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## REINTERPRETING BODO LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM IN ASSAM

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### Abstract

*Language in contemporary time has been a contested notion in a multilingual and multiethnic nation like India. Language has been playing an instrumental role in mobilizing and formulation of an identity of a community, similarly language is also a cause of factor for the ethnic assertion of different smaller communities against the dominance and hegemony of the dominant nationality. Assam is a land of diverse culture, ethnicity and multiple languages. But later on because of the adoption of hegemonic policies by the dominant nationality in Assam have not only generated tension in different times but also created resentments among the ethnic groups which further led to the ethnic conflicts and identity politics among the different ethnic groups. In this paper, however, an Endeavour will be made to examine the role of language in terms of building nationalism in Assam and in this process how this politics of language has also been a source of resentment among the different ethnic groups especially among the Bodo tribes of Assam will be highlighted.*

**Key Words :** Assam, Bodo, Nationalism, Ethnicity, Identity, Politics, Language,

### **Introduction**

Nationalist project all over the world, particularly in multi ethnic, multi cultural societies have come to a rough weather. Nationalist projects are by nature homogenizing exercise as the nation building task insists on creation of a single and common homogeneous culture and identity<sup>1</sup>. In multi ethnic, multi cultural societies such nation building exercise therefore, encounter serious resistance from the different ethnic groups of those societies. This is particularly so when culture and identity of a particular group is sought to be imposed on other communities under such nation building exercise. Different ethnic groups consider such project as threat to their distinct identity and culture and oppose such move to protect and preserve them. Sometimes, such protest against nation building project has led to the ethnic assertions and mobilizations for protection of their different cultural, political and economic interests. Nationalist project of post colonial Assam has invited sharp reactions from the different ethnic groups of Assam. The response of the different ethnic groups towards this nationalist project has been mixed one. Sometimes, they have approved this nationalist project and even enthusiastically participated in it and at other instances have expressed strong reservation against it. Moreover there are differences between these ethnic groups in terms of their attitude towards the nation building process in Assam and even the same ethnic group has shown different attitude to this at different points of time.

This ambivalent attitude of the ethnic groups of Assam towards the nationalist project of Assam can be explained to some extent by the fact that they are torn between two different identities-one is the greater Assamese identity and the other one is their respective ethnic identities. Reflecting on this one scholar has argued that “dualism of identity among the indigenous communities of Assam is between their local beings as distinct community and as a member of greater Assamese community or nationality. While requirement of asserting as Assamese was based on broader political eventuality, assertion as a distinct community was more against their identity as Assamese”.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that though some time Assamese culture is identified with the caste Hindus Assamese, tribal of Assam have equally contributed towards its development. Many of them even underwent

a process of de-tribalization through initiation into Hinduism and more importantly, through renunciation of their mother tongue in favour of the Assamese language. In fact, the Assamese culture is the result of a continuous process of sociocultural formation among diverse linguistic and ethnic traits for centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of British rule in Assam brought further political unification of Assam. However, this administrative unity did not result in further integration of Assamese society. In fact, it hindered the ongoing process of integration by introducing separate administrative arrangement for some of the tribal groups of Assam and thus contributed in keeping the caste Hindus and the Mongolian tribes alienated and separated.

### **Growth of Ethnic Demands in Colonial Assam**

The growth of ethnic consciousness and formulation of demands by different ethnic groups of Assam could be observed in the colonial period itself. Such ethnic sentiments and mobilization in an articulate and organized way first took place among the hill tribes and subsequently similar sentiments were expressed by the tribes of Plains also. In fact, history of growth of ethnic aspirations among the tribes of Assam can be traced back to the days of Simon Commission. At the time of the Simon Commission's visit to Shillong on January 4, 1929, altogether 27 memorandums were submitted by different groups and organizations of the province. Out of these four were submitted by organizations belonging to Bodo, Kachari, Naga and Khasi community. The fact that when the rest of India including mainstream Assam were busy in protesting against the Simon Commission, these communities belonging to periphery of Assam both in geographical and cultural terms, considered it necessary to submit their demands at the hands of the Commission clearly indicate the rise of ethnic sentiments among these communities.<sup>4</sup>

In the plains also similar sentiments were exhibited by different ethnic communities and raised several demands to protect their particular interests in the colonial period itself. For instance, All Assam Ahom Association (later renamed as Ahom Sabha) was established in 1893 to preserve their distinct ethnic identity

and with this first ethnic organization of plains of Assam came in to being. This was followed by the establishment of different ethnic organizations such as Koch Rajbangshi Khetriya Sanmilan(1912), Bodo-Kachari Mahasanmilan (1923), Assam Chutiya Sanmilan (1925), Assam Miri Sanmilan, Assam Bodo Sanmilan, Assam 182 Kachari Sanmilan, Xadou Deori Sanmilan, Xadou Lalung Sanmilan, Xadou Asom Matak Sanmilan etc. to protect the interest of their respective communities.<sup>5</sup> By this time, some sort of ethnic consciousness began to dawn among the leaders of these different plains tribes as they came to believe that they were different from Assamese caste-Hindus in terms of their custom, tradition and culture and they have their own distinct identity and culture. Their economic, educational and political backwardness further contributed towards the growth of such feelings.

### **Rise of Bodo Nationalism**

As mentioned earlier that although rise of ethnic consciousness emerged in the 1930s itself, it was only after 1960 that this political consciousness took the form of separate ethnic demands. From this period onwards, different tribes of Assam started raising demands to protect their distinct ethnic interests. Notwithstanding some variations in terms of level of aspirations and degree of mobilisation, the process of ethnic assertions of different tribal groups has followed a similar pattern. While in the case of the hills tribe, from the very beginning the nature of ethnic demands had been political, the plains tribes of Assam began their journey with some non-political issues. Most of these tribes of Assam plains initially stressed on non-political issues such as safeguarding cultural identity, preservation of language, choice of a script, instruction through mother tongue, continuation of English as medium of instruction in higher education etc. And it was only after certain period these cultural demands of each of these ethnic groups graduated to the next phase to include other socio-economic demands and ultimately culminated in political demand for a separate political identity.<sup>6</sup> However, different ethnic groups have moved from cultural demands to political demands at different pace and are at different stages of this process. Apurba Kumar Baruah has tried to explain this variation in terms of Paul Brass formulation of stages of nationality formation.<sup>7</sup> According to Paul Brass, the process of nationality formation involves

passing through three stages. The first stage is of ethnicity, implying an existence of cultural markers recognised easily but their political significance unnoticed. The second is of community awareness implying evolution of political consciousness of cultural identity and the urge to employ it for furthering community interest. And the third is of nationality formation involving right to selfdetermination.<sup>8</sup> Besides the strength of the ethnic groups in terms of number, resources, organisational ability, leadership quality have also influenced the ability of ethnic groups to move from one stage to another. However, all the tribes of present Assam, who are subject of the present study, have already gone through these different stages and now at the last stage of nationality formation. Though all of them by now have developed political demands, there are some variations among them with regard to the nature of their political demands. Their political demands usually range from equal partnership in federal structure and autonomous status to separate, independent political existence. With regard to the most of these ethnic groups, middle class and youth organisations have been at the forefront of raising and articulating ethnic demands. These middle class, however, have been successful in mobilizing the people of their respective communities around these demands and as a result what began as a demand of the middle class gradually turned into demands of entire people of these ethnic groups.

Their urge to maintain and develop their own culture has found its most articulate expression in the form of demand for recognition of their language. All the tribes are now insisting that their language should be introduced as medium of instruction in the primary and secondary level. It was initially the Bodos who demanded that Bodo language should be introduced as the medium of instruction at the primary and secondary level of education. After the Bodos, the other tribes of Assam such as Mishing, Karbis, Tiwa, Deori, Rabhas etc also have raised similar demands.<sup>9</sup> It is argued that under Article 350(A) of the Constitution of India, it has to be endeavour of every state and every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups.<sup>10</sup> It was this desire to protect and promote their language that led them to oppose the successive language policies

of Assam government. In 1960, the government of Assam, under the pressure of Assamese people passed the Assam Official Language Act which made Assamese language the sole official language of entire Assam. In 1972 again at the insistence of All Assam Student Union (AASU) and Asom Sahitya Sabha, the academic council of Gauhati and Dibrugarh University passed a resolution in 1972 to the effect that after ten years, i.e. 1982 only Assamese language would be the sole medium of instruction in the university level throughout the state of Assam. Further in 1986, under the AGP government, Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) issued a circular making Assamese as the compulsory third language in all the non-Assamese medium schools of Assam. These initiatives on the part of Assam Government have evoked sharp reactions from all the tribes of Assam and opposition to such policies had been a recurring demand/theme in number of successive memorandum submitted by these tribes.<sup>11</sup>

They saw such move as conspiracy on the part of Assamese junta to 'Assamise' them by forcing Assamese language and culture upon them and wiping out their own language and culture which they too cherish to develop. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, in a resolution adopted on the issue of Assam's State Language Bill, argued that the biggest linguistic group in the state is that of Assamese which can claim only 54 percent. However, according to the State Reorganisation Committee a language should be spoken by seventy percent or more to be recognised as an official language of a state. Looking from this point of view, the declaration of Assamese as an official language of Assam would mean imposition of Assamese language on the people of other linguistic groups.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, they demanded that either English or Hindi should be the official language of Assam and English should be retained as the medium of instruction in the colleges of Gauhati and Dibrugarh University.<sup>13</sup> Some of them have moved further ahead with their linguistic demands. In fact, for tribes like Bodo what initially began as demand for protection of their language has ultimately turned into a movement for securing equal status for their language along with Assamese. This becomes obvious from various demands raised by Bodos such as incorporation of Bodo language in the Eight Schedule of Indian Constitution, introduction of Bodo as associate official language in areas where they enjoy numerical predominance, introduction of Bodo as Modern Indian

Language (MIL) subject in M.A. course in 189 Universities, appointment of lecturers for Bodo as M.I.L. subject in degree level, introduction of Bodo language as optional subject in Assam Public Service Commission and Union Public Service Commission examinations, setting of High School Leaving Certificate examination question papers in Bodo, financial assistance for writing and publishing a book on history of Bodos etc.<sup>14</sup> The urge to preserve distinct identity and culture of the tribes has also found expression in number of different cultural demands such as establishment of a Central Museum at Kokrajhar, Doordarshan Kendras at Udalguri and Kokrajhar, transmission of Bodo programmes and Bodo news from Gauhati Doordarshan Kendra, broadcasting of Bodo programmes from All India Radio, protection of monuments and temples of different tribes, establishment of research centers for all tribal groups etc. The most important phenomenon in case of bodo nationalism is the non addressal of their script issue. As bodo does not have their own script therefore their issue was to have their own script. Bodo Sahitya Sabha the most prominent literary organisation formed in 1952 was trying to introduce Roman script for bodo language. When Bodo primer Bhithorai ( Balab-se) in Roman script was introduced in Bodo medium schools in 1974, the Assam government stopped financial grants for Bodo primary schools in an attempt to force them back to the Assamese script. This led them to massive protests in bodo areas against this decision which has led to the boycott and gherao of educational institutions. When bodo leaders approached union government, Prime Minister advised them to adopt Devnagiri script. Two members of BSS Thaneswar Boro and Ramdas Basumatary submitted proposal to Union government and agreed to Devenagri script. This has divided the bodo community along an increasingly religious divide and threatened their cohesion as a nationality. Christian bodos, the church and most of the students as well as NDFB supported Roman script and ABSU and Bodo Proples Action Committee stridently oppose the Roman script. The Script movement of Bodos have not gained much success because of their internal difference among the bodos over roman script and strong opposition raised by a section of Assamese intellectuals instead they favoured retaining of Assamese script again the centre trying to champion national integrity by introducing Devanagiri script. Imposition of Language Bill 1960 in Assam not only attracted opposition

from the ethnic communities but also from Bengali dominated areas of Silchar. 11 people were died on that incident of defending Bengali language. Now the political parties and social groups in Barak valley are demanding that the railway station of Silchar, the biggest town in the valley , should be named as ‘ Bhasa Shahid’ station in memory of the martyrs.

### **Reaction to Nation Building Process in Assam**

There has been a strong tendency to view the ethnic assertions of different communities as a reaction to the nation building process of Assam. This nation building process has continued in the post-independence period also and assumed different dimensions. It has been argued that this nation building process in Assam is structured around the exclusive definition of Assamese nation based on Assamese language and culture. The leaders of Assamese society, who are engaged in the task of building an Assamese nation, have defined it primarily in terms of Assamese language and culture. The language and cultures of different ethnic groups are not accommodated in the definition of Assamese language and culture and as a result these groups have remained outside the purview of Assamese nation. As a result, nation building project of Assam in effect has turned into an attempt to protect and promote the interest of Assamese people without taking into account the interest of different ethnic groups of Assam. The nation building process of Assam has aimed at making Assam for Assamese, but the very meaning of ‘Assamese’ (or notion of ‘Assamese’) is defined in such a way as to exclude the different ethnic groups. The project of making Assam for Assamese thus has meant politically capturing political power and administration, economically establishing monopoly over the government jobs, services and other economic opportunities and culturally promotion of Assamese language and culture.

The nation building process with such objective in post-colonial Assam quite often has gone against the interests of different ethnic groups. For instance, the Assam Movement which was launched ostensibly to oust the outsiders/foreigners from Assam, at times was also directed against the different ethnic groups of Assam. During the agitation in places like Gohpur people belonging to Bodo community were targeted, attacked and even killed.<sup>15</sup> The Assam Agitation came to an end in

1983 with the signing of the Assam Accord between the Central Government and the leaders of the AASU and Assam Gana Sangram Parishad representing the interests of Assamese speaking people. However, at the time of signing the Accord, different ethnic and minority groups were not taken into confidence. As a result, the Accord incorporated number of provisions that were highly resented by different ethnic groups as anti-tribal and anti-minority<sup>16</sup>. The Accord in its number of clauses provided for protection of political, economic and cultural interests of 'Assamese' people. But in the absence of any explanation of the meaning of the term 'Assamese', the AGP government interpreted it narrowly to mean only the Assamese speaking people and indulged in various activities that adversely affected the interests of ethnic groups of Assam.<sup>80</sup> The desire to make Assam for Assamese in the name of nation building process has also made the Assamese people reluctant to share political power with the members of ethnic groups of Assam. It is alleged that the Assam Movement was launched mainly to ensure the monopoly of Assamese speaking people over the political power and prevent others from getting share of it<sup>17</sup>.

The sectional design of nation building process in Assam is most obvious in its cultural manifestation. In conformity with general trend (or like elsewhere) the nation building processes in Assam has sought to forge a common Assamese identity out of the diverse cultural tradition of Assam. The idea is to form a homogeneous Assamese community on the basis of common language and culture. As a part of this homogenizing drive, the Assamese speaking people have imposed Assamese language and culture on the different tribes of Assam. The Assamese speaking people through their numerous acts of commission and omission on the one hand have attempted to impose Assamese language on the tribal people of Assam and on the other hand thwarted the development of their own language and culture. At the same time the Assamese speaking people have shown utter neglect towards the development of language and culture of tribes of Assam and ignored some of the genuine linguistic and cultural demands of them such as introduction of their language as medium of instruction in primary and secondary level etc. The tribal people of Assam have reacted strongly to such policies of Assamese speaking people aimed at establishing cultural hegemony over them. Lot of people argues

that such cultural chauvinism of Assamese speaking people has created a permanent rift between the tribal groups and Assamese speaking people. For instance, the State Official Language Act of 1960 hurt the cultural sentiment of tribal people and eventually paved the way for disintegration of Assam and formation of hill states. The plains tribes have also resented against such expansionist design of Assamese speaking people. Various tribal organizations, in numerous memorandums, have categorically mentioned the hegemonic attitude of Assamese as one of the main reasons behind their demand for political autonomy.

The exclusive nature of nation building process in Assam has created sharp reaction among the tribal people of Assam and the ethnic assertion of tribal people of Assam is interpreted as reaction to such nation building process in Assam. It is interesting to note that tribal people of Assam while expressing their reaction to the nationalist project of Assamese people have emulated the sub-nationalist movement of Assamese people. Particularly from the late 80s, different organisations representing the tribal people of Assam have modelled their agitation on the line of Assam Agitation in terms of goals, strategies and techniques to secure their various cultural, economic and political demands.

### **Conclusion**

The socio-cultural negligence of tribal people is most glaring in case of their language. It is to be noted that most of the tribal groups of Assam have their own language and aspire to develop their respective language. But successive language policy of Assam government is to deny the linguistic aspirations of the tribal people. On the other hand, Assamese people have strongly resisted the claim of tribal people for recognition of their language as medium of instruction at the primary and secondary level of education. Though Bodo and Mising people have succeeded after a prolong movement in forcing the government to recognize their language at primary and secondary level, language of other tribal people is still deprived of such status.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>T. K. Oommen (2004), 'New nationalism and collective rights: the case of South Asia', Stephen May, Tariq Modood and Judith Squire eds. *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Minority Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup>C. J. Sonowal ed. (2010), *Quest For Identity, Autonomy And Development: The Contemporary Trends of Ethnic and Tribal Assertion in Assam*, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, p.12.

<sup>3</sup>Girin Phukon (2003), *Ethnicisation of Politics in Northeast India*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, p.62

<sup>4</sup>P. S. Dutta (1993), *Autonomy Movements in Assam (Documents)*, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, p.2

<sup>5</sup>Girin Phukon (2003), *op.cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup>P. S. Dutta (1993), *op.cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>Apurba K. Baruah (2005), 'Communities and Democracy: A Northeast Indian Perspective' in *North East Indian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June, 2005, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Brass (1991), *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, New Delhi: Sage, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>Memorandum titled 'Why Separate State?' submitted to the President of India, Prime Minister of India and the Home Minister of India by the All Bodo students' Union on November 10, 1987

<sup>10</sup>Memorandum submitted to the President of India by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam on May 20, 1967.

<sup>11</sup>See Memorandum by Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders' conference, Assam, June 9, 1973, memo. by the Action Committee of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills separate State Demand committee, Nov. 24, 1980, memo. by ASDC and KSA, January, 18, 1987, memo. by PTCA, May 20, 1967, memo by UTNLF, July 16, 1985, memo by ABSU, January 22, 1987 and November 10, 1987.

<sup>12</sup>Resolution of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha incorporated as Appendix 'G' in the Memorandum submitted by PTCA (20.05.1967), op.cit.

<sup>13</sup>Memorandum submitted to Shri Rajiv Gandhi, Honourable Prime Minister of India on the long- standing demands of All Bodo Students' Union by the All Bodo Students' Union on January 22, 1987.

<sup>14</sup>Memorandum by All Bodo Students' Union (10.11.1987), op.cit

<sup>15</sup>Medini Choudhury 'Asom Andolan ary Janagosthigata Xamasya', in Hiren Gohain and Dilip Bora eds.(2007),op.cit. p. 286.

<sup>16</sup>ibid

<sup>17</sup>Hiren Gohain, 'Cudgel of Chauvinism' and A. Guha, 'Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist-Assam anti Foreigner Upsurge,1979-80', in A.N.S. Ahmed (2006), Nationality question in Assam: The EPW 1980-81 Debate, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.