

Assamese community in Bengaluru: Tracing Language Through Spaces.

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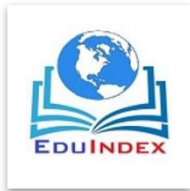
Abstract

Being the nation that provides a space for each of its 22 official languages and close to over 1,600 spoken languages, India is a country that is linguistically very diverse. These dynamic spaces are bound to meet, interact and alter as per the changing platforms. Therefore, the inter-state movements in the country form newer spaces in the host state. Multiple spaces thus get created in this manner especially within a city. These spaces with time may expand, diminish, or at times just wither away. This paper aims to study how language modifications take place in the moving communities who establish newer spaces among the existing ones in a city. The paper traces language through registrars - food and the colloquial usage with respect to the Assamese spaces in this city. Our study looks into the Assamese community, especially the student and the working class that has moved into the cosmopolitan city of Bengaluru. The data that will be used to interpret and to get to the conclusion of the study will be collected through personal narratives, testimonials given by the people of Assam residing in the city for at least a year. On one hand, this community is trying to adapt themselves, while also trying to keep their culture revitalized in this foreign city. By trying to read the dominant culture in which they reside, they inculcate these new flavors into their culture, which most commonly is reflected in the manner of their speech. The concerned group is usually seen maintaining two sets of lingo, one that caters to the language requirement of the people away from their niche group and one with their immediate group. Our study aims to find such diversions in language through the lens of spatiality guided by street vernacular, social activities and more.

Keywords: Assimilation, Assamese, Community, Spaces.

The spaces in India are painted with all kind of philosophical and political ideologies, from nationalism, regionalism, neo-liberalism, spiritualism and many others. These ideologies have gripped the social structure of the nation in an edgy manner. Even though this vast multi-ethnic country has various insurgence, it is remarkable how even today it stands relatively stable as a country. Every state and its varied region has its own social-cultural and political ethos leading to creation of spaces within different other spaces. Migration is one of the prominent justifications for creation of newer spatial establishments.

As reported by 'The Hindu' (10 Aug 2018), Bengaluru is the city with the highest number of colleges in the country, making it an education hub with 893 colleges as per the All-India Survey on Higher Education compiled by the Union Minister of Human Resource Development for the 2017-18 academic year. The city has long been marked as the 'Start-up Capital' and 'the Silicon Valley of India' upon the boom observed in the IT industry during the 1980's. These educational opportunities and job prospectives



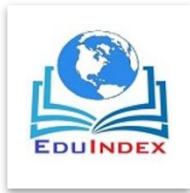
available in the city has converted the then ‘Pensioner’s Paradise’ into the bustling cosmopolitan city with intersecting spaces. Spaces not just a reflection of defining the geographical boundaries, but a social construct of boundaries that one makes by establishing it on the basis of social demarcations, on history, ethnicity, power hierarchy and practices.

The drastic and the emerging changes in Bengaluru has made it an ideal destination to look for a better standard of living for people across the country. Our study predominantly focuses on the community which linguistically identify themselves as Assamese. The very notion of “identity” is confusing. The commercialization of tea plantations by the Britishers witnessed physical displacement of people like the Marwari businessman, Bangladeshi Muslim peasants, Punjabis, Nepali grazers. Even though the ancestral identity can be traced back to different territory, however over the years all these migrants fall in a common identify as Assamese which further can be divided based on religion, and ancestral ethnicity. The identity of Tai-Ahom belonging to a socio-cultural space of Ujjani Aaham (not a mapped territory) is a matrix of spatiality which built on by the continuous migration as people from South and Southeast Asia moved in and left their impressions on the local practices. In spite of this intermixing of identities, they do share a commonality that of being from the state of Assam. In a territory outside the home state, one opens up for a space that is wider than just sticking to a very narrowed down specific space. This reflects that the process of fabrication and re-fabrication of spaces and people’s identity is never-ending.

The Assamese language just like many others, has various sub-divisions and dialects which are spoken in different regions in the state of Assam like Boro, Tala, Lalung, Kachari and more. These variations affect the manner in which an individual is able to roll his/her tongue and speak. Therefore, a change in language often effects an individual’s pronunciation, in other words brings changes or difficulty in pronouncing certain words/phrases. Our analysis of the data collected denote the same. Among the individuals interviewed, some were accommodative of the language of the host state, which in our case is the Kannada language and the reasons can be traced as: the concerned person being a member of various local groups, especially in college crowds where the Assamese students find themselves using the phrase such as ‘Chill da’, ‘Macha’ and also when certain words of Kannada language is used in daily conversations for various everyday activities. This is especially seen when an Assamese person addresses a rickshawala as “anna” rather than “dada” and one thing that almost every non-kannadiga in this city has learnt, “Kannad gothila”.

During the conversations, an unforeseen yet an interesting fact was revealed. Some respondents believed that their Assamese had improved during the course of their stay in Bengaluru. They assume that this could be due the conscious efforts they put into while talking in Assamese with their family members or friends, make constant attempts to not take along any local lingo when they are back at home, learn newer vocabularies while interacting with people with a different dialect but of the same community in Bengaluru city. Nevertheless, some who have stayed in Bengaluru for quite some years now have reported that they seem to have lost their "Khati Akhomiya" accent and now speak in an accent which they feel is an amalgamation of both the Assamese and the Kannada language.

Being in a different geographical space altogether, brings change in almost every sphere of social life. The end result of this is that these migrated group often seeks for fellow community members, which is also true for the Assamese community in Bengaluru. In fact there exists a socio-cultural organization called “Assam Society of Banglore”, which aims to build integrity among its own people and to also entrench co-ordination between the people of Karnataka and Assam residing in Bengaluru . When in a gathering, the terms used by the community are very cultural specific especially in terms of food. For



instance, when they visit restaurants like Axomi or Delicacy which serves their traditional delicacies, they use the terms like 'Masor tenga' and not Assamese Fish Curry or 'Bahor gaas' and not bamboo dish, use 'Aalu pitika' rather than mashed potatoes, 'Jalpaan' and more. These usage of cultural specific terms and Assamese language in a cosmopolitan city of Bengaluru helps them create a private space in any public sphere.

As rightly quoted by Ernesto Laclau, "We discover that urban 'reality' is not singular but multiple, that inside a city there is another city..." In Bengaluru, we do find a city with many sub-cultures that competes for a space. The Assamese community has found its space and is quite stable and prosperous among the existing networks of the space the city of Bengaluru offers.

Conclusion

India's landscape is marked with numerous movements in search of state and community identity. One can identify oneself based on state, caste, religion and also languages. Little Bear said that "language is the basis of sovereignty," as well as the vessel of culture. It is through the medium of language that a identity is propagated. It is the narration of experiences that people develop a familiar memory that defines their identity and creates a boundary of who 'we' and 'other' are. There exists a 'we' feeling in the Assamese Community and 'others' feeling for others outside their community. Nevertheless they do try to assimilate with the dominant group by inculcating their linguistic features. Though there are instances of abuses reported by the minority Assamese community residing in Bengaluru. The ones interviewed (the students and the working class) did not report any major issues of violence, apart from the satirical racial comments they face at times. As per our respondents, the city of Bengaluru has been so far accommodating, one reason could be that the people here have come in terms with the idea of multiculturalism. People are reading the culture in which they reside and assimilate themselves in the host culture.

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