

Hemchandra Goswami and the Teaching of Assamese Language and Literature in Calcutta University

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Abstract

The present article endeavors to analyse the role of Hemchandra Goswami in the formulation of a new linguistic-literary canon of Assamese in the early years of the 20th Century and the subsequent induction of Assamese as a postgraduate subject in Calcutta University. The study also makes a brief assessment of the anthology of Assamese literary works (*Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki*) compiled by Goswami which, for the first time, brought together representative specimens composed in the language for sustained academic study. An attempt is thereby undertaken to contextualise these developments in the light of the new vigor and enthusiasm witnessed at the time vis-à-vis the study of Indian vernaculars alongside the classical languages of India.

Keywords: Assamese, language study, literary history, Hemchandra Goswami, Calcutta University

Introduction

Early research in the literary history of India as a distinct field of study, was undertaken by European scholars driven by an impression that Indian literature was constituted mainly by what was composed within the cosmopolitan Sanskrit literary tradition, with the near exclusion of literatures composed in the vernacular literary traditions of India (Das, 1991, p. 3). However, the closing years of the 19th Century and early 20th Century witnessed the gradual consolidation of a veritable literary culture and canon in many regional languages of India. It was also a period that signaled the nationalist phase of Indian history whereby

aspects of colonial modernity, nationality, and regional identities were merged and synthesised. The impact was felt in Assam as well, and Assamese intellectuals like Debendranath Bezbaroa, Hemchandra Goswami, Banikanta Kakati, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, and Dimbeswar Neog, since the beginning of the 20th Century, started engaging with the task of collecting old manuscripts from various sources and thereby conceptualising a history of Assamese language and literature.

Whether it was the Vedic or the Sanskrit literary tradition, or the mediaeval hagiographical tradition, or even the new experimentations carried out under the influence of Western modernity, there was a greater emphasis on written literatures that defined and determined the features of Indian literary historiography (Pollock, 2006, p. 4). In Assam, the colonial administration deputed Edward Gait, the writer of the first 'rational-positivist' history of Assam, to undertake the task of conserving the extant historical materials from destruction and then applying them as sources to delineate the history of the region. His preparation of a historical report came in the wake of the concern shown by Charles Lyall, the Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1894, towards the preservation of historical documents belonging primarily to the six hundred years of Ahom rule, against the vagaries of nature. He stressed upon the urgent need to catalogue and to rescue from oblivion the historical records of Assam (Saikia, 2008, p. 145). It was during his stint at the Assam Government Secretariat in Shillong that Hemchandra Goswami (1872–1928) came into contact with Gait, who, following his report on the *Progress of Historical Research in Assam*, was working on his book *History of Assam*, a critical history of ancient and modern Assam.

Goswami's Role in Establishing Assamese as an Indian Vernacular

Referring to the association between Gait and Goswami, Major P.R.T. Gurdon, Deputy Commissioner of Eastern Bengal and Assam, and also the Honorary Provincial Director of Ethnography in Assam in the early years of the twentieth century, had remarked:

Hem Goswami was of great assistance to Sir Edward Gait in his work of historical research in which the former's knowledge of Sanskrit and acumen for digging and delving in a previously unknown field supplied a collaborator with just the equipment that Sir Edward required. (as cited in Bhuyan, 2002b, p. xlviiii)

Furthermore, when Hemchandra Goswami was transferred to Tezpur in 1905, he collaborated with Padmanath Gohain-Barua to prepare a brief yet highly informative note in English on Assamese language and literature. This note was prepared under the request of F.W. Sudmersen, then the principal of Cotton College, and who was actually instructed by the Government of Assam to write a short monograph on the Assamese language. Sudmersen spelled out the headings under which the note had to be prepared: namely, (i) The Earliest Beginning of the Language; (ii) Its Earliest Literature, Puthis, Names of Chief Authors; (iii) The Chief Periods of Assamese Literature; (iv) Its Direct Descent from Sanskrit and Its Similarity with Hindi; (v) Distinction between Bengali and Assamese; (vi) The Greatest Periods of Prosperity of Assamese: Do They Concur with Similar Periods of Bengali Literature?; (vii) The Buranjis, The Chief Ones with their Authors, General Characteristics of Style, etc.; (viii) What Does Assamese owe to Bengali?; (ix) Modern Assamese Literature; (x) Is There an Increase or Decrease in the Production of Literary Works in Assamese? and (xi) The Future of Assamese Language: How It May be Encouraged?

This note to Sudmersen and his subsequent composition of the monograph entitled *Notes on the Assamese Language* (1908) laid the ground for the Assamese language to be considered an Indian Vernacular for study at the undergraduate level in Calcutta University almost a decade later. In the earlier note by Goswami and Gohain-Barua entitled *A Note on Assamese Language and Literature*, both the writers not only raised a few significant issues pertaining to the independent identity of the Assamese language vis-à-vis Bengali, but also provided a roadmap for bolstering the presence and visibility of the language upon a pan-national forum. Emphasising the fact that about 63 per cent of the words in Assamese are of Sanskritic origin, they stressed upon its difference from Bengali on multiple aspects. The authors quoted J.D. Anderson, an Indian Civil Service officer, who had made an observation in his article published in the *Calcutta Review* in July 1896 that:

Assamese differs materially from Bengali in grammatical forms: its plural is formed in a different manner from the Bengali plural; the feminine gender is shown in a different way; there is much difference in the conjugation of verbs, specially in the present and the future tenses; it differs also in idioms, in syntax and collocation of words. (as cited in Goswami & Gohain-Barua, 2002, p. lxxxii)

The authors have also made a crucial distinction between a language borrowing any number of words from one or more languages, and the same language adopting the grammatical patterns of another language. As long as the language has an internal grammatical structure of its own, it is free, they argued, to adopt words from the neighboring tribes or even foreign nations (Goswami & Gohain-Barua, 2002, p. lxxxiii).

An important official assignment for Hemchandra Goswami came as part of his association with Sir Asutosh Mookerjee who spearheaded the scheme for the advanced study of Indian vernacular languages through which he believed that the “for the first time in the history of Indian Universities, it became possible for a person to take the highest University degree on the basis of his knowledge of his mother tongue” (Convocation Speech of Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, 18 March 1922, p. 18; quoted in Bhuyan, 2002a, p. xxxvi). In the year 1919, the University of Calcutta established the Department of Indian Vernaculars offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Indian languages. In this context, the Regulations of the University stated that:

[A] student studying for the M.A. in Indian Vernaculars should possess a knowledge of two vernaculars, namely, a thorough knowledge of his mother-tongue and a less comprehensive knowledge of a second vernacular. The student is also required to obtain a working acquaintance with two of the languages which have formed the foundation of the Indian Vernaculars, such as Pali, Prakrit and Persian. (as cited in Bhuyan, 2002a, p. xxxvi)

The languages which were recognised as principal languages till then were Bengali, Hindi, Gujrati (Gujarati), and Oriya and the languages which had been recognised as subsidiary languages were Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Hindi, Urdu, Maithili, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Canarese (Kannada), Malayalam, and Sinhalese. As a necessary corollary to this initiative, there was the immediate requirement for the preparation and publication of ‘typical selections’ from each of the Indian languages to be taught under the Department of Indian Vernaculars in the University which would enable “an advanced study of the Indian Vernaculars in their critical, scientific, historical and comparative aspects” (Report on Post-Graduate Teaching in the University of Calcutta, 1918–1919; as cited in Bhuyan, 2002a, p. xxxvii). The following scholars were identified for the purpose: Mr. D.R. Bhandarkar (for Marathi),

Dr. P.D. Gune (for Prakrit), Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. Satischandra Vidyabhushan and Dr. Benimadhab Barua (for Pali), Babu Bijaychandra Majumdar (for Oriya), Lala Sitaram (for Hindi), Prof. I.J.S. Taraporewala and Prof. A.B. Dhruva (for Gujarati), Dr. A. Suhrawardy (for Urdu), and Sri Hemchandra Goswami (for Assamese). This opportunity for Goswami arrived when Sir Asutosh Mookerjee visited Guwahati in March 1918 for some work related to Calcutta University Commission, and he raised the matter before P.R.T. Gurdon regarding deputing a worthy person to undertake the task for Assamese literature. By that time, Goswami had already proved his abilities through his work with the descriptive catalogue of Assamese manuscripts, and, therefore, he was the fittest person to carry out the assigned task. The model for the 'typical selections,' as envisioned by Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, was the *Vanga Sahitya Parichay* or *Selections from the Bengali Literature* compiled by Dinesh Chandra Sen, under Mookerjee's instructions.

Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki

All the associated compilers were instructed to submit a plan for their proposed selections, and, accordingly, Hemchandra Goswami submitted a scheme, wherein the whole history of Assamese literature was divided into six periods. The first period (*giti yuga*)—from 600 AD to 800 AD—was seen as a period of oral literary compositions comprising cradle songs, pastoral songs, ballads and other lyrics. The second period (*mantra aru bhanita yuga*) from 800 AD to 1200 AD was marked as the period when written specimens appear in the Assamese language in the form of *mantras* and aphorisms committed to writing. The third period (*prak-Vaishnava yuga*) extended from 1200 AD up to 1450 AD, the latter being the time of Sankardeva's birth. This period included Madhav Kandali's *Saptakanda Ramayana* as well as composition of episodic *kavyas* based on the Mahabharata. The fourth period (*Vaishnava yuga*) was considered to be the high point of pre-modern Assamese literature, covering a period of about 150 years from 1450 AD to 1600 AD, roughly corresponding to the lifetimes of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. The fifth period (*vistar yuga*), from 1600 AD to 1800 AD, constituted a period when *puthis* on miscellaneous subjects were composed under the patronage of the Ahom kings. The period also witnessed the gradual decline of Ahom power and the arrival of the British in Assam in the wake of Moamaria rebellion and the Burmese invasions. The sixth period (*vartaman yuga*), beginning from around 1800 AD and continuing till his own time, dealt

with newer forms and subjects of literary compositions under the impact of Western literature and English education.

As the compilation of selections from significant works of Assamese literature from the beginning till the colonial period, the *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki* [Typical Selections from Assamese Literature] was published in three volumes comprising seven parts between the years 1923 and 1929. As regards its role and significance, it could be argued that it not only enabled the academic study of Assamese literature as a postgraduate discipline under Calcutta University for the first time, but also facilitated, possibly also for the first time, the construction of a formalised corpus of literary works in Assamese spanning the whole time-line of its history beginning from the seventh century AD till the end of the nineteenth century.

The publication of *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki* could also be seen as an exercise towards conceptualising a consolidated canon of Assamese language and literature in their own right and also participating, alongside other Indian languages in developing a 'modern' holistic vision of Indian literature. Looking at the methodology adopted by Goswami in selecting the specific works anthologised within the volumes, it is evident that there was a special emphasis on the Vaishnava period of 15th and 16th Century Assam. The seven parts of *Asomiya Sahityar Chaneki* were not published together or in serial order but were divided into three separate volumes; the third volume, containing the sixth and seventh parts, comprising the *varthaman yuga*, was published between August–December 1923. The second volume, containing the second, third, fourth, and fifth volumes, was published between January–November 1924. The first volume, comprising the first part, was published in November 1929. The costs of publication were borne by Shri Bholanath Barua, who was a well-known businessman of Assam, then settled in Calcutta. However, regrettably, none of the three persons associated with the project could witness the final publication of the volume: Bholanath Barua passed away in 1923; Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, who had spearheaded the whole project, died in 1924 while Hemchandra Goswami passed away on May 2, 1928 and hence could only see two of the three volumes published during his lifetime.

The inevitable delay in the publication of *Asomiya Sahityar Chaneki* concomitantly led to the postponement of MA classes in Assamese under the Department of Indian Vernaculars at Calcutta University. In an

article on the postgraduate teaching of Assamese in Calcutta University, Bishwanath Roy notes that post-graduate classes in Bengali started from the year 1919 with 800 marks' syllabus and examination pattern. 1920 saw the beginning of postgraduate classes in Hindi; and in the following year, i.e., 1921, Oriya, Gujarati, and Maithili were brought into the domain of postgraduate teaching under Calcutta University. Urdu was inducted into the fold in 1929. It was later, in 1938, that Assamese was introduced as a postgraduate subject of study. Birinchi Kumar Barua was appointed as a professor in the University in 1936 by the then Vice Chancellor, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. A year later, in 1937, Assamese was included as a principal postgraduate subject. The first batch was admitted in 1938, and the first MA examination in Assamese was conducted in the year 1940. However, it may be noted here that the teaching of Assamese as a 'subsidiary language' for postgraduate study had started in the year 1919 itself. It may be recalled here that Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, in his scheme of study of Indian vernaculars, had envisioned that a student admitted to the MA programme of one principal vernacular language must acquire knowledge of two additional vernaculars in varying degrees. Based on this objective, the three languages to be learned were accordingly referred to as 'Principal Subject,' 'Subsidiary Language,' and 'Basic Language.' Out of 800 marks, 400 marks were devoted to the teaching and examination of the Principal Subject. There were two papers on the Subsidiary Language, one paper on the Basic Language and one more paper on philological study of the three languages concerned. As noted by Bishwanath Roy, Assamese, Hindi, and Oriya were taught as subsidiary languages, and, out of 32 students admitted to the MA programme in Bengali in 1919, six had opted for Assamese. The texts incorporated into the Assamese syllabus included: Sankardeva's "*Rukmini Haran*", Bhattadeva's "*Katha Gita*" (first three cantos), Gunabhiram Baruah's "*Asam Buranji*" (first four chapters), Lakshminath Bezbaroa's "*Kripabar Borbarua'r Kakator Topola*", Mofizuddin Ahmed Hazarika's "*Gyanmalini*", Hemchandra Barua's "*Asomiya Byakaran*", Debananda Bharali's "*Asomiya Bhashar Moulik Bichar*", Satyanath Bora's "*Sahitya Bichar*", Debananda Bharali's "*Anglo-Assamese Grammar*", G.F. Nicholl's "*Manual of the Bengali Language: Comprising a Bengali Grammar and Lessons, with Various Appendices including an Assamese Grammar*", and Debendranath Bezbaroa's "*Asomiya Bhasha aru Sahityar Buranji*" (Roy, 2016, as cited in

Deka, 2021, p. 336).

In a Gazette notification of Calcutta University issued on July 4, 1940, the syllabus of the MA Assamese programme was mentioned. The first paper was the 'History of Literature,' and it comprised Debendranath Bezbaroa's *Asomiya Bhasha aru Sahityar Buranji*, G.A. Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India*, J.N. Farquhar's *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, Kanaklal Barua's *Early History of Kamarupa*, Padmanath Gohain-Barua's *Presidential Address at Asom Sahitya Sabha*, S.K. Sen's *History of Brajavali*, Kaliram Medhi's *Asomiya Natak*, Birinchi Kumar Barua's *Ankiya Natak*, among others. The second paper was on poetry, and the texts taught included Harihara Vipra's *Ashwamesh Parva*, Durgabar's *Giti-Ramayan*, selected portions from Sankardeva's *Kirttan Ghosha*, Madhavdeva's *Namghosha*, Ramcharan Thakur's *Sankar Charit* (all these texts taken from *Asomiya Sahityar Chaneki*), along with Banikanta Kakati's *Puroni Asomiya Sahitya*. The third paper was on prose literature and included Bhattadeva's *Katha Gita*, Raghunath Das's *Katha Ramayan*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's *Asom Buranji*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Sadhukothar Kuki*, Rajanikanta Bordoloi's *Rongili*, etc. The fourth paper was on dramatic literature, and it included Sankardeva's *Parijata Haran*, Gopal Deva's *Janam Jatra*, Gunabhiram Baruah's *Ramnabami Natak*, Padmanath Gohain-Barua's *Goanbura*, etc. The fifth paper contained selections from Vaishnava literary works composed prior to the 18th century. The sixth paper comprised selections of literary works from 18th century to the beginning of the twentieth century, like Gunabhiram Baruah's *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan'or Jiban Charit*, Hemchandra Baruah's *Bahire Rong Song Bhitore Kuwabhatari*, Rajanikanta Bordoloi's *Rohdoi Ligiri*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Kripabar Borbarua'r Ubhotoni*, Chandrakumar Agarwalla's *Bin Boragi*, Bholanath Das's *Sita Haran Kavya*, etc. The seventh paper was on Sanskrit or on any other modern Indian languages, namely, Bengali, Oriya, Hindi, Urdu, and Maithili. The eighth paper was on 'Elementary Middle Indo-Aryan Texts,' within which was taught 'Historical and Comparative Grammar of Assamese.' The prescribed texts were Kaliram Medhi's *Assamese Grammar and Origin of Assamese Language*, Debananda Bharali's *Asomiya Bhashar Moulik Bichar*, and S.K. Chatterji's *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*.

The teaching of Assamese language and literature at the postgraduate level underwent dynamic transformations with the establishment of the University of Gauhati in 1948, and the subsequent emergence of

Maheswar Neog and Satyendranth Sarma as two significant academic personalities in the discipline. However, the legacy and contribution of Hemchandra Goswami remained crucial not only in terms of standardising the literary–linguistic canon of the Assamese language but also in enabling possibilities for further studies on the subject from comparative perspectives.

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