

**Department of History and Culture
Faculty of Humanities and Languages
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi**

Invites you to a lecture

By

Nabanipa Bhattacharjee

On

Speaking the Devil's Tongue: The Bengalis of Assam

24th January, 2013 (Thursday), 12:15 PM

Venue: Seminar Room, Department of History and Culture, JMI

Prof. G.P Sharma, Department of History and Culture will chair the session

The history of the Bengali presence in Assam goes back to early nineteenth century. Assam was part of the Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1873. The tying together of Assam and Bengal into one administrative unit officially facilitated the movement of Bengalis to the region. More importantly, Bangla was adopted as the official language and medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. Due to the efforts of the American Baptist missionaries and members of the Assamese middle class, the Assamese language, which was mistakenly assumed to be dialect of Bangla, was restored to its independent status and adopted as a medium of instruction in Assam in 1873. However, the measure did not alter the prevalent linguistic (and cultural) scenario to the extent it was anticipated for, the following year the Bangla speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar (an adjoining district of Sylhet) were officially attached to Assam after it was constituted as a separate Chief Commissioner's province. By the end of the century, not without the approval of the imperial state and also the Assamese gentry, the movement of Muslim peasant cultivators from eastern Bengal (predominantly from Mymensingh) to Brahmaputra Valley began. Gathering momentum in the twentieth century, the movement however came to be fiercely opposed during the 1920's and led to the enactment of, for instance, the Line System and similar controversial legislations. By 1947 – with the battle line between the Assamese and the Bengalis clearly drawn – the politics of the province became heavily communalised along linguistic (and cultural) and religious lines. The Bengalis of Surma (Sylhet and Cachar) and Brahmaputra Valleys – the Bengali employees of the Assam-Bengal Railway, among others, adding to the population of the latter – not only spoke a much despised language (of domination) but in addition, happened to be predominantly Muslims (in Sylhet). Following a referendum held in Sylhet on 6-7 July 1947, Assam was partitioned. This lecture takes off from Assam's partition to narrate the story of the Bengalis who are the largest linguistic minority of the state now. As a story that is extremely complex, as Assam watchers would not hesitate to concede, it is not only hard to narrate but fraught with risks too. I shall make an attempt nonetheless and focus upon the (interplay of) three intertwined issues– migration, language and religion – which (lay and) lie at the heart of Assam's imagination. From the language movement of the 1960's to the recent riots in 2012, these three issues have defined the state's (violent) politics and policies. Indeed, the anxiety and tension-ridden relationship of the Assamese and the Bengali communities calls for critical reflection. Mapping their otherwise deeply connected histories, I suggest, is the first step towards that. Only afterwards the (interrogation and) burial of the Devil(s) is likely to take place.

About the Speaker

Nabanipa Bhattacharjee teaches sociology at Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest include historical and political sociology, partition studies and contemporary North East India. She has published in English and Bangla in books, journals and magazines. She may be reached at: bula_jnu@yahoo.co.in