

## **Dictionary Writing in Assam: A Study Through Select Classical Texts**

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### **Abstract**

It is believed that Hemchandra Barua's *Hemkosh* (1900) is the first Assamese Dictionary and Miles Bronson's *A Dictionary in Assamese and English* (1867) is the first bilingual dictionary published in Assamese language. But interestingly the first folio of dictionary was drafted in 1795 AD in Tai and Assamese language; on the other hand *Hemkosh* came out in 1900 AD. Under the framework of lexicography, this paper intends to look at the pre-*Hemkosh* era of dictionary writing in three different approaches: (1) A historical account of dictionary writing of pre *Hemkosh* era, (2) A linguistic account of select dictionaries and (3) An analysis of the beginning of Assamese standardisation. The research would be based primarily on secondary sources consisting library works and unpublished manuscripts.

**Keywords:** Assam, classical dictionaries, dictionary-making, pre-*Hemkosh*, dictionary-standardisation

### **1. Introduction**

The functional relevance of a dictionary in modern life is immense and is further increased in linguistic studies. A dictionary is used for several reasons, such as spelling checking, pronunciation of a word, meaning of a word etc. Considering theme, a dictionary is also used to look for synonyms and antonyms, etymological origin of a word, pattern of uses. Perhaps a dictionary is the only resource that can give us the best and most comprehensive information about words. The general conviction is that the information provided in a dictionary is accurate, authentic and reliable.

### **2. Definitions**

Probably in the 13th century, the term *dictionary* was first coined in Medieval Latin on the basis of the Latin adjective *dictionarius* 'of words', a derivative of Latin *diction*

‘saying’, or in Medieval Latin ‘word’. Latin *dictio* (also the source of English diction 15th century) was a derivative of the verb *dicere* ‘say’. Its original meaning was ‘point out’ rather than ‘utter’, as demonstrated by its derivative *indicare* (source of English *indicate*) and words in other languages, such as Greek *deiknunai* ‘show’, Sanskrit *dic-* ‘show’ (later ‘say’), and German *zeihen* ‘accuse’, which come from the same source (Ayto 1990: 170 in Das).

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary for Current English* (1998), a dictionary is a “book that deals with the individual words of a language (or certain specified class of them) so as to set forth their orthography, pronunciation, signification and use, their synonyms, derivation and history, or at least some of these facts; for convenience of reference the words are arranged in some stated order, now in most languages, alphabetical, and in larger dictionaries the information given is illustrated by quotations from literature”.

Similarly, Berg gives the definition of a dictionary in the following way: “A dictionary is a systematically arranged list of socialized linguistic forms compiled from the speech-habits of a given speech community and commented on by the author in such a way that the qualified reader understands the meaning ... of each separate form, and is informed of the relevant facts concerning the function of that form in its community” (Zgusta 1971: 197).

As given in the definitions, a dictionary may serve various practical needs. Besides a dictionary is also a source of information on life, language and society. It is also consulted as a guide-book for distinguishing good uses of words. Therefore, a dictionary performs the function of a ‘court-house’ for a language. Hence, a dictionary embeds both linguistic and extra-linguistic information.

### 3. Theoretical Background

Typological classification of any dictionary is important to understand the nature of the dictionary since it provides a lot of information regarding its compilation, collection of texts, choice of lexical items, arrangements, entries and sub-entries (Das 2008: 438). Adopting the criteria proposed by Malkiel (1967), Das has classified dictionaries in the following manner. However, there is no watertight definition and theory for the classification of dictionaries. Dictionaries may vary in terms of its uses, its entries of words, purposes, level and load of information. Hence, a dictionary is viewed and analysed linguistically and non-linguistically.

1. Density of entries: This refers to the list of vocabulary to be considered for inclusion. The list may include words from general or restricted or from specialised domains. It may also cover regional or social dialects, jargons, slangs or archaisms depending on the speech community.
2. Language: A dictionary can be either monolingual or bilingual, or multilingual (number of language) depending on the target users for whom the dictionary is being made.

3. The nature of entries: A dictionary can contain either lexical information only or full encyclopaedic (non-lexical). Moreover, the degree of concentration on lexical data may vary depending on the consideration of the dictionary.
4. Axis of time: A dictionary can either be diachronic (historical or dynamic) or synchronic (static) with regard to the collection of language data and language representation.
5. Arrangement of entries: Normally, lexical items are arranged in simple alphabetical order, although words can also be arranged according to their semantic or sense relations. Thus, a dictionary can be either alphabetical or semantical.
6. Purpose: This is related to the basic function of a dictionary. A dictionary can either be a general, normative or referential, pedagogic, or a descriptive depending on the goal of the dictionary compilation.
7. Prospective users: A dictionary is meant for general readers who want to find out the general linguistic information of the lexical items or for the special users who are interested in special aspects of lexical items.

Although typological classification seems essential in understanding a dictionary, it is practically onerous to delimit the types into a strict watertight frame, since there is always a chance of overlapping of lexical information across dictionary types. For example, *Oxford English Dictionary* aims at giving synchronic details about English language, it presents diachronic history too. Even *Asomiya Jatiya Abhidhan* (compiled under the supervision of D. Sharma in 2010) is a mixture of both the qualities. It seems overlapping the general criteria of typological definition of dictionary.

We will now look at the pre-*Hemkosh* era of dictionary writing or dictionary making in Assam configuring the theoretical assumption proposed by Malkiel and Das.

#### 4. Methodology

For the preparation of this paper primary and secondary are used. For ethnographical research design, participant observation method is very much crucial and following the method we have taken close observation of the research data. We have taken original unpublished manuscripts for the study. During the field study, photography is used for future record. We have visited Patsaku, Sepon and Parijat of Sivasagar district for the collection of data.

#### 5. Objectives

For the study, we have formulated the following three objectives.

1. To find out the linguistic features of *Bar Amra* and *Lati Amra*
2. To find out the typological characteristics of *Bar Amra* and *Lati Amra*
3. To analyse the limitations (e.g. ambiguities) present in *Bar Amra* and *Lati Amra*

## 6. Historical Background

The compilation of any type of dictionary or lexicon, word meaning book is usually considered to be the most important step towards standardisation, since the language is in somehow stable and not presumed as endangered. But prior to this stage, if the language is in the verge of extinction, the compilation of a meaning book is not only important it's a life to the culture, society and a hope of endurance to the language. No doubt at the juncture of language movement and challenges, the publication of *Hemkosh* by Hemchandra Barua in 1900 is an epoch making effort. He gave English equivalent lexicons to Assamese lexicons along with their etymological meaning. The effect of *Hemkosh* was so remarkable that Birinchi Kumar Barua comments, "*Hemkosh* laid down clear cut rules for spelling and syntax, leaving no room for obscurity and confusion" (Barua 2003: 108). The convention of written Assamese set forth by *Hemkosh* has remained almost unaltered till now ever since its publication except for some few minor changes. Therefore, keeping *Hemkosh* as benchmark, we can divide the publications of dictionaries into two distinct phases: the pre and post *Hemkosh* periods.

The most remarkable contribution of pre-*Hemkosh* period is Miles Bronson's edited *Asomiya aru Ingraji Abhidhan* (an Anglo-Assamese Dictionary) published in 1867. According to the editor, the dictionary contained around 14000 words and that he had followed the system of orthography as adopted by Jaduram Deka Barua<sup>1</sup>. However, Sharma [Public Lecture] has listed out eight more dictionaries (lexicons) written prior to the publication of *Hemkosh*. Following his note, we are listing out the dictionaries according to compilation date.

- (a) *Bar Kakot Homung Puthi, Bar Amra* (1795)
- (b) *Lati Amra* (1797?)
- (c) *Vocabularies of the Ashami Kamrupa Language* (1810)
- (d) *Ten Languages Dictionary* (1814)
- (e) *Jaduram Deka Barua's Dictionary* (1836)
- (f) *A Spelling Book and Vocabulary in English, Assamese, Singpho and Naga* (1836)
- (g) *Brief Vocabulary in English and Assamese with Rudimentary Exercise* (Ingraji aru Asomiya Bakyawali) (1841)
- (h) *Revised version of Brief Vocabulary in English and Assamese with Rudimentary Exercise* (1864)
- (i) *A Dictionary of Assamese and English* (1867)
- (j) *Hemkosh* (1900)

During the reign of Ahom king Gaurinath Simha (1780–1795), Tengai Mohan Pandit tried to write the first lexicon in Tai Ahom and which was came out as *Bar Amra*

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<sup>1</sup> The Groundwork of first Assamese dictionary was done by Jaduram Deka Barua. He was a munsif in the colonial administration. Deka Barua had been asked to carry out the work by the Commissioner of Assam, Mr. Jenkins (C. Vijayasree. (2004). *Writing the West, 1750-1947: Representations from Indian Languages*. Sahitya Akademi; New Delhi)

‘Lexicon of Ahom – Assamese language’ in 1795. The dictionary was in bilingual as it used Tai Ahom and Assamese language. However, the Assamese meaning was given in Tai Ahom script following lexicographical pattern of alphabetical order. In Tai Ahom *Amra* means dictionary or the largest book in the country. Written in *xasipat* (aquilaria agallocha), the length of *Bar Amra* was of 31cm and its width was of 8.5cm (Introduction, Translation of *Bar Amra*). The copy of *Bar Amra*, that we are using for this study is owned by the Ahom Pandit Junaram Phukon of Parijat, Sivasagar.

On the other hand, Ramakanta M Baruah was credited to the second Tai Ahom lexicon called *Lati Amra*. In this lexicon Tai Ahom word-meanings were given in Tai Ahom language and scripts. Unlike *Bar Amra*, it was arranged in terms of content not in alphabetical order. The words included in the dictionary were divided into ten parts namely human body parts, names of fish etc. It was believed that Nandanath D Phukon had recovered the ancient scripts written in *xasipat* and later he worked on the translation of these scripts. After him, Bimalakanta Boruah was appointed in the History and Archaeology Department of Assam. Boruah commissioned Dambarudhar D Phukon to translate *Bar Amra* and *Lati Amra* lexicons to Assamese. Bimalakanta Baruah and Nandanath D Phukon did the editorial work and department of History and Archaeology of Assam published the work as *Ahom lexicons* in 1964.

**ĀHOM LEXICONS**  
PART I  
**BAR-AMRA**  
**বৰ-অম্ৰা**  
[ বৰ্ণানুক্রমিক ]

Āhom words	Pronunciation		Meaning	
	Assamese	English	Assamese	English
৷/মি	অ	a	নদা ; অমৃত ; ব্ৰশু- বোধক উপসর্গ ; 'জাও' শব্দৰ পাচত বহি অতীতকাল- নুজেরা শব্দ ।	A pipe; ambrosia; a particle of in- terrogation; a particle added to 'jāo' to denote pluperfect tense.
৷/মি	আ	ā	বেগা ; বেবোতা ।	To open; to bleat.
৷/মি	আ	ā	আপায়েক ; বিজুত ; বিশাল ।	Elder sister of one's father; wide- spread; vast.
৷/মি	আই	ai	উপায় নবা ; লাজ পোতা ।	To belch; to feel shame.
৷/মি	আই	ai	বৰপুতেক ; লাজ ভাপ ।	The eldest son; shy- ness; vapour.
৷/মি ৷/মি	আই-খুন-লুঙ	Āi-khun- lung	আই-খুন-লুঙ — খুন- লুঙৰ বৰপুতেক, মুহুৰু দেশৰ বজা ।	Āi-khun-lung was the eldest son of Khun-lung and king of Mung- kong.
৷/মি ৷/মি	আই-ঙিঙ	Āi-nging	আইঙিঙ—অপেশুৰীৰ দেশৰ বজা, জাতি- ইপু-চাঙ-চেঙৰ প্ৰথম পুত্ৰ ।	Āi-nging, the eldest son of Jaalipsang- deng, was the ruler of the country of the fairies.
৷/মি ৷/মি	আই-ফা-লান	Āi-phā-lān	আইফালান—লেঙুদেউৰ বৰপুতেক ।	Āi-phā-lān, the eldest son of Lengdon.

**Figure 1.1:** Ahom Lexicons – Based on original Tai manuscripts (1964)

The image shows the first page of *Ahom Lexicons* based on *Bar Amra*. The entry follows the alphabetical order.

## 7. Linguistic Account

Each sentence in *Bar Amra* begins with a Tai Ahom word and follows by an Ahom phrase *cham ba* and then the meaning of the Tai Ahom word in Assamese written in Ahom

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script (Morey, 2006). As shown in the examples below. The meaning of *cham ba* is ‘which means’ or ‘it means’.



**Figure 1.2:** *Bar Amra* (collected from Junaram S Phukon)

The manuscript shows the 3<sup>rd</sup> letter of Tai Ahom consonants. The image was downloaded from sealang.net, which is an archive of Tai Ahom old manuscripts.

Examples:      7.1       $\text{𑜀𑜂𑜆𑜇}$      $\text{𑜀𑜂𑜆𑜇}$      $\text{𑜀𑜂𑜆𑜇}$      $\text{𑜀𑜂𑜆𑜇}$      $\text{𑜀𑜂𑜆𑜇}$      $\text{𑜀𑜂𑜆𑜇}$

                  khe    cham ba    no    di-k

                  river    PRT    say    a river -k

                  ‘khe is said for a river’

Not all the pages are written in column as shown in the Figure 1.2, indeed, most of the pages are in continuous text with sentences crossing over lines and even pages. One feature of this manuscript is that the page number exhibits in the reverse (verso) side, and the number is written on the left side of the page.

As we find in the example 7.1 the first word *khe* is a Tai Ahom word and the last two syllables *no di-k* is an Assamese word. In between these two words the *cham ba* works as the indigenous way of showing the link between these words. Following the Morey’s pattern, we have opted for a literal translation, showing that the known Assamese term is marked with a non-agent marker -k, which has a function that has been termed anti-agentive (Morey, 2006). In all the versions of *Bar Amra*, it is found that all the Assamese words are suffixed either with - k, - ok or with - r at the end. When a word is marked with - k it shows that the form is nominal as in (7.1). In Assamese the suffix -k is associated with patient, but is also associated with recipient, rather than the theme in ditransitive construction. Here in *Bar Amra* the -k is used to mark the known item in definitional sentence (Morey, 2006).

On the other hand, a word marked with suffix - r exhibits for the verbal lexemes. For example, the Assamese word *mosibor* is found in the following example from *Bar Amra*. In Assamese dictionary *mosa* means wipe.

Examples:     7.2    কৈ    চাম    বাকৈ    বসি    বোৰ  
                          kai    cham   ba    mo si   bor  
     mosibo-r  
                          wipe   PRT    say    to wipe  
                          ‘kai is said to wipe’

Here we can see the –r suffixation is used to denote the non-finite verb (verbal) which describes the verb but not showing the tense. In English mostly three types of non-finite verbs are found: gerunds (I love swimming), infinitives (I want to go there), and participles (roasted chicken). In *Bar Amra*, the –r is used only with the infinitives of non-finite form. Gerund and participle form are not marked with –r suffixation.

This –r suffixation in the manuscript creates some ambiguities in deciphering the actual meaning. For example, Morey (Morey & Post, 2010: 80) says that the Assamese word *jabor* (7.3) is a verb. First of all, if we take it as a verb then it is an infinitival form of non-finite verb. Morey says on the basis of using –r suffix at the end of the word. He mentions that the ‘‘Assamese lexeme *jabor* is found in an Assamese dictionary under two entries, one a verb meaning ‘to go’ and another a noun meaning ‘garbage’ (Morey & Post, 2010: 80). Therefore, he says that if it is garbage then it would be written *jaborok*. In Assamese the non-finite verb *jabor*, /যাবৰ/ and the noun which means garbage /জাবৰ/ are marked with two distinct sounds. The problem is due to the absence of /য/ in Tai Ahom language. However, this word is clearly meant for the verb form but there are several examples in the manuscript, which have no evidences (e.g. sentence) of using any one of these suffixations. Therefore, it is not clear that whether the lexeme /mu/ means not finite verb ‘go’ or it means noun ‘garbage’.

Example:     7.3    মূ    চাম    বাকৈ    যাব    বোৰ  
                          mu    cham   ba    ja   bor  
     jabo-r  
                          mu    PRT    say    to go-r/garbage (?)  
                          ‘mu is said for garbage or ‘to go’

We have also found some sentences which are not associated with any final suffixes. For example,

Example     7.4    কখি    চাম    বাকৈ    বি    চিতা  
                          khi    cham   ba    bi   ch   ta                  (no ‘- k’ or ‘- r’)

Here in this sentence what does *khi* means is not clear. It seems *khi* means *bista*. In *Ahom Lexicon* based on *Bar Amra* manuscript, the meaning of *khi* is given /utha/ (to get up), /bistha/ (dung), /gu/ (ordure), /munrag/ (peacock), /kasta/ (distress). Though it closes to ‘dung’ which is *bistha* in Assamese but there is no anti-agentive marker, therefore, we cannot

call it noun directly. /bi s ta / may mean the number twenty also. Like this without any suffixation or agentive marker we find the following example (7.5), where /u do phai/ is understood as asthma in *Ahom Lexicons*.

Example: 7.5     $\text{𑜋𑜪}$      $\text{𑜇𑜡}$      $\text{𑜇𑜡}$      $\text{𑜇𑜡 𑜇𑜡 𑜇𑜡}$   
                  khe    cham   ba    u do phai                    (no '-k' or '-r')

Some more examples showing the absence of non-agentive, suffixations, ambiguities:

Example: 7.6     $\eta$ a cham ba ku pal  
                  7.7    k<sup>h</sup>e cham ba ka ru lik  
                  7.8    k<sup>h</sup>e cham ba gu ro k

Sometimes other than -k, -ok and -r, a final element appears as shown in the following example. This is used as an Assamese clitic meaning 'also', 'as well'.

Example: 7.9     $\text{𑜈𑜡}$      $\text{𑜇𑜡}$      $\text{𑜇𑜡}$      $\text{𑜇𑜡 𑜇𑜡 𑜇𑜡 𑜇𑜡}$   
                  lam    cham   ba    dal   lo   ku  
  dal-ok-u  
                  branch PRT say    a branch of tree -k-u  
                  'lam is said for a branch of tree'

Another important aspect of *Bar Amra* is the uses of colloquial or societal verities. For example:

- /gudhalike/ গুখলিকে (evening),
- /tutibor/ টুটিবৰ (lessening),
- /khorua/ খবুৰা (harelipped),
- /ujuk/ উজুক (easy),
- /ghukuhok/ ঘুকুহক (deep),
- /bagh birali/ বাঘ বিৰালী (wild cat).

## 8. The Linguistic Features of *Lati Amra*

There is no mention of a particular date of writing this manuscript. In personal conversation with Medini M Mohung of Parijat, Sivasagar, it is found that the writing of this manuscript is contemporary to *Bar Amra* or it may one or two years later of *Bar Amra* but he assured that not prior to *Bar Amra*. The writing pattern of *Lati Amra* is as shown below.





**Figure 1.3** *Lati Amra* Manuscript (owned from Junaram S Phukon)

The image shows some of the human body parts in Tai Ahom. The image was downloaded from sealang.net, which is an archive of Tai Ahom old manuscripts.

Example:      8.1      𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫 𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫      𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫      𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫 𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫

ti lok              bu le              ni ru khav

til-ok

a mole-ok      say              ni ru khav

‘nirukhav is said for a mole’

8.2      𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫 𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫              𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫              𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫 𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫

na vi k              bu le              chai ni

navi-k

the navel-k              say              chai ni

‘chai ni is said for the navel’

The second characteristic of the manuscript is its entry of words in domain wise. It includes ten domains, and these are as follows:

1. The words relating to human body
2. The words relating to building of house
3. The names of fishes
4. The names of vegetables
5. The names of arum plants
6. Words relating to grass and plants
7. The names of flowers
8. Ahom years
9. The days in Ahom
10. The months in Ahom

The examples given above (8.1, 8.2) provide the grammatical structure of *Lati Amra*. It has only nouns and for denoting noun the suffixation of - k and - ok is exhibited in the lexemes.

Although the manuscript is basically encyclopaedic structure relating to several domains of Tai Ahom culture, it seems that in the domain of body parts of a human body, several human behaviours are also mentioned. Without using anti-agentive marker, some phrases are written. We can see in the given examples.

Examples:	8.3	so ku r	pa ni	bu ak	bu le	ta nam lai
		soku-r	pani	bua-k		
		eye-r	water	flow-k	say	ta nam lai
		‘ta nam lai is said for the flow of tear’				

This expression might be a verb, which we never know. There are some other expressions, which are not actually the body parts, but some behavioural pattern, for example; *ahom bhire bhoha* (to sit in Ahom fashion), *athur uport athu tuli boha* (to sit knee upon knee).

Apart from these, the manuscript also provides every detailed parts of a human body. For example, it gives a word for the place on forehead where the vermilion mark is put – *non nam*, the ear-ring hole – *pik bang* etc. Interestingly the Assamese language does not have any particular term for these body parts.

## 9. Typologically Both the Dictionaries Can Be Seen in the Following Ways

**Table 1.1:** Typological classifications of *Bar Amra* and *Lati Amra*

Sl. No.	Criteria	<i>Bar Amra</i>	<i>Lati Amra</i>
1	Density of entries	Regional/social	Restricted/special
2	Number of languages	Bilingual	Bilingual
3	Nature of entries	Lexical	Non-lexical
4	Axis of time	Synchronic	Synchronic
5	Arrangement of entries	Alphabetical	Casual/semantical
6	Purpose	Referential	Referential
7	Purpose of users	Special reader	Special reader

The table provides a typological characteristic to the dictionaries. It seems that both the dictionaries share more or less same features except the nature of entries.

## 10. Summing up

The writing of *Bar Amra* and *Lati Amra* provincializes the dictionary writing process in Assam. Both the manuscripts are written in a different way. The pattern of using words and the pronunciation are precisely maintained. Above all the dictionaries are the exclusive treasurer of Tai Ahom words as well as the Assamese words used in *Sivsagariya* (said as *sivsagor* variety or *gargoinya* variety of Assamese language before making it the standard dialect of Assamese by the missionaries) people. Therefore, it can be realised as a dialectal, or societal variations of Assamese. Needless to mention that the words included in the manuscripts helped in the formation of the standardisation of Assamese language.

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