REASONS FOR ASSAM'S DEMAND FOR GREATER AUTONOMY FOR THE STATE.

How did the Centre respond to Assam's agitation for more autonomy.

The Assamese had a persistent sense of grievance that the Central Government had discriminated against the state in the allocation of central funds and in location of new industries. Assam was the site of the tea industry -- a major foreign exchange earner, the oil and the plywood industries, but did not benefit from the revenues generated by them.

The Assamese also feared loss of identity, and culture. Throughout the colonial period and even after independence, Bengalis had settled in Assam, and had come to occupy a dominant role in government service, in teaching and other professions. Being more backward in education, the Assamese youth naturally felt disadvantaged in the competition for jobs. The predominance of Bengalis, also created fear that the Assamese language and culture was in danger of being swamped.

Over the years the demographic profile of Assam also underwent a change. Already the British had settled tribals in the tea gardens and Bengalis in the valley of Brahmaputra, the Bengali Muslims also settled in Assam in the early 20th century. Partition resulted in large scale refugee influx from East Pakistan into Assam, West Bengal and Tripura. In 1971, due to Bangladesh war, over one million refugees sought shelter in Assam. Although many returned but a substantial number remained. This led to great land scarcity and generated a feeling of linguistic, cultural and political insecurity among the Assamese. They felt that the Assamese would be reduced to a minority in their own land.

In 1979 the illegal migrant issue burst as a major issue when it became clear that a number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh had become voters. In the same year, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), a students' group not affiliated to any party, and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) led an anti-foreigner movement. They made an economic demand that the state should obtain income and employment from the industries of Assam. The campaign won widespread support from all sections Assamese speakers. The movement also called for postponement of elections until the voter rolls were verified and foreigners were removed. They called for the sealing of the borders and deportation of those who had entered the state after 1961.

In 1979, the elections could not be held, because of problems in making the electoral rolls. In some cases candidates were not allowed to file their nomination papers. There were statewide closures and agitation before government offices and at times the agitators blocked the movements of trains and the supply of oil from Assam.

The demands of the AASU/AAGSP unfortunately led to religious polarization, as many of the recent immigrants were Muslims. At times this led to attacks on long standing residents who happened to be Bengali or Muslim. The movement was largely non-violent, but in 1983, hundreds of Bengali speaking Muslims were slaughtered by a mob of Assamese Hindus and tribals at a place called Nellie.

Thus the years 1979 to 1985 witnessed great political instability in the state, with collapse of the state governments, imposition of President's rule, strikes, rallies and unprecedented ethnic violence. In such an atmosphere holding elections became virtually impossible.
Through these years, the Central government held talks with the leaders. The real point of contention was the cut off date beyond which immigration could be considered illegal. The Nellie Massacre galvanized both sides into resuming negotiations. In 1983, the Parliament passed an Act to determine the status of illegal immigrants. Finally the Rajiv Gandhi led government signed the Assam Accord in 1985 with the agitators.

According to this Accord:
1. Foreigners who had entered Assam between 1951 and 1961 would be given full citizenship rights.
2. Those who migrated between 1961 and 1971 would not be allowed to vote for 10 years, but given all other rights.
3. Foreigners who had migrated to Assam during and after the Bangladesh war would be identified and deported. Fresh elections were called and the AASU transformed itself into the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). The party did well in the elections and its leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta became the Chief Minister.
4. An economic package for the state was also worked out.
5. The Central Government also promised to protect the cultural and linguistic heritage of Assam.

Extreme and prolonged political turbulence ended in Assam, although fresh insurgencies were to come up -- the Bodo separatist movement and the secessionist and violent United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

NAGALAND'S DEMAND FOR AUTONOMY

The Nagas were the inhabitants of the Naga Hills along the border with Burma. They consisted of a group of different tribes, speaking different languages. During the British rule, they had been isolated from the rest of the country. However the British had allowed missionary activity, and several tribes had been converted to Christianity. The result was a small educated stratum among them.

In 1946, a group of educated Nagas formed the Naga National Council (NNC), and called for 'self-determination and unity'. Immediately after independence, the Indian government followed a policy of integrating the Naga areas within India. The pro-independence faction, led by Angami Zapu Phizo opposed this policy and rose in rebellion in 1951.

The Government of India followed a two track policy. On the one hand Nehru told Naga leaders including Phizo who met him in 1952 -- that while independence was not an option, Nagas could be granted greater autonomy. Towards a violent insurgency, however, the government would follow a policy of harsh suppression. In 1952-53, the NNC leadership had gone underground, the police raided homes and villages, further alienating the local villagers. In 1955, the separatist Nagas declared the formation of an independent government.

Once the separatists launched the movement, the Indian Government sent the army to Nagaland to flush out the rebels. The army's ruthless methods soon earned the hatred of many people. On the other hand Prime Minister Nehru also realised that the government had to follow a conciliatory path as well. While encouraging the Nagas to integrate with the rest of India, Nehru favoured their right to autonomy. At the same time the Indian Government refused to negotiate with Phizo or his supporters as long as they refused to give up violence.

Phizo and his group went underground and the struggle continued, with human rights abuses on both sides. By 1957, the armed rebellion had been broken -- a group of moderate Nagas under Dr. Imkongliba came to the fore. They began to seek peaceful solution to the
problem. In 1957 the Naga Hill District became a Union Territory. In 1960, moderate Nagas called for the creation of a separate state of Nagaland within the Indian Union. Nehru accepted these demands and the new state of Nagaland came into existence in 1963. However, although electoral politics now came to be part of the political process, the armed rebels under Phizo carried on their guerrilla struggle, provoking equal harsh retaliation by the armed forces.

MIZORAM MOVEMENT

The Mizo Districts of the Lushai Hills, were autononous within Assam. However, separatist sentiments had been developing among a section of the population. But the dissatisfaction with the Assam government's relief measures during a famine in 1959, and the state's language policy led to the setting up of the Mizo National Front (MNF), led by Laldenga.

While some Mizos continued to participate in electoral politics, the MNF now received arms and training from East Pakistan and China. In February, 1966, the MNF started an armed campaign for independence and attacked government offices, looted banks and disrupted communications. The Government of India responded with massive counter insurgency measures -- including the army and the air force. Quite often civilians were the victims caught in the cross fire between the insurgents and the state. Although the uprising was crushed, the insurgents fought on for the next twenty years, taking shelter in the neighbouring states.

In 1973, after the less extremist Mizo leaders had scaled down their demand to that of a separate state of Mizoram, the region was made into a Union Territory. After a rise in insurgency in the 1970s, both sides realized the futility of armed struggle. The Government of India was willing to offer liberal terms of amnesty for the rebels and enter into negotiations for a peaceful settlement.

In 1986 Laldenga came back from exile and signed an accord with the Indian government. According to its terms the insurgents agreed to abandon violence and were granted amnesty. The Government of India agreed to grant full statehood to Mizoram. Former insurgents now entered the election process, and in 1987, Laldenga became the Chief Minister of Mizoram. Mizoram attained full statehood in 1987.