

## Reorganization of Composite Assam and Linguistic Chauvinism of Asomiyas

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It has become rather common for a fairly large number of social scientists, journalists and politicians to maintain that the composite state of Assam disintegrated because of the linguistic chauvinism of the Asomiyas. The academia's subscription to this theory is more circumspect and therefore in scholarly writings such views are not apparent but the reality is revealed on close scrutiny of the guarded opinions. One scholar writes, "The official imposition of *Asomiya* language backed by the *Asomiya* bourgeois made the tribals suspicious about the motives of the relatively advanced high castes"<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say, "once the official and social compulsions are removed the *Asomiya* language is likely to gain more acceptability and vigour. Besides it can help healing the injuries repeatedly inflicted by the *Asomiya* chauvinists from time to time on their own mother tongue. And those who try to get out of its fold out of frustration to register their protest against *Asomiya* big brotherhood in Assam would be back again in Assam."<sup>2</sup> In an interesting passage Hiren Gohain writes,

"They (non-Assamese speaking residents of Assam) particularly considered the official languages act of 1961 as a stumbling block in their path of development. They were apprehensive that the domination of the Assamese will in future adversely effect their language and culture. The then education minister of the Bimala Chaliha ministry Captain william Son Sangma resigned from the ministry"<sup>3</sup>

At the political level All Party Hill Leaders Conference, a party claiming to represent the interest of some hill tribes of the erstwhile composite Assam, blames the official Languages Act of 1961 for the disintegration of the composite state<sup>4</sup>. At a popular level such views are expressed more freely. P.C. Raichaudhury writes,

"... in 1960 Assam declared that Assamese would be the

official language of the region. As a result suspicion worsened and some enmity was created ... They (tribals) felt that they had been discriminated against, economically, politically and socially. Therefore an angry attitude emerged among the hill people and all of them demanded separation from Assam. This attitude is spreading among the plain tribes of Assam also."<sup>5</sup>

This line of arguments suffers from a major problem. It fails to answer the question if the decision to adopt Assamese forced the smaller ethnic communities of Assam to demand separation from Assam how is it that some of them like the *Bodos*, and the *Karbis* did not press for separation at the time when *Khasis*, *Jayantias* and *Garos* were asking for it? The proponents of this view fail to notice that the composite state of Assam was a creation of the colonial administration and in the pre-British period there was no process of political integration involving all the ethnic communities of the region. During the six hundred years of Ahom rule the hill tribes of the region maintained their political identity though they were forced to accept the supremacy of the Ahom kings. In fact when the British came to this region they had to deal separately with each of these hill tribes.<sup>6</sup> The British brought the entire region under one political map though some areas were never actually administered even by the British. At the time of India's independence the Naga National Council declared the 14th of August, 1947 as the independence day of the Nagas.<sup>7</sup> The Mizos did not even know what Indian independence was all about.<sup>8</sup> Political integration of the various communities inhabiting the composite state of Assam never really took off during British rule. Nor was there any significant advance in the field of cultural integration. In that sense the separatist demands of the communities like the Nagas and the Mizos should not surprise any one. The hill tribes of present Meghalaya remained parts of the composite state of Assam for two decades after independence. But even these tribes did not get politically integrated with the politics of the Brahmaputra valley or what is known as the Assam proper. It was therefore not surprising that eventually they started demanding political autonomy amounting to separate states. The adoption of *Asomiya* as the official Language might have provided an occasion for some such communities, particularly when an educated elite has emerged

which could develop a nationality consciousness among the members of such communities.

It is evident from the history of the inter community relations of the region that when educated elites of various communities find themselves competing with elites of other communities for resources they use issues related to ethnic and national identity to their advantage. The Assamese Bengali conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth century is an obvious example of this tendency.<sup>9</sup> It is true that a section of the *Asomiya* middle class had been acting in a chauvinistic manner and this has been reflected in the attitudes of their major organisations.<sup>10</sup> Such chauvinism and big brotherly attitude affected all the non-Assamese communities. However, all of them never rose in revolt against Assamese chauvinism at the same time not even when Assamese was adopted as the official language. Various communities have stood up against Assamese chauvinism at various points of time. The only explanation of this puzzle could be that the process of identity assertion is directly related to the emergence and ascendance to hegemony of educated elites in various communities. In a backward area like the erst-while composite Assam or even the entire North-East India of to-day the educated elites of various communities can establish their hegemony in their respective communities because there has not been any other powerful social force. In most of the communities of the region feudal and capitalist classes are either very weak or are totally absent. The working classes are not organised enough to be able to occupy dominant positions required for intellectual and moral leadership. The educated petty bourgeoisie therefore are in a position to acquire hegemony in their respective communities. But it is necessary to remember that such elites, emerging in a socio-economically backward region do not possess any other resources except being the educated in communities which were largely pre-literate till recently. Their initiation in to western education obviously introduced them to western values. They also became equipped to participate in the liberal democratic process initiated during late British period and strengthened in the post-independence period. Having learnt the importance of mobilizing people for acquiring power they found the issues of national and ethnic identity not only useful but also worthy of elites of small backward communities.<sup>11</sup> A close analysis of the political activities of these elites will

show that while some sections of them are genuinely committed to these issues others are adept at making use of these for fulfilling sectional interests. However, most of them seem to have been defining their identities in terms of linguistic communities. With the emergence of viable educated elites small communities of the region are articulating ethnic or nationality interests which are manifested in demands for political autonomy in the form of separate states. The process of dis-integration of the composite Assam will have to be analysed in the context of this trend. Chauvinism of the Asamese particularly the middle class might have provided the elites of smaller communities with an immediately available 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 dis-integration.

#### References

1. Munirul Hussain, 'The Tribal Question in Assam : A Sociological Appraisal', in Milton Sangma (ed) *Essays on North-East India*, (New Delhi, 1994) p. 292.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Hiren Gohain *Swadhinatar Sapon Aru Dithak*, (Nalbari, 1991) p. 184.
4. P.R. Kyndiah, 'APHLC On the March', in the souvenir published by the APHLC in July 1974, from Shillong, p. 1. Also see the political resolutions of the party in the same souvenir.
5. Prafulla Raichaudhury, *Uttar Pub Simanta, Asantir Mul Karan Samuh* (Guwahati, 1986, p.6)
6. For an account of the British policy towards these tribes see, H.K. Barpujari (ed) *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, (Guwahati, 1992) pp. 129-257.
7. M. Horam, *Naga Insurgency*, (New Delhi, 1990) p. 49.
8. Baveja, J.D. *The Land Where The Bamboo Flowers*, (Gauhati, 1970) p. 76
9. For a discussion on these lines see, A.K. Baruah, 'Middle Class

Hegemony and the National Question in Assam' in Milton Sangma (ed) *Essays on North-East India* (New Delhi, 1994) pp. 242-277.

10. See, Manorama Sharma, 'The Assamese Middle Class and Integration : The Role of Assam Sahitya Sabha', *Proceedings of North-East India History Association*, Ninth Session 1988. pp. 430-437.

11. There is ample proof of this in the movements launched by almost all small communities of the region. Social science literature of the region is replete with discussions on these movements. See for instance, Udayon Misra (ed), *Nation Building and Development in North-East India* (Guwahati, 1991); P. S. Dutta (ed) *Ethnic Movements in Poly-Cultural Assam* (New Delhi 1990); Milton Sangma *Op. cit*; A.K. Baruah *Social Tension in Assam* (Guwahati, 1991).