

ASPECTS OF
EARLY ASSAMESE LITERATURE

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1953
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GAUHATI : ASSAM

THE ASSAMESE LANGUAGE *

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1. *Introductory*

Assamese is the easternmost New Indo-Aryan language spoken in the Brahmaputra Valley comprising at present six districts with Lakhimpur in the extreme east and Goalpara in the west. It is a language of the plains and is surrounded by speeches belonging to families of which the Tibeto-Burman and the Khāsī are the important ones. Assamese occupies an important place in the group of N.I.A. languages. Hiuen-Tsang the celebrated Chinese traveller visited Kāmarūpa in the 7th century and remained for sometime in the court of King Bhāskaravarman. In course of his references to various aspects of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa he spoke of its language as "slightly differing" from that of Mid-India. He perhaps meant by it certain peculiarities of the Kāmarūpī language at the beginning of its evolution. For want of sufficient data we cannot ascertain a definite date of the origin of Assamese as an independent N.I.A. language, though the 10th or 11th century of the Christian era is generally regarded as marking the beginning of the N.I.A. languages. Specimens of Assamese as an independent provincial language have been preserved in the literature from the fourteenth century onwards.

2. *Origin of 'Assam'*

The word 'Assamese' is an English one based on the anglicised form 'Assam' from the native word "Asam", which in its turn is connected with the Shans who invaded the Brahmaputra Valley in the 13th century. Though the Shan invaders called themselves "Ṭāi" they came to be referred to as *Āsam*, *Āsām* and *Ācam* by the indigenous people of the province, Early Assamese chronicles used all these variant forms to mean the new Shan invaders. The modern Assamese word *Āhom* by which the Ṭāi people are known goes back to early Assamese *Āsām* (*Āsām* > *Asam* > *Aham* > *Āhom*). The last syllable of *Āsām* might very well be connected with *Sham* (*Shan*, *Syam*) as Dr. Grierson has suggested but then the initial vowel 'ā' would remain un-

* For a detailed history of Assamese language, see the writer's *Assamese, its Formation and Development*.

explained. Sir Edward Gait suggests *Asam* (unequalled or peerless) to be the origin of the present word *Āhom*, but most probably *Asama* meaning peerless or unequalled is a latter day Sanskritisation of some earlier form like *Āchām*. In Ṭāi the root *cham* means "to be defeated". With the privative Assamese affix *ā* the whole formation *Āchām* would mean undefeated. The change of *Āchām* into *Āsām* is very natural. The presence of forms like *Āsām* and *Ācām* in early Assamese lends support to the above view. In a still later period the term *Āsām* was further Sanskritised by changing it to *Āsām*.

Thus the word *Āsām* was first applied to the Shan invaders and subsequently to the country they conquered, and finally the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley came to be known by this designation. In earliest times the territory now called Asam was known as *Kāmarūpa*. It should be noted in this connection that while the name of the country still remains *Āsām*, the name of the tribe to which originally the term was applied undergoes modification and becomes *Ahām*, *Aham*, *Āhom*. In modern Assamese Shan invaders of the 13th century who subsequently settled in the country are invariably known as *Āhoms*.

3. Evolution of Assamese

Ancient *Kāmarūpa*, sometimes known as *Prāgyotiṣapura* in the epics and *Purānas*, comprised the whole of north Bengal including Cooch-Behar, and the Rangpur and Jalpaiguri districts of Bengal. When Hiuen-Tsang visited the kingdom of *Kāmarūpa* (*Ka-mo-lu-po*), its western boundary was the river *Karatoyā* in north Bengal. According to *Kālikā-purāna* (circa 10th century) and *Yoginī-tantra* (circa 16th century) the western and the eastern boundary of *Kāmarūpa* were marked by the river *Karatoyā* (in north Bengal) and *Dikkaravāsini* (in eastern Assam) respectively. Thus from the time of Hiuen-Tsang in the 7th century down to the Koch kings of the 17th and 18th centuries the river *Karatoyā* formed the western limit of *Kāmarūpa*. It was under the patronage of the kings of *Kāmarūpa*, and Cooch-Behar, in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries that the earliest Assamese literature originated and developed. Even now the spoken language of north Bengal and western Assam is subsequently the same and seems to form one dialect group. If territorial readjustments were to be made on the basis of linguistic homogeneity north Bengal should have been included with Assam. Dr. Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India* also notices this affinity of Assamese with the north Bengal dialect. He says, *Māgadhī* was the principal dialect which corresponded to the old Eastern Prakrit. East of