Chapter IV

Rehabilitation of the Assamese Language:

The Historic Role of the American Baptist Missionaries

Assamese was the language in the courts of Assam before the advent of the British. Even after the annexation of Assam by the British, Assamese was the language of the courts in Assam for about ten years. The language was used in almost every department of public office with great facility and convenience, and to the complete satisfaction of the people of Assam. The Act XXIX of 1837 gave full authority to the British Government to adopt the vernacular of the respective provinces in lieu of any foreign language. By exercising the law, the Persian language, which was introduced in Moghul era, was abolished from the courts of Bengal and other provinces of India under the British rule. But in the case of Assam, an unfortunate situation occurred. Instead of abolishing foreign languages, the Bengali language was introduced in courts and schools of Assam, by the British.

Assamese was a distinct language of India. Although the Bengali language was introduced in the schools and courts of Assam, the people could not follow it. This resulted in a confused state in the field of education as well as in the courts.

The American Baptist Missionaries, particularly the noted linguistic scholar Dr. Nathan Brown, emphasized that the vernacular language of the people of Assam was Assamese. He was the first who opposed the introduction of Bengali in the village schools of Assam (Barpujari 1987: 5). The Missionaries tried to establish the fact by
publishing books in Assamese and educating the children with their vernacular language. However, the British people were not convinced. Those British official who were entrusted to manage the public instruction continued to believe that the Assamese and Bengali were one and the same language.

The British occupied Bengal long before they occupied Assam. Due to early exposure to the British regime, the Bengalees were more advanced in general education and in communication using English language. Following the Yandaboo treaty on August 24, 1826, Assam came under the power of the British rule. Assam maintained an independent status from the past, and could not accept the sovereignty of the British in an easy manner.

After occupying Assam, the British administration felt the necessity of people who had a fair knowledge in English to assist them in administering Assam. Since there were none in Assam to meet the need, The British had to bring the Bengalees who had a fair knowledge in English, to perform clerical work. Gradually, an influx of Bengalees took place in Assam, and they became the right hand people to the British administrator. Neither the British nor the Bengalees understood the Assamese language. Since both the Assamese and Bengali languages had roots in common to origin Sanskrit language, the Bengalees could understand a few words here and there. They influenced the British people, and convinced them that Assamese was a dialect or an identical language to Bengali language. Most Assamese scholars agree that the Bangalees were instrumental in trying to have the Assamese language downgraded since lot of evidence supports the high-handed nature of Bengalees towards the
Assamese language in those days. Mr. Talukdar writes that the root cause of this was the conspiracy of the Bengali petty officers (amolahs) [Talukdar 1993: 9]. Mr. D. Neog states:

They [the Bengalees] happened to catch a word or two of Sanskrit origin from the lips of the people and failing to make any head or tail of the rest of their vocabulary chose to call it at random a patois of Bengali and advised the rulers, who were then equally innocent of the language, to replace it by the Bengali language. It was the matter of a minute as it was the question of whims; and the mischief was done. It was indeed, a Himalayan blunder (Neog 1982: 340).

Noted historian of Assam, Dr. H. K. Barpujari is of the opinion that it was a plan of the British people to introduce the Bengali language in place of Assamese in schools and courts of Assam to make it easier for the British to govern. In support of his opinion, Dr. Barpujari refers to a long letter of a popular Commissioner of Assam, Francis Jenkins, to the Lieutenant Governor (Barpujari 1987: 87-93).

However, for good or bad, knowingly or unknowingly, the British officially imposed the Bengali language in the courts and schools of Assam in 1836. As a result the Assamese were deprived of the prestige owed to their rich indigenous language and the Bengali became the administrative language in law courts and in the schools of Assam.

The early part of the nineteenth century was the darkest era for the Assamese language and literature. The environment for the Assamese people was in all aspects like a boat without a boatman floating in a river. The memories of inhuman oppression by the Burmese, famines and earthquakes did not fade away in the minds of
the Assamese people. The hope for a secure life under the British was out of the question to the Assamese. The whole Assamese society was morally degraded. It was more frustrating when the Assamese had to lose their own language while living in their own sweet home. There was nobody to take a stand boldly against this. The society was in a turmoil. It was the most critical time for the Assamese in their social, cultural and economic life.

In the same year when the Bengali language replaced Assamese in courts and schools of Assam, the American Baptist Missionaries entered Assam to throw the light of Christianity on the people of Assam. It really was something like a miraculous coincidence for the Assamese : as if the Baptist Missionaries had come at that particular time to rescue them from a miserable situation.

Mr. David Scott was the first Commissioner of Assam under the British rule. Mr. Scott was a good hearted person who proposed the formation of an English school so that the Assamese people would have proper education, and they could be self dependent and better employed. Due to his early death, he could not fulfill his plan. Mr. Jenkins, the next Commissioner of Assam, was also a person who worked towards the uplifting of the Assamese people, by providing good education and employment. He proposed the formation of an English school in every district of Assam. With his sincere effort and public donations, Mr. Jenkins started the first English school at Guwahati in 1835, and the second English school at Sibsagar in 1841. Mr. Jenkins invited the American Baptist Missionaries to promote education and Christianity in Assam, and he was the person who primarily advocated replacing
the Assamese language with Bengali in Assam.

It has already been mentioned how the American Baptist Missionaries arrived in Sadiya. Within three months of their arrival, the Missionaries instituted a school at Sadiya. They felt that the school was needed to teach the local people reading and understanding the Bible. The medium of language in the school was Assamese, Tai and English and the subjects taught were reading, writing and math. In the beginning, Dr. Brown also thought that the Assamese language was some form of Bengali language. But for the great linguist Brown, it took no time to realize that the Assamese was a sweet language, independent of Bengali, with distinct words and vocabulary.

Dr. Nathan Brown and Mr. Oliver T. Cutter carried a printing press with them when they arrived at Sadiya. The Baptist Missionaries established their printing press at Jaipur in 1839, which was later moved to Sibsagar in 1843. The establishment of the printing press actually ushered in the history of book printing in Assam, and of Assamese printed books.

The Missionaries understood clearly that without learning the Assamese language they would not be able to be closer to the Assamese. The Missionaries also understood that it would be a futile attempt to divert the Assamese people from the faith of deep rooted Hindu Vaishnava religion. However, they tried truthfully and dedicated their services to the Assamese people to help them establish their own language. Although the Missionaries had in mind to convert the people to the Christianity they worked relentlessly to establish the Assamese language, which
actually elevated the language to a contemporary modern style.

Observing the demoralized situation from the past unhappy situations, the Baptist Missionaries were determined to create consciousness in the Assamese society. The Missionaries wanted to work as a team for the re-establishment of the Assamese language.

The Baptist Missionaries started the publication of the *Orunodoi*, the newspaper-cum-magazine, from Sibsagar in January, 1846. From the beginning, the magazine described itself as "A monthly paper, devoted to Religion, Science and General Intelligence". Although religion was a part of the magazine, it was not used as a focal point. However materials on Christianity were published and news of the Baptist world were flashed. Under Science and General Intelligence, the paper tried to publish materials so that readers could get an extensive knowledge of the modern world. Various scientific topics, advancement of engineering and technological materials, were published to keep abreast the readers. Dr. M. Neog states:

It explained global geography and gave descriptions of the night sky with its stars and planets. The news of great events in India and in foreign countries were brought to the door of the Assamese even as they took place. They could have the intelligence of scientific inventions and discoveries in a simple and digestive form. Beyond all these somewhat startling matters, looking like coming from another world, which tended to reshape the Assamese mind, there were 'newsy' and 'sensational' matters from a familiar sphere meaning from different parts of Assam. The mind of the readers was thus treated to a very much rich fare (Neog 1983: 0.66).

The Missionaries studied the history of Assam and published the old chronicles in the *Orunodoi*. It campaigned against the social evils for example opium, rice beer, and others like polygamy, slavery and female infanticide. The creation of new writers,
both native Christians and others, along with the readers, formed a group of people with progressive minds. Although the Orumodoi was for the Assamese people, the editor did not publish any news or significant events that were political in nature. The Missionaries perhaps did not want to confront the British administration in their political affairs. But we see some exceptions to this in their fight for the eradication of the habit of opium eating and to re-establish the Assamese language in the place where it belonged.

The most important contribution of the Baptist Missionaries are the literary works in the Assamese language. They rehabilitated the language for the future generation, brought self confidence to the people of Assamese nation, encouraged the nation for hope and inspired the people to march to a new modern world. But to achieve this goal they had to struggle in a long battle with the British administration.

In 1872, a committee was formed under the name - 'Assam Language Improvement Society' for the purpose of re-instatement of Assamese in place of Bengali. The petition was signed by 216 persons, and Rev. Miles Bronson and Rev. K.E. Neighbor were also signatories. The petition was submitted to the Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon on 10th April 1872, by the Secretary of the Committee, Mr. Futtic Chunder. The text of the letter is as follows:

I am directed by the 'Assam Language Improvement Society' to forward to you the accompanying Memorial from the 'Assamese Community at Nowgong' to His Honour the Lieutt. Governor of Bengal, praying for the introduction of Assamese Language in the courts and schools of Assam, and to solicit the favour of your submitting the same for the consideration and orders of the Government of Bengal (Bhuyan 1990 : 16).
Dr. M. Neog refers to a memorandum dated March 9, 1872 in the *Orunodoi* that stated the public sentiment to reintroduce the Assamese language. Dr. Neog also cites that the memorandum was signed by 216 persons and submitted under the name - 'The humble Memorial of the Assamese Community of Nowgong, Assam' Dr. Neog states that Dr. Bronson himself led the agitation as the president of the community. Dr. F. S. Downs also states Rev. Bronson was president of the committee (Downs 1983: 248). Perhaps both the memorandums mentioned above are the same. Dr. Neog also adds: 'It can be easily referred that representations of a like nature came up from Sibsagar, Gauhati and other places through the inspiration of the Baptist leaders, and that all these memorials went to remove in an effective manner, the misgivings that were working inside the Government machinery, through the machinations of officer like William Robinson' (Neog 1983: 0.64).

A report - *A few remarks on the Assamese Language and a vernacular education in Assam* by a 'Native', was published from the American Baptist Mission Press, Sibsagar in 1855 and was distributed among the educated people of Assam. Undoubtedly this 'Native' was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Anandaram's report was written with facts covering all available applicable documents to justify establishing the Assamese language in place of Bengali. Anandaram's view points were very strong, appealing and justified. Following few references will establish the value of his report for the Assamese forever.

Anandaram quoted two passages in Assamese and Bengali having same meaning with their translations in English. At the end of the passage Anandaram
grouped the words under three categories - (a) the words that do not have the slightest affinity with the Bengali, (b) those words that bear some distant resemblance and (c) those words which are more or less similar. Out of a total of 287 words, 112 were in no way connected with Bengali, 98 were derived from Sanskrit, the common source of both the languages, and only 77 words were either derived from or had a resemblance to Bengali (Native 1855: 10).

To illustrate the distinctiveness of the Assamese language, he grouped another 114 Assamese words denoting the most common objects in nature, and used by all nations in daily life. Out of 114 words, 90 words did not have any connection whatever with Bengali, and of the rest, only a few had any resemblance to Bengali (Native 1855: 17).

Considering a conversation specimen of the colloquial language of Bengal and Assam, Anandaram illustrated that the significant differences were wider between the two languages. Using a specimen of writing, containing a large mixture of Sanskrit words, that be understood easily in other parts of India, Anandaram translated the writing into Hindi, Bengali and Assamese, and the result indicated that the words bore a close resemblance to each other. Considering this fact, probably Bengali should also replace Hindi.

Anandaram explicitly stated ‘--- it is by means of the language spoken and understood by all classes, that popular education can be successfully carried on : and, if this theory be correct, it can no longer be denied, that the Assamese ought to have their own language as the medium of acquiring knowledge’ (Native 1855: 27).
The first book that was placed in the hands of the Assamese youth, in the so-called Government Vernacular School was the Bengali primer - the first words which he or she learned to spell, are not those that he or she had been accustomed to hear or speak. Even by studying for four to five years, the students could not express their thoughts in Bengali correctly, nor they could translate correctly. Anandaram boldly expressed the manifold disadvantages of using a foreign language in the dispensation of justice.

Anandaram included in his report that Bengali was scarcely said to have existed as a written language until the beginning of nineteenth century. On the other hand, Assamese literature existed since the thirteen century of the Christian era. Anandaram documented all kinds of early Assamese literature in his report to support his cause.

Anandaram was a close friend of Rev. Bronson, and he worked closely with Bronson for the re-establishment of the Assamese language in Assam. The contribution of the American Baptist Missionaries in establishing the Assamese language in Assam will always be noted as a milestone. In Anandaram’s own words:

The American Missionaries of Assam, like their worthy brethren of Serampore, have been the only zealous supporters of the Assamese language during the last 20 years. It is to them, that we owe our first publications in Assamese; and the credit of reviving the Native language, is due to them alone. Long will the rising generation have cause to be thankful to the missionaries, for their timely efforts to preserve the language and literature of their country. While the missionaries have for their primary object, the issue of the Bible and Religious Tracts in Assamese, they have not forgotten the all important subject of education. They have published several elementary works in Assamese on History, Geography, Arithmetic, and other subjects; and an invaluable Monthly Magazine in Assamese, written a popular style, and devoted to
Religion, Science, and General Intelligence has been started and continued since 1846. Other useful and instructive works are also in course of preparation by them (Native 1855 : 56).

Rev. Bronson wrote a letter to the editor of *The Friends of India*, on May 25, 1855, expressing his views and concern for the unsatisfactory progress of education of Assam:

You are aware that the Assamese, like all other people, have a mother tongue; and you will not have forgotten that the Venerable Dr. Carey, who put forth the first efforts to benefit the Assamese, found it necessary to employ that medium, as his translation of the Assamese Scriptures and other works abundantly show. At a later period also when the Serampore Mission appointed Messrs Robinson and Rae to Assam, their opinion as to the necessity to use the Assamese language is evident from their having revised and printed Street Luke's Gospel and other works in Assamese.

Rev. Bronson even cited the example of Sankaradeva to justify the identity of Assamese language:

He [Sankaradeva] came down to the level of the people and translated from the Sanskrit these portions of the Hindu sacred books, and presented them to the people in their own familiar dialect. --- They took among them like wild fire, and are to this day increasingly popular (Neog 1983 : 0.64).

Rev. Bronson also mentioned from the experiences of the Missionaries, that both the Bengali medium and Bengali teachers were useless in the vernacular schools of Assam.

Rev. Brown left Assam in 1856. Rev. Bronson had to return home in 1857 for an illness in his family. Mr. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan passed away in 1859. Rev. Bronson returned to Assam in 1861 and resumed his old effort for the re-establishment of Assamese language.
Mr. A. J. Moffat Mills, Judge of the *Suddar Dewani and Nijamat Adawlat* was deputed to Assam during the early part of 1853 to inquire into the existing administrative condition of Assam. Mr. Mills submitted his 'Report on the Province of Assam', in 1854 to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal. Mr. Mill felt necessary to include the report - 'Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam' by Baboo Anandaram Dhekial Phukan as 'Appendix - J' to his report. It will be appropriate to quote the following from the report of the Dhekial Phukan under section 'Education and Schools'.

--- A certain number of institutions styled Vernacular schools has been established in the country. Instructions in these schools are imparted in a foreign language, viz., the Bengalee, which is but imperfectly understood by the teachers themselves, not to speak of the pupils. The education which they afford is of the simplest and most elementary kind; the students seldom aspire to a higher knowledge than a mere acquaintance with simple reading and writing. The few books that are used on the different branches of elementary learning are composed in a foreign tongue, which necessarily prevents their being of any popular use. Much time is in the first instance wasted in acquiring a knowledge of the Bengalee, and the reason assigned for the substitution of Bengalee for the vernacular Assamese, is, that 'Bengalee is the language adopted in the courts', as if the object were to make the Assamese a nation of judicial officers; and strange to say, notwithstanding the proposed object of the schools, very few ex-students of the Vernacular institutions in the interior have ever qualified themselves to fulfill offices of trust or responsibility in the courts of the Province. The knowledge which they acquire seldom makes them fit for discharging any higher duties than those of a Gaon Kakoti, or village accountant, so that very few youths from the respectable classes ever resort to them. The teachers, too, engaged in the Government Vernacular Schools are generally men ill qualified to impart instruction in any of the higher branches of knowledge. We therefore think that little argument is necessary to prove that popular education will never advance in the country unless the system at present pursued in the Vernacular schools be re-modelled. In our humble opinion, the following arrangements appear to be best calculated to promote the cause of education - viz., the substitution, in the schools, of the Vernacular language in lieu of the Bengalee, the publication of a series of popular works on the different branches of Native and European knowledge in the Assamese
language, the establishment of a Normal school to train up a body of teachers, and the creation of a separate department for the study of Sanskrit in the several Vernacular schools (Mills 1984: 105-106).

In his long report Mr. Mills supported and endorsed the views of Mr. Phukan. Mr. Mills clearly states in his report that it was a mistake on the part of the British administration to insert the Bengali language and he recommended for re-instatement of the Assamese. He also honoured Dr. Brown as a best scholar in the province. Text of paragraphs 92 and 93 in his report states thus:

That the Schools have not done more good is attributable to the indifference of the higher classes to instruction, but more particularly to inefficient schoolmasters, the want of proper class-books, and defective supervision; but there is I think good cause for the unpopularity of our schools. 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 would strongly recommend Anundaram Phookun'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 acquires 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.

The American Missionaries have published some elementary educational works in Assamese, and would readily undertake to publish more, so that the change might be introduced at once (Mill 1984: 27-28).
The contribution of the American Baptist Missionaries towards the rehabilitation of Assamese language is so significant that all the Assamese have to acknowledge it forever. The Baptist Missionaries were the pioneers in so many aspects of modern Assamese language and literature. Their pioneering works in public relations, installation of a printing press, the modern style of writing prose, literature in the field of novels and poems, children literature, collection of old manuscripts and their publication, writing of dictionary and grammar and their publication, text books, book review etc. will always be recognized as a golden gift of the Baptist Missionaries to the Assamese language and literature. Dr. Brown truthfully made the statement: 'For beauty and softness, the Assamese language is much superior to the Bengali ------ It is not inferior, in copiousness, to any of the Indian languages' (Bhuyan 1986: 51).

The vast literary works of the Baptist Missionaries may be divided into two classes - secular and non secular, or into three divisions - religious works, literary pieces and text books.

The first printed book in Assamese was the *Old Testament* of the Bible which was translated by Atmaram Sarma, a pundit from Nagaon, under the direction of Dr. William Carey, and was published from Serampore Missionaries Press of Bengal in 1813. However, Cary's Assamese Bible was loaded with Sanskrit vocables and the Assamese could not understand its contents. Rev. Brown therefore undertook a plan to rewrite an Assamese version in January 1838. It took a long time to complete, and publication was only done after the translation passed through several hands.
The printing press of the American Baptist Missionaries was established by 1844 in Sibsagar. In the same year, the Missionaries printed the first History of Assam, compiled by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan and Radhanath Barbaruwa. In January 1846 the first Assamese journal, the *Orunodoi*, was published from the Sibsagar Mission Press which was continued up to 1882.

The first Assamese grammar was written by Rev. W. Robinson in 1839, which was published by the Serampore Mission Press. The first grammar was written in English with specimens of Assamese language in Roman character. Rev. Robinson, who was always against the Assamese language, did this pioneer work not for his love of the Assamese language, but so that other British officers stationed in Assam could learn the language for public relations and administrative purposes. On the contrary, Dr. Nathan Brown, the scholar and linguist, loved the Assamese language from his heart. Dr. Brown had his grammar published in 1848 from the Sibsagar Mission Press. In the introduction, Dr. Brown expresses that he wrote the book under the title *Grammatical Notes on the Assamese Language* for his private use. In case of orthography, Dr. Brown followed the rules maintained by Jaduram Dekabarua, who ventured the first Assamese dictionary which was not published.

Dr. Brown prepared the grammar by following the style of English grammar. Due to this view, the initial Assamese grammar had a touch of modern style of English grammar. Dr. Brown in his preface to the *Grammatical Notes on the Assamese Language* (1840), advanced certain irrefutable arguments justifying the rehabilitation of the Assamese language, and these arguments became the basis of the missionary
campaign for the cause. Dr. Brown specifically discussed some Assamese words which could not be pronounced in Bengali. Some of the letters (like ৰ) used in Assamese were absent in Bengali.

Dr. Nathan Brown published the *New Testament* in Assamese in 1848 which was reprinted four times until 1873 (Neog, 1982: 343). The fifth edition was printed in 1898 from Calcutta. Another work of Brown - *Khrishitar Vivaran Aru Subhavarta*, was published from Sibsagar in 1854. Out of about 330 hymns rendered into Assamese, as many as 60 were done by Dr. Brown. He wrote several other books. From his missionary experiences in Assam, he wrote *The Whole Walford Kin*, which includes vivid descriptions of Assam. Another important work of Dr. Brown was that he collected the old manuscripts (chronicles) in 1840. The details of these manuscripts are added in chapter V. The Sanskrit Arithmetic of Lilavati rendered into Assamese verse by Bokul Kayastha, was published by Dr. Nathan Brown in 1845.

The most important monumental contribution of Dr. Miles Bronson to Assamese literature is his Anglo-Assamese Dictionary containing about 14,000 pure Assamese words with their equivalent English words. It was published in 1867. Dr. Bronson's dedicated labour to this work helped in re-establishment of the Assamese language. His valuable preface in his dictionary is a historical document in Assamese literature. Dr. Bronson states:

Assamese is the language usually spoken by the entire population of the Brahmaputra valley, and in most cases it is the only medium of intercourse with the bordering hill tribes. There is nothing to show that the Assamese race and their language have not existed in this Valley from time immemorial; and it is surprising that during the change of rulers, the oppression and misrule to which they have been subjected, there are no traces of any material change in their
language. The Ahoms, a branch of the great Shan or Thai race, conquered Assam at an early period, and governed it for many hundred years, until it passed into the hands of the present Government; but scarcely a trace of their language is found in the Assamese. The Burmese, Muhammadans, and powerful Cachari tribes have in turn waged war upon Assam without affecting the language. This may serve to show the love of a people for their own tongue (Neog 1982:347).

Even after publication of the dictionary, mischievous attempts were made by reactionaries who were against the Assamese language. It was argued that most of the words in his dictionary were Bengali. The Government forwarded the dictionary to the eminent Bengali scholar Mr. R. C. Dutt. Mr. Dutt reported that Assamese was a distinctly different language although some words indicated a resemblance. Mr. Dutt further states:

I have hardly been able to make out even the purport of the Assamese preface to this Dictionary. I have known an educated young Assamese for many years, and I could never understand him when he spoke Assamese, or quoted from Assamese poetry (Neog 1982:348).

The other Baptist missionar y writers who contributed to the Assamese language also deserve appreciation from the Assamese people: The contributions of Rev. P.H. Moore, Rev. Cutter, Rev. Ward, Rev. Gurney deserve special attention. Mrs. Cutter published her Assamese Words and Phrases. Rev. William Ward was a poet and translator of many Christian Psalms. Rev. Gurney had significant contribution in rendering the Old Testament which published in 1899, and for his book Kamini Kantar Charitra, which is considered as the first Assamese novel. Mrs. Eliza Brown contributed with her Gananar Kitap (1845), First Story-Book for Juveniles in Assamese (1840) and First Reading Book in Assamese (1842). Nidhi Levi Farwell,
the first Assamese convert, contributed to Assamese literature with his consistent writing in the Orunodoi. His Bharatiya Dandabidhi Ain was published in 1865. Farwell wrote on different subjects such as history, story-book, and poems. He also translated Christian devotional songs into Assamese.

We can see that the abundant literary contributions of the Baptist Missionaries lay the foundation of modern Assamese literature.

Due to the leadership of the American Baptist Missionaries and their dedication to Assamese literary work, along with the support of the educated Assamese people, specifically from Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, the Assamese got back their own Assamese language.

On 25 July 1873, the Lieutenant-Governor issued orders under Act XXIX of 1837, which gave powers to the Governor-General-in-Council to order the use of any language and script other than Persian, and Section 337 of the Criminal Procedure Code which called for the use of Assamese in Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts in Law courts and in all matters concerning revenue. Moreover, the Resolution of the General Department (Education) dated 12 April 1873, set forth the Government’s decision to use Assamese in place of Bengali in all primary schools, while the middle and high schools also were to have the same rule (Neog 1983: 0.65).

The Assamese came to gain from the relentless struggle of the American Baptist Missionaries to reestablish the Assamese language. But why were the Missionaries involved so extensively in the language agitation? It was not an objective
of their mission. Were they motivated by patriotic feelings? We cannot support this idea based on their other activities. Perhaps it was a coincidence that they got involved in the agitation which was backed by the feelings of justice that they carried in their heart from America. The Baptist Missionaries in general had a soft spot for the poor of the society in comparison to the elite. Perhaps in the name of God they worked so hard for the restoration of the legitimate status of the Assamese language - for them it was an act of piety to end an injustice.
Notes & References

1. A statement of printing, executed at the American Baptist Mission Press, Sibsagar, from January 1, 1846 to September 30, 1851 is added as Appendix - D.