

## Chapter VI

### Life Writing: Glimmerings of Nationalism

#### 6. i Shared Political Experience

Expression of contemporary political state of affairs in life writing is determined by the author's individual political affiliation. It may not be consistent throughout a life; it is usually influenced by the current waves of local and national issues. It is not possible to separate one's political thought from the general attitude towards history. His/her political association, both of its continuations and changes constituted aspects of study in history. The present chapter looks upon the political orientation of the people of Assam. The period covers three crucial phases of history namely the closing years of Ahom rule, then colonial penetration and consolidation of the British interest in Assam followed by the spread of nationalist feelings.

The chronicle of Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua referred that Assam was then going through a difficult time with a state of anarchy in the Ahom capital. Rivalry and bitterness of the Ahom kings, princes and royal officers over a prolonged period weakened political authority of the capital. Court rivalry between two ministers, Badan Chandra Barphukan and Purnananda Buragohain reached such a point that it culminated in Badan's resolution of revenge. He invited the Burmese military intervention in Assam by misrepresenting facts. The external elements took advantage. The Burmese invaded Assam thrice, in 1817, 1819 and in 1821. The Burmese intruders were almost in control of the politics. They got the territory divided in 1818 after a 'terrible' time of three years, ten months and nineteen days in power. It caused disaster in Assam at all levels, socio-political, social and cultural. There was untold loss of life and resource. Harakanta's parents and relatives became short-term refugees in Bengal (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 1-4). They could not stand the reign of terror. Thousands of families fled to the Surma Valley, the British territory in Goalpara and adjoining districts of the erstwhile Bengal.

In 1823-24, David Scott's arrival in Kamrup witnessed some kind of administrative changes. Scott was Agent to the Commissioner, North-East Frontier. With the restoration of peace in Assam following the Yandaboo treaty (1826), the Assamese families in shelters returned to Assam. They were the helpless people compelled to flee their

villages. Those from Upper Assam had to settle in Lower Assam and the ancestral family of Harakanta was one of them (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 4). Decades after the Burmese invasion, the villages of Assam were facing the consequences. Oscar Flex, a German serving in some tea gardens in Assam, observed in 1864 that the population in the region was reducing following the Burmese occupation and atrocities of the officers (Flex, 2012,15). It could be considered one major wave of internal migration of the Assamese people.

While going to the family background of Anundoram Borooah, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan described that his father, Gargaram, holding the Ahom post of Majindar Barua during the Burmese invasion, was taken as a captive. But this fellow by means of his extraordinary intelligence could manage to escape. It was said that Gargaram got the honour of 'Borooah' from the Burmese as well (Bhuyan,1966,13). Benudhar Rajkhowa recorded that his grandfather Ratiram could not stand the lawlessness of the Burmese invasion and left Guwahati for Rangpur. He settled there in Rangpur with the Ahom office of *burhagohain* (Rajkhowa,1969,2). The British appeared in Assam in the worst hour. Tortured by repeated ravages of the Burmese invasions the people welcomed their rule with unbounded joy and cherished sanguine hopes of peace and prosperity under its protection (Baruah,1993,244). The British firmly declared that they had come to Assam not for the thirst of conquest but for expelling their foe.

Haribilash Agarwala noted that by the time his father Navarangaram arrived at Assam in 1827, the lower division of Assam was under British control. The Ahom capital was at Jorhat. By dint of his efforts, Navarangaram could get himself established at Gomiri on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, about twenty miles east of Biswanath as a toll-collector under the rule of the last Ahom king Purandar Singha. Haribilash also recorded how the British occupied the upper Assam division on the plea that Purandar was not paying the annual tribute of rupees fifty thousand (Agarwala, 1967,1). Harakanta joined the government service in 1835. His account of contemporary polity was reliable as the events were chronologically arranged. In making year wise descriptions, he used to mention the names of the British officers and their administrative renovations. It meant he had keen interest in politics.

Haribilash Agarwala referred the creation of Lakhimpur district with its head quarters at North Lakhimpur; Captain Vetch was appointed the Assistant Commissioner in 1836. In

1839, the British cancelled Purandar Singha's pension. They again took over the charge of administering Assam from Purandar. Harakanta referred to Purandar's death due to urinary infection in October, 1846. Kameswar, the son of the deceased king followed the rituals for his accession to the throne. Harakanta also cherished his warm relations with the royal family of Ghanakanta Singha. The queen Padmarekha always welcomed Harakanta with her habitual courtesy (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991,31,49.65).

Harakanta recounted the events of the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1841, both the conflict and reunion of British Commissioner Francis Jenkins and the Deputy Commissioner E. A. Rowlett in 1857-58 (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 35,116-119). In the biography of Anundoram Borooah, there is a mention of the war with Bhutan. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan mentioned that the eldest brother of Anundoram named Parashuram Borooah came to help the British government against the Bhutanese force. Parasuram was reported to have served as an agent in a shipping company (Bhuyan,1966,15). Such connections were enough for a native person to impel him to abide by the dictates of the ruling command.

A.J. Moffatt Mills, the Judge of the *Sadar Dewani Adalat* was deputed by the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Sir John Campbell for a detailed enquiry into local state of administration in Assam. Mills received quite a few petitions from the hard-pressed gentry of Assam at Guwahati on 15 May 1853. Till his departure from Sibsagar in June, different people represented their interest ventilating long standing grievances and prayed for anything like employment, pension or rent-free grants.

Harakanta *Sadar Amin*, then at his forty, could critically observe the things happening around. Therefore, he wrote details of Maniram Dewan and his schemes. Maniram came to support the son of Kameswar Singha named Kandarpeswar and attempted for negotiations with the British in order to bring him under protection of the British along with a pension. On his way to Calcutta, Maniram came to Ghanakanta Singha's residence for shelter but the latter refused to oblige. Under Harakanta's influence Ghanakanta was claiming the Ahom throne. Maniram, however, did not lose heart and kept him informed of the development in Calcutta through letters. When Ghanakanta came to know the prospect of Kandarpeswar in acquiring the land, he was a little bit upset. He was unhappy also for the reason that he had obeyed Harakanta. Harakanta now tried to comfort him. He assured that once Kandarpeswar gets the section of upper Assam, Harakanta would

manage from the British authority another segment for Ghanakanta (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 91).

After Maniram's return from Calcutta there were rumours that Kandarpeswar would be given a government pension in Guwahati. Harakanta personally visited Kandarpeswar to ascertain the truth. Harakanta's confirmed news here again hurt Ghanakanta and his consort Padmarekha. Then Harakanta thought of an alternative way to persuade the British Agent to act in favour of Ghanakanta. He made some arrangements so that Padmarekha could meet the wife of the British *Saheb*. He expected that their friendly relation might serve political motives in time of need. Harakanta made detailed description of his involvement in political activities as well as the political events taking place during his time (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 95, 100). It was natural because political interests were more important than other interests in his life.

Maniram Dewan instructed Madhu Mallik to raise funds for the war of liberation and in his letter dated 23 *Sravan* that is August 1857 asked Mallik for the money and other stuffs that he could get from his own house and send them down to Maniram. Some members of the erstwhile royalty and nobility including some of those under government obligation contributed to the fund (Dutta, 1990, 154). Some Marwaris and Bengalis also came forward to assist the leaders with money and materials. According to Harakanta, Maniram wrote letters to a Zamindar who could be identified with Konwar Singh of Jagadishpur. Maniram had been to Calcutta twice; in 1855 and in 1857. Ghanakanta Singha offered to give Maniram a golden vase as his contribution but was dissuaded from doing so by Haranath Barua *Sadar Amin* who along with others had advised the prince not to have any relation with Maniram. (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 69, 88-95, 103).

Haribilash Agarwala reported that when the Hindustani sepoys in the western India were preparing for a rebellion, there was silence in this part of the country. However, in 1855, Assam picked up the pulse and Maniram Dewan took the lead. A sixteen year old youth in 1857, Haribilash followed the events of the 1857 rebellion in Sibsagar and recounted them in his memoir (Agarwala, 1967, 18-20). Haribilash did not make any comment on the trial of Maniram despite the fact that the same Maniram introduced Navarangaram to the Ahom king around 1833 with the effect of Navarangaram's royal appointment. By the time of Haribilash, it was a typical attitude among a section of the society who made their fortune by collaboration with the British government not to incur any displeasure. In the

same reference, Haribilash also reported that Haranath Parbatia Barua of Jorhat and Malbhog Baruah of Sibsagar were in good terms with the trial judge Hollroyd. The British could surely make two of these informants disclose the secret planning of the rebels. At Nagaon, Morton, the Principal Assistant, apprehended advance of the mutineers from the upper Assam. So he ordered destruction of the bridges over the rivers Missa and Diju to cut off communication with Jorhat (Baruah,1971,189-190). At Guwahati, all European officers and even chaplains, clerks and missionaries numbering about twenty five, shouldered muskets and drilled themselves regularly (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991, 104 and, Barpujari, 1996,187).

The educated elites in Assam as their counterparts in the rest of India kept themselves aloof from the Rebellion. Some expressed their strong antipathy. Leading Assamese intellectual, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was more concerned with the immediate social needs and was involved in a constructive programme for the restoration of the Assamese language. In fact he was confident of the British rule and regarding the news of Maniram's arrest, he assured the Government that it should no more doubt the integrity of other Assamese gentlemen (Baruah,1971,136). He meant his personal loyalty and attempted for rapprochement. After the death of Ghanakanta Singha his wife Padmarekha was given a pension. Harakanta was posted near Guwahati when the Queen's Proclamation in 1858 transferred India's governance from the East India Company to the Crown of Britain. He knew the details of this declaration (Sarma Majundar Barua,1991,113,120,122).

The image of Queen Victoria as the embodiment of divine power was common to the people of this region. Harakanta recorded that Prince of Wales, the son of Queen Victoria was visiting India for a couple of days in December 1875. The government announced a twelve day vacation of courts. Kandarpeswar Singha rushed to Calcutta just to have a glance of the prince. Harakanta reported the murder of the Governor General, by that time the office was replaced by that of the Viceroy. Harakanta was perhaps unaware of it or was habituated to call the Governor General. Lord Mayo was murdered at Andamans (SarmaMajundarBarua, 1991,179,203). Benudhar Rajkhowa wrote that the Assamese countrymen took solace in their faith on the Mother Empress (Rajkhowa,1969,21). In 1876, there was a grand ceremony in Delhi to confer on Queen Victoria the title of the Empress of India. Haribilash Agarwala had a mind to witness the event and, he took some

of his family members on board to Calcutta, but he could not proceed to Delhi due to illness (Agarwala,1967,34). It is clear from the fact that the charisma associated with the imperial institutions caught the attention of the elite and the moneyed section of the population. They wanted to be a part of the royal celebrations.

Province of Assam was created in 1874 placed under a Chief Commissioner. Harakanta recorded that it to be an important arrangement. Earlier, Assam was under the administration of Bengal and the Commissioner of N.E. Bengal was also in charge of the administration of Assam. He mentioned that S. C. Bayley was the Chief Commissioner of Assam from 1878 to 1881. In November, 1880, Harakanta attended a meeting in Guwahati where donations were collected to help families of those soldiers who had died in the battle field of Kabul. Ahom king Kandarpeswar assisted the mission. In 1885, Russia marched into the heart of Kabul. Same year, England occupied Burma and captured its ruler. Indians were so much obliged to the colonial rulers that they were enthusiastic to observe the fiftieth anniversary of the Queen's reign in 1887. A celebration committee was formed with the leading citizens including Harichandra Chaki. Another son of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert Victor, visited India in January, 1890. Top British officers reached Calcutta on the bank of the Bhagirathi to welcome the royal guest. Harakanta was there in Calcutta; he observed that there was a grand celebration in the city. It was a festive mood with crackers, light, dance and feast. He also mentioned Albert's departure from India in March after tours in different parts of the country. (Sarma Majundar Barua, 1991,182,216,249,252,258,280).

David Scott erected a number of *panchayet* courts to settle petty civil cases in the populated areas of Nagaon, Kaliabor and Charduar in Central Assam. This system continued to exist for several decades because Benudhar Rajkhowa also witnessed the active execution of the *panchayet* administration in his youth in 1880s. It was effective in the entire India and there had been frequent sessions with popular participation. In 1882, the Governor General and Viceroy of India, Lord Ripon introduced reforms in local self government in the country. Benudhar later on lamented the gradual dysfunction of the system. He observed that its substitute judiciary was not up to the mark; it lacked efficiency (Rajkhowa,1969,30).

Rajabala Das recorded that the commencement of the Handique Girls' College was marked by another event; it was the beginning of the Second World War. The war

disrupted normal life in Assam. From 1941, schools and college buildings were totally vacated for accommodating the military personnel. Students' enrolment went down, teaching was imparted with the help of a few local girls (Das,2004,74-75). Due to wartime exigencies, the temporary college had to be shifted frequently. When the University of Calcutta fixed date of the I.A. examination of 1943, the students wrote their examination papers in the makeshift tent at the Judge's field in the heart of Guwahati. The situation was tense. Rajabala, from her position as the Principal, was very careful to maintain discipline in the campus. She never allowed work schedule to suffer. Even when the siren screamed, Rajabala stood by the students, gave them support and asked them not to panic.

Nalinibala Devi gave a vivid account of the political events and its effects on the entire population of the state. The war time situation in Assam was described in a section entitled, 'The Terrifying Days of the Second World War'. The formation and operation of the Indian National Army was also recorded. As regards the Quit India Movement, Nalinibala narrated the frightful days of the post-war period. There were underground activities of the revolutionaries, scarcity of foodstuffs in market, closure of all educational institutions, military camps stationed every here and there. This emergency like situation virtually paralysed civic life in Assam as in the rest of the country. The women felt unsafe because the news spread that the British soldiers were looking for girls in the neighbourhood at night. There were a few Indians in the army who were always helpful to their countrymen. Nalinibala's nephew, Pulin was a member of the radical voluntary organisation, the *Santi Sena*. He worked for it; arranging accommodation, treatment and transportation of the people fleeing from Burma. After bombardment in Calcutta, Guwahati turned deserted with black-out at nights. Whenever there was a Japanese bomber, people were alarmed by the siren. The night became all the more frightful with the only sound of the boots of the British patrolling guards on the roads (Devi,1976,159,162-164).

Nalinibala Devi recorded the unfortunate lathi-charge incident of 1941. The student community of Cotton College were against the holding of a pro-British exhibition in the college premise. The Collector of the Kamrup district, Humffrey, in an arbitrary way ordered the lathi-charge both on those boys and girls, many of them got injured. Nalinibala, as the President of the *Asam Mahila Samiti* organised a meeting in protest

against the recent government atrocities. A resolution was passed and students held a protest meeting. According to Nalinibala Devi, this revolt fuelled the mass revolution of 1942. She mentioned that the enthused young people formed the *Deka Gabharu Dol*. Their activities spread across the state. In Gahpur area, Kanaklata, Mukunda Kakati, Tilak Deka and Bhogeshwari became martyrs (Devi,1976, 166-167).

Nalinibala, during her stay in the city of Calcutta, witnessed the wave of communal violence. The Cabinet Mission of 1946 proposed that British India would be divided into three groups. Assam was to be clubbed together with Bengal. There was countrywide protest opposing the grouping system. In the midst of those disturbances, a group of ten leading figures from Assam met Mahatma Gandhi, tried to convince him about the impending threat to Assam arising out of the grouping system. Nalinibala recorded Gandhi's reaction, 'Assam dies, if included in grouping' (Translation by the present author). The Assamese families and students residing in Calcutta organised the *Assam Sangha* to help Assam against the distressful British conspiracy. The *sangha* propagated the awful situation of Assam through its publications; two of the booklets were *Immigrants of Assam* and *Tribals of Assam*. Finally, however, Assam was saved. Nalinibala appreciated the ardent patriotism of the masses united as well as the shrewd leadership of Gopinath Bardaloi (1890-1950) in this crucial situation (Devi,1976,177,180-182,185).

From this set of autobiographical accounts, it is clear that Assam's response to colonial exploitation and her involvement in the freedom struggle was since in the middle of the nineteenth century. The nationalist movement was the main thread in the political discourse. It could mobilize to a large extent the educated middle-class and occasionally, the general masses.

## 6. ii Political Intimations

Maniram Dewan in his memorandum to Moffatt Mills spoke approvingly of the steps taken by the British. Hemchandra Baruwa extended his support to the British rule with the hope that Assam would be relieved of its immediate trouble. Gunabhiram Baroah had a common view with a few other Assamese that the British had been trying to ensure a peaceful time for Assam so that the province can prosper socially and economically. However, when Assam was placed under the Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1873, her

identity was thought to have got threatened. A large number of Bengali clerks came to work in the newly established government offices. For the sake of convenience, the British enforced Bengali as the official language and as the medium of instruction in the vernacular schools of Assam. There had been a colonial tendency to homogenize regional cultures and tastes. The British had a fair acquaintance with Bengal and had a tendency to treat people around Bengal as distant cousins of the Bengalis. It is a fact that culture determines the language acquisition of people because language and culture go hand in hand in matters of identity formulations. After a lot of effort, Assamese was reinstated as the official language for Assam in 1873. Still, there was a feeling of cultural superiority among some Bengalis. The Assamese elites realized that the best answer against them lay in the use of cultural resources. Vaishnavite revivalism was an important agenda of expression of cultural identity and respectability during the colonial period. This trend was in its turn, part of the 'awakening' within the community. The elites used to fall back upon their cultural resources again and again.

As the middle-class in Assam gradually developed and consolidated, they became conscious about the Assamese identity. In articulating the relationship between culture and national identity, K.N. Panikkar observed that culture of either the dominant or of the religious majority is often universalized as that of the nation (Panikkar,2014,532-534). In the early twentieth century, the process of nationality formation was based on language. This was believed that a 'developed' language was an indication of a 'developed' people. And, therefore, development of language was regarded as the road to total development of the community. The general aim of the students studying in Calcutta was motivated primarily towards protection and promotion of Assamese language and language was at the centre of their consciousness. It was also the common issue bringing the various conflicting classes together. It was the emergence of a collective linguistic patriotism.

Gunabhiram Baroah acknowledged Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's special care for his mother tongue. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was without doubt a singular character. He resolved to give Assamese its rightful place. He changed his own habit of keeping correspondence with fellow Assamese in Assamese instead of Bengali in earlier days. The development of the print media contributed to the spread of literacy and arousing popular support forming an 'imagined community' in this manner. A common language

became a common bond of this community. The sentiment was visible in the Assamese publications of that time.

Anundoram Borooah's patriotism was, however, not confined to the Assamese nationality, he was actually in favour of the entire 'Aryan' people. Hemchandra Goswami put forward a view that Anundoram had liberal feelings, beyond, 'provincial patriotism' and 'national self-conceit'. In spite of his formal training in law, professional qualification like I.C.S. and academic experience in the city of London, Anundoram preferred to make himself introduced as a son from Pragjyotishpur for all time. He was ever conscious of his own identity and the Indian heritage. He was engaged in the Sanskrit literature and was, therefore, also criticized for not being able to contribute to the mother language. His biographer tried to defend Anundoram against such blame. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan argued that Anundoram made many references of Assam in his dictionary. Moreover, he used Assamese words with much of enthusiasm to explain English words whenever he found it difficult to convey the meaning with an appropriate Sanskrit word (Bhuyan, 1966, Introduction, 8, 10). These instances could be taken to indicate the emotional attachment of an Assamese who had to serve others than his native people and worked for a language not spoken by his people.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah passionately tried to instill patriotism among his people through literary and cultural nationalism. During his student life in Calcutta, he was a regular contributor to the Assamese periodical the *Bijuli* edited by Krishna Prasad Duara. He created a distinct social identity for the Assamese in general and the Ahom ethnic identity in particular. Identity has been used to refer both to those attributes of an individual that maintain the consistency of his personal presentation in encounters with others and to the place that he occupies in a community (Gupta, 1989, 28). An autobiography by its nature helps in understanding the interplay of culture, politics and ethnicity. John Eakin had his own way of approaching autobiography. More than only a literary genre, it is an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation (Eakin, 2008). A subject while portraying his life is very sensitive to his audience. He would consider all its social significance and treat himself as possessing culturally valued characteristics. The autobiography of Padmanath Gohain Barooah was a revelatory account of his life and the agenda and a reliable source to trace the history of ethnic awareness of the Ahoms.

Assam was independent under the Ahoms. The Mau branch of the Tai family founded the Ahom kingdom of Assam in 1228 A.D. and was henceforth styled as Ahom in this country. They were a constituent of the Mongoloid stock. They brought with them their rich heritage of religion and culture. The Ahom rulers were credited for their ability to sustain their rule for the longest period in the Indian subcontinent. Following the treaty of Yandabo in 1826, the Ahom king ruling the Brahmaputra valley for several centuries disappeared. The Ahom gentry lost their privileged position under the new dispensation. They were gradually sidelined from polity. The British built up a new system of administration with its paraphernalia. The old aristocracy was deprived of everything. The deplorable condition of the erstwhile ruling race was recorded by the historians of modern Assam. It was also noted by W. W. Hunter,

They (Ahoms) are a strong and healthy race, and although the country and they have freely intermixed with the people of the land they yet retain many of their ancient habits and institutions.

They have now sunk to the level of poor cultivators (Hunter,1982,236).

Purandar Singha and the successive Ahom kings made repeated representations to the British government asking for some concessions to ameliorate the situation but there was no positive response. The Ahom community felt that the British policies deprived them from any sort of benefit. Their social status also deteriorated. Educationally they lagged behind the caste Hindus. The affluent communities under the new regime failed to appreciate the positive traits of Ahoms. There were grievances and stray attempts of resistance against the colonial rulers, but none could succeed. The Ahoms had a territorial identity. Besides having an identity of community and locality, they had common cultural stuff in way of tradition, customs and social norms. Equipped with modern education and an awareness of their past glory, power and privilege, they realised that time was appropriate to mobilise the Ahoms in Assam for a strong ethnic identity. Padmanath Gohain Barooah came from a respectable Ahom family from North Lakhimpur. He was greatly disturbed by the plight of the Ahom Community. Once a mighty ruling community, the Ahoms were reduced to a lowly status. He made a very poignant statement about it (Gohain Barooah,1987,47).

Issues of history, tradition and politics intermingled to form an ideology of ethnic identification. Originally proposed by Fredrik Barth, ethnicity can be understood as the social organization of cultural difference (Barth,1969). Barth observed that ethnic identity

is something to be generated or transformed through interaction between decision-making individuals. There is no fixity in ethnicity, it is situational. It involves political manoeuvring. One should acknowledge that any kind of national or ethnic consciousness is a mass phenomenon. Clifford Geertz defined that ethnicity is a world of personal identity collectively ratified and publicly expressed (Geertz,1973). It also hinted something of wider than a group decision. Ethnic membership does not constitute a group, it facilitates group formation, particularly in the political sphere. Ethnic categorization can be meant to identify some others in contrast to self and group identification (Jenkins,2008).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa neither took part in politics nor was an active member of any political party. He also avoided direct comments on politics but was deeply concerned with the Assamese nationality question. He assumed the pen-name Kripabar Barbaroa to express his political views. Politics had never been a profession and passion for Lakshminath and, therefore, his political account was no way chronological and systematic. In *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, one would find some scattered traces of his concern on the matters of the nation. This consciousness was partly a part of a resistance to the process of cultural subordination of Assamese and partly a part of past legacy being revived and revisited. It was obvious that at first the educated and the elder ones could only feel it. They also realised a threat to the Assamese identity and a sense of insecurity. They came forward to lead their community through different public bodies. A good number of organisations sprang up trying to muster public opinion. It might be seen as the beginning of a nationality mobilization, which took a major form of resistance in the years to come.

### 6.iii Proto-Nationalism and Nationalism

Articulation of regional identity was no way an exception to the Assamese literature. From the nineteenth century it was a common experience in the literature of various Indian languages. The expression of ethnic feeling in this part of the country developed initially as a part of identity assertion from the late nineteenth century. Identity is produced and reproduced during interaction which is contextual. A number of material and ideological factors combined to bring in national and communal identities. These collective identities were found in a relationship of coexistence and confrontation (Chandra,1989,218-225). There was no tension between intense regionalism and a wider

nationalism. Initially the representative leaders of ethnic-roots identified themselves with the larger Assamese society. In his own way, Padmanath had acknowledged that of the sixteen *anna* a rupee, he was an Ahom by two *annas* and an Assamese by all the remaining fourteen. He had also declared that his identity and commitment to his community is total but never at the cost of any harm to his identity as an Assamese. Padmanath expressed his concern over the fate of Assamese in different contexts of his autobiography. On joining Tezpur Normal School as Headmaster, he felt it quite strange to be addressed as Sir and *babu*. He emphasised that an Indian teacher of a vernacular medium school should always be addressed as *gurudev*, but not the other ‘polluted’ terms. At some other place, he referred to Manik Chandra Baruah, as his political mentor (Gohain Barooah,1987,48,85,174).

Some of the instances and observations of Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his autobiography suggest that he always preferred the independence of his mind and character and he sought to maintain the dignity of his people. He proudly announced that though he married a daughter of the famous Tagore family of Bengal, they could not make their son-in-law *solla anna Bangali* which means a complete Bengali. From the beginning, Lakshminath’s brother-in-laws initiated discussions with him regularly over the difference between Bengali and Assamese languages with their tendency to establish the superiority of the Bengali. Lakshminath felt that he had been dragged into such unpleasant debates probably because of their wish that Lakshminath would leave his keenness for the Assamese. They expected that being a member of Tagore family, Lakshminath should work only for the Bengalis. They also wanted to see him dressed like them. Lakshminath revealed that he did never oblige their wishes and he even did not care to incur their displeasure (Bezbaroa,1998,20-22).

Lakshminath was confident of his identity as an Assamese. He prepared himself to be one among the many fighting spirits for his nationality. He felt he had the blessings of his school headmaster Chandra Mohan Goswami who had spoken to him after his marriage and comforted him that he should be aware of the prestige of his own legacy in Assam and never feel humiliated in the Tagore family. The debates between Lakshminath and his in-laws’ family continued for long years. The mode of conversation, however, turned from oral to written, when their Rabi *kaka* that is Rabindranath Tagore published an article in a periodical, *Bharati* with his comments on Assamese language. He wrote

something regarding Assamese in an article, 'Hindu University'. In its response, Lakshminath's retaliatory article, 'Asamar Swatantrata' (Individuality of Assam) appeared in the *Bharati* and the *Punya*. He disapproved of the ideas expressed by Rabindranath. He also expressed a hope that keeping its uniqueness, Assamese language could compete with the Bengali to the extent that the latter would come forward to 'shake hands' with the Assamese. As such there would not be any feeling of subordination from the either side. After these arguments, Lakshminath noticed that Prajnasundari's relatives gave up their hope and left their efforts to 'purify' him to be a Bengali. He never thought himself any way inferior to them (Bezbaroa,1998,20-21). He cultivated a positive attitude towards the cultural heritage which could reap tremendous benefits in the formation of Assamese identity. Repeated references to *Asam Desh* and *jati* exhibited a profound enchantment with Assam's language and culture. It was claimed as separate and distinct from the emerging Indian nation. Again, the cultural heritage and identity are never fixed categories. They are capable of adaption and transformation. It is aptly remarked that identity is a complex, multilayered entity comprising many levels and dimensions (Vatsyayan,2002,359). The vision of the young Assamese of the time was more Assam-centric than nationalistic. The Assamese nationalistic perception was not an isolated entity. It was close to the idea of Indian nationalism but with the concept that Assamese too constituted a nationality in itself. It was more an expression of cultural nationalism oriented towards bringing about a consciousness in the community about the heritage of Assamese culture, invoking more particularly the contributions of the Sankaradeva Movement (15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries) (Mahanta,2014,19) and not heading for a separate nation state. This sentiment can be illuminated in the words of Hans Kohn (1891-1971), a scholar of modern nationalism. In explaining the growth of nationalism, Kohn writes,

...the process of integration of the masses into a common political form. Nationalism therefore presupposes the existence, in fact or as an ideal of a centralised form of government over a large and distinct territory (Kohn, 1948,4).

Not to misplace the business alliances, Haribilash Agarwala was very much careful about his public behaviour. Regarding some disputes in the rubber business, he went to a British officer for justice but the judgment was found unfair, he felt unprivileged just for being a native. He gradually idealized the objectives of the Indian National Congress. He also visited the venue of the Congress session in Calcutta in December, 1895

(Agarwala,1967,40,46-47). This was how the discriminatory behaviour of the colonial bureaucracy sometimes alienated the erstwhile British loyalists.

Benudhar Rajkhowa reflected upon the partition of Bengal in 1905. Indian nationalism was also linked with local and regional politics. Benudhar was certain that the condition of Assam would get worse if the eastern Bengal formed a part of Assam. He was, therefore, thankful to the Bengali community for leading the anti-partition movement. During his service life in Sylhet, he practically came to know the mental distance of people there with those of the Brahmaputra valley, what the former used to call as 'Assam'. In his view, there should have been three separate political units, namely Assam, Bengal and Sylhet. There was hardly any communication among the people of these regions. People in Sylhet could not identified themselves with the Assamese identity. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Benudhar took an opposite stand whereas Jnananath Bora stood in support of non-cooperation. Yet both of them were nationalists on their own counts. Later he realized that in politics, immediate reaction or opinion should be avoided. He recorded that in the peak of the movement, during 1920-21, agitators destroyed government establishments, plundered markets. He mentioned the pillage of the Mising community people of Majuli. Being a government authority, he gave punishment to them (Rajkhowa,1969,132,149,161-165).

Until the late nineteenth century, the Indian masses, mostly rural and illiterate, were unaware of national sentiment. The early Indian nationalists took years of deliberate efforts to extend their notion of nation to the masses. A nation is defined as a social group which shares a common ideology, common institutions and customs and a sense of homogeneity. Nationalism is a rhetoric for speaking about too many different things for a single theory to explain it (Calhoun,1997,8). Linguistic affiliation, common cultural heritage and shared ethnic components were constituents of nationalism. There are historical and local dimensions of nationalism and hence it is connected with ethnicity.

Acquaintance with Indian nationalism generated in Assam concepts of ethnic and cultural identity. Llobera also observes, a reservoir of ethnic potential is necessary precondition of nationhood (Llobera,1994,214). The ground for Assamese patriotism was prepared since a century back in the face of dominating central political and cultural power. One crucial impression was effected by the Bengali language, literature and culture. It resulted in a new kind of political culture in Assam. Public associations came up. They stood for the

budding sense of identity within a particular social group in Assam. They were aware of the economic interests and social status. Different components of Assamese life and culture were incorporated into the larger discourse of nationalism. Instead of a wider audience, the political consciousness involved the elite social groups. Till then there was no concept of an Indian nation nor of independence nor even of any strong desire for major change in the basic pattern of administration (Masselos,1993,46). Preservation and extension of a specific group's interests was the main concern. Focus on non-political issues was augmented by the social condition.

Organisation like the *Ahom Sabha*, later the All Assam Ahom Association tried to mobilise the ethnic communities of the region. The organisational motive was more of identity formation than of any political nature. The leaders stood by their convictions to exhibit their affiliation to the Assamese *jati*. Cultural consciousness is often perceived as a pre-condition for the emergence of nationalism. Linguistic nationalism and identity formation, were positive catalyst. Different components of Assamese life and culture were incorporated to bring in nationalist feeling in the early twentieth century. Though these resources had local and regional character, the Indian nationalists were successful to integrate them with the nationalist ideology. People of Assam were coming gradually under the ambit of Indian nationalism. There was fusion of ideas about a new normative and political order.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was a conscious resident of Assam and pioneer of ideas. He wished socio-economic and cultural development of the province. He had a positive attitude towards the British rule. When Maniram Dewan was hanged in Jorhat, Anandaram was serving 'comfortably' with his office of Junior Assistant and *Sadar Amin* at Nagaon. Anandaram was little upset that the British might suspect his link with the rebels. He wrote to the British ensuring that there would be no more revolt of any kind by the local people. It was on one hand an apology to the British on behalf of his countrymen and on the other, a word of assurance of no more reaction in the following days. Anandaram represented the class who had both resource and reputation in the new administration. They could not feel that majority people of the society were repressed. They rarely consider the colonial status as any impediment to progress (Baroah,1971,141-142).

From the first stirring of involvement in the mid-nineteenth century till the ultimate day of freedom in 1947, mobilization around Assamese nationalism was a long process. The early part of the twentieth century in Assam was marked by a total committed involvement of the Assamese middle-class in nationalist politics. A few select lives had their influence on the political processes of that time. A few leaders shaped public opinion.

Assam's cultural nationalism got an institutional form through the formation of some literary associations within and outside the province. The *Gyan Pradayini Sabha*, the earliest organization of such type, was formed in Nagaon in 1856 mainly through the efforts of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Baroah to disseminate advanced knowledge within a limited circle. The few other literary cum socio-cultural associations were the Assamese Literary Society (1872), the *Asamiya Chattrar Sahitya Sabha* (1872), the *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* (1884) and the *Tezpur Ryot Sabha* (1884). They incorporated political ideas. The ideas spread also through word of mouth. Another literary association called the *Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha* was formed in 1885 in Sibsagar through the efforts of Priyalal Barua for the purpose of developing the modern Assamese language and literature (Dutta,2000,72). These ventures were the first tentative experiment as joint public activity. The Assamese youths in Calcutta were moved by the idea of progress of their nation through literary movement. Their patriotic feelings and inclination for a literary awakening crystallised with the formation of an organization. Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Hemchandra Goswami had the necessary zeal to found the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* that is the Assamese Language Improvement Society in 1888. It was followed by the formation of the Assamese Students' Literary Clubs in Calcutta and Guwahati. The *Sabha* did not confine its activities to Calcutta; Padmanath Gohain Barooah reminisced the efforts that they had put in to extend its branches to different places in Calcutta. He remarked that the different literary organizations not only enhanced the confidence of the Assamese in their own cultural identity but also helped to form the backbone of a movement for national revival. Efforts were made by these *Sabhas* to stop defamation of the community by defending their language. They asserted that Assamese was a distinct language and it is quite different from Bengali. Padmanath defended Assamese language as a measure to uplift the national literature (Gohain Barooah,1987,46,47).

Gradually, a number of journals and newspapers appeared in Assamese. They popularised nationalist ideas and moulded public opinion in a big way. The *Jonaki*, a literary journal was brought out from Calcutta as a part of the activities of the *Sabha* in 1889 with a view to creating a literary consciousness. The journal was very popular and it led to the enrichment of all forms of Assamese literature. It facilitated different literary genres in Assamese. Lakshminath Bezbaroa highlighted role of the Assamese youths in Calcutta to consolidate their efforts. They moved forward for upliftment of their nationality through a literary revolution. These sincere workers realised far better than those on the streets the significance of the pronouncement, ‘a subject nation has no politics’ uttered by Sir Ashotush Chaudhuri in the platform of the *Bengal Provincial Conference*. In order to create a knowledge society in Assam and to bring enrichment in all forms of Assamese literature, Chandrakumar Agarwala, the editor of the *Jonaki*, declared the objectives of the journal. Lakshminath quoted it,

Politics (*raajniti*) is outside our purview. For a subordinate country (*desh*) like ours, we should better concentrate our efforts for the common men (*prajaniti*). We need to initiate discussions on science, literature and society and deal with them with our best effort (Translation by the present author) (Bezbaroa,1998,79).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa was surprised by the thought that how Chandra Kumar being only a school student could realize much earlier what the renowned Barrister in Calcutta, Sir Ashotush Chaudhuri said in later times. The ideals of the *Jonaki* laid stress on social welfare in a dependent state. Lakshminath’s conscious inclusion of this objective in his autobiography itself indicates his emotional attachment with these noble missions that he had been carrying all through his life. He mentioned in detail the work plan of the *sabha*. It appealed to one and all to preserve the old books as a rich legacy for the future generation (Bezbaroa,1998, 79,82-83).

The Assam Association founded in 1903 was the first political association in Assam. In the opinion of Nalinibala Devi, since its annual session in 1915, there started the process of national awakening in Assam. Later in 1919, with the return of Nabin Chandra Bardaloi from the United Kingdom to Guwahati, his residence emerged as the political hub of Congress activities. The Assamese Students’ Literary Conference later, the *Asam Chhatra Sanmilan* (the Assam Students’ Conference) came into existence in December, 1916. The first session of the *Asam Chhatra Sanmilan* was held at Guwahati under the

presidentship of Lakshminath. It was not a political association at the beginning and politics was none of its business (Dutt, 1998,50). Through it, the student community sought to ventilate their views and exert their influence on the contemporary political situation.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah patronised the publication of the *Asam Banti*. It brought out something anti-government and supported Gandhi's war of freedom. The then Director of Public Instruction, Assam insulted Padmanath for his connection with such a journal. He could not tolerate the humiliation and at once resigned the job. He was not a political rebel but he had strong sense of self respect. Later on due to the same DPI's persistent insistence, Padmanath withdrew the resignation letter and joined service (Gohain Barooah,1987,105).

Padmanath's association with Padmeswar Gohainphukan and other leading personalities of the community helped him to form the *Ahom Sabha* in 1893. This is the beginning of the mobilisation of the Ahoms on ethnic line. They spoke of the glories of the Ahoms in the past and their degrading condition at the present time which injured sense of self esteem for the Ahoms and they resolved to come up. By the year 1921, the Ahoms stood first among the Assamese, excluding the Christians in matters of literacy, with a figure of one hundred and nine literate persons per mile (*Report on the Census of Assam 1921*.105). The *Ahom Sabha* was later known as the Ahom Association in the style of the Assam Association. Padmanath insisted on his composite identity; he repeated that he was as much an Ahom as he was an Assamese. Ethnic identifications and their expressions were in parallel line with nationalism. With such a bent of mind, he made manifold public contributions. He worked for organisations like the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha*, the All Assam Ahom Association, the Assam Association, the *Asam Sahitya Sabha*, the *Asam Chhatra Sanmilon*, the Tezpur Assamese Club and the Indian National Congress. In 1912, Padmanath was nominated a member of the Assam Legislative Council as a representative of the Ahom Community. He proved his integrity in the Council. His maiden speech in January 1913, was appreciated by one and all. Padmanath explained that though being an organiser of the *Ahom Sabha*, he spoke not only for the betterment of the Ahom community but also for the larger interest of the people of Assam (Gohain Barooah,1987,46-48,207).

For several of his anti-Bengali stance, Padmanath Gohain Barooah was called by some people as the *Bangal Kheda Padmanath*, the one who chased the Bengalis. But he paid little attention to such remarks; he cared more for the larger benefit and honour of his mother tongue (Sarma,1971,186). Padmanath knew his epithet, he justified his stand in one particular segment in his autobiography entitled as the same, 'Bangal Khedoa Padmanath' (Gohain Barooah, 1987, 92-95).

Over the years, the nationalist movement could create an ideology and culture of democracy. According to Bipan Chandra (1928-2014), civil liberties were based on respect for dissent, freedom of expression, the majority principle and the right of minority opinions to exist and grow (Chandra,1989,522). Though politically motivated, the Ahom community was organized and inspired by their common cultural heritage. Another interesting observation regarding the Indian politics was that when aspiring nation-builders discussed their goals, they appealed to an impersonal public audience bound by common ties of community, culture and spirituality. Belief in common ancestry was a great spur to collective political action.

Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in the Indian political scene and his campaigns from 1914 changed the popular perception of colonial rule. Across India, political associations were formed and different social classes rallied around Indian nationalism. The Assam Association was dissolved in 1920. It merged with the Indian National Congress. Till then Assam was not exactly a part of India's political mainstream. It was from this time, an all-India feeling gradually germinated among the Assamese middle-class. After the formation of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, the idea of the Assamese nationalism was assimilated with all Indian nationalism. It started opposing the status of the land under the colonial rule.

Gandhi provided women the space for public participation. Women's participation in nationalist politics was significant. Rajabala Das developed her political spirit from college days. She met Gandhi first time in Calcutta while addressing women the message of the non-violent Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921. Rajabala recorded the emotional wave following this appeal. She was enthused to do all that she could do for freedom struggle and gave away her gold belongings. Patriotic feelings prevailed through her life. She admitted that Gandhi was an inspiration to her generation. She next met Gandhi at Dibrugarh accompanied by Mohammad Ali and Saikat Ali. The coming of these leaders

belonging to two diverse communities gave a positive message for national harmony. The common people in Assam realised Gandhi's values. An idea spread about the impossibility of achieving independence without the united effort of the Indians. Rajabala witnessed Gandhi's conversation with a few persons representing diverse communities (Das,2004,40-42).

A woman's active way of life beyond household did not fit the ideals of traditional women. Engagement in extra-domestic work was considered derogatory for a woman. It involved social prestige; and other issues of involvement in the company of men. After Gandhi's Dibrugarh visit, Congress Committee was formed making Rajabala Das secretary of the women's cell. Gandhi was perhaps the first leader to assign public responsibility on women. It was then Rajabala's responsibility to organize meetings at places around Dibrugarh to make the women population aware of the ongoing Non-Cooperation Movement. Her parents had reservation regarding her frequent outdoor programmes. Her aunt, already inspired to self-dedication for the nation comforted Rajabala's mother by giving words to accompany her (Das,2004,42). The women participating in the Gandhian movement were not looked down upon even in socially conservative nationalist families. Freedom fighter and the first woman Chief Minister of India, Sucheta Kripalani (1908-1974), describes,

Gandhi's personality was such that it inspired confidence not only in women but in guardians of women, their husbands and brothers. When women came out and worked in the political field, their family members knew that they were quite secure, they were protected (Kripalani, Oral History Transcripts).

For the first time there was a social mobility to such a great extent. Participation in the national struggle was supposed not something antithetical to social respectability or the Sanskritisation process, but, on the contrary, as an essential component of it (Sarkar, 1989,237).

Rajabala Das depicted at places the pulse of contemporary politics. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, college students left their studies and joined the movement. The lawyers gave up legal practice and dedicated themselves fully to the movement. One of them, Nabin Chandra Bardaloi returned from Calcutta and rose to eminence by his dedication in mobilising the nationalist movement in Assam. Rajabala mentioned few other leading personalities in this connection; they were Tarun Ram Phukan (1877-1939), Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri, Gopinath Bardaloi. Some government employees resigned

their jobs. In reaction, the government arrested the participants of the movement as well as the Congress workers from all over the state. Rajabala was the only woman delegate from Assam in the Gaya session of the Indian National Congress in 1923. The other delegates were her brother Rajanikanta Barua, Lakheswar Barua, Tarun Ram Phukan and Jyotish Chandra Das. Among many other things at Gaya, Rajabala recalled the loud and forceful speech of C. Rajagopalachari. She was devoted to the ideals of Congress politics and was committed to social justice for women. She felt an urge to extend female education (Das,2004,43).

Nalinibala Devi highlighted women's participation in the Congress led national movement. As in the rest of India, Gandhi inspired the people of Assam to ensure their active participation in the freedom movement. In 1920, Nalinibala's father Nabin Chandra Bardaloi met Gandhi for the first time at the Nagpur session of the Congress. Since then he became an active supporter of the Gandhian politics. In the high tide of Non-Cooperation Movement around the nation, the notions of *Swadeshi* or self reliance and *khaddar* or hand spun clothes penetrated to this region. Nabin Chandra Bardaloi and Tarun Ram Phukan carried on their back stacks of hand spun clothes by the women and sold them at Fancy Bazar. Nabin Chandra even gave up the legal profession, suffered imprisonment. The government put both of them in prison in order to arrest the intensity of the movement. Nalinibala recorded two of the songs in the name of the popular leaders, Gandhi, Nabin Chandra and Tarun Ram (Devi,1976,86,79-80). These numbers were composed anonymously in order to mobilise more people. The weavers across the villages used to chant those lines. British spies were deployed; they were always around and followed the women organized for spinning yarn. Nalinibala's home, being the first Congress office, facilitated her involvement in the freedom struggle within the threshold of her home. Her opportunity to meet national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Maulana Mohammad Ali, Jamnalal Bajaj, Rajendra Prasad, Subhas Chandra Bose, among others, opened up a new horizon.

Men, women and children including Nalinibala Devi's five year old son, Putuli participated in various activities of the Congress and agitations launched by the leaders. Lakshmi Das innovated a handmade printing machine to get the misrule of the British. Nalinibala was entrusted by her father with the responsibility of hiding all important papers and she sincerely carried out her duty. Five hundred selected volunteers swore in

the name of the nation to sacrifice their lives. Nalinibala with her brothers and sisters resolved to stitch five hundred number of Gandhi-caps for those volunteers (Devi,1976,82-85).

Nalinibala Devi wrote about her father's enthusiasm in establishing the All India Congress session in Assam. Nabin Chandra campaigned for it; 'we must have Congress in Assam, otherwise how will people know about Assam' and 'if Assam is unable to organise even a session, how can she dare to attain independence' (Translation by the present author). He did the necessary groundwork for the extension of Congress activities among the masses. The Assamese female weavers produced *khaddar* cloth for the pandal big enough to accommodate ten thousand people. Nabin Chandra Bardaloi was the General Secretary of the Reception Committee of the Pandu session of the Indian National Congress in 1926. The operating expense in organizing such a huge gathering of course was dependent on collections from the public, but that was insufficient. The task of managing with the financial necessity fell upon three of the leading figures, Nabin Chandra, Tarun Ram and Rohini Hatibarua. With their true sense of responsibility, they shouldered the burden. Nalinibala narrated that each of them turned bankrupt in repaying the loan of the Congress. Girls and women of the household willingly gave up their luxurious life style (Devi,1976,74-75,106,112). Benudhar Rajkhowa also spoke about the enthusiasm of the public and the hard work of Tarun Ram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bardaloi in making the session a success. His wife was present in the entire events. Benudhar could not make it for being a government servant (Rajkhowa,1969,176).

Nalinibala Devi, on her father's advice concentrated more on poetry than on politics. Political involvement was undeniably thought to be improper for a widowed daughter. Perhaps things would have been different if she had become a full-fledged freedom fighter. However, she served as the president of the *Kamrup Mahila Samiti* in the year 1931. She also referred to many women belonging to prominent Assamese families – like Hemantakumari Devi, Dharmada Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharya, Girija Devi who contributed to the strengthening of the movement. It is intriguing to find that Nalinibala Devi ignored Chandraprova Saikiani who was equally prominent as a woman activist and a freedom fighter. Nalinibala had high opinion of the *Asam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti*; it served as a forum for social service which she thought, was essentially a service to the nation.

That was a time when only a few people cared for documentation. As in the rest of India, the situation was similar in Assam even for the high-caste elites. Yet some expressions of women in written words and the propagation of their ideas by activists such as Chandraprova Saikiani meant that they were able to reach to a wider audience. The eventual establishment of the *Asam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti* for the all-purpose welfare of the Assamese women is an appropriate example of such a condition. The educated women took lead and others followed them in great numbers. Women's partaking in politics itself could be regarded as some sort of their liberation. Reflecting on the meaning of women's participation in politics, Tanika Sarkar, wrote,

Political activity of any kind either appears to stem from a high degree of social freedom that already prevails or the very act of participation is taken to bring about an instant liberation, a permanent revolution in wider social status (Sarkar, 1989,231).

Women's political behaviour as it was the case of Rajabala Das and Nalinibala Devi, was not a totally independent choice. Their political identity was born out of some family ties as well as their response to some charismatic appeal. The men in the nationalist movement discovered a new dimension in their activities through the association of women companions. Women were assigned with specific responsibilities; from mobilisation against superstitions to hiding of secret documents. They organised demonstrations, assumed charge of picketing and processions and even courted arrest. They were a committed class and performed their duties to the best of capacity.

Introduction of the printing press and periodicals in vernacular languages facilitated political education of the Indians. As means of popular mobilization, they cultivated discontent against foreign rule. The political consciousness of the Assamese could not be compared favourably with that of the Bengali people. Because British rule entered Assam after seventy years of British rule in Bengal. It is commented,

It would be too much to expect a political advancement akin to that of Bengal which was by far much more advanced in every sphere. For instance Assam like Bengal had enough grounds for reacting strongly to the Curzon plan of Partition of Bengal, but it could not do so (Goswami,2008,181).

Till the twentieth century, the Assamese elites lacked political ambition. Their love of freedom and courage had limitations. There was mobilization of public opinion on a

linguistic-regional sentiment. The leading group of Assamese students came to believe that without having a direct political confrontation with the colonial masters; one could still have a national consciousness through cultural pursuits.

The above discussion makes it clear that Assamese identity formation was a historically evolving process. The Assamese middle-class experienced some kind of threat to the socio-economic, political and cultural life in Assam. Their engagement with the idea of identity directed their following course of action. Loyalty to the nation and the virtue of patriotism, recognized as core values of western civilization, gradually motivated a segment of the society. They had a novel vision; they stepped into public life. The anti-colonial world view of the people generated national interest for their own survival. The leading figures inspired the people for social progress as precondition to political power. They felt that democratic ideals in the country were not to be confined to political life alone but should be extended to social life. It may be observed that differences of gender, social and professional strata produced only a slight variance of ideology within individual texts. The underlying idea of the political campaigns was 'being one people'. It was a multilayered development; in varying situations it denoted one or the other affiliation namely language, caste, gender, occupation and education. Inspiration was there for a cultural mobilisation sharing the uniqueness of Assam's history. There was always a possibility in asserting the Assamese identity.

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