

**LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND THE MAKING OF  
MODERN ASSAMESE IDENTITY**

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**DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis titled **LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN ASSAMESE IDENTITY** is the result of investigation carried out by me at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, under the supervision of Dr Mithilesh Kumar Jha.

In keeping with general practice of reporting observations, due acknowledgements have been made, whenever the work described is based on the findings of other investigators. The work has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other university/institution for a research degree.

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## ABSTRACT

The present study explores the intricate relationship between language, politics, and the construction of the modern Assamese identity. It aims to understand the making of modern Assamese identity by examining various linguistic movements in Assam that have occurred since Independence. It focuses on themes such as Nationalism, demands for autonomy from different linguistic communities, and the issue of indigeneity. By examining these interconnected topics, the study aims to understand the complexities inherent in making modern Assamese identity.

This study focuses on qualitative research methodology. The thesis has five chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter of the thesis contains the research problem, a section on a literature review, research questions, objectives, and methodology employed in this study. The second chapter of the thesis highlights the history of the construction of modern Assamese identity. The third chapter of the thesis explains the construction of modern Assamese identity during the language movements of the state of Assam in 1960 and 1972. The fourth and fifth chapters of the thesis deal with the construction of Assamese identity in the recent phase, especially during and after the signing of the *Assam accord* and surrounding the issues of the NRC and CAA.

The thesis contends that the notion of a language-centric modern Assamese identity was constructed during the colonial period and faced numerous internal and external challenges. It recognizes the significance of print media, particularly in the vernacular sphere, and the contributions of censuses and intellectuals in shaping a language-based modern Assamese identity during the colonial era. It argues that language also served as a foundation for forming Assamese identity in post-independence Assam. The thesis has examined how, following Independence, two notable advancements in language politics in Assam have played an essential role in forming the language-centric Assamese identity. The initial development pertains to the deliberate endeavour of the immigrant Muslim community to reinstate Assamese as their 'mother tongue' in census operations. However, the other one is the struggle for the recognition of separate identity and language by sections of the tribal population, which were

once considered to be a part of Assamese identity. In addition, the thesis emphasizes how, in the recent phase, the construction of Assamese identity has been dominated mainly by the issues of indigeneity and religion. The thesis argues that the decline of Assamese speakers in recent census operations has redirected widespread attention in the state towards the immigrant Muslim community. It concludes that the prevailing political environment also fosters the construction of an Assamese identity, making religion one of its significant markers shifting its focus on language. Despite this, language plays a vital role in defining Assamese identity.



## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Situating the research problem

The present study aims to understand the *language question* and its relation to the formation of ‘Modern Assamese identity’. The term *language question* refers to the multiple domains where language and politics interact, resulting in different historical and political outcomes. It is essential to understand the sites where language and politics interact as they can reinforce scales of social hierarchies, political power and different social and political inequalities.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between language and politics can offer some significant insights into understanding the discourse of a community, nation, state and region.

In India, the *language question* often plays a vital role in shaping political discourse. This is because different linguistic groups and communities can affect the political processes in a multilingual nation like India. Moreover, in India, language has been used for political and social mobilization from time to time. For example, during the colonial period, the colonial administrators used the category of ‘language’ in their enumeration practices like census, which further generated consciousness among the people of their own linguistic identity. With time, language contributes to the formation of social identities. This process of identity formation around language has been an important study area for many researchers of language politics.

Assam, a northeastern state within the Indian nation, has been witnessing controversies over the language issue from time to time. There are many linguistic groups in Assam, like Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Nepali, Karbi, Missing, Tiwa, Dimasa, Deuri, Santhali, Miri, Munda and so on. In the post-independent time, Assam witnessed various movements and political turmoil based on the Language issue. Therefore, discussion on the post-independent politics of Assam requires an in-depth understanding of the *language question*. These language movements are intrinsically linked with the imagination of ‘Modern Assamese identity’ as language is a significant marker of this identity.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Sarangi, ed., *Language and Politics in India: Issues in Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge University Press, 1974)

The available literature on the field has failed to offer an adequate understanding of how and why the boundary of language remains integral to the imagination of Assamese identity, especially in the post-independent period. In that context, the present study is an attempt to explore the language politics in post-independent Assam. This work also attempts to study different language movements of the state that influenced the imagination of 'Assamese identity'. Emphasizing related themes like Nationalism, demand for autonomy by various linguistic communities and the issue of indigenous vs foreigner debate in the context of Assam, the present study also aims to unpack the complexities involved in the language-centric Assamese identity in post-independent Assam. By looking at different language movements of the state, the present study is designed to understand the inner challenges like the negotiations with other speakers of the language, caste, religion and the issue of citizenship etc, to get an idea about the transformation of the existing Assamese identity. An attempt has also been made to see how speakers of different languages challenged the notion of Assamese linguistic identity. Another critical point of the study is how these language movements have shaped the 'Modern Assamese identity' by including and excluding certain groups. Therefore, this study aims to trace all the challenges in creating a 'Modern Assamese identity in the context of post-independent language movements in Assam. This study argues that emphasizing only on Assamese-Bengali debate, like most of the existing literature on this issue alone, cannot adequately represent the reality of Assamese identity transformation. Hence, unpacking the layered construction of Modern Assamese identity in the post-independence era through the lens of language politics is the primary task of the present work.

## **1.2 Language and modern Assamese identity**

The questions like, what are some of the significant forces that shaped a particular identity? How solidarities among different groups are imagined and how people created different subjectivities always fascinates the scholars engaged in the field of identity formations. In such an imagination, language can be considered a significant force. Sometimes language is the marker of group identity and is associated with a community's culture and life. Scholar Sudipta Kaviraj argues that language not only unites people but also effectively divides people both 'internally' as well as externally. Sometimes the language can create an indestructible barrier among people, which Kaviraj calls a 'wall of words'.<sup>2</sup> According to Kaviraj, forming one

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<sup>2</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India," in *Language and Politics in India: Issues in Politics*, ed. A. Sarangi (Oxford University Press, 2009)

linguistic identity makes a sharper sense of differentiation from others' linguistic identities and potentially divides people of the same language community internally. So, language can play a crucial role in developing and transforming identity.

In the case of Assam, many scholars have identified the intrinsic difficulty of defining an Assamese identity. Udayan Misra has remarked that what has been happening in Assam over the past few decades is a matter of widening the parameters of Assamese identity<sup>3</sup>. Hence it is necessary to see the forces and dynamics that have shaped the Assamese identity. On the one hand, Misra acknowledged the composite nature of the Assamese identity; at the same time, he also introduced a category called the 'indigenous Assamese', which he claimed as a community of people speaking the Assamese language as their mother tongue. Misra also identifies a tendency among several segments of people that were part of the broader Assamese identity about the denial of their Assamese credentials recently. He also emphasized the role of immigration in the formation of Assamese identity.

Language indeed has a vital role in the creation of the Assamese identity. One has to closely look at the development of the special relationship between language and identity, which is a modern phenomenon. It is perhaps necessary to examine the complexities of Modern Assamese identity. The present-day Assam consists of different linguistic groups identifying as part of an overarching Assamese identity. In discussing the Assamese identity in nineteenth-century Assam, Madhumita Sengupta argues that the Assamese identity, which is initially a bond of affection towards the Assamese language, is witnessing a significant transformation that is widening the socio-cultural base of the Assamese identity. This identity tries to include large sections of people belonging to other linguistic groups but opting to call themselves Assamese for political and other reasons.<sup>4</sup> Many other scholars have also acknowledged the composite nature of the Assamese identity. For example, Sanjib Baruah used the term 'ethnic Assamese' to define a core group within a composite collectivity different from 'immigrant' and 'tribal' communities. Baruah points out that no one expected Assamese to be the primary language of Assam, but despite this, a single language was sought to be imposed on the province. He accepted this group's hegemony in forming the overall Assamese identity<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Udayan Misra, "The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey," H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture no. 4 (Shillong: The North East India History Association, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Madhumita Sengupta, *Becoming Assamese: Colonialism and New Subjectivities in Northeast India* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999)

One should not ignore the fact that the answer to the question of how people imagined them as Assamese opens up so many possibilities. Udayan Misra talked about two views; one assumes that there is no such Assamese identity at all and the other believes that the process of Assamese identity formation is still ongoing. <sup>6</sup>Many works have identified that the idea of a composite Assamese identity comprising of the caste Hindus, the Ahoms, the plains tribals and the small section of Assamese Muslims took shape during the latter part of the Ahom rule, i.e. the beginning of the nineteenth century. <sup>7</sup>At the same time, scholars have also acknowledged that only in the nineteenth-century language become an important tool for the imagination of the Assamese community. In this context, some fundamental question arises. For example, can we think of a timeline for this imagination of Assamese identity based on language? Why did language retain its importance in forming an Assamese identity? What happened to the language-centric Assamese identity after the immigration took place during 20<sup>th</sup> century Assam? What exactly is the role of language in the entire transformation of Assamese identity? How does the language imagination of people create the Modern Assamese identity? How does the 'indigenous Assamese', as many scholars have put it, retain its significance after the introduction of language politics in the state, specifically after Independence? Also, if the Assamese identity is composite, what is the role of language politics in shaping the modern Assamese identity? The study has identified that this transformation toward modern Assamese identity is an ongoing process. This requires serious attention to understand this transformation and the role of language politics in it.

### **1.3 Background of the study**

The division of people based on their languages is a reality in the politics of Assam. The language issue perhaps acquired the most significant attention during the post-independent time. After independence government and sections of the civil society through various organizations like Assam Sahitya Sabha took upon themselves the task of constructing political discourse based on language. Many studies have already identified how the hegemony of Assamese speakers primarily affected the Bengali language and Bengalis, the most significant minority of the state<sup>8</sup>. By introducing a series of language policies in 1947, the government intended to make the Assamese language the official language of the state. These measures

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<sup>6</sup> Udayan Misra, "The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey," H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture no. 4 (Shillong: The North East India History Association, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Madhumita Sengupta, *Becoming Assamese: Colonialism and New Subjectivities in Northeast India* (Routledge, 2016);

<sup>8</sup>Sandhya Goswami, *Language Politics in Assam* (Ajanta Publications, 1997)

were like the introduction of the Assam official language bill, followed by approving the Assam Language Act in 1960, which stated that Assamese would be the sole official language of Assam. Assam has witnessed two language movements primarily, one in 1960 for making the state language and the other in 1972, known as the medium of instruction movement in Assam. While language-based mobilization in post-independence India has been paid considerable attention in academics and the larger public sphere, the one in Assam has not been considered by scholars. Many scholars argued that the language-based mobilization of the 1960s in Assam was nothing more than an instance of 'resistance' rather than movement. However, these movements have more significant implications for the politics of the state and the understanding of present-day politics. Therefore it is necessary to look at these language movements critically. However, analyzing only the language movements is certainly not sufficient for understanding the layered construction of Assamese identity. These movements have a greater impact on the entire state and the Indian Nation. These trajectories of linguistic politics in Assam need to be seen in a new context when the issue of 'Assamese identity' is becoming crucial for understanding the state's politics. The scholarly works on the post-independence language movements mainly focussed on Bengali-Assamese relations. Their analysis was mostly limited to the implications of these language movements on these two communities. However, various challenges to Assamese identity and the contestation of different language speakers in the state during and after the language movements of Assam need to be analysed for a better understanding of the issue.

Another crucial development in post-independence language politics was the emergence of different tribal elements and their struggle for recognition. One such is the demand by the Bodos, the largest plain tribe of the state, for recognition of their language. The primary objective behind the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, a literary organization, was to develop the Bodo language and work for its expansion. Another motive was to introduce Bodo as the medium of instruction in the primary schools of the Bodo majority areas of Assam and to recognise Roman script for it in place of Assamese. When Assamese was declared the official language of Assam in 1960, Bodos strongly opposed the move. The Act blew the unique sense of unity among the Bodos in Assam. It paved the way for the disintegration of the Bodos from mainstream Assamese society and intensified a process of alienation among them. Along with Bodos, Missing, Karbi, and Deuri tribes also started their demand for recognition. These movements are some important instances to explore for understanding the *language question* in Assam.

Another remarkable development in the post-independent Assam is the Assam movement (1979-85). It primarily demanded the expulsion of foreigners from Assam, which has given a new turn to the concept of Assamese identity. Earlier, the focus was on linguistic Nationalism, but now the direction of politics shifted to the anti-foreigner issue (Pisharoty 2019). Therefore discussion on the Assam movement and its relation to the language issue has been a primary objective of this work. The movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985, by the leaders of the Movement with the Union Government. A discussion on this Accord and its inherent complexities would highlight the shift that has taken place so far as the Assamese identity is concerned. Particularly, Clause 6 of the Accord, which reads, 'Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of Assamese people, posed a significant challenge<sup>9</sup>. The word 'Assamese people' created confusion among those whose mother tongues were other than Assamese. These communities have challenged linguistic identity, and this process can tell us a lot about the formation of Modern Assamese identity.

More significantly, this thesis also explores the role of language in creating an Assamese identity. In doing so, the main thrust is to see the different phases of Assamese identity formation and the role of the language in it. A study on the transformation of Assamese identity without looking into the context of recent development would be a futile exercise. So the last chapter of the thesis mainly focuses on the current transition of Assamese identity in the recent phase. There is a tendency among many political leaders to establish that the Assam Accord was a mistake on the part of AASU, which was a signatory to the Accord. After the National Register of Citizenship was published in Assam, some political leaders argued for a new NRC in Assam purely based on the 1951 NRC, not based on the deadline set by the Assam Accord. The central government constituted a high-level committee for the implementation of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord and has been promising constitutional safeguards to the 'ethnic Assamese' people since then. After the CAA 2019 met with strong protests across Assam, the central government tried to offer some constitutional safeguards to the indigenous communities of Assam based on the recommendations of the high-level committee. It again brings back the debate around the Assamese identity. This thesis mainly highlighted the role of language in defining the contours of Assamese identity in the recent phase. In this context, the study aims

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<sup>9</sup> Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, *Assam: The Accord, The Discord* (Penguin Random House India, 2019).

to explore the language politics of the state and its relation to the formation of modern Assamese identity.

#### **1.4 Literature review**

The vast kinds of literature dealing with the issue of language politics are mainly concentrated on the question of language, identity formation, issue of linguistic Nationalism, different language movements, emotions around the language etc. In a nutshell, these studies have mainly dealt with the contingency of language boundaries. In the following section, I will review some of the existing literature on relevant topics like language questions, language politics of the region, and India.

##### **1.4.1 Language, politics and Indian scenario**

The *language question* in Indian Politics has always been an important area of study. Many works deal with the language question and its role in the functioning of Indian politics. For example, Paul Brass discussed the role of language as a group identity in the context of North India and very lucidly showed how the political elite manipulated the symbol of language<sup>10</sup>. Focusing on various case studies on the Hindi-Urdu debate, Maithili-Bhojpur movements and Hindi-Punjabi controversies, he tried to argue for a case that for gaining an official language recognition or securing own linguistic state; there are many factors which can play the role of major contributing factors. He identified some of those contributing factors, such as the literacy rate of a particular group, the influence of modernization and the level of group consciousness, the state's rules for recognizing specific movements, and the different political strategies of political leaders. This work is one of the most influential works of language politics in the context of north India.

Another important work of Asha Sarangi contributed significantly to India's existing debate on language politics.<sup>11</sup> This edited volume summarises various vital issues related to India's language question. It covers different themes like the historical background of the multi-linguistic reality of India, the unsolved constitutional 'compromise' that aimed at the multi-linguistic problem of India, the linguistic reorganization of the state, various case studies of language conflicts and the relation between language and identity formation, functions of language in cultural and political context etc. For example, in Sudipta Kaviraj's article, the

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<sup>10</sup> Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> A. Sarangi, ed., *Language and Politics in India: Issues in Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

author discusses how the enumeration process of language was linked with forming a language-centric identity. Kaviraj identified how the colonial exercise of enumeration of language posed some serious challenges to the ideas of national unity. This book tries to see the common ground between language and politics. It argues that the demand for linguistic states and recognition became part and parcel of India's democracy. This book also discusses the relationship between language and Nationalism. This whole volume is crucial to understanding the present-day crisis of cultural Nationalism and anxieties over Nationalism.

A work by Lisa Mitchell, is based on the context of south India. She shows how the specific history of Telugu-language politics can help us to understand general questions of "the processes that have led speakers of particular languages to see themselves as having a separate history, literature, politics, and identity".<sup>12</sup> In other words, this book asks how languages became the primary and natural foundations for reorganising knowledge and everyday practices. She tried to distinguish 'the language community and 'the speech community. The language community denotes individuals with some degree of active or passive competence in a given denotational code.

In contrast, the speech community means people who can interact with one another using different languages. Therefore, most speech communities contain members of more than one language community. Using various literature sources, she describes the process where the language community is the basis for membership in political communities in different social setups. She discusses a fundamental shift in how the relationship between people and language is being conceptualized, i.e. how the shift from "language as one of many features of a territory or landscape" (*Desa bhasa*) to "language as an inalienable aspect of every individual" (*Matr bhasa*, "mother tongue) took place in south India. Mitchell discusses how languages become the objects of emotion or affective attachment. She argues that when Telugu became 'the language of the people or 'Matr bhasa', language became a definable, bounded object. Mitchell argues that the externalized representations or objectification of a language as an entity involves a kind of alienation from one's linguistic habitus. The repair of this alienation "requires the enactment of an affective attachment to language to reattach language to self, this time not to all language acts in general but to a specific 'mother tongue'. This way, her study identified how different sensibilities regarding language became a single frame of discourse in the context

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<sup>12</sup> Lisa Mitchell, *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue* (Indiana University Press, 2009).

of Southern India. This understanding is required to analyze the post-independence language movements in other parts of India as well.

In her work, Francesca Orsini, organises her work into five large sections by applying Habermas's concept of the 'public sphere'.<sup>13</sup> Each section introduces and discusses literary, historical, and polemical works written in early twentieth-century Hindi that are little known and even less studied; each section explains these sources thoroughly. The first section, titled 'Language and the Literary Sphere,' discusses the period's major literary developments and trends. Orsini documents the role of the new literary journals, which provided 'high' criticism that almost entirely ignored popular literature; she also analyses the role of school curricula and teaching methods, which confined students to memorising and repeating approved interpretations of approved works. Orsini demonstrates in the second section, 'Language, Literature, and Publicity,' that 'Hindi's claim to be the national language of India was an ideological construct'. She demonstrates clearly how this concept was created and its claims strongly advocated at the expense of Braj, Urdu, local languages and oral traditions, as well as the undeniable historical facts of linguistic diversity and pluralism. Hindi attained a nationalised identity that was 'pure, exclusive, and elitist, albeit in a 'subordinate' sense, given that the highest levels of society utilised English. According to Orsini, this ideologically charged Hindi was protected by 'a literary establishment' that did not favour literary experimentation or entertainment'. By the end of the period, the members of this establishment were entrenched in newly institutionalised positions as editors, critics, and teachers and their positions help them to force their cultural agenda of Hindi imposition on the public.

In the remaining three sections, Orsini analyses how the politics of the 'Hindi establishment' manifested in various domains i.e in the sphere of History, Women and Politics. The Uses of History examines the creation of two binaries of 'we' and 'they' where Hindi-nationalist interpretations of history led to the creation of general and homogeneous categories: Hindu-Indians as 'we' and Muslim foreigners as 'they'. In "Women and the Hindi Public Sphere," it is revealed how, over time, women exploited ideological loopholes wherever they could: As nationalist sentiments grew, service to 'Mother' India was framed as a virtuous alternative to the husband's service. Lastly, 'The Hindi Political Sphere' investigates the conduct of 'Hindi politicians' and the nature of the authority they sought to assert. Overall this book documents,

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<sup>13</sup> Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

the formation and growth of a public sphere that influenced literature, language, and religious Nationalism during the nationalist movement in India.

Papia Sengupta provides a very lucid analysis of the language politicisation process during the colonial period and the emergence of India's Nationalism.<sup>14</sup> This work argues that language and Nationalism are politically constructed through state policies and politics. It also makes a case for the urgent need to recognise India's linguistic diversity. Focussing mainly on Bengal's issue, author also tries to see the process of identity formation around language in various regions of India. However, the arguments of the book seem repetitive.

Mithilesh Kumar Jha takes the case of the Maithili language movement, which is a move beyond the Hindi-Urdu debate in North India, to see the process of identity formation around language from a very fresh perspective.<sup>15</sup> This work tries to see how the Hindi domination was contested and interrogated by its own dialects in the Hindi heartland. Jha discussed the different layers of the Maithili movement, ideological differences, role of the public sphere and political leaders to give insights into the lived realities of a linguistic community and its struggle for recognition. Thus this work established itself as a departure from the existing literature in capturing the historical facts of a subordinated language and its recognition.

Bringing all the literature available on language politics in India under the purview of literature review would be a difficult task, But what is important to highlight here is that the available literature on the issue has successfully brought a clear picture of the problem at large.

#### **1.4.2 Identity, immigration and language politics: context of Assam**

The various kinds of literature that deals with the *language question* in Assam mainly focused on different aspects like Nationalism, Assamese-Bengali relation, historical evolution of language movements, valley politics, identity issues and the formation of Assamese nationality etc. The available literature mainly discussed various aspects of Assamese identity.

For example, Sanjib Baruah traces the trajectory of Assamese identity with the beginning of British colonialism and tries to see how it confronted Indian Nationalism.<sup>16</sup> This book which takes a critical view of the nation-making process in India, tries to understand this process through the making of Assamese sub-nationalism during colonial and post-colonial periods. He uses the term sub-nationalism to refer to a 'political mobilization that meets some of the criteria

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<sup>14</sup> Papia Sengupta, *Language as Identity in Colonial India: Policies and Politics* (Springer, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Mithilesh Kumar Jha, , *Language Politics and Public Sphere in North India: Making of the Maithili Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999)..

of Nationalism but is not committed firmly to the idea of separate statehood. He argued that Assamese identity got its modern expression only after the coming of the British. Baruah discusses colonial geopolitics and Assam's unique position to elaborate on the process of making it the frontier province. By focusing on different aspects like migration into Assam, protest against the immigration, the homogenizing project of linguistic Nationalism, contestation and eventual break-up of Assam in the post-colonial period, ethnic assertion and the rise of a militant nationalism which questions Assam's position within Indian state, the author tries to bring up the contested narrative of Assamese Nationalism. However, he did not discuss the complexities involved in linguistic Nationalism. The language issue could not get the scholar's sufficient attention, which is one of the critical basis of Assamese Nationalism.

Udayan Misra looks at the conflict of the Northeast through the lens of the centre-periphery binary.<sup>17</sup> The author tries to argue for a case that dissent is innate where the centre attempts to dictate its term. It tries to look at the process of making nationhood from a particular angle. Instead of analyzing all the Northeast states, he selected Nagaland and Assam's cases to elaborate his argument. While tracing the history of the Naga struggle, he argues the Naga struggle is all about making a separate homeland for the Naga people. With time the struggle becomes tangled with the issue of tribal resurgence and intergroup conflict. The authors assert the Naga struggle is affecting the centre-state relation as it is a continuous struggle for decentralization of power. But Assam's case is an exception due to the gravity of the situation in Assam. The battle of Assam started with the colonial mode of exploitation and continued even after the Independence. To address the issue of insurgency in Assam, the author argues that the ruling elite of India has to understand the making of the mindset of alienation and address the core issues that created this mindset. But one of the drawbacks of this book is that while explaining the mindset of separation in Assam, he has completely neglected the issue of language policy of the Indian state, which is one of the major contributing factors to the growing separatist tendencies of Assam.

Another work by Udayan Misra is an attempt to analyze present contentious issues confronting the state of Assam.<sup>18</sup> This work deals with the problems of immigration, demographic change, language, identity etc. The author tries to place the roots of all these issues in the years

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<sup>17</sup> Udayan Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-state in Assam and Nagaland* (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Udayan Misra, *Burden of History: Assam and the Partition—Unresolved Issues* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

preceding Independence and the partition. As suggested by author Misra, 'the burden of those momentous years still rests heavily on Assam's contemporary political scenario'. He also made partition responsible for the growth of separatist insurgency in Assam. After the partition, the centre's considerations of this region came to be coloured by considerations of security associated with the periphery. It discusses how the question of language was linked with the question of Sylhet and the dream of a homogenous Assamese homeland. He argues that matters like immigration, identity and language still occupy the central portion of Public space-just as they did in the pre-partition days. However, this work could not examine the language question and focused only on the geo-political angle. Through the debates of the Assembly 1940s, the author wanted to show the opposing view held by the Indian National Congress and Muslim League on immigration, land and identity. He shows how the question of identity became a central theme. By bringing the question of Sylhet and the rivalry between Assamese-Bengali speakers, he discussed how the question of the status of the Assamese language was linked with the question of Sylhet. It traces the history of Sylhet's incorporation into Assam and how this was resisted by the Assamese, who wished to see a homogenous Assamese homeland. It shows that though some section of Assamese population wanted Sylhet to be separated, and they had solid reasons for it, the Assamese middle-class leadership represented by Assam Congress was neither in a position to influence nor did have any influence on the outcome of the referendum. However, this work also could not address the issue of language and how the partition affected the language politics of the state.

Another work by the same author, Udayan Misra, analyses the problems of Assamese identity formation and gives the historical background and the trajectory of its evolution.<sup>19</sup> It identified the role of the region's demographic change that helped to transform the Assamese identity. Various factors have been identified as contributing factors to the emerging Assamese identity. The long period of rule by Ahoms, the influence of Hinduism, and Vaishnavite movements led by Sankardeva<sup>20</sup> to form a composite Assamese identity. He also discusses the colonial period's Assamese linguistic identity formation process. He discussed that the dream of the Assamese middle class to create a unilingual state by completely ignoring the compositions of Assamese society is the ultimate contradiction of Assamese identity formation.

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<sup>19</sup> Udayan Misra, "The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey," H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture no. 4 (Shillong: The North East India History Association, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Sankardeva was a religious saint of Assam. His philosophy was famously known as '*Ek Xaran Nam Dharma*' which believed in the devotion to a single God who can be worshipped solely by uttering His name. This philosophy believed that there is only one God and one should not have to be solely from privileged class for preaching Him.

The scholar has also discussed the role of immigrants and their quest to adopt the Assamese language as their mother tongue. However, this work could not move beyond the usual narrative of depicting the story of Assamese identity formation. In the author's analysis, the construction of Assamese identity around the language led to the alienation of the other linguistic groups who have formed an integral part of Assamese society. There is also a tendency in Misra's work to suspect the sharp rise of Muslim content. He argues that the influx of Bangladeshi immigrants has the potential to fragment Assamese society into pieces. Again, this work that emphasises the immigration factor could highlight only the one-sided story of Assamese identity formation.

Sajal Nag tries to understand the region's complexity and the development of Assamese nationality.<sup>21</sup> He argues that the formation of Assamese nationality was not a homogeneous process. He also discussed the role of language and thought that the process started with the groups with developed languages ('big nationalities') who came into contact with British rulers. This group made progress at the cost of less advanced groups or the 'small nationalities'. In Nag's analysis, the Assamese identity movement (small nationality) emerged because of the domination of Bengalis (big nationality). In this case, the Bengalis (big nationalities) controlled the employment sector and began to dominate the Assamese. As a reaction, the Assamese mobilized themselves primarily to break the domination and reinstate their language and culture. In Nag's analysis, language became the central symbol of Assamese nationality formation. In Nag's theoretical framework, Assamese society evolved from an ethnic group to a nationality. However, he also could not come out of the Assamese-Bengali binary in developing his argument for the formation of Assamese nationality.

Madhumita Sengupta discussed the different aspects of the Assamese identity. By looking at the various policies of the Britishers, she tries to see how Britishers and Baptist missionaries took upon the task of standardization of the Assamese language.<sup>22</sup> She discussed the educational policies of the colonial state in detail and the role of print culture in fostering a language-centric identity of Assamese. The relationship between language and Nationalism is also discussed. She was also concerned about a shift in religious practices from Vaishnavism to Brahminical Hinduism. The central theme that this book covers are the relation between colonial modernity and the Assamese language, linguistic Nationalism, and the making of the Assamese middle class, which are already the most researched topics of the state. Thus her

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<sup>21</sup> Sajal Nag, *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Questions in North East India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> Madhumita Sengupta, *Becoming Assamese: Colonialism and New Subjectivities in Northeast India* (New York: Routledge, 2016)

conclusion could not give any new perspectives on the region's politics. She discussed the marginalization of languages of the lower Assam and Assamese-Bengali rivalry in fostering a language-centric identity of the state. She argues that language displaces all other senses of collectivity to emerge as the “only legitimate markers of group identity for the so-called Assamese people. Hence her work establishes the relation between language and Assamese identity in a historical context.

Bodisattva Kar <sup>23</sup>has discussed the politics of imagining a vernacular for Assam proper. This article deals with the politics of making a vernacular for Assam proper during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He tries to understand the various ways of making the vernacular realm through a small, connected history of orthographic contests, grammarians’ debates and print culture and how it affected the identity formation in the state. Contestation within its dialectical varieties was discussed extensively by the author. It examined the metropolis-oriented production of linguistic knowledge and how this knowledge production contested the heterogeneous speech practices of a frontier province. The article explores the linguistic imagination and the debates regarding the dialectal status of the ‘Assamese’ and traces some connections between spatial logic and language imagination. However this work covered a specific time period and hence could not give us a wholesome picture of identity formation in the state.

Regarding the Assamese identity, Amalendu Guha <sup>24</sup>argues that an integrative process of taking up the culture and identity of Assamese took place among the migrant Muslims of East Bengal origins. He discussed the inclusion of the Tai- Ahoms in the medieval era in Assamese society. While claiming this integrative process is nothing new, he quotes Jyoti Prasad Agarwala <sup>25</sup>, a social reformer of Assam—who termed the Bengali Muslims as *Na Axomiya* or Neo-Assamese. He argued that this process must be encouraged to strengthen the Assamese identity. Sanjib Baruah had a different take on this issue. Contradicting Guha, he argued that the integration of the Bengali Muslims to Assam could not be equated with that of the Ahoms centuries earlier. <sup>26</sup>He believes this immigration has only ‘tangled the Assam’s nationality

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<sup>23</sup> Bodisattva Kar, *What is in a Name? Politics of Spatial Imagination in Colonial Assam* (Guwahati: Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies, Omeo Kumar Das Institute for Social Change and Development, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Guha, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1980): 1699-1720.

<sup>25</sup> Jyoti Prasad Agarwala (1903-1951) was a famous Assamese cultural icon, also known as ‘*Rupkonwar*’

<sup>26</sup> Sanjib Kumar Baruah, "Cudgel of Chauvinism or Tangled Nationality Question," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1980): 543-545.

question'. According to Baruah, integration of the Ahom took so much time and space. However, many Muslims from East Bengal settled in Assam for a brief period. But their integration with Assamese society is quite a complex process. Baruah argued that the Muslim settlers enlisted their language as Assamese because of some 'political call'.

Recently among the Muslim immigrants who accepted the Assamese language, there is also a tendency to carve out their new space, commonly known as 'Miya' boundaries. Baruah tries to address some concerns about what comprises an Assamese identity. There are many similarities in language, food habits, festivals and other forms of social spaces, such as surnames among the indigenous Muslim and Hindus. This, however, is not true for Bengali-origin Muslims. This is the root of the illegal immigration debate, where the language issue became crucial for the imagination of Assamese identity. Therefore, in Baruah's analysis, we can see the linkage between immigration and the language question in Assam.

### **1.4.3 Language, nationalism and the emergence of different movements in Assam**

Assam has witnessed different language movements, especially after the Independence. However, the language movements in Assam have not been analysed adequately in the available literature. One of the works on the language movements in Assam by Sandhya Goswami tries to understand the language question in Assam by placing it historically.<sup>27</sup> She mainly focuses on the historical perspective and tries to see the factors contributing to Assam's language movements. While doing so, she also drew the binary between Assamese and Bengali language communities. She identified that the origin of the Assamese-Bengali division started with the period of British rule beginning in the year 1826. She recognised how the demand for 'Assamese for Assam and Assam is for Assamese' got legitimacy from the Indian linguistic policies. She also realised that the formation of the Assamese nationality started in pre-independence times. According to Goswami, since Independence, there has been a tendency among Assamese to establish its nationality along with other nationalities of the Indian Union. She takes up the case of linguistic reorganization of the Indian State and tries to see how this process helped form the Assamese identity. Using Myron Weiner's analysis, she talked about two kinds of minorities. One is linguistic minorities which are majorities elsewhere, like Bengali in the case of Assam and minorities, which are not majorities elsewhere. In this way, she tries to analyze the language question of the state. This distinction is necessary to

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<sup>27</sup> Sandhya Goswami, *Language Politics in Assam* (Ajanta Publications, 1997)

understand the position of the Bengali language in Assam. The historical rivalry between the two languages, i.e. Assamese-Bengali, was discussed in the backdrop of the migration to the province of Assam. She pointed out the suggestion of the State Reorganization Committee and its failure to address the language issue of the state at length. However, emphasizing too much the Assamese-Bengali rivalry, she completely neglected the tribal question and the tension associated with the language policies of the state. The fact that many of the hill areas got their separate status after the language movements in Assam could not get the necessary attention of the author. The language movements indeed initiated the process of alienation of different tribes. Apart from that, the sense of insecurity arising out of linguistic chauvinism needs to be explored carefully. The assertion of identities by many communities like the Bodos, Missing, and the other tribes should also come under the purview of scholars dealing with the language issue of the state.

Another important work by Dilip Kumar Chattopadhyay gave a chronological account of the language movements in Assam.<sup>28</sup> He calls it the language riot of the state. This work tries to address some of the literature gaps in Sandhya Goswami's work by focusing on the hill tribes' discontentments emerging out of the linguistic chauvinism of the Assamese class. He emphasized the state reorganization commission report and argued that due to the complete negligence towards this report, the language movements of the state took place. He identified the linguistic differences among the Assamese and Bengali communities and argues that there is an emergence of 'fear psychosis' in the Assamese mind due to the increasing number of Bengali-speaking population. However, this work also could not come out of the general assumption of Assamese –Bengali rivalry for the emergence of language movements of the state.

Sandhya Goswami mainly discussed the language movement of Assam from the perspective of Bengali rivalry with the section of Assamese.<sup>29</sup> Drawing a binary of Assamese-non-Assamese, where Bengali people constituted most of the non-Assamese area according to the author, he argues that during 1960, the opposition to the language bill mainly came from the Bengali section. He discussed the role of the opposition by the hill communities as well but thought that their resistance was not as intense as the Bengalis. The Hill community did not

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<sup>28</sup> D.K. Chattopadhyay, *History of the Assamese Movement since 1947* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates (Publications) Pvt. Ltd, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Sandhya Goswami, *Language Politics in Assam* (Ajanta Publications, 1997)

organize any meetings or demonstrations to oppose the move because they were more interested in achieving their dream of a separate state than resisting the language bill. The author tried to see the language agitation as a movement against the Bengali people. The Assamese –Bengali rivalry in Assam was seen as an opportunity by many political parties of West Bengal to influence the situation of Assam. However, he did not discuss the challenges the movements faced with the rising of pro-Bengali sentiments in Assamese-speaking regions and pro-Assamese emotions in the Bengali-speaking areas. This would have given a better understanding of the situation.

Much available literature directly or indirectly addresses the issue of Assamese Nationalism and its position within Indian Nationalism. The literature that deals with the question can be classified under two categories. One set of literature argues that Assamese Nationalism is the direct product of Indian Nationalism. In contrast, according to the other set of literature, Assamese Nationalism is the product of internal politics and contestations.

Sanjib Baruah traces the trajectory of Assamese identity and focuses on the insurgency in Assam to explore the politics of Assamese sub-nationalism.<sup>30</sup> This book critiques the nation-making process in India. The author tries to understand this process by making Assamese sub-nationalism during the colonial and post-colonial period and positioning it vis-a-vis Indian Nationalism. Baruah offers an interpretation of the political and economic history of Assam from the time it became a part of British India and a leading tea-producing region in the nineteenth century. He traces the history of tensions between pan-Indianism and Assamese sub-nationalism since the early days of Indian Nationalism. He uses the term ‘sub-nationalism’ to refer to a political mobilization that meets some of the criteria of Nationalism but is not committed directly to the idea of separate statehood. According to the author, after accession to British India, Assamese identity got its modern expression and eventually had to negotiate its place with pan-Indianism. He discusses how colonial policy has emphasised Assam’s unique geographical position and the politics of making it the frontier. The homogenising project of linguistic Nationalism, migration into Assam, contestation and eventual break-up of Assam in the post-colonial period, protest against the immigration, ethnic assertion and the rise of a militant nationalism which questions Assam’s position within the Indian state are discussed in length by the author. He tried to develop the contested narrative of Assamese Nationalism against the backdrop of the abovementioned dynamics. However, he did not discuss the

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<sup>30</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

complexities involved in linguistic Nationalism. One does not get a clear picture of how far his idea of Assamese sub-nationalism captures the role of language in it. According to him, the region's insurgencies, human rights abuses by government security forces and insurgents, and ethnic violence are mainly due to India's formally federal but centralized governmental structure.

Udayon Misra is another work of significant contribution to understanding Assamese sub-nationalism within the framework of the Indian nation-state.<sup>31</sup> The author looks at the conflict of the Northeast in the centre-periphery paradigm. Misra has identified that Assamese Nationalism emerged from the 'emotional' difference between mainstream India and the Assamese culture, economy and politics. The demands for 'Swadhin Axom' (Independent Assam) made by the militant outfit ULFA indicated the radical elements of Assamese Nationalism. He talks about how the British took over the region and imposed systems incompatible with the region. According to the author, the colonial mode of exploitation still exists in the state. According to him, an area cannot be integrated into a larger whole if there is emotional isolation between the people of the mainstream and the periphery.

The period of the Assam movement (1979-1985) was a popular movement against illegal immigrants in Assam. It was around this time sentiments of Assamese Nationalism arose very strongly. This movement, led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), was developed mainly to identify and expel illegal citizens. So during that time, the debate around Assamese Vs Indian nationalism was gaining solid ground.

Hussain is an essential work on the nature and character of the Assam Movement. To give a broader perspective on the movement, this work goes beyond the Assam movement and explains the social transformation that took place during this period.<sup>32</sup> He also explained the class dimension of this movement. He argued that the dominant class of Assam were the leading class of the movement, and the ordinary people only participated because of frustration. It was Assamese bourgeoisie who stood behind the movement, according to Hussain. He also raises the issue of Assamese nationality in the Bengali, Muslim, and Tribal question context. He argues that over the years, it is gaining its strength; therefore, he emphasized that focus should be given to the assimilative character of the Assamese nationality. However, in

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<sup>31</sup> Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-state in Assam and Nagaland* (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2013)

<sup>32</sup> Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (Delhi: Manak Publications, 1993)

his analysis of the movement, he could not see the threat to the linguistic identity of the Assamese nationality.

The following sections will review a set of literature mainly on the Assam movement issue, which highlighted Assam's nationality question and threw some light on the linguistic identity and its relation with Nationalism.

Amalendu Guha, in his article, discusses the irrationality of Assam's foreigner movement and tries to analyse the nationality question from this movement's perspective.<sup>33</sup> According to the author, the movement of 1979-80 is not a natural and spontaneous move. Instead, it has a historical basis. He contradicted the common belief; he argued that the movement did not emerge from the student's initiative. Instead, the upper-middle-class section of society owned the press and the public sphere, and they initiated the movement. From 1978 onwards, they planned and began to co-ordinate its preparations, according to Guha. The main argument of Guha is that the Assam movement is national in form, chauvinist and undemocratic in content and proto-fascist in its methods. He concludes that the solution to the foreigner's upsurge is mostly in assimilation and sealing the Bangladesh border rather than deportation. According to him, one of this movement's most significant benefits is that it helps people understand the chauvinist nature of middle-class leadership and their objectives. This article by Guha initiated a debate on Assamese Nationalism among the different intellectuals of the region. It is crucial to highlight their point of view for the context of the present study.

Hiren Gohain agrees with many of the points made by Guha. He argues that Guha has brilliantly discussed the different dimensions of this movement, but Guha's analysis can be challenged on many grounds.<sup>34</sup> In his article, he also analyses the role of the left in the present crisis. Tracing the genesis of this movement, he argues that the medium of instruction movement that took place in Assam in 1972 initiated the process of this movement. In discussing the role of the press, Gohain tries to bring in his analysis that social movement does not occur out of a vacuum. According to him, this movement had nothing to do with the centre-state relation, but it emerged out of internal politics. He talked about the hegemonic power of the Assamese middle class and its role in progressing the movement. It later became a power game between political parties like Congress and BJP. He states that though the present action has adopted a

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<sup>33</sup> Amalendu Guha, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80," *Economic and Political Weekly*, no. 10 (1980): 1699-1720.

<sup>34</sup> Hiren Gohain, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: A Comment," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 9 (1981): 339-340.

slogan on the tactical ground that Assamese are worried by the presence of foreigners, the main worry of Assamese is that they are not in a position to regulate immigration economically and politically. It is where Gohain sees the leftist role and states that the leftists in Assam should advocate various development programmes which can expose the centre's negligence towards Assam. He believed the unilingual state of Assam and separatist ideas gaining popularity must be combated.

Udayan Misra, in his article, also criticised Guha on various grounds. In his words, to prove that the current movement in Assam is nothing but a chauvinist sign, Guha fabricated the facts of history.<sup>35</sup> However, Amalendu Guha replied to all these criticisms in his April 1981 article published in EPW. First, Misra argues that Guha gave sole credit to the Assamese middle-class chauvinists for separating Sylhet from Assam. According to Misra, Guha believed that only the Assamese middle class were unhappy with the incorporation of Sylhet into the province of Assam. While negating criticism, Guha says he pointed out in his article that on the question of the Sylhet, Congress committees of both the valleys of Assam gave their opinion favouring the separation of Sylhet from Assam. Hence, he says that Misra of Guha's accusation that the demand for the separation of Sylhet during 1874-1946 was exclusively an order of the Assamese middle-class is entirely baseless. Misra also alleged that Guha created chauvinists even out of some leading congressmen of pre-independence Assam who were known for their all-India outlook. In this context, he talked about a quotation by Tarunram Phukan<sup>36</sup>, a leading congressman of that time. Guha quoted Phukan in the wrong context and sense, according to Misra. Guha quoted Phukan and said that while talking about nationality, Tarunram said, "A rising nationality shows signs of life by extending domination over others' whereas the correct translation according to Misra would be "The sign of life of a rising nationality is the influence, it extends over others". On this accusation, Guha says that by quoting Tarunram, he intended to prove that even a man with an all-India outlook can be affected by the chauvinism of Assamese Nationalism. Guha tried to give his observation on the upsurge of Assamese Nationalism. According to him, "Nationalism is a spiritual sentiment as well as an ideology that, irrespectively of its class roots, reaches out to the peasantry and thus may attain a mass character". Besides, it can be characterised as peasant nationalism only when the peasants become its driving force, with an anti-feudal programme. However, during the rise of the Assam movement, Guha could not see the forces of peasant nationalism in Assamese

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<sup>35</sup> Udayon Misra, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: A Comment," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1981): 290-292.

<sup>36</sup> Tarunram Phukan (1877-1939) popularly known as *Desbhakta*, was a prominent political leader of Assam.

Nationalism. Consequently, Nationalism was confined to a minimal notion of Nationalism and could not come out from the anti-Bengali sentiments of the earlier times. Accordingly, he also justified the mass involvement of a different section of society in this movement and argued that this movement has an economic origin. Due to economic stagnation, landlessness and unemployment, many of the community joined this movement. The chauvinistic tendencies hijacked that movement's original aims and objectives. The movement is indifferent to their demands for local autonomy in demarcated tribal areas, job reservations, restoration of all transferred lands to their original tribal proprietors and school education through the medium of mother tongues. It is for this reason they joined the movement, according to Guha. Guha also wanted to give his solution to the problem of little Nationalism turned chauvinist. In the context of Assam, he argued that the assimilation of different sections of people within the Assamese fold could be a way out. Through linguistic protection of a separateteam of people, autonomy for linguistic areas, and preservation of different cultures and ethnicities would be helpful in this direction. However, how these solutions can be beneficial in the wake of anti-foreigner issues is a matter of doubt. The whole debate on Assamese Nationalism highlighted aspects of Assamese nationalism and some of its criticisms.

Apurba Kumar Baruah covers four themes: the emergence of student power in Assam, Assamese Nationalism, Assamese–Bengali relations and the role of the middle class in Assam's politics.<sup>37</sup> This work has also explored the various trends of Assamese Nationalism and categorised it as a tendency of sub-nationalism. The author also tries to analyse the nature of Assamese Nationalism and its various contributing factors. He argued that it was only during the Assam movement that the nationalities question in Assam came into the central stage. According to the author, when smaller nationalities assert their identity, it is considered a significant threat to the Indian nation-state. The author also expressed his discontent that in a multiethnic or multicultural society, the dominant nationality will slowly assimilate the minor ones, or various communities will form their independent nation-states over time. Therefore, the author always considers the emergence of smaller nationalities a threat. He also discussed the evolution of the Indian middle class, which is acting as an ally to the bourgeoisie class, according to the author. In different regions in India, a dominant community can always influence the other smaller communities. In this context, the nationality question of Assam was

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<sup>37</sup> Apurba Kumar Baruah, *Social Tensions in Assam: Middle Class Politics* (Purbanchal Prakash, 1991)

discussed. According to the author, the rise of Assamese nationality emerged as a reaction against Bengalis. While discussing the role of immigrants, he talked about the economic hegemony of the immigrants that affected the social and cultural life of the Assamese society. How the Assamese middle class reacted against these immigrants and formed different organizations to protect their interests was also discussed. In the post-period, the middle class initiated various popular movements to recognise the status of Assamese as the official language, establishment of refineries, anti-foreigner movement etc. The author argued that the fear that Assamese might be reduced to a minority in their homeland is not merely a fear psychosis, as Hiren Gohain and Amalendu Guha have argued; instead, the threat is real. He also focuses on the tendencies of some historians to interpret the chauvinistic tendencies in Assamese society in terms of the evil designs of the Assamese-speaking middle class. For example, Amabikagiri<sup>38</sup> viewed Assamese Nationalism as a linguistic nationalism and believed that if Assamese did not sharpen their national consciousness, they would be oppressed by others. He perceived Assamese Nationalism as a means to protect the people's economic interests in their homeland. Therefore he argues that to protect the jobs, markets, and even their language and culture, Assamese needs to strengthen their nationalistic sentiments. In the author's view, studying the Assamese middle class would help us understand the tension between the Assamese and Bengali of Assam. For the rising of anti-Bengali sentiments, he also blamed the Bengali middle class. One of the significant drawbacks of the book is that the author does not discuss the role of the Bengali elite in giving rise to anti-Bengali sentiments. Also, emphasising only the middle class cannot give us a comprehensive picture of the conflicts of that time.

Pisharoty is a recent addition to the existing literature on the Assam movement, and its main focus was to unpack the historic Assam Accord. The author gave importance to the genesis of the landmark agreement of Assam's history signed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the leaders of the Assam Movement in 1985.<sup>39</sup> The constitutional protection of 'Assamese' people and the detention of foreigners were two main points of this accord which could end the six-year prolonged Assam agitation. A detailed description of the issue of the ethnic emergence, insurgency of Assam, Rise of All Assam Student Union (AASU) and ULFA, Assam's take on the issue of Citizenship, the emergence of regionalism, the genesis of IMDT act, problems of citizens in submitting the legacy data to many exciting stories about

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<sup>38</sup> Ambikagiri Raychaowdhary (1885-1967) was a Revolutionary as well as a leading freedom fighter of Assam.

<sup>39</sup> Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, *Assam: The Accord, The Discord* (Penguin Random House India, 2019)

detention centres etc. makes this work an interesting read. In other words, by bringing an 'insider's' perspective on the issue of foreigner vs indigenous debate, this work has marked its departure from some of the established positions of the Assam movement. However, while the author successfully gives a very detailed picture of the making of the Assam Accord and its subsequent developments, she did not analyse the reshaping of Assamese identity after the signing of this accord. Especially how different tribal and ethnic assertions shaped the Assamese identity and how this reshaping was done by the marker of language, religion, or the idea of citizenship was missing in an otherwise very detailed book on the Assam movement.

#### **1.4.4 Language ,politics and the recent developments in Assam**

In recent times, Assam politics has taken a new turn from the earlier obsession with language, and now it has taken the issue of citizenship more seriously. Since the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, of 2016, a section of BJP leaders has been trying to give citizenship in Assam a communal colour. Based on the cut-off date set by this proposed amendment, these leaders have started to prove that the Assam Accord was a mistake by AASU, a signatory to the Accord. After the NRC was published in Assam, the same leaders argued for a new NRC in Assam purely based on the 1951 NRC, not based on the deadline set by the Assam Accord. In this regard, the CAA 2019 is a clear stand of the BJP against the Assam Accord and the already concluded NRC Assam. With these developments, there is a recent development that the central government has constituted a high-level committee for the implementation of clause 6 of the Assam accord and has been promising constitutional safeguards to the ethnic Assamese people. After the CAA 2019 met with strong protests across Assam, the central government looked to offer some constitutional protection to the indigenous communities of Assam based on the recommendations of the high-level committee.

In light of these recent developments, many works have been published that address the question of Assamese identity and different related aspects of it. For example, Nath takes up the case of the Neo-Muslim community and how this identity complexes the question of indigenous Assamese identity in the context of recent political developments in Assam.<sup>40</sup> This book provides a fascinating account of Assam's electoral politics, centring around the immigrant Muslims of Assam. It argued that the immigration process, especially after the Independence, has made the Muslim community a sensitive political category. This has also impacted the othering of this community from the idea of the Assamese community. In this

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<sup>40</sup> Manoj Kumar Nath, *The Muslim Question in Assam and Northeast India* (Routledge, 2021)

context, the author tries to understand recent developments in Assam, such as updating the NRC and the citizenship amendment act. It has been shown in this book how a section of the neo-Assamese Muslim community does not qualify to be indigenous (Assamese) people of Assam. But under all circumstances, the Assamese Muslims are indigenous people of the state. With the implementation of Clause 6, the indigenous Assamese Muslims will get the opportunity to enjoy the constitutional safeguards along with other ethnic groups, which will lessen their sense of alienation and threat of losing identity. However, the author has remained silent on many other relevant aspects, like the issue of language and tribal questions, which could have provided a more nuanced understanding of this issue.

Akhil Ranjan Dutta throws some significant insights into the recent politics in Assam more nuancedly.<sup>41</sup> His primary focus was to show the transition of the BJP's strategies in creating a 'Hindutva regime', especially in the context of Assam. By focusing on the complexities in addressing the citizenship issue, the political economy of the state, changing electoral campaign in Assam under the Hindutva regime, the work mainly tries to argue for a case that BJP's success in creating a 'Rainbow Coalition' became possible because it was successful in bringing indigenous and regional political parties as its allies. In other words, how BJP successfully tried to 'Saffronize' the 'Rainbow coalition' by bringing together diverse ethnic groups was the primary objective of the work. In doing so, he tried highlighting some of the significant aspects of Assam politics of recent times, such as the issue of the NRC and CAA debate. However, in recent developments, how BJP successfully transformed the discourse of Assamese identity has been missing from analysing of this otherwise excellent work on contemporary Assam politics.

Nani Gopal Mahanta's recent work tries to understand the nature and growth of Assamese nationality in the wake of the NRC and CAA context.<sup>42</sup> Focussing on the historical legacy of the NRC (National Register of Citizen) and CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act 2019), he also draws his conclusion by focusing on the issue of EBOM (East Bengal Origin Muslims). He also gives insights into the case of Bengali Refugees and Muslim Immigrants and their contribution to achieving the dream of political Hindutva or ethnic identity.

Against this backdrop of literature review, this research attempts to understand the language question from its historical background and trace the connection between language and

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<sup>41</sup> Akhil R. Dutta, *Hindutva Regime in Assam: Saffron in the Rainbow* (SAGE Publishing India, 2021)

<sup>42</sup> Nani Gopal Mahanta, *Citizenship Debate over NRC and CAA: Assam and the Politics of History* (SAGE Publishing India, 2021)

Assamese identity. The relationship between identity and language must be analysed in pre and colonial Assam to understand it in recent times.

### **1.5 Research questions and objectives**

From the literature review, it has been identified that the literature on the language question in Assam is mainly limited to the following themes: different language movements for the recognition of diverse identities, language as a marker of Assamese Nationalism, language and the immigration issue in Assam and the formation of Assamese middle class. But what is more interesting to highlight is that they failed to offer an understanding as to why even after Independence, *language question* remains crucial for the imagination of Assamese identity. The question arises: Does language still hold the same kind of importance in making the modern Assamese identity when the real politics of Assam began to rally around the issue of foreigners vs indigenous debate or the issue of citizenship in recent times? This is the primary question that this thesis is trying to find out. The available literature maintains a silence on the problems of language boundary. It has been identified that emphasising only the relation between Assamese- Bengali cannot give a broader understanding of the language question of Assam. By placing many tribal assertions that emerged during these movements, the existing literature tried to understand the sentiments of the tribal population. However, it did not identify the impact of these tribal assertions in challenging the Assamese identity. In this regard, this present study is trying to understand the development and imagination of Assamese identity based on analysing language movements in post-independent Assam. It has identified the influence of these language movements on different language communities of Assam. This work has focussed mainly on two language movements of Assam, i.e. official state language movement of 1960 and the medium of instruction movement of 1972. While doing so, it has engaged with the politics of standardizing the Assamese language and how it influenced the inclusion or exclusion of specific speakers from the imagination of Assamese identity. How these language movements help us to understand the formation of Assamese identity is the primary objective of this study.

At the same time, perceptions of the Assamese identity as both exclusive and composite are debatable, and there is a need to understand its continuous formations and reformation. Assamese identity is composite as people from different religions, castes, dialects speakers form a part of it. When Assamese was deployed as an important marker for this identity, this exclusive identity tended to exclude certain people. With the emergence of post-independence

language movements, the notion of Assamese identity took a different shape by negotiating across religion, caste, marginal groups and other language speakers. Therefore, this transformation is necessary to understand in the context of emerging language movements.

A detailed literature review has revealed that very little literature deals with post-independent Assam's language movements. They could not adequately analyse how language remains a consistent force in shaping the state's political discourse. At the same time, the linguistic Nationalism of Assamese and its trajectories is a crucial aspect to look at in this context. Moreover how different communities asserted themselves and put forward their demands in post-colonial Assam politics is necessary to understand. This is one of the main objectives of this study. Apart from that, how language issue is relevant to understanding the recent developments in Assam is also an essential thrust of this study.

Based on the current literature review, this study has identified three research questions:

1. How did 'language' become a symbol of Assamese identity's imagination? What is the contribution of colonial politics (if any) to the imagination of the Assamese identity around the issue of language?
2. Does 'language' provide a basis for Assamese identity in post-independent Assam? How do language movements in the state, especially the language movements of 1960 and 1972, consolidate this position?
3. What are the significant challenges and contradictions of Assamese identity in post-independent Assam? What is the trajectory of Assamese identity in the wake of the debate on indigeneity, especially in the context of the Assam accord and its subsequent development?

### **Objectives of this study**

- To understand the colonial legacy of language-centric Assamese identity.
- To understand how a particular language was created as an 'official language' of the state and how standard Assamese language's politics deals with the inclusion and exclusion of certain linguistic groups.

- To understand the nature and dynamics of language movements in post-independent Assam and how these movements can throw light on some of the pertinent questions of Assam politics, like state formation and autonomy demands by many communities.
- To understand Assamese identity's nature and transformation, especially in Post independent Assam.
- To understand the significance of *language questions* in the debate on indigeneity, especially in the context of the Assam accord and its subsequent development.

## 1.6 Methodology

The methodology is generally understood as a research strategy that shows how research is conducted and the principles, procedures, and practices that govern that research. Keeping the objectives and nature of my study, this thesis mainly adopted qualitative methodology for this study. The qualitative method is generally concerned with understanding the meaning of social phenomena.

This work is primarily based on different archival materials collected from places like the Assam State Archive, Guwahati, the National Archive of India, the Nehru Memorial Library, various individual libraries and institutional libraries. This work closely looks into the different primary material like census data, government reports and documents etc., related to the language movements like Assam Official Language Act, 1960, Assam Official Language Amendment Act, 1984 etc. Another source of data collection was informal discussions with different organizational members, intellectuals representing different ideologies and interests, political parties' leaders etc. This work also highlighted and discussed various personal and written communications with a large cross-section of the society representing different walks of public life. During fieldwork and data collection, I attended different meetings where I got the chance to listen to the stories of many persons associated with the language movements of the state.

Apart from looking for new sources to enhance the study's originality, an important exercise was to re-read and ask a different set of questions to the existing primary and secondary sources and utilize the sources creatively. Proceeding of various organizations like Assam Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, pamphlets and documents of different organizations associated with the language movements in Assam has also been studied carefully. Other literary and ordinary texts available in the vernacular, memoirs of people related to these language movements, magazines, journals, and newspapers relevant to the study have also been consulted.

## **1.7 Organization of the study**

This work has been divided into five chapters, followed by a concluding chapter.

### **1. Chapter 1: Introduction**

The first chapter introduces the study by contextualising the research problem. The primary objective of this chapter is to establish the conceptual framework within which the study is conducted. The chapter discusses the literature review, research questions, objectives, rationale, and methodology deployed in the study. I have also identified the scope and limits of this study in this chapter.

### **2. Chapter II: History, language and the imagination of Assamese identity**

The second chapter of this study provides a comprehensive historical context on the relationship between language and modern Assamese identity. Highlighting this relationship during pre-colonial and post-colonial Assam, it discusses the related themes like the role of language politics in colonial geopolitics, print nationalism, debate on the standardization of the Assamese language and so on. It concludes that the imagination of language-centric Assamese identity was influenced by many colonial policies and the development of language-centric Assamese identity faced many internal as well as external challenges.

### **3. Chapter III: The making of an official state language: language, hegemony and Assamese identity**

This chapter analyzes the Post-independence language movements in Assam. In this chapter, the analysis focuses on the correlation between the language movements that took place in Assam during the 1960s and 1972 and the emergence of various related issues, such as linguistic Nationalism, the demand for Bodoland, and the movements advocating for the recognition of distinct linguistic communities. The chapter aims to shed light on the interconnectedness of these language movements with broader socio-political concerns. A significant portion of this chapter is dedicated to analysing the imagination of Assamese identity and its various contestations during this time.

#### 4. Chapter IV: **Language, politics and Assam Accord**

The fourth chapter primarily focuses on Assamese Nationalism and the political dynamics surrounding the *Assam Accord*. Drawing inspiration from diverse scholarly discourse, this chapter studies the transformation in the narrative of modern Assamese identity, particularly in light of the prevailing discussion on indigeneity. It has been argued that the *Assam Accord* played an important role in the transformation of Assamese identity where the focus was shifted more towards the issue of indigeneity. Rather than focusing on the issue of language the identity discourse was replaced by the issue of citizenship. The chapter has argued that in contrast to the 1960s, when the dominance of 'Bengalis' posed a threat; the 'foreigners' posed a threat during the time of the Assam movement and this threat was posed by the large influx of 'foreigners' from across the international frontier.

The chapter has argued that the most significant development was the questioning of the language-based Assamese identity by the very groups that were once expected to gradually adopt the Assamese linguistic identity. The proposal to replace the term 'Assamese people' with 'indigenous people of Assam' represents a substantial change. Consequently, the language issue in postcolonial Assam plays a significant and defining role in the shift in the perception of Assamese identity.

#### 5. Chapter V: **Language and Assamese identity in recent time**

The fifth chapter examines the significance of language politics within the context of contemporary Assam politics. This chapter primarily focuses on the issues that arose during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) movement in 2019 and the process of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam. It has examined the case of language politics among Assamese Muslims and shed light on the intricate trajectories of the modern Assamese identity.

In post-independence Assam, after the introduction of the official language policy, many tribal groups alienated themselves from the Assamese language. They refused to accept Assamese as their mother tongue in the census operations. Despite this Assamese language speakers maintained the majority status as evident from the census table. It is because of the acceptance of the Assamese language by neo-Assamese Muslims. However, after the Assam Accord, a conflict erupted between the Assamese 'indigenous' people and the neo-Assamese Muslim group. This situation prompted the neo-Assamese Muslims to withdraw Assamese as their mother tongue in the census of 1991.

The chapter provides adequate attention to the issue of linguistic consciousness emerging among the neo-Assamese Muslims in the post-NRC period, adding a new dimension to Assam's language politics. The chapter has argued that after the Assam Accord, neo-Assamese Muslims and their language have been used as a political tool. Distrust between native groups and neo-Assamese Muslims in the Brahmaputra valley has been exacerbated by these political developments. The result has been a resurgence of tensions between Assamese and Bengali speakers, but this time in a more nuanced and religiously charged atmosphere than it had been observed since the colonial period.

## 6. Chapter VI: **Conclusion**

The last chapter provides a summary of the study's findings, sheds light on the study's limitations, and explores the further scope for research in this field.

### **1.8 Scope and limitations**

While analysing the problem as outlined at the outset, the work examines the post-independence language movements and their relation to the formation of the Assamese identity. Most of the available literature in this area deals with the historical evolution of Assamese identity. These scholars did not seriously study how this transformation of Assamese identity took place in the context of post-independence language movements. Instead, they tend to focus on other issues like immigration, caste, religion, etc. Therefore, this work will address the existing research gap in the literature. Moreover, explanation on the relationship between language and Assamese Nationalism would be another scope of this study.

However, there are certain limitations of this research. For example, while discussing the post-independence language movement, there will be occasional invocations of different linguistic communities' linguistic assertions like Missing, Rabha, Tiwa communities and so on. Their contribution to making the Assamese identity is crucial. However, the deeper engagement of these issues has been avoided for practical purposes. Also, this work is not a chronological study of different language movements in the post-independence period. Instead, it is trying to stick with the primary question of this dissertation, and from this perspective, all the language movements have been analysed. Likewise, many other issues in making the Assamese identity will be invoked, like caste, tribal elements, immigration, religion, etc., but this thesis has not engaged with these issues extensively. Instead, it is trying to focus only on the problems of language in articulating and re-articulating Assamese identity and is trying to understand how language can play an essential part in linking all other aspects of Assamese identity.

## Chapter II

### HISTORY, LANGUAGE AND THE IMAGINATION OF ASSAMESE IDENTITY

#### 2.1 Introduction

The emergence of distinct identities based on different languages, religions, and cultures is essentially a product of colonial encounters in the Indian subcontinent. Several scholars have studied the influence of colonialism on the formation of a national identity based on language in India. <sup>43</sup>By initiating a new form of knowledge system and enumeration techniques like census, colonialism influenced the conception of identity regarding language, religion, caste and so on in India. Scholars have identified the process of shaping and reshaping the linguistic identities of the people through various enumerative practices started by the Britishers. <sup>44</sup>These practices were critical in constructing language-centric identity formulations in modern India. They help classify and fix the boundaries of Indian languages and their speakers.

The imagination of language-based Assamese identity formation is not a recent phenomenon. In the colonial era, language became a prominent issue in Assam. In response to the many policies adopted by the Britishers, many native intellectuals in the state invoked the idea of '*Matri Bhaxa*' or 'mother tongue'. <sup>45</sup> In later years it became an emotionally and psychologically very charged issue in the politics of Assam. To some extent, it remains so even today.

This chapter explores the following questions: how did 'language' become a symbol for the imagination of Assamese identity? Did colonial policies play any role in shaping or influencing the language politics in the region? How did the language issue shape the evolution of the Assamese community? This chapter examines the emerging debate surrounding *Matri Bhaxa* or the mother tongue in Assam. It also discusses the role of the census, print and enumeration processes in shaping a language-centric imagination of the modern Assamese community. Identification of various historical momentums crucial for the imagination of Assamese identity has also been analysed in this chapter.

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<sup>43</sup> A. Sarangi, "Enumeration and the Linguistic Identity Formation in Colonial North India," *Studies in History* 25, no. 2 (2009): 197–227.

<sup>44</sup> A. Sarangi, "Enumeration and the Linguistic Identity Formation in Colonial North India," *Studies in History* 25, no. 2 (2009): 197–227.

<sup>45</sup> Many doyens and intellectuals in the regions like Laxminath Bezbaruah (1864-1938), Ambikagiri Raichaudhury (1885-1967) had expressed their concerns regarding the issue in many of their public writings.

## 2.2 Imagination of an Assamese identity

The history of the imagination of Assamese as a common identity for the Assamese people is worth mentioning here. While many factors contributed to the imagination of a common Assamese identity, the role of Ahom Kingdoms and the influence of Vaishnavism were two crucial factors in this direction.

In the pre-colonial era, when *Ahoms* ruled Assam for almost six hundred years (1228-1826 AD), a sense of unity began to germinate among various castes, classes, and ethnic and religious groups. For Ahom rulers, bringing heterogeneous social groups into a single fold was their major administrative necessity. To do that, they resorted to and promoted Vaishnavism in the region.<sup>46</sup> They realized that using religious tradition would be a clever step as it could motivate people to come under a single fold. Socio-religious reforms initiated during their rule and later developments in the form of Vaishnavism helped shape a sense of unity among the people. Many works have identified that Ahom rule had impacted the formation of an Assamese identity by initiating an assimilation process through linguistic, cultural and political processes.<sup>47</sup> With the help of Vaishnavite preachers, they brought together different tribal groups under their administrative control.<sup>48</sup> This was achieved through inclusive policies adopted by many Vaisnavite preachers. They allowed various ethnic and religious groups to join Vaisnavism. Prominent Vaishnavite preachers such as Shankardev (1449-1568), Madhavdev (1489-1596) and many others were successful in bringing people divided along caste, language, religion, and ethnicity together. Due to this reason, the conversion of many tribals such as Bodos, Kachari and Tai Ahoms into Vaisnavism was another major development of this period. The Ahoms were also known for their religious tolerance and this could have led to the blending of tribal and Ahom religious elements.<sup>49</sup>

The philosophical foundation of Sankardeva's ideal is mainly drawn from the Vedas and Puranas. Interestingly, he only referred to *Bharatabarsha* (India) and did not use the term 'Assam' in his writings. Many works have established that no other saints and scholars during the Bhakti movement espoused the notion of *Bharatabarsha*, as much as it was done by

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<sup>46</sup> D. Sarmah, *Muwamoria Mohabidruh: Ek Tri-matrik Gono Abhuythan* (Ekalabya Publication, 2018).

<sup>47</sup> Gait S.A., *A History of Assam*, (Calcutta, 1926)

<sup>48</sup> A Guha, *Baishnav Badorpora Muwamoria Bidruhohoi* (Guwahati, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> A Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (Calcutta and New Delhi: Centre for the Studies of Social Sciences, 1991).

Sankardeva.<sup>50</sup> During his time, the Assamese identity was more like an inclusive, pluralistic, and cosmopolitan identity attracting a diverse set of communities. The philosophy of Vaishnavism is the foundation of modern Assamese identity. The concept of Assamese identity became in a sense, a manifestation of Vaisnavite philosophy.<sup>51</sup> However, it is interesting to note here that in such formulation there was hardly any emergence or growth of language-centric consciousness among the people. During this phase, the Assamese identity emerged more like an identity encompassing all sections of people.

However, it is the emergence of the Assamese language which ultimately paved the way for the development of language-centric Assamese identity.<sup>52</sup> In this context, we can refer to one of the most celebrated works on the Assamese language by Dr Banikanta Kakati.<sup>53</sup> In his work '*Assamese: Its Formation and Development(1941)*' he argued that the Assamese language and vocabulary primarily derive from Sanskrit, but they also incorporate words from the Austric and Tibeto-Burman languages.

Talking about the history of the Assamese language and literature, Kakati claimed that the history of the Assamese language can be categorised into three distinct periods:

- (i) Early Assamese:— spanning from the fourteenth to the late sixteenth century. This can be further divided into two sub-periods:
  - (a) the pre-Vaishnavite period and
  - (b) the Vaishnavite period.

During this period, many writers, including the first Assamese prose writers, notably Hema Saraswati, Rudra Kandali, and Madhav Kandali, were busy writing different proses.<sup>54</sup> Sankara Deva, a prominent Vaishnavite reformer in Assam, was born in 1449 A.D. He started writing literary works in the late 15th century to spread his beliefs. The religious zeal he ignited gained popularity, leading to the creation of countless books, predominantly in verse. Sankara Deva

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<sup>50</sup> R. Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam, 1853-1921* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Udayon Misra, "The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey" H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture" (Shillong: The North East India History Association, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> A.K. Baruah, "Social Tensions in Assam: Middle Class Politics" (1991).

<sup>53</sup> Dr. Banikant Kakati (1894-1952) was a polymath, specialising in linguistics, research, education, and literary criticism.

<sup>54</sup> Hema Saraswati is renowned as one of the earliest known Assamese writers during the late 14th century. He is best remembered for his poem, Prahlada Charita, which stands as the earliest known poetic work in the Assamese language. Alongside fellow writers such as Rudra Kandali, Madhav Kandali, and Horibor Bipro, Hema Saraswati laid a robust foundation for Assamese Literature during his time.

also composed religious songs and dramas, which prominently feature a significant blend of *Braja-Buli* idioms.<sup>55</sup>

(ii) Middle Assamese: —from the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

As discussed by Kakati, during this phase, the Ahoms possessed a natural inclination for historical documentation. Initially, historical chronicles in the Ahom court were written in their original Tibeto-Chinese language. However, when the Ahom rulers decided to use Assamese as the court language, historical chronicles started being written in Assamese.<sup>56</sup> Starting in the early seventeenth century, there was a significant increase in the production of court chronicles. The chronicles, known as *Buranjis* by the Ahoms, deviated from the writing style of religious authors. The language is predominantly modern, and with minor modifications in grammar and spelling, the chronicles could easily be mistaken for contemporary compositions.

(iii) Modern Assamese: —from the early 1800s to the present day.

The modern era began with the release of the Assamese prose version of the Bible by American Baptist Missionaries in 1819. The Missionaries established Sibsagar as the focal point of their endeavours in eastern Assam and utilised the Sibsagar dialect for their literary pursuits. In 1846, a monthly periodical titled *Arunoday* was initiated, and in 1848, Nathan Brown authored and released the first book on Assamese Grammar. Miles Bronson edited the Assamese-English dictionary titled *Axomiya Aru Ingraji Abhidhanwas pu*, which was blished by the Missionaries in 1867. As a result of the influence of the Missionaries, a group of indigenous writers emerged, and the production of books and periodicals in the eastern Assam language increased.

This chapter addresses some of the essential topics in the following sections. One among them is how the colonial rule in India introduced a new form of knowledge and ideology which influenced the imagination of Assamese identity around the language issue. It has been argued that colonialism has significantly shaped the perception of Assamese identity around language through different intentional strategies and policies. The role of colonial geopolitics in influencing language-centric Assamese identity has also been discussed. The following section will address these issues.

### **2.3 Colonialism and the making of a modern Assamese language**

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<sup>55</sup> B. Kakati, *Assamese: Its Formation and Development* (Guwahati, Assam: LBS Publications, 1941).

<sup>56</sup> B. Kakati, *Assamese: Its Formation and Development* (Guwahati, Assam: LBS Publications, 1941).

The signing of the Yandaboo Treaty on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1826 marked the beginning of colonialism in Assam as Assam became the colonial land for the Britishers. It was during the period of colonialism, the language-based Assamese identity began to take shape.

In 1830, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, a circular was issued instructing the use of Bengali as the official court language of Assam.<sup>57</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, the British introduced the modern educational system in Assam, utilising Bengali as the official language replacing Persian language.<sup>58</sup> Between 1836 and 1873, Bengali served as the official language of Assam. These thirty-seven years were pivotal in the formation of a distinct Assamese identity, with its language serving as its primary component.

When the British imposed the Bengali language, the people of Assam experienced linguistic and cultural subjugation for the first time. The official recognition of Bengali as a language facilitated the inclusion of the Bengali community in administrative and other employment opportunities. This sowed the seeds of resentment and animosity among the indigenous population towards the Bengali speakers. Over time, it also facilitated the development of linguistic and ethnic awareness among the Assamese speakers.

Assamese speakers began to blame the Bengali Bengali-speaking community for manipulating the colonial rulers by misinforming them about Assamese as an offshoot of the Bengali language or its 'dialect'. For example, in 1890, a crusader of Assamese linguistic nationalism *Hemachandra Goswami* blamed Bengali speakers for making Bengali the medium of instruction in Assam.<sup>59</sup>

British were aware of the existence of different languages in Assam. In fact, before their arrival, they extensively researched the language situation in Assam. In 1795, a dictionary, *Bor Omro* (a Tai-Assamese dictionary) by *Damsung Tengai Mohan* was published;<sup>60</sup> in 1810, *A Vocabulary of the Ashami Kamrupa Languages*, was published by *Ruchinath Buragohain*. Britishers were well aware of these works. In 1814, Francis Buchanan Hamilton compiled a dictionary consisting of words from ten different languages, including English, Assamese, and Bengali, among many others. In addition, Jaduram Deka Baruah of Jorhat compiled a *Bengali-Assamese dictionary* in 1836, which mentioned the differences between Bengali and Assamese. The Britishers were also aware of the different orthographical systems at that time. The

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<sup>57</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of Company* (1980), 34.

<sup>58</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of Company* (1980), 36

<sup>59</sup> P. Chowdhury and Barman, *Itihah Sorsa* (1995)

<sup>60</sup> Debavrata Sharma, *Unnoisxo Xathi Chanar Bhaxa Andolan (Jorhat Assam : Ekalabya Prakaxon 2019)*.

publication of the English Assamese dictionary by Miles Bronson in 1867 and the translation of the Bible by *Atmaram Sarmah* in 1813 also prove that Britishers extensively researched Assam's languages and orthographical systems.<sup>61</sup>

The decision to introduce Bengali as the official language in the region was considered as a practical and administrative one by the Britishers. Nevertheless, there was a significant presence of bitter animosity between the Assamese and Bengali-speaking communities. A certain segment of Bengali communities was thought to have exerted a substantial influence in suppressing the Assamese language. Upon its establishment as an official language in Assam in 1836, Bengali effectively displaced the foreign Persian language that had been in use in the region.<sup>62</sup>

The Bengal Renaissance, spearheaded by Raja Rammohun Roy(1772-1833), was a transformative movement that encompassed cultural, social, religious, and artistic reforms. It catalyzed the preservation and development of the Bengali language. Over time, Bengali started to captivate the minds of ordinary individuals as a language that represented the educated middle class. Renowned figures such as Rabindranath Tagore(1861-1941), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee(1838-1934), and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar(1820-1891), along with numerous others, played a significant role in advocating for the Bengali language.

In various Bangla journals such as *Prabasi*, *Bharati*, and *Mrinmayee*, different Bengali writers asserted that the Bangla language has achieved a superior position among all Indian languages. They argued that weaker languages in the vicinity, such as *Axomiya*( Assamese) and *Oriya* (Odia), would inevitably relinquish their independent status and assimilate into Bengali over time.<sup>63</sup> Thus, a pattern of Bengali cultural supremacy emerged, establishing linguistic dominance over other languages. This resulted in numerous responses from the initial group of distinguished Assamese writers and intellectuals, including Lakhminath Bezbaruah, Gunahiram Baruah, Hemchandra Goswami, and others. They resorted to writing and promoting the Assamese language. The discriminatory mindset and sense of superiority held by a particular group within the Bengali community occupying positions of power during colonial rule likely contributed to the growing awareness among the Assamese people. The initial Assamese authors, through their native language, laid the foundation for a linguistic resistance

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<sup>61</sup> Devabrata Sharma, *Unnoisxo Xathi Chanar Bhaxa Andolan* (Jorhat Assam : Ekalabya Prakaxon 2019).

<sup>62</sup> Tilottama Misra, *Literary Cultures in North East India* (2016), Economic and Political Weekly.

<sup>63</sup> Dutta, Uddipan. "*The Role of Language Management and Language Conflict in the Transition of Post-Colonial Assamese Identity*." PhD diss., Gauhati University, Guwahati.

movement aimed at challenging the dominance of the Bengali language. During the nineteenth century, several Assamese magazines such as *Jonaki* (started in 1889), *Bijuli* (1890-1902), *Banhi* (1909-1946), and *Uxa* (1907-1912) emphasised the autonomous position of the Assamese language and actively advocated for its advancement and growth.

The establishment of printing presses has played a crucial role in this matter. The printing press played a significant role in fostering Assamese linguistic nationalism, driven by influential literary figures of that era. It facilitated the publication of Assamese books, which enriched the imagination of Assamese as a separate language with a unique identity and culture. The standardisation of the Assamese language started to develop this time with the efforts of the Assamese middle class.<sup>64</sup>

The Christian missionaries also exerted significant influence on the political landscape of colonial Assam. Upon arriving in Assam, they encountered challenges in comprehending the indigenous language. Nathan Brown was the first among them to attempt to learn Assamese. In 1837, a directive was issued that all local government officials utilise their native language. In 1837, a significant directive was issued, mandating that all local government officials utilize their native language. This directive represented a notable departure from previous language policies. However, in the case of Assam, the maintenance of the local language was neglected and Bengali was enforced as the primary language for teaching. While missionaries did focus on promoting the Assamese language, their efforts were driven by their self-interest. They played a crucial role in initiating the establishment of the first Assamese language newspaper, *Arunudoï* (1846), in Sivasagar. Within the pages of *Arunudoï*, numerous prominent intellectuals of Assam, such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukon and other Assamese writers, presented compelling arguments in favour of preserving the unique Assamese language and culture.<sup>65</sup>

In 1852, Anandaram Dhekial Phukon, a devoted subordinate to the British administration, expressed his opposition to the utilisation of the Bengali language within the judicial system. He penned a letter to A. J. M. Mill, the justice of Calcutta Sadar Court, for refuting all assertions that Assamese and Bengali are linguistically identical.<sup>66</sup> He questioned the use of Bengali as the medium of instruction, asserting that teaching in a language that is not well understood by

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<sup>64</sup> B. Kakati, *Assamese: Its Formation and Development* (Guwahati, Assam: LBS Publications, 1941).

<sup>65</sup> Maheswar Neog, "'Introduction' in The Orunudoï: A Monthly Paper Devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence, 1846-1854, collected volume (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 2003)"

<sup>66</sup> A.J. Mill, Report on the Province of Assam (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 1988)

the majority would result in a significant waste of time and effort for the people of Assam who are trying to learn Bengali. He strongly advocated for the government to provide a grant of several thousand rupees to supply schools with basic educational materials in Assamese, encompassing both local and European knowledge. Anandaram's arguments advocating for the Assamese language addressed numerous broader inquiries regarding linguistic policy. His contributions were significant in shaping the linguistic history of modern Assamese. He brought up the issue of language, which colonial officials did not consider open to debate, regarding the substitution of Assamese with Bengali. Subsequently, language became an integral component of colonial governance during the colonial rule.

### **Colonialism and Assamese print medium**

The Wood's despatch of 1854 recommended the utilisation of vernacular languages as the primary mode of instruction in Indian primary schools. It heightened the discussion on the medium of instruction in Assam. The debate concluded after Assamese was chosen as the language of instruction for schools in Assam. Nevertheless, making this decision was challenging due to the limited availability of Assamese textbooks and educated individuals. The entire debate revolved around determining the specific vernacular of Assam or which vernaculars, among those spoken in the province, would most effectively serve as a common language. The first Assamese textbook, titled '*Axomiya Lorar Mitra*', was published in 1855 by Anandaram Dhekial Phukon. Nevertheless, despite the availability of prizes for publishing textbooks, a mere fourteen (14) Assamese textbooks were published during the period of 1880-81.<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, the Assamese medium students experienced significant inconvenience. Despite the substitution of Bengali with Assamese in 1874, Bengali remained a subject in schools due to the unavailability of adequate learning resources in Assamese.

Following the implementation of Assamese in schools in 1874, there was a renewed fervour for the creation of educational materials, as evidenced by the writings of numerous authors in the Assamese language and literature. The Missionaries made a noteworthy contribution to the advancement of the Assamese language by publishing grammars and dictionaries. The inaugural Assamese grammar in the English language was authored by Robinson, entitled '*A Grammar of Assamese Languages*', in 1839. Subsequently, Nathan Brown's publication titled

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<sup>67</sup> N. Saikia, "Background of Modern Assamese Literature" (1988).

'Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Languages' was released. In 1859, Hemchadra Baruah authored "*Axomiya Bhaxar Byakoron*," which is a comprehensive grammar book on the Assamese language. During this era, both Christian and non-Christian writers made significant efforts to promote and enhance the Assamese language and culture. Nathan Brown made a significant and influential contribution to the Assamese language through his editing of *Arunodoi*. The *Arunodoi* had indeed laid the foundation for Assamese print nationalism.

In August 1853, one of the most influential writers writing for the cause of the Assamese language Gunabhiram Baruah(1837-1894) introduced the concept of 'mother tongue' and argued that it is the language which none speaks from birth and he emphasised the need for learning Assamese for the first time.<sup>68</sup> It was a crucial awakening call for the people of Assam to adopt their mother tongue Assamese in the face of rising Bengali dominance.

In 1836, Oliver T. Cutter and Nathan Brown, Baptist missionaries, introduced the printing machine to Assam for the first time. The Baptist Missionaries also introduced the practice of disseminating Christianity by establishing a printing press in Sivasagar. The missionaries exerted significant effort to comprehend and acquire fluency in the local language spoken in the vicinity of Sivasagar. The persistent endeavours of Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson had a profound impact on the choice of the Sivasagar dialect as the standardised form of contemporary Assamese. A multitude of individuals, including Moffat Mills, Brown, Bronson, and Cornel Hunton, advocated fervently for the Assamese language. The advent of the printing press facilitated the dissemination of Assamese literature through book publishing. The publication of *Arunodoi* ushered in a new era and played a pivotal role in revitalising the emotions of the Assamese people. Simultaneously, the publication of dictionaries played a crucial role in the process of language standardisation. The process was further expedited by the publication of *Hemkosh*, a dictionary compiled by Hemchandra Barua in 1900, and Miles Bronson's edited *Axomiya Aru Ingraji Abhidhan*, an Anglo-Assamese dictionary published in 1867. According to certain academics, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan initiated the process of compiling a dictionary. Nevertheless, the release of Banikanta Kakati's influential publication "Assamese: Its Formation and Development" in 1941 played a crucial role in solidifying the independence of the Assamese language.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Gunabhiram Baruah expresses his concern regarding this issue in the pages of *Axomiya Lorar Mitra*

<sup>69</sup> Kalita, D. *Assam Sahitya Sabha and Bhaxa Niti*. 2016.

## 2.4 Standardization of Assamese language: choice of *Sibasagariya* dialect as the standard variety

During this period, the Sivasagar dialect spoken in Eastern Assam was chosen by Banikanta Kakati for standardisation. The introduction of printing technology had a significant impact on the standardisation of the Assamese language, contributing to the formation of a standardised Assamese identity. The standard language functions as a potent cohesive element for a nation, representing its distinct identity. The development of a standard language is closely linked to the development of a nation because of its symbolic role.

However, the process of accepting this standard variety has encountered significant challenges and has not progressed seamlessly. Contrary to popular belief, the standardisation of the Assamese language was not a seamless process and faced internal resistance to the standardisation of the Sivasagar dialect. The standardisation of Assamese, based on speeches from upper Assam, elicited a response from educated individuals and this contestation attempted to create a division within the Assamese community.

During the nineteenth century, the language commonly spoken in the upper and middle regions of Assam gained recognition as the preferred language for printed materials. However, the opposition emerged from the lower Assam region. In 1873, various individuals from lower Assam wrote letters to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in opposition to the standardisation of the *Sibasagariya* dialect.<sup>70</sup>

The memorandum was signed by 1226 individuals who expressed their opposition to the standardisation of the Upper Assam variety.<sup>71</sup> By the late 19th century, a group of individuals in lower Assam developed an awareness of the historical significance and autonomy of the Kamrupi language, which was emphasised by specific writers. Shyamlal Barua, Amrit Bhushan Adhikari, and Kaliram Medhi are among the individuals linked to this group. They were also aware of the fundamental morphological distinction present in the standard Sivasagar dialect. The magazine *Asam Bandhab*, published from Tezpur, emphasised the esteemed and ancient tradition of the Kamrupi language. Kaliram Medhi employed the lexicon of lower Assam in numerous essays published in the pages of *Asam Bandhab*.

The Ujoni vs Namoni (Upper Assam vs Lower Assam) debate gradually subsided due to the assertive claim by Bengalis that Assamese is a dialect of Bengali. However, following the

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<sup>70</sup> Barpujari, H. K. *Axom Naba Jagoron: Ona Axomiyar Bhumika*.

<sup>71</sup> Neog, Maheswar. *Introduction to Banikanto Rachanawali*.

release of the groundbreaking book *Assamese: Its Formation and Development* (1941), the internal contradiction was resolved. The persistent contributions of Banikanta Kakoti, Chandranath Sarmah, Maheswar Neog, and others were also beneficial in this regard. Banikanta Kakoti, the author of *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*, and Laxminath Bezbaruah, a prominent advocate for the Assamese language, played a crucial role in resolving the dialectal differences between upper Assam and Lower Assam. Due to Kakoti's origin in lower Assam and Laxminath's origin in upper Assam, their collaborative endeavour proved beneficial in various ways. Kakoti asserted that a thorough understanding of the Assamese language requires familiarity with the writings of Laxminath in Assamese. The periodicals *Banhi* and *Assam Bandhob* played a role in accentuating the distinctions between upper Assam and lower Assam. Subsequently, Chandranath Sarmah and Ambikagiri Raychaudhury decided to edit *Chetona*, an additional publication catering to readers from both regions. To a significant degree, the dispute regarding regional diversity was resolved in this manner. The absence of literary output in the lower Assam language also signifies a lack of progress in the development of the dialect itself. Banikanta Kakoti's expertise in modern linguistics and his profound knowledge of Sanskrit endowed him with the ability to definitively opine on the prescribed structure of the Assamese language and its various regional variations. This necessitates a discussion on the dialectical divergence in Assam and the corresponding cultural marginalisation and dominance. The dimension in question has been both disregarded and actively employed in discussions surrounding Assamese identity.

## **2.5 The impact of colonial geo politics on language**

Before British colonisation, the regions of Assam were under the rule of the Burmese or Maan dynasties. The era known as '*Maanor din*' (Days of Maan) refers to a dark period in the history of Assam, characterised by a savage and merciless reign. The acts of sexual assault and atrocities committed by Burmese soldiers became the dark chapters in the history of Assam. Nevertheless, the British ultimately consented to confront the Burmese in March 1824, which is referred to as the inaugural Anglo-Burmese war in Indian history. According to Sanjib Baruah's argument, the British felt the necessity to establish their governing centre in Hindustan as a response to the aggressive actions of the Burmese. Following a period of two years, the Burmese people were successfully domesticated, resulting in the signing of the Yandabo Treaty of 1826. Nevertheless, the Assamese neglected to recognise that they had fallen into the snare of yet another conqueror. Manirual Hussain contends that the Assamese people became aware of their subjugated status only after it was too late for them to mount any substantial opposition

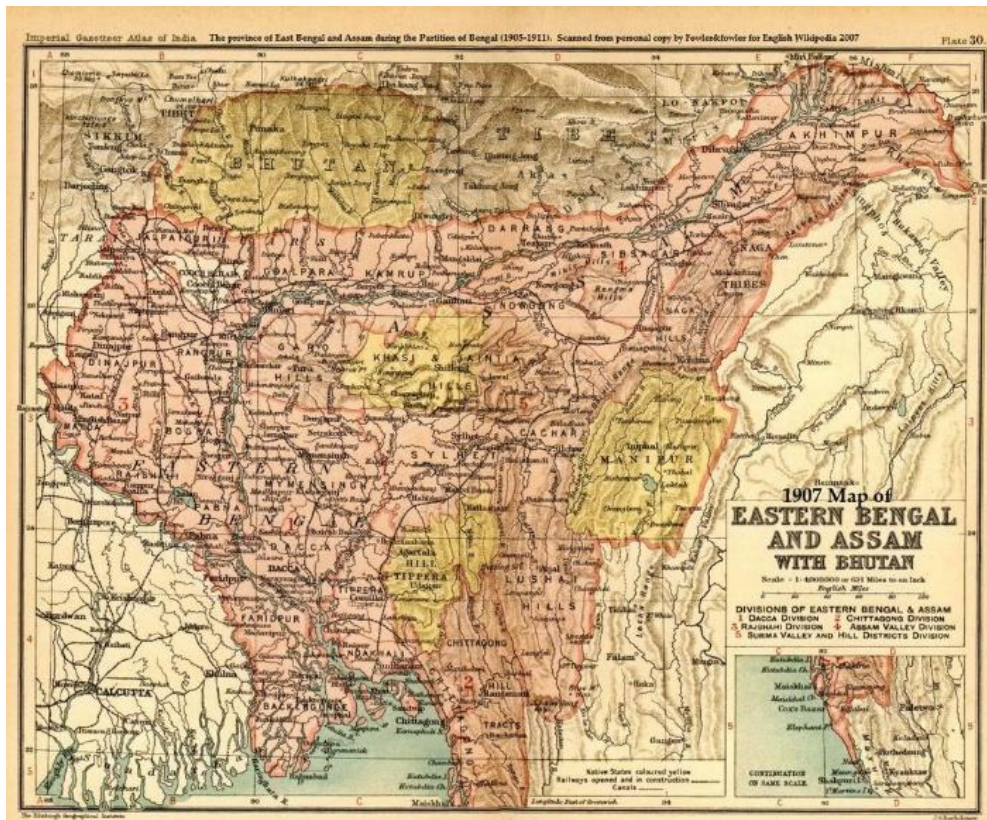
against British colonialism. According to Amalendu Guha, the British Raj aimed to convert Assam into a tea-producing region for British settlers and to modify local traditional institutions to align with the colonial system of exploitation.<sup>72</sup>

The territorial modifications and realignments had a significant impact on the socio-economic and demographic aspects of the population of Assam. The British frequently modified the administrative map of Assam to suit their convenience. Following the British annexation of Assam, there was a significant alteration in the geographical layout of the region. Assam was initially annexed to the Bengal Province for a period of approximately six years (1826-1832) and subsequently for an additional thirty-seven years. Under British occupation, Assam underwent three significant geographical transformations. In 1874, it was separated from the Bengal province, while the Bengali-dominated Sylhet district was incorporated into Assam. Additionally, Shillong became the new capital under the chief commissioner. This event exacerbated the apprehension among Assamese individuals regarding the potential erosion of their cultural distinctiveness in their native region and set in motion a dynamic of imbalanced power relations between the Assamese and Bengali communities. The second alteration in the geographical landscape occurred with the division of Bengal and the establishment of a novel province comprising Assam and East Bengal in 1905. On this occasion, the British deliberately divided the Bengal province based on religious affiliation, resulting in Assam becoming a part of East Bengal, with Dhaka, which was predominantly Bengali region, as its capital. However, after a period of six years, Bengal was once again brought together and the Sylhet division of east Bengal remained connected to Assam under the governance of a chief commissioner. However, Sylhet remained a part of Assam until independence, resulting in a conflict for dominance between the Assamese and Bengali-speaking communities.

Following the accession, the British initiated the sponsorship of immigration from East Bengal to the Brahmaputra valley, thereby influencing the demographic picture of the province. Assam was traditionally categorised into three divisions: the Assam Valley, the Hills, and the Surma Valley. The British allocated extensive tracts of land to European tea growers in the 'Wasteland', which was subsequently transferred to Muslim Bengali farmers from eastern Bengal for their resettlement. Following the Bengal Partition, this policy was strongly promoted, resulting in a substantial increase in immigration to the Assam valley. This issue became a subject of intense political dispute in the subsequent stage.

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<sup>72</sup> Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*.



Map: A 1907 map of Eastern Bengal and Assam

The general public was increasingly concerned that Assam would soon become a homeland for the Muslims of India due to this development. Nevertheless, the All-India Muslim League played a crucial role in this matter. Their objective was to enhance the process of immigrant settlement. The Assam Provincial Congress and the Asom Sangrakshini Sabha (Assam Preservation Association) sought to impose ideological and political limitations on immigration. The integration of the immigrants into the Assamese cultural norms and practices was a significant policy intervention in this context. The Assamese legislative council, established in 1937, formed a line system committee that proposed the establishment of Assamese schools to facilitate the education of immigrants in the Assamese language. The implementation of this policy has resulted in the majority of Bengali immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley currently speaking Assamese.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Report of the Line System Committee (1938)." Assam Government, Shillong, February 1938. Assam Secretariat Record and Confidential File No. 20/44, Line System of Assam, Assam Sect (Pol).

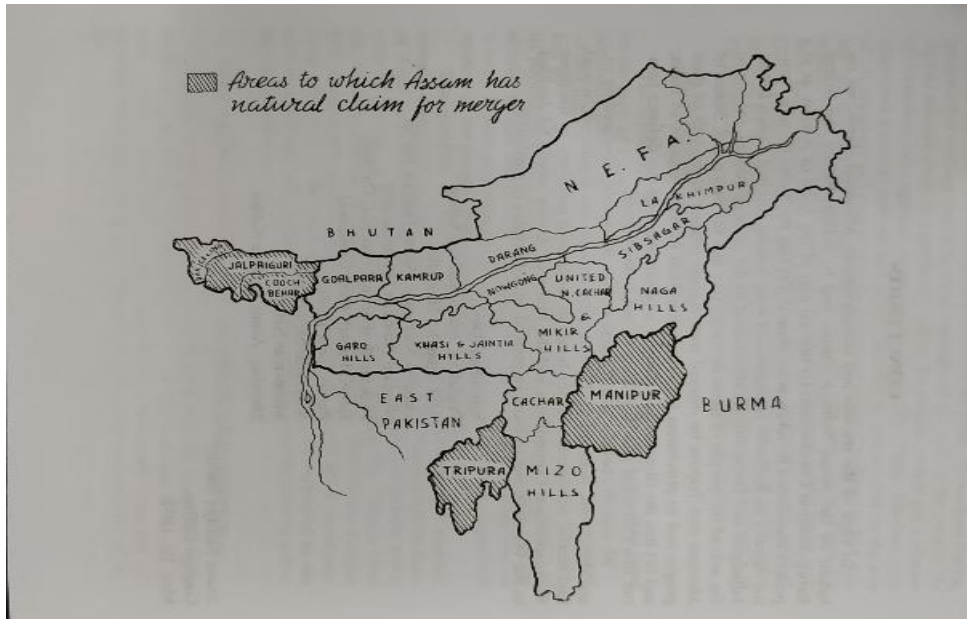


Image : Map of Assam Province showing areas which Assam has natural claim for merger as addressed by Assam Sahitya Sabha (Published in *Assam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*.1955)

## 2.6 Assam, Idea of a linguistically homogenous province and Cabinet Mission Plan

In India, during the first half of the twentieth century, there was a renewed impetus towards regional linguistic politics. Montague and Chelmsford, the co-authors of the report on Indian constitutional reform, concluded that the establishment of linguistic or racial units of government would be advantageous for the administration. Furthermore, during its 1917 Calcutta session, the congress introduced the concept of linguistic provinces for its organisational purposes. The formation of the provincial congress committee of Assam was the result. Nevertheless, the Surma Valley continued to be a constituent of the Bengal Congress. This development has sparked a fresh angle in the discussion regarding the transfer of Sylhet and has invigorated the linguistic nationalists in both the Surma and Assam Valley regions.

The establishment of the congress in Assam in 1921, along with the growing influence of Mahatma Gandhi's national freedom movement, sparked a sense of Indian Nationalism in the state. This, in turn, influenced the development of Assamese linguistic sub-nationalism and identity. The actions of numerous politicians have also influenced the development of Assamese linguistic nationalism. Especially following the implementation of the Government of India's self-rule proclamation in 1935, politicians began to rally the masses around these issues, which played a significant role in fostering awareness among the general population. The Assamese community faced an additional source of concern when the Muslim League

began to actively organise and bring in Bengali Muslim migrants from East Bengal starting in the mid-1930s, to incorporate the Assam province into a Muslim homeland. During the 1930s, in the Assam assembly, a politician named Basanta Kumar Das proposed a resolution to change the name of the Assam province. This proposal was motivated by the fact that the province had a significant number of Bengalis, primarily due to the Bengali-majority Sylhet district.

The Assamese nationalists tried to establish a linguistically homogeneous province, where Sylhet was seen as an obstacle. In 1926, the Assam legislative council adopted a resolution supporting the separation of Sylhet from Assam. The situation became intricate due to the request for secession from Assam in Cachar and Goalpara, which are two other districts with a significant Bengali population. Nevertheless, the Assamese intellectuals and the members of the Legislative Council from the Assam Valley expressed their opposition to the division of Cachar, aligning themselves with the government's stance. In addition to Cachar, they also advocated for the inclusion of Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, and Rangpur into Assam. They asserted their historical and cultural ties to the ancient Kamrupa region.<sup>74</sup>

The introduction of the Cabinet Mission Plan further propelled the momentum for language-centric identity. The Cabinet Mission, which conducted a visit to India in 1946 to address the issue of power transfer, presented a proposition for a three-tier federal government. This proposed government would have authority over only three specific areas: defence, foreign affairs, and communications, all of which would be centralised. The remaining subjects were to be allocated among the provinces. Based on this arrangement, the provinces were to be categorised into three Sections - A, B, and C, and the establishment of a temporary national Government was suggested. The proposed federal structure of the Cabinet Mission aimed to prevent the partition of the country. However, it placed the province of Assam in a vulnerable position by grouping it with Bengal in Group C. Under this arrangement, if Assam was combined with Bengal, the number of Muslim-dominated seats in Bengal would increase from thirty-three to thirty-six, while the number of general seats in Bengal would increase from twenty-seven to thirty-four by including the seven general seats of Assam. Each province was responsible for autonomously determining matters about their respective groups. A province can separate from a section, but this can only occur once the initial election under the newly established constitution has taken place. The provincial autonomy of Assam and the identity of the Assamese linguistic community were severely threatened in this arrangement. The

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<sup>74</sup> The meeting of Gauripur branch of *Assam Association* in 1904 proposed this.

people of Assam were overcome with fear, leading to widespread protests and demonstrations throughout the state. In an extraordinary action, the Assam Legislative Assembly passed a resolution opposing participation in the section and announced that Assam's representatives would draft the provincial constitution. However, the Congress' central leadership supported the Cabinet Mission to prevent the partition and was not inclined to heed the Assam Congress. However, the Congress of Assam, under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi declined to participate in it, recognising that the provinces would naturally align with their respective sections. This situation escalated into a source of conflict between the congress leaders in Assam and their party leadership, who endorsed the idea of forming a coalition with the Muslim league.<sup>75</sup>



Map: Assam Province of 1936(source Wikipedia)

The primary objective of the Cabinet Mission was to negotiate a consensus with Indian leaders regarding the fundamental principles and procedural guidelines for drafting a new constitution for an autonomous India. Additionally, it was anticipated that the Viceroy would initiate discussions with two prominent political parties, namely Congress and the Muslim League, at the same time. A new provisional government would be established to govern during the process of drafting the constitution, except for British members, excluding the Viceroy. Given that the stated goals of Congress and the League were completely contradictory, the Mission faced a challenging task of reconciling them. Unable to reach a consensus on an approved plan, the Mission expressed its support for a three-tier federal government. This government would have authority over three specific areas - defence, foreign affairs, and communications - while all remaining powers would be delegated to the existing provinces, which would be organised

<sup>75</sup> Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi, 1977.

into three zones. This provision was implemented to safeguard the benefits of a separate Pakistan for Muslims while avoiding the complications of a divided India.<sup>76</sup>

The people of Assam strongly opposed the Cabinet Mission's proposal to include Assam in Bengal to establish a predominantly Muslim region in eastern India, similar to the one planned for western India. The grouping plan in Assam faced widespread opposition, with protests emerging from various sources. The declaration of the British Cabinet proposal was perceived as insufficient in meeting India's complete demands. Furthermore, it was believed that the inclusion of Assam in group C would have detrimental effects on its cultural, linguistic, and economic aspects. Assam should be granted the autonomy to determine and establish its constitution. Gopinath Bordoloi, the Chief Minister of Assam at the time, vehemently opposed the Cabinet Mission Plan.<sup>77</sup> Bordoloi advocated for provincial autonomy based on linguistic and cultural factors, in response to the long-standing demands of the people of Assam. He strongly asserted that the unique identity of Assam must be preserved in the forthcoming constitution. G.N. Bordoloi, representing the Assam members of the constituent Assembly, presented a memorandum to the Congress working committee expressing opposition to the amalgamation of Assam with Bengal. Both the Congress and the League had previously agreed to the Cabinet Mission Plan and temporarily supported it.<sup>78</sup> However, Assam's resolute resistance to being grouped with Bengal presented an opening for the League to retract its previous agreement. Consequently, the Cabinet mission's grouping plan ultimately failed. The Congress party ministry rejected the Cabinet Mission proposal to establish a predominantly Muslim zone in eastern India, which would have encompassed Assam. Nevertheless, before the division, it was universally acknowledged by nearly all political factions that Assam should remain a part of India. However, a referendum was planned for the Sylhet districts to ascertain the public's decision on whether it would remain within Assam or choose to join the eastern portion of the envisioned Pakistan.

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<sup>76</sup> Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi, 1977.

<sup>77</sup> A Note on Assam's Stand vis-à-vis British Government: Statement of 6 December, 1946." Gauhati, New Press, Publicity Department of the APCC, G.N. Bardoloi Papers, List No. 170, File No.5, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi, pg. 11, 14, and 15.

<sup>78</sup> Guha, Amalendu. *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi, 1977.

## 2.7 Language issue and the significance of Sylhet Referendum of 1947

The Mountbatten Plan wanted the people of Sylhet the chance to determine their destiny via a referendum. Subsequently, the attention of political engagement was redirected towards the Sylhet referendum. The vote essentially concerned the reorganisation of India based on communal and linguistic grounds, specifically regarding the province of Assam. The Assamese public opinion remained understandably indifferent but unwavering in its previous stance. It was a reasonable expectation that the Muslims residing in the district would cast their votes in favour of Pakistan. The Hindu community residing in the Brahmaputra Valley advocated for the detachment of Sylhet from Assam, whereas the Hindu community residing in the Surma Valley strongly insisted on keeping this district as part of Assam.

The people in the Brahmaputra Valley warmly received the district of Sylhet from Assam. The student community of Assam shared similar perspectives. The Assam Student's Congress branch in Goalpara convened a meeting on July 30, 1947, to advocate for the detachment of Sylhet from Assam. In this meeting, a resolution was passed stating that the British had annexed Sylhet, a district with distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics, to Assam to further their imperialistic agenda. As a consequence of this alliance, there has been a conflict of competing interests impeding the advancement of the entire province. India, as a whole, along with Assam, has been advocating for the delineation of provincial boundaries based on cultural considerations.

The meeting thus called for the division of Sylhet from Assam, without any detrimental impact on the reputation of Indian nationalism, as apprehended by certain national leaders who opposed the separation of Sylhet from Assam. The Sylhet referendum took place in July 1947. The issue at hand pertained to the reorganisation of India based on communal lines and the province of Assam based on linguistic factors. Of the valid votes cast in the referendum, over 50% were in support of Sylhet being included in Pakistan, while the remaining votes favoured an undivided Assam as part of India. The verdict was inherently logical as it accurately mirrored the demographic makeup of the district population. The move was necessary to create a province with a more linguistically uniform population. Upon the announcement of the referendum results, a restrained feeling of relief pervaded the Assam valley, as the majority of the votes cast expressed support for Pakistan.

Ambikagiri Rai Chaudhary, Secretary of *Axom Jatiya Mahasabha*, made the following observation about this matter:

*While there may have been some rationale for keeping Sylhet intact within Assam, there is indeed a valid reason for the leaders of Cachar and Sylhet to strive for the retention of a few Hindu-majority areas of the district within Assam. It is not logical to attempt to keep the Cachar plains, specifically the Hailakandi sub-division in Assam.*<sup>79</sup>

Roychoudhary was dissatisfied with the transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan alone. He wanted Cachar to also do the same. Laksmidhar Barua advocated for the economic well-being of Assam and the protection of the Assamese people's genuine concerns. He proposed that the district of Sylhet, which had been consistently draining Assam's revenue, should be immediately detached from the province.

The Assamese-Bengali language conflict was connected to the re-union of the Bengali areas of the Assamese province. The Bengalis in Assam can be classified into two distinct groups:

- a) The Bengali immigrants in the Assam Valley districts, and
- b) Those in the former Bengal districts of Goalpara, Sylhet, and Cachar.

The problem and the attitude of the two groups or categories exhibited conspicuous dissimilarities. The initial colonisers of the Assam Valley arrived as a result of British expansionism and played an indirect role in facilitating the colonisation endeavour. In contrast, the revenue farmers and professionals in the Brahmaputra Valley did not experience the same level of financial gain as the British did during the Indian struggle for independence, unlike their counterparts in Bengal or the Bengali districts of Assam. The Bengalis in the Assam Valley were subject to the authority of the Rai Sahebs and Rai Bahadurs. Conversely, Goalpara, Sylhet, and Cachar were territories bestowed upon Assam by the British. The inhabitants of that region were unable to accept or adapt to the new system, and throughout the colonial era, there was a persistent and recurring agitation for a return to the previous arrangement. The Assamese-Bengali relations were further deteriorated by a sense of apathy towards Assam, and the educated middle class in the Assam Valley was unable to distinguish between the two Bengali groups.

It is important to note that when the Indian National Congress was restructured with its provincial divisions, the Surma Valley became a part of the Bengal Provincial Congress. Several leaders from the Surma Valley played a significant role in the Bengal Congress. The Indian National Congress adhered to the principle of linguistic provinces, and neither the

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<sup>79</sup> Chaube, S.K. *Hill Politics in North East India*. (New Delhi, 1973).

Assamese nor the Bengali intellectuals in the province opposed this policy, which hindered the two valleys from developing closer ties and improving inter-valley and inter-community relationships.

It is noteworthy that Sylheti Hindus, who had consistently communicated their preference to be part of Bengal Province to the colonial rulers through memorandums, suddenly expressed their inclination to join Assam during the partition, out of fear of being separated from India. Although 60 per cent of the population in Sylhet identified as Muslim, the majority of Hindus were dominant in the Assam Valley. The Bengali Hindus expressed a sudden desire for a Hindu alliance, setting aside their longstanding rivalry. During the referendum in Sylhet, the Chittagong Hill districts were included in the Sylhet division, but the residents of this area did not participate in the referendum. Ultimately, the votes in favour of Pakistan emerged as the majority in the outcome of the Referendum. Subsequently, after considering the results of the referendum, the boundary commission incorporated three and a half thanas of Sylhet district, predominantly inhabited by Bengali Muslims, into Assam. After losing their homeland to East Pakistan, many Sylheti Hindus, influenced by biased writings, have persistently held onto the belief that it was an "Assamese conspiracy" aimed at eliminating Sylhet. Nevertheless, Bordoloi personally requested Mountbatten to establish an independent boundary commission to determine the demarcation between Assam and East Pakistan. His rationale was that the commission members may lack sufficient knowledge of the region, potentially resulting in the inadvertent inclusion of certain Bengali Hindu majority areas within Pakistan. The ineffective leadership of Congress in Sylhet and the absence of active participation by congressmen from the rest of Bengal in opposing the referendum or campaigning against joining East Pakistan had a significant impact on the outcome of the referendum. Following independence, when Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Assamese leaders became more outspoken about the status of their language and culture. This led to a growing demand for Assamese to be declared as the official language of Assam.

Following the referendum, a significant number of Bengali Hindus, who had been displaced and suffered from health issues, migrated to different parts of Assam, including the former capital, Shillong. As a result of Sylhet being separated, the Assamese community once again became the majority. Nevertheless, the Bordoloi government's failure to include all Bengali Hindu officers from Sylhet in the newly established state government became a contentious matter. On June 22, 1950, Bordoloi informed Sardar Patel that his government had already undertaken the task of resettling one hundred thousand new refugees, in addition to the one

hundred twenty-five thousand who arrived a year and a half ago, as well as the ten thousand from the previous group who had already been allocated land. Nevertheless, the central government persistently exerted pressure on Bordoloi to allocate land to the refugees. It is noteworthy that Bordoloi is also facing pressure from organisations such as Assam Jatiya Mahasabha to prevent the influx of Bengali Hindu refugees into the state. Despite Bordoloi's opposition, the influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan persisted until the 1960s. Although a few individuals chose to go back after the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971, the majority opted to remain in Assam. Subsequently, there was an increase in the number of Bengali-speaking Muslims in the state who identified themselves as Bengali speakers rather than Assamese speakers in the latest census.

The geographical location of Sylhet posed a significant challenge for the Assamese leadership and intellectuals during that time until it became a part of Pakistan through a referendum in 1947. The dominant influence of Bengalis in government employment in Assam, coupled with the privileged social standing of Assamese people, served as a compelling rationale for this situation. The amalgamation of Assam with the eastern districts of Bengal was a subject of contention among many Assamese during that time. For instance, Jagannath Baruah believed that Assam proper would receive only a minor portion of the chief commissioner's focus, and the people would have to face unfair competition from highly educated, ambitious, and strategically located districts, for which they are not adequately prepared. The Assam association expressed concern that the proposed scheme would permanently eliminate the historic name of Assam and negatively impact its language.<sup>80</sup> *Axom Bonti*, the newspaper, also expressed its opposition to the division of Bengal and the amalgamation of Eastern Bengal districts with Assam.

The Bengali population residing in the Surma Valley expressed their opposition to the partition on multiple grounds. The plan was perceived as a calculated endeavour by the British government to fragment the Bengali community and its intellectual elite. Despite the administrative separation of Cachar and Sylhet from Bengal since 1874, the valley has managed to preserve its cultural connection with Bengal. The residents of the valley feared that the partition of Bengal would sever their ties with their relatives in West Bengal. The merger of Cachar and Sylhet with East Bengal would result in the loss of the privileges that they previously had in Assam. The anti-partition agitation in Surma Valley transformed into a

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<sup>80</sup> Jagannath Baruah, President, Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha. Letter dated February 10, 1904

widespread and well-supported movement. Nevertheless, a significant faction of Muslim leaders was persuaded by Curzon to support the partition operation and the incorporation of Assam into East Bengal. In the years following partition, the matter of language and culture emerged as a pivotal concern in Assam politics. A new era of valley politics emerged in Assam, which managed to partially marginalise the language matter.

The Sylhet separatist movement gained momentum following the establishment of the Sylhet-Bengal Reunion League. Abdul Karim, a member of the Bengal Legislative Council, voiced his belief that the artificial connection between Assam and Sylhet did not succeed in fostering unity between the two communities. Despite the Assam Association's support for the province, Raja Prabhat Chandra, the founder president of the Goalpara Zaminder Association, held a different stance.

Baruah advocated for the consolidation of that district with Bengal for his advantage. The Assamese intellectual elite held divergent opinions and considered Goalpara to be an essential component of Assam. The Assamese-Bengali conflict was associated with the movements advocating for the reunion of Sylhet, Cachar, and Goalpara with Bengal. In July 1924, B.N Chaudhary proposed a resolution to transfer Sylhet to Bengal, a proposition that garnered support from numerous individuals residing in both valleys.

In 1926, a comparable resolution limited to Sylhet was approved by a significant majority. Meanwhile, the leadership in the Surma Valley became divided regarding the matter of attaching Cachar to Sylhet. The resolution proposing the incorporation of both Sylhet and Cachar into Bengal was rejected during the political conference in the Surma valley on July 1, 1926. The conference approved the transfer of Sylhet alone, but this plan was not implemented due to the divisive nature of communal politics. Following 1926, there was a movement opposing the removal of Sylhet from Assam. The Sylhet Muslim Student Association voiced their apprehension while endorsing the preservation of Sylhet within the jurisdiction of Assam. Similarly, the former Prime Minister Saddulla also expressed opposition to any suggestions regarding the transfer of Sylhet. He advocated for the preservation of Assam as a unified entity, citing the broader political interests of Muslims in India. The issue of transferring Sylhet was once again raised in the council in September 1928. Haji Muhammad Bakht Mazumder and Khan Bahadur proposed a resolution stating that the government of Assam should officially communicate to the appropriate authorities that the residents of Sylhet and Cachar districts wish for these districts to remain part of Assam and have no intention of transferring them to

Bengal. The Assamese intellectual elite strongly opposed the proposal. *The Assam Samrakshini Sabha*, *The Sarbajanik Sabha*, and *The Assam Association* advocated for the partition of Sylhet. *The Semrakshini Sabha* brought up this matter to Jawaharlal Nehru during his visit to Assam in 1937. The issue of immigration to Assam was also presented to him. The *Axomiya Deka Dal* submitted a memorandum to Nehru, urging for the separation of Sylhet. Nehru expressed his support for the separation of Sylhet from Assam, stating that it would be beneficial from an economic perspective. He argued that Sylhet, being a region with a settled population, aligns better with the economy of Bengal compared to Assam, which predominantly consists of peasant-owned land. The Sylhet representatives in the Assembly should consider taking the initiative in this matter. The Hindu Bengalis residing in Surma Valley expressed a preference for reuniting with Bengal based on cultural and linguistic factors. Similarly, the Hindu Assamese population supported the separation of Sylhet to diminish the presence of Bengali elements within the Assamese population. Nevertheless, the Muslims residing in both valleys primarily sought communal unity, which eventually evolved into the aspiration to incorporate the entire province of Assam into Pakistan. During this period, a Muslim League government assumed control in 1937 and remained in power, except for a one-year interruption, until the conclusion of the Second World War. During this period, there was a significant increase in the number of Bengali Muslim migrants moving into the state. This caused concerns among the Assamese and Bengali Hindus, who feared that the entire province might be included in the planned Muslim state of Pakistan.

The Hindu-Muslim animosity further intensified due to the ongoing influx of immigrants. The significant influx of immigrants resulted in a shift in the demographic composition, favouring the Muslim population. Their proportion increased significantly from 9 per cent in 1921 to 19 per cent in 1931 and further rose to 23 per cent in 1941. These facts were enough to not only concern many local Hindus but also some Congress leaders. To address the increasing number of Muslims migrating from East Bengal, Rajendra Prasad, who later became the president of India, supported the idea of allowing Bengali Hindus to immigrate to Assam. The economic issue was transformed into a communal matter, not only by the Muslim League but also by certain Congress leaders. They believed that if immigration persisted at the current rate, the Assamese-speaking population would eventually become a linguistic minority in their territory.

The Government was ill-equipped to handle any form of stringent legislation regarding migration. Nevertheless, they request the convening of a bipartisan conference to deliberate on the matter. In 1928, an all-party committee contended that implementing administrative control

over the migration process was imperative to achieve a planned settlement. The legitimacy of the colonisation policy initiated by the British was derived from an all-party conference and the approval of both Saadulla and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi. Subsequently, the division of Sylhet and its incorporation into East Pakistan through a referendum after Independence granted the Assamese community a majority status. This alleviated concerns of being overwhelmed by a larger national identity and instilled a renewed sense of assurance in the Assamese-speaking middle class.

## **2.8 Census, language, and the fear of marginalisation**

Censuses played a vital role in fostering nationalistic sentiments by providing the emerging intelligentsia with a detailed account of the population. Colonisers attempted to categorise the previously ambiguous world. The processes of enumeration facilitated the formation of rigid categories from numerous ambiguous identities. The influence of the Census on the minds of individuals as a means of shaping identity is a fascinating aspect. In the pre-colonial era, although there were variations among people in terms of language, culture, religion, and caste, these differences were not that rigid and these could not impact psychological barriers.<sup>81</sup> But during the colonial time after the introduction of census, the census categories and statistics were no longer viewed as abstract concepts but had already become a matter of concern and emotion for the section. Laxminath Bezbaruah for example published his reaction to each decennial census through journals since the times of the 1891 census.

The imperial government in Assam initiated its inaugural census operation in 1872.<sup>82</sup> This report indicates that the population of Assamese is less than two million individuals who speak a language closely resembling Bengali but possess a significant blend of Indo-Chinese ancestry. Given the population of 37 million Bengali and 4 million Oriya, the total number was relatively small. The 1881 census report purported to provide a comprehensive depiction of the region's linguistic and religious landscape. It requires the use of a specific language, excluding any dialects. The census recorded a total of 1,361,759 individuals who speak the Assamese language. During the colonial period, the language issue took precedence in the census operation. The 1891 census introduced a new category called 'parent language', which

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<sup>81</sup> A. Sarangi, "Enumeration and the Linguistic Identity Formation in Colonial North India," *Studies in History* 25, no. 2 (2009): 197–227

<sup>82</sup> C. S. Mullan, *Census of India, 1931, Volume III, Assam, Part I - Report* (Printed by the Superintendent, Assam Government Press, and published by the Government of India, 1932)

shifted the focus from geographical territories and brought language into the personal domain. This change in methodology provided a fresh perspective on language.<sup>83</sup>

The selection of language in Assam's political landscape is a significant determinant. The modification of geographical boundaries and the demographic transformation have had a significant impact on the development of the Assamese identity. The British allowed immigrants from various regions to settle in Assam in order to serve their own colonial objectives. One particular interest they had was the establishment of a tea industry, for which they actively promoted extensive immigration. Each year, a substantial number of labourers are recruited from other provinces to work on the tea plantation in Assam. These individuals do not go back to their home provinces and instead become a significant portion of Assam's population.

This census report of 1891 also aimed to highlight the pre-existing disparities among different geographical regions of Assam. Sir Edward Gait, the superintendent of census operation, explicitly stated that Sylhet is geographically, linguistically, and ethnographically more closely related to the neighbouring districts of eastern Bengal than to any part of Assam.<sup>84</sup> This statement has had a significant impact on the language-based identity of both the Bengali and Assamese-speaking populations.

The gravity of the situation associated with language speakers can be comprehended through the census too. Based on the 1911 census, Bengali speakers accounted for 45.8% of the total population, which was more than twice the number of Assamese speakers. In 1931, the proportion of individuals who spoke Bengali decreased to 26.8% due to the deliberate choice made by Bengali Muslim immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley to identify themselves as speakers of the Assamese language. The Assamese-speaking population increased from 22% in 1911 to 32% of the total population in 1931.<sup>85</sup> This created tension among the population speaking Assamese as the mother tongue in Assam.

Due to the amalgamation of Assam with Sylhet and the migration policy of the imperial government in the late 19th century, the Assamese-speaking community became a minority compared to the Bengali speakers in the province. The 1891 census revealed a noticeable influx of immigrants from various regions of India, as evident from the language table entries. In

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<sup>83</sup> E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1891, Volume 1, Assam Shillong* (Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892)

<sup>84</sup> E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1891, Volume 1, Assam Shillong* (Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892)

<sup>85</sup> India. *Census of India, 1931. Report, Part -I, Vol-I and India. Census of India, 1911. Report, Part -I, Vol-I*(1933)

addition to the tribal languages spoken by the native population, the categories of Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Marwari, Gujarati, Odia, and others were included.<sup>86</sup>

According to the 1901 census, 22 per cent of the entire population was identified as Assamese speakers, while 48 per cent were Bengali speakers. The census also revealed a decline of 4.5 per cent in the Assamese-speaking population over the course of the decade. Curiously, 21 per cent of the population in Lakhimpur, 19 per cent in Darrang, and 19 per cent in Sivasagar, which are three major districts in the Brahmaputra Valley, have reverted to speaking Bengali. The escalating influx of immigrants in the Brahmaputra Valley has caused significant concern among the indigenous population.

Based on the 1921 census, approximately 1.3 million individuals classified as 'foreigners' resided in the province due to their involvement in the tea industry. This accounted for one-sixth of the province's total population at that time. In addition to the thriving tea industry at that time, the deliberate promotion of immigration of peasants from densely populated districts in Bengal as part of a colonisation policy in supposedly land-rich Assam significantly altered the demographic set up of the state.

The 1931 census revealed a significant rise in the number of Bengali speakers in the Nagaon and Kamrup districts. The population in Nagaon was recorded as 121,000, while in Kamrup it was 120,000. The superintendent of the Census operation attributed this increase solely to the immigration of East Bengal peasants to these districts, as no other plausible explanation was identified.

The census reports revealed a gradual assimilation of certain indigenous tribes such as *Rabha*, *Kachari*, and *Miri*, who have transitioned from their native languages to speaking Assamese. The Assamese intellectual elite, predominantly from the upper caste Hindu community, deliberately sought to preserve their distinctiveness and distance themselves from both non-Aryan indigenous populations and migrant tea garden workers, thereby impeding the gradual growth of the Assamese population. They were focused on the expansion of the Bengali language. Throughout the course of Assamese nationalism, the prevailing theme of the Assamese people's apprehension about becoming a minority community has gained increased significance. Meanwhile, the British Government took on the responsibility of compiling a census report of all Indian languages. As a result, George Abraham Grierson prepared the

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<sup>86</sup> E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1891, Volume 1, Assam Shillong* (Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1892)

Linguistic Survey of India (1903-1928), which granted Assamese its distinct status. The Assamese language has the right to assert its independent existence as the language of a distinct nationality. This occurrence brought immense relief to Assamese nationalists and, in turn, bolstered their assertion of a language-centric identity.

Another crucial aspect in this regard is that, while the majority of Hindu immigrants strongly adhered to their linguistic heritage, the Muslim migrants pursued a distinct approach. They deliberately chose to adopt the Assamese language in the public sphere and identify it as their native language in the 1951 Census and subsequent census operations. The decision made by the Muslim immigrants has contributed to the Assamese language maintaining its majority in the census data. The Assamese-speaking community is also making an effort to include and accommodate the Muslim community who originated from East Bengal. There is a process of integrating the immigrant Muslim community.<sup>87</sup> They are referred to as *Na-Asamiya* or neo-Assamese. The term *Na-Asamiya* has been gradually phased out in favour of using only Asamiya or Assamese. However, some scholars have identified a significant issue with the approach of including a large group of people under the Assamese identity solely based on their declaration of Assamese as their mother tongue in the Census. Udayon Misra has posed an intricate question regarding the issue of the Assamese identity being language-based. This identity includes a significant number of immigrants with diverse cultural backgrounds but fails to include a sizable portion of ethnic communities with similar cultural affinities. The concerns regarding the integration of the immigrant community from East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh into the Assamese identity should not be disregarded.

A new dispute was emerging in Goalpara. In 1918, the Montague Chelmsford report provided certain provisions for the zamindars of Bengal. As a result, many zamindars from Goalpara also requested the inclusion of Goalpara in Bengal. Nevertheless, *Zamindar Nagendra Nath Chaudhury* emerged as a prominent adversary to the Zamindars' initiative. As a result of his significant contribution, he was subsequently offered the presidency of Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1931. At that time, the Saddulah and Bordoloi ministry also acknowledged Goalpara as a bilingual state.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, the inquiry arises as to what facilitated the amalgamation of the Goalpara region into Assam. The answer lies in the concerted endeavour of specific factions within the Bodo, Cooch Rajbonhi, and Bengali intelligentsia. Particularly, the endeavour

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<sup>87</sup>Udayon Misra, "The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey," H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture no. 4 (Shillong: The North East India History Association, 2001).

<sup>88</sup>Barman, Sibanath. "*Axomiya Bhaxar Hritadhikar Praptiritihah.*" Xamprotilk Xomoyiki, July-August 1982.

undertaken by *Kalicharan Brahma* to unite Goalpara with Assam is noteworthy. The individual stated,

*A group of individuals in our districts are advocating for the transfer of the district of Goalpara to Bengal. However, we are firmly against this proposal. Goalpara is an integral and inseparable part of Assam, and historical evidence will demonstrate the significant role it has played since ancient times. The habits and customs of the people in this region bear a closer resemblance to those of the Assamese rather than the Bangalees. As Bodos, we cannot identify ourselves as anything other than Assamese. The transfer of these districts to Bengal will not only harm the interests of our community but also negatively impact the progress of all other communities. This transfer will significantly impede our development in all aspects.*<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, the commendable endeavours undertaken by Brahma to integrate Goalpara with Assam have not received adequate recognition. The decision made by the residents of Goalpara played a pivotal role at this particular moment. It contributed to the preservation of the dominant position of the Assamese language.

The transformation of the linguistic scenario extended beyond Goalpara. Therefore, the inquiry arises as to how the population of individuals who speak the Assamese language experienced growth. One factor could be the potential integration and embrace of diverse communities, while another factor could be the exertion of political pressure. According to Hiren Gohain, the rapid increase in the number of Assamese speakers can be attributed primarily to the strategic political manoeuvres employed by specific factions. This kind of possibility can be attributed to the communal clashes that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the sudden increase in the Assamese-speaking population. It can be asserted that the significant surge in the number of individuals speaking Assamese has its narrative and this would be discussed in the following chapters.

## **On Conclusion**

The chapter contends that the notion of a language-centric modern Assamese identity was constructed during the colonial period and faced numerous internal and external challenges. It recognizes the significance of print media, particularly in the vernacular sphere, as well as the contributions of censuses and intellectuals in shaping a language-based modern Assamese identity during the colonial era. The identification of the standardization process of the

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<sup>89</sup> Kalicharan Brahma, Memorandum submitted to Simon Commission, January 4, 1929 (cited in Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, page 50-53).

Assamese language and its role in the establishment of an Assamese identity centred around language has been recognized. The recognition of various political events during this period and the influence of colonial geopolitics in shaping this identity have also been acknowledged.



### Chapter III

## MAKING OF AN OFFICIAL STATE LANGUAGE: LANGUAGE, HEGEMONY AND ASSAMESE IDENTITY

### 3.1 Introduction

In post independent time, Assam had witnessed two important language movements, one in 1960 for making the state language and the other in 1972, known as the medium of instruction movement in Assam. In context of these two language movements this chapter explores how 'language' issue negotiated with Assamese identity in post-independent Assam. Many important questions like the issue of language hegemony, tribal question, role of public intellectuals and organisations in maintaining a language -based identity will be discussed throughout the chapter. The chapter tries to understand how the official language issue was raised and the act was implemented during this period. It relies on connected historical narratives and debates around the issue of language and nationalism. Rather than narrating the complexities in implementing the official state language act of 1960, it shows how the standard and a hegemonic language played an important role in arousing a sense of emotions in Assam and how other linguistic communities reacted to it. Examining the language movements in post-independent Assam, this chapter also explores how linguistic chauvinism affected the hegemonic dream of the Assamese linguistic elite to expand their influence in the region. The chapter will analyse the factors that became a threat to the idea of '*Bor Axom*' or 'Greater Assam', a dream of a linguistically homogenous province later on.

On October 17, 2021, a government hoarding written in Assamese located near the Silchar railway station was blackened out by members of some Bengali organizations in the Barak Valley of Assam. Those involved wrote *Bangla Likhun* (Write in Bengali) below the blackened signboard and signed an association's name *Bengali Barak Democratic Youth Front* (BDYF) on it.<sup>90</sup> As a counter-reaction to this, an organization in the Brahmaputra valley, *Bir Lachit Sena*, allegedly smeared black ink over a Bengali signboard in Guwahati.<sup>91</sup> This whole incident once again highlighted the language controversy in Assam. It is because throughout the journey of Assamese nationalism, *Ostitwar Xankat* or the 'Fear of being a numerically minority

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<sup>90</sup> "Hoarding in Assamese Language Smeared with Black Ink in Silchar." Deccan Herald, October 18, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> "Bir Lachit Sena Counters Barak Groups: Hoarding in Bengali Language Smeared with Black Ink in Guwahati." Times 8, October 23, 2021.

community' in their own land became a recurrent theme that acquires newer significance from time to time. As discussed in the previous chapter, the fear that 'Bengali language will override Assamese language' was the most recurring thoughts in the minds of Assamese speakers during later part of 19<sup>th</sup> century. We have seen how the colonial geo-politics was influential in maintaining the majority of Assamese speakers in the province specially during the separation of Sylhet and its merger with East Pakistan by a referendum. However, at this crucial juncture, the impact of tribal population in maintaining the majority of Assamese speaking population is a under covered issue in Assam politics. Specially the effort of the leaders of the tribal community of Assam mainly Bhimbor Deuri and Rupnath Brahma is noteworthy. In a meeting with Muslim league leader Jinnah at Mumbai, Deuri-Brahma and their team expressed their concern and said, "Assam is neither Hindu nor Muslim. It is a tribal state. The tribal do not want to join Pakistan."<sup>92</sup>. This stand by the tribal leaders also helped in terminating the grouping proposal. However, the contribution of the tribal leaders has not been acknowledged properly. Some of them even give credit only to Gopinath Bordoloi for saving Assam from the grouping plan without even mentioning the names of these tribal leaders.

### **3.2 'Assam for Assamese': The fear of being a numerical minority and the dream of a *Bor Axom* or Greater Assam:**

The *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903-1928) by George Abraham Grierson report offers an independent status to Assamese in which Grierson wrote. "Assamese is entitled to claim an independent existence as the speech of distinct nationality".<sup>93</sup> With time the language centric Assamese identity takes the central point in the discussion about Assamese nationalism.

In pre-independence time, the Assamese linguistic nationalist came to nourish the dream of a homogeneous linguistic province. During this time, Assamese feared being submerged under another nationality, specifically under Bengali. Bengali dominated Sylhet was considered an obstacle in the dream of a bigger Assam. In 1926, Assam Legislative Council passed a resolution in favour of separating Bengali dominated Sylhet from Assam. The issue got complicated with the demand for separation of Cachar and Goalpara, two other Bengali dominating districts from Assam.

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<sup>92</sup>Devabrata Sharma., *Bhimbor Bhimbor.*( Ekalavya Prakaxan 2019)

<sup>93</sup> Gierson, A. George. *Languages of North-Eastern India.* New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1985.

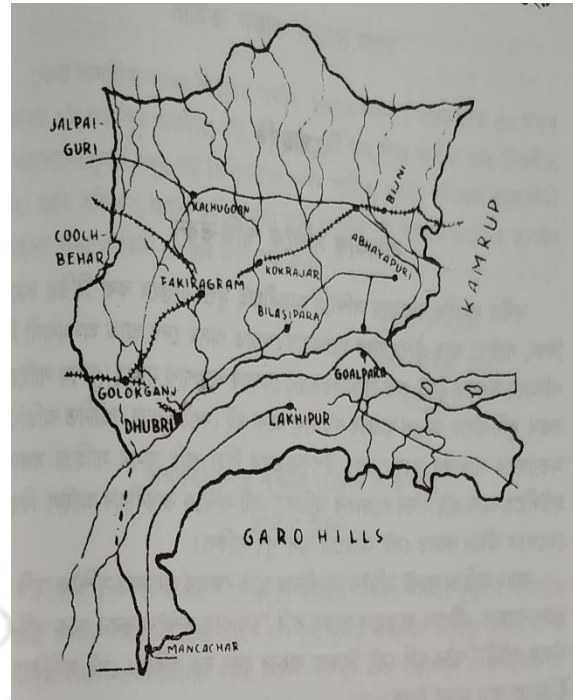


Image : Inclusion of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar was considered as part of the imagination of *Axom* as identified by Assam Sahitya Sabha (Proposals of Assam Sahitya Sabha ,Published in *Assam Sahitya Sabha Patrika* 1955 )

However, most of the Assamese intelligentsia and the Brahmaputra valley members of the Legislative council opposed the separation of Cachar. They demanded the inclusion of Bengali speaking regions Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur with Assam by claiming their historical and cultural relationship with the ancient Assam.<sup>94</sup>

With the demand for the reorganization of states, the notion of '*Axom Axomiar*' or 'Assam for Assamese' was strengthened. It is to be noted that though many among Assamese speaking intelligentsia were against the merger of Sylhet with Assam, they wanted to unite all the states of the northeast. They dreamt of a bigger Assam where they would not have to worry about the majority of Bengali speaking population. However, this idea of '*Bor Axom*' or Greater Assam soon became a threat for the people of another northeastern state. These momentums and changes in the geopolitics of Assam are crucial in understanding the development of Assamese nationalism. However, the following section will first deal with a particular event of Assam history known as the *Official State Language Movement* of Assam, which brought a new perspective to the idea of Assamese nationalism. This movement affected the hegemonic dream

<sup>94</sup>The proposal was made at the meeting of Gauripur branch of *Assam Association* in 1904

of the Assamese linguistic elite to expand its influence in the region. The following section argues that the ‘*Bor Axom*’, or a vision of a linguistically homogenous province, became a distant reality in the hands of a particular section of Assamese nationalists.

### 3.3 Assamese vs Bengali: significance of SRC report, 1955

The most prominent flag-bearer of Assamese linguistic nationalism ‘Assam Sahitya Sabha’, initiated its systematic campaign from the 1950s to recognise Assamese as the Official Language in Assam. During that period, the Bengali elites within Assam also started a new campaign for a new state called *Purbachal* containing Cachar, Tripura, the Lushai Hills, the Naga Hills, Manipur and NEFA. However, the State Reorganization Commission (SRC) report highlighted significant growing development while commenting on this demand. This report very clearly indicated the prevailing Assamese –Bengali rivalry in the province. Though the request of *Purbachal* was rejected outright by State Reorganization Commission, it states,

*‘Since the major part of Sylhet was cut off from India at the time of Partition, the Bengalis in Assam, who used to feel that culturally and even geographically they belonged to Bengal, have found themselves somewhat isolated in what they may now be disposed to regard as an uncongenial environment. It has been represented to us that the activities of the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha and the policies of the local government have not only reconciled the Bengalis in this part of Assam but have had quite the opposite result.’*<sup>95</sup>

The strategy proposed by this report to ease out the differences among the linguistic rivalry is crucial. In 1954, the State Reorganization Commission recommended the merger of Bengali dominated Goalpara district with Assam. Interestingly Assam Sahitya Sabha welcomed this recommendation. The commission suggested a more inclusive policy and recommended that the proposed new state of Assam. It intended to Tripura with all the areas now constituting the existing and proposed that an area and population of about 89,040 square miles and 9.7 million respectively will form the state.<sup>96</sup>

The Pradesh Congress Committee of Bengal submitted a draft to the State Reorganisation Commission where it states that,

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<sup>95</sup>SRC (*Report of the State Reorganization Commission*), Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1955

*“The Assamese have no real patriotism. They have always betrayed the cause of the Indian unity and integrity by allowing Sylhet, a Bengali speaking area, to go easily to Pakistan. The motive behind this is nothing but to increase the percentage of the Assamese in Assam. Assam is, therefore, not eager to maintain the present frontiers of India. So, she cannot be relied upon so as to prove equal to the task of defending strategically important frontiers.”<sup>97</sup>*

The Assam Sahitya Sabha altogether protested against this draft and demanded an apology from the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee. At the same time, demands also came from the hill communities for their secured position concerning linguistic policies. They claimed to form a new state unifying all the hill districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Therefore, the same SRC report alarmed a warning and argued that,

*‘The task of economic development can be undertaken, and substantial cultural autonomy can be enjoyed by the various linguistic and racial groups only if two preconditions are fulfilled, namely that the state of Assam is compact, rich and resourceful and that there exist within the state mutual tolerance and goodwill and if we may say so, chauvinistic trends are bound to retard the progress of the state. They should, therefore, be discouraged in every way.’<sup>98</sup>*

It is clear from the report mentioned above that chauvinist tendencies were there in the actions of Bengali and Assamese linguistic elites from the very beginning. Interestingly, in 1940, many Congresses leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi, and Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed, wanted to incorporate Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur to Assam based on ethnic, religious and linguistic similarity.<sup>99</sup> They started dreaming of a greater Assam or *Bor Axom*. However, the dream of *Bor Axom* or greater Assam was worn out in the hands of a specific section of chauvinist and nationalist members of that group. One example can be given here. Sitaram Brahmachaudhary, the former president of Assam Sahitya Sabha, took the initiative to merge Coochbehar with Assam. But the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee, by pressuring the central leadership of Congress, prevented Coochbehar from joining Assam. During this time, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee also maintained a silence on this matter. These tactics were deployed because of some internal political reasons. The then Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi was himself a member of the Cooch Rajbonshi Group, and he was for the inclusion of

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<sup>97</sup>Atul Ch Hazarika, *Axom xahityaxobhar ruplekha*, Guwahati, 1977

<sup>98</sup>SRC (*Report of the State Reorganization Commission*), Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1955

<sup>99</sup>Boruah, Niroode Kumar, *Gopinath Bordoloi Indian constitution and centre Assam relations 1940-1950*, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 1990

Coochbehar into Assam. However, two other Congress leaders Debeswar Sharma and Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury, were entirely against this inclusion.<sup>100</sup> They thought that the inclusion of Coochbehar would increase the prospects for Bishnuram Medhi as a chief ministerial candidate in future. Ultimately this proposal was rejected.<sup>101</sup> Later on, the development of the language movements in Assam also indicated the nationalist tendencies of a specific section of Assamese that became a threat to the idea of '*Bor Axom*'.

In terms of linguistic reorganization of states, Assam in general and Northeast in particular remained a big challenge to the Indian Polity. Although it had a huge number of languages with speakers of distinct identities, only Assamese was included in the original Eighth Schedule. The notion of '*Axom -Axomia*' got strengthened by the Eighth Schedule and linguistic reorganization of the states. The Eighth Schedule along with three language formula has contributed a lot to the hegemony of the Assamese language as it was the only languages included in the original list from the north eastern region of India.<sup>102</sup>

It is important to point out that Assamese people although they were against the merger of Sylhet with Assam, they did not mind uniting all the states of north east. Probably they dreamt of a larger Assam where they will not have to worry about the threat of Bengali middle class.

In addition, Assam was reorganised against the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Commission of 1955, and four more states, namely Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh, were carved out of its territory. Two valleys, the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, and two hill districts, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, made up the post-reorganization map of Assam. In relation to Assam, the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) led a rather peculiar life. NEFA was managed by the Ministry of External Affairs after it joined the Indian Union, with the Governor of Assam serving as the President of India's agent. The Governor's Advisor served as the administrative leader. Consequently, it was not placed under the direct control of the Assam Government as the Assamese had intended. The NEFA was elevated to the status of a Union Territory and given the name Arunachal Pradesh in 1972. Three years later, in 1975, a legislature was established. And ultimately, on February 20, 1987, Arunachal Pradesh received statehood, becoming the country of India's 25th state. But the

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<sup>100</sup>Chitra Mahanto ,*Hinno Puruh Sitanath Brahmchaudhury* (Jorhat 1983)

<sup>101</sup>Chitra Mahanto ,*Hinno Puruh Sitanath Brahmchaudhury* (Jorhat 1983)

<sup>102</sup>The three language formula also help Assamese linguistic elites to introduce Assamese in various levels of education as the sole regional language to the resentment of many non-Assamese speakers

concept of "Bor Axom" or Greater Assam quickly started to threaten the residents of other north-eastern states. The language movements that occurred in Assam after independence also reflect the hyper-nationalist impulses of some Assamese, which posed a challenge to the concept of "Bor Axom".

### 3.4 Demand for an official state language: the initial years

From the 1950s onwards, the demand for making Assamese as the official state language was raised mostly with the support of Assam Sahitya Sabha. However, before making Assamese the state language, they faced certain internal contestation and settlement of them was the need of that hour.

One of them was the contestation around the regional varieties of the language. The process of standardisation of Assamese on the basis of speeches from the upper Assam aroused a degree of reaction from the educated sections including those of the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Goalpara. The contestation tried to make a barrier inside the Assamese community. This contestation had the historical ground too. Although Britishers tried to make one Assam by merging upper Assam and lower Assam in one single administrative fold, but the different cultural practices and linguistic differences made them not compatible to each other. Missionaries also tried to make Kamrupi dialect the standard dialect, but later on they made Sibsagariya dialect as the standard dialect of Assamese. In a response to standardisation of Sibsagariya dialect different members of lower Assam wrote to the Bengal's Lt governor that.

*'The people of lower Assam protested against the order of the High court...the current dialect in upper Assam improperly designated as Assamese language has been enforced in supersession of the Bengali which has for upwards 40 years been recognised as the court and adopted as the medium of instruction in school. The upper Assam dialect is spoken only by a small portion of the population of Assam districts of Dibrugarh and Sivasagar and is altogether unimportant and meagre and its capabilities and its chances to make itself the language of the entire province are extremely limited as the comparative poverty in respect to written and published work does conclusively show.'*<sup>103</sup>

However, at last with the continuous effort of Banikanta Kakoti, Chandranath Sarmah, Dr Maheswar Neog this contestation came to an end. The author of 'Assamese its formation and

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<sup>103</sup>Dr HK Barpujari, *Axomor Naba Jagoron, Ona Axomiyar Bhumika*, page 35.

*development*', Dr Banikanto Kakoti along with Laxminath Bezbaruah, who is known as the real crusader for the cause of Assamese language, helped in solving the internal contestation of upper Assam and Lower Assam dialectal differences. As Kakoti was from lower Assam and Laxminath was from upper Assam, their mutual effort helped in many ways. Kakoti declared that to know proper Assamese it is necessary to know the Assamese written by Laxminath.<sup>104</sup> The periodical '*Banhi*' and '*Assam Bandhob*' also created the differences of upper Assam and lower Assam. However later on Chandranath Sarmah along with Ambikagiri Raychaudhury decided to edit '*Chetona*'-another periodicals for the readers of both the regions. In this way contestation over the regional variety was solved to a great extent.

Another contestation was arising in Goalpara.<sup>105</sup> In the year 1918, as the Montague Chemsford report granted some provisions for the zamindars of Bengal, many zamindars from Gopalpara also demanded for the inclusion of Goalpara to Bengal. However, Zamindar Nagendra Nath Chaudhury became an active opponent of this move by the Zamindars and for this contribution later on he was even offered the president of Assam Sahitya Sabha in the year 1931. During that time Saddulah and Bordoloi ministry also said that Goalpara is a bilingual state.<sup>106</sup> Sarat Chandra Goswami mentioned about the presence of only few members of Assamese speaking people in that region. Another nationalist Ambikagiri Raychaudhury also took a decision regarding the merger of certain sections of Dhubri districts to Pakistan.<sup>107</sup>

The question arises then what helped in merging the Goalpara region in Assam. The answer would certainly be that it was the effort by certain sections of Bodo, Cooch Rajbonhi and sections of Bengali intelligentsia. More specifically, the effort by Kalicharan Brahma in uniting Goalpara to Assam is noticeable. He said,

“Some interested persons from our districts are agitating for the transfer of the district of Goalpara over to Bengal. So far as we are concerned, we are opposed to it. Goalpara is a part and parcel of Assam and history will prove what part she has been playing since the time immemorial. The habits and customs of the people of this district are more akin to Assamese than Bangalees. We the Bodos can by no means call ourselves other than Assamese. The transfer of this districts to Bengal will be prejudicial to the interest not only of this community

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<sup>104</sup> Introduction by Dr Maheswar Neog in *Banikanto Rachanawali*.

<sup>105</sup> Sharma, Devabrata. *Axomiya Jatigothonprokriyaarujatiya janagusthihomuh*. 2006.

<sup>106</sup> Barman, Sibanth. "Axomiya Bhaxar Hritadhikar Praptiritihah." *Xamproti's Xomoyiki*, July-August 1982.

<sup>107</sup> *The Assam Tribune*, January 23, 1947.

but all the other communities and this transfer will seriously hamper our progress in all direction.”<sup>108</sup>

However, the efforts made by Brahma in uniting Goalpara with Assam has not been acknowledged properly and a very few are aware of this fact. The question then arises how did the population of Assamese speaking people increased. One may be the possible assimilation and acceptance of different communities and other may be the political pressurisation. According to Dr Hiren Gohain, the sudden proliferation of Assamese speaking people were mainly because of the political tactics played by certain groups. The communal clashes of 1950s and 1960s and the sudden proliferation of Assamese speaking population can also single out this kind of possibility.<sup>109</sup>

In 1950s in Cachar and in Goalpara district different communal clashes erupted in Assam. Again, in 1960s another series of communal clashes emerged. In these clashes around burning of 1913 homes, 5 rape cases, 24 mass killings were reported. Around 50000 Bengali people died in that incident.<sup>110</sup> Therefore it can be pointed out that the dramatic increase of Assamese speaking people had its own story.

### **3.5 Making of an official state language**

In this section, an attempt is being made to recount the series of events in 1960-61 and 1972, the events known in the current political discourse as the Official Language Movement and Movement on Medium of Instruction respectively. All these events have a far-reaching influence upon the perception of Assamese identity.

The first was the official language movements. Official Language Movement is a series of events that impacted hugely upon the perception of identities in the state. The series of events unfolded around the demand of declaring Assamese as the Official Language of Assam. This linguistic demand soon got transformed into violent riots between the speakers of Assamese and Bengali languages specifically and alienating at the same time a large chunk of the speakers of different languages of the plain and hills of Assam.

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<sup>108</sup>Brahma, Kalicharan. Memorandum submitted to Simon Commission. January 4, 1929. In Gurudeb Kalicharan Brahma, 50-53.

<sup>109</sup> Gohain. *Assam: A Burning Question*. 174, 178

<sup>110</sup> Report of the Commission of Enquiry of Assam Disturbances 1983. (Guwahati 1984)

When Assam Sahitya Sabha initiated its systematic campaign from 1950 onwards to secure recognition of Assamese as the official language of the state, a vigorous attempt was made by a section of Bengali leaders of the Barak Valley to carve out a different state excluding Brahmaputra Valley. It was under this context and situation, the issue of Official Language assumed political colour and within short time it generated uncontrolled mob-violence all throughout the state.

In April 1959, Assam Sahitya Sabha came out with a statement that a considerable amount of time had already been taken by the state government to declare Assamese as the Official Language of the state and in their demand; they set a timeline for the final execution of a policy in their favour. For a stronger consolidation towards the fulfilment of this demand they observed September 9th, 1959 as the State Language Day<sup>111</sup>. Such celebrations led to rapid political mobilizations throughout the Brahmaputra valley. Just before the budget session of the Assembly of 1960, the Assam Sahitya Sabha issued an appeal to all MLAs to take up the language issue for questioning on the floor of the House. The Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha made a statement on the 23rd March, 1960 in which he said that the Government would prefer to wait till they got the same demand from the non-Assamese speaking population for declaration of Assamese as the State Language. He said,

*‘Some of the Hon. Members have raised the question of State language and absence of any mention about it in the Governor’s Address. The Governor has not mentioned about it in his Address because the Government have not taken a decision on the subject yet. I would, however, mention that Government have not underestimated its importance or the request that has been made by the Assam Sahitya Sabha and other Institutions for declaration of Assamese as the State Language. Perhaps there are two important reasons which warrant enactment on a State language. The first is to make the official communications easily understandable to the common man, and the second is to break the barrier of language which now separates the diverse population of Assam. I highly appreciate the zeal and enthusiasm with which the demand for declaration of Assamese as the State language has been made, more particularly, by the Assamese speaking section of our population’<sup>112</sup>*

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<sup>111</sup> The Assam Tribune, September 10, 1959

<sup>112</sup> Declaration by Bimala Prasad Chaliha on the language in the assembly on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1960

This stand of Chaliha was resented by advocate of Assamese speaking people in the Brahmaputra valley. But the supporters of Bengali in the district of Cachar and the tribal leaders who supported the cause of English welcomed it. However, the Assamese lobby within the Congress Legislature Party started applying its pressure for the immediate declaration of Assamese as the Official Language of the state. Accordingly, the joint meeting of the *Assam Pradesh Congress Committee* (APCC) Executive and the *Congress Parliamentary Party* was held on the 10th, 11th, 24th and 25th March, 1960, where five alternative proposals were formulated for consideration of the Assam PCC. Thereafter a meeting of the APCC was held on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22nd April, 1960, where a resolution on the Official Language for Assam was adopted on maximum agreement after consideration of the five proposals. The APCC noted that the question of official language has been agitating the mind of people of Assam for a long time and as the question was indeed a delicate one, any decision to this effect could no longer be deferred. Having considered all aspects of the matter, APCC proposed a strategy:

- (a) that Assamese be declared by law as the official language of the state and be adopted for such purpose as may be decided by the Government.
- (b) that the Assamese be introduced as the official language in the districts except the district of Cachar, the autonomous districts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Mizo Hills and North Cachar Hills in which areas it may be introduced as and when they are prepared for it.
- (c) that the right of the minorities for protection and development of their languages will be fully safeguarded.
- (d) that in the process of introduction and extension of Assamese as official language just claims and interest of non- Assamese speaking people in the matter of public services and such other matter will be fully safeguarded.
- (e) that the Govt, be requested to take steps accordingly and to provide as early as possible all facilities for learning Assamese and other languages spoken in the state with a view to bring the people closer band to break the language barrier. <sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup>Assam State Archive. APCC Papers. Proposal Documents, 1960. Accessed March 15, 2018.

Although the resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority but it created widespread resentment in the district of Cachar and the Hill districts. Following the resolution of APCC, on 20th May 1960, the Chief Minister issued a statement in which he stated that Government proposed to take preliminary steps to implement the Assam PCC resolution in regard to the Official Language but had not taken any final decision.<sup>114</sup>

Another momentum was the Shillong procession. The Shillong procession of 21st May, 1960 became a referring point in almost all the movement literature supporting the cause of introduction of the Official Language Bill. In a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister, Assam Sahitya Sabha describes the course of the event as following:

*“On 21-05-60 processions were taken out and public meetings were held at Shillong, the State Capital wherein slogans like Assamese is a language of the donkeys, Assam peoples are not man but monkey, Down with Assamese and down with Assamese language and such other derogatory provocative slogans were raised by these Bengali people who succeeded in taking with them some Khasi people also. They also damaged signboards, nameplates etc. written Assamese in Shillong. Assamese people protested against these anti-Assamese acts and requested the government to put an immediate stop to all these. These acts of Hooliganism were committed under the very nose of cabinet ministers and the Inspector General of Police, Assam. But the government had not taken any concrete measures to stop these, hooligans began assaulting Assamese residence at Shillong with greater violence till Assamese residents had to be removed from Shillong for the safety for their lives. These Bengali hooligans misled some of the hills tribal people to join them against the Assamese by disseminating alarming news to the effect the tribals had been tortured in the plains.”<sup>115</sup>*

However, commenting upon the incident, in the report of the Members of Parliament under the leadership of Ajit Prasad Jain, it was mentioned that, the sloganeering might not have been deliberate as no evidence was found against the organizers of having an intention of insulting the Assamese language. The report also condemns that, the incident was given wide publicity by Assamese news-papers which inflamed the Assamese speaking people .

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<sup>114</sup>Report of the Delegation of Members of Parliament to Assam on Official Language Issue. (New Delhi: Publisher, August 29, 1960).

<sup>115</sup> Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India by the Assam Sahitya Sabha on May, 1960.

On 26th May 1960, there occurred another incident pushing the intensity of the movement. Dulal Baruah who later led the movement was arrested by the police from the Gauhati University hostel on the charge of a robbery. It was alleged that the Vice Chancellor and the other authorities of the university were not informed and the sanctity of the university was violated<sup>116</sup>. As coincidentally both the Inspector General of Police and Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup were Bengali speakers, the suspicion of their hands in acting out of revenge was widely circulated and disturbed the atmosphere further.

These incidents soon ignited the passion of the people. Meetings and demonstrations were held in all the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley opposing the so-called insult to the Assamese language, demanding an immediate declaration of Assamese as the State Official Language and voicing other grievances of Assamese speaking people such as inadequate employment in central services and undertakings. In the month of June about thirty meetings were held in Sibsagar district, 12 in Goalpara, 4 in Darrang, 11 in Nowgong, and 30 in Lakhimpur, making similar demands. During the same period there were 20 meetings in Cachar district opposing the introduction of Assamese as a state language. Besides 7 other meetings were organized by the people of the hill districts at Shillong and 7 meetings in various places of United Mikir and N.C. Hills<sup>117</sup>. Meetings and demonstrations were peaceful by and large in the beginning. The incidents of violence started pouring in from 12th June, 1960 onwards.<sup>118</sup>

But there was another important development. The initial disturbances and violence were controlled with the intervention of administration and police. But after 4th July, 1960, the state of Assam witnessed a series of uncontrollable mob violence. The spark was provided by the unprovoked police firing in a Cotton College Hostel. The date July 4, 1960 would be remembered as a critical day in the whole tragic trajectory on the issue of language management in the state. It was reported that some houses near Cotton College Hostel were burnt by the miscreants. Without any provocation, the police entered the premise of the hostel and opened fire at the students killing Ranjit Barpujari, and injuring six other students. Shortly after this, a party consisting of students and others entered the compound of the Deputy Commissioner and stabbed him. Within hours, the entire administration collapsed as the news

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<sup>116</sup> The Assam Tribune, May 27, 1960.

<sup>117</sup> Jain, Ajit Prasad. Report of the Delegation of Members of Parliament to Assam on Official Language Issue. New Delhi, 1960

<sup>118</sup>. Merhotra, G. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Goreswar Disturbances. Shillong: Assam Government, 1961

of the death of Ranjit Barpujari spread like wild fire all over the Brahmaputra Valley. Following the death of Ranjit Barpujari, there was a week of uncontrolled mob-violence throughout the Brahmaputra Valley, which resulted according to official estimates in the death of 39 persons, injuries to 487, burning, damaging and looting of 10,891 houses. There were also reports of molestation of women and a few cases of rape <sup>119</sup>

However, the worst affected district was Kamrup. The Commission of Inquiry which was constituted by the Government of Assam under Justice Gopalji Malhotra of the Assam High Court to enquire into the incidents of rioting that took place on the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th July 1960, in the area popularly known as Goreswar area has made the following observation:

*‘There is no dispute with regard to the nature of the disturbances. Large scale arson, destruction of houses, looting of properties took place. There were deaths and a number of assaults on people resulting in serious injuries. There is also evidence of assault on women at one place. As to the extent of disturbances, it spread over 25 villages, and according to the memorandum submitted by the State, 4019 huts and 58 semi-pucca houses belonging to roughly 1500 families were destroyed, damaged or burnt, and nine persons including one woman lost their lives, about 100 persons were injured and according to the estimate of the state, the loss due to arson and looting was estimated at about Rs 4, 08800 and 1,36550 respectively’<sup>120</sup>*

Not only the Commission, appointed specifically to inquire into the incidents taking place in the greater Goreswar area, but also the Parliamentary Committee that had made its visit immediately after the violence, to look after the overall situation in Assam mentioned, ‘there were every reason to believe that the attack in the Ramsajhar village of Goreswar and the area near about was premeditated and organized’.<sup>121</sup>

### **3.6 Assam Official Language Act**

In the Lok Sabha session of September 1960, the language question and the resulting violence were discussed at length.<sup>122</sup> But the Government failed to pronounce any clear policy statement

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<sup>119</sup> Jain, Ajit Prasad. Report of the Delegation of Members of Parliament to Assam on Official Language Issue. New Delhi, 1960

<sup>120</sup> Merhotra, G. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Goreswar Disturbances. Shillong: Assam Government, 1961

<sup>121</sup> Merhotra, G. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Goreswar Disturbances. Shillong: Assam Government, 1961

<sup>122</sup> Merhotra, G. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Goreswar Disturbances. Shillong: Assam Government, 1961

on the language issue. The government of Assam decided to bring the Official Language Bill to pacify the mass fury and passion. The Chief Minister Introduced the Assam Official language Bill in the Assembly on October 10, 1960. The Bill got passed on October 10, 1960. It received the assent of the Governor on December 17 and published it in the Official Gazette on December 19. The relevant provisions of the language bill are as following:

- i. The Section 3 of the Act provided that without prejudice to the provisions of Article 346 of the Constitution of India, and subject as hereinafter provided, Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the state of Assam.
- ii. The English language so long as the use thereof is permissible 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 Secretariat and the offices of the Secretariat and the offices of the Heads of Departments of the State Government and in such manner as may be prescribed.
- iii. The same section further provided that all ordinances promulgated under Article 213 of the Constitution of India, all acts passed by State Legislature, all bills to be introduced and amendments thereto 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 the Parliament or the Legislature of the state shall be published in the Official Gazette in the Assamese language.
- iv. The provisions of the Act were formulated to maintain the status quo in the Sixth Schedule areas and provided that notwithstanding anything in Section 3, languages which were in use, immediately before the commencement of this Act, shall continue to be used for administrative and other official purposes up to and including the level of the Autonomous District, as the case may be until the Regional Council or the District Council in respect of the Autonomous Region or Autonomous District as the case may be, by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting, decide in favour of the adoption of any other language for any of the administrative or official purposes within that region or district.
- v. The Section 5 of the Act had a special provision for the Bengali language in the Cachar district and provided that notwithstanding anything in Section 3, Bengali language shall be used for administrative and other official purposes up to and including the district level in the district of Cachar until the Mohkuma Parishads and Municipal Boards of the district, in a joint meeting by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members

present and voting decide in favour of the adoption of the official language for use in the district for the aforesaid purposes.

- vi. The Section 6 of the Act had kept safeguard provisions for the candidates appearing in Assam Public Service Commission. It provided that notwithstanding anything in Section 3, any examination held by Assam Public Service 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 the use thereof is permissible under Clause 2 of the article 343 of the Constitution of India and a candidate shall have the right to choose the language in use in the State of Assam, which was the medium of his university examination.
- vii. The Section 7 of the Act had made provisions for the rights of the minority languages. It provided that the right of the various linguistic groups in respect of the educational institutions as laid down in the Constitution of India shall not be affected, the state shall not in granting aid to educational and cultural institutions, discriminate against any such institutions on the grounds of language, the rights to appointments in the Assam Public Services and to contracts and other avocations shall be maintained without discrimination on the grounds of language; and in regard to offices in the region or district, if any member of the staff is unable to note any of the district languages the use of English shall be permitted by the Heads of Departments so long as the use thereof is permissible under Article 343 of the Constitution of India.

But the provisions given for the minorities in the Assam Official Language Act did not satisfy the Bengali speaking populace in general and particularly the ones living in Cachar. An organization called *Sangaram Parishad* spearheaded the movement in the Cachar district. They demanded the declaration of Assam as a bilingual state. On May 19, 1961, *Cachar Sangram Parishad* called for a complete strike. Satyagrahas were organized in all the government offices and the transport system was completely paralyzed. In an unfortunate incident the police opened fire at a group of the demonstrators killing 8 people and wounding 21. Three other wounded persons succumbed to their injuries later on. Six Congress MLAs resigned as a mark of protest against the police action and a complete district-wide hartal was observed on 29 May the day on which the ashes of the eleven persons, killed in the police firing on 19th May 1961 at Silchar were to be carried in a procession. Those young men of Sylhetti origin became what

the Bengalis of Barak valley remember every 16<sup>th</sup> May as martyrs of *Bhaxa Dibox* or Language day. Several incidents of violence leading to death in Brahmaputra valley also reported then.<sup>123</sup>

As the situation was going out of control, the Congress High Command decided to intervene to solve the tangled issue of language and bring to an end the *Sangram Parishad Movement* in Cachar. With central intervention, led by home minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, Bengali became the official language of Barak Valley. The Congress leadership came with a formula popularly known as “Shastri Formula”. The proposal of the Shastri Formula had a number of modifications that include:

- i) The Assam Official Language Act might be amended to do away with the provision relating to Mahkuma Parishads.
- ii) Communications between State Headquarters and Cachar and the autonomous Hill Districts was to continue in English until replaced by Hindi.
- iii) At the State level, English were to be used for the time being and must continue to be used along with Assamese.
- iv) The linguistic minorities in the State were to be accorded the safeguards contained in the Government of India’s Memorandum, dated September 19,1956.
- v) Under the provisions of Article 348(3) of the Constitution, all Acts, Bills, Ordinances, Regulations and orders, etc. had to be published in the Official Gazette in English, even where these are published in Assamese under the second provision to section 3 of the Official Language Act.
- vi) Some arrangements were to be considered for effective implementation of development schemes at the District level.
- vii) The agitation in Cachar were to be withdrawn immediately.
- viii) The Assam Government should consider the release of all prisoners detained in connection with the movement, except those charged with crimes involving violence and sabotage,

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<sup>123</sup>Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, Assam: The Accord, The Discord (Penguin Random House India, 2019).

as soon as they are satisfied that the movement would not be resumed.

The most challenging question had been that of amending the Bill in order to delete the provision made about Mohkuma Parishads in the Cachar area in Section 5 of the Official Language Act. However, the spirit and logic of the Official Language Act was upheld by Lal Bahadur Shastri in the following words:

*'It would be an unfortunate day if in any State different communities speaking different languages could not live together in peace and amity. Every State will have its official language. It should be the duty of all the people of that State, whatever their mother tongue may be, to accept it sincerely and try to learn it quickly. It should equally be the responsibility of the Government and those who speak the official language to give all facilities for the use and growth of other languages which are used by a sizeable number of people living in the State'*<sup>124</sup>

### **3.7 Chief minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha's declaration of 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1960:**

In a statement issued on 6 June 1961, B. P. Chaliha, the Chief Minister of Assam condemned the death of eleven people in the police firing of Cachar and condemned the agitational tactic used by the people opposing the Official Language Act. According to him the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 was based on two basic principles, namely, (1) Assamese would not be imposed in any of the non-Assamese speaking Districts, and (2) No non-Assamese speaking person of the state would be made to suffer any disability for employment, service, etc., because his lack of knowledge of the Assamese Language. Then, he emphasized upon the provision in the act of the continued use of English along with Assamese for all official purposes at the Secretariat and at the heads of the departments till it got replaced by Hindi. He pleaded that it was contingent upon the government to translate and publish in English all ordinances, acts, bills, orders, regulations, etc., in the Official Gazette. Then he made it clear that there will not be any fear of the discrimination of the minority communities in the recruitment to the Assam Civil Service and allied provincial posts. He asserted that the continuance of the knowledge of Assamese or Bengali or a tribal language of the State was essential. This was proposed to be continued even after the enforcement of the Assam Official Language Act. There was no intention to make the knowledge of Assamese compulsory for recruitment to service. So far as

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<sup>124</sup> Shastri, Lal Bahadur. Statement. Shillong, June 6, 1961.

education was concerned, it had been specifically mentioned in the body of the Act that the rights of the various linguistic groups in respect of medium of instruction in educational institutions as laid down in the Constitution of India would not be affected. He also mentioned that the Act provided that no discrimination could be made in granting aid to educational and cultural institutions on grounds of language. Attention was also drawn to the point that the language in which the district administration was to be run in the Autonomous districts would be decided by the District Councils of the respective Autonomous Districts and so far as the district of Cachar is concerned, Bengali language had been provided as the language in which the district administration would be run until the Mahkuma Parishad and the Municipal Board decided by a majority of two-thirds opted for a change to the Official Language. But the most important declaration that the chief minister made was vis-a-vis the provision concerning Mahkuma Parishad in Section 5 of the Official Language Act. He promised the deletion of this provision following the advice of the Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister. He hoped that this should allay the apprehension in the minds of Cachar people regarding the use of Bengali Language at district level in Cachar.

The Chief Minister's speech was in the line of the recommendations made by the Home Minister Lai Bahadur Shastri. The declarations of the Home Minister and the Chief Minister showed that there was a broader agreement between the central and the state leaderships on the resolution of the crisis and it was put largely in the court of the agitating Bengali organization.

Apparently, the Shastri Formula failed to appease the agitating organizations in Cachar. The district committees of Cachar rejected the formula. Paritosh Pal Chaudhari, leader of the CacharZila Sangram Parishad said, "the movement launched by Parishad for recognition of Bengali as state language would continue till the goal is achieved"<sup>125</sup>.

In the meantime, the non- Bengali communities comprising the Muslims, the Manipuris, and the indigenous Cacharis formed a new outfit called *Shanti Parishad*. Its main demand was that Assamese must be made the only official language of Assam. It came into direct confrontation with *Sangram Parishad*. This counter movement resulted in an unfortunate occurrence when police opened fire at Hailakandi at a demonstration organized by *Shanti Parishad* on 19th June 1961 killing five persons and injuring fourteen. The army had to be called to contain the

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<sup>125</sup>The Assam Tribune, June 12, 1961

situation<sup>126</sup>. The situation remained tense for some time although without any major incident. However, the Assam Cabinet went ahead with the Shastri formula and put its nod on the amendment of the Act on 24 September 1961.

The Assam Official Language (Amendment) Act, 1961 amended Section 5 of the 1960 Assam Official Language Act. It deleted the provision for the Mahkuma Parishad and Municipal Boards. As amended Section 5 of the Assam Official Language Act (amendment) 1961, reads: “Without prejudice to the provisions contained in Section, the Bengali language shall be used for administrative and other official purposes up to and including the district level in the district of Cachar.”

Although, neither Assam Sahitya Sabha nor Bengali and the Hill leadership was happy about the formula, no major development took place regarding the official language of the state. Even though there was no direct conflict between the Assamese speaking community and the other linguistic communities living in the hills, the anguish of these communities were well publicized by their leaders who had organized themselves under one umbrella called All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC). In the resolutions passed by APHLC of the Autonomous districts of Assam, held at Shillong on the 6th and 7th July, 1960, they expressed their anger and apprehensions. APHLC urged upon the Government of Assam to drop the proposed Bill which is unfair to the just claims of the linguistic minorities of Assam, in particular the claims of the people of the Autonomous Districts, and in the interests of the unity and security of India. As has been revealed from the sequence of events discussed above, there was a serious discontentment among the indigenous hill communities on the official language issue. Although there was a plethora of other reasons, the official language issue also acted as a substance to already existent demands of the reorganization of Assam.

Contrary to the recommendations of State Reorganization Commission 1955, Assam was reorganized and from its territory, four more states namely Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh were carved out from its territory. The post reorganization map of Assam consisted of two valleys, Brahmaputra and Barak valley and two hill districts, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) had a rather peculiar existence vis-à-vis Assam. After it became a part of Indian Union, NEFA was administrated by the Ministry of External Affairs with the Governor of Assam acting as agent

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<sup>126</sup>The Assam Tribune, June 20, 1960

to the President of India. The administrative head was the Advisor to the Governor. So, it was not put under the direct control of Assam Government as was envisaged by the Assamese elite of that time. In 1972, the NEFA became a Union Territory and acquired the name of Arunachal Pradesh. After 3 years, in 1975, it acquired a legislature. And finally, on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1987 Statehood was conferred on Arunachal Pradesh which became the 25<sup>th</sup> State of the Union of India

### **3.8 Assam Sahitya Sabha and its role during the language movements**

During this turbulent period of Assam history, Maheswar Neog was the president of Assam Sahitya Sabha. Although Sabha had a critical time after the language disturbances, but the stand by President Maheswar Neog has been appreciated by not only members of the executive but also by the people in general. When Sabha faced many disturbances during the implementation of official language, its erstwhile president Dr Maheswar Neog tried to handle the situation in a very efficient manner. For example, when there was an effort by different section of the society to make Bengali a second official language of Assam and there was an effort by a section to restrict the use of Assamese language in Cachar area, Sahitya Sabha tried to do every possible action to counter these kinds of tendencies. In a memorandum submitted by Sahitya Sabha to Lal Bahadur Sastri, it wrote,

*No unjust and unnecessary restrictions be imposed on the state's official language Assamese, by barring its use for administrative and official purpose on the District of Cachar and also for communication between the state headquarters and the districts of Cachar.*<sup>127</sup>

In fact, during this period Dr Maheswar Neog written a piece on 'Assamese language question' which highlighted the shortcomings of 'Sastri Formula' in context of Assam. In fact, in the newspapers, Neog tried to write many write up highlighting the importance of official Assamese language.

Another important point needs to be highlighted here. After 1960 onwards, the government of India promised that the medium of instruction in the erstwhile NEFA region would be Assamese and government would take all the necessary action to fulfil this objective. Despite this, there was no significant progress in this matter. Instead they tried to impose Devanagari script on the primary level education in NEFA region. This ultimately impacted the use of

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<sup>127</sup> Refere to the memorandum submitted by Sahitya Sabha to Lal Bahadur Sastri

Assamese medium in this region. The president of Sahitya Sabha, Maheswar Neog was very critical of this policy of Indian Government. In fact, with his initiative, Sahitya Sabha had published a book named '*The educational and cultural policies of the north east frontier agency administration*' where they emphasised on the need for cultural and linguistic assimilation of NEFA and Assam.<sup>128</sup>

### **3.9 The category of 'threat' during official language movement**

During the course of official language movement in Assam, the Bengali Hindus were viewed as a "threat" at the time by those who supported the Assamese language. For instance, it is written that in a brochure published by the Assam Sahitya Sabha:

*'Almost all the Muslim immigrants from Bengal have taken Assam as their home and adopted the local ways of life and thinking .... This has, however, caused a considerable heart-burning amongst the Bengali Hindus who are always labouring hard to inflate the number of Bengali-speaking people in Assam, and therefore, they have tried hard to alienate them from the Assamese people and by constant persuasion and propaganda against Assamese language and its culture have succeeded in changing the medium of teaching from Assamese to Bengali in a considerable number of schools established in the immigrant areas.'*<sup>129</sup>

It can be illustrated by an incident that occurred during the violent official language movement times. Sisir Nag, a communist and Bengali leader of the movement, first advocated for Assamese to be the state's official tongue. He travelled to Koliabar, Nagaon district on July 7, 1960, to ease tensions between certain Assamese and Bengali residents. However, he was assassinated by a local resident before getting there. His body was found in Nagaon District's Kolong river three days after this occurrence. His murderer was arrested four years later on where he confessed that just because he was Hindu Bengali, he was killed brutally. Interestingly this incident clearly highlighted the fact that during this time Bengali Hindus were considered as the threat of Assamese identity and to wipe out this threat, many innocent killings were taking place.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup>This was mentioned in his autobiography '*Jibonor Digh aru Bani*' by Maheswar Neog

<sup>129</sup> Chowdhary., *Itihax sarsa* 1961. Page 10

<sup>130</sup> Mahanta, Manas Kumar. *Axomiya Jatiyatabador itihax Iyandaboor pora Bortomanoloi*. Pages 81-86.

### 3.10.1960's language movement and some unsung stories

The bloody episode of Assam history was indeed a black episode in Assam politics. At this crucial juncture two cultural icons of the valley-Bhupen Hazarika and Hemango Biswah famously toured the state crooning songs of unity to quell the violence and bloodshed. The initiative by *Bharatiya Gononatyo Sangha* under the leadership of Hemango Biswah was crucial as its the main aim was to create an atmosphere of coexistence of different linguistic community. It tried to include different members from different community like khasia, jayantia, Bodo, Miri, Dimasa, Kochari, Monipuri, Axomiya, Bengali and tea garden workers. But the 1960s language movement completely challenged the working of this organisation. Those were the times where they did not even conduct private meeting among themselves. Therefore Hemango Biswah along with Bhupen Hazarika created 'let us meet cultural troupe'. With this troupe they tried to publish the message for peaceful co-existence of several communities.<sup>131</sup> They composed different song and these songs calmed Assam during that time and this was the part of peace initiative against the linguistic riots in Assam. The duo travelled with a 30 members Caravan across undivided Assam. The high point of the performance was a song specially produced for the occasion by Hazarika and Biswas. Haradhan Rongmonkatha, a conversation ballad that narrated the story of two farmers Haradhan and Rongmon, one Bengali and another Assamese, who had come together to survive in the backdrop of a fratricidal riot.<sup>132</sup> Interestingly it was the Congress government which arranged for the peace tour after the caravan maiden performance in Shillong, realising that the Assamese-Bengali conflict was spiralling out of control. This move was indeed a silver lining in the cloudy sky of Assam that time.

### 3.11 Medium of instruction movement

The medium of instruction movement of 1972 was one of the additional changes in Assam following its independence. In 1971–1972, the language debate once more shook Assam's political climate. In 1971–1972, the intervention was sought in the area of education, as opposed to 1960–1961 when it was sought in the administration. The next stage after Assamese was declared the state's official language was to make it the only language taught in state universities. A dominant position for regional languages in the educational system of their

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<sup>131</sup> Dutta, Utpal. New Age, October 16, 1960

individual states was also legitimised by the language policy adopted by the Indian government. For instance, the Education Commission (1966–1966) suggested using regional languages as the medium of instruction.

In this setting and against the backdrop of general linguistic nationalism, Gauhati University made the decision in 1970 to introduce Assamese as a medium of instruction in all colleges under its purview, effective with the session of 1972–1973; this was done so that the new class of students enrolling in Pre-University classes could take advantage of the opportunity beginning in that year. The decision was made to go to the degree level gradually. However, provisions were made to keep English available as a backup medium.

What is intriguing about this situation is that states like Manipur and Tripura, which were never a part of Assam, Nagaland, which had already been split from Assam, and Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh, which were on the verge of being created, all lacked their own universities. Additionally, these areas' colleges were affiliated with Assam's two universities. The retention of English prevented the residents of these places from entering an agitational style of protest, despite the fact that they were unhappy with the adoption of Assamese as a language of instruction. Given that the residents of these regions had already successfully negotiated the establishment of independent states or Union Territories, it can be safely assumed that they might have understood that it was just a matter of few years that they would get their own universities with affiliating colleges.

However, things were very different for Assamese Bengali minorities. It was obvious that their destiny would be linked with the state of Assam because they made up the majority in the Barak Valley and had a sizable presence in the Brahmaputra Valley. In addition, there were rumours that the other two Assamese universities, Dibrugarh University and Assam Agriculture University, might copy Gauhati University's model. The public and its representatives became upset over this. Bengali residents around the state protested vehemently. They urged that Bengali be added as a second language to teach alongside Assamese. Bengali was a recognised official language under the Assam Official Language Act, giving rise to this demand.

The Academic Council of the University released a new circular with an entirely new component to save the institution from this situation. They determined that while instructions would only be given in Assamese and English, queries would be answered in Assamese, English, and Bengali. Assamese was to progressively replace English, which was preserved for

the time being. The circular hardly tried to explain the matter. Rather, it made things more complicated. On June 6, 1972, the Academic Council approved the same resolution without considering the consequences <sup>133</sup>.

Assam Sahitya Sabha and other leaders of Assamese language nationalism rejected this new setup. Jitendranath Goswami, the organization's general secretary, announced in a statement that Assamese should be the only language used for instruction in the Brahmaputra Valley and that English should be kept around for a while to be used for examinations. <sup>134</sup>. The All Assam Students' Union, led by Atul Bora and Prasanna Narayan Chowdhury, supported the Assam Sahitya Sabha's cause and called for the immediate removal of the requirement that questions be answered in Bengali. On June 12, 1972, the academic council convened once more to try to calm the irate Brahmaputra Valley students. They adopted the following resolution:

1. Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in colleges under the jurisdiction of Gauhati University.
2. 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.
3. Students shall have the option to answer either in Assamese or English in the University examination.
4. The above decision shall come into force with the effect from the session 1972-73 in respect of two-year pre-university course and from the session 1974-75 in respect of two-year degree course<sup>135</sup>.

A timeline was established for the total conversion to Assamese as the only language of teaching, in contrast to the former decision where there was none. This Academic Council Resolution from June 12 took on significant significance since it served as the focal point for organising agitations and counter-agitations. The minority language groups publicly expressed their intense displeasure with the Academic Council's choice. The appeal for indefinite strike was made. On August 31, 1972, Kokrajhar College students from minority communities announced a boycott of classes in protest of the Academic Council's decision.

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<sup>133</sup>The Assam Tribune: June 7, 1972

<sup>134</sup>The Assam Tribune, June 9, 1972

In the interest of the student body in particular and of national integration in the Northeastern region generally, the students demanded that the resolution be withdrawn. To ensure a sense of security among the tribals in particular and the other linguistic minorities of the State of Assam, the Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities should continue to offer English as a second language alongside Assamese, according to a resolution passed at a meeting of the Kokrajhar District Bodo Sahitya Sabha on August 30 in Debagaoan. On the other hand, the All Assam Students' Union increased its encouragement to put the Academic Council's decision into action and recognised September 13, 1972, as Demand Day.<sup>136</sup>

There have been reports of around 10,000 students from Guwahati's various institutions skipping class. Additionally, they demanded the termination of the affiliation of any colleges that disagreed with the university's choice of medium. Another turn in the event, however, had a fundamental effect on the overall situation. One of Gauhati University's affiliate colleges, Gurucharan College, in Silchar's district seat, filed a petition with the Supreme Court challenging the Academic Council's ruling. The Academic Council's decision was placed on hold by an order from the Supreme Court.

On September 23, 1972, the State Legislative Assembly presented and approved a wholly dramatic solution to this impasse because there was a glaring linguistic divide throughout the state. First, it was unanimously decided that Assamese will be the primary language of instruction at the university level in the Gauhati and Dibrugarh University, with English remaining an option. Second, a separate university was suggested for the Cachar district as a response to the problems faced by minorities. Sri Indreswar Khaund, the general secretary of the Assam Congress Legislature Party, introduced the resolution in the House. In keeping with the Official Language Act, he continued, "In the spirit of the Official Language Act, this Assembly do further resolve that a separate university be set up with the territorial jurisdiction over the district of Cachar and that the Government of India be moved in the matter"<sup>137</sup>

Despite the fact that the resolution was unanimously approved by the Assembly and seemed to have the potential to end the issue, it actually made things worse. The Sangram Parishad leaders perceived it as a ruse to force Assamese into the colleges in those parts of the Brahmaputra Valley where Bengalis had their majority, while the AASU and Assam Sahitya Sabha were

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<sup>136</sup> The Assam Tribune, September 14, 1972.

<sup>137</sup> The Assam Tribune, September 24, 1972

unwilling to establish a separate university for the Barak Valley. As a result, both the Assamese and Bengali linguistic minorities participated in the protests. The Assam Sahitya Sabha Executive opposed the resolution as soon as it was passed since it was deemed inappropriate for "geographical, economic, and political propriety"<sup>138</sup>.

The GUTA (Gauhati University Teachers Association) declaration was quite important. Devaprasad Baruah presided over a general assembly where he noted,

*The decision of the Assam Assembly regarding establishment of a separate university for Cachar was fraught with grave implication of making Assam a bilingual state which would be detrimental to accepted principles of linguistic states*<sup>139</sup>

The Barak Valley demonstrations were similarly vehement and audible. The convenors of the Cachar Sangram Parishad, Sri Tarapada Bhattacharjee and Sri Nanda Kishore Sinha, characterised the assembly resolution on the medium of instruction as "contrary to interests of linguistic minorities of the state" in a news release. The statement expressed Cachar residents' "widespread resentment and confusion" about the decision. It urged the residents of Cachar to show up to a meeting hosted by the Sangram Parishad on October 2 to voice their objections.

In a printed brochure, some intellectuals passionately objected to the establishment of a separate university, calling the promise of a separate institution to Cachar a heinous betrayal of Assamese linguistic minorities. Thus, the document's signatories included esteemed poet Sri Shaktipada Brahmachary and local journal editor Sri Kalikusum Chowdhury. The Assam Assembly decision was challenged by student leaders in Cachar, who requested a boycott of schools on September 30th across the city to express their "resentment" at the decision.<sup>140</sup> A counter agitation was started by Sangram Parishad in the Cachar district.

The agitation in the Brahmaputra valley was spearheaded by students under the leadership of the All Assam Student's Union. Following this incident, unrest broke out in the Brahmaputra Valley towns. At this point, Assamese received significant political backing from an unexpected source. The Muslim immigrants backed the Assamese people's cause. There have been reports of widespread acts of violence, including looting and arson, in the Nogaon district's Dhing, Doboka, Laharighat, and Moirabari. Violence in these battles primarily

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<sup>138</sup>The Assam Tribune, September 27, 1972

<sup>139</sup>Assam Tribune, 28 September, 1972.

<sup>140</sup>The Assam Tribute, September 29, 1972

included Hindu Bengali settlers and immigrant Muslim peasantry. The Army was eventually called to restore normalcy when the curfew had to be imposed in several locations to stop the bloodshed.

The Assam Chief Minister then made a statement saying that the Government had no intention of enforcing the Assembly resolution because it had been found to be unpopular with the residents of Cachar and the Brahmaputra valley, and that the Assembly would reconsider the resolution at its following regular session. However, this movement also faded away, much like the Movement of the 1960s, but it left behind deep scars in the minds of the tribal population and the minorities.

### **On Conclusion**

It should be remembered that the linguistic movements primarily represented the middle class. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, an organisation of literary organisations made up of middle-class Assamese speakers, advocated for Assamese to be the state's official language. Furthermore, student organisations at Gauhati University were at the forefront of the movement regarding the medium of instruction. The language barrier was not just a cultural issue; it also had to do with employment, albeit only with positions in the state government. As a result, it mostly affected the educated classes.

Community riots broke out in 1960 and 1972 as a result of the symbol of language becoming too powerful and passionate. The rights of many ethnic languages like Dimasá, Tiwa, Hmar, Mising, Bodo, and Deori, among others, were completely disregarded between 1960 and 1972. The Assamese tribal population quickly began to feel alienated, in addition to other compelling reasons, as a result of this neglect and lack of accommodation.

For instance, reading about the Bodos' battle to have their language accepted is fascinating. A memorandum was submitted to the State Government of Assam in January 1953 by the then Chief Minister of Assam, Bishnuram Medhi, and to the other members of the APCC during the sessions held at Dhubri, just two months after the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, calling for the introduction of the Bodo language as a medium of instruction in the schools.

The next stage was to bring the Bodo language to higher levels of education after its successful introduction in primary and secondary schools. It was classified as a Modern Indian Language

in the universities of Gauhati and North Eastern Hill University in 1976 and 1981, respectively, through continuous language management. Bodo received this distinction from Dibrugarh University in 1994, on the other hand. The Gauhati University began offering an M.A. programme in Bodo in 1996. Along with the introduction of Bodo at various educational levels, Bodo writers consistently worked to create high-caliber works of literature. In recognition of their efforts, Sahitya Academy has listed Bodo as one of their listed languages. The Bodos' inclusion in the Constitution's eighth Schedule, however, represents the most important advancement in the administration of their language. Bodo was acknowledged in the Schedule of the Constitution (Ninety-second Amendment) Act, 2003, with Dogri, Maithili, and Santhali.<sup>141</sup>

Accordingly, it can be concluded from the experiences of language movements in Assam after it gained its independence that during this phase, intemperate linguistic chauvinism played a significant role. On the other hand, Assamese identity underwent a process of transition in the state. The Assamese ethnic groups had embraced the tactic of advancing their native tongues while increasingly rejecting the Assamese identity based on language. These ethnic communities' denunciation was very important because it sparked a new, backwards process of language relearning. The most important change was that the very groups of individuals who were earlier expected to be gradually assimilating into the fold of Assamese linguistic identity began to challenge the language-based Assamese identity.

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<sup>141</sup> 92nd Amendment Act, 2003

## Chapter IV

### LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND ASSAM ACCORD

#### 4.1 The Context

The situation in Assam had undergone a significant transition towards the end 1970s. The medium of instruction movement and the state's official language movement had already established Assamese as the official language of the state. But the situation changed after that period. Previously, the emphasis was placed on linguistic nationalism, but there has been a shift in political direction towards anti-foreigner sentiment.<sup>142</sup> Although there were ongoing discussions about language, the issue of 'outsiders' or '*Bohiragoto*' came to the forefront. One of the notable occurrences in the history of post-independent Assam is the Assam movement that took place from 1979 to 1985. Therefore, discussion on the Assam movement and its relation with the language issue requires serious attention.

In this chapter, the focus has been given to how the post-language movement period has influenced the language politics of Assam, especially in developing the linguistic identity of different ethnic communities of Assam. The transformation of Assamese identity is discussed. The chapter primarily focuses on Assamese nationalism and the political dynamics surrounding the *Assam Accord*. Drawing inspiration from diverse scholarly discourse, this chapter studies the transformation in the narrative of modern Assamese identity, particularly in light of the prevailing discussion on indigeneity. It has been argued that the *Assam Accord* played an important role in the transformation of Assamese identity where the focus was shifted more towards the issue of indigeneity. Rather than focusing on the issue of language the identity discourse was replaced by the issue of citizenship. The chapter has argued that in contrast to the 1960s when the dominance of 'Bengalis' posed a threat; the 'foreigners' posed a threat during the time of the Assam movement and this threat was posed by the large influx of 'foreigners' from across the international frontier.

The chapter has argued that, most significant development after the Assam movement is that the language-based Assamese identity was questioned and different communities that were once expected to gradually adopt the Assamese linguistic identity tried to alienate themselves

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<sup>142</sup>Sangeeta Barooah Pisharothy, *Assam The Accord ,the Disccord* (Penguin 2019)

from the Assamese identity. A process of denial regarding associating their identity with the Assamese identity was noticed. Especially in the process of implementation of the Assam accord, the proposal to replace the term 'Assamese people' with 'indigenous people of Assam' represents a substantial change. Consequently, after this episode in history, the language issue in Assam also plays a significant and defining role in the shift in the perception of Assamese identity.

## **4.2 The changing nature of Assamese identity**

The Assamese identity, which is based on language, has been undergoing a period of change. Throughout history, the Assamese language has functioned as a cohesive force for various communities. Nevertheless, the process of standardising the Assamese language during the colonial period had a profound influence on the formation of Assamese identity. In this direction, the struggle for recognition of identity and language in post-colonial Assam by certain communities has played a role in defining the Assamese identity that is based on language.

In the following section the case of Bodo communities, which is one of the important tribal communities of Assam, the struggle for recognition of their language has been explained.

### **4.2.1 The language assertions by the Bodos**

The Bodos comprise a significant population of individuals who speak the Tibeto-Burman languages in the regions of North and East Bengal, Assam, and Burma.<sup>143</sup> The Bodo represents a significant tribal community in the state of Assam. Brian Hodgson, a British ethnographer, initially employed the term to refer to a specific linguistic community within the Tibeto-Burman family.<sup>144</sup> This linguistic category encompasses tribes such as Kachari, Mech, Ra Garo, Chutia, and others. Subsequently, the term 'Bara' was adopted by the Kachari and Mech communities to refer to themselves. They reside in Assam, West Bengal, Nagaland, Tripur Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. However, their focus was primarily on the northern region of the Brahmaputra valley, encompassing the territory of the pre-existing Bodoland Territorial Council.

In 1952, for the development of Bodo language and culture, they established Bodo Sahitya

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<sup>143</sup> From the official page of BODO SAHITYA SABHA: a literary organisation working for the recognition of Bodo language .

<sup>144</sup> Pramod Ch. Bhattacharya, *A Descriptive Analysis of Bodo Language* (G U ,1997)

Sabha and this became the central organisation for the development and promotion of Bodo language.

There is no consensus among Bodo language experts regarding the number of Bodo dialects. According to Phukan Chandra Basumatary, the Bodo dialects of the northern portion of the Brahmaputra Valley fall into two main dialect groups: the Western Bodo Dialect Group and the Eastern Bodo Dialect Group.<sup>145</sup> It is to be noted that the dialect spoken around Kokrajhar gradually emerged as the standard variety of Bodo Language. The existence of a Bodo script known as *Deodhai Hangkho* is frequently asserted.

In producing Bodo textbooks and religious books, however, Christian Missionaries modified the Roman Script. The missionaries' attempts to educate Bodo children in their native language persisted for a considerable length of time, and the various texts they produced served as a point of reference for the eventual demand for the Roman Script. However, during colonial and early post-colonial times, most educated Bodos used the Assamese script to record their language due to its familiarity. A few even employed Bengali script. The Assamese script was quite prevalent, and the majority of early Bodo literature, including the Bodo primer that was formally introduced in 1964, was published in Assamese script.<sup>146</sup>

In 1964, however, some Bodo students living in Shillong raised the issue of the script. On February 22 and 24, 1964, they presented a proposal for the adoption of the Roman alphabet to the sixth annual conference, which was to be convened in Malguri, Goalpara district, on February 22 and 24. As a result, the demand was reintroduced at the 1965 session in Masalpur, where it had little impact. Also in this instance, the outcome was identical. In the eighth session of 1966, the students who supported the demand for the Roman script mobilised the youth delegates and exerted pressure on the leadership of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The senior leaders of the organisation were hesitant to accept the demand outright and sought an out by referring the matter to an Expert Committee charged with scrutinising the script issue. However, the Expert Committee was unable to complete its report within the allotted time. At the ninth annual session of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Expert Committee was dissolved and a new 'Bodo Script Sub-Committee' was established. However, two subsequent initiatives also failed

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<sup>145</sup> Basumatary, Phukan Chandra, 'The Bodo Dialect Group: An Empirical Study' in Praban Borgoyri (ed.), *The Bodo: the Mouthpiece of Bodo Sahitya Sabha*, Rangia: Bodo Sahitya Sabha, 2003

<sup>145</sup> Boro, Anil Kumar, *A History of Bodo Literature*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010.

<sup>146</sup> Boro, Anil Kumar, *A History of Bodo Literature*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010

because the subcommittee lacked consensus. It wasn't until 1968 that Roman script supporters were able to dominate the session and influence the subcommittee's decision.<sup>147</sup>

In the beginning, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha was not receptive to the demand for Roman script for the Bodo language. However, over time, the demand gained steam. In March 1969, at a special conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha convened in Udalguri, the Bodo Script subcommittee submitted its report for Roman script's acceptance. The subcommittee proposed ten recommendations for implementing Roman Script in the Bodo language. As there are only twenty-six alphabets in Roman as opposed to three hundred alphabets including all compound letters and other variants in Assamese, Bengali, or Devnagari Script, the committee believed that the Roman script is simple and fast to learn and write. Roman Script allows one to write without elevating their hand, whereas Assamese, Bengali, and Devnagari Scripts do not. Then it is suitable for simple mechanical manipulation, such as typing, printing, and message transmission, etc. Furthermore, it was argued that Roman Script is economical because it requires less time and labour and therefore costs less. Then it is exclusively appropriate as a medium for recording scientific and technical topics. It also recommended Roman Script on the grounds of maintaining uniformity of spelling and pronunciation amongst all sections of the Bodo people living in different places, states, and countries using different dialects and state languages, as well as to maintain communication between the Bodo-speaking people living in countries outside of India such as Nepal, South Bhutan, East Pakistan, and Western Burma.<sup>148</sup>

In addition, it is frequently observed that the adoption of a simplified script necessitates the adoption of unique characters to represent certain sounds unique to the language. Occasionally, even allegedly simple or straightforward scripts can be difficult or complex. Despite the fact that the recommendations of the Script Sub-Committee were adopted at the general conference held in a village in North Bengal with a substantial Christian Bodo population, opposition from the older generation remained strong. It took a few more years to reach an agreement on adopting a new script and to present a unified front for it. At the 15th Annual Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, convened in Khelmti, near Tezpur, on March 15 and 16, 1974, it was decided to unilaterally introduce the Roman Script into Bodo-medium schools without the education department's permission.

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<sup>147</sup> Daimari, Bijoy Kumar, "The Bodo Movement for the Roman Script", *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Eighth Session, Shillong : NEIHA, 1988

<sup>148</sup> Narzary, K., *Roman (English) Script and Bodo Sahitya Sobha*, Kokrajhar: Bodo Sahitya Sobha, 1993.

As requested by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, a number of Bodo medium institutions taught the Roman Script. In addition to deciding to confront the Sabha, the government stopped paying salaries and other benefits to instructors at schools where the Roman script primer had been implemented. This government action compelled the Sabha to launch a series of protest campaigns. Classes were boycotted and picketing was organised at the district headquarters in all Bodo-dominated regions. Rapidly, the protest transformed into a mass movement with substantial student participation. There were discussions with the Assam administration in September 1974, but no resolution was reached. As a consequence of the escalation of violence, the police opened fire on protesting Bodo volunteers in Bijni and Kokrajhar on November 18, 1974, resulting in a tragic incident. Six volunteers were killed due to police gunfire. Additionally, two CRPF personnel perished at the hands of the violent mob. During the expedition, fifteen volunteers perished in total. However, the protest was postponed on November 28 after the government pledged to engage in dialogue. The federal government intervened because the state government was unable to resolve this complex issue.<sup>149</sup>

Since August 1974, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha's leadership has held discussions with the Central Government. The federal government had a distinct approach to the issue. The Devanagari script was proposed as a compromise script. On April 9, 1975, the two BSS representatives, Ramdas Basumatary and Thaneswar Bodo, yielded to the pressure of the Central government and submitted a revised proposal to the Prime Minister in response to the pressure from the Central government. The duo had adopted the Devanagari script and sought generous assistance from the Central Government to implement it. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha formally adopted the Devanagari script at its 1975 annual conference, which took place from April 25 to April 27. Since then, the Devanagari script has been the official writing system for the Bodo language. However, the script controversy did not go away so quickly and continued to plague the Bodo community until recent times. Large portions of the Bodo intelligentsia, who were at the forefront of the Script Movement, were never satisfied with the compromise formula and demanded the reintroduction of the Roman script on multiple occasions.

They have always acted as a pressure group within BSS, and numerous resolutions in favour of the Roman Script have been passed. Twenty-two years after the introduction of the Devanagari script, the Government of Assam finally acknowledged the adoption of the Roman script in 1997. Thaneswar Bodo, the then-Education Minister of Assam, inaugurated Roman script at a meeting conducted at Hagjer Bhawan on April 12, 1997. In accordance with a

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<sup>149</sup> Narzary, K., Roman (English) Script and Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Kokrajhar: Bodo Sahitya Sabha, 1993.

government decision, the education department prepared a Bodo primer in Roman script, which was to be implemented in 1998. However, after years of using the Devanagari script, there was much debate about the effectiveness of the Roman script. The status and usage of the language have undergone significant change since 1974. As a result of its designation as an Associate Official Language, it came to be utilised in various administrative domains. Multiple classes of students have graduated after studying the language using the Devanagari script. Additionally, orthography has been standardised. The production of dictionaries and grammar books required significant effort from the academics. In addition, a great deal of creative literature has been written in the language using the Devanagari script. With the movement for a separate Bodoland capturing the people imagination, the use of the language was intensified and a large corpus of written materials was produced in the Devanagari script. Thus, re-adoption of the Roman Script posed a significant risk of undoing all progress made over the years. The members of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha engaged in a great deal of deliberation, which sparked numerous public discussions. In the end, at the 39th annual conference held in Simbargaon, Kokrajhar District, it was unanimously resolved that the Devanagari script would continue to be used to write the Bodo language.<sup>150</sup>

However, a portion of the Bodos did not approve of the decision. The Christian Bodos favoured the Roman alphabet. The enmity that arose between the opposing and supporting factions had a very tragic outcome. Bineswar Brahma, the President of Bodo Sahitya Sabha was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in his residence at Bhetapara on August 19, 2000. According to the newspaper report, NDFB ( National Democratic Front of Bodoland) was suspected to have carried out the killing<sup>151</sup>. The NDFB with a sizeable Christian Bodo cadres was in favour of the Roman Script and Binewar Brahma was a votary of Devanagari script. Brahma was the president of Bodo Sahitya Sabha from 1996, till the time he was killed and it was under his aegis that the Sabha had organized discussions, seminars and workshops and after considering the pros and the cons of the issue had finally come to the conclusion that Devanagari script was indispensable to the development of the Bodo language at that juncture.

Commenting on brutal nature of the killing of Bineswaar Brahma, Hiren Gohain, a prominent scholar of Assam has written:

*If the murder is the consequence of the script controversy, it becomes obvious that there are powerful political interests rather than academic and cultural factors behind the controversy.*

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<sup>150</sup> Narzary, K., Roman (English) Script and Bodo Sahitya Sobha (Kokrajhar: Bodo Sahitya sabha, 1993).

<sup>151</sup> The North East Times, August 20,2000

*However, it is time the Bodos close their ranks against powerful external forces trying to use divisions among them to establish their insidious control over them.*<sup>152</sup>

The killing of Bineswar Brahma made it wide open how polarized the Bodo society was over the script issue and to what extent the extreme forces could go to drive their point home. However, the killing brought a united Bodo Sahitya Sabha firmly stand for the adoption of Devnagari Script. The people within Bodo Sahitya Sabha supporting the Roman Script had to switch their loyalties in favour of Devnagari. With the active pursuance of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Devnagri Script got almost a final approval from the majority of the Bodo academicians and litterateurs. Thus the selection of script, the first step of standardization, was not an easy task in Bodo language. It had to undergo many twists and turns before finally accepting Devnagari Script.

The introduction of a language as a medium of instruction or as a subject of curriculum is perhaps the most important step in the language assertion of a community. The struggle of the Bodos to get their language introduced makes an interesting reading. Just after two months of the formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the demand of the introduction of Bodo language as medium of instruction in the schools was raised by submitting a memorandum to the State Government of Assam during the month of January, 1953 to the then Chief Minister of Assam, Bishnuram Medhi and to the other members of the APCC in the sessions held at Dhubri. In the year 1956, an attempt was made by the government to introduce a text book having Bodo words with Assamese equivalent. But that attempt was foiled by the protests from the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The Sabha however took a firm stand on the introduction of Bodo language as a medium of instruction.

Right after the violence of the Official Language Movement that put Assamese language as the Official language of the state, a convention of the Bodo people was held at North Kajalgaon on 11th and 12th November 1960. As decided in the convention, a mass rally of the Bodo people was organized which took the streets of Kokrajhar by storm. After this demonstration, the Government of Assam decided to institute a one-man enquiry committee to report on this issue. Late Mr. Rupnath Brahma, a Cabinet Minister of Assam Government was entrusted with that job. He submitted his report in favour of the demand of introducing Bodo as a medium of instruction at the primary level for the Bodo students. The State Government's decision to

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<sup>152</sup> The North East Times, August, 21,2000

introduce the Bodo medium in the Primary schools came out in the year 1962. It was first introduced in the Primary schools of Kokrajhar Anchalik Panehayat area in 1963. Sri Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Chief Minister of Assam, the introduction was formally inaugurated on the 18th May, 1963 at the Kokrajhar Government High School ground.

The next phase was the up-gradation of Bodo to the level of High School. As Bodo students were to complete the Primary Education in the Bodo Medium by the year 1967, the parents and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha became anxious about the fate of these students. Delegations from the Bodo Sahitya Sabha met the Chief Minister and the other authorities concerned which yielded no result. This was followed by programmes of agitations and talks with the authorities. In the meantime, the batch of many Bodo students had to take admission in the Assamese medium schools. This aggravated the situation further. But what came as the most trying situation for both the Sabha as well as the State Government was the threat of the former to stage picketing in the matriculation centres of Kokrajhar district which was to be held from 12 March 1968. A situation of conflict was saved by the timely intervention of the Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha on 11th March. The next day on 12th March the Chief Minister made the announcement of accepting the demand of introducing Bodo language as a medium of instruction at the secondary stage of education at the floor of the Assam legislative assembly. Accordingly, formal discussions were held between the delegates of the Bodo community and the Government at the various levels and finally the introduction of the Bodo medium of instruction finally inaugurated by Sri Syed Ahmed Ali, State Education Minister on the 23rd September 1968 at the Kokrajhar Govt. Higher Secondary School's premises. After that, the Bodo people had various stages of struggles to include their languages in the different stages of education and administrative units.<sup>153</sup>

After the successful introduction of Bodo language in the primary and high schools, the next step was to take it to further levels of education. Through consistent management of the language, it was put as a Modern Indian Language in the universities of Gauhati and North Eastern Hill University in 1976 and 1981 respectively. Dibrugarh University on the other hand, gave this status to Bodo in the year 1994. In the year 1996, Gauhati University opened M.A course in Bodo. The department has also introduced a certificate course for the non-Bodos. Apart from the introduction of Bodo in different levels of education, there was a consistent

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<sup>153</sup> Dutta, Uddipan. *The Role of Language Management and Language Conflict in the Transition of Post-Colonial Assamese Identity*. PhD diss., Gauhati University, Guwahati.

effort on the part of the Bodo litterateurs to produce quality literatures and as a recognition to their efforts Sahitya Akademy has recognized Bodo as one of their listed languages.

By ordinance dated December 27, 1984, the Government of Assam amended the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 to include Bodo as an official language. It instructed that the Bodo language be used for administrative and other purposes as specified in the districts' schedule and subdivisions with a significant Bodo population. The most significant development in the administration of the Bodos language, however, was its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The Constitution (Ninety-second Amendment) Act, 2003 included Bodo in the Schedule alongside Dogri, Maithili, and Santhali.

Just like the Bodos other the ethnic communities of Assam like Tiwa, Missing, Deori etc also had adopted the strategy of developing their languages and denouncing more and more the language-based Assamese identity. As a result of a long-standing process of language shift towards Assamese, the denunciation by these ethnic communities was incredibly significant. Not only was the process halted, but a new reverse process of relearning the language began. The most significant development was the questioning of the language-based Assamese identity by the very groups that were once anticipated to be slowly assimilating into the Assamese linguistic identity. The proposal to supplant the term 'Assamese people' with 'indigenous people of Assam' represents a significant shift. Thus the language issue post-colonial Assam plays a significant and defining role in the shift in perception of Assamese identity, and language management has far-reaching effects on this shift.

In the postcolonial Assam, many of the tribal communities, such as the Bodos, Rabhas and Misings have also become uncomfortable being clubbed into an Assamese identity that does not recognize their distinct socio-cultural origin.<sup>154</sup> Historically, therefore, many tribal communities did see themselves as part of the pluralistic indigenous population in Assam. Attempts to realise an 'Assamese for Assam' or an 'Assam for Assamese' only have led them to seek withdrawal from the Assamese sub-national formation. In some cases, they have demanded territorial separation.<sup>155</sup> However, the Accord did not define who an 'Assamese' was, and an acceptable or shared definition of the term is yet to evolve.

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<sup>154</sup> Basu, S.P.. *The Fleeing People of South Asia: Selections from Refugee Watch*. (New Delhi: Anthem Press 2008)

<sup>155</sup> S. Baruah. *Durable Disorders: Understanding The Politics of Northeast India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2005)

Political parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI) even demanded that the entire state of Assam be declared a 'tribal state'. In a media conference, CPI leader Promod Gogoi said that *"to preserve the identity of the indigenous tribes and communities as continuous influx of illegal migrants is posing a great danger to the existence of Assamese society, Assam should be declared as a tribal state"*.<sup>156</sup> Neither the AASU nor the CPI, however, clarified the terms 'Assamese', 'indigenous', 'tribal state' or 'immigrant'. Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi said that 'indigenous people' simply means anyone who accepts the Assamese language and culture and considers Assam as their own land. This raised doubts in the mind of many tribal groups, especially the Bodos, that this was another attempt by ethnic Assamese to impose the Assamese language and Assamese culture on the tribal people.

#### 4.2.2 Questioning Assamese Identity

The effect of the general assumption of gradual assimilation of the plains tribes of the Brahmaputra valley into the Assamese speaking caste Hindu fold was so strong that a visionary like Gopinath Bordoloi, while participating in the Constituent Assembly Debates on the issue of providing sixth schedule autonomy to the people of the hills in Assam on 6th September 1949, distinguished between the 'plains tribes' and the 'hills tribes' in Assam, They were progressively assimilated into the culture and folds of other plains people, or, more accurately, the Aryan culture."<sup>157</sup>

Similarly, Sir Edward Gait, the historian of Assam, has predicted a doomed future for the Bodo language in the following words,

*The Bodo dialects, though still spoken in Assam by more than half a million persons, are in their turn giving way to Aryan languages ( Assamese and Bengali) and their complete disappearance is only, a matter of time*<sup>158</sup>

But, one needs to look at the language assertion of the plains tribes of Assam during the post-colonial period and understand how they have successfully retained their languages and their linguistic identity. In the following section I will be dealing with the assertion Bodo language particularly.

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<sup>156</sup> Declare Assam A Tribal State: CPI Urges Govt (2012). [online news] Retrieved from:<http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jan1412/state05>

<sup>157</sup> Constituent Assembly Debates: New Delhi: 1012

<sup>158</sup> Gait, Edward A., *A History of Assam*. (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall 1990)

### 4.3 The Assam Movement : *Bohiragoto bonam Bidexi* - outsiders vs foreigners

The situation in Assam had undergone a significant transition by the end of the 1970s. Gauhati University's medium of instruction and the state's official language had established as Assamese as the official language of the state. But situation changed after that period. Although there were ongoing discussions about language, the issue of 'outsiders' or '*Bohiragoto*' came to the forefront.

One of the notable occurrences in the history of post-independent Assam is the Assam movement that took place from 1979 to 1985. The recent expulsion of foreigners from Assam has brought about a significant shift in the understanding of Assamese identity. Previously, the emphasis was placed on linguistic nationalism, but there has been a shift in political direction towards anti-foreigner sentiment.<sup>159</sup> Therefore discussion on the Assam movement and its relation with the language issue requires serious attention. The movement came to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985, by the leaders of the Movement with the Union Government. A discussion on this Accord and the inherent complexities would highlight the shift that has taken place so far as the Assamese identity is concerned. Clause 6 of the Accord, which reads, 'Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as appropriate shall be given to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of Assamese people, posed a significant challenge.'<sup>160</sup> The word "Assamese people" also created confusion among those whose mother tongues were other than Assamese. These communities have challenged the linguistic identity.

It has been noted that there was a significant influx of Bengali Muslim cultivators from former East Pakistan and modern-day Bangladesh. As demonstrated earlier, this process also caused unease during colonial times. This time, however, the situation had taken on a new hue, as East Bengal had become part of a foreign nation, and the immigration issue could no longer be regarded as an intrastate population movement but as a transnational movement. Prior to the announcement of the Lok Sabha by-election in the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency, the issue had been raised multiple times, but the movement gained momentum when the Lok Sabha by-election in the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency was announced. It was discovered at the time that the number of electors had skyrocketed. Almost immediately thereafter, the

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<sup>159</sup> Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, Assam: The Accord, The Discord (Penguin Random House India, 2019).

<sup>160</sup> Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, Assam: The Accord, The Discord (Penguin Random House India, 2019).

AASU demanded that the election be postponed and the names of foreign nationals be removed from the voter records.<sup>161</sup>

In August 1979, the Sahitya Sabha, several regional political parties, and a youth organisation came together to establish the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). Their objective was to identify foreigners on the electoral lists, remove them from the rolls, and deport them from Assam.

#### **4.4 Axomot Bidexhi - Foreigners in Assam : Changing Perception of 'threat'**

In contrast to the 1960s, when the 'Bengali Hindus' cultural dominance posed a threat; to the AASU, the 'foreigners' posed a threat this time. In order to mitigate the threat posed by the cultural 'other,' the national language (Assamese) was introduced as a counter measure. This time, the threat was posed by the large influx of 'foreigners' from across the international frontier. To highlight the threat to the state's demographic structure, the movement's organisers produced several pamphlets on the steep increase in the population growth rate, based on census data.

In one of their most extensively distributed pamphlets, '*Mass Upheaval in Assam*', the AASU estimated that there were 45 lakh (4.5 million) foreigners in the state (AASU 1980). According to the 1971 census, the population of the state of Assam was 14,625,152 people, so this is a sizeable quantity.

The AASU and AAGSP leaders were very careful to avoid the accusation of being communal, so they took care to explicitly define who 'foreigners' are and framed the issue as a Constitutional issue for India, not just a local or regional one. When they emphasised the 'threat' posed by the large influx of foreigners, they were mindful not to describe it in terms of cultural, religious, or linguistic identity, but rather in terms of national security.

This does not imply, however, that cultural, religious, or linguistic identity has lost significance in modern Assamese society. Although the leaders of the AASU were careful to avoid using a communal tone in their arguments, some of the organisations that supported the movement expressed concern about the threat to Assamese cultural identity posed by the influx of foreigners.

In a pamphlet published by the Guwahati University Teachers Association, it is stated that-

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<sup>161</sup> Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, *Assam: The Accord, The Discord* (Penguin Random House India, 2019).

*Since the majority of immigrants from Bangladesh (and the former East Pakistan) were Muslims, the abnormal increase in the Muslim population in some of these districts (where population growth is rapid) is further evidence that the growth rate was unnatural and the result of large-scale migration.*<sup>162</sup>

Notably, the GUTA was one of the organisations that closely sympathised with the AASU, and several of its members were at the forefront of the movement. Various inferences can be drawn from the student leaders' statements. First, there is a distinct connection between the language movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the anti-foreigners movement in terms of leadership and the movement's focus on preserving Assamese identity. However, we can also see that the leaders of the movements employed a significantly different strategy. In the latter movement, the issue of language was excluded, and students primarily based their claims on population statistics and constitutional rights. In this respect, the AASU was making a serious effort to present a constitutionally permissible secular claim.

At the same time, as evidenced by the pamphlets of the GUTA, some defined the issue in terms of language and religion. Here, we can see how past events have affected the anti-foreigner movement in Assam. For many individuals who endured the language problem and disturbances of the 1960s and 1970s, the newly formulated anti-foreigners movement was merely a continuation of the same struggle.

If we analyse the distinction between two main nationality movements in postcolonial Assam, namely the anti-foreigners movement and the linguistic movements, we will find that in the 1960s and 1970s, Bengali-speaking individuals, particularly Bengali Hindus, were labelled as 'other' due to the language movement. During the anti-foreigners movement, however, the category of 'other' shifted from the cultural category 'Bengal Hindus' to the political category 'foreigners'. In this manner, they attempted to legitimise the claim by highlighting the massive influx of people into Assam. On the basis of the abnormal population growth in Assam, the movement leaders attempted to accentuate the gravity of the issue. In order to avoid a communal tone in their official claims, they did not target any religious or linguistic groups.

Aside from the movement's target, there are a number of significant differences between the linguistic movements and the anti-foreigners movement. A distinguishing feature of the latter is that the leaders were able to inspire the participation of the populace. Notably, the linguistic movements were predominantly middle-class movements. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, a literary organisation comprised of Assamese-speaking middle-classes, demanded that Assamese

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<sup>162</sup>Source : Proceeding of GUTA 1980

become the state's official language. Moreover, student organisations led the movement at Gauhati University regarding the medium of instruction. The linguistic issue was not only cultural, but also employment-related, but only in the state administration. Therefore, it was predominantly associated with the educated classes. In the instance of the movement to change the medium of instruction in universities, the masses and rural peasants remained indifferent.

In the eyes of many Assamese, the movement leaders' ability to represent the interests of the majority, including rural peasants and tribes, was a success. However, some opponents of the movement, insisted that the Assamese upper class used the peasants and the tribes to advance its own interests. For example, Hiren Gohain was of the opinion that it was the Assamese ruling elite who used the 'cudgel of chauvinism' and defeated the non-Assamese working class by inspiring the Assamese peasantry with the dream of restored 'national' glory. In his lengthy article published in Economic and Political Weekly, Amalendu Guha argued that the current anti-foreigners movement is "gentry nationalism" and not "peasant nationalism". Udayon Misra refuted the claim made in the previous paragraph by asserting that Guha himself had previously acknowledged that the conflict of interests involved peasants and tribals.

One of the reasons for the success of the mass mobilisation in the movement was that there was a demand for the deportation of immigrants, which related to the peasants' primary concern regarding land. At the time of the movement, Bengali Muslim immigrants comprised the largest segment of those deemed illegal "foreigners." In the lower and middle portions of Assam, enormous tracts of land were primarily held by peasants. If the movement had been successful and the demand for the deportation of the immigrants had been met, they would have abandoned the land they owned. Thus, the primary demand of the anti-foreigners movement was related to the issue of land, which attracted the interest of rural peasants. In fact, some peasants were told by movement leaders that they would receive the 'foreigners' land if they joined the movement.

This was of vital importance to the plains communities, such as the Bodos. The plains communities of Assam once possessed a vast amount of land, but they have since lost the majority of their traditional territory. Bengali Muslim immigrants colonised a large portion of the land. After India's independence, the Government Order established tribal districts and blocks to reserve land for the tribes and prohibit non-tribal people from acquiring land in tribal areas. However, the system failed to function in many tribal belts and blocks, and the tribes

progressively lost their land to immigrants. The AASU and the AAGSP grasped the initiative and drew public attention to the issue of tribal land alienation. It was possibly the first time that mainstream Assamese had treated the matter seriously.

The communities' support for the movement may have been primarily due to the movement's leaders' emphasis on the issue of land alienation. Concurrently, the leaders of the movement made the controversial demand that the immigrants on government-reserved land be deported. They claimed that a large number of foreigners illegally occupied the government-reserved forest and emphasised the need for the eviction of the illegal encroachers. Given that a large number of plains tribes had also settled in the government forest alongside the immigrants, their demand was met with opposition.

The situation was particularly grave in the Gohpur region, where the Bodos and Assamese had a long-standing dispute over government land. In the Gohpur protected forest, Bodo peasantry had settled and cut down trees. The government officials expelled them with the assistance of the non-tribal Assamese, and then allotted the same lands to the non-tribal Assamese. This resulted in the Gohpur incident of 1983, in which Bodos killed Assamese citizens.

In addition, when the central government and the AASU reached an agreement in 1985, clause 10 of the Memorandum of Settlement (also known as the Assam Accord) addressed government land and tribal regions and blocks. It stated that it will ensure that laws prohibiting encroachment on government land and lands in tribal regions and blocks are strictly enforced. Under such statutes, unauthorised encroachers will be evicted. It will be ensured that pertinent Assam laws restricting foreign ownership of immovable property are strictly enforced.<sup>163</sup>

This clause elicited conflicting reactions from the nations. Although the protection of the tribal belts and blocks was hailed by the plains tribes, the demand for eviction from government land has grave consequences for many of the tribal people who illegally cut down the forest and resided there.

Moreover, in clause 6, it was emphasised that the central government would take special measures to safeguard the cultural, social, and linguistic identity of the Assamese people, while tribal culture and identity were not mentioned. To protect the cultural, social, and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people, the appropriate constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards will be established.

Consequently, the AASU and the AAGSP were able to mobilise the plains tribes during the first phase of the movement, but ultimately failed to recognise their social, cultural, and

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<sup>163</sup> The Assam Accord, 1985

economic requirements. These are some examples to consider when analysing the relationship between tribes and movement leaders and their representation of the rural populace's interests. It should be noted that, despite the movement's success in garnering widespread support, there were differences in the interests and concerns of the urban middle class and the rural peasants. For the middle-class, the movement was about their identity, political dominance, and employment, whereas for the rural peasants, it was about their property and means of subsistence.

However, it should be noted that this was the first time after independence that the people of Assam experienced a movement involving rural peasants on this magnitude. By participating in the movement, the rural populace realised the significance of the concept of nationality in relation to issues affecting their lives, such as land alienation. It may also be the first time they encounter the concept that Muslim immigrants are '*bidexi*', or foreigners. The notion that they are the original inhabitants of the land and therefore have the right to own the land, whereas the immigrants are 'foreigners' with no legal or political rights and should therefore be evicted, must have had a profound effect on rural peasantry.

However, when the leaders of the movement failed to satisfy the economic and political aspirations of the plains tribes, their disappointment grew exponentially. This will be addressed in the following section.

Analysis of the 1960s and 1980s claims made by movement leaders reveals that the rhetoric used by the leaders of the Assam movement had undergone significant change. The leaders of the anti-foreigners movement attempted to define "foreigners" in a legally and constitutionally sound manner, and they have remained steadfast in their claims that "foreigners" should be deported from Assam. In the later stages of the movement, Bengali Muslims emerged as the primary component of the category 'foreigner,' or the significant 'other. During the 1983 state legislative assembly election, this was notably true. Obviously, this was not explicitly stated by movement leaders, but the anti Muslim bias was so blatant that many Assamese Muslims who had initially supported the movement turned against it. In Assam's past, so-called 'communal disturbances' involving the Hindu and Muslim communities were rare. Nevertheless, during the election of 1983, Muslims became the target of violence. Although the primary target was immigrant Muslims and there was no large-scale violence against Assamese Muslims, the latter felt at risk of becoming victims.

#### **4.5 Little nationalism turned Chauvinist : The debate**

The movement started a new era of debate on the question of nationalism in context of Assam. In a series of articles written in the Economic and Political Weekly, many scholars were interpreting Assamese nationalism question from different viewpoints. The following section will highlight some of the important aspects of this debate.

In his article, Amalendu Guha discusses the irrationality of Assam's foreigner movement and attempts to analyse the nationality question through the lens of this movement. According to the author, the movement of 1979-1980 is neither spontaneous nor natural. Instead, it is grounded in history. Contrary to popular belief, he argued that the movement was not the result of student initiative. In contrast, the upper-middle-class segment of society controlled the press and the public sphere, and it was they who initiated the movement. According to Guha, the planning and coordination of its preparations began in 1978. Guha's primary argument is that the Assam movement is national in appearance, chauvinist and undemocratic in content, and employs proto-fascist tactics. He concludes that the solution to the influx of foreigners lies primarily in assimilation and the closure of the Bangladeshi border, not in deportation. According to him, one of the most important benefits of this movement is that it helps people comprehend the chauvinist nature and goals of middle-class leadership. This article by Guha sparked a discussion on Assamese nationalism among the region's intellectuals. It is essential to emphasise their perspective in the context of this study. <sup>164</sup>

Hiren Gohain concurs with many of Guha's observations. He asserts that Guha has ingeniously discussed the various facets of this movement, but Guha's analysis can be contested on numerous grounds. He analyses the role of the left in the current crisis in his article. In tracing the origins of this movement, he contends that the medium of instruction movement that occurred in Assam in 1972 was the impetus for this movement's development. In his discussion of the role of the press, Gohain attempts to demonstrate that social movements do not occur in a vacuum. According to him, this movement had nothing to do with the relationship between the centre and the state, but arose from internal politics. He discussed the hegemonic authority and role of the Assamese middle class in advancing the movement. It evolved into a power struggle between the Congress and the BJP. He states that although the current action has adopted a slogan based on the tactic that Assamese are concerned about the presence of foreigners, the primary concern of Assamese is their inability to economically and politically

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<sup>164</sup> Amalendu Guha, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80," *Economic and Political Weekly*, no. 10 (1980): 1699-1720

regulate immigration. This is where Gohain sees the role of the left, stating that leftists in Assam should advocate for various development programmes that expose the central government's neglect of the state. He believed that the unilingual state of Assam and the rise of separatist ideas must be combated.<sup>165</sup>

Udayan Misra criticised Guha on numerous grounds in his article. Guha fabricated historical facts to prove that the current movement in Assam is nothing more than a chauvinist signal. However, Amalendu Guha responded to all of these criticisms in an April 1981 EPW article. First, Misra contends that Guha gave the sole credit for separating Sylhet from Assam to Assamese middle-class chauvinists. According to Misra, Guha believed that only the Assamese middle class disapproved of Sylhet's incorporation into the Assam province. While refuting criticism, Guha notes in his article that Congress committees from both Assam valleys supported the separation of Sylhet from Assam on the question of Sylhet. In light of this, he asserts that Misra of Guha's claim that the demand for the separation of Sylhet between 1874 and 1946 was a demand of the Assamese middle class alone is completely unfounded. Misra also alleged that Guha created chauvinists out of some pre-independence Assam congressmen renowned for their pan-Indian perspective. In this context, he talked about a quotation by Tarunram Phukan<sup>166</sup>, a leading congressman of that time. Guha quoted Phukan in the wrong context and sense, according to Misra. Guha quoted Phukan and said that while talking about nationality, Tarunram said, "A rising nationality shows signs of life by extending domination over others" whereas the correct translation according to Misra would be "The sign of life of a rising nationality is the influence, it extends over others". On this accusation, Guha says that by quoting Tarunram, he intended to prove that even a man with an all-India outlook can be affected by the chauvinism of Assamese nationalism. Guha tried to give his observation on the upsurge of Assamese nationalism.

According to him, "Nationalism is both a spiritual sentiment and an ideology that, regardless of its class origins, reaches out to the peasantry and can therefore attain a mass character." In addition, it cannot be termed peasant nationalism until the peasantry become its driving force with an anti-feudal agenda. During the emergence of the Assam movement, Guha was unable to recognise the peasant nationalist forces within Assamese nationalism. As a result, Assamese nationalism was limited to a minimal concept of nationalism and could not escape anti-Bengali sentiments of the past. Consequently, he also defended the mass participation of a distinct

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<sup>165</sup> Hiren Gohain, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: A Comment," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 9 (1981): 339-340.

<sup>166</sup> Tarunram Phukan (1877-1939) popularly known as *Desbhakta*, was a prominent political leader of Assam.

segment of society in this movement and argued that its origins are economic. Many community members joined this movement due to economic stagnation, homelessness, and unemployment. The chauvinistic tendencies usurped the original goals and objectives of that movement. Their demands for local autonomy in delineated tribal areas, employment reservations, the return of all transferred lands to their original tribal owners, and mother-tongue instruction in schools are disregarded by the movement. According to Guha, they joined the movement for this purpose. Guha wished to offer a solution to the problem of small-scale nationalism transformed into chauvinism. In the context of Assam, he argued that the assimilation of various subgroups into the Assamese population could be a solution. In this regard, linguistic protection of a distinct group of people, autonomy for linguistic regions, and preservation of diverse cultures and ethnicities would be beneficial. However, it is unclear how these solutions can be advantageous in light of anti-foreigner sentiments. The entirety of the discussion on Assamese nationalism highlighted aspects of Assamese nationalism as well as some of its detractors.

Apurba Kumar Baruah covers four topics: the rise of student authority in Assam, Assamese nationalism, Assamese-Bengali relations, and the role of the middle class in Assam's politics. This work also examined the numerous subnationalist tendencies of Assamese nationalism and classified them as such. The author also attempts to analyse the nature and numerous contributing factors of Assamese nationalism. Only during the Assam movement, he argued, did the nationalities question in Assam come to the forefront. When lesser nationalities assert their identity, the Indian nation-state faces a significant threat, according to the author. In addition, the author expressed his displeasure with the notion that, in a multiethnic or multicultural society, the dominant nationality will gradually assimilate the minority nationalities, or that various communities will eventually establish their own independent nation-states. Consequently, the author views the emergence of smaller nationalities as a constant menace. According to the author, he also discussed the development of the Indian middle class, which is an ally of the bourgeoisie. In various regions of India, a dominant community can always exert influence over the subordinate communities. The nationality dilemma of Assam was discussed in this context. According to the author, the emergence of Assamese nationality was a response to Bengalis. While discussing the role of immigrants, he discussed their economic dominance and its impact on the social and cultural life of Assamese

society. It was also discussed how the Assamese middle class reacted to these immigrants and formed various organisations to defend their interests.<sup>167</sup>

In the post-colonial period, the middle class initiated various populist movements to recognise Assamese as the official language, to establish refineries, to oppose foreigners, etc. The author contended that the fear that Assamese may be reduced to a minority in their homeland is not merely a symptom of fear psychosis, as Hiren Gohain and Amalendu Guha have claimed; rather, the threat is real. He also examines the propensity of some historians to interpret the chauvinistic tendencies of Assamese society in terms of the nefarious intentions of the Assamese-speaking middle class. Amabikagiri, for instance, regarded Assamese nationalism as a linguistic nationalism and believed that the Assamese would be oppressed if they did not rise their national consciousness. He viewed Assamese nationalism as a means to safeguard the economic interests of the people in their homeland. To protect employment, markets, and even their language and culture, he argues that Assamese must strengthen their nationalistic sentiments. According to the author, researching the Assamese middle class will help us comprehend the tension between Assamese and Bengali in Assam. In addition to blaming the Bengali middle class for the rise of anti-Bengali sentiments, he also blamed the Bengali upper class. The fact that the author does not discuss the role of the Bengali establishment in fostering anti-Bengali sentiments is one of the book's major flaws. In addition, focusing solely on the middle class cannot provide a complete picture of the conflicts of the era.

#### **4.6 The transition of Assamese Identity: Significance of 'language' issue**

The Assamese identity founded on language has been in transition. Historically, the Assamese language has served as a unifying force for diverse communities. However, the standardisation of the Assamese language during the colonial era had the greatest impact on the conception of a nation. Two significant developments in post-colonial language administration in Assam have contributed to the erosion of the language-based Assamese identity. The first development is the conscious effort of the immigrant Muslim community of East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh origin to return Assamese as the mother tongue in all post-independence census operations. Nonetheless, the second and most significant development is the

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<sup>167</sup> Apurba Kumar Baruah, *Social Tensions in Assam: Middle Class Politics* (Purbanchal Prakash, 1991)

consolidation of identities among the various ethnic groups of the Brahmaputra Valley, also known as the "plains tribes."

#### **4.6.1 Immigration, language, and the Assamese identity**

In the twenty-first century, immigration from East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh is essential to the sociopolitical existence of Assam. It has altered the region's demography and bears directly on the issue of language and identity in Assam. Within a century, the region's demography changed irreversibly. This modification reinforces the Assamese identity manifested through various "identity-movements," most notably the Assam Movement and the subsequent trajectory.

Although it is widely acknowledged that expatriates continue to make up a significant portion of Assam's population, no precise estimate of their number is available. This has led to wildly inaccurate estimates of the number of immigrants made by various groups. Significantly, the influx of immigrants precipitated an identity crisis among the indigenous Assamese. The presence of these migrants, according to Myron Weiner, has disrupted the very foundations of the Assamese social structure.<sup>168</sup> The concern that illegal immigrants would outnumber the indigenous population sparked a six-year-long movement known as the Assam Movement beginning in 1979. As a result of the demise of Hiralal Patowary, MP for the Mangaldoi constituency, the voter list was revised and many foreigners were discovered, which led to a by-election.<sup>169</sup> On June 8, 1979, the AASU initiated the Assam Movement with a 12-hour Assam bandh under the direction of its president Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and general secretary Bhrigu Kumar Phukan. It was argued in a memorandum that the negative effects of continuous immigration are evident in every aspect of life.<sup>170</sup> Tensions have already emerged in the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres, and both the federal and state administrations must act before it is too late. During the six-year duration of the Assam Movement, Assam experienced a very turbulent period in its history. However, the movement ended on August 15, 1985, when the Government of India, AASU, and Gana Sangram Parishad signed the historic Assam Accord.

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<sup>168</sup> Weiner, M., *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

<sup>169</sup> Hussain, Monirul, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*, Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt Ltd in associations with Har-Anand, 1993

<sup>170</sup> Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India on 2nd February , 1980

While the majority of Hindu immigrants steadfastly adhered to their linguistic heritage, the majority of Muslim immigrants adopted an entirely different approach. In the 1951 and subsequent censuses, they consciously decided to adopt Assamese as their mother tongue and return it to the public domain. This decision regarding Muslim immigrants has helped the Assamese language maintain its majority status according to the census. The Assamese-speaking community is also making efforts to accommodate the Muslim community of East Bengal origin. There is an effort to accommodate the Muslim immigrant community. They have been referred to as Neo-Assamese or *Na-Asamiya*. *Na-Asamiya* has been progressively eliminated in favour of Asamiya or Assamese. However, the process of incorporating a significant portion of the population into the Assamese identity solely on the basis of identifying the language as their mother tongue in the Census has been deemed problematic by some academics. Udayon Misra, for instance, has raised this complex question and illustrated the language-based Assamese identity problem, which accommodates a large portion of immigrants with a vastly distinct cultural background but not a large group of ethnic communities with cultural affinities. According to his assertions,

*Those who view the Na-Asamiyas as an integral part of the Assamese community, which they undoubtedly are, should not disregard the sociocultural and religious differences that exist between the majority Hindus and the Na-Asamiyas, despite the tendency to minimise these differences*<sup>171</sup>

While discussing the language management in post-colonial Assam, it is important not to overlook the concerns expressed regarding the integration of the East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladeshi immigrant community into the Assamese identity.

#### **4.7 Defining 'Assamese': positions by AASU and Assam Sahitya Sabha**

Twenty years after the signing of the Accord, the Government of Assam established a committee under the Additional Chief Secretary (Home and Political Affairs) to develop an appropriate definition of the term "Assamese." Accordingly, two important meetings were held in Assam Secretariat between the delegates from the literary bodies representing different communities in Assam including, Asam Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Karbi Lamet Amei, Missing Agom Kebang, Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra, Deuri Sahitya Sabha, Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha, Hmar Sahitya Sabha, Nikhil Rabha Sahitya Sabha and Char Chapori Sahitya

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<sup>171</sup>Misra, Udayon,- *The Transformation of Assamese Identity*, Shillong: North East India History Association, 2001

Parishad on September 6, 2005, and October 1, 2005. Two proposals for the definition of 'Assamese community' were discussed at a meeting conducted on September 6, 2005; one was proposed by AASU (All Assam Students' Union) and the other by Asam Sahitya Sabha. AASU proposed that the solution to the problem of defining Assamese identity can be found from two perspectives: solely anthropological and a workable solution centred on a cut-off year. As a workable remedy, it was proposed that NRC (National Register of Citizens) 1951 registrants and their descendants be referred to as Assamese. The proposal of the Asam Sahitya Sabha defines Assamese as 'Persons enlisted in 1951 and their descendants who speak Assamese or one of the indigenous languages of Assam.' The delegates from other literary organisations, on the other hand, opined that a thorough discussion was necessary due to the gravity of the issue and postponed their decisions until the next meeting.

However, there were internal discussions within and between the literary bodies. In a meeting conducted on September 20, 2005 in Guwahati, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha adopted the following resolutions regarding the definition of Assamese identity:

*The house has observed that in spite of assimilation, some communities are still living with their distinctive language, culture, tradition, rituals and historical background at the most. Under the circumstances the house comes to an unanimous decision that the "Assamese" are those whose mother tongue is Assamese and those who discarding their own language and culture accepted and assimilated with the Assamese language and culture, but the communities like Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa etc. having their own identity with distinctive language, culture, heritage and historical background do not come under the purview of Assamese. Rather they are indigenous inhabitants of Assam and not the Assamese.*<sup>172</sup>

Similar resolutions were passed by other linguistic community organisations as well. According to a resolution passed on September 28, 2005, Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra took the solution, "*Tiwas are not Assamese but indigenous people of Assam with its own heritage, tradition, language and culture.*"<sup>173</sup>

In a joint meeting of the literary bodies of different linguistic groups held under the aegis of Bodo Sahitya Sabha on 30th September, 2005 under the presidency of Sri Brajendra Kr. Brahma, President, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, it was proposed that since ethnic groups such as Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa, etc. have their own identities with a distinct language, culture,

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<sup>172</sup> From the proceedings of the Meeting of the Bodo Experts on Definition of "Assamese", Date- 20-09-2005

<sup>173</sup> From the Proceeding of the meeting of Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra on 28-9-2005

heritage, and historical background, the word " Assamese" in Clause No. 6 of the Assam Accord, 1985 is too ambiguous to include the aforementioned communities; therefore, " Indigenous people of Assam" should replace " Assamese."<sup>174</sup>

The following day, on 1st October 2005, delegates of various literary bodies and the Government of Assam met at the State Secretariat, where it was unanimously resolved that "Assamese" should be replaced with "Indigenous people of Assam." The definition of indigenous was as follows: "The indigenous people of Assam are those who have assimilated with the land, water, air, people, and indigenous culture of Assam, and who are accepted by Assam's larger society" Thus, the endeavour to define "Assamese" had to be abandoned, and it was decided that the beneficiaries of Clause No. 6 should be determined not by the language, but by the "indigeneity" of the people. Evidently, the Assam Sahitya Sabha had no alternative but to accept the decision of the September 30th meeting of the literary bodies of various linguistic groups convened by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. When viewed historically, Sabha's inability to provide a definition of "Assamese people" signifies a shift in the very construction of Assamese identity. The proposed alternative, "Indigenous people of Assam," is just as imprecise as the original, "Assamese community." Nonetheless, the replacement has brought the Assamese-speaking community closer to parity with other natives of Assam.

The definitional crisis discussed in the context of the Assam Accord is not the only indication that the perception of Assamese identity is shifting. The non-implementation of the Assam Official Language Act and the dearth of public concern regarding the matter are additional indicators of a shift in the linguistic basis of Assamese identity. We have elaborately discussed the unrest surrounding the implementation of the Assam Official Language Act. However, the administration has no interest in implementing the Act after its implementation. A glance at some of the circulars sent by the Political Department of the Assam State Secretariat to the heads of various government departments regarding the implementation of the Official Language Act reveals the dire situation. I'll now discuss a particular circular. At least on Mondays, it was requested in a circular distributed on March 4, 2002, that the official language be used. It is indicative of how infrequently the official language is used in the administration that a special request must be made to use it on Mondays. It is quite paradoxical that in 1960

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<sup>174</sup> From the letter to Sri PK Choudhury, IAS, Principal Secretary to the Government of Assam, Implementation of Assam Accord Department, Assam Secretariat, Dated 18-12-2007

there was so much fervour over the issue of official language. Assam Sahitya Sabha has been attempting to incite comparable fervour to that of 1960, but with little success.

To understand the challenges of defining Assamese identity in the contemporary context, we must distinguish between the communities that contested the political hegemony of the Brahmaputra Valley-based Assamese-speaking elites and received their territorial units by 1972 and the ethnic communities living in the Brahmaputra Valley who speak languages other than Assamese. Due to a deliberate colonial policy of segregation, hill communities such as the Khasis, Nagas, Garos, Mizos, etc. were historically culturally and geographically peripheral to the Brahmaputra valley. But because the tribal communities of the Brahmaputra valley had lived so closely with the caste Hindu Assamese-speaking society, it was believed that their search for identities was inextricably linked to that of the Assamese-speaking people. In the Government of India Act of 1935, a distinction was made between the 'hill tribes' and the 'plains tribes'. The hills tribes were afforded special protections, which were later enshrined with modifications in the sixth schedule of the Constitution of Independent India. No such protection was accorded to the 'plains tribal communities', as historically the tribal people of the plains, despite being numerically the largest tribal community in the region and constitutionally designated as scheduled tribes, were viewed as indistinguishable from the non-tribal people of the plains in every other respect. This perception was influenced by historical considerations that regarded the plains tribes as an inalienable part of the still-developing Hindu Assamese society. In contrast to the Hill Tribes, the Plains Tribes have lived too long in close proximity to the Hindu caste population of Assam.

One of the important contribution of Assam movement was the the rise of regionalism. Regionalism as a political ideology and the formation of regional parties in Assam can be attributed to the rise of subnational consciousness among the local population. Prior to 1985, regional parties in Assam were either minor actors or nonexistent. Most regional parties in Assam arose as a result of an imminent political issue, such as the illegal immigration of Bangladeshis into Assam, which gave rise to the Asam Gana Parishad (AGP). The AGP, which ruled the state for two mandates from 1985 to 1990 and 1996 to 2001, reflects the political ambitions of the Assamese ethnic group. Post-1985, when the party system in Assam shifted from the dominance of the Indian National Congress to a multi-party system, the slow and dormant process of ethnicities being politicised gained abrupt momentum. The proliferation of political parties was directly related to the increasing demand for self-government by indigenous and other communities. This resulted in numerous demands from various

stakeholders, frequently at cross-purposes and in opposition. As the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) took power in Assam in 1985 and became the representative of non-indigenous Assamese language speakers, electoral politics in the state began to reflect the multiethnic reality of the state. Other communities soon formed their own political parties to demand self-government. The Karbis, for instance, were represented by the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), while Bengali Muslims and Hindus were represented by the United Minority Front (UMF). The Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) represented the Bodos, while parties such as Gana Sakti represented the Mishings. In 2005, Bengali Muslims also founded their own political party in Assam, bringing a new dynamic to the region's politics. The President of this new party, the Assam United Democratic Front (later renamed the All India United Democratic Front), Badruddin Ajmal, emerged as the most influential political figure after 2005. Recent politics in Assam have revealed the growing political influence of migrant Bengali Muslims, while the marginalisation of indigenous and non-indigenous natives has remained a significant issue.

Returning to the analysis of the situation in Assam in 1983, Bengali Muslim cultivators were perceived as the 'other' in two distinct ways. In addition to being the immigrant community, they were the religious "other." As previously argued, in Assam, the distinction between natives and foreigners has been the most significant ethnic marker. However, during the 1983 election, Bengali Muslims became the most conspicuous 'enemy' due to their support of the candidate. The tone was so anti-Muslim that the indigenous Assamese Muslims, who identify as part of the Assamese nationality and differentiate themselves from the immigrant Muslims, turned against the movement. In the next chapter the issue of the Assamese Muslims will be raised. There have been no large-scale clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Assam since the movement, and it appears that Assamese Muslims are once again well incorporated into the Assamese nationality. However, the issue of the influx of foreigners remains a significant concern in Assam, and there is growing concern regarding the rise of the Muslim population.

### **On Conclusion**

The anti-foreigners movement had a significantly different character than the linguistic movement. At this time, the large number of immigrants prompted the Assamese to anticipate a significant demographic shift within their state. They feared becoming a minority in their native country. This was the most significant turning point in Assam's postcolonial movement.

In addition, leaders of the anti-foreigner movement could obtain mass support by emphasising the issue of land. The linguistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s were a struggle between the local middle-class elite and the middle-class minorities. Since the deportation of the immigrants, specifically the Muslim peasants of Bengali origin, was connected to the issue of land, a large number of rural peasants, including tribes, participated in the movement.

The shift in the movement's objective prompted a shift in the target of its violence. In the 1960s, Bengali Hindus and Marwaris were the target of the disturbances. However, the victims of the anti-foreigners movement were predominantly Muslim immigrants. Prior to the 1983 election, communities in Assam were divided on the issue of boycotting the election. The Assamese attempted to prevent the Muslims from voting, resulting in violence between the two communities. Through the experience of the violence, the line between 'we' and 'they' ('self' and 'other') was redrawn and reinforced. The most significant development was the questioning of the language-based Assamese identity by the very groups that were once expected to gradually adopt the Assamese linguistic identity. The proposal to replace the term 'Assamese people' with 'indigenous people of Assam' represents a substantial change. Consequently, the language issue in postcolonial Assam plays a significant and defining role in the shift in the perception of Assamese identity, and language management has far-reaching effects on this shift.

This chapter primarily focuses on Assamese nationalism and the political dynamics surrounding the *Assam Accord*. Drawing inspiration from diverse scholarly discourse, this chapter studies the transformation in the narrative of modern Assamese identity, particularly in light of the prevailing discussion on indigeneity. It has been argued that the *Assam Accord* played an important role in the transformation of Assamese identity where the focus was shifted more towards the issue of indigeneity. Rather than focusing on the issue of language the identity discourse was replaced by the issue of citizenship. The chapter has argued that in contrast to the 1960s, when the dominance of 'Bengalis' posed a threat; the 'foreigners' posed as a threat this time.

## Chapter V

### LANGUAGE AND ASSAMESE IDENTITY IN RECENT TIME

This thesis seeks to investigate the significance of language in determining Assamese identity. I have illustrated the various phases of Assamese identity formation and the function of language throughout the thesis. However, the study of the transformation of Assamese identity would be incomplete without a discussion of recent time, particularly in light of the recent implementation of the National Register of Citizens(NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act(CAA). This chapter concentrates primarily on the recent transformation of Assamese identity, particularly since the rise of the BJP. Particular emphasis is placed on the anti-CAA movement era.

#### 5.1 Assamese identity in post Assam movement phase

Establishing the Assamese identity in Assam following the Assam movement is characterised by certain narratives. One narrative revolves around the conflict between immigrants and nationals that occurred during the Assam movement period, which began in 1979. During this phase, the concept of Assamese identity was constructed in opposition to immigrants, who were perceived as the primary threat to the Assamese identity. The second narrative focuses primarily on the concept of preserving the '*Jati-Mati-Bheti*' (Identity, Land and Base) for which many political parties were formed after the Assam Movement. A discussion on the formation of Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), one of the state's most influential regional political parties in the following section will add to the discussion of this point. In almost every election, preservation of Assamese identity becomes a central issue of all the political parties. For example, prior to the 2016 General elections, many political leaders of Assam, particularly the BJP member Himanta Biswa Sharma (current Chief Minister of Assam), attempted to evoke the memory of Lachit Borphukon, the Assamese hero who triumphed over the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671 AD, during their election speeches.<sup>175</sup> He was mainly targeting Badaruddin Ajmal (All India United Democratic Front chief), an aspiring candidate for the Chief Minister, and requested the people not to vote for his party and its alliances. He wanted

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<sup>175</sup> The Hindu. "Jati, Mati, Bheti, and Sarma's Invocations of War Glory." March 31, 2016.

to convey that the primary target of every Assamese voters should be to secure Assamese identity and only the BJP and its alliance can work towards it. The another dominant narrative that developed recently is around the issue of language and religion, where Bengali-speaking Muslims, commonly known as the *Miya* community are seen as a threat to Assamese identity. In light of this, the extent to which the language issue has dominated the construction of Assamese identity over the years is a crucial question, and I will address it in detail in the following section. I will concentrate on three key themes: the rise of regionalism and the issue of language, the significance of '*Miya*' question and the issue of language. It will concentrate primarily on the recent transformation of Assamese identity, particularly since the rise of the BJP. Particular emphasis will be placed on implementation of NRC and the anti-CAA movement of recent time.

### 5.1.1 Rise of regionalism

One of the results of the Assam movement and the Assam accord was the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) formation, which initiated a new phase of regionalism in Assam politics. It was believed that it was the only party which would safeguard the future of people living in Assam.<sup>176</sup> The 1985 election was a turning point in the politics of Assam as, for the first time in Assam history a regional party won the election in Assam. All Assam Student Organisation of Assam initiated the Assam Movement along with nine other socio-political and cultural organisations of Assam for the identification of foreigners and their deportation.<sup>177</sup> It was the first regional party which could break the 'one-party dominance' of Indian National Congress. It occupied the power between 1985 and 1996 and became an epitome of regionalism. The coming up of AGP has generated new hope for the people of Assam, and they believe that it will act as the guardian of Assamese people's language, culture, and identity. The victory of AGP in the 1985 election was considered as the triumph of regionalism. However, it enjoyed a second term in office during 1996-2001.

The protection of national identity and integrity of the Assamese community in the state of Assam was the main objective of the AGP. It aimed for establishing a 'classless society'. Ensuring rights to the people of Assam by politically organizing people irrespective of caste,

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<sup>176</sup> Das, Samir. *Regionalism in Power*. (Omsons Publication, 1997)

<sup>177</sup> The nine organisations were All Assam Student Union (AASU), Assam Jatiyadabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Assam Sahitya Sabha, Assam Jatiyadabadi Dal (AJD), Assam Yuva Samaj (AYS), All Assam Tribal Youth Association, All Assam Tribal Student Students Union, Prbanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP), Young Lawyers Forum (Guwahati), *Assam Sukti Aru Ananya* by Hiten Mahanta, *Julu Tulu Prakashan*, Guwahati

creed, religion and language was another objective of AGP. To maintain self-sufficient economy for Assam was another major objectives of this party.<sup>178</sup>

**Table: Performance of Political parties in the assembly election 1985<sup>179</sup>**

Name of the Party	Election to Assam Legislative Assembly	Election to Lok Sabha
AGP	64	7
CONGRESS	25	4
UMF	17	1
PTCA	3	1
CONGRESS(S)	4	1
CPI(M)	2	0
Independents	10	0
Total No of seats	126	14

It is interesting to note that during the time of Assam Movement, the leaders of the movements were divided on the basis of settlement of the foreigner's issue with the center. However, the AASU leaders mainly believed that the Assam Accord should be signed immediately. However, the result of this historic achievement of signing the Accord was the formation of AGP. Nevertheless, later on, AGP somehow failed to carry on the promised they made, and they had to face the consequences later in the election result.<sup>180</sup>

The issue of the base year for the expulsion of foreigners in Assam was another point of contention among the leaders. The AASU and AAGSP leaders were for the base year 1951 for the detection of foreigners, whereas central government especially home minister Jail Singh and prime minister Indira Gandhi and proposed March 25,1971 as the final date. The base year

<sup>178</sup> Source : *The constitution of AGP*, published by Hitendra Nath Goswami.

<sup>179</sup> Niru Hazarika, , *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 1988

<sup>180</sup> Das, Samir. *Regionalism in Power*(Omsons Publication, 1997)

controversy began in Assam's intellectual community. Numerous intellectuals, including Nirupama Bargohain(1932-), Hiren Gohain( 1939-), and Homen Bargohain(1932-2021), proposed 1971 as the base year. People believed that they were traitors and wanted to promote immigration to Assam, so they were subjected to social boycott and personal attacks. <sup>181</sup>

One of the important contributions of Assam movement was the rise of regionalism. Regionalism as a political ideology and the formation of regional parties in Assam can be attributed to the rise of subnational consciousness among the local population. Prior to 1985, regional parties in Assam were either minor actors or nonexistent. Most regional parties in Assam arose as a result of an impending political issue, such as the illegal immigration of Bangladeshis into Assam etc. Post-1985, when the party system in Assam shifted from the dominance of the Indian National Congress to a multi-party system, the slow and dormant process of ethnicities being politicized gained momentum. The proliferation of political parties was directly related to the increasing demand for self-government by indigenous and other communities. This resulted in numerous demands from various stakeholders, frequently at cross-purposes and in opposition. As the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) took power in Assam in 1985 and became the representative of Assamese language speakers, electoral politics in the state began to reflect the multi-ethnic reality of the state. Other communities soon formed their own political parties to demand self-government. The Karbis, for instance, were represented by the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), while Bengali Muslims and Hindus were represented by the United Minority Front (UMF). The Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF) represented the Bodos, while parties such as Gana Sakti represented the Mishings. <sup>182</sup>In 2005, Bengali Muslims also founded their own political party in Assam, bringing a new dynamic to the region's politics. The President of this new party, the Assam United Democratic Front (later renamed the All India United Democratic Front), Badruddin Ajmal, emerged as the most influential political figure after 2005. Recent politics in Assam have revealed the growing political influence of migrant Bengali Muslims, while the marginalization of indigenous and non-indigenous natives has remained a significant issue.

## **5.2 National Register of Citizens,Citizenship Amendment Act and the Assamese identity**

Ever since the publication of the first draft of National Register of Citizens, Assam has become the epicenter of citizenship debate. The first draft of NRC in Assam has identified 28,983,677

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<sup>181</sup> Borah, Dilip, and Hiren Gohain, eds. *Assam Andolon: Pratistuti aru Falasruti*.(Guwahati: Banalata, 2001).

<sup>182</sup> Das, Samir. *Regionalism in Power*.(Omsons Publication, 1997)

as valid citizens of India in Assam and a total number of 4,007,707 applicants could not make it to the first draft.<sup>183</sup> National and global media sharply reacted about the exclusion of over 4 million names of residents from the draft NRC.

There are various actors involved in the process of conceptualization, evolution, articulation and implementation of the NRC Assam which has adopted one of the most discussed approaches to the issue of inclusive citizenship. The cut-off date of 24 March 1971 for granting citizenship, the inclusion of a huge chunk of foreigners from 1966 to 1971 through a legal and political process and amendment of citizenship laws till 2004 are some of the testimonials of such an accommodative character. The cut-off date for a person to be declared as a foreigner for all other states in India was 19 July 1948, and in case of Assam, it was 24 March 1971. Assam took the burden of accommodating foreigners for additional 23 years, from 1948 to 1971, unlike any other state. Incidentally, Assam witnessed the highest number of refugees and immigrants from across the border in those years.

If one tries to understand the history of NRC, one has to go back to the history of how the Assamese nationality was gradually dominated by the excessive immigration from East Bengal. As discussed in previous chapters, the first fight was against the domination of the Bengalis by persuading the British to accept the Assamese language as the state language. Along with pan-Indian nationalism, there was a strong move to assert Assamese distinctiveness or nationality against immigration and the Muslim League's effort to transform Assam into a Muslim-dominated society. The Assam Association, established in 1903, served as the platform for the Assamese middle class to articulate their grievances. The first student organization of the state called *Assam Chatra Sanmilan* established in 1916 and *the Assam Sahitya Sabha* established in 1917 also acted as the catalysts for the mobilization for an Assamese identity. The Bengalis had overshadowed the Assamese in terms of numbers and representation in government services, professions, and business. In the 1920s, the Assamese middle class became highly apprehensive of the continuous immigration of East Bengal people. The most worrying factor for the middle class was the 'immigrants would in due course, further tilt the provinces' demographic, cultural and political balance in favor of the Bengalis'.<sup>184</sup>

The final NRC list, published on 31 July 2019, dropped about 1,906,657 names. NRC, which was conceived to be the final protection mechanism for the indigenous Assamese people, could hardly meet the expectations. Almost all the stakeholders (except perhaps the minority

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<sup>183</sup> The publication of the final draft NRC took place on 30 July 2018 and that of the final list on 30 August 2019.

<sup>184</sup> Guha, Amalendu. "Nationalism: Pan-Indian and Regional in a Historical Perspective." *Social Scientist* 12, no. 2 (1984): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517093>.

organizations and political parties like Congress and All Indian United Democratic Front [AIUDF]), including AASU, APW, etc., expressed reservations at the figures.

*"We are not happy at all. It seems there were some deficiencies in the updating process. We believe that it is an incomplete NRC. We will appeal to the Supreme Court to remove all the faults and discrepancies in this NRC"*- AASU president Lurinjyoti Gogoi told in a press conference after the release of final draft.<sup>185</sup>

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) president Atul Bora also expressed his unhappiness with the final version of the state's National Register of Citizens (NRC) and that there is room for review of the NRC in the Supreme Court, which oversaw the process of updating the NRC.<sup>186</sup>

The Assam Gana Parishad, a state regional political party that came to power based on the Assam Accord, considered the number as 'ridiculously small'. Its president said, 'The people of Assam had hoped for a free and fair NRC but it now seems that the very existence of the Assamese will be further threatened'. The reason behind the huge disappointment with NRC was that the Assamese psyche was built with the impression that there are a minimum of 5 million illegal migrants in the state. This figure was stated in the Indian Parliament on various occasions by various political parties.

The number of 1.9 million hardly met the aspirations of the indigenous tribal and the Assamese people. The impression of 5 million illegal migrants was created by various non-BJP political dispensations at the centre and the state; for example, on 10 April 1992, Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia gave a figure of 3.3 million in the Assam Assembly.

On 6 May 1997, the then Home Minister Indrajit Gupta gave a figure of 4 million foreigners in the Indian Parliament. On 14 July 2004, a Parliament statement by MoS Home, Sriprakash Jaiswal, stated that the total number of Bangladeshi infiltrators in India was 12 million, out of which 5 million (40% of total) foreigners lived in Assam as of 31 December 2001. The numbers must have increased after that and certainly not declined. A reality check in Assam would reveal a huge change in the demographic and landholding pattern in the border and other districts of Assam. Starting from the two Muslim-dominated districts, Assam today has 11 EBOM-dominated districts. From 1991 until 2011, the Muslim growth in the state has been 5.79 per cent, while the Hindu population in the same period declined by 5.66 per cent.

Keeping in mind the trend of population growth among the east Bengal origin Muslims, the low numbers of exclusion in NRC is also attributed to the 'manipulation of legacy data' as the

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<sup>185</sup> See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nrc-unhappy-with-exclusion-figure-aasu-to-move-sc/articleshow/70921632.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>186</sup> See <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/assam-agp-dissatisfied-final-nrc-list-1593905-2019-08-31>

family tree is not biometric based and there is no mechanism to verify the authenticity of such claim and documents .

One has to understand the dilemma of a smaller nationality like the Assamese whose numbers have been declining at an alarming rate and has the possibility of being declared as a minority in their homeland. NRC reflects the anxiety of smaller nationalities that want to keep their distinctiveness which is recognized by the 6th Schedule of the Constitution and other provisions.

On 9 December 2019, when the Lok Sabha passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, Home Minister Amit Shah argued that the Bill had to be brought in because ‘the Congress had partitioned the country in 1947 on the basis of religion’. He pitched the Bill as a panacea for those who had fled Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to escape religious persecution. Shah also pointed out that if any ‘sajjan ’ (well meaning) Muslim from these three countries applied for Indian citizenship, he or she too would be considered under the due process, but outside the provisions of the Bill. But critics have pointed out that ‘the very introduction of the principle of religious discrimination’ in the CAA was problematic and could have far-reaching consequences for the country.

In Assam, the BJP and its government were out of their depth because an exercise they expected to be merciless with Bengali-origin Muslims had ended up excluding, among others, a large number of Bengali Hindus—an important vote bank for the party. The party discredited the process, argued that it wrongfully included ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ and demanded a rectification. In November 2019, a month before Modi’s backtracking on plans for a national NRC, Shah told the Rajya Sabha, ‘When the NRC exercise is done across the country, it will naturally be repeated in Assam’. He went on to reassure people, saying that irrespective of their religion, they should not be scared about the NRC. <sup>187</sup>

In no time, Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma followed up on Shah’s statement, saying that the state government welcomed the announcement. However, he said the government stood by its demand of re-verification of 20 per cent of names included in the final NRC in the border districts of the state.

In February 2020, the APW again moved the top court urging that the NRC process be stalled till two other cases related to citizenship laws in Assam were settled by a constitution bench and a 100 per cent re-verification of names included in the final NRC completed. The same month, Hajela’s successor Hitesh Dev Sarma wrote to all deputy commissioners and district

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<sup>187</sup> *Asomiya Pratidin*, 21 November 2019

heads of the NRC asking them to report details of all persons under their jurisdiction ‘who are ineligible for inclusion in NRC but whose names got included in NRC’.

In October 2020, state coordinator Sarma ordered district NRC officials to delete names of “ineligible” persons from the published list.

The order appeared to be a validation of the accusations made by the state government, the state unit of the BJP, the AASU and the APW that many ‘illegal foreigners’ were in the final NRC. The NRC state coordinator’s directive somehow ended up reminding me about what the minister Sarma had told journalists that December afternoon about the state government’s position. ‘The literal meaning is that we do not accept the NRC which has been published.’

### **The context and the political trajectory**

While the trepidations about the NRC are both logical and appreciable, the concerned parties either failed or refused to understand and recognize the critical political journey that Assam had passed through during the last four decades or so. The critics of NRC have also ignored the polyrhythm of the NRC process that facilitated a working consensus across different sections, including the East-Bengal-origin Muslims.

The critics also chose to ignore the fact that it was not NRC but the resistance against the CAB, 2016, that generated the momentum around the citizenship debate in Assam. Assam, particularly the Brahmaputra Valley, never had such a consensus on the Assam Accord and NRC as it has today. The Accord has now been christened as ‘public law contract’,<sup>99</sup> a term that Assam did not hear until recently.

It is this momentum that helped the state to avoid any possible communal holocaust after the final draft and the final list of the NRC had been published. Both the consensus on NRC as well as the relative peace today may be momentary, and it may break down at any moment due to the aggressive politics of polarization pursued by the Unmaking the Consensus current regime. However, understanding the critical journey to the working consensus on NRC is necessary to appreciate why relative peace prevails in the state despite serious apprehensions both inside the country and beyond. The humanists who were campaigning against updating the NRC and finally rejected the updated list have indulged in an abstract humanist approach. The humanists in Assam, who have been defending the NRC, are adopting a mature and pragmatic approach which is based on their long-term understanding of the ground reality.

The Assam Movement, in its initial phase, was marked by violence and had a strong chauvinist agenda. It demanded 1951 as the cut-off date for the detection and deportation of the foreigners.

The left political parties and the intellectuals were very critical of the movement at that time and protested the communal forces that had allegedly penetrated it. The left was completely cornered by the movement, as the mainstream narratives projected them as the real enemy to the greater cause of the Assamese nationality and labelled them as pro-Bengali and pro-Muslim. The debate in *EPW* in 1980 that started with an article by Hiren Gohain titled 'Cudgel of Chauvinism' and culminated in a comprehensive debate entitled 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist' is a testimony to it. This debate brought together those who strongly defended the movement on account of its long-term nationality issues and those who found serious undemocratic and chauvinist elements in the movement. However, as the debate moved, there were also changes in the positions by the participants. Notable among them was Hiren Gohain himself, who gradually accepted the fact that the movement carried genuine concerns of the masses which were the 'fall-out of underdevelopment'. During the more than three and half decades of the political trajectory of Assam since the signing of the Assam Accord on 15 August 1985, gradually, almost all political parties and all sections of the society accepted 24 March 1971 as the cut-off year for the detection and deportation of the foreigners.

In other words, there was widespread consensus around Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955, as amended and incorporated in 1985. The NRC is the outcome of a long journey that has passed through the critical trajectory of Assam's nationalist imagination with respect to migration and immigration. It is important to point out that the mobilization and resistance against the influx have always been contentious, and it attracts serious apprehensions and criticisms from different quarters, particularly from the human rights groups. One important reason behind this is the issue of minority rights, particularly the rights of the Muslims, who have been the victims of mobilization against the influx of migrants/immigrants to India. In the case of Assam in particular, and India in general, a mass psyche of reducing illegal migrants to Bangladeshi Muslims and equating East-Bengal origin Muslims to Bangladeshi illegal migrants cannot entirely be overlooked. However, such a psyche has not been the prime driving force of mobilization against the illegal migrants in Assam. There have been healthy debates about bringing the East-Bengal-origin Muslims into the fold of the greater Assamese society. The colonial schemes of appropriating the resources of the region through tea plantations and jute cultivations were the driving forces of migration to the state. The schemes further received patronage from the Muslim League government led by Syed Muhammad Sadulla, resulting in another wave of huge migration, which eventually created tussles over resources and threatened the security of the language and culture of the indigenous communities. Gross indifference shown by the All India Congress Committee towards Assam's agony over the schemes of

Cabinet Mission's Grouping Proposal, 1946, which had proposed to club Assam into the Muslim League-dominated Group C, also implanted fear against the influx of Bengalis, particularly Bengali Muslims, into Assam. Consolidation of the Muslim League in Assam during that period, and constant reference to that period by both by nationalists and right-wing political forces like RSS and Jana Sangh, continues to keep Assam under the shadow of fear over the Bengalis in general and the Bengali Muslims in particular. However, over time, despite the six-year-long Assam agitation, Assam has been struggling to evolve its own accommodative ethos. The armed struggle of the ULFA for *Swadhin Asom* (independent Assam) pushed Assam into a state of agony and repression for almost two decades—from the mid-1980s to the first decade of the present century.

The initial euphoria about Assam's ability to fight the mighty Indian State gradually reduced to much despair. The saga of ethnic insurgencies since the late 1980s and a series of violent incidents in the BTAD since its formation in 2003 have also pushed the state into endless miseries and physical and mental trauma. The transition from euphoria to despair has persuaded the larger masses to be pragmatic than emotive on every issue. The introduction of the economic reforms in the early 1990s along with the adoption of the Look East Policy by the Government of India had their implications. These developments facilitated the expansion of the middle classes in Northeast India and opened avenues to get integrated into the Indian consumer market. They also enabled the Indian State to appropriate the resources of the north-east through development agendas like mega hydropower projects, which continue to meet with strong resistance due to the risks they pose to the life and property of millions of people. At the same time, they have also helped the integration of the popular resistance movement of the region with the national resistance movements in the country.

With so many issues reining the multi-layered nationalist imagination of Assam and the north-east, consensuses are in short supply. One among them is the gradual realization that the secession of Assam from the Union of India is a distant reality, and Assam's identity lies in a multi-ethnic homeland. This realization has brought another important consensus that the Assam Accord is inviolable, for which it has now been hailed as a public law contract. The near-universal acceptance of the NRC by the greater society in Assam is the logical outcome of this critical journey. Since the publication of the final list on 30 August 2019, which at the end excluded 1.9 million applicants out of the total 32.9 million, the same concerns continue to reverberate in different corners.

Violent elements of the Assam agitation also targeted the tribals, particularly the Bodos, which is often overlooked. The Nellie massacre was preceded by violence and killings in Gohpur

located in the eastern end of the present-day Sonitpur district of Assam. The East-Bengal-origin Muslims supported the Bodos' demand for self-determination. However, gradually the equations changed, and the community became a target in the Bodo dominated areas. The violence against the East-Bengal-origin Muslims alleged to be 'Bangladeshis', in the present-day BTC under the pretext of homeland politics, has also created a state of ethnic cleansing. The fate of the D voters in Assam and the plight of those who are languishing in detention camps have also contributed to the growing anxieties over the NRC. The absence of an extradition treaty with Bangladesh and the denial by the Government of Bangladesh of having official evidence of emigration of the country's people to Assam will make the people excluded from the NRC stateless. With as many as 1.9 million people being rendered stateless by the NRC, the matter is bound to create ripples across different quarters. The apprehensions about chauvinism, racial discrimination and violence against minorities haunted the concerned people so much so that a parallel had been drawn between the NRC to that of the Nazi regime's torture of the Jews.

Therefore, warnings from the UN cannot be labelled sectarian. However, without understanding the political dynamics in a longer time frame, and the polyrhythm of the whole debate on citizenship and immigration in Assam, the rejection of the NRC as a chauvinist or xenophobic design will make such reports one-dimensional and sectarian. The UN has declarations and conventions on the rights of the minorities, refugees and stateless citizens as well as rights of the tribal and indigenous people. It has the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities as well as the 1989 convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries and the 1994 Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. The UN has a 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees, a 1954 convention relating to the status of stateless persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Therefore, one cannot overemphasize one and overlook the other. In the context of India, smaller nationalities are a reality, and aspirations of their rights cannot be reduced to xenophobia. Over-centralized federal polity, state's growing nexus with the corporate and their combined drive for appropriation and control over common's resources, among other issues, also need to draw adequate attention.

As pointed out by many critics, there are legitimate concerns over the process followed during the NRC updating exercise as well as the fate of the applicants left out from the final list. However, at the same time, it is important not to equate it with the spelt-out intentions of the

government alone and see its significance from political as well as common people's perspectives. For a start, the register was not an instrument designed solely by the government; it was an outcome of long-drawn demands of the people of Assam, and the modalities were developed in consultation with the stakeholders during the Congress-led state government. The actual process started only with the intervention of the Supreme Court. The process received a lot of blows after the BJP-led governments assumed power at the Centre and in the state in 2014 and 2016, respectively. The Supreme Court heavily criticized the Central government and passed several orders to expedite the NRC updating process.

The coordinator of Assam NRC was made accountable exclusively to the apex court, relieving him of any obligation to the incumbent governments. The final list disappointed both the incumbent governments and many stakeholders, although the reasons behind the disappointment were different.

Most of the stakeholders were disappointed because the number of exclusions irrespective of religious identities turned out to be rather small. The incumbent state government and the ruling party were disappointed because the number of Muslims excluded from the list was too small.

Hiren Gohain, a voice of conscience in Assam, has been one of the consistent defenders of Assam's NRC. In the national and international media, he has been the single voice in this regard. His endorsement of the NRC provoked a lot of criticisms.<sup>188</sup> Gohain's defence of the NRC comes from an understanding of Assamese society that privileges the Assamese-speaking middle class elite over the 'others' within the state's territorial space. For him, the vaguely defined 'Assamese national culture' and its agents play the role of the largehearted 'hosts' who tolerate and accommodate, while the Bengal-origin Muslims and Hindus are reduced to 'guests' who 'are tolerated'.

It may be mentioned that Hiren Gohain's position on Assam's nationality question shifted diametrically. Gohain's famous essay in *EPW*, 'Cudgels of Chauvinism', was a scathing indictment of the anti-foreigner agitation that had erupted earlier. The 'chauvinistic movement' against migrants from Bangladesh, Gohain contended, was built on the back of 'propaganda in the Assam press—skilfully mixing up news about influx of outsiders with stories of Bengali trickery, deceit and treachery'. But in 2019, Hiren Gohain faced 'charges of sedition—for opposing the settlement in Assam of Hindu migrants from Bangladesh'. He was alleged to have

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<sup>188</sup> Angshuman Choudhury and Suraj Gogoi, 'Re-contextualising the NRC: A Response to Hiren Gohain', <https://countercurrents.org/2019/09/re-contextualising-the-nrc-a-response-to-hirengohain>

advocated the secession of Assam during a protest against the CAB. He, of course, did not make such statement but reminded those who raised this issue that ‘such a demand can have relevance if and when all democratic resources have been exhausted’.

In a series of writings and interviews in both national and international media apart from his regular interventions in local media, Hiren Gohain defended the NRC. His articulation on the register became sharp while responding to his critics. In his interview to Saif Khalid of *Al Jazeera*, Gohain categorically stated, If the NRC process is allowed to go in a normal way without any hindrances, without undue haste, with fair consideration to all, it may indeed resolve the imbroglio. Rightly or wrongly the citizenship issue has become a crucial talking point and an issue in Assam politics. Unless it is settled, you cannot go forward.

But what was more important in the interview was his position on the natives of Assam. He suggested that all those who were granted citizenship should also be called the natives of Assam. He said,

Natives also include children of immigrants. All those who were in Assam prior to 1947 or even 1971—when Bangladesh was born following its independence from Pakistan—should be treated as natives of Assam, irrespective of their religion and language. That has been the democratic consensus. That’s why we have accepted 1971 as the cut-off year and the preparation of the NRC as a kind of benchmark to ascertain this. Gohain’s position on natives provoked adverse reactions in Assam, and he was immediately labelled pro-Bangladeshi. While acknowledging the fact that ‘the democratic space for the rights of Muslims has been shrinking in India ever since independence’, he has also pointed out that the Muslims today ‘may be murdered in broad daylight with impunity’. This political environment in the country may have had some adverse impact on some Muslims during the preparation of the NRC.

But that does not ipso facto prove the whole exercise bogus and mala fide. Millions of Muslims have found their names in it. Besides, people in Assam are still not hooked to the kind of venomous hatred of Muslims that seems to be thriving in North India. They should be helped to maintain this attitude and not pushed to the atrocious Hindu–Muslim hostility by misguided concern.

Udayon Misra, while reminding the critics of the NRC with his historical insights ‘Why Many in Assam See the National Register of Citizens as a Lifeline’ has also cautioned that the parameters of the definition of ‘Assamese’ should be broadened to include the Bengali-

speaking Muslims who have already embraced Assamese as their mother tongue. Meanwhile, with the parameters of Assamese nationality having expanded over the years to include all those initially Bengali speaking Muslims who have been returning Assamese as their mother tongue through the different censuses, the question remains as to whether they too would naturally come within the definition of 'Assamese' when it comes to constitutional safeguards relating to land, representation and culture. Now that a great many of them have been enlisted as genuine citizens in the NRC, their demand to be seen and accepted as Assamese is bound to be strengthened.

What is important to note here is that the endorsement of the NRC as the lifeline for Assam did not deter him to talk about the humanitarian crisis embedded into the process as 'neither Delhi nor Dispur has been working on a proper plan for those who will soon be declared stateless'.

Writing just after the publication of the final draft of the NRC, Misra also pointed out that even though after the process of claims and objections,

The actual number of deletions will substantially come down. But even then, there would be a massive number of stateless persons, necessitating a well-coordinated, nationwide move to work out a solution within humanitarian parameters. But that in itself should not deflect from the ground reality in Assam where immigration and demographic change continue to be a major concern for the indigenes.

The critics, of course, continued to attack the defenders of the NRC. Suraj Gogoi and Parag Jyoti Saikia termed these defenders as proponents of intellectual racism. Hiren Gohain, Harekrishna Deka, Sanjib Baruah and Udayon Misra have shown 'limited sympathy' and seek to create a secure environment for the 'Assamese', whose definition itself remains ambiguous. In their narrow opinion, they propose to consider a certain section of individual's action as reduction of space and rights for others. When they should have written about cultivating equal respect, tolerance and inhibit those that go against them, they stood at the wrong side of history. Through passivity, denial, ignorance, and even outright support for the section of humans whom they call 'autochthons', they have shown the lack of ability and desire to love everyone equally.

Only history will prove whether the critical defenders of the NRC, who have also been the critics of Assamese chauvinism, xenophobic tendencies of whatever kind and the majoritarian communal offensive, are intellectuals of racism. But one thing is certain that these young

scholars who have been using all possible abusive languages against critical defenders of the NRC are the obsessive defenders of the minority rights which itself is another form of xenophobia.

They appear to be intellectuals of the pure kind who are far away from the multi-layered subjugations and contradictions of smaller nationalities and appear to be in nexus with the global human rights club whose approach to human rights is driven by singular track or one-dimensionality.

But defending the NRC does not mean being indifferent to the plights of those who have been excluded from the final list. Hiren Gohain has asserted,

Now that the NRC has ended, what are we to do with the 19 lakh (1.9 million) people left out? The problem is that their fate will be decided by Foreigners' Tribunals which are short of mature and judicially trained members and who have so far leaned on reports of the Border Police. An option of appeal to the higher echelons of the judiciary does exist for those excluded but that is likely to be expensive and sometimes unaffordable. The government has promised legal aid, but we have to wait and watch if it is dispensed impartially.

### **Beyond the NRC-CAA debate**

The NRC is one step ahead towards resolving the foreigners' issue in Assam; it is not the end. The plight of the 1.9 million excluded applicants is a huge political and humanitarian challenge. The Government of India has ruled out the option of deportation. India cannot afford to deal with the issue of illegal migrants through detention. Indeed, the whole idea of detention must be done away with completely. The state should not be allowed to use those excluded from the NRC as non-recognized labour force either, as this will make way for inhuman exploitation. Therefore, in the long run, the critical defenders must negotiate with both the state and the greater civil society for general amnesty through which the excluded migrants are gradually recognized as full citizens. That amnesty, unlike the CAA, must be universal and secular. But that will be achieved only if the state redefines its character of being the appropriator of resources to that of the guarantor of entitlement of the commons over resources. Both the critical defenders and the opponents of the NRC must understand that resource entitlement is pivotal towards resolving the issue of citizenship in the region of Northeast India. The resurgence of people's movements on land, forest and ecology in the post-liberalization period is a key towards an inclusive society, provided these movements can transcend ethnic and

regional obsessions. The struggle in Kaziranga,<sup>128</sup> where the defenders of the NRC sided with the ‘suspected’ immigrants and fought back the state’s vested designs, may be a ray of hope in this regard.

A proposal that may trigger immediate controversies but will be the only feasible way to resolve this crisis is to accept the NRC as the base document. In the long run, all applicants of the NRC including those who have been excluded from the final list will have to be granted citizenship as they will neither be deported nor will be put in the detention camps, and those whose names figure in the final list have to be recognized as ‘natives’ with full political rights including the right to representation. This will require shifting the base year for constitutional safeguards as envisaged under Clause 6 of the Assam Accord and as proposed by the Justice Biplab K. Sharma Committee (2020) from 1951 to 24 March 1971, the cut-off date of detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners as envisaged in the Assam

Accord and Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955. Such a radical proposal will invite public wrath, but after 50 years of citizenship it will not be politically sustainable to deprive any one from the right to representation.

The communal political mobilisation of Muslims by the Assam Jamiat through the AIUDF in recent times has ushered in religious polarisation to the politics and society of Assam. The existence and success of the AIUDF have paved the way for Hindutva political forces like BJP to grow in Assam. In recent years, Assam has become a playground between the Muslim minority politics of the AIUDF and the majoritarian politics of the BJP. Tenth, because of the controversy surrounding the continuous illegal immigration to Assam, the citizenship of a large section of immigrant Muslims has always remained under suspicion. Finally, the long-term exclusion of the community from the process of development and the continuous labelling of the community as ‘Bangladeshi’ by a section of political and non-political leaders has brought about a sense of alienation to the neo-Assamese Muslim community from the idea of Assamese. This sense of alienation has created the background of the question of a separate identity consciousness among the Assam Muslims.

When the separate identity consciousness among the Muslims in Assam is talked about, it is about the Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley and an identity separate from the Assamese identity. Barak valley does not align with the idea of Assamese. The Assam Movement, for the first time after independence, started a process of ‘othering’ the Muslim community from the idea of Assamese. This brought about a sense of isolation to the entire Muslim community. It

should be noted that, among the Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley, the neo-Assamese Muslims in particular became the target of the Assam Movement and as a result, the sense of alienation became stronger among them than the Assamese Muslims. However, after the Assam Movement came to an end with 1971 as the base year for the identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam, the neo Assamese Muslims started to realise their importance in the society and politics of Assam because of their numbers. The success of UMFA in Brahmaputra valley in the 1985 Assembly election visibly proved the strength of the neo-Assamese Muslim votes in Assam. On the other hand, the Assamese speakers grew in Assam in the consecutive 1961 and 1971 censuses only because of their support. After such realization, a section of the neo-Assamese Muslims dissociated from the Assamese language in the 1991 census as counter to the process of ‘othering’ started by the Assam Movement. This dissociation from the Assamese language caused controversy regarding the origin of a new identity among the neo-Assamese Muslims. Interestingly, when the question of a new identity consciousness among the neo-Assamese Muslims started to surface, the Assamese Muslims began to blame them for a crisis of identity among the Assamese Muslims.

### **Identity consciousness among neo-Assamese Muslims**

During the last seven decades after independence, Assam saw the formation of identity consciousness among different ethnic groups, who had started to assert their identity separate from Assamese identity in the society and politics of the state. Such identity formations even led to the creation of new states separate from Assam like Meghalaya and Mizoram. In the post Assam Movement period, ethnic identity consciousness among a few tribes led to the formation of autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution for tribes like Bodos. The politics of identity became an instrument of political bargaining in Assam during this period. However, the Muslims in Assam had never talked about any separate identity for them. The Muslims living in Brahmaputra valley have tried to assimilate with the Assamese society and culture and have never argued for any identity separate from Assamese identity. On the other hand, the Muslims living in Barak valley have been identifying themselves as Bengali. It indicates that Muslims in Assam had never tried to establish their community identity as Muslims, unlike different ethnic groups. Despite this, a tendency has grown among the neo-Assamese Muslims to abandon the Assamese language and identity they once wilfully embraced. This started with the 1991 census which showed a sharp decline of Assamese speakers. This book has shown that the decline was mainly due to a refusal to recognise the Assamese language as the mother tongue by a section of the neo-Assamese Muslims. Assamese

speakers further declined in the 2001 census. The percentage of Assamese speakers remained almost the same from 2001 in the 2011 census, but the new issue of the *Miya* language came into prominence during the census enumerations. During the upgrading of NRC 1951 in Assam, a section of neo-Assamese Muslim poets used the *Miya* language to express their subordinated condition in Assam in poetic form, an insinuation that Assamese people were responsible for their subordination. These developments have given the impression that the neo Assam Muslims no longer wish to associate with the Assamese language and are trying to create a new identity for themselves.

### **Crisis of identity among the Assamese Muslims**

The Assamese Muslims enjoy a privileged position in the social and cultural lives of Assam. However, the community is constantly ignored in the politics of the state. The Assamese Muslim populations do not form the majority of voters in any Assembly constituency, as they do not live in contiguous areas. On the other hand, immigrant Muslims are decisive in more than 30 constituencies in middle and lower Assam of Brahmaputra valley and in Barak valley. In Assam, while immigrant Muslims are becoming increasingly important for political parties due to the fast growth of their population and the consequent fast rise of voters, the indigenous Muslims are losing their importance as a minority community. The indigenous Muslims have started to believe that the immigrant Muslims have deprived them of the government-provided benefits. There are allegations that several central government schemes for minority welfare, tenure of which ended in 2012, were mainly implemented in lower and middle Assam districts of Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley districts, where mainly immigrant Muslims live in contiguous areas. The indigenous Muslims living in upper Assam districts have remained excluded from these schemes. The consecutive governments in Assam have always tried to provide maximum facilities to the immigrant Muslims to satisfy them as they are large in number, live in contiguous areas, are a determining factor in many Assembly constituencies and are easier to manipulate during elections. During the whole process, the needs and concerns of the indigenous Muslims have always been ignored and neglected. In Brahmaputra valley, the political and economic marginalisation of the Assamese Muslims at the hands of their neo-Assamese religious counterpart has made the community resemble a 'minority within minority'. An impression is growing among the Assamese Muslims that even the privileged position the community enjoyed in the Assamese society has now started to erode because of the neo-Assamese Muslims. This is because the very existence of a section of neo-Assamese Muslims in Assam has always remained controversial. The continuous Muslim immigration

from Bangladesh to Assam and the high growth of the population among the neo-Assamese Muslims have kept the community under suspicion. That suspicion towards the neo-Assamese Muslims has now started to spread to Assamese Muslims. community claims that their community is not responsible for the socio-political marginalisation, if any, of the Assamese Muslims. If the Assamese Muslims are not getting what they deserve in the society and politics of Assam, the Hindu Assamese society is responsible for that, not the neo Assamese Muslims. Rejaul Karim points out: The idea of indigenous Muslims being exploited and politically discriminated is not true. The fact is that the indigenous Muslims from upper Assam are not getting the opportunity to represent in assemblies and governments. And for that, the Muslims living in *char* and remote areas cannot be held responsible. These *chars* and remote areas, where mainly the immigrant Muslims live, were completely abandoned at a time by the indigenous people, and these areas by now have become assembly constituencies. Elected representatives of these areas have never exploited the indigenous Muslims of the state. The Muslims of upper Assam have not asked for political representation until recent times. They have been enjoying the political rights with non-Muslim indigenous counterparts which is an example of deep-rooted assimilation. If the indigenous Muslims now ask for separate political representation, then, it will ignore the present status of assimilation. This will also mean that the Muslims of upper Assam are neglected and exploited by their non-Muslim representatives. It will again mean that one-sided assimilation cannot be permanent. If there is a capable Muslim leader, both Muslim and non-Muslims should try for his/her candidature and should try for his/her win, which is not happening.

It is pertinent to note here that while the Assamese Muslims consider their neo-Assamese Muslim counterparts as the cause of their socio-political marginalisation, the neo-Assamese Muslims also have some serious allegations against them. The neo-Assamese Muslims allege that the Assamese Muslims have never considered the neo-Assamese Muslims to be equal to their position and status in the society. They allege that the Assamese Muslims have never come forward to help them to assimilate with the Assamese society and culture. The Assamese Muslims have a cordial relationship with the Assamese Hindu society based upon which they could have played an active and positive role in the process of assimilation of the neo-Assamese Muslims with the Assamese society. If it had been done by the Assamese Muslims, they believe, the existing psychological barrier between the Assamese people and the neo-Assamese Muslims would not have appeared. Moreover, the neo-Assamese Muslims feel that the Assamese Muslims have always remained a silent spectator in their crisis. In support of this

allegation, they talk about the days of the Assam Movement during unprecedented psychological torture was meted out to the community. The Assamese Muslims, they allege, did not come forward to stand by their religious counterparts, and an overwhelming majority of Assamese Muslims supported and joined the movement.

It must be noted here that the Assamese Muslims are culturally and linguistically Assamese. In that situation, their behaviour does not reflect anything except the behaviour of other ethnic Assamese communities. In the post-Assam Movement period, all the ethnic groups of Assam – including the Assamese Muslims – have felt increasingly politically marginalised by the fast-growing population strength of the immigrant Muslims. For the Assamese Muslims, this feeling of marginalisation is becoming more acute due to the growing impression among them of being increasingly deprived of government opportunities as religious minorities in the state because of the neo-Assamese Muslims. Despite the psychological barriers and allegations and counter-allegations between the Assamese and the neo-Assamese Muslims, the question of a cohesive Muslim identity between the communities in Brahmaputra valley has begun to emerge as a possibility in recent times. The rise of BJP as a counter to the Muslim communalism of AIUDF and the strategy of the BJP-led Assam government to unite Hindus of the state by alienating Muslims are creating the context of this possibility.

### **5.3 Question of indigeneity and the language issue: Changing perception of ‘threat’**

In the public sphere of Assam many people have tried to identify the criteria for defining an ‘Indigenous Assamese’. I would like to mention a speech by Pranab Gogoi, the speaker of 13th Assam Legislative Assembly (2011–16). According to him, 1951 should be taken as the cut-off period for defining the indigeneity and the Assamese people.<sup>189</sup> This definition became the first of its kind to be a property of Assam legislative assembly. This definition is very crucial to understand the fact that immigrant population specially the immigrant population like neo-Assamese Muslims that came to Assam during 1951-71, are not the indigenous Assamese. The political parties like AGP, BPF and BJP were supportive of the definition by Gogoi during that time. However, Congress party maintained a silence on this matter even after Gogoi being a member of their party.

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<sup>189</sup> Gogoi, Pranab, *Edin Bhal Din Ahibo*. In *Bhabishyat Asomor Dastabej* [A Document of Future Assam], edited by Phanidhar Pathak, 13–16, (Guwahati: Banalata. 2015).

After this incident, there emerged a lot of debates and discussion among different political parties of Assam. A cursory look at those debates reveals that the main student organization of Assam namely AASU were of the opinion that all people whose names were included in the 1951 NRC are Assamese and people coming after 1951 cannot be considered indigenous of Assam. North East Students Organisation (NESO), was also of the same opinion. However, many organizations and political parties representing the neo-Assamese Muslims strongly opposed the idea of Assamese on the basis on 1951 NRC and argued that language should be the basis of definition of Assamese people. This was crucial in the emerging language politics of the state. For example, we can talk about the stand by AAMSU here. It opposed the stand by AASU. According to AAMSU, any Indians living in Assam with Assamese or any other languages of indigenous communities as the mother tongue should be an Assamese.<sup>190</sup> It wanted to include the neo-Assamese Muslims as the indigenous people of Assam who migrated to Assam during 1951–71. It supported the definition of ‘Assamese People’ by Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS). Assam Sahitya Sabha defines Assamese as ‘Persons enlisted in 1951 and their descendants who speak Assamese or one of the indigenous languages of Assam.’ However, the delegates from other literary bodies opined that it needs detailed discussion as the matter is severe and postponed their decisions to the next meeting. However, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), the literary organization of the Bodos of Assam, along with many other tribal literary organizations completely rejected the definition of ‘Assamese People’ suggested by the Assam Sahitya Sabha. It argued ‘Assamese People’ word in Clause 6 of the Assam Accord should be replaced by ‘indigenous people of Assam’ so that it can protect the identities of indigenous people<sup>191</sup>.

Interestingly, ULFA, the armed organization of Assam who has been in demand of sovereign Assam was of the opinion that ‘the people of Assam’ should be used to denote the bonafide inhabitants of Assam.<sup>192</sup> They have been considering the neo-Assamese Muslims as an important component of Assamese nationality and they see this group as a strength of Assamese nationality.<sup>193</sup>

The Assam Government during the last few decades fail to qualify the indigenous people of Assam. When the NRC 1951 was upgraded in Assam, on the basis of cut-off date of Assam accord, the neo-Assamese believed that the cut off should define the status of indigeneity of

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<sup>190</sup> [www.telegraphindia.com](http://www.telegraphindia.com), 19 March 2015

<sup>191</sup> [www.telegraphindia.com](http://www.telegraphindia.com), 11 March 2015

<sup>192</sup> [www.timesofassam.com](http://www.timesofassam.com), 26 November 2012

<sup>193</sup> Udayon Misra, *Burden of History: Assam and the Partition—Unresolved Issues* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Assamese. However, they believed that all the residents of Assam on 24 March 1971 should be recognized as the indigenous people of Assam. But when the NRC was out on 30<sup>st</sup> July, 2019, it excluded 40 lakhs names from the list again brought back the question of safeguarding indigenous population. Many organizations like AASU, AIUDF, APW etc expressed their fear about the numbers and demanded the re-verification. Even the erstwhile state finance minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma wanted for 20% re-verification (Bordering districts) and 10% re-verification (remaining districts) for a fair NRC. In 2019, under Justice (Retd) Biplab Sarma, the central government formed a high-level committee to suggest measures for the implementation of the Assam Accord and to define 'indigenous Assamese'. While defining 'Assamese people', the committee has finally agreed that Assamese people will constitute as the following

1. Assamese community, residing on Assam on or before 01.01.1951  
Or
2. Any indigenous tribal community of Assam residing on Assam on or before 01.01.1951  
Or
3. Any other indigenous community of Assam residing on Assam on or before 01.01.1951  
Or
4. All citizens of India who are residing in the territory of Assam on or before 01.01.1951  
Or
5. Descendent of the above categories.<sup>194</sup>

Interestingly, on language issue, this report has recommended taking the necessary safeguards for the protection of Assamese and other indigenous languages. It also recommended not to forcefully impose any languages apart from Assamese and indigenous languages in the state. It also suggested for the implementation of state official languages in Barak Valley, Hill Districts and Bodoland Territorial Area districts. It also created a provision for the mandatory provision of an Assamese language paper for recruitment in state government services with alternatives for Barak Valley, Hill District and BTAD areas. It has to be mentioned here that

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<sup>194</sup> Biplab Sarma Report on implementation of Assam Accord.

along with the line of recommendation of this committee, the government has brought many acts . One of them can be the Assamese language learning act 2020.<sup>195</sup>

#### 5.4 Assamese identity and the question of Language: Old anxieties and new form

What has been important to note here is in the recent phases, the issue of language has been again getting an important position in determining Assam Politics. It is more prominent in case of Assamese-Bengali rivalry. The following table will highlight the percentage of Assamese and Bengali speakers in the various census operations.

The Assamese language has been an identifying marker for the question of Assamese identity. If we take the case of immigrant Muslims in Brahmaputra Valley, also known as the neo-Assamese, we have already identified the fact that they identified Assamese as their mother tongue in census enumerations after independence which ultimately helped the Assamese speakers to maintain their majority status.

Throughout the journey Assamese nationalism, ‘Fear of being a numerically minority community’ of Assamese people was a prevalent theme that acquires newer significance. In the meantime British Government undertook the task of preparing a census report of all Indian languages and as a result George Abraham Grierson prepared Linguistic Survey of India(1903-1928), which offers an independent status to Assamese. Grierson wrote. “Assamese is entitled to be an independent existence as the speech of distinct nationality”.<sup>196</sup> This moment was a great relief for Assamese nationalists and in a way helped them to strengthen their claim for a language centric identity.

Table : Census of India 1951,1961,1971,1991,2001,2011

Language(No of speakers in percentage)	1951	1961	1971	1991	2001	2011
Assamese	56.29	57.14	60.89	57.81	48.80	48.38
Bengali	21.2	18.5	11.7	21.7	27.5	29.91

<sup>195</sup> The Assamese language learning act 2020 provide and ensure learning of Assamese as one of the languages in all schools in the state of Assam except in the sixth schedule areas, Bodo areas and Barak valley.

<sup>196</sup> Majeed, Javed. Nation and Region in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India. 1st ed. Routledge India,2020

Another significant factor in this direction is that while most of the Hindu immigrants were steadfastly glued to their linguistic heritage, the Muslim migrants adopted a very different strategy. They consciously took the decision of adopting Assamese language in the public domain and returning it as their mother tongue in the Census operations of 1951 and the subsequent census operations. This particular decision on the part of the Muslim immigrants has helped Assamese language to maintain its majority in the census data. There is also an effort on the part of the Assamese speaking community to accommodate the Muslim community of East Bengal origin. There is a process of accommodation of the immigrant Muslim community. They have been called *Na-Asamiya* or neo-Assamese. The term *Na-Asamiya* has been dropped gradually to replace it with only *Asamiya* or Assamese. But there are scholars who have found the process of bringing a large chunk of people within the fold of Assamese identity, only on the basis of returning the language as their mother tongue in the Census quite problematic. Udayon Misra has raised this complex question and shows the problem of the language based Assamese identity that accommodates a large chunk of immigrants with a very different cultural heritage but does not accommodate a large group of ethnic communities with cultural affinities. One must not overlook the apprehension raised on the issue of the accommodation of immigrant community of East Bengal/ East Pakistan/ Bangladesh origin in the fold of Assamese identity.

One of the important points here is that in Barak Valley, most of the Muslims irrespective of indigenous and immigrants are the Bengali speakers. On the other hand, in Brahmaputra Valley the indigenous Muslims are mainly Assamese speakers. Still in lower Assam some Muslim people speak Assamese language, like in Goalpara, they speak Goalporia dialect of Assamese. People in Assam valley, they consider entire immigrant Muslim population as the threat to indigenous Assamese communities. So it was well established that the support of Muslim is very much necessary to maintain the majority status of Assamese language. I have revealed earlier how Neo-Assamese Muslims have been recognizing Assamese as their mother tongue in census enumerations, these sections became main support to maintain the dominant status of Assamese. It is true that the tendency among different ethnic groups to identify themselves as the speakers of their own languages, instead of Assamese in recent censuses would have a difficult task for Assamese language to save its majority-status in the state.<sup>197</sup> .

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<sup>197</sup> Sharma, Chandan Kumar. 2016. "Immigration, indigeneity and Identity: The Bangladeshi Immigration Question in Assam". In *Unheeded Hinterland*, edited by Dilip Gogoi, 89–113, New Delhi: Routledge

In the earlier chapters I have identified that the prevalent Assamese-Bengali rivalry is there since imposition of Bengali language by the colonial administration. This rivalry was there during the two language movements in 1960 and 1972. During that time, the immigrant Muslims from Brahmaputra valley became an important component of Assamese nationality by adopting Assamese language.

In post independent Assam, after the introduction of official language and as a result of this many tribal groups alienate themselves from the Assamese language. And they refused to stick to Assamese as their mother tongue in the census operations after Assamese became the official language of the state. Despite this Assamese language speakers maintained the majority status as evident from the census table. It is because of the acceptance of the Assamese language by neo-Assamese Muslims. However, after the Assam accord as discussed in the above section, a conflict was created between the Assamese indigenous people and the neo-Assamese Muslims group. This situation prompted the neo-Assamese Muslims to abandon their mother tongue Assamese as in census of 1991.

In this regard, a meeting organized by some the neo-Assamese Muslims, on the eve of the 1991 census, can be discussed here. In a meeting at Hazi Musafirkhana, Guwahati, the members of the neo-Muslim community expressed their concern regarding the consolidation of Assamese identity and took a decision that in the subsequent censuses, they will return to Bengali as their mother tongue.<sup>198</sup> Consequently, in the 1991 census there was about three percent decline of Assamese speakers against the ten percent increase of Bengali speakers. One possible reason could be the neo-Assamese Muslim sections' abandonment of Assamese as their mother tongue in the census operation. And they identified Bengali as their mother tongue. The table on census data reveals that over the different censuses, the percentage of Assamese speakers declined by more than 12 percentage whereas Bengali speaking population rose to 18 percentage.

Regarding the downfall of the numbers of Assamese speakers, the role of tribal population also can not be ignored. I have identified earlier how the tribal population left the Assamese language after the official language movement in 1960. After the medium of instruction movement of 1972, and the Assam Accord in 1985, some tribes abandoned the Assamese language in 1991 census. However, for many tribal population of Assam, Bengali is not their

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<sup>198</sup> Ahmed, A.N.S., and Adil-Ul-Yasin. 1997. "Problems of Identity and Nation Building: A Case Study of the Muslims of Assam." In *Politics of Identity and Nation Building in Northeast India*, edited by Girin Phukon and N.L. Dutta, 143–152. New Delhi: South Asian Publishers. s

mother tongue. So it can be assumed that the neo-Assamese Muslims have a huge role to play in the declining of Assamese speakers and the rise of Bengali speakers. Many studies have identified how the neo-Assamese Muslims have been adopting Bengali language by leaving the Assamese language.<sup>199</sup> It is also noteworthy that the fast growth of Hindu Bengali population in Assam also helped in growing of Bengali population of Assam.

The leaving of Assamese language in the census operation and deliberately accepting Assamese as their mother tongue after independence on the part of neo-Assamese Muslims is a part of a larger political conspiracy. Notably, in the post-Assam Movement period, a section of Muslim politicians in Assam is trying to distance the neo-Assamese Muslims from the Assamese language. Many significant developments were taking place in this region. One such development was the rise of UMFA in 1985. It mobilized Bengalis against the Assam Accord irrespective of the religion.

The formation of UMFA was initiated by CRPC, a Bengali organization from Barak valley. The role of A.F. Golam Osmani, a Bengali Muslim from Barak valley, is important to mention here. He tried to play a crucial role to unite the immigrant Muslims and Hindu Bengalis under UMFA. With the help of Baskandi Darul-Ulum Madrasa, a Cachar educated Maulavi, Osmani established himself also as a religious leader and became the strong UMFA leader until he joined Congress in 1998. Osmani played a divisive politics in lower Assam in the name of language to increase his influence among neo-Assamese Muslims. He encouraged the neo-Assamese of remote and *chars* areas of Brahmaputra valley and urged them to identify themselves as Bengali instead of Assamese in 1991 and 2001 census enumerations.

As a result of such dirty and divisive politics, the census of 1991 shows a ten per cent rise of Bengali population than the previous 1971 census. The 2001 census however identified an increase of six per cent of Bengali speakers after such discriminatory politics at the time of 1991 and 2001 census enumerations. Again during the 2011 census, a new controversy was emerging in Assam regarding the mother tongue of neo-Assamese Muslims. Similarly, a social media campaign namely 'Chalo Paltai-Mission 2021' was initiated as a call to Bengali speakers to identify themselves as the Bengali speaking group in 2021 census.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Nani Gopal Mahanta, *Citizenship Debate over NRC and CAA: Assam and the Politics of History* (SAGE Publishing India, 2021)

<sup>200</sup> Abu Eusuf Mohammad Raihan was running a 'chalo paltai' facebook page where they mentioned their concern regarding the target of themselves as the illegal migrants despite they have identified Assamese as their mother tongue in the previous censuses.

Interestingly during 2011 census, a Congress MLA from Barpeta district, a neo Assamese, claimed to have identified *Miya* as his the mother tongue in the census. He urged everyone to adopt *Miya* as a common language of the immigrant Muslim community in Assam. It gave rise to controversy where people opined that *Miya* is a dialect only, not a language. Interestingly, the *Miya* language became a burning topic and in 2011, for the first time some Muslims in Brahmaputra Valley listed *Miya* as their mother tongue.<sup>201</sup> It was in this census the neo-Assamese Muslims identified three languages Assamese, Bengali and *Miya*, as their mother tongue. Since the *Miya* language is not included among scheduled and non-scheduled languages in India, the exact number of people identifying *Miya* language as the mother tongue was not available in 2011 record. One thing is important to note here. The entire immigrant Muslim community is categorized as *Miya* in Assam loosely and *Miya* language has been emerging as the common language of the community

During April, 2016, at the time of updating the NRC process, Hafiz Ahmed, the president of Char sapor Sahitya Parixad, a neo-Assamese Muslim started writing poem in *Miya* Language in the social media. The title of the poem was that '*Likhi Lua Moi Miya*', English translation loosely will be, 'Write down I Am a *Miya*'. This poem started a trend in the social media and many people started to write *Miya* Poetry in social media. Through these poems, the writers were trying to expose the Assamese people as the exploiter of *Miya* community. The subjects of these poems were mainly the pathetic socio-economic condition of immigrant Muslim and the problems faced by the communities in updating the NRC. Against the controversy, the Char sapor Sahitya Parixad were of the opinion that they will accept Assamese as their mother tongue in subsequent official census records.

Commenting on the issue of *Miya* Poetry, Hiren Gohain is of the opinion that the Bengal origin Muslims of Assam are ignoring the decision of earlier generation to use only Assamese formally.<sup>202</sup> In defense against the *Miya* Poetry, Ahmed says that they are in no way associated with changing the census language of the Bengal origin Muslim of Assam and 'Chalo Paltai' and *Miya* poetry are completely based on different stand.<sup>203</sup> With these clarification the controversy became somewhat marginalized.

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<sup>201</sup> Nath, Monoj Kumar. 2015. *Asom Rajnitit Musalman: Biswas, Bastob aru Sanghat (Muslims in Politics of Assam: Myth, Reality and Conflict)*. Guwahati: Banalata.

<sup>202</sup> Daniyal, Shoaid. "Why Poetry of Bengal-Origin Muslims in Their Mother Tongue is Shaking Up Assam." Scroll.in, July 14, 2019.

<sup>203</sup> Daniyal, Shoaid. "Why Poetry of Bengal-Origin Muslims in Their Mother Tongue is Shaking Up Assam." Scroll.in, July 14, 2019.

There has always been a suspicion among the indigenous Assamese for the neo-Assamese Muslims that they have accepted the Assamese as their mother tongue after independence for avoiding any conflict with the local people. So, when the census showed declining percentage of Assamese speakers in consecutive censuses, the suspicion grows that the neo-Assamese Muslims will leave the Assamese language as their mother tongue as they do not need any protection from the local indigenous people. One reason for this is that they have already grown in numbers and they have significant electoral influence to some extent.

What we have seen here is that the neo-Assamese Muslims and their language became a political tool in the politics of Assam post Assam accord period. The politics of language has also created an environment where a situation of distrust prevailed among indigenous communities and the neo-Assamese Muslims in Brahmaputra valley. Therefore it again brought back the old anxieties of colonial period between Assamese and Bengali speakers, but this time the form is more complex and the issue of religion has also been associated with these anxieties.

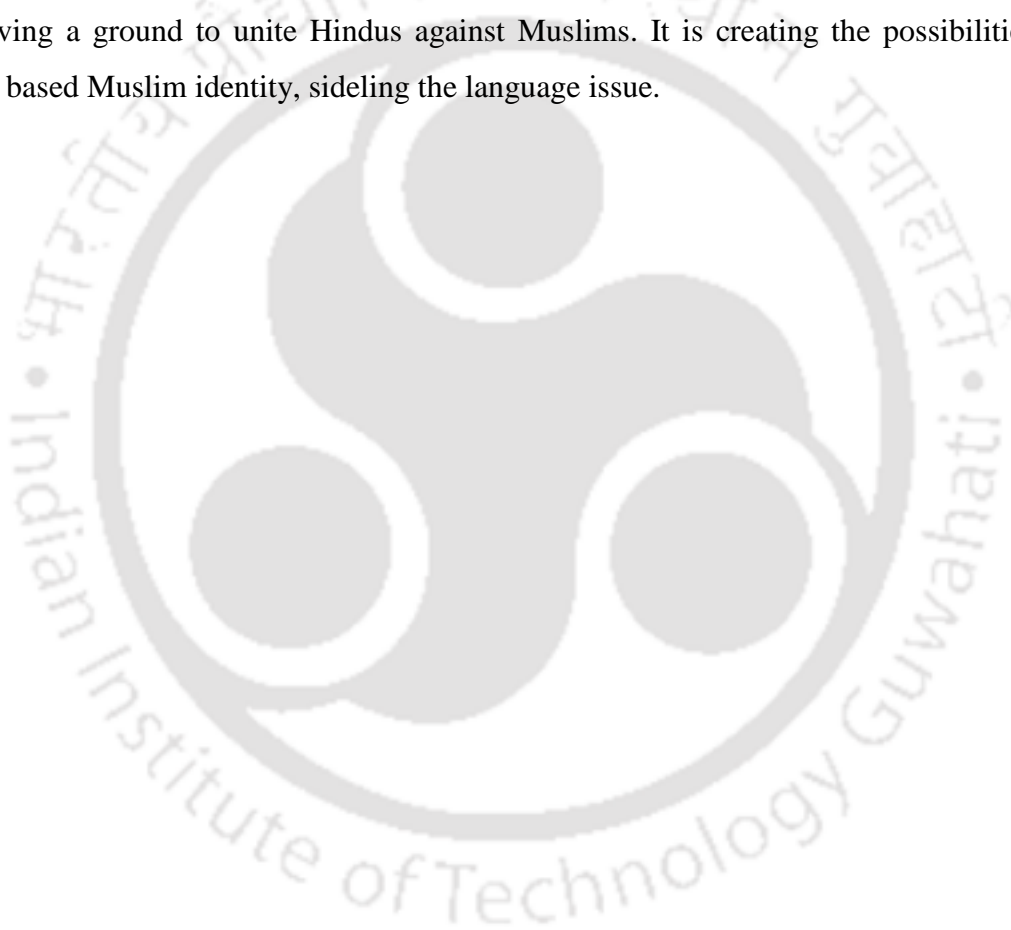
### **On Conclusion**

The political class of the neo-Assamese Muslims realized their importance in maintaining the majority status of Assamese. Hence they have been using the issue of language politically as a bargaining tool. Moreover, there is a growing tendency developing among the neo-Assamese Muslims for the alienation from the Assamese language as we have already discussed about the Hazi Musafirkhana meeting in Guwahati 1991. From this it can be argued that a psychological barrier between neo-Assamese Muslims and indigenous Assamese communities developed after the Assam movement. It is probably because of the chauvinist elements present in the Assam movement. Many labelled the whole neo-Assamese Muslim community as the Bangladeshis and used various derogatory comments against them. The significance of AIUDF has been prominent here. As a political party of the mainly immigrant Muslim communities of Assam, AIUDF has been engaging in the politics of Assam since a long time. However, its party chief Badaruddin Ajmal (All India United Democratic Front chief) often targeted and recently BJP is trying to project Ajmal and the Miyas (Bengali speaking Muslims) as the threat to Assamese identity and Ajmal as their protector. These have created an environment for alienation

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of a section of neo-assamese muslims from the Assamese culture and language. One needs to understand that the act of assimilation is a two-way process where we can not expect some communities to identify themselves as the speakers of Assamese language in the census operation and later on project them as the enemy of Assamese identity. That is what is happening with the neo-Assamese muslim communities of Assam.

In the politics of Assam, the indigenous Assamese people are considering the immigrant Muslim community as a future threat. The decline of Assamese speakers in the census operations and rise of Miya poetry and Miya language are giving the impression that they are alienating themselves from the indigenous Assamese language. In the recent years BJP has been giving a ground to unite Hindus against Muslims. It is creating the possibilities of a religion based Muslim identity, sidelining the language issue.



## Chapter VI

### CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the key findings of this research. Three core arguments concerning the three research questions that were identified initially have been addressed in this chapter. However, before addressing the three research questions, it is necessary to look at the more significant theoretical issue of this work.

As identified at the outset, many works have highlighted the relationship between identity and language. In the case of Assamese identity too, language is playing a significant role in shaping and reshaping the Assamese identity. Taking a cue from the scholarly intervention where it has been established that linking one's identity to language or any other markers signifies a modern phenomenon; this work has used the term 'Modern Assamese identity' in place of 'Assamese identity'. This work has argued that modern Assamese identity is a colonial construction. However, the making of modern Assamese identity is grappled with the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and linguistic considerations. This work has highlighted these issues, emphasizing the two significant language movements of the state after independence.

#### 6.1 Summary of key findings

At the outset, this work has identified three research questions.

The first research question is:

How did 'language' become a symbol of Assamese identity's imagination? What is the contribution of colonial politics, if any, to the imagination of the Assamese identity around the issue of language?

To answer this question, the thesis contends that the notion of a language-centric modern Assamese identity was constructed during the colonial period and faced numerous internal and external challenges. It recognizes the significance of print media, particularly in the vernacular sphere, and the contributions of censuses and intellectuals in shaping a language-based modern Assamese identity during the colonial era. The identification of the standardization process of the Assamese language and its role in establishing an Assamese identity centred around language has been recognized. The recognition of various political events during this period and the influence of colonial geopolitics in shaping this identity have also been acknowledged.

The second research question is:

Does 'language' provide a basis for Assamese identity formation in post-independence Assam? How do language movements in the state, especially the language movements of 1960 and 1972, consolidate this position?

The thesis contends that language was a foundation for forming Assamese identity in post-independence Assam. This is apparent from the examination of how various tribes have effectively preserved their languages and reclaimed their original native tongue during the census operations in the post-colonial era. Furthermore, during the period before independence, Assamese linguistic nationalists developed a strong desire for a linguistically unified province. Consequently, the Bengali-speaking population posed a perceived threat to the Assamese-speaking population. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the *Official State Language Movement* and *Medium of Instruction Movement* in Assam introduced a fresh viewpoint to Assamese linguistic nationalism. Various instances of language movements in Assam have demonstrated that the Bengali-speaking population was perceived as a threat, prompting the use of the Assamese language as a defensive measure.

The third research question is:

What are the significant challenges and contradictions of Assamese identity in post-independence Assam? What are the major trajectories of Assamese identity formulations in the wake of debates over indigeneity, especially in the context of the Assam Accord and recent development?

The thesis has examined the various tropes that have shaped the modern Assamese identity based on language. Two notable advancements in post-independence language politics in Assam have played an essential role in forming the language-centric Assamese identity. The initial development pertains to the deliberate endeavour of the immigrant Muslim community to reinstate Assamese as their 'mother tongue' in all census operations following the attainment of independence. However, the second and most notable advancement is the integration of identities among the diverse ethnic groups residing in the Brahmaputra Valley, commonly referred to as the 'plains tribes'. Unlike the 1960s, when the Bengali-speaking population was seen as a potential danger, the 'foreigners' or '*Bohiragoto*' were perceived as a threat during the Assam Movement and afterwards. The final chapter of this thesis has identified that the immigrant Muslim community has been recognized as a 'threat' in recent years. The thesis contends that the decline of Assamese speakers in recent census operations and the emergence

of Miya poetry and the Miya language assertions have redirected widespread attention in the state towards the immigrant Muslim community. The prevailing political environment also fosters establishing an Assamese identity rooted in religion rather than prioritizing language.

## **6.2 Challenges and dynamics of language politics in Assam**

This study concludes that the interaction of language and politics can produce social hierarchies and various sites for contestation, and this applies to the case of Assam. Issues like the Assamese language's dominance and the preservation of other tribal and minority languages posed a significant dynamic in this direction. The debates surrounding the linguistic identity of different communities and their impact on politics, education, and administration have also contributed to the complexity of language politics in Assam.

### **Process of 'othering':**

Right from the beginning of the colonial period, when language became the marker of Assamese identity, a process of 'othering' took place in Assam. During the state's language movements, especially between 1960 and 1972, the target community was the Bengali-speaking population in Assam as identified in chapter three. However, from 1980 onwards, the process of 'othering' was directed towards the '*bohiragoto*' or the outsiders of Assam which was initially directed towards people from different regions except Assam. Soon, this othering process was linked to citizenship and indigeneity. However, the discussion from chapter five reveals how the process of 'othering' is now mixed with the issues of language, indigeneity, and citizenship. In the recent phase, the case of separate identity consciousness among the indigenous Muslim community in Assam also represents this shift. After the *Assam Accord*, neo-Assamese Muslims and their language were used as a political tool, as identified in chapter five. The linguistic politics of the state also influence distrust between natives and neo-Assamese Muslims. The result was a resurgence of tensions between Assamese and Bengali speakers, but in a more nuanced and religiously charged form than they had seen since the colonial era.

### **Linguistic hegemony and political will**

Language hegemony is another issue when it comes to the challenges of language politics in Assam. The hegemony of the Assamese language was challenged by many tribal groups like Bodo, Missing, Rabha, etc, after the introduction of the official language act and especially during the implementation of the *Assam Accord*. The tendency to link the concept of

indigeneity, especially with the Assamese language, provided much discomfort to the tribal populations of the state, and this signifies a significant departure from the ongoing identity construction of Assamese. This was also relevant in recent years when the hegemony of Assamese speakers caused a rift in the construction of Assamese identity.

The role of political will is also crucial here. During the colonial period, language was primarily used to gain political objectives (for example, to gain control over people and administration). This trend continued in the post-independence era, too. Although the state's two major language movements initially aimed to protect and preserve the Assamese language, many political goals eventually took over, such as securing majority status for a particular language-speaking community and associating this language issue with protecting a specific linguistic group under the constitution. This created a divide between the various Assamese communities.

### **6.3 Broader implications and future research directions**

The research focuses mainly on identifying the challenges and dynamics of Modern Assamese identity. However, this work is not free from errors and omissions in all the details. This is a humble attempt to capture the formation process of Modern Assamese identity, keeping the language as the backdrop. While Assamese identity involves various issues like language, religion, ethnicity, culture etc., understanding its formation only from the language viewpoint is challenging. In the process, the explanation of other issues is carefully neglected, which may be a drawback of this research.

However, this research attempted to fill up the existing research gap by providing a comprehensive story of the creation of Modern Assamese identity through the issue of language. Rather than making it a chronological account of the language politics of the state, it focused on giving details of the construction of language-centric modern Assamese identity, concentrating mainly on the period after independence. However, future researchers can unfold the story of Modern Assamese identity by looking at the interplay of language issues with various other issues like religion, caste and many other markers of Assamese identity. To conclude, it can be argued that multiple factors influence Assam's dynamics in language politics. Demographic changes, government policies on language and education, official language status, and political will to protect the linguistic diversity of the state are some of these factors. Monitoring these factors can help identify the trajectories of the language politics of Assam in the future.



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## List of abbreviation

AAGSP	All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad
AAMSU	All Assam Minority Student Union
AASU	All Assam Student Union
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AJD	Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal
APW	Assam Public Works
ASA	Assam State Archives
ASS	Assam Sahitya Sabha
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BPF	Bodo Peoples Front
CAA	Citizenship (Amendment) Act
CAB	Citizenship (Amendment) Bill
CAD	Constituent Assembly Debate
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
IMDT	Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals)
NRC	The National Registrar of Citizens
UMF	United Minority Front

# **Accord between AASU, AAGSP and the Central Government on the Foreign National Issue (Assam Accord)**

*15 August 1985*

1. Government have all along been most anxious to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) have also expressed their keenness to find such a solution.
2. The AASU through their Memorandum dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1980 presented to the late Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi, conveyed their profound sense of apprehensions regarding the continuing influx of foreign nationals into Assam and the fear about adverse effects upon the political, social, culture and economic life of the State.
3. Being fully alive to the genuine apprehensions of the people of Assam, the then Prime Minister initiated the dialogue with the AASU/AAGSP. Subsequently, talks were held at the Prime Minister's and Home Minister's level during the period 1980-83. Several rounds of informal talks were held during 1984. Formal discussions were resumed in March, 1985.
4. Keeping all aspects of the problem including constitutional and legal provisions, international agreements, national commitments and humanitarian considerations, it has been decided to proceed as follows:

## **Foreigners Issue**

- 5.1 For purposes of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base data and year.
- 5.2 All persons who come to Assam prior to 1.1.1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections shall be regularised.
- 5.3 Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.
- 5.4 Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939.
- 5.5 For this purpose, Government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the government machinery.

5.6 On the expiry of a period of ten years following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the electoral rools shall be restored.

5.7 All persons who were expelled earlier, but have since reentered illegally into Assam shall be expelled.

5.8 Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.

5.9 The Government will give due consideration to certain difficulties expressed by the AASU/AAGSP regarding the implementation of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983.

### **Safeguards and economic development**

6. Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

7. The Government take this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science and technology through establishment of national institutions.

### **Other Issues**

8.1 The Government will arrange for the issue of citizenship certificates in future only by the authorities of the Central Government.

8.2 Specific complaints that may be made by the AASU/AAGSP about irregular issuance of Indian Citizenship Certificates (ICC) will be looked into.

9.1. The international border shall be made secure against future infiltration by erection of physical barriers like walls, barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places. Patrolling by security forces on land and rivering routes all along the international border shall be adequately intensified. In order to further strengthen the security arrangements, to prevent effectively future infiltration, an adequate number of check posts shall be set up.

9.2 Besides the arrangements mentioned above and keeping in view security considerations, a road all along the international border shall be constructed as to facilitate patrolling by security forces. Land between border and the road would be kept free of human habitation, wherever possible. Riverine patrolling along the international border would be intensified. All effective measures would be adopted to prevent infiltrators crossing or attempting to cross the international border.

10. It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws.

11. It will be ensured that the relevant law restricting acquisition of immovable property by foreigners in Assam is strictly enforced.

12. It will be ensured that Birth and Death Registers are duly maintained.

### **Restoration of Normalcy**

13. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the all Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) call off the agitation, assure full co-operation and dedicate themselves towards the development of the country.

14. The Central and the State Government have agreed to:

- a. review with sympathy and withdraw cases of disciplinary action taken against employees in the context of the agitation and to ensure that there is no victimization;
- b. frame a scheme for ex-gratia payment to next of kin of those who were killed in the course of the agitation;
- c. give sympathetic consideration to proposal for relaxation of upper age limit for employment in public services in Assam, having regard to exceptional situation that prevailed in holding of academic and competitive examinations, etc., in the context of agitation in Assam;
- d. undertake review of detention cases, if any, as well as cases against persons charged with criminal offences in connection with the agitation, except those charged with commission of heinous offences;
- e. consider withdrawal of the prohibitory orders/ notifications in force, if any.

15. The Ministry of Home Affairs will be the nodal Ministry for the implementation of the above.

Signed/-  
**(P.K. Mahanta)**  
*President*  
*All Assam Students Union*

Signed/-  
**(R.D. Pradhan)**  
*Home Secretary*  
*Govt. of India*

Signed/-  
**(B.K. Phukan)**  
*General Secretary*  
*All Assam Students Union*

Signed/-  
**(Smt. P.P. Trivedi)**  
*Chief Secretary*  
*Govt. of India*

Signed/-  
**(Biraj Sharma)**  
*Convenor*  
*All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad*

In the presence of  
Signed/-  
**(Rajiv Gandhi)**  
*Prime Minister of India*

Date : 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1985

Place: New Delhi

1. Election Commission will be requested to ensure preparation of fair electoral rolls.
2. Time for submission of claims and objections will be extended by 30 days, subject to this being consistent with the Election rules.
3. The Election Commission will be requested to send Central Observers.

Signed/-

**Home Secretary**

1. Oil refinery will be established in Assam.
2. Central Government will render full assistance to the State Government in their efforts to re-open:
  - i. Ashok Paper Mill.
  - ii. Jute Mills
3. I.I.T. will be set-up in Assam.

**Source:** The South Asia Terrorism Portal (Website)

The 17th December 1960

**No. L.JL. 35/60.**—The following Act of the Assam Legislative Assembly which received the assent of the Governor is hereby published for general information.

**Received the assent of the Governor on the 17th December 1960**

**ASSAM ACT No. XXXIII OF 1960**

**THE ASSAM OFFICIAL LANGUAGE ACT, 1960**

(As passed by the Assembly)

[Published in the *Assam Gazette*, Extraordinary, dated the 19th  
December 1960]

*An*

*Act*

*to declare the Official Language of the State of Assam.*

**Preamble.**

Whereas Article 345 of the Constitution provides that the Legislature of a State may by law adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the State as the language to be used for official purposes of the State and for matters hereinafter appearing,

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It is hereby enacted in the Eleventh Year of the Republic of India, as follows:—

Short title,  
extent and  
commence-  
ment.

1. (1) This Act may be called the Assam Official Language Act, 1960.

(2) It extends to the whole of the State of Assam.

(3) It shall come into force on such date as the State Government may, by notification, in the official Gazette, appoint and different dates may be appointed for different official purposes and for different parts of the State of Assam:

Provided that the date or dates appointed by the State Government in respect of any of the parts of the State of Assam shall not be later than five years from the date the assent to this Act is first published in the official Gazette.

Definitions.

2. In this Act, unless there is anything repugnant in the subject or context:—

(a) "Autonomous District" means an area deemed as such under paragraph 1 (1) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

(b) "Autonomous Region" means an area deemed as such under paragraph 1 (2) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

(c) "District Council" means a District Council constituted under paragraph 2 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

(d) "Mohkuma Parishad" means a Mohkuma Parishad established under the Assam Panchayat Act, 1959. Assam  
XXIV  
1959.

(e) "Municipal Board" means a Municipal Board established under the Assam Municipal Act, 1956 and shall include Town Committees established under the said Act. Assam  
XV of 1956.

(f) "Prescribed" means prescribed by rules made under this Act.

(g) "Regional Council" means a Regional Council constituted under paragraph 2 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

Official language for official purposes of the State of Assam.

3. Without prejudice to the provisions of Articles 346 and 347 of the Constitution of India and subject as hereinafter provided, Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the State of Assam:

Provided that the English language, so long as the use thereof is permissible 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 Secretariat and the offices of the Heads of the Departments of the State Government and in such manner as may be prescribed :

Provided further that,—

- (a) all Ordinances promulgated under Article 213 of the Constitution of India ;
- (b) all Acts passed by the State Legislature ;
- (c) all Bills to be introduced or amendments thereto to be moved in the State Legislature ; and
- (d) all Orders, Regulations, Rules and Bye-laws issued by the State Government under the Constitution of India or any law made by Parliament or the Legislature of the State

shall be published in the official Gazette in the Assamese language.

Safeguard of the use of language in the Autonomous Region and in the Autonomous District.

4. Notwithstanding anything in Section 3, only languages which are in use immediately before the commencement of this Act shall continue to be used for administrative and other official purposes upto and including the level of the Autonomous Region or the Autonomous District, as the case may be, until the Regional Council or the District Council in respect of the Autonomous Region or the Autonomous District, as the case may be, by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting decide in favour of adoption of any other language for any of the administrative or official purposes within that region or district.

Safeguard of the use of Bengali language in the district of Cachar.

5. Notwithstanding anything in Section 3, the Bengali language shall be used for administrative and other official purposes upto and including the district level in the district of Cachar until the Mohkuma Parishads and Municipal Boards of the district in a joint meeting by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting decide in favour of adoption of the official language for use in the district for the aforesaid purposes.

The use of English as official language in respect of examination conducted by the Assam Public Service Commission.

6. Notwithstanding anything in Section 3, any examination held by the Assam Public Service 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 the use thereof is permissible under clause (2) of Article 343 of the Constitution of India :

Provided that a candidate shall have the right to choose the language in use in the State of Assam, which was the medium of his University examination.

Rights of the  
various ling-  
uistic group.

7. Subject to the provision of this Act, the State Government may by notification issued from time to time, direct the use of the language as may be specified in the notification and in such parts of the State of Assam as may be specified therein :

Provided that—

- (a) the rights of the various linguistic groups in respect of medium of instruction in educational institutions as laid down in the Constitution of India shall not be affected ;
- (b) the State shall not, in granting aid to educational and cultural institutions, discriminate against any such institutions on grounds of language ;
- (c) the rights to appointments in the Assam Public Services and to contracts and other avocations shall be maintained without discrimination on the ground of language ; and
- (d) in regard to noting in the offices in the region or district if any member of the staff is unable to note in any of the district language, the use of English shall be permitted by the Heads of Departments so long as the use thereof is permissible under Article 343 of the Constitution of India.

Powers to  
make rules.

8. The State Government shall have the power to make rules for carrying out the purposes of this Act.

B. C. BARUA,  
Secy. to the Govt. of Assam, Law Deptt.

পঞ্জীয়ন নং-১২

Registered No. A-12

অসম



ৰাজপত্ৰ

# The Assam Gazette

অসমসংবাদ

EXTRAORDINARY

প্ৰতি কৰ্তৃক দ্বাৰা প্ৰকাশিত

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নং 40	দিশপুৰ, মঙ্গলবাৰ, 16 এপ্ৰিল, 1985, 26 চ'ত, 1907 (শক)
No. 40	Dispur, Tuesday, 16th April, 1985, 26th Chaitra, 1907 (S. E.)

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GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM

ORDERS BY THE GOVERNOR

LEGISLATIVE DEPARTMENT : LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

### NOTIFICATION

The 16th April 1985

No.LGL.199/84/32.—The following Act of the Assam Legislative Assembly which received the assent of the Governor is hereby published for general information.

ASSAM ACT No. VI OF 1985

(Received the assent of the Governor on 12th April, 1985)

**THE ASSAM OFFICIAL LANGUAGE (AMENDMENT)  
ACT, 1985**

**An**

**Act**

further to amend the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 (Assam Act No. XXXIII of 1960).

**Preamble** Whereas it is expedient further to amend the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 hereinafter called the principal Act, in the manner hereinafter appearing ;

It is hereby enacted in the Thirty-sixth year of the Republic of India, as follows :—

**Short title,  
extent and  
commence-  
ment.**

1. (1) This Act may be called the Assam Official Language (Amendment) Act, 1985.

(2) It shall have the like extent as the principal Act.

(3) It shall be deemed to have come into force on the 28th day of December, 1984.

2. In the principal Act, after Section 5, a new Section 5A shall be inserted, namely —

**Insertion of  
new Section  
5A.**

“5A. Without prejudice to the provisions contained in Section 3, the Bodo Language shall be used as an Associate Official Language for all or any of the official purposes of the State of Assam as are specified in the Schedule, in the Districts and Subdivisions having substantial Bodo population as may be declared by the State Government from time to time.”

3. In the principal Act, after Section 8, the following Schedule shall be inserted, namely:—

"SCHEDULE

(See Section 5A)

Insertion of  
a Schedule.

- (1) Entertaining applications in Bodo presented by members of the public.
- (2) Receiving documents in Bodo presented for registration with English copy as long as the use thereof is permissible for the official purposes of the Union under any law made by the Parliament in this behalf, and thereafter Hindi in place of English or Assamese copy thereof.
- (3) Publication of :—
  - (i) all Acts passed by the State Legislature in Bodo;
  - (ii) all Orders, Regulations, Rules and Bye-laws issued by the State Government under the Constitution of India or any law made by Parliament or the Legislature of the State in Bodo.
- (4) Publication of Government advertisements in Bodo."

Repeal and  
Savings.

4. (1) The Assam Official Language (Amendment) Ordinance, 1984 is hereby repealed.
- (2) Notwithstanding such repeal anything done or any action taken under the principal Act as amended by the Ordinance so repealed shall be deemed to have been done or taken under the principal Act as amended by this Act.

Assam  
Ordinance  
No. VIII  
of 1984.

MD. SAADULLAH,  
Secretary to the Govt. of Assam,  
Legislative Department.