

Editorial

Thursday, July 5, 2018

Meitei Mayek - are the scales tipped now

Before anybody could realize the Meitei Mayek script now prevalently taught in all schools and colleges in the state has caused a decisive schism apart from a headache peculiar to the Meitei Mayek issue so much alive in Manipur but not really amounting to anything very important in terms of its educational and cognitive worth that could be discussed although such a discussion is now unavoidable considering the utility of this language as practicable linguistically, phonetically and other factors relevant to education and a syllabus for promoting that education as a subject under the state educational board governing schools and college education.

The fact of the matter is that the script is an archaic one and it would have been impossible to trace or know when precisely the written scripts available for this language were lost as is likely must have happened even if it could be reasoned out in a hypothetical situation proving that the language is and has been only a spoken language as far back as the origin could be known. Without sufficient available texts like literature, or any codified written evidence the language would not deserve the status of a written script that is supported only by a 26-letter alphabet, as is prescribed under the schools education syllabus.

To put it in layman's language A,B,C,D....etc., A to Z alphabets only and that only, would be the Meitei Mayek's claim to knowing all subjects and that is an absurd claim; something that does not exist in reality - a wild dream that has run amok and caused dissension in how different groups on the matter would view the ongoings in setting of syllabus and much earlier in the introduction of this subject as a language that is projected as being able to explain everything related to Manipur, something not relevant in schools and college education anyway and something that students would not be expected to know as a part of schools and college education, but a fact that was the underlying factor at the time the issue was a compulsion on most of the educated and thoughtful people in the state and has now surfaced not only as an educational lacunae but also a matter that is expected to snowball in the way the syllabus was introduced by the state education authorities involved - to keep the debate alive - and further the appointments made, the regularization of pay scales for the concerned teachers - whose educational qualifications apart from knowing the Meitei Mayek script have always been in controversy for not meeting the standard requirements for appointment to state government jobs. This being the facts that happened over the past decade or so concerning this subject the point that is now - at this moment - relevant is how much harm to Manipuri social conditions this move has caused, involving the secondary patenting of all newspapers, media, shops in Imphal valley, billboards for advertisements, and many other factors known or unseen yet, that do not have anything to do with the concern and the widespread promotion of a Manipur that was being projected forcefully at the time the Meitei Mayek activists were supposed to have claimed a major victory for the Meitei Mayek organizations and for Manipur itself - as the organizations together deemed correct.

The situation now was not foreseen even by the casual bystanders who might have thought it was in fact a change that was coming. But was it really that - as is commonly being lived now. Is Meitei Mayek a haunt or the boon it was promised to be. Are children safe in the schools and colleges. A review committee is certainly called for if common wisdom should prevail.

Writer - RK Lakhi Kant

Operation Lebensraum - Illegal Migration From Bangladesh

Courtesy: *The Wire*
By - *Hiranya Bhattacharyya*

Now at 84, Bhattacharyya - accorded with the prestigious Friends of Liberation War honour in 2013 by Bangladesh government for training Mukti Bahini cadres - has come up yet another book, *Operation Lebensraum - Illegal Migration From Bangladesh* (Bloomsbury). It puts the lens on the perennial issue of cross-border immigration in Assam from a "global" perspective.

In an interview with *The Wire*, he said the deportation of those found to be non-citizens is no more an option, adding, "Even a dignitary no less than the Pope has asked for the sympathetic treatment of the migrants. The whole issue is a human issue, after all."

Among other things, he also offers "organised labour force" as a possible solution to the issue once the updated National Register of Citizens (NRC) throws up an official number of "illegal immigrants" in the state.

Excerpts from the interview: **There have been a lot of words written on the issue of undocumented immigration in Assam and the students' agitation of the 1980s. You have also written books on the subject. What is new in your latest book?**

The situation is entirely different today. Not just Assam, but India too has missed the bus.

In the 1960s, 70s and the 80s, the entire focus was on the issue of infiltration from East Pakistan and Bangladesh into the Indian side. At that time, the process of deportation was on, in spite of the fact that there was no formal agreement with East Pakistan or Bangladesh on deportation. Those days, when we deported thousands, there was no hue and cry. What was happening was considered natural. Since then, tonnes of waters have flown down the Brahmaputra. The main difference now is that human migration, both legal and illegal, has become a global phenomenon. Today, there is hardly any place in the world where there is no footprint of migrants, particularly Chinese and Bangladeshi migrants. Some legal, some illegal. They are everywhere. But the attitude towards immigrants is undergoing a vast change all over the world. Even a dignitary no less than the Pope has asked for the sympathetic treatment of migrants. The whole issue is a human issue, after all.

In America too, people were against the infiltration of Mexicans. Even now they are. But there too, public opinion, at least in some section, has also been tilting towards treating the whole matter from the political angle. Both in America and Europe, including England, illegal immigrants are being treated as refugees. They may be given whatever is possible and available to them. Just before laying down office, former US president Barack Obama exempted 50 lakh Mexican workers from the onus of being deported to their country. That was one reason his party lost to the Conservatives. Many felt they would have to take on the burden of so many people. But America can afford it. Obama or the US state exempted them from being deported, but they didn't give them political rights.

These are the realities. I want to point out that in our case too, if you ignore the ground realities, there can be no solution. This is what is new in my book.

So you are basically saying that deportation of those found to be foreigners by the ongoing update process of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, a popular demand in the state, is no more an option.

As I said, we missed the bus. The time for deportation (of undocumented immigrants) is gone. But as per the terms of the Assam Accord and the existing laws, they should be detected and their names struck off the state's voters' list. My

point is, if you can deport them after signing an agreement to that effect with Bangladesh, it is the ideal situation. But can you really do that? One must appreciate the ground reality.

People who have filled the NRC forms in Assam have been voting as citizens.

I want to point out that in most countries in Europe and America facing the issue of immigration, there have been systems in place, according to which the first condition for voting rights is that he/she should be a citizen of that country. In Assam, an absurd rule is being followed. Because you have been voting, you automatically become a citizen. That is the tragedy.

This also brings us to question how our electoral rolls are prepared. I will give you an example. In 2008, the Gauhati high court, in a judgement, said one Mohammed Kamaruddin, a Pakistani citizen, after successfully entering Assam through Bangladesh, contested the 1996 assembly elections from Jamunamukh. He was in possession of a Pakistani passport, on the strength of which he travelled to Dhaka before sneaking into Assam. The HC said in its judgement: "This can happen only in Assam".

Earlier, till about the 1980s, there was no organised way of immigration from Bangladesh into Assam. It was an open border and they were coming entirely for economic reasons.

The poor were subjected to inhuman atrocities by landlords, so they were crossing over in search of land to till. Now it is being done in a planned and organised manner by religious fundamentalist forces. This angle has added an extra wing to the entire issue. **The arrests in Assam in connection to the 2014 Burdwan blast intensifies such suspicion.**

This apart, another point I want to flag here is the geo-physics of our region. Many islands in the South Pacific region have already gone under the waters. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself admitted in the United Nations that 30 million people in her country would be displaced if the coastal lines go under water. Nobody has considered the compulsion of the Bangladeshis due to possible climate change. Where will they go? It is only to the easily accessible India, most easily accessible Tripura, West Bengal and Assam, can they come to. All these points have to be factored in now to look at a possible solution to the festering problem.

Where, according to you, lies the solution to this 'festering problem' in Assam?

Apart from what I have suggested in the book, there should be a human approach. I would say, Assam, and for that matter, India, can't remain islands. It is not possible for the whole world to be doing something and we something else.

Many countries have agreed to admit a certain number of migrants every year, but when it comes to the question of illegal migrants, there should not be any compromise. Else, you are only encouraging it.

In the case of Assam, we are in this situation due to an absolutely weak-kneed policy by the Centre and because of state governments looking the other way. I have a feeling that the Central governments have been ignoring the whole problem. For instance, 33 years have passed since the adoption of the Assam Accord, but they have not implemented its main clause - which is detection, deletion and deportation of the non-citizens. I think that the Accord was chalked out not to solve the problem but to defuse it. And that is where the student leaders of the agitation were taken up the garden path by cunning bureaucrats with the blessings of then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Villagers walk past CRPF personnel patrolling a road ahead of the publication of the first draft of the

National Register of Citizens in Juria village of Assam's Nagaon district. Credit: Reuters

One solution you have mentioned in your book is the creation of a labour force made up of undocumented immigrants.

After the NRC update is complete, the detection process would be more or less done. So the question comes, what will you do with those people? Bangladesh has been anyway denying the presence of any citizens illegally residing in India.

Can they be organised into a labour force? With the growing number of middle-class families and expansion of the industrial base in India, the demand for low-skilled labour, domestic workers, etc is there. Can Assam utilise them to fill that need and convert what is seen as a liability into a revenue earning source? It should be noted here that according to a Bangladesh government report in 1980, (published in Assamese daily *Amar Axom* on October 20, 2016), remittances made by Bangladeshi labour constitute a major source of revenue for the country. From \$349 million in 1980, it jumped to \$14.9 billion in 2014. Can Assam also look at such options?

In 2013, you were conferred the Friends of Liberation War award by Bangladesh government for your role in the 1971 war.

Yes. I trained two batches of Mukti Bahini in Assam during the Liberation War. It was a secret affair; there are no official records of it with Indian government but those who trained certainly kept a record of it. There were 43 of us from India who were awarded by prime minister Hasina in Dhaka apart from honouring world leaders like Fidel Castro of Cuba.

When I speak of Bangladeshi migrants in Assam, I have nothing personal there. Some of my good friends are Bengali. But I am only stating facts.

I also want to point out here that when we went to New Delhi in 2010 for the peace talks on behalf of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and met then prime minister Manmohan Singh and then Congress president Sonia Gandhi, our first declaration to them was: we are not secessionists; we have not come to support ULFA's secessionist agenda. We were part of the talks only because we wanted a peaceful solution.

What do you think of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill which wants to grant Hindu Bangladeshis, among others, citizenship on the basis of religion? It has triggered a lot of protests in most parts of Assam.

As you have seen, people have not accepted it. Why? It is because New Delhi has never understood the mindset of the Assamese people.

I will give you some simple examples here. There is an actor named Adil Hussain from Assam who has earned fame globally. Have we thought that he is Muslim? No. We feel proud that he is an Assamese artiste. Likewise, there is a young girl, a music reality show sensation from Assam, Nahid Afrin. We never thought she was Muslim. She is just Assamese and people from all communities of the state voted for her in that show. Then there are other artistes - Abdul Majid, Baharul Islam, Tabajjal Ali, Tariqudin Ahmed - they are all Assamese for us, we don't see them as Muslims. This attitude in Assam not to identify someone just on the basis of religion, for that matter in the whole of the Northeast, is what Delhi (national political parties) fails to understand. To evoke religion is vote bank politics.

The Congress reaped rich harvest in Assam by doing it. It mobilised the Muslim migrants. Now BJP is trying to follow the same example by patronising the Hindu migrants. This is wrong. Also, latest reports say that the Hindus in Bangladesh are no more facing religious discrimination under Hasina regime. Another thing is, if one agrees to the Bill it will be an open invitation to all Hindus from all over the world to settle down in any state, including Assam. That also amounts

to de-Hinduising those countries. **Even though you were an important part of the students' agitation, you never joined Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) when it was formed, unlike some others like Dinesh Goswami (former union minister in the V.P. Singh government).**

I never joined the AGP. After the Accord was signed, some of us were totally ignored by the AGP leaders, particularly myself, Nibarun Bora (prominent leader of the Assam Movement) and Kirti Nath Hazarika (journalist and writer who passed away in 2002). I feel, with us around, the self agenda of the new leaders would have been difficult to materialise. That was the reason I finally parted ways with the AGP leaders.

You then joined the BJP and contested Lok Sabha elections from Guwahati on the party ticket twice.

I was victimised in the context of the Assam movement and unjustly treated by the then Congress government. It was because I was the DIG in charge of the border at the time, detecting illegal immigrants crossing over to India. Unfortunately, some of my Bengali colleagues in the police force joined hands with the Muslim clique, led by former chief minister Anwara Taimur (December 1980-June 1981) because most of the names of illegal immigrants I was detecting was from her constituency - Mangaldoi. She felt I am out to finish her politically which was wrong. The government gave me an order to check the names and I was only doing my job.

I was devastated that I was dismissed from my job summarily. I put the case in the central administrative tribunal which gave the verdict in my favour. Though the government challenged it, the clique working against me kept buying time and didn't submit a counter affidavit in the tribunal. Meanwhile, the first AGP government came to power in 1985. They did nothing to help me. Not even in their second term. I was very disappointed. It was during that time, around 1986, A.B. Vajpayee, Jaswant Singh and Murli Manohar Joshi met me to ask, why I did not join BJP. I knew Murli Manohar from my Allahabad University days; he was in the next room in the hostel.

Apart from my case, my intention was also to go to parliament to be able to throw focus on the what was happening in Assam at the national level. I contested the 1991 Lok Sabha elections from the BJP and I lost. In 1996, I contested from Guwahati again and lost by a few thousand votes only because the AGP candidate against me was backed by the ULFA. But the irony of it is, I had to be inducted by the ULFA for drafting its charter of demands to be submitted to the Centre as part of its peace talks. Later, pro-talks ULFA chairman Arabintra Rajkhowa told me things were different then.

Why did you quit BJP?

In 2001, when the BJP wanted to have an alliance with Prafula Mahanta (AGP leader and former Assam chief minister) only to grab power, I vehemently opposed it. The BJP central leadership sent Sunil Shastri thrice to my house. But I couldn't go to that extent of compromise. They (the BJP) offered me some lucrative posts too to stay on but I quit. Thereafter, I retired from active political life.

Some say that you were close to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh during the Assam agitation. Did you ever join the RSS?

This is absolutely wrong. I have nothing to do with the RSS. I was entirely motivated by the Assamese *jatiotabad* (sub-nationalism). Also, in the Assam movement itself, there was no RSS or BJP in the beginning, only towards the end. Some Hindu Bengali RSS leaders did meet me when I was the DIG. They came to request me not to touch Hindu Bangladeshis. But I turned them down saying I will follow whatever the law says. That is it.

(Contd. on Page 3)