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## An Analysis of Literature and Language of Assam in the Light of Historical Perspectives

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**Abstract:** *Twenty first century Assamese society comprises with different linguistic groups. It contains various linguistic communities and as such Assamese language is the product of other modern Indian languages. Therefore, in a sense, Assamese language and literature is the result of different stages of historical development. No doubt, there is a long history behind this development, but this development is tremendous. Both Assamese literature and language developed side by side primarily from Sanskrit during neo-Vaisnava movement. The present day Assamese language and literature is the outcome of notable contributions made by Mahapurusha Sankardeva and his follower Sri Sri Madhavadeva. Moreover, Madhava Kandali's Assamese verse of Ramayana vigorously helped in the development of Assamese language and literature. In the same vein of Kandali, the verbal communication of Kamrupi and Goalpariya dialects of western Assam have also helped in the formation of modern Assamese language. Hence, it becomes necessary to discuss and analyse the growth and development of Assamese literature and language in the light of Historical perspectives. That is why the present topic is selected for study and analysis.*

**Keywords:** *Ancient, Assimilation, Kamrupa, language, literature, Manuscripts, Renaissance.*

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**Date of Submission:** 13-12-2021

**Date of Acceptance:** 05-01-2022

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### Introduction

Literature and Language is the mirror of a nation. It reflects the culture, civilization, essence and identity of a particular community. It is worth mentionable that Assamese literature and language

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is said to be the symbol of unity and assimilation among the different caste-community people in Assam. The growth and development of Assamese language can be traced from the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. when Rudra Kundali translated the 'Dranaparva' of the Mahabharata and Madhab Kandali rendered dramatic incidents from the Ramayana to Assamese. Hem Saraswati could be called the first poet in Assamese with his Prahlada Charita. The great saints-poet Sri Sri Sankardeva composed various songs and 'Ankiya Nats' to usher the pace of growth and development of Assamese literature and language. He and his great follower Sri Sri Madhabdeva contributed a lot to this effect and since then the trends of development of the script is going on with dynamic results. All parts of literature have been touched by both these great soul of the land.

Nineteenth and twentieth century is considered as the renaissance for the development of Assamese literature and language. The pioneer of the movement was Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Hem Chandra Goswami and many others. In the post-independent period, include Syed Abdul Malik, Yogesh Das, Bhabendranath Saikia, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, etc. contributed a lot to the literature and language of Assam. Presently Assamese literature and language represents as one of the leading accents in the north-eastern region.

## **Background of Development of Assamese Literature and Language**

It would not be an exaggeration if we claim that both ancient and medieval Assam made notable contribution to the Sanskrit literature and language. Sanskrit can be treated as the official language and the language of the learned few. Since long, the literary history of Assam and language of Assam is fruitful.

### **Literature**

Present day Assamese literature is the outcome of various stages of development. It is not a new one, it is very old. In other words, Assamese literature dates back to ancient Assam. If we look back, there was unwritten ancient Assamese literature. It can hardly be expected that Mon-Khmer and the Tibeto-Burman speakers of ancient Assam would leave anything that may rightly be called literature. However, they

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possessed no script of their own. Though there exist amongst them a lot of folk-tales and folk songs,<sup>1</sup> we are uncertain to trace the period of those folk literature. They have undergone changes with the progress of time in diction even though keeping the content intact. We have a mass of unwritten ancient Assamese literature such as the *Bihu* folk songs, popular *ballads* (e.g., the story of *Behula* and *Lakhindar*), *Oja-pali* songs, *boat* songs, *riddles*, *proverbs* and the *mantras* incantations used for sorcery and treatment of diseases and similar purposes. In his *Asomiya Sahityar Chaneki*, H. C. Goswami nicely outlines about ancient Assamese folk literature. Barring these, the so-called *Dakar-Bachans* are wise sayings on different useful matters of daily life which are concerned with the acts of agriculture, etc. belongs to this category of floating literature. K. L. Barua assigns *Dak* to a very early period while according to H. C. Goswami the aphorism of *Dak* was reduced to writing in about 800 A. D.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the so called *Dakar-Bachan* do not present a uniform language pattern.

Ancient Assam made notable contributions to the Sanskrit literature. A number of passages in our inscriptions hinge that the Kamrupa kings took a personal interest in Sanskrit literature. Since the kings were great patrons of learned men and so various branches of learning like *Sruti*, *Smrti*, *Nyaya* and *Mimamsa* and so on, have been studied, taught and cultivated in ancient Assam. Scholars are of the opinion that Assam's contribution to Sanskrit literature dates back to Palakapya. Palakapya is the author of the *Hastyayurvedaon Gaja-cikitsa*<sup>3</sup> is an extensive compilation of Sanskrit verses on the treatment of elephants in 160 chapters covering 700 pages. It is divided into 4 sections, namely, *Maharoga*, *Ksudraroga*, *Salya* and *Uttarasthana*. The contents of the work are presented as a dialogue held in Campa between king Romapada is a contemporary of king Dasarath and Palakapya Muni in about 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century B. C. Here it is important to observe that the word *pala* is shown to have great phonetic similarity with such words of south Indian languages like *palla* and *pal* meaning tusk of an elephant and also with Punjabi *piuli* and *pili* meaning an elephant. *Hastyayurveda*, according to Handiqui, 'is an ancient work of which we have only an imperfect text in the printed edition, and, the home of the sage was on the side of the Himalayas on the banks of the Lauhitya or the Brahmaputra, which points on the north-eastern Assam where the river is still called Luit.'<sup>4</sup>

Besides, the name Pragjyotisha hinges that the study of *Jyotisha* was prevalent in ancient Assam. What it means that Pragjyotisa was a seat of astronomical studies. At this juncture, one can remind Purusottam Bhattacharya was a practitioner of Kamrupa Jyotisha. It true that therewas school of astronomy for calculating the almanac in Kamarupa called *Kamrupiya Nibandhaniya Khandasadhya*. Manuscripts on this system are available with the professional astrologers of Kamrupa. Even we can name later well known writers of Kamrupa

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who worked on Jyotisha are Damodara Misra's *Jyotisasarasam graha*, Pitambara siddhanta vagisa's *Grahana kaumudi* and *Samkranti kaumudi*, Mathuranathavidyalamkara's *Samayamrta* and *Abhuta*, Sambhunatha's *varsabhaskara*, Vamsivadanasarman's *Jyotirmuktavali*, Krsnadevamisra's *Samvatsaraganana* and Laksmipatisarman's *Jyotirmata* and so on.

Moreover, there are drama like *Mudraraksasa* by Visakhadatta, *Ratnavali* by king Sriharsa etc. According to scholars, Visakhadatta was a poet of Kamrupa. In all the CP inscriptions of the Kamrupa kings there is an invariable reference to the Varaha incarnation of Visnu. Even his Nandi verse addressed to Siva proves that Visakhadatta belonged to Kamrupa. Similarly, J. C. Gosh is of the opinion that Sriharsha, the author of the Sanskrit drama *Ratnavali*, was a king of Narakasura line and so he belonged to Pragjyotishpur. Here Gosh said that 'Naraka episode inasmuch as Madu was a demon engaged by Naraka for protecting the Pragjyotishapur'<sup>5</sup>, and thus Naraka happened to be the master of Mudu. In short, like Visakhadatta, Sriharsha is referred to as a poet.

Of a number of Classical literatures, the *Arthasastra* of Kautilya makes important references to a number of places of Kamrupa. Equally, Sandhyakaranandi's *Ramacharita* explains the conquest of Kamrupa by Ramapala's general Mayan, Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* describes the marriage between the Kamrupa princes Amritaprabha and Meghavahana, the king of Kashmir and Lalitaditya's campaign as far as the Lauhitya. Above all, the *Vedic literature*, the *Sankhyayana Grihasamgraha*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* contains references to Kamrupa or Pragjyotisa and its ruler Naraka too.

Forthermore, we have *Kalika Purana*. Precisely speaking, of the eighteen *Upapuranas* of the traditional list, *Kalika purana* is the most important. According to R. C. Hazra, *KalikaPuranor Kali puranas* known to the Nibandha writers is an earlier work composed in about the 7<sup>th</sup> century and is different from the printed *kalika purana*.<sup>6</sup> *Kalika purana* is primarily concerned with the glorification of the *Sakta Tantric* cult at the temple Kamakhya in Kamrupa. In fact, in *kalika purana*, adequate importance is given to Siva and Visnu. V. Raghavan shows that there were three versions of the text of the *kalika purana*. They are: Aufrecht's *Scatalogus catalogorum I*, p. 98-6, L. 370 called *Candi Puran*, Eggeling's *India Office Catalogue*, vi, p. 1193, 3344 (No 2488) styled *Kalika purana- (Kali-) Purana* and *Sati Purana*, and the same pp. 1189 f, 3339 (2943).<sup>7</sup> Thus, there is no question of doubt that *Kalika Purana* is of immense importance to studies in the cultural studies of ancient Assam. In the *Kalika Purana* Siva is referred to as Kamesvara and the Goddess as Mahagauri. The *Purana* describes all the temples

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and holy places of ancient Kamrupa. The *Kalika purana* was anterior to *Vanamala*.

Like Purana, other Sanskrit texts such as *Svalpamatsyapurana* supposed to have been composed in Kamrupa.<sup>8</sup> Manuscripts of the other *puranas* like *Visnudharma*, *Visnudharmottara* and *Dharma Puranare* available also. Even *tantra* work *vrhadgavaksa* earlier than *Yogini tantra* composed in Kamrupa in sixteenth century. *Yogini Tantra* discusses the ancient geography of the land and the cultural condition of the people of Kamrupa. Apart from these, the history of ancient Assam includes the *Tantrik Buddhist literature* such as the *Kamrupa-Yatra*, a Sanskrit work composed in Assam, the *Kamakhya-tantra* gives an account of Naraka-Bhagadatta, the *pagsomzonzan*, the *kahgyur*, the *Tangyur*, the *Kamakhya Guhyasiddhi*, the *Goraksha – Samhita*, the *Kamaratna Tantra*, the *Sadhanamala* and many more. According to scholars, in a sense, the Buddhist literature of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan links ancient Assam with the *Mahaparinirvana* of the Buddha. Of course, *Haragaurisamvada* or *Haragauri-Tantra* is an another *Tantra cum dharmasastra* text, probably composed in Kamrupa earlier than 15<sup>th</sup> century contains, the genealogy of the rulers of ancient Assam and *Haragauribilasa* gives the ancient geography of the Assam.

The Vedic literature as well as other Sanskrit literature is important for the study of the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam. Equally it is true of the people of India. As a matter of fact, Assam has vast Vaishnava literature. Like Shakespeare, Sankardeva (1449-1568), the most prominent figure in Assamese literature and culture, ushered in a wave of neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam, makes a respectful reference to the Rama poetry of Madhava Kandali and other poets. Sankardeva and his chief disciple and apostle Madhavadeva composed a good number of songs, dramas, verse narratives etc. Sankardeva's the *bargit* songs (best of his 34 lyrics), narratives such as *Hariscandra-upakhyana*, *Rukmini-haran* of the *Bhagavata purana*, and exposition of *Bhakti* lucidly placed in *Bhakti-pradipa* *Nimi-nava siddha-samvada*, *Anadi- patana* etc. Again he created a literary idiom *Brajabuli* in a new in Sanskrit. Sankardeva's *Vipra- patniprasada*, *rukmini-haran*, *Parijata-haran*, *Kaliya-damana*, *koli-Gopala* and *Ram-vijayanat* were called *natankiya*, *yatra* or *ankiya nat*. They are mostly dance dramas in which dances of a classical tone are employed. Similarly, Madhavadeva made 157 *bargits*. Also, he wrote the dramas *Arjuna-bhanjana*, *Chor-dhara*, *Pimpara-guchuwa*, *Bhumi-lutiwa*, *Bhojona-vyavahara*, *Brahma-mohana*, *Bhusna-haran*, *Rasahurmura* and *Kotora-khelowa* etc. It does not mean that assamese literature end here as we have the historical ballads such as *Mani Konwarar Git*, *Badan-Barphukanar Git*, *Bakhar Barar Git*, *Padum Kunwarir Git*, *radha-Rukminir Git*, *Maniram Dewanar Git* and many

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more. Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that Assam has made the largest and the most spectacular contribution to the Sanskrit literature in the field of *Smriti* and *Dharmashastra* as well as other fields too.

### Language

The present day Assam is a bilingual state with Assamese and Bengali. Assamese is the court language in the Brahmaputra valley and Bengali in the 2 districts of the Surma valley. For scholars, Assamese is the easternmost new Indo-aryan language spoken in the Brahmaputra valley and in Arunachal. In Nagaland we find a mixed form of Assamese. If we look back to the history of Indo-Aryan language, it can be divided into 3 groups such as *Old Indo-aryan* (1200-600 B. C.), *Middle Indo-Aryan* (600 B. C. – 1000 A. D.) and *New Indo-Aryan* (1000 A. D.). The Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) is again subdivided into 3 stages, such as, the *first* stage from 600 B.C-1<sup>st</sup> century A. D., specimens of this stage of languages are found in Asokan and other inscriptions of the Pre-Christian era and in the Pali works; the *second* stage from 1<sup>st</sup> century A. D. - 6<sup>th</sup> century A. D., specimens of this stage of languages are found in epigraphs of the 1<sup>st</sup> three Christian centuries, the literary prakrits, Maharastri, Sauraseni, Ardhamagadhi, Magadhi and Paisai and in Buddhist Sanskrit texts, and the *third* stage from the 6<sup>th</sup> century A. D.-10<sup>th</sup> century A. D. is represented by *Apabhramsa* and *Apabhrastra*.

It is believed that Assamese language developed from Magadi and other parallel variety of Prakrit. In the same vein of Bengali, Bihari, Oriya, Assamese language originated from the eastern variety of the *Magadhan prakrit*. Here what is Banikanta Kakati writes: ‘Assamese is not an off-shoot or patios of Bengali but an independent speech related to Bengali, both occupying the position of dialects with reference to some standard Magadhan Apabhramsa.’<sup>9</sup> What it reveals that Assamese language originated after 10<sup>th</sup> century A. D. This view, however, goes against the history of the Assamese language. There is no question of doubt that Assamese language is a Magadhan language is evident from the remarks of Hiuen Tsang. Hiuen Tsang writes: “The men (of Kamrupa) are of small stature and their complexion of dark yellow. Their language differs a little from that of Mid-India.”<sup>10</sup> Quite truly, this is the first reference to Assamese language and establishes the relationship of the Assamese language with the speech of Magadhan. As Grierson said, ‘We may trace Magadhi Prakrit from Magadh in three lines: to the south it has become Oriya, to the South-east it has become first western and then eastern Bengali

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and to the east it has become first Northern Bengali and then Assamese.’<sup>11</sup> Here D. Neog opines that the theory of the origin of the Assamese language from Magadhi Prakrit propounded by Grierson and followed by S. K. Chatterjee is only a concoction of fact<sup>12</sup>, not otherwise.

It is claimed that there are three kinds of languages in Assam. They are: Sanskrit as the official language and the language of the learned few, as just noted above, non-Aryan tribal languages of the Austric and the Tibeto-Barman families and a local variety of Prakrit (i.e., an MIA language) wherefrom, in course of time, the modern Assamese language emerged as an M. I. L. The next development of Assamese language is seen by the language of the *Caryas*. The language of the *Caryas* has certain striking affinities with Assamese language. Even a number of the Assamese case terminations are found in *Caryas*. For example: normative case ending *e* in *kumbhirekhaa*, *core nila* (No. 2) etc. If we observe minutely then it is seen that the language of the *Caryas* having an intimate relation with the Assamese language of the formative stage. Assamese language in the formative stage is also seen in epigraphs, namely, the stone inscriptions discovered at Ambary, Guwahati contains the text: *adityasama-srisamudrapalajye*...<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the earliest specimen of writing so far discovered in ancient Assam is found in the Umacal Rock Inscriptions of Surendravarman assigned to C. 470 A. D.<sup>14</sup> The script is identified as the eastern variety of the Gupta Alphabet,<sup>15</sup> an offshoot of the Brahmi script. Some of the aksharas of the Brahmi script, Gupta script, Kutila script or Siddhamatrka or Early Nagari or Proto Bengali closely resemble Bengali Assamese forms.<sup>16</sup> The Early Nagari script also called Proto-Assamese inasmuch as in the inscriptions of ancient Assam we perceived a positive development of the alphabet towards the modern Assamese script. This brings us to the point that though the present Assamese script differs from its earlier specimen, it is the product of certain historical factors.

It is a common assumption that of the Assamese-Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, the Bodo language is an important language. The Bodo language, however, have no inherited script at present. Indeed, the Bodo people of Assam are scattered in the area from Dhubri in the west to Sadiya in the east. There are a small number of Bodo-Kachari people in Arunachal, Tripura and Nagaland. The Kacharis, Koches, Rabhas, Hojongs, Lalungs, Garos, Morans and Chutiyas in fact belonged to the one and same speech community. Here it is worth noting that since 1963, Bodo language has been introduced as the medium of instruction at the primary level in the predominant areas, namely, Kokrajhar and in the Goalpara district of Assam. Besides, the Tai-Ahom is an important language of the Assam-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-

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Burman group. This kind of language is spoken mainly by the Khamtis, Aitonias, Shyams (Naras), Phakials, Khamjangs and so on. If we look back, in the early part of the Ahom rule, this language was used as the court language but gradually it was substituted by Assamese. A few historical works were written in this language till the end of the Ahom rule. It has its own script. There are, in fact, at present time the Assamese language consists of two main currents. The speech as represented by the Kamrupi and Goalpariya dialects of western Assam constitutes the main current of the Assamese language flowing from one end of the state to the other. The other current is the dialect of eastern Assam on which the standard colloquial is based and which also is intimately related with the *Carya* songs. Bhojpuri words are also used in early and modern Assamese.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of the above observation, we may note that the standard Assamese and its different dialects have preserved many peculiarities of Magadhi, sauraseni, Ardhamagadhi, Paisaci Prakritis, etc. This is how many ways Assamese is related to Vedic and pre-Vedic languages. In the same vein of Kakati it can be said that 'Assamese is a small island in a sea of diverse non-Aryan languages.'<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the non-Aryan languages spoken in Assam and its neighboring states, namely, the language of the Austric and Sino-Tibetan family have contributed a lot to the Assamese language. They have contributed in the field of phonology, morphology, vocabulary and syntax in particular. At this juncture, it is interesting to note that the non-Aryan influence is marked in the alveolarization of the palatal affricates of *c*, *ch* to *s* and *j*, *j* to *z*, the phenomenon of spontaneous nasalization, the origin of the definitive's and the formation of the negatives, the omission of the copula etc. Again, the following words we are uses are of non-Aryan origin: *khang*'anger', *bhur*'ruft', *maikaa* 'female', *gohari*'petition', *gahari*'pig', *phan* 'a trick', *hai*'noise' etc. Again, Assamese has preserved a good number of Perso-Arabic and Turki words in its vocabulary, e.g., *rumal*'handkerchief', *kharas*'expenditure', *gap* 'gossip', *sabon*'soap', *nagad*'cash', *kabu*'control', *las* 'corpse', *talas* 'search' etc. Thus, we conclude that the Assamese language has evolved and in the course of time occupied the status of literary language as an outcome of the admixture of different elements Vedic, Pre-Vedic, Pali, Prakritis and other Northern Indian languages and the local non-Aryan languages.

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