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Linguistic Diversity and Movement for Ethnicity in North East India

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Abstract:

Unity in diversity is chief feature of India. This diversity consists of language, religion, food, dress etc. North East India is also not an exception. The eight states v.i.z Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim have their own independent languages, culture and religion. It is seen that each state is a mixture of inhabitants of different religion and speaking a number of different languages. For example Arunachal Pradesh has tribes like Adi, Nishi, Tagin, Wangchu, Singpho, Apatani, Nigte, Khamti etc. and each tribe follows their own mother tongue. It should be mentioned that Indian Government has recognized 1652 languages and amongst them the Constitution of India has recognized 22 out of all. It is to be noted that only a few of these ethnic languages have come into script and most of these are still to come to script. Out of these Bodo, Khasi, Mishng, Garo, Khamti have their own dictionaries and independent works on prose and poetry. Though English is the official language in most of the hill areas, Hindi is also widely spoken. Assamese is the prime language in Assam. Out of all the ethnic tribes residing in Assam 9 plain tribes and 14 hill tribes have been identified as of now. All have their own mother tongue but Assamese is used as the communicating language amongst all.

This paper attempts to find out the linguistic diversity in the North Eastern India and the movement of ethnicity that might have emerged due to this diversity prevailing in the region.

Keywords: *linguistic diversity, movement of ethnicity, independent sentiment etc.*

1. Introduction

Unity in diversity is a key identity of India who houses a huge population of different castes, creed and a lot of diverse ethnic groups speaking numerous languages. These languages help in creating the cultural homogeneity of a region. Language being the greatest cultural communicator of human civilization, a commonly accepted language helps in the development of unity and brotherhood of a nation e.g. in ancient India Sanskrit was the language which helped in maintaining the unity of the entire nation.

2. India's Linguistic Groups

Many scholars have researched about the different linguistic groups in India. Amongst all we can mention about Sir George Abraham Grierson and Dr. Iravati Karve. '*Linguistic Survey of India*' edited by Sir George Abraham Grierson tells us about 179 languages and 544 sub languages practiced in India. On the other hand the Population Census of India in 1921 reported the presence of 188 languages in India. Dr. Iravati Karve has divided the Indian languages into three prime groups.

- Indo-European
- Astro- Asiatic and
- Dravidian.

The Assamese language has developed from the Indo- European group and the languages of Meghalaya have descended from Astro Asiatic group. Experts had opined that most of the Indian languages are direct descendents of the Indo European branch or its impact is quite apparent.

Besides the prime languages there are numerous colloquial languages in India. After India's Independence, the states were linguistically reorganized. Actually the rational division of the states on the basis of languages was an outcome of the people's agitation against the English rule. The British, for their own political benefit have divided the people in smaller administrative groups or provinces. These provinces were multilingual. The rulers never bothered about the preservation or development of the different ethnics, their languages and culture prevailing in India. But without the individual and uniform development of these diverse and traditional culture and languages, the development as a whole was impossible. This was well realized by the conscious group of people that the unity and tradition which was overruled by the British was an important matter to be looked after. Therefore Indian National Congress in their Nagpur General meeting in 1921 included Linguistic Distribution of the States as a prime agenda. Education through mother tongue and use of mother tongue in administration procedures was what Congress believed and fought for. To maintain the all round development of different castes and creeds and to keep the brotherhood alive

the laws of the constitution has to be unified, to which Pandit Motilal Nehru said, "It becomes essential to conduct the business and politics of a country in a language which is understood by the masses. So far as the provinces are concerned this must be the provincial language."

In the year of Independence i.e. on 27 November 1947, Prime Minister Nehru declared that keeping in mind the linguistic homogeneity of the country the states would be re distributed (Linguistic Reorganization of States) and so a commission has been established for the cause which was known as "*Linguistic Provinces Commission, 1948*". The objectives of this commission were to investigate how many states would be created in this process and in what are the probable crisis on administrative, economic, revenue and other sectors that might occur in doing so and what would be the reaction of the neighboring states etc. (Report of Linguistic Provinces Commission, 1948). The commission later sought administrative interference in case of the Linguistic Reorganization of the States and so the unified linguistic aspect was overlooked. English was the language used in offices and courts till then. But Nehru and Gandhi's agenda was that the chief language of a State would be the regional language and the medium of teaching. To consider the report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission a committee was formed which included Nehru, Patel and Sitaramaya. It was advised that all the probable problems that could arise in formation of the new states should be sorted out before the actual formation of the proposed states. In this regard a new commission was formed namely "*States Reorganization Commission*" on 29th December 1950 and the new states were formed in demand of the proposed Linguistic Re-division of the States in the year 1956. Apart from this, the elements that were considered are inter-state relations, economic infrastructure and cultural aspects of the states. States like Tripura, Manipur etc were proposed to be under Central Jurisdiction by the Commission. Being the next door neighbor these two states could not be included within Assam because of the greater difference of language and culture. Many more neighboring hilly states that logically have to be included in Assam got autonomic status due to the protest of the local people who wanted to be separate.

There are 1652 government recognized languages in India out of which our Constitution has recognized 22. Apart from the recognized languages there are many more colloquial languages in our country. Moreover it is seen that every region of the country has more than one language in practice. North East India is also a home for diverse linguistic speakers. According to '*People's Linguistic Survey of India*', Assam has 52 different languages out of India's 852 chief languages. All the different tribes of North East have their own mother tongue. All the residents of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim speak their own regional languages. But most of these languages are still in form of colloquial language only. Only a few have attained the status as a written language. Languages like Mising, Bodo, Khasi, Khamti, and Rabha have their own literatures and constitutions also. But most of these languages are still in the developing stage. It would not be exaggerating if we say the influence of western culture and language has affected these local languages deeply. It is correct for today's time when we say we lose our identity when we lose our mother tongue. That is the prime reason why every ethnic tribe is working hard for the preservation of their mother tongues. Bodo can be used as a medium till Master's Degree who have recognized *devanagari* as their script. Mising had used Roman script and are now publishing lot of works. In Meghalaya, the Khasi's, Jaintia's and Garo's had published literatures in their individual languages. Given below is a list the languages used by the North Eastern States:

- **Arunachal Pradesh:**- Apatani, Nishi, Tagin, Edu, Khamti, Sinfo, Tangsa, Nigte, Wangchu, Chakma etc and others. Associating languages are Hindi and Assamese. English is the official language.
- **Assam:** - Assamese, Bodo, Mising, Deuri, Rabha, Karbi, Bangla, Singfo, Khamti, Hindi, Dimasa, Nepali and Rajasthani. Regional language: - Assamese. Barak Valley:- Bengali.
- **Manipur:** - Meitei, Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Naga, Kuki and other languages. Regional language :- Manipuri.
- **Mizoram:**- Mizo, Paite, Pawoi, Lekhar, Chakma and others. Regional language- English.
- **Nagaland:**- various Naga tribes has their own mother tongues. Communicative language-
- **Tripura:**- Bengali, Tripuri, Kokborak, Hindi and other tribal languages. Regional language- Bengali.

The local language of the Tripuri tribe is 'Kokborok'. Works are going on for the improvement of this language. This language has been introduced as the chief medium of primary education in the State. Likewise 'Duhlian' is the tribal language of the 'Lusai's' in Mizoram in which its improvement program is going on. All tribes are taking important steps in improvising their own local languages such as in Manipur, Meitei, Bishnupriya, Kabui Naga and Kuki language are undergoing tremendous improvement programs. During the British reign the unification of the people became so massive that many small tribes tend to lose their own language and culture. For example the Coorge tribes of South India had transformed themselves to Higher Hinduism under the conversion process of '*Sanskritization*'. Moreover the cultural communication between different tribes had great impact on each other's individual cultural identity at least by the dominating language prevailing in the region. We can take the Assamese language as an example since it is regarded as the chief language of the entire Brahmaputra valley along with being the central communicating language of the neighboring states. Nagamese is the lingua franca that had been in practice since ages for the Naga's.

India is land of diverse linguistic practice and the development of the entire nation would definitely depend on the individual development of the different tribes and communities. Under Article 29 of the Indian Constitution each individual has the right to preserve their own language, script and any other thing relating to their culture. Still the question of justification arises in fairly following the Linguistic Re-division of the States whose answer we get from the different linguistic movements still prevailing in our society which might have a dirty political conspiracy underlying.

3. Linguistic Movements

The North Eastern region of India, being a multi lingual part we can see various movements relating to linguistic identity from time to time. These kinds of movements in the North East actually started in Assam. The British for their administrative and other

official works imported many Bengali people from West Bengal and appointed in the offices and courts. Following this trait many people from East Bengal now Bangladesh came here for business and agricultural purposes. Seeing the rising population of these kinds of people the British imparted the medium of instruction for the official work in Bengali. Later the medium of instruction and the official language also became Bengali. It degraded the status of Assamese language to the second position. The concerned group of people of that time showed their agitation against this instruction and hence in 1874 the medium of instruction and the court language in the Brahmaputra valley changed to Assamese.

India attained freedom in 1947 and the constitution was laid. The 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution though included Assamese in the list of recognized Indian languages, but it could not attain the status of the regional language of Assam. Due to this Assamese could not be used as the medium of communication in the official works and as a court language. English still was recognized as the official language of Assam. So in order to attain the deserving status of the regional and official language of Assam a mass movement started in 1960. On the other hand a part of Assam namely the Barak valley was not ready to accept Assamese as their regional and official language and hence Bengali got the status of the official language in Barak Valley. Many new parts were formed in the North East and many of them showed their disapproval in accepting Assamese as their regional and official language and hence displayed agitation against the government to claim separate states. Reasons were different but the Greater Assam was divided into many states. For example, in 1959-60, there occurred a terrible famine in Mizoram to which the government of Assam did not show requisite attention which started the flame of separation. Later in 1960 when Assamese gained the status of the regional language they started displaying violence and claimed a separate state for them. As a result in 1986, Mizoram separated from Assam and became a separate state.

In this way different tribes like Naga, Manipuri, Khasi, Tripuri, and Nishi's of Arunachal have protested numerous times with different agendas. Most of these movements are results of individual identity crisis of the ethnics. Among all the plain tribes of Assam, the Bodo's being the majority has been fighting for a separate Bodo state since the 80's. This has led to the formation of BTC and with reformation on the sixth schedule Bodoland acquired the Autonomous status. But the prime cause of their movement i.e. a separate state namely Bodoland has gained a strong mileage in the present time. At the same time the Karbi's of Karbi Anglong and the Koch Rajbanshi's of Assam are in protest of not attaining separate states namely Karbi Anglong and Kamatapur respectively. The cultural unity of the state is in a very bad shape in the present time.

In this state of a great crisis of Assam, the role of the public and the government is a question mark. It may be due to the deprivation of status or the separatist mentality of the people but these people are away from the mainstream lifestyle. This divorce had denounced them to a much backward status as a civilization compared to others. One major point which caused this disturbance of its infrastructure is the immigration of human population from different places. For example the mass immigration from Bangladesh, the encroachment in the tribal lands, rehabilitation on the sixth schedule land etc posed a great threat to the ethnic culture and languages.

The issues of separate states are very sensitive issues and should be tactfully handled. Keeping in mind the deteriorating condition of the ethnic tribes of the North East government should with immediate effect take definite steps to ensure the fundamental rights of the ethnic tribes and the infrastructural development should be at a faster rate.

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