IDENTITY POLITICS AND INSURGENCY IN ASSAM: ISSUES, THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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"IDENTITY POLITICS AND INSURGENCY IN ASSAM: ISSUES, THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES" submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Imankalyan Lahiri, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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CONTENTS

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Abbreviations

AASU – All Assam Students' Union

ABSU – All Bodo Students' Union

AFSPA – Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act

AGP – Asom Gana Parishad

AJYCP – Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad

AJP – Assam Jatiya Parishad

BAC – Bodoland Autonomous Council

BLT – Bodo Liberation Tigers

BLTF – Bodo Liberation Tigers Force

BPAC – Bodo People's Action Committee

BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party

BTC – Bodoland Territorial Council

BTR – Bodoland Territorial Region

CAA – Citizenship Amendment Act

DHD – Dima Halam Daoga

HUJI – Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami

IDSA – Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

INC – Indian National Congress

ISI – Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan)

JMB – Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh

KAAC – Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council

KLO – Kamtapur Liberation Organisation

KNV – Karbi National Volunteers

KMSS – Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti

MULTA – Muslim United Liberation Tigers Association

NDFB – National Democratic Front of Bodoland

NRC – National Register of Citizens

NSCN – National Socialist Council of Nagaland

PLA – People's Liberation Army (Manipur)

PTCA – Plains Tribal Council of Assam

PULF – People's United Liberation Front

RD – Raijor Dal

SULFA – Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam

ULFA – United Liberation Front of Assam

UPDS – United People's Democratic Solidarity

List of Tables

List of Figures

ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex relationship between identity politics and insurgency in Assam, a state that has long been at the heart of Northeast India's political turbulence. It explores how the questions of belonging, recognition, and cultural survival have repeatedly shaped movements that extend far beyond struggles over law and order. Assam's trajectory, deeply influenced by colonial policies of migration and classification, was further complicated after independence when attempts at homogenisation, like the Official Language Act of 1960, created new layers of alienation among diverse communities, and this unresolved tension gradually hardened into demands for autonomy, statehood, or even sovereignty. From the Assam Movement of 1979–1985, which culminated in the Assam Accord yet failed to heal deeper grievances, to the rise of insurgent organisations such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), identity has served both as a rallying point and a fault line, enabling mobilisation while also creating divisions that fragmented the very idea of an "Assamese" nationality.

The research argues that insurgency in Assam is not merely the product of underdevelopment or centre–periphery tensions but a political language of exclusion, one that arises when groups feel that their histories, cultures, and voices are being erased or ignored, and thus insurgency becomes both a protest against the state and a contest among communities within Assam itself. It draws on historical analysis, field interviews, archival records, and discourse analysis, while engaging with theories of recognition, constructivism, and postcolonial state formation to understand how identity-based exclusion has fuelled conflict. Moreover, it reviews state responses, from peace accords to counterinsurgency measures and shows how these have only partially succeeded in addressing grievances, since the persistence of migration debates, NRC-CAA controversies, and competing ethnic claims keeps the landscape unsettled.

The study not only fills a gap in scholarship but also highlights the urgent need for inclusive governance, regional autonomy, and democratic recognition, arguing that without addressing the fundamental issues of identity and belonging, peace in Assam will remain fragile and incomplete.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The Northeast India is one of the most geo-strategically important regions in the context of India. As such, the region has been marked by years of neglect and barriers that have hindered effective assimilation into the mainstream. Despite being one of the most culturally vibrant regions in the country, the Northeast has been a breeding ground for political unrest, instability and external pressures, which have all culminated in a major political influx that often threatens the social fabric of the region. Assam, which has a long history of deprivation and neglect, despite being the gateway to the Northeast India, is often a testament to the political will, or rather the "*unwill*" of the political leadership over the years; and the consequence - long running insurgencies that stretch the socio-political frameworks that are often understood as fickle, threatening collapse, which more so, resembles an implosion of social imagination and not in a good way as it disrupt statehood in itself. Assam and its crises are deep-rooted, revolving around the larger questions of identity, autonomy and recognition, resulting in years of political conflicts along ethnic lines, which are influenced by linguistic, racial and religious differences, coupled with the determination to control vital resources, that eventually shape the trajectory of state politics in Assam.

The emergence of identity-based conflicts in Assam is often rooted in its colonial history, a time when British colonial policies of administrative control and economic exploitation brought about massive demographic and social transformations. Particularly, major historical events such as the partition of Bengal of 1905, which resulted in a substantial influx of migrants for the tea industry and the eventual drawing of rigid ethnic and linguistic categories for census purposes, and the privileging of certain communities over others largely contributed to a fractured landscape of social relations and over time, these fault lines hardened into politically salient divisions. In the years following independence, the Indian state made feeble attempts to integrate Assam within the broader national apparatus. For instance, in 1960, the Assamese Official Language Bill was introduced, which sought to establish Assamese as the sole official language of Assam, but faced backlash and protests. As such, this process of homogenisation, or in this case "*Assamisation*", failed to effectively take into account the internal heterogeneity and historical grievances of the

region. As a result, multiple waves of resistance have emerged, some constitutional, while others were determined to take a rather radical approach, which would mostly be expressed through some level or degree of insurgency. The most prominent among these was the rise of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in the 1980s, which articulated a secessionist vision grounded in Assamese sub-nationalist sentiment and critiques of perceived economic and political marginalisation. At around the same time, the Assam Movement (1979-1985), spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), was the largest mass movement India witnessed in its newly independent era, which ultimately culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. However, the Accord did not succeed in resolving the deep-seated grievances of the people and still has long-lasting repercussions. Moreover, the persistent dissatisfaction, coupled with a pervasive sense of marginalisation among indigenous groups, provided enough fuel for the emergence of other ethnic-insurgencies, most notably, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which rose to prominence in the aftermath of the failures of these shallow attempts by the mainstream leadership. What ensued was that these groups articulated demands for outright sovereignty, greater autonomy, or even separate statehood, frequently citing arguments rooted in economic deprivation, political exclusion, and perceived demographic threats.

It would be misleading and rather simplistic, however, to treat the political trajectory of Assam as a sort of opposition or conflict between the centre and the periphery. What is more evident is a complex and shifting relationship between various ethnic groups, each with its own imagination of self-identity and political aspiration that would be later concretised into their political will to place demands upon the state. As such, movements led by Bodos, Karbis, Koch-Rajbongshis, and others emerged not only as responses to the Indian state but also as critiques of Assamese hegemonic discourse within the state's internal configuration. While the intensity of insurgent activities in Assam has demonstrably declined over the years due to the appeasement and wooing of the central leadership and administration, identity-based conflicts remain a much-relevant reality, both politically and socially. Recent developments, the vigorous debates surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the complex issues associated with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), have renewed focus on the questions of ethnic identity and territorial sovereignty, within the broader framework of identity politics. As such, it can also be understood that although the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Agreement (2020) represented an effort to

address long-standing grievances, demands for autonomy and more robust ethnic representation within the region continue to persist and shape the nuances of the socio-political fabric in Assam.

This thesis, very broadly, explores the evolving relationship between identity politics and insurgency in Assam. The central idea in the thesis is that insurgency in the region is best understood not merely as a product of underdevelopment or state violence, but as a political expression of identity-based exclusion and historical misrecognition in which identity has been both a language of protest and a site of conflict, used to resist marginalisation, assert autonomy, and at times, to exclude others. Understanding the dynamics of identity politics and insurgency in Assam, as a matter of fact, is crucial for analysing the causes and evolution of ethno-political movements in Northeast India. In addition to evaluating government responses and peace negotiations, it is also crucial to identify the long-term strategies for sustainable conflict resolution and development. The central questions that guide this research are: How has identity been constructed and politicised in Assam? In what ways has the assertion of identity led to insurgent mobilisation? And how has the state responded to these movements, both in terms of repression and accommodation? By combining historical analysis, conceptual reflection, and field-level data, this study aims to understand not just the causes of conflict but also the possibilities for meaningful resolution, shedding light on the complexities of identity construction and reproduction and the outcome of such political expression.

1.2 Scope of the Study

The insurgency problem has been one of the most serious challenges faced by the states of the north-eastern region (NER) of India. The reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis opened up Pandora's box for further fragmentation and division in a multi-racial and multilingual country like India.[1] The multifaceted cultural, linguistic and racial composition of the states of the NER made it the most adversely affected by the policy of reorganisation of states. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Nagas and the Mizos raised arms to voice their demand for separate homelands. By the 1970s, insurgency was on the rise in the states of Manipur and Assam. The cause of insurgency in Assam is embedded in history, geography and socio-economic factors. However, one recurring

[1] H. K. Barpujari, *"General President's Address: North-East India: The Problems and Policies Since 1947,"* in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 56 (Indian History Congress, 1995), 1–73.

phenomenon in the discourse and discussions on insurgency in Assam revolves around the concept of identity politics. One of the most critical complexities can be found in the functioning of the Sixth Schedule, for although district councils were formally intended to safeguard tribal identity, customs, and land rights, in practice they often created parallel legislative and judicial structures that clashed with the authority of the state, thereby producing a system marked as much by contestation as by autonomy. While these councils were furnished with liberal provisions such as exemptions from taxation, special educational reservations, and targeted financial assistance, there remained a persistent belief among the hill populations that resources meant for their development were being redirected to benefit the plains, and even though official commissions went so far as to dismiss such complaints as "without substance," the perception of discrimination endured and hardened over time, fuelling resentment and strengthening demands for greater autonomy. This sense of mismatch between constitutional design and lived experience illustrates how administrative frameworks, conceived as protective in nature, could just as easily entrench ethnic grievances rather than resolve them.

Barpujari, in his wide-ranging account, also draws attention to what he describes as the "Balkanisation of Assam,"[2] a process that he directly links to administrative missteps, noting how Assamese elites often failed to draw a careful distinction between integration and assimilation and instead advanced a vision of "Greater Assam" that alienated the state's tribal communities. The enactment of the 1960 Official Language Act, which elevated Assamese to the position of sole state language, became the clearest expression of this policy, for while it was justified in the name of unity, it sparked widespread mistrust and deep-seated fears of cultural encroachment among non-Assamese groups who increasingly came to feel that their identities were being deliberately subsumed. These dynamics would, in due course, set the stage for waves of insurgent mobilisation, as a range of ethnic groups sought to defend their land, their culture, and their political voice through demands that ranged from enhanced autonomy and separate statehood to, in some cases, outright sovereignty. Yet, the fragmentation of Assam into multiple smaller political units did not bring about stability but rather multiplied sources of conflict, since the creation of new states led to the emergence of enduring inter-state boundary disputes with Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh, each of which soon began asserting its claims by erecting police posts,

[2] Ibid.

establishing markets, or even encouraging settlement in contested territories, thereby fuelling recurring cycles of violence and mistrust. As such, the administrative responses to the challenge of identity politics, whether expressed in the form of constitutional safeguards, linguistic policy, or state reorganisation, did not ultimately succeed in reconciling competing aspirations but instead produced overlapping sovereignties and chronic insecurity, deepening the political fault lines in the region rather than repairing them.

In a society that is at once multi-cultural and multi-linguistic, identity inevitably becomes one of the primary markers through which unity and disunity are both experienced, for people often find themselves divided along lines of ethnicity, religion, caste, gender, and other affiliations that define social life. In conditions where inequality and discrimination prevail, identity politics can indeed serve as a powerful instrument for groups to articulate their interests and aspirations and, in certain circumstances, to secure recognition or rights that have long been denied; yet the same process also fragments society, creating divisions that stand in the way of the broader integration of communities which is so essential to the building of a nation or state. When one particular identity, whether it be national, sub-national, ethnic, or religious, comes to dominate over the many others, it tends to generate tensions and rivalries that give rise to identity crises, and such crises, in turn, provide fertile ground for the emergence of insurgency and militancy, thereby perpetuating further conflict and instability within an already divided society. In this respect, identity politics and insurgency are not only closely correlated but also mutually reinforcing, for the desperation of certain groups to secure their objectives through identity politics often escalates into militant or insurgent movements. This is by no means a new phenomenon in Northeast India, where questions of identity have always been both complex and vital, given the extraordinary diversity of cultures, languages, religions, races, and ethnicities in the region. Assam, in particular, has long stood as a prominent example of these dynamics. The consequences of Partition in 1947 were deeply felt in the Northeast, for while it was hoped that the division of the subcontinent might bring some measure of unity among diverse groups, the reality was quite the opposite, as Partition only deepened the divides within and between the already fragmented communities of the region. The subsequent reorganisation of states did little to heal these fractures and instead provided fresh grounds for different groups to press their claims for autonomy, some demanding full-fledged statehood while others were prepared to settle for autonomy within Assam itself. For Assam, this

process marked the beginning of one of its most enduring crises. Partition, described by some as a "blessing in disguise" for political leaders, enabled the push for Assamese integration and the assertion of an Assamese nationality,[3] yet this very assertion provoked widespread anxiety among various ethnic groups and tribes who were reluctant to identify themselves wholly and unambiguously as "Assamese." The absence of a precise legal or constitutional definition of who qualifies as Assamese only compounded the matter, giving rise to prolonged debates and disputes over the meaning of Assamese identity and the contested interpretations that continue to shape politics in the state.

In the decades that followed, conflicts, competition, and mutual distrust began to spread among the different groups and communities of Assam, and this atmosphere quickly became a fertile ground for identity politics, which in turn further complicated and aggravated the already delicate relationships that bound these groups together. The result was a marked rise in insurgency, as movements began to emerge with demands that centred on questions of identity, language, separatism, and autonomy, thereby giving rise to a deepening crisis of identity in the state. The origins of Assamese nationalism can be traced back to the colonial period, particularly to 1836 when the British administration introduced Bengali as the official language of Assam, a move that provoked considerable resentment among the Assamese middle class and eventually led to the reversal of the policy in 1873, when Assamese was reinstated as an official language.[4] This sense of cultural assertion later evolved into a political force with the Assam Movement, also known as the Anti-Foreigners' Agitation, which marked the point at which Assamese nationalism began to take a more organised and forceful shape, but at the same time, it created deep controversy and unease among the state's tribal groups and linguistic minorities who felt threatened by the growing dominance of Assamese identity. The agitation itself opened the door to insurgency, and the emergence of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) provided both inspiration and a model for other ethnic groups to form their own militant organisations in pursuit of autonomy or recognition. Over time, this led to the proliferation of outfits such as the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the Karbi National

[3] Haresamudram Srikanth, "Militancy and identity politics in Assam." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2000): 4117-4124.
[4] Debajyoti Biswas, "Deconstructing Assamese Nationalism Vis-a-vis Indian Nationalism." In *Global Perspectives on Nationalism*, pp. 133-152. Routledge, 2022.

Volunteers (KNV), Dima Halam Daoga (DHD), the Koch Rajbongshi Protection Force, the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), the Rabha National Security Force, and the Muslim United Liberation Tigers Association (MULTA), to name only some of the more prominent ones. Nor was this confined to Assam alone, for militant groups operating in neighbouring states, such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K and NSCN-IM), the People's United Liberation Front (PULF), and the National Liberation Front (NLF), also gained traction and exerted influence on the wider region. The creation of Nagaland as a separate state, together with the passage of the Assam Reorganisation and North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971, emboldened groups in Karbi Anglong, the North Cachar Hills, and among tribes in the plains to demand greater autonomy as a stepping stone to eventual statehood.[5] What unfolded, therefore, was a process in which the Assam Agitation not only sharpened intra-ethnic tensions but also gave rise to a range of separatist movements that undermined the very notion of a cohesive "Assamese nationality." While it is true that militancy has diminished in more recent times due to shifts in governmental policy and efforts to initiate peace processes, many groups continue to operate in smaller factions, and it would be premature to conclude that insurgency has been eliminated entirely. Indeed, as insurgency in Assam has always been a direct offshoot of identity politics, the persistence of unresolved identity-based grievances means that without a concerted effort to address these fundamental issues and their long-term consequences, there can be little assurance of achieving a permanent resolution to the problem in the near future.

Despite decades of counterinsurgency operations, the signing of peace accords, and repeated attempts at governance reform, the reality remains that identity politics continues to be decisive and influential on the socio-political landscape of Assam, shaping the way in which communities interact with both the state and each other. Although militant organisations such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) have weakened considerably over the years, the persistence of ethnic tensions, demands for varying degrees of autonomy, and grievances centred on economic deprivation and political marginalisation reveals that the core issues have not been resolved. The failure of earlier policies to fully integrate the state's diverse ethnic groups and to provide durable solutions to long-standing

[5] Col Ved Prakash, *Encyclopaedia of North-East India*. Vol. 2. Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2007.

conflicts has ensured that Assam remains prone to periodic outbreaks of violence, continuing political instability, and periodic resurgences of separatist sentiment. While agreements such as the Assam Accord of 1985 or the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Agreement of 2020, along with other governmental interventions, have been presented as milestones towards peace, they have only partially addressed the deeper causes of ethnic mobilisation and insurgency, leaving fundamental questions unanswered. In more recent times, controversies surrounding migration, the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and state responses to renewed ethnic assertions have further reinforced the sense of exclusion, insecurity, and political uncertainty among many communities in Assam. It is against this backdrop that the present research seeks to examine critically the intersection between identity politics and insurgency in Assam, with particular attention to their historical roots, contemporary challenges, and possible trajectories for the future, and in doing so it aims to contribute to ongoing policy debates on conflict resolution, regional autonomy, and the pursuit of genuinely inclusive governance in Northeast India.

The nexus between identity politics and insurgency in Assam remains one of the most critical areas of inquiry within political science, conflict studies, and the broader discourse on South Asian security, for it continues to reveal how deeply historical grievances and contemporary challenges intertwine. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to provide a multidimensional analysis that not only traces the socio-political and economic factors which have historically shaped insurgent movements in Assam but also engages with the contemporary security dilemmas and governance responses that frame current realities. While there is a substantial body of scholarship on ethnic insurgencies in India, much of the focus has traditionally been directed towards Kashmir, Punjab, and Naxalism, leaving Assam relatively underexplored, and this research seeks to fill that gap by bridging theoretical perspectives on identity and conflict through the integration of constructivist, postcolonial, and structuralist frameworks, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the persistence of identity-based insurgency. In doing so, the study also aims to contribute empirical depth through fieldwork, interviews, and archival research, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data in order to assess how identity politics continues to shape Assam's socio-political landscape in tangible ways. Importantly, the analysis places insurgency in Assam within a wider comparative frame, drawing parallels with other identity-driven movements

in Chechnya and Sri Lanka, thus situating the case within global debates on the politics of ethnicity and secession. At the same time, the study underscores the practical relevance of its findings by evaluating the Indian state's historical difficulties in resolving insurgency through both military and political strategies, and by offering a critical assessment of major agreements such as the Assam Accord of 1985 and the Bodoland Territorial Region Agreement of 2020 alongside broader counterinsurgency policies, it identifies not only policy successes but also the structural shortcomings that have hindered long-term conflict resolution. The research examines in detail the long-term consequences of surrender and rehabilitation policies, state reintegration programmes, and economic incentive schemes, asking to what extent they have been able to reduce armed resistance and foster trust, while also acknowledging their limitations. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide evidence-based policy recommendations that prioritise regional autonomy, inclusive governance, and sustainable peacebuilding, emphasising that unless identity-based grievances are addressed through democratic institutions and political accommodation, rather than being suppressed through armed confrontation, there can be no guarantee of lasting stability in Assam or in the wider Northeast.

The findings of this study are particularly important for making sense of the contemporary threats to peace, stability and security in Assam, especially given the rise of new forms of identity-based tension that are increasingly linked to debates around the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), as well as to unresolved border conflicts and demographic anxieties that continue to unsettle the region. In examining these issues, the research also considers the role of former insurgents in processes of peacebuilding, asking whether they can effectively transform themselves into mediators, policymakers, or leaders within civil society who might contribute to post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in Assam, rather than remaining on the margins of politics. By addressing these interrelated themes in both their local and regional dimensions, the research seeks to provide not only a holistic understanding of post-insurgency challenges in Assam but also to outline viable policy frameworks that can promote long-term stability, promote ethnic reconciliation, and ensure that conflict transformation is embedded within inclusive and democratic governance structures.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Literature Review: Identity Politics and Recognition Theory

Identity politics scholarship spans multiple disciplines, emphasising that identity is complex, socially constructed, and shaped through interaction rather than inheritance. Wendt (1992) defines identities as "relatively stable, role-specific understandings" that emerge through social processes, while Abrams and Hogg (2006) stress the relational dimension, showing how individuals understand themselves through others. Taylor (2021) advances this by arguing that "my identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame" for judging what is valuable or endorsed, emphasising the dialogical development of identity. Erikson (1959) contributes a psychological perspective, noting that identity formation is developmental, not automatic, and requires communities to achieve social awareness before group identities can emerge. Bhargava (2002) highlights that identities are maintained by preserving consistency in meaningful aspects, even as other characteristics change, resolving the tension between continuity and transformation. Recognition theory challenges conventional liberal approaches, with Taylor (1995) arguing that misrecognition harms self-esteem and constitutes a justice issue rather than a symbolic gesture. Parekh (2001, 1996) extends this critique, rejecting liberal universalism and advocating transparent dialogue among communities, while Kymlicka (1991, 1995) defends minority rights within liberalism, arguing that stable "societal cultures" are essential for individuals to make autonomous choices. Habermas (2003) contrasts pre-modern, stable identities with modern politicised ones shaped by centralised nation-states, while Fukuyama (2015) observes that state attempts to enforce uniform identities often strengthen smaller cultural groups. Wallerstein (1995) situates identity politics in the context of modernity's breakdown of grand narratives. Giroux (1995) and Faulks (1999) note that contemporary movements often arise from identity-focused struggles and institutional distrust, while constructivists such as Berger and Luckmann (2016) argue that identities emerge socially, becoming naturalised through repeated interaction. Giddens (1991) introduces ontological security, showing that threats to familiar cultural frameworks produce defensive, anxiety-driven identity politics, a pattern evident in Assam, where demographic shifts and territorial reorganisation challenged Assamese identity, leading to movements such as the Assam Agitation and NRC. Yuval-Davis (2011) emphasises that belonging involves ongoing contestations over inclusion along racial, linguistic, and religious lines, highlighting the politicised nature of identity. Colonial experiences also shape identity politics, as Fanon (1963) and Memmi (2013) demonstrate how oppression generates enduring grievances. The

liberal ideal of toleration, as Deveaux (2000) and Gutmann (1993) show, often fails to guarantee equal visibility for diverse groups, while Gellner (1983) warns that identity politics can fragment pluralist societies when electoral or communal pressures dominate. In international relations, Wendt (1992) analyses identities through state interactions, Mearsheimer (2017) examines nationalism's effect on conflict, Smith (1998) traces national identity narratives, and Anderson (2020) shows how collective identities transcend borders. Collectively, these works demonstrate that identity politics emerges from historical marginalisation, the struggle for recognition, social construction, and contested belonging, shaping individual, collective, political, and global behaviour in profound and enduring ways.

1.3.2 Insurgency and Armed Movements in Assam

The insurgency in Assam, particularly led by groups like ULFA, NDFB, and Bodo militant factions, has been the subject of extensive academic inquiry. Sanjib Baruah (1999) in *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of how Assam's insurgency emerged from historical grievances, economic deprivation, and migration anxieties. Sanjib Baruah states that separatism is only one of the many voices in the complex political landscape in Assam. However, it has led to serious problems and a political crisis. He talks about the sub-national ideology that is giving rise to these problems. As mentioned earlier, the conflicts regarding ethnicity in Assam are more concerned with sub-national ideology. Ethnic groups are becoming conscious about their sub-national identity (ethnicity) and are detaching themselves from the national identity of being an "Assamese." This consciousness of identifying oneself with the sub-national identity is seen in almost all the groups in Assam. Even the Muslims who were "*Assamised*" in trade for land later, demanded a separate territory for the Muslims in Assam and were not satisfied with the Assamese dominance. The instance of the Bodos/ Kachari can be taken into account when we talk about divisions and fragmentations within the group. Sarania Kachari previously belonged to a sub tribe of Kachari, but later did not agree to identify wholly as Kachari and demanded Sarania to be a distinct and separate identity with regard to their ethnicity.

His later work, *In the Name of the Nation (2020),* expands on how contemporary political shifts, such as NRC and CAA, continue to shape ethnic conflicts. Udayon Misra (2017) in *The*

Immigration Issue in Assam examines how demographic changes due to cross-border migration have fuelled identity-based resistance, contributing to both political movements and insurgencies. Udayon Mishra reviews the pre-independence and post-independence changes in demographics and politics in Assam. He also examines the conflicts between the Assamese Middle class and Muslims in Assam. Further, Mishra analyses the language issues and conflicts between the tribals and middle-class Assamese people. According to Mishra, Assamese identity formation will be the intersection of various religious, ethnic and linguistic divisions in Assam. Mishra points out two important factors for the unification of the people of Assam. One being the Language Movement (when Bengali was declared as the official language in Assam in April 1836). And the other being, the increase of Bengali peasants from Bangladesh in order to cultivate barren lands in Assam. The first factor affected mostly the middle-class Assamese, who were to face domination in the future by Bengali clerks and administrators, while the second factor affected the tribal people of both plains and hills, as they felt alienated from the land. These two factors united the whole of Assam against the Bengalis, and thus, the feeling of resentment was growing in the minds of the people of Assam.

Nani Gopal Mahanta (2013) in *Conflagration in the North-East* explores the operational structure of ULFA, NDFB, and other insurgent groups, analysing their recruitment patterns, funding mechanisms, and ideological shifts. Jaideep Saikia (2009) in *Terror Sans Frontiers* examines the role of transnational insurgency networks, particularly how militant groups in Assam have sought external alliances in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.

1.3.3 State Responses and Peace Accords

The Indian state has responded to Assam's insurgency through military operations, peace negotiations, and governance reforms. The effectiveness of these strategies has been widely debated in academic literature. Arunabh Ghosh (2016) in *Negotiating Peace in Northeast India* provides a detailed evaluation of peace accords, such as the Assam Accord (1985) and the BTR Agreement (2020), highlighting their partial successes and long-term failures. Sanjoy Hazarika (1994) in *Strangers of the Mist* critiques the failure of peace accords in addressing core grievances related to identity, political autonomy, and economic exclusion. Praveen Kumar (2018) in *AFSPA and Insurgency in Northeast India* examines the controversial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act

(AFSPA) and its role in militarised conflict resolution. Paula Banerjee (2012) in *Women in Peace Politics* highlights how counterinsurgency measures have disproportionately affected women and marginalised communities in Assam.

H.K. Barpujari states that the crisis of identity in Assam and the misconceptions regarding immigration are among the most important issues dominating the politics of Assam. According to him, the restructuring and reorganisation of states added to the already existing conflicts and instead paved the way to inefficiency, corruption and nepotism, resulting in creating more conflicts and insurgency in the region. Barpujari states that the restructuring of states on a linguistic basis and the reorganisation of Assam deprived the elite tribals in the hills of their political and cultural identity. Also, the Sixth Schedule failed to meet their demands, and the fragmentation of Assam occurred with the formation of the state of Nagaland in 1964. The reorganisation further inspired the Karbi angling and North Cachar hills to demand autonomy and thus, statehood. Also, the continuous influx of immigration has bred the fear of alienation among the hills and plains tribes and also among other groups. This hatred had led to violence and killings and resulted in intra-ethnic conflicts. The fear of being outnumbered in their own territory has caused communities to demand a separate territory on the basis of ethnicity or religion. It has further resulted in fragmentation among ethnic groups and even sub-ethnic groups. Baruah calls the scheme of autonomous councils as units which has created more problems than solutions. The Koch Rajbanshis, immigrant Muslims, and Adivasis in the Bodoland covered area in the accord are unfair to the other communities residing there. There was ethnic cleansing to reach the desired majority in order to form an autonomous territory. This created fear among the other communities and led to them taking up arms in order to protect themselves. The call for autonomy has divided Assam and destroyed the homogenous character of the state. The alienation and neglect have forced the Ahoms, Koch Rajbanshis, Morans, Mataks, and Chutias to demand inclusion in the sixth schedule.

H. Srikanth states that militancy in Assam is not a mere law and order problem but a deeper malaise, which is identity politics. Srikanth opines that the deep-rooted ideological issues regarding ethnicity and migration give rise to insurgency in Assam. According to him, identity politics in Assam is trapped in fighting imaginary enemies and misconceptions of groups about themselves and others. Militancy in Assam cannot be understood without understanding the

material and ideological roots that gave birth to militancy. Srikanth opines that in order to consolidate one's respective identity, every group constructs "the other", which can be immigrant Muslims, Bengalis, non-tribals, tribals or just anyone. Assam is living under the fear of the "other", and this "the other" will take up their jobs, land and opportunities. As the number of identities increases, the list of "others" also multiplies. And "the other" is never seen as an individual, but the community to which he belongs. According to him, in a society where politics is dominated by politics of identity, groups tend to resort to taking up arms to fulfil their demands. Even if one group surrenders, there will be others who would take the path of insurgency to meet their demands. Also, military operations alone are not enough to curb the problem of insurgency. Instead, a deep-rooted understanding of the complex issues needs to be addressed to curb financial and economic problems in the region. Only when the causes of insurgency and the feeling of alienation are addressed by the people can it be said that peace can prevail without conflicts in the society. In her article, "*Migration, Ethnicity-based Movements and States' Response: A Study of Assam"*. Komol Singha analyses the various ethnic identities, the movements arising out of them and the issue of migration, which altogether leads to insurgency in Assam. She examines the Assamese movement and its dominance to create a national identity, and also traces the cause for resentment among the non-Assamese communities. Singha also sheds light upon the armed movements and how the state failed to contain conflicts and instead gave rise to hybrid ethnic identities, which further resulted in the demands of various ethnicity-based autonomy movements. Singha states that the clash between locals and Bengali migrants forms the origin of the movement. Since the movements are driven because of economic and political interests, there is grouping and regrouping of the ethnic groups. The internal conflicts subdued the larger armed rebellion of ULFA, and there are no quick solutions to these internal feuds and conflicts, giving rise to hybrid identities which have resulted in autonomy movements from various ethnic groups. Singha states that the use of force was successful to some extent in controlling the insurgency in Assam; however, it gave rise to more autonomy movements. According to her, the state failed to maintain peace; rather, it fragmented the nation and gave rise to hybrid ethnic identities. Singha talks about inclusionary policy and accommodating civil society, movement leaders and insurgent group leaders in order to reach a solution. The most important thing is the inclusion of other smaller groups in the community by the Assamese people, which will help in reducing the gap between them and contain further fragmentation and autonomy movements.

In his article, "*Assam and the Foreigner within*", Navin Murshid examines the narrative that states Bengali Muslims are illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators residing in Assam. His analysis of the demographic data shows that there is not much evidence to prove the narrative. He discusses the various factors responsible for intermixing Muslims in Assam as Bangladeshi infiltrators. According to Murshid, the geographical as well as historical factors, along with ethnic division and the feeling of alienation from mainstream India, have resulted in the labelling of Bengali Muslims as foreigners. In addition, the common "enemy" was constructed artificially for political gains through the policies related to immigrants and over a course of time, it resulted in creating the feeling of hatred among the people in Assam, and they started to see the Bengali Muslims as "foreigners". He states that the Liberation War was the starting point of this narrative, where thousands of refugees took refuge in Assam and other north-eastern states. Assam Movement was the boiling point for this issue, and it used the narrative to its full extent to influence the masses (not just Assamese-speaking people but also among other tribes and communities). With the influence of the Assam movement and its conception of Bangladeshi Muslims, the common "enemy" was constructed. Murshid claims that the selective use of data to analyse the presence of Bangladeshi infiltrators has resulted in creating misconceptions and misunderstandings among the people in Assam. According to Murshid, the creation of an external threat to unite the people is not new, but in Assam, it heavily depends on misidentification and misunderstanding of the Bengali Muslims.

1.4 Research Gap

While there is a strong theoretical foundation in identity politics, very little research has been done specifically on how identity politics interacts with insurgency in Assam. This study aims to bridge that gap by analysing both theoretical perspectives and ground realities in Assam. These studies primarily focus on insurgent organisations and their historical evolution, but they do not provide a comparative framework to assess how Assam's insurgency differs from or resembles other ethnic insurgencies globally. While these studies analyse peace accords and military strategies, they do not extensively examine post-insurgency governance challenges and insurgent reintegration programs. This study aims to fill that gap by assessing government rehabilitation policies and the role of ex-insurgents in peacebuilding. These studies offer comparative insights but lack direct application to Assam's insurgency. This research builds on their frameworks to

explore how Assam's conflict compares to other identity-based insurgencies. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to integrate identity politics theory with field-based analysis of Assam's insurgency. Further, it expands beyond single-group studies (ULFA, NDFB) to a broader comparative perspective. Additionally, it analyses post-insurgency governance, security challenges, and peacebuilding in contemporary times and seeks to provide policy recommendations informed by global case studies.

1.5 Research Questions:

1. What factors led to the rise of insurgency in Assam?
2. How has the question of identity evolved throughout the years, leading to an identity crisis?
3. Did the Centre and State governments fail to eliminate the rise of insurgency in Assam?

1.6 Methodology

The methodology used in the research is qualitative with some quantitative elements. This study employs a qualitative research approach with elements of historical analysis, fieldwork-based ethnography, and policy evaluation. The research is structured as an exploratory case study of Assam, examining how identity politics has shaped insurgency and conflict resolution in the region. Sources are both primary and secondary. Primary sources of material: Field Survey, Semi-structured interviews with former insurgents, policymakers, security officials, and civil society leaders. Focus group discussions with members of affected communities (ethnic leaders, students, and displaced persons). Archival research of government records, peace accords (Assam Accord, BTR Agreement), and legal documents related to insurgency and identity-based conflicts. Secondary sources: Scholarly books and journal articles on identity politics, insurgency, and Northeast India's security challenges. Reports by government bodies (Ministry of Home Affairs, Assam Government, and Intelligence Bureau) provide data on insurgency-related incidents and counterinsurgency measures. Think tank and NGO reports (IDSA, South Asia Terrorism Portal, Human Rights Watch) analysing peacebuilding efforts and conflict resolution strategies. Historical

records and newspaper archives from *The Assam Tribune, The Hindu, The Indian Express,* and other credible sources.

The study applies thematic and discourse analysis to examine how identity politics is framed in insurgent narratives, policy debates, and media discourse. It also employs a comparative method to assess Assam's insurgency relative to other regional and global conflicts. Constructivist and postcolonial perspectives help analyse how ethnic identities are shaped by historical narratives, migration, and governance policies. Structuralist theories (Wallerstein, Gurr) are used to assess how economic marginalisation contributes to insurgency.

1.7 Chapter Scheme of the Study

The introductory chapter lays the foundational groundwork for the thesis by articulating the primary research concern: the complex entanglement of identity politics and insurgency within the socio-political landscape of Assam. The region of Assam, situated in India's Northeast, is marked by a distinctive historical trajectory that has been shaped by colonial classifications, demographic transformations, linguistic anxieties, and postcolonial administrative frameworks. These historical and structural conditions have produced a dense terrain of identity contestation, wherein ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional affiliations intersect and often come into conflict. This chapter argues that the region has long experienced a structural tension between the centre and the periphery, manifesting in repeated movements for recognition, autonomy, and cultural preservation. While Assam has often been viewed through a security-centric lens in both academic and policy discourses, particularly in relation to insurgency and separatism, this thesis contends that such a reductionist approach fails to capture the layered and historically embedded processes that have shaped both identity formation and insurgent politics in the state. By reconfiguring Assam not simply as a zone of unrest but as a paradigmatic case for studying how identities are constructed, politicised, and transformed into resistance, the chapter lays the conceptual terrain for the rest of the thesis. Assam, it argues, is not merely a troubled frontier but a dynamic space of political imagination, where demands for recognition and autonomy emerge from historically sedimented grievances. These demands are not static but evolve in response to both local transformations and national policy shifts. In this context, insurgency is analysed not as a

pathological deviation from democratic norms but as a political language of the excluded, one that challenges the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the Indian postcolonial state.

The chapter situates this inquiry within broader theoretical frameworks of recognition (drawing from Charles Taylor), cultural identity (as articulated by Stuart Hall), and postcolonial state formation (building on Partha Chatterjee and Amalendu Guha). It foregrounds the need to rethink insurgency not merely as an expression of ethno-national discontent but as a form of political articulation that emerges when institutional mechanisms of democratic inclusion are perceived to be inadequate or exclusionary. In doing so, it bridges the conceptual gap between identity politics and insurgency studies, which have traditionally been treated as discrete fields of inquiry. The introduction also identifies a critical lacuna in the extant literature. Most academic works on Assam's identity politics tend to focus either on linguistic or ethnic mobilisations without adequately analysing how these mobilisations produce or intersect with armed resistance. Conversely, literature on insurgency often privileges strategic, military, or policy perspectives, thereby eliding the socio-political contexts from which insurgencies arise. This thesis seeks to offer a holistic framework that draws upon both domains to explore how insurgency is a product of historically conditioned identity assertions and institutional failures of democratic recognition. The chapter proceeds to lay out the core research questions that guide the study: How have identity-based political movements in Assam evolved into insurgent forms? What are the historical, political, and socio-economic conditions that enabled this transformation? How has the Indian state responded to these movements, and with what consequences? What are the long-term implications of these developments for the practice of democracy, peacebuilding, and federalism in India? In response to these questions, the chapter articulates the central objectives of the thesis: first, to trace the historical evolution of identity politics in Assam from colonial to postcolonial times; second, to analyse the emergence, trajectory, and decline of insurgent movements with a particular focus on ULFA, Bodo groups, and other regional actors; third, to critically evaluate the state’s response to these movements, both militarily and politically; and finally, to propose a post-insurgency framework that moves beyond peace accords to address deeper questions of recognition, autonomy, and democratic inclusion. Methodologically, the chapter outlines a qualitative research design anchored in political ethnography, archival research, and discourse analysis. It incorporates fieldwork interviews with former insurgents, civil society actors, and

political stakeholders. It also draws upon textual analysis of government documents, peace accords, media discourses, and insurgent publications. This triangulated approach allows the study to examine both structural conditions and subjective experiences, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Finally, the chapter concludes by offering an overview of the structure of the thesis. Chapter 2 elaborates on the theoretical and conceptual framework. Chapter 3 analyses the historical foundations and evolution of identity politics in Assam. Chapter 4 focuses on the emergence and transformation of insurgent movements. Chapter 5 presents the fieldwork findings, and Chapter 6 synthesises the issues, threats, and opportunities that define Assam's post-insurgency landscape. Through this structure, the thesis advances an integrative analysis of identity and insurgency that is both historically grounded and politically relevant.

This second chapter is pivotal in constructing the conceptual scaffolding through which the phenomena of identity politics and insurgency in Assam are interpreted. The chapter opens with an interrogation of dominant theories of identity, drawing from cultural studies, political theory, and postcolonial scholarship. It argues that identity is not an intrinsic or biologically determined essence but a historically situated, politically constructed, and socially mediated process. This understanding challenges essentialist perspectives and aligns with constructivist and dialogical approaches to identity. The chapter begins by exploring the insights of Stuart Hall, who foregrounds identity as a product of positioning within historical and discursive formations. Hall's notion that identity is constituted through difference and continuously re-articulated in response to socio-political conditions serves as a foundational premise. Charles Taylor's work on the "politics of recognition" is also examined, particularly his assertion that recognition is a vital human need and that misrecognition can inflict harm and oppression. Taylor's dialogical view positions identity as co-constructed in interaction with others, rendering recognition a central site of political contestation. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" further informs the analysis, especially in understanding how collective identities like the Assamese nation are constructed through symbolic resources, print capitalism, and shared narratives. To comprehend the rise of sub-nationalist movements in Assam, the chapter then engages with theories of ethnonationalism. Ernest Gellner's modernist approach views nationalism as a product of industrial society and the homogenising imperatives of modernity, while Anthony Smith introduces an

ethno-symbolist perspective that emphasises the role of pre-modern ethnic ties, myths, and collective memories in shaping national identity. These theories are contextualised in Assam's political history, where both modern state-building projects and ethno-historical narratives play significant roles in identity mobilisation. Simultaneously, the chapter incorporates insights from postcolonial theorists who critique the universalising assumptions of Western political theory. Partha Chatterjee's distinction between "derivative nationalism" and "political society" is used to explore the limitations of postcolonial state formation in India, especially its failure to accommodate regional aspirations within a truly federal and pluralist framework. Amalendu Guha's Marxist critique of colonial and postcolonial policies in Assam provides an important lens to examine how economic extraction, political marginalisation, and cultural domination have historically shaped the region's identity politics. Bringing these strands together, the chapter outlines a conceptual model based on three interlinked variables: ethnic identity, state response, and political mobilisation. Ethnic identity is understood as a dynamic and contested construct shaped by historical memory, cultural practices, and socio-political positioning. State response encompasses both the institutional mechanisms of recognition (or denial thereof) and the coercive apparatus deployed in the name of national security. Political mobilisation refers to the strategies and narratives through which identity-based groups articulate claims, ranging from constitutional assertion to armed insurgency.

Crucially, the chapter treats these variables not as discrete or sequential, but as relational and co-constitutive. Identity contestation often emerges from institutional exclusion, which in turn catalyses mobilisation. The failure of the state to respond adequately or equitably to such mobilisation further exacerbates alienation, sometimes culminating in insurgency. Thus, rather than adopting a linear model of causality, the chapter proposes a processual framework wherein identity, exclusion, and resistance are mutually reinforcing over time. This framework allows the study to challenge linear or securitised models of conflict analysis that treat insurgency as an aberration or a law-and-order issue. Instead, insurgency is examined as a form of political resistance emerging from systemic denial of recognition, asymmetrical federalism, and the de-legitimisation of subnational aspirations. The chapter concludes by emphasising that understanding insurgency in Assam requires an analytical lens that moves beyond ethnic

essentialism and state-centric paradigms, embracing instead a relational, historical, and dialogical perspective on identity and resistance.

The third chapter undertakes a comprehensive historical and political genealogy of identity politics in Assam, situating its evolution within the broader trajectories of colonial governance, postcolonial state formation, and contemporary regional contestations. The argument advanced here is that identity in Assam has never been static or singular; rather, it has been continuously shaped and reshaped by structural conditions, administrative interventions, and popular mobilisations. The chapter contends that the roots of identity-based contestations in Assam lie deep in the colonial period, when British administrative practices and demographic engineering initiated a chain of disruptions that would have long-lasting implications. One of the earliest interventions that shaped Assamese identity politics was the imposition of Bengali as the official language in the newly annexed province of Assam in 1836. This decision, justified in terms of administrative convenience, was resented by the emergent Assamese middle class and intelligentsia, who viewed it as a form of cultural erasure. The subsequent restoration of Assamese as an official language in 1873 did little to undo the damage, as it had already set in motion a linguistic consciousness rooted in opposition. This phase also witnessed the emergence of vernacular literary nationalism, championed by figures like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and later Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, who articulated early visions of Assamese distinctiveness and autonomy.

The colonial state also introduced ethnographic classifications and migration policies that would deeply alter the demographic landscape. The settlement of Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal in the Brahmaputra Valley, encouraged by colonial land policies, gave rise to a discourse of demographic anxiety that would later crystallise in postcolonial politics. These developments fostered a sense of cultural siege among the Assamese-speaking population, who began to view migrants, especially those with different linguistic or religious backgrounds, as threats to their cultural and political primacy. In the post-independence period, these anxieties persisted and were intensified by state policies that failed to address regional aspirations. The creation of new states for Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram in the 1960s and 70s, while recognising tribal identities, left the Assamese middle class with a diminished sense of territorial

and political agency.[6] This provided the backdrop for the emergence of the Assam Movement (1979–1985), spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). Ostensibly focused on the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, the movement was in fact a broader sub-nationalist assertion demanding cultural recognition, political autonomy, and control over land and resources. The movement, despite its mass support and non-violent character, institutionalised a binary between "sons of the soil" and "outsiders," which had exclusionary consequences. The resultant Assam Accord of 1985, while hailed as a political compromise, embedded these exclusionary logics within state policy through the introduction of cut-off dates for citizenship, special provisions for employment and education, and the promise of protective legislation. While it temporarily quelled agitations, the Accord failed to address the deeper structural tensions between various communities. In particular, it marginalised several tribal groups like the Bodos, Karbis, and Mishings, who later mobilised their own movements for autonomy, arguing that Assamese nationalism was itself majoritarian and unresponsive to their cultural and territorial aspirations.

The chapter critically examines this paradox of Assamese nationalism: a movement that arose against perceived central domination ended up reproducing hegemonic structures within Assam. The rise of Bodo militancy in the 1990s, the fragmentation of the state into multiple identity-based political parties, and the assertion of localised indigeneities underscore the limitations of a homogenised Assamese identity. The chapter draws on the works of Sanjib Baruah, Udayon Misra, and Hiren Gohain, among others, to highlight the layered and often contradictory dimensions of sub-nationalist discourse in Assam. In more recent years, identity politics in Assam has entered a new phase marked by the intersection of legal regimes (such as the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act) and cultural anxieties. The NRC process, intended to identify undocumented migrants, has reactivated deep-seated fears of demographic submergence and legal belonging. The CAA, which offers a pathway to citizenship based on religious identity, has further polarised public discourse, with regional actors criticising it as a violation of the Assam Accord and an assault on the secular foundations of the Indian Constitution. These developments have triggered the rise of new political formations like the Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and Raijor Dal,

[6] Komol Singha and M. Amarjeet Singh, eds., *Identity, Contestation and Development in Northeast India* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

which seek to reclaim regional identity through democratic means. At the same time, these formations face the challenge of navigating a highly fragmented identity landscape, where ethnic, tribal, and religious cleavages intersect and sometimes collide. The chapter concludes by asserting that Assamese identity today is not a unified construct but a contested and evolving terrain, shaped by overlapping histories, competing aspirations, and shifting political alliances. It is this dynamic and conflictual nature of identity that forms the backdrop for the emergence of insurgent politics in the region, a theme that is explored in detail in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter four delves into the multifaceted evolution of insurgent movements in Assam, arguing that insurgency must be understood as both a political language of dissent and a product of historical exclusions. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the rise, trajectory, and transformation of major insurgent groups, most notably the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), as well as the Bodoland insurgency, the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD), the Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), and the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO). These insurgencies are not examined as isolated aberrations but as responses to a complex interplay of factors, including economic marginalisation, cultural alienation, the denial of political autonomy, and the failures of democratic accommodation. The chapter adopts a tripartite periodisation to trace the evolution of insurgency in Assam. The first phase, the emergence phase (1970s–1990s), is characterised by the growth of sub-nationalist ideologies and the articulation of armed resistance as a legitimate political strategy. ULFA, formed in 1979, emerged as the most prominent actor during this period, advocating for a sovereign Assam free from Indian rule. The group drew support from disillusioned youth and marginalised communities who perceived the Indian state as exploitative and indifferent. This phase also witnessed the roots of the Bodo insurgency, initially articulated through peaceful mobilisation by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) but later radicalised into armed struggle led by groups such as the Bodo Security Force (BdSF), which later became the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB).

The second phase, the escalation and radicalisation phase (1990s–2005), is marked by intensified insurgent activity, including bombings, extortion, targeted killings, and the establishment of parallel administrations in some areas. During this period, ULFA deepened its organisational network and ideological posture, even securing sanctuaries in neighbouring countries such as Bhutan and Bangladesh. Simultaneously, the Bodoland insurgency also

expanded, with increasing factionalism between the NDFB and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). Other ethnic insurgent groups, such as the DHD and KLO, emerged during this time, each grounded in distinct ethnoregional grievances and demanding either statehood or sovereignty for their respective communities. The escalation of insurgent violence during this phase provoked a severe response from the Indian state, which relied heavily on militarised strategies. The imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) across Assam, the use of counter-insurgency operations, fake encounter killings, and the deployment of intelligence surveillance networks constituted the core of the state's coercive apparatus. However, the chapter highlights that this militarisation did not result in the desired pacification. Instead, it often deepened local resentment, eroded democratic institutions, and contributed to cycles of retributive violence. The state's approach during this phase was marked by contradiction: while pursuing aggressive counterinsurgency, it simultaneously engaged in back-channel negotiations and offered conditional amnesty schemes to insurgents willing to surrender.

The third phase, the decline and negotiation phase (post-2005), marks a turning point in the insurgent landscape of Assam. This period saw the erosion of ULFA's mass support, increasing internal dissent within its leadership, and the emergence of pro-talk factions. Key leaders like Arabinda Rajkhowa opted for peace talks, while others like Paresh Baruah resisted any form of negotiation, resulting in a split between ULFA (Pro-Talks) and ULFA (Independent). The Bodo insurgency similarly underwent a transformation, with the BLT signing the Bodo Accord in 2003, leading to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). Subsequent agreements with NDFB factions further institutionalised Bodo autonomy within the Indian federal framework. The chapter pays particular attention to the internal dynamics of insurgent organisations, highlighting how leadership tussles, ideological fatigue, corruption, and ethnic exclusivism led to fragmentation and loss of credibility. Many insurgent groups were unable to sustain their earlier ideological coherence and increasingly degenerated into criminal enterprises, engaging in extortion and illicit trade. This transformation weakened their moral legitimacy and alienated sections of the population that had once supported them. At the same time, some former insurgents successfully reinvented themselves as political actors, entering electoral politics or participating in peacebuilding initiatives.

A key contribution of the chapter lies in its analysis of the Indian state's inconsistent response to insurgency. The state's approach has oscillated between militarisation and co-optation, with peace accords often failing to address the root causes of conflict. The rehabilitation packages offered to former insurgents have been uneven and inadequate, leading to disillusionment and, in some cases, recidivism. Moreover, the structural issues of land alienation, unemployment, cultural marginalisation, and lack of effective political representation remain unresolved. The chapter argues that unless these underlying grievances are addressed through sustained democratic engagement, the risk of cyclical insurgency remains. Finally, the chapter complicates the simplistic binary of state versus insurgents. It presents a nuanced and multi-layered understanding of insurgency as both a symptom and a critique of a flawed federal and developmental model. The insurgent movements in Assam are shown to oscillate between radical resistance and political reinvention, reflecting broader transformations in the nature of subnational politics in contemporary India. This sets the stage for the next chapter, which examines the lived experiences of conflict and post-conflict transitions through empirical fieldwork.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted across various districts of Assam, the fifth chapter constitutes the empirical backbone of the thesis. It explores the lived experiences of individuals and communities directly and indirectly impacted by insurgency and the processes of post-conflict transition. The field data, gathered through in-depth interviews, semi-structured conversations, focus group discussions, and participatory observation, provides a granular understanding of how conflict is experienced, narrated, and remembered at the grassroots level. The interlocutors include former insurgents, civil society actors, local political representatives, displaced individuals, women's groups, student leaders, and community elders. The chapter is organised thematically around recurring concerns and insights that emerged from the field. A significant portion of the narratives centres around the disillusionment with both insurgent leadership and the Indian state. Former combatants from groups such as ULFA, NDFB, and DHD often expressed a profound sense of betrayal. Many had joined the movements with aspirations for justice, dignity, and a better future for their communities. However, following their surrender or disengagement from insurgent activities, they encountered inadequate rehabilitation packages, delayed government responses, and persistent social stigma. Several respondents reported being viewed with suspicion by both the state and their own communities, trapped in a liminal space without clear pathways for

reintegration. This sense of marginalisation is also reflected in the voices of the youth, particularly in regions previously affected by insurgent activity. Many young people described their lives as shaped by economic deprivation, cultural uncertainty, and political invisibility. The narratives highlight how decades of conflict have disrupted local economies, weakened educational infrastructures, and eroded inter-community trust. Youth in these regions often feel disconnected from state institutions and are sceptical of mainstream political processes. A common theme across interviews was the yearning for recognition, not only in terms of identity but also in terms of opportunities, dignity, and participation in public life. Equally significant are the testimonies of women, who are often overlooked in conventional accounts of insurgency. Women shared experiences of living in constant fear during periods of armed conflict, of shouldering familial and community responsibilities in the absence of men, and of enduring systemic neglect in post-conflict policymaking. While some women actively supported insurgent movements, whether by providing logistical assistance, engaging in ideological propagation, or participating directly, they were seldom recognised as political actors in their own right. In the post-conflict phase, women continue to face gendered barriers to accessing rehabilitation schemes, land rights, and political voice.

Another critical theme is the condition of displaced communities, particularly those affected by ethnic clashes and state-backed counterinsurgency operations. Interviews with internally displaced persons (IDPs) from districts such as Kokrajhar, Baksa, and Karbi Anglong reveal a protracted experience of liminality. Many displaced families remain in temporary shelters or poorly equipped camps, with limited access to healthcare, education, or employment. The state's response has often been patchy and uneven, marked by bureaucratic indifference and political expediency. These communities express a deep sense of abandonment and mistrust, feeling that both insurgent leaders and state institutions have instrumentalised their suffering without offering long-term solutions. A key analytical insight developed in this chapter is the notion of "post-insurgency melancholia." This term is used to describe the dissonance between formal cessation of violence and the absence of meaningful justice or reconciliation. While peace accords, ceasefire agreements, and disarmament exercises have reduced overt violence, they have not resolved the underlying structural and symbolic grievances that gave rise to insurgency. Former insurgents lament the absence of honourable reintegration; communities mourn the loss of lives and livelihoods without

truth-telling or accountability; and marginalised groups continue to navigate exclusion within a supposedly post-conflict polity.

The chapter critiques the narratives that dominate official discourse, which often portray peace as an accomplished fact following the signing of accords or the surrender of militants. Field data suggests that peace, in many areas, remains an aspirational horizon rather than an experienced reality. The chapter calls for a deeper and more inclusive understanding of post-conflict transition, one that recognises the emotional, cultural, and structural dimensions of recovery. Importantly, the fieldwork also documents instances of resilience, innovation, and political renewal. Local civil society initiatives, youth-led cultural projects, women's cooperatives, and memory work around insurgency have begun to reshape the discourse in subtle but significant ways. These efforts, while fragile, point to the possibility of constructing a genuinely democratic and pluralist political space in Assam—a vision that will require sustained engagement, political will, and empathetic policymaking. In synthesising these diverse voices, the chapter reaffirms the central argument of the thesis: that insurgency cannot be understood merely through the lens of violence or security, but must be approached as a deeply political and social phenomenon rooted in historical injustice, cultural assertion, and democratic aspiration. The insights from this chapter form the empirical basis for the policy analysis and future-oriented framework presented in the next chapter.

The final chapter of the thesis synthesises the empirical findings and theoretical insights to present a forward-looking framework for understanding and addressing the enduring legacies of insurgency in Assam. It argues that while overt armed resistance has declined, the structural and symbolic conditions that catalysed insurgency remain unresolved. These unresolved issues, if not addressed with sensitivity and political imagination, continue to pose significant threats to democratic deepening and social cohesion in the region. One of the most pressing issues is the resurgence of demographic anxieties, exacerbated by the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). These legal instruments have reignited fears around migration, indigeneity, and belonging, unsettling the tenuous consensus that had emerged in the post-Assam Accord era. The NRC process, despite being projected as a neutral exercise in documentation, has disproportionately affected marginalised communities, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus, Adivasis, and other groups with weak documentation. The CAA, by introducing a religious criterion for

citizenship, has further fragmented Assam's political landscape and triggered widespread protests across ethnic and religious lines. These developments represent not merely policy missteps but structural threats to the inclusive democratic ethos envisioned in the Constitution.

The chapter also analyses the fragmentation of identity-based movements in Assam. Where once Assamese sub-nationalism could claim a broad-based cultural and political consensus, today it stands fractured along ethnic, tribal, linguistic, and religious fault lines. The proliferation of demands for autonomous councils, scheduled tribe status, and separate statehood reflects both the failure of the existing federal structure and the deepening of inter-group mistrust. In this context, identity politics in Assam appears to have entered a post-consensus phase, where multiple claims to indigeneity, entitlement, and justice compete for legitimacy and institutional recognition. Militarised governance remains another persistent threat. Despite the relative decline in insurgent violence, the continued deployment of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in certain areas, the normalisation of surveillance practices, and the expansion of police powers contribute to a climate of fear and exceptionalism. The securitisation of governance not only erodes civil liberties but also delegitimises democratic protest and weakens institutional trust. The chapter argues that the persistence of such practices in a post-insurgency context indicates a deeper structural unwillingness to engage with political dissent as a legitimate expression of democratic citizenship. Despite these threats, the chapter identifies several emerging opportunities for reimagining Assam's political future. The decline of armed insurgency has created new democratic spaces for articulation and mobilisation. The emergence of regional political parties like the Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and Raijor Dal, both of which draw from the legacies of past movements but adopt explicitly democratic and rights-based platforms, signals a generational shift in the modes of political engagement. These parties, while nascent, reflect a broader aspiration for regional autonomy, cultural recognition, and participatory governance. Youth-led movements around environmental justice, indigenous land rights, and cultural preservation also offer hopeful signs of intersectional political consciousness. The anti-CAA protests, though suppressed, witnessed unprecedented cross-community participation and revived discussions on secularism, constitutionalism, and inclusive citizenship. Similarly, the mobilisation around the protection of forests, rivers, and tribal commons has brought ecological concerns into mainstream political discourse, connecting the politics of identity with the politics of sustainability.

Drawing from these observations, the chapter proposes a normative framework centred on three interlinked pillars: recognition, autonomy, and reintegration. Recognition entails the acknowledgement of Assam's internal diversity and the validation of multiple identities without hierarchical categorisation. It demands institutional mechanisms that can accommodate cultural specificities and ensure symbolic parity for all communities. Autonomy refers not merely to administrative decentralisation but to the substantive empowerment of local governance institutions, including autonomous councils, panchayats, and urban local bodies, with meaningful fiscal and legislative authority. Reintegration calls for a holistic post-conflict reconstruction strategy that goes beyond rehabilitation packages to include social reintegration, political inclusion, and psychological healing for individuals and communities affected by insurgency. The chapter argues that such a framework requires a reimagining of Indian federalism, one that moves beyond the binary of centralisation versus decentralisation to embrace pluralism as a foundational political value. This vision of pluralist federalism must be supported by reforms in education, media, and public policy that promote inter-community understanding, counter majoritarian narratives, and foster a culture of democratic deliberation. The chapter asserts that true peace in Assam cannot be measured merely by the absence of insurgency. It must be evaluated through the presence of justice, dignity, and meaningful democratic participation. The post-insurgency moment thus offers not an end, but a new beginning—an opportunity to build a political community in Assam that is inclusive, plural, and genuinely democratic. This aspirational horizon, while fraught with challenges, is essential for securing a sustainable and just future for all its inhabitants.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1. Introduction

The Indian subcontinent, exquisitely known for its diversity, yet strives for unity and togetherness as "Indian". Post-independence, the very multicultural characteristics that unified the country are seen to be a breeding ground for identity politics. The shared historical experience of British colonial rule gave birth to the successful construction of the national identity of being an "Indian". However, the later phases of homogenisation of this multicultural society resulted in the politics of identity. The national identity lacks inclusiveness in encompassing the primordial identities. The social fabric of Indian society is ingrained in the root concept of identity. Hence, like other South Asian countries, India struggles to balance between national unity and identity-based movements for autonomy, making it a constantly evolving and debatable issue in the realm of politics.

Identity plays a key role in discourses related to insurgency, sub-nationalism and other related concepts. This chapter seeks to provide a thorough conceptual clarity on the meaning of "identity" and its relation to this study. Before delving into the complexities of the concept of identity politics, it is important to understand what identity is and why it is required. Today, when discussing identity, it typically refers to two aspects: individual identity and collective or social identity. This study emphasises the latter - how people perceive themselves within a broader community. Though the idea is frequently debated in scholarly contexts, it's also often employed in daily discussions, where individuals instinctively understand its meaning. However, despite its popularity and extensive usage, identity continues to be a complicated and frequently hard-to-define concept. A few of the definitions of identity are:

> *"Identities are relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self"*[7]

[7] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 397.

Identity is *"people's concepts of what they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others"*[8]

"*My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what I endorse or oppose*"[9]

The definitions mentioned earlier emphasise the extraordinary intricacy and variety of the identity concept. Regardless of this variety, they unite around a common core concept: a "sense of recognition." Identity denotes a person's consciousness of the "Self," influenced by both ascriptive (inherited) and subjective (experienced) processes. It is fundamentally ingrained in the essence of humans as naturally social beings. Utilising Erik Erikson's psychological perspective on personal identity, various important insights help in understanding the concept of group identity:

- Identity does not automatically belong to a community or group just because it exists.
- It is a developmental occurrence that arises when a group attains a specific degree of social and self-awareness.
- Identity needs to be comprehended in a historical framework.
- As a community or group develops, so does the character and manifestation of its identity.
- The process of socialisation is crucial in shaping and conveying group identity.[10]

Therefore, identity should be comprehended within its historical framework, not merely concerning a group's or community's development, but also in connection with the prevailing values and social norms that influence people's socialisation. In this regard, identity politics isn't a natural phenomenon; instead, it arises from prolonged histories of discrimination and

[8] Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.
[9] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Campus Wars*, (London: Routledge, 2021), 27.
[10] Erik Erikson, "Theory of Identity Development," in *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: International Universities Press (1959).

marginalisation. The drive to establish a single identity, among numerous possible ones, can either emerge internally within a group or be influenced by external forces over time.[11]

Identity politics often arises when a group or community attains a particular level of collective consciousness, especially as its members start to view themselves in comparison to other groups. It's not about achieving a complete grasp of their identity, but instead a relative one, shaped through comparison and contrast. The term "identity politics" is commonly used in social sciences and humanities to denote various movements and struggles, including multiculturalism, women's rights, civil rights initiatives, separatist demands, and violent ethnic or nationalist conflicts, particularly in postcolonial regions throughout Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. Bauman presents an interesting viewpoint in this regard. He proposes that the idea of identity, especially national identity, did not emerge organically from human experience. Rather, it emerged from a crisis, a profound sense of alienation and a wish to bridge the divide between societal reality and people's perceptions of what it should be.[12] From this perspective, identity was not found but created; it emerged in the modern world not as a reality, but as an obligation, something individuals were expected to engage with. To unite its populace, the modern state needed to impose this notion of identity using both influence and force. What started as a tale had to be consistently reinforced until it evolved into a prevailing social reality. Bauman contends that the narrative of contemporary state-building is full of attempts to establish identity as something tangible and compelling.[13]

The intricacies of identity are deeply connected to the dynamics of modernity and modernisation. Identity politics, specifically, originates from the attempt to form a unified national identity within contemporary nation-states. To completely understand contemporary identity concerns, it is crucial to recognise how modernisation has influenced them. Identity can be understood through two essential aspects: sameness and difference. While sameness pertains to how individuals connect with their own identity, difference indicates how they set themselves apart from others. Essentially, identity is not a static or narrowly restricted concept. It is adaptable, continually changing, and influenced by various experiences and situations.

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[11] Cressida Heyes, "Identity Politics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2002 Edition).
[12] Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).
[13] Ibid.

For something to have an identity, it should remain unchanged over time. In other terms, continuity is regarded as vital to identity. Nevertheless, in truth, change is ongoing, and total uniformity is seldom achievable. A thing, or concept, may remain consistent in certain areas, but not in every aspect. If merely possessing a few consistent characteristics over time were sufficient to establish identity, then everything would perpetually maintain its identity, rendering the idea meaningless. If nothing ever shifted, there would be no reason to examine identity whatsoever. Consequently, identity should be perceived in relative, rather than absolute, terms. Something is described as having preserved its identity when it stays consistent in specific, significant or pertinent aspects over time. The concept of identity, therefore, includes recognising which characteristics are both meaningful and lasting. Sameness of relevant features over time is integral to any notion of identity. To have an identity, a thing must have features that are both relevant and enduring".[14]

Charles Taylor argues that identities develop through a continuous dialogue and conflict with others who are important in our lives. This dialogical method of identity development is relevant not only at the personal level but also throughout the wider social and political context. In this vibrant context, the politics of recognition is most apparent. Individuals desire not just social validation of their identities and cultural characteristics but also official, public recognition and esteem. This acknowledgement can manifest in various ways within the public domain.[15] Nonetheless, characterising "the other" in multicultural societies proves to be particularly difficult, as there is no overarching criterion for achieving this. Conversely, "the other" is shaped in various ways based on particular historical and spatial circumstances.

Identity is not a static or fixed entity; rather, it is dynamic, flexible, and perpetually changing. Cultural identity, specifically, is influenced by both our current selves and our evolving selves. This is valid not just for culture but for all types of identity. Identity reappears repeatedly over time; it is not a fixed essence that exists independent of history, location, or culture. As with all phenomena grounded in history, identities are constantly redefined by the influences of time,

[14] Rajiv Bhargava, "The Multicultural Framework," in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Kushal Deb (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002).
[15] Charles Taylor, *The Sources of Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

power and culture.[16] In varied, multicultural communities, no universal guidelines exist for identifying "the other"; such definitions change according to the temporal and spatial context. In the contemporary world, where worldwide connectivity obscures conventional limits, the issue of identity has become increasingly important for individuals, nations, states, and the global community. Having a sense of identity involves experiencing a connection to oneself, along with the sense of belonging to a community that shares a common history, envisioned future, and shared narratives.[17] Consequently, identity is crucial for both individual and communal existence, and it develops through interactions and connections within diverse cultural contexts. As Girin Phukon points out, relating to a group is a nearly universal human tendency. This identification frequently depends on specific common symbols, symbols that differ over time and place. Although these indicators of identity may seem cultural or emotional, they are frequently linked to the search for concrete, material benefits rather than just a psychological need for belonging.[18] In a globalised society, the perception of "sameness" transcends international boundaries. Identity is essential, yet it can become divisive and can be negative if misused. To address these contradictions, two fundamental concepts must be acknowledged: firstly, that identity is inherently fluid and evolving; and secondly, that we must continually reassess and reshape our comprehension of both history and the current situation to effectively engage with identity in the present.

2.2 Identity Politics

In pre-modern societies, identities were primarily stable, dictated by society, and intensely ingrained within the prevailing cultural and social frameworks. They were passed down instead of being selected, and there was minimal space or necessity for individuals or groups to reinterpret or reshape them. As Habermas observes, identity development during this time was mainly a personal matter, rather than something that occurred in the public or political sphere. This was partly due to the fact that the state, in its previous forms, was neither extensive nor centralised, and there was no cohesive national identity as we recognise it today. Traditional identities wielded

[16] Charles Taylor, *The Sources of Self: The Making of Modern Identity,* United States: Harvard University Press, 1992.
[17] Charles Taylor, *The Sources of Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 1992.
[18] Girin Phukon and Nikunjalata Dutta, eds., *Politics of Identity and Nation Building in Northeast India* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1997).

unquestioned power over social and cultural existence.[19] However, there were transitions in the contemporary period. Identities grew more politicised, no longer limited to personal or cultural domains. The emergence of modernity brought about the dynamic construction and challenges of identities. This change resulted in what we refer to today as the "politics of identity," a significant influence in both national and global political discourses. In this view, identity politics can be regarded as a consequence of modernisation and changes in contemporary society. Jean-Jacques Rousseau once contended that the rise of reason signified the deterioration of human nature.[20] Likewise, the rationality and framework introduced by modernity also opened the door for political conflicts rooted in identity. Instead of welcoming the complete range of social identities, contemporary nation-states frequently sought to enforce a single, dominant national identity. This initiative, aimed at fostering unity within a wide framework, inadvertently strengthened smaller cultural and social identities, encouraging them to express themselves more vigorously in the political arena.

As modern societies developed, influenced by the principles of reason and advancement, there was a conscious attempt to build a cohesive national identity within every state. In India, this endeavour was most evident during the fight for freedom and in the years after gaining independence. Nonetheless, in the effort to establish a shared sense of nationhood, this approach frequently marginalised the unique voices and identities of local and regional groups. Rather than truly incorporating these varied viewpoints, the prevailing narrative often assimilated or disregarded them. At the core of this approach was an inclination towards pluralism, a framework that recognises the existence of various groups within society, yet does not guarantee that all of them receive equal visibility or acknowledgement in the public realm. Pluralism emphasises harmonious coexistence, yet it does not actively confront the power disparities between dominant and marginalised identities.[21] Multiculturalism, conversely, advances the concept even further. It

[19] Jürgen Habermas, "Citizenship and National Identity," in *Globalization: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, ed. Roland Robertson and Kathleen E. White (London: Routledge, 2003), 155–174.
[20] Mads Qvortrup, *The Political Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Impossibility of Reason* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
[21] Monique Deveaux, *Cultural Pluralism and Dilemmas of Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

emphasises justice, transparency, and equal standing for all identities in public and political spheres. [22]

The issue with pluralism is that it frequently prioritises national identity at the forefront of a hierarchy, relegating all other identities to a lower status. Groups that do not conform easily to the national standard are frequently referred to as "sub-national," a phrase that quietly undermines their legitimacy. Consequently, numerous marginalised communities have sensed the necessity to emphasise their identities more vigorously, particularly when the national identity is influenced by the culture or faith of the majority. What makes things more complex is that even these smaller identity groups often overlook the internal diversity present among their own members. Without a common, inclusive concept of identity in which all groups can identify, these disjointed identities have entered the political sphere worldwide. What modernity envisioned as a unifying endeavour has, in numerous instances, resulted in greater divisions. Instead of eliminating differences, it has heightened them, leading to the kind of identity-driven conflicts and politics that characterise much of the contemporary world.[23]

The core principles of modernity are rooted in uniformity, that is, frameworks which are universal in nature. This has resulted in conflicts as a uniform approach is not an ideal fit in societies which are diverse in nature. The concept of a universal national identity, which is a prerequisite during the nation-building of contemporary states, has struggled to hold together the multiple layers of socio-cultural communities. Rather than promoting a genuine sense of unity and togetherness, a universal national identity construction was often built through coerced assimilation, which has resulted in further fragmentation, thus leading to resistance and the rise of identity-driven politics.[24] This phenomenon is witnessed in both developed and developing nations, the degree of impact being different in each. With regard to the developing nations, maintaining a balance between national unity and cultural diversity has been the greatest task. The

[22] Amy Gutmann, "The Challenge of Multiculturalism in Political Ethics," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 171–206.
[23] Immanuel Wallerstein, "The End of What Modernity?," *Theory and Society* 24, no. 4 (August 1995): 471–88.
[24] Francis Fukuyama, "Nation Building and State Building," in *Building the Nation: N.F.S. Grundtvig and Danish National Identity*, edited by John A. Hall, Ove Korsgaard, and Ove K. Pedersen (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 29.

process of nation-building highlights the existing tensions and conflicts that exist below the surface, which are hugely influenced by the socio-cultural aspects of the society.[25]

A reason for the increasing emphasis on identity today is its connection to marginalisation and the politics of opposition. For numerous individuals, adopting a unique identity goes beyond the concept of mere difference. It represents an act of empowerment and resistance to prevailing narratives.[26] Therefore, identity politics is frequently regarded as a realm for cultural and political opposition, mirroring wider transitions towards a postmodern or late modern society. It challenges existing power dynamics by questioning the status quo. Significantly, identity politics isn't solely about exclusion; it may also entail a deliberate decision to stay on the periphery, either as an act of resistance or as a different lifestyle. What could previously have been regarded as "dropping out" is now seen as a political position. Contemporary social movements often originate from these identity-focused battles, characterised by their distrust towards the government and its agencies. These movements present a considerable challenge to modern nation-states, which are increasingly required to manoeuvre through the intricate landscape of belonging, representation, and resistance.[27]

Scholars of International Relations have tried to understand the concept of identity politics through different lenses, exploring how identities shape state behaviour, international conflict, cooperation and global politics. Identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others".[28] Constructivists state that identity is constructed through historical context, social interactions, norms and social practices and that it is mutable. It is the societal norms, beliefs and discourses that shape identities, and thus, once constructed, identities can be politicised to pursue political ends. Alexander Wendt analyses the construction of identities through the process of interactions between states and other actors and the role of norms, beliefs and identities in the realm of international relations.[29] John Mearsheimer dealt with the concept of identity politics through the lens of nationalism, and its influence on state behaviour

[25] Andrea Kathryn Talentino, "The Two Faces of Nation-Building: Developing Function and Identity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2004): 557–575
[26] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
[27] Keith Faulks, *Political Sociology: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1999), 87.
[28] Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications.* 2006.
[29] Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It." 1992.

and international conflict.[30] Other scholars like Antony Smith traced the historical narratives, cultural practices and myths in the construction of national identities and their influence in the politics of the state.[31] Benedict Anderson's concept of "Imagined Communities" sheds light on the importance of collective identities beyond the lines of territory or borders, transcending traditional nation-state boundaries.[32] Thus, identity is a key factor in shaping a state's behaviour and influences the dynamics of peace and conflict in the politics of the state. Identity Politics thus influences the political landscape of any given region as it mobilises on shared characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and other social aspects and can shape collective identities as well as define group boundaries. It lays a strong foundation for groups to attain common political aspirations or address grievances. Instances can be seen in the form of nationalist movements and ethnic conflicts shaped by contested identity claims, claims for recognition, demand for resources, insurgency and secessionist movements, and so on.

2.2.1 Genesis of Identity Politics:

The term "identity politics" refers to a form of politics driven by the interests and demands of a specific group based on shared linguistic, ethnic, cultural, racial, or social identity. It reflects a preference for advancing the group's concerns over those of others. In essence, identity politics emerges when political mobilisation is shaped by collective identity, influencing policy decisions, social movements, and governance structures. The genesis of identity politics can be traced to the notion of identity-based oppressive behaviours. Identity-based oppression takes place under circumstances marked by an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, which are invariably linked to their identity, whether group or individual. In generic terms, identity politics relates to the politicisation based on one's identity, particularly ascribed identities that are linked to a sense of belongingness to one's group or community. Human beings are social animals, and as such, prioritise their group identity in any given society. Identity politics, as stated by the Combahee River Collective, is a radical form of politics, the implicit and explicit nuances of which

[30] John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions." In *International Organization*, 237-82. Routledge, 2017.
[31] Graham Smith, *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities.* Cambridge University Press, 1998.
[32] Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism" In *The New Social Theory Reader*, 282–88. Routledge, 2020.

conform to a wide-ranging pattern of political interaction and mobilisation.[33] Scholars like Frantz Fanon[34] and Albert Memmi[35] inquired into the roots of identity-based grievances in the context of colonial identity, explaining how identity influences political behaviour.

The emergence of identity politics in the late twentieth century cannot be comprehended only through the perspective of rights-centric liberalism. Charles Taylor's argument in *The Politics of Recognition* provides a crucial perspective on why conventional liberal principles, particularly those focused on non-interference and equal treatment, frequently succeed in inadequately addressing the demands of cultural minorities, feminists, or other marginalised communities.[36] Taylor proposes that identity is not solely a personal, internal issue but is influenced by social interactions and, rather, is a "dialogical" process. Individuals learn about their identity through the perceptions and reactions of others. Consequently, misrecognition, that is, being perceived in a skewed, stereotypical, or reduced manner, is not simply an issue of emotional pain; it can cause genuine damage by eroding an individual's self-esteem.[37] It is this profound desire for acknowledgement that drives numerous appeals central to identity politics. Groups that have historically been excluded, misrepresented, or silenced frequently pursue not only rights or representation but also public recognition of the worth and legitimacy of their identity. This is why movements centred on race, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, or nationality frequently go beyond liberal neutrality and seek structural changes or specific protections to maintain identities they view as crucial to their well-being. Moreover, Taylor's focus on collective identity clarifies that identity politics involves not only personal dignity but also the preservation of culture. For numerous individuals, the claim of identity is tied to a background of being denied acknowledgement in both political and social realms. The origin of identity politics, therefore, is rooted not just in the denial of rights but in the fight to be recognised, validated, and appreciated as a community. Consequently, the notion of cultural minorities attracted considerable focus during the second stage of identity politics research, and the idea of recognition came to be a key topic in later scholarly discussions. Multicultural theorists, drawing from Taylor's perspectives,

[33] Clarissa Rile Hayward, and Ron Watson. "Identity and Political Theory," *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 33 (2010).
[34] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth.* Grove Press, 1963.
[35] Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized,* NY: Routledge, 2013.
[36] Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, (1995).
[37] Ibid.

contend that the state is crucial in influencing identity politics. They propose that governments can intentionally acknowledge specific identity groups by providing unique rights, safeguards, or legal exceptions designed to maintain collective identities, including linguistic or cultural communities. In this framework, the emphasis transitions from how states ought to merely intervene in identity formation to how they can facilitate the development of identities within a democratic environment. This entails opposing the enforcement of a dominant, singular identity and instead creating an environment where varied communities can freely develop, express, and redefine their identities according to social indicators like ethnicity, language, or religion.[38]

Expanding on Taylor's argument, Bikhu Parekh deepens the criticism of the liberal belief that rights and justice are universally relevant across all cultural contexts. He contends that liberal societies cannot determine beforehand, purely based on theoretical principles, which cultural customs to embrace or dismiss, but rather, these decisions should arise from a transparent and respectful dialogue among communities focused on achieving a reasonable consensus.[39] Parekh cautions against enforcing liberal standards as misleadingly universal, pointing out that this kind of coercion threatens cultural supremacy. He argues that authentic moral understanding is more likely to arise when various cultural traditions have the assurance and room to engage equally in democratic discussion.[40] Similarly to Taylor, Parekh emphasises that recognition, dialogue, and mutual respect serve as crucial foundations for tackling the intricate challenges of identity politics in multicultural societies. By reinterpreting identity politics as a democratic and conversational process, Parekh strengthens and broadens Taylor's assertion that recognition is not a minor request but a fundamental requirement for justice in diverse societies. Both Taylor and Parekh emphasise the normative importance of recognition, with Parekh enhancing this concept by incorporating it into a pluralistic moral discourse that counters monocultural impositions. Identity politics entails more than simply aiming for acknowledgement from the state; it includes establishing democratic environments where cultural distinctions can participate in significant dialogue. This bolsters the assertion that the rise of identity-based claims is connected not just to liberal oversight but also to the lack of authentic avenues for intercultural dialogue and consensus creation.

[38] Hayward and Watson, *Identity and Political Theory,* (2010).
[39] Bhikhu Parekh, "Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory," *Ethnicities* 1, no. 1 (2001).
[40] Bhikhu Parekh, "Minority Practices and Principles of Toleration," *International Migration Review* 30, no. 1 (1996).

Toleration was the liberal answer to the question of identity and difference for more than three centuries. According to the liberal view, toleration protects the rights of individuals and promotes peaceful coexistence across identity divides. However, with the development of the concept of identity politics, it is seen that tolerance is a mere myth, a utopia where party politics and narrow issue-based politics dictate the course of socio-political interactions in society in a multicultural society.[41] India, being a hotspot for a multicultural society, has been crippled due to the ill effects of vote-bank politics and short-term policies of governments, in an attempt to appease communities along socio-religious parameters and partisan behaviour. In such a fractured society, there exists an unequal distribution of resources and, as such, of justice as well. This is where intolerant politics come into the picture. Political leaders appeal to the social identity of the people, such as language, religion, ethnicity and even regionalism, and the like, to garner support. This kind of political behaviour has two sides to it. On the one hand, the demands of specific communities get a voice to be heard in the halls of power, giving them a chance at representation and redressal of grievances. On the other hand, such patterns of socio-political intercourse breed intolerance toward other communities, eventually fragmenting the society and making it easier for political leaders to use propaganda based on such divisive politics, where people commit infighting while the more tragic issues are usually sidelined. This results in leading "to a pervasive disregard for the interests of Indian pluralist culture."[42] Therefore, the introduction of intolerance in politics has changed the very nature of the Indian political process. It has resulted in aggression and violence over the years, and there have been further fragmentations in the name of identity politics. It has become a process of grouping and regrouping due to the prevalence of issue-based politics.

Numerous academics contend that the emergence of identity politics in the twentieth century can be interpreted as a reaction to the breakdown of the grand, universal narratives that characterised modernity.[43] As conventional frameworks started to collapse, cultural politics emerged at the centre, partly fuelled by changing economic and political circumstances. Will Kymlicka, drawing from Charles Taylor's research, openly recognises that dominant groups have frequently inflicted harsh discrimination on minorities in their efforts to establish a singular, uniform identity in society, thinking that this uniformity would result in a perfect social structure.

[41] Hayward and Watson, "Identity and Political Theory," (2010).
[42] Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism.* Paris: Payot, 1983.
[43] Henry A. Giroux, "National Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism," *College Literature* 22, no. 2 (1995).

Kymlicka's ideas, which he first laid out in his 1989 work Liberalism, Community, and Culture, offer a comprehensive way to understand why liberal societies should recognise minority cultural groups. He argues that these groups should be supported not because they have special moral importance, but because people need a strong and stable cultural background to understand their choices and think clearly about their values.[44] His argument builds on two basic things that the liberal tradition says people need for a good life. The first connects closely with Taylor's ideas about cultural survival and recognition - people need to be able to live their lives "from the inside,"[45] meaning they should live in ways that match their deepest beliefs and most treasured values, but the second part is equally important - people also need to be able to question those beliefs and values, and change or even reject them if they decide that's what they want to do.[46] However, this second ability requires what Kymlicka calls awareness of different views about what makes life good, plus the capacity to examine those views intelligently. To develop this awareness and ability to think critically about their own lives, people need educational opportunities and liberal freedoms like free speech and the right to associate with others.[47] But Kymlicka emphasises what he calls a "societal culture",[48] which is essentially a comprehensive cultural framework that gives people meaning across every aspect of human life, covering everything from social and educational activities to religious, recreational, and economic pursuits, touching both public and private spheres.

Kymlicka's focus on social culture provides an essential perspective to grasp the genuine essence of liberal freedom, transcending a simple listing of formal rights. It clarifies that merely providing people with freedoms is not sufficient if they do not have the cultural resources to understand and effectively use those liberties. The ability to live honestly and independently isn't a standalone occurrence; it is deeply intertwined with making decisions that truly align with one's sense of self and perception of reality. A robust cultural framework, thus, serves as a vital anchor, enabling individuals to participate in critical reflection while staying rooted in a recognisable moral

[44] Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[45] Will Kymlicka, "Multicultural Citizenship within Multination States," *Ethnicities* 11, no. 3 (2011).
[46] Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, 1991.
[47] Will Kymlicka, "Multicultural Citizenship," in *The New Social Theory Reader*, ed. Steven Seidman and Jeffrey C. Alexander (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020).
[48] Ashwani Kumar Peetush, "Kymlicka, Multiculturalism, and Non-Western Nations: The Problem with Liberalism," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (2003).

and linguistic framework.[49] However, with a lack of this foundation, the concept of liberal autonomy may appear empty, especially for minority groups whose cultural stories are frequently neglected or disregarded. Kymlicka's argument raises the conversation beyond theoretical liberal principles, illustrating how culture serves as the essential means through which autonomy is articulated and meaningfully maintained. This viewpoint fundamentally shifts the discussion as it is no longer simply a matter of whether cultural groups fundamentally "merit" acknowledgement, but instead how their growth directly enables individuals to better embody essential liberal ideals.[50] As a result, the principled integration of minority cultures is not an extraordinary concession in liberalism; it arises as a fundamental necessity to avert exclusion and guarantee that real freedom is genuinely available to all individuals in society.

This way of understanding cultural rights becomes especially relevant when we look at identity politics in Assam, where the complicated relationship between preserving culture and maintaining individual freedom has shaped decades of political activism. The Assamese identity movement that gained real momentum in the 1980s during the anti-foreigner agitation shows us Kymlicka's "external protections" in action. Communities were trying to protect their societal culture against what they saw as demographic and cultural threats, and when they demanded constitutional safeguards, language protection, and political representation, they were fighting to maintain access to their cultural narrative and the meaningful choices that came with their societal framework.[51] But Assam's identity politics also reveals the tensions built into Kymlicka's framework, especially around those "internal restrictions." While movements like the one that led to the Assam Accord aimed to protect Assamese cultural identity from outside pressures, they also raised difficult questions about the rights and recognition of indigenous communities within Assam itself.[52] Bodo, Karbi, and other tribal groups found themselves marginalised within the dominant Assamese cultural conversation, and the later emergence of sub-regional movements like the Bodo autonomy struggle and various tribal identity assertions reveals how the desire to preserve culture can create

[49] Hayward and Watson, "Identity and Political Theory," (2010).
[50] Andrew Kernohan, *Liberalism, Equality, and Cultural Oppression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[51] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
[52] Gurudas Das, "Identity and Underdevelopment: On Conflict and Peace in Developing Societies - A Case Study of Assam in India," *Humanities and Social Sciences Review* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-18.

new forms of exclusion even while seeking protection from broader marginalisation.[53] The racism and discrimination that people from the North-East face in other parts of India further demonstrate what Kymlicka means when he talks about needing a societal culture for meaningful choice and autonomous living. When North-Eastern individuals encounter systematic prejudice because of how they look, their cultural practices, or the languages they speak, their access to the broader Indian societal culture gets cut off. This limits their ability to participate fully in education, professional life, and social activities. This kind of marginalisation undermines both of the basic requirements for a good life that Kymlicka identifies. It restricts people's ability to live "from the inside" according to their values, while also limiting their exposure to the diverse perspectives and choices that would help them think critically and make autonomous decisions about their lives.

New Social Movements (NSMs) emerged as a distinct response to the limitations of traditional class-based politics. These movements, which emerged mostly in post-industrial cultures, represent a change away from economic redistribution and toward the politics of recognition, identity, and self-expression. NSMs, which are based on post-materialist principles, emphasise quality of life, autonomy, and participatory democracy while rejecting the bureaucratic rule of the state and market.[54] Unlike previous movements, they are distinguished by decentralised institutions, symbolic activities, and cultural framing, with a stronger emphasis on lifestyle and group identity. The rising developments in the New Social Movements claimed that toleration was not enough and that "recognition" is vital in understanding the complexity of identity politics.[55] The theoretical understanding of the New Social Movements (NSM) approach comprehends the varieties of social movements that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, which are not ostensibly organised around the class structure. It is important to note that, although NSM theory does not use the language of identity politics, even some theorists referred to it as "identity-oriented paradigm", it happened to be the first systemised theoretical attempt at understanding the importance of identity in social movements.[56] This theoretical breakthrough legitimised identity-based mobilisation as rational collective action, fundamentally challenging existing paradigms that

[53] Bhupen Sarmah, "Identity and Aporia of Autonomy: The Bodo Movement in Retrospect," in *Marginality in India: Perspectives of Marginalisation from the Northeast*, ed. Kedilezo Kikhi and Dharma Rakshit Gautam (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2023).
[54] Jan Pakulski, "Cultural Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 1, no. 1 (1997): 73–86,
[55] McGarry, John, and Brendan O'Leary. *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation.* London: Routledge, 1993.
[56] Mary Bernstein, "Identity Politics," *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 47–74.

either dismissed non-class activism as psychologically aberrant or failed to theorise identity formation as a legitimate political process.

The identity-oriented paradigm that emerged from NSM theory developed through key theorists like Pizzorno, Jean Cohen, and Alain Touraine, each contributing distinct insights into how identity functions within collective action. Central to this understanding is Pizzorno's argument that collective identity formation requires direct participation in collective action rather than indirect representation or delegation, making identity production inherently tied to collective interaction itself.[57] This line of argument was significant because it demonstrated that identity is not a pre-given characteristic but an emergent property of collective engagement. Jean Cohen advanced this analysis by arguing that NSMs depend not merely on expressive identity assertion but on actors' capacity to create new, more authentic identities through challenging established social boundaries between public, private, and political domains.[58] Her contribution moved beyond viewing identity as simply expressive toward understanding it as constitutive of new forms of political subjectivity. The theory inspired greater rationalist views of social movement theory, resource mobilisation, and political process theory in addressing the concerns of identity and culture. NSM theories also attempted to explain mobilisation similarly to social movement theory, that is, why and when people act, and refuted the assumption that activism based on other than class is psychologically rooted, raising the potential of alternative causal descriptions to identity politics.

NSM theory distinguishes class-based social movements, especially past labour and socialist movements, from contemporary movements organised based on ideology and values. Furthermore, New Social Movement theory views these as historically new collective responses resulting from macro-structural changes of modernisation and a shift to a post-industrial society.[59] These macro-structural changes produced post-material values concerned with achieving

[57] Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," Annual Review of Sociology 27, no. 1 (2001): 283–305.
[58] Jean L. Cohen, "Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements," *Social Research* 52, no. 4 (1985): 663–716.
[59] Sunil Kumar, and K. M. Seethi, "Marginalisation, Identity Politics and New Social Movements." *Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations*: 268.

democracy rather than economic survival.[60] *T*ouraine further developed this understanding by positioning social movements as active forces that struggle to control "historicity", that is, the general cultural forms and structures of social life, rather than merely reactive collective behaviour.[61] Thus, New Social Movements are viewed as an effort to regain control over decisions and areas of life increasingly becoming subjects to social control, to resist the colonisation of the lifeworld, and to transform civil society. NSMs are said to advocate direct democracy, employ disruptive tactics, and enact the democratic organisational forms that they seek to achieve.

However, the theoretical advances of NSM theory contain inherent tensions that reveal both its contributions and limitations. NSM's theory acknowledges the seriousness of identity politics in the present-day world instead of dismissing it as being merely cultural, symbolic or psychological. However, NSM's theory continues to separate identity and culture from the political economy. The NSM theory has been criticised for not taking into consideration the conservative social movements that could also be considered as NSMs, as these movements too are concerned with "identity, culture and values.[62] NSM's theory deals with normative political evaluation of identity politics. For instance, Touraine makes an interesting ontological distinction between identity politics and New Social Movements.[63] In his view, movements such as women's or lesbian movements are not mobilised around identity politics because they manifest radical and inclusive tendencies and have themselves criticised identity politics. He does consider "conservative social movements, in contrast, as identity politics because they respond to economic globalisation and decline of a national character by mobilising movements based on ethnicity, religion or nationalism.[64] Touraine defines identity politics as movements with exclusive tendencies rather than movements organised around several status identities that might vary between exclusivity and inclusion.[65] This distinction reveals the normative dimensions embedded within NSM theory and its approach toward understanding the notion of identity. While the theory pioneered systematic

[60] Max Haller, "Theory and method in the comparative study of values: Critique and alternative to Inglehart." *European sociological review* 18, no. 2 (2002): 139-158.
[61] J. Rusmanto, E. S. Ulfarita, and M. Farid, "Challenging the Hegemony of the Grand Paradigm of Social Movement Studies: A Review of Paradigmatic Weaknesses," *Journal Ilmu Sosial, Politik Dan Pemerintahan* 12, no. 2 (2023): 271–287
[62] Christian Scholl, "The New Social Movement Approach," in *Handbook of Political Citizenship and Social Movements*, ed. Hein-Anton van der Heijden (Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014).
[63] Bernstein, "Identity Politics," 2005.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid

analysis of identity in collective action, its analytical framework was shaped by particular assumptions about democratic participation that both enabled its theoretical innovations and limited its scope in understanding the full spectrum of identity-based mobilisation.

Drawing on the arguments from NSM theory, the identity politics that emerged in Assam can be understood as manifestations of the post-materialist shift toward recognition and cultural autonomy that characterises new social movements. The Assamese identity movements of the 1980s, including the anti-foreigner agitation, reflect the NSM emphasis on "regaining control over decisions and areas of life increasingly becoming subjects to social control" - in this case, demographic composition, linguistic dominance, and cultural preservation.[66] These movements exhibited the decentralised organisational structures and symbolic activities that NSM theory identifies, mobilising around lifestyle and group identity rather than traditional class-based concerns. However, the evolution of some identity-based movements into insurgency reveals a critical limitation in NSM theory's framework. While NSM theory positions social movements as active forces struggling to control "historicity" through democratic participation, the emergence of armed insurgency in Assam suggests that when identity-oriented movements encounter persistent exclusion or state repression, they may move beyond the participatory democratic forms that NSM theory celebrates.[67] This creates a cyclical pattern where insurgency, as one manifestation of identity politics, simultaneously destabilises the very cultural and political spaces these movements initially sought to protect, leading to further marginalisation and radicalisation. The case of Assam thus demonstrates both the explanatory power of NSM theory in understanding the genesis of identity-based mobilisation and its analytical boundaries when identity politics encounters structural violence and transforms into armed resistance.[68]

2.2.2. Understanding Identity Politics and the Various Forms of Identity

Collective identity grows out of people's sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, but the way individuals connect to a group tells only part of a much richer story. When someone identifies with a collective, they go through a deeply personal process, they see where

[66] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself,* 1999.
[67] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000.
[68] Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology, and Identity*, New Delhi: Shipra Publications, 1993.

they fit, they feel something real about that connection, and they make a conscious choice to be part of it all.[69] This individual experience of belonging matters enormously because it shows us how much people invest in their group membership and what it actually means to them in their daily lives.[70] But here's where it gets interesting: the collective identity that emerges from all these personal connections becomes something quite different from what any one person experiences. It develops its own character through the shared stories people tell, the struggles they face together, and the countless interactions that happen between members over time. Think of it as the difference between loving one's family and understanding what makes their family unique as a unit. In other words, one's personal attachment is real and important, but the family's identity comes from years of shared meals, arguments, celebrations, and quiet moments that have shaped who you are together.[71] This relationship between individual belonging and group identity never stops moving. People constantly rework their sense of connection while the group itself changes through historical events, internal disagreements, and encounters with outsiders. What makes this distinction crucial is that it explains why collective identities can outlast individual members and why they sometimes develop in ways that surprise even the people who belong to them.[72]

2.2.3. Nationalism, National Identity and Sub-nationalism

Nationalism is not a static concept; rather, it is an evolving process influenced by history, legends, and communal logic. Yogendra Singh posits that defining a nation is akin to defining the mind, as it is more meaningful to focus on its functioning.[73] From this perspective, the nation is a construct which is developed gradually, based on the collective experiences, narratives, and challenges. Nationalism is, therefore, both a set of beliefs and a catalyst for political mobilisation, promoting a sense of common belonging and dedication to the concept of a nation-state. It creates

[69] Richard D. Ashmore, Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe, "An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity: Articulation and Significance of Multidimensionality," *Psychological Bulletin* 130, no. 1 (2004): 80–114.
[70] Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 283–305.
[71] Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
[72] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47.
[73] Yogendra Singh, "Modernization and its contradictions: contemporary social changes in India." *Polish Sociological Review* 178, no. 2 (2012): 151-166.

a barrier between the concept of "us" and the "other".[74] These identities are built through personal experiences, collective memory, and political stories. Although it was 18th-century Europe, which is said to be the emergence of the roots of nationalism, there is no uniform nature of nationalism globally. It is found in democratic, authoritarian, as well as post-colonial settings with different forms and nature according to the cultural context of the region.[75] The existing culture, history and geography of a society shape nationalism, and as such, to understand the concept of nationalism, it is important to comprehend it from various historical, cultural and political perspectives.

At the core of national identity lies a profound aspect of shared cultural identity. More than sharing a common belief system, it is about a sense of collective past and a collective future. This feeling of belongingness or togetherness is developed through shared events of the past, customs and beliefs passed through generations over time.[76] What is most significant is how communities recall their histories, that is, what could be referred to as their "ethno-history." In contrast to the historian's account, this type of memory is influenced by feelings, experiences, and personal identity. It serves as the bond that unites a community and provides significance to its political dreams. Although nationalism went through transformation over the centuries, one core demand remained constant, which is that the government should be formed of the same ethnic complexion as the majority. Hence, political self-determination has been found to be one of the core traits of nationalism through time and space. Along with political self-determination, cultural self-determination is another core demand inherent in nationalism. The former makes the space for the latter. Instances can be seen in the 19th century in parts of Europe, the 20th century in Arab and also in Southeast Asian countries in contemporary times.[77] Since the 19th century, nationalist movements have been defined by a push for cultural self-determination. The decline of universal cultural elements led to more importance being given to vernacular, national language, folk traditions and accessibility of culture to the masses. Thus, cultural self-determination is another

[74] Peter Sahlins, Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees (Berkeley, 1989),
[75] Guntram H. Herb, and David H. Kaplan, eds. *Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview [4 volumes]*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2008.
[76] Bhikhu Parekh, "The Concept of National Identity." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 21, no. 2 (1995): 255-268.
[77] Smith, Anthony D. "The ethnic sources of nationalism." *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 48-62.

key trait of nationalism. However, the history of nationalism is scarred by the concept of racial purity as its theoretical base for nationality.[78]

As such, these insights about core demands of nationalism for political and cultural self-determination find practical expression in contemporary political movements, where different theoretical frameworks offer competing explanations for how and why identity-based mobilisation occurs. To understand how these dynamics manifest in real political contexts, three major analytical approaches provide distinct yet complementary perspectives on how collective identities form, persist, and drive political action in modern societies. The Developmental Perspective treats modernisation as something of a double-edged phenomenon when it comes to political identity and conflict. While this approach suggests that economic development and expanding capitalist markets should theoretically weaken older ethnic loyalties and help create more unified national identities, the reality proves far more complicated. State efforts to build cohesive national identities often end up doing the opposite—they awaken and energise sub-national groups, sparking what we now recognise as identity politics.[79] Political tensions and ethnic conflicts frequently emerge not from development itself, but from its uneven distribution and the state's struggle to bring diverse identities under one umbrella. This creates what scholars call "relative deprivation", which highlights the painful gap between what groups expect from their political system and what they actually receive in terms of power, economic opportunities, or social recognition.[80] When marginalised communities feel this disconnect most acutely, they organise, demand recognition, and sometimes challenge existing power structures in ways that can escalate toward violence. Moreover, Ted Robert Gurr's influential work, *Why Men Rebel*,[81] remains essential for understanding how these perceived gaps between expectations and reality drive people toward collective action.

Communitarian approaches take a fundamentally different view, arguing that pre-existing bonds between people, whether ethnic, cultural, or religious, remain the bedrock of political order and social unity. Drawing from both enlightenment ideals and traditionalist thought,

[78] Michael J. Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity*. Fordham Univ. Press, 2011.
[79] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983.
[80] Alam Saleh, "Relative Deprivation Theory, Nationalism, Ethnicity and Identity Conflicts," *Geopolitics Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 156–174.
[81] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.

communitarians argue that political legitimacy emerges from something more profound than individual self-interest: an authentic collective spirit rooted in shared community bonds that fosters enduring group loyalty.[82] Even as modernisation transforms how societies hold together, people's basic need to belong somewhere meaningful persists and often grows stronger when groups feel their distinctiveness threatened by homogenising state policies or global forces.[83] Politically, this means shared cultural values, collective consciousness, and historical narratives become powerful drivers of group demands for recognition, autonomy, or self-governance, often in direct opposition to states that emphasise individual rights over community bonds.[84] Communitarian thinkers argue that liberalism's focus on isolated individuals misses something crucial about human nature, that our identities are fundamentally shaped by the communities that raise and sustain us.[85] In contrast, Conflict Approaches offer yet another lens, suggesting that social and political conflict, rather than simply being destructive, can actually forge stronger political identities and group unity. This perspective sees society as constantly struggling over limited resources, where "enmity", whether from external threats or internal divisions can sharpen group boundaries and rally members around their collective identity.[86] Georg Simmel, a foundational sociologist, keenly observed how conflict can strengthen group cohesion by forcing members to unite against common enemies,[87] while Max Weber emphasized both the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and the ongoing political struggles between distinct "value-bearing communities:".[88] From this viewpoint, political competition over scarce resources, power, and representation transforms vague social differences into sharp political divisions, compelling groups to organise into movements that either challenge or reinforce existing power arrangements.

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[82] Gerard Delanty, "Communitarianism and Citizenship," in *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, ed. Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 161–174.

[83] Jan Aart Scholte, "The Geography of Collective Identities in a Globalizing World," *Review of International Political Economy* 3, no. 4 (1996): 565–607.

[84] Charles Taylor, T*he Politics of Recognition*, 1994.

[85] Allen Buchanan, "Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (1989): 852-882.

[86] Dhruba Das and Monica M. Whitham, "Framing the Collective 'We' and the Antagonistic 'Other' through Metacontrast: Intragroup Homogenization and Intergroup Polarization in the Hindu Nationalist Movement," *Sociological Forum* 36, no. 3 (2021): 689–711

[87] Michael Nollert, "Social Cohesion, Outside Threats, and Multiple Identities," in *Social Cohesion in Times of Crisis: Concepts, Approaches, and Perspectives*, ed. Susanne Pickel and Gert Pickel (London: Routledge, 2021), 76–92.

[88] Anthony D. Smith, "Ethnic Identity and World Order," *Millennium* 12, no. 2 (1983): 149–61

Sub-nationalism refers to the allegiance and political aspirations of groups within a larger nation-state that seek greater autonomy or recognition of their distinct cultural, linguistic, or territorial identity. It can manifest as regionalism or separatism.[89] Using the terminology from Cutt and Murphy, a subnation refers to "a group of people or individuals residing in a current state who demonstrate a deep sense of belonging as a unique country." The existence of a unique, distinct language, printed materials, and regional entities. Sentiment encourages the growth of sub-nationalist movements in a region. Subnational sentiments often become visible in three broad ways. First, when there is a clear and organised push by a group to demand the creation of a separate state. Second, even in the absence of such active movements, certain regions may still express a desire for greater political autonomy or distinct recognition. Third, these sentiments are frequently reflected in the rise and presence of regional political parties that seek to represent local identities, interests, and aspirations within the wider national framework.

Sub-nationalism represents a collective identity beneath the nation-state. M. Crawford Young effectively characterises sub-nationalism as identities that "fulfil certain criteria for politicisation and mobilisation", linked to nationalism, yet are not strongly dedicated to independent statehood.[90] A feeling of connection or unity, the 'collective sentiment', which is the fundamental aspect present throughout the ladder of political community, nationalism and sub-nationalism, serves as the primary mechanism by which sub-nationalism promotes social progress. These components, that is, a shared origin myth, a collective culture, language, print capitalism and national awareness, which are frequently referenced in the concept of sub-nationalism.[91] Insurgencies may be driven by sub-nationalist movements seeking independence or greater autonomy from central authorities, often rooted in grievances over cultural or political marginalisation.

2.2.4 Ethnicity, Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Mobilisation

The terms "ethnicity" and "ethnic group" are commonly used in political debates and cultural connotations, and even in something as basic as cuisine. According to Webster's Dictionary, the term "ethnic," derived from the Greek word ethnikos, originally denoted: (i) non-Christian peoples

[89] Anthony D. Smith, "The Origins of Nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12, no. 3 (1989): 340–67.
[90] Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1979.
[91] Patrick Colm Hogan, *Understanding nationalism: On narrative, cognitive science, and identity*. The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

who are frequently termed as heathens or pagans; (ii) racial or cultural populations with common characteristics and traditions; and (iii) societies regarded as components of an "exotic" or "primitive" culture.[92] Several academics have embraced this third viewpoint, interpreting ethnicity from a limited perspective, mainly appropriate for the conventional anthropological examination of so-called “tribal” cultures. Nonetheless, this restricted perspective has been contested by numerous others who claim that the idea of ethnicity is significantly wider. It pertains not just to small or "primitive" populations but also to extensive groups in contemporary, industrial societies. They contend that ethnicity encompasses both marginalised groups and those deeply integrated within advanced, intricate nations.[93] The uncertainty regarding the term has caused significant confusion, as it is often used interchangeably with ideas such as nationality and race in both scholarly discussion and common speech. This convergence, along with the politically charged aspect of ethnicity, has led some academics to recommend different terminology, like “peoplehood,” “race,” or “nationalist ideology” - as possibly more accurate and beneficial frameworks for examining collective identities.

Ethnicity, similar to class, gender, age, and sexual orientation, is a fundamental component of identity that significantly influences how individuals and groups navigate social standing and gain access to power.[94] At its essence, ethnicity is based on a common belief in shared lineage, frequently influenced by collective recollections of historical events like colonisation and migration. Ethnic affiliation is not static; it is influenced by context and conveyed through various cultural indicators or limits.[95] These indicators, like language, traditions, or symbols, assist in shaping group identity and possess differing degrees of social significance and worth based on the context of their usage. Nationalism frequently arises from the state’s ambition to consolidate its citizens by fostering a common, unifying identity. In doing so, it fuses the concepts of individuals, territory, and political power into a single envisioned community. This process usually reduces

[92] *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: G and C Merriam Co., 1978), 781; Also see: *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G and C Merriam Co., 1967), 285.
[93] Yulian Bromley, ‘The Object and Subject Matter of Ethnography’, in Ethnography and Related Sciences, Problems of Contemporary World, 49, Moscow: Social Sciences Today Editorial Board, USSR Academy of Sciences, 1997.
[94] John Stone, “Race, ethnicity, and the Weberian legacy.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 38, no. 3 (1995): 391-406.
[95] Fredrik Barth, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries”* (Stockholm: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm, 1994), 11.

diversity by creating distinct boundaries between those seen as belonging to the national “we” and those regarded as the “other.” It’s an initiative focused on unity, yet it frequently relies on exclusion. In academic discourse, "race" is widely defined as a form of identity based on perceived physical qualities such as skin colour, facial features, hair texture, and bodily form, which are frequently used to indicate social distinction. In contrast, "ethnicity" refers to a sense of belonging formed by common cultural activities such as language, religion, dress, cuisine, music, and communal history, which provide a stronger connection to tradition and way of life. According to John Szwed, physical appearance and cultural behaviour are rarely seen as distinct in the social understanding of identity; instead, they often operate together, reinforcing one another to signal and sustain broader social hierarchies and structures.[96]. Due to this overlap, the difference between race and ethnicity is frequently unclear; they operate less as completely distinct concepts and more as linked methods of categorising identity and diversity.

Ethnicity emerges from the more varied and distinct results of state-building. Rather than advocating for uniformity, it emphasises and strengthens distinctions among groups. These differences not only represent cultural diversity but also influence the value placed on groups in society. Consequently, certain communities receive elevated social standing and improved access to rights and resources, while others are side-lined within the same political framework. Ethnicity refers to a social category based on shared cultural heritage, ancestry, language, and traditions. It involves a sense of belonging to a particular group that distinguishes its members from others in society.[97] Ethnic identities can influence social interactions, political affiliations, and collective behaviours. Identity politics often revolves around ethnic identities, mobilising groups based on shared ethnicity to assert political claims or resist perceived marginalisation. Since the publication of *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985), Donald Horowitz’s work has shaped scholarly discussions on ethnic identity. Comparative political scientists have largely agreed on a broad definition of ethnicity, which Horowitz describes as an umbrella category encompassing distinctions based on race, language, religion, tribe, nationality, and caste. Ethnic identity, therefore, falls within a larger spectrum of identity categories but is specifically determined by descent-based attributes.

[96] Ana Maria Alonso, “The Politics of Space, Time and Substance: State Formation, Nationalism, and Ethnicity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 379–405
[97] Anthony D. Smith, *The Origins of Nations*, 1993.

Identity, in general, refers to any social category in which an individual qualifies for membership. Ethnic identity, however, is distinct in that eligibility is defined by inherited traits or markers that signal lineage. These attributes can be classified into three categories. The first includes genetically transmitted features such as skin colour, hair type, eye colour, height, and other physical characteristics. The second comprises cultural and historical inheritances, including an individual's name, language, place of birth, and ancestral origins. The third involves attributes acquired over a lifetime that reinforce ancestral ties, such as surnames or tribal markings. In addition to objective traits, ethnic identity is often shaped by perceived descent. This means that even in cases where a direct ancestral link is absent, a collective belief in such an association can define ethnic belonging. These myths of descent play a crucial role in identity formation and social classification. Ethnic identity categories, as a subset of descent-based identities, exhibit four defining characteristics.[98] First, they are impersonal, forming an "imagined community" that extends beyond immediate family or kinship ties. Second, they represent only a section of a country's population rather than the entirety of it. Third, if one sibling qualifies for membership in an ethnic category within a given location, all other siblings would also be eligible. Finally, the criteria for membership are restricted to inherited traits or the ancestral background, such as language, religion, region, tribe, caste, clan, nationality, or race, of an individual's parents and forebears. This conceptual framework highlights the interplay between ancestry, social perception, and classification in defining ethnic identity. It underscores the complex ways in which both objective lineage and subjective beliefs shape communal belonging in multi-ethnic societies.

Scholars have long debated how best to define ethnic identity, and over time, three broad approaches have emerged: objective, subjective, and a combined or composite approach.[99] The objective approach focuses on visible traits—like shared language, religion, customs, or historical experiences—to classify ethnic groups. While this framework offers some clarity, it tends to be too rigid, often overlooking the ways in which identities shift and evolve over time. On the other hand, the subjective approach emphasises how people feel about their belonging, highlighting group consciousness and a sense of shared identity. Yet, this view can fall short when it fails to

[98] Kanchan Chandra, "What Is Ethnic Identity and Does It Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 397–424.

[99] Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi; Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991). Also see: Urmila Phadnis, *Ethnicity and Nation-Building in South Asia*, rev. ed. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001).

connect those feelings to the broader social and historical forces that shape them. To bridge these gaps, a growing number of scholars advocate for a composite approach, one that sees identity as shaped by both internal perceptions and external realities. As Phadnis suggests, understanding ethnicity requires us to look at how objective and subjective elements work together, rather than treating them as opposites.[100] Ethnic identity, in this view, is not fixed or one-dimensional; it's a dynamic process shaped by history, memory, culture, and social interaction.

According to this perspective, an ethnic group can be understood as a community bound together by shared historical experiences, a real or imagined connection to a particular place, and cultural traits, such as language, religion, food, or clothing, that mark their distinctiveness. Just as importantly, members of the group recognise this identity themselves, and it is also recognised or sometimes challenged by others.[101] This view highlights three key dimensions: a material and historical foundation, a subjective sense of belonging, and external recognition within a social and political context. In places like Assam, where histories of migration, colonial rule, and political marginalisation have deeply shaped community identities, this composite approach offers a powerful way to understand how ethnic groups see themselves, and how they are seen by others. It reminds us that ethnicity is not just inherited or imposed; it is built, negotiated, and lived in specific historical and political moments.

Ethnic identity is not a static designation but an evolving power that can either strengthen a state's borders or contest its legitimacy for the sake of self-determination. Throughout the years, researchers have provided various reasons for the mobilisation of ethnic groups, highlighting four main viewpoints: primordialist, cultural pluralist, modernisation and development, and Marxist or neo-Marxist. Every viewpoint contributes valuable insights, but alone, none provides the complete narrative. The primordialist perspective regards ethnic identity as an inherited trait, grounded in strong cultural connections such as language, religion, and tradition. These attachments, from this perspective, are not selected but experienced, frequently constituting a part of an individual's emotional and social foundation[102]. Nevertheless, it has difficulty elucidating why interactions

[100] Urmila Phadnis and Rajat Ganguly, "Ethnicity in Post-Independent India: A Sociological Perspective," *Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2016): 56–61.
[101] Sanjay Sharma, *Communalism and the State: The Role of the State in Communal Violence* (New Delhi: Economic and Political Weekly, 1998).
[102] Urmila Phadnis, and Rajat Ganguly. *Ethnicity and nation-building in South Asia*. Sage, 2001.

among ethnic groups can change over time, from harmony to discord, and in what ways those cultural ties develop. The cultural pluralist perspective enhances this by acknowledging that various ethnic communities often exist together in one society, occasionally in unequal or conflict-prone manners[103]. Although it aids in understanding dominant-subordinate interactions, it does not entirely explain the tensions present within ethnic groups or the reasons why conflict may arise between communities that seem culturally alike.

The modernisation and development perspective emphasises the structural aspect, proposing that as societies evolve, traditional bonds diminish; however, ironically, these changes can also enhance ethnic consciousness.[104] This perspective frequently references the concept of relative deprivation when groups perceive themselves as disadvantaged in comparison to others as a primary factor for mobilisation. However, it fails to clarify why certain marginalised groups stay silent while more affluent ones spearhead protests or movements. At the same time, the Marxist and neo-Marxist theories introduce the concept of internal colonialism and cultural division of labour, contending that certain ethnic groups remain in economically and politically inferior positions within a broader state.[105] These concepts strongly echo in regions such as Assam, where many communities feel excluded from the benefits of development and national recognition.

2.3 Insurgency

Insurgency is not simply a form of armed resistance; it is often a strategy chosen by groups who find themselves excluded from the formal channels of power. [106] Historically, it has taken on different levels of importance depending on broader geopolitical conditions. There are times when insurgent activity barely registers beyond local boundaries, overshadowed by global events. But there are also moments when insurgency becomes a central force in destabilising regions, drawing in external powers, and altering the course of conflicts. In periods where powerful states avoid direct confrontation with each other, insurgency often takes on a different role: that of a proxy, a

[103] Anthony D. Smith, "Ethnic Origin of Nation, (1991)
[104] Frank J. Lechner, "Ethnicity and revitalization in the modern world system." *Sociological Focus* 17, no. 3 (1984): 243-256.
[105] Jan Mejer, "Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretations of ethnicity." *Sociological Focus* 20, no. 4 (1987): 251-264.
[106] Steven Metz, "Rethinking Insurgency," *in The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, edited by Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, 32–44 (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

way 2for major powers to engage in conflict through others.[107] Insurgencies can adopt various forms. At times, they arise as national movements, focused on toppling or reforming a local government perceived as corrupt, oppressive, or discriminatory. In other cases, they manifest as liberation movements, aiming to eliminate what is viewed as foreign control or occupation. Instances encompass the rebellion in Rhodesia, the conflict against the white minority regime in South Africa, the Palestinian uprising, Vietnam post-1965, the Afghan resistance to Soviet control, Chechnya, the ongoing Taliban/al-Qaeda insurgency in Afghanistan, along with the insurgency in Iraq.[108]

Insurgencies generally, although not necessarily, consist of three elements: political mobilisation, guerrilla tactics, and the implementation of terrorism. An insurgent group might employ terrorism, but it is not required to do so. It is theoretically feasible (although practically uncommon) for an insurgent organisation to rely solely on guerrilla tactics and political engagement, without resorting to terrorism. A guerrilla faction might concentrate on military objectives and those participating in a COIN operation. Noncombatants could be harmed, but the group's actions wouldn't qualify as terrorism if they were incidental to a military operation and not aimed at conveying a wider political statement (which is a key feature of many terrorism definitions).[109] Historically, U.S. military and strategic doctrine has focused on revolutionary insurgencies, viewing them as the primary threat to national interests, even though scholars such as Bard O'Neill have cautioned that insurgencies can manifest in various ways.[110] Initially, U.S. doctrine characterised insurgency mainly as a coordinated attempt to topple a current government using violence and subversion.

The term "insurgency" is often used interchangeably with concepts like terrorism and guerrilla warfare, militancy in military and other discourses, as it lacks a clear definition. This stems from the evolving nature of insurgencies and their ability to adapt to different socio-political, military settings, making it difficult to establish a singular definition of the term. The definition of

[107] Ibid.
[108] Steven Metz and Raymond A. Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Reconceptualizing Threat and Response* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004).
[109] Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (London: Routledge, 2012).
[110] Bard E. O'Neill, ed., *Insurgency in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

insurgency has expanded over time, focusing beyond immediate overthrow of the prevailing regime to encompass the motive of eroding the legitimacy of the state while also enhancing the influence and power of the insurgent groups.[111] Hence, insurgent groups focus on creating a powerful parallel base against the government. In this regard, the work of Bard O'Neil expands the meaning of insurgency by incorporating the social and political dimensions of insurgency. Stating that since the emergence of formal governments, insurgency has been the most prevalent form of warfare. It is a struggle between the ruling and the non-ruling authorities, wherein political strategies and violence are used by the insurgents to dismantle, challenge or uphold the legitimacy of the ruling authority.[112] This definition sheds light on the dual nature of insurgency as a political and military phenomenon.

During the Cold War period, insurgency was seen as an isolated event that resulted from the government's inability to address the demands of specific groups. It was solely based on the inefficiency of the government to address the voices of the groups that used insurgency as their last resort for achieving socio-political and economic goals. However, modern-day insurgency is not limited to a physical struggle between the state and the insurgents but also a struggle for legitimacy and mass support. Groups look beyond the state to gain confidence and outside support (transnational actors), which has a huge influence on the dynamics of the conflict.[113] During the Cold War period, insurgencies played a crucial role as they increased Soviet influence. Currently, insurgency is significant due to its connection to transnational terrorism, rather than just ideological alignment. Effective uprisings motivate others, fostering a symbolic environment where armed opposition receives social acceptance. Terrorism has transformed from a method used by insurgents to a strategic means of exercising power, particularly targeting foreign backers of governments.[114] Rebels currently employ terrorism to weaken international backing and diminish internal credibility. Even uprisings not directly associated with global terrorism can support extremist networks, as evidenced by intertwined criminal economies (e.g., drug and diamond trafficking). Clearly identifying the differences between insurgents and groups such as

[111] Steven Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*, 2012.
[112] Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005).
[113] Seth G. Jones and Patrick B. Johnston, "The Future of Insurgency," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 1 (2013): 1–25.
[114] Ariel Merari, "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 4 (1993): 213–51.

Al-Qaeda or Hezbollah has often been a difficult task for researchers. While in some instances, insurgent groups may promote terrorism, that is not always the case.[115] It's not merely the triumph of insurgents but the ongoing, unresolved strife that creates an environment conducive to terrorism, criminal behaviour, and societal collapse. Current insurgencies reflect weakened state authority, worsened by artificial borders, fragile governance, pressures from globalisation and information, and rising public aspirations that outstrip the capabilities of weak institutions. Globalisation heightens awareness and expectations, yet weak states find it hard to meet them, increasing their susceptibility to radical ideologies. The push for limited reforms to gain economic legitimacy can threaten authoritarian regimes, particularly in hybrid political frameworks. Modern insurgencies are interconnected, situated within wider crises characterised by economic instability, identity politics, inadequate services, criminal networks, and deteriorating state legitimacy. The conflict landscape now encompasses both tangible territories and informational domains (infosphere).[116]

The root cause of insurgency can be traced to the socio-political and economic grievances of the people and ineffective administrative capabilities of the government. Issues that are ignored and unaddressed for a long period of time create a sense of dissatisfaction and helplessness among the people. Initially starting as protests or movements turn into groups resorting to violence as a means of last resort.[117] Grievances related to identity foster the emergence of insurgent movements.[118] As mentioned earlier, identity plays an important role in approaches to conflict as well as cooperation. The fluidity and flexibility of identity can be used to unify as well as create fragmentation and conflict among the people. Ethnic identity, as stated by Horowitz, acts as a key variable in the emergence of identity-based conflict and violence, which is caused by the ineffective policies of the existing socio-political and economic structure of the government.[119] Economic goals coupled with grievances related to identity fuel insurgencies.[120] Thus, the basic

[115] James Khalil, "Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing Between Terrorists and Insurgents," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 5 (2013): 419–430.
[116] Daniel Byman, "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165–200.
[117] Navin A. Bapat, "Insurgency and the Opening of Peace Processes." *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 6 (2005): 699–717.
[118] Charles Tilly and Lesley J. Wood, *Social Movements, 1768–2012.* Routledge, 2015.
[119] Horowitz, Donald L. *Structure and strategy in ethnic conflict*. World Bank, 1998.
[120] Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–95.

economic and material needs coupled with marginalisation based on political, ethnic and cultural elements are key sources of insurgency.

Contemporary insurgencies no longer adhere to one specific model of insurgency. 21st century insurgencies consist of diverse types of insurgent methods influenced by changes in global politics, advanced technology and diminishing ability of contemporary states in the era of a globalised world. Historically, the proto-state framework, influenced by Maoist principles, was viewed as the template for effective insurgency. This model focused on a dual approach: systematically eroding the current state while concurrently offering essential services, governance, and security in regulated areas. Insurgents aimed to gain the populace's support and ultimately seize control by establishing legitimacy locally and providing a substitute for state power. This method prospered in agricultural environments, where closeness to the community and the potential for transformation held considerable importance. The groups established by Mao and his top student, Ho Chi Minh, ultimately achieved conventional military triumphs over the Chinese and Vietnamese and were ready to take on the responsibilities of the state.[121] Conversely, non-political or commercial insurgencies have arisen in environments where ideology is overridden by economic factors. These organisations are not aiming to establish a state or gain public support. Rather, their goal is to establish areas, both geographically and politically, where they can run criminal operations with little state involvement. These groups depend less on community support and more on diminishing state influence. Their activities resemble those of politically driven rebels, yet their objectives are based on profit rather than influence or legislation. Today, Mexico serves as one illustration of this phenomenon, whereas certain other insurgencies that initially emerged as proto-state movements ultimately transformed into apolitical or what could be referred to as commercial insurgencies. Instances of this are the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, Shining Path in Peru, and several African movements.[122]

A third and more common type is the networked insurgency, which operates less as a conventional movement and more as a dynamic, shifting network. These insurgents frequently do not possess the territorial authority needed to imitate state roles. Rather, they prioritise disruption

[121] Steven Metz, "The Internet, new media, and the evolution of insurgency." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 42, no. 3 (2012): 9.
[122] Metz, "The Internet, New Media, and the Evolution of Insurgency,"2012.

rather than governance, employing methods like terrorism, cyber manipulation, and minor, dispersed assaults. Their objectives might still involve replacing the state, yet they function in varied and flexible manners, frequently transcending borders and working in several nations. This model represents the current landscape of security: intensified government monitoring, diminished backing from major powers, and the rise of novel technologies such as the internet and encrypted messaging, enabling insurgent factions to persist and organise without requiring established locations or large-scale mobilisations.[123]

Various elements have driven insurgencies toward these more modern forms. Currently, governments are better equipped to identify and dismantle conventional insurgent strongholds, complicating the establishment of Maoist-style proto-states. Secondly, the reduction of Cold War-era proxy financing has constrained the resources available for maintaining territorial control. Lastly, global technologies, ranging from media manipulation to digital recruitment and financial dealings, have enabled non-state actors to function across borders and bypass conventional security systems. In this changing environment, insurgency has evolved beyond merely a rural guerrilla conflict; it is increasingly a hybrid occurrence that fuses political aspirations with economic exploitation, based in a reality where the distinctions between rebellion, terrorism, and organised crime are frequently indistinct.[124] Grasping these models is essential for examining modern conflicts, from urban systems in Latin America to ideological uprisings in Asia and Africa, and even groups in Northeast India, in this case, Assam, where various aspects of these insurgent types may intersect.

2.4 Contextualising the Interplay between Identity Politics and Insurgency

The intertwining relationship between identity politics and insurgency has become one of the defining features of contemporary internal conflicts. The convergence of identity politics and insurgency cannot be comprehended solely through a military or security perspective. Both phenomena are fundamentally connected to issues of identity, acknowledgement, marginalisation, and authority. Identity politics frequently involves highlighting the uniqueness of a group, be it

[123] Jones, Seth G., and Patrick B. Johnston. "The future of insurgency." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 1 (2013): 1-25.
[124] Metz, Steven. "The Internet, new media, and the evolution of insurgency." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 42, no. 3 (2012): 9.

ethnic, linguistic, religious, or regional, while insurgency represents a method of that assertion when traditional political routes are unavailable or have been depleted. In this regard, insurgency represents not just a method of violence but a political manifestation of marginalisation, frequently arising from deep-rooted grievances linked to identity.

Identity, as noted by scholars like Benedict Anderson, is a constructed notion, a collective story that connects people into a community, regardless of whether they ever encounter one another. National and subnational identities are not inherent; they are created within historical and political frameworks, frequently through the institutional and symbolic mechanisms of the contemporary state.[125] In a similar vein, Zygmunt Bauman observes that identity emerges from a belonging crisis, a reaction to the conflict between the reality of a community and its perceived ideals.[126] Political movements, such as insurgencies, discover fruitful opportunities in this gap. Fredrik Barth changed the perception of ethnicity from essence to boundary, contending that it is not the cultural characteristics that define ethnicity, but rather how groups establish distinctions between "us" and "them."[127] Ethnic identity is thus linked to relationships and circumstances, rendering it strategically political. Expanding on this, Paul Brass proposed that political elites frequently invoke ethnicity during times of social or political rivalry. Ethnicity serves as a tool, a way to strengthen group unity and rally against an assumed external danger or prevailing authority. [128]

In this context, ethnicity acts as both a central point and an instrument in rallying insurgents. U. Phadnis and Girin Phukon highlight that ethnic identity transcends cultural pride; it serves as a means to mobilise resistance, claim rights, and confront current power structures.[129] When governments strive to enforce a uniform national identity, as frequently seen in postcolonial nation-building initiatives, groups that perceive themselves as excluded or misrepresented may react by emphasising their ethnic identity in political contexts. When their demands are overlooked or stifled, this may lead to the mobilisation of insurgents.[130] Hence, insurgency can be seen as a

[125] Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism." In *The new social theory reader*, pp. 282-288. Routledge, 2020.
[126] Bauman, Zygmunt. *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
[127] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*. Waveland Press, 1998.
[128] Paul R. Brass, "Ethnic groups and the state." In *Ethnic groups and the state*, pp. 1-56. Routledge, 2023.
[129] Urmila Phadnis, and Rajat Ganguly. *Ethnicity and nation-building in South Asia*. Sage, 2001.
[130] Girin Phukan, "Politics of Secessionism in Northeast India: A Case of the Assamese." *Insurgency in Northeast India* (1997): 255.

drastic expansion of identity politics. It happens when grievances related to identity, concerning land, resources, cultural preservation, or political representation, can no longer be resolved through official channels. In numerous instances, insurgency serves as the final means of political expression, especially in areas where the government is either non-existent, oppressive, or viewed as unjustified.

Examining the overlap of identity politics and insurgency reveals them as interconnected reactions to modernity, state development, and globalisation rather than distinct occurrences. Identity politics delivers the storyline and emotional energy, whereas insurgency supplies the strategic and organisational structure. When identity serves as the basis for exclusion and the state acts as the arena of conflict, insurgency may arise as a demand for acknowledgement and a challenge to power. Viewed this way, analysing insurgency through identity politics allows us to move our attention from merely managing violence to tackling the factors that generate insurgent feelings. It also offers the instruments to investigate how movements organise, why some identities are prioritised in politics over others, and how these conflicts develop over time, understandings that are essential for analysing areas like Assam, where ethnic identities, land disputes, and political violence are closely interconnected.

2.5 The Global Context

The emergence of identity-driven insurgencies worldwide indicates a significant change in the way conflicts, belonging, and power are addressed in contemporary times. Although insurgencies are typically depicted as armed resistance or separatist goals, they are becoming more connected to deep-rooted identity assertions, claims regarding who belongs, who rules, and who delineates the concepts of national identity. These movements gain power from histories of marginalisation and unmet assurances of citizenship, flourishing in political climates where the legitimacy of the state is challenged, or where varied groups feel continually sidelined.

Insurgent movements have arisen from Palestine to Chechnya, as well as in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, and in the Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, where groups feel that their cultural, religious, or ethnic identities are endangered by the state's centralising tendencies. In Palestine, for example, identity cannot be separated from issues of dispossession, occupation, and

lack of statehood. The rebellion in that region represents a struggle for territory, as well as for national acknowledgement and historical fairness.[131] Likewise, the Kurdish movement reflects a persistent stateless identity, disrupted by colonial-era boundaries and consistently deprived of cultural and political independence.[132] In Chechnya, the insurgency shifted from a quest for national independence to a violent conflict shaped by transnational Islamic groups, as the Russian state reacted with significant military power.[133] The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, originally pursuing an independent territory for Tamils, also represented deeper issues regarding language rights, political representation, and ethnic discrimination in a postcolonial majoritarian state.[134]These actions demonstrate that insurgency, even when armed, is frequently based on the politicisation of identity, long before violence and territorial claims.

A key feature of modern insurgencies is the role of globalisation and colonial histories in fostering identity fragmentation and diminishing state power. As Benedict Anderson has correctly pointed out, national identities are constructed through collective stories, but when these stories marginalise or silence minority perspectives, the nation turns into a space of conflict.[135] Colonial borders, frequently created without regard, persist in troubling numerous areas by not representing the cultural and historical connections of the inhabitants. Postcolonial nations, in their efforts to create unity, often implemented homogenising policies that typically favoured a particular language, religion, or ethnic group while sidelining others. The outcome has led to a structural crisis of inclusion, where the essence of citizenship and identity is distributed unevenly. This creates the conditions for insurgent groups to arise as a means for restoring visibility and voice. Additionally, globalisation has exacerbated the crisis by elevating expectations (through access to media, education, and information) without guaranteeing inclusion or prosperity. In unstable or authoritarian governments, this fosters a perilous combination of political standstill and unrealised hopes that can be readily redirected into insurgent efforts. Insurgents not only respond to state

[131] Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and identity politics in Israel/Palestine*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006
[132] Benjamin Meyer, "Constructing Kurdistan: Cross-Border Kurdish Relations and Ethnic Identity." (2022).
[133] Robert W. Schaefer, The insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From gazavat to jihad. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010.
[134] Jeyaratnam A. Wilson, and Alfred Jeyaratnam Wilson. *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries*. UBC Press, 2000.
[135] Anderson, "Imagined Communities," 2020.

collapse, but they also frequently take advantage of the ungoverned areas that are created, establishing alternative economies, illicit networks, and even systems of governance.

Contemporary insurgencies are no longer consistent. As mentioned previously, researchers categorize three main models: the proto-state model, in which insurgents aim to overthrow and supplant the state (observed in Maoist or Tamil movements); commercial or non-political insurgencies, focused on capitalizing on ineffective governance for illegal profit (e.g., regions of Mexico or Colombia); and networked insurgencies, which are decentralized, transnational, and more technologically advanced (e.g., ISIS or al-Qaeda-linked organizations).[136] These forms frequently intersect, increasing the insurgency's adaptability and resilience against state reactions. What connects these apparently different forms is their common dependence on identity as a political asset. Regardless of being based on ethnicity, religion, language, or historical grievances, identity serves as an instrument for mobilisation, legitimacy, and opposition. In all these instances, insurgency emerges not only from urgent political demands but also from profound conflicts regarding recognition, rights, and representation, conflicts frequently driven by feelings of betrayal by the postcolonial or post-authoritarian state.

In this global landscape, identity has become both the battleground and the weapon. It is used to claim space, galvanise supporters, and challenge dominant narratives of the nation. Where modern states have failed to accommodate diversity, politically, culturally, and economically, identity-based insurgencies have emerged to fill the void. These movements are not just about resistance; they are about reimagining the terms of belonging, often in ways that challenge the very foundations of the modern nation-state. Understanding this broader context is essential for making sense of regional insurgencies like in Assam, where ethnic mobilisation, territorial anxieties, and historical exclusion are tightly woven into a longer global story of how identities are shaped, politicised, and defended under conditions of perceived erasure or neglect.

2.6 Situating Assam in the Context of Identity Politics and Insurgency

The patterns of identity-based insurgency seen worldwide resonate clearly within the intricate political environment of Northeast India, especially in Assam. Similar to other postcolonial

[136] Metz, "The Internet, New Media, and the Evolution of Insurgency," 2012.

societies dealing with diversity, disputed borders, and state centralisation, Assam has experienced enduring conflicts regarding identity, autonomy, and political acknowledgement. Assam's situation reflects a wider global pattern where communities react to perceived exclusion by mobilising ethnically and often resorting to insurgent activities. The insurgent movements in Assam, such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland, have been influenced by profound identity issues rooted in a crisis of representation. This was intensified by demographic concerns, especially regarding cross-border migration, which were presented not merely as administrative challenges but as fundamental threats to native identity. In this context, similar to others, ethnicity has been utilised as a tactical means, not just an indication of cultural distinctiveness, but as an instrument to contest governmental power and reaffirm assertions regarding territory, resources, and political influence. Assam's experience underscores the constraints of post-independence nation-building, which frequently favoured a pan-Indian identity over regional and ethnic diversity. Although the Indian government sought to promote unity through constitutional integration and federalism, numerous residents of Assam perceived this as a means of cultural assimilation and economic disregard. Consequently, sub-nationalism arose, not against India itself, but as a call for acknowledgement, respect, and autonomy within it. In this scenario, insurgency evolved into a mode of political expression when parliamentary processes were perceived as insufficient.

Similar to numerous worldwide insurgencies, ULFA's initial mobilisation was not solely militaristic; it carried symbolic and political significance, rooted in the remembrance of historical wrongs and the desire for self-determination. Over time, like other movements globally, the insurgency in Assam diversified, splitting into factions, occasionally losing ideological focus, and even resorting to commercial or criminal avenues. Assam's insurgency reflects international trends in significant aspects. It highlights the inability of the state to embrace internal diversity, similar to the cases of the Tamils or Kurds. It has tried various insurgency models, ranging from proto-state setups to more scattered, interconnected approaches. It has been influenced by worldwide elements, such as transnational conversations regarding indigenous rights, identity, and autonomy, although its particular issues are highly local. Analysing Assam within this comparative context reveals that its insurgency transcends a mere regional security concern, becoming part of a broader global trend, where identity serves as a significant means for expressing demands, challenging

exclusion, and redefining political futures. The deliberate application of ethnicity, the emergence of sub-nationalism, and the politicisation of identity related to marginalisation and demographic concerns are not exclusive to Assam; however, their particular paths require detailed examination.

These intricate intersections, among ethnic identity, governmental policies, migration, political activism, and violence, will be dealt with in more detail in the subsequent chapters. The following chapter will specifically investigate the dimensions of identity politics in Assam, outlining how historical, cultural, and socio-political elements have influenced unique expressions of community identity. This will establish the foundation for later conversations on insurgency, governmental reactions, and the difficulties and opportunities of reconciliation and autonomy in a highly diversified society.

Chapter 3: Identity Politics in Assam

3.1. Introduction

Identity develops through continuous conversation and negotiation with "important others." In a diverse social setting, identity needs to be consistently affirmed to receive recognition and esteem. Identity crises often arise when the fundamental traits of a group appear threatened. If perceived threats or losses didn't exist, identity wouldn't emerge as a major concern in contemporary politics.[137] The marginalisation of the language of the indigenous people in Assam resulted in the emergence of a significant identity crisis, leading to a continuing internal struggle over identity. This resulted in the formation of a "we feeling" around a shared identity, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a construct of modernisation. In order to understand the multiple layers of identity politics in Assam, it is essential to trace the historical roots of the formation of Assamese identity, which is deeply embedded in the emergence of modern nationalist consciousness. The building years of this consciousness began during the colonial period. Since its inclusion into British India, Assam has witnessed movements for socio-political change.[138]

A significant moment in this trajectory is the year 1979, which witnessed the rise of a mass movement, led by student organisations, demanding protection from what was perceived as threats posed by illegal migration into the state. The same year marked the birth of the first armed organisation, the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), channelling subnational sentiments into an armed struggle.[139] However, it must be noted that expressions of sub-national identity existed even before the 1979 movement. But the events of 1979 marked the initiation of a prolonged armed insurgency in Assam. The movement lasted over three decades, until the signing of the Assam Accord, resulting in significant human cost, loss of resources, withholding of developments and disrupting the peace in Assam[140]. This landmark movement resulted in the emergence of Assamese nationalism, which, over the course of time, led to further conflicts and

[137] Charles Taylor, "Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity." *Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.* (1989).
[138] Sanjib Baruah,. *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
[139] Baruah, Sanjib. "The state and separatist militancy in Assam: winning a battle and losing the war?." *Asian Survey* 34, no. 10 (1994): 863-877.
[140] Sanjib Baruah, "Immigration, ethnic conflict, and political turmoil--Assam, 1979-1985." *Asian survey* (1986): 1184-1206.

fragmentations and a never-ending competition over recognition and territory in a multicultural state like Assam. The hotbed of identity politics paved the way for groups to take up arms and violence in their fight for autonomy, recognition and territory.

The politics surrounding identity in Assam play a crucial role in the larger story of India's nation-building efforts and its persistent challenges regarding diversity, acknowledgement, and regional self-governance. Assam, situated in the borderlands of Northeast India, reflects a deeply layered history shaped by migration, political shifts, and cultural assimilations, making it one of the most complex terrains of identity and belonging in contemporary India. Here, the question of who belongs and who remains an outsider has shaped not just electoral outcomes and government policies, but the very fabric of social life. The state's distinctive historical trajectory, marked by Ahom rule, British colonial manipulation, and post-independence demographic anxieties, has created a political landscape where identity operates as both sword and shield.[141] Unlike many other Indian states where identity politics emerged primarily as responses to democratic competition, Assam's experience runs deeper. Colonial classification systems transformed flexible and overlapping social identities into fixed ethnic categories, subtly but profoundly altering how communities came to see themselves and relate to others.[142] When independence arrived, these colonial legacies collided with the new Indian state's nation-building project, creating tensions that persist today. The promise of a secular, unified nation often felt hollow to many Assamese speakers who feared cultural submersion, while various tribal and ethnic minorities worried about domination by both the Assamese-speaking majority and the Indian state.

What makes Assam's identity politics particularly intricate is how it operates simultaneously at multiple levels. Communities assert their distinctiveness not just against the Indian state or immigrant populations, but against each other. Though politically influential, the Assamese-speaking middle class has often perceived itself as under threat, both from shifting demographic patterns and a sense of economic displacement.[143] Meanwhile, Bodo, Karbi, and other tribal groups have challenged Assamese hegemony while also competing among themselves for recognition and

[141] Arupjyoti Saikia, *The Quest for Modern Assam: A History, 1942–2000* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2023).
[142] P. P. Borah, R. Deka, and A. J. Bhuyan, *"Ethnicity and Fragmented Identity: Diverse Forms of Identity Formation among the Misings of Assam," Asian Ethnicity* 23, no. 1 (2020): 66–89.
[143] Sanjoy Barbora, *Homeland Insecurities: Autonomy, Conflict and Migration in Assam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

resources. Bengali-speaking Muslims, many of whom have lived in the region for generations, find themselves perpetually suspected of being recent immigrants, their citizenship questioned, and their loyalty doubted. These competing claims of nativity reveal the constructed nature of identity itself. The boundaries between insider and outsider, indigenous and immigrant, have shifted repeatedly depending on political convenience and changing demographics. The very idea of an "Axamiya" identity, supposedly encompassing all who speak Assamese and embrace the region's culture, remains fractured despite decades of political mobilisation around this concept.[144] According to the Anthropological Survey of India (1985), Assam is home to 115 distinct communities, making its ethnic landscape both complex and layered. Among them, the 'Axamiya' identity stands out as the most widely embraced, yet it remains without a clear official definition. In contrast, the Bodos represent the largest plains tribal group and the second-largest tribal linguistic community in Assam, with over 1.3 million Bodo speakers.[145] State interventions, from the Assam Accord of 1985 to the recent National Register of Citizens, have often intensified rather than resolved these contradictions.

Understanding this complex web of identity politics proves crucial for grasping why Assam became fertile ground for insurgent movements. Organisations like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) did not emerge from deep-seated grievances, and their rise reflected deeper frustrations with how the Indian state managed questions of recognition, representation, and resource distribution. These groups transformed cultural anxieties and political grievances into armed resistance, offering their supporters a vision of liberation that mainstream politics seemed unable to deliver.[146] The trajectory from identity assertion to insurgent mobilisation in Assam thus reveals broader patterns about how cultural communities respond to perceived threats and opportunities. When democratic channels appear blocked or insufficient, when state responses seem dismissive or heavy-handed, and when economic development fails to address fundamental concerns about cultural survival, identity politics can take more radical forms. As such, examining how identity has been

[144] Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2014).
[145] K. Bharadwaj, *"Ethnicity in Assam: Understanding the Complexities of Ethnic Identities and Conflicts," Indian Journal of Public Administration* 62, no. 3 (2017): 546-58.
[146] Dilip Gogoi, "Rise and Fall of Ethnonationalist Armed Movement in Assam: A Diachronic Narrative of the Assamese Nationality and Its Systemic Insecurity," *Social Change and Development* 21, no. 1 (2024).

constructed, contested, and mobilised in Assam, it is possible to better understand not just the turbulent recent history of the region but also the ongoing challenges facing the diverse democracy in India.

3.2. Historical foundations of Assamese identity

Movement of people from diverse groups in Assam, from within the Indian subcontinent and from eastern regions has been going on for centuries. What is implied as an "Assamese" or "Asomiya" in contemporary times is closely tied to two historical processes, one being the process of Aryanisation and the other being the rise of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley. The formation of the idea of a composite Assamese nationality took place during the later periods of the Ahom rule in the 16th century, as a reaction to an external threat, in this case, from Muslim invasion from neighbouring Bengal. The fear of Muslim invasion brought together various indigenous communities under the common banner of Assamese (or Ahom) to fight the common enemy/ threat. The Ahoms successfully repelled the Muslim invasions, and were also able to free the greater part of Kamrup and Kamata from their occupation, extending their rule up to the Karatoya in Murshidabad and to the close proximity of Dacca by the 1530s.[147]

The consolidation of Assamese identity grew more during the reign of Pratap Singha, from 1603 to 1641. The shared enemy, Mughal encroachment, was collectively resisted by the people, which culminated in victories in 1616 against the Mughals, and later the defeat of the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671. Before the Ahoms, the western part, Lower Assam, known as Kamrupa and the eastern part, Upper Assam, were separate regions consisting of several tribal kingdoms. During the initial period of the Ahom kingdom, historians described Upper Assam as Ahom country and Lower Assam was referred to as the land of "Dhekeris." However, Koch and Keot communities living in eastern or upper Assam were referred to as 'Ahom Koch' or 'Ahom Keot'.[148] The expansion of the Ahom rule over the greater part of the Brahmaputra valley gave the name to the country as Asom, which originated from the word Ahom.

[147] Heramba Kanta Barpujari, ed. *The Comprehensive History of Assam: From the pre-historic times to the twelfth century AD*. Vol. 1. Publication Board, Assam, 1990.
[148] Gunabhiram Baruah, (1885): 'Bangali' in Asam Bandhu, (Assamese), Magh. (January- February)., (1972 reprint): Asam Buranji, (Assamese) Guwahati, first printed 1875

Even during Sankardeva's era, the term Asom frequently referred to the Ahoms.[149] The Ahom kings' embrace of Hinduism and their significant support for the faith in the 17th century under Rudra Singha and Siva Singha accelerated the integration of various tribes into Hinduism, leading to the development of a unified Assamese identity that included caste Hindus, plains-tribals, and a minor segment of Assamese Muslims. Sankardeva's reform-oriented Vaishnavism had set the stage for integrating the plains tribals into Hinduism. Historians have observed that in the 17th and 18th centuries, many members of the Bodo-Kacharis and other tribal communities adopted Hinduism.[150] The initial Muslim invasions that began in the early 13th century and persisted into the 14th century led to a significant number of Muslims remaining in Assam following the unsuccessful campaigns. This group ultimately integrated with the developing Assamese identity as "Asamiya Mussalmans". The Ahom leaders granted influential roles to the Assamese Muslims, who actively participated in opposing the ongoing Mughal efforts to conquer the area. The integration of this group of Muslims into Assamese society was so thorough that historians who joined the Mughal campaigns in Assam remarked they were more Assamese than Muslim. Therefore, the demographic composition of Assamese society just before British arrival in the region can be described as encompassing various ethnic groups integrated into Hinduism, caste Hindus, the tribal communities of the plains, and the relatively modest population of Assamese Muslims.[151]

The growing Assamese nation started facing a significant crisis over the last few decades of the Ahom dynasty. Growing resistance was seen from the ethnic communities due to the existing exploitative feudal structures of the Ahom dynasty. The Moamoria uprising is known to be a broad umbrella encompassing many of these revolts against the Ahom dynasty. Additionally, the Burmese invasion in the years 1817 and 1819 caused sufficient havoc and violence in the region. The foundational social and administrative system, known as the paik-khel of the Ahom dynasty, was dismantled. The occurrence of the two events, the Moamoria Uprising and the Burmese invasions, together exacerbated the crisis, leading to a huge number of deaths and the collapse of

[149] Udayon Misra, "Immigration and identity transformation in Assam." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1999): 1264-1271.
[150] Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam 1826-1947*. New Delhi: People's Pub., 1988.
[151] Misra, Udayon. "Immigration and identity transformation in Assam." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1999): 1264-1271.

the agricultural and commercial sectors.[152] Following these events, the Ahom ruler Purandhar Singha called for the help of the Governor-General of India.[153] Initially, the request was declined, citing the cost of military engagement and a lack of administrative familiarity with the region.[154] However, with the expansion of Burmese aggression, the policy of non-intervention by the British shifted. When the Burmese expansion affected territories like Chittagong, Cachar and Jayantia, which were under British protected areas, the British were apprehensive that the Burmese control over Assam could destabilise Bengal.[155] Therefore, in March 1824, the beginning of the first Anglo-Burmese war took place, resulting in a victory in 1825 and thus, the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, withdrawing all Burmese claims over Assam, Cachar and Manipur. With the signing of the treaty, British control over Assam was formalised, although parts of lower Assam were already under the administrative control of the British.[156]

Although initial British statements did not indicate any intention of annexation of Assam, the then Governor-General's Agent for the Eastern Frontier, David Scott, gradually established a strong presence of the British administration starting from Lower Assam. He used the strategy of initially supporting the Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam to pacify the local population and maintain traditional administrative systems.[157] Nonetheless, Upper Assam, greatly depopulated and economically devastated by the Moamoria Rebellion and Burmese invasion, was regarded as financially unfeasible, yielding less than one lakh rupees in revenue each year.[158] In 1833, the British entered into an agreement with Purandhar Singha, restoring him as a princely leader under British control. He was obligated to pay an annual tribute of fifty thousand rupees and cover the expenses of the British soldiers based in his territory. As expected, he could not meet these financial commitments. Pointing to administrative inadequacy, the British took control of Upper

[152] H.K. Barpujari, ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. 1 (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992), 5.
[153] S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771–1826* (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1956), 501.
[154] R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1835), 82–84.
[155] Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, 511.
[156] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2013).
[157] H.K. Barpujari, ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. 1 (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992), 9–10.
[158] Ibid.

Assam in 1838.[159] Company representatives thought that, with revamped governance, the area's revenue capabilities could be considerably improved.[160]

During the initial stage of British colonial administration in Assam, David Scott maintained the traditional paik system established by the Ahoms, which required each adult male to render state labour for several months each year in exchange for access to arable land, typically about 2.5 acres.[161] After Scott's demise in 1831 and the short-lived reinstatement of Purandar Singha in Upper Assam, colonial officials started substituting local systems with an official land revenue structure. The khel system was abolished in Lower Assam and substituted by the mauza system. In 1838, a similar reorganisation was enforced in Upper Assam, establishing fixed land revenue rates, one rupee for every pura of rupit land and eight annas for other categories.[162] Nonetheless, these financial demands created significant difficulties for the peasant population, which mostly existed outside a monetary system. The British alteration of local institutions increasingly exposed a colonial intent: optimising land revenue while showing minimal concern for the populace's welfare.[163] With the early relief from reestablished order diminishing, public dissatisfaction grew. The Ahom elite, displaced from authority and struggling to adjust to the new regime, increasingly felt resentment.[164] The growth of the tea sector worsened these circumstances. British officials increased land taxes deliberately to compel financially strained peasants to work on the new tea plantations, thereby solving the colonial labour deficit.[165]

Discontent within the former aristocracy emerged in early anti-British revolts, particularly by Gomadhar Konwar and Rupchand Konwar in 1828–29, but these were quickly suppressed because of insufficient public backing. In 1830, Peali Barphukan and Jeuram Dihingia Baruah spearheaded a revolt to regain power from the British; both were put to death for their actions.[166] Although

[159] Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, 2013.
[160] Nirode K. Barooah, *David Scott in North-East India, 1802–1831: A Study in the Foundations of British Power* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970), 131–142.
[161] S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771–1826*, (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1956), 529.
[162] Ibid., 567.
[163] Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826–1947*, (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977), 2.
[164] H.K. Barpujari, ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. 1 (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992), 18–19.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Barpujari, *Comprehensive History of Assam*, 19–20, 5–6.

labelled a palace coup, Peali Barphukan's endeavour was significant for uniting the Assamese rebels with hill tribes such as the Singphos, showcasing the initial attempt at coordinated regional opposition.[167] However, there was a lack of broad public backing for the uprising. Scarred by the political turmoil at the end of Ahom rule, the majority favoured British governance over returning to disorder. Additionally, the Ahom elite was split, with some forming alliances with colonial authorities.[168] The Khasi community, led by U. Tirot Singh, Raja of Nungklow, initiated the first organised and widespread resistance in Northeast India. Singh's actions rallied a broad portion of the Khasi community against colonial encroachment.[169]

A detailed examination of Assam's early colonial past indicates that, even with the financial pressures of the British revenue system, the local community did not unite in efforts to reinstate Ahom governance. The fall of the Ahom monarchy resulted from not just internal conflicts and elitist court politics but also its inability to protect the welfare of the ordinary citizens. This disillusionment was clear in the Ahom nobility's failure to organise even a slight opposition to British advances.[170] The British authorities, motivated by a desire to maximise profits, established the foundation for institutional modernisation to fulfil their colonial motives. These changes, although meant to benefit imperial goals, unintentionally sparked enduring socio-political transformation. Significantly, three domains of progress were crucial. Firstly, the introduction of modern transport and communication infrastructure, which included railways, roads and postal services, enhanced interaction between the earlier isolated communities in the remote regions. Secondly, the establishment of vernacular printing technology facilitated the dissemination of ideas across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This helped in the spread of reformist, political and cultural discourses, leading to an increase in public awareness. Lastly, the establishment of a structured colonial administrative, beginning with Assam's inclusion in the Bengal Presidency, then the formation of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1906, and finally its reconstitution as a Chief Commissioner's Province in 1912, paved the way for formal political institutions such as the Assam Legislative Council (1913) and later the Assam Legislative Assembly (1937) in Shillong.[171]

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[167] Ibid., 24–25.
[168] Ibid., 27.
[169] Barpujari, *Comprehensive History of Assam*, 21–24; Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 3.
[170] H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. 1 (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992), 26.
[171] Harish K. Puri and Paramjit S. Judge, *Social and Political Movements: Readings on Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, and North-East India* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2000).

These developments resulted in the emergence of an indigenous Assamese middle class, whose formation marked a significant phase in the region's socio-political awakening. This new class would eventually become central to the articulation of Assamese identity and nationalist aspirations.

With the arrival of the British, the process of industrialisation began in Assam. In 1839, the Britishers discovered Camellia sinesis in Assam and a series of tests were followed in London from 1836 to 1837, which, after successful results, marked the genesis of the tea industry in the region. Consequently, the Assam Company was established in 1839 to commercialise the rapid cultivation of tea, especially in Eastern Assam, due to favourable conditions in that particular region. However, as the majority of the local population refused to work under the British, the Britishers brought indentured workers from other states such as Orissa, Bengal and the Madras Presidency.[172] The native Camellia assamica gained popularity over the Chinese hybrids in the international market, and by the 1850s, the Assam tea industry began generating profits. Due to the rapid expansion of the industry, migration of tea labourers increased between 1853 and 1860 and continued, although at a slower pace, until 1937. The number of labourers relocated to Assam was approximately one million by the year 1931.[173] The population change naturally called for more agricultural produce. The local farmers, especially from Upper Assam, were not eager to expand their cultivation for the newly added population. Hence, the British brought farmers from Myrmesingh in Bangladesh to transform the barren lands into lush green cultivable lands. This group of farmers belonged to the Muslim community.[174] It is important to note this period of migration during the colonial period, as it marks the beginning of the feeling of insecurity among the indigenous communities due to the demographic changes. Simultaneously, the imposition of the Bengali language in courts and schools in the year 1837 emerged as a catalyst for the first wave of Assamese political consciousness. The replacement of Assamese with Bengali created a sense of alienation and fear among the communities in Assam. This contributed to the emergence of a shared collective ethnic consciousness based on ethnic and linguistic lines. Language, therefore, emerged as a key component around which the Assamese community began to develop its cultural

[172] Sanjib Baruah *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
[173] Talukdar Kalita, *Migration in Colonial Assam: 1853–1937* (Guwahati: Banalata, 2012).
[174] Malini Sur, *Jungle passports: Fences, mobility, and citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh border*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

and political assertion. British administrators considered Assamese as a mere dialect of Bengali, thus reinforcing its inferior status in official domains such as administrative services or educational sectors. As the pre-colonial Assamese population did not have access to Western education, Bengali Hindus were brought in for administrative and other higher-ranking services.[175] This classification led to the alienation of the Assamese speakers in the service and education sectors.[176] However, this was challenged by prominent Assamese intellectuals such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. In 1855, he published a pamphlet titled "*A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language*", where Phukan argued that the use of Bengali in vernacular schools significantly hampered the progress of Assamese students, many of whom were unable to comprehend Bengali. He advocated for Assamese as the rightful medium of instruction and was strongly supported by American Baptist missionaries who began publishing vernacular journals such as *Orunodoi* (1846–83), which played a critical role in Assam's linguistic revival.[177] In spite of these efforts, the Assamese masses could not progress in the educational sector. A few of the elite sections of the society, mainly the descendants of Ahom administrators, gradually began to adopt English and competed for colonial jobs, but often fell behind their Bengali counterparts. In this regard, the *Wood's Despatch of 1854*, implemented in 1857, which called for mass education over elitist "filtration theory," failed to significantly address Assam's educational issues. Higher education facilities remained largely inaccessible, leading to the need for many students to migrate to Calcutta for further studies.[178]

By the year 1837, Assamese was reinstated as the official language and medium of instruction. This milestone was preceded by the formation of the Assamese Literary Society in Calcutta, symbolising the region's cultural resurgence. This period is also known as the "Dark Age of the Assamese language". It hugely impacted the Assamese language, hindering its development and usage in the service and educational sectors. This period fuelled the sense of alienation and threat among the Assamese people towards the Bengali migrants. Additionally, the creation of the Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam in 1874, where Bengali speakers outnumbered Assamese till

[175] S.K. Sinha's Report, 1998
[176] M.K. Dhar, *Assam: Politics of Language and Identity* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing, 2006).
[177] Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language* (Calcutta, 1855).
[178] S.K. Bhuyan, *Studies in the History of Assam* (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam).

1947, reignited deep anxieties among the indigenous population. Over time, a growing sense of cultural and economic exclusion intensified anti-Bengali sentiments. These dynamics showcase the broader link between language and national identity. The idea of German Romantic nationalism and post-World War I Europe, that "Language equals nationality", became a powerful force in Assam as well.[179]

It is essential to highlight that during the pre-colonial period, the term "Assamese" encompassed a diverse section of the population, including Muslims. However, this was changed with the advent of the British in Assam. The colonial rule in Assam began with the annexation of Assam in 1826. This period marked a significant change in the demography and socio-political scenario of Assam. The tea industry was set up during this period. A huge number of workers were required for the effective functioning of the industry. Moreover, to administer and understand the vast area and diverse population, the Britishers employed crucial administrative tools such as the decennial census, administrative ethnographies and land revenue assessments. Even though these administrative tools were conducted as impartial exercises, they had severe repercussions on the cohesive identity of the Assamese population. These ethnographic assessments recorded not just the diversity of the population, but they also created fixed, rigid legal identities from the previous fluid social categories. The census initially started in 1872 and was formalised by 1901, categorising the population on the lines of religion, caste, tribe and language. The 1872 census recorded basic demographic classification in Assam; however, the 1901 Census report by Herbert Risley structurally established definitions of race, caste and tribe throughout the colony. This Census categorised people who speak Assamese as a "linguistic group", whereas the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis were classified as "aboriginal tribes". This rigid classification failed in understanding the intricate socio-political history of all the communities and groups residing in the territory for decades.[180] The Census also established that, "the indigenous tribes of Assam constitute the majority in the hills yet are in a primitive stage of civilisation", creating a sense of marginalisation and establishing a symbolic hierarchy in the process of building a modern state.[181] the writings of scholars such as E.A. Gait and B.C. Allen hugely influenced the colonial policies

[179] Harish K. Puri, and Paramjit S. Judge, *Social and Political Movements: Readings on Northeast India* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2000).
[180] Census of India, 1901, Vol. VI: Assam, compiled by E. A. Gait (Calcutta: Government Press, 1902), pp. 47–55.
[181] Ibid., p. 62.

and legislations regarding land ownership, political representation and education. These British scholars categorised the population into fixed racial and cultural categories such as "aboriginal" or "primitive", while others were categorised as "immigrants" or cultivated.[182]

These classifications led to policies like the Inner Line Permit. In contrast to the hill states of Northeast India, the pre-British tribal and ethnic populations of Assam were not granted protective measures like the Inner Line Permit. This lack of restriction made it significantly easier for outsiders to migrate and settle in Assam. This is reflected in the region's rapid population growth during the colonial period.[183] Assam's population was 32.9 lakh in 1901, which increased to 38.5 lakh in 1911, 46.4 lakh in 1921, and further to 55.6 lakh in the following decade. The decadal growth rates during these three decades were 17.02 %, 20.52%, and 19.82 %, respectively, which were substantially higher than the national average growth rate of 5.75 % during the same period.[184]

S.C. Mullan's Census Report of 1931 is a notable official record showing the demographic change at that time. Mullan stated that the migration of Bengali Muslim immigrants is a significant occurrence as it would fundamentally shift the socio-cultural landscape of Assam. He referred to the huge influx of farmers in Goalpara as almost similar to the movement of a "colony of ants", emphasising the danger of this shift to the culture and identity of the Assamese people. As pointed out by Mullan, the growth rate of migration increased significantly in the following twenty years, especially in Goalpara. This created a sense of alienation and anxiety among the local Assamese population, further determining the discourse of identity politics in the region for the years to come.[185]

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[182] Edward Albert Gait. *A history of Assam*. Thacker, Spink & Company, 1906.; Also see: B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers* (Calcutta: Government Printing Office, 1905).
[183] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
[184] S.C. Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Volume III: Assam, Part I – Report* (Shillong: Government of India Press, 1932), 114–116.
[185] Ibid.

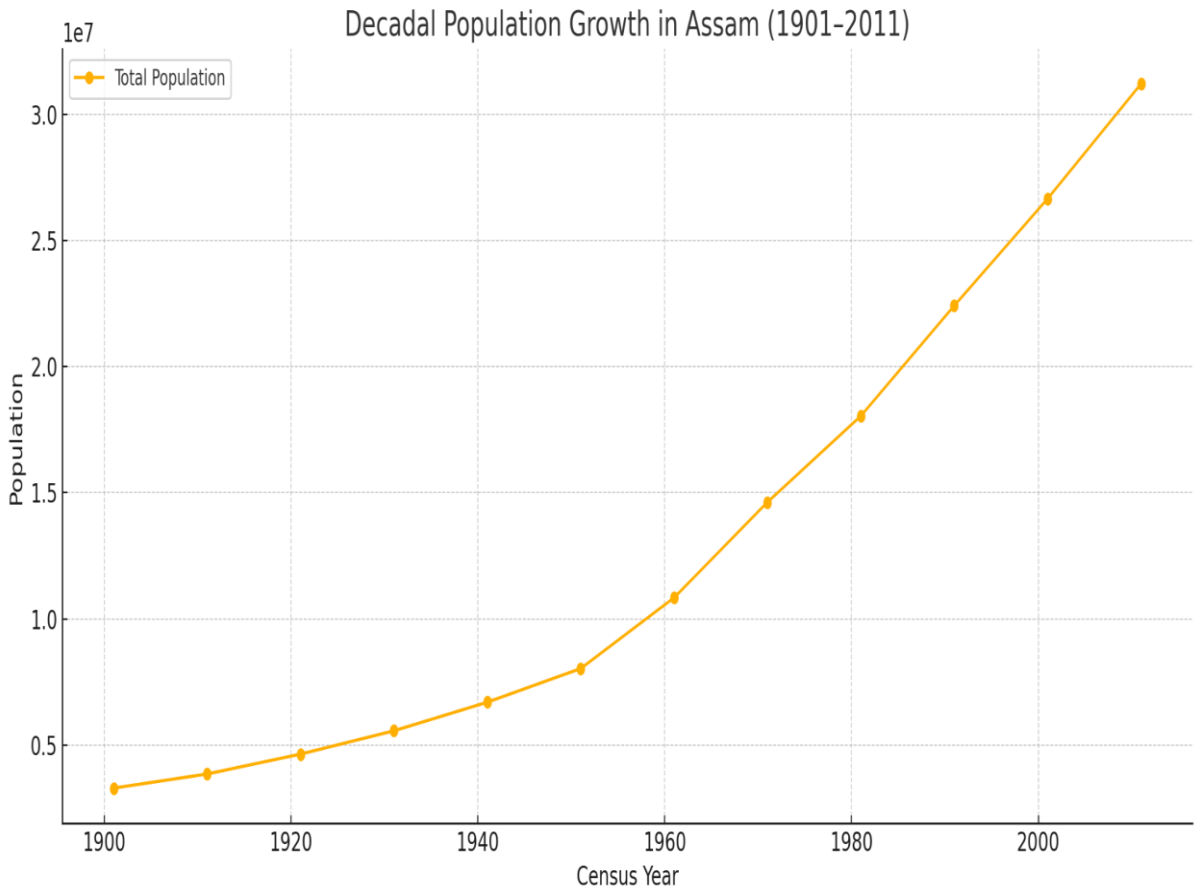

Figure 1.1: Decadal population Growth in Assam (1901-2011)

3.3. Post-Independence Identity Conflicts

Assam, post-1947, like several states in the Northeast in particular and India in general, faced a crisis of ontologies, to the extent that it paved the way for a new kind of reconfiguration of identities which would ultimately shape the future of identity politics in Assam. Assam presents a compelling case in the investigation of identity conflicts rooted in its complex multi-ethnic and multi-lingual demographic landscape, which are further heightened due to a confluence of historical legacies, especially colonial policies that have often resulted in marginalisation of certain communities in favour of others, and demographic transformations, which continued after independence as well. In the post-independent era of state building, the Northeast, as such, has been much distant from the concerns of mainstream politics, which often led to the assertion of a

distinct "Assamese identity", that may be perceived as a reaction or a defensive response to cultural vulnerability, eventually sowing the seeds for sub-nationalist imaginations in the people.

Giddens presents the idea of ontological security in his modernity theory, which he describes as the faith that people and groups have in the persistence of their sense of self and the stability of their social surroundings, and as such, any threats to the familiar cultural frameworks upset this sense of continuity, resulting in defensive identity politics, fear, and anxiety.[186] In the case of Assam, the perceived superiority and dominance of the Assamese community came under challenge as a result of post-partition demographic shifts and persistent migration from East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). Moreover, the loss of hilly regions of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram as a consequence of the States Reorganisation Act (1956) further fuelled feelings of marginalisation and deprivation among these communities, invariably adding to their psychological anxieties about their identity.[187] In other words, these changes threatened the ontological security of the identities of the Assamese communities, with concerns over language and land, leading to movements like the Assam Agitation (1979-85) and efforts like the NRC to reestablish ontological security by establishing precise limits on who is entitled to what. A common misconception in the politics of identity in Assam revolves around the question of legality. It is rather a question of belongingness, as exemplified by the arguments put forth by Yuval-Davis, who argues that *belonging* is not just about legal status but about emotional attachment and social recognition and as such, the politics of belonging refers to the ongoing contestations over who is included in or excluded from a political or cultural community - the boundaries of which are drawn along the lines of race, language, religion, and historical narratives.[188] The idea of being "Assamese" has always involved contested boundaries, raising crucial questions along the lines of who is Assamese by birth, language, culture, or history. Moreover, the push for Assamese as the sole official language in 1960, the Assam Accord of 1985, and even the more recent NRC process are to be understood as political projects of *belonging*. In the face of perceived challenges from Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus, many of whom migrated during and after Partition, these projects represent an effort to stabilise their identity, and,

[186] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
[187] Ivy Dhar, "Assam through the Prism of Reorganisation Experience," in *Interrogating Reorganisation of States: Culture, Identity and Politics in India*, ed. Asha Sarangi and Sudha Pai (London: Routledge India, 2011), 163-85.
[188] Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (London: Sage, 2011).

as such, the idea of *belonging* in the context of Assam is a politicised and historically conditioned process. Moreover, in their seminal work The Social Construction of Reality (1966), Berger and Luckmann make the case that reality, including national or ethnic identity, is not a fixed category, but rather shaped by social processes and that society enables this reality to seem "natural", which is created and maintained by civilisations through interactions, institutions, and narratives.[189] Over time, the notion of a coherent "Assamese identity" has evolved through the processes of social construction and reconstruction. The selective interpretations of language, history, culture and migration have been sacrosanct in the rise of an imagined community.

3.3.1. Reorganisation of State and Identity in Assam

The reorganisation of states in India following independence was a critical and often difficult process, typically motivated by linguistic and ethnic identities to ensure greater acceptance of new administrative boundaries. As such, the procedure was much complicated in the Northeast due to deep-seated social cleavages, especially due to the fact that the tribal population voiced unwillingness to accept the minimal autonomy guaranteed under the Sixth Schedule of the newly approved Constitution, often raising the claims of total independence, triggering insurgencies and violence in various pockets.[190] The States Reorganisation Act of 1956, which reorganised much of India along linguistic lines, had a limited effect on Assam but set a precedent for federal restructuring. In 1971, the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act and the North-Eastern Council Act were enacted by Parliament, formally creating a distinct "North-East India" region, and as such, Northeast India emerged as a significant administrative concept replacing the hitherto more familiar unit of Assam.[191] Assam underwent reorganisation, leading to the emergence of new territories - Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972) and Mizoram (1987), in a bid to accommodate subnational ethnic identities of various tribal communities. What this entailed was the complete separation of the tribal hill regions and the communities like the Nagas, Khasis, and Mizos. Assam

[189] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, "The Social Construction of Reality," in *Social Construction of Reality*, ed. by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[190] Anjan Jyoti Borah, "Identity Politics and Tribal Autonomy Movement in Assam," *National Journal on Social Issues and Problems* 11, no. 1 (January-June 2022): 6-10.

[191] Sanjib Baruah, "Expert Explains: How the Northeast Was 'Invented', 52 Years Ago," *Indian Express*, December 30, 2023. Also see: Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), where he states, "With the reorganisation of the Northeast, Assam lost its frontier. What was once a frontier state became a heartland, and this profoundly shaped the new Assamese political imagination."

now mainly includes the Brahmaputra Valley, where Assamese, Bodo, and Bengali speakers live, along with the Barak Valley in the south. These developments brought forward three interrelated consequences. Firstly, Assamese elites, especially from upper-caste backgrounds, saw a decline in their broader regional influence due to the exclusion of multiple hill communities.[192] Secondly, this territorial loss, in turn, had a consolidating effect within Assam itself, as with the departure of many hill tribes into separate states, the remaining Assam became more homogeneously Assamese in linguistic and cultural terms,[193] and as such, for many Assamese nationalists, this was seen as a chance to strengthen their identity and build a more unified political core. Lastly, the recognition of difference meant that the tribal groups and minorities who remained within Assam, such as Bodos and Bengali Muslims, increasingly felt marginalised in a political landscape that now tilted in favour of Assamese-speaking communities.[194] While state reorganisation of the Northeast, particularly Assam, granted statehood to certain ethnic identities, it also reinforced an imagined Assamese identity within its newly formed borders, highlighting the interplay of territory and identity in the politics of Assam.

3.3.2. The Politics of Language

The territorial losses of 1960 left Assamese communities in a state of anxiety, as having witnessed the creation of Nagaland and the prospect of further fragmentation, they turned to language as a way to consolidate what remained. The Official Language Act of 1960, which made Assamese the official language of the state, with Hindi designated for certain hill areas, was passed in the immediate aftermath of territorial loss. It represented more than administrative policy, and as such, it was a desperate attempt to restore the ontological security that had been shattered by partition, migration, and now state reorganisation. Baruah described the necessity of vernacularising and linked it with the process of decolonisation, particularly post-colonial dignity, while firmly warning that vernacularisation acted as a double-edged sword,[195] as in a bid to consolidate the social fabric, it also alienated others, creating new boundaries of belonging that

[192] Jogendra Kr. Das, "Assam: The Post-Colonial Political Developments," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 66, no. 4 (2005): 873-900.
[193] Gareth Price, *The Assam Movement and the Construction of Assamese Identity*, PhD diss., University of Bristol, 1998.
[194] Harihar Bhattacharyya and Jhumpa Mukherjee, "Bodo Ethnic Self-Rule and Persistent Violence in Assam: A Failed Case of Multinational Federalism in India," *Regional & Federal Studies* (2018).
[195] Sanjib Baruah, "The Politics of Language in Assam," *The India Forum*, June 21, 2021.

would prove just as contested as the old ones. The double-edged nature of this linguistic nationalism became apparent almost immediately. What was meant to unify and strengthen Assamese identity ended up creating new forms of exclusion and resentment. The very attempt to restore ontological security for one community inevitably threatened the security of others who called Assam home but did not speak Assamese as their mother tongue.

The Chief Minister of the time, B.P. Chaliha, seemed acutely aware of these potential pitfalls. His approach revealed both political wisdom and democratic sensitivity. Rather than imposing the language policy through majoritarian force, Chaliha adopted a more cautious stance. He stated that while there were practical reasons to establish an official language, the state government would prefer to "wait until they get the same demand from the non-Assamese speaking population for declaring Assamese as the state language."[196] This statement reflected an understanding that lasting linguistic policies require broad consensus rather than narrow imposition. Chaliha's words were remarkable for their democratic restraint. In an era of rising linguistic nationalism across India, where states were being reorganised along lines of language and communities were asserting their linguistic rights with increasing fervour, his call for patience stood out. He seemed to recognise that authentic belonging cannot be legislated; it must emerge from genuine acceptance and shared commitment to a common future. However, the political pressures of the time made such democratic patience difficult to sustain. The Assamese middle class, already anxious about demographic changes and territorial losses, saw language policy as their last line of defence. For them, however, waiting for consensus felt like surrendering their remaining advantages to communities they perceived as recent arrivals or cultural outsiders.

The tensions embedded in the 1960 language policy would reverberate through the political landscape of Assam for decades to come. The fundamental question of who constitutes "the Assamese people" remained unanswered, creating space for ongoing conflicts and competing claims to authentic belonging. This ambiguity became particularly evident during later political developments. As Baruah observes in his analysis of contemporary Assam politics, "the key phrase 'Assamese people' has so far eluded a definition that the current political dispensation finds acceptable".[197] This ongoing definitional crisis reflects the deeper problem that the 1960 language

[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid.

policy tried to solve but ultimately perpetuated the challenge of creating inclusive identity in a diverse, multi-ethnic state.

The Official Language Act thus established a template for how identity politics would unfold in Assam. It demonstrated both the appeal and the limitations of using state power to resolve questions of cultural belonging. While the policy succeeded in giving official recognition to Assamese linguistic identity, it also created new boundaries of exclusion that would fuel future conflicts. The legacy of 1960 suggests that language policies, however well-intentioned, cannot resolve the fundamental tensions of a multi-ethnic society through administrative mandate. Instead, they often transform these tensions into new forms of political contestation. The challenge that Chaliha identified, that is, building genuine consensus around shared belonging, remains as relevant today as it was six decades ago. In many ways, the story of the Official Language Act encapsulates the broader dilemmas of postcolonial nation-building in diverse societies. The desire to assert indigenous identity and reclaim cultural dignity is both understandable and legitimate, yet when this assertion comes at the expense of the rights of other communities and recognition, it risks reproducing the very patterns of exclusion that nationalism claims to overcome. As such, language became a facilitator of sub-national consciousness.

3.3.3. Migration and Demographic Changes

By 1947, as a consequence of British colonial era immigration policies and the partition, the demography of Assam had fundamentally altered. While the Sylhet referendum moved most Bengali Muslims into East Pakistan, massive refugee flows of Hindu Bengalis and Assamese into Assam continued to change the ethnic balance of the state. Census data reflects this upheaval: by 1951, approximately 56% of Assam's population declared Assamese as their mother tongue, while 16% declared Bengali.[198] As such, the persistent characterisation of demographic change as a "grave threat" to both Assamese identity and Indian national security represents what can be understood as the securitisation of demography and, as a consequence. Transforms complex humanitarian and economic challenges into existential threats, justifying extreme measures and hardening identity boundaries. The 1979-85 Assam Movement emerged as a direct response to these perceived demographic threats, with activists demanding the detection and deportation of

[198] Arup Baisya, "Citizenship Question and Assam Politics," *Frontier Weekly* 50, no. 30.

"illegal foreigners".[199] Moreover, the apparent focus of the movement on Bengali-speaking Muslims, rather than all immigrants, revealed the religious and ethnic dimensions underlying ostensibly legal concerns about documentation and citizenship. As such, the Assam Movement, which was deeply rooted in Assamese nationalism, aimed to remove foreigners from the state, something the Indian government and Constitution have failed to achieve.[200] This deep-rooted anxiety over identity and belonging further reinforces Abraham Maslow's theory of the Hierarchy of Needs, which identifies the need for identity as a fundamental psychological requirement.[201]

The Assam Movement, at its core, was driven not only by political grievances but by deep-rooted psychological anxieties. The fear of demographic dilution and the loss of cultural and linguistic dominance disrupted the sense of belonging of the Assamese community. In essence, the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation that ties identity and psychological well-being to the experience of social acceptance and group membership.[202] Moreover, social identity theory explains that when a group perceives itself to be under threat, its members seek to preserve distinctiveness by reinforcing internal cohesion and resisting perceived outsiders.[203] As such, it can be argued that Assamese efforts to assert linguistic and cultural boundaries, enforce citizenship norms, and exclude "foreigners" can be understood as attempts to restore a sense of collective identity and existential security.

Census figures from the 1990s and 2000s showed a noticeable increase in the Bengali-speaking Muslim population in several lower Assam districts, including Dhubri, Barpeta, and Goalpara.[204] These shifts were widely perceived within Assamese public discourse as evidence of sustained illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Even if migration records did not fully support them, these population trends became politically important and were often used in nationalist claims about

[199] Robert G. Gosselink, "Minority Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Assam, India," *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 84.
[200] Ibid., pp. 84.
[201] Kuntala Das, "A Social Construction of 'Identity' among the Indigenous and Immigrants in Assam." *Journal of North East India Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016): 3.
[202] Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 498, 502.
[203] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 10–12.
[204] *Census of India 1991* and *2001*, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Government of India.

losing cultural identity and control over land.[205] Weiner observes that these claims, though often speculative, were grounded in anxieties about identity loss and the fear that Assamese people would be outnumbered in their own homeland.[206] These perceptions, amplified by political rhetoric and selective use of census statistics, played a decisive role in fuelling mass mobilisation during the Assam Movement. As Sanjib Baruah argues, the figure of the migrant in Assam is often constructed more through narrative than verifiable fact, turning population changes into emotive symbols of cultural anxiety.[207] Moreover, this overlap between census data and nationalist ideas created a powerful political message, where population numbers were seen not just as facts but as emotional signs of cultural loss.

These exclusionary anxieties did not end with the Assam Movement but have continued to shape contemporary public discourse in Assam. As such, it can be observed that Assam's public discourse has increasingly drawn sharp distinctions between Bengali-speaking Hindus and Bengali-speaking Muslims, despite their shared linguistic identity, and such forms of differentiation reflect the deeper entanglement of religious identity with citizenship and belonging in postcolonial Assam.[208] Furthermore, Bengali Hindu migrants, particularly those who arrived as Partition refugees, have been largely accepted into Assamese society and granted citizenship with minimal resistance, and their portrayal as victims of religious persecution has acted as a catalyst and legitimised their inclusion.[209] In contrast, Bengali Muslims are persistently labelled as "illegal infiltrators" from Bangladesh by Assamese nationalists, regardless of legal status or generational roots in the state and have largely shaped public opinion and policy, fuelling anxieties about demographic change.[210]

3.4. Rethinking Identity in Assam: Politicisation of Ethnic and Sub-National Identity

[205] Myron Weiner, "The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement," *Population and Development Review* 9, no. 2 (1983): 282.
[206] Ibid., pp. 282.
[207] Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 93–96.
[208] Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 121-125.
[209] Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[210] Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "'Do we not have any rights?' Indian Muslims' fear after Assam evictions," *The Guardian*, October 18, 2021.

The previous sections in this chapter traced the historical foundations of identity politics in Assam. As discussed earlier in this chapter, identity politics in Assam is not a single-layered concept, rather a multi-dimensional complex phenomenon, encompassing issues of ethnicity, sub-nationality and identity formation. The development of the historical roots of identity formation has undergone huge shifts from pre-colonial to contemporary times, enforcing the statement that identity is a fluid and ever-evolving concept. The complexity of identity politics in Assam revolves around the core concepts of ethnicity and sub-nationality and their formation into political demands and assertions. Therefore, identity politics in Assam cannot be fully understood without tracing the historical roots of its subnational consciousness and unpacking how these roots evolved into contemporary political assertions. This section seeks to conceptually tie together the trajectories discussed so far and interrogate the critical juncture at which ethnicity and sub-nationality were transformed into political demands by examining the underlying structural causes, ideological transformations, and evolving popular anxieties that have shaped the Assamese identity discourse from the colonial to the postcolonial period.

Unlike other Indian states where subnational movements have been largely driven by cohesive ethnic or linguistic identities, Assamese sub-nationalism evolved in the absence of a single, unifying identity. Rather than being rooted in a common ethnicity or language, it emerged from the anxiety of cultural erosion and demographic transformation. It represents a defensive assertion of selfhood in response to what was perceived as the homogenising, assimilationist tendencies of the Indian state, a state seen as dominated by central power and insensitive to Assam's cultural specificities and demographic vulnerabilities.[211] Post-independence Assam has witnessed consistent feelings of marginalisation among its indigenous population. Politically, economically, and culturally, many Assamese feel they have been sidelined within the larger Indian federation. The persistent failure of successive central governments to acknowledge or adequately address core issues, particularly the unchecked influx of migrants from East Bengal (later East Pakistan and Bangladesh), has only deepened alienation. This historical neglect is compounded by the perception that the Assamese voice has been drowned out in the national discourse, despite the state's strategic and economic importance.[212]

[211] Baruah, Sanjib. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
[212] Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*, Manak Publications, 1993.

3.4.1. Facilitating Factors Behind the Rise of Identity Politics:

Since the days before independence, Assam's politics has consistently revolved around a deep-rooted struggle to reclaim and protect its unique identity from the dominance of the Centre. The feeling of alienation of the Assamese people did not go in vain. Several instances have resulted in the formation of this feeling of neglect and discrimination towards Assam by the Centre.

3.4.1.1. The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946

From the very outset, Assam's journey toward Indian independence was marked not just by anti-colonial struggle but by a simultaneous assertion of its regional autonomy and cultural identity**.** Nowhere was this more evident than in the province's response to the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, which, under the guise of securing Indian unity, proposed a federal structure that alarmingly grouped Assam with Bengal in a larger Muslim-majority bloc (Section C).

PROVINCE	GENERAL	MUSLIM	TOTAL
BENGAL	27	33	60
ASSAM	7	3	10
TOTAL	**34**	**36**	**70**

Table 1: Representation of Assam in the Cabinet Mission [213]

[213] Source: A.C. Bhuyan, Political History of Assam, vol.III (Guwahati Publication Board of Assam, 1980), 344)

This grouping, if accepted, would have undermined Assam's distinct identity and reduced its political autonomy under the weight of Bengal's numerical dominance. The Cabinet Mission Plan, announced on 16 May 1946, sought to transfer power from British to Indian hands by creating a three-tiered constitutional structure, dividing powers between the Centre, Provinces, and newly proposed "Groups." While Muslim-majority provinces like Punjab, Sindh, and Bengal were grouped to placate the Muslim League's demand for parity, Assam's inclusion with Bengal in Section C triggered widespread opposition across the province. Fears of cultural assimilation, political domination, and economic subjugation loomed large.[214] Despite initial reassurances from central Congress leaders like Nehru and Patel that no province would be forced into any grouping, this verbal support proved hollow. When the matter came before the Cabinet Mission meeting on 10 June 1946, Congress leadership chose silence over support, failing to raise Assam's objection.[215] This perceived betrayal stunned the provincial leadership, which had aligned with the All India Congress in the Quit India Movement and actively resisted the Muslim League's attempt to include Assam in Pakistan.[216]

Assam Congress leaders like M. Tayebullah and Gopinath Bordoloi had rightly identified contradictions in the Cabinet Mission Plan, specifically in Clauses 15(5) and 19(V). While one clause claimed provinces were free to join groups, another subtly made such groupings mandatory.[217] As the ambiguity deepened, so did the disillusionment. Assam's Legislative Assembly rejected the grouping outright and passed a historic resolution refusing to participate in Section C's formation, while continuing to contribute to the making of the Indian Union Constitution.[218] Despite mass protests and growing frustration in Assam, central leaders like Nehru increasingly viewed Assam's refusal as a roadblock, rather than a principled assertion of regional identity. Nehru's stance hardened; stating "Assam's opposition could not be allowed to "hold up the progress of the rest of India."[219] Sardar Patel, too, justified the compromise as a political

[214] Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006), 310–11.
[215] A. C. Bhuyan, ed., *Political History of Assam: 1940–1950*, vol. III (Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1991), 361.
[216] Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 311
[217] Ibid.
[218] A. C. Bhuyan, *Political History of Assam*, vol. III, 363.
[219] *Transfer of Power*, Vol. IX, eds. Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon (London: HMSO, 1980), 510.

necessity, stating that "principles must sometimes be swallowed for the sake of expediency."[220] It was Mahatma Gandhi, more than any other national leader, who stood by Assam in this moment of crisis. He urged Assamese leaders to resist, stating that "no one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do," and even encouraged them to walk out of the Constituent Assembly if necessary.[221] Jayaprakash Narayan and Saratchandra Bose also extended support, but the Congress High Command eventually chose national unity (on their terms) over Assam's autonomy.

Ultimately, Assam stood firm, and the failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan was partly due to its resistance. The subsequent referendum that led to the separation of Sylhet from Assam brought some relief, but the damage was done. The episode instilled a lasting sense of betrayal in Assam's political psyche. It also laid the groundwork for the long-standing tension between Assam and the Centre, which would later manifest as sub-nationalist movements rooted in fears of political neglect, demographic marginalisation, and cultural erosion.[222] The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 reinforced fears of cultural and political domination by Bengal, which had historical roots in the colonial imposition of Bengali as the official language in the 19th century.[223]

3.4.1.2. Migration and Post-Partition Politics

In the turbulent years following Partition, Assam found itself caught in an acute humanitarian and political crisis, one that would deeply shape the contours of its identity politics for decades to come. The state was grappling not only with devastating floods and economic collapse, but also with a massive and ongoing influx of refugees and migrants from the newly created East Pakistan. This dual burden of natural calamity and demographic shock triggered one of the earliest and most visible clashes between Assam's regional government and the central leadership of independent India. In 1949, as Assam tried to resettle nearly 186,000 landless indigenous peasant families displaced by floods, it faced increasing pressure from the Centre to accommodate additional waves of Hindu refugees. These demands came despite the state's already fragile infrastructure and limited financial capacity. By 1950, Assam had taken in more than 300,000 refugees out of nearly

[220] Ibid., 509.
[221] Ibid., 403-5.
[222] Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom: An Autobiographical Narrative* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 1988), 187–88.
[223] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000

two million who had entered India. This generosity, however, pushed the state to its limits.[224] When Assam signalled its inability to absorb further refugee populations, Prime Minister Nehru responded not with empathy but with a veiled threat, suggesting that financial aid from the Centre would be withheld if Assam failed to comply with its expectations on refugee settlement.[225] For a province already severed from its historical trade routes due to Partition and left landlocked, this was a moment of deep political and economic vulnerability. The state's tea, coal, and oil industries, which were once linked to the Chittagong port and Bengal's commercial networks, now suffered heavy disruption, and hill districts that relied on trade with Sylhet found themselves cut off from markets and supplies.[226]

Despite these structural challenges, Assam was expected to carry the weight of refugee rehabilitation. Nehru's insistence on viewing the refugee crisis as a national priority came at the expense of Assam's regional priorities. Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Chief Minister, responded with dignity and restraint, reminding Nehru that Assam's limitations stemmed from chronic underdevelopment rather than a lack of will.[227] He made it clear that withholding essential financial support on this basis would amount to throttling the province's right to exist and grow. The Centre's next move was telling. When Assam refused to allocate land for further refugee settlement, the central government circumvented the state by settling refugees on railway lands, which were under central control.[228]

This decision left a lasting imprint on Assam's spatial and social landscape, explaining why, even today, settlements of non-indigenous populations often appear concentrated along railway tracks. This episode captures a recurring theme in Assam's identity politics: a deep sense of political neglect and cultural imposition by the Centre, often framed through the lens of internal

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[224] Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006), 312; also see H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 1996), 31.

[225] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 79–80.

[226] Prabin Baishya Bhagabati, "Partition and Economic Disruption in Assam," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 40 (1991): 3–4.

[227] Nehru to Chief Ministers, 1947–48, in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. I* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1984).

[228] H.N. Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi: The Assam Problem and Nehru's Centre* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1990), 30–32.

colonialism. For Assam, the refugee crisis was not merely a humanitarian issue; it was a crisis of survival, identity, and autonomy. The fear of demographic marginalisation, triggered by unchecked migration and compounded by the state's historical underdevelopment, became a powerful driver of Assamese sub-nationalism. The central government's inability or unwillingness to acknowledge these regional anxieties further entrenched a narrative of betrayal and neglect, feeding into a larger story of resistance, assertion, and alienation that continues to shape Assam's political discourse today.

3.4.1.3. Illegal Immigration and the Unresolved Crisis

One of the most contentious and enduring issues that shaped Assam's political trajectory after independence was the problem of illegal migration from East Pakistan. This crisis not only strained Centre–state relations but also became a catalyst for Assamese sub-nationalism and later, separatist demands. The roots of this issue can be traced back to the pre-independence era, particularly to the decisions taken during Sir Syed Muhammad Saadulla's ministry, which operated under the influence of the Muslim League. In line with the League's political ambitions, Saadulla's government encouraged Muslim migration from East Bengal into Assam, including into its reserved forest and tribal belts, an act that essentially **d**emographically re-engineered the state, sowing the seeds for a long and unresolved political conflict.[229] These policies were seen as an intentional move to bolster Muslim numbers in hopes of merging Assam with East Pakistan under the Cabinet Mission Plan.

After independence, although around 50,000 Muslim migrants left Assam, the influx did not stop; instead, it continued for decades. What followed was a mounting sense of insecurity among the indigenous Assamese population, who viewed this continued migration as a direct threat to their cultural identity, land rights, and political autonomy.[230] This led the Assam government, under Chief Minister Gopinath Bordoloi, to repeatedly demand a permit **sys**tem to regulate entry into the state and safeguard its demographic composition. However, the Centre, particularly Nehru and Patel, remained evasive. Despite Bordoloi's appeals and his attempts to raise the issue at

[229] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 47–49.
[230] H.N. Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi: The Assam Problem and Nehru's Centre* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1990), 52.

forums such as the Inter-Dominion Conference, the Centre refused to act decisively.[231] Their reluctance stemmed from a fear of antagonising West Bengal's leadership, which opposed the permit system on the grounds that it might divert Bengali-speaking Hindu refugees toward their already strained state.[232] This political calculation of prioritising electoral and inter-state considerations over Assam's demographic anxieties was perceived in Assam as a deep betrayal. As a result, the Centre's inaction and evident bias not only heightened Assamese resentment but also undermined their faith in the Indian federal structure. The perception that Assam's concerns were systematically ignored or sacrificed for the convenience of larger political forces in Delhi and Bengal became a central tenet in Assamese political consciousness. Over time, these experiences crystallised into a larger narrative of internal colonialism, reinforcing the sense that Assam was being politically and culturally dominated by outside forces.

It is in this context that one can trace the beginnings of Assamese identity politics, framed not merely around ethnicity or language but around the right to safeguard indigenous existence. The illegal immigration issue, therefore, was never just about numbers; it became a **s**ymbol of cultural erosion, political marginalisation, and systemic neglect, eventually feeding into mass movements like the Assam Agitation and the rise of organisations like ULFA.

3.4.1.4. The 1962 Sino-Indian War and the Reinforcement of Assamese Alienation

The events of 1962, particularly during the Sino-Indian war, continue to occupy a poignant space in Assam's political memory, shaping the evolution of its subnational consciousness. The Indian government's decision to withdraw troops from the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh, amid Chinese military advances, was widely perceived by many in Assam as an abandonment of the region. The sudden and unresisted retreat of Indian forces, leaving the state vulnerable, fuelled a deep-seated sense of betrayal, reinforcing the notion that Assam and the North East were treated as peripheral colonies, valuable only for their resources and strategic location.[233] This narrative was later appropriated by separatist organisations such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which, in its correspondence with international institutions like

[231] Barooah, *Gopinath Bordoloi*, 52–54.
[232] Udayon Misra, *Burden of History: Assam and the Partition—Unresolved Issues* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 126.
[233] Parag Kumar Das, Swadhinatar Prastab [In Assamese] (Guwahati, 1983).

the United Nations, described the Indian Army's withdrawal as symbolic of India's lack of rightful authority in the region. ULFA claimed that Assam was "sacrificed to China" on 21 November 1962, and that the Indian re-entry into Assam occurred without moral or legal justification.[234] This event became part of the broader grievance discourse of Assamese sub-nationalism, where historical neglect, economic marginalisation, and cultural erasure were repeatedly cited to justify the call for greater autonomy or independence.

The 1960s were already a turbulent decade in Assam's history, marked by the contentious language movement that sought to declare Assamese as the official language of the state. What appeared to be a legitimate demand by the Assamese-speaking population to assert their linguistic and cultural identity was interpreted by non-Assamese groups, especially the tribal communities and Bengali-speaking population of Barak Valley, as a form of cultural imposition. This led to widespread unrest, with protests turning violent and the tragic police firing in Silchar in 1961, which resulted in the death of eleven demonstrators. These events not only deepened the ethnic fault lines within the state but also fragmented the idea of a unified Assamese identity, which was already under strain due to linguistic and regional diversities. In this emotionally charged environment, the Sino-Indian war acted as a catalyst, intensifying the feeling among many Assamese that the Indian state had little regard for their security or political sentiments. The "farewell speech" by Prime Minister Nehru, effectively acknowledging the military failure and loss of territory, was interpreted by many as a symbolic turning away from Assam. However, despite this event, many in the state continued to demonstrate patriotic support by forming local defence committees and contributing to national funds, irrespective of the emotional injury inflicted by the perceived abandonment by the centre.[235]

In the longer arc of Assam's identity politics, the 1962 war thus represents a key turning point. It reaffirmed the growing belief among Assamese nationalists that their region's strategic importance was not matched by genuine political recognition or empathy from the Indian centre. The memory of 1962, alongside earlier incidents such as the Cabinet Mission Grouping controversy or the refugee influx post-Partition, helped construct a collective narrative of internal

[234] United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), "Report to the United Nations Secretary General," 1990.
[235] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1991), 126.

colonisation, where Assam's distinctiveness was neither protected nor respected. This formed the course for later movements that sought greater control over land, resources, language, and political representation.

3.4.1.5. Colonial Exploitation and Internal Colonialism

Assam's historical experience with both external and internal forms of exploitation has deeply influenced the trajectory of its identity politics. At the heart of this discontent lies what many scholars and political actors in the region have identified as "internal colonialism". It is a condition in which Assam, though legally part of the Indian Union, has faced systematic political and economic marginalisation by the Centre.[236] This notion finds its roots in colonial-era patterns of extraction and continues in various forms even after independence.

The British colonial regime laid the foundation for economic exploitation when it annexed Assam in 1826. Viewing it primarily as a resource-rich hinterland, they initiated extractive economic activities centred around tea, coal, and oil. Due to the sparse population in Assam, labour was imported from Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha to work in tea plantations and other industries. Simultaneously, Bengali-speaking clerical staff were brought in to administer the region, marginalising the indigenous population from educational and administrative domains. This demographic influx fundamentally altered the cultural and social fabric of Assam, creating long-standing anxieties around identity and belonging.[237] Following independence, these colonial patterns of exploitation did not abate. Instead, the state's natural resources continued to benefit other regions while Assam remained underdeveloped and industrially stagnant. A prime example of this is the case of oil exploitation. Though crude oil was first discovered in Digboi in 1889 and a refinery was established in 1901, meaningful growth in this sector was only witnessed post-independence. By the 1970s, Assam's crude oil production had reached nearly five million tons per year, yet the Centre showed persistent reluctance to establish new refineries in the state.

Despite expert recommendations, including a Soviet study endorsing Silghat in Assam as a more cost-effective location for refining oil, the Indian government set up a high-capacity refinery

[236] Tilottoma Misra, "Assam: A colonial hinterland." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1980): 1357-1364.
[237] Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826–1947* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006).

in Barauni, Bihar.[238] The Centre cited national security concerns as justification, claiming Assam's proximity to international borders made it a vulnerable location. This reasoning, however, was widely rejected in Assam, where leaders like Bishnuram Medhi pointed out the inconsistency of this logic, questioning how the Centre planned to protect extensive oil pipelines passing near the Pakistan border if it couldn't defend a refinery in Assam.[239] The Centre's decision to bypass Assam's legitimate demands created a deep sense of betrayal among the populace, reinforcing the narrative of colonial extraction without local benefit. The slogan of internal colonialism began gaining traction, linking economic grievances to identity-based struggles. This sentiment was further intensified when the Centre established a small-capacity refinery at Noonmati only after public agitations in the 1960s, and another at Bongaigaon in 1969. Yet, even these were insufficient: Assam's refining capacity remained significantly lower than its production, while the bulk of its crude oil continued to benefit other states.[240]

These acts of economic marginalisation have become central to Assamese sub-nationalism. The leadership of the Assam Movement, notably the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), and later the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), drew heavily from this sense of historic injustice. They argued that Assam had been reduced to a colonial hinterland by a central government that treated it as a periphery meant only for extraction, not development. The idea that fundamental decisions were made in distant power centres without regard for local interests became a recurring theme in political mobilisations and armed struggles.[241] This colonial logic, extended into the postcolonial period, not only shaped economic realities but also hardened identity-based distinctions. Land, employment, business opportunities, and cultural autonomy all became symbols of a broader resistance to perceived internal colonisation. As such, economic exploitation and the denial of equitable participation in national development deepened the psychological and

[238] Soviet Expert Committee Report on Refinery Locations, Government of India, 1960.
[239] Sanjay Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's North East* (New Delhi: Viking, 1994), 250.
[240] Jawaharlal Nehru's letter to Bishnuram Medhi, expressing the Centre's reasoning behind the location of the Barauni refinery, is cited in H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1990).
[241] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: IIAS, 2000).

political divide between Assam and the Indian mainland, embedding the logic of identity politics within the structural framework of postcolonial neglect.

3.4.1.6. The Assam Movement and Identity Politics

The Assam Movement of 1979–1985 stands as one of the most significant mass uprisings in post-independence India, reflecting a deep-rooted assertion of Assamese identity in response to decades of demographic, economic, and political marginalisation. Although it is often assumed that the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was a product of this movement, ULFA was, in fact, formed on April 7, 1979, two months before the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) launched its first statewide strike on June 8 that year to protest the unchecked influx of foreign nationals from Bangladesh and their inclusion in electoral rolls. What began as an electoral dispute in the Mangaldoi constituency, where over 45,000 suspected illegal immigrants were detected in a voter list of six lakhs, quickly escalated into a full-fledged socio-political awakening. The underlying issue, however, ran much deeper. Assam had long harboured resentment toward what was seen as New Delhi's consistent disregard for the state's interests, be it in terms of development, resource allocation, or cultural recognition. This widespread sense of betrayal coalesced around the growing fear of demographic subversion, land alienation, and the erosion of Assamese socio-political identity.

At the heart of the movement was the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), an umbrella platform comprising regional parties, civil society organisations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha, and AASU itself. Together, they mobilised an extraordinary segment of the Assamese population through various non-violent forms of resistance, civil disobedience campaigns, janata curfews, economic blockades, and ultimately, a call for election boycotts. The boycott of the 1983 general elections marked a particularly volatile phase; violent state repression during this period claimed the lives of at least 150 protestors, underscoring the disproportionate use of force by the Indian government against largely peaceful dissenters.[242] Running parallel to this popular movement was the ideological mobilisation of groups like the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), which was formed in 1978 and soon allied with AASU. The AJYCP articulated

[242] M. Hussain, *Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 1993), 143.

a more radical position by rejecting parliamentary politics and advocating for "dual citizenship" and the "right to self-determination" for the people of Assam. It viewed the Indian Constitution as a neo-colonial instrument designed to perpetuate mainland dominance over peripheral regions like Assam. In this framework, the call for federal restructuring and local control over natural resources gained traction, particularly among landless peasants and tribal communities who were already grappling with economic deprivation.

While AJYCP's ideological stance leaned heavily on Marxist principles, its version of nationalism was uniquely rooted in Assamese identity. By blending egalitarian goals with ethno-regional aspirations, AJYCP broadened the appeal of the anti-foreigner agitation to include marginalised tribal groups and rural landless populations. It positioned itself as a semi-militant but inclusively nationalist platform, pushing for a more equitable socio-political order without abandoning its regionalist core.[243] Together, these movements and organisations did more than challenge illegal migration; they redefined the contours of identity politics in Assam. By foregrounding issues like land rights, cultural autonomy, and regional economic justice, the Assam Movement carved a path for both democratic and armed forms of sub-nationalist assertion. The psychological and political impact of this period continues to shape Assam's relationship with the Indian state to this day.

Identity in Assam is not merely a cultural or historical construct; it is a contested political terrain shaped by historical grievances, perceived injustices, and cultural insecurities. The shift of ethnicity and sub-nationality into the political realm was not an aberration but a culmination of decades of marginalisation and resistance. Assamese sub-nationalism must be understood as a historically conditioned response to multiple layers of marginalisation, cultural, economic, and demographic. The colonial legacy of administrative alienation, the post-independence failure to respond meaningfully to Assamese fears, and the growing internal tensions between various ethnic groups all coalesce into a complex identity discourse. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, the postcolonial nation-state often reproduces the same logic of control and exclusion that it claims to

[243] Udayon Misra, "North-East: Identity Movements, State, and Civil Society," in *India's North-East: Identity Movements, State, and Civil Society*, ed. T. V. R. Murthy (New Delhi: Indus, 1988), 149–150.

replace.[244] In the case of Assam, this is evident in how state institutions have failed to accommodate the diverse aspirations of its people, thereby reinforcing the very fissures that sub-nationalism seeks to bridge. In rethinking identity politics in Assam, it becomes evident that ethnicity and sub-nationality became politically salient not merely as ideological projects but as lived experiences of dispossession, anxiety, and cultural assertion. This section has attempted to connect the long historical conjuncture from colonial interventions to contemporary political mobilisations and highlight the necessity of viewing identity politics in Assam as both a product of state neglect and a form of political self-assertion.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter dealt with the trajectory of identity politics in Assam throughout pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times. In the previous sections, the interplay between language, migration, ethnicity and power has been emphasised through the process of evolution of identity politics in Assam. What becomes evident from these historical trajectories is that Assamese identity has never been static; it has been shaped, contested, and redefined in response to both internal dynamics and external pressures. From the integrative political structure of the Ahom state to the homogenising thrusts of British colonialism and the demographic and administrative reshaping under postcolonial India, identity politics in Assam have remained both fluid and fiercely contested. These historical developments culminated in the emergence of a strong Assamese sub-nationalism, which grew over accumulated cultural and economic anxieties. This form of identity politics emerged not from a homogenous cultural core but from a reactive consciousness shaped by marginalisation. Historical colonial policies of marginalisation have created a deep sense of alienation and a crisis of identity among the people of Assam. The central government's repeated failure to address Assam's concerns over immigration, the perceived economic exploitation of the region's resources, and past administrative attempts to merge Assam with Bengal, such as the Cabinet Mission Plan, has collectively deepened the fear of cultural erasure and demographic subjugation.[245] These conditions gave rise to the idea of internal colonisation, where Assamese identity was positioned not simply in opposition to external forces

[244] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 10.
[245] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2013), 124–129.

but also in protest against its own structural invisibility within the Indian Union. This resonated with the growing Assamese middle class who, though exposed to modern education and administration, found themselves structurally disadvantaged by policies that favoured historically entrenched Bengali-speaking communities.[246]

However, this trajectory of identity politics was not without contradictions. The assumed singularity of Assamese identity was fractured from within by competing claims of tribal and ethnic groups such as the Bodos, Karbis, and Dimasas. Each of these groups possessed distinct linguistic, cultural, and territorial aspirations that challenged the narrative of an overarching Assamese nationhood.[247] This internal contestation revealed the complex and layered nature of identity in Assam, where sub-nationalism and ethnic nationalism often coexisted uneasily. Thus, identity politics in Assam cannot be understood as a uniform or linear phenomenon. Rather, it is best seen as a historically produced, politically charged, and socially fragmented process. What began as a struggle for cultural preservation and linguistic recognition gradually evolved into a quest for political and territorial autonomy. This evolution laid the groundwork for more assertive and, at times, radical expressions of identity, including mass mobilisations and armed insurgencies, which sought to redefine Assam's relationship with the Indian state.

The next chapter builds on this political and emotional landscape to examine how these long-standing identity anxieties transformed into militant separatism. It will explore the rise of major insurgent groups in Assam, not simply as armed movements, but as manifestations of unresolved historical discontent, where identity, land, and legitimacy are central to the quest for sovereignty.

[246] H.K. Barpujari, ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. V (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992), 119–125.
[247] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 68–75.

Chapter 4: Insurgency in Assam

4.1 Introduction

Insurgency in Assam must be understood as an extension of the identity politics discussed in the previous chapter. The same grievances of cultural anxiety, demographic shifts, and economic marginalisation that produced mass movements in the 20th century also generated more radical armed insurgencies. This chapter examines how those same grievances took a more radical form of armed insurgency. To examine this trajectory, the chapter utilises Ted Robert Gurr's theory of relative deprivation, James C. Scott's perspectives on daily resistance, Paul Brass's explanation of elite-driven identity politicisation, Johan Galtung's concepts of structural and cultural violence, and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems framework, alongside Assamese scholars like Amalendu Guha and Sanjib Baruah regarding internal colonialism. Collectively, these frameworks enable us to view insurgency not as an isolated eruption of violence, but as the militarised expression of deep-rooted conflicts regarding recognition, autonomy, and belonging.

The late 1970s witnessed the rise of insurgent groups that challenged the political order through the demands of sovereignty, autonomy, or religious revival. In each case, insurgency represented not only a rejection of the Indian state but also a reconfiguration of subnational and ethnic politics within Assam itself. Insurgency in Assam is fragmented and ever-evolving. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) called for sovereignty in a pan-Assamese context, stating the state's connection with India as colonial subjugation and calling for freedom through military resistance.[248] However, ULFA's assertion of representing the entire population of Assam was contested by various ethnic groups like the Bodos, Karbis, and Dimasas. These groups focused on the significance of ethnic autonomy politics. Thus, the disunity within Assamese subnationalism, where identities that had previously stood together against outside oppression began to clash over land, acknowledgement, and resources. Moreover, a different dimension can be seen alongside Islamist extremism, which shifted the focus of insurgency in terms of religious identity. Together, these created a complicated mosaic of insurgencies, each drawing from different sources of legitimacy while competing for control over overlapping spaces. Unlike other states, such as Punjab and Kashmir, that dealt with the challenge of insurgency in a cohesive manner, Assam's

[248] Bhagat Oinam, and Dhiren A. Sadokpam, eds. *Northeast India: A Reader*. Taylor & Francis, 2018.

insurgency landscape was diversified and fragmented, which added layers of multiple challenges. The state's response was two-fold: coercion and compromise. Counterinsurgency efforts focused on short-term resolutions through operations for dismantling militant groups, while peace agreements focused on incorporating the factions into the political scenario. These strategies heavily focused on addressing the problem of insurgency without resolving the root causes behind its emergence, which led to what scholars like Sanjib Baruah refer to as the politics of "durable disorder."[249]

This chapter presents three primary arguments by examining the insurgency in Assam. Initially, insurgency represented the militarised manifestation of identity politics, converting cultural and political fears into aggressive calls for sovereignty or autonomy. Secondly, the spread of insurgent groups illustrates the centrifugal logic of identity-driven mobilisation, where the declaration of one community frequently provoked opposing assertions from others. Third, the strategy of containment employed by the Indian state highlights the shortcomings of militarisation and selective accommodation in tackling deeply rooted structural grievances.

The previous chapter critically examined the puzzle of identity in Assam and how it has been shaped by its colonial past, ethnic diversities, and sub-nationalist aspirations, which, over the period of time, resulted in political instability and conflicts. These identity formations, once primarily cultural or linguistic, became increasingly politicised in response to perceived threats of demographic marginalisation, economic neglect, and the failure of institutional recognition and with the gradual intensification of identity politics, particularly from the late 20th century onward, it created conditions that were suitable for more radical expressions of discontent and as such. Insurgency in Assam must therefore be understood not as an isolated eruption of violence but as a direct offshoot of the long-standing grievances rooted in identity-based exclusions, from feelings of deprivation as well as the often failed attempts at belonging. In such a scenario, insurgency might well be understood as an attempt to rectify and redefine the ontologies of the communities in Assam.

While political expressions in the form of mobilisation and protests, such as the Assam Movement, sought to negotiate recognition within the framework of the Indian state, insurgent

[249] Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast*. Stanford University Press, 2020.

groups emerged to challenge the legitimacy of that very framework. The call for sovereignty, or at the very least great autonomy, was fuelled by a deepening sense of alienation from the Indian nation-state and a belief that the history, culture, and people of Assam were being systematically undermined, whether perceived or real, which would shape the future socio-political trajectory of the state of Assam. This chapter explores the trajectory of insurgency in Assam by situating it within this continuum of identity-based struggle.

Ted Robert Gurr's theory of *relative deprivation* offers a compelling lens through which to understand the emergence of insurgency in Assam. According to Gurr, "the primary source of the human capacity for violence appears to be the frustration-aggression mechanism," which is often triggered when people perceive a discrepancy between what they believe they deserve and what they actually receive.[250] In the case of Assam, such perceived disparities, whether economic, cultural, or political, were not episodic but deeply ingrained in the region's experience of marginalisation, making Gurr's theory especially useful in explaining the conditions under which grievance transformed into organised rebellion. The roots of Assamese discontent can be traced to the period of the Cabinet Mission's Grouping Plan of 1946, a development previously examined in detail in the preceding chapter.

James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance introduces an additional aspect. It demonstrates how marginalised groups, kept out of formal political spaces, maintain resistance through hidden actions, like procrastination, avoidance, or symbolic defiance that subtly challenge oppression. Although Scott does not associate these practices with insurgency, his approach aids in comprehending how resistance cultures establish themselves in daily life, creating a hidden source of dissent that, in specific political contexts, can lead to explicit forms of mobilisation. In Assam, this clarifies why dissatisfaction persisted despite the suppression of public protests, establishing the basis for future insurgency to thrive.[251] Furthermore, Paul Brass states how identity is not inherently conflictual, but becomes politicised and weaponised by elite actors in moments of institutional breakdown and competition.[252] In Assam, however, this instrumentalisation of identity did not occur in a vacuum; it was deeply tied to the perception that the Indian state had

[250] Ted Robert Gurr, Why Men Rebel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 13.
[251] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
[252] Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991).

failed to adequately accommodate Assamese and ethnic minority aspirations, thereby making identity a dominant factor for insurgent mobilisation.

Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence explains how entrenched, systemic disparities, like persistent economic and political marginalisation, can cause unnecessary suffering without explicit physical force. Within Galtung's framework, this differentiates from direct violence (e.g., coercive force) and is supplemented by cultural violence, the symbolic systems that justify both direct and structural harm. Assam's prolonged underdevelopment and political marginalisation illustrate structural violence, whereas the cultural undervaluation of local identities facilitates its normalisation.[253] Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory depicts why ethnicity is used as a powerful political resource in peripheral areas. According to Wallerstein, identities such as nation and ethnicity are historically formed within unequal systems of economic exchange and political control. With time, these forms of identity solidify due to the marginalisation and exploitation from the centre. Assam's position as a resource-rich but politically neglected border state aligns with this core–periphery framework, explaining why Assamese sub-nationalism and the ethnic assertions of Bodos or Karbis transformed identity into a means of resisting perceived structural oppression.[254]

In conclusion, the insurgency in Assam must be understood as both a result of systemic exclusion and as a transformative force that reshaped political identity in the region. It transformed historical grievances based on deprivation and marginalisation into armed struggle for sovereignty, autonomy, and religious identity, while fragmenting the wider Assamese subnationalist movement into competing ethnic and ideological claims. The following sections trace the historical context of insurgency in Assam, analyse the emergence and radicalisation of ULFA, the Bodo quest for autonomy, and the insurgencies of other ethnic groups like the Karbis and Dimasas. It also focuses on the emergence of religious dimensions in insurgency. Further, the chapter evaluates the policies and the government's responses with regard to insurgency in Assam. Finally, it tries to look into insurgency in Assam, not merely as an armed revolt but as a crucial phase in the region's continuous process of negotiating identity, belonging, and power within the Indian Union.

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[253] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.
[254] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy: The States, the Movements and the Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

4.2 Historical Background of Insurgency in Assam

The birth of insurgency in Assam was not a sudden rupture in the state's political landscape rather a byproduct of the culmination of long-standing grievances. Understanding insurgency in Assam requires situating it within the historical trajectory of the convergence of economic discontent, political alienation, demographic anxieties, and the radicalisation of student politics. This convergence created the conditions in which armed struggle came to be viewed not as an aberration, but as a logical, even inevitable, extension of Assamese resistance.

One of the earliest factors contributing to discontent was economic grievances. The economy of Assam has been paradoxical. While being abundant in resources such as oil, tea, coal, and natural gas, the state remained underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure, industrialisation, and employment. The perception that revenues generated by these resources were appropriated by the central government without adequate reinvestment in Assam showed the narrative of economic exploitation. Amalendu Guha's influential thesis of "colonialism of a special type" captured this sentiment by likening Assam's postcolonial position within India to that of a colony, in which extractive structures of the colonial era were retained and extended by the Indian state.[255] This idea resonated strongly with Assamese intellectuals and students, who increasingly interpreted economic stagnation as the outcome of structural subordination rather than internal inefficiencies. The oil industry became a particularly potent symbol: while Assam produced crude oil, decisions regarding refining and pricing were controlled from outside the state, and profits accrued largely to the centre.[256] For a generation of activists, this economic grievance was inseparable from the demand for sovereignty.

Alongside these economic frustrations, political alienation started to deepen. The process of the state reorganisation after independence, which aimed at creating unity on linguistic and ethnic lines, resulted in further fragmenting Assam. The birth of the states of Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Mizoram (1987), and Arunachal Pradesh (1987), by carving them out from the territory of Assam, was often seen as a loss of territory and authority by the Assamese

[255] Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam 1826-1947*. New Delhi: People's Pub., 1988.
[256] Heramba Kanta Barpujari, "North-East India: problems, policies and prospects: since independence." 1998).

nationalists.[257] While these moves addressed tribal demands for autonomy, they also underscored the weakness of Assamese political claims within the federal framework. Sanjib Baruah argues that such developments contributed to a "durable disorder," in which the Indian state maintained control not by resolving underlying tensions but by managing them through ad hoc concessions and coercion.[258] Simultaneously, organisations like the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) highlighted internal fragmentation. The organisation challenged the domination of Assamese elites by demanding separate homelands for the plains tribes.[259] This dual process of territorial fragmentation from above and the sub-state assertions from below reinforced the perception that Assamese aspirations were systematically undermined, and that the federal system offered little scope for meaningful accommodation.

Another major factor adding to the existing grievances was the huge shift in the demography of the state. As discussed in the previous chapter, migration from East Bengal had been a contentious issue since the colonial administrators encouraged the settlement of Bengali Muslim peasants in Assam's fertile river valleys. After independence, the problem intensified with successive waves of migration, particularly during the Partition of 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.[260] For many Assamese, these movements threatened not only the economic resources of the land but also their cultural survival. The fear of becoming a minority in one's homeland became a recurring theme in Assamese political discourse and continues to be the most dominant theme to date. Hiren Gohain has noted that the anxiety over migration transformed identity politics into a defensive struggle, framing Assamese culture as being under siege.[261] The demographic issue, therefore, functioned as both a socio-economic grievance and an existential anxiety, one that profoundly shaped the trajectory of protest movements in the 1970s till contemporary times.

The demographic anxiety, coupled with economic and historical political grievances, turned out to be the breaking point for the people of Assam. Student politics were on the rise at this point.

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[257] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 87–91.
[258] Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72–74.
[259] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (2000)
[260] Hiren Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese middle class." *Social Scientist* (1973): 11-26.
[261] Smitana Saikia, and Ravindra Chowdhary. "Indigene, outsider, and the citizen: Politics of migration in Assam." In *Migrants, Mobility and Citizenship in India*, pp. 97-109. Routledge India, 2021.

The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) emerged as the most influential student organisation during this time. Although initially focused on issues such as corruption, unemployment, and educational reforms, AASU soon shifted to the issue of migration as its central agenda.[262] Monirul Hussain argues that the Assam Movement (1979–1985), combined class-based frustrations with identity concerns, which resulted in a movement that was at once populist and nationalist.[263] While AASU operated within constitutional frameworks, its uncompromising stance and growing disillusionment with the political establishment created fertile ground for radicalisation. Many of the future leaders of insurgent groups, such as ULFA, were shaped by this background.

The shift to insurgency was the result of exhaustion of democratic means and inefficiency of the government's response towards these grievances. Subir Bhaumik has shown how militant groups across the Northeast often emerged from student movements, where youthful idealism merged with disillusionment.[264] In Assam, this is seen with the founding of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 1979. For its founders, the demand was no longer limited to controlling migration or securing autonomy within the Indian Union; it was the establishment of a sovereign Assam. ULFA thus represented the culmination of decades of grievances reframed in a militant idiom. Its ideology drew upon Guha's "colonialism of a special type," Baruah's "durable disorder," and popular resentment over demographic change, translating them into the language of armed struggle and self-determination.

The historical background of insurgency in Assam, therefore, cannot be explained through any single factor. Economic exploitation provided the structural basis of resentment; political alienation and incomplete integration eroded faith in federalism; demographic anxieties intensified fears of cultural extinction; and student radicalisation channelled these sentiments into a militant movement. Scholars have variously emphasised different dimensions of this process, such as economic exploitation, structural disorder, cultural anxieties, class and ideology, and militancy. In sum, their insights help understand that insurgency is not an abrupt departure but he cumulative outcome of long-standing contradictions between Assam and the Indian state.

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[262] B. G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development* (New Delhi: Konark, 1996), 144–47.
[263] Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology, and Identity* (New Delhi: Manak, 1993), 56–62.
[264] Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire: North-East India* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1996), 103–07.

4.3 The Emergence and Rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)

The birth of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) shifted the dynamics of identity politics and Assamese sub nationalism from a democratic means to a radical one. ULFA was founded in 1979 by a group of young Assamese nationalists at the historic Rang Ghar in Sibsagar. The group defined itself not merely as a militant outfit, but as a revolutionary political movement committed towards the sovereignty of Assam from any external aggressor. Although the radical outfit emerged two months prior to the Assam Movement, its aims and objectives were shaped through the common issues which revolved around historical injustices, demographic threat, and economic exploitation. ULFA held the Centre's domination over Assam as a responsible factor contributing towards these issues. ULFA's self-perception significantly diverges from the mainstream view of it as a terrorist or extremist organisation[265]. ULFA frames its armed struggle as a necessary and defensive response to what it calls the colonial occupation by the Indian state. It contends that Assam has historically never been an integral part of India and that Indian statehood was imposed through military and administrative control. In its pamphlets, ULFA argues that the post-Partition influx of migrants and the state's promotion of demographic shifts were part of a broader strategy of internal colonisation.[266] The organisation does not seek secession but rather liberation from an illegitimate annexation. It maintains that Indian rule over Assam is unjust and historically unfounded. According to ULFA, Assam continues to be a victim of systemic economic exploitation, arguing that despite its rich natural resources, it remains economically underdeveloped due to the exploitative central policies.[267]

These ideological foundations of ULFA intersect with Marxist and leftist views with the ethnonationalist assertion of Assamese identity. The documents and public speeches of ULFA leaders revolved around the themes of exploitation, underdevelopment, and cultural subjugation, echoing the idea of Guha's "internal colonialism". According to ULFA, Assam, despite being resource-rich, was a systematically plundered region, where oil, tea, and coal benefited the Indian

[265] Alex Waterman, "The shadow of 'the boys:'rebel governance without territorial control in Assam's ULFA insurgency." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 34, no. 1 (2023): 279-304.
[266] Piyali Basu, "The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)." In *Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgent Groups*, pp. 676-685. CRC Press, 2024.
[267] Ibid.

state and external capital while leaving Assamese society impoverished.[268] This framing resonated with Gurr's notion of relative deprivation, where groups mobilise violently when structural inequalities become politicised.[269] In ULFA's case, the promise of sovereignty was presented as both an economic and cultural reclamation. The organisation was founded by seven young Assamese nationalists, viz. Suren Dihingiya, Budheswar Gogoi, Sumeshwar Gogoi, Bhupen Gohain, Gulap Barua, Pradip Gogoi, and later joined by Aurobindo Rajkonwar (also known as Rajib Rajkonwar) and Paresh Barua. Most of these individuals were associated with the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), which played a foundational role in ULFA's early growth. They started their first major act of militancy in April 1980 with an attempted grenade attack on MLA Hiteswar Saikia, resulting in the death of ULFA activist Hari Borkakati. Following this incident and the arrests of its early leaders, the organisation saw temporary setbacks. However, under the leadership of Gulap Barua and Paresh Barua, ULFA restructured and reorganised itself into military and political wings, and adopted pseudonyms for operational secrecy. In its former years, ULFA drew significant popular support, particularly among the rural middle class, unemployed youth, and sections of the peasantry. It had a similar social base to that of the Assam Movement but diverged in strategy and ambition. Whereas groups such as AASU and AGP eventually sought accommodation within the Indian constitutional framework, ULFA denounced electoral politics as corrupt and complicit. The Mangaldoi by-election of 1979, which sparked the Assam Agitation over alleged illegal voters, also provided the immediate backdrop for ULFA's founding, symbolising the disillusionment with democratic avenues of redress.

By the early 1980s, the group's influence expanded significantly, drawing support from the AJYCP and recruiting youth across the state. With the help of the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland), ULFA grew into a major insurgent force with key political leaders such as Chitrabon Hazarika, Jugal Kishore Mahanta, and Sasha Chaudhury and also associates such as Ratul Kotoky and Raju Barua. In a short period of time, ULFA embedded itself deeply within Assam's political consciousness and began to influence not only insurgency dynamics but also the broader socio-political discourse of the region. By the 1980s, ULFA established its bases in neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh for the purpose of training its

[268] Nani Gopal Mahanta, *Confronting the state: ULFA's quest for sovereignty*. SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2013.
[269] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.

cadres. Its means of generating finances included a combination of extortion, "taxation" of businesses, kidnappings for ransom, and control of local trade networks. ULFA's common targets included state institutions, infrastructure projects, and individuals perceived as "outsiders". Companies such as Oil India Limited, tea estates were primary targets. ULFA regarded itself as the protector of Assamese aspirations, and in the due process, not only widened its influence but also deepened the cycle of violence.[270] The shift from a political organisation to an armed group marked a turning point in the insurgency landscape of the state. By the early 1980s, the organisation concluded that democratic and peaceful agitation was ineffective in addressing the long-standing grievances of the Assamese people. Thus, inspired by separatist movements in other parts of India and elsewhere, ULFA took up arms as a means of establishing a "swadhin Assom" through armed struggle. During its initial days of formation, ULFA received support and training from other insurgent groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur. It also received training and arms from agencies across the border in Bangladesh and Pakistan's ISI during the height of the movement in the 1990s.[271]

ULFA's modus operandi included a range of elective assassinations, attacks on security forces, extortion from businesses, and bombings targeting infrastructure and symbols of the Indian state. These actions were aimed at weakening the state's control and creating a climate of fear to assert parallel authority. The group became so influential that it enforced social and moral codes in rural areas, projecting itself as a parallel government.. By the end of the 1980s, ULFA had built a robust underground network with thousands of cadres, an intelligence wing, and a well-organised military hierarchy. In the year 1990, the government of India declared the group as a terrorist organisation, following which full-scale counterinsurgency operations were launched. With the rise of insurgent activities of the ULFA in the late 1980s, especially high-profile assassinations and bombings, the Government of India imposed President's Rule in Assam in November 1990 and launched Operation Bajrang in December of the same year. This marked the beginning of counterinsurgency efforts, involving the Indian Army, paramilitary forces, and state police. However, the operation

[270] Namrata Goswami, *India's Internal Security Situation: Present Realities and Future Pathways*, IDSA Monograph Series No. 23 (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, September 2013).
[271] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 134–38; Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire: North-East India* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1996), 74–80.

was criticised for its human rights violations, lack of intelligence coordination, and the failure to capture top ULFA leadership. This led to further alienation and mistrust among the local population and the centre.[272] Thereafter, a second operation named "Operation Rhino" was launched in 1991 with improved intelligence and strategic deployment across suspected ULFA strongholds in Upper Assam. The counterinsurgency operations gradually dismantled ULFA's organisational base and forced several of its leaders to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, especially in Bangladesh and Bhutan. From 1997 onwards, Bhutan also cooperated with India on counterinsurgency measures during Operation All Clear in 2003, which significantly weakened the group's cross-border havens and operational capacity.[273] Along with the military responses, the government of India also pursued strategies of negotiation, political reintegration, and psychological operations. Several ULFA members surrendered under the government's rehabilitation schemes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, giving rise to the SULFA (Surrendered ULFA) phenomenon. These former militants were reintegrated into civil life or used as informants and vigilante groups, which further fragmented the insurgency and generated internal tensions within ULFA. Despite military successes, these counterinsurgency efforts came with a heavy cost. Accusations of enforced disappearances, custodial killings, and harassment of civilians tarnished the legitimacy of state forces in many areas. The oscillation between hard military action and soft political outreach reflected the Indian state's dual strategy of coercion and co-option, with varying degrees of success over time.[274]

After the counterinsurgency operations and external pressures, the organisation went through splits and internal fragmentation. The organisation got divided between two factions. By the early 2000s, a section of the group under the leadership of Arabinda Rajkhowa began advocating for dialogue with the Indian government, known as the (Pro-Talks Faction), which formally entered into peace negotiations in 2011. This group demanded discussions on key issues, including political autonomy, cultural protection, and economic development within the Indian federal framework.[275] The shift marked a significant departure from ULFA's earlier insistence on

[272] Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 89–93
[273] Wasbir Hussain, *India's Northeast in 2015*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies., 2022.
[274] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000), 142–49.
[275] Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 113–118.

sovereignty, demonstrating how long-standing insurgencies often evolve toward political engagement under conducive conditions. The central government, in turn, adopted a calibrated approach, welcoming dialogue while maintaining pressure on the anti-talks faction led by Paresh Barua. The hardline faction, ULFA (Independent), led by Paresh Barua, rejected the peace process altogether, reiterating its commitment to full sovereignty. Operating largely from safe havens in Myanmar's Sagaing region and along the China-Myanmar border, this faction continued low-scale armed activity and sought to internationalise the cause of "*swadhin Assom*". However, its operational capacity declined over the years, particularly after enhanced border coordination among India, Myanmar, and Bhutan.[276] The split within ULFA reflects deeper ideological and strategic disagreements on the question of identity, sovereignty, and the feasibility of violent resistance. It also revealed the impact of counterinsurgency diplomacy and regional cooperation in reducing the space for armed rebellion.

By the mid-1990s, ULFA had become the symbol of Assamese insurgency. The outfit was the result of long-standing grievances and identity politics, and at the same time, ended up deepening and further generating violence in the state. Its trajectory underscores the complex interplay between ethno-nationalist aspiration, repressive governance, and the perils of military resistance. ULFA's radicalisation lays the groundwork for understanding other insurgent formations in Assam, such as the Bodo autonomy movements, which followed different but equally contested paths.

4.4 NDFB and Bodo Militancy

The Bodo insurgency in Assam is a testament to the ways in which ethnicity becomes central in the politics of identity and recognition. The emergence of the Bodo insurgency in Assam sets a different lens to analyse the insurgency landscape in Assam. Unlike ULFA, which positioned itself as a pan-Assamese sub-nationalist movement, the Bodo struggle was deeply rooted in ethnic specificity, in this case, the Bodos. Its origins lie in the long history of Bodo identity assertion, shaped by demographic changes, land alienation, and cultural marginalisation. The movement drew upon a longstanding grievance that Bodos, despite being one of the oldest tribal groups of

[276] Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China, and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*. Yale University Press, 2015.

the region, had been historically marginalised both by the elite Assamese-dominated state structures and also the central government.[277] The Bodos, considered the largest plains tribe of Assam, historically inhabited vast tracts of land across the Brahmaputra Valley. However, migration, particularly from East Bengal during the colonial as well as postcolonial periods, along with the expansion of tea plantations and state-sponsored land settlement schemes, resulted in reduced access to land for the Bodos. By the mid-twentieth century, many Bodo villages experienced acute displacement, while their socio-economic marginalisation was exacerbated by limited access to education, employment, and political representation. These structural conditions produced what Gurr identifies as a sense of relative deprivation, where the gap between rising aspirations and persistent exclusion fostered resentment and mobilisational potential.

Cultural and linguistic anxieties further intensified the Bodo question. The imposition of Assamese as the official language in 1960, followed by repeated attempts to assimilate tribal groups into the larger Assamese identity, provoked widespread dissatisfaction among Bodos. Unlike other smaller ethnic groups, Bodo leaders resisted this, emphasising their Tibeto-Burman linguistic heritage and distinct cultural identity. This resistance was institutionalised through organisations such as the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), which became the nucleus of mass political mobilisation in the 1980s.[278] The ABSU articulated cultural, economic, and political grievances, emphasising both the neglect of Bodo areas in development and the threats posed by demographic changes.[279] The emergence of the Bodo insurgency in the late twentieth century was closely tied to the radicalisation of ethnic mobilisation spearheaded by student organisations and armed groups. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma in the 1980s, became the most influential platform articulating Bodo grievances. Initially focusing on cultural recognition, education, and developmental rights, ABSU soon expanded its agenda to demand a separate Bodoland state, invoking Article 2 and Article 3 of the Indian

[277] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 160–162.
[278] Varshali Brahma, and Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat. "Bodos Quest for Socio-Political Identity: A Historical Perspective." *Artha Vijnana* 66, no. 1 (2024).
[279] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 142–165.

Constitution as the legal basis for state reorganisation. This marked a critical shift from reformist demands to a separatist framework.

While early demands for a separate Bodo administrative unit were channelled through democratic means by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in the 1960s, the inability of peaceful mobilisation to yield results contributed to the emergence of a militant phase. This culminated in the formation of the Bodo Security Force (BdSF) in 1986, later renamed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB**)** in 1994.[280] The NDFB pursued a separatist goal of establishing a **s**overeign Bodoland, claiming that the community had been deprived of land rights, political representation, and socio-economic development under both colonial and postcolonial governance.[281] Parallel to NDFB's rise, another armed group, the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), advocated for an autonomous Bodoland within India rather than full independence. The radicalisation of Bodo politics can also be seen as a product of structural conditions. Land alienation, high unemployment rates among Bodo youth, and the perceived domination of Assamese elites over state resources combined to produce what Johan Galtung conceptualises as structural violence, a condition where social structures systematically disadvantage a community.[282] This sense of systemic exclusion translated into armed resistance, positioning the Bodo struggle as not merely ethnic but also deeply socio-economic in character. By the 1990s, the dual strategy of constitutional agitation (ABSU and allied organisations) and militant insurgency (NDFB and later the Bodo Liberation Tigers, BLT) defined the trajectory of the Bodo movement. The growing violence manifested in targeted attacks, ethnic clashes, and insurgent–state confrontations, entrenched the Bodo question within the wider insurgency landscape of Assam.

One of the most defining and tragic aspects of the Bodo insurgency has been the recurrent outbreaks of ethnic violence, particularly in western and northern Assam. These conflicts were not only manifestations of inter-community tensions but also deeply connected to the struggle over land and demographic change. The Bodo heartland, spanning the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri, has historically been multi-ethnic, inhabited by Bodos alongside Adivasis,

[280] Udayon Misra, "Bodoland: The burden of history." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2012): 36-42.
[281] South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), "National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)," Institute for Conflict Management
[282] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.

Bengali-speaking Muslims, Assamese Hindus, and other tribal communities. This demographic heterogeneity created overlapping and often contested claims to land and resources. With the expansion of agriculture, population growth, and migration. The pressure on land intensified. For many Bodo activists, this process was interpreted as a systematic encroachment upon their ancestral territory, eroding both cultural identity and economic security. Insurgent groups such as the NDFB and, at times, the BLT, framed land dispossession as part of a larger narrative of existential threat. Violent campaigns, including targeted killings, forced evictions, and village burnings, were justified as a means of defending the Bodo homeland. These clashes frequently escalated into cycles of retaliation, involving not only state forces but also community militias formed for self-defence.[283] The violence of the 1990s and the renewed clashes in 2008 and 2012 revealed how fragile inter-ethnic relations had become in the region.[284] The politics of land thus functioned as both a material and symbolic driver of insurgency. Land was not merely an economic asset but the spatial foundation of identity and sovereignty. The struggle to control territory became intertwined with demands for political autonomy, reflecting that land conflicts extended beyond economic disputes to embody the contested imagination of belonging, exclusion, and political power.

The Indian state's response to the Bodo insurgency combined military containment with political accommodation, reflecting a dual strategy that has been characteristic of counterinsurgency in the Northeast. While armed operations sought to neutralise militant groups, successive governments also engaged in negotiation, resulting in a series of Bodo Accords that restructured the institutional landscape of the region. The first major attempt came with the Bodo Accord of 1993, signed between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) along with the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC). This agreement created the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC), granting limited self-governance over designated Bodo-majority areas. However, the Accord quickly ran into difficulties: disputes over the demarcation of BAC boundaries, inadequate transfer of powers, and continued insurgent activity rendered the

[283] Walter Fernandes, *Land Relations and Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Northeast India* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2008).
[284] Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Violence in Assam: Battle for the Bodo Heartland*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies., 2022.

arrangement ineffective.[285] For many Bodo groups, the 1993 Accord symbolised a partial and unfulfilled promise.

The persistence of militancy and ethnic violence led to renewed negotiations in the late 1990s. A turning point came with the 2003 Bodo Accord, signed with the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). This agreement dissolved the BAC and created the more powerful Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The BTC enjoyed greater legislative, executive, and financial powers, covering the newly demarcated Bodoland Territorial Areas Districts (BTAD). The Accord also facilitated the disbanding of the BLT and the rehabilitation of its cadres, marking a significant step towards peace.[286] Yet, the BTC experiment did not fully resolve the conflict. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which had boycotted the 2003 settlement, continued its insurgency, demanding a sovereign Bodoland. This splintering of insurgent groups revealed the limits of state accommodation and the challenges of reconciling maximalist demands with constitutional frameworks. The cycle of insurgency, counterinsurgency, and negotiation persisted, underscoring the fragility of peace settlement**s** in ethnically diverse and politically contested regions. The most recent development came with the 2020 Bodo Accord, signed between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and four NDFB factions along with ABSU. This accord promised greater autonomy to the BTC, enhanced development funds, and political safeguards for Bodos, while explicitly rejecting the demand for a separate state.[287] The inclusion of multiple factions and stakeholders distinguished the 2020 agreement from earlier settlements, aiming for a more comprehensive and sustainable peace. Nevertheless, debates over land rights, representation, and inter-ethnic balance remain, highlighting that while accords may institutionalise autonomy, they do not erase the deeper structural and identity-based tensions at the heart of the Bodo question.

The trajectory of the Bodo insurgency demonstrates how identity politics, when intersecting with structural deprivation and state neglect, can evolve into a sustained separatist movement. Unlike the ULFA insurgency, which framed its struggle in terms of Assamese subnationalism against the

[285] Government of India, *Memorandum of Settlement with ABSU/BPAC* (New Delhi, 1993).
[286] Government of India, Government of Assam, and Bodo Liberation Tigers, *Memorandum of Settlement (Bodoland Territorial Council, February 10, 2003)*.
[287] Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, "Agreements Opened the Doors to Solutions in the North East," *Press Information Bureau*, March 21, 2024

Indian state, the Bodo insurgency highlighted the internal fractures within Assam's plural society. By demanding a distinct political and territorial space, the Bodo movement challenged not only the Indian state but also the hegemonic position of pan-Assamese identity in the region. The cycles of mobilisation, insurgency, negotiation, and fragmentation illustrate a broader pattern of how ethnic movements in Northeast India interact with the state. Each phase, from the early mobilisation of ABSU, the militancy of NDFB and BLT, to the negotiated settlements of 1993, 2003, and 2020, reflects both the possibilities and the limitations of state-led accommodation. While the accords institutionalised autonomy and provided a framework for peace, they could not fully address the deeper issues of land, identity, and inter-community relations that continue to define the Bodo question.

In theoretical terms, the Bodo insurgency underscores the argument that insurgency in Assam cannot be seen as a monolithic phenomenon. Instead, it is a fragmented landscape shaped by overlapping grievances, competing nationalisms, and uneven experiences of state integration. The Bodo case also reinforces Johan Galtung's notion of structural violence, as systemic exclusion and unequal development were as central to the insurgency as cultural or political identity. Furthermore, the fragmentation of insurgent groups and the multiplicity of accords support the view, advanced by scholars such as Sanjib Baruah, that peace processes in the Northeast often produce "negotiated coexistence" rather than final settlements. Thus, the Bodo insurgency must be situated as both a parallel and distinct narrative within Assam's wider insurgency landscape.

4.5 Beyond ULFA & NDFB: Other Insurgent Movements in Assam

As mentioned earlier, the sub-national identity was the main marker for ULFA's road to armed struggle, whereas for the Bodos, their ethnic identity remained the marker for peace and conflict. Following the Bodo insurgency and the violence that ensued, other groups took up arms for the protection of their culture and assertion of their demands. The insurgencies in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, though often categorised as "ethnic insurgencies," reflect a deeper crisis rooted in structural marginalisation, land dispossession, and a long history of political exclusion. The Karbi and Dimasa peoples, like many other tribal groups in Assam's hill districts, have historically struggled with inadequate representation, ineffective governance, and systemic neglect. These

conditions fostered a growing sentiment of alienation and a drive for autonomy, eventually culminating in armed mobilisations.

The Karbi insurgency formally consolidated in 1999 when the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and the Karbi People's Front (KPF) merged to form the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), aiming for greater autonomy within Assam.[288] Their emergence was not simply a reactionary response but the result of a prolonged process of identity assertion and ethnic mobilisation. As Partha Pratim Baruah and Bikash Deka argue, the Karbi movement for self-determination "centres primarily around issues of socio-cultural identity, control over resources and political emancipation."[289] Land alienation became symbolic of the wider political and cultural marginalisation experienced by these groups. Furthermore, poor governance, unaccountable bureaucracy, and corrupt local administrations amplified resentment. As a result, disenchantment with state institutions and mainstream politics provided fertile ground for insurgent recruitment and support. The slogan "Hemprek Kangthim," meaning self-determination, symbolises the movement's demand for autonomy and recognition of Karbi identity.[290] In 2002, UPDS entered a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government, creating an internal division between factions favouring negotiations and those advocating continued armed struggle. The anti-talk faction subsequently formed the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF) in 2004, continuing insurgent activities. [291]

The Dimasa insurgency, spearheaded by the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) and later split into DHD (Jewel) and DHD (Nunisa), followed a similar trajectory of ethnic assertion and disenfranchisement. What began as a movement for a Dimaraji (a proposed Dimasa homeland) evolved into violent confrontations with other communities and rival groups. This inter-ethnic strife, as witnessed in frequent clashes with Karbi, Zeme Naga, and Hmar militants, further fragmented the social fabric of the region and complicated peace processes. These insurgencies reflect more than separatist aspirations; they are symptomatic of deeper crises in development,

[288] Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000), 56–62.
[289] Partha Pratim Baruah and Bikash Deka, "Shifting Paradigm: Politics of Transition in Karbi Anglong," *Journal of Northeast Indian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2018).
[290] Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89–94.
[291] Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and reconciliation: The politics of ethnicity in Assam*. Routledge India, 2014.

governance, and recognition. Both the Karbi and Dimasa movements expose the limits of existing institutional mechanisms in addressing ethnic aspirations within the constitutional framework. The state's failure to negotiate inclusive autonomy and its tendency to rely on military suppression over political engagement have prolonged the cycles of violence and mistrust.

While the dominant insurgent landscape in Assam has been shaped by ethnic and sub-nationalist movements, recent decades have witnessed the growing shadow of Islamist militancy, often operating at the fringes of both domestic discontent and transnational jihadist agendas. These networks, though not indigenous to Assam's primary insurgent history, have emerged as a critical security concern, especially in border districts with porous boundaries. The emergence of Islamist militancy in Assam must be understood in the context of broader demographic anxieties, religious polarisation, and Assam's geographical contiguity with Bangladesh. Groups like the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and Ansarullah Bangla Team have allegedly established sleeper cells and training modules in parts of lower Assam. Security agencies have periodically arrested individuals suspected of links to such groups, especially after the Burdwan blast of 2014 in West Bengal, which exposed an extensive network of JMB operatives using Assam as a corridor and hideout.[292] The concerns around radicalisation and cross-border infiltration are closely tied to the politicisation of the "illegal migrant" narrative. While the Assam Movement of 1979–85 framed the influx of Bengali-speaking Muslims as a threat to Assamese identity, post-2000s discourses have gradually securitised this demographic shift, associating it with Islamic extremism. The state has responded with intensified policing and surveillance, including border fencing, National Register of Citizens (NRC) verification, and counter-terror operations. However, the lack of concrete evidence in many such cases has also raised concerns about profiling and communal stigmatisation. As Sanjib Baruah notes, "the securitisation of immigration has produced a political culture in which religious and ethnic markers are increasingly entangled with narratives of threat."[293]

Unlike ULFA or NDFB, Islamist networks in Assam do not seek a separate homeland or autonomy, but their presence highlights a shift from ethno-nationalist insurgency to ideological

[292] South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), "Islamist Terrorism in Assam.
[293] Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 171.

radicalism, posing challenges that transcend state boundaries. This shift mirrors global patterns, where local grievances, such as exclusion, poverty, or perceived injustice, intersect with international extremist ideologies. Assam's location along strategic fault lines, religious, ethnic, and geographic, makes it particularly vulnerable to such intersections. Thus, while numerically smaller and less politically embedded than other insurgent formations, the presence of Islamist networks represents a new dimension of conflict in Assam: one that is shaped less by local autonomy and more by the geopolitics of religious extremism and regional instability.

4.6 External Actors and Transnational Networks

The insurgency in Assam has not been confined to internal dynamics but has been heavily influenced by the involvement of external actors and transnational networks. Throughout its history, insurgent groups in Assam, particularly the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and other militant organisations, have established connections with foreign governments, insurgent groups in neighbouring countries, and international networks to secure funding, arms, and training.[294] These external actors have played a critical role in sustaining the insurgency by providing logistical support, safe havens, and ideological backing. This transnational dimension of Assam's insurgency is crucial to understanding its persistence and complexity, as well as the challenges faced by the Indian government in addressing it.

In the initial days, Bangladesh has been one of the most significant external actors in Assam's insurgency due to its geographical proximity and shared border with the northeastern region of India. The porous border between Assam and Bangladesh has historically facilitated cross-border movement, allowing insurgent groups like ULFA to establish safe havens, training camps, and logistical bases across the border. During the 1980s and 1990s, ULFA reportedly maintained several camps in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and other areas of Bangladesh, where they received arms, training, and other forms of support.[295] These camps were used to plan and execute attacks on Indian soil, making Bangladesh a critical hub for insurgent activities. Bangladesh's involvement in Assam's insurgency has been a source of tension between India and Bangladesh, particularly during periods of political instability in Bangladesh. It is widely believed that elements

[294] Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan. *Trends in outside support for insurgent movements*. Rand Corporation, 2001.
[295] Ziaul Haque, "Spoilers in the Peace Process of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)." (2015).

within the Bangladeshi establishment, including intelligence agencies and political factions, were complicit in providing assistance to ULFA and other insurgent groups. However, this support has fluctuated over time, depending on the political leadership in Dhaka. For example, the government of Sheikh Hasina, which has maintained strong relations with India, took decisive steps to crack down on insurgent activities, dismantling ULFA camps and arresting key leaders. The arrest and deportation of ULFA's chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, from Bangladesh in 2009 marked a significant turning point in the group's fortunes.[296] While Bangladesh's cooperation has improved in recent years, the long history of cross-border insurgent activities has left a lasting impact on the security dynamics of Assam. The presence of a large number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam continues to be a contentious issue, contributing to the ethno-political tensions that fuel insurgency in the state.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has played a pivotal role in sustaining insurgent movements in India's northeastern region, including Assam. The ISI's involvement in northeastern India is part of its broader strategy to destabilise India and divert its military resources, as well as to exploit ethnic and regional grievances within India for strategic gains. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the ISI provided crucial support to insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), as well as other separatist movements in northeastern India, including the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Manipur.[297] The ISI's support for these groups has included training, arms supply, financial aid, and the provision of safe havens in neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and Myanmar. The ISI's interest in Northeastern India dates back to the 1970s and 1980s, when Pakistan sought to weaken India by exploiting its internal vulnerabilities, particularly in the context of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The war not only led to the creation of Bangladesh but also humiliated Pakistan by dismembering its eastern wing, an outcome that Pakistan's military establishment never fully reconciled with. In the aftermath of the war, the ISI sought to retaliate by supporting insurgent movements within India's sensitive Northeastern region, which shares long, porous

[296] Sanjib Baruah, *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
[297] Tanmoy Das, "Naga Insurgency and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act-A Critical Analysis." PhD diss., Sikkim University, 2015.

borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China.[298] For the ISI, Northeastern India represented an ideal area for insurgent activities due to its ethnic diversity, historical grievances against the Indian state, and geographical isolation from mainland India. By supporting insurgencies in Assam and neighbouring states, the ISI hoped to create a security quagmire for India, forcing New Delhi to divert military and economic resources to internal security operations. Moreover, by aiding insurgent groups that were demanding secession from India, the ISI aimed to stoke separatist sentiments and weaken India's territorial integrity. The ISI's most significant contribution to the insurgency in Assam has been its support for the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the most prominent separatist group in Assam that has been fighting for an independent Assam since its formation in 1979. ULFA's leadership, particularly its military wing, maintained close ties with the ISI, which provided the group with arms, training, and logistical support. ULFA cadres were trained in ISI-sponsored camps located in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where they were instructed in guerrilla warfare, bomb-making, and intelligence gathering. These camps played a crucial role in enhancing ULFA's operational capabilities, enabling the group to carry out sophisticated attacks against Indian security forces and government installations in Assam. The ISI's involvement with ULFA also extended to facilitating the group's connections with other insurgent organisations in the region, such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF).[299] By fostering alliances between these groups, the ISI sought to create a united front of northeastern insurgents that could operate more effectively against Indian security forces. This transnational insurgent network, supported by the ISI, allowed ULFA to expand its operations beyond Assam and establish safe havens in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar.

One of the ISI's key contributions to the insurgency in Assam was its role in securing safe havens for ULFA and other northeastern insurgent groups in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ULFA maintained a significant presence in Bangladesh, where it operated training camps and safe houses with the tacit support of elements within the Bangladeshi establishment.[300] The ISI played a critical role in facilitating this arrangement, using its influence within Bangladesh to ensure that ULFA's operations could continue relatively

[298] Sanjib Baruah, *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
[299] P.G. Rajamohan, "Fundamentalism and the ISI in Northeast Insurgency." *IPCS Article* 1090 (2003).
[300] Piyali Basu, "The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)." In *Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgent Groups*, pp. 676-685. CRC Press, 2024.

unhindered. In Bangladesh, ULFA leaders, including Paresh Baruah, maintained close ties with ISI operatives, who provided financial and logistical support to sustain the group's activities. This relationship allowed ULFA to regroup and replenish its resources after facing military setbacks in Assam, and it also enabled the group to coordinate attacks from across the border. Similarly, ULFA established connections with insurgent groups in Myanmar, where it took advantage of the country's porous borders and weak state control to set up camps in the jungles along the India-Myanmar border. The ISI's involvement in securing these safe havens helped ULFA evade Indian security forces and prolong its insurgency.

Myanmar, which shares a long and porous border with India's northeastern states, has also been a critical external factor in sustaining insurgent groups in Assam. The dense forests and rugged terrain along the India-Myanmar border have provided an ideal sanctuary for insurgent groups, allowing them to evade Indian security forces and establish bases in Myanmar's border regions. ULFA, along with other northeastern insurgent groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), has utilised Myanmar as a base of operations, taking advantage of the weak governance and lack of effective control in Myanmar's border areas. The Myanmar government's limited control over its border regions has made it difficult for Indian security forces to conduct cross-border operations, and insurgent groups have often taken refuge in Myanmar to regroup and launch attacks on Indian soil. While there have been periods of cooperation between the Indian and Myanmar governments in tackling insurgency, the lack of sustained and coordinated efforts has allowed these groups to maintain a presence in the region. Additionally, the complex ethnic landscape of Myanmar, with various insurgent and ethnic militias operating in the border areas, has further complicated efforts to neutralise the threat posed by Assamese insurgent groups. The transnational networks that link ULFA with other northeastern insurgent groups and ethnic militias in Myanmar have allowed these organisations to share resources, intelligence, and operational tactics, making the insurgency more resilient and difficult to dismantle.[301] The ISI's support for ULFA and other northeastern insurgent groups was not limited to training and safe havens; it also provided these groups with arms and financial aid. ULFA, for example, received a steady supply of sophisticated weapons, including AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and explosives, which were smuggled into Assam through Bangladesh and Myanmar. The ISI facilitated these arms transfers,

[301] Arupjyoti Saikia, *A century of protests: Peasant politics in Assam since 1900*. Routledge India, 2015.

often using established smuggling routes through Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts and Myanmar's jungles to transport the weapons.[302] These arms helped ULFA carry out deadly attacks on Indian security forces and maintain a steady level of insurgent activity throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In addition to arms, the ISI provided financial aid to ULFA, helping the group sustain its operations. The ISI used hawala networks, an informal money transfer system widely used in South Asia, to funnel money to ULFA's leadership, allowing the group to fund its recruitment, propaganda, and operational expenses.[303] This financial support was crucial in enabling ULFA to recruit new cadres, expand its influence in rural areas, and sustain its insurgent campaign over a prolonged period.

The ISI's involvement in Assam's insurgency also extended to facilitating cross-border coordination between northeastern insurgent groups and Islamist militant organisations operating in Bangladesh. In particular, the ISI played a key role in linking ULFA with groups like the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) and the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), both of which had an established presence in Bangladesh and were involved in anti-India activities.[304] These Islamist groups provided logistical support to ULFA and helped facilitate arms smuggling routes across the India-Bangladesh border. The ISI's strategy of linking northeastern insurgents with Islamist militant groups was part of its broader plan to create a nexus between separatist movements in northeastern India and Islamist terrorism in South Asia. By forging these links, the ISI hoped to create a more formidable network of anti-India forces that could operate across multiple fronts and create security challenges for India in both its northeastern region and along the western front in Kashmir. This cross-border coordination also allowed ULFA to expand its operational reach and enhance its ability to carry out attacks on Indian soil. While the ISI played a significant role in sustaining the insurgency in Assam throughout the 1980s and 1990s, its influence has waned in recent years due to a combination of factors. One of the key reasons for the decline in ISI's influence has been the improved counter-insurgency operations by Indian security forces, which have successfully dismantled many of ULFA's operational networks in Assam and its neighbouring states. Moreover, the changing political landscape in Bangladesh, particularly under

[302] Gunaratna, Rohan. "Illicit transfer of Conventional Weapons: The Role of State and Non-state Actors in South Asia." *Small Arms Control* (2019): 251-277.
[303] Balasubramaniyan, V., and S. V. Raghavan. *Terror Funds in India: Money Behind Mayhem*. Lancer Publishers LLC, 2017.
[304] Mansi Mehrotra, "Terrorism in Bangladesh." *Central Asian Studies* (2009): 95.

the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has led to a crackdown on northeastern insurgent groups operating from Bangladeshi soil. Bangladesh's government, in cooperation with India, has arrested several ULFA leaders and shut down insurgent camps, significantly weakening the group's ability to sustain its insurgency.[305]

Additionally, the growing international pressure on Pakistan to crack down on terrorist and insurgent networks has also contributed to the decline in ISI's support for northeastern insurgencies. Following the events of 9/11 and the subsequent global war on terror, Pakistan has faced increasing scrutiny for its role in supporting militant groups, and this has limited the ISI's ability to provide overt support to groups like ULFA. While the ISI's influence in the region has diminished, the legacy of its involvement in Assam's insurgency continues to shape the security dynamics of the region, and concerns remain about the potential for future ISI involvement in northeastern insurgencies.[306] Pakistan's ISI has played a crucial role in the insurgency in Assam, providing material, financial, and logistical support to groups like ULFA and fostering cross-border coordination with other insurgent and militant groups. The ISI's involvement in northeastern India has been driven by its broader strategic objective of destabilising India and diverting Indian military resources, and it has exploited the region's ethnic and political grievances to further this goal. While the ISI's influence has declined in recent years due to improved Indian counter-insurgency efforts and changing geopolitical dynamics in South Asia, its legacy in Assam's insurgency remains significant. The ISI's role in sustaining the insurgency highlights the complex transnational dimensions of the conflict and underscores the need for continued vigilance and regional cooperation to prevent future destabilisation in India's northeast.

China's involvement in insurgencies in India's northeastern region, particularly in Assam, has historically played a significant, though often covert, role in shaping the trajectory of these movements. While China's engagement with the northeastern insurgencies has fluctuated over time, it has largely been driven by geopolitical considerations, with the region serving as a strategic point in the broader Sino-Indian rivalry. China's influence in the insurgencies, including those in Assam, has ranged from providing ideological support and training to offering material assistance

[305] Brig. Sushil Kumar Sharma, "Future Prospects of Peace Talk with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) Genesis, Issues and Recommendations." *Vivekananda International Foundation* (2016).
[306] Sreeradha Datta, "Security of India's northeast: External linkages." *Strategic Analysis* 24, no. 8 (2000): 1495-1516.

in the form of arms and logistical backing during the height of the Cold War. Although China's direct involvement in recent years has been more subdued, its past support to northeastern insurgents has left a lasting impact on the dynamics of insurgency in the region, and its geopolitical posture continues to influence the security environment in India's northeast. During the 1960s and 1970s, China's revolutionary ideology, grounded in Maoist thought, sought to inspire and support revolutionary movements across Asia as part of its broader strategy of exporting Communist revolution. At the time, China was engaged in ideological competition with both the Soviet Union and the Western capitalist bloc, and supporting insurgencies in neighbouring countries, including India, was seen as a means of advancing its strategic goals.[307] This period saw China actively supporting insurgent movements in India's northeastern region, including the Naga and Mizo insurgencies, as well as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), with the aim of destabilising India and diverting Indian military attention away from China's border areas. The Sino-Indian War of 1962, which left a deep scar in India's strategic psyche, also provided China with an opportunity to exploit the discontent in India's northeastern states. Following its victory in the war, China sought to weaken India's control over the region by providing support to various insurgent groups. The northeastern region, with its difficult terrain and ethnic diversity, presented a fertile ground for insurgency, and China's strategic calculus recognised the potential of supporting these movements to destabilise India's grip over the region. Chinese support came in the form of training in Maoist guerrilla warfare tactics, material aid, and the establishment of safe havens for insurgents across the border in China's Yunnan province and Tibet.

China's support to insurgent groups in India's northeast is most clearly illustrated in its relationship with the Naga and Mizo insurgencies. During the 1960s, Naga insurgents from the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) were provided military training in China, where they were instructed in guerrilla warfare and armed with weapons to carry out their insurgency against the Indian state. Similarly, Mizo insurgents from the Mizo National Front (MNF) also received support from China during their rebellion in the 1960s and 1970s.[308] Chinese training and weapons allowed these insurgent groups to launch sustained attacks on Indian security forces, thereby prolonging their insurgencies and posing a significant security challenge to the Indian

[307] Aaron L. Friedberg, "Competing with China." *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018): 7-64.
[308] Namrata Panwar, "Explaining cohesion in an insurgent organization: The case of the Mizo National Front." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 6 (2017): 973-995.

state. China's support for these groups was not limited to material aid; it also extended to ideological backing, with Maoist doctrines of "people's war" influencing the strategies employed by these insurgent movements.[309] China viewed the northeastern insurgencies as a means of encircling India with hostile forces, thereby creating internal security challenges that would weaken India's ability to project power in the region. This strategic objective aligned with China's broader goal of containing India's influence in Asia, particularly after the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

Although the Naga and Mizo insurgencies were the primary beneficiaries of Chinese support in the 1960s and 1970s, ULFA also received indirect assistance from China during the early stages of its insurgency. While there is no concrete evidence of direct Chinese military aid to ULFA, it is widely believed that ULFA cadres received training in camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh that had been established with Chinese support. These camps provided ULFA with access to arms and guerrilla warfare training that allowed the group to build its military capabilities and carry out its insurgency in Assam. ULFA's connection to China can also be traced through its ideological alignment with Maoist principles of revolution and self-determination.[310] In its early years, ULFA's leadership espoused a blend of Assamese nationalism and Marxist-Leninist ideology,[311] drawing inspiration from China's revolutionary model. The group's demand for an independent Assam, free from Indian control, was framed within the broader context of anti-colonial struggles, mirroring China's revolutionary narrative of self-determination for oppressed peoples. This ideological alignment helped ULFA attract support from other Maoist insurgent groups in the region and strengthened its ties to transnational insurgent networks that had historical links to China. While China's support for insurgent movements in India's northeast was significant during the 1960s and 1970s, its approach began to shift in the 1980s and 1990s as China's foreign policy became more pragmatic and focused on economic development. The normalisation of Sino-Indian relations, beginning with the 1988 visit of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China, marked a turning point in China's engagement with northeastern insurgencies. As China sought to improve its economic ties with India and reduce tensions along their shared border, it gradually distanced itself from supporting insurgent groups in the northeast. This shift in Chinese policy coincided

[309] Robert McKaine Smith, *The revolutionary doctrine of Communist China*. American University, 1971.
[310] G. Jayachandra Reddy, and M. Sasikala. "Insurgencies in Northeast India and the Role of China." *seaps* (2016): 267.
[311] Obja Borah Hazarika, Chandan Kumar Sarma, and Rubul Patgiri. "Unpacking ULFA: Precursors and Paradoxes of an Insurgency in Northeast India." *Ethnopolitics* (2025): 1-16.

with India's own efforts to strengthen its counter-insurgency operations in the northeast. Indian security forces, with the help of intelligence agencies, successfully dismantled many of the insurgent camps that had previously received Chinese support. Moreover, China's focus on economic modernisation under Deng Xiaoping meant that it no longer viewed insurgent movements as a primary tool for achieving its geopolitical goals in the region. Instead, China adopted a more conciliatory approach toward India, seeking to resolve border disputes and enhance economic cooperation.

Although China's direct support for northeastern insurgencies has waned in recent years, its influence on the security dynamics of the region remains significant. China's growing presence in Myanmar, through infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has raised concerns in India about China's long-term strategic intentions in the region. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which runs close to India's northeastern border, has increased China's leverage over Myanmar, a country that has historically served as a safe haven for northeastern insurgent groups, including ULFA [312] India's concerns are compounded by the possibility that China could use its influence in Myanmar to facilitate insurgent activities in the northeast as a form of strategic pressure. While there is no evidence to suggest that China is currently providing direct support to insurgent groups in the northeast, the potential for future manipulation of these groups cannot be ruled out. China's border disputes with India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, remain unresolved, and any escalation of tensions between the two countries could see China reactivating its old networks of influence among northeastern insurgents.[313] Additionally, China's strategic partnership with Pakistan has also raised concerns about coordinated efforts to destabilise India. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has a long history of supporting insurgent groups in India's northeast, and its close ties to China suggest the possibility of joint efforts to leverage northeastern insurgencies as part of a broader strategy to contain India. While China has thus far refrained from overtly supporting insurgent activities in the northeast, the geopolitical rivalry between China and India continues to shape the security environment in the region. China's influence in the northeastern insurgency has evolved over time, from providing direct support to insurgent groups during the 1960s and 1970s to adopting a more cautious and pragmatic approach

[312] Arupjyoti Saikia, *A century of protests: Peasant politics in Assam since 1900*. Routledge India, 2015.
[313] Sanjib Goswami, "Identity and violence in India's North East: towards a new paradigm." PhD diss., Swinburne, 2016.

in recent decades. While China's revolutionary ideology and geopolitical rivalry with India initially drove its support for northeastern insurgencies, its growing emphasis on economic development and improved bilateral relations with India led to a gradual decline in direct assistance to insurgent groups. However, the transnational networks established during the Cold War era, combined with China's strategic presence in neighbouring Myanmar, continue to influence the security dynamics of India's northeastern region. As India and China navigate their complex geopolitical relationship, the potential for China to once again use insurgent groups as a tool for strategic leverage cannot be entirely dismissed. The northeastern insurgency, therefore, remains intertwined with broader regional power dynamics, with China playing a critical, if often indirect, role in shaping the trajectory of the conflict.

In addition to state actors, transnational networks have played a role in sustaining insurgent activities in Assam. The rise of digital technologies and the internet has further enabled insurgent groups to maintain transnational connections, allowing them to recruit, raise funds, and disseminate propaganda on a global scale. The use of online platforms has made it easier for insurgent groups to reach out to sympathetic elements of the Assamese diaspora and other international supporters, thereby reinforcing the transnational dimension of the insurgency. The involvement of external actors and transnational networks has been a critical factor in sustaining the insurgency in Assam. Countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar have provided safe havens, logistical support, and training for insurgent groups like ULFA, while international networks, including diaspora communities, have facilitated the flow of funds and resources. The influence of these external actors highlights the complexity of the insurgency, as regional and global geopolitical dynamics have intersected with local grievances to fuel the conflict. While efforts to dismantle these networks have made progress in recent years, the continued existence of safe havens and external support remains a significant challenge for the Indian government in its efforts to bring lasting peace to Assam.

4.8 Conclusion

The insurgency in Assam, deeply rooted in the region's complex history of ethnic identity, migration, and political marginalisation, presents a multifaceted challenge that has persisted for decades despite numerous efforts to address its underlying causes. The insurgency can be traced

back to the colonial period, when British policies of migration and economic exploitation began to sow the seeds of ethnic tension between the indigenous Assamese population and Bengali migrants. This tension was exacerbated post-independence by the partition of India and the subsequent influx of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), further altering Assam's demographic composition and heightening fears of cultural erosion. The rise of ethnic nationalism, as seen in movements like the Assam Movement (1979–1985) and militant organisations such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), reflects the deep-seated anxiety among the Assamese people about becoming minorities in their own land, overwhelmed by migrants and marginalised by the Indian state. These anxieties were not limited to cultural concerns but were also driven by perceptions of economic exploitation, as Assam's natural resources were perceived to be benefiting the central government and external actors more than the local population. The phases of insurgency in Assam, from the early days of political mobilisation in the Assam Movement to the rise of armed rebellion by ULFA, and later, the government's military operations and attempts at peace negotiations, illustrate the evolving nature of the conflict. External actors and transnational networks played a significant role in sustaining the insurgency, with countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) providing safe havens, training, and logistical support to insurgent groups. These external influences, combined with the porous borders and rugged terrain of Assam's neighbouring states, allowed insurgent groups to evade Indian security forces and maintain their operations despite military setbacks. Moreover, the geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan, as well as the broader regional dynamics involving Myanmar and China, added another layer of complexity to the insurgency, transforming it from a purely local issue into a conflict with regional and even global implications. Despite several military operations aimed at crushing ULFA and other militant groups, the insurgency persisted, fuelled by deep-rooted grievances related to migration, identity, and economic underdevelopment. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 was an attempt to address some of these grievances, particularly the issue of illegal migration, but its incomplete implementation and the failure to resolve the underlying socio-political issues led to continued unrest.

The decline of ULFA's influence in recent years, due to internal divisions, loss of popular support, and successful counter-insurgency efforts, has brought a relative reduction in violence. However, the introduction of new policies such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and

the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has reignited ethnic tensions in Assam, with many Assamese nationalists viewing these policies as threats to the cultural and demographic balance of the state.[314] The NRC and CAA, while aimed at addressing the long-standing issue of illegal migration, have raised concerns about the potential marginalisation of indigenous communities and have sparked widespread protests, indicating that the core issues driving the insurgency remain unresolved. As Assam navigates these new challenges, the region's history of insurgency offers important lessons for policymakers: the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict, such as economic marginalization and ethnic identity concerns, rather than relying solely on military solutions; the need for meaningful political dialogue that includes all stakeholders; and the role of external actors in either exacerbating or mitigating conflict. The transnational dimensions of the insurgency, particularly the involvement of neighbouring countries, underscore the importance of regional cooperation in achieving lasting peace. Ultimately, the future stability of Assam depends on the ability of the Indian state to balance its security concerns with the legitimate aspirations of the Assamese people for cultural preservation, political autonomy, and economic development, while also navigating the complex regional dynamics that have historically shaped the insurgency.

[314] Manish K. Jha and Anindita Chakrabarty. "Nationalism and populist politics: the migrant-citizen conundrum in Assam." *Citizenship Studies* 27, no. 4 (2023): 514-529.

Chapter 5: Fieldwork and Research Findings

Research, in simple terms, is about finding the truth. A successful inquiry into the truth of any idea/ topic/ study is backed by strong theoretical understanding as well as empirical data collected from the field. A synthesis of these two elements makes promising research. In my journey of inquiry into the truth of my research problem, the review of literature was my first choice to form a strong base to move into field work. This chapter presents the findings derived from extensive fieldwork conducted over a period of three years. The research followed a multi-phase approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between identity politics and insurgency in Assam. Primary data collection was carried out in three phases, each designed to build on the insights gained from the previous stage.

Phase 1: Content Analysis and Preliminary Research

The first phase of primary data collection involved content analysis, which served as the foundation for field inquiry. This stage focused on examining books, journal articles, newspaper reports, and research papers relevant to identity politics and insurgency in Northeast India, particularly Assam. Scholarly works on the region's ethnic movements, separatist struggles, and state policies provided crucial insights into the existing literature and gaps in research. By critically engaging with these sources, this phase helped establish a theoretical and conceptual framework, allowing for a more structured approach in the subsequent fieldwork. The key themes identified from this analysis—such as the role of ethnic identity, state policies, and transnational influences—shaped the research instruments for interviews and surveys in later phases.

Phase 2: Surveys and Questionnaires – Primary Data Collection

The second phase of fieldwork involved the collection of primary data through structured surveys and questionnaires to examine how different stakeholders perceive the link between identity politics and insurgency in Assam. The objective was to obtain both quantitative and qualitative insights from individuals directly or indirectly engaged with the insurgency, identity movements, and state policies. Respondents were carefully selected to represent a diverse set of

perspectives. Among them were former insurgents who had either surrendered under government amnesty schemes or disengaged voluntarily, providing first-hand insights into the motivations for joining militant groups and the challenges of reintegration. Additionally, policymakers and security officials were interviewed, including government representatives, police personnel, and members of the Assam Rifles, whose experiences in counterinsurgency operations provided a valuable understanding of state responses. Finally, civilians and civil society representatives, including student leaders, activists, and community members from insurgency-affected regions, were surveyed to assess the broader social impact of identity politics and militancy. Surveys and questionnaires were designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative responses. Participants were asked to reflect on their personal experiences with insurgency, their perceptions of government policies such as the Assam Accord, CAA, and NRC, and their views on the effectiveness of peace and rehabilitation initiatives. The survey structure combined multiple-choice questions, Likert scale assessments, and open-ended queries to ensure a balanced analysis of trends and personal narratives.

For my research, samples were taken from key regions which could be categorised under Upper Assam, Lower Assam, Barak Valley and border areas. The reason behind selecting these regions is that there is a huge influence of groups such as ULFA in Upper Assam. Districts such as Tinsukia, Dibrugarh were seen to have a strong influence of the group. The districts of Kokrajhar, Goalpara in Lower Assam have faced the heavy brunt of the Bodo movement. Therefore, selecting those districts for the study seemed relevant. The Barak Valley region has the majority of Bengali-speaking people, which makes it an essential element of the research to understand the dynamics of the identity politics of the state. Another area selected for understanding illegal immigration and the influence of external actors in the insurgency process was the district of Dhubri. A total of 100 respondents was set as my target to reach.

Selection of Respondents and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was adopted to ensure that participants had relevant experiences or insights into the themes of identity, insurgency, and policy impact. Participants comprised former Insurgents and Surrendered Cadres, which included ex-members of ULFA now known as SULFA (Surrendered ULFA) and former members of insurgent groups like the National

Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and other smaller organisations. The questionnaire was divided into four sections addressing key questions as follows:

1. What are the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of individuals affected by or involved in insurgency in Assam?
2. What factors drive individuals to participate in insurgent movements, and how do they exit these groups?
3. How do former insurgents and affected communities perceive identity-based grievances, and do they believe insurgency remains a relevant political tool?
4. What are the major security threats in Assam today, and how can former insurgents contribute to peacebuilding?

Each key question contains sub-questions, which can be found in the questionnaire attached at the end of this chapter.

Third Phase:

The third phase of data collection heavily relied on my observation and interactions. Newspapers, news, and debate discussions on identity issues on electronic media were my constant focus of observation. The key area of interaction and observation were specifically focused on defining define identity politics in Assam in the present-day context, evolution of Assam's ethnic landscape due to socio-political changes in recent decades, correlation between identity politics and insurgency in Assam, policies in effectively addressing insurgency related problems, debates and discussions on the impact of NRC and CAA in the socio-political fabric of Assam, the relevance of Assam Accord and its implementation and topics related to lasting peace in Assam in the contemporary times and also the role of civil society towards bridging the gap between ethnic communities and the government. These observations allowed for a deeper exploration of themes identified in the previous phase, offering a more nuanced understanding of how identity-driven insurgency continues to evolve in Assam. First-hand accounts from surrendered militants, security officials, and local leaders sourced through print and digital media, along with reports and data, helped trace the shifts in insurgent narratives over time and highlighted the complexities of state and non-state interactions.

Together, these three phases of fieldwork provided a comprehensive dataset that informs the core analysis of this research. The findings highlight the interplay between historical grievances, contemporary political shifts, and policy interventions, shedding light on both the persistent challenges and emerging opportunities in Assam's socio-political landscape.

Key Findings

This section presents the major findings derived from the fieldwork, aligning them with the core research questions of this study. The research was conducted over three years through content analysis, surveys, interviews, and media reports, allowing a comprehensive examination of the relationship between insurgency, identity politics, and state policies in Assam. Before proceeding to the key findings, I would like to mention the three research questions below for a comprehensive understanding:

Research Questions:

1. What are the factors leading to the rise of insurgency in Assam?
2. How has the question of identity evolved throughout the years, leading to an identity crisis?
3. Did the Centre and State governments fail in eliminating the rise of insurgency in Assam?

Keeping in mind the research questions, I have categorised the findings into three major themes as follows:

Factors Leading to the Rise of Insurgency in Assam

This section explores the structural, economic, and symbolic triggers that led to the rise and continuation of insurgency in Assam. Framed through post-colonial and subaltern theories, it argues that insurgency is not merely a security problem but a political response to exclusion, memory, and marginalisation embedded in the region's historical and demographic anxieties. The fieldwork highlights multiple interconnected factors that have contributed to the emergence and persistence of insurgency in Assam. The factors leading to insurgency in Assam are as follows:

1. **Historical Grievances and Marginalisation Policies**:

One of the major factors leading to insurgents joining insurgent groups was rooted in historical grievances and marginalisation policies. When asked if they had any grievance towards the policies of political exclusions and economic neglect, as well as cultural erosion, the majority of the respondents strongly agreed on this statement. Colonial policies were a driving force behind motivating the youths to take up arms to change their situation and status. Policies such as the language act, state restructuring and reorganisation were hugely against the wishes of the indigenous communities. Many former insurgents cited that they joined insurgency movements to protect their identity and culture from outsiders. A thorough analysis of key grievances provides insights into the root causes of conflict. The most commonly cited grievance was the perceived loss of cultural heritage (35%), followed by economic marginalisation (30%), political exclusion (25%), and displacement due to armed conflict (10%).

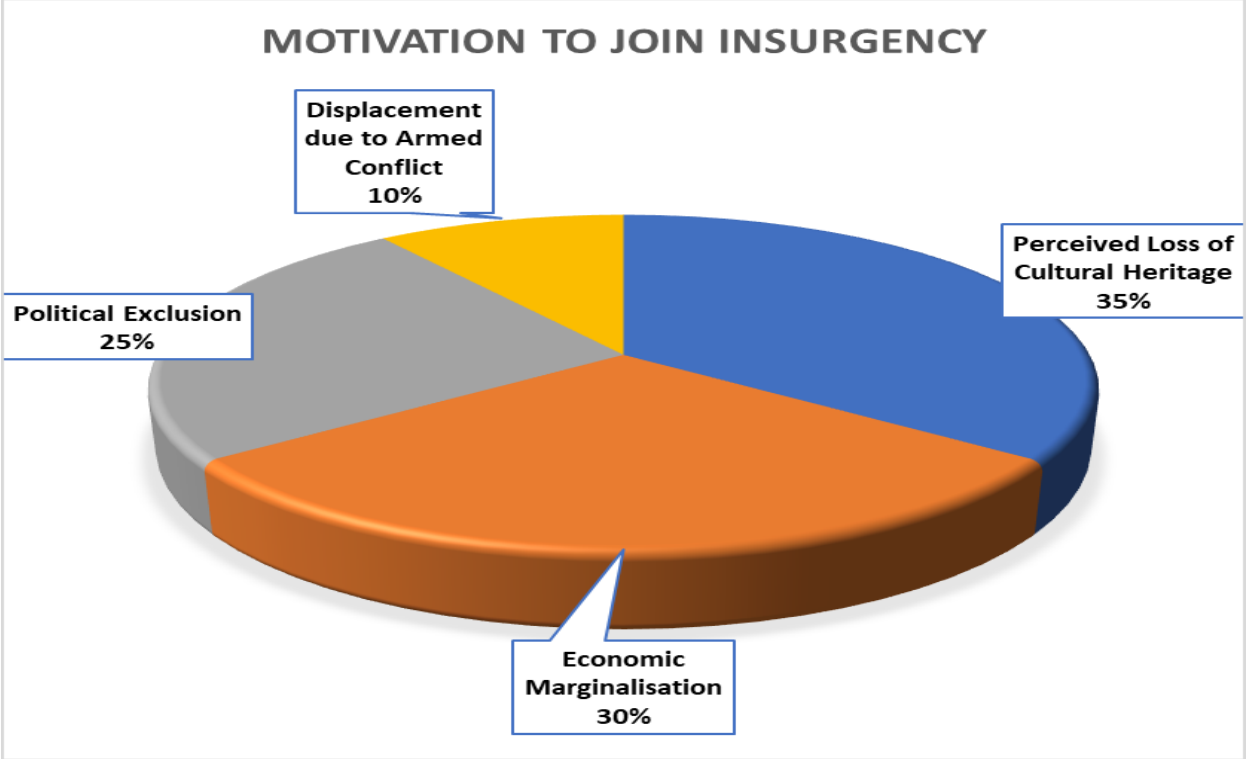

Figure 2: Factors leading to Insurgency

2. Demographic Anxieties and the Ethnic Tensions

Another factor leading to the rise of insurgency in Assam and also the continuation of insurgency movements is due to demographic changes and ethnic tensions. Respondents identified armed militancy (50%) as the most pressing concern, followed by illegal immigration (30%), ethnic tensions (15%), and political instability (5%). The high percentage associated with armed militancy suggests that while large-scale insurgent activities have diminished, smaller militant factions and breakaway groups continue to pose a threat. The issue of illegal immigration, particularly from neighbouring Bangladesh, also emerged as a contentious topic, with many respondents citing concerns over demographic shifts and economic competition. From the data collection and fieldwork, it is highly evident that the people living in Assam (ex-militants, students, scholars) are highly of the opinion that the demographic shift, especially post the Bangladesh Liberation War, threatened the indigenous communities living in Assam. Many ex-insurgents, as well as students linked to political organisations, viewed insurgency not as an offensive but as a defensive mechanism to protect their identity and culture. The perception of the outsider was created due to the illegal migration from Bangladesh, which has fuelled insurgency movements in Assam, creating chaos and havoc not only between people of Assam and "outsiders" but also fragmentation between the groups living in Assam. The insecurity of losing one's identity, land and recognition fuelled nationalistic tendencies, causing sub-national identities to overpower the unity among various groups. The construct of the other created "other" for each group, meaning the multicultural, multi-linguistic and multi-religious composition fell prey to the construct of the other, and thus there were seen to be further fragmentations and rise of ethnic conflicts in the state.

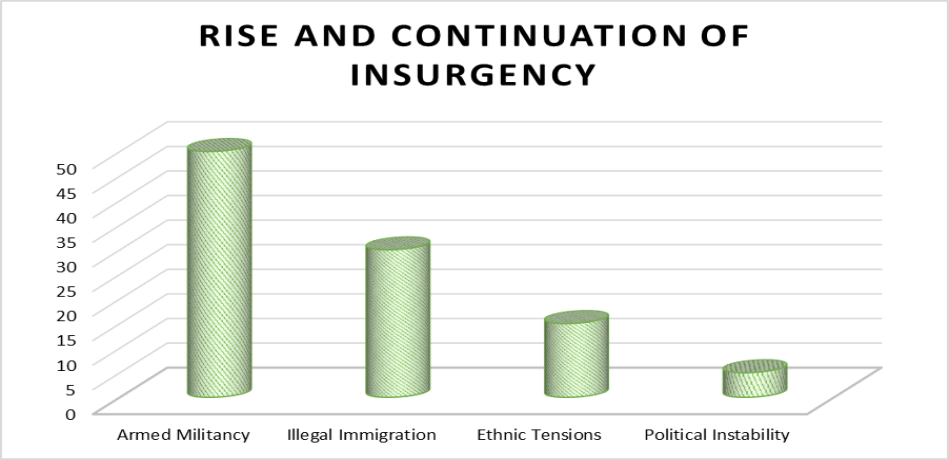

Figure 3: Rise and Continuation of Insurgency

3. The Role of Economic Underdevelopment and Lack of Economic Opportunity

The third contributing factor to the rise of insurgency in Assam is found to be underdevelopment and a lack of economic opportunity. When asked about the employment opportunities before joining the insurgency groups, the majority of the respondents pointed to the issue of underdevelopment and lack of economic opportunity in the state. Most of the youth, especially members in the lower ranks who hailed from remote villages, did it for the money and security of their families. High unemployment rates, lack of industrialisation and unequal distribution of resources were key factors pushing the youths towards joining militancy to gain easy money and food for their families. One of the most critical aspects of the study was understanding the motivations behind insurgent participation. The survey results indicate that ethnic identity concerns (40%) were the most significant factor, followed by economic hardship (25%), political discrimination (20%), and forced recruitment (15%). These figures highlight that a combination of identity-based and economic grievances served as a catalyst for radicalisation. The role of ethnic identity in insurgency aligns with historical narratives in Assam, where the demand for sovereignty and cultural preservation has remained central.

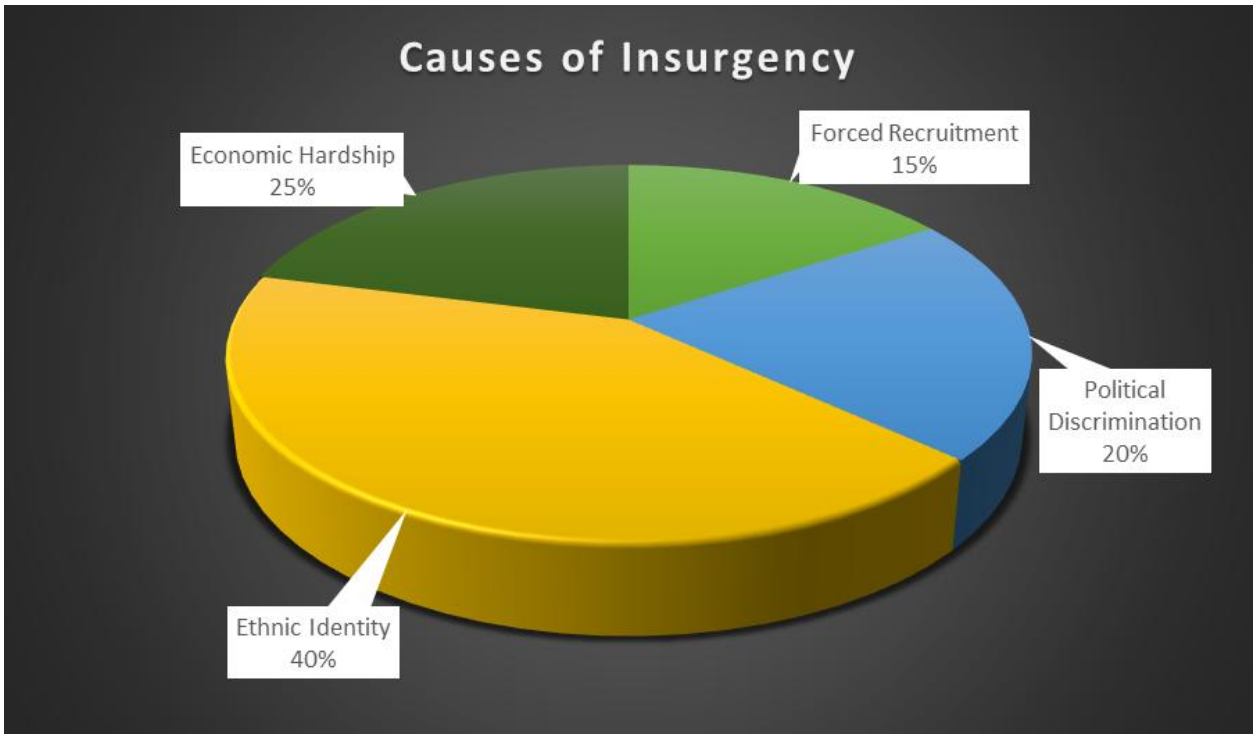

Figure 4: Role of Underdevelopment and lack of economic opportunity

4. Failure of the Government

Another factor leading to the continuation of insurgency is that even after signing several peace accords with the insurgent groups, the failure on the part of the government to fully align with their given promises to the groups over the years has built a hinge of frustration among the ex-members of insurgent groups. Thus, further radicalisation can be seen from time to time, and there are new groups formed and reformed as peace talks are not inclusive of the ideas and beliefs of the groups. Some groups that entered peace talks later saw factional splits, with breakaway groups continuing the insurgency. This is commonly seen in major groups such as the ULFA and the NDFB. The geostrategic location of Assam plays a vital role in determining the insurgency situation. The borders, as analysed through observations from media reports, statistical data and also accounts of ex-insurgents, show that insurgent groups get the upper hand in fleeting and continuing operations along with the flow of money due to the accessibility of cross-border linkages with the help of external networks. Militant networks in Bangladesh, Myanmar have for decades influenced and supported insurgent groups in Assam. Also, post-War on Terror, factions of larger terrorist networks are seen to aid local insurgent groups in the state in terms of capital and training. Most ex-members of insurgent groups have accounted for crossing borders to get extensive training in different countries.

These findings show that insurgency in Assam was not driven by a single factor but is rather a combination of economic, political, ethnic and external influences. It is a complex, multifaceted understanding of colonial policies, post-colonial grievances, cultural exclusionary policies, merged with underdevelopment and the influence of transnational actors.

Evolution of Identity Politics and the Emergence of Identity Crisis in Assam

Over the years, identity politics in Assam has transformed, shifting from armed insurgency to political and legal activism. However, the identity crisis persists, with **c**ontested narratives of indigenous rights, migration, and linguistic preservation dominating public discourse. The second objective of the research was to find the trajectory of identity politics and insurgency in Assam. The data collected from field work through surveys, questionnaires, reports, as well as print and digital media, shows the evolution of identity politics from armed struggle to political mobilisation. Despite the decline in large-scale militant activities, insurgency remains a relevant discussion point

in Assam. When asked whether identity-based insurgency is still pertinent today, responses were divided: 40% of respondents answered "Yes," 45% said "No," and 15% were uncertain. These figures suggest a significant shift in public perception, indicating that while insurgent ideologies persist among certain factions, a growing number of individuals no longer see armed resistance as a viable path forward.

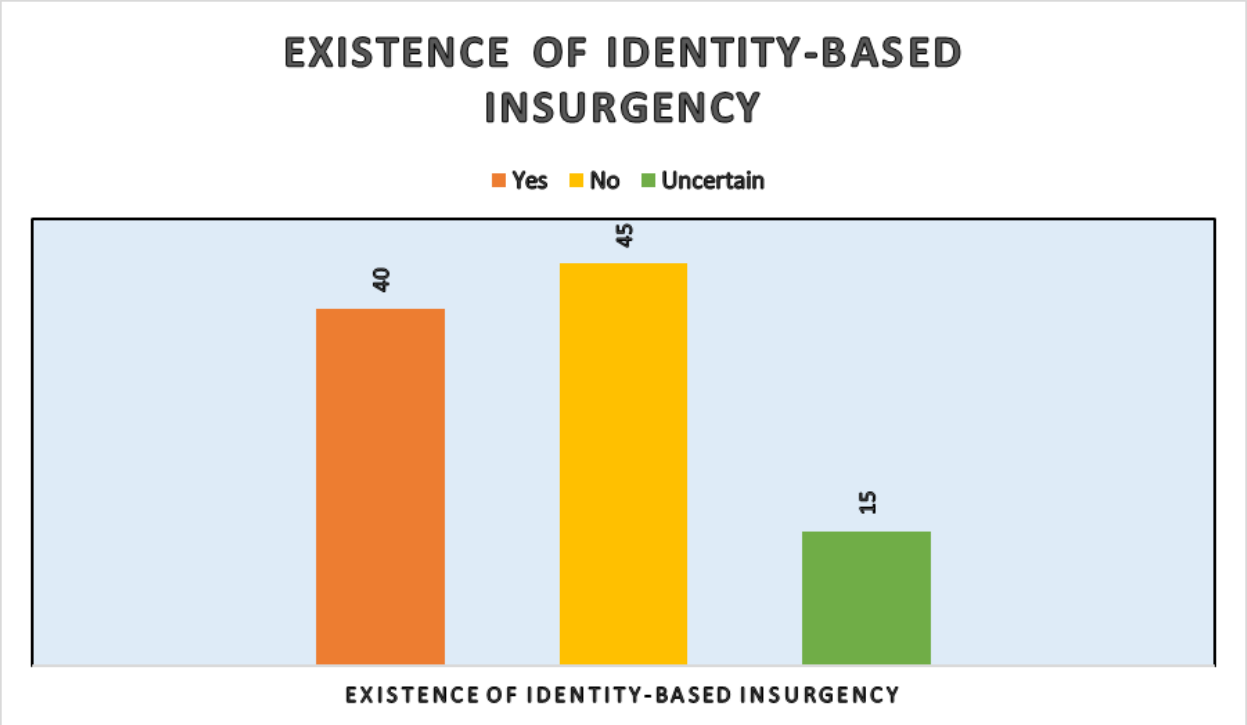

Figure 5: Current analysis of insurgency based on identity

The trajectory of identity politics in Assam has undergone significant transformations over the decades, shifting from armed insurgency to political, legal, and social activism. However, this shift has not led to a resolution; rather, it has deepened into an identity crisis, shaped by historical grievances, demographic anxieties, and contested policy measures. Many students and scholars viewed insurgency as ineffective in addressing the concerns of the state. They were more in favour of advocating for regional political assertion, policy-based activism and democratic protests.

The genesis of identity politics in Assam was seen taking the form of insurgency driven by ethno-nationalist ideologies. Groups such as the ULFA and NDFB took up arms demanding sovereignty or greater autonomy. The Anti-Foreigner movement fuelled a sense of threat among various groups due to the large-scale migration from internal and from borders. The data collected from the field work shows that, according to the majority of insurgents (now ex-members), taking up arms was a necessary reaction to protect the Assamese interests against the domination of the Indian state. However, after many years, the ex-members believe that taking up arms did not solve the problem of identity assertion or regional autonomy. Rather, political activism and electoral participation a more viable options for voicing the demands of the communities. With counterinsurgency measures in place over the years, insurgency has declined significantly. Major insurgent groups have engaged in peace negotiations or have split into pro-talks and anti-talks factions. This shift shows a huge transition from violent insurgency towards regional political assertion and institutional engagement. Two major insurgent groups in Assam, the ULFA and the NDFB, have both gone through splits over the years. There is a pro-talk group and an anti-talk faction. The pro-talk groups are in a negotiation process with the government. The government has implemented various rehabilitation programs to reintegrate former insurgents into mainstream society. However, survey results indicate mixed responses regarding their effectiveness. While 25% of respondents found these programs effective, 40% deemed them ineffective, and 35% believed they required significant improvement. The dissatisfaction with rehabilitation initiatives suggests gaps in policy implementation, with many former insurgents facing challenges in securing employment, receiving skill-based training, and obtaining social acceptance.

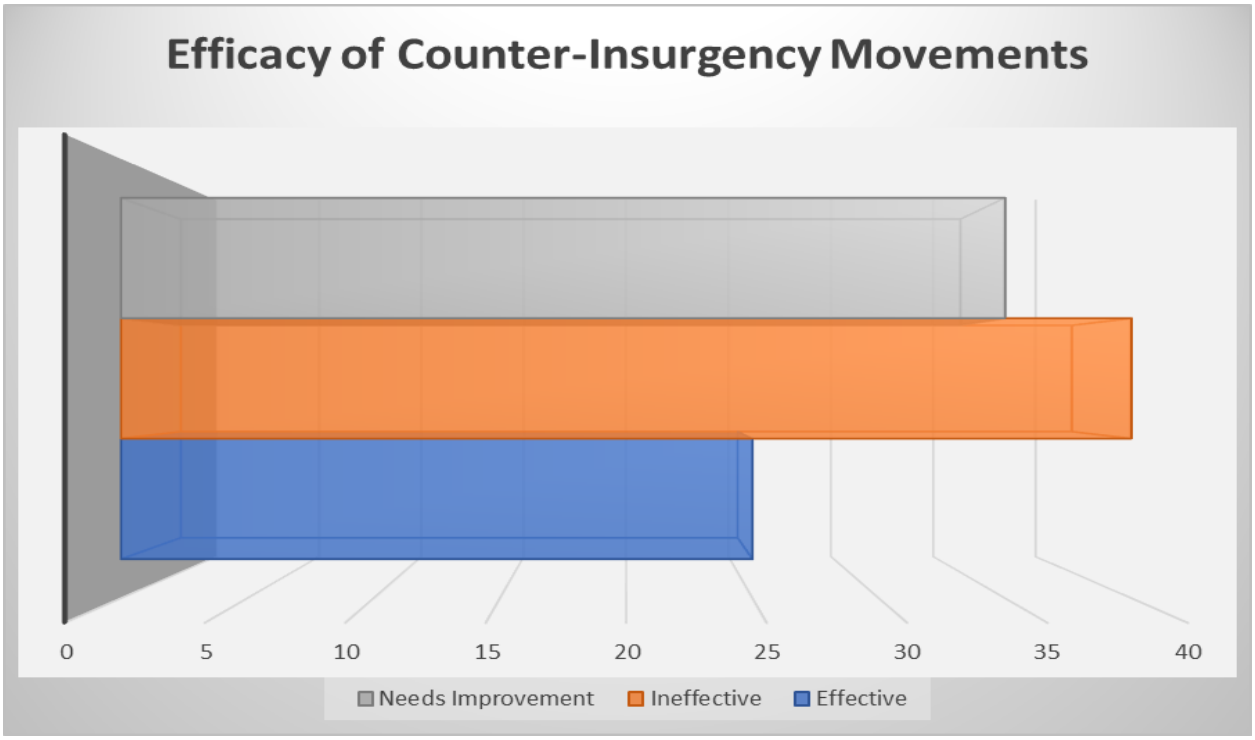

Figure 6: Analysis of Counter-Insurgency measures in eliminating insurgency

Policy experts and academicians have highlighted that this transformation was not a conscious ideological transformation, but rather a result of the operations and counterinsurgency process. However, the significant decline in insurgency has led to a rise in regional political parties and movements. Newer groups such as Raijor Dol, Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and even the oldest regional party, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), have been active in contemporary times.

The second phase of identity politics and insurgency in Assam is characterised by discourse on Assamese identity led by political organisations, student bodies and civil society groups. The rise of regional political organisations like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Raijor Dol and Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) shows the increasing role of electoral politics as a means of protecting indigenous identity and culture. Additionally, student organisation bodies like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) are actively mass mobilising protests, especially against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Another key shift is seen in terms of judicial and policy-oriented

activism. Assamese nationalist movements, which earlier sprang up to insurgency, are shifting towards legal battles, public interest litigations and policy lobbying to state their demands. Data from student groups along with print and digital media reports indicate that even though insurgency has significantly weakened, the identity-based movements are still seen by the state; however, there is a shift from arms struggle to electoral participation, democratic protests and legal battles. AASU is still a key player in shaping the Assamese nationalistic discourse, especially regarding citizenship and demographic concerns, which were one of the key reasons for the genesis of autonomy and linguistic movements in Assam. The implementation of CAA and NRC has led to the continuation and resurfacing of earlier identity struggles, although in contemporary times, the means are legal and democratic rather than insurgent. However, data collected from field work indicates that the majority of the respondents feel that, despite this shift, there is a resentment against central policies, with some fearing that legal measures may not be sufficient to fulfil the demands of identity preservation in the long run.

Survey participants were asked to identify the most effective measures to curb insurgency in Assam. The most favoured solution was economic development (40%), followed by political dialogue (35%), cultural preservation initiatives (15%), and military action (10%). The preference for economic and political solutions indicates a broader consensus among former insurgents that sustainable development and dialogue are more effective than armed struggle. Many respondents emphasised the need for greater job opportunities, education reforms, and infrastructure development to address long-standing grievances.

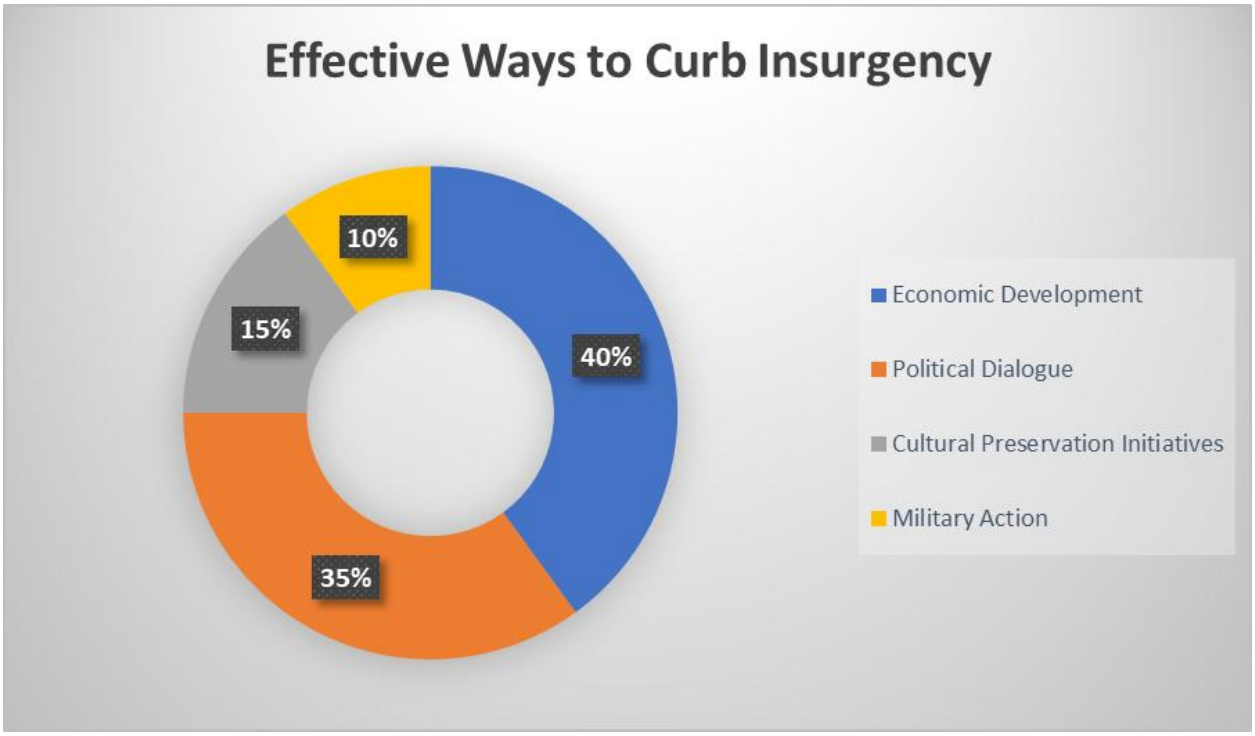

Figure 7: Comprehensive measures to curb insurgency

The contemporary discourse on identity politics in Assam shows a deeper concern, which is an identity crisis. Identity politics has evolved into an identity crisis in contemporary times. Findings from policy analysis, media reports and interviews show that identity politics in Assam is driven by conflicting narratives. There is no polarity in terms of narratives on policies such as the CAA or the NRC. It is seen that while Assamese nationalist groups are in support of the NRC as a means to identify illegal immigrants and thus, solve the issue of illegal migration and demographic shift but they oppose the CAA, citing that it grants citizenship to non-Muslims, which is a perceived threat to their cultural and linguistic identity.

Over the period of time, identity politics has sown the seeds of cultural and linguistic anxieties among the groups in such a way that it is difficult for them to think beyond those lines. The insecurity of Assamese linguistic marginalisation due to demographic shifts has been a concern for decades. Assamese speakers worry about linguistic Bengali dominance, which has historically fuelled tensions and protests. Contemporary debates revolve around the topic of linguistic dominance, especially causing concerns among the Barak Valley (Bengali-speaking majority) and

the rest of the state. Over the years, tendencies of ethnolinguistic fragmentation have been on the rise. Ex-members of insurgent groups, students and activists pointed out that while Assamese nationalism was once broadly unifying, present-day identity struggles have become more fragmented, with different ethnic groups, such as Bodos, Karbis, and Mishings, asserting their own distinct identities, sometimes in conflict with Assamese nationalism itself. While Assamese identity movements were once centred around a broad Assamese sub-nationalism, contemporary fault lines have emerged among different indigenous communities, each asserting its distinct identity. This fragmentation complicates the possibility of a unified regional identity. Civilians interviewed during the fieldwork expressed frustration with both state and central governments, arguing that policies like the Assam Accord failed to deliver lasting solutions. Many believed that government actions have been reactionary rather than proactive, leading to continued cycles of unrest and resistance movements.

The Future Trajectory of Identity Politics in Assam

Identity politics in Assam has moved from violent insurgency to more institutionalised forms such as political mobilisation and legal activism. However, the path ahead remains uncertain, shaped by ethnolinguistic divisions, anxieties over migration, and unresolved policy debates. Based on data derived from census trends, electoral patterns, insurgency records, and field observations, Assam's identity politics may unfold along three possible trajectories.

1. **Institutionalised Political Assertion:** National parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) continue to dominate Assam's electoral landscape. However, identity-based regional parties still retain a significant presence. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which emerged from the 1985 Assam Accord following the anti-foreigner agitation, remains active, albeit with diminished political leverage. In response to the mass protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), new political entities such as Raijor Dal and the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) were formed in 2020. These parties sought to channel the sentiment of Assamese sub-nationalism, particularly among the youth. According to the 2021 Election Commission of India data, RD and AJP together secured over 9.23% of the vote share in the Assam Assembly elections, although they failed to win many seats. A Lokniti-CSDS Youth Survey found that more than 55% of Assamese youth respondents prioritised issues of indigenous rights and identity over mainstream developmental agendas. Civil society

activists interviewed by *The Hindu* and *Scroll. in* have argued that political participation is viewed as a viable democratic alternative to armed struggle. However, there is little systematic evidence suggesting that former insurgents have transitioned into electoral politics at a meaningful scale.

2. **Sustained Policy Conflicts:** The NRC-CAA issue remains one of the most polarising fault lines in Assam's identity politics. Past Census data and linguistic surveys have highlighted declining proportions of Assamese speakers in certain districts, fuelling fears of demographic marginalisation. The publication of the final NRC list in 2019 excluded 1.9 million individuals, many of whom claimed to be indigenous or long-term residents. The process was widely criticised for inconsistencies, and legal challenges continue to be heard in the Supreme Court of India. Despite mass protests across Assam, the Union Government reiterated its commitment to implementing the CAA as recently as March 2024. Prominent legal scholars and political commentators such as Sanjoy Hazarika and Harsh Mander have argued that these policies not only deepen mistrust but also leave unresolved the core demands of the Assamese nationalist movement. Legal activism and public interest litigations have thus become a central mode of identity assertion, though the risk of radicalisation persists, particularly among disenfranchised youth.
3. **Localised Ethnic Movements:** Assam's broader identity politics is gradually shifting from pan-Assamese nationalism to more fragmented ethnic assertions. The Bodo Peace Accord of January 2020, signed between the Government of India and various Bodo groups, including the NDFB, marked a formal cessation of armed insurgency in Bodoland. However, Bodo organisations continue to press for the full implementation of constitutional safeguards and development packages. Similarly, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in Karbi Anglong maintains its long-standing demand for separate statehood, citing neglect and underdevelopment. Among the Mishing and Deori communities, there has been a growing emphasis on linguistic and cultural rights, often articulated through student unions and civil society organisations. These developments point to a fragmentation of identity politics in Assam, where subnational assertions are gaining traction, challenging the idea of a unified Assamese nationalism. This trend places new pressures on the state's administrative apparatus, as it must navigate competing demands for autonomy, representation, and resources.

Effectiveness of Centre and State Governments in Addressing Insurgency

Analysing the state and centre's role in effectively addressing the root causes of insurgency in Assam indicates a mixed answer. While insurgency has significantly decreased in Assam after the counterinsurgency measures, the root causes still remain unresolved. Government initiatives, including military operations, peace talks, and surrenders, have led to a significant reduction in active insurgent groups. The signing of accords with groups like ULFA factions, Bodo insurgents, and Karbi militants has helped in bringing relative peace. While 25% of respondents found these programs effective, 40% deemed them ineffective, and 35% believed they required significant improvement. The dissatisfaction with rehabilitation initiatives suggests gaps in policy implementation, with many former insurgents facing challenges in securing employment, receiving skill-based training, and obtaining social acceptance.

Many respondents, especially former insurgents and political analysts, criticised the government for treating insurgency as a law-and-order issue rather than a political problem. There is a lack of long-term policies addressing the underlying grievances of ethnic communities. A common concern among insurgent groups that entered peace processes was the state's failure to fully implement peace accords. Many ex-militants struggled with rehabilitation, economic reintegration, and political representation. Policies such as the CAA and NRC have divided public opinion, with some viewing them as necessary for indigenous protection while others see them as exacerbating ethnic tensions. This division has led to violent protests and renewed identity-based mobilisation, suggesting that state policies have not been entirely successful in resolving identity-driven conflicts. Interviews with security personnel indicated that while military operations weakened insurgent groups, they also generated resentment in some communities due to allegations of human rights violations under acts like AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act). The findings suggest that while insurgency has been curtailed, the deeper socio-political issues remain unaddressed, leaving room for potential resurgence or shifts like identity-based movements.

The fieldwork findings underscore that insurgency in Assam cannot be understood in isolation from identity politics and state responses. The research highlights the following:

1. Insurgency in Assam was driven by a complex mix of economic, ethnic, and political grievances, reinforced by historical and external factors.
2. The nature of identity politics has evolved from violent insurgency to electoral and legal activism, yet the identity crisis remains unresolved.
3. While insurgent activities have declined, state responses have been inadequate in fully addressing underlying grievances, and policy decisions continue to polarise public opinion.

The study on identity politics and insurgency in Assam highlights the complexities underlying the region's socio-political landscape. While historical grievances persist, there is an evident shift toward non-violent mechanisms for conflict resolution. The emphasis on economic development, political inclusion, and cultural preservation presents opportunities for long-term peacebuilding. However, the lingering security threats and dissatisfaction with rehabilitation efforts indicate that more comprehensive policies are needed to ensure lasting stability. Moving forward, a multi-pronged approach that integrates economic, political, and social interventions will be key to addressing insurgency-related challenges in Assam.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the evolving nature of identity politics and insurgency in Assam, with a particular focus on how post-colonial grievances, demographic shifts, and state interventions have shaped the region's political trajectory. The guiding research questions were:

1. What structural and symbolic factors contributed to the rise and continuation of insurgency in Assam?

This involved analysing the colonial demographic engineering, the breakdown of regional federalism, the anxieties around linguistic and religious minorities, and the sense of Assamese betrayal by the Indian state.

2. How has the articulation of identity transformed across time, actors, and institutions?

The focus here was to chart the transformation from armed rebellion to legal contestation, and to understand how new forms of civic nationalism and constitutional resistance emerged in place of militancy.

3. What roles have the state and central governments played in resolving or exacerbating the identity conflict?

The state's actions, from the Assam Accord to the CAA/NRC, were analysed not just as interventions but as agents in producing new forms of exclusion, resistance, and fragmentation.

These questions were approached using a constructivist theoretical lens that views identity not as innate or essential, but as produced and performed within material and symbolic contexts. The subaltern perspective further ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the lived experiences of communities whose voices are often marginalised in both policy and academic literature. The broader goal was not merely to trace insurgency's origins or decline, but to understand its ongoing afterlife, in terms of laws, documents, party politics, and civic discourse. The research questions aimed at understanding the deeper relationship between identity politics and insurgency in Assam. These two overlapping, intertwined concepts complicate the socio-political landscape of Assam in such a way that understanding each requires taking into consideration the other.

Synthesis of Key Findings

The findings of this research show that insurgency in Assam is not simply a manifestation of economic underdevelopment or unemployment among youth, as is often reduced in mainstream counterinsurgency literature. Rather, it emerged from a historical experience of structural exclusion, a perceived loss of political agency, and a failure of Indian federalism to accommodate Assam's ethno-regional claims. The early mobilisation through the Assam Movement (1979–1985) framed identity not just in cultural terms but as a defensive reaction against demographic change, particularly with regard to undocumented migration. Identity is seen to be the marker for unity as well as conflict in the case of Assam. Groups are formed and united based on their collective identity, and at the same time, outsider politics takes a shift, keeping identity as the marker for differentiation. This framing of identity as endangered created a popular consensus that legitimised insurgency as a last resort for preserving Assamese sovereignty. Over time, identity, which acted as a means for political recognition, was also used by armed groups to assert their voices and aspirations, which in turn further deepened the cycle of violence.

With the counterinsurgency efforts, over time, insurgency as an armed form of resistance lost legitimacy due to internal factionalism, human rights abuses, and the Indian state's militarised response. What replaced insurgency was not peace, but a reconfiguration of identity politics. The study identifies three interrelated but distinct trajectories that now define post-insurgency Assam:

a) Constitutional Assertion: This trajectory reflects a shift from underground resistance to democratic and electoral assertion. Parties such as Raijor Dal and Assam Jatiya Parishad have emerged from civil society movements and student activism, signalling a desire to reclaim Assamese identity through the constitutional process rather than through violence. These political formations represent an attempt to institutionalise regional nationalism without falling into the trap of secessionism. However, their success remains uneven, given the dominance of national parties and the fragmentation within regionalist politics.

b) Legal Resistance: With the introduction of the NRC and the passage of the CAA, the battleground of identity has shifted to the **l**egal terrain. Here, identity is no longer just a cultural or

political claim but a juridical status, one that determines inclusion or exclusion from citizenship itself. Legal petitions, PILs, and community documentation drives have replaced the insurgents' manifesto. The findings show how citizenship has become a site of everyday anxiety, particularly among marginalised ethnic and religious groups. This has created a form of "paper-based nationalism," where proving one's identity requires navigating opaque bureaucratic systems.

c) Ethnic Fragmentation: A striking finding is the growing trend of intra-regional identity assertion. While earlier narratives of Assamese identity presented a somewhat unified front, there is now a resurgence of separate demands for recognition by groups such as the Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Mishing, and others. Many seek Scheduled Tribe status, autonomous councils, or cultural protection. This process reflects a fragmentation of the Assamese identity into more granular ethnolinguistic components. While it opens up space for the expression of multiple identities, it also poses a challenge to pan-Assamese political unity and risks reinforcing competitive victimhood.

These three trajectories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they operate simultaneously, and often in tension with one another. Together, they signal a profound transformation in how identity is imagined, claimed, and institutionalised in Assam. What was once a battle waged through bullets and underground leaflets is now played out in electoral manifestos, courtrooms, and government-issued documents. The chapter concludes that while violence has declined, the core conflict, however, the question of belonging and recognition still remains unresolved. The transformation of insurgency into democratic and legal resistance represents progress, but without a deeper structural resolution, these identity conflicts risk resurfacing in new forms.

This thesis makes significant contributions across three dimensions: theoretical, empirical, and regional, by advancing a critical understanding of identity politics, post-insurgency transitions, and the evolving forms of subnational assertion in Assam. The study deepens the application of constructivist theories of identity in the South Asian context by demonstrating that identity is not an essentialist or static category but a contingent political construction, shaped through institutional framings and moments of crisis. While much of the existing literature focuses on identity as rooted in language, ethnicity, or religion, this thesis illustrates how **s**tate policies themselves (such as NRC and CAA) become tools of identity production, distinguishing between

the “native” and the “other.” Building on scholars like Benedict Anderson and James C. Scott, the research shows that Assamese nationalism operates both as a form of imagined community and as a mode of resistance to perceived imperialism, whether colonial or postcolonial. Furthermore, the study enriches subaltern theory by foregrounding voices from the margins, such as ex-insurgents, tea tribe youth, and undocumented citizens, who often challenge the elite framing of Assamese identity. This shifts the understanding of insurgency from a mere security challenge to a political legitimacy of recognition, where actors demand justice not through violence alone, but through symbolic, legal, and discursive means.

Methodologically, this thesis contributes to the qualitative and ethnographic mapping of post-insurgency societies. Drawing upon interviews, document analysis, and extended field observation across three Assamese regions, the research provides a nuanced portrait of how identity is lived, negotiated, and contested in everyday life. Unlike security-focused accounts that centre the state or militant actors, this study pays close attention to ordinary lives shaped by extraordinary laws. For example, testimonies from residents navigating NRC tribunals, ex-combatants returning to civic life, and women activists leading documentation campaigns offer granular insights into how identity is performed under surveillance. This is one of the few works to empirically chart the transition from militant nationalism to legal constitutionalism, capturing a dynamic that is unfolding in real time across Assam.

Additionally, this research contributes to the broader study of conflict and federalism in South Asia. Assam provides a complex yet instructive case: it is simultaneously part of India’s Northeast “exception” and an example of how democratic failure can reproduce conflict under legal guise. While much scholarly attention has gone to Kashmir or Sri Lanka in discussions of secession and ethnic violence, Assam remains under-theorised. This thesis argues for Assam’s repositioning as a critical site for studying the afterlives of insurgency, where law, historical legacies, and political transition intersect. Moreover, the findings offer comparative potential for analysing other case studies such as Sri Lanka’s post-LTTE Tamil politics, Nepal’s Madhesi identity assertion, Citizenship anxiety in Myanmar’s Rohingya context, and Border politics in post-Partition Bengal. By situating Assam in a wider landscape of contested citizenship and identity-driven governance, the research opens up scope for research on legal identity as the new frontier of political belonging in postcolonial democracies.

Policy Implications

The findings of this thesis offer several urgent and long-term policy implications, particularly for the Indian state, regional policymakers, civil society institutions, and international human rights organisations. Addressing Assam's post-insurgency condition requires more than managing security; it demands a structural response to the root causes of identity anxiety, legal exclusion, and institutional alienation.

1. **Reform Legal Identity Mechanisms:** The NRC process and the Citizenship Amendment Act have introduced legal frameworks that many communities perceive as tools of exclusion rather than protection. The process of proving citizenship through documentary evidence, some dating back to 1971, disproportionately affects the poor, women, minorities, and those displaced by conflict or environmental degradation. Therefore, there remains a need to introduce a rights-based framework for citizenship determination that ensures due process, transparency, and community oversight. Additionally, implement legal aid systems and grievance redressal mechanisms for NRC-affected individuals. Also, halt detention-based approaches and prioritise reintegration and documentation pathways, especially for stateless populations.

2. **Strengthen Regional Federalism:** Assam's identity conflict is, at its core, a reflection of India's incomplete federalism. Repeated central interventions, from military deployments to top-down legal frameworks, have undermined regional autonomy, exacerbating the legitimacy crisis. Institutional autonomy and recognition of ethnic councils can reduce demands for secession while preserving diversity. Hence, more focus should be given on strengthening the autonomous councils (e.g., BTC, KAAC) with real fiscal and legislative powers. Also, consider constitutional mechanisms like asymmetrical federalism to grant greater agency to ethnic sub-regions. And encourage cross-border cultural diplomacy with neighbouring states and nations (Bangladesh, Bhutan) to de-escalate border anxieties.

3. **Rehabilitate Post-Insurgency Actors:** Current reintegration policies focus narrowly on surrender ceremonies and token financial grants. Yet many ex-combatants remain stigmatised, economically insecure, and socially alienated, while their communities face militarisation and surveillance. Therefore, more emphasis is required to expand reintegration programs to include

educational opportunities, employment training, psychological support, and civic reorientation. Furthermore, to develop community-level reconciliation mechanisms that allow both ex-combatants and victims to share space without fear or resentment. Additionally, to replace security-centric surveillance with community-based peacebuilding models led by youth and civil society.

4. **Invest in Civic Dialogue:** Years of violence, protest, and political repression have left behind collective trauma and inter-ethnic mistrust. Yet, no formal mechanisms exist for truth-telling, reparations, or inter-community dialogue. Therefore, there is a need to create state-backed platforms for inter-ethnic dialogue, public hearings, and cultural memory initiatives. Along with incorporating Assam's history of insurgency and resistance into educational curricula, recognizing the plurality of its identity narratives. Also, to extend support to community radio, documentary media, and theatre as tools for nonviolent engagement and intergenerational learning.

5. Ensure Intersectional Representation in Governance: The findings also reveal a gendered and classed dimension of legal exclusion: women, labouring castes, and rural minorities face unique vulnerabilities under the NRC/CAA regime. Their political participation remains limited despite being the worst affected. Therefore, more focus should be given on designing inclusive governance models that guarantee representation of marginalised identities, particularly women from excluded communities. And to encourage gender-sensitive data collection and program planning in all documentation and citizenship-related interventions. Lastly, to promote grassroots leadership training and political mentoring for underrepresented groups, especially in border and remote regions.

Limitations

While this study makes meaningful theoretical and empirical contributions, it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. These limitations arise not from oversights but from the realities of working within a highly complex and evolving socio-political landscape like Assam. The first and foremost limitation of a topic so complex was geographical and security constraints. Fieldwork was conducted across three primary regions — Upper Assam, Lower Assam, and the

Barak Valley, with particular attention to urban and semi-urban spaces, tea garden zones, and conflict-affected pockets. However, some border regions, forest settlements, and active insurgency zones (e.g., Dima Hasao, Indo-Bhutan border) remained inaccessible due to logistical challenges and heightened security risks. This may have limited the representation of hill tribe narratives or perspectives from those still involved with underground networks or cross-border dynamics.

Secondly, the NRC and CAA processes are still evolving, with new court rulings, political responses, and administrative interventions occurring beyond the study's research window. As such, the full social, legal, and demographic consequences of these interventions may not yet be visible. This limits the ability to make definitive conclusions about the long-term impact of legal identity regimes, particularly for vulnerable communities such as women, indigenous migrants, and stateless persons.

Thirdly, there was a limitation regarding Linguistic and Archival Access. While interviews were conducted in Assamese, Hindi, and Bengali, certain tribal dialects and non-textual modes of knowledge (oral folklore, protest songs, etc.) were harder to access or analyse systematically. Similarly, archival sources related to pre-1971 migration, security operations, and state records remain classified or fragmented, restricting deeper historical reconstruction.

Fourthly, despite efforts to include diverse gendered voices, particularly among student activists and women involved in documentation drives, the study did not include testimonies from female ex-combatants, who are either underrepresented or hard to reach due to stigma and protection concerns. Moreover, as a researcher positioned within certain socio-academic privilege, the reflexive challenge of interpreting lived trauma and political anger from communities affected by violence was constant. While ethical research protocols were maintained, the politics of interpretation and translation must be acknowledged.

Lastly, though the study draws occasional comparisons to other identity-based conflicts in South Asia (e.g., Kashmir, Sri Lanka), it does not engage in a systematic comparative analysis. Future work could benefit from a structured cross-case comparison using shared variables (legal identity, federal response, post-insurgency transitions) to generate broader theoretical generalisations. By stating these limitations transparently, the study situates itself not as a

comprehensive closure of the topic, but as an invitation for further layered inquiry. These constraints do not diminish the value of the findings; rather, they highlight the moral and methodological sensitivity required to study conflict and identity in real time.

Assam's journey through insurgency, identity contestation, and institutional violence is far from linear. What began as a movement for cultural survival and regional dignity evolved into a prolonged confrontation between state sovereignty and subnational memory, between citizenship and belonging, between documents and lived realities. This thesis does not offer easy resolutions. Instead, it affirms that identity politics in Assam cannot be understood through security doctrines or nationalist binaries. It must be understood as a living archive of anxieties, dreams, exclusions, and refusal**s**, carried in the bodies of those who wait in NRC queues, in the silence of parents whose children disappeared during ULFA crackdowns, and in the chants of student protestors demanding dignity over documentation. The transformation from militant insurgency to legal resistance is significant, but it is not a substitute for justice. A peace that is merely procedural, without historical reckoning or reparative inclusion, risks becoming a silence that simmers. And yet, there is hope which can be understood through the lives in the archival labour of collecting documents for their children. In the **t**estimonies of ex-combatants who now teach in schools. In the voices of students who speak of an Assam that is both proud and plural. These are not minor footnotes; they are the future. This research has been, above all, a journey through layers of identity, of grief, of aspiration. It calls for a politics that moves beyond recognition to reparation, beyond federal management to federal empathy, and beyond nationalism to justice rooted in memory. As Assam writes its next chapter, the question is no longer whether it belongs to India, but whether India is willing to belong, ethically and equally, to all of Assam. Thus, Assam's insurgency has transformed but not ended. The battlefield has moved from the jungle to the courtroom, from the gun to the voter's ID card. The identity crisis continues, not in the language of secession, but in the vocabulary of constitutional betrayal and recognition. In order to truly resolve Assam's conflict, the Indian state must recognise identity not as an inconvenience, but as a democratic demand. Until then, peace will remain procedural rather than transformative.

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ANNEXURE I

QUESTIONNAIRE:

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Name (Optional): _____
2. Age: _____
3. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other
4. Educational Qualification: ☐ No formal education ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Higher Secondary ☐ Graduate ☐ Postgraduate
5. Current Occupation: ☐ Farmer ☐ Businessperson ☐ Daily wage labourer ☐ Government employee ☐ Other: _____
6. Native Place: _____

Section B: Involvement in Insurgency

7. Which insurgent group were you associated with? ☐ ULFA ☐ NDFB ☐ Other (Specify): _____
8. What was your role in the organisation? ☐ Recruit ☐ Trainer ☐ Militant ☐ Support staff ☐ Political wing ☐ Other: _____
9. What motivated you to join the insurgency? ☐ Ethnic identity ☐ Economic hardship ☐ Political discrimination ☐ Forced recruitment ☐ Other: _____

10. What were the key issues you were fighting for? ☐ Sovereignty ☐ Economic rights ☐ Protection of cultural identity ☐ Retaliation against state actions ☐ Other: _____

11. How did you exit the group? ☐ Surrendered ☐ Left voluntarily ☐ Arrested ☐ Other: _____

Section C: Perspectives on Identity Politics

12. Do you feel your ethnic identity is threatened today? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

13. What are the major identity-related grievances among your community? ☐ Loss of cultural heritage ☐ Economic marginalization ☐ Political exclusion ☐ Displacement ☐ Other: _____

14. Do you believe government policies have improved your community's situation? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Partially

15. Do you think identity-based insurgency is still relevant? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Maybe

16. What measures can reduce insurgency in Assam? (Tick the most effective ones)

☐ Political dialogue

☐ Economic development

☐ Cultural preservation programs

☐ Military action

☐ Other: _____

Section D: Threats and Opportunities

17. What are the biggest security threats Assam faces today? ☐ Armed militancy ☐ Illegal immigration ☐ Ethnic tensions ☐ Political instability ☐ Other: _____

18. What role can former insurgents play in peacebuilding? ☐ Mediators ☐ Community leaders ☐ Educators ☐ Policy advisors ☐ Other: _____

19. What do you think about government rehabilitation programs? ☐ Effective ☐ Ineffective ☐ Need improvement

20. Any additional comments or suggestions: _____

ANNEXURE II

Questionnaire (Assamese)

অংশ A: জনসাংখ্যিক তথ্য

নাম (ঐচ্ছিক): _____

বয়স: _____

লিংগ: ☐ পুৰুষ ☐ মহিলা ☐ অন্য

শিক্ষাগত অৰ্হতা:

☐ আনুষ্ঠানিক শিক্ষা নাই ☐ প্ৰাথমিক ☐ মাধ্যমিক ☐ উচ্চ মাধ্যমিক ☐ স্নাতক ☐ স্নাতকোত্তৰ

বৰ্তমান পেচা:

☐ কৃষক ☐ ব্যৱসায়ী ☐ দৈনিক মজুৰি কৰ্মচাৰী ☐ চৰকাৰী কৰ্মচাৰী ☐ অন্য: _____

জন্মস্থান: _____

অংশ B: বিদ্রোহত সম্পৃক্ততা

আপুনি কিহৰ সৈতে সম্পৃক্ত আছিল?

☐ উল্ফা (ULFA) ☐ এন ডি এফ বি (NDFB) ☐ অন্য (উল্লেখ কৰক): _____

সংগঠনত আপোনাৰ ভূমিকা কি আছিল?

☐ নতুন সদস্য ☐ প্রশিক্ষক ☐ বিদ্রোহী ☐ সহায়ক কর্মচাৰী ☐ ৰাজনৈতিক শাখা ☐ অন্য: _____

আপুনি বিদ্রোহত যোগদান কৰিবলৈ কেনেকৈ উদ্বুদ্ধ হৈছিল?

☐ জাতিগত পৰিচয় ☐ অর্থনৈতিক সংকট ☐ ৰাজনৈতিক বৈষম্য ☐ বলপূর্বক নিযুক্তি ☐ অন্য: _____

আপুনি কি বিষয়সমূহৰ বাবে সংগ্রাম কৰিছিল?

☐ স্বায়ত্তশাসন ☐ অর্থনৈতিক অধিকাৰ ☐ সাংস্কৃতিক পৰিচয়ৰ সুৰক্ষা ☐ চৰকাৰী দমনমূলক পদক্ষেপৰ প্রতিক্রিয়া ☐ অন্য:

_____

আপুনি দল কেনেকৈ এৰি আহিছিল?

☐ আত্মসমর্পণ কৰিছিল ☐ স্বেচ্ছায় এৰি আহিছিল ☐ গ্রেপ্তাৰ হৈছিল ☐ অন্য: _____

অংশ C: পৰিচয়ৰ ৰাজনীতি সম্পর্কে দৃষ্টিভংগী

আপুনি অনুভৱ কৰে নেকি যে আপোনাৰ জাতিগত পৰিচয় সংকটৰ সন্মুখীন?

☐ হয় ☐ নহয় ☐ নিশ্চিত নহয়

আপোনাৰ সমাজৰ মুখ্য পৰিচয় ভিত্তিক অসন্তোষ কি?

☐ সাংস্কৃতিক ঐতিহ্যৰ ক্ষতি ☐ অর্থনৈতিক পৰিবঞ্চনা ☐ ৰাজনৈতিক বিৰ্জন ☐ বিতাড়ন ☐ অন্য: _____

আপুনি বিশ্বাস কৰে নেকি চৰকাৰৰ নীতি-নিয়মে আপোনাৰ সমাজৰ পৰিস্থিতি উন্নত কৰিছে?

☐ হয় ☐ নহয় ☐ আংশিকভাৱে

আপোনাৰ মতে পৰিচয় ভিত্তিক বিদ্রোহ এতিয়াও প্রাসংগিক নেকি?

☐ হয় ☐ নহয় ☐ সম্ভৱ

অসমত বিদ্রোহ হ্রাস কৰিবলৈ কিহি কার্যকৰী হ'ব? (সর্বাধিক উপযোগী বিকল্পসমূহ টিক কৰক)

☐ ৰাজনৈতিক আলোচনী

☐ অর্থনৈতিক উন্নয়ন

☐ সাংস্কৃতিক সুৰক্ষাৰ কার্যসূচী

☐ সেনা ব্যৱস্থা

☐ অন্য: _____

অংশ D: আশংকা আৰু সম্ভাৱনা

অসমৰ সর্বাধিক গুৰুত্বপূর্ণ সুৰক্ষা সংকট কি?

☐ সশস্ত্র বিদ্রোহ ☐ অবৈধ অভিবাসন ☐ জাতিগত সংঘাত ☐ ৰাজনৈতিক অস্থিতিশীলতা ☐ অন্য: _____

পূর্ব বিদ্রোহীসকলে শান্তি প্রতিষ্ঠাত কেনে ভূমিকা গ্রহণ কৰিব পাৰে?

☐ মধ্যস্থতাকাৰী ☐ সমাজ নেতা ☐ শিক্ষাবিদ ☐ নীতি পৰামর্শদাতা ☐ অন্য: _____

আপুনি চৰকাৰৰ পুনর্বাসন প্রকল্পসমূহ সম্পর্কে কি ভাবি?

☐ কার্যকৰী ☐ অকার্যকৰ ☐ উন্নয়নৰ প্রয়োজন

অতিৰিক্ত মন্তব্য বা পৰামৰ্শ: _____