

A STUDY OF INTERCOMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS
AND AMITY IN ASSAM

PROJECT SAHACHARYA

CONDUCTED BY

SRIMANTA FOUNDATION FOR CULTURE AND SOCIETY

GUWAHATI

REPORT PREPARED
BY

BAPUKAN CHOUDHURY

PROJECT DIRECTOR
&
PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
GAUHATI UNIVERSITY

PREFACE

The following pages constitute the Report of the **Project Sahacharya** undertaken by the **Srimanta Foundation for Culture and Society** as the aftermath of violent incidents in 2003 among the Assamese and the Bihari communities residing in Assam which had taken a toll of many lives and properties and vandalized the social fabric. The Foundation, a voluntary organization deeply sensitive to the abiding values of social harmony, amity and understanding fostered since the days of Srimanta Sankaradeva, the great saint and social thinker thought it proper to understand the vicissitudes of intercommunity expectations among the Assamese and non-Assamese people residing in Assam in the event of changed social circumstances and undertook the **Project Sahacharya** to suggest ways and means towards the amelioration of grievances of both these communities.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the Foundation for reposing the trust on me to conduct the Project as the Project Director. I am particularly thankful to Shri B.J.Mahanta, I.P.S., Managing Trustee of the Foundation, and Dr. P.J.Mahanta, Executive Trustee for extending all possible help, cooperation and material assistance in conducting the survey. I am also grateful to Dr. A.C.Bhagabati, eminent social scientist and formerly Vice-Chancellor, Arunachal University for extending his profound wisdom and support towards conceptualizing the vision and objective of the project. He also extended his valuable help during the training programme of the Research Investigators. I express my sincere thanks to all the Research Investigators-Mr. Aref Zaman, Ms. Daisy Baishya, Ms.Rita Deka, Mr. Dhritiman Sarma, Mr. Dimbeswar Barman and Mr. Mahananda Das for their help in collecting the field data.

I place on record my sincere thanks to Shri Apurba Jibon Barua, S.P., Tinsukia, Shri Debajit Hazarika, S.P. Sivasagar, Shri Nitul Gogoi, S.P., Tezpur, Shri Vijoy Ramasetti, S.P., Kokrajhar and Ms. Violet Barua, S.P. Goalpara for their kind help and cooperation during the fieldwork. We are extremely grateful to all the informants for their generous help and cooperation during the fieldwork.

While it has been a rewarding experience to conduct the survey and complete the Project with immensely benefiting fieldworks, the revelations of the survey at times have been to my shocking disbelief and they demand immediate attention of the concerned authorities for preventing further eruptions of such violence.

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Bapukan Choudhury

A STUDY ON INTERCOMMUNITY EXPECTATION AND AMITY IN ASSAM

INTRODUCTION:

Assam, one of the states of North Eastern part of India, lies between twenty-fourth and twenty-eighth degrees of north latitudes and eighty-ninth and ninety-sixth degrees of east longitude. Criss-crossed with hills and dales, rivers and rivulets, the state is surrounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the north, Nagaland, Manipur and part of Arunachal Pradesh on the east, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Bangladesh on the South and West Bengal on the West. Spreading over an area of 78,438 sq. km. which constitute 2.39 per cent of the total land area of India and with a total of 26,655,528 souls according to 2001 census, the state is a complex mosaic of multicultural, multilingual and multiracial mix of population.

Although geography has imposed a formidable barrier on her contact with the rest of the world, people of diverse ethnic and cultural background entered into this region in different successive waves at various times through the passes and the river routes.

History says that the region, known as Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa in the earlier epic period, was ruled by several dynasties viz, the Varman (436-648 A.D.), Sala Stambha (664-780 A.D.) Pralambha (800-1000 A.D) and Pala (1000-1048 A.D.) dynasties (Chatterjee, 1951:91). The local dynasties, however, had contact with the Hindu states of India. In the first half of seventh century, Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang came to India. When he visited the Nalanda Monastery in Magadha, or South Bihar to study “the profound law of Buddha”, Kumar Bhaskar Varman, the then king of Kamrupa, invited him to his capital. After his visit Hiuen Tsang described the land and people of Assam with all praise. He wrote: “The present king belongs to the old line of Narayan Deb. He is the Brahman Caste. His name is Bhaskara Varman, his title, Kumar. From the time that his family seized the land and assumed the Government, there have elapsed a thousand generations. The king is fond of learning and the people are so likewise in imitation on him. Men of high talent from distant regions, seeking after office visit his dominions”. (Gait, 1997:23)

By the twelfth century local kings of the Brahmaputra valley who were of Mongoloid origin became Hindus. To quote Gait (1997:30) :

“It is claimed by the scribes of this dynasty that they were descended from Narak and Bhagadatta, but in the copper plate inscriptions of the Pala kings, who in their turn put forward the same claim, they are referred to as Mlechhas, or non-Hindus. The explanation doubtless is that both dynasties were of aboriginal origin and that, when they raise to power, they were converted to Hinduism and fitted out with a noble ancestry by the Brahmans, who have always been adepts in procuring for themselves protection, favour and power by inducing the aboriginal chiefs to enter the fold of Hinduism on the

fiction that they are descended from some god of the Hindu pantheon or some potentate in Hindu Mythology. In more recent times the Rajas of Rani and Dimarua have in this way been connected with the dynasty of Bhagadatta, and the Koch, Kachari and Manipuri Rajas have also been provided by their priests with divine or a heroic lineage”.

In the caste-based Hindu social order, thus emerged, the Mongoloid rulers such as the Koch kings in the lower Assam region made a significant contribution in forming the Assamese Hindu society (Bhagabati, 1992).

In the thirteen century the Ahoms, a Shan tribe of upper Burma migrated to Assam and ruled it for nearly 600 years from 1228 to 1826 A.D. The Ahoms have not only managed to forget their language and have accepted Assamese as their mother tongue, but have fully integrated into the Hindu socio-economic order (Chatterjee, 1970:10). There are other local Mongoloid groups like the Sonowal Kachari, the Chutia, and the Pati-Rabha who have also accepted Assamese as their mother tongue. At the same time the Bodo Kachari, the Rabha, the Mishing, the Deori, the Karbi, the Tiwa, the Dimasa, the Itonia, the Phakial, the Turung, the Khampti and many others speak their own language. (Goswami, 1992).

Assam came into contact with the Muslims for the first time in the early part of thirteenth century when Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khiliji, a Muslim General of Kutubuddin led a Turkish army to this region. This was followed by several Muslim invasions and each time a few Muslim soldiers preferred to stay in Assam instead of going back with their defeated commanders. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Azan Fakir, a Muslims saint came to Assam who promoted and stabilized Islam in Assam.

The Ahom monarchy started declining from the middle of the eighteenth century. “The throne was occupied by a number of weak but unscrupulous rulers whose only ambition was the preservation of their own lives and power regardless of the interests of the state. The court became hot-bed of intrigues and conspiracies and this was followed by political assassinations and insurrections”. Barpujari, 1999:2)

Taking advantage of the situation, the Burmese entered Assam in 1819 and unleashed a region of terror leading to destabilization of the entire social system. This Burmese conflict invited the British East India Company to Assam. The British declared a war against the Burmese in 1825 and at the Treaty of Yandabo, 1826 the Burmese king surrendered the claim over Assam. Thus, British took charge of lower Assam region in 1828 and finally extended its territory to upper Assam region in 1838. Eventually, Assam for the first time became the part of British India.

During the colonial regime different communities with their distinctive heritage of language and culture came to Assam. They brought a lot of Bengalis as teachers and for different administrative work. There was further flow of Bengali people to Assam with the coming of Railway in 1881. With the beginning of tea plantation, the Britishers recruited tribesmen from Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh – under a system of contract labourer. These migrants were very much heterogeneous in terms of language and culture. At present, they constitute an important social stratum in Assam (Bhagabati, 1992).

Another group of people who came to Assam during the British period was the Nepalese who were engaged in army and as graziers. (Hussain, 1989:29). The Marwaris from Rajasthan also came to Assam during this period as traders.

It was during the British period that the state of Assam was merged with East Bengal in 1905. The province so formed was named as East Bengal and Assam with its capital at Dacca. In 1911 the pre-merger position was restored and Shillong again became the capital of Assam. During 1905 and 1911 people from East Bengal districts (mostly Muslim population of the lower strata) migrated to Assam quite confidently. No one could question their legal status as it was the inter district migration (De, 2005: 13-14). Since then Assam is receiving flow of migrants from the East Bengal districts (now Bangladesh). Thus, people of diverse ethnic and cultural affiliations migrated to Assam during the British period.

Some of the migrant populations got fully assimilated with the local inhabitants while others tried to preserve their own identity and still others tried to impose their own language and culture on the local people. To quote Goswami, 1993:

“I perceive it to be a strong force in generating a vital but cohesive strength for assimilation, identification and final merger with the dominant linguistic group. It emerged and became identifiable under the dominant Ahom rulers, who, significantly, instead of imposing their tongue of culture on their subjects, adopted the language and culture of the local inhabitants, viz., the collective group of Assamese speaking inhabitants. This is an exemplary instance of voluntary assimilation with the socio-cultural aspirations of the majority groups of the subject population. The tribal principalities of the Bodo, the Chutia, the Barahi, the Asura, the Koch etc., likewise voluntarily assimilated themselves with their subject population. Relation between the rulers and the ruled, between the protector and the protected became so merged that their interests got identified into one. This spontaneous identification led to the emergence of the nationality which embraces numerous ethnocultural groups, some of whom lost their ancestral identity altogether. In this context, it is worthwhile to state that a liberal attitude and all embracing policy of the great religious preacher, Shri Sankardev and other Vaisnavite socioritual reformers played no mean part in assimilating and absorbing the tribal groups into the fold of the Satra System of Assam. The neophyte entrants attracted and encouraged their cognate groups to follow their suit overwhelmingly accepting the neo-Vaishnavism which preached and practiced equality for all the disciples irrespective of caste or class. It suited the tribal groups which could as well retain their essential cultural traditions including animistic faith. Shri Sankardev’s religious preachings had a universal appeal in as much as neo-Vaishnavism emphasized upon equality of all human beings. At the same time the sacerdotal complexities in rituals were studiously avoided to suit the tribal psychology. What is more, his teachings through local language reached the masses without an intermediary exploitative priestly group”. (Goswami, 1992).

The state, therefore, can be called a melting pot where people of cultures of diverse origin coexisted, commingled and lived cheek by jowl. However, due to long pervading perception of deprivation on the part of the mainland population, the state has experienced intercommunity distrust in the post independence period resulting in intermittent clashes and violent situations. While the long standing issues pertaining to interethnic divide are being attended to in varying degrees through political intervention, not much attention is being paid to the fragile relation of mainland people of Assam with the communities from other parts of the country who have settled here over a long period of time and others who frequent this land for varying interests-occupational and commercial.

The last couple of decades have witnessed sustained violence by extremist groups against the Indian nationals all over the state of Assam. While the people of Assam have unequivocally condemned the secessionist advocacy by the violent groups, opinion leaders and the media tend to reflect a pattern of deep frustration of the people of Assam for not receiving their due despite providing tremendous amount of natural resources to the country. While the communities from the rest of the country like the Marwari, Bengali, Bihari and other North Indian and South Indian populations are contributing their own ways for the betterment of the economy of the state, there seems to be a perception of not enough being done by these communities for the interest of the state. In turn, there appears to be a perception on the part of other communities about the mainland Assamese being chauvinistic and unkind towards them.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY:

Keeping the divergent perceptions, outlined above, in view, the present project was undertaken in a few urban centers of the state of Assam in order to:

- i. Identify the root causes of disharmony in the state of Assam.
- ii. Identify the causes responsible for intercommunity distrust among the people of Assam.
- iii. Provide an insight into the interdependence of various communities, if any.
- iv. To suggest means to develop integration and amity among different communities residing in Assam.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY:

The data for the present study have been collected through extensive fieldwork from six urban centres of Assam, i.e. Guwahati, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Tezpur, Kokrajhar and Goalpara. These urban centres were selected purposively. People belonging to different communities from different parts of India poured into and settled mostly in the urban areas over the years and as such these areas are more heterogeneous in terms of culture, religion and language. Guwahati, being the capital and nerve center of the state, has accommodated diverse communities. Besides, two urban centers from upper Assam, i.e. Tinsukia and Sivasagar, one from central Assam, i.e., Tezpur and two from lower Assam, i.e. Kokrajhar and Goalpara were selected in order to understand the relationship between the mainland people of Assam and the communities from other parts of the country.

Though the project was officially launched on April 8, 2004 the actual work started in June and continued till December 2004. Six qualified research investigators were appointed to undertake fieldwork. They were put to orientation and training under the able guidance of very experienced social scientists of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University for a period of seven days starting from June 12, 2004.

Two structured schedules – one for the Assamese community and the other for the other communities were designed in order to collect the relevant information. The schedules were canvassed at random among three other communities, i.e. the Bengali, the Bihari and the Marwari besides Assamese inhabiting different selected areas as detailed below:

Communities	Guwahati	Tinsukia	Sivasagar	Tezpur	Goalpara	Kokrajhar	Total
Assamese	97	143	143	143	137	150	813
Bengali	39	65	45	55	66	65	335
Bihari	75	137	137	95	51	52	547
Marwari	36	50	50	58	67	58	319
Total	247	395	375	351	321	325	2014

Besides, 15 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were organized where people belonging to different categories of professions were invited to discuss the problems among themselves. The opinions of different people attending the FGDs were recorded. The researchers also discussed the issues with different people and visited many places of occurrence of violence in recent times. A few case studies were also collected from these areas. The researchers also recorded their personal observations visiting those areas. Thus, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

FINDINGS:

Data were collected from both the males and the females. The number of females is, however, relatively much less than the males. Therefore, no separate analysis for the two sexes has been made. The respondents from whom the data were collected were of different age groups. The majority of them were of ages between 20 to 50 years (Table 1). Assam is the place of birth for most of the Bengalis (77.61%) and Marwaris (66.14%) whereas majority of the Biharis were born outside Assam (table 2). This shows that many of them are migrants of not very distant past. As regards the occupation, most of the Biharis are found in the wage earner/cultivator and petty business categories. They are mostly found to work as 'godown porter' engaged in loading and unloading the truck and the rail wagon. Some of them also work in the commercial hubs for the same work. The porters in the train stations are almost exclusively the Biharis. Some of the Biharis have settled in the suburbs where they

Table 1: Communitywise distribution of respondents according to age
Age (years)

Community	<20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60+	Total
Assamese	14 (1.72)	165 (20.30)	278 (34.19)	205 (25.22)	104 (12.79)	47 (5.78)	813
Bengali	14 (4.18)	68 (20.30)	94 (28.06)	88 (26.27)	55 (16.42)	16 (4.78)	335
Bihari	12 (2.19)	109 (19.93)	179 (32.72)	140 (25.59)	83 (15.17)	24 (4.39)	547
Marwari	13 (4.08)	92 (28.84)	92 (28.84)	68 (21.32)	39 (12.23)	15 (4.70)	319
Total	53 (2.63)	434 (21.55)	643 (31.93)	501 (24.88)	281 (13.95)	102 (5.06)	2014

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 2: Communitywise distribution of Non-Assamese respondents according to place of birth.

Community	In Assam	Outside Assam	Total
Bengali	260(77.61)	75(22.39)	335
Bihari	182(33.27)	365(66.73)	547
Marwari	211(66.14)	108(33.86)	319
Total	653(54.37)	543(45.21)	1201

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

practise dairy farming in small scale and in some areas few of them are also found to practise agriculture. The barbers, washer men and cobblers in Assam are mostly the Biharis. Tyre (of motor vehicle) retreading and tube repairing are also done exclusively by the Biharis. Quite a good number of them also own small 'pan' shops and grocery shops.

In the skilled worker category also their number is reasonably high. They are good masons, carpenters and tailors. Now-a-days some of them are also found in teaching profession, clerical jobs and in other professions, but their number in these professions is very insignificant. The Marwaris are mostly found in business of all kinds from small shopkeeper to big merchants. In fact, they control the business of Assam. The Assamese and the Bengalis are mostly found in white collar jobs. The teachers, offices, clerks, doctors, para-medical staff engineers advocates etc., are mostly either the Assamese or the Bengalis. At present, some of them are also found in petty business.

Table 3: Communitywise distribution of respondents according to their occupation.

Community	Non-worker	Worker							Total
		Cultivator/ Labourer	Skilled Worker	Lower Profes- sional	Middle Profes- sional	High Profes- sional	Businessman		
							Category I	Category II	
Assamese	50 (6.15)	58 (7.13)	44 (5.41)	107 (13.16)	238 (29.27)	89 (10.95)	203 (24.97)	24 (2.95)	813
Bengali	17 (5.07)	19 (5.67)	20 (5.97)	63 (18.81)	68 (20.30)	29 (8.66)	112 (33.43)	7 (2.09)	335
Bihari	5 (0.91)	186 (34.00)	90 (16.45)	45 (8.23)	30 (5.48)	8 (1.46)	173 (31.63)	10 (1.83)	547
Marwari	15 (4.70)	-	-	3 (0.94)	15 (4.70)	11 (3.45)	161 (50.47)	114 (35.74)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

The monthly income of the Biharis is also found to be very low. About 86 per cent of them have the income below Rs. 10,000.00 per month. Contrary to that about 59 percent of the Marwaris have the monthly income above 10,000.00 per month. In case of the Assamese about 63 per cent belong to the income group of Rs. 5000.00 to 15,000.00 per month. More or less the same picture is seen among the Bengalis.

Table 4: Communitywise distribution of respondents by monthly income

Community	Monthly income (Rs)				
	<5000	5000-10,000	10,000- 15,0001	15,000 +	Total
Assamese	228 (28.04)	364 (44.77)	148 (18.20)	73 (8.98)	813
Bengali	69 (20.60)	154 (45.97)	78 (23.28)	34 (10.15)	335
Bihari	262 (47.90)	211 (38.57)	45 (8.23)	29 (5.30)	547
Marwari	19 (5.96)	111 (34.80)	102 (31.97)	87 (27.27)	319
Total	608 (30.19)	810 (40.22)	373 (18.52)	223 (11.07)	2014

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

The literacy level of the Biharis is found to be the lowest. About 36 per cent of them are found to be illiterate and only 9 percent were educated beyond the secondary standard. Among the Marwaris about 24 per cent have educational qualification beyond secondary standard. The number of persons with educational qualification beyond undergraduate standard is about 34 per cent among the Assamese and 28 per cent among the Bengalis.

Table 5 : Communitywise distribution of respondents by educational qualification.

Community	Illiterate	Barely literate	Primary standard	Secondary standard	Graduate standard	Post-graduate standard	Total
Assamese	26 (3.20)	16 (1.97)	50 (6.15)	443 (54.49)	211 (25.95)	67 (8.24)	813
Bengali	23 (6.87)	-	28 (8.36)	190 (56.72)	69 (20.60)	25 (7.46)	335
Bihari	196 (35.83)	24 (4.39)	93 (17.00)	182 (33.27)	42 (7.68)	10 (1.83)	547
Marwari	8 (2.51)	-	33 (10.34)	201 (63.01)	66 (20.69)	11 (3.45)	319
Total	253 (12.56)	40 (1.99)	204 (10.13)	1016 (50.45)	388 (19.27)	113 (5.61)	2014

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

The number of persons having school education in Assamese medium is the highest (26.92%) among the Bengalis and lowest (2.95%) among the Biharis. About 87 per cent of the Biharis had their schooling in Hindi medium against 66% of the Marwaris. About 43 per cent of the Biharis cannot speak Assamese and 62 per cent of them communicate with the Assamese people only in Hindi. Only a few Bengalis (3.58%) and the Marwaris (3.76%) cannot speak Assamese. More than 80 percent of the Bengalis and the Marwaris can speak Assamese fluently and most of them communicate with the Assamese people in Assamese.

Table 6: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to the medium of instruction in their school.

Community	Assamese	Bengali	Hindi	English	Total	N.A.	Total
Bengali	84 (26.92)	186 (59.62)	-	42 (13.46)	312	23 (6.87)	335
Bihari	10 (2.95)	-	293 (86.69)	35 (10.36)	338	209 (38.21)	547
Marwari	27 (8.68)	-	206 (66.24)	78 (25.01)	311	8 (2.51)	319
Total	101 (10.51)	186 (19.35)	519 (54.01)	155 (16.13)	961	240 (19.98)	1201

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 7: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to their reading and writing ability in Assamese.

Community	Well	A little	Not at all	N.A.	Total
Bengali	145 (43.28)	78 (23.28)	89 (26.57)	23 (6.87)	335
Bihari	43 (7.86)	63 (11.52)	245 (44.79)	196 (35.83)	547
Marwari	100 (31.35)	79 (24.76)	132 (41.38)	8 (2.51)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 8: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to their Assamese speaking ability.

Community	Speaking ability			Total
	Fluently	Haltingly	Not at all	
Bengali	281 (83.88)	42 (12.54)	12 (3.58)	335
Bihari	201 (36.75)	118 (21.57)	228 (41.68)	547
Marwari	257 (80.56)	50 (15.67)	12 (3.76)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 9: Communitywise distribution of respondents according to their communication with Assamese people.

Community	Language of communication					Total
	Assamese	Bengali	Hindi	Assamese & Bengali	Assamese & Hindi	
Bengali	254 (75.82)	25 (7.46)	-	56 (16.72)	-	835
Bihari	111 (20.29)	-	339 (61.97)	-	97 (17.73)	547
Marwari	196 (61.44)	-	35 (10.97)	-	88 (27.59)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Almost all the Bengalis (93.13%) have their Assamese friends. However, roughly 50 per cent of the Biharis do not have the Assamese friends. Many of the non-Assamese people are not aware of the important personalities of Assam like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Srimanta Sankardeva. Quite a good number of them also do not know about the important religious institutions of Assam like Namghar and Sattra.

Table 10: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they have Assamese friends of not.

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	312 (93.13)	23 (6.87)	335
Bihari	283 (51.74)	264 (48.26)	547
Marwari	235 (73.67)	84 (26.33)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 11: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to their knowledge about Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.

Community	Contribution of J.P. Agarwala				Total
	Business	Politics	Art & Culture	Do not Know	
Bengali	54 (16.12)	58 (17.31)	125 (37.31)	98 (29.25)	335
Bihari	45 (8.23)	60 (10.97)	86 (15.72)	356 (65.08)	547
Marwari	43 (13.48)	54 (16.93)	144 (45.14)	78 (24.45)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 12: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they have heard of Srimanta Sankardeva or not.

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	201 (60.00)	134 (40.00)	335
Bihari	135 (24.68)	412 (75.32)	547
Marwari	130 (40.75)	189 (59.25)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

These non-Assamese people, however, hardly experience any clash with the Assamese people at personal level. The survey shows that about 98 per cent of the Marwaris, 93 per cent of the Biharis and 89 per cent of the Bengalis did not experience any clash at personal level. Interestingly enough not a single Marwari know of any clash of their community with the local Assamese people. Contrary to that 95.2 per cent of the Biharis and 86 per cent of the Bengalis reported that there was clash between their communities with the local Assamese people.

Table 13: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they know about Namghar and Sattra.

Community	Namghar			Sattra		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	229 (68.36)	106 (31.64)	335	52 (15.52)	283 (84.48)	335
Bihari	300 (54.84)	247 (45.16)	547	47 (8.59)	500 (91.41)	547
Marwari	183 (57.37)	136 (42.63)	319	99 (31.03)	220 (68.97)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 14: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they experienced any clash at personal level.

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	37 (11.04)	298 (88.96)	335
Bihari	41 (7.50)	506 (92.50)	547
Marwari	7 (2.19)	312 (97.81)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 15: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they know of any clash of their community with Assamese at communal level.

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	288 (85.97)	47 (14.03)	335
Bihari	522 (95.43)	27 (4.94)	547
Marwari	-	319 (100.00)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

The Bengalis speak of the 1960 language movement, which led to ethnic clash between the Assamese and the Bengalis. This language movement had its roots in the colonial period. As has already been mentioned, lot of people from other parts of India migrated to Assam during the colonial rule. The unsophisticated indigenous Assamese people accepted all the migrants without any reservation. But this tolerant meek and mild attitude of the Assamese people was tried to be selfishly exploited by the Bengali people. During the first half of the nineteenth century Assam was under the jurisdiction of the Government of Bengal. As early as 1831, the Government of Bengal imposed Bengali language in Assam. The people of Assam reacted very sharply to the imposition of Bengali language in Assam and finally in 1871 Assamese language was restored as the court language and the medium of instruction in school. (Gohainbaruah, 1976:162).

The medium of instruction again became an issue when the Government of Assam, following the national policy, decided to introduce regional language as the medium of instruction in the educational institutions of Assam. The situation became critical when the two Universities of Assam, i.e. Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University decided in 1972 to introduce Assamese as the sole medium of instruction in the Colleges under its jurisdiction. Since the Barak Valley of Assam is dominated by the Bengali speaking people and the colleges in the valley were under Gauhati University, the Academic Council of Gauhati University in its meeting held on June 6, 1972 decided to retain English as an additional medium of instruction in the colleges under its jurisdiction outside the Brahmaputra valley. But the Bengali speaking people of Barak Valley demanded introduction of Bengali in the Colleges of Barak Valley. Gauhati University then decided to allow the students to write their answer scripts in any of three languages (a) Assamese, (b) English and (c) Bengali. This three language formula adopted by the Gauhati University was vehemently opposed by the students community of the Brahmaputra Valley and finally the Academic Council of Gauhati University revised its earlier decision and decided to adopt Assamese as the medium of instruction in all colleges under its jurisdiction, and English as an alternative medium for a period of not exceeding 10 years. However, the same formula is still continuing. It was during this period of language controversy that there was ethnic clash between the Assamese and the Bengalis. 'Consequently a submerged sense of exploiter and exploited worked against the prior feelings of being members of the same and identical sociocultural unit of Brahmaputra valley' (Goswami, 1992).

It is heartening to point out that such distrust is gradually on the wane and at present, as the survey reveals, the Bengalis are not only found to be tolerant but have also tried to integrate with the local Assamese people. They now coexist peacefully with their Assamese neighbours. Intermarriage between the Assamese and the Bengalis have already started in many places and there are Bengali families who prefer to speak Assamese even at home and desire to maintain matrimonial relation with the Assamese only. In Tinsukia, during the recent violence, when the Biharis attacked Assamese families, the Bengalis extended their helping hands to the Assamese by giving shelter. In some areas the Bengalis and the Assamese became united to thwart the attack of the Biharis.

The Marwaris are found to be the most tolerant group of the state with better ability to adjust with the situation. They pick up the local language very easily. They have also contributed considerably to the development of the state considering it to be their homeland. They have undertaken welfare programmes like establishment of schools, colleges, hospitals, and parks, etc. in many places of the state. They also contribute significantly to the temples and for organizations of the fairs and festivals of Assam. This type of closeness and togetherness has helped maintaining a very close relation with the indigenous people without having any social or cultural divide or clash of interest.

However, some of the Assamese, as the survey reveals, still feel that through business the Marwaris are exploiting Assam.

Table 16: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they ever contributed to the development of their locality.

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	216 (64.48)	119 (35.52)	335
Bihari	147 (26.87)	400 (73.13)	547
Marwari	234 (73.35)	85 (26.65)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

The level of interaction of the Biharis with the indigenous people of Assam is, on the other hand, found to be minimal. Unlike the two other communities, most of the Biharis do not consider Assam as their home and these people have come here only for earning. The Assamese people consider them as very hard working people though they live shabbily. However, since most of the Biharis belong to labour class or in petty professions, in which the indigenous people are not interested, there is hardly any competition between the two groups – and as such there was no misapprehension or clash of interest between the two communities till the other day.

Table 17: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they consider Assam as their home place.

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	305 (91.04)	30 (8.95)	335
Bihari	155 (28.34)	392 (71.66)	547
Marwari	262 (82.13)	57 (17.87)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

In November 2003 the state experienced a violent clash between the Biharis and the local Assamese people. The clash broke out in connection with the policy of recruitment in Indian Railways.

The fact of the situation was that there was an interview for a few Grade III posts in North East Frontier Railway with its Head Quarters at Maligaon, Guwahati. The students' organizations and youth organizations of Assam are demanding that the candidate from the state be recruited in all Grade III and IV posts of any Central Government organizations located in Assam. But a group of Bihari youth came to appear in the interview from Bihar. In Tinsukia a group of local youth objected to it and did not allow

them to appear in the interview. They were also reportedly tortured by a few local youth since they (the Biharis) ignored their (the local youth) initial request not to appear in the interview and to go back home. The candidates coming from Bihar finally had to go back without appearing in the interview.

As a repercussion to this some Assamese people coming from Delhi in a train through Bihar were attacked by a group of Bihari youth in the Patna Railway Station.. The incidence was widely reported in the print media and the most commonly circulated version was that the Assamese people were brutally tortured by the Biharis in Bihar. In some vernacular dailies the news occupied the front page with bold letters. When the news spread in Assam, some Assamese youth assaulted some Biharis in their respective localities. Finally the clash took a violent turn in many places.

In Guwahati the clash broke out mainly in some pockets of Bihari concentration and the sufferers were mostly the Biharis. Though there were stray cases in many places, the major affected areas were the Sarumataria of Dispur (Chaliha warehouse complex), Godown complex of Hindustan Lever Ltd. Located at Sixmile and also in Noonmati, Narengi and Satgaon. Their houses were burnt and in few places they were looted.

The proportion of the Biharis is relatively much higher in Tinsukia. There are also villages inhabited by the Biharis in the suburbs of Tinsukia. It was the worst affected area in the whole of the state where both the Assamese and the Biharis suffered in more or less in equal proportions. Cases of burning of houses, looting and physical tortures and even death occurred. The clash started first in the town and then spread to the suburbs inhabited by the Biharis. When some Biharis assaulted some Assamese in the town, some of the nearby Bihari villages were burnt down by some Assamese youth. Such affected villages are Baluguda, Devipukhuri and Chirapatty. Some people claim that in Tinsukia the students of Assamese and Hindi medium schools staged 'dharna' before the office of the N.F.Railway office at Tinsukia demanding not to allow the candidates coming from Bihar to appear the interview. Their demand was that the posts be reserved for the inhabitants of Assam irrespective of their ethnic affiliation. Their apprehension was that they might be deprived if the candidates from Bihar are allowed to appear the interview since the Railway Minister was from Bihar.. But when the news of assaulting Assamese people in Bihar spread, a group of students of Senairam Higher Secondary School assaulted some Bihari rickshaw and hand cart(*thela*) pullers and pan shop keepers without any fault of theirs. In return, the Bihari people of that area assembled and assaulted a few students of the school. When the news percolated to other areas, gradually it took a violent turn and spread all the areas of Tinsukia town and the nearby villages.

Except a few stray cases, Sivasagar, Tezpur and Goalpara were by and large peaceful. In these towns the concentration of Bihari people is very insignificant. There was, however, absolutely no clash in Kokrajhar. In fact, the Biharis got extra protection from the local people in Kokrajhar. It was considered to be the safest place for the Biharis in the entire state during that period.

Interestingly, unlike Assamese-Bengali clash in 1960 and 1972, as the study reveals, in this Assamese-Bihari clash the violence was done mostly by the unemployed

local youth of ages 18 to 30 years. Secondly, the victims were mostly from the lower level profession. Thirdly, in most of the cases, the youth involved in violence were not from the same locality where the incidence took place.

Table 18: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to their knowledge regarding age of the persons involved in the clash.

Community	Age (years)							
	<20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35+	All	Donot know	Total
Bengali	30 (8.96)	25 (7.46)	12 (3.58)	11 (3.28)	8 (2.39)	11 (32.84)	139 (41.49)	335
Bihari	98 (17.92)	138 (25.23)	133 (24.31)	20 (3.66)	3 (0.55)	-	155 (28.34)	547

As has already been mentioned, the state of Assam did not experience any inter-ethnic conflict in the pre-independence period. In 1960 and 1972 the state experienced Assamese – Bengali conflict, the reason of which was very much clear. The recent clash between the Biharis and the Assamese was of a different kind which is very difficult to explain.

The clash started from not a very major incident. Incidences of this type often happen in many cities and towns in India and these are settled locally, without resorting to violence. In this case what did really sparkle the conflict? Why was that on many such occasions the spark fell on water, while in this case the spark fell on inflammables?

No single factor explanation can give real answer to this question. To understand this we must have to take into account combinations of several factors, their entailments and the dynamics of antagonistic politics.

The Biharis in Assam are found in such professions where the local people hardly participate. There is no Assamese *dhobi*(washer man) and cobbler. Traditionally though there were Assamese barber, the young generation do not consider it to be a profession of dignity and as such in the cities and towns of Assam the barber shops are hardly owned by local Assamese people. The Assamese people are also not found to be interested in much hardwork. Therefore, no Assamese people are found in the market places, ware houses, railway yards, etc., as ‘godown porter’. It is almost exclusively a profession of the Biharis. In other words Assam is, at present, dependent on the Biharis for fulfillment of many such requirements. In their absence these works will have to be done by some others and not by the Assamese. The Biharis are also not much interested in entering into political arena and thereby hobnobbing with or capturing the political power of the state. For the most of them, the main objective is to earn money through hard work to support their family in Bihar. In other words, the Biharis do essential jobs in Assam which an Assamese is reluctant to undertake. They provide many of the services on which the Assamese society depends. The only complain of the Assamese people against the Biharis are – they do not consider Assam as their homeland and they do not contribute much for the development of the state. Also they are said to live shabbily and under unhygienic conditions. On the other hand, not only the Biharis but all the non Assamese people, while appreciating their

hospitality, also complain that the Assamese people do not have the work culture and that they are interested only in white collar jobs. These are some of the latent conflicts, but these are not supposed to take a violent turn

Table 19: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they want more political representation in Assam

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	180 (53.73)	155 (46.27)	335
Bihari	184 (33.64)	363 (66.36)	547
Marwari	110 (34.48)	209 (65.52)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Table 20: Communitywise distribution of non-Assamese respondents according to whether they have any property in Assam.

Community	Yes	No	Total
Bengali	299 (89.25)	36 (10.75)	335
Bihari	193 (35.28)	354 (64.72)	547
Marwari	262 (82.13)	57 (17.87)	319

(Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages)

Some of the causes for the recent clashes between the Assamese and the Biharis, as reported by the informants, are:

- (i) Unemployment problem of the state.
- (ii) Exaggerated and irresponsible reporting of the incidents of clashes in train in Bihar and subsequent incidents in Assam by the media.
- (iii) Attempt of aggrandizement of personal grievances by the local youth on the Biharis taking the clue of the incidents of torture on Assamese people in a train in Bihar as a result of not allowing people from Bihar to appear in an interview in Assam for recruitment in N.F.Railway.
- (iv) Malafide motives of some of the political leaders, in some places, to draw political mileage out of these incidents
- (v) Lack of a sense of belonging on the part of the Biharis towards the state of Assam.
- (vi) Lack of understanding between the two communities.
- (vii) Involvement of extremist organizations.

The people were also of the opinion that the clashes could have been averted through:

- (i) Timely action by the Government and the local administration.

- (ii) Declaration of a clear cut employment policy of the Central Government, particularly in respect of the Grade III and Grade IV personnel in Railways and other Central Government establishments
- (iii) Restrained and responsible coverage of the violence by the media.
- (iv) Timely mobilization of public opinion in proper direction by the educated and the intelligentsia through media.
- (v) Promotion of proper understanding between the two communities.

This is a story we see on the stage which can not explain properly why a simple incident transformed into a conflagration despite the fact that there was no clash of interest between the two communities atleast in economic and political front. There must be a story behind it which needs to be carefully examined. The point which needs critical consideration is why the extremist organizations got involved in this scenario. It was stated by some informants in Guwahati and Tinsukia that the ULFA, an extremist organization of Assam, was involved in the clashes particularly in these two areas. Though they did not figure directly on the scene, they engaged some unemployed youths to vindicate their purpose. In Tinsukia it was reported that some local youths were punished by the ULFA for not obeying their direction to torture the Biharis. Contrary to it, in Kokrajhar town the BLT, another extremist organization of the Bodos in Assam, instructed the local people not to disturb the Biharis but to protect them at any cost. The contradictory stands of the two extremist organizations in this regard also merit careful consideration.

The extremist organizations in the state usually extort money from the rich people like doctors, engineers, contractors, politicians, and big business houses, etc. Those who cannot pay as per their demands are kidnapped or sometimes killed. They do not have any enmity with the poor people like the wage earners or those who are in petty professions. There are, therefore, reasons to believe that they have got themselves involved with this clash in the interest of a powerful **Third Force**. Now the question is what might be that **Third Force** at work? Some informants in Guwahati and Tinsukia were of the opinion that the ULFA's involvement in this case was basically in favour of the Muslims of the Bangladeshi origin.

It has already been referred to that people from the then East Bengal districts (now Bangladesh) started migrating from 1905. These migrants found certain places of Assam a better habitat than their native land, which offered them ways for their easy survival. Gradually this population started swelling. The Assam administration did not oppose the settlement of these Bengali Muslims in the fallow lands of the valley as they grew there more food for the indigenous people of Assam (Bhuyan and De.1978; 308). But considering the very high rate of increase of Muslims population in Assam from nine percent in 1921 to 23 per cent in 1941, the Assamese people in the Brahmaputra valley sharply reacted to the settlement of Bengali – speaking East Bengal migrants in their land. The Muslim immigrants' reaction to this sensitive issue was quite businesslike (ibid: 313). In order to appease the aggrieved native gentry, they ungrudgingly volunteered to pick up Assamese language and culture as their own. However, a trail of unredressed ill feeling

continued to persist in the mind of the natives, as their sentiment was badly wounded on the economic issues as well (De, 2005: 14).

To quote Bhuyan and De, 1999:309:

This alarming rise in the population adversely affected the rural economy of Assam. Mass immigration in an organized way and occupation of wastelands, grazing and forest reserves, posed a serious problem. Mass squatting as well as the occupation of whole villages at times by the immigrants through the purchase of land by offering tempting prices to the local inhabitants whose economic difficulties compelled them to part with their land seemed to threaten the survival of the indigenous inhabitants. As public opinions in the rural areas was too feeble and unorganized to focus the magnitude of the problem in its proper perspectives, the immigration issue was steadily assuming a serious turn”.

The migration of these people is continuing unabated. Though they came initially as peasants to occupy the wastelands, after a few years of settlement there when their economy improved to a considerable extent, they started purchasing lands in the nearby villages of the indigenous people giving very high price and finally shifted from the flood plain to the built-up areas. An examination of the land record of Assam particularly in respect to land transfer since independence will show how much land in rural Assam has already been transferred to the Muslims of Bangladeshi origin. Land transfer in rural Assam has now come to a saturating point and occupational mobility among these Muslim peasants has also increased to a considerable extent. They gradually started migrating to the nearby townships to earn their bread. Today, they are found in all the lower level professions starting from daily labourer to carpenter, mason, tailor, and electrician and also in all sorts of petty business. These Muslims have already occupied rickshaw and handcart (*thela*) pulling which was almost the exclusive domain of the Biharis till the other day. Earthwork both in rural and urban areas of Assam was again the work of the Biharis till a few years back. Seasonal migration of the Biharis during the winter season was a regular scene. At present we see these Muslims in the earth work and also in road construction works in Assam in place of the Biharis. In Darwinian terms these Muslims of Bangladeshi origin have emerged to be the example of the survival of the fittest particularly, in the professional areas as mentioned above. But there still remains certain professional areas where the Biharis are proved to be more efficient. The ‘godown porters’ are exclusively the Biharis. The barbers and cobbler in Assam are also Biharis. These are some of the professional areas where the Muslims of Bangladeshi origin can enter only in the absence of the Biharis since no indigenous people are interested to work in these areas. Moreover, coming to the cities and towns these Muslim people find it difficult to purchase land in the core areas. In Guwahati city for instance, they have occupied some places where till some years ago the local Assamese people did not like to inhabit. There are still certain pockets of Bihari settlement particularly in the foothills of Noonmati, Narengi and Satgaon areas where they are doing mostly dairy farming in small

scale. If the Biharis can be driven out of Guwahati, these Muslims can conveniently occupy these areas. But it is not possible for them to come in direct clash with the Biharis.

Therefore, they tried to take advantage of the situation of the aforesaid Assamese-Bihari clash. It is believed that they sought help of the ULFA through the Government of Bangladesh. That the ULFA was involved in the clash was proved in the successive bomb blasting in the areas where Bihari people either work or inhabit. The matter has also been focused in the print media. It has also been reported that Bangladesh has given shelter to a number of extremist organizations of N.E.India. In lieu of that their Government might have sought the help of ULFA in their plan to accommodate more people from Bangladesh driving the Biharis out of Assam.

The question still remains to be answered. If the ULFA got involved in the clash at the request of the Bangladesh Government why did the BLT, another extremist organization of the state, take a totally opposite stand? Why did they protect the Biharis instead of attacking them at Kokrajhar? Was it that the request of the Bangladeshi Government came only to the ULFA not to the BLT?

The ULFA is said to be one of the most powerful extremist organizations in North East India. It is also said that some top leaders of the outfit are not only taking shelter in Bangladesh but are also doing lot of business there. Bangladesh Government is helping them undertaking the business more particularly for the development of transport and hotel industries in Bangladesh with the money extorted from Assam. In relation to the facilities reportedly availed by the ULFA in Bangladesh the support they have given to the interest of Bangladesh in Assam is quite minimal. The BLT perhaps does not have any such relation with the Bangladeshi Government as yet. Besides, during the period of Assamese-Bihari clashes the negotiation of the Bodos with the Central Government was on for the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council for which they did not like to antagonise Government of India and disturb the peace process. Most importantly, the Bodo extremist organizations from the beginning are opposing the settlement of the Muslims of Bangladeshi origin in the Bodo dominated areas. Perhaps they knew about the design of the Bangladesh Government for which they extended protection to the Biharis in their areas. In all probabilities, they kept the interest of their community in front.

This is the story behind the stage. It is thus apparent that a hidden agenda prepared outside the country was in all possibility at work behind the on stage conflagration in the form of violence between the Asamese and the Biharis. In reality, therefore, it was a clash between the Muslims of Bangladeshi origin and the Biharis at least at this stage for economic reason. Fortunately enough the clash did not continue for long and it appears that the Assamese people have understood the machination and implications of the whole issue. The whole issue merits serious attention and scrutiny by all sensitive minds and the Government establishments both at the Centre and the State level keeping the interest of the nation and its democratic process which is at stake.

In order to avoid recurrence of such clashes in future –

- There must be proper understanding between different communities living in an area. Involvement of people of different communities for the development of the area in which they live can help bringing a sense of belonging to the area. Cultural meets can also bring different communities closer to each other. That will accelerate the process of integration, assimilation and absorption and contribute to social peace and harmony..
- A 'give and take' policy will help reducing the distance and divide between the communities. Efforts for promotion of such exchanges should be undertaken by right thinking people and organizations
- All migrant communities in Assam should have a sense of belonging towards the state and should contribute towards its development. They should consider Assam not only as a workplace for their earning but also as a second home.
- In dealing with any such sensitive issues, the interest of the state should be above the party interests at the political level. All political parties must be responsive in a dispassionate manner to the understanding of the real situation so as to prevent such eruption in future.
- Media should play a positive and constructive role to assuage feelings of grievances and deprivation.
- Unemployment problem should be carefully dealt with.
- It becomes imperative on the part of the Government of India to take right measures in proper monitoring of the movement and designs of the extremist organizations like the ULFA vis-a vis designs and machinations of the Government of Bangladesh in this particular context failing which such conflagration will recur again in near future in Assam.

It may also be inferred that the operational success- although achieved partially- of the implicit designs of the aforementioned Third Force will certainly encourage it to target some other communities in Assam in the days to come. Fears are also imminent that such operations will be extended to other states of North East India, and some communities will be taken as targets for fomenting violence. My hunch is that Meghalaya and Manipur will be immediate targets for its next operation

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