



**NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**PERSPECTIVES
IN INDIAN DEVELOPMENT**

New Series

9

**From Movements to Accords and Beyond:
The critical role of student
organizations in the formation and
performance of identity in Assam**

Kaustubh Deka



Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2013



© Kaustubh Deka, 2013

All rights reserved. No portion of the contents may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the author. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the opinion of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Society, in whole or part thereof.

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 81-87614-64-1

Price Rs. 100/-; US \$ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri
Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com



From Movements to Accords and Beyond: The critical role of student organizations in the formation and performance of identity in Assam*

Kaustubh Deka**

Introduction

The state of Assam has a vibrant legacy of student movements. This became especially evident in the period leading up to and post the tumultuous years of the Assam movement (1979-1985) when Assam witnessed what came to be acknowledged as the single biggest student movement in post-emergency India.¹ Six long years of an intense anti-government agitation led by a section of the students resulted in the formation of the state government by a newly founded political party composed mostly of students freshly out of Universities, who contested and won the assembly elections held after the signing of an accord between the government and the movement leadership. This newfound legitimacy and access 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 fissures in the once hegemonic project of depicting one linguistically and culturally totalizing community as dominant in Assam. Though the nature and extent of the social ‘inclusiveness’ of these movements 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 led to significant and sustained processes of social transformation in the state.

* Lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 17 July, 2012.

** Kaustubh Deka is a Doctoral Candidate at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Post Assam Movement, largely as a reaction to the hegemonic putative universalisation of the Assamese identity preached and practiced during the movement years by the dominant student organization All Assam Students Union (AASU), student groups claiming to represent the different ethnic groups in Assam have taken the initiative to forge an intimate bond between the concepts of ethnicity, identity and group rights. Among these, for a while now, 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 vis-a-vis the question of 'ethnic homeland' and 'identity'. Similarly, 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 led at times to demands for some measures of autonomy or complete secession from Assam at others. This historical run of experience of nationality formation in Assam provides insight for understanding the causes behind the persistence of student groups in the socio-political scenario in Assam.

This paper seeks to posit that student organizations have provided crucial platforms for the performing and performance of different identities in Assam at various levels. These have ranged from the inception 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 arenas. That is to say, the unfolding of this process has largely shaped the discourse(s) of identity politics in the state — one which 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.

However, I also emphasise that there co-exists a politics of solidarity alongside the 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 has been one of the most powerful and early receptors of these changes. Threat of displacement due to plans of big dam construction, threat of massive influx of illegal foreign migrants into the state, problems of floods and



erosions have moved many a student group with seemingly diverse agendas into common platforms of struggle, thus potentially broadening the ambit of the identity discourse in Assam from the path of an essentialist-exclusivist, unipolar one to one open to multiple interpretations and implications. The relationship between All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the other ethnic minority student groups like All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), All Assam Mishing Students Union (TMPK) and so on is one of changing strategies and shifting narratives that throw crucial light on the observation that identities are not fixed but are being defined, redefined, reworked and reconstituted through interactions and deliberations enacted at all levels of state and society. It is this politics of alliance making, both in a contingent and substantive manner, being displayed by the student organizations time to time that shows the limits and possibilities of a politics hinged on identity in general and of the contestations within the 'domain' of student politics in Assam specifically.

Section One

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 shape the nature and scope of social mobilization under group categories like student politics and sometimes give it special prowess is very evident in the case of Assam. The key political role played by the students in the anti-colonial struggle has legitimated the participation of students in national politics in the developing countries.² In the case of Assam too students were at the forefront of anti-colonial struggle as well as driving forces of some of the biggest social movements in the region in the post-colonial decades. Indeed, in the context of Assam the very formation of the category of the student as a 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 within 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.³ The process of 'conversion' of tribal people as such 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.⁴ As a result, at the advent of colonialism and, with it, the modern education, 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 define their identity through articulations in tune with the changed rational legal framework. Historically, this is the essential factor responsible for according an influential role in the dynamics of community formation to the student's class in Assam. Thus, a chief feature of the student movements in Assam lay in its attainment of organizational maturity and the subsequent formation of a well-knit structure. From the inception of the 'Asomiya Bhasar Unnoti Sadhini Sabha at Calcutta' in 1985 the organizational structure developed into one that became a well established precursor to the success of subsequent student led mass movements.

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. However, the existence of a close relationship between the students in Assam and the middle-class from the initial stages of crystallization of student power in the region has been an established phenomenon. 'Asom Chatra Sannidan' (Assam Students' Conference) formed in 1916 and 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'.⁵ However, the matter of contention is whether the nature of the relationship between the middle class and the students has been one of domination, subordination, or mutual co-operation?

The concept of hegemony as developed by Antonio Gramsci is useful here in understanding this relationship.⁶ To the extent, that hegemony of the dominant classes in civil society implies their ideological predominance over the subordinate classes, it is interesting to assess the complex relationship that student classes in Assam have been having with the dynamics of hegemony.

*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 history.*⁷

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, in a scenario of increasing ethnicisation of politics in Assam largely as a consequence of this very middle-class hegemony and with increasing manifestations of the limits of a dominant middle class agenda, the continued relevance of student politics (apart from of course viewing this politics in a cycle of hegemony and counter-hegemony) needs to be explained using concepts of structural sociology like network analysis also that attend to those aspects in which decisions are made and 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 dead-end position that a dichotomous view of universal ethnocentrism leads one to. It purports to show how actors use a combination of perceptions and attributes in order to structure actions within their networks. This approach brings useful insights into understanding the continued relevance of the social category of ‘Students’ in the discourse of identity formation and performance in Assam. Also it will be interesting here to see if 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.⁸

Section Two

The evolution of student politics in Assam: Volatile period leading to Assam Movement

Set up in 1916 as a non-political organisation the Asom Chattra Sammilan (Assam Students’ Conference or ASC) functioned side by side with the ‘Asom Sahitya Sabha’, (Literary Association of Assam) established the following year, focusing on general problems involving the culture and education of the Assamese people. With the rise of the National Congress after 1921, the Sammilan became politicized and mobilized students against colonialism. In 1939, it was formally affiliated to the All-India Students’ Federation (AISF). The Sammilan, the student wing of Assam State Congress, cut itself off from the AISF and became known in 1942 as the All India Students’ Congress (AISC). During 1942-45, the ASC was replaced by the AISF and the AISC — the latter having been founded around 1942. By the early 1950s, the AISC branch in Assam disappeared, while the AISF became a cadre institution for the Communists. Between 1939 and 1967 student politics in Assam was not represented by a single body, but by a number of rival organizations (as seen particularly during the 1956-57 Refinery Movement and the 1960 Official Language Movement) such as All-

Gauhati College Students' Union, Gauhati University Students' Union, etc., many of them playing a by and large anti-colonial role during British rule. It was from a feeling that unification might redress students' grievances in Assam, that the general secretaries of different student organizations met at a Conference in 1967 and formed the All Assam Student's Union (AASU). Despite the existence of a number of oppositional political parties (such as the CPI, RCPI, Forward Bloc), apart from the all dominant Congress party, and joint collaboration of the opposition parties⁹, the AASU, played a prominent role during the Food and Anti-SRC Movements (1966-68) and also during the Second Refinery Movement (1970), and eventually elbowed these national parties out of these Movements.¹⁰ However an important development happened in 1972 when one Anil Bora who was selected as the Assistant General Secretary of the Guwahati session of AASU in 1972 became the first 'martyr' of the Student's Union, losing his life in the 'language movement' in 1972. This brought AASU to the centre stage of activities and limelight too.

A.K. Baruah classifies the student movements in Assam in the first two decades of post-independence period under the categories of,

- Struggle over economic issues
- Struggle launched for the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people.¹¹

These movements focused on the various aspects of the industrial backwardness of Assam, and reflected the distress and anxiety of the Assamese middle-classes over the scarcity of jobs. The students in Assam in this phase had also launched three important struggles for the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people, cashing in on a 'very sensitive string in the psyche of the Assamese middle-classes and the peasantry, the fear of the loss of identity'.¹² Some others have seen this crucial phase in the development of student politics in the state as a phase marked by a calculated design by the dominant classes and sections to tilt the prevalent student politics of the day away from the growing influence of leftist ideologies towards agendas oriented around middle-class rights.¹³ Here it is interesting to note that during the early years of the 1970s the left student's organisations have increased their influence significantly on the Assamese

students. Events like the railway strike, internal emergency, Vietnam War had created an atmosphere for this growth. Despite heavy opposition to the left student forces during the phase of Assam movement, one survey shows a steady growth in the ranks of the left students groups during all those years. In 1973 the Students Federation of India (SFI) had a total membership of 4,765, in 1978 it stood at 27,576 and by the year 1982 it became 33,177.¹⁴ In any case, the emergent trend of the universal turning into particular in the language of student movements in Assam turns explosive by the late seventies when the ground gets prepared for what came to be known as the Assam Movement.

Thus, in the march of history by then, the student class in Assam had become what Altbach calls “an incipient elite, the elite that perceives a given region within a nation as its political constituency and struggles to protect the interests of that particular region, by demanding changes in the policies of the “national elite.”¹⁵

Section Three

The Assam Movement: Paradoxes of identity

The six years long Assam Movement from 1979-1985 culminating in the signing of the Assam accord has to be considered extremely important for the student politics of not only Assam, but of the entire north-eastern region, as the success of Assam’s student leaders in sustaining a prolonged campaign and then capturing political power inspired other student movements in the northeast.¹⁶ “Sociologically speaking, the leadership of the Assam Movement has become their reference group.”¹⁷ The Assam Movement took place in the wake of the fast growing reputation of AASU as the most powerful and effective body representing 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. Following are the most prominent factors prompting AASU to the forefront of the movement:

- Non-acceptability of the regional and all-India political parties and the credibility gained by AASU during the ‘Medium of Instruction’ Movement in 1972 and the ‘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. It brought about an acceptability of the issue as a crucial one and lent respectability to the movement. A critique of the movement observes, “It (AASU) represents the student power that has added respectability to chauvinism and a spirit of dedication to the cause”.¹⁸

- The agitation gained instantaneously in respectability from the weighty support of the Assamese intelligentsia, especially the press 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.¹⁹
- 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 sections 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”.²⁰

Also, post-independence, one sees the expansion of schools and colleges leading to a new social space for youth power in Assam that gave a solid organizational base to the political aspirations of Assamese nationalism and subnationalism. 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 organization in the 1970s.”²¹ To this one can now add predominantly tribal areas like Bodos, Karbis and at times Mishing areas in this domain outside direct AASU influence. Also, AASU in the Movement phase and the immediate aftermath can be viewed as, along with the premier literary organization of Assam, Asom Sahitya Xobha, the institutions that give the Assamese civil society its organizational capacity. This legacy has in many a sense lingered on in the corners of the Assamese

psyche and the image of the AASU members as “boys who gets things done” has become fairly established in some quarters.²² The leadership of the Assam Movement had shown tremendous power to mobilize the masses and build a pressure through various means, thereby making themselves indispensable in any bargain. It is to be observed, that 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 equations 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.²³ 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.²⁴

The Assam Movement ethnicised the Assamese and the political landscape of Assam, as different tribal and religious minority organizations 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, culminating in the powerful Assam Movement spearheaded by the AASU. Here 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 society in Assam at that point of time that resisted the attempted ‘combative’ hegemonic drive by the middle-class through student organizations. 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. as a polysonic one addressing itself to a multiplicity of interests and B. as a ‘liminal event’

through which the society impresses its form on its members irrespective of their status differences and generates a consensus.²⁵ However, in retrospect the hegemonising agenda of the student movement of the 70s and 80s has proved counter-productive to the consolidating middle-class hegemony in Assam. These have in effect led to further ruptures in the shared normative consensus of the society by highlighting many a contradictions. With Assam Movement, the limits of a 'majoritarian' middle-class politics in Assam strongly came to the fore and the 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.

Ascendance of identity politics: Shifting positions, persuaded positions?

It is observed that because the various issues and instances of mobilization staged by AASU in the course of the Assam Movement were in essence 'subnationalist' standing in a dialogical relationship with pan-Indian politics, and with roots in civil society,²⁶ the movement tried incorporating all 'Assamese' irrespective of their differences, into the high-order sub national projects of purported national/community unity. In other words the movement constructed an image of an 'Assamese' that was highly undifferentiated and putative. Therefore, it is interesting 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 especially in the post Assam-Movement years.

Here AASU's shifting position regarding the concept of 'indigenous Assamese' reflects a lot. Indigeneity as an essentialist identity can be deployed both for political mobilisation and for self-affirmation. Ideas of territoriality and indigeneity have been conflated in ethnic-nationalist discourses encouraging demands for autonomy and 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.”²⁷ One finds significant reference to different issues involving the parameters of Assamese identity in the speech of AASU’s adviser and former President 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 anthropologists, 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 groups are Assamese. Although acceptable the definition 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 nation.*²⁸ (Translation mine).

Also it is to be noted that conscious of their earlier damaging step during the Assam Movement of the initial calling for abolition of reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the state, the 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.”²⁹

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.’³⁰ This is also through the 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 15th 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 28th 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 16th October 2004 the different ethnic students organizations have taken out a joint rally with AASU in the streets of Guwahati and the student leaders of the ethnic groups were the special invitees of the central ‘Shahid Diwas’ (Martyr’s day) observed by AASU on the 10th December at Guwahati. AASU souvenir comments, “Every ethnic group has their separate organization, with 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.”³¹ 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.

**Section Four****Understanding the 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.³²

Prominent Bodo leader Upen Brahma had said in the immediate aftermath of the Assam Accord, “The Present AGP government is the chauvinist Assamese government and it is by no means a government for tribals.”³³ Similar echo of grievances is heard from Karbi leader Jayanta Rangpi, when he commented that the “AGP government has turned more brutal than Congress in suppressing the aspirations of the hills people. Even I was put in jail six times, though we were together in the movement.”³⁴ In later years, in an interview, Prabin Boro, former president of the AASU explained that “In what atmosphere the leadership of Prafulla-Bhrigu 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 were compelled to go out of the AASU and form a separate platform for the Bodos.”³⁵

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.³⁶ 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 Vaishnavite institution of Xotro, which under the colonial dispensation had lost its old prestige and political patronage.”³⁷

*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 Sammilan) 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 Sammilan’, 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.³⁸ 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.

Deuri³⁹ 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 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 its own ethnic-community interests, though very consciously the interest of the ‘Swajati’ was kept above that of ‘Swagyati’ in the early spirit of the Sabha.⁴⁰ This duality of interests and the contradictions springing from it can be said to be the key issue influencing the leadership of the various organizations to be coming up within the different backward sections, tribals 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 centred 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 Sammelan*’ (1912), ‘*Bodo Kachari Maha Sammelan*’ (1923), ‘*Assam Chutia Sammelan*’ (1925) and by 1933 a unified organization 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.”⁴¹ Later Indibor Deuri argues that though these organizations 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, 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.⁴²

However, 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 wider interest of the state, various tribal organizations under the Tribal League actively participated in the anti-grouping agitation led by the Assam provincial Congress against its All India parent party. In addition, 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 latter 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 organizations re-consolidated around the latter half of the 1960s and reached a new height with formation of the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in the 1967. It is interesting to observe that learning its lesson from history, unlike in the anti-grouping agitation; in no way the tribal leadership got merged with or absorbed into the AASU or ‘Sangram Parishad’ leadership, 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. Unlike previous times they were conscious about maintaining their independent functioning, because it took them almost twenty years to regroup and agitate about self-rights.⁴³

A separate homeland for the plains tribes: PTCA movement and intensification of identity politics

It was the All Bodo Students’ Union which took a major role in Bodo politics since its inception on 15th February, 1967 that was instrumental in the formation of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) on 27th 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 tribals 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 13th January 1967. The PTCA working in close co-operation with the ABSU for the first time placed the demand for the creation of a separate state for the plains tribals on 19th May 1968. Since then the question of autonomy for the plains tribes of Assam remained a major issue in Assam politics, and the ABSU was associated with this issue all throughout. Another major tribal student's organisation, the All Mishing Student's Union or Takam Memang Porin Kebang (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 mobilization."⁴⁴

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 20th May 1967, 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 the impetus to organize and later on lead an alternate style of tribal politics to that of the Bodos, in the state.

Also interesting to observe is that in early eighties an initiative was undertaken to form an All Assam Tribal Students Union (AATSU) with joint endeavours of ABSU and TMPK. Though when the Bodoland movement picked up post 1985, AATSU became irrelevant in the Bodo areas, because there arose practical difficulties in having two organizations running. Still in 1987-88 periods AATSU was very strong in other parts of Assam, but the Bodo agitation left its influence on other tribal movements in Assam too. Each tribe decided to go under its own banner. It was pointed out in an interview with TMPK adviser Ranoj Pegu that in places like Jonai, with mixed populations of Bodos and Mishings, and where Mishings are in a majority, when Bodos didn't prefer the AATSU banner but the ABSU one, the Mishings too felt inclined to go under TMPK's banner only. Similar fractionalisation happened with other tribes and AATSU grew weak and had its last conference in 1989.

Again in the early nineties when Koch Ranjbangsis's were given ST status in Assam, and subsequently they started getting upto 95% of the reserved seats for tribals as per some estimates, all other tribal student organizations like the Tiwa, Rabha, Mishing came together to form the Tribal Students Federation, but once the issue was subsided, the organization subsided too. Have these issue-based, near ad-hoc joint endeavours and more by ethnic minority student organizations been able to leave a durable impact on state and politics of Assam? The next section tries to answer this.

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.”⁴⁵

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, Mishing, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa etc. have their own distinct identity, with distinctive language, culture, heritage and historical background, the word ‘Assamese’ used in 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 Amei, 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

latter point of view AASU decided on the definition: “Persons enlisted in NRC (National Register of 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 6th 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.

However, in an interview to me former President and now adviser to AASU, Samujjal Bhattacharya, referred to this whole debate on who is an ‘Assamese’ as a deliberate ploy by the government to create confusion and division amongst people and thus creating a pretext to deny the long standing demands of AASU for constitutional safeguards under clause six of the Assam Accord of ensuring various special rights to indigenous people including the hundred percent seat reservations for indigenous people from the local representative bodies onwards to state assembly and parliament seats.

Nonetheless it is interesting to observe that in various recent documents released by the organisation including the widely circulated “25 Years of the Assam Movement - An account of government’s failure”, the motto of AASU prominently features the pursuit to build an Assam where the ‘indigenous’ predominates.

Another pamphlet released by the organisation in 2010 titled "25 years of the Assam Accord: Situation precarious, need to build an Assam where the indigenous dominates- the need is time bound action plans and united struggles" (the emphasis in the original title) seems very interesting. The release is address by AASU adviser Dr. Samujjal Bhattachrya and it takes a brief stock of the developments of the event since the signing of the Assam accord in 1985 before harping mainly on the many harmful implications for Assam due to the failure to implement the accord in the period of 25 years. The document is important as it articulates though briefly AASU's position on some critical matters plaguing Assam politics in this period. It ends with a call for a unified battle. "The seriousness of the burning foreigner's crisis and the relevance of the Assam Movement-Assam accord has been proved every day. The suspicions of the people of Assam has been proved true one by one. Relying not only on the political parties, there is no alternative to a unified battle of all the nationalities, tribes, ethnic, linguistic, religious group. Because for the security of the state of Assam and the indigenous people of Assam, we will need an Assam free of illegal Bangladeshi and an Assam with the dominance of the indigenous people."

Section Five

Preaching difference, practicing solidarity: Probing the potentials of common struggles

Proliferation of identities notwithstanding, my fieldwork with different student organizations 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, 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 mobilization 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 different ethnic communities have formed a unified platform of struggle along with AASU 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. What might seem paradoxical is that whereas groups like the AASU and All Assam Minority Student's Union (AAMSU) are in vociferous opposition when it comes to the issue of NRC updating, both the organisations are in active coalition against proposed river dams. Similarly telling are the instances of highly charged exchanges between ABSU and AAMSU over the proposed expansion of the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) and on the issue of formation of Bodoland in general, whereas in this instance AASU and AAMSU being broadly on the same side on it.⁴⁶ Also crucial is not to miss the rapid rise of a mass based 'peasant's' organisation called Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) that has in a way occupied the centre stage of mobilisation when it comes to the issue of opposing river dam construction. But more significantly due to its radical and uncompromising attitude on the issue, KMSS has brought about a shift in the ideological as well mobilisation factors in protest politics in the state.⁴⁷

Therefore, I would argue that given these and despite these seemingly contradictory developments, existence of these platforms of joint actions brings forward the interdependence of the different

groups of people living in Assam even at the face of often 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.

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. Consequently, ethnic identities are fluid across time and social contexts, sometimes even to the point of “ethnic switching.” The public presentation of ethnic identity is also situational, which reveals the plural or hybrid character of modern ethnicity. 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.”⁴⁸ 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.

Conclusion

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 culture⁴⁹ 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.’⁵⁰ As against the tendency shown and perpetuated by some dominant student organizations upholding and battling for a culture given and the notion of a pre-existing cultural community as a matter of purity, the evolution

of student politics in the state has taken the matter of culture to the site of political struggle. Culture here not only intersects with and sustains the structures of power, but political struggles itself is understood to be taken place in the sphere of culture.

However with its focus on a politics of difference predicated on diversity and solidarity, this paper has deliberately not highlighted on the potential factors that could limit or distort the collaborative possibilities of these movements. The issue of politicization in terms of participation of students organisations (directly or through affiliate political parties) in different autonomous council elections, remains a potential arena of manipulation where the political class can pit the student groups against each other.⁵¹ The offer of disparate division of spoils in terms of compensation package etc. in events of displacement also can become another test for students' unity. In the last two decades or so the growing sway of a globalised worldview and the influence of a pan-Indian market outlook on the state's youths/students are fairly discernible. While this politics now has to make space for the emergent aspirations and ambitions of its participants, it has also evolved into a platform for voicing the grievances, frustrations and demands of the lot whose regional-local reality falls far below the globalised aspirations. In a modernity erected on ethnicised development plans and consequent uneven development amongst communities' reactions are ethnic too.

In any case, 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 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' speaking 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 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 endeavours with the ‘others’. Here a situation seems to be emerging where the choice of identity affects future activism. 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 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, 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 trade-off 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.

Critical explorations of the formation of alliances and strategies as well as the nature of conflict and co-operation between the various student organisations in the state is essential to understand whether Assam will move towards a non-essentialist politics of identity predicated on diversity or towards that of closed circuits of ethnic consciousness.

References:

- Ahmed, Abu Nasar Saied (ed.), *Nationality Question in Assam: The EPW 1980-81 Debate*, Delhi, 2006.
- Altbach, Philip G., 'Student Politics', *Transition*, No. 28. (Jan., 1967).
- Barth, Frederick (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*, New York, 1969.
- Baruah, Apurba K., *Student power in North-East India: Understanding student movements*, New Delhi, Regency, 2002.
- Baruah, Sanjib, *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Bhattacharjya, Smmujal, 'Bidhan Sabha, 'Ananya Starat 100 santansha Ason Sarankhonoke dhori Asomiya Manuhak Sanbidhanik Rakhyakavas Lagiboi', *AASU Souvenir*, 2005.
- Bora Nitya, 'Asom Andolon aru chatra samaj', in Hiren Gohain and Dilip Bora (ed.), *Asom Andolan: Pratisruti aru Phalasaruti*, Banalata, Dibrugarh, 2001.
- Bora, Shiela and S.D. Goswami, (ed.), *Youth at the crossroads- A study of North-East India*, Guwahati, 2007.
- Brass, Paul R, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and comparison*, New Delhi, 1991.
- Chabra, K.K.L, *Assam Challenge*, Komrack Publishers, Delhi, 1992.
- Cohen, Abner, 'Variables in Ethnicity', in Keys, Charles F. (ed.) *Ethnic Change*, University of Washington, 1981.
- Cohen, Abner, *Masquerade politics: Explorations in the structure of urban cultural movements*, University of California Press, 1993.
- Cohen, Ronald, 'Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology' in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Stanford University Press, 1978.
- Claire, L. Adida, *Beyond the immigrant ethnic economy: A network theory of socio-economic wellbeing*, Stanford University, 2006.
- Datta, P.S., *Autonomy Movements in Assam (Documents)*, Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1993.
- Deka, Meeta, *Student Movements in Assam*, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, 1996.
- Deuri, Indibor, 'Asom aru Janagusthio Somoysa', in Gohain, Hiren and

Bora, Dilip (ed.), *Asom Andolan: Pratisruti aru Phalasaruti*, Banalata, Dibrugarh, 2001.

Doley, Basanta Kumar, *Samprotik Somoyor Dastabej*, Dhemaji, 2006.

Dutta, Uddipan, 'Question of Assamese Identity and Language Politics in Assam' in *NEIHA Souvenir*, 2008.

Gohainbaruah, Padmanath, *Mur Xuworoni*, Guwahati, 1987.

Gohain, Hiren, 'Reflection on Ethnicity and Ethnic Movement', in K.N. Phukan and K.M. Deka, (ed.), *Ethnicity in Assam*, Centre for North-East Studies, Dibrugarh University, 2001.

Gohain, Hiren, *Assam, a burning question*, Guwahati, 1995.

Guha, Amalendu, *Medieval and early colonial Assam: Society, polity, economy*, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1991.

Hussain, Monirul, *The Assam Movement: Class, ideology and identity*, Delhi, 1993.

Leonard, Ana Sierra, Ajay Mehra, Ralph Katerberg, *The social identity and social networks of ethnic minority groups in organizations: A crucial test of distinctiveness theory*, University of Cincinnati, 2005.

Chantal, Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, Trans by Winston Moore and Paul Cammack, London, Verso, 1985.

Parsons, Talcot, *Social System*, Routledge & Kegan Paul PLC; New edition, September 10, 1970.

Phukan, Girin, *Inter-Ethnic conflict in Northeast India*, South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2005.

Phukan, Girin in, K.M. Deka, and K.N. Phukan, (ed.), *Ethnicity in Assam*, Dibrugarh University, Assam, 2001.

Sharma, Manorama, 'Students and Nationalism: An assessment of the Assam Chatra Sammilan, 1916-1939' in Apurba Kr. Baruah (ed.), *Student power in North-east India: Understanding Student Movements*, New Delhi, 2002.

Shah, Ghanshyam, *Social Movements in India: A Review of literature*, New Delhi, Sage, 2004.

Turner, Victor, 'Liminality and Community' in J.C. Alexander, and Steven Seidman, (ed.) *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, Cambridge, OUP, 1990.

Notes

¹ Shah, 2004, p.210.

² Altbach, 1967.

³ Dutta, 1993: p. 26.

⁴ Guha, 1991: pp. 80-92.

⁵ Sharma, 2002: p. 65.

⁶ Both instances of 'expansive' and 'subversive' hegemony as put forth by Ernesto Laclau and C. Mouffe, 1985: p. 92.

⁷ Baruah, 2002: pp. 16-17.

⁸ Barth, 1969.

⁹ Six political parties in the state had formed the 'Samyukta Andolan Parishad' (SAP) to agitate food shortage.

¹⁰ Bora, interviewd in Deka, 1996: p. 252.

¹¹ Baruah, 2002: p. 190

¹² Ibid: 191.

¹³ Gohain and Bora, 2001.

¹⁴ Bora, Nitya, 2001: p. 208.

¹⁵ Altbach, 1967.

¹⁶ Baruah S, 1999: p. 187.

¹⁷ Hussain, 1987: p. 1332.

¹⁸ Guha, p. 1991.

¹⁹ Chabra, 1992: p. 67.

²⁰ Ibid: p. 68.

²¹ Baruah, 1999: p. 124.

²² I witnessed a curious evidence of this during my interviewing of AASU leaders in January, 2011 when a representation of the Assam Police Home Guards came with a petition to the AASU leadership seeking their support and cooperation in the struggle for better pay,

regularization, etc.

²³ Baruah, 1999: p. 125.

²⁴ Abner, Cohen 1981: pp. 307-31.

²⁵ Victor, Turner 1990: pp. 147-54.

²⁶ Baruah, 1999: p. 5.

²⁷ AASU souvenir, 2005: p. 51.

²⁸ Ibid: p. 50.

²⁹ Ibid: p. 51.

³⁰ AASU, 2005: p. 59.

³¹ Ibid : p. 20.

³² Hussain, 1993: p. 226.

³³ *The Sentinel*, 2nd February, 1986.

³⁴ *The Assam Tribune*, 3rd September, 1988.

³⁵ (*Dainik Janambhumi*, 11th January, 2005: p. 5) (Translation mine).

³⁶ Datta, P.S., 1993: p. 10.

³⁷ Baruah, S., 1999: p. 184.

³⁸ Souvenir of 26th biennial session of ‘All Assam Mottock Yuba Chatra Sanmilan’, 2007: p. 16.

³⁹ Deuri Indibor, 2001: p. 286

⁴⁰ Gohainbaruah, Padmanath, 1987: p. 48.

⁴¹ *Assam Gazette*, part VI B, 1939: p. 134.

⁴² Deuri, I, 2001: p. 286.

⁴³ Ibid: p. 287.

⁴⁴ Doley, 2006: p. 20.

⁴⁵ The Assam Accord, 1985: p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Asomiya Pratidin*, 26 May, 2012, p. 1.

⁴⁷ This was admitted by both TMPK and AASU activists to me during



my interviews.

⁴⁸ Barth, 1969: p. 15.

⁴⁹ Cohen, A, 1993.

⁵⁰ Barth, 1969: p. 35.

⁵¹ However, there are reverse examples like where delegates of All Tai Ahom Students Union (ATASU) took part in TMPK convention in 2012 after a gap of many years where relationship between the two had soured over the issue of scheduling in Mishing Autonomous Councils (MAC) areas in 2003. This renewed dialogue is attributed to the joint activities of the two organisations as part of anti river-dam coalition.