

LANGUAGE PROBLEM IN ASSAM

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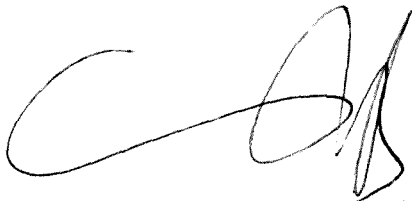
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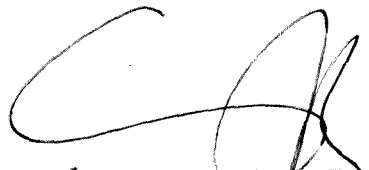
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I certify that the dissertation entitled
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of my knowledge and may be placed before the examiners
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INTRODUCTION

The language problem in Assam is unique, yet it has hardly been studied in depth and properly analysed. This study aims at understanding the problem against its socio-economic and historical background.

Language is an integral part of the national question. The national question embraces the entire complex of relationship between ethnic communities and also between existing nations and those nations which are in the process of formation in their economic, social, political, linguistic, and ideological manifestations. Hence an attempt has been made in the first chapter to understand the language problem in the context of the national question in India. We have also tried to examine various concepts like "nation" and "nationalities" which are related to the problem.

Then we come to the specific case of Assam. A thorough understanding of the roots of the social tension in its historical perspective is necessary. E.H. Carr once said: "Historiography is a progressive science, in the sense that it seeks to provide constantly expanding and deepening insights into a course of events which is itself progressive. That is what I should mean by

saying that we need a constructive outlook over the past." Therefore, the second chapter tries to examine the historical socio-demographic and economic background of Assam in order to have a clear understanding of the problem.

In the third chapter we have taken up the case after Independence. We have mainly dealt with the language movement arising out of the declaration of official language and regional medium of instruction. We have also tried to analyse (no doubt very sketchily) the various forces involved in these movements. The political responses to the problem have been also touched upon.

Finally, we came to the conclusion that it is factional politics centred on language which has resulted in highlighting the already existing "Assamese-Bengali" rivalry.

In examining this problem, the attempt throughout has been on analysis and interpretation rather than making the work a comprehensive one. The main difficulty in studying this problem has been the lack of sufficient data. Leave alone the particular issue of language, enough systematic work has not been done even on the historical aspect of Assam. The one comprehensive account available, that of E. Gait's - A History of Assam - is no doubt good enough as a pioneering work. But, as happens with all books which undertake a vast period for study, it is

inadequate for a depth study. Most of the work which is available on the language problem hardly give any analytical picture of the whole situation. Social Tension in India by G. S. Ghurye, Critical Days of Assam by K. C. Barua, Assam Language Question by M. Neog - all these books are, no doubt helpful to know various incidents chronologically, but they do not try to examine the problem analytically and do not give the clue to understand the various forces behind the movement.

Owing to the lack of documentary evidence, we could not show the interplay of various class forces in these movements. Occupational data would have helped in establishing the true base of the Assamese/Bengali rivalry, is not available separately in the Census Reports. However, what would have really helped, is interviewing various people involved in these movements which we could not do due to short time at our disposal.

Moreover, with all these shortcomings and difficulties in getting data, we have tried to make an objective study of the problem as far as possible within our limitations.

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM : THEORY AND HISTORY

Language is the most important instrument of human communication. In a multilingual country like ours, language can also become a dividing factor.

Language issues cannot be treated in isolation from the 'national question' and more fundamentally from the class correlations existing on the basis of the relations of production. It becomes national along with the success of commodity exchange which integrates nations. Upon this formation, the nation State is erected as the most convenient profitable and normal arena for the play of capitalist 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, in their economic, social, juridical, political, linguistic, ideological and psychological manifestations.¹

Language, therefore, is part of a wider social question. Hence, the need to study the former in the wider context of the latter. This study is intended to be

1 Lazarev, M.S., ed., Oriental Countries Today (Calcutta, 1976), vol. 2, p. 140.

solely confined to the language problem in Assam. But before going into a detailed study of Assam, we would like to examine in this chapter the language problem in the context of different facet of national problem in India.

(a) The historical stage through which the national problem in our country has been passing; (b) The multinationality character of the Indian Union; and (c) The uneven development of Regions inhabited by various nationalities.

Each epoch fills the "national question" with its own content, though the old forms persist and the national question remains the same. The national question that Marx and Engels faced was shaped by the political framework of Europe at that time by a balance of power which opposed the "revolutionary democratic" nations of the West to the reactionary nations of the East centred on Czarism and small nations movement sponsored by it.² They favoured Polish independence and the break-up of the Austro Hungarian monarchy in the interests of European democracy. It, therefore, appears that "the interests of the liberation of a number of big and very big nations in Europe rate higher than the interests of the movement for liberation of small nations".³ The national question that Lenin faced was very different

2 J. Banaji, "Nationalism and Socialism" (Review Article) Economic and Political Weekly, 7 September 1974.

3 V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, vol. XXII.

in content, It was based on the system of Great Powers, on the conversion of the revolutionary democratic nations into imperialist oppression nations, on the common front of Czarism and European capital and on the struggle to divide up the world market on a new basis.

Nation State and Class Question

"Independent, or/but loosely connected, provinces with separate interests, laws, governments and system of taxation became lumped together into one nation, with one government one code of laws, one national class interest, one frontier and one customs tariff."⁴ The words "nation" and national, refer evidently to the State and the people having a State, and not to the nationality in the sense of descent and language. When in the Manifesto Marx and Engels speak of a national struggle waged on the scale of the entire State it is equated directly with the class struggle. Only such a centralization of the struggles of the workers on the scale of the State could organize the workers as a class to the class of bourgeoisie and give these struggles the stamp of political struggles.⁵

When Marx and Engels speak of the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie as one that is at

4 Karl Marx, Communist Manifesto, p. 48.

5 Precisely because the bourgeoisie is no longer an estate but a class, it is compelled to organize itself nationally, no longer locally and to give its average interests a general form.

first national, they evidently have in mind a struggle waged at first within the framework of a single State as is clear from the reason given, that the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own 'bourgeoisie'. But from this point of view, the emergence of the proletariat to be the leading class of the nation, its constituting itself as the "nation" likewise take on a very definite meaning. It says that the proletariat must at first be guided by existing State borders must rise to be the leading class within the existing State. That is why it will at first be "so far national" - though not in the bourgeois sense of the word - for the bourgeoisie sees its goal as political detachment of the people from each other and exploitation of foreign nation by its own. On the other hand, the victorious working class will from the beginning work towards the elimination of national, hostilities and antagonisms of people. By its hegemony it will create conditions under which the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end.⁶ Thereby creating the conditions for a stateless society of producers, i. e. communism on a world scale.

For Marx, the nation as a historical category

6 R. Rodolsky, "Worker and Fatherland" (A note on a passage in the Communist Manifesto), Science and Society, vol. XXIX, 1965.

arose from the shattered ruins of the community as an expression of "civil society". Hence a nation is not a community either economic, ethnic, linguistic or cultural. For community is a pre-capitalist phenomena and whose disintegration is the basis for the creation of nation-states. "The awakening of the masses from feudal lethargy, and their struggle against all national oppression, for the sovereignty of the people of the nation are progressive. Hence, it is the Marxists' bounden duty to stand for the most resolute and consistent democratism on all aspects of the national question."⁷ This is precisely why, Lenin could talk both of combating nationalism of every kind and uphold the right of self-determination as a strategy for broadening the base of working class movement in the Russian context.

Nationalities are separate linguistic cultural ethnic formations, which existed prior to capitalism and continue to exist for an indefinite period under capitalism. Nationality thus is predominantly a form of pre-capitalist community on whose disintegration the modern capitalist society gets crystallized. If these still continue to exist under capitalism it is either due to the backward (nation of the capitalism) or the long duration of pre-capitalist survivals. Thus, it is clear that nationality in its

7 V.I. Lenin, Collected Works (Critical Remarks on National Question), VOL. 20, P. 34.

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. Marx considering this as a progressive phenomenon voted for free trade as against protection, for the former "breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point."⁸ In a developed 'late' capitalist society, nationalities if at all they exist, exit or continue to survive as a mere community of descent and language.

Nations, on the other hand, are constituted by a historical process specific to the early stages of capitalism and their unity embodied in and mediated through the State. In its formation, the nation may follow two possible lines of evolution; it may arise out of a numerically preponderant single nationality or it may fuse several distinct nationalities of more or less equal numerical weight into one framework.

Nation and Nationalities as Historical Categories

The categorical demand of Marxian theory in examining any social question is that the question be formulated within definite historical limits, and if it

8 K. Marx, On the Question of Free Trade (1848).

refers to a particular country (e.g. the national programme for a given country) that due account be taken of the specific features that distinguish that country from others within the same historical epoch.⁹ Here the question arises, what does this categorical demand of Marxism imply in application to the question we are discussing?

It implies that a strict distinction must be drawn between two periods of capitalism, which differ radically from each other as far as the national movement is concerned. On the one hand, the period of the collapse of feudalism and absolutism, the period of the formation of the bourgeois--society and state--when the national movement for the first time become mass movements and in one way or another draw all classes of the population into politics through the press, participation in representative institution, etc. On the other hand, we have the period of definitely formed capitalist states with a long established constitutional regime, with a strongly developed antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the period that may be called the eve of the collapse of capitalism.¹⁰

The typical features of the first period are the awakening of national movements and the drawing of the

⁹ V.I. Lenin, Selected Works (Moscow, 1950), vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 322.

peasants, the most numerous and the most "sluggish" section of the population, into these movements, in connection with the struggle for political liberty in general, and for national rights in particular. The typical features of the second period are the absence of mass bourgeois-democratic movements, the fact that developed capitalism, while bringing the nations that have already been fully drawn into commercial intercourse closer together and causing them to inter-mingle to an increasing degree, brings into the forefront the antagonism between internationally united capital and the international working class movement.¹¹ The bourgeoisie play the leading role in its creation, and the market is the first school in which the bourgeoisie learns its nationalism. Thus the national struggle is a struggle of the bourgeoisie among themselves. A national movement is in its essence always a bourgeois struggle, one that is chiefly favourable to and suitable for the bourgeoisie.

The epoch of classical bourgeois revolutions (Europe) ^{is one} in which the rise of capitalism had destroyed the pre-capitalist relations and formed the nation States, either out of a single nationality or out of several nationalities by destroying the basis of their existence.

11 Ibid., p. 323.

In the colonized countries under the impact of imperialism, the societies concerned were drawn into the capitalist network, and the resultant class-formations and the development of the nation in its various characteristics are linked to the fight for national liberation.

The epoch of imperialism and colonial, national liberation movements, where the aspirations of the colonial-bourgeoisie to form its own nation state, take manifestation in bourgeois national movements, whose opposition to imperialist oppression is considered as progressive from a proletariat standpoint. It also has the most significant feature of opposition to bourgeois nationalism, i.e. the nationalism of the masses.

Having considered the question of nations, nationality and their historic specificities in different epochs, we feel that the language which is a mere attribute of a given nationality in its pre-capitalist form, takes up a different character under capitalism. It is a known fact that expanding commerce assimilates various dialects and evolves a unified linguistic script. If the said language is an attribute of one nationality, it tends to strengthen the nationality merely as a linguistic community, dissolving at the same time all other aspects of nationality. The emergence of a nation state, therefore, is not a product of the linguistic togetherness but vice versa. To stretch the argument further, if one language unifies the process

of capitalist development, the destruction of cultures, and languages of other nationalities irrelevant for this process, is a progressive phenomena. The question of national oppression is a different one and specific to backward economies of Russia and Eastern Europe. In India, we find ^{that the} national problem remains unsolved leading to the emergence of various problems like casteism, communalism and separatism--linguistic, provincial and regional. Therefore, it has to be concretely studied and its specific characteristics delineated.

Colonialism and Uneven Development

India was fully 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.¹² The purpose is to understand our past and present, and to use history to shed light on the present. Here what has to be kept in view is that colonialism in India was as modern a historical phenomenon as industrial capitalism in Britain - in fact the two developed together.¹³

12 Bipan Chandra, "Modern India and Imperialism", paper read at a Seminar at Australia in September 1972.

13 As J.S. Furnivall put it: "Modern India Grew up with Modern Europe". J.S. Furnivall, Colonial Policy and Practice (1956 reprint), pp. 537-8, as quoted by Bipan Chandra in his Presidential Address, Section III, "Colonialism and Modernization".

The colonial Indian economy was as much a part of world capitalism which needs to be viewed as a single world-wide system, of which colonial economies were an integral part. The historical process that led to this colonial integration inevitably led to the underdevelopment of India.

While the whole country was yoked to the service of the British metropolitan finance capitalist interests and although there were wide disparities in the development of the different parts of the country as also between the so-called British provinces as a whole and the princely states - there was no single region that prospered at the cost of the rest of the country.¹⁴ On the subservience to the metropolis-colony nexus led to a more or less comparable level of development of the three widely dispersed regions, around the three major port-towns, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

Growth of trade and commerce in colonial India meant the creation of jobs and educational opportunities in the coastal centres. This led to the emergence of some consumer industries in these enclaves and hence to the development of a merchant capitalist class, which started to invest in industry. This gave these regions a lead start over other regions before independence was achieved.

¹⁴ Ajit Roy, "National Problems in India and Pre-Revolutionary Russia", Social Scientist, August 1975, p. 26.

Today, these disparities have been accentuated and exacerbated by the later uneven development of India.

As the Indian State, though under the hegemony of the national capitalist class maintains its autonomy over these classes and tries to mediate the interests between them, the contradiction between various classes and between the State and classes, at times, take severe manifestations; One such manifestation is the formation of linguistic States. The formation of linguistic States should also be seen in the context of the organization of Indian State structure on a federal basis to mediate various class interests. Therefore, we find in the fifties and sixties, violent struggle for the creation of linguistic States.¹⁵

Another factor in the uneven regional development was the growth of the education system. India had been little developed and efforts at development had brought about a new unevenness in the social and economic structure of the country. There were keen internal rivalries but these were between caste and caste, community and community, and not between class and class. Moreover, these groups which felt a similarity of interests were themselves more the production of bureaucratic initiative than of economic change. Since these groups can be largely identified with the men

15 For details see M. Desai, "India : Emerging Contradictions of Slow Capitalist Development", in Robin Blackburn, ed., Explosion in a Subcontinent (Penguin, 1975), p. 31.

educated in Western styles, and since it was these men whose hopes and fears went into the building of the new associations that emerged as the Indian National Congress, a conceptional system based on elites rather than on classes, would seem more promising.¹⁶

Rise of Indian Capitalist Class

The Indian capitalist class, in the strictly modern sense, arose during the British period. It arose as a consequence of a number of measures adopted by British rulers to transform India into a colony to subserve their own interests. From the beginning it possessed one important characteristic: "it did not develop any organic link with British capital, it was not integrated with foreign capital in India". While the Indian capitalist class was not as a class integrated with British capital a subordinate position, the economy of which it was a part was so, i.e. colonially, integrated with and subordinated to world capitalism. Since it is the economy that is colonially subordinated and structured and not the capitalist class, the latter on the one hand struggle against imperialism and for independent capitalist development, and on the other is compelled to compromise with imperialism because the structural links with the world capitalist economy weaken the position of

16 Anil Seal, Emergence of Indian Nationalism (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 381.

capitalism in a colonial or ex-colonial society.¹⁷

The Indian capitalist class fully realized that the 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; 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.

The Indian capitalist class gave broad support to the nationalist movement against imperialism. They realized that the Indian people were politically restive and bent on anti-imperialist struggle because of their conditions of life, and because of their own contradiction with imperialism that their nationalist political activity would continue and grow irrespective of capitalist participation and therefore, the basic task before the capitalist class was to remain relevant to such a basic and powerful social force as nationalism and to try to establish their hegemony over its programme, organization and strategy and the pattern of struggle.¹⁸

This two-fold relationship of the capitalist class to imperialism led it to work for a non-revolutionary pattern

17 Bipan Chandra, "The Indian Capitalist Class and Imperialism before 1947", Journal of Contemporary Asia Quarterly, vol. 5, no. 3, 1975.

18 Ibid.

of anti-imperialism struggle. Its aim was at no stage to lead to permanent hostility and total confrontation but the exertion of enough pressure to force concessions and prepare for the next round of the struggle. Thus the struggle was to be based on the strategy of struggle (pressure) compromise - struggle and stage by stage (or step by step) advance towards a bourgeois nation - state and independent economic development.¹⁹

Nationalism

The nationalism of the oppressed colonies has always been a complex articulation of two instances--the nationalism of the colonial bourgeoisie and the nationalism of the masses.²⁰ This distinction is absolutely necessary for the understanding of the colonial question. The nationalism of the Indian bourgeoisie, the expression of a rising subordinate capital seeking to establish control over its own state apparatus, functioned simultaneously as a mechanism for paralysing the revolutionary instinct of the proletariat masses, for splitting up their common front and incorporating the backward peasant strata into the bourgeois hegemonic bloc, represented politically by the National Congress. In short, it was not only a means of emancipating India from the clutches of the British capital and

19 Ibid.

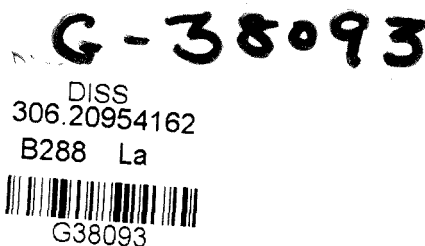
20 Banaji, p. 2.

establishing local capitalist control over the home market, but also a means of effectively excluding the working class from hegemony over the peasant masses of insulating the flow of working class ideas and controlling the nationalism of the Indian masses.²¹

The Indian nationalist leadership started attacking foreign capital from the 1870s, clearly bringing out both its economic and political consequences. The nationalist movement widely popularized the motive of imperialist exploitation through the drain mechanism. The leaders of the national movement being essentially bourgeois nationalist, were unable to have a comprehensive understanding of the problem as a whole; their class interests reflected in the socio-economic theories which guided their activities and made them totally incapable of finding a proper solution for any one of the innumerable problems whose totality makes up India's national problem.

The basic political objectives of the nationalist leaders were (a) To help the process of unifying Indian people into a nation. (b) To generalize, form, and crystallize an anti-imperialist ideology. (c) To create an all India national leadership. (d) To promote the growth of modern capitalist economy and in the end to create a broad all-

21 Ibid.



India national movement. In this process they also undertook an analysis of the basic character of British colonialism in India, and to spread their understanding of its exploitative character among the Indian people. They created a national political platform and programme on which all Indians belonging to different regions, and social classes could agree and could serve as the basis for all India political activity.

In order to place in better historical perspective the realization of the exploitative character of the British rule on the part of the Indian leaders and their later propagation of it, three factors have to be kept in view. Firstly, an important section of the Indian leadership, consisting primarily of some of nationalist newspapers at no stage believed in the benevolent intentions of the rulers; it consisted of people who were described by Hume in 1888 as "this objectionable fringe" who rail at and abuse the best and friendliest of our rulers and who sneer snarl and snap at everything government does, good, bad or indifferent.²² Secondly, the speeches and writings of many of them continued to abound in the paradox of faith in the British benevolence on the one hand, and assertion of British selfishness on the other. Dadabhai Naoroji,

22 A.O. Hume, A speech on the Indian National Congress and its origin, aims, and objects delivered at a public meeting held at Allahabad on 30 April 1888.

for example, resolved it by calling British rule in India un-British. Thirdly, the newspapers invariably gave a more open and 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 interests 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 not to carry on any activity which would tend to divide the people at a time when the need of the hour was to unite them into a nation. This perspective, essentially correct, made them ignore other aspects of contemporary reality.²³

The nationalist leaders did not assign an important role to the masses. They assumed that for the time being, political activity was to be confined to the stratum of the "educated classes" as they put it. Behind this assumption lay the belief that political action by

23 Bipan Chandra, Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969), p. 749.

this narrow social stratum would suffice. When they looked at the Indian masses they only saw their apathy and ignorance, their very real social cultural and political backwardness, and not their energy, tenacity and capacity to make sacrifices and fight heroically. Consequently the task of politicising and mobilising the masses was seen as an extremely slow process. The extent to which the Gandhian movement politicized and involved the masses is often exaggerated because -

- (1) The masses of the agricultural labourers and poor peasants in most parts of the country and the masses in general in several parts were not brought into the political process or even touched by the nationalist politics.
- (2) While the masses were moved into action, they were never politically organized.
- (3) The gulf between the educated Indians, who still provided the actual leadership of the movement, and the masses was still largely unbridged, in spite of some aspects of Gandhian mass work.
- (4) Above all, the political activity of the masses was rigidly controlled from the top. The masses never became an independent political force,²⁴

So the national movement was a bourgeois democratic movement in that it represented the interests

24 For details see Bipan Chandra's article "Elements of Continuity and Change in the Early Nationalist Activity".

of all classes and segments of Indian society viz-a-viz imperialism but under the hegemony of the industrial bourgeoisie. In their programme and ideology, the nationalist leaders worked for the creation of a modern bourgeois state, economy and society in the image of the most advanced bourgeois state, economy, and society of the day. This programme represented the interests of all classes in so far as they came into conflict with imperialism. At the same time they retained all issues and demands which would bring one section of the Indian society into conflict with another. There was little in their programme to arouse the uneducated peasants, workers or the urban poor. Their entire programme was bourgeois in so far as it was confined within the broad parameters of bourgeois social development.²⁵

Since the impact of British rule as well as the penetration of new forces did not take place at the same pace throughout the country, the conditions which lead to the rise of political and national consciousness matured unevenly among different parts and communities. Some provinces and some communities became politically conscious earlier than others. It is appropriate to term the historical development of regional nationalities as the basic process on which British rule has been impressed for

a certain period, and the product is a modification of some aspects of the basic process of nationality development. The concrete issue of linguistic reorganization made its first official appearance in the 1917 Calcutta Congress Session. It was imperative for the Congress under Gandhi if it had to become a mass organization to canalize the linguistic nationality sentiments and use the national languages as vehicles of political communication and propaganda. But Congress all through the period of the freedom movement never formulated a concrete plan of action but contented itself in assuaging nationality sentiments by passing resolutions and accepting the principle.

In the post-Independence period many hitherto backward or less-developed minorities and linguistic groups have become conscious of their rights and put forward the claims for the recognition of their distinct entity.

Multi-nationality Character

India is a multi-nationality State. There are at least 12 major nationalities demarcated by language and culture. They are: Telegu, Assamese, Oriya, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Maharashtraian, Gujarati, Punjabi, Hindi and Kashmiri. There are also a host of minor nationalities like Manipuri, Nagas, Garos etc. There are variations in the degree of nationality formation, dependent

on their respective class formations within the major nationalities themselves. But, all these nationalities, as we have seen above, have certain common patterns of development since the advent of British rule and the development of capitalist relations under colonialism. The multi-nationality problem in India is further complicated by the existence of a number of castes, religious communities within these nationalities, which become instrumental in the bourgeois game of politics. These survive, owing either to the backward nature of Indian capitalism or of pre-capitalist survivals; but not as pre-capitalist homogeneous communities. It is also because of the bourgeois strategy of nationalism.

Unlike the situation in Tsarist Russia, there is no single dominant nation in the multi-nationality of Indian State today. Russia was a State with a single national centre--the Great Russian--dominating the Tsarist State. The peculiarity of the national State is (a) alien races (which in the whole, form the majority of the entire population, 57 per cent) inhabiting precisely the border land; (b) the oppression of these alien races was worse than in the neighbouring States (and not even in the European States alone); (c) the development of capitalism and the general level of culture were not frequently higher in the border lands inhabited by "alien

regions" than in the centre of the State. Finally, it is precisely in the neighbouring Asiatic States that we observe incipient bourgeois revolutions and national movements which partly affect the kindred nationalities within the borders of Russia.²⁶ However, in India, there is no single dominant nation exploiting and oppressing the other nations. This, of course, does not mean an absence of discrimination against, or disparities among the constituent nationalities.²⁷

TABLE I.1

Advance and Investments

State	Book advances 30 June 1973	DFCI loans 30 June 1974	IDBI advan- ces 1973-74	Indus- trial Licen- ces 1952-67	LTC invest- ments
1	2	3	4	5	6
Maharashtra	1,686	106	349	3,084	244
West Bengal	886	428	98	1,854	136
Tamil Nadu	682	62	152	1,149	142
Uttar Pradesh	369	44	37	748	109
Rajasthan	92	17	20	203	66
Bihar	132	25	42	571	34
Madhya Pradesh	118	10	31	275	53

Sources: Government of West Bengal, Economic Review, 1974-75; Government of Kerala, Alternative Policies for the Fourth Five Year Plan, p. 106.

26 Lenin, n. 7, pp. 407-8.

27 In the distribution of industrial licences, advances by commercial banks and central financial institutions and investment by LIC, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu hold the top-most positions while the Hindi-speaking States including Uttar Pradesh, stand much lower down as seen in the above table.

**The Uneven Development of Various Regions
Inhabited by Nationalities**

The uneven development of various regions inhabited by nationalities produce various social and economic tensions between region vis-a-vis the centre. Historically, certain regions have developed under the impetus of specific changes, confined to the particular region. This historical fact, reflects itself in all spheres--literary, industrial development, agriculture etc. These problems get further complicated in the process of economic development.

The unevenness of capitalist development and regional economic imbalance, is a characteristic feature of the Indian Union. The role of the centre in industrial licensing provides clear illustration of this attempt to build a capitalist economy without regard to nationality disparities and social needs. The main criteria for licensing in the private sector is preference for those with large capital, established connections with government and their investment in already advanced infra-structural areas. "About 46 per cent of the approved investment in 1969-66 was in the three top States, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Madras."²⁸

28 R.K. Hazari, Industrial Planning and Licensing Policy (Delhi, 1967), p. 4, as quoted by Karat Prakash in his Language and Nationality Politics in India (New Delhi, 1973), p. 145.

The problem of unevenness is not confined to variations between nationalities but also within a linguistic nationality. The Andhra Bourgeois Government had followed such policies which have resulted in the economic backwardness of Telengana and consequent handicaps in the field of education and employment.²⁹ The separatist movement in Telengana was therefore not a struggle of nationality or linguistic group for self-determination but a dissident section of the Andhra bourgeoisie and landlords canalizing the frustration of the people against exploitation to serve their interest.

In Assam, we find that the relations between various linguistic groups are strained. Cultural nationalism and the bogey of an alien enemy have always served as used instruments of the ruling classes to induce the masses to engage in fratricidal conflicts and overlook the real enemy. Thus off and on situations have to be created which keep language tensions alive in Assam.

The Problem

The pattern of linguistic social conflict in each State is reflected not only in the number of language groups and their relative size but also in the degree of

²⁹ For details see Duncan B. Forrester, Sub-Regionalism in India, the Case of Telengana Modern Asian Studies.

relatedness and distinction among them. The co-existence of closely related Bengali and Assamese communities in Assam has given rise to fierce rivalry that has so far defied solution. Historical reasons apart, the tagging of Bengali speaking Cachar District to the Assamese speaking Brahmaputra Valley in the same State, with Assamese declared as the official language and the sole vernacular medium of university, has complicated the issue.

This raises a series of questions -

- ✓ 1. What are the identifiable factors responsible for the origin and growth of the language problem in Assam?
- | 2. What are the social and political bases of the movement and conflicts related to this problem?
- | 3. What are the approaches of the various political parties to the language problem?

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The language problem cannot be viewed in isolation from the entire process of social, economic development and the various political processes. In order to do so, it would be proper to give a historical, socio-demographic, and economic background of the region, under study, in this case--Assam. An attempt has been made in the chapter to find out the identifiable factors responsible for the origin and growth of the language problem in Assam.

The State of Assam is located in the north-east corner of the Indian Union. It is a State of plains and hills. It comprises the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and a part of the Surma Valley together with the intervening range of hills which form the watershed between them. The Assam plains or Assam proper comprises the seven Districts--Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Newgong, Sibsagar and Cachar.¹ The Assam Hills consist of five Districts--Garo Hills, united Mikir and North Cachar Hills, Miso Hills, and the united Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The political map of Assam has undergone several changes since Independence.

1 Cachar District includes a small area of the old district of Sylhet which was merged with East Pakistan in 1947 as a result of the partition of India.

As a result, Assam of today is reduced to the Brahmaputra Valley and the Cachar District.

The population of Assam in its racial compositions has all the basic elements. There are Austric, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan and finally the Indo-Mongoloid. According to the 1971 census, Assam's population is 14,952,108. It is a land of contrast where diverse races, castes and creeds have met at different levels in different ages. With the mixture of Aryan, Mongolian and local inhabitants, Assam is one of India's most cosmopolitan societies. Nowhere in the world, is the composition of population so diverse as in this region.

A very significant fact about Assam is the fusion which took place here of Aryan and Mongolian cultures. We find here how a dominant culture although supported numerically by a few can absorb and impose itself on weaker cultures. Thus we find in Assam some people by and large Mongolian, speaking at the present day Assamese which is an Aryan Sanskrit language. This happened not merely because of the superiority of the Aryan language over the rude tribal dialects but also because of the absorbing power and influence of Hinduism. The Brahmins from northern India succeeded in absorbing into Hinduism all the tribal people of the plains including the powerful Ahoms who ruled over Assam for over six hundred years, and who, in course of time not only adopted the Hindu religion, but also forgot their own Ahom language and adopted Assamese. "The reason in these cases is partly

that Assamese is the language of the priests who are gradually bringing these rude tribes within the fold of Hinduism and partly that it is the language of a higher civilization."² The royal correspondence and judicial trials were conducted in Assamese and important court documents also were written in Assamese. "Thus there is no doubt regarding the separate identity of Assamese language in pre-British society which is basically a synthetic product of cultural and ethnic fusion."³

The Ahoms were the members of the Shan branch of the great Tai or Thai-family of the human race. This tai family extended from the gulf of Siam northwards into Yunnan and thence westwards to Assam and it comprises several divisions, namely, the Siamese, Laos, Shans, Taimon or Tai Khi Kamph and Ahom. 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, dissensions and the civil war that broke out at the end of the 19th century.⁴

2 E. Gait, A History of Assam (Calcutta: Commercial Press Ltd., 1963), p. 20.

3 E.K. Bhattacharyya, "Language Controversy in Assam : Its Socio-Economic Background and Need for a National Policy", North Eastern Research Bulletin, vol. IV, Summer 1973.

4 Civil War that struck at the roots of the Ahom monarchy came in the forms of a popular uprising against the monarchy. The Moamana Satra gave the leadership in this uprising. For details see H.K. Barpujari, Assam in the Days of Company (Gauhati, 1963). See also E.K. Bhuyan, Early British Relations with Assam (Shillong, 1949).

Taking advantage of dissensions and intrigues in the Ahom royal family and among the nobility, the Burmese led several invasions into the country between 1816 and 1824, paralyzing the administration and establishing instead a reign of terror. As a result of their inhuman brutality, large sections of the people of Assam Valley fled to the hills and thus there was a general depopulation of the whole region. In addition, thousands of Assamese were taken away as captives. However, the local nobility was scarcely in a position to rescue the people of this region from the consequences of feudal decay. Assam gradually passed into the British hands in 1826 (at the conclusion of the First Anglo-Burmese War).⁵

Developments under British Rule

The period from 1826 is 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 having radical changes, the effects of which can be felt even today. The East India Company annexed Lower Assam and tried to establish its hegemony in Upper Assam⁶ through a puppet king, Purandar

5 Refer A.C. Banerji, The Eastern Frontier of British India (Calcutta, 1964).

6 Lower Assam comprised of the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong; upper Assam included the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur only.

Singha. That experiment, however, failed and then the Company annexed the territory and placed it under the Bengal administration. Assam was administered as part of Bengal during the years 1826-1873. In 1874, it was made a Chief Commissioner's province and major portions of Bengali speaking areas of Cachar and Sylhet, and also Coaplara, came under the provincial administration of Assam.

At the turn of the century, in 1905, a new reorganization took place that was to have a lasting influence on the attitude of Assamese towards migrants from the neighbouring areas of East Bengal.⁷ At that time the British partitioned the sprawling densely populated province of Bengal into a predominantly Bengali Muslim province in the east which incorporated Assam, and a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the west. There followed a bitter hostility from the Bengali Hindus who resented the partition of their province and from the Assamese who resented incorporation into a portion of Bengal. In 1912 the British annulled the partition, reunited east and west Bengal and re-established Assam as a separate Chief Commissioner's province that included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar. These new boundaries were to remain

the composite culture by its hermetic background.

⁷ Myron Weiner, "Assam and its Migrants", Demography India, vol. II, No. 1, June 1973.

intact until the partition of India and Assam in 1947. Pre-partitioned Assam thus consisted of the two valleys, the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills and Mizo Hills including Sylhet district.⁸

✓ The establishment of the Company's authority, consequent necessity of manning the different Government departments, and the reconstitution of Assam, bringing in large Bengali speaking areas, may be said to have marked the beginning of the language problem in Assam.⁹ It was then a problem of finding educated persons for the administrative machinery to facilitate expansion of the Empire. A large number of Bengalis already conversant in the art of Government came to the province on various assignments to serve the interests of the British administration replacing the indolent and incapable nobility of the entire region.¹⁰

For proper understanding of this problem, British administration system in Assam must be discussed. In the first decade of the British take over, the conditions of the people continued to worsen under the burden of taxation and mismanagement. In the long run, however, the British rule

8 Ibid.

9 M. Kar, "Assam's Language Question in Retrospect", Social Scientist, vol. 4, September 1975.

10 Barpujari, n. 4, p. 46.

was destined to play for some decades a regenerative role within its colonial limits, was not the country to be prepared for meaningful economic exploitation.¹¹

The period from 1826 to 1873 was a period of transition from Assam's pre-capitalist economy into its colonial period. British capital penetrated the economy and started building up an infra-structure to sustain the exotic capitalist set up. The closed society was exposed to immigration labour new skills, new vices, and new ideas. Large migration of people into Assam from outside have taken place since British conquest established her political link with the rest of India. Assam has been the Eldorado of immigrants from Bengal and other places. Establishment of the Assam tea company was part of the scheme of colonization of wasteland in Assam to provide new avenues of investment for foreign capital.¹² The tea industry was faced with an acute labour supply problem from its very inception. Plantation, being labour intensive required a regular and high degree of labour supply. The tea industry attracted large number of labourers from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Uttar Pradesh and Madras who also formed a permanent element in Assam's population.

11 A. Guha, "Planters Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947" (quoted with permission from the author's manuscript).

12 For details see A. Guha, "Colonisation of Assam - Years of Transitional Crisis 1826-1840", Indian Economic and Social History Review, no. 2, June 1966.

While the immigrants contributed to the Assam's economy by bringing large tracts of wasteland under cultivation, they threatened to effect Assam's social and cultural life adversely and thus created problem which agitated public mind in late sixties.

The colonial economic development had opened the flood gates of immigration into Assam from the other States of India.¹³ This immigration was on such a scale that the indigenous component of the valley population went down considerably in percentage terms by the end of the 19th century. Not only did they respond poorly to the process of assimilation, but also did they aspire for the same dominant role as that of the Assamese in the Valley. Thousands of labourers annually recruited for the plantations from outside the province, most of whom did not return home, formed the biggest migrant group. In size, the next important stream of migration was that of peasants from East Bengal districts, some 85 to 90 per cent of whom were Muslims. Together with children, they numbered about three lakhs in 1921 and five lakhs in 1931, according to official estimates. This rural immigration continued during the years

13 For the trends of growth rate of population in various districts of Assam see Appendix Tables I and II.

1901-1947.¹⁴ But immigrant Bengalis Hindus as well as Muslims competed with the dominant Assamese linguistic group which led to conflicts and social tensions. Thus the pull of the plantation sector coupled with other factors brought two demographic changes; viz. (a) a change in the ethnic composition of the population; and (b) a change in its spatial distribution for decades.

The demographic changes were economically significant. Rapid increase in the number of immigrants as against a stagnated indigenous population almost all of whom were engaged in subsistence farming could mean only two things. First, a continued imbalance between the fast growth of plantations, coal, petroleum and the associated infrastructure on the one hand and the growth of the traditional agriculture on the other. Secondly, the gap between the gross earnings of the economy and the locally disbursed income originating therefrom increasingly widened.

The annual drainage of manpower to the tea districts must have been one of the contributory causes of the fall in cultivated acreage. The policy of raising ordinary

14 A. Guha, "Immigrants and Autochthones in a Plural Society; Their Inter-relations in the Brahmaputra Valley in Historical Perspective" (Paper presented at a seminar held during 10-12 March 1975 at the Department of Sociology, Dibrugarh University).

land revenue rates to force the peasants out of their farms to seek jobs in plantation proved a failure.¹⁵ On the other hand, it led to the stagnation of agricultural growth and made the population dependent on expensive food imports.

In Assam, as elsewhere in British India, the establishment of a hierarchy of new officials operating a new legal and administrative machinery through a new language opened the way to widespread exploitation--both social and economic--of the old society. The appearance of Bruce, the merchant adventurer who reported the possibilities of tea cultivation in Assam, the penetration of Marwari traders right up to Sadiya, the installation of Bengali tehsildars in upper Assam, were the signs of changes to come in the future.¹⁶ Demands for trading, clerical, skilled and even unskilled services invited further migration of suitable personnel belonging to non-indigenous ethnic groups such as the Marwari traders and the Bengali professionals.

15 For details see Amalendu Guha, "A Big Push without a Take Off: A Case Study of Assam, 1871-1901", Indian Economic Social History Review, vol. 6, 1968.

16 In fact ever since the British occupation--the time when many of the Assamese Rajkhowas, Kotokias, Hazarikas, Saikias and Baras had to make room for the Bengali tehsildars and various sorts of other emikhs--the Assamese culture and tradition (due to the predominance of the Bengali language and personnel) began to be affected severely by a clash with forces coming from Bengal. The general consciousness among the educated Assamese in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the early decades of the present century, of the harm that had already been done to the Assamese language and culture led them to oppose any move which seemed detrimental to the interests of Assamese.

In the eighteenth century as the British had extended their trading activities in Bengal and then had become involved in administration, they had to recruit increasingly large numbers of Indian associates. Some of these were Hindu bankers and traders but most were from the Bengali upper castes (Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha) which had previously supplied administrators and entrepreneurs for service in the Mughal province and the local Hindu kingdoms. Throughout the first three quarters of the 19th century opportunities for such employment under the British continued to expand. As the imperial armies marched triumphantly westward through central and northern India, they were followed by administrators and judges. Indian assistants and clerks were needed. As courts, hospitals and schools were established there were openings for lawyers, doctors and teachers and the construction of railways created demands for accountants and more clerks. The Bengali migrants were quick to grasp these opportunities, and from hundreds of villages throughout Bengal ambitious men stepped into the road that led to Calcutta and beyond to all part of India.¹⁷

Another plank of the imperialist policy was to suppress the local languages and to set up artificial provincial boundaries for the sake of a cheap and simplified

17 E.H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in Plural Society (University of California Press, 1968), p. 7.

administration. This policy retarded the growth of the local middle classes and by promoting jealousy between them and the immigrants also served as an instrument that would help divide and rule. In April 1831, the Government of Bengal made Bengali, in place of Persian, the court language of Assam on the ground that it was very difficult and too costly to have replacement when a Persian scribe was on leave or left the service. Bengali was actually introduced in 1837. The language controversy which arose out of the introduction of Bengali into the courts and schools of Assam in place of Assamese in 1837, deepened and agitated popular mind in the sixties.¹⁸ The services of the Bengalis immediately became indispensable in the Anglo-vernacular and vernacular schools. Since school teachers were not available in adequate number in any case to impart lessons in Bengali language, which had since become the medium of instructions, "The enthusiasm with which the Bengali bhadralok accepted and promoted English language education in marked contrast to the response of the landed elite in the surrounding provinces gave them the lion's share of the new opportunities for professional, administrative, and clerical employment throughout eastern and northern India."¹⁹

*Cuzishe
develops*

18 K. N. Dutta, Landmark of the Freedom Struggle in Assam (Gauhati, 1968), p. 28.

19 Broomfield, n. 17, p. 8.

The initial monopoly of office in almost all the departments by the newcomers from Bengal naturally generated an ill-feeling and deep resentment amongst those, for whom hitherto there was no other means of livelihood than Government service. The polemic between the Bengali and Assamese languages since then had been fairly continuous and symbolizes in many ways the fight between the interests on the one hand of an immigrant and comparatively advanced middle class, and on the other hand an indigenous, less advanced and suppressed middle class. In the first decade of this century the Bengali middle class had already produced a big surplus of educated youth who could not hope to be employed on the narrow provincial administrative 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.²⁰

The Assamese language remained suppressed during the whole period from 1836 to 1871. The introduction of Bengali in the schools of Assam seriously hampered the progress of education. This was seriously opposed by the enlightened section of the Assamese people.

²⁰ Ibid.

(The social dominance of Bengali speaking people in Assam, Orissa, Chotanagpur and parts of Bihar was reflected in the dominance of their languages.) As these areas, backward in the new education and professional training, came slowly to produce their own educated, eager for a share of opportunities snapped up by Bengalis, they attempted to redress the balance by stressing the claims of their own languages to be recognized as the languages of administration and the law courts.²¹ Bengali patriotism and pride in language came to be challenged by the patriotism of the speakers of Assamese, Oriya and Bihari.²²

Beginning of modern political consciousness can be traced from 1853, when Mani Ram Dewan and Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan²³ submitted their memorandum to A.J. Moffat Mill, who had come to enquire into the condition of the province. They protested against the appointment of several Bengalis from Sylhet, and Marwaris as mauzadars²⁴ when a number of Assamese were already available for employment. The native of the province have great reason

21 Anil Seal, Emergence of Indian Nationalism (London, 1963), p. 47.

22 For the beginning of the demand "Bihar for the Biharis" see V.C.P. Chaudhary, The Creation of Modern Bihar (Patna, 1964).

23 Refer infra p.

24 Mauzadars were Commissioner's agents; under them the revenue charge of a mauza (circle of villages) aggregated for the purpose of record and revenue collection. Refer Baden Powell, Land System of British India (Delhi, 1974), p. 420.

to complain of the preference which is too often given to Bengalis who came into Assam at the time of selecting officers to fill vacancies. A number of Bengalis came into Assam when the British took the province, and from the uneducated State of Assam it was necessary to give them service, but there were then in Sibsagar and Gauhati many young men of high family and good character who had qualified themselves for employment and it was most discouraging to them to see most of the high and some of the inferior officers' jobs were filled up by foreigners. When Mills was Commissioner of Cuttack, the Government at his recommendation interdicted employment of Bengalis, not domiciled in the country, without the special sanction of the Commissioner in Orissa, and Mills thought that the same order might with the greatest advantage, be introduced into Assam.²⁵ The first fruit of a growing national consciousness amongst the Assamese intelligentsia was the restoration in 1871 by order of the Lt. Governor of Bengal Sir George Campbell, of Assamese into its rightful place in the schools and courts of Assam. A. J. Moffat Mills clearly expressed his view in support of the language:

25 A. J. Mills, Reports on the Province of Assam, 1853.

The people complain, and in my opinion with much reason, of the substitution of Bengalee for the vernacular Assamese. Bengalee is the language of the courts, not of their popular books, and shastras, and there is a strong prejudice to its general use. It is because instruction is imparted to the youths in a foreign tongue, that they look only to Government for employ. Assamese is described by Mr. Brown as a beautiful language, differing in more respects from than agreeing with the Bengalee, and I think we made a great mistake in directing all business should be transacted in Bengalee, and that the Assamese must acquire it. 26

Assamese language had opened its career before the Ahom settled down in Assam. The non-recognition of Assamese during British rule naturally gave umbrage to the people of Assam.

Structural differentiation between Assamese and Bengali Language

Assamese has been subjected to various misinterpretation regarding its status as a distinct language. This language is commonly believed to be an off-shoot or sub-dialect of Bengali language. This misunderstanding is largely due to the territorial redistribution under the British rule. 124-

The whole of North Bengal, including Koch-Bihar, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and also perhaps Dinajpur should have been included with Assam

and the modern district of Sylhet which forms a part of political Assam should have been joined to Bengal, if the territorial readjustment were to be made on the basis of linguistic homogeneity. Such territorial distribution would have given a proper perspective to the formation and the development of the Assamese language. 27

The Assamese language developed out of the Sanskrit language as early as in 7th century A.D. Its direct ancestor, however, is Magadhi Apabhramse. "Magadhi" was the principal dialect which corresponded to the eastern Prakrit. East of Magadhi was spoken Prachya Apabhramse. It spread to the south and south-east and here it became the parent of Bengali language. Besides spreading southward Prachya apabhramse also spread to the east, keeping north of the Ganges and reached the Valley of Assam, where it is represented by the Assamese. Each of the three decendants of Magadhi Apabhramse, Oriya, Modern Bengali and Assamese, is equally directly connected with the common immediate parent. 28

The main points of agreement and difference between the Bengali and Assamese languages are:

- (1) Assamese words for fire and water are from the earliest period 'zui', and 'pani', as opposed to the Bengali 'agun' and 'jal'. Assamese 'pani' for water is common to all

27 Benikanta Kakoti, Assamese: Its Formation and Development (Assam, 1941), p. 26.

28 G. A. Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India (Delhi, 1967), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 125-6.

dialects of Bihari and eastern Hindi but 'jui' for fire has parallels only in 'jui' of the Bihari dialect and in the Bhulia dialect of eastern Hindi respectively, both south of Vindhya.

(2) Assamese and Bengali languages have contrasting system of accentuation. Assamese language follows the pan-Indian system of penultimate stress and the Bengali language has an initial stress. Even in that respect Bengali language differs from the Kamrupi dialect which also has an initial stress. In this regard the most common word for courtyard (corresponding to skt catvāla) in St. Assamese, St. Bengali, and Kamrupi may be compared, e.g. St. Assamese 'sotal'; St. Bengali 'catal'; Kamrupi 'sotal'. In St. Assamese the stress on the penultimate shortens the previous -a-; in Kamrupi the initial stress shortens the following -a- and in Bengali there is anticipation of lengthening of initial a - in a position of stress.

(3) Assamese has a complete set of negative conjugation with the negative particle 'na' placed before the verb root. Oriya has a negative conjugation with the verb substantive only. Bengali has no negative conjugation.

(4) The plural suffixes in Assamese are entirely different from those of Bengali. The types of vowel harmony, where an interior -a- is shortened under the influence of a following - a in a succeeding syllable is absent in Bengali,

while Assamese has it in common with Oriya and in a modified form with Bihari. This often makes Assamese formations unintelligible to the Bengali speaking people.

(5) Assamese devised from earliest times a symbol (০) for the W - W glide, Bengali has no distinct symbol; it has only a spelling device to denote the glide sound.

All this proves that Assamese is not an off-shoot or patois of Bengali but an independent speech related to Bengali, both occupying the position of dialects with reference to some standard "Magadhan Apabhramsa". S.K. Chatterjee has made certain valuable observations by saying that the Bengali dialects cannot be referred to a single primitive Bengali speech, but they are derived from various local forms of late Magadhan Apabhramsa which developed some common characteristics that may be called Bengali. Again, Assamese under her independent kings and her social life, entirely self contained, became an independent speech although her sister dialect, north Bengali accepted the vassalage of the literary speech of Bengali.²⁹

The Role of Assamese Middle Class

It is important to understand the origin and development of the various regional sections of the Indian bourgeoisie. Their unity and conflict with the big

29 For details see S.K. Chatterjee, The Origins and Development of the Bengali Language (London, 1970).

bourgeoisie ought to be properly understood. Origins of the Assamese middle class is particularly important and useful because it has come in the wake of an upsurge of violent linguistic chauvinism in Assam.

The history of Assamese middle class is one of the tragic deformation under imperialist rule. It is of comparatively recent origin, trailing behind its Bengali counterpart. Having had to defend its interests in competition with outsiders who possess greater financial resources and more advanced skill in an economy stunted by imperialism--it has developed chauvinist tendencies that continually deflect its legitimate aspirations. 30

Its landed property, is no counterweight to the enormous pull of big capital, in the economy of the State and contradictions between its historical role as the junior partner of an exploiting force controlling the entire Indian economy and the growing impatience of the big bourgeoisie with separate regional interests have sharpened.

There is a tendency to blame immigrants from other provinces which has led to terrible consequences, and the central government is not keen to remove such illusions. The lack of economic power combined with the survival of feudal habits of thought has made the Assamese middle class

30 H. Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class", Social Scientist, vol. 2, no. 1, August 1973.

dangerously prone to reactionary thinking.³¹

But it will be an exaggeration to say that the British fostered the growth of the middle class without restriction. In fact anything that disturbed the tenor of their colonial exploitation was destroyed. In this context, it is useful to recall the meteoric rise and fall of Mani Ram Dewan an outstanding, if somewhat unscrupulous Assamese gentleman who developed from a loyal friend and enthusiastic supporter of the British into a moral enemy. Mani Ram, in his memorandum to Mills, had hailed the abolition of forced labour and restoration of law and order as the beginning of a new era of prosperity and well-being for the people of Assam. The Dewan in fact had served as the Dewan of the first private tea garden in Assam, the famous Assam Company. The shrewd and skilful management of his gardens had earned him handsome profits in the 1850s while the British planters were running at a considerable loss. But Mani Ram was not allowed to develop further. He was arrested in 1857 on the charge of conspiracy with the leaders of 1857--the revolt to overthrow the British rule.

The involvement of Mani Ram in the national revolt of 1857 and of the new Assamese middle class in the modernist and tactically collaborationist politics of the last quarter of the 19th century, indicate Assam's early identification

31 Ibid., p. 23.

with the then mainstream of Indian nationalism. The attitude of the new Assamese middle class is better typified by Mani Ram's illustrations. He affirmed the separate identity of the Assamese language.³² However, he presumed close collaboration with the British authorities when he was promoted to the then important post of sub-assistant commissioner, and when the 1857 revolt sent its nipples towards Assam, he made anxious efforts to prove his spotless loyalty to the British rulers. The same line of collaboration with the British was advocated by another distinguished member of the new middle class in the following decade. This was advocated by Hemchandra Barua. He edited one of the earliest English newspapers in Assam, Assam News (1882) which had a circulation of about 900. His opinions on various subjects like social manners, traditions of Assam, tenancy rights and opium addiction were invited by the colonial Government. However, even his robust and rugged personality was not opposed in principle to British rule which he considered an agent of progress and enlightenment.

The existence of the independent small and middle bourgeoisie is threatened by imperialist feudal coalition, whereas the bureaucratic and distributive petty bourgeoisie

32 Phukan affirmed the separate identity of the Assamese language against the expansionist claims of new Bengali chauvinism in his "observations on the Administration of the province of Assam" submitted to Mills and in a separate monograph viz. "A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language, 1855".

depends for its existence on the semi-feudal, semi-colonial trade and commerce and production. However, the very condition of the petty bourgeoisie's existence severely limited as it is by the inherent contradiction in the ruling set-up, which make economic growth impossible, throws it ultimately on the side of the revolutionary toiling masses and in the long-run, therefore, this class becomes even more radical than the national bourgeoisie.³³

This perhaps explains why a section of the Assamese middle class typified by Mani Ram (1806-1858) who started his successful tea garden was relatively more anti-imperialist in his final action than the other section of the middle class typified by Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan (1829-39), who depended for his livelihood on the bureaucratic machinery. Their other differences in approach also stemmed from the difference in their respective situations. However, as the stagnation inherent in colonial feudal role became clearer, the latter section of the middle class, that which we have called the petty bourgeoisie, did play an increasingly important role.³⁴

Assam lagged behind the more advanced parts of India during mediaeval times due to low level of economic

33 Refer Mao Tse-tung, The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party.

34 A. Guha and A.N. Das, "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class : A Comment", Social Scientist, January 1974.

development and geographical considerations and the isolationist policy of the Ahom monarchy. The downfall of feudal order did not bring the pace of development in line with that of the rest of British India. Commerce and commodity production had not attained in Assam the height of prosperity that they did in Gujarat and Bengal. There was no trading class, a phenomenon the British noted in their nearly administrative reports and official surveys.³⁵ There was no native capitalist in Assam, the artisan was independent and he supplemented his income with the products of a farm he worked regularly. This explains the commercial monopoly of the Marwari merchants who followed the British into Assam and diligently tapped the few opportunities for money-making, opened by the British, like money-lending, supplying provisions to tea gardens, procuring mustard and later jute for the market outside Assam and meeting the demands for new household implements and articles--cheap and mass produced that the Assamese soon came to adopt.³⁶ On the whole, imperialism acted as a further brake on the development of the forces of production, communication, education, and political consciousness suffered from a

³⁵ B.C. Allen, Sibsagar District Gazetteers (Allahabad, 1906), p. 191.

³⁶ For details see William Hunter, Statistical Account of Assam (Delhi, 1975).

corresponding stagnation. The economic weakness and political immaturity of the middle class continued to prevent it from having a decisive confrontation with big capital which succeeded imperialism as the main exploiter, though the middle class has made some gains since independence. The middle class in Assam cannot have much to show in terms of capitalist property. The bankruptcy of the middle class and its characteristic nationalist illusions and to establish that, it no longer qualified as the leader of the masses of this region in the fight against big capital.³⁷

Intimate contact with the enlightened ideas of the west produced a group of Assamese literatures. The most famous among these writers were--Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Chandra Kumar Agarwal, Padmanath Gohain Barua and Hem Chandra Goswami. In the latter part of the 19th century they took in the publication of the Assamese monthly magazine Jonski and contributed to the revival of Assamese literature. Ambika Giri Roy Choudhary whose Cheira, a monthly journal, had contributed largely to build up Assamese national consciousness founded at that time the Assam Sangrakshini Sabha and he began to voice through this organization demands indicating the rights of the Assamese

³⁷ H. Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class : Reply to Comment", Social Scientist, January 1974.

people, the rights of the children of the soil as against aggression of outsiders. His ideology was based upon the historic past of Assam, and he maintained that swaraj for India must also mean swaraj for each component unit, like Assam, giving it full freedom to preserve its individuality in respect of language, culture and social structure from aggression from outside or by outsiders from within. Liquidation of vested interests of all kinds that run counter to the interests of the Assamese people was also an objective of the Sabha. This organization was later transformed into the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha, seeking to bring the indigenous population of the hills and plains of Assam, as also others, who identified their interests with those of the Assamese people within its orbit.

The Assam Association (1903-20), the Assam Chhatra Sammilan (1916), and the Assam Sahitya Sabha (1917), all of them attempted to articulate their unsettled question for a linguistic-regional identity and their desire to be administered at the lower level at least, not by the recruits from Bengal, but by the sons of the soil. An article on the gloomy future of the Assamese nationality was published in 1937 by Jnananath Bora, a leading intellectual of the province in Dainik Batori (Jorhat), the mouthpiece of the Sangrakshini movement. Bora argued that unless Sylhet was separated, unless Assamese was

declared the only medium of instruction in schools and unless the influx of settlers was stopped it would be difficult for the Assamese to survive as a nationality. One of the reasons why the Assamese supported the separation of Sylhet was that they would be able to establish the domination over their language. The Indian National Congress adopted a resolution recommending exclusion of Sylhet from Assam, so that the population of Assam might be more homogeneous. But it became only a record of opinion without any chance of being implemented.³⁸

However, after Independence with Sylhet going over to Pakistan, Assamese leaders became more vocal about the position of their language and culture³⁹ and also the demand for the declaration of Assamese as the State language started getting momentum. We would be taking up this problem in the following chapter. The study would be mainly on the language movement arising out of the declaration of the official language and vernacular medium of university education and the political and social base of the movement.

38 Proceedings of the Indian Legislative Council, vol. 1,
pp. 492-6.

39 M. Car, "Muslim in Assam Politics", North Eastern Affairs,
July 1973.

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER III

LANGUAGE POLITICS IN ASSAM

In this chapter, a study is to be made of the language movement arising out of the declaration of (a) official language, and (b) vernacular medium of university education. We would try to examine the following questions; What are the social and political bases of these movement? Do Government policies help toward bringing integration and assimilation? What are the approaches of the various political parties towards this problem?

In the previous chapter we have examined the historical root of the problem starting from pre-British period to the time of independence.

The national movement led by the Indian National Congress culminated in the transfer of power from British imperialism to the Indian State, with Muslim League, led by M.A. Jinnah, curving out a separate State geographically distributed in West and East Pakistan in India. The principal party, in power came to be the Indian National Congress itself. While the colonial State had unified India for the purpose of its domination and exploitation in a politico-administrative sense, it left the organizational unity of the Indian ruling classes to the Indian State itself. The principal task of the Indian State, in the wake of independence,

was to organize a single national market and to bring a political integration, through which it could mediate the various class-interests contradictory at times.

The picture that emerged at the time of independence, was by no means a simple one. The communal trouble arising out of partition, the integration of the princely States and the difficulties of organizing the various nationalities into a single constitutional State structure were the most important of the many problems that confronted the Indian State.

The Indian National Congress, which, while getting all its efforts towards negotiating transfer of power, a process in which it subordinated and integrated the various conflicting interests¹ -- economic, political and linguistic, kept in suspension of the resolution of the very same problems pointing to the difficulties involved in achieving them within the colonial structure, had to take up the issues and resolve them after the transfer of power. The Congress Party itself came to be divided on these questions, especially at the provincial level, where the regional interests pulled them in different directions. The Congress Working Committee, however, was not to give in to such demands. In

1 For an analysis of its integration of the interests of the rich peasantry into its organizational base, see N. G. Ranga, "Fight for Freedom", and "Bapu Blesses" - Indian Peasant Institute, Nidubrolu. The Congress Party never, during the course of its movement, adhered to the principle of linguistic reorganization, conceded to the demand of Swarajstra by Andhra in Madras Presidency in its annual session in 1938.

the field of organization of State structure, the constitution was framed to have a federal structure. "The colonial structure having left no single strong class, state power continues to be based on a coalition between the bourgeoisie and large land owners. More specifically, the coalition has three elements; the monopoly bourgeoisie whose members control business empires spread across a number of spheres and a number of states; the small urban bourgeoisie consisting of businessmen confined to single industries or states and professional groups who are not direct exploiters but integrated into the system of exploitation, like lawyers, managers and upper bureaucracy; and finally the class of landlords and rich peasants, who live mainly by exploitation either through rent or through wage labour or both. This last may appear too heterogeneous, but post-independence land reforms have caused its constituents to coalesce into a more or less single category, so it is better treated as such. Bourgeoisie democracy and a federal political structure create the environment for this coalition to work both at the centre and at the provincial level."² The question of linguistic organization of these provinces was not to be acceded to.³

2 Prabhat Patnaik, "Imperialism and the Growth of Indian Capitalism", in Robin Blackburn, ed., Explosion in a Subcontinent (Penguin, 1975), p. 52.

3 For details see, Constituent Assembly Debates. Durga Das, India: From Curzon to Nehru and After p. 326.

The problem of Assam has to be seen in the context of these politics. Contemporary Assam is only a small portion of what was termed Assam only a few years ago. Today, Assam consists of nine districts containing 30,408 square meters. Most of the population live in two valleys--the predominantly Assamese speaking Brahmaputra valley, with about 12.5 million people, and the predominantly Bengali speaking Surma valley, with 1.7 million persons. The Census of 1961 returned 192 languages and dialects as mother tongues in the State.⁴ The principal linguistic groups are Assamese (57.14%), Bengali (17.36%), Hindi (4.31%), Khasi (3.00%), Garo (2.54%), Baro (2.36%), Mizo (1.92%), Nepalese (1.81%), Mikir (1.30%), Oriya (1.23%), Manipuri (0.75%), Miri (0.87%).⁵

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the economic changes that came about in the united Assam--Bengali province--under the colonial structure, were lop-sided, yet dis-integrating in the sense of reducing the objective basis for a community of Bengalis or Assamese living in an isolated, single territory as such. While the remnants of parcellized and localized economies (not in an ideal pre-capitalist sense) in the tribal tracks of Assam continued to prolong and strengthen the claim for existence of tribal people, the commercial sector and the tea industry shattered the basis

4 Government of India, Census Report (Delhi, 1961).

5. *Ibid.*

for such an existence for the Assamese and Bengalis. They remained, however, as socio-linguistic groups, separated by language and culture. The problem would not have been complicated, but for the fact of the concentration of Bengali speaking population in certain areas like Cachar district coming first, followed by Goalpara, Kamrup and a few isolated urban centres. This provided, as it historically did in most parts of India, a specific area in which politics could be manipulated in times of conflicting pulls. The specific problem of Assam, in later years, in terms of political manifestations, was to be that of "Assamese-Bengali rivalry".

PARTITION AND 'BONGAL KHEDA'

The separation of East Pakistan, "the Sylhet referendum" and its consequent merger, reduced the Bengali population from 27.56% to 19.64%.⁶ It had also resulted in the migration of Bengali-Hindu 'refugees' into the bordering districts of Assam. The pre-partition Assam Ministry or Interim Government of Assam had both Assamese and Bengali representatives. Thus, it maintained the balance and avoided any linguistic trouble coming to the fore. The formation of first Assam Ministry after Independence consisted, for

6 For distribution of Assamese and Bengali population district-wise see Appendix Table 3.

the first time, mostly of Assamese.⁷

A period of three years were to lapse before the Constitution could declare its official language policy, viz., the replacement of English by Hindi for the official purposes of the Union, and as the language of communication between the States and the Union, and between one State and another. Article 345 of the Constitution further empowers the legislature of a State to adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the State, or Hindi as the language or languages to be used for all or any of the official purposes of that State.⁸ The official language both at the centre and State levels meanwhile continued to be English.

7 First Sitting of the Assembly in Post-August 1947
Assam

Members of the Council of Ministers

<u>Name of Minister</u>	<u>Constituency</u>
1. Gopinath Bordoloi	Kamrup Sadar (South)
2. Bishnu Ram Medhi	Kamrup Sadar (Central)
3. Ram Nath Das	Jorhat Reserve Seat
4. Rupnath Brahma	Goalpara (Tribal) (Plains)
5. J.J.M. Nichols Roy	Backward Area (Hills, Shillong)
6. Maulavi Abdul Matlib	Hylekandi

Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, vol. 1, no. 14, 1947.

8 Constitution of India.

While official language was settled in this manner, the problem of medium of instruction hung in the balance. This provided an area where conflicting interests could be politically brought on to the surface. On 26 September 1947 the Bordoloi Government directed that "Assamese is accepted as compulsory second language in all schools where it cannot be Assamese completely". The Bengali speaking people have cited the fact that "the number of government primary schools in Goalpara district with Bengali as the medium of instruction has fallen from 252 in 1947-48 to 1 at 1951."⁹

Henceforth, Assamese language was to replace Bengali in course of time in all those schools, where Bengali was sole medium of instruction. Subsequently, there followed a period of agitation. There was a strong resentment from the Bengali middle class against this policy of the government voiced mainly through an organization, called Cachar District Committee.¹⁰

Fuel was added to the fire when the Governor w made a statement:

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 of the language and

⁹ See Report of the State Reorganisation Commission, 1956, p. 191.

¹⁰ Akbar Hydri's Paper (1947-48).

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 he 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. 11

But the source of the trouble seems to have risen from a different conjuncture. From the limited documentary evidence we have, the economic interests that were at logger head in the wake of partition seemed to be the main cause of the trouble. As is evident from a secret circular issued by Cachar Kalyan Samiti,¹² a middle class organization of Assam, and the evidence, however, partial and one-sided published in Bombay weekly Forum,¹³ the Cachar Kalyan Samiti was reportedly financed and strengthened by some "merwaris" and other "non-Bengali interests".¹⁴ The same paper reported that "embryonic agitation is afoot to bang the door against Sylhetees and Bengalees reportedly inspired and financed by these sections".¹⁵

11 Akbar Hydri's speech, Assam Assembly Debates, 5 November 1947.

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

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

It is also clear from the circular mentioned above¹⁶ that the revenue minister of Assam Bishnu Ram Medhi (who was to become the next Chief Minister) and an organization called Assam Jatiya Mahasabha, were also giving monetary help to the agitation for "Bengal Kheda" (drive away Bengalis). It was aimed at ousting the Sylhet traders "from the Hylekandi sub-division and further up". This circular went on to say: "If you desire to get position of these bazars (markets) of Kulain, Bihara, Barkhala and Shealhik, then organize a Kalyan Samitee and a defence party; there need be no anxiety for finance in these behalf."¹⁷ The Muslim League which had earlier confronted with the Bengali Hindu traders during partition, also supported the move. There followed a storming of Bengali shops, stoning Bengali people and demanding Bengalis to part with their titles.

All this gave added concern to the Bengali organization, which being in minority/approached Sardar Patel to (a) dissuade Government of Assam from trying to impose Assamese language in their schools, and (b) to provide employment facilities or opportunities to refugee employees hailing from Sylhet.¹⁸

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

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

But the economic interest seemed to be predominant for the memorandum complained of "refusing facilities of government contract" and "trade licenses and permits to Bengalis and Hindustanees". It is not clear from these documents as to how these competing interests were accommodated, the intervention from the Central Government though seems to have helped and subsidise the issue by asking the Assam Government to allow certain amount of influx of Bengali middle class into the administrative jobs.¹⁹ However, Assamese as the medium of instruction continued unabated in the schools of Assam province.

LINGUISTIC REORGANIZATION IN ASSAM

Although the organization of Indian State into a unified federal structure was by and large an accepted phenomena, the actual working out, proved to be difficult. This, as discussed earlier, was accentuated by the uneven economic development and the consequent regional class formations to carry on the business through the provincial state structures, the facilities of one regional official language was felt to be in the interest of these classes.²⁰

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

20 Though a number of studies showing this phenomena exist in the theoretical formulation of a regional bourgeoisie etc. do not seem to be based on any specific scientific investigations. (See Social Scientist, Special Number August 1975).

The problem and its dimensions varied from region to region. But the intensity was most acutely manifested in Andhra which has been demanding a separate state on the basis of one language.²¹ It found echo in other regions as well.

Once the fierce agitation culminated in the conceding of the state of Andhra on a linguistic basis, the primordial loyalties in other regions were whipped-up into agitations.

The argument is often put forward that the movement for linguistic states was a "broad democratic national movement" implying thereby, that it was a demand based on aspirations of the sub-altern classes and self assertion of nationalities as distinct socio economic communities.²² It is difficult to understand in what sense it was such a movement because as a socio-political movement the leadership did not lie in the hands of the working class. Though masses were drawn into it, they were not a conscious element in this movement. Neither was there any national oppression as obtained in Russia. For the autonomy of the regional languages was never suppressed. Hence, it is wrong to equate agitations based on language with nationality agitation, as is done by Kerat Prakash,²³ though the feeling of nationality was an important factor in the mobilization of masses.

21 Refer S. Harrison, India - The Most Dangerous Decades (Madras, 1960).

22 Kerat Prakash, Language and Nationality Politics in India (Madras, 1973), p. 63.

23 Ibid., p. 44.

The conceding of linguistic reorganization was the realization by the Government of the fact of reconciling the regional interests with other short term conflicting interests. It was also feared that these agitations might be used for ends other than envisaged by the movement. Therefore, the State followed a policy of repression as well as concession.

The demand for linguistic reorganisation on the national scale had little importance in case of Assam, as there was little that Assam claimed for linguistic reorganization. Yet there were few tendencies towards it which brought upon (a) the demand for separate Hill State which had little or no linguistic manifestation; and (b) the demand for the formation of a "Purbachal State" from a section of Bengali speaking people particularly from Cachar and Goalpara districts.²⁴ The Bengal Sangram Samiti became the reorganizational form of such a demand. "The genesis of the Purbachal demand is that since the major part of Sylhet was cut off from India at the time of partition, the Bengalis in Assam, who used to feel that culturally and even geographically they belonged to Bengal, have found themselves somewhat isolated in what they may now be disposed to regard as an uncongenial environment."²⁵

24 States Reorganization Commission Report, 1956, p. 190.

25 Ibid., p. 191.

These demands contrastingly were not part of the linguistic reorganization for a State of West Bengal already existed and reorganisation would not have meant in any way the inclusion of these districts, geographically distant (being part of Assam) into Bengal.

As far as Nagas were concerned its viability as a state was felt to be a doubtful proposition, as there were other tribes which might need the same solution. This problem was then realized by the State Reorganization Commission.

Racially, linguistically and culturally, even the tribes which are described compendiously under a 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 recognise this fact. 26

The State of Assam that came into existence following the State Reorganisation Act of 1956 did not bring any change in the physical or linguistic composition (except including Tripura with Assam) with an area and population of about 89,040 square miles and 9.7 millions respectively.

II

POLITICS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
IN ASSAM

The linguistic reorganization of the provincial state structures hardly disturbed the balance of the organizational unity of the Indian ruling classes. In case of Madras, which seems to be an exception and needs its specific study in itself.

However, as the stipulated period for switching over from English to the regional language as the official language of the administration of the State came nearer, it set contradictory phenomena in motion in Assam.

The linguistic bodies of Assam viz. Assam Sahitya Sabha,²⁷ Assam Jatiya Mahasabha (set up in 1917) became the pivotal organization for implementing the constitutional provisions. Ever since independence, these organizations were demanding for recognition of Assamese as the state language. The surfacing of such a body was the result of socio-economic changes along with the great improvements in communications and the catalyst of modern education providing for a greater awareness of the mother tongue.²⁸ Assam Sahitya Sabha in

27 The Assam S.S. is composed mainly of middle class intellectuals, literateurs, college and university teachers etc. For details see K. Neog, Annals of Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1917-1975 (Jorhat, 1976).

28 Karat Prakash, n. 22.

its annual conference in 1959, adopted a resolution again urging upon the Government of Assam to declare Assamese as the official language of the State within 1960.²⁹ State language day was observed all over Assam. Public meetings throughout the State echoed this demand. Several members of the Assembly belonging to different parties raised the demand during the discussions in its budget session in 1960.

The budget session of 1960 witnessed political parties declaring their support to the demand, with the only exception of APHLC and all tribal organizations which saw in these demands deprivation of their English educated middle class³⁰ from 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 are such that the acceptance of the Assamese language would place the Assamese in a more dominant position, will lead to the assimilation of all the hill people into the Assamese community, thereby gradually leading to the

29 The annual session of Assam Sahitya Sabha held at Nowgong on 18-20 April 1959, expressed and indicated the year 1960 as the deadline within which the government were requested to take measures to recognise Assamese as the official language of the state. Maheswar Neog, Assam Language Question (Jorhat, 1961).

30 See "Resolution of All Party Hill leaders Conference" in Girja Kumar and V.K. Arora, ed., Documents on India Affairs 1960 (London, 1965).

disintegration of their identity as distinct community of India, which identity has been given recognition and protection under the Constitution. Such assimilation and disintegration are against the deepest sentiments of the hill people and detrimental to the composite culture of India which is born out of unity in diversity.

(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 can always be circumvented.

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

(d) Assam being inhabited by people of diverse races, cultures, and languages desires that the proper official language should be Hindi. 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, 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.

There are two important reasons which warrant enactment on 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 separates the diverse population of Assam--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. 31

But the objective political situation obtaining in Assam was not conducive to a smooth change over. This statement 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 in principle. On the other hand, it raised a storm of protests from the Assamese speaking people and their supporters throughout the State and even beyond it. The official language enthusiasts organized meetings and passed resolutions and attacked the minority oppositions. The issue of official language should not be mixed up or confused with the rights and facilities in respect of linguistic minorities.³² The safeguard provided for in the

31 Assam Assembly Debates, 3 March 1960 (Chief Minister's speech).

32 Memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister on 22 March 1960 by leading public men of Assam "State Language Action Committee".

Constitution and the recommendation made by the States Reorganization Commission in this regard are sufficient to allay any fear or suspicion of linguistic minorities tribal or otherwise. The linguistic minorities of any state cannot stand in the way of its main regional language being made the official language. As a matter of fact, the official Language Commission have made pointed observations in this respect. About the people of the tribal areas of Assam, the Commission observed that "while the children from tribal areas must receive a modicum 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 interests that they should acquire a knowledge of Assamese language also".³³

Yet the demands of the minorities persisted. The "Bengal Sangram Parishad" persisted to have Bengali as the second State Official language and as the State Official language for Cachar on district level, because the majority of Bengali educated middle classes meant to gain by this proposition.

Owing to the lack of documentary evidence, it is difficult to show the interplay of class forces. The extent of support from the classes in short-term conflict to the warring organizations of the two communities cannot be

33 Report of the Official Language Commission, 1956, p. 54.

clearly established. But the duration of the sustained mass agitation (mainly middle class) and the riots, and the way in which these were conducted and organized, leave one in no doubt that the political base (class support) was in fact forthcoming. It was pointed out by the leader of the Communist Party, Gouri Sankar Bhattacharyya, that the Chief Minister's statement might give a convenient weapon to the elements to be used against the minorities. The executive of the CPI said:

It stood by any resolution that seeks 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 will have their full right of petition, appeal education and examination in their own mother tongue. 34

The PSP held its state convention which adopted a resolution demanding the immediate declaration of Assamese language as the State language.³⁵ At this stage, the APCC revised its earlier decision and passed a resolution on the following lines:³⁶

34 See Resolution, Assam State Council, Communist Party, 1960.

35 See Resolution of the Praja Socialist Party, August 1960, pp. 235-6.

36 Resolutions passed by the Executive Committee of the Congress Committee of Assam, APCC and APP, 21 April 1960.

(a) 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.

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

(c) That the right of the minorities for protection and development of their languages will be fully safeguarded.

(d) 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.

(e) 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 bring the people closer and to break the language barrier.

The APCC resolution failed to satisfy people of both sides and it produced sharp reaction both in Cachar and hill district and the Brahmaputra Valley.

Violence broke out when Assamese students took out a procession shouting anti-Bengali slogans on 17 June 1960.³⁷ The agitation and counter-agitations, arson and

³⁷ Times of India (New Delhi), 30 June 1960.

murder did not happen only to provide the government an opportunity to enquire into them. They have no doubt achieved an immediate political end. While the agitation continued in the districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur during the latter period of May as well as the beginning of June, the movement took a violent turn during the second week of June in Sibsagar district. There was repeated incidents mainly of stoppage of trains, looting of Bengali shops, damage to railway property etc.

In Guhanti on 4 July a fire broke out in the vicinity of a cotton college hostel, upon which the police, for obvious reasons, availed themselves of the opportunity to put the blame squarely upon the college students and resorted to wanton and illegal firing within the hostel grounds as a result of which the valuable life of a student was lost instantaneously and six other students were seriously injured. The news of these incidents of bloodshed and atrocities of the police were determined to bring about a reign of terror in the town, spread like wild fire and precipitated certain untoward happenings in different parts of the state.³⁸

In the ensuing disturbances ten thousands families

38 R. Chowdhary, "Inside Assam 1960", Assam Language Question (Jornat), 1961, p. 13.

lost their homes and 34 persons their lives³⁹ thereby postponing implementation of official language for some more time. The Central Government as usual had to intervene.

With the advice of the Union Home Minister, Govinda Ballabh Pant, the Assam Assembly and Assam Pradesh Congress Committee had come to the following decisions:

Assamese, and English, to be replaced by Hindi, should be declared the official language for the State. And Assamese should be used for district administration in the Brahmaputra Valley, and Bengali, for Cachar and leave the option for selecting whatever language the respective district and regional councils choose for district administration in their respective districts and there would be continuation of English in the secretarial and in the heads of departments.

This decision of the Assam Assembly and Assam Pradesh Congress Committee to turn Assam into a bilingual state has come as a great disappointment to most sections of public opinion in Assam.

"If the bill gets through the Assembly, it will pave the way for the gradual extinction of the Assamese language in a few years."⁴⁰

39 G.S. Ghurye, Social Tension in India (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1968).

40 A. Hazarika, President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, Assam Tribune, 9 October 1960.

Political parties like PSP and CPI were also strongly opposed to this bilingual formula. There was again differences of views within the Congress itself. Smt. Jyotana Chandra, Congress representative from Cachar, was of the opinion that the formula given by Pant was not adhered to and the recognition he wanted to give to Bengali language along with Assamese had not been respected.

A second phase of violence took place which resulted in fire and loot directed at the Bengali homes and shops the day on which the Sangram Parishad was to go on district-wide hartal (strike) but withdrawn.⁴¹

The rioting and counter-rioting involving the petty bourgeois section of the masses imbued with "linguistic chauvinism" had the politics of opportunism as its basis. Amidst pulls and pressures the official language act was passed, consisting of concessions to both the rival claims. "Without prejudice to the provisions of the Articles 346 and 347 of the Constitution of India and subject as hereinafter provided Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the state of Assam."⁴² The Act also provided:

only languages which are in use immediately before the commencement of this Act shall continue to be used for administrative and

41 Times of India (New Delhi), 1 July 1961.

42 Assam Official Language Act, 1960.

other official purposes upto 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 decide in favour of adoption of any other language for any of the administrative or official purposes within that region or district. There was also provision in section 3, that the Bengali language shall be used for administrative and other official purposes upto and including the district level in the district of Cachar. 43

It is true that a section of the Hill people and some of the Bengali speaking people of Cachar were not reconciled to this change. The language issue indeed provided the ground for the Hill State movement. But as everybody familiar with the history of the movement for a separate Hill State knows, it is 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 fact, of these facts we do not see how the language bill could be held responsible for the political disintegration threatened by 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.⁴⁴

43 Ibid.

44 Refer S.K. Chanda, Hill Politics in North East India (Calcutta, 1973).

The Congress members from Cachar did nothing more than abstaining from voting. So did CPI, which asked for adequate safeguards for the Bengali minority like the publication of State Gazette and court judgement in Bengali language.⁴⁵

The Political Parties and Official Language

A political party can be looked upon as a coalition of interest, 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 other. Interests, similarly are competing with one another so as to capture the maximum portion of the resources (limited by their very nature) that the political system commands. The interest group is, therefore, trying to become a part of the winning coalition and to convert it to its own value system.

In an ideal situation, therefore, every potential and actual interest gets articulated and aggregated by the very situation of dynamic challenge inherent in the situation that keeps the system working. In Assam, we find powerful demand for Assamese as the official language backed by mostly students, professionals, who are normally categorized as the middle class. The problem here is to find out, if

45 "Assam in Agony", New Age, 13 June 1961.

the political parties functioned as⁶ mechanism for transformation of needs into demands and articulated and aggregated them in relation to language problem. The disturbances, agitations, mass demonstrations, regarding official language, just before 1962 general election provided yet another arena for the political parties in Assam to manoeuvre the politics to gain the mass support. The Congress Party suggested that "the Assamese language is one of the national languages of India laid down in the Constitution. This language like other has to be encouraged in every way and 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 entered in areas where other languages prevail. Many areas of India are bilingual or multi-lingual and each of the languages in use has to be protected and encouraged."⁴⁶

The Assam Congress party was in favour of implementing the Central Government's stand and also reconcile its position vis-a-vis other groups. While it may be responsible for meeting or supporting one disturbance or the other in the interests of its own success it gave into the dictates of Indian Congress and that of Central Government. The non-Congress national parties do not possess the powers

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

of patronage and organizational advantages of the Congress, therefore, disputes of a linguistic nature, prove more intractable and prone to be left unresolved in favour of one of the two strands, without a satisfactory compromise.

Because of this awareness, the Praja Socialist party did not force any general policy line over the question of linguistic reorganization of states. The party allowed every state unit to pursue its own line without prejudicing its position in that area. But even this cautious fiat, could not prevent conflict within the leadership and between party units at state and national levels. The PSP despite its all India commitments, took an active part in the linguistic state movements. Its state units were identified with district regional issue. Its support in Assam is derived predominantly from Assamese provincial fears against the domination of another linguistic group, the Bengali. So the trend within the PSP which showed political success lay in this strategy.

The PSP position while not differing from the official position put much stress on the autonomy of usage of minority language. However, the Socialist Party took a different position in the midst of the disturbances. It came in support of the demands of second official state language of Bengali. Thus Jayprakash Narayan said that Bengali should given in Assam a status of state language,⁴⁷ which meant

47 Times of India, 3 June 1961.

supporting the chauvinistic demand of the Sangram Committee.

The CPI position did not differ much from that of the Congress. The party executive suggested that it stood by any resolution that seeks to declare Assamese as the official language in the State without compulsion to any minority in the hills and Cachar district. The minority in the whole State will have their right of petition, appeal education and education through their own language.

The language issue was only a political issue. All political parties in Assam were united this time and there was no difference between the Congress, PSP and the Communists. It was only a question of degree of responsibility in the disturbances.⁴⁸

Congress and Factional Politics

Within the parliamentary system in which political parties operate in India, linguistic and national diversity poses a problem and challenge to political groups who have to operate at party units at State and Central levels. Even at the State level, the interests of government clashed with party over language. Language policy in Assam, for example, illustrated the same gap between government and party.⁴⁹

48 Assam Tribune, August 1960.

49 See statement of Assam Chief Minister, and the Resolution of the Assam PCC 1960, in Girja Kumar and V.K. Arora, ed., n. 30.

The dissent voice of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee came from the 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 APCC's resolution was to lose their electoral support. It could not but support the Cachar Sangram Parishad. The Cachar Congress Committee adopted a resolution opposing Assam Congress Committee. The Karimganj District Congress Committee in its meeting urged the Government to introduce Bengali also as the State language in addition to the Assamese language. The combined pressure of disturbances in Cachar led the six Congress MLAs to submit their resignations on 27 May, two days before the district-wide complete strike was declared.⁵⁰

"The three District Congress Committees of Cachar at Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi were all full of whinings. A few months back the Cachar Congressmen took a leading part in organizing a convention which decided to take militant steps against the Assam official language Act and for that purpose to form a Cachar zilla Gana Sangram Parishad. The Assam provincial Congress raised, but its feeble voice against these activities lead towards an open rebellion. Nothing daunted the Cachar Congress to go a step forward; they demanded a break from the APCC and the

50 Times of India, 27 May 1961.

formation of their three DCCs into an independent Pradesh Congress Committees. This demand, like the one about twelve years old, now to have a POC with the addition of Tripura and Manipur has since been turned down by the Congress High Command.⁵¹ Much more than the opposition from Cachar and tribal politicians, the internal conflict based on individual politicking in political rivalry centring around the issue of implementation of official language policy, dominated the political scene. The organizational and programmatic⁵² weakness of the opposition parties helped to accentuate the factional dissension within the Congress. The faction opposed to the Chief Minister led by Moinul Haque Chaudhary who also hailed from Silchar in the Cachar district found an opportunity to dislodge him from power. A smaller section led by Dabeswar Sarma,⁵³ the former Education Minister, wanted immediate implementation of Assamese language act not only in the Assam Valley but also in Cachar and the tribal areas - thus putting himself in opposition to both Chakrabarti and Chaudhary faction. There is enough evidence to show that the anti-Chakrabarti sections were

51 M. Neog, n. 29.

52 Though SP had a programme opposed to the Congress, organizationally it was too weak to launch an independent campaign. Relatively stronger parties like the PSP and the CPI tailed behind the Congress.

53 Ref. 'ASSAM TRIBUNE' (GAUHATI) 10 June 1960.

active behind the disturbances.⁵⁴ The anti Chakla group also made different allegations. "These disturbances only serve to confirm our view that the Chakla 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 storms of protest where there might have been just a stir of opposition.⁵⁵

Chakla with his faction continued to bank on the support of the Central Government and their repeated intervention from the central leaders in settling its factional differences through a compromise linguistic formula (Shastri and Pant) preserved the former political position.

No clear correlation can be established between the stands taken by different parties on the language question and election results. Issues other than language have also gone into consideration in the 1962 election.

The Congress party remained in power increasing its majority by 8 more seats in the Assembly. The PSP strength got reduced from 8 to 6, while CPI lost all its

54 Assam Tribune (Gauhati), 15 July 1960. Ananda Bazar Patrika (Calcutta), 16 July 1960.

55 Assam Tribune (editorial), 25 July 1960.

four seats.⁵⁶ The Cachar district returned the Congress candidate with one seat less and the independent presumably supported by Sangram Samithi secured 4 seats, polling 40.6 per cent of the total votes. The Congress percentage of votes got reduced. However, this innocence meant the defeat for the Congress in Cachar district. 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 party did not result in weakening the party. The weakness of other parties to pose an alternative is to be taken account in this regard.

MOVEMENT REGARDING MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

Language is not merely an attribute of a given nationality, but is a medium of communication and an instrument of ideology.⁵⁷ In a country where the ruling classes, based on the given form of division of labour, have organized politically into a State, the latter's organization into various apparatuses, coercive and persuasive groups, is done through the process of education in a given language or languages. Education, both primary and higher, provides these apparatuses with the required personnel. While the degree of autonomy of educational institutions depends on the prevalence of forms of democracy and the strength of mass

56 See Appendix Table 6 regarding Election results (1957-62).

57 "State and Ideology", in L. Althusser, Lenin on Philosophy and Other Essays, NLE.

Movements, the state always tries to maintain its hegemony⁵⁸ over the system of education and its concomitant, the medium of instructions. It is also an important matter how various competing political parties try to use this phenomenon of education and languages for the purposes of keeping or changing a given state of political power.

In India, the organization of the State structure on a linguistic/federal basis and the granting of official language status to regional languages, necessitated for the recruitment of State personnel and dissemination of its ideology, the introduction of these official languages also as medium of instruction in educational institution in the respective States. The Education Commission (1964-66) recommended the same, viz. "the use of regional languages as the medium of education"⁵⁹ to facilitate the carrying on the business of these Governments vis-a-vis various classes. The continuation of English at all levels of higher education would, however, ensure the running of the Centre-State apparatus. Hindi, as a link language, despite its national moorings has little particular significance from the standpoint of running the administration. It remains as a symbol of nationalism⁶⁰ and an issue for the political parties to

58 Ibid.

59 Education Commission (1964-66).

60 "It is, however, equally obvious that English cannot serve as the link language for the majority of the people. It is only Hindi which can and should take this place in due course." Report of the Education Commission (1964-66), p. 42.

manipulate. Although the regional forces had their say in wringing the regional official language from the State. The three-language formula ensured the objectives to be realized, discussed above.⁶¹

But the implementation of the medium of instruction in regional languages (with three-language formula) faced the difficulties depending on the regional ^{class} correlation and linguistic forces.

In Assam, "Assamese-Bengali rivalry" became a pivotal point in the political issue. The decision of the Gauhati University to introduce Assamese along with English language as the medium of instruction at the University level, with the concession to the Bengali students to write their examination papers⁶² in Bengali, sparked off reaction among them. While Assamese middle class community and students had no objection to the Bengali students coming from the Cachar district for making use of this provision to write their examination papers in Bengali, they were vehemently opposed to any of the Bengali coming from Brahmaputra Valley for availing the same facility.

61 According to Education Commission Report, English will serve as a link language in higher education for academic work and intellectual inter-communication. Ibid.

62 Resolution of the Academic Council of Gauhati University passed on 6 June 1972.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha backed up this position by passing a resolution to the effect that Assamese alone should be the medium of instruction in the Brahmaputra Valley and English, along with Assamese, should be retained for a few years for answering examinations.⁶³

A subsequent agitation asking for Assamese as the regional medium of instruction in the university resulted in violence and repression.⁶⁴ The agitational and the political pressures made the university to revise its decision on 12 June and it resolved that Assamese would be the medium of instruction in colleges under its jurisdictions while English was to be continued as an alternative medium of instruction till such time, not exceeding ten years, as considered necessary. The Council also withdrew the option of answering question papers in Bengali language.⁶⁵

A counter-agitation in Cachar led by Jangram Parishad backed up as usual by Cachar factional Congress and its youth wing--"Chhatra Parishad", culminating in a legal challenge,⁶⁶ forced the Chief Minister to take a decision. Accordingly it was decided that "the medium of

63. Jitendra Nath Goswami, General Secretary of Assam Sahitya Sabha on the Gauhati University Academic Council's decision quoted in Dainik Assam, 9 June 1972.

64. Times of India, 17 October 1972.

65. Academic Council's revised its decision on 12 June 1972.

66. A writ petition challenging the decision of the Academic Council of Gauhati University to make only Assamese and English languages as the medium of instruction and examination was moved on behalf of the Silchar Gurucharya College at the Supreme Court on 1 July.

instruction at the University stage for the Gauhati and Dibrugarh University should be Assamese and English, and a separate university be set up with territorial jurisdiction over the district of Cachar" and the Government of India be moved in the matter.⁶⁷

Contrary to the expectations of supporters of the Chief Minister the unanimous resolution of Assam Assembly on the medium of instruction at the university level has failed to satisfy both the linguistic majority or linguistic minority. Even the unanimous support to the resolution itself is being called into question in certain quarters.⁶⁸

The students of Brahmaputra Valley led by All Assam Students' Union, called for a day "Assam Bandh" on 5 October. There was no resistance to the bandh from the State Government. But, for the unfortunate incidents at some places like the industrial town of Tinsukia in Dibrugarh district, and Kharupetia and Mangaldai in Darrang district, the bandh was peaceful. Their main opposition to the resolution was, if implemented, making Assam a bilingual State which they maintain is against the principle underlying the State's reorganization. Hence they maintain that Assamese alone should be the medium of instruction and

67 Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 23 September 1972.

68 Patriot (New Delhi), 5 October 1972.

it should be made compulsory subject in all schools where medium of instruction is not Assamese. If Cachar would not accept this, this section maintains that that district would go out of Assam.⁶⁹

The Congress leaders from Cachar who had joined the Cachar Sangram Parishad are reported to have decided to resign from the State Legislature if ^{The} Chief Minister failed to meet Cachar's demand. The Cachar Sangram Parishad called for a strike on 9 October backing the rights of linguistic minorities in Assam.⁷⁰ Their main demand was not a separate University but equal status of Bengali as medium of instruction in both the Universities of Assam.

The linguistic situation in Assam was moving inexorably towards a crisis with the government caught in the cross fire between Assamese and Bengali chauvinism.⁷¹

The Singha Ministry completely failed in the language riots of 1972 on which a large number of people from both minority as well as majority communities were killed. The unanimous decision taken in the legislature had to be withdrawn again due to pressure from agitation launched by All Assam Students Union which was supported by the people of the Brahmaputra Valley. Behind the agitation

69 Ibid.

70 Hindustan Times (New Delhi), 5 October 1972.

71 Ibid., 6 October 1972.

anti social fact elements were also involved in rioting and destruction.

During the agitation, some of the pro-Choudhary group elements in the Congress party who were in power neither in the Government nor in the party organisation offered their assistance to the All Assam Students Union in continuing their agitation against the decision of the Legislative Assembly. Even the opposition parties who supported the Assembly resolution in the floor, found it difficult outside the House to go against the will of students and the people. That is why after supporting the Government's decision in the House they supported the students' agitation for their political future.

Cachar leaders now maintain that a separate University might solve the problem of the linguistic minority in their district, but it would not solve the basic problem involved, namely, in the right of linguistic minorities in their district to receive education through their mother tongue. The threat posed to the ruling party in the State by its own members from Cachar could be far-reaching. The Congress leaders from Cachar who had joined the Cachar Sangram Parishad are reported to have decided to resign from the State Legislature party if Chief Minister failed to meet Cachar's demand on the medium of instruction issue. The CLP has 14 members, from Cachar two members and in the Cabinet-- Mr. Mohitosh Purkayastha and Dr. Lutfur Rahman.

Both Purkayastha and Lutfur Rehman faced serious changes of violating party discipline during the language riots. Pressure from the party members from the Brahmaputra Valley mounted in favour of dismissal of the offending Ministers. This put Singha in a delicate position, for not taking action against them. This alienated the members and created a bad precedent. Taking action on the other hand, might lead the issue to serious proportions by losing support of all the 14 legislators from Cachar which Singha could not afford keeping in view his personal interests.

However, Singha sought the help of the party High Command and the Prime Minister in getting out of the wrangle as a result of which the Assembly passed the resolution that "Assamese would be the sole medium of instruction and English would continue as an alternative medium for a period not exceeding 10 years.

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 interests will permit it to be judged on its merits. A new political phenomena of this period was the localized opportunism of the CPI which ~~would be making~~ a vociferous put forward the proposal for political separation of Cachar.⁷²

72 The suggestion of the CPI leader, R. Rao, for the secession of Cachar or possible solution as quoted in Hindustan Standard, 29 October 1972.

This was also voiced by the minority chauvinists of the Bengali organization of Cachar. Neither political experience nor a theoretical and programmatic formulation can be shown to justify CPI's change in policy. Because the national oppression of Cachar Bengali is far from a reality. The autonomy given to the Bengali language in its literary sphere is a clear indication of the same fact.

The tendency throughout the period following Independence in all these language movement has predominantly been of middle class orientation. The most consistent advocate of aggressive linguism in the State since the time of independence has been found to be the Assam Sahitya Sabha. Disgruntled political personalities specially those with background in student politics are frequently found to be associated with this movement. The politics and slogans revolved around the competitive job-hungry middle class elements of this province divided by geographical accidents--(partition) into Bengalis and Assamese. The working class and peasantry say for instance, ⁷³ have been a passive phenomenon politically. Hence it is clear,

73 Delegates representing 13,000 tea labour population of the Dibrugarh branch of Assam Chau Mazdoor San_h in its annual session demanded Assamese as the State language. Assam Tribune, June 1960.

that the social base of the language movement was predominantly a semi-educated and educated petty bourgeoisie who became the instrument in the game of factional and group politics.⁷⁴

74 Times of India, 10 November 1972. National Herald, 20 October 1972. Patriot, 13 October 1972. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 12 November and 22 November 1972.

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Having examined the various aspects of the language problem in Assam, we make an attempt to sum up the analysis and see if any conclusions can be drawn out of it.

An attempt has been made to understand the language question in its historico-theoretical perspective by examining the problem in the context of Russian situation as obtained in the 19th and early 20th century and the classical Marxist and Leninist positions on the related problems of nationality, nation and the various attributes therein. Thus the theoretical formulation is necessary to locate the problem in its correct perspective. Having located the problem of language in the context of nationalities oppression, we proceeded to see how the former becomes one of the factors in setting the political problem of national self-determination and how centralization of various dialects and languages is a progressive phenomena.

Historical conditions of Russia were much different from India. In Tsarist Russia one nationality, i.e. the Great Russian nationality oppressed the other

nationalities. Therefore, the demand for the right of secession was raised by the non-Russian nationalities fighting for national liberation. Thus it is precisely the special concrete, historical features of the national question in Russia that recognized the right of nations to self-determination. However, the Indian case is different due to different historical conjuncture. The role that the Greater Russian colonizers had played in the outer regions of European Russia and other regions of the Tsarist empire was historically played by the British imperialist in the colonial period of development in India. In India, all the different nationalities and linguistic groups were oppressed by British imperialism. Therefore, the immediate task of the Indian national movement was to organize a single national market and to bring about a political integration, through which it could mediate various class interests. They retained all issues and demands which would bring one section of the Indian society against another. The interests of various nationalities demanded not secession from one another but the forging of strong bonds of unity against the British imperialism. Therefore, the demand for the right of secession was not raised by any nationality. Thus we find in India, nationalities as independent socio-economic entities ceased to exist from the 1920s onwards as shown in the case of Assamese

and Bengali. However after Independence the problem has been always posed in terms of equality of languages. Therefore, it is wrong to equate the language politics with nationality though it is true that language is an attribute of a given nationality. Coming back to the specific case of Assam, we have seen how Bengali and Assamese rivalry is not nationality politics. In fact, it is a struggle between Assamese and Bengali middle class for the position of political and cultural hegemony over all the varied tribes and races of Assam. The economic changes that came about in the united Assam-Bengal province under colonial structure were lop sided, yet disintegrating in the sense of reducing the objective basis for a community of Bengali and Assamese living in an isolated single territory as such. The problem would not have been complicated but for the fact of the concentration of Bengali speaking population in certain areas--Sachar and Goalpara. This provided, as it historically did, in most parts of India, a specific area in which politics could be manipulated in times of conflicting pulls. The specific problem of Assam, in later years was in terms of political manifestation was that of Assamese Bengali rivalry.

However after Independence, the raising of official language and medium of instruction brought the linguistic chauvinism to the forefront. No doubt it is a most sophisticated device of the ruling class to ensure

the perpetuation of an elitist principle of education to completely formalise in the name of modernity and Progressivism. The sophistication lies in the linking of these issues with the question of cultural and linguistic identity of the various nationalities of our country. This device is working exceedingly well in case of Assam. Chauvinism is one of the ideological tools which enables the bourgeoisie to maintain its domination over proletariat.¹ In Assam we find most issues, even when not even remotely connected with language tend to be seen in terms of Assamese and Bengali rivalry. Thus off and on situations have to be created which keep language tension alive in Assam and divert people's mind from the real issue.

Immigration - refugees, infiltrants and overcasts - in one form or the other have been still going on; sometimes in an organised manner under the aegis of the ruling power and often due to economic development Assam still continues to have the highest in-migration rates among the States of India.² This high rate of

1 N. Lowy, "Marxist and the National Question", New Left Review, no. 90, 1970.

2 Present variation of population in India and Assam

	<u>1901-11</u>	<u>1911-21</u>	<u>1921-31</u>	<u>1931-41</u>	<u>1941-51</u>	<u>1951-61</u>	<u>1961-71</u>
Assam	16.8	20.2	20.1	20.5	20.1	35.0	34.7
India	5.7	0.2	11.0	14.2	13.3	21.0	24.0

Source: Myron Weiner, "Assam and its Migrants", Demography India, vol. 11, no. 1, June 1973.

immigration and internal power struggles in the ruling party has a demoralising influence. The cumulative effect is to enhance the scope for communal, language and separatist politics. Thus it appears that factional politics centred on language has highlighted the existing rivalry between Assamese and Bengali middle classes.

The demand for political separation of Cachar is not a viable one. Assam's substantial Bengali population outside 'Cachar' might feel still more insecure if 'Cachar' were taken out of Assam. And even if the case of the Bengali minority could be settled by Cachar's separation, the problem of other linguistic minorities would remain. In fact, the demand itself is very chauvinistic and it has nothing in common with democratic right of self-determination. The right of nations to self-determination implies exclusively "the right to independence in the political sense, the right to free political separation from the oppressor nation". It implies only a consistent expression of struggle against all national oppression. The national oppression of the Cachar Bengalis is far from reality and the autonomy given to the Bengali language in its literary sphere is a clear indication of the fact. The question arises here, what should be the correct interrelation between different languages in Assam?

The unhesitating answer is that, there should be a relation of equality and friendly co-operation and certainly not that of the predominance of one or few languages over others. The basis of the above relation will be full and unfettered opportunity for every language to develop its inherent possibilities. Only on this basis, it would be possible for the people speaking languages that are now underdeveloped, to carry forward their own distinctive cultural heritage on the one hand and to absorb progressive ideas on the other.

The broad free, and rapid development of capitalism would be impossible by the absence of such autonomy, which facilitates the concentration of capital, the development of the productive forces, the unity of the bourgeoisie and the unity of the proletariat on a country-wide scale. For bureaucratic interference in purely local (regional national and other) questions is one of the greatest obstacles to economic and political development in general and an obstacle to centralism in serious important and fundamental matters in particular.³

Therefore, even while giving official language status to Assamese, the autonomy and right of free

³ Lenin, "Critical Remarks on the National Question" Collected Works, vol. 20, p. 46.

development of Bengali and other linguistic groups should be recognized. At the same time it is important to guard against the tendencies of national narrow mindedness and linguistic exclusiveness.

APPENDICES

TABLE (I)

Growth Rate of Population in each District
of Assam during the Decade 1881-1891.

District	Percentage of growth	Immigrants from other provinces (% on total population)
1 Cachar	25.1	+ 5.0
2 Sylhet	9.4	+ 3.7
3 Goalpara	1.36	+ 4.96
4 Kamrup	1.66	+ 0.85
5 Darrang	12.60	+ 2.94
6 Nowgong	10.81	+ 2.45
7 Sibsagar	23.49	+ 10.11
8 Lakhimpur	41.22	+ 22.21
9 Khasi & Jaintia Hills	16.85	+ 0.36
10 Garo Hills	10.97	- 0.14

Source: Reports on the Census of Assam, 1891.

Growth Rate of Population in each District
of Assam from 1891-1901

1 Goalpara	+ 2.05
2 Kamrup	- 7.10
3 Darrang	+ 10.43
4 Nowgong	- 24.80
5 Sibsagar	+ 24.40
6 Lakhimpur	+ 46.18
7 Sylhet	+ 4.04
8 Cachar	+ 17.88
9 Khasi & Jaintia Hills	+ 2.19
10 Garo Hills	+ 13.74

Source: Census of India, 1901, Assam Part I Report.

TABLE (2)

PERCENTAGE OF VARIATION OF IMMIGRANT AND EMIGRANT
IN EACH DISTRICT OF ASSAM IN 1911-1921

Districts	1911		1921	
	Immigrants	Emigrants	Immigrants	Emigrants
Goalpara	19.68	2.97	27.8	1.9
Kamrup	4.73	3.44	10.6	1.98
Darrang	32.15	1.17	40.49	0.89
Nowgong	12.92	5.05	25.71	2.26
Sibsagar	26.50	2.17	27.73	2.28
Lakhimpur	42.15	1.87	44.05	1.32
Cachar	22.21	2.05	17.18	2.59
Sylhet	6.61	3.33	6.85	3.29
Garo Hills	8.11	2.27	7.44	2.28
Khasi & Jaintia Hills	-	-	-	-

Source: Census of India, 1931, vol. III, Part II Tables.

TABLE (3)

DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION (1911-1961) (LANGUAGE-WISE) IN VARIOUS DISTRICTS OF ASSAM

State / District	(1) 1911-1921			
	1911		1921	
	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali
Assam	* 1,530,692	* 166,002	* 1,723,111	* 1,422,805
	** -	** -	** + 12.52	** + 22.02
	*** 35.31	*** 26.90	*** 33.43	*** 27.60
Goalpara	* 85,329	* 347,772	* 138,810	* 405,710
	** -	** -	** 62.68	** + 16.66
	*** 14.21	*** 57.90	*** 18.20	*** 53.21
Kamrup	* 529,750	* 8,504	* 576,205	* 50,855
	** -	** -	** 8.77	** 49.801
	*** 79.23	*** 1.27	*** 75.46	*** 6.66
Darrang	* 166,988	* 57,986	* 175,865	* 86,680
	** -	** -	** + 5.32	** + 49.48
	*** 44.37	*** 15.41	*** 36.59	*** 18.04
United Mikir North Cachar Hills	* 80	* 15,789	* 104	* 15,918
	** -	** -	** + 30.00	** + 0.82
	*** 29	*** 57.84	*** 0.39	*** 59.52
Lakhimpur	* 158,535	* 76,436	* 187,379	* 106,073
	** -	** 16.29	** + 18.19	** + 38.77
	*** 33.99	*** 12.71	*** 29.83	*** 16.89

....

Distribution of Population (1911-1961) contd...

(1) 1911-1921

State/District	1911		1921	
	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali
Wangong	* 195,049 ** - *** 04.44	* 12,715 ** - *** 4.19	* 210,661 ** +7.67 *** 52.94	* 72.101 ** +467.05 *** 18.12
Mibsagar	* 291,584 ** - *** 56.73	* 127,816 ** - *** 18.62	* 430,656 ** +9.98 *** 52.31	* 191,351 ** +2.77 *** 16.98
Cochar	* 1,484 ** - *** 0.21	* 496,671 ** - *** 69.60	* 2,016 ** +35.75 *** 0.27	* 528,236 ** +6.37 *** 70.29
Garo Hills	* 309 ** - *** 0.19	* 18,913 ** - *** 11.90	* 481 ** +65.66 *** 0.27	* 29,100 ** 6.23 *** 11.22
United Assam & Jaintia Hills	* 286 ** - *** 0.33	* 297 ** - *** 1.12	* 362 ** - 2.49 *** 0.35	* 4,315 ** +164.25 *** 1.77
Mizo Hills	* 106 ** - *** 0.12	* 773 ** - *** 0.35	* 73 ** - 31.13 *** 0.07	* 1,416 ** +23.18 *** 1.44

TABLE

DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION (1911-1961) (LANGUAGE-WISE) IN VARIOUS
DISTRICTS OF ASSAM
(ii) 1931-1961

State/District	1931		1951		1961	
	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali
Assam	* 1,992,291 **+ 15.62 *** 32.32	* 1,698,927 ** + 19.41 *** 27.56	* 4,971,229 ** + 144.52 *** 56.29	* 1,734,466 **+ 2.09 *** 19.64	* 6,784,271 ** + 36.47 *** 57.14	* 2,089,248 ** + 20.45 *** 17.60
Goalpara	* 161,179 ** + 16.11 *** 18.26	* 476,433 ** + 17.43 *** 53.97	* 687,027 ** + 326.25 *** 62.00	* 193,379 ** - 56.41 *** 17.45	* 1,021,145 **+ 48.63 *** 66.14	* 185,020 ** - 4.32 *** 11.98
Kamrup	* 649,512 ** + 12.75 *** 66.50	* 170,409 ** + 235.09 *** 17.45	* 1,177,587 **+ 81.30 *** 79.01	* 225,211 ** 32.16 ***15.11	* 1,665,994 **+ 41.48 *** 80.77	* 203,687 ** - 9.56 *** 9.88
Darrang	* 193,736 *** 10.16 *** 32.85	* 95,535 *** 10.22 *** 16.22	* 714,395 ***286.75 *** 77.35	* 64,151 ** 32.88 *** 0.95	* 839,788 ***17.55 *** 65.12	* 127,021 *** 98.00 *** 9.85
United Mikir North Cachar Hills	* 128 *** 23.08 *** 0.39	* 19,502 ***22.52 ***89.38	* 5,796 ** - ***3.50	* 7,222 ** -62.97 *** 4.37	* 21,733 ***275.05 *** 7.75	* 23,563 **+226.27 ***8.42
Lakhimpur	* 236,933 **+ 26.45 *** 30.44	* 78,699 ** -25.81 ***10.11	* 721,535 ** 204.53 ***64.06	* 85,902 **+9.45 ***7.2	* 985,157 **+36.54 ***63.00	* 127,985 **+48.99 ***8.18

Distribution of Population (1911-1961) contd.

(11) 1931-1961....

State/District	1931		1951		1961	
	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali	Assamese	Bengali
Nowgong	* 237,406 **+12.70 *** 42.20	193,349 +168.16 34.37	* 612,802 **+158.12 *** 69.09	* 207,254 +7.19 - 23.39	* 929,893 **+51.74 *** 76.80	* 209,716 +1.19 -17.32
Sibsagar	* 503,603 **+ 16.94 *** 53.96	* 73,351 **+44.16 ***7.86	* 1,023,569 **+103.25 *** 84.44	* 41,581 **+43.31 *** 3.43	* 1,289,451 **+26.98 *** 85.49	* 46,036 **+10.71 *** 3.05
Cochin	* 2,231 **+ 10.72 *** 0.23	* 504,316 **+6.82 ***70.22	* 3,462 **+56.18 *** 0.31	* 860,772 **+52.53 *** 77.14	* 4,542 **+31.20 *** 0.33	* 1,035,851
Garo Hills	* 5,573 ** - *** 2.92	* 20,453 **+1.76 *** 10.71	* 9,651 **+73.17 *** 3.99	* 23,264 **+13.74 *** 9.61	* 16,073 ** 66.54 *** 5.23	* 28,945 **+24.42 *** 9.42
United Khasi & Jaintia Hills	* 1,876 **+117.63 *** 0.65	* 5,547 **+23.55 *** 1.91	* 15,276 **714.29 ***4.20	* 13,691 **+146.82 *** 3.77	* 21,732 **+275.06 *** 7.77	* 32,742 **+139.15 *** 7.08
Mizo Hills	* 114 **+ 56.16 *** 0.09	* 1,393 **+5.86 *** 1.07	* 129 **+ 13.16 *** 0.07	* 12,039 **+803.15 *** 0.14	* 275 **+113.18 *** 0.10	* 13,682 **+55.18 *** 7.02

Note: Language data for 1941 were not published.

* indicates - Absolute figure

** indicates - percentage variation population

*** indicates percentage to total

Source: Census of India, vol. III, Part II
Cultural and Migration Table - Table C, Appendix III,
 pp. 69-73.

TABLE (4)

ASSAM STATE ELECTION RESULTS : 1957-62

Party	Contested		Won		LD		PCT	
	1957	1962	1957	1962	1957	1962	1957	1962
Congress	101	103	71	79	1	2	52.4	45.3
P.S.P.	36	53	3	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:

Symbol used in Table:

APHLC: All Party Hill
Leaders' Conference
ACK : Achik Asongna
Chilchakgipa Kotak
TUP : Tribal Union Party

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
their security deposit.
PCT : Percentage of the total valid votes in the
district polled by the party's candidate.
* Only winning candidates of the party can be
identified.

Source: Baxter: District Voting
Trends in India.

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