Chapter II
Colonial Enterprise: Predicament of a Language

2.1 Introduction

The appropriation of vernaculars and knowledge into frameworks of western rationality and the subsequent introduction of English and colonial education were chronologically related within the transformative design of the colonial power. However, these did not follow a uniform pattern throughout the sub-continent. There were significant differences in the duration and sequence of initiatives by at least a quarter of a century. The establishment of British power at a relatively later date in western India meant the timing of the orientalist and education projects overlapped to significant extent in that region (Naregal: 2001). In Assam, the educational initiatives preceded to the process of stabilization and standardization of modern Assamese vernacular in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The administrative and education policy, especially regarding decisions on the medium of administration and instruction,
had long term implications as it affected the communicative capabilities and choices before the intelligentsia of the region.

The process of decay and stabilization of the Assamese language was the result of interplay between a few linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is well known that colonial rule was able to alter textual norms, networks of patronage and dissemination, and the ways the Assamese people described and assessed their world. Moreover, it altered the notions of political space, subjectiveness, and collective identities of the sub-continent, displacing and appropriating the existing notions. And it had been long established that language is a critical arena for the operation of colonial power (Cohn: 1985). Fabian has showed that colonial codification, patronage and appropriation of Swahili in Belgian-controlled Congo was crucial for maintaining colonial control over the indigenous workforce needed to exploit Congo’s natural resources (Fabian: 1966). Anderson stresses on the impact of language and print capital on the making of the political imagination in different societies (Anderson: 1991).
In India too, the colonial government used the Indian languages for the consolidation of their knowledge about the country and command over the people of the sub-continent. Bayly illustrates that access to information rested on the company officials' linguistic competence in Sanskrit, Persian and regional vernaculars (Bayly: 1996). East India company officials, therefore, had to learn, codify and then teach Indian languages in a systematic way. These languages were taught at colonial institutions in both of India and England to the aspiring colonial officials in eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was mandatory for the officials to have competence in minimum one Indian language. Such practices helped colonial officials gain the 'command of language' that was crucial for the consolidation of power in India (Cohn:1992: 30).

Hence, an examination of colonial language policy can help to elucidate on colonial power structure and their larger aim at political control. This chapter will explore three interrelated themes in the linguistic scenario of colonial Assam by examining colonial language policy adopted in the province in the nineteenth century. These themes are: (a) the relationship between language and colonial governance; (b) the tension between colonial administrative power with the missionaries and local intelligentsia; and (c) the limits of
colonial power. These themes reveal specific aspects of colonial enterprise and elucidate important dimensions of Assam’s nineteenth century social history, especially linguistic history.

Language played a crucial role in realizing the governmental ideal about the legal and just rule in the early nineteenth century. The colonial officials across India, from the turn of the century, insisted that Indians should be governed in the languages that were easily understood by them. Translating into Persian everything told by the natives in their own languages at the colonial court was a tedious and time consuming process. It also hampered the direct communication between the ruler and the ruled which was against the ideal of just governance. This changing attitude can be located in the Act No. 29 of 1837, which prescribed provincial level governance through vernacular languages. From the turn of 1837, therefore, the predominant vernacular of the province was used as the official language at provincial level administration.

The history of the company’s language policy in Assam, however, presents a counter-example of the general trend of the company which propagated the use of local vernacular at least for
the local administration. Colonial language policy in Assam instituted Bengali as the official language of the province rather than Assamese, the most predominant vernacular of the region. This was against the imperial language policy and the political ideology that stressed the idea of just and legitimate colonial governance.

A careful examination of the language policy adopted in early nineteenth century Assam points to some astonishing phenomena in both cultural and social milieu. When the colonial administration instituted an unfamiliar official language in Assam, it affected the Assamese language and Assamese society in several ways. It led to the predicament of the Assamese language at the initial phase. However, the cultural production, from print culture to colloquial language, thrived through the period of displacement of Assamese which is a pointer to the limitation of colonial authority.

2.2 Colonial language policy of India

After the East India Company began to administer Indian territories politically, they did not change their predecessors’ language policy abruptly. They continued with Persian at the provincial level.
administration though English was used for highest level administration. This policy continued till the 1830s when vernaculars of the provinces replaced Persian as the official languages at the provincial level. This critical shift in colonial language policy was not altogether surprising, given the nature of the early nineteenth century colonial discourse on vernacular languages (Mir: 2006:399). However, as early as 1750, the Company had exhorted its employees “not only to learn the Persick but also the other languages of the country” (Blackburn: 2003:91). In an 1802 letter to India’s Governor General, the court of the Directors of the Company hinted about the shift in the language policy and the growing importance of vernacular languages:

An intimate acquaintance with the Languages of the Country, and as competent [a]knowledge of the Laws and Regulations ... are in our opinion most essential qualifications, and indeed indispensable for the conduct of public business in every department of our Government. Of three languages current on the Bengal side of India the Persian and the Hindostanny are necessary for the transaction of business in all offices; with respect to he Bengalese or provincial Language ...we conceive that the knowledge of it will be found indispensibly [sic] requisite to the provincial Collectors; nor less to the Civil Judges.¹
This letter was an indicator of the changing attitude of the Company's policy makers towards the role of language in the governance of the colony. The Court acknowledged the utility of the existing language policy in which Persian was the official language of courts and revenue proceedings and Hindustani or Urdu was the widely used medium of communication between the Europeans and the natives. Besides these two languages, the Court stressed on the importance of the "languages of the country". It also suggested that proficiency in vernacular languages would be a pre-requisite for office. The letter reiterated the Company's early nineteenth century language policy that maintained Persian as the official language; Hindustani as a medium of communication and vernacular languages, though they did not have any official role, were considered to be crucial for colonial governance. The same sentiment was echoed from the India based Company officials too. Some officers from different provinces emphasized vernacular languages as an important tool for effective and just governance. For example, in an 1805 public notice, officials at Fort St. George declared that the Company would not "appoint any Civil Servant to the situation of Judge or Collector, who shall not be found to have an adequate degree of proficiency in one of the following native
languages—viz. the Tamil, the Telinga [sic], the Canarese [sic], or the language of the province of Malabar. In the same letter, the officials reiterated the importance of local vernacular over Persian or Hindustani:

We attached considerable importance to the study of Hindoostanee & Persian Languages. But highly meritorious as we should ... consider the acquirement of them; we did not deem them so absolutely necessary as the vernacular languages of the Country.

From the beginning of nineteenth century, the aspiring British civil servants, fresh from England, were required to learn Indian languages. Three Colleges were set up during the first two decades for language teaching, two in India and one in England. In 1800, the College of Fort William was set up at Calcutta and after studying one or more Indian Classical or modern vernacular for three years in the college, the new recruits were sent to their posts in one of the three Presidencies. The second such College was the East India College at Haileybury in England where for sometime the first two years of language and other administrative training were held for the aspiring civil servants. The scheme was changed again and the new recruits selected for posts in Madras Presidency were sent directly to Madras for their final year training which led to the establishment of
the College of Fort St. George in 1812. This College was set up with the purpose of redirecting the language learning away from the classical languages. Nonetheless, the acquisition of South Indian vernaculars by civil servants were not up to marks. In 1812, the ‘Committee for the Improvement of the Study of the Native Languages by the Junior Civil Servants’, set up to examine junior civil servants in the native languages reported only “two instances of uncommon proficiency in the Tenegu[sic.] and Tamil, the study of which is... much more important than of any other of the native languages”.\(^5\) Trautmann explains that most of the new recruits had started on Persian and Hindustani at Haileybury and they tended to continue with those languages in Madras though they were of limited use in south India (Trautman: 2006: 48-49). The Fort St. George officials offered two solutions: the study of south Indian languages should be promoted at Haileybury and the existing system of financially rewarding the linguistic competence should be re-oriented to the competence of south Indian vernaculars.\(^6\) This re-orientation was built into college regulations, which stipulated that civil servants must first pass an examination in Tamil, Telegu, Kannada or Malayalam before being able to get a further financial award for the study of Sanskrit, Persian, Hindustani or Arabic. Therefore, 'the
College at Fort St. George, unlike Fort William, gave preference to the study of Indian vernaculars. Though the goal was to redirect the study away from the study of Indian classical languages, the college explained that “it was not the aim to neglect them altogether” since these languages were used in legal and revenue proceedings (Blackburn: 2003: 91). Despite the projected governmental importance of Indian vernaculars, official language policy remained unchanged till the 1830s. Meanwhile, the use of vernaculars was additional to the existing language policy and it depended on the proficiency level of the officials in the local vernacular.

By the 1830s, a shift in the colonial attitude towards language policy was distinctly visible. Persian had been finally officially abandoned in Bombay and Madras presidencies by 1832. In Madras, the language policy was changed after a prolonged debate grounded both in India and England. This debate highlighted the changed ideals of the nature of just governance, honest administration and efficiency. In an 1835 letter, the Court of Directors wrote to the Bengal judicial department about the impending abandonment of Persian in judicial proceedings as it “forms a barrier between the European functionaries and the
Natives: it multiplies facilities for dishonest practices on the part of the Native Officers attached to our courts [and it] embarrasses the transaction of every description of the business." This sentiment was echoed in an 1836 minute by the Governor General Auckland where he noted that Persian was not a colloquial language in any part of Company territory. Hence, to retain it as the language of the court was to keep "the bulk of people in ignorance of the judicial proceedings which they may hear or to which they may be parties".8 The obvious remedy was to abolish Persian in the Bengal Presidency, where it was still the official language of the courts and revenue proceedings. The decision about the replacement was taken after getting the opinions of the European officers of the presidency. Most of the officers strongly opposed replacing Persian with the predominant vernaculars of the presidency, namely, Bengali, Oriya and Hindustani. They charged that those vernacular languages were not standardized and they were 'uncouth', barren and 'unadapted' to the conduct of judicial proceedings (Mir: 2006:43). Some of the officials felt that finding enough officers competent in local vernaculars to run the business of the courts would be impossible. Despite opposition from most of the officers
that vernaculars were ill-suited for administration, a resolution was passed on the fourth of September, 1837, which declared:

...it to be just and reasonable that those Judicial and Fiscal Proceedings on which the dearest interest of the Indian people depend should be conducted in a language which they understand...[He] is therefore disposed... to substitute the Vernacular languages of the country for the Persian in legal proceedings and in proceedings relating to the revenue.\textsuperscript{9}

The resolution was passed in November as Act No.XXIX of 1837 and Persian was officially replaced by Bengali, Oriya and Urdu or Hindustani in Bengal Presidency. However, it was an all India act and it set a precedent for future language policy throughout India. It ensured that from 1837 onwards, vernacular languages would be the medium of colonial governance except at the highest level (Mir: 2006:404).

The main factor behind the changed policy was attributed to the concern for just rule. However, Mir has suggested that financial matters also played a crucial role in this change. The Court of Directors believed that the changed language policy would eliminate the need of translation between vernacular languages and Persian and hence it would be financially expedient. Though the colonial
authority tried to downplay the fiscal matters by stating that it would be of a small degree, but official correspondences reflected a greater economic concern (Mir: 2006:404).

2.3 Language policy of colonial Assam

2.3.1 The language policy adopted in Assam did not follow the pan-Indian uniformity projected by the 1837 Act. The tensions between the notion of ideal rule and ground reality became clear in the changing language policy in nineteenth century colonial Assam. It also brought forward the issues colonial government had to handle during the thirty six years of linguistic instability such as the difference between a dialect and a language, the preference of one language over another; differences between speakers of different dialects, differences of opinions among the colonial officials about the choice between the native vernacular and the official language of the province, and a prolonged debate between the colonial government and the colonial missionaries and native intelligentsia.

The East India Company annexed Assam after the Yandabo treaty with the King of Burma in 1826. However, five districts of
Assam, namely Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur came under British occupation in 1825 itself when the East India Company had entered into Assam at the request of the Ahom king to fight away the Burmese invaders. By 1854, direct British rule was uniformly introduced and stabilized over the entire territory (Banerjee: 1992:123). Assam was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency and the colonial administration followed the same policy as the Bengal province. The Bengal Presidency authority was also responsible for choosing the language of administration and the medium of instruction in the province of Assam. One of the first responsibilities of the Company was to determine the language of provincial administration.

2.3.2 The language policy in colonial Assam experienced at least three changes during the colonial period. After annexation of Assam in 1826, several languages were used in the courts till the 1830s. Until 1837, when the Act No. 29 propagated a uniform language policy, the colonial administration used Persian and English language at different levels of administration. In a petition to A.J. Moffat Mills, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan noted that “for more than ten years after the annexation of the Province, the Assamese was
the language of the Courts" and it was also used "with great facility and convenience, and with universal satisfaction to the people" in other departments of public offices (Neog: 1977: 119). Official records from that period, to some extent, substantiated Dhekial Phukan’s claim about the use of Assamese in public offices (Bhuyan: 1990:2-3). But Assamese was not the official language as Anandaram claimed. Some other sources recorded that in April, 1831, the government replaced Persian with Bengali as the court language on the ground that it was very difficult and too costly to have replacement when a Persian Scribe was on leave or left the service (Barpujari:1980 :266). David Scott introduced Bengali also as the medium of the newly established schools in the Brahmaputra valley as “it differs but little from the language of Assam”.10 However, James Metthie, the collector of Guwahati, found in 1835, that the language taught was Sanskrit in schools in Darrang (Barpujari: 1992: 351). Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, on the other hand, believed that the introduction of Bengali as the court language had been taken on an even earlier date when the conquest of Assam became probable and Scott was stationed at Goalpara (Long: 1855: 170). The claim was supported by two documents dated as early as eleventh March, 1825 and cited by Henry
Hopkinson, commissioner of Assam who succeeded Jenkins in 1861, which showed that the administrative language of that period was Bengali. This policy was continued till 1837 when Persian was officially replaced with Bengali as the official language of the province.

According to the precedent set by Act 29, the colonial authority should have chosen Assamese. But it did not happen for the next three decades. Bengali was undoubtedly a vernacular language, hence it held the letter of the law, but it was primarily the vernacular of the adjoining Bengal, not of Assam. The choice, therefore, clearly contravened the spirit of Act 29. After much resentment from the Assamese intelligentsia and American Baptist Missionaries, Assamese was finally instituted as the official language of the courts and the medium of instruction in 1873.

What was the reason that motivated the colonial authority's choices of official language in Assam? Why was Assamese ignored though different colonial sources, as it documented below, had already identified Assamese as the language or dialect spoken by the majority of the province's inhabitants? Why was Bengali chosen
as the official administrative language and the medium of instruction? What were the consequences of this language policy in Assamese society? What does it reveal about the colonialism? How did the choice of official language in the nineteenth century colonial Assam affect the relations between two speech communities even today? Much were written and debated on these issues in the literary history of Assam\textsuperscript{12}. In fact this problem of displacement of Assamese language has occupied a central problematic in the academic as well as political rhetoric of the province.

2.3.3 Although in some parts of India colonial philology of this stage was something of a developed science, such knowledge was rudimentary in those areas which were recently brought under colonial control. However, the little linguistic information available to colonial officials at that moment already identified Assamese as the ‘spoken language’ or ‘dialect’ used by a majority of the inhabitants of the province. But it may also be noted that Assamese was conceptualized as a dialect or a corrupt version of Bengali which could influence the future language policy of the government. The term dialect, jargon or spoken language was almost always associated with the description of Assamese language by the
colonial writers of early nineteenth century. A serious discussion on Assamese language had been started by the missionaries in the third decade of the nineteenth century only. Earlier accounts on Assam generally covered political and geographical aspects of the province and there were only a few passing comments about the language of the province. British missionaries published Assamese books but did not consider Assamese as a major Eastern language.

However, the existence of Assamese language was acknowledged much before the annexation of Assam by colonial sources. It had started with the journals and accounts by colonial officials, written mainly for the benefit of Europeans interested in trade and commerce prospects in Assam. In 1824, East India Company's Surveyor General Captain Valentine Blacker wrote to Lord Amherst about Assam:

Its interesting situation between Hindustan and China, two names with which the civilized world has been long familiar, whilst it remains unknown, is a striking fact and leaves nothing to be wished, but the means and opportunity for exploring it. (Barua: 1970: ii)

But the comment seems to be slightly exaggerated; Assam was not an entirely unknown province for the colonial power in 1824. It was in fact associated with British trade since late eighteenth century.
The Company appointed an agent at Goalpara, then bordering Assam, on November 1, 1765 to participate in inland trade consisting mainly of salt, betel-nut and tobacco (Bhuyan: 1949:67). From that period, many Europeans came to Assam proper and a few of them prepared reports or accounts of Assam. Several of these accounts also documented about the language of the province.

John Peter Wade, who travelled to Assam as a medical practitioner with Captain Welsh in the last decade of eighteenth century in his *An Account of Assam*, written in the later part of the eighteenth century, mentioned that *buranjis* were written in two languages – *Ahom* and *Bakha* or *Bassa*, which was a dialect of Bengali. Francis B. Hamilton during his survey of Eastern India in the first decade of nineteenth century, collected materials partly from "several natives of Bengal, who, on different occasions visited Assam" and partly from natives of Assam, who were temporarily residing in Bengal after series of civil war. For Bucannon the main informant was a Bengali Brahmin, who was a family-member of the spiritual guide of the Ahom king. Being a Bengali himself with no knowledge of philology, he must had some confusion about Assamese and the Ahom language. Hamilton was convinced that
the 'Assamese' language was becoming extinct and it was being replaced by a dialect of Bengali (Hamilton: 1963:7). He also wrote that “a dialect of Bengali” was the common language of the Ahom court and it replaced the old ‘Assamese’ language prevalent until the time of Ahom king Rudrasimha (ibid). These were some of the earliest East India Company records where Assamese was conceptualized as a dialect of Bengali.

One of the most important centers of Indian linguistic practices and languages in the early nineteenth century was the Serampore Mission in Bengal. As a part of their evangelical mission, they devoted themselves to the study of different Indian vernaculars and translating the Bible and other religious tracts to these languages. They also produced philological materials in these languages that helped themselves as well as colonial officials and other missionaries to learn Indian languages which were immensely helpful in communicating with other Indians in their own languages. In 1813, the Baptist Missionary Society published Dharma Pustak, a translation of the New Testament of the Bible and the first Assamese printed book. In 1822, the mission published a language map of India, drawn and engraved by J. Walker, based on the
information collected by the Serampore missionaries (Figure 1). The map contains a list of the Indian languages into which the Bible was translated till then. The map covers the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent including Nepal and Ceylon or Sri Lanka and documents the presence of forty-seven spoken languages and it includes the Assam language. The Serampore missionaries used two connotations for describing the language of the province – Assamese and Assam language. In 1819, a list of one hundred and twenty six languages and dialects in which translation, printing or distribution of Christian religious scriptures or portions of them, promoted by the British and Foreign Bible Society was published in the Classical Journal, a mouthpiece for missionary organizations. In the third category of the list which enlisted the languages and dialects was published by the Serampore and its auxiliary societies by grants of the society the name Assamese was featured. In 1825, the missionaries published a facsimile of a printed passage in different Eastern languages and Assamese was not included in it (Figure 2). Therefore, the fact that Assamese language was not accorded the status of a major Indian languages like Bengali or Oriya was evident by the missionaries' treatment of the language.
Figure 1
Map of India Exhibiting the extent to which its various languages were spoken. Prepared by the Serampore Missionaries, 1822

Source: http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/bibles/translation.htm
Quarterly Papers.
FOR THE USE OF THE
WEEKLY AND MONTHLY CONTRIBUTORS
TO THE
Baptist missionary Society.

FAC-SIMILE OF A PRINTED PASSAGE
IN THIRTEEN OF THE
EASTERN LANGUAGES.

TEXT. "The people which sat in darkness saw great light," &c.
Matt. iv. 16.

No. 1. The Bengal.
— 2. The Orissa.
— 3. The Hindoostanee.
— 4. The Sungsrit.
— 5. The Telinga.
— 6. The Kurnata.
No. 7. The Affghan.
— 8. The Burman.
— 10. The Cingalese.
— 11. The Malay.
In Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies, there were several mentions about the language of Assam before the annexation by the Company. For example, the name of the ‘Assam language’ was featured repeatedly between 1816 and 1820. Here is an illustrative example from 1818:

In the Pushtoo Testament the printing is advanced as far 1st of Peter; and in the Assam and Wutch, to the Roman; while in the Bruj Bhasa, although a delay has arisen in consequence of the distance of Brother Chamberlain’s station, who was superintending the version, we are preparing to proceed with the printing as before.\(^\text{15}\)

During the preparation for war with the Burmese in 1824, the Company prepared the text of a proclamation to the people of Assam. Three hundred lithographic impressions of the proclamation in Assamese were made as “the people in general being unable to read the printed character”\(^\text{16}\) which implies that the Assamese script was different from the Bengali script, and was still more different from Bengali types till 1824. More importantly, the colonial authority was well aware of crucial difference between these two languages and hence they had prepared the text in Assamese.
The missionary and colonial knowledge of Assamese as a spoken language of Assam was clearly accessible to the East India Company authorities. As early as 1824, the Company had already acknowledged the difference between Assamese and Bengali as it has been mentioned above. Still it preferred to choose Bengali as the official language of Assam. It would have been unremarkable were it not for the existence of Act 29, which ensured that local vernaculars would be used in provincial administration in Company territories. It may be recalled that Act 29 was greatly motivated by political ideals that insisted on Indians being governed in and through a language they understood and spoke. The decision to place Bengali as the official language of Assam was clearly a counter-example to this policy. What then prompted the colonial power to choose a language other than Assamese in Assam? The Company did not give any justification for its language policy at that time. Only much later, a colonial officer tried to conjecture the factors that could place Bengali as the official language. In 1872, Captain M.O. Boyd, Assistant Commissioner of Mangaldai, wrote in a report to the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang about his view on the restoration of Assamese. In this report, he described the
possible factors that could determine the official language of the province:

The selection of Bengali was, I conjecture, made with a view, *first*, to introducing a uniform court language throughout the province, on the ground that the Assamese dialects were so numerous and so distinct in character that documents written in the vernacular of one district would be difficult of comprehension in another; and *secondly*, to taking advantage of a language possessing a ready-made vocabulary of law terms, in which respect Assamese was undoubtedly deficient. 17

The first point raised by Captain Boyd may have some truth as there was no standard Assamese at that time which would be acceptable to the speakers of all dialects of Assamese. However, the linguistic situation of Bengal was not very much different from Assam at the beginning of the colonial period. The second point did not have any ground as until 1837, Bengali was also not used in Bengal as the court language. Therefore, in 1837, there was no added advantage to Bengali as a court language.

There might be another reason that prompted the colonial power to introduce Bengali in Assam. The Company anticipated that the cultivation of Bengali would "enable the natives of Assam to
participate in the benefit of all the works which may in future be translated into Bengalee for the benefit of lower provinces”¹⁸ In 1854, Jenkins and William Robinson, inspector of schools, echoed similar arguments while defending the retention of Bengali as the official language.

The displacement of Assamese has remained a major literary and political issue for Assamese literary historians and social scientists and there have been mainly two different opinions prevalent as the reason behind the displacement of Assamese as the official language of Assam. Most of the Assamese literary historians have inclined to believe that the Bengali clerks, recruited by the colonial regime were the main playmakers. They made the authority believe that Assamese was a mere dialect or corrupt version of Bengali and there was no basic difference between Assamese and Bengali (Bhuyan: 1990: 8). Another version, articulated by both social and literary historians, on the other hand, asserted that the colonial authority themselves chose Bengali for convenience in administrative matters (Barpujari: 1987; Barman & Choudhury: 1986). The colonial records and other contemporary sources have to be analyzed to know the colonial rational, which
decided the language policy of Assam. The language policy of other provinces may also be helpful because in theory every province had to enact the Act 29.

One of the important reasons that the East Indian Company instituted Bengali as the official language of Assam was that it could get a set of trained administrative personnel. In the years immediately following annexation, the colonial authority employed Assamese ex-officials of the Ahom regime maintaining a policy of not antagonizing them. But most of them could not be fitted into the new bureaucratic and legal set up as they were not adapted to the western administrative system. Higher officials in the Company, thereafter, repeatedly argued for an immediate need for trained subordinates to staff the new provincial government in Assam. Most of the Indian staff coming to Assam was primarily from Bengal and this was not unique. When Jenkins joined his service in Assam in 1830s, he found that all the clerks with two or three exceptions were Bengalis. In his 1854 correspondence with the Bengal superiors, he stated

The Courts of then two existing Zillas, Gwalparah and Kamroop, (Lower Assam,) were also filled with Bengalis, who had mostly accompanied Mr.
Scott from Rungpore; the Police Officers, as also the Native Judges in
Gowalparah, were mostly Mahomedans of Burdwan or the North West
Provinces, whilst all the Chief Revenue Officers and all the Tresurers
were Bengalis of Rungpore and Mymensing, or Brahmans of Santipore,
connected with the Gosains of the Kamikha Temple (sic) of Gowhattty
(Long: 1855: 169).

They were well versed in Bengali, but knew no Assamese and after
coming to Assam, they thought that Assamese was a dialect of
Bengali. Similarly, the British officers who took up positions had
some rudimentary knowledge of Assamese, but were more
comfortable with Bengali as they had already learnt and passed a
test of that language in their training days. By using Bengali in courts
and revenue proceedings, the Company was, therefore, able to fill
both administrative and clerical positions with experienced and
trusted employees. Similar situation prevailed in the education
sector too where Bengali teachers gradually substituted erstwhile
Assamese Brahmin *pundits* from native schools as they were not
complying to the company policy of imparting education to the lower
classes of the society (Long: 1855: 173).

For a number of reasons, the Company officials were convinced
that Assamese was incapable of serving as an administrative
language. This attitude towards Assamese was based on misconceptions about Assamese linguistic and literary tradition. Hardly these officials had any intuition about the five hundred year long stable and established Assamese literary tradition. While most of the Company records continued to identify Assamese either as a spoken language or as a dialect of Bengali, it was only the Serampore missionaries which acknowledged Assamese as an independent language and found it importance to print and publish a book to prove this point. But this translation was not good enough for substantiating Assamese as a written language. The American Baptist Missionaries had to re-translate the Bible for this deficiency.

Early Company records identified Bengali or a 'corrupt version' of Bengali as the language of Assam. Ananadaram Dhekial Phukan, in his 1854 memorandum to A.J.M. Mill, also mentioned about this "erroneous impression that the Assamese and Bengali language are identically one and the same" (Neog: 1977: 152). Moreover, Bengali was seen as the language of Assamese elites, a class that the early colonial power fostered as potential colonial officials as well as intermediaries with the royalties and the subjects as large. Most of the early Assamese company officials, such as Haliram Dhekial
Phukan, Maniram Dewan or Jajnaram Khargharia Phukan were from this elite class. These elites did not influence the Company to choose Assamese as the official language. On the contrary, some of the elites who had contacts with outer world and new ideas, regularly subscribed to Bengali newspapers and contributed to these papers which was duly acknowledged by the papers.\textsuperscript{20} Contemporary Assamese elites used Bengali as the medium of their correspondence too. In 29th August 1831, much before the Act XXIX, Joduram Deka Barua, the compiler of the first Bengali-Assamese Dictionary, wrote a letter in Bengali for a correction in Haliram's \textit{Buranji}. (Sharma: 1964: 105) With the exception of Harakanta Sadaramin Barua, most of them used Bengali as the medium of their writing. They preferred Bengali as Assamese had not been developed as a modern vernacular till then. There was not a single murmur of protest from the Assamese intelligentsia against the displacement of Assamese until 1854, when Ananadaram petitioned to change the language of courts and schools to Assamese.

The role of Bengali clerks in this episode, as narrated by the later Assamese intelligentsia and literary historians, seem to be little
exaggerated. This exaggeration owes largely to the ambience of competing aspirations between Assamese and Bengali middle classes in the late nineteenth century. The influence of Bengali staffs in determining the colonial language policy of Assam is hardly substantiated by any documentary proof. None of the colonial officials or contemporary Assamese intellectuals mentioned anything about the role of Bengali clerks. Contrary to this, Jenkins owned the responsibility of choosing Bengali over Assamese as the official language of Assam (Barman and Choudhuri: 1986: 21). Secondly, as Bengal had progressed in Western education and had already proved to be competent and faithful subjects of the colonial state, Bengali clerks were employed in large scales in other provinces such as Orissa, Bihar and Punjab. But Bengali was not installed as the official language those areas.\textsuperscript{21} Actually it was a much later phenomenon when the expansionist moves by the Bengali resident communities began in Assam as well as in Bihar and Orissa\textsuperscript{22}. This tendency was visible when the debate about the restoration of Assamese language was going on in the second half of the nineteenth century. At that point, several Bengali civil servants expressed their opinions against the restoration on the ground that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali like other eastern and northern
dialects of the language. Moreover, some colonial officials prepared their reports against the restoration with the help and guidance of Bengali subordinates. For example, C.A. Martin, the officiating School Inspector of Assam, relied on the view of his Bengali translator cum Head Assistant to such a large extent that he tried to ignore the opinion of Ramesh Chandra Dutta, an ICS officer and a reputed Bengali scholar of his time, about the independent status of the Assamese language.²³

It seems that the decision to install Bengali as the official language of Assam by the colonial government can be explained by combining the inter-related factors. Colonial state’s desire to get a cadre of experienced and trained administrative personnel, the colonial attitude towards Assamese language, non-existence of a native intelligentsia who could influence the colonial state for installation of Assamese or could oppose the Company’s decision, and contemporary aristocracy’s preference to Bengali are some of the factors that seem to play an important role in taking this decision. Some of these factors were to be found at the time of determining the colonial language policies of other provinces also. For example, in Bengal in 1837, the company administrators
showed concern over the suitability of Bengali as an administrative language and the availability of qualified personnel. Similar arguments were used against introduction of Bengali as the administrative language in Punjab too. In 1849, shortly after the annexation of Punjab by the Company, same issues were raised by the colonial officers against using Punjabi, the vernacular language, used by the majority of the population of the province. Interestingly, these arguments failed in Bengal, while in Punjab, as in Assam, same arguments prevailed and Persian as well as Urdu was instituted as the official language of the province (Mir: 2006: 317). An examination of different local application of the colonial language policy in nineteenth century colonial India suggests about the contradiction between the imperial policies with provincial authority and the limit of imperial policies in determination of local policies.

2.4 Impact of language policy

The colonial language policy of Assam affected the transition process of Assamese language to a modern vernacular. It also affected the emerging Assamese middle-classes' attitude towards Assamese in the nineteenth century colonial Assam. Moreover, this
policy was the beginning of tensions between the Assamese speech community and the Bengali speech community of Assam and of Bengal.

The predicament of the Assamese language had started in pre-colonial time itself as in that period the rich Assamese literary tradition had been disrupted by political unrest and civil war. In the last fifty years of the Ahom regime, the state support for high literary practices had almost disappeared. It could have been recuperated if Assamese had been declared as the official language and had it got the state patronage like other vernaculars such as Bengali or Tamil had got while shaping as a modern vernacular. The pre-colonial Assamese did not have a standard form as different forms of Assamese were used for different literary genres. But this was applicable to other Indian vernaculars too. Unlike the Bengali tradition, the Assamese language had a long pre-colonial tradition of prose writing. Independent Assamese writers like Bhattadev (c. 1480 saka -1560) Raghunath Mahanta (18th century) along with historical chronicles (buranji) or hagiographies (carit puthies) had already gave birth and shaped an Assamese prose style. Engagement in prose tradition was crucially missing from the pre-
colonial Bengali literary tradition (Sen: 1965). But with exposure to western literary tradition and practices, and Western ideas through colonial education for half a century, Bengali was rapidly evolving as a medium of modern prose when Assam was yet to be a part of the Company government.

The displacement of Assamese language from schools of Assam, however, affected the prospect of mass education of the Indian subjects as desired by the Company government. After much deliberation and debates on the best medium for instruction between the Anglisans and the Orientalists, it had been finally decided that mass education would be conducted in vernacular languages. The improvement of vernacular literature was one of the briefs of the Education Committee, an all-India body established in 1854, which was later renamed as the Education Department. In the first Annual Report, the Committee admitted the “almost total absence of a Vernacular literature” and also warned about “the consequent impossibility of obtaining a tolerable education from that source alone” (Mir: 2006:420). Therefore, the Committee announced, “We conceive the formation of a Vernacular literature to be the ultimate object to which all our efforts must be directed” (ibid). Hence all the
Indian vernaculars which were declared as official languages of different provinces had got official patronage for the formation and betterment of their literature. But Assamese literature was deprived any such patronage from the colonial authority till 1873 when Assamese was restored. Till then the formation of modern Assamese literature was dependent solely on individual effort or missionary patronage and it seriously hampered the modernization of Assamese language and literature.

The displacement of Assamese as the official language further damaged the prospect of immediate modernization and stabilization of the language as it was not deemed as a 'language proper' by the colonial government as well as the Assamese speech community. Though Assamese was the medium of instruction in the missionary schools, these were attended by a small number of students. Most of the students were enrolled in government schools and their medium either English or Bengali. Those educated young Assamese young men did not consider Assamese worthy of a medium of literature, letters or even formal dialogues. Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Padmanath Gohainborooah, Assamese littérateurs of late
nineteenth and early twentieth century, mentioned about this phenomenon in their autobiographies.

2.5 Response to the colonial language policy

The missionary schools in Assam were founded by the American Baptist missionaries, who came to Assam just after the implementation of the colonial language policy of Assam. After finally settling in Assam for their evangelical mission, it decided to set up some schools. As for the medium of instruction in these schools, they were in a dilemma. With critical training in philology, they realized that Assamese was the spoken language of the province whereas Bengali was the official medium of instruction. The mission deliberated extensively on the colonial language policy as it could affect their evangelical mission of propagating Christianity in the local vernacular. In 1838, Rev. Brown wrote in a letter:

This project [the introduction of Bengali in schools] has been for some time in contemplation, and now that government has set about the work thus vigorously, there can be little doubt that they will ultimately succeed in effecting the change. This renders it a serious question with us, how
far we ought to cultivate the Assamese, or teach it in schools. (Downs: 1977-78)

Ultimately the mission took the decision in favour of Assamese and started printing and publishing religious tracts and teaching materials. The American Baptist Mission had already decided upon their own language policy that aimed to preach the natives in their mother-tongue as an alien language could not serve that purpose. Hence, they had to go against the colonial language policy though they were brought and facilitated by that colonial power itself.

2.6 The language debate

2.6.1 The language debate in nineteenth century Assam was an interesting admixture of linguistic features with different but sometime overlapping motives such as administrative feasibility, expansionist (linguistic and religious) intention or national identity. Members from the colonial administration – both of British and Bengali origins, missionaries, and Assamese intellectuals participated in the debate on Assamese language question in different platforms like official correspondence, books and journals. But participations of this prolonged debate cannot be classified into
any distinct categories. Members from the same group could be seen in either side of the participants. For example, colonial officers were divided into two distinct categories of for Assamese or against Assamese. Likewise, there was difference of opinion amongst the missionaries. The difference of opinion can be visible in case of the Bengali participants also. The Bengali civil servants from Assam were in favour of Bengali. But several civilians from Bengal as well as other Bengali residents from Assam were noticed in the opposite camp. And interestingly, there was a divide in the Assamese camp too.

The discussion on Assamese language had occupied a sizable part of the colonial administration as well as missionary activities of the Baptist Missionaries. The linguistic analysis of Assamese, its relation to Bengali, and the suitability of the language in administrative and legal works are some features that were raised and discussed in different debates on the Assamese language that were held during the period of linguistic instability in Assam.

As mentioned earlier, a serious discussion on Assamese language had been started by the missionaries in the third decade of
the nineteenth century. In 1837, just after finally selecting Assam as their centre for evangelical mission, the American Baptist missionaries tried to establish the genealogical origin of the Assamese language. Initially, they thought that the language came from the Indo-Chinese language family, which included all the languages of India and China. They also noticed that Bengali and Assamese did “possess close affinity to each other” except “slight variation in pronunciation”. And they were in a fix in deciding about the language of the mission as the colonial authority declared Bengali as the official language. But after exhaustive deliberations, the mission decided to use Assamese as their major medium of instruction as well as their preaching in Assam. They produced several Assamese printing matters including elementary text books, grammar, and a monthly journal in the next ten years. After that they tried to mobilize the public opinion to pressurize the authority for the institution of Assamese in Assam. In fact barring Anandaram as the sole crusader on behalf of Assamese language, the missionaries' was the most prominent voice in the first phase of the language debate.
After seventeen years of displacement, for the first time, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan or Baboo Anunadaram Dekeal Phookun, as he spelled his name, raised the issue of difference between the vernacular of the province and the official language. In a memorandum presented to A.J.M. Mills, the sadar judge, who came to Assam to get a first hand knowledge about its condition, Phukan drew attention of the colonial government to the difficulties faced by the common people as the language of the court was foreign to them:

Under the Provisions of Act XXIX of 1837, the Vernacular language of a district was directed to be used in the courts. We find, however, with regret, that not withstanding the provisions of this wholesome law, a foreign language, viz., the Bengallee, has been introduced into the courts of Assam. It is only to the officers and other persons connected with the courts that Bengallee is generally intelligible. The mass of the population and private gentlemen possess no knowledge of the language. The Native judges are less familiar with the Bengallee than with their own tongue, and the European judges have always been found to understand the Vernacular Assamese with greater facility than the Bengallee; and they often speak the former with a degree of fluency much to be commended. Even evidence which under Section VI. Regulation IV. of 1793, ought to be taken in the language intelligible to the witness is
He also insisted that the similarity of Bengali with Assamese was not more than the former’s similarity with Oriya; and if Oriya could be the court language of Orissa, then Assamese should also be used in lower courts of the province (Neog: 1977:118). In his other publication of the year, where Ananadaram used the pseudo name ‘A Native’, he advocated for the use of Assamese as a medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. However, he did not want to eradicate Bengali altogether from the schools of the province as it has been believed by the Assamese literary historians of later years. He wanted Assamese students to begin their education in Assamese and then use Bengali as the medium in higher classes in the same way as their counterparts in Europe start their education in their vernacular and then graduate to Latin (Neog: 1977: 150). Anandaram’s proposal was grounded in political ideals and philology. He lamented that no difference was perceived between the languages of Bengal and Assam and the ‘mistake’ of introducing Bengali in Assam was committed. The Assamese community, therefore, should be permitted to express their belief that “the error in question, has been, and is still likely to be, the principal cause of
retarding the intellectual improvement of the people of Assam" (Neog: 1977: 121). He also wanted to assert the community's 'right to use our native language, both in the education of the people and in the dispensation of justice' (Neog: 1977: 124). His philological arguments about the difference between Assamese and Bengali were based on three grounds. His acquaintance with both of the languages made him believe that they were separate languages. Secondly, the vocabulary of Assamese and Bengali are not identical. It consists of some common loan words from Sanskrit, some similar words and some separate words. Thirdly, these two languages have their differences in written or 'refined' as well as at colloquial level. Ananadaram compares several specimens from Assamese and Bengali languages to establish a distinct identity of the Assamese language. According to him, the presence of common loan words from Sanskrit cannot deny a language its identity:

We may here remark, that almost all the dialects, spoken in different parts of India, may be said to have their origin in Sanskrit and contain a vast proportion of Sanskrit words, introduced either in an original, or a modified form; and there is not a Sanskrit word which cannot be, with propriety, used in any of the various dialects of the Hindoos. It necessarily follows, that if the writer or speaker in any of these dialects...
chooses to borrow largely from Sanskrit, he would be nearly understood by all Hindoos of education throughout India (Neog: 1977: 143).

Anandaram also thought that the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam had hampered educational progress of Assamese students. During an inspection of schools in different parts of the province, he noticed that even after studying Bengali for four or five years, Assamese students could not translate an Assamese sentence into Bengali properly. Therefore it was beyond their reach to "acquire knowledge by means of books written in that language" (ibid: 143). Anandaram also pointed to the discrepancy of the colonial language policy of Assam:

Act XXIX of 1837 gave full authority to the government to adopt the Vernacular of the country in lieu of any foreign language; and the Government in the exercise of this authority wisely abolished the Persian from the courts of Bengal and Hindustan and substituted the Bengali and Hindustani languages respectively in the provinces. In regard to Assam, however, a serious error appears to have been committed; and the law of 1837, instead of giving the Assamese their own language, has produced a contrary effect, and made the language of Bengal supersede that of Assam (Neog: 1977: 152).

Anandaram insisted that Assamese language was not a vulgar and 'uncouth' language as conceptualized by the authority and it is sufficiently capable to express all the sentiments which the "present
improved state of science and literature” requires. He also prepares a catalogue of Assamese manuscripts and published books to refute the allegation of not having a literary tradition. He regrets that the colonial government’s “misdirected” effort to improve and enlighten the Assamese people proves “abortive” (Neog:1977: 169).

This debate was extensively covered by print media, both domestic and overseas. The missionary journal *Orunodoi* acted as the first platform for building public opinion for the rehabilitation of Assamese language. Moreover, the *Baptist Mission Magazine*, the mouthpiece of American Baptist Society which was published from Boston in United States of America, closely monitored the debate. While announcing the printing and publishing of Anandaram’s book on Assamese language by the missionaries, the magazine also commented upon the ongoing language debate:

The question in agitation is whether the native population may use and cultivate the language wherein they were born, or shall substitute the language of another province and people. The principal arguments alleged in favor of the Bengali, the language propose to be substituted, appear to be founded mainly on the supposed essential identity of the Assamese with the Bengali, the differences being regarded as “differences of form,” belonging to the grammar and not the vocabulary, -
on the superior refinement of Bengali as contrasted with the so-called "crude, and vulgar and slovenly" Assamese, - and on the general expediency of availing "of the books that have been prepared and may yet be published for the thirty million of Bengal – in preference to creating a distinct literature. For a comparatively small section of the people, merely for the sake of perpetuating what at best, is but a dialectical difference."²⁵

2.6.3. Colonial response to the language question throughout the thirty six years of displacement of Assamese is also an interesting episode of the linguistic and philological study of the Assamese language in the nineteenth century. The colonial government's response to Anandaram's petition can be found in the report presented by A.J.M. Mills. Appointed by the authority to assess the administrative scenario of the Assam province in 1850s, Mills submitted his report in 1854. He had received several memorandums from colonial officials, missionaries and colonial officers on different aspects of Assam. Two of these memorials, one from Ananadaram and one from Missionary Danforth covered the issue of displacement of Assamese from courts and schools of Assam. Both the petitioners prayed for the installation of the Assamese vernacular in courts and lower classes of schools. Mills
was sympathetic to the cause of Assamese but was also aware of the colonial reality that it could cause much inconvenience to the authority in replacing Bengali as the whole set up had to be changed to accommodate Assamese in courts and schools. But he acknowledged that Assamese was a different language from Bengali and it had a literary repertoire. He desired to install Assamese in the lower section of schools though he did not press for the replacement of Bengali from the courts in Assam:

The people complain and in my opinion with much reason, of the substitution of Bengalle for the vernacular Assamese. Bengalle is the language of the Courts, not of their popular books and Shasters, and there is a strong prejudice to its general use. It is because instruction is imparted to the youths in a foreign tongue that they look only to Government for employ. Assamese is described by Mr. Brown, the best scholar in the province, as a beautiful, simple language, differing in more respects from than agreeing with the Bengalle, and I think we made a great mistake in directing that all business should be transacted in Bengalle, and that the Assamese must acquire it. It is too late now to retrace our steps, but I strongly recommend Anundoram Phookan's proposition to the favourable consideration of the Council of Education, viz., the substitution of the Vernacular language in lieu of Bengalle, the publication of a series of popular works in the Assamese language, and the completion of the course of Vernacular education in Bengalle. I feel
persuaded that a youth will, under this system of tuition, learn more in two than he now acquire in four years. An English youth, is not taught Latin until he is well grounded in English, and in the same manner, an Assamese should not be taught a foreign language until he knows his own (Mills: 1984: 28).

An analysis of these observations by Mills points to three aspects: a) Assamese is a separate language and the government made a great mistake by not acknowledging it; b) the decision on official language could not be retraced at the moment, and c) the Assamese students should start their education in Assamese and then complete their schooling in Bengali.

2.6.4. The first debate on Assamese was held between the colonial authority and the missionaries in 1854. The missionaries believed that Robinson had influenced the Council of Education against the introduction of Assamese despite the favourable recommendation from Mills. They decided that “the time has arrived when the subject should be openly discussed” (Long: 1855: 169). Hence, six missionaries, stationed at different places of Assam strongly responded to Robinson’s arguments where he repeated his earlier views about the similarity of Assamese and Bengali, disguised only in the difference of forms between colloquial Assamese and refined
Bengali of the books. Nathan Brown, the author of the second grammar on Assamese after Robinson, refuted the claim of similarity between Assamese and Bengali on the ground that these two languages are mutually unintelligible. According to him, their pronunciation as well as orthography was not similar. Brown asserted that the modes of pronunciation were uniform even in a large territory. However, from this large territory, he most interestingly excluded the Dhekeris, the caste-Hindus of Kamrup as well as the Kacharis and other tribes to whom Assamese was not the vernacular. However, William Ward, who was stationed at Guwahati did not share his view and asserted that all the residents of Assam could easily understand the 'vernacular of Upper Assam'.

The judgments by Brown and Ward about the speech community and local varieties of the Assamese language seem to be guided by the attitude of the local people of their respective postings. Robinson, however, retorted that the exclusion of the people from lower Assam or western Assam and other tribes from the speech community of Assamese would reduce the number of speakers of the vernacular to a comparatively small section of the community (Long: 1855: 167). Brown's urge for restoration of Assamese was shared also by other missionaries who participated in this debate.
One thing is clear that the missionaries were facing problem in their evangelical project as the language of their books and the official language was different (Long: 1855: 151).

The colonial response to the debate was typically grounded more on administrative feasibility than linguistic accuracy. Though Robinson asserted in his different writings about the oneness of Assamese and Bengali, he was more concerned about the difficulties that would be faced by the administration in the case of the replacement of the existing official language. He admitted the fact that some dialectical differences were there between Assamese and Bengali. But at the same time, such differences might be noticed in Assamese orthography itself which could be implied by the different orthography followed by Anandaram and the missionaries. According to him, except Anandaram, there was no opposition to the use of Bengali in the government schools. He stressed the "want of school books" in Assamese vernacular as a reason for not replacing Bengali in schools. In the case of Assamese declared as the medium of instruction, "it will be necessary to prepare a series of School books in it, and that could not be done without considerable additional expense" (Long: 1855: 185). An
additional expense would be required for translating Bengali books and other governmental documents such as official gazettes, circulars into Assamese and then publishing them. Jenkins was more forthright when he stated that the introduction of Assamese in schools would be ruinous as it would stop the process of "gradual amalgamation of the people of Assam with our subjects in Bengal" (Long: 1855: 173). Moreover, the uniformity of administration in Assam and Bengal proper could not be retained anymore. He also stated that an Assamese having instruction in Bengali could still read an Assamese book. But having studied in Assamese medium, he would be isolated as well as deprived from studying the large and advanced repertoire of Bengali books, published by numerous presses of the province.

2.6.5. This debate then entered the public sphere of Assamese society. Encouraged by the missionaries as well as by the newborn sense of linguistic identity, several Assamese young intellectuals wrote extensively on this issue and kept the issue in constant focus. Several essays and letters were published in Orunodoi, where the young Assamese writers identified the development of the province with the development of the mother tongue. One short essay,
published in 1855, also emphasized the practical gains that could be gained by the study of local vernacular. The author mentioned about the official circular by which the knowledge of native vernacular, i.e. Assamese was essential for any appointment exceeding the salary of six rupees (Saikia: 2002: 133). Gunabhiram Barua writing under the pen name of ‘an Assamese person’ published essays on the rich literary heritage of the Assamese language and its difference with the Bengali language (Neog: 1983: 1095).

2.6.6 The constant pressure from the missionaries and Assamese intellectuals made the colonial authority to reconsider its earlier decision. It, therefore, asked for opinions from different quarters of the administration and representations from the people of Assam about their views in this issue. The correspondences can be divided into official and civilian categories. Altogether opinions of fourteen colonial officials including two Bengali natives were consulted before taking any decision on the issue. As neither Bengali nor Assamese were spoken in the hill districts, no opinion from those districts was consulted. Five officers were in favour of Assamese whereas eight were against it. The opinion of Babu Chandranath Nandy, translator
to C.A Martin and also a judicial head-assistant, was not taken into account. It is very interesting to note that the officers who advocated for Assamese had never served in Bengal. On the other hand, the officials who were against the installation of Assamese either had served in Bengal or they were natives from Bengal. Martin, the officiating Inspector of Schools of Assam circle prepared a list of such officers mentioning about their stint in Bengal proper or lack of it. Another interesting point not mentioned by Martin was that the officers in favour of Assamese were vehemently against the use of Bengali in courts and schools. One thing is clear from their reports that a major portion of amlahs were from Assamese community in 1872. However, their views about the existing court language were not identical. The Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon reported that the court language was Assamese in three fourth of the cases when the parties concerned were Assamese. An Assistant Commissioner from Sivasagar, on the other hand reported that the so-called Court Bengali was nothing but a “mongrel language” and a spurious compound of Bengali, Assamese and Urdu. He also stressed the need of the introduction of Assamese in schools too as dictionary and books were now available in the language.
Martin forwarded these correspondences to the provincial authority with his own report. He repeatedly denied acknowledging Assamese as a separate language on the basis of the vocabulary shared by Assamese and Bengali. In 1873, Martin, while analyzing the pros and cons of introducing Assamese in the schools of Assam, made an interesting point about the opinion of the officers on Assamese language:

I observe that almost all of the gentlemen whose opinion as expressed in those reports is that Assamese is but a dialect of Bengali have served for several years in Bengal proper, and have known the Bengali language as spoken before coming to Assam: while those who hold that the province has a distinct language of its own are chiefly the missionaries who have come direct from America to Assam and military officers, who before entering the commission had a knowledge of Hindustani but not of Bengali, or if they had any knowledge of Bengali, it was the Bengali of books and not the language of peasants.  

In his correspondence, Martin quoted from Porter's *Educational Report for 1867-68* where Porter made two points against the status of Assamese as a distinct language. According to him, the language spoken in Sibsagar differed from Kamrup and North Darrang. The Kacharis and the 'Mikir's had their own dialects; and the hill tribes could easily learn Bengali in place of Assamese. Secondly, the
missionaries are continuing their process “to make Assamese as different as possible from Bengali, by destroying the whole science of the Language, and making it impossible to trace the root of a word.” Porter defined the Assamese language used by the missionaries as Missionary Assamese and he lamented the fact that an Assamese boy acquainted with this language had to unlearn almost all that he learnt when he would turn to Bengali. After ‘carefully’ reading all the correspondences on the restoration of Assamese in Assam, Martin was also “inclined to believe that the language of Assam does not differ from that of Rangpur more than does the language of Sylhet or Chittagong differ from that of Calcutta or Nuddea”.

2.6.7 The Assamese civilian views were generally in favour of Assamese. A memorandum from Nagaon and signed by Assamese and Bengali civilians and missionaries reiterated their demand for introducing Assamese as the official language of the province. It is interesting that at least several Bengali gentlemen also signed this memorandum. However, colonial government’s initiatives on restoration of Assamese took forward the question of the ‘real Assamese’ or the actual language of Assam to the forefront. Due to
long cultural and political differences between the people of upper Assam and lower Assam, their spoken languages also had a few differences in phonological, morphological and syntactical levels. In pre-colonial Assam, Assamese and Kamrupi, the dialect of Lower Assam might be considered as separate languages. It may be noted that Ruchinath Kamrupi compiled the first vocabulary of Assamese which had differentiated between Assamese, Kamrupi and Sanskrit (Figure 3). The missionaries as well as Anandaram and Hemchandra Barua groomed modern Assamese vernacular in the model of the spoken language of Sivasagar, i.e., of Upper Assam which was not acceptable to the speech community of Lower Assam. Another memorandum, signed by 1226 people from Lower Assam, drafted after Assamese was declared as the language of the court, was sent to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. It claimed that “the dialect current in Upper Assam”, spoken only in Dibrugarh and Sibsagar districts was “improperly designated as the Assamese language”. The decision to use the local vernacular in courts would not be possible with the introduction of Assamese as it was “comprehended by the uneducated class of Lower Assam with almost the same amount of difficulty as the Bengali”. They felt that the missionaries helped the project of the people from Upper Assam
to force their ‘patois’ on the people of whole Assam. The petitioners were in favour of Bengali as the official language of the province because it was either “very closely akin to our language” or identical with Bengali as confirmed by “many high linguistic authority”. This debate on the ‘real Assamese’ continued through the third decade of the twentieth century which will be discussed in a latter chapter. But much before the people from the Lower Assam demanded that their dialect was the real Assamese as it was the literary language of pre-colonial Assam, the division between the dialects of upper Assam and lower Assam was clearly visible from the circulation pattern of the Orunodoi. In a statement submitted to Captain Holroyd, Magistrate of Sivasagar, and prepared by Miles Bronson, who was in charge of the mission press at that time, the circulation of the journal from its commencement to the end of 1852 was recorded. This record demonstrates a more or less stable readership in Upper Assam whereas the Lower Assam witnessed a sharp decline. In 1846, when the journal was first published, people from lower Assam town like Mangaldoi and Goalpara subscribed the journal as much as their counterparts in Upper Assam. But after three years of gradual declinement, the figures came down to zero in Mangaldoi and one in Goalpara. There was not any subscriber in any other
lower Assam town. The circulation pattern of the journal seems to have related with the difference of the spoken languages of the community. As the journal was published in the Upper Assam dialect, readers from Lower Assam seem to be uncomfortable to follow the language as the following table clearly indicates.

Table 2.1
Circulation of the Orunodoi 1846-1852

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<tr>
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<td>428</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>538</td>
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</table>

(Prepared from Long: 1855, p. 108)
The colonial authority finally declared Assamese as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools of Assam via Government of Bengal resolution No. 1537 on 19 April in 1873.

2.7 Conclusion

2.7.1 An examination of the colonial language policy of Assam makes one thing clear that there was a difference in the colonial language policy at imperial and provincial levels of administration. Whereas the colonial authority at the highest level propagated a policy of just rule with the help of local vernacular, its implication depended on the provincial administration only. There was a pattern in the way the colonial authority responded to the linguistic questions of a province. Generally, the responses of the colonial officers were negative, when they were directed to give their opinions about the introduction of the native vernacular as the official language of the province where they were posted. Their argument against the introduction of the vernacular was almost similar when they argued that the particular vernacular in question was ‘vulgar’, ‘uncouth’ and ‘not suitable for administrative works'.
Figure 3
Ruchinath Kamrupi's Sanskrit-Assamese-Kamrupi Vocabulary
(Source: British Library, Assamese Manuscripts)
These were the very words used by the officers in contexts of different vernaculars such as Assamese, Punjabi, Oriya and even Bengali. The colonial government reacted in the same manner in different provinces on linguistic matters which is a pointer of their pre-mediated pattern of colonial language policy. The Punjab provincial government reacted in the same manner as their counterpart in Assam did when the issue of native vernacular and the official language was raised.

Like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan’s memorandum to A.J.M. Mills, a British colonial officer stationed in the Punjab province, petitioned to the Punjab government to change the official language of the province to Punjabi and got the same response from the authority concerned. This petition was presented in 1862 by Judicial Commissioner R.N. Crust and he argued that the Punjab’s language policy was flawed because it insisted “on the court language being different from the language in ordinary use in the district” (Mir: 2006: 416). As an amateur philologist who had *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies and Linguistic and Oriental Essays* to his credit, he requested the Punjab government to change the official language. (ibid). On receiving the petition, the authority asked
District Commissioners in Punjab's central districts for their opinions. The overwhelming response was that Punjabi should not be introduced as the court language even after conceding that Punjabi was the only language in general use in the districts. The government ultimately rejected Cust's proposal because "it is unnecessary to alter the present court language" (ibid: 417) and retained Urdu as the official language of the province until 1947. However, the Punjab government, in a rejoinder, conceded that Punjabi was the language of the districts and it wished that the colonial officials "should take pain to familiarize themselves with the dialects of the districts in which they are placed" (ibid: 417). Colonial language policy of Punjab thus took a two language policy- one official and one unofficial language. Urdu was retained as the official language of the province. Court and administration records were documented in that language. On the other hand, Punjabi also played an unofficial and important role in administration as a lingua franca or colloquial language.

In 1850s, thus, the linguistic scenario in the provinces of Assam and Punjab were almost similar. In both the provinces, a language other than the native vernacular was instituted by the colonial
authority as the official language. The authorities were petitioned by colonial officers to restore the original vernacular as the official language. In both provinces the higher authority acknowledged the fact that the official language and the language used by the common people of the province were not the same language. But at the same time, they insisted that their early decision was not retraceable. However, the native vernacular should begin to get some importance and from mid-1850s, both Assamese and Punjabi had been used as unofficial language of communication in Assam and Punjab respectively. But the similarity ends here. Whereas Urdu dominated the printed discourse of Punjab's public sphere (ibid: 418), Bengali never got such importance in Assam. Assamese was the overwhelming choice of vernacular language for printed discourse of Assamese intellectuals as well as the American Baptist Missionaries during the displacement of Assamese as the official language. Moreover, Assamese was restored as the official language in 1873, but Urdu remained as the official language of Punjab until 1947.

2.7.2 But the case of W. Robinson was quite extra-ordinary. Earlier a British Baptist missionary and later a colonial officer, Robinson
wrote several books and articles on Assam. In fact he wrote the first grammar on the Assamese language. It is quite interesting to note how his notion about the Assamese language was evolved through the years. It is also a marker to the impact of colonial language policy on colonial officers. After serving as a preacher at Guwahati Mission, he joined the colonial administration as the Head-master of newly found Government Seminary, Gowhati. In 1839, his *A Grammar of the Assamese Language* was published from the Serampore Press. In his dedication of the book to the General Committee of Public Instruction of the Presidency of Fort William in Bengal, Robinson acknowledged the Assamese language as ‘the language of a province’ and the aim of book was to “facilitate an acquaintance” with it (Robinson: 1839: 1). But two years later in his second book, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, published in 1841, Robinson changed his mind and acknowledged Assamese as a ‘dialect’ and found a lot of similarity with Bengali:

> As the Ahoms were once the rulers of Assam, it is somewhat surprising that more traces of their language are not to be found in the present dialect of the Assamese, which, with the exception of a very few words of Tai origin, seems to have been originally derived from Sungskrit, and in most cases possesses a close affinity to the Bengali. A greater portion of the words in common use seem identical, and are distinguished only
by a slight difference in pronunciation...The grammatical peculiarities of the two languages are considerably unlike, though there is scarcely any difference in their syntactical construction (Robinson: 1975: 253).

In 1849, Robinson published "Notes on the Languages spoken by the various tribes inhabiting the valley of Asam and its mountain confines" in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society Bengal*. In this work, he defined 'Asamese' or Assamese as the 'language spoken by the entire population of the valley, and in most cases, is the only medium of intercourse between them and the people of the hills' (Robinson: 1849:184). He mentioned about the close affinity of the language to 'its parent' Sanskrit; but he had some reservations about the status of Assamese and whether it was a language or a dialect of Bengali:

It is highly probable, however that a careful investigation will conduce to the support of the later supposition; for there does not seem to be a greater diversity between what are usually considered the *provincialisms*, spoken in the remoter parts of Bengal, - in Chittagong and Silhet for instance, - and unadulterated Bengali of Nuddeah (where the language is said to be spoken in its purity), than between any of these and the dialect of Asam. (ibid:185).
After comparing the vocabulary, different grammatical categories and syntax and compositions, Robinson drew the conclusion that Assamese was a corrupt version of Bengali.

In 1854, after Mills submitted his report, the authority asked for a report about this matter from the concerned officials stationed in Assam. It may be noted here that Robinson, as the Inspector of Schools of Assam, naturally opposed the idea of restoration of Assamese as the official language of Assam. He was, hence, held responsible for the delay of the introduction of Assamese as the official language of the province by the missionaries as well as later nineteenth century Assamese intellectuals.

End Notes

1 Court of Directors, letter to Governor General in Council at Fort William in Bengal, 27 January, 1802, British Library (hereafter BL), Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/300

2 Ibid

3 Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George to the Court of Directors, 8 September, 1805, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/300

4 Ibid

5 Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George, 23 October, 1805, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/357.
6 Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George, 10 January, 1812, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/357.

7 Board of Control, letter to Judicial Department (No. 1 of 1835), 26 June, 1835, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, E/4/744.

8 'Minute by the Right Honourable the Governor General', 25 September, 1836, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/1684.

9 'Resolution of the Governor General', Political Department, 4 September, 1837, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/1684.

10 The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies, 1832, Vol. 7, p. 84

11 Colonel Hopkinson, letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Department, Education, 2 December, 1873, No. 214, Assam Commissioner's File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

12 Majority of Assamese literary historiographer starting from Hemchandra Goswami to Jogendra Narayan Bhuyan wrote that Bengalis were responsible for the initiation of Bengali as the official language of Assam in 1836. But historian H.K. Barpujari showed that this accusation has no documentary proof. Later Assamese literary critic Sibanath Barman and Prasenjit Choudhury also supported Barpujari.

13 Oriya was regarded as a distinct language from Bengali in early nineteenth century itself as the Oriya translation of Carrey's *The Bible* was published in 1809.


16 Scott to Swinton, Feb 10, 1824 in Bhuyan: 1949, p. 524

17 Letter from Capt. M.O. Boyd to the Deputy Commissioner of Durrang, 5 June, 1872, No. 80 in Assam Commissioner's File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati

18 Asiatic Journal: 1832: vol.7:32.

19 Jenkins, letter to W.M. Grey, Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, 7 December, 1854 in Selections From the Records of the Bengal Government, Calcutta, 1855

20 Samachar Darpan, 30 July, 1831.
Despite much debates going on, Oriya was the official language of Orissa and Hindustani was the official language of Bihar area of Bengal province.

Fakirmohan Senapati vividly described about the attitudes of the Bengali teachers appointed as Oriya teachers in his autobiography *Atmajeevancharit*.

C.A Martin, letter to Colonel Hopkinson, Governor General’s Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam, 30 January, 1873, No 1824 in Assam Commissioner’s Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati


Letter from Colonel Hopkinson, Governor General’s Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Department, 20 March, 1873, No 67 in Assam Commissioner’s Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati

Letter of M.O. Boyd, Assistant Commissioner of Mangaldoi to the Deputy Commissioner of Durrong, 5 June, 1872, no 80, in Assam Commissioner’s Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.


Letter of Captain AN. Phillips, Assistant Commissioner, Sibsagar to Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, 10 June, 1872, No. 309 in Assam Commissioner’s Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

Letter of Officiating Inspector of Schools to Colonel Hopkinson, Governor General’s Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam, 30 January, 1873, No 1824 in Assam Commissioner’s Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

Ibid

Ibid

Memorandum by the people of Lower Assam to the Lt. Governor of Bengal, undated, unnumbered in Assam Commissioner’s Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati

Ibid
Indian literary tradition did not have the practice of writing grammars in vernaculars. So, it was not an extra-ordinary case for Assamese that the first grammar of the language by an outsider. Other New-Indo-Aryan languages too got their first grammar by a non-speaker of the language. For example, N. Halhed wrote the first grammar of Bengali in Bengali text. Earlier Portuguese missionaries wrote some rudimentary Bengali grammar in Roman script.