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Language, Identity and Conflict: Comprehending Everyday Co-existence in Assam

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Abstract

Assam has long experienced intercommunal tensions stemming from faulty colonial-era administrative policies, which have continued post-independence. Key instances of violence include the Language Movement (1960), the Medium of Instruction Movement (1972), and the Assam Movement (1979-1985). These conflicts, particularly over language, have intensified tensions between Bengali and Assamese-speaking communities. Despite efforts to protect Assam's ethnic and linguistic diversity, political manipulation and poor crisis management have deepened divisions. As affective relation is built up to fuel community sentiments and empower these movements, one may discern that three principal factors have been responsible for intensifying the conflict: misinformation among the communities, misdirection of the Movements, and involvement of political parties. Further, as political rhetoric has kept fuelling and nourishing communal sentiments till the present day, the same factors seem to be at work in varying degrees. Employing qualitative methods, this study draws from primary and secondary data, including interviews with 150 families from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds in violence-affected areas of Western Assam. Through semi-structured interviews, leaders, political figures, victims, and witnesses shared their views on Assam's socio-political and economic history. This research is structured on three principal arguments corresponding to three sections, and a set of recommendations is presented in the concluding section. The first section argues that although the genesis of language conflict was triggered by transformation brought about by a new socio-economic structure introduced by the East India Company (EIC), the rhetorical conflict has been sustained till the present times through the clerk-conspiracy theory. The second section discusses how the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), as a non-communal association, tried to diffuse communal sentiments during the Language Movement in 1960. The third section looks at the post-1960s era when the conflict intensified due to the failure of the previous governments to tackle the immigration issue, and the concluding section argues that since inter-ethnic relationships worsened in subsequent years, a constitutional safeguard for the Assamese community may transform the socio-economic conditions responsible for the conflict. However, this can be achieved only when solidarity-building measures, mutual respect for all communities, and humility are made the basis of conversation.

Keywords: Language Movement; Assam Movement; The Indian People's Theatre Association; Bhupen Hazarika; Hemanga Biswas; Bengali Language; Assamese Language; Assam; North East India; India

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Introduction

Assam[1] is a microcosm of modern India, showcasing its rich ethnic and linguistic diversity. However, the region has been entangled in complex inter-communal relations and periodic conflicts among various communities due to faulty administrative policies related to language and the reorganisation of territories since colonial times. Following the annexation of Assam in 1826, the changes made in the political boundaries by the East India Company (EIC) exposed the indigenous population to political and cultural vulnerability (Bhattacharyya & Sarma, 2023). First, the colonial administration introduced Bengali as the language of courts and schools in Assam by disregarding the Assamese language (Bhuyan, 1956, p. 22; Barpujari, 1986). Secondly, immigrants from various parts of India were brought to Assam to be engaged in tea plantations, colonial administration, and the education sector (Guha, 2014; Misra, 2019). Thirdly, with the inclusion of Sylhet, Assam was demographically affected, which in turn created economic challenges for the indigenous people (Misra, 2019). Therefore, the economic hardship created by the flow of immigrants deepened the resentment among the people. Based on some of these issues, after India's independence, notable instances of violence erupted during the Language Movement of 1960, the Medium of Instruction Movement in 1972, and the Assam Movement from 1979 to 1985. These conflicts claimed numerous lives and caused widespread destruction. Among the many causes, language has been a persistent source of tension between the Bengali-speaking and Assamese-speaking communities, a friction that dates to the colonial era beginning in 1826 (Saikia, 2011).[2] Towards the end of 1970, this linguistic sentiment turned into an anti-outsider sentiment (*Bohiragoto*), which changed to anti-immigrant (*Oboidho Bidexi*) sentiment (Boruah, 1980) towards the later part of the Assam Movement. The language issue remains a potential source of conflict driven by genuine apprehension that the Assamese language may lose its official status should Bengali emerge as the linguistic majority in the language census. This has triggered significant anxiety among Assamese language speakers, as language is not only a marker of regional identity but also a potent instrument of cultural hegemony with far-reaching economic implications.[3] Given that a society's progress and

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[1] The origin of the name Assam/Asam/Axom is shrouded in mystery as the rulers never called themselves Ahom, just like the Hindus never addressed themselves as Hindus. Therefore, the change in the name of a geo-political space from Kāmarūpa to Assam underscores the need for a nuanced approach to understanding the political and social history of the region. Since names of ruling tribes and territorial claims are politically crucial, one must approach the subject cautiously. Among the many suggestions regarding the origin of the name Assam: *Asama* (meaning an uneven area due to its hilly terrain or meaning peerless fighters as argued by different historians and political scientists) and Ha-Com (meaning low land) have been suggested as possible sources for the origin of the name. Of these two words, the Bodo word Ha-Com (Choudhury, 1959, pp. 27-28) either used by the Moran, who were one of the earliest tribal groups to be subdued, or the Kachari king, whose power was vanquished in 16th Century by the Ahom (the Bodo people, whose language belongs to Tibeto-Burman group, is one of the oldest inhabitants of the region) could be the source of this name (See Gait, 2008 [1905], p. 79-93). Since many names have been derived from place names, Ha-Com seems to be a plausible explanation.

[2] Between 1837 and 1873, Bengali was Assam's instruction medium (Misra, 2019). It has been alleged that some of the Bengali clerks who accompanied the British convinced the British that Assamese is a dialect of the Bengali Language, resulting in the latter's imposition in Assam. Although there has been no documentary evidence to prove this allegation, it has created a sense of resentment among some Assamese-speaking people (Barua, 2003 [1964]; Goswami, 1961; Sharma, 2018; Saikia, 2001; Saikia, 1971; Goswami, 2002). By drawing evidence from colonial-era official correspondences, this essay argues that while this allegation is historically untrue and not verifiable, it has created an intense social discord between two communities and the clerk-conspiracy theory has turned into an invasive memory. On the contrary, there is documentary evidence in the form of official correspondences to assert that the British not only created the "laboratory Bengali" but were solely responsible for imposing Bengali in Assam for administrative convenience by deliberately ignoring the prevalent Bhasha in the region.

[3] In his presidential address to the North Bengal Literary Conference in Gauripur in the year 1910, Padmanatha Bhattacharyya stated "According to the census, only 1,350,000 people speak the Assamese language; how wide can the

prosperity are closely tied to its social, economic, and political stability, the upheavals caused by various protest-movements have had a detrimental impact on the region's collective well-being. While these movements are often viewed as vital to preserving Assam's linguistic and ethnic identities, poor management of the crises, coupled with political manipulation and the lackadaisical attitude of the previous governments, has exacerbated ethnic divisions within the state. Each episode of conflict has further deteriorated inter-community relations by deepening mistrust and fuelling pervasive xenophobia among different communities in the Barak and the Brahmaputra Valleys of Assam, thereby leaving an indelible scar on the society. It has been noticed that, at times, civil society organisations have played a constructive role in bridging social gaps among the communities through conversation and dialogue. However, as Samar Das pointed out, the role of civic society may become "limited" at times because these organisations, especially the students' organisations, often become mouthpieces or representatives of certain ethnic groups (Das, 2007, p. 43). Peace groups, bridge-builders in the form of civil society have also played an important role in bridging gaps between the ethnic groups and the State (Dutta, 2014; Das, 2007); however, a multi-ethnic forum for peace remains almost absent except for the Indian People's Theatre Association (henceforth, IPTA), which had played an incredible role in de-escalating communal tension in the 1960s. As witnessed in 1960, despite the differences in culture, community, language, place, and ideology, the artists from different ethnic

backgrounds in Assam collectively contributed to the restoration of peace and reconciliation processes. Among them, Bhupen Hazarika and Hemanga Biswas led a group of artists who relentlessly contributed to bringing peace and harmony to Assamese society after the social tension caused by the Language Movement. It is pertinent to mention here that Bhupen Hazarika became a member of the IPTA after its Assam unit was established by Hemanga Biswas in 1948. Akhil Ranjan Dutta points out that Hemanga Biswas "steered a movement of 'peoples' culture' (*gana sanskriti*) in Assam and brought together cultural figures to work for peoples' emancipation. Hemanga Biswas was both a teacher in music and comrade-in-arms for Dr Hazarika till the early 1960s" (Dutta, 2013). Therefore, the IPTA worked as a catalyst in the peace restoration process after the Language Movement of the 1960s destabilised the region. However, inter-community relationships deteriorated further following the conflict in 1972 (Medium of Instruction Movement) and the Assam Movement (1979-1985). It affected the Bengali-Assamese relation and alienated the hill and plain tribes of *Bor-Axom*.[4] Our findings from the interviews suggest that mistrust among the communities, feelings of insecurity among the Indigenous people, loss of faith in government machinery, and negative political rhetoric have induced communal fissures in the society.

This research, therefore, argues that conflict resolution will be possible only when the root cause of the problem is addressed and corrective measures are taken for conflict transformation

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extent of the literary culture be within such a small number? Almost 50,000,000 people speak the Bengali language. If there [were] a union of Assamese and Bengali, these fifty million people would have also come to know of the genius of Sankaradeva et al. It needs to be calculated whether Assam has lost or gained by the present arrangements" (Cited in Kar, 2008, p. 63). Similarly, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan wrote, "The Progress of Assamese literature has been seriously hampered by the numerical inferiority of the reading public. For several decades after the British occupation of the country, Bengali was the language of the schools and the courts, and the influence of Bengali literature thus introduced has not been entirely eradicated from the land. The Assamese

author publishes a book at a loss, and he is naturally shy in repeating his financially unprofitable experiment by publishing another book…Every man has to struggle hard for bread and cannot participate in the economically unprofitable amenities of a cultured life, by expanding the scope of his knowledge, or by "voyaging through the realms of thought alone." (Bhuyan, 1956, p. 21). These two statements relate cultural production with an economic base that has shaped much of the politics and policies related to linguistic hegemony among the lettered and cultured peoples.

[4] Greater Assam (*Bor-Axom*) encompasses Assam's geographical and cultural landscape before its balkanisation.

(Goswami & Dutta, 2021). In the next section, I discuss the methodology of the study.

Methodology

The objective of the study is to argue that since social myths like clerk-conspiracy theory,[5] and practical problems like demographic change have caused long-term social ramifications, corrective measures should be initiated by all stakeholders to ensure peace in the region. This study arrives at this conclusion by using both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been collected through personal interviews of the people who live in violence-hit areas of Western Assam: Guwahati, Goreswar, Barpeta, Barpeta Road, Nalbari, Tihu, Pathsala, Bijni, Sorbhog, Goalpara, Nagarbera, Dhubri, and Kokrajhar. A purposive sampling method is used to identify the respondents. We also used the snowball technique to identify our respondents, where one respondent led to other respondents. We identified the first respondent through a personal contact in Sorbhog (Barpeta District), which was an epicentre of conflict. We interviewed 150 families (each family roughly consists of at least five members) of different ethnic groups. The samples include people from different socio-economic sections of the society. We interviewed leaders of students' unions who actively participated in various movements, political leaders, political workers, victims and witnesses of violent incidents, reporters, teachers, lawyers, business persons and daily wage labourers. The interviews were conducted for an average of 30 minutes, where the respondents shared their perceptions about Assam's past and present-day conflict and socio-political and economic conditions. We have not shared the names of any respondents in our research paper in view of the ethical considerations during research. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for the interviews. The questions were asked in Assamese language, and the respondents replied in Assamese language. We have transcribed their responses in English without altering the meaning. Secondary data have been collected from archival sources, research works, media reports and NEI literature. This qualitative research is structured on three principal arguments corresponding to three sections leading to the objective of the research: The first section argues that although the genesis of language conflict was triggered by transformation brought about by a new socio-economic structure introduced by the EIC, the rhetorical conflict has been sustained till the present times through the clerk-conspiracy theory. The second section discusses how the IPTA, as a non-communal association, tried to diffuse communal sentiments during the Language Movement in 1960. The third section looks at the post-1960s era when the conflict intensified due to the failure of the previous governments to tackle the immigration issue, and the concluding section argues that since inter-ethnic relationships worsened in subsequent years, a constitutional safeguard for the Assamese community may transform the socio-economic conditions responsible for the conflict. However, this can be achieved only when solidarity-building measures, mutual respect for all communities, and humility are made the basis of conversation.

New Hegemonies: A Chronosophy of Language, Identity and Economy

Although conflicts among various ethnic communities have taken place in Assam at different points in time in the precolonial period, a protracted Moamoria uprising between 1769 and 1805 and Burmese invasions between 1817 and 1824 have weakened the Ahom Kingdom (Barua, 1978, p. 69) to such an extent that only one-third[6] of the population that survived "sword and captivity" had to endure the

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[5] It has been argued that some Bengali clerks convinced the British officials that Assamese is a mere patois of Bengali (see Gupta, 2017). Because of this conspiracy, the Assamese language was replaced by Bengali in government offices and schools in Assam. This conspiracy theory has become social lore in the present times. See, Footnote 2.

[6] According to William Robinson, the population of Assam was eight lakhs in 1841, of which about one-sixth was Muslim, and the rest consisted of Hindus and tribal people such as Rabhas, Kacharies, Chuteyas, Mikirs and Lalongs (Robinson, 1841, p. 253).

onslaught of "famine and pestilence" (Mills, 1984, p. 3). Further, the Burmese invasion forced "all men of rank, the heads of the Great Ahom and priestly families" to seek refuge in British "Gowalparra" and many of them decided to settle down there even after the invaders were routed (Mills, 1984, p. 3; Baruah, 1995). After the Treaty of Yandabo between the British EIC and the King of Burma in 1826, the Burmese "renounced all claim upon, and covenanted to abstain from all future interference with, the principality of Assam and its dependencies, and the contiguous petty States of Cachar and Jaintia" (Mackenzie, 2012, p. 4-5) facilitating the occupation of Assam by the EIC. It is pertinent to note that before 1826, the "Raj of Cachar" was already a British protectorate, Jaintia a bordering dependency of Bengal (Mackenzie, 2012, p. 4), and Goalpara,[7] a part of Bengal since the defeat of the Koch King in 1637 by the Muslims, and subsequently passing on to the EIC in 1765 (Allen, 1908, p. 3, 24). It was in 1874 that Assam was made "a Chief Commissioner's Province and a major portion of the Bengali speaking areas of Cachar and Sylhet and also Goalpara came under the provincial administration of Assam" (Barua, 1978, p. 69). Therefore, the educational and administrative arrangements in these three regions till 1873 have been imposed as per the policy of the EIC. With the transfer of the Diwani of Bengal to the hands of EIC, the judicial and administrative language continued to be Persian even under the British till 1837, including Assam since it was annexed as a North East Frontier of Bengal (Clark, 1956; Phookun, 1984; Wilson, 1855). Whereas the administrative and court languages in Cachar, Jaintia and Goalpara had been Persian before 1826, the government-aided schools in Bengal and its North-East Frontiers promoted English and Bengali as a vernacular after 1837. Regarding Assam as of 1841, Robinson writes that "the state of education may be in general terms be described as deplorable in the extreme. Unlike the provinces of Bengal, where every village has its teacher supported by general

contribution, never till lately was a provincial school known in Asam" (Robinson, 2014, p. 277-278). However, he contends, a few "Brahmins" in Assam imparted the basic art of reading and writing to male children of higher classes, who can afford to pay but such education also ends "at ten years of age" (Robinson, 2014, p. 278). It was only in the "year 1835, a school was established at Gowhatti, under the patronage of General Committee of Public Education" (Robinson, 2014, p. 278). A.J. Moffat Mills also echoed similar views when Captain Butler reported that even thirty educated people could not be found in the entire district of "Nowgong" in the year 1838 (Mills, 1984, p. 27). On the other hand, Adam's report on education in Bengal is noteworthy in understanding the British policy on the Indian education system before 1834. According to Adam, the "desire to give education to their male children was deeply seated in the minds of the humblest classes of Bengal" (Howell, 1872, p. 29). However, he further adds, that education continued only for five to six years and the pupils were trained in reading, writing and mathematics to enable them to use that knowledge in writing letters and in managing trade accounts. Terming the teaching as defective Adam notes:

> It may be safely affirmed that in no instance whatever is the orthography of the language of the country acquired in those schools, for although, in some of them, two or three more advanced boys write out small portions of the most popular poetic compositions of the country the manuscript copy itself is so inaccurate that they only become confirmed in a most vitiated manner of spelling, which the imperfect qualifications of the teachers do not enable him to correct (Cited in Howell, 1872, p. 29).

Adam proposed that "the Government should undertake the preparation and distribution of a series of vernacular school books" (Howell,

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[7] According to B. C. Allen, Goalpara was earlier a part of the Ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kāmarūpa . For some time after the 12th Century, it was conquered by the Sen and Pala Kings of Bengal before the Kamata Kingdom was established by the Koch King Durlabh Narayan in the 14th Century (see Allen, 1908, p. 2-3).

1872, p. 32). Two more changes that occurred at this time are also worth considering, as these would enlighten us on the emergence of a new arena in which language politics would be played out for the next two hundred years. Following a resolution taken at the meeting of the Council of the Government of India on July 11, 1837, in the presence of Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay and Lord George Eden Auckland (the then Governor General of India), an Act (Act XXIX) to substitute Vernaculars for Persian from "Judicial and Revenue Proceedings" was passed on 20 November 1837 (Howell, 1872, p. 40). While this sudden change was seen as mischief by the minority (Howell, 1872, p. 39), it created new opportunities for standardising vernaculars. On 11 October 1844, another critical resolution was taken by Lord Hardinge:

> The Governor General having taken into consideration the existing state of education in Bengal, and being of the opinion that it is highly desirable to afford it every reasonable encouragement by holding out to those who have taken advantage of the opportunity of instruction afforded to them, a fair prospect of employment in the public service… (Howell, 1872, p. 44)

These resolutions can be considered significant because language and education created new economic opportunities for a population living on subsistence farming and trade till then. The change in economic base enabled new structures and institutions to create new hegemonic relations (Barua, 1978; Kar, 1975; Bhattacharyya, 1987). However, the problem was that neither Assamese nor Bengali languages were standardised till the end of the 18th Century, and they existed only as *Bhasha* with plentiful variations in orthography. Furthermore, the term Bangla (Bengali), which has been derived from Vanga as it appears in *Aitareya Aranyaka* (See Chatterji, 2017, p. 62), is the Bengal to East of Brahmaputra (East Bengal), once ruled by the ancient Kingdom of Kāmarūpa and the powerful Koch Kingdom during the times of Nara Narayan. The present-day standardised Bengali is certainly not the language which was

spoken by the different tribes of Bengal- Pundra (Pundra-Vardhana is the present-day North Central Bengal), Vanga (East Bengal), Radha, Suhma, Kaivarttas (Keots), Candalas, Doms, Haddikas, Bagudis, Vathuris, Chudas (Chatterji, 2017, p. 67) — before the Aryan influence in the 600 BC. In fact, "Brahminical works regard[ed] the countries of the East, including Magadha, as barbarian lands not suitable for Brahmin to settle or sojourn in: penances are prescribed, for instance, in the 'Baudhayana Dharma-sutra' (I, I, 32, 33) for Vedic Brahmans who went to Pundra, Vanga and other lands" (Chatterji, 2017, p. 62-63). With the Aryanisation of Mithila and Magadha from 600 BC, the "pre-Aryan peoples of Bengal began to be influenced by the Aryan culture and language" (Chatterji, 2017, p. 64) and by "300 AC," Bengal had been considerably Aryanised. Therefore, the Bengali language spoken by the people has residual elements from the pre-Aryanised tongues spoken in the region. Suniti Kumar Chatterji highlights the influence of Kol, Dravidian, and Tibeto-Burman (Bodo) words, accentuation, and syntax on the Sanskritised Bengali language. In contrast, Jnanabrata Bhattacharyya has pointed out that the Aryan tongue has displaced these indigenous languages (Bhattacharyya, 1987, p. 57). For instance, the names of places like *Bhatapara*, *Jora-Sako* and *Pora-bari* have been Sanskritised into *Bhatta-Palli*, *Yugma-setu* and *Dagdha-vati* (Bhattacharyya, 1987, p. 65). In much the same way, Dravidian words like *Jola* (meaning river, water, liquid) and *Bhitti/Vittu* (Homestead/home) have found their way into Bengali and Assamese languages, just like *Sako*, *Para* and *Bari*. Furthermore, the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudra Gupta in the 4th Century mentions that "Sama-tata, [Kāmarūpa] and Davaka" paid tribute to the Guptas which indicates that Kāmarūpa and Bengal were already under the sway of Aryanisation. It may be surmised that under the patronage of the Guptas, large settlement of Brahmans in the various parts of Bengal and present-day Western Assam began, thereby exerting Aryan cultural and linguistic influence on these societies. Therefore, when the Chinese Pilgrim Hiuen Tsang travelled through Assam (its western

boundary was the Karatoya River in North Bengal) to East Bengal and Odisha, he observed that the language in Assam differed only "a little" from that of "Mid-India;" whereas, the language of Odisha varied a lot from "Mid-India" (Chatterji, 2017, p. 77-78; Kakati, 1987, p. 6). Kāmarūpa, whose radius was 1700 miles (Gait, 2008, p. 28), included many parts of present-day Bangladesh and North Bengal and rose to prominence under the leadership of powerful Hindu Kings between the 7th and 12th Centuries. From the various copper plate inscriptions and the description given by Hiuen Tsang, it is obvious that the people in Kāmarūpa "were mostly Brahministic," and the King Bhaskara-Varman (Chatterji, 2017, p. 78) facilitated the growth of Aryan rituals and traditions.[8] Therefore, the orthographic variations among the *Bhashas* spoken at different places in Kāmarūpa and East and North Bengal were only "little," and that too due to the impact of other *Bhashas* used in their proximity. For instance, the Tibeto-Burman influence on the Magadhi Prakrit or Apabhramsa (Chatterji, 2017, p. 79) and the impact of Dravidian speeches in areas nearing Southern Bengal created different orthographic variations and vocabularies. Further on, over a period, with the arrival of the Ahom, the pronunciation and vocabulary of the *Bhashas* spoken in different parts of Assam underwent further changes, and under Arabic, Persian and Portuguese influence, the *Bhasha* spoken in Bengal also transformed. The influence of Arabic, Persian, and Portuguese are also to be seen equally in Assamese (See Barpujari, p. 1963, p. 265). For example, words like *Dwarwaja*/ door, *Ayana*/ mirror, *andaz*/estimate, *aram*/rest, *ukil*/lawyer, *karkhana*/factory, *kushti*/wrestling, *khali*/empty, *gu*/stool, *grorom*/hot,

sosma/spectacle, *sakor*/servant, *sakory*/work, *saku*/knife, *sehera*/face, *sador*/blanket, *rang*/colour, *hazar*/thousand and many more have been adapted from Persian language, and words like *balti*/bucket, *alpin*/pin, *kaju*/cashew, *fita*/ribbon, *tamak*/tobacco, *faltu*/unnecessary, *anaras*/pineapple, *sabi*/key etcetera have been borrowed from the Portuguese. Further, it will be erroneous to claim that Sanskrit is the root of the *tadbhava, tatsama, semi-tatsama* words in Assamese or Bengali, because many words included in Rig-Veda and the Brahmana have been phonetically affected by Dravidian, Kol and non-Aryan words including the borrowed ones like *anu* (particle), *kala* (art), *Katu*-ka (sharp), *kapi* (monkey), *kunda* (hole), *rupa* (form), *hadga* (rhinoceros), *nila* (blue), *nana* (several), *karmara* (smith), *puspa* (flower), *pujana* (worship), *phala* (fruit), *bila* (hole), *bija* (seed), *mayura* (peafowl), *ratri* (night), *sava* (corpse) and many more (Chatterji, 2017, p. 42). Taking these linguistic influences into account and considering the proliferation of Magadhi-*Apabhransa* for several centuries, it can be surmised that Aryanisation has created a common stock of vocabulary with orthographic variations among the common people living in Assam, Bengal, and Odisha.[9] It is also pertinent to mention that under the tutelage of non-Aryan kings, the Borahi-Kachari King Manikpha and the powerful Koch Kings, Vaishnavism and religious literature have flourished in Assam (Misra, 2016) and Bengal. The Hinduised Koch and Kachari Kings helped in the creation of a vast gamut of literary works by patronising the Brahmin pandits. Madhav Kandali's *Saptakanda Ramayana* composed in the 14th Century, Hem Saraswati's *Prahlada Charita,* and religious compositions by Harivara Vipra and Rudra Kandali under the patronage of Kamatapur Kingdom during the 14th Century

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[8] P.C. Choudhury cites from Nidhanpur Grant to eulogise the kingly qualities of Kumara Bhaskaravarman. The kind has been praised "for the proper organisation of the duties of various classes and stages of life who had revealed the light of the *Aryya dharma* by dispelling the accumulated darkness of this Kali age by making a judicious application of his revenue" (Choudhury, 1959, p. 181).

[9] According to Dutt et al., "Chronologically, Old Indo-Aryan Sanskrit developed into Middle Indo-Aryan Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramsa between 1000 BC to 1000 AD. The

regionally based Apabhramsa languages furnished the bases of modern Aryan languages: Hindi, Sindhi, Marathi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, Assamese and Oriya" (1985, p. 53). Therefore, some of the religious works of Srimanta Sankardeva, which were in Brajavali, were intelligible to the people among whom he was preaching. Brajavali and local Bhasha became the language through which literary works flourished and strengthened the medieval Assamese language.

pinpoint the symbiosis between the Aryan language and Koch Kingdom which had been instrumental in shaping Assamese and Bengali *Bhashas* (Barpujari, 1963). Likewise, in the 15th and 16th Centuries, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Sri Madhavdeva not only emerged as great social reformers but also transformed the literary landscape through their quintessential lyrical compositions in the form of Bhakti literature in a language intelligible to the folks. However, this caused great resentment among some Brahmins (Pathak, 2009, p. 60; Devi, 2008, p. 14), leading to a situation that forced the Gurujana and his followers to seek shelter in Koch Behar, from where they carried their religious activities. Maheswar Neog, in this connection, writes, "Sankaradeva and his Bara Bhuyas relations …fell into disfavour of Suklenmung as they did not cooperate with the king's men" (Neog, 2018 [1965], p. 62). They were, thereafter, forced to migrate "into the territory of Naranarayana" (Neog, 2018 [1965], p. 62). Since the Koch King and his valorous brother Cilaraya were "enlightened patrons of learning" … the "Vaishnavite movement of Sankardeva secured unstinted help from these two brothers…It is also under Koch patronage that Purusottama Vidyavagisa wrote his Sanskrit grammar *Prayogaratnamala*, Pitambara Sitthantavagisa his Smriti *bandhas*, and Kavi Karnapura his *Vrtta-ratna* and other poetical works" (Neog, 2018 [1965], p. 62). This brief history is to emphasise that the *Bhasha*, under the influence of Sanskrit as a literary language had a local character and flourished under the patronage of the Koch Kings in Kamatapur (a centre of literary activities which is now peripheralised between Assam and Bengal). *Bhasha* has never been the bone of contention in precolonial India, although knowledge of a language gave access to certain privileges in the society. However, when language became a medium to earn livelihood and a common ground for asserting homogenous identity and territoriality, it emerged as an instrument of power. Therefore, the hegemony of print modernity that entered India with the coming of the EIC needs to be re-examined as to why print-modernity played a crucial role in creating a

Bengali or Assamese linguistic consciousness and its standardisation vires new polars. Having said this, it needs to be reckoned that the role of print modernity in shaping modern languages became inevitable when the economy became entangled with language learning. Since Assam was annexed as a frontier of Bengal, it is pertinent to understand the linguistic scenario of the latter to comprehend its effect on the former.

After the British took over the Deewani of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha and sought a uniform vernacular language that could be used "as a general medium of intercourse between the ruler and the subjects" (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. ii), the role of printing press emerged as a potent factor in fixing the modern form of languages. It was with the advent of the colonisers in polycolonial Bengal (Bhaduri, 2020) that the first compilation of Bengali *Bhasha* and a simple grammar, as intelligible to the proselytising agents, were attempted. The competition among the European Missionaries and traders and their relationship with the different peoples of the Indian sub-continent that shaped language, culture, food habits, and religious outlook will be a separate area of inquiry and is beyond the scope of this paper. Portuguese missionary Manuel da Assumpção's *Vocabulario em idioma Bengalla, e Portuguez* (Thompson, 2010, p. 10), written between 1734 and 1742 and published from Lisbon in 1743 is an early attempt to write the first grammar of the then-spoken *Bhasha* in around present-day Gazipur in Bangladesh. Since the British emerged as the most powerful one among all the colonial powers in Bengal and established their centre in Calcutta, they started their colonial project of expansion and economic extraction from that seat of power. For this, the first step was to learn and codify the *Bhasha* of the Natives so that the civil servants may be trained in that.

Commenting on the language used by the Brahmins and the educated "Jentoos," Halhed noted that the Bengal letters are from the Sanskrit stock: "The Characters in which it is written, though all derived from the Sanskrit, deviates much from their original exemplar as our running-hand and Italian differ from round-

hand" and are "less beautiful than the refined Sanskrit" (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. xii-xiii). He then adds that these characters are used in "Assam as well as in Bengal…" (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. xiii), and the language of "Bengal is intimately related to the Sanskrit both in expression, construction and character" (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. xiv). Therefore, for the ease of governance, official transaction, and correspondence, Halhed undertakes the task of writing a standard form of "Bengalese", which was already in use in the writing of land *Pottahs*/Leases (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. xv). He also argues that it is easier for the Europeans to comprehend the Bengal language than the flowery Persian because of the former's simple structure: "Suffice it to mention, that I have selected for this grammar as clear a set of rules, and given it as comprehensive an arrangement as I could devise" (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. xiii). Halhed, while preparing the Bengal grammar in 1778, believed that it was a mere dialect of Sanskrit, in which several "anomalous characters" and "inaccuracy" have crept in, making it difficult to have uniformity. Therefore, his purpose was to excise the inaccuracies and delineate the structure, orthography and meaning of "Bengalese" as close to Sanskrit as possible (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. 3). James Marshman, who was also carrying out linguistic investigation, commented on the chaotic state of the Bengal *Bhasha*, "If they can write at all, each character, to say nothing of orthography, is made in so irregular and indistinct a manner, that comparatively few of them can scarcely wade through that which has been written by themselves after any lapse of time" (cited in Kopf, 1961, p. 298). Therefore, the paradox that Bodhisattva Kar pointed out in the case of the Assamese language (See Kar, 2008) is not to be ruled out in the case of the Bengali language. The period from 1778 to 1800 must have been crucial in producing a laboratory Bengali because what Halhed termed as "Bengal" language and grammar, indicating its amorphous and polycentric *nature*, was shaped as "Bengali"

language by William Carey in 1801 in his *A Grammar of the Bengalee Language*. The first noticeable change in Carey's grammar book is the deletion of the character ৱ and the retention of ৰ for the /r/ sound (both the variants were included in Halhed's Grammar and Georgio Jacobo Kehr's Latin work *Aurenk Szeb* published in 1725 (see, Ross, 1988);[10] The manuscripts (*Vidyasundara*, *Candimangala*) in possession of Charles Wilkins who had prepared the metal "founts" for printing this new language had ৰ as the /r/ sound (see, Ross 1988, p. 35-37, 52). Considering grammar as a science, Carey went on to claim that he is writing the grammar in a simplified manner for all those who shall "attempt to learn the Bengalee Language" (Carey, 1801, p. iii). Terming it "pure Bengalee" but derived from "Sangskrito," Carey argued that when the "language itself is acquired, the difficulty of understanding the provincialisms will be obviated by a little attention to the conversation of the natives" (Halhed, 2014 [1778], p. iv). Jnanabrata Bhattacharyya argues that "the people of Bengal did not speak "Bengali". They spoke a *Bhasha*, the current speech, which is distinguished from Sanskrit or Persian, natural, un-selfconscious, and anonymous. The Muslims called it Zaban-i-Bangalah, and the Portuguese, Idioma Bengalla" (Bhattacharyya, 1987, p. 56). Therefore, while standardising the *Bhasha* into a language, the polycentric voices of the "uncultivated," and "backward" were muted and a language "with contents altogether alien to most Bengalis" was produced for the consumption of the elite-class (Bhattacharyya, 1987, p. 58). This mechanisation to standardise a language by giving centrality and significance through institutionalised users created a hierarchy which made possible the marginalisation of the provincial speeches. Therefore, when Richard Wellesley, the Governor-General of India, established Fort William College on 24 November 1800, with the sole purpose of training Civil Servants, William Carey, who

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[10] Ross writes, "The copperplate impressions of the Bengali script in these European publications cannot be regarded as direct precursors of early Bengali 'founts,' and for this

reason form no part of this study of movable pre-fabricated Bengali letter forms" (Ross, 1988, p. 19).

worked 30 years to compile eighty thousand words to create a Bengali dictionary, was immediately appointed as a Professor of Bengali:

> Wellesley's idea was to train a civil service elite with a general linguistic and cultural background of the India they were called upon to administer ... The candidate was required to know a specific language for a specific job. If, for instance, he aspired to the bench, he needed to learn both Persian and what was then called Hindustani. If he trained to be a Collector of Revenue or a Salt Agent in Bengal or Orissa then naturally Bengali would be requisite (Kopf, 1961, p. 297).

Under such circumstances, when the British occupied Assam in 1826, they conveniently imposed the laboratory language they had laboriously manufactured, propagated, and taught for two decades. Initially, the Assamese were unmindful of this linguistic hegemony because it did not affect the political economy and culture of the common people in any way. The elite class was indifferent to it, and the rising middle class learned this language and used it in knowledge production for a while before understanding the hegemonic role of language, culture, and economy. Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan's *Asam-Buranji* (1829) and his brother Jaggoram Kharghariya Phukan's translation of William Wordsworth's poem in Bengali (1831) are early instances of Assamese contribution to Bengali language (Bhuyan and Deka, 2024, p. 3; see also, Bhattacharyya and Sarma, 2023). As previously stated, the creation of government offices and schools facilitated new avenues for the educated masses but was of little help to the locals. Anundaram Dakeal Phookun in his letter to the British administration lamented that the imposition of Bengali in the courts, and as the language of instruction in school, has created a dual problem: First, the evidence of a witness is to be taken in a language intelligible to him/her, but the use of laboratory "Bengallee" has created an opportunity for mischief as it remained unintelligible to the locals (Phookun, 1984, p. 131). Secondly, very few Assamese

people have "ever qualified themselves to fulfil offices of trust or responsibility in the courts of the province" after receiving education in the Bengali language (Phookun, 1984, p. 106). Since Bengali is a foreign language for the locals, education imparted in that language could not be fruitful for the masses. Therefore, in 1853, when Mill was reporting to Cicil Beadon, Secretary to the government of Bengal, he mentioned these problems and suggested that not only Assamese should be introduced in the schools, but also all jobs in Assam should be reserved for the local inhabitants (Mills, 1984, p. 27). Contrary to Mill's suggestion, A.H. Danforth suggested:

> Before any great blessing can result to the country from these schools, education must, so to speak, be incorporated into the body politic, and made to tell in its effects upon the masses of the people rather than upon the courts…But to secure this, must we give up the Bengalee? – by no means. I would have the course in Bengalee rendered more extensive and more thorough (Danforth, 1984, p. 90).

Danforth added that due to the dearth of books in the Assamese language, it was impossible to introduce Assamese in schools. In the editorial of 'Assam Bandhu,' Nagen Saikia discussed in detail the reasons behind the use of the Bengali language in Assam. James Rae established the first school in Assam in Guwahati in 1830. However, due to the scarcity of printed books in the Assamese language, they had to teach the Bengali language as a subject instead of Assamese (Saikia, 2003, p. 6). This scarcity, noticed in 1853, was caused by the oversight of officers like Francis Jenkins who considered Assamese as a "corrupt dialect" of Bengali (Kar, 2008, p. 28). William Robinson of Srirampur Mission also had a similar opinion regarding the status of Assamese (Saikia, 2003, p. 7). On the contrary, the American Missionaries who aimed at spreading Christianity among Assamese people in Upper Assam realised that the language spoken by the locals in Sibsagar differed from the Bengali language, and they

would need to use the local language to make the Bible popular (Bhattacharyya and Sarma, 2023). Thus, they started developing grammar books and dictionaries in the Assamese language to standardise it and publish printed books, with Miles Bronson taking the lead. *Orunodoi*, the first Assamese magazine, was published by the missionaries to spread the Lord's message among the masses just like the Portuguese and other European missionaries, including William Carey, did in Bengal. Since the main purpose of this magazine was to provide religious education, the translated works and articles published aimed at social transformation and moral edification of the Assamese people. It must be noted that all European missionaries and officers who came to Assam have portrayed the Natives as savage, backward, licentious, cowardly, effeminate, and morally debased. It was only through the conversion of the people that they could be made morally suited to receive Western education (Grant, 2013 [1792]; Cutts, 1953). William Robinson's derogatory comment highlights the ambition of the Europeans in India since the times of Charles Grant: "The Assamese have frequently been described as a degenerate and weakly race, and in these respects inferior even to their effeminate neighbours the Bengalis" (Robinson, 2014 [1841], p. 254). Ignorant of the ambition of the Europeans, like Raja Ram Mohon Roy and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the English-educated Assamese middle class also started working towards the standardisation process of the language guided by their linguistic consciousness and nationalistic ideas in the 19th Century. Through this linguistic standardisation process, a positive social transformation was also initiated by abolishing *Satidah Pratha*, *Dax Pratha* (slavery), and introducing widow remarriage and women's education. Interestingly, the standardisation of Assamese also went through the same excision process to which Bengali *Bhasha* was subjected. The Assamese *Dangoria* and his counterpart, the Bengali *Bhodrolok*, played similar roles (Prodhani, 2021) in creating a hegemonic class of people who, through standardisation of the language (Pure Bengalese and Pure Assamese),

attempted to standardise the elite "self." Therefore, it is not surprising to see Nathen Brown's invocation of theoretical principles of language formation and Hem Chandra Barua's *Asamiya Bhashar Byakaran* relying overtly on the principles of Sanskrit grammar. Bodhisattva Kar writes, "Goonabhiram Barooa, Kafaitoolla and Anundaram Dakeal Phookun, all representative of an earlier generation of literary workers from Lower Assam, were frequently chastised by the new language activists in Calcutta for 'their impurity, provincialism, vulgarism and Bengalism' (Kar, 2008, p. 27). Nevertheless, with the efforts of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Hemchadra Baruah, followed by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Chadrakumar Agarwalla and other personalities, the standardisation process of the language took momentum. These developments took place after 1873 when the British recognised the Assamese language for administrative purposes and school education. However, the dominance of Bengali clerks continued in government jobs, and the immigration of many educated Bengalis to work in government departments in Assam created anxiety among the educated Assamese people (Barpujari, 1998, p. 41). Hiren Gohain writes in this connection:

> As early as 1850, one hears complaints of favouritism and discrimination on the part of certain British officers in favour of Bengali candidates. The amalgamation of Sylhet, an integral part of Bengal, with Assam, also drove ambitious and well-trained Bengali youths to crowd the government offices to the chagrin of the newly-educated Assamese middle-class elite (Gohain, 2019, p. 167).

This created an economic disbalance within the society. Whereas the British were levying high taxes on the Assamese people and extracting resources out of the region, the Assamese people were not given adequate employment, in return. Apart from that, a tendency of nepotism also developed in Assam because one Bengali often brought another Bengali to fill up vacant positions (Mills, 1984, p. 44). Coupled with this, the chauvinistic outlook of the Bengali elites

added further resentment, as Hiren Gohain observes, "While it is not given to mob violence Bengali chauvinism not only seeks to protect and advance the material interests of the Bengalis regardless of means but also generates perpetually an attitude of insularity and cultural superiority that effectively prevents a real meeting of minds with the Assamese" (Gohain, 1985, p. xxviii). While it is a naïve notion among the Assamese people that the Bengalee clerks conspired with the British to impose the Bengali language over Assamese in schools and courts,[11] the cultural and linguistic arrogance among some Bengalis[12] have in fact alienated the Assamese people, who came to study in Calcutta in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. This sense of alienation persists in the collective unconsciousness of the community till today, like a ghost from the past.

Jayeeta Sharma in this connection writes:

> Against the background of this newly fierce competitiveness, the language encounters of the early colonial period were now reframed as a conspiracy by migrant Bengali *amlahs* (clerks) to eradicate the *Asomiya* language. In this narrative, the British rulers of Assam were portrayed as blameless except insofar as they were misled by cunning Bengali subordinates who sought the death of the *Asomiya* language. Assamese publicists first articulated this conspiracy theory at public meetings during the 1890s. Their theory reached a

wider audience in 1907 when Hemchandra Goswami and Padmanath Gohain Barua outlined it in their Note on Assamese Language and Literature. This *amlah* conspiracy theory became well grounded in local scholarly lore and nationalist rhetoric over the twentieth century. Its longevity is apparent from its reappearance at crucial moments in postcolonial language politics of the region, for instance during Assam's language riots in the 1960s and 1970s (Sharma, 2011, p. 191).

Most of the respondents we have interviewed believe in the clerk-conspiracy theory and consider it to be the reason for the language conflict between the Assamese and Bengali. The 36 dark years of the Assamese language (1837-1873) are ascribed to the Bengali-clerks, which have remained one of the reasons for the ill feelings towards the Bengalis to this day. Many respondents replied that they had read about it in newspapers, articles, and textbooks during their childhood. Some respondents also remarked that this myth has travelled by word of mouth and has remained a popular myth in political narratives during protest movements. However, none of the respondents know the historical circumstances under which the *Bhashas* have been standardised and imposed exclusively by the EIC. None of our respondents know that Persian had been the court language in Western Assam when the region was annexed as the North East Frontier of Bengal in 1826 and

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[11] People like John Peter Wade, Francis Hamilton, and David Scott wrote in their accounts of Assam that Assamese was only a dialect of Bengali, thereby convincing the British administrators to impose Bengali after Assam was annexed to British India. Sagar Boruah has cited the works of John Wade (1927[1800]), Francis Hamilton (1986), and Rajen Saikia (2000) to argue that the "clerk-conspiracy theory" was a fictitious construction. Even Nathan Brown, who is celebrated for his notable work on Assamese language and Grammar, had earlier held the misconception that Assamese was a form of "barbarous Bengali" (Barpujari, 1986, 122, cited in Boruah, 2022).

[12] Dinesh Chandra Sen's comment in the preface to the third edition of *Bangabhasha O Sahitya* 'We do not recognize Assamese as an independent language distinct from a provincial variation of Bengali', Jogesh Chandra

Ray's over-jealous assertion that Bengali language should be restored in Assam, and Rabindranath Tagore's comment in *Bhashabicched* "stating that Assamese and Oriya were 'mere dialects' of Bengali and that 'there can be no literature in a dialect'" are instances of cultural arrogance that have alienated the Assamese intellectuals in the early 20th Century (all cited in Kar, 2008, p. 64-65). However, Tagore later corrected his view by admitting that Assamese is a separate language with a rich intellectual and cultural history. Reading Boddhisatva Kar's essay the other way round, and contrary to Padmanatha Bhattacharyya's perspective, the territorialisation of language and partitioning of literary tradition has deprived the Bengalis of a rich literary tradition and worldview that exist in the works of Madhav Kandali, Hema Saraswati, Sankardeva, and Madavdev.

that Goalpara had been under the Mughals since 1637.

Therefore, coupled with language politics of the collective unconsciousness, issues like faulty administrative policies, demarcation of territories without considering the ethnicity of people residing in the areas, ignoring the demographic composition while formulating policy, and lack of political will of both colonial and post-colonial governments created a climate for social unrest in the region which manifested in terms of ethnic conflicts in the post-colonial period. Nani Gopal Mahanta writes, "[t]he inclusion of Assam in Bengal, with Dhaka as its capital, further facilitated the immigration of East Bengal-origin Muslims (EBOMs) and Hindus to the hitherto under-populated virgin state of Assam (Mahanta, 2021, p. xi). The inclusion of Sylhet and the introduction of the Line System facilitated further immigration beginning from the last quarter of the 19th Century till 1947. Nani Gopal Mahanta (2021) argues that the Assamese society has always been composite in nature and has a long history of immigrants settling and shaping the Assamese community. The plurality can be perceived in the cultural and religious practices among the Mongoloid and Aryanised communities. However, during the partition of the subcontinent, this plural socio-cultural space was about to be usurped and ceded to Pakistan due to the presence of a sizable number of East Bengal-origin Muslims (EBOMs), who migrated to Assam during the early 20th Century under the patronage of Mohammed Sadullah. Had this materialised, Assam would have become a part of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) and that would have altered the fundamental "character and nature of Assamese society" (Mahanta, 2021, p.15). Mahanta maintains, "[t]here was a fundamental intrusion to the essence of Assamese nation through the politics of Muslim League and massive immigration mainly from the Mymensingh district of East Bengal" (14). While the Muslim population posed a threat to the cultural and religious plurality of Assam, other immigrant communities posed a threat to the Assamese language. After India's independence, when the language census

became a determining factor in asserting territorial demarcations, the old wounds resurfaced with a complex problem. However, the EBOMs, now taken within the Assamese fold as *Na-Axamiya*, along with the contribution of the tea-garden labourers, helped in securing the position of the Assamese language as a majority language in the 1951 census (Bhattacharyya and Sarma, 2023). On the other hand, with the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA), which would provide citizenship to the religious minorities belonging to six communities, excluding Muslims from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, a new linguistic challenge has emerged for the Assamese language. While the Hindu Bengalis have been instrumental in averting the integration of Assam with Pakistan (Mahanta, 2021), a linguistic reluctance of the Bengalis to accept the Assamese language and culture has alienated the community further. Unlike other Indigenous communities, the contribution of the Bengali-speaking Hindu population to the Assamese language has been negligible, barring a few names. Therefore, there is a very complex socio-economic and cultural dimension related to the conflict between the Assamese and Bengali communities in Assam. The partition of Sylhet, the effects of the partition of India (Misra, 2018), the official language status of Assam, resource extraction without undertaking development work in the region (Misra, 1980), and many more such issues have fuelled the anger of the people in the region leading to the Language Movement in 1960. Initially, the conflict grew around the official language issue between Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking communities but later it spilt over to demographic changes caused by immigration, territorial rearrangement, and competition for jobs and land. As social fissures widened, people who believed in social cohesion came forward to rebuild the society. This is where stalwarts like Bhupen Hazarika and Hemanga Biswas come in.

Songs of Harmony in 1960: Bhupen Hazarika, Hemanga Biswas, and IPTA

The Language Movement in 1960 created a social rupture among the communities in

undivided Assam. In places like Shillong and Barak Valley, the Bengali population opposed the Assamese language, and in retaliation, the Assamese population retaliated in Guwahati and Upper Assam. However, Bhupen Hazarika and Hemanga Biswas, already mentioned above, came forward under the banner of the IPTA along with different artists in Assam and tried to restore peace and harmony. The IPTA, inspired by communist ideology (Saha, 2018; Ghosh, 2019), has been a driving force in promoting equality and harmony among communities in Assam, providing a platform to unite artists from different backgrounds. Explaining the origin and role of IPTA, Hemanga Biswas explains that the organisation was conceived because of the limitation of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in reaching out to the common masses. While PWA was limited only to the educated section, the IPTA could reach out to all sections of people, including the illiterate ones, thereby building a wider public base conducive to social movement (Biswas, 2016, p. 900). This section delves into how IPTA laid the groundwork for inter-community harmony in Assam from its inception and served as a platform for the emergence of progressive artists during the crisis in 1960. Established in 1943, IPTA played a pivotal role in advancing the progressive cultural movement in India. It leveraged local cultural institutions and mediums such as Indigenous institutions, religious and mythological plays, folk dances, and folk music. Employing a direct approach, IPTA aimed to instil anti-fascist ideology and advocated for world democracy among ordinary people. In 1947, the Assam chapter of IPTA was founded, with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala as president, Bishnu Rabha as vice president, and Hemanga Biswas as secretary. Bhupen Hazarika was introduced to IPTA's work through Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Rabha. In 1951-52, Niranjan Sen and Montu Ghosh took the lead in revitalising the IPTA at a state convention in Guwahati. Following his return from the USA in 1953, Bhupen Hazarika, guided by the legacy of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Rabha, spearheaded IPTA's activities

(Bora & Buragohain, 2023, p. 5) thereafter coming in close association with Hemanga Biswas.

As a result, touring became a vital aspect of IPTA's activities, and it was through its Assam chapter that Hemango Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika tried to bring social reconciliation. Through IPTA's Assam chapter, countless cultural visionaries in Assam worked to awaken cultural consciousness among the public (Bora & Buragohain, 2023). Initially driven by anti-fascist fervour, IPTA focused on sending touring cultural workers to spread its message. In Assam, they successfully organised a program in Dibrugarh with the assistance of railway factory workers. They also adopted Assamese songs, incorporating them into their performances (Bhattacharya, 1989, p. 6). These touring squads consistently sought to integrate local music and dance forms into their performances from the outset. Moreover, they adeptly endeavoured to unite the Assamese and Bengali communities. Malini Bhattacharya highlights the Surma Valley[13] Squad's approach to winning over the "local Assamese population" by engaging with local leaders individually and incorporating Assamese songs into their repertoire (Bhattacharya, 1989, p. 8). This ongoing initiative brought together artists from diverse backgrounds, both renowned and lesser-known, to collaborate and enrich the cultural landscape.

During the turmoil of the 1960s, Assam was ravaged by violence that deeply impacted both Hazarika and Biswas. In response, they spearheaded the formation of a cultural troupe encompassing dramatists, singers, writers, and artists, with the support of the then Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha. This collective embarked on a mission to spread the message of harmony and peace in the conflict-stricken regions. Biswas and Hazarika collaborated on a poignant composition titled "Haradhan Rongmonor Katha," recounting the tales of a Bengali peasant and an Assamese peasant who had lost their homes in the riots.

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[13] Also known popularly as Barak Valley.

> *Luit*[14] *or Saporit*[15] *Sakoie*[16] *Kandiley Manuhar Naokhon Sai*
>
> *Manuhar Dukhotey Manuh Buribo Anokson Doxibor Nai* (Biswas, 2016, p. 929)
>
> At Luit's sapori, Sakoi mourned when Humanity's boat, it beheld
>
> Humankind's grief shall deluge its own kind, no one else to be blamed (my translation)

Their melody is ingeniously interwoven with elements from indigenous folk traditions of Bengal and Assam. The troupe ventured into the heart of the riot-torn areas in Assam, using their art to advocate for peace. This endeavour is a remarkable example of how a cultural troupe can play a pivotal role in quelling violent riots during that era (Biswas, 2015-2016). Following the leadership of Bhupen Hazarika and Hemanga Biswas in the ITPA movement, a coalition of Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, and Khasi singers dedicated themselves to fostering peace and goodwill amidst the strife-ridden societies in 1960 and 1961. Assamese artists Chandra Phukan, Jugal Das, Kamal Chowdhury, Lohit Kakati, Gyanada Kakati, Bengali musicians Paresh Chakrabarti, Satyajit Chatterjee, and Khasi violinist Filkin Laloo joined forces to create a cultural troupe that traversed through areas afflicted by riots. Subsequently, musicians like Dilip Sharma, Ramen Barua, Dipali Barthakur, Jayanta Hazarika, Rubi Hazarika, and Khagen Mahanta joined their ranks, leading to a successful initiative bridging the gap between the two communities. The impactful efforts of this cultural brigade were widely acknowledged by English and Bengali newspapers, recognising their profound influence on society during the conflict between Assamese and Bengali communities. In a newspaper article, an anonymous singer from Calcutta commended the cultural group's efforts, stating, "[t]his is how the sword should be used – the way they are doing in Assam" (Dutta, 2020, [1960]). Many

Bengali newspapers praised Bhupen Hazarika and Hemanga Biswas's endeavour to combat violence through music. Thus, IPTA strove to foster harmony by spotlighting the Assamese language and promoting a rich blend of diverse cultures. Hazarika's songs touch on themes of love, compassion, sorrow, structural inequality, socio-political conditions, and, notably, humanity. His ability to transition between genres and sing about various communities led Arupjyoti Saikia to describe him as a non-committal personality (Saikia, 2011) who transcended spatial and temporal boundaries. This is why his works resonated with people from all communities and walks of life, from the hills to the plains.

In his most celebrated song, *Manuhe Manuh r babe*, Hazarika appeals to the aggrieved population during the 'Language Movement' to change their perspective and be compassionate towards their fellow human beings. It is important to note that Hazarika never supported violence against humanity. His song *Aah Aah Ulai Aah* is often misunderstood as a call for the youth to show their aggression against migrants or *bohiragoto* people. However, the context of the song was different, as Hazarika later explained: the phrase '*Ramore Dexote Thoka Rawan Bodhute Jai Dodi Jai Jiwan Tu Jaak* (If one must lose one's life while slaying the Ravan in the land of Ram, so be it) in that song was meant to encourage the youth to fight against the widespread corruption in society. As Hazarika writes, '[a]n artist cannot brighten the lives of other people unless they sing for humanity' (Hazarika, 1993, p. 273).

In 1960, when Hazarika lamented the violence by alluding to Ganga, Padma and Luit, the waterscapes became a cultural signifier to two communities (Nath, 1986, p. 100) as these water bodies merge physically as well as metaphorically signifying the confluence of cultures. The poetic flight that encompasses the cultural landscape organically shapes the Assamese identity through his songs (Dutta,

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[14] Luit is another name for the river Brahmaputra.
[15] Sapori is an Assamese word for flood-prone river banks.

[16] Sakoi Sokua (scientific name: *Tadorna ferruginea*) is a bird found .

2013; Saikia, 2011, p. 31). By alluding to Ganga and Padda, while repeatedly referring to Brahmaputra and Luit, he creates a sense of belongingness and inclusiveness. Hazarika's songs echo, to use Sanjib Baruah's phrase, "Assamese multiculturalism" yet assert self-preservation: "Unless you wipe the tears of your mother's eyes, your love for the world will be wasted" (Baruah, 2005, p. 131). This line encapsulates Hazarkia's worldview of preserving all forms of life without annihilating the self. There is an attempt to portray Bhupen Hazarika either as a representative of Assamese nationalism or as an opportunist (Rajkhowa, 2022) by overlooking his humanitarian perspective. As an Assamese and a Humanitarian, he not only celebrates the composite essence of the Assamese community while promoting equality among all, but he also sings of resistance against hegemonic forces that threaten to destroy Assamese people: "[t]oday's Assamese must save themselves or else they will become destitute in their own land" (Baruah, 2005, p. 131). However, unlike Baruah's argument that Hazarika's song can be seen with contiguity to Lakkhinath Bezbarua's nationalism, I argue that Hazarika's resistance is against all forms of hegemony, be it Bengali or Assamese. This is why his songs have become contested resources for appropriation (Saikia, 2011, p. 31) because, at times, hyper-nationalists have tried to portray Bhupen Hazarika as an Assamese nationalist (Dutta, 2014, p. 456) by undermining his humanitarian concern. Hazarika has transcended the narrow limits of parochial cultural representation through his songs, underscoring a broad humanitarian perspective (Dutta, 2013). Like casteism being part and parcel of feudal practices, the purification and standardisation of language may also be seen as part and parcel of feudal (read high class/caste/elite) society. This is why his role in the IPTA was important in integrating the folk lives of Barak Valley and Brahmaputra Valley communities. However, with the decline of IPTA, no other cultural organisation came forward to carry on the social reconstruction process in the same manner. Under this circumstance, the role of Xudhakantha Bhupen Hazarika as a humanitarian force becomes important in Assam. Akhil Ranjan Dutta has rightly argued that Hazarika is a zealous modernist with Marxist fervour because he advocates the integration of the individual with society and state. Hazarika's songs have become a source of strength and integration as they not only shape Assamese composite identity but also become emotionally relatable to people from all communities.

In his song *Prasondo Dhumuhai Prasno Korile Muk*, Bhupen Hazarika appeals to overcome parochial ideas. According to Hazarika, humans cannot live in isolation; they complement each other (Hazarika, 2009, p. 102). He composed this song in 1963 for Nazira Assam Sahitya Sabha's session, perhaps influenced by the memory of violence from the Language Movement. In the song *Ami Axomiya Nohou Dukhia*, he attempts to deliver a message to the community regarding social reconstruction and emphasises that whoever considers Assam as their motherland is an Assamese (Hazarika, 2009, p. 144). In *Mur Gaan Houk*, Hazarika states that his songs are not meant to create misunderstandings but are against destructive outlooks. The song *Mrityu Kar* questions the linguistic conflict between Bengali and Assamese and critiques the media for their role in fueling social tension. He also conveys a message of harmony through a song from the film *Sameli Memsaab*, where the main character accepts Bihu along with her own culture (Hazarika, 2009, p. 230). However, he also wrote the song *Akou Jodi Jabo Lage Saraighatoloi* to support the Assam Movement and the people involved (Hazarika, 2009, p. 312). During the tumultuous years of the 1980s, Hazarika was anxious about the violent turn that the movement took. He created the song *Mahabahu Brahmaputra* to showcase the multicultural composition of Assamese society and its contribution to the Assamese society (Hazarika, 2009, p. 321). When Khargeswar Talukdar was martyred, he composed a song, *Xex Xokiyoni*, and inspired the student protestors (Hazarika, 2009, p. 325-26). Dolly Ghosh, an ethnic Bengali artist who contributed to Assamese culture and music, was worried about the language politics and the threats of certain population sections. She requested

Bhupen Hazarika to compose a song to showcase the Bengali community's outlook. Thus, he created the song *Axomi Aaire Lalita Palita* at her behest. Dolly Ghosh, who showcased her love for Assam, promised to uphold Assam's dignity and protect its culture (Hazarika, 2009, p. 330-331). This song represented the members of the Bengali community who accepted Assam as their home and sent a message of harmony to the conflicting masses. However, the conflict between the Assamese and the Bengali communities did not subside even after the success of the Language Movement in 1960. By the time protests started in the 1970s, the effects of the Bangladesh Liberation War and the rise of the Left in West Bengal started shaping the regional politics in Assam. Eminent critique Hiren Gohain's essay *The Labyrinth of Chauvinism* (1983) is a well-argued piece that underscores the role of the CIA and the role of communism in Assam during the Assam Movement (Gohain, 2019). However, this discussion is outside the purview of this essay as it would warrant separate space and attention to research on the rise of Jyoti Basu in Bengal and its impact on the violence in Assam.

Conflict After 1960: Consequences and Contemporary Social Response

When the Medium of Instruction Movement started in 1972, it again created a turbulent political climate in Assam. While there are a few scholarly works available on these issues (Barua, 1978; Baruah, 1994; Bhattacharyya & Sarma, 2023; Kar, 1982), less attempt has been made to unpack the causes and consequences of this violence by visiting the afflicted areas. In this section, we shall discuss how the historical divide between the two communities has been politicised, how political inaction triggered social protest, and how misinformation has precipitated among the people in Assam. Before delving into the nuanced social realities, a few important historical facts are to be briefly mentioned for the convenience of argument. The migration of peasants from East Bengal under the patronage of Mohammed Sadullah and the role played by Abdul Bhasani during the partition of India has been detrimental to the

Assamese society for two reasons. First, unabated migration to the region created a sense of insecurity among the indigenous community economically, politically, culturally and socially. Secondly, there was no closure to the process which is why assimilation in any form with the host community was not possible in a real sense. This section shall critically analyse the political scenario, the war of words and hegemonic contestations that have been responsible for exacerbating the conflict. Since early 1920, peasants' flow started changing Assam's demography, as reported by C.S. Mullen, adding to the disadvantage of Assamese language and culture (Bhattacharyya & Sarma, 2023; Bhattacharyya, 2019; Datta, 2013, p. 89). The EIC and later the British administrators promoted immigration to the region to maximise the revenue output by bringing the lands under cultivation. As a result, the peasants started coming in large numbers. The impact on Assam is to be understood in contiguity with the partition of Bengal, as the latter had an adverse effect on it. Bengal was partitioned three times: First, in 1874, when Assam Province was created, and Sylhet was made a part of it. Secondly, in 1905, Assam was clubbed with East Bengal; and thirdly, in 1947, when East Bengal became East Pakistan (Bhattacharjee, 2005; Bhattacharyya, 2019; Bhattacharyya & Sarma, 2023; Chakrabarty, 2004; McLane, 1965). When India was partitioned in 1947, the Sylhet referendum decreed the inclusion of Hindu-populated areas into East Pakistan (Saikia, 2023, p. 81), much to the relief of Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi; however, areas like Hailakandi, Patharkandi, Ratabari, Karimganj and Badarpur had been retained because "these thanas were crucial to protecting southern Assam's Plantation economy and also Assam's link with Tripura" (Saikia, 2023, p. 81). The partition of India saw a huge influx of Hindu immigrants into India from East Bengal, which created further resentment among the people as it created competition for resources while creating the possibility of making the Assamese a linguistic minority in their state. The resentment against such large-scale immigration was openly addressed in meetings and public rallies by some

ethnonationalist leaders (Sharma, 2010, pp. 46-47). Things went from bad to worse when more immigrants started entering Assam in the 1960s and 1970s due to economic and political reasons (see, Hazarika, 2000). Since East Pakistan/Bangladesh is a flood-prone country with very high population density, the economic conditions have forced the Bangladeshis to migrate to various countries across Europe (Knights & King, 1998; Rahman & Kabir, 2012; Knights, 1996) and South Asia (Bhattacharyya & Sharma, 2023; Kumar, 2010; Percot, 2018), with the North East and Eastern region of India being their closest destination due to geographical contiguity. Apart from that, political upheavals caused by Islamic fundamentalism (Bhattacharyya & Sharma, 2023) in the Chittagong Hill tracks and other parts of East Pakistan/Bangladesh have forced people of various ethnic communities like Chakma, Koch Rajbangshi and Hindu Bengali to seek shelter in north-east India. The impact of these immigrations has been discussed in many academic papers (see Chakma & D'Costa, 2012; Sarma, 2015; Gogoi, 2023). Whereas common people are aware of the impact of the migration in Assam, the political arrangements between the two countries (India and Pakistan) have not been highlighted or addressed, resulting in misinformation among the common people. The Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 08 April 1950, facilitated the movement of people across East-Bengal, West-Bengal, Assam, and Tripura till 31 December 1950, with the guarantee to protecting the rights of the minorities in the respective countries (Bhattacharyya & Sarma, 2023; Raghavan, 2020). However, with India and Pakistan fighting three wars between 1947 and 1971, and Pakistani army violated human rights in every possible manner through rape, loot, and genocide in East Pakistan (Alamgir & D'costa, 2011; Bose, 2011; Das et al., 2022). As a result, three million people (30,00,000) have been murdered within a span of eight months, and four hundred thousand (4,00,000) women have been raped resulting in the birth of thousands of 'war babies' (Chowdhury, 2022; Das et al., 2022; Mookherjee, 2015; Ranjan et al., 2024). During our interviews, we collected some testimonials of violence, which are shared in the following subsection.

Testimonials

During our interview, we asked a few families about the reason for their migration to Assam. Many of the families shared the stories of violence and arson faced by their forefathers during the partition of India. We deduced from their responses that suffering from traumatic intergenerational memory related to violence, the Hindus of East Bengal started entering India to avoid the atrocities of the Muslims which they earlier experienced during the Noakhali Genocide (see, Ghosh, 2011), Great Calcutta Killings (see, Mitra, 1990; Daniyal, 2017) on Direct Action Day, and during Partition (see, Jana, 2022). It is understood that many of these refugees were entering India through the border closest to their places of residence in East Bengal/East Pakistan without having any definite idea of a destination except for seeking shelter in India. One of our respondents was only 4 years old when he arrived in Assam with his parents in 1947. All he could recall from his failing memory was the sight of the windowless refugee camp (probably a school), barefoot journey and restless nights without food. The only reason they entered Assam was because the train brought them there. Other Bengali families who migrated to Assam had similar stories to share. They narrated how their neighbouring villages were burned down to ashes and how the incidents of rape and murder of their family members forced them to abandon their homeland. Most of these immigrants, after settling down in Assam, had their schooling in Assamese vernacular medium schools as well. Specific mention may be made to a family whose house has been burned down twice (1971 and 1983) in Goreswar, a town in the Baksa district of Assam. When asked why are they still living in Assam despite facing such challenges, the hapless head of the family timidly responded that they have no other place to go, so they are living here after repeated humiliation. Although the respondent (in his 60s) studied till class six in Assamese vernacular medium school, and his daughter was also educated in Assamese

vernacular medium school, he could not comprehend the hatred of the agitators towards him. In some areas where there were counter-attacks, like in Sorbhog and Manikpur (small towns in Assam), in 1983, the Assamese families shared their traumatic experiences of losing their young family members. During that time (1983), twelve youths belonging to the Bengali community were killed in police firing in Bijni while participating in a protest rally. The vicariously traumatic stories of violent experiences of the Assamese and the Bengali people add a whole new way of looking at the idea of conflict. This journey through memory lane has reshaped their perception of life in the past, and as a result, their worldview and responses to conflict situations have undergone tremendous change. They have become critical towards political rhetoric and provocative political speech. Almost all the interviewees pointed out that the media has played a negative role by publishing comments with communal undertones. This, according to them, has worsened the situation. One can verify this by revisiting the newspaper articles published during that period (see Biswas, 2017; Sharma, 2010; Kaushik, 2017). This war of words between the two communities, happening between the elite and middle class, percolated to the grassroots, thereby making the conflict and crisis unmanageable during the Assam Movement. While rallying for self-preservation in Gandhian principles, the Assam Movement was overridden by anger, intolerance, and hatred due to arrogant speech and counter-speech by community leaders.

It has been noticed that many of the former leaders and activists are now disillusioned with the entire process of the Medium Movement (1972) and Assam Movement (1979-85). Many of the Assamese respondents who actively participated in the Medium of Instruction movement now feel that their cause is being defeated because many of the children and grandchildren of the former agitators attend English medium schools instead of Assamese vernacular schools. Since English is an international language and the command over that language is desirable for higher studies,

many of them feel that economic needs have compelled them and others to change their view on the Medium of instruction. However, all respondents (Bengali and Assamese), without any exception, have concurred that at least all students should learn to read and write Assamese and opt for Assamese as an elective subject even if parents decide to send their children to English Medium schools. Most of the educated Assamese respondents stated that they equally love reading Bengali literature and magazines, such as the puja issue of *Desh*. The love for Bengali literature underscores the fact that there is no cultural hatred among the Assamese people. They believe that Bengali literature is very enriched and reading such works provides intellectual enrichment. The data we have gathered through interviews reveal that misleading statements by some political leaders from Barak Valley and disrespect for the Assamese language and literature have been the root cause of the conflict. Unfortunately, the then Indian National Congress government's inaction to address the issue on time, appeasement policies and vote-bank politics by allowing immigration into Assam had created strong resentment among the people. As the Assamese youth were losing jobs to the educated Bengalis who came from Bengal, and as their lands were grabbed by immigrants, apart from the demographic changes brought about by such migration, the Assamese people were left with no other choice other than coming down to the streets. The insistence of the then government to hold the bye-election in the Mongoldoi constituency in 1979 by defying the All Assam Students' Union's (AASU) demands was the immediate cause of the Assam Movement. AASU's call for a boycott was justified as official sources confirmed the presence of large numbers of illegal immigrants in Assam (Reddi, 1981; Baruah, 1986; Pisharoty, 2019). In 1983, when the Assembly election was declared, a similar situation cropped up. The respondents in Sorbhog and Goreswar informed that violence erupted on voting day when certain people from minority groups reached the polling station to vote. Since AASU has boycotted the election, the insistence of certain political

parties and incitement to the people to vote by challenging the students' union boycott call created a direct clash. This points out the failure of the government machinery in 1983 to contain violence, their ill-preparedness to conduct elections at that time, and the dubious role played by political groups for drawing political dividends (Bhattacharyya & Sarma, 2023; Pisharoty, 2019). The influx of illegal immigrants from East Bengal into Assam after 1951 has been a genuine cause of anxiety among the Assamese people. Many Bengal-origin people had already entered and settled in Assam apart from the partition refugees; the influx of more people had become an unbearable burden for the people of Assam. It was an indispensable existential fight, not by choice but by compulsion, long overdue due to apathy and failure of the then governments to handle the immigration issue.

The Assam Movement came to an end after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, following which Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) came to power. However, they, too, failed to solve the problem, and neither the names of the immigrants were deleted from the electoral rolls nor were the foreigners deported. There is no provision to do so in fact, as it would require either a formal agreement with Bangladesh or a forceful pushing of millions of people across the border. There cannot be any mechanism to do the latter constitutionally. India's assistance to East Pakistan in breaking away from West Pakistan and later India's involvement in the war in 1971 left no space for any agreement through which the immigrants who entered India may be sent back. Those who entered India from East Pakistan were constitutionally residents of Pakistan, and the pact that Indira Gandhi signed with Mujibur Rahman was a pact with the newly formed nation of Bangladesh. Seeing the magnitude of the human crisis created by the Pakistani army, Indira Gandhi, during her visit to Bangladesh on 24 March 1971, commented:

> On the 15th and 16th [of] May, I visited Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal to share the suffering of the refugees, to convey to them the sympathy and support of this House and the people of India … So massive a migration, in so short a time, is unprecedented in recorded history. About three and a half million people have come to India from Bangla Desh during the last eight weeks. They belong to every religious persuasion – Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian. They come from every social class and age group. They are not refugees in the sense we have understood this since Partition. They are victims of war who have sought refuge from the military terror across our frontier (Gandhi, 1971).

The language of Indira Gandhi underscores the fate of the victims of war. They are to stay, and the validation came through Section 6A of the Citizenship Act following the Assam Accord. However, as Bangladesh has refused to renew the Indira-Mujib pact, the fate of the minorities in Bangladesh is further jeopardised, with the possibility of more illegal immigration. Ironically speaking, although 6A got constitutional and judicial sanction, Clause 6 of the Assam Accord[17] which promised to shield the Assamese people by guaranteeing them certain rights remains unfulfilled. India being a powerful nation with the world's fifth-largest economy, should play a greater role in bringing stability to her neighbourhood and through, international diplomacy, ensure the protection of the human rights of the minority communities living in her neighbourhood. Moreover, since Bengali communities are indigenous to Bengal, the "victims of war" who entered India in 1971 could have been better rehabilitated in West Bengal as they would have assimilated easily with the Bengalis due to cultural affinity. Since this could not be made possible, a constitutional safeguard for the Assamese community becomes inevitable to protect their land and economic, political, and cultural rights.

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[17] Clause 6 of the accord states, "Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people" (Parashar, 2024).

Conclusion

The conflict between Bengali and Assamese communities discussed in this study, therefore, has a long trajectory and a complex history. As discussed earlier, the conflict intensified in a phased manner under different historical circumstances: language, immigration, economic competition, linguistic hegemony, and finally, a sense of overwhelming insecurity. The apprehension among the Assamese elite regarding the influence of the Bengali language in administrative matters and the Bengali community's economic predominance has led to various protest movements organised by the Assamese populace. This concern was initially articulated through the works of prominent Assamese writers, many of whom expressed their grievances against the Bengali community. This sentiment of discontent grew notably during the mid-20th Century, as many Calcutta-based newspapers published counter-arguments addressing the criticisms put forth by Assamese intellectuals. Later, many people migrated from East Pakistan to the Barak and Brahmaputra valleys during the partition. This movement significantly altered the demographic makeup of Assam and increased pressure on resources, leading to ethnic tensions and conflicts in the decades that followed. The failure of political leaders to address these issues further worsened the situation. Additionally, political rhetoric and misinformation contributed to a culture of violence.

The conflict in Assam is intricate, arising from a confluence of complex spatial, cultural, social, political, and economic dynamics. Presently, the predominant drivers of these conflicts include competition for land, resources, language, and employment opportunities. While some respondents in recent interviews argued that language has diminished as a pertinent source of conflict compared to its significance in the latter half of the 20th Century, prevailing political discourse surrounding linguistic issues suggests otherwise. A thorough examination of newspapers, digital platforms, and social media interactions, particularly on Facebook, reveals the influential role of certain organisations within the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley in exacerbating linguistic tensions and promoting communal animosities. Further, disputes regarding language use on billboards, signboards, and banners illuminate the underlying political rivalries between the Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking communities within these two valleys. This is to suggest that further research is required to highlight the impact of social media platforms in triggering conflict between the two communities.

It is important to acknowledge that the conflicts between the Bengali and Assamese communities have historically positioned Upper Assam and the Barak Valley as polarised representations of these two groups with either Guwahati becoming the centre stage of violence or Upper Assam and Barak Valley harassing the ethnic minority in their localities. These incidents are not simplistic manifestations of the underlying linguistic anxiety of the Assamese and the Bengali communities; rather, these incidents centring linguistic chauvinism are packed with arrogance, ignorance, and lack of humility among the middle-class leadership who keep on orchestrating communal violence by playing out differences. The bipolar hegemonic social structures that have emerged under the guise of language politics since colonial times continue to thrive on the dissemination of misinformation among the masses. Field studies conducted in Western Assam indicate that numerous Bengali medium schools have either shuttered or been converted into Assamese medium institutions. The remaining schools serve a dwindling number of students, predominantly from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Caste communities. In contrast, families with greater financial resources from both Assamese and Bengali backgrounds tend to enrol their children in English medium or Assamese medium schools, as indicated by survey respondents. Moreover, societal perceptions persist that the Bengali community has historically deprived Assamese speakers of their linguistic rights during the colonial era. This view lacks factual basis, as official communiqués discussed in this essay

reveal that the British authorities exclusively made decisions regarding language use. The standardisation of languages during that period should be understood as a Sanskritization process, reflecting the shared roots, multiple ethnicities, and interconnectedness of the two regions through a common Hindu tradition. Furthermore, observations made during a field visit to Goalpara provided evidence of the Bengali community's active promotion of the Assamese language. The contributions of figures such as Prasanna Kumar Ghosh, notably in establishing PR Government High School in 1901, signify pivotal milestones in forming the Assamese linguistic landscape (Correspondent, 2010). This historical context underscores the complexities of language politics in Assam, suggesting a need for a more nuanced understanding of inter-community relations and the socio-political dynamics at play.

Drawing from our findings and discussions above, we suggest that to contain future conflicts in Assam, a robust fact-checking agency should prohibit the spread of misinformation among the masses. Secondly, as we can see, most of the time, social inequalities and lack of economic opportunities create frustration among the common people, and political groups use the anger of these people for their gain. However, such political gain is a short-term achievement with ramifications that could destabilise a region economically and socially. The present Bharatiya Janata Party-led (BJP) government has played a positive role by giving classical status to both languages. However, a constitutional safeguard for the Assamese language by making it a compulsory subject in all state service examinations and other major languages like Bodo will ensure linguistic immunity to the ethnic communities. When economic opportunities are created based on languages, their applicability and demand automatically increase. Another positive change witnessed in the past few years is that since knowledge of proficiency in local languages has been made mandatory, the influx of candidates from other states has declined. These kinds of measures shall ensure economic safeguards for the native applicants. However,

there is a lack of public grievance redressal forum in Assam. Official red-tapism and lackadaisical attitude of officials also cause social dissatisfaction among civilians. There is a need for a public grievance redressal forum in every district that can mediate in diffusing social tensions among communities within the purview of the law. Since civil society members have been taking the law into their own hands, it is causing lawlessness underpinning the law's inefficacy. Lastly, implementing Clause 6 of the Assam Accord in letter and spirit is essential in providing constitutional safeguards to the Indigenous communities. However, the safeguard should be based on a scientific approach and rationality instead of relying on emotional intelligence.

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Data Availability Statement

We have collected 150 interviews; each interview is approximately 30 minutes.

About the Author

Debajyoti Biswas is an alumnus of Jawaharlal Nehru University and Gauhati University. He teaches Anglophone writings from India's northeast and Critical Theory to Postgraduate students. His areas of interest include identity, nationalism, environment, and conflict in North East India. His writings have appeared in journals like *Regional Environmental Change* (Springer), *Asian Ethnicity* (T&F), *National Identities* (T&F), *Journal for Cultural Research* (T&F), *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* (Springer), *Journal of International Women's Studies* (Bridgewater State University), *English: A Journal of English Association* (Oxford University Press), *South Asian Popular Culture* (T&F), *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (Nature), *Space and Culture, India*, and *Postcolonial Studies* (T&F). He has completed two minor research projects funded by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and is currently heading an ICSSR-funded Major research project (2024-2026) as a Project Director. He has co-edited four volumes entitled: *Nationalism in India* (Routledge) and *Global Perspectives on Nationalism* (Routledge), *Environmental Humanities in India* (Springer), and *Disability and Peripherality* (Springer). His monograph entitled *Anglophone Literature from Northeast India and Women's Writing* has been published by Atlantic Publishers in 2024. He is the managing editor of *Transcript: An e-Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, published by the Department of English, Bodoland University.