

The Impact of the Tai-Ahom Speech on the Assamese Language, an Indo-Aryan Speech of Assam, India.

**Satyendranarayan Goswami
Rabindranath Tagore Professor,
Gauhati University, Gauhati, Assam, India.**

Assamese is the lingua-franca throughout Assam and its close neighbouring areas of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as North-East Frontier Agency) Nagaland, border areas of Mizoram and Bhutan and also border areas of Bangladesh close to Assam and Meghalaya. To speak the truth Assamese or "Axamiya" is the only major Modern Indian Language, which is spoken very widely in the largest area of the easternmost part of India. There are some very strong grounds for such linguistic situation: Guwahati being the gateway to this region, has maintained a tremendous influence over the socio-cultural life throughout this area including educational, commercial and industrial spheres of life. Moreover, most of these seven small states were originally the parts of Assam and practically after independence of India these new states were bifurcated from Assam in different times and were given the status of statehood. But before that time they had already developed their linguistic situation as an integral part of Assam. Thus the population of these states had developed their habit of Assamese speaking, and thus, majority of the tribal population are now appeared to be bilingual.

The spoken Assamese in this way has developed in different places within various language speaking areas at the needs of those language speaking people, and so, such spoken varieties of Assamese are known as 'Nagamese' in Nagaland and 'Nefamese' in Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA). Assamese spoken by the Rabha community is such way termed as 'Rabhamese' and so on. Basically the common spoken tongue of most of these tribal people i. e., ethnic groups is broken Assamese. This is why Assamese is considered as lingua-franca of this region.

Assamese, Bengali, Maithili and Oriya are considered as major Pan-Magadhan languages as they are originated from one common source which was Magadhan Prakrit. This Mg.Pkt. had some dialectal areas and each of these dialects identified as separate distinct language after a few hundreds of years by embracing

large number of linguistic elements from the various speeches of different stocks of those areas. This way Assamese was developed from Kamarupi Apabhramsa in Kamarupa i.e., the then Assam during the 9th-10th century. At that time the present North-East Bengal and a large area of the eastern part of the present Bangladesh were the part of Assam; then the entire territory was known as Kamarupa Kingdom. But later on, politically this whole territory took a different shape and the present socio-political picture is entirely different while linguistically Assam and its neighbouring states have still maintained the past heritage and traditions by keeping the Assamese language as their common medium of conversation in a vast area. Assamese has also maintained its richness in a magnificent way.

The language shows much peculiarities in various ways, which are considered as the result of the impact of many tongues spoken by different ethnic groups lived in this area. This entire area covering 183,759 sq. km. in this easternmost part of India is the home of some sino-Tibetan group of languages of which some belong to Sino-Tai and some to Tibeto-Burman. Many of these languages speaking population have lost their own tongues due to very number of such population and constant i.e., close contact with the Assamese speaking advanced population. Moreover in their day to day life they had to depend in various ways on the Assamese speaking people as these ethnic small groups used to live from the remote past forming some small islands of two or three villages within the Assamese speaking areas. This way many of them had to adopt Assamese for their survival-that their socio-cultural need. At the same time these speeches, which were either lost or on the way to lose importance as speech have also contributed towards Assamese some linguistic elements. These tongues mostly have contributed a large number of vocabularies, of which many are related with the place names, river names, etc. Similarly Assamese has developed some peculiarities in its phonology and morphology besides incorporating vocabularies from these representatives of non-Aryan languages. Thus Assamese has taken some linguistic elements from the Tai language through the Tai speaking Ahom community who identified fully with the local population as Assamese.

The Ahoms are originally the descendants of the Mungman and migrated to Assam through the Pitkai Gills in batches during 12th -13th century and they founded a kingdom here in Upper Assam i.e., easternmost part of the Brahmaputra Valley. In course of time they expanded the boundary of their kingdom towards west and

ruled over the entire valley of Assam during 1228-1826. These Tai/Thai speaking people were known as Ahoms who had to accept the local widely speaking popular language Assamese for all purposes for their survival. Thus Assamese got the status of the Royal language. The Ahoms that way merged with the Assamese speaking people like many other ethnic groups of the area and identified as Assamese at their own initiative. Thus the Ahoms become a community within the Assamese population. They introduced inter-marriage and most of the womenfolk were originally non-Ahoms and they played a great role in taking the new shape of the socio-cultural behaviour of the Ahoms. Ahoms were originally Buddhist in religion, but in course of time due to social pressures perhaps from their family members they had to accept the Hinduism, giving up their own faith. they were small minority and they had to keep harmony in their kingdom. Hence they try to please their subjects by assimilating in different ways with them in socio-cultural level. The Ahoms thus lost their language, own religion and many other own customs and traditions, but on the other hand enriched the local people i.e., Assamese, who have already combined many ethnic groups and formed one nation and enrich the language by incorporating linguistic elements from their tongues. These Tai speaking Ahoms were also like such group of people and they had also enriched the Assamese language mainly in two ways: linguistically and culturally. The Tai-Ahom impact on Assamese language is considered as an important factor in the development of Assamese. The paper deals with only this aspect here.

Linguistically both Assamese and Ahom, a dialect of the Tai language belong to two different linguistic stocks. Assamese develops from Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European family of languages while Ahom develops from the Sino Tai branch of Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Both are originated from distinct groups, but Ahom, a small group of Tai speaking population settled down in Assam in a small minority and originally it was a small island within Assamese speaking area. Tai spoken by the Ahoms was actually the eastern variety of the language, but due to close contact with the Assamese speakers and many other reasons in course of time their speech has developed some differences with the standard Tai and such differences appear as dialectal. All these are the result of various influences of the local languages. This way ultimately the Tai speech of the Ahoms was totally lost as a medium of conversation. It was replaced by the Assamese language. But their own

intonation and Assamese speaking habits brought certain peculiarities in articulation of Assamese phonemes which ultimately brought some changes to the Assamese phonology.

Assamese does not retain all phonemes developed from Sanskrit like other Pan-Magadhan languages. Assamese does not possess retroflex; both dental and retroflex merged together into one e.g., alveolar. In early Assamese we have observed both these two types of phonemes in writings, but after the 14th century onwards we have observed lots of confusion of the writers in using these phonemes, and later on, alveolar replaced them. Ahom or Tai Ahom does not possess retroflex and dental phonemes. Other allied speeches, such as Aiton, Phake, Khanti also do not possess these two phonemes; all are having only alveolar. Assamese for the close contact with the Tai speaking people has developed the habit of articulating alveolar in place of retroflex and dental phonemes while other Magadhan languages, such as, Bengali, Oriya and Maithili possess retroflex and dental phonemes because they do not have such contact with any language which have only alveolar. Of course, the Boro language also does not have retroflex and Assam is the chief home of the Boro language. But Boro influence in articulation of Assamese phonemes is not considered very powerful or effective like Ahom. During Boro-Kachari's Rule Assamese possessed retroflex, we got it in the writings during those days. Boros could maintain their differences with the Assamese speaking people, and they have retained their tongue till now, while Ahoms have lost their separate identity both linguistically and culturally, and they have lost their tongue also. They have totally merged with the Assamese speaking population. Their mother tongue is Assamese and Ahoms are no longer Tai, they are the protectors of the Assamese language. So their influences or impact on Assamese is more reliable and convincing.

Assamese does not possess voiced fricatives i.e., sibilants which appear in Sanskrit as retroflex, palatal and dental / s s s / respectively. Ahom does not possess any of them. In Assamese sibilant is articulated as voiceless alveolar fricative, and very often it becomes glottal fricative /h/. Most of the Ahom people articulate it as glottal fricative. This articulation of voiceless alveolar fricative as glotal fricative is considered as the impact of the Ahom's language. Even to-day also in thickly populated Ahom villages they articulate it like glottal fricative e.g.;

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| axsa | 'truth' | as hasa |
| goxai | 'goswami' | as gohai |
| xap | 'snake' | as hap |

as a result Assamese has accepted the word dah 'ten' besides dax. xeh 'finish' beside xex, lah bilah 'luxury' besides lah bilas, etc. So the simplification of sibilants as voiceless fricative is the result of Ahom (Tai) impact.

Another prominent impact is irregular nasalization of vowels. Regular nasalization, spontaneous nasalization and denasalization of vowels are considered as result of the evolution process of the Assamese language while profuse nasalization, irregular or spontaneous are considered as result of Tai i.e.; impact e.g.; aha/aha 'please come', kos kos 'a caste; kahi/kahi 'dish', etc.

In Ahom numerals always take place in between noun and definitives. e.g.; dausidun=star eight (only) i.e; 8 stars

raunsip lan=house 10 only i.e; 10 houses
khaipet phon=egg 5 only i.e ; 5 eggs etc.

Similarly Assamese has also developed this type of expression as gotatinek tamol 'piece 3 nut 'i.e; three nuts,

kitapkeikhan 'book some piece' i.e; some books. This is a clear Tai (Ahom) influence over Assamese speech.

Another important impact of Tai (Ahom) in Assamese is observed in its gender distinction. Gender is not grammatical in Assamese, where feminine markers are -i, -ni, -ani, etc. and these are suffixed to the noun to mean feminine gender. Besides that another system of gender distinction is also developed in Assamese like Ahom speech. Here a word denoting 'female' or 'male' is used to the noun as adjective. It appears as marker (male/female) + noun while in Ahom noun + marker (male/female).eg;

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| Ahom i.e., | luk chai | 'child male' i.e; boy |
| Tai | luk yin | 'child female' i.e; girl |
| Assamese: | mata lara | 'male boy' i.e; boy |
| | maiki lara | 'female boy' i.e; girl |
| | mata para | 'male pigeon' also paira |
| | maiki para | 'female pigeon' also pairi / pari |
| | mata xap | 'male snake' |
| | maiki xap | 'female snake', etc. |

The verb system in Assamese is very simple like other non-Aryan languages of this area. In this aspect

we observe more common feature with all these languages, and therefore it is difficult to say about the Ahom influence on Assamese. Assamese negative verbs show some identity with the verbs of Ahom, where ma- 'no-not' is the negative particle, and it is used as prefix to the verb to mean negation like Assamese. In other allied languages of Assamese negative particle never attached to the verb as prefix or suffix. So it is also considered as an impact of the Ahom speech. In comparison to other Magadhan languages Assamese possesses quite a large number of definitive post-position, which is a special characteristic of Tibeto-Burman and Sino Tai languages. Here also Ahom influence is observed for having such tendency to a great extent. But Ahom or Tai loan is very limited; only a plural marker in collective sense 'chak' is used in Assamese as jak 'hord/folk'e.g;

As. caraijak 'hoard of birds'
larajak 'boyfolk'. etc.

Regarding vocabulary we observed quite a different impact of the Ahom speech. Assamese has incorporated many Tai word which are elaborated below:-

- (a) The Ahom words without any change used in Assamese personal names, such as, cukafa, cuteofa, cutamfa, cucinfa, cukhrungfa, etc.
- (b) Ahom place names used in Assamese :- toa-kak, ti-pam, ti-rap, ti-man, ti-ru, ti-lai, nam-ti, pat-kai, ban-tap, ban-tung, ban-ruk, ma-kum, ru-kang, ban-lung, khum-tain etc.
- (c) River names taken from Ahom:-nam-ti, nam-kiu, nam-cai, nam-cang, nam-jing, nam-ti, nam-rup, nam-pang, etc.
- (d) Some Ahom words used to mean place, house materials, other utensils:-maidam, cung, tifa, tangkak; henglang khukang, tup, cang, mi cang; mit, fak, hengdang, taokin, henglang, etc.
- (e) Ahom words used in naming sons in serial numbers in Assamese:-lai 'eldest/main/first', langi 'second', lacam 'third', langu 'fifth', lacai 'fourth', lacit 'seventh', lapet 'eighth', lakau 'ninth'.
- (f) A few Ahom dresses and such words are also used in Assamese: -kum min, kun kha, fa kham, etc.
- (g) Ahom relation words used to address people:- puthao, athao, anai, pucao, micao, apao, puman, etc.
- (h) Some Ahom surnames developed from Ahom Royal official cadres :- khun bao, fukan, cangmai,

caodang barua, etc.

- (i) Ahom words used in Assamese with some phonetic changes:-

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| nam gang | from | Ahom word nam teng, |
| nam rup | | Ahom word nam ruk, |
| ban kek | | Ahom word bang kek, |
| baruk | | Ahom word ban ruk, |
| lahan | | Ahom word lan han, |
| laluk | | Ahom word la ruk, etc. |

- (j) Some hybrids i.e, Assamese and Ahom words:-
bar barua, bar fukan, barcau, laikhuta,
barmi-cau, dampuja, etc.

- (k) Some Ahom words used in Assamese frequently,
such as

khang 'a wicket basket',
takali 'click with tongue against plate'
pang 'to plan',
pokha 'to sprung',
kareng 'a palace with araised plateform',
pung 'water-hole',
phang 'false statment / trick',
phau 'nothing',
ban (bati) 'cup like pot',
jeka 'damp',
jin 'quite',
dong 'puddle',
thonga 'wallef', etc.

This way the Assamese language shows quite a number of vocables incorporated from Ahom speech. Kakati has rightly stated: 'A language may cease to be spoken but it may leave traces of its former vitality in the shape of a large number of loan supplied to the current language of the province.' Tha was really happened with the Tai-speaking Ahom population of Assam.

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