GENDER SYSTEM IN ASSAMESE AND BORO : A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

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1.1 Assamese and Boro historically belong to two different language families; the first belongs to Indo-Aryan branch of *śatam* group of Indo-European language family, and the second falls under Assam-Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burman group of Sino-Tibetan language family. But it is interesting to note that both the languages possess some common phonological and morphological features which are absent in their parent languages. Gender system is a morphological aspect in which both the languages possess some common characteristics.

1.2 Sanskrit, the parent language of Assamese has preserved three distinct genders : masculine, feminine and neuter. These three genders are generally determined according to the meaning, formation of the stem and suffixes added to the stem. Moreover, in Sanskrit gender is grammatical where the choice of gender is arbitary and without any logical foundation; e.g. the words *dārā*, *kalatra* and *patnī-* all expressing the sense of wife are in masculine, netuer and feminine respectively (Murti 1984). In middle Indo-Aryan stage, i.e. in Prākrit the conception of gender had become very weak. Apparently, though there are three genders in MIA, no strict distinction is maintained amongst them (Woolner 1986). In addition in MIA grammatical gender is generally discarded though in literary Prākrit there is a tendency to preserve the old mode of distinguishing the grammatical gender from natural gender. In a natural gender system animate beings and inanimate things are classified as masculine, feminine or neuter according to their sex or lack of sex. For example, man is masculine, woman is feminine and town is neuter.

1.3 NIA languages like Assamese, Bengali and Oriya possess the natural gender system in which animate beings and inanimate things are classified as masculine, feminine or neuter according to their sex or lack of sex. But it should be noted that there is no difference in declension system between the words of masculine and neuter gender. Actually, in Assamese animate objects only distinguish gender. As such Assamese possesses two genders: masculine and feminine. Most of the nouns, few pronouns, few adjectives and classifiers denote masculine and feminine gender in Assamese. But the common nouns denoting human beings and animals do not indicate the sex. Such common nouns fall under common gender, e.g. *mānuh, garu, hātī.*

1.4 In Boro also gender distinction is maintained among animate objects only. As such Boro also possesses three genders : masculine, feminine and common gender. Common gender is indicated by common nouns denoting human beings and animals. e.g., *māwzi* (cat), *omā* (pig) and *bormā* (goat).

1.5 In both the languages Assamese and Boro, the distinction of sex may be expressed mainly by the following three ways :

1. Using separate noun bases for male and female beings
2. Using separate qualifying words before or after the common nouns
3. Using different suffixes (Goswami 1978)

1.5.1 **Separate noun bases for male and female** : Both the languages, Assamese and Boro, possess varieties of separate noun bases which indicate male and female status. Most of the nouns of relationship fall under this category. It is interesting to note that in both the languages most of the noun bases indicating male status are generally vowel ā ending. e. g.,

Assamese :

Masculine	**Feminine**
deutā, 'father'	*mā*, 'mother'

kakāideu, 'elder brother'	*bāideu*, 'elder sister' *nabau*, 'elder brother's wife'
bhāi, 'younger brother'	*bhanī*, 'younger sister'
la'rā, 'boy'	*choālī*, 'girl'
darā, 'bridegroom'	*kainā*, 'bride'
damarā, 'young bull'	*ceurī*, 'young cow'

Boro :

bifā, 'his father'	*bimā*, 'his mother'
ādā, 'elder brother'	*āba'*, 'elder sister'
sengrā, 'young man'	*sikhlā*, 'young woman'
ādai, 'uncle, i.e. father's younger brother'	*mādai*, 'uncle's wife'
birāi, 'old man'	*burai*, 'old woman'

1.5.2 **Separate qualifying words** : In Assamese there are mainly two qualiying terms or words which are used before the noun bases. The two qualifying terms are *matā*, 'male' and *māikī* 'female,' and they are used before the terms which belong to common gender, e.g.

matā mānuh, 'male person,'	*māikī mānuh*, 'female person.'
matā ma'h, 'he buffalo'	*māikī ma'h*, 'she buffalo'
matā chāgali, 'he goat'	*māikī chāgalī*, 'she goat'

In many cases *tatsama* words *purux* (Skt. *puruṣa*, male) and *mahilā* (female) are used before the terms belonging to common gender, e.g.

purux kabi, 'male poet'	*mahilā kabi*, 'female poet'
purux rāṣṭrapati, 'male President'	*mahilā rāṣṭrapati*, 'female President'

purux mantrī, 'male minister' *mahilā mantrī*, 'female minister'

Sometimes, in Assamese sex is indicated by addition of enclitic definitives *'ṭo'* for masculine and '*zanī* ' for feminine after the terms belong to common gender.

Example :

mānuhṭo, 'the man' *mānuhzanī*, 'the woman'

kukurāṭo, 'the cock' *kukurāzanī*, 'the hen'

chāgalīṭo, 'he goat' *chāgalīzanī*, 'she goat'

In Boro there are few qualifying terms which are generally used after the noun bases. At present some people use the qualifying terms before the nouns as in Assamese. Sometimes noun bases are ommitted and sex is distinguished only by the qualifying terms. The following are the qualifying terms used in Boro :

bundā, meaning male of cat, pig and dog, and bundi, meaning female of cat, pig and dog, e.g.

māwzi bundā, 'male cat' *māwzi bundi*, 'female cat'

omā bundā, 'male pig' *omā bundi*, 'female cat'

soymā bundā, 'male dog' *soymā bundi*, 'female dog'

phānthā, meaning male of goat, deer and *phānthi*, meaning female of goat, deer, e.g.

bormā phānthā, 'he goat' *bormā phānthi*, 'she goat'

moy phānthā, 'male deer' *moy phānthi*, 'female deer'

bungā, meaning male of rat and *bungi*, female of rat, e.g.

enzor bungā, 'male rat' *enzor bungi*, 'female rat'

mākhundā, male elephant and *mākhundi*, female elephant, e.g.

moyder mākhundā, 'male elephant' *moyder mākhundi*, 'female elephant'