AHOM LANGUAGE: ITS TYPOLOGY, LANGUAGE CONTACT AND HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES.

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Introduction: The Tai, having 197 (one hundred and ninety seven) varieties (Diller 1994 : 8-17) is a major language of South-East Asia. One of the said varieties is the Ahom which was once the National Language of Moung Dun Sun Kham, nowadays called Assam, situated in the North-East of present day India. Assam was ruled over by the Tai Ahoms for six hundred years from 1228 A. D. The Ahoms are politically Indians but socially and culturally, South-East Asians. ".........Assam is much different from India. Geographically its land form and climate are part of Southeast Asia ..........A study of Assam requires an understanding of T’ai society and culture. Britain and India have made us believe incorrectly that Assam is India. The fact is that Assam is not India. It may be more correct to study Assam as a part of Southeast Asia. At least Assam is a frontier whereby the culture from Southeast Asia is confronting with the culture of India’’ (Nartsupa and Wichasin 1994 : 5-21). In view of the above perspectives the Ahom language is here taken up for discussion in its typology, language contact and historical implications as one of the important languages of South-East Asia.

Typology:
(1) Character - The Ahom is regarded as a dead language, but it remains preserved for posterity through
I) Historical works
II) Lexicographical works.’’ (Weidert 1979 : N.A.)

Moreover the Ahom religious chants available in the Khiek Lai (religious texts) contain the Ahom language to survive in tongues although chiefly amongst the Ahom priests, namely, Mo-sam (Mo-hung, Mo-plong and Sang-bun) and some of the Mo-Sai (the fourth group of Ahom scholars) of the Ahom people. It is therefore that the Ahom language is not dead but is in slumber for the last two hundred years or
so. The Ahom language cannot die because its survival is ascertained by the old manuscripts now available in hundreds if not in thousands.

After the Ahoms have recently attempted their best to awake the Ahom language from slumber, books and many other writings in Ahom language and Ahom script have been composed and published (Nartsupha and Wichasin 1995: 3-37).

"At present the Ban Ok Pup Lik Muang Tai Association arranged a large cultural meeting among various Tai groups each year, attended by tens of thousand people. The Association issued a yearly commemorative journal Souvenir in 3 languages (Tai, Assamese and English). The Ahom knew their language better. They wrote short stories and issued them in pamphlets, ‘Kham Seng’ (1992) and in book form, ‘Moang Fi,’ (1993) as publications of the Association. These two works used the Ahom language and the Ahom characters. Chow Nagen Hazarika was the editor of Kham Seng and the author of Moang Fi. Moang Fi consisted of 13 Tai songs written in Tai Ahom characters. It can be regarded as the first Ahom literary work of a new era."

Moreover many writings both prose and poetry including lyrics are being composed in Ahom language and are published in different magazines, such as Lik Tai Khwam Tai, 1990, Editor–Chow Nagen Hazarika, Le-Nge-Ri–1993, Editor–Chow Bhola Changmai, Namruk, 1994, Editor–Chow Nagen Hazarika, Che-Mo-Ngen, 1995, Editor–Chow Siddhinath Gogoi, Che-Hung, 1996, Ting-Khang, 1997, Ai-Ma-Nang, 1998 etc. All these writings bear Ahom character, such as, (a) less grammar, more expression, (b) no infiltration (of course except a few) of words from Pali and other languages, thereby keeping the Ahom language in its ancient Tai form. Besides, the following are also some of the characteristics of the Ahom language (c) ḅā ( reallocating ) sometimes is pronounced as wā ( reallocating ) but invariably when suffixing a word, (d) jā ( reallocating ) is sometimes pronounced as yā (as in jāng pronounced as yāng but generally as jā), (e) consonant clusters are found in Ahom language, such as klā ( reallocating ), kwā ( reallocating ), kyā as in
kyeng (ŋəν) but for having no sufficient symbol to represent them separately, it sometimes becomes difficult to ascertain as to which should be what. In Ahom language and script there is no ār as appearing in English words such as ‘Chart’, ‘Shirt’ as found in some other Tai languages. The symbol rā (/animate) was originally not there in Ahom. It was represented by (ə) such as appearing in (ŋəν) but later on (ŋəν) was adopted, may be in the 18th century.

(2) Language group: ‘The Ahom language of Assam is a branch of the Tai language belonging to the Siamese-Chinese family of the Indo-Chinese forms of speech’ (Barua and Phukan 1964 : 201) and is regarded to have fallen under the northern group of Tai languages (Grierson and Barua 1920 : 8). Every Ahom word like that of any other Tai language consists of one syllable. ‘A word may consist of a vowel alone.’ (Gruerson and Barua 1920 : 9). The language is a tonal one and a word may carry one meaning, such as āp (ŋŋə) meaning ‘to bathe’, āt (ŋṁŋ) meaning ‘to sprain the waist’, im (ŋioso) meaning ‘to eat to one’s satisfaction’ etc. and to the extent of twenty two meanings, e.g., khān (ŋŋi) meaning ‘to neglect’ ‘to punish’, ‘to trade’, ‘to speak’, ‘to go quickly’, ‘to make haste’, ‘to fall down’, ‘the crowing of a cock’, ‘to be lazy’, ‘pain’, ‘an axe, ‘rust’, ‘a sickle’, ‘a fish spear’, ‘speech’, ‘two boats lashed together side by side’, ‘kind of fish called ‘kātal’, ‘thin-legged like that of a crow’, ‘punishment’, ‘a shuttle’, ‘laziness’ (Barua and Phukan 1964 : 20) depending upon the tone applied to the word.

(3) Alphabet: The Ahom alphabet had originally sixteen vowels and nineteen consonants but during the eighteenth century, five other consonants, namely, gā (ŋi), ghā (ŋio), dhā (ŋso), bhā (ŋso), and jhā (ŋso) were adopted. There is only one word, namely, dhek (ŋ‰m), meaning ‘to intimidate with loud, sudden and angry words,’ ‘to get angry’, ‘to beat’, comprising of letter dhā (ŋso) and no Tai word at all to comprise of gā, ghā bhā and jhā letters. ā (ŋ‰) is a consonant and not a vowel as shown by Dr. G. A. Grierson (Grierson and Barua 1920 : 23). In the Ahom alphabet there is no letter to represent Hs or Sh. The consonant sign (sāt) falls only on letters, namely, kā (m), ngā- (ũ), nyā (ũ), tā (ũ), nā (ũ), pā, (ũ) wā (ũ) and mā (ũ) when suffixing a word. But while writing words belonging to English, Indo-European and other languages in Ahom script, the consonant sign has to be applied to other
suffixed letters too (e.g., English word 'are' has to be written as \( \text{ରା ଅ} \)) which is against grammatical rules of the Ahom language. It is, therefore, considered that modification of some of the grammatical rules in the use of consonant sign has to be made. But if done so, the original Ahom character shall be lost, and, if not, modernisation to compete with other modern languages shall be hampered. The Ahoms, therefore, are in two horns of dilemma at present.

(4) **Script**: "In Northern Thailand or Lanna before the 1932 coup d'état, two kinds of alphabet were in use. The first one develops form R. G. (King Rama Gamhen) and is named as *Fak Kham* (tamarind pod) alphabet (T.P.), because the characters are elongated. The second one is derived from Mon and is called Thai Yuan alphabet (T.Y.)" (Na Nagara n.d.: 1). Scholars are of the opinion that the Ahom script is the oldest Tai script and was adopted from the old *Mon* script. Prasert Na Nagara (n.d. 4) writes –

"The minority group in any locality usually would use the local alphabet, e.g., *Nan Chao* inscriptions were written in Chinese characters. Thai in Lanna was likely to use Mon alphabet. That in Lopburi should use Khom alphabet. Thai Ahom might use Assamese writing. Being not a ruling class the Thais would not find it necessary to force anybody to write Thai alphabet......... Codes said further that there are many Shan characters similar to Thai Ahom which should represent an older Thai writing. But some epigraphists think that the Thai Ahom was invented very recently.''

The above opinions of Prasert Na Nagara go out of acceptability, because:

(1) At the time of Ahom advent in and possession of the area of *Moung Dun Sun Kham* (now upper Assam proper), the Assamese language was not there. What was there were the non-Assamese tribal dialects of the Morans, the Barahis and the Chutiyas without having any script. The Assamese script, called the *Garhgaya lipi* was adopted by the Ahoms during the reign of Chow Fa Suo-Seng-Fa (1603-1649 A.D.) that too for writing Assamese and not Ahom. This is ascertained from the available numismatic evidence that coins were for the first time struck in Assamese language in 1648 A.D. by that king (Allan 1986).