

***“Divide Assam fifty-fifty”***

***From movements to accords and beyond: the critical role of Student organisations in the formation and performance of identity in Assam***

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**1.0: Introduction:**

The paper seeks to posit that student organizations have provided crucial platforms for the performing and performance of different identities in Assam at various levels, from the inceptions and articulation of identities from within the ‘movements’ to acknowledgement or ‘deliverance’ of it in the form of accords /negotiations as well as their further ‘circulation’ beyond these arena. The unfolding of this process has largely shaped the discourse(s) of identity politics in the state. Post Assam movement (1979-85), student groups claiming to represent the different ethnic group in Assam had taken the initiative to forge an intimate bond between the concepts of ethnicity, identity and group rights largely reacting to the hegemonic putative univerasaliation of the Assamese identity preached and practiced by dominant student organization All Assam Students Union (AASU). In the recent times, the All Bodo Students Union’s (ABSU) rhetoric of ‘divide Assam fifty-fifty’ has captured the imagination of many, debates have flared up on the question of Assam’s territorial integrity viz a viz the question of ‘homeland’ and ‘identity’. In a similar vein, ethnic minority student groups like the Karbis, Dimasas, Mishings among others have also rallied behind ideas of territoriality and indigeneity. The resultant conflation of ethnic-nationalist discourses has often led to demands for some measures of autonomy and at times even secession from Assam. The paper emphasize that the historical run of experience of nationality formation in Assam has to studied to understand the causes behind the persistence of student groups in the socio-political

scenario in the state of Assam and their crucial role in the performance of the identity discourse in Assam, especially in the period leading up to and post the tumultuous years of the Assam movement, acknowledged as the single biggest student movement in the post-emergency India.<sup>1</sup>

The state of Assam has a vibrant legacy of student movements. Six long years of an intense anti-government agitation by the student movement resulted in the formation of the state government by the students who contested and won the assembly elections held after the signing of the accord between the government and movement leadership. This new found legitimacy and road to power, post Assam Movement, progressively led student politics in Assam to become an essential articulation of the agendas of socio-cultural assertions and political ambitions of the different ethnic groups in the state, thereby signifying the fissures in the hegemonic project of depicting one linguistically and culturally totalizing community in Assam. In a way, this has made Students the agents of identity formation and student movements into de-facto identity movements or at least strong articulation of an identity politics. Though the nature and extent of the social ‘inclusiveness’ of the movement remains a matter of contestation, a fairly established fact is the attainment of an intense synergistic relationship between students as a social group and other groups in the society- a relationship that subsequently lead to significant and sustained processes of social transformation in the state.

### **1.1 : Students as a social category of change and guardians of identity in Assam: the backdrop and the conceptualization:**

The fact that historical circumstances and political culture crucially shapes the nature and scope of social mobilization under group categories like student politics sometimes giving it special prowess is very evident in the case of Assam. It is observed that the key political role played in the anti-colonial struggle has legitimated the participation of students in national politics in the developing countries.<sup>2</sup> Thus students achieved a place

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<sup>1</sup> Shah, 2004, p.210. ,

<sup>2</sup> . Altbach, 1982, Lelyveld, 1978.

in history and their contemporary political role is considered legitimate. In the case of Assam too students were at the forefront of anti-colonial struggle and as it will be discussed driving forces of some of the biggest social movement in the region in the post-colonial decades. Indeed in the context of Assam the very formation of the category of the student as on of social agent is a process of social history. The formations of student groups and the development of a kind of student politics in an ethnically charged situation like of Assam, needs to be understood with the backdrop of history.

The state policies of the Ahom monarchy, facilitated retention of tribal pockets in the heartland of Assam, through which tribes retained their distinct language and culture. Economically the situation paved the way for exclusion of 'Tribals' from plough-based agriculture.<sup>3</sup> As such the process of 'conversion' of tribal people did not operate here and even in the heartland of Assam 'tribal' people continued their existence outside the Brahminical fold away from the culture-frame of Plough-based system of production. Thus the Indian variety of feudalism of that period operated in Assam only at the super-structural level. Its orbit excluded the most numerous sections of the indigenous population. This proved to be a weak point at the very starting point of Assamese nationality formation process. In a sense there was no 'feudalism from below' and belated attempts by the Ahom monarchy at 'feudalism from above' eventually ruined the monarchy<sup>4</sup>. As result, when colonialism and with it the modern education came, there was no ready-made middle-class to appropriate these changes. Students fulfilled this role of an incipient middle-class and harbinger of modernity in Assam. The major contribution of this middle-class was that they could provide a definite direction to their identity through articulations in tune with the changed rationale-legal framework. This historical truth is the essential factor responsible for according an influential role in the dynamics of community formation, to the student's class in Assam. Therefore a chief feature of the student movements in Assam lies in its attainment of organizational maturity and the subsequent formation of a well-knit structure. Tracing its initiation in the *Asomiya Bhasar Unnoti Sadhini Sabha* at Calcutta in 1985 the organizational structure

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<sup>3</sup> Dutta , 1993: 26.

<sup>4</sup> Guha, 1976: 80-92.).

developed into one that came to be a well established precursor to the success of subsequent student led mass movements.

However, it is interesting to observe if student movements and politics in Assam has been able to usher in a process of social change in which student organisations are assuming some features of a new social class, an understanding of a class that centers on the notion of a conflict group consisting of people with a common interest rather than the Marxist sense of class formation along the lines of property relations. What however has been fairly established is the existence of a close relationship between the students in Assam and the middle-class, from the very first stages of crystallization of student power in the region. ‘Assam Chatra Sammilan’ (Assam students’ Association) , the first and for a considerable amount of time the foremost students’ organization of the state ‘was the most articulate exponent of the middle class ideology’<sup>5</sup> However, the matter of contestation is whether the relationship is one of domination, subordination or mutual co-operation?

The concept of hegemony, as developed by Antonio Gramsci can be very helpful here in understanding this relationship.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that hegemony of the dominant classes in civil society implies their ideological predominance over the subordinate classes. “More than any other sections of the society, the students as receptive members of the intelligentsia, and as persons constantly engaged in studies are greatly exposed to this hegemony. This hegemonic position is not synonymous with the governing fraction, which staffs the top levels of the state apparatus, or the groups, which elaborate and reproduce dominant ideology. Nor should it be located in those groups which visibly exercise political and ideological leadership in society but rather in the effects of dominant forms of political and ideological practice, the particular social relations they reproduce. It would therefore be necessary in the study of student movements not merely to locate the class which apparently rules but to locate the class or the combination of classes which exercises hegemony in that particular society at that particular phase of

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<sup>5</sup> Sharma, 2002: 65

<sup>6</sup> .both instances of ‘expansive’ and ‘subversive’ hegemony as put forth by Laclau Ernesto and C Mouffe (1985, p.192).

history.”<sup>7</sup> in this sense the students become both the targets and purveyors of middle class hegemony, as they carry forward their hegemonised ethos to other sections of the society.

However, with increasing ethnisation of politics in Assam as a consequence of this very middle-class hegemony and resultantly the limits of middle class agenda coming to the fore more than ever, the continued relevance of student politics ( apart from and besides viewing these politics in a cycle of hegemony and counter-hegemony) needs to be explained using concepts of structural sociology like network analysis that attends to those aspects in which decisions are made, groups formed for ad hoc purposes, areas in which "informal organizations prevail"; in sum, on dynamic rather than static aspects. A network approach to ethnicity can aid in defining "ethnicity" processually through seeing it as a means used for moving through a network of relationships. Additionally, the network perspective permits use of a status, role, and social identity concept of ethnicity in order to break out of the deadend position that a dichotomous view of universal ethnocentrism leads one. It purports to show how actors use a combination of perceptions and attributes in order to structure actions within their networks.

## **1.2 :The Assam Movement; paradoxes of identity:**

The historical Assam Movement (1979-85) has to be considered extremely important for the student politics of not only Assam, but of the entire northeastern region, as it has observed that the success of Assam’s student leaders in sustaining a prolonged campaign and then capturing political power inspired other student movements in the northeast.<sup>8</sup>“Sociologically speaking, the leadership of the Assam movement has become their reference group”.<sup>9</sup> The historic Assam movement took place in the wake of the fast establishing reputation of AASU as the most powerful and effective body representing

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<sup>7</sup> Baruah, 2002:16-17

<sup>8</sup> (Baruah S, 1999: 187)

<sup>9</sup> (Hussain, 1987: 1332)

mighty student power in Assam. To know the student groups influence on the discourse of identity in Assam one must look into their ascendance to the dominant position.

- Non-acceptability of the regional and all-India political parties and the credibility gained by AASU during the ‘medium of instruction’ movement in 1972, refinery movement of 1970, made AASU the right body to take on the sensitive issue of foreign nationals in Assam, where traditional political parties hesitated.
- The agitation gained instantaneously in respectability from the weighty support of the Assamese intelligentsia, and this helped to bring about a mutually reinforcing unique equation between the teacher and the taught, which in a wider sense bridged the generation gap also.<sup>10</sup>
- The AASU was cautious in avoiding any linkage with established political parties to maintain its leadership in the face of any political hijacking. However, there was conscious effort to garner support from various section of the society in Assam. “In order to pledge support to the agitation, small groups of people engaged in particular activity would form associations and pass resolutions. A multiplication of such associations sprang up at the state, district, taluk and village level”.<sup>11</sup>

One also sees the post-independence expansion of schools and colleges leading to a new social space for youth power in Assam, thus giving a solid organisational base to the political aspirations of Assamese nationalism and subnationalisms. Sanjib Baruah rightly observes, “Now there are schools in the most remote small towns and villages; colleges too are numerous. Only predominantly Assamese-speaking schools and colleges seem to have become part of this federation- Assam’s numerous Bengali or Hindi schools are not part of the All Assam Students Union. It is not surprising that the explosion of subnationalist politics in Assam coincides with the founding and consolidation of this

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<sup>10</sup> (Chabra, 1992, p. 67)

<sup>11</sup> (ibid:p.68)

organisation in the 1970s.”<sup>12</sup> One can add now predominantly tribal areas like bodos , Karbis and at times Mishing areas in this domain outside direct AASU influence. But there is a difference still; we’ll come to it later. Also, AASU can be viewed as, along with the Xobha as the institutions that give the Assamese civil society its organisational capacity. The leadership of the Assam Movement had shown tremendous power to mobilize the masses and build a pressure through various means, thus making themselves indispensable in any bargain. It is to be observed being a multi-ethnic state following a particular logic of development every social group in Assam has come to have its own faction in the ruling-class, weak or strong. Naturally with the change in political situation the equation of these factions keep on changing. The inter-factional or intra-ruling class conflict has a significant bearing on the social life of the state. Sanjib Baruah has rightly pointed out that a good starting point to look at the effect of the turmoil on ethnic relations in Assam is to focus attention on the term “ethnic Assamese” which has become common in discussions of Assam politics since the Assam movement<sup>13</sup> The term was either nonexistent or in extremely rare use before the Assam movement. The emergence of the term “ethnic Assamese” suggests a process that anthropologists like Abner Cohen have described as a shift from an ‘elite group’ being culturally invisible to becoming culturally visible- a result of a loss of hegemony.<sup>14</sup>

The Assam movement ethnicized the Assamese and the political landscape of Assam, as different tribal and religious minority organisations began challenging the ‘assumed’ authority of the Assamese speakers to speak for Assam and its people. One can thus observe the historical ascendance of Assamese middle-class through assertion of students politics throughout the decades of the fifties and the sixties and culminating in the powerful Assam movement spearheaded by the All Assam Students Movements (AASU), where the movement did succeed to achieve a ‘unity of purpose’ between various sections or communities in the state by articulating a cultural space that was shared by various components of the political block as a forum for mutually intelligible communication and interaction. However, it was this same value consensus of the

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<sup>12</sup> ( Baruah, 1999: 124)

<sup>13</sup> (Baruah, 1999: 125)

<sup>14</sup> (Cohen, 1981: 307-31).

society in Assam at that point of time that resisted the attempted 'combative' hegemonic drive by the middle-class through student organizations. Indeed the type of normative understanding and consensus within various contesting components of the community due to its particular configuration determined the nature of the movement itself, a polysonic one addressing itself to a multiplicity of interests, a 'liminal event' through which the society impresses its form on its members irrespective of their status differences and generates a consensus<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the hegemonising agenda of the student movement of the 70s and 80s has proved counter-productive to the consolidating middle-class hegemony in Assam and have led to further ruptures in the shared normative consensus of the society by highlighting many a fault lines. With Assam Movement the limits of a 'majoritarian' middle-class politics in Assam strongly came to the fore and as more the student leadership became coercive in the face of critiques and challenges from different sections and classes from within the community, more they deviated from the route of hegemony.

### **1.3: Ascendance of identity politics: renewed positions?**

The various issues and instances of mobilisation staged by AASU during the course of the movement being 'subnationalist' standing in a dialogical relationship with pan-Indian politics, and with roots in civil society,<sup>16</sup> tried incorporating all Assamese irrespective of their lower-order engagements, as it were, into the high-order subnational projects. However interesting is to analyze the socio-political implication of this projected higher-unity of the community in terms of AASU's understanding of the notion of the Assamese identity, which increasingly came to be perceived as one of consensual dominance at best and authoritarian coercion at worst by the student groups of the minority ethnic groups in the post Assam-movement years. AASU's position regarding the concept of 'indigenous Assamese' reflects a lot. Indigeneity as an essentialist identity can be deployed both for political mobilisation and self affirmation. Ideas of territoriality and indigeneity have been conflated in ethnic-nationalist discourses and encouraged demands for autonomy and

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<sup>15</sup> (Turner Victor, 1990: 147-54).

<sup>16</sup> (Baruah, 1999:5)



secession, although the two ideas are distinct. Significantly AASU takes note in recent years that “the word ‘indigenous’ does not feature in the Assam accord of 1985. Its subsequent prominence in the politics of Assam creates a lot of tension and controversy”<sup>17</sup>. One finds significant reference to different issues involving the parameters of Assamese identity in the speech of AASU’s adviser and long standing former adviser Sammujal Bhattacharjya’s speech to the annual session of the organization in 2005, the last annual session of the conference till date. There the definition of the indigenous of Assam given in the R.C. Bhageval Committee report in 1951 is taken to be the accepted and ‘settled’ definition on the matter by the AASU leadership.” Indigenous person of Assam means a person belonging to the state of Assam and speaking the Assamese language or any tribal dialect of Assam, or in the case of Cachar the language of the region.”

Emphasizing on the need for constitutional safeguards to preserve the ‘basic identity’ of the Assamese nation, Bhattacharjya elaborates on the ‘concept’ of an Assamese, “...who is an Assamese? On this the Student’s Union have discussed with a number of anthropologist, historians of Assam. After detailed discussion the Student’s Union has put forth the definition of ‘Assamese’ for seat reservation. This definition is for the purpose of seat reservation only. Anthropologists are saying that speakers of the languages of Assam’s indigenous ethnic group’s are Assamese. Though this definition is acceptable it cannot be framed with the issue of seat reservation. Historians have said that one of the three can be taken for defining ‘Assamese’, the year of 1826, the 1947 or the year of 1950. But keeping in perspective the situation arising out of the country’s partition and the flowing process of integration between different religious, linguistic, ethnic groups-peoples, the Student’s Union have taken a liberal position (perspective) and instead of 1826, 1947 or 1950, defines the concept of an ‘Assamese’ as the people irrespective of religion-language-ethnicity, whose names are included in the Citizenship registrar of 1951 based on the first population census of post-independence India in 1951, and their subsequent generations. By the word ‘Assamese’ the Student’s Union refers to all the nationalities, tribes, ethnic, religious groups composing the greater Assamese

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<sup>17</sup> (AASU souvenir, 2005: 51)

nation.”<sup>18</sup>(Translation mine). Also it is to be noted that conscious of their earlier damaging step during the Assam movement of calling for abolition of reservations for Scheduled Castes and tribes in the state, AASU leadership now is very prompt to clarify that “the system of reservation for the Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribe people will continue as before. This definition of Assamese will be effective only for seat reservation”<sup>19</sup>

Here one sees a conscious effort from the AASU to dispel their image as being an ‘upper caste’ organization and restore what one contributor in their annual 2005 souvenir calls a ‘secular ideology’.<sup>20</sup>This is often through the symbolic but crucial way of electing people belonging to tribal and other backward sections of the Assamese society to the highest office of AASU as president and general secretaries. The fact that AASU is getting increasingly aware of the internal tension gripping Assamese identity is evident from the fact that in their 15<sup>th</sup> annual souvenir in 2005, a total number of six articles are reflections and discussions on various dimensions of the issue of ethnic identities in Assam. On 28<sup>th</sup> September 2004 following AASU’s invitation leadership of the various ethnic-students groups sat in a joint discussion in Guwahati, working out on issues of joint importance. Following this discussion, on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2004 the different ethnic students organization have taken out a joint rally with AASU in the streets of Guwahati and the student leaders of the ethnic groups were the special invitee of the central ‘Swahid Diwas’ ( martyr’s day) observed by AASU on the 10<sup>th</sup> December at Guwahati. AASU souvenir comments, “Every ethnic group has their separate organization, with separate separate aims, ideologies and purposes. It is only natural. But the decision for a unified fight for solving the common problem of Assam is definitely a positive step in today’s situation”<sup>21</sup> This understanding of shifting norms can be seen in the light of intense counter discourse preached and practiced by the ethnic minority student groups in the state , especially in the post-Assam movement decades.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 50

<sup>19</sup> Ibid: 51

<sup>20</sup> AASU, 2005: 59

<sup>21</sup> Ibid : 20

## **2.0 : Politics of difference by Ethnic minority student groups:**

It is often pointed out that with Assam movement as their reference point, the tribals and other ethnic minorities have become very restive against their oppressed status in a high-caste dominated regional society, building up mass movements as protest. Hussain comments that the emerging leadership of the Autochthon tribals is not prepared like other oppressed groups in Assam (the Adivasis and immigrant Muslims), to accept the hegemony of the ethnic Assamese ruling class<sup>22</sup>.

In an interview to me, Prabin Boro, the present president of the ABSU and former president of the AASU explained that “In what atmosphere the leadership of Prafulla-Bhrihu should have welcomed the tribal-ethnic leadership to the same platform, ridiculing that atmosphere they had made fun of the ethnic leadership. As a result of which leaders like Bodufa Upen Brahma was compelled to go out of the AASU and form a separate platform for the Bodos”

However, the protest politics of the minority ethnic and tribal groups in the state has to be understood in some developments spanning over a period preceding the course of the Assam Movement also, though the movement undeniably gave these tendencies a concrete push. While placing the discourse in the general backdrop of the democratizing impact of the modern times, one can highlight an argument about the two contextual reasons or situational exigencies encouraging a politics hinged on differentiation and autonomy amongst the minority student groups.

One, political developments leading to creation of a number of new states, controlled by tribal groups that were all once part of Assam has made the idea of political separation from Assam both attractive and seemingly viable to the residual tribal and minority groups in Assam<sup>23</sup>.

Two, also it is argued that “the cultural, economic and political transformation of Assam that begun in the colonial period has made mobility into the Assamese formation seem unattractive and pointless. To the ‘tribal’ peoples of the northeast the Christian missions, with their association with the ‘modern’ West, became a powerful rival to the Assamese

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<sup>22</sup> (Hussain, 1993: 226)

<sup>23</sup> (Datta P.S, 1993:10)

Vaishnavite institution of Xotro, which under the colonial dispensation had lost its old prestige and political patronage.’<sup>24</sup>.

### **2.1: The historical trajectory towards differentiations of identities:**

The history of ethnic resurgence and socio-political identity assertion by different minority groups in Assam is yet to complete a hundred years. The Bodo Students Union (Bodo Chattra Sanmilian) formed by Kalicharan Brahma in 1915 was the first reverberation. The Tribal League established in 1933 was the concrete expression of the ethnic renaissance and a loud clear sign of the arrival of modern ethnic identity consciousness of Assam tribes. The nascent tribal middle-class preferred a posture of cooperation rather than confrontation with colonial regime and capital in the same manner of ethnic Assamese middle class, their reference point in many a sense.

In retrospect the period 1929-47 can be said to be a crucial period of transformation for the smaller ethnic-tribal groups of Assam. Some of the tribal groups presented their case to the Simon Commission visiting India in 1929. Here it is interesting to note the note of lament even in the much later years by tribal groups like ‘All Assam Mottock Yuba Chatra Sanmilian’, when they point out that it was only the ‘relatively modern educated tribes having graduates’ who could give witness to the Commission and thus subsequently got included in the tribal schedule by the government. Groups like Mottock and Moran were too ‘backward’ to avail of any opportunity arising with modern, rational-legal structures.<sup>25</sup> Indeed this reflects a significant and wider trend in the history of ethnic upsurge in Assam. We can observe a hierarchy of development within the ‘marginalised’ and ‘backward’ ethnic groups in Assam too which is proportionate to the rise of the educated ethnic elites for the respective groups. One can observe two significant historical phases in the rise of tribal consciousness in Assam, both landmarks in the discourse of Assamese identity formation.

Deuri<sup>26</sup> points out to the significant example of the birth of ‘the Ahom Sabha’ way back in 1893 (a contemporary of ‘the Assam Association’) and along with it the process of

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<sup>24</sup> (Baruah S, 1999:184)

<sup>25</sup> .Souvenir of 26<sup>th</sup> biennial session of ‘All Assam Mottock Yuba Chatra Sanmilian’, 2007: 16.

<sup>26</sup> Deuri Indibor, 2001.:286

identity consciousness of the backward sections. However what held a crucial significance for the years to come was the distinction raised by the Ahom Sabha between 'Swajati' (one's own nationality, i.e the Assamese) and 'Swagyati' (one's own community, i.e., the Ahom). The Sabha was committed to serve the dual interest of the wider Assamese nationality as well as the own ethnic-community interest's, though very consciously the interest of the 'Swajati' was kept above that of 'Swagyati' in the early spirit of the Sabha.<sup>27</sup> This duality of interests and the contradictions springing from it can be said to be the key issue influencing the leadership of the various organisation to be coming up within the different backward sections, tribal of the state in the following years.

The first decades of the 20th century saw a significant consolidation of the various tribals and other backward sections of the society towards forming identity based organisations centered on group-based demands. The slowly rising nascent middle-class within these communities, backed by the traditional elite sections of the respective communities (though significantly lesser in number and influence if compared to the Caste Assamese sections), provided the solid backbone for these organisations. Thus 'Koch Rajbangshi Khatriya Sanmelan' (1912), 'Bodo Kachari Maha Sanmelan' (1923), 'Assam Chutia Sanmelan' (1925) and by 1933 a unified organisation called 'the Tribal League' was established. Against the hegemonistic role of the caste –Hindu middle-class Assamese, Tribal League leader Bhimbar Deuri demanded in the floor of Assam Assembly- "the right of every community to have a share in administration, a right of every community to serve the province, or to serve the people at large."<sup>28</sup> Later Indibor Deuri argues that though these organisations wanted to contain the contradictions between the two interests by putting the ethnic interests as being complimentary to the cause of the greater Assamese national interest. But the overwhelming influence on the 'construction' of the Assamese 'national interest' being the interest of caste-Hindu dominant Assamese middle-class interest, there was no scope of this contradiction getting abated.<sup>29</sup>

However, with the cabinet mission proposal of grouping Assam in group C along with the Muslim dominant Bengal changed the internal dynamics of Assam politics. In the

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<sup>27</sup> Gohainbaruah Padmanath, 1987: 48.

<sup>28</sup> Assam Gazette, part VI B, 1939: 134

<sup>29</sup> Deuri I, 2001: 286

wider interest of the state, various tribal organisations under the Tribal League actively participated in the anti-grouping agitation led by the Assam provincial Congress against its All India parent party. Also the threat to tribal land-holding from Muslim settlers in the case of any merger can be said to be an important factor motivating the League. In the changed situation many a tribal leader joined the Congress getting assurance of the protection of tribal rights. Thus till the end half of the 1960s one observes a lull in the activities of the tribal groups in the state, as the period was marked by post-independence expectations and a gradual disenchantment. With the disenchantment with the post independence Congress government, unmitigated loss of land and consolidation of ethnic-middle-class groups, tribal organisations re-consolidates around the later half of the 1960s and reaches a new height with formation of the Plain Tribes Council of Assam (PTCA) in the 1967. It is interesting to observe that learning its lesson from history, unlike in the anti-grouping agitation, the ethnic-tribal organisations despite showing principled solidarity with the principle issues of the Assam movement of the late Seventies, by stepping down the movements for ethnic-rights in some cases or by showing ‘moral’ support in some other, in no way the tribal leadership got merged with or absorbed into the AASU or ‘Sangram Parishad’ leadership. Unlike previous times they were conscious about maintaining their independent functioning, because it took them almost twenty years to regroup themselves and agitate about self-rights<sup>30</sup>.

## **2.2: Movement for PTCA: intensifying identity politics:**

It was the All Bodo Students’ Union that took a major role in Bodo politics since its inception on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1967 that was instrumental in the formation of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1967, just twelve days after the formal launching of the ABSU. The declared aims and objects of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam was to secure autonomy for the plains tribal in the form of union territory under the name Udayachal and the ABSU members were the main force behind it and participated in the programmes of PTCA. The ABSU took part in the formation of the PTCA in the wake of the Government of India Plan for Reorganization of Assam which was announced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1967. The PTCA

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*:287

working in close co-operation with the ABSU for the first time placed the demand for the creation of the separate state for the plains tribals on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1968. Since the question of autonomy for the plains tribes of Assam remained a major issue in Assam politics, and the ABSU kept themselves associated with this issue all throughout. Another major tribal student's organization, the All Mishing Student's Union or TMPK notes the fact that the various tribal movements in Assam demanding self-rule have taken to different political-ideological routes and channels due to which social or political unity of Assam tribals have not come about. Interestingly, The TMPK considers the political style and discourse of the Mishings for political autonomy to be different from the nature of the Bodo's agitation for the same. "Within the tribals, Mishing national struggle is uniform in character with the trends in autonomous council movements of the Rabha, Tiwa, Deuri and Sonowal Kacharis. Therefore, after attainment of autonomous councils, for all round development of the tribal life-styles one must have a unified political programme of all the tribal groups in the state. One needs to mobilize political will to secure rights in a democracy. Due to separate ethnic locations, tribals in Assam are always in a minority in their respective locations. But a unified programme based on inter-ethnic coordination will give them a strong base for mobilisation"<sup>31</sup>

The movement for 'Udayachal' under the Banner of PTCA added a new dimension to the tribal politics of the state. Significant is to note that the forming of the PTCA and the subsequent politics surrounding it is considered by the TMPK as inimical to the development of tribal solidarity in the state, very much contrary to the take of ABSU, as we have discussed. TMPK blamed PTCA's tendency of 'anthropological differentiation' amongst the Assam tribes, for its own eventual downfall. The memorandum submitted by PTCA leadership To the President of India on 1967, 20<sup>th</sup> May reflects this perspective which TMPK alleges strongly influenced inter-ethnic differences in Assam and led to heightened sensitivity towards group-particularity amongst the tribal groups in the state. Inclusion in the Bodo groups of many a small tribes like Rabha, Lalung, Deuri etc have suddenly made these groups aware of the need to preserve their own distinct ethnic-tribal identity. Whereas, to tribal groups like Mishings, it provided with the impetus to organise and later on lead an alternate style of tribal politics to that of the Bodos, in the state.

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<sup>31</sup> (Doley, 2006: 20).

### **2.3: Is ethnic student politics shifting the discourse on identity in Assam and how?**

The successful demand by the Bodos to include their language in the Eighth Schedule is an interesting story how the language was pushed to different levels of education with mass movements with a parallel process of standardization of the language. The other plain and hill tribes within Assam have also started pushing their languages at different levels of education along with the demand for more autonomy. This new trend gives a new paradigm to the language movement and the question of identity in the state. The question of Assamese identity also had undergone process of transformation consequently. The issue surfaced sharply regarding the implementation of the Assam accord. According to clause no 6 of the Accord, “Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people”<sup>32</sup>.

Strong remonstrations came from the various communities of the state whose mother tongue is not Assamese. It was contested that as the various ethnic groups like Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa etc. have their own distinct identity, with distinctive language, culture, heritage and historical background, the word ‘Assamese’ used in the clause no 6 of the Assam Accord is too ambiguous to include the various communities and can be jeopardizing to various ethnic identities. A committee was formed to review the definition of Assamese by the government of Assam under the aegis of Additional Chief Secretary (Home and Political Affairs), in the year 2005. Various meetings were held in the Assam Secretariat between delegates from the literary bodies representing different communities in Assam including Assam Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra, Karbi Lamet Amej, Mising Agom Ke’bang, Deuri Sahitya Sabha, Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha, Hmar Sahitya Sabha, Nikhil Rabha Sahitya Sabha and Char Chapori Sahitya Parishad. AASU offered a twofold solution: Ethnic/ anthropological and pragmatic /workable. From the anthropological point of view it should be “Persons speaking the indigenous languages of Assam”. From the later point of view AASU decided on the definition: “Persons enlisted in NRC (National Register of

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<sup>32</sup> (The Assam Accord, 1985: 6)



Citizens) 1951 and their descendants are Assamese”. After deliberations between different ethnic bodies it was decided unanimously that the word “Assamese” should be replaced by the phrase “indigenous people of Assam”. The resolution of 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2005 for the effort to be undertaken to define ‘Assamese’ was also formally withdrawn. The word indigenous was explained as such:

“ people who are living since the historical period in this geographical area and who had become assimilated with the soil, water, air, people and the aboriginal culture of Assam and who are already accepted by the greater society of Assam are the indigenous people of Assam.”

Thus a unified effort to define “Assamese” had to be dropped and it was decided that the beneficiaries of the provision in clause no.6 must be determined not by the language but by the ‘indigenouness’ of the people. Thus the lingua franca Assamese as a referring point for the identification of a nationality came to be questioned and it got replaced by the term ‘indigenous’ as the new anchor of identity.

### **3.0: Preaching difference, practicing solidarity: probing the potentials of common struggles:**

However, proliferation of identities apart, my fieldwork with different student organisations in different areas of the state shows there co-exists a politics of solidarity with a politics of difference due to a sharpening of the existing class-relations of mutual dependence between different ethnic groups and communities in recent years and student politics, due to the reasons discussed before, have been one of the most powerful and early receptor of these changes. Issues like the threat of displacement due to plans of big dam construction, threat of massive influx of illegal foreign migrants into the state, floods and erosions have moved many a student groups with seemingly diverse agendas into common platforms of struggle and thus as we will discuss strengthening the potential to broaden the ambit of the identity discourse in Assam from the path of many essentialist-mutually exclusivist, unipolar ones to one open to multiple-interpretations and implications.

In Assam today whereas there is the intense mobilisation under ABSU's banner for a separate homeland/state for the Bodos, to divide Assam fifty-fifty in their rhetoric , whereas the student group has been lobbying with other state formation demand groups in the country such as Telengana movement committee etc., there is also parallel mobilization by the same group in partnership with AASU and other groups regarding the need to update the National Registrar of Census (NRC) to check infiltration of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, to oppose land transfer from Assam to Bangladesh besides the common critique of the government for lack of resource control and revenue transfer to Assam. Also, in a recent development, 26 student organizations in Assam claiming to represent the different ethnic community besides AASU has formed a unified platform of struggle against the proposed construction of big river dams in various parts of Assam, chiefly in the lower Subansiri area in the North bank of Assam. Existence of these platforms brings forward the interdependence of the different groups of people living in Assam even at the face of at times exclusivist and dominance seeking politics preached and practiced by these very same groups. In this sense student groups and importantly the individuals within these groups have become active agents of situational or political ethnicity, where ethnicity is taken as instrumental, goal directed, formed by internal organizations and stimulated by external pressures to defend the economic and political interests. Ethnic boundaries are considered permeable and people, sometimes singly and sometimes in groups, cross them. In general, they do so either to maximize their opportunities or minimize perceived threats. There are a number of reasons why receiving groups would allow new members to permeate their boundaries. Although each situation needs empirical observation to explain fully all the variables, normally the recipient group perceives the addition of new members as an advantage in coping with socio-cultural problems.

Student politics and its involvement in group identity formation in Assam affirms that the ways in which insiders and outsiders go about characterizing a group, and thereby positioning it and its members in the larger society, are responsive to the social and historical context within which inter group interactions take place<sup>33</sup> Consequently, ethnic

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<sup>33</sup> . Nagel 1994, Waters 1990

identities are fluid across time and social contexts, sometimes even to the point of "ethnic switching"<sup>34</sup>. The public presentation of ethnic identity is also situational, which reveals the plural or hybrid character of modern ethnicity.<sup>35</sup> It is the social spaces wherein cross-group interactions take place and which forms the effective social boundaries between groups that is the most critical to observe in understanding identity formation. In this sense, as Barth famously said it is "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses."<sup>36</sup> In Assam today where the ethnic cleavages are ever sharpening and there has been a breakdown of meaningful interaction between different groups of people, student groups remain one of the crucial participants in the social space spanning the thresholds of ethnic boundaries.

### **3.1: Conclusion: performing new identities in the field?**

As we discussed student politics in Assam has been fragmented along ethnic lines, each representing particular ethnic groups or groupings and their aspirations.. We argued that this has to be understood as an interpenetration of politics and culture<sup>37</sup> in the construction and articulation of identities to establish, affirm and perpetuate boundaries between the self and the other, contextually and strategically, for 'symbolic-political-material ends.'<sup>38</sup> As against the tendency shown and perpetuated by some dominant student organizations upholding and battling for a cultural given and the notion of a pre-existing cultural community as a matter of purity, evolution of student politics in the state has taken the matter of culture to the site of political struggle, where culture not only intersects with and sustains the structures of power, but political struggles itself are understood to be taken place in the sphere of culture.

Sustenance and proliferation of coalitions and joint platforms erected by student groups not only has the potential to broaden the definition of who is an Assamese, i.e., the Assamese identity but also the effect of strengthening the proliferation of multiple identities in Assam. It is observed that though essentialist identities inhibit the formation of coalitions, even without shedding the essentialism, it's under the sway of structural

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<sup>34</sup> Alba 1990, Nagel 1995)

<sup>35</sup> . Espiritu 1992, Lessinger 1995

<sup>36</sup> Barth 1969, pp. 15.

<sup>37</sup> . Cohen A, 1993.

<sup>38</sup> . Barth, 1969, p.35.

and contextual factors as well as strategic decisions, rather than an essentialist view of identity, that causes movements to emphasize on cultural and political change and leads to form coalitions. This in turn has the potential to critique the earlier essentialism sometimes internally. For example a Bodo student working side by side with a Rabha, Mishing, Tiwa student and an ethnic Assamese student would be forced to focus on the commonalities at least for the time being rather than harnessing the differences. One argues that fostering solidarity across identities depends on the ability to freely discuss the identities that a group ideology claims and joint struggles by student groups as in the case of Assam has the potential of providing this forum in different ways. As this “identity talk” in the public sphere is often culturally constructed through interactional routines and can exacerbate or mitigate tensions between identity claims, the platforms of student groups can provide a non-formal space to these interactions that can speak back to the formal structures and norms of the very organizations at times. Interestingly I have come across many a instances where a local unit of the student group, ( both AASU and ABSU) being more rooted in the local struggles and realities have forced the organization centrally to widen their position on different matters and go for joint endeavors with the ‘others’. Here we agree with Beckwith that, ‘The choice of identity affects future activism’.<sup>39</sup> Thus it is tempting to test here the hypotheses that if in the face of external threats that provide the impetus for cross-movement alliances, organizational imperatives have a greater impact than movement identities in forming coalitions and thus pushing the discourse of the identity itself eventually?

As we have seen the relationship between different student groups as different movers and checkers in the identity discourse is one of changing strategies and shifting narratives that throw crucial light on the observation that identities are not fixed and constantly being defined, redefined, reworked and reconstituted through interactions and deliberations enacted at all levels of states and societies. Identities are simultaneously being reproduced and resisted through processes that challenge as well as reappropriate meanings. Finally, ethnic groups are at one and the same time collections of statuses, identities, social persona, and categories that channel interaction with similar entities in a social field. In those interactions each ethnic group functions as a social persona,

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<sup>39</sup> Beckwith 1996.

combining social identities within a field of possible statuses. Each presents itself to each other ethnic group in a social field in a slightly different way because the relationships are differentially structured. Student organizations again can crucially influence the formation of the social persona of the ethnic group being the most active inter-group collective actor in Assam today. One hopes that these platforms would show that achieving commonality does not depend on a tradeoff between commitment to one's group identity and a commitment to the broader social good, but rather on acting together in ways that could create a democratic commons, one that is plural, egalitarian, and communicative.

For this one has to critically study the formation of alliances and strategies as well as the nature of conflict and co-operation between the various student organisations in the state to understand whether Assam will move towards a multiple, non-essentialist politics of identity or towards that of closed circuits of ethnic consciousness.

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