Chapter VI
Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this work was to understand the complex history of Assamese language in the background of colonialism. This study points out that the Assamese language that has emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was a result of complex social history of colonial Assam. Colonial institutions and knowledge as its by-product played an important role in the making of the modern Assamese vernacular. In the context of the Assamese language, missionaries were closely linked with other institutions of colonial modernization.

6.2 Choice of a language

A pre-colonial homogenous Assamese society did not really exist. It was roughly divided in several sub-parts which are sometimes overlapped with each other. Several large and small political territories of the province were at loggerheads at most of the time and it prevented from creating a homogenous Assamese
community. Colonial administration, by putting a large territory as one political unit paved the possibility of making a nation out of different tribes and communities. The choice of language played a major role in this nation making process. After almost a half decade of insecurity, the Assamese vernacular emerged as a major apparatus for the nationalists in the late nineteenth century.

The choice of language for the few Assamese pre-colonial aristocrat families conversant with the outer world was dominated by different non-linguistic features such as their location and their connection. It is interesting to note that many prominent writers of early colonial Assam were initially based at Hadirachaki, the border between Assam and Bengal for a substantial period. Hence they were well equipped to use the Bengali language as the medium of their writings. Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, as the eldest son, learnt Sanskrit and Bengali because he was not allowed to learn foreign languages like English or Persian. His younger brother Jajnaram Khargharia Phukan was free from those restrictions and therefore he learnt Persian and English along with Bengali and Sanskrit. Thus it was quite natural that both of them wrote in Bengali. Besides the famous *Assam Buranji*, Haliram wrote extensively in *Samachar*.
Chandrika and Samachar Darpan, two of the most prominent Bengali periodicals of that era (Tamuli:1987:.34). His brother Jajnaram and contemporary Joduram Dekabarua also wrote in those periodicals (ibid:35).

In the case of Assam, the interplay of an almost anarchical situation with a colonial regime made the language scene more complex. Till the middle of the nineteenth century, identification with the Assamese language did not happen to Assamese aristocracy and intelligentsia. Either they were more concerned for making their place in Bengali public domain as Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan and Jagnaram Khargharia Phukan or it might be such that they were more determined to be a part of the power play, be it the colonial or pre-colonial regime as in the case of Maniram Dewan. They did not bother about the official installation of another language despite the presence of their own vernacular. Moreover, Joduram Dekabarua compiled a Bengali to Assamese dictionary and presented it to a colonial official. It may have implied that despite being aware of the presence of a local language, it was not considered as a suitable medium for literature. Joduram’s project may be classified along the same line of Haliram who wrote Asam Buranj or the History of Assam for the benefit of the colonizers. Or it was in the same line of
Ruchinath Kamrupi who compiled a manuscript of a Sanskrit-Asami-Kamrupi vocabulary and presented it to a colonial officer in 1810. As it never got published, it may be observed that this manuscript was compiled for the benefit of the Company officers who were trying to be familiar with the region. Joduram too tried to help the colonial officers to officiate in the Bengali language with the knowledge of Assamese language. It may also be noticed that Joduram did not compile it for local or native consumption as he did not take any initiative to publish it. Significantly, he presented the manuscript to a colonial officer rather than the missionaries who had the means as well as interest in printing Assamese books. It should be noted here that til Anandaram started writing in Assamese, most of these aristocrats shunned Assamese language as the medium of writing. On the other hand, common people's feeling towards the Assamese language was indifferent in the initial colonial phase. They were much more occupied with more important problems of adjusting to a new regime than paying attention to the language problem.

6.3 The colonial intervention

One of the most striking facts was how little thought the colonial government as an institution had ever expressed for the role of
language in communication. They seemed to consider language as a neutral tool which had nothing to do with the specific society and culture it represented. In a multicultural society, the linguistic situation should be carefully handled to avoid the negative stereotyping and resentment. That consideration was not visible in the nineteenth century Assam. Bengali officials were packed off to Assam without preparing them to communicate to non-Bengali speakers. As the local Assamese speakers were concerned, nothing was done to prepare them to work with or under the non-speakers of the language. Predictably, the result was a fair amount of negativity between Assamese and Bengali communities.

Colonial institutions played a major role in the shaping of the Assamese language in the nineteenth century. The decision to declare Bengali as the official language of Assam and the setting up of a missionary station in Eastern Assam actually expedited the modernization and standardization of the Assamese language. After deciding that the Assamese language would be their medium of press, the missionaries tried their best to establish it as a separate and official language. It also created a public platform for the Assamese people in their mouthpiece Orunodoi. It is also true that their endeavour paved the way for the movement for establishing
Assamese as the official language. However, the missionary impact on the language was not a lasting one. Their language policy did not get much support from most of the Assamese litterateur and their language did not have any major impact in the standard Assamese by the end of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, Orunodoi was not acknowledged as a source of inspiration for the later writers. In his autobiography, Lakshminath Bezbaroa did not even mention it when he compared the language forms used by the newspapers and magazines of contemporary Assam (Hazari: 1988: 39).

6.4 Standardization of the vernacular

Standardization or evolution of a language is generally considered to be a natural process. The evolution of the Assamese language in the course of one hundred years of colonialism cannot be said a natural one. Colonialism, with the help of different apparatus, shaped the language as a ‘standard’ one. After standardization, the language moved away from the different forms that had existed earlier.

Making a modern vernacular fit for printing took a longer time in the cases of other Indian languages. For example, Marathi and
Bengali took a much longer period to become a standard language based on the spoken forms. However, the Assamese language form that the missionaries used for their publications was projected as the standard form from the very beginning of the missionary publications. It was almost twenty years after that it was realized that the language could be shaped differently.

The amusing part of the social history of the Assamese language of the nineteenth century was that the standard of the vernacular was always evaluated with a comparison to another language, Sanskrit in the earlier era and then Bengali in the later part of the century. At the initial phase of the making of the language as the modern vernacular, the missionaries tried to distance the language from Sanskrit. Based on the dialect of Sivasagar, the Assamese used by the missionary school created a new orthography for the language. This approach was codified by the literature and language tools created by them. After some years, this approach was confronted by Sanskrit reliant intellectuals who felt that the orthography of Assamese should be Sanskrit-oriented because the latter was the source language. Led by Hemchandra Barua, this group advocated for an Assamese language which would be a mixture of *tatsama* and *tadbhava* words as well as local
words. Interestingly, Gunabhiram Barua, a product of missionary endeavour, later turned out to be a staunch supporter of Sanskrit-leaning Assamese. Later writers of that century followed either of them in their writings. In his autobiography, Gohainborooah narrated the interesting story of making a compromise by incorporating features from both the Gunabhiram school and the Hemchandra school (Gohainborooah: 1987: 31-32).

But after the restoration of Assamese, the purity or the dignity of Assamese was generally measured against the influence or use of Bengali language. Perhaps, the after effect of the declaration in both the provinces created the love-hate relationship between the two speech-communities. Assamese language suddenly became excessively self-conscious. A text got criticized not only on it theme or form, but on the use of Bengali words and phrases. The tendency was to establish the Assamese language as a distinct one free from any possible Bengali influence. Right from Gunabhiram Barua to Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Hemchandra Goswami, the Assamese litterateurs tried to position Assamese against Bengali. Bezbaroa and Gohainborooah, arch-rival litterateurs of that period, carried their criticism on each other especially on the possible influence of Bengali language in their writings.
The Assam administration also engaged in a serious debate about the features that the language should have or should have not. After restoration of Assamese as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam, writing text-books in Assamese became a sheer necessity. At that point, apart from the mission press books, rarely any Assamese text-books was written. Bengali text-books were circulated in many schools for paucity of suitable Assamese books. To encourage production of text-books, government took several steps such as establishing Assam School Book Society and giving cash incentive to the best text-book of the year. Most of the contemporary major writers devoted their energy in writing textbooks for school as they felt that the availability of good textbooks could only ensure the progress of education in Assam. Padmanath described text books as the foundation of national literature (Gohainborooah: 1987: 51).

6.5 Language as an identity marker

During the process of claiming the position of official language, the Assamese language also became an identity marker for the emerging 'homogenous' Assamese society. With the help of a rich
heritage of pre-colonial literature and folklore coming into print form, the language was identified as the language of Assam and its people. The shaping of the language as a modern vernacular also helped creating a modern literature. The equation with the Bengali language and Bengali people consolidated the status of Assamese as the national language of the Assamese people. The fact that Bengali was used as the medium in many schools even after twenty years of declaring Assamese as the official language in 1873 aggravated the situation. As a reaction, in the 1890s Assamese was allowed as the only vernacular in a Kohima school where most of the students were non-Assamese speakers (Gohinborooah: 1987: 58-59). It might be so that it was the beginning of Assamese language chauvinism which was started as a counter reaction of Bengali expansionism that wanted to include the Assamese language in its fold. The Assamese community, throughout the nineteenth century, tried to establish standard culture and language for the entire community. In this process, the diverse elements of culture and language forms of the province were either ignored or neglected.

Emergence of new Assamese intelligentsia based in Kolkata was one of the most important features of the social history of the
language in the nineteenth century. As the shaping of the language was not natural one, it was quite evident that this group played the most crucial role of making the language as the career of modern thought. They engaged in serious debates about the language in different public spheres in both Assamese and Bengali. For example, the 1887 debate between Bolinarayan Bora and Mathuramohan Barua may be mentioned here (Sarma: 1980: 104-112). Many of these intellectuals were attached to the cause of the development of the Assamese language. For example, Hemchandra Goswami, even after joining government service, dedicated enough time for the upliftment of the Assamese language from publishing the *Hemkosh*, the dictionary compiled by Hemchandra Barua, after his death to compile a three volume anthology *Asamiya Sahityar Caneki*. He also played a pivotal role in establishing Assamese as the vernacular in the schools of Goalpara district. However, there was an ambiguity in their attitude towards the Assamese language. Though in public life they invariably used Assamese, it may be observed that most of them used English in their private correspondence. A parallel may be drawn with a similar situation in 1855 when Purnananda Deka Borua opposed the practice of using Bengali as a medium for correspondent among Assamese elites (Saikia: 2002: 132-33). It may be also mentioned that Anandaram
Dhekiyal Phukan used Bengali, Sanskrit, English and Hindi at just before his death in 1859 (Neog: 1983: .88).

6.6 Assamese in the age of nationalism and ethnonationalism

Assamese entered the twentieth century with a more or less standardized form. It came down to be identified as a symbol of ‘Assameseness’. It became a vibrant language as more and more writers had started to write in Assamese and new magazines and newspapers were getting launched. The study of the language had started with the colonial project of Grierson (1903-28), which legitimized Assamese claim of being an important part of the Indo-Aryan linage, became the most important reference point for the latter linguists of the region. However the suppression of other dialects of Assamese led to the division of Assamese litterateurs along the line of their dialects. It was culminated in the publication of the Assam Bandhav in the second decade. It was patronized by the intellectuals from Lower Assam and it encouraged the use of vocabulary and expressions from the dialect of Kamrup. This feud took a bitter turn when Asam Sahitya Sabha refused to include words from Lower Assam dialects in the Chandrakanta Abhidhan. This attitude changed when Banikanta Kakati recognized different
dialects as an integral part of Assamese in his doctoral thesis Assamese: Its Formation and Development which got published in 1941. The study of the dialects of Assamese and other language forms of the state has started subsequently in the universities of the state. However, the language was still at the centre of different social as well as political equations of the state. The emergence of ethnocentric identity formation project of different communities of the region influenced the status and impact of the Assamese language in the late twentieth century.