

## **Identity Politics, Ethnic Conflict and Altruistic Sentiments: Situating Assam in 1960**

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### **Abstract:**

*In Assam, the perennial discords between the indigenous/native Assamese and immigrant/refugee Bengalis have posed serious challenges to peaceful cohabitation and administration. The year 1960 proved tumultuous in Assam's history as these two communities clashed with each other. This paper traces the roots of ethnic conflict in Assam to British colonial policy of encouraging Muslim Bengali immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal to clear forests and cultivate in Assam, (a flow which soon became unrestrained); the middle class educated Bengalis who threatened the livelihood of the Assamese in oil refineries, tea gardens, government services and business; the introduction of Bengali as the official language in Assam from 1826 to 1873; and the Sylhet Referendum in 1947 which ousted Sylhet from Assam and led to an unprecedented refugee influx that led to immense resentment among the Assamese. An attempt to declare Assamese as the state language fuelled Bengali discontent and led to the political radicalization of the Assamese. In 1960, violent clashes erupted, especially in the Bengali-speaking district of Cachar. The disturbances were politicized by the political parties in Assam. This article also highlights the humanitarian side of ethnic conflict, which often lies in obscurity, with an illustration of how the Assamese people helped and supported a Bengali family at the height of communal tensions, thus giving expression to altruistic sentiments.*

**Keywords:** *Assamese, Bengali, Immigrants, Refugees, Conflict, Language*

The questions of identity politics and ethnic violence have engaged the attention of administrators, academicians, politicians, and research scholars alike. This is especially true of Assam, where the perennial discords between the indigenous /native Assamese and immigrant/ refugee Bengalis have posed serious challenges to peaceful cohabitation and administration. The year 1960 proved tumultuous in Assam's history as these two communities clashed with each other, the roots of which can be traced to Assam's colonial legacy and Bengal's partition in 1947. British colonial rule encouraged Bengali Muslim immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal to cultivate lands in Assam, as large parts of Assam had been left depopulated and devastated on account of Burmese invasion, as well as outbreaks of malaria and plague epidemics. Though the British Government obtained an increased revenue in Assam, the unrestrained flow of immigrants exacerbated tensions as the Assamese were already resentful of middle-class educated Bengalis who threatened their livelihood by occupying important posts in oil refineries, tea gardens, government services, and business. In spite of having a rich Assamese culture and language, Bengali became the official language of Assam, which remained so till 1873. The Sylhet

Referendum, which ousted Sylhet from Assam, added to the agonies of the Assamese as there was an unprecedented influx of Bengalis into Assam, this time as refugees or *Bhaganiyas* (those who had fled).

Redrawing of borders with erstwhile East Pakistan led to the question of further intricacies of human migration and identity politics. The Assam Government gave shelter to three lakh refugees between 1947-1950. An Indian Law of 1950 facilitated the influx of 'Bengali Hindus who were victims of disturbances in East Pakistan.'<sup>1</sup> (Nag 2017: 351) This large-scale influx led to the emergence of Hindu settlements in different parts of the Brahmaputra, making them distinct centres of linguistic and cultural superciliousness. The largest concentration was in the Barak Valley owing to its proximity to East Pakistan. A rising Bengali population in Assam, who spoke Bengali, threatened the cultural, linguistic, and political identity of the Assamese, who wanted a unilingual state. If Assamese happened to be the language of the majority, Bengali was the language of the largest minority. The Assamese felt that their newly acquired political status would be lost. There were violent clashes in Assam in 1948 and the 1950s. Ethnic violence again erupted in 1960 between the Assamese and Bengalis as the latter fought to retain the Bengali language, especially in the Barak Valley. The disturbances were politicized by the political parties in Assam. Amidst the clashes and trauma faced by the victims, there was a ray of hope as members of both communities came forward to extend a helping hand and support each other, thus giving expression to altruistic sentiments. This paper tries to cover these complex issues and highlight the humanitarian side of ethnic conflict and violence, which often lies in obscurity.

### **The Roots of Identity Politics:**

The Bengali Assamese divide was the outcome of British colonial policy. To increase the revenue in Assam, the British encouraged migrants from East Bengal, mostly Muslim cultivators hailing from the district of Mymensingh, who did a commendable job by increasing agricultural yields and revenue. Poor and hardworking, the immigrants easily adapted Assamese as their mother tongue. But things deteriorated as the indigenes soon realized, to their horror, that the flow of the immigrants had not ceased but was ongoing. Encouraged by an Assamese Muslim Minister, Saadulla, the 1940s witnessed a proliferation of the Muslim Bengali immigrant population in the four lower districts of Assam Valley. This was done with the objective of helping Jinnah to claim Assam in the League's concept of Pakistan.

From 1826 to 1873, Bengali became the official language of Assam. Educational institutions adopted it as the medium of instruction, much to the resentment of the

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<sup>1</sup> In March and April 1950, over 80,000 refugees out of a total of 2,74,555 came to Assam. A majority of them are censured in the Cachar district. Due to the Nehru-Liaquat Khan Pact of 8 April 1950, the flow of refugees decreased, and till February 1951, there were only 1,541 newcomers.

Assamese people. Several theories have been put to explain the reasons behind such a step. It was alleged that a handful of devious Bengali clerks had 'mised' British authorities in early nineteenth century to believe that Assamese was not a distinct language but a corrupt *idiom* of Bengali; and also that a 'group of self-seeking Assam-resident Bengalis blocked the path of progress of the Assamese language and literature in the early nineteenth century as they were aspirants for government jobs.' (Kar 2008: 60) It was observed that after being patronized by the British for barely ten years, the Assamese language fell into disuse in 1836. (Kar 2008: 60) However, this view is contradicted by the fact that there was no protest initially, and for almost a decade, the language policy of the government remained unquestioned. Commenting on this, Jenkins, in a letter to Grey, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, wrote, "I do not recollect that there was a single proposition made to retain Assamese, or that any difficulty was alleged as to the introduction of Bengali as the language of the courts." (Goswami 2012: 219) But with the increase in the recruitment of Bengalis in government services in Assam, there was growing resentment among the unemployed Assamese against the Bengalis. A feeling of being subjugated not only by the British but also by the Bengalis gained ground. (Goswami 2012: 220) Bengali was finally replaced by Assamese in 1874 when Assam became a Chief Commissionership, with the inclusion of Sylhet. Now the Assamese had to put up with stiff competition provided by Bengali-speaking Sylheti in jobs and trading ventures. "The economically and socially powerful Sylhetis frequently displayed cultural superiority over the natives." (Dasgupta 2014: 137) The years from 1826 to 1873 witnessed Assam's transition from a pre-capitalist economy into its colonial phase. Government jobs and professions were monopolized by Bengali clerks, doctors, and lawyers as they had early access to English education. In this context, 'the new-born, rickety Assamese intelligentsia' of the period found itself to be an insignificant minority in the 'urban' sector. (Guha 1977: 25)

In order to counteract the cultural and linguistic threat in 1926, the prominent Assamese leader Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury floated the protectionist *Asom Surakshini Sabha* to propagate the Assamese cause, joined also by Nilmoni Phukan, another Assamese stalwart. (Dasgupta 2014: 149) The Protectionist Movement aimed at preventing religious, linguistic, and cultural subjugation by the Bengalis by raising the nationalist consciousness of the Assamese and by encouraging the Bengali Muslim immigrants to become Assamese. It was not surprising that Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury voiced the opinion that Bengalis were the greatest threat to Assamese linguistic and cultural identity, and if not counteracted, would exterminate Assamese nationality. Nilmoni Phukan spoke on similar lines and expressed the view that Assam was for the Assamese and anyone who lived in Assam could become Assamese by adopting the Assamese language and culture. The Assam Pradesh Congress proposed that Sylhet be separated from Assam and the flow of immigrants be curtailed. Assamese was to be the official language through which the indigenes could assert their nationality as Assamese language was synonymous with Assamese culture and identity.

Once Independence and partition of India were announced, the crucial issue of the Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet cropped up as it was regarded 'as an ulcer hindering the emergence of a unilingual Assam'. (Chaudhuri: 2002) Thus, by 1947, Assam was in a 'conundrum with sentiments and views of the people sharply divided along linguistic lines'. (Bhattacharjee: 2013) But all hopes were belied as with the ouster of Sylhet from Assam by the Sylhet Referendum, most of the Sylhetis crossed over to the newly formed Assam during the years 1947-48, and in 1950 due to communal riots in East Pakistan. Gopinath Bordoloi proclaimed that his government's nascent policy would be 'Assam is for the Assamese.' The sentiments of the Assamese people found expression in the speech of the Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari. He declared that the 'natives of Assam were the masters of their own House' and could now engage in the 'encouragement and propagation of Assamese language and culture'. The role of the Bengali was no longer to be one of imposition on the 'will of the peoples of the hills and valleys which constitute Assam.' (Kar 1999: 9-10)

Between 1951 and 1958, the number of Hindu refugees who came to Assam stood at 4,87,000, which rose to 6,00,000 in 1961. (Chaudhuri 1982: 40) The district which sheltered the largest number of refugees was Cachar (93,177) between 1941 and 1951, due to its proximity to Sylhet and having the same culture and language, and then Goalpara (44,967) and Kamrup (42,871) (Assam Gazette, Volume 1). There was considerable pressure from the Centre that the refugees should get priority over the locals for land and job facilities, but this was disregarded by the Assam government. The landless and jobless Assamese expected from their government cultivable land and job facilities (Barooah 1990: 387). Though they remained deprived and neglected. A devastating flood had displaced 50,000 Assamese families who needed to be rehabilitated. The existence of refugees was officially denied till 1948. It was stipulated that the refugees would not be given settlement on any land within Assam and would be prohibited from enrolling as voters in the state electoral rolls. There were apprehensions that the influx of refugees could one day reduce the status of the Assamese to a minority in their own land and deprive them of their newly acquired political status.

The district of Cachar, which had the largest concentration of refugees, was dissatisfied with the Assam government's indifferent attitude towards them. Rehabilitated mostly in dense forests, rocky land, and low-lying areas, the refugees had to live in extremely unhygienic conditions. Their story was one of negligence, with no proper cooperation and understanding between different levels of bureaucracy. Refugee deaths were in the hundreds due to the inhospitable living conditions and ineffective plans to rehabilitate them. In Silchar town, the approximate number of refugees within the town limits was 20,000 against the approximate population of 50,000. There were as many as 14 colonies, big and small, within the town limits. There was no proper road or street, no light, and no drainage or water supply. It was said that the Municipality had neither adequate funds to spare for necessary development, nor was there any fund forthcoming from the

Government towards this end, which delayed the sanction of loans. It was suggested that the Government should come forward with a definite scheme for this purpose and have an effect on this at an early date. (RR File No. 318/1955)

### **Simmering Discontent and Ethnic Conflict:**

Deep resentment was felt by the Bengalis of Assam, especially the people of Cachar, against the Assam Government when Assamese was introduced in all printed forms like *Kacha patta*, *jamabandi* records, summons, notices, etcetera that proved to be very disadvantageous. The Assamese language was thrust upon the non-Assamese in all-India service examinations, such as the Postal Department and the railways. Promising young boys and girls were denied their well-earned merit scholarships for the sin of being non-Assamese in origin. (Kar 1999: 178) A circular was issued by the Assam Government Education Department to all Inspectors and Deputy Inspectors of Schools, instructing them to take all possible steps to ensure that Assamese was adopted as the compulsory medium of instruction in all the schools of the Assam valley and that Bengali was no longer to be the sole medium of instruction. (Goswami 1997: 32) Assamese was introduced as a medium of instruction in primary schools. This was deeply resented by the people of the western areas of Goalpara, where Bengali happened to be the mother tongue of the majority of the people. In Dhubri Government High School, the teaching of Bengali as a vernacular subject was altogether stopped even though Bengali was recognized by the Guahati University up to B.A. standard, which caused a great deal of bitterness among the local population.<sup>23</sup> (File No. C282/1954) The demands of the Assamese youths (who belonged to the student community) were that signboards of Bengali shops should be in Assamese, there should not be separate schools for Bengalis, and that the Bengalis should accept Assamese as their mother tongue.

Seen as a deliberate measure of political suppression and denial of fundamental rights, language politics infected the officers of other departments, including even the subordinate ranks of the Police. Dubious means were adopted to dislodge Bengali from the schools, such as another High School in a 95% Bengali-speaking area at Mankachar. A twist to the tale of language politics was the insinuation that staunch ex-Leaguers and active and suspected Pak spies suddenly became great champions of the Assamese language. They used this cloak to hoodwink the local authorities. Thus, S. M. Dutt of Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, appealed that the

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<sup>2</sup> Letter No. SA.6/49 (5) of S. M. Dutt of Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Shillong, dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1954, to Mr. P. V. Bhaskaran, IP, Deputy Director, Intelligence Bureau, (MHA) Govt. of India, New Delhi.

<sup>3</sup> Letter No. SA.6/49 (5) of S. M. Dutt of Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Shillong, dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1954, to Mr. P. V. Bhaskaran, IP, Deputy Director, Intelligence Bureau, (MHA) Govt. of India, New Delhi.

wrong be rectified as it was bound to impinge very adversely on the genuine loyalty and political stability of the people of Assam's bordering areas with Pakistan.

The language issue caused considerable tension among the students of Hailakandi sub-division in Cachar, as the Hindu students who adopted a resolution against the introduction of Assamese as an additional subject and embarked on a signature campaign to that effect were not supported by the Muslim students.<sup>4</sup> (File No. C282/1954) This was not surprising as there existed some hard feelings, particularly among the refugees who migrated from East Pakistan and settled in different parts of the sub-division, having lost everything in Pakistan. Moreover, to add salt to one's wounds, grants to Bengali medium schools were refused. Efforts were on the rise so that the non-Assamese did not get white-collared jobs.

The Bengali Muslim immigrants (mostly cultivators) registered their mother tongue as Assamese in the 1951 Census. In 1901, Assamese speakers were less than 3% but in 1951, they increased to 62% whereas Bengali speakers decreased from 69% in 1901 to 17.4% in 1951.<sup>5</sup> (Chaudhuri 1982: 43; Goswami 1997: 39) Over the years, the number of Assamese speakers increased as lakhs and lakhs of people were made to say that they could speak Assamese on pain of losing all they might have acquired over half a century or seventy years. (Kar 1999:173) Many did so without actually going through the process of assimilation. All these were provided as justification for Assamese to be introduced as the official language of Assam.

Proposal for introducing the Language Bill came from the 27<sup>th</sup> session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in April 1959 at Nowgong. The 'State Language Day' was observed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1959, throughout Assam. Accordingly, on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1960, Sri B.P. Chaliha, Assam's Chief Minister, announced that a bill to that effect would be introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly's next session. Meanwhile, an already resentful and aggrieved Bengali people, mostly refugees, 'started an agitation against the Assamese people and Assamese language, apparently with the purpose of disengaging the government from taking the final decision, by muddling the issues.'<sup>6</sup>(Trivedi 1995: 47) Demeaning slogans were made in relation to the Assamese language and Assamese people, in processions led by Bengalis and some Khasis in Shillong, then capital of Assam, on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1960.

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<sup>4</sup> As reported by the Superintendent of Police, Cachar, Silchar, to the Deputy Inspector General of Police, C.I.D., Assam, Shillong. Memo.No.15507/C/A-8(3)/54.

<sup>5</sup> Sandhya Goswami opines that one of the reasons for the decrease in Bengali speakers was because, in the past, Bengali enumerators filled with Bengali nationalism erroneously recorded Rajbanshis, tribals, and tea garden labourers as Bengali speakers, which was rectified when the Assamese formed their own government in independent India.

<sup>6</sup> Memorandum submitted to Sri Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, by The Assam Sahitya Sabha, July 1960.

This brought the fiercest reactions from the Assamese. People found themselves to have spoken ill of the Assamese people and language were hassled and asked to leave Assam. It was alleged that police officers and policemen belonging to subordinate ranks played an important role in this. They usually turned a blind eye to the anti-social activities of miscreants, as did one Golam Mohamud, town-in-charge of Tinsukia Police Station, who remained a silent spectator when miscreants broke the signboards of the shop of M/S N. K. Ghose. He regretted that the Assamese people of Tinsukia could do nothing in comparison with that of his own district, Nowgong, and others like Sibsagar and Kamrup. Any Bengalee who came to register a case with him was threatened and told that the case was false. A close associate of Golam was L. Gogoi A.S.I., a notorious fellow who was a silent witness to the pelting of stones by some *goondas* (anti-socials) of the town on Bengalee houses in front of Damodar Cinema Hall in Tinsukia. When the A.S.I was questioned, he said, “*Kela Bongali Na Matibi.*” (Damn Bengali do not talk)<sup>7</sup> (File No. C416/1960). He further justified the action of Chita Gohain and others when they damaged the signboard of Bengal Potteries, telling his constables that the exodus of Bengalis would mean that the Assamese would be employed in better jobs in tea gardens.

#### **Outbreak of Ethnic Violence:**

Assam turned into a boiling cauldron over the language issue. On 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1960, intense violence was perpetrated on Bengalis of twenty-five villages in Goreswar (Kamrup district). According to the Report made by a one-man enquiry commission under Justice Gopalji Mehrotra, 4,019 huts and 58 houses had been vandalized and destroyed; nine Bengalis had been killed and more than a hundred injured; and there had been at least one instance of attack on women. (Bhaumik 2009:131) It was a part of the ethnic cleansing pogrom and was the outcome of a resolution taken at a secret meeting of the Teachers’ Association at a school in Sibsagar, where Assamese students and youths were mobilized and instructed to spread the message in different parts of Assam. A police firing took place at Gauhati on 4.7.60 in which one Ranjit Barpujari died.<sup>8</sup> The news spread like wildfire and led to a week of uncontrolled violence throughout the Brahmaputra valley. The arrest of student leader Dulal Barua within the university campus was immediately followed by a Peace Meeting convened by the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong at Bardoloi Hall on 5.7.60, where highly disturbing speeches were made against Government Bengali officials and the Bengalee community as a whole. Shri Ramnath Sarma, M.L.A, delivered a provocative speech condemning the police firing in Gauhati and called upon students as well as youths of Assam to rise from their slumber and teach the mischievous and evil

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<sup>7</sup> Complaint letter of Sri Nirendra Kumar Sen to General Srinagesh, Governor of Assam, dated 25<sup>th</sup> July 1960.

<sup>8</sup> On 4 July, some Bengali houses near Cotton College were burnt by a mob. The police opened fire, in which Ranjit Barpujari was killed. He was honoured as the first language martyr of the Assamese.

designing Bengalis a lesson.<sup>9</sup> (File No. C416/1960) He blamed Bengalee officers holding top administrative positions like “Lala Dey,” “Pabbi” and “Shome Saheb” as harbouring evil intentions against the Assamese and held them responsible for the firing in Gauhati. He declared that Bengalis should desist from having separate institutions in Assam, and should they not comply with this directive, the Assamese would rise to their heels just as a sleeping tiger rising from slumber. He concluded his speech saying that if Assamese could not be declared as the state language, the Government should resign. (File No. C416/1960)

A programme involving picketing, *hartal* (a closure of stores and offices as a protest), and procession (silently) for 6.7.60 to protest against police firing was decided upon in this very meeting. What followed was a spate of violence where members of both communities were assaulted or murdered. Reports came in from all parts of Assam. On 6.7.60, one Assamese P.W.D. Overseer of Badarpur ghat was assaulted by three Bengali students, causing slight injuries, and on the same day, twenty Bengali boys attacked a house in the Badarpur Railway colony, in which six Assamese employees were living in a rented mess. The inmates fled, except one, who was assaulted with sticks and some sharp weapons.<sup>10</sup> (File No. PLA 507/1960) In Lumding, two Assamese, one railway employee and another a teacher, were assaulted by some Bengalees (File No. C416/1960). Attacks were made on the Assamese in Karimganj and Lumding (railway colony), which were refugee strongholds. Uprooted Assamese arrived from Lumding to Jorhat, and this gave rise to local disturbances when Bengalis were targeted by the Assamese. Bengali families arrived from the Brahmaputra Valley to Hailakhandi due to the disturbances and reported that thirty persons were missing<sup>11</sup> (PLA 507/1960). On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1960, riots started in Sibsagar as Bengali shops were looted, and Bengalis were assaulted with guns and weapons. Bengalis in every walk of life were targeted by Assamese miscreants in various places in Assam. There were attacks on Bengali staff in Bengali newspapers and weeklies; Bengali passengers, railway security guards and employees, including those in oil refineries and tea gardens; Bengali doctors, restaurant owners, hawkers and shopkeepers. Even innocent students were not spared. Heart-wrenching was the case of a poor teaseller, Brindavan Roy of Nagaon, Kampur slum area, who left in the morning of July 5<sup>th</sup> but in the evening, people saw his body lying on the side of the road (Kalita 2020). Bengali residents were targeted and set ablaze with petrol, and if any inmate tried to escape, he was forcibly pushed into the fire by a violent mob and killed instantly, as happened in the case of one Harul Chakraborty. There were countless incidents of looting, arson, stabbing, and merciless beatings to which the Bengalis of Assam were subjected during 1960. There were also

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<sup>9</sup> Copy of Memo No. 11714/C dated the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 1960 from the Superintendent of Police, Nowgong, to the Superintendent of Police, Special Branch, Assam, Shillong.

<sup>10</sup> Report of the Sub-divisional officer, Karimganj, to the Joint Secretary, Government of Assam.

<sup>11</sup> Report of Sub-Divisional Officer, Hailakandi to the Joint Secretary to the Government of Assam, Political Department, Shillong.

incidents when a Bengali pharmacist was chopped to death in Palashbari police station and two Bengali youths were stoned to death in Tezpur. (Kalita 2020)

Reports started coming in from either Sub-Divisional officers or Deputy Commissioners in September and October 1960, -Mangaldai-102 families affected by arson and shop looting and one missing; United Mikir and North Cachar Hills, Diphu -38 families targeted; Golaghat -306 families affected; Kamrup-1601 families who suffered loot, arson and damage and where three persons missing were believed to have been killed; and in Khasi and Jaintia Hills the houses of two families were burnt down, one family was looted and 50 persons of various families were injured (PLA 507/1960). A tense situation arose in the Brahmaputra Valley when Sylheti settlements were attacked by Assamese mobs. The violence hit the highest point between July and September 1960, during which about 50,000 Sylhetis fled from the Brahmaputra Valley to West Bengal, and 90,000 fled to the Barak Valley. Unfortunately, the Bengalees of the Brahmaputra valley, who had been living for generations in the towns of Tezpur, Guahati, Jorhat, Nowgong, and Dibrugarh, etc., and publicly supported the Assamese language, happened to be victims of the Assam violence. All these incidents created an atmosphere of fear and hatred. The Bengalis felt traumatized as they not only lost their loved ones but means of livelihood and had to leave behind their hearths and homes. They felt stigmatized for being Bengalis.

These disturbances witnessed the mushrooming of refugee camps in the Cachar district (Assam) and Alipurduar and Cooch Behar (West Bengal). The West Bengal Chief Minister expressed his unhappiness over the influx of victims of violence from Assam to West Bengal, as he felt that West Bengal had no more space to accommodate them. He alleged that every day, a thousand people were coming to West Bengal, and not all of them were direct victims of violence, but people who were migrating for fear of disturbances (Bhaumik 2009:131) In the ongoing raging controversy, the Muslims of Karimganj wanted the Assamese language should be implemented as the official language of the state of Assam. They were threatened by the S.D.O of Karimganj, P. C. Deb, and D.S.P., J. N. Deb that if they did not send a representation to the Chief Minister, B. P. Chaliha demanding that Bengali be adopted as state language instead of Assamese, they would be driven out to Pakistan or murdered, or looted or money extorted from them for the rehabilitation of the refugees.<sup>12</sup> (File No. C416/1960)

#### **Reactions of Political Parties:**

In spite of all these developments, an undeterred Assam Legislature passed a bill on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1960, declaring that Assamese would be recognized as the only official language of Assam. There were adverse reactions from two quarters. In a meeting held between the Home Ministers and the Hill leaders of Assam on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1961, Captain Williamson A.

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<sup>12</sup> Letter of all the Muslims of Karimganj dated 11<sup>th</sup> October 1960 to the Additional Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, Shillong.

Sangma<sup>13</sup> pointed out that the adoption of Assamese as the state language would make it obligatory for the Hill peoples to learn Assamese to be employed in the state government and the Secretariat. Moreover, the tribals would have to learn too many languages—indigenous, Hindi, English, and now Assamese. It needs to be mentioned here that earlier when the bill had been proposed there was a strong and determined opposition from the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) of the Autonomous Districts of Assam comprising representatives of Mizo Hills District, North Cachar Hills, Garo Hills, and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills in its meeting at Shillong (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1960). It was clearly stated that acceptance of the Assamese language would place the Assamese in a more dominant position and lead to the assimilation of the Hills people into the Assamese community, thereby leading to the disintegration of their identity as distinct communities in India, an identity that had been given recognition and projection in the Constitution (Trivedi 1995: 120) It would also make it difficult for Hill people to get jobs in government and other sectors. The Government of Assam had been urged to drop the proposed bill for the sake of the minorities of Assam, in particular the claims of the autonomous districts, and in the interests and security of India. The other organization which vehemently objected to this bill was the Bengal Sangram Parishad with its centre at Karimganj, having an enormous number of East Pakistani Hindu refugees. It demanded that Bengali should be recognized as the other state language of Assam, as it held Assam to be a bilingual state. This organization, along with Nikhil Assam Banga-Bhasha Samiti and Cachar Zila Gana Sangram Parishad, protested non-violently against the implementation of the Assam Language Act. So did the District Congress Committee, which formed the Bhasha Andolan Samiti, as well as students, eminent community leaders, and intellectuals. (Bhattacharjee 2012, February 19) Girl students at G. C. College demonstrated with a black flag to Congress Parliamentary members, comprising of Indira Gandhi and Sucheta Kripalini, on 15/8/60<sup>14</sup> (File No. PLA 499/1960). Some Assamese students showed black flags to Dr. Bidhan Roy on his visit to Assam, to protest against Dr. Roy's silence on outrageous attacks

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<sup>13</sup> William A. Sangma (1919-1990) was a Garo leader who, after serving in the military, joined politics in 1952. He was the chief executive member of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council and was instrumental in pleading for the separation of Hill States from Assam in a meeting held in Shillong in 1954. The others who were present in this meeting were representatives from Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, North Cachar Hills, and Lushai (Mizo) Hills. This demand was made to safeguard the identity of the hill people under the Sixth Schedule. In 1957, Sangma was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly and given the portfolio of Minister in charge of "Tribal Areas Development" in Chaliha's Cabinet. When the language bill was passed, favouring the adoption of Assamese language as the state language, Sangma resigned from his post in the Cabinet and henceforth devoted himself to the cause of separate statehood for the hill people. Though the desire for separate hill states had been much earlier, the movement gained momentum when the language bill was passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly.

<sup>14</sup> Extract from Secret Report, dt. 19/9/60 from DCIO, Gauhati.

on the Assamese in West Bengal, such as the assault on Hareswar Goswami and the murder of Suryya Bora, as also the false and vile propaganda made against Assam through Dr. Bidhan Roy's Calcutta paper<sup>15</sup> (File No. PLA 499/1960).

In Assam, the language issue became an important tool of political bickering and factionalism. The Indian National Congress held Assamese to be one of the national languages of India and wanted its implementation as the state language of Assam, as any other state in India. It was supported by the Assam State Congress Party. The Proja Socialist Party split over the adoption of Assamese as the state language, with the Cachar unit openly clashing with the Brahmaputra valley. In Cachar, all the members of the PSP resigned their membership from the Party. As the Chairman of the PSP in Assam, Hareswar Goswami successfully fought for the cause of the Assamese. On the other hand, Dr. Ghose, the Bengal PSP chief, joined the leaders of his state in condemnation of the government of Assam and the Assamese, even going to the extent of encouraging the Sangram Parishad leaders to carry on with their agitational programme till their demands were fulfilled (Goswami 1997: 109). The Socialist Party, led by J P Narayan, favoured the implementation of Bengali as the state language. The Communist Party in Assam initially remained silent but showed dissension when Nilmoni Borthakur, a prominent Assamese gentleman resigned his membership of the assembly, being in favour of the adoption of Assamese as the state language; while Achintya Kumar Bhattacharyya of Silchar, another member of this party, openly sided with the *Sangram Parishad*.

It is interesting to note that the language issue intensified the factional fights within the leadership of the Assam Congress Party, as some party members tried to undermine the Chief Minister, Chaliha and his Cabinet by triggering the emotional feelings of the people and creating a disquieting situation. Anti-Bengali feelings became a handy weapon in the hands of some Assamese politicians with which they struck Chaliha's government. The Chaliha Cabinet was accused of having 'bungled the language issue' and allowed 'the weeds of opposition to grow under its feet' (Goswami 1997: 113). The apathy of the Central Congress Party in New Delhi, which dismissed the disturbances as a law-and-order problem, further aggravated the situation in Assam. Factional bickering reared its ugly head within the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) when the Cachar Congress, which supported the Sangram Parishad demanded a break from APCC in order to form three Congress Committees –Silchar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi, but the demand was not entertained by the Congress High Command. It is without any doubt that the major responsibility for the language disturbances lies with the anti-Chaliha faction who played on the chauvinistic feelings of the Assamese, accentuating their fears and insecurities of being swamped by the Bengalis.

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<sup>15</sup> The Calcutta papers, which enjoyed a large circulation in the towns populated by Bengalis in Assam, showed scant regard for the natural and legitimate aspirations of the Assamese and even published false reports. The Assamese dailies were not far behind as they also indulged in falsity.

On 19 May 1961, a complete *hartal* was observed when police fired on the peaceful *satyagrahis* in Silchar, and eleven persons were killed (one woman, Kamala Bhattacharjee, and ten men) and twenty-one were wounded. They became Language Martyrs who, on the initiative of the Sangram Parishad, had spearheaded the Bhasha Andolan striving for *Bangla* to be recognized as the other official language of Assam. Six Congress MLAs from the Cachar district vehemently protested against the firing by resigning, and a *hartal* was observed on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1961. The Sangram Parishad was determined that the Bengali language must be recognized at the state level. This led to minor skirmishes between the Sangram Parishad and Shanti Parishad, an organization of non-Bengalis that included Muslims, Manipuris, and indigenous Cacharis, which continued till 21<sup>st</sup> September 1961. Eventually, on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1961, the Assam Cabinet accepted the Draft Bill that aimed at revising the Assam Officials Language Act, made on the recommendations of Lal Bahadur Sastri (Sastri Formula). Accordingly, in the Cachar district alone, *Bangla* was granted the status of the other official language in October 1961. (Bhattacharjee 2013 August 12) Incidentally, some people who were inclined towards politics, but were neither in the government nor full-fledged members of any political party, adopted a two-pronged approach. While supporting the Sastri Formula, they at the same time encouraged the agitation of the students to ensure their own political future. Apart from the age-old animosity between the two communities, it appears that whatever transpired centering on the linguistic issue was to a large extent, the outcome of factional wrangling within the ruling party.

#### **Ray of Hope as Reflected in Altruistic Sentiments:**

It is worth mentioning here that amidst all these disturbances, an Assamese gentleman L. C. Bordoloi from Dibrugarh, who belonged to the Rashtriya Swayam Seva Sangha, along with other co-members, ‘tried to prevent riots in many places at the cost of their own lives.’ (File No.C416/1960) In a letter dated 4 October 1960 addressed to Govind Ballabh Pant Patel, he observed how the Muslims became Assamese overnight and killed the Bengali Hindus throughout the Brahmaputra valley, especially in Goreswar (Kamrup), the whole of Nowgong district, and in many parts of Sibsagar district (File No. PLA 499/1960). He lamented how, because of his neutral approach and role as a peaceful mediator between the two communities, he was dubbed by Assamese-speaking police officers as ‘Badan Barphukan’, the Assamese man who had invited the Burmese to invade Assam in 1810 (File No. PLA 499/1960). He complained that he was manhandled by Assamese youths at the instigation of an Assamese police officer.

Even at the height of the Bongal Kheda movement Assamese Bengali relations were not so bitter and hateful as many would have us believe. There were various instances when Assamese men and women came forward to help those Bengalis who might have been targeted by some Assamese hoodlums, at the cost of their own lives. Abhijit Choudhury, retired Head, Department of History, St. Edmunds’ College, Shillong, recalled his

childhood years in Assam in an interview taken by the present author, on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2017. In his words:

“My first experience of the Assamese-Bengali conflict in 1960, when the Bongal Kheda began in Assam, and we were staying in Dumduma near Dibrugarh. My father was a doctor there, and we were living in a rented house owned by one Assamese gentleman, late Ajit Baruah from Kamrup. Whenever there was a possibility that we might be attacked as we were Bengalis, Mr. Barua would caution us to be careful. He would stay up the whole night and give rounds in his compound, carrying with him his personal rifle. Mr. Barua and our families were very close. There were no ill feelings between us, even though we belonged to two different communities at loggerheads with each other. When two young Assamese gentlemen, who also happened to be his tenants, hurled abuse at us for being Bengalis, Mr. Barua warned them not to do so, or they would have to face dire consequences.

During the height of the Bongal Kheda movement, many Bengali doctors would be given calls in the names of fictitious patients and then murdered. I still remember it was some of my father’s Assamese friends and well-wishers such as the local Congress leader of Dumduma, Jogenbabu and our house owners, Mr. and Mrs. Barua who used to caution my father not to entertain these calls. Almost immediately after the Bongal Kheda was over, my father got transferred to Nalbari in October 1960. Even now, I remember with a sense of pride the rousing farewell my father was given on the grounds of Dumduma College, where many Assamese people were present.

My next experience of living in Assam from 1960 onwards was the school that I was admitted to in Nalbari. The name of my new school was Gurdon Higher Secondary School, where I happened to be the only Bengali boy among seven hundred students. Anyone in my place would have felt lonely, lost, and awkward. But I was never made to feel out of place due to the kind consideration and care shown to me by the Headmaster of the school, Madan Mohan Goswami as well as by my Assamese teachers and classmates. Though sometimes there were undercurrents when anti-Bengali sentiments were articulated, my memories of Gurdon Higher Secondary School are filled with much joy and happiness, especially when I remember my Assamese classmates and teachers. Sometimes my Assamese classmates and I would sit together and pull each other’s legs. They would address me as either “Kela Bongal’ (Damn Bengali) or ‘Lau Khuwa Bongal’ (Bengali who eats white gourd), and I would immediately retort ‘Khar Khuwa Asomiya’ (Assamese who eats *Khar*, the inner stem of the banana plant). This exchange of words would be followed by shouts of glee and peals of laughter. With a deep sense of gratitude, I remember some of the Assamese teachers who made a great difference to my life. One was Shri Bhubaneswar Sharma, who

helped me pick up Assamese and cultivated in me a keen interest in Assamese literature; another was Shri Bhupendranarayan Choudhury, who allowed me to consult encyclopaedias in the school library during the summer vacation when, for some reason or the other, our family was unable to go to Shillong. I owe a lot to my Assamese teachers and classmates and remember them often with warmth and fondness. I would also like to mention a very important citizen of Nalbari, late Ishwar Baruah, an advocate who always encouraged me to be a student of Assamese literature and culture”.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, it is evident that Assam's dilemmas and struggles initially stemmed from the machinations of British colonial rule. The introduction of Bengali as an official language during colonial rule in Assam until 1873 created significant resentment among the Assamese. The Bengali Muslim immigrant population and the stiff competition from the educated Bengali middle class, especially Sylhetis, worsened the situation and widened the gap between the Assamese and Bengalis. Matters deteriorated further as, following Partition and the influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan, the dream of all Assamese for a homogenous homeland with Assamese as the state language was shattered. Since 1947, an emerging Assamese middle class sought to assert the dominance of Assamese cultural identity and to achieve economic and social equality with the Bengali middle class through the state government. (Goswami 1997: 29) The pursuit of linguistic and cultural identity led to violent clashes between the two communities. Both Assamese and Bengalis suffered. It is undeniable that political parties and groups influenced the narrative of the language agitation. The Congress Party's response was often seen as hesitant and inadequate, contributing to the escalation of the conflict. However, hope persisted as better judgment prevailed, and peace was eventually restored. During the disturbances, many Assamese and Bengalis protected each other and helped rebuild each other's burnt huts. (Trivedi 1995: 73) Ultimately, the Language Bill was revised considering the interests of both the Assamese majority and the Bengalis of Cachar. For the Autonomous Hill Districts of Assam, which contributed to molding Assam into a heterogeneous and multilingual state, the language agitation served as a catalyst for the creation of new states—Nagaland in 1964 and Meghalaya in 1972, and the Union Territory of Mizoram in 1972.

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