CHAPTER – 4
LANGUAGE MOVEMENT – A CRISIS OF IDENTITY

Language problem in Assam: Assam presents a unique fusion of different racial and linguistic elements. As a result of the long-term migratory flow into Assam, it is linguistically and ethnically the most diversified state in India. The tangled national question of Assam cannot be comprehended unless this historically evolved regional cultural pattern is constantly kept in mind. The present study is designed to focus the dynamics of the relationships between Assamese, the language spoken by the majority of the people of the state and Bengali, the language of an important linguistic minority in the state.

The co-existence of closely related Assamese-Bengali communities in Assam has given rise to fierce rivalry that has so far defied any solution. The historical, socio-demographic and economic background of Assam needs to be studied in order to understand the problem in the proper perspective.

The land-mass of the state is characterized by two distinct natural regions, i.e. (i) The plains comprising the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and a part of the Surma Valley and (ii) the hilly regions of the north, east, south and the center which surround the Assam plains. The political map of Assam has undergone several changes since independence. As a result, Assam of today is reduced to the Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley and the two hill districts – Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills.
Emergence of the Problem: The establishment of the company’s authority in the different Government departments and the reconstitution of Assam, bringing in large Bengali speaking areas, may be said to have marked the beginning of the language problem in Assam.\(^1\) British capital penetrated the economy and started building up an infrastructure in the interests of accumulation. The closed society was exposed to immigration labour, new skills and new ideas. This immigration has done much towards opening out and colonizing the fertile and sparsely-peopled districts of Assam, while relieving other provinces of a portion of their surplus population.\(^2\) The establishment of the Assam Tea Company was part of the scheme of colonizing waste land in Assam to provide new avenues of investment for foreign capital.\(^3\) The tea industry required a regular supply of labour and so attracted a large number of labourers from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Uttar Pradesh and Madras. Thousands of labourers annually recruited for the plantations from outside provinces, most of whom did not return home, formed the biggest migrant group in Assam’s population. The next stream of migration was that of peasants from East Bengal districts, some 85 to 90 percent of whom were Muslims. The rural immigration continued during the years 1901-47\(^4\), and was on such a scale that the indigenous component of the Assam

\(^1\) Kar, M., Assam's Language Question in Retrospect, Social Scientist, Vol. 4, Sept., 1974, p.2.
\(^2\) Assam Administrative Report, 1911-12, p. 54.
\(^3\) Guha, A., Colonisation of Assam Years of Transitional Crisis 1825-1840, Indian Economic and Social History Review, No. 2, June, 1968.
\(^4\) Guha, A., Immigrants and Autochthones in a Plural Society: Their Inter-relations in the Brahmaputra Valley in Historical Perspectives, paper presented at a seminar held during 10-12 March, 1975, Dibrugarh University, Assam.
valley population went down considerably in percentage terms by the middle of 20th century. This migration had created certain impact on the land-use pattern in Assam. No doubt the immigrations not only contributed to Assam’s economy by bringing large tracts of waste land under cultivation but also they revitalize Assam’s social and cultural life simultaneously.

**Partition and Independence:** The partition of the country into two separate states did not, in any way, facilitate the solution of the language problem either in India or in Pakistan. If anything, partition further complicated the language question and brought in its wake a complex set of new problem. The principal task of the Indian state at the time of independence was to organize a single national market and to bring about political integration through which it could mediate between the various contradictory class interests. The picture that emerged at that time was by no means a simple one. The communal trouble, the integration of the princely states and the difficulties of organizing the various nationalities into a single constitutional state structure were some of the most important problems that confronted the Indian state. The Indian National Congress, while directing all its efforts towards negotiating the transfer of power, a process in which it gave low priority to various conflicting interests of an economic, political and linguistic nature, only kept in suspension the resolution of the problems.5 They pointed out the difficulties involved in achieving them within the colonial structure, but agreed to take up these issues and resolve them after the transfer of power. Independence in

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1947 thus became a signal for agitation favouring realignment of state boundaries on linguistic basis.

Myron Weiner\(^6\) observes that there are at least two special types of minorities (i) linguistic minorities belonging to linguistic groups which are majorities elsewhere, (ii) minorities which are not majorities elsewhere. The minority group presses for the preservation of its language in schools and demand that administrative ordinances be published in its own language. If the particular minority groups claiming functional recognition happen to be a majority language of neighbouring state and if the size of this minority is substantial, it raises difficult political problems of inter-ethnic rivalry including violence. The chain of violence continuing intermittently in Assam since independence over the rights of the Bengali linguistic minority can be cited in this context.

**Social Setting:** Assam, after 1974, remained one of the most diverse cultural regions in the sub-continent. Assam’s indigenous population is extremely diverse in cultural linguistic and religious terms. The 1971 Census classifies Assam’s population into speakers of 76 languages and dialects and residual category consisting of 48 other languages and dialects.\(^7\) Table 4.1 lists only those languages that were declared as mother tongue by more than 50,000 people.

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\(^7\) There was no census in Assam in 1981 due to non-settlement of the foreign national issue.
Of the languages that appear in Table- 4.1, Assamese, Bodo, Mikir, Mishing and Garo are indigenous languages. While sizeable speakers in Bengali are mostly immigrants in the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, Bengali is an indigenous language in the Cachar district where, according to the 1971 Census 77.8 per cent of the population speak Bengali. Hindu, Gorkhali, Nepali, Oriya, Santhali and Munda are languages spoken by immigrant groups. Among the indigenous language speakers, the Bodos, the Mikirs, the Mishings and the Garos fall within the statutory category of “Plain tribals”. The facts of ethnic demography have had an important impact on the state politics in Assam. Assamese is by far the most important language in Assam, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley where its speakers vary between 85.77 percent in Sibsagar district to 61.16 percent in Lakhimpur district. In other districts of the valley, Assamese speakers vary between 63 per cent to 80 per cent. The proportion of Assamese speakers is the lowest in Karimganj (0.08 percent) followed by Cachar (0.50 percent) and North Hills (2.8 percent) and Karbi Anglong (13.61 percent). Map in Figure 4.1 shows the pattern of ethnic composition in the state in 1961.

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8 Of course, indigenous and migrants are only relative terms. Many indigenous groups too were descendents of migrants. Here migrant groups refer to groups that were part of the moderated migration since the middle of the 19th century.
Fig. 4.1: Assam, Ethnic Composition, 1961
Table 4.1
Major Language Groups in Assam, 1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number of speakers (as mother tongue)</th>
<th>Percentage of Total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>8,904,917</td>
<td>60.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>2,882,039</td>
<td>19.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>792,481</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodo</td>
<td>533,713</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>349,116</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikir</td>
<td>191,354</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miri/Mishing</td>
<td>177,226</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriya</td>
<td>150,196</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipuri/Meitei</td>
<td>87,167</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santhali</td>
<td>86,086</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munda</td>
<td>76,894</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garo</td>
<td>76,004</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>317,959</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14,625,959,152</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Bengali is spoken by 77.76 percent of the population of Karimganj and Cachar Hills district, 19.31 percent of Nagaon, 14.70 percent of Dhubri, Goalpara and Kokrajhar, 14.38 percent of North Cachar Hills, 13.31 percent of Sonitpur and Darrang, 12.34 percent of Kamrup and Barpeta and 11.05 percent of Dibrugarh district. Although the Brahmaputra valley has both Bengali Hindu and Muslim population, most of the latter returns themselves as Assamese speakers in Census, hence the above Bengali speaking population of the valley consist mainly of the old Hindu settlers of the colonial period and post-independence refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan. Surma Valley
already had a large indigenous Bengali population, who are joined later by the refugees. The Bengali settlers and refugees in the Brahmaputra Valley are distributed over the towns and commercial centers and along the railway lines.

As discussed in the earlier chapter, the rift between the Assamese and the Bengalis on the issue of language has been in existence since the days of British rule. In fact, the origin of this rivalry may be attributed to the British policy of diluting the national characteristics of this region by including largely Bengali speaking areas within it, such an arrangement undoubtedly helped to manipulate the politics of the region to the advantage of the powers that be even after independence. The political situation in Assam had changed tremendously after independence. The separation of East Pakistan, the Sylhet Referendum and its consequent merger reduced the Bengali population in Assam from 27.56 percent to 19.64 percent.\(^9\) The partition also brought in its wake the problem of refugees. The most important stream of migrants, however, during this period consisted of Bengali Hindus.

**Migration:** Soon after the partition of the country on 15 August, 1947, large scale movement of Hindu Bengalis to Assam began to start. This was perhaps due to the apprehension of the Hindu minorities about the security of their life, property and livelihood. The concept of Islamic state of Pakistan as enshrined in the objective resolution of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly might have frightened them. Consequently, as many as 12,297 persons came

\(^9\) The Census of India, 1961, Assam.
to Assam in the month of August, 1947. In the subsequent months of September and October, 6,348 and 4,409 persons migrated to Assam. Thereafter, there was a decline in the flow of refugees, but it never went below 2000 in any month in the following three years except in November 1949.\(^{10}\) These displaced persons continued to come and scattered themselves most imperceptibly in the areas which had earlier exclusive Bengali population. In post-independence Assam, this problem of immigrants was further complicated and made more acute by the movement of thousands of Hindu refugees into this state from East Bengal. The number of Bengali Hindu refugees went up from 2.62 lakhs in 1951 to 6.0 lakhs in 1961.\(^{11}\) The sentiment of the Assamese middle class in the wake of the continuous flow of refugees is well-reflected in the editorial article of the Assam Tribune on refugees which ran as follows.\(^{12}\) “Since independence, the attack is being carried on from two flanks. First, there are the Muslim immigrants whose love and attachment to Pakistan are as strong as ever. There is no evidence of a change of heart and yet they are finding it much easier to migrate to this province under the shelter of the secular state policy of the government of India. Then there are Hindu immigrants who apparently want to create a Bengali in this province.”

\(^{10}\) Census of India, 1961, Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Part I-A.
\(^{11}\) Idem.
\(^{12}\) The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, July 18, 1949.
A section of conscious Assamese middle class of this period raised their voice by publishing letters to the editor\textsuperscript{13} for an early solution of the refugees problem. Probably in view of such pleas from the Assamese middle class the Indian Parliament passed the “Immigrants Expulsion from Assam Act” in February, 1950 the Act provide for removal of immigrants except bonafide refugees whose stay in Assam was considered undesirable politically. However, the Act practically remained a show piece since its enactment and subsequently went into disuse by 1957. The post-independence period was, therefore, a period of social and economic tensions.

Therefore, it seems obvious that the Assamese middle class were noticeably agitated over the issue of “refugee”. In this connection, it is necessary to mention that migrant population constituted a very large proportion of Assam’s population. Thus, out of Assam’s total population of 9,044,000 in 1951, as many as 1,344,000 constituting 14 percent were born outside Assam, compared to 6 percent in the case of West Bengal and 5 percent in the case of Bombay.\textsuperscript{14} There was significant emigration from Assam to counteract this massive immigration. The influx of refugees from East Bengal made the Assamese ruling class apprehensive of the new entrants into the state as they might one day outbalance the Assamese people leading to eventual loss of their newly acquired political status. This apprehension coupled with economic effects of migration of refugees in thousands resulted

\textsuperscript{13} The Refugee problem being an all India problem, these people should be distributed equitably among all the states in the Indian Union. The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 5, 9, 15 July, 1950.

\textsuperscript{14} Census of India, Assam, 1951, Vol. XII, Part II.A, Vol. I, Part (II)A
in periodic upheavals and social conflict in the state. In the early part of
February and March of 1950, communal feelings were worked up to an
unprecedented height. It started at Lumding where Muslim passengers going
to Pakistan were assaulted and robbed by miscreants. Minor outbursts
followed at Badarpur and at Hailakandi. In the Assam Valley there were a few
sporadic cases of arson and stabbing in Guwahati town. Several districts of
East Pakistan became involved in Hindu-Muslim riots about the same time.
The communal disturbance of Soneswar, Habibganj, East Dinazpur and the
gruesome incidents of Dacca between February and March 1950 had resulted
in the desertion by thousands of minorities of their hearths and homes to seek
shelter in the neighbouring areas of West Bengal and Assam.

After India’s states were reorganized along linguistic lines so as to
create a closer fit between ethnicity, territoriality and political power, the
numerically dominant linguistic group in each state made a special claim to
the territory it occupied and to any economic and educational activities that
took place. Especially in states such as Assam and Maharastra where the
proportion of migrant population is high, there are demands for ordinance and
legislation to restrict the opportunities and cultural position of the migrants.
Since 1947, the emerging Assamese middle class has sought to use their
control over the state government to assert the paramountcy of Assamese
culture identity and to seek economic and social equality in relation to

Bengali middle class. The Assamese dominated Congress party that took power with independence was committed not simply to the development of Assam, but more particularly to the use of state power for improving the position of the Assamese speaking population. The Assam government, on 26 September 1947, thus stated, “Assamese is to be accepted as compulsory second language in all schools where it can not be Assamese completely.”

The number of educated Assamese middle class started increasing with the development of many schools and colleges. The percentage of literacy has increased and the development of Assamese consciousness gained its strength (Table 4.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>18.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>28.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>28.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Census of India, 1991.*

With the growth of political strength, the Assamese leaders of middle class origin began to make Assamese nationalism felt in practically every

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17 The First Assam Ministry after independence was composed of mainly Assamese politicians. Refer, Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. I, No. 14, 1947.
sphere of activity, Assam Jatiya Mahasabha and Asomiya Sangha took a leading role in this regards. The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha was quite vocal about the recognition of Assamese as state language and medium of instruction. Sri Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, the President of Assam Jatiya Mahasabha, submitted a memorandum to Sri Gopinath Bordoloi, then Chief Minister of Assam, urging upon the government to concede the persistent demands of the association. Highlighting the necessity for introducing Assamese as state language the memorandum states. The main demands incorporated in the memorandum were (1) the influx of outsiders must be stopped (2) full representation of Assamese interest in all departments of central government should be given, (3) Assamese language should be given full recognition in every sphere of governmental activities including all the Central departments, (4) Assamese must be declared as the medium of instruction in all educational institutions. Chandra Kanta Phukan, President of Asomiya Sangha, Nagaon also pleaded for the recognition of Assamese and proposed that Assamese people should be given preference in all spheres of activities.

**Political Development:** The change in the power structure in Assam in the wake of independence had given the Assamese people a political leverage for manipulating the ethnic division of labour which in turn stimulated competition and conflict. Consequently, governmental authority was directed

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19 Idem.
towards restructuring the ethnic division of labour which in turn had intensified the conflict between the Assamese and Bengali Hindus. For example, in the riots of 1948 and 1950 the starting point was the demand by Assamese youth on the Bengalis to shed the sign of separatism, viz, to replace Bengali shop signboards with Assamese, to desist from running separate schools for Bengalis and finally to accept Assamese as their language. The Calcutta Press, however, termed this agitation as “Bengali Kheda” (Drive away Bengalis) movement. Thus the language issue assumed a great political importance immediately after independence and the language policy in Assam became the bone of contention between the Assamese and Bengali communities.

Meanwhile the Assam Government Education Department had issued a circular to all Inspectors and Deputy Inspectors of Schools directing them to take steps for making Assamese the compulsory medium of instruction in all the schools of Assam valley. In places where the spoken language is used as medium for primary education, Assamese would be taught as the second language. Assamese language was to replace Bengali in course of time in all those schools where Bengali was the sole medium of instruction. Bengali Muslims and migrant labourers were generally provided with Assamese schools. But the Bengali Hindus continued to insist that their schools should have the Bengali medium. There was strong resentment from the Bengali

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middle class in Assam against this policy of the government and they voiced their demands through an organization called Cachar District Committee.\textsuperscript{22} Another association known as Assam-Bengal Association echoed a similar sentiment when it said that “Bengalis were in majority in Assam and it would not take long to have Bengali as an accepted state language of Assam”.\textsuperscript{23}

It appears that the official language question in Assam touched upon the issue of employment as well as cultural identity. Therefore, it became the focal point of controversy between the Assamese and Bengali communities. The Bengalis favoured a party in status between the Assamese and Bengali languages in Assam because that would mean equality of opportunity in employment and political and social status. The Assamese on the other hand, viewed such duality as a perpetuation of Bengali domination in both cultural and employment spheres. For the Assamese middle class, due to historical reasons, it was the Hindu Bengali who stood as an obstacle to economic development. Therefore, after independence the Assamese middle class made a bid to acquire sizeable control over the apparatus of the state administration and share in the state sponsored development process. They wanted the lion’s share not only of the government jobs, but also of the financial resources of the state government. They mobilized a strong cultural campaign with this end in view.\textsuperscript{24} Myron Weiner\textsuperscript{25} observed in this context,” What characterized

\textsuperscript{22} Akbar Hydris, paper (1947-48).
\textsuperscript{23} Natun Assamiya, Gauhati, 18 August, 1947.
\textsuperscript{25} Weiner, Myron, Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict of India, op. cit., pp.112-113.
the Assamese quest for the cultural identity was their need to distinguish themselves from the Bengalis in their midst, it is quite likely that the presence of large numbers of migrants from other states; especially from Bengali, sharpened the sense of Assamese identity and give it what many outsiders perceived as its peculiarly aggressive character.”

The 16 July 1951 was observed for the first time as the ‘State Language Day’ by the Sahitya Sabha. It also appealed to all sections of the public to cooperate with the government of Assam in their efforts to introduce Assamese in all educational institutions in the state. Meeting and procession were organized supporting the cause. However, a few unhappy incidents took place in Nagaon district after the observance of the state language day. Magnified reports of violence against the Bengali Hindus appeared in the Calcutta Press and also in the local press.26

The Assamese speakers increased from less than 3 percent in 1901 to 62 percent in the 1951 and that of Bengali speakers decreased from 69 percent in 1901 to 17.4 percent in 1951. Commenting on the 1951 census R. G. Bhagaiwala,27 the Census Commissioner said, “A comparison with the percentage of population speaking these different languages in 1931 for which alone figures are available reveals an interesting tale. There was no tabulation in 1941 as measure of war economy. Hence we have no figures regarding the distribution of Assam’s population according to language for 1941. there is a

27 The Census of India, Assam, 1951, Vol. XII, Part I-A.
striking increase in the percentage of people who speak Assamese in 1951 (56.7 percent) over those of 1931 which was only 31.4 percent. There is an equally striking decrease in the percentage of the people speaking Bengali in 1951 which is only 16.5 percent against 26.8 percent in 1931. With the solitary exception of Assamese, every single language or language group in Assam shows a decline in the percentage of people speaking the same. All these decline has done to swell the percentage of people speaking Assamese in 1951. The figure do not fail to reflect the aggressive linguistic nationalism prevailing in Assam, coupled with the desire of many persons among the Muslims as well as the garden labour immigrants to adopt Assamese as their tongue in the state of their adoption. It is not unlikely that some amongst the persons who have returned their mother tongue as Assamese have done so from devious motives even though their knowledge of Assamese may not amount too much.”

With regard to the 1951 census returns, it had been alleged by interested parties that figures were manipulated for political purpose. Despite the population influx, it seemed that the proportion of Assamese speakers increased strikingly in every decade after independence, while the proportion of Bengali speaker continued to decline. This demographic shift aroused the anxieties of Bengali population in Assam.28 They argued that this sudden rise of Assamese speaking people reflected a political move of Bengali Muslims to side with the Assamese and that was nothing but a preparation to make

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Assamese as the state language of Assam. The Bengali Muslims, on the other hand, publicly embraced the Assamese language and they did not object to the establishment of Assamese schools in their localities, since knowledge of local language help them tremendously in getting land and to gain acceptance in Assamese society. Similarly the tea plantation workers did not object to the government’s language policy for schools and they accepted Assamese. These people with varied social and linguistic background had little emotional attachment to their place of origin. Although they had a common economic identity as so-called ‘Kulis’ (the refined terminology now in use is Chah Mazdoor) they lack a common linguistic identity. The linguistic assimilation of Bengali Muslims and tea garden labourers thus rescued the Assamese people from being reduced to a minority community in their own state. Besides this, the separation of Sylhet from Assam help to bring about a decline in the Bengali speaking percentage in Assam. The Assam government however, made the following clarification on the Census figures, “there is nothing unusual in the figures of 1951 census, so far as the Assamese speaking and Bengali speaking populations are concerned. The increase or decrease in the number of people speaking a particular language between 1931-1951 Census is dependent not merely on natural growth and biological factors. Emigrations, immigration and natural absorption of immigrant groups are all relevant factors. In all previous censuses there were

certain factors which resulted in inflation of the population of Bengali speakers, as for instance, the language of a fairly large number of tea garden tribes was written as Bengalis. Besides, the ideas on the real character of the language of Goalpara were confused and it was written as Bengali. In the 1951 census, these mistakes of the previous censuses were avoided.”

Language-wise population change in Assam as a whole from 1911 to 1961 is shown in figure 4.2, whereas in figure 4.3 the district-wise changes are recorded. The census data on these distributions are presented in Table 4.3.
Fig. 4.3: Language wise population changes in various districts of Assam, 1911-1961
Considered in this background, West Bengal’s claim on Goalpara district of Assam on linguistic ground, therefore, caused widespread tension in Assam. A protest week was observed from 31 March to 6 April, 1955 in Goalpara district.\textsuperscript{31} Protest meeting and processions were organized throughout the district by the people of Goalpara to give vent to their feelings. At Barpeta, the Nagar Chatra Sangha\textsuperscript{32} of Barpeta took the lead in this regard. They cautioned the people against the unjust claim of West Bengal over the district of Assam. Other communities who took active part in anti-merger movement were mainly Rajbanshis, Medhis, Boros, Muslims of Dhubri, the Nepalis and even some local Bengalis of Kokrajhar district. On the other hand under the leadership of Mr. Ramani Bose, a few Bengali lawyers and businessmen took the lead in the pro-merger move. Both, merger anti-merger feelings were expressed through demonstrations and meetings. Bengali communities organized a student demonstration at Dhubri on 1 April, 1955 infavour of merger of Goalpara with Bengal. Counter-demonstrations were organised by Assamese students and these spread to other parts of the district.

\textsuperscript{31} The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 31 March, 1955.
\textsuperscript{32} Nagar Chatra Sangha over the Signature of Sarat Chandra Singha, President District Congress Committee, Dhubri, Khagendra Nath Deka, MLA, Sadat Ali, MLA took the lead in this regard. Refer Report on the Goalpara Disturbances in April, 1955, Confidential No. C-51/55/204-5/A.
In Chungphuta, Khuslapara, Chasiknuti, Chaparkala and Chouraguri villages houses were damaged and at places looting also took place. Commenting on the Goalpara incident, Atulya Ghosh, President of West Bengal Congress Committee, remarked, "the happenings in Goalpara district are not the outcome of sudden flare up. Systematically and deliberately and with precision, feelings of animosity were roused against the Bengali speaking population during the past few years by section of local people who were directly supported by the Assam government." Further, he blamed the various measures adopted by the Assam government against the Bengalis in the field of service, education etc. in the name of safeguarding the interest of the Assamese. He further charged that the indirect help and support rendered by the Assam government to the language issue had greatly encouraged the people of Assam to think that the Bengali speaking people are unwanted outsiders. However, it was a fact that the whole affair of Goalpara was dressed up to give the appearance of a state-wide language feud.

The Legislative Assembly of Assam witnessed several debates on the reorganisation question. Supporting the Commission's position, Bishnu Ram Medhi the Chief Minister of Assam, stated, “In any case, we do not favour reorganisation of state on the basis of language alone. There are so many dialects prevalent among the hills that if linguistic basis were pursued to its logical conclusion, every range in the hills would have to be framed into a

33 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 4 April, 1955.
34 The Statesman, Calcutta, 14 April, 1955.
35 Idem.
separate state. Once the claim for making language the criteria for reorganisation of state is conceded it would be difficult to resist the force of disintegration, particularly in a state like Assam which it is feared, would fall into pieces." Mr. Hareswar Das member from Goalpara district observed "In the re-distribution of states, language no doubt plays an important role, but the main consideration should be promotion of unity, security and prosperity of India as a whole. If, for the sake of Bengali speakers in Goalpara district, transfer should be made to West Bengal what would happen to other Bengalis living in other parts of Assam. Transfer of Goalpara, therefore, does not solve any problem but it would create many more. Moinul Haque Choudhary, however, pointed out that the best solution was not in having a separate state but in having Hindi as our lingua franca and at the same time, giving importance to the local languages for transacting court, business and in primary and secondary schools. Ranendra Mohan Das, however, opposed the stand taken by States Reorganisation Commission. He felt that the assamisation policy followed by the Assam government after independence greatly disturbed the other linguistic minorities living in Assam. Maulana Abdul Zalil, Secretary of Assam Provincial Jamiat-Ulema, did not favour reorganisation of states on linguistic basis. Gauri Sankar Bhattacharyya was of the view that the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission.

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37 Idem.  
38 Idem.  
39 Idem.  
40 Idem.  
41 Idem.
Commission on the language question failed to provide any concrete answer to the problem of official language for Assam. As a result, it has intensified the controversy rather than leading to a satisfactory solution. Assam Sahitya Sabha was somehow satisfied with the stand taken by the States Reorganisation Commission. Jatin Dowera\textsuperscript{42} in his presidential address said “although the States Reorganisation Commission did not include Cooch-Bihar and Jaipaiguri with Assam, as they demanded, but it rightfully rejected the West Bengal's claim and also other proposals regarding the formation of a separate hill state, Purbanchal and Kamatapur state”. Thus the States Reorganisation Commission made this abundantly clear when it decided against all territorial claims on Assam in respect of Goalpara district and the merger of Tripura State in which Bengali was the dominant language.

The state of Assam that came into being following the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, did not undergo any major change. The commission did not favour any demand for further division of the state and for the formation of a separate Hill state or Purbanchal State out of composite state of Assam. The Commission however proposed the merger of Tripura with Assam for administrative reasons. It transpires from what has been discussed above that the Commission's formula for solving Assam's problem did not provide any concrete answer to the vexed problem.

**Official Language Movement in Assam:** Linguistic minorities remain almost in every state in spite of the linguistic reorganisation of states, and

\textsuperscript{42} Assam Sahitya Sabha Bhasanwali, Gauhati 20, 27 Dec. 1955.
Assam is no exception to this. In April, 1959 the Assam Sahitya Sabha came out with the statement that considerable time had been wasted over declaration of Assamese as the state language of Assam and the people of Assam could wait no longer and that within 1960 the Assamese language must be declared as the state language of Assam. The Sabha set the year 1960 as the deadline for implementation of its demands. 9 September, 1959 was observed as the ‘State Language Day’ throughout Assam. Meetings were held, resolutions were passed and processions taken out. Several members of the assembly belonging to different political parties raised the issue during the discussions in the budget session in 1960. The session witnessed political parties declaring their support to this demand with the only exception of All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) and all tribal organization which saw in these demands deprivation of their English educated middle class in getting a share of the administrative jobs. Their main arguments against the implementation of Assamese languages as ‘state language’ were as follows:

(a) The position and the conditions of the hill people in Assam were such that the acceptance of the Assamese language would place the Assamese in a more dominant position, leading to assimilation of all hill people into the Assamese community, thereby gradually leading to the disintegration of their identity as distinct communities. Such assimilation and disintegration militated against the deepest sentiments.

of the hill people and thus were detrimental to the composite culture of India.

(b) The adoption of Assamese as the official language of the state would adversely affect the opportunities and prospects of the hill people in government services.

(c) There is no justification for Assamese as the official language even from the population point of view, as this is the mother tongue of less than fifty per cent of the population.

(d) Assam being inhabited by people of diverse races, cultures and languages deserves to have Hindi as the official language. Meanwhile, English should continue as the official language until such times as the people of the state are ready to adopt Hindi as the official language.

The Chief Minister of Assam, Shri B.P. Chaliha by and large reflecting the cautious policy adopted by the central government, tried to tread a middle path in regard to the official language policy. Shri Chaliha commented, \(^{45}\) “perhaps, there are two important reasons which warrant enactment of 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 languages which now separates the diverse population of Assam. I highly appreciate the zeal and enthusiasm with which the demand for declaration of Assamese as state language has been made, more particularly by the Assamese speaking section of our population. However, government would

\(^{45}\) Assam Assembly Debates, 3 March, 1960.
prefer to wait till they get the same demand from the non-Assamese speaking population for declaration of Assamese as the state language. Government feels that this question should be judged more from the point of view of appreciation and acceptance than from the point of view of majority or minority. If this issue is decided only on the basis of majority or minority, government is afraid that its object would be defeated.”

The Official Language Commission has made pointed observations in this regard. About the people of the tribal areas of Assam, the Commission observed, “while the children from tribal areas must receive a medium of instruction in the union language (i.e. Hindi) as in case of other children of the country, obviously it is necessary in their own interest that they should acquire a knowledge of Assamese language also.\(^\text{46}\) However, the particular demands of the minorities continued. The Bengal Sangram Parishad insisted on having Bengali as the second official language of the state and also as the official language for Cachar at the district level. The majority of the Bengali educated middle class meant to gain by this proposition.

The opposition parties of Assam reacted sharply to the Chief Minister’s statement. Gauri Sankar Bhattacharya, the leader of the Communist Party of India, pointed out that the Chief Minister’s statement might provide a convenient weapon to be used against the minorities. The executive of the Communist Party of India maintained that ‘it stood by any resolution that sought to declare Assamese as the official language in the state

without compulsion to any minority in the hills and Cachar districts. Assamese should be introduced in a phased manner. The minority in the whole state would have their full right of petition, appeal, education in their own mother tongue.”

At this stage, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee revised its earlier decision and passed a resolution on the following lines.

(1) Assamese be declared by law as the official language of the state and be adopted for such purposes as may be decided by the government.

(2) Assamese be introduced as official language in all districts except the district of Cachar, the autonomous districts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and North Cachar Hills in which areas it may be introduced as and when they are prepared for it.

(3) The rights of the minorities for protection and development of their language will be fully safeguarded.

(4) That in the process of introduction and extension of Assamese as the official language, just claims and interests of non-Assamese speaking people in the matter of public services and such other matter will be adequately safeguarded.

(5) That government be requested to take steps accordingly and to provide as early all facilities for learning Assamese and other language spoken

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48 Resolutions passed by the Executive Committee of the Congress Committee of Assam, 24 April, 1960.
in the state with a view to bringing the people close and to break the language barrier.

However, the A.P.C.C. resolution failed to satisfy people of both sides and it produced sharp reaction both in the Brahmaputra Valley and in Cachar and Hill districts.

**Language Riots:** It was at this stage that large scale violence erupted in certain parts of Assam in the months of May, 1960 when the non-Assamese speaking residents of Shillong staged a demonstration at which provocative slogans against the Assamese language and also against the A.P.C.C. resolution were shouted. This was followed by a counter demonstration of Assamese students in the Brahmaputra Valley. There were student rallies at Dibrugarh and Jorhat where over ten thousand students, including girls, condemned the Shillong Processions and the slogans used therein and demanded immediate introduction of Assamese as the state language. The movement took a violent turn in the second week of June in Sibsagar district. There were repeated incidents of stoppage of trains, looting of shops, damage to railway property etc. The riot affected areas of Assam in 1960 are shown in the Map in Figure. 4.4. These incidents were mostly confined to the urban areas of Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Golaghat. By the last week of June, a complete breach had been brought principally between the Assamese and Bengali communities. On 18 June, 1960, a procession of young men paraded the

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49 One of the slogan was "Assamese is a donkey's Language", Refer. The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 24 April, 1960.

50 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 26 April, 1960.
streets of Mariani town and shouted anti-Bengali slogans. Similarly at the Lumding railway station, one of the Bengali-concentrated areas, some members of Bengali community attack the local cinema house, which at that time was screening an Assamese film. As a consequence of these acts of violence some Assamese people were forced to leave their home and became refugees in their own land. As a reaction to this, stray and sporadic demonstrations against the Bengalis begun to take place in various parts of Assam. Reports of violence came from Jorhat where a Bengali sales representative along with the employees were assaulted on 10 June.

Thereafter, the storm center shifted to Guwahati and Lower Assam districts as colleges and the University reopened.51

Following the APCC resolution, the government of Assam examined the legislations of different states on official language and also the recommendations of various organizations and had decided to introduce a Bill. The Chief Minister of Assam disclosed that the Language Bill would be “more or less on the lines of the APCC resolution making Assamese applicable to Cachar and Hill districts as the official language as and when they are prepared for it.”52 However, the proposed official language Bill raised a storm of protest. It brought out an open rift inside the APCC meeting itself. Their view, as also the view of other political parties functioning in Cachar, was that Bengali should also be declared as the state language.

52 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 24 June, 1960.
Further, to popularize their view as well as to build up an Assam wide movement the Cachar Congress leaders had called a Bengali language conference. On 2 and 3 July, 1960 an All Assam Bengali Language Conference was held in Silchar, under the Presidentship of Shri Chapala Kanta Bhattarcharya, an M.P. from West Bengal. They demanded declaration of Assam as a bi-lingual state. The Silchar and Karimganj Bar Associations passed resolutions demanding President’s rule in Assam alleging that there was complete lawlessness. They vehemently opposed the introduction of Assamese as the sole official language in Assam. On 4 July, 1960, the police brought the crisis to a head by resorting to firing and killing one Assamese student and injuring six others inside the Cotton College hostel at Guwahati.

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**Fig. 4.4: Assam, Riot Affected Areas, 1960 and 1961**

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53 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 6 July, 1960; Shillong Observer, 10 July, 1960.
54 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 20 June, 1960.
55 Cottonian (editorial), Guwahati, July, 1960.
The Assam Official Language Bill: In a tense atmosphere, the motion for Assam Official Language Bill was introduced in the Assembly by the Chief Minister, Shri Chaliha. Even in its final shape this piece of legislation was a compromise and it failed to satisfy the wishes of different sections of people in the state. Amidst pulls and pressures the Assam Official Language Bill was passed in the Assembly. The Act provided that “Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the state of Assam. Further the Act provided that the English language, so long as the use thereof is permissible and thereafter Hindi in place of English, shall also be used for such official purposes of the Secretarial and the offices of the heads of the departments of the state government.” (For detail see Annexure – 6/ pp. X-XII). It is a fact that the Bengali speaking people of Cachar were not reconciled to this change. Ranendra Mohan Das, on behalf of the Congress members from Cachar thus commented.56 “you may pass the Language Bill today by a majority but do not think for a moment that the problem is solved by it. For heaven’s sake don’t do anything which would embitter our feeling more and make disintegration of the state a settled fact”. The Bengali speaking population of Cachar did not feel content with the safeguards given to them by the Assam Language Act, 1960. *Nikhil Assam Bangla Bhasa Samiti*57 had submitted a memorandum to the President of India. Their main demand was

56 Assam Assembly Debates, 24 October, 1960.
that, Bengali should also be recognized throughout the state of Assam for all official purposes including the following specific ones.

(i) Preparation of all Official Bills and other legislative matters dealt with by the Assam Legislative Assembly.

(ii) Preparation of all official documents of the government of Assam and office subordinate thereto.

(iii) Correspondence between the government of Assam and the people of the state of Assam on the one hand and between various departments of the government of Assam on the other.

(iv) For all business carried on in courts of law including and upto the level of the High Court of judicature of Assam.

(v) For all educational purposes including the teaching in the University of Gauhati and all educational institution subordinate thereto, and

(vi) For any other matter that may appear relevant to the President.

The movement in Cachar for recognition of Bengali as state language of Assam had started with the initiative of the Sangram Parishad. It was mainly a middle class organization which had the support base from the town people, but the refugees were also drawn into in. Therefore, the Parishad made Karimganj, with its highest concentration of East Pakistan refugees and its predominantly Hindu Bengal speaking population, the main seat of activity and demonstrated tactical skill by making a Muslim, Abdul Rahman Choudhury, its President. The Sangram Parishad had organized meetings, passed resolutions with a view to enlisting mass support for the fulfillment of
their demands.\textsuperscript{58} The Cachar Congressmen played an important role in organizing a convention which later on decided to take militant steps against the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 by forming \textit{Cachar Zila Gana Sangram Parishad}. To make the situation more awkward, Congressmen including legislators and members of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee of the district played the rebel role by joining this movement in spite of warnings from the Congress President and formed \textit{Bhasa Andolan Samiti}. Thus a very unnatural situation was created. On 19 May, 1961, \textit{Cachar Sangram Parishad} called for a complete strike and organized picketing of all offices and transport system. On that day at Silchar 11 persons were killed and 21 wounded in police firing against the satyagrahis of the movement.\textsuperscript{59} Six Congress M.L.A.’s from Cachar district had resigned as a protest against the firing and a complete district-wide hartal was observed on 29 May – the day on which the ashes of the 11 persons, killed in the police firing on 19 May, 1961 at Silchar were to be carried in a procession.\textsuperscript{60} Paritosh Pal Chaudhury, the chief architect of the Sangram Parishad, led the procession and also categorically stated that “the movement would be resumed and carried on until the Bengali language was recognized at the state level.”\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} The demands of the Parishad were: (a) Recognition of Bengali as an additional state language of Assam (b) Separation of Cachar from Assam.
\textsuperscript{59} Times of India, Delhi, 20 May, 1961.
\textsuperscript{60} Idem.
\textsuperscript{61} Times of India, Delhi, 30 May, 1961.
At this stage, in order to bring about reconciliation between the contending parties, mediation through a member of the Congress high command was suggested. The Congress leadership proposed a formula which was popularly known as ‘Shastri’ formula.

The Shastri Formula: The objectives behind this formula was to find out a solution to the language tangle in Assam vis-a-vis the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 and the Sangram Parishad Movement in Cachar. It was after a prolonged discussion with the Assam government, the Assam Pradesh Congress and section of the Cachar people, that the Union Home Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri unfolded his formula, but none of the organizations in the Brahmaputra Valley including Assam Sahitya Sabha was consulted by Mr. Shastri in the process of his efforts to solve the Cachar problem. (For detail see Annexure - 7/ pp. XII-XV).

The Sangram Parishad was not satisfied with the Shastri formula. The action committee of the Prishad in a meeting at Karimganj on 9 June, 1961 commented that Shastri’s formula bypassed the main issue (recognition of Bengali) and as such it was wholly unacceptable. The Karimganj Subdivisional Congress Bhasa Andolan Committee also rejected the proposal. The Silchar Bhasa Andolan Samiti described the formula as “far short of our legitimate demand for recognition of Bengali as an Official language of Assam”.

The three district Congress Committee of Cachar unanimously rejected the Shastri formula. Paritosh Pal Choudhury, leader of the Cachar

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62 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 10 June, 1961.
Zila Sangram Parishad said: “the movement launched by Parishad for recognition of Bengali as state language would continue till the goal is achieved”.63

In the meantime, a new situation had arisen in Cachar itself. To counter the militant activities of the Sangram Parishad, non-Bengalis in Cachar, which included the Muslims, the Manipuris and the indigenous Cacharis, formed another organization known as Shanti Parishad. A number of minor clashes occurred between the two groups. In a memorandum64 to the Home Minister, the Shanti Parishad emphasized that Assamese should be the only official language in Assam. Counter demonstrations, meetings were organized in different places of Cachar district by Shanti Parishad leaders. The counter movement in Cachar had finally resulted in an unfortunate incident on 19 June 1961,65 when police opened fire at Hailakandi killing five persons and injuring fourteen. Army was brought into control the situation. The disorder and fears of further were so great that the Cachar district continued to be treated as a disturbed area till at least 21 September, 1961.66 It was on 24 September 1961 that the Assam Cabinet approved of the Draft Bill to amend the Assam Official Language Act in accordance with the Shastri formula. The Assam government had decided to sponsor an amendment to the Act deleting the provision concerning, Mohkuma Parishad in section 5 of the Official Language Act. The Assam Sahitya Sasbha was, however, not happy with this

63 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 12 June, 1961.
64 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 16 June, 1961.
amendment. In a memorandum to the Union Home Minister it commented: “The Assamese people strongly resent that their legitimate demand for recognition of Assamese as the only official language of the state which has been partly fulfilled in the Assam Official Language Act, 1960, as it stands, will be further adversely affected if the Act is amended so as to do away with the provision regarding Mahkuma Parishad.” (For detail see Annexure - 8 / pp. XVI-XVIII). The Sangram Parishad and the people of Cachar, however, followed certain agitational methods on the line of making Bengali as an alternative official language for the whole state of Assam. But the legislature accepted the recommendation of Shastri and the assembly passed the amendment to the Language Bill on 7 October, 1961.67

Language Movement on Medium of Instruction: Language is not merely an attribute of a given nationality, but is a medium of communication and an instrument of ideology.68 The education Commission (1964-66) recommended the same, viz. “the use of regional language as the medium of education, to facilitate conducting business of the government vis-a-vis various classes. The continuation of English at all levels of higher education would, however, ensure the running of centre-state apparatus. Hindi, as a link language, despite its national moorings, has little particular significance as a symbol of nationalism.”69 In Assam, Assamese-Bengali rivalry became a pivotal point of political issue. It was in early 1970 that Gauhati University

67 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 8 October, 1961.  
decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction in all colleges under its jurisdiction with some exceptions. This decision was to come into effect from the academic year 1972-73 and students entering the Pre-University classes that year were to be able to study Assamese. The Assamese medium was to be progressively extended to the degree classes also. There were quite a few exceptions which were intended to make the decision acceptable to the considerable number of colleges under the jurisdiction of Guwahati University that were located in the non-Assamese areas i.e. outside the Brahmaputra Valley. These were, Cachar where the majority of the people speak Bengali, Manipur where Manipuri is spoken, Nagland whose official language is English, the then proposed autonomous district of Meghalaya where the situation was unclear and NEFA which also had a college affiliated to Guwahati University. The decision of Guwahati University was only on the medium of instruction and to make the decision acceptable to the considerable number of colleges situated in these areas outside the Brahmaputra Valley, provision was made for the retention of English as an alternative medium of instruction; more importantly no deadline was set for a total switch over to Assamese as the sole medium of instruction. With the decision of Guwahati University to have Assamese and English as the medium of instruction and a similar decision presumably due to be taken by the other two University of Assam that are both situated in the Brahmaputra Valley, Cachar was faced with a problem. Press statements were issued, reports of public meetings appeared in newspapers, legislators and minister promised to resign on the
issue. The demand was for the recognition of Bengali, along with Assamese (and of course, English) as a medium of instruction in all the colleges of the state. It was, however, clear that they would be satisfied with acceptance of this demand for the colleges in the district of Cachar.\footnote{The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 15 March, 1971, Desh (Bengali Journal), Nov. 1, 1972, Dainik Asom, May 31, 1972.}

The University authorities early in March 1972 came out with a “circular” on the vexed question of the medium of instruction. The circular hardly helped to clarify the issues. The Academic Council which met on 6 June, simply stated the position taken in the circular. The Council made two concessions to the linguistic minorities in the state: (i) English was to be retained as the medium of instruction for a period of time and (ii) students would be permitted to answer their examination questions in Assamese, English and Bengali. This declaration raised more problem than it solved. Almost immediately, demonstration by Assamese students broke out in Gauhati demanding that the option of taking examination in Bengali should be withdrawn. Assamese middle class community and students had no objections to the Bengali students coming from the Cachar district for making use of this provision to write their examination papers in Bengali. They were vehemently opposed to any of the Bengali students hailing from Brahmaputra Valley availing the same facility.\footnote{Dainik Asom (editorial), 7 June, 1972.} The Assam Sahitya Sabha backed up this position by passing a resolution to the effect that “Assamese alone should be
the medium of instruction in the Brahmaputra Valley and the English alone with Assamese, should retained for a few years for answering examination.\textsuperscript{72}

The agitational and the political pressures made the Academic Council to revise its decision on 12 June, 1972 and to resolve that:

(i) Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in all colleges under the jurisdiction of Gauhati University.

(ii) 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.

(iii) Students shall have the option to answer either in Assamese or English in the University examination.

(iv) The above decision shall come into force with 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.\textsuperscript{73}

Unlike in the earlier decision where there was no deadline set for complete switchover to Assamese as the sole medium of instruction, now a deadline was set. The council also withdrew the option of answering question papers in Bengali language.

There was an uproar in Cachar district. A counter agitation in Cachar led by the \textit{Sangram Paridhad} backed up as usual by Cachar factional Congress and its youth wing \textit{Chhatra Parishad} agreed to seek remedies. One

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\textsuperscript{72} Jitendranath Goswami, General Secretary of Assam Sahitya Sabha on the Gauhati University Academic Council's Decision quoted in Dainik Asom, Gauhati, 9 June, 1972.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{73} Academic Council's revised decision on June 12, 1972.
\end{flushright}
of the affiliate college of Gauhati University, Gurucharan College, in the district head-quarter town of Silchar, filed a petition with the Supreme Court arguing that the University’s decision to restrict the medium of instruction to Assamese was in violation of Article 30 of the Indian Constitution which assured protection for linguistic minorities. The Supreme Court had issued a stay order on the University, restraining it from implementing the decision. But by announcing the so called concession to Bengali, the University clearly roused Assamese sentiments and by hastily revising its decisions and incidentally, at a meeting which was not attended by any member from Cachar, it made the Bengalis too bitter.\(^7\)

In the meantime, the Chief Minister of the state, evidently eager to avoid any embarrassment that might be caused by an adverse decision by the court, announced after consultations with groups of teachers, students, leaders of public opinion, etc. that a separate University with jurisdiction over the colleges in the district of Cachar, would be established. A resolution to this effect was passed unanimously in the Assembly on 23 September, 1972.

“This Assembly do now resolve that the medium of instruction at the University stage for the Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities should be Assamese. English should, however, be continued as the medium of instruction. In the spirit of the Official Language Act, this assembly does further resolve that a separate University be set up with territorial jurisdiction

\(^7\) Kamrupee, Cool Behind the Noise and Funny, Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number, August, 1972.
over the district of Cachar and that the government of India be moved in the matter”.75

The resolution to establish a separate University for Cachar was meant to make the implementation of the decision of the Universities in the Brahmaputra Valley on the medium of instruction more acceptable. Public opinion in the Brahmaputra Valley was opposed to it because it would for all practical purposes, reduce the state into a bi-lingual one. The *Assam Tribune* editorial thus commented “It is also true that the government in pursuance of the mandate of the Assam Assembly has prematurely and unwisely decided to set up a separate University for Cachar, a proposal which has neither satisfied the people of Brahmaputra valley nor those in Cachar”.76 Public opinion in Cachar is also opposed to the creation of a Bengali University in Cachar, for what the leaders of the *Cachar Sangram Parishad* demand is the acceptance of Bengali as an alternative medium of instruction even in those colleges of the State situated in the Brahmaputra Valley, where the Bengalis form only a minority. Thus the old controversies about the status of Bengali in Assam are once again revived. The students of Brahmaputra Valley led by All Assam Student Union declared that the Assembly had failed to give due recognition to the Assamese language and that their decision would endanger the existence of Assam and the Assamese people. Their main opposition to the resolution was, that it would convert the State Reorganisation Commission,

75 Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 23 September, 1972.
76 The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 8 October, 1972.
1956, which suggested the formation of the State of Assam on the basis of the Assamese language spoken by the majority of the population of the region.\textsuperscript{77}

All Assam Students Union had given a call for Assam Bandh on 5 October, 1972 in protest against the resolution of the Assembly. There was no resistance to the bandh from the state government. However, the decision of a section of the people at Kharupetia, a small township in the Mangaldoi Sub-division, to dissociate themselves from the Bandh led to a clash between a section of the local people and a group of young men resulting injury to 42 youths, of whom one died in the hospital. As a sequel to the Kharupetia incident, violence erupted in Mangaldoi and a few neighbouring area.\textsuperscript{78}

Within a few days violence broke out in one town after another throughout the Brhmaputra Valley. Incidents of large scale arson and looting were reported from rural areas for example Dhing, Doboka, Laharighat and Moirabari of Nagaon district where the clashes were mainly between sections of the immigrant peasantry, living in large stretches of continuous villages and Bengali Hindu refugee settlers, concentrated in small town situated amidst these immigrant villages.\textsuperscript{79}

The riot affected areas of Assam in 1972 are shown in the Map in Figure. 4.5. Curfew was imposed in number of places in Gauhati, Dibrugarh and Nagaon as violence spread throughout the state. The government brought in the military to re-establish peace and order. According to official information, in all 33 deaths took place in course of the

\textsuperscript{77} The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 14 October, 1972.
\textsuperscript{78} The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 14 October, 1972.
\textsuperscript{79} Dainik Asom, Gauhati, 23 October, 1972.
disturbances under different circumstances including three deaths due to police firing. As these incidents were matter of great public importance the state government appointed a Commission headed by a High Court judge to hold enquiry into the circumstances and other allied matters relating to those incidents.

![Fig. 4.5: Assam, Riot Affected Areas, 1972](image)

**Causes of Language Conflicts in Assam:** The movements on the official language as well as on the medium of instruction in Assam may be interpreted as essentially a product of the reorganisation of states on linguistic basis. This process gave rise to some new conflicts and tensions especially relating to the

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80 Governor’s Address, Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 16 March, 1973.
81 Idem.
rights of the linguistic minorities. It is of course true that regional and linguistic chauvinism did have their share in these movements. These forces could play their role due to the fact that the democratic rights of nationalities both major and minor, have not been firmly established in the polity.

The high rate of population growth in Assam is not due to high birth rate or low death rate. Rather, it is due to large scale immigration, since the beginning of British rule, from outside the country, mainly from the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and from the other states of India. P.C. Goswami\textsuperscript{82} traces the origin of these human waves to three main centres, viz. (i) From Bihar, U.P., Orissa and Madras as labourers for the tea gardens. (ii) from Eastern Bengal as settlers on agricultural land and (iii) from Nepal as livestock farmers. Added to this, there has been a steady inflow of East Bengal Hindu refugees since independence. Apart from these, a large number of persons from other states also earn their livelihood in Assam as traders, labourers and salary earners is evident from the Map in Figure 4.6

The unchecked immigration into Assam produced far-reaching socio-cultural consequences, the Bengali Hindu immigrants, unlike the East Bengal Muslims, tea garden labourers and other groups, are educationally advanced and culturally conscious and they constitute a sizeable population in each district of Assam.

\textsuperscript{82} Goswami, P.C., The Economic Development of Assam, second edition, New Delhi, 1988, p. 23.
Table- 4.4 showing the distribution of Bengali Hindu migrants in Assam in 1971 indicates that the Nagaon district had the highest share of Bengali Hindu immigrants in the state. It is followed by Kamrup, Goalpara and Cachar. The district of Cachar is predominantly Bengali-speaking district and the population of this district comprises mostly of the earlier immigrants from Sylhet, a district of undivided Assam. They are now treated as
indigenous. It is only the refugees from East Bengal who are treated as immi-
grants and they constitute about 2,00,000 in 1971.

**Table 4.4**

**Distribution of Bengali Hindu Immigrants in Assam, 1971**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Approx. Nos.</th>
<th>As % to total in the state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>230,000</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>240,000</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>145,000</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>140,000</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi Anglong</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Cachar Hills</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1,310,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the remaining districts, the share of Bengali Hindu immigrants is conspicuously small (less than 5 percent). The distribution of Bengali Hindu and Bengali Muslim Population in the state in 1971 are shown Map in Figure 4.7 and 4.8 respectively.
Fig. 4.7: Assam, Distribution of Bengali Hindu, Immigrants in Areas of Arrival, 1971

Fig. 4.8: Assam, Distribution of East Bengal Muslim Immigrants in Areas of Arrival, 1971
The greater portion of Bengali Hindu immigrants are concentrated in urban centres like Dhubri, Goalpara, Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Kokrajhar, Lanka, Djing, Digboi, Doomdooma, Tinsukia, Mariani, Lumding, Hojai, Rangapara, Maligaon, Pandu and Bongaigaon Map in Figure 4.7. Most of the Bengali Hindu immigrants in Assam are essentially non-agriculturist and belong to three occupational groups. The first group comprises the professional elite like doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers, chartered accountants, journalists, and teachers. The second group includes the office- assistants, supervisors, operators etc. The third group consists of self-employed artisans and semi-skilled persons such as tailors, carpenters, goldsmiths, photo-artists, sign painters, shopkeepers, etc. The persistently dominant position of the Bengalis in the middle class occupations is thus indicated by their concentration in urban areas especially in the Brahmaputra Valley towns. The rise of an Assamese middle class in the 20th century to the position that was previously the monopoly of the Bengalis did not stop the Bengali Hindu influx into the state. It is commonly believed that the north-Indian settlers as well as the Muslim Bengali migrants have generally assimilated themselves into the Assamese culture. However, the Hindu Bengali Middle class with its own brand of chauvinism resents the marginally dominant position of the Assamese language. The Bengali Hindu immigrants developed a strong instinct of consciousness about their linguistic and ethnic identity. The Assamese middle class, therefore, on acquiring effective political control attempted to use political instruments for equalizing the
position of Assamese and they demanded immediate declaration of Assamese as state language of Assam and also for informal preference for Assamese in employment. Thus the indigenous Assamese fear of linguistic and economic domination by the Bengali Hindus led to the growth of an additive Assamese nationalism centering on the state language issue and medium of instruction issue.

Unabated East Bengal Muslim immigration into Assam had also its effects on the politics and economy of the region. The East Bengal Muslim immigrants are mostly confined in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang and Lakhimpur as shown in Table- 4.5. As per data in Table- 4.5, Goalpara district has the largest share of East Bengal Muslim immigrants in the state. It is followed by Nagaon and Kamrup. The impact of East Bengal Muslim immigration on the population structure of the Brahmaputra valley is evident. The demographic consequence is all the more remarkable in as much as the immigration is responsible for contributing a population of about 2.2 million to the state's total population of 14.6 million in 1971.

The immigration of East Bengal Muslim had also another social consequence. For fear of losing their land or getting repatriated, the Bengali Muslim immigrants sacrificed their linguistic identity and accepted Assamese language. In the process, they secured economic benefits. Though originally they were Bengali speakers, they are desirous of identifying themselves with the Assamese linguistic community. This is evident from the census returns of 1951. This marked increase in Assamese population is due to the opting of
Assamese as the mother tongue by most of the immigrant Muslims of that period.

Table- 4.5
The East Bengal Muslim Immigrants of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang and Lakhimpur

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>As % to total in the state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>750,000</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrap</td>
<td>550,000</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>600,000</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,180,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Bengali Muslims also provided political support to the ruling party i.e. Congress in times of election. The election statistics for the period 1957-79 (Table 4.6) clearly indicates the significant increase in the number of voters during this period mainly due to large scale influx of immigration population. To quote Myron Weiner,83 “after 1947 the Bengali Muslim became defacto allies of the Assamese in their conflict with the Bengali Hindus. Bengali Muslims have been willing to accept Assamese as the medium of instruction in their schools and they have thrown their votes behind Assamese candidates for the state assembly and national parliament. They have declared Assamese their mother tongue. In return, the state government has not attempted to eject Bengali Muslims from lands on which they  

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83 Weiner, M., Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, op. cit., pp.103-123.
have settled in the Brahmaputra Valley, though earlier Assamese leaders had claimed that much of the settlement had taken place illegally.” The immigrant Muslims solidly supported the case of Assamese nationalism against the slogans of the Bengali Hindus on the official language issue. In a vastly changed demographic reality of Assam, Assamese were dependent on some bargaining to realise their basic democratic right to have a homogeneous state of their own. The Assamese earned the historical right to have a linguistic state of their own. Since independence, the desire of the Assamese nationality to be at par with other nationalities in the Indian Union has been a primary concern. The Assamese fear of losing their land due to influx was a basic issue; because it calls into question one of the defining characteristics of a nationality. In the absence of any positive step by the government, Assam continued to be the 'coveted lebensraum' for the illegal immigrants.

Table- 4.6

Pattern of Increase in Electorates, Assam, 1957-78

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Electorates</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Percentage of Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>44,93,359</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>49,42,816</td>
<td>4,49,457</td>
<td>10.00(5yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>55,85,056</td>
<td>0,42,240</td>
<td>12.99(4yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>57,01,805</td>
<td>1,16,749</td>
<td>2.09 (4yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>62,96,198</td>
<td>5,94,393</td>
<td>10.42 (lyrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>79,74,476</td>
<td>16,78,278</td>
<td>21.04(7yrs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Election Department, Government of Assam.

**Economic Aspects:** The official language and medium of instruction movements were essentially a by-product of the acute economic problem. The
The economic structure of Assam is underdeveloped. Neither agriculture nor industrial development of the region has kept pace with the needs of its growing population. The problem of unemployment coupled with decades of neglect and underdevelopment of the region explains the justifiable fears in the Assamese mind of losing their culture and civilization and becoming a non-entity in their own land.

Agriculture, although underdeveloped, is the basis of the economy of Assam. Agriculture in the state has been playing a very important role by way of contributing more than 40 per cent of the state income and was a single source of employment to the rural people of the state. More than 80 per cent of the total population of Assam, including persons engaged in tea plantations, are dependent on agriculture. The development of agriculture is, therefore, vital to strengthen the whole economy of the state.

Considering the excellent climatic conditions, abundant rain-fall and fertile soil, the yield per acre is very low in Assam. With a little change of technique and with the application of modern technology it should not be difficult to increase the yield. Of course, the recurrent floods are a source of great devastation and loss to the agricultural economy of the state.

The economy being agrarian in nature without any organised industrial base to balance it, any pressure upon the agrarian economy ultimately affects the economic well-being of the entire state. The pressure exerted by an abnormal population growth upon agricultural land has resulted in lower production of agricultural items because of the increase in unviable and
uneconomic landholdings. To a great extent, the cultivator labours not for profit nor for a net return but for subsistence.

In the sphere of industrial development, Assam is yet to make much headway. The pace of industrialization of the state is rather slow and lopsided. Although the state possesses vast potential for developing various resource-based and demand-based industries, except in certain sectors like petroleum, coal, tea and forest, other potential have by and large remained untapped. As a result, Assam has continued to remain one of the most industrially backward states of the country.\(^{84}\)

Although, there is lack of reliable data on the extent of unemployment situation in the state, the figures of job seekers on the live register supplied by the Employment Exchange provide some idea of the pattern and trend of unemployment in Assam. The number of job seekers on the live register of Employment Exchange in the state went up from 29.5 thousands in 1961 to 93.8 thousands in 1971 and to 3.47 lakhs in 1990.\(^{85}\) It has been observed that in the employment sphere, the people of Assam have been deprived of their legitimate share of jobs. As explained by Myron Weiner (1978) "In non-household manufacturing industries 50,000 out of 1,03,000 were migrants and a large number of the remainders can be presumed to be decendents of migrants rather than native population. Similarly, migrants account for 55 percent of a total labour force of 38,000 in construction, 50 percent of

\(^{85}\) Directorate of Employment and Craftsmen Training, Assam, 1981.
1,83,000 in trade and commerce, 55 percent of 75,000 in transport, storage and communications (mainly in Railways and Post and Telegraphs) and about 33 percent in other services. The Assamese middle class attributes these conditions to the fact that most of industries, trade, commerce and tea plantations are owned by non-Assamese.

A survey of the employment pattern in three establishments of N.F. Railways in Assam, namely N.F. Railways Headquarters at Maligaon, N.E. Railways Lumding Division and N.F. Railways workshop at Dibrugarh clearly reveals that discriminatory recruitment policy is adopted against the local people and even among the local people a discriminatory pattern is adopted in favour of a particular language group. This is evident from the data presented in Table 4.7. The employees with place of birth within Assam constituted about 40 percent as against 60 percent claimed by employees having their birth places outside Assam.

Therefore, the real problem with Assam is economic underdevelopment. The Assamese people had been nationally exploited right through the British period and they are being treated almost in the same manner by the centre. The uneven growth of economy, growing unemployment among the middle class, the presence of a large number of middle class people of Bengali origin in jobs professions which the Assamese

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86 Weiner, M., Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, op. cit., pp. 128-129.
middle class had not earlier entered, have further aggravated the problems of the state.

Table 4.7
Distribution of employees by Mother-Tongue (Major Group) and Place of Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Number of employees by mother-tongue</th>
<th>Grand total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>4866</td>
<td>3918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>952</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>8046</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4866</td>
<td>13505</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Political Aspect: Role of Political Parties: Within the parliamentary system of government in India, linguistic and national diversity poses a problem and a challenge to political parties that operate at both the central and state levels. Language is an important tool for the political parties to impart their influence on masses. In Assam, we find, that powerful demand for Assamese as the official language and medium of instruction was backed mostly by students and professionals who are normally categorised as the middle class. The problem here is to find out, if the political parties
functioned as a mechanism for transformation of needs into demands and to articulate them in relation to language issue. The Assam agitation over the language issue before general elections of 1962 and 1972 provided an explosive issue for political parties in Assam to manipulate politics in order to gain mass support. In fact, the language issue in Assam was another notable social phenomenon which had a sort of decisive impact on the general election in the state.

Opposition parties in Assam generally held particularist and frequently mutually incompatible positions which were linked primarily with their party political interest. There are always political parties in the country ready to fish in troubled waters or even in still waters, but the language agitation in Assam was one in which all political parties had to explain their conduct. All political parties in Assam based their strategy of struggle for the electoral battle, more or less on the same consideration. They tried to enlist the support of the middle class by playing on their sentiments. Thus in Assam, elections were fought mainly on emotional issues rather than on definitive ideological basis.

Indeed, the language issue appears to have been utilized as a pawn in the game of power politics in Assam and it is unlikely that the conflict of local political interest would permit it to be judged on its own merits. The tendency throughout the period following independence in all these language agitations has predominantly been of middle class orientation. Disgruntled

political personalities especially those with background in student politics are frequently found to be associated with the movement. There is ample evidence to show that the large scale atrocities associated with any languages movements were inspired and organized by reactionary chauvinistic elements and certain vested interests who occupied important positions in government and administration as well as in the ruling party and public life. Some sections in the administration, at different levels, even went to the extent of encouraging and abetting the rioters.\textsuperscript{89} Faced with the growth of democratic forces and internal factional dissensions within the ruling circles, some leaders sought political diversion through linguistic conflicts and used them for serving their factional ends. Some local leaders and elements of the \textit{Projr Socialist Party} also took leading parts in inciting the people against the minorities. Behind the agitation anti-social elements were also evolved in rioting and destruction. The working class and peasantry, for instance, have been a passive factor in these agitations.\textsuperscript{90} The social base of the language movement was spread mostly in urban areas although it succeeded in rousing the people at large in semi-urban and rural areas under middle class leadership. It is therefore, clear, that the social base of the language movement

\textsuperscript{89} Memorandum submitted by Gauhati Student Union to Pandit Nehru during his visit to Assam 17, 18 and 19 July, 1960.

\textsuperscript{90} Delegates representing 13000 tea labour population of the Dibrugarh branch of Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha in its Annual Session demanded Assamese as the state language. Refer \textit{The Assam Tribune}, 15 June, 1960.
was predominantly a semi-educated and educated middle class who became the instrument in the game of factional and group politics.\(^{91}\)

**Role of the Press:** The influence of mass media on social relations is extremely significant. No aspect of our behaviour, relationships and habits escape the impact of mass media. Mass media work as an instrument for forming public opinion. Different aspects of our life-social, political, economic and even personal are being influenced by mass media. A message can be communicated to a mass audience by many media means. They are press, radio, television, cinema etc.

Press is one of the mass media which communicates message through newspapers, magazines. The role of newspapers is not confined merely to catering of news to the public but in creating and moulding public opinion as well. In most cases the newspapers of our country are controlled by vested interests and politically motivated groups. It is no wonder therefore that these newspapers carry, many a time, biased and exaggerated and inflammatory news items that foment public unrest, violence and even rioting. The case of Assam is no exception in this regard.

The press had played a significant role in creating, encouraging and sustaining the language riots in Assam. The press both Assamese and Bengali were active in spreading canards among the two communities. Not only was the display of news provocative, there was, in addition editorials as well as

letters to the editors emphasizing these points. The Assam Sahitya Sabha played an important role in the language movement. Their published views\textsuperscript{92} had definitely moulded local opinion. However, it is to a great extent true that a more imaginative language policy of the Sabha could perhaps have slowed down the alienation of the hill tribes from the Assamese people. The Sabha very strongly criticised the role of Calcutta newspapers for publishing inflammatory news items. They even urged the government of Assam to ban the entry of Calcutta newspapers into Assam.

On the whole, both the Calcutta and Assam press had failed to maintain a reasonable standard of impartiality and accuracy. Thus the chauvinist element, in conjunction with nationalist press of Assam and Calcutta availed themselves of the opportunity to muddy the waters. Even Nehru saw no reason why action should not be taken against those newspapers which slanted the news in such a way that it created hatred among communities.\textsuperscript{93} The Parliamentary Delegation had this to say on the situation, "Both Assam and Calcutta press have failed to maintain a reasonable standard of impartiality and accuracy. We are fully aware of the importance of the freedom of expression but when the misuse of that freedom by some persons leads to the suppression of the fundamental rights and endangers the life and the property of a large section of the people, we think there is justification for

\textsuperscript{92} Which state in India does not have minority community. But is there a state which is waiting to declare its state language based on the claims of the minority? Refer Assam Sahitya Sabha Issue, 1960.

\textsuperscript{93} Lok Sabha Debates, 1 September, 1960.
applying checks on that freedom.”94 When passions run high on either side on an issue involving emotional involvement in a mass scale, sobriety becomes the casualty.

Assessment: Since independence the ethnic Assamese political leadership, in response to popular campaigns, pursued cultural policies that sought to assert a truly Assamese identity for the state; for instance to have Assamese as the official language of the state and as the language of instruction in the state's educational institutions. In a sense, since independence an attempt at Assamization of positions and power appeared to gain ground howsoever imperceptibly. The political leadership of the Bengali Muslim community skillfully insulated the influx issue from the language issue that dominated the scene, by getting that community to return Assamese as their mother tongue in the census enumerations. The language controversy in Assam, therefore, was incidentally a conflict between the Assamese and Bengali Hindu communities. In the vastly changed demographic reality of Assam, the Assamese were now dependent on some bargaining with the other communities to realise their basic democratic rights to have a culturally homogeneous state of their own.

In a society where there is private ownership over land and other means of production area and amount of which respectively are limited, this sudden influx of a huge number of homeless people inevitably creates

94 Santhanam, Assam Riots: Reports of M.P.’s Delegation, Hindustan Times, Delhi, 18 September, 1960.
pressure on the economic system and drives the local people to terrific competition for living. Thus the growing problem of landlessness and unemployment coupled with decades of neglect and underdevelopment explain the justifiable fears in the Assamese mind of losing their distinctive identity and culture. It is merely a coincidence that the majority of people coming from erstwhile East Bengal happen to speak Bengali which is the single most important language of the immigrants. Therefore, the issues on official language and medium of instruction became the focal point of controversy precisely because it touched upon the issue of employment as well as cultural identity. The Assamese viewed the dual language policy as perpetuation of Bengali domination in both the employment and cultural spheres. On the other hand, the Bengalis favoured the equal status of both Assamese and Bengali languages in Assam because that would mean equality of opportunity in employment as well as political and social status. The official language and medium of instruction issue in Assam is no doubt an economic problem and as long as unequal economic relationship exists among various sections of the people, the super-structural differences of caste, language or religion are bound to be exploited by the vested interests to secure tactical gains. This is indeed the crux of the situation in Assam.

Thus, due primarily to historical reasons, we find that in Assam most issues, even when not remotely connected with language, tend to be seen in terms of Assamese and Bengali rivalry. Off and on, situations are created which keep the language tension alive and divert people's mind from the real
issues. No doubt, the language issue has provided an arena for political parties in Assam to manipulate politics in order to gain mass support. Factional leaders whipped up emotional feelings of the people and created an alarming situation leading to a total disruption of normal life and disturbance of peace and order. They proved by their actions that they would not care less even to satisfy their selfish ends. It was again obvious that a few parties used the language issue to consolidate their political base at the local level and did not mind taking a diametrically opposite stand from their parent organization. Thus, the language can be a great unifying as well as a divisive force. In Indian politics, it is used as a wedge to divide communities. In Assam, the language issue appears to have been utilized as a pawn in the game of power politics and it is unlikely that the conflict of local political interests will permit it to be judged on its own merit.