Identity and Violence
In India's North East

Towards a New Paradigm

Sanjib Goswami
Institute for Social Research
Swinburne University of Technology
Australia

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on contemporary ethnic and social conflict in India's North East. It concentrates on the consequences of indirect rule colonialism and emphasises the ways in which colonial constructions of 'native' and 'non-native' identity still inform social and ethnic strife. This thesis' first part focuses on history and historiography and outlines the ways in which indirect rule colonialism was implemented in colonial Assam after a shift away from an emphasis on Britain's 'civilizing mission' targeting indigenous elites. A homogenising project was then replaced by one focusing on the management of colonial populations that were perceived as inherently distinct from each other. Indirect rule drew the boundaries separating different colonised constituencies. These boundaries proved resilient and this thesis outlines the ways in which indirect rule was later incorporated into the constitution and political practice of postcolonial India. Eventually, the governmental paradigm associated with indirect rule gave rise to a differentiated citizenship, a dual administration, and a triangular system of social relations comprising 'indigenous' groups, non-indigenous Assamese, and 'migrants'. Using settler colonial studies as an interpretative paradigm, and a number of semi-structured interviews with community spokespersons, this thesis' second part focuses on the ways in which different constituencies in India's North East perceive ethnic identity, ongoing violence, 'homeland', and construct different narratives pertaining to social and ethnic conflict. Recurring unrest in India's North East is thus contextualised in its historical dimension. Scholarly discourse has traditionally analysed these conflicts by focusing on a number of binaries: colonial / postcolonial, development / underdevelopment, civilised / uncivilised. Emphasising a

triangular system of relationships, this thesis presents an alternative interpretation of

the ongoing social and ethnic conflict.

Declaration:

This is to certify that

(i) this thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

(Sanjib Goswami)

This thesis is dedicated to

the countless victims of violence

in North East India

Their sacrifices and the voices of the loved ones they left behind

form the core inspiration for this thesis

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This thesis has primarily been possible through the participation and cooperation of numerous individuals and organisations in India. First and foremost, the spokespersons and the civil society groups that welcomed me in their homes and their villages, gave their valuable time to participate in the study and answered my irritating and often uncomfortable questions. They not only tolerated my questions but also entertained me with their food and their warmth. While the primary spokespersons are named in the thesis, it is not possible to name each and every one of the people I met. Never the less, they remain the backbone of this study.

The support of other individuals in North East India, especially in Assam, also cannot be forgotten. Dr. Alaka Sarma, Dean at the University of Science and Technology,

Abbreviations

AASU	All Assam Students Union
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
APCC	Assam Pradesh Congress Committee
ASS	Assam Sahitya Sabha
ATTSA	Assam Tea Tribes Students Association
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BLT	Bodoland Liberation Tigers
BTAD	Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts
DONER	Development of North Eastern Region
IUML	Indian Union Muslim League
MOBC	More Other Backward Castes
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
OBC	Other Backward Class
SC	Scheduled Castes
ST	Scheduled Tribes
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
UPDS	United Peoples Democratic Struggle

Glossary of Indian Terms

Adivasi	An umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups believed to be the aboriginal population of India
Anchalik Rashtrabad	Regional Nationalism
Asomiya Bangali	Assamese Bengali (A Bengali who is in Assam for generations)
Asomiya Mussalman	Assamese Muslim
Bideshi	Foreigner
Bohiragoto	Outsider
Bongal Kheda	Expelling the Bengali / migrants
Bor Asom	Greater Assam
Brahmin	A Hindu upper caste
Buranji	Written historical records maintained by the Ahoms
Dobashi	A bilingual person
Ganak	A Hindu upper sub caste
Gaonburha	Village Headman
Gosain	Head of a Hindu monastry
Griha Bipras	A Hindu sub caste
Hinduization	The complex process by which Hinduism exerts influence
Hindutva	The political philosophy that defines Hinduism as a culture
Jhum	Slash and burn form of agriculture
Kaivartya	A Hindu sub caste
Lungi	Long skirt type dress worn by the Bengali Muslims

Paik	The system of administration under Ahom rule
Panchayat	Local Self Government
Razakar	A voluntary militia of Bangladesh
Miya	Colloquial for Bengali Muslim living in riverine areas
Mur Ai	My mother / motherland
Saran	Become followers of Hindu saints
Satra	Hindu Vaishnavite Monastry
Sepoy	Soldier

Chapter 1: Introduction

On 23rd July 2012, the BBC reported news with the headline: "Thousands flee rioting in Indian state of Assam".[1] The news item went on to mention of communal riots between indigenous Bodo people and Bengali-speaking Muslims migrants in the North East Indian state of Assam that had left seventeen dead and led to the fleeing of tens of thousands of people from their homes. Within two days, the death toll of the violence increased to forty and subsequently to nearly a hundred. Soon the violence spread to other districts in the state. As the situation remained tense, the army was called in to handle the riots, a curfew was imposed, and shoot-at-sight orders were issued. Other international media, *The Economist*, for example, reported that about 400,000 – 500,000 people had become homeless or displaced and of Assamese people being attacked in other parts of India. This led to tens of thousands north-easterners to flee homewards in fear of their lives.[2]

On 26th July 2012, the BBC carried an analysis of the events that addressed the origins of this violence.[3] Subir Bhowmik, BBC's Bureau Chief (Eastern India), wrote that at the heart of Assam troubles lies the so-called "infiltration" by outsiders, which has led to ethnic tension between the state's indigenous population and Bengali Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh. Changing demography, loss of land and livelihood and the intensified competition for political power has added a deadly potency to the issue of who has a right to Assam, he wrote. However, Wajahat

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[1] Thousands flee rioting in Indian state of Assam (23rd July, 2012). [online news] *BBC News Asia*. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18952933 [Accessed: 12.8.2012].

[2] A Neglected Crisis (25th August, 2012). *The Economist,* p. 23.

[3] Bhauwmik, S. (26th July, 2012). What lies behind Assam violence? [online news] *BBC News India*. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-18993905 [Accessed: 12.8.2012].

Habibullah, Chairman of India's National Minorities Commission, submitted a contradictory report to the Prime Minister on the 17th August 2012. The commission said that the violence in Assam was a result of clashes between indigenous Bodos and "resident Muslims", and not with Bangladeshi immigrants.[4]

But this was not the first major violent incident in the BTAD areas or even in North East India.[5] Between 1993 and 1998, the Bodos had been involved in four major disturbances which had resulted in the death of over 300 persons and the displacement of nearly half a million people.[6] In addition, violent incidents between indigenous people and the Assamese people had also occurred in several other districts: Karbi Anglong, Darrang, and Lakhimpur. Since 1979, extremist organizations in the state have also targeted and killed hundreds of people of different communities.

Earlier, there had also been several indigenous movements, often violent, in the region, especially when the Naga, Mizo, and Khasis communities struggled for statehood and clashed with the Assamese. And during 1960-61 and later in 1972, Assam also witnessed the language riots between the Assamese community and the Bengali Hindu community. In the recent past, there have also instances of violence between indigenous communities including the Karbi–Dimasa clashes of 2005-06, the Rabha–Garo clashes of 2011, the Bodo–Adivasi clashes of 2014, and even clashes

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[4] Assam violence due to Bodo-Muslim feud: Minorities body (2012, 17 August). [online news] *Indian Express*. Available at: http://www.indianexpress.com/news/assam-violence-due-to-bodomuslim-feud-minorities-body/989579/ [Accessed: 12.8.2012].

[5] BTAD is the acronym for Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District.

[6] Bhaumik, S. (2008). Internal Displacement in North East India: Challenges Ahead, pp. 254-255. In: Basu, S.P. ed., (2008). *The Fleeing People of South Asia: Selections from Refugee Watch*, New Delhi: Anthem Press.

between different factions of the Bodo community. During all these movement, conflicts and strife, the state also witnessed the growth of militancy as a corollary to the other movements that were going on.

Militancy in Assam had a long post-independence history. The first of the militant group was the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). It struggled for an independent Nagaland. Later, the militancy problem became acute and endemic during the Assam Agitation. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was established in 1979. It wanted Assam to secede from India. Separatist groups also began to form along ethnic lines. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) both demanded more autonomy for the Bodo community. As violence increased in the 1980s, Assam was declared a 'disturbed area' and was brought under the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act was made applicable in 1980. It gave special powers to the Army, allowing it to operate in a civilian setting to control violence. With increasing socio-political polarizations in the region, the Institute for Conflict Management in New Delhi has listed 32 extremist organizations operating in Assam by the turn of the century.[7] It is thus seen that postcolonial Assam presents a complex picture of inter as well as intra-community conflicts.

In postcolonial Assam, several violent clashes have thus occurred when indigenous people clashed with non-indigenous ones in the context of various indigenous self-determination movements. Likewise, there were several other communal riots when Assamese militant clashed with either the Bengali Hindu or the Bengali Muslim

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[7] For details, see the website of the Institute of Conflict Management at: www.satp.org

migrants. The BBC report of 26th July 2012 cites 1983, the year of the Nellie massacre, as another example of immigrant – indigenous clashes. In that instance, 1,383 people were initially killed in just a matter of four hours by a frenzied mob of 12,000 who walked from nearby villages.[8] Media reports suggest that over 20,000 people died in different violent incidents over the last few decades.[9] While these violent incidents had led to displacements of population, clashes between other non-Bodo indigenous groups and the Assamese people are also not uncommon in the state.

At this point, it is important to locate Assam and India's North East. In 1947, North East India had just three states: Assam, Manipur, and Tripura.[10] But in subsequent years, starting in 1963, the four states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh were carved out of Assam at different times. As such, in this thesis, I shall be using the terms North East India and Assam in an interchangeable way. At present, North East India is an area of seven contiguous states: Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura.[11] It is a unique geopolitical region with a long international boundary with several South East Asian countries: China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The region is strategically sensitive. It occupies an area of 255,511 square kilometres and is connected with the

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[8] Horowitz, D.L. (2001). *The Deadly Ethnic Riots*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 228-229; Basu, S.P. (ed.) (2008) *The Fleeing People of South Asia: Selections from Refugee Watch*, New Delhi, Anthem Press, p. 261.

[9] This data has been computed from various sources. The Institute of Conflict Management (ICM), New Delhi, mentions 7679 people killed in extremist violence during the period 1992 - 2012. In addition, the Assam Movement (1979 – 85) saw the death of nearly 5000 persons, including 852 Assamese Hindus. Deaths had also occurred in the Assamese – Bengali language riots of the 1960s and 1970s and during the tribal – non tribal clashes. For details please see the ICM website: www.satp.org

[10] See map of North East India and Assam in 1950 and in 1999 at Appendix A.

[11] Sikkim has been added as an eighth state to the North East Council recently, though the people of the region imagine the North East India as "seven sisters".

rest of India only by a 22 km-wide land connector known as the Chicken Neck or the Siliguri corridor. The region is also ethnically, linguistically and culturally very distinct from the rest of India, having a large indigenous 'tribal' population of several different communities,[12] a unique and varied culture, and a distinct customary judicial and administrative system. For example, the state of Meghalaya is the only state in India to have a matrilineal system of family ties. With a population of 31 million and an area of 78,523 square kilometres, Assam occupies a central place in the North East region of India. Assam includes several tribal autonomous areas within the state. In this area, the indigenous peoples exercise administrative power under the provisions of the sixth schedule of the Constitution of India (see Chapter 2 below). The state is multilingual and multi-religious, with Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Karbi and several other indigenous languages being spoken, and Hinduism, Islam and Christianity being the main religions.[13] The Brahmaputra river cuts across the length of the state.

Traditional interpretations of these conflicts have adopted a binary paradigm. This thesis presents an alternative interpretation. I shall be presenting in the following chapters how British colonialism in Assam implemented a specific form of colonial rule that came to be known as indirect rule colonialism. This form of colonial rule created new identities and it is these identities that in the postcolonial period have produced identity struggles. I shall be arguing that the genesis of the conflicts lay in indirect rule colonialism and its creation of triangular social relationship, which is different from the binary relationships mentioned above. I shall, therefore, be arguing that the conflicts in Assam can be better explained with reference to a settler colonial

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[12] The Constitution of India uses the term "tribal" to denote the indigenous peoples and this term is commonly used by the people of the country as well.

[13] See religious demographic profile of North East India in Appendix B.

rather than a colonial system of relationships. This provides us with a better historically-grounded and inclusive analysis of the conflict. But before I elaborate on the settler colonial studies framework, I shall discuss in the next section the scholarship on India's ethnic troubles.

1.1 Overview of the Literature on North East India

The purpose of this section is to conduct a review of the literature that analysing violence and identity in North East India. Communal violence arises as a result of the collective perception of discrepancies, incompatible wishes, or irreconcilable desires; it may also be due to lack of awareness. The scholarship on these issues predominantly consists of journalistic writings with detailed chronicling of the events, incidents and organizations, scholarly writings by researchers, and policy-oriented writings and reports of the government. This scholarship has taken different approaches to interpret the conflicts and the fractures in social cohesion. Some of the prominent scholars include Amalendu Guha,[14] Hiren Gohain,[15] Sanjib Baruah,[16] H. K.

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[14] Guha, A. (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 – 1947*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.

[15] Gohain, H. (1985). *Assam: A Burning Question*, Guwahati: Spectrum.

[16] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Baruah, S. (2008). "From Memories of the Past to a Vision for the Future: Resolving the Crisis of Citizenship in Northeast India", paper presented at *Seminar on Contested Space and Identity in the Indian Northeast*, New Delhi: Academy of Third World Studies; Baruah, S. (1994). Ethnic Conflict as State - Society Struggle: The Poetics and Politics of Assamese Micro - Nationalism. *Modern Asian Studies,* (vol 28) (no 3).

Buzarbaruah,[17] Yasmin Saikia,[18] and Sanjay Hazarika.[19] My review of the literature reveals that three themes have been prominent: immigration, language, and economics. All approaches emphasise the colonial origins of the conflicts. Others have looked at the violence from a security perspective and in the context of the frontier politics of the Indian state.

A traditional reading of Assamese history asserts that even before the arrival of the British, Northeast India was already situated in, "one of the greatest migration routes of mankind".[20] It was always a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural social formation. Yet, it is migration itself that is at the centre of the breaks of social cohesion in postcolonial Assam, with the first agitations against migrants beginning in the state in 1979. Barpuzari's five-volume *Comprehensive History of Assam* provides a narrative of the history of Assam. His analysis covers the British line policy and excluded / partially excluded areas policy and their consequences: the separation between the hill and the plains people of Assam. At the same time, as Bengali replaced Assamese in the administration and became the official languages, further social cleavages

[17] Barpujari, H.K. ed., (2007). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, Vol 1 – 5.

[18] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom*, New York: Duke Publication; Saikia, Y. (2005). "The Tai Ahom Connection". [online] paper presented at *Seminar on Gateway to the East: A symposium on Northeast India and Look East Policy,* New Delhi. Retrieved from: http://www.india- seminar.com/2005/550.htm [Accessed: 15.02.2012].

[19] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Penguin Books; Hazarika, S. (2000). *Rites of passage: border crossings, imagined homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd.

[20] Barpujari, H.K. ed., (1992), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. II,* Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, p. 35

developed.[21] Post-1947, with a further large inflow of migrants and refugees, the position of the Assamese worsened.[22]

Migration as the cause of violence in North East is also emphasised in T.S Murthy's *Assam: The Difficult Years 1979-1983.* Murthy gives a detailed historical account of the anti-foreigner agitation and the parallel identity assertion of the Assamese people.[23] It was, in effect, a new phase in the socio-political history of Assam. Murthy states that the issues of Assam are not unique to the state and that similar situations arising from migrations exist in other Indian states too, as he traces the events during that period. But he fails to address the structural underpinnings of the conflict. Agitation is a reactionary response towards illegal immigration.

The second approach of analysing the conflicts in Assam is by positing it in relation to colonialism and arguing that it was the colonial state that created permanent fissures in society leading to ongoing conflict. Several scholars such as Amalendu Guha have extensively dealt with this theme by looking at how colonialism produced migration flows and provided the initial stimuli for the growth of community identity consciousness among the Assamese. In his *Planter's Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 – 1947,* Guha *s*tates that as the colonial state first encouraged migration into Assam from neighbouring Bengal and then imposed Bengali as the official language of the province, it created a permanent cleavage within society. The need to import labour into Assam, tea labourers, for

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[21] Barpujari, H.K. ed., (1975). *Political History of Assam, Vol. 1.*Gauhati: Government of Assam, p. 75.

[22] Barpujari, H.K. (1998). *North East India: Problems, Policies & Prospects,* Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, p. 39.

[23] Murthy, T.S. (1983). *Assam: The Difficult Years – A Study of Political Developments in 1979-*83. New Delhi: Himalaya Books.

example, and Muslim agriculturist, apparently owing to the acute manpower shortage in Assam, thus magnified the problems in the postcolonial period. Guha identifies the rise of Assamese identity consciousness and conflicts as primarily arising out of economic reasons.[24] He presents colonial Assam as a case of contending hegemonies owing to the co-existence of pan-Indian nationalism and Assamese regionalism, the latter manifesting itself in the form of a struggle to drive Bengali immigrants from Assam.[25] He classifies the immigrants in Assam into four groups: (1) tea garden labourers (2), migrants from East Bengal prior to independence (3), Hindus who came as a result of partition, and (4) Nepalis who came in search of livelihood.[26] Guha points out that the Nepalis and the tea garden labourers did not compete with the local people for jobs, a factor that rendered them more acceptable to the Assamese. While Guha's chief contribution lay in his identification of the primarily economic nature of the Assam agitation of 1979-85, he does not deal with why colonially induced migration only affected Assam and the North East and not the other states where similar migrations had also taken place.

The link between migration and colonialism is also foregrounded by Hiren Gohain in *Assam: A Burning Question.* Here he attributes the beginning of community identity consciousness in Assam to colonial decisions that generated among the Assamese a fear that they would be eventually marginalised in their own homeland.[27] Gohain's

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[24] Guha, A. (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 – 1947*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.

[25] Guha, A. (1977). Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826 – 1947. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.

[26] Guha, A. (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826 – 1947*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.

[27] Gohain, H. (1985). Assam: A Burning Question. Guwahati: Spectrum.

analysis is, however, restricted to the study of the conflicts between Assamese and immigrants in the postcolonial period.[28] According to him, well-placed Bengalis often appeared to endorse the colonial rulers' neglect of Assam. He explains that since the common man, whether Assamese or tribal, often confronted the government in the person of the petty Bengali official, there was always resentment against Bengalis. But Gohain is not the only author who blames Bengali migrants for the conflicts. Many others have prioritised 'Bengali chauvinism' as the key factor that antagonised the Assamese. Sajal Nag, for instance, refers to the attitude of the Bengali functionaries of the imperial administration and to their treatment of Assamese as a subordinate and inferior community.[29] Likewise, Apurba Baruah blames the 'elite' of Bengali society for imposing the Bengali language on Assam and blames this as the main reason for the growth of anti-Bengali sentiments among local people.[30]

The issue of imported labour during the colonial period and the way it contributed to new identity formation is also cited by Bhattacharya, who argues that British efforts to recruit labourers for tea companies and allow the immigration of a large number of Muslims took the shape of a well-planned conspiracy to create differentiation.[31] The result of such a policy was that a number of laws that favoured the migrants were passed, including *The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863* and *The Wasteland*

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[28] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.

[29] Nag, S. (1990). Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Questions in North East India. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

[30] Baruah, A.K. (1991). *Social Tensions in Assam Middle Class Politics*. Guwahati: Purbanchal.

[31] Bhattacharya, H. K. (2001) *The Silent Invasion: Assam Versus Infiltration,* Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, p. 33.

Rules 1838. Bhattacharya states that it was this policy that lay at the root of the conflicts in Assam.

As the issue of immigration from East Bengal (later East Pakistan /Bangladesh) continues to prompt scholarly debate, Samaddar writes that debate in contemporary Assam is now focused on demography.[32] His argument is that the problem of immigration in Assam is not merely about nationality, identity, and numbers. The nature of the contentious politics of migration and its role in the conflicts in Assam, he writes, cannot be understood without taking a critical view of the preceding history of Indian nationalism and the history of the colonial borderlands. Saikia and Goswami also contend that in the postcolonial period, the main issues of Assam revolved around migration, as the state witnessed large inflow of migrants from other parts of India, seeking economic opportunities in trading, construction work, and white collar jobs.[33] In most parts of North East India, the immigrant populations are not looked upon kindly, and perhaps no history of Assam in the postcolonial period can be written without dealing with the issue of migration.

Another approach to analysing the conflicts and identity assertions contextualized them in the Assamese micro-nationalism that coalesced around the Assamese language. Apart from migration, language politics is another central theme in the scholarship of the North East India and Assam. Ever since the first provincial Government led by Gopinath Bordoloi, various organizations in Assam have taken

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[32] Samaddar, R. (2003). *The Marginal Nation – Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

[33] Saikia, A., Goswami, H. and Goswami, A. (2003). *Population Growth in Assam, 1951-1991: With Focus on Migration.* New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House. p. vi.

upon themselves the task of constructing a political discourse that sought to project a monolingual state of Assam. This search for linguistic hegemony gave rise of a new form of linguistic nationalism. In *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Sanjib Baruah suggests how language continued to occupy centre stage in Assam's social struggles. He opines that the violence is due to the binary used in colonial policies, leading the indigenous ethnic groups and the ethnic Assamese to believe that they may become a minority in the state.[34]

Yasmin Saikia's *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom* also deals with the problem of how languages in Assam created cleavages and conflicts.[35] She writes that even though there were migration and settlement in the pre-colonial period, the Ahoms and other migrants of that period adopted the Assamese language and built up an inclusive 'we' identifying a plural society.[36] But in the postcolonial period this plural society became fractured, as the indigenous people began seeing the Assamese and other migrants as dominating their traditional social, cultural and political space. Saikia, while dealing at length with the issue of Tai Ahom, goes into a detailed analysis of the surviving memory of a pre-colonial plural society.

Apurba Baruah, likewise, while dealing with the issue of language and conflicts, argues that imposing the Bengali language on Assam resulted in the growth of anti-

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[34] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 183. ; Baruah, S.(2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 165.

[35] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[36] Historians do not know where the Ahoms came from. From South China to Thailand, their origin is cited differently by different scholars.

Bengali sentiments.[37] He, however, counters Gohain by rejecting the role of economic factors as stimuli for conflicts. He writes that while the Nepalis and tea garden workers slowly got assimilated, this process did not happen with the immigrant Bengalis. Hence the conflicts continued between the Assamese population and the immigrant Bengalis. At the same time, Rajen Saikia dismisses the notion of a Bengali conspiracy proposed by Sajal Nag and Apurba Baruah by arguing that even though the Assamese language standardization process was opposed by ordinary Bengalis, the British formulate policies to suit their own colonial design.[38]

In *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Sanjib Baruah also contends that language continues to occupy center stage in Assam's social struggles and micronational movements. He adds that the language question has been kept alive in the state. The struggle for recognition of Assamese language was also integral to the economic interests. Baruah further dwells with the issue of language standardisation in Assam. As the Bengali language predated language standardization, and many of the hill peoples, who were historically close to the Assamese had rejected the Assamese language, enacting standardization was especially difficult. However, post-1873, when Assamese was recognized as the official language, the nature of the struggle had shifted from the ambit of language to that of demographic transformation. According to Baruah, throughout the entire colonial period, the British treated Assam as a frontier of Bengal, which led to Assam being dominated both by Bengali language and by immigration from Bengal.

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[37] Baruah, A.K. (1991). *Social Tensions in Assam Middle Class Politics*. Guwahati: Purbanchal.

[38] Saikia, R. (2001). *Social and Economic History of Assam, 1853-1921*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

While postcolonial violence and breaks in social cohesion have become a feature of the social fabric in Assam, Baruah also states that violence may not be a simple case of contested space and identity. He opines that colonial geography shaped the projects of peoplehood in Assam – the Assamese sub-national narrative and the counter-narratives as well as the political agendas that followed from these narratives.[39] Territoriality and indigeneity, he notes, are often mentioned for the purpose of consolidating political movements and resistance. The binaries used in interpretations focusing on the legacies of colonialism lead one to believe that the violence and the issues of self-determination is a result of the fear of the indigenous ethnic groups, including the Assamese mainstream or ethnic Assamese, that they may become a minority in the state.[40] In view of the continuing hold of this interpretation in the official discourse, this binary is further amplified, as Indian law continues to make a distinction between subjects governed by customary law and subjects governed by general law. This, Baruah argues, leads to a differentiation between the Assamese people and other ethnically defined groups, allowing them de facto ethnic homelands.[41] While he mentions that Assam consists of the ethnic Assamese, the indigenous, and the immigrants, Baruah does not analyse this triangulation holistically, limiting his analysis to the indigenous – non-indigenous relationship.[42]

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[39] Baruah, S. (2001). India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[40] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 183; Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 165.

[41] Baruah, S. (2008). *From Memories of the Past to a Vision for the Future: Resolving the Crisis of Citizenship in Northeast India*, [Conference paper] Seminar on Contested Space and Identity in the Indian Northeast, New Delhi, Academy of Third World Studies, pp. 11 -13.

[42] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and Politics of Nationalist,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 125.

While referring to considerable opposition to immigration, Baruah at the same time shows how several vocal spokesmen of the Assamese community, such as Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, were willing to co-opt all those who agreed to accept Assamese culture. The Assam Sanrakshini Sabha, the Assam Preservation Society founded by Roychoudhury, for example, had a policy of welcoming immigrants who chose to identify with Assamese culture, accepted Assamese as their language, and declared themselves members of the Assamese nationality.[43]

Another approach to the conflicts is to treat it from a security perspective. Nani Gopal Mahanta in *Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty* suggests that the violence in Assam is primarily due to the unresolved issue of identity and ideology and the links between Assam and the rest of India. This unresolved crisis of identity turns into violence, often manifested by extremist groups such as the ULFA. He argues that these extremist organizations carry the suppressed voice of protest of Assam's tribal and ethnic groups and their quest for homogeneous homelands. While Nani Mahanta also focuses on the demographic shift in Assam, due to illegal immigration. He points out that the ULFA, instead of identifying the Bangladeshi immigrants as 'illegal', went on to identify the Biharis, Rajasthanis, Bengalis and Marwaris as 'illegal migrants', calling for their expulsion before proceeding with expelling migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal. Thus, they resorted to labelling even the non-Assamese Indians as immigrants, and this needs further exploration.

While immigration, language, and issues of security are the themes on which scholars focused, another group of writers such as B. G. Verghese, Gulshan Sachdeva, H. N.

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[43] Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 82.

Das, and Jayanta Madhav, viewed development as the only panacea to resolving the conflict. At another level, there are writers who believe that development, instead of solving the problems, might actually aggravate them, as market exchanges and transactions might skew the existing lines of ethnic preferences. Scholars such as Hazarika and Dutta,[44] on the other hand, advocate the initiation of economic development with a concern for human security. Other eminent writers such as Subir Bhaumik and Wasbir Hussain also follow this approach.

Writings on ethnicity and identity-based conflicts by Apurba Baruah, Manorama Sharma, Udayon Mishra, and Tilottama Mishra reflected broadly on how the communities of the Northeast remain far less internally differentiated than their counterparts in the rest of India. This is often attributed to the skewed and backward nature of the economic and political development in the region. These writers opine that Assam and North East India are constantly vulnerable to the machinations of hostile neighbours and radical Islamist forces and that any policy initiative must have an overarching development and security concern.

Thus, several contemporary scholars analyse the violence by arguing that it is the lack of development and the internal colonialist policies of the union government that generate these conflicts. Sanjib Baruah, however, adds in *Durable Disorders: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* that a lack of connections to the region is one of the major causes of the chronic violence and insurgencies. Thus, he refers to

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[44] Dutta, A. R. ed., (2010). *Human Security in North-East India: Issues and Policies*. Guwahati: Anwesha Publications.

a 'unique triangular relation' in societal relationships in Assam, which was unique to the state and not seen elsewhere in India.[45]

Myron Weiner, who studied the violence in Assam from an economic viewpoint, mentions of a large number of immigrants whose presence in the state has shaken the foundation of Assamese social structure and created solidarity among the Assamese, even while generating cleavages between the Assamese and the indigenous tribals. Thus, he refers to a unique triangular relation in the society of Assam, stating that the state is "by no means a typical area for studying the relationship between local population and migrants from which one can generalize to other regions of India". [46] Both Baruah and Weiner, while acknowledging the triangulation in social relations in Assam, however, limit their focus of analysis to a wide range of binary social relations (colonizer–colonized; internal colonialism–internally colonized; native–non-native; local–immigrant).

Yasmin Saikia, in *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom* deals with the issue of Assam from a different approach: the highly politicized construction of the identity of the Tai-Ahoms.[47] She argues that the frontier politics of the Indian nationalist narrative ignored the Tai-Ahoms, thereby failing to integrate them into the new Indian nation. The Ahoms came from the east of Assam in 1228, settled and ruled the state till 1826. During this period, they encouraged the migration and

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[45] Weiner, M. (1978). *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p 82.

[46] Weiner, M. (1978). *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p 82.

[47] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

settlement of a large number of Hindus from the rest of India. While the Ahoms and other migrants of that period adopted the Assamese language and had come to Assam centuries ago, the indigenous people see them as people who had not only come from elsewhere but have now dominated their traditional sociocultural and political space.

Through a detailed analysis of historical and literary sources, Saikia presents the feelings and aspirations of the Tai-Ahoms. She reveals the basis of the indigenous histories on which they base their claims and shows how the British colonial state constructed and alienated them. Saikia thoughtfully considers the processes and agents that organize the production of memory-history as used by the Tai-Ahom. To legitimatize what were to this community real memories of their once glorious origins, she argues that the Tai-Ahoms accepted British colonial historiography about a people who had migrated from northern Thailand and established their rule over Assam in the thirteenth century. She delves into the history of Assam written by Edward Gait, which, she argues, is misleading and yet was accepted by most Assamese historians. She states that many of the Assamese and Indian historians followed erroneous British-created histories. As the colonial history declared the Ahoms a 'dead community', the Tai-Ahoms embarked on an identity creation exercise to recover their self-esteem.

As many ethnic separatist movements vie for recognition in far northeast India, Saikia thus traces how the people calling themselves Tai-Ahom were marginalized economically, culturally, and politically by the British colonial administration and by successive Indian governments. Saikia's scholarship contrasts with the major scholarship on the region, which concentrates on other ethnic movements, while

briefly touching on the Tai-Ahom. Saikia argues that formal recognition by the Indian government of the erased histories of these people would lead to alleviating their alienation.

As India's North East gradually came to be viewed largely through the prism of identity assertion, different ethnic communities began demanding separate homelands. These ethnic homelands, such as in the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram, as well as in the autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, deprived non-tribal citizens of their rights to employment, trade, franchise and access to land. This writes Baruah, created a differentiated citizenship that converted citizens to denizens.[48] Over and above these demands, the issue of refugees and trans-border migration began casting its shadow over the dynamics of politics in India's Northeast. As already discussed, a good deal of the literature highlighting these issues highlights their impact on democracy and reflects a modernist understanding of civil society based on human rights.[49] An emphasis on migration, however, obscures an indigenous viewpoint.

The works of scholars such as Amalendu Guha, Hiren Gohain, Yasmin Saikia and Sanjib Baruah have created a new interest in the issues of this frontier state. However, a number of unanswered questions remain. I intend to look into these issues from a different perspective and frame of analysis. For example, the colonial introduction of

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[48] Sanjib Baruah deals at length on the issue of how exclusive tribal homelands have turned citizens into denizens through a non-tribal exclusionary administration. See Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 185-208.

[49] See for example, Biswas, P. & Joshua C.T. eds. (2006). *Peace in India's North-East: Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment.* New Delhi: Regency.

Bengali labour and the employment of Bengalis in government offices did contribute to the growth of community consciousness amongst the Assamese-speaking population. And yet this cannot be the sole factor producing the breaks in social cohesion. What contributed to the selection of other markers and in freezing social and community consciousness in the postcolonial period needs further analysis. Scholars have noted that the insistence on the Assamese language as the principal identity marker by Assamese intellectuals in the 19th and 20th centuries led to a complete transformation and to the alienation of the tribal groups. But, how and why this identity marker became crucial and what prompted its growth in importance warrants further investigation. In addition, the role of the colonial state in creating and then freezing identities and the ways in which a series of colonial traits were retained in the postcolonial period needs explanation. At the same time, the ways in which the Assamese community, which is not a majority community in Assam, came to occupy a hegemonic dominant position, and how its perceptions towards all 'others' influence the conflicts is another area that needs further analysis.

Media and scholars, as I outlined above, have thus traditionally conceptualized the conflicts in India's North East either within the framework of contested space or unique ethnic identities. Through a process of binary interpretation, these are explained as resulting from colonial and postcolonial demographic and economic realignments. But as each realignment produces violence, attempts to resolve the conflict have proved unsatisfactory and temporary, calling for more violence. At the same time, the structural elements that create the conflicts in the region are obfuscated. No research on the origins of intercommunal violence has explicitly examined the impact of indirect rule colonialism and the consequences of this form of

colonialism, including the frozen identities characterising North East India and Assam. The interpretations of the conflict have generally overlooked the triangular identity formation of Assam: the indigenous peoples, the Assamese, and the migrants. This dissertation proposes an alternative paradigm for analysing the violence and identity struggles. The contemporary violence can be better understood if the consequences of indirect rule colonialism are observed and Assam is analysed in the context of a triangular social relationship.

1.2 Research Focus

This research on North East India's history and ongoing violence focuses on a number of key interpretative tropes. In this section, I briefly discuss indirect rule colonialism and the ways it was implemented in colonial Assam, settler colonialism, and the recent literature that deals with this mode of domination, the issue of identity formation, and violence. These concepts form the focus of this thesis.

1.2.1 Indirect Rule Colonialism

The core focus of this thesis is the study of indirect rule colonialism in North East India, its reproduction in postcolonial Assam, and its consequences on social cohesion in the state. Direct rule colonialism differs from indirect rule in a variety of ways. While direct rule focuses on the ultimate political assimilation of the colonized elites, indirect rule acknowledges that differences across social relations are permanent, even if it sought to shape them. The transition lay in a shift from a civilizing impulse focusing on native elites to defining and managing intractable differences in society.

Henry Orenstein, presenting the works of Sir Henry Maine, who authoritatively first formulated the indirect rule paradigm for India, writes that Maine saw indirect rule as a natural evolution of patriarchal power in the early societies where the aristocracy controlled the law. Maine, therefore, believed that to alter this natural evolution was the only way to allow progress. The natives would be allowed some self-rule and a benign policy of non-interference was the best option.[50] Mahmood Mamdani differs with this assessment and argues that while the paradigm presented itself as non-interfering, the very nature of this doctrine was rather a process of all-round interference because it gave the colonial state the prerogative to define the boundaries and content of its involvement.[51]

Karuna Mantena's recent work on indirect rule sees this paradigm as a move from universalist and liberal imperialism to a culturalist framework. This new governmental paradigm had become an administrative priority because of the tendency of native societies toward social collapse. It needed the colonial state to 'protect' the natives from the influences of modern civilization and capitalist forces. But in fact, this change in approach had great bearing on the structure of government and governance and let to the profound reshaping of traditional societies.[52] Even if Mamdani does not focus on India, Mamdani argues that under indirect rule colonialism, both the 'native' and the 'non-native' were defined by the colonial state which sought to limit citizenship to those whom the state defined as non-native. This

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[50] Orenstein, H. (1968). The Ethnological Theories of Henry Sumner Maine, *American Anthropologist*, (vol 70) (no 2), pp. 264-276.

[51] Mamdani, M. (2012). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identiy,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 26.

[52] Mantena, K. (2010). *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism,* Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 2-5.

differentiation in citizenship created ethnic and racial cleavages, leading to hostile communal relations and dysfunctional governments.[53]

Post-1857, a crucial year India's history, the doctrine was implemented all over India, but in different ways. It resulted in the colonial administration creating several new differentiations in society. For example, in the name of protecting the village community from moneylenders, the government restricted the operation of markets in rural villages and enhanced and crystallised divisions between the farmers and the traders. It also defined and established special protections for religious minorities by creating separate legal provisions for the Muslims, the Sikhs and, later, for other non-Brahmin groups. These provisions were supervised not by the judiciary or the administration, but by some of the groups concerned. Still later, the Indian Councils Act of 1909 (known as the Morley-Minto Reforms) was expanded to create separate electorates for Muslims and Hindus in various legislative bodies. A uniform legal and administrative structure was thus no longer in operation in India. Indirect rule legalized and immobilized new political differentiations.

Crucially, as the doctrine came to be implemented in the North East India, it took a different form. While a differentiation in this region initially resulted in a separation of the hill people from the plains, in due course, a new categorization separating immigrants from locals was added. As mentioned above, the legal lexicon of indirect rule gave rise to new group-based identities, and in the early twentieth century colonial agents in Assam, through the census, introduced a third group identity: immigrants. This converted the hitherto binary differentiation of indirect rule and a

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[53] Mamdani, M. (2001). Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (vol 43) (no 4), p. 651.

binary colonial social formation in Assam (native–non-native) into a triangular one (native–non-native–immigrant).

By the middle of the twentieth century, three social group identities were formed and soon they had become ossified in their political and socio-cultural outlook, unable to think beyond themselves. Post-independence, all these fissures, therefore, led the region as a whole to differ from the rest of the country in important parameters leading to social cohesion and growth. In contemporary Assam, therefore, three colonially defined and ossified groups remained opposed to each other. It is my contention that this development has produced an inherently violent social context.

The scholarships on political violence traditionally analyse it as either due to differences in market-based identities (such as rich vs poor), or due to cultural differences (such as ethnic vs nonethnic). Marxist works come to mind immediately with regards to the former; while Samuel Huntington comes to mind when talking of the latter (see his *Clash of Civilization*). In both cases, such conflicts are seen as binary in nature and arise between social classes or cultural identities. But the violence in Assam does not reflect such a binary nature. Violence cuts across social classes. Mamdani labels this new type of conflicts as non-revolutionary violence, rooted in the constructed identities that the colonial state under indirect colonial rule has crafted and the postcolonial successor state retained. He labels these constructed identities as political identities. The construction of political identities in Assam is discussed in Chapter 1.

1.2.2 Settler Colonialism

As I discussed the different approaches and framework used so far to understanding violence in Assam, I have found all the scholarly work useful to my research. However, what these discourses do not focus on is the triangular social relations and the effects of the ossification of communal identities. I am offering the insights of settler colonial studies as an alternative interpretative framework. Settler colonialism as a mode of domination also identifies triangular relationships. The concept of a settler state requires that it be differentiated from a traditional colonial state. I am not suggesting that India's North East is the result of settler colonialism; I am suggesting, however, that some of the attributes of settler colonialism are evident in this region. The most important feature of this similarity is the presence of triangular social relationships. While there are other issues that liken Assam to a settler state and the Assamese to settlers in a settler colonial context, such as the hegemonic position of a collective that is neither indigenous neither exogenous, the availability of assimilation as strategy, and the issue of an incomplete decolonization, the point of my thesis is that appraising triangular relationships would allow a novel understanding of the violence in Assam.

Scholars offer different definitions of settler colonialism. Caroline Elkins & Susan Pederson, quoting Jürgen Osterhammel, say that while colonialism is generally understood to mean a "relationship of domination" by which an invading foreign minority governs an indigenous majority according to the dictates of a distant metropolis, settler colonies try to weaken or get rid of metropolitan control. They also

attempt the destruction of the indigenous population.[54] They further mention that when the indigenous peoples finally disappear, the settler colonies could develop into what D. K. Fieldhouse refers to as "pure" settlement colonies.[55] Raymond Evans, quoting Raphael Lemkin, the founder of the notion of genocide, mentions that settler colonies aim at the

> destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group and then the imposition of the pattern of the oppressor either upon people left territorially fixed or upon territory cleared of its inhabitants to allow for colonization of the area by the oppressor's own nationals in order to destroy or cripple the subjugated people in their development.[56]

He uses the term "indigenocide" to describe the three-way onslaught on the lives, land, and culture of the indigenous people. Evans also quotes Richard Horvath's definition of settler colonies as dominating the territories and behaviours of other groups through the migration of permanent settlers, which results in the exploitation of the dominated territories' natural and human resources and leads to enforced cultural change and the destruction of indigenous lifeways.[57]

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[54] Elkins, C. and Pedersen, S. eds. (2005). *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century,* New York: Routledge, p. 2.

[55] Elkin, C. and Pedersen, S., eds. (2005). *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century,* New York: Routledge, p. 2.

[56] Evans, R. (2008). "Crime Without a Name": Colonialism and the case for "indigenocide" In Moses, A. D. ed., (2008) *Empire, Colony, Genocide: conquest, occupation and subaltern resistance in world history*, 1st ed., New York: Berghahan Books p. 142.

[57] Evans, R. (2008). "Crime Without a Name": Colonialism and the case for "indigenocide" In Moses, A. D. ed., (2008) *Empire, Colony, Genocide: conquest, occupation and subaltern resistance in world history*, 1st ed., New York: Berghahan Books, p. 142.

Veracini brings out the important difference between colonial and settler states. He argues that settler colonies establish inherently triangular relations between settlers and indigenous and exogenous Others.[58] Further, he states: "The successful settler colonies 'tame' a variety of wildernesses, end up establishing independent nations, effectively repress, co-opt, and extinguish indigenous alterities, and productively manage ethnic diversity". In other words, "whereas colonialism reinforces the distinction between colony and metropole, settler colonialism erases it".[59] This results in the settler collective finally trying to establish itself as indigenous. [60]

Decolonization under colonialism is a process, which Prasenjit Duara defines as the "process whereby colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally sovereign, nation-states".[61] Patrick Wolfe, however, states that settler colonialism remains permanently, making decolonization a complex undertaking, a more difficult process than decolonising colonial forms.[62] He states that under settler colonialism "invasion is a structure and not an event".[63] I shall present how this rings true in Assam, where decolonization failed and colonial tropes continue to inform the politics of the state.

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[58] Veracini, L. (2011). On Settlerness. *borderlands ejournal*, 10 (1), pp. 1-3.

[59] Veracini L. (2011). Introducing settler colonial studies, *Settler colonial studies,* vol. 1, p. 2.

[60] Veracini, L. (2011). On Settlerness. *borderlands ejournal*, vol 10 (no 1), pp. 1-3.

[61] Duara, P. (2004). Introduction: The Decolonization of Asia and Africa in the Twentieth Century. In Duara, P. ed. (2004). *Decolonization - Perspectives from Now and Then* London: Routledge, p. 2.

[62] Wolfe, P. (2008) Settler Colonialism, Time, and the Question of Genocide. In: Moses, A.D. (ed.). (2008) Empire, Colony, Genocide: conquest, occupation, and subaltern resistance in world history. 1st ed. New York: Berghahan Books, pp. 102-105.

[63] Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native, Journal of Genocide Research, 8 (4), pp. 387–409.

This brief outline of the scholarship on settler colonialism suggests that settler states are founded by groups who assume a superordinate position vis-à-vis native inhabitants. It leads us to analyse contemporary settler societies in an effort to understand structures of domination that have become invisible in their normality and are this relatively untouched by the scholarly literature. To constitute a settler state, the settlers must remain politically dominant over the natives and the immigrants alike. In this sense, settler rule is a form of invisible political domination that is established through different means. At the same time, settler states have shown more resilience to decolonization because they are constituted around the hegemony of a dominant group that is prepared to resist any change, including that demanded by indigenous resistance. The transformation of these states, after formal yet not substantive decolonization, is generally more difficult and complicated. While conventional colonial states are superimposed on civil society and organized around economic and geopolitical objectives such as exploitation, land appropriation, military control and trade, settler states are not superimposed but are rooted in the land. Assam is an important case in point.

The above exposition of a settler state demonstrates three main features. First, it aims to achieve autonomy from a central authority (or metropole) in the exercise of political authority. This gives the settlers greater room to manoeuvre in moulding economic, social, and political structures. The second feature of stable settler rule is to consolidate control over the indigenous and migrant populations. This often results in successfully restricting political mobilization and ensuring the economic dependence of the indigenous and migrants, sometimes through the use of overt or covert physical repression. Thirdly, a settler state aims to establish settler supremacy by developing

settler solidarity. As internal conflicts within the state and the dominant community along class, ethnic, political, or cultural lines may result in cracks in the settler regime, focusing on language, creating fear of outsiders, and material incentives help promote settler solidarity.[64]

Thus, in settler colonies, as the incoming settler collective dominates the indigenous peoples, society, lifestyles, and cultural indicators are replaced by assimilation or elimination. As other migrants arrive in this society, some get fully assimilated, some partially, and some not at all. In due course, an assimilated society, based on the settlers' way of life, is built up. As indigenous people also get assimilated, eliminated or displaced, the original dispossession leads to indigenous resistance.[65] This creates differentiation between the indigenous and the settler. Along with the migrants, this differentiated settler society, therefore, presents structurally triangular social relations.[66] Such triangulation, settler domination, and consequent indigenous resistance are also observed under indirect rule.

In spite of such differences between colonialism and settler colonialism as distinct formations, settler societies share important features with societies emerging from indirect rule colonialism. This thesis brings together the insights of two scholarly literatures. Since indirect rule colonialism has much in common with settler

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[64] Weitzer, R. (1990). *Transforming Settler States: Communal Conflict and Internal Security in Northern Ireland and Zimbabwe*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 26-28.

[65] Evans, R. (2008). "Crime Without a Name": Colonialism and the case for "indigenocide" In Moses, A.D. (ed.) (2008). *Empire, Colony, Genocide: conquest, occupation and subaltern resistance in world history*, New York: Berghahan Books Evans, p. 140.

[66] Veracini, L. (2011). Introducing Settler Colonial Studies. *Settler Colonial Studies*, (vol 1) (no 1), pp. 1- 9.

colonialism and since, as I shall argue, contemporary Assam demonstrates some typical settler colonial characteristics, this thesis will propose a novel interpretation of the conflict.

1.2.3 Identity Formation

One of the most extensively studied social constructs is identity. Scholars have provided us with a wealth of knowledge on identity structures and identity formation processes. Studies have focused on individuals and communities, and on personal and social identities. As this thesis critically examines the consequences of indirect rule colonialism in Assam, the process of identity formation and identity politics need elucidation. Milton H. Erikson, for example, proposed that identity helps one to make sense of, and to find one's place in, an almost limitless world with a vast set of possibilities.[67] All identities are thus relational, political, produced within systems of inequality, and it is not possible to provide a single overarching definition of identity, or a similar overarching theory of identity formation.[68] In general, the notion of collective identity, which is the basis for identity politics, operates in a complex and dynamic social environment in which all individuals retain multiple role-based identities. These identities exist either in harmony with each other or in opposition. Identity formation, whether achieved or ascribed, is always negotiated and not absolute.

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[67] Firestone, R.W., Firestone, L. and Catlett, J. (2013). *The Self Under Siege: A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation,* New York: Routledge, pp. 5-6.

[68] Lawler, S. (2014). *Identity: Sociological Perspectives,* Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 14.

This suggests that people become members of a particular group because of a common identity and shared belief system that makes collective action possible. Smith argues that high group affiliation through repeated activities within a group can lead to an "us" versus "them" attitude.[69] In relation to a group identity, Tafarodi and Swann state that the individual identity becomes the basis of the normative behaviour of the group through the process of feedback and self-verification.[70] Schultz et al state that the formation of identity is a process that is continually developing.[71]

The relationship between individual and collective identity is very complicated. In many ways, they co-constitute each other. Much of the writing on identities in post-colonial studies has also moved away from mainstream identities and brought alternative identities to the fore. There's a more critical literature that looks at identity not just as given, frozen and unchanging, but as inherently multiple and constantly under contestation. Social identity theories as well as self-categorization theories, for example, have made important observations regarding the ability of individuals to see themselves and their groups in relation to other groups. Richer and Hopkins conclude that "Self-categorization theory tends to treat context as if it were a given and categories as if they are largely read off from this context".[72] But self-categorization theories are often unable to explain subjective interpretations and are unable to

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[69] Smith, J. R., Terry, D. J. and Hogg, M. A. (2007). Social identity and the attitude-behaviour relationship: Effects of anonymity and accountability. *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 37 (2), pp. 239-257.

[70] Tafarodi, R. W. and Swann Jr, W. B. (1995). Self-liking and self-competence as dimensions of global self-esteem: Initial validation of a measure. *Journal of Personality Assessment,* (vol 65) (no 2), p. 322.

[71] Schultz, M., Maguire, S., Langley, A. and Tsoukas, H. eds. (2012). *Constructing Identity In and Around Organizations*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., p. 3.

[72] Reicher, S., & Hopkins, N. (2001). *Self and Nation.* London: Sage, p. 39.

explain why alterities previously considered harmless suddenly become reconstructed into the stranger-enemy. In order to understand this change in perception, we need to go further than traditional approaches within the social identity literature.[73]

However, as mentioned above, some of these theories also offer an essentialist argument of identity as being ascribed rather than acquired. The destabilizing effects of the present social conflicts in North East India and Assam will be difficult to understand unless we first grasp the ways in which identities were ascribed under indirect rule colonialism and how fluidity in identity relations was lost. In this thesis, I shall, therefore, discuss the discursive construction and ossification of community identities in the region.

Mamdani contends that the shaping of community identity under indirect rule was centred on three sites: the census, a new colonial historiography and a dual legal and administrative system.[74] As the political state defined these identities, they became frozen.[75] Appadurai supports Mamdani's contention that the census was used in India by colonial agents, not as a mere instrument to enumerate but to create identities based on state-defined castes and tribes.[76] Saikia's research similarly argues that the identity assertion of the Ahoms in Assam was extensively influenced by new histories

[73] Kinnvall. C. (2004). *Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,* Political Psychology, (vol. 25) (no. 5), p. 751.

[74] Mamdani, M. (2012). *Define and Rule,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p 46.

[75] Mamdani, M. (2001). "Making Sense of Non Revolutionary Violence: Some Lessons from the Rwandan Genocide", paper presented at *Franz Fanon Lecture*, University of Durham, 8 August. Westville: University of Durham, p. 5.

[76] Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial Imagination. In: Breckenridge, C. A. and Veer, P. eds. (1993) *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 320.

written by colonial ethnographers.[77] Under indirect rule in Assam, two separate

structures of government, therefore, developed: a native administration with its own

customary rules, and a civil administration for the rest of the people with civil rules.

This separation proved resilient.

Scholars agree that the history of Assamese identity formation and its transformation

is a colonial construction. As a result, the inclusive pre-colonial society reconstructed

by Yasmin Saikia was superseded. In the post-colonial period, the ossification of

group identities has led to processes of reverse assimilation, as many groups or classes

(i.e., the Nagas, the Mizos, the Garos, the Bodos, the Karbi and the Mishings) asserted

their separate political life.

1.2.4 Violence

There is a deep ontological relationship between identity and violence. Amartya Sen

points out that the concept of identity is based on two basic assumptions. First, the

presumption, that people have a principal and dominant identity. And, second, the

supposition that people should discover their identity. The first assumption, he states,

is plainly wrong, as not only do people exist with multiple identities but often invoke

different identities in different contexts. Similarly, the second supposition is also

erroneous, he states, as it presupposes that people acquire their identity from

relationships within a community and have no role in choosing their identities. Sen

maintains that this is erroneous because while the constraints of community and

traditions are always there, reason and choice have a role to play in identity

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[77] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

construction. Sen thus maintains that human beings are 'multi-identitied' and critiques the scholarship of Huntington and the notion of the 'Clash of Civilizations' for categorizing people through a single unchanging essence.[78]

Mamdani too maintains that Huntington's theory is incapable of explaining the issue of violence in states emerging from indirect rule colonialism. But, unlike Sen, Mamdani points out that these states are unique because their constructed identities have become fixed in the post-colonial period. Violence is an easy outlet. Wielenga adds to this notion when she points out that the more fluid identity conceptions are, the less likely communal violence is. Static and fixed identities leading to stereotyping and other forms of 'othering' thus tend to be at the root of violence.[79] At the same time, collective memory and perception, after violent conflict, are also important issues. The way in which the past has been remembered and collective 'others' are perceived becomes the impetus for renewed violence rather than healing and reconciliation.[80]

My argument in this thesis is that indirect rule colonialism created a social structure that persists in postcolonial Assam. Colonial identities and inequality are maintained, but political domination also continues. Declarative assertions of progressivism, democracy and rule of law become meaningless. This aligns my research with the

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[78] Sen, A. (2006). *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny,* New York: WW Norton and Company, p. 182. See Huntington, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order,* New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

[79] Wielenga, C. (2011). Genocide and identity: Stereotyping, 'othering' and violence in Rwanda, Paper submitted in the 9th International Association of Genocide Scholars Biennial Conference, July 19th - 22nd, Buenos Aires.

[80] Wielenga, C. (2012). Remembering together in Rwanda and South Africa, Paper presented in the Conflict, Memory and Reconciliation Symposium, Jan 10-13, Rwanda.

violent situation that developed elsewhere in postcolonial states (i.e., Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria and Sudan).

Demmers states that violent mass conflicts that develop over long periods of time are mostly structure driven. He mentions Marxian theories of violence interpreting it as the result of the inherent contradictions of capitalist structures, where one class stands in opposition to another and discusses Durkheim's theories, where violence is understood to be the result of change and social processes that weaken existing social structures.[81] In the end, the legacies of indirect rule not only generate violence, the political use of social welfare and / or developmental discourse helps to justify and maintain domination too.

As already discussed, Mamdani's scholarship is essential to appraise the role of the resilience indirect rule's categories in generating violence. But his emphasis on politically constructed social structures allows an insight on the systematic ways in which specific social structures harm or otherwise disadvantage individuals and communities. Structural violence is subtle, often invisible, and frequently there is no individual who can be held responsible (this is in contrast to behavioural violence). I use the term "actor-driven" to differentiate it from "structure-driven" violence, though they always intertwine. For example, structural violence can involve the continued use of police, military, or other state powers in the context of a hegemonic power structure to maintain law and order. Specific violent incidents can be blamed on the individual soldier or policeman. Paul Farmer defines structural violence as:

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[81] Demmers, J. (2012). *Theories of Violent Conflicts: An Introduction,* Abingdon, Routledge, p. 55.

one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way […]. The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people […] neither culture nor pure individual will is at fault; rather, historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency. Structural violence is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of scientific and social progress.[82]

"Structural violence" is an umbrella definition that covers many different forms of social and institutional injustice. They have real if not always immediately appreciable consequences in peoples' lives.

Violence consists of actions, words, attitudes, structures or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and/or prevent people from reaching their full human potential. Violence can also be deeply structured into relationships, within socio-economic and political arrangements, and in the culture of a particular society.

According to Galtung's notion of a 'violence triangle', there is a causal flow from cultural to structural violence, which leads to direct collective violence.[83] Direct violence reinforces structural violence and becomes visible. However, direct violence does not come out of nowhere; its roots are cultural and structural. Structural violence

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[82] Farmer, P. (2004). An Anthropology of Structural Violence. *Current Anthropology,* vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 305–326.

[83] Galtung, J. (August, 1990). Cultural Violence, *Journal of Peace Research*, (vol. 27), (no. 3), p. 295.

exists when some groups, classes, genders, and nationalities are assumed to have, and in fact do have, more access to goods, resources, and opportunities than other groups, classes, genders and nationalities. It is thus an unequal advantage built into the very social, political and economic systems that govern societies. These tendencies may be overt such as domination and exclusion, or more subtle, such as traditions or the routine allocation of privilege to one group or another. Constitutionally-enshrined discrimination in labour arrangements and financial support in the name of the welfare, and non-uniform land laws and differentiated citizenship rights banning one group from owning landed property or equal citizenship rights in their own land are examples of structural violence that can be detected in contemporary Assam.

1.3 Research Questions

The thesis presents contemporary Assam as a locale that shares a number of important traits with settler colonial societies. It explores how a triangulation in political identities premised on assumed notions of ancestral collective origin came to be formed and eventually became frozen during the colonial period. It also discusses the reproduction of these forms in the postcolonial period. This thesis will answer the following basic question:

> Are the unresolved legacies of indirect rule colonialism having an impact on social cohesion in contemporary Assam?

In addition, it will also answer the following questions:

Have the fundamental narratives of indirect rule colonialism been reproduced in postcolonial Assam?

Can we interpret interethnic relations in Assam in the context of a colonial / postcolonial interpretative pattern, or does a settler colonial studies paradigm offer a better approach?

The research, therefore, seeks to understand the impact of indirect rule colonialism in informing postcolonial social structures, identity, and violence in the state of Assam, India.

1.4 Research Approach and Methods

A number of scholars (Donald Denoon, Patrick Wolfe, David Pearson, Alan Lawson, Caroline Elkins, Susan Pedersen, and Lorenzo Veracini) have recently differentiated conventional colonies (i.e., India) from settler colonies (i.e., Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States). India is generally seen as a prime example of colonialism proper: the British never sought to settle collectively and permanently while excluding local labour. However, as I shall argue, North East India, which was at one time the state of Assam, presented a peculiar evolution that resembles in its triangular relations that of a settler society. Unlike the rest of India, North East India presents a social triangle where "immigrants" occupy a third space. In Chapter 1, I shall deal with how this triangulation came to be under indirect rule.

Because of the similarities linking indirect rule and settler colonialism (even though they are not the same mode of domination, of course), this thesis, therefore, proposes to use settler colonial studies as an interpretive framework for analysing the conflicts in Assam. Rowlands notes that the foundational "assumption for interpretive research is that knowledge is gained, or at least filtered, through social constructions such as language, consciousness, and shared meanings".[84] An interpretive framework thus explores related issues and conceptions, organizes diverse information and perspectives on a related topic, and is a way to arrive at an integrated and meaningful conclusion. In this sense, a novel interpretative framework produces a novel understanding of social contexts and the processes operating in it.

This thesis first approaches indirect rule and the trajectories of identity formation under it. As indirect rule created a fundamental triangulation, this thesis does not rely on the scholarship of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, who use the binary of hegemony to interpret the subaltern movement in India.[85] Similarly, the economic analysis of class conflict, also binary in nature, is not adopted here. Huntington's scholarship on the clash of civilization is also premised on a binary understanding of relationships and is cast aside.[86] As settler colonial scholars discuss the enduring structures and the triangular relationships characterising settler societies, this adopts a number of insights arising from the recently established field of settler colonial studies. The study draws on the scholarship of several colonial, postcolonial scholars

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[84] Rowlands, B. (2005). Grounded in Practice: Using Interpretive Research to Build Theory, *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methodology* (vol 3) (issue 1), pp. 81-92.

[85] Guha, R. and Spivak, G.C. (1988). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. London: Oxford University Press.

[86] Huntington, S.P. (1993). The Clash of Civilizations? *Foreign Affair*s, (vol 72) (no 3), pp. 22-49.

and scholars of settler colonialism, drawing especially on the scholarship of

Mahmood Mamdani to understand indirect rule colonialism.[87]

This study relies on both secondary and primary data sources. I also used in-depth

interviews with targeted individuals as a qualitative methodology to understand how

and why people form stereotypes, and the ways in which perceptions of identity and

memory play a role in recurring violence. These interviews were essential in

understanding violence and its representation. In-depth interviews with a small

number of respondents as primary data also allowed me to explore new issues and

seek information about thoughts, behaviours and perceptions from community

spokespersons.[88]

At the same time, a novel analytical framing of the violence is important because it

allows us to move beyond originating causes alone and explore and explain the

dynamics of violence.[89] Relying on the concept of a settler state as a comparative

interpretive framework also helped a reconceptualization of deep-seated assumptions

about Assam exceptionalism. In the light of Mamdani's scholarship, bringing Assam

into comparison with cases like Nigeria, Zanzibar/Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda

helped a reinterpretation of significant historical events. This reinterpretation adds

significantly to the existing knowledge and may help policy framers.[90]

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[87] Mamdani, M. (2012). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identities,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[88] Boyce, C. and Neale, P. (2006). Conducting In-depth Interviews: A Guide for Designing and Conducting In-depth Interviews for Evaluation Input, Watertown: Pathfinder International, p. 3.

[89] Demmers, J. (2012). *Theories of Violent Conflicts: An Introduction,* Abingdon: Routledge, p. 95.

[90] Veracini, L. (2011). Introducing Settler Colonial Studies, *Settler Colonial Studies*, (vol 1) (no 1), p.1-9; Veracini L. (2010). *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

I visited Assam several times during the research period and talked to numerous individuals of different communities. They have helped me immensely and provided in-depth information on the issues I was researching. My informants identified as members of the following communities: the Bodo, the Tiwa, the Dimasa, the Mising, the Sutiya, the Assamese, the Bengali Hindu and the Bengali Muslims amongst others. I travelled to different places in Assam and North East of India – from Dhemaji in the east to Dhubri in the west and even to Shillong in Meghalaya – to meet different people. I also visited relief camps and violence-affected families. Through interviews, I hoped to find answers to the main research questions and aimed to unearth specific representations of the conflicts. In addition, several informal interviews were also undertaken during 2013 – 2014. They supplemented some of the primary interview data. My own exposure to the conflict in Assam, over several years, also finds expression in the discussions and analysis.

The data presented and discussed in Part B of this thesis are drawn from in-depth interviews with twenty-two spokespersons informally representing the indigenous people, the Assamese, and the migrant communities. These interviews were initially conducted during October - November 2014. Sometimes, follow-up questions over the phone allowed me to seek clarification when needed. I visited Assam again in February 2015 to gain more insight. All the interviews were conducted at an individual level and explored the same issues. While basic individual biographical details of the interviewees were collected and are presented in the chapters, the focus of the interviews remained on the issues of collective identity and violence. All formal interviews were recorded and field notes were taken. The interviews were also

transcribed, even if not all transcriptions were translated into English. All informal conversations were only recorded in the field notes. The informal conversations also offered relevant material for the research; a more formal setting may have been stifling. Information gathered this way, was then cross-linked in formal interviews. The informal interviews thus became a sort of mirror on which to check and recheck information gathered from different sources.

The selections of the interviewees resulted from their being prominent, socially and politically active in their respective communities and from their in-depth knowledge of the issues I was exploring. No age limit or any other criteria were considered. The interviewees had diverse backgrounds, hailed from different areas of Assam, and had different educational backgrounds. Though my research topic is of a sensitive nature, with their permission, I have not kept their identities anonymous All of them are very active in the public domain.

These interviews are therefore used as "expert texts" in the same way as other academic literature. To retain the originality of these conversations, I have not edited their responses and only translated them into English when needed. These interviews were not the subject of randomization and the interviewees are not representing their communities in any formal way. Nevertheless, they are a mix of educated public figures from across Assam, from a variety of backgrounds, areas and age groups. These informants allowed me to access information and analysis that would otherwise be inaccessible. It should also be noted that they are grouped as 'Indigenous', 'Assamese', or 'immigrant' primarily for heuristic reasons and that these labels remain contentious.

The indigenous interviewees included four academics and two socio-political workers. I also informally interviewed a few students and villagers from one indigenous community to test their attitudes. All the indigenous interviewees had Masters degrees, and three had Doctorates. They lived in different places. One lived in the central Assam district of Morigaon, one in the North Assam district of Dhemaji and the others in Guwahati, though they hailed from different districts such as Dhemaji, Dima Hasao, and Kokrajhar.

Within the Assamese community, my interviewees included spokespersons for the Assamese community actively involved in the socio-political life of Assam. At the same time, I ensured that the selected interviewees were born and brought up in Assam and identified themselves as Assamese. Here too, the selected interviewees ranged from diverse backgrounds and had different educational backgrounds. One had a Bachelor of Arts degree, two had in addition Bachelor of Law degrees, and two had Doctorates. One had a Master degree in engineering. One interviewee was educated in the UK and one in the US. The others were educated in Assam (Gauhati University). All but two of the interviewees lived in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, but they hailed from different corners of Assam. Two were from North Assam (from Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts), two were from Eastern Assam, also known as Upper Assam (Sibsagarh district), while the two who did not live in Guwahati were from the central Assam district of Nagaon.

The interviewees of the migrant community, likewise, had diverse backgrounds and hailed from different areas of Assam. They included three lawyers, two politicians,

and one businessman. All the three lawyers had Bachelor of Law degrees. The two politicians also had degrees. One of the lawyers and one of the politicians were educated outside Assam. All but one of the interviewees lived in Guwahati. Among the others, one hailed from Tinsukia district in Upper Assam, one from Barpeta district in Lower Assam, and one from Hojai subdivision in central Assam. One of the politicians hailed from Nagaon in central Assam, while another had his ancestral home in Barak Valley.

As with any fieldwork, the first challenge was in arranging the interviews. At the field level, further challenges arose, as some of those who were contacted could not participate. Other participants had to be contacted and enlisted. Interviewees often digressed from the main focus of the research. Keeping the interview within the set topics was at times another challenge. The percentage of women in active socio-political life in Assam is quite small and the gender balance of the interviewees reflects this. My own bias undoubtedly crept into the data analysis. I have lived most of my life there and this was inevitable. During 2012 – 2014, I also conducted ongoing conversations on the issues of violence and social conflicts in Assam over social media. These informal social media conversations helped me understanding the situation and dynamics in Assam as much as reading books and articles, if not more so.

Interviews would begin with a general question on why Assam witnessed periodic eruption of violence and would go on to explore other topics, contradictions, and the informants' views on other communities. Each interview lasted somewhere between forty-five minutes to one and half hours. The questions and interviews followed a

semi-structured pattern. The approach was flexible, and allowed for following interesting leads in the conversation.[91] In this way, the conversation proceeded in unexpected ways.

In-depth interviews were also useful in another way. Clive Seale draws attention to the fact that every interview gives access only to the speakers' version of an account, and that it is very difficult to ascertain how this version corresponds with reality. Apart from the content of a speaker's account, it is therefore of importance how they share their account, the words they choose, the themes they choose to emphasise, the emotions they express and their body language.[92] This information proved very valuable.

Generally, when researching violence, there is always a danger that informants would not share relevant information. I was not known to the interviewees, and so it took at least a couple of visit to get to know each other. Interviewers are at times seen as agents of police or intelligence agencies, and so the interviewee had to be sure I was a genuine researcher. This initial hesitation made it difficult for them to speak openly and honestly about issues of identity, conflicts, perceptions, and reconciliation. But as the interviews proceeded, insights into the speakers 'true' feelings on specific matters would be gained. For example, during initial conversations with many participants, in formal and informal interviews, when asked whether there were any tensions between Assamese and other communities, such as indigenous or migrants who were in Assam since the pre-independence period, the response would almost always be something like 'There is no tension; we are all in Assam; it is all political'. But upon further

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[91] Seale, C. (1999). *Researching Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications, p. 205.

[92] Seale, C. (1999). *Researching society and culture*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 203-205.

discussion, the speaker often revealed that there was some level of mistrust and that politicians actually do take advantage of this mistrust. As the next layer peeled away, informants would start to admit certain fault lines, talk about favouritism and the privileges of one community, and refer to their prejudices and stereotypes. They even spoke at times about their intense fear of other ethnic groups, admitted that it was necessary to protect their own community at whatever cost, and referred to the need to prevent the state from going to the hands of other communities. Effectively, they would justify violence as being the result of having 'no other option', or 'a measure of last resort'. This careful peeling away of the layers would not have been possible with a survey, a questionnaire, or even a formal interview with a stranger. It was only possible because of the trust and friendship that developed between the participants and the researcher.

The data discussed here was analysed through a holistic interview analysis approach. The thesis is presented as a historical and political analysis where the interviews are used to describe the reasons for violence and issues of identity. These interviews are then merged with other commentary, references to literature and theory on the topic in Part B of the thesis.

In selecting the themes for analysis and their organisation in the thesis, the interviews were first read to find significant specific terms or references. I use the term "theme" in the sense used by Morris Opler.[93] Words such as 'violence', 'tribals', 'immigrants', 'assimilation', 'homelands', 'AASU Movement' and 'Constitution' were thus

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[93] Opler, M. E. (1945). *Themes as dynamic forces in culture.* American Journal of Sociology (vol 51), (no 3), pp. 198– 206.

selected. Once these themes were identified, a more detailed reading of the interviews was done. In this way I focused on four interrelated themes:

- Violence

- Identity

- 'Others'

- Homelands

I shall discuss these themes in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

1.5 Limitations of the research

Using a settler colonial studies framework, this research on violence and colonially created identities under indirect rule is not without limitations. One obvious limitation pertains to the constraint of time. While a more long-term ethnographical study would perhaps have yielded a better result, the in-depth interviews were the best that I could do in the context of my doctoral research. A second limitation of the in-depth interviews method relates to the participants' lack of representativeness. Though the participants were selected in order to gain privileged knowledge and insight, the sample was small and did not aim to be representative. They were not community spokespersons in any formal sense. The in-depth interviews approach, however, generated important insights. A third limitation of this study relates to the definition of social cohesion. In this study, I have adopted a broad definition of the term, and while this allowed for interpretative flexibility, it brought some indeterminacy. Another limitation of this study that needs to be clearly noted and concerns what this

study did not address: the involvement of external or non-state actors, the presence of security forces in an internationally sensitive geo-political zone, the issue of free and fair elections, the level of economic development, the level of democratization. All these need further research.

1.6 Thesis Structure:

After this introductory chapter, the thesis is comprised of two parts. Part A (Chapters 2 and 3) s based on secondary sources and discusses the colonial and postcolonial period of North East India, and especially Assam. In this part, I present the social and ethnic landscape of contemporary North East India. Part B (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) is based on ethnographic work. In this part, I present the views of spokespersons involved in the triangular relationships characterising the state. Part B is based on both primary and secondary data sources.

Chapter 2 discusses the history of the colonial period, the theories of Henry Maine and the elaboration of the indirect rule paradigm, how it was built up as a set of colonial reforms for India, and its implementation in Assam. It traces how the colonial administration in Assam moved from a type of universalist imperialism to a culturalist framework, created differentiations in society using the census, history, and law as tools of identity-creation, and constructed a variety of group based identities. This chapter also discusses how this paradigm of colonial rule led, in subsequent years, to the ossification of collective identities.

Chapter 3 discusses how this form and structure of colonial rule was reproduced in the postcolonial period through the Indian Constitutions, and state structures and institutions. It discusses the rise of Assamese linguistic nationalism and the consequences that have resulted from this development. It also discusses how a colonially-defined paradigm of rule still underpins relationships in the state, giving a privileged hegemonic domination to the Assamese people, a position that is similar to that of settlers in a settler colonial context.

Chapter 4 centres on the political struggles of the indigenous peoples. It presents interviews with indigenous spokespersons to discuss how indigenous identities struggle in their assertion of political autonomy, and how they viewed other communities in the context of political violence in Assam. It discusses the interviews and different indigenous approaches to the troubled relationship involving the 'tribal' and the Assamese communities.

Similarly, Chapter 5 presents interviews with non-native Assamese spokespersons. These conversations centered on Assamese influences in the state and society and how the Assamese community see its hegemonic dominating position in the political and social life of Assam. The chapter also presents their views on the conflicts and breaks in social cohesion in the context of Assamese micro-nationalism. These interviews address the issues of identity and violence and the failures of the democratization process.

Chapter 6 moves then to the perspectives of the 'migrant' community, discussing through the interviews the position and issue the migrants in Assam, with a focus on

the Bengali Hindus and Muslim migrants. It also presents how the fragmentation of this collective identity fortifies the Assamese hegemonic position. Two forms of citizenship emerge, one civil, the other ethnic. This distinction contributes greatly to ongoing tensions involving communities that moved to Assam during colonial and postcolonial times.

The Conclusion weaves together the various parts of this dissertation and recapitulates its findings: how the legacies of indirect rule inform ethnic relations in postcolonial Assam, how this promotes unequal and violent relations, how these relations resembles those of other postcolonial settings, and how the different communities perceive their positions in this context and that of the other contributors to a triangular system of relations. The conclusion also discusses Assamese hegemony and suggests that decolonisation was defective in the North East.

PART - A

Chapter 2: The Constitution of Assam under Colonial Rule

Mahmood Mamdani concludes: "A new form of colonialism was born in the aftermath of the mid nineteenth-century crisis of colonialism".[94] This new form of colonialism, which eventually came to be known as indirect rule, was implemented in Assam. This chapter discusses the ways in which indirect rule reproduces relationships that resemble those of settler colonial formations and focuses on the ways in which it operated in relation to three critical sites: a new legal framework, the census, and the writing of new histories of Assam. I shall also discuss how these three sites together resulted in creating new collective identities, how these became unchanging, how these were retained in the postcolonial era and how this ossification contributes to dysfunction in present-day Assam.

The year 1826 is often referred as a point of reference for any discussion of Assamese history. It was in this year that the Yandaboo Treaty was signed, which resulted in Assam being transferred from Burmese to the British sovereignty.[95] It also ended what was at the time the longest and most expensive British war in India, when fifteen thousand European and Indian soldiers had died, together with an unknown number of Burmese. The war exacted its toll on the people of Assam as well, with some historians concluding that about half of the population in the state had perished as a result of drawn out strife.[96] When the British occupied Assam in 1826, the

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[94] Mamdani, M. (2012). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identities,* Cambridge: Harvard University, Press, p. 6.

[95] Pathak, N.C. and Pathak, G. (2008). *Assam History and its Graphics*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, p. 125.

[96] MPP Remembers Treaty of Yandaboo (2011). *E-Pao* [online]. 24th February. Available at: http://www.e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=23..250211.feb11 [Accessed on 24.2.2013].

'Assamese', who had settled in previous centuries, the Ahoms and caste Hindus, for example, had already taken over the land and replaced or assimilated many of the aboriginal peoples of the area. Religious conversion had contributed considerably to the assimilation of local indigenous peoples.

After a couple of years spent on setting up administrative structures, the British in Assam embarked on a territorial expansion programme. In 1828, they annexed the Kachari kingdom, which was earlier under Ahom rule. They did so by claiming the Doctrine of Lapse. This doctrine, a controversial policy of British rule, allowed lands whose feudal ruler died without a male biological heir, to be directly controlled by the colonial powers. In 1832 the Khasi king also surrendered, and the British increased their influence over the Jayantia ruler as well. In 1833, the Upper Assam area, consisting of Sibsagarh and Lakhimpur, became a British protectorate, and by 1834 the British had carved out four more administrative districts in central and western Assam: Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Nowgong. In 1839, the Maran and Matak territories were also annexed. Assam's colonial occupation was complete.

Saikia states that the British encountered a society that did not resemble the traditional caste-based society of Northern India. Rather, they found numerous indigenous communities cohabiting with several Hindu groups. This society was difficult to interpret. The British found a confronting and confusing social fabric where non-Aryanized plain and hills peoples coexisted side by side. The British cast these peoples and their culture as "absent subjects".[97] They had not yet developed a systemic approach to administering the region. The first British administrator, David

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[97] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in Assam*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 31.

Scott, attempted to promote development and concentrated on raising revenue.[98] As part of the administrative process, a native ruler, Purnadhar Singha, was also installed in the inaccessible eastern parts of Assam, primarily to collect the land tax.[99]

Assam was eventually attached to the province of Bengal, for administrative convenience, while a sustained program of economic exploitation was also initiated.[100] The profitability of tea and the availability of coal and petroleum further led to a redefinition of trading patterns. The traditional trade links with regions to the east such as today's Myanmar, Bhutan and China were discontinued, as the British preferred to open up the western trade routes.

The local people of the state did not benefit from these economic changes. The British preferred to use captive labour transferred from central India to the newly established plantations. Contract labour to work in the tea plantations was also brought in. These later settled down in the state and locally came to be known as *adivasis*. The British also encouraged the large-scale immigration of people from other parts of India to the state to work in the new industries. At the same time, the immigration of Bengali Muslims to Assam was encouraged to cultivate the land and meet increased demand for food.

The effect of these migrations was assessed by C.A. Bruce, Superintendent of Tea Culture, as early as 1839 in an article for the *Madras Journal of Literature and*

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[98] Gait, E. A. (1906). *A History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Co. p. 288.

[99] Gait, E. A. (1906). *A History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Co. p. 291.

[100] Sharma, J. (2005). A Historical Perspective. [Conference paper] [online] *The Symposium on Gateway to the East Conference, New Delhi* Available at: www.india-seminar.com/2005/550.htm [Accessed: 15.02.2012].

Science: "with such large-scale migration from other parts, the Assamese language would soon become extinct".[101] Bruce's assessment also led to several other administrative and policy decisions by the British, such as imposing Bengali as the official language and the recruitment of outsiders to administer the state. As shall be discussed later, these decisions proved momentous and their nefarious legacy survives to this day.[102]

By this time, the intention of the British colonisers to manipulate cultural indicators such as language, dress, and religion had become evident. For example, in the minutes of the Governor General in Council meeting presided by Lord Macaulay on 7 March 1835 it was recorded:

> The greatest object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science amongst the natives of India and all the funds appropriate for the purpose of education would best be employed on English education alone to create a class of Indians in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinion, in moral, in intellect.[103]

The imposition of Bengali as the official language of Assam in 1836 prompted resistance movements. In 1857, Assam participated in India's first War of Independence. The 'revolt' of 1857, known as the Sepoy Mutiny, was the turning

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[101] Bruce, C. A. (1839). Report on the manufacture of Tea, and on the extent and produce of Tea Plantation in Assam. *The Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, vol X (July-December), p. 194.

[102] Bujarbaruah, H.K. eds., (2007). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, Vol 4, p. 364.

[103] Bujarbaruah, H.K. ed., (2007). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, Vol 4, p. 348.

point in the British colonial project. A comprehensive reassessment followed its repression and a new colonial paradigm was introduced.

2.1 1857 and the Development of Indirect Rule Colonialism

The Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 led to policy changes in the administration of British India. As part of the change, the British stopped all further annexation of native states and during the period 1858–1947 the general policy changed to one of non-annexation but with the right of intervention. Opinions differ on the causes of the mutiny: whether it was a planned war of independence against the colonial empire, or an uncoordinated mutiny of soldiers who felt a threat to their religious sensitivity, or simply a revolt by soldiers who wanted increased pay and greater career opportunities.[104] Whatever the cause, the Sepoy Mutiny saw the participation of some 8,000 of the 139,000 *sepoys* (soldiers) of the Bengal Army.[105] Though the mutiny was suppressed by the end of 1858, it was a major shock to British power. It led to the administration of India being directly taken over by the British Crown from the East India Company.

Unable to make sense of the mutiny, the colonial authorities required the services of scholars. Mamdani writes that the task of interpreting and articulating a response to the crisis of 1857 was primarily led by Sir Henry Maine, who had to "rethink and

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[104] Iyer, L. (2008). *Direct versus Indirect Colonial Rule in India: Long-term Consequences*, [Working Paper], Massachusetts: Harvard Business School, p. 8.

[105] Mamdani, M. (2011). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 9.

reconstruct the colonial project on a more durable basis".[106] Maine's understanding of the crisis emanated from a failure of the British administrators to understand the 'nature' of native Indian religious and social beliefs and what Mamdani refers to as "the mid nineteenth-century crisis of colonialism".[107] Maine called for a shift in focus from direct rule colonialism to indirect rule colonialism in several key areas. As part of that process, the Queen's proclamation of 1858 stipulated non-interference in the private domain of the colonised, especially in religion.[108]

The content and implementation of Maine's indirect rule colonialism was vastly different from earlier paradigms implemented by the East India Company. The Company had since 1757 allowed local kings (like Purnadhar Singha in Assam) to pay an annual royalty. These kings retained their traditional administrative authority and the ability to legislate, subject to British supervision and control.[109] Maine's indirect rule was vastly different because it moved away from a focus on the conquered elites. In essence, direct rule had a civilizing aim over 'uncivilized' colonized others. This civilizing and assimilative nature of direct rule colonialism was best articulated in Lord Macaulay's already mentioned statement. In addition, direct rule colonialism was also primarily premised on economic exploitation. In doing so, it acknowledged the differences between colonizer and colonized and attempted to ultimately erase them.

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[106] Mamdani, M. (2011.) *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 6.

[107] Mamdani, M. (2011). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 6.

[108] Mamdani, M. (2011). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 26.

[109] Iyer, L. (2008). *Direct versus Indirect Colonial Rule in India: Long-term Consequences,* [Working Paper], Massachusetts: Harvard Business School, p. 5.

Indirect rule colonialism, on the other hand, while acknowledging differences, sought to shape them.[110] Using a specific theory of history and a particular theory of law, Maine sought to differentiate between the Western concepts of universal civilization and non-Western concepts of local customs. This meant a shift from the homogenizing concepts of civilization to one articulating and managing intractable differences in society. This resulted in a new form of protection that sought to preserve custom and traditions, create new political identities, and endeavoured to shape the perception of the past, the present and the future of the colonized. Mamdani argues that the shaping of this new form of colonialism was achieved by creating new histories that memorialized the past by casting different groups of colonized peoples differently. Censuses and the establishment of separate administrative apparatuses completed this institutional structure. The aim of indirect rule colonialism was to shape the subjectivities of the entire colonized people and not just the elites. Hence, it necessitated a shift in focus from merely mobilizing and exploiting natural resources to the shaping and freezing of cultures and identities.

Maine's theory of indirect rule colonialism was so powerful that his books became compulsory reading for those aiming to join the India Civil Service. His assumptions were later transported to the entire British colonial empire from Malay to Natal, to Egypt and Nigeria, to Sudan and Tanzania.[111] Post-1857, although the British gave up outright annexation of territory, they still reserved the right to intervene in the internal

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[110] Mamdani, M. (2011). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 50.

[111] Mamdani, M. (2011). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 6.

affairs of native states and they exercised this right in several native areas. North East India was no exception.

2.2 The Consequences of Indirect Rule in Assam

Post-1857, Assam became one of the laboratories for experimenting indirect rule colonialism amongst the hill people. In the early colonial years, the two opposing systems of non-intervention and annexation had continued side by side, but after 1857 the concept and approach towards the tribals underwent a fundamental change. This came to be known as the 'forward policy'. Using elements of nativism theory, the colonial agents defined the hills tribes as different from the 'plains' population. As the hills tribes were slowly conquered one by one, the nature of indirect rule also differed from place to place. To maintain a uniform policy of colonization, the British imperialists initially organised the indigenous administration of the hill areas. But in subsequent years, the administration began affecting all aspects of life for the local people. Ultimately, under the British colonial administration, the tribal areas of North East India came to enjoy a special exclusive status.

That a special consideration for the tribal people of the North East was being implemented is seen in the instructions of Sir Cecil Beadon, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal (1862-1867):

> A main principle to be adopted in the administration of these people when they have been made to feel the power of the Government and submitted to its authority is not to leave them in their old state, but while adopting a simple

plan of Government suitable to their present conditions and circumstances, and interfering as little as possible with existing institutions, to extend our intercourse with them, and endeavour to introduce among them civilization and order.[112]

Beadon was thus aiming to form a dual system of administration, by separating the administration of the hills (based on local customs) from that of the plains (based on general law). This forward policy was first introduced in June 1866, with the establishment of the Naga Hills District. As the British colonial agents felt that the local Naga Angami tribe had no internal form of government, their first step was to introduce the *Dobhashi* (bilingual person) system and the *Gaonburha* (village headman).

In order to extend the reach of the colonial empire, administrators were urged to move beyond the fringe of British 'civilization' and enter into the interior parts of India.[113] And as British administrators began moving inwards, they also began using census documents to classify local populations into groups of tribals (indigenous), non-tribal (caste Hindu) and migrants (Bengali Hindus / Muslims). This endeavour resulted in shifting the fundamental distinction from that separating colonizer and colonized to new distinctions separating colonized communities. As census operations became a tool of new identity creation since 1891, with haphazard classification of various communities into 'tribes' and 'non-tribes', it was in the 1911 and 1921 censuses in

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[112] Zorema, J. (2007). *Indirect Rule in Mizoram*, New Delhi: Mittal Publication, p. 6.

[113] Mamdani, M. (2011). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 11.

Assam that references were made to the 'invasion' of 'land-hungry' immigrants, mostly Muslim.[114]

At the same time, indirect rule colonialism sought to memorialize the past with several new histories. Edward Gait, an officer of the Indian Civil Service, wrote the first colonial history of Assam. It still continues to be a standard textbook in schools. Without being able to access appropriate sources, Gait wrote that history itself was unknown to the early inhabitants of Assam and that "the stories culled from later sources cannot, of course, be dignified with the name of history".[115] This form of history-writing produced an elitist history of. [116]

With past identities memorialized in the new historiography and present identities etched in the censuses, indirect rule colonialism was also secured through legal and administrative changes. The relationships between the newly created collectives and their identities (tribal – non-tribal / Assamese – migrant) were thus controlled and defined by the colonial state through the use of law.[117] The Political Officer or Resident was also given the responsibility to establish native courts in every district and supervise their work.[118] The laws in these courts were drawn from what the British defined as native law and 'customs'. These legal measures were premised on the establishment of homelands or secluded / reserved areas for the tribals. This

[114] Sinha, S.K. (1998). *Report on Illegal Migration into Assam*. Guwahati: Governor of Assam. Ch. II.

[115] Gait, E. A. (1906). *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, Thacker Spink and Co., p. 1.

[116] Guha, R. and Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. London, Oxford University Press, p. 17.

[117] Mamdani, M. (2011). *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 26.

[118] Lugard, F.J. (1970). *Political Memoranda - Revision of Instructions to Political Officers on Subjects Chiefly Political & Administrative 1913-1918,* London, Frank Cass, pp. 18–19.

resulted in limitations in the citizenship status of the non-native settlers. Baruah states that under such circumstances, the concept of unequal or differentiated citizenship arose.[119]

Indirect rule colonialism, therefore, went beyond the organization of administration and expanded to encompass the socio-cultural and political regime governing native peoples.[120] The idea of an 'authentic' native rule thus relied upon the sharp differentiation between colonially-defined Assamese and natives. This differentiation was articulated and legitimized by law. This fragmentation was the focus of much of the governing philosophy of indirect rule in Assam.

2.3 Sites of Indirect Rule Colonialism

The very purpose of the colonizers was to maintain control over conquered people, though there was always controversy over how this may be achieved. Policies varied between direct rule, assimilation, and indirect rule. Attempts to codify customary law under indirect rule actually served to shape future customary. Mamdani emphasizes how indirect rule created an 'official customary law' and how the system dictated the identity of the local peoples, ultimately leading to "decentralized despotism".[121] In this section, I will discuss how colonial administrators in North East India used the

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[119] Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India,* New Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 186-187.

[120] Lugard, F.J. (1970). *Political Memoranda - Revision of Instructions to Political Officers on Subjects Chiefly Political & Administrative 1913-1918,* London, Frank Cass, p. 30.

[121] Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 37.

three sites mentioned above as the founding pillars of indirect rule and to create political identities that resulted in permanent social cleavages.

2.3.1 The Legal Framework

As indirect rule colonialism was based on the notion of non-interference, several new legal provisions sought to ensure and create separate protected enclaves for tribal peoples and to nominate the tribal authority that would administer these areas. In effect, it created two sets of laws – customary and general – for two different groups. The policy of non-interference was, thereby, expressed in different legislative acts. The colonial administration rarely interfered with these customary laws, unless they infringed fundamentally on their Western sensitivities. The acts enacted during these decades, such as The Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation, 1880, the Scheduled District Act, 1874, the Assam General Clauses Act, 1915 and the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms, 1919, all adopted the policy of non-interference with the customary laws and practices of the tribes inhabiting North East India. As shall be discussed later in this chapter, the Government of India Act, 1935 (which was the constitution of British India) also provided that no act of the central or provincial legislature would be applicable to the hill areas of North East India. These were declared 'excluded areas', or 'partially excluded areas'.[122]

Post-1857, as the form of governance of North East India changed to indirect rule, the 'inner line' system became implemented. This system got its legal legitimacy

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[122] Parwez, M. (2012). Customary Laws and Practices in North East India: Records and Reports Preserved in Law Research Institute, Gauhati, *Indian Journal of Applied Research,* (vol 2), (no 3), pp. 81-83.

primarily from the East Bengal Frontier Regulation, 1873. Other laws that helped in the continuation of the indirect rule paradigm included the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation, 1880, the Chin Hills Regulation, 1896, the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935, and the Constitution of India. All these acts relied on dual administration and on the exclusion of specific areas and peoples from governance structures.

The Inner Line regime was crucial to the consolidation of exclusionary relations in North East India. It was ostensibly first implemented to stop 'tribal' raids into the plains, but it is still in place in some areas. While the hill tribes were allowed to move out of the plains, plains people were permanently restricted from entering the hills without authorization. This led to a reversal of the original restrictions, which now applied only to the people of the plains districts of Assam. In the long run, the continuation of the Inner Line only fed into a dual system of citizenship.

Jafa, a former Chief Secretary of Assam who had worked extensively on conflict resolution, argues that this exclusion resulted in the Lushai Hills, the Naga Hills and the Frontier Tracts (now Arunachal Pradesh) being 'excluded' from the rest of the country by several administrative orders, while the Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills, the Mikir Hills and the North Cachar Hills were categorized as 'partially excluded' areas. Soon, all outsiders who were considered undesirable by the British in the hills were removed. Simultaneously, the operation of most laws was made inapplicable in the hills under the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation, 1880. The Government of India Acts of 1915 and 1919 confirmed these areas as separate and defined them as 'backward'. They were excluded from the purview of the provincial

legislature and the High Court. Finally, the Government of India Act of 1935 created a totally new political status for these areas.[123]

As the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 and the Inner Line Regulation, 1873 declared most of the tribal hill areas "excluded areas", most of the tribal indigenous communities (the Khasis, Garos, Nagas, Manipuris and Arunachalis) became permanently excluded from the social and political developments taking place elsewhere. Social mobility and assimilation processes came to a halt. They had characterised previous arrangements. Tribal - non-tribal differences became ossified.

Under this regime, neither the proprietary rights nor the land use system of excluded local peoples were recognized. Rights over land were only recognized when lands were privately owned and the owners either through their own labour or by hiring others brought specific enclosures under settled cultivation. Land abundance in pre-colonial Assam had allowed many communities to follow an itinerant lifestyle of *jhum* cultivation (shifting cultivation), often leaving one plot vacant for several years. This allowed the colonial rulers to define shifting cultivation land as 'wasteland', making it inaccessible to local people. In addition, the British colonizers also termed all common land in Assam as 'wastelands'. This was not always barren or infertile land. The people associated with such category of land were negatively categorized. Constructing land either as a utilized resource or as wasted became the dominant

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[123] Jafa, V. S. (2001). Administrative Policies & Ethnic Disintegration Engineering Conflict in India's North East. [online] [Available at]:

http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume2/Fault2-JafaF.htm [Accessed: 7 June 2013].

praxis in the colonial system. Policies and laws defined its utilization, exploitation, and appropriation.

In the pre-1857 period in Assam, the primary aim of British colonialism was exploitation. With the development of tea and the discovery of oil, exploiting these resources became a primary concern. Access to land became critical. As mentioned above, in 1838, colonial administrators promulgated the Wasteland Rules, barring local people from cultivating the idle or fallow land. Sanjib Baruah illustrates how this land settlement policy actually resulted in restricting access to unused and uncultivated land by the local gentry for hunting, fishing and shifting cultivation. It also allowed the colonial state to designate large areas as wasteland available either for tea cultivation or for peasant settlement.[124]

Normally, such exclusion from land rights should have pushed the local population to work in other forms of agriculture, or to become labourers in British tea gardens. But in Assam agriculture was an activity that was only performed as subsistence and to meet the household food needs; it was not traditionally seen as a commercial venture. This became evident by 1853 when even after more than 27 years of British rule only 6.3 percent of the total area in Assam was under cultivation. As the peasants showed little interest in working in the plantation sector, the administration increased the land revenue rates with the aim of creating additional pressure upon the peasants and to coerce them to move out of traditional subsistence agriculture. Chakraborty states that between 1864-65 and 1872-73 land revenue demand on Assam was raised by a hundred per cent; and yet by 1875, nearly after 50 years of colonial rule, more than

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[124] Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi, Oxford, p. 47.

7,000,000 acres of land remained uncultivated. Local people refused to work as plantation labour.[125] Immigration of plantation and other labour into Assam was the British only option.

2.3.2. The Census in Assam during Colonial Times

India is a country of immense religious, ethnic and cultural diversity. But the boundaries between different communities have not always been clear and were often fluid. This, writes Bhagat, prompted some scholars to characterize Indians belonging to 'fuzzy communities'. Bhagat cites several scholars such as Appadurai to further state that this fluidity was lost in the census as many communities were cast within definite geographical and social boundaries.[126] As legal changes enforced indirect rule bringing in divisions and a duality system of laws, the second site of indirect rule colonialism was initiated. Colonial administrations effectively used the census, not as a system of enumeration, but as a system that allocated communal identities.

Apart from the mere enumeration, the colonial Government incorporated caste and religion as structuring descriptors. The census also incorporated the categories of tribe and race, but the distinction between them was often obscure. Bhagat gives the example of *Jats* and *Rajputs* – two important castes of northern India – which were mentioned as tribes in the 1891 census.[127] The census left caste, race, and tribe to be

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[125] Chakraborty, G. (2012). Roots and Ramification of a Colonial Construct: The Wastelands of Assam [Occasional Paper] Kolkata Institute of Development Studies, p. 12.

[126] Bhagat, R.B. (2006). Census and caste enumeration: British legacy and contemporary practice in India, *Genus*. (vol LXII) (no 2), p. 120.

[127] Bhagat, R.B. (2006). Census and caste enumeration: British legacy and contemporary practice in India, *Genus*. (vol LXII) (no 2), pp. 120-121.

ultimately interpreted and recorded by local officers. At the social level, this lack of consistency led many to believe that the object of the census was to fix the relative social positions of the different categories. Many underprivileged communities expressed an aspiration to acquire new identities.[128]

Even though no attempt was made to clearly define caste, tribe, and race, the census operations classified the population into mutually exclusive groups. Barpuzari mentions of several examples of the confusion created by the censuses in Assam. In the 1891 census, for example, g*anaks* were labelled as degraded *Brahmins*, but following objections, were relabelled as *graha bipras.* Similarly, in the 1900 census, the fishing community wanted to be termed as *kaivartyas*, which was initially refused, but in the 1921 census, they were identified as such. The Indian census operations thus fundamentally differed from the British system, where the census was concerned with counting and the politics of representation, rather than being a tool for identity creation. But in the end, fluidity in the mobility of classes and castes, especially the upward mobility of the 'backward' castes, was stemmed.[129]

Several scholars have traced the links between caste and communitarian politics and the politics of group classification in India.[130] While pre-colonial regimes, like that of

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[128] Bhagat, R.B. (2006). Census and caste enumeration: British legacy and contemporary practice in India, *Genus*. vol LXII, No 2, p. 120-124.

[129] Barpujari, H. K. ed., (2007). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, vol 5, pp. 166-170.

[130] For details, see Thapar, R. (1989). Imagines Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity, *Modern Asian Studies* vol 23 pp. 209-232 ; Dirk, N.B. (1987). *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Guha, R. (1983). *The Prose of Counter Insurgency* Subaltern Studies: Writing of South Asian History and Society, New Delhi, Oxford University Press ; Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial

the Mughal rulers, did practice counting and classifying, the British system of enumeration was much more structured. The interaction between counting and classification under the British census was able to ossify communal relations. Pre-colonial states counted and classified on the basis of vocations, the British system counted and classified on the basis of ascribed categories.

Appadurai writes: "British bureaucrats must have found it tempting to imagine that good numerical data would make it easier to embark on projects of social control or reform in the colonies".[131] The role of numbers, he writes, had two sides in India: one justificatory and the other disciplinary. As a justification, British officials used numbers to justify to the metropolitan centre issues that related to discovery, learning, and social and resource-related policy decisions. However, at the disciplinary level, the same numbers became a tool for what Foucault defines as biopolitical control.[132] In the end, Appadurai cites Bernard Cohen to say that the Indian census, rather than being a passive instrument of data gathering, actively created new types of identity.[133]

The British census in India and in Assam thus led to unyoking social groups from the complex and localized group structures in which they were situated. In an agrarian

Imagination, in Breckenridge C.A. and Veer P. (eds) (1993). *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 314–339.

[131] Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial Imagination, in Breckenridge C.A. and Veer P (eds) (1993) *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 318.

[132] Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial Imagination, in Breckenridge C.A. and Veer P (eds) (1993) *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 320.

[133] Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial Imagination, in Breckenridge C.A. and Veer P (eds) (1993) *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 316-317.

economy, the huge diversities of castes, sects, tribes and other groupings were rendered out of context, in a way that was unrelated to the agrarian landscape. As census operations began after 1870, caste and tribe became crucial sites of administrative concern to the detriment of other ones. Pant concludes that in the post-1870 era "such enumeration created a powerful and special relationship between essentialization, discipline, surveillance, objectification and group consciousness".[134]

Numbers, therefore, became an integral part of British colonial rule. The vast network of complex national caste and tribe grid that the British census artificially created provided the crucial link between census classification and community politics. It thereby set the ground for group differences between caste / tribe and other communities in later years. Appadurai argues that linking the idea of representation to the idea of communities, based on the idea of commonalities and differences, was the critical marker of the colonial census in India.[135]

As new understandings of caste and tribe became important sites for social classification, colonial administrators believed that the Indian population could be known and intelligible through numbers. Enormous organizational difficulties and subsequent anomalies meant that 'numbered majorities' were given prominence in the census reports. This apparently innocuous administrative principle gave rise to the concepts of 'majority' and 'minority' in Indian politics and profoundly affected the

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[134] Pant, R. (1987). The Cognitive Status of Caste in Colonial Ethnography: A Review of Some Literature of North West Province and Oudh, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol 24, no 2: pp. 145-162.

[135] Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial Imagination, in Breckenridge C.A. and Veer P (eds) (1993) *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 330.

communal politics to come. It led to the religion-based, caste-based, and indigenous-based politics of modern India.[136]

The 1891 census was a turning point. While the term *adivasi* was earlier used to describe the autochthonous indigenous inhabitants of a region, the term 'tribe' or 'tribal' became more common. In Assam, the term *adivasi* is now used only to denote the people of the tea community that have migrated from central India but who are no longer categorized as scheduled tribe in Assam. At the other end of the triangular system of relationships, Chakraborty details the ways in which the British colonial administrators first encouraged the Muslim migration into Assam, then used the census to record their presence, and then went on to pronounce that the migrants were inherently different from the local Assamese and indigenous population. In this way, the census created permanent differentiations.[137]

The census further entrenched fissures separating Hindus and Muslims in 1911, 1921 and 1931. The census reports make multiple references to the 'invasion' of 'land-hungry' Muslim migrants into Assam. S. C. Mullan, the Census Superintendent of Assam in 1931, wrote in the census document:

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[136] Appadurai, A. (1993). Numbers in the Colonial Imagination, in Breckenridge C.A. and Veer P (eds) (1993) *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 328.

[137] Chakraborty, G. (2011). From Isolation to Desolation: Analysing Social Exclusion among the *Char* Dwellers of Assam, *Man and Society, A Journal of North-East Studies,* vol VIII, pp. 51-51.

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 into the Assam Valley during the last twenty-five years. [138]

This statement is often quoted in the anti-immigration discourses in Assam as proof

that the decades-old Muslim migration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) threaten

to swamp the indigenous inhabitants and change the whole nature, language and

religion of the Brahmaputra valley.[139] Table 1 shows the figures for the five districts

of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sivasagar and Lakhimpur in different

censuses in the colonial period. As can be seen, the Muslim population in Assam

increased considerably during this period:

Table 1: The Muslim Population in Assam [140]

Year of Census	Total Population	Muslim Population	Percentage of Muslim to the total population
1911	3108669	355320	11.42
1921	3812624	585593	15.36
1931	4664800	943252	20.22
1941	5695659	1303902	22.89

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[138] Sinha, S.K. (1998). *Report on Illegal Migration into Assam*. Guwahati: Governor of Assam. Ch II.

[139] Bordoloi, B. (1991). *Transfer and Alienation of Tribal Land in Assam*. Guwahati: Self Publication, p. 77.

[140] See Dev, B.J. and Lahiri D.K. (1985). *Assam Muslims: Politics and Cohesion*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, p. 28.

Dev and Lahiri quote Robert Reid, ex-Governor of Assam, who cited these figures and said: "This gives satisfaction to the Muslims but not to the Hindu community. For the more Mohammedans you have in Assam, the stronger is the case for Pakistan".[141] As colonial law and colonial censuses fractured society, separate communities arose: the indigenous and the Assamese, the Bengalis and the Assamese, and the Hindus and the Muslims.

2.3.3 Writing New Histories: Defining the "Assamese"

The haphazard classification of different communities into various categories (tribal, non-tribal, caste and migrant communities) produced a permanent transformation.[142] This transformation focused on the present, but was premised on an intense historiographical activity. Memorializing the past and projecting on it the distinctions of the present required written histories. This was a crucial the third site of indirect rule colonialism.

Several histories were written during this period by colonial historians. A few British colonial agents began an official project of history writing. While scholars such as Edward Gait wrote on Assam, others such as Hutton and Gurdon wrote on the Naga and Khasi tribes. In order to make their histories acceptable, all these histories had one thing in common: they sought to discard old histories and replace them with a new version shaped by colonial realities. All of them began with an assertion that the

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[141] Dev, B.J. and Lahiri D.K. (1985). *Assam Muslims: Politics and Cohesion*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, p. 44.

[142] Sinha, S.K. (1998). *Report on Illegal Migration into Assam*. Guwahati: Governor of Assam. Ch II.

area and the people who lived there had no previous history. By doing so, they discarded oral memory as a tool of historical analysis, and earlier texts as sources.

Colonialism came late to the Apatani valley in Arunachal Pradesh. British officials had first visited the valley in 1897 and had stayed only two days, followed by approximately six similarly brief visits in the 1920s and 1930s. In examining the colonial record and oral histories in Arunachal Pradesh, British colonial scholars emphasised the region's isolation, even though the Ahom kings of the Brahmaputra valley had negotiated treaties with the hill tribes of the area until the early nineteenth century. In doing so, they discarded oral traditions, the only reliable source.[143]

A similar trajectory was followed when writing the history of the Khasis. In 1903, Sir Bampfylde Fuller, then Chief Commissioner of Assam, proposed the preparation of a series of monographs on the more important tribes and castes of the province of Assam. These studies were undertaken by specialized writers under a uniform scheme. Major Gurdon, Superintendent of Ethnography in Assam and editor of the whole series, undertook to describe the Khasis. The first contact between the British and the inhabitants of the Khasi Hills occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century and brought them closer to each other during the Burmese invasion in 1824. David Scott, the Governor-General's Agent, entered the hill territory of the Khasi tribes for the first time during that year.[144] In spite of this early contact, Gurdon states that no history is discernible before the arrival the Welsh missionaries later in the century.[145]

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[143] Blackburn, S. (2003). Colonial contact in the 'hidden land': Oral history among the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol 40. no 3.

[144] Gurdon, P.R.T. (1914). *The Khasis*, London, Mcmillan and Co. Ltd, pp. i–xv.

[145] Gurdon, P.R.T. (1914). *The Khasis*, London, Mcmillan and Co. Ltd, p. 8.

Hutton wrote on the Nagas. He cites S. E. Peal, who in his *Fading Histories* lamented the delay in the study of the Naga tribes and consequent loss of much material out of which their past histories might have been recovered. He then goes on to record, in his own way, many of the changes in the customs of the Angami Nagas. With the Aos and Lhota Nagas, he writes, many old beliefs and customs were already dead and forgotten.[146] As for the Khasis, Hutton too states that the history of the Naga tribes cannot be established out of vague traditions.[147] In fact, he writes, there is no previous record to know the precise relations that the Naga tribes had with the various nations of the plains before the coming of the British Raj.[148]

Gait's already mentioned *History of Assam* takes a similar approach:

> The science of history was unknown to the early inhabitant of Assam and it is not until the Ahom invasion in 1228 that there is anything approaching a connected account of the people and the region. For several hundred years previously, there are some scattered facts from a Chinese traveller and dubious and fragmentary reference to the Mahabharata and Puranas. The stories culled from the latter sources cannot, of course, be dignified with the name of history.[149]

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[146] Hutton, J.F. (1921). *The Angami Nagas: with some notes on neighbouring tribes,* London, Macmillan and Co. Limited, p. vii.

[147] Hutton, J.F. (1921). *The Angami Nagas: with some notes on neighbouring tribes,* London, Macmillan and Co. Limited, p. 6.

[148] Hutton, J.F. (1921). *The Angami Nagas: with some notes on neighbouring tribes,* London, Macmillan and Co. Limited, p. 13.

[149] Gait, E. A. (1906). *A History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Co., p. 1.

Gait further discards some of the events cited in the written histories (*buranjis*) of the Ahoms as unreliable, preferring to emphasise a colonial script.[150] He then proceeds to reinterpret the *buranjis* and tries to connect it with Pali language, a literary language that is often related to the vernacular language of Magadh province in central India.[151] This effort to link the Ahom rule with central India was part of the attempt to downplay the influence of the eastern provinces on Assam and sustain the notion of economic and cultural exchange with the western states.

Yasmin Saikia argues that the British conclusion that the region did not have any previous history allowed the colonial to be the first ones to write it. By doing so, colonial history sought to create a particular memory of the past. This memory was aimed at delegitimising the Ahom rulers.[152] In this context, she argues, even the term "Assamese" in the colonial period was constructed:

> It appears that the more the British merchants and administrators penetrated the interiors of Assam to expand the reach of colonialism, the more British scholars wrote of the lack of history of the natives in these margins. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, colonial practises had already established a neat category to classify natives of India – Aryan and non-Aryan – and within these broad classifications were several groups and subgroups of caste and religion. Subjected groups had to fit within these categories. In the

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[150] Gait, E. A. (1906). *A History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Co., p. vi.

[151] Gait, E. A. (1906). *A History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Co., p. v.

[152] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press, p. 20.

margins of Assam, the colonial found Tai Ahom but could not fit them into the established categories of known caste and religious groups. Thus they dismissed them as "unknowable" community and soon declared them dead. For convenience, a new category, Assamese, was devised and everyone in the region of Assam was christened with this new name. The vast majority of Assamese, the colonial found, were some sort of caste Hindu. They also found that within Assam, there were Assamese and Bengali-speaking Muslims. The Assamese Muslims became Assamese by colonial estimation and the Bengalis were deemed an immigrant community. Beyond this, the late colonial administrators did not explain what Assamese meant or signified.[153]

The colonial construction of the Assamese helped to create a new class of people who – due to higher education and political awareness – were finally able to exert a form of hegemonic domination. Saikia's work on the Ahoms, their cultural and political history and their relationship to Assamese nationalism, however, produces an account that differs considerably from that of the British narratives. She argues that the distinctions between Assamese and those claiming to be Ahoms during the pre-colonial period were blurred, in the context of a pluralist society strategically placing an emphasis on the collective 'we'. But when the Ahoms community was declared 'dead' and considered dissolved into the Assamese by British ethnographers in 1891, the colonial power of myth-making was at its peak. Local intellectuals accepted this

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[153] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 20.

colonial version of their history.[154] In due course, an image of the Ahoms as a degenerated, superstitious, backward and apathetic community within the greater Assamese society emerged. Saikia argues that local scholars in Assam simply reinforced the colonial narrative and only introduced some new element in their new versions.[155] This history became accepted.[156]

Edward Gait extensively relied on the *buranjis* of the Ahoms to write the history of Assam. But Saikia states that the genesis of the *buranji* is unknown and that British scholars simply used the word to mean 'storehouse to teach the ignorant'. She argues that the term Ahom never occurs in the *buranjis* to designate a specific ethnic community and that the label Ahom does not have a meaning in the local languages of Assam. In the *buranjis*, she states, 'Ahom' is an inclusive, all-encompassing term referring to the inhabitants of a polity administered by a *swargadeo* (king). New entrants were assimilated with each phase of expansion and settlement.[157] Under indirect rule, this fluidity was lost and became frozen.

As history began to be used as a tool of identity memorialisation, British colonial administrators and scholars also made a simultaneous attempt to weaken the image of the erstwhile Ahoms royalty. This was attempted through the historical narratives

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[154] Saikia, Y. (2005). The Tai Ahom Connection. [online] [Conference paper] *Seminar on Gateway to the East: A symposium on Northeast India and Look East Policy*. New Delhi Available at: http://www.india- seminar.com/2005/550.htm [Accessed: 15.02.2012].

[155] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 17.

[156] Guha, R. & Spivak, G.C. (1988). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 39.

[157] Saikia, Y. (2001). Landscape of identity: transacting the labels 'Indian', 'Assamese' and 'Tai-Ahom' in contemporary Assam, *Contemporary South Asia,* Vol 10, No 1, pp. 73–93.

where the construction of an Assamese composite society continued to privilege the upper caste Hindus within it.[158] During the British period, while the Ahoms and other caste Hindus in Assam came to be identified as Assamese, the Bengalis – both Hindus and Muslims – were identified as 'immigrants'.

2.4 Indirect Rule Colonialism in Assam

As discussed above, the changes brought about by the new legal framework, the colonial censuses and the new historiography led to much confusion and social tension. Indirect rule crafted new political divisions and led to far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, it shifted the focus of social differentiation from the colonizer – colonized dichotomy to the colonizer people themselves. The colonizer was now a benevolent and necessary ruler.

2.4.1 A Divided Polity

In the 1840s British scholars first attributed to the autochthons inhabitants of lower Assam the generic name of Bodos, describing them as 'primitive' aboriginals. Later, the Bodos were subdivided in census records into Kacharis, Lalung, Rabha, Mech, and Garo 'tribals'.[159] From 1919, the attempt to forge a separate Bodo identity intensified, as numerous groups and associations were formed to demand the recognition of the Bodos and their culture in official records. Such association

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[158] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 73.

[159] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 208–209.

included the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan (Bodo Students Association), the Kachari Chatra Sanmilan (Kachari Students Association), and the Bodo Maha Sanmilan (Greater Bodo Association). By the 1940s, Jayeeta Sharma writes, some Bodos tried to join a new political grouping that sought to unite the different plain tribes into one party on the basis of their phenotypical features. The claim was that the Bodos had lived in Assam far longer than Aryans. [160]

At the same time, recognition in the census and in law under the colonial regime led to a host of low-status people seizing new political and economic initiatives for socio-political mobility. Like the Bodos and the Kacharis, these groups also often renamed themselves. Sharma argues that the census of 1901 interpreted this as an attempt by those at the bottom of the social scale to renegotiate their position. [161]

British administrators steered an uneasy course with the Ahoms, as they found it difficult to categorize their social ranking. But in 1928 the Ahom Association demanded special reservation for the community. Soon other tribes also advanced similar claims. In response to attacks by orthodox Brahmins, some Ahoms made a call to abjure Hinduism and revert to the traditional *Bailung* worship. Soon they tried to link up with other communities such as Kacharis and Deoris to set up a tribal league. They also sought to maximize their political influence by positioning themselves between the Muslims, represented by the Muslim League, and the Hindus, represented

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[160] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 208–213.

[161] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 214.

by the Congress. In March 1945, in a convention in Shillong, they even demanded a "free state" without being included in either Pakistan or Hindustan.[162]

The introduction of the term 'tribal' in census records added another division in the Assamese polity. In modern times, the word 'tribe' immediately throws up a powerfully preconceived image of a 'primitive' and primordial group. A similar image of the indigenous people in Assam still continues, and the retention of the term in the official lexicon of postcolonial India reinforced the notion of backwardness. This has resulted in a profound alienation. As Yasmin Saikia states, in "official British lexicon, another representation of the excluded groups was also created: they were the tribals, people without a real history, akin to savages".[163] In the context of North East India, Soumen Sen writes,

> The hill people of Northeast India – at least the political and academic leadership who are very sensitive to the question of cultural identity – refuse to accept the term tribe. They consider the term derogatory and prefer to designate themselves only by their endoethnonym to emphasise their distinct cultural identity.[164]

The first indigenous movement against Assamese hegemony was started by the Naga community. The Nagas were considered part of the Assamese community since the

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[162] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* New York, Duke University Press, pp. 217–222.

[163] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 50.

[164] Sen, S. (2004). *Khasi - Jaintia folklore: context, discourse, and history,* Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre, p. 54.

pre-colonial period, but in 1929, the 'Naga Club' demanded the exclusion of Nagaland from the proposed constitutional reform of the British administration of India. This demand led to widespread violence and in 1963 Nagaland was formally carved out from Assam. Similarly, the Khasis, who had been a part of Assam since 1835, agitated to break away from the state. Their struggle also became violent. In 1971, they secured their state: Meghalaya.

The Mizos, another indigenous tribe, had been annexed to British-India by proclamation in 1895. They had been attached to Assam. As a frontier state, it too soon became subject to the domination by the British and the Assamese elites. In 1919, the hill areas of Mizoram were declared a Backward and Excluded Tract. In 1971, after a violent struggle for self-determination led by the Mizo National Front, they secured the state of Mizoram.[165]

The story of the hill areas of Arunachal Pradesh followed a similar pattern. In 1858, it was annexed to India. In 1914, some indigenous majority areas were separated from the Darrang and Lakhimpur districts of Assam to form the North East Frontier Tracts (later renamed North East Frontier Agency). Later, in 1950, the area was declared a tribal area and in 1987, the North East Frontier Agency became the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Through these reorganizations, mostly due to the various tribal movements and the granting of indigenous self-determination, the state of Assam has been greatly reduced in its territorial size.

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[165] Mizoram.nic.in (n.d.). *History of Mizoram*. [online publication of Government of Mizoram] Available at: http://mizoram.nic.in/about/history.htm [Accessed: 8 Aug 2013].

The effects of indirect rule colonialism on the polity of Assam were also seen in other areas of society. Both language and religion, which were used as assimilative tools by the Ahoms to build a coherent polity, came to be used in the colonial period as tools for communal identity assertion. During the colonial period, Christian missionaries were encouraged to proselytize in the indigenous areas and they succeeded in converting a large portion of the tribal peoples in the hills areas of Assam. In fact, the percentage of Christians in the hill states of Northeast India (Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland) rose to nearly 90% in postcolonial India.[166] At the same time, the politics of language and language script also played a role in dividing society, as most of the hill tribes had opted for the Roman script and the English language.

While the larger indigenous hill communities in North East India such as the Nagas, Khasis, Mizos, and Arunchalis were able to secure statehood by breaking away from Assam, other protected smaller indigenous communities, the Bodos, Karbi and Dimasas, also began demanding autonomous areas. Until 1854, the present day Karbi Anglong area was an independent Dimasa kingdom. When it became a part of Assam, it was subjected to Hinduization, but after the British declared it a partially excluded area under the Government of India Act, 1935, the Hinduization process stopped and the indigenous people came under the influence of Christianity. Similarly, the present Dima Hasao district in Assam was a part of indigenous Kachari kingdom before 1832 and after annexation had become a part of Assam and subjected to Christian influence. Both these areas are now declared autonomous districts under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. Their struggle for separate statehood is ongoing.

[166] Census of India (2012). *Population by Religious Communities*. [online] Available at: http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_data_finder/C_Series/Population_by_religious_communities.htm [Accessed: 08.06.2012].

Of course, the arrival of British colonialism and the fragmentations that followed also prompted the evolution of Assamese micro-nationalism. Sanjib Baruah argues that throughout the whole British period and even in post-independence India Assam remained poorly integrated. Lack of integration with the main polity and fragmentation within the local polity fuelled micro-nationalism.[167]

The history of Assamese identity formation and transformation has proceeded rapidly under colonial rule. But it has been brought into sharp focus in recent times with the widening of the parameters of the Assamese nationality, chiefly as a result of real or perceived demographic changes. Sengupta also notes that it was the colonial state that provided the initial stimulus for the growth of community consciousness among the Assamese.[168] This stimulus, he argues, happened as the colonial power encouraged immigration into Assam from neighbouring Bengal and imposed Bengali as the official language. He notes how agitation in Assam stemmed from the apprehension that the Assamese would be turned into a minority in their own province. Hiren Gohain's *Assam: A Burning Question* also attributes the beginning of community consciousness in Assam to colonial decisions that generated among the Assamese a fear that they would be eventually marginalized in their own homeland.[169]

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[167] Chadda, M. (2000). Review of India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality by Sanjib Baruah, *Political Science Quarterly,* vol. 115 (no. 2), pp. 320-322.

[168] Sengputa, M. (2006). Historiography of the Formation of Assamese Identity: A Review, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, vol 2, no 1 & 2, p. 122.

[169] Sengputa, M. (2006). Historiography of the Formation of Assamese Identity: A Review, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, vol 2, no 1 & 2, p. 123.

However, post-1873, when Assamese was reinstated as the official language, the nature of the perceived threat shifted out of the ambit of the language. A new threat based on religion began to be invoked to highlight the demographic transformation. By this time, the colonial agents believed that the Assamese identity needed defined cultural parameters. Those not conforming to these markers were not accepted as true Assamese. While one of these parameters was definitely the Assamese language, the second was the Hindu religion.

2.4.2 A Religiously Divided Social Landscape

In colonial Assam, Christian missionaries and colonialism followed each other. British colonial agents were often a 'politician' and a 'priest' at the same time. The Christian missions became a driver of colonial expansion. Since missionary activity was backed up by the colonial power, missionary activity assumed a political character. Aware of the serious implications of the coupling of mission and colonial politics, the Christian missions gradually took missionary leadership into their own hands. It was the missionary who initially ventured deep into the interiors and often made the way easier for the subsequent exercise of political control over the native people. Where such colonial rule was established, missionary work tended to legitimize colonial occupation.

From the later part of 19th century, British administrators welcomed Christian missions as intermediaries to conduct indirect rule in the Assam hills since their revenue barely recouped administrative costs. Under this paradigm, the state would oversee basic law and order but the missions were given responsibility to undertake

activities relating to education and healthcare. In this new role, the American Baptist Mission, and the Welsh Methodist Mission enjoyed a near monopoly in religious proselytising, educational and modern health care services in the hill areas. They exerted great influence.[170] This situation did not occur elsewhere in India.

In 1830, British officials extended an invitation to the American Baptists, who were based in Burma since 1812, to civilize and 'elevate' the people in Assam. Being evicted from Burma, they found convenient to come to neighbouring Assam. But the goals of proselytising clashed with other aims of the colonial administrators. One such issue of contestation was language. The British preferred the Bengali language and replaced Assamese, the language of choice of the missionaries.[171] At the same time, the colonial administrators wanted to minimize the influence of the Hindu priestly class, such as the *Gosains* and *satras* (monasteries), on the tribals. As the *Gosains* became a focal point of anti-British mobilization, the colonial administration sought to promote modern notions of merit as opposed to inherited privileges that the *Gosains* enjoyed. Colonial administrators preferred dealing with the emerging intelligentsia, groomed by English education, rather than the priests and their ancestral status. Throughout the period after 1857, tensions between state and temple continued to surface. The British continued, as the British saw themselves as emancipators from a retrograde system of slavery. [172]

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[170] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* New York, Duke University Press, pp. 200-202.

[171] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 134-135.

[172] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 128-140.

It is interesting to note here that while other parts of India were swept by nationalistic fervour during the independence movement and were undergoing a sea change politically, the North East remained largely unaffected. This is often attributed to the influence of the Christian missionaries under indirect rule. As the Christian missionaries started proselytizing, they established the first printing press in Sibsagarh in 1836 and in 1846 published the first Assamese vernacular magazine: *Arunudoy*. They also published the first Assamese-English dictionary in 1867. By this time, as agents of British colonialism, they had also started to shape the Assamese language itself. However, the marriage of convenience between church and state soon came under strain. In 1872 the Lt Governor of Bengal received a memorandum signed by over 200 influential residents of Assam led by Miles Bronson, a Christian missionary. They demanded that Assamese be declared the official language in place of Bengali.[173]

The impact and growth of Christianity in North East India thus resulted in the fragmentation of the entire socio-cultural and political landscape. In several of the regions that would be carved out of Assam, such as Meghalaya and Mizoram, the entire populations had been converted to Christianity. In Nagaland, the Christian proportion of the population increased from 13% in 1931 to 54% in 1941. In Mizoram, by the end of the decade 1941-1951, more than 90 % of the population was converted to Christianity. While in 1901, Christians formed less than 2 % of the population in the hill states of North East India by 1991 this figure had risen to nearly

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[173] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 177.

40 %.[174] Attempts to manipulate the cultural orientation of the native peoples had not been a feature of colonialism in the rest of India.

2.4.3 The Partition of Bengal

The need for territorial reorganization of the Indian empire emerged slowly. But as the British extended their territorial influence, the strain of administrative overextension became felt. Bengal was a classic case, where an administrative unit initially consisting of a few districts had grown over the years into a large province. It included Assam. In 1874, Lord Curzon, in order to promote administrative efficiency, separated Assam from Bengal and put the state under a Chief Commissioner. Sylhet, a predominantly Bengali-speaking area, and the Lushai Hills were also transferred from Bengal and added to Assam. Efforts to add other Bengali speaking areas to Assam, such as Mymensingh and Chittagong divisions, though initially opposed, were also successful.

In June 1903, Lord Curzon prepared an exhaustive Minute on Territorial Redistribution. It redefined the administrative boundaries within India.[175] It included the partition of Bengal. It was approved in 1905. The Government of India announced its decision to set up a new province: 'Eastern Bengal and Assam', comprising the Chittagong, Dacca, Rajshahi, Hill Tripura, Malda, and Assam. The

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[174] Joshi, A.P., Srinivas, M.D. and Bajaj, J.K. (2003). *Religious Demography of India*. [online] Available at: http://www.cpsindia.org/dl/religious/summary3c.pdf [Accessed: 8 Aug 2013]. A chart, from the Census of India, depicting the religious profile in North East India is given in Appendix A.
[175] Nair, V.S. (1985). *Swadeshi Movement: The Beginning of Student Unrest in South India*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, p. 7.

formal proclamation was made on 16th October 1905. This came to be known as the first partition of Bengal.

The effect of this partition was unprecedented. With communal tensions focusing along the Hindu-Muslim fault lines, this partition resulted in the Hindu majority western Bengal being separated from the Muslim majority eastern part. Assam, though a Hindu region, was on the easternmost part and became administratively disconnected from the Hindu areas. In effect, the partition created a new Muslim political class, isolating and weakening the Hindu Bengali class that was spearheading political agitation. Assam, as a consequence, came to be dominated by a Muslim majority. In this context, Lord Curzon noted in a 1905 letter to the Secretary of State: "a thin wedge could be driven between the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal".[176] Partition sowed the seeds for further divisions between the Assamese Hindus and the Bengali Muslims. The censuses of 1911, 1921, and 1931 reflected this.

The partition of Bengal led to increased communal disturbances. The Government of India itself recognized the growing estrangement between the two communities in 1911. The political crisis affected the life of nearly 18 million Muslims and 12 million Hindus. One result of sustained political protests was that the two parts of Bengal were again reunited in 1912. This time, however, a second partition was effected, dividing the province on linguistic rather than religious grounds. As East and West Bengal were reunited, Assam became fully separated from East Bengal.

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[176] Barpujari, H.K. ed., (2007). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, Vol 5, p. 250.

While administrative convenience was cited as the primary reason for dividing Bengal, from the point of view of Assam, the real reason has to be sought in the local operation of the indirect rule paradigm. If Lord Curzon's words are taken seriously, the real aim was to weaken a solid body of opponents and reduce the influence of Calcutta as the centre from which the Congress party carried out its activities against the British. In short, the partition of Bengal aimed to rupture the development of national and political consciousness, which radiated from. However, in the indirect rule areas of Assam, where new identities were being constructed, the "divide and rule" policy of colonialism soon became what Mamdani says is "define and rule".

By viewing the partition of Bengal in 1905 through the lens of indirect rule colonialism, the construction of Muslims as 'immigrants' comes to light. As mentioned, the 1911 census referred to the 'massive' Muslim immigration from East Bengal to Assam, even though it was the colonial administrators that had first encouraged migration. The result of this new focus on immigrants created a new triangulation in social relations in Assam. The genesis of the social conflicts in postcolonial Assam can be sought in the process of administrative reorganisation and in the deliberate use of language and religion to create communal tensions.

The partition of Bengal was followed by its annulment. In 1912, West and East Bengal were reunited and Assam was established as a separate province. Though Assam did get separate status, it was not homogeneous, as Sylhet, a Bengali Muslim-dominated district, and Cachar, a Bengali Hindu-dominated district were attached to it. In addition, Assam continued to be heterogeneous, as indigenous-dominated areas such as the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills and the Mizo hills were also

included. The Muslim migration into Assam after the Bengal partition of 1905 led to significant demographic changes.

The British attempts to weaken and divide the existing Assamese society and redefine the identities and subjectivities of the local people were successful. Indirect rule in Assam involved a profound shift social structure (from a binary to a triangulation). This shift was not only about communal identities. Once a thriving crossroads kingdom, by the beginning of the twentieth century Assam had become one of the poorest regions of British India.[177] Assam's development was different from that of other parts of India. What was not different was an increasing determination to resist colonialism.

2.5. The Struggle for Independence and the Government of India Act, 1935

While the first insurgency against the British in Assam started as early as 1828, when Gomdhar Konwar revolted, it was not till much later that Assam entered the independence struggle. While Gomdhar Konwar's revolt was easily overcome, Goswami notes how "David Scott was able to gauge its real implication". He realised that "unless steps were taken, the discontent elements were likely to engage in similar schemes again".[178] Scott was right. Several rebellions and uprisings thereafter took place against the British. Maniram Barua, also known as Maniram Dewan, was an important officer of the Ahom king Purandar Singha. In 1838, after Purnadar Singha

[177] Saikia, Y. (n.d.). *The Tai Ahom Connection*. [online] Available at: http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20yasmin%20saikia.htm [Accessed: 20/02/2012].

[178] Goswami, P. (2012). *The History of Assam: From Yandabo to Partition 1826 – 1947*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, p. 50.

was deposed by the British, Maniram Dewan became the Dewan (highest finance official) of the Assam Tea Company and soon ventured into other areas of business. As Maniram charted out a new course of development in Assam, he came into increased confrontation with British colonial designs. In 1853, in a petition to Moffat Mills, the British Judge, Maniram Dewan stated that Assam's main problem was the loss of political, social and economic power. He demanded the restoration of the Ahom monarchy. When the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny occurred, Maniram Dewan formed an underground network of revolutionaries and supported the struggle from Assam. Dewan was able to rope in considerable influence in upper Assam and bridged the fault lines left by the abrupt end of the Ahom kingdom. Soon groups of Ahom and Bodos joined Dewan. In February 1858, Maniram Dewan and one of his associates were hanged at Jorhat jail after a brief trial. This marked the start of the nationalist independence movement in Assam.[179]

In the post-1857 period and after Dewan's hanging, peasant outbreaks became endemic. The 1861 Phulaguri-Nowgong uprising was followed by another large peasant uprising in Kamrup and Darrang.[180] Subsequently, there were peasants' rebellion in Patharighat, Rangia and Lachima in the 1890s.[181] In 1884, Jagannath Baruah in Jorhat called the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha (Assam Pradesh Congress

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[179] Goswami, P. (2012). *The History of Assam: From Yandabo to Partition 1826 – 1947.* Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, pp. 89-92.

[180] The Phulaguri uprising assumes importance, as it was the first organized peasants uprising in which the indigenous Tiwa and Kachari communities were involved against the British. It signified the start of the indigenous consciousness. See Goswami, P. (2012). *The History of Assam: From Yandabo to Partition 1826 – 1947.* Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan. pp. 222-223.

[181] The Patharighat rebellion was different, as it was a mass peasant rebellion against raising taxes. See Goswami, P, (2012). *The History of Assam: From Yandabo to Partition 1826 – 1947.* Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan. pp. 222-223.

Committee). The Sabha was organized for the purpose of representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the government. Thereafter, social leaders from Assam participated in the sessions of the Indian National Congress that was spearheading the independence struggle elsewhere. In 1887, Radhanath Changkakati attended the Madras session of the Indian National Congress and Haridas Ray participated in the 1889 Bombay session. Meghnath Bannerjee, a Hindu-Bengali medical practitioner, represented Assam in the 1892 Nagpur session.[182] The stated British need to 'protect' the 'tribals' from Assamese influence through indirect rule was also an attempt to restrict the influence of the independence struggle.

This did have some impact as initially several organizations stayed aloof from the struggle. But soon a renewed sense of nationalism arose. In 1916, the Assam Students Conference participated in the non-cooperation movement. And by 1921, a provincial committee of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee was formed under the leadership of Kuladhar Chaliha. The nationalist fervour intensified when in the same year Mahatma Gandhi paid his first visit to Assam. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, revolutionary enthusiasm had reached a high pitch in the hill regions of Nagaland, Garo Hills, and Arunachal Pradesh. The Quit India Movement in 1942 saw students taking an active role.[183]

When independence seemed near and the Indian Muslim League forced the British to accept the two-nation theory, the British administrator established the modalities that

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[182] Barua, D. (1994). *Urban History of Assam: A Case Study*, New Delhi: Mittal Publication. Pp. 144-145.

[183] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast.* New Delhi: Penguin Books. pp 46–59; Goswami, P. (2012). *The History of Assam: From Yandabo to Partition 1826 – 1947.* Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan. pp. 269-270.

would guide renewed partition. The Cabinet Mission plan of 1946, proposed to merge Assam and the entire North East into the 'C' group and join it with Muslim-dominated East Pakistan. But the Congress party fought tooth and nail the Mission's proposal, and succeeded in attaching Assam to India. This attempt to tag Assam with East Pakistan still evokes strong anti-Muslim sentiments in Assam.[184]

Decolonization took place in India on 15th August 1947. On that day, the British colonizers 'left' and India gained independence. Prasenjit Duara notes: "decolonization refers to the process whereby colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally sovereign, nation-states".[185] Decolonisation is generally understood as a transition from foreign rule to sovereign status. But the legacies of colonial domination did not leave. They resonate powerfully in postcolonial Assam. While the nationalist image of India as a single entity emerged in the late nineteenth century, this imagination did not occur in Assam.

As the struggle for independence started to gain strength, the British authorities promulgated the Government of India Act, 1935. The Constitution of India is heavily drawn from this Act and has kept many of its provisions intact. J. H. Hutton, the then Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills, submitted a memorandum in 1933 that later became a background for the Act of 1935. The proposals in this memorandum recommended that the areas of the Naga Hills, the Lushai Hills and the Frontier Tracts

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[184] Sinha, S.K. (1998). *A Report to the President of India*, Available at www.satp.org Ch II, para 5. [Accessed on 03.06.2012].

[185] Duara, P. (2004). Introduction: The Decolonization of Asia and Africa in the Twentieth Century. In: Duara, P. (ed.) (2004). *Decolonization - Perspectives from Now and Then* London: Routledge, p. 2.

of Balipara, Sadiya and Lakhimpur be totally excluded areas and that the North Cachar Hills, the Garo Hills, the Mikir Hills, and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills be considered as partially excluded. It recommended that the excluded areas have no representation in the federal and provincial legislature, while the partially excluded areas would be represented in the provincial legislature only. These areas were thus excluded from fully joining the larger Indian polity. This resulted in a resilient exclusionary political framework.

The Government of India Acts of 1915, 1919 and 1935 gave legality to these fragmentations, labelling the hills areas as 'backward' and excluded them politically and judicially. Jafa analyzes the effect of the Act of 1935 in Assam:

> Although the Northeastern hill tribes had been effectively excluded from the administration of India from 1873 onwards, their socio-cultural exclusion did not become a vital political necessity for the British until the first decade of this century. The order issued under the 1919 Act, declaring these areas "backward tracts", requiring special administrative measures and direct rule by the Governor, gave the missionaries a synergistic and unhindered opportunity to proselytize, and the administrators to reconstruct, the tribal traditions to create a separate ethno-national identity. The 1935 Act reinforced the status in a more artful manner. [186]

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[186] Jafa, V. S. (2001). *Administrative Policies & Ethnic Disintegration Engineering Conflict in India's North East*. [online] Available at: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume2/Fault2-JafaF.htm [Accessed: 7 June 2013].

The Indian National Congress condemned the Act of 1935 in its 1936 Faizpur session and called it yet another attempt to divide the people of India into different groups. On May 16, 1946, Prime Minister Clement Attlee suggested that in framing the Indian Constitution, an Advisory Committee should look into "a scheme for the administration of tribal and excluded areas". This Advisory Committee set up in January 1947, appointed a sub-committee designated as the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee.[187] This sub-committee considered the apprehensions and fears of the indigenous peoples about the Indian political class's ability to govern a multi-racial and multi-religious society and incorporated the provisions of the 1935 Act into what became the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution.

With independence came a sense of belonging but at the same time a renewed effort at identity assertion. The social and group identities that indirect rule colonialism had created thus once again gained predominance. The Nagas, the Manipuris, the Arunachalis, the Garos, the Bodos, the Karbi and various other indigenous tribes began to reassert themselves, often violently, and tried to carve out their own political future. These developments are discussed in the next chapter.

Dirks's argument that "colonialism was made possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by cultural technologies of rule as it was by the more obvious and brutal modes of conquest that first established power on foreign shores" aptly

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[187] Jafa, V. S. (2001). *Administrative Policies & Ethnic Disintegration Engineering Conflict in India's North East* [online] Available at: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume2/Fault2-JafaF.htm [Accessed: 7 June 2013].

sums up this Chapter.[188] I began with a discussion on indirect rule in Assam and analysed the processes used to frame identity and define the subjectivities of local peoples. As the effects of indirect rule became entrenched, Assam moved towards an exclusionary paradigm.

This shift is crucial to understanding the contemporary conflict in Assam. Colonialism was as much a cultural project as an economic one. By constructing separate categories of colonized people, colonial rule in the region eased the process of subjugation and domination. As such, the colonial project in North East India developed a political discourse where colonial ideas of modernity and primitiveness became entrenched. As the independence struggle intensified, these colonially created fissures in society were temporarily reduced. They re-emerged soon after independence. I shall discuss these in the next Chapter.

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[188] Dirks, N.B. (2001). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 9.

Chapter 3: Breaks in Social Cohesion in Postcolonial Assam

In 1947, after the partition of India on religious lines, and keeping the large-scale migration of people in mind, a debate arose on the status of the indigenous peoples and their position within the Indian nation. Scholars like Ghurye had then suggested that a homogenizing nationalism should be enforced.[189] But the indigenous people resisted. A sub-committee headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam, was formed and assigned the task of devising ways to incorporate appropriate protection policies for the indigenous people into the new constitution.[190] Accordingly, the sub-committee suggested the inclusion of a separate Sixth Schedule and other legal safeguards in the constitution. Along with these constitutional reforms, other enabling legislation was also framed. A new chapter, known as Chapter X, was introduced in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886. It paved the way for the protection of tribal land by establishing exclusive tribal areas: the tribal belts and blocks

After independence the region as a whole continued to lag behind the rest of the country in important parameters. Growth was feeble, social cohesion deteriorating. Scholars such as Hazarika attribute this backwardness to the neglect of North East India by successive union governments under the policy of internal colonialism.[191] He argues that the union government took a piecemeal and ad-hoc policy towards any

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[189] Baruah, S. (2003). Citizens and Denizens: Ethnicity, Homelands and the Crisis of Displacement in North East India, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (vol 16) (no 1), pp. 49-50.

[190] Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 190.

[191] Hazarika, S. (1994). Strangers in the Mist: Tales from War & Peace from India's Northeast, New Delhi, Penguin Book, pp. 249–275.

issue in the North East and that the people of the region had to wage relentless struggles and agitations to draw attention to their plight. But at the same time, he admits that the Assamese people had a 'superior attitude to the indigenous people such as the Bodo-Cacharis and the Karbis'.[192] Similarly, other scholars, including Baruah and Weiner, also admit divisions separating the Assamese community and the indigenous ones. Weiner, who studied the social conflicts in Assam from an economic viewpoint, refers to local–non-local feelings.[193] Baruah also mentions how the ethnic Assamese came to be separately identified from the indigenous peoples during the Assam Agitation.[194] In the process, internal exclusionary politics sustained the hegemony of the Assamese community.

While scholars analyzed the social issues in Assam in the context of a series of unequal binary relationships (internal colonialism vs. internally colonized; local vs. non-local; ethnic Assamese vs. indigenous peoples), what remains under-researched is the partition's impact on Assam. Partition accentuated the colonially-crafted social triangulation discussed above. This was the period when one of the largest human migrations in history took place. The partition compelled millions of people to leave their ancestral homes in either India or Pakistan and move to the other side. Bharadwaj, Khwaja and Mian estimated that nearly 14.5 million people had migrated

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[192] Hazarika, S. (1994). Strangers in the Mist: Tales from War & Peace from India's Northeast, New Delhi, Penguin Book, p. 247.

[193] Weiner, M. (1978). *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 82.

[194] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and Politics of Nationalist,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 125.

either way by 1951. Nearly 3.4 million people were missing or unaccounted for.[195]
Datta estimates that up to 1971 an estimated 4.7 million Hindus had sought refuge in
India from East Pakistan.[196]

Scholars and activists in North East India often neglect to account for the ways in
which a specific form of colonial rule had profoundly changed spatial and cultural
dynamics. Hazarika's view of the breaks in social cohesion is related to a wider
canvas of internal colonialism, security, and development. This echo with media
reports emphasising economic, social, or environmental issues as a cause for conflict
and dislocation. The Government of India recently attempted to address these issues
through the North East Vision Document under the 'Look East Policy'. It aims to
foster accelerated development in the region by linking it (again) with South East
Asia.

Even if his work focuses on postcolonial Africa, the insights of Mamdani's work
allow looking beyond economic development as a harbinger of social cohesion.
Mamdani actually warns that economic development would actually invite more
violence in this context. Economic development invites in-migration and it is the
movement of people in the context of a dual system that produces unsustainable
tensions. Mamdani highlights a structural dilemma: "as the economy dynamizes, the

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[195] Bharadwaj, P., Khwaja, A., and Mian, A. (2008). The Big March: Migratory Flows after the
Partition of India, *Economic & Political Weekly,* 30 August, pp. 39–40.

[196] Datta, P. (2004). "Push-Pull Factors of Undocumented Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal:
A Perception Study", *The Qualitative Report*, 9 (2): p. 337.

state penalizes those more dynamic by defining them as outsiders leading to violence".[197]

The traditional scholarship on the breaks of social cohesion in Assam is thus focused on two perspectives. While one group of scholars sees it as a hegemony issue and the result of macro-level political, economic, or socio-cultural factors, the second group of scholars looks at it from a micro-level perspective. Mamdani's approach to the study of Hutu–Tutsi clashes during the Rwanda genocide of the 1990s offers a different model. He argues that we should focus on 'frozen political identities'.[198] He looks at the transition from peace to violence as a long-term consequence of indirect rule.[199] The Nellie massacre of 1983, where outdated weapons such as machetes, spears, and axes were extensively used, is very similar. In that instance, Lalung tribals killed thousands of immigrants in a matter of a few hours. In both cases, 'frozen identities' created by indirect rule colonialism sustained an outburst of horrific violence. Post-colonial Africa and contemporary Assam share important characteristics and a history of indirect rule.

This chapter, therefore, discusses the consequences of the 'frozen identities' created through law, census, and history under indirect rule in post-colonial Assam. It also discusses how the persisting triangulation in social relations has commonality with the

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[197] Mamdani, M. (2005). Political Identity, Citizenship and Ethnicity in Post Colonial Africa, *New Frontiers of Social Policy*, p. 11.

[198] Mamdani, M. (2001). "Making Sense of Non Revolutionary Violence: Some Lessons from Rwandan Genocide", paper presented at *Franz Fanon Lecture*, University of Durham, 8 August. Westville: University of Durham, p. 5.

[199] Karekezi, U.A. (2004) The Rwandan Genocide, Review of When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda by Mahmood Mamdani. pp. 13- 14. In: Africa Review of Books /Revue Africaine des Livres, 1, Octobre 2004, p. 1.

scholarship on the settler societies. Veracini's argument regarding triangular formations and Wolfe's argument regarding the structural permanence of settler colonialism offer significant insights for the study of contemporary Assam.[200] This chapter will analyse what Baruah describes as a 'failed partition'.[201]

3.1 The Reproduction of Indirect Rule in Postcolonial Assam

Comments by future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1930 that to abandon India to the rule of upper caste Brahmins would be an act of cruel and wicked negligence resonated with the sentiments of many indigenous people.[202] As British colonial agents further added to the fear of domination by the upper castes, the indigenous communities of North East India resisted homogenizing nationalism. Thus, the indigenous peoples' search for their identities and demand for political space within the framework of the Indian state prompted the Bordoloi committee to retain crucial aspects indirect rule and its exclusionary administration. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution was the outcome of this compromise.[203]

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[200] Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native, *Journal of Genocide Research,* 8 (4), pp. 387–409.

[201] Baruah, S. (2008). "Assam: Confronting a Failed Partition, Battle for the States". Paper at Battle for the States, a Symposium on Forthcoming State Elections. November 2008.

[202] Guha, R. (2005). Churchill's Indiaspeak. *The Hindu*, 05th June.

[203] Prasad, R.N. (2004). Sixth Schedule and Working of the District Councils in North-Eastern States, *Dialogue*, 6 (2) October-December.

3.1.1 The Sixth Schedule

Like most parts of the Indian constitution, the basis of the Sixth Schedule was also drawn heavily from the Government of India Act, 1935. This act had divided the hill areas of Assam into two categories: 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas. The Lushai Hills (now the state of Mizoram), the Naga Hills, and the North Cachar Hills were excluded areas, over which the federal and provincial ministry had no jurisdiction. On the other hand, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Mikir Hills were partially excluded areas. They were administered by the state government subject to the special powers of the Governor. The Bordoloi sub-committee, while allowing for the continuation of a dual legal system and of separate administrative provisions, replaced the terms 'excluded' or 'partially excluded' with a series of District Councils. This was incorporated in Article 244 (2) and Article 275 (1) of the Indian constitution.

The Sixth Schedule provides separate provisions for the administration of the tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Section 2 of the Schedule mentions that if there are different Scheduled Tribes in an autonomous district under the sixth schedule, the Governor may, by public notification, divide the area or areas inhabited by them into autonomous regions. In addition, Section 3 and 4 mention that the District Councils and Regional Councils can make laws on 'social customs' and establish a separate legal system inclusive of village councils or courts for the trial of suits and cases between parties belonging to Scheduled Tribes.[204] The

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[204] For further details on the Sixth Schedule, please see The Constitution of India available at http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/shed06.htm

schedule, therefore, established a framework for the retention of a dual system of laws and the exclusionary politics of the indirect rule era.

The Sixth Schedule is a paternalistic provision of the Indian constitution. But soon conflict emerged in the areas identified by the Sixth Schedule: first between the tribal and non-tribals, and then between the state and the councils themselves. These conflicts further complicated a delicate situation. Post-independence, the constitution, instead of creating one unifying space for all Indians continued with the colonial paradigm. This paradigm was further enshrined by subsequent legislation.

The specific provision for the establishment of district councils under the sixth schedule of the constitution also led to ethnic exclusion. Non-tribal people residing in these areas were 'outsiders'. They were thus excluded from participating in political processes within the council areas.[205] This group-based protection thus led to the violation of the rights of non-tribal individuals. Baruah states that this had the effect of turning citizens into denizens. No uniform citizenship could be enforced.[206] At the same time, insistence on cultural autonomy also denied individual rights within the tribal groups themselves. Shared identity and cultural pluralism could not find expression in postcolonial Assam. Assam Governor J. B. Patnaik reported to the Government that in the Sixth Schedule areas there is no decentralization of powers

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[205] The term is used here to denote a difference between the non-tribals who have been living in these areas since independence or before and are Indian citizens and those who came in later as migrants and are often labelled as illegal immigrants and are marked as 'D' ('doubtful) by the Election Commission of India. The persons marked as 'D' in the voters roll are not allowed to vote.

[206] Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 183.

and few people enjoy unbridled power. This, he said, has adversely affected democracy and development:

> The non-sixth schedule areas are more developed than the Sixth Schedule ones. While the Sixth Schedule was enacted for giving more benefit to the people and brings development at a faster pace, the result on the ground has been opposite.[207]

In the end, Baruah states that these administrative measures have transformed the excluded areas into exclusive homelands for specific ethnically defined groups. [208]

3.1.2 Census, Law, and History in the Postcolonial Period

The uses of historiography, census, and administration were also retained through formal legislation. While censuses in the colonial period contributed significantly to the processes of communal identity formation, in postcolonial India the transformation was not substantial. Caste-based enumeration, for example, was formally discontinued in the census in the post-1947 era. It was nevertheless carried out under different nomenclatures. Hence, the categories that drove the census after 1947 were the same ones that were drafted in the pre-1947 period. The post-colonial focus of censuses merely moved from identifying and categorizing castes to a more generalized approach. New institutions such as the National Commission for Schedule

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[207] 6th Schedule Areas Have Failed (2011). [Retrieved from]:
http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-17/guwahati/29896161_1_areas-dima-hasao-panchayat [Accessed on 12 September 2013].

[208] Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 184.

Caste, the National Commission for Schedule Tribe, the National Commission for Backward Castes, and the National Commission for Minorities sought to advance the interests of specific communities. The consequences of indirect rule became endemic.

Under these new arrangements, several castes were identified as socially, economically, educationally and politically backward, and were grouped together under the generic nomenclature of 'scheduled caste' (SC). Similarly, several tribes were also grouped under the generic nomenclature of 'scheduled tribes' (ST). Groups that were left out were further included in the census under other generic categories: 'Other Backward Caste (OBC), and 'More Other Backward Caste' (MOBC). Along with these broad classifications in the census, religion became an even more crucial form of identification in the postcolonial census.

The colonial distinction between hill tribes and plains tribes was also retained in the Indian census. Baruah states that at the time of independence there were 23 ST communities in Assam. 14 were hill tribes and 9 were plains tribes. However, as the census still continues to count tribes only in their supposed natural habitats, the number of people being classified as plains tribal is zero in the hills, and those classified as hill tribes is zero in the plains. [209] So a tribal individual's identity is influenced by locality and residency. This resulted in creating a distinction between a tribe's cultural identity, its biological identity, and its state-created political

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[209] Baruah, S. (2013). Politics of Territoriality: Indigeneity, Itinerancy and Rights in North-East India. In: Joelle Smajda, J. ed. (2013).*Territorial Changes and Territorial Restructurings in the Himalayas*, New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, pp. 69-83.

identity.[210] And it was the political identity, created and frozen by law, which gained prominence. It is the basis for gaining access to government services and support.

Along with these constitutional reforms, similar enabling legislation was also framed. A new chapter, known as Chapter X, was introduced in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886, paving the way for the protection of tribal land in the plain areas by forming exclusive tribal areas known as tribal belts and blocks. While the Sixth Schedule had already created a separation in the hill areas between the tribal and non-tribals, Chapter X extended the reservation and separation of the hills to the plain areas as well. While the separation of tribal and non-tribal continued, other legal frameworks supported the settling of immigrants in Assam. The Assam Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948 allowed the government to acquire land to settle any 'displaced' persons or Hindu refugee from East Pakistan. Similarly, the Assam State Acquisition of Zamindari Act, 1951, and the Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holding Act, 1956 resulted in Bengali Muslim migrants in the Goalpara and Cachar districts to immediately get permanent, transferable and heritable land rights. Thousands of migrants and refugees of partition were settled in these districts.[211] This led to perpetuating the colonial social triangulation.

While the government argued that these changes were aimed at protecting the displaced people of the partition as well as the customary land rights and political authority of the indigenous people, it is evident that these measures reproduced earlier

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[210] Mamdani, M. (2001). "Making Sense of Non Revolutionary Violence: Some Lessons from Rwandan Genocide", paper presented at *Franz Fanon Lecture*, University of Durham, 8 August. Westville: University of Durham, p. 5.

[211] Sinha, S.K. (1998). *A Report to the President of India*, Ch. II, para. 14. Retrieved from: www.satp.org. [Accessed on 03 June 2012].

exclusionary policies. Changes in land laws, for example, made the land into a 'customary' commodity and the exclusive right of members of native tribes. Similarly, changes pertaining to the exercise of political and administrative authority, where local chiefs or headmen were appointed from members of native tribes, also created an exclusionary political environment where non-natives had no right to contest or have a say in their political and economic future. These governmental practices converted tribal identity from a cultural construct to a political one.[212] It was a crucial shift.

While census and law thus followed the indirect rule paradigm in postcolonial Assam, history-writing also took a similar path. Indian ethnographers and historians in the postcolonial period were unable to free themselves from the informing paradigms that preceded their work. Many local scholars continued to use official colonial sources and as a result emphasized and represented colonial narratives. Saikia's concludes:

> Local scholars of Assam, like S K Bhuyan, devoted themselves to the task of expanding Gait's history. Through the repetition of the same story line, local memory was restructured, and the study of all things Assamese became an academic exercise for local intellectuals. The Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) was established in 1904 with this purpose in mind. Public space and memory in Assam from that time on would belong only to the Assamese but not the peasant society – only the Assamese that the British had constructed. The historical Assamese presented by the local literati

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[212] Mamdani, M. (2009). Mamdani Responds to his critics I. Retrieved from: http://africanarguments.org/2009/05/05/mamdani-responds-to-his-critics-i/ [Accessed on 29th October, 2013].

was clearly an imagined group in Assam, for they could neither explain nor locate themselves in a specific community. One might say the educated middle class thought of themselves as Assamese and claimed this fuzzy identity.[213]

As regional and oral histories tended were neglected in the study of colonial and postcolonial history, the struggle of the Khasis, Jaintias, Nagas, Mizos, and Manipuris, as well of other indigenous collectives, was neglected by national historiographies. Moreover, like the colonial agents, local scholars also continued to highlight the isolation of the North East from the rest of the country and the differences separating the plains from the surrounding hills. This further sustained separatism.

It is evident therefore that the three sites of indirect rule colonialism were reproduced in the postcolonial period and that the social triangulation they sustained became sharply crystallized. Weiner points to this triangulation when he concludes that immigrant presence "has shaken the foundation of Assamese social structure and created solidarity among the Assamese while generating cleavages between the indigenous Assamese and the indigenous tribals".[214]

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[213] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 101.

[214] Weiner, M. (1978). *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp. 81–82.

3.2 The Consequences of the Continuation of Colonial Policies

Group identities were once fluid. When this fluidity was lost and identities became 'frozen', the risk of communal violence dramatically increased. Mamdani argues that when the

> law imposes a cultural difference, that difference becomes reified. Prevented from changing, it becomes frozen. When this difference is turned into a basis for legal discrimination – between those who are said to belong ethnically and those who are said not to belong, between insiders entitled to customary rights and outsiders deprived of these rights – these culturally symbolic differences become political.[215]

In Assam, as indirect rule dictated identity formation and as identities became ossified, the fluid nature of social relationships was irretrievably lost.

3.2.1 Indigenous Self-Determination Movements

Since 1947, with frozen identities and increasing socio-political polarization in the region, separatist groups began to form along ethnic lines. As a result, demands for autonomy, self-rule, and sovereignty began to grow within the indigenous and tribal populations. Land became the focus of this native versus non-native divide. A fear that the intrusion of outsiders into ancestral lands and forests in the name of

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[215] Mamdani, M. (2001). "Making Sense of Non Revolutionary Violence: Some Lessons from the Rwandan Genocide", paper presented at the *Franz Fanon Lecture*, University of Durham, 8 August. Westville: University of Durham. p. 5.

settlement, urbanization, and development would endanger particular rights to live and use natural resources also fed the self-determination movements. The Government of India was unable to respond to the complex reality of the region and continued to neglect it and treat it as a frontier province. By the early sixties, when these movements gained momentum, the Government of India had carved out, as we have seen, the indigenous tribal state of Nagaland from Assam. Subsequently the indigenous state of Meghalaya was also carved out of Assam to cater to the aspirations of the Garo and Khasi people. In 1987, the Government of India further bowed to tribal aspirations and declared Mizoram as a full-fledged state. At present, Assam is witnessing further indigenous demands for exclusive homelands with the Bodo movement for a separate state, the Karbi-Dimasa autonomy movement, and the autonomy movements of the Misings, Deuris, and Sonowals.

In addition to land, demands for the recognition of separate socio-cultural lifestyles also gained momentum within indigenous communities. When the Assam Official Languages Bill, 1960 was passed by the Assam Assembly, a sense of deprivation and the feeling of being exploited by the Assamese reached boiling point among the Nagas and Khasis. Hazarika states that this was a reflection of the domination of the Assamese community. In one rendition, Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi "sought to force the Assamese language down each non-Assamese throat".[216] Besides the hill-tribes, some other plain-tribes of Assam, such as the Bodos, Karbis, Misings, and the Deuris, who had been maintaining their separate linguistic-cultural identity, were also unhappy to accept Assamese as the medium of instruction. As a result, the State witnessed several language riots.

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[216] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, p. 247.

Language thus took the new centre-stage in the context of ethnic turmoil in North East India. Making Assamese the compulsory language from class VIII onwards also led to massive agitation in the Bengali-dominated Barak valley. In 1972, the Bodo dominated Plains Tribes Council of Assam (PTCA) complained that the plains tribes were being uprooted in a systematic and planned way from their own soil and that the 'step-motherly' treatment of the administration, dominated by Assamese-speaking individuals had reduced them to 'second class citizens' of the state. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (established in 1952) and the PTCA soon succeeded in making the Bodo language the medium of instruction in the Bodo areas. Following this recognition of native languages in Bodo-Kachari and in the Karbi areas, the Mising perception of being marginalised sharpened. This led to the formation of Mising Agom Kebang (Mising Literary Society) in 1972. In order to maintain a distinct minority linguistic identity vis-à-vis the majority Assamese, the Mising favoured the Roman script. The Assam Sahitya Sabha insisted that the Assamese script should be retained for 'Mising language', but the Misings ultimately adopted the Roman script. In 1987, the Mising language was recognised as a medium of instruction at primary school level in Assam. The Bishnupriya Manipuri language issue, particularly in Assam, has also recently prompted an ethnic movement.[217]

Das mentions that the rejection of the Assamese script by the Mising, the Bodos and other tribal communities dismayed the Assamese, who realized that without their tribal counterparts they may become a minority and would be overwhelmed by the

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[217] Das, N.K. (2009). Identity Politics and Social Exclusion in India's North-East: The Case for Re distributive Justice, *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology.* 6 (1), p. 3.

Bengali-speaking migrant population.[218] But this did not result in any reorientation of political ideology or the embrace of pluralism. It can be argued that the indigenous self-determination movements were based on two indirect rule premises: one, that every indigenous community had a separate and distinct origin, and, two, that each such community should return to its original condition. In the end, each indigenous group not only embraced exclusionary policies vis-à-vis the Assamese and the immigrant, they also became exclusive vis-à-vis each other.

3.2.2 The Assam Agitation, 1979–1985

Ruptures, real or perceived, between civil society and the state are often temporarily settled through negotiations, even though genuine reconciliation rarely occurs. This was fully evident in the 1980s, when micro-nationalism in Assam veered violently around the issue of the supposed rising influence of Bengali Muslims and underdevelopment. This was a departure from the 1960s and 1970s when Assamese micro-nationalism had centered primarily on the language issue and on the rising influence of the Bengali Hindus. Thus a new form of hegemonic domination was initiated. This veering of the Assamese micro-national assertion to focus on religion, instead of language – even though the immigrant Muslims, unlike the Bengali Hindus, had been reporting Assamese as their mother tongue in census operations – should be linked to the influence of *Hindutva* and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).[219]

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[218] Miri, S. (1993). *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach.* New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, p 71.

[219] Hindutva, sometimes also referred to as cultural nationalism, is a term which the Supreme Court of India in a 1995 judgement mentioned could be used to mean the way of life of the Indian people and the Indian culture or ethos.

Two key organizations in Assamese civil society are the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Asom Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society). Both these organizations have great influence in moulding public opinion within the ethnic Assamese and have been instrumental in mobilizing Assamese-speaking people on various socio-political issues. In the 1960s, these two organizations were instrumental in the mobilization seeking to declare Assamese as the official language of the state. The emphasis then was on linguistic nationalism as a way to enforce domination and hegemony. That demand had fuelled the language riots in the state and had later led to the anti-foreigner violence of 1979-1985.

Lange, writing on the AASU, quotes Baruah to say that "the explosion of micro-nationalist politics in Assam coincided with the founding and consolidation of this organization".[220] The AASU is one of the largest student organizations, not only in Assam but in the country, and officially protects and pursues student interest. But the organization sees itself as the protector of the interest of the Assamese people as a whole and this is used to justify its aggressive posture. Lange argues that the organization is thus involved in pursuing an agenda of ethnic nationalism that lobbies the state government to support the interest of the dominant Assamese community.[221]

The Asom Sahitya Sabha was formed in 1917 with the motto "my mother language – my eternal love". Instead of promoting the different mother languages of the various communities, it consistently sought to promote and enforce only the Assamese language in Assam. Baruah argues that Sabha's aggressive cultural nationalism, an agenda pushed since as early as 1950, insisted that Assamese be made the official

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[220] Lange, M. (2012). *Ethnic Violence and Education,* New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 129.

[221] Lange, M. (2012). *Ethnic Violence and Education,* New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 129.

language in the state. Many smaller nationalities were alienated in the context of this demand. They began agitating for separation.[222]

This pattern changed in 1979 when the Assam movement against illegal immigrants began and the movement targeted Bengali Muslims, rather the Bengali Hindus. The shift from language to religion was sudden. This shift obscured for a while the indigenous–non-indigenous divide as indigenous and Assamese organisations allied to contain the growing influence of the Muslim immigrants. The emphasis by this time had moved to a new ethnic nationalism that clothed linguistic nationalism with references to religious faith. Once again, this movement was led by AASU. Several violent incidents, including the massacre of over 2,191 Bengali Muslims that left 370 children orphaned in 16 villages at Nellie in 1983. [223] These clashes occurred between the indigenous Lalung community and the Bengali Muslims. In addition, 852 Assamese youths were also killed during the Agitation. In subsequent years, the Assamese micro-nationalism became even more aggressive and found expression through extremist organizations such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

The India-Pakistan war of 1971, which led to the formation of Bangladesh, is often cited in Assam as an event that brought major demographic changes, with millions of

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[222] Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 138.

[223] Mandar, H. (2008). Nellie: India's Forgotten Massacre. [online news] *The Hindu*, 14th December. Retrieved from: http://www.hindu.com/mag/2008/12/14/stories/2008121450100300.htm [Accessed on 10th September, 2013].

Bengali Muslim refugees fleeing the war zone and settling in Assam.[224] As fears of being swamped by the Bengali Muslim rose, the death of Hiralal Patwari, Member of Parliament from the Mangaldoi constituency in 1979, proved to be a turning point. A revision of the electoral rolls in his constituency resulted in up to 70,000 complaints against alleged illegal immigrants. Forty-five thousands of these were upheld in a total electorate of 600,000. This triggered a flood of complaints across the state as local electoral offices received nearly half a million complaints against alleged illegal Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh. This ultimately led to the Assam Agitation. It aimed at ousting illegal immigrants and it exploited Assamese fears of being swamped by Bengalis and of being neglected by the Union government.[225] The agitation ended in 1985 with a tripartite accord between the Government of India, the Government of Assam and the AASU. The government undertook to detect, delete from voter lists and deport illegal migrants from Assam.

As the students articulated widespread concerns regarding the presence of illegal immigrants and took advantage of popular resentment, the Chief Election Commissioner of India, S. L. Shakdher, issued the following statement:

> In one state (Assam), the population in 1971 recorded an increase as high as 34.98 percent over the 1961 figures and this increase was attributed to the influx of a very large number of persons from neighbouring countries. The influx has become a regular feature. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make, on the basis of the increase of 34.98 percent between the two

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[224] Sinha, SK, (1998). *Report to the President of India*, Ch II para 6 & 19c. Retrieved from: www.satp.org [Accessed on: 03.06.2012].

[225] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers in the Mist,* New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., pp. 251-275.

censuses. The increase that is likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100 percent over the 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached when the state would have to reckon with the foreign nationals who may probably constitute a sizeable percentage, if not the majority of the population, of the state. [226]

Such statements from senior Government census officials only demonstrated to the migrants the influence that Assamese lobbying exercised on the state administration. While many of the Bengali Muslims had been in the state for decades, they were continuously being targeted as 'illegal' immigrants. They formed their own political party: the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). The issue of alleged illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and their citizenship has now become so volatile in Assam's politics that an election could be decided on this issue alone. All major national and regional political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian National Congress (INC), the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), and the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) have brought the issue to the forefront of electoral campaigns. Assamese intellectuals and print media also write vigorously on this issue. It has emerged as the most critical factor in Assam's political scenario at present.

For the quarter century after Nellie the Indian state tried to manage the political challenge of a "failed partition" of Assam with an extraordinary piece of legislation known as the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act more popularly

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[226] Hazarika, S. (1996). "India's North East and the Crisis of Migration". Paper submitted at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies, New Delhi. Paper No 32, pp. 3–4.

known as the IMDT Act.[227] This law was promulgated in the midst of the Assam Agitation in 1983 and continued to operate in the state until it was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of India in 2005. The law was brought in to address thousands of complaints against suspected illegal immigrants. It reversed the practice of determining citizenship in Assam. This is now differently in the rest of India, which continues to operate in accordance with the Foreigners Act, 1946. Baruah argues that the IMDT law formalizes the Assamese exception within India's citizenship. It gives legitimacy to questionable citizenship practices prevalent in Assam.[228]

Baruah argues that the agitation gave rise to the term 'ethnic Assamese', a term that was non-existent in the pre-1979 era when all the people of Assam were considered Assamese. He cites Abner Cohen to state that this was a process by which a culturally invisible elite group became culturally visible. As it lost hegemonic influence, it began asserting itself as a separate group. "The Assam movement ethnicized the Assamese, as the state's 'immigrant' organizations and 'plain tribes' organization began challenging their authority to speak for Assam and its people", Baruah writes.[229] As postcolonial Assam tried to address the conflicts generated within its social triangulation, it was obvious that the effects of indirect rule had resurfaced after independence. The constitution accentuated the fault lines rather than minimizing them.

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[227] Baruah, S. (2008). "Assam: Confronting a Failed Partition". Paper submitted at the Battle of the State: A symposium on the forthcoming state elections, November 2008. New Delhi.

[228] Baruah, S. (2008). "Assam: Confronting a Failed Partition". Paper submitted at the Battle of the State: A symposium on the forthcoming state elections, November 2008. New Delhi.

[229] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 125.

It is important to note that the alliance between the indigenous peoples and the Assamese community that developed during the Assam Agitation did not last long. So, while in the Nellie massacre the plain tribe Lalung and ethnic Assamese were on the same side, it was the plains Bodos that fought against both ethnic Assamese and Muslims in the Bodoland areas between 1993 and 1998.[230] During this period, in four major communal riots in the tribal dominated Bodoland area about 400 people were killed.[231]

3.2.3 The "Migration" Question

The high Muslim population in Assam had motivated the Muslim League to assume that Assam would be included in East Pakistan.[232] The Cabinet Mission Plan, which drew up the plan of division, also placed Assam in Group C with East Bengal and proposed it being included in East Pakistan.[233] The Congress under Gopinath Bordoloi opposed this move and was successful in negotiating that Assam is kept with India.[234] The Assamese natives saw this alignment with India as a new opportunity to build a

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[230] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 134.

[231] Hussain, W. (2012). *Assam: A Method in the Madness*. [online] Available at: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/ [Accessed: 04.08.2012].

[232] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

[233] Sinha, S.K. (1998). *Report on Illegal Migration into Assam*. [Report] Guwahati, n.p. [online] Available at: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam.htm [Accessed on 12 April 2012].

[234] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

homogenous province for themselves: in India without and yet without Muslim domination.

But, contrary to expectations, partition brought about a major change in the demographic profile of the state. As East Pakistan became part of an Islamic country, population movements from East Pakistan continued, and it was initially mostly of Hindu refugees fleeing from religious persecution that arrived in Assam. Sinha's report points out that this movement spread over several years and is still continuing. He argues that the shift of the Hindus population is demonstrated by the simultaneous decline of the Hindus of East Pakistan. While in 1947 they were 27% of the population, by 1971 their proportion of the population had been reduced to 14%. By 1991 it was down to 10%. Sinha asserts that the movement of Hindu refugees subsequently declined and that the illegal migrants from Bangladesh into Assam are now almost exclusively Muslim.[235]

Nevertheless, it was the Assamese-speaking Hindu middle class that took control of the government of the newly formed state after partition. In the process, they started to assert the supremacy of the Assamese cultural identity, and the Assamese language. They considered all of the Bengali population as migrants.[236] Weiner states that as Assamese became the official language, a policy of giving preference to Assamese

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[235] Sinha, S.K. (1998). *Report on Illegal Migration into Assam*. Chapter II, para 6. [Report] Guwahati. n.p. [online] Available at:
http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_ass am.htm [Accessed on 12 April 2012].

[236] Weiner, M. (1983). The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement. *Population and Development Review*, (vol 9) (no 2), p. 1.

natives in employment also became established.[237] Many Bengali Muslims who stayed back in Assam also supported the Assamese natives in making Assamese the state language and even declared Assamese to be their native tongue in the census. This helped to raise the number of Assamese speakers and a temporary alliance was established between all non-indigenous Assamese.[238] Initially, violence was directed against Bengali Hindus refugees.

On the 6th of December 1985, Steven Weisman wrote in *The New York Times* that "Every region in India has its share of sectarian rivalries but few are afflicted with the hatred found here in the remote northeastern state of Assam."[239] This view captures the essence of the breaks in social cohesion in Assam, and in particular the anti-migrant violence. Like the indigenous communities, anti-migrant violence in Assam has also been inter-community (Assamese / indigenes vs migrants) as well as intra-community (Bengali Muslims vs Bengali Hindus).

The first violent movement against the Bengali Hindus resulted in the language riots. The first one occurred in 1960-1961. There was another in 1972. The riots attracted media attention and on July 29, 1960, even the Melbourne daily *The Age*, reported on

[237] Weiner, M. (1978). *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[238] Shamshad, R. (2010). "Settlers, Refugees or Infiltrators? The Trajectory of Bangladeshi Discourse in Assam, India." [online] paper presented at *The 18th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Adelaide, 5-8 July 2010,* Retrieved from: http://asaa.asn.au/ASAA2010/reviewed_papers/Shamshad-Rizwana.pdf

[239] Weisman, S. (6th Dec, 1985). In Assam's Pastoral Setting Blind Hatred Thrives, *The New York Times* [online news]. Available at: http://goo.gl/dliZyh [accessed 8th August, 2014].

the violence.[240] In 1960, when the Assam Official Language Act granted Assamese the status of sole official language of the state, large-scale protest in the Barak Valley ensued. Led by several Bengali organizations such as Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasha-Bhashi Samiti, and Bhasha Andolan Samiti, several non-violent protests were organized to oppose the Act. On 19 May, 1961, 11 people were killed in Silchar Railway station and this day is still observed in the Barak Valley as the *Bhasha Shahid Divas / Matri Bhasha Divas* (Language Martyrs' Day / Mother Tongue Day).[241] Elsewhere, in the Brahmaputra Valley, however, the violence also took an anti-Bengali turn. Horowitz writes that the riots against the Bengalis in the Brahmaputra Valley were ignited by an assault on the Bengali manager of the Gauhati Oil Refinery. Students were in the front rank of the rioters. These attacks against middle-class Bengali Hindus, and not against the Bengali Muslims, were interpreted by Horowitz as an expression of the economic demands of a "careerist leadership producing an appropriate target for a careerist riot".[242]

The violence of 1960-61 in the Brahmaputra Valley took a further gruesome shape when 25 villages of the Goreswar area (now under BTAD) were attacked. Nine Bengali Hindus were killed and more than one hundred were injured with 4,019 huts and 58 houses vandalised and destroyed. Elsewhere, even senior government officials

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[240] Language Riots Cost 34 Assam Lives, (29th July, 1960). The Age, Melbourne, p 4. Available at: http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1300&dat=19600729&id=TJ5VAAAAIBAJ&sjid=Sa8DAA AAIBAJ&pg=1377,4862555 [Accessed on 8th Sept., 2014].

[241] Dutta, P.C. and Pradhan B.C. (2006). Issues and problems of Ethnicity in Assam, in Deb, B (ed.) (2006) *Ethnic Issues, Secularism, and Conflict Resolution in North East India*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, p. 168.

[242] Horowitz, D.L. (2001). *The Deadly Ethnic Riots*, Berkeley: The University of California Press, pp. 209-210.

of the Bengali Hindu community (the District Magistrate of Guhawati and the Deputy Inspector General of Police) were also attacked and stabbed. [243]

The ensuing violence and deaths of the early 1960s did not mark the end of post-colonial conflicts in Assam. It was just the beginning. There was a perception that the Assamese Official Language Act was aimed at erasing the Bengali language from the Barak Valley, where Bengali Hindus were a majority. In order to contain the violence, the Assam Government subsequently declared Bengali as 'other official language' in the Cachar district.

When a large number of Bengali refugees came to Assam from East Pakistan during and after the 1971 India–Pakistan war, a second round of language riots occurred when in 1972 Gauhati University introduced Assamese as the medium of instruction in undergraduate courses across the state. There were exceptions this time and the university excluded colleges in the Barak Valley from this prescription. But this did not quell the violence. It was only later when the government decided to allow English as another option for instruction that the violence subsided. Within the Assamese community, these attacks came to ominously known as *Bongal Kheda* (evict the Bengalis). Thousands of Bengali Hindus were displaced from the Brahmaputra Valley. They subsequently migrated to other parts of India while many settled in the Bengali Hindu dominated Barak Valley of Assam.[244] Subir Bhowmik

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[243] Banerjee, P. et al.,(2005). *Internal Displacement in South Asia: The Relevance of the UN's Guiding Principles*, New Delhi: Sage, pp. 150–151. See also, Chakravarti, K.C. (30 July 1960). "Bongal Kheda Again", *The Economic Weekly*, Mumbai: Sameeksha Trust, pp. 1193–95. [Accessed on 5 Sept., 2014].

[244] Saikia, P. (2009). *Protest Networks, Communicative Mechanisms and State Responses: Ethnic Mobilization and Violence in Northeast India.* Montreal: McGill University. p. 115. [Accessed: 5 Sept. 2014].

quotes one estimate at 500,000 Bengali Hindus being displaced from Assam during these riots.[245]

The violence pattern changed in the post-1979 period when Bengali Muslim, and not Bengali Hindus, became the victims. As already mentioned, the first major violent incident against Bengali Muslims in Assam took place in Nellie in 1983. This was preceded by a build-up of religious and communal tension while all Bengali Muslims were seen as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Writing on the Nellie massacre, Kimura states that it was a 'pre-emptive' attack by local indigenous and Assamese people against the Bengali Muslims, the result of a long history of economic issues such as land alienation.[246] But this interpretation does not explain why poor agricultural farmers should suddenly turn homicidal.

In subsequent years, several conflicts involving indigenous and Assamese people against Bengali Muslims migrants took place in Assam. Most of these were in the lower Assam districts of Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, and Dhubri. There have been major clashes with the Bengali Muslims in Barpeta, Bongaigaon and Udalguri districts. These were mostly between the indigenous Bodos and the Muslims and over 200 people were killed and thousands rendered homeless. In the 1993-94 nearly 80,000 people were displaced and rendered homeless. Attempts to relocate them and resettle them in the Lumding area of Nagaon district has not met with success due to opposition from local Hindu Bengalis.[247]

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[245] Bhaumik, S. (2008). In Das, SK (ed.) Blisters on their Feet. Sage. p. 303. [Accessed: 5 Sept 2014].

[246] Kimura, M. (2013). *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters*, New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd p. 124.

[247] Basu, S. P. (2008). *The Fleeing People of South Asia*, New Delhi: Anthem Press, p. 254.

At the same time, there has been violence directed at the Nepalis too. The Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 ensures equal rights and privileges for nationals of India and Nepal in both countries. It also stipulates an open border between the two countries. This reinforces the belief among Indians that Nepalis in India enjoy a double homeland. The 1951 census placed the Nepali population in Assam at 101,335, which rose to 353,673 in the 1971 census.[248] In Assam, where identity is often built on perceptions and stereotypes, this increasing population was often perceived as enjoying special economic and political benefits. It has also been perceived as a burden in a state where ethnic groups are already fighting over scarcely available resources. Episode of violence and discrimination against Nepalis followed.

In recent times, the tea community has also been the target of violence in Assam. Most of these clashes have been in the Bodoland areas and are interpreted as either economic or political. Bhan mentions that when the Adivasi indentured labourers of tea gardens complete their contract, the tea garden management encourages them to settle nearby forests. This encroached upon the livelihood and land rights of the Bodos.[249] The clashes targeting the tea community occur in the rural areas and are therefore not always well reported, as they do not affect the urban Assamese middle class. However, on 24th November 2007 a protest rally by the All Adivasi Student Association of Assam (AASAA) in Guwahati demanding schedule tribe status triggered an attack on the rally. Over 200 of the protesters were injured and one

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[248] Sinha, S. P. (2007). *Lost Opportunities: 50 Years of Insurgency in the North-east and India's Response*, New Delhi: Lacer Publishers and Distributors, p. 40.

[249] Bhan, S. (1999). *Impact of Ethnic violence on Youth: A Study of Tribal-Non-Tribal Violence in Kokrajhar, Assam.* Delhi: Institute of Peace Research and Action.

teenage woman was stripped naked, chased and beaten by local men. The media carried video footage of the state police not intervening to stop the violence. AASAA interpreted this as a demonstration of Assamese state terrorism. Earlier in May 1996, Basu reports of violence against tea communities in Bodoland areas, where 115,000 tea tribals had to flee their homes. However, he states, in the subsequent violence in May 1998, there was retaliation from the tea community as well, resulting in 300 deaths and 231,989 persons of both communities affected and rendered homeless.[250]

While these violent incidents continued against the various migrant communities, violence against the Hindi-speaking people gained more national and international prominence. On November 11, 2003, *The Age* carried the headlines "Hundreds Flee Ethnic Violence" and reported of Assamese–Hindi migrant clashes in Assam. It mentioned of 29 Hindi speakers killed in Tinsukia, an upper Assam industrial town, and also reported killings and attacks on Hindi speakers in others towns such as Nalbari in lower Assam. As men, women and children were killed, the news item touched upon earlier attacks (in 2000), when 150 Hindi speakers were killed. It said: "At least 600 houses of Hindi-speakers have been torched by angry mobs, while the ULFA has killed 20 people in separate attacks across the state".[251] On 27th October 2009, the Voice of America reported about similar violence from other parts of the state such as in Dibrugarh in upper Assam and Dhubri in lower Assam. It carried a news item which referred to clashes between "Assamese people and Bihari migrants", and said, "rampaging mobs began looting homes, and assaulting people from Bihar,

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[250] Basu, S. P. (2008). *The Fleeing People of South Asia*, New Delhi: Anthem Press, p. 254.

[251] Hundreds flee ethnic violence, (21st Nov., 2003). The Age. Available at http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/11/21/1069027275426.html?from=storyrhs [Accessed on 7th Sept., 2014].

prompting thousands of these Hindi-speaking settlers to seek refuge in police stations".[252] The cycle of violence against migrants was repeated in 2014 when on 24th December 2014, the BBC reported of the killing of 32 immigrant Muslims in May that year and of another 62 people of the tea tribes community in December in the BTAD areas.[253]

Earlier, during 1966–1968, several anti-Marwari demonstrations were staged by the AASU and the Lachit Sena. Several *godowns* (warehouses), shops and business establishments were ransacked and burnt. Later, during the Assam movement, the Hindi-speaking community, especially the Marwaris, became the target of large scale extortions. With the rise of the ULFA in the 1990s, several Hindi speaking and Marwari traders were forced to leave the state, even though in many cases "the displaced traders have been found to be living in Assam for many decades, studied in Assamese medium schools and have merged with the local Assamese society".[254]

Scholars have analyzed these violent incidents from different perspectives. Misra states that the issue of 'migrants' and 'outsiders' has to be seen in the context of strong indigenous identities and in relation to special rights over land and forests in the North East.[255] Similarly, Bhan states that the conflicts in the Bodoland areas between the Bodos and the *Adivasi* and other tea communities are linked to the

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[252] Ethnic Violence Erupts in India's Assam State (27 Oct., 2009), The Voice of America,. Available at: http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-a-2003-11-19-2-ethnic-66839037/375205.html [Accessed on 7th Sept., 2014].

[253] BBC News (24th December, 2014). India Attack: Suspected Rebels kill Dozens in Assam [online news] Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30594622 [Accessed on 14/4/2015].

[254] Sharma, C.K. (2012). The Immigration Issue in Assam and The Conflicts Around It, *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol 13, No 3 (June), p. 295.

[255] Misra, U. (2000). *The Periphery Strikes Back.* Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies pp. 11-17.

adivasis' status as *"outsiders"* in an area where the Bodos are struggling for scarce resources.[256]

But while the pre-1979 violence was directed mostly against the Bengali Hindus, the post-1979 violence has shown a marked shift against Bengali Muslims. At the same time, the violence against Hindi, Nepali and tea community has also risen. Since these communities are Hindus, clearly a religious explanation or references to 'illegal immigrants' or 'Bangladeshi infiltration', or even a simple economic explanation are not enough. While each incident may have localized or immediate causes or triggers, it is important to find a common theme and offer a more holistic interpretation for such anti-migrant violence.

As linguistic and religious migration became the heart of Assam's political discourse, sections of the Assamese intelligentsia led by organizations such as Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society), with the support of the state government, attempted to construct a unilingual homogenous cultural identity.[257] This brought the Assamese directly in conflict with the Bengali migrants. Several attacks and communal riots on the Bengalis Hindu migrants and refugees became frequent in the period between 1960 and 1961.[258] Later in 1972, as the demand for the Assamese language to be the

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[256] Bhan, S. (1999). *Impact of Ethnic violence on Youth: A Study of Tribal-Non-Tribal Violence in Kokrajhar, Assam.* Delhi: Institute of Peace Research and Action pp. 9-10.

[257] Bhattacharjee, N. (December, 2012). Assam's Language Warriors. Paper submitted at the symposium on Assam: Unstable Peace, a symposium on politics, society, culture and the challenges of reconciliation. New Delhi.

[258] Hussain, M. (2008). Displacing Identities, Displaced Identities, pp. 260-261. In Basu, S.P. (ed.) (2008) *The Fleeing People of South Asia: Selections from Refugee Watch.* New Delhi: Anthem Press.

state only official language took effect, more riots occurred.[259] These movements resulted in nearly half a million Bengali Hindus fleeing the state to take shelter in nearby West Bengal.[260]

One of the major consequences of the language riots and the Official Language Act, 1960 was the acceleration of separatist sentiments and movement within the indigenous communities. As Assamese hegemony came to be resisted by both the indigenous and the immigrant collectives, political exigencies led the Assamese nationalists to selectively target only the migrant Bengalis. [261] But though the Assamese Hindus and Bengali Hindus had clashed over several riots on the language issue, in the later part of the twentieth century these two groups underwent some major realignment and came closer to forge an anti-Muslim grouping.

As discussed, by the middle of the twentieth century the three communal identities that had consolidated during the colonial period and were retained in the postcolonial one had begun to assert their politics through violent means. The migrant communities – both old and new – were unable to identify with either the indigenous or the local Assamese population; and the non-native Assamese population continued to dominate the socio-political context. As these formations jostled with each other, in an attempt to make political space for themselves, recurring violence resulted in a severely diminished form of democracy.

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[259] Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality.* New Delhi: Oxford, p. 105.

[260] Basu, S.P. (ed.) (2008). The Fleeing People of South Asia: Selections from Refugee Watch New Delhi: Anthem Press, p. 252.

[261] Horowitz, D.L. (2001). *The Deadly Ethnic Riot,* London: University of California Press, p. 210.

3.2.4 Regional Politics in Assam

While the colonial administrative measures such as the line system and inner line regime granted protection and allowed the indigenous peoples to maintain a separate identity through exclusion, the British construction of the 'Assamese' identity, where the Ahom were considered folded into the Assamese, promoted and privileged the caste Hindus in Assam. In postcolonial Assam, the influence of upper caste Hindus in the polity became so pronounced and the neglect of the earlier Ahoms community so acute that the community is now earmarked as 'other backward class' by the government. This has led the Ahoms to intensively agitate for recognition as ST community. At the same time, many of the tribal communities, such as the Bodos, Rabhas and Misings have also become uncomfortable being clubbed into an Assamese identity that does not recognize their distinct socio-cultural origin. Basu states: "Unless the Assamese nationality formation process is reinvigorated to accommodate the dual identity of the tribe and the nationality, many other tribes already assimilated into the Axomiya or Assamese identity may ask for separate homelands".[262]

Historically, therefore, many tribal communities did see themselves as part of the pluralistic indigenous population in Assam. Attempts to realise an 'Assamese Assam' or an 'Assam for Assamese' only have led them to seek withdrawal from the Assamese sub-national formation. In some cases, they have demanded territorial separation. Baruah states that this demand for separation flows from Clause 6 of the Assam Accord. It promised to safeguard the cultural identity of the 'Assamese

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[262] Basu, S.P. (2008). *The Fleeing People of South Asia: Selections from Refugee Watch.* New Delhi: Anthem Press, p 250.

people'. This clause states that the government will take constitutional, administrative and legislative steps to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. However, the Accord did not define who an 'Assamese' was, and an acceptable or shared definition of the term is yet to evolve.[263] The Accord led to organizations like the AASU to demand hundred percent reservations for 'indigenous people' in the assembly, in parliament, and in jobs. Political parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI) even demanded that the entire state of Assam be declared a 'tribal state'. In a media conference, CPI leader Promod Gogoi said that "to preserve the identity of the indigenous tribes and communities as continuous influx of illegal migrants is posing a great danger to the existence of Assamese society, Assam should be declared as a tribal state".[264] Neither the AASU nor the CPI, however, clarified the terms 'Assamese', 'indigenous', 'tribal state' or 'immigrant'. Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi said that 'indigenous people' simply means anyone who accepts the Assamese language and culture and considers Assam as their own land. This raised doubts in the mind of many tribal groups, especially the Bodos, that this was another attempt by ethnic Assamese to impose the Assamese language and Assamese culture on the tribal people.[265]

In addition, the land policy that was implemented by the Assam Accord was a cause of concern for the tribal population. This was because this policy would allow

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[263] Divided Over Who Is An Assamese (2010). [online news] *The Telegraph*, 26th July. Retrieved from: http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100726/jsp/northeast/story_12726570.jsp [Accessed on 12th September 2013].

[264] Declare Assam A Tribal State: CPI Urges Govt (2012). [online news] Retrieved from: http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jan1412/state05 [Accessed on 12.10.2013].

[265] Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 201-203.

evictions to be carried out from all public and protected lands. It was seen as an attempt, not only to evict the immigrants but also to evict indigenous tribals who had settled in the context of traditional shifting cultivation practices.[266] In effect, this policy brought back memories of the British Wasteland Rules of the colonial era. Attempts to forcibly remove indigenous communities from land that is declared unused, underused, or unowned call the examples of the settler colonial societies to mind.

The rise of regionalism as a political ideology and formation of regional parties in Assam is attributed to the growth of sub-national awareness amongst the local people. In the pre-1985 period, regional parties were marginal players or non-existent in Assam, but today they are permanent fixtures in the state political scene. Most observers have responded to the rise of regional parties with suspicion and considered them as reflecting narrow regional identities that threaten the integrity of the Indian state. Concerns have also been raised that regional parties may raise the spectre of secessionist conflict and evidence of a failed nation-building project. This belief rests on the assumption that voters vote for regional parties because they privilege their regional identities over other identities. The assumption that regional parties indicate weak support for an Indian national identity is, however, problematic, as all regional parties do not articulate a similar message. Most regional parties in Assam have arisen due to an immediate political issue such as the illegal Bangladeshi immigration in Assam that gave rise to the Asam Gana Parishad (AGP). The AGP, which was in power in the state for two terms in 1985-1990 and 1996-2001, reflects ethnic

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[266] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 174-175.

Assamese political ambitions (with a focus on Assamese linguistic micro-nationalism).

Post-1985, as the party system in Assam changed from the dominance of the Indian National Congress to a multi-party system, the slow and dormant process of politicisation of ethnicities suddenly gathered momentum. The multiplication of political parties was directly linked to the rise of indigenous and other communities' demand for self-rule. This resulted in numerous demands from different parties, often at cross-purposes and opposed to each other. A fragmented political environment ensued. As the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) came to power in Assam in 1985 and became the voice of the non-indigenous Assamese language speakers, the electoral politics in the state changed and began to reflect the state's multi-ethnic reality. Soon other communities also started to float their own political parties to demand self-rule. The Karbis, for example, lobbied under the banner of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), while the Bengali Muslims and Hindus under were represented by the United Minority Front (UMF).[267] Other parties like Gana Sakti represented the Mishings; the Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) represented the Bodos.

Regional politics in Assam took a new turn when the Bengali Muslims also started their own political party in 2005. Badruddin Ajmal, the President of this new party – the Assam United Democratic Front (later renamed as the All India United Democratic Front) – emerged as the most significant political figure in the post-2005 political scene. In the 2006 state election, his newly formed party won 10 seats in the 126-member state assembly. Baruah writes that though the AIUDF gained several

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[267] Goswami, S. (2003). Assam: Multiple Realignments and Fragmentation of Party System, *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy,* (Jan – June). pp. 221 – 247.

seats with Muslim votes in the assembly, a distinction existed between the ethnic

Assamese Muslims and Ajmal's primary constituency: Muslims from East Bengal. [268]

While 31% of Assam's population comprises Muslims, Ajmal seeks to represent the

state's 26.6 million Muslims. The growth of the political strength of the migrant

Bengali Muslim in Assam's political scenario became evident in the 2011 assembly

election. Ajmal's AIUDF won 18 assembly seats and became the second largest

political party in Assam. The BPF was pushed to third with 12 seats and the AGP to

fourth with 10. The marginalization of the indigenous and non-indigenous natives

remained.

3.2.5 Contemporary Violence and Terrorism

While militancy started in Assam since independence, when the National Socialist

Council of Nagaland (NSCN) under Phizo started the movement for Nagaland, the

problem became acute and endemic with the Assam Agitation. A militant

organization, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), was established on April

7, 1979, under the leadership of Paresh Barua with secession from India as the

declared goal. As violence erupted in the 1980s, the army was deployed in the State to

restore law and order. The whole state, with the exception of Cachar and the North

Cachar Hills districts, was declared a disturbed area and was brought under the Assam

Disturbed Areas Act, 1955. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1980 gave the

army further powers. These Acts allow it to operate in a civilian setting to control

violence.

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[268] Baruah, S. (2008). "Assam: Confronting a Failed Partition, Battle for the States". Paper at Battle for
the States, a symposium on forthcoming state elections. November 2008.

With increasing socio-political polarization in the region since 1947, separatist groups also began to form along ethnic lines while expressing demands for autonomy, self-rule, and sovereignty. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), both of them demanding more autonomy for their respective communities and areas, are two such examples. But these are not the only ones operating in Assam. The Institute for Conflict Management (ICM) lists 32 extremist organizations operating in Assam, many of which are now banned. [269] A full list is detailed in appendix 1. In order to address the aspirations of the indigenous communities, the government created several autonomous tribal councils within the state. They were given limited tribal autonomy and authority over the administration of their own land. Worsening inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relationships have characterised the postcolonial period in Assam.

The cyclical violence in Assam did not stop with some of the agitating groups succeeding in carving out specific territorial areas. Rather, more groups began to agitate violently to achieve political recognition. ICM cites several data to highlight the militancy situation in the state: the incident in Bodoland on September 16, 2012, had left 5,000 houses burnt in 244 villages and 187,052 persons affected. Most victims are now lodged in relief camps. The displaced persons in the camps include 168,875 Muslims; 17,344 Bodos and 833 persons belonging to other communities.

ICM also gives a detailed picture of the extent of violence in Assam. In 2012, Bodo–Muslim conflicts had claimed the lives of 83 persons. On March 27, 2012, State Forest Minister Rokybul Hussain told the State Assembly that 56 abduction cases had

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[269] For details, see the website of the Institute of Conflict Management, New Delhi at www.satp.org

already been registered since January 2012 and that between 2006 and 2011 there had

been 456 cases of abduction in the State.[270] As militancy increased in the garb of sub-

national aspirations, the government exerted sustained military pressure on the

militant formations. 707 militants of different groups surrendered during 2012. At the

same time, peace accords were also signed with a few militant groups, such as Dima

Halim Daogah (DHD), Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF),

the pro-talks faction of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB-PTF), and

the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA-PTF).

However, ICM reports of several other indigenous outfits: the Liberation Democratic

Council of Mising Land (LDCMS), a militant group in Lakhimpur and Jorhat

districts, the United Tribal Liberation Front (UTLF), operating in the hills of Assam

bordering Imphal East District, the United Tribal Revolutionary Army (UTRA),

operating from Manipur in Cachar District of Assam, the Dimasa National Liberation

Front (DNLF), operating in NC hills and Karbi Anglong District of Assam, the

Bodoland Royal Tigers Force (BRTF), in Bodoland area, the National Dimasa

Protection Army (NDPA), operating in Dima Hasao District, and the Gorkha

Liberation Army (GLA), operating in Upper Assam and Karbi Anglong District. They

remain active.[271]

Historian Sujit Choudhary opines that the real issue of the Bodo tribals was that "in a

sense, history failed them". He goes on to explain that in the early history of Assam,

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[270] Bhattacharjee, G. (online news). Assam: Slippery Slope to Chaos Available at:
http://www.newswala.com/India-National-News/Assam-Slippery-Slope-to-Chaos-23090.html
[Accessed on 12.12.2014].

[271] For details, please refer to Institute of Conflict Management website at www.satp.org

as elsewhere in the country, there were periods when mobility from tribe to caste-based mainstream society was definitely possible, even if slowly. But though the Bodos were in close proximity to mainstream society, this assimilation and absorption did not happen. Choudhury's view is that as tribals were excluded from the economic activities of agriculture, they were pushed from fertile lands to the remote jungle areas and their lands were encroached upon by new settlers. Thus, he says, the dispossession of the ancestral land of the Bodos could have started much before Muslim peasants began arriving from East Bengal during the colonial period.[272] Later, as Amalendu Guha states, British planters were responsible for further land alienation, as the 'wasteland' settlement policy of the British Government led to the establishment of tea gardens and the settling of adivasis from central India.[273]

Many of the ethnic clashes that have frequently rocked the north bank of the Brahmaputra can thus be traced back to struggles over land. As early as 1947, sensing the need to protect tribal land, the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 was amended to create tribal belts and blocks and by drafting and enacting Chapter X. But this chapter did not specifically mention the protection of 'tribal' land, preferring to refer to 'other communities'.[274] As such, the intention of the government was not clear and tribal land continued to be encroached and alienated. The tribal communities felt that the amendments were not really meant to benefit them but had a much larger

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[272] Choudhury, S. (2007). *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies.

[273] Guha, A. (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.

[274] Sec 160 (1) and Sec 160 (2) of the 1886 Land Regulation does not mention 'tribal' and empowers the state government to take a decision on which classes of people would get the benefit of protection. Further, Sec 161 provides for the constitution of compact areas for the notified classes of people. The government's decision to notify specific classes is obviously a very sensitive issue.

target group. At the same time, the various autonomous councils had no real control over their own ancestral land. From the tribal peoples' viewpoint, including the Bodos, the land question became a trigger for immediate agitation. They started to view all migrants, including the Bengali speaking Muslims, as outsiders and encroachers.

While militant organizations within the indigenous and Assamese communities became active, it should be noted that militant organizations have also taken root within the migrant Bengali Muslims. ICM reports of several such organizations: the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), the Harkat-ul-Mujahedeen (HuM), the Muslim Security Council of Assam (MSCA), the United Liberation Militia of Assam (ULMA), the Islamic Liberation Army of Assam (ILAA), the Muslim Volunteer Force, the Muslim Liberation Army (MLA), the Muslim Security Force (MSF), the Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS), the Islamic United Reformation Protest of India (URPI), the Revolutionary Muslim Commandos (RMC), the Muslim Tiger Force (MTF), the Muslim Liberation Front (MLF), the Muslim Liberation Tigers of Assam (MLTA), and the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA). They are all active in Assam.

'Fake encounters' and 'secret killings' are two terms that have dominated the post-1979 conflict situation in North East India. The former refer to the armed forces' extrajudicial killings of arrested citizens suspected of being militants. The practice of reporting fake counter-insurgency operations for the purpose of justifying these assassinations is widespread. The latter refers to state terrorism when unidentified gunmen kill family members of militant activists in order to pressure them to

surrender. But since the AFSPA law legitimizes the presence and activities of the army in Assam, no court has the authority to call their actions in question. The Supreme Court of India had recently addressed the question of extrajudicial killings.[275] As these laws violate basic human rights, demands that the AFSP Act should be repealed have become more frequent.[276]

Explaining the current predicament, Baruah authoritatively talks about the failures of the 1947 partition. He states that even the ULFA, which demands an exclusive homeland for the Assamese people, grew out of such failure during the Assam Agitation. Unfortunately, Baruah argues, the rest of India does not want to hear about it. Questioning partition would bring into question the very nature of India's nationalism. The Union government, he goes on, prefers to hide behind legalisms and insist on portraying some of the region's major concerns as a pathology that would be cured by mainstreaming the region through economic development (together with political craftsmanship and the effects of a police-military administration). [277] While this is convincing, I suggest that the causes for the failures of partition in Assam should be sought in the inability or unwillingness to deal with the legacies of indirect rule.

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[275] Mahapatra, D. (2012). 1,528 victims of fake encounters in Manipur: PIL [online news] *Times of India.* 2nd October. Available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/1528-victims-of-fake-encounters-in-Manipur-PIL/articleshow/16633496.cms

[276] Press Trust of India (2012). UN asks India to repeal Armed Forces Special Powers Act. [online news] *NDTV*, 31th March. Available at: http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/un-asks-india-to-repeal-armed-forces-special-powers-act-192249 [Accessed: 12.08.2012].

[277] Baruah, S. (2008). "Assam: Confronting a Failed Partition". Paper submitted at the Battle of the State: A symposium on the forthcoming state elections, November 2008. New Delhi.

Violent events led the Union Minister of Home Affairs P. Chidambaram during his two-day visit to the State in the aftermath of the Bodo-Muslim clashes to remark in 2012: "Assam is perhaps the most complex State administered in the country because people of various ethnicity live together".[278] As the political identities became frozen, Assam moved from one violent situation to another, while developments showed remarkable similarities with the conflicts of several African nations. Mamdani draws a comparison of the African experience in Rwanda of the Hutu-Tutsi violence with the Hindu-Muslim violence in India and speaks of violence's increasing 'popularity'. This is a uniquely troubling aspect that needs explanation and understanding.[279] He writes:

> There was a time when a clash of this sort was a signal for an exodus: those branded non-indigenous would leave, their belongings on their head, and run in the direction of home. Now, the tendency is for them to fight it out. Faced with a native authority that divides the resident population into two, pitting the indigenous against the non-indigenous, the trend is for the non-indigenous to arm themselves in self-defence. Thus the proliferation of armed militias in the context of ethnically driven clashes around land and other rights.[280]

In similar fashion, when the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya were carved out of Assam, the Assamese simply left the area and moved elsewhere. But when the

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[278] For further details on the data of insurgency and violence, see the Institute of Conflict Management website available at: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/index.html

[279] Mamdani, M. (2001). *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 8.

[280] Mamdani, M. (2001). Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 43 (4), p. 659.

Bodos and Karbis now demand separate states and resort to violence the Assamese agitate and fight back. The state of citizenship in Assam shows indeed similarities with that of many African states. Mamdani refers to "the colonial state living on, albeit with some reforms". He concludes that by privileging the indigenous over the non-indigenous, the postcolonial nations did not fundamentally change the colonial relation.[281]

Varshney suggests three plausible solutions to address the Assam situation: first he recommends a decentralization of power; second, he calls for the improvement of the educational attainment and economic level of the general population; and third, he recommends that secular leaders make a sustained effort to reintroduce and deepen secular and democratic politics.[282] However, the paths of Assam's economic and social development do not conform with the binary of class and caste found in the rest of India. There is a dynamic and violent interconnection between immigration, the marginalization of native peoples, and the domination of non-indigenous Assamese. While exclusionary policies became the norm in North East India through a duality of administration, citizenship, and rights, the North East Vision Document prepared by the Government of India still proposes an inclusive growth model that remains inapplicable.[283]

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[281] Mamdani, M. (2001). Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 43 (4), p. 658.

[282] Varshney, A. (2010). Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in India, [online article]. Retrieved from: http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/ethnic-and-religious-conflicts-india [Accessed on 13th September, 2013].

[283] Government of India (2008). Northeast Region Vision, 2020. New Delhi: Ministry for Development of Northeastern Region and North Eastern Council, pp. 16-18.

The causes for the breaks in social cohesion need to be analysed using alternate interpretive methods. The colonial politics of exclusion must give way to inclusionary politics, and this thesis used the settler colonial paradigm heuristically to offer such an alternative interpretation. This chapter discussed how the colonial intent and content of indirect rule continued in postcolonial Assam, making decolonization ineffective. I examined how various brands of identity politics in postcolonial Assam have served to create the basis for excluding particular groups, resulting in various conflicts. I also discussed how the frozen identities and breaks in social cohesion have been explained in binary terms and in a non-satisfactory way.

The situation in Assam is therefore not a case of 'communal triangle' (Hindus–Muslims–government) or of a 'divide and rule' policy, as articulated by Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India.[284] Rather, with an institutionalized colonial form of dualism separating allegedly indigenous peoples and non-indigenous ones and where one section of society does not enjoy full citizenship rights, it is a case of an ethnic administration ruling over a multi-ethnic society and a case of 'define and rule'.[285] Therefore, unlike what scholars such as Nani Mahanta have argued, Assam does not reflect actor-driven violence that could be considered merely as a law and order problem. It is a case of structural violence where a triangular system of relationship produces endless conflict. I argue that Assam's triangular socio-political relationships can be profitably compared to similar triangular relationships characterising other settler societies (such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States).

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[284] Prasad, R. (1946). *India Divided.* Bombay: Hind Kitabs Ltd, p. 88.

[285] Mamdani, M. (2012). *Define and Rule,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 26-27.

In the next three chapters, this thesis will discuss each of the groups comprising a triangular system of relations and their perspectives.

PART - B

Chapter 4: The Struggles of the Indigenous Peoples of India's North East

On 9th September 2005, the BBC reported a news item of clashes between the indigenous Karbi and Dimasa communities in Assam. The news report mentioned that extensive rioting and arson had led to 14 Karbi people being killed and many rendered homeless.[286] On the 22nd of October, the BBC reported again that the death toll in the rioting had reached 90 and that over 30,000 people have become homeless.[287]

This was not the first time in Assam that indigenous communities have clashed with each other or with other communities. In the aftermath of Indian independence, different ethnic groups within the administrative domain of Assam began voicing their aspirations for self-determination. Demands ranged from seeking autonomy within the Indian union to complete secession. As a result of these movements, the Naga Hills district of Assam was separated from Assam and became a full-fledged state in 1963, even though attempts at full secession still continue there. Similarly, the indigenous states of Mizoram and Meghalaya were carved out of Assam in 1987 and 1972 respectively, after violent insurgencies. As identity formation and struggles thus dominate contemporary political and social agendas in the North East India, ethnic assertion, revivalism, and quests for separate sovereignty resulted in Assam being divided into four states: the Hindu-majority Assam, with a sizeable Muslim population, and the Christian hill states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya.

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[286] Army Deployed After Assam Riots, (9th Oct., 2005). [online news] BBC News Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4325066.stm [accessed: 02/02/2015].

[287] Thousand Flee Assam's Tribal Feud (22nd Oct., 2005). [online news] BBC News Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4367494.stm [Accessed: 02/02/2015].

In the postcolonial period in Assam, conflicts between Karbi and Kuki communities, between Bodo and non-Bodo communities, between Bodos and Muslims, and between Mising and non-Misings have been observed.[288] Clashes eventually gave way to armed conflicts within the different communities.[289] Some armed groups, however, eventually entered into ceasefire arrangements with the Government of India and are now in negotiations with the government. Some groups, like the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), signed complete agreements. The Bodoland Autonomous Territorial District (BTAD) was established in this context.

Scholars have generally analysed these conflicts as struggles for land and political autonomy. However, Uddipana Goswami says that the Karbi-Dimasa conflict has to be viewed not from an economic angle but from a security perspective. She says that the clashes were engineered by the government and that it used the militants to conduct covert operations that were aimed at keeping the North East destabilized.[290] Uttam Bathari of Gauhati University said that the Karbi-Dimasa conflict was actually one result of deeply-seated perceptions I shall present his interview later in this chapter.

At the same time, the politics of treating Assam as a periphery of mainland India led to the retention of the indirect rule paradigm, in which separating 'tribals' from 'non-tribals became central. Deb cites census figures to show how the system resulted in de-assimilation and re-tribalization. He states that between 1971 and 1991, as per the

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[288] A summary of fatalities in the major conflicts are shown in Appendix C.

[289] A list of the major militant groups in North East India is included in Appendix D.

[290] Goswami, U. (2014). *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam*, New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 140-141.

1991 census, the tribal population grew by 78.9% compared to 53.25% for the whole population of Assam. This high growth rate of the tribal population is abnormal, as there has been no in-migration of tribals to Assam, and the birth rate of tribals has remained constant. The only explanation, says Deb, is that many of the tribals who had been Hinduized and had lost their tribal status have now been reclassified as tribals. The increased consciousness of tribal peoples and their participation in the census enumeration process are part of this process.[291] At present, Assam has 60 tribal groups with a population of 2.8 million, which is 12.50% of the total population. But of these, the seven largest communities (Bodo, Rabha, Santhali, Garo, Mishing, Karbi and Dimasa) constitute 84.35 %. The remaining 15.65% contributes to the other 53 tribes.

The desire for re-tribalization could be explained in a variety of ways. The accessibility of government benefits, including jobs and preferential loans reserved for tribals, should be considered. However, the issue of re-tribalization is also often attributed to Assamese domination and a desire to break away from Hinduization processes. Sarma highlights the Assamese community's desire to assimilate plural entities into a singular Assamese national consciousness. He refers to early post-independent Assamese authors who exhibited a desire to consolidate social plurality within a larger Indian identity. He cites Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's Jnanpeeth award-winning novel *Mritunjoy* and Umakanta Sarma's *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*,

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[291] Deb, B.J. ed., (2006). *Ethnic Issues, Secularism, and Conflict Resolution in North East India,* New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, pp. 159–160.

where the representation of ethnicity had the main aim of forging and consolidating regional and national identities into one.[292]

As tribal communities, therefore, continued to feel deprived and dominated, demands for self-determination started to gain ground. After the creation of Mizoram, when the geographical size of Assam was considerably reduced, the government addressed further demands for autonomy by creating several autonomous councils within the state. While Assam already had two district councils for the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao under the sixth schedule of the Constitution, a new autonomous council under the same schedule was created: the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District. In addition, six more autonomous development councils for six different ethnic communities were also established: the Tiwas, the Rabhas, the Misings, the Sonowal-Kacharis, the Thengal-Kacharis, and the Deuris. In addition to these, the Government of Assam in 2010 has further announced the intention of setting up more autonomous development councils for seven more ethnic groups: the Ahoms, the Mataks, the Morans, the Koch-Rajbangshis, the Sutiyas, the Adivasis and the Gorkhas.

However, creating exclusive homelands for particular communities also resulted in homelessness for non-indigenous peoples inhabiting those areas. At the same time, indigenous peoples who resided outside of these homelands became outsiders in their places of residence. For example, the Bodos who live outside the BTAD have become

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[292] Sarma, P. M. (2011). Ethnicity, Identity and Cartography: Possession/ Dispossession, Homecoming/Homelessness in Contemporary Assam, *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, (vol 3) (no 3), p. 28.

outsiders in their age-old homestead of Karbi Anglong and are thus ineligible for the benefits enjoyed by the Bodos within BTAD.

In India, the term 'indigenous' is not used in official government language. The argument for its non-use is that the complex and centuries-old history of migration, exchange, and mixing of cultural and physical traits makes it impossible to distinguish any specific group as 'indigenous' in relation to other groups. Therefore, everyone in India is officially 'indigenous'.[293] In the official parlance, the term that is always used is the constitutionally recognized term: 'scheduled tribes' (ST). 'Tribal' is commonly used.

In Assam, there are many communities that are therefore known as 'tribals' and fall within the broad parameters of the term 'ST'. It is to be noted that the in Assam STs are again subdivided into 'ST (Plains)' and 'ST (Hills)', each with different rights and privileges.[294] As we have seen, this complex categorization reproduces the divisions created by colonial agents. A brief outline of these communities composition is given below.

The Bodos, also referred to as Kacharis in the pre-colonial period, are considered to be the 'aborigines' of the Brahmaputra Valley. They have been living in the area since time immemorial, but due to frequent clashes with in-migrating people like the Tai-Ahom from the east, and other Indo-Aryan groups from the west, many of them

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[293] Erni, C. (n.d.) Indigenous Peoples' Self-Determination in Northeast India, *Indigenous Affairs* (vol 3) (no 1), pp. 56–66.

[294] The tribal population in different North East states is included in Appendix E. A list of the major ST communities in Assam is shown in Appendix F.

moved to Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts in the 16th century. The Bodos are a Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group. They are the largest plains tribe of Assam and inhabit the northern areas of the Brahmaputra Valley: the Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang, Baksa, Darrang, Sonitpur, Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, and Dhubri districts. Elsewhere, the Bodos are spread out in the lower regions of Nepal, West Bengal, Meghalaya, and Tripura.

During the pre-colonial period, some of the Bodos were subsumed within the Assamese nationality under the influence of religious preachers such as Sankardev. Many of them who took *saran* (i.e., who became followers of Hindu saints), came to be known as Saranias. As I mentioned above, during the colonial and postcolonial period, attempts at religious and cultural assimilation were often successful. They were resisted eventually, as the Bodos gained socio-political awareness. In 1933, with the formation of the All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTL), the first political assertion of a specific Bodo identity was declared. Subsequently, organisations such as the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) reflected the Bodo people's quest for cultural and political self-determination. Though the origins of the Bodo movement in Assam can be traced as far back as 1967, when the PTCA raised the demand for separation from the state, it was only after the formation of ABSU (1972) that the Bodo demand became prominent.[295]

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[295] For a detailed discussion on the Bodoland movement, see Basumatary, J (2014). *Quest for Peace in Assam: A Study of the Bodoland Movement*, New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd for Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

As I mentioned above, the general feeling of the Bodos, like the other tribal communities in Assam, has been that of subjection, neglect, exploitation, alienation and discrimination for decades. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 led to many of the tribal groups realizing that the tribal interests were not protected by the Assamese movement leaders. This resulted in the movement taking a violent turn. Bodo militant organizations like the Bodoland Liberation Tiger (BLT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) were formed to wage insurgencies. Nani Gopal Mahanta states that the rise of such extremist violence is due to the failure of civil society groups within the tribal and other communities to benefit from engaging with the state. In this context, they feel they are necessary to advance and protect their identity and existence.[296]

The Karbis, mentioned as the *Mikir* in the Constitution Order of the Government of India, are another major indigenous community. Unlike the Bodos, they are recognized as hills tribes and reside in the district of Karbi Anglong. The term *Mikir* is now no longer preferred. They have been granted an autonomous council under the sixth schedule of the Constitution since 17 November 1951. Besides Karbi Anglong district, the Karbis live in several other districts. Referring to Article 244 (A) of the Constitution, they have also been demanding an autonomous state within Assam through the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) for several years.[297] However, this demand has not been granted as yet. In a memorandum to the Deputy

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[296] Mahanta, N.G. (June, 2013). Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland, *Economic and Political Weekly*, (vol 48) (no 23), pp. 51-52.

[297] On 11th September 1968 the Government of India announced a scheme for constituting within the State of Assam an 'autonomous state' comprising certain Sixth Schedule areas. It was incorporated into the Constitution of India as Article 244. 'Autonomous states' have wider powers and functions than Sixth Schedule autonomous districts.

Prime Minister of India on 5th August 2002, leaders of the ASDC emphasized that this demand was a legitimate one. In the past, the political organizations representing the Karbis had preferred to remain within Assam. The memorandum stated that this was a national commitment:

> given by the nation to the people of this area at the time of creation of smaller hill states in the North East region in the year 1971 [but that] the people of these two hill districts were rewarded for their decision to remain in Assam with step-motherly treatment on all fronts.[298]

As the Karbis, therefore, launched a vigorous struggle for recognition, a memorandum of understanding was signed on 1st April 1995 by the three sides (ASDC, the state government, and the central government) to upgrade the autonomy of the existing Hill Councils of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. The issue of autonomous statehood remained unresolved. Meanwhile, an insurgent group, the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), was formed in 1999 through the merger of two other insurgent groups (the Karbi National Volunteers, KNV, and the Karbi Peoples Front, KPF). It is fighting for a separate Karbi homeland.

The story of the Dimasa in the North Cachar Hills district, now renamed Dima Hasao district, presents a similar pattern. Long before the British occupation, the North Cachar Hills district was part of the Dimasa kingdom, which extended to cover the whole of the Cachar District, the existing Karbi Anglong district, a major part of

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[298] Barbara, S. (2005). Autonomy in the Northeast: The Frontiers of Centralized Politics in Samaddar, R. (ed.) (2005). *The Politics of Autonomy: Indian Experiences,* New Delhi: Sage Publication India Pvt Ltd, p. 205.

Nagaon district, and also several parts of Nagaland. But after the death of the last Dimasa king in 1854, the colonial rulers denied succession to his son, and the entire territory was annexed to Assam. Subsequently, the area was first made part of Nagaon district, then attached to the Naga Hills, and then again to the Cachar district. Finally, in 1895, a sub-divisional headquarter was established in Haflong.

In its struggle for recognition, the Dimasa community also gave birth to several militant organizations. The Dimasa insurgent group Dima Halam Daoga (DHD) was formed in 1995 with the objective of establishing a separate Dimasa homeland comprising of the Dimasa inhabited areas of North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong and parts of Nagaon district. However, internal dissensions have led to the creation of two outfits, one led by Dilip Nunisa (DHD-N), and the other by Jewel Garlosa (DHD-J). Meanwhile, an autonomous council, called the Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council, under the sixth schedule, has been provided with an economic package for developmental activities. But this homeland for the Dimasas has created anxiety among the non-Dimasa communities residing in the area. The Zeme Nagas, the Kukis, and the Hmars are opposed to the settlement.

Postcolonial Assam also saw the identity assertion of the Mising community. The Misings reside in the North East part of Assam, mostly in the districts of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur, and on the river island of Majuli. In 1972 a literary society, the 'Mising Agom Kébang', was established. It was crucial to establishing Mising consciousness through an assertion of separate language and culture. The selection of script for the Mising language was the first flash point. When the Assam Literary Society (Assam Sahitya Sabha) tried to enforce the use of the Assamese script, the Misings opted for

the Roman script. This break in the age old Assamese–Mising cultural ties led to a heightened Mising–non-Mising tension. Sailen Sonowal, a local political activist, told me that slogans such as 'non-Misings go back' resonated strongly in the Mising community.

The Ahom buranjis speak of the Lalungs as another ethnic group inhabiting the central Assam districts of Morigaon and the Ri-bhoi district of Meghalaya. Colonial sources and India's constitution also mention the Lalungs, who are recognized as a scheduled tribe community. But the community prefers to call itself Tiwa, though some of the hill Tiwas are still known as Lalungs. This is a striking peculiarity of the Tiwas as they are recognized as two sub-groups: the Hill Tiwa and the Plains Tiwas, with each demonstrating their own cultural features. The Tiwas of Morigaon came into the media spotlight during the Nellie massacre.

In December 2010, violent clashes broke out between members of the Rabha community in Goalpara district of Assam and the Garo community of the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The Rabhas of Assam, though having a close cultural affinity with the Garos, have been demanding a Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. The emergence of this identity movement has had significant implications for the Muslims in Goalpara district and the Garos in the bordering East Garo Hills district. This also led to inter-ethnic conflict between the Rabhas and the non-Rabhas. The Rabhas struggle also led to militant organizations becoming active, the Rabha National Security Force, for example, which mooted the idea of separation from India. Finally, in the year 2000, the Assam Assembly passed an Act to establish the Rabha Hajong Autonomous Council. But the creation of local self-governments or

panchayats in the Rabha areas complicated the issue further, as it created a new parallel institutional framework that negated much of what the Rabhas wanted to achieve through their own autonomous council.

Two more indigenous communities should be considered. They have been in Assam since the pre-Ahom period. However, due to the Hinduization process, they have lost most of their cultural indicators. As such, the successive census operations also did not mark them as scheduled tribes. These two communities – the Sutiya and the Koch Rajbongshi – are now part of another struggle by four other communities (the Ahom, the Moran, the Motok and the Tea tribes) to gain recognition as ST community.

As is evident from the above outline, the various indigenous communities in Assam face numerous intra- and inter-community tensions. The term 'indigenous' itself is highly contested in North East India. While the tribals consider themselves indigenous, clause 6 of the Assam Accord speaks of 'protecting the cultural, political, economic rights of the Assamese people'. Many tribal communities feel that this definition could potentially identify mainstream Assamese as also indigenous. Baruah states that in 1985, the term Assamese as stated in the Accord clearly meant the 'composite indigenous' population of Assam.[299] But as many of the tribal communities, especially the Bodos, did not identify as Assamese, this was seen as an attempt by the Assamese to dominate the indigenous tribals once again. In order to address indigenous–Assamese differences, a meeting of the AASU and 26 ethnic

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[299] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 174.

organizations resolved in 2015 to recast the word 'Assamese' in the Assam Accord as 'Indigenous and Indigenous Assamese'.[300]

As I mentioned above, scholars have analysed the complex nature of the conflicts in Assam by linking it to land and other political issues. However, the following interviews attempt a more nuanced approach that looks at the perceptions of the community and pays attention to issues of identity and context. Traditional analyses should merge with the knowledge of the indigenous peoples.

In an attempt to reframe the conflicts involving the indigenous communities of Assam, I talked to several leading individuals identifying as members of indigenous communities.

4.1 On Violence

How do the indigenous communities view violence? What are their opinion and perception? And what do they think could be the reason for decades-long conflicts? I wanted to find out whether these were merely driven by economic causes, or whether there were other issues at stake.

When I asked these questions to former Professor at Cotton College, Guwahati and retired Director of the Tribal Research Institute Tabu Ram Taid, he responded:

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[300] 26 Ethnic Bodies Reach Consensus on Assam (18th March, 2015). [online news] Assam Tribune Available at: http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar1815/at050 [Accessed: 04/07/15].

The tribal–non-tribal divide started during colonial days and can be traced back to pre-independence days. My own perception is that when we have the republic and certain democratic rights are guaranteed under the Constitution, it gives rise to hopes. Since these rights cannot be violated, political and administrative mismanagement leads to some rights being misutilized. In the end, democracy is a weapon that is to be used by highly civilized people, but if over-exercised and over-asserted, it leads to social tension […]. Every conflict may have different roots [...]. Politics is to be blamed especially when there is a perception that one group is neglected. The Bodos and Misings have got their cultural rights, such as those relating to language and religion, yet these should not be mixed with politics, such as politics of language and politics of religion. This mixing has led to many of the problems. Some of the conflicts in Assam are also very localized conflicts, such as those between Karbi and Dimasa, or between Dimasa and Kuki.

Taid emphasised how conflicts are often situational, with each having a different origin. He saw many of these conflicts as 'political'. When I asked him what he meant, he clarified that the general impression of politics in Assam is not as a branch of philosophy and ethics concerned with the care and wellbeing of the people. Rather, 'politics' has come to represent a cynical profession practiced by unprincipled individuals whose primary aim was to gain and use power. However, he agreed with my contention that the tribal–non-tribal divide was a colonial creation. He added that this was a 'fact' that this divide gained constitutional validity through the sixth schedule.

Mukul Chutia, the Principal of C.N.S. Higher Secondary School in Sonitpur district, however, blamed the Assam Movement for having created the ethnic fault lines separating tribals and non-tribals. He said that since that time, politicians have been playing with the sentiments of the 'people' and kept these fissures alive, which in turn lead to violence. He said:

> From 1980, the process of assimilation stopped and got fractured. One reason was the economic reasons that gave rise to a lack of opportunities and jobs. But there is also the role of politics as the politicians used caste and tribes issues for votes. So they created the divisions and the communities resorted to agitations. In effect, the communities were misguided by the political leaders. Assam has a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society. But the leaders do not want to solve these problems and want to keep these problems alive.

Swarnalata Pegu, a retired senior Government of Assam officer and presently Vice President of the Bharatiya Janata Party, highlighted the linguistic angle and how it creates divisions. She said:

> Language has always been at the centre of conflicts in Assam. The same has happened with the Mising–non-Mising relationship. It was as early as 1947 when the Misings wanted an autonomous area comprising some of the similar tribal areas of present day Arunachal Pradesh with which the Misings have affinities. But this did not happen. Rather, the areas and communities got divided and the blame obviously fell on the then Government of Assam. Soon, the Assamese language was imposed as state language by the government and

this was resisted by many tribal groups. So when the in 1972 the Mising Agom Kebang (Mising Literary Society) was formed, the Mising community started asserting their linguistic heritage. In due course, they adopted the Roman script rather than the Assamese script and started to see themselves as different from the Assamese.

The situational origin of the conflicts was downplayed by Dr. Uttam Bathari, Deputy Director of the Institute of Historical Studies at Gauhati University. Bathari claimed that the issue was structural:

> Traditional history-writing or historiography in North East India followed the positivist approach. The colonial ethnographers have not been critically examined but are simply being used as sources. So we are perpetuating the same colonial history-writing. This is perpetuating the divide and rule paradigm. In Assam, it is always seen that this approach has generally led to complete silence about the presence and history of the indigenous people. Since the indigenous people had not developed textuality, they relied on oral history, but their history finds no mention in the histories of Assam.
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> Being thus marginalized in history, in politics, in social life, etc. they start identity struggles. History-writing is a state project in India and our past is being deliberately denied. There are thus some arguments that it is a state agenda to obliterate the past of the indigenous communities as the state wants to create one homogenous community in Assam. The violence is thus a product of history. The struggle of the indigenous [peoples] is thus to find

their place in history as well as against the effort of the state to obliterate their past.

Bathari's views on history resonate with my reconstruction of the colonial historiographies and their neglect of oral history. It is surprising, says Bathari, that these colonial histories still continue to be accepted by Assamese intellectuals as the authentic history of Assam. This neglect has pushed the indigenous peoples to feel marginalized. The view of Bathari on marginality is important and in a later conversation, he clarified that 'marginality' means 'being a part of the whole but not in the main body'. In this sense, marginality, he explained, was not merely a site of deprivation but a site for resistance that produces a counter-hegemonic reaction in the ways habits, perceptions, and ways of life are formed. It does not encourage people to move into the main body by assimilation or by surrendering; rather it is marginalization that leads to resistance and sometimes to conflicts.

Dr. Anil Boro, Associate Professor in the Department of Folklore at Gauhati University was, however, more in tune with what Professor Taid had said. He said that there are a variety of reasons for the conflicts but when 'politics gets intertwined in these complex situations', violence is accentuated as politicians 'use one community against another'. He added:

> The ethnic movements in North East India in the last 67 years are due to a variety of factors. They range from linguistic to cultural, to identity, to social and economic issues. The indigenous communities seek political recognition and protection. At the same time, while these agitations start democratically,

there is always a simultaneous military struggle as we have seen in Nagaland, Mizoram and during the Assam movement and the Bodo movement […]. For example, the Bodo movement started with one organization, the BLT, but after it entered into some form of discussions, splinter groups formed and now the NDFB has three factions. In this, the unpopular truth is that there is always some kind of political intervention by the centre. They wish to keep these problems alive so that the exploitation can continue […] the ULFA problem clearly points to this.

What is important to note from Boro's interview is that he speaks of political 'recognition' and 'protection' for the tribals. Obviously, such protection can be constitutional and has to come from the state. I asked him what form of protection he thinks would work. He mentioned that formation of a separate state can lead to some resolution. In some respects, Boro also echoed Bathari's view on the manipulation of history when he noted:

The Bodo history before King Bhaskar Barman has been completely erased. Assam's histories have also been intentionally manipulated, as even the names of many rivers have been changed. So this amounts to a new reconstruction of history.

Moneswar Deuri, Chief Advisor of the Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee, sees the violence and the conflicts as fundamentally linked to religion. It may be mentioned here that Deuri belongs to the Tiwa community and lives in Morigaon, the district where the Nellie massacre against immigrant Muslims took

place in 1983. He, however, says that the religious issues are not a new creation but have been in society for a long time. He then clarified:

> The religious transformation affected Assam as the original satras [of Srimanta Sankardev] and other religious institutions got removed from the indigenous people. This created a religious gap, a social gap, and a communication gap. At the same time, there was untouchability between the high castes and the low castes. In fact, in 1932, Congress leader Beliram Das gave a memorandum to Mahatma Gandhi complaining against the Brahmins who were chauvinistic and would not even touch the shadow of a lower caste person. So they felt neglected. Still later, in 1956, Mising groups filed a case in Jorhat court against the Auniati Satra alleging caste untouchability. The case was that even after coming under the fold of the same Guru the non-tribal and tribal disciples were segregated and tribals were not allowed to share food with the non-tribals. These created the gaps in society.

Deuri's interview, therefore, highlights another dimension of the conflicts. The Hinduization process impacted many tribal communities in Assam who embraced the Hindu religion giving up the animist way of life. But even though they were formally assimilated, they continued to be socially excluded from the Assamese Hindu community. Deuri, therefore, asserts that the structure of Hindu religion itself is exclusionary and produces segregation. The latter, eventually leads to conflicts.

Dr. Ranoj Pegu, Chairman of the indigenous Mising Autonomous Council, however, sees the conflicts as historical and a part of struggles that have been going on since the pre-colonial period:

> If we see the history of Assam, we find that the Ahoms ruled for 600 years. Their rule was a history of conflict. These conflicts were social and ethnic. The main reason for these conflicts was that within the ethnic communities the evolution of nationality was at a nascent stage and the formation of the nation was not completed. For example, the Mizo had many clans and their nation is not even 200 years old. In these 600 years, the conflicts were sometimes between Ahom and Nagas, sometimes between Ahom and Sutiya, and sometimes between Ahom and Misings.

While Pegu opines that ethnic conflicts have plagued Assam since pre-colonial period, he adds that it was the British, who as a powerful dominating force, helped to bring peace:

> During the British period, these conflicts subsided as they [i.e., the British] acted as a third force that was more powerful and dominating. Thus during the British period, the ethnic conflicts subsided. When the British left India, the people got carried away with a dream of Indian nationalism. And so initially the conflicts did not get reflected in the surface, but as time elapsed, and then the question of haves and have-nots started. Those who got more started to dominate, while a feeling of deprivation resulted within the other communities. And this led to a new form of self-assertion […]. Presently,

qualitatively, these movements have moved from the pure conflicts of the Ahom period to an arena of intellectual debate and to silent competition. But when politics gets mixed up with these struggles, it is then that violence starts.

Even on the question of land, which has been the trigger of some of the conflicts, Pegu traces back the problem to the pre-colonial period:

> In Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya, land is a community asset. But in Assam, while there was community land earlier, during the Ahom period, land was nationalised and it became the property of the king [i.e., state property]. As [communal] land ownership vanished, it became an issue for conflict. When the British arrived, they found that the land belonged to the *rajah* [king] and so under British rule, land in Assam continued to be government land […]. Presently, these conflicts continue, but their form has changed. There is now a bigger emphasis on democratic movements and direct conflicts have been reduced, even though communal tension is there everywhere. And this tension gets magnified as politics get mixed up in the movements.

Pegu's reference to land nationalisation under the Ahom kings is important for an analysis of Assam as one result of processes of settlement. The Ahom/Assamese state asserted its sovereignty by dispossessing indigenous peoples, like settler colonial states elsewhere. Pegu's assertion that the land issue is a pre-colonial creation is indeed insightful. But what is important for the purpose of this thesis is to note that through land nationalisation and indigenous dispossession, the Assamese ruling

classes behaved like typical settler colonialists. Their current position in the triangular system of relationships I have been analysing reflects this initial settlement process.

When I asked Pegu about Muslim migration as the cause of the conflicts, he said that the migration has two dimensions: 'In Assam, the migration issue has two dimensions: the first is the international migration and the other is the inter-district migration'. This view reflects that for the tribals, inter-district migration is as much a cause for anxiety as international Muslim migration. The perception of tribals, explained Pegu, is that since tribals do not have control over land rights, and even the Autonomous Councils have not been given such right, inter-district migrations may lead to the their being economically, politically and numerically marginalised. They thus fear 'illegals' from Bangladesh as much as the Assamese and other non-tribals.

4.2 On Identity

As we discuss the issue of conflict, it is important to look at the definition of indigeneity in Assam. As colonial identities were constructed, imposed and retained, a pan-indigenous identity never developed in the state. Rather, haphazard census classifications led to fragmentation, and the struggle for indigenous communities was to gain a political voice and recognition within the postcolonial state. This approach did not transcend colonial borders. These struggles have led many indigenous communities to seek language recognition, the establishment of autonomous councils, and to be enlisted as scheduled tribes.

I discussed issues of identity with indigenous professor Tabu Ram Taid. He noted:

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The word "tribal" was used by British to denote all the natives. So the communities were known by their exonyms and that was the tradition. For example, there is nothing like the Adi community, as there are 11 or 12 tribes within the larger label of Adi community. The Bodos themselves are known differently at different times as Kacharis, Sonowals, and Dimasa. In Arunachal, there are over 80 tribes, and every tribe lives in its own territory. While these [territories] denote exclusiveness, it does not denote separatism. Such tribal exclusivism has been in practice since centuries and may take time to overcome this kind of territorial feeling.

Mukul Chutia was of the opinion that identity borders have hardened due to various factors. As a result, cultural assimilation has suffered. He mentioned what several Assamese scholars had already mentioned: the hegemony of the Assamese elites. He said that this domination has created divisions separating the Assamese and the indigenes as well as the Assamese and other migrant communities. This has resulted in the Assamese identity itself being 'obliterated'. He continued:

> At present, there is no democratic environment in Assam. The Assamese people want to push their language and culture forcefully on other smaller communities. This has resulted in identities being lost. The forced domination [by the Assamese] has also led to communities moving away. For example, the Biharis, Bengalis, Bodos have all moved away during the Assam agitation, and so now there is no identity as Assamese.

Against these views of indigenous identity, Uttam Bathari offered a different explanation. His views were that in North East India,

indigeneity has not been examined critically. There is no yardstick to define who is indigenous. Generally, those who are outside the Hinduization process are referred to as indigenous. But the Assamese people also includes some indigenous communities.

Indigeneity remains undefined and yet controversial and contested. Bathari raises another issue: indigeneity, he notes, can be lost through religious conversion. This issue is highlighted in the case of Naba Kumar Sarania, he noted, presently Member of Parliament from Kokrajhar. Members of the Bodo community filed a case in the Gauhati High Court challenging the ST status of Sarania arguing that

the Sarania Kachari community impersonated as a sub-tribe of Boro-Kachari, which is enlisted in the ST list of Assam. It retained its Sarania surname while identifying itself as a sub-caste of Boro-Kachari though there is no constitutional provision for a community to partly retain its name and partly adopt the name of another community.[301]

[301] Cited in Choudhury, P.B. (22 April, 2014). Sarania ST Status Challenged [online news] The Telegraph India Available at
http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140422/jsp/northeast/story_18263392.jsp#.VPGXJ3yUdVQ
[Accessed: 02/02/2015].

This issue arose as the Saranias, though originally part of the Bodo community, have taken up the Hindu religion, become Hinduized, and are therefore alleged to have lost their indigeneity.

When I discussed the issue of indigenous identity and how to differentiate between indigenes and 'others' with Anil Boro, he said that boundaries are mostly linguistic. It is through language that the identity demarcation starts in Assam, and from there it moves on to become a political struggle. He said:

> The Bodo agitation started with a demand for protection of language and identity. The demand started with having Bodo as a medium of instruction as the Bodo people felt the domination of the Assamese middle class and wanted to break away. In 1963, the Bodo language was accepted as a medium of instruction and in 1967, the PTCA and ABSU were formed to demand statehood. A new movement for Udayachal started. Since then, the movement is continuing, as the Bodos feel that they cannot develop fully if they remain with the Assamese.

Moneswar Deuri echoed Anil Boro's view that language was the basis from which identity struggles developed. Having himself written one book on the Tiwa language and its grammar, he added:

> The tribal languages were getting erased by the Assamese language. The Assamese language speakers do not like to give recognition or dignity to the tribal languages. This has happened with the Chutiyas, the Koch, the Ahoms,

the Bodos, the Rabhas, and the Lalung in the plains, though the Lalungs in the hills were able to preserve their language. As such, I have established through my books that the Tiwa language is not a dialect of Assamese but is a separate language.

While agreeing with the argument that languages were used as a tool to initiate the process of demarcating indigenous groups, Ranoj Pegu said that originally there was fluidity and assimilation in the nation building process. This, however, was 'reversed' in recent times. He outlined his argument saying:

> During this period of conflicts [between Ahoms and other communities], a greater Assamese nation building process was also initiated. So many clans merged to form a nation. For example, the various tribes in Pasighat [in Arunachal Pradesh] formed one community known as Adi. Similarly, the Misings also had many clans but about 200 years back, there was no Mising community and their identity was restricted to their clans […] But when Sankardev started his Vaishnavite movement, at that time, the Meiteis also started a separate Vaishnavite movement and started to return to an original Meitei script, thereby moving away from the Bengali or Assamese script. Again, in recent times, the Ahoms also started a similar revivalist movement. The basic reason for all this is a power struggle by these communities for physical, emotional, economic and political space. This is a common theme in the entire North East.

Yet, he said, there are examples of indigenous groups that do not have a common language. He noted:

> During the 600 years of Assamese nation building during the Ahom period, there were other nation building processes also. For example, the Naga, with no common language, started to evolve a new Naga identity that cut across state and country borders. The same thing happened with the Mizos who created a Mizo identity.

Pegu's remark goes to show that nation building can take other forms beyond language. So, while the Bodos and Misings followed the path of ethnic nationalism by emphasising common descent and affinities with peoples speaking similar languages, the Nagas and Mizos followed a path that mobilised religious sensitivities (i.e., Christianity) to construct the vision of a nation.[302] So while on the one hand, the Nagas and Mizos were struggling to separate from Assam, at the same time they were also following a complex nation-building process within their various tribes.

When I asked Ranoj Pegu about his opinion on the vexed issue of ways to identify 'the Assamese' and the indigenous peoples, he proposed:

> All residents in Assam before 1826 should be treated as indigenous. But those who lived in Assam on Aug 15, 1947, should be treated as Assamese. So, for example, the tea communities are Assamese, but they cannot be labelled as indigenous or tribals.

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[302] See Biswas, P. & Suklabaidya, C. (2008). *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*, New Delhi: Sage Publication Pvt Ltd., p. 174.

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He added that if this process is not accepted, then Clause 6 of the Assam Accord would become 'infructuous' and the common threat of illegal immigration to Assam could not be tackled. This periodization and its effect on the term 'indigenous', is similar to AASU's declaration that the Assamese should be referred to as 'indigenous Assamese' rather than merely as 'Assamese'. It also brings the term closer to the definition of the International Labor Organization's Convention, 169, which defined indigenous people in Article 1 (b) as:

> peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.[303]

While defining what indigeneity means remains controversial, it is nevertheless a valuable concept in social, political and scholarly discourse. But by linking indigeneity to a specific timeframe, Pegu has advocated a flexible framework that allows indigenous peoples to respond to real life issues, in this case, responding the in-migration of Muslims from Bangladesh. This offers the Assamese and the indigenous peoples of the North East the possibility of collaborative struggles. It also

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[303] International Labour Organization, 'Convention 169: Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention,' Geneva (June 27, 1989). Available: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169 [Accessed: 21 January, 2013].

brings the question of indigeneity closer to a political definition. Moving away from a purely anthropological definition may offer a way out of the contentious politics of language, script, and religion.

4.3 On Non-Indigenous Peoples

Discussing the identity of the indigenous peoples would be meaningless without addressing the identity of non-indigenous ones: the 'others'. Tabu Ram Taid focused on perception:

> The tea tribes and others are in Assam for a long period, but even after 200 years, many such communities are still not considered natives. It is all a matter of perception. Similarly, the issue of Muslims in Bodoland and the riots there are also to some extent a matter of perception: that Bangladeshis have taken over Assam and that question still haunts us […]. The general perception that we will be overwhelmed by Muslims is growing fast as there is also a perception that their population grows faster and they will grab our land […]. Marwari and Bihari people are here for livelihood and this is very common worldwide. Nepalis, likewise, have been here for over 100 years but they are not considered foreigners, as there is some homogeneity.

While conflicts are created by mutually incompatible interpretations of events that are built upon beliefs, values, and experiences, Taid's view seems to suggest that it is perception rather than any tangible reality that creates the 'Other'. 'Perception' itself, however, involves the selection, organization, and interpretation of data, and it is

important to note who or what feeds this process. He repeatedly pointed to the role of the vernacular media; it is language that has led to a volatile communal environment.

For Mukul Chutia, however, the 'other' was about whether one is regarded as an ST. This was clear, even if he admitted that there is confusion in the rational for ST classification. He provided an example:

> Sutiyas, which once got assimilated with the Assamese, are now struggling to separate [from the Assamese] primarily due to lack of opportunities. Hence they are demanding ST status […], because while one part of the Sutiyas such as the Deori [the priests of the Chutias] are categorized as ST, the other main community of Sutiya are not. This has created division […]. The whole demand is constitutional and so, unless this issue is solved early, it may become a very big problem.[304]

The construction of the 'other' according to Uttam Bathari was historical. The indigenous peoples of Assam have over the years developed some "allergy" towards the Assamese. This allergy is merely because the Assamese are a linguistic society, said Anil Boro. But when it came to Muslims, the 'other' is seen differently. He said:

> Muslims, on the other hand, are seen as a threat to religion, culture, and economic issues. Though some safeguards are there for the tribals and the Bodos, the non-Bodos are now trying to take away these safeguards; some even advocating the scrapping of the Bodoland accord.

[304] I use the term "Sutiya", instead of the term "Chutiya", as the former is used only in Assam due to its phonetic closeness to the Assamese script.

Boro also touched upon the demand by six communities for formal scheduling and said that 'if they are scheduled, they will also get the benefits the Bodo are receiving', making the Bodoland Accord meaningless. This may create more problems and more violence, he warned.

The issue of Muslim 'expansionism' was also touched upon by Moneswar Deuri. He mentioned that Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam, earmarked 44 tribal belts and 32 tribal blocks, and provided that other tribal forest land should also 'not go under Muslim domination'. This, he said, created a 'feeling' that the Muslims in Assam were the 'other'. But, he said, such efforts to safeguard tribal interests were actually neglected in recent years. He expanded:

> There is large-scale encroachment now and Muslims are a big issue. Tribals are uneducated and there is economic backwardness. So this gives rises to clashes. But there is a long lasting problem between tribals and Assamese too. And the bureaucrats are the new British in Assam, and even with tribal leadership, there will not be any development of the tribals, as the fault is in the system. For example, during the AGP rule, local AGP district leaders had pressured the AGP ministers not to attend our conferences. This sort of negligence is at the root of the Bodo movement too.

Ranoj Pegu, however, gave a more detailed analysis of how the 'other' is constructed from an indigenous point of view. He said that the 'other' is constructed not by the indigenous but by the Assamese themselves as they create their own identity. He said:

The Assamese language speakers think that language is their identity but they take different positions at different times. At times they aligned with the immigrant Muslims, at other times with the Hindu Bengalis against the Bengali Muslims. At times, they have even formed alliances with tribals against the Muslims […]. In Assam, for example, there should be nothing to complain about the Assamese nation building process. But this process has a hegemonic aspect and a democratic aspect. And the democratisation of Assamese society will have to accept and accommodate the various 'other' cultures and communities and give them space.

Pegu admitted, like the other interviewees, that tribals do have an "allergy" against the Assamese. But he said that as migrants 'jostle for space' (i.e., 'geographical territory and political recognition') new otherness is produced. So while international migration dominates the discourse of violence in Assam, it is the inter-district migration that assumes importance for the indigenes. Therefore, the 'other is not limited to just Muslims migrants from Bangladesh, but includes any other migrants from other parts of Assam'. For example, he said:

There have been Muslim migrants in Goalpara district for a long time. But for the far away district such as the Mising areas the international migration is not so important. What is more worrisome is the inter-district migration, as people from, say, Goalpara move to Dhemaji. This has the potential of creating the conflicts as indigenous land is encroached upon. In upper Assam, there is a new community, now known as ex-tea garden community. These are the

surplus tea garden workers and the progeny of the original tea garden workers. They too are creating pressure on the scarce land resource and there is potential for conflicts with the indigenous communities.

When I talked about this issue with Uttam Bathari, who as I had mentioned is a Dimasa scholar in Gauhati University, he said that all clashes occur as a result of the construction of 'self' and 'other'. As such, the Karbi-Dimasa clashes are not exceptional. He added:

Within the indigenous people, the construction of self and the other in Assam is an ongoing process since the pre-colonial period. Since the time of the Dimasa state, there was constant interaction, negotiation, and adaptation of other cultures and practices. At that time it was a fluid society but with colonial rule, it became ossified. Now it is completely ossified. The state structure has led to this ossification. For example, in Dimasa language, the Kopili river (as it is called by the Assamese) is called Lungfrang. Now, 'Lung' is not a Dimasa word but a Karbi word, yet the Dimasas never changed the name. Similarly, in offering a prayer to the river deity, Dimasas use a prayer that has Karbi words. This shows the fluidity in social interaction. Yet, in 2006, near that same Kopili river, a few buses were stopped and 38 Karbis were hacked to death with no harm inflicted on the Dimasas on those same buses. This proves that while at the grass root level there is an ongoing exchange of culture at the upper level the identity issue has become ossified.

Bathari's comment touches upon the issue that is central to this thesis: that colonially constructed identities froze previous fluid relations and promoted ongoing processes of 'othering' in Assam.

I talked to Anil Boro of Gauhati University on the issue of reverse assimilation and re-tribalization. He responded:

> Some of the Bodo, Rabha and Tiwa people have taken up the Assamese identity but this has not affected the entire people. This has created a cultural difference. They left the tribal practices and took up the Assamese culture, even changing their names. This is another interesting social problem. But the Bodos do not see the Assamese as an enemy, like they see the Muslims, though there is an allergy towards them. This is because of the hegemonic and chauvinistic mind-set of the Assamese people.

Many of the interviewees insisted: it was Assamese domination that was forcing indigenous communities to seek protection through preventive measures.

4.4 On "Homelands"

Having discussed indigenous perspectives on violence, their view of themselves and of their non-indigenous counterparts, I now turn to discuss the issue of possible ways forward. I asked Tabu Ram Taid for his views on how to promote social cohesion. He said that the fault lies in the very system that created divisions in the first place: 'this is a result of vote bank politics and political influence by those who settle immigrants.

But the Bodo–non-Bodo issue has another angle'. I asked him to elaborate but he simply said 'we all know'. I assumed he meant it had to do with religion. He then proceeded:

> The perception that each community is different was always there, but administratively dividing them started only during the British period. Now it is leading to heart burning amongst the different communities, as some are having reservations [i.e., positive discrimination] while others do not have such privileges.

Two issues flow from Taid's comment: firstly, that the earlier community divisions moved from being issues of cultural variation to becoming enshrined in the legal framework; and secondly, that this legal framework is in turn producing haves and have nots. The economic inequalities that drive the violence are one result of the codification of legal inequality.

When I talked about communal divides with Mukul Chutia, he responded by noting that the conflict situation cannot continue forever:

> At one time there will be change and we can see this even today. In the last 50 years, we see that Assamese culture itself has changed over time. Dress, music and food all have changed in the last 50 years. However, autonomous councils as they are will not solve any problem. Even the granting of ST status may not solve all the problems. But it could be a good way to address some of the economic issues […]. The Sutiyas are seen as Assamese, do not want a

separate state and want to be part of Assam and the Assamese community. But we want ST status, so we can derive economic benefits. And if the demand for ST status is not fulfilled, then our demands may take a different turn, like what has happened with the Bodos, the Koches, and others.

Swarnalata Pegu, however, put it differently. She clarified that while the initial stress was on language, the Misings now only want development in their villages. They are 'lagging behind' the rest of Assam:

As I mentioned, the demand for a separate autonomous area for the Misings is an old one. Since tribal lands have been alienated decades ago and were settled by non-tribals, some organizations started to highlight the Mising–non-Mising division, but in the present day, with a new sense of nationalism and inclusiveness in India, such division are simply for furthering the cause of development in Mising villages and not for creating violence and conflicts. Misings now only see themselves as a separate linguistic community within Assam and not as a separate political community seeking separation.

Social cohesion, in this case, is linked to fulfilling economic aspirations. And granting schedule tribe status, which leads to 'reservations' in jobs and other opportunities, is seen as a way to achieve that economic benefit.

When I discussed the nature of prospected economic development with Uttam Bathari, he responded that when it comes to indigenous peoples, there is a widespread misconception about 'development' and what it means. He added:

When we talk of development as a means to stop the violence, we always talk about the Western model of development, such as industries. But we neglect the community process. The 6th schedule envisaged a community process but that has been neglected and the constitutional-legal process has gained prominence. The constitutional-legal process gives importance to the individual and the character of the society is neglected. Banks, for example, want land ownership documents for granting loans, but indigenous people do not have land rights or documents.

This assertion indicates that in many respects the constitutional-legal process that is meant to protect indigenous peoples is blocking community aspirations and creating a social divide.

In this context, therefore, Anil Boro concluded that the solution is not easy to find:

The problems are too complex and will go on. Many believe that if the Bodos get a separate state the problem will be minimized. But some dissatisfaction will still remain. The Bodo–non-Bodo divide is a big problem.

I talked to Ranoj Pegu on the role of the state in promoting processes that may address these challenges. As he is the former Chairman of the Mishing Autonomous Council, he seemed to be the right person to ask. He said:

There should be a mechanism for resolution. Conflicts are there everywhere, but there have to be ways of addressing them. In North East India there are also some outside forces working to destabilize the area […]. The existence of conflicts is not important but how to manage them by the state and by civil society and communities is what we should look into.

Pegu suggested that one way to initiate positive change could be to periodize indigeneity itself. His call was to move from a fixed notion of indigeneity to a time-based notion of indigeneity. This, he felt, would help the indigenous communities to move away from having to live within the bounds of colonially-determined parameters and their legacies.

4.5 Discussion

The viewpoints in this chapter reflect a variety of approaches to the subject of indigenous identities, sovereignties, and struggles. The interviewees agreed that the conflicts in Assam are a product of a particular history and of colonial and post-colonial politics, rather than an outcome of primarily economic issues or immediate political grievances. Land, or the right of access to productive natural resources, were not highlighted by the interviewees as the primary driver of the conflicts, though Ranoj Pegu did speak of land nationalization as a pre-colonial legacy. The interviews repeatedly stressed cultural and linguistic domination and the role of colonial agents and 'politicians' in creating divisions. The interviewees contradicted the standard scholarly narrative of the conflicts in Assam: economic issues such as land and under

development, and the internal colonial policies of the central government were not mentioned as primary causes.

At the same time, the interviewees did not see cultural differences as the conflicts' main causes. They mentioned language and fears of Assamese domination but stressed that this was a consequence of historical developments and not the originating cause for the conflict. The effects of subordinate Hinduization, for example, were mentioned by Moneswar Deuri and Anil Boro in order to highlight ongoing social exclusion. For them, this initially created the indigenous–Assamese dichotomy, which was later supplemented by the migrant issue.

On the question of the definition of the indigenous peoples of the area and of non-indigenous others, responses varied. While Taid saw it as a matter of 'perception', Bathari saw it as a result of 'historical processes', and Ranoj Pegu opined that the 'other' is the creation not of the indigenous peoples but of the dominant Assamese. While all of the interviewees agreed that the Assamese elites enjoy a dominant role, there was a marked interest in forging some sort of unity. Restricting the 'aggression' of the immigrants from Bangladesh was cited as the main priority. This is well articulated in Ranoj Pegu's periodization of indigeneity. In this sense, indigeneity is, as Francesca Merlan has authoritatively noted, "frequently" the outcome of "governmental policies".[305]

Communal violence is not only about destructive technologies and the actors involved. It involves how the target of violence is defined, and what triggers are

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[305] Merlan, F. (2009). Indigeneity: Global and Local, *Current Anthropology* (vol 50) (no 3), p. 305.

capable of unleashing it. Before a group is targeted for elimination, one needs to define it. This definition of the 'self' and the 'other' has varied through the history of Assam but, I suggested, has become ossified as a consequence of indirect rule. The interviewees agreed, even if they often insisted in mentioning the precolonial past. As narrated by some of the spokespersons interviewed, indigenous violence in Assam is primarily a consequence of Assamese domination. Many of the interviewees used "allergy" in their conversation to refer to a generalised aversion towards the Assamese. For these individuals, violence is thus a form of collective self-defence in the face of real or perceived existential threats.

It is clear that for these interviewees the primary reason for indigenous violence is related to the need to protect a specific identity and be recognised and classified as separate. The issue of indigenous identity and recognition has therefore become crucial in Assam's postcolonial politics.

As a complex and confusing system of classification became an intrinsic part of the colonial administration of Assam, a simultaneous attempt to eliminate indigenous difference began. As indigenous characteristics were to be replaced with more 'civilized and acceptable' mores, and as religious conversion proceeded, a hegemonic Assamese nation building process was to produce a homogeneous society. These assimilatory attempts are seen in settler societies worldwide. Haphazard classification, fragmentation, and marginalisation produced violence and exploitation.[306] In the end, in postcolonial Assam, a system of triangular relationships proved resilient and indigenous exclusion persisted.

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[306] Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural Violence, *Journal of Peace Research,* (vol 27) (no 3), p. 294.

Ethnic conflicts in Assam involving indigenous and other communities have been recurring but not continuous. Even in Nellie, the indigenous Tiwa community continues to live in close proximity to Bengali Muslims. Similar situations can be observed in Bodoland and in Dhemaji. This implies that the indigenous communities are interested in recognition more than exclusivity. Democratic politics are seen with suspicion since they fear being numerically swamped by more numerous communities. Yet again, there is often intra-communal cooperation and coexistence for mutual gain. In the main, the interviewees felt that respectful state-driven projects can play a role in creating reconciliation.

Chapter 5: The Question of Assamese Hegemony in Assam

The ULFA, as I discussed in Chapter 2, was formed during the Assam Movement as an effort to protect Assamese interests. Many in Assam consider the ULFA as faithfully representing an Assamese ideological mindset. Often the organization is mentioned as a primary source of Assamese protests against New Delhi, especially after the decline of regional forces such as the AASU and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Even if the organization carried out several violent attacks against the police and paramilitary forces, and on Hindi speaking immigrants, efforts to bring it to the negotiating table began in mid-2005, when a group of civil society activists calling themselves as the Peoples' Consultative Group (PCG) initiated talks on their behalf with the Government of India. But even when these talks were in progress, between Sept 2005 and June 2006, ULFA killed 41 civilians and injured 135 others.[307] In this chapter, I attempt to unearth the views of the Assamese on violence, non-Assamese others, and social cohesion. I interviewed a few community spokespersons.

While the move to assert the domination of the Assamese had started even before independence, it was after independence that a real concerted effort was made to gain political domination on the basis of language. Assam is one of India's most diverse states, socially and linguistically. In 1971, the census classified Assam's population into speakers of 76 major languages and dialects, with 48 other languages and

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[307] Mahanta, N. G. (2013). *Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty*, New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd,. pp. xiv, 264.

dialects.[308] In that census, 60.89% of the population in the state marked "Assamese" as their mother tongue. This figure included a large part of the Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants.

As discussed in Part A, during the colonial period and up to 1873, Assam had Bengali as the official language. Later, during the independence struggle, the state was to be attached to Bengali-speaking and Muslim-majority Pakistan. These events created a genuine psychosis in the mind of the Assamese people. The multiplicity of languages in the state motivated Assamese intellectuals to try to enforce language uniformity.

The Congress party led the independence movement and was generally dominated locally by Assamese speaking people. All the senior leaders (Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnu Ram Medhi, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Tarun Ram Phookan, Kuladhar Chaliha, and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi) were Assamese. The party, therefore, committed itself, not simply to the economic development of Assam, but also to improving the position of the Assamese speaking population by using the state's constitutional powers. On 26 September 1947, the Assam Government stated that "Assamese is to be accepted as the compulsory second language in all schools where it cannot be Assamese completely".[309] That same year, a number of Assamese organizations such as Assam Jatiya Mahasabha and Asomiya Sangha took a leading role in lobbying for Assamese to be declared the state language. Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, the President of Assam

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[308] The census in India is held every 10 years. 1971 was the last census year before the illegal Bangladeshi immigrant issue became volatile. Due to the Assam Agitation, no census was conducted in 1981.

[309] Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 1947 (vol. I) (no. 14) quoted in http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/13531/8/08_chapter%204.pdf, p121 [Accessed: 12/12/15].

Jatiya Mahasabha and a doyen of the Assamese people, submitted a memorandum to Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Chief Minister of Assam, urging upon the government to concede to the persistent demands of the Association and to declare Assamese as the state language.[310]

Subsequently, the Assam Sahitya Sabha observed 16th July 1951 as the first 'State Language Day', and appealed to all sections of the public to cooperate with the Government of Assam in its efforts to introduce Assamese in all educational institutions in the state. Against this backdrop, and with the rise of Assamese sub-national movements, this chapter explores the link between the breaks in social cohesion, their causes, and the views of the Assamese elites. Central to these topics is the way in which the Assamese community perceive itself and its predicament.

The Assamese have played a dominant and hegemonic role in the socio-political life of the state after independence. This domination has been ongoing, and the Assamese see themselves as the majority community. However, census figures suggest that the Assamese may no longer constitute a majority of the population. In 1911, the Assamese language speakers were a mere 21.69% of the total population of Assam. Its share of the population subsequently rose. This increase was not due to an absolute increase but to changes in the borders of the state and the ways in which some groups of immigrants preferred to identify themselves.[311] Later, as immigrants stopped identifying themselves as Assamese, the Assamese language speakers, therefore,

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[310] Natun Assamiya, Gauhati (September 10, 1947). The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, September 29, 1947. Quoted in http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/13531/8/08_chapter%204.pdf, p. 122.

[311] Baruah S (1999) *India Against Itself : Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 52.

started to decline.[312] The latest census data confirms that the numerical strength of the Assamese community has been reduced. While they constituted 60.89% in 1971, by 2001 the numerical strength of the Assamese was reduced to 57.81%, and in the 2011 census, it was 48.80%. Even nationally, the percentage of speakers of Assamese language had declined from 1.63% in 1971 to 1.58% in 1991, to 1.28 in 2001. On the other hand, the percentage of Bengali speakers increased from 19.71% in 1971, to 21.67 % in 2001, and to 27.54 % in 2011.[313] Yet, even though it is no longer the absolute majority community, the Assamese community continues to dominate the state. Mo tribal individual or migrant has become the Chief Minister in the post-independence period.[314]

After independence, a policy of welcoming immigrants who chose to identify with Assamese culture, accepted Assamese as their language and declared themselves members of the Assamese nationality developed. This Assamese linguistic nationalism led to alienating the tribal elements that were earlier acknowledged as integral to the Assamese community. Commenting on this domination of the Assamese in the state, Gosselink states:

> When Assam was established as a full-fledged state in the Indian Union in
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> 1947, the Assamese realized that they had significantly more power under the

[312] Talukdar, S. (9 Jan., 2008). Less than 50 per cent Assamese speakers in Assam [online news] Available at: http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/less-than-50-per-cent-assamese-speakers-in-assam/article1175679.ece [Accessed on: 13/03/2015].

[313] Talukdar, S. (2008). Less than 50% Assamese speakers in Assam, [online news] The Hindu. 9th January, 2008 Available at: http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/less-than-50-per-cent-assamese-speakers-in-assam/article1175679.ece [Accessed: 12/12/15].

[314] Anowara Taimur was Chief Minister for six months between 1980 and 1981. She was an Assamese Muslim, and not an immigrant Muslim.

new Indian Constitution than ever before under the British. Possessing independent power for the first time in 120 years, the majority Assamese were blind and indifferent to the claims of the Bengali minority groups and the tribal communities for a share in the fruits of independence. Instead of trying to integrate the minority tribal groups within Assamese society, the Assamese endeavoured to acculturate them by imposing the Assamese language upon them.[315]

As the numerical strength of the Assamese has always been marginal, Assamese linguistic nationalism became the new norm. Even the numbers did not improve dramatically. A genuine psychosis gripped the Assamese community: that Bengalis – both Hindus and Muslims – could in future renew attempts to dominate Assam. Moreover, as many indigenous communities had rejected alignment with the Assamese, enforcing language homogeneity became a crucial tenet of attempts to retain a hegemonic position.

The explosion of Assamese sub-nationalism in 1959-60 was led by AASU. This was primarily directed against migrants. A similar language movement flourished again in 1972. At that time, organizations such as the AASU maintained that the influence of the migrants Bengali Hindus would "endanger the existence of Assam and the Assamese people".[316]

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[315] Gosselink, R.G. (1994). Minority Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Assam, India. *Boston College Third World Law Journal* (*v*ol 14) (issue 1) (article 5), p. 91.

[316] Weiner, M. (1978). *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India,* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 119.

These developments should be contextualised in the wider picture. The process of imagining India as a single unit emerged during the independence movement.[317] This happened peculiarly in Assam, as the indigenous people were considered to have a permanently separate identity. The nationalist imagination was further stunted locally by the mindset of the Assamese elites, which relied upon a number of assumptions or beliefs about indigenous inferiority and Assamese superiority. In addition, the freedom movement itself was visualized by many of the indigenous people as an attempt to entrench the privileges of the Assamese elites.[318] The national organizations that held the leadership, such as the Congress Party, also continued to have a pro-Assamese bias. The attempt to retain Assamese hegemony backfired and the establishment of separate autonomous areas and states for some of the indigenous peoples became inevitable.

Saikia states that within the struggles opposing indigenous peoples and the Assamese, the Ahoms find themselves in a peculiar position. While the majority of the Ahoms consider themselves to be part of the Assamese society, a section of the Ahoms seeks to re-invent and establish a separate identity. They advocate social and economic justice and claim rights to land and resources.[319]

As I present the interviews with my informants from the Assamese community, my aim is to understand if their rule can be profitably compared to that of other settler

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[317] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 45.

[318] Pathak, S. (2010). Tribal Politics in Assam: 1933-1947, Special Article published in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLV, No 10, pp. 61-69.

[319] Saikia, Y. (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, p. 17.

communities. I explore their views on the violence, and their attitudes and opinions of other communities. Though the Assamese community is more homogenous than the umbrella category of 'indigenous peoples', or the migrant communities that I will present in the next chapter, my informants represent a fairly wide cross-section of opinion. The main themes I have used in the previous chapter to articulate my findings are unchanged.

5.1 On Violence

When asked about violence, my interviewees emphasised the lack of governance, a desire for political power, and under-development. Often the media blames the lack of governance for outbursts of communal violence. In the interviews, I explored with my informants the reasons why Assam periodically erupts into communal violence.

Mukul Mahanta, a social worker and a consulting engineer who was educated in the UK and often writes on the need of the Assamese people for full autonomy, stated that all violence in Assam has its root in some instigation by the Union Government. This is a widely held view in Assam. Hazarika refers to the Delhi 'Step Mother'.[320] Mahanta added:

> Every conflict in Assam can be traced to some poking by Delhi in the local
> issues. One glaring example is to ask for a definition of 'Assamese', as this
> adds to their plan of creating a distinction between the tribals and the
> Assamese. The political system thus has a role to play in this conflict. Once

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[320] Hazarika, S. (1994). *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast,* New Delhi, Penguin Books, p. 249.

the conflict has appeared and gets magnified, then Delhi quietly draws up a peace accord with one group or the other. Then the process is repeated. Conflicts in Assam, therefore, are not identity struggles, as no one is looking at identity, for there is no identity beyond self.

On further probing, he clarified that all Union Governments (often referred to as 'Delhi' in Assam) are guilty of a 'cycle of instigation, violence and peace accords'. Rajagopalan remarks that several peace accords have been signed in the North East since 1949, but that there are no visible outcomes.[321] The major accords in the past included those with the AASU, the BLT, the NSCN and the NDFB. Mahanta's statement suggests that the Union Government is following a policy of internal colonialism in the attempt to exploiting the North East. This also resonates with the widespread view amongst the Assamese that Assam has been continuously neglected and exploited by the Union Government.

I discussed the issue of violence with Shristi Sharma, also known as Dwipamani Kalita, a now surrendered ULFA cadre who was an expert in mortar shelling. She agreed with what Mahanta said: violence for her is often the result of the central government's neglect and instigation. She said:

> People have many demands. These they articulate in various forms. But the state structure [the federal structure] in India does not help in resolving these demands. When simple requests are not met, people start to protest. Soon it leads to bigger protests and some people take to violence as a way to express

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[321] Rajagopalan, S. (2008). *Peace Accords in Northeast India: Journey from Milestones,* Washington, East West Centre, p. 2.

anger and frustration […]. But if the government had been responsive, these problems would not have arisen.

Narayan Barkataky, a former Member of Parliament from the Bharatiya Janata Party, also pointed to the central government's failures, but he spoke of under-development as the root of the violence. Like the commonly held view of neglect, he too alluded to the 'divide and rule' policy of the British and then tied up this argument with the policies of the current government. But he goes further than Mahanta and said that both the Union and State Governments are at fault. He went on:

> Never in my childhood, even when I went to college in the 1970s, did I witness violence of the sort I see today. These are all the result of under-development. The Congress party has divided the different ethnic groups and society in Assam for their own interest […]. The main issue for the conflicts is neglect. The central government neglects Assam and the Assam government in turn neglects smaller areas, like the areas inhabited by tribals, such as the Bodos and the Karbis […]. There is a complete lack of governance.

His view is that the Union Government neglects the state and that the State Government, in turn, neglects the tribal areas. This opinion, however, was not shared by the other interviewees. These participants pointed out that the 'tribals' were not neglected, but were actually accorded exclusive privileges not available to others.

Dr. Sanjib Barkakati, Associate Professor at A.D.P. College, Nagaon, and a well-known Sankardev scholar, insisted that it is not the government alone, but the

diminishing influence of religion, and the rising influence of leftist ideologies, that are to blame for the violence. In this sense, he favoured a religious explanation rather than references to language. He further analysed the causes of violence:

> One reason for this disappearance [i.e., the lack of social peace] was the role played by leftist intellectuals who tried to occupy the space and influence the tribals with leftist ideologies. For this they tried to eliminate the influence of Sankardev and his Mahapurishiya culture by spreading a propaganda that Sankardev was anti tribes […]. Intra-ethnic clashes, on the other hand, were due to rifts amongst the elite classes within the ethnic groups themselves. This was because they are mainly fighting for the spoils of power. Different influential groups operate within the tribal and ethnic groups to control power. The power struggle has increased after the tribal autonomous bodies were established by [former Chief Minister of Assam] Hiteswar Saikia.

Barkataki was thus rehearsing the view of most historians of Assam who refer to the assimilative influence of religion and Hinduization. Hinduization is a process that uses the Hindu religion to influence tribals and other communities to adopt Hindu customs and traditions.[322] The process aims to build a common cultural identity for the entire people of Assam in terms of religion, dress, festivities and language. Barkataki was asserting that it is the impasse in the assimilative processes that had begun in pre-colonial times that is at the root of the conflicts. However, his references

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[322] See Xaxa, V. (2008). *State Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India,* New Delhi, Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd. pp 16 – 22; and Bujarbaruah, H.K. (eds.) (2007) *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, Vol. 3, p. 248.

to leftist ideologies and economic theories regarding the conflict between classes contradict his contention that the conflicts are a colonial creation.

Manjil Saikia, a senior lawyer in the Gauhati High Court, on the other hand, blamed a 'feudal mentality' for promoting violence. He expanded:

> In Assam, unlike India, a feudal structure and a feudal socio-cultural mentality still prevails. This is not so in other parts of the country where capitalism is starting to grow. As such, the mental attitude of the people of Assam is not the same as other parts of India. With such an attitude of feudalism, most of the people are thus not capable of overcoming the barriers of narrow attitudes, which germinates the seeds of conflicts amongst different classes and communities […]. The concept of 'son of the soil', which drives a lot of conflicts in the region, is a phenomenon of a feudal state and not of capitalism. So such conflicts are not seen in other states that have crossed the threshold of feudalism.

Saikia added that the violence is driven by 'economic factors', such as the 'son of the soil' movement, but he also acknowledged that there are constitutional issues that need to be addressed. Like Mukul Mahanta, he blamed the constitution as one of the major causes of the conflicts:

> Prior to Independence, India was a group of feudal states and when Independence came, effectively it became a union of feudal states […]. Now the people are digging their roots and trying to go back to history. Though the

constitution is supposed to be federal and unitary, it is actually neither. So this

creates confusion and so, in order to get rid of the conflicts, the constitution

should be either fully federal or fully unitary. This half-baked approach, partly

federal and partly unitary, does not seem to be working.

Thus, he said, a disharmonious legal structure that gives preferential treatment to

some and not to others creates different power relations and fuels the conflicts. By

focusing on a feudal mentality, he also focused on state control of land as a major

cause of conflict. This point is supported by a large literature. In this context, Kohn,

for example, writes that in India the absolute control of land by the state restricted

transforming it and transferring it to decentralized private ownership. Since this

inhibited indigenous development and economic modernization, she stated, "British

domination became the agent of economic modernization".[323]

On this point, Nani Gopal Mahanta, Associate Professor in the Department of

Political Science at Gauhati University elaborated at length and referred to the

conflicts as 'colonial':

> I have written about the causes of the conflicts in an article in the *Economic*
> *and Political Weekly*. They are due to a continuation of the colonial policies.
> For example, the creation of ethnic enclaves in the postcolonial period is
> nothing but a continuation of the colonial policies.

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[323] Kohn, M. (2014). Colonialism, published in The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [Available at: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/colonialism. [Accessed: 03/08/14].

Mahanta gave detailed examples of the creation of ethnic homelands and insisted that it was a 'colonial concept'. He thus echoed Sanjib Baruah's argument that ethnic homelands create a division in society and lead to violence.[324]

Rajen Gohain, a Member of Parliament from Nagaon constituency, on the other hand, emphasised identity as the driving factor generating violence:

> All people have existential problems and no one wants to lose their identity. So in their attempt to safeguard their identity, conflicts are natural, but there is always some politics involved. For example, Hindus come from Bangladesh for survival, as they have been tortured there and did not get their right to a safe and secure place. When they come and settle in a place, the original inhabitants get disturbed. Similarly, the Bodos and other tribal people have developed a political consciousness and think that they have been overpowered. So they too want to establish their existence and are fighting for their right through the autonomous councils and to ensure progress and development.

Though Gohain spoke of efforts to safeguard identity, he did not clarify what identity meant. This issue was also not pursued in the interview but I assumed that he meant cultural identity as expressed by language and religion. He went beyond cultural identity, however, and spoke of 'economic' and 'security' issues that drive migration, and how migration, in turn, drives violence.

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[324] Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorders: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 183.

Violence is thus seen differently by the interviewees. While all of them spoke of the immediate flash-points (such as politics, underdevelopment, and cultural differences) as the reason, they all linked it to structural reasons and their colonial roots. All of them also saw the political system as being linked to the violence in some way or another. Barkataki, for example, talked of the discontinuation of the assimilative process. He did not seem to see that it is precisely forced assimilation that produced the marginalization of the indigenous communities.

5.2 On Identity

As discussed in Part A, history was used by colonial administrators as a tool. The memorialisation of identity offered by the colonial historiographies can be positive or negative. When negative stereotyping is memorialized and internalized, it creates fear of other communities and may lead to conflicts. I spoke in the interviews about stereotypes, about the image that the Assamese hold of themselves and of others, and the consequences of this imagery.

When British colonizers came to Assam, they developed the tea industry. At around that time they also formed an opinion of the people as 'lazy natives'.[325] They thus justified bringing in indentured labour to work in the tea gardens. Similarly, Mukul Mahanta asserted: 'In Assam, there is no work culture. Everything is provided for by the Union Government turning the local people into a dependency'. Mahanta's view that the Assamese are unwilling to work hard reproduces a colonial trope.

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[325] Sarmah, J. (2006). Growing Tea: Lazy Natives and Colonialism's Coolies, published in Agrarian Studies Colloquium, April 14 [Available at:

http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/colloqpapers/24sharma.pdf [Accessed on: 05/08/14].

His view that the Union Government desires to make Assam into a dependency is thought-provoking and once again refers to the notion of 'Delhi'-driven internal colonialism. In divided and conflict-prone societies like Assam, history leads to memorialisation of past events. But while a positive history should stimulate and promote civic engagement and critical thinking, a negative history does the opposite. In this sense, Mahanta's interview revealed how the negative image of the Assamese people has been internalized. In Assam, such internalization has led to fear of other communities and resulted in attempts to enforce domination and uniformity through assimilation and/or exclusion. This is often a cause of conflict.[326]

Mahanta stated that the colonial system replaced the old 'system of harmony' with a new system. He maintained somewhat inconsistently that this replacement was also done through the constitution:

> That harmonious system which operated for thousands of years was taken off and society was given a wrong hope that everybody will have equality like in Russia or a good life like in the USA. So the present system has resulted in the continuity of the same British system in which there are exploitation and corruption. The Union Government will never stop this exploitation, as they survive on the exploited resources of the North East […]. The whole purpose of the present Government is a hoax, and for all this to change and for it to get reversed, the constitution should be recast.

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[326] Demmers, J. (2012). *Theories of Violent Conflicts: An Introduction,* Abingdon, Routledge, p. 55.

He thus compared the present administrative system in Assam with the British system which was based on exploitation. As such, he finds that the colonial paradigm lives on in post-colonial Assam through the constitution.

Narayan Barkataky speaks in the same language:

> Knowledge of local history is lacking in the education system and that has resulted in the younger people not being proud of their heritage […]. Moreover, people have become lazy with no industry, no jobs, and no employment.

But while viewing the Assamese people as lethargic, Barkataky extends the negativity to Assam as a whole: lack of governance, lack of industries, lack of employment, and lack of opportunities. In this sense, his views are similar to the colonial ones, which found Assam a 'backward' land of 'demonic peoples' and witchcraft.[327] The importance of historical narratives for collective identity is well documented. People strive to retrieve, validate, and be acknowledged by others in their own history. But historical accounts of Assam have also been used to portray an inherent negativity of its society. This interview uncannily reproduced these tropes.

Sanjib Barkakati, however, did not agree and questioned the very authenticity of colonial history:

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[327] Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p 6.

The basis of the Bodo demand for banning Sankardev is based on historical accounts that are not factually correct. History has been distorted in this regard to depict Sankardev in poor light […]. Edward Gait, who had written a book on Assam history, collected materials to write this book through official channels and relied heavily on one office assistant who was not an expert and certainly not a scholar of Assamese history. Yet, the material for the book was whatever that office assistant supplied. This, therefore, became distorted. Similarly, I have seen Danton's book on Barpeta Satra, which has a lot of mistakes. As such, the colonial historians were either careless or opinionated, and hence their publications are not quite trustworthy.

Barkakati thus cited specific examples to demonstrate that the histories written by the British were erroneous. Yet, in Assam, Gait's book is still the recommended history textbooks. There is indeed a major gap in historical research on Assam.

The projection of a negative image of the Assamese was also mentioned by Manjil Saikia:

Immigrants come to the state of Assam because of the sluggish nature of the Assamese people. The people are not hard working. Large tracts of land have been left vacant, and the vacant land was taken over by immigrants.

His view, blaming immigration on the Assamese people, once again faithfully echoes a fundamental tenet of the colonial historiography of the region. Many in Assam see Assam as a place of '*lahe lahe*' ('slow and steady').

I asked Rajen Gohain, a leading spokesperson of the Ahom community, what he felt of the Tai Ahom identity struggles in Assam in the context of the larger Assamese community. He responded:

> I do not support the Tai Ahom movement. Ahoms came to Assam and started the Assamese nation, abandoning most of their cultural markers and took up the local culture through marriage. In the process, they lost all of their own and became Assamese.

Gohain thus felt that since the Ahoms have become Assamese, there is no justification for reversing assimilation and trying to articulate a new/old separate identity. He then emphasised the importance for all communities to 'live together' and build a homogeneous Assamese nation.

My informants expressed a wide range of opinions on the impact of history and memorialisation. All the participants, however, echoed the colonial viewpoint. The interviews revealed a consistent inclination to downplay the differences between the indigenous peoples and Assamese and to focus on the immigrants. The interviewees acknowledged the legacies of the colonial past but refused the possibility of genuine transformation. For them, the way forward is to assimilate into a homogeneous whole.

5.3 On Indigenous Peoples and on Migrants

Stereotypes fix and freeze identity. Stereotypes and their projections have often been the impetus for violence. Once again, my discussion began with Mukul Mahanta. He repeated what has been his general argument: that it is the Union government that divides and pits one community against the other:

> While the tribals think that ethnic Assamese are cheating them, they don't realize that the ethnic Assamese are themselves being cheated by the Union Government. Presently, Delhi is doing this to the Assamese [i.e., turning them into a dependency], and now they want to do the same with the tribals by providing them with funds directly so that they too become Delhi-dependent communities. And for this, Delhi has been trying to instigate the tribals to rise against the Assamese and break away. Various agents are working at various levels.

In this interview, Mahanta brought out another factor in the creation and continuation of social divisions: the Union Government uses project funding as a tool to create, develop and manage the differences between the Assamese and the tribals. His statement explained how differences in society continue and are managed in postcolonial Assam.

When asked about social inclusion, social exclusion, and social cohesion in relation to the issue of immigration, Mahanta said that the state needs "controlled development",

where local people are preferred, which would act as a deterrent to further immigration and would address the core issue of "political control":

> I have no problems with immigrants coming in, as the state is not yet saturated. If there had been population saturation, further people would not have come in to settle anyway. It is possible to recast our economy in agriculture, forestry, pisciculture, and meat cultivation. But development must be controlled. If there is uncontrolled development, then obviously it will lead to conflicts. If there is controlled development and local people are preferred in the development process, in jobs and other facilities, then the migrants would also be controlled, or will stop coming as they will then be treated as second class citizens […]. Peoples' mind can be changed fast if someone comes along with a vision and a will to change things.

But the whole issue of defining 'local' people is a contested issue in Assam. In 2010, the Government of India had asked AASU to define the term 'Assamese' when they demanded protection for the 'Assamese people'. No universally acceptable definition has been found yet. Leadership, Mahanta noted 'is a major issue'.

Shristi Sharma expressed similar sentiments on social divisions. She said:

> While there are always economic demands, the non-fulfilment of which leads to violence, it is also true that in Assam there are several communities, each with their own demands. Often these demands overlap and create friction. For example, the Bodos made some demands and got those resolved with the

carving out of BTAD. But it is now clear that they are a minority in BTAD, and so the majority communities feel neglected. Naturally, there will be violence. The government should have looked into these aspects in their totality when trying to resolve the problems, but it is clear that the government's actions give rise to more problems.

Narayan Barkataky, on the other hand, clearly speaks of the divisions separating tribals, non-tribals, and immigrants:

There is a clear divide. These [differences] are now embedded in the minds of peoples […]. I can give an example of the conflict between the tribal groups of Chakmas, who are seen as immigrants, and the local Arunachali people in Arunachal Pradesh […]. Assam had immigrant problems earlier too, when the border was porous, as originally the whole subcontinent of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was one country. But now Bangladeshis come for work as they are a densely populated country. At the time of partition, when East Pakistan was formed, there was a saying in Assam that Muslims will one day try to take over the North East by sending people from there to this area.

Barkakaty's view of a conspiracy of Muslim immigrants trying to create a 'greater Bangladesh' is widely held in Assam. This view can be found already in the colonial census documents. For example, J H Hutton, the Census Commissioner in 1931 wrote that "Muslim immigrants will swamp entirely the indigenous inhabitants and in the course of two or three decades change the whole nature, language, and religion of the

Brahmaputra valley".[328] It is significant that these notions were unaffected by decolonisation.

Barkataky further added that even after the Assam agitation and the resultant Accord, there was neither any social cohesion nor any development:

> During the AASU Movement over 800 people died but the AGP leaders had no idea how to run a government and they became politicians overnight with no vision or experience. When the AGP failed, now some people, including the ULFA, are thinking that we need independence and should be out of or within India autonomously and that will solve our problem […]. Many migrants have accepted the laws of the country and so they should be accepted as our own.

He thus admitted the inability of the Assamese society to be inclusive and favoured regularising the pre-1971 illegal immigrants. But he lamented that lack of leadership has hampered inclusive efforts.

Sanjib Barkataki gave a detailed answer on the issue of stereotyping and othering. He was very categorical about the social divisions and his views were strongly stereotypical. He mentioned sub-divisions within the Bodo communities and their intra-ethnic conflicts. He first spoke on the tribal demand for a ban on the Assamese religious scriptures:

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[328] Hutton, J.H. (1931). Census Reports 1931. Available at: http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/old_report/Census_1931n.aspx [Accessed on: 01/08/14.

The demand by ex-MP S. K. Bwismuthiary to ban Sankardev's books [*Kirtan Ghosa* and *Naam Ghosa*] cannot be accepted. Within the Bodos there are three primary groups: some of them had even given up their own culture under the influence of Brahmanism and it is their misconception that Sankardev had a role to play in that [conversion].

When speaking of immigrants, Barkakati cited his own research as an academic to highlight the immigrant onslaught in Assam:

The immigration issue in Assam is a very sensitive matter. I have analysed the demographic data on Assam and have observed that the growth rate of population in Assam has been 50% higher than rest of India. This was only due to immigration. This rise in the immigrant population has affected the indigenous peoples and hence the Assam Agitation resulted.

When asked to clarify, he added that by 'immigrants' he meant Bangladeshi illegal immigrants. However, Nani Gopal Mahanta, another academic participating in my interviews did not agree with the notion of an 'onslaught'. He said that there is no reputed study on the extent of such alleged illegal immigration. The in-migrations of Bengali Muslim to Assam has been going on since the colonial period. While the extent of immigration has not been scientifically measured, the interview revealed that stereotyped images were indeed shaping perception.

Manjil Saikia spoke on the issue of otherness from the point of view of uniformity. He noted that there is no concept of Indianness in India. Nationalism in Assam has been either linguistic or culturally framed:

> In India, this [uniformity of thought and attitude] does not happen, as they cannot consider themselves 'Indians' and thus there is no concept of Indianness. So people tend to think only of their own language, community, and caste, and not of the entire country. They are unable to think beyond the immediate.

This stress on linguistic nationalism is also emphasised by Baruah who argued that the creation of linguistic states in India (each state being created on the basis of an official language) has given rise to sub-nationalisms. The Assamese community was no different. And even though Assam is a multilingual state, the Assamese developed a concept of Assam as a 'nation-province'. This led to a loss of Indianness in Assam.[329]

Nani Gopal Mahanta, like Mukul Mahanta and Narayan Barkataky, also stated that identities were created by the colonial state. He then spoke on the immigration issue and on my suggestion that a settler colonial studies framework be applied to understand the conflicts:

> But the immigrant Muslims were again a dilemma of the colonial state, which therefore created the boundaries by making, unmaking and remaking of their

[329] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 7.

identity. There was no history of ethnic cleansing in Assam earlier and hence no group demanded a space as theirs. The term 'settler' is itself a colonial concept, settlers are supposed to have hegemonic power, but it does not apply [to precolonial Assam] because both the settler and indigenous were the same. There was nothing like settler or indigenous earlier, as all the people were considered part of mother earth.

As mentioned earlier, Nani Mahanta did not believe in an immigrant 'onslaught'. He instead linked the immigration issue to electoral politics:

> The analysis of some groups that immigration, like that of the Muslims or the Nepalis, is being done as per a design to wipe out the Assamese and occupy the space is not true, as their growth is happening because of natural growth. But their domination as a political group is having an effect, as the indigenous people do not have the numbers to match them in elections and struggle for political power.

When asked why there has been so much violence directed against the immigrants if there is no real threat to Assam and the Assamese, Mahanta said that the image of an immigrant is immediately linked to his cultural identity: his religion, his dress, a particular beard style, and a skull cap. He added:

> Ethnic politics is all about perception and it is both a positive perception, which speaks of similarity and a negative one, which creates the 'Others'. In this case, the idea of immigration is frozen. The very concept of a composite

Assamese has become a frozen concept since 1930, and that frozen-ness is re-established and re-affirmed not only by the increasing numbers of the immigrants, but because of their cultural practices, such as polygamy, religion, long beards, the Islamic cap, different dress, etc. In the end, people ascribe certain ideas to these people as their entire socio-cultural practices are foreign to the local people.

This stereotyped image of the immigrant, he maintained, has become frozen since the colonial period and feeds the fear of the Assamese of losing control. It is therefore, Nani Mahanta felt, not a fear of losing cultural identity; rather, it is the fear of losing political power in elections that is driving the violence.

The discussions on this theme produced important insights. Nearly all the participants linked their stereotyped perception of 'tribals' and 'illegal immigrants' to the political system. There was also a marked desire to assimilate the tribals with the Assamese to contain the rising political influence of immigrants. At the same time, some of the participants highlighted the role of the constitution of India in continuing the colonial paradigm of socio-ethnic divisions

5.4 On "Homelands"

I have discussed how it was the Assamese linguistic micro-nationalism that prompted indigenous demands for self-rule. Rajen Gohain's view of the indigenous homelands that were established in the postcolonial periods returns to assimilation:

In the end, economic, political and social survival is the main issue that is driving these divisions and conflicts. But these divisions will only create more problems and perhaps at one time, the original unity of Assam will return. The feeling of neglect has to disappear and all must be treated as one. The Ahom domination in politics in Assam must give way to others, say the tribals, one of whom can become a Chief Minister, and there is a need to accept their leadership.

While Gohain admits to 'Ahom' (i.e., Assamese) domination in politics and fantasises of a tribal Chief Minister, the question that needs to be answered is whether assimilation or an overarching Assamese identity can help a multi-ethnic and multi-language state. It is forced assimilation that actually marginalized and excluded the indigenous peoples from the Assamese community. When I asked him to comment on this contradiction, Gohain suggested that to address this exclusion, the tribals should be brought to 'the forefront' of Assam's political space.

Nani Gopal Mahanta also spoke of the continuation of the colonial paradigm through the constitution. He cited several Acts framed in the colonial period but still operating in Assam today:

Then with independence came the 6th schedule in the constitution, which was nothing but a continuation of the colonial paradigm. It is a sort of asymmetrical federalism. It contained all the elements that were seen in the formation of the excluded areas. Many scholars argue that this provision in the

Constitution is nothing but a continuation of Coupland plan […].[330] Even the laws are of the colonial age with only slight amendments, but they were still in the same form and content. For example, the Police Act, 1862, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the various land laws. It is all a continuation of the colonial paradigm in terms of practices and form.

Rajen Gohain responded to the issue of tribal homelands and the resultant differentiated citizenship highlighting that this is a legal and constitutional process:

> At the same time, the constitution has given some protection to some communities, and when the same is implemented, other communities are affected. For example, when some rights are given to the tribals in the form of scheduled areas or other reservations, the 'son-of-the-soil' issue crops up in those areas, as other local people are affected. It is an ongoing process and resolving it is not easy. The tribal demands, or the demands of other groups, are all based on the constitution and hence cannot be termed illegal. For example, ST reservation is now being demanded by six communities. Now if these six communities are given ST status, then the state will become a tribal state, and other non-tribal communities will be affected.

He states that any change that will turn citizens into denizens will create problems temporarily, but he noted that these problems would not arise if the whole state is declared a tribal state. If this is done, then it is the tribal viewpoint that would

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[330] The Coupland Plan was announced in 1941 by Robert Rides, Governor of Assam. The plan envisaged a directly ruled British crown colony in the North Eastern hills and the Kachin region of North-western Burma.

dominate. A recurring theme of these interviews is the desire of the Assamese community to be designated as indigenous. This definition is in fact similar to the prospect of assimilation. Such a declaration would render indigenous protection meaningless and would result in further indigenous cultural, economic, and political subordination. The nationalist settlers of many settler societies often claim to have become indigenous.

Unlike Nani Mahanta, Narayan Barkataky argues that the 6th schedule of the constitution should be 'reinterpreted':

> Even the 6th schedule is no longer what it was and has been amended several times. The idea of the schedule that ensures protection is not bad but it is being wrongly used [...]. If the basic issue of under-development, including education, is addressed, many of these conflicts would disappear.

Sanjib Barkatki referred to intra-community divisions within the tribals to highlight that these are merely political struggles for power. He gave the example of the Bodos once again and said that there are several groups within the Bodos in conflict with each other. He then advanced his views:

> Within the Bodos, one group is of the Christians, one is of those who practise their traditional Bathou religion, and the third is of the Hindu followers. Now there are rifts within themselves and each group is at loggerheads with the other group.

Referring to the other factor in the system of triangular relations, he then added:

> The Assam Agitation gave rise to AGP but now the AIUDF has been formed
> as a natural corollary of the Assam movement. This party has been formed to
> address the insecurity within the minorities.

Barkataki's statement regarding the AIUDF, a political party formed in 2009
representing immigrant Muslims and other minorities as a result of the Assam
Agitation is important. It demonstrates that the Assam Agitation achieved in the long
term just the opposite of what it had set out to achieve. Rather than restricting the role
of the immigrants in Assam, it actually generated increased political consciousness
amongst them, leading to the formation of a political party capable of representing
them. This clearly reflects the failure of the Assamese leadership to achieve social
inclusion and social cohesion.

Manjil Saikia also spoke of economic development as a way to achieve social
cohesion. This is a common theme of all my interviewees identifying as Assamese.
Saikia addressed this question by saying:

> The conflicts in Assam and the North East are a conflict of attitudes and not of
> class or caste. When there will be uniform development, then these differences
> will disappear as the attitudes will change and become homogenous and
> similar.

His views, therefore, negate the need for ethnic homelands. Rather, he would prefer an economically developed Assam, where development acts as a catalyst for social cohesion. He exemplified:

> Assam is now developed in agriculture only because of the hard working immigrants. Initially, these people were weak, economically and politically, but now they have become strong and so they are trying to acquire political power […]. Even the Assamese language is now surviving and is being developed by the immigrant people. What the people of the region fail to notice is that there was assimilation at one time but the entire process of assimilation has now stopped, due to lack of initiative by the government in furthering the process of assimilation. If the present trend continues, one day, in maybe 30 years or 40 years, the Assamese people will lose their grip on political power.

Nani Mahanta evoked a pre-colonial homogeneous society. He found fault in the colonial paradigm that broke it up, and added:

> Colonial arguments for such division were fallacious, as Assam had always witnessed a vibrant relationship amongst all communities, even during the time of the Ahoms, who had intermixed with the hill tribals.

Like Manjil Saikia and Narayan Barkataky, he too spoke of struggles for political power and opined that the immigrant issue is ultimately about keeping political power with the Assamese. He then remarked:

What is challenging for the indigenous people is that their political space may slip out of their control. It is not a design of the settlers, as they were themselves always exploited by the colonial rulers and were anyway always on the periphery and never a part of the colonial brotherhood […]. It is not possible or justifiable to compare these Islamic immigrants with other immigrants such as the Nepalis or the Bengalis Hindus. These others are looked differently, due to religious proximity […]. The primary issue on the immigrant question is the possibility that political representation may slip away from the local people. The question is thus not of Bangladeshi immigrants per se, but more of political power.

But he also clarified that when he says 'indigenous' people, he means the Assamese and tribals together and that by 'settlers' he was referring to the immigrants. The media in Assam also uses 'settlers' as a term in this way. Nani Mahanta, however, stated clearly that the present 'top-down' model of development was not conducive to social cohesion, and that it was indeed driving some of these conflicts:

The present development model in the North East would actually trigger more conflicts. This is because development here now gives benefit only to certain groups and all other groups get neglected. For example, numerous hydroelectric projects are currently being planned or implemented, and the dam construction work is being done without any consultation with local people.

Rajen Gohain too, like the other participants, spoke of a pre-colonial homogenous society in Assam. And yet, while 'the nation building process that was going on in Assam has stopped', there are going to be more problems: 'even in this age, the Assamese Hindus have failed to protect and secure the Satra land. So while Muslims have secured their own countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, they are now even coming as immigrants and occupying our country'. Gohain's latter statement links the immigration issue to religion and land. He said that the Hindus have failed to protect land in India, while the Muslims, even after having carved out their own country from India, now 'come to occupy Indian land'. This was a failure of the Indian nation. The pre-colonial nation building process must restart; indigenous homelands would contradict this need.

The interviewees agreed that the basic features of the current legal and administrative machinery inherited from colonial period should be retained. None of the spokespersons, except Nani Mahanta, proposed structural changes. The interviews revealed an Assamese desire to be labelled 'indigenous', and a determination to propose modifications to the 6th schedule.

5.5 Discussion

The interviews presented above threw light on some of the underlying issues shaping the conflict in Assam. All the interviewees spoke of the need for political power to remain with the Assamese, though nearly all admitted that migrants and indigenes also form a part of Assam's society. All the interviewees had a stereotyped image of the immigrants and nearly all of them were also opposed to the present model of

ethnic homelands. Many even referred to the notion of the Assamese 'indigenous' peoples, a term that is now actively used by the AASU as well. My discussions with my informant further revealed that the political structures established by the colonial and postcolonial states are at the root of the breaks in social cohesion. The constitution of India was especially seen as a document that creates and sustains social divisions rather than creating inclusion.

One of the issues that nearly all the participants mentioned was that economic development would bring an end to the violence. Only one informant argued that the present model of development would bring further conflicts. Nearly all the interviewees felt that certain sections of society are benefiting from government policies. Some noted that project funding was used as a government tool to create and sustain social divisions. But without wide-ranging consultations and structural changes recognizes the political autonomy of the indigenous communities and their interests, creating sustainable reconciliation opportunities involving indigenous and non-indigenous Assamese would be difficult to achieve. Rather, development may lead to renewed exploitation and displacement. The Pagladiya and Subansiri dam projects are a case in point. Indigenous resistance to them was to be expected.

At the same time, an interesting point that came out of these interviews pertains to a perceived vacuum of leadership. All the participants from the Assamese community perceived themselves as belonging to an "at risk" community, even though the Assamese have held the reigns of political power in the government since independence. Nearly all of them blamed the political system and spoke of the need for strong leadership to create a space for open dialogue and for a more truthful and

honest engagement with migrants and indigenes. They admitted that the political leadership, something that has always been with the Assamese, has failed in Assam.

The most important finding of these interviews is that while all the participants wanted peace, they preferred to refer to the immigrants as the most dangerous "other". They were not willing to accept the immigrants, wanted the political leadership to remain with the Assamese, and did not want to allow for separate autonomous spaces to the tribals. Pathak writes that attempts by Assamese intellectuals like Ambikakagiri Rai Choudhury to simply label the tribals as 'Assamese' and therefore assimilate them have been going on since the colonial period.[331] Except for Sanjib Barkataki, who saw the tribal society as too fragmented, all the others envisaged some form of assimilation and for the tribals to merge within the Assamese community. This, again, reflects a basic settler colonial characteristic.

While some of the interviewees commented on surviving colonial legacies, their stereotypical perception of 'illegal' immigrants should be linked to the media's ability to mould public perception. The media often presents a simple moral world, where a group of perpetrators faces a group of victims, but where neither history nor motivations are contextualized. Even when newspapers highlight violence as a social phenomenon, they fail to understand the forces that shape the agency of those involved. Images of immigrants and their Islamic cultural practices are reproduced over and over again on television screens and other media. Since the media in Assam is mostly controlled by the Assamese people, there are two major English daily newspapers, several Assamese language daily newspaper, and a couple of TV

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[331] Pathak, S. (2010). Tribal Politics in Assam: 1933-1947, (Special Article) Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLV, No 10, p. 61-69.

stations, all in the hands of Assamese people, stereotypical representations of

immigrants and tribals are widely diffused. Beyond stereotypes, the interviews

allowed me to an insight in the ways in which the Assamese perceive the tribals as

enjoying privileged citizenship rights and the immigrants as benefitting from weak

legal provisions. They, therefore, see themselves in a disadvantaged position. This

perception shapes a particularly anxious political consciousness. Even in this respect,

the Assamese resemble the settlers of other settler societies.

Chapter 6: Being migrant in India's North East

In the early hours of 18th February 1983, one of the biggest massacres in the history postcolonial India took place in an area known as Nellie in the Nagaon district of Assam. On that day, in a short span of a few hours, over nearly 2,000 Bengali speaking Muslims, often referred to in Assam as 'Bangladeshi Miya', were massacred by Assamese and indigenous tribals, allegedly of the Lalung (Tiwa) community.[332] When the Assam Movement ended and the AGP came to power in 1985 with the backing of the Assamese community, the exclusivist politics of the Assamese state were retained. The migrants' claim for justice went unheeded. Writing in *The Hindu* daily, Harsh Mandar, a well-known social activist, said:

> The government gave the survivors of Nellie compensation for each death of as little as 5,000 rupees, contrasted for instance with Rs. 7 lakhs that have been paid to survivors of the Sikh carnage of a year later in 1984. Six hundred and eighty-eight criminal cases were filed in connection with Nellie organised massacre and of these 310 cases were charge-sheeted. The remaining 378 cases were closed due to the police claim of "lack of evidence". But all the 310 charge-sheeted cases were dropped by the AGP government as a part of the Assam Accord; therefore not a single person has even had to face trial for the gruesome massacre.[333]

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[332] Kimura, M. (2013). *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters*, New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd., p. 68. Note: Figures of the Nellie massacre vary from 1383 to 3000.

[333] Mandar, H. (14 Dec. 2008). Nellie: India's Forgotten Massacre [online news]. The Hindu. Available at: http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-sundaymagazine/article1437892.ece [Accessed on: 14th November, 2015].

Beside the Nellie massacre, during the Assam Movement several small violent incidents occurred. There were rumours that the Bengali Muslims in Assam were being supported by *Razakars*, a volunteer militia that used to be sponsored by the Pakistan army. During the period 1979-1985, anti-migrant tensions were high and street violence common. One week after the Nellie massacre, a student delegation from the Aligarh Muslim University came to Assam to visit the area and assess the situation. I acted as a local guide and interpreter. We visited several of the villages in the Nellie area, including the worst affected villages of Alisinga, Barbari, and Khulapathar. During that visit I was exposed to the outcomes of the worst imaginable violence. There were bodies strewn in the fields and floating in marshy lands.

During this period, I, therefore, took a keen interest in trying to know why villagers suddenly turned against each other, and in illegal immigrants issue in Assam. As I explored the issues, I gained insights from several eminent individuals, including Syed Samsul Huda, a well-known Assamese Arabic scholar. I realized that apart from the Bengali Muslims, there are other political identities labelled as 'migrant communities' in Assam: the Bengali Hindus, and the Hindi speaking peoples, for example. They all are affected by violence. In this chapter, I explore the perspectives of the migrants to Assam.

The 'migrants' to Assam are a very diverse group. Writers, media, and scholars label them in various ways and this chapter also touches on these various differentiations.[334] Migration to Assam is a historical issue, but during the colonial

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[334] See for example Khadria, B. (2009). The future of South Asian Migration: a look at India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. *OECD Journal: General Papers.* (vol 2009/4) (no. 13), pp. 31-54. And

period, it was the state that encouraged it. Yet, by the end of the 19th century, it was the colonial administrations that began to treat them differently.

As we have seen, in 1836, the British colonizers declared Bengali the official language of Assam and this created growing distrust against the Bengali Hindus who had migrated to help the state's administration. But after a long campaign, in 1873, the Assamese succeeded in restoring Assamese as the official language of the state. This transformed overnight the community of Bengali Hindus into a newly defined category: non-Assamese immigrants. However, unlike the Bengali Muslims, the Bengali Hindus were differentiated on the basis of their language and not their religion. This differentiation created a separation between the two communities even though both spoke the same language.

In 1947, when the country was partitioned on religious lines, millions of Bengali Hindus fled East Bengal (which became East Pakistan and later Bangladesh) and settled mostly in West Bengal and in Assam. This heightened the already strained relationships. The Assamese community had always expressed a set of very anxious stances towards the Bengali Hindus. The districts of Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi in the Barak Valley, including several other areas such as Dhubri, Nagaon and Tinsukia district in the Brahmaputra Valley became areas where the Bengali

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also Khadria, B., Kumar, P. eds., (2010). *India Migration Report 2009: Past, present and the future outlook,* New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University: Exclusively distributed by Cambridge University Press.

Hindus settled. During the 1971 India-Pakistan war, more Bengali Hindus settled in Assam as refugees.

In November 2010, twelve organisations representing the Hindu Bengalis in Assam submitted a petition to the President of India seeking her intervention to stop the state government from harassing their community. The co-ordination committee of the Hindu Bengali Organisations of Assam demanded that the 6.5 million Bengali Hindus in Assam (approximately 20% of Assam's population) be identified as political sufferers of and victims of partition. *The Telegraph* newspaper reported Chief Coordinator of the organization Sanjay Kumar Chakravarty saying: "for years, the government has been looking at us with suspicion and many [Bengali Hindus] are being harassed by the authorities in the name of detection and deportation of foreigners". The committee pointed out that the central government had provided protection to the Hindu migrants from West Pakistan in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan by making appropriate legal provisions in 2004, and that the state governments in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Bihar, Tripura and West Bengal were supporting Hindu migrants. The Assam government, however, was depriving Hindu Bengali migrants of their political rights by labelling them 'D-voters'.[335]

This community has very ancient roots in Assam. And so does that the community of Bengali Muslims. The British had encouraged their immigration to sustain agricultural production. They were later labelled 'immigrant Muslims' in the census of 1901, thereby creating a new group-based political identity. The events leading to

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[335] 12 groups move President: Hindu Bengalis in Assam allege harassment [online news]. The Telegraph India (Nov 27, 2010). Available at:
http://www.telegraphindia.com/1101127/jsp/northeast/story_13225697.jsp [Accessed: 12.12/15].

the partition of India in 1947, created further distrust towards Bengali Muslims and since the early 20th century, the xenophobic focus of Assamese nationalism targeted them with particular virulence. They were labelled 'silent invaders', and 'land-hungry Bengali immigrants' by colonial administrators, including Census Commissioner C. S. Mullan in his 1931 report.[336] This sustained the generalised perception of this community as 'encroachers'. For example, writing in *The Guardian*, prominent lawyer and former Union government Minister Ram Jethmanali writes:

> It is recorded that between 1905 and 1921, the immigrant population from East Bengal increased four times over. Assam has had the highest rate of population growth in India since the beginning of this century. Between 1961 and 1971, the proportion of Assamese declined for the first time and that of Bengali speakers increased; between 1971 and 1981, 1.2 million migrants were added to a population of 14.6 million in 1971, and the number of registered voters increased inexplicably from 6.5 million in 1972 to 8.7 million in 1979. Clearly, the demographic invasion and its electoral returns, and the inevitable conflict for livelihoods, land, and political power had begun.[337]

This demographic accounting is exemplary of the nature of public debate on the issue. Horowitz states that due to in-migration, the population of Assam grew 138% between 1901 and 1951, an outstanding rate, especially when compared to the all

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[336] Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 57.

[337] Jethmanali, R. (2014). Assam's Tragedy Has Roots in History, [online news] The Sunday Guardian, August 31. Available at: http://www.sunday-guardian.com/analysis/assams-tragedy-has-roots-in history [Accessed on 8th Sept., 2014].

India growth rate of 52% during the same period. At the same time, he noted that the Assamese were reluctant to work as hard as the other immigrant communities (the Oriyas and Biharis) and did not have the entrepreneurial acumen of the Marwaris.[338] This type of essentialising permanent differentiation between the Assamese and the various immigrant communities is at the origin of the violence.

Since 1979, 'illegal immigrants' have been occupying the very centre of political discourse in Assam. This is further fuelled by the fact that Muslim population in Assam is now 34%, and that Assam is the second highest Muslim-populated state in India. This population has the highest growth rate.[339] While there is no group who can be actually labelled 'illegal' immigrants, as very few have been formally identified as such, this is a question that can swing the result of an election. Nevertheless, in the post-1979 period anxiety has grown exponentially. Vague indicators have at times been referred to, sustained by the assumption that people speaking East Bengali dialects (Mymansinghi or Shyleti) are inevitably Muslim, wear a skull cap, a *lungi* (a common dress worn by Muslim men in Assam), and sport a beard. These communities are also sometimes referred to as *miya* or *bahiragoto*, or merely as *Bangladeshi*.

The Assamese–Bengali divide was highlighted in the demographic profile of the Census of India 2001. The census found that the proportion of Assamese speaking people in seven districts of the Brahmaputra Valley (Barpeta, Darrang, Sonitpur, Morigaon, Bongaigaon, Lakhimpur, and Dhemaji) had declined, while that of Bengali

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[338] Horowitz, D.L. (2001). *The Deadly Ethnic Riots*, Berkeley: The University of California Press, pp. 208-209.

[339] Census of India report on demography. *Times of India*.

speakers had increased over the previous ten years.[340] While Bengali speakers are already a majority in the Barak Valley, this profiling and associated numbers resulted in further anxiety and in a hardening of political stances.

At the same time, other communities were also categorized separately from the Assamese in that census. This consisted of the tea community and others, the Hindi speaking Marwaris and the Nepali-speaking people, for example. The tea community, also loosely referred to as adivasis, were also encouraged by colonial agents to migrate to Assam around 150 years ago to work in the tea gardens. They came from central India, from states that now constitute Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, West Bengal and Orissa. But while their counterparts in these states enjoy 'schedule tribe' status, the Indian constitution denied them this privilege in Assam. The community mostly lives in their own tea garden areas and there is little intermixing with other communities. Violence directed against them in Assamese areas is minimal, even though there was a violent attack on an adivasi procession in Guwahati in 2007. There have been several violent incidents against the adivasis in the BTAD areas, however.

The Hindi speaking people are generally clubbed together as one by the Assamese. Often they are all referred to as Marwari, though this group may include Sindhis, Gujaratis, and Jats. Baruah writes that the Marwaris in Assam helped Assam to transition from a non-monetised economy to a market economy. In this sense, their contribution to Assam has been immense. In fact, Baruah writes, the Assamese

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[340] The Hindu (Aug 10, 2008). Decline in Assamese Speaking population in 7 districts [online news] http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/decline-in-assamesespeaking-population-in-7-districts/article1312013.ece [Accessed on: 14/3/15].

peasant economy was once largely dominated by the Marwaris. Even though the Marwari community has produced several Assamese literary stalwarts, including Jyoti Prasad Agarwal, the Assamese have expressed their 'resentment ever since the nineteenth century'.[341] In recent times, the community has often come under attack from ULFA extremists who see them as a symbol of the Indian central state.

Nepalis form another large migrant community. Nepali migration to Assam is nearly two centuries old. It also resulted from the settlement policies of the colonial administration. Today, after generations having lived in Assam, the community faces new challenges: being labelled either as 'migrants' or 'foreigners', they face displacement and have to live with "underdevelopment, deprivation, insecurity and lack of proper facilities".[342] Their in-migration was encouraged by colonial agents even before the formal onset of British control, and the Treaty of Sagauli in 1817 already mentions it. Nath writes that the Nepalis continued to be loyal citizens and faithful allies of the British. However, in 1929, the British colonial administration depicted them as having dirty sanitary habits and referred to them learning 'bad habits' from the local people. This created a new differentiation. Between 1951 and 1971, the Nepali population grew 3.5 times. It was 2.4% of Assam's population in 19781. Baruah remarks that "[b]y and large, except perhaps during the Assam movement, anti-Nepali feeling in Assam has been rare".[343] In post-colonial Assam,

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[341] Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 61-62.

[342] Nath, L. (2006). The Nepalis in Assam: A question of identity in Deb, B.J. (ed.) *Ethnic Issues, Secularism, and Conflict Resolution in North East India,* New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, pp. 126-133, 225-226.

[343] Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 64.

the Nepalis, therefore, became a significant immigrant community and were labelled as 'foreigner' during the Assam movement. Nath concludes that even though the Nepalis have integrated well with the Assamese, they have "lived in the periphery of the Assamese mainstream people".[344]

In this chapter, the term 'illegal' immigrants shall specifically refer to Bengali Muslim migrants from East Bengal (later East Pakistan and even later Bangladesh), while the term 'migrants' shall include all who are perceived as non-Assamese and non-indigenous in-migrants (including Nepalis, Marwaris and the 'illegals'), including people from other parts of India. The boundaries separating migrants, illegal immigrants, and refugees have become even more contested in contemporary Assam. These categorisations sustain a system of relationships that resembles indeed that of settler societies elsewhere.

6.1 On Violence

Violence in Assam has always been linked to land alienation and/or the machinations of politicians. In discussing violence in Assam, land alienation is seen as a crucial driving factor. The BBC analysis that I began this thesis with, for example, cited land alienation by Bengali Muslims as the dominant cause of the clashes in Bodoland. Received explanations for the Nellie massacre of 1983 insist on Bengali Muslims

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[344] Nath, L. (2006). The Nepalis in Assam: A question of identity in Deb, B.J. ed., *Ethnic Issues, Secularism, and Conflict Resolution in North East India,* New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, p. 131.

encroaching on the tribal land.[345] In these interpretations, the tribals are not seen as violent perpetrators but rather as victims. While the tribals claimed victim status, the Bengali Muslims did the same and generally refer to their social and economic exclusion as the cause of the riots.

Debasis Sur, a lawyer in the Gauhati High Court who is active in several Bengali Hindu protection forums and is also the Convenor of Assam's Hindus Displaced from Bangladesh Committee, focused on victimisation:

> My father had come from East Bengal during the partition to Assam and had settled in Tinsukia. He left everything behind, fearing persecution but unfortunately, even after 60 years in Assam, we have not got the same citizenship rights as the Assamese people. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in Delhi or Kolkata, where Bengali Hindus are treated as equal. Bengali Hindus are the real sufferers

He continued:

> Bengali Hindus are the victim of circumstances beyond their control. But the Assamese failed to distinguish between the refugees and the illegal Muslim immigrants. Because of historical reasons, the Assamese see it merely as a question of language. This creates linguistic mistrust and this mistrust is then exploited by political parties for electoral gains […]. Political parties also want all this to go on, as they are interested in vote bank politics […]. The mistrust

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[345] Kimura, M. (2013). *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters*, New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd pp. 124-125.

is not in the system, as initially, it was not there […]. It is created to generate conflicts, for otherwise the creators [of discord] cannot demand and get benefit.

Sur articulated a particular feeling I encountered in my fieldwork with the Hindu Bengali community: they are a "double victim" in Assam. On the one hand, they have been victims of circumstances in East Pakistan; on the other, their migration to Assam has led to renewed victimization.

Mohammad Sheikh, who hails from the Bengali Muslim community and is also a lawyer in the Gauhati High Court, however, said that he viewed violence differently. He says this was a natural outcome of 'friction':

It is a process. When new languages and religion come in contact with old ones, some conflicts are generated. This is natural and in time it stabilizes and the conflict disappears.

A reluctance to blame the dominant communities (either indigenous or Assamese) for the conflicts, while claiming a type of 'circumstantial' victimhood is significant. I have encountered this stance repeatedly in my fieldwork. It is a rhetorical structure that contributes to situate a particular type of subaltern discourse.

Politics as the cause of violence is also a recurring argument. It was summed by Ranabir Samaddar, a Bengali Hindu scholar based in Kolkata, who stated at the outset

that violence was the result 'population as politics'.[346] This was a colonial construct, he added. It started in September 1915, he went on, when a new set of rules were promulgated to 'contain' the migrants by giving them only annual leases over land with no inheritance or transferability rights. This was aimed not only at restricting the rights of the migrant community but also at restricting the rights of the Assamese, who were no longer able to sell their land. Subsequently, he stated, dividing lines under the Line System were drawn between the Bengali Muslims and the Assamese, and the Bengali Muslims were encircled by the land holding Assamese. And while the Assamese people thus continued to have complete inter-district migration and land holding rights, any migration by the Bengali Muslims out of their own area was seen as encroachment and an expansionist movement.[347]

The interviewees all preferred to blame the situation on external causes. They refused to draw further conclusions. Broadly speaking, the narrations I have encountered in my interactions with Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Nepalis, and people from the tea communities, refrain from blaming the dominant Assamese community. They all blamed the 'political system' as the root cause of their predicament. This circumspection is extremely significant and may be one result of self-censorship in an extremely tense context.

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[346] Samaddar, R. (2007). *The Materiality of Politics: The Technologies of Rule,* Vol 1, London: Anthem Press, p. 203.

[347] Samaddar, R. (2007). *The Materiality of Politics: The Technologies of Rule,* Vol 1, London: Anthem Press, pp. 221-222.

6.2. On Identity

Identity struggles involve more than a demand for self-determination. They are also preceded by or accompanied by a movement to reconstruct a shared history and cultural roots. But the migrant communities in Assam are not making particularly interested in historical or cultural issues. Compared with the stances of the other communities involved in the triangular system I have been exploring, the migrant communities, including the very large Bengali Muslim community, are less determined to establish themselves as a separate group in Assamese society.

Many migrants have often preferred to align with the Assamese and have adopted the Assamese language as the medium of instruction in schools. They have also reported it as their mother tongue at census time and many Bengalis do speak Assamese at home. Mohammad Sheikh highlighted this:

> My children have been in Guwahati since childhood, they speak Assamese at home […]. Soon they will marry and have children and they will also speak Assamese. So they will automatically become Assamese after two generations.

As members of the community like Sheikh strive to become part of the larger community, organizations such as the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society) have in the past referred to them as '*na-Assamiya*' (neo-Assamese). In fact, it was the Bengali Muslim community's adoption of the Assamese language that raised the Assamese language speakers in Assam from 35% in the 1951 census to 60.89% in the 1971 census and helped to establish Assamese as the majority language in the state.

During the language riots, these communities felt quite close to each other. Weiner even referred to the "unspoken coalition between the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims against the Bengali Hindus".[348]

However, the present political situation in Assam is quite different. In the interview, Shivan Mazumdar, a businessman and social activist from Nagaon, mentioned the threat from Bengali Muslims and their role in the future politics of Assam. He then articulated his fears:

> AIUDF is a communal party and even the current Chief Minister Sri Tarun Gogoi has said that the President of the AIUDF, Mr. Badruddin Azmal, is a very communal man […]. They have their own interest and they want that one day Assam should become a Muslim state […]. Presently, there are 35 [Muslim] MLAs [members of the legislative assembly] and by 2016, it will go up further.

When I asked Mazumdar about the AIUDF, he admitted that the party was formed when the Muslim leaders realized that the political option was no longer available after the repeal of the IMDT Act in 2005. This was further accelerated with constant media and political incitement against Muslim immigrants as a threat to Assam. How did the "unspoken coalition" between the Assamese and Muslims dissolved in the post-1979 period? How was the possibility of assimilation mentioned by Sheikh ruled out? Mazumdar's stance reveals a stereotypical characterization of Bengali Muslims.

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[348] Weiner, M. (1983). The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement, *Population and Development Review*, (vol. 9) (no. 2), pp. 284–285.

The Assam Movement mobilized and further strengthened this image. The fear now is about "Islamization" and the possibility of a "Greater Bangladesh" in Assam.

The Assamese – immigrant conflicts have another dimension. Mohammad Hussain, a political activist in Bilasipara in Dhubri district (an area that was severely affected during the BTAD clashes) told me that many Bengali Muslims from his district had to abandon their homes due to floods and soil erosion. I went with him to visit a relief camp that was established in the Raniganj Development Block, near Bilasipara. There I met Monowara Khatun, a socially active woman. She told me:

> We are originally from South Salmara where my parent and grandparents had been living for many years. I do not know since when, but I know we are originally residents of Sukchar. However, when the floods and the erosion took away our land and house, we moved to Kokrajhar where we have been living since a long time. But now suddenly we are beaten up and some of us are killed as we are called 'Bangladeshi' and 'Mussalman' [Muslim]. But we are Indians. My grandfather voted in elections as did my father and me. Is being born a 'Mussalman' my fault? Is it a crime to be a Mussalman? And how suddenly we became Bangladeshi from Indian I do not know.

This narrative presents the conflict as a natural feature of society? Persecution and floods operate similarly. At the same time, I also observed in the street of Guwahati, Bengali Muslims engaged in menial and construction jobs. As the Assamese economy begins growing, it sets migrant labour into motion. But as ethnic differentiation in society persists, these movements create friction. The horizontal movement of

migrants – most of whom are citizens whose great-grandparents had migrated to Assam in the pre-independence period – is a movement of workers with limited political rights. They may be voters, but have no social or cultural rights as other ethnic citizens. Differentiated citizenship, ethnic tension, and the inability to follow economic opportunities to work or settle constrain the opportunities of this community.

Part of the change in the general attitude towards Bengali Muslims can be traced to the rising influence of the BJP's ideology of *Hindutva* (i.e., cultural Hinduism) in Assamese political and media discourse. In the post-1982 period (after the demolition of the Babri mosque), the BJP identified Muslim infiltration into Assam, as a key issue and realised that denouncing it would have a national appeal. The BJP combined this determination with a simultaneous appeal to safeguard Hindu refugees and migrants as part of their *Hindutva* agenda. It was in this strategic political context that the Bengali Hindus, the Nepalis, and the tea communities found an ideal opening to engage with the dominant Assamese community. They too began to view the Bengali Muslim as a threat. As the dominant Assamese community slowly veered towards the BJP ideology, the strategic alignment between the Assamese and other Hindus migrants, especially the Bengali Hindus was strengthened.[349] Gillian writes that during this period recurring references to high Bengali Muslim growth were

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[349] From 0.5% of the vote in 1985, the BJP secured 35.6% of the vote in the 2014 parliamentary elections in Assam. Presently the BJP has one Nepali, two tea tribes, one indigenous and three Assamese Members of Parliament. It had also nominated three Bengali Hindus candidates but they lost their elections.

deliberately issued to foster the perception of a 'threatened Hindu' community. Political mobilization to contain the threat of Muslim domination followed.[350]

6.3. On Indigenous Peoples and on the Assamese

In Assam, the Assamese have generally seen the migrant communities as 'other' and the indigenous ones as assimilable. In the context of the Nellie massacre, Sanjib Baruah emphasised how the Tiwas "had lost much of their land to immigrants from East Bengal".[351] This view has been articulated by other scholars. Sanjoy Hazarika wrote that the Tiwas' "bitterness grew as they saw the immigrants nourish the soil and grow more crops, making profits on fields which were, until recently, their own".[352] These explanations, however, do not account for the fact that in the BTAD and in other autonomous areas the Assamese have aligned with the immigrants – both Hindus and Muslims – against the indigenous communities.

Debasis Sur refuted the view of some scholars. Refugees and migrants do not come to Assam for economic gain. He added: "We are here as we are refugees and not for the fruits of development and it is the duty of the state to give protection or this problem will go on". This view was echoed by Shiladitya Dev, spokesman of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Dev's family had come from East Pakistan during partition and now lives in Guwahati. He noted:

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[350] Gillan, M. (2002). Refugees or Infiltrators? The Bharatiya Janata Party and illegal migration from Bangladesh, *Asian Studies Review*, Vol 21, No 1 (March), pp. 85-86.

[351] Baruah, S. (1999). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 134.

[352] Hazarika, S. (2000). *Rites of Passage*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, p. 26.

Assam had always lagged behind the rest of the states in the context of

development and was one of the poorest states in India, and so why would a

refugee settle here for economic benefits? […] There are no jobs and no

development and the Congress, with its divide and rule policy, has been the

cause of the conflicts.

It was the Assam movement that initiated a change in the perception of the 'Other'

within Assamese society. Only in later years the BJP was able to succeed in bonding

the Assamese Hindus and Bengali Hindus and in presenting a single political

ideology. But the Assamese now began assigning a 'double' identity to some of the

migrant communities. For example, Muslims in upper Assam were at one time simply

referred to as Assamese or Muslims (when the reference was to religion), but in the

post-1979 period they are referred to as *Asomiya Mussalman* or 'Assamese

Muslims'.[353] This new double identity marker and labelling also affected the Bengali

Hindus.

Shivan Mazumdar also remarked on this double definition:

My forefathers migrated to Assam some 150 years and in Nagaon, we are

known as a Bengali family […]. I married an Assamese girl and speak

Assamese at home [and] I feel I am 100% Assamese […]. But people now say

we are Bengali-speaking Assamese ...

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[353] Yasmin Saikia's also refers to this issue in her *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India* (p 18).

This redefinition is a result of shifting identity markers. The Assamese language and the Hindu religion are ultimately attempts to permanently exclude Bengali Muslims. There is indeed a generalised fear of the possibility that Bengali Muslims may organise politically and electorally. In this context, while the Assamese have historically adopted an exclusionary attitude towards all migrants, there are important political reasons to see migrants as resources. Faced with worrying census data, the Assamese community is facing the need to integrate some migrants into their own identity and traditions. In this sense, and in the context of the 'population as politics' paradigm mentioned before, the primary question is: how to integrate them"? At this stage of its socio-political development and despite a long history of animosity, the Assamese community's efforts seems to align with the interest of Bengali Hindus. This incorporation is thus advanced *precisely* to defend an exclusionary politics. That the traditionally linguistic nationalism of the Assamese has in recent decades shifted to take on a religious focus should be interpreted in this context.

I met Raman Khatuwala, a Marwari businessman and chartered accountant in Shivan Mazumdar's house and discussed with him the issue of hidden violence and intimidation. He knew what I was talking about:

> In earlier times, all communities in Assam lived in harmony. But now we are afraid to allow our children to mix with the Assamese children for we fear that if there is any fall or some small misunderstanding it is we who would be blamed.

When I asked him about the origins of this fear, he said:

The breaks in social harmony have historical roots. Perhaps we are seen as representing the central government, which is seen as Hindi-dominated and exploitative towards Assam.

A point that all the interviewees insisted on was that the Assamese dominant elites clubbed all migrants into one group and that this was lamentable. As such, those with lesser numerical strength like the Bengali Hindus or the Nepalis in the Brahmaputra Valley, who still aligned with the Assamese, were at a disadvantage. Despite this desire to emphasise a distinct experience, none of the interviewees argued against the movement against 'illegal' immigrants. They all agreed that the question of 'illegality' was not properly contextualised.

My migrant interviewees chose not to blame the Assamese or the indigenous peoples for the violence. They also expressed a desire to remain aligned with the locally dominant groups. So while in Nellie they continue to remain closer to the Tiwas, in BTAD they are closer to the Bodos. To do otherwise would probably be seen as a step towards a type of identity assertion that would invite a counter-reaction and possibly a violent response. This was the crucial difference that distinguished the responses of my indigenous and migrant informers: the indigenous informants endorsed a separate identity while the migrant ones were not.

6.4 On "Homelands"

In Assam, the migrant communities (both those who defined themselves religiously or in linguistic terms) have arrived at an intersection where they might have to choose whether or not to articulate their collective identities. Political outfits such as the Amra Bengali (dominated by Bengali Hindus in the Barak Valley), and the United Minority Front have had brief histories. Presently, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) is dominated by Bengali Muslims and is the second largest political party in Assam. Its position is quite moderate and the migrant communities of Assam have generally shown a desire to assimilate and co-exist with the dominant Assamese community. As we have seen, their assimilation is being resisted.

Debasis Sur argued that violent incidents and breaks in social cohesion are a relatively new phenomenon. They are being deliberately fostered, he added, to protect vested interests:

> In the early days, we had good relation with the Assamese people but now there is mistrust. This mistrust is created [….]. And until and unless this mistrust is minimised, this conflict will go on […]. Promises made by successive Prime Ministers, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, have not been implemented. In terms of those promises and the Immigrants (Expulsion) from Assam Act, 1948, those who came to Assam due to ethnic clashes or the threat of conversion in East Pakistan/Bangladesh must not be treated as illegal but as refugees, or at least as displaced persons.

Ranabir Samaddar says that the nation produces two subjects: citizen and aliens, or non-citizens.[354] Territoriality is crucial in this distinction and gains primacy. As the indigenous communities claim their own separate homelands and the Assamese protect their ascendancy, the migrant is thus placed at the intersection between the politics of the nation and politics of the homeland. Facing exclusive claims over a variety of homelands, the various migrant communities invoke democratic principles and human rights to seek their rights to security, livelihood, and equal opportunities. Democratic principles and political practice are out of step.

Shivan Mazumdar confirmed this observation:

> Everything is politically motivated for vote banks [….]. The state can legislate to bring about the changes […]. The only way to save Assam is to have seats [in the legislative assembly] and reservation for Assamese Hindus […]. The only other solution is that other states must also share the population burden.

Coming from a Bengali Hindu, this view is similar to the demands of the Assamese community for constitutional safeguards. Mazumdar argued that since immigration in Assam was a national problem and not merely a state problem, the entire nation should contribute to addressing the problem. When I asked him what would happen to the existing tribal reservations if reservations are also granted to the Assamese Hindus, he said that "the tribals already have their own reservation in various forms",

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[354] Samaddar, R. (2007). *The Materiality of Politics: The Technologies of Rule*, Vol 1, London: Anthem Press, p. 234.

including tribal belts, political representation and employment guarantees, and it is Assamese Hindus who are now struggling to survive in the face of demographic changes. He referred to the major political realignment of recent years, as Muslim MLAs in Assam have risen to 27, the Muslim population has risen to 34% of the total population, and a former AIUDF MLA, Rasul Haque, has even formed a platform to seek a Muslim Autonomous Council as the first step towards establishing yet another homeland: "If other communities like the Bodos, Rabhas and Misings can be given autonomous councils, why can't we get it?" Haque is reported to have told the media.[355]

In post-colonial Assam, state governments have often combined strong repressive measures with delayed responses to growing political emergencies. Debasis Sur confirmed this:

> In Assam, without any law, they [i.e., the 'D' voters] are put in detention camps on the basis of merely an administrative order. There is no trial and no court procedure, and it is thus worse than jail. Some people are in detention camps for 3-4 years and their whole life has been ruined.

On this point, Shiladiya Dev added: "The 'D' voter issue is a government creation. There is nothing like it in law, and it is being used to terrorise the Bengali Hindus to vote for the Congress".

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[355] New Party Sets Eye on Muslim Council (25th April, 2013). *The Telegraph India* [online news] Accessed on: 13/4/15 Available at:
http://www.telegraphindia.com/1130425/jsp/northeast/story_16825200.jsp#.VV1vq9Kqqkp [Accessed: 14/04/15].

As the state failed to take appropriate steps to create opportunities for migrant integration, it has also failed to take proactive steps to stop the violence and provide relief to the victims. At the same time, an intimidating environment is forcing many Bengali Hindus to nominally assimilate by way of 'name change'.

I asked about this issue to Asit Sarkar, who is a political activist involved with the Trinamul Congress, a party that is in power in West Bengal. He confirmed that name changing is more diffuse than normally thought:

> Many Bengali people have made affidavits to change their Bengali surnames to Assamese ones. It is going on in Nagaon district. Bengali surnames such as Ghosh or Dastidar face this labelling problem more than those that have Assamese sounding surnames such as Bhattacharjee or Chakravarty.

The analysis of these interviews reveals that while the Bengali Hindu community, who mostly came to Assam during the partition of India and should be considered refugees, does not seek a homeland it does seek a home and justice. Their political voice, like those of the other immigrant communities, remains silenced. The continued existence of 'migrants' as a separate category in a triangular system of relationships provides indeed a point of comparison with the politics of other settler societies. The challenge for democracy and social cohesion in Assam is to address the issues of the dominant Assamese, the neglected indigenes, and the threatened migrant in a holistic manner.

6.5 Discussion

Even though the situation circumstances and the political stances expressed by different migrant groups in Assam are very different, all of them are seeking peaceful co-existence with the Assamese community. All of them are trying to become assimilated in different forms with the Assamese community by incorporating its culture, language, and way of living. While none of my interviewees was seeking a distinct identity, it is true that the recent establishment of political organisations representative of the Bengali Muslim community creates some worry within the Assamese Hindus.

While the Bengali Muslims have of late established a political space for advancing their interest, they have not as yet developed or are not promoting a counter-narrative capable of challenging the received historical account. Though they have developed their own organisations they seem to be a defensive reaction to the consistent anti-Muslims rhetoric emanating from the Assamese community. Since all the migrant groups feel that assimilation is the best way to integrate, they are reluctant to define themselves as distinct groups. The various political outfits that represent them (AAMSU and AIUDF for the Bengali Muslims, BCP for the Bengali Hindus, AATSA and ACMS for the tea communities, and AANSU for the Nepalis) do not practice "identity politics".

Even with their limitations, the interviews also confirmed that the various migrant communities remain subordinate economically, politically and socially. They are subjected to the possibility of forced displacement, and their interrelations with

surrounding communities are very complex. This is because nearly all these communities continue to live near their counterparts even after violent outbursts. The interviews also revealed that the violence is fed by stereotypical representations incessantly reproduced in the public discourse. A reference to an alleged "victim" status is also crucial in most rhetorical representations of the conflicts. All communities claim it. Thus, even if the different communities may appear to live side by side, there is always a structuring separation. They may appear close, yet are never intimate. Invisible lines of division are always present.

This situation results from a colonial history, the postcolonial decision to strategically confirm previous paradigms, and the political interests of those who are currently benefiting from a 'population as politics' system. Restricting the political rights of some favours the over-representation of others in the political system. Some may subtract them through special institutions, but others are unable to avail themselves of this option.

In the long term, organic resettlement may be a solution. Organic resettlement would be a process by which an immigrant is able to establish economic viability, social networks, and acceptability following migration, and to contribute and avail himself of the opportunities available to all in the receiving society. As the migrants remain stuck in a constantly unsettled state, the triangular system of relationships and its consequences are reproduced. It is important to also note that while each migrant community has expressed an interest in assimilation, none has shown an inclination to align or identify with the indigenous communities. This is an important feature in the context of a systematic comparison with other settler societies. In these contexts,

subaltern immigrants also benefit and participate in the dispossession of indigenous communities.

In this context, as the Assamese offer a type of a collaborative co-existence to the Hindu migrants, and as the focus of anti-migrant movements shifted and targets the Bengali Muslim, a news item released on the 4 of September 2014 created fear and panic. On that day, Reuters reported about Al Qaeda establishing a South Asia wing with an India focus. It reported that al-Zawahiri, then head of al-Qaeda referred to "al-Qaeda in the Indian sub-continent as a glad tidings for Muslims in Burma, Bangladesh, Assam, Gujarat, Ahmedabad, and Kashmir". al-Zawahiri added that the new wing would "rescue" Muslims in these places from injustice and oppression.[356] The scalar politics of nation, state, and sub-state administrative units also interact with a global outside.

As already discussed, in the writings of scholars and journalists in Assam, the problem of land encroachment by Muslim migrants has often been regarded as the primary cause of violence. In Bodoland and in other places, such immediate flashpoints have regularly been highlighted. It is only subsequently that issues of cultural and political marginalisation are presented as additional causes. My interviewees, however, highlighted that the latter may be as crucial to shaping the conflict. Scholars also neglect the ongoing legacies of a particular colonial system and the possibilities offered by comparisons with African polities riven by ethnic conflict and settler societies characterised by ongoing triangular systems of relationships.

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[356] Al Qaeda announces India wing, Renews loyalty to Taliban chief (4th Sept., 2014). *Reuters News*. Available at: http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/09/03/uk-india-qaeda-idUKKBN0GY2EK20140903 [Accessed on: 6th Sept., 2014].

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand the conflicts in North East India. It analysed the ways in which colonial paradigms retained in postcolonial arrangements affected ethnic identity politics and prevented integration and social cohesion. The two parts comprising this thesis should complement each other: the first was a study of the past in order to understand the present, the second was a study of present circumstances informed by a new understanding of the past. The ways in which colonial policies were retained in post-colonial North East India and Assam through various legal and social institutions and structures is crucial. The suggestion that the ethnic identity politics and the violence can be better framed if analysed within a comparative framework also proved insightful. There are indeed many points of comparison. Other societies were able at times to face these contradictions and promote reconciliation. This international practice could be taken as a model and adapted to the conditions of India's North East.

In the introductory chapter, I presented the topic and the specific locale of my study, the scholarly literature on the topic, certain key terms, and the research focus and the methodology. I mentioned that I am studying identity and violence in North East India and its history. I took the period of study from the time when colonialism came to Assam (i.e. 1826) to the contemporary situation. Chapter 1 and 2 discussed colonial rule and postcolonial arrangements in India's Northeast and their contested evolution. These two chapters relied on secondary sources. In Part B, I relied on primary data sources to appraise a triangular system of relationships. This analysis, and the interviews that underpin it allowed me to discuss a number of characteristics of the

Assamese situation that are shared with a number of postcolonial states in Africa and settler societies elsewhere.

In Chapter 2 I discussed the colonial history of Assam and the development and enactment of indirect rule colonialism there. I discussed how it unfolded in Assam, and how its implementation there was different from its implementation elsewhere in India. Based on the insight provided by Mamdani's analysis of conflicts in postcolonial Africa, I presented indirect rule colonialism and its legacies. I argued that the binary social relationship in the colonial state was eventually converted to a triangular one, and (also following Mamdani) how the three instruments of colonial rule were essential in this transformation: history-writing, the census and a dual system of law. Different communal identities were thus constructed, differentiated and separated. I discussed how the separate communities of North East India became estranged and became competitors.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how the colonial paradigm of indirect rule was largely retained in postcolonial Assam and how the indigenous peoples, the Assamese and the various communities of immigrants intersected in the context of a triangular system of relationships. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution and other legislation were crucial in this retention. I also looked at the changing form of nationalism in Assam: how the Assamese came to occupy a privileged position and how they expressed a type of micro-nationalism premised on language. I also outlined how various indigenous communities rejected this restrictive and exclusionary micro-nationalism and struggled for separate homelands. In this context, anti-migrant sentiments became prevalent even if animosity was redirected in recent decades. The political domination

of the Assamese community has encouraged the growth of communal feelings and inter-community hatred and prevented the emergence of a multi-ethnic Assam composed of a variety of religious and linguistic groups.

Chapter 4 presented a number of selected narratives offered by indigenous informants. They confirmed that the indigenous people of Assam are searching for their roots and for protected spaces that will allow them to address their historical grievances. They viewed the violence in Assam as a result of neglect. Some of my informants felt that neglect was ultimately due to the domination of the Assamese community. Neglect was paralleled by anxiety regarding the possibility of becoming estranged in their 'own land'. This narrative sought to reclaim tribal land through the constitutional mechanism as a pre-emptive measure.

The interviewees also highlighted how the introduction of a common Assamese language may be seen as 'unification' or 'assimilation' from the centre but is seen as 'cultural invasion' and 'linguistic elimination' from the periphery. I also reflected in this chapter a recent AASU resolution defining the Assamese as 'indigenous Assamese'. If the traditional stance has been of forced assimilation (i.e., everyone is Assamese irrespective of their indigenous background), this proposition offers an equally hegemonic reversal (everyone is Assamese because everyone is indigenous).

Chapter 5 presented and analysed the interviews I conducted with Assamese spokespersons. My informants reflected on the ways in which Assamese society grapples with a very diverse social body and copes with deteriorating social cohesion. In- migration was the primary focus of my Assamese informants; they felt that all the

violence was directly or indirectly linked to the presence of 'illegal' immigrants and/or the machinations of politicians. Participants in the interviews mentioned that the Union and Assam governments' response to recurring violent outrages were to promote development and ensure security control. My informants, however, preferred a mix between an assimilative approach and an exclusionary one: the indigenous communities should refrain from seeking separate homelands, the migrants should refrain from seeking political representation. My informants understood the Assamese as the normative community in the state.

My informants also expressed the notion of a form of 'Delhi' driven internal colonialism. This trope is indeed a typical expression of settler nationalisms, busy asserting their autonomy vis-à-vis the metropole, and their domination of indigenous and immigrants others. The Assamese community had used different methods at different times to exert its socio-political domination in the state. These have included and include containment (separation and segregation of migrants and of indigenous communities), erasure (cultural assimilation through the imposition of the Assamese language and Hinduization process); intimidation (intimidation and threats, and indeed outbursts of violent rage), removal (the expulsion of targeted communities from specific locales and the deportation of 'illegal' immigrants), and legislative restrictions (a ban for some to own property or obtain jobs in the state). These strategies are common in the context of the settler societies. Clause 6 of the Assam Accord, which contemplates "constitutional, legal, cultural safeguards for the Assamese people" can be seen as the constitutional sanctioning of a settler colonial regime.

Based on a number of targeted interviews, Chapter 6 discussed the core issues of the thesis from the migrants' point of view. I presented several interviews to represent the diversity of this grouping and highlight how the refugees from East Pakistan have found themselves as 'double victims' in Assam: first as victims of partition and their resultant displacement, and then as victims of intimidation and exclusion. My interviews allowed me to inquire into the assimilative strategies pursued by this group, including the changing of names to camouflage identities. The narratives I was able to collect emphasise how violence fundamentally shapes the politics of these communities: a determination to align with the local majorities was probably one result of the fear of further violence and the threat of further displacement. Thus general view was that violence was somewhat natural and that with time things will get better.

As in other settler colonial contexts, in Assam different groups are racialized in different ways and in accordance with the strategic needs of the dominant group. This form of racialization cast the Assamese as the superior and normative group and rationalise the ongoing denial of basic human rights of others. Education and the media, even if an analysis of the operation of these institutions was not part of this project, are crucial to the reproduction of stereotypes and rationalisations. Conflicts are one result of a particular institutional setup. Economic development, political exigencies, frozen identities and the nature of citizenship all produce contradictions. In this context, as the indigenous groups aim for separate spaces and the migrant groups aim for an erosion of separation, the dominant group is intent on managing a threatened status quo.

I also discussed throughout the thesis how the Assamese and the indigenous communities in Assam express forms of linguistic nationalism that are sustained by the institutions of the state ('Assam for Assamese' is a political slogan that encapsulates this tendency). Linguistic nationalism and the myths about its superiority, and the fears of being extinguished by immigrants produced a very tense and anxious state of mind, an anxiety that is comparable to that of other settler polities.[357] The competition to prove that each language was unique, different and older contributed to the emergence of a different form of micro-nationalism, internal colonialism, and chauvinism. A multi-ethnic and multi-language state needed an inclusive society but this has proved elusive.

Like developments in other postcolonial contexts, as Assam's socio-political collectives were deliberately reconstructed during the colonial period, dehumanising ideologies took hold and the prospect of shared living became a thing of the past.[358] Going back to the colonial origin of these contradictions is especially important because it will enable the articulation of a narrative that can be agreed by all. Shared and acceptable narratives can lead to social inclusion. We should replace myth-making and exclusive collective memory with a shared history.

As well as reflecting on the origins of the current predicament, we should reflect on the reasons why it was not addressed. A failing decolonisation should also become the topic for further inquiry. As I discussed throughout this thesis, the colonial paradigm

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[357] See Devji, F. (2014). *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 2-23.

[358] Harrow, K.W. (2005). Foundational Fantasies of Ethnicity and History, *Research in African Literature*, (vol 36) (no. 2), pp. 35-45.

of indirect rule continued to subsist in post-colonial Assam. Decolonization took place in India on the 15th August 1947, the exact date when the British administration ceased to operate and left. But this resulted in Assam in a form of incomplete decolonization. Colonial legacies create challenges to social cohesion in present day Assam through a differentiated citizenship. While the process of imagining 'India' as a single unit consolidated during the independence movement, this imagination did not occur in Assam. Micro-nationalisms displaced larger nationalisms.

The scholars of comparative settler colonialisms emphasise that settler colonialism is a form of domination that is rarely decolonised.[359] One implication of framing Assam as a settler colonial polity is to bring the need for a further decolonising passage to the fore. Indeed, the elaboration of a settler colonial framework for the interpretation of the conflicts might be closely paralleled with the development of de-colonial projects for equitable justice and social inclusion. This naturally requires integrating two different forms of decolonization: the decolonization of colonialism with the decolonization of settler colonialism, breaking away from a dominating metropole located elsewhere and breaking away from a dominating community locating at the periphery. Part of the process of developing a shared vision of social cohesion is thus centred on dismantling the structures that generate exclusive narratives and proposing a new one: a decolonial narrative that can bind people and communities together. This narrative cannot be imposed from above. It contributes to them but has to begin, as Mamdani notes, with effective decolonization processes. It is paradox: only effective decolonization can lead to positive interplay between differing versions of social

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[359] I reiterate here Patrick Wolfe's famous quote on settler colonial societies: 'invasion is a structure and not an event'.

relations, and only such interplay can lead to effective decolonization. But we have to start somewhere and this thesis aims to contribute to this transformation.

The problem in Assam is that a particular colonial history framed postcolonial existence and turned the indigenous peoples, the Assamese and the migrants into prisoners of history, census, and law that constructed them. Ethnic and communal violence is constitutive of Assam as a postcolonial polity. In order to break this cycle, a new form of inclusive and decolonial nationalism should be promoted, appealing to all communities to live a self-determining life rather than a collective life regulated by a colonial paradigm and its successors.

Appendix A: Outline Map of North East India and Assam in 1950 and in 1999
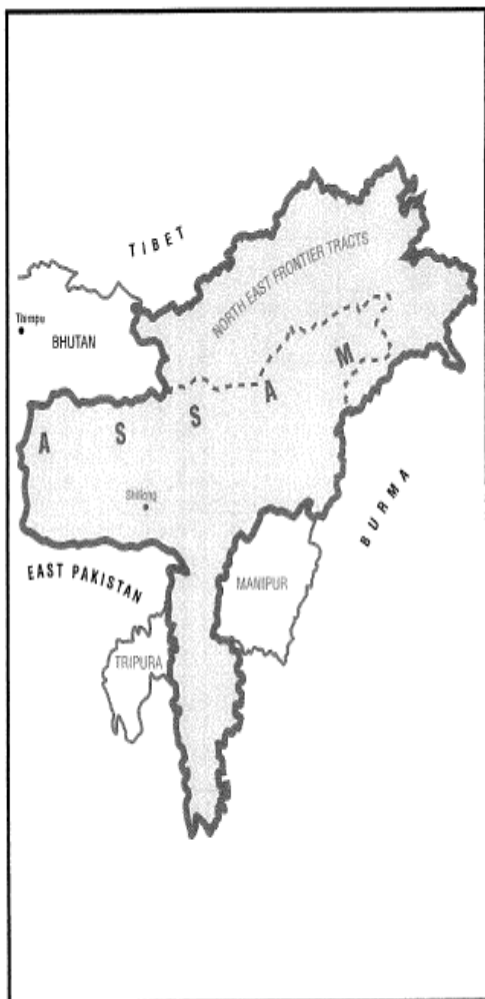
Map 3. Assam, 1950.

Map 4. Assam, 1999.

Source: Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, pp. 92- 93 (Not to scale).

Appendix B: Population in percentage by major religions in North East India

State	Hindus	Muslims	Christians
Assam	67.13	28.43	3.32
Arunachal Pradesh	37.04	1.38	10.29
Manipur	57.67	7.27	34.11
Meghalaya	14.67	3.46	64.58
Mizoram	5.05	0.66	85.73
Nagaland	10.12	1.71	87.47
Tripura	86.50	7.13	1.68
N. E. India	60.93	21.55	13.63

Source*: Census of India*, 1991, Series I paper-1 of 1993, Union Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Appendix C: Insurgency related Fatalities in Assam: 2002-2010 (excluding deaths due to riots and communal clashes)

Year	Incidents	Civilians	Security Forces	Militants	Total
2002	412	193	26	308	527
2003	358	182	12	207	401
2004	267	194	17	104	315
2005	398	173	7	74	254
2006	413	164	32	46	242
2007	474	287	27	759	1073
2008	387	245	18	1237	1500
2009	424	152	22	1259	1433
2010	35	11	1	37	49

Total: 5794

Source: Institute of Conflict Management, New Delhi website, quoting Ministry of

Home Affairs, Government of India.

Appendix D: Major Militant groups in North East India

Assam	Meghalaya and Nagaland	Manipur	Tripura
Proscribed Groups: Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) **Active Groups** Communist Party of India (Maoist) Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB-Songbijit) Karbi People's Liberation Tigers (KPLT) Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent (ULFA-I) **In Peace Talks:** Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF) Adivasi People's Army (APA) All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA) Birsa Commando Force (BCF)	**Proscribed Groups:** Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) **Active Groups:** Achik National Liberation Army (ANLA) Achick Songa An'pachakgipa Kotok (ASAK) Achik National Liberation Co-operative Army (ANLCA) Achik Tiger Force (ATF) Achik National United Force (ANUF) Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) Liberation of Achik Elite Force (LAEF) **In Peace Talks:** United Achik Liberation Army (UALA) Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN-NA) Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN-Accordist) National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-Khaplang) Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-(NSCN-Reformation)	**Proscribed Groups:** Communist Party (KCP) Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF) People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) People's Liberation Army (PLA) United National Liberation Front (UNLF) **Active Groups:** Coordination Committee (CorCom) Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front (MNRF) National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) People's United Liberation Front (PULF) Zeliangrong United Front (ZUF) **In Peace Talks:** Kuki National Organisation (KNO) Kangleipak Communist	**Proscribed Groups:** All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) **Active Groups:** All Tripura Bengali Regiment (ATBR) All Tripura Bharat Suraksha Force (ATBSF) All Tripura Liberation Organisation (ATLO) All Tripura National Force (ATNF) All Tripura Volunteer Force (ATVF) Bangla Mukti Sena (BMS) National Militia of Tripura (NMT) Socialist Democratic Front of Tripura (SDFT) Tripura Armed Tribal Commando Force (TATCF) Tiger Commando Force (TCF) Tripura Defence Force (TDF) Tripura Liberation Force (TLF) Tripura Liberation Organisation Front (TLOF)

		Party (KCP-Lamphel)	Tripura Mukti Police (TMP)
Hmar People's Convention (HPC-Democracy)	Naga National Council (NNC-Non Accordist)	Military Defence Force faction of Kanglei Yowel Kanna Lup (KYKL-MDF)	Tripura National Army (TNA)
Kuki Liberation Army (KLA)	Naga National Council- (NNC-Accordist)	United Revolutionary Front (URF)	Tripura State Volunteers (TSV)
Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF)			Tripura National Democratic Tribal Force (TNDTF)
	In Peace Talks	United People's Front (UPF)	
Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA)	Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland- (NSCN-Khole-Kitovi)	United People's Party of Kangleipak (UPPK)	Tripura Rajya Raksha Bahini (TRRB)
National Santhal Liberation Army (NSLA)	Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland- (NSCN-Isak Muivah)		Tripura Tribal Action Committee Force (TTACF)
Pro-Talks faction of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA-PTF)			Tripura Tribal Democratic Force (TTDF)
National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB-Ranjan Daimary)			Tripura Tribal Sengkrak Force (TTSF)
Santhal Tiger Force (STF)			Tripura Tribal Volunteer Force (TTVF)
United Kukigram Defence Army (UKDA)			Tripura Tribal Youth Force (TTYF)
			United Bengali Liberation Front (UBLF)
			Borok National Council of Tripura (BNCT)
			In Peace Talks:
			National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT-BM)

Source: Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi (website at: www.satp.org)

Appendix E: Tribal population in different states of North East India

State	Percentage of tribal population to total population
Arunachal Pradesh	63.65
Assam	12.82
Manipur	34.41
Meghalaya	85.53
Mizoram	94.75
Nagaland	87.7
Tripura	30.95
N.E. India	25.81
India	8.08

Source: *Census of India*, 1991, Series 1, Paper 2 of 1992, Final population totals:

Brief analysis of Primary Census.

Appendix F: Population of Major Scheduled Tribes in Assam as per Census, 2001

	Name of the Scheduled Tribe	Total population	Proportion in % to the total ST
1	All Scheduled Tribes	3,308,570	100%
2	Boro	1,352,771	40.9
3	Miri*	587,310	17.8
4	Mikir	353,513	10.7
5	Rabha	277,517	8.4
6	Kachari	235,881	7.1
7	Lalung	170,622	5.2
8	Dimasa	110,976	3.4
9	Deori	41,161	1.2

Source: Census of India, 2001, Assam: Data Highlights: Scheduled Tribes

* Miri refers to the Misings and Mikir to the Karbis

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SUHREC Project 2013/111 Ethics Clearance [Adjusted Duration]

Keith Wilkins
Sent: Monday, 4 November 2013 5:06 PM
To: Lorenzo Veracini; Sanjiv Goswami (sanjivgoswami@gmail.com)
Cc: RES Ethics; FLSS Research

To: Assoc Prof Lorenzo Veracini/Mr Sanjib Goswami, FLSS

Dear Lorenzo and Sanjib

SUHREC Project 2013/111 Challenges to social cohesion in India's northeast: towards a new paradigm
Assoc Prof Lorenzo Veracini, SISR/FLSS; Mr Sanjib Goswami, Assoc Prof Ellie Rennie
Approved Duration: 04/11/2013 To 30/04/2014 [Adjusted]

I refer to the ethical review of the above project protocol by Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). Your responses to the review, as per your email of 23 June 2013 with attachments, were put to a SUHREC delegate for consideration.

I am pleased to advise that, as submitted to date, the project may commence in line with standard on-going ethics clearance conditions here outlined. If you wish to commence human research activity ahead of the proposed starting date given on the ethics clearance application, please do not hesitate to formally request this.

-   All human research activity undertaken under Swinburne auspices must conform to Swinburne and external regulatory standards, including the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and with respect to secure data use, retention and disposal.

-   The named Swinburne Chief Investigator/Supervisor remains responsible for any personnel appointed to or associated with the project being made aware of ethics clearance conditions, including research and consent procedures or instruments approved. Any change in chief investigator/supervisor requires timely notification and SUHREC endorsement.

-   The above project has been approved as submitted for ethical review by or on behalf of SUHREC. Amendments to approved procedures or instruments ordinarily require prior ethical appraisal/ clearance. SUHREC must be notified immediately or as soon as possible thereafter of (a) any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants and any redress measures; (b) proposed changes in protocols; and (c) unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

-   At a minimum, an annual report on the progress of the project is required as well as at the conclusion (or abandonment) of the project.

-   A duly authorised external or internal audit of the project may be undertaken at any time.

Please contact the Research Ethics Office if you have any queries about on-going ethics clearance, citing the SUHREC project number. Copies of clearance emails should be retained as part of project record-keeping.

Best wishes for the project.

Yours sincerely

Keith

Keith Wilkins
Secretary, SUHREC & Research Ethics Officer
Swinburne Research (H68)
Swinburne University of Technology
P O Box 218
HAWTHORN VIC 3122
Tel +61 3 9214 5218
Fax +61 3 9214 5267