

Language, Class and Superstructure ; A Study in Aspects of Nationality Formation in 19th Century Assam

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Linguistic issues cannot be treated in isolation from nationality question and more fundamentally from class correlations existing on the basis of their relations of production.¹ Though language alone is not the badge of nationhood, language does reflect the degree of development an objective nationality has attained. In objective historical situations each determine their mutual stage of growth. Any hindrance to the progress of a language in such situations might affect the development of the concerned nationality. Hence language and linguistic issues are sensitive subjects to any developing social group. In fact language is seen on a symbol of collective identity.

At the same time, various classes of a nationality may not be speaking the same variety of a language. In other words, though one single language is often attributed to a nationality, its class segments may speak different versions.² Implicit here is, like class-cultures there may be class-language too. The tongue spoken by the subaltern classes differ from other bourgeois classes,³ not only in phonetics and vocabulary but in other linguistic aspects too. The language spoken by the former tend to be crude, simple and limited in vocabulary while the latter's usually is sophisticated, complex, richer in vocabulary, meticulous and stylised. Often the written language of a particular group reflects the language of this latter group who as a social elite generally enacts the same role in the literary field also if the modern literature of that community is relatively undeveloped.⁴ This entails the emergence of a standard language on the one hand and dialects on the other. A standard language becomes necessary in a capitalist system as the new economic forms of production required a homogeneous market created by the unification of political territories and the rise of a common language as means of communication and intercourse. In some cases, the local language where the literary pioneers belong, emerge as the written or/and standard language as against its colloquial form and/or dialects. This implies a linguistic segregation on the basis of class-structure.⁵ The language of the elite or upper classes is automatically recognised as the correct form of expression in such a class society. In contrast dialects are treated as informal and rural or lower class speech.⁶ sometimes they are

often seen even as standing outside language and much stigma is placed⁷ on such tongue which is avoided of degree. In between the upper and lower classes there is petty bourgeois classes which also talks a speech different from the other two. If these petty bourgeois classes emerge from the lower classes, they retain those traits and since they constantly aspire to climb the social ladder they are the speeches of the higher classes. This makes their speech dissimilar than the other two. These are in addition to the socio-economic and environmental influences in the modulation of speeches. But once a nationality is established and recognised and a particular language is attributed to it, the language and a particular language is attributed to it, the language (the standard language that is) attains a supra-national character ; in the sense that various classes of that nationality in spite of having different dialects do not react differently on the issue of their language, but as a collectivity. But before the establishment and recognition of their nationality. Any attack on their language, as a cultural symbol, might affect them differently. The Assamese case, which we are going to examine, goes on to show this.

II

The modern Assamese nationality formation began with penetration of British capitalism in the guise of colonialism in the second decade of nineteenth century. One of the major demands of the situation was the identification of the Assamese as Assamese vis-a-vis other emerging nationalities of India who were exposed to each other within the same arena ; and this identification could be primarily done only through the attribution of a language to themselves to project the unique and separate identity of themselves against others. But to perceive this situational demand a nationality consciousness was essential on the part of the Assamese which had not yet dawned on them. Such consciousness was elementary for the birth of a modern nationality, not on individual basis but collectively. In Assam this consciousness emerged as a result of the coercive imposition of an alien language on the Assamese (1836). This polley did not affect the Assamese community universally ; different social classes were affected differently. But the sentiment of all the classes as a result of this experience was the same : that they were not being allowed to use their own language which caused them immense hardship. This consciousness

brought the feelings of various conflicting classes together making the language a supra-class entity. A bond of unity entailed. This was the precondition that was seen to have preceded the emergence of a collective linguistic patriotism.

III

In 1836 under historical circumstances Bengali language was introduced as the official language of Assam and it continued to remain so until 1873. Though these were the water tight official dates Bengali had begun to be used as the same, much before and did not cease to be used as such until much later. This particular policy had affected the various Assamese social classes variously. The new classes who arise the result of the change in the existing economic order were now placed in a new administrative, executive and judicial system where the interaction between the two became immensely difficult because the new language that was introduced was foreign to the Assamese.⁹ In other words, in the changed situation, language was one of the few means by which the Assamese could participate in the reformed super-structure and the new policy made it impossible. For example, the reforms both at the structural and super-structural level involved the peasants in various litigation cases. Firstly, this new Assamese peasantry, like the emerging petty bourgeois and embryonic middle class, was also the result of the transformatin of the old economic order. With the new system not ony revenue rates but also the crimes at that level of society was on the rise which were the major reasons involving them in litigation.¹⁰ Hitherto the Assamese were not used to pay revenue in cash. Now not only they were made to say so, with successive administrators the revenue system and rates also kept changing. The revenue cases involving the peasants were, non-payment of dues, suit of arrears, dispossession from lands, recovery of wages and breach of contract, inactions, over assessments, mortgage and so on. The civil cases were also basically agrarian in nature, usual theft, cattle lifting, burglary, highway and and gang robbery and elopment of girls. Such crimes were on the rapid increase since the inception of British frule. For the peasants the last resort was the judiciary becasue even the excutive was throughly corrup.¹¹ So much was the prevalence among the policemen that the office of Darogaship was demanded to be abolished altogether.¹² Similar rampant evil was reported to have existed even amongst the ministerial officers also.¹³ Thus the

peasants crowded before the court. But the greatest hurdle that came in the way of this entire judicial process was the language of the courts. The vernacular of the province, that is Assamese was not the court language of Assam. This was a clear violation of the provisions of the Act XXIX of 1837 and Bengalee was made the court language of Assam which "man of the population and even private gentlemen possess(ed) no knowledge of the language." The situation was described by Francis Danforth Bronson, wife of the Missionary Mills Bronson,

The province has suffered great injustice at the hands of the British ruler. The Govt has forced the people to present their petition (to the courts) in a foreign tongue (Bengalee). . . . the oppressed peasant is thus at the mercy of the court interpreter in a country where bribery and lying are the rule, not the exception.¹⁴

This was corroborated by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan,

Very few people in country are able to sign their names and almost all the deeds and documents signed by them for the party who execute them. This practice has innumerable instances led to the ruin of various individuals and numerous deeds are daily produced in the courts supported by lined evidence.¹⁵

The whole judicial spectacle was something very incongruous even to the authorities themselves.¹⁶ Even if the judicial officer hearing the evidence was an Assamese himself, listening to the evidence delivered by an Assamese, the transcribing of the evidence was in Bengali language. Finding that such a procedure was hardly calculated to enhance the reliability of the record and render little value to the certificate that the statement had been read over to the witness and admitted by him to be correct, it was felt that the language of the court should be chosen one which was intelligible to the masses.¹⁷ There was no doubt that the great bulk of the Assamese peasants who attend the courts speak Assamese language and did not understand Bengali, the court language.¹⁸ In more than three-fourth of the cases instituted in different courts whether criminal, revenue or civil, the parties concerned were Assamese who give their evidence and statement in Assamese - their mother tongue. It very often happened that parties in suit or case were unable to understand what might have been taken down and recorded in Bengalee until such had been again fully explained to them in their own Assamese tongue. As a rule the native of the province were unable to give their evidence in any other language

but Assamese. This had to be transcribed in the court then. The result was often disastrous.

An Assamese ryot comes for the first time into court, we will ask a Bengalee clerk to draw up an agreement for him in ordinary official language. He does so and on his reading aloud what he has written, the latter (who knows nothing but his own language) finds that, whereas he dictated, 'I will do this than the other', the clerk has made him say that a third person will perform the contract for him. The Bengalee *Koribo* (I will do or make) signifying in Assamese 'He will do or make' ²⁰.

Not that the ordinary peasant could ever catch more than stray words here and there for he certainly would not understand the general purport of what had been written without its being translated to him but what he did catch would tend him to mislead. Obviously the peasants realised what great disadvantages were accruing to them only because the court language was a foreign tongue. Even the few Assamese functionaries found that out. For example, an Assamese moonsif was bound to record in a foreign tongue, (Bengalee) evidence which he heard delivered to them in their mother tongue and then made a viva-voce translation of the whole for the benefit of the parties when the entire operation could have been conducted in their own vernacular with great advantage.

The net result of these, we may imagine. How bewildering it all must be to the thousand of illiterate Assamese cultivators who attend our courts and who know nothing of any language but their own and that too colloquially. ²¹

Indeed, it is unnecessary to emphasize that at that period the people never spoke but their own language either at homes or even when they came to the courts. Their usual rejoinder whenever they were confronted with Bengalee documents in terms of which they usually disputed was, "Ki jani ki hikhishe Mohorie ki hikhishe. Bangla kotha moi ki janoo?" (How do I know what has been written. The Mohorie wrote it. What should I know of Bengalee?).²²

The adoption of Bengalee in courts had reduced the language of the courts throughout Assam, to a dead level of unintelligibility, opined one British administrator. Official documents, complaints, and petitions in so far as they were written in Bengalee were all incomprehensible to the mass of the people.²³ Of course the well to-do and the educated classes of the Assamese community were

able to comprehend and converse freely in Bengalee but the bulk of the native who attended the courts comprised of illiterate and ignorant ryots who were unacquainted with the Bengalee language and knew only their own Assamese mother tongue which again they could not write.²⁴ But as a rule the Assamese, when examined as witnesses gave their evidence in Assamese which had to be transcribed into Bengalee by the Bengalee knowing Mohorir.²⁵ Hence the Assamese peasants were often at the mercy of these Bengalee transcribers proving language to be a stumbling block in receiving justice as far as the poorer peasants were concerned. Language also hindered the smooth running of the judiciary.

At a slightly higher level of the social ladder were the petty bourgeois who were also put to a disadvantage because of the prevalence of a foreign tongue as the official language of Assam. The disadvantage arose because this group was not bilingual and hoped to gain a share in the employment sector.²⁶

In Assam the petty bourgeois class emerged out of the lower bureaucracy of the previous regime. This group comprised of the *Hazarikas*, *Boras* and *Saikias* who after the change in the rulers hoped to gain employment in the new system.²⁷

David Scott's policy of appeasing the nobility of the old regime by providing them pension, chowdhuryship, mouzadarship and other responsible offices did not leave anything for the petty bourgeois. On the other hand, posts like clerks of all denominations, inspectors, Munsifs, Deshkars, Muhorir, Record Keeper, Daroga, and constables were filled mostly by the imported and immigrated Bengalees.²⁸ The latter continued to be employed due to the uneducated state of the Assamese. By the time the petty bourgeoisie acquired education and appeared on the scene, the employment scene was highly competitive, almost monopolised by one group of people and vices like nepotism, bribery had already emerged to deprive them of their share.³⁰ Moreover, the progress of education was slow.³¹ In fact no serious attempt was made to introduce a system of liberal education till Jenkins realised the necessity of imparting English education in the 1830's.³² The traditional *tols* and *Pathsalas* persisted. The schools set up by Scott taught Sanskrit and *shastras*. Captain White's school taught in Bengalee and the American Baptist Missionaries introduced vernacular schools. When systematic education had started under William Robinson, the official language had become Bengalee and hence the education imparted was in the same language. This was responsible for the late emergence of

the petty bourgeois as well as the middle class.

The net result of the late coming of the English education was that the Assamese who came from the vernacular schools could not hope to gain employment; as the official language was Bengali and the Assamese who came from government schools spoke and wrote a language which was a mixed language. In other words, such youth did not become bilingual in spite of the schooling, which was essential. Moreover their chances of employment was always marred by the preference given to the Bengalees. The situation was frustrating for the Assamese.

The motive which brings the (Assamese) boys to school is simply prospect of getting employ..... The one cry with higher classes is: you have given us education under the promise of employ and unfitted us for agricultural life and you do not fill your promise..... (This) province has great reasons to complain of the preference which is too often given to the Bengalees when selecting officers to fill vacancies.....

May (Assamese) young men of high and good character who have qualified themselves of employ and it is most discouraging to them to see most of the high and even some of the inferior offices filled by foreigners.⁸³

The policy of recruiting Bengalees was being followed from the time of David Scott when the Assamese men of rank who were appointed as a part of the conciliatory policy, were found to be corrupt and inefficient to discharge the duties as required by the new administrative system.³⁴ Men, mostly from Eastern Bengal, were then began to be recruited who were experienced in such work.⁸⁵ Robertson continued to pursue the same policy and when Jenkins took over, he found "almost every department was filled by the Bengalis."³⁶ The introduction of Bengali as the court language created more job facilities for the incoming Bengalis.⁸⁷ With the opening up of avenues of employment in government offices or trade, the influx of population from neighbouring districts of Bengal like Sylhet, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Rangpur increased immensely. In fact, with the introduction of Bengali, the services of Bengalees became indispensable in the government offices and schools, whether Anglo-Vernacular or vernacular since local teachers were inadequate and incapable of imparting education in Bengali. The virtual monopoly of the Bengalees in such jobs, deprived the emerging Assamese bourgeoisie from employment. This new class had now placed their whole dependence on the chance of getting employment as they could not go back to

agriculture not was there any other source of earning respectably. White collar jobs were not only paying but assured them some social status also in the changing value system. But the employment since had become not only competitive, but difficult for the Assamese while Bengalees could acquire them not only because of their educational edge but also because Bengali was their mother tongue. The Assamese petty bourgeoisie were thus quick to realise that it was the existence of Bengali language that placed them in a terribly disadvantageous position in terms of government employment.

IV

In the proceeding historical period the Assamese people emerged into a community ; that is in course of their common geographical habitation and production relations, they developed a single language, similar cultural traits and a common psychological make-up. An elementary unification of the community was brought about by the vaishnavite reform movements brought about by Sankardev in the 16th century. A great service was done by Sankardev towards the development of Assamese nationality was his compositions and the 'use' he made of the Assamese nationality in such compositions. This entire process made the Assamese cultural bonds stronger. But the situation did not demand the attainment of any cultural or political recognition. Such demands arise only with the beginning of capitalism and its corresponding superstructural manifestations like the appearance of a bourgeois democratic political system, a developing money-commodity relationship and the appearance of a bourgeoisie.

The imposition of Bengali language brought about a rudimentary consciousness among the Assamese that they could become a 'nationality by themselves' by virtue of their language. But this realisation was confined only to a few individual middle class members who were just emerging. The absence of a middle class explains why the fight for the legitimate reinstatement of the Assamese language was left entirely on the Missionaries. Barring Dhekial-Phukan all the protests that came from within the Assamese came only after 1850's. We have tried to show above that various classes were affected by the language policy as a 'class' but not as a nationality at that point of time. In the absence of a middle class who could have channelled this class discontentments, the potentialities of a language movement deterred out. The Assamese middle class had not yet emerged strong enough to lead the Assamese.

The peasants were basically a class, which though a potentially revolutionary class, need middle class leadership to become rebellious.⁸⁸ The setting bourgeois group also did not wish to protest. But the middle class was just emerging. In fact Dhakial-Phukan can be called to be the first member of it and those who were contesting the policy after him were also the members of this nascent class. But they were weak as a class to be able to infuse the ideology of linguistic patriotism nor could they organise any powerful protest movement. But the task was carried on by the Missionaries working in Assam then and helped the beginning of the tacit formation of the modern Assamese nationality. Awakening of national life and national movements starts only after capitalism and such movements are usually led by a middle class.⁸⁹ This was not only lacking in Assam during the period of our purview, even the disintegration of the former system was not complete to pave way for the new mode. While the Missionaries played the role which could have been played by the middle classes, the situation faced by other classes as shown above, provided the precondition for the awakening of the Assamese nationality into life. These conditions were the result of the new system created by the Raj. It attacked the Assamese classes through the language and made them aware of the persecution of their own language. That is why when initially there was no opposition, it became a vigorous issue later on, in fact more strongly after the reinstatement of the language.

The relationship of capitalism and nationality is hence, inextricable, not only in its structural (base) aspects but also superstructural.

Notes & References

1. Karat Prakash, *Language and Nationality Politics in India* (Madras, 1973), p. IX.
2. E. Haugen 'Dialect, Language and Nation. in J. B. Pride and Janet Holmes (ed.), *Socio-Linguistics* (Penguin, 1973) pp. 99-101,
3. *Ibid.*
4. Examine, for example the Modern Literature of Bengalee, Assamese or Oriya.
5. As in note 2. 6. *Ibid.* 7. *Ibid.*
8. See Sajal Nag, *Social Roots of Linguistic Communalism in Colonial Assam*, unpub. Ph. D. thesis, NEHU, 1986.
9. The British not only replaced the government, the entire functional pattern of the government was changed. The new administrative functions were, for example, mainly bureaucratic and involved a lot of paper works. An executive machi-

nery was introduced to enforce the law and the judicial system that began to function from now on was also hitherto unexperienced by the Assamese. As such all these functional patterns were new to the natives of Assam. Cf. H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company* (1826-1858), (Gauhati, 1963), pp. 30-34 ; 104-105 ; 140 ; 209 ; -216. Also H. K. Barpujari (ed). *Political History of Assam* (Gauhati) pp. 27-45.

As regards the judiciary, for the administration of civil justice, in Upper Assam Lambodhar Phukan was appointed co-adjutor with Janardan Barbarua of the revenue department. To decide cases of minor importance Suprasuree Pachayats were set up while criminal cases were tried by the political agent or referred to the court of Barphukan. Trials of cases demanding Capital Punishment or long term imprisonment was held before juris presided over by the Barphukhan, subject to the supervision of the Commissioner of Assam. In Lower Assam, the Senior Commissioner tried civil cases without any limit and criminal cases not involving sentences of death. All cases not involving capital punishment were tried by the senior commissioner who was empowered to pass sentences of fifty stripes, imprisonments with or without labour or transportation for life. During Robertson the charges of the civil administration was under himself, In civil cases the principal assistant was vested with power of deciding original suits from Rs. 500 to 1000 and to hear appeals from lower courts. All suits for property exceeding Rs. 1000/-, special appeals and appeals from the decision of the Principal assistant were to be referred to the Commissioner. In each district there existed two other courts, (a) Sadar Munisif s courts vested with the power of trying all original suits from Rs. 1500/ whether of personal or real property and to hear appeals from Munsiffs panchayat and Muffassil Munsiffs Panchayat, (b) The Muniffs panchayat which sat as a jury consisting of not less than three members, was vested with power of investigating original suits upto Rs, 100/-. None of the Munsiffs, was allowed to execute his own decrees which were to be referred to for orders or endorsement by the principal assistant. In case of murder the aid of panchayat was taken and the Commissioner exercised the functions of the *Nizamat Adalat* in giving the final verdict. In 1834 the principal assistant was placed under the control and superintendence of the Sadar court in civil and original cases and in revenue cases under the Board of Revenue for lower provinces.

There evolved gradually a series of rules of practices, mainly

on judicial procedure which were codified as Assam Civil Code, enforced from 1837. It provided the appointment of *Vakils*, process-servers and so on. From 1839, the junior and sub-assistants were vested with enlarged judicial power.

10. ".....*Kutcherry* was at all times crowded. Indeed to a great degree which would have rendered it impossible for persons for an ordinary strength of constitution to have transacted business at all. The most unlimited freedom of petitioning was allowed without expense to the complaints. A large box was placed in the *Kutcherry* into which petition could be thrown". writes Adams White, *A Memoir of David Scott*, (Calcutta. 1932) pp. 16-17. There were 451 cases awaiting trial at the first session court under the Commissioner held at Gauhati in 1826. Bengal Secret and Political consultations, 1826, 7 July, No.25. Scott to Swinton, 2 March, 16, Feb, 1827, No. 2 in Borpujari, Assam in the Day etc. p. 34.
11. For example.
"Then (Police) of gain often leads actually to sell justice for money and to send their co-operation in the preparation of injury and oppression on the poor and helpless.... When a poor ryot is put to duress or extortion the wealth of the oppressor gains over the *Daroga* to his side..... when murder robbery occurs in a village, the villagers purchase their safety by levy of a general contribution. Even the occurrence of an unnatural death in a village and the inquisition that follows afford a fruitful field of extortion on the people." (Memorial of Anandram Dhekial Phukan, in AJM Mills, *Report on Province of Assam*, (Calcutta, 1854), Append-J.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Baptist Missionary Magazine, L-II (12) Dec. 1872, pp. 493-4.
15. Dhekial-Phukan's Memorandum etc. as in note 11.
16. Bengal Govt. General Proceedings, (BGGP) 1873, No. 83. M. O.Boyd to the DC, Darrang dt. 5.6.1872.
17. *Ibid.*
18. BGGP, 1873, No. 364, J. F. Sherer to the Commissioner of Assam, dt. 19.6.72.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. BGGP 1873, No. 106 J, A. N. Phillips to the DC, Lakhimpur, dt. Dibrugarh 10th June 1872.

22. *Ibid.*
23. GP, April 1873, No. 1873, No. 80, Boyd to DC, Darrang, dt. 5.6.72.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in Days etc.*, op. cit., p. 298.
27. Sajal Nag, op. cit.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in Days etc.* op. cit., p. 300.
32. *Ibid.*
33. AJM Mills, op. cit., p. 27.
34. Foreign Proceedings, June 1831, No. 50-59. David Scott to Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal.
35. S. Nag, op. cit.
36. Letter issued to the Govt. of India Vol. 7, No. 236, Jenkins to William Grey, 7. Sec. 1854.
37. Same as note 26.
38. E. Hobsbawm, 'Class consciousness in History' in I. Mezaros, *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (London, 1977) pp. 5-21.
39. Stalin, 'The National Movement' in *Selections from Lenin and Stalin on National Colonial Question* (Calcutta, 1970), p. 73; Lenin, 'Critical Remarks on National Question' in *Ibid* p. 6.