PART—IV

CULTURAL ASPECTS.
1. Language :

(a) Assamese Script :—

In the beginning of the Medieval period the Assamese scripts had assumed a definite shape. The nomenclature of the Assamese script was given by the Ahom kings of the Shan dynasty. In the Copper plate grant of the Ahom kings it is distinctly written असमाध्यशेष लिखित (Asamaksarena Likhita), i.e., recorded in Assamese script (in one side of the plate). But, as there was no printing press, it is certain that there was not a definite standard of the uniform shape of the different alphabets; in the hands of the different writers the shape of alphabets underwent certain changes.

After a gradual process of development in the hands of different schools, the Assamese scripts had developed certain distinctive features in their shape. Examining these distinctive peculiarities under different schools, the Assamese scripts of the Medieval period can be divided into three categories, viz., (1) Gargayan, (2) Bāmuniā, (3) Lahkari or Kaitheli. But their distinctions have not yet been closely studied. Even then, we want to point out the formation of some of the Assamese alphabets. But before we proceed to do so, it should be borne in mind that the modern Bengali and the Assamese scripts are almost identical. Therefore, certain quarters hold the view that the modern Assamese script is no other than the Bengali script. It must be admitted that before the Assamese and the Bengalis developed their individual characteristic, they formed one dialect group and one script. It would be more appropriate to quote R.K. Barkakati. He writes: "As the modern Assamese script except the two letters अ and ए resembles the modern Bengali script."
So the ancient Bengali script resembles the ancient Assamese script with a very little difference only. This certainly proves that the present Assamese or Bengali script is not exclusively a Bengali one, but it is a common script for both Assamese and Bengali, as it is nothing but a little modified type of the same ancient 'Kutila' and 'Deva-Nagari' scripts of the old Assamese and Bengali forms. If on historical and philological evidence Assamese language is proved older than Bengali .... it is quite logical to say that the present Assamese script had rather been adopted by the Bengalees later on as their script.  

Dr. S.K. Bhuyan examining the scripts used in early Assamese manuscripts points out some of the peculiarities of the Assamese alphabets. According to Dr. Bhuyan the difference of Assamese scripts from Bengali consists in many letters; but at present we have noticed difference in two letters only, viz.,  and . The Bengali language has no , and  is represented by giving a dot below , e.g., . The letter  is a reproduction of 'U' with a small dash projecting from the bottom of the letter. The letters  and  are sometimes indistinguishable though some copyists put a dot below  in order to represent . In many manuscripts  and approach their Sanskrit prototypes more than their modern Assamese equivalents.  

Though Assamese alphabets are closely connected with their original Sanskrit, as regards their pronunciation, yet they have locally developed some phonetic variations owing to the contact with the vast non-Aryan inhabitants. Many of the Assamese alphabets have lost their original sounds. Dr. B.K. Kakati has thoroughly discussed all these points in his work "Assamese its formation and development." In the line of Sanskrit grammar although we have retained all the divisions, such as 'Kapthya', 'Talabya', 'Dantya' etc., yet in practice we have not been maintaining their pronunciation. For example, we have no dental and cerebral pronunciation; they are all alveolar. Another peculiarity of the Assamese alphabets is its sibilants. They are not correctly pronounced
like their Sanskrit equivalents; they are guttural sounds and present a peculiar
type of sound in Assamese which can be traced in the old Iranian only. There
are many other peculiarities of the Assamese alphabets in their sound; but the
place for such discussion is very limited here. For detailed discussion of
these points we may only refer to Dr. Kakati's work "Assamese its formation
and development." 5

(b) Assamese Language: Its Origin and Development:

Assamese language is the easternmost branch of the New-Indo-Aryan
languages. It is believed to be the outcome of the Prāchya Magadhi Apabhraṃsa.
According to Grierson, North Bengal and Assam did not get their language
from Bengal proper but directly from the west. Magadhi Apabhraṃsa, in fact may
be considered as spreading out east-wards and south-wards in three directions.
To the North-east it developed into North-Bengali and Assamese, to the South
into Oriya and between the two into Bengali. 6 Traces of the evolution of the
modern Assamese language are found as early as the 6th 7th century A.D. The
beginning of the evolution of the modern Assamese language is indicated in
the remark of Yuan Chwang when he says that the language of Kamarupa differs
a little from that of the Mid India. 7 The copper plate grants of the early
Kamarupa kings, though written in Sanskrit, contain many Assamese formations
which are used in modern Assamese also. For example 'Kāliya' (a name of a man),
'Dumbari' (used for modern dumaru), 'Nakka' (nose) for modern 'Nāk', 'Kūa'
(well) for modern 'kūa', 'Āli' (dam in rice field), 'Jān' (a channel) and the
names of persons, such as 'Sanī', 'Dhanī', 'Anī', which are also used similarly
in modern times, are found used in the different grants of the early
Kamarupa kings. 8

The second phase of the modern Assamese language is revealed by the
language of the 'Dohas' of the 'Charyya padas'. It is now accepted on all
hands that some of the writers of these 'Dohās' were men from Assam. The philologists and the historians of the Assamese language and literature have already proved that the language of the 'Dohās' are more akin to Assamese than Bengali or Oriya. Dr. P.C. Bagchi determines the date of the composition of these 'Dohās' sometimes between 8th or 10th centuries A.D.. Therefore, we fully endorse the view held by Dr. P.C. Choudhury that after a gradual process of change and development, the script and language of the Kamarupi dialect, which according to Yuan Chwang differs a little from that of Mid-India arrived at a final individualised form by the 12th 13th century A.D. From the 6th century A.D. to the 12th - 13th century A.D. this period may be ascribed as the formative period or Proto-Assamese stage of the modern Assamese language and literature.

Though Assamese is a branch of the Indo-Aryan language, so far as its origin is concerned, yet the influence of the non-Aryan elements in the formation and development of the Assamese language is not a mean one. The influence of the non-Aryan elements is manifold, such as phonological, morphological and glossarial. Further, we have indicated above about non-Aryan influence in the phonology of Assamese. It would not be, however, out of the mark if few words are said about the non-Aryan contributions to the Assamese language. "Like the composite character of the Assamese culture" the language has also absorbed various non-Aryan elements. Dr. Kakati has clearly shown the influence of the non-Aryan elements such as Austrik, Kolarian, Malayan, Bodo, etc. on the formation of the Assamese vocabulary. But the influence of the Bodo and the Austrik elements seem to be more marked. Scholars are of opinion that like the Bodo "the Austric elements seem to contribute an essential substratum of the Assamese vocabulary." The vocabularies of
Assamese language also bear resemblance with the vocables of the western languages, such as Marathi, Gujarati, Sindhi, Kasniri etc. Even it bears a few characteristic peculiarities of the language of the Zend Avesta, the Zoroastrian Scriptures.  

Now, to support our views that Assamese language is much indebted to the non-Aryan languages of Assam as regards its phonology, morphology and vocabulary, it is needless to cite instances here as they are adequately treated by Dr. B.K. Kakati and Dr. B.K. Barua in their works.

The earliest speciments of the Assamese language are found in the 'Dohas' composed between 8th and 10th centuries, which were recovered from Nepal. But it is believed that the language of the 'Dohas' represent the specimen of the language that was prevalent in the eastern part of India, viz., in Kamarupa, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Dr. Kakati is of opinion that "in a pre-Bengali and pre-Assamese period, there were certain dialect groups which may be designated as Eastern Magadhan Abhayrama. They represented mixtures of many tongues and many forms. When they were reduced to writing the authors often used parallel forms characteristic of different dialects without any discrimination; but with the development of linguistic self-consciousness, the forms were isolated and each dialect group became clearly demarcated and the parallel forms became leading characteristic of different dialect groups". For example Dr. Kakati finds such a mixture of dialects representing the early Assamese and early Bengali period in the language of the 'Krishna Kirttana'—the work which Dr. Chatterjee accepts as having presented early Bengali formations. In 'Krishna Kirttana', we come across double sets of forms, which according to Dr. Kakati, are not dialectal aberrations of one another. In course of time when we enter into the
distinctive Bengali and Assamese periods, we find that the Bengalis had accepted one set of forms as their distinctive feature and the Assamese the other. Therefore, Assamese and Bengali are independent speeches "both occupying the position of dialects with reference to some standard Magadhan Apabhramsa". In certain respects, modern Assamese shows it nearness to the forms and idioms found in the 'Dohas'.

2. Literature:
(a) Preliminary discussion:

Detailed discussions of Assamese literature have already been made by different scholars. However, we will only attempt to discuss briefly about the patrons and centres of literary activities along with the different trends and evolutionary phases of Assamese literature.

The literary output of the early period so far known to us is very meagre; but it should not lead us to believe that the people of this country at that time were not enlightened. From the epigraphic records and other sources it is evident that the kings of early Kamarupa were fond of learning and their capitals were the abode of scholars and litterateurs. Not only that, Kamarupa attracted scholars and students from other parts of India. "The king," (king Bhaskar Varman), wrote Yuan Chwang, "is fond of learning and the people are so in imitation of him. Men of ability come from afar to study here". Similar statements about many early Kamarupa kings are found inscribed in many of the early copper-plate grants. The Sanskrit texts of some of the copper-plate grants of the early Kamarupa kings, bear testimony to the literary genius and attainments of the Assamese litterateurs of those days. Dr. Bhuyan points out that the ancient records bear testimony to the musical aptitudes and talents of the Assamese people. The fact that
king Bhaskar Varman sent some books to Harsa as present proves the abundance of books at that time. The copper-plate grants refer to names of 'śmrīti-kāras' of early Assam. References of different learned 'śmrīti-kāras' are found in different sources also. Besides, some dramas and many 'Tantras' and religious books, especially belonging to the 'Mahayana' or 'Vajrayana' schools of Buddhism were composed in early Assam. All these prove that Medieval Assam had got a good literary heritage which formed the bedrock of the Medieval Assamese literature.

It is very unfortunate that we do not possess sufficient literary works of the early period. The reason for such dearth of literary materials is not far to seek. The natural calamities like flood, storm, earthquake, the humid climate of the country and the frequent political upheavals are mainly responsible for this loss of literary materials. The same can be said as regards the literary output of the Medieval period also. We are perhaps deprived of a large number of works which were destroyed or damaged during the Moamaria insurrections and the Burmese invasions. It seems, the number of popular literary works composed in the early part of the Medieval period by the non-Vaisnavite writers which have come down to our hands is very negligible. We think, a large number of such works disappeared from the scene owing to some unavoidable reasons. With due deference to the Vaisnavite writers, it must be admitted that we have certainly lost a substantial portion of the popular literature composed by the non-Vaisnava poets of the early part of the Medieval period due to the orthodox outlook and their influence upon the common people. It can not be gainsaid that some of the prominent Vaisnava poets went to the extent of unduly removing the names and works of some prominent non-Vaisnava poets from the firmament of
Assamese literature by plagiarising their works or by making their works non-existent by other means.

(b) Patrons and Centres of Literary activities:

Literary activities were carried on mainly under the patronage of the rulers and under the guidance of the religious movements, especially the Vaishnava movement. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of the vast Assamese literature, viz., the portion known as folk literature is the contribution made by the common people who did not read. We owe a great measure to the unknown and unlettered village poets for Assamese folk literature which is mainly lyrical in nature. The date of the composition of the folk literature cannot be even tentatively fixed. Even after the beginning of the written period, composition in oral state had been going on side by side with the literary activities of the cultured people. However, it is believed that most of the folk literatures were reduced to writing not prior to the 15th century, though the language of these folk literature now and then reveal characteristics which induce the readers to believe that they were composed prior to the 10th century A.D.. Although Sanskrit was not totally discarded as the medium of literary expression, the Kamata kings were the first to have composed literary works in Assamese. It was the Kamata king, Durlabha Narayana who patronised poet like Hem Saraswati, Haribar Vipra and Kabiratna Saraswati. The first book in Assamese, that is, 'Prahlad Charitra' composed by Hem Saraswati under Durlabha Narayana is ascribed to the 13th century A.D.. The other Kamata king who patronised Assamese literature is Indra Narayana. In the second phase, we find the great epic Ramayana, translated by Madhab Kandali under the
patronage of the king Mahamanikya, in the 14th century A.D. Mahamanikya was a Barahi king; the Barahis were a branch of the Boço-Kachāri people. Madhab Kandali is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the firmament of the Assamese literature. It was he who by translating the great epic 'Ramayana' brought Assamese language to a certain level of literary standard and made the path clear to his followers to follow his ideal. During the regime of the Kamata kings, Kamatapur, the capital of the Kamata kingdom, was the centre of the literary activities. After the fall of the Kamata kings, Koch dynasty rose to power and naturally the patronage to the Assamese literature as well as other cultural activities shifted to the hands of the Koch kings.

The Koch king Naranarayana and his brother Chilarai rendered unique service to the growth and development of Assamese literature by giving shelter to the scholars and literary talents in the capital. During the rule of Naranarayana, there assembled a galaxy of scholars and literary talents in the capital of Kochbehar, whose contributions made the Assamese literature enormously rich. We have already discussed that Naranarayana was throughout his life a benevolent king devoted to the cause of literature and education. The generosity and benevolence shown by the king Naranarayana for the cause of literature is best revealed by poet Ramsaraswati in the 'Vana Parbha' of the Mahabharata, where he writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Āmāka karilā ājnā parama sādare} / \\
\text{Bhāratara pada tumī kariyoka sāre} / \\
\text{Āmāra grhata ache tikā bhasya yata} / \\
\text{Niyoka āpona ghe dilo ho samanta} / \\
\text{Ehi buli rajā save baladhī yorāi} / \\
\text{Pathāilā pustaka sava āmāsāra thāi} / \\
\text{Dhana bastra alamkāra dilā bahutara} / \\
\text{Dāsa-dāsi diyā mana badhāilā āmāra} / \\
\end{align*}
\]

---- Vana Parbha, Verses 840-841.
(Translation - With great courtesy he (Naranarayana) told me: "please translate Bharata into (Assamese)Verse. I give you all commentaries; take them to your place." So saying the king sent me all the books on a bullock cart. He also gave me for encouragement sufficient money, cloths ornaments and servants.)

It was king Naranarayana who first realised the importance of rendering the Sanskrit works into popular vernacular in order to bring the knowledge of these works within the reach of the common people. He summoned the scholars and asked them to translate the classics with the following object: "These translations will first be read with eagerness by women and Sudras, and after sometime by the Brahmanas as well." "It is only by this means," said Naranarayana, "the scriptures can be protected from loss in this Kali-Yuga." The masterpieces of Indian classics were thus opened to the common people through these translations. But unfortunately, after the death of Naranarayana the Koch power declined and the centre of literary activities shifted to the Ahom capitals Gargaon and Rangpur. So long, the trend of Assamese literature or its outlook was mainly religious, but under the patronage of the Ahom kings the literature changed its ideal; it became secular. Literature, predominantly of erotic sentiment and Sākta influence are the main characteristics of the vast mass of Assamese literature that came to be cultivated under the patronage of the Ahom kings. Another significant contribution of the Ahoms to the Assamese literature is its vast historical works composed in Assamese prose. These historical writings known as 'Buranji' are unique among the new Indo-Aryan languages.

The Ahom kings became keen in patronising Assamese literature after their conversion to Hinduism. Ahom king Jayadhvaja Singha who was the first to have been initiated into Hindu faith took the initiative in patronising
Assamese literature. He also composed some songs in Assamese. However, up to the reign of king Rudra Singha, the Ahom kings paid more attention to the growth of the historical literature only. But from the reign of king Rudra Singha, royal patronage was extended to scholars for the composition of other types of literature. It was only after king Siva Singha had been initiated into the Sākta faith that literature having Tantrik or Sākta bias came to be composed in Assamese under the patronage of Ahom kings.

Dr. S.K. Bhuyan observes, "the full efflorescence of Assamese poetry came however with Sankardeva and his devoted disciples and kindred spirits. The saint lived up to the age of one hundred and twenty and during his long span of life he gave to Assam a treasure house of literary gems, all aiming at the glorification of Vishnu and his several manifestations. He based his teachings on the Bhagavata-purana and hence his creed is known as Bhagavati-Dharma".28

Vaisnavite poets accepted poetry as the medium of propagating their cult. They introduced a sort of artificial language known as 'Braja-buli' in the dramas called 'Ankiya-nat' and in the devotional songs called 'Bargit'. Bhattadeva, who was a great vaisnava scholar and also a devoted disciple of Damodardeva, translated the 'Gitā' and the Bhagavata Purāṇa into simple and elegant Assamese prose. After reading the 'Kathā-Gitā' (Gita in prose) the great scientist Dr. P.C. Roy admitted the development of the Assamese prose literature in the far distant sixteenth century which no other literature of the world reached except the writings of Hooker and Latimer in England.29

Assamese prose literature is further enriched by the Vaisnava movement with a branch of biographical literature on the life and activities of the Saint-preceptors of the Vaisnava cult. The biographies of the sants saints were also written in poetry. So long Sankardeva and Madhabdeva were alive, wherever they had gone and made their camps, the places became the centres of
cultural activities and among such places we can mention the names of Kochbehar, Barpeta, Sundaridia, Dhuahat, Bardowa, Belguri etc. After Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, the literary and other cultural activities centering round the religious movement, came to be carried on by the innumerable Satra institutions that came into existence as a result of the Vaisnavite movement. These have already been throughly discussed in the foregoing chapters and there is no use of dilating upon this point. In fine, it may be said that the Vaisnavite movement made an epoch in the field of Assamese literature. The Vaisnavite upheaval flooded the country with innumerable works such as epics, Purāṇas, songs, dramas and biographies either of original nature or translation from Sanskrit works.

The Darangi kings—a branch of the old Koch dynasty, and some of the important ary royal families related to the old Koch kings living in the district of Goalpara, also, patronised literary activities in a great extent. Under the patronage of the Darangi kings in the Mangaldai Subdivision and other royal families of the Koch kings, there grew up in Assamese a sort of historical epics, mainly dealing with the family history of the Koch kings, known as 'Rajvamsavali', about which we have already discussed.

The nobles and officers of the Ahom court also individually patronised Assamese literature and we are indebted to them for a number of translated works of epics and Purāṇas and some secular works. Many important families of the State having direct or indirect relations with the court, have left for us their family chronicles which throw ample light on the past political, social, economic and cultural activities of the State.

During the Medieval period, in spite of the fact that much stress was laid on the medium of Assamese vernacular to carry on literary activities,
Sanskrit was not totally discarded from the field. Under the patronage of the Koch and the Ahom kings a number of works were written in Sanskrit. Another most striking feature of the Assamese literature, noticed in this period, is the composition of a few epics and a considerable number of songs known as 'Jikirs' of the Islamic influence. The 'Jikirs' were composed in order to explain the rites and rituals to be observed by the followers of Islam and to explain the religious philosophy of Islam.

REFERENCES

1. Our Script question, By- R.K.Barkakati, 1955, p- 9
2. Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, By- H.C.Goswami, 1950, vide Introduction, p-VIII.
3. Our Script question, p- 4
4. Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, p-Introduction-XVIII.
5. Assamese its formation and development, By- Dr.B.K.Kakati, 1941, pp- 193, 197, 223.
8. Kamarupa Sasanavali, pp- 26, 187, 64, 123, 176 and 140.
12. Ibid... p- 394.
13. Assamese its formation and development, pp- 32-56
19. Ibid... p- 11.
21. Ibid... pp- 1-3.
25. Ibid...  p- 6.
27. Studies in the Literature of Assam, pp- 12,6.
28. Ibid... pp- 6
29. Ibid... p- 7.