



The linguistic landscape of northeast India

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Abstract

This research paper explores identity formation through language in India's Northeast. It critically analyzes how language has been deployed, perceived, and utilized in the Bodo and Assamese assertion of identity in India's northeast. This research paper traces two communities, the Assamese and Bodo, to demonstrate how language-based identity is created in India's northeast. Among the many communities in India's Northeast, I have chosen to examine the Assamese and Bodo communities because existing literature indicates that these communities have asserted language as the primary marker of their identities. These two communities, unlike other ethnic groups in India's Northeast, assert their identity based on language. They demonstrate, situate, and represent language and identity in multiple contexts. The research paper employs a literature review as my research method to understand the dynamics of language and identity in India's northeast. In this research paper, I argue that history plays a significant role in the assertion of language-based identity. Additionally, the socio-political contexts of British-ruled Assam facilitate the shaping of Assamese and Bodo identity assertions based on language. This thesis will give readers a broad outlook into the linguistic landscape of India's Northeast.

Keywords: Identity, language, history, colonialism

Introduction

The Bodos are considered one of the largest tribal groups in the plains of Assam, and the Assamese comprise members who are not immigrants and lack ethnic membership in tribal communities. The earliest assertion of Assamese identity based on language dates back to the introduction of Bengali as the language of the courts during the colonial period. The Assam court's language was Persian before the Bengali language replaced it. The Bengali language was also introduced as the medium of instruction in schools in Assam. These developments brought forth by the colonizer in the land and soil of Assam hurt the cultural pride of the Assamese.

On account of this, the Assamese began to articulate language as an indicator of their identity to challenge the Bengali identity formed around the Bengali language and to consolidate their distinct identity. In addition, the Bodo ethnic consciousness was also formed during the colonial period. With the establishment of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Bodo leaders gradually linked their identity with language. In fact, the articulation of Bodo's identity based on language formally began after the passing of the Assam Official Language Act in the year 1960. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha launched a fresh linguistic movement and lodged a strong protest against the bill, fearing it could have serious repercussions for the Bodos' language and culture.

The Bodos began to express their identity on the basis of language in response to the Assam Official Language Bill 1960, to separate themselves from the Assamese, assert their cultural and linguistic autonomy, and challenge the Assamese identity. In light of this background, this research paper seeks to explore factors that motivate the Bodo and the Assamese to assert language as the central symbol of their identity in India's northeast. It will also look at how academic scholarship from multiple schools of thought has examined and conceptualized the themes under study.

A review of the existing literature shows that considerable research has examined how language becomes central to identity assertion among two of the largest communities in India's Northeast, namely the ethnic Assamese and the Bodo. Some significant works by scholars in this field are as follows.

Historical Aspect

Sanjib Baruah's book *India Against Itself* argues that the colonial political geography, the notion that Assam is an extension of Bengal, is the main reason behind the cultural politics of Assamese Assam. The desire to have a cultural policy that defines the state of Assam and the resistance to envisioning Assam as a land frontier of Bengal triggered the assertion of a language-based identity. He asserts that, more than any other factor, colonial political geography shapes the projects of peoplehood in Assam, the Assamese sub-national narrative and its counter-narratives, as well as the political agendas that follow from these narratives. Sandhya Baruah's article "Language Problem in Assam" subscribes to the same perspective. She asserts that the colonial administrative policy envisioned Assam as part of Bengal from 1826 to 1873, noting that, with the Company's annexation of Assam, Assam was placed under the Bengal administration. A major portion of the Bengali-speaking areas of Cachar, Sylhet, and Goalpara came under the provincial administration of Assam. In 1905, a reorganization took place, and Assam was once again incorporated into Bengal. The British partitioned the sprawling, densely populated province of Bengal into a predominantly Bengali Muslim province in the East, which incorporated Assam, and a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the West. This administrative policy had a lasting influence on the Assamese attitude towards migrants from neighboring areas. In the year 1912, the British annulled the partition and re-established Assam as a

separate Chief Commissioner's province that included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar. The reconstitution of Assam could be claimed to mark the beginning of the language problem in Assam.

Sandhya also argues that the establishment of the Bengali language as the court language of Assam, one of the imperialist policies aimed at suppressing the local languages in Assam, is largely responsible for the language issue in Assam. With the introduction of the Bengali language in schools and courts, the services of the Bengalis immediately became indispensable in the vernacular and Anglo-vernacular schools. The social dominance of the Bengali-speaking people in Assam was reflected in the dominance of their language. The emerging Assam Intellectuals attempted to redress this balance by stressing the Assamese language's claim to be recognized as the language of administration and law. The Assamese speakers' patriotism soon challenged Bengali patriotism and pride in their language. This policy affected the Assamese middle classes and began to promote differences between the Bengalis and the Assamese.

M.K. Kars' article "Assam's Language Question in Retrospect" shares the perspective of Sanjib Baruah and Sandhya Baruah, attributing the language issue in Assam to the reconstitution of Assam and the British language policy. Through their lenses, they assert that the language issue in Assam arose from British colonial political geography and the imperial language policy intended to suppress local languages. This concept implies that the cultural policy of Assam, the officialization of the Assamese language as the sole language of Assam, and the assertion of an ethnic Assamese identity based on language should be analyzed and understood in light of British policies in Assam. The assertion of Assamese identity based on language has its roots in British administrative policy. These scholars highlight the instrumentality of language in asserting an Assamese identity. The Assamese employ language to challenge the Bengali identity around the Bengali language. The Bengali identity, grounded in the Bengali language, predated language standardization in Assam, and many literate sections of Assam's Bengali population, especially Hindus, began identifying with the Bengali language and culture. Language was used to confirm one's distinctness and separateness from the Bengalis. Sanjib Baruah, M. Kar, and Sandhya Baruah's argument justifies that language is politically manipulated. Language has been deployed to define the state of Assam and the resistance to the British envisioning of Assam as a land frontier of Bengal. The British policy in colonial Assam compels the Assamese to assert their identity through language. The Assamese also deploy language to recognize the vernacular status of the Assamese. The Bodo assertion of their identity based on language stems from the passage of the Assam Language Bill. The Bodos' assertion of identity based on language is the direct impact of colonial political geography and language policy, which has compelled Assam to homogenize its people with only one language. Colonial political geography and administrative policies have displaced the Bodos from their traditional land settlement. This further strengthens their desire to be separated from the Assamese and expedites the demand for a Bodo homeland in India's Northeast. Subsequently, the Bodo ethnic group uses language to distinguish themselves from the Assamese and assert their distinct identity.

Conclusion

Based on existing scholarly writings, the research findings conclude that language is not necessarily the central marker of Assamese and Bodo identity. British political geography and administrative policy significantly contribute to the assertion of Assamese and Bodo identities based on language. The fear of being invisibilized and the desire to be seen as a separate community from the Bengalis prompt the Assamese to immediately adopt language as the central marker of their identity. Similarly, the Bodos, out of fear of being dominated by the Assamese and because of the impact of British political geography and the officialization of the Assamese language, began to assert that language is the core marker of their identity.

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