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Northeast India: Linguistic Diversity and Language Politics

T T Haokip



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Email: printline2003@yahoo.co.in

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1

Introduction

Language that differentiates one ethnic group from the other and demarcates ethnic boundaries has been an existential issue for long. On many occasions, language has become an increasingly sensitive and political issue, becoming the basis for organising interest groups. It has been a major factor in shaping ethnic relations in multiethnic societies of Asia.¹ The non-Burman nationalities² have viewed the adoption of Burmese³ as the national language of Myanmar as a tool for discrimination against them. Similarly, the decision of Pakistan to enshrine Urdu⁴ as the national language set the stage for decades of ethnic conflict, as the Bengalis and Sindhis, in particular, viewed it as a policy of privileging some ethnic groups over others. The driving force behind East Pakistan's secession was political and economic disenfranchisement, galvanised by the language issue. The state's ideology of using Islam and Urdu, as symbols of Pakistani identity and national integration did not change even after the secession of East Pakistan.⁵ The colonial policy of favouring minority Tamils over the majority Sinhalese disrupted the 2,000 years of cordial relations between the two major linguistic groups in Sri Lanka. The passage of the Sinhala-only Act of 1956, which made Sinhala the country's official language, was a turning point in the history of Sinhalese-Tamil relations. In India, demands from regional groups for greater recognition of their identity

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1. For details, see, M.E Brown and Sumit Ganguly (eds) *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1997.
 2. The term 'non-Burman nationalities', is used here to denote the ethnic nationalities of Burma other than the ethnic Burmans. Majority of the non-Burmans have used this term rather than 'ethnic minorities' to refer themselves collectively.
 3. Burmese was the only language allowed in the Union Parliament and regardless of a legislator's proficiency in his dialect or language or his fluency in English, he was required to speak in Burmese. *The Nation*, August 8, 1950, p.1; *The Nation*, March 14, 1959, p.1; *The Guardian Daily*, March 14, 195, p.1.
 4. Urdu is spoken by about 3.5 per cent of the total population as against Bangla spoken by about 54.5 per cent of the total population of Pakistan. Urdu was projected as a major symbol of national integration in the new country of Pakistan.
 5. Many Pakistani historians have admitted that this policy was wrongly adapted. See Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1996.

began soon after independence, with the demand for recognition of an Andhra state,⁶ although the Indian state was initially unsympathetic to such demand based on linguistic identity. However, the reorganisation of states primarily on linguistic basis and the inclusion of certain languages in the Eighth Schedule further helped strengthen the local push-pull of linguistic identities. The Northeastern region has so many linguistic groups that it is not realistically possible to reorganise it on linguistic lines. Nevertheless, the creation of separate states based on linguistic principles and ethnic identity began with the formation of Nagaland state in 1963. Thus, linguistic issues continue to play an important role in the politics of some Asian countries. The demands for more autonomy, separate states and even secession based on language not only challenge and threaten the political stability of these countries but also very often lead to ethnic conflicts. This paper attempts to analyse the complex dynamics of language politics in resolving or exacerbating ethnic relations in Northeast India.

6. Dipankar Gupta, “Ethnicity and Politics” in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed.), *Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, pp.244-5.

Northeast India: Linguists' Paradise

The Northeastern region of India, comprising of seven states — Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura—is often referred to as ‘the Far East of India.’ The linguistic diversity of the region indicates not only the spatial distribution of various linguistic groups but also reflects the variegated ethno-cultural mosaic of the region. The region presents a mixed and varied population of diverse linguistic groups, each group having a distinct life-style and heritage, and even aspiring for a separate political identity. An estimated 483 different tribes with a comparable number of languages and dialects encompasses the region, reflecting the enormous diversity of the people.⁷ Although several linguistic minorities do have hundreds of thousands of speakers, there are many languages with just a few hundred speakers, which are being absorbed or in the process of being absorbed by the dominant languages.

Arunachal Pradesh

A heterogeneous state characterised by extraordinary ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, Arunachal Pradesh is very often called a ‘linguist’s paradise’. The population of Scheduled Tribes in Arunachal Pradesh as per the 2001 census was 705,158. There are more than 100 communities speaking entirely different dialects. Of these, 25 tribes have a population of over 5,000 as per the 2001 census. The five languages spoken by the major tribes — Adi, Apatani, Bhoti, Khampti, and Nishi—have been adopted as the third language under the three language formula. None of these languages, except Khampti, had any script.⁸ Nefamese, a pidgin of Assamese and Arunachalee that came into being due to the constant contact between the people of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, served as the lingua franca of the state. Yet, a distinct Arunachalee identity has not emerged because of cultural diversities. The identity question in Arunachal has taken a different turn in the post-Independence period, as one can locate various trends of identity formation among the numerically dominant as well as smaller tribes or even sub-tribes.

7. Dipankar Banerjee, *Myanmar and Northeast-India*, Delhi Policy Group, New Delhi, 1997, p.11.

8. The Khamptis are the only tribe to have a script of their own called ‘Shan’ script.

Nagaland

The total population of Nagaland as per the 2001 Census was 1,9990,036. Of these, 1,774,026 are Scheduled Tribes. The communities notified as Scheduled Tribes in Nagaland are Garo, Kachari, Kuki, Mikir and Naga. While Naga constitutes 98.2 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribe population of the state, the Kuki tribe accounts for only 1.1 per cent. Garo and Kachari account for less than 1 per cent. The Mikir, with a population of 106 as per the 2001 Census, is the smallest tribe of Nagaland. The 16 Naga tribes as mentioned in the 1971 Census for the first time include Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Chang, Chirr, Khiamniungam, Konyak, Lotha, Makware, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Tikhir, Yimchunger and Zeliang. The inclusion of Pochury Naga to the list of Naga tribes in the 1991 Census has increased the number of Naga tribes from 16 to 17. Surprisingly, no population of Makware was returned in the 2001 Census. The Lotha, Ao, Angami, Konyak, Phom, Chakesang and Sema are the major Naga tribes, each having a population of more than one lakh as per the 2001 Census. Each Naga tribe is distinct in character from the others in terms of customs, language, and attire. Indeed, one tribe does not understand the language of another tribe. None of the Naga languages has been declared as official or additional official language. Instead, an artificial language known as Nagamese, based on the Assamese language, has evolved as a common link language. Nagamese is not the mother tongue of any of the tribes nor is it a written language. English, the official state language, is widely spoken in official circles and is the medium of education in Nagaland. The Scheduled Tribe population and linguistic profile of Nagaland is given below.

Table 1: Scheduled Tribe Population of Nagaland, 2001 Census

Name of the Tribe	Total Population	Proportion to the total ST population
All Scheduled Tribes	1,774,026	100%
Naga	1,741,692	98.
Kuki	20,195	1.1
Kachari	7,807	
Garo	1,582	0.1

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001

Table 2: Population of Major Naga Tribes, 2001 Census

Ao	231823	13.2
Sema	241806	13.9
Konyak	243758	14.0
Angami	124696	7.2
Lotha	148210	8.5
Phom	115389	6.6
Chakesang	134646	7.7
Sangtam	83714	4.8
Yimchunger	75983	4.4
Zeliang	71871	4.1
Rengma	50966	2.9
Chang	60885	3.5
Pochury	15908	0.9

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001

Mizoram

The British after conquering Mizoram⁹ in 1890 annexed its southern region to Bengal province and the northern one to Assam province. The southern region was withdrawn from the Bengal province when the British came to know that the people inhabiting the two regions were of the same ethnic groups. Mizoram was then governed and administered by the Governor of Assam. The organisation that embraced the whole of the then Lushai Hills before the formation of the Mizo Union was the Young Lushai Association (YLA), now called the Young Mizo Association (YMA). The Sailo chiefs dominated the non-Lushais,¹⁰ locally known as *Hnamchawm*. As a way to contest the monopoly of the Lushais in general and the Sailo

9. The present state of Mizoram, which became a district of Assam in 1898, was known as Lushai Hills till August 1954.

10. The early Christian missionaries were popular with the commoners (non-Lushais) who readily took to modern education and later on became a formidable force in the then Lushai Hills. In contrast, the missionaries were initially not popular with the Lushai chiefs who were upholders of customs and tradition.

chiefs in particular, the non-Lushais initiated the formation of the Mizo Common People's Union (MCPU), which was later changed to Mizo Union (MU). The choice of Mizo and the formation of MU forged unity and oneness among the non-Lushais. Interestingly, the Mizo Union not only accepted the Duhlian dialect,¹¹ the symbol of Lushai power, as the Mizo dialect but also popularised and developed it as a link language. Many non-Lushais, who spoke the Duhlian dialect but refused to enter themselves as Lushais until 1951, accepted the Mizo nomenclature and by 1961, the Mizo identity was a *fait accompli*.

The Mizo National Front (MNF) under the leadership of Laldenga further popularised the Mizo identity and language beyond Mizoram by promising to integrate all Mizo-inhabited areas under one administrative unit. Thus, the process of Mizoisation set in and as a result, many numerically smaller ethnic groups were completely Mizoised to the extent of forgetting their original dialects and cultures. Today, the Mizo language spoken by about 77 per cent of the people is the official language of Mizoram and there is no other additional official language. Important rules and regulations are not published in the languages of the minority groups, which comprise 27 per cent of the state's population. Mizoram has 15 communities notified as Scheduled Tribes. The minority languages are Chakma, Laker, Pawi, any Kuki tribes, Hmar, Hindi, Nepali, Paite, etc.

Mizoram is no doubt an oasis of peace in the conflict-ridden Northeastern region. However, some non-Lushais in Mizoram are now in the process of reasserting their separate identities to the extent of reviving their dormant dialects and cultures. The Mizo nomenclature, initially invented to cover all the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups, is increasingly identified with the speakers of Duhlian or Mizo dialect. The minority ethnic groups of Mizoram feel discriminated in terms of access to educational and employment opportunities.¹²

The Scheduled Tribe population of Mizoram as per 2001 Census is given below.

11. The Lushai originally spoke the Duhlian dialect. The numerically smaller non-Lushai clans who were the subjects of the Sailo chiefs used the Duhlian dialect even though they had their own dialects. In the process, many of the non-Lushai clans completely lost their own dialects.
12. Paritosh Chakma, "Mizoram: Minority Report," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44 (23), June 6, 2009.

Table 3: Scheduled Tribe Population of Mizoram, 2001 Census

Name of the Tribe	Total Population	Proportion to ST Population
All ST Tribes	839,310	100%
Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribes	646,117	77
Chakma	71,282	8.5
Pawi	42,230	5.0
Lakher	36,018	4.3
Any Kuki Tribes	21,040	2.5
Hmar	18,155	2.2
Khasi	1,514	0.2
Any Naga Tribes	1,194	0.1
Synteng	419	**
Dimasa	95	**
Garo	74	**
Mikir	18	**
Man (Tai Speaking)	3	**
Hajong	2	**

** Very negligible

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001

Tripura

Formerly a princely state, Tripura was traditionally the abode of different tribes, who had their distinct dialects, customs and traditions. The native population has, however, been outnumbered by growing waves of migration from erstwhile East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1971. The tribes of Tripura, who formed 70 per cent of the population in 1901, came down to 56.37 per cent in 1951. The total population of the 19 notified Scheduled Tribes as per the 2001 Census is 993,426, accounting for 31.1 per cent of the state's total population. The major tribes include Tripura, Reang, Jamatia, Chakma, Munda, Kuki tribes (Halam Kuki), etc. The official languages of the state are English, Bengali and Kokborok. However, the acts, rules, etc., have not been translated into Kokborok and representations are received only in English and Bengali. Kokborok, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Halam Kuki and Chakma are used as the medium of instruction at primary levels.

Table 4: Population and Proportion of Major Tribes of Tripura, 2001 Census.

Name of the Tribe	Total Population	Proportion to ST Population
Tripuri	543,848	54.7
Riang	165,103	14.6
Jamatia	74,949	7.5
Chakma	64,293	6.5
Halam (Kuki)	47,245	4.8
Mag	30,385	3.1
Munda	12,416	1.2
Any Kuki Tribes	11,674	1.2
Garo	11,180	1.1

Source: Office of the Registrar General, 2001, Census

Meghalaya

Meghalaya is predominantly a Christian state with a population of 2,318,822 as per the Census of 2001. Of these, 1,992,862 persons are Scheduled Tribes, accounting for 85.9 per cent of the state's population. There are 17 notified Scheduled Tribes in the state. There is no regional language, as the number of speakers of any language does not exceed 50 per cent. Khasi comes close, with 49.54 per cent followed by Garo with 30.86 per cent. Other languages are Bengali 8.13 per cent, Nepali 2.77 per cent, Hindi 2.19 per cent, Assamese 1.92 per cent, Rabha 1.15 per cent and Koch 1.05 per cent. There is no area where a language is spoken by more than 60 per cent of the people. English is the official language of the State. Meghalaya has emerged largely as a bilingual state, where Khasis are relatively more urbanised and advanced than other tribes. The population of major Scheduled Tribes is given below.

Table 5: Scheduled Tribe Population of Meghalaya, 2001 Census

Name of the Tribe	Total Population	Proportion to Total ST Population
All Scheduled Tribes	1,992,862	100%
Khasi	1,123,490	56.4
Garo	689,639	34.6
Hajong	31,381	1.6
Rabha	28,153	1.4
Koch	21,381	1.1
Synteng	18,342	0.9
Mikir	11,399	0.6
Any Kuki tribes	10,085	0.5
Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribes	3,526	0.2
Any Naga Tribes	3,138	0.2
Bodo Kachari	2,932	0.1
Hmar	1,146	0.1

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001

Assam

Assam, the largest state in Northeast India, has long been a melting pot of various linguistic groups and cultures. There was no community and language called Assamese before the coming of Ahoms from upper Burma. What existed were small principalities and chiefdoms. The Assamese or the Asomiya community took shape only under the patronage of the Ahom monarchy, who ruled Assam for 600 years (1228-1828) giving the state its present name.¹³ Since the 19th century, the Assamese began to protect and preserve their Assamese linguistic majority over the plain tribes and Bengali Hindus. The Assamese intellectuals accepted immigrants Muslims who returned Assamese as their mother tongue as *na-assamiya* or new Assamese and then as Assamese.

The major tribes¹⁴ of Assam are Bodo/Bodo Kachari including Sonoval, Mishing/Miri, Rava, Tiwa/Lalung, Deuri, Mon, Burman of Cachar, Chakma, Dimasa Kachari, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia/Synteng, Hajong, Hojai, Kuki, Mech, Kari/Mikir, Naga and other smaller tribes. As per the 2001 Census, there are 23 notified Scheduled tribes in Assam. However, no population of Pawi tribe has been returned in 2001 Census. Sonovals and Meches of Upper Assam have completely assimilated and now identify themselves with the Assamiyas. The Bodos have developed their language in Devanagari script and Mishings have recently adopted the Roman script for developing their language. In contrast, the Deuris, Tiwas and Ravas have adopted the Assamiya script for developing their respective languages. In the absence of a well-developed or a developing language of their own, the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley had to accept Assamiya as their *lingua franca*. As a result, the speakers of non-Assamese languages have always been less than the number of their populations. It is estimated that one-third of the tribes had apparently given up their language by 1971.¹⁵ Of late, the tribes of Assam have become gradually conscious of their separate identity and are gradually articulating it. The assertions of their identity, at times through violent means, have generated tensions leading to ethnic conflicts in the state.

13. Udayon Misra, *The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey*, North East India History Association, Shillong, 2001, p.2.

14. For details, see *Census of India*, (1991), Assam.

15. In the 1971 Census, out of 16,06,648 tribals, only 10,99,008 spoke tribal languages.

Table 6: Population of Major STs of Assam, 2001 Census

Name of the Tribe	Total Population	Proportion to the Total ST Population
All STs	1,3308,570	100%
Boro	1,352,771	40.9
Miri	587,310	17.8
Mikir	353,513	10.7
Rabha	277,517	8.4
Kachari	235,881	7.1
Lalung	170,622	5.2
Dimasa	110,976	3.4
Deori	41,161	1.2

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001

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Language Politics in Northeast India

Language politics in Northeastern India stems from objectively distinct ethnic groups' aspirations for achieving certain rights, ranging from recognition to the right of forming a separate state, autonomy, and even sovereignty.¹⁶ The continuing process of reinvention and reassertion of identities by smaller linguistic communities to demarcate an exclusivist territory for themselves and coercion by the dominant linguistic communities to impose their languages for homogeneity or cohesiveness have often led to political manifestation of language rivalry. The majority languages/dialects assume more powerful and privileged role, rendering the minority languages unimportant, weak and underprivileged. The minority linguistic groups interpret their losses in terms of generic discrimination against the majority linguistic groups. Similarly, some minority linguistic groups, in order to assert their identity with a common language against the majority, have put other minority languages under threat. The ethnic communities of the region are in the process of reviving and reinventing their dormant languages/dialects and identities to carve out political and economic space on the lines of their social spaces.

Assam: Reinventing Identities

The colonial government fostered Assamese community consciousness by first encouraging immigration into Assam and then by imposing Bengali,¹⁷ which predated language standardisation in Assam, as the official language of the province in 1836. However, there was no perceptible reaction against the decision till 1853. Significantly, the missionaries, who emphasised the distinctness of the Assamese language, continued to teach Assamese.¹⁸ The demand for restoration of Assamese as a language of

16. Mrinal Miri (ed.), *Linguistic Situation in Northeast India*, Ri Khasi Press, Shillong, 1982, p.1.

17. For details, see A.K. Baruah, *Social Tensions in Assam Middle Class Politics*, Purbanchal, Guwahati, 1991; S. Nag, *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Questions in North East India*. Manohar, New Delhi, 1990; S. Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001

18. The American Mission from Sibsagar started the first Assamese journal *Arundel* in 1846.

education and courts was voiced for the first time by Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan.¹⁹ Since then, the emergence of Assamese nationalism has been intimately linked with their opposition to the Bengali language. Indeed, Assamese nationalism was often sustained by positing ‘Bengali expansionism’ as the main obstacle in the way of the development of Assamese language and culture. The official language bill passed in December 1960 discarded both Hindi and English, and declared Assamese as the official language of the state. In protest, the Sangram Parishad, an organisation of the Bengalis living in Assam, launched a civil disobedience campaign in support of the Bengali language. The 1960 Assam Language Act protected tribal languages only in the districts where they were spoken, while Assamese was to be the official State language in other areas of the state. These and other issues resulted in the two Mizo Union MLAs resigning their seats in 1962. In the same way as the Assamese suspected the Bengali expansion, the Assamese too were suspected of expansionism by other nationalities such as Mizo, Khasi, and Naga, who also nurtured their languages with pride and aspired for autonomy in some form or the other. Indeed, attempts at making Assamese the official language in 1960 boomeranged. Consequently, the size of Assam state was reduced from 1, 47,624 sq km to 78,525 sq. km, with the creation of Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1969 and Mizoram in 1972. Thus, Assam, which was the first state in the region to oppose the Bengali language, also became its first victim of language politics.

The protagonists of Assamese identity like the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the Asom Sahitya Sabha are trying to redefine the Assamese community. The AASU at one stage demanded the abolition of the Sixth Schedule, which provides safeguards to the language and culture of the tribals.²⁰ The Assam movement of the 1979-85 and the aftermath of the Assam Accord further created an identity consciousness amongst both the tribes of the plains and the hill areas. Significantly, clause 6 of the 1985 Assam Accord provided for protecting the cultural and social heritage of the Assamese but no mention has been made of other ethnic groups. The

19. Deputed by the Bengal Government to report on Assam, the A.K. Moffat Mills’ Report, Appendix J, favoured Assamese language.

20. The plains tribals were not given any protection under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule because they were seen as yet another sub-nationality of the Assamese.

continuing process of reinvention of identities by tribes and by non-scheduled tribes is a part of the region's political strategy. Thus, the various tribes' demand for exclusivise territory and political space to the exclusion of others living in the same space. Similarly, some ethnic groups have sought reclassification as Scheduled Tribes. The movements of the Bodos, Karbis, and Dimasa Kacharis for the creation of separate states and the autonomy movements of some ethnic groups in their respective areas reflect the complex nationality question in Assam. While the parameters of Assamese identity have been expanding over the decades, the nationality question in Assam is very complex.²¹ Some of the important issues include the steady influx of Muslim population from across the border, the integration of the immigrant neo-Assamese with the Assamese nationality, the struggle for economic space between the *na-assamiya* and the plain tribes, and the gradual alienation of the plain tribes of Assam from the Assamese mainstream.

Tripura: Bengali Versus Kokborok

The unrestricted flow of refugees transformed the state of Tripura from a predominantly tribal state to a non-tribal majority state. The immigrants now constitute 69 per cent of the state's population. Additionally, Bengali is the official state language against Kokborok, which enjoys the status of second language. The term 'Kokborok' was coined by Radhamohan Thakur for the Tripuri language and it is spoken by about 80 per cent of the tribes and was the main language for inter-tribe communications. Hence, politics of language (adoption of script for Kokborok) assumes a crucial issue for them.²² Although the Kokborok language varies little from region to region, area to area and clan to clan, the basic structure remains the same. The Kokborok speaking people want to use the Roman script for developing their language. The Tripura Upajatiya Juba Samiti (TUJS) made the demand for introduction of Kokborok in the Roman script for the first time in 1967. However, the Left Front government of Tripura wanted to impose the Bengali script on the Kokborok language, although the Bhasha

21. For details see Monirul Hussain, "Tribal Question in Assam" in AK Baruah, (ed.), *Understanding Society and Politics: Selected Essays on Contemporary Issues*, North-East India Political Science Association, Guwahati, 1992.

22. See Sukhendu Debbarma, "An Uprising For Linguistic Rights", *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, June 6, 2004.

Commission recommended introducing the Roman script for Kokborok. Adoption of Bengali script for Kokborok language, according to the Tripuris, is nothing but a ‘policy of ethnocide’, and a policy to absorb and assimilate the indigenous people into Bengali culture and traditions. On their part, a section of the Bengali elite has been insisting on retaining their script to construct the idea of superiority of their language and culture in the minds of the Tripuris. The Left Front Government recognised Kokborok as the second official language in 1979. However, the Congress-Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) coalition that came to power in the late 1980s decided to introduce the Roman script for Kokborok language, a move that the Left Front leaders declared “was communal politics”.²³ Subsequently, when the Left Front Government came to power in 1993, it re-introduced the Bengali script for Kokborok. It was only in 2000 that the Tripuris decided to use the Roman script for Kokborok language. The Bengalis, being apprehensive of such move, manoeuvred to resist this challenge. Thus, the consistent efforts of the Bengalis for retaining Bengali script and the determined efforts of the Kokborok speakers to oppose the Bengali script needs to be debated, discussed and understood in the larger context of their identity and future. The reason lies not in the script or language but involves the larger socio-political question of identity and the struggle for political space.

Mizoram: Duhlian Versus Non-Duhlian

Rev. Savidge and Lorraine of the London Baptist Mission adopted the Roman script for the Lushai dialect for the first time in 1898.²⁴ The Sailo chiefs, who were the upholders of customs and tradition, did not object to it. The commoners (non-Lushais) who contested the dictatorship of the Sailo chiefs also accepted the Lushai dialect as Mizo dialect and developed it as a link language,²⁵ although they considered it as a Lushai symbol of power. Since then, the Lushai dialect has become more and more dominant and it was also recognised as an official language in the then Lushai Hills. With the renaming of Mizo Commoner People’s Union as Mizo Union

23. Kunal Ghosh, “Religion and Linguistic Separatism in North-East India”, *The Organiser*, July 30, 2000.

24. Chitta Ranjan Nag, *Post-colonial Mizo Politics 1947-1998*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 72-73.

25. Amiresh Ray, *Mizoram*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1993, p.48.

(MU) in 1947 and Lushai Hills as Mizo Hills, the Mizo identity became inclusive, although the Lushai Federation opposed the act on the ground that the word Mizo had no distinctive existence. The Mizo Union would not have been formed and the process of Mizo integration too would have been delayed had there been no Mr. McDonald.²⁶ Additionally, the 1954 acquisition of the rights of chiefship²⁷ practically marked the end of the dominant role of the Sailo chiefs. The Mizo National Front further popularised the Mizo identity and language beyond Mizoram when Laldenga met over 100 Kuki-Chin-Mizo leaders at Kawnpui in Churachandpur district of Manipur in 1965.²⁸ The creation of a single administrative unit for the Kuki-Chin-Mizo people was the underpinning objective of the Kawnpui convention. Ever since, many ethnic groups in Mizoram and other parts of northeast India have either completely or partially assimilated with the dominant Mizo culture and tradition, with the exceptions of the Maras (Lakhers) and Lais (Pawis), who continue to maintain their own ethnic identity, culture and tradition. Had there been no separate autonomous district councils (ADCs) for the Maras and Lais, they too might have been assimilated to Mizo identity. The population of Lai and Mara as per 2001 Census was 51,878 and 50,188, respectively.²⁹ The Chakma population is 32,807 inhabiting in 69 villages. The Chakma ADC³⁰ employs 996 persons.

The advantages of having a separate ADC in the new democratic dispensation led a section of Hmars, Brus, Paites, etc., to also demand

26. Mr. ARH McDonald, Superintendent of Lushai Hills, publicly declared on January 16, 1946 that the land belonged to the people who lived on it and not to the chiefs, contrary to the popular belief of old that the land belonged to the chief and his legal heirs. He also dismissed four prominent chiefs on the same day.
27. While there were less than 100 chiefs when the British annexed the Lushai Hills, there were more than 300 chiefs when the institution of chiefship was abolished in 1954.
28. B.K. Roy Burman, *Mainstream*, 22 (46), July 14, 1984, p.29. The organisations present at the Kawnpui convention were the Paite National Council, Vaiphei National Organisation, Simte National Organisation, Zoumi National Organisation, Mizo Union, Mizoram, Mizo National Front, Chin National Union, Mizo National Union, Hmar National Union, Kuki National Assembly, Gangte Tribal Union, Kom National Union, and Biete Convention Council.
29. See Draft 10th Five-Year Plan (2002-2007), Government of Mizoram's Memorandum to Tenth Finance Commission, February 2004.
30. There have been calls by the Mizo public organisations for the abolition of Chakma ADC. However, no such calls have been made for Mara and Lai ADCs.

separate ADCs to protect their cultural identity. However, there are some sections of Hmars who are today fully Mizoised and consider themselves as part of Mizo society. Nevertheless, it was only after the formation of HPC in 1986 that the Mizoram government agreed to recognise Hmar language as one of the major languages of Mizoram. However, the Shinlung Hills Development Council (SHDC) has little control over land and resources of the Hmar community as compared to other ADCs. The Paite National Council (now Paite Tribe Council) has also been demanding a District Council. Surprisingly, no Paite was returned in the census of India and a majority of them no longer speak the Paite dialect, although they claim themselves to be one of the original inhabitants of Mizoram. At present, there are 32 Paite villages in Mizoram. Paite is recognised as a tribe of Mizoram since 2003. Again, the Brus are also demanding an ADC. Thus, the non-Lushai communities, who assimilated to Mizo identity in the past, are now in the process of asserting their separate identity at different levels. Their main grievance is the dominant role played by the original Duhlian speakers, who were concentrated in central and northern parts of Mizoram.

The recruitment rules of various government departments make it mandatory for a candidate to have studied the Mizo language up to middle school level, disqualifying other non-Mizos no matter how talented they may be. The search for a separate identity has gained momentum among those who are not fully Mizoised. In the same way as the people of Lushai Hills (Mizoram) viewed the introduction of Assamese as the official language in 1960 as Assamese imperialism, some ethnic groups in Mizoram have begun to suspect the Lushai dominated-Mizo nomenclature. Considered by many as a melting pot, Mizoram is today heading towards the Pentecostal days of the Bible, speaking in mutually intelligible dialects instead of one dominant Duhlian dialect. The future outcome will depend on whether identity construction and mobilisation in Mizoram is inclusive and aggregative, or partisan and exclusionary. Much will depend on how the Mizoram government takes its minority ethnic groups on the path of development. The Duhlian speakers should exercise equal concern for the dialects of smaller groups who still want to preserve their dialects and cultures. Otherwise, it may lead to damaging consequences to the inclusive Mizo identity as well as the unity and integrity of Mizoram.

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Conclusion

The impressive and unique linguistic diversity of the Northeast region, capable of contributing to the enrichment of a composite culture, has been the main source of conflict and a fundamental and intractable obstacle to peace and development. Multiple and linguistically rich ethnic identities are in conflict with not only the Indian state but also with each other, although the underlying current of all ethnic movements in the region is that of widespread dissatisfaction with the existing set-up and a deep urge for recognition of their identity, autonomy and statehood. The Indian government sees these ethnic movements as foreign-inspired, anti-national, and destructive, and has thus opted for military solutions. The deployment of armed forces, however, has led to the institutionalisation of military power in the region where ‘human security’ is under constant fear and threat. The inability of political establishments in coping with the challenges of linguistic diversity in Northeast India and the constant fear of possible exclusion very often leads to re-assertion and reconstruction of their socio-political identity. This often results in giving loyalty to social formations such as the community or language. In such situations, language become tools deployed for the acquisition of power. The continuing process of reinvention and reassertion of identities by smaller linguistic communities to demarcate an exclusivist territory for themselves and coercion by the dominant linguistic communities to impose their languages for homogeneity or cohesiveness is to carve out political and economic space on the lines of their social spaces.

The language issue in a multilingual society like Northeast India is no doubt baffling and complex, and has the potential to explode into ethnic conflicts. The movements for restoration of ancient indigenous scripts or revival of dormant languages and dialects have to be analysed in the broader issues of the political process of re-asserting and re-constructing their socio-political identity and the struggle for political space. The language issue of Northeast India cannot be treated in isolation from other long list of issues that surround the subject of identity politics in the region. The solution to the language problem needs a careful study of the situation,

the needs and aspirations of the people. The most important step is to acknowledge the sensitivity and complexity of language issue that can divide communities. The recent history of Asia in general and Assam in particular has demonstrated the dual role of language as a unifier and divider. The move to make Assamese as the official language of the state led to the creation of Meghalaya and Mizoram and to the partition of Assam. Any attempts by any majority linguistic group to assimilate other smaller linguistic groups will lead to further alienation of the latter. Instead, the preservation, protection and development of languages/dialects and cultures of smaller linguistic groups needs to be emphasised. There should not be any question of opposing languages/dialects of a group or a community by others and certainly not that of the predominance of one or few languages/dialects over others. The language issue in the region requires critical analysis and farsighted action from both the state and central governments, although the extraordinary ethno-geographic and linguistic diversity of the region precludes uniform solutions.