic homeland either through armed struggle or nonviolent means by an identifiable ethno-national group within a recognized territory of a state or between states is not a new phenomenon in post-colonial societies. The post-colonial Assam has witnessed a sovereignty based ethno-nationalist armed conflict since 1980s. This radical ethno-nationalist movement remains mostly unresolved, occasionally takes violent form, gives birth to terrorism, invite states' repression, resulting in gross violation of human rights. The ideologues of armed movement believe that India is a multinational state and every nationality has the right to decide their own destiny by exercising the principle of self-determination. The armed nationalist movement although failed in achieving its goal, has pertinently raised the question of 'sovereign Assam', a radical ideological construct, built on the basis of past history and ethnic

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collectivity. This radical ideological construct has been still alive among certain section of the people and has been instrumental in igniting the Assamese mind in the event of any potential insecurity to their identity.

It is against this backdrop the article tries to examine the discourse of Assamese identity formation in post-colonial Assam through the ethno-political narratives and how these ethnopolitical narratives ignite and radicalize certain sections of Assamese people on ethno-political line. The article also examines the causes and the reasons as to why there occurs recurrent resistance movement against the state despite the decline of the ethnopolitical armed movement led by ULFA in recent times. While explaining it the article extensively relies on the Assamese vernacular sources including the print, views of the community elites, petitions and memorandums of native organizations along with the ethnographic and historical materials pertaining to the region in charting the question of Assamese nationality and sovereignty from a historical and ethnopolitical standpoint.

The Assamese Identity: An Ethno-National Construct

The formative history of Assamese identity goes back to pre-Ahom period and the consolidation of Assamese nationality harks back to Ahom rule.² Assam, a melting pot of diverse cultural origins mainly consists of the Indo-Aryan and the Austro-Mongoloid people. The migration of people into Assam continues since centuries from both Indian sub-continent and Southeast Asia. The migrant people interacted with the local communities of both the Brahmaputra valley and the hills thereby creating a common identity. The Ahoms decisively formed a greater community by amalgamating the local communities through the policies of accommodation and assimilation into the Ahom kingdom. The Ahoms also partook in the process of *Assamisation* by adoption of Hinduism. As a consequence, the Assamese or '*Asomiya*' *jaati* (nationality) was formed with the process of *Aryanisation* as well as the rise and consolidation of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra valley.³ The policy of accommodativeness towards the different ethnic groups, absence of caste prejudices⁴ and the presence of assimilative administrative system in the Ahom reign made it possible to form a common political territory to nurture Assamese *jaati*- a distinct composite cultural identity. Most significantly, Sankardeva (1449-1568), a great social reformer and cultural legend, along with his disciple Madhabdeva had prepared the ground for creating a composite cultural identity by propagating-*Vaishnavism*. The neo-Vaishnava movement was instrumental in bringing many tribals within the

² The Ahom rulers continued to maintain their independence and ruling the territory until the British finally occupied Assam. The Mughal rulers of Delhi made several attempts to annex the Ahom kingdom. However, the Ahom kingdom was defended by the Ahom General Lachit Barphukan by defeating the Mughals in the historic battle of Saraighat in 1671 which has remained a symbol of national unity and victory in the collective memory of the Assamese people.

³ Misra, 'The Transformation of Assamese Identity,(2001)2.

⁴ Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations ,1771-1826* (1974) 48.

Hindu fold and thereof the greater Assamese community. It was possible because of the egalitarian and democratic character of the movement. Historian Amalendu Guha noted that during the 17th and 18th centuries large segments of Bodo-Kacharis and other tribal groups embraced Hinduism.⁵ He further said that the neo-Vaishnavite movement had a de-tribalizing role⁶ and brought diverse tribal nationalities under a common faith. Hiren Gohain, an eminent public intellectual of Assam, argues that Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism, through its liberal and egalitarian values, provided the base for founding of the modern Assamese nationality.⁷ It helped to evolve a unique social identity for the Assamese by rejecting the conservative Hindu practices as seen to be practiced different parts of India. Nevertheless, the presence of a small section of Muslims was there in Assam who earlier had come as a part of the expeditions of Muslim warriors to Assam in 13th and 14th centuries. In due course of time, this group of Muslim people got assimilated with the emerging Assamese nationality and came to be known as *Asomiya Musulmans*. Even Ahom kings bestowed position, power and eminence on many of these Assamese Muslims and they got assimilated into greater Assamese identity. The demographic position of Assamese community at the time of British entry into Assam indicates the presence of various tribal groups (tribes who originally descended from the hills in the neighborhood such as Rabhas, Garos, Bodo-Kacharis, Mikirs, Lalungs, Hajongs, Miris etc.), the Ahoms, the caste Hindus, the lower caste Hindus and a relatively smaller section of Assamese Muslim. Besides the Assamese language, script with original root in Kamrupi with proto-Nagari script, which is derived from Sanskrit and an 'aprombhasa' of Magadhi and Maithali of Bihar with strong roots of Aryan connection remain an important contributing factor in the formation and growth of Assamese nationality.⁸ However, some scholars⁹ suggest that although it has a Sanskrit root, Assamese came into contact with the local dialects of the Tibeto-Burman language family¹⁰ and Tai. The early period of the development of Assamese language can be traced back to two main centres of writing with two different scripts respectively: one was the kingdom of Kamrupa in the western Assam with its close ties with North Bengal following a proto-Nagari script which was influenced by Magadhi and Maithali of Bihar with some modified Sanskrit words and terms, and the other Centre of writing was Sadiya, in the eastern Assam, and the

⁵ Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (1991) 25.

⁶ Guha (1991) 103.

⁷ For detailed explanation and impact of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism toward formation of the Assamese nationality – see Hiren Gohain, *Asomiya Jatiya Jibanat Mahapurusiya Parampara* (Guwahati, 1990).

⁸ To understand the root of Assamese language see Maheswar Neog, *Asomiya Sahityar Ruprekha* (Guwahati: Publication Broad of Assam, 1974).

⁹ For example Kalirum Medhi mentioned that Assamese language formed with a variety of influences from Sanskrit, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai. For details explanation see Kalirum Medhi, *Assamese Grammar and the origin of the Assamese Language* (Guwahati: Publication Broad of Assam, 1988).

¹⁰ For detailed explanation about presence and influence of Tibeto-Burman family in Assamese language see Upen Rabha Hakacham, *Asomiya Aru Asamar Tibbat- Barmiya Bhasa* (Goalpara: Smt. Manjula Rabha Hakachamzak. Rabha Hakacham, 2000).

inscriptions are in Tai.¹¹ All these scripts available during that period were merged into one when the printing press was established in the 19th century with the creation of standardized Assamese letters under the aegis of American Baptist Missionaries. This initiative marked a new beginning in the growth of Assamese linguistic nationalism.

Politically, another significant development was the enactment of Bengal Eastern Frontier regulation of 1873, particularly section 2 by the British, which created the North East Frontier there by further introducing inner lines by identifying two distinct zones – inner line covering the plains districts and the tribal areas of the hills fell beyond the inner line.¹² The plains of Assam valley have a majority of Hindu population while the hills are mostly inhabited by the Christians and non-Hindu tribal groups. However, the British policy of divide and rule deeply hampered the integration between the plains and hills people. The British Census of 1881, which categorized population according to religion, caste, and tribe, revealed an interesting fact about the population pattern of the region: the non-Muslim and non-Christian population of the valley was classified into three groups -- Tribes uninfluenced by Hinduism, tribes in process of conversion into Hinduism, and Hindu Caste.¹³ As per classification, the Assamese came under the subheading of Hindu caste which indicates the dominance of Hinduism and the influence of Hinduism information of Assamese identity. In such a situation it is difficult to define as to who are the Assamese in the purest form. The process of Assamese nationality formation became more complex when a large scale of population from East Bengal, North and Middle India migrated to Assam during the British period. In the process, the tea tribes and the Muslims who came during the period of British rule from East Bengal became a part of the broader Assamese society. Gradually, Assamese identity found its critical base with the emergence of Assamese language, which united the people on linguistic line. However, a section of the Assamese intelligentsia stressed the poly ethnic nature of the Assamese nationalism and claimed that it was the Hindu, particularly the Vaishnavite faith, which served as a cementing force for Assamese society.¹⁴ With the passage of time, thus, Assamese identity came to acquire a multiethnic secular identity through the process of assimilation wherein the factors of common language and cultural tradition have played a crucial role in shaping the composite Assamese identity.

Print Media and Assamese National Consciousness

During the British regime, one of the most influential factors which strengthened the Assamese national consciousness was the struggle to regain the status of the

¹¹ Saikia, *Assam and India : Fragmented Memories , Cultural Identity , and the Tai- Ahom Struggle*(2005)6.

¹² Inner lines basically designed by the British to demarcate the settle and unsettled areas of the colonial administration for the purpose of jurisdiction. The colonial authority-imposed restriction on the British subjects entry beyond the inner line.

¹³ Guha (1991)131.

¹⁴ Misra(2001)14.

Assamese language. In 1837 when Assamese was replaced by Bengali, however, the emerging Assamese middle class elites like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and others in association with the Christian Baptist Missionaries brought out standard Assamese grammar and the first Assamese Journal '*Orunodoi*' (1846-83)¹⁵ which played a significant role in Assamese language as an official medium of instruction in 1873. It was against this backdrop that the Assamese students studying in Calcutta organized the *Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (ABUSS), an Assamese literary society in 1888 for the cause of Assamese national identity through the promotion of linguistic nationalism. The provincial litterateurs like Ananda Ram Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, Hem Chandra Barua, Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, Dinanath Bezbarua, Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Kanaklal Barua and others played a very significant role toward the growth of Assamese national consciousness through their writings. Similarly, a strong sense of linguistic based nationalism also emerged with the writings of Lakhsmi Nath Bezbarua. In his writings '*Asom Desh*' (The land of Assam), Assam finds itself being represented as an autonomous socio-cultural and political entity which is clearly revealed in his poems like '*Mor Desh*' (My Country) and '*Asom Sangeet*' (Song of Assam). '*Mor Desh*' which eulogizes Assam as a country of matchless beauty and uniqueness and which can be found nowhere remains as the '*Jatiya Sangeet*' (National song) in Assam.¹⁶

The role of the native press had also immensely contributed toward the growth of Assamese national consciousness. During the British period a large number of vernacular newspapers and periodicals namely *Assam Bilashini* (1871), *Jonaki* (1889), *Bijulee* (1890), *Assamiya* (1918), *Times of Assam* (1923), *Bonti* (1927), *Avahan* (1929), *The Assam Tribune* (1937) emerged and dedicated themselves to the nationalist cause. Papers like *Chetana* (1919), *Deka Asom* (1935) and *Dainik Batori* (1935) dedicated themselves towards Assam's cause and the latter even strongly advocated the idea of "Assam for the Assamese."

Community Elites and Advocacy for Assamese Nation

The early part of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of a section of conscious and educated Assamese elites. The formation of The *Assam Association* in 1903, followed by *Assam Chatra Sanmilan* in 1916 under the presidentship of Lakshminath Bezbarua and *Assam Sahitya Sabha* in 1917 — a literary body under the presidentship

¹⁵ The publication of *Orunodoi* from Sibsagar was the first print revolution in Assam at the aegis of American Baptist missionary, primarily devoted to innovate a new world of Assamese literature with an emphasis on local dialects instead borrowing from other languages. It is noteworthy that Dr Nathan Brown, Miles Bronson and Oliver T. Cutter played a significant role toward the history of Assamese literary resurgence. This was the first Assamese magazine which introduced the Assamese people to the western modernity and provided a literary network for creating a new generation Assamese intellectuals to re-establish the language.

¹⁶ *Mor Desh* written by Bezbarua in 1910 remains a national song for the Assamese. The song '*O Mor Apunar Desh*' signifies today as symbol of Assamese unity and national pride. It is translated into many local dialects and languages and is sang in common platform for celebrating the heritage of Assamese nationality.

of Padmanath Gohain Baruah—were considered to be significant steps toward the growth of Assamese nationalism in the early stages. The *Sanmilan* and *Sabha*, although both were non-political bodies, produced a group of politically conscious civil society activists in Assam. However, it was *Assam Association*, which by deciding to extend support to Gandhi's non-cooperation programme in 1920, marked the beginning of Assam's formal entry into Indian national struggle led by the Congress. The joining of *Chatra Sanmilan* members in the non-cooperation movement and Gandhi's visit to Assam in August 1921 gave an impetus to the anti-British movement, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. The popularity of Congress party and its leadership in Assam started taking shape largely among the caste Hindu Assamese which subsequently saw the national movement led by Congress. Conspicuously non-caste Hindu leaders more particularly tribal leaders were absent from the Congress politics. However, a few provincial congress leaders wanted to maintain distinctiveness of the provincial Congress in conformity with Assamese nationality. But they could not succeed as the National Congress politics never created a space for the provincial cause and subsumed it under the umbrella of grand Indian nationalist struggle.

In 1920, Chandra Nath Sarma, the founder of the Congress Party in Assam, voiced his concern about the threat posed to the Assamese identity by immigrants from East Bengal. This migration was encouraged by the British from Sylhet and Mymensingh for their colonial interest to meet the labor shortfall in newly found resource rich Assam. The various degrees of influx of migrant population into Assam have caused land alienation to the native Assamese. Therefore, the provincial congress leaders expressed their concern regarding the settlement of migrants in the province which, however, was not given attention by the national Congress. This development later helped in the construction of Assamese nationality on the provincial line as against the pan Indian nationalism. Inevitably, it became a grave cause of disappointment to the Assamese people when Maulana Bhasani, an immigrant leader, started demanding for the abolition of the Line System which was introduced in 1920 to protect the land of native people. Between 1930 to 1936, fifty-nine grazings, forest and village reserves were opened in Nagaon district for settling the migrants under the colonial immigration scheme.¹⁷ Even Saadullah, who headed the Province during 1937-1946, took a pro-migrant stance and this policy was rightly observed by the Viceroy Lord Wavell and the latter stated that 'grow more food' policy of Saadullah was aimed at 'grow more Muslims.'¹⁸ In this context, even C.S. Mullan's 1931 Report on Census was significant which highlighted the threat posed to the culture and identity of the native Assamese people by the migrant Bengali Muslims. He termed 'immigration as an invasion' and warned that 'in course of time the Assamese homeland would be confined to only two districts of upper Assam' (*The Census of India 1931:50-51*).

¹⁷ Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947* (1977)210.

¹⁸ Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and* (2000)129.

It was against such background that the Assamese middle class intellectuals like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Jnananath Bora and others wrote about the need to defend the Assamese homeland against foreign incursions by espousing the idea of the Assamese nation. Roy Choudhury put forward the idea of an 'Indian federation of linguistic nationalities with dual citizenship'.¹⁹ In his article "*Bharatiyar Swaraj aru Asamiyar Swaraj*" published in *Chetna*, vol.3(2) 11, 1920 Roy Choudhury offered a distinct idea about Assamese nationalism and its relationship with pan Indian nationalism. He referred India as *Mahajati* and Assamese as *Jati*. Though Roy Choudhury's vision of the Assamese *Jati* did not include the idea of a sovereign Assam²⁰, but his disillusionment with the Congress in later phase drew him closer to the idea of a *Swadhin Asom*.²¹ *Jatiya Mahasabha* under his leadership voiced concerns of Assamese insecurity and accused all India Congress leadership of not being able to foresee the threat to the Assamese identity from the immigrant Muslims.²² Roy Choudhury also formed the *Atmarakshi Bahini* (Self Defense Force)to launch the struggle for Assamese national existence and save the Assamese homeland from the designs of the Muslim League in getting it incorporated into Pakistan.

Jnananath Bora, another leading intellectual, through his writings in 'Awahon', an Assamese journal and 'Dainik Batori', a local daily, put forward his ideas of a 'sovereign Assam'²³ in his article "*Kamrup Aru Bharatvarsha*" published in *Awahon* (3), 1936. In another article "*Asom Desh Bharatvarshar Bhitarat Thakiba Kiyo?*" (Why should Assam stay inside India?) published again in *Awahon* (2), 1938 Bora stated that before the year 1920, "the Assamese people had no idea of the Congress. The Assamese have always lived in a distinct country with its own distinctive administration and never seen Assam as a part of India. He believed that "Assam's regeneration would be possible only if it was separated from India".

The cry for an independent homeland also came from the many native elites particularly from Ahoms, Nagas, Mizos and the Bodo Kacharis at the time of Independence as they feared that Assam's amalgamation with the rest of India would undermine the interest of the native tribal people. The Ahom who have been marginalized by the British and subsequently by the Caste-Hindus²⁴ called for a separate independent political existence for Assam through the *Ahom Association*, formed in 1893but could not succeed due to its strong link with the *mahapurukhia* Vaishnavism of Sankardeva. Nevertheless,

¹⁹ For detail views of Roy Choudhury and role of Jatiya Mahasabha see *Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury Rachanavali*,Guwahati:*Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury Swaroni Committee* , (1986).

²⁰ Baruah, *Social Tensions in Assam: Middle Class Politics*(1991) 61.

²¹ Misra, 2000,p.85.

²² *Jatiya Mahasabha* 9 June 1946. "Case of Great Assamese people and their Homeland: Assam", Memorandum submitted to All India Congress Committee.

²³ Bora wrote his articles in Assamese. For details see Girin Phukon ,*Assam's Attitude to Federalism* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers 1984) 45-82 and Misra (2000) 88-91.

²⁴ See Phukon (1984) 52-56.

a section of the Assamese intelligentsia consistently put forward the argument that ethnically Assam belonged to the Mongoloid people with its culture and civilization closely linked with glorious heritage of South East Asia.

Freedom Struggle and Advocacy for Provincial Sovereignty

The main driving political force - the Provincial Congress and its role in the critical 1940s - can't be ignored when it comes to the matter of shaping the Assamese sovereign mindset. In Jorhat jail, Gopinath Bardoloi initiated a discourse with his jailed colleagues on provincial sovereign rights and the province's future political relations with India. Farkhrudin Ali Ahmed favored the idea of provincial sovereignty for Assam.²⁵ The provincial Congress consistently opposed the Muslim League's design to incorporate Assam into Pakistan. The Grouping Proposal clubbing Bengal and Assam together under Group C as per Cabinet Mission plan which was supported by the All India Congress was vehemently opposed by the Provincial Congress leadership as it would pose a serious threat to the Assamese identity.²⁶ The Provincial Congress under the leadership of Gopinath Bardoloi fought back with Gandhiji's support,²⁷ which ultimately forced the Congress leadership to realize the fate of Assam in case the Grouping Proposal was implemented, and subsequently the proposal was dropped. Once the Muslim majority district of Sylhet decided to be a part of Pakistan through referendum, the threat to Assamese identity temporarily disappeared and demand for independent Assam also died down. However, it facilitated to articulate regionalism on the line of Assamese nationality which was reflected throughout the Constitutional Assembly debates.²⁸ Importantly, the Congress party itself in Assam harbored autonomy for the region and this reflected during the debates of the Constituent Assembly on center-state relations. Bardoloi demanded "fullest possible autonomy" from the Centre so that Assam could utilize its resources for development of the region. However, the provincial leaders, despite their best efforts²⁹ failed to secure greater financial and political autonomy

²⁵ Mahanta, *Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty* (2013) 298.

²⁶ *An Appeal to the All India Congress Committee* by the Assam Provincial Congress Committee 1946 published by Siddhinath Sarma, General Secretary, Assam PCC. The Assamese people felt betrayed by the top Congress leadership as Nehru, Azad and Patel consistently insisted Assam Provincial Congress on accepting the proposal without realizing the apprehension of the Assamese people. In a special Assam Assembly session (which was held for electing the Assam's representatives to the Constituent Assembly as per the Cabinet Mission Plan, 1946), even Bardoloi moved a resolution and argued that Assam should have a constitution of its own, framed and settled by its own elected representatives (*Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings* 1946:785-797).

²⁷ Gandhi's Advice came to Assam through the emissaries- Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati and Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury who met Gandhiji on behalf of Gopinath Bardoloi on 19 December 1946 (Source: *Harijan*, 29 December 1946) *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

²⁸ *Constituent Assembly Debates*. Volumes III to VIII. For a perceptive analysis see chapter 7 'Assamese Demand for Provincial Autonomy: An Analysis of Constituent Assembly Debates' in Phukon (1996) 74-89.

²⁹ The members of Constituent Assembly from Assam- Amiya Kumar Das, Kuladhar Chaliha and others repeatedly stressed the need for economic independence and greater control over the state resources.

except for protection of the tribals in the sixth schedule of the Constitution.³⁰ All these factors shaped the Assamese mindset and added new dimension to post independent provincial politics in Assam.

Post Partition: Burden of Refugees and Assam's Economic Woe

Among many root causes of political unrest, the partition induced refugee burden and Nehru's position over the question of settling the refugees from East Pakistan created a major differences of opinion between the provincial government of Assam and the Centre. After the partition, the continuous influx of the both Hindu and Muslim refugees into Assam posed a serious burden to the provincial government. Despite severe financial and other limitations, the provincial government did its best to provide settlement to the refugees in Assam. However, when the provincial government expressed its incapacibilities to host the refugees indefinitely, Nehru in fact threatened Bardoloi that if his state did not agree to host the refugees from East Pakistan and settle them on its land, the Centre would cut down financial aid to Assam.³¹ This attitude of Nehru further widened the gap between the Centre and the people of the province.

Further, the differences between the Centre and the state were widened over the question of unchecked illegal immigrants into Assam from East Pakistan. The influx of refugee and its settlement in Assam in absence of a proper national refugee law has caused a negative impact on Assamese psyche. Though Indian parliament legislated a law "*The Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) 1950 Act*", it was never implemented in true spirit. This gross insensitivity of the Centre coupled with the non addressal of complex immigrant issue and land questions further sowed the seeds of separatist demands.

Apart from the refugee burden, the partition of India made Assam a completely landlocked state by separating Assam from the rest of India. Assam had access to the Chittagong port through the rail communication between Dibrugarh and the Chittagong port, which was started in 1904.³² The disruption of the rail connectivity from Dibrugarh to Chittagong impacted the economy of Assam which had seen robust trade in timber and tea during the colonial period. The partition severely imbalanced the economy and trade practices in the state resulting in economic slowdown. Consequently, The per capita income of Assam which was Rs. 265 (higher than the national average of Rs.255) slowed down in the post-independence period and fell below the national average.³³

³⁰ The Sixth schedule of Indian constitution is designed to protect the rights of the tribal groups of the region through granting autonomy. Presently it deals with the administration of tribal areas in the state of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram .

³¹ 35 Barooah, *Gopinath Bardoloi: Indian Constitution and Centre-State Relations, 1940-1950*(1990) 32.

³² India Office Records and Private Papers, 'Records of the Assam Bengal Railway Company Papers'. The British Library , London.

³³ Alokesh Barua and Santosh Kr . Das, "Perspective on Growth and Development in the Northeast: The Look East Policy and Beyond"; Margin: *The Journal of Applied Economic Research* 2 (4) , 2008, p. 347.

The popular anger was first expressed in the form of a movement by the people of Assam in 1957 following the Central government's proposal to set up the oil refinery at Barauni instead of Assam on national security ground. This popular movement eventually forced the Centre to set up a small refinery with a capacity of 0.85 million tons at Guwahati. The growing feeling of alienation and unemployment among the youth of Assam triggered the second oil refinery movement under the auspices of All Assam Oil Refinery Sangram Parisad in 1969. The movement was actively supported by the political parties and student bodies who expressed resentment against the Central government for not initiating industrialization and exploiting the state resources in a form of neo-colonialism. This was followed by the state wide agitation led by the All-Assam Students Union in 1974 for economic development of the state. Despite the fact that Assam produced and contributed more than 50 percent to the Indian tea market and earned good number of annual foreign exchanges, but it didn't contribute much to the development of the local economy. Thus, it is the failure of the state and its govern mentality that made little effort to address the critical issues of economic urgency in the state burdened with gradual divergence of per capita income from the national average coupled with unemployment which created a sense of neglect that had its far reaching impact in various movements and organized resistance prevailing in the state for a long time.

Assam for the Assamese: Voices Against the Reorganization of Assam

Declaration of Assamese as Assam's official language by the Government of Assam in 1960 resulted in widespread resentment among the Bengalis and the people from the hills. While Assam adopted Assamese as the official language of the state for safeguarding their identity and culture at the insistence of the Assam Sahitya Sabha and Assamese student community, the non-Assamese speaking people felt insecure in the face of being *Assamised*. This development sparked political reaction from Barak Valley which led to the death of a number of protesters³⁴ thereby worsening the relationship between the Assamese and the non-Assamese speaking people. Subsequently the language policy was changed and Bengali was recognized in Barak valley for administrative and other official purposes. However, *Assam Sahitya Sabha* and students organization continued to insist for implementation of Assamese language for entire Assam.

Similarly the Central government's intention to reorganize Assam and create new state for the hills provoked the Assamese people of the Brahmaputra valley. The popular sentiment against the re-organization of the state was based on the perceptions of the Assamese that those regions which did not have Assamese speaking population and which territorially belonged to Assam were part of greater Assam.³⁵ Similar line

³⁴ For recorded information see *Report on Linguistic , Communal and Ethnic Conflicts in Assam . 2014. Chief Minister's Secretariat, Assam.* p. 28.

³⁵ Misra(2000) 120.

of observation was made by Myron Weiner who stated that the Assamese had twin objectives—make Assam as the land for the Assamese and retain control over all territories that the British had historically annexed to Assam even though some of these areas were predominantly non-Assamese.³⁶ Consequently, the political organizations and civil society bodies such as Assam Anti-Federation Action Council and *Lachit Sena*³⁷ raised their voices against the probable restructuring of Assam on federal basis. The Assam Anti-Federation Action Council called for a state wide strike on January 24, 1968 and appealed for boycotting the Republic day celebration, resulting in wide scale disturbances in the State. In consonance with that, the *Lachit Sena* raised their voice for the slogan - “*Assam for the Assamese.*” The popular movement headed by the Assamese against the Indian government took a key turn when the students in the state organized for the first time ‘Unity Day’ to oppose the proposed reorganization of the state. Notably, several speakers for the first time in post Independent India openly called for Assam’s separation from India³⁸ which later helped the radical forces in articulating the idea of united Assam.

Nationalistic Activism through the Native Press and Intelligentsia

In late 1970s and early part of the 1980s, Assam had witnessed an aggressive regional nationalist sentiment against the backdrop of an insecurity arising out of economic deprivation and continuous influx of immigrants into the state. These two factors exceedingly influenced the native activist which was reflected in their writings published by the native press.³⁹ The organizations like *Purbanchal Lok Parishad* (PLP) led by Nibaran Bora in 1977, *Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal* led by Nagen Hazarika in 1978, *Assam Jatiya Sangha* led by Nitya Hazarika and Bhimkanta Buragohain⁴⁰ in 1979 raised popular consciousness among the native Assamese people against these two grave issues. *Assam Sahitya Sabha* in its Sualkuchi session in 1979 appealed to the authority to protect the Assamese identity and language demanding expulsion of the illegal foreigners from the state. During this period various slogans showing radical sentiments such as ‘*Boycott Non-Assamese*’, ‘*Go back Indians*’, ‘*Be Armed Yourself*’, ‘*We want Sovereignty*’, appeared in many parts of Upper Assam. The Assamese dailies like *Dainik Asom* and *Nagarik* sensitized the local people by extensively publishing series of editorials, reports and lead articles on the issue of land, immigration and

³⁶ Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, (1988) 121.

³⁷ The Assam Anti-Federation Action Council- a loose Civil society network was formed for opposing the central govt's move to create new states by reorganising Assam. Lachit Sena was a militant outfit of Assamese youths formed in 1967. For Lachit Sena and their involvement in violent political activities in 1968 see *Report on Linguistic, Communal and Ethnic Conflicts in Assam . 2014. Chief Minister's Secretariat, Assam.* p. 36.

³⁸ Das, *Swadhinatar Pssamrastab*(1993) 50.

³⁹ For more information and detailed local narratives on the role of press and provincial intellectuals in shaping the mindset for confronting the state see Mahanta (2013) 31-46.

⁴⁰ He became the main protagonist of ULFA who was popularly known as ‘*Mama*’ among the organisation's cadres . He was the most influential ideologue and architect of the organization.

protection of Assamese identity thereby giving an intellectual base to prepare the ground for anti-foreigner movement in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. A few provincial influential leaders and intellectuals like Nibaran Bora Homen Borgohain contributed a lot to the growth of Assamese nationalist thoughts. Nibaran Bora through his nationalist political activism and writings in *Nilachal*, *Nagarik* and *Dainik Asom* in the late 1970s and 1980 consistently tried to provide an alternative discourse by advocating Assam's cause. He criticized the role of Indian state and nation building process and viewed that Assam is more organically connected to the South East Asian region than the mainland India. His *Swadhin Asom Sambhavne? (Is Independent Assam Possible?)*⁴¹ remains one of the most influential writings adored by the proponents of *Swadhin Asom*.

Homen Borgohain, an influential intellectual, highlighted Assam's economic woes and colonial exploitation under the aegis of Central Government through his series of aggressive nationalistic writings in *Nagarik*. His book *Oupaniveshik Sosonor Biruddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram 1980 (The last Struggle of Assam Against Colonial Exploitation)*⁴² gave an intellectual base for sustaining the Assam Movement by ASSU and ULFA's armed movement although Borgohain was not an ideologue for both the organizations. Both Bora and Borgohain had immense contribution in framing the internal colonial thesis in the state in late 1970s which had, in a significant way, provided a theoretical impetus to the ULFA's armed struggle against the Indian State. At the same time, Suresh Phukan,⁴³ an activist, adopted cultural forms like patriotic songs and drama to spread Assamese nationalism among the younger generation in Upper Assam in 1980s. His writing *Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koisu (I, Lachit, Speaking from the Graveyard)*⁴⁴ inspired the Upper Assam youth to take up the national cause and restore the glory of Assam founded by *Sargadeo* Sukapha. Nevertheless, these thoughts stimulated the younger generation for reviving Assamese nationalism.

Impact of Assam Movement and the Assam Accord

In such political quandary, All Assam Students' Union (AASU) emerged as a potent force to mobilize the people against the Central Government on the issues of economic deprivation and neo-colonial form of exploitation. Later, AASU shifted its focus to the foreigner issue following the crucial statement made by the then Chief Election Commissioner S.L. Shakhderon foreign national issue regarding the presence of a sizeable proportion of doubtful citizens in Assam in the conference of state chief

⁴¹ It was written in Assamese. To know in details see Nibaran Bora, *Swadhin Asom Sambhavne?* (Guwahati:Ekhona, 1998).

⁴² About colonial pattern of exploitation in Assam see Homen Borgohain, *Oupneshik Sosonor Biruddhe Asomor Sesh Sangram*, (Guwahati: Vintage Bookshop, 1980).

⁴³ He became an ardent supporter of ULFA and he was the president *Assam Jatiya Unnayan Parishad*-a sister organization of ULFA to popularize the organization's ideology and welfare programmes.

⁴⁴ See Suresh Phukan, *Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koisu* (Sibsagar: Rupom Prakashan, Phukan, 1980)

Electoral Officers in 1978.⁴⁵ This fact came to light in the mid 1979 when the electoral roll was updated for the parliamentary bye election in the Mongaldoi constituency as caused by the death of Hiralal Patowary, a sitting member of Lok Sabha. This development set a new discourse in the state politics with the formation of *All Assam Gana Sangram Parisad* (AAGSP) comprising several regional bodies along with All Assam Students' Union and *Asom Sahitya Sabha*. Although the AASU leaders consistently maintained that this was a struggle to 'save Assam today so as to save India tomorrow'⁴⁶, there were trends within the movement which seemed to expose the concern for an independent Assam. The *Jatiyatabadi Dal*, *Asom Yavak Samaj* as well as the *Purbanchalya Lok Parisad* were known to harbour secessionist feelings and demand for a sovereign and independent Assam free from the control of the Indian state. The Central Government under the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had to impose President's Rule in the state to suppress the Assam Movement. During the controversial election of 1983 more than hundred lives were killed in police firing.⁴⁷ Importantly, the infamous Nellie massacre⁴⁸, which the state completely failed to deal with, took place during this period. Resultantly, people lost faith on the government and a radical section of followers of the movement sought political alternative for the future of the state⁴⁹ while the moderate section sought the solution to the problem through negotiation within the Indian constitution. Meanwhile, Rajiv Gandhi, who became the Prime Minister after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, took an affirmative stand on the matter of ending the Assam Movement. Accordingly, the Assam Accord was signed between the Union Government and the leaders of the AASU on 14th August, 1985 in the presence of Rajiv Gandhi just before he 38th India's Independence Day. Although the Assam Accord triggered a hope of protection and preservation of Assamese identity, it introduced two new challenges for the state.⁵⁰ First, an arbitrary cut-off date to determine a foreigner was fixed as on 25th March, 1971 solely for Assam, while for the rest of India the cut-off date for the migrants from Pakistan remained the same as 19 July, 1948. Secondly, the Parliament of India made a separate immigration law exclusively for Assam for detection, determination and deportation of foreigners from Assam through judicial process by enacting the IM (DT) Act, 1983, thereby making detection and deportation of foreigners virtually impossible until it was struck

⁴⁵ The detailed information can be accessed from *Report on Illegal Migration into Assam, 1998*, submitted to the President of India by the Governor of Assam, 8th November.

⁴⁶ *Memorandum* submitted by the AASU before the Prime Minister (2 February 1980).

⁴⁷ It was marked by complete breakdown of state machineries followed by violence where more than hundred agitators were killed in Police firings during the State Assembly Election 1983.

⁴⁸ Nellie is located in Nagoan district of Assam where infamous communal clash took place on 18 February 1983. Around 1,600 innocent people belonging to the Muslim community were killed mercilessly by a local community which was appeared in detail in *India Today* (1983, March 15).

⁴⁹ Although the ULFA came into exist on 7 April, 1979 with a motto 'unity, revolution and liberation' in historic Rang Ghar of Sibsagar, Assam, it has gained momentum during the 1983 controversial election and subsequent state repression for suppressing the Assam Movement.

⁵⁰ For detailed negative impact of Assam Accord see D.N. Bezbaruah, 'Why celebrate a Dead Accord'. *The Assam Tribune* (August 17, 2010).

down by the Supreme Court of India in 2005.⁵¹ Under such development, a section of the participant of Assam agitation, mostly belonged to the *Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad* and the AASU, lost faith in the system and the Accord, and openly propagated liberation of Assam from India through armed struggle for protecting the right of the Assamese people.

The ULFA's Ideological Propagation for Armed Nationalist Movement

In the wake of such a political development, the ULFA has propounded the idea of Sovereign Assam, based on principle of self-determination. They believe that 'nation under foreign occupation has no alternative other than to fight for freedom and national liberation.' They argue that they are not secessionists because Assam was never a part of India at any point of time in history. The treaty of Yandaboo (1826) was signed between British and Burmese – two foreign forces where Assam was not a party to it and the result was the subsequent inclusion of Assam in British India. In its appeal to the United Nations, the ULFA states, "Culturally and racially we Assamese are different and not the part of Indian civilization." The organization claimed that the people of Assam have every right to exercise self-determination through national liberation and appealed to the people of Assam to unite and join the struggle against Indian occupation irrespective of different nationalities, caste, race and religion.

In this context, it needs to be mentioned that Parag Das⁵², an ideologue as well as a critic of the ULFA, through his writings in the local newspapers *Boodhbar* and *Aagan*⁵³ in 1989 and 1990 shaped the ideological foundation of the organization. His book *Swadhinotar Prastab, 1993 (Proposal for Independence)*, which was banned by the Government, advanced the idea of independent Assam by rejecting the Indian constitution. He insisted on the recognition of Right to Secession as a constitutional right for the federating units.⁵⁴ He argued that Assam was never a part of India and therefore people of Assam have the right to exercise self-determination under international laws through referendum. His writings influenced in shaping the organization's ideology and setting the course for its continuing armed struggle. It needs to be mentioned here that leading cultural icons and litterateurs like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Padmanath Gohainbaruah, Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Bishnuprasad Rabha, Bhupen Hazarika believed that Assam is inextricably connected with Indian civilization which is evident in the fifteenth century saint Sankardeva's idea of *Bharatvarsha*.⁵⁵ Although a section of

⁵¹ The Supreme Court Judgment on *Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union of India*, 2005 (on Scrapping IM(DT) Act 1983.

⁵² He was killed by the secret killers on May 17, 1996. He was also arrested by the Indian State under National Security Act in the year 1992 and under TADA in the year 1993. He was also a human rights defender and led *Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti* (MASS).

⁵³ *Boodhbar* was a weekly newspaper and *Aagan* was a magazine, started by Das in 1990 where he was the editor of both publications.

⁵⁴ Mahanta (2013) 137.

⁵⁵ Misra (2000) 146.

intellectuals of Assam refrained alluring to the ideological views of ULFA. Whatsoever, it cannot be denied that the Assamese people have provided moral and ideological support, while the Indian state has given a political space to grow and sustain the armed struggle for *Swadhin Asom* by non addressal of the region's many-thronged problems.

Phases of ULFA'S Armed Nationalist Struggle vis-à-vis Indian State

The three decades long armed struggle of ULFA against the Indian state couldn't succeed much although it had an impact at the initial *formative romantic* phase (roughly 1979-1990) when the organization had been able to galvanize and mobilize the people for the cause of Assam through a series of developmental social works and at the same time consolidated military strength by acquiring guerrilla training and military strategies before militarily confronting the Indian state. This was followed by phase of *military confrontation* (1990-1996) which was marked by a low intensity war that led to the death of many innocent civilians apart from security forces and armed cadres of the ULFA. During this phase Assam was placed under the National Security Act and Armed Forces Special Powers Act, followed by two major military operations against the armed radical group, namely Operation *Bajrang* and *Rhino*. Although these operations had limited success, still it delivered a psychological blow to the radical group and forced hundreds of cadres to surrender to the Indian security forces. However, the radical armed group re-asserted their armed struggle through subversive activities after AGP Government came to power in 1996 which forced the government to launch a three tier joint operation structure consisting of Army, Para-military forces and the State Police on 20 January, 1997 under the name of '*Unified Command*'. This phase could be well described as a *terror phase* (1996-2004)⁵⁶ for which both state agencies and the non state actors were responsible for disregarding the rule of law and grossly violating human rights, involving extra-legal and extra-judicial killings of innocent people, infamously known as 'secret killings'.⁵⁷ In the meantime, the '*Operation All Clear*', carried out by royal Bhutan Army with the support of the Indian Army in 2003 had caused a major setback to the insurgent groups camping in Bhutan's soil. This event of history forced the organization to think of a negotiated settlement through formation of the People's Consultative Group (PCG) to initiate peace talk with the Union Government. This phase was marked as the phase of *Peace Process* (2005-2007) by the three rounds of talks⁵⁸ but without any substantial outcome. Both the parties were not willing to compromise with the sovereignty question from their respective positions. After the arrest of the top leaders by Bangladesh and then on being handed over to India, the organization headed towards a vertical *fragmentation phase* (2008 onwards) with the formation of two camps namely the *Pro-talk* group led by the Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, later joined by

⁵⁶ The author has used this term on own to describe this particular phase as *terror phase* due to prevalent of extra-legal and extra-judicial killings of innocent people in the state, resulting gross violations of human rights.

⁵⁷ *Report on Secret Killings of Assam, 1998-2001*, by Justice K.N . Saikia Commission (2007).

⁵⁸ See Arup Borbora, *All About PCG & Talks*(Guwahati: Aank Baak,2010).

Anup Chetia, the General Secretary of the organization who had been lodged in jail in Bangladesh for 17 years and the *Independent* group headed by the Commander-in-Chief Paresh Baruah. The Pro-talk group expressed their desire for dialogue with the Indian government without setting any pre-condition for a negotiated political settlement. At the same time, the civil society also tried to persuade and facilitate the dialogue process between the Group and the Centre with an initiative for peace under the *Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibarttan* led by public intellectual Hiren Gohain.⁵⁹ However, it did not produce any substantive result and subsequently peace initiative collapsed.

After a prolonged gap, the pro-talks signed a tripartite peace deal with the union and the state Government on December 29, 2023 for a negotiated settlement. The new memorandum of settlement primarily has assured for safeguarding the indigenous land and political rights by reserving the maximum state assembly seats for the indigenous people along with a promise for accelerating all round economic development of Assam. As per the deal, the pro talk group has agreed to “renounce violence, disarm, disband the armed organization, vacate their occupied camps, and participate in peaceful democratic process” of state. However, peace process remains incomplete as the ULFA (I) headed by Paresh Baruah rejected peace deal.

Downfall of the ULFA’s Armed Nationalist Movement

The reasons for subsequent downfall of the armed nationalist movement of the ULFA Assam can be traced from the following factors.

First, the **ideological shortcomings** arose within the organization against the backdrop of the declining trend of ideological armed movements worldwide.⁶⁰ The ULFA’s ideological commitment to achieve *Swadhin Asom* and establishment of scientific socialism were neither fully conceptualized nor debated. The means to attain an independent Assam too remained uncharted and unexplained. Moreover, waging a war with the Indian state by resorting to an armed movement gained a limited appeal and acceptance in face of the mighty state power. Besides many hardcore cadres including former publicity secretary, Sunil Nath, expressed disillusionment with the organization’s armed struggle. Instead of *Swadhinata* (independence) he talked about *Swadhikar* (self-right) for the Assamese people. Even the Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and the general Secretary Anup Chetia along with most of the top ranking leaders of the organization who were arrested at different points of time gave up the original claim and favored for a full autonomy to the state.

⁵⁹ *Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibarttan* , Charter of Demands for Discussion between Government of India and the ULFA dated 7May 2011.

⁶⁰ The worldwide decline of the revolutionary armed movements in post-cold war period , more particularly after 9/11 episode and people’s gradual acceptance of a liberal democratic path further weakened the ULFA’s ideological base and international support for their cause .

Second, the **ideological deviations** reflected in the ULFA's activities over the years largely account for its downfall. The Operation Bajrang had a minimal success and the ULFA managed to survive and could operate from the underground. However, the aftermath of the discovery of mass graves at the Lakhpathar camp of the ULFA came as a terrible shock to the people of the state thereby finally knocking down many popular myths about the organization. It unveiled an unknown face of the organization and led to the gradual erosion of mass support especially among the middle class Assamese. Leading intellectuals raised doubt about the organization's structure and its ideological commitment when it embarked on undertaking anti-people actions like suppressing the dissenting voices through the use of gun powers, abductions, killing innocent people specially the Hindi speaking population, indiscriminate bombing in public places - particularly the Dhemaji incident in 2004 in which 10 children died including three adult in Independence day parade,⁶¹ and anti-India campaign by collaborating with the ISI of Pakistan. The Killing of Sanjoy Ghose, a prominent social worker in Majuli river island tarnished the image with national and international repercussions.⁶² 'A terror driven agenda with exclusive focus on arms, international network, money and an obscure ideology gradually made ULFA a near-irrelevant force in Assam.'⁶³ ULFA's pro-immigrant Muslim stance through its formal statement in 1992 revealed yet another ideological deviation. In July 1992 in its publicity pamphlet *Sanjukta Mukti Bahini Asom, Prachar Patra* the ULFA, addressing the people of Assam belonging to the East Bengal origin, recognized migration as an inevitable part of the national life of the state and stated that "their freedom struggle could not be successful without the support from the immigrant population of Assam." This ideological shift of the ULFA invited sharp criticism from the people and eroded the organization's popularity among the Assamese people.

Third, **explicit militaristic character** of the organization for a political struggle largely contributed to its downfall. The last three decades revealed the ULFA's role with ethno-nationalistic aspiration supported with the military wing which remained powerful both in policy decisions and executions from the very beginning. The dominance of powerful armed wing and the weak political wing of the organization has invariably de-popularized the organization. Even after the successive Indian Army operations, the ULFA stressed on military discipline and armed preparedness rather than political

⁶¹ In an interview, Anup Chetia the general secretary of the ULFA, after released from the Jail on 24 December 2015, himself publicly admitted that blast triggered by the organisation in 2004 independence day parade at Dhemaji was a big mistake. He mentioned that while he was in Bangladesh jail, he heard about the Dhemaji blast but he was stunned to know that some of the cadres of the organisation were behind the blast. Tendering an apology on behalf of the organisation he further stated that killing innocent people specially women and children is a heinous crime and nobody should target the innocent civilians including Hindi speaking people in the state.

⁶² In fact, the arrest of the frontline leaders of the Organization became imminent due to the mounting diplomatic pressure upon the Government of Bangladesh by India and international for a for killing the social worker Sanjoy Ghose, admitted Anup Chetia in an interview in local media, after release from the jail.

⁶³ Mahanta, 2013:136.

mobilization of the through democratic methods. The tall claim of support made by the organization from the all the sections of the people of Assam remains ambiguous and questionable. The overt military characteristic of the organization has acted as a deterrent and undermined the possibilities of a politically negotiated settlement of the conflict.

Moreover, **inherent cultural fault lines** that existed among the ethnic communities of Assamese society and the complex multiple ethnic aspirations have weakened the organization's ideological support base. The United Reservation Movement Council of Assam (URMCA), a conglomerate body of plains tribal people, opposed ULFA's idea and regarded it as an Assamese middle class hegemonic militant organization failing to represent the entire ethnic communities of Assam. At the same time, the Bodos among the plains tribes and the Karbis and the Dimasas from the two hill districts of Assam raised their respective voices for protecting their identity and culture through armed struggle and demanded separate statehood. These highly heterogeneous and volatile ethnic complexities in Assam made grounds tougher for ULFA to sustain its armed revolution for *Swadhin Asom*.

State of Assamese Insecurity: Recent Predicaments

Assamese identity today is in a deep crisis due to the external pressure and internal fragmentation. Most of the prominent ethnic groups have been trying to break away from the greater Assamese identity and demanding respective separate ethnic homeland. At the same time, the immigrant settlers have already formed a formidable social and political force in the state. Assuming a grave threat to their identities, the six indigenous ethnic groups namely, Moran, Motak, Chutia, Tai Ahom, Koch Rajbanshi and Tea community are currently demanding schedule tribes status with an objective to protect the land and political rights for the indigenous people. Of late, the indigenous Assamese have been facing yet another level of grave insecurity in course of updating the National Registrar of Citizens (NRC) in Assam with a cut-off date fixed at 25 March 1971 as per direction of the Supreme Court of India.⁶⁴ The Clause 6 of the Assam Accord⁶⁵ although promised constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguard to the Assamese people and is being considered to be the most vital clause, yet it was never implemented by the subsequent government at the Centre. In the midst of NRC exercise, the Centre constituted a High-Level Committee on 16 July 2019 to suggest possible measures to implement the Clause 6 of the Accord with a politically tricky question as to how to define the Assamese people for determining the criteria for constitutional safeguard. Because of the complex multiplicities of

⁶⁴ The Supreme Court of India Judgment on Civil Original Jurisdiction, Writ Petition (Civil) No .562 of 2012, *Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha & Ors. Versus Union of India* along with the Writ Petition (civil) No .274 of 2009 & Writ Petition (civil) No . 876 of 2014.

⁶⁵ Clause Sixth of *Assam Accord* promises "Constitutional, Legislative and Administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate ,shall be provided to protect , preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people."

ethnicity and inherent assimilative character, the definition of the Assamese⁶⁶ has remained inconclusive till date. Moreover, the act of defining a cultural identity by political parameters itself proves to be problematic and unscientific.

The indigenous Assamese initially saw NRC to be a lifeline for the protection of the Assamese identity and recognition of the indigenous political rights over land and resources. However, in course of time the NRC exercise in the state unfolded wide spread dissatisfaction once the official figure of doubtful citizens of East Bengal origin, which was very less than expected by the civil society bodies,⁶⁷ were put up in the public domain. The resentment focused on faulty method of NRC exercise, imposition of cut-off date of 25th March 1971 exclusively to Assam alone instead of 1951, the all-India base year for upgrading NRC. Without having a decisive settlement of the issue of immigrants, Assam entered into another identity tangle when the Central Government through the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 decided to grant citizenship to the persons belonging to six religious minority communities except Muslim and who had entered India before 31 December 2014 from neighboring Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan on the grounds of religious persecution.⁶⁸ This act of the Centre galvanized the political situation as Assam had already borne the brunt of illegal immigrants as per the Assam Accord and the CAA that seeks to legitimize citizenship to the Hindu immigrants, who came from Bangladesh and settled in the state on the grounds of religious persecution before 31 December 2014. This caused widespread protest including violent protest⁶⁹ by a section of the civil society in the Brahmaputra Valley allaying the fear that this would pose identity crisis to the indigenous people in their own land.

⁶⁶ As per available report in media, the High-Level Committee on *Assam Accord's Clause 6* constituted by the Union Home Ministry has submitted the Report to the Union Home Ministry through the office of the Chief Minister of Assam with a consensus on 1951 NRC as the basis for defining and determining constitutional safeguard to the Assamese people. In 2015, similar line of argument with 1951 NRC to be taken as the basis for definition of the Assamese people, has been put forward by Pranab Gogoi then speaker of Assam Assembly after consulting 53 organizations of the state. The Speaker in his two page report has defined the indigenous person of Assam means "a person belonging to the state of Assam and speaking the Assamese language or any tribal dialect of Assam, or in the case of Cachar the language of the region" (Report on the "Definition of Assamese" 2015. Initiated by the Speaker Pranab Gogoi, Assam Legislative Assembly). *Indigenous Forum Assam* and some tribal organizations insisted that those people living in the state before 24 February 1826, the day of signing the Yandaboo Treaty, and their descendants should be recognized as indigenous people of Assam and eligible for constitutional safeguard (*Guwahati Declaration, 12 February, 2018*. Indigenous Forum, Assam). *Axom Nagarik Samaj's* (ANS) proposal to the High Level Committee on Clause 6 of Assam Accord, takes the view that persons who have been listed in Assam in Census 1891, Census 1951 as indigenous people, Census 1971 recognized themselves belong to an indigenous group in the state and their descendants should be recognized as indigenous people of Assam and eligible for constitutional safeguard.

⁶⁷ As per the official record, declared by the competent authority of NRC on 31 August 2019, total 19,06,657 persons out of 3,30,27,661 applicants were found to be not illegible for citizenship in Assam.

⁶⁸ The rules framed for implementing CAA has been notified on 11 March 2014 by the Home Ministry, Govt. of India. However how it will impact upon Assam vis-à-vis those left out of the NRC and how many people in the state to be granted citizenship is not clear at this juncture

⁶⁹ The anti CAA protest in India initially originated from Assam in the month of December 2019 to protect the rights of Indigenous Assamese and preserve the secular identity of the greater Assamese society. However, anti-CAA protest took a bizarre turn at all India level with a deep religious Hindu-Muslim divide which was not the case in Assam. This protest movement had a sudden halt in the second half of the month of March 2020 due to the outbreak of deadly Covid-19 virus in the state and the country.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

The protracted history of exploitation and marginalization, denial of rights and recognition, and perceived discrimination by both the British colonial and post-colonial state has encouraged ethnonationalist identity movement, leading to the emergence of violent radical armed political struggle in post-colonial Assam. It is true that armed nationalist struggle which created a state of unrest and anarchy in Assam was born out of state-society contradiction. Although the radical group is not a formal body to represent and act on behalf of the Assamese people, it is the Assamese society that has provided ideological and moral support to armed radical movement to fight against the Indian state on the basis of historical grievances and perceived discrimination. The ULFA as an armed insurgent force is on the wane but the ULFA as an idea still remains as a voice to express the historical grievances of the people, though the ULFA's violent method and terror tactics find little support. Notwithstanding ULFA's weak ideological base and the militaristic nature, it must be agreed that the ULFA has been the first armed nationalist insurgent group of the Northeast who has effectively raised the 'internal colonial thesis'⁷⁰ against the Indian state. This continues to ignite the resistance movement against the Centre in the face of any insecurity and crisis of Assamese identity.⁷¹ Lack of comprehensive understanding about the region coupled with wrong perception and prejudices further complicated the situation. While the Centre's dealing with the situation has relied mainly on a simplistic assessment of the region terming it as law-and-order problem threatening the integrity and unity of the nation from the national security view point, the policy making has also been affected by a lack of comprehensive understanding about the region's diverse problems. Therefore, the present crisis of identity and insecurity of indigenous people of Assam need to be addressed closely interlinked with the past complex history, ethnic multiplicities, and the geo-strategic peculiarities of the region. What is needed is an affirmative constitutional engineering on the part of the Indian government to protect indigenous rights and recognition through well charted development intervention that can pave the way for a durable solution.

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⁷⁰ Misra (2000). The issue of colonial hinterland was extensively debated in the 1980s in Economic and Political Weekly. A section of intellectuals believed ULFA has borrowed this idea from it.

⁷¹ *Assam Sahitya Sabha* believes Assamese identity at risk due to external pressure and therefore Sabha continuously insist the government to implement the Assam official language act in the state. As per Census 2011, language and mother tongue data, Assam recorded decline of the percentage of Assamese speaking population. It causes a deep sense of insecurity among the Assamese.

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