

Research Article

Linguistic Identity Embedded in Multilingual Landscape of Assam¹

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Date of Submission: 19/11/2021; Date of Acceptance: 20/11/2021

ABSTRACT

The north eastern parts of India which is commonly known as (the seven sisters) are seven hill states on the north-eastern frontiers of India. These states are Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam. Northeast India has approximately over 250 ethnic groups and equal or probably a greater number of languages around 300. Most of these languages are mutually non-intelligible. These hill states host a wide range of diverse tribal societies with layered distinctions within the same tribal groups. Assam as one of these states has many languages spoken in the society. It has got many languages spoken in the North East. Assam has languages from major language families such as Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Austro-Asiatic, which converge out of contact situation and complex ways of maintaining social and linguistic identities. This paper attempts to understand almost 200 years of sustained movements amid various forms of linguistic identity and linguistic tensions in Assam. This paper deals with the linguistic identity of Assamese society and sustained conflicts with other linguistic groups, which finds an origin in the colonial history and multiple geographical reorganization of the present-day Assam. In doing so, this paper closely looks at the Assam Official Language Act 1960, consequent

¹This paper is an outcome of a Major Project Grant on *Linguistic Diversity of Assam rooted in the Socio-Cultural Landscape of the North East of India* by the Indian Council for Social Sciences Research [ICSSR], New Delhi, India vide F. No.02/183/SC/2017-18/RP/Major. We are grateful to the funding agency for all kinds of logistic and financial support in carrying out this project work. The present paper is one of the outcomes of this project.

fall out of the Act and the recent questions of linguistic identity of minority groups in the multilingual landscape of Assam with specific reference to the Assamese Language Learning Act 2020.

Keywords: language, identity, multilingualism, linguistic landscape, linguistic tension, language policy

INTRODUCTION

The organization of states in Indian Union is broadly based on the basis of a major language centric linguistic identity in the territory. In general, therefore a state like Punjab is identified with Punjabi as its language, similarly Tamil in Tamil Nadu, Gujrati in Gujarat, Assamese in Assam as its language and so on. However, even a basic study would reveal the multiplicity of languages spoken in these states and their continued linguistic tensions. When we go into the details and look deeper, the underlying multilingualism, which results in a complex linguistic landscape, is not of an ordinary type. In other words multilingualism is not linear and mathematical, but substantially overlapping. This study brings out the relationship between non-linear multilingualism and complex socio-cultural fabric for understanding the visible linguistic landscape of the state. It helps us understand the underlying fabric of Assam as an amalgamation of multiple cultures in multilingual societies. This paper attempts to understand almost 200 years of sustained movements amid various forms of linguistic identity and linguistic tensions in Assam. This paper deals with the linguistic identity of Assamese society and sustained conflicts with other linguistic groups, which finds an origin in the colonial history and multiple geographical reorganization of the present-day Assam. In doing so, this paper closely looks at the Assam Official Language Act 1960, consequent fall out of the Act and the recent questions of linguistic identity of minority groups in the multilingual landscape of Assam with specific reference to the Assamese Language Learning Act 2020.

The peoples of north-eastern India often construct migration stories in an attempt to explain their history and present distribution. These stories assume that language and ethnic (tribal) boundaries coincide, and that they endure through long periods. Ethnic boundaries, however, are widely contested in north-eastern India, and even language boundaries are interpreted in varied ways so as to support particular ethnic and political goals. (Burling, 2007: 391)

Language is instrumental in organizing communities, societies and cultures. We develop images, associations and experiences through it and create our own social lives and realities. Language shapes the ways we think, perceive and relate to our immediate environment (Whorf and Carroll, 1956). It is very significant and powerful tool for

socialization. It becomes imperative that in order to understand intricacies in terms of functioning of a society we understand the nature and structure of language as the social practices. The cultural norms are deeply rooted in the structure, function and the use of language in a social context. In fact, languages open windows to look into the complex web of socio-cultural norms and practices of any given society and culture. Studies on Identity has been a focus of research in various disciplines, such as social psychology, linguistics, and language acquisition to name a few. Tajfel (1974) describes identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 69). On the other hand, Gumperz (1970) argues that a microlevel analysis reveals that code-switching serves “definite and clearly understandable communicative ends” (p. 9).

The north eastern parts of India which is commonly known as (the seven sisters) are seven hill states on the north-eastern frontiers of India. These states are Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam. Northeast India has approximately over 250 ethnic groups and equal or probably a greater number of languages around 300. Most of these languages are mutually non-intelligible. These hill states host a wide range of diverse tribal societies with layered distinctions within the same tribal groups. Each of the tribal societies has its own unique identity, language and social practices. The rich social, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the North East makes the diversity of India richer. Assam as one of these states has many languages spoken in the society. It has got many languages spoken in the North East.

Assam has languages from major language families such as Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Austro-Asiatic, which converge out of contact situation and complex ways of maintaining social and linguistic identities.

Assam is populated by three distinct groups of people: the tribes of the hills, the tribes of the plains, and the non-tribal inhabitants of the plains. This diverse population speaks a complex mixture of several dialects and languages, apart from the majority language of Assamese (Asomiya).... Thus, linguistically and culturally diverse groups and tribes coexist in the state. (Sharma, 2018)

Assam constitutes major part of the North East of India. It has a little bit of everything that constitutes north east. Assam has linguistic convergence of languages form at least three geologically and typologically distinct language families. It is the gateway to the north eastern languages, cultures and societies. Assamese is the largest language spoken by the people of Assam. It is listed in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution of India. Apart from four major languages, Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and Bodo; there are other languages

present with a sizeable number of speakers in Assam. Some of them are Dimaca, Mishing, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa etc. These languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. Assam has languages from Austro Asiatic family too. Small pockets of ethnic groups like the Tai Phake, Tai Aiton, Tai Khamti, etc. speak the Tai language, which has its origins in southern China and south-east Asia. Punjabi, Marwari, Bhojpuri, Manipuri are spoken in Assam as well.

Assamese Ethnic-Linguistic Identity through the Lens of Colonial History

The genesis of the Assamese Language issue can be traced back into the nineteenth century, when the British replaced Persia by Bengali as the language of the courts and the medium of instruction in Assam. The appointment of the Bengalis became indispensable in the Anglo-vernacular and vernacular schools, since school teachers were not available in adequate numbers in any case to impart lessons in the Bengali language. The social dominance of Bengali-speaking people in Assam was reflected in the dominance of their languages. Writing of text books in Assamese did not get any encouragement and Assamese literature naturally suffered in its growth. The enmity between the two linguistic groups led to a social conflict in Assamese society. (Basid, 2016; 125).

The Assamese Identity, which primarily appears to be a linguistic identity, is very layered and complex. It amalgamates in it multi-ethnic and diverse territorial identities, besides cultural diversities. We witness the rise of an assertion of ethnic consciousness among Assamese language speakers in 1836 after the annexation of Assam under British administration after the Treaty of Yandaboo signed in 1826 between the Burmese king and the British East India Company. In 1836, Bengali was introduced as the medium of instruction in schools of colonial Assam. A large number of Assamese speaking middle class saw it as an attempt to impose Bengali language and culture and a covert policy approach for depriving Assamese speaking population from government jobs and upward mobility. The strong assertion of Assamese identity (more of linguistic than cultural) finds its roots in the immigrant policies of the British Colonial State which were favourably inclined toward young and educated Bengalis. The British colonialists found it very convenient to recruit educated Bengali in local administration for two reasons, first they got loyal employees who were already familiar with the British style of functioning and second, they posed no threat to the local administration locally. The large influx of Bengali employees and workers started eating up government jobs, business opportunities, and control on local resources, which became primary cause of conflict between the host and the guest communities.

Early in their administration, the British sought to make use of high-ranking officials from the Ahom government . . . But these officials did not fit into the Anglo-Mughal administrative structure created by the British in Assam. They had never

kept written records; even judicial proceedings were conducted without recording the statements of witnesses, complainants, or defendants. Moreover, the new administrative offices and titles created by the British, such as tahsildar or district revenue collector, were not based on indigenous Ahom administrative structures, but were adapted from British governance in Bengal. It was no wonder; therefore, that the British increasingly imported trained Bengali officers to work in Assam.

(Weiner, 1978)

The British annexation of Assam in 1926 and its placement under the Bengal Administration from 1826 to 1873 allowed massive migration of Bengali speaking population into the territory which largely remained undocumented. This brought big demographic change was multiplied with fresh wave of new settlers specially when Bengali speaking areas like Cachar, Sylhet, and Goalpara were brought under the control of the Chief Commissioner's Provincial Administration of Assam in 1874.

Besides the immigration of a sizeable population of Bengali speaking settlers, another wave of immigration consisted of the tea planters and workers from erstwhile Bihar now Jharkhand who were primarily speakers of Munda and Santhali languages. Besides the above speakers, this wave also consisted of portions of Oriya speakers. Nepali speaking communities also arrived in the territory in search of employment and better living. It is interesting to note that these communities did not face local resistance. As Sharma (2012; 292-293) observes:

... the 'discovery' of tea and the establishment of tea plantations by the British colonialists that resulted in a huge transformation in the demographic as well as the overall social landscape of Assam. the planters turned their attention from 1840 onwards to the various tribal and marginalised caste populations from mainly the Chhotanagpur region spanning over the states of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. ... As an immigrant community the tea garden workers did not come to Assam on of their own accord. The colonial regime brought them under most repressive conditions. It is also interesting that the Assamese middle-class nationalist leadership did not raise any hue and cry about the large-scale import of the plantation workers to Assam. This might be attributed to the fact that though the plantation economy seriously affected the Assamese peasant economy, the foundation of the emerging Assamese middle class, however, depended mainly on the employment opportunities generated by the expanding colonial administrative machinery as well as the plantation economy. (Sharma, 2012; 292-293)

This assertion of Assamese identity got shaped and consolidated by the works and services of American Baptist Missionaries who propagated faith in the vernacular and adopted Assamese language as their tool to penetrate into Assamese society. They created texts, reference books, religious texts and popularized western thought and Christianity

in Assamese language. They continued with the propagation of their faith coupled with modern education, science, western thoughts all in Assamese language, which ultimately got local acceptance and support against Bengali hegemony.

The 19th and early 20th century saw a series of administrative and territorial reorganizations of the Assam Province as we know it today. The following table illustrates the chronological summary of major administrative, political and movements that took place during the period:

- 13thC Ahom Kingdom was founded and continued till mid 19th century
- 1818 Continued Burmese invasion led to the military intervention by the British Colonialists between Ahom Dynasty rule and Burmese King
- 1826 British annexation of Assam
- 1826 The territory was placed under the Bengal Administration
- 1874 The territory was brought under the Chief Commissioner's Provincial Administration.
- 1947 The Northeastern region of the British India had Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura.
- 1947 India got independence but with a wound of partition. Bengal was partitioned into the Indian state of west Bengal and the Pakistan province of East Bengal. The majority of East Bengali came and settled in the city of Kolkata. Later, a number of people moved to the Barak valley of Assam and Tripura (Doley, 2020; 3064).
- 1950s Asam Sahitya Sabha, the oldest literary-cultural organization of Assam, was constituted for the development of Assamese language, literature and culture in 1917. The organisation evolved from two earlier Kolkata-based bodies— 'Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha' and 'Assamese Literary Society'— which were established by the Assamese students². The Sabha strongly pushed for recognizing Assamese as the official language of the state that consequently culminated into the Assam Official Language Act, 1960.
- 1960 Assam Official Language Act, 1960 [Act No. 33 Of 1960]
- 1963 Creation of the state of Nagaland from Assam
- 1971 In 1971, East Pakistan became an independent country and East Pakistan named was replaced as Bangladesh. During Bangladesh war, around 10 Million east

²See <https://asamsahityasabha.org/> for details.

Bengali refugees entered India. Of whom 1.5 million may have returned after Bangladesh war. Remaining refugees inhabiting in India and never went back to Bangladesh (Doley, 2020; 3065).

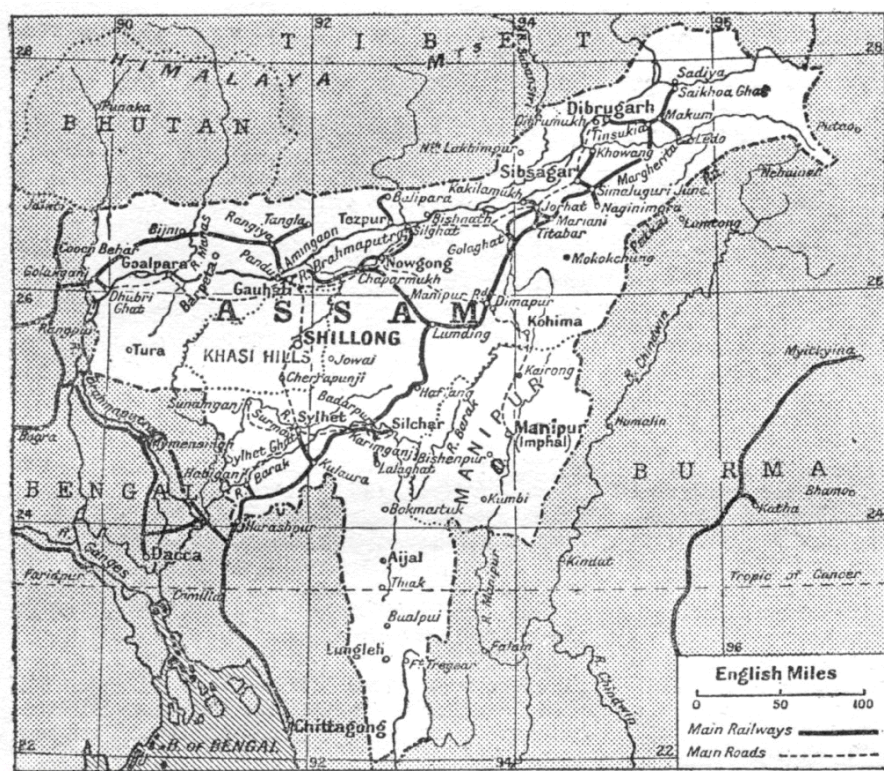
- 1972 Creation of the state of Meghalaya from Assam
- 1975 Creation of the state of Arunachal Pradesh from Assam
- 1987 Creation of the state of Mizoram from Assam

Linguistic Tension post-Independence

‘Assam is the meeting ground of diverse cultures. The people of the enchanting state of Assam is an intermixture of various racial stocks such as Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan. The Assamese culture is a rich and exotic tapestry of all these races evolved through a long assimilative process. The natives of the state of Assam are known as “Asomiya” (Assamese), which is also the state language of Assam. The state has a large number of tribes, each unique in its tradition, culture, attire and exotic way of life³.’ The continued influx of immigration documented and illegal otherwise during the colonial history of Assam has posed a serious perceived identity threat to the ‘original’ inhabitants of the territory. The independence of India was marked by an unfortunate partition and creation of Pakistan which in turn had a serious demographic threat to Assam. India got independence but with a wound of partition. Bengal was partitioned into the Indian state of west Bengal and the Pakistan province of East Bengal. The majority of East Bengali came and settled in the city of Kolkata. Later, a number of people moved to the Barak valley of Assam and Tripura (Doley, 2020; 3064). Since then an illegal influx of migrants continued until another wave of mass migration in 1971 when East Pakistan became an independent country and East Pakistan name was replaced as Bangladesh. During Bangladesh war, around 10 Million east Bengali refugees entered India. Of whom 1.5 million may have returned after Bangladesh war. Remaining refugees remained in India and never went back to Bangladesh (Doley, 2020; 3065). Immigration of various groups which started systematically under the British colonial regime continued even after independence causing socio-cultural conflicts among various host and guest communities in Assam. During all these conflicts, language emerged as a vigorous marker of identity and a significant tool for mobilization and protest throughout Assam.

The census reports from 1911 to 1951 show that the Assamese speaking population in the British-made province of Assam had increased from 21.7% to 56.7%. During the same period, the percentage of Bengali speaking population declined from 45.67% to

³<http://assam.gov.in/culture-of-assam>



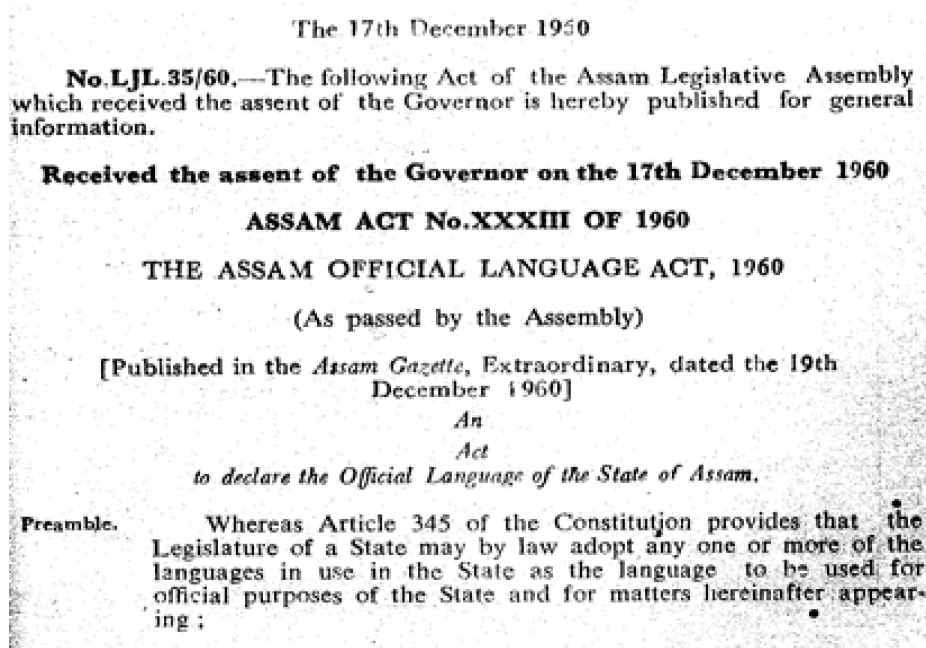
A map of Assam in 1932. Credit: Wikimedia Commons (as quoted in Bose, 2018)

16.5%. After independence, the number of Assamese speakers increased to 56.59% in 1951 as compared to 31.42% in 1931. According to the census of 1951, a population of about 80 lakhs, of which nearly 45 lakhs declared themselves to be Assamese speaking and nearly 13 lakhs Bengali speaking (Bose, 2018).

According to the census of 1951, a population of about 80 lakhs, of which nearly 45 lakhs declared themselves to be Assamese speaking and nearly 13 lakhs Bengali speaking. The Surma Valley comprising the districts of Cachar which includes Karimganj sub-division of the old Sylhet district, which, as a result of Partition, became a part of the Indian Union has a population over 11 lakhs of which 8.6 lakhs were Bengali speaking and less than 4000 Assamese speaking; and the Hill regions made up of the district of Garo Hills, United Khasi-Jayantiya Hills, United Mikir and North-Cachar Hills and Mizo Hills has a total population of about 8 lakhs. The inhabitants of these regions speak their own dialects and the number of people speaking either Assamese or Bengali in any one district did not exceed 5% (Trivedi: 67-68) (Basid 2016; 131).

From 1947 onwards, the growing linguistic tension led to demand of recognition of Assamese language as an official language of the state amid the protest against this campaign from other linguistic groups like Bengali speaking areas, Bodo linguistic groups, hill regions and other linguistic minority groups. The Assam Sahitya Sabha started systematic campaign for the recognition of Assamese as the official language of Assam. It made an emphatic demand from the government of Assam to meet the aspirations of Assamese people. The 16th July 1951 was observed as the *State Language Day* by the Sabha. The Sabha started mobilizing people to create pressure on the state government for introduction of Assamese language in educational institutions. Finally, on the 24th Oct, 1960 Assam Official Language Bill was passed in the Assam State Assembly and was published in the Gazette on 17 December 1960.

Assam Official Language Act, 1960 [Act No. 33 Of 1960] 17th December, 1960⁴



The excerpts from the Bill:

It is hereby enacted in the Eleventh Year of the Republic of India, as follows:—

Section 3 - Official language for official purposes of the State of Assam

Without prejudice to the provisions of Articles 346 and 347 of the Constitution of India and subject as hereinafter provided, Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the State of Assam:

⁴Retrieved from: <https://legislative.assam.gov.in/documents-detail/the-assam-official-language-act-1960>

Provided that the English language, so long as the use thereof is permissible under Article 343 of the Constitution of India and thereafter Hindi in place of English, shall also be used for such official purposes of the Secretariat and the offices of the Heads of the Departments of the State Government and in such manner as may be prescribed;

Provided further that,—

- a) all Ordinances promulgated under Article 213 of the Constitution of India;*
- b) all Acts passed by the State Legislature;*
- c) all Bills to be introduced or amendments thereto to be moved in the State Legislature; and*
- d) all Orders, Regulations, Rules and Bye-laws issued by the State Government under the Constitution of India or any law made by Parliament or the Legislature of the State shall be published in the official Gazette in the Assamese language.*

In order to mitigate potential opposition in Bengali speaking areas, the bill safeguarded the use of Bengali language in the district of Cachar and stated as:

‘the Bengali language shall be used for administrative and other official purposes upto and including the district level in the district of Cachar until the Mohkuma Parishads and Municipal Boards of the district in a joint meeting by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting decide in favour of adoption of the official language for use in the district for the aforesaid purposes’
[Section 5].

It made provisions for safeguarding linguistic rights of other stakeholders such as the use of language in the Autonomous Region and in the Autonomous District [Section 4]; the use of English as official language in respect of examination conducted by, the Assam Public Service Commission [Section 6]; and the Rights of the various linguistic group [Section 7].

The Assam Official Language Act, 1960 was fulfilment of the long standing desire of Assamese speaking people to construct Assamese identity along the Assamese language irrespective of their ethnic and religious identities. This idea of converging ethnic, religious and social identities as a composite Assamese identity was aligned with their linguistic allegiance and Assamese language was just fit for that as a very effective instrument. This Bill created very sharp and widespread resistance throughout non-Assamese-speaking areas in the state. The APHLC [All Party Hill Leader’s Conference] and All Tribal Organization registered their strong protest against this Bill and voiced that this Bill excluded tribal language communities and undermined their linguistic rights. These sustained protests throughout non-Assamese-speaking regions against this move resulted

on long standing demand for Bodoland. The Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasa Bashi Samiti called for a protest convention on 6th November 1960 to register their voice against this Bill. The continued agitations, organized protests and perceived alienating sentiments had far-fetching political, social, and demographic outcomes.

The unrest in Hill regions led to creation of the state of Nagaland out of Assam in 1963. This unrest against the move for making a unilingual Assam further led to creation of the state of Meghalaya in 1972, state of Arunachal Pradesh in 1975, and the state of Mizoram in 1987. Though this reorganizations of stated owe their creations to various other socio-ethnic factors, the linguistic identity and allegiance played a significant role. An another wave of immigration that made demographic changes, which further escalated the ethnic and linguistic identity issues was the political event that happened in 1971, when East Pakistan became an independent country and East Pakistan named was replaced as Bangladesh. During Bangladesh war, around 10 Million east Bengali refugees entered India. Of whom 1.5 million may have returned after Bangladesh war. Remaining refugees inhabiting in India and never went back to Bangladesh (Doley, 2020; 3065). This new wave of mass immigration complicated the already turbulent undercurrents between Assamese and Bengali speakers.

The move of aligning Assamese identity along the linguistic allegiance and effort of creating a composite Assamese identity across cultural, ethnic and territorial identities have waged a high cost and yielded a complex situation. The territorial organization of the state and integration of socio-culturally alienated regions during colonial period created a complex idea of Assamese identity. In addition, multiple territorial reorganizations of multi-ethnic Assam post-independence has created a society where the social, cultural and ethnic contours converge into linguistic identity which has Assamese language at its centre. Though the agitations and protest that erupted after the passing of the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 have subsided and the turbulent undercurrents have subsided, the Assam has an unfinished task of mitigating the demands of various linguistic minorities in the state. The census 2001 lists 15 major languages spoken in Assam. The following table gives details of the number of speakers as per the Census data 2001.

The linguistic tensions and identity undercurrents are reflected in the continued demands for recognizing languages and cultures of different ethnic groups and societies within the extended Assamese identity framework. The socio-political arrangements in mitigating such demands and gradual acceptance of Assamese Umbrella Identity seems tenable at present. The exponentially growing number of speakers declaring Assamese as their mother tongue even areas outside Brahmaputra and Barak valley in subsequent census data indicates this trend. Though we require primary linguistic data to establish this trend, but preliminary observation suggests that the Assamese society is drifting towards

STATEMENT- 9
FIFTEEN NUMERICALLY BIGGEST LANGUAGES IN DESCENDING ORDER OF STRENGTH

Language	Number of Persons who returned the Language as their mother tongue					
	Persons	Percent to State Total Population	Rural	Urban	Proportion Rural	Proportion Urban
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. Assam						
1 Assamese	13,010,478	48.81	11,507,993	1,502,485	88.45	11.55
2 Bengali	7,343,338	27.55	6,187,018	1,156,320	84.25	15.75
3 Hindi	1,569,662	5.89	1,079,025	490,637	68.74	31.26
4 Bodo	1,296,162	4.86	1,254,416	41,746	96.78	3.22
5 Nepali	564,790	2.12	503,057	61,733	89.07	10.93
6 Miri/Mishing	517,170	1.94	510,083	7,087	98.63	1.37
7 Karbi/Mikir	406,160	1.52	371,668	34,492	91.51	8.49
8 Santali	242,886	0.91	241,640	1,246	99.49	0.51
9 Oriya	231,474	0.87	222,778	8,696	96.24	3.76
10 Manipuri	154,059	0.58	130,856	23,203	84.94	15.06
11 Garo	144,767	0.54	141,911	2,856	98.03	1.97
12 Rabha	130,875	0.49	129,170	1,705	98.70	1.30
13 Dimas	108,133	0.41	98,518	9,615	91.11	8.89
14 Munda	93,088	0.35	92,171	917	99.01	0.99
15 Kurukh/Oraon	72,311	0.27	71,010	1,301	98.20	1.80
Other languages	770,175	2.89	674,974	95,201	87.64	12.36
All languages total	26,655,528	100.00	23,216,288	3,439,240	87.10	12.90

Source: Census of India 2001: Series 1-India; Language, India, States and Union Territories, Table C-16

a broadly emerging diglossic situation where, the dominant linguistic identity of the people of Assam is formulated as Assamese in the larger socio-cultural space and their native linguistic identities in their restricted social domain.

The recent attempt of making all such students who study with the jurisdiction of the state of Assam study Assamese as a subject in Standard I to Standard X from the Academic Year 2021 in phased manner. The Bill consolidates the long standing demand of unilingual identity of Assam in a subtle manner within negotiated linguistic and political arrangements agreed upon.

The Assamese Language Learning Act 2020

In line with the deep seeded desire of making Assamese language a symbol of Assamese identity, Government of Assam introduced the Assamese Language Learning Act 2020 which was passed in the state assembly and received the consent of the Governor to become law on 15th May 2020. It was notified on 22nd May 2020 and published in the Gazette on 26 May 2020⁵. This Bill states out the intent of the Government of making

⁵Retrieved from: https://legislative.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/legislative_medhassu_in_oid_3/menu/document/the_assamese_language_learning_act_2020.pdf

learning of Assamese language compulsory to all such students who study with the jurisdiction of the state of Assam.

Excerpts from the Notification of the Bill:

Clause 4. Assamese as a Compulsory Language.

- (1) *In those Schools which are not teaching Assamese as MIL or first language or second language or Elective language, as of now, shall introduce Assamese as a subject in Standard I to Standard X from the Academic Year 2021 in phased manner. The Pre-Primary School shall also introduce teaching of Assamese language in their School from the Academic Year 2021.*
- (2) *Every School shall follow Text Books prescribed by the respective academic authorities of the Government for teaching Assamese as MIL or first language or second language or as Elective Subject compulsorily.*

পঞ্জীকৃত নম্বৰ - ৭৬৮/৯৭

Registered No.-768/97

অসম ৰাজপত্ৰ
সংসদীয় অধিদপ্তৰ
THE ASSAM GAZETTE
অসাধাৰণ
EXTRAORDINARY
প্ৰাপ্ত কৰ্তৃত্বৰ দ্বাৰা প্ৰকাশিত
PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHORITY

নং 213 দিশপুৰ, মঙ্গলবাৰ, 26 মে', 2020, 5 জেঠ, 1942 (শক)
No. 213 Dispur, Tuesday, 26th May, 2020, 5th Jaistha, 1942 (S. E.)

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM
ORDERS BY THE GOVERNOR
LEGISLATIVE DEPARTMENT:::LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

NOTIFICATION

The 22nd May, 2020

No. LGL.53/2020/4.—The following Act of the Assam Legislative Assembly which received the assent of the Governor on 15th May, 2020 is hereby published for general information.

ASSAM ACT NO. V OF 2020
(Received the assent of the Governor on 15th May, 2020)
THE ASSAMESE LANGUAGE LEARNING ACT, 2020

- (3) *A student who has not opted his mother tongue (other than Assamese) as First or Second Language may study his mother tongue as Third Language.*

Clause 5. Exemption of Students transferred from other States.

Notwithstanding anything contained in section 4 of this Act, a student admitted in class VI or above in any School in the State of Assam on transfer from other state shall be exempted from the purview of this Act. [THE ASSAM GAZETTE, EXTRAORDINARY, 26 MAY 2020, page: 714]

However in order to contain the undercurrents and linguistic tension in the non-Assamese-speaking-areas, this Bill makes concessions to such students in the notified areas and states as:

Whereas, a policy decision has been taken by the Government of Assam to ensure that all students studying in Nursery and Class I to X standards in all Schools in the State of Assam except in the Sixth Schedule areas, Bodo medium Schools of Bodo inhabited areas and Barak valley areas, shall learn Assamese as one of the language from the Academic Year 2021 in a phased manner; [THE ASSAM GAZETTE, EXTRAORDINARY, 26 MAY 2020, page: 712]

This Bill is an attempt to make Assamese language acceptable to the speakers of other languages and paving way for the extension of their native linguistic identity that aligns with the larger identity as Assamese. The acquisition and learning of Assamese will open new avenues for assimilation, acceptance, and unfolding of opportunities for them.

CONCLUSION

The linguistic movement of establishing Assamese multi-ethnic identity constructed along the linguistic allegiance and complemented with systematic political arrangements and social acceptability has achieved its goals. The present day Assam projects a negotiated Assamese dominated identity with socially accepted identities associated with Bengali and Bodo language speaking communities. The recent attempt of making all such students who study with the jurisdiction of the state of Assam study Assamese as a subject in Standard I to Standard X from the Academic Year 2021 in phased manner is yet to delivers results. The Assamese Language Learning Act 2020 consolidates the long standing demand of unilingual identity of Assam in a subtle manner within negotiated linguistic and political arrangements agreed upon. Though the underlying linguistic tension and assertion of distinct identities seem to have settled down for now, the demands for a long lasting accommodation and acceptance of multilingual and multi-ethnic identities within the larger identity framework of dominant Assamese identity need to addressed adequately.

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How to cite this article: Kumar, R. and Prakash, O. (2022) 'Linguistic Identity Embedded in Multilingual Landscape of Assam', *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 103-118.