Research Note


Makiko Kimura

1. Introduction

From 1979 to 1985, there was a large-scale movement conducted by a student organization and some political parties in Assam. The main aim of the movement was to delete foreigners' names from the electoral roll. As most of the foreigners in Assam were of Bangladeshi (or East Pakistani) origins, this problem is often regarded as a confrontation between 'the Assamese' and 'the Bengalis.'

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the role of the newspapers in shaping the ethnic boundary in this foreign nationals issue. As Barth states, boundaries of ethnic groups are not inherent, nor static [Barth 1969: 37–8]. For example, the distinctions between the Assamese and the Bengalis, or the Bangladeshis and the Indians are not clear, as shown below. But while reporting on incidents related to this issue, newspapers...
played a role to categorize people and to make stereotypical images of the ethnic groups. In other words, newspapers re-defined and re-interpreted ethnicity.

In order to analyze the role of newspapers, I examined the newspapers in Assam and West Bengal. It was already pointed out that the descriptions in articles about this issue were totally different between newspapers issued in Gauhati (the center of the movement in Assam) and Calcutta (the center of West Bengal). Until today, it has been believed that these biased reports evoked the emotional feelings of the Assamese and the Bengalis [Gupta and Gupta 1990: 166].

However, although there is a strong belief that newspapers in Assam and West Bengal played an important role in the foreign nationals issue, the way they actually affected people has not been made clear. In recent mass communication theory, the direct and strong effect of newspapers has been denied. Of course, this does not mean that the mass media have little effect, and it has been revealed that the mass media have a strong effect on people's perceptions of reality and recognition of the environment by choosing the issue or topic and ranking their importance. This is called the agenda-setting function of mass media [McCombs and Shaw 1972: 176–7; Takeshita 1998: 3–4].

Regarding Assam's foreign nationals issue, the newspapers in Assam and West Bengal reported the same issues or incidents, but they had different views and opinions about what should be recognized as 'a problem,' what was its cause, and who were victims and offenders. It can be said that their 'framing' or 'conceptualization' of the problem was extremely disparate. In fact, they were setting different agendas on the same issue.

Therefore, in order to clarify the way these papers made up agendas on this issue, I analyzed articles published in The Assam Tribune (Gauhati) and Amrita Bazar Patrika (Calcutta). It was revealed that the difference of their reporting deeply related to their utilization of ethnic concepts such as Assamese, Bengalis and Bangladeshis. The distinctions between these concepts are highly fluid by nature, but they are labeled using these names and stereotyped in articles published in the newspapers, thus affecting people's recognition of the present situation. The aim of this paper is to explain such utilization of expressions of ethnicity by media in setting different agendas regarding Assam's foreign nationals.
issue, and their effect as re-interpretation and re-definition of ethnic images, which is the process of the construction of ethnicity.

In the next section of this paper, I will explain what the foreign nationals issue is, and will introduce the views on the cause of this issue. In the third section, text analysis of *The Assam Tribune* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* will be done. In the last section, I will present a new perspective by focusing on the way that the expression of ethnicity contributed to the setting of different agendas.

2. Background: The Arguments on the Cause of the Foreign Nationals Issue

2.1 What is the Foreign Nationals Issue?

In 1979, a student organization and some political parties in Assam organized an influential movement against the inclusion of foreign nationals in the voter’s list, and called for their deportation. This so-called ‘agitation’ continued for 6 years until 1985, when they came to agree with the Assam Accord with the Central Government. It was one of the biggest political movements that endangered the national integration of independent India, and the legitimacy of this movement was a great concern of not only the people of Northeast India but also the people all over India.

In Assam, a large number of immigrants have continued to come in from other parts of India since the colonial period, the largest group of these being Bengalis. In the first stage, Bengalis were brought to Assam as British colonial administrative officials, but gradually Muslim peasants also migrated to Assam from densely populated East Bengal. There were also immigrants from other areas such as Orissa, Bihar and Rajasthan, but the Bengalis were the most prominent. The influx continued after the independence of India, and at the time of the confusion caused by the partition of India and Pakistan, large numbers of Bengalis (not only Hindus but also Muslims) were said to have migrated to Assam from East Pakistan (East Bengal). Moreover, when East Pakistan became independent as Bangladesh in 1971, there were also many immigrants or refugees crossing the border. The history of continued immigration, and especially the large-scale population movement after independence are said to be the cause of the Assamese dissatisfaction that laid the ground
The main point of argument was which year should be the cut-off year for deportation. Political parties which organized or supported the movement, such as Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad and Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal, claimed that foreigners who entered Assam after 1951 should be deported, but national parties such as Indian National Congress and Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist) insisted that only foreigners who migrated to Assam after 1971 should be deported. Thus, this issue was not only a conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalis, but also a conflict closely related to the national integration of India.

The main organizers of the movement were a student organization called All Assam Students Union (AASU) and an organization called All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), which comprised the representatives of several political parties, literary groups, and also AASU. They claimed that they were conducting peaceful actions such as picketing and striking, but these frequently resulted in violent action. A large-scale debate took place regarding the interpretation of this movement.

There were several views when analyzing the cause of the movement. In the next section, I will introduce some of them to show the background of the issue and make it easier to understand the debate.

2.2 The Arguments on the Cause of the Foreign Nationals Issue

There have been several views that try to explain the cause of the foreign nationals issue. Those arguments are complicated as they encompass several fields (economy, politics and culture) and some conflicting points of view. So, I will categorize each view according to three aspects (India-Assam, Bengal-Assam, Assamese-Minorities). By doing so, it is possible to overview almost all the typical arguments on the background and cause of this issue.

The first typical argument explains the cause in this way: Assam is a backward state in India, and the center and other states exploited Assam's rich natural resources. For example, Assam has rich natural resource such as tea and oil, but most of them are dealt by 'outsiders' and do not benefit Assamese [Pardesi 1980a: 1001–2; T. Misra 1980: 1357–64]. Moreover, there is a dissatisfaction among people that national political parties such as the Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India
(CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) were not seriously taking measures to alleviate the impact of the entrance of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (and later, Bangladesh) [Baruah 1980a: 543-5]. For these reasons, it was argued that Assam’s problem should be seen as a national problem, and the Indian Government must take measures to address Assam’s backwardness. This is the first typical opinion.

The second typical argument, and perhaps the strongest opinion, was that Assam was invaded by continued population movement from Bengal. The immigration from Bengal to Assam started when Assam became a part of British India in 1826, and continued after the independence. Especially, after the partition and at the time of the independence of Bangladesh, large scale population movement took place. It is often pointed out that problems such as unemployment, land problem, cultural invasion and economic exploitation occurred because of the immigration [U. Misra 1981: 291; Baruah 1980a: 545; T. Misra 1980: 1359-61]. There are also significant amount of immigrants from Orissa, Bihar and Rajasthan, but especially Bengalis are looked upon as ‘invaders’ to Assam. This kind of argument is often utilized by the supporters of the movement who tried to justify their claim as a just cause of the Assamese.

The third typical argument focuses on the majority-minority relations in Assam. According to them, Assamese bourgeoisies and petit bourgeoisies utilize students and peasants and try to evoke the anti-immigrant feelings in order to exploit immigrants who are mostly peasants and workers. This type of argument is closely related to Marxist argument; the most prominent of them is Amalendu Guha, the leading historian of Assam [Guha 1980: 1699-720; Gohain 1980a: 420]. Also, there are many arguments which do not refer to class relations but condemns Assamese chauvinistic and anti-minority attitudes [Bargohain 1980: 878]. Not to mention that this argument was often referred to when people criticized the movement.

All the arguments reflect certain facts. It can be said that the structure of the foreign nationals issue in Assam is complicated and it is difficult to judge which argument is more appropriate for explaining the cause of the issue. Rather, it should be considered that all those aspects together comprise the foreign nationals issue, and this complex structure makes it difficult to grasp the whole phenomenon.
3. **Comparative Analysis of The Assam Tribune and Amrita Bazar Patrika**

In the previous section, I summarized the theories on the cause of the foreign nationals issue, and looked through the views about the cause of the argument. It became clear that seen from the different viewpoints, the meaning of the issue was totally disparate. In this section, I will analyze these conflicting views by comparing two newspapers — The Assam Tribune and Amrita Bazar Patrika.

3.1 **Subjects and Method**

The subjects of the analysis are The Assam Tribune (hereafter referred to as AT) — a daily newspaper published in Gauhati, the center of the movement — and Amrita Bazar Patrika (hereafter referred to as ABP) — a daily published in Calcutta, the center of the state of West Bengal. Both newspapers are written in English, so we can assume that these newspapers are read by a section of educated people.5)

There were some other newspapers issued in Assam and West Bengal at the time. In Assam, there was a daily called Dainik Assam, and a weekly called Assam Bani. Both of them were written in Assamese and there was at least one more English daily in Assam. In West Bengal, there were several other newspapers. The most famous Bengali daily was Anand Bazar Patrika. There were other English dailies such as The Statesman and The Hindustan Standard.

Each paper had its own opinion on the foreign nationals issue, but on the whole, newspapers issued in Gauhati were favorable to the movement and those issued in Calcutta were critical. The reason for choosing The Assam Tribune and Amrita Bazar Patrika is that among English dailies, they illustrate these two opposing points of view to an extreme.

The analysis is of articles in both papers from November 1979 to May 1980, the first seven months of the movement. The reason for choosing this period is that the opinions of each paper were formed at this time, the first stage of the movement, and later, similar arguments were repeatedly asserted. Furthermore, a former study conducted by Surendra K. Gupta and Indira B. Gupta also focused on the same period. Therefore, in order to compare with their analysis, the first seven months of the movement is the subject of this analysis.
As for the method, I will analyze the text of selected articles rather than surveying all of the published articles that relate to the foreign nationals issue. In the former study, Surendra K. Gupta and Indira B. Gupta conducted an analysis of three newspapers including The Assam Tribune and Amrita Bazar Patrika. Their method focused on the headlines of the newspapers: they classified the headlines into five themes, and by counting headlines and analyzing the content of articles in each of the newspapers, they analyzed the tendency of the reporting. They concluded that a bias in the reporting of the Assam movement attempted to evoke emotional feelings among two linguistic groups, i.e., the Assamese and the Bengalis [Gupta and Gupta 1990: 166].

Their research provides one of the first and the most precise arguments on the role of the newspapers in Assam’s foreign nationals issue, and is highly suggestive. However, as their analysis surveyed all the articles published about the issue, the logic each newspaper used for persuading readers was not explored in depth. In order to elucidate the way they set different agendas, I will conduct a deeper analysis. I will focus on three violent incidents in this period, and look at the way reports emphasize the victims and the offenders in each violent incident. Examination of the descriptions in the articles reveals what kinds of problems were constructed in the newspaper report.

The aim of this paper is to examine the logic and reasoning used in the newspapers, rather than to speculate on the effect these reports may have had on the reader’s opinion. In order to study the effects of the newspapers, a study based on interviews of readers is required.

3.2 Articles on Three Violent Incidents: The Descriptions of Offenders and Victims

a) The Incidents in North Kamrup: The First Incident of Large Scale Violence

In early January 1980, incidents of large-scale violence broke out in North Kamrup—north of the capital of Assam, Gauhati. It is reported that Bengali immigrants, both legal and illegal, old comers and new comers, were victims of the incident. Following this, the Government took severe action against Assamese villagers and they became victims of rape and killing by the security forces.

On 6th January, The Assam Tribune reports death of a student leader
with his picture. 'Madhyam Baska, a tribal populated Mauza came first under curfew since last mid-night after the murder of a student leader, Sri Dilip Huzuri at Barikadonga.' And under the picture, it writes, 'Sri Dilip Huzuri, a Class X student of Baganpara High School who was killed on January 3 night by miscreants.' And on the next day, AT states, 'Death of Sri Dilip Huzuri was mourned today in Kamrup district by holding a number of condolence meetings and flying black flags by the students and people at large.'

Thus, AT stresses the death of a student leader and treated him as a victim.

On 10th January, after North Kamrup was declared as a Disturbed Area, AT reports, 'Indigenous people who are being attacked by Bangladeshi elements in Kaoimari Reserve and Matikhowa areas continue to evacuate to safer areas.' Moreover, on 12th January, 'Organized Attack by Bangladeshis on Indigenous Peasants' was announced. Under the headline, it was alleged

> Over 3,000 indigenous peasants and their families fled their homes from Kaoimari reserve areas in Barpeta sub-division following organised attack by alleged Bangladeshi infiltrators, who have now taken poise in a five to ten kilometres belt on both banks of the Brahmaputra extending up to Bangladeshi border, according to information reaching here. [The Assam Tribune, January 12]

In this way, AT reports the whole incident as caused by 'organized attack by Bangladeshis.' Moreover, it also reports atrocities done by army personnel. According to their report on 12th January,

> Untold atrocities are let loose on villagers in extensive areas of North Kamrup by the Army personnel, according to information received here today. The Army and CRP units are reported to have made indiscriminate arrests of the people from a number of villages in Nalbari sub-divisions. All atrocities are, however, alleged to have been perpetrated by army men. [The Assam Tribune, January 12]

From these articles, it can be said that while emphasizing the death of a student leader, AT regard Bangladeshis and the Army as threats to local people.

On the other hand, Amrita Bazar Patrika does not state who the
offenders and the victims of the incident are at the first stage. On 8th January, it reports ‘3 die in Assam violence,’ and on 9th, it states

Death toll in North Kamrup violence mounted to 8 with two more killed in police firing in Mukalmua. Over 8000 people have been rendered homeless as nearly 2000 houses and huts have been burnt down in the large-scale arson, looting and rioting in wide-spread areas of North Kamrup. [Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 9]

Again, on the 10th, ABP writes ‘At least 32 persons had been killed in the areas declared disturbed in lower and southern Assam since January 4th, official sources said tonight,’ and never reported the details of the victims or the offenders.

But on 11th January, ABP publishes the statement of the Government of West Bengal expressing concern for the life and property of Bengali people.

The West Bengal Government is very much worried over large-scale reports from Assam that the life and property of Bengalee-Hindus in upper Assam “have become unsafe as a result of the jingoistic activities of the Assamese people.” [Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 11]

Here, ‘Bengalee-Hindus’ are described as victims and ‘the Assamese people’ are defined as attackers.

Looking at reports of this incident, AT stresses the death of a student leader killed by ‘miscreants’ and condemns both the attack on ‘indigenous people’ by ‘Bangladeshis’ and ‘army atrocities.’ On the other hand, ABP does not report the details of the incident, but in the article with the statement by the state government, it depicts ‘Bengalis’ as victims and ‘Assamese’ as offenders. Thus, these two reports of the same incidents give readers entirely different impressions.

b) The incident in Duliajan: Death of one Bengali and several Assamese

On 18th January 1980, police fired at students picketing in front of Oil India Limited in Duliajan in the northern part of Assam. Several Assamese students and a Bengali technical manager of the company were killed.
In a front-page article on this incident, AT reports,

At least seven youths were reported to have been killed and more than 100 men and women of different ages seriously injured as a result of firing by the BSF (Border Security Forces) at about 8 a.m. while they were picketing along with thousands of persons in front of the industrial area of Oil India Limited at Duliajan. [The Assam Tribune, January 19]

It also states that AASU had condemned the police firing on peaceful picketers at Duliajan. And in the last page, AT writes, ‘Dr. Robi Mitra, Technical Manager of Oil India Limited, was dragged out of his car by a violent crowd near the hospital at Duliajan and was killed, police said.’

Moreover, in an editorial on 20th January, an AT editor writes,

That ladies were among the victims heightens the ghastliness of the tragedy and wantonness and indiscriminate nature of the police action . . . . The unfortunate failure to save the life of the OIL official from mob fury, apparently sparked off by the killings, the police and the civil authorities must be held the squarely responsible. [The Assam Tribune, January 20]

Thus, AT focuses on death of the picketers and condemns the police for using gunfire.

Moreover, on 21st January, AT reports ‘At least 70 Picketers Killed At Duliajan.’ It states, ‘The police firing at the Oil Town of Duliajan on last Thursday is feared to have turned into an ugly massacre of non-violent and peaceful picketers, according to assessment of different organizations.’ Again on 25th, AT reports ‘Over 1000 Dead Bodies were Hidden At Duliajan, Says PLP.’

It is clear that AT focuses on the death of the ‘peaceful’ picketers and doubts that there are more killings. Furthermore, AT condemns the firing by the police and the security forces, and claims that the police and civil authorities are responsible for the death of the technical manager.

On the contrary, ABP emphasises the death of Dr. Robi Mitra. On 19th January, it reports,

At least six persons were killed — five of them in police firing and another in mob violence — in front of Oil India Limited at Duliajan in Upper Assam this morning. Dr. Robi Mitra, Technical Man-
ager of OIL was dragged out of his car by a violent crowd near the hospital at Duliajan and was killed, police said. [Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 19]

On 21st January, ABP reports the statement by the West Bengal Chief Minister Mr. Jyoti Basu. It writes,

Mr. Jyoti Basu . . . said that apparently regional fanatics were now on a rampage and on a murder spread in Assam and the alarming situation there had not only affected the normal life and procession of Bengalees alone, but had equally endangered the personal safety and security of all non-Assamese people alike including those speak Hindi and Nepalese languages. [Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 21]

From this article, it can be said that Basu interprets the death of a Bengali as a threat to all non-Assamese residing in Assam.

Moreover, on 22nd January, an ABP editorial explains,

A young Bengali scientist, Dr. Robi Mitra, who was serving as a Technical Manager . . . was stoned to death. . . . This was a case of premeditated murder, not a case of sudden attack on an individual by an angry mob . . . . Dr. Mitra was not a Bangladeshi, nor was he a Bengalee living permanently in Assam. . . . If the “anti-social elements” in Assam succeed in driving away all non-Assamese residents from that state, India will cease to be one country. [Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 22]

ABP stresses the death of one Bengali and claims that this is a premeditated crime by the organizers of the movement, thus concluding all non-Assamese lives are threatened. And it pays little attention to the death of student picketers.

As for this incident, there is no difference in the reporting of the facts. But AT clearly emphasises the police firing and death of the picketers, and ABP condemns the death of one Bengali as caused by the organizers of the movement.

c) Counter-Agitation by the All Assam Minority Students’ Union: Bangladeshis (Foreigners) or Indian Minorities?

In May 1980, the newly formed All Assam Minority Students’ Union (in which Bengali-Hindus and Bengali-Muslims were dominant) led pro-
cessions and demonstrations against the detection and the deportation of foreign nationals. Police fired at the violent mob, resulting in the death of several people.

On 27th May, AT reports,

'The newly formed Minority Students' Union, which took out processions in certain pockets dominated by Bangladeshis turned violent at some places when police had to open fire killing three persons and injuring one seriously at Bijni. . . . An official report says, a big procession of linguistic and religious minority people attacked police men on duty at Bijni when police had to open fire killing two on-the-spot and injuring one seriously. [The Assam Tribune, May 27]

Also on 29th May, it states,

A serious communal violence rocked parts of Nowgong district dominated by Bangladeshis where armed hordes of immigrants from Bangladesh and East Pakistan made a number of attacks on indigenous villages and assembled at places with aggressive postures. [The Assam Tribune, May 29]

In these articles, 'minority' or 'immigrants from Bangladesh and East Pakistan' are described as offenders.

On the same day, AT reports the statement of AAGSP condemning the 'Violent Activities by Foreigners.' It states,

The Central Office of the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad in a Press statement condemned the violent activities of the foreigners and their supporters for in carrying out a mass carnage and devastation under the banner of a minority organization and expressed grave concern about the possible repercussions of these incidents. [The Assam Tribune, May 29]

Also, a statement by PLP is reported. 'It is a case of direct aggression by foreigners who have illegally stayed in Assam. . . .' In this way, by borrowing the words of AAGSP and PLP, AT insinuates that AAMSU is a group of foreigners.

In this incident, despite several people being shot dead by the police, AT doesn't focus on this, rather reporting on the violence by the people from Bangladesh and East Pakistan. This is a sharp contrast if we com-
pare it with the articles about the Duliajan incident, in which AT severely condemns the police for using gunfire. And by presenting the statements by AAGSP and PLP, AT describes the incident as ‘conducted by foreigners.’

On the other hand, on 27th May, ABP reports,

A police party and paramilitary forces opened fire at least in three places in Goalpara district today killing two persons and injuring another 10 persons when the peaceful demonstration and procession by the AAMSU was attacked by elements of AASU and Sangram Parishad in a bid to muffle the minorities from giving expression to their grievances. [Amrita Bazar Patrika, May 27]

Thus, although it is the police that actually fired and killed, ABP report puts an emphasis on the attack by AASU and AAGSP. On the same day, ABP presents the statement by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu claiming that people who entered Assam after 1971 are not foreigners.

The Chief Minister reiterated that the first task of the Central Government to solve the Assam issue should be determination of the question who is a foreigner. . . . The cut-off date must certainly be 1971. [Amrita Bazar Patrika, May 27]

And on 29th May, in an editorial, ABP states,

Moreover, the violence which has marked the agitation — despite the protestations of the AASU and the Gana Sangram Parishad — as also the harassment suffered by the linguistic minorities, the Bengali-speaking residents of the State in particular, has created a feeling of insecurity among them. . . . But the peaceful demonstrators (organised by AAMSU) were reportedly attacked by hostile elements leading to violence, accompanied with large-scale arson and loot, and police firing in which several persons were killed. [Amrita Bazar Patrika, May 29]

Thus, ABP stresses that the people suffering in Assam are Indian national minorities, and that AAMSU represents their voice. In this incident, AT described AAMSU as ‘foreigners’ and as responsible for the violent incident. On the other hand, ABP describes AAMSU as a representative group of minorities and the organizers of the movement (AASU and AAGSP) as harassing those minorities. Thus, victims and
offenders seem to be reversed even though AT and ABP report on the same incidents.

3.3 Analysis — Construction of Different Agendas

As stated above, the articles of AT and ABP differ from each other in the way they describe the victims and the offenders. The distinction of AT and ABP reports becomes clear when comparing the typical victims and offenders in the articles.

AT describes the victims of the incidents as: indigenous people, students, youth, peaceful picketers and local Indian citizens. As for the offenders, it mentions: miscreants, police, army, foreigners, Bangladeshis, immigrants, linguistic and religious minorities and foreign elements. ABP illustrates the victims as: Bengali Hindus, Bengalis, non-Assamese and linguistic minorities. As for offenders, it mentions: Assamese, regional fanatics, anti-social elements, AASU and AAGSP.

Therefore, the structure of the problem described in each paper seems to be totally disparate. The main message of AT is that the police or military oppress the student organization asserting a just cause, and the foreigners attack indigenous people. In this message, the ‘problem’ is the social insecurity caused by foreign nationals, deletion of their names from the voters’ lists, and their detection and deportation. This logic used in AT’s articles is identical to that of the second typical argument of the second section (2.2): Assamese people are culturally and economically threatened by the immigration of Bengalis (recently, especially Bangladeshis = foreigners).

On the other hand, the focus of the articles published in ABP is mainly

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<th>Patients and Offenders described in The Assam Tribune and Amrita Bazar Patrika</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Assam Tribune</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Amrita Bazar Patrika</strong></td>
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on the attacks on religious and linguistic minorities of Indian nationality by anti-social student organizations. Then, the ‘problem’ is the oppression of linguistic and religious minorities (especially the Bengalis) in Assam. This logic used by ABP is similar to that of the third typical argument of the second section (2.2): there is the oppression of ‘minorities’ and criticism of the organizers of the movement for their chauvinistic attitudes.

Therefore, it becomes clear that even if newspapers report the same incidents, they select ‘facts’ and utilize them to support their own arguments, thus setting totally different agendas. From this analysis, the effect of the reports is unknown. But even if the reported ‘facts’ are the same, the interpretations, which include the structure of the problem, victims and offenders, are different. So it can be assumed that they had influences on people’s recognition and acknowledgment of the situation, although I cannot agree with the view that the newspapers had direct effect on people’s action. Hence I accept the argument of Surendra K. Gupta and Indira B. Gupta to some extent: the reporting of the newspapers accelerated the discord between the Assamese and the Bengalis.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed the descriptions in articles published in The Assam Tribune and Amrita Bazar Patrika and made clear the role of the newspapers in Assam and West Bengal in the foreign nationals issue. I found out that while setting different agendas, the two newspapers utilized ethnic concepts and made stereotypical images. The Assam Tribune reports that the Bangladeshis are illegal immigrants who are organizing attacks upon local citizens. Here, they are labeled as threats to the society. And AT described supporters of the movement, such as students and picketers, and the indigenous people (that means, Assamese and immigrants who had lived in Assam for a long time) as the victims of the movement. AT illustrated the organizers of the movement as asserting the just cause of the Assamese, and the police and the security forces as illegitimately oppressing their movement, and conducting atrocities upon local people.

In Amrita Bazar Patrika, the Assamese, especially AASU and AAGSP, are described as offenders. ABP label them as chauvinistic regional fa-
natics, and state that they are trying to drive out all the non-Assamese from Assam. Non-Assamese are described as linguistic and religious minorities, and especially the Bengalis are illustrated as victims of the attack.

It goes without saying that the expression of ethnicity of the ethnic groups — the Assamese and the Bengalis — is essential in setting those agendas. Also, concepts such as 'Indian national linguistic minorities' or 'foreigners' are important when suggesting whether those people are eligible for protection under the constitution of India. Looking at these concepts, it can be said that the foreign nationals issue includes two problems: the ethnic conflicts between the Assamese and the Bengalis, and the problem of national integration of India (the distinction between the foreigners and the Indian nationals). And the reporting of the newspapers is concerned with defining the boundaries between ethnic groups and nations — the Assamese and the Bengalis, and the Indian nation and the foreigners.

As for the Assamese and the Bengalis, the distinction between them is not clear. For example, there are people who are of Bengali origins, but are now assimilated to Assamese culture and speak only Assamese. It is not stated whether these people are called Assamese or Bengalis, but both papers categorize people as 'Assamese' and 'Bengalis,' and label them as victims or attackers, thus making these stereotypical images.

Moreover, AT reports that 'foreigners' and 'the Bangladeshis' attack local citizens, and ABP describes the oppression of 'Indian national linguistic and religious minorities.' But it is difficult to distinguish 'foreigners' or 'Bangladeshis' from 'Bengali-speaking Indian nationals' or 'linguistic minorities' because there is a debate over the cut-off year. Congress, CPI and CPI (M) insist that the immigrants who entered India before 1971 should be treated as Indian citizens, but political parties like PLP and AJD that supported the Assam movement claim those who entered Assam after 1951 should be treated as foreigners and deleted from the voters' lists. Therefore, it is not clear whether people who entered between 1951 and 1971 are foreigners or Indian national linguistic minorities, and these categories are highly fluid. But they are classified in different groups and labeled each name in the newspaper reports, constructing different ethnicities.

The setting of the different agendas analyzed in the last section closely
relates to the national integration of India, as well as the ethnic confrontation between the Assamese and the Bengalis, as these expressions of ethnicity contribute to defining the 'Indians' or the 'Assamese.' Therefore, it is important to study such plural agenda settings when considering the issue of national integration in India. The distinctions between nations and ethnic groups are not inherent, but they are constructed from perceptions as a result of people's arguments. Although it seems that there are clear boundaries, they are re-interpreted and re-defined from time to time. The analysis of this paper reveals the mass media to be one of the factors setting the boundaries, thus constructing ethnicity.

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Notes

1) The term 'foreign nationals issue' is frequently used to describe the whole phenomenon including political changes, social transformation and violent incidents caused by the movement. I also use this term when referring in general to events occurring at the time.

2) Goffman used the concept of 'framing' as a definition of a situation or context in which interaction takes place, by an actor in that situation [Goffman 1974].

3) McClain used a term 'conceptualization' as 'issue definition' and 'problem structuring' when discussing policy agenda setting [McClain 1993: 69-79].

4) It was not common to presume that there were multiple agendas regarding one issue. But from the arguments by Goffman and McClain, it is clear that agenda setting includes the reality-defining function. Goffman argues that actors put various definitions to a situation, and McClain states that problem identification is a very important aspect of agenda-setting (here, she refers to policy agenda) [Takeshita 1998: 208–9; McClain 1993: 82]. From these arguments, it is possible to presume that there can be multiple agendas regarding a single issue, and these multiple agendas can affect people's acknowledgement and recognition of the situation differently.

5) Being that the subjects of the study are English dailies, it is impossible to consider
some of the important local concepts such as ‘Asamiya’ (an Assamese word expressing Assameseness). I understand that this could be a crucial limitation of this study, but at least we can grasp a rough sketch of the logic used in newspaper reporting.

6) Inspired by the arguments of Gupta and Gupta, and McClain, I decided to focus on victims and offenders. Gupta and Gupta argue that AT presented the supporters of the movement as victims most of the time, and ABP sought to establish that the agitators committed violence.

References


Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1980, Real Face of the Assam Agitation.


