



**STUDENT ACTIVISM AND ETHNO-LINGUISTIC CRISIS OF THE BARAK VALLEY
OF ASSAM: A STUDY**

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Abstract

Although 'Barak Valley' politically formed a part of Assam since 1874, yet the region has developed a distinct demographical identity from the rest of the state, especially from ethnic as well as linguistic view point. From the previous census reports it has been established that throughout the colonial rule, the Bengalees constituted linguistic majority in Cachar district. Not only that, they seemed to be successful in establishing a socio-cultural dominance over the valley along with a distinct linguistic identity. In 1947, India became independent but it came along with the partition of the country. As a result of the partition, the major part of the Sylhet district was transferred to East Pakistan and Cachar district remained the only Bengalee dominated district all over Assam. Moreover, numerical strength of the Bengalees had a sudden decrease in the state. The same census report also shows that the numerical strength of the Assamese speaking population in Assam had a remarkable increase. The new political arrangement and the great demographic change brought some far-reaching consequences for the state. A strong ethno-linguistic sub-nationalism swept over the whole upper Assam popularly known as Brahmaputra Valley and a tendency developed by the initiative of the elite of the linguistically majority group of Assam to establish Assam as a unilingual state by any means. Under such situation, Bengalees became very keen to safeguard their ethnic and linguistic identity in the state and took all resorts to protest against this aggressive nationalism. Thus, an ethno-linguistic dichotomy seems to have developed in Assam particularly between the educated sections of the two predominant communities of the state.

This ethno-linguistic dichotomy between the two valleys of Assam assumed the form of open tussle in the post-independence period. However, so far as student activism in Assam is concerned, when the ethno-linguistic dichotomy became very important issue in the state, the students of both the valley seem to undertake an active role to make the issues popular among the masses. This paper will try to throw light on the ethno-linguistic crisis of the Barak valley since its genesis and the role of the students in mobilising the mass movements in Barak Valley during 1961, 1972 and 1986.

Key words: Ethno-linguistic dichotomy, linguistic chauvinism, Barak Valley

Students in the contemporary world are found to play a very dominant role in socio-political uprisings in different societies. In fact, North-East India has also become a hot bed of student politics for quite some time (Baruah, A.K., 2002:1). Students of this region have been launching massive movements on issues of cultural identity and economic backwardness, at times with secessionist overtones (Sinha, A.C, 1995). Societies of all the states in NE India have today been greatly influenced by these movements. Some of these have toppled governments, forced governments both at the centre and the states to enter into agreements involving policies affecting polity and society. Some student organisations e.g. Khasi Students' Union of Meghalaya and All Assam Students' Union of Assam even claim monopoly over the moral and intellectual values affecting the life of the people (Baruah, op. cit.).

The picture is not much different in case of Barak Valley, situated in southern tip of the State of Assam. The present article would like to throw light on student activism in Barak Valley which is very much linked with the ethno-linguistic crisis that has been faced by the valley for quite a long period of time. However, an understanding of the development of student activism or for that matter, student movement in Barak Valley calls for an understanding of the demographic as well as ethno-linguistic set up of the Valley.

Although politically a part of Assam, Barak Valley has very little in common with Assam proper or to say otherwise, with the Brahmaputra Valley. In fact, the region is distinct in almost every aspect from other units of N.E. India (Choudhury, Sujit, 2005:12). Geographically, linguistically, culturally and socially, Barak Valley is an extension of the eastern Bengal. Throughout the colonial rule, i.e. from 1766 to 1947, the Karimganj district of present Barak Valley formed a part of the district of Sylhet (Census of India, 1921:34). In the British period i.e. from 1832 to 1947, the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi of present Barak Valley constituted the district of Cachar (Census of India, 1971:4). In 1874, when Assam was organised as a province by the British, these two Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar were carved out of the Bengal Presidency and incorporated in Assam to meet the revenue deficit of the newly formed province. The twin districts were then placed under a Commissionership and came to be known as the Surma Valley division (Choudhury, op. cit.). However, in 1947 the independence of India came with the partition of the country and the Indian portion of the former 'Surma Valley Division' constituted the district of Cachar with three subdivisions namely Silchar, Hailakandi and Karimganj (ibid.). In the post-independence period, the area came to be known as the Barak Valley signifying the name of the main river of this region 'Barak'. Subsequently, Karimganj and Hailakandi were made two separate districts in 1983 and in 1989 respectively for administrative convenience.

It is very important to note here that although Barak Valley was attached to Assam right from 1874, yet the region developed a separate demographical identity totally different from the rest of the state especially with regard to linguistic and ethnic point of view. In fact, for all practical purposes, the Surma Barak Valley i.e. the pre-independence districts of Sylhet and Cachar forms a single cultural unit since time immemorial. As Niharranjan Roy observes:

“The Barak Surma Valley is nothing but the northern extension of the Meghna Valley (Dacca-Mymensing-Comilla). There is nothing like a natural boundary between these two valleys and that is why, the traditions and culture of these districts of East Bengal so easily spread into Sylhet-Cachar in ancient and medieval periods. Even now, the society and culture of the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar is bound with the eastern districts of Bengal in one thread.” (Roy, Niharranjan, 1994:65)

Thus, the region developed a separate demographical identity totally different from the rest of the state especially with regard to linguistic and ethnic point of view. From the previous census reports it has been established that throughout the colonial rule, the Bengalees constituted linguistic majority in Cachar district. Not only that, they seemed to be successful in establishing a socio-cultural dominance over the valley along with a distinct linguistic identity (Bhattacharjee, Arunima, 2011:25).

This identity consciousness of the people of Barak Valley can, however, be linked with the long immigration process that started much before the British annexation of Cachar, when the Kachari kings invited and encouraged the Bengalis to settle in the kingdom by liberal grants of land (Bhattacharjee, S.K, 2014:78). For obvious reasons, the flow of immigrants increased during the British rule and hundreds of agriculturists immigrated from Sylhet, Mymensingh, Comilla and even from Burdwan and Birbhum and they were followed by the traders and fortune-seekers (ibid.).

The population reports of Cachar at the initial stage of the colonial rule did not specifically state the numerical position of the various linguistic groups residing in the district. However, from the reports of Captain R.B. Pemberton and J.G. Bern, (two British officers of Cachar in the 1830s) in the 1835 and 1837, it appears that the Bengali speaking population consisting of both Hindu and Muslim communities constituted a linguistic majority (Pemberton, R.B, 1835). In 1853, G. Verner, the then Superintendent of Cachar had estimated that the total population of Cachar during his period was 85,522 out of which 50,281(i.e. 58% of the total population) were ‘Hindus’ and ‘Musalmans’ and “they are nearly all Bengalees and no doubt, all or most of them came originally from neighbouring district of Sylhet” (Verner, G, 1853). In 1879, W. W. Hunter in his ‘Statistical Accounts of Assam’ had made a study of the district of Cachar (along with the other districts of Assam) and though no linguistic breakup of the communities in Cachar are given in his report, yet the following remark

made by him is considered as an important document in this respect. “The Manipuris are, after the Bengalees the most numerous and important race inhabiting in Cachar...” (Hunter, W.W, 1879:381). It is quite evident from the remark that the Bengalees were the most numerous linguistic communities in the district of Cachar in 1879.

This numerical position of the Bengalees in Cachar continued to be more and more consolidated subsequently because the immigration from the various sources and for various reasons as referred earlier, continued all throughout the British rule. It has been found that 61.49%, 57.85%, 59.51% were the Bengalees as per census of 1901, 1911 and 1921 respectively while it was 59.38% as per the Census of 1931 (Bhattacharjee, Arunima, op. cit.: 2). However, till 1941, the immigration continued in the way, but during the decade 1941-51 it took a serious shape, as was never before, when the mass exodus of displaced persons (or Hindu refugees) from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) took place following the partition of the country in 1947 (Bhattacharjee, S.K, op. cit.:79). Thus, it is certain that throughout the colonial rule, the Bengalees constituted the linguistic majority in Cachar district, the major cause of which being the continuous immigration from Eastern Bengal. Another important aspect that needs to be mentioned here is that after the British annexation of Cachar, there started gradual development of the district in different spheres some of which are the establishment of the government offices as well as private concerns like Tea Industry, introduction of western education, introduction and development of transport (railways) and communication (post & telegraph) system, extension of the prospects of trade and commerce and the like (Bhattacharjee, J.B, 1977: 184-208). All these seem to have started in full swing towards the later part of the 19th century. As a result of the above-mentioned developments, a good number of educated Bengalee people started to be settled in Cachar from Eastern Bengal primary as the officials, teachers, lawyers, small traders and in such other professions (ibid.:184-245). Thus, from the beginning of the 20th century, it appears that a small section of educated Bengalees began to establish their roots in the district of Cachar.

These educated Bengalees seem to provide leadership in various ways in the socio-cultural activities of the region throughout the colonial period (ibid.). On the one hand, they spearheaded the national liberation movement in the valley from 1905 to 1947 while at the same time they could also cultivate a rigid cultural identity consciousness among the Bengalee residents of the district since the anti-partition agitation of 1905 (Bhattacharjee, Arunima, op. cit.: 24). On the issue of identity question, both the leadership of Cachar and Sylhet seemed to have shared their views mainly due to linguistic affinity. In the Legislative Council of Assam, the leaders of Sylhet and Cachar were frequently found to oppose the views of the Brahmaputra Valley leaders on various issues such as on the question of separation of Sylhet and Cachar from Assam and their reunion with Bengal (B.N.

Choudhury in his motion in the Legislative Council. "Assam Gazette", April 12, 1924), on the question of the establishment of a separate university in Assam (Bhattacharjee, Arunima, op. cit.: 25) and the like. In all such issues, the leaders of Sylhet and Cachar shared almost the similar views perhaps because of their same linguistic identity which differentiated them from the rest of the state of Assam.

Thus, it is clear that in the colonial period, the Bengalees were not only able to establish their numerical superiority in Cachar, but also seemed to be successful in establishing a socio-cultural dominance over the valley with a distinct linguistic identity.

In 1947, India became independent but it came along with the partition of the country. As a result of the partition, the major part of the Sylhet district was transferred to East Pakistan and Cachar district remained the only Bengalee dominated district all over Assam. Moreover, numerical strength of the Bengalees had a sudden decrease in the state (Census of India, 1951: 4). The same census report also shows that the numerical strength of the Assamese speaking population in Assam had a remarkable increase. The new political arrangement and the great demographic change brought some far-reaching consequences for the state. A strong ethno-linguistic sub-nationalism swept over the whole upper Assam popularly known as Brahmaputra Valley and a tendency developed by the initiative of the elite of the linguistically majority group of Assam to establish Assam as a unilingual state by any means (Baruah, op. cit.:118). Under such situation, Bengalees became very keen to safeguard their ethnic and linguistic identity in the state and took all resorts to protest against this aggressive nationalism. Thus, a linguistic dichotomy seems to have developed in Assam particularly between the educated sections of the two predominant communities of the state.

This ethno-linguistic dichotomy between the two valleys of Assam assumed the form of open tussle in the post-independence period. The broader spirit of nationalism ceased to exist and regional sentiments and consciousness began to get more and more importance in the socio-political activities of the state. The most important of these issues became the official language issue of 1961 and the medium of instruction issue of 1972 and 1986.

However, so far as student activism in Assam is concerned, in the pre-independence period, there was no movement called student movement as such although the students of both Barak and Brahmaputra valley participated immensely in the national liberation movement. At that time, their only focus was the liberation of the country. After the attainment of independence, when the ethno-linguistic dichotomy became very important issue in the state, the students of both the valley seem to undertake an active role to make the issues popular among the masses. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the students along with the elites organised two mass movements centring round the Official

language issue in 1960 and the Medium of Instruction issue in 1972 (Bhattacharjee, Arunima, op. cit.: 27) supporting the governmental effort to make the state a unilingual one.

.Opposing these repressive measures of the government, people of Barak Valley raised vehement protest and, in this respect, students of this region perhaps shared the views of their senior leaders. They seem to undertake a very important role in mobilising counter movements all over the valley with their demands on the official language and the medium of instruction questions in 1961 as well as 1972 (ibid.) respectively. Thus, after the independence, the student movement also changed its character. Its focus slowly turned towards the preservation of linguistic identity of the people of this valley which reached its climax in the language movements of 1961 and 1972 causing the death of 11 people (among whom 2 are students) and 1 student respectively. Perhaps in these two movements, students acted as the main pressure group in Barak Valley to compel the Government of Assam not to accept the demands of the Brahmaputra Valley in respect of the official language and the medium of instruction questions of the state (ibid.).

Since the movement on medium of instruction issue in 1972, student activities in Barak Valley took a much broader perspective relating to the promotion of general socio-economic condition of the region, although ethno-linguistic crisis was still alive. The crisis once again gained momentum in 1986 when Board of Secondary Education, Assam (SEBA) issued a number of circulars one after another making Assamese language as compulsory subject (third language) for all non-Assamese students in both middle school and high school level. Opposing the circulars, people of Barak Valley again raised protest and students of all organisations started vehement agitation throughout the valley which reached its climax on July 1986 when there was open firing on the Satyagrahis in Karimganj by the police officials in the presence of the then Chief Minister of Assam, P.K. Mohanta causing the death of two youths (Laskar, Dilip Kanti, 1998).

Although it is a fact that after the language movement of 1961, the state government became bound to accept Bengali as parallel state language especially for the Barak Valley (Section 5, Safeguard for the use of Bengali Language in Cachar, Assam Act No XVIII of 1961), yet the distrust among the people of two valleys with respect to this language issue continues to persist. The state government led by educated intelligentsia of Brahmaputra Valley has not been found sincere and sensitive enough to pay heed to the demands of the people of Barak Valley so far as socio-economic development of the valley is concerned and there is an allegation against the state government that it always follows a step-motherly attitude towards Barak Valley mainly because of these ethno-linguistic differences. Though Bengali has been incorporated as a state language especially for the Barak Valley, as referred earlier, yet there is a criticism levelled against both the state government and educational intelligentsia of Brahmaputra Valley that a slow process of language aggression has every now and

then been felt by the people of Barak Valley. This allegation was proved to be true when medium of instruction issue gained momentum in 1972 and 1986, as pointed earlier.

Thus, student activism, found in Barak Valley is, to a great extent, the product of this ethno-linguistic crisis of the valley. In fact, the character of student movement of Barak Valley cannot be studied in isolation. It must have to be studied in the context of the development of the valley which has its own uniqueness. All the major student movements occurred here were evolved out of the distinctiveness of the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the people of Barak Valley. Thus, the ethno-linguistic issue is to be dealt with proper importance and seriousness in order to have the all-round development of the Valley.

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