Growth And Development Of Modern Assamese Literature

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Introduction: The history of Assam can be traced to the 4th century AD, though relics from beyond this period suggest some kind of a pre-history, through cave paintings, etchings on pots etc. The Charyapa Das have almost been referred to as the earliest example of Assamese literature. The Charyapa Das pertain to Buddhist songs penned within the period of 8th to 12th centuries. These writings, by the way, correspond to Oriya and Bengali languages as well. The phonological and morphological characteristics of these songs bear exceedingly powerful semblance with Assamese some of which are survive to this date. Despite the rich historical details of the Pre-Ahom kingdom, literary history of Assam has been traced to the mystic lyrics, known as the “Caryas”— esoteric doctrines and erotic practices of the later Sahajayana form of Mahayana Buddhism written by “Siddha-purusas”. The oldest Assamese writer is Hema Saraswati of the late 13th century. His Prahlada-Charita based on the Sanskrit Vishnu Purana depicts a finished Sanskritized Assamese. Other poets in the court of Kamatapur like Harihara Vipra and Kaviratna Sarasvati rendered into Assamese, verse episodes from the Mahabharata in the early 14th century. Kaviraja Madhava Kandali in the 14th century is the first great poet of Assam. His extant work consists of a version of the Ramayana and a narrative poem Devajit. Another great poet was Durgavara who retold the story of the Ramayana in songs. A large group of manuscripts known as the “Mantras” of unknown authorship is extant probably going back to the period before 1500. The “Mantras” contain magical formulae against snakebite, against ghosts and demons and against various kinds of diseases.

Discussion:

Bhakti Movement:

The greatest period of Assamese literature was ushered in with the “Bhakti” movement started by the great Sankardev. To spread this movement a lot of literature was created,
songs, poems and chants. Shankari religion like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism is again centered on the written word, in this case that of Srimanta Sankardev. The evening prayers in the "Namghar" or "The House of Praise" celebrate God through songs and chant or reading of sacred texts. Among the 27 works composed by him the most important are the last canto of the Ramayana, some portions of the Bhagvata Purana, Kirttanaghosha, Rukmini-harana, a narrative poem depicting an episode of the life of Krishna, the Bhakti-pradipa and the Nimi-nava-siddha-samvada. He also wrote a number of dramas that show a Maithili influence. Another kind of poetry introduced by him was “Bargeet”, devotional poems, extremely popular to even this day. The father of Assamese prose literature Bhattadeva wrote three major books of Vaishnavism--Katha Geeta, Katha Bhagawat and Katha Ratnawali. He also penned other great books. The 17th century, is renowned for the growth and development of the “Charit Puthi”.

The Missionaries:

It was only with the coming of the missionaries that the first printed book entered Assamese literary circles; the first printed book being the New Testament (Dharmapustakar Antobhag) printed by William Carey in 1813 with the help of Atmaram Sharma and in 1833 the entire Bible. As in the other parts of the country, the missionaries with their interest in propagating Christianity were the initiators in the establishment of the first printing press in Assam as well. Christianity being the religion of the book and the missionaries seeking easy accessibility to the locals, almost always learnt the local languages, translating the word of God (the New Testament more so than the Old Testament for the use of the common people. For this purpose various pamphlets, magazines and other such media was also used.

In connection with the American Baptist Mission Press, which is the first press to be established in Assam, the first name that comes to the forefront is that of the Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown.

Nathan Brown was born on 22 June 1807 in New Ipswich, New Hampshire, USA. He graduated from Williams College in 1827 holding the highest position in the class. He married Eliza Ballard on 5 May 1830. For a few years, he was Associate Principal of Bennington Seminary and editor of a weekly newspaper called The Vermont Telegraph. He attended the Newton Theological Institute in order to prepare himself for work as a missionary. He graduated in 1832. The American Baptist Missionary Union appointed him as a missionary to Myanmar in 1833. He headed for Assam at the request of Captain Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam. This request was made in order to launch the “Shan Mission” aiming to help the British administration to enlighten, refine and educate the warrior tribes of Shan, Khamtis and Singphos. Brown and his associate Oliver Cutter along with their printing press sailed to Calcutta. After a stopover in
Calcutta, they set out for Sadiya by river. A long, tiresome and dangerous trip brought them to their destination on 23 March 1836.

With the establishment of the first printing press in Assam, Brown’s arrival ushered in an era of literary development in the region. Due to inadequate assistance from the Mission and due to tribal aggression in Sadiya, Brown had to shift his base to Joypur near Naharkatiya in 1839 and then to Sibsagar in 1843. He found Sibsagar to be a better place to work from. In fact Upper Assam is seen the hub of printing and the early birthplace of the printed book in Assam. He remained there until 1855. Towards the end of 1844, Brown travelled on foot from Sibsagar to Guwahati, visiting villages in order to study the diverse cultural backgrounds of the people. He along with two other missionaries, Miles Bronson and Cyrus Barker, organized and founded the first Baptist church at Panbazar in Guwahati on 25 January 1845. Brown also pioneered in establishing schools in different parts of the state. He established 14 Assamese medium schools in and around Sibsagar by 1846.

Rev. Nathan Brown’s Grammatical notes of the Assamese Language first published in 1848 originally was not intended to be regarded as a grammar of the Assamese language but “they were commenced with the intention of printing only a few sheets, for private use of the most common grammatical forms.” However this book soon served as the first Assamese grammar book. He wrote books on elementary arithmetic and geography which were much superior to Bengali books used in schools at that time. In this he was assisted by his wife Eliza, who was a translator in her own right. Brown was also a pioneer in the unearthing of old manuscripts and in editing and publishing them.

Brown was involved in teaching, translating and preparing books in Assamese. He translated and published a catechism in Assamese. Brown found that the Assamese Bible published by William Carey from the Serampore Mission Press, in circulation at that time, consisted of Bengali and Sanskrit loan words, so it was idiomatically inadequate. Therefore, he undertook the project of translating the Bible into pure and simple Assamese and published the New Testament in 1848, from his press. Brown was also a pioneer in writing school books. His books on elementary arithmetic called Pratham ganana (1845), Dutio ganana (1855) and geography called Bhugulor biboran (1851) were much superior to Bengali books used in the schools at that time. He also translated and published John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress into Assamese. Brown’s wife, Eliza, also translated a dozen tracts into Assamese and wrote arithmetic textbooks and story books for children. Due to ill health and certain problems in Home Mission, Brown, after 20 years of successful service, left Assam on 13 February 1855 for US.

**Orunodoi Era:**
Orunodoi was the first Assamese magazine, printed by the Baptist Missionary Press in Sibsagar; it was first published in January 1846. The tag line for the magazine was, “The Orunodoi, monthly paper, devoted to religion, science and general intelligence”. It continued to be published till 1879; the press however was sold in 1883. The editors of this magazine include Dr. Nathan Brown, A.H Denforth, William Ward, and others. Though propagation of Christianity remained the main aim of the paper, it contained other articles related to science, current affairs, astrology, history, and local trivia. This paper helped in entrenched the Assamese intelligentsia, bringing into the forefront three key figures of Assamese literary world, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hem Chandra Baruah and Nidhi Levi Pharowal. The crowning glory of Brown’s career was Orunodoi which means ‘the dawn’. Brown did the editorial work whereas Oliver Cutter was involved in printing and publishing the magazine. Brown was the editor of this magazine till he left for US. Under his editorship, Orunodoi published history by bringing out the texts of old chronicles in properly edited form such as Chutia Buranji, Purani Asom Buranji and Kamrupar Buranji. He also patronized various Assamese scholars and helped them publish. Among these publications Kashinath Tamuly Phukan’s Asom Buranji (1842) and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan’s Axomiya Lorar Mitro (1849) and A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education (1855), Bronson’s A Spelling Book and Vocabulary in English, Assamese, Singpho and Naga (1839) printed at the Mission Press in Sibsagar are worth mentioning.

After Brown, the Orunodoi was in circulation with occasional breaks until 1880. Following the example of Orunodoi, several newspapers and magazines were published in Assam in the second half of the 19th century. Prominent among these were Asam Bilasini, (1871, published by Dharma Prakash Press, Auniati Satra, Majuli) Asam Darpan (1874, Tezpur), Asam Mihir (1872, Guwahati), Goalpara Hitshadini (1876, Goalpara), Chandrodaya (1876, Nagaon), Asam Dipak (1876, Guwahati) Jonaki (Calcutta, 1889) and Assam News( an Anglo-Assamese weekly, 1885, Guwahati), Assam Bandhu (1885, Nagaon), Mau(1886, Calcutta).

Apart from portions of the Bible, hymn books, tracts and school books in Assamese, a good number of other works were published under Cutter’s care at the Mission Press. In 1853, Cutter left the mission work and joined as superintendent of the Government Press in Calcutta. Even today, the place at Sibsagar where Cutter established the printing press is locally known as Chapakhana. The Asom Year Book 2008 acknowledges Cutter, Brown and Bronson among the six foreigners (along with Edward Gait, John Berry White and Charles Alexander Bruce) who rendered benevolent service for Assam.

**Growth of Printing in the 20th Century:**
Printing and publishing began in Assam from around the end of the 19th century, a number of presses being established in Dibrugarh (also in Upper Assam). The first press in Dibrugarh was established by Radhanath Changkakoti, on 9 May 1881 called the “Radhanath Press”. Shivnath Bhattacharya established the “Bhattacharya Press”, around the same time, printing mostly school text books and religious books. Nandeswar Chakravarty, a tea planter set up the “Sadasiva Press” in 1905, while the “Ahom Press” established in 1910 was another important press. It was due to the effort of Chandra Kumar Agarwalla that the “Assam Printers and Publishers Limited” was formed, a joint company established along with Nimoni Phukan, Sadananda Dowerah, Lakshminath Phukan. The “Borooah Press” established in 1928 by Guna Govinda Borooah, “Bholanath Press” established by Bholanath Gohain, “Rajkhowa Press”, “Jagaran Press” etc. were important presses established during that period. One of the first indigenous names of Assamese print is Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Phukan (1829–1858) was a writer, government employee and supporter of the American Baptist Mission Press and of its leaders Brown and Bronson for their work in the propagation of Assamese. Phukan was a great scholar and studied English literature, was one of the very first students of the school established by Francis Jenkins in 1835 and went on to study at Presidenc College, Calcutta. He started his literary career at the age of seventeen by contributing articles to Orunodoi. He then wrote Axomiya Loraar Mitro, a textbook for schoolchildren modeled on English textbooks, publishing it from the Mission Press at Sibsagar. He wrote a pamphlet called A few remarks on the Assamese Language, and on the Vernacular Education in Assam printing 100 copies from the Mission Press and distributing it to various government officials for the purpose of putting forward the case of Assamese language.

**Jonaki Era:**

Jonaki Era, Age of Romanticism in Assamese Literature Jonaki era is also known as the age of Romanticism in Assamese literature. The Jonaki magazine, published by “probashi” Assamese students in Calcutta, was the result of this zeal. ‘Bhāxār bikāx holehe jātir bikāx hobo’ (The nation develops only when the language develops) was the slogan of the early Assamese intelligentsia and they began the process of standardization of the language by standardizing orthography, writing grammars and dictionary, and most importantly by using a standardized version in print. By the end of the nineteenth century the language spoken in Upper and Middle Assam became the accepted standard language of Assam as a direct intervention of this group of young men,” writes Uddipan Dutta in the same essay. The students living in Calcutta at the end of the nineteenth century in various “messes” strove towards the development of the Assamese language. One issue of the magazine (Vol. 5, No. 7) relates the inception of the magazine as the outcome of the expat students’ meeting on Wednesdays and Saturdays at Mirzapur Street mess on
Saturday 25 August 1888. Thus a committee was set up—“Axomiā Bhāxā Unnati Xādhini Xabhā” the development of Assamese language and literature “is the primary aim of the organization. For that purpose it strives to preserve the old Assamese texts available, to translate different important books from Sanskrit and other languages into Assamese which are not available in the mother tongue, to develop reading habit among the masses to introduce pure grammar and orthography instead of the impure orthography and grammar, and to create one standard written language all through the areas of Assam.”

It was however, rather strangely a Marwari businessman from Tezpur who would finally come to the aid of the Sabha, which did not have the financial means to have the magazine printed. The “Agarwalla” family of Tezpur, is of course not an unfamiliar name in the world of Assamese literature, the most famous of them being the illustrious poet, writer, filmmaker, musician, freedom fighter Jyotiprasad Agarwalla (1903–1951). Haribilash Agarwalla (1842–1916), like the Baptist missionaries printed books in Assamese and his son Chandra Kumar Agarwalla became a leading literary figure in the late 19th and early 20th century, and it was Chandra Kumar Agarwalla who helped in printing, publishing and editing Jonaki. Chandra Kumar was himself a student of Presidency College, Calcutta and a member of the Sabha; it was also he who named the magazine Jonaki.

Bijuli (1891) meaning thunder is another important journal of this era, like Jonaki, it too was a student magazine being brought out from Calcutta by members of the Assamese Literary Club.

Banhi, meaning flute, a monthly periodical magazine was the brainchild of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the celebrated littérateur; he was both the editor and publisher of this magazine, which was influential in propagating many influential writers and poets of Assam. The magazine was published from 1909 to 1940.

In 1848, Dr Nathan Brown serialized the Assamese translation of John Bunyan’s Pilgrims’ Progress in Orunodoi as Jatrikor Jatra. It was the first taste of a “novel” for Assamese readers. It came out in a book form in 1857. In 1854, another missionary translated into Assamese a Bengali novel with the title – Phulmoni Aru Karuna. In 1877, the first original “novel” in Assamese, Kaminikanta by A. K. Gurney, was published from the Baptist Mission Press. M. E. Lesley’s Alokeshi Beshyar Bishay was also published in the same year. Gurney’s Koni Beheruar Bishay came out the next year. All these books were written for the propagation of Christianity. They are called novels because they are continuous narratives with a unified theme. These can at best be called prototypes of novels and they helped in laying the foundation of the novel in Assamese literature. Padmanath Gohain Baruah’s Bhanumati is generally taken to be the first
“genuine” novel in Assamese, first serialized in Bijuli magazine from 1890 to 1891 Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s Padumkuwori published in 1891 was the other important novel. Miri Jiyori (1894) is an important novel in Assamese, written by Rajnikanta Bordoloi, Bordoloi was a member of Axomiā Bhāxā Unnati Xādhini Xabhā. Bordoloi is more famous as the Walter Scott of Assamese literature, being a writer of historical novels, having spent much time as researcher for E. A Gait’s A History of Assam.

The First Assamese newspaper was Dainik Batori, published from the Thengal Bhawan, 8 km from Jorhat town on 12 August 1935. Tea baron Shivaprasad Barua started the paper. Earlier, too he had managed a paper called Sadinia Batori. When the Dainik Batori was started, Bagmibor Nilmoni Phukan was appointed as its editor.

Dictionaries:

Miles Bronson, an American missionary was the first to compile a dictionary of the Assamese language. His Dictionary published in 1867 at American Baptist Mission Press Sibsagar, is out of print now. Bronson’s work was not really an etymological dictionary but contained a very considerable collection of words culled from the lips of local people but without derivations. Hem Chandra Baruah (1836–1897) was the first Assamese to compile an etymological dictionary called Hem Kosh of the Assamese language, published in 1900 under the supervision of Capt. P. R. Gordon, ISC 33 years after the publication of the Bronson dictionary. It contained about 22,346 words. It was published and is still under publication by the Hemkosh Printers. In 1873 he wrote a first Primer of the Assamese Language for which he obtained a reward of Rs. 500. He was the author of a treatise called “Notes on the marriage system of the people of Assam” and of two farcical plays the Kania Kirtan which exposed the vice of excessive opium eating, and Bahire Rangchang Bhitare Kowan Bhuturi which was a satire on the contemporary Assamese Society. Hem Chandra also edited the Assam News at Guwahati for some time.

Recent Developments:

The Publication Board of Assam established in 1958 by a legislation of the Assam Legislative Assembly with the vision of publishing and editing books in the languages of the state (including Bodo, Mising, Kachari and other such languages), as well as English. Along with providing aid to authors, the board also helps in publishing rare manuscripts of historical, academic and cultural importance and also helps in preserving the originals, as well as reprinting classics, such as the great Sanskrit scholar Anandaram Borooah’s English-Sanskrit Dictionary, Ancient Geography of India, Namalinganushashana, Bhabhabhuti and His Place in Sanskrit Literature, etc. and other such works, republished nearly a century after their first publication. The board has also worked on an Assamese
Encyclopaedia. Among the most notable of the board’s publications are the reproductions of Ahom and Shankari manuscripts. Also the Board published an influential magazine called Prakash. It was also instrumental in reissuing several of the Jonaki magazine copies, along with another influential magazine Banhi.

**Conclusion:**
The great attempt had done by the Missionaries in the middle of nineteenth century for resurgence and recognition of Assamese language. Therefore, Assamese language has recognized in a literary figure at last. Then the Missionaries Composed many books, magazines and pamphlets. Actually, the themes and the writing style of The Missionaries had shown a new direction of Assamese literature. So, modern Assamese literature began by the writings of the Missionaries. Modern Assamese literature has developed in five consecutive phases, as mentioned below.

**References:**