

The Play of Language, Land, Region, and Religion in Extending the Cultural Hegemony and Political Dominance in India's Northeast

Ajmol Hussain Laskar¹, Reena Sanasam²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Science, National Institute of Technology Silchar ajmol24_rs@hum.nits.ac.in

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Science, National Institute of Technology Silchar reena@hum.nits.ac.in

How to cite this article: Ajmol Hussain Laskar, Reena Sanasam(2024) The Play of Language, Land, Region, and Religion in Extending the Cultural Hegemony and Political Dominance in India's Northeast. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 19007-19010.

ABSTRACT

Northeast has been a contested region regardless of colonial, post-colonial, or post-independent India. *"In pre-colonial time the notion of Northeast India as a geographical or cultural unit simply did not exist. And in colonial times the term, if used at all, referred to as much larger area: Orissa, Bihar, Bengal and Assam"* (Ven Schendel, 2018). It was only after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 as a nation, and the annexation of Sikkim in 1975 by India, the territorial definition of Northeast in the Indian context got a concrete shape with a proper boundary connecting to the central India through Chicken's Neck. The region is prone to the existence of different ethnic communities and shares boundaries with different countries, thus the migration among the ethnic groups for political, social, and cultural adaptation is gospel truth. Before the British encounter in the first half of the 19th c. These tribes had no idea of a realm such as an India or an Indian Culture. They knew and recognised only their own identities and cultures, and that of their immediate tribal neighbours (Lygdoh, 2017). The idea of assimilation and integration of tribal folks into mainstream India emerged since the colonial force stepped in the region. Thus, Northeast in the Indian context is just its postcolonial adopted son. The post-independent state formation in the Northeastern region was grossly based on ethnic tribes. To understand the complex dynamics of colonial, postcolonial, and post-independent conflicts in the region of Northeast, I will consider Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam as the primary areas of analysis which will facilitate in understanding the rest of the region. Further, the paper will try to acquaint the readers with the issues of migration, the play of language and religion, and how it vilifies a particular community as Other and lionize one as master. The political and linguistic discourse in extending hegemony will be catered through new (Miya) literature that has emerged as a resistive structure to the prevailing dominant discourse.

Keywords: Northeast India, Postcolonial, ethnic communities, Migration, Hegemony, Miya Poetry,

1.1 The Hill-Plains Relations, Territorial Demarcation and its Postcolonial Development.

The demography of Northeast provides a peculiar character of the existence of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills surrounded by the plain lands of Bengal, and parts of Assam. Because of the proximity of the hill tribes and plains, there was continual trading between the two to meet everyday needs. The hill tribes were dependent on the plains for procuring items scarce in the hills. The local produce which had a market in the plains were thus exchanged or bartered for items needed in the hills (Gurung, 2023). As a result, trade connected diverse sections of the region, allowing access to various resources and goods. The post-independent development of state formation and territorial demarcation was conspicuous from the administrative point of view but was sensationallly pejorative and an extra burden for the tribal folks as the territory of the tribes already existed based on their shared

history and oral tradition. The international boundary line was imaginatively drawn by the colonial administration without any empirical research which led to many families being bifurcated to exist half in India and the other half in Myanmar. Ziippao aptly pictured this hallucinating view exemplifying one of Angh's (chief's) family whose home has been divided in the middle. Thus, the Angh and his family dine in Myanmar but sleep in India. This precisely makes us understand that the territorial demarcation wasn't any welfare but a bane for the locals.

In the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26, the British conquered Assam, marking their first entry into North East India. They occupied the conquered region but followed an isolationist policy in the North East Frontier Tracts intending to leave the indigenous people alone. To limit the mobility and protect the culture of the tribes of the region the first policy that the British applied was the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation in 1873 also known as the Inner Line Regulation. This colonial regulation exists even today in the form of Inner Line Permit applicable to the states of Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland. Thus, the economic policy of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation isn't a reality for this land which is one prominent reason for its backwardness. I had the first-hand experience of traveling to NIT-Mizoram for my Ph.D. interview. It was a journey of 160 km from Silchar (Mizoram House) which took eight hours to reach there by a taxicab as the Highway was full of potholes. In the border everyone was rigorously checked and enquired about the ILP, I need not had to procure it as I was visiting for educational purpose. On the day of the interview, I conversed with a Mizo boy who also came for the interview. I asked him, the whole country today has been connected by the broad-gauge (railway) network and why is it Mizoram still bereft of this set-up. He responded rather positively as he believes that the railway connectivity would make the region prone to outsider notice leading to the cultural affinity of the tribe at risk. These hurdles in the mobility of goods, people, and concepts made the state a deserted region from the rest of India.

If we look at the discursive pattern of India as a nation-state, we find that to administer Northeast, the government of India tried to acquaint the tribal people in one single entity as "Indian" with the catchphrase "unity in diversity". This phrase, in turn, serves as the ideological base to suppress the dissenting voice through the use of *repressive structure*. The ideological apparatus of the term "unity in diversity" thus serves to maintain the status quo legitimising the military control and suppressing the voice from the border. Arunachal Pradesh is one such example. The territorial demarcation of the state formation in Arunachal Pradesh has a history of mainland India's *cultural hegemony* over it. The colonial master previously named it as Northeast Frontier Tract which the Indian government Indianised by Sanskritising its name to "Arunachal Pradesh". This Sanskritisation has evoked an epistemic structure of reactionary literature from the region. Yumlam Tana's writing serves as the counter voice of the resistive hegemonic structure. Tana outlines how the Indian leaders whom he calls "trespassers" attempted to change the Northeast by giving the region a new name (Arunachal Pradesh) in a language (Sanskrit) which they are alien to:

The trespassers not knowing what to call the place,
Named it, in alien tongue, Arunachal Pradesh,
Albeit the land of rising sun. ...

That is how 'Gekar Sinyi' became the 'Ganga'. (Tana, 2015, p. 12)

The author is disturbed by this imperialist stance of renaming the land and worried about the memory that he had with the land. The renaming of lake "Gekar Sinyi" to "Ganga" has traumatised the author to its root as now he has to think of his land from Indianised view as it has been *interpellated* upon him.

2. Assamese/ Bengali: Literary and cultural cockfight and its current development.

One of the major geopolitical issues with respect to Assam is migration. Migration is embedded in history and with respect to Assam, who came when is a task impossible to figure out. Assam the then the greater part of Bengal has both literary and cultural influence over it. Assamese as a language has a genealogical complexity of its emergence and its categorization of whether it is an Indo-Aryan or Tibeto-Barman language. A major part of the nineteenth century was spent disputing the claims of leading Bengali scholars and writers, including Rabindranath Tagore, about Assamese being a dialect of Bengali (Saikia, 2023). By the end of 19th c. of the extensive research by the Assamese literati helped to gain Assamese its recognition as an Indo-Aryan language. The rediscovery of *Charyapada* in 19th c. by Haraprasad Shastri from the Royal Library of Nepalese King triggered questions about its linguistics genealogy. The Assamese, Odias, Bengali all claimed it as their ancient text until the linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji wrote *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* tracing its linguistic roots and proved that *Charyapada* as the first written text of Bengali literature.

The burning sociopolitical issue today in Assam is immigration. In contrast to today, life for the state's immigrant population was significantly easier when colonial government was formed in 1826. To make up for the declining Assamese population and economy, the native Assamese welcomed the immigrants with open arms. Assamese intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan advocated for the emigration of Bengalis to Assam (Choudhury, 2019). The British encouraged educated Bengalis, mostly Hindus, to migrate to Assam to improve administration and impoverished but skilled Muslim peasants from Bangladesh's Mymensingh district to boost revenue from the newly acquired province. The seed of animosity and division was sown when the colonial rulers imposed Bengali as an official language on the native Assamese populace and relegated Assamese to the status of a dialect of Bengali. The Assamese regard their language as the essence of their identity, hence imposition of Bengali on Assamese was the most damaging. They saw the Bengali immigrants as alien invaders intent on destroying their culture and way of life. What was once welcome is now a threat to Assamese.

Over the past decade, right-wing nationalism has become more prevalent in several nations, including the USA and India, which are regarded as the flagbearers of liberal, inclusive, and democratic political setup. Given the emergence of right-wing politics in India, which has led to the marginalisation of Muslims in general and Miyas¹ in particular, it is not surprising that the community of Muslims of Bengali descent, known as the Miyas, would fit into this discursive scenario of Hindu/Muslim polarisation. Miyas are the people whose ancestors migrated from Bangladesh. They are settled in chars (river islands) and chaporis (low-lying flood-prone river banks) of lower Assam. To do away with the Assamese/Bengali conflict Miya surrendered their linguistic root and accepted both the Assamese language and culture to adapt to the mainstream Assamese sentiment. The Assamese people's anxiety about losing their native tongue progressively subsided once the Muslim migrants acknowledged Assamese as their mother tongue. The integration of Bengalis as Assamese helped the Assamese population maximising its strength. Otherwise, it was impossible for the local Assamese to reconstitute the state of Assam in 1956, on the basis of Assamese language (Choudhury, 2019).

The present government BJP in both state and centre stands as a threat to the Muslims and Miyas because of its ideological leaning towards RSS. The introduction of NRC and CAA has further dehumanised Muslims and Miyas and a communal atmosphere prevailed throughout the state as the citizenship criteria were made totally on religious lines. This alienation of Miyas who once accepted Assamese both linguistically and culturally is now vilified as Other based on their Muslim identity. Miyas in search of identity and to preserve their memory tried to establish museums and monuments but has been repeatedly denied by the state cultural institutions. The relentless oppression faced by the community has given rise to a poetry movement (Miya Poetry) that functions as a new episteme, seeking to counteract the dehumanisation by embracing their 'Miya' identity. Miya poetry got its first shape in the digital platform (Facebook) and is still to publish an anthology because of the institutional hegemony of the Assamese over Miyas. The first Miya poem by Hafiz Ahmed uploaded on Facebook titled "Write Down 'I Am a Miyah'" replicates Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Identity Card" which talks about Israeli occupants and their torment over the Palestinian in their own land. Ahmed drawing similar pain of the Palestinians concerning their identity, pens his own trauma that he faces because of his Miya identity:

Write
Write Down
I am a Miya
My serial number in the NRC is 200543
I have two children
Another is coming
Next summer.
Will you hate him
As you hate me? (Ahmed, 2021)

The long-suppressed voice of the Miya and their poetry did not find any space in the mainstream media and newspapers. On 10 July 2019, an Assamese journalist name Pranabjit Doley who has earned the reputation of a serial accusation-filer filed a first information report (FIR) at a Guwahati police station against ten Miyah poets and activists associated with them (Hussain, 2022, p. 103). It is the digital social media platform (Facebook) that

¹ Miya in Urdu means a gentleman, while in Assam it serves as a new category in a derogatory manner designating Muslim migrants of Bengali descent.

acted as a liberating force in expressing their dissent on the current communal narrative of Muslim marginalisation and Hindu vote-bank politics.

2.1. CONCLUSION

Northeast is a scattered region based on the existence of different ethnic linguistic groups and tribes. The region is very different from the mainland India and its culture. Every tribe or community has its own issues and to club all issues under same heading would be a work half-done. One single issue that all tribes adhere is their unwelcoming nature for the intruder albeit there aren't any issues for the temporary settlers. Most of the tribes are inclined to live in isolation for fear of corrupting their cultures by outsiders. But the only solution for the region to come at par with the rest of India is through assimilation. Culture is not a fixed entity and is bound to evolve. Fixity of culture is a dogmatic view and adhering to it will merely lead the region to a hinterland. Assimilation involves appreciation and respect for other culture without wiping out of one's own. A bowdlerization of tribal culture is a necessity and the adaptation of the best that has been thought and said can bring the region at par with the rest of India.

3. Bibliography

- Ahmed, H. (2021). Write Down I am a Miya. In N. S. Harsh Mander, *This Land is Mine, I Am Not of this Land: CAA-NRC and the Manufacture of Statelessness*. New Delhi, India: Speaking Tiger.
- Arnold, M. (1868). Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism. *Cornhill Magazine*.
- Azad, H. (2015). *Lal Nil Dipabali ba Bangla Shahityer Jibani*. (Fourth, Ed.) Dhaka, Bangladesh: Agamee Prakashani.
- Berry, P. (2018). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Fourth ed.). New Delhi, India: Viva Books.
- Choudhury, B. D. (2019, December 17). *Immigrants were once welcomed in Assam – Part 2*. Retrieved from Pragyata: <https://pragyata.com>
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Tavistock.
- Gurung, T. (2023). Frontier Tribes and the Mughals in the Eighteenth Century. In S. Nag, *The Mughals and the North-East: Encounter and Assimilation in Medieval India* (pp. 243-268). India: Routledge.
- Hussain, S. M. (2022). Pitting Irony against Aggression: Miyah Poetry as a Challenge to the Dominant Assamese Discourse. In K. M. Islam, *Literatures from Northeast India: Beyond the Centre-Periphery Debate*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lygdoh, F. (2017, November 16). The Shillong Times. *North Eastern Tribals and the Indian Mainstream*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from <https://theshillongtimes.com>
- Now, T. (2022, October 26). Funding For Miya Museum Will Be Traced', Says Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sharma [VIDEO]. Assam. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com>
- Saikia, A. (2023). *The Quest for Modern Assam: A History:1942-2000*. India: Penguin Random House India Private Limited.
- Ven Schendel, W. (2018). Contested, Vertical, Fragmenting: De-Partitioning 'Northeast India' Studies. In M. B.-R. Mélanie Vandenhelsken, *Geographies of Difference: Explorations in Northeast Indian Studies* (pp. 272-288). London and New York: Routledge.
- Tana, Y. (2015). *The Wind Also Sings: Poetry of Protest and Anger from India's Northeast*. India: Partridge. Retrieved April 2024, from <https://books.google.co.in>
- Ziipao, R. R. (2020). Frontier tribes and nation states: infrastructural intersection at the Indo (Naga)-Myanmar borderland. *Asian Ethnicity*.