

## THE ASSAM CONFLICT

Citha D. Maass

### I. POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ANTI-FOREIGNERS' AGITATION

The widespread violence and carnage in the course of the State Assembly Election in Assam in February 1983 with attracted world-wide notice was really the explosion of a long-drawn conflict between various sections of the Assamese society. In essence, it arose because of a sense of grievance nursed by one community, i.e., the Assamese Hindus, which considered itself to be long originally to the state but felt that its civic privileges had been eroded by the influx of "foreigners" who had migrated to the state over a period of generations.

The historical perspective is a vital component of the multi-causal crisis. The emergence of an extremely composite society and the subsequent failure to integrate the different ethnic communities into an all-Assamese identity provide the background for the recent outburst<sup>1</sup>.

Under these circumstances a recently expressed view seems questionable. According to that the events of February 1983 were "not the climax of the act" but "just happened to be one of the more torrid scenes"<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary, it has to be seen as the manifestation of the very complex nature of the conflict in Assam and for that matter of the entire North-East of India. This endemic conflict can, in fact, be said to have been exacerbated by the manner in which the Central Government tried to manage the situation and it should not be surprising if there is more unrest in future.

Another important component is of federative nature, namely the problematic relationship between the Central Government and political forces in the various states. The strong centre personified by Indira Gandhi frequently prevents the emergence of strong state governments. In the case of Assam, genuine grievances of the population as a whole (such as delayed economic development of the state) or special complaints of the different communities were not efficiently supported by the State Government vis-à-vis the Central Government. In this constellation, the agitation movement grew into a political alternative. Consequently, the main political opponents are the agitation leaders and the Central Government. Yet, keeping in mind the composite structure of the Assamese society the question arises which segments of the society are

actually represented by the agitation leadership. Thus, momentum, demands and composition of the agitation movement and its supporting groups are analysed in Part I and viewed against the background of an increasing fragmentation of the Assamese society.

Another aspect of the acute political crisis namely the tragedy of the State Assembly Election in February 1983 was outlined in a separate article by the same author and supplements the present analysis<sup>3</sup>.

The missed integration of the various communities and the still on-going illegal migration into Assam provoke the question "Who is an Assamese" and "How can a foreigner be identified". The controversy about this central issue provides the main momentum for the agitation. In Part II the analysis concentrates on this ethnic element in a two-fold way.

First, the problem of finding appropriate criteria for identifying a "foreigner" is discussed and different methods of determining the exact magnitude of "foreigners" are explained. At first glance, the problem of quantification seems to be merely a technical one. Yet, it soon becomes obvious that the preference for a certain method is determined by the ideological outlook of the respective political opponent and that an "objective" clarification of this core issue is not possible.

Secondly, a district-wise analysis of the composite nature of the Assamese society demonstrates the repercussions of the permanent influx of "foreigners". The political argumentation is based on average figures for the whole of Assam. A disaggregated approach, however, reveals that the illegal migration causes a rather different impact in the eight concerned districts.

## 1. Fragmentation and Balkanization of Post-Independent Assam

The impulse to the 1983 happenings was provided in 1979 when it was discovered during the revision of the electoral rolls of a parliamentary constituency in the state that a very large segment of the constituency could not be considered to be eligible for franchise rights. The doubts of the eligibility of this segment were, by no means, new, but had found expression even during the 50s and 60s. It would appear, however, that the representations made by various sections of the Assamese opinion in regard to this were either ignored or by-passed. If any action was taken at all, it was stopped half-way or watered down by the successive government. It was this repeated experience over two decades which substantiated the reproach that the Central Government only exploited the North-East for its own benefits without caring for its needs. At the same time, the Assamese Hindus did not seem to realise that their linguistic offensive cut both ways. The more they pressed for the priority of their indigenous language, the more they alienated non-Assamese speaking communities. A few examples will illustrate that the Assamese society

headed for an increasing fragmentation instead of a growing integration.

One way to meet the justified demand of the Assamese to make Assam in fact the home-state for their language was by reshaping the state boundaries according to the actual language distribution. This kind of solution was probed in 1956 and ended in large-scale riots. At that time, the States Reorganisation Commission revised several Indian states on linguistic lines. In Assam, Bengali Hindus were in favour of a separation of the Bengali dominated districts of Goalpara and Cachar<sup>4</sup>. In both cases the Bengali Muslims joined hands with the Assamese and helped to prevent a split. More successful was the attempt of various hill tribes in 1963 and 1972 to form their own states.

How strong separatist tendencies among non-Assamese minorities prevail even now is documented by the fact that during the 1983 clashes a fresh partition was considered by tribal politicians. The Assamese Hindus were confronted with a dilemma. Either they could opt for preserving as much of the former British-Assam territory as possible or they could insist on a purely Assamese speaking state, but in that case risk further splits.

But the "foreigners" problem was not confined to the non-Assamese already residing in Assam. How easily infiltrants can cross over into Assam, can be seen from the following report:

"There has been large-scale infiltration of Pakistani nationals and they have been staying here illegally without being detected. Detection and deportation of these unauthorised Pakistani infiltrants has become a stupendous problem. Assam has a very large number of immigrant Muslim population who migrated into Assam from the areas now in Pakistan. The influx has been still continuing even after partition of India and this has endangered the security of the State. The present infiltrants get mixed up with the immigrants who had come to this State earlier in lakhs from the areas now in Pakistan and common habitant of the new infiltrants. Further, there is constant communication of people from one side to the other on the Indo-Pak border and the people living on both sides of the border in most areas of the boundary belong to the same community with natural ties of religion, relationship, language, customs and habits and common economic interest and ethnology. People coming from the other side of the border can easily cross the border and become unidentifiable with the people living on our side of the border and spread over to other parts of the State in large numbers. There has been no effective check on the border and the ineffectiveness has been proved by the exit of hundreds of hostile Nagas into Pakistan and their return to this State equipped with military training and deadly weapons from Pakistan. Arms, ammunitions and contraband goods are also smuggled in and out with Pakistan by these routes."<sup>5</sup>

This passage was quoted in full length out for three reasons. First, it becomes obvious how difficult, if not nearly impossible, it is to detect an illegal

resident. Secondly, the risks involved for India's security are clearly spelt out. One of the main arguments of the agitation leaders is that in spite of the strategic role Assam respectively the entire North-East plays for India's national security, the region remains neglected:

"Assam, like Kashmir, is a state hemmed in on all sides by foreign powers - Bangladesh, Burma, China. Why then should the state not be protected in the same way as Kashmir is? Obviously, prejudices die hard and double standards run deep for those Indian leaders in Delhi who have never seen Assam and never regarded it as anything better than a colony of the Republic to be exploited."<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, this quotation is taken from a memorandum submitted by the Assam Congress Parliamentary Party to Guljarilal Nanda, Home Minister, member of the Congress-led Central Government, on March 19, 1964. The situation described in it was exactly the same in the early 1960s as was the case during the 1970s. The authors belonged to the same party which ruled at the Centre. That this report could have been verbally repeated by the agitation leaders 15 years later proves that the situation in Assam had not at all changed and that the agitation leaders voice a problem which is not merely the concern of some jobless middle-class Assamese extremists.

Yet, one important change can be noticed between the 1960s and now. As already mentioned for 1956, "both in 1960 and in 1972 the immigrant Muslims solidly supported the cause of Assamese nationalism against the slogans of the Bengali Hindus"<sup>7</sup>. In 1960, clashes again arose on account of the language controversy. Until then, English had been the official language in Assam. Against the strong resistance of the Bengali Hindus who opted for a bilingual formula, the Assamese with the support of the "Assamized" Bengali Muslims succeeded in declaring Assamese as "state language". In 1972, new riots broke out because a resolution was passed according to which the Assamese language should replace English as medium of instruction at the universities and should be made a compulsory subject at all non-Assamese secondary schools<sup>8</sup>. The Bengali Hindus in the Cachar district and many tribal communities opposed this Assamization policy, while the Bengali Muslims again sided with the Assamese Hindus.

For the period between independence and the early 1970s, Weiner observed "an unspoken coalition between the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims against the Bengali Hindus. It is not a wholly stable coalition, however, since it could be shattered if there were to be a new major influx of Bengali Muslims into Assam, or if Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims coalesce"<sup>9</sup>. Both these events did take place after the emergence of Bangladesh, and that was exactly the reason for the new momentum of the anti-foreigners' agitation!

The civil war in East Pakistan in 1971 "had brought about a deluge in Pakistani infiltration" into Assam, as an agitationist described the situation: "About a crore (= 10 million) of people from that country entered Assam as though a flood-gate was opened, during that year and over one million of them

stayed back in this state even after the war"<sup>10</sup>. Again, large-scale infiltration is agreed upon in general, but the number of Pakistani refugees varies even among different agitation publications<sup>11</sup>.

Unrest among the Assamese grew. They complained that none of the national parties, i.e., the Congress parties (1978 split into two), the rightist opposition parties and the left parties displayed any serious concern. On the state level, both Congress groups "made a sommersault". Thus, it was left to "the few regional parties and youth and student organisations and the public at large of the state" to insist on a solution. "They agitated from the early seventies for about five years in the form of meetings and prayers and petitions to the Central Government practically to no avail"<sup>12</sup>.

## 2. From Mangaldoi to the Announcement of Assembly Elections

The turning point came in 1979 on account of the Mangaldoi findings. The Lok Sabha M.P. of the Mangaldoi constituency had died and a by-election became necessary. The Indian constitution provides for a yearly revision of the electoral rolls or at least an inspection before each election. When this revision was done during April-May 1979, it was found that out of a total electorate of about 600 000, objections were raised against the enrolment of about 70 000 persons. Of these, about 45 000 were identified as foreigners "by due process of law"<sup>13</sup>.

This disclosure caused an uproar among the Assamese, yet events took an even worse turn. In summer 1979, the Janata-led Central Government in New Delhi finally broke down, the Lok Sabha was dissolved in August and National Elections were announced for early January 1980. It, therefore, became necessary to revise the lists of all the constituencies in Assam. While revising and correcting the electoral rolls, the Chief Election Commissioner, S.L.Shakder, declared, however, in a press note of the Government of Assam on September 18, 1979:

"The Commission has instructed that no person whose name was included in the Electoral Rolls should be eliminated on the ground of citizenship as the process of establishing whether a person is a citizen or not is time consuming and will have to be gone through very carefully in accordance with law so that genuine Indian citizens are not eliminated."<sup>14</sup>

This questionable application of the constitutional provision further heightened the post-Mangaldoi tensions in Assam. The agitationists accused the politicians of misusing the foreigners as "block votes" during elections: "The fear of losing their secure 'vote banks' shook the unscrupulous politicians out of their snug confidence. Thus by using all their influence they forced the authorities to stop the deletion of foreigners' names from electoral

rolls"<sup>15</sup>.

The Mangaldoi disclosure and the subsequent stoppage of the deletion process had touched a most sensitive point because in the absence of any official figures since the 1971 census<sup>16</sup>, the rising number of enrolled voters served as the only indicator for an abnormal population increase. How fast Assam's electorate grew in the 1970s is demonstrated by the following figures. The voters' increase was 10.00 per cent (1957-1962); 12.99 per cent (1962-1966); 2.09 per cent (1966-1970); 10.42 per cent (1970-1971); 14.82 per cent (1971-March 1977); 10.30 per cent (March 1977 - November 1977); 7.06 per cent (November 1977-1979)<sup>17</sup>.

The closer the National Elections approached, the stronger the agitationists insisted on a revision, and held out the threat that they would otherwise prevent the elections from being held at all in Assam. To impress on their demand, on November 6, 1979, the anti-foreigners' agitation was formally started with a students' rally at Gauhati. It was followed by a week-long mass satyagraha from November 12-17, 1979, which paved the way for a widening response to the election boycott call among the Assamese. Towards the end of the year, the State Government lost control over law and order in Assam and, for the first time in post-independence Assam, President's Rule had to be declared. Picketing in front of the houses of potential election candidates was taken up with the purpose to prevent them from filing their nomination papers before the deadline of December 10, 1979. In the next phase, picketing was extended to the oil installations from December 27, 1979 onwards. This tactic made use of the vital role which Assam's oil production plays for the entire Indian economy. To what degree the Assamese had actually been mobilized was proved by the election turnout in the first week of January 1980. Only in two of Assam's 14 Lok Sabha constituencies the polling could be finalized. These two constituencies belonged to the Bengali dominated Cachar district<sup>18</sup>.

The movement had grown so strong that the agitation could be continued even after the National Elections. Realizing its potential threat to India's further integration, Mrs. Gandhi, who returned to power in 1980, started to negotiate with the agitation leaders from February 1980 onwards. More than 20 rounds of talks were to follow until January 1983, but to no avail. The Central Government rather allowed the negotiations to fail than to make substantial concessions. The agitation leaders, on their part, were prepared for a limited compromise but refused to call off the agitation. On the contrary, it was carried on so successfully that no State Government could remain in power since 1979. A detailed account of the various short-lived governments and the two periods of President's Rule is given elsewhere<sup>19</sup>.

No solution was reached until January 1983. Time was running short in view of the approaching end of another spell of President's Rule. At that point, ignoring the strong resistance and the grave warnings the Central Government announced Assembly Elections for February 1983. It justified its decision on the ground that all time periods provided for by the constitution had passed. From a formal point of view the Centre's decision was correct because (i)

within five years after the last Assembly Election (that was March 21, 1983) and/or (ii) within one year of President's Rule (that was March 19, 1983) the Central Government had to announce Assembly Elections - or to look for alternatives which had to be in accordance with the constitution<sup>20</sup>.

### 3. Agitationists' Demands Versus Central Government's Position

The three D's form the core of the agitationists demands: the detection of the "foreigners", the deletion of their names from the electoral rolls and their deportation to Bangladesh or, alternatively, their dispersal among various other Indian states.

The Foreigners Act of 1946 defined a "foreigner" as a person who was not a citizen of India. In view of the large-scale refugee movements at the time of partition, the Indian constitution fixed July 19, 1948 as deadline. Beyond that date, only persons who applied for and were granted the Indian citizenship have to be considered as legally naturalized, full-fledged Indian citizens endowed with the right to vote. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951 and the electoral rolls of 1952 were the very documents which are nearest to that constitutional deadline and which provided comprehensive lists of all Indian citizens at that time. Therefore, these two documents had to be the base for a further updating. The Foreigners Act as well as the NRC had to be interpreted in a way that the burden to prove one's citizenship lies upon the person concerned and not upon the State (as was argued by the Central Government). In case a certain name was not included in the NRC or the electoral rolls, other documents such as landownership rights, school exams, etc., can be accepted as proof as well.

Another important demand focusses on a number of proposals how to protect or seal off the Indo-Bangladesh border against further infiltration and how to distinguish inter-state migrants from indigenous Assamese residents (i.e., by issuing identity cards with photographs affixed).

The allegation of the agitation being a secessionist movement was countered by the agitationists' motto "Save Assam today to save India tomorrow" and by a firm commitment to India's territorial integrity. This commitment, however, did not hinder the agitationists from pointing out to the gross neglect by the Centre which Assam had to suffer since independence<sup>21</sup>.

It must be added that the change conceded later on of the cut-off year from 1951 to 1961 did not overrule this basic argument of the agitationists.

Explaining the Centre's point of view, Mrs. Gandhi referred to the constraints of the bilateral agreements with Bangladesh. Hence her insistence on 1971 as cut-off year on which an understanding was reached between her and Mujibur Rahman in 1971, popularly referred to as Indo-Bangladesh Agreement of 1971, although it was not an official agreement. According to

this understanding, Mujibur Rahman agreed to take back all Bangladeshi refugees who crossed over the border from March 26, 1971, onwards which is the official date of Bangladesh's independence. All refugees who entered into Indian territory before that deadline would be offered asylum in India. In the course of the negotiations, Mrs. Gandhi revoked her earlier claim that all the deportations were finalized during the previous years. Now, she, however, alleged that the remaining number was only very small.

The other main demand, i.e., to close the "open" border with Bangladesh or at least to secure a more efficient border control, was rejected on the two-fold ground: (i) the geographical localities such as many small rivers and inaccessible areas prevent a thorough check of the 2500 mile border; and (ii) the Indo-Bangladesh Border Agreement of 1975 provides for certain restrictions along the border. For example, within a distance of 150 meters on both sides of the border line no defence installations are allowed or troops to be posted.

#### 4. Political Composition of the Agitation

To analyse the political character of the present agitation, one has to ask who do the agitationists actually represent.

On August 27, 1979 at Dibrugarh, the AAGSP that is the All Assam Ganga Sangram Parishad (All Assam Council of the People's Struggle) was formed by three organisations, the AASU (All Assam Students' Union), the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Assembly - the cultural centre of Assamese intellectuals established in 1917 with a history going back to the 1870s when it fought for the cause of the Assamese language)<sup>22</sup> and the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP, Eastern Regional People's Council - an influential regional party founded in 1977). Soon it was extended to eleven organisations such as the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (Assam Nationalist Party), Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva-Chatra Parishad (Nationalist Youth and Student Council of Assam) and Asom Yuvak Samaj (Assam Youth Society). Later on, the Plains Tribal Council (Progressive), the All Assam Tribal Sangha and the Young Lawyers' Forum joined the AAGSP. Besides, the agitationists claimed that:

"Teachers' organisations of the State together with the state government employees, the Central and Semi-Government employees, the Electricity Board employees, the Bank employees, the Railway employees and the employees of the Private establishments and different women's organisations also came out in support of the movement and began to take an active part in the agitational programme. The tea garden labourers ... also expressed complete support for the movement thereby giving the broadest base to the movement and making the same a real mass upsurge. Likewise, the Oil employees of the state have also made a remarkable contribution to the movement by resorting to non-cooperation with the Government in the



matter of transportation of oil and crude oil out of the state in addition to their participation in the action programme of the movement."<sup>23</sup>

Organisation-wise, the AAGSP forms an umbrella for quite a number of organisations. With regard to mass support, the agitationists claim that during the mass satyagraha "lakhs of people of all ages, castes and communities including thousands of men and women from the different states of India including a saner section of Bengalees participated"<sup>24</sup>. A neutral though benevolent study team from the Gandhi Peace Foundation commented on this satyagraha:

"Gandhian techniques of satyagraha and non-cooperation were adopted as literally millions of Assamese and other residents in the State registered their protest in what is indubitably a truly massive people's movement involving men, women and children, urban and rural, rich and poor, scholars and illiterates bound together by a common sentiment and burning emotion. It is claimed that over three million persons courted arrest in the mass satyagraha conducted between November 12-17, 1979."<sup>25</sup>

The mass support is acknowledged even by communist sources which are otherwise, highly critical of the agitation. For example, the investigation team from the People's Union of Civil Liberties stated that the agitation was "quite successful in terms of the number of people participating in it". The team, however, differentiated in its assessment between the "rather peaceful" satyagraha itself and the movement as a whole which "wilfully violated civil rights and liberties of thousands of innocent citizens of India and ... posed a threat to their lives"<sup>26</sup>. This last allegation is countered by the agitationists that some "miscreants" took advantage of the situation and that - more important - violence, excesses, atrocities and rape of local women were committed by the police and the military including those sent by the Central Government<sup>27</sup>. Similarly Guha, a strong communist critic of the movement, admitted: "Over the months, the movement demonstrated that it could mobilise hundreds and thousands of people without disturbing peace or creating violence, if it so wishes"<sup>28</sup>. Yet, he added: "Hence, despite mass participation, the middle class character of the movement cannot be denied"<sup>29</sup>.

Guha's statement leads to the question which social/economic groups or classes do, in fact, support the agitation. The organisation-wise break-up of the AAGSP shows that regional parties with a strong sub-national identification - communists would call it "parochial" - students and youth organisations and a number of professional associations backed the movement. The most important organisation within the AAGSP is the All Assam Students' Union which "spearheads" the movement and is even labelled as "parallel government" during those phases of the agitation or after the 1983 elections, when the official government is "non-functioning"<sup>30</sup>. The AASU agitates since 1972, claims "to represent a large section of the state's 1.3 million school and college students"<sup>31</sup>, has its base at Gauhati University, in particular at the

medical college hospital, and maintains close links with school, college and university teachers.

Another representative of the academic community is the Assam Sahitya Sabha which provides the "cultural underpinnings of the movement". This organisation together with AASU "provide the theoretical basis and echo the historical memories of the Assamese"<sup>32</sup>. Besides the educational and cultural institutions, certain other professions preferentially support the movement such as "the Assamese elements among the administration and police"<sup>33</sup>. This is substantiated by another analyst:

"The Assamese middle class 'fighting its last-ditch battle for survival' has the moral support and backing of the bureaucracy, the police (for its own reasons) and what is more significant, the judiciary. This is confirmed by a senior Home Ministry official who ... confessed that 'our biggest problem is that extremists caught in the act of violence are immediately bailed out by the judiciary'."<sup>34</sup>

The students were motivated by the threat of not finding jobs. What was still a potential, though realistic threat to them was already experienced by a large number of young people who - not primarily on ethnic grounds but out of an economic motive - joined the movement: "We must not miss the basic fact that youth - unemployed youth - was in the vanguard trying to protect territory and to satisfy the urge for jobs in an overpopulated milieu."<sup>35</sup>

The urban middle class character is testified by different sources which vary widely in their ideological orientation. By April 1980, the agitation had absorbed "the entire Assamese-speaking Hindu urban middle class and a slice of the agrarian population"<sup>36</sup>. In 1978, Myron Weiner already pointed out to the growing conflict between Assamese middle class and Bengali Hindus<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, in his latest article of 1983 he emphasized that the urban Assamese were leading the anti-election boycott<sup>38</sup>.

The strongest advocates of this characterization are the Marxist authors. The linguistic, political and ideological animosity between the communist parties, in particular between the ruling party in West Bengal - the CPI(M)<sup>39</sup> - and the Assamese Hindus is obvious on both sides. While the Assamese Hindus gave the agitation an "anti-communist turn"<sup>40</sup> in 1979, the Marxists reject the agitationists' claim to lead a pluralistic movement and to fight for a non-discriminating solution of Assam's national question. Guha's uncompromising analysis is an excellent example:

"In our view ... the agitation was started by the Asamiya capitalists and gentry through the communication media they control, and the students and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie including sections of peasants were gradually drawn into it. Ethnicity was not a given factor to which politics responded; rather, ethnicity-awareness was encouraged and exploited by the upper classes for political ends."<sup>41</sup>

## 5. The Assamese Hindu Elite

This leftist view is questionable on the ground that it exaggerates the role of the upper middle class. It is possible to reject the assertion that "alienation in Assam is deliberately caused by the upper middle class", because "many of the reasons behind the sentiment are genuine"<sup>42</sup>.

Perhaps the most cogent analysis of the socio-political pattern of the Assamese Hindu elite has been provided by Shekhar Gupta<sup>43</sup>. He describes this elite as "a small group of inter-connected families" which consists of three categories. The first comprises the tea or oil executives retired or in senior position, lawyers and business men. Oil companies and tea estates form the "last bastions of colonialism in India". Their senior executives think of Assam as an economically "viable independent entity", if only Assam's rich oil resources could be used for its own benefit and not be exploited by India in a kind of intra-national colonialism. Although Gupta ascribes this line of thinking to a tiny elitist group among the Assamese, the widespread complaint about too low oil royalties indicates that some sort of internal colonialism is felt by a large number of agitation supporters.

More controversial seems to be Gupta's statement that most members of this first category are absentee landlords and they are still using the immigrant Muslim sharecroppers as tenants on their farm estates. Gupta hints at their uncertain reaction in case their own tenants will be deported. Weiner, too, reports that many members of the Assamese urban middle class own agricultural land which is leased to immigrant tenants. He mentions this in the context that Assamese landowners became hostile to the CPI(M) because the latter supports the tenants demand title to land they had been tilling for several years<sup>44</sup>. This perfectly explains that Assamese landowners oppose the CPI(M) and that they will back any attempt to minimize the immigrants' political impact - but not to deport them at all. The fear of being deprived of their cheap tenants could even be considered as an obstacle against their joining the movement. Their interest would call for a status quo solution. Thereby, they, ironically, meet the CPI(M) half-way, the difference being "political low profile" versus "full citizenship status" for the immigrants. For a comparison, the Marxist stand is as follows:

"The solution of Assam's national question, looked at from a Marxist point of view, therefore lies not in putting the clock back (i.e. deporting the immigrants - the author), but in an emphasis on assimilation and a halt to further immigration for the sake of 'national peace'."<sup>45</sup>

The second category comprises bureaucrats and police officers, retired and in service. During the first Presidential Rule and later under Mrs. Taimur, i.e. from December 1979 until June 1981, they were ousted from their key postings. Gupta explains their recent support for the movement on the ground that they feared an exposure of their previous misdeeds.

This kind of fellow-traveller can be found in every movement. To which

extent they actually exercise influence, depends entirely on their individual personalities. Typical for the decision-making process in India - and Assam is no exception - is an extremely high importance of personal loyalties as against an impact exercised by institutions or by virtue of one's office. The close inter-connection of a few families high-lights this personalistic component and, thus, supports Gupta's argument. Beyond this general assessment the problems, however, arise. Only a detailed, behind the scene inquiry, investigating each case separately, can transform this general allegation into a verified analytical explanation.

The third category consists of "the relatively younger entrepreneurs, whose parents almost invariably figure in the first category". Gupta correctly identifies their importance. One can even go one step further and ascribe to them, with regard to the underlying economic motivation, an outstanding impact on the movement. The explanation Gupta provides for their participation, sounds, however, too superficial. According to him, "they are driven by the apprehension of 'non-indigenous' enterprises usurping the benefits of Assam's natural resources". The competitive disadvantage of young Assamese entrepreneurs, of young Assamese professionals and young Assamese job-seekers in general and the retarded economic development of Assam are not merely "apprehensions" of an underprivileged social group but factual outcomes of Assam's socio-economic history.

This is how much can briefly be stated concerning the rise, momentum and demands of the anti-foreigners' agitation and the composition of its leadership and supporters. The central issue "Who is a foreigner" and "How high is the actual percentage share of foreigners in the Assamese society" still needs to be clarified. The complications involved in the identification and the methodical as well as political controversy in determining the exact magnitude of the "foreigners" is outlined in Part II.

## II. ESTIMATES ON THE FOREIGNERS' INFLUX

The large-scale immigration of extraneous people into Assam which had taken place in the colonial period continued after independence also, but there was an essential change in the pattern of migration into the state for several reasons.

The first was the emergence of the sovereign states of India and Pakistan. The earlier migrants into Assam from what was then East Bengal henceforward became migrants with a foreign nationality namely of Pakistan and later Bangladesh. These were now labeled as "infiltrators" who were not automatically entitled to Indian citizenship.

The domestic reason for the essential change in the character of the migrants into the state was that free India embarked on a phase of restructuring

the state infrastructure which the successor government had inherited from the British. This involved essentially the reordering of the Indian states on the more rational pattern of linguistic and cultural homogeneity in the place of a state structure which had been built during the British period for merely the administrative convenience of the colonial rulers. This reorganisation followed more or less closely recommendations made by the States Reorganisation Committee in 1956 which decided that the basis of the states should follow as far as possible the linguistic criteria. If this recommendation represented the recognition of a subnational sentiment in the country, it also led simultaneously to a heightening of the sentiment. Its implication for Assam was one of a twofold and often conflicting pulls. On the one hand, it necessitated for the Assamese the need to assert their identity as a linguistic-cultural group in the context of a society that had become multi-ethnic and -cultural in character. On the other hand, this implied the accommodation of various communities in an equitable manner if there had to be political stability in the state.

The other domestic factor which had its influence on the migration to the state was the economic one arising from the plans for development undertaken by the Government. Here again, there was need to ensure an equitable share of economic benefits among different communities in the state which proved to be none too easy in the circumstances of scarce resource availability.

Added to this was the continued influx of "foreigners", the Bengali Hindus and Muslims. Thus, in the aftermath of the partition, between 1947-51 Bengali Hindus took refuge in Assam. Especially in 1950, communal disturbances in Assam as well as in East Pakistan resulted in large-scale migration to and from Assam. On the Assamese side, Bengali Hindus forced quite a number of Bengali Muslims to escape to East Pakistan, but these Muslims soon made their way back to Assam. In the course of the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, another influx of Bengali Hindus upset, once again, Assam's fragile communal balance. Tensions were rekindled once more as a result of the 1971 war. From 1971 onwards, more and more Bengali Muslims immigrated from the overpopulated Bangladesh to Assam, thus replacing the formerly political/religious motivated immigration by a dominantly economic motivated one.

In order to prove or refute the central concern of the anti-foreigners' agitation, it would be necessary to determine the exact number of "illegal" residents in Assam. Their quantification is, however, impeded by several problems.

### 1. How to distinguish a "foreigner"?

The identification of an illegal resident requires specified criteria which will distinguish an "Indian" from a "foreigner". One of the criteria could well be the language. The fear that, in future, the Assamese language might be spoken

only by a minority in Assam suggests this criterion. Yet, the language criterion does not provide for an unquestionable distinction. First, the close relationship between the two concerned languages facilitated switching over from Bengali to Assamese without really assimilating oneself with the Assamese culture. Secondly, the declaration of one's mother tongue is subject to political pressure. That was proved by the census enumerations. Each of the censuses taken decennially in 1951, 1961 and 1971 was preceded by communal riots. They were meant to intimate mainly the Bengali Muslims in order to make them declare Assamese as their spoken language. As a consequence, the census reports, according to some people, do not reflect the language-wise distribution correctly but distort it in favour of the Assamese-speaking persons compared with the actual strength of the Bengali speaking residents. The fear of the Assamese to lose control over the Bengali Muslim community in the 1970s was one of the main reasons for preventing the 1981 census.

The prevention of the 1981 census, thus, ramified the issue of the aliens. Though the agitationists had a set of economic grievances vis-a-vis the Centre as well as the adjacent state of West Bengal, presumably, for tactical purposes and for greater mobilisation, they focussed on the issue of the "foreigners". The Central Government and the agitationists had divergent views on the question who was a "foreigner". The leaders of the anti-foreigners' agitation - All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) - propagated 1951 as cut-off year (only recently 1961 was conceded), while the Central Government in New Delhi insisted on 26 March 1971 (the date of Bangladesh's official birth). The arguments of both sides remain the case of the conflict, which has divergent political implications. There were a sizeable number of cases where one family did not migrate as an integrated unit but individually over a period of time. This naturally caused complications in fixing a universally applicable cut-off point satisfactory to the migrants and the Assamese. Apart from this, the practical problem arises as to how a resident can prove his migration before a certain deadline.

The task of quantification is further complicated by the questionable correctness of the statistical material, its incompleteness and the changes in the social composition due to politically motivated balkanisation of the Assamese state.

Estimates of the most realistic percentage of foreign settlers are based on the census data, as these are the only available official figures. The census data, however, pose several statistical problems. The alleged distortion of the language-wise break-up had already been mentioned. The most important break-up of the Assamese society, i.e., according to the various communities, was not provided for by the census categories. Finally, no census data are available at all for the most controversial period, i.e., the decade from 1971 onwards. That is so because no census could be conducted in 1981 due to the intensity of the agitation.

Another complication arose out of the fact that Assam had been divided

several times. The inclusion of the Bengali Muslim dominated Sylhet district in East Pakistan in 1947 (now Bangladesh) suddenly raised the percentage of the Hindus vis-à-vis the Muslim in the remaining area. The 1950 large-scale riots and manifold migration flows resulted in a total shake-up of the whole Assamese society, thus limiting a comparison of pre- and post-1951 figures. In the aftermath of the language riots in 1960 and the early 1970s, several predominantly Christian hill tribes were carved out of Assam and made separate states/union territories such as Nagaland in 1963, the Union Territory of Mizoram and Meghalaya in 1972. In the same year, the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), was separated and transformed into the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh. As a consequence, figures for the 1970s refer to a rather different social set-up than the ones for 1951, let alone pre-independence figures. These manifold transformations of the Assamese society not only impede statistical comparisons, but reflect the complex nature of the Assamese problem.

Therefore, "the exact number of post-1951 settlers in Assam, together with their locally born progeny, is and will remain an unknown quantity"<sup>46</sup>. It is unavoidable that this situation attracted a game of figures. Thus, it was no surprise that estimates on the number of foreigners in Assam varied from 13 lakhs (1.3 million) to 77 lakhs (7.7 millions)<sup>2</sup>. The low estimate of 1.3 million would place the share of "foreigners" at 8.9 per cent of Assam's total population of 14.6 millions in 1971, while the second estimate would place it as high as 52.7 per cent. A critical inquiry into the various estimates highlights the complexity of the problem.

## 2. The quantification problem: All-India average as indicator

The different estimates can be grouped into certain categories depending on the method used in each case. The first distinction results from the choice of the base year. If 1901 is taken as the base year, the share of aliens with regard to Assam's population in 1971 will be much higher than in the case of 1951 as base year. Besides, an essential change is involved in the alteration of the base year. Estimates starting with 1901 will measure the number of "immigrants", while estimates starting with 1951 will measure the amount of "infiltrants" (if inter-state migration is excluded).

The second distinction results from the causes assumed in each case to explain Assam's phenomenal rate of population increase. Natural increase versus immigration is the main controversy. The differences arise from the indicator applied in each case to determine the contribution of these two factors to Assam's population growth.

The main argument of the agitation leaders focusses on the much higher population increase in Assam as compared with the all-India average. While India's total population increased by 21.64 per cent between 1951 and 1961

and by 24.80 per cent between 1961 and 1971, the respective growth rates for Assam were 34.98 and 34.95 per cent. Table 1 presents a break-up for those Indian states with the highest growth rates and leads to a very interesting observation. It is not only that Assam recorded one of the highest population growth rates but the entire North-Eastern region (popularly referred to as Seven Sisters)<sup>48</sup> formed a cluster of states with the highest rates of population increase vis-à-vis the rest of the Indian states except Haryana in the North West<sup>49</sup>.

After presenting a detailed statistical analysis, Dass concludes that immigration and natural growth equally contributed to Assam's extremely high population growth. The influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan cannot be held responsible as the only cause for their high growth, but natural increase was accelerated by inter-state migration<sup>50</sup>.

While Dass attributes not more than an equal contribution of natural increase and immigration to Assam's population growth, Guha even states "that more than four-fifths of the decadal population growth is due to natural growth and only about one-fifth due to immigration". As a proof, he refers to the indigenous tribes in the Brahmaputra Valley. Constituting 11 per cent of its population, they are "almost free of any migration-induced demographic change", and yet, their growth rate for 1961-71 is "as high as 41 per cent as against a 38 per cent growth for the Brahmaputra Valley population as a whole". Improved health measures had resulted in a high birth rate and a lowered death rate. He concludes: "this cuts to size the exaggerated role ascribed to migration in Assam's population growth in recent times and corroborates S.K.Dass's contrary findings ..."<sup>51</sup>.

Guha's line of argument raises the crucial question which method of inquiry is most appropriate to comprehend the reality. As far as the agitation leaders are concerned, they put forward their case by comparing Assam's decade-wise growth rates between 1901-1971 with the all-India decadal growth rates, the latter being much lower for all the decades. If Assam's actually recorded population of 3.289 millions in 1901 would be computed on the base of India's growth rates for each of the decades, then Assam's computed population in 1971 would have been 8.355 millions instead of the actually recorded 14.625 millions, the balance therefore would account for the immigrants<sup>52</sup>. According to this method, the estimated migrant population would be 6.270 millions (= 42.87 per cent of Assam's population in 1971). If one takes 1951 instead of 1901 as base because of the 1947 partition of British India, then for 1971, the difference between actual and computed population would be 2.361 millions (16.14 per cent of Assam's population in 1971)<sup>53</sup>. This example illustrates the extent to which the method used in each estimate determines the result which accounts for the wide variance between the different estimates.

After the agitationists' approach, it is an open question as to whether the statistical average of all-India's growth rate can be used as correct indicator to ascribe Assam's above-average growth to immigration. This deficiency is taken care of, to a considerable extent, by Goswami.



Table 1: Population growth rates in selected states 1951, 1961 and 1971

States	1951 (million)	Increase in % 1941-51	1961 (million)	Increase in % 1951-61	1971 (million)	Increase in % 1961-71
1. India	361.09	13.31	439.23	21.64	548.16	24.80
2. Assam	8.03	19.93	10.84	34.98	14.63	34.95
3. Nagaland	0.21	12.30	0.40	73.35	0.52	39.88
4. Tripura	0.64	24.56	1.14	78.71	1.56	36.28
5. Arunachal Pradesh	-	-	0.34	n.a.	0.47	38.91
6. Manipur	0.58	12.80	0.78	35.04	1.07	37.53
7. Meghalaya	0.60	8.97	0.77	27.03	1.01	31.50
8. Mizoram	0.20	28.42	0.27	35.61	0.33	24.93
9. Haryana	5.67	7.60	7.59	33.79	10.01	32.23
10. Madhya Pradesh	26.07	8.67	32.37	24.18	41.65	28.67
11. Gujarat	16.26	18.69	20.63	26.86	26.70	29.38
12. West Bengal	26.30	13.22	34.93	32.80	44.31	26.87

Source: India - A Reference Annual 1981, Tabl. 1. 1, p. 7; percentage figures calculated by the author.

### 3. Assam's decade-wise rates of natural increase as indicator

Goswami used Assam's decade-wise rates of natural increase which were estimated by the Office of the Registrar General of India on the basis of differences between estimated birth and death rates in Assam. The respective rates of natural increase were: 1901-10: 13.6 %; 1911-20: 2.2 %; 1921-30: 13.8 %; 1931-40: 18.7 %; 1941-50: 14.9 %; 1951-60: 22.4 %; 1961-70: 29.4 %<sup>54</sup>. His figures are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Decade-wise estimates of migrants into Assam: 1901-1971

Year (1)	Projected Pop. (2)	Recorded Pop. (3)	Cumulative Mi- grant Pop. (CMP) (4)	CMP as % of col. 3 (5)
1911	3 737 644	3 848 617	110 973	2.88
1921	3 819 292	4 636 980	817 688	17.63
1931	4 346 354	5 560 371	1 214 017	21.83
1941	5 159 122	6 694 790	1 536 668	22.94
1951	5 927 831	8 028 856	2 101 025	26.17
1961	7 255 665	10 837 329	3 581 664	33.05
1971	9 388 830	14 625 152	5 236 322	35.80

Source: Goswami (1983), Tabl.3, p.51.

In Table 2, Assam's population of 1901 was taken as wholly indigenous (which is not quite true because immigration already started before 1900) and projected at the rate of natural increase for the decade 1901-10. The result showed the projected population in 1911 (col.3). The difference between actual and projected population, thus, indicates the immigrated population in 1911 (col.4) and its percentage share of Assam's total population (col.5). Then, for the next period 1911-20 the rate of natural increase of this decade was used to project the population in 1921.

According to Goswami's method, 35.80 per cent of Assam's population in 1971 would be immigrants - a rather high percentage which would support the stand of the agitation leaders. If the rates of natural increase were estimated correctly by the Office of the Registrar General, then this method would provide for a distinction between the share in Assam's population growth which was due to natural increase as against the share which was due to immigration.

Even so, there is another point of controversy which is not solved by Goswami's approach. The bulk of the tea garden labourers arrived in Assam before 1900, while the Bengali Muslims cultivators mostly came after 1900. By taking 1901 as deadline, he implicitly treats the tea garden labourers and all immigrants who settled before 1900 as assimilated members of the Assamese society, while all later immigrants are categorised as "migrant population" irrespective of the fact that quite a number of them were "Assamized" between 1901 and 1951 (especially among the Bengali Muslims). Again, one can see the act of arbitrariness which, in the absence of other applicable criteria, is connected with the choice of a specific deadline or cut-off year.

A further point in dispute still has to be clarified. Guha arrived at his conclusion by comparing the growth rates of the tribal population in the Brahmaputra Valley with the Valley population as a whole. He assumes that living conditions were more or less the same for both population groups. As the tribals' growth rate was higher and as no significant immigration could be found, he concludes that, first, Assam in general experienced a higher rate of natural increase than the rest of India which, secondly, would reduce the share of migration conditioned growth in Assam's total population increase.

Table 3: Tribal population growth 1901-1971

Year	Total tribal population	Increase in % of tribal pop.	% share of tribal pop. to Assam's total population	Increase in % of Assam's population
1901	550 000	-	16.71	-
1911	600 000	9.09	15.59	16.99
1921	617 135	2.85	13.30	20.48
1931	704 977	14.23	12.67	19.91
1941	750 000	6.38	11.20	20.40
1951	805 657	7.42	10.03	19.93
1961	1 164 641	44.55	10.75	34.98
1971	1 606 648	37.95	10.99	34.95

Source: Goswami (1983), App. 2, p. 62 (compiled from various Census Reports)

Guha's approach is strongly criticized by Goswami on the ground that Guha does not examine the tribals' growth rates carefully enough<sup>55</sup>. Goswami's own findings present a rather confusing picture which questions Guha's method in principle. Table 3 presents the tribals' growth as compiled by Goswami from

the Census Reports.

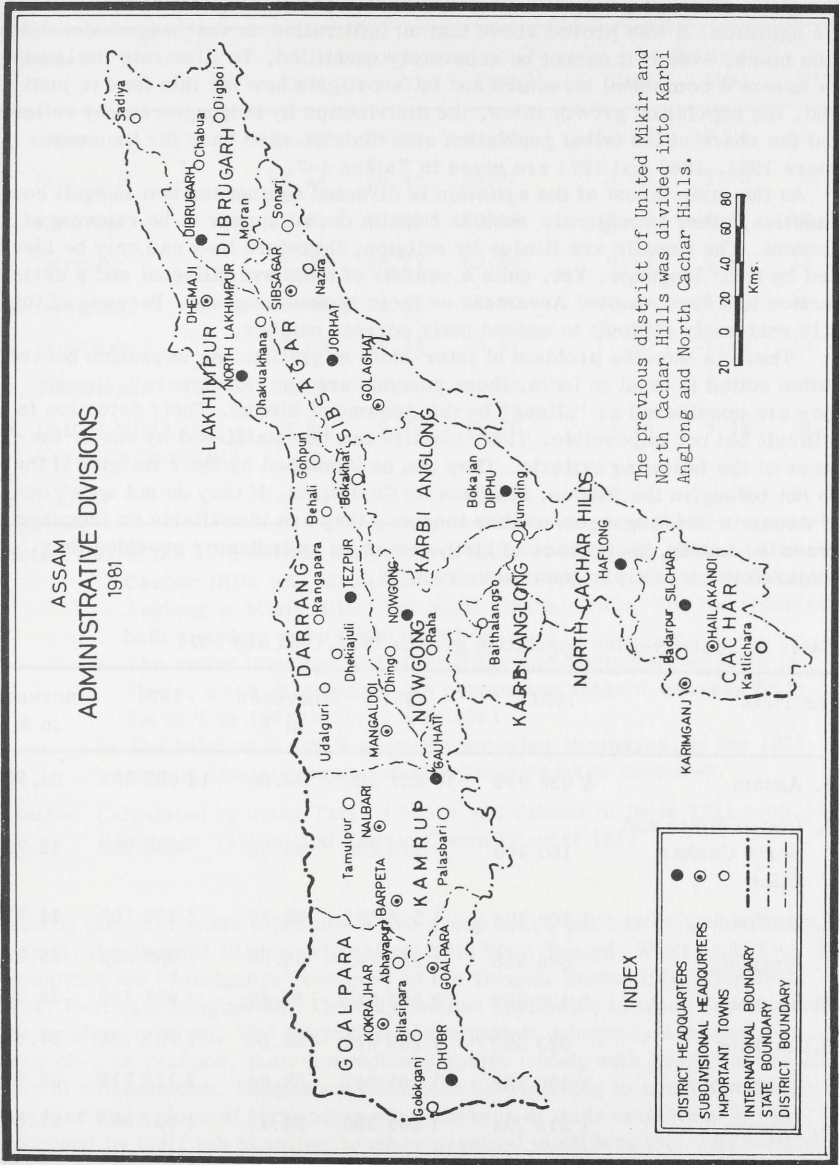
The most surprising feature of this table is the sharp increase of the tribal population between the two census enumerations of 1951 and 1961. If any significant tribal immigration is ruled out (which is assumed in general), then, according to Guha's arguments, this remarkable increase is caused by improved health measures. Although Assam's total population experienced a significant increase during the same period, it, however, fell far short of the tribals' increase. This observation denies Guha's assumed similarity in the growth-pattern between the tribal and non-tribal population. Secondly, if the tribal population increased at a higher rate of natural increase as Assam's population, then one would expect a steadily increasing share of the tribals in Assam's total population. Although the tribals' share in Assam's total population slightly increased from 10.03 to 10.99 % between 1951-1971, the overall development from 1901 onwards indicates a clearly decreasing tendency.

Even more confounding is a district-wise break-up of the tribals' growth rates during the two decades 1951-61 and 1961-71. While in the three districts Kamrup, Goalpara and Sibsagar, the growth rates of the tribals differed only slightly between the first and second decade, the development in the other five districts varied widely. In Lakhimpur (1951-61: 39.95%; 1961-71: 71.93%) and Nowgong (1951-61: 27.34%; 1961-71: 42.93%) the growth rate was significantly higher in the second period. In Darrang it was decreasing from 56.08 % (1951-61) to 32.32 % (1961-71). But the most surprising change occurred in Cachar and the combined district of United Mikir (in the 1971 census renamed into Karbi Anglong) and North Cachar Hills. Cachar recorded a growth rate of 110.09 % during 1951-61 which dropped to only 8.57 % during 1961-71. In United Mikir and North Cachar Hills the rate of 183.63 % during 1951-61 dropped to 24.27 % during 1961-71<sup>56</sup>.

Under the assumption that Goswami adjusted the districts correctly after the various splits of Assam in the early 1960s, these wide fluctuations in the tribals' growth pattern indicate that Guha's approach is not valid any longer. Besides, improved health measures alone cannot account for these wide fluctuations. Finally, apart from alterations in the rate of natural increase other reasons have to be looked for. One potential explanation is suggested by Goswami: "Is it not reflective of the greater consciousness of the tribals about their ethnic identity leading to more accurate reporting of their numbers in the last two censuses, rather than a sudden jump in their fertility?"<sup>57</sup>

#### 4. District-wise analysis of the communal structure in Assam

The controversy about the quantification plays such a vital role in the agitation because of its psychological dimensions. The underlying fear of the Assamese to be ethnically and linguistically overwhelmed by aliens, in particular by



Bengalis, finds its political expression in this issue and gives momentum to the agitation. It was proved above that an infiltration on vast magnitudes did take place, even if it cannot be accurately quantified. To illustrate its impact on Assam's communal structure and to investigate how far this fear is justified, the population growth rates, the distribution by languages and by religions and the share of the tribal population on a district-wise base for the census years 1951, 1961 and 1971 are given in Tables 4-7.

As the main thrust of the agitation is directed against the two Bengali communities, other immigrants such as Nepalis do not appear to be relevant at present. The Nepalis are Hindus by religion, therefore they can only be identified by their language. Yet, quite a number of them are bilingual and a certain section has even adopted Assamese as their spoken language. Because of this, it is extremely difficult to assess their correct number.

There is then the problem of inter-state migration. As migration between Indian states is legal in India, these persons are not "foreigners", though they are considered as "aliens" by the Assamese Hindus. Their detection is difficult but not impossible. Their identity can be established by one or the other of the following criteria. They can be identified by their religion if they do not belong to the Hindus, Muslims or Christians. If they do not speak one of Assam's 124 languages/mother tongues, they are identifiable on language grounds. Lastly, their place of birth serves as an indicator provided they declared it correctly in the census reports.

Table 4: District-wise population growth 1951, 1961 and 1971

Districts	1951	1961	Increase in %	1971	Increase in %
1. Assam	8 028 856	10 837 329	34.98	14 625 152	34.95
2. United Mikir and North Cachar Hills	165 440	279 726	69.08	455 357	62.79
3. Goalpara	1 108 124	1 543 892	39.32	2 225 103	44.12
4. Nowgong	886 955	1 210 761	36.51	1 680 895	38.83
5. Kamrup	1 490 329	2 062 572	38.40	2 854 183	38.38
6. Darrang	923 562	1 289 670	39.64	1 736 188	34.62
7. Lakhimpur	1 126 294	1 563 842	38.84	2 122 719	35.74
8. Sibsagar	1 212 224	1 508 390	24.43	1 837 389	21.81
9. Cachar	1 115 865	1 378 476	23.53	1 713 318	24.29

Source: Asam Sahitya Sabha (ed.), *Eclipse in the East*. 1980, Table 1, p. 2

Table 5: District-wise language distribution (in %)

Districts	Assamese			Bengali		
	1951	1961	1971	1951	1961	1971
1. Assam	61.93	62.60	60.89	21.41	19.28	19.71
2. Sibsagar	84.44	85.48	85.77	3.43	3.05	3.73
3. Kamrup	79.01	80.77	76.68	15.11	9.87	12.34
4. Darrang	77.00	65.12	62.84	6.93	9.85	13.31
5. Nowgong	69.09	76.80	73.72	23.37	17.32	19.31
6. Goalpara	62.00	66.14	63.57	17.45	11.98	14.70
7. Lakhimpur	62.31	63.00	61.16	7.42	8.18	5.95
8. United Mikir and North Cachar Hills	3.50	7.77	14.00	4.36	8.42	10.53
9. Cachar	0.31	0.33	0.40	77.14	78.77	77.76

- Notes: 1. In the 1971 census the previous district of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills was divided into the two separate districts of Karbi Anglong (= Mikir Hills) and North Cachar Hills. For the calculation both districts were taken together.
2. The major language of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills is Mikir, a tribal language. Its percentage share decreased from 52.92 % in 1951 to 37.87 % in 1971.
3. The balance to 100 % accounts for other languages. In the 1971 census 124 languages / mother tongues were recorded.

Source: Calculated by using Table 4 above and Census of India 1951 resp. 1961 (Language Tables) and Assam Census Report 1971

Among the inter-state migrants is one group which can hardly be identified, namely the Bengali Hindus originating from West Bengal. Most probably, they comprise the "foreigners" category of the Bengali Hindus migrating from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. The only method applicable to trace them would be by place of birth. The migration tables suffer, however, a main defect. For obvious reasons, their correctness varies widely with regard to the different communities. Indigenous Assamese have nothing to conceal and will declare their place of birth correctly. Because of their conditions of stay imposed by their job situation or other personal consideration, inter-state migrants do not in all cases provide correct details. The least reliable are, of course, the census returns from Nepali and Bengali immigrants who crossed over the international border into Assam.

Table 6: District-wise distribution by religions (in %)

Districts	Religion	1951	1961	1971
1. Assam	Hindus	65.20	71.33	72.51
	Muslims	22.09	25.30	24.56
	Christians	6.50	2.43	2.61
	Others	6.21	0.94	0.32
2. Sibsagar	Hindus	92.03	91.70	92.22
	Muslims	5.82	5.83	5.27
	Christians	1.75	1.93	2.09
	Others	1.06	0.61	0.29
3. Lakhimpur	Hindus	87.27	86.76	89.57
	Muslims	8.63	9.70	7.54
	Christians	3.04	2.93	2.60
	Others	1.06	0.61	0.29
4. United Mikir and North Cachar Hills	Hindus	71.86	80.57	83.65
	Muslims	0.31	1.10	1.08
	Christians	9.62	13.49	14.93
	Others	18.21	4.84	0.34
5. Darrang	Hindus	78.65	75.72	78.45
	Muslims	17.03	19.35	16.19
	Christians	4.03	4.64	5.06
	Others	0.29	0.29	0.30
6. Kamrup	Hindus	69.74	69.19	69.96
	Muslims	29.29	29.36	28.93
	Christians	0.74	0.89	0.88
	Others	0.23	0.56	0.22
7. Cachar	Hindus	60.64	59.60	58.71
	Muslims	38.49	39.14	39.89
	Christians	0.75	1.10	1.32
	Others	0.12	0.16	0.08
8. Nowgong	Hindus	58.40	57.94	59.70
	Muslims	40.54	41.24	39.39
	Christians	0.54	0.59	0.71
	Others	0.52	0.23	0.20
9. Goalpara	Hindus	51.54	50.95	53.92
	Muslims	42.94	43.32	42.25
	Christians	2.80	3.34	3.59
	Others	2.72	2.39	0.24

Source: Assam Census Report 1971



This leads to the main problem of how to identify Bengali Hindus and Muslims. The Bengali Hindus share the same religion with the Assamese Hindus, but they maintain their Bengali language. The Bengali Muslims, on the other hand, maintain their religion but used to adopt the Assamese language, at least in the past. As there are only a few Assamese Muslims, the religion can serve as distinguishing sign.

A comparison of the Tables 4-7 leads to the following district-wise analysis:

With regard to population growth, the districts Sibsagar and Cachar recorded a remarkably low growth rate. A further inquiry reveals that these two districts represent the two extremes of the Assamese/Bengali polarisation. Sibsagar has the highest share of Assamese speaking persons as well as followers of the Hindu religion and the second-lowest share of tribals. Thus, this district is the stronghold of the Assamese Hindus. Cachar, on the other hand, has by far the highest percentage of Bengali speaking persons, the third-highest share of Muslims and only a negligible tribal population. It is the stronghold of the Bengali Hindus, but with a large Bengali Muslim community.

The extremely low growth rate of Sibsagar is not surprising because immigration into this Assamese Hindu stronghold could not be very attractive. One could even suggest that Sibsagar's growth rate can be taken as an indicator for an immigration-free, almost purely Assamese Hindu population increase. This would, of course, require further research about the specific geographical and economic conditions of this district in order to eliminate other impediments

Table 7: District-wise share of tribal population (in %)

Districts (1)	1951 (2)	1961 (3)	1971 (4)
1. Assam	10.03	10.75	10.99
2. United Mikir and North Cachar Hills	65.96	75.54	57.67
3. Goalpara	15.33	14.67	13.85
4. Lakhimpur	10.72	10.65	13.49
5. Kamrup	11.53	10.78	10.44
6. Darrang	9.73	10.88	10.69
7. Nowgong	7.75	7.23	7.44
8. Sibsagar	5.66	6.36	6.82
9. Cachar	0.60	1.02	0.89

Source: Calculated from Goswami (1983), Appendix 3, p.63.

for a higher population growth. In the case of Cachar, however, this low growth rate is surprising. Being such a Bengali dominated district, one would have expected a high growth rate due to further immigration. If one assumes that this district has reached the saturation point, one can suggest by analogy with Sibsagar, that Cachar's recorded growth rates indicate an immigration-free Bengali population increase. Interestingly, Sibsagar's as well as Cachar's growth rates are exactly in the margin of all-India's growth rates for the decades under consideration. This observation would support the estimate method applied by the agitationists i.e. comparing Assam's growth rates with the one's of all-India. One could further assume that the excess in the growth rates of the remaining six districts would be on account of infiltration.

The districts of Lakhimpur, Darrang, Kamrup, Nowgong and Goalpara recorded growth rates which were above Assam's average. Yet, their Assamese/Bengali polarisation is not so predominant that their population increase can be explained only in terms of Bengali Hindu or Muslim immigration. Other factors such as tribal growth, Nepali influx and inter-state migration have to be taken into account as well. Although Tables 4-7 present a fairly detailed picture, the impact of the two Bengali communities can only be determined up to a certain degree. On the other hand, analysing each district will give an idea of the pluralistic character and the changing ethnic composition of the post-independence society in Assam.

Among these five districts, Lakhimpur has a relatively small Bengali speaking as well as Muslim community, but a rather high tribal population and - what is not obvious from the tables - a comparatively high percentage of Nepalis. The high population growth during 1951-61 coincided with an increase of all indicators mentioned in the tables except a stable share of the tribal population. It can be concluded that this population increase was caused by a combination of Bengali Hindu, Bengali Muslim and Nepali influx. The remarkable decline of the growth rate during 1961-71 can be explained by a reduced immigration rate of these three communities, while the tribals significantly increased. This is proved by the declining share of both Assamese and Bengali speaking persons. Their combined share was reduced from 71.18 per cent in 1961 to 67.11 per cent in 1971, thus making allowance for other linguistic communities such as the tribals whose population share significantly went up.

In the case of Darrang, the picture is very clear. The share of the Assamese speaking persons is remarkably falling, while the share of Bengali speaking persons is increasing. As the Muslim increased at the expense of the Hindus during the first decade, one can conclude a rather high Bengali Muslim infiltration, while the Bengali Hindus influx prevailed during the second decade. Another contribution to the first decade's increase was caused by the tribals. Their share was slightly increasing with the Boro tribe as the predominant one. The population increase of all the Boro tribes was as high as 60.11 per cent during 1951-61 but only 21.64 per cent during 1961-71. Besides, Darrang has a relatively high percentage of Gorkhali/Nepali speaking

persons so that Nepali infiltration also comes into the picture<sup>59</sup>.

Kamrup has the second-largest share of Assamese speaking persons, but with a slightly declining trend. In none of the other districts the percentage distribution by religions has remained so stable as in Kamrup. The tribals' share showed a negligibly declining tendency. Fluctuations occurred, however, in the language distribution. In view of the permanently high population growth rate and the stable Hindu share, one can presume that the sharp decline of Bengali speaking persons during 1951-61 was counterbalanced partly by non-Bengali inter-state migrants who spoke another Indian language and were Hindus and partly by non-Assamese speaking tribals such as the Boros. This is supported by the fact that, taking together the Assamese and Bengali speaking persons, their combined share dropped from 94.12 per cent in 1951 to 90.64 per cent in 1961 and to 89.02 per cent in 1971. Most probably, Nepali infiltrations can be excluded, because their officially recorded share in Kamrup's population was very small. The increase of Bengali speaking persons during 1961-71 would indicate a revived influx of Bengali Hindus at the expense of non-Assamese speaking Hindus.

Nowgong has the second-highest share of Bengali speaking persons as well as the second-highest share of Muslims. The Bengali Muslims account for about 40 per cent, while the Bengali speaking population varies around 20 per cent. The Bengali domination is obvious. The tribals' share of about 7.5 per cent remains constant and does not figure as an important variable. Assamese and Bengali speaking persons taken together account for 92-94 per cent. It is the highest combined share and indicates that the confrontation almost exclusively concentrates on the Assamese and Bengalis. The significantly increased rate of population growth during 1961-71 was brought about by Bengali Hindu immigrants.

Goalpara with a high, but fluctuating share of Bengali speaking persons and with its 43 per cent of Muslims, which is the highest share among all eight districts, is clearly Bengali dominated, in particular by Bengali Muslim. Besides, it has the second-highest share of tribals, although their share is declining. Being the district with the second-highest and still increasing rate of population growth which seems to be on account of Bengali Hindus influx, Goalpara can be considered as an illustration for the deeply rooted fear of Bengal domination. This fear is clearly spelt out by one of the agitationists:

"Assam is today face to face with the twin problems of its conversion into a prospective 'Greater West Bengal' or colony of West Bengal and prospective 'Greater Bangladesh' or for that matter a colony of Bangladesh. And the Assamese people (and they include lakhs of people who have come over to this state from different parts of India and have merged and assimilated with its indigenous population) will naturally fight against both these dangers. They will naturally regard the menace of Greater Bangladesh as the greater danger but they cannot look upon the danger of Greater West Bengal or a colony of West Bengal also with equanimity."<sup>60</sup>

The last district, United Mikir and Cachar Hills, does not at all fit into the picture. It recorded an extraordinarily high population increase of 69.08 per cent respectively 62.79 per cent and has an extremely high share of tribals. These are mostly Hindus, but quite a number are Christians. In 1971, it had the highest share of Gorkhali/Nepali speaking persons among all districts, namely 6.38 per cent. The main tribal language, Mikir, was spoken by 52.92 per cent in 1951, but only by 37.87 per cent in 1971. This declining tendency corresponds with the sharp drop of the tribals' share from 75.54 per cent in 1961 down to 57.67 per cent in 1971, but does not account for the significant tribals' increase during 1951-61. How does it come that the tribals as well as Assamese speaking as well as Bengali speaking persons increased their respective share during the first decade 1951-61? Was there really no tribal immigration? The rising share of Bengali speaking persons during both decades together with a corresponding increase in the Hindu share testify to a large Bengali Hindu influx. But how can the steadily rising share of Assamese speaking persons be explained? Tribals could not have adopted the Assamese language on a broad base because the enormous population growth rate implies a huge influx from outside. The Assamese are the least mobile of all major linguistic communities in India<sup>61</sup>. Therefore, intra-state migration within Assam cannot be ascribed as the reason for the changed demographic pattern of this particular district, nor, for that matter the influx of Assamized Bengali Muslims because the share of Muslims increased only insignificantly.

## 5. Conclusions

In Part I and II of this article three aspects of the multi-causal crisis in Assam were analysed: (i) the political character of the agitation movement; (ii) the controversy arising from the question how to identify the "foreigners" and how to determine their magnitude; (iii) the fear of the Assamese of being reduced to a minority in their own state.

The political character of the anti-foreigners' agitation can be summarized in four points.

First, the mass response among various organisations, professional associations and different social groups had been established. Naturally, the major response came from the Assamese although the agitationists claimed some support from other communities such as the tea garden labourers.

Secondly, the dominant factor in the movement was the Assamese urban middle class. This was verified by sources with different ideological orientations. Among them, the major contribution was provided by Marxist authors.

Thirdly, according to the Marxist analysis of the middle class character, the underlying economic motivations became apparent, thus correcting the agitationists' claim to fight primarily for an ethnic, linguistic and cultural issue concerning the whole Assamese nation.

Fourthly, the analysis of the anti-foreigners' agitation cannot be concluded without assessing its political effect on the Assamese society. It had a two-fold effect: polarisation and fragmentation. After 1971, the permanent influx of Muslims from Bangladesh destroyed the earlier "unstable coalition" between Assamese Hindus and Bengali Muslims. The line of confrontation was readjusted. It changed into a polarisation between Assamese and Bengalis, thus driving Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims together for the first time. The more the Assamese Hindus pressed forward their demands and emphasized the language issue, the more they alienated other non-Assamese speaking communities. To what degree the entire Assamese society had already been fragmented, was finally revealed during the election campaign in January-February 1983, when in a civil war like situation each community attacked the other.

The controversy about the identification and quantification of the "foreigners" leads to the following results:

First, as Goswami has already suggested, the tribals' growth pattern requires further research. Secondly, a comparison between the different estimates places the percentage share of immigrants in Assam's population in 1971 more in the middle range. The agitation leaders' high estimate of 42.87 % can be ruled out by Goswami's more appropriate method which led to the result of 35.80 %. On the other hand, Guha's low estimate of only one-fifth (= 20 %) was also rejected on methodical grounds.

An even lower estimate of 16.14 % was presented by the agitation leaders, but on the base of 1951 as cut-off year. Therefore, with 1901 as cut-off year Goswami's result of 35.80 % = 5.236 million immigrants can be treated as the upper limit. The closer the cut-off year comes to the time of independence, thus qualitatively changing the problem from one of immigrants to that of "foreign" settlers and "infiltrants", the lower the number of "foreigners" will be. 16.14 % = 2.360 million would mark the very lowest estimate which, in comparison to Guha's result of 20 % = 2.925 millions, is certainly an under-estimation. One is left with a margin of 2.9 to 5.2 millions of "non-Assamese" residents (to use a neutral term) in 1971 - who depending on the chosen cut-off year - are either immigrants or foreigners.

Thirdly, the present stage of research does not provide for a more accurate quantification of the immigrants/foreigners. Fourthly, this unverifiable situation enables each side to choose the best suited method in order to arrive at the "right" number of immigrants/foreigners for one's own purpose of argumentation.

In order to demonstrate the fear of the Assamese to be ethnically and linguistically overwhelmed by aliens, the population growth rates, the distribution by languages and by religions, and the share of the tribal population were analysed on a district-wise base by comparing the census data for the years 1951, 1961 and 1971. Four observations can be made.

First, although the increasing fragmentation affected all ethnic components of the Assamese society, the main clash occurred between the Assamese Hin-

and the two Bengali communities, i.e. the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims.

Secondly, the district-wise analysis revealed a rather diverse picture of the repercussions caused by high population increase and migration on the ethnic composition of the eight concerned districts.

Thirdly, as a result the eight districts can be arranged in three groups. The two districts of Sibsagar and Cachar represent the two extremes of the Assamese/Bengali polarisation, the former being the stronghold of the Assamese Hindus and the latter of the Bengalis (especially of Bengali Hindus). The five districts of Lakhimpur, Darrang, Kamrup, Nowgong and Goalpara are characterized by varying degrees of the Assamese/Bengali communal share and seem to form the core regions for the distributional clash between the ethnic communities at present. The last district, United Mikir and Cachar Hills, obviously is a unique case and needs further investigation.

Finally, the most interesting finding of the district-wise disaggregation is the fact that the districts of Sibsagar and Cachar with the most distinct polarisation recorded the very lowest population increase. Both their growth rates correspond with the all-India growth rate and seem to indicate an immigration-free growth rate thus revealing the excess population increase in the other districts as migration-affected.

#### Notes

- 1) See Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil. Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*. Princeton 1978; Shekhar Gupta, *Assam. A Valley Divided*. New Delhi 1984.
- 2) Gupta 1984, p.173. Having been stationed as a correspondent in Assam during the crucial period, Gupta provides a first hand survey of the multi-fold factors which contributed to the election outburst.
- 3) Citha D. Maass, *The 1983 Election in Assam- Culmination of a Long-Lasting Conflict*, in: *Asien (Hamburg)*, No.11, April 1984, pp.38-59.
- 4) It was proposed to attach Goalpara to West Bengal. Cachar together with Tripura was to form a new state named Purbanchal Pradesh.
- 5) Memorandum submitted by the Assam Congress Parliamentary Party to Guljarilal Nanda, Home Minister, Government of India on 19 March 1964. Here quoted from *Assam's Struggle for Survival*, 1980, p.11.
- 6) *Eclipse in the East. An Analysis of the Present Agitation in Assam*. Published by Assam Sahitya Sabha, Gauhati, 1980, pp.7-8.
- 7) Gohain, Hiren., *Melting Pot or Witches' Cauldron. Ethnic Conflict in Assam*, in: Pankaj Thakur (ed.), *India's North-East, A Multi-faceted View*, Tinsukia/Assam (1983), p.226.
- 8) For details see Weiner 1978, pp.117-124.
- 9) Weiner 1978, p.124.

- 10) Assam's Struggle for Survival, 1980, p.17 (bracket by the author).
- 11) For example, the AAGSP in its pamphlet "The Foreigners Problem. An Analysis", 1980, p.16, stated: "During the early period of 1971 ... more than 13 lakhs (i.e. 1.3 millions - the author) of Pakistanis entered Assam and Meghalaya. The number of those who were sheltered by their kinsmen in Assam is also very high. In 1974-75 the influx of Bangladeshis became greater because of the near famine condition in Bangladesh in 1974 followed by the political turmoil in 1975. The Border Security Force failed to prevent the infiltrants from having an easy way across the border."
- 12) Assam's Struggle for Survival, 1980, p.17.
- 13) AAGSP, The Foreigners' Problem, 1980, p.20.
- 14) Quoted from Shourie, in: India Today, Vol.8, No.10, 31 May 1983, p.48.
- 15) Mass Upheaval in Assam, by AASU, 1980, pp.5-6.
- 16) The 1981 census was prevented by the agitationists in Assam.
- 17) Percentage figures from: Eclipse in the East, 1980, Table II, p.3. For a complete table with the absolute figures see Maaß, 1984, p.42.
- 18) Gupta, 1984, p.136 emphasized the fact that the agitation leaders never did any campaigning in Cachar.
- 19) See Maaß, 1984, p.43.
- 20) The alternatives are discussed in Maaß, 1984, pp.47-49
- 21) The agitationists' main arguments were summarised from the following pamphlets which were all published in 1980 and in which further details can be found: 1. Save Assam today to save India tomorrow. An appeal from the people of Assam; published by AASU and AAGSP; 2. Why National Register of Citizens of 1951 must be used to detect foreign nationals in Assam? Published by AASU; 3. Assam in Crisis. A historic mass upsurge of Assamese for survival and a national struggle for security and integrity, published by Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad; 4. Voice of AASU. Mass upheaval in Assam, published by AASU; 5. Invasion in Disguise. The problem of foreign infiltration into Assam, published by Co-ordination Committee, Gauhati University Teachers' Association.
- 22) Amalendu Guha, Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist. Assam's anti-foreigner upsurge, 1979-80, in: Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number 1980, p.1703; India Today, Vol.5, No.8, 30 April 1980, p.44
- 23) AAGSP, The Foreigners' Problem, 1980, pp.25-26; also p.20.
- 24) Assam's Struggle for Survival, 1980, p.24.
- 25) Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF), Situation in Assam (February 1980). Report of a Study Team, New Delhi, p.6.
- 26) Magnitude of Assam Disorder. Report of PUCL Team (PUCL = People's Union of Civil Liberties, Delhi Branch) in: Mainstream (New Delhi), Vol.XVIII, No.28, 8 March 1980, p.19.
- 27) See for example, Assam's Struggle for Survival, p.25, and AAGSP, The Foreigners' Problem, p.25. The reproach of excesses and rape was, in

the meantime, substantiated by press reports and several private investigation teams.

- 28) Guha, 1980, p.1707.
- 29) Guha, 1980, p.1709.
- 30) Preserving State's Integrity, in: *The Hindu*, 28 April 1983.
- 31) Myron Weiner, *The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement*, in: *Population and Development Review*, Vol.9, No.2, June 1983, pp.286-287.
- 32) GPF Report, p.6.
- 33) Ibid.
- 34) Preserving State's Integrity, in: *The Hindu*, 28 April 1983.
- 35) K.F. Rustamji, *A lack of firm government*, in: *Indian Express*, 1 June 1983.
- 36) *India Today*, 30 April 1980, pp.42-43.
- 37) Weiner, 1978, p.111: "For this aspiring middle class, it was the Bengali Hindus who stood as its obstacle to economic advancement".
- 38) Weiner, 1983, p.286: "In their own urban centers the Assamese were outnumbered by the Bengalis. For the Assamese, the towns of Assam had become centers of alien life and culture. It is no surprise, therefore, that the urban Assamese took the lead in opposing parliamentary elections in Assam in late 1979".
- 39) PUCL Report, p. 18.
- 40) Weiner, 1983, p. 288.
- 41) Guha, 1980, pp.1705-1706.
- 42) Gupta, 1984, p.80.
- 43) Shekhar Gupta, *What adds to Assam's Agony*, in: *Indian Express*, 24 April 1982.
- 44) Weiner, 1983, pp.288-289.
- 45) Guha, 1980, p.1705.
- 46) Guha, 1980, p.1709.
- 47) *Magnitude of Assam Disorder*, Report of PUCL Team (PUCL = People's Union of Civil Liberties, Delhi Branch), in: *Mainstream* (New Delhi), Vol. XVIII, No. 28, 8 March 1980, p.18.
- 48) "Seven Sisters" comprise the Indian states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram.
- 49) Haryana is one of the highest industrialised states with a large percentage of inter-state migration from jobless Biharis who seek employment in Haryana's industries. States outside the North-East such as Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and West Bengal recorded only growth rates slightly above the average.
- 50) Susanta Krishna Dass, *Immigration and Demographic Transformation of Assam, 1891-1981*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 15, No. 19, 10 May 1980, p. 859:  
 "First, it is found that since 1951 Assam's rate of population increase



has been always much higher than that of the country as a whole or any state or province thereof. Secondly, unlike in other states, immigration and natural growth rate are equally prominent causes contributing to Assam's heavy increase of population. Thirdly, the tremendous increase of Assam's population since 1951 is due to (i) an acceleration of the natural rate of increase; (ii) influx of the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan; and (iii) heavier inflow of Indian nationals from the rest of the country. It appears from these three points that the widely held impression that Assam's population has been mounting only due to influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan since partition is not tenable. Fourthly, the tremendous swelling of the Assamese speaking population by people belonging to other languages adopting the Assamese language is a unique instance of its kind in the history of any regional language of India. Fifthly, the apprehensions about 'infiltration' and 'Bangladeshi' or 'East Pakistan' Muslims into Assam appear not to be supported by facts. Sixthly, the inflow of immigrants from the Eastern Bengali part of the sub-continent into Assam has been continuous since 1891. The only difference is that while it was the Bengali Muslims who migrated between 1891 and 1947, the vacuum has been filled by the Bengali Hindus since 1947. Finally, the burden of Hindu refugees on Assam has been greater than in any other state."

51) Guha, 1980, p.1709.

52) Assam's Struggle for Survival, 1980, p.40.

53) Ibid.

54) Atul Goswami, Migration into Assam: 1901-1971: Demographic Dimension, in: Thakur (ed.), 1981, Table 1, p.49. For the decade 1911-20 an abnormally low rate was recorded because of the influenza epidemic soon after World War I.

55) Goswami, 1983, pp.54-55; in his critique he also includes: B.K.Roy Burman, North-East India: An Overview, in: Mainstream, Vol.XIX, No.14, 6 December 1980, pp.13-18.

56) Goswami, 1983, Appendix 3, p.63.

57) Goswami, 1983, p.55.

58) Goswami, 1983, Appendix 4, p.64.

59) As this article pays no particular attention to Nepali infiltration, a few figures will be given here. Lakhimpur and Darrang are the districts most favoured by Nepali immigrants. Their exact number cannot be determined. The agitationists describe the influx as follows: "The increase of Nepali population in Assam is higher by about 13 per cent than the percentage of general increase in population during the period from 1951 to 1971. The fact of influx of Nepali infiltrants into Assam is proved by the increase in the number of their population from 182,925 in 1961 to 353,673 in 1971, showing 48.2 per cent increase in the Nepali population in the state during the decade. The total number of Nepali-foreigners at present would be about 5 lakhs in Assam. In this context it may be mentioned that there is

no passport system between India and Nepal." (5 lakhs = 500,000).

Source: The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, *The Foreigners' Problem - An Analysis*. Gauhati/Assam, p.16 (the year is not mentioned, but it must be 1980).

60) *Assam's Struggle for Survival*, p.19.

61) Weiner, 1978, p.130; Gupta, 1984, p.80.