



Contribution of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan to the reinstatement of the Assamese language : a critical study.

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Abstract

Language is an emotive issue. Assamese language for the Assamese people was no exception. During the colonial rule, a language as alien as Bengali, was introduced as the official language of Assam, stirring a commotion in the society. Assamese language was mired in different controversies as to its distinctness. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan is known in the annals of history as the greatest votary of the Assamese language. He is credited with the laurel of bringing Assamese to its rightful position. The paper tries to examine his role in the reinstatement of the Assamese language. Did he achieve it single handedly or in conjunction with like minded allies as the American Baptist Missionaries? It also explores other factors which may have incidentally helped in the reinstatement of the Assamese language.

Keywords: Assamese, baptist, missionaries.

1. Introduction

The timing of the rendezvous with the British opened a new vista for the indigenous people of Assam because, immediately after the Burmese invasion, people's psyche was totally bruised with the destruction and mayhem that the Burmese had unleashed. They required a much needed respite and healing and they believed that British rule would provide them with that. The British provided them the much needed identity in the form of a structured language. Hope and aspiration for the Western/ British tradition turned into utopia then. They had great veneration and adoration for this tradition.

2. Method

The paper sought to determine the contribution of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan in the restoration of Assamese language by critically evaluating both the primary and secondary sources, keeping in mind the state of the Assamese language during the Ahom rule as well as the yeoman service of the American Baptist Missionaries in this regard.

3. Objectives

- a. To unearth the factor/factors that lay behind

the reinstatement of the Assamese language in Assam.

- b. To find out the role and contribution of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan in the reinstatement of the Assamese language in Assam.

4. Hypotheses

- a. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan played a pivotal role in the reinstatement of the Assamese language.
- b. American Baptist Missionaries played a second fiddle to Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan in the reinstatement of the Assamese language.

5. State of the Assamese language

During the *Ahom* rule, Persian was used to conduct foreign affairs while lingua franca was Assamese. In April 1836, the Government of Bengal declared Bengali as the Court language. Bengali began to be taught in schools of Assam. In spite of clear provisions in Code of Criminal procedure that the language of the soil is to be used in judicial and revenue proceedings, Bengali was introduced as the official

language of Assam in 1838. (Nag, 1990. *Roots of Ethnic Conflict. Nationality Question in North East India*).

Till the official proclamation, imposing Bengali as the official language of Assam, there was close proximity between the two traditions, namely Assamese and Bengali. People had exchanged different ideas especially religious ones. People of Assam closely identified themselves with the people of Bengal, that they went to the extent of proclaiming themselves as one of them and even christened the names of their places in Bengali language. Till 1852, people of both traditions deeply respected and cherished ideals of each other. From 1836 to 1852, people acquiesced in the fact that they had no problem with the government proclamation. They lay inactive and dormant till 1852. It was in 1852, when Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan took up the cause of the Assamese language, that the common Assamese suddenly woke up from their slumber and followed in the footsteps of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan. From 1852 onwards, Esteem and appreciation for the Bengali tradition was suddenly transformed into Abhorrence.

6. Zeal of the proponents of the Assamese language

Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan proposed to enquire, whether there exists any radical difference between the Assamese and Bengali languages. After pointing out the results that had attended the introduction of the Bengali language, into our courts and educational institutions, he wanted to proceed to describe the state of the language and show how far it was adapted to be used as a medium for educating and governing the Assamese. Those who maintained that the Assamese and Bengali were one and the same language, and advocated the adoption of the latter, in the schools and courts of Assam, appeared to adduce arguments that the language spoken in Assam was essentially the same as that spoken in Bengal. (A Native. 1856. *A Few remarks on the Assamese language, and on vernacular Education in Assam.*) Anandaram stressed that he had acquired some acquaintance with both the written and spoken language during a long residence in that country. While the Assamese was his mother tongue and the more he compared the two languages, the wider appeared the difference to him. (A Native. 1856. *A Few remarks on the Assamese language, and on vernacular Education in Assam.*)

7. The role of the American Baptist Missionaries

The American Missionaries of Assam had been

the only jealous supporters of the Assamese language. The Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown and his wife Eliza, the Reverend Oliver T. Cutter and his wife Harriet, and the Reverend Dr. Miles Bronson were the first among the American Missionaries to have arrived and worked in Assam. Eventually, they became the first Christian writers and for that matter, the first modern writers also in Assamese language. They tried to proselytize among the Assamese as they, and not British missionaries were allowed to preach, – but in vain. (A Native. 1856. *A Few remarks on the Assamese language, and on vernacular Education in Assam*)

Unlike the British administrators, those Americans who came to the people themselves in a direct way, knew that Assamese was “a beautiful simple language differing in more respects from than agreeing with the Bengali” (as Brown told Mills). When the Government accepted Bengali as the official language and medium of instruction in Assam, they established two printing press in Assam in 1836 and also started publishing books in Assamese- a work taken up earlier by the British Baptists of Serampore near Calcutta under the leadership of the Reverend Dr. William Carey. They brought out from Sibsagar, a news journal in Assamese in 1846, the Orunodoi, monthly paper, devoted to religion, science and general intelligence.

Had it not been for the efforts of Brown and Bronson, that Assamese language would not have achieved its independent status and George Campbell would not have acceded to their request. The Baptists laid stress on the English education even though they were votaries of Assamese language. They exhorted everyone to have English education if they wanted to excel themselves; if they wanted to learn trade, progressive system, politics, and also if they wanted to earn the respect of the people and also after acquiring knowledge, unite in the language of the region. (Letter of Orunodoi dated Sept, 1846 cited in Barpujari, H.K. 1987. *Renaissance of Assam. Role of the non Assamese*)

8. Discussions centering around the true identity of the Assamese language

8.1 Ahoms thought that the language they spoke was unfit for spiritual advancement and on embracing tenets of Hinduism, adopted the speech of the conquered. No Conquerors usually adopt speech of the conquered. (Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471. Assam State Archives).

8.2 There were several reasons that have tended to prevent any material divergence of speech between Hindus of Assam and those of Bengal and Bihar which may be stated as follows (*Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471*. Assam State Archives) :

1. Original Language being fixed by written characters was not susceptible of rapid alteration.
2. Communication between two countries had been always maintained.
3. There had always been a large influx of settlers from Bengal and Behar into Assam, and their intercourse had doubtless, tended to preserve language from becoming unintelligible to each other.
4. The bonds of a common religion and of a common sacerdotal community had also been important in preventing any material divergence of language.

8.3 Mr. Mills, Mr Danforth and Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, all agreed that Bengali was essential to Assamese and they recommended that it should only be taught in Higher classes to complete vernacular education. The supporters of Assamese urged it being taught in elementary rather than at higher classes where it was unsuited. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471*). Assam State Archives).

For Courts and Schools of a higher grade a technical vocabulary and terminology was required, and there was the weak point in arguments for introduction of Assamese. Every definition in Penal Code and the whole of law terms were rendered in Bengali. It was a farce to try a man in Assamese and explain the charge recorded against him in Bengali. (*Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471*. Assam State Archives)

8.4 Babu Chandra Mohan Goswami, Member of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Teacher, High School, Guwahati observed:

“In 1835, when Persian, which was the medium of correspondence with Provincial Courts and Sadar Court and Board of Revenue, was abolished and vernacular schools at the State cost were established, it became necessary to the

Commissioner then in Charge of the province to decide the language in which the business of the court could be carried on and instruction in school given. The Officers found as many dialects prevailing in Assam then, as there were races and districts, and that there were no Assamese books fit for introduction in schools and that old Assamese manuscripts which have been discovered, were found to be written in a language in idioms and Grammar the same with that of Bengal, and they could not come to a more correct decision.” (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471*. Assam State Archives.)

8.5 Assam reconciled to Bengali language and many believed themselves to be immigrants from Bengal and even went so far as to adopt Bengali titular and family names, such as Datta. Whatever may have been the feelings of the Assamese then; there was a time when they considered it as an honour to be recognized as Bengalis. This spirit of partiality towards Bengali was manifested by all classes of people up to year 1852, when it was suddenly changed by the influence of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, who was with a few friends submitted a memorial to Mr. Mills, Judge of late Sadar Court on deputation to Assam. (*Assam Commissioner's Office File no. 471*)

8.6 Native young men who have received an English education, of Upper Assam, and such of them who had settled themselves in Lower Assam, the people of Kamrup, Darrang and Gawalpara had not joined that movement for reinstatement of the Assamese language. Assamese with a laudable patriotic zeal had joined the American Missionaries for attainment of same object, and had apparently forgotten their mutual differences in a common cause. Missionaries were desirous of having a language degraded to level of comprehension of masses, whereas the Assamese wanted to have the dialect of Upper Assam recognized as language of whole country. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471*. Assam State Archives)

8.7 Missionaries and Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan represented Assamese language as distinct from Bengali and had taken no

inconsiderable labour in reducing to writing Sanskrit and Assamese words as had been pronounced by natives. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471*. Assam State Archives).

- 8.8** Assamese did not appear to have any fixed rules of Orthography. The same word could have been written in different forms by two persons of the same district or by same person in two different places. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471*. Assam State Archives.)
- 8.9** One third population of Assam (excluding natives of Gowalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and non Aryan tribes of Plains and Hills) spoke Upper Assam Dialect, which again was subdivided into Sutia and Sibsagar dialects. Natives of Lower Assam would never accept it under compulsion. Even if Assamese had been accepted: they must have had either accepted the language of old Assam Manuscripts or form two languages, one in Upper Assam and one in Lower Assam. Whoever had observed the growth of the Bengali language have had marked its tendency of excluding local patois and of incorporating Sanskrit vocables which had given it almost an easy Sanskrit form except in Grammar. Same tendency had been perceived in Hindustani and there was no reason to suppose why Assamese would not have it. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471*. Assam State Archives)
- 8.10** Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan was an exception, whose work in law was an ornament of Bengali literature and whose knowledge of English had commanded respect of Europeans, there was not a single instance of an Assamese capable of composing a decent letter in any language. Government wanted a much gradual approach. Henry Cotton was in favour of proper place of residence for the Assamese students in Calcutta. He was of the opinion that it was very important to break their mood of isolation. He thought that when they would be able to live in harmony with fellow students in Bengal, narrow mentality would be changed. He said just as people in Welsh were dependent upon England,

likewise Assamese cannot exist without depending upon Bengal. (*Assam Secretariat. Home - 1899*: July Nos. 123-4, see Note by Chief Commissioner.)

- 8.11** Major J. K. Graham, DC, Darrang observed that exclusion of Bengali was a great boon for only those who have had hopes of employment in courts. (*Letter of Major J. K. Graham, DC, Darrang. No. 339 dtd 13 June, 1872*. Assam State Archives)

The difference between several dialects of Assam though considerable, was not so radical that a native of one village would have failed to make himself understood by Assamese speaking races throughout the length and breadth of Valley from West Kamrup to Sadiya. With few exception, Bengali Law terms had been borrowed, almost literature, from Persian and Arabic and the like process obtained in Assam. The advocates of Bengali presupposed a crystallized Bengali Language in a very remote period when what was Bengali then, had no fixed existence. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471*. Assam State Archives.)

- 8.12** Those who held that Assamese and Bengal were same had served in Bengal Proper and have had known the Bengali language "as spoken" before coming to Assam. While those who held that province had a distinct language of its own were chiefly missionaries (who came directly from America to Assam) and military officials who before entering the Commission had a knowledge of Hindustani, but not of Bengali. If they had any knowledge of Bengali, it was the Bengali of books and not language of peasants. (*Letter No. 1824 dtd Gauhati. 30/01/1873* From-the Officiating Inspector of Schools, Assam Circle to Col. Hopkinson, Gov. General's Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam. Assam State Archives.)
- 8.13** The Anti-Assamese lobby went to the extent of stating that all respectable persons, especially the gentry's class, of Assam had in fact migrated from Bengal. Even if we go by this argument that all respectable persons of Assam had migrated from Bengal, there was no rationale for the

superimposition of Bengali over Assamese. (Assam Commissioner's office file No. 471. Assam State Archives). Besides, no report was submitted from hill districts, as neither Bengali nor Assamese was spoken there. (Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471. Assam State Archives). American Baptist Missionaries stated that there were more than forty language and dialects which were spoken in Assam then. Half of these were languages of Hill tribe people. (*The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union. 1886*)

8.14 Col. Henry Hopkinson observed in 1873 : "Had Christian mission first established in Assam happened to have been derived from a parent branch in Calcutta, instead of one in Burma, I doubt whether we should have ever heard of an Assamese language. Bengal mission was supposed to be already occupied when the American Baptist Mission Board sent its missionaries to extreme frontier of Assam, among the Khamtis and the Singphos, to cooperate with their brethren in Burma. But country in that quarter was found too unsettling and missionaries asked and obtained leave from their Board to move a little down the river, and established themselves at Sibsagar, in honest belief that they were still among a race allied to Burmese and speaking a cognate tongue. If indeed this was not so, they had no business in Assam (an Offshoot from the Burmese Mission). If language of Assam could be confounded with that of Bengal, then exclusive control over most powerful of educational instruments was lost to them. Thus, at Sibsagar, they conceived and from Sibsagar, they promulgated the Assamese dogma, which was to extirpate the Bengali heresy and which was part of creed of Christian Churchman in Assam." (*Substance of Assamese for Bengali in Courts and schools of Assam. Letter No. 115, dtd Gowhatty, 11/4/1873.*)

8.15 When ethnologists were allowed to prove that the plains of Assam were settled from Bengal, it was explained that in Assam the Bengali had remained as it was when Bengalis brought it with them, while in Bengal itself, it had been a progressive

language. How was it that names of oldest places in Assam were not Assamese-Ganhatty, Nowgong, Joshatti, Golghat, Rungpore, Seebpore, Luckhimpore, Burpeta, Sonareegaon, etc. Anandaram was constrained to admit that education in Assam could not be completed without Bengali. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471. Assam State Archives.*)

8.16 Assamese was apparently a Tai dialect. This Tai dialect appeared to have been the language of the Court up to the time of repulse of Mir Jumlah, when Assamese first began to come under the Brahminical influences to which they soon entirely had succumbed. A large colony from Nuddea headed chiefly by Brahmins settled at Jorhat, and Denonath Sen related that the Santipur Goswamis, who subsequently reclaimed Assam Kings from apostasy came to Upper Assam about latter end of the fifteenth century. Buchanon said that conversion of Royal families seemed to have been accomplished by a Royal intrigue. As Assamese had conquered Mussulman, the woman and the Priest conquered them and soon Bengali Language became more and more common, until in the time of Rudra Singha, it was used on coin and in state affairs. The Date of earliest coin with a Bengali legend which came to Buchanon's possession was of 1721AD, when Rudra Singha accepted the guidance of Brahmin from Burdwan. (*Assam Commissioner's Office file No. 471. Assam State Archives.*)

8.17 The late officiating Commissioner, Colonel Haughton, formally recommended that Assamese should be made the language of the Courts. Colonel Haughton's recommendation was not approved by the Government of Bengal. But, all civil officers serving in Assam were compelled to pass in Assamese, just as Bengal officers had to pass in Bengali, or North Western Provinces officers in Hindustani. Memorials from different parts of Assam had been presented to the Lieutenant Governor upon this subject; and he had himself held in other parts of India that the vernacular of a people ought not to be elbowed out of a country in favour of another language, which happened

to be the vernacular of a neighbouring, more numerous and more educated people. The tendency of the Government of India and of the legislation of late years had been to permit the vernacular of each province to be used in its courts. The facts and memorials of the bygone years had shown that the Assamese language was still the vernacular of the people. Accordingly, Lieutenant Governor, Sir George Campbell, caused a thorough enquiry about the matter to be made through the Commissioner of Assam. He referred inter alia particularly and very significantly to the fact of the existence of a dictionary of the Assamese language- very clearly the Reverend Bronson's one (1867), with its two very appealing prefaces in Assamese and English. The Commissioner, who himself was an advocate of the retention of Bengali in the Assamese schools and courts, sent up to Calcutta the field reports of all the Deputy Commissioners and some of the experienced Sub divisional officers of the valley districts of Assam. These papers showed to the lieutenant Governor that the majority of these officers, with larger experience in the province than others, were in favour of Assamese. The Lieutenant Governor came to the inevitable conclusion "that the people of Assam do not understand Bengali, and that the petitions written in their name and the court proceedings were unintelligible to them, while the majority of Assamese wished to have their own language for educational and court purposes. It would have been abundantly clear from that the Authorities were not moved till there was a popular agitation, and that this agitation took shape quite some time after Phukan's efforts and even the recommendations of Mills in that regard were wasted on the Government. The Baptist Associates of Phukan now held the line of this agitation in their hands. In fact, the commissioner, Colonel Henry Hopkinson, makes specific reference in his letter, dated 11 December 1873, written to the Director of Public Instruction, to "the Sibsagar Missionaries to whom we are chiefly indebted for the agitation in favour of the

creation of the Assamese language ." (Neog. 1977. *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan*).

The Lieutenant Governor considered it imperative that Assamese must then be introduced into all courts and schools of the valley districts of Assam. His orders were applicable to all the primary schools, middle schools and lower middle classes of higher schools but with certain limitations. The Commissioner of Assam was directed on 9 April 1873 to take very early steps to give effect to these orders of the Government in the five valley districts. Thus and thus the order in Assam's educational and judicial fields, for which Anandaram worked so diligently, came about at long last. (Neog. 1977. *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan*).

9. Conclusion

Had Bengali not been declared the official language of Assam, Assamese language would have receded into oblivion. It was the American Baptists Missionaries, armed with religious fervour, who took up the case of the Assamese language in order to spread Christianity. It was only for them that Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan took up the cudgels on behalf of his mother tongue. The official proclamation was a blessing in disguise. On one hand, it wanted to dislodge Assamese. But, on the other hand, it generated a lot of publicity and propaganda which itself hurt its own interests. The study found that both the hypotheses have been proved wrong. Neither Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan played a pivotal role nor American Baptist Missionaries played second fiddle to Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan in the reinstatement of the Assamese language. That Assamese was saved due to the superimposition of Bengali as an official language in Assam, can be gauged from the following facts-

- a. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan should not be considered as someone who fought for the total abolition of Bengali from Assam. He acted quite rationally and in the most measured way. Even though he was a votary of the Assamese language, it would be wrong to club him as the member of the anti Bengali Front led by the American Baptist Missionaries. Supporters of Assamese language like Mills, Danforth and Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan himself urged that it be taught in elementary rather than at higher classes where it was unsuited. Anandaram had to admit that education in Assam could not be completed without Bengali. He himself was one of the finest

- exponents of the Bengali language. Assamese was used for 10 years after annexation of the province. He used the word 'suppression', to describe the substitution of the Assamese language by the Bengali language.
- b. In 1835, The Officers found that there were no Assamese books fit for introduction in schools and that old Assamese manuscripts which were discovered were found to be written in a language in idioms and Grammar the same with that of Bengal. So, they could not come to a more correct decision.
 - c. Assam reconciled to Bengali language and many believed themselves to be immigrants from Bengal and went so far as to adopt Bengali titular and family names, such as Datta. Whatever may be the feelings of Assamese then, there was a time when they considered it as an honour to be recognized as Bengali. This spirit of partiality towards Bengali was manifested by all classes of people up to year 1852, when it was suddenly changed by the influence of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, who was with a few friends submitted a memorial to Mr. Mills, Judge of late Sadar Court on deputation in Assam.
 - d. Natives of Lower Assam would never accept Assamese under compulsion. Even if Assamese were to be accepted, (1) They would have to either accept the language of old Assam Manuscripts or (2) Form two languages, one in Upper Assam and one in Lower Assam.
 - e. Indifference of the hill tribes with respect to the linguistic battles then.
 - f. American Baptist Mission wanted to propagate in Assamese i.e. language of the masses. But, they literally fought for the reinstatement only when it was officially dislodged by the Government. Had they decided to preach in any language other than the Assamese, there would not have been any reaction from their side for the reinstatement of the Assamese language.
- It was only for the Western influence in general and the American Baptist Missionaries in particular, that our basic sense of identity in the form of Assamese language was kept intact, thereby helping us in the reconstruction of a greater Assamese society. The sheer show of resilience of the Assamese society in the midst of two forces- vertical one in the form of overall British hegemony and horizontal one in the form of Bengali linguistic dominance is indeed remarkable. There was a great adoration for the West in general and American Baptist Missionaries in particular. But, even then Assamese people at large were not swayed by the evangelization processes of the Baptist Missionaries. An alien religion was not able to make a dent on the socio-religious fabric of the greater Assamese society.

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