

LANGUAGE AND POLITICS IN ASSAM: AFTER INDEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

India is considered to be one of the linguistically most diverse and complex societies in the world. This linguistic diversity was speculated to lead to the break-up of the country in the initial years immediately after independence. Article 345 seeks to tackle the issue of the official language for each State and language for inter-State communication at the governmental level. The legislature of a State may by law adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the State or Hindi for all or any of the official purposes and until that is done, English may continue to be used as hitherto fore. The language authorized to be used as the official language of the Union shall be the official language for communication between the States and between a State and the Union. If a substantial proportion of the population of a State demand and the President of India is satisfied, he or she may order that the language used by them may also be officially recognized throughout the State or in any part thereof for such purposes as may be specified. The present study is an attempt to understand the nature and demand of the reorganization of language by Bengali and Assamese speaking people in Assam after independence.

KEY WORDS: *Language, movement, Bengali, Assamese, Politics and Identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's national leaders had to confront several language problems in the first two decades of Independence and what appeared to some of them in the aftermath of Partition to be a real threat of the "Balkanization" of the country. (*Paul R Brass:157*) These problems included the official language issue, demands for the linguistic reorganization of the provinces of India whose boundaries during British rule did not conform to reorganized states. Most of the language conflicts in the Nehru periods, some of which became at times bitter and violent, were ultimately resolved through pluralistic solutions. The central government and the national leadership of the Congress sought to avoid direct confrontations with the language movements for linguistic reorganization of states, until mutual agreements were reached among contending language groups and their leaders, the Centre attempted to

ensure that the state governments were under the control of strong leaders whom it supported in efforts to maintain civil order.

After the setting up of the State Reorganization Commission (S.R.C.), the perspective altogether changed. The S.R.C. did not accept any of these demands and thought of an integrated North East India in the form of an enlarged Assam. It suggested the merger of Tripura with Assam on the ground that it would be desirable to bring the entire region between Pakistan and India under one administration-the Government of Assam. But the Commission did not suggest the merger of NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Area) and Manipur on the ground that NEFA being the frontier area required special attention and Manipur had an individual characteristic of its own. (*B.D. Ray:146*)

The Government of India accepted the recommendation of the Commission and the Constitution (Seventh Amendment) Act, 1956 came into being. The recommendations made by S.R.C. were not all acceptable to the people of hill districts. While Nagas continued their demand for independence from Assam and India, other Hill people continued their pressure for separation from Assam. Ultimately, Nagaland Bill received the President's assent on 4th September 1962, and thus Nagaland became the sixteenth State of India.

Other Hill Districts of Assam have been agitating for separate Hill States, the formation of Nagaland further strengthened their demand. The Mizos continued to press their demand forcefully on the lines of Nagas. Their demand was based on the ground that the political and socio-economic policy followed by the erstwhile Assam Government was not acceptable to them. They also complained that they did not get full scope to develop their language and culture and were forced to live in penury. On the implementation of Assamese Language Act, 1960, the People of Hill Districts vehemently opposed making Assamese language as the State Language Assam. (*B.D. Ray:147*)

OBJECTIVES

- a) The objectives of the study is to understand the nature and demand of the recognition of language by Bengali and Assamese speaking people in Assam after independence, and
- b) Impact of the declaration of Official Language Bill 1960 in Assam.

METHODOLOGY

The required information is collected from books, memoranda, pamphlets, news paper reporting, research articles and other archival records both official and non-official. Both primary and secondary data is used. The method of historical analysis is employed for the present study.

SAMPLING DESIGN

Purposive Sampling is employed for the present study. Some persons having knowledge of the subject (like retired professors, members of various associations, journalists etc.) are interviewed. Interview was done by unstructured questions.

RESULTS

Assam was one of those states where linguistic issue has emerged as dominant issue in the post-independent period. The two successive language movements indicate that how dominant was the language issue in Assam. The first language movement started in 1960's, demanding Assamese as Official Language and the second was in 1970's, which demanded Assamese as a medium of instruction up to university level.

The language issue of Assam was, however, somewhat different to that of the other parts of the country. Following are some aspects, which distinguish the language problem of Assam from that of other parts of the country.

- Unlike the language movements of other parts of the country the language movement of Assam did not demand for re-organization of states on the basis of language. Rather the demand of language movement of Assam concentrated only for the recognition of Assamese as official language and as medium of instruction.
- The language movement of Assam was a reaction against Bengali Chauvinism, whereas the language movements of other parts of the country were the

reaction against Hindi chauvinism. They were basically the product of recognition of Hindi as national language. Contrary to that the language movement of Assam was less concerned with the status of Hindi as national Language.

- Most of the language movements of other parts of the country ended with the formation of political party, like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are the best examples where the language based political parties came into existence because of their history of language movement. But in Assam the language movement did not lead to the emergence of any such language base political party although some organizations played active role in the language movement of Assam.

The language movement of Assam started in the post-independent period. However, it has got its momentum in April 1959, when the Assam Sahitya Sabha set the year 1960 as deadline to implement their demands. Meanwhile, incidents and counter incidents of violence began to take place between the Assamese and Bengali at the different parts of the state. Under such a situation the then chief minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha felt it necessary to introduce the Official Language Bill in the state legislature.

Accordingly the Assam Official Language Act was introduced and Mr. B.P. Chaliha said as "During the last few years several states in India have decided upon their respective official language and therefore, this question naturally has assumed some urgency and importance in Assam also. Meanwhile public opinion grew in intensity and volume and the matter was again raised in all seriousness in the last Budget session of the Assembly.(therefore)...in the situation prevailing in the state today in no longer desirable to postpone a decision on the question. Emotions have been raised and sentiments played up and the state has passed through some unfortunate and tragic happenings" (Assam Legislative Debate: 1960, 233)

Thus, for Mr. B.P. Chaliha, it was imperative to introduce Official Language Bill (1960) keeping in mind the developments of other parts of the country and also the "emotions" of Assamese people.

However, while providing the justification to the introduction of language Bill. Mr. Chaliha kept in mind only about the sentiments and emotions of the Assamese speaking people and not about the discontent of other linguistic minorities which was almost equally significant. As a result a statewide reaction was noticed, by Dimasas, Karbis, Khasis, Garos and Bengali Community. As a protest against the Assam Official Language Act the Nikhil Assam Bonga Bhasa Samiti had submitted a memorandum to the president demanding reorganization of Bengali for all official purpose throughout the state. The Bengali speaking people were so dissented that they started movement, particularly under the guidance of Sangram Parishad and Bhasa Andolon Samiti. As the situation was deteriorating, the central level leader of the Congress party had to intervene on the issue. As a result, the then prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri came out with a formula which was popularly known as "Shastri Formula". The basic objective of Shastri formula was to find out the solution to the linguistic conflict in Assam by making the official language Act some what flexible and by giving opportunity to the linguistic minorities.

While Plain Cachar, particularly Bengali community wanted separation on linguistic issue, those of the Hill districts talked about culture, custom, social systems, language etc. in favour of their demand. The Nagas sought independence from Assam as well as India. They alleged that the Assamese dominated Government was not looking to the interest of these minority groups. The move to declare Assamese as the state language has once again brought the demand for a separate Hill State.

Again Assam had to witness another language movement in 1970's, which was known as movement for Medium of Instruction. It did take place, when, in early 1970's, Gauhati University decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction in all colleges under its jurisdiction with some exception. This decision was come into effect from the academic year 1972-73. Decision of Gauhati University to introduce English and Assamese as a medium of instruction, created discontent among the Bengalis and hence, demands were made to declare Bengali also as medium of instruction. Keeping in mind the increasing demands of the Bengali speaking people, the Academic Council of Gauhati University came out with a 'Circular' according to which:-

- a) English was to be retained as the medium of instruction for a period of time, and
- b) Students would be permitted to answer their examination questions in Assamese, English and Bengali.

The decision of the Academic Council to permit the students to answer in Bengali had provoked the Assamese speaking people and started agitation. Under such an agitational pressure the Academic Council had to review its decision. Accordingly the Academic Council came out with its revised decision on 12 June 1972, which included following aspects

- a) Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in all colleges under the jurisdiction of Gauhati University.
- b) English will continue as an alternative medium instruction till such time not exceeding ten years as may be considered necessary by the Academic Council.

- c) Students shall have the option to answer either in Assamese in English in University Examination.
- d) The above decision shall come into force with effect from course from the session 1974-75 in respect of two years, pre-university course from the session 1974-75 in respect of two –years degree course.

The revised circular, again, created discontent among the Bengali speaking people and the government had to establish a separate university for the people of Barak Valley.

CONCLUSION

The issue of language movement of Assam was different to that of the language movements of other parts of the country. But in spite of having all these differences the language movement of Assam could able to put tremendous effect both in the politics of Assam and India as well.

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