



Research Paper

## Language, Immigrants and Religion: Negotiating Identity Issues of the Assamese People

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**ABSTRACT:** Mass migration from the neighbouring Bangladesh has been a major socio-political issue in Assam so much so that in recent times it has posed a serious threat to the linguistic identity of the Assamese people. In the post-truth world, where fake news and fake history predominate and control the psyche of the masses, such issue(s) becomes complicated and problematic. This paper is an attempt to research the much-trodden issue of the identity crisis of the Assamese people in terms of the lurking threat to the Assamese language from the illegal migrants in the light of the publication of the Final NRC in Assam on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2019, the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 on 11 December, 2019, and the dynamics of the post-truth world.

**Keywords:** Migration, Linguistic Identity, Assamese Language, Illegal Migrants, Post-Truth

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Assamese people have always been apprehensive of history repeating itself by bringing about yet another threat to the majority status of the Assamese language. This fear has assumed a horrendous proportion in recent time with the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 by the parliament on 11 December, 2019. The illegal foreigners' issue has also once again come to the limelight with the publication of the final NRC on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2019. In the post-truth world of fake news and fake history, where statistics are embezzled to manipulate truth, all these issues relating to the linguistic identity of the Assamese people vis-a-vis the issue of the influx of illegal immigrants need to be revisited in search of new avenues for addressing the issue from new perspectives.

### II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore the threat to the linguistic identity of Assamese people.
- To address the related issue of illegal immigrants to have a comprehensive view of the language issue.
- To reassess the language issue in the context of the dynamics of the post-truth world.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is exclusively based on secondary data.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What constitutes the threat to the linguistic identity of Assamese people in the post-truth world?
- How is the issue of illegal immigrants related to having a comprehensive view of the language problem of Assam?

### IV. DISCUSSION

The issue of illegal migrants infiltrating from Bangladesh has been debated in various forums in Assam ever since the pre and post partition period. Simultaneously the language issue also came to the limelight in the 1940s and 1950s and is still as contentious as before with the lurking fear that Assamese language might lose its majority status in the aftermath of the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. Assamese people are apprehensive about the possible threat to the majority status of Assamese language that might come from the

Bengali speaking Hindu migrants who are likely to be awarded Indian citizenship in the near future. This apprehension has its historical legacy in the ouster of Assamese language from schools and law courts in 1836 as a result of the takeover of it by Bengali language.

Since Assamese nationalism is basically language-based, the identity politics of Assamese People is bound to be language-centred:

“With the number of Assamese speakers coming down with every census, the crisis centred on linguistic identity of the Assamese is certainly going to become deeper and language politics, which has always superseded religious politics in the state, is bound to take on a new edge” (Misra 2017).

In other words, when it comes to choosing between religion and language as a marker of identity, Assamese people have always given preference to the latter. Though the impending danger of more and more districts becoming Muslim dominated is looming large on the Assamese Hindus, whenever there is a threat to their linguistic identity, they have never hesitated to give language the upper hand. Ironically, while indigenous tribal people of Assam have refused to enter their names as Assamese speakers in the census, and while majority of Bengali Hindus accepted Bengali as their census language, many of the Bengali Muslim immigrants contributed to the survival of the majority status of the Assamese language by enumerating themselves as Assamese speakers in the census.

“[M]any of the literate sections of the Bengali population of Assam, especially Hindus, had begun identifying with the Bengali language and culture ... Even the hill peoples who were historically close to the Assamese and some of the plain tribal who had historically adopted the Assamese language and culture eventually rejected Assamese” (Baruah 1999: 73).

However, the Hindu Muslim rivalry acquiring a new impetus in recent years, and Muslim immigrants using what they call *Miyan* language simultaneously with Bengali language for various interactions, Assamese Hindus in particular have the fear that in the succeeding census (es) a large section of these Muslims would prefer to enumerate themselves as Bengali speakers rather than Assamese speakers. There is also the question of according the status of Assamese People to those “immigrants who had gained citizenship up to March 1971” as defined by Asom Sahitya Sabha (Misra 2017: 72). While some Assamese nationalist organizations are opposed to it in the logic that such a move would garble and violate the very definition of “indigenous”, the issue at hand is if the immigrants are expected to declare themselves as Assamese speakers, how we can exclude them from the ambit of Assamese people. Some others are of the apprehension that once these immigrants are granted citizenship, they would return Bengali as their mother tongue. Another issue is whether the indigenous people alone can save the Assamese language from losing its majority status to Bengali language. Some others have the absurd view that since Hindus will become minorities in Assam very soon, the influx of Hindus from Bangladesh would compensate for this. These people have also the most ridiculous view that the arrival of these Hindus would contribute to the survival of the majority status of the Assamese language.

In so far as the politics of identity is concerned, Assamese people seem to be divided into two different camps – one camp focusing on the issue of more districts becoming Muslim dominated, while the other highlighting the issue of the Assamese language gradually losing its majority status. While the first issue has almost become a reality, the second one is yet to materialise. In view of the Assamese nationality being language-based, the second issue has got the upper hand to the extent of relegating the other issue to the periphery. However, the other camp’s arguments have also been gaining grounds among some sections of Assamese people under the backing of the ruling party and due to the urgency and substantiality of the issue in question in comparison to the linguistic issue which has so far been more or less imaginary and apprehensive in nature.

Since the language issue in Assam is inseparable from the illegal immigrant issue, there has been an appropriation, and sometimes manipulation, of data regarding the number of post 1971 immigrants illegally residing in Assam. In the post-truth era of fake news and fake history misappropriation of statistical data has been the instrument for the ruling class and their allies to spread their ideologies and justify their absurd claims. The Oxford Dictionaries define “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs”. The suffix ‘post’ is used, according to Lee McIntyre, to indicate “the sense that truth has been eclipsed—that it is irrelevant”. He further notes that “many see post-truth as part of a growing international trend where some feel emboldened to try to bend reality to fit their opinions” (Lee McIntyre 2018: 5). A more dangerous form of post-truth is related to the hidden agenda of making someone actually believe “an untruth that virtually all credible sources would dispute” (Lee McIntyre 2018: 9).

Coming back to the issue of illegal immigrants, different sources offer different data regarding the number of illegal immigrants in Assam in particular and the country in general. For instance, in 1992 Hiteswar Saikia, the former Chief Minister of Assam, announced that there were 30 lakh illegal immigrants in the state. In 1997 Indrajit Gupta, the then central Minister of Home Affairs, announced in the Lok Sabha that there were 40 lakh foreigners in the country. In 1998, then Assam Governor Lt Gen S K Sinha (retd) had sent a report- ‘Illegal

Migration into Assam’ – to President KR Narayanan stating that the number of illegal migrants to Assam would run into millions. The report also indicates that between 1971 and 1981 there was a drop of 39 lakh Hindu populations and between 1981 and 1989 there was a reduction of 36 lakh Hindu populations in Bangladesh. These 75 lakh Hindus, says Sinha, have entered India. In 2004 Prakash Jaiswal, former central Minister of State, Ministry of Home Affairs, reported in the Lok Sabha that there were 50 lakh foreigners in Assam and 1 crore 20 lakh in the entire country. During 2014-18, Kiren Rijju, central Minister of State, Ministry of Home Affairs declared that there were 2 crores foreigners in the country. Union Home Minister Amit Shah declared that there were 40 lakh foreigners in Assam (The Times of India, Sep 1, 2019). These statistics are not only confusing but also misleading. The number of inclusion and exclusion of foreigners and Indians made in the final NRC in Assam has been explained by different sources not on the basis of any empirical evidence (except, of course, in certain cases) but simply on whimsy and imagination.

## V. FINDINGS

- Both the issues of certain districts of Assam becoming Muslim majority districts and the threat to the majority status of the Assamese language have been the apple of discord among different sections of Assamese people. However, in view of the spread of fake news actual picture has become bleak.
- While it is true that Muslims have become majority in quite a few districts, the fear that the Hindus might become minorities in Assam in near future is nothing but a construct aimed at disseminating Hindutva ideologies and justifying the ruling party’s project of enabling the influx of Hindus from neighbouring countries with the help of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019.
- For quite a considerable section of Assamese people, the religious issue is more alarming given the fact that the language issue still remains in the realm of imagination and apprehension.
- While the religious issue is gaining ground, the language issue has also strongly bounced back after the publication of the final NRC on 31<sup>st</sup> August.
- If the provisions of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 are invoked and enacted in letter and spirit, the majority status of the Assamese language is bound to get a serious jolt with the newly inducted Bengali Hindus declaring themselves as Bengali speakers in the next census in all probability.
- Though a substantial section of Assamese people believes that the Muslim immigrants would continue to support Assamese people by enumerating themselves as Assamese speakers in the succeeding censuses, the tendency on their part to use *Miyān* language in different interactions instead of the Assamese language is a matter of serious concern making Assamese people apprehensive of their future roles in so far as the majority status of the Assamese language is concerned.
- Misappropriation of statistical data and spread of fake news in the media are going to mislead the masses and form inferences which are bound to be erroneous and self-defeating.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The spectre of the ouster of Assamese as an official language and the replacement of the same by Bengali language in 1836 has once again started haunting the Assamese people in the aftermath of the publication of the Final NRC in Assam and the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. The issue of illegal immigrants has once more become a burning issue with the “double engine” government intent on granting citizenship right to Bengali speaking Hindu illegal migrants. The spread of fake news has made these issues even more complicated and bleak.

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