



Research Paper

## Centre-State Relations in India: An Understanding of The Legacy Centre-Assam Relationship

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this paper, an attempt is made to deal with the background of Centre-State relations in the context of Assam and the attitude of Assamese leadership towards the federal aspects between the Centre and the State during both the pre-independence as well as the post-independence periods. It also focuses how the roots of Assamese regionalism have been deeply embedded in the socio-economic and political realities of the society over a long period of time. The issues relating to political and financial autonomy raised by Assamese leaders in the pre-independence period continue to exercise impact on the Assamese mind even today after decades of independence and promulgation of constitution.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Centre-State Relations, Assam, Nationalism, Economic Backwardness, Immigration*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-sixties of the last century, a new type of regional, linguistic and even parochial forces have become articulate and acquired importance in the States which influenced the functioning of India's federal system. These region-oriented forces have given birth to new political dimensions and political processes in the field of Centre-State relations. The new political processes which have emerged in the States often lead to tension between the Centre and the States. It is interesting to investigate whether these forces are new or they existed at an earlier stage. In order to have a clear knowledge about it, we need to know its legacy which may have impact on the present political process in the States.

In this paper, an attempt is made to deal with the background of Centre-State relations in the context of Assam and the attitude of Assamese leadership towards the federal aspects between the Centre and the State during both the pre-independence as well as the post-independence periods. The paper also makes an inquiry into the various socio-economic and political bases of dissent and discontentment which intrigue the minds of the Assamese elite towards the Centre and its federal policies. In addition, this paper endeavours to highlight whether the Centre-Assam tension has emerged in the post-independence period or it existed even prior to the inauguration of the Republic.

#### Origin of Assam and its Nationalism

The history of Assam is as old as the epics and the Puranas. Kautilya even mentioned about this region in his *Arthashastra*.<sup>1</sup> The history of the Assam plains extended beyond the fourth and fifth century AD.<sup>2</sup> The process of state formation in Assam had taken place in the fourth and fifth centuries AD and epigraphic evidences show that the political chronology of Assam can be well traced from the fifth to the twelfth centuries AD.<sup>3</sup> It was during the rule of Bhaskarvarman (AD 594-650) that the kingdom of Kamrupa reached new heights of political power and influence. The Chinese pilgrim, Hsuan Tsang visited Kamrup during AD 643 at the invitation of Bhaskarvarman.<sup>4</sup> In the thirteenth century the Ahoms came to Assam from upper Burma and quickly assimilated with the local population. From 1228 onwards the Ahoms gradually extended their domain and ruled Assam till 1826. Apart from a well-ordered system of administration, the Ahoms brought about a radical change in the economy of Assam.<sup>5</sup> The Ahoms gave Assam a continuous rule for some six hundred years and during the rule a transition from tribalism to feudalism took place in Assam. Through the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826 the British took over control of the region.

Thus, Assam, formerly known as Kamrupa, was an independent State ruled by several kings from time to time having relationship with outside regions and it retained independence till the advent of the British power in 1826 when the six hundred year old Ahom rule came to an end. The tradition of freedom and independence taught the Assamese people to fight against the British imperialism.

The resentment against British rule reached its culmination in the rebellions of Gomadhar Konwar and Rupchand Konwar in 1828 and 1829 respectively. Due to lack of popular support, these revolts were quickly suppressed by the British.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, the Revolt of 1857 could be heard in Assam. Maniram Dewan<sup>7</sup> was the person who co-ordinated the moves aimed at an uprising against the British. Maniram did have a considerable degree of popular support. But the revolt was nipped in the bud as Maniram and Peali Baruah were hanged after a highly 'partisan trial' in February 1858. The burden of increased taxation and the disastrous impact of the money economy of the British rule on the peasantry found expression in revolts like the *Phulguri Dhawa*<sup>8</sup> in 1861. From then on, the peasant uprisings continued to play a significant role in building up resistance to British rule in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. The incident at Patharughat in the Mangoldoi sub-division on the 28 January 1894 seemed to be the tragic climax to the peasant revolt as several peasants were killed and dozens were grievously injured to police bullets. However, finally the British climbed down from its earlier position and reduced the revenue rates. This was indeed a victory of peasants of Assam who had shown great sense of unity and sacrifice for the cause they were fighting for. Thus, the peasant uprisings through the *raij mels*<sup>9</sup> played a crucial role in articulating the peasants and ventilating their grievances. Side by side, the emerging Assamese middle class organized *Tezpur Sarbajanik Sabha* and *Jorhat Ryot Sabha* in 1890s which helped in organizing and ventilating the grievances of the peasants. While *Tezpur Sarbajanik Sabha* was formed mainly to ventilate the grievances of the agricultural *ryots* against the enhancement in revenues on land, *Jorhat Ryot Sabha* was organized for the purpose of representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the government and ameliorating the condition of the people.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the Assamese people asserted the autonomy and distinctiveness of their language and culture, which is almost as old as the British conquest of Assam. Like in other parts of India, the growing Assamese middle class<sup>11</sup> objected the British rule and resented the British policy. When in the year 1836 British colonial officials had decided to impose Bengali in place of Assamese, the Assamese cultural pride grew as a reaction to that decision. In this the Assamese elite of the period like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan<sup>12</sup> and of the Christian missionaries, who brought out the journal *Orunodoi* (1846-83), played the decisive role. Dhekiyal Phukan petitioned to Moffat Mills in 1852 against introduction of a foreign language, that is, Bengali as a medium of instruction in the "Vernacular schools". Thus the very first generation of modern Assamese public intellectuals asserted that they were a distinct people with a distinct language and culture. This shows that they became increasingly conscious of their distinct identity. As a result of their efforts, in 1873 Assamese once again became the language of courts and schools of Assam.<sup>13</sup> In the previous year of 1872, the Assamese Literary Society was formed in Calcutta led by Jagannath Barooah (1851-1907) and Manik Chandra Barooah (1851-1915), which submitted a memorandum to Viceroy Lord Northbrook highlighting the potential resources of Assam. These activities reflected the dawning of modern political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to imposition of Bengali language on Assam, the territorial adjustment by the British made Assam more heterogeneous in character than ever before, which had a tremendous impact on the socio-political and economic aspect of the province. The declaration of Assam as a Chief Commissioner's province along with the Sylhet district of East Bengal in the year 1874 added a new dimension to the politics of the region. The Bengali-speaking population increased rapidly and came to outnumber the Assamese population. The competition for jobs between the Assamese middle class and its Bengali counterpart began, and was to be one of the factors contributing to Assamese-Bengali bitterness in the following decades. The marginalization of the Assamese middle class was not only due to the British preference for Bengali officials, but also because of the demographic changes that were taking place. By the year 1901 "non-indigenous elements came to constitute at least a quarter of the population of Assam proper".<sup>15</sup> A substantial rise in the Muslim population through immigration also marked the beginning of a conflict that assumes frightening proportions from the nineteen thirties onwards.<sup>16</sup> This was added by the serious imbalance triggered off by the highly extractive tea and oil industries to the traditional agricultural sector. At the same time, though Assam was made a Chief Commissioner's province, yet during the period 1874-1905, Assam did not have a legislature of its own and the people had no chance of participating in legislative activities.<sup>17</sup> The small educated middle class was kept out of the democratic process. The Assamese intelligentsia was marginalized.

In such a situation the Assamese students studying in Calcutta organized themselves to work for the cause of Assamese nationalism. They founded *Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sobha* (ABUS) (Association for the Development of the Assamese Language) in Calcutta in 1888. The establishment of this organization is said to be "a landmark in the history of Assamese language and literature."<sup>18</sup> There was a distinct attempt on the part of the ABUS to re-discover the glorious past of Assam through linguistic nationalism. The ABUS wanted to make Assamese one of the richest and most advanced languages of the world. The association also brought out a

journal *Jonaki* which ushered in a new era in Assamese literature. The members of ABUS were influenced by the stalwarts of Bengali literature and society of the time and tried to bring a renaissance in Assamese literature.<sup>19</sup> Contributors to *Jonaki* lamented the contemporary state of Assam and called upon the people to derive inspiration from the glories of the past. Particularly Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya insisted that the Assamese should constitute an independent, self-reliant nation. He warned that the fear of being inundated and overtaken by stronger foreign nationalities can be confronted by a stress on the separate identity of the Assamese people. Even in the writings of Lakshminath Bezbaroa<sup>20</sup> one can trace his underlying commitment to the idea of the homeland of the Assamese people. He forcefully propagated the cultural resurgence of the Assamese and made a conscious attempt to highlight every single aspect of Assamese culture and tradition.<sup>21</sup> Though Bezbaroa's Assamese linguistic nationalism was a part of the broader Indian nationalism, yet he was in favour of an autonomous socio-cultural and political entity. Thus, we notice that Indian as well as Assamese nationalism co-existed side by side in the writings published in *Jonaki* and other journals of the period.

This consciousness among the Assamese elite<sup>22</sup> led to the formation of the 'Assam Association' in 1903. Since its inception till 1920, the 'Assam Association' served as the mouth-piece of the Assamese elite in articulating their needs, grievances, hopes, aspirations and placing their economic demands before the government of the day. Apart from this, under the banner of 'Assam Association', the politically conscious Assamese middle class elite engaged themselves in laying the foundation for the movement against the British rule.<sup>23</sup> During this period, the Indian National Congress had almost no presence in Assam and therefore the Assam Association became the most influential public organization in Assam. One of the Assam Association's presidents, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, once described the Association as a "National Assembly representing the real public opinion of Assam."<sup>24</sup> In such a background, the British policy of destroying the "nascent nationalism in Bengal by dividing the Bengali speaking people" was opposed in various forms such as prayers, protests and demonstrations throughout the province of Bengal. Along with anti-partition activists in Bengal, the Assam Association and the Assamese elite too resented the British policy of tagging the backward province of Assam with the relatively advanced districts of Bengal which would be of great disadvantage to the people of Assam. The President of *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* Jagannath Baruah in this regard maintained:

Assam proper will secure only a small fraction of the Chief Commissioner's attention, his very seat will be removed, and the people will have to meet a keen and unequal competition of highly educated, enterprising and advantageously situated districts, (because of ) which they are not yet prepared for the same.<sup>25</sup>

The Assam Association particularly apprehended about the partition scheme on the fear of losing "the care and attention from the government". Therefore, in Assam, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury<sup>26</sup>, Triguna Barua and others organized the students on terrorist lines to oppose partition.<sup>27</sup> Due to the similar nature of anti-partition movement, the Assamese middle class elite came to a closer touch with developments in the rest of the country and prepared themselves to enter into national politics led by Indian National Congress.

Thus the early stage of the anti-British movement, till 1920, was basically regional in character in Assam. It grew up within the regional framework of Assam. The articulation of this sentiment was reflected in the writings of journalists and litterateurs of that period. The formation of the '*Asom Chhatra Sanmmilan*' (Assam Students' Conference) in 1916 and '*Asom Sahitya Sabha*' in 1917 marked a new stage in the growing consciousness of the Assamese middle class. With the growth of the national movement in Assam, a strong sentiment of Assamese sub-nationalism had also grown side by side. Of course, this feeling of sub-nationalism was apparently submerged by the Indian nationalism in the subsequent period as in the year 1920 when the new Congress Constitution was adopted and the Provincial Congress Committees were being reorganized on linguistic basis, Assam was recognized as a separate Congress Province in its Nagpur session. Those members who previously belonged to the 'Assam Association' now realized that their interest could be better served by the Congress.<sup>28</sup> Thus, a section of the Assamese elite became conscious of the fact that the separate interest of Assam could not be served without the achievement of larger national interest. Consequently Assam began to follow the all-India leadership in order to contribute to the national efforts to overthrow foreign rule. Finally, the Assam Association's annual meeting of the year 1920 voted to amend its constitution to replace loyalty to the British Crown with the "attainment of swaraj by non-cooperation" as its goal. Almost all members of the Association joined the newly established Assam Provincial Congress Committee, and the Assam Association ceased to function as a separate organization. Gandhi's visit to Assam in August 1921 gave a fillip to the movement, particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley. Thus, British rule established Assam's political link with the rest of India both at the level of administration and national movement.

The participation of the Assamese elite in the national movement, however, was not without reservations. They simultaneously endeavoured to maintain their distinct identity as a part of Indian nationalism. Congress party in Assam itself had harboured strong autonomous sentiments right from the beginning and many of its leaders were not averse to the idea of an independent Assam.<sup>29</sup> They continued their effort to keep 'Assamese nationalism' alive. Newspapers and periodicals of Assam had also made profound contribution in this effort. Among them the Assamese daily *Dainik Batori* adopted a policy of establishing a homogeneous and viable State

of Assam on the basis of the consciousness of the Assamese as a nationality by expounding its idea of “free India in which the Assamese would come to its own.”<sup>30</sup> The tensions between Assamese sub-nationalism and pan-Indianism during this period are best seen through the career of the Assamese literary and cultural figure, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury. With this end in view he formed the *Asom Samrakshini Sabha* (Assam Preservation Society) in 1926 to promote Assamese sub-national interests. In 1936, he started the *Asom Jatiya Mahasabha* (Assam National Assembly). Roychoudhury brought out two influential magazines, *Deka Asom* (Young Assam) and *Chetana* (Consciousness), which contributed a lot to vitalize the Assamese sub-nationalism. The main objective of the *Chetana* was to arouse the consciousness among the Assamese people of their self-identity and individuality. It clearly distinguished ‘*Asamiya Swaraj*’ from ‘*Bharatiya Swaraj*’.<sup>31</sup> Roychoudhury believed that Assam’s position as a nation could be ensured only in a federation of equal nationalities. In his article “*Bharatiyar Swaraj Aru Asamiyar Swaraj*”, Roychoudhury spelt out his views on the position of a free Assam in an independent India. He believed that although in the fight against the British rulers the different nationalities of the Indian sub-continent had submerged their identities for a common cause, yet once India gained independence, each nationality must be given the right to assert itself according to its own national consciousness. Thus, Roychoudhury, despite being deeply involved in Congress politics, had a distinct vision of an Assamese homeland where the different indigenous peoples would live in quality and harmony. The Jatiya Mahasabha wanted to have a homogenous Assamese territory distinct from the Indian mainland by separating the Sylhet district from Assam. This sort of apprehension came out of the assumption of the Assamese elite that the British domination might be replaced by the domination of non-Assamese Indians with independence. Roychoudhury also built up the *Asom Atmarakshi Bahini* to save the Assamese homeland from Muslim League designs to have it included in Pakistan. Even after independence, when the Congress government in Assam failed to provide adequate checks to infiltration from newly created East Pakistan, Roychoudhury and the Jatiya Mahasabha started espousing the cause of an independent Assam by asserting that “Assam should come out of the Indian Union and become an independent country like Burma or any country.”<sup>32</sup>

Another important Assamese intellectual Gyananath Bora wrote a set of influential essays which was published in *Chetana*. One of the essays addressed the tension between Assamese sub-nationalism and pan-Indianism and questioned “How should different provinces, different languages, different literatures and different religions become one? Should we completely eliminate our differences and try to create one language, one literature and one nation? Is that what we need in order to achieve independence?”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Bora argued the case for protecting the autonomy of India’s provinces. In another article titled “*Kamrup Aru Bharatvarsha*” Bora recalled the glory of the Kamrupa kingdom and stressed Kamrupa or Assam’s separateness from the rest of India by saying: “Today, Kamrupa, which had always been a separate country, has become a province of India. The history of our country is not the same as that of the other provinces of India and our people have not been able to accept our country as a province of India.”<sup>34</sup> In his article “*Asom Desh Bharatbarshar Bhitara Thakiba Kiya*” (Why should Assam stay in India) Jnananath Bora again insisted “Assam’s regeneration would be possible only if it is separated from India.” He argued that before the year 1920, the Assamese knew virtually nothing about Congress and maintained that Assam’s history was different from that of India’s history. Therefore, the people of Assam consider themselves to be outside India.<sup>35</sup>

### **Immigration and Assamese Nationalism**

Another important cause of concern of the Assamese elite was infiltration. The British administration imported a large number of working hands to work in tea plantation, transport, road construction, oil field and coal mines. A certain number of other people also came within this flow to fill up the various demands of colonial economic development. Assamese public opinion started to be increasingly agitated over the occupation of cultivable land by immigrants who came mainly from East Bengal. In May 1920, Chandranath Sharma, the virtual founder of the Congress in Assam, voiced his concern about the threat to Assamese identity from unchecked infiltration. In a letter to a friend Lochan Barua he wrote “Something has to be done by the Government regarding the foreign settlers. Otherwise, the country will have to face very bad days and a miserable situation.”<sup>36</sup> Jnananath Bora also elaborated about the concern of the Assamese regarding immigration in his booklet entitled *Asomot Bidesi* (Foreigners in Assam). Bora argued “in Assam’s very particular circumstance the issue of ‘foreigners’ becomes very urgent” and “the only road to Assam’s autonomy and progress is to free Assam from the grip of foreigners”. The only concern and responsibility of the Assamese was “to save themselves from the grip of foreigners.”<sup>37</sup> In this connection the observations of Census Commissioner C. S. Mullan, Census Report of 1931, are significant. He highlighted the threat posed by the immigrants to the culture and identity of the Assamese people. Describing the immigration as an invasion, Mullan declared that in the course of time the Assamese homeland would be confined to only a district or two of upper Assam.

This issue of immigration had taken a new turn with the development of the idea of Pakistan. The increased Muslim population in Assam gave the Muslim League the opportunity to demand for inclusion of it in the proposed East Pakistan. The Assamese middle class were convinced that the Muslim League Government in



Assam under the leadership of Muhammad Saadulla was deliberately welcoming the Muslim element into the province with the introduction of 'Land Development Scheme', which was "meant to reduce the importance of the Hindus both politically and numerically."<sup>38</sup> This apprehension of the Assamese middle class was further accentuated by the Saadulla Government's policy of Census operation in 1941. The Assamese elite complained that the League Ministry manipulated the Census figures to serve their communal interest to include Assam into East Pakistan by showing a larger Muslim population than the actual number and a smaller figure for the Hindus. Gopinath Bordoloi, the leader of the Congress, challenged the Census Report of 1941 and demanded its revision by an independent body. Owing to the above factors, there was an apprehension in the minds of the Assamese middle class that they would soon cease to be a dominant community in Assam and it would become a part of Pakistan. Therefore, the Assamese middle class consistently demanded that the Sylhet district, which was a Muslim majority district, be separated from Assam and it was motivated by the urge to have a homogenous Assamese territory, distinct from the Indian mainland.

Along with the Assamese middle class different linguistic and ethnic groups of plains and hills of Assam also expressed strong sub-nationalist or centrifugal sentiment. The hills people possessed their own language and culture with different socio-political institutions. They thought that Assam's amalgamation with the rest of India would lead to the strengthening of the Caste-Hindu elements in Assamese society.<sup>39</sup> The demand for Pakistan further aggravated their fears. For this reason, the Naga District Tribal Council was formed in April 1945 with a view to unite the multi-lingual Nagas. Later on it was reorganized as Naga National Council (NNC). Initially it demanded autonomy within Assam. But this movement for autonomy was transformed into one for the establishment of a sovereign independent Nagaland after A. Z. Phizo became the President of NNC in November 1949.<sup>40</sup> In Mizo Hills two political organizations of the Mizos, namely the 'Mizo Union' and the 'United Mizo Freedom Organization' came into existence in April 1946 and July 1947 respectively. The 'Mizo Union' was for the continuation of link with India on the basis of full local autonomy, on the other hand the 'United Mizo Freedom Organization' propagated secession of all contiguous Mizo areas from India and demanded their merger with Burma on the ground of racial affinity.<sup>41</sup> In 1946, the Khasi-Jayantia Political Association was formed, which demanded a federation for the Khasi areas with adequate cultural and political autonomy within a sovereign Assam. The Garo National Council (GNC) came into existence in March 1946 in the Garo Hills to claim for an autonomous Garo region. Similarly, in the Mikir Hills the Karbi Durbar was formed in 1947 which emphasized the protection of local customs and consolidation of Mikir areas into a single administrative unit.

In the plains of Assam too centrifugal tendencies gained ground. The Ahoms, who had been the rulers of Assam for six hundred years, organized themselves with the formation of the All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA) in 1893, which was subsequently renamed as the Ahom Sabha. It stood for the preservation of the separate ethnical identity of the Ahoms and asserted that the attachment of the Ahoms to Hinduism was the root cause of their degeneracy.<sup>42</sup> They had been insisting that the Ahom identity was under threat from Hindu Aryan culture. Terming the Congress as a Caste-Hindu organization, a section of the Ahom elite demanded a sovereign independent Assam and expressed considerable separatist sentiment. The AAAA in a resolution on 29 September, 1944 maintained that "Assam without Sylhet has a legitimate claim for free and independent existence in the event of India being divided into Pakistan and Hindustan zones."<sup>43</sup>

Similar centrifugal and separatist sentiment was also expressed by various plains tribal of Assam such as the Bodos, the Kacharis, the Miris, the Deoris and Muttocks etc. who felt unhappy with the role of the national political parties. The tribal elite realized that they remained economically, educationally, socially and even politically much more backward than the Assamese Caste Hindus and the Muslims. The feelings of tribals were reflected in the note of Andrew Clow, the Governor of Assam (1942-46), as follows:

"The Assamese both Caste Hindus and the Muslim, professed solicitude for the tribes, but neither had troubled to study the question nor had any real sympathy with the tribes."<sup>44</sup> This feeling of deprivation among the tribals led them to the growth of a number of organizations i.e., the *Kachari Sanmilan*, *Koch Rajbangshi Sanmilan*, *Chutia Sanmilan*, *Muttock Association*, etc. Initially though these organizations worked independently, in the thirties of the last century they joined hands and formed the All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTTL). The plains tribals expressed its fear of both caste-Hindu and Muslim domination and the General Secretary of AAPTTL Bhimbor Deori in a press statement demanded: "Assam proper and its hills should be constituted into a separate sovereign state. Assam and its hills should not be made a part or province of any Indian federation – Hindustan or Pakistan without the consent of its people."<sup>45</sup>

The particularistic sentiment of the Ahoms and other hills and plains tribal communities of Assam united them in a common platform All Assam Tribes and Races Federation (AATRF) in 1944 with a view to "securing political, economic, social and cultural welfare and advancement of various tribes of Assam." The demand of Pakistan made by Muslim League made the tribes more articulate and conscious of their distinct identity and demanded a sovereign independent status for Assam in the first convention of the AATRF in 1945 by resolving that "Assam proper, with its hills, was never a part or province of India, and that its people,

particularly the Tribes and the Races inhabiting it are ethnically and culturally different from the people of the rest of India”, and therefore “it should be constituted into a separate Free State into which the Hills Districts bordering Assam be incorporated.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, the idea of independent Assam lost much ground with the popularity of the Congress in the region. But due to sympathetic attitude of some leading Congressmen the idea persisted side by side with Congress politics. Therefore, the State Congress consistently stressed on the maximum possible economic and political autonomy for Assam in a new federal set-up.

This sub-nationalist sentiment among the Assamese elite further aggravated with the Cabinet Mission Plan, 1946. The plan widened the conflict between the AICC and Assam as all-India Congress leadership was indifferent to Assam in this regard. According to the Plan, India was to be divided into three groups: A, B, C. sub-federations. Under this Plan, the representatives of the provinces in the Constituent Assembly were to divide themselves into three sections A, B and C and each section was to decide upon its own provincial and group matters. Section 'C' was to consist of Bengal and Assam. Thus under the proposed Plan, Assam was intended to be clubbed together with the Muslim majority province of Bengal. Accordingly, the members of the Constituent Assembly representing Assam and Bengal supposed to sit in Section 'C'. As the implementation of the Cabinet Mission Plan involved infringement of the basic principle of provincial autonomy, the Assamese elite reacted very sharply and made a strong protest against the Plan. The Assamese leaders felt that the Cabinet Mission Plan would pose a serious threat to Assam's identity by placing it at the mercy of Muslim-majority Bengal. The Assam Congress leadership informed the all India leadership that the groupings would not be acceptable to the people of Assam because Bengal with its majority members would impose its will on Assam. They apprehended that if Assam were included in Group 'C', she would lose her existence and distinct identity.

After publication of the Cabinet Mission's proposals, Gopinath Bordoloi, Premier of Assam through a memorandum to All India Congress Working Committee on May 19, 1946, demanded withdrawal of the proposals. He asserted that the Cabinet Mission's proposals would "perniciously affect the province of Assam."<sup>47</sup> The Assamese elite refused to accept such an imposition because they believed that if the proposals were accepted by Assam, the provincial constitution as well as the Grouping would be determined by the majority of the Constituent Assembly Members sitting in Group 'C.' And in that case, Assam would inevitably remain at the mercy of the Muslim League. Further, the President and Secretary of APCC clearly noted that "Assam shall resist any forcible compulsory imposition of constitution, notwithstanding approval by Muslim League."<sup>48</sup> The APCC reiterated that Assam was determined to stay out from the section due to the general principle of self-determination, autonomy for the provinces and fundamental principles of democracy. Apart from these steps taken by the APCC, hundreds of public meetings were held throughout the Assam Valley to record vehement protest against the Grouping clauses. Resolutions adopted in those meetings, to that effect, were forwarded to the national leaders and the Government. The *Asom Jatiya Mahasabha* played an important role in mobilizing the Assamese public opinion against any kind of Grouping with Bengal. Similarly the *Asamiya*, a language weekly, made a valuable contribution in anti-Grouping movement in Assam. It kept the people well informed and alert with the coverage of events regarding the Grouping.<sup>49</sup>

The Assam Legislative Assembly also adopted a resolution, moved by the Premier Gopinath Bordoloi, expressing strong disapproval of the Plan. The same resolution also directed the representatives of Assam in the Constituent Assembly not to sit in the 'Section' with any other province for devising the constitution and for settlement of any question relating to Assam.<sup>50</sup> Initially, the Central Congress leaders seemed quite sympathetic towards Assam's stand, but by the time the Assam Assembly passed the resolution against grouping, the attitude of the Central Congress leaders had undergone a change. Nehru not only expressed his unhappiness at the resolution of Assam Assembly but viewed Assam's objection as an obstacle.<sup>51</sup> Finally on August 10, 1946 the Congress Working Committee accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan. By accepting the Plan Nehru declared: "We are perfectly prepared to, and have accepted, the position of sitting in sections which will consider the question of formation of groups."<sup>52</sup> At this moment of grave crisis of Assam, Gandhi came to Assam's assistance and told a delegation of Assam Congress leaders, "If Assam keeps quiet it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do. It must stand independently as an autonomous unit. It is autonomous to a large extent today. It must become fully independent and autonomous."<sup>53</sup> Thus, Gandhi exhorted the Assam Congress to revolt against the Central Congress leadership if necessary. However, Nehru and Azad continued to hold the view that Assam's stand was helping the Muslim League and also acting as an obstruction to freedom. Nehru even told a delegation of Bengal that "Assam could not hold up the progress of the rest of India and support to Assam would mean refusal to accept the British Prime Minister's statement of December 6 and letting loose forces of chaos and civil war".<sup>54</sup> Further, the supporters of the Muslim League in Assam extended their support to the Grouping Plan because, under the Grouping arrangements, the Muslims would have been in an advantageous position to become the majority in Bengal. At the same time, the All India Congress leadership also persuaded the Assam Congress to accept the same. Under this situation the Assamese elite thought that Assam would lose her distinct identity and individuality forever. This made them even more anxious about safeguarding their distinct identity. However, with the acceptance of the Mountbatten plan, the Anti-Grouping

movement came to an end in Assam. Nevertheless, the proposed Grouping Plan deepened the Assamese fears about the existence of Assam which contributed a lot to the contradiction between all India Congress leadership and the leadership of Assam Congress. It is obvious from the above discussion that the central leadership of the Congress, except Gandhi, did not share Assam's apprehensions about Grouping Plan. However, the dropping of the Cabinet Mission proposals and the subsequent separation of the Muslim-majority district of Sylhet from Assam, through a referendum held on July 6 & 7, 1947, set at rest Assamese fears of losing their identity.<sup>55</sup>

### **Independence of Country and Centre-Assam Conflict**

In the post-independence period, the first major difference of opinion between Assam and the Centre occurred over the question of settling the Hindu refugees from newly-created East Pakistan in Assam and nearly reached a crisis point.<sup>56</sup> The 1951 Census Report showed the number of refugees in Assam as 274,455. Out of these 272,075 came from East Pakistan; 647 from West Pakistan and 1,733 from other unspecified areas. Because of its proximity to East Pakistan, the Cachar district alone sheltered 93,177 refugees. The number of refugees in other districts was as follows: Goalpara 44,967, Kamrup 42,871, Darrang 18,833, Lakhimpur 13,965, Sibsagar 7,514, Khasi Hills 5,990, Garo Hills 5,072.<sup>57</sup> Assam's Premier Bordoloi argued that Assam could not accommodate very many refugees. But when the State Government expressed its unwillingness to settle refugees without limit, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Bordoloi that Assam was "getting a bad name for its narrow-minded policy" and further wrote: "You say there is no further land available in Assam. This is a question of fact which can easily be determined. It is patent, however, that if land is not available in Assam, it is still less available in the rest of India."<sup>58</sup> Historian Nirode K. Barooah referred to Nehru's letter as 'tantamount to blackmail' because it indicated that "if Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam for financial help obviously suffer." Thus, all India Congress leaders tended to "think of themselves as more all-India minded than their provincial counterparts" and were determined to impose their will on the Bordoloi government. Gopinath Bordoloi responded to Nehru for his 'threat of economically strangling Assam' by stating that:

I feel extremely hurt when you say that the claims of Assam for financial help would suffer for our incapacity to help solving the refugee problem...It will be quite easy to throttle the province of its existence by withholding the necessary help for its life and growth; but I hope it will not be done – not surely on the plea of our failure to solve this particular problem...I am sure that if we are unable to do more, it is entirely due to the non-development of the province. A more developed province today might have helped better in solving the problem.<sup>59</sup>

In the face of Bordoloi's argument, the Centre attempted to settle the refugees in Assam in vacant railway lands which belonged to the Central Government without prior consultation with the State Government. The Assam Government objected to this idea of the Central Government on the ground that the railway employees were by and large of communist sympathies and if settled on railway lands, the refugees too would be influenced on those lines. When finally Nehru heard this argument, he again wrote to Bordoloi: "If Assam wants to follow a narrow provincial policy excluding others, there are bound to be reactions against Assam in other parts of India. It will be difficult for the Central Government to have any major scheme in Assam."<sup>60</sup> Nehru's prejudice towards the Assam Congress leadership was strengthened by the emerging demand for dual citizenship from *Asom Jatiya Mahasabha* and he remarked: "I suppose one of these days we might be asked for the independence of Assam."<sup>61</sup> Nehru even threatened that Assam would be left out of consideration for general schemes of progress. Bordoloi was certainly unhappy at Nehru's outburst and expressed his dismay at the 'exaggerated and false propaganda against the Assamese.'<sup>62</sup> Thus "Nehru's outbursts against Bordoloi and the Congress government in Assam"<sup>63</sup> after independence revealed the degree of Centre's authoritarian attitude towards the States of the Indian Union which finally widened the gap between Assam and the Centre.

The conflict between the Centre and Assam further widened over the question of continued illegal migration in the post-independence period. The Assam Government demanded strong measures from the Centre. On July 21, 1948 Bordoloi met Nehru in New Delhi for this issue and requested him to give the Assam Government the necessary power to stop the flow of immigrants from East Bengal. But Nehru wanted to do something through the Inter-Dominion Conference, which Bordoloi had already found unsatisfactory.<sup>64</sup> Later on, the West Bengal Government opposed to any permit system on the ground that it would bring a larger influx of Hindu population to West Bengal. Nehru and Patel were afraid of antagonizing the West Bengal leadership by putting restrictions on the movement of migrants into Assam.<sup>65</sup> Thus Nehru showed indifference to the dangers posed by illegal infiltration from East Pakistan into Assam. Besides Nehru, Sardar Patel also adopted a 'partisan stand on the question of settling the refugees in Assam.' Patel wanted the surplus waste land to be distributed on a fifty-fifty basis between the Assamese landless and the refugees. When Assam Revenue Minister Bishnuram Medhi planned to allot the surplus waste lands of Assam first to the indigenous landless cultivators, then to Assam's tea garden labourers and only last of all to the refugees, he was criticized by Patel in a letter to Bordoloi in strong words: "Medhi's plan was at variance with the letter and spirit of instructions of the Central

Government.” Patel further condemned Medhi as a ‘narrow-minded parochial person.’<sup>66</sup> Bordoloi, of course, defended Medhi and explained to Patel that Medhi had not gone out of his way. Assam had already sheltered some two and a half to three lakhs of displaced persons from East Pakistan. Thus, Bordoloi and his colleagues were quite dissatisfied at the Centre over refugee problem and even threatened “not to contest the ensuing election.”<sup>67</sup> This kind of ‘insensitivity and prejudice’ towards Assam sowed the seeds of discord which certainly helped in the growth of sub-nationalism in the subsequent period.

### **Economic Backwardness and Assamese Nationalism**

The discontentment also grew among the Assamese leadership due to its economic backwardness as the legacy of the colonial economy had continued in post-colonial Assam. Assam, which contributed a large share of revenue to the central exchequer, continued to remain an agriculturally and industrially backward State in spite of the State’s rich water, forest and mineral resources and vast potentialities. The Assamese elite called it “a rich province with the poor people.”<sup>68</sup> The successive Financial Enquiry Committees also admitted the economic backwardness of Assam. The Indian Statutory Commission in its report admitted that of the entire Governor's province “Assam is the least developed.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Sir Otto Niemeyer in his financial report stated that Assam had been “universally recognized as deficit province and must undoubtedly receive assistance.”<sup>70</sup> In post-independence period, the Assamese elite were not happy with the financial adjustment between the Centre and Assam. Characterizing this adjustment as “unscientific and inequitable” the Government of Assam in a memorandum even alleged that it constituted a “grave injustice done to Assam.”<sup>71</sup> A section of the Assamese elite used to blame the Centre for the backwardness of Assam. They thought that the Centre was taking too much revenue away from Assam; while the Government of Assam, on the other hand, did not get its legitimate share of the duties on tea, oil, jute etc. *The Assam Tribune* expressed this sentiment of the Assamese elite thus: “Despite her vast potential resources Assam is to-day as underdeveloped as she was during the British rule. Indeed, Assam's financial stringency has been responsible for holding up all her progress. It is plain that the Centre gets more from Assam than Assam can manage to get from herself.”<sup>72</sup>

The perpetuation of economic backwardness of Assam even after independence may be largely attributed to the weak transport link with the rest of the country. The partition snapped the direct transport link between Assam and the rest of India and it made the rail and road link circuitous. This seriously affected the economic development of Assam. The partition of the country had turned Assam into a completely landlocked province. It disrupted river and railway system through which tea, coal and oil were transported. The creation of Pakistan severely upset the economy of Assam as Assam’s natural outlet through Bengal was cut off. Nehru himself admitted that the people of the Assam hills faced difficulties because of the snapping of trade links with former East Bengal.<sup>73</sup> Added to this, the refusal on the part of the Centre to extend special financial assistance to Assam to overcome its economic backwardness compounded with the economic crisis arising out of partition. In spite of this the people of Assam thought that the Congress government under Gopinath Bordoloi would soon be able to recover the situation. But Bordoloi’s death in August 1950 and the passing on of the leadership to Bishnuram Medhi, the situation gradually deteriorated.<sup>74</sup> Further, the migration from East Pakistan continued and the number of Bengali Hindu refugees in the state increased from two lakhs and seventy three thousand in 1951 to six lakhs and twenty eight thousand in 1961. Therefore, there was a widespread feeling among a section of the Assamese elite that they were being deprived by the Central Government of their ‘legitimate share’ for which they thought the Government of Assam failed to improve the economic condition of the people. As a result, popular anger mounted and found its first expression in the movement for the first oil refinery in Assam in 1957. The oil refinery movement, headed by the Assam Oil Refinery Action Council (AORAC), was supported by all the political parties of the State. The Assam Congress also finally supported the movement and opposed to the setting up of refinery at Barauni in Bihar with Assam crude oil. Prime Minister Nehru cited defense reason for not setting up the refinery in Assam. But Assam Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi reflected the mood of the people and wrote to Nehru thus: “If defense cannot undertake to protect the refinery located in Assam, how will they protect the oil-fields and the transport system in the Eastern Region.”<sup>75</sup> In the face of popular agitation, as a small concession to Assam a toy refinery, the Assamese elite alleges, with a capacity of 0.85 million tones was set up at Guwahati. But the people of Assam understood that the Centre would not concede even their most legitimate rights without a fight. Due to the growing feeling of alienation, the Assamese elite started to demand due benefit from its rich natural resources. This motivated them to start the second oil refinery movement which engulfed Assam in 1969 with much wider base than the first one. In this movement thousands of people from the Brahmaputra Valley took to the streets to vent their anger against the indifferent attitude of the Centre and demanded speedy industrialization of the State.

The reorganization of Assam also played a crucial role in the enlargement of discontentment of the Assamese elite towards the Centre. The Indian Constitution empowers the Central Parliament to reorganize the States. This power of the Union Executive and Legislature to create new states and to change state boundaries has seriously affected the politics of Assam. The Central Government carved out separate states in spite of



opposition of Assamese elite in the form of Assam Anti Federation Action Council (AAFAC) in the face of the aspirations for cultural and political autonomy by the tribal peoples in the post-independence period. New Delhi's policies of carving separate states out of Assam profoundly affected State's politics in the subsequent period. It 'energized movements for separation and discouraged a politics of accommodation.' As a result Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh were separated from Assam one after another. The Assamese elite reacted sharply and started agitation against the move of the Centre to reorganize Assam. The dominant Assamese middle class elite believed that they would be able to keep the territorial integrity of Assam intact and organised state-wide strike against reorganization. To oppose reorganization of the State, the people observed "Unity Day" and even propagated Assam's separation from India<sup>76</sup> due to the anger against New Delhi. Thus the issue of reorganization of Assam certainly shaped and moulded the attitude of the Assamese elite towards Indian federalism.

This was followed by a state-wide agitation led by the AASU in 1974 on the issue of the economic development of the State. Udayan Misra termed it as 'a sort of dress rehearsal for the Assam Movement of 1979-85'.<sup>77</sup> One of the important causes of AASU movement in 1974 was the rise of unemployment in the State. In the period after independence, State Government's job sector was virtually stagnant, while the Central Government was known for its discriminatory attitude in the matter of appointment towards the local candidates. The Employment Review Committee of the Assam Legislative Assembly also stated that the Central industrial establishments showed discriminatory attitude towards local applicants in the matter of employment. Incumbent Assam Chief Minister Bimalaprasad Chaliha expressed grave dissatisfaction at the unsympathetic attitude of the railway authorities towards the legitimate claims of the local youths.<sup>78</sup> The situation in the tea, oil, coal and plywood sectors was even worse. The State's tea industry seemed to have little positive impact on the economy of the State. The British and Indian tea companies earned enormous profits, but had done almost nothing for the welfare of the State. Further, due to non-existence of head offices Assam earned little sales tax on tea. For example, in the year 1980, Assam got only Rs. 22 crores as sales tax on tea produced in the State whereas West Bengal got Rs. 42 crores. Similarly, on Assam's plywood it got only Rs. 35 lakhs whereas the Centre got Rs. 80 crores.<sup>79</sup> Assam's petroleum industry also did not have the positive impact it should have in the economy. The Centre established public sector oil refineries only after popular movements. Further, after the Assam Movement only the royalty on Assam crude was increased to Rs. 325 and subsequently to Rs. 578 from mere Rs. 42 per tonne. In the matter of natural gas also the Centre showed indifference and over 50 million cubic feet of natural gas are flared up daily in the oil fields of Assam.<sup>80</sup> This kind of situation led to the formation of the AJYCP in March 1978 to secure for the people of Assam dual citizenship and the right of self-determination, which asserts that only self-rule would give the State's control over their natural resources and put an end the 'colonial exploitation' of the Centre.<sup>81</sup> At the same time the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was formed on April 7, 1979 to protest against continued infiltration of foreign nationals into the State and to put an end to the colonial exploitation of Assam by the Centre by liberating the State through armed struggle, though ULFA's concept of independence of Assam is not acceptable to the different ethnic groups and civil society of the region in the changed political scenario. The ULFA raised the issue of Centre's economic relationship with the States and brought to the fore the issues relating to political and financial autonomy raised by the leaders of Assam in the pre-independence period. Under the circumstances, the increasing pressure on land and jobs ultimately found expression in the anti-foreigner movement to hold the Government of India accountable not only for colonially exploiting Assam and the Northeastern region but also for not detecting and deporting the foreigners from Assam. It is pointed out that while the problem of continued influx, the ever-growing pressure on land and the fear of losing the socio-political identity of the Assamese people seemed to be the immediate motivating factors of the Assam movement, actually the most prominent one was the popular outburst against decades of economic neglect of the State by the Central government. Udayan Misra puts "uneven development bordering on colonial pattern of exploitation coupled with pressure on land and jobs could be said to be some of the prime motivating factors behind the Assam Movement."<sup>82</sup> The Indian State's coercive measures to suppress the Assam Movement alienated the Assamese and also a large section of the tribals of the plains from the Indian mainstream. After the Assam Accord of August 1985, the people of Assam had given reign of the State in the hands of a newly formed regional political party AGP for two terms with intervals due to their loss of confidence in the 'centrist party' INC (I) with the hope that it would bring an end to decades old colonial exploitation of the Centre, but the AGP failed to translate it into reality. This kind of regionalist sentiment still persists among the Assamese elite even up to the second decade of this century under the INC (I) government which has been in reign for three consecutive terms.

## II. CONCLUSION

Thus, the attitude of the Assamese elite towards Indian federalism is influenced by certain socio-political and economic problems of Assam. These basic socio-political and economic issues not only made the Assamese elite conscious of their distinct identity but also determined their attitude towards Indian federalism.

The study highlights that the Assamese elite have for long been conscious of their distinct identity for continuous immigration towards Assam ever since the British came to Assam. The overall colonial pattern by and large, continued in post-colonial Assam's polity and economy. It rendered a slow process of development into the economy of Assam. The Centre has failed to meet the legitimate expectations of the people of Assam. Further, the trend of rapid growth in population in Assam continued in the post-colonial period. Added to this, the Centre's authoritarian policy of disintegration of Assam, continued neglect and indifference to peaceful forms of protest on socio-political and economic issues have led to the growth of sub-nationalist urge among the Assamese people. Hence, this paper focuses how the roots of Assamese regionalism have been deeply embedded in the socio-economic and political realities of the society over a long period of time. The issues relating to political and financial autonomy raised by Assamese leaders in the pre-independence period continue to exercise impact on the Assamese mind even today after decades of independence and promulgation of constitution which has certainly articulated regionalist sentiment and influenced the federalizing process of the country.

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- [8]. To oppose the betel nut taxation of the British, the peasants of Phulaguri village of Nagaon district assembled on September 17, 1861. However, instead of listening them the British fined and detained them for a day. After this incident, the peasants decided not to pay the tax and from October 15 onwards a five days *Raij-mel* (Mass Meetings) was called for greater mobilisation. The participation was so large that on October 18, the British administration had to send a senior officer J.B. Singer to control the situation. However, the tactic of lathi charge and firing to disperse the crowd made the situation volatile and the peasants attacked and killed Lieutenant Singer.
- [9]. The *Raij mels* were people's assemblies usually led by influential sections of the village population. Popular grievances were ventilated at these *mels* or assemblies during the early phases of the company's rule in Assam. But, later on these *mels* became focal points of resistance to the new taxes which were imposed by the British.
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- [22]. The term 'Assamese elite' refers to educated and influential sub-group within the Assamese middle class. Because of their education and other advantages, the Assamese elite became culturally, politically and even economically dominant within the Assamese society. Obviously, they controlled the press and other platforms and articulated public opinion in Assam. For this reason, the attitude of the Assamese in general towards the question of 'federalism' implies the attitude of this dominant group. However,

- the Assamese elite has been projecting its own interest as the interest of the entire Assamese masses, it is argued. Phukon, Girin (1984). *Assam's Attitude to Federalism*. (p. xxiv), New Delhi: Sterling Publishers
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