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ASSAM'S LANGUAGE QUESTION : A POLITICAL ANALYSIS FOR THE PERIOD 1947 THROUGH 1961

A THESIS PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
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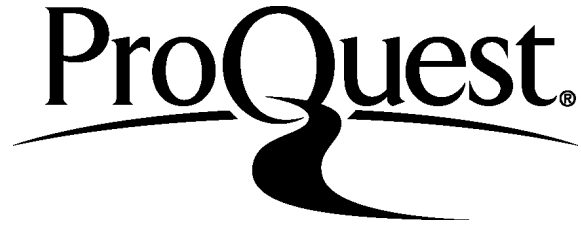
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This is to certify that Ms Sandhya Goswami, Lecturer in Political Science, Pub-Kamrup College worked under my guidance while preparing her thesis entitled ASSAM'S LANGUAGE QUESTION: A POLITICAL ANALYSIS FOR THE PERIOD 1947 THROUGH 1961. She has fulfilled all the requirements relating to the submission of a thesis for the Ph.D. Degree under this University. The thesis is the result of her own investigation and neither the thesis nor any part thereof was submitted for any other Degree of this or any other University.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'D.P. Barooah'.

(D.P. Barooah)

Professor in Political
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February 12, 1990
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Sandhya Goswami
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PREFACE

Language is not only a means of communication, but it is also an indispensable tool for all social existence. It is a prime factor in creating the sense of nationhood. In few rare cases as in Switzerland the role of language, which is at the very root of nationhood, is so significant that language proved to be an outstanding means of knitting together separate groups into a nation. However, the complexity and sublimity of India's ethnic and linguistic situation is probably unparalleled in any country in the world. In Independent India the language issue emerged as one of the most intransigent problems. In the wake of the reorganisation of the states on linguistic basis in 1956, a number of unilingual states were carved out in India. But even this operation could not solve the acuteness of the linguistic problem. And this fact was acknowledged by the Commission itself 'The scheme of redistribution of state boundaries which we have recommended will result in many cases in bringing together people speaking a common language. To that extent, it will reduce the number of linguistic minorities. It is, however, quite evident that even if the linguistic principle were applied very rigidly the problem of linguistic minorities will by no means be solved'. However, the linguistic formation of states can be identified as a major gain of the democratic

movement as far as the national problem in India is concerned. Even this has been effected shabbily as can be seen from problems that linger even now. Thus we find the national problem remains unsolved leading to the emergence of various problems like communalism, separatism and linguistic chauvinism both at the state and regional levels. This study is an attempt to understand the Language Question in Assam against its historico-theoretical perspective.

Assam's language problem is no doubt peculiar in the sense that it is complicated by a multitude of languages and dialects spoken by its people, yet it has hardly been studied in depth and properly analysed. This study is an humble effort in this direction. Although, Assam is the home of many languages this study is designed to focus on the dynamics of the relationship between Assamese - the language spoken by the majority of the people in the state, and Bengali - the singlemost important language of the minorities.

Following demands to introduce the regional language in the state administration, there was hectic political activity coupled with a great deal of misplaced enthusiasm. It is known that some of the states were opposed to the introduction of Hindi as the official language of the Indian Union. At the same time in many states minority language groups opposed the imposition of the regional language. In

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the case of Assam, it generated a controversy in the Assembly and in the Parliament and finally it led to a strong language movement in the state. The early sixties witnessed serious disturbances and riots on this issue. The present study aims at understanding this problem against its socio-economic and historical background.

The thesis carries six chapters. Chapter I examines the language problem of Assam in the context of different facets of the National Question in India. The different historical stages through which the National Problem in our country has evolved are discussed at length. In Chapter II an exhaustive study of the language problem in the state against its historical background is presented. Moreover, socio-economic developments under British rule and its impact on the linguistic nationality consciousness are touched upon. Chapter III describes how a persistent movement for the recognition of Assamese as the official language was launched for the first time after independence. Chapter IV focuses the chronological development of the official language movement in Assam. The government of Assam, by and large reflecting the cautious policy adopted by the central government, tried to tread a middle path by agreeing to implement the official language policy. However, the political situation obtaining in Assam during that time was not conducive to a smooth change over. In Chapter V an attempt is made to explore the causes that led to widespread

riots between the Assamese and the Bengali communities in the state over the official language issue. Immigration and its impact on economy, unemployment problem, stagnant economic development etc., have been touched upon. Attention has also been paid to the role of political parties and the press on the language issue. Finally, chapter VI carries the summary and conclusion of the study.

In analysing this problem, the attempt throughout the work has been on analysis and interpretation rather than a mere descriptions of events. The main difficulty in studying this problem has been the lack of sufficient data. Although, a number of scholarly works have been done on the history of Assam (Ref. Gait 1963; Dutta 1958; Guha 1977; Political History of Assam, Vol. I, II and III 1971, 1978, 1980) practically no work has been done specifically on the Language Issue of the state. Most of the works which are available on this problem hardly give any analytical picture of the entire situation. Critical Days of Assam by K.C. Barua, Assam's Language Question by M. Neog and Social Tension in India by G.S. Ghurye - all these books are no doubt helpful to follow the various incidents chronologically but these works left much to be desired in examining the problem objectively.

To circumvent the inadequacy of relevant data and information and to gain a better insight into this vexed

problem, the author had carried out personal interviews and written communications with a large cross-section of the society representing different walks of public life. The comments and ideas received through some of the questionnaires have gone a long way in moulding the perspective of the author on the problem. Occupational data would have helped in establishing the true base of the Assamese - Bengali rivalry, but it is not available separately in the Census Reports. However, with all the noted shortcomings and limitations in getting the required data, we have tried to make an objective study of the problem insofar as practicable. There will always be scope for bringing to a clearer light the nuances of the Assamese-Bengali divide.

The present study may be considered as an attempt to understand the complex question of language in the state paving the way for more intensive researches on the issue. In spite of the author's best efforts to present a reasoned account based on available data and records, there may be gaps in knowledge and weakness in theory that are inherently linked with the nature and complexity of the problem under study. For errors of fact or interpretation, if any, the responsibility lies, of course, with the author. However, a sincere attempt has been made to present a coherent study of the problem as the author sees it.

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CHAPTER - I

THE PROBLEM : THEORY AND HISTORY

Language is the most important means of human communication. Language presupposes both logically and factually the interaction among people. Language can be a great unifying as well as a divisive force. The linguistic questions assume a crucial importance in the shaping of the political structure of India given its multilingual nature.

India is a sub-continent extending for about two thousand kilometres from north to south and east to west. With an area almost equal to Europe without Russia, a population highest in the world next to China and a geographical position turning it into a meeting ground throughout history for people of diverse racial and demographic origin, it is hardly to be wondered that there should be great multiplicity and variety in the forms of speech in this country. In such a historical setting, the problem of language in India is beset with complexity as also apparent difficulty. Language being an important constituent of nationality and culture, there

cannot be any genuine solution to the problem without proper recognition of the urge for self-expression of the different cultural entities that constitute the complex reality of India.

The Indian linguistic scene is dominated by a variety of languages. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India had put the total number of languages at 872 covering all the known language families.¹ The unique feature of the linguistic scene is the fact that there are over a dozen different languages each spoken by large number of people.² Some languages are more or less highly developed possessing a rich literature and a fairly long literary tradition; while there are also some languages that are comparatively newcomers in the field of literature. Then again, there are some languages which do not possess any written literature or even a script of their own. Thus, India is a veritable 'tower of Babel' and the multilingual nature of the land affects every aspect of Indian life.³ It creates social cleavages in addition to those created by religion and caste. It gives linguistic foundation to regional as opposed to national loyalties. However, multilingualism in itself is not a sufficient cause of

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1. Grierson, G.A., Linguistic Survey of India, 20 vols, Calcutta, 1903-28.
 2. Map showing distribution of major linguistic groups in India, Fig. 11.
 3. Lamb, B.P., India : A World in Transition, U.C.A., 1963.

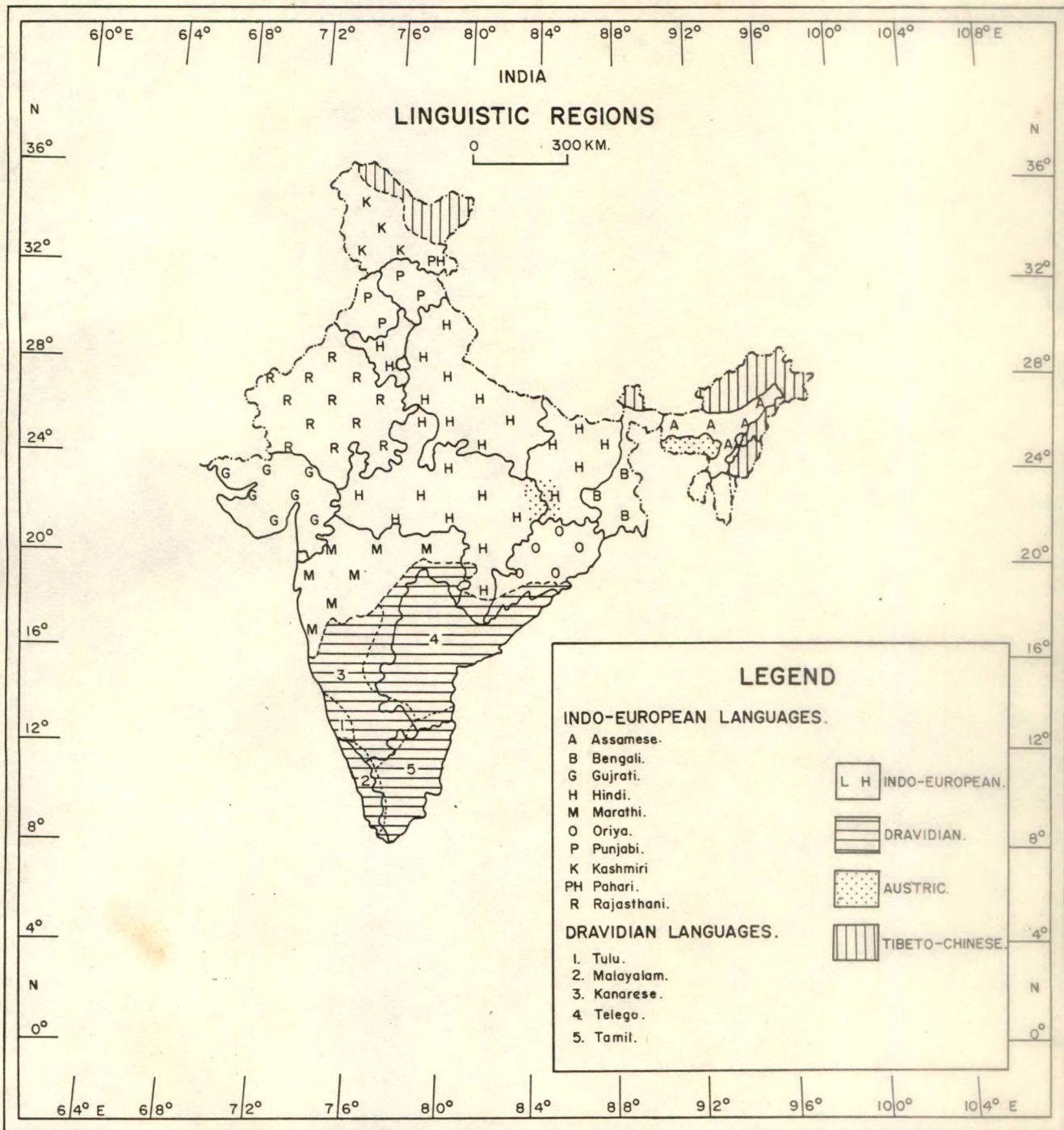


FIG. I.I

language conflict in India. The examples of Belgium (the French and Wallons), Canada (the French Canadians and the Anglo-Canadians) and Sri Lanka (the Sinhalese and the Tamils) show that only two languages are enough to engender under certain circumstances strained relations between their speakers. On the other hand, where all major languages are on an equal official footing as in Switzerland, the presence of several language groups may not necessarily be divisive.⁴ Similarly, although it is far less widespread than Hindi, English is less divisive as an official language in India because all groups are more or less equally touched by it. The Soviet Union has even larger problems with ethnic and linguistic jingoism. The Soviet Union has over one hundred 'nationalities' twenty two of which comprise more than a million people. Despite all hopes that these nationalities will wither away under the impact of communism, nothing of the sort has happened. They were held under effective control by a resort to repressive measures. With Gorbachev preaching Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring) the nationalities are baring their teeth and coming out into the open. That will explain the recent demonstrations in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, believed to be the largest since 1917, and the riots in the industrial town of Sumgait in

4. Giglioli, P.P. (ed.), *Language and Social Context*, Great Britain, 1975.

neighbouring Azerbaijan. Though all local languages are encouraged, the study of Russian is a must in all states and that undoubtedly created problems, apart from problems of assimilation.

India witnessed violent forms of linguistic conflict on several occasions in connection with one or the other aspect of the problem. An examination of this question from historical perspective suggests that the language issue cannot be treated in isolation from the national question and more fundamentally from the correlation of class forces existing in any social formation. The national question is first and foremost a question of solving vital problems of social development, abolishing national oppression and inequality, eliminating obstacles to the liberation of nations and assuming freedom for the development of people including achievement of equality in national relations. In its widest sense, the national question embraces the entire complex of relationship between ethnic communities and above all between nations that have already been established, and those in the process of formation, their economic, social, judicial, political, linguistic, ideological and psychological manifestations.⁵ Language, therefore, is part of a wider social question and needs to be studied in wider context.

5. Lazarev, M.S. (ed.), *Oriental Countries Today* (New Delhi, Calcutta, 1976).

We would examine in this chapter the language problem of Assam in the context of different facets of the national question in India thus giving it a deeper perspective. The focus would be on (i) the historical stage through which the national problem in India has evolved, (ii) the multinational character of the Indian Union and (iii) the uneven development of regions inhabited by various nationalities.

Nation and Nationalities as Historical Categories:

It is necessary to consider the linguistic issues in the framework of the categories of nations, nationalities and national minorities. The nation is a reality. As a form of human community it evolves historically on a given territory. It develops a common language, a common culture and builds up a common economic structure.⁶ Different social classes in their totality comprise the nation. The nation may follow in its formations two possible lines of evolution. It may arise out of a numerically preponderant single nationality or it may grow out of several distinct nationalities. Nationalities, on the other hand, are separate linguistic, cultural, ethnic formations which existed prior to capitalism and continue to exist for an indefinite period under capitalism. Nationality thus comprises predominantly a form of pre-capitalist communities

6. Lenin, V.I., Collected Works, Vol. 20, Moscow, 1964.

6

on whose disintegration the modern capitalist society was crystallized. If these still continue to exist under capitalism it is either due to the backward nature of the capitalism or the long duration of pre-capitalist survivals. Thus, it is clear that nationality in its pure form belongs to the epoch of localized economies. The development of commerce and industry breaks down the barriers in a given nationality and between various nationalities of a given country. In a developed 'late' capitalist society, nationalities still continue to exist as a mere community of descent and language. Therefore, the issues pertaining to nations, nationalities and national minorities in their modern context, including the right of self-determination of nations are the products of capitalist development first in the west and then onwards in the rest of the world.

The important requirement of a scientific theory in investigating any social question is that the question should be examined within definite historical limits and if it refers to a particular country (e.g., the national programme for a given country) due account should be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch.⁷ First of all, it implies that a clear distinction must be drawn between the two periods of capitalism which differ radically from

7. CARR, E.H., The Bolshevnik Revolution, Vol. (1), Great Britain, 1973, Stalin, J.V. Works, Vol.2, Moscow, 1953.

8. Lenin, V.I., Selected Works, Vol.I, Moscow, 1950.

each other as far as the national movement is concerned. On the one hand, there is the period of the collapse of feudalism and absolutism, the period of the formation of the bourgeois democratic society and state, when the national movement for the first time become mass movement and in one way or the other draw all classes of the population into politics through the press, participation in representative institutions etc. On the other hand, there is the period of fully formed capitalist states with a long established constitutional regime and a highly developed antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, a period that may be called the eve of the collapse of capitalism.⁹ The national question is, therefore, very much a democratic question and needs to be considered in their historical, socio-economic and cultural context. The struggle for national rights is identified more and more often with the movements for a fundamental solution of acute social problems. This is quite logical because conflict between nationalities today are rooted in the capitalist system itself in its exploitative class essence. These developments are borne out by Lenin's analysis, 'Imperialism does not halt the development of capitalism and the growth of democratic tendencies among the masses of the population. On the contrary, it accentuates the antagonism between their democratic aspirations and the anti-democratic

9. *ibid.*

tendency of the trust',¹⁰ The growth of the national liberation movement is linked to this process, which is further assisted by the emergence and growing strength of the social system. Among the factors¹¹ underlying the aggravation of the nationalities question are the general crisis of capitalism, the sharpening of existing social contradictions and the emergence of new ones in capitalist countries, the involvement in political life of the intermediate social strata, the increasingly uneven socio-economic development of regions and the integrative processes in the capitalist economy that are breaking up long standing national ethnic ties, creating new and aggravating old nationalities problem. In the concrete conditions prevailing in an individual country, the operation of these factors is peculiar and often highly specific. For example, in Belgium we find two groups, the Flemings and Wallons, whose economic and cultural development had proceeded along totally different lines, were united in a single state. For a long time, the heterogeneity of the Belgian population was practically of no consequence for the reason that when the state was proclaimed none of the regions had a national movement, seeking to set up a state structure¹² of its own. In India, we find that the national problem remains unsolved leading to

10. Lenin, V.I., Collected Works, Vol. 23, Moscow, 1964.

11. World Marxist Review, Vol.23, No.3, March, 1980.

12. Ibid.

the emergence of various problems like communalism, separatism, linguistic chauvinism, provincialism and regionalism. Therefore a concrete analysis of the Indian situation from the historical perspective is essential.

Colonialism and uneven development:

India was integrated into the world capitalist economy in a subordinate colonial position during the nineteenth century. It emerged as a classic colony playing a crucial role in the development of British capitalism. The colonial Indian economy was very much a part of world capitalism which needs to be viewed as a single world-wide system of which colonial economics were an integral part. The historical process that led to this colonial integration or this pattern of modernization inevitably led to the underdevelopment of India.¹³

The British administration of India systematically destroyed all the fibres and foundations of Indian society. Its land and taxation policy ruined India's village economy and substituted for it the parasitic landowner and money-lender. Its commercial policy destroyed the Indian artisans and created slums of the Indian cities filled with millions of starving and diseased paupers. Its economic policy broke down whatever beginnings that were of an indigenous industrial development and promoted the proliferations of

13. Chandra, B., Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, New Delhi, 1979.

speculators, petty-businessmen, agents and precarious livelihood in the meshes of a decaying society.¹⁴ Thus, British rule consolidated itself by creating new classes and vested interests who were tied up with that rule and whose privileges depended on its continuance. There were the land-owners and the princes, and there were a large number of subordinate members of the services in various departments of the government from the patwari, the village headman upwards. To all these methods must be added the deliberate policy, pursued throughout the period of British rule, of creating divisions among Indians, of encouraging one group at the cost of the other.¹⁵ It is thus a fair assessment of the effects on India of two centuries of domination by Western capitalism as well as a correct analysis of the causes of India's present uneven development. As Nehru put it, 'Nearly all our major problems today have grown up during British rule and as a direct result of British policy; the princes, the minority problems, various vested interests - foreign and Indian, the lack of industry and the neglect of agriculture, the extreme backwardness in the social services and above all, the tragic poverty of the people.'¹⁶

The policy of economic development pursued by the colonialists created serious regional imbalances which generated political tensions of various kinds. Growth of trade and

14. Baran, P., *The Political Economy of Growth*, U.S.A., 1976.

15. Nehru, J., *The Discovery of India*, New York, 1946.

16. *Ibid.*

commerce in colonial India meant the creation of jobs and educational opportunities at the lower level at coastal centres like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. This led to the emergence of some industries in these enclaves and hence, to the development of a merchant capitalist class which started investing in industry. This gave these regions a lead start over other regions, before independence was achieved. Today, these disparities have been accentuated and exacerbated by the later uneven development of India.

Rise of Indian Capitalist class:

The Indian capitalist class, in the strictly modern sense, arose during British period. It arose as a consequence of a number of measures adopted by the British rulers to transform India into a colony to subserve their own interests. When capitalism developed in historically belated countries like India, it developed under different and more unfavourable conditions from those in the pioneering capitalist countries. The first capitalist countries subordinated other societies to facilitate their own development by gaining access to the markets and resources of these societies. The societies thus subordinated, like India, faced this same process as a barrier to their own capital accumulation process. In contrast to what was the case in the first capitalist countries the Indian capitalist class found it difficult even to get access to its own home market against the established competition of British

industry. British imperialism took away resources that could have sustained India's own development and the colonial state neglected to provide the necessary overheads for competitive industrialisation.¹⁷

The Indian capitalist class realized that imperialist economic exploitation of India blocked their long term growth and it opposed all the three major channels through which the metropolis extracted India's social surplus. Those channels were - domination of the Indian market, investment of foreign capital both industrial and finance, and direct surplus expropriation through control over public finance and in particular through high military expenditure for imperial purposes. Therefore, the Indian capitalist class gave broad support to the nationalist movement against imperialism and it also formed its organisations to project its specific problems. They sensed that the people of India as a whole desired freedom from imperialist bondage. It was also realized that their conditions of life and their contradiction with imperialism would propel their nationalist political activity irrespective of the participation of the capitalist class. The basic task before the capitalist class was, therefore, to remain relevant to such a basic and powerful social force as nationalism and try to establish its hegemony over the programme, organisation, strategy and the

17. Davy, B., The Economic Development of India, New York, 1975.

pattern of struggle.¹⁸ This two fold relationship of the capitalist class with imperialism led it to work for a non-revolutionary pattern of anti-imperialist struggle. Thus the struggle was to be based on the strategy of struggle (pressure), compromise and stage by stage advance towards a bourgeois nation state¹⁹ and independent economic development.

Nationalism:

Indian nationalism is a modern phenomenon. The roots of modern nationalism are found in the critique levelled by the emerging Indian intelligentsia during the second half of the nineteenth century against the inherent limitations of the colonial economy, society and political structure as a whole. It was the breadth of this critique and the creation of a humanist vision which in fact had much in common initially with the developing liberal-democracy in Britain thus enabling the nationalists and their party - the Congress in India, to relate to diverse social groups up and down the economic ladder to influence them, and mobilize them in the movement for winning political independence. In this respect, Indian nationalism was never narrowly based.

Indian nationalism came into conflict with the rule of British Capitalism supported by Indian feudal remnants

18. Chandra, Bipan, The Indian Capitalist Class and Imperialism before 1947, Contemporary Asia Quarterly, Vol.5, No.3, 1975.

19. Ibid.

and other reactionary forces. This was in contrast to the nationalism of the English and the French peoples, who came into conflict with their own indigenous feudal classes.²⁰ This was one of the basic peculiarities of Indian nationalism. The basic colonial character of British rule and its harmful impact on the lives of the Indian people led to the rise and development of a powerful anti-imperialist movement in India. This movement was a national movement because it embraced within its fold all the different classes and groups of Indian society. These classes and groups had their own contradictions with imperialism which brought them together in a common national movement.

The basic political objectives of the nationalist leaders were, (a) to help the process of unifying Indian people into a nation, (b) to promote the growth of modern capitalist economy, (c) to create an all India national leadership and (d) to generalize form and crystallize an anti-imperialist ideology and in the end to create a broad all India national movement. In this process they undertook an analysis of the basic character of British colonialism in India and spread their understanding of its exploitative character among the Indian people. An important

20. Desai, A.R., Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Bombay, 1976.

section of the Indian leadership at no stage believed in the benevolent intentions of the rulers. Dadabhai Naoroji, for example, resolved it by calling British rule in India un-British.²¹ Moreover, the newspapers²² invariably gave a more open, direct and bold expression to the feelings of the rank and file of national leadership than the public men did, and played an important part in developing and moulding popular nationalist sentiments on economic questions and their political bearings.

The nationalist leaders adopted a national approach towards economic development. Their total concern was with the general welfare of the community and they, therefore, tried to represent the interest of all classes of Indian society. They felt that while they were engaged in the struggle for getting economic justice and equality for the entire nation they should not take up the fight for justice and equality between classes. They decided therefore not to take up any activity which would tend to divide the people at a time when the need was to unite them into a nation. This perspective, however correct, made them ignore

21. Chandra, Bipan, The Problems of Poverty and Indian National Leadership 1880-1905, Enquiry, Vol.1, No. 2, Monsoon, 1964.

22. Tilak, L. edited, The Kesari, Bombay, 1896.

other aspects of contemporary reality.²³ Initially, the nationalist movement did not have a wide social base. The area of its influence was limited mainly to the urban educated Indians. However, with the emergence of Gandhi, the character of Indian national movement changed with a new ideology and a mass social base. Gandhi was firmly rooted in the Indian soil and it was from this fact that he drew immense strength. The masses, the peasants and workers came into the national movement primarily in the Gandhian era. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the growth of national movement. It is also equally important to note that the capitalists as a class also joined the movement and came to support it actively, though primarily financially, during this era. Thus, Indian national movement was a multi-class movement of the Indian people against imperialism. The Congress before independence was not a party of the bourgeoisie but a platform, an open-ended organisation heading a popular movement, in which different classes and different shades of political and economic opinion could contend for hegemony.

The Problem of National Minorities

The problem of nationalities and minorities was evolved in the course of Indian national movement. It is

23. Chandra, Bipin. Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India, New Delhi, 1969.

not a unique problem of Indian nationalism. Such a problem did emerge and demanded solution in the history of a number of modern people such as the Austrians, the Hungarians, and the Russians. However, it is not that every modern people was confronted by their historical development with the problem of nationalities. For example, the English, and the French did not have to confront such a problem on the road to their consolidation as nations. In contrast to this, the peoples of the East European countries like the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Balkans, and others, had to confront this problem. Specific historical reasons are responsible for this distinction.²⁴

It is interesting to study how the problem of Indian national minorities emerged and came to the forefront of Indian nationalist politics. The growth of nationalism was an uneven process among different communities and provinces in India. The impact of British rule as well as the penetration of new forces did not take place at the same pace throughout the country. At the same time, the conditions which led to the rise of political and national consciousness matured unevenly among different parts and communities. Some parts of India and some communities became politically conscious earlier than others. As a result, the development of the national movement was paralleled by the growth of independent political movements of such socio-religious categories as the Muslims, the depressed classes,

24. Desai, n. 20.

the Sikhs and the non-Brahmins and of such provincial social groups speaking the same language and having the same culture as the Tamils, the Telegus, the Malayalis, the Kanarese, the Marathis, the Oriyas, the Gujraties, the Punjabis, the Sindhis, the Bengalis, the Biharis, the Assamese and others. As group awareness developed among these groups of people, they felt a yearning for a corporate life unhampered by the existing provincial division, which did not correspond to linguistic groups but were created mainly for administrative convenience. The politicising role of language was felt not only by those who benefited from linguistic expansion but by those who were threatened by it. The Bengalis, the Marathis and the Tamils were surrounded by submerged linguistic groups whose advancement and distinctive claims were not taken care of. The Assamese, the Oriyas and the Biharis eventually expressed their resentment against the Bengalis by urging the claims of their own languages. Similarly, in Andhra the Telegus followed the same tactic against the claims of the Tamils; the intrusions of Marathi were denounced by Hindi speakers in the Central Provinces and the Kanarese-speakers in the south of Bombay provinces. The social dominance of Bengali speaking people in Assam, Orissa, Chota Nagpur and parts of Bihar²⁵ was reflected in the dominance of their language. Although these areas were backward in the new education and professional training, they came

25. Seal, A., The Emergence of Indian Nationalism, New York 1971.

slowly to produce their own educated people. Thereby, they attempted to redress the balance by asserting the claims for introduction of their own languages in administration and law courts. Bengali patriotism, and pride in language came to be challenged by the patriotism of the speakers of Assamese, Oriya and Bihari. For example, the enlightened section of the Assamese educated in Calcutta brought out their own literary journal in 1889 named 'Jonaki' which stressed the linguistic identity²⁶ of Assamese. 'A Few Remarks on Assam',²⁷ by Ananda Ram Dhekiel Phukan affirmed the separate identity of the Assamese language against the expansionist claims of the Bengali.

However, the question of linguistic re-organisation of provinces received scant attention during the British rule. The concrete issue of linguistic re-organisation made its first official appearance in the 1917 Calcutta Congress session. The Congress then held the view that the maintenance of non-linguistic administrative divisions by the British government was arbitrary and a part of the policy of 'divide and rule' and it was argued by some of the prominent Congress leaders that 'language in this country stood for and represented culture, race, history, individuality and finally a sub-nation'.²⁸

26. Sarmah, S.N., *Asamiya Sahityar Itibritta*, Assam, 1959.

27. Mills, A.J., *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854.

28. Harrison, S., *The Challenge to Indian Nationalism*, *Foreign Affairs*, 34, April, 1956.

It was imperative for the Congress under Gandhi, if it had to become a mass organisation, to channelise the linguistic nationality sentiment and use the national languages as vehicles of political communication and propoganda. The Congress, all through the period of the freedom movement, never formulated a concrete plan of action but contented itself in assuaging nationality sentiments by merely passing resolutions and accepting the principle of linguistic basis for recognition²⁹ of different provinces. Adoption of linguistic principle for reorganisation of the administrative and political divisions marked a turning point for the Congress and transformed it from a middle class assembly to a mass organisation by deriving support from different regions and building up the national movement by harnessing the forces of regionalism.³⁰ But later on limitations were imposed on such a principle by the Congress itself leaving it to public sentiments to grow in course of time.

Even after the achievement of independence, the government at the centre continued to resist the demand for the linguistic reorganisation of states for a long time. Therefore, in the post-independence period, many hitherto

29. Prakash, K., Language and Nationality Politics in India, Madras, 1973.

30. Ghose, S., Political Ideas and Movements in India, Calcutta, 1975.

backward or less developed minorities become conscious of their rights and have put forward claims for the early recognition of their distinct entity. The State Reorganisation Commission³¹ with some hesitation, had accepted the principles of linguistic states. Although the acceptance of the principle of linguistic self determination was not officially acknowledged, India was divided into fourteen states that subsequently increased to twenty five states most of which embody a cultural and linguistic identity.

The principle of linguistic states has no doubt some inherent inadequacies. Historically, the implicit acceptance of the principle ended divisive language conflicts in some states, while setting into motion new conflicts in other states. In states that were relatively culturally homogeneous or where the rates of social and economic transformation kept up with the assimilative capacity of dominant cultures the creation of linguistic states resulted in resolution of language conflicts within the states. However, in culturally heterogeneous states and where social transformation ran ahead of assimilative capacities of dominant cultures, linguistic states only gave a boost to new conflicts.³² Linguistic considerations

31. Report of the States Reorganisation Commission, Delhi, 1955.

32. Baruah, S., Lessons of Assam, Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, Feb 15, 1986.

apart, there were also other forces at work which have been given concession in some cases in course of time.

Multinational character

India is a multinational state. It has various nationalities marked out by language and culture. For example, Tamil, Telegu, Malyalam, Merathi, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Bengali, Assamese etc. There are variations in the degree of nationality formations dependent on the respective class formations within the nationalities themselves. The multinationality problem in India is further complicated by the existence of a number of castes, religions and ethnic groups.

Though India is a multinational state just as Russia or China, the nationality question has assumed different forms in India. The Indian situation is different due to different historical position. Since India was a British colony for several centuries, imperialism itself had become a great hurdle for development of nations in this country; that is why the national consciousness of those nationalities has developed as a part of the anti-imperialist consciousness. Moreover, the historical circumstances under which capitalism arose and developed in India brought in their wake a complex uneven development of nationalities and regions. All parts of India and all Indian nationalities did not come under British rule at one and the same point of time. Nor were they at the same stage of socio-economic development. This

unevenness left its imprint on the manifestation of nationalism at various levels, both in terms of chronology and in terms of the emotional content and identity. This uneven development is inseparably tied to the entrenched existence of backward relations of production of the Indian society and the most retrograde survivals of the feudal past. The uneven development of the various regions inhabited by the nationalities produce social and economic tensions between the different regions and the centre. This problem gets further complicated in the process of economic development. One of the most striking experiences of planned development in India has been that economically backward areas have gained little from planning. In many states, though the development effort has increased in every successive plan period, its benefit has percolated more to the already developed areas. The failure of the planning process developed economic imbalances between states, regions and sub-regions. State wise per capita income at constant prices, although not an adequate indicator, would fairly indicate the trend of economic growth in states (table 1). It is evident from the table-1 that by the ranking method the states that occupy the last five positions, viz. Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh with the exception of Karnataka, continued to occupy the same positions from 1960-61 to 1970-71. While Bihar continued to have the same per capita income during the period, Rajasthan and Orissa showed even a

Table-11: Statewise Per Capita Income at Constant Prices : 1960-1961 to 1970-71

Name of the States	1960 - 1961		1970 - 1971	
	Per Capita Income	Index All India=100	Per Capite Income	Index All India = 100
Maharashtra	399 (1)	128.7	424 (4)	121.3
Gujarat	338 (2)	125.2	525 ⁺ (3)	122.5
Punjab	376 (3)	121.3	470 (1)	135.4
Tamil Nadu	344 (4)	111.0	389 (5)	112.1
Haryana	327 (5)	105.5	440 ⁺ (2)	126.8
West Bengal	313 (6)	101.0	339 (6)	97.7
Andhra Pradesh	291 (7)	93.9	300 (9)	86.5
Jammu and Kashmir	287 (8)	92.6	324 ⁺⁺ (7)	93.4
Kerala	263 (9)	84.8	291 ⁺⁺ (10)	83.9
Madhya Pradesh	255 (10)	82.3	267 (14)	76.9
Assam	254 (11)	81.9	285 ⁺ (11)	82.1
Orissa	251 (12)	71.0	249 ⁺⁺ (15)	71.8
Rajasthan	247 (13)	79.7	270 (13)	77.8
Uttar Pradesh	247 (13)	79.7	272 (12)	78.4
Karnataka	242 (14)	78.1	305 (8)	87.9
Bihar	216 (15)	69.7	216 ⁺	62.2
All India	310	100	347	100

Notes: Figures in brackets indicate ranks of the states

⁺ Figure for the year 1969-70

⁺⁺ Figure for the year 1968-69

Source: S. Sastarajan, 'Budget in Relation to the National Development Conference, 27, March, 1970, pp. 29-33.

decline in the real income and Uttar Pradesh and Assam showed a marginal improvement. But all these states are trailing behind the all-India average per capita income of Rs. 347. . . The absolute dependent position of the states on the centre has no doubt hampered balanced regional development.

In India the problems of national unity like casteism, linguistic division, the position of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes etc. have been more and more complex. In fact, it broke out on many of these issues like the separatist Naxalite movement, the official language movement in Assam, the language movement in Bihar etc. These conflicts seem to function within the realm of ideas and cultural pattern. Closer investigation, however, reveals that behind the apparent caste, religious and linguistic differences, economic causes are the determining factors. It has been observed that vested interests are fanning the flames of religious, communal, linguistic and regional susceptibilities for their own partisan ends. As a major task the democratic movement in India is confronted with is to quieten the tension, restore harmony on these issues and to concentrate attention on the burning economic and political demands. These problems are related to the nature of the Indian socio-economic formation and to the dialectical relationship to the base and super structure. Keeping this in mind, the present study relates to the problem of language in Assam. This is one of the significant issues in the process of political development in India.

The Problem

Assam presents a unique fusion of different linguistic and racial elements. For reasons of a historical nature dating back to the early days of the Company Raj, induction of Bengali elements to the administration in Assam gave rise to conflicts between the Assamese and the Bengalis on issues related to the use of the language as a medium of instruction and language of the courts as well as University. The present study is designed to focus the dynamics of the relationships between Assamese, the language spoken by the majority of the people in the state, and Bengali, the language of an important linguistic minority in the state. The pattern of linguistic conflict in each state in India is reflected not only in the number of language groups and their relative size but also in the degree of relatedness and distinction among them. Historical reasons apart, the tagging of Bengali speaking Cachar district to the Assamese speaking Brahmaputra Valley within the same state has further complicated the problem. This provided, as it historically did in most parts of India, a specific area in which politics could be manipulated. This study is an attempt to examine this political scenario based on the official language question.

CHAPTER - II

ORIGINS OF THE LANGUAGE PROBLEM IN ASSAM

The Question of official language for the state of Assam had engaged the minds of the people for a number of years since independence. Several times it was raised on the floor of the assembly and was frequently discussed in the press and on other platforms. During the last few years several states in India decided the question of their respective official languages and therefore, this question naturally assumed importance in Assam as well. The historical, socio-economic background of Assam needs to be studied in order to understand the problem in its proper perspective. An attempt has been made in this chapter to trace the identifiable factors responsible for the origin and growth of the language problem in Assam.

The state of Assam is located in the north-eastern part of the Indian Union, between 23° north and 27° north latitude and $89^{\circ}46'$ east and $97^{\circ}4'$ east longitude. It is bordered on the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Towards its east and south lie Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya. In its western boundary lie West Bengal, Tripura and Bangladesh. By virtue of its geographical

situation, Assam occupies a strategic position in the political map of India. With an area of 78,523 sq. Km., Assam represents 2.39 per cent of the total land area of the country. The landmass of the state is characterised by its division into 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 centre which surround the Assam plains. The state now has a population of more than twenty million with a density of over 260 persons per sq.km.

Assam presents a unique fusion of different racial and linguistic elements. Rarely in the world is the composition of population as diverse as in this region. 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.

Pre Colonial Period

Prior to the advent of British rule, Assam was ruled by Ahoms, an off-shoot of the Tai or the great Shan stock of south east Asia. Hundreds of them, who belonged to the main wave of immigrants from the southern part of China, ultimately crossed the Patkai hills at the beginning of the 12th century

and with Sukapha¹ as their head settled down in the plains of Assam. They did not meet much resistance² from the local people belonging to such communities as Chutiyas, Barahis and Kacharis.³ They conquered the local tribes one after another. By the end of the 15th century, the Ahoms became the dominant power in Assam. Their power and prosperity reached its zenith during the rule of King Rudra Singha (1696-1714). The Ahoms ruled in Assam for a little less than six hundred years. In the 18th century, the Kingdom was greatly weakened by internal jealousy and dissension. Civil war⁴ broke out at the end of the 17th century. Taking advantage of the dissensions and intrigues in the Ahom royal family and among the nobility, the Burmese led several invasions into the country between 1816-1824. The Burmese invasion at the end of the Ahom rule was the greatest catastrophe for the Assamese people. As a result of inhuman brutality inflicted in them, the

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1. Dutta, K.N., Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam, Gauhati, 1969.
 2. Gait, S.A., A History of Assam, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1926.
 3. Bhuyan, S.K., Studies in the History of Assam, Gauhati, 1965.
 4. Civil war that struck at the roots of the Ahom Monarchy came in the form of popular uprising against the Monarchy. The Moamria setra gave the leadership in this uprising. For details see, Borpujari, H.K., *Assam in the Days of Company*, Gauhati, 1960.

people of Assam valley fled to the hills, to Cachar, to Manipur, and the whole region became depopulated; in addition, thousands of Assamese were taken away as captives. Assam gradually passed into the British hands in 1826 at the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese war.⁵

The Assamese society, prior to the coming of the British, was tribal-feudal in structure. The Indian system of feudalism could never infiltrate deeply into major parts of Assam and did not pose a challenge to the Ahom system of government. Hinduism being the dominant religion, the traditional division of the society into different categories of caste existed. Consequently, the dominance of the upper caste over the lower caste continued to prevail. Over and above this, the vast majority was tied to the upper caste with feudal obligations. They had to serve the nobility either in the capacity as paiks⁶ or as laguas or slaves.⁷ These people, the commoners, the mass of the population other than the Brahmins, the ruling nobility and those Kayasthas and Kalitas who served as spiritual guides to the people who

5. Banerjee, A.C., The Eastern Frontier of British India, Calcutta, 1964.

6. The Paiks were the manual servants for three months in a year and enjoyed rent-free tenure in return of such services to the state.

7. The slaves (or Laguas) were allotted to the royal officers as personal attendants, originally recruited amongst the prisoners of wars. For details refer Gogoi L., Assamese society in the 18th century, paper presented in the U.G.C. Seminar on Society in North East India, Dibrugarh University, March, 1978.

had no separate entity as individuals and no privileges except to serve their masters. In between the privileged nobles and the labouring paiks there was a stratum of people to which the roots of the present day middle-class may be traced. This group consisted of the junior officers like Hazarikas and Boras who formed a separate social group. They were denied the privileges enjoyed by the nobles, but unlike the paiks, they were exempted from doing compulsory state labour. This Assamese social structure did not change⁸ radically with the introduction of foreign rule.

Development Under Colonial Period

The period from 1826 was a formative epoch in the history of Assam. It marked not only the end of the independent and powerful Ahom monarchy but ushered in a new regime of foreign domination with attendant changes. The East India Company annexed lower Assam⁹ and tried to establish its hegemony in Upper Assam¹⁰ through a puppet King named Purander Singh. That experiment having failed, the company annexed the territory and placed it under the

8. Deka, K., Structural changes during the British regime, The North Eastern Research Bulletin, Vol. IV, 1973.

9. Lower Assam comprised of the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong.

10. Upper Assam includes the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur only.

Bengal administration. Assam was administered as a part of Bengal during the period 1826-1873. In 1874, Assam was constituted into a separate province with the two Bengal districts of Sylhet and Cachar under a Chief Commissioner. A new reorganisation took place in 1905, and that was to have a lasting influence on the attitude of the Assamese towards migrants from the neighbouring areas of East Bengal.¹¹ Few more Bengal districts including Jalpaiguri were tagged to Assam and a new province under the name of Eastern Bengal and Assam was constituted under a Lieutenant Governor. The partition of Bengal displeased both Assam and Bengal and had to be annulled in December 1911 after which Assam again reverted to the status of a Chief Commissioner's province. Under the Reform's Act of 1919, Assam became a Governor's province. Demands for the transfer of the remaining two Bengal districts viz., Sylhet and Cachar (pleins) were made again and again by both Assam and Bengal, but the authorities refused to give effect to this popular demand.¹² These new boundaries were to remain intact until

11. Weiner, M., *Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton University Press, 1978.

12. This led to a large number of Bengalis to give up the hope of getting these districts re-transferred to Bengal and move on the line of converting the province of Assam itself into a Bengali majority province and constitute a Greater Bengal by importing Bengali immigrants and propagating Bengali language and culture. Many of them even argue that the Assamese language itself is a dialect of the Bengali. Refer, Barua, H., *Reflections on Assam-cum-Pakistan, Gauhati, 1944.*

the partition of India in 1947. The reconstitution of Assam by bringing in large Bengali speaking areas as also the introduction of English educated Bengali clerks may be said to have marked the beginning of the language problem in Assam. However, for a proper understanding of the problem a look into the British administrative system in Assam is called for.

Colonial Policy

The process of colonization in Assam was aimed at restructuring the society and monetizing its economy to effectively serve the imperial interests. The administration, land revenue and taxation measures were geared to the major task of colonial exploitation.

The process of territorial adjustments and readjustments had its impact on the economic, socio-cultural and demographic aspects of the people of Assam. The most important impact was evidenced on the demographic profile of the Brahmaputra Valley. A study of the one hundred and twenty years of British colonial rule in Assam reveals that they opened the doors of Assam to the immigrants from distant places to suit their own colonial interests. Establishment of the Assam Tea Company was part of the scheme of colonization of wasteland in Assam to provide new avenues for investment of foreign capital. The tea plantation in Assam represented the device of British capitalism

for expropriation of surplus by adopting largely pre-capitalist methods of exploitation backed by colonial state machinery. The British made enormous profits from the tea industry in Assam. With a nominal capital investment, they kept the profit high by paying abnormally low wages to the labourers brought almost as slaves from the poverty stricken areas of Bihar, Orissa, and the Madras presidency. Though initially local Assamese people were employed as labourers, the practice was later discontinued due to signs of rebellion¹³ and discontent among the Assamese labourers in the early years of the plantation days. Immigrant labourers could be exploited and ill-treated without much impact on the surrounding villages. The British administration, therefore, encouraged large scale immigration into Assam tea gardens. The following table¹⁴ reveals that tea plantation

Table 21 : Growth of Population in Assam

Period	Per cent growth
1871 - 1881	9.1
1881 - 1891	9.2
1891 - 1901	5.9
1901 - 1911	14.6
1911 - 1921	12.8
1921 - 1931	15.6
1931 - 1941	15.5

13. Guha, A., Planter Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, New Delhi, 1977.

14. Census of India, 1931, Vol.3, Assam Part I.

labourer has been a dominant factor causing Assam to be the province with fastest growing population in India. Thousands of labourers annually recruited for the plantations from outside provinces, most of whom did not return home, formed the biggest migrant group till then in Assam's population.

The immigration of the Muslim peasants into Assam in the first decade of this century was clearly linked with the growth of jute industry in and around Calcutta by British finance capital. With the expansion of jute trade, the expansion of its cultivation also became an immediate necessity. As the area of jute cultivation in Bengal could no longer be extended, it was thought suitable to grow the same in Assam. As a result the immigration of expert jute cultivators into Assam started. With their superior techniques of cultivation, these immigrant peasants took to cultivate of jute, vegetable and Ahu rice. The acreage under jute in the Brahmaputra Valley increased as a result of this immigration from a little less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-1906 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-1920.¹⁵ Bengal had been the scene of mounting peasant mobilization against the Zamindari oppression and exploitation. Therefore, immigration into Assam from East Bengal

15. Guha, A., Socio-Economic Change in Agrarian Assam, in Chaudhary, M.K. (ed) Trends in Socio-Economic Change in India : 1871-1961, Simla, 1965.

was encouraged under landlord-imperialist machination. This process had two immediate effects. First, it resulted in the ebb, though temporary, of the peasant upsurge in Bengal and second, it created a situation for a conflict between Assamese and Bengali peasants. The exploiting landlords and their colonial overlords viewed that their interests would be served as long as there was disunity among the toiling masses in the name of language, religion and nationality.

The increase in the migration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal between 1911-1921 was characterised by a gradual spread up in the Brahmaputra Valley. At first the cultivators simply spilled over into the nearby district of Goalpara, and as late as 1911, the other districts of the valley contained only a few thousand Bengalis, most of whom were clerks, traders and professional men rather than farmers. But during the 1911-1921 decade, the agricultural expansion was extended far up the valley, and the colonists came to form an appreciable part of population in all the four lower and central districts. Only the two Upper Assam districts (Sibsagar and Lakhimpur) remained practically untouched. Most of the settlers came from a single Bengal district of Mymensingh. The table 2.2 shows how the people from Mymensingh came to constitute an ever larger percentage of the Bengali horde moving into Assam from 1911 to 1931.¹⁶

16. Kingsley, D., The Population of India and Pakistan, Princeton University Press, 1968.

Table 22 : Growth of Bengal-Born Population in Assam, 1911-1931

Year	Born in Bengal		Enumerated in Assam Valley	Per cent of Assam Valley Bengalis born in Mymensingh
	Total	Born in Mymensingh		
1911	194	37	120	30.8
1921	376	172	301	57.1
1931	575	311	496	62.7

Source : Kingsley, D., 1968 (cf. 16).

One added attraction for these immigrants from East Bengal to come to Assam was the Ryotwari land tenure system in Assam which offered them the taste of a refreshing life of peasant proprietorship in sharp contrast to the permanent settlement system of East Bengal. With their descendants, the Bengali settlers represent a large and permanent addition to the population. Most of them, probably 85 per cent, were Muslim, whereas the original population of Assam was predominantly Hindu with a large tribal element. Thus the influx of people from Bengal was a steady process covering the entire Brahmaputra Valley where no waste land was left requiring the cultivators to plough. This migration had created certain impact on the land-use pattern in Assam. By taking advantage of the Ryotwari land system of Assam and the land settlement policy of the British, these immigrant

peasants occupied large tracts of fertile land in the Brahmaputra Valley. This increased pressure on land added another dimension to the social conflict in Assam. As a scholar¹⁷ put it, 'if the immigration continued unrestrained, would not the Assamese be turned into a linguistic minority in their own homeland - the Brahmaputra Valley?' He further added that 'an open door policy towards migrants, therefore, might be unwise from another point of view, particularly so, when in a small linguistic sub-region such migration leads to the danger of the local community being culturally swamped or outnumbered by another dominant or numerous community'.¹⁸

Demands for trading, clerical, skilled and unskilled services invited further immigration of suitable persons belonging to non-indigenous ethnic groups such as Marwari traders and the Bengali professionals. As middlemen, petty traders, professionals and clerks, the immigrants in Assam attained a dominant position in its economy. Assam Administrative Report 1911-1912 thus observes : 'A considerable share of the export trade in mustard oil from Assam was in the hands of a class of traders who are natives of the Kamrup district, but almost all the rest of the export traffic, and nearly the whole of the import traffic of the valley is carried on by Marwari traders community called 'Keyas'. Besides these, there were a few mohammedan merchants from Dacca. It was very remarkable to notice the

17. Guha, A. no. 13.

18. Ibid.

complete mastery over the internal commerce of the valley which these strangers possessed'.¹⁹ The systematic colonisation of Assam made it easy for the British imperialists and later on for indigenous exploiters to administer the state and exploit its natural resources. Infact, ever since the British occupation of Assam, many of the Assamese had to make room for the Bengali tahsilders and various sorts of other amlahs.²⁰ Thus, Assamese culture and tradition began to be affected by a clash with forces coming from Bengal.

Dominance of the Bengali Language

Another plank of imperialist policy in Assam was to suppress local languages and set up artificial boundaries for the sake of a cheap and simplified administration. This policy affected the local middle class very

19. Assam Administrative Report 1911-12, pp. 54-59.

20. The Amlahs were the colonial collaborators and social exploiters and they were the Bengalis who were influential with the government in the early days of the British rule in Assam and as a result, in the matter of language controversy, 'it was generally held that the Amlahs were at the root of all evils' which occasioned the animosity between the two communities - Assamese and Bengali. But as Dr. Barpujari writes ; 'Not merely the Amlahs of Bengal, almost all the officials, high and low, Assamese and non-Assamese, never failed to exploit the situation as best as they could whenever an opportunity presented itself ... it must also be clearly understood that the Amlahs were not the true representatives of the people of Bengal'. Refer, Barpujari, H.K., Assam : In the Days of the Company, Gauhati, 1963.

much. The colonial rulers wanted english educated persons to maintain written documents, files, accounts etc. following the introduction of new rules and regulations relating to general administration and collection of land revenue in Assam. This province came to be occupied by the British nearly seventy years after the establishment of their domination over Bengal. This was how english educated Bengali clerks were brought to Assam by the rulers. The introduction of people from outside the province and the creation of a new set of Amlehls appeared to create a gulf between the government and the governed, and it was officially acknowledged that such a situation was not conducive to efficient administration. To quote Cunningham,²¹ 'The Assamese were slow to adjust themselves to the change and to acquire the education which would fit them to dispense with outside help. The Bengali community grew in numbers and importance. Some settled; others, their service over, turned again home. But whether settlers or sojourners, they maintained their communication with the land of their origin and held themselves as a people apart. And it was natural also that finding the Assamese language closely akin to Bengali they looked on its differentia as mere dialectical variations which ought to yield to what

21. Cunningham, J.R., Report on Assam University Enquiry, Assam Govt. Press, Shillong, 1936.

they considered the more cultivated language of the Calcutta standard. What responsibility attached to them in this matter and what to the inertia of government I do not know, but for nearly half a century after the occupation the Assamese language did not receive official recognition'. The British rulers introduced Bengali in the schools of Assam and as a court language in April 1836 on the ground that it was very difficult and too costly to replace Persian scribes who were on leave or left the service. As expert rulers, the Britishers must have known what they were doing principally for administrative convenience. Apart from administrative convenience, it is possible that the policy of 'divide et impera' had much to do with it. This decision on the language question struck a severe blow to the nascent Assamese nationalism and even to the survival of the Assamese nationality. The realization of the threat to the linguistic identity of the Assamese people brought about a new wave of consciousness among the educated youth of the province.

The Assamese language undoubtedly suffered a setback due to the policies of the rulers. The services of the Bengali became indispensable in the government schools, since local teachers were not available in adequate numbers to impart lessons in Bengali which became the medium of instruction. Thus in Assam, as elsewhere in British India, the establishment of a hierarchy of new officials operating in

a new language opened the way to widespread exploitation both social and economic. As Broomfield²³ points out, 'the initial monopoly of office in almost all the department by the newcomers from Bengal naturally generated ill feeling and deep resentment amongst those for whom hitherto there was no means of livelihood other than government service. The polemic between the Bengali and Assamese language since then had been fairly continuous and symbolizes in many ways the fight between the interest on the one hand of an immigrant and comparatively advanced middle class and on the other hand of an indigenous less advanced and suppressed middle class. In the first decades of this country the Bengali middle class had already produced a big surplus of educated youth who could not hope to be employed in their provincial set up. They sought their fortunes in the neighbouring states of Orissa, Bihar and Assam where their assertion of cultural superiority exacerbated local resentment at their success in finding jobs.'

The Assamese language remained suppressed during the whole period from 1830 to 1871. The enlightened section of the Assamese people strongly opposed the use of Bengali language in Assam. The demand for restoration of Assamese as language of education and that of courts was for the first time voiced by Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan. In his

22. Broomfield, J.H., *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, Barkely, 1968.

'A Few Remarks on Assam', he affirmed the separate identity of the Assamese language against the expansionist claims of the Bengali and thus it became a historic document in the field of Assamese cultural nationalism.²³

The contribution of the Christian Missionaries especially the Americans towards the renaissance of the Assamese literature was indeed unparalleled. In their desire to propagate Christianity in Assam, it became clear to them that in order to successfully develop their religion among the backward classes who were totally ignorant of the English language, it was imperative to take the help of the Assamese language. With this end in view, they made determined efforts to reintroduce the Assamese language. This work of the missionaries brought optimism into the hearts of the educated youths of Assam. Popular resentment over the denial of its rightful status to the Assamese language found expression in various ways. In a written petition submitted by Ananda Kam Dhekial Phukan to Mills, an officer deputed by the Bengal government to report on Assam, he urged, 'the substitution, in the schools, of the Vernacular language in lieu of Bengalee, and the publication of a series of popular works on the different branches of native and European knowledge in the Assamese language.....'²⁴. Mills realized the formidable obstacles which the Assamese people had to face

23. Moffat Mills, A.J., Report on the Province of Assam, Calcutta, 1854.

24. Ibid.

and in his report submitted in 1854, he stated that just as 'an english youth is not taught Latin until he is well founded in English and in the same manner the Assamese should not be taught a foreign language until he knows his own'.²⁵ To strengthen his point he expressed his view in support of the Assamese language, 'the people complain, and in my opinion with much reason, of the substitution of Bengali for the vernacular Assamese. Bengali is the language of the courts, not of their popular books and sastras and there is a strong prejudice to its use. I think we made a great mistake in directing that all business should be transacted in Bengalee and that the Assamese must acquire it'.²⁶ But surprisingly the attitude of the government was one of complete indifference. The enlightened section of the Assamese people did not keep quiet over the issue. In May 1872, Sir George Campbell, the Lt. Governor of Bengal, received a number of petitions²⁷ from different parts of Assam for the introduction of Assamese in Courts and schools. Finally on April 1873, the Lt. Governor recognised the force of Assamese arguments and decided to reinstate Assamese into its rightful place in the schools in

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Assam Commissioner's File No. 471, Assam Secretariat.

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the Brahmaputra Valley subject to the condition that 'when a class of twelve or more boys wished for Bengalee it might be taught separately'.²⁸ The de-recognition of Assamese during British rule naturally caused widespread resentment among the people of Assam. Although, Assamese was recognised as an independent language in 1873, Bengali remained in Assam alongside the Assamese before long resulting in the middle class led movements for (i) adequate share in employment (ii) restoration of the lands under the occupation of the immigrants and (iii) transfer of the Bengali speaking district to Bengal. These issues were basically the by-products of the Assamese-Bengali polemic.

Impact of Bengal Renaissance

The impact of Bengal Renaissance on the life and culture of the Assamese people was very significant. The process which began since the closing years of Ahom rule continued till 19th century. In spite of their grievances against the linguistic domination of Bengali, the Assamese intelligensia was not slow in adopting Bengali culture²⁹ in matters of dress and food habits. Haliram Dhekial Phukan played a key role in this process. He appreciated the true significance of promoting commercial and cultural contacts between the people of Bengal and Assam. He contributed a

28. File No. 1537.G. Education 19.1.1873, Assam Secretariat.

29. Borpujari, H.K. (ed), Political History of Assam, Vol. I, Gauhati, 1977.

number of articles to the leading Bengali periodicals of that period and also wrote his *Assam Buranji* (or *Assam Desher Itihas*) in Bengali. The Bengali periodicals like Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika, and Masik Patrika had wide circulation in Assam.³⁰ Gunabhiram Barua, a pioneer of the new awakening, was attracted towards the Brahmo Samaj even before 1857. Contact with renaissance Bengal profoundly influenced Gunabhiram's life and activities. He was one of these few Assamese to be converted to the Brahmo fold which was having a great spell on Bengal at that time. A few prominent Assamese of the time including Lakhinath Bezbaruah, the doyen of Assamese literature, set up matrimonial relationship with reknown Bengali families of Calcutta. To counteract the evils of westernization even the orthodox section of the Assamese community felt pride in showing their common heritage with their economically advanced neighbours. The western influence on Assam came through the activities of Christian missionaries, mainly the American Baptist, who championed the cause of the Assamese language and under their auspices the first *Assam Buranji* (in Assamese) was published in 1840. The first Assamese news-magazine, Orunodoi was also launched by the American Baptist Mission Press in 1846 and it was quite popular with the new middle class. Infact,

30. Guha, A., Impact of Bengal Renaissance on Assam, 1820-1870, *Indian Social and Economic History Review*, No.5, July, 1968.

they brought about the renaissance in Assamese literature by opening doors to the west. The Missionaries not only liberated the spirit of the Assamese from the bondage of the old world ideas in the domain of thought, they also removed the confines of the language and made it quite suitable for modern use.³¹

Re-awakening in Assam

The awakening of modern political consciousness in Assam can be traced from 1853 onwards. The Assamese press never ceased to protest against the employment of non-Assamese in educational services. With the spread of western ideas, the need was gradually felt for the formation of political association and organisation to ventilate the grievances of the people. Assamiya Bhaser Unnati Sadhani Sabha, although it originated in Calcutta with the object of promoting Assamese language and literature, contributed immensely to arousing a sense of unity and a spirit of patriotism among the Assamese. Branches of the Assamiya Bhaser Unnati Sadhani Sabha were set up in different parts of Assam like Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Newson, Barpeta, Jorhat, North Lakhimpur and Gauhati. The foundation of the Sarbajanik Sabha at Jorhat in 1884 by Jagannath Barua is a landmark in the history of public

31. The Golden Jubilee Volume, Cotton College, Gauhati, 1951-1952.

associations in Assam. It had dawned upon the rising generation that even the high offices in the state could not be a monopoly of the Europeans or non-Assamese, and that of right, the natives of the soil should have the major share in them.³² The sabha also pleaded that due consideration be given to local candidates for appointments in the departments of forest, police, post and telegraphs which were so long the monopoly of the non-Assamese. Language-wise distribution of employees in the Assam Secretariat bears testimony to this fact (Table 23). The interaction with western literature had an invigorating effect on Assamese literature widening its scope and enriching its content. The emergence of the 'Jonaki'³³ in February 1889 ushered in a new era in Assamese literature. As opined by Dimbeswar Neog, the 'Orunudoï' and the 'Jonaki' were practically the organs of the two movements, the former against the usurpation by the Bengalis and the latter for the recognition of the Assamese after her restoration.³⁴ Ambikagiri Roychoudhary through his 'Chetna' and 'Deka Asom'³⁵

32. In a Memorial to the Commissioner on 14 December 1902, the Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha pointed out that as regards the employment of the natives of the soil in the services of their province, the proportion in which they have been employed is much discouraging. See, Assam Secretariat Records, Home A, July 1894, Nos. 185-296.
33. 'Jonaki' an Assamese monthly was the unofficial mouth-piece of the Assamese People.
34. Neog, D., New Light on History of Assamese Literature, Gauhati, 1962.
35. Barua, B.K., Modern Assamese Literature, Gauhati, 1957, Bhuyan, S.K. Studies in the Literature of Assam, Gauhati, 1962.

Table 23 : Employees in Assam Secretariat

Civil Secretariat 1912			Civil Secretariat 1917		
Permanent	-	66	Permanent	-	73
Temporary	-	0	Temporary	-	12
Total	-	66	Total	-	85
European or Anglo Indian	-	3	European or Anglo Indian	-	5
Bengalis of Sylhet	-	21	Bengalis of Sylhet	-	28
Assamese	-	10	Assamese	-	15
Surma Valley Muslim	-	2	Surma Valley Muslim	-	2
Assam Valley Muslim	-	3	Assam Valley Muslim	-	4
Khasi	-	9	Khasi	-	13
Non-domiciled Bengalis	-	10	Non-domiciled Bengalis	-	12
Others	-	2	Others	-	Nil

Source : Dutta Ray, B., Assam Secretariat 1874-1947, Calcutta, 1978.

(two periodicals which he himself edited) contributed largely to build up Assamese national consciousness. Assamese nationalism began to take firm roots and the Assamese middle class undertook the task of awakening self consciousness

among the Assamese community so that through its mobilisation it could be transformed into a nationality to achieve goals of socio-economic, political and cultural significance. The growth of the Assamese press, the birth of Indian Association, Indian national Congress or similar other organisations in other parts of the country convinced the Assamese intelligensia of the necessity of a broad based provincial organisation to represent the wishes and aspiration of their people. The Assam Association founded in 1903 pressed for liberal reforms and practised a politics of persuasion and collaboration. Assamese students studying in Calcutta directly felt the impact of the national movement and therefore the decision was taken to make concerted efforts to form a provincial organisation of the students of Assam dedicated to the cause of the province and the nation.³⁶ The foundation of Assam Chitra Sammilan (1916) was an event of great historic significance. It gave tremendous fillip to literary activities and Assamese culture. It played a pioneering role in rousing political consciousness and associating the province with the mainstream of the growing national movement. Ambika Giri Choudhury founded the Assamiya Samrakshini Sabha in 1920 to propogate the Assamese cause. He began to voice through this organisation demands indicating the rights of the

³⁶. Borpujari, H.K., no. 29.

Assamese people, the rights of the children of the soil, as against aggression of outsiders. The need was felt for a broad based provincial organisation to represent to the government the wishes and aspiration of the people by the Assamese elite. The Assam Association (1903-1920), the Assam Chatra Sammilan (1916) and the Assam Sahitya Sabha (1917) endeavoured to articulate their unsettled question for a linguistic regional identity. The political activities in Surma valley had begun as a protest against the partition of Bengal in 1905. The Sylhet Chronicle, Silchar-Paridarshak and Sribhumi played a commendable role in focussing public opinion. Under the leadership of Bipar Chandra Paul, Kamini Kumar Chandra, Sundari Mohan Das and many others, the valley was equally rocked like any other parts of Bengal on the partition issue, although Sylhet and Cachar had already been separated from Bengal (since 1874) and attached to Assam. The people of two districts, however, because of their historical, linguistic and cultural oneness with Bengal could not appreciate the reality of the existence of a different political set up.³⁷

Operation of Partition of Bengal

The partition of Bengal was imminent towards the end of the 19th century. The announcement in 1903 that provincial boundaries would be rearranged, served as an

37. Bhattacharjee, J.B., Cachar under British rule in North-East India, New Delhi, 1977.

invitation to Bengalis, Biharis and Assamese to advance their respective claims. The two main objects of the partition were the alleged 'reinvigoration of Assam' and 'the relief of Bengal'. Nevertheless, the proposed partition was denounced very rightly as 'an attempt to break up our presidencies and to break up our nationalities to divide us and rule'.³⁸ The scheme for partition was announced in July 1905, and it was to take effect from October of that year. Assam's status as a separate chief Commissionship came to an end on 16 October, 1905 under the 'Curzon Plan'. H.H. Risely, Home Secretary to the Government of India, thus admitted, 'Bengal united is a power. Bengal divided will pull in different ways. One of our main objects is to split-up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule.'³⁹ The province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, including Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara was constituted with Dacca as the headquarters and Bamfylde Fuller as the lieutenant Governor. Fuller's skilful role was interesting. Like many other British civilians of his time, he too thought that the growing tree of Indian nationalism could be cut at its roots only by isolating Bengali baboos. The

38. McLane, R.J., The Decision to Partition Bengal in 1905, Indian Economic and Social History Review, July, 1965.

39. Cited in Guha, A. no.13.

prevailing position of the Bengali hold over the governmental jobs in Assam as well as the public status of Assamese provided a handle. Indeed, the seeds thus sown, developed into the vexatious Assamese-Bengali conflict in later years.

The proposed amalgamation with the eastern districts of Bengal was a bolt from the blue to the people of Assam. Jaganath Barua felt that 'Assam proper will secure only a small fraction of the Chief Commissioner's attention and the people will have to meet a keen and unequal competition of highly educated, enterprising and advantageously situated districts for which they are not yet prepared'.⁴⁰ The Assam Association further apprehended that under the proposed scheme the historic name of Assam would be obliterated forever and her language would suffer.⁴¹ The Advocate of Assam and Assam Banti, the two renowned newspapers of that period were equally opposed to the partition of Bengal and the Union of Eastern Bengal district with Assam. They criticised the plan mostly on economic grounds. The Tea Planters Associations of both valleys supported the proposal recommending, however, that while naming the new province, in no case, the word 'Assam' for which its tea was known all over the globe should be done away with.⁴²

40. Letter from Jaganath Barua, President, Jorhat Sarbajitik Sabha dated 10 Feb., 1904, cited in Barpujari, H.K.No.29.

41. Proceedings of the Assam Association, Feb., 1904.

42. Borpujari, no.29.

The Bengali population of the Surma Valley vehemently opposed the partition on several grounds. They considered the plan as a deliberate attempt on the part of the British government to divide the Bengali race and intelligentsia like their counterpart elsewhere in Bengal. In spite of the fact that Cachar and Sylhet were administratively separated from Bengal since 1874, the valley had maintained its cultural link with Bengal and looked upon the anti-partition movement as a concern for any Bengali. They felt the partition of Bengal would cut them off from their kith and kin in West Bengal. The amalgamation of Cachar and Sylhet with East Bengal would deprive them of the privileges they enjoyed in Assam. K. K. Chanda⁴³ admitted this fact in the following words, 'In spite of these serious drawbacks, we have become content with our present position, owing to the special and compensating advantages we enjoy in the matter of education and public service and some other matters probably, as compared to what we might have possibly enjoyed had we continued to be in Bengal.' Evidently, the anti-partition agitation in Surma Valley turned into a popular movement based on swadeshi boycott and national education. A major section of the Muslim leaders, however, were won over by Curzon in favour of this operation partition and Assam's merger with East Bengal. The first appreciable Muslim support for the partition dates back from Lord Curzon's visit to Dacca in

43. Barpujari, H.K., op cit. Appendix F.

February, 1904 and his open hints that a new province with a Muslim majority was under consideration. The central figure in this shift in Muslim public opinion in East Bengal was Nawab Salimullah of Dacca. The Muhammedans Defence Association of Calcutta and later Muslim league played a significant part in mobilising Muslim support to⁴⁴ the government.

Moreley Minto Reforms and Assam

The Curzon plan did not work for long in the face of the rising forces of nationalism in Bengal. The anti partition movement succeeded in its principal objectives of unsettling the settled fact and getting the partition annulled in 1912. Assam was reinstated as a separate Chief Commissioner's province that included the Bengali districts of Cachar and Sylhet. Nevertheless, the political association of Sylhet with Assam involved serious differences from the beginning. The spirit of provincialism in fact ran high in both the valleys. The people of the Surma Valley, particularly those of the district of Sylhet considered that a deep injury and a deep wound had been inflicted on the Bengali speaking population by tagging them to Assam having no affinity whatsoever - geographical, ethnological and linguistic. In the Indian legislative council, on 6 February 1918, K.K. Chanda raised the question of

44. Refer, n. 39.

transfer of Sylhet to Bengal in the form of a resolution with the remark that the provincial boundaries were not made on broad and comprehensive lines and with a view to give satisfaction to all.⁴⁵ Although the resolution was lost, the movement for separation gained strength with the formation of Sylhet-Bengal Reunion League. Supporting the cause Abdul Karim, a member of the Bengal Legislative Council expressed the view that the artificial relation between Assam and Sylhet failed to produce unity between the two communities.⁴⁶ The position of Assam Association, which alone stood for the province as a whole, became all the more embarrassing when Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua of Gauripur, the founder president of Goalpara Zaminder Association, demanded the amalgamation of that district with Bengal spurred by his class interest.⁴⁷ The Assamese intelligensia, on the other hand, had a different view on Goalpara issue. The district was considered by them as an integral part of Assam and they feared that it would adversely affect Assam's status in the new administrative set up. The Bengalis living in these two districts came out with a complaint that they had no links with Assam and

45. Imperial Legislative Council Proceedings, April, 1918.

46. *ibid.*

47. As regards Goalpara a deputation of Zaminders pressed for their portion of the district being transferred to Bengal largely on the ground that land-holders would be better treated there by a legislative council which contained a large element of such persons. For details refer, Assamiya, Assamese Weekly, 29 January, 1928.

that their socio-economic base was in Bengal. The Assamese people, by and large, were sympathetic to the aspirations of the people of Sylhet. Many viewed separation of Sylhet would be a blessing in disguise, for whenever Assamese people made a demand for an University or a high court in the Assam valley there invariably followed a counter clamour for similar institutions in the other valley, thus giving rise to a perpetual rivalry between the two valleys.⁴⁸

The so-called Assamese-Bengali conflict was, therefore, linked up with the reunion movement of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara with Bengal. Sylhet protested against its separation from Bengal when it was attached to Assam in 1874 and since then agitated at intervals for its restoration. This issue came up for discussion in the council in July 1924 when B.N. Chaudhary⁴⁹ moved a resolution for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. Chaudhary was supported by members from both the valleys. R.K. Barua⁵⁰ supported the resolution and said that 'we Assamese cannot unite ourselves into a nation with Sylheties. We have not

48. Borpujari, H.K., no.29

49. Assam Gazette, Part V, Aug. 13, 1924.

50. Ibid.

a different language, a different tradition and ideas of different origin than those of the Sylhetieswe all know the Indian national Congress is committed to a policy of self-determination. I believe the present is an opportune moment when the wishes of the people of Sylhet should be recorded'. The inclusion of Cachar in the same resolution, however, resulted in some complications which made it necessary to return the issue for re-consideration with reference to Sylhet alone.⁵¹

The issue since then started getting controversial. Thereafter, in 1926, a similar resolution confined to Sylhet was passed by a large majority. Meanwhile, the leadership in Surma Valley got divided on the issue of tagging Cachar to Sylhet. In the Surma Valley political conference held on 1 July, 1926, a resolution recommending the inclusion of both Sylhet and Cachar in Bengal was defeated. This conference voted for the transfer of Sylhet alone but this too did not materialize due to the divisive communal politics, which gained a new dimension with the appointment of the Simmon Commission. The post-1926 period witnessed a counter agitation demanding retention of Sylhet in Assam. The Sylhet Muslim Student Association expressed their opinion in these words,⁵² 'there is an apprehension

51. Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, August Vol. 1, 1928.

52. Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, Part V, October 3, 1928.

of the district of Sylhet being separated from Assam and united with Bengal which apprehension if come about is bound to irreparably impair the progress of Muslim education in this district they may be pleased to see that the district may remain with Assam and thus help the cause of Muslim education in this district.' In a similar tune, Saadulla opposed all proposals regarding transfer of Sylhet. He was for undivided Assam in the larger political interest of Muslims⁵³ in India. In line with the changed public opinion, the question of transfer of Sylhet was again brought up in the council in September 1928. Haji Muhammad Bakht Mazumder and Khan Bahadur moved a resolution⁵⁴ to the effect that, 'the government of Assam do represent to the proper authorities that the people of the districts of Sylhet and Cachar desire that these districts do remain incorporated in the province of Assam and they do not seek a transfer of these districts to Bengal'. The Assamese intelligensia were very much against this motion. Kuladhar Chaliha⁵⁵ thus observed, 'the main principle on which we are to decide this matter are geographical, economical, and linguistic basis of the area concerned. Linguistic unity is the fundamental principle

53. Confidential B 1945, File No. C 241/1945, Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, 6 January, 1928.

54. The Assam Gazette, October 23, 1928.

55. Ibid.

on which this question should be decided. So all things concerned I think we should allow Sylhet to go to Bengal'. The Assamese press and platform were equally vociferous on the issue. The Assam Samrakshini Sabha, the Sarbajanik Sabha and the Assam Association raised demands for the separation of Sylhet. The Samrakshini Sabha raised the issue before Jawaharlal Nehru when he visited Assam in 1937. The problem of large scale immigration to Assam was also put before him. The Asamiya Deka Dal presented a memorandum ⁵⁶ to Nehru urging Sylhet's separation. Nehru supporting the claim for the separation of Sylhet from Assam thus commented, 'this is desirable from the economic point of view also, as Sylhet being a permanently settled area fits in with the economy of Bengal far more than that of Assam which has peasant proprietorship. It might be desirable for the Sylhet representatives in the Assembly to take the initiative in the matter.'⁵⁷

Evidently, the Hindu Bengalis of Surma Valley favoured the reunion with Bengal on cultural and linguistic grounds and the Hindu Assamese supported the separation of Sylhet in their anxiety to reduce the Bengali elements in Assamese population. However, the Muslim in either valley were more for the communal solidarity which later on

56. Nehru's paper, File no. P(L) 1937, A.I.C.C. papers.

57. Ibid.

matured into the demand for the inclusion of the entire province of Assam in Pakistan. A Muslim league government took power in 1937 and remained in office, except for a one-year interlude, until the close of the second world war. During this period, there was unabated influx of Bengali Muslim migrants into the state and this aroused fears among Assamese and Bengali Hindus that all of the province might be incorporated into the proposed Muslim state of Pakistan. The Hindu-Muslim antagonism took a new turn with the continuous inflow of the immigrants from Mymensingh. The large scale immigration led to a change in the demographic balance in favour of the Muslims with abnormal rise in their proportion from 9 per cent in 1921 to 19 per cent in 1931, and 23 per cent in 1941. In Barpeta sub-division alone, the proportion of Muslims shot up from 0.1 per cent in 1911 to 49 per cent in 1941.⁵⁸ These facts were sufficient not only to unnerve many local Hindus, but also some Congress leaders of national stature. To counter the influx of Muslims from East-Bengal, Rajendra Prasad, who later became the first president of India, advocated the immigration Bengali Hindus into Assam. Thus an economic issue was turned into a communal one, not only by the Muslim league, but also by some Congress leaders. To quote Rajendra Prasad,⁵⁹ 'I sounded the Assamese on the

58. Report of the Line System Committee, Shillong, 1938, p.27.

59. Prasad, R., India Divided, Bombay 1946, Autobiography, Bombay 1957.

subject and they welcome it some thought it better to have the Hindus of Bihar than the Muslims of Mymensingh. They welcomed the idea because by themselves the Assamese were unable to bring the land under the plough. But the influx of Muslims from Mymensingh was upsetting the population ratio and the Assamese wanted to retain a majority in the Brahmaputra Valley. The influx from Mymensingh could be countered only by Bihari Hindus to settle down on the land'. Soon it became a serious concern for the Assamese intelligensia. They thought that if the immigration continued in the same pace the Assamese speaking people would ultimately turn into a linguistic minority in their own land.

The British rulers in their turn has exploited the situation to their advantage by introducing the so-called Line-system, to restrict the indiscriminate settlements of the immigrants in the Assamese dominated areas. Under this system, a line was drawn in the districts under pressure in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas specified for their exclusive settlement. The aim of this government system was to isolate the immigrants from the local people by compelling the former to live and toil in particular segregated localities beyond which they were not allowed to settle.⁶⁰

60. n.59.

The authenticity of the line system as well as the government's scheme and methods regarding the legitimate settlement of the immigrants appeared impotent as strict observance was not maintained by its authorities. The violation of the line system made a section of the Assamese middle class to think seriously of their future. The Assamese Hindus and other local people demanded a rigid policy. They were afraid of losing their permanent or predominant position in the province. The arrangements under the line system did not work well. It proved a dismal failure in restricting the coming of the immigrants and their rehabilitation in Assam. It was felt that 'the line system keeps alive feelings of separation between the immigrants and the local people. It was not the immigrants alone who suffer from the existence of the line system but the indigenous Assamese are also the victims of the line system. Because of the line system, the richer section of Assamese, money-lenders and the capitalists, are securing lands from the poor cultivators at a low price and made profits for themselves under the guise of protecting Assamese interests'.⁶¹ Rai Bahadur P.C. Dutt thus observed that the line system is a 'communal, anti-national, anti-social and illegal measure taken by the government. This line system has been created for the stable advantage of insignificant minority of Zaminders and capitalists and to turn the cultivating class to be the ever slave'.⁶² The worthy-support that

61. Rev. B. (1941) Assam Secretariat.

62. Ibid.

immigrants received from the Assamese Muslim leaders was politically motivated. The Assamese Muslim in general welcomed immigrants with the hope that they would be Assamised in due course and would numerically strengthen the base of Muslim communal politics in Assam.⁶³ The intention of British government was not to stop inflow of immigrants but to inject communal virus whenever possible. They might have probably wanted to keep the inhabitants of Assam divided on religious grounds so that the latter would not form a united front against the British. Centering round this line system, tension generated in Assam politics. The Muslims demanded its abolition, while the Assamese Hindus and other local people demanded its rigid observance. On 16 March, 1936, Nuruddin Ahmed even demanded abolition of the line system in the council as he felt that it had stood in the way of absorbing the immigrants into the Assamese society. However, his resolution⁶⁴ on abolition of the line system was voted out in the council. Maulana Munawar Ali also placed a resolution against the system as it created a gulf between the people living within the same province.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the Assamese public opinion as voiced through

63. Das, D. (ed). Sarder Patel Correspondences 1945-50, Vol. III, 1972.

64. Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol.16, March, 1936.

65. Assam Gazette, Part VI, Sept. 5, 1937.

council debates, the Assamiya Samrakshini Sabha⁶⁶ and the Assamese press were vocal enough in opposing the anti-line propoganda.

The government was not prepared to commit itself to any kind of restrictive legislation, but agreed to call an all party conference to thrash out the issue. In 1928, an all party committee with A. Botham as the Chairman conferred on this issue. It argued that an administrative control over the process of migration was necessary for a planned settlement. The colonization policy though initiated by British officials derived its legitimacy thus from the deliberations of an all-party conference and had the approval of both Saadulla and N.C. Bordoloi.

Cabinet Mission Plan and Assam:

The task of the Cabinet Mission was to seek an agreement with the Indian leaders on the principles and procedures to be followed in framing a new constitution for an independent India. It was also envisaged that, simultaneously, the Viceroy in consultation with the Mission would open negotiations with two principal political parties, Congress and Muslim league,⁶⁷ for the formation of a new

66. The abolition of line system would only mean the creation of a vast number of landless Assamese in their own land without any hope of their future development and expansion. Refer, Memorendum presented to Nehru by Assam Samrakshini Sabha, A.I.C.C. papers, File No.F.4 (1)22,1937. N.M.M.L,Dainik Batori,12 September, 1935.

67. Moon, P.(ed.). Wavell the Viceroy's Journal,London,1971

interim government, which would hold office while the constitution was being formed and would include no British members except the Viceroy himself. Since the proclaimed objectives of Congress and the League were diametrically opposite, the Mission's task of bringing them to an agreement was a difficult one. Failing to arrive at a scheme approved by all parties, the Mission declared itself in favour of a three-tier federal government with only three subjects - defence, foreign affairs and communications, vested in the centre and all residuary powers in the existing provinces to be grouped into three zones. This provision was there to secure the advantages of a Pakistan for Muslims without the troubles of a partitioned India.⁶⁸

The Cabinet Mission's proposal to group Assam with Bengal for creating a predominantly Muslim zone in eastern India, like the one proposed to be set up in western India, was strongly resented by the people of Assam. There was a storm of protest against the grouping plan⁶⁹ from all quarters in Assam. It was felt that ' declaration of the British Cabinet proposal does not concede India's full demands, but fomented provincialism and the inclusion of Assam in group C will ruin her culturally, linguistical y and

68. Tayyebullah, M., *Between the Symbol and Idol* Atlast, Bombay, 1965.

69. Under the plan, the representatives of the provinces were to divide themselves into three zones — A, B and C sections. The C section was to consist of Bengal and Assam.

economically. Assam should have the right of self-determination in framing her own constitution'.⁷⁰ Gopinath Bordoloi, the Chief Minister of Assam himself staunchly opposed the Cabinet Mission Plan. In line with longstanding demand of the people of Assam, Bordoloi pleaded for autonomy of the province on linguistic and cultural basis. He insisted that Assam's distinctive identity must continue in the future constitution.

However, the scheme drawn up under the Cabinet Mission proposal was full of defects and contained seeds of communalism. The people of Assam felt that as the provincial boundaries had not been delineated on the basis of language and culture before the election of representatives to the constituent Assembly, it jeopardised the preservation of the identity of Assam. It was felt that from the religious, linguistic and cultural viewpoint the grouping of Assam with Bengal was a blow to the culture and civilization of Assam. G.N. Bordoloi, on behalf of the Assam members of the constituent Assembly, submitted a memorandum⁷¹ to the Congress working committee opposing the grouping of Assam with Bengal. Both the Congress and the League had at one stage accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan and, for a while, a solution of the

70. Home Deptt. Misc. Branch, File No. H.M.I. 67/46, Assam Secretariat.

71. Memorandum submitted by Gopinath Bordoloi to Congress Working Committee, Delhi, 19th, May 1946, A.P.C.C. Papers.

communal question without the partition of the country seemed to be in sight. But Assam's determined opposition to its grouping with Bengal provided an opportunity to the League to repudiate its earlier acceptance. This resulted in the ultimate failure of the grouping plan of the Cabinet Mission, for Jinnah would not have it unless he could have it in its entirety.⁷² Thus, the Cabinet Mission proposal to create a predominantly Muslim zone in eastern India that would include Assam was rejected by the Congress party ministry. However, with the acceptance of the Mountbatten Plan, the anti-grouping movement died down and attention was diverted to the referendum in Sylhet. On the eve of partition, it was agreed by virtually all political parties that Assam should remain in India, but a referendum was to be held in the Sylhet district to obtain the people's verdict whether it would remain in Assam or would opt for the eastern wing of the proposed Pakistan.⁷³

Sylhet Referendum:

The Mountbatten Plan provided the people of Sylhet with an opportunity to decide their future through a referendum. Thereafter the focus of political activity was shifted to the Sylhet referendum. It was virtually a vote on the

72. Dutta, K.N., Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam, Gauhati, 1958.

73. Azad, M., India Wins Freedom, Calcutta, 1959.

twin issue of the reorganisation of India on communal and the province of Assam on linguistic basis. Assamese public opinion remained understandably cold but consistent with the earlier stand. It was a logical anticipation that the Muslims, constituting the district, would vote for Pakistan. While the Hindu community of the Brahmaputra Valley demanded the separation of Sylhet from Assam, the Hindu community of the Surma Valley was vociferous in their demand for the retention of this district in Assam. Ironically enough, these very people, who had clamoured for union with Bengal, were now desperately trying to cling to Assam.

The idea of separation of the economically deficit district of Sylhet from Assam was welcomed by the people at large living in the Brahmaputra Valley. The student community of Assam also held similar views. The Goalpara Branch of the Assam Student's Congress held a meeting on 30 July, 1947 to demand the separation of Sylhet from Assam. A resolution was also adopted in this meeting to the effect that the Britishers had joined Sylhet, a district with an entirely different culture and a different language, to Assam for the promotion of their own imperialistic design. As a result of this union, there had been a clash of rival interests retarding the progress of the entire province. Not Assam alone, but India as a whole had been demanding the demarcation of the provincial boundaries on a cultural basis.

The meeting,⁷⁴ therefore, demanded the separation of Sylhet from Assam, which would in no way harm the prestige of Indian nationalism as feared by those national leaders who had spoken against the separation of Sylhet from Assam. The Sylhet referendum was held in July 1947. It was virtually a vote on the twin issue of the reorganisation of India on communal and the province of Assam on linguistic basis. Of the valid votes cast in the referendum, 50.0 per cent were in favour of Sylhet's inclusion in Pakistan and only 43.4 per cent for an undivided Assam in India. The verdict was quite natural as it clearly reflected the communal composition of the district population. It was indeed a life time opportunity for the Assamese leadership to get rid of Sylhet and carve out a linguistically more homogeneous province. To quote Rabindra Aditya,⁷⁵ a Congress leader from Sylhet, 'the Assamese leadership, too eager to get rid of Sylhet with a view to carving out a homogeneous province, arranged little protection for the minorities of Sylhet in the free exercise of their united franchise. When the results of the referendum were declared, there was a subdued sense of relief in the Assam valley as the majority of the votes cast were in favour of Pakistan'. In this connection, Ambika Giri Roy choudhury, Secretary, Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, thus observed,⁷⁶

74. Assamiya, 7th July, 1947.

75. Aditya, R., From the Corridors of Memory, Karimganj, 1971.

76. Quoted in Chaube, S.K., Hill Politics in North East India, New Delhi, 1973.

'It is our definite opinion that whatever sense there has been in retaining Sylhet as a whole in Assam, there is no justification whatsoever in the Cachar and Sylhet leaders trying to retain a few Hindu majority thanas of the district within Assam. There is little sense in trying to retain the junior partner of Sylhet, the Cachar plains, at any rate the Hallakandi sub-division in Assam'.

Roychoudhary was, therefore not satisfied with the transfer of Sylhet alone to Pakistan. He desired that Cachar too should follow suit. Laksmidhar Barua also felt that for the economic salvation of Assam and for the maintenance of the other real interests of the Assamese, the district of Sylhet which had been causing a constant drainage on the revenue of Assam should forthwith be separated from the province.⁷⁷

On the other hand, there was a feeling among the leaders in Surma Valley that some forces in the Assam Valley were instrumental in Sylhet's inclusion in Pakistan. Dr. Triguna Sen,⁷⁸ thus commented that 'the transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan had already been secretly decided upon and accepted by the Congress High command and also by many in the Assam Congress to reduce the Bengali element in Assam's population.'

77. Nehru Papers, N.M.M.L., New Delhi.

78. Sen, S.P. (ed.) Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. I, Calcutta 1972.

Thus the Assamese-Bengali language conflict had some link with the re-union movement in the Bengali areas of the composite province. In fact, the Bengalis in Assam fell in two distinct categories, i.e., the immigrant Bengalis in the Assam Valley districts and those in the former Bengal districts of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar. The problems and attitude of the two groups or categories were also visibly different. The early settlers in the Assam Valley came in the wake of British expansionism and indirectly helped the colonization scheme. Besides this the Amlahs, the revenue farmers and professionals in the Brahmaputra Valley did not face the same vengeance of the British during the India struggle for freedom as did their counterpart either in Bengal or in the Bengali districts of Assam. The Bengalis in the Assam Valley were generally under the control of the Rai Sahebs and Rai Bahadurs.⁷⁹ On the other hand, the Bengalis in Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar were never immigrants and these districts were British gifts to Assam. The people there could not reconcile themselves to the new set up and throughout the colonial period the agitation for re-union repeatedly cropped up. A feeling of indifference towards Assam further worsened the Assamese-Bengali relations. The intellectual middle class in Assam Valley either could not

79 . Misra, P., Communist Movement in Assam, North-Eastern Affairs, July-Sept., 1972.

refused to differentiate between the two groups of Bengalis. It should also be brought to focus that when the Indian National Congress was reorganised with its provincial units, Surma Valley formed part of the Bengal Provincial Congress and some of the Surma Valley leaders, including K.K.Chanda, were prominent in Bengal Congress. The Indian National Congress worked on the principle of linguistic province and neither the Assamese nor the Bengali intellectuals of the province raised any voice against this policy which stood on the way of the two valleys to come closer and improve the inter-valley and inter-community relationships.

A basic failure of Indian intellectuals during the colonial period was its inability to counteract the divisive policy of the agents of imperialism. The British policy, found and developed in this soil, extensively covered the complex element of caste, communal discords and social obscurantism that would expose them to capitalist exploitation. The merging middle class was objectively opposed to foreign domination over the home market. Hence, they looked forward to establish their own control instead so that indigenous capitalism could thrive. To promote their own interests, these classes rallied popular support behind them by exploiting spiritual sentiments based on community of culture. This happened both at the regional and national level, as we have seen above in case of Assam.

After independence, with the inclusion of Sylhet in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the Assamese leaders became

more vocal about the position of their language and culture and the demand for the declaration of Assamese as the state language in Assam started gaining momentum. The self-consciousness of nationalities is historically constituted. Just as the nation state as the dominant form of world political organisation, in turn, influenced the self perception and expectations of many nations, the principle of linguistic states in India has historically determined the aspirations and concern of the Assamese. Since independence, the desire to be at par with other nationalities in the Indian Union has been a primary concern of the Assamese nationality. The case for retaining Assamese as the official language of the state will be examined at length in the following chapters.

CHAPTER III

POST-INDEPENDENCE DEVELOPMENTS AND THE LANGUAGE QUESTION IN ASSAM

Language demands in independent India have been expressed at several levels. One of these levels can be identified as the demand for the recognition of the regional language as the medium of official transaction. The formal provisions in the constitution of India regarding the official language question set a formidable task for the Indian political authorities at both the union and state levels. The constitution envisaged the replacement of English by Hindi for the official purposes of the union and as the language of communication between one state and another. Article 345 of the Indian Constitution¹ thus empowers the legislature of a state to adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the state or Hindi as the official language of the state concerned. The plural basis of the Indian society, however, added to the complication of the above task. It was in respect of the official language for the state of Assam that the social

1. Constitution of India, Delhi, 1971.

tension burst the bounds and opened out into the violent riots. The year 1960, which saw the linguistic struggle reach a climax point in Bombay and Punjab, also saw tension reach a breaking point in Assam. A persistent movement for the official recognition of Assamese as the official or state language was launched for the first time after independence. This chapter discusses the political developments of this problem after 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 problems.² 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 organising the various nationalities into a single constitutional state structure were some of the most important problems that confronted the Indian state. The

² Partition of India has in its turn brought in the most baffling Refugee problem.

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 linguistic³ nature, only kept in suspension the resolution of the problems. 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 1947 thus became a signal for agitation favouring realignment of state boundaries on linguistic basis.

The development of regional movements in independent India, identified with regional language and tradition, obscured the fact that, within most of the states in India, there were serious divisions. There has been, first of all, the problem of forming the present state boundaries out of separate administrative units. Another problem involved the relationship of minority groups to the major section of the population of the state. Myron Weiner⁴ observes that there are at least two special types of minorities.

(1) linguistic minorities belonging to linguistic groups

3. The Congress Party conceded the demand of Swarashtra by Andhra in Madras Presidency in its annual session in 1938. For details refer, Das, D. India : From Curzon to Nehru and After, New York, 1970.

4. Weiner, M., Political Development in the Indian States, Princeton, 1969.

which are majorities elsewhere; and (ii) minorities which are not majorities elsewhere as shown in Table 31. The minority group presses for the preservation of its language in schools and may demand that administrative ordinances be published in its own language. If the particular minority groups claiming functional recognition to be a majority language of a 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.

Assam, after 1947, remained one of the most diverse cultural regions in the sub-continent. The social structure of the state is strongly influenced by two inseparable historical facts - the extraordinary role of immigration in the State's population and the ethnic and cultural diversity of the immigrants. Even without immigration, Assam's indigenous population is extremely diverse in cultural, linguistic and religious terms. The 1971⁵ census classifies Assam's population into speakers of 76 languages and dialects, and residual category consisting of 48 other languages and

5. There was no census in Assam in 1981 due to non-settlement of foreign national issue.

Table 1 : Linguistic Majorities and Minorities

Ranked according to highest P.C. of linguistic minorities ^a	Majority language	P.C. of Majority language	Largest minority language	P.C. of largest linguistic minority	P.C. of all linguistic minorities
Assam	Assamese	55.0	Bengali	19.0	45.0
Rajasthan	Rajasthani	70.1	Hindi	21.4	29.9
Mysore	Kannada	71.1	Telugu	10.9	28.9
Madhya Pradesh	Hindi	76.7	Rajasthani	3.4	23.3
Bihar	Hindi	81.5	Urdu	7.0	19.1
Madras	Tamil	82.4	Telugu	11.0	17.6
Orissa	Oriya	82.4	Telugu	2.3	17.6
West Bengal	Bengali	84.6	Hindi	6.3	15.4
Andhra Pradesh	Telugu	84.8	Urdu	5.4	15.2
Utter Pradesh	Hindi ^b	89.1	Urdu	7.0	10.9
Kerala	Malayalam	94.3	Tamil	3.7	5.7

^a Data not available for Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Kashmir.

^b Includes Hindustani.

Source: Report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1960 (based on 1951 census).

dialects. Table 3.2 lists only those languages that were declared as mother tongue by more than 50,000 people.

Table 3.2 : Major Language Groups in Assam, 1971

Language	Number of Speakers (as mother tongue)	Percentage of Total Population
Assamese	8,904,917	60.89
Bengali	2,882,039	19.71
Hindi	792,481	5.42
Bodo	533,713	3.65
Nepali	349,116	2.39
Mikir	191,354	1.31
Miri/Mishing	177,226	1.21
Oriya	150,196	1.03
Manipuri/Meitei	87,167	0.60
Santhali	86,086	0.59
Munda	76,894	0.53
Garo	76,004	0.52
Others	317,959	2.17
Total	14,625,152	100.00

Source : Census of India, 1971, Series 3 : Assam, Part I-A, General Report.

Of the languages that appear in Table 3.2, Assamese, Bodo, Mikir, Mishing, 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 Cachar district where, according to 1971 census, 77.8 per cent of the population spoke Bengali.⁶ Hindi, 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 'Plains 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 per cent in Sibsagar district to 61.16 per cent in Lakhimpur district. In other districts of the valley, Assamese speakers vary between 63 per cent and 80 per cent. The proportion of Assamese speakers is the lowest in Karimganj (0.08 per cent) followed by Cachar (0.50 per cent), North Cachar Hills (2.8 per cent) and Karbi Anglong (13.61 per cent). Map in Fig. 3.1 shows the pattern of ethnic composition in the state in 1961.

Bengali is spoken by 77.76 per cent of the population of Karimganj and Cachar districts, 19.31 per cent of

6. Of course indigenous and migrants are only relative terms. Many indigenous groups too were decedents of migrants. Here migrant groups refer to groups that were part of the modern migration since the middle of the 19th century.

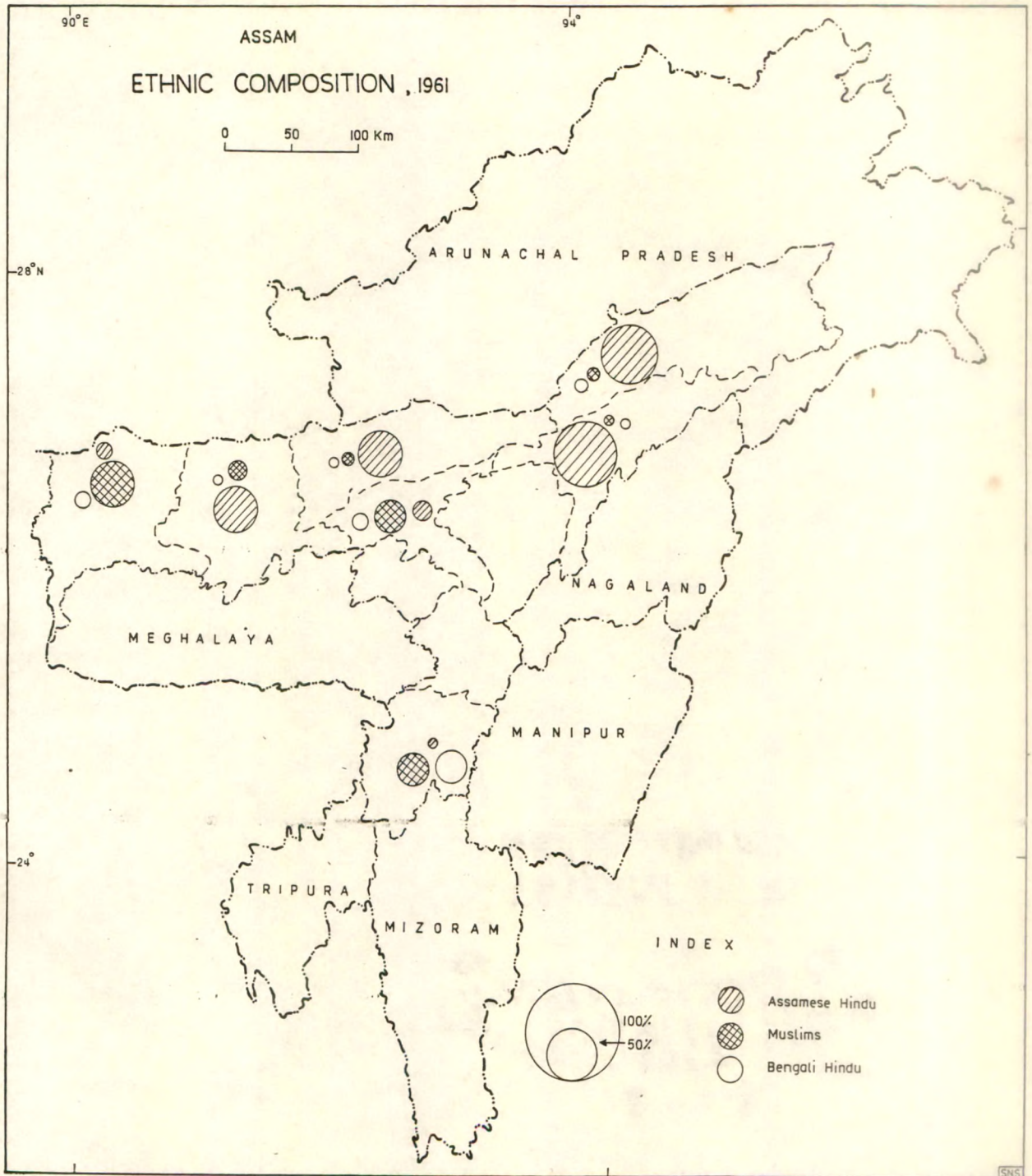


FIG. 3.1

Nagaon, 14.70 per cent of Dhubri, Goalpara and Kokrajhar, 14.38 per cent of North Cachar Hills, 13.31 per cent of Sonitpur and Darrang, 12.34 per cent of Kamrup and Barpeta and 11.05 per cent of Dibrugarh district. Although the Brahmaputra valley has both Bengali Hindu and Muslim population, most of the latter return themselves as Assamese speakers in census, and hence the above Bengali speaking population of the valley comprise mainly the old Hindu settlers of the colonial period and post-independence refugees from old 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 centres 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 per cent to 19.64 per cent.⁷ The partition also brought in its wake the problem of refugees. During the post-independence period 1951-61, contrary to the general expectations that partition would put a stop to the influx of migrants from newly emerged East Pakistan whose rate of inflow into Assam had considerably slackened by 1941, the process had suddenly picked up. The most important streams of migrants, however, during this period consisted of Bengali Hindus. With their coming, new dimensions were added to the existing tensions between the two major linguistic communities.

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 to Assam alone 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 fall in the volume of refugees, but it never went below 2000 in any month in the following three years except in November 1948 and November 1949.⁸ These

7. Census of India, 1961, Assam, General Report

8. Census of India, 1951, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part I-A.

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 1961.⁹ In the words of Pakyntein,¹⁰ 'even the setting up of the two dominions of India and Pakistan did not prove a deterrent to these settlers who continued to pour in even after partition'. 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 follows¹¹:

'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

9. Ibid.

10. Census Report of Assam, 1961.

11. The Assam Tribune, July 18, 1949.

policy of the government of India. Then there are the Hindu immigrants who apparently want to create a Bengal in this province'.

The government of India, however, seemed to be not particularly concerned about them. For this reason, the Assam Tribune¹² cautioned, 'the centre must not be blind to Assam's interest and must not adopt any policy that will ultimately lead to the annihilation of Assam. The danger point had almost been reached, and the centre expect Assam to commit suicide with her eyes wide open'. A section of conscious Assamese middle class of this period raised their voice by publishing letters to the editor¹³ for an early solution of the refugee 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 provided 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.

12. Ibid.

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, July 9, 5, 15, 1950.

Realising the gravity of the situation, Sri Prakash, Governor of Assam, thus expressed himself,¹⁴ 'Immigration from Eastern Bengal to Assam has already created various social and economic problems, and succeeding governments of the province have tackled it, encouraged or discouraged it, as it moved their fancy or conformed to their wishes. With the definite separation of these two contiguous territories as parts of different independent Dominions, the problem has assumed an altogether new aspect getting complicated as was inevitable with political considerations, and has got naturally and unavoidably to be met in a different way'. Thus the partition had added a new dimension in the Assamese society. In a memorandum¹⁵ addressed to Sri Prakash, the then Minister of Scientific Research and Natural Resources, Government of India and President of Assam Refugee Rehabilitation Enquiry Committee, the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha expressed its concern in the following manner, 'the problem of Bengal refugees in Assam definitely means a vision of the creation of Brihattar Banga Samrajya, based on Bengalism or Bengali language in which combined efforts of a powerful section of Bengali speaking old settlers of Assam, West Bengal, East Pakistan and also of the

14. Assam Gazette, Part VI, 13th March, 1950.

15. Memorandum submitted by the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha to the honourable Sri Prakash, Minister of Scientific Research and Natural Resources, Government of India and President, Assam Refugee Rehabilitation Enquiry Committee, Camp Gauhati, July 4, 1951.

Bengali settlers in other parts of India, who think themselves more in terms of Bengali than Indian, can easily be seen from the trend of their mentality and movements. Behind the Bengali refugee relief movement as carried on by the Bengalis, and their persistent effort to rehabilitate them in Assam beyond her capacity, lies this motive aimed at disruption of the strength of the Indian Union for a sovereign Bengal. It may, however, be noted that the Assamese leadership was not opposed to the entry of the refugees qua refugees but only to the Bengali refugees. For instance, the Jatiya Mahasabha expressed a preference for refugees from Punjab rather than from Bengal.¹⁶ In a similar tune, the Assam Tribune, in one of its editorials, also pleaded that Assam should welcome a quota of refugees from Punjab.¹⁷ The Assamese middle class apprehended that since the Bengali population had already constituted a sizeable section in the province, the new Bengali refugees would strengthen the cause of the Bengalis posing a severe threat to Assamese language and culture. In view of this, the local press in Assam criticised the policy of the Central government regarding the refugee problem and asked, 'has Assam no right to exist as the land of Assamese people? Is it the intention of the government to turn the Assamese people into minority community in their own

16. Ibid.

17. The Assam Tribune, May 8, 1949.

province and jeopardise their language, culture and their very existence?¹⁸

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 per cent, were born outside Assam, compared to 6 per cent in the case of West Bengal and 5 per cent in the case of Bombay.¹⁹ There was no significant emigration from Assam to counteract this massive immigration. The influx of refugees from East Bengal into Assam 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 the economic effects of migration of refugees in thousands resulted 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 Luming where Muslim passengers going to Pakistan were assaulted and robbed by miscreants who were

18. The Assam Tribune, May 27, 1949.

19. Census of India (Assam), 1951, Vol. XII, Part II A, Vol.1, Part II(A).

apparently not residents of Assam. Minor outbursts followed at Bodarpur and at Hailakandi. In the Assam valley there were a few sporadic cases of arson and stabbing in Gauhati town. But by far the greatest tragedy that had been enacted was in the north of Goalpara district²⁰ and the adjoining part in Barpeta subdivision. Several districts in East Pakistan became involved in Hindu-Muslim riots about the same time. The communal disturbance of Sonaswar, Habiganj, East Dinajpur 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 reorganised 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. Specially in states such as Assam and Maharashtra where the proportion of migrant population is high, there are demands for ordinances and legislation to restrict the opportunities and cultural position of the migrants.²¹ Since 1947, the emerging Assamese middle

20. Assam Gazettee, Part VI, 13 March, 1950.

21. Weiner, M., Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, Princeton, 1978,

class has sought to use their control over the state government to assert the paramountcy of Assamese cultural identity, and to seek economic and social equality in relation to Bengali middle class. The Assamese dominated Congress Party²² 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 26th 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 3.3).

Table 3.3: Progress of Literacy (in percentage) in Assam.

Year	Percentage of Literacy
1901	4.2
1911	5.6
1921	7.1
1931	8.6
1941	13.1
1951	18.06
1961	27.4
1971	28.15

Source : Census of India, 1971.

22. The first Assam ministry after independence was comprised of mainly Assamese politicians. Refer, Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. I, No. 14, 1947.

With the growth of political strength, the Assamese leaders of middle class origin began to make Assamese nationalism felt in practically every sphere of activity. The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha²³ and the Asomiya Sangha took a leading role in this regard. The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha was quite vocal about the recognition of Assamese as state language and medium of instruction. Sri Ambikagiri Roy Choudhary, 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,²⁴ 'the right of self determination has been today demanded by every nationality, and as such, the claim of the Assamese people to exert their voice against exploitation by an alien race or races who own no obligation to the land that feeds and sustains them is very legitimate. Explaining the slogan of Assam for Assamese, it said that by Assamese, it means those who feel for the betterment of Assam and the Assamese and work for the cause as such and anyone who takes up the interest of the Assamese as his own and calls himself an Assamese and

23. For details refer Das, T.C., Ambikagiri Aru Teour Jivan Darshan, Vol.1 (in Assamese) Gauhati, 1952.

24. Natun Assamiya, 10 september, 1947, The Assam Tribune, 29 September, 1947.

can claim equal rights with the children of the soil'. 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 instructions in all educational institutions.²⁵ Chandra Kanta Phukan, President of Asomiya Sangha, Nowgong also pleaded for the recognition of Assamese and proposed that Assamese people should be given preference in business, government office etc.

The change in the power structure in Assam in the wake of independence had given the Assamese political resources for manipulating the ethnic division of labour which in turn stimulated competition and conflict. Consequently, governmental authority was directed towards restructuring the ethnic division of labour which in fact 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.²⁶ The Calcutta press, however,

25. Ibid.

26. Confidential Report of Enquiry into Goalpara Disturbances, April 1955.

termed this agitation as 'Bengali Kheda' (Drive away Bengalis) movement.²⁷ Certain reactionary Bengali elements living in Assam were at the back of this campaign of hate. But these further added to the animosity between these communities. In 1948 itself there was a demand for a separate Bengali dominated independent state with the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, Lushai Hills and Tripura. Satindra Mohan Das took the lead in this move.²⁸ 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 resentment²⁹ from the

27. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 1 July, 1960

28. Assamiya, 3 April, 1948.

29. Hindustan Standard, 5 July, 1955.

Bengali middle class in Assam against this policy of the government and they voiced their demands through an organization called Cachar District Committee.³⁰ Another association known as Assam-Bengal Association echoed a similar sentiment when it said that 'the Bengalis were in majority in Assam and it would not take long to have Bengali as an accepted state language of Assam'.³¹ At this juncture, the Governor of Assam, Akbar Hydri, made the following statement³² in the assembly which further complicated the issue; 'the natives of Assam are now masters of their own houses. They have a government which is both responsible and responsive to them. They can take what steps are necessary for the encouragement and propagation of Assamese language and culture and customs of tribal people, who are their fellow citizens and who also must have a share in the formulation of such policies. The Bengalees have no longer the power even if they had the will to impose anything on the people of the hills and valleys which constitute Assam. The basis of such feeling against them, as exists, is fear but now there is no cause for fear. I would, therefore, appeal to you to exert all the influence you possess to give the stranger in our midst a fair deal, provided of course, he in his turn deals loyally with us'.

30. Akbar Hydri's Paper (1947-48).

31. Natun Assamiya, 18 August, 1947.

32. Assam Assembly Debates, 5 November, 1947.

All these developments became a matter of deep concern for the Bengali organisations in Assam. They approached Sardar Patel to dissuade the government of Assam from trying to impose Assamese language in their schools and also provide employment facilities to the employees hailing from Sylhet.³³ It was clear from their memorandum that the economic interest seemed to be the main issue, because they complained of the refusal on the part of the government to issue contract and trade licenses and permits to the Bengalis. However, the intervention from the central government seemed to have helped subside the issue for sometime by asking the Assam government to induct Bengalis as well into administrative jobs.³⁴

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 parity in status between the Assamese and Bengali languages in Assam because that would mean equality of opportunity in employment and

33. Clearly a middle class demand, for it should be noted that Assamese language was meant to be the second language in Bengali Schools and official language continued to be English.

34. Das, D. (ed), Sardar Patel's Correspondence, 1945-50, Vol.9, Ahmedabad, 1971.

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. But their late start and the fact that big business had already spread its network into the furthest nooks and corners of the country made their efforts in business and industry weak and ineffectual.³⁵ In consequence, they clung all the more tenaciously to their control over the state administration. Myron Weiner³⁶ observed in this context : 'What characterized the Assamese quest for a cultural identity was their need to distinguish themselves from the Bengalis in their midst; it is quite likely that the presence of large

35. Gohain, H., Ethnic Conflict in Assam in Pankaj Thakur (ed.) India's Northeast : A Multifaceted View, Tinsukia, 1982.

36. Weiner, M., Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India, Princeton, 1978.

numbers of migrants from other states, especially from Bengal, sharpened the sense of Assamese identity and gave it what many outsiders perceived as its peculiarly aggressive character'.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha began their systematic campaign from 1950 onwards to secure recognition for Assamese as the official language of Assam. It placed the demand before the government of Assam. The Sabha also desired the introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction in all the districts of Assam including the hill districts. 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 co-operate with the government of Assam in their efforts to introduce Assamese in all educational institutions in the state. Meetings and processions were organized supporting the cause. However, a few unhappy incidents took place in Nowgong district after the observance of the state language day. Magnified reports of violence against the Bengali Hindus appeared in the Calcutta and also in the local press. Further, many small matters which otherwise would not have received any notice were being exaggerated in the said press creating the impression that something very serious had happened.³⁷

37. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 8 July, 1960, The Assam Tribune, July 14, 15, 1950.

Reorganisation of Assam

The movement for redrawing state boundaries on the basis of linguistic homogeneity has had a long history in India. Formation of linguistic provinces was one of the earliest demands of the Indian national Congress. Since the Nagpur session of 1920, The Congress Party has itself been organized on a linguistic basis with linguistic provinces as its major units. In 1928, a committee appointed by the All Parties Conference to draft a Constitution for 'a full and responsible government' in India reported that 'it was clear that there must be a redistribution of provinces'. The principles governing this redistribution, the committee said, should be partly geographical and partly economic and financial, but the main considerations must necessarily be the wishes of the people and the linguistic unity of the area concerned.³⁸

In subsequent years the Congress went on record favouring the redistribution of provinces on linguistic lines. In 1945, the election manifesto proclaimed that the Congress stood for the freedom of each group and territorial area within the nation to develop its own life and culture within the larger framework, and it was stated that for this purpose such territorial areas of provinces should be constituted, as far as possible, on a linguistic and cultural basis.

38. All India Congress Committee, 1928, Allahabad.

On the advent of independence, there was widespread expectation that the principle of linguistic division of states would be applied in organizing full and responsible government in India. A Linguistic Provinces Commission under the chairmanship of S.K. Dar, a former judge of the Allahabad High Court, was appointed to advise the constituent Assembly in its deliberations on this question. However, the report of the Dar Commission firmly opposed the immediate formation of linguistic states on the grounds that circumstances obtaining in independent India were very different from those obtaining earlier when the Congress had declared itself for the redistribution of provinces in linguistic basis. The paramount need of India, the Report continued, was that it should become a nation and everything which threw obstacles in the way of the growth of national unity must be rejected. Upon the recommendation of the Dar Commission, the constituent Assembly made no attempt to effect an immediate redistribution of states but the constitution was so framed that any future plan of realignment of states would meet with no constitutional difficulties. Even the Congress party's High Power Linguistic Provinces Committee which included Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya disfavoured the formation of linguistic provinces on administrative and financial ground. In the early 1950's mass agitations erupted throughout the country, and especially in the south, where the interest in redistribution

of provinces on a linguistic basis was most intense, the public response was clearly antagonistic. The progress of internal developments in Andhra was treated as significant not only in assessing the effect on the notion of reorganization of states, but also in the prognosis for other linguistic state movements. Decan Herald³⁹ which had, throughout, supported the movement for linguistic states took a more optimistic view, 'the emergence of Andhra underlines the lesson that once a decision is taken with public support, ways and means can be found to make it work despite diversionary talk about Indian solidarity, viability, administrative convenience, sociological reaction, etc. etc. Andhra marks the first most significant act of internal consolidation after the epic deeds of integration accomplished by the Sardar Patel'. The agitated people took the matters to the streets that culminated in the death of Potti Sriramulu on 15 December, 1952 after 56 days hunger strike for the cause. It led to the breaking out of more serious disturbances that forced the government of India to create the first linguistic state of the Telegu speaking people after cutting a part of the then Madras state in 1953. The creation of the state of Andhra virtually led to the redrawing of the political map of India as a whole. Andhra Pradesh inspired other

39. Decan Herald, October 1, 1953.

nationalities like Malayee, Tamil, Gujrati etc. and provided added strength to their struggle.⁴⁰ While speaking in the parliament on 22 December, 1953, Nehru announced the appointment of a commission to examine the whole question of reorganisation of the Indian states in the light of the dimensions of the problem.

The demand for linguistic reorganisation had little direct importance in the case of Assam. In the wake of the appointment of the States Reorganisation Commission, regional aspirations with political overtones raised their heads in Assam. The demand for a separate hill state pressed by some hill districts of Assam had little or no linguistic manifestations. Another alternative demand was put forward by the Cachar States Reorganisation Committee for the Constitution of a Purbachal State comprising Cachar, Tripura, the Mizo hills, the Naga hills and N.E.F.A.⁴¹ In a strongly worded memorandum to the State Reorganisation Commission, it declared that, 'Cachar's future is doomed in Assam. We are sure of one thing, Cachar cannot be worse-off in a new state than she is in Assam today. The people of the district are not only discontented but practically on the verge of despair under Assam with the Nagas in revolt effectively defying Assam's authority in every sphere, with

40. Harrison, S., India : The Most Dangerous Decades, Madras, 1960.

41. Chaudhary, J.K., Purbachal Reconsidered, Silchar, 1954.

Manipur and Tripura refusing to be the Cindrellas in a state - the only positive course left open to the commission is in our view to suggest a separate administrative unit for these areas.⁴² The sponsors of Purbachal Movement had laid stress on the absence of development projects and raised the bogey of linguistic domination to rouse public support. To cite a concrete example, Mr. Ranendra Mohan Das⁴³ complained, 'the government's persistent policy of Assamisation we have too clearly seen all these years. The hostile attitude and crippling policy towards the district councils and the rapid introduction of the Assamese language in the schools and administration may be cited as instances in point. There has been a growing realisation on the part of the hill people that the ruling group have begun to treat the tribes as hewers of wood and drawers of water'. The commission, however, recognized the difficulty of its task in this region and found that the state should not be disturbed unless it wanted to create more problems. The commission's contention was that, 'separation will add to the cost of administration, and the co-ordination of policies and programmes between the state of Assam and the hill areas on the one hand and between the hill districts themselves on the other will become more difficult'.⁴⁴

42. Ibid.

43. Assam Assembly Debates, Part VI, 16 November, 1955.

44. Report of the State Reorganisation Commission, 1955.

At the time of States reorganisation, West Bengal also demanded the transfer of Goalpara district of Assam to Bengal claiming that the people of that district speak Bengali. West Bengal's claim on Assam's territory raised tension in Goalpara and Barpeta sub-divisions. The claim on Goalpara made by a section of the West Bengal politicians principally founded on alleged linguistic kinship of the district with West Bengal. But the source of trouble seemed to have arisen from different circumstances. Some of the Zaminders of the Goalpara district had by marriage and cultural intercourse developed predilection for Bengali. The ties with the Bengal zaminders and a natural feeling of solidarity with them were other forces working to the same end. The officers in the management of the zaminders were mostly imported from Bengal since it was believed that the local people could not be entrusted with the work on account of a clash of economic interests. These officers exerted considerable influence over the zaminders and worked with these officials to distort the census figures.⁴⁵ Even Mr. Macswiney⁴⁶ in his report on the census of 1911 remarked, 'I am afraid that the return of language in Assam will always be marred by a certain amount of inaccuracy though nodoubt the error will show a

45. Sarma, D., Language of Goalpara, The Assam Tribune, April 7, 1955.

46. Census of India, 1931.

gradual diminution at each successive census'. This prophetic apprehension was nowhere borne out more clearly than in Goalpara. Official interference only favoured Bengali prejudice and manipulations in the matter as would be evident from the following remarks of Mr. Macswiney, 'At my request the Commissioner of Assam valley consented to have the schedule checked on the spot during the last cold weather. It came to light that there was a great deal of local feeling on the subject and that changes from the original entries of Assamese to Bengalee had been made under the orders of the census officer of the district and some charge superintendents'.⁴⁷ The error of returning the Rajbanshi and other inhabitants of Goalpara as Bengali was progressively rectified since 1911 so that in 1951 census the proportion of Assamese speakers increased from less than 3 per cent in 1901 to 62 per cent in 1951 and that of Bengali speakers decreased from 69 per cent in 1901 to 17.4 per cent in 1951. Commenting on 1951 census figures R.G. Bhagatwala⁴⁸ 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 a measure of war economy. Hence we

47. Ibid.

48. Census Report of India 1951, Vol. XII, Part I-A.

have no figures regarding the distribution of Assam's population according to language for 1941. There is a striking increase in the percentage of people who speak Assamese in 1951 (56.7%) over those of 1931 which was only 31.4 per cent . There is an equally striking decrease in the percentage of the people speaking Bengali in 1951 which is only 16.5 per cent against 26.8 per cent 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 this decline has done to swell the percentage of people speaking Assamese in 1951. The figures do not fail to reflect the aggressive linguistic nationalism now prevailing in Assam, coupled with the desire of many persons among the Muslims as well as tea 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 speakers continued to

decline. This demographic shift aroused the anxieties of Bengali population⁴⁹ in Assam. 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 Assamese as the state language of Assam.⁵⁰ 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 helped 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 helped to bring

49. Hindusthan Standard, July 24, 1960; Amrit Bazar Patrika, July 27, 1960.

50. Chaudhary, A., 'Mukher Bhasa Buker Rudher' in Bengali, Calcutta 1972; Chaudhary, N. 'Asamer Bhasa Danga' in Bengali, Calcutta, 1973.

about a decline in the Bengali speaking percentage in Assam. The Assam government, however, made the following clarification⁵¹ on the census figures, 'there is nothing unusual in the figure 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. Emigration, 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 returned as Bengalis. Besides, the ideas on the real character of the language of Goalpara were confused and it was returned as Bengali. In the 1951 census, these mistakes of the previous censuses were avoided'. One may, however, conclude that fired by Bengali nationalism, many Bengali enumerators showed an artificial increase of the Bengali population in Assam during the colonial period. Tribals and other tea garden labourers were included as Bengali speakers. Most of the census enumerators in Assam were Bengalis and Assamese people

51. Sarma, S.C., On Language Statistics of Assam Censuses, Assam Government Press, Shillong, 1955.

tended to call all foreigners Bengalis.⁵² The Bengali enumerators took this opportunity and returned them in the census as Bengali. However, after independence, the upsurge of Assamese nationalism helped to single out these mistakes and as a result, the percentage of Assamese speakers had increased.⁵³ Language-wise population change in Assam as a whole from 1911 to 1961 is shown in Figure 3.2, whereas in figure 3.3 the districtwise changes are recorded. The Census data on these distributions are presented in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 : Distribution of Population (Language-wise) in Assam (1911-1951).

Language	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961
Assamese	35.3	33.43	32.32	56.29	57.14
Bengali	26.90	27.60	27.36	19.64	17.36

Source : Census of India, 1961, Assam, Vol. VII, Part I-A.

Considered in this background, West Bengal's claim on Goalpara district of Assam on linguistic ground,

52. For instance even the European tea planters, civil administrators were called 'Baga Bengali' or 'White Bengali'. Refer for details, Chaudhary, N., 'Bubar Marma Bedana' (in Assamese), Gauhati, 1960.

53. For distribution of Assamese and Bengali population, districtwise, see Appendix I.

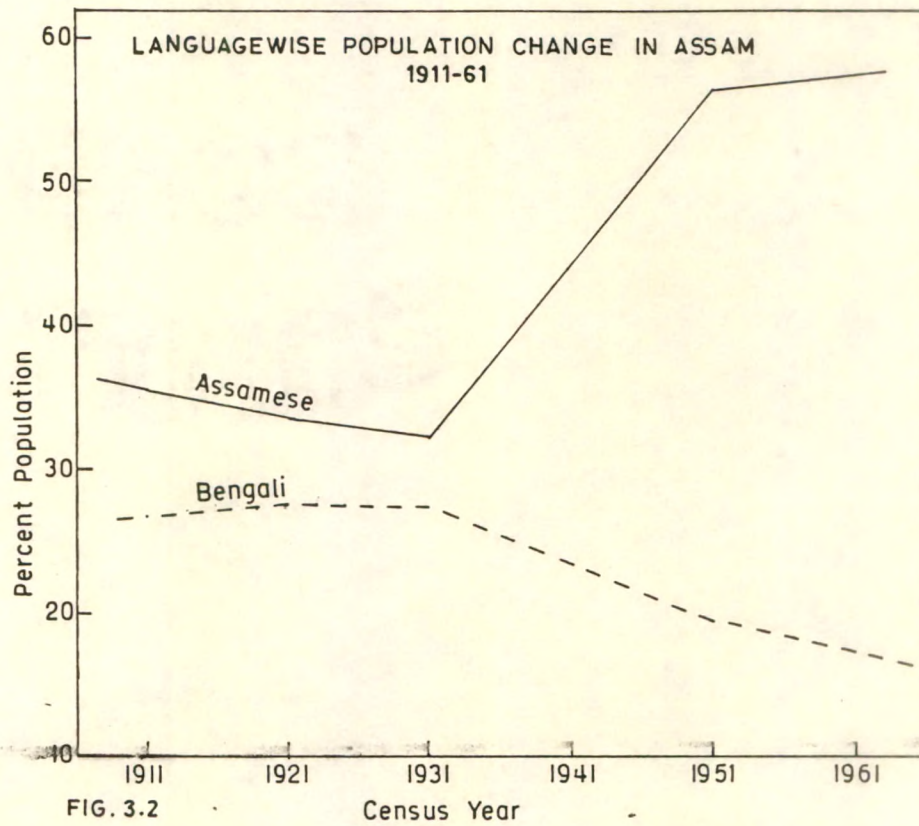


FIG. 3.2

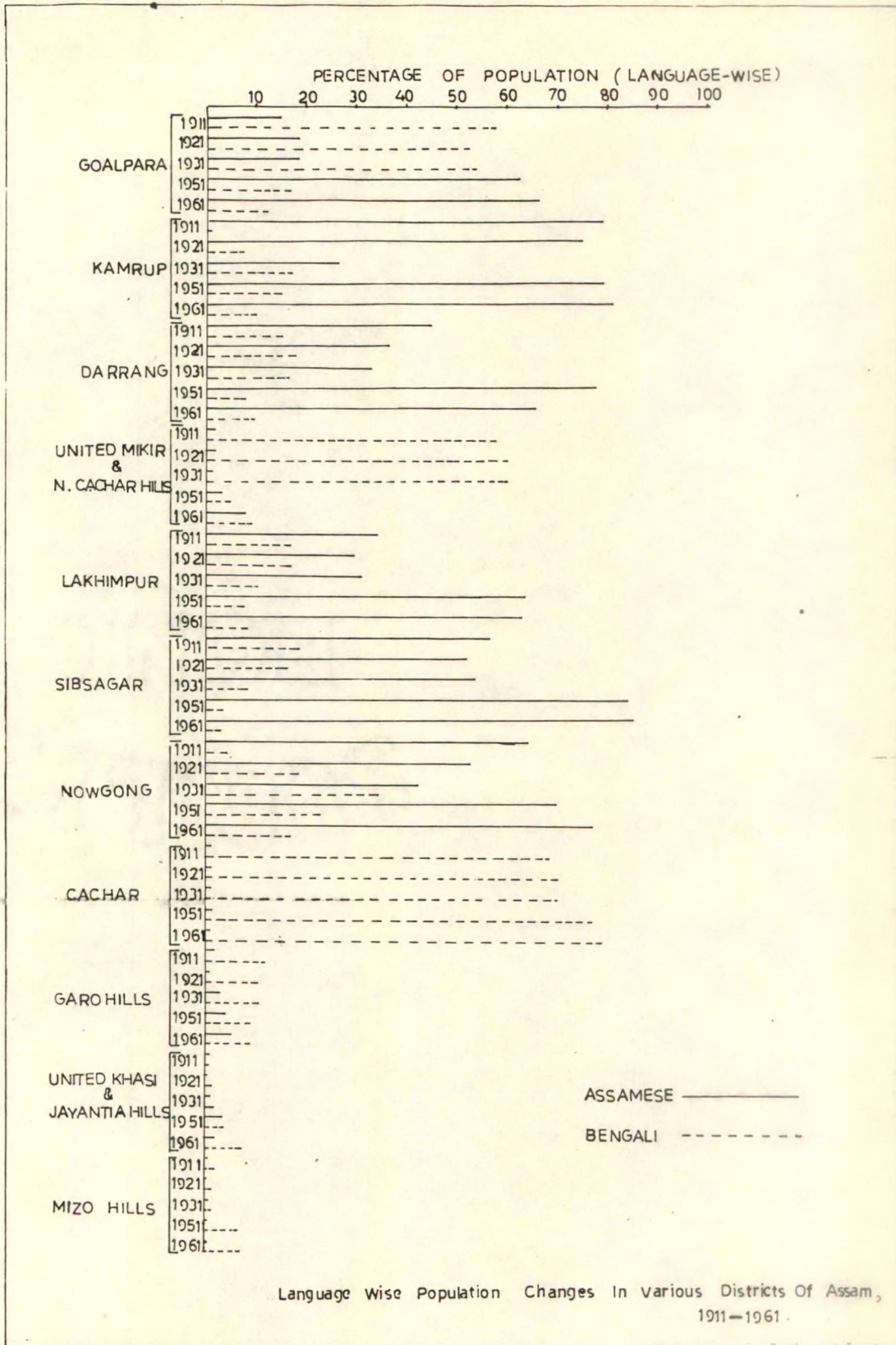


FIG. 3.3

therefore, caused widespread tension in Assam. A protest week was observed from March 31 to April 6, 1955 in Goalpara district.⁵⁴ Protest meetings and processions were organised throughout the district by the people of Goalpara to give vent to their feelings. At Barpeta, the Nagar Chatra Sangha⁵⁵ 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 promerger move. Both, merger and anti-merger feelings were expressed through demonstrations and meetings etc. Bengali communities organized a student demonstration at Dhubri on 1 April, 1955 in favour of merger of Goalpara with Bengal. Counter-demonstrations were organized by Assamese students and these spread to other parts of the district. In Chungphuta, Khuslapara, Chasikniti, Chaparkala, and Chouraguri villages houses

54. The Assam Tribune, March, 31, 1955.

55. Nagar Chatra Sangha over the signature of Sarat Chandra Singha, President District Congress Committee, Dhubri, Khgendra Nath Deka, M.L.A., Sadat Ali, M.L.A. took the lead in this regard. Refer 'Report on the Goalpara Disturbances in April, 1955' Confidential No. C-57/55/204-5/A.

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were damaged and at places looting also took place. It appears from Enquiry Report that the Revolutionary Communist Party and the Communist Party of India joined hands with the anti-mergerites in protesting against West Bengal's claim to Assam territory. They have been trying to take advantage of the situation and to keep the tension alive with a view to creating disturbances so that they could turn the blame on the Congress government to make a political capital out of it.⁵⁷ The Report also observed that, 'the happenings caused by demonstration etc. were over dramatised, exaggerated and served with vitriolic comments in the Calcutta Press which in turn excited greater indignation of the anti-merger groups and caused deeper panic among the Bengalis, many of whom evacuated to safer zones within the district and to Cooch Bihar and Alipur-Duar in West Bengal, though not involved or affected by these acts of violence'.⁵⁸ 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

56. The Assam Tribune, April 14, 1955.

57. Refer n 55.

58. *ibid.*

population during the past few years by a section of local people who were directly supported by the Assam government.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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 Assam Sahitya Sabha also placed a memorandum⁶¹ before the States Reorganisation Commission for the reconstitution of the State of Assam. Their main demands were: (i) that no part of the state of Assam, as at present constituted, be taken away from it, (ii) that the North Eastern Frontier Agency be forthwith amalgamated with Assam (iii) that Cooch-Bihar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling be transferred to the state of Assam, subject to the will of the people of these districts, (iv) that the two part C states of Manipur and Tripura be merged with Assam subject to the

59. The Statesman, Calcutta, April 14, 1955

60. *ibid.*

61. Memorandum submitted before the State Reorganisation Commission by Assam Sahitya Sabha on May 10, 1955.

will of their people and to provisions for subvention from the government of India, (v) that the ill-conceived plans of separate states on this defence frontier like Furbachal and Hill state be not countenanced. They regarded these demands as important for administrative convenience and for the unity and security of India. It might be of interest to know that the States Reorganisation Commission did not envisage the break-up of the composite state of Assam. The State Reorganisation Commission stated in its Report: that, 'these demands were not part of linguistic reorganisation, for a state of West Bengal already existed, and reorganisation would not have meant in any way inclusion of these districts geographically distant (being part of Assam) into Bengal. As far as Nagas were concerned the viability of their homeland as a state was felt to be a doubtful proposition, as there were other tribes which might need the same solution'.⁶² Further, the Report suggested, 'Racially, linguistically and culturally even the tribes which were described compendiously under single name, for example the Nagas, are in reality different each from the other. In spite of a certain tendency towards 'Assamisation' about which the minorities in Assam have complained, the heterogeneous character of Assam has so far been substantially preserved and our proposals merely recognize this fact'.⁶³

62. n 37.

63. *ibid.*

The legislative assembly of Assam witnessed several debates on the reorganisation question. Supporting the Commission's position, Bishnu Ram Medhi⁶⁴ the Chief Minister of Assam, stated, 'In any case, we don't favour reorganisation of state on the basis of language alone. There are so many dialects prevalent among the hills that if linguistic basis were pushed to its logical conclusion, every range in the hills would have to be framed into a 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 and it is feared, would fall into pieces'. Mr. Hareswar Das,⁶⁵ member from Goalpara district, observed thus : 'In the re-distribution of of states, language nodoubt 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 Bengalees living in other parts of Assam. Transfer of Goalpara, therefore, does not solve any problem but it would create many more'. Moinul Haque Chaudhary,⁶⁶ however, pointed out that the best solution was not in having a separate state but in

64. Assam Assembly Debates, Part VI, Nov. 17, 1955.

65. *ibid.*

66. *ibid.*

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,⁶⁷ 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. Moulana Abdul Zalil, Secretary of Assam Provincial Jamiat-Ulema, did not favour reorganisation of states on linguistic basis.⁶⁸ Gauri Sankar Bhattacharyya⁶⁹ was of the view that the recommendations of the State Reorganisation 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 Dowera⁷⁰ in his presidential address said : 'although the States Reorganisation Commission did not include Cooch-Bihar and Jalpaiguri with Assam, as they demanded, but it rightfully rejected the West Bengal's claim and also other proposals regarding

67. *ibid.*

68. *ibid.*

69. *ibid.*

70. Assam Sahitya Sabha Bhasanawali, Gauhati, 26, 27th December, 1955.

the formation of a separate hill state, Purbachal 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 State 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 Purbachal state out of composite state of Assam. The Commission however, proposed the merger of Tripura with Assam for administrative reasons. The Commission's formula for solving Assam's problem was found to be unworkable.

CHAPTER IV

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

This chapter focuses on the chronological development of official language movement in Assam. In spite of the linguistic reorganisation of states, linguistic minorities remain in almost every state, and Assam is no exception to this. As the stipulated period for switching over to the regional language as the official language of the administration came nearer, it set contradictory forces in motion in Assam. The linguistic bodies of Assam, viz., Assam Sahitya Sabha¹ and Assam Jatiya Mahasabha, became the pivotal organisations for implementing the constitutional provisions. The surfacing of such bodies was the result of socio-economic changes² along with the great improvement in communications and the catalyst of modern education providing for a greater awareness of the mother-tongue. In April 1959, the Assam Sahitya Sabha came out with the statement

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1. For details see Neog. M., Annals of Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1917-1975, Jorhat, 1975.
 2. Prakash, K., Language and Nationality Politics in India, Madras, 1973.

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'.³ The Sabha set the year 1960 as the dead line for implementation of its demands. 9 September, 1959 was observed as the state language day throughout Assam. Meetings were held and resolutions passed and processions were taken out. Several members of the assembly belonging to different political parties raised the issue during the discussion 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 (A.P.H.L.C.) and all tribal organisations⁴ which saw in these demands deprivation of their English educated middle class of getting a share in the administrative jobs. Their main arguments against the implementation of Assamese language 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 the hill people into

3. Neog, M., Assam Language Question, Jorhat, 1961.

4. Kumar, G. and Arora, (ed.) Documents on India Affairs, London, 1965.

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 detrimental to the composite culture of India.

(b) The adoption of Assamese as the official language of the state will adversely affect the opportunities and prospects of the hill people in the government services and other avocations notwithstanding any amount of safeguards which could always be circumvented.

(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 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,

5. Assam Assembly Debates, March 3, 1960.

'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 language 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 prefer to wait till they get the same demand from the non-Assamese speaking population for declaration of Assamese as the state language. Government feel 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'.

But the objective political situation obtaining in Assam was not conducive to a smooth change over. This statement of the Chief Minister in the Assembly set the Brahmaputra valley afire. On the other hand, this statement also encouraged the bulk of the Bengali majority of the Cachar district and some Bengalis of the Assam valley and a section of the people of hill districts to object to the adoption of Assamese as the official language of the state even in principle.

The official language enthusiasts organised meetings and passed resolutions and adopted a strident attitude to those opposed to their basic demand. Different organisations submitted memoranda⁶ to the Chief-Minister. They demanded that the issue of official language should not be mixed up or confused with the rights and facilities in respect of linguistic minorities. The safeguards provided for in the constitution and the recommendation made by the States Reorganisation Commission in this regard are sufficient to allay any fear of suppression of linguistic minorities, tribal or otherwise. The linguistic minorities of any state cannot stand in the way of the main regional language being made the official language. As a matter of fact, the Official Language Commission have made pointed observations in this regard. About the people of the tribal areas of Assam, the commission observed that, '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.'⁷ However, the particular demands of the minorities continued. The Bengal Sangram Parishad insisted

6. For example, at the instance of some leading public-men of Assam, a state language Action Committee was formed which submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister on 22.3.60.

7. Report of the Official Language Commission, New Delhi, 1957.

on having 'Bengali' as the second official language of the state and also as the official language for Cachar at the district level, because the majority of Bengali educated middle classes meant to gain by this proposition.

Propoganda and counter propoganda over the declaration of 'Assamese' as state language was carried on in the press, both inside and outside Assam. The extent of mass support behind the warring organizations of the two communities cannot be clearly established. But the duration of the sustained mass agitation (mainly led by middle class) and the riots, and the way in which these were conducted and organized leave no one in doubt about the political base of the upcoming forces.

The opposition parties of Assam reacted sharply to the Chief Minister's statement. Gauri Sankar Bhattacharyya 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'.⁸ The Praja Socialist

8. See, Resolution of the Assam State Council Communist Party, Aug. 1960.

Party in its state convention adopted a resolution demanding immediate declaration of Assamese as the state language.⁹ The local newspapers in Assam ridiculed the Chief Minister's statement that the move for the language change should come from the linguistic minorities as 'extremely odd and thoughtless'.¹⁰

At this stage, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee revised its earlier decision and passed a resolution on the following lines:¹¹

- (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 the official language in all the 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.

9. See, Resolution of the Praja Socialist Party, Aug. 1960

10. The Assam Tribune, 11 March, 27 March, 1960, Janambhumi (Assamese) 17 March, 1960.

11. Resolutions passed by the Executive Committee of the Congress Committee of Assam, 24 April, 1960.

- (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 as possible all facilities for learning Assamese and other languages spoken in the state with a view to bringing the people closer 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. The local papers in Assam were highly critical of the A.P.C.C. resolution on state language. An Assamese local paper, Janambhumi¹² stated : 'it was not proper on the part of the said resolution to declare Assamese as state language only in the six districts of the Brahmaputra valley. It was vague and short sighted'. Though the resolution was adopted, representatives from Cachar were reported to be siding with those opposing the introduction of Assamese as the sole state language.¹³ The Karimganj District Congress Committee was critical of the A.P.C.C.

12. Janambhumi (Assamese), Jorhat, 28 April, 1960.

13. Hindu, 6 July, 1960.

resolution. The Hill Leaders Conference also vehemently opposed the resolution.

Language Riots

It was at this stage that large scale violence erupted in certain parts of Assam in the month of May, 1960 when the non-Assamese speaking residents of Shillong staged a demonstration at which provocative slogans¹⁴ 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 processions¹⁵ and the slogans used there in and demanded immediate introduction of Assamese as the state language. The agitation and counter-agitation had no doubt electrified the political atmosphere in the state, while the agitation continued in the districts of Sibsagar, Kamrup, Lakhimpur and other districts during the May-June period, the movement took a violent turn during 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 on the map in Fig. 4.1. These incidents were mostly confined to the urban areas of

14. One of the slogan was 'Assamese is a donkey's language'. Refer. The Assam Tribune, 24 April, 1960.

15. The Assam Tribune, 26 April, 1960.

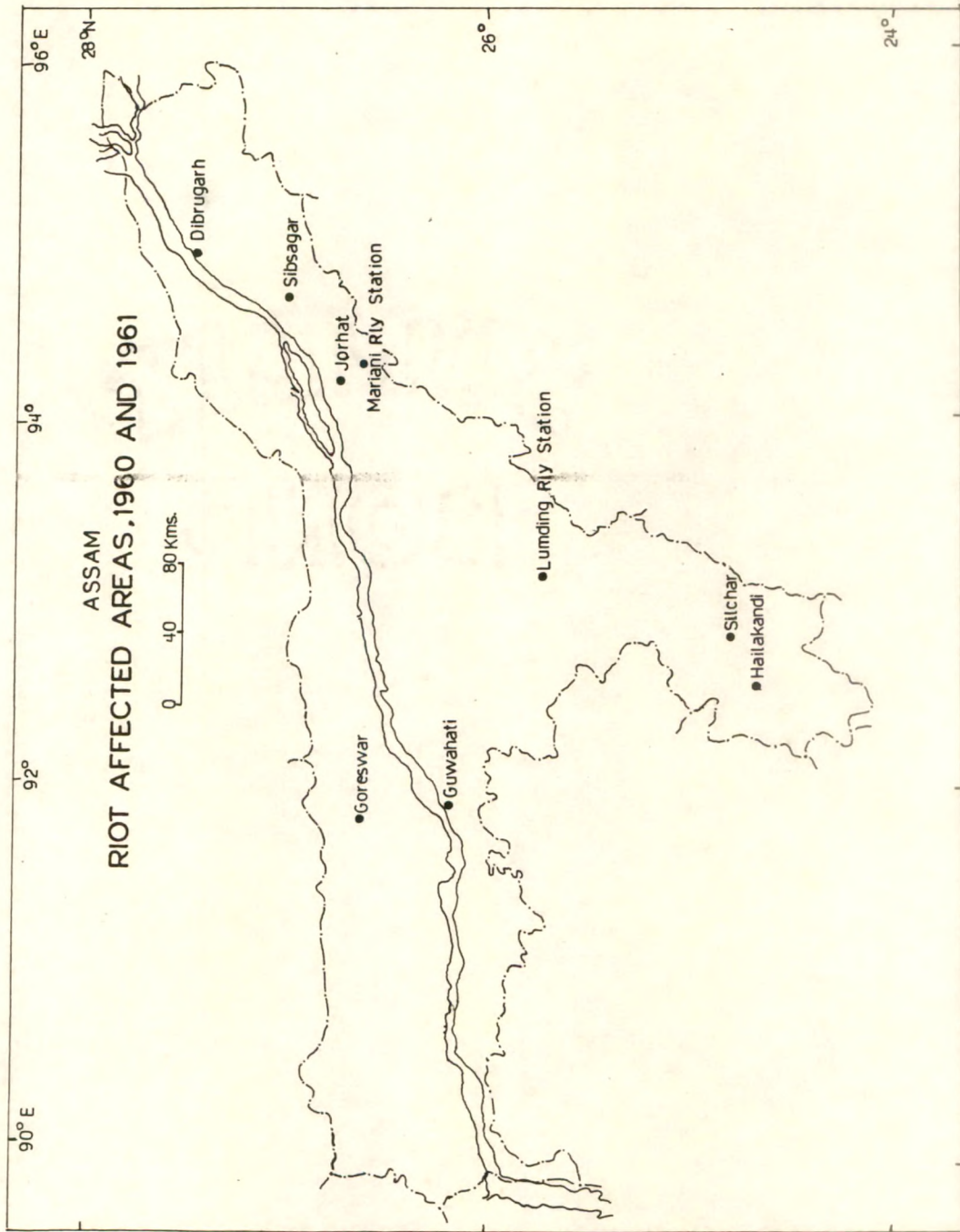


FIG. 4.1

Dibrugarh. Jorhat and Golaghat. By last week of June, a complete breach had been brought about principally between the Assamese and Bengali communities. On 18 June 1960, a procession of young men paraded the 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 community¹⁶ attacked 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 began to take place in various parts of Assam. Reports of violence came from Jorhat where a Bengali sales representative along with the employees of the Raj and Company were assaulted on 10 June. From middle of June, violence spread all over Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts. Thereafter, the storm centre shifted to Gauhati and Lower Assam districts as colleges and the University reopened.

Following the A.P.C.C. resolution, the government of Assam examined the legislations of different states on official language and also the recommendations of various

16. Neog, M. (ed.), Assam Language Question, Jorhat, 1961.

organisations 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 A.P.C.C. resolution making Assamese applicable to Cachar and Hill districts as the official language as and when they are prepared for it'.¹⁷ However, the proposed official language Bill raised a storm of protest. It brought out an open rift inside the A.P.C.C. itself as all the eighteen A.P.C.C. members from Cachar were opposed to it. The Cachar Congress leaders disfavoured the resolution at the A.P.C.C. meeting itself. Their view, as also the view of other political parties functioning in Cachar, was Bengali should also be declared as the state language. Further, to popularise 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,¹⁸ under the presidentship of Shri Chapala Kanti Bhattacharyya, an M.P. from West Bengal. They demanded declaration of Assam as a bi-lingual state. The Silchar and Karimganj Bar Associations passed resolutions¹⁹ demanding President's rule in Assam alleging that there was complete

17. The Assam Tribune, 24 June, 1960.

18. The Assam Tribune, 6 July, 1960; Shillong Observer, 10 July, 1960.

19. The Assam Tribune, 28 June, 1960.

lawlessness. They vehemently opposed the introduction of Assamese as the sole official language in Assam. The effects of all this began in a very telling manner at Gauhati. Some sporadic acts of violence were committed by some members of both the communities. 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 Gauhati. Voices of indignant protest were raised throughout the country. The press, political parties, Bar associations and other public bodies and eminent individuals condemned the violent outrage and demanded prosecution and punishment of the guilty persons. The Secretary of the Cotton College Teacher's Association in a public statement condemned the police action in the following manner, 'Never in the history of Cotton College, not even in the days of the British rule, was such an unholy outrage committed in the holy name of law and order on the life and liberty of the student community in Assam'.²⁰ Infact, Nehru²¹ himself commented on this firing as, 'it was bad enough for the policeman to lose his head and shoot without adequate cause.' There were public protests against the unwarranted

20. Cottonian, (editorial), Gauhati, July, 1960.

21. Ramdhenu (Assamese monthly) 9th issue, 1882 sak.

firing and demands were raised for immediate action against the S.P. and D.I.G., but no action was taken. The news of police atrocities spread like wild fire and precipitated certain untoward incidents in different parts of the state. Thereafter, the disturbances spread to the villages. The worst affected villages were Goreswar, Bokulgiri, Tengazhar, Silkajhar and Mohipara. Large scale arson, destruction of houses, looting of properties took place. The nature of the crime in each village was the same, like setting fire to houses, incidental looting etc. There were a few deaths and a number of assaults resulting in serious injuries. The holocaust went on unchecked for three days from 4 July to 7 July, 1960. The innocent victims of these areas were poor villagers of both communities who played no role whatsoever in the language controversy but had suffered a lot. These sufferings were made possible by inadequate measures taken by the local administration. It appeared that none of these riots could have achieved such intensity or accomplished so much destruction without careful prior planning. The administration undoubtedly failed to prevent the disturbances.

There was widespread public demand that the incidents of 4 July, 1960 at Gauhati and 4 to 7 July, 1960 at Goreswar should be enquired into by a high court judge. Finally the government accepted this demand and appointed a

Commission with Shri C.P. Singha, Chief Justice of Assam High Court, to enquire into the police firing incident of 4 July. The Commission had this to say in its Report:²²

'With regard to the causes of the disturbances that took place in the town of Gauhati and suburbs from 27 June 1960 onwards the language controversy was the main cause of the disturbances and other causes that led to the disturbances were dissatisfaction of the people that proper proportion of employment in the central services specially in the Oil Refinery has not gone to Assamese, as also the part played by both local and outside press by publishing incorrect, inflammatory statements and even incorrect news with provocative head lines'. The Commission further pointed out that, 'the measures taken by the authorities were quite adequate, but it appears that they were not properly implemented by the officers below the rank of the Superintendent of Police and that is why, inspite of adequate measures having been taken, the situation went out of control'.²³ The Commission finally suggested that, 'the state will be benefited immensely if a system were introduced by which officials on all levels of one state were sent to other state for stated period, say for two years or so, on exchange basis, as such a system is bound to broaden their mental horizon and infuse

22. Report of the Inquiry Commission into the Police Firing incident of 4 July, 1960 at Gauhati, Assam Government Press, 1961.

23. Ibid.

in them a sense of oneness throughout the country and it is bound to have a healthy repercussion and effect upon the general administration and the people at large in helping them to think in terms of India as a whole in juxtaposition to the present trend of narrow provincialism; such officials will have naturally to learn the languages of other states and that by itself is not a meagre gain from the national point of view.²⁴

The government appointed another commission of enquiry on 9 November 1960, under justice Gopal Mehrotra of the Assam High Court, to enquire into the incidents of rioting and arson which took place from 4 to 7 July 1960 in the Goreswar area. The Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasa Samiti²⁵ had submitted a memorandum before the Commission. They pleaded for a permanent solution to check recurrence of similar violence against Bengalis in Assam.

The Commission was of the view²⁶ that, 'the disturbances were not the direct result of the firing at Gauhati. Deep rooted and long-standing mutual dislike for both the communities created the atmosphere in which the

24. *ibid.*

25. The Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasi Samiti was formed at a convention of the Bengali speaking people of Assam at Hojai on Nov.4, 1960.

26. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Goreswar Disturbances, Assam Government Press, 1961.

language controversy gained momentum resulting in the holocaust.' Most of the affected villages were within the Rangiya circle which comprised of three thanas—Rangiya, Tamulpur and Kamalpur. The Commission held the view that 'the disturbances at Goreswar were premeditated and pre-planned and not sudden. The operations were carried on in a systematic manner and there were some people behind the whole disturbances, who had a clear idea of the pattern and the method to be adopted and who had managed to get buses, trucks, jeeps and even fire arms'.²⁷ Further, the report said 'the intelligence department which normally is of great assistance in determining the extent and nature of the preventive measures was utterly inefficient in this state during that period. The measures taken to suppress the disturbances in this area were inadequate. The intelligence department was not vigilant and supplied no information to the local authorities. Even the authorities at Gauhati did not act promptly as they could have done under the circumstances'.²⁸ It was, however, contended that the responsibility for the disturbances indirectly rested on the leaders of the various political parties. They made no active efforts to resist the fissiparous tendencies which were evident and their activities further encouraged the anti-social elements to take the law into their own hands.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

Both reports, however, commented very little on political parties and individuals²⁹ which were widely believed to have been involved in these happenings.

A number of other reasons were also advanced for the unpreparedness of the state government to meet the situation. The principal reasons were the illness of the Chief Minister Chaliha, the absence of Home Minister Mr. P. Ahmed from the state during the crucial period who could have taken over command in Mr. Chaliha's absence and the inadequate law and order machinery. Thus in the ensuing disturbances ten thousand families lost their homes and 34 persons their lives,³⁰ thereby postponing implementation of Official Language Act. for some more time. The Chauvinist elements in conjunction with the press of Assam and Calcutta availed themselves of the opportunity of misleading large section of the people of Assam into a riotous situation.

At this stage, a parliamentary delegation led by Ajit Prasad Jain visited Assam to assess the situation. The delegation was not constituted in accordance with any resolution of parliament. However, members of all political parties welcomed this initiative at restoring peace. The

29. Statesman (editorial), Aug 2, 1961.

30. Ghurye, G.S., Social Tension in India, 1968.

parliamentary delegation felt that, 'the language issue was the immediate cause while the deeper causes were the mutual distrust and dislike between the Assamese and the Bengali speaking communities generated during the British rule'.³¹ Commenting on the role of the press the delegation said, 'we regret to say that both Assam and Calcutta presses 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 lead to the supersession of fundamental rights and endangers the life and property of a large section of people, we think there is justification for applying checks on that freedom'.³² The delegation, however, could not provide a formula which would have a reasonable chance of being accepted by various linguistic communities in Assam. It also failed to offer a thorough judicial inquiry into the whole tragic episode.

The language question of Assam was discussed at length in the Lok Sabha³³ session of September 1960. However, it did not provide any clear enunciation of Governmental policies. Opposition parties spoke indignantly of the centre's refusal to act in Assam. The Assam

31. Hindustan Times, September 18, 1960.

32. *ibid.*

33. Lok Sabha Debates, September 1960.

government had in the meanwhile proceeded with the Official Language Bill in the form as blessed by the late Home Minister, Gobinda Ballabh Pant. It suggested that, 'Assamese and English, to be replaced by Hindi, should be used for district administration in the Brahmaputra valley, and Bengali for Cachar and leave the option for selecting whatever the respective district and regional councils choose for district administration in their respective districts and there would be continuation of English in the secretariat and in the heads of department.³⁴

This decision of the Assam Assembly and Assam Pradesh Congress Committee to turn Assam at least at the administrative level, into a virtually bilingual state had come as a great disappointment to most sections of public opinion in Assam. Protests against the bilingual formula were voiced by various organisations and political parties including some of the district Congress Committees. Mr. Hareswar Goswami,³⁵ P.S.P. leader said, 'This Bill disappointed and dismayed the people of Assam. We have not been able to accept the logic of a bilingual state in Assam. If it is not acceptable to a large section of the hill people, if it is not acceptable to the Cachar people then for whom we are

34. Assam Assembly Debates, 10 October, 1960.

35. *ibid.*

bringing this Bill. At the moment, I want, and it is the voice of the people of Assam that as the people's language Assamese should be made state language and English should continue as provided in article 345 of our Constitution'. The Communist Party leader Gauri Sankar Bhattacharyya³⁶ suggested that Assamese being the language spoken by the majority of the people in the state, should be made official language in all spheres at the state level as well as in all levels in the district except the district of Cachar, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo hills, Mizo hills and North Cachar hills with proper and adequate safeguard provided to all linguistic minorities. Smt. Jytsna Chanda³⁷, Congress representative from Cachar, felt that the formula given by Pandit Pant was not adhered to and the recognition he wanted to give to Bengali language along with the Assamese had not been respected. Thus, there was difference of views within the Congress itself. The Assam Sahitya Sabha expressed apprehension that 'if the Bill gets through in the assembly it will pave the way for general extinction of the Assamese language in a few years.'³⁸

Thus 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

36. *ibid.*

37. *ibid.*

38. The Assam Tribune, 11 October, 1960.

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 Bill³⁹ 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 secretariat and the offices of the heads of the departments of the state government.⁴⁰ 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 commented⁴¹, '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 Banga Bhasa Samity⁴² had submitted e

39. For further details see Appendix No.2, The Assam Official Language Act, 1960.

40. *ibid.*

41. Assam Assembly Debates, 24 October, 1960.

42. Refer, A Case for Bengalis in Assam, published by Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasa Samity, Hojai, April 1960.

memorandum to the President of India. Their main demand was that Bengali language 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 offices 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 up to the level of the high court of judicature in 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 it. Therefore, the Parishad made Karimganj with its highest concentration of East Pakistan refugees and its predominating Hindu Bengali speaking population the main seat of activity and demonstrated tactical skill by making a Muslim, Abdul Rahman Chaudhary, its President. The Sangram Parishad had organized

meetings, passed resolutions with a view to enlisting mass support for the fulfilment of their demands.⁴³ The Cachar Congress men 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 a Cachar Zila Gana Sangram Parishad. To make the situation more awkward, Congress-men including legislators and members of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee of the district played the rebel role by joining this movement inspite of warnings from the Congress President and formed Bhasa Andolan Samiti. Thus, a very unnatural situation was created. On 19 May 1961, Cachar Sangram Parishad called for a complete strike and organized picketing of all offices and transport system. On that day at Silchar 8 persons were killed and 21 wounded in police firing against the 'Satyagrahis' of the movement; army was called out and about 1000 persons were arrested.⁴⁴ Six Congress M.L.A.'s from Cachar district had resigned as a protest against the firing and complete district-wide hartal was observed on 29 May, the day on which the ashes of the eleven persons killed in the police firing on 19 May at Silchar were to be carried in a procession.⁴⁵ Paritosh Pal Chaudhary, the

43. The demands of the Parishad were (a) Recognition of Bengali as an additional state language of Assam, (b) Separation of Cachar from Assam .

44. Times of India, 20 May, 1961.

45. *ibid.*

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 recognised at the state level.'⁴⁶

At this stage, in order to bring about a 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 objective 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 a 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.⁴⁷ The main points of the formula were -

(1) The Assam official language Act of 1960 may be amended to do away with the provision relating to Mahkuma Parishads,

46. Times of India, 30 May, 1961.

47. Kakoti, S.C., 'The Shastri formula and the Roy Recipe' in Neog, M.(ed.) Assam's Language Question, Jorhat, 1961.

(2) Communication between the state headquarter and Cachar and autonomous hill districts would continue in English until replaced by Hindi, (3) At the state level, English will continue to be used along with Assamese, (4) The linguistic minorities in the state will be accorded the safeguards contained in the government of India's memorandum dated September 19, 1956, (5) Notification may be issued that under the provisions of article 348 of the Constitution all Acts, Bills, Ordinances, Regulations and Orders etc. will continue to be published in the official Gazette in English even where these are published in Assamese under the second provision to section 3 of the official language Act.⁴⁸

Any solution suggested from any quarter must have the willing support and consent of all parties and organizations involved in the tangle if it is to succeed. But this aspect did not receive due consideration from the Union Home Minister and the state government. The attempt by Shastri to find a lasting solution to the language impasse was considered by many as a partisan approach to bolster the image of the ruling party and to serve its interests rather than serving the national cause.⁴⁹ Commenting on a similar vein, the Times of India in its editorial⁵⁰ observed, 'the kind of issue which has created an explosive situation in Assam is by

48. Assam Tribune, 7 June, 1961

49. Shillong Observer, 15 June, 1961

50. Times of India, 29 May, 1961.

no means peculiar to that state. There are linguistic minorities in almost all the states and the problems affecting them consequently demand a national solution. What is required is a formula acceptable to all or at least most of the political parties.'

However, the Sangram Parishad was not satisfied with the Shastri formula. The action committee of the Parishad in a meeting at Karimganj on 9 June 1961 commented that Shastri's formula bypasses the main issue (recognition of Bengali) and as such it was wholly unacceptable. The Karimganj sub-divisional 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'.⁵¹ The three district Congress committees of Cachar unanimously rejected the Shastri formula. Paritosh Pal Chaudhary, leader of the Cachar Zila Sangram Parishad, said: 'the movement launched by Parishad for recognition of Bengali as state language would continue till the goal is achieved'.⁵² To make matters worse, political leaders like Jaya Prakash Narayan had blessed the extreme movement which, if successful could have given Bengali the status of an official language almost at par with Hindi.

51. The Assam Tribune, 10 June, 1961.

52. The Assam Tribune, 12 June, 1961.

The language movement in Cachar was admittedly the outcome of an unrealistic demand pitched too high by the Sangram Parishad, namely, amendment of the Assam Language Act of 1960 and recognition of Bengali as another state language of Assam. Indeed, the principal source of linguistic tension in Assam is the overemphasis of minority rights almost to the extent of pushing out majority rights. Even Pandit Nehru once commented,⁵³ when he was asked if the centre would not inspire confidence in minorities by taking over the administration, that 'there is such a thing as a constitution giving certain democratic rights to the majority as well as to the minority'. Had the Cachar Bengalis been bothered only about legitimate minority rights, they would have accepted the generous Shastri formula which had given everything that the Bengali minorities required for their cultural, educational and administrative facilities.

In the mean time, 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 organisation known as Shanti Parishad. A number of minor clashes occurred between the two groups. In a memorandum⁵⁴ to the Home Minister, the Shanti Parishad

53 . The Assam Tribune, 30 June, 1961.

54. The Assam Tribune, 6 June, 1961.

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 incident⁵⁵ on 19 June 1961, when police opened fire at Hailakandi killing five persons and injuring fourteen. Army was brought in to control the situation. The disorder and fears of further trouble were so great that the Cachar district continued to be treated as a disturbed area till at least 21 September 1961.⁵⁶ 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 Sabha was, however, not happy with this 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 partially 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'⁵⁷

55. The Assam Tribune, June 21, 1961; Shillong Observer, 22 June, 1961.

56. The Times of India, August 5, 1961.

57. Refer, Assam Sahitya Sabha's memorandum to the Union Home Minister On Assam Language Question (included in Appendix-3).

Hareswar Goswami expressed the view that 'by amending this section relating to Cachar we have gone against the Constitution'. Gauri Sankar Bhattacharyya, however, appreciated the Bill and he thought that 'the Assamese language will grow to the full stature as the real official language of the state'. 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.

However, a section of the hill people and some of the Bengali speaking people of Cachar were not reconciled to this change. The language issue came to be seized upon for the hill state movement, although the movement for a separate hill state arose as an independent issue and was there even when the language controversy hardly came to the fore. The Eastern India Tribal Union was formed exclusively for furthering this cause. It was the main issue on which elections were fought in the hill areas. In view of these facts it is obvious that the language bill could not be held solely responsible for the separatist movement of the hill leaders. The very stand taken by these leaders on the language issue clearly shows that 'they do not want any compromise. They have only exploited the issue to further their demand for separation'.⁵⁸

58. Chaube, S.K., Hill Politics in North-East India, Calcutta, 1973.

CHAPTER V

CAUSES OF LANGUAGE CONFLICTS IN ASSAM

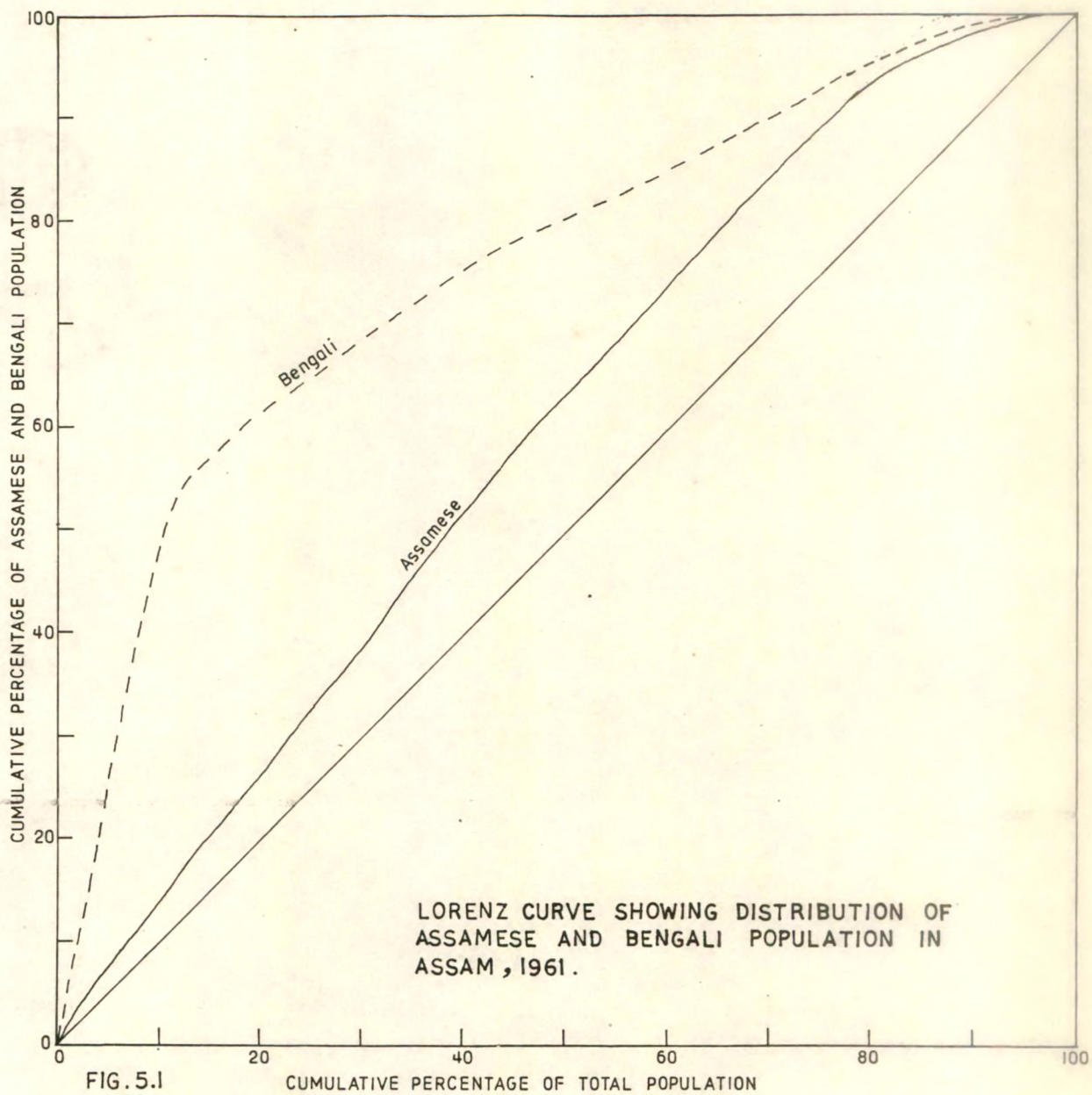
The official language movement in Assam may be interpreted as a byproduct of the reorganisation of states on linguistic basis. The process gave rise to some new conflicts and tensions especially relating to the rights of the linguistic minorities. The language movement of 1960 showed that minorities, no matter how large in number, stood against the majority right of the Assamese people. This is a kind of situation that reactionaries, both internal and external, take advantage of to defeat the socio-economic progress of the state. It is of course true that regional and linguistic chauvinism did have their share in this movement. These forces could play their role because the democratic rights of nationalities, both major and minor, have not been firmly established in the polity. This chapter would make an attempt to explore the causes which led to widespread riots between Assamese and Bengali communities in Assam over the official language issue.

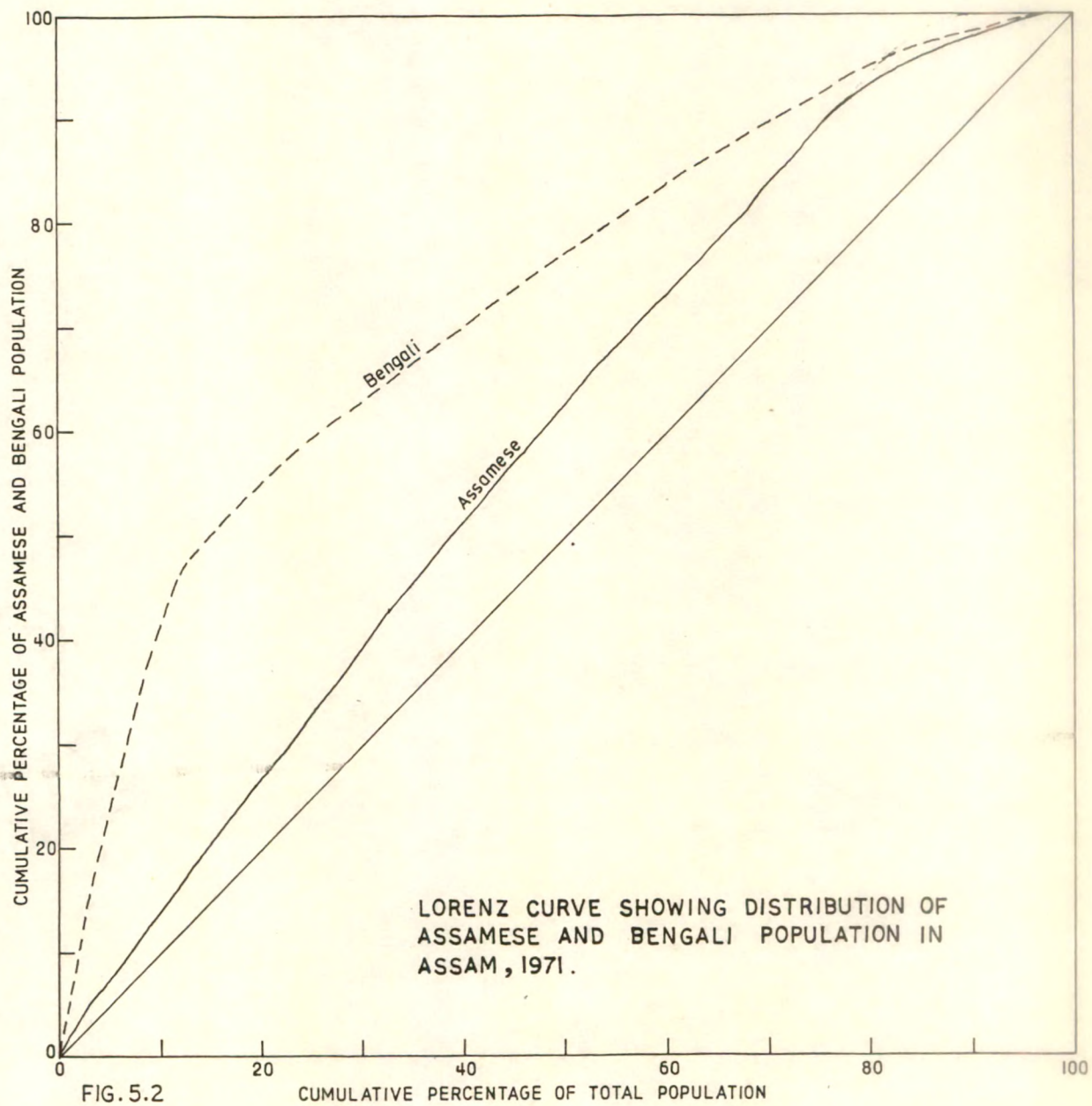
Minority Size and Rate of Increase

The size and rate of increase of minority is an important factor in the ethnic conflicts in Assam. The

distribution pattern of Assamese and Bengali in relation to the total population of the state is shown with the help of Lorenz Curves for the years 1961 and 1971 in figures 5.1 and 5.2 respectively. In both these figures the Assamese population is found to be more uniformly distributed than the Bengali population. This state is a typical area for studying the relationship between the local population and the migrants due to historical reasons as discussed earlier. 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 East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and from the other states of India. P.C.Goswami¹ traces the origin of these human waves to three main centres, viz., (i) from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, 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. Zachariah's² study confirms that there was influx

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1. Goswami, P.C., The Economic Development of Assam, Second edition, New Delhi, 1988, p. 23.
 2. Zachariah, K.C., A Historical Study of Internal Migration in the Indian Subcontinent, Bombay, 1964, p. 203.





of people from other parts of India and the outmigration was quite insignificant. Thus, the state of Assam has recorded the highest rate of population growth in India during pre and post independence periods. The growth rate of population in Assam is much higher compared to the all India average as evident from Table 51 below.

Table 51 : Rates of Population Growth (in percentage)

States	1941-51	1951-61	1961-71
Assam	19.28	34.45	34.54 ⁺
Andhra Pradesh	14.02	15.65	20.90
Bihar	10.27	19.78	21.31
Orissa	6.38	19.82	25.05
West Bengal	13.22	32.79	26.89
Kerala	22.82	24.76	26.29
Madras	14.66	11.85	22.30
All India	13.31	21.50	24.80

⁺ including Meghalaya.

Source : Census of India, 1971, Vol.III, Assam Part.

The reasons for the galloping rate of growth after 1941 is obvious - the partition of India in 1947 and the resultant influx of refugees in hordes from time to time. Even after long years of independence, the influx of refugees has not stopped. The pattern of immigration to Assam from the different source regions is evident from the map in Fig.5.3.

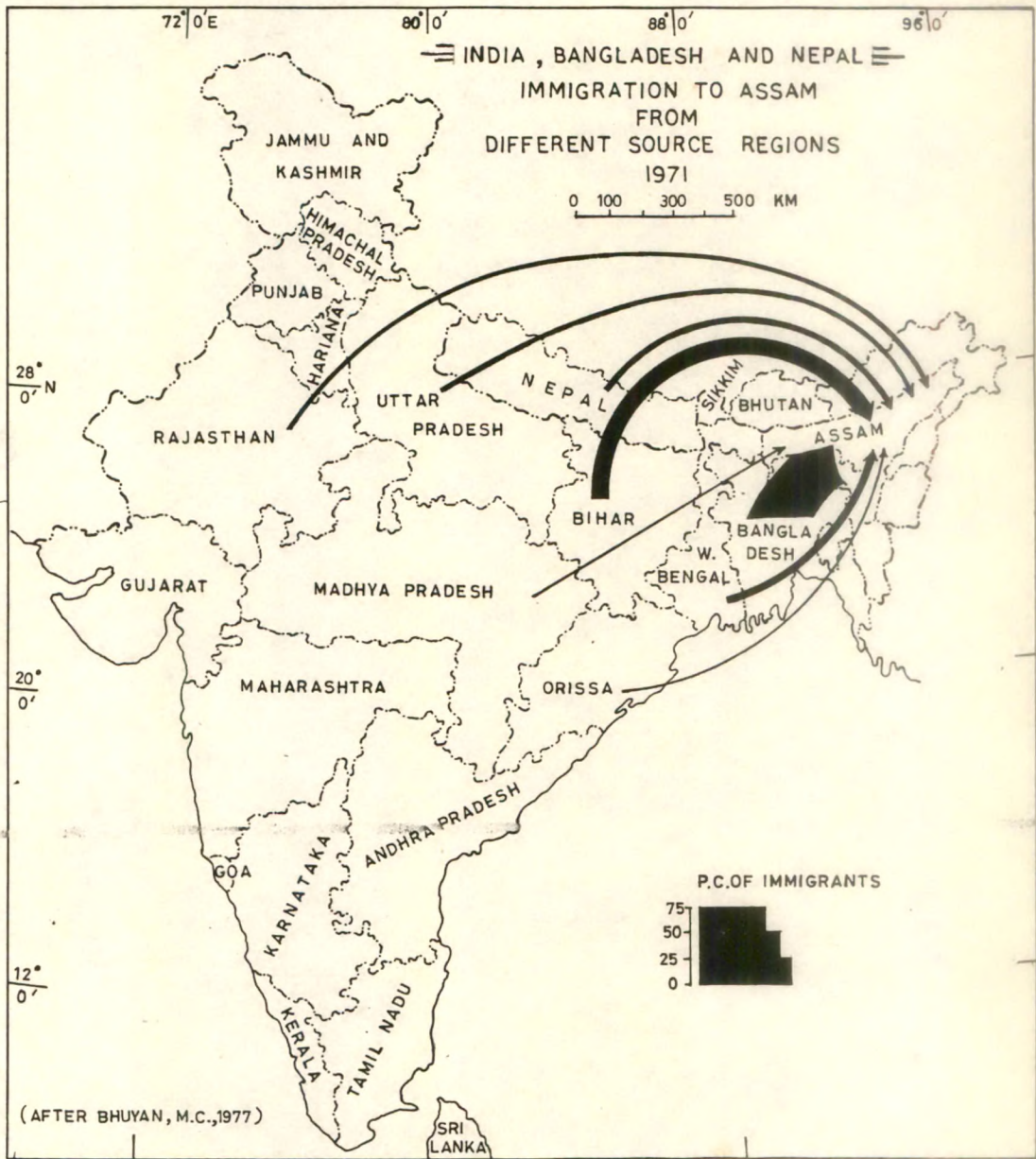


FIG. 5.3

The failure to put an effective control over the influx from East Bengal (subsequently Bangladesh) has added a new dimension to Assam's demographic balance. This problem was officially recognised by the central government way back in 1950 when parliament passed the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950.³ The preamble to the Act recorded the threat posed by immigrants in these words, 'during the last few months, a serious situation had arisen from the immigration of a very large number of East Bengal residents into Assam. Such a large scale migration disturbs economy of the province besides giving rise to a serious law and order problem. The Bill seeks to confer necessary powers on the central government to deal with the situation'. However, the Act remained, for all practical purposes, a dead letter and subsequently went into disuse by 1957. But immigration continued unabated. Speaking about the impact of refugee influx on the state, Goswami⁴ observes, 'a new stream of immigration recently flowing into Assam has been the Hindu refugees from East Bengal. These people are averse to become cultivators or manual labourers and as a result their inflow has created a serious imbalance in the economy, more particularly in urban areas. Because of the absence of other opportunities for employment, excepting agriculture which has already been overstrained, increasing pressure on the

3. Assam Gazette , Part V, 13 March, 1950.

4. Goswami, P.C., no.1.

land can easily be foreseen with the increase of population in the state. Unless measures are taken to create more employment opportunities for the people of Assam, a serious crisis in the economy of the state is bound to occur'.

The unchecked immigration into Assam produced far-reaching socio-cultural consequences. The Bengali Hindu immigrants, unlike the East Bengali Muslims, tea garden labourers and other groups, are educationally advanced and culturally conscious and they constitute a sizable population in each district of Assam. Table 52 showing distribution of Bengali Hindu migrants in Assam in 1971, ^{indicates} that the Nowgong district had the highest share of Bengali Hindu immigrants in the state. It

Table 52 : Distribution of Bengali Hindu Immigrants, Assam 1971.

Districts	Approx. Nos.	As percentage of total in the state
(1)	(2)	(3)
Goalpara	230,000	17.5
Kamrup	240,000	18.2
Darrang	145,000	10.7
Nowgong	250,000	19.1
Sibsagar	60,000	4.6
Lakhimpur	20,000	1.5
Dibrugarh	140,000	10.6
Karbi Anglong	20,000	1.5
North Cachar Hills	5,000	0.4
Cachar	200,000	15.2
Assam	1,310,000	100.0

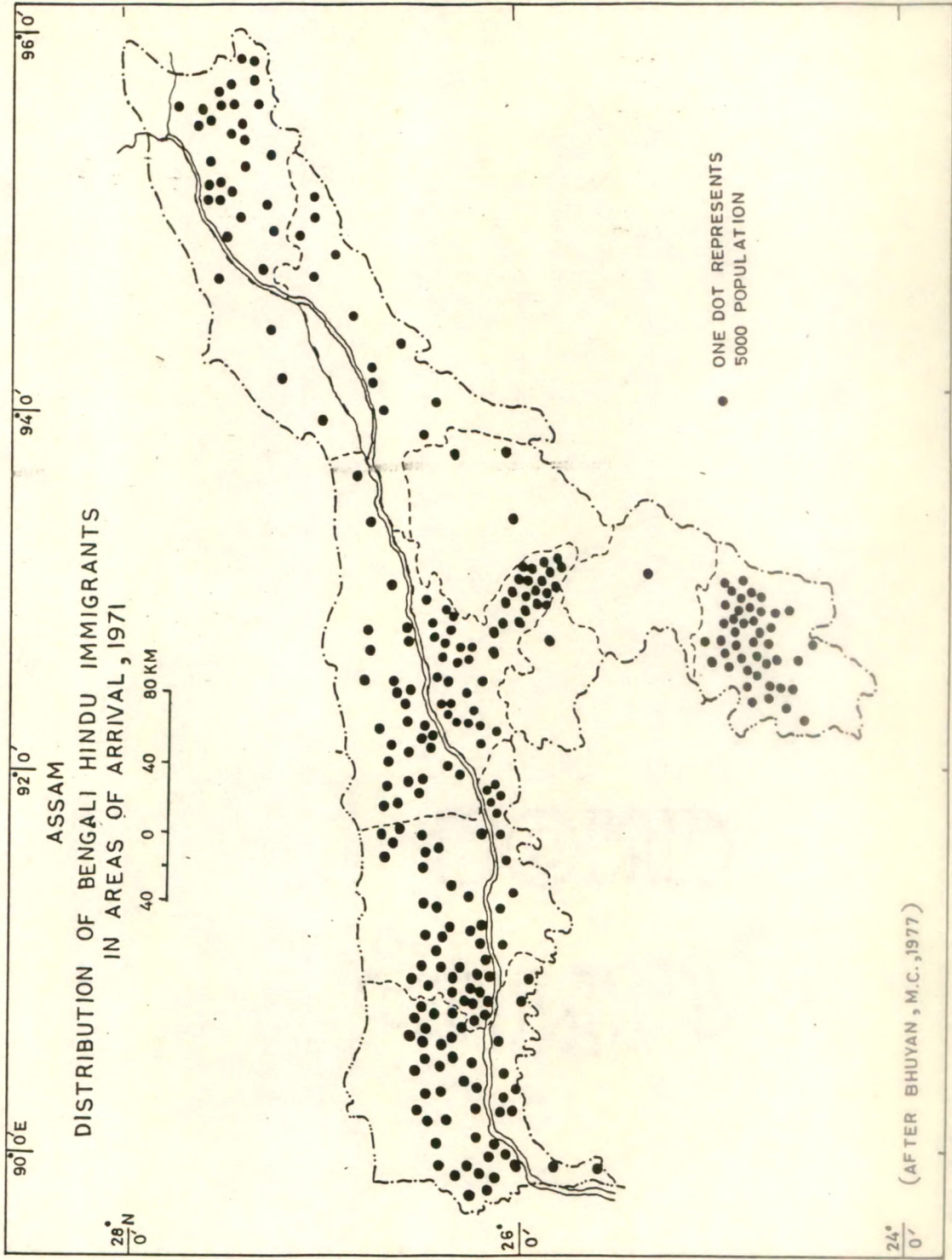
Source : Bhuyah, M.C., Immigrant Population of Assam : An Analytico Synthetic Study with a Special Treatment of Darrang District, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Gauhati University, 1977.

is followed by Kamrup, Goalpara and Cachar. The district of Cachar is a 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 immigrants and they constitute about 200,000 in 1971. In the remaining districts, the share of Bengali Hindu immigrants is conspicuously small (less than 5 per cent). The distributions of Bengali Hindu and Bengali Muslims population in the state in 1971 are shown in Figures 5.4 and 5.5 respectively.

The greater proportion of Bengali Hindu immigrants are concentrated in urban centres like Dhubri, Goalpara, Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Kokrajhar, Sorphog, Tangla, Rangia, Kharupetia, Lanka, Dhing, Digboi, Doomdooma, Tinsukia, Mariani, Lunding, Hojai, Rangapara, Maligeon, Pandu and Bongaigaon.⁵ 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

5. Refer Map on next page.



(AFTER BHUYAN, M.C., 1977)

FIG. 5.4

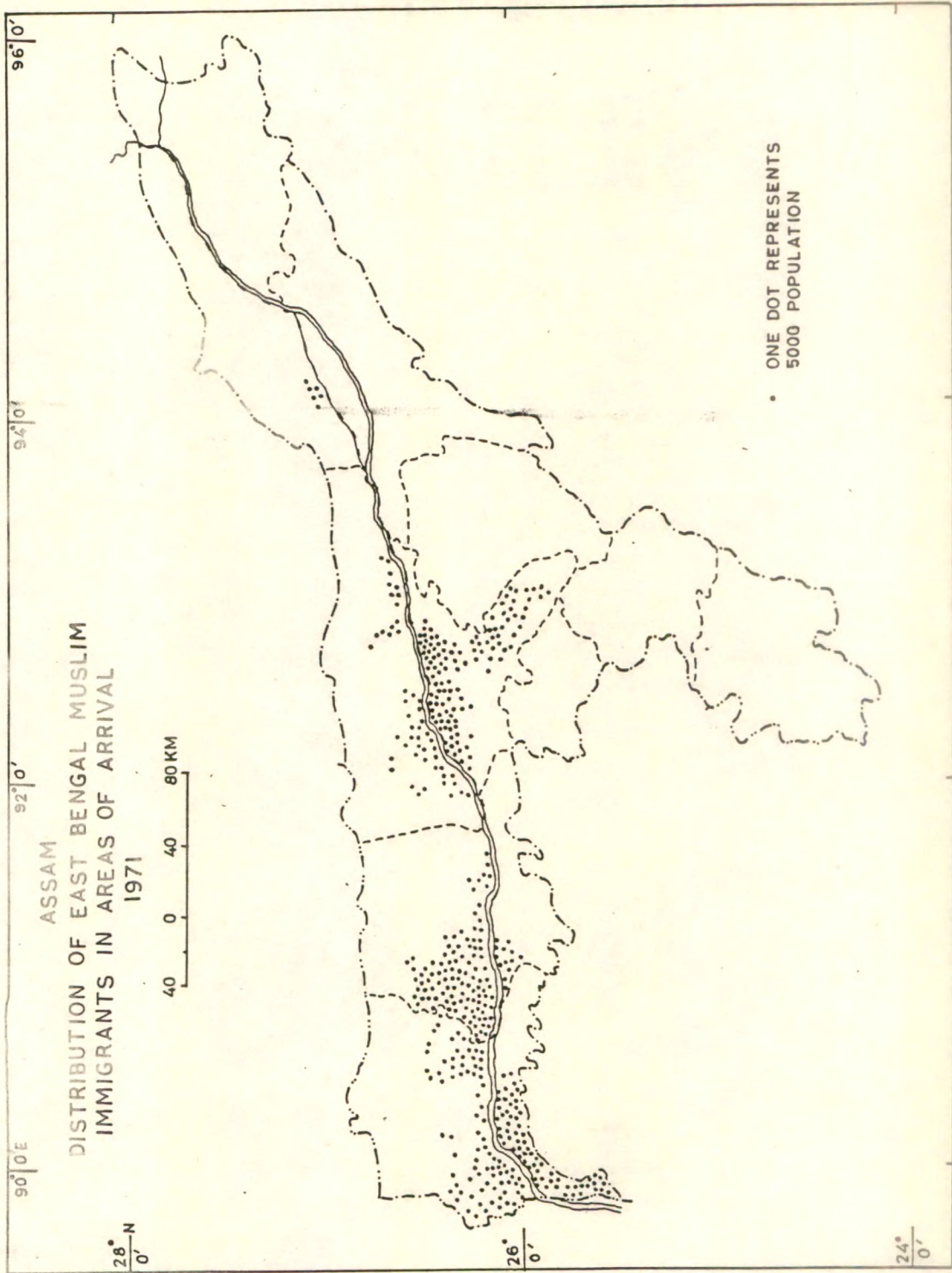


FIG. 5.5

by their concentration in urban areas specially 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 population; however, the Hindu Bengali petty bourgeoisie 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 around the state language 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, Nowgong, Darrang and Lakhimpur as shown in table 5.3.

Table 5.3: East Bengal Muslim Immigrant Population, Assam, 1971

District	Population	As percentage to total in the state
(1)	(2)	(3)
Goalpara	750,000	34.0
Kamrup	550,000	25.0
Nowgong	600,000	27.5
Darrang	250,000	11.5
Lakhimpur	30,000	1.5
	2,180,000	100.0

Source : Bhuyan, M.C. (cf. p. 149).

As per data in Table 5.3, Goalpara district has the largest share of East Bengal Muslim immigrants in the state. It is followed by Nowgong 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 of 14.6 million (1971).

The immigration of East Bengal Muslims 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.

The Bengali Muslims also provided political support in times of elections. Local politicians found these immigrants ideal means for their electoral battles. Infact, the immigrant vote was one of the main props of the long Congress rule in Assam. To Quote Weiner,⁶ 'after 1947 the Bengali Muslims 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 the 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 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 cause of Assamese nationalism against the slogans of the

6. Weiner, M., Sons of the soil, Migration and ethnic Conflict in India, Princeton, 1978, pp. 103-125.

Bengali Hindus on the official language issue. In a vastly changed demographic reality of Assam, Assamese are now dependent on some bargaining to realise their basic democratic right to have a homogeneous state of their own. The self consciousness of nationalities is historically constituted. 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 is 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.

Economic aspect:

The official language movement in Assam was essentially a by-product of the acute economic problem. 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 nonentity in their own land.

Agriculture, although undeveloped, 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 is 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.

The cropping pattern in Assam is more or less similar to that in other states of the country. The main agricultural products of Assam are rice, maize, pulses, rape and mustard, sugar-cane, cotton, jute, tobacco, potatoes, and several varieties of fruits. Average yield of food grains in Assam is very low compared to those in other states of India as indicated by the statistics in table 5.4.

Considering the excellent climatic conditions, abundant rainfall 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

Table 514: Average Yield of Principal Crops - Kilograms per hectare.

Crops	Assam		All India		States with highest yield
	1972-73	1980-81	1972-73	1980-81	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Rice	1052	1126	1092	1336	Punjab 2736 Haryana 2602
Maize	557	586	994	1146	
Wheat	1432	1158	1271	1630	Punjab 2730
Small Millets	495	489	364	441	
Gram	488	472	652	657	Gujarat 797 Bihar 718 U.P. 679 W. Bengal 663
Rape seeds	412	482	545	557	
Sugar-cane	3927	3611	5206	5914	Tamil Nadu 10543 Maharashtra 10152
Jute	1353	1463	1280	1245	
Potato	4788	5833	8821	13256	
Tobacco	750	725	837	1065	

Source : N.E.C. - Basic Statistics, 1982, Ministry of Agriculture, Indian Agriculture on Briefs, 1982

the agrarian economy ultimately reflects 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. During 1951-61, the area under food-crops increased by only 10.60 per cent while the population increased by 34.45 per cent.⁷ Due to absence of development of secondary and tertiary sectors in Assam, this heavy pressure on land has resulted in the reduction of the size of landholdings, inequality in the ownership of land and landlessness of a major population. In 1961-62 the National Sample Survey concluded that the percentage of household owning no land was highest in Assam (27.77 per cent) compared to other states in India (for example Bihar 8.6 per cent, West Bengal 12.56 per cent, Gujrat 14.44 per cent and all India 11.68 per cent).

In the sphere of industrial development Assam is yet to make much headway. The pace of industrialisation 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

7. Economic Survey of Assam, 1972.

and potential have by large remained untapped. As a result, Assam has continued to remain one of the most industrially backward states of the country.

Assam has been occupying the predominant place in cultivation and production of tea in India Table 55 shows the importance of Assam as a tea producing centre in comparison to other Indian states.

Table 55: Tea Statistics for Different States in India, 1988

	Area		Production		Daily labour employed	
	'000	P.C. hect.	Million	P.C. Kg	Number	P.c.in '000
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Assam	225	54.61	395	54.75	484	54.26
West Bengal	100	29.27	152	22.55	231	25.30
Tamil Nadu	38	9.22	86	12.76	87	9.75
Kerala	35	8.50	56	8.31	65	7.29
Others	14	3.40	11	1.63	25	2.80
Total	412	100.00	674	100.00	892	100.00

Source : Tea Statistics, Tea Board, 1988-89.

The tea industry has been playing a significant role in the development of the Indian economy. The importance of this industry can be gauged from the fact

that Assam alone produces more than 50 per cent of the country's total tea production. Every year it contributes a considerable amount to the Government revenue from export and excise duties and income tax, besides earning valuable foreign exchange⁸. The head offices of most of the Assam tea gardens are located in Calcutta and about 80 per cent of the sale and distribution of Assam tea is controlled by auction centres located in Calcutta. An auction market for tea had been set up at Guwahati in 1970. Unfortunately, even after so many years of its existence a large quantity of tea produced in Assam is still sent to Calcutta auction market, instead of bringing these tea to Guwahati auction market. This is due mainly for the location of head offices of most of the tea companies at Calcutta. Some important statistics pertaining to the tea industry of the state are furnished in the table 5.6.

Assam occupies an important place in the production of petroleum (crude) and natural gas (utilised) also. At present Assam produces about 5 million tons of crude oil, compared to production of about 3 million in Gujrat, and about 13 million tons in off shore (mainly Bombay High). The Gauhati refinery refined 802 thousand tons of crude in 1982-83, Digboi 596 thousand and the Bongaigaon 596 thousand tons. The Barauni refinery in Bihar refined about

8. Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission, 1954 (Chairman, P.M. Menon), 1956.

Table 5.6: Some Statistics of Tea Industry in Assam.

Head	1970	1975	1978	1979	1980	1981 (P)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
1. No. of tea garden	751	756	763	769	777	777
2. No. of tea factories	587	589	576	576(P)	N.A.	N.A.
3. Area under tea (in thousand hectare)	180	189	192	195	200(P)	N.A.
4. Production of tea (in Million Kg)	212	263	299	278	301	305
5. Average Yield per hectare (in kg)	1178	1393	1544	1413	1499	1521
6. Daily average no of labour employed (in thousand)	394	402	421	446	449(P)	N.A.
7. Average price fetched per Kg at the Guwahati tea Action Centre (Rs.)	N.A.	9.52	12.40	12.83	12.69	13.21

N.A. : Not available.

Source : Economic Survey of Assam 1982-83, Government of Assam, Guwahati, Sept. 1983.

3 million tons crude (sent from the oil fields of Assam) in 1982.

Besides petroleum, the production of natural gas also went up to the level of 875 million cubic metres in 1982 from 869 million cubic metre in 1981 and 455 million cubic metre in 1980.⁹ However, due to almost non-utilisation of the natural gas and the by-products of the crude refined in Assam, no ancilliary industries worth the name have been set up in Assam. On the other hand, such industries dependent on the raw materials from Assam oilfields are multiplying at a rapid rate in the metropolitan centres in India. Plywood industry in Assam has also been progressing well. But it has created problems due to unplanned cutting of trees by the timber contractors and resultant ecological distortion. In case of employment also, the industries have not given preference to local people. However, excepting for tea and petroleum industries, not much progress has yet been achieved in the industrialisation of Assam. Infact, the industrial development in Assam is comparatively much less than the other states, although she has immense mineral, forest and agricultural wealth. The per capita income of this region presented in Table 5.7 reveals a tendency to decline or at best a state of stagnation.

9. Bulletin of Mineral Statistics and Information, New Delhi, 1981.

Table 5.7: Per capita Income at Constant Prices of 1970-71
in Rupees.

Year	Assam	All India	Difference with All India
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1950-51	520.1	467.7	+ 50.4
1960-61	505.4	550.1	- 44.7
1970-71	534.7	632.8	- 98.1
1975-76	559.5	660.0	-100.6
1980-81	557.6	696.8	-139.2
1981-82	533.5	715.3	-181.8
1982-83	554.8	712.1	-157.3
1984-85 (Projected)	559.7	782.6	-212.9

Source : Das, H.N., A New Paradigm of Development-Regional Imbalance and Assam, 1986.

From table 5.7, it is obvious that the per capita income in Assam has remained almost constant during the 35 year period since 1950-51 while incase of all India it has increased by about 166 per cent. As a result the difference with the all India figure has increased greatly. Compared to other developed states, the per capita income in Assam is much lower. The Eight Finance Commission has

placed Assam in the 17th position with the per capita income at Rs. 960 (average of three years 1976-79) amongst the twenty-two states, above Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Manipur and Bihar. In the absence of any major rise in the per capita income trade and commerce of the region have also failed to take off and led to a limited employment potential. Thus the unemployment problem in Assam has intensified due to the extremely slow rate of economic development and exceptionally high growth rate of population. The 'sons of the soil' theory can also be traced to inordinate immigration in the face of growing urban unemployment. ^{Unemployment} has hit all sections of population in Assam. Quite naturally the vested interests have also taken advantage of the situation. The official language policy, therefore, became the focal point of controversy between the two dominant groups, viz., Assamese and Bengali in Assam as it touches upon the issue of employment as well as cultural identity.

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 provides 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 1980.¹⁰

10. Directorate of Employment and Craftmen Training, Assam, 1981.

It has been observed that in the employment sphere, the people of Assam have been deprived of their legitimate share of jobs. In non-household manufacturing industries, 50,000 out of 103,000 were migrants and a large number of the remainders can be presumed to be decedents of migrants rather than native population. Similarly, migrants account for 55 per cent of a total labour force of 38,000 in construction, 50 per cent of 183,000 in trade and commerce, 55 per cent of 75,000 in transport, storage and communications (mainly in Railways and Post and Telegraphs) and about 33 per cent in other services.¹¹ The Assamese middle class attributes these conditions to the fact that most of industries, trade, commerce and tea plantations are owned by non-Assamese.

The Assam Legislative Assembly was also very much concerned about the problem of unemployment of the local people and formed a committee of the House during the budget session, 1969, to review the employment position of the people of the state in the various public and private sector undertakings from time to time. The Employment Review Committee of the Assam Legislative Assembly observed in its First Report (1970), : 'A feeling has been growing that Management in charge of the industrial establishments show discriminatory attitude towards the local applicants in the matter of employment, though they have equal qualifications

11. Weiner, n.

as others. Such feeling spreads poisonous seeds for creating further tensions. Very often, the storm or earthquake is preceded by stillness in the atmosphere. But it is dangerous to be deceived by such stillness. Violent outburst would nullify the objective of national integration for which India had taken up planned development. We want that any Indian should be able to live in any other state with dignity and honour, as much as we want that the sons of the soil of the state are not deprived of the benefits due to them'.¹² Reference may also be made to the comments on the employment policy of Digboi Oil Company by the Judicial Enquiry Report to the effect that, 'the employment policy of the company has been since the inception and is at present one of search for the best coupled with a preference for the children of company's employee without any preference for the local people. This policy is colonial and exploitative in origin, restrictive and violative of the spirit of the constitution in character and harmful in effect on the employment for the local people.'¹³

A Survey of employment pattern in three establishments of N.F. Railways in Assam, namely N.F. Railways Headquarters at Maligaon, N.F. Railways Luming Division and

12. Report of the Employment Review Committee (First Report) 1970, Gauhati, 1972.

13. Report of the Judicial Enquiry into the Incident at Digboi, S.M. Deka, September, 1978.

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.¹⁴ This is evident from the data presented in Table 5.8. The employees with place of birth within Assam constituted about 40 per cent as against 60 per cent claimed by employees having their birth places outside Assam. The distribution of employees by status, place of birth and by type of units (public and private sector) is presented in Table 5.9. The data have been compiled from the First, Second, Third and Fifth Reports of the Employment Review Committee covering 43 number of units (public sector undertakings, private sector industries, Nationalised Banks and Reserve Bank of India) and 241 numbers of tea gardens. The statistics in table 5.9 are graphically illustrated in a series of histograms presented in figures 5.6, 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11. The figure 5.6 shows the distribution of employees by status and place of birth in public sector enterprises. It shows a higher proportion of employees born outside the state in class I and class II jobs and a higher proportion of Assam born employees in class III

14. Barua, S., Unemployment Problem in Assam and Employment Pattern in North East Frontier Agency, North Eastern Quarterly, Vol. II, No.1, 1983.

Table 5.8 : Distribution of Employee by Mother-Tongue (Major Group) and Place of Birth

Place of birth	Number of employees by mother-tongue				Grand Total	
	Assamese	Bengali	Hindi	Nepali Others		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Assam	4866	3918	444	88	91	9407 (40.33)
West Bengal	-	952	2	2	3	959 (4.11)
Bihar	-	15	1689	-	3	1707 (7.32)
Andhra Pradesh	-	7	1382	-	12	1401 (6.00)
Bangladesh	-	8046	-	-	-	8046 (34.50)
Nepal	-	-	-	310	-	310 (1.33)
Others	-	567	60	-	864	1491 (6.41)
Total	4866 (20.86)	13505 (57.91)	3577 (15.34)	400 (1.71)	973 (4.18)	23321 (100.00)

Source : As compiled by Barua, I. (n.14) from the information furnished in the Fifth, Sixth and Tenth Reports of the Employment Review Committee of Assam Legislative Assembly.

Table 5.9 : Distribution of Employees by Status, Place of Birth (Assam or Outside Assam) and by Type of Units (Public or Private Sector).

No. of Units	Type of Industries (Public or Private)	Place of Birth	Class I/ Class II/ Administrative/ Executive/ Managerial	Class III Supervisory and clerical	Class IV Subordinate Staff/Skilled and Semi-skilled and Unskilled Workers	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
11	Public sector Undertakings	Assem	536 (31.7)	6236 (57.3)	3966 (58.9)	10738 (55.6)
11		Outside Assam	1155 (68.3)	4646 (42.7)	2765 (41.1)	8566 (44.4)
	Total		1691 (100.0)	10882 (100.0)	6731 (100.0)	19304 (100.0)
26	Private Sector Industries	Assem	238 (45.2)	1252 (54.8)	4800 (34.6)	6290 (37.7)
		Outside Assam	288 (54.8)	1032 (45.2)	9074 (65.4)	10394 (62.3)
	Total		526 (100.0)	2284 (100.0)	13874 (100.0)	16684 (100.0)

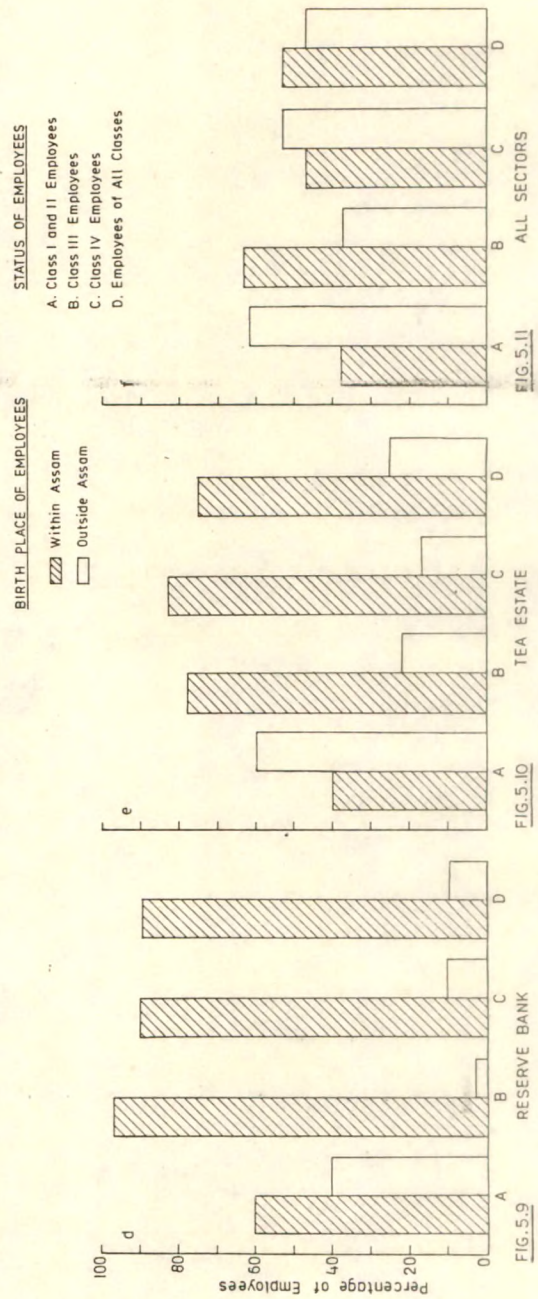
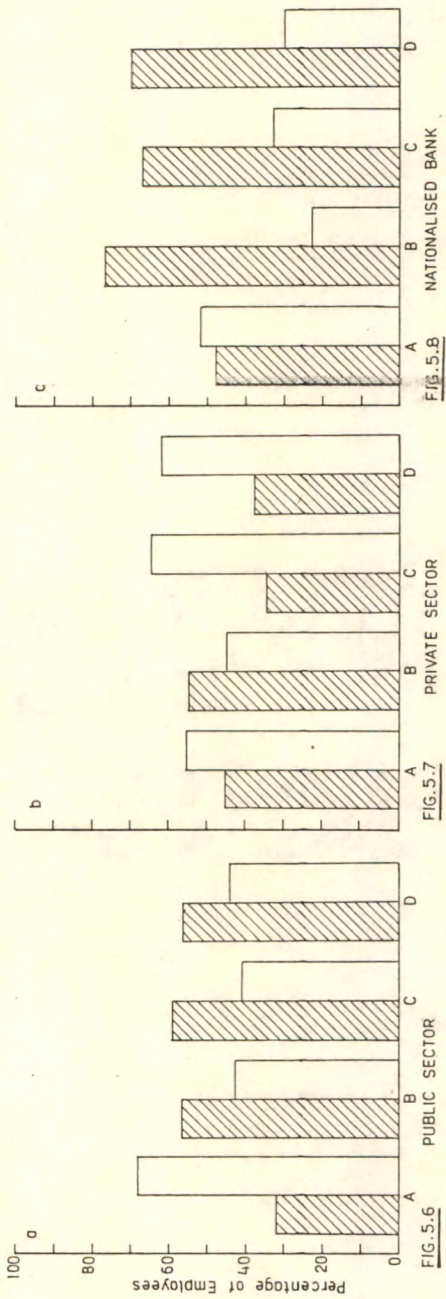
(Contd.)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
2 5 Nationalised Banks			Assem	170 (47.6)	1119 (76.9)	444 (66.6)	1733 (69.9)
Outside Assem				187 (52.4)	337 (23.1)	222 (33.4)	746 (30.1)
Total				357 (100.0)	1456 (100.0)	666 (100.0)	2479 (100.0)
1 Reserved Bank of India			Assem	25 (59.5)	163 (97.0)	81 (90.0)	269 (89.7)
(Sub office Gauhati)			Outside Assem	17 (40.5)	5 (3.0)	9 (10.0)	31 (10.3)
Total				42 (100.0)	168 (100.0)	90 (100.0)	300 (100.0)
241 Tea Estates			Assem	389 (40.4)	3078 (78.0)	1634 (82.8)	5001 (75.4)
Outside Assem				426 (59.6)	866 (22.0)	338 (17.2)	1630 (24.6)
Total				715 (100.0)	3944 (100.0)	1972 (100.0)	6631 (100.0)
284 Grand Total (All Sectors)			Assem	1258 (37.8)	11848 (63.2)	10925 (46.8)	24031 (52.9)
Outside Assem				2073 (62.2)	6886 (36.8)	12408 (53.2)	21367 (47.1)
Total				3331 (100.0)	18734 (100.0)	23333 (100.0)	45398 (100.0)

(The figures in brackets represent percentage of totals under each type of industry/undertakings).

Source: Report of the Employment Review Committee, Sixth Report Fifth Assembly, Gauhati, 1977.

and class IV jobs. The figure 5.7 shows that in the private sector the proportion of workers born in Assam is lower in class I, II and IV jobs and higher in class III jobs. However, taken all categories of jobs together, the proportion of workers born in Assam is higher than those born outside. In figure 5.8 where the pattern of employment in nationalised banks is shown the proportion of workers born in Assam is almost equal to those born outside Assam in class I and II jobs. In other categories the proportion of those born within Assam is higher. In figure 5.9, the proportion of Assam - born employees in the Reserve bank is shown to be strikingly higher in all the categories of jobs. In figure 5.10 the proportion of workers in tea estates in class I and II jobs born outside Assam is higher than those born inside. In class III and IV jobs the situation is just the reverse, those born inside the state being larger in proportion. In figure 5.11 where the overall pattern of employment in the state is shown, the proportion of those born outside the state is higher in class I and II posts whereas in class III posts those born in the state dominate. To sum up, 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



Histograms showing distribution of employees by status and place of birth in Public Sector (Fig. 5.6), Private Sector (Fig. 5.7), Nationalised Banks (Fig. 5.8), Reserve Bank (Fig. 5.9), Tea Estates (Fig. 5.10) and in all Sectors (Fig. 5.11).

Assamese middle class had not earlier entered, have further aggravated the problems of the State. And the issue has been made more complicated by imparting a political overtone to it. Therefore, at the economic level, a programme of balanced development of all cultural regions should be emphasized to remove inter-regional economic differences. Equality of opportunity in the economic sphere has also to be ensured. Besides this economic argument, there are also strong political reasons for advocating the removal of regional imbalances.

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. A political party can be looked upon as a coalition of interests, a coalition which by the very nature of the activity is shifting because each functioning political party is trying to expand its activities and this it can do by cutting into the mass base of the other. Interests, similarly, are competing with one another so as to capture the maximum portions of the resources (limited by their very nature) that the political system commands. In an ideal situation, therefore, every potential and actual interest gets articulated and aggravated by the very situation of dynamic challenge inherent in

the situation that keeps the system working. Language is an important tool for the political parties to impart their influence on masses. In Assam we find powerful demand for Assamese as the official language backed by mostly students, and professionals who are normally categorized 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 official language issue just before 1962 general election 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.

The Indian National Congress held that 'Assamese language is one of the national languages of India laid down in the Constitution. This language like others has to be encouraged in every way and should be progressively used by the people whose mother tongue it is. In promoting its use in various public activities it should be remembered that its use should not be enforced in areas where other languages prevail. Many areas of India are bilingual or multi-lingual and each of the languages do not grow in conflict with each other, but they flourish in co-operation each helping the other. The question of

language, therefore, in Assam is one that should be settled co-operatively by representatives of various parts of Assam state so that this sense of conflict should disappear and an atmosphere of co-operative endeavour for the good of the state should take place'.¹⁵ The Assam Congress Party was in favour of implementing the central body's stand but it had also to adjust its position in the interest of its own local success. The Proja Socialist Party did not force any general line over the question of linguistic reorganisation of states. The party allowed every state unit to pursue its own line without prejudicing its position in that area. But even this cautious stand could not prevent conflict within the leadership and between party units at state and national levels. The P.S.P. thought that the language issue was a handy stick to beat the Congress ministry. The P.S.P., despite its all India commitments, took an active part in the language movements in Assam. Its state units were identified with district and regional issues. Its support in Assam was derived primarily from Assamese fears against the domination of another linguistic group, the Bengali. Therefore, the political success of the P.S.P. may be attributed mainly to this strategy. The P.S.P. at the relevant time,

15. All India Congress Committee Resolution, Congress Bulletin, July 1960.

spearheaded the movement only to survive as a party exploiting the linguistic sub-nationalities.¹⁶ For example, the Cachar P.S.P. clashed openly with the P.S.P. in the Brahmaputra valley. Incidentally it may be mentioned that almost all the members of the P.S.P. in Cachar resigned their party membership as a protest against the stand of the state leadership of their party on the Assam language issue. Thus the attitude of P.S.P. to the official language question in Assam was a product of factional compromise. Even at the national level P.S.P's stand was very much different. Hareswar Goswami, as a chairman of the P.S.P. in Assam, successfully fought for the cause of Assamese. On the other hand, Dr. Ghose, the Bengal P.S.P. Chief, joined the leaders of his state in condemnation of the government of Assam and the Assamese. He even instigated Sangram Parishad leaders to carry on with their agitational programme till their demands were fulfilled. Moreover in their Madras executive, the P.S.P. asked for a 'just and fair solution of the Assam language problem'.¹⁷ Therefore, it clearly indicates that P.S.P. outside Assam did not support Hareswar Goswami's stand as just and fair. Thus, it shows that the attitude of P.S.P. to the official language question was a product of factional compromise.

16. Hareswar Goswami's various statements in this regard and of his colleagues may be noted. Refer. Assam Assembly Debates, Part VI, June 1960. The Assam Tribune, July 5, 1961, Amrit Patrika, Aug 6, 1960.

17. The Assam Tribune, July 5, 1961.

The socialist party took a different position in the midst of the disturbances. It came in support of the demands of the second official state language i.e. Bengali in Assam. Jay Prakash Narayan commented that Bengali should be given in Assam a status of state language.¹⁸ In other words, Narayan supported the Bengali chauvinistic demand of the Sangram Parishad.

The position of the communist party in India did not differ much from that of Congress. The party executive suggested that it stood by any resolution that sought to declare Assamese as the official language in the state without imposing any compulsion on the minority in the hills and Cachar districts. The minority in the whole state would have their right to petition, appeal and to have education through their own language. However, till the demand for declaration of Assamese as official language of Assam did not gain momentum, the communist party of Assam remained silent. They were more alert to the need for not alienating the Bengali voters who were instrumental in the victory of at least three out of four of their M.L.A's in the 1957 general election. They took a decision supporting the demand only at the end of 1960, when the demand became strong enough to be neglected only at the risk of losing Assamese support altogether.¹⁹ However, some members of the party, swayed by linguistic sentiment, defied the party

18. Times of India, June 3, 1961.

19. The Assam Tribune, April 25, 1961.

directives. For example, Nilmoni Borthakur, an influential member of the party resigned his membership of the assembly on the language issue. Achintya Kumar Bhattacharyya of Silchar, a member of this party, on the other hand was involved in the Sangram Parishad movement in Cachar. Thus in Assam in the words of the C.P.I. organ, 'the Communist Party has been hopelessly entangled in the web of communal conflicts among Bengalis and Assamese, Assamese and Tribals, Hindus and Muslims with little benefit to Communist strength',²⁰. 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.²¹ All political parties in Assam based their strategy of struggle for the electoral battle (in 1962) more or less on the same consideration. They tried to enlist the support of the middle class by playing on their sentiments as came their fancy. Thus in Assam, elections were fought mainly on emotional issues rather than on definitive ideological basis.

20. New age, 10 July, 1961

21. Amrit Bazar Patrika, July 3, 1960.

Congress and Factional Politics

Regional factors play a major role in promoting factions within the Congress. Unlike other issues in politics, language is a part of the edifice on which Congress is built. The factional fight in the leadership of Assam Congress is not a new phenomenon. It has been continuing with varying degrees of intensity for a pretty long time particularly ever since the second general election. Language riots of 1960 brought in sharp focus the desperate attempt of the dislodged groups to pull down the ministerial group from power. Factional leaders whipped up emotional feelings of the people and created an alarming situation leading to a total disturbance of normal life and peace and order. The disgruntled Congressmen had proved by their actions that they would not care less even to satisfy their selfish ends.²²

Similarly the central leadership dismissed the situation as a law and order problem created by a section of the student leaders on the reported advice of the Chief Minister. The grievances of the people were exploited for their factional ends. Thus the 1960 language agitation in Assam was the handiwork of the ruling authority, to a very large extent due to its acts of omission and commission.

The resolution adopted by the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee for the use of Assamese as the official

22. Shillong Observer, October 15, 1961.

language led to factionalism within the party. It brought about an open rift inside the A.P.C.C., as all the 18 Pradesh Congress members from Cachar were opposed to it. Moreover, a section of Cachar Congressmen had actively supported the Sangrem Parishad movement of Cachar to agitate against the Assam Official Language Bill. The dissident voice of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee came from Cachar section of the Congress itself, for its electoral base comes from the Bengali population which is about 80 per cent in Cachar. To follow and implement the A.P.C.C.'s resolution would indirectly mean the loss of their electoral support. The Cachar Congress Committee also adopted a resolution opposing the Assam Congress Committee. The Karimganj District Congress Committee urged the government to introduce Bengali also as an additional state language. To further popularize the view, the Cachar Congress leaders organised a Bengali language conference. The combined pressure of disturbances in Cachar led the six Congress M.L.A's to submit their resignation²³ on 27 May, 1961, two days before the declaration of the district-wide hartal over the language issue. They protested against the police firing at Silchar on 19 May, 1961. They have also urged the Union government to institute a judicial inquiry into what they described as 'brutal firing' in Silchar. In a joint statement they appealed to the Prime Minister and Home Minister to intervene in the language issue in Assam.

23. Times of India, 27 May, 1961.

Thus, the three district Congress committees of Cachar, viz., Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi took a leading part in organising demonstrations against the Assam official language Act. The Assam Provincial Congress raised its feeble voice against these activities.²⁴ Sarat Sinha, General Secretary, A.P.C.C., in a statement said, 'some congressmen of Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi district Congress are reported to have actively supported the Sangram Parishad in its movement against the Assam Official Language Act threatening to paralyse the administration. If any Congressman is aggrieved at any decision of the Pradesh Congress Committee it is open to him to make representation to the A.I.C.C. against such decisions or can appeal to Union government against any members of the state government. But surely in such a matter they cannot join hands with these who are opposed to the Congress and its government'.²⁵ However, nothing prevented the Cachar Congress to go a step forward; they demanded a break from the A.P.C.C. and the formation of their three district Congress Committees into an independent Congress Committee.²⁶ But this demand was turned down by the Congress High Command. Finally, the executive of the Assam Pradesh

24. Shillong Observer, Sept. 15, 1960.

25. The Assam Tribune, May 9, 1961.

26. Neog, M. edited, Assam's Language Question, Jorhat, 1961, pp. 30-31.

Congress Committee, meeting on 11 and 12 July, suspended four Congress leaders of Cachar for their role in the language agitation in that district in violation of the directive of the A.P.C.C. The executive also called upon the three district Congress Committees of Cachar to show cause why disciplinary action should not be taken against them for acting against the A.P.C.C. directive. The four suspended Congress leaders of Cachar were Shrimoti Jyotsna Chanda, Shri Ranendra Mohan Das, Shri Nanda Kishore Singh and Shri Abdul Rahman. It may be noted that Mr. Abdul Rahman was the President of the Sangram Parishad of Cachar which initiated the language agitation in the Cachar district. It could also be pointed out that the Shanti Parishad which was formed in the wake of the language agitation and which, though not officially sponsored by the Congress, had the blessings of the Congress bosses of the state behind it. Thus in Cachar a significant shift in the alignment of forces inside the Congress had taken place before election and it had its impact on the general situation over there. As a newspaper commented, 'the ministerial group allied itself with the Muslim communalism against the language movement there. Infact, the ministerial group itself was responsible for raising the communal passion there among the Muslims with a view to disrupt the language movement there instead of facing the movement with a democratic solution.'²⁷

27. Shillong Observer, May 10, 1961.

Much more than the opposition from Cachar and tribal politicians, the internal conflict based on individual politicking in political rivalry centering round the issue of implementation of official language policy dominated the scene. The organizational and programmatic²⁸ weakness of the opposition parties helped accentuate the factional dissension within the Congress. Some Congress leaders sought political diversion through linguistic conflicts and used them for serving their factional ends. The faction opposed to the Chief Minister led by Moinul Haque Chaudhary from Silchar in the Cachar District found an opportunity to dislodge him from power. Hindustan standard thus commented, 'ambitious Congress leaders in collaboration with persons who have reasons to be annoyed with the policy of Mr. Chaliha have been trying for sometime past to control Congress affairs in the state. They found in the anti-Bengali sentiments prevailing in a section of Assamese people a handy weapon to strike the government of Mr. Chaliha with'.²⁹

A smaller section led by Mr. Debeswar Sarma, the former education Minister of Assam, wanted immediate implementation of Assamese language Bill not only in the Assam valley, but also in Cachar and the tribal areas thus putting

28. Though Socialist Party had a programme opposed to the Congress, organizationally it was too weak to launch an independent campaign. Relatively stronger parties like the P.S.P. and the C.P.I. tailed behind the Congress.

29. Hindustan Standard, July 7, 1960.

himself in opposition to both Chaliha and Chaudhary factions. The language agitations thus brought into sharp focus the desperate attempt of the dislodged group to pull down the ministerial group from power. Moreover it resulted in a realignment of forces in the ruling party and exposed some of the vulnerable points of the ministerial group.³⁰ There were enough evidence to show that the anti-Chaliha group also indulged in allegations against the Chaliha ministry. The Assam Tribune in its editorial³¹ thus commented, 'these disturbances only serve to confirm our view that the Chaliha cabinet had bungled the language issue. By marking time and thereby allowing the weeds of opposition to grow under its feet and by thoughtlessly suggesting that the language move should originate from the linguistic minorities, the government has caused storm of protest, where there might have been just a stir of opposition.'

It is nodoubt true that the major responsibilities for the language disturbances also lay with the anti-Chaliha group of Congressmen who had joined hands with the avowedly chauvinist elements in whipping up the passion of the people with a view to dislodging the Chaliha ministry. However, Chaliha with his faction continued to bank on the support of the central leaders in settling its factional differences through a compromise linguistic formula (Pant and Shastri)

30. Shillong Observer, 10 June, 1960.

31. The Assam Tribune, 15 July, 1960.

preserving their former political position. Thus, the linguistic episode, to a large extent, was the offshoot of factional squabble in the ruling party.

Election Results and Language Issue

No clear correlation could be established between the stands taken by different political parties on the language question and the election results. Issues other than language had also gone into consideration in the 1962 election. The Congress party remained in power increasing its majority by eight more seats in the assembly. The P.S.P's strength got reduced from eight to six, while C.P.I. lost all its four seats (refer Table 5.10). The Cachar district returned the Congress candidates with one seat less and the independents, presumably supported by the Sangram Parishad, secured eight seats polling 40.6 per cent of total votes. The Congress percentage of votes was reduced. The dissenting Chaudhary faction which supported the demand of the Bengalis again happened to be the official nominee of the Congress. The factionalism within the Congress did not however, result in the weakening of the party's electoral position.

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 merits. The tendency

Table 5.10 : Assam State Election Results 1957-62).

Party	Contested		Won		LD		PCT	
	1957 (2)	1962 (3)	1957 (4)	1962 (5)	1957 (6)	1962 (7)	1957 (8)	1962 (9)
Congress	101	103	71	79	1	2	52.4	48.3
P.S.P.	36	53	8	6	8	21	12.7	12.7
C.P.I.	22	31	4	0	3	12	8.1	6.4
T.U.P	-	-	9	-	-	-	-	-
R.C.P.I.	-	8	1	1	-	5	-	1.2
IND	78	85	12	8	76	121	26.8	23.8
APHLC		15		11		1		5.5
SP		14		0		9		1.5
JS		4		0		3		0.2
ACK		4		0		3		0.2

Party Abbreviations:

APHLC : All Party Hill Congress Conference
 ACK : Achik Asonga Chilchakgipa Kotak.
 TUP : Tribal Union Party

Symbol Used in Table:

Cont.: Candidates of a party contesting in the district.
 Won : Seat won by the party's candidate
 LD : Number of the party's candidates who lost the security
 PCT : Percentage of the total valid votes in the district polled by the party's candidate.

Source: Baxter, District Voting Trend in India, U.S.A., 1974.

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 this movement. There is ample evidence to show that these large scale atrocities 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 congress party and public life. Some sections in the administration, at different levels, even went to the extent of encouraging and abetting the rioters.³² Faced with the growth of democratic forces and internal factional dissensions within the ruling circles, some Congress leaders sought political diversion through linguistic conflicts and used them for serving their factional ends. Some local leaders and elements of the P.S.P. also took leading part in inciting the people against the minorities. Behind the agitation anti-social elements were also involved in rioting and destruction. The working class and peasantry,³³ for instance, have been a passive factor in these agitations. 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. As for

32. Refer, Memorandum submitted by Gauhati Student Union to Pandit Nehru during his visit to Assam 17, 18 and 19 July, 1960.

33. 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, The Assam Tribune, June 15, 1960.

the political parties, factionalism and particularist group politics ruled to roast.

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 etc. The role of newspaper is not confined merely to catering of news to the public but in creating and moulding public opinion as well. It is because of the latter that one should examine the political affiliations, economic control and other strings attached to these newspapers before going to analyse their impact on the society with regard to a particular issue like language, religion etc. 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 and malicious 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. However, it deserves to be noted that the newspapers of Assam being limited in their circulation do not reach as large a readership as the Calcutta-based newspapers do. Hence, the impact of Calcutta -based papers appears to be more telling compared to their Assamese counterparts.

The papers in Calcutta commented on the language agitation in a manner that was calculated to inflaming the young and excitable elements in the Assamese community. What is more, many small matters which otherwise would not have received any notice, were exaggerated by the said press as something very serious and earth-shaking. The Calcutta press took up the cause only from the minority point of view. Their main argument was that Assam being a multilingual state there was no question for Assamese to be declared as the state language. The Ananda Bazar Patrika editorially commented,³⁴ 'where the population is a mixture of several linguistic groups, each group having a distinct language and a distinct culture of its own and where the tribals and the Bengali speaking people together form two-thirds of the

34. Ananda Bazar Patrika, July, 7, 1960.

population, it passes one's understanding how the under-developed language of a particular group can be imposed on the rest when that language too cannot claim superiority over others'. To quote another instance, 'there is no doubt that the anti-Bengali movement or the so-called 'Bengal Kheda' movement, which is being systematically carried on the Assam for the last few years is due to the narrow political outlook of some of her political leaders. A few years ago inflammatory speeches of Sri Ambikagiri Roy Chaudhary, the so-called patriot poet of Assam, resulted in a communal riot in which Bengalees suffered a great loss to their properties'.³⁵ It cannot be denied that some section of the press behaved irresponsibly and do not seem to be aware of the consequences of what they were writing. For instance, the Hindustan standard stated in a leader³⁶, 'the Bengali speaking minority in Assam are therefore in need of not only armed protection against violence but also political protection for safeguarding their status as citizens of the state. Bengalis in Assam should not be condemned for their language to the status of an inferior citizen which the partition of India has imposed on Hindus left in Pakistan for the religion they professed. The present position in Assam seems to be that whosoever speaks Bengali is regarded as an enemy of the state. This feeling will

35. Amrit Bazar Patrika , Aug. 7, 1960.

36. Hindustan Standard, July 5, 1960.

grow if only Assamese is given the official status but not if Bengali also is simultaneously given the same status in the state'. The publication of untrue and provocative reports added fuel to fire. The Hindustan Standard of 10 July, 1960 reported a news item under the caption 'Assam situation now out of gear', 'the armed mob held up the train which was carrying some 250 Bengali persons, dragged down the passengers from various compartments and attacked them with deadly weapons'. The presentation of provocative news items tended to excite local anger of agitationist. Publication of inflammatory news items, write ups and editorials helped to rouse passions.³⁷ to the detriment of preservations of social harmony. In regard to the solution to the problem the paper commented,³⁸ 'the only way to resolve the chronic incompatibility is to form linguistic states which is the established policy in India though it has been flagrantly violated in case of the constitution of the state of West Bengal, with the result that a very large number of Bengalees occupying compact, sizeable areas have been left at the mercy of aggressive linguistic majorities in Assam and Bihar. The only effective way would appear to be their integration with West Bengal which will destroy the very roots of misunderstanding and the consequential offensive against the Bengalees'. The chauvinist trends in Bengali

37. Hindustan Standard, July 13, 1960.

38. Hindustan Standard, July 15, 1960.

thought³⁹ were responsible to a large extent in damaging the situations.

The Assam Press also did not remain quiet. It played its part by publishing intensive and unrelenting propaganda against the Bengalis living in Assam. Newspapers like Dainik Janambhumi, Natun Assamiya, Assam Tribune, Asom Bani played an important role in this regard. The Assam Press expressed great dissatisfaction over the government's policy criticising, among other things, the delay in coming to a decision on the official language issue. The Assam Tribune in an editorial commented,⁴⁰ 'It is a blunder that the government of Assam had not straight way introduced the Bill for making Assamese the state language, but had needlessly terrified and had exaggerated fears of opposition. This policy of vacillation had itself encouraged the reactionary forces of opposition'. In another context, the Assam Tribune editorial commented,⁴¹ 'Indeed the principal source of linguistic tension in Assam is the overemphasis of minority rights almost to the extent of pushing out majority rights'. The Assam Sahitya Sabha played an important role

39. Chaudhary, N., Assamer Bhasa Danga (in Bengali) Calcutta 1973; Choudhary, P.P. Cacharer Kanna' in Bengali'72. These literature have distorted facts and dissipated false and provocative news.

40. The Assam Tribune, July 25, 1960.

41. The Assam Tribune, July 3, 1961.

in the language movement. Their published views⁴² had definitely moulded local opinion. The Sabha duly criticised very strongly 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.

Inflammatory pamphlets, bulletins were also responsible for aggravating the situation. For example, the relevant portion of a cyclostyled leaflet issued on the 30th of June, 1960 allegedly by the 'youths of Nowgong' read as follows⁴³, 'Brutal oppression has been committed on the Assamese by the Bengalis of Assam who have grown by breathing air and eating the food of Assam. As a protest against this, if you do not hold an open meeting within seven days, then starting from the 8 next for an indefinite period every Bengali, whether boy or girl, gentleman or rustic will be assaulted and tortured wherever found and their shops and houses will be looted, so that the mischievous propaganda of lies being conducted by the Bengali newspapers of Calcutta is proved true to the latter'.

42. '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 Patrika (editorial), 3rd issue, 1960.

43. Refer, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Goreswar Disturbances, Assam Govt. Press, 1961.

It seems chauvinist trend in Assamese thought⁴⁴ also played its role in creating animosity between these two communities. 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 the 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.⁴⁵ 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 supersession of the fundamental rights and endangers the life and the property of a large section of people, we think there is justification for applying checks on that freedom"⁴⁶. When passions run high on either side on an issue involving emotional involvement on a mass scale, sobriety becomes the casualty.

44. An Assamese novel entitled 'Mati-kar' (whose land is this) elaborately outlined the techniques of Bengal Kheda Movement.

45. Lok Sabha Debates, 1st September, 1960.

46. Santhanam, K., Assam Riots: Reports of M.P's Delegation, Hindusthan Times, September 18, 1960.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Having examined the various aspects of the language problem of Assam vis-a-vis the state language issue in the preceding chapters, an attempt is made here to sum up the analysis and to see to it if any conclusion could be drawn as a result of the study.

The overriding thrust in this politico-social enquiry has been to understand the language question in its historico-theoretical perspective and to focus on the salient features that are considered causative or contributory in this regard. A theoretical perspective is necessary to locate the problem in its proper context. Various concepts like nation, nationalities which are related to the problem have also been examined. The language issue cannot be treated in isolation from the national question that embraces the entire complex of relationship between ethnic communities and, above all, between nations that have already been established and those in the process of formation. Therefore, the language question of Assam has been examined in the context of different facets of the national question in India,

thus considering it as the right perspective. Different facets of the national question in India include, (i) the historical stage through which the national problem has evolved, (ii) the problem of national minorities, (iii) multinational character and (iv) the uneven development of various regions inhabited by different nationalities. An in depth study of these aspects provided the backdrop against which the language issue was examined.

Coming back to the specific case of Assam, we find that the relations between major linguistic groups, namely Assamese and Bengali, were strained primarily due to historical reasons. The Assamese-Bengali mistrust in Assam dates back roughly to the period of British rule beginning in the year 1826. The process of colonisation aimed at restructuring the Assamese society and monetising its economy with a view to gaining more imperial benefits. The administration, land revenue and taxation policy as well as super and infra-structural growth were geared to the major task of colonial exploitation. Communities became victims of this colonial exploitation. British capital penetrated the economy and started building up an infra-structure in the interest of accumulation of profit. The tea-industry, for example, ever since its development in Assam had opened the flood-gates of immigration into the state. Demands for trading, clerical,

skilled and unskilled services invited further immigration of suitable personnel belonging to non-indigenous ethnic groups such as Marwari traders and the Bengali professionals. A further plank of imperialist policy in Assam was to suppress the local language and set up artificial barriers for the sake of a cheap and simplified administration. This policy affected the local middle class and injections of differences between them and the immigrants served as an instrument that helped the doctrine of 'Divide and Rule'. The Assamese language stood suppressed during the entire period of 1836-1871. As a result, the services of the Bengali educated persons became indispensable in almost all the government school and offices. Thus in Assam, as elsewhere in British India, the establishment of a hierarchy of new officials operating in a new legal and administrative machinery through a new language opened the way to wide-spread exploitation. The polemic between the Assamese and Bengali language since then had been continuous which identifies in many ways the fight between the interest of an immigrant and comparatively advanced middle class on the one hand and an indigenous less advanced and suppressed middle class on the other.

Different waves of migration into Assam - the Hindu Bengalis, the tea labourers and the small but powerful Marwari element - all these continued throughout the 19th and early 20th century. The impact of these migrations

continued to be felt for a long time. The quite different political circumstances attending upon the second great wave of migration into Assam, that of the Bengali Muslim peasantry specially brought to cultivate jute to feed the British owned jute mills, had altogether different political and economic motivations. Their impact on the language situation was qualitatively different.

On the whole, imperialism acted as a brake on the development of the forces of production, communication and education. Further, it had impaired the consciousness of the Assamese people causing stagnation. The economic changes that took place in the United Assam-Bengal province under colonization had a disintegrating effect on the age-old amity between the two communities, Assamese and Bengali, who shared an isolated single territory. The problem would not have been complicated, but for the fact of the concentration of Bengali speaking population in certain areas like Cachar, Goalpara and certain urban pockets in the Assam valley districts. This provided, as it historically did in other parts of India, a specific area where politics could be manipulated. Thus the tension between the Assamese and Bengali communities in Assam had been nurtured by the British, and later by the ruling authorities as suited their interests.

The post-independence period of Assam was a period of economic and social tensions; The failure of

independence and partition to put a stop to the influx from East Bengal (subsequently Bangladesh) had added a new dimension to the existing tension between linguistic communities. There has been a steady inflow of Hindu refugees and the continuous infiltration of Muslim peasants from Bangladesh. The official language issue acquired a tremendous importance immediately after independence. 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 skilfully 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. The political parties dependent on support across the communities agreed not to raise this inconvenient influx issue. But they had hardly contributed to a genuine integration of communities and the evolution of a composite cultural pattern. On the whole, political parties succeeded in putting a lid on the influx

issue. Immigration, exodus, infiltration and evacuation in one form or the other still remain as active sores in the body politic, retarding economic development and causing tensions in the cultural and social spheres.

This large scale in-migration has produced many deleterious effects on the economy of the state. The most serious and ominous of these effects has been felt in the land economy of Assam. The Assam's economy is predominantly agrarian. More than 70 per cent of the population of the state derive their means of livelihood mainly from this sector. But the overcrowding in agriculture and the consequent pressure of population on land have led to the subdivision and fragmentation of land holdings, disguised unemployment and all this caused stagnation in agricultural productivity. For example, in a single decade from 1961 to 1971, the size of per capita agricultural holding in Assam registered a decline by 26 per cent as against the national average decline of 16.7 per cent during the same decade. The State Planning Board of Assam in the draft Fifth plan estimated that 77 per cent of the rural population of the state lived below the poverty line. The massive inflow of migrants to the rural sector has greatly contributed in keeping the productivity of agriculture stationary at a low level by intensifying the population pressure on land. The trend in agricultural production

compared to population growth is also not very satisfactory. The census data (Statistical Hand Book , Assam, 1978) on land use pattern indicate a net sown area of 33 per cent and there is no further scope to increase the area under cultivation. The proportion of area under forest has come down from 38.5 per cent to 26.3 per cent in the Assam plains. Thus the land-man ratio is likely to narrow down ^{with} increase in population. Another serious effect of this heavy pressure on land is the creation of a considerable number of disguised unemployment in the rural areas. In order to pave the way for agricultural development in the state, this heavy pressure on land has to be eased.

The state has also lagged behind many other states of the country in the sphere of industrial development. The share of Assam in the country's net product from manufacturing sector accounted for 3.1 per cent during 1960-61 and then it came down to 2.4 per cent during 1965-66. It has further declined to 2.3 per cent and 2.2 per cent during 1971-72 and 1972-73 respectively. The per capita income of this region has also shown a tendency to decline. In 1978-79 the per capita income in Assam was Rs. 852 compared to Rs. 1,236 in India as a whole. In the absence of any major rise in the per capita income, trade and commerce of the region have also failed to take off and led to a limited employment potential. The problem of unemployment in Assam has become acute due to slow rate of economic development

and exceptionally high rate of population. In a society where there is private ownership over land and other means of production are limited, this sudden influx of a huge number of homeless people inevitably creates 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 singlemost important language of the immigrants. Therefore, the official language issue 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 a 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 language in Assam because that would mean equality of opportunity in employment as well as political and social status. The official language 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. The fact that the whole situation is a crisis of underdevelopment should receive serious consideration. Measures for balanced economic growth at accelerated rates should be the collective endeavour of the central and state governments. This would remove the isolation and the feeling of negligence as well as the scope for the privileged few to exploit the situation to their own advantage.

Thus, due primarily to historical reasons, we find in Assam that 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. Nodoubt, the official 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 disturbance of normal life and peace and order. They proved by their actions that they would not care less even to satisfy their selfish ends. The Congress party in Assam fully benefited from the block voting of large sections of the so-called immigrants. Infact, the immigrants' vote was one of the main props of the long Congress rule in Assam. It was generally observed during the agitations that there was a variance in attitude and

behaviour between national party organization and their local units. The central organs of the national parties were under strain and were faced with the problem of defiance by the local units. 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, language issue appears to have been utilized as a pawn in the game of power politics. The tendency throughout the period following independence in all these language agitations has predominantly been of middle class orientation. This is not to deny the just demands of the majority of the population.

An examination of the language problem in historical perspective thus suggests that all steps should be taken for the development of Assamese language and culture. At the same time, while giving official language status to Assamese, the constitutional rights of the minorities should also be protected. It is important to guard against the tendencies of national narrow mindedness and linguistic exclusiveness. The Bengali leaders, instead of constantly harping on the theme of minority rights, would do well to concede that minority rights in Assam can be fruitfully enjoyed only when they recognize

the majority rights of Assamese nationality as a historical necessity and make the inevitable adjustments befitting the composite culture of the land.

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APPENDIX I

Population by Language in Different Districts of Assam (1911-1971)

State/District	1911		1921		1931		1951		1961		1971	
	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
Assam	1530692 (35.31)	166002 (26.90)	1723111 (33.43)	1428805 (27.60)	1922291 (32.32)	1698927 (27.56)	4971229 (56.29)	1734466 (19.64)	6784271 (57.14)	2089248 (17.60)	8904917 (60.89)	2882039 (19.71)
Goalpara	85329 (14.21)	34772 (57.90)	138810 (18.20)	405710 (53.21)	161179 (18.26)	476433 (53.97)	687027 (62.00)	193379 (17.45)	1021145 (66.14)	185020 (11.98)	1414470 (63.57)	327122 (14.70)
Kamrup	529750 (79.23)	8504 (1.27)	576205 (75.46)	50855 (6.66)	649512 (66.50)	170409 (17.45)	1177587 (79.01)	225211 (15.11)	1665994 (80.77)	203687 (9.88)	2188506 (76.68)	352210 (12.34)
Darrang	166988 (44.37)	57986 (15.41)	175965 (36.59)	86680 (18.04)	193736 (32.85)	95535 (16.20)	714395 (77.35)	64151 (6.95)	839788 (65.12)	127021 (9.80)	1090949 (62.84)	231173 (13.31)
Lakhimpur	158535 (33.99)	76436 (16.29)	187379 (29.83)	105073 (16.89)	236933 (30.44)	78699 (10.11)	721535 (64.06)	85902 (7.63)	985157 (63.00)	127985 (8.18)	1335380* (62.91)	198239 (9.34)
Nowgong	195649 (64.44)	12715 (4.19)	210661 (52.94)	72101 (18.12)	237406 (42.20)	193349 (34.37)	612802 (69.09)	207254 (23.39)	929843 (76.80)	209716 (17.32)	1239156 (73.92)	324499 (19.31)
Sibsagar	391584 (56.73)	127816 (18.52)	430655 (52.31)	131351 (15.96)	503603 (53.96)	73351 (7.86)	1023569 (84.44)	41581 (3.43)	1289451 (85.49)	46036 (3.05)	1575852 (85.77)	68588 (3.73)
Cachar	1484 (0.21)	496671 (69.60)	2015 (0.27)	528286 (70.29)	2231 (0.28)	564316 (70.22)	3462 (0.31)	860772 (77.14)	4542 (0.33)	1085851 (78.77)	6840 (0.40)	1332269 (77.76)
Baro Hills	309 (9.19)	18913 (11.90)	481 (0.27)	20100 (11.22)	5573 (2.92)	20453 (10.71)	9651 (3.99)	23264 (9.61)	16073 (5.23)	28945 (9.42)	51625 (13.61)	37005 (9.76)
United Khasi and Jaintia Hills	884 (0.38)	2627 (1.12)	862 (0.35)	4315 (1.77)	1876 (0.65)	5547 (1.91)	15296 (4.20)	13691 (3.77)	21738 (7.77)	32742 (7.08)	2139 (2.81)	10935 (14.38)
United Mikir and North Cachar Hills	80 (0.29)	15789 (57.84)	104 (0.39)	15918 (59.52)	128 (0.39)	19503 (59.38)	5796 (3.50)	7222 (4.37)	21738 (7.77)	23563 (8.42)		
Mizo Hills	79 (0.12)	773 (0.85)	73 (0.07)	1416 (1.44)	114 (0.09)	1333 (1.07)	129 (0.07)	12039 (6.14)	275 (0.10)	18682 (7.02)		

* Includes Dibrugarh District.

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages to total population

Source : Census of India, Vol. III, 1911, Vol. III, 1921, Vol. III Part I-1931, Vol. XIII Part I-A, 1961, Vol. III Part V-A, 1961, Vol. III Part I-A 1971.

APPENDIX - 2

THE ASSAM OFFICIAL LANGUAGE ACT, 1960

(As Amended up to 10th November, 1967)

Received the Assent of the Governor on the 17th Dec.
1960.

An
Act

to declare the Official Language of the State of Assam

Preamble

Whereas Article 345 of the Constitution provides that the Legislature of a State may by law adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the State as the language to be used for official purposes of the State and for matters hereinafter appearing:

It is hereby enacted in the 11th year of the Republic of India, as follows:-

Short title
extent and
commencement

1.(A) This Act may be called the
Assam Official Language Act, 1960.

(B) It extends to the whole of the
State of Assam.

(C) It shall come into force on such
date as the State Government may, by notification
in the Official Gazetteer, appoint

different dates may be appointed for different parts of the State of Assam for official purposes and for different parts of the State of Assam:

Provided that the date or dates appointed by the State Government in respect of any of the parts of the State of Assam shall not be later than (ten)¹ years from the date of assent to this act in first published in the official Gazette.

2. In this Act, unless there is anything repugnant in the subject or context :-

- Definitions.
- (a) "Autonomous District" means an area defined as such under paragraph 1(1) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.
 - (b) "Autonomous Region" means an area defined as such under paragraph 1(2) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.
 - (c) "District Council" means a District Council constituted under paragraph 2 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India
 - (d) (deleted)
 - (e) (deleted)²
 - (f) "Prescribe" means prescribed by rules made under this Act.

1. Substituted by Assam Act XXII of 1964.

2. The clauses (d) and (e) were omitted vide Assam Act XXII of 1961.

(g) "Regional Council" means a Regional Council constituted under paragraph 2 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

3. Without prejudice to the provisions of Articles 346 and 347 of the Constitution of India and subject as hereinafter provided,

Official
language
for
official
purposes
of the
State of
Assam

Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the State of Assam:

Provided that the English language, so long as the use thereof is permissible for official purposes of the Union under any law made by the Parliament in this behalf) and thereafter Hindi in place of English, shall also be used for such official purposes of the Secretariat and the offices of the heads of the Departments of the State Government and in such manner as may be prescribed :

Provided further that -

- (a) all ordinances promulgated under Article 213 of the Constitution of India:
- (b) all Acts passed by the State Legislature:
- (c) all Bills to be introduced or amendments there to be moved in the State Legislature and

(d) all Orders, Regulations, Rules and Bye-Laws issued by the State Government under the Constitution of India or any law made by Parliament or the Legislature of the State shall be published in the official Gazette in the Assamese language.

Safeguard of the use of language in the Autonomous region and in the Autonomous District.

4. Notwithstanding anything in Section 3, only languages which are in use immediately before the commencement of this Act shall continue to be used for administrative and other official purposes up to and including the level of the Autonomous Region or the Autonomous District, as the case may be, until the Regional Council or the District Council, in respect of the Autonomous Region or the Autonomous District, as the case may be, by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting decide in favour of adoption of any other language for any of the administrative or official purposes within that region or district.

Safeguard of the use of Bengali language in the district of Cachar

5. Without prejudice to the provisions contained in Section 3, the Bengali language shall be used for administrative and other official purposes up to and including the district level in the district of Cachar.

The use of English as official language in respect of examination conducted by the Assam Public Service Commission

6. Notwithstanding anything in Section 3, and examination held by the Assam Public Service Commission which immediately before the commencement of this Act used to be conducted in the English language shall continue to be so conducted till such time as the use thereof is permissible (for the official purposes of the Union under any law made by the Parliament in this behalf).³

Provided that a candidate shall have the right to choose the language in use in the State of Assam, which was the medium of his University examination.

Rights of the various linguistic groups

7. Subject to the provision of this Act, the State Government may by notification issued from time to time, direct the use of the language as may be specified in the notification and in such parts of the State of Assam as may be specified therein:

Provided that:

(a) the right of the various linguistic groups in respect of medium of instruction in educational institutions as laid down in the Constitution of India shall not be affected :

- (b) the State shall not, in granting aid to educational and cultural institutions, discriminate against any such institution on grounds of language;
- (c) the rights to appointments in the Assam Public Services and to contract and other avocations shall be maintained without discrimination on the grounds of language; and
- (d) in regard to noting in the offices in the region or district if any member of the staff is unable to note in any of the district language, the use of English shall be permitted by the Heads of Departments so long as the use thereof is permissible (for the official purposes of the Union under any law made by the Parliament in this behalf).
8. (1) The State Government shall have the power to make rules for carrying out the purposes of the Act.
- (2) Every rule made under this section shall be laid as soon as may be after it is made, before the Assam Legislative Assembly which is in Session for a total period of fourteen days which may be comprised in one session or

Power to make rules.

5. Inserted by Assam Act XXII of 1964, original Section being re-numbered as clause (1).

in two successive sessions, and if, before the expiry of the session in which^{it} is so laid or the session immediately following, the Assam Legislative Assembly agree in making any modification in the rule or the Assam Legislative Assembly agree that the rule should not be made, the rule shall thereafter have effect only in such modified form or be of no effect, as the case may be ; so, however, that any such modification or annulment shall be without prejudice to the validity of anything previously done under that rule.⁶

6. Substituted by Assam Act XXII of 1964.

APPENDIX- 3

ASAM SAHITYA SABHA'S MEMORANDUM
TO THE UNION HOME MINISTER
JUNE 29, 1961

ASSAM SAHITYA SABHA

General Secretary's Office
Vaijayanti, Saraniya
Gauhati, Assam
July 29, 1961

Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri
Home Minister
Government of India
New Delhi

Subject : The Assam Official Language Act 1960

Dear Sir,

In continuation of our memorandum submitted to you at Gauhati on June 4, 1961, we on behalf of Assam Sahitya Sabha beg to make the following submission for your kind consideration.

1. With the passage of the Assam Official Language Act 1960 it was earnestly hoped by the people of Assam that the language question was set at rest, and that efforts could now be directed towards the restoration of harmony among different section of the State's people. May it please be noted also that although this piece of legislation did not adequately meet the desire of the Assamese people and those

others who unreservedly supported the cause of the Assamese language being the only official language of the State, Assam Sahitya Sabha and the people of Assam accepted the Act in consideration of the special circumstances the prevailing and in the hope that the safeguards given in the Act to the linguistic minorities - even to the extent of more than what should have been reasonably done - would go to bring back peace to this usually peaceful State.

2. It is very unfortunate that a section of the Bengali population of Cachar, mostly East Bengal refugees and refugee leaders drawn from among the urban people, who have always been very vociferous in their unjust demand for Bengali being made a second official language of the State of Assam, launched a militant organisation like the Cachar Zila Gana-Sangram Parishad. To make the situation more awkward, the Congressmen including legislators and members of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee of the district played the rebel role by joining this unwarranted movement in spite of warnings from the Congress President, and formed Bhasa Addolan Samitis. A very unnatural situation was thus created, and this culminated miserably in the death of nineteen persons as results of police firings on May 19 and June 19, 1961.

3. During this critical situation you were kind to come to Assam and explore possibilities of solving the tangle.

But the solutions proposed by you in your declaration of June 6, 1961 of amending Clause 5 of the Assam Official Language Act 1960 to do away with the provision relating to Mahkuma Parishads, etc., seemed to have come only under duress of circumstances, and the decision of the Government of Assam and the Executive Committee of Assam Provincial Congress Committee seemed to be very hasty, perhaps prompted by a sincere desire to give some fulfilment to the wishes of the agitators of Cachar.

4. But the profession of these agitators to be able to speak out the whole heart of Cachar was very seriously falsified by the events in that district very immediately following their movement. Their agitation roused indignation and sharp opposition in the whole of rural Cachar as well as in the outskirts of the few small towns in the district. The unreasonableness of the demand of the Sangram Parishad was clearly proved by the spontaneous rising among the indigenous people, the Kacharis, the Hmars, the Manipuris, the Hindusthanis, and nearly the whole Muslim population of Cachar. The discomfitures of the Parishad started by May 28, when you were still engaged in the negotiations. The menacing hostility offered by the Sangram Parishad could not suppress the people, who came out with open support to the official language. Assamese, in meetings, processions and delegations. We can in no way think that the strong public opinion thus expressed for having Assamese only as the official language of Assam is to be

treated with neglect or connivance if we mean to respect democracy.

5. We, therefore, feel it to be our duty to make the submission that the decision to amend the Language Act in the light of your suggestions will be unwarranted from facts and principles of democracy, and will neither be conducive to the "stabilization of the situation regarding the language issue in Assam" nor in any way "facilitate final peaceful settlement fair to all", which must be the sincerest desire of us all now. This decision, taken under duress and based upon the illegitimate demand of an extremely limited section of Cachar's people, cannot naturally have the effects of permanent good.

6. The Assamese people strongly resent that their legitimate demand for the recognition of Assamese as the only official language of the State, which has been only partially 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 Parishads. It need perhaps scarcely be pointed out that with all the safeguards for the minority languages as already embodied in the Act and the amendment to it now proposed, the Assamese language will be reduced to the status of a regional official language within the State. This apparently would be in contravention of constitutional propriety, as has been vouchsafed by the Prime Minister of India's letter to the West Bengal Provincial Congress Vice-President:

"But it is clear to me, in giving full recognition to the regional language such as Nepalese, the State language does not cease to function. The State language is anyhow the language for the whole State..... In giving a minority language full protection, we should not do something which may adversely affect some other group in that area."

We take our stand firmly on this constitutional right of the official language when we demand that Assam's official language, Assamese, cannot or should not be shut off from Cachar or, for that matter, any other part of the State. We pray that the Government may not do positive harm to the acknowledged official language only in deference to a precipitate demand of unreasonableness.

7. We have already, in our memorandum submitted to you on June 4 last, attracted your attention to the provocative writings of the Calcutta papers and the constant incitements provided by irresponsible utterances of the West Bengal politicians. No peaceful attitude is to be expected from the Bengalis of Assam until and unless there be a quiet on this agitational front. Without this provocation from outside, Assam can, we are sure, always be expected to be peaceful. We, therefore, earnestly hope that you would kindly use your kind influence to that the extraneous agencies of vilification and provocation do not disturb Assam's calm.

8. The latest resolutions of the Executive Committee of Assam Sahitya Sabha on the language issue vis-a-vis the Cachar trouble reflect, we believe, the public opinion in Assam, and the Sabha has the apprehension that any attempt at this stage to alter the provisions of the Assam Official Language Act 1960, despite all unsatisfactory features in them, will seriously disturb Assam's atmosphere now somewhat stabilized as you rightly judge.

In the circumstance, Sir, we beg to request you to reassess the whole situation, and advise the Government of Assam to take very early steps for the implementation of the Assam Official Language Act 1960 as it now stands.

Yours faithfully,

9
Maheswar Neog
General Secretary
Assam Sahitya Sabha

GLOSSARY

Amalaks	-- an agent or subordinate officer
Bora	-- an officer over twenty paiks
Chatra	-- a student
Deka Dal	-- youth association
Hazarika	-- an officer entrusted with the supervision over thousand paiks.
Kalita	-- a peasant caste ranked high in the Brahmaputra Valley
Kayastha	-- a high caste in the Brahmaputra Valley often inter-marrying with Kalita.
Keyas	-- Marwari traders community
Kuli	-- the refined terminology now in use is chah Mazdoor.
Laguas	-- slaves
Mouzadar	-- a revenue collector on commission basis.
Moamaria	-- a religious sect of the Vaishneva faith in the Brahmaputra Valley.
Paik	-- a ryot under the Ahom rule whose duty was to render service to the king or the State.
Ryot	-- peasant cultivator.
Ryotwari	-- a system of land revenue settlement made by government with each individual cultivator without the intervention of third party.

Sabha	-- an assembly
Samrakshini Sabha	- a society for conservation.
Sanmilan	-- a conference, an associate body.
Sarbajanik	-- for all, universal
Tahsil	-- a revenue subdivision of a district
Tahsilder	-- officer in charge of a tahsil.
Zaminder	-- landholder, paying revenue to government directly, hence, Zamindari.

