

Politics in the States (I): Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Assam

Functioning within the political and economic framework of the Indian Union, politics in various states have a great deal in common, but their pattern and achievements vary considerably. Each state has a different constellation of class, caste, social and cultural forces and levels of social and economic development, and which, in turn, influence its politics.

It is, therefore, not accidental that changes in the social bases of politics, whether of caste, class, tribe, status groups, religion, region, or gender, are first reflected at the state level. Patronage networks, extending into small towns and villages, are also initiated and built up at this level. Basic nation-building and human resource development measures, relating to changes in agrarian structure, agricultural and industrial development, health, roads, power, irrigation, are implemented primarily by state administrations. Despite the many centralizing features of Indian polity as it has developed over the years and the Centre's ability to interfere with and encroach upon the powers of the states, the central government basically relies on the state governments for carrying out its important decisions; the effectiveness of the central developmental programmes also depends on the performance of the states. Even when the same party rules in the Centre and the states, the capacity of the central government to get its plans and policies executed is quite limited. Witness, for example, the varying fate of land reforms in different Congress-ruled states in the 1950s. In fact, the difference in the competence of various state governments explains to a large extent the wide divergence in their performance and the rates of social, cultural and human resource development.

Unfortunately, we do not have the space to discuss most of these aspects of state politics or the politics of each one of the states as they have developed since independence. Instead, we have chosen as case studies a few states—Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir—and that too to illustrate some aspect of their politics that makes these states distinct.

We have discussed Punjab separately in the chapter 'The Punjab Crisis' as an example of both communal politics and minority communalism ultimately assuming a separatist form.

Constraints of space also prevent us from taking up the case of Bihar where, since the 1960s, casteism both of the upper castes—Bhoomihars, Brahmins, Rajputs and Kayasthas—and the backward castes—Yadavas, Kurmis and Koeris—has gradually eroded and seriously damaged the administration, economy, educational system, and culture of the people. This is particularly depressing as the state had a hoary past, militant traditions of the national, peasant and tribal movements and produced in recent times political leaders of the calibre of Sachidanand Sinha, Rajendra Prasad, Mazhar-ul-Haq, Jayaprakash Narayan and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, and intellectual giants like the economist Gyan Chand, historian R.S. Sharma, political scientist B.B. Mazumdar, historian, philosopher and writer Rahul Sankrityan, novelist Phanishwar Nath Renu, and poets Nagarjun and Ramdhari Singh Dinkar.

The DMK in Tamil Nadu

A study of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) illustrates how a strong separatist regional strain in Indian polity was overcome and co-opted.

The DMK emerged in the 1950s as a party and a movement which thrived on strong caste, regional and even secessionist sentiments. It was the heir to two strands of the pre-independence period movements in Tamil Nadu: the non-Brahmin movement, which had led to the formation of the pro-British Justice Party in 1920, and the strongly reformist anti-caste, anti-religion Self-Respect Movement led by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as Periyar (Great Sage).

In 1944, Naicker and C.N. Annadurai established Dravida Kazhagam (Federation) or DK which split in 1949 when Annadurai founded the Dravida Munnetra (Progressive) Kazhagam (DMK). But, significantly, in contrast to the Justice Party and Naicker, Annadurai had taken up a strongly anti-imperialist, pro-nationalist position before 1947.

Annadurai was a brilliant writer, a skilful orator and an excellent organizer. Along with M. Karunanidhi and M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) and other film personalities—actors, directors and writers—Annadurai used dramas, films, journals, pamphlets and other mass media to reach out to the people and over time succeeded in building up a mass base, especially among the youth with a rural background, and a vibrant political organization.

The DMK was strongly anti-Brahmin, anti-North and anti-Aryan—southern Brahmins and North Indians being seen as Aryans, all other South Indians as Dravidas. It raised the slogan of opposition to the cultural, economic and political domination of the South by the North. Naicker and others had in 1938 organized a movement against the decision of the Congress ministry to introduce Hindi in Madras schools, labelling it to be an aspect of Brahminical North Indian cultural domination. The DMK also decided to oppose what it described as expansion of Hindi ‘imperialism’ in the South. Its main demand, however, was for a homeland for the Dravidas in the form of a separate independent South Indian state—Dravidnadu or Dravidasthan—consisting of Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Karnataka and Kerala.

During the 1950s and 1960s, however, there were several developments which gradually led to a change in the basic political thrust of the DMK. Naicker gave up his opposition to Congress when, in 1954, Kamaraj, a non-Brahmin, displaced C. Rajagopalachari as the dominant leader of Congress in Tamil Nadu and became the chief minister. The DMK leadership too gradually lessened its hostility to Brahmins and started underplaying its anti-Brahmin rhetoric. It also gradually shifted its emphasis from race to Tamil consciousness, to pride in Tamil language and culture and in being a Tamil. It, however, retained its opposition to Hindi and its emphasis on radical social reforms, especially in terms of the removal of all caste distinctions and the inculcation of a rational and critical approach towards the classical ‘Hindu’ scriptures.

There was also a gradual change in the DMK’s secessionist plank as it began to participate in elections and in parliamentary politics, and also because the other southern states refused to support secessionism. The DMK did not participate in the 1952 elections, but it tested its electoral

appeal by helping nearly thirty MLAs to win. It participated in the 1957 and 1962 elections. That a change was coming became visible when, in the 1962 elections, it entered into an alliance with Swatantra and the CPI and did not make a separate Dravidnadu a campaign issue though it was still a part of its manifesto. Later still, during the India–China war, it rallied to the national cause, fully supported the government, and suspended all propaganda for secession.

A further and final change came when, as a result of Nehru's determination to deal firmly with any secessionist movement, the 16th Constitutional Amendment was passed in 1962 declaring the advocacy of secession a crime and requiring every candidate to parliament or state assembly to swear 'allegiance to the Constitution' and to 'uphold the sovereignty and integrity of India'. The DMK immediately amended its constitution and gave up the demand for secession. From secessionism it now shifted to the demands for greater state autonomy, more powers to the states, while limiting the powers of the central government, an end to the domination and unfair treatment of the South by the Hindi-speaking North, and allocation of greater central economic resources for the development of Tamil Nadu. The DMK gradually developed as a state-wide party with appeal in urban as well as rural areas and with a programme of radical economic measures, social change and development of modern Tamil language and culture. It also further softened its anti-Brahmin stance and declared itself to be a party of all Tamils, which would accommodate Tamil Brahmins.

With each election the DMK kept expanding its social base and increasing its electoral strength. In 1962 it had won 50 seats in the state assembly and 7 in the Lok Sabha. Two subsequent events enabled it to take off in the 1967 elections. First, fierce anti-Congress sentiments were aroused by the anti-Hindi agitation of early 1965, and the DMK was the main beneficiary. Second, the DMK fought the 1967 elections in alliance with Swatantra, the CPM, PSP, SSP and the Muslim League. Consequently, it captured 138 of the 234 seats in the assembly, with Congress getting only 49. The DMK formed the government in the state with Annadurai as chief minister. Congress was never to recover from this defeat. The DMK, on the other hand, began to follow the trajectory of a 'normal' regional party.

After Annadurai's death in February 1969, M. Karunanidhi became the chief minister. Later, the DMK supported Indira Gandhi in her struggle against the Syndicate. Its support, along with that of CPI, enabled Indira Gandhi to remain in power after having been reduced to a minority in the Lok Sabha. In the 1971 elections to the Lok Sabha and the state assembly, the DMK teamed up with the Indira-led Congress (R), which surrendered all claims to assembly seats in return for DMK's support to it in 9 parliamentary seats which it won. The DMK won 183 out of the 234 assembly seats and 23 Lok Sabha seats.

In 1972, the DMK split, with MGR forming the All-India Anna DMK (AIADMK). The two-party system now emerged in Tamil Nadu, but operated between the two Dravida parties, with both parties alternating in power in the state since then.

Participation in electoral politics, assumption of office, and greater integration of Tamil Nadu with the national economy led to the DMK being transformed from a secessionist movement into an integral part of India's democratic and secular political system and a 'politically mature and pragmatic' regional, or rather one-state, party.

Just like the other mainstream parties, the DMK also split into two main, and later, several small parties. The DMK and AIADMK (and their offshoots) in turn, at one time or the other, allied with Congress, the CPI, CPM, Janata and Janata Dal and other all-India parties. In recent elections, the AIADMK in 1998 and the DMK in 1999 joined forces with the BJP, the party they had earlier accused of representing the Aryan North and Hindi domination at their worst. The two also gradually diluted their anti-North and anti-Hindi stance. They have given up the idea of Dravidnadu or even of the unification of the four southern states within the Indian Union. They have put the goal of the annihilation of the caste system in cold storage with the result that the Scheduled Castes and other downtrodden castes have been turning away from them. In fact, the anti-Brahmin movement has, as a whole, failed to make much of a dent in the Brahminic caste order and caste domination; its only success has been in driving out Brahmins from Tamil Nadu to the rest of India and the United States, thereby affecting science and technology, and intellectual and academic life in Tamil Nadu. Caught in a cleft between the rich and middle peasantry and the rural landless, the DMK and AIADMK have also virtually given up their agrarian radicalism. Their social radicalism has in the main taken the form of providing large-scale reservation in education and government services to backward castes and classes, which has resulted in long-term damage to administration, educational standards and development without significantly removing economic disparities based on caste and class.

Of course, the most important reason for the transformation of the Dravida parties has been the realization that (i) secession was not possible and the Indian state was strong enough to suppress any move towards it, (ii) there was no real contradiction between a regional identity and the overall national identity, (iii) India's federal and democratic system of government provided both the state and the individual Tamils economic opportunities, and a great deal of political and administrative freedom to develop and undertake social reforms, (iv) the Indian political system and national integration were based on acceptance of cultural pluralism, and (v) the states have complete cultural autonomy, including control over language and other cultural affairs. In short, the Dravida parties and the people of Tamil Nadu have come to realize over time that the concept of 'unity in diversity' is quite workable and an integral part of the Indian polity and ethos.

Telangana versus Coastal Andhra Pradesh

Andhra's is a case of a single linguistic cultural region being engulfed by political conflict and sub-regional movements based on disparity in development and presumed inequality in economic opportunities.

As we have seen, Andhra was created as a separate state in October 1953 and in November 1956 the Telugu-speaking Telangana area of Nizam's Hyderabad state was merged with it to create Andhra Pradesh. The hope was that being part of a large unilingual state would cement the Telugu people culturally, politically and economically. Even at that time certain Telangana Congress leaders, as also the States Reorganisation Commission, had some reservations about the merger because of Telangana being relatively more underdeveloped, its level of development being nearly half that of the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. Telangana's per capita income was Rs 188 compared to Rs 292 in the coastal districts; the number of hospital beds per lakh

population was 18.6 while it was 55.6 in the coastal districts. The literacy rate in Telangana was 17.3 per cent as against 30.8 in the rest of Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, Telangana had only 9 miles of roads per 100 square miles, the comparative figure being 37 miles for coastal Andhra. Unlike coastal Andhra, Telangana's sources of irrigation were scanty, consisting mostly of rain-fed tanks and wells.

A powerful movement for a separate state of Telangana developed in 1969 based on the belief that because the politics and administration of the state were dominated by people from the Andhra region (Andhrans), the Andhra government had neglected Telangana, had done very little to remove the regional economic imbalance, and Andhrans were exploiting the Telangana region. For example, it was believed that in rural electrification the ratio of the Andhra region and Telangana was 4:1 during the Second Plan and 5:1 in the Third Plan. Similarly, in the matter of irrigation schemes, the Andhra region was stated to have been favoured at the cost of Telangana. Further, the revenue surpluses being generated in Telangana because of free sale of liquor were supposed to be diverted to Andhra which had prohibition. All these allegations were refuted by the spokespersons of the government but the people of Telangana were not convinced.

But, above all, the separatist sentiment was based on the notion of injustice and discrimination in employment in state institutions. While the number of educated job-seekers had been growing as a result of sharp increase in education, employment, especially in the government services, was contracting all over the state as a result of the difficulties in the implementation of the Third Plan. But the political leaders and the unemployed middle-class youth put the blame for the growing unemployment in Telangana and Hyderabad city on the governmental bias in favour of the Andhra region.

The major issue in this context became the implementation of what came to be known as the Mulki Rules. The Nizam's government in Hyderabad had accepted as early as 1918 that in all state services those who were born in the state or had lived there for fifteen years (i.e., Mulkis) would be given preference, while restrictions would be imposed on the employment of outsiders. At the time of the merger of Telangana with Andhra in 1956 the leaders of the two regions had evolved a 'gentlemen's agreement' providing for the retention of the Mulki Rules in a modified form, a fixed share of places in the ministry for Telangana leaders, and preference for students from Telangana in admission to educational institutions including to Osmania University in Hyderabad. The discontented in Telangana accused the government of deliberately violating the agreement while the government asserted that it was trying its best to implement it. The latter argued that sometimes properly qualified persons were not available from the Telangana region because of educational backwardness in the old Hyderabad state. For example, expansion of education in Telangana made it necessary to bring in a large number of teachers from the Andhra region.

Towards the end of 1968, the students of Osmania University went on a strike on the question of discrimination in employment and education. The strike soon spread to other parts of Telangana. Fat was added to the fire by a Supreme Court judgement in March 1969 declaring the reservation of posts under the 1956 agreement to be constitutionally invalid. A massive, often violent, agitation demanding separation of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh now spread all over

Telangana where schools and colleges remained closed for nearly nine months. The agitation was soon joined by organizations of non-gazetted government employees, who went on an indefinite strike, and a large number of teachers, lawyers, businessmen and other sections of the middle classes.

To lead the movement for a separate Telangana state in an organized manner, the Telangana Praja Samiti (TPS) was soon formed. A large number of disgruntled and dissident Congress leaders joined the TPS and occupied a dominant position in it. All the major national parties opposed the demand for a separate Telangana state; the two Communist parties looked upon it as an effort of the vested interests to misguide and misdirect popular anger against the landlord-bourgeois system. A large number of local leaders of Swatantra Party, Samyukta Socialist Party and Jan Sangh, however, supported the demand. Indira Gandhi and the central Congress leadership strongly resisted the demand though; trying to play a mediatory role, they urged the Andhra government to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards Telangana's economic demands and to redress its grievances.

Because of the central government's firm opposition to the breakup of the state, the failure of the movement to mobilize the peasantry, and the inevitable fatigue from which any mass movement suffers if it is not able to achieve success when it is at its height, the movement for a separate Telangana began to lose steam and to peter out after the summer of 1969. In July, the economically hard-pressed non-gazetted employees called off their strike. The students too went back to their studies before the examinations to be held in December 1969. Still the TPS succeeded in winning 10 out of 14 Telangana seats in the 1971 elections to the Lok Sabha.

After the 1971 elections, a compromise was worked out under the aegis of the central government, under which the Mulki Rules were to continue and a Telangana regional committee with statutory powers was to be formed. The compromise satisfied the disgruntled middle-class youth. The TPS merged with Congress in September 1971 after Brahmanand Reddy, the chief minister, resigned and was replaced by P.V. Narasimha Rao from Telangana.

It was, however, now the turn of the middle classes of the Andhra region to express anger. They were convinced that the Mulki Rules, however much amended, would adversely affect recruitment of Andhrans to state services. The political storm broke when the Supreme Court gave a judgement in October 1972 sanctioning the continuance of Mulki Rules. And, as in the case of Telangana, students and non-gazetted employees unions took the initiative in organizing meetings, strikes and demonstrations, which sometimes turned violent, and demanded the repeal of the Mulki Rules and other acts of alleged discrimination against Andhran government employees. Once again, doctors, who argued that medical funds were being diverted to Hyderabad city, lawyers, who wanted a High Court in the Andhra region, and businessmen, who opposed ceiling on urban wealth proposed by the state government, joined the agitation. An important difference from the Telangana agitation was that the big landowners and rich peasants, too, took an active part in the agitation because they were opposed to the land ceiling legislation passed by the state legislature in September 1972.

The prime minister announced a compromise formula on 27 November, according to which the Mulki Rules would be further modified and would continue in Hyderabad city till the end of

1977 and in the rest of Telangana till the end of 1980. The formula was seen as favourable to Telangana and the Andhra agitation now turned against both the central government and the concept of a united Andhra Pradesh. On 7 December, the Andhra non-gazetted employees went on an indefinite strike. Encouraged by Swatantra, the Jan Sangh and some independents, the agitators now demanded the creation of a separate state for the Andhra region. Once again the demand for division of the state was firmly opposed by the Communists, with the result that most of the trade unions and Kisan Sabha organizations stayed away from the agitation. Many Congressmen, however, supported it. Nine members of the Narasimha Rao cabinet resigned from it, though others remained integrationists. The movement turned violent in many places with attacks on the railways and other central government property and clashes with the police. The Central Reserve Police Force and the army had to be brought in at many places.

Once again Indira Gandhi took a firm stand in favour of a united Andhra Pradesh. On 21 December the Lok Sabha passed the Mulki Rules Bill. On 17 January 1973, she asked Narasimha Rao to resign and then imposed President's Rule in the state. The situation was gradually brought under control. Faced with a determined central government and as 'agitation fatigue' set in, the separatist movement subsided, especially as it could not mobilize the mass of the peasantry and the working class. Moreover, the epicentre of the movement remained in the coastal districts. Though the Rayalaseema region was opposed to the Mulki Rules it did not feel strongly about the demand for a separate state. As in the case of the upsurge in Telangana, non-gazetted government employees called off their strike in March and the students too returned to their classes. Finally, in September, the central government put forward a six-point formula which did away with the Mulki Rules but extended preference in employment and education to all districts and regions of the state over outsiders. The 32nd Constitutional Amendment was passed to enable the implementation of the formula. This satisfied most of the Congressmen of the two regions. In December, President's Rule was lifted and J. Vengal Rao, who became the consensus chief minister, was asked to implement the new formula. Thereafter, the demand for division of the state gradually petered out in both parts of Andhra Pradesh, though the Jan Sangh and later the BJP adopted it as a part of their programme.

In the case of both the Telangana and Andhra regions, the central government firmly and successfully opposed the demand for bifurcation of the state as it was apprehensive of similar demands being raised in other parts of the country. At the same time, what made it possible in the end to accommodate the two regional demands in Andhra was the fact that they were entirely economic and did not involve communal or cultural differences. Another lesson learnt from the two movements was that it is necessary not only to alleviate economic disparities between different states but also to promote integrated development within a state and that mere linguistic and cultural unity was not enough to inculcate a feeling of oneness and solidarity among a state's people.

Turmoil in Assam

In terms of population Assam is a small state. Political turmoil racked the state for years because its people feared the weakening or loss of their identity as Assamese. At no stage, however, did

their politics take a secessionist turn. Several components constituted this fear, shaping the nature of demands made and movements launched.

(i) The Assamese had a strong and persistent grievance that the severe underdevelopment of Assam was due to unfair treatment being meted out to it by the central government, which had not only neglected its development but also discriminated against it in allocation of central funds and location of industrial and other economic enterprises. Much worse, the Centre was seen as having deprived Assam of its due share of revenues from its crude oil and tea and ply wood industries. Assam's revenues had been pumped out and utilized elsewhere in the country. Assam's economic backwardness was also ascribed to control of its economy and resources, particularly the production and sale of its tea, ply wood and other commodities by outsiders, mostly Marwaris and Bengalis. Moreover, the labour force in tea, ply wood and other industries was also mostly non-Assamese.

Several times since independence, Assam has witnessed protest movements. There were demands for a greater share for Assam in the revenues derived from tea and ply wood industries, a higher royalty for its crude oil, larger central financial grants and plan allocation, location of oil refineries in Assam, construction of more bridges over the Brahmaputra river, upgrading of the railway link between Assam and the rest of India, greater effort at industrialization of the state by both the state and the central governments, and greater employment of Assamese in central government services and public sector enterprises located in the state.

(ii) For historical reasons, which we do not have the space to discuss here, throughout the colonial period and for several years after independence, Bengalis settled in Assam occupied a dominant position in government services, in teaching and other modern professions and in higher posts in the public and private sectors. Being more backward in education, the Assamese-speaking youth felt disadvantaged in competition with the Bengali-speaking middle classes for jobs. There was also a strong feeling among the Assamese speakers that Bengali predominance in education and middle-class jobs also posed a threat to the Assamese language and culture.

The lack of job opportunities, the significant role of 'outsiders' in Assam's industry and trade, and the fear of being culturally dominated produced a sense of deprivation in the minds of middle-class Assamese. They started a movement in the 1950s demanding preference for Assamese speakers in recruitment to state government services and making Assamese the sole official language and medium of instruction in schools and colleges. Bengalis, who formed a majority in Cachar district and had a large presence in the rest of Assam, felt that the practice, initiated in 1871, of having both Assamese and Bengali as official languages should continue.

The movement for a change in the official language led to the gradual building up of hostility between Bengali and Assamese speakers. In July 1960, it erupted in tragic language riots. Bengalis were attacked *en masse* in both urban and rural areas, their houses were looted and set on fire. A large number of Bengalis had to take shelter in Cachar and Bengal. This led to a counter-agitation in Cachar and an angry, sometimes chauvinist, reaction in West Bengal.

Very soon, in 1960 itself, the state assembly passed a law, against the wishes of Bengali speakers and many tribal groups, making Assamese the sole official language, though Bengali

remained the additional official language in Cachar. In 1972, Assamese was made the sole medium of instruction also in colleges affiliated to Guwahati University.

This effort to impose the Assamese language became one of the factors which hampered the process of evolution of the Assamese identity, prevented it from encompassing the entire state and led to many of the hill tribes demanding separation from Assam.

(iii) Over the years, the demographic profile of Assam underwent a change as a result of migration from other parts of India and, above all, from East Bengal-Bangladesh. However, the main grievance that was to develop into a massive anti-foreigners movement in 1979, was the large-scale illegal migration in a relatively short span of time from Bangladesh and to some extent from Nepal.

Migration of outsiders into Assam has a long history. The British administration had encouraged migration of thousands of Biharis to work on the tea plantations and of hundreds of thousands of Bengali peasants to settle on the vast uncultivated tracts of Assam. Assamese landlords had welcomed the hardworking Bengali tenants in the sparsely populated Assam. Between 1939 and 1947 Muslim communalists encouraged Bengali Muslim migration to create a better bargaining position in case of partition of India. Partition led to a large-scale refugee influx from Pakistani Bengal into Assam besides West Bengal and Tripura. In 1971, after the Pakistani crackdown in East Bengal, more than a million refugees sought shelter in Assam. Most of them went back after the creation of Bangladesh, but nearly 100,000 remained. After 1971, there occurred a fresh, continuous and large-scale influx of land-hungry Bangladeshi peasants into Assam. But land in Assam had by now become scarce, and Assamese peasants and tribals feared loss of their holdings. However, this demographic transformation generated the feeling of linguistic, cultural and political insecurity, that overwhelmed the Assamese and imparted a strong emotional content to their movement against illegal migrants in the 1980s.

Since the late nineteenth century and especially after independence, a certain cultural renaissance took place enhancing people's pride in language, culture, literature, folk art and music in Assam. Even while becoming a part of the Indian nation-in-the-making, a distinct Assamese linguistic and cultural identity emerged. The process was a complex one, given the state's cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. Many Assamese felt that the development and consolidation of a wider Assamese identity, by the gradual assimilation of Assamese tribes, was prevented by the central government's decision to separate large tribal areas from Assam and create small non-viable states such as Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

The demographic transformation of Assam created apprehension among many Assamese that the swamping of Assam by foreigners and non-Assamese Indians would lead to the Assamese being reduced to a minority in their own land and consequently to the subordination of their language and culture, loss of control over their economy and politics, and, in the end, the loss of their very identity and individuality as a people.

There was undoubtedly a basis for these fears. In 1971, Assamese-speaking persons constituted only 59 per cent of Assam's population. This percentage covered a large number of Bengali speakers, many of whom had in the course of time and as a result of generational change also

learnt Assamese and had given the census enumerators Assamese as their mother tongue because of pure political expediency. Moreover, Assamese speakers lacked a majority in Guwahati and several other towns, which are the main habitat of literature, the Press, culture, modern economy and politics.

Though illegal migration had surfaced as a political matter several times since 1950, it came to the fore as a major issue in 1979 when it became clear that a large number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh had become voters in the state. Afraid of their acquiring a dominant role in Assam's politics through the coming election at the end of 1979, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (Assam People's Struggle Council), a coalition of regional political, literary and cultural associations, started a massive, anti-illegal migration movement. This campaign won the support of virtually all sections of Assamese speakers, Hindu or Muslim, and many Bengalis.

The leaders of the movement claimed that the number of illegal aliens was as high as 31 to 34 per cent of the state's total population. They, therefore, asked the central government to seal Assam's borders to prevent further inflow of migrants, to identify all illegal aliens and delete their names from the voters list and to postpone elections till this was done, and to deport or disperse to other parts of India all those who had entered the state after 1961. So strong was the popular support to the movement that elections could not be held in fourteen out of sixteen parliamentary constituencies.

The years from 1979 to 1985 witnessed political instability in the state, collapse of state governments, imposition of President's Rule, sustained, often violent, agitation, frequent general strikes, civil disobedience campaigns which paralysed all normal life for prolonged periods, and unprecedented ethnic violence. For several years there were repeated rounds of negotiations between the leaders of the movement and the central government, but no agreement could be reached. It was not easy to determine who were the illegal aliens or 'foreigners' or how to go about detecting or deporting them. There was also lack of goodwill and trust between the two sides.

The central government's effort to hold a constitutionally mandated election to the state assembly in 1983 led to its near-total boycott, a complete breakdown of order, and the worst killings since 1947 on the basis of tribal, linguistic and communal identities. Nearly 3,000 people died in state-wide violence. The election proved to be a complete failure with less than 2 per cent of the voters casting their votes in the constituencies with Assamese majority. The Congress party did form the government, but it had no legitimacy at all.

The 1983 violence had a traumatic effect on both sides which once again resumed negotiations in earnest. Finally, the Rajiv Gandhi government was able to sign an accord with the leaders of the movement on 15 August 1985. All those foreigners who had entered Assam between 1951 and 1961 were to be given full citizenship, including the right to vote; those who had done so after 1971 were to be deported; the entrants between 1961 and 1971 were to be denied voting rights for ten years but would enjoy all other rights of citizenship. A parallel package for the economic development of Assam, including a second oil refinery, a paper mill and an institute of technology, was also worked out. The central government also promised to provide 'legislative

and administrative safeguards to protect the cultural, social, and linguistic identity and heritage' of the Assamese people.

The task of revising the electoral rolls on the basis of the agreement was now taken up in earnest. The existing assembly was dissolved and fresh elections held in December 1985. A new party, the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), formed by the leaders of the anti-foreigners movement, was elected to power, winning 64 of the 126 assembly seats. Prafulla Mahanta, an AASU leader, became at the age of thirty-two the youngest chief minister of independent India. Extreme and prolonged political turbulence in Assam ended, though fresh insurgencies were to come up later on, for example that of the Bodo tribes for a separate state and of the secessionist United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

Experience in Assam since 1985 has shown that while it was and is necessary to stop the entry of foreigners, massive detection and deportation of the existing illegal entrants is not easy and perhaps not possible. Expulsion of old or recent minorities of all types is not the answer. Rather their gradual integration and assimilation into the Assamese identity is the only long-term and realistic solution. Chauvinism, whether in the form of their exclusion or their forceful elimination would only disturb and weaken the historical process of Assamese identity-in-the-making.

It is noteworthy that the Assam anti-foreigners movement was not communal or secessionist or disruptive of the nation in any form. It was therefore possible for the central government and the all-India political parties to negotiate and accommodate its demands, even though they were sometimes exaggerated and unrealistic.

There were elements in the Assam movement, such as the RSS, which wanted to give it a communal twist because most of the illegal aliens were Muslims. Similarly, some others wanted to give the movement a chauvinist, xenophobic, Assamese colour. The movement, however, succeeded in avoiding both these eventualities because of the non-communal cultural tradition of the Assamese, the role of the national parties such as the CPI, CPM and large parts of Congress, and the wide base of the movement and leadership among Assamese Muslims and Bengalis. Undoubtedly, the movement suffered from many weaknesses; but, then, no movement is generated and develops according to a blueprint.

The conflict in Assam and its resolution again showed that while communal and secessionist movements disruptive of the nation cannot be accommodated and have to be opposed and defeated, it is quite possible and, in fact, necessary to accommodate politics of identity based on language or culture, or economic deprivation and inequality, for they are quite compatible with progressive and secular nationalism.