

# 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 arbitrary and without any logical foundation; e.g. the words *dārā*, *kalatra* and *patnī*- all expressing the sense of wife are in masculine, neuter and feminine respectively (Murti 1984). In middle Indo-Aryan stage, i.e. in Prākṛit 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 Prākṛit 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**

*dcutā*, 'father'

**Feminine**

*mā*, 'mother'

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

Boro :

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

1.5.2 **Separate qualifying words** : In Assamese there are mainly two qualifying 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.

<i>matā mānuh</i> , 'male person,'	<i>māikī mānuh</i> , 'female person.'
<i>matā ma'h</i> , 'he buffalo'	<i>māikī ma'h</i> , 'she buffalo'
<i>matā chāgalī</i> , 'he goat'	<i>māikī chāgalī</i> , '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.

<i>purux kabi</i> , 'male poet'	<i>mahilā kabi</i> , 'female poet'
<i>purux rāṣṭrapatī</i> , 'male President'	<i>mahilā rāṣṭrapatī</i> , 'female President'

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

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

Example :

<i>mānuhṭo</i> , 'the man'	<i>mānuhzanī</i> , 'the woman'
<i>kukurāṭo</i> , 'the cock'	<i>kukurāzanī</i> , 'the hen'
<i>chāgalṭo</i> , 'he goat'	<i>chāgalīzanī</i> , '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 omitted 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.

<i>māwzi bundā</i> , 'male cat'	<i>māwzi bundi</i> , 'female cat'
<i>omā bundā</i> , 'male pig'	<i>omā bundi</i> , 'female pig'
<i>soymā bundā</i> , 'male dog'	<i>soymā bundi</i> , 'female dog'

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

<i>bormā phānthā</i> , 'he goat'	<i>bormā phānthi</i> , 'she goat'
<i>moy phānthā</i> , 'male deer'	<i>moy phānthi</i> , 'female deer'

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

<i>enzor bungā</i> , 'male rat'	<i>enzor bungi</i> , 'female rat'
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*mākhundā*, male elephant and *mākhundi*, female elephant, e.g.

<i>moyder mākhundā</i> , 'male elephant'	<i>moyder mākhundi</i> , 'female elephant'
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1.5.3 **Addition of suffixes** : Both the languages, Assamese and Boro, possess some suffixes which are generally added to the masculine noun bases to indicate feminine gender. These suffixes are called feminine suffixes.

1.5.3.1 Assamese possesses the following feminine suffixes : *ī*, *anī*, *nī*, and *rī*. Their usage is shown below:

ī.

(a) It is added after masculine forms ending in a consonant, e.g.

*nilāz*, 'shameless man'      *nilāzī*, 'shameless woman'

(b) It replaces masculine forms ending in *ā* and in some cases it raises the preceding vowel from low/middle to high, e.g.

*burhā/burā*, 'old man'      *burhī/burī*, 'old woman'

*pehā*, 'father's sister's husband'      *pehī*, 'father's younger sister'

*ghorā*, 'male horse'      *ghurī*, 'female horse'

*lengerā*, 'lame man'      *lengerī*, 'lame women'

(c) It replaces masculine forms used as an adjective ending in *ā* raising the preceding low vowel to high and there is a morpho-phonemic change of initial *a>a'* and *a>ā*, e.g.

*azalā*, 'simpleton'      *āza'ī*, 'female simpleton'

*pagalā*, 'mad man'      *pāga'ī*, 'mad woman'

*kaṇā*, 'blind man'      *kāṇī*, 'blind woman'

*ka'lā*, 'black man'      *ka'ī*, 'black woman'

*mugā*, 'light brown bull'      *mugī*, 'light brown cow'

*bagā*, 'fair man'      *ba'gī*, 'fair woman'

(d) In Assamese few adjectives take feminine suffix '*ī*' before the noun bases denoting feminine gender, e.g.

*rupah dekā*, 'beautiful  
young man'

*rupahī gābharu*, 'beautiful  
young woman'

**anī** : It is added after nouns ending in a consonant and vowel u, e.g.

*nāpiti*, 'male barber'

*nāpita'nī*, 'female barber'

*phukan*, 'officer bearing  
the title'

*phukananī*, 'wife of the  
officer'

*hindu*, 'male hindu'

*hinduwanī*, 'female hindu'

**-nī** : It is added after masculine forms ending in a, ā and i, e.g.

*grihastha*, 'house holder'

*grihasthanī*, 'wife of house  
holder'

*kalitā*, 'male of a kalita  
caste'

*kalitānī*, 'wife of a man  
belonging to  
kalita caste'

*nāti*, 'grandson'

*nātinī*, 'granddaughter'

It has two allomorphs : *inī* and *unī* . - *inī* is added after a form ending in a consonant and vowel ā, e.g.

*bāgh*, 'tiger'

*bāghinī*, 'tigress'

*mitā*, 'friend, a namesake'

*mitinī*, 'friend's wife'

**-unī** : is added after consonant and vowel ending bases with morpho-phonemic change, e.g.

*cor*, 'thief'

*curuṇī*, 'female thief'

*dhobā*, 'washerman'

*dhubunī*, 'washer women'

**-rī** : It is added after a few forms with morpho-phonemic change, e.g.

*kalā*, 'deaf man'

*kāla'rī*, 'deaf woman'

*dekā*, 'young man'

*dekerī*, 'young woman'

1.5.3.1.1 Masculine Suffix in Assamese: Actually there is no masculine suffix in Assamese. But in some derived words formative suffix ‘*ā*’ is used as masculine suffix. For example, ‘*kharā-nāk*’, meaning flat-nose; after this if we add ‘*ā*’, it becomes ‘*Kharā-nakā*’, meaning man who has flat nose. It may be changed to feminine gender after adding feminine Suffix ‘*i*’, e.g. ‘*kharā-nākī*’, meaning woman who has flat nose.

1.5.3.2 Feminine suffixes are very few in Boro. The most common suffix is ‘*i*’ which may change to ‘*e*’ particularly in addressive term. It may be mentioned that masculine forms in Boro are generally vowel *ā* ending, e.g.

<i>nāblā</i> , ‘flat nose man’	<i>nābli/nāble</i> , ‘flat nose woman’
<i>ludurgā</i> , ‘fat man’	<i>ludurgi</i> , ‘fat woman’
<i>alangā</i> , ‘pot bellied man’	<i>alangi</i> , ‘pot bellied women’
<i>udlā</i> , ‘wide-lipped man’	<i>udli</i> , ‘wide-lipped women’

Boro possesses both masculine and feminine indicating suffixes which are added to noun bases indicating birds, human beings, proper names of persons (Bhattacharya 1977). Such masculine-feminine indicating suffixes are: *-zālā/dlā* (mas.), *-zo* (fem); *-sron* (mas.) and *-sri* (fem), e.g.

<i>dāwzālā</i> , ‘cock’	<i>dāwzo</i> , ‘hen’
<i>haīsozālā</i> , ‘male duck’	<i>haīsozo</i> , ‘female duck’
<i>phārewzālā</i> , ‘male pigeon’	<i>phārewzo</i> , ‘female pigeon’
<i>phisāzālā/phisādlā</i> , ‘son’	<i>phisāzo</i> , ‘daughter’
<i>phisowzālā/phisowdlā</i> , ‘grandson’	<i>phisowzo</i> , ‘grand- daughter’

The feminine suffix *-zo* is sometimes added to kinship terms also like this -

<i>bihāw</i> , ‘father-in-law’	<i>bikhumzo</i> , ‘mother-in-law’
<i>bizāmādoy</i> , ‘son-in-law’	<i>bihāmzo</i> , ‘daughter-in-law’

The masculine-feminine indicating suffix-sron and -sri are added to a limited number of noun bases denoting names of man and woman which are so common in the Boro society. Masculine suffix -sron has an alternant form as rām added to a few proper names, e.g.

<i>embusron</i> , ‘male frog’	<i>embusri</i> , ‘female frog’
<i>ruphārām</i> , ‘male proper name’	<i>ruphāsri</i> , ‘female proper name’
<i>dudurām</i> , ‘male proper name’	<i>dudusri</i> , ‘female proper name’

A limited number of noun bases denoting names of gods and goddess take - brāy as masculine suffix and - bri as feminine suffix, though these suffixes are derived from free noun bases, e.g. brāy/borāy ‘oldman’, buri/bri ‘old woman’; brāy/borāy is added after the name of god, e.g. bāthow-brāy ‘Supreme Boro God’, and *huri/bri* is added after the name of Goddess, e.g. *bullibri* ‘Goddess Bully’; *monsinsinbrāy* ‘Father of human beings’, i.e. ‘deity’; māy nāwbri, ‘Goddess of harvests i.e. Lakshmi/Lakhimi’ (Boro 1980).

1.6 There are some nouns in Assamese which always belong to feminine gender; they have no masculine forms in opposition. For example, *xipinī*, ‘woman skilled in weaving’, *dāwa’nī*, ‘a reaper woman’ and *nāma’tī*, ‘woman skilled in singing songs’. The sex of a few words like *sakhi*, ‘friend’ and *rāndha’ni*, ‘cook’ can be known only from the context. In writing to denote the feminine these are written with a long *ī*. Some of the third personal pronouns have gender distinction in Assamese, e.g. *xi* ‘he’, *tāi* ‘she’, *i* ‘this man’, *ei* ‘this woman’. There are few nouns in Assamese which always belong to masculine gender, they have no feminine forms in opposition, e.g. *daṅguwa* ‘living alone, having neither wife nor children.’

Boro does not possess natural feminine gender like Assamese. In addition in Boro gender can not be changed by



using long ī instead of short i. Moreover third personal pronoun shows no gender distinction in Boro.

1.7 From the above analysis it is seen that there are much similarities and dissimilarities between the gender system of Assamese and Boro. Similarities prove that both the languages are influenced by each other. This has happened due to close contact of the two languages.

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