

# India: On non-political Assamese

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## **How two civil-society groups have defined politics in Assam.**

Civil society is the “true source and theatre of all history”, as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*. In Assam, the role of civil society is particularly crucial given the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which has made the state a focal point for questions around citizenship and statelessness. The long history of Assamese nationalism goes back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, while in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, civil-society groups played a significant role in shaping the question of Assamese nationality (and nationalism). This story is best told through the activities of two distinct institutions which achieved organisational influence, legitimacy and authority in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in colonial Assam. They are the Asom Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Association or ALA), formed in 1917 and the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU), formed in 1967. How does civil society animate the theatre of politics in contemporary Assam? Who does civil society defend and speak for in the region?

The ALA held yearly sessions, its primary aim being to promote and legitimise Assamese as an official language in schools and courts (its motto read: “my mother language – my eternal love”). Over time, the ALA established itself as central to defining Assamese nationalism and worked for the development of Assamese literature. Similarly, the AASU began as a volunteer-led organisation in schools and colleges. Although the Asom Chatra Sanmilan, formed mostly by Assamese students studying in Calcutta in 1916, was one of the first students’ platforms with a sole focus on Assam and Assamese, it disintegrated over time. (Some consider it the first national organisation of Assam.) In its first meeting, president Lakshminath Bezbaruah in his speech noted: “Our youth must work relentlessly for the development of our mother tongue and our literature so that the deficiencies of the Assamese literature and language could be removed.” Even in the constitution of the meeting, it was declared that the group “shall have nothing to do with any political propaganda or political movement.” Although members of the group were involved in the freedom struggle at an individual level, nonetheless at an organisational level, the Asom Chatra Sanmilan stressed on staying away from politics. Its primary focus was to develop Assamese language as the mother tongue of Assam, and it was also made clear that all proceedings of the Sanmilan would be allowed only in Assamese and English. It was not until students regrouped around the 1960s language movement (in which the ALA played a crucial role) calling for recognition of Assamese as an official language and medium of instruction, that the constitution of a new students’ led union was outlined in a student conference held in Tezpur on 8 August, 1967.

One of the peculiar dimensions of AASU, which had a large organisational base, was its choice of members, drawn particularly from Assamese-speaking schools and colleges. Hindi and Bengali schools were not included.

How does civil society animate the theatre of politics in contemporary Assam?

The duo of ALA and AASU are integral to Assamese nationalism and have influenced the social and political landscape of Assam since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were set up by regional elites who were not

necessarily anti-colonial in their outlook. In fact, many early ALA presidents, including historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan, were in awe of colonial sahibs, and expressed their admiration and gratitude to them for extending Assamese concerns. In Assam, the colonial state and missionaries were very much part of “print capitalism” and “bilingual elites” who helped in the development of Assamese language (some knew two to four languages with some authority, namely Assamese, Bangla, Sanskrit and English). This was unlike in the case of Bengal, as political scientist Partha Chatterjee writes, where bilingual elites in the colonial period came together to give their mother tongue sufficient linguistic quality so that it could become a language of “modern culture”. Various printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines and literary societies were formed “outside the preview of the state and the European missionaries”, adds Chatterjee. However, in Assam, the colonial state and American and European missionaries were also *inside* the vernacular and provincial rituals of writing, publishing and thought, and were intimately involved in the process of modernising and standardising the Assamese language. This emergence of the public sphere in Assam and its civil society is intimately connected to such relations and associational public life, where Bengalis were the more hated intruders compared to colonisers. These specificities linked to the colonial period are crucial clues to understand the varied consequences in post-colonial Assam and Bengal.

### **‘Non-political’ actors**

Until the formative years leading to the Assam Movement, both the ALA and AASU characterised themselves as non-political. One can think of a type or attribute of civil society whose interests are largely “civil and economic, not political”, as C J Arthur describes in the introduction to *The German Ideology*, referring to Georg W F Hegel’s philosophy on civil society. For both these organisations, “non-political” translated to non-interest in electoral politics or desire to rule. In that limited sense, they imagined that their concerns (of nationality) were of a “higher order” than those shared by politicians. This sensibility can be witnessed in the 1974 Assam Sahitya Sabha president Maheswar Neog’s speech. Neog noted that “the Sahitya Sabha is greater than any political organisation just because humanism and permanent values are the best desiderata in literature”. He also thought that the Sabha should be kept away from people who “only have a love for power” and make it an organisation of “lovers of language, literature and culture.” In other words, they were preserving their status as a civil group for a dreamed Assamese nation, by making moral claims of what *ought* to be the undivided focus for Assamese – the question of Assamese nationality and literature.

This self-proclamation of being non-political irked Assamese human rights activist, journalist and writer Parag Kumar Das. In an article titled “Non-Political Politics” for a regional English newspaper *The Sentinel*, he asked:

Can a responsible citizen ever remain non-political in a democratic set up? Are his day-to-day activities not bound to be affected by the prevailing political structures and policies? Can an organization struggling for a political problem remain non-political forever?

In these questions, there is a swift progression from the ‘responsible citizen’ to how organisational life affects the ‘responsible citizen’ in a democracy. In many ways, these concerns highlight the way Hegel defined both civil society and the individual who is seemingly impacted by civil and economic matters. Das was primarily addressing AASU to be more political in their sensibilities about the issue of immigration. He insisted that the ‘non-political’ impression given by organisations like AASU cannot solve the issue of ‘aliens’ (ie the issue of ‘foreigners’ in Assam) as such a problem is intrinsically “political”.

Debo Prasad Barooah’s admission in his introduction to *Assam: Agonies and Grievances* about

AASU's influence in the public sphere and popular life is telling, particularly during the times leading to the Assam Movement, or the anti-foreigner movement. He writes:

the Assamese have become a people reborn with the initial inspiration provided by AASU. In the popular mind, this students' organisation has come to acquire the status of a national organisation of the people of Assam. While retaining its *nonpolitical* character of being away from party politics, it has not been vested with the responsibility of creating a climate in favour of organising the people of Assam politically, armed as it is with the rich experience of the popular movement...it bids fair to strike a happy balance between healthy regionalism and national integration in a truly federal polity.

On the other hand, the Sabha thought that cementing Assamese into various aspects of public life and social space was essential to ensure a robust and worthwhile civic life. It projected itself along the lines of the AASU. In the opening sentences of his speech, Neog noted: "Sabha is a national organisation of ours. It is a place of our pilgrimage". The ALA often argued that Assamese language was core to Assamese culture, without which the Assamese would cease to exist, swept away by Bengali people and their language, Bangla. They also played an instrumental role in the eventual passage of the 1960 Assam Official Language Act.

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Both ALA and AASU participated in the Assam Movement between 1979 to 1985. Both of them formed an integral part of the umbrella organisation Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) which led the Assam Movement. Moreover, Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed as a political party by student leaders of the Movement that came to power in 1985. AASU was quick to clarify that it was not a 'student wing' of the political party. Furthermore, the involvement of the ALA in the Movement put a formal end to its 'non-political' status and also, caused a crack in its relationship with the government, as Sanjib Baruah writes in *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*.

Can any other organisation in Assam claim a similar non-political status and yet exercise such legitimacy and authority in public life? Do the members of such civil-society groups live *for politics* or *from politics*, or both?

### **Who is Assamese civil society?**

Today the Asom Sahitya Sabha is no longer a major social force which mobilises public sentiments and opinion. Despite this, it has done significant damage to the Assamese public sphere in narrowly defining the Assamese language and community. AASU still asserts some degree of pull in terms of civic space within the state. This brings us to the question of the organisational structure and politics of these two influential organisations. Who do they defend?

If, for the Sabha, the Assamese language was their mainstay, the 'migrant' assumed a sharper focus for AASU. Both questions of language and migrants have their material basis; however, they are also intertwined. In making migrants with supposed roots in East Bengal the enemy of the Assamese, Assamese leaders, intellectuals and writers - who often shared membership with both the organisations and had their own individual public positions on each issue - created an affective space for these questions in the minds of the public.

The routes of human mobility that Northeast India shared with other parts of Asia (which

are older than any states, as Ludden reminded us) are now sites of national and regional anxieties.

Any civil society achieves a kind of *re-distribution*, as Michel Foucault noted. It is a kind of *re-centring* and *de-centring* of public opinion, power, identity, and ideology of a social group or community. In the case of Assam, the ALA and the AASU managed to carve out a space for particular kinds of nationalistic sentiments through a narrow definition of what constituted being Assamese. They managed to locate Assam and the identity of Assamese people by shaping a regional identity that spoke intimately to regional and national frames of belonging in India. They mapped Assam within the territory of India and coded Assamese within the majoritarian fold of Hindu civilisation, a kind of “happy balance between healthy regionalism and national integration in a truly federal polity”, as Barooah described.

Any claims to identity and belonging that were outside of these measurements made by the two organisations were seen to be anti-Assamese. Not only did they resist criticism, but they became increasingly comfortable with and blind to the violence that Assamese nationalism produced over decades. Both of them enjoyed a kind of legitimacy that sealed their role as a credible voice for society from where “regional consensus” was built.

In this light, two qualifications of a civil-society group identified by Foucault become essential to map the two organisations and their politics. Firstly, he noted that civil society is a communitarian and not a humanitarian group. This is true for both the ALA and the AASU. One can sense this in AASU’s demand for the re-verification of the NRC, or even the call for a fresh NRC, as they were unhappy about the 1.9 million people left out of the citizenship register. (They want even more people to be excluded.) Incidentally, AASU and AGSP submitted a draft proposal to the central government in 1981 where they demanded a fresh NRC in order to determine foreigners. Populist and communitarian tendencies in elite and subaltern politics has also been noted by Partha Chaterjee in his work *The Nation and its Fragments*. Secondly, Foucault argued that, like sexuality and madness, civil society was also born at a particular time and under specific conditions. It also assumes a “transactional reality”, meaning, it is born precisely from the “interplay of relation of power and everything which constantly eludes them.” It is found at the transaction between the “governors and governed”. In this sense, if we roll back history, the ALA and AASU were reactionary, national and deeply political entities formed to give shape and direction to the quest for Assamese nationalism.

Assamese civil society is very *communitarian* to its own – the caste Assamese community.

The ALA and AASU’s long term and intimate engagement with the political and cultural life of Assam have created an affective space in the public sphere. This encompasses discourse around the regular commemoration of the 860 people who lost their lives during the Assam Movement, which called on the Indian government to detect, disenfranchise and deport outsiders, built around narratives of becoming a “minority in our own backyard”, a discourse now taken up vigorously by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Assam. The migrant continues to be the enemy of Assamese, even after the NRC process left out 1.9 million people from the citizenship register. Like most enemies who are hated for who they are, not because of what they do, in the eyes of these two organisations, the ‘Bangladeshi’ in Assam continues to remain an unwanted being.

## **Situating Assam and Assamese**

Neither the ALA nor AASU tried to code adivasi elements into Assamese identity. They always foregrounded an Assamese identity rooted in Vaishnavism, which was never fully caste free. It is also because of these existing viewpoints on religion and caste that RSS and Hindutva ideology can be sold in Assam. Assamese civil society's strategic response of blaming contemporary communal tendencies in Assam on rightwing politics is both historically and sociologically untrue. In his essay for *Himal Southasian*, 'Where is Assam', historian David Ludden [noted](#) that: "In Assam, a regional political movement also tried to close borders to alien immigrants, particularly from Bangladesh. Today, the Bharatiya Janata Party again reiterates this rhetoric." Even though Ludden limits the context to Bangladesh here, it becomes clear who inspired these tendencies. The type of social structure, including an emphasis on anti-migrant fear and hatred that both the ALA and AASU promoted as intrinsic to being Assamese, provides sufficient grounds for communalism to flourish. In order to profile migrants in such light, they relied heavily on, among other things, the disciplinary tools utilised by colonial governments, such as the census, particularly the 1931 census reports written by C S Mullan.

Many national commentators such as political activist Yogendra Yadav have argued that Assamese nationalism is not anti-Muslim (Harsh Mander has also made this point in the context of NRC). In reality, this nationalism has largely harboured anti-migrant and anti-Bangladeshi sentiments, which are, at the end of the day, anti-minority sensibilities. Such anti-minority sentiments need very little tweaking to direct them towards a specific community, which the current BJP government has managed to do.

The phrase 'non-political' can simply indicate a different orientation to politics, not necessarily disinterested or devoid of it.

The history of Assam, a place connected with multiple water and land routes to various other parts of Asia and India, is now defined in the fixed terms of national territory. Civil society in Assam is also caught up with the nationalistic imagination imposed by maps. And as Ludden [noted](#), "national, political and cultural systems remain committed to strong border defenses in the fear of disturbing the coherence of their national traditions." The same is true for Assam and its dominant civil-society groups too. The routes of human mobility that Northeast India shared with other parts of Asia (which are older than any states, as Ludden reminded us) are now sites of national and regional anxieties. So, in locating Assam and defining the measurements of the Assamese, civil society has not been true to Assam's history and her people. In modern Assam, considering such mobility is crucial to understanding belonging and the figure of the enemy in the 'Bangladeshis', which is in turn central to the citizenship question in the form of the NRC.

While I agree with Ludden that *territorial openness and closure* are two modern needs which are difficult to reconcile, in the case of Assam, the decision around cultural membership and closure took place before a fixed imagination of territorial Assam was imagined and agreed upon. Civil-society groups (like the duo I've examined here) played a vital role in cementing and deciding upon who should be included and excluded as being Assamese. Of course, Assamese nationalism had a life outside of such civil-society groups and although much of its direction was led by people who were in some capacity members of these groups, Assamese identity was clearly defined in terms of caste Assamese identity. Put differently, a credible biography of Assamese nationalism is possible if we consider the work and life of the ALA and the AASU. Assamese nationalists gave robust measurements of what constituted being Assamese and what the territorial identity of Assam meant. Cultural and territorial imaginations are interlinked, but perhaps the former is equally important to live in a community as a citizen who enjoys freedoms and rights. If the majority cultural community doesn't accept a minority, constitutional safeguards have proved to be inadequate, and have

subsequently eroded too.

In Assam, not only is the “migrant” question unresolved, but even internally, those who are considered indigenous to Assam like Misings, Bodos, Karbis and so on, don’t seem to be equally considered as members of the Assamese community. This is because Assamese identity never coded adivasi elements into its identity. Thus, Assamese civil society is very *communitarian* to its own – the caste Assamese community. Its failure to address and include the multi-ethnic identities of Assamese also defines its interest as an organisational group and whom they represent. Seemingly, including the cultural ethos of various other groups also remains contested and ignored, giving us sufficient grounds to classify some groups in Assam as internal minorities, such as the adivasi groups mentioned above.

There are many Assams, as Ludden noted, but Assamese dominant civil-society groups such as ALA and AASU anchored their cultural identity and linguistic location on conflicts and contentions over resources and culture. This narrowness is what defines political and civil life in contemporary Assam, and within it nestles the hapless minority communities.

The phrase ‘non-political’ can simply indicate a different orientation to politics, not necessarily disinterested or devoid of it. This orientation has depoliticised the public in Assam. This depoliticisation must also be read along with the politics of consensus where there are fixed views on politics – around language, about the ‘Bangladeshi’, the NRC, the Nellie Massacre and other issues. The measurement of consensus about such issues has often come from such civil and literary bodies in the state. It is as if Assamese are born into a set of consensus around these issues, and any suggested alternative or critique of those views become necessarily anti-Assamese. Both the ALA and AASU are deeply political, if we take politics in the sense Max Weber defined in his lecture ‘Politics as a Vocation’. They have influenced the state; distribution of power, leaderships and political groupings; or even how the public orient themselves to state, power and authority. Non-political is political to Assamese civil society.

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