

Language as a Catalyst to Identity Assertion among the Tribes of North East India

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Abstract

Language in the contemporary world has not only been a crucial instrument of identity assertion, but has also played an important role in shaping the politics of multilingual states like India. Recent trends show that while the dominant nationality in a state has sought to use language to assert its cultural and political hegemony over smaller nationalities, the latter have organized protest movements by mobilizing members of their own group for recognition of their language and linguistic identity. In northeast India, this phenomenon had important consequences for small linguistic communities and even led to the demand for new states for the protection of their linguistic rights. In 1960, the declaration of Assamese as the official language of Assam, a multilingual state of northeast India, caused widespread resentment among both the hill and plains tribes of Assam because this was perceived to be a threat to their linguistic identity. Similarly, the Bodos, the largest plains tribe of Assam, organized a movement for protection of the Bodo language against the Assamese linguistic hegemony. The proposed paper, therefore, seeks to examine the dynamics of linguistic assertion by smaller nationalities like the Khasis and the Bodos of northeast India.

Keywords: Language; Catalyst; India; linguistic; Politics

Introduction

Language has emerged as a crucial determinant of identity politics in multi-ethnic and multilingual societies today. On the one hand, the core communities in such societies have used their language as a hegemonic instrument to subjugate the peripheral communities. On the other, this has led to counter-mobilization by the latter for protection of their distinct linguistic identity. This phenomenon has manifested itself in the demand for new territorial units by endangered communities for assertion of their linguistic rights in northeast India.

In view of the above, this paper has identified the Khasis, a hill tribe and the Bodos, a plains tribe of Assam, which is a multilingual state of northeast India with tremendous socio-cultural diversity and has sought to examine the role of language as an instrument of identity assertion among these small linguistic communities.

The first section will begin with a review of the existing literature on the theme under study. The second section will conceptualize language as an instrument of identity assertion. The third section will examine the various dimensions of language politics in India with special reference to the northeast. The next section will focus on the reactions of the hill tribes of composite Assam to the Assam Official Language Bill of 1960. The fifth section will discuss the linguistic aspirations of the Bodos of Assam. The final section will critically comment on the language politics of northeast India.

Review of Literature

A review of the existing literature shows that considerable research has been done on language and politics. Some of the significant works in the field are as follows.

John E Joseph in his book *Language and Politics* [1] argues that language, is political from top to bottom, whether considered at the level of an individual speaker's choice of language or style of discourse with others (where interpersonal politics are performed), or at the level of political rhetoric, or indeed all the way up to the formation of national languages.

Patrick Stevenson and Jenny Carl in their book [2] explore the dynamics of language and social change in contemporary central Europe. Few parts of the world have witnessed such profound social transformation over the past twenty years as central Europe, with the end of the Cold War and the eastern expansion of the EU. One of the outcomes of this process has been the reshaping of the linguistic environment and the relationship between particular languages and linguistic varieties, especially newly assertive "national" languages and regional or ethnic minority languages. A number of studies have investigated these new relationships from the macro perspective of language policies, while others have taken an ethnographic approach to individual experience.

This book joins these two perspectives together for the first time, focusing primarily on the German language, which has a complex and problematic history. An influential lingua franca across central Europe for centuries, German became the language of fascist oppression during World War II, only to be rehabilitated as the language that bridged the east-west fault line. Today German is the "national" language of two EU member states, and in these states' eastern neighbors, it has become both a "heritage language" of dwindling minority communities and a language of wider communication" with renewed currency in industry, commerce, and tourism. By drawing on a range of theoretical, conceptual, and analytical approaches and principally language ideologies, language policy, positioning theory, discourse analysis, and linguistic ethnography, the authors show the necessity of combining these different perspectives in order to attain

an understanding of the complex constellation of language politics in central Europe.

A number of scholars have also contributed to the literature on language and politics in India. In an article entitled "Language and Politics in India" [3], Paul Friedrich derived in part from linguistic research conducted in India in 1958-59, under the auspices of the Rockefeller Program for South Asian Languages. Thus, it covers events up to August 1959. Beginning with a definition of key concepts like "national state", Friedrich examined the complexities of multilingual India. As a way out of the present difficulty, he favored an improved education in the regional languages and also in Hindi and English, combined with a general attitude of tolerance and patience. He felt that pressurized programs could stir up nativist reactions beyond government control and observed that multilingualism itself should be regarded as a goal and a form of knowledge. During the interim, English might be explicitly rejected as a national language, while continuing in the status of an existing code, useful for national and international purposes.

Prakash Karat in his book [4] discussed the developments on the language front during the British rule and examined the role of language and class in the strategy of Indian communism. He also commented on linguistic states and their political consequences.

Paul R Brass' book titled Language, Religion and Politics in North India [5] is recognized as a classic study both of the politics of language and religion in India and of ethnic and nationalist movements in general.

In a more recent volume edited by Asha Sarangi, [6] eminent authors like Paul Brass, Granville Austin and Sudipta Kaviraj among others have used an interdisciplinary approach to understand the relationship between language theory and politics in India.

Some scholarly works have also been undertaken on language and politics in northeast India. Commenting on the language problem in Assam, Sandhya Barua [7] asserts that the language issue cannot be treated in isolation from the national question and more fundamentally from the co-relation of class forces existing in any social formation. She studied the language problem in the context of the different historical stages through which the national problem in India has evolved, the multi-national character of the Indian Union and the uneven development of regions inhabited by various nationalities. She argues that the language issue has been utilized as a pawn in the game of power politics in Assam and that the conflict of local political interests will not permit it to be judged on its own merits. In another work, [8] she observes that as a result of the long-term migratory flow into Assam, it is linguistically and ethnically the most diversified state in India. According to her, the tangled national question of Assam cannot be comprehended unless this historically evolved regional cultural pattern is constantly kept in mind. In this context, she focuses on the dynamics of the relationships between Assamese, the language spoken by the majority of the people of the state and Bengali, the language of an important linguistic minority in the state.

Baruah, an eminent scholar on the theme, observes that with the emergence of educated elites, small linguistic communities of the region are articulating ethnic or nationality interests which are manifested in the demands for political autonomy in the form of separate states. The process of disintegration of composite Assam will have to be analyzed in the context of this trend. Chauvinism of the Assamese middle class might have provided the elites of smaller communities with an immediate reason for demanding political

autonomy and adoption of Assamese as the official language could have been considered the right occasion, but even without these, the aspirations of the educated elite-led small communities would have brought in the process of disintegration [9]. This paper agrees with the formulation of Baruah on the role of the educated elite in the articulation of linguistic identity, but reaffirms that the Language Bill provided the momentum for a separate hill state demand.

Conceptual Framework

Language means a system of mutually intelligible vocal symbols by which the members of a society communicate. In anthropological terms, language is a part of culture, because it is also a historically derived system of conscious and sub-conscious patterns shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society. On the other hand, language is unique because it is a means of communication in part as a code, in part as a symbolic organization of experience-which is interwoven with other cultural subsystems, like that of politics. Moreover, language plays a singular role in the process by which individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others. The rise of nationalism in modern period is often linked with question of linguistic status and linguistic boundaries [10]. In his pioneering work on nationalism, Karl Deutsch has identified the volume of linguistic uniformity as one of the quantifiable characteristics of nationalism [11].

In the Indian context, the communist party of India (CPI) had been opposed to the conception of India as a multi-lingual nation and had propagated the theory of a multi-national India based on the Soviet model. The CPI, from the beginning, has been advocating the linguistic reorganization of India. It looked upon the different linguistic groups as national groups and had been supporting their linguistic cause as the nationality cause. This doctrinal commitment on the part of the Communists enabled them to support all regional and autonomy movements by linguistic groups irrespective of their political desirability [12].

Language Politics in India

Acknowledging the reality of a basically pluralistic Indian polity, the Indian National Congress had resorted to linguistic reorganization during the British period which helped it to derive support from different regions [13]. There was, however, a change in the attitude of the congress party in the post-independence period and this became clear in the J.V.P. Committee (1949) report which viewed linguistic reorganization as a threat to the political and economic stability of the country [14]. In this connection, A.K. Baruah argues that the champions of 'Indian Nationalism' could not realize that appreciation of the aspirations of the smaller nationalities especially in respect of linguistic cultural identity would in fact strengthen political integration [15].

The framers of the Constitution of India kept an astute silence on the principles on which the emerging state units were to be created. The Congress Party went back on its own principles of evolving state units based on linguistic, historico-cultural identity of a population occupying a particular territory. It left the entire process of state formation to the centre, only laying down certain conditions. The reorganization of an overwhelming portion of territories of India on a linguistic and territorial-cultural basis was carried out only after bitter struggles were launched by regional leaders, backed by mass movements. However, the approach adopted was pragmatic, hesitant

and based upon the intensity of upsurges in support of the cause. Moreover, numerous linguistic, ethnic and territorially culturally unified groups were lumped together, were subordinated to other units, or were manipulated into state reformation which intensified tensions among the groups and led to recurrent demand for state reformation by these discontented units [16].

It may be noted that northeast India has remarkable linguistic diversity. Bilingualism and sometimes trilingualism is common in both rural and urban areas even among the unlettered. Settlement of outsiders has also helped in spreading bilingualism and trilingualism in the region. The linguistic matrix of the northeast is made up of a number of polyglots. It is not only different languages of a single family but also languages of different families spoken in different states of this region as each state in the region is a multilingual complex rather than a linguistically homogeneous unit.

Thus, the northeast presents striking socio-cultural features in terms of ethnicity, language and socio-cultural practices. As a result, there has been ethnic assertion in every group of its socio-cultural and political aspirations. In the process, language has become a vital tool to subjugate a minor ethnic group by larger and stronger dominant groups. This is apparently observed in the non-tribal dominant states like Assam, Tripura and Manipur. In these states, the tribal languages have little scope for growth. The dominant languages of the geographical areas are compulsory like Assamese in Assam, Bengali in Tripura and Meiteilon or Manipuri in Manipur. Both Assamese and Manipuri use the Bengali script with some modifications. Tribals in Assam like the Bodos, the Karbis, the Kacharis etc. invariably study Assamese in schools and colleges. In Tripura, tribals such as Tripuris and Reangs study Bengali; tribals of Manipur like the Nagas and the Kukis have to study Meiteilon. The dominant languages in these states have eventually developed into 'lingua franca' and are commonly used to communicate among the various ethnic groups. But most tribals cannot write in these languages because of the unfamiliar script. The northeast often witnesses a tug-of-war among the multiple tribal languages and the dominant one. It appears, therefore, that linguistic diversity in the northeast has triggered and intensified ethnic tensions in the region [17].

Reaction of the Hill Tribes to the Assam Official Language Bill

Within the context of the complex linguistic scenario of northeast India, it is interesting to examine the reactions of the hill tribes of Assam, particularly the Khasis, to the Assam Official Language Bill of 1960. It would be pertinent to point out in this regard that the hill tribes of composite Assam were already toying with the idea of a Hill State. The tension between the state leaders of Assam and the tribal leaders increased tremendously following the introduction of the Language Bill in the State Assembly in 1960 [18]. The hill leaders interpreted the Bill as an effort to impose Assamese language upon them [19]. Thus, the language issue helped the Hill Parties to unite on a common platform to articulate regional grievances and to mobilize public opinion in their favour. The decision to form the all party hill leaders' conference (APHLC) was reached at a meeting of all leaders of all the political parties in the hill areas at Shillong in July 1960. The Conference unanimously resolved to oppose the Official Language Bill, mainly on the ground that 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 [20].

Under the leadership of the APHLC, the movement for a separate hill state continued to gain momentum. In September 1960, the APHLC Council of Action issued an ultimatum to the Chief Minister of Assam. In the meantime, the Language Bill was adopted by the Assam Assembly in a special session on October 24, 1960. On November 16-18, the third All Party Hill Leaders' Conference met at Haflong in North Cachar which demanded the immediate creation of a separate Hill State [21]. Thus, the language issue provided the ground for the hill state movement.

It may be argued in the context of the above that perceived Assamese linguistic hegemony was a major determinant of state reorganization that culminated in the remapping and redrawing of Assam's boundaries in the 1970s. Although the hill state demand raised by the APHLC did not materialize, the language issue was used by the hill elite as a propaganda weapon to garner political support for the formation of Meghalaya to be carved out of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills of Assam. It is significant to note that language not only became an instrument of identity assertion by the hill elite, but it was also used by them as a catalyst for consolidation of their regional aspirations that eventually intensified the demand for a separate regional entity.

Linguistic Assertions by the Bodos of Assam

Bodos are known as the earliest indigenous inhabitants of the Brahmaputra river valley of Assam, a state of North East India. They had their own kingdom, religion, culture and language. It is interesting to note that racially the Bodos belong to Mongoloid origin whose homeland might have been somewhere in Mongolia, Siberia, China, Tibet and Central Asia, but linguistically they are included under the Tibeto-Burman speech family of Bodo-Naga sub group.

The emergence of Bodo language movement can be traced back to the formation of the Bodo literary society, known as the Bodo sahitya sabha (BSS) on November 16, 1952. One of the major objectives behind the formation of the BSS was to develop and expand the Bodo language by introducing it as the medium of instruction in the primary schools of the Bodo majority areas of Assam and the recognition of Roman script for it in place of Assamese [22]. The BSS published an annual mouthpiece named *The Bodo* which has contributions in all three languages that an educated Bodo is expected to know, viz. Bodo, Assamese and English. Initially, the BSS had avoided all kinds of linguistic chauvinism. One of the aims of the BSS was to bring all the Bodo groups of languages currently spoken in northeast India under one umbrella organization [23].

In 1956, the Government of Assam composed some books in Bodo language. But the BSS rejected them as they contained a number of Assamese words. Meanwhile, Assamese was declared as the official language of Assam in 1960 in spite of the strong opposition raised by other ethnic groups of the plains as well as hill areas. It had tumultuous reactions throughout the undivided Assam. The Act gave a blow to the unique sense of unity in Assam resulting in a process of disintegration and also intensifying a process of alienation of the Bodos from the so called mainstream Assamese society. As a reaction, the hill people demanded English as their official language, the people of the Barak valley demanded Bengali as the official language for Barak Valley and the BSS demanded implementation of Hindi as the official language which is acceptable to all. Finally the Government of Assam accepted the three-language formula, i.e. Assamese in Assam, English in the hill areas of Assam and Bengali in Barak valley as viable alternatives. This posture of Assam Government and the fear of Assamese domination

led the BSS as well as some Bodo intellectuals to launch a fresh language movement. The BSS lodged a strong protest against the Bill and demanded the recognition of Bodo language as the medium of instruction at primary level of education in the Bodo dominated areas of Assam.

A significant step taken by the BSS as part of their movement was to submit a memorandum to the then Chief Minister of Assam entitled 'Scheme for the Introduction of Bodo Language in the Schools Situated in the Bodo Speaking Areas.' In support of its demand, the BSS also organized a rally on November 16, 1962. Soon thereafter, Bimola Prasad Chaliha, the Chief Minister of Assam, assured the leaders of the BSS regarding the fulfillment of their demand. As a follow-up measure, a 'study Committee' was established under the leadership of the then Forest Minister Rupnath Brahma to look into the feasibility of the Bodo demands. The Committee submitted its report in February, 1963. On the recommendation of the study Committee, the Chief Minister formally announced the Government decision to introduce Bodo language as the medium of instruction in primary schools of Bodo-speaking areas. As per the conditions of the order of implementation, the state government was bound to take the responsibility to support a special kind of textbooks to enable the schools to cope up with the new syllabus. But the Government failed to fulfill the task. The first batch of 415 Bodo medium students after completion of their primary education (Class III) in 1967 faced a lot of problems in pursuing their higher study. So the BSS demanded the extension of Bodo language up to the Middle Elementary School level in its Central Committee meeting held during October 10-11, 1967. The BSS also gave an ultimatum to the Government of Assam that if the Government would not accept their demands by February 27, 1968, it would launch a mass movement. However, there was no response from the Government till that date and the BSS started the mass movement from February 28, 1968. It organized a mass rally in Kokrajhar during which schools and colleges were boycotted. The agitation took a serious turn. Meanwhile, in a session of the Assam Assembly, the demand of the BSS was recognized by passing a law and this message was sent to the BSS. Thus, as a result of the pressure exerted by the BSS, the Government of Assam not only conceded the demand to introduce Bodo medium up to the Lower Secondary Stage, but also introduced Bodo language as a medium of instruction up to Higher School level. Thus, under the leadership of the BSS, the Bodo language was recognized as a medium of instruction in the Bodo inhabited areas [24].

The BSS also protested against the Government of Assam to abolish English as the medium of instruction in College and University levels and introduce Assamese in its place in 1972. Joining other linguistic minorities, the BSS pleaded for the retention of English along with Assamese in the said levels of the education system of Assam.

It may be mentioned that the Bodos inherited no script of their own. It is claimed that in ancient times, there was a kind of Deodhai script among the Bodos [25]. However, in course of time, they lost their script with the fall of the kingdom. In the absence of their own script, various scripts were used for the Bodo language and literature. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Christian missionaries tried to write the language in Roman script, but it remained a limited practice. Later on, they adopted the Assamese script to write the Bodo language.

The BSS, since its inception, faced the problem of using multiple scripts for writing Bodo language and literature and felt the need for a common one. The suitability of Roman, Assamese, Bengali or Devanagari script in the context of Bodo language was examined at

various levels over the years and the idea of adopting the Roman script commanded the widest support. Finally, on the recommendation of the Saisingra sub-committee, the BSS accepted the Roman script by a formal resolution in February 1970. The BSS appointed an implementation committee and it was decided to implement the Roman script with effect from the academic session of 1974-75 [26]. The release of a book named "Bithorai" written in Roman script in 1974 marked the formal inauguration of the Roman script for Bodo language and literature. The BSS declared this book being adopted as textbook for Class I students and called upon all teachers of the Bodo medium schools to introduce it accordingly.

The Government of Assam refused the demand of the BSS and the Asom Sahitya Sabha, the prominent literary organization of Assam also opposed the unilateral move of the BSS. The Government of Assam even withheld the salaries of the teachers concerned. In view of this, the BSS launched a full-scale movement demanding Government's recognition of the Roman script and withdrawal of Government's action against the teachers of the Bodo medium schools. It was a mass movement which included the participation of organizations like the Plains Tribal Council of Assam and the All Bodo Students' Union. There were continuous strikes and boycott of schools and colleges for several months in the Bodo dominated areas. Later on, the movement turned violent and 15 young Bodos died in police firing [26]. Finally, the Government of Assam referred the matter to the Union Government. Meanwhile, the state of emergency was proclaimed throughout the country in 1975. The Union Government utilized the threat of emergency provisions of arrest and detention to force the Bodo leaders to accept Devnagari script. However, this move fuelled the anti-Assamese attitude of a section of Bodo educated youths [26]. However, the prolonged use of the Devnagari script in all matters of communication became gradually convenient for the Bodo people to accept the script for their language.

Concluding Observations

It is evident from the above discussion that for the smaller nationalities of northeast India, language has been an important catalyst in the assertion and preservation of their distinct identity and an integral element in the process of their nationality formation. It is pertinent to note here that tribes of the northeast like the Khasis and the Bodos consider themselves as 'nations' and therefore, protection of their specific linguistic identity is crucial to their claim for nationhood. The attempts by the Indian State to impose Hindi as the official language for emotional integration of India was resented by most of the tribal communities because they perceived the move as a threat to their linguistic identity. An understanding of the dynamics of language politics in northeast India will necessitate an enquiry into all these processes.

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