

# **The Economic Basis of Assam's Linguistic Politics and Anti-Immigrant Movements**

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**Many accounts ignore the fact that the Assamese territory saw massive geographical expansion under the British and that despite immigration, there was an increase in the Assamese speaking population in what was a multi-lingual society.**

The issue of undocumented immigration of Bangladeshis into Assam had emerged as a serious political concern in the 1970s. Udayon Misra, a reputed Assamese scholar, [in a recent article in \*The Wire\*](#), says:

“Quite often, people from other parts of the country appear a bit puzzled at the emotional response of the Assamese people to the question of identity and demographic change. This is often seen as an expression of an insular mindset, or even as a sign of xenophobia.”

Misra points to the colonial policy of encouraging immigration of peasants, workers, professionals and business persons from Bengal and other parts of the Indian subcontinent into Assam during the nineteenth and twentieth century and continuing undocumented migration of Hindus and Muslims into Assam from former East Pakistan and present Bangladesh as the reason for this emotional response.

## **“Immigration” and identity politics**

Large scale immigration, whether legal or undocumented, is a matter of serious social, economic and political concern. It not only changes the size of the population and other compositions like age, sex, language, religion, but also brings both quantitative and qualitative changes in the socio-economic and political pattern of the host region giving rise to friction and conflicts. While the issue of large scale immigration into Assam was discussed at the national level, unfortunately, it was treated essentially as a “regional” problem created by influx of undocumented migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. The only solution that has ever been discussed was to “push the undocumented immigrants out of India”. The ongoing NRC exercise is the outcome of that singular focus on undocumented migration.

The singular focus on undocumented immigration obscures the fact that the present Assamese “homeland” itself is a colonial creation and it is much larger than the traditional home of the Assamese people, the Brahmaputra valley. After defeating the Burmese who had occupied Assam, the British had created the new territory of Assam by amalgamating the existing kingdom of Jaintia, Cachar and their dependencies into Assam. Later they added the territories of the independent tribal kingdom of the Khasi Hills, the land of the Lotha, Ao and Angami Nagas, the Luhsai and the Garo Hills into Assam. The Surma valley, which is separated from the Brahmaputra valley by the Garo, Khasi, Jaintia and the Naga Hills, consisted of the kingdom of Cachar and it was populated by

Bengali speaking people. Goalpara, which lies above the Garo hills was similarly populated by Bengalis and was a part of Bengal for more than 200 years.

Apart from ignoring the fact of massive geographical expansion of Assamese territory, and notwithstanding the demographic changes caused by immigration, the increase in the Assamese speaking population in what was a multi-lingual society is often not taken into account.

The census reports from 1911 to 1951 show that the Assamese speaking population in the British-made province of [Assam had increased from 21.7% to 56.7%](#). During the same period, the percentage of Bengali speaking population declined from 45.67% to 16.5%. After independence, the number of Assamese speakers increased to 56.59% in 1951 as compared to 31.42% in 1931. According to the census of 1951, a population of about 80 lakhs, of which nearly 45 lakhs declared themselves to be Assamese speaking and nearly 13 lakhs Bengali speaking.

A map of Assam in 1932. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

All identities, as we know, whether national, sub-national, ethnic or original inhabitants – are modern homogenous construct which the proponents of identity impose from above to maintain territorial solidarity among its people. The people who assert to be the “original inhabitants” of a particular piece of territory lay claim on that territory as their “homeland”. The emergence of an “ethnic” community in Assam, which treats language as its main identity marker, particularly in a multi religious, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic region like Brahmaputra valley, is indeed an intriguing phenomena. This is not the traditional ethnic community which lived in the Brahmaputra valley before the entry of colonialism. It had evolved out of intermarriages, social and cultural interactions between the Tai Ahom people who had come from the frontier regions between Myanmar and Yunnan Province in southwest China and established their rule over the Brahmaputra valley. Tai Ahom rule lasted for nearly 600 years, during which some of the local ethnic communities were completely subsumed in the Ahom community.

This linguistic ethnic community is quite distinct from traditional Assamese ethnic community and different in character. It was constructed by the growing Assamese middle-class in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to unite the people in their struggle against the immigrant Bengali Hindu middle-class who were occupying almost all the clerical and supervisory jobs in the colonial administration. This is a political class, which is using its indigenusness based on language to legitimise its group exclusive claims on state power, rewards of the state and resources. Most of the academics and scholars who have written on social and political movements in colonial and post-independent Assam seem to ignore the economic basis of Assamese linguistic politics.

This article is an attempt to explain the nature and the agenda of this community from a historical perspective to show how a unilingual ethnic identity was constructed by Assamese intellectuals of 19<sup>th</sup> century to establish its political control and hegemony over diverse communities in the composite province created by the British colonialists.

### **Language as the sole marker of identity**

There was no evidence of a linguistic community consciousness in Assam prior to 1836, when Bengali was introduced as the official language as well as the medium of instruction in schools. Assamese language was yet to develop its grammar and script. Although it was used in religious prayers and in conversations, it was yet to be standardised.

This changed with the efforts of the American Baptists Missionaries who had entered Assam in the 1830s to preach Christianity. Realising that they needed to use the vernacular medium to spread

Christianity, the [missionaries began to strongly espouse the cause of the Assamese language](#) as the rightful medium of instruction. Apart from printing all their religious material in Assamese, through their magazine, Nathan Brown, an American Baptist, developed Assamese grammar, language and scripts.

Nathan Brown, an American Baptist, developed Assamese language, grammar and scripts. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The efforts of the missionaries in asserting the separate identity of the Assamese language received wholehearted support from the Assamese intelligentsia. *Orunodoi*, a magazine published by the American Baptists disseminated western thoughts and learning, for over twenty years. It inspired the younger Assamese generation and paved the way for an intellectual awakening. Faced with the growing protests, the government revised its earlier language policy and Assamese was reinstated as the official language in 1873.

With the removal of Bengali, expectedly, the language issue should have moved lower down in the hierarchy of issues in the subsequent stages of the ongoing 'ethnic' struggle. Language, however, continued to occupy center-stage, even though it was alienating other ethnic/tribal communities of the Brahmaputra valley, who were accepted as integral part of the Assamese community. There is a need to explore the reasons for the selection of language as the sole marker of Assamese identity. The question arises, whether it was motivated purely by concerns for language and culture or perhaps the real reasons were the concerns of the emerging Assamese middle-class that the Bengalis were taking away a lion's share of the loaves and fishes?

Throughout the nineteenth century, Assam's rural areas as well as the Khasi and Jaintia hill tracts was afire with militant peasant agitations against increasing burden of taxation on land. The peasants organised through "*raij mel*" (peoples' assembly). The emerging middle-class was not a part of these uprisings. However, when it entered the peasant movement towards the end of nineteenth century through Ryot Sabha, the armed uprising were replaced by "petitions" and the peasantry gradually began to toe moderate reformist ideas of the middle-class leadership. It clearly diverted the mounting anger of the rural masses against the British for imposition of high taxation on land and farm produce to middle-class concerns regarding assault on language and culture. Having established its control over the peasantry, the Assamese middle class, gradually established itself as the most dominant class - a position it holds till date. In their efforts to maintain their hold over the masses and the peripheral communities, the Assamese middle classes used "language" as a hegemonic instrument.

### **The colonial construction of composite Assam province**

As I have pointed out earlier, what is known as Assam today, is essentially a colonial creation. The British created Assam as a Chief Commissioner's province in 1874. It was a composite of two valleys - the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley. The former was dominated by Assamese speaking people and the later had an overwhelming majority of Bengali speaking people. Brahmaputra valley had a Hindu majority whereas the Surma valley was a mix of Hindu and Muslims.

According to Amlendu Guha(*Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 1977), "the term Assam proper, i.e., the erstwhile Ahom territory alone - and later for the entire Brahmaputra valley that was under a common Commissionership, that was now given a wider significance to denote the newly emerged province". According to the census report of 1881-82, the population of Brahmaputra valley was about 1.8 million whereas the Surma valley's population was nearly 2.1 million. There were practically no Assamese speaking persons in the two districts of the Surma Valley, where as in Goalpara district of the Brahmaputra Valley, the majority, according to early census figures, spoke Bengali. At the time

of inclusion of Sylhet into Assam province, the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet were opposed to its inclusion. The resentment against this inclusion continued to be articulated by the people of Sylhet in all social and political forums. In 1947, at the time of partition, Sylhet was incorporated into East Pakistan after a referendum.

It was the colonial state's policy of encouraging immigration into Assam from neighbouring Bengal and then by imposing Bengali as the official language that spurred the growth of community consciousness among the Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley. The nineteenth century immigrants in Assam may be classified into four groups: (1) tea garden labourers (2) migrants from East Bengal prior to independence (3) Hindus who came as a result of migration, and (4) Nepalese who came in search of livelihood.

Amalendu Guha points out that of these immigrants, the Nepalese and the tea garden labourers did not compete with the natives for jobs, a factor, which rendered them more acceptable to the local people. The immigrant Bengali Muslims also did not pose much problem to the indigenous Assamese people in the field of employment in the government sector because of their interest in getting land in the fertile valley and by offering their cheap labour in the struggle for survival. The immigrant Bengali Muslims had declared Assamese as their mother-tongue.

The Nepalese and the tea garden labourers did not compete with the natives for jobs, a factor, which rendered them more acceptable to the local people. Credit: Reuters

The case of the Bengali Hindu immigrant was, however, different. The British required the services of "native" bureaucrats to run the administration. The British had found it convenient to recruit educated Bengalis as clerks, supervisors, overseers and tax collectors as the Bengalis were acquainted with the British administrative method. The Bengali Hindus were disliked by the emerging Assamese middle class as they dominated the local bureaucracy and had the lion's share of the government jobs.

### **The threat of the Bengali**

Hiren Gohain describes the [chauvinistic attitude of a section of the Bengali community in Assam](#) as the reason for the resentment. Gohain is not the only author who blames the Bengali settlers in Assam. Sajal Nag, Apurba Baruah and several authors have prioritised "Bengali chauvinism" as the key factor that antagonised the Assamese and contributed to the growth of community consciousness among them. The population imbalance and limited access to economic development had given rise to valley-ism in Assam promoting competitive identities of Assamese and Bengali. As Guha points out, it was a cleverly designed policy of divide and rule, "maintaining the balance of loaves and fishes - not power certainly, between the two rival valleys, jealous of each other".

In his book on middle class politics in Assam, Apurb Baruah in his book *Social Tensions in Assam: Middle Class Politics* (1991) blames the "elite of the Bengali society and their patrons in Bengal" not only for the imposition of the Bengali language on Assam, but also for the growth of anti-Bengali sentiments among the local people. Apurb Baruah rejects the role of economic factors as stimuli. He does not substantiate what kind of a role the Bengali elite had played in influencing the official opinion. All accounts of colonial history show that the colonial state selectively accepted ideas and interpreted them to suit their imperial interests.

In *India Against Itself, Assam*, Sanjib Baruah suggests that it was the "colonial geography" that shaped "the projects of people hood in Assam- the Assamese sub-national narrative and the counter-narratives as well as the political agendas that followed from these narratives". He points out that the colonial policy of encouraging large scale immigration from Bengal to Assam, as well as the way

the boundaries of Assam were drawn up which included the Bengali dominated Surma valley, had produced a demographic imbalance that kept Assam's language question a highly controversial one throughout the entire colonial period and beyond. According to Sanjib Baruah, the language movement continued primarily because of the inclusion of Sylhet. While referring to the considerable opposition to immigration, Sanjib Baruah also talks about the willingness of sections of Assamese middle-class to co-opt all those who agreed to accept Assamese language and Assamese culture.

History of Assam indicates that while language was one parameter, the second and equally important marker was Vainashvi Hinduism. Udyon Misra in *The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey*, points out that beneath all the 19<sup>th</sup> century rhetoric about a multi-cultural identity was the firm belief that the Assamese identity was not an inclusive one. The Hindu religious underpinnings of the Assamese community are, in fact, impossible to overlook as Misra asserts that, "An influential section of the Assamese intelligentsia who stressed the poly-ethnic nature of Assamese society, at the same time felt that it was the Hindu, and particularly the Vaishnavite faith, which served as the main cementing force of Assamese society."

If Vaishnava Hinduism was so important to the people, why this was ignored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a marker of Assamese identity remains unanswered. Also the question that needs to be asked is whether the willingness to accept immigrants, particularly Assamese-speaking Bengali Muslims, as part of the Assamese community led to the transformation of the Vaishnavite Hindu identity of the Assamese community?

### **Privileging language over other markers of ethnic identity**

The problem with identity arose due to the incongruity between the aspiration of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam their "national homeland" and the historically developed multi-ethnic social base of territorial Assam of today. The selection of language as the main marker of Assamese identity by Assamese intellectuals of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century over other traditional markers of ethnicity was aimed at transforming both the Assamese community as well as the other communities that lived on the extended territory, to create a unilingual community in order to retain its control over the new provincial territory. As the Sylheti could not be subdued, Assamese intellectuals and politicians campaigned for exclusion of Sylhet from Assam and were happy when at the time of the partition in 1947, it was transferred to East Pakistan.

Assamese intellectuals and politicians campaigned for exclusion of Sylhet from Assam and were happy when at the time of the partition in 1947, it was transferred to East Pakistan. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Sanjib Baruah acknowledges that Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims were not averse to becoming part of the Assamese cultural mainstream. It is evident from the 150% increase in the Assamese speaking population and nearly 200% decline in the Bengali speaking population during the four decades from 1911 to 1951, that a large section of Bengalis had adopted Assamese as their main language. Yet the problem has continued. It would seem that the dominance of Bengali speaking people in the Surma valley continue to pose a threat to the project of making Assam as the national homeland of the Assamese people. This explains the violent "Bongal Kheda", the organised campaign of ethnic cleansing of the Bengalis which began in the 1960 and continues till date. The Bengali, particularly the Bengali Hindu, has become the "other", the "outsider" who was the cause of all the troubles.

### **Conclusion**

The attempt to convert Assam into a monolingual state through the controversial Official Language

Act, 1960, the six-year long AASU agitation culminating in the inking of the Assam Accord in 1985, which successfully curbed the domicile rights of a large number of Bengali settlers in the State, and the current NRC update process – all these have found unstinted approval of the Assamese cognoscenti.

Since the 1980's, the very definition of the “illegal foreign immigrant”, has undergone many changes. The Assam agitation, at its inception in the year 1978, was a movement against all foreigners staying in Assam. Within a year, it had become a movement for “driving out” all so called illegal immigrants – the Bengali speaking Hindus, Muslims and Nepalese, all were targeted. However, in 1981-82, the perception about foreigners changed again and only the Bengali origin Muslims of Assam were targeted as Bangladeshi infiltrators. Though the Assam agitation was started against the undocumented migrants, over the time, it become violent and morphed into a communal movement with anti-Muslim bias. The so-called Assam Accord of 1985 did not end Assam agitation. It has continued under different garbs and continued killing of Bengali Muslims and members of other minority communities.

It has scarred the mind of the Assamese youth and deeply affected modes of social exchange. The denial of humanity to the “other” has sprung from this exchange. Even after the completion of the NRC process and rendering the detected non-citizens as “stateless persons”, without any rights to participate in politics of Assam, the problem will not be solved. As long as the agenda of establishing total hegemonic control over all communities and the entire territory of Assam is not achieved, the so-called “emotional” outbursts against the threat to Assam’s “linguistic and cultural identity” will happen again and again.

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