

# Teaching of Hmar Language with Special Reference to Assam

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## Introduction

The Hmar language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and is a part of the Lushai-Kuki-Chin group. It is a verb final language. It was first reduced to the written word in the Linguistic Survey of India done by G.A. Grierson way back at the beginning of the last century. The language may be said to be in a developing stage; it requires standardization in several areas.

The Hmar people were first recognized as a tribal community in the North-Eastern States of India. In 1956, the Government of India also granted recognition to the tribe by including it in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification), 1956 vide Ministry of Home Affairs Order No. S.R.O. 2477 dated 29 October 1956. Prior to this, they were known as Kuki or old Kuki, which is not actually a name of any tribe but a term that was coined by others to refer to them. In all likelihood, the people who assigned this name could not differentiate between the different tribes or their languages, and therefore gave them this name. In fact, anyone who enlisted in the armed forces, police force or petty government jobs was also known by that name. However, with the publication of the list, the different tribes came to be known by their specific tribe names.

## Development of Hmar as a Language

The Hmar group of tribes speak several languages and dialects among themselves. For the convenience of having a common language, the language of the *Khawsak* (Easterner) group was accepted by the tribes. Although the other languages and dialects are still widely spoken, only Khawsak is used for literary and teaching purposes.

For a long time, from the 1920s until independence, the Hmar language was written and taught by the tribal communities largely for religious purposes and for literacy in their own language. Hymn books were among the earliest that could be mentioned as a book. The New Testament of the Bible in Hmar was published in 1947 and the entire Bible in 1972. In fact, with the exception of a dictionary by Dr. Thanglung, a medical practitioner, there were very few books on non-religious topics. A few weekly, fortnightly, monthly and annual news magazines were published but were often discontinued due to various constraints.

However, since the fifties and the sixties, a substantial number of books have been published and the language has developed into a modern Indian language.

### **Teaching of Hmar Language in Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya**

Way back in 1928-1929, Dr. Thanglung wrote a language primer known as the *Bu Hmasa* (First Primer) for Hmar language. That primer is still in use in primary schools in Manipur. The book was intended to help the Hmar people to become literate in their own language and it did serve the purpose for which it was intended. Many Hmars became literate in their own language because of this primer. Today, apart from the primer, there are a number of school textbooks of Hmar that are used in the secondary schools in Manipur for teaching Hmar. In fact, some vernacular schools in Cachar, Assam have also adopted these textbooks called “Readers” in upper primary schooling.

In 1956, Hmar language was formally recognized by the Government of Manipur. In 1968, the Government of Manipur granted permission to teach the language at the primary level. In 1985, Hmar language was elevated to the status of a modern Indian language (MIL), and was included in the High School Leaving Certificate Examination as a half-paper; it carried fifty marks. As the upper primary schooling was consolidated and textbooks for secondary schooling were finalized, Hmar language gained the status of a full paper in the HSLC Examinations in the year 1997. From the year 2000, Hmar was included at the higher secondary level and Manipur Central University granted permission for study of the language at the degree level. Examinations in Hmar MIL were permitted from the year 2003. Currently the university

is taking measures and preparing textbooks to introduce a course on the study of the Hmar language as an Elective and as a Major subject in degree courses.

The Governments of Mizoram and Meghalaya are also trying to introduce the teaching of Hmar language at the primary level. However, till date not much has been achieved in this regard. In both States the Hmar tribe is recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (Hills).

### **Teaching of Hmar Language in Assam**

The Hmar people living in Assam unofficially adopted the textbooks written in Manipur, and some schools in the Cachar District even started teaching the language. Two vernacular Middle Schools (Upper Primary Stage) were established at Hmarkhawlien and Diphucherra in Cachar, where students were taught in Hmar upto the Upper Primary level.

The Government of Assam recognized the Hmar language as a medium of instruction vide their order conveyed in Memo No. EMI. 82/67/199 dated Shillong, 25 March 1969. However, the language was introduced as the medium of instruction in the primary classes in the autonomous district of north Cachar Hills only from the academic session of 1984-1985. One vernacular Middle School (Upper Primary) was established in Saron. However, the Government did not recognize the school as the establishment of vernacular schools had been discontinued by the authorities. The school was recognized as a Middle English School where Hmar is taught as a language paper only.

As the teaching of the Hmar language advanced, the question of textbooks arose. The textbooks developed and approved by the Government of Manipur could not be accepted by the Government of Assam, and for a good reason as well. Textbooks of Manipur had lessons pertaining to the local history, geography, and biographies of local heroes and leaders. Therefore, new textbooks from the Pre-Primary to the Secondary stages had to be developed for the schools of Assam. The Hmar people themselves in Assam developed school textbooks that incorporated their local history, biography, etc., and even printed and circulated most of these books on their own.

In the meantime, there was a change in the National Policy on Education (1986) which made it mandatory to develop textbooks as per the norms prepared by the NCERT. Following this, the SCERT developed primers and textbooks in Assamese, the major language of the state. Now, all other languages of the State had to adapt the pattern of the newly developed textbooks. That again posed another major problem; while the State language is an Indo-Aryan language, the Hmar language is a Tibeto-Burman. Moreover, the alphabets of Assamese are similar to that of the official language Hindi, with all the *sandhis*, combined consonants, etc. The Hmar language on the other hand has only 25 alphabets (both vowels and consonants) and all Hmar sounds are represented by a combination of these consonants in a manner that is different from that of Assamese. Adapting from one to the other therefore became a major problem. It would have been much easier if the writing of the

textbooks was permitted in a manner that could simplify the learning process. However, the State Government could not be blamed because they had to abide by the national directives. Finally, the State Government decided to develop new textbooks up to the Lower Primary level in Hmar language as per the standards prescribed by the NCERT. The writing of language textbooks for the Upper Primary level is currently being developed. As a result of various constraints, the Hmar people of Assam have decided to have only one language paper at the Upper Primary level.

The Government of Assam has also supplied all textbooks upto the Upper Primary level free of cost to all students. Textbooks developed under the guidance of the SCERT are printed as free textbooks by the Government of Assam and distributed to the learners through Block Development Offices.

Though the Hmar language is yet to be introduced as a medium of instruction at the Upper Primary level, the Board of Secondary Education Assam has recognized and introduced it as a language paper in the High School Leaving Certificate Examinations from the year 2007, vide No. SEBA/AB/HMAR/2007/01 dated 23 August 2007. The Assam Higher Secondary Education Council has allowed the introduction of the Hmar language as a MIL paper in classes XI and XII from the year 2008, vide AHSEC/ACA/CURR. SYLL/01/96/94 dated 3 January 2008. Consequent to this, Assam University, Silchar has recognized the language as a MIL paper for the first Degree (TDC) from the year 2010, vide No.

AUD-56/2009-10/2004 dated 23 July 2010. For all these classes, new textbooks have to be written according to the norms laid down by the respective authorities of education.

### **Problems Relating to the Teaching of Hmar Language**

As mentioned earlier, preparation of textbooks is one of the major problems. Another major problem is that of supporting the teachers. So far, only the teachers of the Lower Primary levels are appointed and supported by the State Government. All other teachers of the language, from the Upper Primary level to the Degree level are appointed and supported by the community through sheer determination. Had this not been the case, the teaching of the language would not have progressed so far. However, this has now become a burden for the community. A proposal around the creation of posts of teachers at different levels of education has been submitted to the government, but so far not a single post has been sanctioned. The schools eagerly await the day when these posts will be created and sanctioned but nobody knows when that will happen. In the meantime, the teaching of the language is somehow going on. The teachers are working with negligible remunerations and making supreme sacrifices of their time and talents for the cause of the language.

Despite everything however, we cannot blame the authorities for not sanctioning the posts of the teachers. The Hmars are a small minority of scheduled tribes. There are many larger scheduled tribes and

communities in the State who are facing the same problems. At the same time, this cannot go on indefinitely, and something needs to be done about it. The teaching of the Hmar language will not be able to continue unless teachers are appointed by the Government to teach the language at every stage. As of now, in the State of Assam alone, the language can be taught in about 90 primary schools, 39 high schools and 15 higher secondary schools and colleges, which include Government and non-Government schools and colleges.

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