

## **The Assamese Language Issue: An Analysis from Historical Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The genesis of the Assamese Language issue can be traced back into the nineteenth century, when the British replaced Persia by Bengali as the language of the courts and the medium of instruction in Assam. The appointment of the Bengalis became indispensable in the Anglo-vernacular and vernacular schools, since school teachers were not available in adequate numbers in any case to impart lessons in the Bengali language. The social dominance of Bengali-speaking people in Assam was reflected in the dominance of their languages. Writing of text books in Assamese did not get any encouragement and Assamese literature naturally suffered in its growth. The enmity between the two linguistic groups led to a social conflict in Assamese society. Raising Bengali speakers in 1951 census report of Assam, was opposed by the Bengali speakers and says that these figures were inflated to provide justification for the introduction of the Assamese as the State language. In this article an attempt has been made to focus on the certain historical developments relating to the Assamese language issue from 1836 to 1960 and how Assamese was installed as the official language of Assam by passing Assamese Language Act of 1960.

**Keywords:** Assamese Language, Intellectual Awakening, Language Movement, Identity and Conflict.

Concept of ethnicity and education, language serves as a vehicle of social change and interaction. On the other hand, the correlation and interrelation between language and ethnicity is easily discernable. Thus, while language as the most effective instrument of culture becomes the most important vehicle for conveying the sense of belonging, it can also serve as a potent decisive force. While it enriches its users, the deeper and more comprehensive use of language makes it an instrument of culture and identity. Language is inherent to every society. It has a unique power to tie different sections of people, irrespective of caste, creed, and religion to a common linguistic and cultural unit. Language is “the immediate reality of thought”. It plays a significant role in the intellectual development of society because thought by and large is the product of language. According to D.P. Pattanayak “Language gives identity to a person, to a social group, to a geographical entity and as well as to a nation”. Moreover “language is the medium as well as the expression of culture”. Therefore, in any clash of cultures, in any crisis of identities, language is used as the instrument of political actions (Mazumdar: 1-4).

The conflicts among different ethnic groups have given rise to a series of interrelated and complicated socio-economic and identity questions. The political dimension of language assumes different shapes and content at various times. North-East India as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country has different experience in respect of the language issue. The biggest and the most interesting manifestation of the identity crisis in Assam has been the shadow boxing among the two large linguistic and cultural groups, so similar and yet so determinedly different- the Bengalis and the Assamese. . However the genesis of the Assamese Language issue can be traced back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the British replaced Persia by Bengali as the language of the courts and the medium of instruction which was not the mother tongue of the Assamese people. Thus the controversy regarding the British language policy had started during the “Jonaki Age” which entered into a new phase during the post-independence era, with the proposal of APCC to declare “Assamese” as the one and only official language of the state.

With the British annexation in 1826, the socio-political and economic situation underwent a rapid change. Developments under British Rule and the period from 1826 is a formative epoch in the history of Assam. It marked not only the end of the independent and powerful Ahom monarchy but ushered in a new regime of foreign domination, the effects of which can be felt even today. The Company annexed the state of Assam and placed it under the Bengal administration which was administered as part of Bengal during the years 1826-1873. In 1874, it was made a Chief Commissioner's province and a major portion of the Bengali speaking areas of Cachar and Sylhet and also Goalpara came under the provincial administration of Assam. The viceroy Curzon's Plan of partition of Bengal, 1903-1905, facilitated immigration from across the Bengal border to Assam.(Kalita: 106) This new re-organisation that took place was to have a lasting influence on the attitude of the Assamese towards migrants from the neighboring areas of East Bengal.

At that time the British partitioned the sprawling densely populated province of Bengal into a predominantly Bengali Muslim province in the East which incorporated Assam, and a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the West. Though ostensibly the partition meant for raising the administrative efficiency of the government, the plan had been designed to give a homeland to the Bengalis in the newly created province East Bengal and Assam with its capital at Dhaka.( Kalita: 106) There followed bitter reaction from the Bengali Hindus who resented the partition of their province and from the Assamese who resented the incorporation into a portion of Bengal. In 1912 the British annulled the partition and reestablished Assam as a separate Chief Commissioner's province that included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar.

The language in the province too faced the wind of the change. Assamese, the vernacular language of Assam, has a long history of its existence. But prior to British rule, it was not taught as a subject in the absence of schools in the modern sense of the term. The Assamese intelligentsia of the pre-British periods was much influenced by Sanskrit and also to some extent by Persian which was at that time the court language of India (Majumdar: 11). In April 1831, the Government of Bengal made Bengali, in place of Persian, the Court language of Assam on the ground that it was very difficult and too costly to replace Persian scribes who were on leave or who left the service. The services of the Bengalis immediately became indispensable in the Anglo-vernacular and vernacular schools, since school teachers were not available in adequate numbers in any case to impart lessons in the Bengali language, which had since become the medium of instruction. The social dominance of Bengali-speaking people in Assam, Orissa, Chotanagpur and parts of Bihar was reflected in the dominance of their languages.

Thus, with the advent of the British, the whole situation rapidly changed. The British needed the services of 'native' bureaucrats to run the administration. The people who, at that time, were intimately acquainted with the British administrative method were those of Bengal, the immediate neighbor of Assam. On the other hand, in first decade of this century the Bengali middle class had already produced a big surplus of educated youth who could not hope to be employed in their narrow provincial set up. They sought their fortunes in the neighboring states of Orissa, Bihar and Assam where their assertion of cultural superiority exacerbated local resentment at their success in finding jobs. To help the British in consolidating their power in Assam, came with them, a large number of Bengalis who gradually own their prestige as efficient '*amlahs*' or bureaucrats.

In 1837, under the Act of XXIX passed by the President of the Council of India the vernacular language of a district was directed to be used in the courts. Abolition of Persia from the court was highly appreciated. Although for more than ten years after the annexation of the province, Assamese was the language of the courts, as a part of the Presidency of Bengal, Bengali language was introduced in the courts of Assam.(Majumdar: 57). For their administrative convenience in 1936 British

authorities introduced Bengali in place of Assamese in the Schools and the courts in Assam.( Barpujari: 109) The use of Bengali as the language of the court and educational institutions had done great harm to the people of Assam and driven a permanent wedge between the two communities of Assamese and Bengalis. As a result of use of Bengali between 1837 and 1873 as the medium of instruction, the progress of education in Assam remained not only slow but highly defected and a lot of Bengalis were imported and employed in the different schools of Assam. Writing of text books in Assamese for school children in Assamese did not get any encouragement and Assamese literature naturally suffered in its growth. The enmity between the two linguistic groups affected the Assamese society and it led to a conflict between the Bengalis and the Assamese (Bose: 91).

The imposition of Bengali as the official language and as the medium of instruction in Assam did not meet with any protest initially. On the contrary, the Assamese elite use the language in their writings and often even in their conversations. Hence for almost a decade, the language policy of the government remained unquestioned. But as recruitment of Bengalis in government services increased resulting in greater unemployment among the Assamese, strong feelings of resentment begun to grow amongst the people.

The increased number of Bengali Amlas in the different districts of Assam might pose a challenge to the distinct identities of the Assamese people because these immigrants had their own culture, language, traditions and religion and their existence in the land might affect the Assam's language, culture, economy and political status. Of the migrants, the tea plantation labourers posed no problem linguistically and culturally, rather there has been a process of assimilation between the two communities. They speak Assamese and in the census of 1961 only 2, 04,000 reported to have spoken their tribal language.( Barpujari: 41)

The immigrant Bengali Muslims on the other hand did not pose much problem to the indigenous Assamese people in the field of employment in the government sector because of a tacit understanding that migrant Bengali Muslims, keen on improving their economic lot, appeared to have reached with the indigenous Assamese on language issue. Being interested in getting land in the fertile valley and by offering their cheap labour in the struggle for survival, the immigrant put their love of language on the shelf and declared Assamese as their mother- tongue. The transfer of the major portion of the Sylhet to Pakistan and the declaration of Assamese as their mother- tongue by Bengali immigrants, led to the dramatic increase in the of Assamese speakers in the 1951 census. (Chhabra: 16)

Initial protests against the government's language policy came from the American Baptist Missionaries and the educated Assamese elite section. Soon after their arrival into Assam, the missionaries realized that they need to use the vernacular medium to spread Christianity. Hence, they began to strongly espouse the cause of the Assamese language as the rightful medium of instruction. Apart from printing all their religious

material in Assamese, they made fervent pleas in defense of the Assamese language through the *Orunodoi*. Primarily intended for the propagation of Christianity *Arunodai* contained informative knowledge of science, history, geography certain regional and national news and views. Disseminating western thoughts and learning, for over twenty years, it inspired the younger generation of the Assamese and paved the way for an intellectual awakening. (Neog: 360- 61) The untiring efforts of the missionaries in asserting the separate identity of the Assamese language was indeed commendable and they received wholehearted support from the Assamese intelligentsia, whose chief spokesperson was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, followed by a number of petitions and memoranda to the government. (Goswami: 219-21)

The labors of the Baptist Missionaries and men like Hemchandra, Gunabhiram and Anandaram- the Trinity- helped to restored Assamese language to its rightful place in the state, when in 1872, George Campbell, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal made Assamese the language of education and administration for its native speakers. Eventually in February 1874, the government revised its earlier language policy and the Commissioner categorically stated that in the primary schools, rather than Bengali, should be the soul medium of instruction. However, the Commissioner had no objection to the use of Bengali text books if student understood that language. This decision made the Assamese suspect some sly device by the Bengalis to supplant Assamese. Despite the Chief Commissioner's assurance that Assamese would not be supplanted, Bengali continued to be the medium in middle grades until the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Chattopadhyay: 20-21).

Vigorous protests were made by the Assamese people as to why Bengali was taught in middle and high schools. The Director of Public Instruction replied on January 16, 1903 that Sir Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner, was not favorable to the substitution of Assamese for Bengali texts in Assam Valley high schools. On the other hand, an influential Bengali in Gauhati demanded for the instruction of Bengali in high schools. Further the Chief Commissioner stated (March 28, 1903) that students in the Assamese-speaking district of Kamarupa to be taught in Assamese, but non-availability of Assamese texts stood in the way of its implementation.

The attitude of the Assamese educated community is reflected in Manikchandra Barua's argument to the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrupa that as the district was never a part of Bengal and that Gauhati was essentially an Assamese town, the medium of instruction in the high schools there must be Assamese. The establishment of Cotton College (1901), Earle Law College, and many other institutions bear testimony to his patriotism and ardor for Assam's development. While accepting the cogency of Barua's argument, P.G. Melitus, the Commissioner of the Assam valley, pointed out that on demands from the parents of the Bengali students arrangements should be made in Gauhati to provide instruction through Bengali. Though, Mellitus was willing to respect the sentiments of the sizably intelligent section of the Bengali community, the Commissioner felt that owing to the closer relation of this community to the people of Bengal than to the Assamese, schools in Goalpara must have Bengali

as the medium. In his concluding note Mellitus states that the imparting of education in Assamese instead of in Bengali was being done at the cost of efficiency. This forgoing study clearly anticipates the shape of things to come, especially after 1947. The Official Language Movement of 1960 and the subsequent Medium of Instruction Movement of 1972 had a strong foundation in the agitations of these years (Chattopadhyay: 20-21).

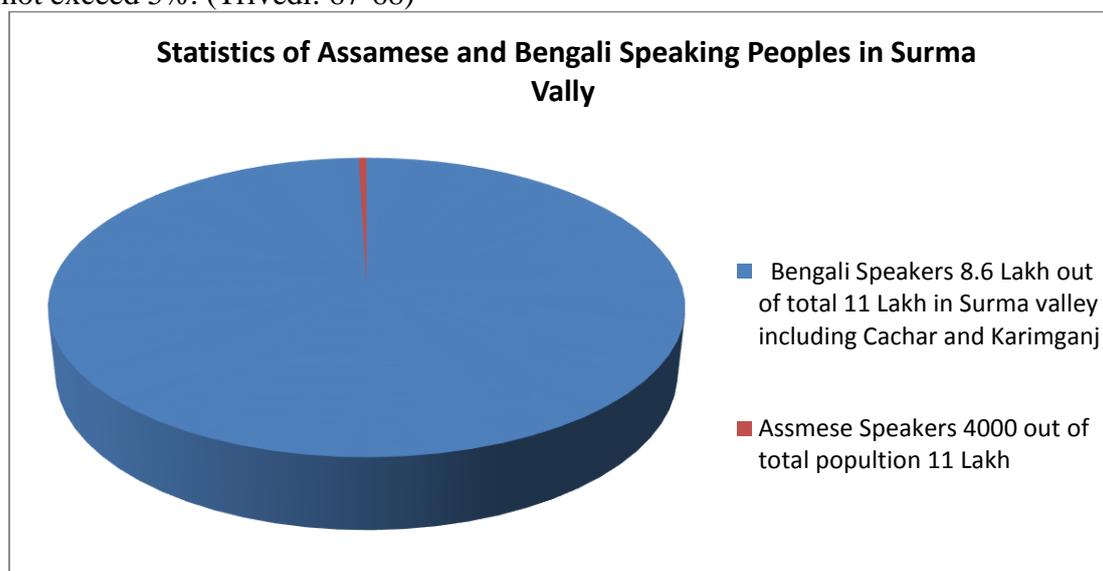
The debates on the language issue during the 19<sup>th</sup> century had resulted in the increasing awareness about the distinctive linguistic, cultural and political existence of Assam and the educated people of the provinces. It instilled in them confidence and sense of pride which went a long way in generating a regional consciousness in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which further escalated in the post-independence era. This Socio-cultural and linguistic awakening of the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the considerable increase of the Assamese speakers in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Language	1911		1931		Variation in Percentage of Total	Variation in Number of Speakers
	Speakers in Lakh)	Percentage of the Total	Speakers in (Lakh)	Percentage of the total		
1911-1931						
Hindi	2.35	6.11	4.24	7.62	+1.51	+80.43
Bengali	17.58	45.67	14.90	26.78	-18.88	-15.24
Assamese	8.35	21.69	17.47	31.42	+9.73	+109.22
Others	10.21	26.53	19.00	34.17	+7.64	+86.09
Total	38.49		55.61			+44.48
1931-1951	1931		1951			
Hindi	4.24	7.62	3.07	3.82	-3.80	-27.59
Bengali	14.90	26.79	13.25	16.50	-10.29	-11.07
Assamese	17.47	31.42	45.52	56.69	+25.27	+160.56
Others	19.00	34.17	18.45	22.99	-11.18	-2.89
Total	55.61		80.29			+44.3

Source-( Chhabra: P17)

After independence the number of Assamese speakers increased to 56.59 percent in 1951 as compared to 31.42 percent in 1931. According to the census of 1951, a population of about 80 lakhs, of which nearly 45 lakhs declared themselves to be Assamese speaking and nearly 13 lakhs Bengali speaking. The Surma Valley comprising the districts of Cachar which includes Karimganj sub-division of the old Sylhet district, which, as a result of Partition, became a part of the Indian Union has a population over 11 lakhs of which 8.6 lakhs were Bengali speaking and less than 4000 Assamese speaking; and the Hill regions made up of the district of Garo Hills, United Khasi-Jayantiya Hills, United Mikir and North-Cachar Hills and Mizo Hills has a total population of about 8 lakhs. The inhabitants of these regions speak their own dialects

and the number of people speaking either Assamese or Bengali in any one district did not exceed 5%. (Trivedi: 67-68)



The Bengali speaking people questioned the accuracy of the 1951 census figures insofar as they relate to the Assamese speaking population. The Bengalis had questioned these figures before the State Re-organization Commission. Their contention was that these figures were inflated to provide justification for the introduction of the Assamese as the State language. The representatives of both Cachar and Hill districts also complained that their regions had been neglected in respects of the development schemes both in the Five and Second Five Year Plan. Since the coming into force of the Constitution and the recognition of Assamese as one of the languages in the Eighth Schedule, the desire of the Assamese people to have Assamese declared as the official language of Assam has gained new momentum but they felt that their aspirations had all along been thwarted by the opposition of the Bengali speaking people and the people of Hill regions.

The Non-Assamese felt that the declaration of Assamese as the official language of the State would place the Assamese speaking people in a position of advantage in many respects, particularly in the recruitment of state Services. The people of the Hill districts had a feeling that the recognition of Assamese as official language in addition to their own languages would place unbearable burden on them. As a result, the Assamese speaking section of the population has been nurturing a grievance that the Bengali and the others have stood in the way of the achievements of their just aspirations. The language question has thus caused dissension and mutual suspicion between the Assamese and the non-Assamese speaking sections of the population (Trivedi: 69).

Initially started as an elite movement by the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society organized in 1917), the Official Language Movement of 1960 was

spearheaded by the student community comprising the All Assam Students' Federation (under the banner of the Students' Association of Gauhati) The Official Language Movement of 1960 was however, a direct sequel to the appointment of the States' Reorganization Commission in 1955 and dates back to the agitation of Assamese as the official state language beginning in 1950. Through two resolutions in 1950 and again 1959, the Sahitya Sabha stressed the need for making Assamese as the official state language. (Chattopadhyay: 98-99) The controversy, however, gained momentum after April 1959, when the Sabha proposed that the Assamese language be declared as the state language in 1960. During Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Gauhati University on April 17, the students in a body demanded an immediate declaration of Assamese as the State Language. This was reinforced by the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee's (A.P.C.C.) resolution of April 22. However on May 21, 1960, a huge procession of non-Assamese students was led out from the Khasi National Darbar, shouting slogan to oppose Assamese as State Language.

The disturbances in Assam created by the Assamese students in the form of processions, meetings and '*hartals*' and soon they begun to dominate the situation and the violence and widespread destruction to large number of residence of Assam leading the State, have been a matter of disconcerted and sorrow to the Government of Assam. (Deka: 133-35) It was necessary for the Government to enunciate its policy in regards to its action to deal with the situation that has arisen. Despite the S.R.C. Report that the Assamese language did not fulfill the formula laid down for an official language and contrary to the non-Assamese opposition, Chief Minister Chaliha introduced the Assamese Official Language Bill in the Assembly on October 10, 1960. The Bill provided for two official language- Assamese and for an interim period, English. The bill passed on October 24, 1960, included safeguards for linguistic minorities as well.

The Assam Official Language Act, 1960, received the assent of the Governor on December 17 and was published in the Assam Gazette on December 19. The provisions of the Act provided Assamese as the official language for all or any of the official purposes of the State of Assam. It further provided that English language, under the Article 343 of the Constitution of India, and thereafter Hindi in place of English, shall also be used for such official purposes of the offices of the Heads of Department of the State. In the Section 3 of the Act, it has been mentioned that the Bengali language shall continue to be used for administrative and other administrative purposes up to and including the district level in the district of Cachar until the Mokhuma Parishad and the Municipal Boards of the district, in a joint meeting by a majority of not less than two-third of the members and present and voting, decide in favour of the adoption of the official language for use in the district for the aforesaid purposes. The Assam Official Language Act of 1960 was further amended in 1964. As amended it extended the period within which it was to come into force throughout Assam to ten years from the date of its initiation to December (Goswami S.: 62-63)

## CONCLUSION

Thus in 1960 the Assam official Language Bill was passed and Assamese was declared as the official language of the state. After the installation of Assamese in its rightful place, there shows a phenomenal increase of Assamese speaking people from 1960 onwards. By 1961 Assamese speaking people were in the Brahmaputra valley supposed to have increased more than threefold to reach the staggering number of 67,31,378 whereas during the same period the Bengali speaking people were supposed to have decreased to 8,99,465. This was obviously because of the, large number of Bengali and Muslim and other non-Assamese people turn Assamese as their mother tongue. (Ahmed: 122) The language Movement of 1960 was, however, the biggest manifestation in the socio-cultural history of Assam. The movement in favour of the Assamese language was undoubtedly developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century but it further gained momentum in the post-independent era, which finally came to an end with the historic Assam Official Language Act, 1960, with its declaration of making Assamese as the sole official language of the State.

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