



ROOTS OF LINGUISTIC CONFLICTS IN POST- COLONIAL ASSAM

Ananda Chandra Ghosh

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Cachar College, Silchar, Assam, India

ABSTRACT

Assam, the most populous state of North East India has been experiencing different social problems since the colonial period. But the problem which played major role in creating division among different groups of people and drawn the attention of the social scientists is the language problem. The issue of language resulted in the outbreak of two violent language movements in the post colonial period. The nature of such conflicts and movements has close relation with the colonial policy of administration, the problem of immigration, ethnic-lingual composition and demographic structure of the state. Although Assamese is the dominant language of the state yet a considerable number of people speak Bengali and Tribal languages. The Assamese people are concentrated in upper Assam but the Bengalis form the majority in the three districts of Southern Assam Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Besides, there is a good number of Bengali in the Brhamaputra valley and hilly region of the state. The hill Tribes are concentrated in the two hill districts of Karbi Anglang and Dima Hasaou(North Cachar). The Bodos constitute the single largest community in the lower Assam's districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Odalguri. Apart from this the tribes like Deoris', Tiwas, Sonowals, Missings, Rabhas, Koch- Ranjbanghis, Barman's are concentrated in the different corners of the state. Some of these Tribes have assimilated themselves and have become the part and parcel of Assamese nationality. But the Bengalis and some of the tribes like the Bodos, Karbis Dimasas etc. maintain their separate identity and try to protect their language and culture . In the present study an attempt has been made to find out the roots of linguistic conflict in post colonial Assam.

DISCUSSION

The state of Assam is the most diverse state in India. "Society in Assam has historically been multi-racial, multi- religious, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, multi-class and multi-lingual in composition".(Hussain:2000,4519)Although Assamese is the dominant language of the state yet a considerable number of people speak Bengali and Tribal languages. The Assamese people are concentrated in upper Assam but the Bengalis form the majority in the three districts of Southern Assam Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Besides, there is a large number of Bengali in the

Brhamaputra valley and hilly region of the state.The hill Tribes are concentrated in the two hill districts of Karbi Anglang and Dima Hasaou(North Cachar). The Bodos constitute the single largest community in the lower Assam's districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Odalguri. Apart from this the tribes like Deoris', Tiwas, Sonowals, Missings, Rabhas, Koch- Ranjbanghis, Barman's are concentrated in the different corners of the state. Some of these Tribes have assimilated themselves and have become the part and parcel of Assamese nationality. But the Bengalis and some of the tribes like the Bodos, Karbis Dimasas

etc. maintain their separate identity and try to protect their language and culture .There are more than 26 linguistic groups in the state. According to 2001 census 57.8% recorded Assamese, 21.61% recorded Bengali, 5.21% recorded Bodo, 4.62% recorded Hindi 3.66% recorded Missing, Karbi and Garo and rest 6.96% recorded Oriya, Nepali, Manipuri, Santal and other languages as their mother tongue.(Wikipedia)

The migration of foreigners into Assam is not a new phenomenon. It is very difficult to identify the actual indigenous population of the state because almost all groups living here have migrated to this state from different places at different points in time. It is said that the Karbis were the first to enter this region. The Kiratas belonging to the mongoloid. Race have migrated to this region from southern part of China. It was the Bodo Tribes who built up first civilization in the Brhamputra valley. But in the 13th century the most important group known as Ahom entered to this region from the maulung Provice of Burma. The Ahoms defeated the local kings and the Tribal chiefs and by the 17th century they established powerful Ahom kingdom. ‘The Ahoms could resist and protect their kingdom from the Mughals. But there was cultural and religious interaction with the Ahom kingdom and the rest of India. They invited Brahmin priest from different parts of the country and granted them vast area of land and converted themselves into Hinduism. But due to some internal disorder Ahom ruler became weak and their kingdom was invaded by the Burmese. To save the Assamese from the atrocities of the Burmese the British interfere in the domestic matter of Ahom kingdom and with the support the local people they defatted the Burmese. But in course of time taking advantage of the weakness of the puppet kings and they annexed the Ahom kingdom under their administrative controlled and gradually occupied the whole north eastern region.

The occupation of entire north east region by the British gave new directions to the process of migration. During this period Bengalis, Marwaris, Biharis, Nepalis and Tea Tribes migrated to the state. As a result the colonial Assam became more diverse than the pre colonial Assam The incorporation of this region into the colonial system led to the discontinuation of the earlier way of administration which was replaced by British system of Administration based on bureaucratic principle. Modern western educations become a precondition to get jobs in the new colonial Administration. So the British brought with them educated Bengali from Bengal as clerks’ lawyers and other profession. According to Guha without any investment in western education in Assam, the colonizers availed the service

of already surplus educated unemployed persons from Bengal Presidency. (Guha : 1977,58)

In 1836 the colonial government made Bengali as the official language of the State 'This declaration of the colonial master was one of the main reason for the Assamese-Bengali competition and conflict in the post colonial period, This issue has been utilized raucously by a very large number of the Asamiya scholars, journalists, literary figures, politicians and even social scientists, of both the 19th and 20th century. Even today the blame continues to be on the Bengalis/Bengali baboos for decisely misguiding the British colonial rulers against the legitimate right of the Asamiya language in Assam. (Hussain :1993,232) They believe that a handful of the Bengali baboos were successful in persuading the British rulers to accept Bengali as the official language of Assam and their conspiracy led to the suppression of the Asamiya language between 1837-1873. Myron Weiner too observed similarly, "Since Bengali and Assamese language and the scripts are similar the Bengalis were able to persuade the British government that Assamese was only a corrupt and vulgar dialect of Bengali" (weiner 1978:93).But this theory is not supported by any historical evidence. There is no evidence that Bengalis made organized demands for the declaration of Bengali as the official language of the state. Moreover when Bengali was declared as official language of Assam Sylhet was not part of it and the number of Bengali of the state was a few. The Bengali as other Indians had little role in the matter of policy formulation and all powers concentrated in the administrative missionary centered round English man.

In 1874 for administrative convenience Assam proper together with Cachar, Goalpara and Garo hills was formed into a chief commissioner province. Although vast in area this new province with its small population of 24, 43,000 had a merge revenue potential, “To make it financially viable therefore the authority decided to incorporate into it the populous Bengali speaking district of Sylhet which historically as well as ethnically was an integral part of Bengal”. (Guha : 1977,27) A memorial protesting against the transfer of Sylhet was submitted to the authority. Though the authority refused the prayer “but the petitioner obtained the assurance of no change whatsoever either in the system of law and judicial procedure.....”. (Guha : 1977,28,29) Though the province was named Assam, it was in fact “ an amalgam of Asamiya speaking, Bengali speaking and myriad tongued hill and tribal areas in which Asamiya was claimed mother tongue to less than a quarter and Bengali more than 40% of the population”. (Guha : 1980) It changed the demographic and linguistic structure of the state. Thus the colonial decision

transform the Assamese in to a minority. This colonial arrangement weakened both the Assamese and the Bengalis and paved the way for Assamese competition and conflict in colonial as well as post colonial Assam. Again to increase state revenue and to bring Barren land under cultivation the British Government with the support of the Assamese Zaminder encourages Bengali Muslim peasants in to the Brahmaputra Valley which further increased the number of Bengali in the state.

India achieved independence in 1947. Independence brought not only pleasure but also pain because India became independent after her partition. The province of Bengal, Assam and Punjab were divided to create a separate state for the Muslims. The fate of Sylhet district of Assam was decided with a referendum. As per the result of the referendum major portion of Sylhet went to Pakistan. Only three thanas of Patharkandi, Ratabari and Badarpur and about one half of the thana of Karimganj remained with Assam. Sylhet, the 'Golden calf which was sacrificed in 1874 to usher in a new province was now once more sacrificed at the altar of a new state'. (Guha : 1977,320) When the result of the referendum was declared there was a feeling of relief in the Brahmaputra Valley because for Assamese it was a lifetime opportunity to get rid of Sylhet and to carve out a linguistically more homogenous province. Again the decision of the East Bengalis Muslims peasants of the Brahmaputra tongue in the census of 1951 transformed the Bengali into a minority. In such situation the Assamese leader became more vocal about their language, culture and demanded the introduction Assamese in the province as a whole and its adoption as the state language.

On 26th September 1947 the Bordoloi Government directed that Assamese as compulsory second language in all schools where it cannot be Assamese completely. When the Bengali complain of government partiality on the matter and imposition of Assamese on them Gopinath Bordoloi the Chief Minister replied on 23rd March in the Assembly "If you must analyzed the population of Assam, you will find there is hardly any community in Assam which may be cal majority community. I do not know whether this fact is known..... In Assam there is no community which may be called a majority community in which the population of one community is predominantly more than the population of another community..... Again, As I said, there are hardly any minorities in the province and that is, I suppose, to the best interest of the province. Nobody can rule over anybody on account of the number of any community and that has probably been one of the reasons why we have lived in such peace and unity"(Kar 1982:27)

Participating in debate on a cut motion to raise a discussion on the question of alleged imposition of Assamese and protection of Bengali language in Goalpara, Sri Nilmany Phukan made a category assertion on 29th March 1948 on the basis of Chief Ministers Statement that Assam would not be a bilingual state. He said "This question of protecting the Bengali speaking minority of Goalpara district cannot arise." (Kar :1982,47:) Again he made it clear that "geographical territory of Assam can no longer be disturb on any other ground of linguistic basis of any minority community..... Regarding our language Assamese must be the state language of the Province.(hear, hear)..... there can be no gainsaying on it even if the government stand or fall on it (hear, hear)..... so the question of language is solved once for all. The question of language for the minority communities in Assam is also solved.... All the languages of different community and their culture will be absorbed in Assamese culture...He asserted we will have as our state language and the state cannot nourish any other language in this Province" (Kar: 1982,48)

The assurance and assertions of Bardoloi were not honored by his successors which found its worst manifestation in 1960 and 1972. In 1959 the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the literary body of the Brahmaputra valley came out with statement..... that Assamese language must be declared as the state language of Assam and started movement accross the valley.(Goswami 1997:48) In 1960 there was a student's demonstration in Guwahati for the declaration of Assamese as the official language of the state. Police attacked on the demonstration in which one student was spot dead. The death of the student erupt entire Brahmaputra Valley into communal violence and led to the "Bangal Kheda Andolon". In such situation the in spite of protest of the linguistic minorities the state Legislative Assembly pass the Official Language Act on 17th October 1960 and made Assamese as the official language of the state. The linguistic minorities of the state opposed such hegemonic imposition of Assamese language on them. The Hill tribe under the banner of all Party Hill Leader Conference started movement protesting the language act. The Bengalis also under the banner of Nikhil Assam BangaBhasha Sammellan and Sangram Samity started movement to protest against the hegemonic imposition of Assamese language and declaration of Bengali as another official language of the state. The state governments try to suppress such non violent and peaceful movement of the Bengali for the status of their mother tongue and killed 11 Satyagrohi at Silchar Railway Station on 19th May 1961. In this movement a few Assamese also died and they were elevated as martyr. The Assamese press highlighted the victory of

Assamese language visibly but the atrocities over the Bengalis were ignored silently. However at the interfere of the Central Government the official Language Act was amended on October 7, 1961 and Bengali was made official language for the Cachar District. But no recognition was given to Bengali language in the Brahmaputra Valley which is the homeland of second largest linguistic group of the valley. Again in 1972 ASSU raised the demand to make Assamese as the medium of instruction up to the graduate level in addition to existing English language when the linguistic minorities of the state opposed it. When Linguistic minorities of the state it once again generated violence and terror against the Hindu Bengalis. However as a result of strong protest movement of the Bengalis and Hill Tribes, English was made an alternative medium for the colleges of the Cachar & Hill districts. 1972 was not the end, in 1986 during AGP rule the SEBA send the circular to make Assamese as the compulsory third language for non Assamese medium Schools. Once again the linguistic minorities of the state in general and Bengalis of Barak Valley in particular had to launch movement against the hegemonic imposition of Assamese language and protection of their mother tongue and accordingly two person had to sacrifice their lives in Karimganj.

Thus post colonial Assam witnessed almost continuous language conflicts. Bengali being the second largest group was the worst sufferer of such conflicts. The hatred and ill feeling of many Assamese towards Bengali were generated by the Bengali conspiracy theory. This theory played the most important role in bringing the language conflicts. This theory was successfully applied for the socialization of large section of Assamese to label the Bengalis as inimical to the interest of the Assamese language and culture. The leadership of the language movement of the Brahmaputra valley articulated this theory successfully to exploit its follower's throughout the valley. This conspiracy theory is still being sincerely pursued by a large number of Asamiyas cutting across the class and political barriers. Even the Assam Sahitya Sabha, in a memorandum submitted to the Union Home Minister on 23rd February 1980, which was widely circulated inside and outside Assam, alleged that it was not the baboos but the entire Hindu Bengalis of Assam who were responsible "there were Bengali speaking people and on their advice Bengali was introduced in the courts of justice and other government offices and schools in Assam" (Hussain 1993,233,234)." This conspiracy theory became all pervasive, and has been used in the socialization process, even through the university level text-books. "The Propagators and the supporters of the conspiracy theory grossly under-estimated the colonial context,

and failed to situate the all powerful role of the colonial rulers as the real decision makers in their colony. Consciously or unconsciously, they viewed the British rules as 'native', 'innocent', and manipulable by a group of their subordinated subjects - the Bengali baboos. There is no tangible historicity about the successful Bengali conspiracy against the Asamiya language. (Hussain ,1993, 234)."

The post colonial linguistic conflicts in Assam is the result of failure of the dominant linguistic groups to understand the multi lingual composition of the state. They have ignored historical fact that Assam has been a shared homeland of different linguistic and ethnic groups. The strategy of one linguistic group to impose their language would not only unconstitutional but also undemocratic. It will create problem for the both. It is not possible for Assam to turn itself into a unilingual state. It will have to remain multi-lingual in character and composition. It is therefore necessary on the part of the authority to make arrangements so that all linguistic groups can take education according their choice and necessity. People should be left free to choose his/her own language and to work for the development of their languages.

REFERENCES

1. Barpujari H.K. (1977) *Political History – 1826 to 1919 Govt. of Assam, Guwahati.*
2. Baruah Hem (1962) *Red River and Blue Hills Lawer Book Stall, Guwahati.*
3. Chatterjee, S.K. (1951) *Kirata Jankirti, Asiatic Society of Bengal Calcutta.*
4. Gait Edward (1905) *A History of Assam, reprint Edition, LBS Publication, Guwahati.*
5. Gopal Krishna R. (2000) *Assam : Land and People, Omsons Publications New Delhi.*
6. Goswami Sandhya(1997)*Language Politics IN Assam, Ajanta Publication New Delhi,*
7. Guha Amalendu (1977) *Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam – 1826 – 1947, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi.*
8. Guha Amalendu (1980) *Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinest, Assams Anti Government Upsurge EPW, Vol. 2, pp. 41-43.*
9. Hussain Manirul(1993) *The Assam Movement Class Ideology and Identity,Manak Publication, New Delhi.*
10. Hussain Manirul (1997) *Roots of Ethnic Conflict Violence, Nationality and Ethnic process in India Northeast, Indian Journal of Secularism Vol- 1 No.2 July-September.*
11. Hussain Manirul (2000) *State Identity movement and Internal Displacement in the North East India, Economic and Political Weekly.*
12. Kar, M (1982) *Evolution of Assamese medium of Instruction in Mrinal Miri (Edited) Linguistic Scenario in North east India, Northeastern council of Historical research. Shillong.*
13. Pual R. Brass (2001) : *The Politics of India since Independence, Cambridge University Press.*
14. Trivedi V.R(1995)*Docoment on Assam,Part II , Omsons Publication,New Delhi.*