

## The Assam Movement\*

SANJIB BARUAH

The issue of immigration from East Bengal had caused political instability in the area prior to the independence and Partition of India in 1947. However, between independence and the Assam movement that began in 1979, it had not been a subject of major political controversy.<sup>1</sup> Two factors that helped keep the immigration issue out of the political agenda were, first, the centrality of language issues in defining the contours of ethnic conflicts in the state and, second, the aggregation of interests within political parties, primarily the Congress, but in other parties as well, which in effect produced a tacit agreement among political leaders not to raise this explosive issue.

Since independence, the ethnic Assamese political leadership, in response to popular campaigns, pursued cultural policies that sought to define the state as Assamese—for instance, to have Assamese as the official language of the state and as the language of instruction in the state's educational institutions. They also made claims to preferential policies in jobs.<sup>2</sup> The creation of a linguistic state superimposed on Assam's ethnic diversity and demographic transformation had assuaged the fears of the ethnic Assamese and, despite the alienation of significant segments of Assam's indigenous 'tribal' population, it had managed

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to achieve ethnic accommodation in the residual state of Assam. The Bengali Muslim immigrants allied with the ethnic Assamese on cultural policy issues, while Bengali Hindus were among the most vociferous opponents of these policies.

The immigration issue, however, had occasionally burst into the open in the politics of the state since independence. In 1965, when relations with Pakistan were deteriorating, the state government under instructions from New Delhi began expelling Pakistani 'infiltrators'.<sup>3</sup> But the process had to be stopped when 11 members of the state legislative assembly protested that Indian Muslims were being harassed in the process, and threatened to resign. Major Muslim politicians from Assam such as Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, who became the President of India, and Moinul Haque Chaudhuri, who was a member of the central cabinet in the early 1970s, were persuaded to relinquish their claims to the state's chief ministership and leave state politics because it was feared that such moves, which might suggest growing immigrant political power, might be politically destabilizing.<sup>4</sup>

With the Assam movement that started in 1979 the issue of Assam's demographic transformation as a result of immigration returned to the state's political agenda with a vengeance. It ruptured carefully nurtured ethnic coalitions that were at the foundation of political stability in the state, setting the stage for a prolonged period of political turmoil.

The Assam movement began in 1979 after a by-election to the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency, which is located in an area with a heavy concentration of East Bengali immigrants, drew public attention to a rapid expansion of the number of voters since the previous election two years earlier. The event followed reports of fresh large-scale illegal immigration from Bangladesh into the state.

On 8 June 1979, the All Assam Students' Union sponsored a 12-hour general strike (*bandh*) in the state to demand the 'detection, disenfranchisement and deportation' of foreigners. That event turned out to be only the first of a protracted series of protest actions. On 26 August 1979, the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) was formed as an ad hoc coalition to coordinate a sustained state-wide movement. An unprecedented mass popular upsurge followed in the form of sit-ins, picketings in front of government offices, strikes and symbolic disobedience of the law.

Between 1980 and 1982, there were 23 negotiating sessions between the movement leaders and the central government. Even though the Assam movement had immense popular support, there was considerable disagreement on the demands of the movement in Assam as well as in the rest of the country. For the Government of India, the political costs

of agreeing to those demands would have been high.<sup>5</sup> By the end of 1982, there was agreement that illegal aliens who came between 1951 and 1961 would be given Indian citizenship and that those who came after 1971 would be deported, but the status of those who came between 1961 and 1971 was unresolved. It was reported that in the negotiations of October 1980, the government's position was that these immigrants should stay and the government would pay for their rehabilitation. There were also disagreements on the procedures to be used for the detection of aliens—that is, on the kind of documents to be relied upon to prove when a person had actually immigrated. The Assam movement leaders combined negotiations with general strikes and civil disobedience campaigns designed to demonstrate their power capability.<sup>6</sup>

The Assam movement succeeded in significantly disrupting the functioning of the governmental institutions in Assam, including the 1980 parliamentary elections and the Assembly elections in 1983. The leadership of the movement declared established political parties to be 'irrelevant' to the problems of the state and successfully mobilized campaigns of non-recognition of elected state governments, arguing that they were elected on the basis of invalid electoral rolls that included the names of large numbers of illegal aliens. President's Rule had to be imposed intermittently as elected governments lost their majorities in the state assembly. Since negotiations appeared unlikely to produce a settlement, the Indian government sought to reassert the legitimacy of the governmental institutions and attempted to cut into the popular base of the Assam movement by seeking to wean away ethnic subgroups that constitute weak links in the Assamese ethnic coalition. These efforts, combined with the strains caused by the movement itself, repeatedly changed the ethnic alignments in the state. However, the movement remained quite strong. The political crisis was eventually resolved when the Indian government recognized the power capability of the movement and made important concessions to their demands. This once again altered the conditions of Assam's ethnic politics. It is useful to view the political developments in Assam of the past six years in terms of changes in the government's strategy and their impact on ethnic alignments. Five phases can be distinguished: (a) June 1979–November 1980; (b) December 1980–January 1983; (c) the election of February 1983; (d) March 1983–May 1984; and (e) June 1984–December 1985.

### FESTIVAL OF PROTEST

The first phase of the Assam movement started with demonstrations and rallies including widespread participation by ethnic Assamese in

support of their demands. This phase began with a mood of optimism about a negotiated settlement and ended with considerable pessimism about the prospects of a solution and signs of increasing fissures in the Assamese ethnic coalition. The movement began in the last days of the Janata period. The Janata ministry headed by Golap Borbora collapsed in September 1979, and the ramshackle coalition ministry that came to power, headed by Jogen Hazarika and consisting of factions of the erstwhile Janata Party, fell within three months. President's Rule was imposed in December 1979 until the following December, when a Congress (I) government came to power. That inaugurated a new phase in the state politics. The first phase began with festive and mostly peaceful protest actions, but with some reports of ethnic violence. Ethnic conflicts and signs of confrontation between the government and the movement began to show by the middle of 1980. The next phase marked a significant accentuation of these trends.

A report of an investigation committee of the Delhi-based Peoples Union for Civil Liberties gives a flavour of the early phase of the Assam movement. In a *satyagraha* (symbolic disobedience of the law) in November 1979 nearly 700,000 people in the city of Gauhati and an estimated two million people in the state as a whole courted arrest. 'The *satyagraha*', says the report, 'is fairly simple. People walk to the High Court in Gauhati or some such office in other towns, court arrest and are released a few hours later.' The entire government machinery, said the report, was party to the *satyagraha*. 'The Government of Assam', a witness told the committee, 'is running the movement and the AASU is running the government?' In December 1979, the civil disobedience campaign was extended to an economic blockade, and movement supporters stopped the flow of crude oil and plywood from Assam to the rest of the country. Support for the movement by officials of the state government and the fact that such officials, most of whom were ethnic Assamese, were often in charge of dealing with protest actions, kept the confrontation between the state and the movement to a minimum. Even when the government adopted a tough posture, usually as a result of proddings by the central government, confrontations between the protesters and the police were avoided.

With enthusiastic support for the demands of the movement by major sectors of Assamese intellectual and cultural life—for example, literary societies, cultural associations, newspapers, magazines, and school and college teachers associations, apart from the leadership role of the All Assam Students Union (AASU)—the Assam movement had extremely broad support among the ethnic Assamese. The campaign, in which hundreds of thousands participated with displays of distinctive

Assamese cultural and historical symbols, acquired the appearance of a state-wide cultural festival, individuals and organizations with influence among segments of the 'plains tribals,' a group that had lost significant amounts of cultivable land to East Bengali immigrants over time, and of tea plantation workers also supported the movement. There were, however, some distinguished ethnic Assamese intellectuals and political figures, mostly of the political left, who were opposed to the movement. They complained of a suffocating intellectual atmosphere where there was little room for dissent. There were reports of terrorist attacks on opponents of the movement.

The ethnic subgroups directly threatened by the demands of the movement were the East Bengali immigrants, both Hindu and Muslim. The increasing tendency to lump all East Bengali immigrants as 'Bangladeshis' irrespective of when they came, did little to assuage their fears. There were reports of increasing violence against East Bengali immigrants in the atmosphere created by the movement, even though the sponsors of the movement condemned the violence. Initially the attitude of most East Bengali immigrants was to lie low, and there were few efforts to present an organized opposition to the Assam movement by groups directly threatened by its demands.

Immigrants from other states of India also felt insecure. The leaders of the movement had to do some careful conflict management to assuage the fears of some of these groups. Despite the support for the movement by important organizations of tea workers, there were reports of clashes between tea workers and student picketers attempting to close down tea plantations. The AASU responded by excluding tea plantations from picketing, and the assistance of tea workers' unions was sought in order to explain to the workers that the agitation was not directed against them.<sup>8</sup>

The leaders of the movement called for a boycott of the parliamentary elections of December 1979 unless the government agreed to remove the names of foreigners from the rolls. Potential candidates were asked not to contest elections until the electoral rolls were revised. Picketing of candidates by movement supporters led to confrontations with the police. Owners of printing presses in Assam refused to print the electoral rolls for the election. As a result of the boycott, the election that returned Indira Gandhi to power nationally could be held only in two constituencies in Assam, located in the predominantly Bengali-speaking Cachar district. Elections had to be cancelled in 12 of Assam's 14 parliamentary constituencies.

By May 1980, ethnic subgroups directly threatened by the demands of the movement began to form organizations to oppose these demands.

In May 1980, a new organization, the All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), which attempted to include both Muslim and Hindu East Bengali immigrant students, appeared on the scene to rival the AASU. While not disputing the seriousness of the problem of illegal immigration, the AAMSU demanded that all immigrants who came before 1971 be given citizenship status and that harassment against minorities be stopped. The AASU opposed the new organization, and in certain strong immigrant strongholds strike calls on days that AAMSU had called for protest demonstrations led to violent conflicts between AASU and AAMSU supporters. Apart from ethnic violence, a growing number of terrorist attacks on state officials and state property began to be reported in Assam.

By September 1980 the immigrant organizations had become a third force in the negotiations on the Assam movement's demands. The government invited AAMSU leaders to Delhi for consultation during the negotiations between the government and the movement leaders. The leader of the Assam Congress (I), Anwara Taimur, who was elected to the state Assembly from a heavily East Bengali immigrant constituency and was seen as a representative of immigrant interests, was also in Delhi during the negotiations.

As the negotiation appeared less and less likely to produce an agreement, the movement leaders intensified their protest actions. The government attempted to raise the costs of participation in the movement by using more and more coercion in dealing with protesters and by taking disciplinary actions against state government officials who participated in the movement. The Assamese press that was sympathetic to the demands of the movement came under censorship. In November 1980, the Indian army was used to break the 11-month-old oil blockade.

## CONFRONTATION

The inauguration of a Congress (I) government led by an Assamese Muslim, Anwara Taimur, in December 1980 marked a new phase in the Assam movement. The Taimur government, formed as a result of defections to the Congress (I) from other parties, survived for only six months. President's Rule was then imposed once again in June 1981. In January 1982, the new Congress (I) government led by Keshab Gogoi came to power, but survived only two months. In March 1982, President's Rule was imposed once again and the state assembly, elected in 1978 under very different political conditions, was dissolved. The dissolution of the state assembly meant that the day of reckoning in Assam was approaching because the constitution did not allow for the

extension of President's Rule beyond a year and elections would have had to take place unless the constitution itself was amended. Yet it was unlikely that an election could be held without an agreement between the movement leaders and the government.

The decision to end President's Rule and to form a state government in December 1980 had indicated New Delhi's decision to challenge the power capability of the movement and to back electoral institutions that reflected the demographic realities of the state. The movement's power capability lay on the streets, since it could mobilize the ethnic Assamese almost to a person, but the same power capability cannot be translated into electoral strength because of the state's ethnic diversity and transformed demographic reality. Not unexpectedly, the movement leaders greeted the state government with a call for a general strike. The government, whom the leaders of the movement refused to 'recognize' as legitimate, had to rule with maximum police protection and minimal public visibility.

The Taimur government took action against ethnic Assamese government officials who were known sympathizers of the movement, including the arrest of one of the top-most police officials of the state. In order to use coercive measures against the movement, Taimur effectively had to transform the state bureaucracy. For instance, her personal secretariat, it was reported, had only Muslim gazetted officers or executives.<sup>9</sup> These measures accentuated the legitimacy crisis in the state, for the process appeared to be one of de-Assamization of the state bureaucracy and it reinforced the fear of Assamese minoritization, the loss of Assamese hegemony to immigrants. The election of Taimur to the chief ministry of the state itself had ruptured the subtle rules on ethnic accommodation in Assam's politics.<sup>10</sup>

In the months following the inauguration of the Taimur ministry, there was an increase in the incidence of violence. In April 1981, one of the state's highest-ranking civil servants, who was identified with measures to tighten discipline among state government employees, was killed in a terrorist bomb attack. There were signs of tensions in the Assamese ethnic coalition. However, there was little evidence of any significant erosion of the movement's support base in the ethnic Assamese areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. State coercion was a double-edged device. While it was expected to increase the costs of participation in the movement, it also reinforced a sense of justice of the cause, while the erosion of influence of ethnic Assamese officials reinforced the fears of Assamese minoritization. The choice of Gogoi as chief minister in January 1982 was an attempt to limit the damage. Gogoi, an ethnic Assamese, was Ahom by caste,<sup>11</sup> which was another potential weak link

in the Assamese ethnic coalition. While his government survived for only two months, the period was characterized by a somewhat reduced level of coercive actions and the release of the senior ethnic Assamese police official arrested by the Taimur government.

The President's Rule regime that was brought in after the collapse of the Gogoi government in March 1982 once again went about the task of cleansing the administration of officials in sympathy with the movement. There was increasing use of coercion. By January 1983 it was reported that the capital city of Gauhati and the towns of the Brahmaputra Valley were 'virtually armed camps'. In view of the 'presumed unreliability' of the state police forces, paramilitary forces were brought in from the centre and from other states. On the streets of the capital city, according to an *Economic and Political Weekly* editorial, there was 'a premium in not being an Assamese', because ethnic Assamese young men were likely to be arrested and beaten up. The Republic Day celebration of 26 January 1983, which was boycotted by movement supporters, turned into a 'blatant display of military muscle against its citizens'.<sup>12</sup>

The 23rd round of negotiations between the government and the movement leaders took place in December 1982 amid reports that the government was determined to hold elections in Assam by March 1983.

### THE BREAKDOWN OF ORDER

The state assembly election of February 1983 marked the breakdown of Assam's framework of ethnic accommodation and of political order. The election was a direct challenge of the central government to the Assam movement. The election was to be held on the basis of the electoral rolls prepared in 1979, which had precipitated the Assam movement. No attempt was made to revise the rolls to incorporate the points of agreement between the movement leaders and the government—that is, to remove the names of post-1971 immigrants from the rolls. Indeed, apart from sidestepping all the thorny questions of illegal aliens that had rocked the state for three years, the use of four-year-old electoral rolls was problematic since it did not include voters who had come of age during the preceding four years.

The question in the election was not who would win, but whether there would be an election at all. The holding of the election became the focus of a contest between the Assam movement and the Centre. An election with a moderate to high turnout would have weakened the movement's claims about its representativeness and its power capability. The movement leaders, as expected, called for a boycott of the elections.

They portrayed the election as Assam's 'last struggle for survival'. The east Bengali immigrants, on the other hand, had few alternatives but to display their appreciation of the Centre's support for their cause by participating in the voting in large numbers. The breakdown of the framework of ethnic accommodation was complete.

Voter participation mostly followed a pattern predictable from the ethnic settlement patterns. In constituencies where Bengalis were predominant, the polling was high; in Assamese strongholds, it was low. The attitude to the election, however, did not vary only across the Assamese-Bengali divide. The developments of the preceding two years had led to fissures in the weak links of the Assamese ethnic coalition. Moreover, apart from the Congress (I), some opposition parties also contested the election. In areas where there were significant numbers of both pro-election and anti-election ethnic subgroups, violent confrontations took place. In a detailed investigative report, the Indian journalist Arun Shourie called the violence a 'Hobbesian war of all against all'.

They testified not so much to 'communalism' as to the total breakdown of governance: in Nellie Lalung tribals killed Bengali Muslims, in Kokrajhar subdivision Boro Kacharis fought Bengali Hindus and Muslims; in Goreswar and Khairabari Sarani and Boro Kacharis fought Bengali Hindus; in Gohpur Boros fought Assamese Hindus; in Dhemaji and Jonai Mishing tribals fought Bengali Hindus and Muslims; in Samaguri Muslims killed Hindus; in Dhaila and Thekrabari again Muslims killed Hindus; in Chaowlkhowa Chaporis Assamese Hindus and Muslims together killed Bengali Muslims. And each community that was a victim in one place was a predator in another.<sup>13</sup>

The pattern of violence reflected the total breakdown of order. If the violence did not follow neat ethnic cleavages, it is because of the oscillating and coalitional nature of ethnic projects in Assam. The violence took place along the weak links in ethnic coalitions. Most of the violence occurred as supporters of the election clashed with opponents. In so far as the attitude toward the election—which to many became Assam's 'last struggle for survival'—defined the contours of ethnic conflict in Assam, the violence reflected the local variations in ethnic alignments.

The violence took place partly because of inadequate intervention by the police. Even though there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the election would be violent, the holding of an election amidst the prevailing ethnic and political polarization was no ordinary law and order problem. Arun Shourie's investigative report revealed that the government estimated that the election could be held safely in 30

of the 126 constituencies despite ethnic Assamese opposition. In 78 constituencies, polling was expected to be between 30 per cent and 65 per cent, and in the rest between 1 per cent and 30 per cent.<sup>14</sup> These estimates were probably based on calculations of settlement patterns of ethnic subgroups. A prior secret intelligence report had calculated that the ethnic Assamese were a minority in as many as 85 of the state's 126 constituencies.<sup>15</sup>

The government prepared for the anticipated disruption and poll violence by mobilizing large contingents of military and police forces from the rest of the country. The estimated need for security personnel was so high that the election was staggered over three days to allow for the movement of security personnel. Furthermore, all intelligence warnings about potential violent ethnic conflicts in areas other than the polling stations themselves had to be ignored in order to concentrate security personnel at the polling stations. One of these was from a local police official who warned that 'one thousand Assamese villagers [are] getting ready to attack' East Bengali immigrant villages 'with deadly weapons'. That warning which anticipated the massacre in Nellie that was reported widely in the international press, was filed three days before the massacre. According to official figures, 1,383 men, women, and children were killed in that massacre.<sup>16</sup>

The poll boycott was quite effective in the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Of Assam's 126 Assembly constituencies, only Congress (I) candidates contested and won unopposed in four constituencies. In 14 constituencies elections had to be cancelled because of the 'total breakdown of law and administration'. In some strong ethnic Assamese constituencies, the polling was as low as 0.38 per cent (269 voters), 0.40 per cent (360 voters), and 0.68 per cent (440 voters).<sup>17</sup>

### CONTEST BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE MOVEMENT

The expectation of a moderately legitimate government was considerably undercut by the extent of the violence and the effectiveness of the boycott campaign. The election brought a new Congress (I) government headed by Hiteshwar Saikia, an ethnic Assamese who is Ahom as chief minister for the second consecutive time is significant since there was a widespread perception that the Assam movement had its strongest support among ethnic Assamese 'upper' castes.

The new government's strategy of dealing with the movement combined political manoeuvring with the use of coercion. It sought to wean support away from the Assam movement by allocating governmental patronage to groups that constitute weak links in the Assamese

ethnic coalition. The election violence had already strained the coalition. Ever since the election of Anwara Taimur as chief minister there had been some signs that sections of ethnic Assamese Muslims might have had second thoughts about their participation in the movement. The large number of Muslim victims in the election violence and the national and international press coverage of it as a case of Muslims being killed strained the Assamese Muslim attitude toward the movement.<sup>18</sup>

By May 1983 there was indication of a split in the AASU. At a secret conclave, several Muslim members of the AASU leadership issued an ultimatum to the AASU leadership demanded a 'firm definition' of a foreigner. The press gave some credit for the growing Hindu-Muslim rift in the ethnic Assamese coalition to the Saikia government.<sup>19</sup>

Rifts began to show in other weak links of the Assamese ethnic coalition as well. The election violence included some instances of conflict between ethnic Assamese opponents of the election and tribal supporters from the plains. In the following months important conferences of plains tribals made demands that emphasized their distinctiveness from the ethnic Assamese, demands that smacked of a rebellion from the Assamese coalition. These demands included recognition of Bodo as an associate official language, the adoption of the Roman script instead of the Assamese script for writing certain other tribal languages, and creation of autonomous districts and regions for plains tribals. The Saikia government probably played a significant role in these rifts: for instance, the government actively patronized the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and promoted it as a rival of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in plains tribal areas. The annual session of the organization was attended by most members of the Saikia cabinet. By contrast, the declining share of government resources and patronage forced the Assam Sahitya Sabha to reconsider its involvement in the Assam movement.<sup>20</sup>

The leadership of the movement had to guard against the growing divisions in the movement. The election violence forced the leadership to suspend the movement and concentrate attention on healing the rifts in the Assamese coalition. In January 1984 the AASU held a National Convention, which was attended by a number of prominent Assamese intellectuals as well as movement activists, in order to search for ways and means for 'regeneration of the Assamese nationality and to provide a united socio-cultural as well as political platform'. The emphasis on unity was a recognition of the impact of the rifts. At the second AASU convention in December 1984, the need to adapt to the ethnic diversity of the state dominated the discussions. The convention formed a committee to compete the 'process of political unification of the various ethnic groups of the Assamese people'. There were discussions that

stressed the need to include tea garden workers, Indian Nepalis, the tribal communities, and 'already assimilated religious minorities' and 'like-minded Indians' in future protest actions.<sup>21</sup>

The Saikia government tried to compete for legitimacy with the Assam movement by emphasizing that the government, led by an ethnic Assamese, was serious about stopping future immigration and about removing the names of post-1971 illegal aliens from the electoral rolls, on which there was agreement between the movement leaders and the central government. Other measures aimed at redefining the policy agenda in order to wean support away from the movement included the carving out of new administrative districts and subdivisions, and symbolic concessions to Assamese ethnic pride such as changing the English spelling of the Assamese city from the Anglicized Gauhati to the more Assamese Guwahati. The government secured popular support for some of these measures. For instance, the response to the calls for strikes by the movement leaders to greet the inauguration of the headquarters of the new districts was weak even in the movement's strongholds. 'We should have ignored the move', said an AASU leader after the failure of their strike calls. 'How do you expect people to protest against a step that upgraded their small towns to district headquarters?'<sup>22</sup> Even though political manoeuvring to break the Assamese coalition was a major part of the new government's strategy in dealing with the Assam movement, coercion also continued to play a major role. Journalists working for Assamese newspapers and magazines were the special targets of the new coercive measures. Many were arrested and beaten up in police lock-ups.<sup>23</sup>

The measures, however, failed to cut into the movement's popular base. During its 33-month rule, members of the Saikia cabinet were greeted by strikes and boycotts during their visits to ethnic Assamese areas. The sponsors of the movement refused to extend 'recognition' to the Saikia government. The non-recognition was effective enough that when the central government decided to return to the negotiating table in the spring of 1984, it carefully left out the Saikia government since its participation would have led the movement leaders to leave the talks. The agreement to dissolve the state assembly when the Assam accord was signed was a concession to the movement's continued power capability.

#### ACCOMMODATION

After 18 months, negotiations between the Government of India and the movement leaders were initiated once again in April 1984. An

accord was signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and leaders of the Assam movement on 15 August 1985, India's Independence Day. According to the accord, illegal aliens who entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 will be deported. The state assembly elected in 1983 was dissolved and fresh elections based on revised electoral roles took place in December 1985. An amendment to India's citizenship law that was enacted by the parliament in November 1985 stipulated that non-citizens who are found to have entered Assam between 1961 and 1971 will enjoy all rights of citizens except the right to vote for 10 years.

The accommodation phase had begun in the middle of 1984. Several factors brought back an atmosphere of optimism about the prospects for a negotiated settlement. First, the central government recognized the movement's power capability by keeping the state government away from the negotiations. Second, administrative measures for revising electoral rolls, based on earlier points of agreement such as the disenfranchisement of post-1971 aliens, helped win the trust of the movement leadership. Third, even though the ice had been broken before the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the change of leadership in Delhi in late 1984 was a factor in the renewed goodwill between the centre and the leaders of the movement.

Election officials were increasingly taking the AASU into their confidence in the process of revising the rolls. By the end of 1984 there was a break between the AASU, which supported the administrative process of revising the electoral rolls, and one of the regional political parties behind the movement which believed that the measures were unlikely to be effective. The AASU began to consider the formation of a new regional political party. Its second National Convention in December 1984 emphasized the need to bring together different ethnic subgroups in the Assamese ethnic coalition under a common political platform.

Once the accord was signed the revision of electoral rolls was taken up even more earnestly. The procedures followed were controversial. Crisis claimed that a large number of names of legal citizens were removed from the electoral rolls.<sup>24</sup> The final electoral roll on the basis of which the December election was contested had 9,806,285 voters—689,715 fewer than on the updated electoral roll of October 1984, which listed 10,496,000 voters.<sup>25</sup>

After the signing of the accord, two new parties emerged: the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), formed by the student leaders of the Assam movement, and the United Minorities Front (UMF), formed by major East Bengali Hindu and Muslim politicians who had been members

of the Congress (I). If the implementation of the Assam accord was the main issue for the AGP, the UMF demanded that the accord be scrapped. In the election the AGP won 64 seats and 35.17 per cent of the popular vote, followed by the Congress (I) with 25 seats and 23.43 per cent of the popular vote and the UMF with 17 seats and 11.09 per cent of the votes.

The election results allow some preliminary formulations on the pattern of ethnic voting. While the UMF hoped to bring all 'minorities'—for example, immigrant Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Assamese Muslims, Nepalis and tribals—within its framework, it did not do well except for some major concentrations of East Bengali Muslims.<sup>26</sup> The UMF fared poorly in Hindu Bengali areas where most voters seemed to have supported the Congress (I). The AGP itself came much closer to grasping the imperatives of Assam's transformed demographic reality as it entered the electoral fray and used 'Minorities are not Foreigners, AGP for all, all for AGP' as a major campaign slogan.

The AGP came to power on a wave of popular support that was remarkably inclusive: its appeal was not only to the ethnic Assamese, but to many other ethnic subgroups. The AGP won in major 'plains tribal' constituencies in Kokrajhar district, the autonomous district of Karbi Anglong, and the plains-tribal inhabited constituencies in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Darrang. The AGP also won in constituencies that have major concentrations of tea plantation workers—mostly immigrants from Bihar, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh—and were traditional strongholds of the Congress (I). The significant number of Muslims on the AGP's list of candidates suggests that the support for the Assam movement and the AGP among Assamese Muslims despite reversals during certain phases of the movement remained quite high. Certain sections of Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims too appear to have voted for the AGP. The AGP victory in the immigrant Bengali-Muslim dominated Barpeta Assembly and Parliamentary constituencies and the Nowgong Parliamentary constituency supports this hypothesis.<sup>27</sup> This is not surprising when one considers the likely effect of the accord on reconstituting the basis for political alignments on the part of East Bengali immigrants. Apart from the disenfranchisement of significant numbers of aliens, the accord also legitimized the citizenship status of a large number of immigrants: those who came before 1966 and those who came between 1966 and 1971, who were to be legitimized in phases. The past tendency of East Bengali immigrant Muslims to vote as a bloc for the ruling party, which in that context was consistent with support for the ethnic Assamese project, was partly due to the insecurity that went with the legal ambiguity of their status, despite the inclusion

of their names on the electoral rolls. To some extent the basis for that insecurity and bloc voting for the ruling party was gone. An Indian reporter surmised that some immigrants, 'especially those surrounded by Assamese-speaking inhabitants voted for the AGP as a safe course'.<sup>28</sup> The support for the AGP among some sections of Bengali Muslims is also consistent with their support for ethnic Assamese causes in earlier controversies over cultural policy issues.

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The election results reflect ethnic polarization as well as new beginnings of ethnic accommodation. At one level the emergence of two new regional political parties—one based primarily on the ethnic Assamese and the other on those threatened by the demands of the Assam movement—indicates significant ethnic polarization. However, the inclusive nature of the AGP's support, in particular its ability to secure some support among Bengali Muslim immigrants, and the somewhat limited nature of the UMF's support indicate that the forces of polarization were mediated by the forces of accommodation.

One of the most significant effects of the Assam movement is that the immigration issue has been put firmly on the public agenda. Earlier frameworks of ethnic accommodation attempted to obscure the immigration question. The AGP ministry has a new portfolio of Accord Implementation under the chief minister. It indicates the importance attached to the issue by supporters of the Assam movement and of the AGP. Now that the issue has left the backrooms of political horse-trading, there is space for new innovations in dealing with the question. It is likely that electoral realities will bring about an approach to the problem that focuses more on stopping the future influx than on deporting those who are already there. New modes of incorporating illegal aliens—for example, the status of 'guest workers' or of 'permanent residents'—may be considered as options by a government that enjoys the trust of the ethnic Assamese on this question. However, the Assamese are unlikely to accept non-deportation of the post-1971 illegal aliens. Yet deportation will be no easy task. The official position of the Bangladeshi government is that none of their citizens have illegally crossed the border into India. It is unlikely that the Indian government will risk deterioration of its relations with Bangladesh and exacerbation of tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India by seeking to force the issue by the deportation of illegal aliens. There are already indications of opposition in Assam to efforts at soft-pedalling the implementation of the accord.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, since all ethnic subgroups in Assam do take the issue seriously, there is room for a

political resolution. The AGP leadership has shown signs of flexibility by acquiescing to a constitutional amendment introduced during the election campaign that allows disenfranchised non-citizens to continue enjoying all other rights of citizens. Some mix of resettlement of illegal aliens in the rest of the country and phased enfranchisement in return for measures that will stop any future influx may be an acceptable compromise.

The ability to evolve a new framework of ethnic accommodation will remain the key to political stability in Assam. In the course of the Assam movement, the leadership learned that the road to cultural survival of the Assamese lies as much in an inclusive definition of Assameseness as in restricting numbers. If ethnic diversity has the potential to cause political turmoil in Assam, it also holds the possibility for political stability. Even though the old framework of ethnic accommodation broke down, the logic of electoral politics and the imperatives of ethnic diversity will continue to force contestants to search for ethnic accommodation.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the immigration issue in Assam politics in the pre-Independent period, see Amalendu Guha, 'East Bengal Immigrants and Bhasani in Assam Politics 1928-47', *Indian History Congress, Proceedings of the Thirty fifth Session*, Jadavpur, December 1974 (New Delhi: Indian History Congress, n.d.), pp. 348-65.
2. Myron Weiner, 'Seeking Ethnic Equality in Assam', in Myron Weiner and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein (eds), *India's Preferential Policies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 91-119.
3. Ironically, at that time the Government of India's position on illegal immigration from East Pakistan was quite close to the position later taken up by the leaders of the Assam movement. See the pamphlet published by the Indian government on this issue: *Influx: Infiltration from East Pakistan* (Delhi: DAVP, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1963).
4. K.N. Deka, 'Assam: The Challenge of Political Integration and Congress Leadership', in Iqbal Narain (ed.), *State Politics in India* (Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1976), pp. 14-45.
5. To treat Hindu immigrants from East Pakistan and what subsequently became Bangladesh as illegal, irrespective of what the citizenship laws state, would have alienated significant sections of Hindu opinion in the country. On the other hand, to explicitly distinguish between Hindu 'refugees' and Muslim 'illegal aliens' would have cut into the secular fabric of the state and would have alienated India's Muslim minority. To expel 'foreigners' would also have political costs internationally in terms of

India's relations with Bangladesh. The official Bangladesh position is that there are no illegal immigrants from their country in India.

6. The notion of 'power capability' is borrowed from Charles W. Anderson. In delineating the contours of the Latin American political system, where there are various contenders for power with different political resources, he noted: 'As a strike may demonstrate the power capability of a labor union, or insurrection that of a military faction, so election tests and demonstrates the power capability of a political party', *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1967), p. 94.
7. 'Magnitude of Assam Disorder: Report of PUCL Team', *Mainstream* (New Delhi), 18 (28), 8 March (1980), pp. 18–21.
8. U.M., 'Assam: Set for Confrontation', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 (49), 8 December (1979), pp. 1993–4; and Udayon Misra, 'Fresh Tensions in Tea Belt', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 (31), 2 August (1980), p. 1300.
9. 'Plains Tribals Save Assam's Ministry', *Sunday*, 8 (32), 5 April (1981), p. 34.
10. See Deka, 'Assam', in Narain (ed.), *State Politics in India*, pp. 34, 45.
11. The Ahoms, whose forefathers immigrated from present-day Thailand into Assam and ruled Assam for six centuries before the British, are now considered a separate ethnic Assamese caste. There had been a rise of Ahom awareness of separateness from the ethnic Assamese in the years prior to the Assam movement.
12. 'Fraud in Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 (3), 29 January (1983).
13. Arun Shourie, 'Assam Elections: Can Democracy Survive Them?', *India Today*, 8 (10), 31 May (1983), p. 57.
14. Arun Shourie, 'Assam Elections: Come What May', *India Today*, 8 (9), 15 May (1983), p. 56.
15. 'Suspended Agony', *India Today*, 7 (22), 30 November (1982), p. 26.
16. Shourie, 'Assam Elections', pp. 65–6.
17. Jaswant Singh, 'Assam's Crisis of Citizenship', *Asian Survey*, 24 (10), October (1984), p. 1067.
18. The political impact of the international coverage can be gauged by the fact that Indira Gandhi sent an emissary—an Assamese Muslim politician—to the Gulf countries to explain the situation in Assam. See 'The Communal Divide', *India Today*, 8 (9), 15 May (1983), p. 31.
19. Ibid., p. 31.
20. Udayon Misra, 'Assam Sahitya Sabha: Retreat from Populist Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 (15), 14 April (1984), pp. 620–2.
21. Cited by Udayon Misra, 'AASU's Search for a Alternative Platform', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 (50), 15 December (1984), p. 2115. The quotations are attributed to AASU leaders.
22. 'Assam: Bracing For Showdown', *India Today*, 8 (15), 15 August (1983), p. 33.
23. For a description of an incident in which the police shot and killed seven ethnic Assamese villagers, see Udayon Misra, 'Remembering a Police

Killing', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 (17), 28 April (1984). See also Udayon Misra, 'Assam: Assertion of Regional Identity', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 (1), 4 January (1986), pp. 13-14.

24. For a critique of the procedures followed in the revision, see Sujit Choudhuri, 'Election Commission and the Assam Accord', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 (49), 7 December (1985), pp. 2146-7.
25. The 1984 figure is from 'The Faces of Assam', *Sunday*, 12 (50), 17-23 November (1985). The figure of the final electorate is from *Sentinel* (Guwahati), 30 December 1985.
26. A pre-poll report had also concluded that the UMF's support was evident primarily among East Bengali Muslims, 'Caste, Religion Crucial in Assam', *The Times of India*, 15 November 1985.
27. Some parts of this preliminary analysis parallels that of Udayon Misra, 'Assam: Assertion of Regional Identity' (mss.), pp. 13-14.
28. 'The Assam Showdown', *Sunday*, 29 December 1985-4 January 1986, p. 47.
29. 'The Endangered Accord', *India Today*, 11 (5), 15 March (1986), pp. 30-3.