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THE DISTINCT CRY OF AN IMPERILLED FRONTIER

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The outburst against the Citizenship Amendment Bill, or CAB, (now an Act, or CAA) in the Northeast has left many outside the region confounded. Unlike the objections to the CAA everywhere else in the country — which is about the discriminatory and seeming Islam-phobia attributes of the new law — they are bewildered that in the Northeast, CAB is seen as a threat to survival. This inability of those outside the Northeast to see what the Northeast sees betrays to an extent an ignorance and an insensitivity to a stark reality small marginalised communities there face.

The truth is, going by UNESCO's definition of endangered languages, all of the 200 and more languages spoken in the Northeast, with the exception of Assamese and Bengali, are in the vulnerable category. Even in the case of Assamese, though it is the language of the majority in the State with about 15 million speakers (Census 2011), they are still a tiny minority when the larger region of Bangladesh, Bengal and Assam is considered. Bengali speakers in Assam total about 9 million (Census 2011); however, neighbouring Bangladesh alone has 164 million speakers of the same language. The fear in Assam of being overwhelmed by an unceasing influx of people from Bangladesh therefore is nothing beyond legitimacy. This is a peculiar situation often described as "a majority with a minority complex"; its consequences have resurfaced in the region time and again, yet few take cognisance of it, perpetuating the phenomenon.

In Bhutan in the 1980s, when a lakh or so Nepali migrants were evicted from the country, and even in the current Rohingya crisis, it is this same and largely ignored "population anxiety" that lies at its roots.

Bertil Lintner, Swiss journalist and author who has been very closely associated with the region, has pointed out in a recent interview that the Rohingya crisis is nowhere near the popularly projected binary of Muslim versus Buddhist. The ethnic Rakhines, numbering about two million in the Rakhine state — shared with the Rohingya — were the ones feeling the pressure of a continuing population influx from Bangladesh, expanding the Rohingya population. That the Myanmar government favoured the Rakhines was always obvious but it may be noted that the crisis was precipitated when a previously unheard-of militant organisation, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, made a coordinated attack on 30 Myanmar police camps in August 2017. This major incident prompted the Myanmar government to begin its brutal ethnic cleansing campaign.

Even now, says Mr. Lintner, the presence of seven lakh Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh close to the Chittagong Hill Tract, is making small ethnic Buddhist communities such as the Chakmas and Marmas uneasy: they could become marginalised if the refugees were to be resettled among them. These are tragedies that are indeed multi-layered but often only one is made visible.

A closer look at the UNESCO classification of endangered languages will illuminate further the Northeast's reaction to the CAA. If a language is vulnerable because of the small size of the number of speakers, it becomes more so if the language is spoken only in certain domains — for instance at home, but not at schools and offices, etc. It becomes definitely endangered if parents speak the language and children only know the language but do not speak it as mother tongue. It becomes critically endangered if the grandparents' generation speak the language, parents know it but do not use it, and children do not know it any more.

Extinct languages are those languages which no longer have any speakers. In the UNESCO list, several languages in the Northeast have already become extinct; many more are critically endangered. As Ganesh N. Devy, cultural activist and the man behind the People's Linguistic Survey of India campaign, has said in an interview, when a language dies, a world view dies with it. Under the circumstances, the response of the Northeast to the CAA, is not merely tribal xenophobia as many have portrayed it to be with patronising condescension, but a desperate survival throe.

Nari Rustomji, a bureaucrat known for his love of the region and who served there during India's troubled decades of Partition, sensed this mood with empathy. In his book, *Imperilled Frontiers: India's North-eastern Borderlands*, he observed that migration at a pace the host communities can absorb without detriment to their own social organisms is unlikely to cause problems. Indeed, the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Northeast show that migrants and their integration have always been a part of the historical reality of the region. Large scale and rapid influxes, therefore, are the problem.

Provoked and compelled by the imperial ambition of Burmese Konbaung ruler, King Bagyidaw, whose army invaded and occupied Assam and Manipur starting 1819, the British intervened and took over Assam (which then was virtually the entire Northeast with the exception of Tripura and Manipur) and formally annexed it in 1826 after the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo to make it a part of its Bengal province. Manipur was left as a protectorate state. As Assam was at the time unfamiliar with British colonial administration and education, educated Hindu Bengalis from neighbouring Sylhet became the favoured agents to fill the colonial bureaucracy and carry forward the colonial project. It is from this position of power, that Hindu Bengalis dominated Assam's political as well as cultural spheres, at one point even having Bengali declared the official language of Assam on the plea the latter is a dialect of the former. This was predicted to ultimately provoke a reaction from the Assamese middle class as it came of age. There was also the Muslim Bengali peasantry which migrated to Assam, but those who arrived before politics in India began polarising on religious lines, found it much easier to assimilate and adopt the Assamese identity.

When Assam was separated from Bengal and made a separate chief commissioner's province in 1874 and then in 1912 after Curzon's 1905 partition of Bengal was withdrawn, a reluctant Sylhet which felt it was better off as part of Bengal, came to be affiliated with the new province. At the time of Partition, the equation changed and Sylhet's chance of remaining with India was for it to be treated as a part of Assam. The then Assamese leadership refused this as Assam would then have become Bengali majority. Sylhet had to face a referendum separately and by a thin Muslim majority was awarded to Pakistan. The current migration issue is also a consequence of this bitter politics of antagonism of the past. Nobody is perfectly innocent or guilty in this sordid drama, and the way forward has to be on the path of truth and reconciliation that Nelson Mandela showed.

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