

## **CULTURAL ELITES AND MIDDLE-CLASS POLITICS IN POST-INDEPENDENT ASSAM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This essay explores the role of the elite cultural organisations in shaping the political discourse of Assam. The presence of cultural organizations such as the ones discussed in this paper is important because they articulate the aspirations of the elite in society. In this paper I have tried to identify how socio-cultural organizations reflect the characters of elite clubs and in the context of Assam, how the middle-class, upper-caste, educated elites wielded social, cultural and political power through these organizations. By looking at organisations such as the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha, this paper locates how cultural elites create exclusionary spaces, which thereby shape the political discourse for a region. The study of socio-cultural organisation and middle-class politics in Assam is reframed within the study of politics of cultural elites in Assam. This contributes to the studies on regional specificities of elite formations.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Elites, Middle Class, Politics, Assam.

## **Introduction**

The site of the social has an active potential for developing into sites for political imagination. The language of modern politics in Assam did not emerge synthetically; it had its roots in the vibrant public sphere in the colonial and post-colonial period which informed the cultural and intellectual foundation of the society. The events that transpired in Assam in the nineteenth century have been recognised within a larger movement for the assertion of regional identity and political autonomy. The regionalist tendencies that erupted in the nineteenth century created a rupture between the civil society and the state and within this rupture a class of educated, urban elites materialized as custodians of the Assamese culture. The significance of these educated urban elites came to be projected in the many social organisations that played a vital role in shaping the politics of Assam. The opinions of this dominant Assamese middle class reflected all important developments in Assam since the early nineteenth century. The socio-cultural organizations of which these individuals were members, began articulating their political, social, and economic concerns at a more public platform. Two important socio-cultural organizations, the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha have held important cultural and political significance in Assam. Both organizations drew their members from the educated middle class who were vocal participants in the national imagining of Assam. However, the attitude of the Assam Association and the Sahitya Sabha towards the protection of the ‘Assamese’ language and culture was criticized on many fronts. They reflected the values and premises of the class it represented, which was a minority, educated Assamese-speaking middle-class elite. What happened as a result was many of the ethnic communities felt left out from the larger Assamese identity which was imagined and constructed by the upper-caste, middle-class elite in Assam. A series of social processes followed that changed the way politics was organised in the region and how different communities in Assam got initiated into organised politics.

Looking back at the history of Assam, many structural and cultural changes occurred that shaped the social and political trajectory of Assam for the years to

come. When the Ahom kingdom came under British rule in 1826, it was the first time that the region became politically incorporated into the pan-Indian imperial imagination. Once Assam was made into an administrative area, its boundaries were drawn up according to administrative conveniences such that many other regions like the area of Angami Nagas and Lushais became a part of Assam, noted Baruah (1999). After Assam was incorporated into the Indian union, the independent Indian state's political manipulations in the north east greatly altered the nature of the social in the region. The modern developmental state was instrumental in connecting the region with the rest of the country and within itself. Towns and villages were linked through railways and print and radio mediums were responsible for disseminating information. A brief tracing of the history of modern Assam takes one back to 1905, when a new expanded province was sought to be created, combining Assam with all of eastern Bengal. Given the circumstances, the boundaries of the newly formed colonial Assam included the large Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet.

The British often treated Assam as a land frontier for Bengal. As a result of this colonial administrative hijacking of the region, the demography of the region went through transition-large scale immigration from Bengal to Assam began taking place. At the same time, Bengali dominated as the language of the courts and government schools in Assam. This made a very controversial impact on the language question in the region. Assamese intellectuals saw that the progress of Assam would only be possible if its language was given its due status but the colonial authorities saw these demands as demands of a separate province. Since Sylhet was attached to provincial Assam, a bulk of the important opportunities were taken advantage of by the English-educated Bengalis. This was highly resented and this bias was opposed by a section of the educated Assamese who had begun to be vocal about these issues by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

A vibrant social sphere began emerging in Assam which was critical in the consolidation of a group of well-off individuals from upper-caste family

backgrounds who emerged as arbitrators of the political, cultural and social matters of Assam. The educated middle-class Assamese were relationally more advanced than the rest of the ethnic groups in the region. Although the Axom Sahitya Sabha had mass appeal, it was evident that the power to control the narrative remained with a select few, mostly the Assamese-speaking elite. The Assam Association as well as the Sahitya Sabha gave the civil society in Assam an organizational capacity, which saw its impactful fruition in the scale of the Assam movement. Despite the important role played by the Assam Association and the Sahitya Sabha, these organizations acted as exclusive clubs that followed exclusionary practices opening up selective access to its functioning and membership. The exclusive nature of these organizations led to widespread criticism. Scholars and commentators have criticized the Sahitya Sabha and the Assam Association over time for taking a strong Assamese chauvinist stance that sought to create a pan-Assamese identity without taking into account the language, culture and identity of the various ethnic communities who resided in Assam. The Assam Association and the Sahitya Sabha had the characteristics of elite clubs and can be placed within the vibrant public sphere of Assam whose political underpinnings had a significant impact on shaping the cultural politics in the region.

By looking at organisations such as the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha, this paper locates how cultural elites create exclusionary spaces, which thereby shape the political discourse for a region. The analysis of socio-cultural organizations and the role of the middle class in shaping the public sphere in Assam is redefined within the examination of cultural elite politics, contributing to the understanding of regional distinctions in elite groups. To delineate the nature of politics in Assam, it is crucial to closely examine the influence of these organizations.

### **Locating Power in the Social Sphere**

Much before the independent state came into being, specifically during the period of British colonial administration, much of the geographical and spatial

dimensions of the region had transformed. Much like how the British altered the socio-political structures in the rest of India, the British presence in Assam initiated a series of changes that left foundational impacts. Guha (1991) notes that the historical accounts of the society of Assam in the Pre-colonial period show that the Assamese society was consolidated largely under the Ahoms, who were the major administrators of greater Assam for almost 600 years. The Ahoms were able to successfully fight off the Mughals in the seventeenth century, and create a strong political and social hold over the area. In 1826, with the signing of the Yandabo Treaty, as the Ahoms relinquished its kingdom to the British for administration, it was for the first time that the region became incorporated into the larger British imperial project. Existing kingdoms ruled by Tribal Kings such as the Kachari Kingdoms and Koch Kingdoms were categorized into administrative areas and the boundaries were drawn up according to colonial administrative conveniences. These historical developments define the present politics in the region in a major way.

In the first few years of colonial rule, the British tried to form alliances with the pre-colonial elites who were termed variously as *Chamuapaiks*, *Mahantas*, *Khatdars* etc as noted by Guha (1991) and as such included revenue functionaries into their administrative system. The land ownership pattern in pre-colonial Assam proved to be conducive for the middle class to develop in colonial Assam. The big feudal landlords could avail of modern education and other opportunities under the aegis of British rule and be able to shift their loyalty to the British easily. The landed gentry or *dangarias* and the educated *babus* who were employed as *Mauzadars* and government servants in the nineteenth century belonged to the families of the landholding classes with upper-caste backgrounds, noted Guha (1991). As a result, the upper caste Assamese were able to exploit the colonial bureaucratic apparatus and establish a dominant role for themselves in the society. The Assamese middle class emerged amongst the upper caste as a result of these imperial networks and this educated elite gained prosperity under the patronage of the British.

Most prominent individuals who belonged to this section of the society included Maniram Dewan (1806-58) who became the Dewan of the Assam Tea Company and later started his tea plantation. As urban centres began developing, clusters of middle-class localities emerged in and around areas of present-day Jorhat and Tezpur. As Sharma (2014) notes people like Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59), Gunabhiram Baruah (1837-98), Boli Narayan Borah (1852-1927) who was educated in modern English became the youth leaders and prominent faces of a class of English educated, upwardly mobile individuals forming the nascent middle class that was consolidating in Assam. This nascent Assamese middle class was an important catalyst in the socio-economic development and integration of the region. The fear of encroachment on government jobs and employment avenues by the Bengalis was the driving force which led to the consolidation of the middle class in Assam.

This section of the society also had active links to the peasantry and this link gave greater impetus to the movements launched largely to fulfil the middle-class aspirations and interests. This social position also became the cause of antagonism between this social group and the other social groups in the region. Nineteenth-century politics in Assam was largely shaped around middle-class which was played out through the socio-cultural organizations that although identified themselves as apolitical organizations, played active political roles. Politics in Assam took a drastic turn when the civil society organisations began mobilising public opinion around issues of economic, social and political concerns plaguing the state. These organisations identified themselves as “non-political”, as socio-cultural organisations. None of these organisations identified themselves as aligned to a political party or called themselves interest groups but identified themselves as cultural organisations seeking to ‘protect’ the Assamese culture and identity. However, their presence and authority had massive consequences on the politics of the region. These organisations fell within the purview of civil society as they encompassed a public space beyond the direct state control and worked as a network between formal and informal associations of ‘concerned’ citizens of

Assam. One way to understand the substantive role of the Assamese middle class is to situate the various socio-cultural organizations of which this social group was an active part of. Two such organizations, the Assam Association in the pre-independent period and the Assam Sahitya Sabha, in post-independent Assam became the mouthpiece of the educated, middle class in the state.

These elite organizations have played a crucial role in shaping the political discourse of Assam. They have stayed pertinent by articulating the aspirations of a small minority of the educated elite.

It was through these socio-cultural organizations that the middle-class, upper-caste, educated minority was able to wield social, cultural and political power. The middle class, upper-caste, educated minority was culturally privileged and they functioned as the cultural elites of Assam.

These socio-cultural organizations, of which these elites were a part, became the seat of symbolic power for the existing elite groups and they resisted the entry of other groups into this space. Through these clubs, sanctions are placed, and people are excluded from opportunities and at the same time, mass interests are manipulated to coordinate the aspirations of the elite groups. As Lamont (1994) argues, elites use cultural symbols and institutions to help constitute their own identities and exclude others through the process of boundary-drawing. A shared culture is sought to be generated through exclusive clubs that crystallize to form the culture of the elite. Scholars like Bourdieu (1984) have argued that cultural dispositions serve as markers of elite status and that, in addition to reflecting social position, culture also helps to produce it. Elites have more often than not used cultural institutions to construct themselves as a class defined by a particular set of tastes, values, and ways of being as Beisel (1998) and DiMaggio (1982) note. Often elites, through the mechanism of institutions like social clubs and organisations exclude people from social power. Elites also wield ideological power to manipulate the masses into particular political mobilizations. The English-educated Assamese as such was an elite group that constituted of English-educated intellectuals. These

intellectual elites had a powerful toolkit that influenced the politics of Assam and also counterbalanced the power and authority of both the British and the independent Indian state on various occasions. However, these organisations were far from being democratic spaces and often worked as a platform for the creation and continuation of elite domination. The Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha and their role during the Assam movement portray the regional specificities of the elite formations and how in Assam these social clubs proved to be a catalyst for social movements of one kind.

### **Assamese Middle Class and the Assam Association**

Tracing the history of the formation of the middle class in Assam opens up an interesting chapter in the economic history of Assam. As Kalita(2011) notes it took several years for the consolidation of the middle class in Assam, which traces its roots to four historical processes -networks of trade and commerce, participation in government employment, land ownership and the growth of the tea plantation industry. The group which formed a significant foundation for the development of the middle classes was the individuals who were government officials, the job holders at the civil and judicial branches and revenue officials. A section of the middle class that emerged also belonged largely to the tea plantation the tea managers, the *Bura Sahabs*. Due to their economic capital, a lot of these families sent their children to places like Calcutta and Delhi for education. Individuals like Maniram Dewan who was one of the last Ahom feudal aristocrats or AnandaramDhekialPhukan, who was educated in modern, English western education and other such members of a small group of English educated class who were active in the public sphere became prominent faces of this new middle class. Three major elements could be identified to be the core ideology of the nascent Assamese middle class that began emerging in the 1860's- loyalty to the British, provincial exclusiveness and the preservation and expansion of the class interest.

The years 1873-74 were crucial for instituting middle-class politics in Assam. The English middle-class intelligentsia which was also well-versed in the

Assamese language began showing interest and awareness about their separate linguistic, cultural and political existence from the Bengali-speaking population. The assertion of the autonomy of the Assamese language and culture was the task of the first generation of Assamese public intellectuals who had to make the case that the Assamese were a distinct people with a distinct language and culture. Intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan were at the forefront of such activities. Actively publishing in Assamese, he also petitioned General Moffat Mills against the use of Bengali language, which was identified as a foreign language in the vernacular schools in Assam. As noted by Sharma (2014) some groups of the middle class began voicing their opinions in leading Assamese dailies like *Prabashi*, and *Mrinmayee* opposing the converging of Assamese and Bengali languages. A staunch rejection of the secondary status given to the Assamese language was taken up by various members of the middle class, which ultimately took up the character of cultural nationalism.

These concerns about Assamese culture and language took concrete shape in the year 1867, with the draft proposal of the Assam Association. The Assam Association was formally instituted in 1903, in its Guwahati session. 1903 was also the year when the reconstitution of the provinces of Bengal and Assam took place. About forty prominent individuals who held influential positions as tea plantation owners, government servants and businessmen gathered to form the Assam Association. This organization became the mouthpiece of the few educated Assamese who put up pertinent social, political and economic questions to the colonial government. The Association remained one of the primary organizations which identified itself as a non-political organization that had in some senses, had a softer approach to the British suzerainty. This association was dominated by the wealthy and the westernised Assamese individuals, mostly men whose objectives were to improve the local self-government and the municipal administration, secure more jobs for the educated Assamese youth in government departments and establish educational institutions and propagate ideals of trade and commerce and industry and also champion the case of Assamese language and literature. It was

dominantly serving the interests of the middle classes but also tried to articulate the grievances of the masses, which was largely a peasant society. As identified by Kalita(2011), the activities of the Association between 1917-1919 prepared the ground for Assam's participation in the national struggle under Indian National Congress. In the sessions conducted over the three years, there was a strong plea for the establishment of a university in Assam similar to the Calcutta University which was the seat of language, literature and culture for the Bengali intelligentsia. The Assam Association was one of the first few region-based local organisations in pre-independent Assam which was institutionalised as a thriving site of intellectual and public debate and discussion. It was also important because it was an active agent for political activity. It was along the footsteps of the Assam Association, that the Axom Sahitya Sabha formed itself, in the post-independent period.

The formation of the Assam Association represented the organizational capacity of the middle class in Assam. The Association as a formal organization was not only instituted to shape the aspirations for the region but to also reflect the middle-class ideology harboured by this group of educated, upper-caste, middle-class individuals that crystallized their position as the elite class in the social hierarchy of Assam. The cultural elites initiated a period of aggressive Assamese nationalism. They were fueled by their desire to protect the Assamese identity from the onslaught of two distinct sets of immigrants over time. First were the Bengali middle class in the colonial period and the Bengali-speaking Muslim immigrants from East Bengal in the post-independent period. The first group was seen as a threat to the advancement to the advancement of the Assamese educated individuals because the Bengali middle class received undue patronage from the British and on the other hand for the other group, the middle class feared that "these immigrants would change the demographic, cultural and political makeup of Assam, noted Guha (2000). In the pre-independent period, the cultural elites framed the nature of middle-class politics in Assam. As Mahanta (2013) notes, there was a specific strand of public opinion that was spearheaded by intellectuals like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Jnananath Bora, and Chandra Nath Sharma were apprehensive that

the Assamese culture would be replaced by non-Assamese Indians. this was followed by their desire to engage in a political leadership that was separate from the dominant All India Congress leadership, which was weaved around strong Assamese nationalism.

### **Axom Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society)**

The political discourse in Assam during 1979-85 was centred on the question of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. At the same time, economic underdevelopment in the state had been one of the major points of discussion in the literary works of the nineteenth century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many writers and social critics at the time started writing about the Assamese fear of becoming a minority in their state. Gyannath Bora published *AsomatBideshi* (Foreigners in Assam) in 1923, a polemical piece that stirred intense reaction among the local intellectual circles, and also Bhupen Hazarika in his famous song “*AamiAxomiyaNahouDukhia*”, (We Assamese are not poor) put out a clarion call across the sections of the society calling for social and politically awareness. In short, the nineteenth and twentieth-century literary and cultural discourse of Assam was dominated by the fear of the Assamese becoming a cultural minority in its state.

The Assamese middle class had faced the clear impact of four decades of language subjugation in the colonial period. Definitive administrative preference for Bengalis in the state bureaucracy and lack of opportunities in the government sector prompted the Assamese middle-class leadership to take matters into their own hand; they tried to propel the cause of the lack of opportunities with rigid actions and thoughts. In 1888, an organisation called *AxomiyaBhaxa Unnati XadhiniXobha*(Association for Development of the Assamese Language) was founded in Calcutta by the Assamese students studying there. This association identified that a developed language is a sign of developed people and the goal of the Xobha was to help the Assamese mother tongue grow. The *Axom Sahitya Sabha* was a successor to this late nineteenth-century cultural rise. The *Axom*

*Sahitya Sabha* was formally constituted in 1917 (Nag 1986). One of the projects of the *Unnati Xadhini* was to remove all grammatical anomalies from the Assamese Language. Ideologically, it was identified that language would be the marker of nationality. All native speakers of Assamese would be seen as belonging to the Assamese *jati*. As Baruah 1999 identifies, those who could and who could not become a part of the Assamese nationality became an important part of the cultural politics of Assam which was later adopted by the *Sahitya Sabha* staunchly.

Although publically known as a literary and cultural society, almost all of the *Sahitya Sabha* members were politically active and represented the political ideologies of the *Sabha* in public forums. The *Sahitya Sabha* actively took a political turn when it openly demanded that Assamese should be made the state language in 1960. It was staunchly opposed to the bi-lingual Bill put forward by the Chief Minister in the Assam Assembly, which sought to give recognition to Bengali as the second language of the state. This call by the *Sabha* was preceded and followed by widespread violence which is often referred to as the language riots. The growing political role of the *Sabha* also caught the attention of the Government during the time of intense agitation of the Assam Movement. Although the *Sabha* had always identified itself to be the cultural and literary panel that consistently sought the promotion of the Assamese language during the 1975-89 campaign for ending illegal infiltration into Assam, the *Sabha* gave up its official nonpolitical posture and formally became part of the *Gana Sangram Parishad* (Organization for People's Struggles). This open declaration strained the relationship between the sitting government and the *Sabha* who were receiving patronage from the state till then (Baruah 1999). The *Sahitya Sabha* became an active partaker in political activities in the decade of the 1980s in Assam.

The *Sabha*, however, harbored a chauvinist attitude towards adopting the Assamese language. The educated elite leadership of the *Sabha* was pressing for the protection of Assamese so much so that they overlooked the many hills and plains Tribal communities living in the region, who did not necessarily speak

Assamese as their mother language. The execution of a fierce cultural nationalism drove the hill tribes to form a separate homeland in Meghalaya for themselves, noted Baruah (2005). Within what remained of Assam, the Bodo tribe also began outrightly rejecting the forced Assamese cultural assimilation and began asserting their identity as a separate nation. In the post-independence period thus, what authors like Sanjib Baruah (2005) call, sub-nationalist tendencies had begun expanding horizontally within Assam. Thus identity and cultural assertion took centre stage in the political narrative of modern Assam. The *Sabha*'s chauvinist stand on Assamese language and identity in the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of the middle class among the plains tribal speeded up the process of cultural and ideological separation of a sizeable section of the plains tribal from the Assamese mainstream. As it occurred, the Bodo, Mishing and Karbi ethnic communities did not want to live within the political boundaries of Assam. The newly emerging middle class within the ethnic communities feared that their identity would submerge in the expansion of Assamese nationalism, which was popularized as *Jatiyotabadi*. In confrontation with this fear, many literary and cultural organizations of these communities were instituted which came in direct opposition to the Sahitya Sabha's chauvinistic stance. The Assamese elite wanted to retain its political, social and cultural hegemony over Assam under the garb of language and cultural standardization, however, this chauvinist attitude adopted by the Sabha led to various reactionary organizations to emerge to challenge the cultural hegemonisation drive led by the Assam Sahitya Sabha. All through the 1950s, 1960 and 1970 the *Sabha* reiterated that all the hills and plains must be assimilated with the composite 'Axomiya' social and cultural milieu. The Assam Sahitya Sabha had become the signatory of the Assam Accord by being a part of All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP).

It was clause 6 in the Assam Accord<sup>3</sup> that struck a nerve with the Bodos. Clause 6 identified that the signing of the Accord would safeguard and protect the cultural identity of the 'Assamese' people. This protection of the Assamese cultural identity was seen as a threat by the Bodos and other ethnic communities who saw

this as an imposition of the Assamese culture on them. As Baruah (1991) had identified, a majority section of the Bodos believed that due to the unequal assimilation into the Assamese culture, there was a rising fear that their ethnic culture would get subsumed within this tide of 'Assamesization'.

The Sahitya Sabha has been instrumental in mobilizing public opinion regarding a series of demands that had major public concerns. First was the demand for a refinery in Assam in 1956. Then the demand for the official recognition of Assamese as the official language in then-undivided Assam. As Misra (1984) notes the language movements of 1960, as it is popularly known, crystallized the role of the Sahitya Sabha as the only socio-cultural body that looked after the Assamese-speaking population in the Brahmaputra valley. The Sahitya Sabha's vague standpoint regarding the composite Assamese culture had very well shown that its sphere of influence and concern was narrow. As a departure from its earlier stance, it was only from around the 20th century onwards that the *Sabha* made a conscious effort to recognize other ethnic cultures within Assam.

### **Cultural Elites and Politics Of Exclusion**

The opinion of the educated, upper-caste, middle-class Assamese reflected in all the important cultural and political developments in Assam. Although characteristically, the Assam Association became an openly political organization over time, the *Sahitya Sabha* tried to maintain its non-political stance. Even at a time when it openly supported the Assam movement, it held its cultural ground and established itself as backing the movement from a cultural standpoint. However, the transformation of these socio-cultural organizations into vocal political mouthpieces of Assam needs pertinent analysis because it reflects the political trajectory of the educated, upper-caste, middle class in Assam

Both the Assam Association and the Axom Sahitya Sabha drew their members from the educated middle class who were vocal participants in the regional imagining of Assam. The leadership of these organizations often went into the hands of a literati, who were small in numbers but they took it upon

themselves to be the vanguard of progress and development of the Assam and its culture. The middle-class leadership was characteristically different from the pre-colonial aristocratic leadership because they were capable of mobilizing all sections of the society into a common goal of protecting Assamese nationality. The public petitions and opinionpieces that the members of these organizations took were actively read, heard and followed across all sections of the society and they were able to capture the sentiments of the masses. The masses saw the literati as the spokespersons for the people. The middle-class Assamese literati, that led the Axom Sahitya Sabha, had a mass appeal. The Assam Association as well as the Sahitya Sabha characteristically functioned as elite clubs. They based their foundations purely on literary and cultural grounds but they eventually encompassed political concerns like the development, preservation and protection of the Assamese cultural identity in its agenda. These organizations deeply impacted the socio-political flair of the state by functioning as civil society groups but also playing active roles as political advocates for society. These organizations on many occasions ceased to be merely cultural organizations; they had strong links to the state, at times gaining state patronage and influencing political decisions. These organizations played a crucial role in transforming the political discourse of the region, moving it from a state of stagnation to one characterized by active and increasingly disruptive political engagement. The Axom Sahitya Sabha's efforts to raise social and political awareness among the masses were instrumental in providing momentum to the Assam movement. The character of these organizations was defined by the members who it constituted of. This group of literary elites often came to be identified as public intellectuals or the literati or *Buddhijibi* in colloquial Assamese. The Assam Association as well the Axom Sahitya Sabha gave the masses an organizational capacity, which saw an impactful culmination in the scale of the Assam Movement.

Although the Sahitya Sabha had mass appeal, it was evident that the power to control the narrative remained with a select few. The attitude of the Sahitya Sabha towards the protection of Assamese was that of a chauvinist cultural nationalism, which was criticized on many fronts- one being that the Sahitya Sabha was an elitist organization, as Gohain (1973) had noted. This critique was true to

some extend because the Sabha reflected the values and premises of the class it represented, which was a small-numbered educated, middle-class, upper-caste elite. The middle class was still a small social group but this class became the mouth piece for the whole of Assam and inadvertently became the cause of fueling sub-nationalist tendencies in Assam. These organizations operated as exclusive groups, selectively opening access to individuals. Particular educational qualifications, and specific cultural capital, were essential to be a part of these organizations formally and there was an open favouring of an intellectual bent of mind and social and national awareness of some kind.

A section of the educated elite also turned orthodox in their approach and espoused Hindu conservatism. Educated individuals began commenting and advocating for practices and social ideology that imitated the caste society of Bengal in a way, which came to be reflected in the way they identified the role of women in the household. Sharma (2014) notes that essays such as “*GhoiñirKartabya o Strisiksha*” (A Wife’s Duties and Women’s Education) and “*Tirotar Bon Ki*” (What are a Woman’s Duties?) written by intellectuals like Ratneswar Mahanta and Boli Narayan Bora in the Assamese periodicals were read widely in middle-class households and created new ideals for the Assamese women. The Sabha harboured a chauvinist attitude towards adopting the Assamese language. The leadership of the Sabha while pressing for protection of the ‘Assamese’ culture and language overlooked the many ethnic communities living in the region, who did not necessarily identify with the Assamese language spoken by this middle class as their language. The cause of working for the Assamese emerged as a question within the politics of the region when language standardization was demanded by the Sahitya Sabha. The hill tribes of erstwhile Assam and the Bengali population of Cachar district protested against the arbitrary imposition of the Assamese language. From then on the assertion of separate identity from the Assamese began to spread prolifically; first among the hill tribes and later among the plains tribes. The Sahitya Sabha’s chauvinist stand on the Assamese language speeded up the desire for separation of a sizable section of the plains Tribe from the Assamese mainstream. The Bodo, Mishing, and Karbis did not want to live within the political boundaries of Assam, fearing that their

history, culture, and identity would submerge in the expansion of Assamese nationalism. As a result, many literary and cultural organizations of these communities were instituted which came in direct opposition to the Sahitya Sabha's stance. The Assamese elite middle class had wanted to retain its political, social, and cultural hegemony over Assam under the garb of language and cultural standardization. However, this chauvinist attitude turned on the association and various reactionary organizations emerged to challenge the *Axom Sahitya Sabha*. Strong opposition to the dominant Assamese middle class's standardizing tendencies came from the Bodos.

The Sahitya Sabha's staunch language policy cemented the ethnic divisions among the people of the region. Intense politicization and mobilization took place among the ethnic groups which came to define the modern reconfigurations of politics in Assam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The formation of the Bodo Sahitya sabha in 1952 was a result of the rising political consciousness among the Bodos. The consolidation for a separate Bodo identity began to be played out in the form of the Tribal League. This consolidation of the Bodo identity was in response to the role of larger processes of identity formation among the composite Assamese society. With the emergence of a socially aware, literati class among the Bodo and Mishing ethnic groups, the Sahitya Sabha faced its first equal opposition which had the potential to influence the masses. This forced the institutions to rethink their standpoint and politics. Among the Bodos, individuals like Kalicharan Brahma and Rupnath Brahma were the very first individuals trying to rearticulate the traditional beliefs of the Bodos and inculcate the importance of education for progress and self-representation. The creation of institutions such as the Brahma Boarding for male students and the Bodo Club was important for creating social and political consciousness among the newer generations (Kalita, 2011). The Bodo club acted as the foundation for the Bodo Sahitya Sabha which was formed in 1952. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha was an important factor in driving the Bodoland movement forward with the launch of the Bodo script movement where they demanded the Roman script for the Bodo language during 1974-75. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha was also at the forefront of introducing the Bodo language at the primary and secondary educational levels. This Bodo Sahitya Sabha was actively

supported by the All Bodo Students Union, a non-political student organization formed in 1967, mirroring the All Assam Students Union. It can be inferred that the leadership of the Bodoland movement identified with the leadership of the Assam movement as the reference group. The educated Bodo individuals actively participated in organizations like the Bodo ChattraSanmillan, The Tribal league, and the All Bodo Students Union and were at the forefront of advocating for a separate Bodo ethnic identity. It was through the formation of their literary and socio-cultural organizations that the Bodo community was able to cement their political agency.

### **Conclusion :**

The newly consolidated middle class of the nineteenth century in Assam was an important section that brought about eventful social and political changes in the region. These middleclass, upper caste, and elite organized themselves into formal associations that formed the institutional foundations and were used as a platform from which many decisions were taken, that affected the political activity in the region. These organizations reflected the aspirations and ideologies of the class it represented, which excluded many issues and concerns of the hills and plains tribal communities residing in the region. The exclusionary politics played by the educated elite in Assam, point to a larger question of how elite groups seek to seek to control knowledge in society. The educated elites in Assam had access to most of the significant resources- political, economic, social, cultural and as well as knowledge capital. It was in this language of exclusion that Assam saw its political story being played out. These organizations were largely dominated by a group of elites-and in the context of Assam, it was the cultural and the intellectual middle class, upper caste elites who were responsible for generating the political discourse in Assam. The upper caste, Assamese-speaking individuals who were educated in English became the dominant fraction of the middle class in the nineteenth century in Assam. The developments in 18<sup>th</sup> and nineteenth century Assam- the emergence of newspapers and magazines and associations like the Axom Sahitya Sabha, created a platform for the educated upper caste Assamese individuals to occupy prominent roles in the social and cultural life of Assam, often

establishing favourable links with the dominant intelligentsia outside Assam as well. Cultural elites occupy a social position in a relational structure, even when they do not directly rule, they influence, and often shape, power politics, economic processes as well as normative and aesthetic frames of everyday social lives. Since politics in the region had derived from institutions that were not a part of the state, it was the cultural organizations which were the active drivers of instituting politics in the region. They often excluded groups and aspirations of people who did not fall within their idea of an Assamese Jati. Elite social clubs thus play important roles in shaping political activity. These organizations play a crucial role in social movements and provide platforms for individuals to come together and organize for political action. Cultural Elites in a society use these exclusive platforms to advance their political agendas. The Assam Association and the Ahom Sahitya Sabha served as spaces for the upper caste, middle-class educated elites in Assam to shape the political discourse in Assam, the exclusive character of which shaped the consequent trajectory of politics in the region.

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