THE LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY
IN ASSAM

In this chapter an attempt has been made to analyse the role played by the middle class in Assam in the language issue which cropped up during Colonial Era and remains essentially unresolved till to-day. The language controversy in Assam needs to be understood against its historical, economic and socio-cultural background.

The world 'Assamese' is an anglicised form of the word 'Asamiya' which is derived from the name of the State 'Asom'. "The word Assamese is an English one, built on the same principle as Cingalese, Canarese, etc. It is based on the English word Assam by which the tract consisting of the Brahmaputra Valley is known". 1 Assamese language became standardized by thirteenth century.

People with different language and culture came at different phases of history and dwelt in Assam. They contributed to the growth and development of Assamese language and literature. The principal non-Aryan sources

which contributed words to Assamese were (1) Austro-Asiatic (Khasi, Kolarian and Malayan) (2) Tibeto-Burman (Sodo), (3) Thai-Ahom. When the Ahoms came to Assam they brought with them their own language and culture. The Ahoms did not want to create confusion by introducing and imposing their language on the people of Assam. They gradually adopted Assamese language.

The language tangle in Assam is rooted in the Colonial Era. Conflict involves two major linguistic groups—Assamese and the Bengalee. Several factors account for the Assamese-Bengalee rivalry in Assam.

Bengal was under British rule since 1765. Taking Bengal as their base, the East India Company extended its territory upto Assam. In 1874, Assam (including Cachar, Goalpara and some hill districts) was made a Chief Commissioner’s province under direct control of the Governor General in Council (Map No.1).

After few months, Sylhet was also incorporated into it. Inclusion of Sylhet into Assam caused disorder.

since people of this district are mostly Bengalee speaking.
This was disliked both by the people of Sylhet as well as
the people of Assam, because of their linguistic differences.
This, led to Assamese-Bengalee rivalry on linguistic
basis as Sylhetis (People of Sylhet) were not willing to
accept Assamese as their language. Thus, the transfer of
two Bengalee speaking districts to Assam viz., Sylhet and
Cachar and also incorporation of the district of Goaipara*
In 1874, intensified the language controversy. Assamese
is the predominant language of Goaipara district. Since
this is a border area, an intermixture of both Bengalee
and Assamese culture can be found here.

Again in 1905, the Governor General and Viceroy
Lord Curzon issued a proclamation amalgamating some
eastern districts of Bengal with Assam which came to be
known as 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' (Map No.2) 'Partition
of Bengal' was a part of the divide and rule policy of
the British government in order to weaken the combined
effort of the ruled against the ruler. This amalgamation
of some districts of Bengal with Assam was not liked

* The district of Goaipara is a marginal area and
remained a constituent part of Bengal for nearly two
hundred years from 1639 to 1822.
Report, p.211.
by the Assamese people in general and Assamese middle-
class in particular, Jagannath Sarma, President of Jorhat
Sarvajanik Sabha, felt that due to this amalgamation
Assam would get less attention from the Chief
Commissioner. The Assam Association feared that this
would gradually obliterate the historic name of Assam
and that Assamese language would suffer. The intelligentsia
in Surma Valley also opposed the partition and considered
it as a policy of the British Government to divide the
Bengalee people.

The conflict between the Bengalees and the
Assamese over language began around the middle of
nineteenth century. Initially, the court language was
Persian. When Assam was a part of Bengal, the court
language of Bengal Presidency was also Persian. In 1831,
Persian was replaced by Bengalee. In April 1836, the
Government of Bengal replaced Persian with Bengali as
the court language of Assam. The services of Bengalees
became indispensable in the schools for imparting education
in Bengali, which became the medium of instruction also.
"The social dominance of Bengali speaking people in
Assam, Ories, Chotanagpur and parts of Bihar was
reflected in the dominance of their languages. As these areas, backward in the new education and professional training, came slowly to produce their own educated, eager for a share of opportunities snatched up by Bengalis, they attempted to redress the balance by stressing the claims of their own languages to be recognised as the languages of administration and the law courts.  

When services of Bengalees became indispensable, then many members of the Bengali educated middle class (bhadralok or the baboo) were brought by Britishers to Assam. These educated Bengalees, whom the Britishers brought from outside exercised great influence over the British officers in the matter of administration. The Bengalee bureaucrats carried on administration through their own language. They persuaded the Britishers that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali and, therefore, Bengali should be the official language. Accordingly, Bengali was used as official language and also medium of instruction in schools. Due to the introduction of Bengali language, local Assamese people were put to

Inconvenience in matters of administration and education, Introduction of Bengali in schools of Assam hampered the progress of education among the Assamese people.

The attitude of Bengalees agitated the minds of Assamese people. Some Assamese people struggled hard for the rehabilitation of their language in concert with the missionaries. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan along with the Christian missionaries worked for the development of Assamese language. "Phukan helped the Missionaries and the Missionaries propped up Phukan in the matter of the native language, and both could now exert themselves together in the cause of the vernacular". 5

Since English was not a popular language amongst the Assamese, the Christian missionaries found some difficulty in propagating Christianity and this compelled them to learn the language of the local people. Besides religious books, they wrote grammer, dictionaries and other useful books in Assamese. In 1839, William Robinson published the grammer of Assamese language. The missionaries published the journal 'Orunodoi', the first

Assamese monthly, in January 1846 in order to rouse an intellectual awakening, Phukan started contributing articles in this journal from 1846.

Dhekial Phukan did not want Bengali to be used as medium of instruction in Assam for instructing Assamese people. He, along with some Baptist missionaries, said that continuation of Bengalee medium will hinder the progress of education in Assam. Dhekial Phukan and the Baptist missionaries, however, did not want the complete abolition of Bengali language. They said,

"By the substitution of the Assamese we do not mean to suggest that Bengalee should be altogether abolished from the schools. On the contrary, we are of opinion that it should be cultivated as a language indispensable to complete the course of vernacular education, and that the standard Bengali works, should likewise be introduced in the higher classes. We are only opposed to its exclusive adoption as the medium of instructing the people in literature, science and other useful branches of knowledge".6

For more than forty years, Assamese language remained suppressed in its homeland. The Calcutta authorities had an idea that Assamese had no literature of its own. This was, refuted by many natives of the state.

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Anandaram Dhekial Phukan refuted the theory that Assamese is a dialect of Bengali and substantiated his argument by pointing out that in one Assamese passage "out of 287 words, 112 are in no way connected with the Bengali; 98 have been derived from Sanskrit, the common source of both the languages; and only 77 words are either derived from or have a resemblance to the Bengali". Though the script of both the languages is same yet there is a difference between the two. In 1855, Dhekial Phukan published a booklet refuting the theory that Bengali and Assamese are the same language. Grierson described "Assamese as the sister and not a daughter of Bengali. It comes from Bihar through Northern Bengal and not from Bengal proper ...there is a considerable difference in the conjugation of the verb in the idiom, the syntax and even in the vocabulary". The view that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali, as Gait notes in his Report on the progress of historical research in Assam, was refuted by the natives of Assam. Phukan joined the agitation by writing 'few remarks on the Assamese

language and on vernacular education in Assam under the signature of 'A native'. He got hundred copies of it printed at the American Baptist Mission press at Sibsagar by A.H. Danforth. These were sent to government of Bengal and distributed among the leading persons in Assam.\footnote{M. Neog, \textit{op. cit.}, p.9.}

The tempo of the agitation subsided for some time due to the premature death of Phukan. Yet it was due to his untiring efforts that subsequently the restoration of Assamese to its former position became possible. After the death of Phukan, the struggle for rehabilitation of Assamese language to its former position, was carried on by the American missionaries—the Bronsons and Danforths.

Besides the Christian missionaries, several renowned personalities of Bengal also contributed to the development of Assamese language and literature. They included Asutosh Mukherjee due to whose efforts 'Assamese' became a subject of Post-Graduate study in Calcutta University.
Consequently, the Lieutenant Governor, Sir George Campbell, decided on 9th April 1873 that Assamese should be introduced in the schools and courts of Brahmaputra Valley. Initially, Assamese was introduced in primary schools only. Due to lack of books in Assamese language, middle schools were still conducted in Bengali till 1880s. Due to the paucity of books written in Assamese, a provision was made that where books written in Assamese language were not available, teaching could be done either in Bengali or in English.

Though Assamese was introduced, the Lieutenant Governor put some limitations on the use of Assamese language: 
1. For teaching the higher classes of the schools, when Assamese school books were not available, Bengali books must be used.
2. When Assamese technical terms are not available, and when English words cannot be conveniently used, Bengali words may be employed.
3. Where in the upper classes of higher schools Assamese books did not exist, every subject can be taught in Bengali or in English.

The Commissioner of Assam was asked to implement this order on 9th April, 1873 in the five districts of Brahmaputra Valley.
the language conflict to some extent. Now the main problem of the Assamese people was to enrich Assamese language and literature by producing literary works particularly books for school going students. Due to the numerical weakness of the Assamese literate and educated people, their contribution towards the development of Assamese language and literature was slow and inadequate.

A few people belonging to Assamese middle class like Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua and Anandaram Barua and some others laid the foundation of modern Assamese language and literature. 'Assamiya Bhasar Unnati Sahini Sabha' (Assamese Language Improvement Society) was formed in 1888 by some Assamese students. Its main objective was to promote Assamese language and culture and it helped in arousing a spirit of patriotism among the Assamese. Laxminath Bezbarua, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Padmanath Cohain Barua and some other middle-class people were its leading members. 'Jonaki' a monthly journal published in 1889 acted as a mouthpiece of the Assamese society.

* See Appendix.
Through several journals, the educated middle-class people succeeded in bringing about a renaissance in Assamese literature by the end of nineteenth century. They got the stimulating influence from their counterparts in Bengal like Hemchandra Chattopadhyaya, Nabin Sen, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Michael Madhusudan Dutta who were in turn influenced by English culture and literature. The age of renaissance in Assamese literature is known as 'Jonaki age'. The missionary zeal of the Baptists effected a rejuvenation of the Assamese language. They published periodicals, grammar and also compiled dictionary. In order to continue this, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua started new journals, which really ushered in the modern period of Assamese language and literature.\footnote{M. Nacc, \textit{Lagiminath Bahadar: An Introduction} (Gorhat, Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1968), p.1.}

Activities of American Baptist missionaries and Bengal renaissance helped in bringing a new awakening in Assamese literature. Gunabhiram Barua, who along with some others laid the foundation of Assamese language and literature, was considerably influenced by this new awakening.
POST-INDEPENDENCE TREND

The language controversy has become a major political issue after independence in Assam. When some Indian states adopted their regional language as state language, middle class of Assam also agitated for making Assamese the official language. The demand for declaration of Assamese as state language came from Assam Sahitya Sabha which was the premier literary organization in the state. The Sabha contributed much for developing national consciousness among the people. Initially, the Sabha's functions were non-political in character and the members of the Sabha also kept the organization free from Congress politics. But gradually, the Sabha has shunned its non-political character and has become a highly political organization. Ever since the achievement of Independence, controversy started over the declaration of Assamese as the state language of Assam. But this controversy gained momentum since April 1959, when, Assam Sahitya Sabha, demanded that within 1960 the Assamese language must be declared as the state language of Assam. 12

When the Assam Sahitya Sabha demanded that, Assamese should be made the state language, the then Government headed by Bimala Prasad Chaliha did not act speedily. The Chief Minister, Sri Chaliha, declared that demand for making Assamese as the official language of the state should come from the minority linguistic communities of Assam. Chaliha made a statement on the floor of the Assembly on 3-3-60, that the demand for Assamese as official language should come from the minority. In a democracy minority is entitled to protection and safeguards from the Government.

Answering a question in the Legislative Assembly on 3rd March, 1960, Sri Chaliha said that he appreciated the enthusiasm with which the demand for the declaration of Assamese as the state language has been made, by the Assamese speaking section of the society. But Government would wait till they get the same demand from the non-Assamese speaking population for the declaration of Assamese as state language. Government felt that this question should be judged more from the point of view of acceptance than from the point of view of majority or minority.

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People of Cachar district, with a overwhelming majority of Bengalee speaking people, were very happy with the stand taken by Chaliha, from 1959–61 strong movement was geared up under Assam Sahitya Sabha's leadership. The students of Assam did not have any powerful organization at that time. Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) suggested that, while introducing Assamese as official language, government should not impose it on the non-Assamese districts. Accordingly, on 23 June 1959, Chaliha declared that official language bill would be introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly. People of the Brahmaputra Valley welcomed it while the people of Cachar district opposed it. Thus, amidst opposition, official language bill was introduced on 10th October, 1960 and passed into Law as the Assam Act XXXII of 1960. Accordingly, Assamese became the state language. It was, however, declared that English would continue to be used in secretariat and in all state government departments till its replacement by Hindi.  

The discontentment of the Bengalee speaking parts of Assam over the language Act was manifested through the formation of 'Nikhil Assam Bangabhasa Raksha Samity' (All Assam Bengali Language Preservation Committee). They submitted a petition to the President of India on April 5, 1961 for protection under article 347 of the Constitution.

In 1960, Assamese was accepted as official language. Official Language Act of 1960 created misgivings in the minds of different groups of people. Assam is composed of various ethno-linguistic groups. When demand for giving due place to the Assamese language was raised, the legitimate interests of the various linguistic groups which formed a part of the state of Assam at that time, were not taken into consideration by the leadership of the movement. At that time, various hill people formed a part and parcel of the population of Assam.

* Article 347 is a special provision relating to language spoken by a section of the population of a state on a demand being made on that behalf by the President if he is satisfied that a substantial proportion of the population of a state desire the use of any language spoken by them to be recognized by that state, direct that such language shall also be officially recognized throughout the state or any part thereof for such purpose as he may specify.
Assam. "According to the 1961 Census, the total population of Assam is 1,22,09,330. Assamese speakers constitute 57.14 per cent of the population. The speakers of Bengali, Hindi, Khasi, Bodo/Boro, Garo, Nepali, Lushai, Mikir, Oriya and Miri constitute 17.60, 4.41, 2.97, 2.82, 2.47, 1.77, 1.76, 1.26, 1.18 and 1.12 per cent respectively of the population."

Passing of the Assam State Language Act of 1960 caused the dismemberment of Assam through the formation of separate hill states. It was the Assam Sahitya Sabha's language policy which led to the emergence of organizations of the tribals like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Earlier, the Bodos identified themselves with the Assamese mainstream. But gradually they drifted away from it and formed their own organization. The continued insensitivity of the Assamese middle class towards the legitimate aspirations of the Plains tribals of Assam, led to the formation of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) which is currently voicing the demand for the creation of a separate state for the Plains Tribals of Assam. PTCA raised the demand for a separate tribal

state 'UDAYACHAL' to be carved out of the present state of Assam. "Sabhas stand on the Assamese and the emergence of the small but influential middle class among the plains tribal speeded up the process of separation of sizable sections of these people from the Assamese mainstream'. The plains tribal movement, led by Plains Tribal Council of Assam, is of recent origin. Conflict arose between Assamese and the Bodos over the language issue. The Bodos demanded recognition of Bodo language. Assamese script had been used as the script for Bodo language for decades. PTCA fought for replacing Assamese script by Roman Script. Finally, Devnagri was accepted as script for Bodo language.

The language issue got resurrected in 1972. In accordance with the national educational policy, Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities also decided to adopt regional languages. In 1971-72, the Assam Sahitya Sabha organized and led another mass movement in the Brahmaputra Valley and demanded that Assamese should be made the medium of instruction at the College and University level. The movement even turned violent in 1973.

several places. On 12 June, 1972, a teacher and a student of Gauhati University, both Assamese, were assaulted inside the campus. They protested against the University Courts decision to adopt Assamese as the medium of instruction at the Under-Graduate stage.\textsuperscript{17}

Subsequently, both Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities adopted Assamese as the medium of instruction at the Under-Graduate level. However, safeguards were provided for the linguistic minorities by the Gauhati University: "(1) Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in Colleges under the jurisdiction of Gauhati University, (2) English shall continue as alternative medium of instruction, (3) The students shall have option to answer either in Assamese or in English in the University examinations."\textsuperscript{18} This decision of Gauhati University had justification. An alternative medium of instruction is necessary in a state like Assam where according to 1971 Census 2,882,039 persons or 19.71\% of the population of the state speak Bengali as L/MT.

\textsuperscript{17} S.K. Das, "Assam's Bengali Unit: Protection for Cachari Education", The Statesman (Calcutta), May 9, 1983.

Other important languages spoken by more than 1% of the total population of the state are Hindi (5.42)...

As mentioned earlier, apprehensions of the Plains tribal people were aroused with the adoption of Assamese as the medium of instruction. They were afraid of the stand taken by the Assamese to convert Assam into a unilingual province by neglecting various tribal languages, among which Bodo language was an important one. After the creation of hill states by dismemberment of Assam, the Bodos remained as the only major tribal group (plains tribal) of Assam. In his Presidential address to the first convention of the All Assam Tribal Youth League in 1979, P.K. Mushahary, a Bodo lawyer, said: "Now the plains tribes are left to suffer alone after the dismemberment of hill areas. The first attempt was made by the resolution of the Gauhati University Academic Council dated June 12, 1972. It has expressed their naked aim to convert Assam into a unilingual state neglecting the various tribal languages".

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The plains tribal demanded that English be retained as the medium of instruction and that they should be given education at the primary level in their own mother tongue. A deputation of the Mishing Agon Kabang (Mishing Sahitya Sabha) met the Minister of Education, Assam, on August 20, 1984 and demanded introduction of the Mishing language as a medium of instruction at the primary stage of education. The Minister, accepted the demands and agreed to introduce Mishing as a language subject in Class III and IV from the next academic session. 21

The language tangle has become a major issue in the contemporary Assamese society. Language is one of the factors for the conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalees. The century old language conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalee communities is still going on. Assamese is the medium of instruction at the under-graduate level while English is the medium of instruction at the post-graduate level which has created a state of confusion in the academic sphere. 21. The Assam Tribune (Gauhati), August 21, 1984.