

Chauvinism in Assamese Society and the Bengali Elite in Assam

Apurba Baruah.

A section of the Indian left has always been of the opinion that the chauvinistic tendencies in the Assamese Society have been receiving their ideological and political sustenance from the Assamese middle class who in league with the Indian ruling classes are trying to keep the toiling masses divided so that the left and democratic movement can be prevented from making any significant progress. The articulation of this argument attained the proportions of a conspiracy theory during the hey-days of the Assam Movement. However, attempts at analysing the roots of these chauvinistic tendencies have concentrated mainly on the role of the Assamese middle class and the socio-economic conditions which determine the character of this class. In an widely referred to article Hiren Gohain, for instance argues that the Assamese middle class developed chauvinistic tendencies, because it had to defend its interest in competition with outsiders who possessed greater financial resources and more advanced skill. This line of argument was so influential that while trying to examine the 'Xenophobic' tendencies in the context of the Assam agitation I myself have argued that the fear of the outsiders noticed in Assam was the result of a bitter conflict over jobs, land and cultural hegemony.² Such analysis no doubt throws some light on the problem of chauvinism in Assamese society but it fails to answer the question why the Bengali speaking population of Assam has repeatedly become the target of the chauvinistic section of the Assamese society?

Being proud of one's own language, culture and homeland is a characteristic common to all communities and nationalities. Only when such pride becomes, absurd, unreasoning, with the

quality of being wildly extravagant and aggressively demonstrative bearing a contempt for other cultures can it be termed as chauvinism. In other words being chauvinistic means being fanatical in regard to the glory and honour of one's own community or nationality. If we define chauvinism in these terms it becomes obvious that this kind of a belicose nationalism exists among a dominant section of the Assamese only so far as its relationship with the Bengali culture in Assam is concerned. Such a tendency does not exist in the relationship of the Assamese with other non-Assamese cultural entities in Assam like that of the Marwaris, Oriyas, Tamils or for that matter any other Indian Community, some of which are definitely far more advanced than the Assamese. It is interesting to note that even during the turbulent years of the Assam Agitation the non-Assamese communities in Assam, other than the Bengalis did not feel the ire of the Assamese except in some isolated incidents. But despite the fact that a section of the Bengalis came out in support of the Assam agitation under the banner of organizations like the 'Bangabhasi Asomiya Samaj' there was a general sense of bitterness against the Bengalis. In fact the over all relation of the Assamese with the non-Assamese population in Assam barring the Bengalis has been more or less cordial. But the Bengali speaking population in Assam has been facing the wrath of the chauvinist section of the Assamese society almost in regular intervals. And since these chauvinist sections often organise their anti-Bengali campaigns by raising the emotive issues connected with the existence and development of Assamese language and culture anti-Bengali feeling in Assam at times acquire massive and hysteric proportions. I must also add that the common Bengali and the Assamese live a harmonious social life in ordinary times but during periods of tension both these communities seem to show the worst forms of chauvinistic tendencies. One

must then ask - what is so peculiar about the Assamese-Bengali relations in Assam that it generates so much of communal passion?

It is ofcourse common knowledge that one of the major irritants in Assamese-Bengali relations in Assam has been the language issue. This irritant can ofcourse be traced to the early days of British administration in Assam when Bengali was imposed in Assam as the official language and medium of instruction. While a large majority of Assamese nationalists and their cultural and political organizations blame the Bengalis for this imposition and point to the later cultural expansionism in considering Assamese as a dialect of Bengali many authors with leftist ideological dispositions attribute this to the divide and rule policy of the British. While discussing the Middle class and language politics in Assam Sandhya Barnah and J.B. Bhattacharjee say,

".....imperialist policy in Assam was to suppress the local language and set up artificial boundaries for the sake of a cheap and simplified administration. This policy affected the local middle class and by promoting difference between them and the immigrants served as an instrument that would help "divide and rule"³.

M. Kar while discussing Assam's language question puts the blame for imposition of Bengali in Assam on the British and cites Henry cotton's statement,

"Every educated Assamese is bound to know Bengali just as every welshman is bound to know English... All efforts to boost up Assamese as a separate language are... doomed to failure"⁴.

Even a historian of Amalendu Guha's eminence seems to have lent credence to this theory when

while refuting the Sahitya Sabha's charge that it was on the advice of the Bengali speaking people that Bengali was introduced in the courts and schools of Assam to replace Assamese he refers to Benudhar Sharma's research which quotes Jenkins to the effect that it was on his advice and order that Bengali was introduced and that Robinson merely carried out his orders. Guha infers from this that the British policy was not formulated under the advice of the native clerks⁵. The native here ofcourse means the Bengali. In support of his theory Guha also gives a long list of Bengalis who supported the Assamese cause and the ones who fought Bengali chauvinism. That itself appears to be quite revealing because if some Bengalis had to support the Assamese cause and some others had to fight Bengali Chauvinism in the context of Assamese-Bengali rivalry then there must have been a strong anti-Assamese chauvinistic lobby operating among the Bengalis. But the otherwise incisive mind of Guha blissfully ignores this aspect and harps on the divide and rule theory in an attempt to refute the charges brought by forces like the Asom Sahitya Sabha. In 'Planter Raj to Swaraj' Guha, infact, becomes so enamoured by this theory that he describes chief commissioner Fullers' efforts in early twentieth century in protecting the interest of Assamese in Govt. jobs and getting the Assamese language recognised by the Calcutta University as a "manner which bore the bitter fruits in the context of the devide and rule policy"⁶. In yet another piece Guha explains the introduction of Bengali as the official language in British Assam in the following words:

"In British official view their (Assamese) language was a mere dialect of Bengali consequently in suppression of Assamese, Bengali alone was recongnised since 1837 as the Vernacular of the Assamese people for use in schools and courts".

The point that the British themselves believed that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali has been repeatedly stated by Guha in various contexts. For instance, he says about Fuller that "he (Fuller) believed mistakenly if not misciviously—that the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra velley speaks (sic) a language which is infact, a dialect of Bengali"⁸.

It is clear that this approach puts the blame for introduction of Bengali as the official language in British Assam squarely on the British themselves because according to the proponents of this view the tension created by the imposition of Bengali was a result of the British policy of devide and rule and that the Assamese chauvinists played into the hands of the colonial rulers. They seem to ignore or under play the role played by the elite of the Bengali society of British Assam and their patrons in Bengal on this and related issues which infact gave rise to chauvinistic tendencies and anti-Bengali sentiments amongst the Assamese. On the controversy over the independent status of Assamese language the early British opinion might have been influenced to a great extent by the dominant Bengali opinion of the time which held that Assamese and Oriya were dialects of Bengali. An influential section of Bengalis both in Assam and Bengal not only believed that those two languages were Bengali dialects but forcefully argued this. That this opinon was widespread among the Bengalis in that period becomes obvious from the fact that even after restoration of Assamese in 1873 the Bengali press in Calcutta carried a series of articles arguing that Assamese was a mere dialect of Bengali. It is interesting to note that even in 1898 in an article written allegedly by no less a person than Rabindranath Tagore in *Bharati* it was argued that Assamese and Oriya were two dialects of Bengali and that it was only the devide and rule policy of the British which was responsible for creating the painful separation between Bengali

and these dialects of Assam and Orissa⁹. It is not that only Bengali elite of Bengal indulged in such activities but leading Bengali residents of Assam also contributed their mite to this obviously anti-Bengali sentiments in Assam. As Tilottama Misra shows Jogesh Chandra Rai a Bengali Professor of Cotton College Gauhati wrote a series of articles in *Mrinmayee* and *Prabasi* reiterating the 'dialect of Bengali' thesis. Ms. Misra documents how *Prabasi* continued to publish a series of articles, letters and reports which had a definite anti-Assamese tinge.¹⁰ L.N. Bezbaruah mentions that in one such article the Assamese people were referred to as the non-Bengali inhabitants of Assam implying that Assam was a homeland of Bengalis and the Assamese were just another community inhabiting this Bengali homeland.

The Anti-Bengali feelings generated by the activities of this section of the Bengali elite became so strong in course of time that Bolinarayan Borah, himself a great admirer of Bengali culture had to admonish the Bengali residents of Assam. After severely criticising his compatriots for nurturing anti-Bengali feelings Borah wrote- "Bengali friend! don't think that all the faults lie with the Assamese. you cannot clap with one hand. You are also there at the root of this dispute. Bengalis think of Assamese as uncivilised, when they meet a Bengali the forsake the Assamese; they don't learn Assamese because they think that it is the language of an uncivilised people. In such a situation how can there be any friendship between Assamese and the Bengalis... Do Bengalis in Assam hate Assam so much that not to speak of Befriending Assamese they don't wish even, to learn Assamese"?

On the language controversy the role of the Bengali elite in Assam was such and the controversy generated by this issue created so much

of bad blood that Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy an ex-president of the Bengal literary conference while presiding over the Tezpur session of the Assam Chatra Sammilan in 1919 had to say, There has been a controversy for long about the independence and the identity of the Assamese language. This is extremely foolish. This is due, I hold, to the provincial patriotism and national¹/₂ conceit of the Bengalees living in Assam".

It is therefore erroneous to conclude that the original sin of introducing Bengali as the official language of Assam during the early British period and the then Official opinion that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali were results merely of the British policy of divide and rule. The elite of the then Bengali society in Assam and their patrons in Bengal did contribute their bit in creating the right climate for the formation of the official opinion and the adoption of the policy. The tensions generated by that policy created conditions for strengthening of anti-Bengali Chauvinistic forces in Assam. An analysis of the role of the Bengali elite in Assam in the post-independence period may also reveal that the anti-Bengali Assamese chauvinism in contemporary Assam may not merely be the result of the Assamese middle class's conspiracy to keep the Assamese and the Bengali masses divided so that left and democratic forces could be prevented from making steady progress. In fact harping of the divide and rule argument may worsen the situation in the sense that the chauvinist section of the Assamese society may successfully paint the authors of such works as anti-Assamese which indeed will cause great harm to the left and democratic forces.

Notes & References

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9. For a discussion on this point and L.N. Bezborua's reaction to such writings See Tilottoma Misra, **Literature and Society in Assam** (New Delhi, 1987) pp. 162-63.
10. **Ibid.** p. 167.
11. S.N. Sharma (ed) **Mau**, (Gauhati 1988) p.44.
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