

## The British Attitude Towards Language and the Linguistic Background of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Assam

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### Abstract

Assamese is one of the principal languages among the eastern branches of modern Indo-Aryan languages. Recognized under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, Assamese is the state language of Assam. From the 14th century onwards, the language has been enriched by a continuous tradition of literary writing. In the context of the formation and development of the modern form of Assamese, the role of non-Assamese people is worth considering from various perspectives.

The Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 liberated Assam from the long-standing Burmese oppression. However, it was only about twelve years after this treaty that the British brought the entire region of Assam under their control. Even before the Yandaboo Treaty, the British had a preconceived notion that Assamese was merely a dialect. After the treaty, the British made no real effort or took no responsibility to examine and establish Assamese as a distinct and independent language.

Overall, the colonial period was a transitional era for the entire Indian subcontinent. In Assam too, colonial rule had a profound influence on society, literature, and language. Specifically, in terms of language, the British attitude toward Assamese, the language policies implemented by them in Assam, and the removal of Assamese from schools and courts significantly affected the language's developmental trajectory. The approach of the ruling class

toward Assamese and the promotion of Bengali in Assam instilled a particular attitude among the Assamese people toward their own language—an attitude that continues to influence the course of the language's evolution to this day. The colonial rulers, Christian missionaries who came to spread their religion and the Assamese writers of that time all contributed in their own ways to the development of the Assamese language.

This research work will explore the British rulers' attitude towards the Assamese language, the language policies they implemented in the context of Assam, and their role in shaping the linguistic landscape of 19th-century Assam.

**Keywords:** 19th century, language attitude, language policy, linguistic background, Assamese language.

## **0.0 Introduction**

### **0.1 Introduction to the Topic:**

Assamese is one of the major languages among the Eastern branches of the New Indo-Aryan languages. Recognized under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, it is the official language of the state of Assam. Written literary records of the Assamese language can be traced back to the 14th century AD. Since then, the Assamese language has retained its unique characteristics. For the purpose of linguistic analysis based on the developmental trajectory of its linguistic features, the history of the Assamese language is generally divided into three stages. The final stage among these is termed as the "Modern Assamese Language."

The term "modern" is relative. It implies something new, contemporary, or currently prevalent. When significant changes occur in society—be it in social, economic, political, educational, or other spheres—we refer to this transformation process as modernization. The concept of linguistic modernity is closely associated with social modernization. Changes in society's religion, culture, art, industry, thought, vision, ideals, and values bring about transformations in the linguistic field as well, giving the language a modern form. The expansion of a language to meet the needs of society is what constitutes linguistic modernity.

Broadly speaking, the colonial period was a transitional time for the entire Indian subcontinent. In the case of Assam as well, this period ushered in modernity in various spheres such as society, literature, and language. The role of British colonial rule was significant in the modernization of the Assamese language. Factors such as British governance, the changed

administrative setup of Assam, the arrival of missionaries, language policy of British rulers and the removal of the Assamese language from schools and courts of Assam contributed to shaping the modern form of Assamese.

During the colonial period, Assamese—like other New Indo-Aryan languages—encountered unprecedented linguistic circumstances. The people of Assam came into contact with two languages simultaneously. One was English, the language of the ruling class, and the other was Bengali, spoken by another section of the governed population. The participation of Bengali speakers in the new administrative system, the pre-existing socio-economic connection between Assam and Bengal, a natural admiration for Bengali language and literature, and the imposition of Bengali in Assamese schools and courts in 1836—all contributed to a sense of cultural superiority among a section of the Assamese population towards Bengali. Alongside this, a parallel rise in linguistic nationalism was also witnessed, triggered by these very circumstances. The interest in learning foreign languages and the inferiority complex towards one's native tongue was counterbalanced by the efforts of a group of language enthusiasts devoted to preserving and promoting the Assamese language. As a result, in the pre-independence era, Modern Assamese experienced a unique and dynamic phase of development. The pace of Assamese language development during British rule, the linguistic backdrop of that time, and the various attitudes toward the Assamese language were largely shaped by the British language policy.

This research paper will examine the British rulers' attitudes towards the Assamese language, the language policy implemented by them in the context of Assam, and the role this played in shaping the linguistic background of the Assamese language in the 19th century.

## **0.2 Objectives of the Study:**

- a) To examine the British rulers' attitude towards the Assamese language.
- b) To examine the role of British rulers' attitude towards the Assamese language in shaping the linguistic background of 19<sup>th</sup> century Assam.

## **0.3 Scope of the Study:**

This research paper, titled “The British Attitude Toward Language and the Linguistic Background of 19<sup>th</sup> century Assam,” is based on the period from 1813 to 1947. During this time, political developments brought significant changes to Assamese society, economy, values,

literature, and language. The implementation of British language policies, the imposition of Bengali in Assam, the resulting inferiority complex towards the Assamese language among certain groups, and the efforts by language-conscious Assamese patriots to counter this—these conflicting attitudes significantly influenced the trajectory of modern Assamese. Language attitudes are broadly categorized into two perspectives:

- a) Psychological Perspective
- b) Behavioral Perspective

Psychological perspectives on language stem from a person's internal mindset. A speaker's outward behavior reflects their internal attitude towards a language. In a social setting, one can understand a person's language attitude through their linguistic behavior. Therefore, both these perspectives are interrelated. This study considers both psychological and behavioral perspectives relevant to attitudes toward the modern Assamese language.

#### **0.4 Methodology of the Study:**

The main theoretical framework of this study is drawn from the field of sociolinguistics, particularly the concept of language attitude. During colonial rule, British language policy led to the introduction of Bengali in Assam. For the British ruling class, Assamese was viewed merely as a dialect of Bengali. Furthermore, when Assam was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency, Bengali was made the official language of the region, in accordance with British policy. As a result of this policy, Christian missionaries attempted to revive the Assamese language as a way to expand their work. In parallel, a group of Assamese writers launched a collective effort to re-establish the language.

Alongside this, the influence of British policy and the pressure of earning a livelihood led to the development of a sense of superiority among some Assamese individuals toward the Bengali language. Later, this attitude extended to English as well, and during the Jonaki era, the Assamese language began to take on a mixed linguistic form. This blended attitude toward Assamese, Bengali, and English was largely a consequence of British language policies. The internal psychological attitudes people formed toward these languages became externally visible in their language usage. This study analyzes the linguistic background of Assam during the colonial period based on both the psychological and behavioral perspectives of language attitude, in relation to British language policy and its consequences.

## 1.0 British Attitude towards Language and Language Policy

The period during which the Assamese language attained its modern form was a transitional phase for Assam in political, economic, and social terms. During this time, the Assamese people did not have the opportunity or a stable environment to engage in conscious and systematic efforts in the field of language and literature. Political instability dominated this era. Events such as the Burmese invasions, internal power struggles within the Ahom monarchy, the subsequent entry of the East India Company into Assam's governance, and the arrival of Christian missionaries all took place during this time.

From 1800 to 1845—up until the publication of the *Orunodoi* magazine and newspapers—the development of Assamese literature was significantly limited. Some of the Assamese books written during this period include *Buranji Vivek Ratna* by Moniram Dewan, *Asom Buranji Sar* by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan, *Dharma Pustak* by Atmaram Sharma, and *Asom Buranji* and *Sadarameenir Atmajiboni* by Harkanta Sharma Barua. Among these, *Dharma Pustak*, published in 1813 by the Serampore Press in Kolkata, is considered the first translated book in modern Assam – a distinct religious text.

At that time, since no powerful newspapers or periodicals existed in Assam through which public opinion could be expressed, the Assamese middle class fulfilled this need by reading Bengali and English newspapers. According to a report published in *Samachar Darpan* on July 30, 1831, prominent individuals from Assam maintained regular contact with Bengal and Bengal-related affairs through these newspapers. It was also mentioned that no district in Bengal had as many newspaper subscribers as Assam did.

This information proves that even before the British had formally annexed all of Assam, a section of the Assamese middle class had already developed a sense of loyalty toward them. During this period, Kolkata was the main center of British administration, and its modern lifestyle was able to attract the Assamese middle class. The influence of the Kolkata-Assam connection was visible in areas such as education and trade. After the Treaty of Yandaboo and the subsequent British annexation of Assam, the region was placed under the Bengal Presidency, and the British language policy was officially introduced in Assam. However, long before Yandaboo, the British had already adopted a particular perspective regarding the languages in use in Assam.

### 1.1 British Attitude Towards Language:

Through the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the people of Assam were freed from prolonged oppression. However, from 1826 to 1836, the British administration did not implement a stable language policy in Assam. During this period, Assamese, Parsi, English, and Bengali were all used in official and public spheres.

It is important to note that although Assam was liberated from Burmese rule in 1826, it was only in 1838 that the entire region came under the control of the East India Company. From that point until 1873, Assam remained a part of the Bengal Presidency. Since the British had adopted Bengali as the official language for governance in the Bengal Presidency, they did not support the development of a separate language policy for Assam.

It is also worth noting that in 1800, Fort William College was established in Kolkata by Lord Wellesley to provide education in various languages and subjects to Europeans who wished to enter government service. This educational system was quite strict, requiring candidates to demonstrate proficiency in local languages before receiving their degrees. It was believed that this would foster understanding and sympathy between rulers and the ruled.

However, in the case of Assam, the British did not feel the need to foster such linguistic understanding. This was because trained Bengali clerks already accompanied the British administrators to Assam. Additionally, the British officers, having already learned Bengali and encountered a wealth of literature in science, astrology, law, and language in Bengali, developed an informed familiarity with the Bengali language. Thus, the British officers who managed governance by learning Bengali out of necessity tended to regard the Assamese script and grammar as merely a corrupted or dialectal form of Bengali.

This belief was not entirely unnatural. According to them, the so-called language of Assam was essentially the same as Bengali. They considered the Assamese language to be merely a corrupted pronunciation of pure Bengali, with no proper script or structure. Therefore, they believed that if Bengali were used as the medium of instruction in schools, Assamese students would easily learn a superior language and gradually acquire various kinds of knowledge. They even opined that using Assamese as the medium of instruction would lead to the downfall of the region.

In addition to the idea that Bengali language spread in Assam due to Bengali clerical influence and that Assam was part of the Bengal Presidency until 1874, another notion also contributed to this situation: the preconceived ideas of British officials about the Assamese language that existed even before the Treaty of Yandaboo. During the reign of Gaurinath Singha in 1787 (1709 Saka), when the Moamoria rebellion broke out, a request was sent to the British government for assistance in suppressing the revolt. As a result, Captain Welsh arrived in Guwahati on 29 November 1792. In the book *An Account of Assam*, written by Dr. John Peter Wade—who accompanied Welsh and stayed in Assam for eighteen months—he expressed the following opinion about the Assamese language:

“The original history of Assam exists in two distinct languages. The first is termed the Bayloongh or Ahom, being the language of the race of Swurgedee—the conqueror of Assam. The other is termed the Bhakha, being a dialect of the Bengalese” (John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam*, edited by Benudhar Sharma, Vol. II).

Francis Buchanan Hamilton (1807–14), in his writings, described Assamese as a dead language at the time. He also noted that only those who followed ancient religious beliefs learned this language. In John McCosh's 1837 publication *Topography of Assam*, based on a paper by Reverend N. Brown in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Assamese was classified as a dialect:

“According to a paper in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, by the Reverend N. Brown, ... Among the Ahoms, or that portion of the Tai race inhabiting Assam, the language is nearly extinct, being cultivated only by the priests, as the ancient language of their religion; while their vernacular and common dialect, as well as that of the people, is Assamese” (John McCosh, *Topography of Assam*, p.20).

Even William Robinson referred to the Assamese language merely as a colloquial dialect. All this evidence clearly shows that the British had formed the opinion that Assamese was a mere dialect long before the Treaty of Yandaboo. They were not committed to verifying whether Assamese was an independent language based on factual analysis.

Moreover, during that time, the people of Lower Assam were often unable to comprehend pure Assamese speech. The linguistic divergence was so pronounced that if a missionary spoke in pure Assamese, people in Lower Assam could not understand



him.(HerambaKantaBarpujari, American Missionaries and Nineteenth Century Assam, p. 40). Outside of Guwahati, much of Kamrup was already under the heavy influence of the Bengali language. Therefore, the British authorities found linguistic circumstances that appeared to support their conclusion that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali.

It must be acknowledged that the East India Company came to Assam for commercial interests. The development of Assamese language, culture, or socio-economic conditions was never their objective. Though a few British officers may have personally supported some affluent Assamese individuals, it was never the overall policy or objective of the Company. In fact, the Company's control over Assam began during the Moamoria rebellion. After rescuing the state from the Moamorias, a treaty was signed in 1793 between Ahom king Gaurinath Singha and Captain Welsh, under which the Company was granted exclusive trading rights in Assam(Prafulla Mahanta, Asomiya Madhyabitta Shreneer Itihas, p. 84).

According to another treaty in 1794, the Ahom king agreed to pay Rs. 1,50,000 to the Company as military expenses. Later, in 1819, when Purandar Singha sought British help during the Burmese invasion, the Company initially declined. This proves that the Company had no interest in matters that did not benefit them financially. Since a language was necessary to administer the region, and based on earlier assumptions, instead of choosing the so-called 'dialect of Bengali', the British adopted the main Bengali language itself.

The British rulers promoted Bengali in Assam through their official language policy. In this context, Jogendranarayan Bhuyan's opinion is noteworthy, as he stated that from 1826 to 1836, the administrative medium in Assam was actually Assamese. Further, Dr. Prafulla Mahanta raised a pertinent question: If missionaries were the first to introduce the Assamese language, then who used it as the medium of administration before their arrival?

It is important to note that although Assam came under British political control through the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, in Upper Assam, the region was still administered by tributary Ahom rulers until 1833. However, due to allegations of oppression and failure to pay revenue, Purandar Singha was removed from power. On 16 September 1838, all of Assam formally came under British control.(Tassaduk A. Hussain, A Asomor Sankhipta Itihash, p. 461). On that day, as per Commissioner Jenkins' orders, Captain White assumed administrative charge of Upper Assam, and with the end of Purandar's rule, Assam became integrated into British India.



Meanwhile, Assam had been included in the Bengal Presidency in 1836, though Lower Assam (the senior division) had already been placed under Bengal before 1828.(Prafulla Mahanta, Asomiya Madhyabitta Shreener Itihas, p. 86)Therefore, the administration of Upper and Lower Assam was not unified until 1838.

## **2.0 The Impact of British Language Policy on the Formation of Modern Assamese Linguistic Identity**

In 1836, the British incorporated Assam into the Bengal Presidency. Among the three official languages of the Bengal Presidency, Bengali was granted the status of the official language in Assam. Consequently, Bengali became the language of education and judiciary in Assam. Due to Assam's close ties with Calcutta, the predominance of Bengali clerks and officials in the British administration, their active roles in administrative affairs in Assam, and the pre-existing British perception of Assamese as a dialect of Bengali — all these factors contributed to the imposition of Bengali as the language of schools and courts in Assam.

The British language policy had far-reaching consequences on the later development of the Assamese language. Some people, influenced by the desire for livelihood and loyalty to the ruling power, gave importance to the use of Bengali. During this time, a sense of inferiority toward the Assamese language began to emerge. The use of Bengali, the writing of books in Bengali, and the adoption of a condescending attitude toward Assamese became the language policy of a section of Assamese society.

Later, when Calcutta became the center for Assamese literary activities, a trend toward favoring English over Assamese also emerged, belittling the native tongue. Simultaneously, some conscious language enthusiasts took the initiative to re-establish the Assamese language. When Assamese was removed as the official language, Christian missionaries who came to Assam to spread their religion realized that without using the native language, their efforts would be hindered. As a result, they played a significant role in various areas such as establishing Assamese-medium schools, spreading education, composing textbooks, writing religious literature in Assamese, and reintroducing Assamese in public life.

In the process of standardizing the written form of Assamese, the missionaries, driven by their own perspectives, introduced a particular style of script during that period. Parallel to the missionaries, prominent Assamese figures like AnandaramDhekialPhukan and Hemchandra

Barua actively participated in the struggle to restore the Assamese language. They played a vital role in affirming the uniqueness and authenticity of Assamese. Subsequently, a group of Assamese students who studied in Calcutta during the latter half of nineteenth century played a significant role in the linguistic revival of the Assamese language. Thus, a conflicting language consciousness emerged due to British language ideology and policy, creating a distinct sociolinguistic atmosphere in Assam. This mentality has influenced not only the historical development of modern Assamese but also continues to impact the language to this day. This research paper attempts to analyze the nature of language attitudes shaped by the application of colonial language policies and the concurrent responses from different societal perspectives.

## **2.1 Missionaries' Language Attitude**

The attitude of the missionaries toward the Assamese language was unique in its formation. The missionaries first arrived in Assam at Sadiya in the year 1836. Their primary objective was to propagate Christianity. In order to make their mission of religious propagation successful, they paid attention to almost every aspect of the society. Realizing that preaching religion among people who had no access to education would be futile, they first tried to spread the light of education. To that end, they established a boys' school at Sadiya on June 7, 1836, and a girls' school on June 19, 1837. For teaching in that school, Nathan Brown compiled a book containing the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. Although the missionaries learned the Assamese language with great care and dedication, their principal aim remained religious propagation.

Much like the British rulers who believed that learning Bengali would increase opportunities between rulers and the ruled, the missionaries had a similar outlook in the context of Assam. ("I am trying hard to master the language well so that I can spread religion without any hindrance" — \*Imran Hussain, Nathan Brownor Asom Obhiyan, p. 83). The missionary campaign was conducted wherever opportunity allowed—in the markets of Assam, before commercial shops, in tailor shops, grain stores, under trees, and on the open grounds where people gathered. Apart from spreading Christianity, missionaries also made efforts to reduce interest in Hinduism among the Assamese by pointing out its flaws. In fact, Assamese Christian Nidhi Levi Farewell even published a book in 1851 against the Hindu religion.

The attitude that developed among missionaries to learn the Assamese language thoroughly to avoid any hindrance in religious propagation later influenced their role in the

revival of the Assamese language in Assam. (Imran Hussain, Nathan Brownor Asom Abhiyan, p. 83). Some critics therefore describe the missionaries' efforts to re-establish the Assamese language as purpose-driven. According to them, the missionaries essentially gave special attention to the language for the benefit of their religious mission (Prosenjit Choudhury, Orunodoi, pp. 123–24). Although the missionaries' learning of the Assamese language may be seen as purposeful, their efforts for the benefit of the Assamese language and society are praiseworthy. During the first two to three decades after the British annexation of Assam, the overall situation of the region was quite dire. Internal conflicts and repeated invasions by the Burmese left the Assamese people unable to pay the taxes imposed by the British. Economic destitution led to famine. Cholera wreaked havoc as an epidemic. Knowledge of advanced agricultural techniques was also limited. During that time, Brown made efforts to provide agricultural knowledge and also to instill in the people the virtues of hard work, thriftiness, and moderation. In this regard, he even sent letters to his homeland requesting missionary farmers. (Imran Hussain, Nathan Brownor AssamObhiyan, p. 72).

Thus, the missionaries' efforts for the development of Assam were multi-faceted. By fostering a favorable environment for language discussions, they awakened the linguistic nationalism of the Assamese people and played a strong role in the movement for the revival of the Assamese language. The publication of Arunodoi, the printing of old Assamese manuscripts, and the dissemination of Assamese news were part of such initiatives. Miles Bronson was one such missionary who played a key role in the reestablishment of the Assamese language. Bronson, who openly expressed his views in favor of the Assamese language, created the Assamese-English Dictionary, which became a powerful tool in preserving the existence of the Assamese language. He aimed to establish the idea that the development of the mother tongue is a significant path to the progress of a nation. Regarding the importance of the dictionary, he wrote:

“Among all books, a dictionary is most essential. Many English people want to learn the Assamese language, and many Assamese people are eager to learn English. For the benefit of all, I have completed this first Assamese dictionary.”

Alongside this necessity, the dictionary served several other important purposes — reviving the linguistic consciousness of Assamese speakers whose language was under threat from Bengali

dominance and who conducted administrative work in a mixed dialect, and establishing the uniqueness of the Assamese language through the creation of the dictionary. About the linguistic environment of that time, Bronson wrote:

“Unfortunately an impression has prevailed that Assamese and Bengali are identical or nearly so. Hence all the Schools, Courts, and official business of every kind are conducted in Bengali. This has greatly retarded the cause of education and general progress among the masses. They have no inclination to abandon their own for a foreign dialect. The higher classes, seeing their own language ignored, strive to obtain a sufficient knowledge of Bengali to feel at home in the language.” (M. Bronson, A Dictionary is Assamese and English, Preface, iii).

In such a context, Bronson felt that in order to develop the country, the mother tongue had to be improved. In this regard, he gave importance to preparing textbooks in the mother tongue. Brown’s attitude toward the Assamese language was also natural. Speaking about the beauty, softness, and uniqueness of the Assamese language, he said—

“For beauty and softness, the Assamese language is much superior to the Bengali; resembling in this respect the Hindustani. It is not inferior, in copiousness, to any of the Indian languages, and is capable of indefinite extension by additions from Sanskrit” (N. Brown, Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language, p. vi).

With such an attitude toward the Assamese language, the missionaries played a significant role in its movement for self-establishment. For linguistic standardization, they adopted the orthographic system used in the Bengali-Assamese dictionary prepared by Jaduram Deka Barua in 1839. Starting with Brown, the missionaries not only collected old manuscripts but also studied them. Thus, they attempted to give a stable form to the orthographic flow that had evolved from ancient Assamese. Since old Assamese lacked formal dictionaries or grammars, there was no fixed or standardized orthographic rule either. Therefore, the missionaries tried to bring structure to the Assamese script and, for that, adopted the orthographic style of Jaduram Deka Barua’s Bengali-Assamese dictionary.

The missionaries, who supported a phonetic spelling system, included 9 vowels and 28 consonants in the Assamese alphabet. In the April 1854 issue of Orunodoi, Brown, in an article titled "Style and Mode of Spelling", supported phonetic-based decisions and wrote:

“But we are not writing only for scholars—we are writing for all people. If it is Sanskrit, let it remain Sanskrit... While writing a language, only the number of letters that match the number of sounds should be used; using multiple letters for the same sound is unnecessary. 'জ', 'ঈ', 'জ-ৰ'—all are pronounced the same; hence, apart from the semi-vowel 'ঈ', the rest are not used. 'শ', 'ষ', and 'স()' are pronounced alike; I see no difference between 'শ্রী' and 'স্রী', so we write it as it sounds. The same goes for 'ন', 'ণ' and for short-long vowels. If the language does not pronounce 'ব্ৰণ', then write it as 'বন'; if it says 'পানী', write 'পানি'; instead of 'পাপীৰ', write 'পাপি'; instead of 'কূল', write 'কুল'; instead of 'সূৰ্য্য', write 'সুৰ্জ' or 'সুৰুজ'. And when a letter follows a reph, it does not produce a double consonant sound; people do not say 'পৰ্বত', they say 'পৰ্বত'; 'সৰ্ব', 'ধৰ্ম', 'মৰ্ম' do not occur in speech—'সৰ্ব', 'ধৰ্ম', 'কৰ্ম', 'মৰ্ম', or 'ধৰম', 'কৰম', 'মৰম' are used instead. If one is writing a shloka, it should follow the Sanskrit form; but in regular speech, we need not follow it” (N. Brown, “Style and Mode of Spelling”, in MaheswarNeog (ed.), Orunodoi, p.1133).

Such observational attitudes by the missionaries towards Assamese orthography and word forms gave a renewed shape to the spelling and vocabulary standards of the Orunodoi era.

## **2.2 Language Attitude of the Assamese People**

### **2.2.1 During the first half of nineteenth century**

At the onset of British arrival, the traditional education system was identified as an area needing improvement. In response, David Scott, the Agent to the Governor-General for the British North-East Frontier Agency, received permission to open eleven schools in Lower Assam. (MamoniRaisom Goswami (ed.), AdhunikAsomiyaSahityarPotobhumi, p. 91) Later, the new system of education expanded further. In 1835, a total of 21 schools were established in Kamrup district. By 1838, the Upper Assam region came fully under the control of the East India Company. From the arrival of missionaries in Sivasagar in 1841 to 1844, they established 14 schools in and around the region. The first government school in Sivasagar was established in 1841. The medium of instruction in the missionary schools was Assamese. However, in both

Upper and Lower Assam, the medium of instruction in government-established schools was Bengali. After the establishment of government schools, many missionary schools shut down.

Therefore, the use of Bengali in schools and courts, the preference for individuals with Bengali language skills in government jobs, the gratitude felt towards the British for rescuing Assam from the horrors of the Burmese invasions, and the desire to remain loyal to the government led a section of Assamese elites to develop an affinity for Bengali. Meanwhile, due to the inefficiency of certain former Ahom officials appointed in the revenue and judiciary departments of the British government, individuals from Bengal were brought in to fill those roles. These factors also played a crucial role in cultivating a superiority complex among Assamese people regarding the Bengali language. Notably, Holiram Dhekial Phukan and Jagannath Phukan contributed to literature in the Bengali language. Even in the writings of Maniram Dewan, a significant amount of Bengali usage is evident. Juduram Deka Barua began his dictionary under the title “Manuscript Bengali Dictionary with Assamese Definitions.” These are significant examples of the high regard for the Bengali language at the time.

Simultaneously, the efforts of missionaries to popularize Assamese and the contributions of some conscious Assamese individuals toward reestablishing their mother tongue played a vital role in restoring Assamese as the language of schools and courts in Assam. However, the orthographic rules proposed by missionaries attempted to disconnect Assamese from its Sanskrit roots. Hemchandra Barua, therefore, refused to accept the missionaries’ linguistic principles. His core principle regarding orthography was:

“The Assamese language is derived from Sanskrit. Therefore, even if Sanskrit words become distorted in Assamese usage, the original letters from Sanskrit must be retained.

For example, from the Sanskrit root 'या', Assamese verbs like 'যাঁও', 'যাম' are derived. Thus, they should be written using the semi-vowel 'য' (ya)” (Lilabati Saikia Bora, "Hemchandra Barua Byakoronor Boishishtyaaru Gurutwo," in Hemkosh Smaran, ed. Basanta Kumar Goswami)

Hemchandra Barua strongly opposed the phonetic spelling system of Orunodoi and undertook the mission to align Assamese orthography with Sanskrit rules. His principles of letter combination and spelling were based on three key foundations.

a. According to pronunciation

b. According to the root

c. According to the rules followed for a long time by learned and knowledgeable people

These principles formed the basis of Hemchandra Barua's linguistic ideology, which aimed to give a new form to the Assamese language used in Orunodoi. The spelling system used by non-Christian Assamese writers during the Orunodoi period gradually transitioned—from 1861 onward—toward the Sanskrit grammar-based orthography supported by Hemchandra Barua. Nearly all sounds from the Sanskrit vowel system (11 vowels) and consonant system (41 consonants) were preserved in written form. Gradually, from this time onward, the use of Sanskrit-style orthography began to appear even in foreign and native words, including letters that were not pronounced in Assamese. For instance, from 1861 onward, the name Orunodoi began to be spelled as Orunodoi, and other orthographic elements were also changed accordingly

### **2.2.2 during the latter half of nineteenth century:**

The Assamese language was considered a dialect of Bengali, not an independent language. Challenging this perception held by the British rulers, a movement for the establishment of the Assamese language began in the first half of the 19th century. This movement gained momentum from the 1890s, led by a group of language-loving youths studying in Kolkata. Since the 1860s, several literary organizations were established with the aim of developing Assamese language and literature. Among them were the 'AsamDeshHitaishini Sabha' established in Sivasagar in 1855, the 'Asomiya Sahitya Sabha' or 'Asomiya Chatrar Sahitya Sabha' founded in Calcutta in 1872, and the 'Asomiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha' established in Calcutta in 1888.

Of these three literary organizations, the goals and objectives of the 'Asomiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha' functioned as a kind of language planning for Assamese at that time. The Sabha's objective was “to gradually eliminate incorrect grammar and spelling from reading and writing activities and to replace them with correct usage of the language” and the goal was

“to develop the Assamese language. Keeping this great aim at heart, the Sabha was formed under the name 'Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha.' The aim was to explore how a neglected mother tongue could become a rich and expansive language, comparable to other prosperous and progressive languages of the world—how it could shine with pride and glory, illuminating the dark and impoverished face of Assam. The Sabha's



purpose was to find ways for Assamese to grow from a weak, fragile condition to one of strength, health, and vitality” (Jonaki: Introduction, p. 014).

The mouthpiece of the Sabha, Jonaki, also aimed for the country's progress—Jonaki (meaning "moonlight") symbolizing enlightenment. Among this vision of national progress, linguistic development was a core concern. The first issue of Jonaki mentioned in its 'Autobiography' that "special attention will be given to our own language."

The objectives of the Asomiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha and Jonaki not only expressed the linguistic mentality of the time but also functioned as a form of language planning. This can be identified as component planning in language development. The language used in Jonaki clearly reflected this approach. Notably, alongside the linguistic awareness for Assamese, there was also a simultaneous mentality of excessive admiration for English and a tendency to belittle one's own language. In such a linguistically contradictory environment, where on one side there was an effort to enrich Assamese and on the other, a tendency to dilute it with foreign elements, Jonaki's writers put forward specific policies regarding Assamese orthography and spelling.

During this period, several writers expressed strong personal attitudes towards the Assamese language in their literary works. Among them, LakshminathBezbarua and PadmanathGohain Baruah were prominent leaders. Bezbaroa's language-related views can be traced throughout his writings. He and his contemporaries developed policies regarding Assamese orthography, the use of words from other languages—especially English—and applied these policies in their later works.

The British rulers' perception of Assamese as a dialect significantly influenced this growing linguistic awareness. In an effort to demonstrate that Assamese was indeed a robust and expressive language capable of conveying all forms of thought, efforts to develop and refine its structure became more active during this period. Signs of code mixing and code switching were clearly visible. All this was driven by a desire to showcase the expressive potential of Assamese.

It can be said that Political changes in the social structure of Assam occasionally gave rise to different attitudes in Assamese society, culture, and collective consciousness. These attitudes played a significant role in shaping the linguistic background of the Assamese language in the 19th century.

### 3.0 Conclusions:

From the discussion above, we can draw the following conclusions:

- a. The linguistic background of the Assamese language evolved in two distinct ways due to the British attitude toward the language and their language policies. In the initial phase, the Bengali language was given preference. During the Jonaki period, a group of students studying in Kolkata developed a fascination for the English language. Alongside this, a sense of inferiority toward the Assamese language began to take root.
- b. This inferiority complex was countered by a linguistic nationalism that had emerged since the Orunodoi period. In the Jonaki era, this consciousness played a vital role in making the Assamese language capable of expressing all forms of ideas and thoughts.
- c. From the Orunodoi era to the Jonaki writers and up to the pre-independence period, the development of modern Assamese language was entirely focused on enriching the linguistic elements of the language and enhancing its expressive power. There was also an attempt to give the script and orthography a stable form.

Writers of that era gave utmost importance to enriching the language itself. They did not oppose the ruling class; in fact, in many cases, the British rulers were regarded as divine figures by the intellectual class. Thus, instead of opposing British language policies, the dominant mindset of the time was to develop the Assamese language within that linguistic environment itself.

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