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**Assam, Nehru, and the Creation of India's  
Eastern Frontier, 1946–1950s**

**Arupjyoti Saikia**

*Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati*



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## Assam, Nehru, and the Creation of India's Eastern Frontier, 1946–1950s\*

Arupjyoti Saikia

The story of the making India's eastern frontier has to begin by recounting the deep impact of World War II on the region. Hopes and fears loomed large across the highly volatile and contested political landscape of Assam in the 1940s and 1950s. Anxiety over the frontier became clearly visible when, in 1944, the Allied powers fought with the Japanese army on India's eastern border. The Allied powers undertook massive work of physical transformation of the hilly terrains. The American General, Joseph Stillwell, began the construction of the 769 km Ledo Road as a strategic military route linking north-eastern India with Burma, and eventually connecting with China. Large numbers of Indians fled Burma and entered into Assam and Manipur causing panic and administrative chaos.<sup>1</sup> The military build-up had already unnerved the populace. The Anglo-American army virtually took over Assam's communications links.<sup>2</sup> Many resources became scarce in the region as these were commandeered for the war effort. Long neglected, these war related events—both political and environmental—in India's north-east have attracted attention in recent historical scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

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\* Paper presented at a Conference titled 'Rethinking the Nehru Legacy: The long twentieth century', held at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 17–18 November, 2014.

<sup>1</sup> For a gripping literary account of these times in Assam, see, D.N. Acharya. 1982. *Jangam* (Assamese).

<sup>2</sup> Jackson, A. 2006. *The British Empire and the Second World War*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>3</sup> Tucker, Richard P. "The War's Environmental Legacy in Northeastern India and Burma" in Simo Laakkonen, Richard P. Tucker, and Timo Vuorisalo (eds.), *Long Shadows: Essays on the Environmental History of World War II*, (forthcoming); Bayly, C.A. and Tim Harper, 2005, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan*, Penguin: London.

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Meanwhile, several tribal communities articulated strong opinions regarding their political future. They often had visions or demands that were contrary to the plans of Assamese political leaders. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British Empire had extended an extremely complex form of governance to the areas inhabited by these communities. General isolation from the aggressive march of British rule and the limited penetration of British capital characterized British imperial rule in these areas. So, most of the areas generally inhabited by these communities remained under Assam's administrative ambit. By virtue of this, and also because of the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century politico-economic linkages, the Assamese speaking population aspired to retain cultural and political control over these territories. As Independence approached, political activities in these areas caused panic among Assamese leaders. British administrators approached the question of future of tribal dominated territories of Assam in a markedly different way. British Governors were the key negotiators in this development. Two serving British Governors Robert Reid (1937–42) and Andrew Clow (1942–47) indicated a possible 'Colony' status for these hill areas. Both believed the considerable cultural gap between the dominant Assamese speaking populace and Assam's tribal speaking population. J.H. Hutton, who served as administrator of Naga Hills and was a distinguished anthropologist, strongly asserted that the tribal population in the Assam's hill districts had little in common with the Assamese-speaking populace. It was against this intellectual background that in 1941 Reid proposed to combine the loosely administered frontier areas of Assam and the contiguous frontier areas of Burma into a British colony.<sup>4</sup> Nothing much happened then but years later Clow came out in favour of Reid's original proposal. Since political aspirations in the hills and plains moved in mutually contradictory directions many from the hills found no problem in such a proposal.

This proposal had swiftly found many takers but in 1946 the Gopinath Bardoloi-led Congress government in Assam strongly

<sup>4</sup> Syiemlieh, David R. 2014. *On the Edge of Empire: Four British Plans for North East India, 1941–1947*. New Delhi: Sage.

opposed it. Bardoloi was personally sympathetic to the Assam's tribal peoples. However, as Independence approached the tribal question was viewed by the Assamese Hindu leaders very differently from British administrators. The Naga political leaders became restless and took a strident stand in talks with the Congress. By contrast, a number of the Khasi leaders thought that India was a better option for them. While the former often envisaged a future outside India, the latter did not even consider the idea. After Independence, Tripura, Manipur, and the Khasi states signed the Instruments of Accession with the Indian Government. Tripura and Manipur were accorded Union Territory status but several areas were covered under a provision for District Councils.

In the months following Independence, large numbers of Assamese-speaking poor peasants and tribal populations joined the Communist-led organizations.<sup>5</sup> An earthquake in 1950 further deepened the political uncertainty. A few years later the Assamese leaders, strongly backed by the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, took to the streets questioning India's industrialization programme. They sought a better deal via negotiations.<sup>6</sup> The Assamese-speaking urban population was deeply concerned by their inability to enhance their economic prospects. The century-old tea plantations did not help in creating wealth nor could they uplift their economic conditions. They had essentially remained enclaves of resource extraction from the region by major tea companies. The expansion of jute cultivation brought economic prosperity to the Bengali-speaking rich peasants, but it was transitory. A section of the Assamese traders and moneylenders also benefitted from this. The Marwari traders had already monopolized retail trade, and had a near-total monopoly over grain trade along with a small Bengali Muslim trading population. The lone petroleum refinery established in 1900 had absorbed only a small fraction of Assam's educated

<sup>5</sup> For details see, Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2014. *A Century of Protests : Peasant politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Baruah, Ditee Moni. 2011. 'The Refinery Movement in Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (01), pp. 63–69.

population. Between 1946 and the end of the 1950s several political mechanisms were in place to displace these fears and boost the hopes of Assam.

What role could Nehru have played in this highly contested political space animated by rival visions of past and future? How did Nehru negotiate with the competing social and political forces? How far did his interventions help the frontier province and its domestic politics to keep pace with the aspirations of the new nation-state? A few instances from the political life of Assam can help us to understand the changing character and impact of Nehru's engagement with a frontier province.

Nehru had made his presence felt in Assam's public life well before 1947. Several works have discussed Nehru, Assam, and the Cabinet Mission plan at length.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately this rich scholarship did not pay much attention to the post-Cabinet Mission domestic politics of Assam. It is notable how Nehru, as Prime Minister, advised and often reprimanded his Congress colleagues. He tried to persuade the Assamese leaders of his views and tried to reason with them. This engagement continued throughout the 1950s. Over the years a friendly but cautious relationship developed between Nehru and the Assamese political leadership. Discussions did not bridge all differences but were still warm and open in tone. This relationship came under stress in the wake of Indo-China War in 1962 and Assam's general populace continued to share an ambivalent attitude well into the present times.

Contrary to the common perception of an 'apathetic Nehru', he was closely engaged with larger questions involving Assam and India's eastern frontier. He could not establish a lasting

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see Guha, Amalendu. 1977. *Planter-raj to swaraj : freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam, 1826–1947*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research; Barooah, Nirode Kumar. 2010. *Gopinath Bardoloi, 'the Assam problem' and Nehru's centre*. Guwahati: Bhabani ; Barpujari, H. K. 1977. *Political History of Assam*. Gauhati: Government of Assam.



friendship with the Assamese leaders but he left a mark on the way in which modern Assam's polity began to take shape. Some institutions owed their origin more to Nehru's vision than any other factor. Some political features remained firmly within a democratic frame of actions, precisely due to Nehru's imagination and interventions. There were, however, departures from such norms and practices.

What were the key democratic features? This paper spells out some from Assam's political life. These deserve attention while thinking of a Nehruvian or Nehru's legacy in India's north-eastern frontier. They may not be the best instances to understand Nehru's influence on India's north-east but this author feels that they did push Nehru to think differently about Assam and India's north-east. This paper does not touch on the very complex Naga autonomy question and the reorganization of Assam's political boundaries. There are several fine works on these subjects and these deserve separate treatment.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Trouble with the Cabinet Mission: 'Gentlemen, Assam Retires'**

Nehru's biggest test in Assam was shaped by the political consequences of the Cabinet Mission's proposal published on 16 May 1946.<sup>9</sup> To put it briefly, the Cabinet Mission, aimed at transferring power to a 'Union of India' and to frame a Constitution for it, announced a 'Grouping' proposal where provinces were to divide themselves into three sections (A, B, and C). Assam was placed in section C along with Bengal. Each Provincial Legislative Assembly was to elect a total number of

<sup>8</sup> Guha, Ramachandra. 2007. *India after Gandhi : The history of the world's largest democracy*. New York: Ecco; Nag, Sajal. 2002. *Contesting Marginality: ethnicity, insurgence and subnationalism in North-East India*. New Delhi: Manohar; Misra, Udayon. 2000. *The Periphery Strikes Back : Challenges to the nation-state in Assam and Nagaland*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

<sup>9</sup> For "Grouping" and related political events in Assam, see Guha, *Planter-raj to swaraj : Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam, 1826-1947*.

seats proportional to its population.<sup>10</sup> Group C was to have seventy seats where Assam's total seats were 10. The proposal immediately sparked off debates within and outside the Assam Congress leadership. The Assam Congress refused to join Bengal, which would be a Bengali Muslim majority state with 33 seats reserved for Muslims.<sup>11</sup> Trying to explain such staunch opposition from Assam to this plan, Abul Kalam Azad wrote that 'they [Assam] said that if Bengal and Assam were grouped together, the whole region would be dominated by Muslims'.<sup>12</sup> The Cabinet Mission announcement deeply troubled the Assamese political leaders and led to intense negotiations between the All India Congress Committee (AICC) and the Assam Congress leaders.<sup>13</sup> The Assam Congress seized the opportunity to activate public opinion against this proposal. Widespread mobilization took place across the Brahmaputra valley. Communists and Congress-Socialists joined hands with the Congress. Numerous meetings took place and hundreds of telegrams opposing Assam's inclusion in section C were sent to the AICC. Emboldened by this popular mood, the Gopinath Bardoloi led-Assam Congress leadership let go of no opportunity to condemn the Cabinet Mission Plan. On 16 July the Assam Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution refusing to join section C. This move came after advisories from both Nehru and Sardar Patel.<sup>14</sup>

On 10 August the Congress Working Committee accepted the Cabinet scheme in its entirety but did not approve all the

<sup>10</sup> For details of the Cabinet Mission proposal see, Appadorai, Angadipuram and Maurice L. Gwyer. 1957. *Speeches and documents on the Indian constitution : 1921–1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> The total number of seats allotted for Bengal was 60.

<sup>12</sup> Azad, Maulana Abul Kalam. 1988. *India wins Freedom*, Orient Longman: New Delhi, p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> A recent work had put the blame on Nehru for misleading Assam on the grouping question that may require fresh thinking. Barooah, Nirode Kumar. 2010. *Gopinath Bardoloi, 'the Assam problem' and Nehru's Centre* Guwahati: Bhabani.

<sup>14</sup> The APCC delegation met both of them during 8–9 June 1946 at Delhi. Barpujari, H.K. 1980. *Political History of Assam*, vol. 3. Gauhati: Assam Publication Board, pp. 360–61.



proposals. Assam sent ten members to the Constituent Assembly. The next few months were eventful; the ups and downs in the moods of Assam Congress were easily noticeable. As events began to unfold contrary to the expectation of Assam, and the Nehru-led Interim Government and the Constituent Assembly were formed, Assam tried hard to win support from the AICC. The Congress Working Committee was largely of the view that the Congress 'should not reopen the question of grouping'.<sup>15</sup> [Azad, 1988, *India Wins Freedom*, (the complete version)]. Despite being isolated, Assam persisted. To placate Assam's opposition, A.K. Azad wrote to the Viceroy opposing the participation of European members in the Constituent Assembly. The Viceroy agreed and the Europeans in the Bengal Assembly declared they would not seek representation. Azad refused to retreat further and said 'Jawaharlal agreed with me that the fears of the Assam leaders were unjustified and tried hard to impress them with his views.'<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, Nehru continued to try to allay the fears of Assamese leaders. On 17 September he wrote to Ambikagiri Raychaudhury, General Secretary of the *Assam Jatiya Mahasabha*, the most vocal organization championing the cause of Assamese opinion, assuring him that 'it is for the province to agree or not to agree...' on the question of forming groups.<sup>17</sup> A few days later, he reiterated this stand to Bardoloi.<sup>18</sup> Nehru now made it clear that 'in no event are we going to agree to a province like Assam being forced against its will to do anything'.<sup>19</sup>

In this moment of crisis, Assam received clear moral support from none other than Gandhi. This led to some anxieties in the

<sup>15</sup> Azad, Maulana Abul Kalam. 1988. *India wins Freedom*. Orient Langman: New Delhi, p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.172.

<sup>17</sup> 'Nehru's Letter to Ambikagiri Raychaudhury', Gopal, S. ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*: Vol. 1 (second Series), Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, pp. 115–116.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

top Congress leadership. He held a series of meetings with the worried Assamese leadership, encouraged them to remain true to their conviction and opposed the Plan. But as nothing happened and there were signs of both the Congress and the League aborting the Cabinet Mission, an exasperated Gandhi told the Assam Congressmen on 15 December 1946, ‘Whether you have that courage, grit and the gumption, I do not know. You alone can say that. But if you can make that declaration, it will be a fine thing. As soon as the time comes for the Constituent Assembly to go into Sections you will say, “Gentlemen, Assam retires.”’<sup>20</sup>

In December 1946, Nehru submitted a confidential draft to the CWC where he clearly stated that, ‘it is well known that the proposal in regard to grouping affected injuriously two provinces especially, namely Assam and the North West Frontier Province, as well as the Sikhs in the Punjab...’.<sup>21</sup> He further added that, ‘it is true Assam has a mandate to oppose Sections and groups and Assam can fight if it wants. But I would like to remind you that battles are won, not by the personal courage of one or two, but by the co-operation of many thousands and by the mobilization and right use of resources...The time may come when Assam will have to fight; that fight will not be single handed but will be waged with the whole of India behind them’.

What forced Nehru to lend such conditional support to Assam? The Assam Congress was morally and politically riding high on the Grouping issue. In fact even before the anti-Grouping agitation, during his tour of 1945, Nehru was witness to the popularity of the Congress in Assam.<sup>22</sup> Won over during his travels

<sup>20</sup> ‘Interview to Assam Congressmen’, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 86, p. 228.

<sup>21</sup> Mansergh, N. ed., *The Transfer of Power 1942–7: The fixing of a time limit*, 4 November 1946–22 March 1947; ‘Statement of Working Committee on Declaration of 6 December’. in S. Gopal, ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*: Vol. 1 (second Series). This also became part of the statement released by the Congress Working Committee on 22 December, 1946.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Impressions of Assam Tour’ in Gopal, S. ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol. 14, pp. 277–78.

by the sheer level of mass participation, Nehru then wrote:

There were vast crowds at the meetings and on the wayside, but even more impressive than these crowds was the light in the eyes of the people and a ringing confidence in their voices. There was no spirit of defeatism in them, but a tone of challenge and hope as at the dawn of a new day after the long night was over...but in the main there was an eager questioning in their eyes,... When will Swaraj come?<sup>23</sup>

Now as uncertainties loomed large on the question of transfer of power to India, given the Muslim League's staunch stand on Grouping<sup>24</sup>, Nehru thought of reaching out to both Assamese and Sikh leaders. Appreciating their genuine concerns, Nehru made a final effort and wanted to ensure that when the time comes everyone would join hands with Assam and the Sikh population. Nehru further assured Assam that he was quite, '...alive to the dangers that confront Assam [the fear that there would be a mass exodus of Bengali Muslims to Assam] and Assam should "make a positive and constructive approach"'.

Assurances from Nehru could not and did not convince Assam leaders. Azad later wrote that, 'nobody can understand why the League placed so much emphasis on the question of Assam, when Assam was not a Muslim majority province'. By early days of 1947, the AICC also accepted the view that, 'there was no valid reason for forcing Assam to join Bengal'. Assam's strong opposition to the Cabinet Plan and the Muslim League's equal

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 277.

<sup>24</sup> Syed M. Saadullah, leader of the Muslim League in Assam wrote to Jinnah in 1947: "The Congress government has raised the false cry that the Movement is specially designed to bring Assam into the Pakistan Zone. The varied geographical position of Assam will compel her ultimately to align herself with Bengal, for Assam has got no outlet to the outside world except through Bengal and alienated Bengal can use the stranglehold on the economic life of Assam". Letter from S.M. Saadullah to M.A. Jinnah, 16 April, Jinnah Papers, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 555–58, in S. Mahajan ed. 2013, *Towards Freedom: Documents on the movement for Independence in India 1947*, Part 1, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, p. 1057

emphasis on Assam's acceptance of the grouping plan remained the bone of contention. Nehru's conciliatory approach did not pacify Assamese leaders. In the end the Cabinet Mission failed.

### **Partition, Border and Migration**

Though, the Grouping proposal failed it had been a nightmare for Assamese political leaders. In the early months of 1947, Assam was struggling with the events such as the fallout of the state-sponsored violence of Direct Action Day, 16 August 1946 in Bengal. After the departure of Viceroy Wavell in March 1946, political events gathered pace. The fate of the district of Sylhet now became a highly contested political subject. Sylhet, historically and ethnically a Bengali dominated area was made part of Assam in September 1874. One major factor, which helped favourably in making Sylhet part of Assam, was the political economy of the British tea plantations. Since then the idea of 'back to Bengal' was a cry in Sylhet's political life. There were instances in 1924 and 1926 when influential Hindu as well as Muslim members from Sylhet in the Assam's Legislative Council tried hard to push for Sylhet's merger with Bengal.<sup>25</sup> Resistance from the powerful tea-planters lobby did not help this dream to materialize. As a geo-cultural entity, Sylhet implied different meaning for the Assamese and Bengali speaking urban populace. Nehru also held the view that Sylhet should become part of Bengal. After a visit to Assam in 1937, he opined that Sylhet, by virtue of being 'not only linguistically Bengali, its economy was allied to that of Bengal' and with a permanent land settlement unlike Assam's 'peasant proprietorship...should go to Bengal'.<sup>26</sup>

On the eve of Partition, the demand for inclusion of Sylhet with Pakistan became powerful. This was largely a result of hectic

<sup>25</sup> Hossain, A. 2013. 'The Making and Unmaking of Assam-Bengal Borders and the Sylhet Referendum', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 47, pp. 250–87.

<sup>26</sup> 'In the Valley of the Brahmaputra', Gopal, S. ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol. 8, p. 494.



mobilization by the Muslim League. The Sylhet referendum, in which all those who paid a minimum 9 *anna* rent could vote including all the permanent tea labourers, took place on 6 and 7 July 1947.<sup>27</sup> This referendum voted in favour of Sylhet joining Pakistan. The referendum verdict was a product of "...deep-rooted division between Hindu and Muslim elites, between upper caste and lower caste, and between educated 'pro-Pakistani' Muslims and madrasa educated 'pro-Indian' *maulvis*."<sup>28</sup> In her own right, Sylhet had a complex story to tell.

Sylhet became part of Pakistan but this brought new challenges for Assam. Interpretation of the Radcliffe Award on Sylhet became a bone of contention between Indian and Pakistani governments. India's Ministry of External and Commonwealth Relations and the Ministry of Home kept Nehru updated and often sought his direction in resolving this crisis.<sup>29</sup>

However, the question of the Bengali-speaking Hindu employees who decided to remain in India became a matter of serious contention. A few Assamese, mostly employed in the government services, had arrived from Sylhet in towns like Guwahati and Shillong, leaving behind memories. The Bengali-speaking population faced resistance from the Assam government; for many finding a new job was a nightmare.

Assam faced two complex problems as consequence of the Partition. First was the issue of an international border for Assam

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<sup>27</sup> On the question of voting pattern etc, see *Ibid*, p. 274. Several works have discussed in detail about Sylhet referendum. For instance, see, Bidyut Chakrabarty, 2004, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932–1947 : Contour of Freedom*, Routledge:London; Bhattacharjee, J. B., 1989, 'Sylhet: Myth of a Referendum', *Indo-British Review: Journal of History*, 17 (1&2); Chaudhuri, S., 'A god-sent opportunity?' *Seminar*, no. 510, 2002; Dasgupta, Anindita, 2014, *Remembering Sylhet: Hindu and Muslim voices from a nearly forgotten story of India's Partition*, Manohar: New Delhi.

<sup>28</sup> Hossain, A. 2013. *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Bhasin. 2012. *India-Pakistan relations, 1947–2007: A documentary study*, Geetika Publishers: New Delhi.

and the second was that of the large number of refugees pouring into Assam. Assam's three districts, that is, Goalpara, Khasi Hills, and Cachar, came to share an international border whose demarcation was problematic. A few square miles of Sylhet remained with Assam. This new but largely muddy and riverine border with East Pakistan led to regular trouble. There were claims and counter-claims about the territorial jurisdiction of both India and East Pakistan. Clashes along the border became common. Harassment of citizens of respective nations also became common. Assam also sensed trouble for her economy as a result of the dislocation of her regular railway link with Bengal and the rest of India. Assam's trade declined. Timber, jute, and tea products faced major challenges. The East Pakistani authorities regularly obstructed movements of mails and goods wagons.

Partition led to increased cross-border refugee migration. Compared to Punjab, Bengal and Assam borders witnessed much less violence. But Partition and its aftermath sparked off passionate and sustained debate that continues till today. Refugees were mostly petty traders or small peasants. As the Noakhali riot spread, Hindu refugees in small numbers began to arrive in Assam's border villages from October 1946. Refugees trickled into Assam until May 1947. After Partition, several thousands arrived in Assam every month, mostly by trains,<sup>30</sup> although several thousands, including those who came before 1947, left Assam for East Pakistan after the 1950 communal riots. The 1951 Census estimated that 274,000 refugees came to Assam between 1946 and February 1951.<sup>31</sup> The refugees, without any government support, had dispersed to different districts in Assam. Some settled down in unattended government lands, some bought small plots of land, and yet others tried to secure petty jobs. Large numbers

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<sup>30</sup> The highest numbers of refugees to arrive in Assam was in May 1949 to be estimated at 2,74,455.

<sup>31</sup> Government of India, *Report on the Census of India*, Vol. XII, Assam, part 1 (I-A), p. 353.

waited for government relief. In the absence of any government support system, refugees fell back on kinship networks and friends to seek help to settle down.

With regular trouble on the border, which seriously disrupted Assam's economy and an increasing flow of refugee population to support, a worried Assam's Premier Gopinath Bardoloi, wrote to Nehru in February 1948, '...it is necessary to point out that the border troubles, particularly those in Assam, must not be taken as an isolated action. The importance that is to be given to them may of course vary. But they cannot be considered negligible for a place like Assam. Assam is cut off from the rest of India entirely and anybody passing through Pakistan with anything in the nature of arms is put under arrest and subjected to all manner of indignation'. Nehru remained in regular touch with Bardoloi and was quick to acknowledge the troubles on the Assam border. In April 1948 he admitted that the Government of India was 'distressed at reports of harassment of passengers', to and from Assam crossing the East Pakistan border.<sup>32</sup> Nehru also cabled Pakistan's Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan seeking co-operation in resolving border disputes. In April 1948 Nehru cabled Liaquat hoping that, 'harassment caused to people crossing borders will be put an end to as well as such incidents as recent stoppage of our mails from Assam'.<sup>33</sup>

A month earlier Nehru had written to Patel expressing his concern at the agitations carried out by the Muslim National Guards in the Tripura State opposing its accession to India. Nehru agreed that 'Tripura state is very feeble and the Raj family itself is divided', and Tripura could only be reached through Assam. On 3 November, he wrote to the Pakistan government, 'warning them about this matter' and requested Patel to, 'deal directly with the Tripura State authorities'. A month later, assured of the fact that nothing significant will happen in Tripura, Nehru wrote to

<sup>32</sup> 'Letter to Gopinath Bardoloi 16 April, 1948', Gopal, S. ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*: Vol. 6 (second Series), p. 103.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Bardoloi to say that he did not, 'attach much importance to the position in Tripura'.

Migration to Assam was more than just a politically and culturally sensitive issue. Assam's trade was mostly controlled by Bengali and Marwari traders. The only option available for most educated Assamese was to seek government jobs. Migration from East Pakistan deepened fears of the Assamese about their uncertain future. Over time, this led to more strident reaction. The Assamese Congress leaders had to respond and handle issues sensitively. They had the advantage of Nehru's constant attention. In May 1948, Nehru wrote to Akbar Hydari, Assam's Governor, emphasising that, 'migration either of Hindus or Muslims into Assam on any large scale should be avoided. This general principle might be applied anywhere in India at present as it is a disturbing factor and more specially in Assam'.<sup>34</sup> However he thought that persuasion and diplomacy with the East Pakistani leadership was the best possible way out. This was obviously a source of anxiety for his Congress colleagues in Assam.

Nehru promised the Assam government all possible support but wrote that he did not want any 'barrier to free movement but a large influx of people should certainly be avoided'.<sup>35</sup> Nehru also wrote to Bardoloi expressing his concerns at the 'double immigration of Hindus and Muslims into Assam', but advised him that, 'there should be no bar to individuals coming, but I think you would be justified in stopping large groups from coming unless they come with your approval'.

As mistrust grew between the governments of India and Pakistan, both sides took initiative to bring representatives of both the governments to the negotiating table. The first Inter-Dominion conference took place in Calcutta in April 1948. Several more would take place over the next two years. The Assam Chief Minister took a dim view of these Conferences. He still felt that

<sup>34</sup> Nehru's Letter to Akbar Hydari, 3 May, New Delhi, *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*





migration remained beyond his control. This brought him closer to Deputy PM Patel and he urged the latter to take tough measures. Assam virtually demanded Ordinances to stop the flow of refugees. Nehru advised against adopting any such measure but agreed that the Assam government had a right 'to regulate and check an influx of large numbers or groups of people into Assam'.<sup>36</sup>

Assam's Congress leaders continued to raise the immigration issue. They discussed the possibilities of introduction of a permit system. Nehru continued to appeal for a reasonable stand on this subject. If immigration continued, the question of refugee rehabilitation posed a great challenge. The Assam government, sensing opposition from the local populace to the rehabilitation programme, expressed its inability to offer any large-scale land settlement programme to Bengali Hindu refugees. The Assam government also pointed out that many refugees came from an economically well-to-do background; a large number of them were either shopkeepers or artisans. Meanwhile, in September 1948, the Indian government instructed the Assam government to set up camps for refugees.

With the experience gained in Delhi and its neighbourhood in settling the refugees arriving from West Pakistan, in 1949, he virtually reprimanded Bardoloi by saying that, '...you say that there is no further land available in Assam. This is a question of fact, which can easily be determined. It is patent, however, that if land is not available in Assam, it is still less available in the rest of India, which is very heavily populated, barring the deserts and mountains. What then are we to do with millions of refugees we have to deal with?'

The refugee rehabilitation question brought Nehru's government and the Assam government in open confrontation. Despite the Assam government's resistance, Nehru insisted on

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<sup>36</sup> 'Migration from East Bengal to Assam', S. Gopal, ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*: Vol. 7 (second Series), p. 67.

dignified terms of settlement for the refugees, this did not go down well with Assamese leaders. Muslim peasant families who were returning back to Assam after riots in East Pakistan in 1950 created additional problem.<sup>37</sup> Many came back to retake control of their cultivated lands and some newcomers came to find new lands. Patel wrote to Nehru saying that ‘new incoming Muslims would not only be most irksome but undesirable’.<sup>38</sup> Nehru agreed with Patel and thought that the Assam government had ‘no responsibility for them of any type’.<sup>39</sup> For Nehru the only comfort was that ‘the number involved thus far does not appear to be very big’. After 1950 that the Assam government slowly came to terms with the refugees and began to extend official support to the Refugee Rehabilitation Programme. But soon the refugee rehabilitation lost the political patronage and other troubles came into the forefront. In 1960, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the Assam chief minister (1957–70) declared that all such works had been completed.<sup>40</sup>

### **An Earthquake in a Troubled Frontier**

While the unease between Nehru and the Assam government, the 1950 earthquake came as a shock to all. The 8.6 m earthquake, which struck Assam on 8 August 1950, had major ecological impact.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, upstream of the Brahmaputra, the political impact of the earthquake began to unfold differently. The major ecological challenges faced by Nehru’s government provided an unprecedented occasion to extend government’s reach

<sup>37</sup> On 13 September 1950.

<sup>38</sup> Patel to Jawaharlal Nehru, 29 September, 1950, in Durga Das ed. *Sardar Patel’s Correspondence* Vol 9, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publication, p. 247.

<sup>39</sup> Nehru to Patel, 1 October, *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>40</sup> *The Times of India*, November 16, 1960.

<sup>41</sup> This section is mostly based on Saikia, A. 2012. *Dancing Like Nataraj: Earthquakes and Environmental History of the Brahmaputra River Valley*”, Agrarian Studies Seminar, Yale University, (unpublished paper); Beirèinice Guyot-Reichard, ‘Re-ordering a Border Space: Relief, Rehabilitation, and Nation-Building in North- Eastern India after the 1950 Assam Earthquake’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 49, Issue 4, July 2015, pp. 931–62.

into the interiors. This was something the British had never achieved successfully. The Imperial Government's attempt to trace the upper course of the Brahmaputra had created an empirical base of knowledge about the geography and people of the upper parts of the river basin. The 1950 earthquake now provided a chance for the Indian nation-state to reinforce its relationship with the Valley's far eastern landscape. The areas surrounding the Brahmaputra's upper course within India were known as the North East Frontier Tracts till 1951. Since then, this administrative zone came to be known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Until India's Independence in 1947, the imperial government had only loosely governed this terrain. Independent India also followed a similar policy while a future framework for these tracts was still under discussion. The earthquake also exposed the constraints of the government. It could offer little help financially. The administration did try to restore public works, but it agreed that it was impossible to restore them to their original condition.

The Imperial government had felt that these areas could not be easily brought under governance. Linguistic barriers, traditional legal practices, and difficult terrain all conspired to stall any government attempt to bring these areas under control. So it allowed qualified local autonomy through promulgation of laws that gave powers to 'men on the spot'. The British administrators often had deep knowledge of Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages. But they had limited command over the Tibeto-Burman languages, which were variously prevalent in these areas. Customary laws of resource use, labour, and governance stood in the way of colonial laws. Despite this, several British explorers had tried to travel through the hills and mountains to reach southern China and eastern Burma. Often unsuccessful, these searches and journeys convinced these officials that these areas were a link between Tibet and northern Burma. Finally, the hills and terrains were home to a different kind of economy altogether, which required a different political approach from that of the plains. The Imperial government began to administer these tracts through an administrative arrangement

of Inner Line, which excluded these areas from its larger framework of governance.

At the time of India's Independence, this system was still at work and came to be administered by the Ministry of External Affairs. The experience of the Second World War had already transformed the area into India's strategic borderland. The Chinese government resisted this newfound presence of the Indian government. Later, in 1962, as we know, the India-China war broke out. Even before its aggression, China had laid strong claim over these territories. Certainly, the new Indian government did not welcome this. In the British era, several punitive military campaigns against the local inhabitants had ended disastrously.<sup>42</sup> All these ensured that the foothills of the Himalayas and the upper reaches of Brahmaputra had a limited space in the imagination of modern Indian rulers or of geographers. In the eyes of the Indian government the 1950 earthquake had severely injured an impenetrable natural frontier lying between India and China.

The earthquake-induced relief and rehabilitation programme offered space for these Himalayan foothill areas to gain the central government's attention. The tragedy and devastation associated with the 1934 Bihar earthquake was still fresh in the nation's memory. Nehru now admitted that the earthquake 'has been a very big and serious affair'. For him, it was also an extraordinary opportunity to prove the worth of the new nation-state. Nehru felt that the tribal people—estimated to be around half a million—now needed guidance from the Indian Union. Nehru appealed to the nation to face the 'disaster bravely'. Thousands of tea garden workers were mobilized to put rehabilitation and reconstruction work in place. The shortage of food, mostly due to hoarding by traders, was widely reported, and admitted by the government. The earthquake only reaffirmed stereotypes about Assam, as a place irremediably subject to the whims of nature. The earthquake facilitated conditions for an encounter between Nehru's

<sup>42</sup> Barpujari, H.K., ed. 1992, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol.4, Guwahati, Publication Board, Assam.



government through intermediaries in the Valley and the people living in the interior to begin a nation-building process in this strategic borderland.

The urge for both nation-building and proving the worth of the newly attained freedom, meant that relief and rehabilitation were undertaken on war footing. Nehru made an aerial visit of the affected places and addressed a public meeting on the banks of Brahmaputra. Agreeing that this earthquake wrought permanent physical changes, Nehru, however, admitted that, 'Assam is a province which was badly neglected in the past and yet is most important today for a variety of reasons. It deserves every kind of assistance...'. Nehru had also believed that the earthquake had, 'done good in the sense that it has roused up the people of Assam and made them realize that it is up to them to pull their province up'.

Through these recovery programmes, the Indian government also sought to critically reorient the area's relationship with so-called 'mainland' India. The process had begun with the formation of the North East Frontier Tracts in 1914 as a state apparatus to administer the region. Nehru's government now began a long-term project towards making this exclusive geographical space as integral to the national geography and cultural imagery of India. Through relief operations the inhabitants, the Indian government believed, would come into direct contact with 'modern' state agencies.

A modern nation-state also meant standardizing some of the country's agrarian practices. The livelihood practices of the people in these areas also required significant transformations. To achieve this, 'model villages' were established. These villages aimed at transforming the hunter-gatherer populations to settled agrarian practices. The first move was to establish an Agricultural Research Institute, a symbol of modern Indian agriculture. This would train the populations to practice wet-rice cultivation. The local inhabitants fiercely resisted these. They would frequently go back, to the much concern of the officials, to the hills in search

of food. Discouraged by the humid and hot climate and epidemics, many finally returned to the hills. The relief programmes and the remaking of urban settings encouraged people from other Indian provinces to move in various capacities. The administrative policy of sheltering the area from outside influences and penetration was temporarily discontinued. This enabled various people to occupy government jobs, and Marwari traders moved into the hills from the foothills and floodplains of the Brahmaputra. Couple of years later, Indian anthropologists would find meaningful but slow transformation in these areas of both the populace and the landscape. Similarly, the Assam government was able to temporarily re-establish its relationship with the frontier despite losing its political control over NEFA. Assam's access to NEFA was temporary, and by the early 1951, the NEFA administration gradually restricted further access. Assam's cultural organizations and the government machinery were denied physical access to the Frontier. In 1953 the Indian government, much to the dismay of Assam's political and social organisations, decided to appoint a commissioner to administer NEFA under the direct supervision of the Assam governor. The Assam government wanted the NEFA to be slowly merged with Assam. The *Asom Jatiya Mahsabha* called for demonstrations on 16 July, which it declared as 'All Assam State Language and Assam Integration Day'. Nehru was opposed to any such idea. On 2 July he wrote to Bishnuram Medhi about the need to keep the NEFA 'as a separate unit under the Central Government for a variety of political and other reasons appertaining to the frontier'.<sup>43</sup> The Assamese were suspicious of such acts of the Nehru's government but the door remained closed till the late 1950s.

### **The Tribal Way of Life: A blessing for Assam**

While everyday matters related to the governance of Assam, now sandwiched between East Pakistan and Burma, was settling down, Nehru carefully tried to build rapport with the tribal communities living in north-eastern India. He appreciated the

<sup>43</sup> Nehru to Bishnuram Medhi, New Delhi, July 2, 1953, in S. Gopal ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 23, second series, p. 223.



political and cultural spirit of these communities and persuaded Gopinath Bardoloi and his other colleagues to think differently about the tribal communities. It was not surprising that several members from Assam spoke against the Sixth Schedule. The incorporation of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution restricting and limiting the influences of the Indian state on those communities was partially a result of this stand. Later Nehru thought that the Sixth Schedule 'was a very wise decision'. He further reiterated that 'it is essential that these tribal people should be given the largest possible measure of local autonomy'. Nehru's celebrated friendship with Verrier Elwin also got reflected in his appreciation of the lives of the tribal communities of north-east India. Writing to Jairamdas Doulatram (Assam's Governor, 1950–56) in 1955, Nehru indicated how much he gave value to Elwin's insight on tribal affairs of Assam. Nehru wrote, 'it is a pleasure to read Verrier Elwin's report, partly because he writes well and partly because he is a good observer and chiefly because of his sympathetic approach'.<sup>44</sup> Nehru thought that Elwin's views on the tribal population of the NE mattered most because 'of his wide knowledge and experience and his human sympathy for these tribal folk'.<sup>45</sup>

As the NEFA took shape, Nehru visited the Agency in October 1952. He visited these areas again in March–April, 1953. He wrote a detailed account of his impression of the people and the place.<sup>46</sup> He admitted that his recent tour of the North Eastern Frontier Areas proved not only exceedingly interesting, but also, 'if I may say so, exciting to me'. 'It was in the nature of a

<sup>44</sup> 'Nehru's Letter to Jairamdas Doulatram, 24 May 1955, Delhi', Sharma, S.K. & Usha Sharma ed., 2006, *Documents on North East India: Assam (1936–1957)*, Mittal: New Delhi.

<sup>45</sup> North east frontier areas, Note 24 April, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (New Series), vol. 22, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, p. 236.

<sup>46</sup> 'A Note by the Prime Minister on his tour of the North east frontier areas in October, 1952', Chief Minister's Secretariat, Foreign, Record B, 1956 (Assam State Archives). B.R. Medhi, Assam Chief Minister wanted his ministerial colleagues to read this 'secret' report. Nehru's statements in this section are taken from this report.

discovery of a new and fascinating aspects of India' wrote the author of the *Discovery of India* in 1952.

Meanwhile, the political distrust between the Assamese and tribal communities began to widen and the latter began to articulate this distrust openly. Nehru agreed that, 'we have looked upon the question of the tribes as a social problem, which of course it is, but in these north-eastern frontier it is very much a political problem also because of the frontier and because these people are culturally related to the people on the other side of the frontier'. He lamented their geographical isolation but equally was unsympathetic to the call of the Assamese leaders for 'integration of these tribes' and 'the establishment of a homogenous state'. Extension of Indian administration into these areas required careful approach, Nehru had no doubt about that. He wanted government officers to learn the tribal languages, behave properly towards tribal women, not to propagate Christianity by the Christian officers ('if any officer...indulges in any proselytizing tendency he would be warned and transferred').<sup>47</sup>

Nehru was equally worried of the works done by the foreign missionaries among the tribal populations in the border areas of Assam. While welcoming foreign missionaries for social welfare activities and reminded them of India's policy of religious neutrality, he warned that the government had 'to deal with cases of missionaries encouraging separatist and anti-national tendencies'. He made his mind clear, missionaries 'who come here for purely proselytizing purposes usually run down our religious and cultural traditions resulting in bitterness and even conflict'.<sup>48</sup> India had complete religious freedom but Nehru made it clear, unless the Indian government checked these missionary activities 'we may have to face still further difficulties in future'.

<sup>47</sup> "Nehru's Letter to Jairamdas Doulatram, 24 May 1955, Delhi' in S. Gopal ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, second series, vol. 22, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund: New Delhi, p. 239.

<sup>48</sup> 'Cable to R.R. Saxena', New Delhi, 8 May 1953, Ibid. p. 239.





Nehru was probably right. After the 1980s this attempt at integration bounced back and took the form of powerful ethnic mobilization. Nehru had thought that forcible integration would 'lead to conflicts and difficulties'. He assured that 'there is bound to be a process of assimilation, but this will have to be developed by itself through education and contacts without any special effort'. Nehru remained sensitive to this and thus did not mind emphasizing that:

the problem of these areas is to make the people feel that they have perfect freedom to live their own lives and to develop according to their wishes and genius. India should signify not only a protecting force but a liberating one. Any conception that India is ruling them and that they are the ruled, or that the customs and habits with which they are unfamiliar are going to be imposed upon them, will alienate them, and make our frontier problems more difficult.<sup>49</sup>

Nehru knew well that unlike the tribal areas of central and eastern India, British rule had a limited penetration in Assam's hills notwithstanding the influence of the British officials and foreign missionaries. The latter, according to Nehru, had 'instilled in them a feeling of slight contempt for Indians as weak people and who have, at the same time, made them a little afraid' of the people of India.<sup>50</sup> Nehru agreed that tribal communities 'are a mixture of hope and apprehension and every little incident emphasizes one or the other aspect'. If Nehru was hopeful of good effect of little doses of administrative interference on their ways of life, yet he wanted everyone to be cautious.

### **The Nation's Petroleum**

Nehru also played a very crucial role in Assam's political battle asserting its rights over its petroleum resources. A joint-stock company owned petroleum refinery was in Assam since the

<sup>49</sup> M. Khosla, ed. 2014, *Letters for a Nation: From Jawaharlal Nehru to His Chief Ministers 1947–1963*, Penguin: New Delhi.

<sup>50</sup> 'Upliftment of the Tribals', Note, Shillong, 19 October, 1952, in S. Gopal ed. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 20, second series, p. 146.

early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>51</sup> New petroleum reserves were discovered in Upper Assam in 1953 and to refine these, the Assam Oil Company and the Government of India, citing economic and security concerns, strongly recommended establishment of new refineries at Calcutta and Barauni respectively. Nehru wrote to Fazl Ali (Governor of Assam, 1956–59) that senior Indian defence personnel had refused to undertake the protection of refinery if it was situated in Assam. ‘This strong and definite statement by those responsible for our defence and security could not be ignored’.<sup>52</sup> This was sure to create a bitter political opposition in Assam. Street demonstration, strikes, and aggressive public debates took place largely endorsed by political parties, including the Congress, demanding that the refinery should be established in Assam.

The Partition had significantly destabilized the regional economy and the Assamese leaders rightly feared that if Assam missed this new phase of industrialization, it would lag behind the rest of the country. These leaders appreciated that after independence India had embarked on a path of development where the state was to play an active role in developing the national economy. They also knew that Assam was unable to attract investments and central developmental and infrastructural projects. Establishment of an oil refinery was now seen as an opportunity for revival of a dying regional economy.<sup>53</sup>

As demand for setting up a refinery within Assam grew, Assam’s anti-Delhi rhetoric also became more marked. Congress leaders met Nehru in 1957. Nehru was convinced that the ideas and programmes of industrialization involved planning by experts

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<sup>51</sup> Barua, Ditee Moni., 2014. ‘Polity and Petroleum: Making of an Oil Industry in Assam, 1825–1980’, unpublished Ph.D thesis, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Nehru’s Letter to Fazl Ali, June 12, 1957’ no. 459, PMO.57/New Delhi, quoted in S.K. Sharma, *Documents on North East India: Assam (1936–1957)*.

<sup>53</sup> For a brief outline on Assam’s economy after 1947, see, P.C. Goswami, 1988. *The Economic Development of Assam*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Delhi: Kalyani Publishers, 1988.



on rational and scientific grounds. Nehru argued that the location of a refinery was a technical, financial, and security question and not a political question and stayed with the Government of India's decision in favour of Barauni. One can easily understand that the Assamese leaders were not to be easily convinced and the protests continued. Nehru made it clear that he had, 'been distressed at the agitation in Assam' although he would 'well understand and sympathise with the desire of the people in Assam, to have a refinery situated there'. But 'questions involving technical and other complicated aspects can only be decided by cool and dispassionate thinking and consultation'.

Nehru agreed that Assam must be on a path of industrialization and that, 'Assam is fortunate in the fresh discoveries of oil' however, he emphasized that, 'this acquisition of [Assam's wealth] should be utilized to the best advantage as well of the rest of India'. He also made it clear that, 'a solid foundation should be laid for the rapid development of this oil business in Assam so that the people of Assam might be the first to prosper under it and other industries should grow up'. Nehru explained to the Assamese leaders that a refinery itself was only a very small part of Assam's future industrialization and it was the duty of the Indian government to draw up various schemes for the development of Assam...which should result in the establishment of large-scale industries'. During the height of the agitation, Nehru, however, came down heavily on Assam and thought that the 'people of Assam will devote their enthusiasm and energy in realizing this prospect of a developing and advancing Assam, instead of pursuing negative and wasteful policies which can only hinder that development'. Nevertheless Assam got a refinery and construction began in 1957 itself.

### **A Language for Assam**

As the 1950s progressed another controversy, the seeds of which were sown long before, came to the fore in Assam. A push for making the Assamese, spoken by a little more than half of the state population as the official language became a major issue

in 1960 when the Congress-led Assam government made Assamese the sole official language of Assam.<sup>54</sup> This meant, even in Cachar, the mainly Bengali-speaking southern district, would now have to put Assamese in official use. Behind the government's move was the public opinion created by the *Assam Sahitya Sabha*, the platform of the Assamese literary intelligentsia with widespread organizational network.<sup>55</sup> The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee also gave support to this demand. This raised serious apprehensions amongst the educated Bengalis, who constituted one-fourth of Assam's population, across the state and more so in the southern districts. The non-Assamese speaking tribal communities also strongly opposed the decision saying they were virtually forced to speak three languages: English, Assamese and Hindi apart from their own languages. In 1960 riots broke out and violence soon spread to most urban areas of Assam, where both the Assamese and Bengali-speaking population used to live.<sup>56</sup> Fear gripped various language-speaking communities. Bengali speakers continued to resist; strikes, public meetings, and violence refused to die down.

Nehru was on a slippery road again but nonetheless had to speak out his mind. He made a couple of visits to Assam and also invited leaders to Delhi. Nehru visited Assam in July. At a largely attended public meeting in Jorhat, the centre of Assamese cultural politics, he said that he sympathised with the aspirations of the Assamese people to make Assamese the official language but insisted that imposition of a language was bad in principle and

<sup>54</sup> For an overview on the political mobilization around the Assamese language question, see Goswami, 1997, *Language Politics in Assam*.

<sup>55</sup> Neog, M. 1961. *Assam's Language Question*, Jorhat: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1961, pp. 29–30. The Sabha passed a resolution on 16 July 1950 to declare Assamese as the State Language. This evoked strong response from the Calcutta based Bengali press. Letter from G.N. Bardoloi to S. Patel, 5 August, 1950 in Durga Das ed. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence Vol 9*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publication, p. 213.

<sup>56</sup> For details of riots and violence, see, Government of Assam. *A Brief Report on Linguistic, Communal and Ethnic Conflicts in Assam (1950–2013)*, Guwahati: Chief Minister's Secretariat, 2014.



also the cause of the Assamese language had been harmed by acts of violence. *The Times of India* reported that Nehru had asked the Assamese people to accept the Devanagari script as a way out which will at least help to allay the tribal anger. But this did not help him to escape from attack from the Bengali-speaking people in West Bengal. The press in Bengal had even suggested that Nehru must resign. The Assam government refused to bow down, but Nehru with the help of negotiation carried out by Lal Bahadur Shastri arrived at a pact whereby English, apart from Assamese, became another official language in the Barak valley. On 7 October 1961 the Assam Legislative Assembly amended the Assam Official Language Act of 1960.<sup>57</sup>

Nehru had much more tough time in Assam and NEFA as the Indo-China war broke out. The Assamese leaders, already deeply disturbed by Nehru's ideas and vision of India's north-east, again found opportunities to misread Nehru's diplomatic and political mission during the war. After the war, in June 1963, Nehru inaugurated the only bridge connecting both the banks of the Brahmaputra.<sup>58</sup> This bridge, the only one on the Brahmaputra till then, would soon become a symbol of Assam's newfound destiny. This forms a subject of another enquiry.

## **Conclusion**

Nehru's relationship with Assam was marked by both anxiety and distrust. This anxiety was also a reflection of a tussle between the political and economic aspirations of the urban Assamese populace and the leadership of the Indian nation-state. It was also a reflection of breach of trust between the promise of a federal India and an increasingly powerful centralized India. But despite temporary antagonisms, both sides looked forward to better times and tried to reach out to each other. Nehru's extra-ordinarily warm relationship with the tribal communities accorded them a much-needed breather within the emerging democratic space. This

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<sup>57</sup> *The Assam Tribune*, 8 October, 1961.

<sup>58</sup> 'Brahmaputra Bridge', *The Times of India*, June 7, 1963.



helped the latter to carry forward dialogue with the Indian State, the political outcome of which only began to unfold after Nehru's death. Nehru always wanted Assam's political leadership to take a larger view but he equally sympathized with the specificities of Assam. Yet Nehru, given the need of the hour, gave impetus to processes of centralization of the Indian polity and thereby opened up fissures within Assam. Nehru's major failure was his limited, sporadic effort to help stabilize Assam's economy after the post-Partition troubles. In a few years' time Assam's deep economic problems came to the fore and fed the growth of strong regional sentiments. These sentiments often took a strong 'anti-Centre' stance and found echo among many Assamese.

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