

## **British Raj in Assam and the Politics of Linguistic Nationalism: An Overview on Growth and Maturation**

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**Abstract:** Colonial Assam witnessed the rise of linguistic nationalism as a dominant force developing identity and political mobilization. This study examines maturation process of linguistic nationalism in Assam during the colonial period, centering on how colonial policies shaped language based identity creation and political ambitions. Depending on historical interpretation and examining archival records and literary texts, the paper studies the antagonism between Bengali and Assamese in terms of territorial and cultural contentions. It also emphasizes the missionary engagement, the emergence of middle class, Bengali Assamese linguistic disputes, population diversity and regional programs for education. The conclusions disclose that linguistic nationalism in Assam both a reply to colonial linguistic structure and a push for colonial reorganizations. The study emphasizes the lasting impact of colonial linguistic strategies on Indian nation building and emphasizes the language complexity in the local politics of later post-colonial Assam.

**Keywords:** British Raj, Assam, Bengali, colonial Assam, Nation building, Post-Colonial, Linguistic Nationalism, Linguistic Identity, Baptist Missionaries, Sylhet, Maturation.

### **Introduction:**

Linguistic nationalism in colonial Assam advanced in the complicated societal and political framework of British rule. Barua (1999) has articulated that nationalism in Assam matured mainly about the issues of linguistic and cultural aspects which is varied from the political and economic Nationalism of many other parts of India. With the administrative reformation and creation of Assam province in 1874, linguistic issues foster to a new course. This article examines the history of growth and maturation of linguistic nationalism during the time 1874 to 1947.

### **Organizational Transformation and the Linguistic Issues:**

Assam was the annexed by the British in 1826 throw the Treaty of Yandaboo. Assam province was created with the merger of five uneven areas. (Hossain, 2017). Sylhet was annexed to it to remove revenue deficiency and to increase administrative efficiency. (Ahmed 2025). However, due to merger of Bengali populated districts with Assam the population pattern was changed and it had created anxieties among Assamese speaking people. Earlier on, the colonial administration made Bengali as the language of courts and medium of instructions in schools in 1836 which created an important ground for Assamese language politics in Assam. (Roy 2022) The influential Assamese intellectuals and American Baptist missionaries demonstrated against the installation of Bengali language and argued for the reinstallation of Assamese as a language of courts and schools and accordingly Assamese was reinstated in 1873. This sorts of transition was instrumental in establishing the language as a sign of political opposition and identity. (Goswami 2008)

### **Rule of Missionaries:**

Baptist mission became key player in the debates regarding language issue in Assam can be obtained in Nathan Brown's 1848 book 'Grammatical Notes on the Assamese Language'. Nathan brown was effective in recovering old Assamese scripts and prepared text books for the Baptist Schools since 1848. Under this process he learned Assamese language and His Grammatical Notes is probably the earliest articulation of the missionary views in the context of colonial language policy (Dasgupta, 2021). The missionaries installed printing press in Assamese language and established schools in Assamese language and strongly advocated for reinstallation of Assamese language in the schools in Assam.

### **Rise of Linguistic Differences and the Politics on Identity:**

During the second and third decade of the twentieth century, language was the central factor to grow linguistic tensions in Assam. Language was the recognized as a sign to compete for professional opportunities, commercial establishments, organization entitlements and educational rights. Privileged Assamese society observed the ethnic impact of Bengali as a menace to territorial identity.(Nag 1990). The Bengali population pattern of Sylhet had created complexity and fueled the linguistic nationalism, even Legislative Council debates on Sylhet transfer issue was moved constantly during the fast half of the 20th century. Through a debated referendum Sylhet was merged to East Pakistan in 1947 (Ahmed 2016). The foundation of Assam Association in 1903 and Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1917 were operational to lay structural foundation of linguistic nationalism in Assam. They prescribed major directives in fostering Assamese based educational setup, standardization of language and reinforcing regional identity.

### **Emergence of middle class and Linguistic Nationalism:**

During the first quarter of the 20th century, a division of conscious and learned Assamese elite were emerged. Among these intelligentsia, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Padmanath Gohain Barua, Chandranath Sharma, Anandram Dekhiyal Phukan, Maniram Dewan, Gunabhiram Barua and others were prominent. They carefully acted for the linguistic interests of the Assamese. Moreover native presses had created the grounds for the Assamese middle class to think about their language and identity. Assam Bilashini (1871), Bijuli (1890), Assamiya (1918), Jonaki (1889), Times of Assam (1923), Bonti (1927) and so on had played significant role behind societal transformation and awareness (Gogoi, 2024).

### **Pan-Indian Nationalism and Linguistic Nationalism of Assamese:**

Amidst the ongoing conflict between Bengali and Assamese the development of nationalism in 19th century Assam was a dual process. People were increasingly moving as much to pan-Indian nationalism in the context of national level, at the same time little nationalism was tied with them at the linguistic regional level. These two processes more often complementary rather than contradictory to each other, that allowed nationalism in India, for that directions, also in Assam become stiff opposition to British imperialism (Guha, 2006).

### **The Crucial Forties (1940-1947):**

Linguistic nationalism got its maturation during the last decade of colonial India (1940-1947).(Misra,2017). Literary works, news media, peoples movement, parliamentary debates, coordinated language promotion activities, all of these contributed to develop a mature language identity (Guha,2006).

### **Conclusion:**

Linguistic nationalism during Company's rule in Assam grown through synthesized administrative initiatives, demographic disparities, language promotion efforts of missionaries, language based cultural activities of the middle class. The ideological framework of modern Assamese identity was developed throughout the years 1874-1947. This historical age is necessary to comprehend the regional nationalism, language advocacy and identity politics in the succeeding post-colonial Assam.

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