LINGUISTIC
SITUATION

in
North-East
India

Edited by
MRINAL MIRI

Professor Mrinal Miri is an outstanding scholar of the country. He is a former Director of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and a former President of North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong. At present, he is the Vice Chancellor of North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition of this book was published in 1982. Two decades have passed since then. The basic issues however of linguistic scenario of North East India have not changed much. We need to understand the problems of relationship between language, culture and politics.

We would like to thank Concept Publishing Company and Mr. Ashok Kumar Mittal for taking initiative to bring out the second edition of the book.

7th October, 2002

B. DATTA RAY

Secretary
N.E.I.C.S.S.R

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

North-East India Council for Social Science Research in association with the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, North Eastern Hill University held on September 25-26, 1979 a seminar on the Linguistic Situation in North East India in its effort to study the multi-dimensional issues involved in the development process of North East India. The special focus of the seminar was on the linguistic situation with particular reference to the problems of inter-ethnic communication, linguistic identity and growth of ethnic consciousness on the basis of linguistic affiliation in post-independence period. The attitude of the numerous ethnic groups in the maintenance and shift from various languages spoken was brought to light in the seminar. Attempts were made on the basis of phonological and syntactical study of the language to arrive at deeper understanding of the underlying historical and cultural identity of the people of the region.

We were much encouraged in our study by the wide response from scholars from different regions. We are grateful to Dr. A. K. Dhan, the then Vice-Chancellor, North Eastern Hill University for agreeing to inaugurate the seminar. We are also grateful to Rev. Brother M. G. Shannon, Principal, St. Edmund's College, Anthropological Survey of India, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, and the Chief Regional Manager, State Bank of India, Shillong, for their support in making this study possible.

Dr. Mrinal Miri, a past president of NEICSSR has kindly edited the papers for publication. We thank him for it. We thank also Mr. Sarkar and Ri Khasi Press, Shillong for undertaking the printing of this book.

9th August, 1982 **B. DATTA RAY**
Secretary
N.E.I.C.S.S.R

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INTRODUCTION

One of the difficulties of editing the proceedings of a seminar is that of organizing the material in such a manner as to give it a sense—even if it is a vague of coherence and purpose. In spite of the best efforts on the part of the organizers to formulate a seminar problem in relatively definite terms with more or less clear bounds, the papers that eventually come up for discussion fail, nearly always, to remain within the confines of these limits. The volume that results is thus frequently no more than a collection of unconnected papers. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that very often detailed records of discussions held are also not available.

The present volume, as the reader will quickly realize, suffers somewhat from this difficulty. However, what makes it still worth publishing is that in the general state of ignorance about the North-East, this volume at least brings to light the enormity of the phenomenon of language in this part of the country. And some of the papers deal with their problems with vigour and incisiveness, while others contain valuable information. Still others are almost the very first attempts at systematic understanding of a certain kind.

It seems to me that a question which we cannot and *must not* avoid asking in a fundamental way is: "What ought to be my attitude to another's language?" I think of it primarily as a moral question capable of a rational answer; and although much of our talk about the problems of language in this country presumes some answer to this question, we have really not faced the question with the kind of intellectual explicitness and honesty that it deserves.

This is not the place for me to discuss this question in any detail. I would, however, like to consider some of the grounds on which we might normally appreciate or criticise another's language. One might say any of the following in criticism of a language:

(i) that it is a distorted version of another language (e.g. "Assamese is a distortion of Bengali"); (ii) that it does not have a script; (iii) that it does not have a literature ("the Mishing language does not have a literature and, therefore, it is only a 'dialect' "), (iv) that it is incomplete (inadequate) ("the Bengali language says much better what the Apatani language can say only inadequately").

To take these in order: (i) Two languages may be very closely similar to one another, and can be shown even to have a common origin but this does not make either of them an inferior version of the other or of the "original" language. A language—or, to use Wittgenstein's phrase, a "form of life"—is what it is and not another one in a different guise. "The individuation of a language is undoubtedly a difficult task, and often in the actual act of individuation, considerations other than linguistic (in the broad sense in which a language encompasses a distinct form of life)"[1] may be involved. Such considerations may be political, economic, historical and racial and so on; or, of course, all of them together. But the claim by a group that their native language is autonomous and distinct, although motivated partly by any or all of these considerations—is there ever a pure, unmixed motive of human action?—is almost invariably associated with the perception, by the group, of significant differences in their form of life. To think that this language is a distorted version of one's own may exhibit an arrogance and insensitiveness which could be compared to the arrogance and insensitiveness of thinking that there is no way of looking at a thing other than one's own.

(ii) To criticise another language on the ground that it does not have a script is peculiarly misplaced. The script of a language is not an internal part of it. It stands, as it were, outside the language in a way in which the form of life cannot stand outside the language and it gets whatever "life" it has *from* the language and not the other way round. A script without a language is "*dead*"; but a language without a script is still very much a language, not *less* of

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1.   I have argued elsewhere for the view that a language does encompass a distinct form of life, a distinct culture, if you like.

a one. The presence of a script may undoubtedly help in the growth of a language in so far as it facilitates the exploration of the possibilities of the language, but such exploration can take place, and *have* taken place without the help of a script. The absence of a script is not a criterion of the poverty of a language.

(iii) The third kind of criticism is, however, serious. The possibility of literature is inherent in any language, and it is in literature that the bounds of meaning of a language are continuously explored and extended. A language which has not developed a literature has not, as it were, "realized" itself. But is there in fact a language which does not have a literature? If the emergence of a literature is not thought to be dependent on the existence of a written tradition—and it will be merely silly to think so—then I do not think there is in fact a language without a literature. For, literature will then include stories, songs, legends, "myths" (if that is the correct word), parables, incantations and so on. It is quite safe to say that there is not a language which does not have a good measure of all these. In fact quite frequently, the primary source of creativity even in a written tradition of literature is to be found in the symbols employed in these stories, songs, etc.[2]

(iv) In a sense, no language is complete, because it must be possible for new things to be said in it. But when a language is criticised as being incomplete what is meant is that some things are (can be) said in that language, but vaguely, confusedly and inadequately, while the same things can be said clearly and adequately, in another language. And this is not true. An attempt to "improve" a language by inducting elements into it from a different language so that the "same" things may be said more completely in the former, cannot succeed; because, the result of such an attempt

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2.   "Language is something that can have a literature. This is where it is so different from chess. And if we include folksongs and stories, then literature is immediately important in almost any language; important for ways in which things said in the language are understood. It has to do with the 'force' which one remarks or another may have in that language, for instance. And in this way, it has to do also what is seen to make sense and what is not." Rush Rhees, *Discussions of Wittgenstein*, London, 1970.

is not that the same things are said less confusedly in the language, but that something different is also said in the language now. When Wittgenstein says that any given language is "complete" he means that you fall into a confusion if you try to provide a more ample and more perfect system for what may be said in it. Whatever may be said in your new system, it will not be what was said in the original "language game".

I believe that a language affords a specially intimate and the most authentic access to the culture of the people whose native language it is. A culture, of course, includes things like the way people cultivate their lands, bury their dead, celebrate marriages, build their houses and so on; and a study of the culture must include all these and more. But these people's language (which, of course, includes its literature) is not another of these cultural things that they have. It embodies, as it were, the special "life" and tone of the entire culture. That is why mastering another's language is not just a matter of mastering its grammatical rules, vocabulary and accent. It is much more importantly a matter of understanding nuances of gestures, pauses, voice and subtle differences of action and reaction. In the absence of such an understanding, to speak another's language with a mastery over its grammar is speaking it without grasping the life of the language. And one's access to another culture based on what might be called a mere "mechanical" understanding of its language (its grammar and pronunciation) is therefore bound to be superficial. Also, therefore, any *assessment* of the culture based on such an understanding of its language must be fraught with danger—both intellectual and moral. There will be a great danger of assimilating it to one's own and applying to it one's own criteria of evaluation. If the assimilation is wrong the evaluation is bound to be wrong. Someone who thinks of polyandry as practised in some societies as indicating an extraordinary moral depravity in the women of these societies, makes this type of mistake of assimilation and evaluation.

In the following passage from his *Celebration of Awareness*, Ivan Illich speaks of silences, but his argument can be extended to encompass a great variety of other things. I quote it because it says with such tremendous eloquence and with such telling effect what

ideally I would like to have been able to say. Thus to quote Illich:

> To learn a language in a human and mature way, therefore, is to accept the responsibility for its silences and for its sounds. The gift a people gives us in teaching us their language is more a gift of the rhythm, the mode and subtleties of its system of silences than of its system of sounds. It is an intimate gift for which we are accountable to the people who have entrusted us with their tongue. A language of which I know only the words and not the pauses is a continuous offence.
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> It takes more time and effort and delicacy to learn the silence of a people than to learn its sounds. Some people have a special gift for this. Perhaps this explains why some missionaries, notwithstanding their efforts, never come to speak properly, communicate delicately through silences. Although they speak with the "accent of natives" they remain forever thousands of miles away. The learning of the grammar of silence is an art much more difficult to learn than the grammar of sounds. .
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> As words must be learned by listening and by painful attempts at imitation of a native speaker, so silences must be acquired through delicate openness to them. Silence has its pauses and hesitations, its rhythms and expressions and inflections; its durations and pitches, and times to be and time not to be. Just as with our words there is an analogy between our silence with men and with God. To learn the full meaning of one, we must practice and deepen the other. (Illich, 1970).

2. From what I have said, it will be obvious to the reader of the volume that I differ substantially, in spirit at least, with some of the contributors. I should particularly like to record here my difference with the views of Sudhansu S. Tunga. Quite apart from the material presented in his paper, "Sociology of Language: North-Eastern Case", I find its tone wholly objectionable.

Amalendu Guha ("Language Politics in North-Eastern India") with characteristic lucidity discuss the rise of "little nationalism" in the North-East and the role that language has played in this development. However, as he points out, in the hills region of the area "a pool of other symbols like common dress, diet, economic

ways and folk culture rather than language as such, has been the primary rallying point for nationality formation".

In their substantial paper, "Khasi-Bengali to Roman: the Colonial Transformation of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills", Shyamdas Bhattacharya and Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharjee trace, with clarity and insight, the changes of fortune of the Bengali language and script in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills under the impact of British colonialism.

M. Kar describes with great care the "evolution of Assamese as a medium of instruction" during the colonial period; he also sees the origin of the language problem, which has figured so prominently in the politics of Assam in recent decades, in the wranglings about the medium of instruction in the District of Goalpara during the nineteen twenties and thirties.

In his paper, "trend of the Language and Culture of Manipur", E. Nilakanta Singh presents the stark reality of Manipur in simple but telling language. The problem of diversity in this tiny state is overwhelming, and the future seems bleak.

B. N. Talukdar makes a fervent plea for the depoliticization of the admittedly complex language problem of the region.

The kinship terminology of the Garo language is fascinating and in his equally fascinating paper, "Kinship and Language: An Exploration of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the Garo Language", D. N. Majumdar analyses the organic relationship between this terminology and what he calls Garo "culture" (as distinct from "society", "environment" and "psychology"). I am not sure about this last distinction, but the paper remains an important contribution to cultural linguistics.

Birendranath Datta's paper is a sensitive survey of the amazing variety of "non standard" forms of Assamese spoken in Assam and some of the neighbouring areas. These vary, as he shows, not only according to region, but, within the same region, according to community, class and religion.

Promod Chandra Bhattacharji's papers makes a useful survey of the speakers of the Sino-Tibetan group of language in the region.

P. Goswami's excellent paper on loan words in Assam and

some other languages of the region shows how enormously profitable this kind of study can be in understanding social changes and intercultural relationships.

Tabu Taid's paper is a pioneering work on Mising phonology and K. Das Gupta's paper brings out interesting features of the language spoken in Arunachal Pradesh.

It remains for me to thank the North-East India Council for Social Science Research, which has done such wonderful work in the field of social research in the area over the past decade, for asking me to edit this volume. This organization, under the extremely able and creative guidance of its Secretary, Dr. B. Datta-Ray, has done more perhaps than any other comparable organization to promote academic awareness of the societies of the North-Eastern part of our country. It has been my privilege to be associated with its work.

MRINAL MIRI

PART – I

LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

1

LANGUAGE IN POLITICS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA
The Background

Amalendu Guha

I

Language politics stem from objectively distinct ethnic groups' aspirations for achieving certain rights—those ranging from the recognition of their group identities in the matter of language and culture in some form or other within the Indian Union to the right of forming a separate, sovereign state outside it.

There could be two approaches to understanding the language situation in its political aspects. One, the conventional national integration approach from above: and the other, the nationality-formation approach from below.[1]

The first approach starts with the assumption that India is a nation-state, representing in all-inclusive terms diverse linguistic and other ethnic groups which are either already fully integrated or are still in the process of being integrated. Here, the emphasis is on assimilation. What is brought into focus is a pan-Indian identity, a composite nationalism, to which minority ethnic groups, if lacking integration and loyalty, are to be assimilated.

The second approach starts with the given multi-ethnic situation, takes note of the process of nationality-formation within that situation and examines how the emergent nationalities are mutually related within the given state. Here, the emphasis is on

the recognition of differentiation, rather than on assimilation. 'One nation, one state' principle is not recognized. In a country like India, the multiple nationalities are said to have their political unity rooted in the shared memories of their common struggle against the British imperialism and in the considerations for convenience and common advantages of sharing a single political structure, and not in the awareness of a common national identity.[2]

Whatever be the approach—the one from above or the other from below—it cannot be denied that the growth of nationalism in India has simultaneously proceeded along two tracks. There are two streams of nationalism. One, at the all-India plane, coextensively with the whole Indian territory and all ethnic groups, demanding loyalty to the Indian nationality. And the other, at the regional-linguistic planes, demanding loyalty to the respective regional nationalities. Elsewhere, I have called the former as great nationalism and the latter as little nationalism—both moreoftenthan not accommodative to each other.[3] These are not necessarily pulls in opposite directions, but have been and are, by and large, complementary to each other. Simultaneously pulls of great and little nationalisms have created, or are in the process of creating, dual national personalities (whether recognized so by the Constitution or not), that is, dualized nationalities within the Indian Union in which no single nationality is dominant[4] Hence, India is better described as a multi-national state rather than as a nation-state.

Ethnic groups may be distinguished from one another by such criteria as language, religion, caste, tribe and, of course, region. However, such distinguishing features do not by themselves, automatically and necessarily, lead to the emergence of national consciousness. It emerges when a rising middle class, belonging to such a group, steps in to mediate. The class highlights one or more of these distinguishing features to make the group self-conscious so that by mobilizing mass support, it could win some class demands, skilfully posed as the group's national demand. Thus being conscious of a community of culture through the mediation of its middle class, the group is slowly transformed into a nationality, attaining or desiring to attain substantial political significance within or outside the existing state.

This is how Indian nationalism and the Bengali, Assamese,

Naga, Mizo and Khasi nationalisms and their likes developed—some early, others late— in course of the last one and a half centuries in our country.

Keeping this broad frame in view, the evolution of little nationalisms in north-east India, involving the language issue as a major symbol of group identity, will be discussed in the remaining part of this chapter.

II

Provincial boundaries in British India were fixed in accordance with considerations of convenience and economy, rather than of regional homogeneities. The province of Assam, therefore, engulfed almost the whole of present north-east India, with its many region-based languages and tribes. With the rise of the middle classes in mainland India during the nineteenth century, there was a simultaneous development of both great and little nationalisms. Until 1917, i.e. before the rise of Gandhiji to national leadership, the Indian National Congress used to champion the cause of great nationalism alone, without taking into consideration India's multi-ethnic and multinational situation. However, alongside of this mainstream of nationalism, there was the other stream—the little nationalisms of the Bengali, Marathi, Assamese and other nationalities. Their middle class wanted for themselves a share of the market as well as of regional political power to ensure it, even as they were together fighting for India's independence from the yoke of British rule.

In north-east India, Bengali and Assamese middle classes came, in that process, into conflict with each other. Their mutual competition for jobs, business and other opportunities, which were limited under the colonial regime, was keen. In course of that competition and conflict, the Assamese middle class plays its role in making its own ethnic group self-conscious about its language and political rights and about the desirability of an autonomous status for the Assamese nationality, in some form or other. The national consciousness in the case of the Assamese fairly developed by 1920.

With the rise of the middle classes amongst the hill tribes thereafter, this process of nationality-formation slowly extended to

the hills region as well. There, the Khasi, Garo, Naga and Mizo nationalities emerged, in due course, in their respective regional base by 1947. They too, nurtured their languages with pride and aspired for autonomy in some form or other. This unfolding process continued through the post-independence period which saw a number of regional national movements, the constitutional provision for and extension of the Sixth Schedule and the progressive break-up of the composite province of Assam into a number of autonomous states and regions.

III

Language, as a mobilizing symbol of nationality-formation, has not however played the same role everywhere. Nor is it always of primary importance, (e.g. in Nagaland) in this respect. The point may be illustrated.

In the case of the Assamese nationality-formation, the language symbol remained all along the strongest spiritual bond. Status of the language in offices and educational institutions and relative numerical strength of the Assamese speaking community from census to census— these have remained the chief concerns of Assamese nationalism. This nationalism if often sustained by positing 'Bengali expansionism' as the main obstacle in the way of the development of the Assamese language and culture. Hence, its political programme includes measures that would permanently ensure both numerical and linguistic-cultural domination of the Assamese within the state. At times, Assamese little nationalism becomes fierce and aggressive, so far as the ethnic minorities are concerned.

This model has repeated itself in the case of other little nationalisms of north-east India, only with this difference that language as a mobilizing symbol has played a lesser role and that the Assamese, too, had been suspected of "expansionism". In Mizoram, the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills, Mizo, Khasi and Garo languages are respectively, the dominant languages but not the only languages. Here, the dominant little nationalisms have stood for assimilation of smaller local (tribal), linguistic groups to the main group. To this extent, languages play a positive role in

transcending tribal boundaries and widening the base of the respective nationalities, all of them having well-defined home land regions. In all these cases, attempts at making Assamese the official language in the old state of Assam boomeranged. However, a pool of other symbols like common dress, diet, economic ways and folk culture rather than language as such has been the primary rallying point for nationality-formation in the hills region.

This is evident from the case of Nagaland. There are several Naga languages, all more or less in the same stage of development and none dominant. Here, therefore, of all symbols of identity, language plays the least role. It is the use of Nagamese, an artificial link language, over and above English and the Roman script that helps reduce the communication gap amongst the Naga tribes who together form the Naga nationality. Nagaland is thus an epitome of multi-lingual India.

Finally, despite constitutional arrangements for regional autonomy the problem of national minorities persist even within the autonomous states. The Bengali-speaking, Buddhist Chakma tribe in Mizoram and the Boro-Kachari (and Miri) tribal population in Assam are resisting assimilation as aggrieved national minorities. They do not fit into our analytical frame. All said, the problem of minority rights will continue to persist at all levels of the Indian state structure, even if the aspirations of all the emergent nationalities are largely fulfilled. Drive for economic development is bound to lead to a situation in which peoples of many nationalities will intermingle all over India. Thus, national minorities will be there everywhere.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Paul R. Brass, *Language Religion and Politics in North India* (Delhi, 1974), ch. I. We have found the analytical frame of this book useful with certain modifications.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Amalendu Guha, "Great Nationalism, little nationalism and the problem of integration : tentative view" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XIV. Annual Number Feb. 1978.
4. There is similarity with the Yugoslav situation. See Paul Shoup, *Communism and the Yugoslav National Question* (Columbia University Press, 1968)., pp. 262-3.