

# Regime of Linguistic Conflict: Understanding the Assamese Language Movement and the Current Political Scenario in the State

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**Abstract-** India is unique because of its diversity. The Indian census of 1961 recognized 1652 different languages in India including languages which are not native to this land. But recently the move made by the central government to impose Hindi all over the country is yet another attack on the Assamese community in particular and also on other linguistic groups in general. The Assamese Language Movement was started from the southern tip of Assam a little more than 50 years ago. The agitation started just after the Assam Official Language Bill was introduced on 3rd March 1960. There was a movement in support of the Bill in the Brahmaputra Valley on one side, whereas on the other side the hill districts and Bengali speaking districts witnessed a massive protest against the bill. Now the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Bill is a déjà vu for the people residing in Assam because the Assamese and Bengali speaking communities are seen coming and protesting for and against the bill. So language is a terrain contestation between the two communities.

Among the major issues that affected Assamese culture and ethnicity, the issue of language was the most prominent one. With the help of this article I would like to draw a connection between the Assamese Language Movement and the current political scenario of Assam.

**Index Terms-** Ethnicity, Linguistic, Assamese, Bengali, Protest

## I. INTRODUCTION

India's unity lies in its diversity. According to A.R. Desai, "India presents a spectacle of museum of tongues." George Abraham Grierson in his linguistic survey of India has noted that India is home to 179 languages and 544 dialects. On the other hand, the census of 1971 reported that 1652 languages are spoken in India as mother tongue. The reorganisation of states in India was carried on in 1956 with linguistic boundaries that had its own script. The then Home Minister of India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel played a crucial role in the reorganisation of states on the basis of language. The Government of India has taken numerous steps till date to safeguard the linguistic minorities and to maintain the linguistic pluralism in India. But the country has also witnessed a number of instances when the government itself tried to undermine the linguistic pluralism in India by giving preference to a particular language. Pritam Singh in his article Hindu Bias in India's 'Secular' Constitution: probing flaws in the instruments of governance mentions about Article 343 and 351 which imposes Hindi in Devanagari script as the official language of the Union of India and also gives directive for the development of the Hindi language. The importance accorded to Hindi language and especially to Devanagari script and the Sanskrit language in the constitution reflects pro-Hindi and pro-Hindu bias of a very powerful section among the constitution. Recently the move made by the central government to impose Hindi all over the country is yet another attack on the various linguistic groups present in India and the Assamese community in particular. With the help of this article I would like to draw a connection between the Assamese Language Movement and the current political scenario of Assam

## II. BACKGROUND

Before connecting the present political scenario of Assam with the language movement of 1960s, I would like to briefly discuss about that phase when the Assamese language was eclipsed by the Bengali language. After the British took control over Assam, the Bengali language was imposed over Assamese. The British brought with them many Bengali clerical and technical workers to work in Assam with the motive of imposing Bengali in schools and colleges and also for official purposes. The imposition of Bengali as the court language over the Assamese language frustrated the Assamese society. Printing of Assamese books was not encouraged and hence the Assamese literature suffered to a great extent. This is regarded as one of the main factors behind the conflicts that emerged in the following decades between the two communities. Initially, this imposition was not much protested by the Assamese people. Rather it

was used by the Assamese elite class for speaking and writing. But when more and more Bengali people were recruited in the government services, the unemployment rate among the Assamese people increased. These people had their own culture, tradition, language etc and their presence in the state was seen as a clear threat to the culture, economy, political status and language of Assam.

### III. CITIZENSHIP AMENDMENT BILL, 2016

The Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016 was introduced on July 19, 2016 with the motive of granting citizenship to illegal immigrants on the basis of religion. The bill attempted to accommodate “Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan”. It was very interesting to note that the bill had no provision for Shia Muslims and Ahmadiyas in Pakistan who are persecuted minorities there. Waves of protests against the CAB, 2016 were witnessed in various parts of North-East. Various political parties, student and other unions in Assam were seen leading the protests because they felt that the bill neglects the Assam Accord of 1985.

- Clause 5 of the Assam Accord says that: “Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and up to 24th March, 1971, shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946, and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.”

The names of these foreigners “will be deleted from the electoral rolls” and such persons would have to register themselves under the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939. Also, foreigners who entered Assam on or after March 25, 1971, “shall continue to be detected... and expelled”.

According to the amendment, if a Hindu illegally enters India on December 30, 2014 he/she will just have to show that he/she have resided in India for six years, which means it would be December 30, 2008.

### IV. THE CONNECTION

Some Bengali organizations openly came out and supported the bill. The JPC (Joint Parliamentary Committee) visited North-East for knowing the views of people regarding the CAB(2016). The hearings clearly showed that while most of the people from the Brahmaputra valley were protesting against the bill, in the Barak valley-the reverse happened. This reminds me of the Assamese language movement of the 1960's when the majority of the people in Brahmaputra Valley were supporting the state government's decision to make Assamese the state language whereas waves of protests were witnessed in the Barak valley and in the hill districts of Assam. The non-Assamese speakers led a procession in Shillong to oppose the government's decision to make Assamese the official language. This procession led by non- Assamese speakers was opposed in Upper Assam (Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat) where the people supported the acceptance of Assamese as an official language. The only difference between these two events is that in the 1960's the Assamese speaking people were supporting the government's decision and the Bengali speaking population protested against the bill whereas in the case of CAB (2016) the Bengali speaking people from Barak were seen supporting the government's decision i.e. the bill while the Assamese speaking people protested against it. The credit for the creation of these two events which changed the political scenario of Assam goes to both the government and to their hegemonic mindsets.

### V. CURRENT POLITICAL SCENARIO IN THE STATE

The lapse of the Citizenship Amendment Bill might have given some amount of relief to the people of Assam and other parts of the North-East but the centre is again set to introduce a new Citizenship (Amendment) Bill in the winter session of the Parliament. He also said that under the leadership of Home Minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Narendra Modi the government will prepare a new NRC. After the bill lapsed in Rajya Sabha, Himanta Biswa Sarma termed it as the defeat of the people of Assam. According to him the bill is the only way to protect the interests of the indigenous Assamese people. After this declaration by Himanta Biswa Sarma, The All Assam Bengali Youth Students' Federation came out and said that only someone like Himanta Biswa Sarma can protect the insecure Hindu Bengali community of Assam. The Federation's President expressed his support for Himanta Biswa Sarma by saying “Sarma is more vocal about issues concerning the people. He at least addresses the people and expresses discontentment over issues. We have seen him speaking on NRC-related issues. We can see that he understands the emotions of the people. So, we want him as the CM”. On the other hand, this particular bill is seen by the Assamese people as an obvious threat to their identity. The way Central government is getting ready to introduce the bill again is something to worry for. The state has already witnessed wave of protests against the CAB(2016) and now if the government introduces the bill again, it might bring some serious consequences with it. The BJP is just trying to protect the Hindu identity by neglecting the Assamese identity. Their prime motive is to promote their ideology and to create a vote bank among Bengali Hindus which is not at all a hidden agenda and this can again widen the gap between the peace loving Assamese and Bengali people living in Assam since decades.

### VI. CONCLUSION

Religion is used as a tool by many to promote and profess their radical ideologies. Religious scriptures are interpreted in a wrong way

which encourages individuals to discriminate and carry out violent activities against those who follow a different religion. This is seen in a country like India where people belonging to different religion, caste, race, and creed live together. It must also be noted that in India, we still have places which are known for its communal harmony. In India, the relationship between religion and politics is a complicated one. The political parties are often seen using religious symbols, values, ideas and institutions to achieve their political goals. The main motive of the political parties, as seen in the recent past is to create divisions or widen the gap between various religions especially between Hindus and Muslims. This has resulted in loss of many lives, peace and harmony. India is a developing country with a staggering population of 1.3 billion. There are many important issues starting from unemployment to a downtrodden economy which are often neglected by the political parties. Hence it is very important for us to recognise and reject the vote bank politics of these political parties. These political parties divide the population into sections to achieve their political goals. To live with peace and harmony with all the sections of the society, we will have to unite and reject these communal political parties.

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