

Linguistic Nationalism and its Ramifications in Assam

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Abstract

The paper intends to focus on the genesis of the language agitation movement in Assam and its multi-dimensional ramifications on the socio-political atmosphere in the respected region following the Assam Official Language Act in 1960. Moreover, language takes a very complex position in a multi-ethnic society or a linguistically and religiously diverse country. As language becomes the soul of identity, the political dimension of language assumes different shapes and content at various times, just as it happens so following the divergence of regions. India as a multi-ethnic country has different experiences regarding the language issue. In some parts of the country, language is a great force in social and other movements. In some places, language receives religious appeal. In such a scenario language with a religious overtone affects the process of assimilation of several ethnic groups as evident from the experience in North-East India. Intertwined with the Assamese sub-nationalism, the Assamese language movement left its implications and its fateful connection to the future cultural politics of Assam.

Keywords: Language Movement, Northeast Region, Official Language Bill, Multi-Ethnic Dimensions

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the genesis of the language agitation movement in Assam and its multi-dimensional ramifications on the socio-political atmosphere in the respected region following the Assam Official Language Act in 1960. Language is the soul of a society or nation. It gives identity to a person, to a social group, to a geographical entity and as well as to a nation. Moreover “language is the medium as well as the expression of culture”. Therefore, in any clash of cultures or crisis of identities, language is used as the instrument of political actions.¹

¹ P. Majumdar, *Colonialism, Language and Politics: Origin of the Language Dispute in Assam*, (DVS publishers: Guwahati, 2014), 1-4.

Assam has been a vastly underpopulated state in the North-Eastern region of India. Owing to its richness of resources, Assam has attracted migrants for more than a century. Immigration and internal migration Assam planned and economically desirable at first, became haphazard and politically motivated, particularly during the pre-independence era.² Since independence and partition in 1947, growing immigration has led to a conflict among different groups of people belonging to different communities. The conflicts among different ethnic groups have given rise to a series of interrelated and complicated socio-economic and identity questions. However, the identity problem in Assam as in many colonial nations, where the structure and the imaginative model of the nation-state have been the result of Colonialism lies in the effort to integrate many ethnicities into homogeneities of the nation-state. This raises identity issues that take different shapes over the years because of the deployment of historical memory, the reading of the past in specific convenient or expedient ways raised questions on identity in the present time. In Colonial Assam, British policies involved the insertion into the region of communities belonging to other regions and more importantly, to other linguistic and culturally distinct groupings, the question of migration has been part of the imagination of an “identity always in crisis”.³

The biggest and the most interesting manifestation of the identity crisis in Assam has been the shadow boxing among the two large linguistic and cultural groups, so similar and yet so determinedly different- the Bengalis and the Assamese. The language controversy in Assam is part of the uncomfortable relationship between these two diverse communities, traceable both to the introduction of Bengali as the official and educational language under the British and to the impact of the ‘Bengali Renaissance’⁴. The major dimension of the perception of threat to the community has therefore been not so much the religious as the linguistic and traditional-cultural dimensions were severe.⁵

One of the major issues that informed the culture and politics of the post-independence Assam, other than the issue of immigration, which acquired the kind of centrality, was the language issue. The post-independence Provincial Government, and also sections of the civil society through various organizations

² Samir K. Das (Ed.), *Blisters on their Feet: Tales of Internally Displaced Persons in Northeast India*, (Sage Publication India Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi, Indian Council of Social Science Research- North Eastern Regional Centre, 2008), 13-19.

³ N. Dutta, *Question of Identity in Assam*, (Sage Publication India Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi, 2012), 34-18.

⁴ The intellectuals of Assam, who were mostly educated in Calcutta and developed great cultural empathy with the Bengalis.

⁵ Dutta, *Question of Identity in Assam*, 39.

such as the *Assam Sahitya Sabha*⁶ and *Assam Jatiya Mahasabha*⁷ took upon themselves the task of constructing a political discourse to make Assamese the sole official language. The genesis of that lay of course, in the cultural politics of Colonial Assam which further culminated in the referendum of 1960. The hegemonic linguistic nationalism, sponsored and propagated by the Assam Provincial State was primarily pitched vis-à-vis the Bengali Language, which was the largest linguistic minority of the province.⁸ However, the genesis of the Assamese Language issue can be traced back to the 19th century, when the British replaced Persian with Bengali as the language of the courts and the medium of instruction which was not the mother tongue of the Assamese people. Thus, the controversy regarding the British language policy started during the “*Jonaki Age*”⁹ which entered a new phase during the post-independence era, with the proposal of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee to declare “Assamese” as the only official language of the state.

Genesis of the Assamese Language Issue:

Assam in the 19th century presented a peculiar scenario. With the British annexation in 1826, the socio-political and economic situation underwent a rapid change. The language in the province too faced the wind of the change. Assamese, the vernacular language of Assam, has a long history of its existence. But before British rule, it was not taught as a subject in the absence of schools in the modern sense of the term. The Assamese intelligentsia of the pre-British periods was much influenced by Sanskrit and also to some extent by Persian which was at that time the court language of India.¹⁰ With the advent of the British, the whole situation rapidly changed. The British needed the services of ‘native’ bureaucrats to run the administration. The people who, at that time, were intimately acquainted with the British administrative method were those of Bengal, the immediate neighbour of Assam. To help the British in consolidating their power in Assam, came with them, a large number of Bengalis who gradually owned their prestige as efficient ‘*amlahs*’ or bureaucrats.

In 1837, under the Act of XXIX passed by the President of the Council of India, the

⁶ The *Assam Sahitya Sabha* was founded in December 1917 in Guwahati. Assam is the oldest literary-cultural organization in the State. The Sabha’s history can be traced back to two Kolkata-based organizations namely the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* and the Assamese Literary Society.

⁷ *Assam Jatiya Mahasabha* was established by Ambikagiri Raichoudhury to protect the rights and interests of the Assamese people.

⁸ V. R. Trivedi, *Documents on Assam, Part-A*, (Omson Publication: New Delhi, 1995), 12-20.

⁹ The *Jonaki Age* is a period in Assamese literature and culture that lasted from 1889 to 1929. It is also known as the Age of Romanticism in Assamese literature. The period was characterized by the rise in nationalist sentiments and a resurgence of Assamese identity.

¹⁰ Majumdar, *Colonialism, Language and Politics*, 11.

vernacular language of a district was directed to be used in the courts.¹¹ The abolition of Persia from the court was highly appreciated. Although for more than ten years after the annexation of the province, Assamese was the language of the courts, as a part of the Presidency of Bengal, the Bengali language was introduced in the courts of Assam. The decision to use Bengali in the schools was first implemented in the very next year.¹² The use of Bengali as the language of the court and educational institutions had done great harm to the people of Assam and driven a permanent wedge between the two communities of Assamese and Bengalis. As a result of the use of Bengali language between 1837 and 1873 as the medium of instruction, the education of the Assamese could not progress and a lot of Bengalis were imported and employed in the different schools of Assam.¹³ Writing textbooks for school children in Assamese did not get any encouragement and Assamese literature naturally suffered in its growth. The enmity between the two linguistic groups affected the Assamese society and it led to a conflict between the Bengalis and the Assamese people of the region.

The imposition of Bengali as the official language and as the medium of instruction in Assam did not meet with any protest initially. On the contrary, the Assamese elite use the language in their writings and often even in their conversations. Hence for almost a decade, the language policy of the government remained unquestioned. But as recruitment of Bengalis in government services increased resulting in greater unemployment among the Assamese, strong feelings of resentment began to grow amongst the people. Initial protests against the government's language policy came from the American Baptist Missionaries and the educated Assamese elite.¹⁴ Soon after they arrived in Assam, the missionaries realized that they needed to use the vernacular medium to spread Christianity. Hence, they began to strongly espouse the Assamese language as the rightful medium of instruction. Apart from printing all their religious material in Assamese, they made fervent pleas in defence of the Assamese language through the *Orunodo*, the first Assamese Journal. The untiring efforts of the missionaries in asserting the separate identity of the Assamese language were indeed commendable and received wholehearted support from the Assamese intelligentsia, whose chief spokesperson was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, further followed by several petitions and memoranda to the government.¹⁵

The labours of the Baptist Missionaries and men like Hemchandra, Gunabhiram and Anandaram- the Trinity- helped to restore the Assamese language to its rightful

¹¹ Majumdar, *Colonialism, Language and Politics*, 50.

¹² Majumdar, *Colonialism, Language and Politics*, 51.

¹³ M. L. Bose, *Social History of Assam*, (Ashok Kumar Mittal Concept Publishing Company: New Delhi, 1989), 91.

¹⁴ P. Goswami, *The History of Assam from Yandaboo to Partition 1826-1947*, (Orient Black Swan Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi, 2012), 219.

¹⁵ Goswami, *The History of Assam from Yandaboo to Partition 1826-1947*, 220-221.

place in the state, when in 1872, George Campbell, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal made Assamese the language of education and administration for its native speakers.¹⁶ Eventually, in February 1874, the government revised its earlier language policy and the Commissioner categorically stated that in the primary schools, rather than Bengali, Assamese should be the sole medium of instruction. However, the Commissioner had no objection to the use of Bengali textbooks if students understood that language. This decision made the Assamese suspect some sly device by the Bengalis to supplant the Assamese. Despite the Chief Commissioner's assurance that Assamese would not be supplanted, Bengali continued to be the medium in middle grades until the close of the 19th century.¹⁷ Vigorous protests were made by the Assamese people against the decision. The Director of Public Instruction replied on January 16, 1903, that Sir Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner, was not favourable to the substitution of Assamese for Bengali texts in Assam Valley high schools. Further, the Chief Commissioner stated on March 28, 1903, that students in the Assamese-speaking district of Kamarupa should be taught in Assamese, but the non-availability of Assamese texts stood in the way of its implementation.

The attitude of the Assamese educated community is reflected in Manik Chandra Barua, one of the pioneers in this regard argument to the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrupa that as the district was never a part of Bengal and that Gauhati was essentially an Assamese town, the medium of instruction in the high schools must be Assamese. The establishment of Cotton College, Earle Law College, and many other institutions bear testimony to his patriotism and ardour for Assam's development. While accepting the cogency of Barua's argument, P.G. Mellitus, the Commissioner of the Assam valley, pointed out that on demands from the parents of the Bengali students' arrangements should be made in Gauhati to provide instruction through Bengali. Though Mellitus was willing to respect the sentiments of the sizably intelligent section of the Bengali community, the Commissioner felt that owing to the closer relation of this community to the people of Bengal than to the Assamese, schools in Goalpara must have Bengali as the medium. In his concluding note, Mellitus states that the imparting of education in Assamese instead of in Bengali was being done at the cost of efficiency. This foregoing study anticipates the shape of things to come, especially after 1947.¹⁸

The Movement

While the year 1947 was the year of independence for India, to Assam it was a decisive one in determining her future and the continuity of her historical tradition. When the New Constitution, framed by the Constituent Assembly, was introduced on January 26, 1950, Assam emerged as a Free State of the Dominion of India,

¹⁶ D. K. Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947*, (Minerva Association Publication: Calcutta, 1990), 20.

¹⁷ Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947*, 21.

¹⁸ Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947*, 23.

which soon formally transformed into the Republic of the Indian Union. Immediately after independence, a referendum was held as a result of which the district of Sylhet was transferred from Assam to Pakistan, a large area of Kamarupa district in West Assam was transferred to Bhutan, and further reduced the size of the State by the declaration of Nagaland and Meghalaya as separate States.¹⁹ This reduction of size, however, did not mean a reduction in demography; the inflation in the demography resulted from the influx of large-scale immigration into the State from the turn of the century. This inflation reached an unmanageable proportion and thereby created a strain on the socio-economic structure of the State. These major changes viz, the change of government, the change in the geographical boundary and demographic changes and the tradition of student movements in the pre-independence period, have created a new environment which has renewed student activism more on value-oriented socio-economic lines and on the quest for an identity in the national set-up.²⁰

The Background:

The State of Assam is divided into three regions having distinct topographical features and languages. The Brahmaputra Valley, comprising the six districts of Goalpara, Kamarupa, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, has, according to the census of 1951, a population of about 67 lakhs, of which nearly 49 lakhs declared themselves to be Assamese speaking and nearly 8 lakhs Bengali speaking. The Surma Valley comprising the districts of Cachar which includes the Karimganj sub-division of the old Sylhet district, which, as a result of Partition, became a part of the Indian Union has a population of over 11 lakhs of which 8.6 lakhs were Bengali speaking and less than 4000 Assamese speaking; and the Hill regions made up of the district of Garo Hills, United Khasi-Jayantiya Hills, United Mikir and North-Cachar Hills and Mizo Hills has a total population of about 8 lakhs. The inhabitants of these regions speak their dialects and the number of people speaking either Assamese or Bengali in any one district did not exceed 5%.²¹

The Bengali-speaking people questioned the accuracy of the 1951 census figures insofar as they relate to the Assamese-speaking population. The Bengalis had questioned these figures before the State Re-organization Commission. They contended that these figures were inflated to justify the introduction of the Assamese as the State language. The representatives of both Cachar and Hill districts also complained that their regions had been neglected in respect of the development schemes both in the Five and Second Five Year Plan.

Since the coming into force of the Constitution and the recognition of Assamese as

¹⁹ A. Dasgupta, *Remembering Sylhet*, (Manohar Publishers and Distributors: New Delhi, 2014), 13-15

²⁰ M. Deka, *Student Movements in Assam*, (Vikas Publishing House: New Delhi, 1996), 132-133.

²¹ Trivedi, *Documents on Assam*, 67-68.

one of the languages in the Eighth Schedule, the desire of the Assamese people to have Assamese declared as the official language of Assam has gained new momentum but they felt that their aspirations had all along been thwarted by the opposition of the Bengali speaking people and the people of Hill regions. The Non-Assamese felt that the declaration of Assamese as the official language of the State would place the Assamese-speaking people in a position of advantage in many respects, particularly in the recruitment of state Services. The people of the Hill districts had a feeling that the recognition of Assamese as the official language in addition to their languages would place an unbearable burden on them. As a result, the Assamese-speaking section of the population has been nurturing a grievance that the Bengalis and the others have stood in the way of the achievements of their just aspirations. The language question has thus caused dissension and mutual suspicion between the Assamese and the non-Assamese speaking sections of the population.²²

The Assamese felt that the Bengalis considered their culture and language to be superior to that of the Assamese and looked down upon the Assamese language and culture. They also felt that the Bengalis had monopolized jobs in the Central Governments in Assam and deprived the Assamese youths of their due share in Central Services. On the other hand, the Bengalis believed that the recent disturbances were part of an organized plan, called the “*Bongal Kheda Movement*”, to drive them out of Assam. Further, the Bengalis gave a figure indicating that in the Dhuburi sub-division of Goalpara district, the number of lower primary schools, where Bengali boys had been receiving education in their mother tongue, had been reduced from 250 in 1947-48 to 3 in 1950-51. They said that the same story had repeated itself in other districts. This inflation reached an unmanageable proportion and thereby created a strained feeling between these two sections of people over the question of language.

Initially started as an elite movement by the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society organized in 1917), the Official Language Movement of 1960 was spearheaded by the student community comprising the All-Assam Students’ Federation (under the banner of the Students’ Association of Gauhati). With “Assam for the Assamese” as the ideology, the movement leadership demanded that Assamese be made the official language of the state²³ The students of Assam were well organized by that time. The youthful imagination of the students had already been inflamed by the language agitation and the stories of how the Bengalis deprived them of livelihood. The students thus became the spearhead of the agitation on the language issue. They organized processions, meetings and ‘*hartals*’ and soon they began to dominate the situation throwing the political parties into the background. (Deka: 1996: 133-35)

²² Trivedi, *Documents on Assam*, 69.

²³ Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947*, 56.

The States' Reorganization Commission (S.R.C.)

The Official Language Movement of 1960 was, however, a direct sequel to the appointment of the States' Reorganization Commission in 1955 and dates back to the agitation of Assamese as the official state language beginning in 1950. Through two resolutions in 1950 and again in 1959, the *Sahitya Sabha* stressed the need for making Assamese the official state language. The controversy, however, gained momentum after April 1959, when the Sabha proposed that the Assamese language be declared as the state language in 1960. Just before the Budget session of the Assembly (1960), the Assam Sahitya Sabha issued an appeal to all the legislators to raise the language question in the Assembly.²⁴ On March 3, 1960, Chief Minister B.P. Chaliha stressed two important reasons which warranted the enactment of the state language. First, to make the official communication easily understandable to the common man, and second, to break the barrier of language which now separates the diverge population for declaring Assamese as the state's official language. The Government feared that if this issue was decided only based on majority or minority, its object would be defeated.²⁵

Various political parties exploited this statement, criticizing it severely. From their respective standpoints, the different newspapers of Assam also criticized this statement. On March 22, 1960, a deputation on behalf of the newly formed All Assam Student Association (AASA) and the student community met the Chief Minister at Gauhati, led by Bhuvan Thakur and Bhubaneshwar Bezbarua. The deputation presented a memorandum demanding the declaration of Assamese as the State language of Assam. On March 26, the local people and the students organised a public meeting at Barpeta and condemned the Chief Minister's statement concerning the language controversy.

During Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Gauhati University on April 17, the students in a body demanded an immediate declaration of Assamese as the State Language. This was reinforced by the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee's (A.P.C.C.) resolution of April 22. However, on May 21, 1960, a huge procession of non-Assamese students was led out from the Khasi National Darbar, shouting slogans to oppose Assamese as a State Language.²⁶ On May 29, a deputation of local students led by Hiren Dev Goswami (GU/LAW) and Dilip Kakoti, Union Secretary, Cotton College, met the Chief Minister and submitted a memorandum requesting the latter to take immediate measures against the persons who staged the anti-Assamese demonstration at Shillong on May 21.²⁷ Similar meetings, with similar resolutions, were held and passed at Sivsagar on June 3, and at Drrang on June 2, while the students of Nagaon organized a complete 'hartal' on June 2 in

²⁴ *Census Report Assam, 1961*, Assam State Archive, Dispur, Guwahati-14.

²⁵ Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947*, 57.

²⁶ H. K. Barpujari (Ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol-V*, (Publication Board Assam: Guwahati, 2007), 135-39.

²⁷ *Barpujari (Ed.), The Comprehensive History of Assam*, 41.

protest of the language issue. On June 9, the students of Golaghat town held a demonstration by bringing out a procession, picketing in offices, schools, railways etc. as a protest against the anti-Assamese demonstration in Assam. Further on June 13, at Dibrugarh and Jorhat a 10,000 strong students' rally condemned the slogans of the Shillong processions and demanded immediate introduction of Assamese as the State language.²⁸

On June 21, 1960, the Mizo students led by Lalzarliana and others carried out a procession showing dissatisfaction with the Assam Government. As Chief Minister Chaliha announced on June 23, that the government's decision to introduce a bill declaring Assamese as the state language on the lines of the A.P.P.C. resolution, the student representatives of different educational institutions of Gauhati resolved (June 25) to hold a meeting on July 4. The Garo students held a meeting on July 1, at Benefa-Atbla (Tura) expressing their determination to foil the declaration of Assamese as the State language. The same day students of Digboi requested the manager of Jasada Talkie, to stop screening a Bengali Picture. The situation further worsened when at Gauhati Calcutta papers were burnt by the student agitationists on June 29. On June 29, curfew orders were imposed under a section of the Criminal Procedure Code. In a telegram of July 1, the post-graduation students of Gauhati University requested the Chief Minister to convene an emergency Assembly for declaring Assamese as the state language.²⁹ The situation further worsened after July 1. On July 4, students went to Laluk and Bihpuria and damaged some Bengali signboards and burnt some Bengali calendars. The police firing on the Cotton College Boarders on July 4, 1960, was the climax of the language movement, in which Ranjit Barpujari was killed and six others were injured at the college hostel. This aroused the sentiments of the entire student community. On July 10, 1960, the Golaghat District Student Federation condemned the police firing and the death of Ranjit Barpujari and demanded a judicial enquiry into the matter and immediate dismissal of the police officers responsible for the tragedy.³⁰

On July 12, The All-Assam Students Demand Day was observed at all places by organizing '*hartals*' and processions. This student's strike had its repercussions at Calcutta. Thousands of students of different schools and colleges in Calcutta stayed away from classes and protested against the atrocities on the Bengali community in Assam. They submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister, Dr. B.C. Roy demanded immediate intervention from the Government to suppress the disturbances. Further from July 16, two students, Madan Mohan Dobi and Krishnapada Bhakta, went on a hunger strike at Uluberia to express their resentment against the atrocities in Assam and demanded the Central

²⁸ Deka, *Student Movements in Assam*, 166-167.

²⁹ S. Baruah, *India Against Itself, Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1999), 25-35.

³⁰ Baruah, *India Against Itself, Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, 37.

Government's intervention to restore peace and security in Assam.³¹

The Assam Government, however, did not possess any efficient machinery for disseminating correct information. Their Press releases on many occasions failed to give a full and correct picture and to contradict false and tendentious news published by these papers. As a result, a sort of cold war atmosphere was developed by the Press in both the States. Even when serious attempts were being made to restore order and impart a sense of security among the people, the Press on both sides did not fully realise its responsibility. For the emotional integration of different groups, the creation of an atmosphere of amity and peace was essential. In this, the Press has a significant role to play, but both the Assam and Calcutta presses have failed to maintain a reasonable standard of impartiality and accuracy.

State Response

The disturbances in Assam erupting in violence and widespread destruction to a large number of residents of Assam leading the State, have been a matter of concern and sorrow to the Government of Assam. The Government needed to enunciate its policy regarding its action to deal with the situation that has arisen. The Government condemned the actions of those who participated in the riots and indulged in violence of any kind. As a consequence of the violence various complications have resulted both in Assam and in neighbouring States, which deserved earnest consideration for the future peace, security and progress of the State and its neighbouring States. On August 30, 1960, the Government stated its policy, in which it was alleged that the democratic rights of the students had been curtailed, processions and meetings were prohibited, and being made responsible for the disturbances on language issues in Assam.³² The secretariat of ASF appealed to all students of Assam to raise a voice of protest against the policy statement of the Government and to organise public opinion against it. Kamal Bora, Vice President of ASF, Guwahati had stated in the policy statement to the press. The Asom Starasammilan (ASF) issued a leaflet entitled, '*Satrar Ganatantrik Adgikar Horonor Birudhey Pratibad Karak (raise voice against suppression of democratic student movement)*'.³³

On September 19, the All-Assam Student Federation (AASF) met at Galaghat and adopted the following resolutions:

- 1) It reiterated the demand for the declaration of Assamese as the State language in the ensuing Assembly session with necessary safeguards for the minority communities;
- 2) It urged the government to make arrangements for the Bengali evacuees to

³¹ K. Deka, *Youths in Turmoil Assam*, (Purbodoya Press: Calcutta, 1991), 39-41.

³² U. Mishra, *North-East India, Question for Identity*, (Omsons Publications: Panbazar, Guwahati, 1988), 157-168.

³³ Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947*, 95.

return and rehabilitate;

- 3) It urged the Government to arrange foreign education for the Assamese youths in scientific and technical lines;
- 4) It appealed to the students to protest against the imposition of prohibitory orders on the students; and
- 5) It urged the Government to punish the real culprits involved in the language riots and demanded the suspension of Lala B.K. Dey (DIG) and Pabbi (S.P. Kamarupa) pending disposal of Ranjit Barpujari murder case, else the meeting urged the students to offer strike for an unlimited period.³⁴

The Official Language Bill: Its passage

The question of language has become closely associated with the unfortunate occurrences in Assam. The Government proposed to give its separate consideration to the language issue. Therefore, the Government did not deal with the Statement of Board Policy and decided to solve the language question with the spirit of cooperation and understanding. The immediate task which has to be undertaken by the Government after the riots was the establishment of peace and order, and to produce a sense of security in the minds of all the people. For this, the immediate task which has to be undertaken is the rehabilitation of the victims of the riots and return their homes to. It requests the Government of West Bengal to co-operate in this task. It has, therefore, become necessary for the Government to remove once and for all the feeling of immunity and consequent boldness to take the law into their hands.

Despite the S.R.C. Report that the Assamese language did not fulfil the formula laid down for an official language and contrary to the non-Assamese opposition, Chief Minister Chaliha introduced the Assamese Official Language Bill in the Assembly on October 10, 1960. The Bill provided for two official languages- Assamese and for an interim period, English. The bill passed on October 24, 1960, included safeguards for linguistic minorities as well. The Bill on official language further guided by the following principles:

In schools, rights of different linguistic communities regarding medium of instruction would be preserved; rights to obtain government services, and grant of '*thika*' (lease) or to adopt any profession in Assam was to be preserved regardless of language; if any employee of a district or locality could not write a note on the current language, he would be able to write the same in English with the permission of the department.³⁵

³⁴ *Deka, Youths in Turmoil Assam*, 170.

³⁵ "Assam Official Language Bill", File NO. As-321, Home Confidential, Political Department, Assam State Archive, Dispur, Guwahati. (The file doesn't contain the page number.)

Following the passing of the official language bill, a thirty thousand strong anti-Movement demonstration and '*hartal*' marked minority protests against the language bill, at Shillong. During the Assembly debates, a linguistic minority member from Cachar (R.M. Das) demanded the adoption of three official languages, such as Assamese, Bengali and Hindi instead of one, for the State of Assam. However, the Government's ready acceptance of an amendment from some Congress members of the Brahmaputra Valley made Assamese the sole official State language with provisions for using English in certain governmental work. A second Government amendment endorsed by the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha (ANC), the Sahitya Sabha and even A.P.C.C. empowered Village Panchayats and Municipal Boards in Cachar to induce sections of Bengali, Manipuri Muslims and scheduled castes to declare Assamese as their mother tongue.

The Official Act

The Assam Official Language Act, 1960, received the assent of the Governor on December 17 and was published in the Assam Gazette on December 19.³⁶ The provisions of the Act provided Assamese as the official language for all or any of the official purposes of the State of Assam. It further provided that the English language, under Article 343 of the Constitution of India, and thereafter Hindi in place of English, shall also be used for such official purposes of the offices of the Heads of Department of the State Government. Further, the Act provided that all Ordinance promulgated under Article 213 of the Constitution of India; all Acts passed by the State Legislature; all Bills to be introduced or amendments there to be moved in the State Legislature; and all Orders, Regulations, Rules and By-Laws issued by the State Government under the Constitution of India or any law made by Parliament; shall also be published in the Official Gazette in the Assamese language.³⁷ In Section 3 of the Act, it has been mentioned that the Bengali language shall continue to be used for administrative and other administrative purposes up to and including the district level in the district of Cachar until the Mokhuma Parishad and the Municipal Boards of the district, in a joint meeting by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members and present and voting, decide in favour of the adoption of the official language for use in the district for the aforesaid purposes. In Article 3, it was also mentioned that any examination held by the Assam Service Public Commission, which immediately before the commencement of this Act used to be conducted in the English language shall continue to be so conducted till such time, as it is permissible under the clause of Article 343 of the Constitution of India. However, the rights of various linguistic groups in respect of the medium of instruction in educational institutions were not affected by this Act. Besides, it was also promised by this Act that the rights of appointment in the Assam Public Services and other avocations shall be maintained without

³⁶ "Assam Official Language Bill", File NO. As-321. (The file doesn't contain any page number.)

³⁷ "Assam Official Language Bill", File NO. As-321.

discrimination on the grounds of language.³⁸ The Assam Official Language Act of 1960 was further amended in 1964. As amended it extended the period within which it was to come into force throughout Assam to ten years from the date of its initiation to December 19, 1970.

The Impact

Intertwined with the concept of ethnicity and education, language serves as a vehicle of social change and interaction. On the other hand, the correlation and interrelation between language and ethnicity are easily discernable. Thus, while language as the most effective instrument of culture becomes the most important vehicle for conveying the sense of belonging, it can also serve as a potent decisive force. While it enriches its users, the deeper and more comprehensive use of language makes it an instrument of culture and identity. The annexation of Assam by the British bound her fate to that of the other parts of the Company's dominion in India. The sweeping administrative changes and the accompanying political, economic and social changes had enormous and far-reaching consequences. Official language and as the medium of instruction in Assam. However, in the initial stage, the Government's language policy did not meet with any protest but over time strong agitation took place against the Government to place the Assamese language as the rightful medium of instruction.

The introduction of the Assam Official Language Bill, followed by the Assam Official Language Act in 1960, which stated that Assamese was to be then and thereafter the sole official language of Assam, added often violent and conflict-like situations between the Assamese and non-Assamese speakers prevalent in the State. The Bengalis of Southern Assam in particular, the region popularly known since 1980, by the epithet of Barak Valley, to represent the district of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi, with an Bangla speaking majority, was a site of tremendous protest against the ALA. The organizations like the Nikhil Assam Bangla Bhasha Bhashi Samiti, Sangram Parishad, Cachar Zila Gana Sangram Parishad, etc. intensified their protest against the imposition of Assamese in the Bengali-speaking Barak Valley. However, non-violent modes of protest were followed, but on May 19, 1961, the killing of one woman and ten men by the State Police firing, was signified as the high point of the Bengali Language Movement or the "Bangla Bhasha Andolon".³⁹ On May 20, the people of Silchar took out a procession with the body of the martyrs in protest of the killings. Given the seriousness of the situation, the Durgapur Session of the Congress Committee (A.I.C.C.) deputed Lal Bahadur Shastri to arrange a compromise, which succeeded. The Assam Government had to withdraw the circular and the ALA was amended

³⁸ "Assam Official Language Bill", File NO. As-321.

³⁹ M. Hussain, *The Assam Movement- Class, Ideology and Identity*, (Manak Publications, Delhi, 1993), 45-57.

to grant Bangla the status of the other official language in Barak Valley.⁴⁰

As a result of the Assamese Language Movement, the physical map of Assam and North East India changed with the territorial unit of the region which reduced from 219,877 sq. km. (1963) to 78,523 sq. km. (1972). Nagaland became a separate state on December 1, 1963, and the Garo Hills and the Khasi-Jayantiya Hills were formed into the state of Meghalaya (1972), while from United Territories in 1972, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh attained statehood in 1986.⁴¹

The Movement's alleged anti-national activities got momentum when the A.A.S.U. Leadership articulated their secessionist demand for an 'Independent Assam' as the language of the posters underwent change, the campaign was directed against 'Indians' as such rather than 'foreign' immigrants. The Anti-S.R.C. Movement of 1968 was the outcome of the later activities of the Language Movement, as the main slogan of the movement "Assam for the Assamese" stressed nationalism among the people. The Anti-S.R.C Movement was against the protest of the domination by non-Assamese in economic and employment matters.

The base of the 1960 Official Language Movement, initiated and organised by the Assam Sahitya Sabha and led by the heterogeneous student bodies, widened mob participation. The disturbances over the year of 1960, indicate the involvement of the student community in the political scenario, though they had no common platform at the initial moment. While the self-sufficiency drive became the Food Movement's cover for the anti-minority operation, the Anti-S.R.C Movement was launched against the hill districts' demand for a Federation endorsed by the Union Government.

Since the working of the S.R.C. in 1955, the immigrant Muslims have become dominant over the Bengali Hindus, particularly in Goalpara. During the Language Movement of 1960, the caste Hindu Assamese leadership used the Muslims as 'stormtroopers. In fact, in 1961, the indigenous and immigrant Muslims of Cachar not only supported Assamese chauvinism but also opposed the declaration of Bengali as the district's official language. Thus, the struggle to defend the Bengali language turned out to be a conflict between the Bengali Hindus and the joint forces of Assamese and Bengali Muslims. Led by some of their eminent leaders, a large section of the immigrant Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley returned themselves as Assamese speaking in the 1951 and 1961 censuses. However, the experience of the 1961-70 events following the Official Language Movement awakened the ethnic consciousness of many of those people. Thus, contrary to what they had done in 1961, in the 1971 census many Bengali Muslims in the Brahmaputra Valley districts correctly returned Bengali as their mother language. This change in

⁴⁰ Goswami, *The History of Assam from Yandaboo to Partition 1826-1947*, 152-54.

⁴¹ P. Sankar Dutta, *Autonomy Movement in Assam*, (Omson Publications: New Delhi, 1993), 37.

attitude caused a rupture between them and the Assamese bourgeoisie.⁴²

The Language Movement of 1972, better known as the “Medium of Instruction Movement” was another significant landmark which had been developed after the Official Language Movement of 1960. The linguistic aspirations of the Assamese, which had been expressed during the Official Language Movement were consolidated through making Assamese the medium of higher education. The issue of the Bengali linguistic identity of Cachar and its preservation had arrived at Centre State yet again during the language riots in 1972 (Medium of Instruction Movement), which broke over the issue of Gauhati University’s decision to introduce Assamese as the ‘language of education’ in its affiliated colleges.

Conclusion

The long-term struggle which continued for 36 (1836-73) years for introducing the Assamese language as a medium of instruction in schools and also a court language, achieved its goal when the British Government finally resolved the issue by deciding in favour of Assamese. However, the decision could not be properly executed in schools due to a lack of textbooks in Assamese. The British administrators themselves seemed to be divided regarding the utility of the Assamese language. The process of introducing of Assamese language from primary to high school classes was not completed till the end of the 19th century because of some reservations of the Government. On the other hand, a group of Assamese people held the firm view that the Bengali *Babus* were mainly responsible for the introduction of the Bengali language in Assam, and hence they developed a strong hatred towards the Bengali community. Thus, though the language movement was ended in 1873, by the Government’s revised language policy with the adoption of Assamese as the official language of the schools and courts, practically it could not pacify the Assamese people as problems arose in its way of execution. The ambivalent solution of the Assamese language question thus again gained its ground during the post-independent era.

The Provincial Government by introducing a series of language policies since 1947 pronounced its intention of restoring the Assamese language to the position of supremacy, that it was always denied. The Assamese Language Movements in the post-independent period was the culmination of the increasing political awareness among the Assamese themselves. Further, the source of the ‘unrests’ which had been developed during the year 1960, may also be traced to the economic causes, the inadequacy of jobs and unemployment for the educated Assamese in government and private firms, the influx of the Bengalis, as well frustration among the students and youth communities. Thus though not singly, a combination of the varied socio-economic and political factors alienating the caste Hindu Assamese middle class resulted in statewide ethnic and cultural conflagration during the period.

⁴² Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947*, 100-106.

The Language Movement of 1960 was, however, the biggest manifestation in the socio-cultural history of Assam. The movement in favour of the Assamese language was undoubtedly developed during the 18th century, but it further gained momentum in the post-independent era, which finally came to an end with the historic Assam Official Language Act of 1960, with its declaration of making Assamese the sole official language of the State. However, the Act was vigorously protested by the people of Barak Valley and gave birth to another language movement throughout the districts of the Southern trips of the State, yet it was considerably significant for the ‘Anti-SRC’ and ‘the Medium of Instruction Movement’

Abbreviations

S.R.C- State Reorganization Commission

A.A.S.F- All Assam Student Federation

A.P.C.C- Assam Pradesh Congress Committee

A.L.A- Assam Official Language Act

A.A.S.U- All Assam Student Union

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