

POLITICS AND LANGUAGE: A STUDY ON LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT: Language determines the identity of the people. People are always concern for their linguistic identity. India is a multilingual country. The constitution of India recognises twenty two languages. Among which Assamese is the native language of the state of Assam. After independence language movement has occurred in the state. The Assamese speaking people of the Brahmaputra valley has demanded to recognise Assamese as the official language of the state. This was opposed by Bengali speaking people of the Barak valley. Hence post colonial Assam has witnessed violent language movement. In 1960 the official language act was enacted which recognised Assamese as the official language of the state. Later in 1972 the medium movement has started in the state regarding the issue of medium of education in the universities of the state. The issue of language in a way contributed to the perpetual clash in between Assamese and non Assamese speakers of the state. Therefore the present paper tries to analyse the language politics with special reference to Assamese language movement with the help of secondary sources.

KEYWORDS- language, Assamese, Bengali, Movement, Riots, Act

I. INTRODUCTION

Assam, a northeastern state of India is a multilingual state. Since Ancient time people speaking of different language has been residing in Assam. People from different region has been migrating to Assam in different phases of the history and assimilating in the state in spite of the linguistic differences. In Assam, Assamese is the major language spoken in the state and serves as a lingua franca in the state.

The Assamese language, recognized by the constitution of India belongs to the new Indo-Aryan language family.¹ In 1826 Assam was annexed under the British colonial rule as per the provision of the Yandabo treaty. After annexation of Assam the colonial ruler has introduced new language policy in the state. In 1836, the British colonial officials declared that Bengali would be state language.² But this decision had created much resentment in the state and the newly emerging Assamese intelligentsia vehemently opposed it. In 1840s the American Baptist missionary had arrived in Assam for the propagation of Christianity also supported the Assamese intelligentsia. Due to the collective efforts of the Assamese intelligentsia and the Baptist missionary in 1873 Assamese once again became the language of schools and judicial proceedings in the state.³

During the colonial rule large numbers of people from different parts of the country had migrated to the state out of which number of Bengali speaking people was highest. So Assamese people were apprehended considering the imminent threatening to the Assamese language by the Bengali speaking immigrants.

After independence the Assam sahitya Sabha has urged the government to recognize Assamese language as the official language of the state within 1960. But the All Party Hill Leaders conference and various tribal organizations and the Bengali speaking people of the Barak valley has also opposed the demand of Assam Sahitya Sabha. Ultimately the language movement has started in Assam.⁴

II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the paper are to study about the genesis, politics of language movement, result of the movement and suggestions to resolve the language issue of the state.

III. METHODOLOGY:

To understand the subject matter, the analytical and descriptive method has used in the study. The study is based on the secondary sources of data obtained from books, magazines, reports, internet and newspapers etc.

3.1. LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN ASSAM:

Linguistic politics has become one of the major issues in post colonial period which paralysed the Indian politics. Demands were raised to reorganised the states on the basis of language, political parties were formed to secure linguistic identity indicates the dominance of linguistic politics. In Assam also linguistic issue has emerged as a

major issue in the post-independence period.⁵ However the issue relating to the language was not a new one in Assam as the Assamese people had fought against the colonial rulers when they introduced the Bengali language in Assam in 1837. So the establishment of the company's authority may be considered the beginning of the language problems in the state.⁶

The linguistic issue of Assam was differing from other parts of the country. Unlike the other parts of the country in which the main demand was to reorganise the states on the basis of language, but in Assam demand of language movement was to recognise the Assamese language as official language; it was a reaction against Bengali chauvinism and in Assam the movement didn't led to the formation of political parties.⁷

There are number of causes of the language movement in Assam. Even the genesis of language movement can be attributed to the colonial and post colonial period. After annexation of Assam under the colonial rule people from different parts of the country have encouraged to immigrate towards Assam. Since the first decade of the 20th century the Bengali speaking Muslims had started to immigrate to Assam which led to increase of Bengali speaking people. After independence inclusion of Sylhet to the East Pakistan reduced the number of the Bengali speaking people in Assam hence the demand was raised to declare Assamese as official language. Other hand the press of both Assamese and Bengali medium also encouraged the people to engage in the struggle to secure their linguistic identity. Again various organizations of both Assamese and Bengali have also contributed to the genesis of the Language movement of Assam. Among the Assamese organisations Assam Sahitya Sabha, All Assam Students Union, Asom Jatiyatabadi Mahasabha was prominent. While the Nihil Assam Banga Bhasha Samiti, Bhasha Andolon Samiti were the Bengali organisations which have participated in the language movement.⁸

Table-1

Distribution of population (language- percentage wise) in Assam (1921-1951)

Language	1921	1931	1941	1951
Assamese	33.43	32.32	56.29	57.14
Bengali	27.60	27.56	19.64	17.36

Source: Census of India, 1961, Assam Part I-A.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha has observed 9 September, 1959 as the state language day, to declare Assamese as the official language, several members of different political parties have raised the issue and supported it in the state assembly during the budget session in 1960. But the APHLC and all tribal organisations opposed the demands arguing that it would be deprived of their English educated middle class in getting a share of the administrative jobs.⁹ These organisations have claimed that Assamese as the official language would be a barrier regarding the assimilation of hill tribes with the people of plain, Assamese is mother tongue of the less than fifty percent of the total population, so there is no justification to recognise Assamese as the official language. At the same time Assam Pradesh congress committee (APCC) passed its resolution and declared that Assamese be introduced as official language in all districts except the district of Cachar, Khasi and Jaintia hills, Garo and north Cachar hills in which areas it may be introduced as and when they prepare for it. But the APCC resolution failed to satisfy the all sections of the state.¹⁰ Ultimately large scale violence has occurred in different parts of Assam in May, 1960 when non Assamese speaking people of Shillong demonstrated with slogans against the Assamese language and also against the APCC as a result thousands of students came to the street against the Shillong processions and demanded immediate introduction of Assamese as the state language.¹¹ The movement became violent in Upper Assam. Due to the acts of violence and conflict between Assamese and Bengali, some Assamese people were forced to leave their home and became refugee in their own place. As a result large scale of demonstration took place in different parts of the state. Other hand an All Assam Bengali Language conference was convened by the Cachar congress leaders to raise their demand on 2 and 3 July, 1960 which was held in Silchar under the presidenship of Chapala Kanta Bhattacharyya, an M.P from West Bengal.¹² They demanded declaration of Assam as a bi-lingual state. The Silchar and Karimganj Bar Associations passed resolutions demanding president rule in Assam due to the lawlessness in the state. The incidents of violence took place in Guwahati. On July 4, 1960 an Assamese students of cotton college Ranjit Borpujari was killed in the police firing while six other students of Cotton College were injured.¹³ Borpujari became the first martyr of the language movement in Assam.

3.2. The Assam Official Language Bill:

Amidst the violence and tense atmosphere the chief minister of Assam Bimala Prasad Chaliha introduced the Assam official Language bill in the Assembly. The bill failed to satisfy the different sections of people in the state but the bill became an act. The act provided that "Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the state of Assam. Further the act provided that the English language, as long as the use there of is permissible and thereafter Hindi in place of English shall also be used for such official purposes of the secretarial and the offices of the heads of the departments of the state government". Regarding the act a congress legislator Ranendra Mohan Das of Cachar commented that the act can't solve the language issue

forever.¹⁴The Bengali speaking population of Cachar expressed dissatisfaction regarding the Assam Official Language Act, 1960. Nikhil Assam Bangla Bhasha Samiti¹⁵ had submitted a memorandum to the President of India. Their demand was that, Bengali should also be recognized throughout the state of Assam for all official purposes.

In Cachar, Sangram Parishad led the movement to declare Bengali as a state language, it has organized meetings, tried to get mass support for the fulfilment of their demands. On 19 May, 1961, Cachar Sangram Parishad called for a complete strike, picketing was organized which led to the violence and lawlessness. As a result 11 persons were killed and 21 injured in police firing. Six congresses M.L.A.'s from Cachar district had resigned as a protest against the police firing.¹⁶ Regarding the issue the then Union Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri proposed a formula to bring about reconciliation between the opposing groups.

In his formula Shastri tried to find out a solution of the language issue vis-a-vis the Assam Official Language act of 1960 and the Sangram Parishad Movement in Cachar. The main provisions of the Shastri formula¹⁷ were-

- a. To give local bodies the authority to alter the official language of their area by a two-thirds majority
- b. To allow communication between the state capital and Cachar and the hill districts to continue to be in English
- c. At the state level to continue the use of English along with Assamese
- d. To incorporate stronger provisions for the protection of linguistic minorities.

But the Sangram Parishad has stated that Shastri's formula bypassed the main issue and so it was unacceptable. The Karimganj Sub-divisional congress Bhasa Andolan Committee and the Silchar Bhasa andolan Samiti have rejected the proposal.¹⁸ Other hand at the same time non-Bengalis in Cachar included the Muslims, the Manipuris and the indigenous Cacharis formed Shanti Parishad. Clashes were occurred in between the two sides and in their memorandum to the Union Home Minister the Shanti Parishad demanded that Assamese should be the only official language in Assam.¹⁹ The Assam Cabinet on 24 September 1961 approved the draft bill to amend the Assam Official Language act in accordance with Shastri formula. The Assam Government has decided to remove the provisions relating the Mahkuma Parishad in section 5 of the Official Language act. But the Assam Sahitya Sabha was dissatisfied regarding the amendment and submitted its memorandum to the union home minister insisting that their legitimate demand for recognition of Assamese as the only official language of the state which has been partly fulfilled in the Assam Official Language act, 1960, as it stands, will be further adversely affected if the act is amended so as to do away with the provisions regarding Mahkuma Parishad. At last the legislature accepted the recommendation of Shastri and the Assam legislative assembly passed the amendment to the Language Bill on 7 October, 1961.²⁰

The Assamese-Bengali rivalry again resurfaced in 1972, when Gauhati University decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction under its colleges.²¹ The decision was to come into effect from the academic year 1972-73. The decision of Gauhati University was only on the medium of instruction and to make the decision acceptable to the considerable number of colleges situated in these areas outside the Brahmaputra valley, provision was made for the retention of English as an alternative medium of instruction, but there was no ultimate time for doing this. In Cachar demand was made to recognise of Bengali along with Assamese as a medium of instruction in all the colleges of the state, especially for the colleges in the district of Cachar.²²

The University authorities early in March 1972 came out with a circular on the ambiguous question of the medium of instruction. However the Academic Council of the University made two concessions to the linguistic minorities of the state i.e. English was to be retained as the medium of instruction for a period of time and students would be permitted to answer their examination question in Assamese, English and Bengali. But the Assamese students opposed the decision and demonstrations were broke out in Guwahati demanding that Bengali in examination should be withdrawn. At the same time Assamese students have stated that they had no objections to the Bengali students coming from the Cachar district to write their examination papers in Bengali, but this facility should not be for the Bengali students of Brahmaputra valley.²³

The Academic Council of the Gauhati University has decided that Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in all colleges under Gauhati University, and English shall continue as an alternative medium of instruction till such time not exceeding ten years as may be considered necessary by the Academic council. Again Students shall have the option to answer either in Assamese or English in the university examination.²⁴

Regarding the decisions of the academic council Gurucharan College, a college affiliated to Gauhati University filed a petition with the Supreme Court arguing that University's decision was in violation of article 30 of the Indian Constitution. The supreme court of India had issued a stay order of the decision of the university.

At the same time the chief Minister of the state has convened a discussion with the group of teachers, students, leaders of public opinion, etc. that a separate university in the district of Cachar, would be established. Regarding the decision a resolution was passed in the state assembly on 23 September, 1972.²⁵

However the resolution has neither satisfied the people in the Brahmaputra valley nor the people of the Cachar district. The people in the Brahmaputra valley opposed the decision as the resolution would pave the way for a

bi-lingual state. Even the All Assam Students Union had given a call for Assam Bandh on 5 October, 1972 in protest against the resolution of the Assembly. At last Assam University was established in Silchar in 1995, a city of southern Assam as a result of the language movement and the struggle of the people of the Barak valley.

IV. CONCLUSION

Language is the primary identity of the people hence people are more concerned with the linguistic identity. The language movement of 1960s has shown that both Assamese and Bengali speaking people in the state of Assam were concerned regarding their linguistic identity. Besides Bengali people, the tribal people are also worried about their linguistic identity in Assam. The tribals of Assam are opposing the Assamese language as official language. They consider that the imposition of Assamese language indicates the hegemonic attitude of Assamese people.

Due to a multilingual state, in Assam it's difficult to adopt a uniform language policy for the state. Hence the official language act of 1960 is yet to be implemented. Again the Assamese speaking people of the state should not try to impose Assamese language on the tribal people of the state and should respect the language of all other people of the state. All of the people of the state should be encouraged to use Assamese language as lingua franca of Assam.

In the budget of 2019-20 the Assam government has declared a scheme known as Vaxa Gourab (Pride of language) to provide financial assistance to all the languages of the state for their promotion of the language. Such kind of initiative is helpful to maintain linguistic harmony in the state. Mere conflict is not solution of any issue hence path of reconciliation should be followed by the entire linguistic group of the state of Assam.

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