Religion, ethnicity, and the role of the state: explaining conflict in Assam

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Introduction

The violence between Assamese Hindus and Bengali Muslims in India during the early 1980s stands out as one of the most extreme examples of intergroup conflict in recent times. Five years of political, social, and economic upheaval between 1978 and 1983 culminated in over 1,500 deaths in February 1983 alone. The total number of deaths during the preceding five-year period exceeded 7,000 (*India Today*, March 15, 1983; Gupta, 1984). How did this initially secular movement become one in which conflicting groups were subsequently identified by their religious and cultural affiliations? Was the conflict one based on culture and religion, or were those merely the most visible aspects of a conflict that was much wider in scope?

In this article, we characterize Assamese-Bengali conflict as one that is essentially ethnic in character. We argue that ethnicity and ethnically-based action are determined by political, economic and cultural factors, and that these factors vary in importance according to specific historical and contextual conditions. Initial accounts of the conflict emphasized the role of religion. We argue that religion is a necessary component of any explanation, but insufficient as a single explanatory variable. An additional factor that is important to explaining the conflict in Assam is the state. The state is crucial in two ways: it shapes the boundaries of struggle, and it introduces a new set of interests, those of the state, into the negotiation process between the two conflicting parties.

We begin our analysis by offering a definition of ethnicity that is based on Weber's conception of the term. We then review theories of political and economic ethnic mobilization and show why they are insufficient for understanding events in Assam, and propose an explanation more sensitive to the role of culture in ethnically based action. Third, we discuss the importance of religion and the role of the state in ethnic conflict. Finally, we consider the case of Assam in more detail and conclude by focusing on the importance of cultural factors and state interests in shaping the contours of conflict.

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Theories of ethnicity and ethnic conflict

Our understanding of ethnicity and ethnic identity begins with Weber (1978:387–92). He argues that certain characteristics that are primarily objective in nature such as religion, language, customs, or physical appearance are basic to distinguishing ethnic groups from one another and from other delimiting categories like race or class. Ethnicity is a socially defined, inclusive category that is in part dependent on some combination of these characteristics to set the parameters of ethnic identity and membership. Integral to establishing an ethnic identity are individuals who share 'feelings of common ethnicity and notions of kinship' (Weber, 1978:392) that are embodied in 'perceptible differences in the *conduct of everyday life*' (Weber, 1978:389). This recognition, according to Weber, is not dependent on the objective reality of a 'blood relationship', but rather can only be determined on the basis of a subjective belief (Weber, 1978:389). In addition, there must be at least two groups with distinguishable social or cultural characteristics that enable monopolistic closure of group boundaries. Otherwise, ethnic divisions cannot be established. In short, one of the two groups must perceive itself as different from the other and act on that perception by establishing criteria for membership.[1]

Important for Weber's understanding of ethnicity is the link between economic and political conditions and the manifestation of ethnicity. He explains that 'feelings of common ethnicity and notions of kinship, are usually caused . . . by the diverse economic and political conditions of various groups' (1978:391) and that 'it is primarily the political community . . . that inspires the belief in common ethnicity' (1978: 389). The role of 'differences in the economic way of life' are fundamental to shaping 'the belief in ethnic affinity' (1978:391). Economic and political factors, then are crucial variables in determining the nature of ethnic relations.

To summarize, we understand ethnicity to result from a subjective recognition and acknowledgement of a set of interconnected social markers such as language, religion, historical experience, or shared institutions that are intertwined with a common cultural foundation. One or more of these characteristics is sufficient to distinguish an ethnic group from other groups and the specific characteristics of a given ethnic identity are determined by the historical and cultural context in which they are embedded. Culture is a critical feature of ethnicity because it provides a framework in which the political and economic conditions take on their 'ethnic meaning'. Otherwise, the objective qualities associated with a particular ethnic group would be defining features of nationalism, class, or some other socially determined category.[2]

In order to gain insight into these different aspects of ethnicity and ethnic conflict we look to recent studies of ethnicity which can be categorized according to the emphasis they place on political, economic, or cultural factors. Three approaches have emphasized the role of

economic variables and relationships in studies of ethnicity. In the first, split labor market theory, it is hypothesized that 'ethnic antagonism first germinates in labor markets split along ethnic lines [and] to be split, a labor market must contain at least two groups of workers whose price of labor differs for the same work, or would differ if they did the same work' (Bonacich, 1972:549). Subsequently, the emphasis is placed on ethnic conflict and the relationship between the ethnic group and class.

The split labor market model is only partially applicable to the Assam case. There is competition between ethnic groups in certain markets, especially in the organized sector, where Bengalis have dominated the government career positions. But overall, the split labor market theory is unable to explain why events unfolded in Assam as they did. Several reasons stand out.

First, Bonacich developed the split labor market approach after examining advanced industrial societies, and one of the key assumptions for the model is the existence of an over-supply of labor. In Assam, however, there has historically been an undersupply of labor, and several emigrant ethnic groups have been brought in to fill labor shortages. For example, Biharis were resettled in Assam by English tea plantation owners in order to meet labor needs of the plantations because the local Assamese preferred to continue farming to meet their own needs.

Second, a key assumption of the Bonacich model that does not fit Assam is the interchangeability of ethnic groups for a given labor market. This condition does not hold in Assam because competition for positions in the organized sector was not shaped wholly by economic factors. Instead, the Bengalis secured a majority of the status positions because they were more easily able to adapt to British requirements than the Assamese. In addition, during the periods in which Assam was being incorporated into Bengal for administrative purposes, the more numerous and educated Bengalis came to monopolise civil service posts in Assam (Gupta, 1984:124). Thus, the Bengalis 'won' the labor competition because the British believed they were more qualified than the Assamese, not because they were a cheaper labor supply.

This competition brings out a third assumption in the split labor market model that does not apply to Assam: both ethnic groups are forced to accede to the industry's demands because they are politically weak. In the Bengali-Assamese case, however, both groups have political power. Through their control of legislative politics in the state of Assam, the Assamese have been able to implement job qualifications that give them an advantage over Bengalis. At the same time, Bengali dominance of civil service positions in Assam, the size and influence of West Bengal in national politics, and the electoral strength of Bengalis in Assam made Bengali immigrants important to the central government, which could often influence state policy.

The second approach that actively involves economic relations is the

theory of segregated labor markets. Here, an emphasis is placed on an ethnic group's ability to establish and maintain its principal economic relations with members of the same ethnic group. This idea had been developed primarily by Bonacich and Modell (1980) through the concept of 'middle man minorities'. The ideas used in describing segregated labor markets are also tied to the notion of ethnic enclaves (Wilson and Martin, 1982; Wilson and Portes, 1980). This approach argues that 'immigrant enterprises might manage to create a workable form of vertical integration by developing ethnically sympathetic sources of supply and consumer outlets' which enables them to create and maintain control over their development (Wilson and Portes, 1980:301–2). Ethnic enclaves, then, provide a haven for the enduring saliency of ethnic identity.

The segregated labor market and ethnic enclaves approaches do not adequately explain ethnic group relations in Assam. Ethnic groups in Assam, particularly the ethnic Assamese and the Bengalis, are able to dominate certain sectors of the economy, but they do not integrate vertically to maintain control over their development. A more common pattern is for an ethnic group to monopolise a particular aspect of the economy and make all other groups dependent on it, such as the Marwaris (from Rajasthan) who monopolise money lending. This behavior does increase the salience of ethnic identity, but not through vertical integration; instead, it makes ethnic and material interests congruent. An assumption of the Wilson and Portes argument for vertical integration is that an ethnic group is economically heterogeneous. In Assam, however, the smaller ethnic groups are economically homogeneous. And Bengalis, although they are economically diverse, often have cross-cutting cleavages such as religion and nationality that undermine salience based on linguistic grounds.

Internal colonialism is the third approach that places a stress on economic relationships. This approach emphasizes the economic and political subordination of one group to another (Blauner, 1970; Hechter, 1975, 1976). Hechter, for example, has noted that during England's early domination of British peripheral regions,

> the social structures of the Celtic lands . . . came to resemble colonial situations in which Englishmen . . . controlled the polity and dominated the economy, leaving indigenous Celts clustered at the bottom of the stratification system . . . [A] cultural division of labor had emerged as a consequence of English rule in the Celtic fringe. Further, the existence of a cultural division of labor provided a sound structural basis for the maintenance, and perhaps even the development, of ethnic identity among those groups relegated to the bottom layers of society. (Hechter 1976:215)

Control in the economic sector, particularly with respect to labor relations, is the principal source of domination. Political domination

serves to assure economic control and superiority.

Of the three economically driven explanations discussed above, the internal colonialism model is most useful in understanding the Assam case because it provides a framework for examining the role of the state and the friction between the ethnic Assamese and the central government. Similar to Hechter's example, Assam is geographically set off from the rest of India, rich in natural resources, and not politically powerful. The central government business interests have a 'colonial hold on Assam's economy and the utilization of [its] resources' (Sharma, 1986:49). These factors combine to make it easy for the central government and business to extract and export valuable resources[3] at the expense of economic and social development in Assam.

Even though the internal colonialism model can provide valuable insights into Assam it does not easily address several characteristics of the region. First, the model assumes a highly stratified society in which ethnicity was relegated to the 'bottom layers of society'. This condition does not hold in Assam where the distribution of labor and the monopoly of occupational and economic sectors by specific ethnic groups is not necessarily confined to one class. A second feature of the Assam case that does not fit into the internal colonialism model is the relationship between the central government and the Assam region. The internal colonialism model promotes an image of the state as an impregnable body that does not have to worry about retaining its position of dominance. However, in India the Congress Party, which has been in control of the central government for all but two years (1978–79) since Independence in 1947, is dependent on Assam's vote banks to help it remain in power. Consequently, the Congress Party, in its role as the central government, must cater to their allies in Assam or else lose its hold on the region.

A second set of variables which are emphasized in studies of ethnic groups and ethnicity relate to political processes. Two types of relationships are emphasized in this body of literature: those that focus on ethnic mobilization or the political origins of an ethnic group (Adam, 1979; Despres, 1975a, 1975b; Nagel, 1984; Nagal and Olzak, 1982; Olzak, 1983; Ragin 1979) and those that are concerned more generally with the dynamics of ethnic-government relations (Brass, 1985; Enloe, 1973, 1980; Young, 1976, 1986). The ethnic mobilization approach argues that ethnic mobilization is facilitated by 'political structural arrangements and policies [which] promote ethnic mobilization' and 'provide the rationale for the selection of ethnicity as the basis for mobilization and designate the particular boundaries along which mobilization most likely occurs' (Nagel, 1984:25–6). The ethnic-government approach does not conflict with this emphasis, but it emphasizes the role of the state and those political organizations, internal and external to ethnic groups, which influence ethnic identity formation and political mobilization (Brass, 1985).

Central to both positions is the assumption of competition between different groups for political and economic resources. Indeed, competition for scarce resources has been advanced by some as the critical determinant in the formation and reproduction of ethnic groups (Despres, 1975a). Even when political mobilization and relations are emphasized they are typically placed within a conceptual framework that posits the causal preeminence of economic factors. Hence, 'sectoral labor distributions, economic differentiation, levels of industrial development and standard of living indices' are variables that provide the context within which ethnic relations and mobilization are embedded (Nagel, 1984:8).

These approaches help to explain the political dimensions of conflict in Assam. One of the major issues in the Bengali-Assamese conflict is how to allocate scarce government and private sector jobs, which the Assamese are afraid of losing to the Bengali immigrants. An important goal of Assamese mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s was to ensure preferential treatment for 'sons of the soil' in employment and education. Conflict in Assam, however, is not the result of politics or economics alone but is also shaped by concerns about cultural issues; it is on this subject that the politically and economically driven models fail to offer an adequate explanatory framework.

Culture, as a source of explanation, has been frequently overlooked in recent studies of ethnicity. When the cultural variables have been used they are often of a superficial nature that reduce culture to a set of descriptive variables or 'markers' which are used to identify objective characteristics of an ethnic group. In such instances, culture and cultural relations are seen as passive aspects of ethnic studies that are either linked to external forces or are the basis of the social fabric that bind an ethnic group together.

From our standpoint, culture should be a more active component in understanding ethnicity because culture, in conjunction with an ethnic group's subjective recognition of its ethnic distinctiveness, is a critical component in giving meaning to the more objective attributes of ethnicity. Culture and cultural patterns, in this framework, 'are sets of symbols whose relations to one another "model" relations among entities, processes, or what-have-you in . . . social . . . systems' (Geertz, 1973:93). Culture provides the medium through which the symbols, history, modes of communication, community perceptions, and attitudes members of a group share the [ethnic] group's life experiences (Geertz, 1973:89). Because of the complex relationship that results between culture and experience, culture and cultural patterns 'give meaning, that is objective conceptual form, to the social and psychological reality by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves' (Geertz, 1973:93).

Several recent studies have adopted a more central role for the concept of culture in their formulations of ethnicity. In this approach

ethnicity is both something to be explained and something that can explain (Comaroff 1984; Cornell 1985; Turner and Singleton 1978). Comaroff (1984), for example, argues that after ethnicity is constituted and possesses identifiable cultural markers it must ultimately 'be represented as the "independent variable" that shapes and constrains careers and biographies.' Once at this stage of reality, ethnicity can '[order] social status, class membership, and so on' (Comaroff, 1984:15).

The analytical dimensions of ethnicity actively involve political, economic, and cultural variables. In the case of Assam, all three factors are important for explaining the recent conflict. Two variables, distinct from ethnicity, stand out as important to understanding events in Assam: religion, which is a highly visible factor distinguishing the actors; and the state, which is an imposing force that helped shape the way events unfolded. These two factors are discussed at greater length below.

Religion as an analytical category

Religion cannot be used in the same manner as ethnicity for explaining conflict. Several features of religion distinguish it from ethnicity. First, most religions are constituted as institutions and driven by institutional superstructures. As a result, their fiduciary responsibilities rest not only with the membership, but more importantly with the religious group's leadership and the doctrines upon which the religion is based (Parsons, 1975:62). One consequence is that the way religion influences a situation is not necessarily a function of social structural relationships, but rather results from the codified organization of the religion. Indeed, the formal and informal structures and scriptures of a religion, which are resistant to extra-systemic factors such as poverty, exploitation, or institutional infringements, can become dominant factors in decision making and interpretations of events.

Second, religion generally does not form the basis for wholly separated groups in society the way ethnicity often does. It more frequently constitutes subgroups which may or may not be contained within an ethnic group (Horowitz, 1985:51). As a result, a religion's relationship to the society in which it exists is different from that of an ethnic group. A religion is individually or group oriented and does not depend for its legitimacy and reproduction on the broader society. In addition, its membership is controlled by the organization itself – groups external to the religion do not establish requirements for membership. Ethnic groups, on the other hand, exist as a result of either their exclusion or isolation from society as a whole or their differentiation from one other group. Its membership is a function of a variety of social and ecological factors and is not generally subject simply to the discretion of the ethnic group itself.

These differences between ethnicity and religion not-with-standing, it is necessary to be cautious about drawing too sharp a distinction between them. In specific instances, religion and ethnicity are ultimately constituted under the same cultural arrangement. This means that the symbols used to establish the boundaries of each group are drawn from the same cultural reservoir so that an ethnic group and a religion can share symbols and overlap in their meanings and significance. As a consequence, it is possible for memberships not only to overlap, but to be identical.

A second aspect of religion that makes it similar to ethnicity is the ability of people of groups to mobilize around a religion. Indeed, 'the world religions . . . [can] . . . provide the basis for common perceptions and shared emotional reactions to real or imagined threats from other groups' and provide a superstructure around which violent or peaceful political action can be initiated (Young, 1976:52).

The state

Forces outside of ethnic groups have enormous potential to influence, directly or indirectly, basic elements of an ethnic group such as its perpetuation, livelihood, and actions. Perhaps the most influential external force on ethnic groups and ethnicity in modern times is the state.[4] As a major actor in social processes, the state is in a position to define the terms and content of interaction within ethnic groups, between ethnic groups, and between an ethnic group and the state (Enloe, 1980; Young, 1976). The state's influence can be described as one of 'a transcendent despotism over reality' that can exercise its domination through the 'fixation of boundaries, orientation of the community system, patterning of economic activity, containment of population movement, and parameter-setting for political conflict' (Young, 1976:66–7).

The state, however, is more than a force influencing the social processes that encompass different ethnic groups. It is also a resource for which ethnic groups compete (Brass, 1985; Skinner, 1975). It can hold the key to the wide range of economic and political benefits that it distributes by some internally determined process. For example, the central government in India has introduced and controls a wide range of preferential policies[5] that are intended to assist in the economic and social development of India's various ethnic groups, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes. Whoever controls the specific state apparatus responsible for disbursement of the benefits is in a powerful position to affect the livelihood of a large number of groups and communities.

The state is neither necessarily a neutral nor a passive actor in these encounters. It is an autonomous body that possesses its own interests and objectives independent from the rest of the populace. It can be a potentially disinterested party that engages in mediation and crisis

management or it can negotiate to achieve goals based on narrower interests. On first glance the Indian central government's continual dialogue and negotiation with protesting Assamese groups between 1979 and 1983 would appear to place it in the role of mediator and manager. However, the ulterior motives that were served by their actions after 1979 suggest that the state was concerned primarily with reestablishing its control and domination over Assam. Thus, the state can use its influence to establish, entrench or even expand its power (Enloe, 1980). In the Assam case, we can hypothesize that the central government was more concerned with its power base in the post 1979 period than in alleviating the ethnic tensions and conflicts of the area. The central government's practices during this period are more in keeping with the assessment that state actions 'take forms that attempt to reinforce the authority, political longevity, and social control of the state organizations while incumbents [generate] the relevant policies or policy-ideas' (Skocpol, 1984:26).

Ethnic conflict in Assam

Assam state is located in the extreme northeast corner of India, and is connected to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor of land. There are two main groups indigenous to the state: high caste Hindus known as the 'ethnic Assamese' and tribal peoples who live in the hill areas and farm the fertile land of the Brahmaputra valley.[6] Tribal Assamese have tended to remain separate from the traditional conflict and competition between the Bengalis and the Hindu Assamese and only became involved in the agitation in its last stages. Assamese suspicion of Bengali domination goes back to the nineteenth century, when at different times all or part of Assam was incorporated into Bengal for jurisdictional purposes.

The ethnic Assamese feared that their culture would be subsumed by the more populous and influential Bengali tradition. This concern was exacerbated by the continual flow of emigrants from overcrowded Bengal into relatively underpopulated Assam. The rate of population growth after 1947 was always greater in Assam than in the rest of India because of emigration (Singh, 1984; Joshi, 1981), but it escalated dramatically after the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war sent hordes of new refugees over the border. Table 1 shows the dramatic increases in the Assam population between 1941 and 1979; and Table 2 lists the number of legal emigrants compared to the estimated number of illegal emigrants. Both the tables and the figure show that there has been a huge influx of immigrants, the bulk of which are illegal. The deportation of both these refugees and any illegal immigrants into Assam since 1951 is the pivotal issue in the current conflict (*India Today* March 15, 1983; Gupta, 1984; Joshi, 1981; Murty, 1984).

What is striking about the Assamese situation, especially in light of

Table 1. *Population growth in Assam, 1941–79*

Year	Population in Assam	Increase	Increase	% Increase in all India
1941	6,694,000	1,133,000	22	14
1951	8,029,000	1,335,000	20	13
1961	10,837,000	2,808,000	35	22
1971	14,625,000	3,788,000	35	24
1979*	17,625,000	3,000,000	21	NA

* Figures for 1979 were estimated on the basis of figures in Joshi (1981:160, 163).

Source: Joshi 1981:160–3

Table 2*. *Estimated number of legal and illegal immigrants entering Assam, 1947–79*

Period	Number of legal emigrants	Number of illegal emigrants	Total
1947–51	274,455 (33%)	558,833(77%)	833,288
1951–61	640,000(83%)	134,869(17%)	774,869
1961–71	640,000(65%)	341,697(35%)	981,697
1971–79	640,000(21%)	2,360,000(79%)	3,000,000

* The figures in this table are only estimates of one author. Other may find radically different numbers in another source since data on this issue are rarely consistent and their accuracy hotly debated.

Source: Joshi 1981:163

the recent violence, is that Assamese Hindus and tribal peoples have not been historically in conflict with Bengali Muslims. Tribals have largely remained apart from the rest of Assamese society while the Assamese have competed primarily with Bengali Hindus, who dominate the urban economy. Indeed, the interests of the ethnic Assamese and Bengali Muslims are often similar because of the superior economic position of Bengali Hindus. In addition, Bengali Muslims were acutely aware of their tenuous position in Assam, and often claimed Assamese as their mother tongue to placate the indigenous groups.

It is clear that the primary cause of the breakdown of peaceful Hindu-Muslim relations has been the vast influx of refugees from Bangladesh (Hardgrave, 1983; Singh, 1983; Weiner and Katzenstein, 1981). Ever increasing numbers of Bengalis fanned Assamese unease about cultural domination into 'near schizophrenic fear' (Singh, 1983:1959). Furthermore, what had been common economic interests began to diverge as

rural Assamese feared they would be driven from their land by an apparently limitless flow of refugees. Tribal peoples, who had until now been on the periphery of Assam's problems developed a new militancy in the face of encroachments on their way of life (*India Today*, March 15, 1983: 16–17).

Simmering Assamese fears of Bengali domination came into the open after the 1978 election, when the Communist Party (CPI-M) captured eleven seats with the help of 'foreigners' votes, and the Muslim block garnered twenty-eight seats. These successes were 'a clear indication . . . that newly-arrived "foreigners" had gathered considerable political strength' (Das, 1982:61). The first indigenous groups to mobilize against this trend were the student groups, especially the All-Assam Student Union (AASU). The AASU quickly issued a list of demands, which included deportation of illegal immigrants, and began a non-violent campaign to bring attention to the issue. The Janata government[7] responded with statements of concern about the foreigners problem, and assured the Assam government that solutions would be sought, but Morarji Desai and A. B. Vajpayee[8] became wholly occupied in keeping their own party in office.

In 1979 the agitation intensified when scrutiny of the voter rolls for a by-election revealed that about eight percent of the voters were foreigners (Das, 1982). This news was particularly upsetting to the Assamese because Darrang district, where the by-election was held, did not have a large immigrant population.[9] Several politicians increased tensions by objecting to any deletion of names, and since some of these politicians were Muslim, the issue of communalism arose. In the wake of these events, the AASU decided to create a broader base of support and met with Assam cultural associations to form the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), an umbrella organization. The AAGSP soon had the backing of many Assamese student, social, and worker organizations and even some tribal associations.

In September, 1979 the Assam state government fell. The Chief Minster, Borbora, was considering a foreigner deportation plan but was opposed by two of his Ministers, who were Muslim. When he dropped them from his cabinet, he lost support in his coalition from the Muslim block, the Congress factions and the CPI-M, and was forced to resign.

The fall of the Janata government at the center kept the foreigners issue in the forefront in Assam. For the new elections, voter rolls had to be prepared. On the foreigners question, the government of Assam decreed 'no person whose name was included in the electoral rolls shall be eliminated on the grounds of citizenship as the process of establishing citizenship is time consuming.' For its part, the Election Commission stated, 'A person whose name is included . . . [on the voter lists] shall be presumed to be a citizen of India' (Das, 1982:70). This decision had serious ramifications because in the years immediately preceding the 1979 the voter rolls grew by over 30 per cent and it was argued that the

majority of those new voters were not legal citizens of India (Joshi, 1981).

These policies sparked a full-scale protest against the holding of elections. Two tactics were adopted. One was that the AASU and AAGSP called for a boycott of the elections, and the candidates of all political parties were 'gheraoed'[10] to prevent them from filing nomination papers. As a result, no nomination papers were filed, except in the heavily immigrant district of Cachar. A second form of agitation, that was successful on two fronts, was the blockade of oil extraction and oil refinery plants. As a result of the blockade the Union Petroleum Minister was quoted as saying that 'an oil crisis in the country is threatened if the Assam impasse is not resolved' (quoted in Murty, 1984:39). In addition, the oil blockade enabled the agitators to get 'the attention of the Indian press. Previously the press, the leaders and the people of India did not pay attention to the movement in Assam' (Das, 1982:77).

At the same time, the Hazarika ministry which had succeeded Borbora failed for the same reasons as its predecessor: when Hazarika yielded to Assamese pressure to establish tribunals for the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants, the Muslim block, both Congress factions, and the CPI-M withdrew their support. Since none of the opposition parties could command a majority, the legislature was suspended (although not dissolved) and President's Rule imposed in December, 1979. Indira Gandhi won the midterm elections and took office in January 1980. Almost immediately she extended an invitation to the AASU leaders to come to New Delhi for talks. The talks, which took place in February 1980, ended after only eighty minutes because the central government would not negotiate unless 1971 was agreed upon as the date for deportation of illegal immigrants, while the AASU insisted on 1951 as the cut-off date (Das, 1982:80–1).

Throughout 1980 there were talks between the AASU and the central government, none of which produced either agreements or progress toward a solution. Meanwhile, the agitation continued unabated as the Assamese staged strikes and protests and the government cracked down harder on dissidents. In the October 1980 meetings, the AASU announced its willingness to accept illegal immigrants from 1951 to 1961 if the central government took responsibility for relocating those who entered the state between 1961 and 1971. The government, however, refused to agree and insisted on allowing everyone who entered before 1971 to remain in Assam (Murty, 1981:91).

In November, the government took steps to reopen the oil fields. Citing danger to the pipeline, it invoked the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 and declared all areas within one kilometer of oil installations and the pipeline disturbed areas. Despite heavy picketing, the army moved in and was able to resume the flow of oil through the pipeline (Murty, 1983:99). In December 1980, President's Rule was

scheduled to expire. Ordinarily this would have meant that new elections would have to be held, but in 1979 the Assembly had not been dissolved, merely suspended. Following the massive mandate Congress-I received in the 1980 parliamentary elections, many non-Congress politicians had defected to Congress-I ranks, and when Mrs Gandhi reconvened the assembly her party was able to command the majority and form the government with Anwara Taimur as Chief Minister.

But the formation of a popular assembly proved to be more of a setback than an asset in binding a solution to the foreigner problem, since the AASU and AAGSP mistrusted both Taimur and several of her cabinet Ministers, who were known to be critical of the movement. Their suspicions were borne out as the government took a harder line against the agitators; but this approach proved to be its undoing. In June three non-Communist opposition parties criticized the Taimur Ministry for excessive arrests, and shortly thereafter the Left parties withdrew their support (Murty, 1983:133). Mrs Taimur submitted the resignation of her Ministry in late June 1981, the Assembly was returned to a state of suspended animation and President's Rule reimposed. The remainder of 1981 and early 1982 followed the familiar pattern. The agitation continued, with periods of relative calm alternating with agitation, strikes, and boycotts. One more ministry was attempted but it was unable to sustain itself, and President's Rule was invoked once more. Talks between the central government and the AASU continued as well, but they were equally fruitless, even after the introduction in 1981 of tripartite talks that included national opposition parties. By the summer of 1982, however, there seemed to be some grounds for cautious optimism. The AASU had agreed to accept all foreigners who entered before 1961, and the central government had agreed to deport or resettle those emigrating after 1971 (Murty, 1983:191). But President's Rule was scheduled to expire at the end of 1982 and who would be allowed to vote in elections again became a live issue. The AASU did not want elections to be held until a solution to the foreigner problem had been agreed upon, but the Election Commission began preparing electoral rolls.

By December the Congress party was preparing for elections even though the 1979 final electoral rolls had not been revised (Murty, 1983:236). Given these conditions, the AASU repeated their opposition to elections and urged all parties to boycott them. Only Congress seemed optimistic about the potential for successful elections; opposition parties and the Assamese urged the government to wait until solutions to outstanding issues could be found. The press noted, 'never before in the history of the country has an election scenario been so threatening' (*India Today*, February 15, 1983:20).

The first hints of difficulty came after the early January meetings in Delhi. When the AASU leaders returned home, they were immediately arrested under the National Security Act. In addition, the government

censored for two months two major Assamese newspapers known to be sympathetic to the agitation. And as a final signal of its intention to hold elections no matter what the costs, fifteen Central Reserve Police Force battalions were dispatched to Assam, bringing the total number of special battalions to thirty-five. Not surprisingly, 'The people have not taken at all kindly to this display of muscle' (*India Today*, January 31, 1983:35), organizing strikes and gheraoing election candidates. When election time finally came, 'There [were] no moderate opinions left. Everyone [had] something angry and emotional to say' (*India Today*, February 28, 1983:1). But the Congress party was in a difficult situation. Having just lost control over two major southern states for the first time in the history of independent India, the party needed to assert itself in Assam, whatever the consequences. As became tragically clear, the price was death by the thousands as Hindus slaughtered Muslims, Muslims killed Hindus, and tribals attacked them both.

Conspicuously absent from the preceding chronology is the interaction of cultural and religious issues with day-to-day political developments. This absence is not because such issues were unimportant. Rather, it is due to the way in which concerns about culture and religion were expressed. Assamese fears of cultural assimilation were important in bringing about the agitation, and throughout the period of conflict these fears were reiterated (Murty, 1983; Das, 1982; Gupta, 1984). Religious concerns were also apparent in the Assamese fears that most politicians were advancing their careers by relying on illegal immigrant Muslim voters, and in the clashes between the AASU and the AAMSU, the All Assam Muslim Student Union.

Following Indira Gandhi's reelection in 1980, the cultural and religious aspects of the conflict were transformed by the ongoing political negotiations. Instead of being issues, along with political and economic concerns, that needed solutions, religion and culture became the language of the agitation, which now derived its framework from the process of the negotiations. That is to say, religious and cultural symbols were evoked to make points and to establish positions, but they were used as bargaining chips to achieve political goals rather than as issues to be confronted on their own terms.

Conclusion

The massacres that took place in Assam during the February 1983 elections were the culmination of five years of political, social, and economic upheaval. This particular wave of violence was ignited by elections that had been called and then held in order to comply with Constitutional requirements. But the preceding five years were highly significant in bringing about some of the most vicious communal and ethnic violence India had experienced since Partition. The conflict, though, can only be fully understood through an appreciation of how a

series of historical, political, and social circumstances converged in Assam to stimulate ethnic and communal rivalries to the point of extreme violence.

One of the most important issues precipitating the tensions and conflict that enveloped Assam resulted from major shifts in the demographic composition of the region. In particular there was a vast influx of legal and illegal emigrants who had been flooding into Assam from neighboring Bangladesh and Nepal. The bulk of the foreigners, or 'infiltrators', were Bengalis. They became a major political issue as different groups argued over how they were to be dealt with; in addition, they became pawns in the political struggles between the central government and Assamese activist groups.

A second factor that contributed to destabilizing the area was a breakdown in traditional political coalitions that had previously been a major source of stability. In 1978, when Congress lost the national election to Janata, it became factionalized, ultimately breaking into two parties. In Assam this internal strife was a particularly critical problem since Congress's power base in Assam was largely built upon coalitions. These coalitions deteriorated, leaving Indira Gandhi's party, the Congress (I), and most other parties severely weakened. Even when Congress (I) returned to power in 1980 the damage to Assam's political coalitions was too great to salvage.

The breakdown in traditional political coalitions in Assam reinforced the effect of a third factor, Indira Gandhi's Congress (I) Party's monumental attempts to reestablish political hegemony in India and Assam. Because of the party's apparently precarious position it was deeply concerned with the problem of renewing what had previously been a major source of votes. Consequently, it engaged in practices that were geared toward its retention of power rather than toward finding amicable solutions that could have reduced its new basis of power – the immigrants.

The tensions that were produced by these three factors helped facilitate a realignment of political coalitions in Assam into ethnically cohesive bodies. The group distinctions reverted to those that corresponded to a language of centuries-old conflicts. In particular, Assamese concerns focused on what had previously been a disproportionate control of political power by Bengalis, who had been favored by the British to manage the local bureaucracy. The Assamese were also deeply concerned about the threat of Bengali Muslim emigrants to their cultural and linguistic patrimony. These concerns had ebbed and flowed for the previous hundred years. Finally, the tribal peoples of Assam were becoming increasingly hostile toward the appropriation of their lands by Bengali emigrants, and to a lesser extent the Assam government. They had been consistently, although slowly, losing their farming lands to emigrants ever since the British encouraged emigrants to move there at the turn of the century.

The lines established by the language of centuries of conflict present an interesting insight into the relationship between ethnicity and religion as factors in mobilization. In combination with political and economic forces, culture and religion provided the basis for the creation and maintenance of an intense ethnic conflict which continued for over five years in Assam. But while the conflict was always ethnic in character, the role of culture and religion were not the same at all times. Fears of cultural assimilation were critical in facilitating the agitation, which would seem to support the 'primordial' argument that ethnicity is ever-present across time and events. But the process of government-agitator negotiations reduced the cultural component to one of a number of bargaining points, which would seem to follow the 'instrumentalist' view that ethnicity is manipulated for political and economic gains.

We would argue that both of these extremes are in part correct. 'Soft' concerns such as cultural integrity and religious freedom can play major parts in facilitating ethnic conflict in themselves. At the same time, however, they can often be coopted to serve other interests, in this case the Assamese agitators' political agenda. The interesting question then becomes, if the legitimacy of cultural and religious concerns is accepted, how are these factors transformed and utilized to further other interests? In the case of Assam, extreme agitators and self-aggrandizing politicians were able to appeal to communal fears to advance their own causes. Similarly, cultural issues were invoked by some participants to rid Assam of as many Bengalis as possible, whether they had entered illegally or not. The emotional appeal of these aspects of ethnicity make them particularly effective in coopting followers to serve other agendas. Thus ethnicity, with its ability to shift emphasis between political, economic, and cultural factors, is a more illuminating framework for understanding conflict than religion alone.

Finally, an intriguing and unexpected way that religion and culture can deflect attention from more immediate causes of conflict can be seen by examining the effect of the election violence on the Congress party. The party was universally held responsible for what happened in Assam, but it was not brought to account. The killings were deplored, but the election results were accepted and Congress acquired more seats in Parliament. We argue that this occurred because by playing out the scenario in the language of 'eternal' conflict, religion and culture became the villains rather than the state apparatus which ordered elections in spite of the obvious potential for disaster. Religion and culture, as irrational and therefore insoluble causes of conflict, became the explanation covering a political choice by the party in control of the state apparatus. The Assam case clearly demonstrates how unidimensional explanations of ethnic conflict can obscure both real causes and genuine solutions.

Notes

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1. We do not want to give the impression that this is a completely rational or instrumental process. Rather, establishing group boundaries is likely to be an unconscious process that may well lack rational decision making processes.
2. There is an ongoing debate as to whether ethnicity has instrumental or subjective foundations. Issacs (1975) and Patterson (1975) are frequently cited as representative of the subjective and instrumental approaches, respectively.
3. Assam, which is rich in oil, receives less than three percent of the total revenues collected by the central government on the oil. In addition, virtually all of the oil is exported from the region before it is refined, thus limiting further revenues that could be collected from it. The tea industry is also important in Assam, but it is controlled from Calcutta and London and virtually all revenues, with the exception of wages, are taken out of the region (Gupta, 1984:63).
4. Our understanding of the state corresponds to that of Evans (1979: 5–16) who envisions the state as an actor that functions as 'a diverse collection of organizations and individuals' which may possess a high degree of autonomy, but which are interconnected 'by legal obligations and bureaucratic ties.'
5. Preferential policies in India resemble affirmative action programs in the United States, but are often times more forceful and penetrating.
6. The Hindu and tribal Assamese are distinguished further by economic, educational, and occupational differences. The Hindus are typically more advanced and 'modern' than the tribals.
7. The Janata Party assumed control of the central government in 1978.
8. The Prime Minister and Home Minister respectively.
9. Das (1982:104–6) has shown that regions with the greatest conflict have undergone marked changes in the population density of Muslims between 1951–71 and 1971–80.
10. Gheraoed means the candidates were forced to remain in their houses.

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