DEVELOPMENT OF VERNACULAR:

(A) Evolution of Script and Art of Writing:

(i) Origin of Indian alphabets:

Scholastic research is not unanimous regarding the origin of Indian alphabets. 1 Although some scholars have opined that the Indian script is an adaptation of the foreign script, Dowson maintains that the circumstantial evidences lead us to the conclusion that the alphabets are of Indian origin. 2 It is now commonly agreed that Indian scripts originated from Brahmi which had been used since the vedic period. 3 But the scholars are yet to decipher the prehistoric pictographs in order to confirm whether the said script was used in the pre-vedic period. 4

1. (a) Buhler, J.G., Indian palaeography, pp. 2, 6-9.
   (c) Keay, F.E., Indian Education in Ancient and later times, 1932, p. 33.
   (d) Rhys Davids, T.W., Buddhist India, 1903, p. 107.
2. Dowson, J.R.A.S., XLI, pp. 102 f.
4. (a) Mitra, P., I.A., 1919, pp. 57-64.
   (b) Dasgupta, H.C., J.R.A.S., 1921, pp. 210-222.
(ii) Origin of Assamese Alphabets: -

The origin of the Assamese scripts cannot be viewed separately from the Indian script. As in the case of Indian script, the Assamese script also originated from Brahmi and Devanagari through successive stages until it reached its final form. According to some historians, the Assamva script is a member of the Kutila branch of Gupta group of the Brahmi family of alphabet along with her utrine sister Maithili.

The Assamese script in the earliest times was known as Devanagari, rather than North Indian Brahmi. The art of writing was known in Assam as early as the sixth century A.D., if not earlier as proved by the grant of Bhutivarman. The process of evolution of both the script and the language continued until it had an individualised and independent script of its own. The Assamese script took their present shape in the 13th century, referring to which P.C. Choudhury in his book, The History of civilisation of the people of Assam to the twelfth century, A.D., has remarked, "It may be noted that in most of the inscriptions

of the period under review, composed in Devanagari, rather than North Indian Brahmi, and in Sanskrit language, not only do we notice Assamese aksharas but also words and expressions which are found in modern Assamese almost in their present forms. In the Kanaivarasi Rock inscription of North Guwahati, dated Saka 1127, we find specimens of few Assamese characters. Along with Brahmi, characters approximating the old Assamese alphabets are found even in the old inscriptions as those of Khanikargaon and on the Hari-Hara as well as Vishnu icons from Deopani. It is evident therefore that Assamese alphabets had taken more or less their present forms around the 12th century A.D.  

Although epigraphs were composed both in Brahmi and Devanagari scripts, in manuscript writing the Brahmi script was invariably used; and these manuscripts provide us with a wealth of the Assamese script. Tracing the distinctive character of the manuscripts from the wide variety of manuscripts, S.K. Bhuyan, in his Studies in the Literature of Assam has remarked, "Its (scripts) difference from Bengali consists in several letters; but at present only the letters "¥" and "©" have maintained the distinction between the two alphabets. The letter "©" is a reproduction of "ë" with a small dash projecting from the

bottom of the letter. The letters "न" and "ष" are sometimes indistinguishable, though some copysts put a dot below "न" in order to represent "न". In many manuscripts "अ,आ,ऋ,ॠ,ऌ,ॢ,ॣ" and "ऋ" approach their Sanskrit prototypes, more than their modern Assamese equivalents. Words written at one stretch without demarcation from each other by the necessary gap present enormous difficulties to uninitiated reader. The habituated copyist or reader has in these cases, to read the next by anticipation, which is possible only when he is intimately acquainted with the contents or allied subjects. Thus manuscript reading and copying were confined to a fixed and trained class of people. There were several schools of Assamese script viz, Gargaonya, Bamunia, Lakhari and Kaithali, but their distinctions have not been closely studied and they have a tendency now to merge into one another, thus more or less, producing a common script, which has further been accelerated by the uniformity of the printing press. In fact, the early evolution of the Assamese script explains for its universal use in production of both Assamese and Sanskrit manuscripts.

(iii) Evolutionary Process :-

The Hastayurveda written in Assam by the sage Palakapya confirms evolution of a system of writing, without which

such compilations would not have been possible. The system of writing in Assam must have been very old and evidenced by the inscriptions found in the greater Kamrup area (then Pragjyotish kingdom). The script falls within the range of the Brahmi of the eastern variety; and it developed independently in certain areas from the Brahmi scripts undergoing, as time advanced, changes with cultural exchanges and fresh migration. The rapidity with which a particular script could be written showed the progress of a particular community achieved in cultural fields. This possibly led the people to develop a more cursive style in writing. Originally figures of some of the animals as living beings were symbolically used in writing. These writings were possibly connected with a form of early tantric religion. In fact, the Brahmi script in course of time began to give-up their fixed forms and developed in a certain order throughout Northern India and in a different order in South India. These became known as the North Indian and South Indian varieties of the Brahmi scripts.

The Northern variety of Brahmi script underwent further changes in Kamrup. As a matter of fact, Kamrupia scripts

1. Pandey, R.B., Indian Palaeography, pp.18-19.
were developed from the days of the earliest inscriptions and were channelised into two slightly different streams of writing, the Kamrupi proper and the Assam script, after the introducing of two political regimes at two different areas in the beginning of the early medieval period.\(^1\)

(B) Evolution of Language and Literature:

(i) Assamese - an independent speech.

Like Bengali and Oriya, Assamese belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of languages. The vernacular languages of North India branched directly out of apabhramśas of Prakrit, not Sanskrit, referring to which Max Muller, in his "lectures on the science of Language" has remarked that these languages must be considered as descendants not of grammatical Sanskrit, nor of grammatical Prakrit but of various apabhramśas, spoken in different parts of India.\(^2\) Grierson traces the origin of the Assamese language to the eastern variety of Magadhan Prakrit from which group sprang the Bengali, Oriya and Bihari.\(^3\)

2. Max Muller, op. cit, pp. 179-80.
Because of the common origin there is found to be some similarity among these languages; and this similarity is very much striking between the Bengali and Assamese in view of which some scholars had the wrong impression that Assamese is an offshoot of Bengali. But this misconception has been removed by the Historical researches of G.A. Grierson, B.K. Kakati, S.K. Chatterji, P.C. Choudhury and others who established with evidences that Assamese is an independent speech having experienced a process of evolutionary growth since the earliest period.

The Assamese took an independent character in the ancient period. The Chinese traveller noted in the 7th century that the language of Assam was different from that spoken in mid-India. It is therefore evident that as early as in the 7th century, the Assamese had already branched-off from Magadhi Prakrit as an independent language. Taking care from the remarks of Hiuen Tsang, S.K. Chatterji remarks that in the middle of the 7th century, "there was one language spoken in Bihar and Bengal;"

   b) Aspects of early Assamese literature, G.U., 1953 p.3
only in Assam there was distinction,  

and while classifying the eastern Apabhramsa into sub-group, he placed Assamese into a separate class alone by itself. According to him there were four sub-groups of eastern Apabhramsa. These were (1) Radha dialects from which sprang western Bengali (calcatian) and oriya (2) Varendra dialects of North-central Bengal (3) Vanga dialects comprising of the dialects of east Bengal and (4) Kamrup dialects consisting of the dialects of Assam and North Bengal. It is, therefore, clear that Assamese has its independent existence not only in the evolutionary process of the formative period but also in its origin rooted in the dim past.

(ii) Formative Stage :-

S.K. Bhuyan in his book "Studies in the Literature of Assam" has tried to show with historical evidences that there were plentitude of book production in ancient Assam. His idea is based on two genuine historical grounds - (1) First, the style of expression in Nidhanpur copper plate, Harjara varma's copper-plate and Ratnapala's copper plate reveals the existence of a high

degree of intellect and humanism capable of production of literary master-pieces (2) Secondly, several volumes of fine writings were presented by King Bhaskaravarman to Emperor Harshavarman of Kanauj, which speak of book-production. Two outstanding contributions of the non-literary period are "Dakar bacher Vedar vani" containing the sayings of the natural philosopher, Dak who is believed to have flourished in Lihidangara in Barpeta, and "Baudhaga gan-o-doha" in which some of the poets of Kamrup are believed to have made rare contributions. Intensive historical research is likely to throw more light on the literary achievements of ancient Assam.

According to S.K. Bhuyan, the Assamese literature, in the strict sense of the term, came into existence in the thirteenth century. The Assamese language was cultivated in the royal court of Durhabhanarayana, the king of Kamata, who possibly ruled at the middle of the 14th Century A.D. The Kamata kings encouraged poets to write verses in Assamese. Both Haribni Vipra and Hem Sarasuati who were contemporaries praised king Durhabhanarayana for his patronage. About the same period Madhava Kendali undertook the stupendous work of translating the whole of the Sanskrit

3. Ibid, p.5.
epic Ramayana into Assamese verse. A great Sanskrit scholar, Madhava Kandali was the court poet of king Mahamanikya and was known also as Kaviraja Kandali. Of vernacular translations of Valmiki Ramayana, Madhava Kandali's appears to be the earliest. Hindi, Bengali and Oriya versions appeared about a century and a half later."¹ Sankaradeva who recreated the Assamese literature at a later period was also greatly influenced by the great poets of the early middle ages in Assam.

There are definite marks of vaisnavism in the early literature of Assam, but the early Vaisnava writers did not emphasize the worship of Vishnu, rather they glorified the Vaisnava pantheon, on Prahlad and Ramchandra. Referring to the historical significance of these writers, S.K. Bhuyan has written, "In a way they were precursors of the Vaisnava revival, and they paved the path for ushering in the great out-burst of devotion, music and poetry of the age of Sankaradeva who, in humility paid compliments to this preceding band of unerring poets, "Purva Kavi apramadi", compared himself to a rabbit in the presence of an elephant."²

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¹ Basu, N.K., Assam in the Ahom Age, p. 260.
(iii) Period of Efflorescence:

The neo-vaishnava literature that grew under the influence of the great reformer Sankaradeva has been considered as blossoms of renaissance in Assamese literature by Dimbeswar Neog in his book "New light on History of Asamiya literature".¹

Since the Sankarite movement ushered in an era of unprecedented advancements of literature, art and culture amounting to what may be appropriately called "Revival of learning" referring to which the same scholar has said. "The period under review also synchronises with the Age of Renaissance (1400-1550) and the Elizabethan period (1550-1620) and the Puritan Age (1620-1660) of English literature taken together. Curiously enough, Assamese literature of this period, reveals almost all the main characteristics and prominent trains of these three periods of English literature. Firstly, like the Age of English Renaissance it is "the most volcanic period" in the history of Assam, when "man discovered himself and the universe" had "suddenly opened his eyes and seen", Orthodoxy or old authority.... people became curious, for a new intellectual horizon opened before his eyes. Secondly,

¹ Neog, D., New light on History of Asamiya Literature, p.122.
like the glorious elizabethan period of English literature, it was in Assamese literature too "an age of great thought and great action" and "marked by a strong national spirit, by patriotism, by religious literature, by social content, by intellectual progress and by unbounded patriotism." Thirdly, like the puritan movement, in England, the vaisnavite Age may be considered as "a rebirth of moral nature of man following the intellectual awakening" or "the greatest moral ... reform which even swept over a nation." ¹

The great Vaisnava reformer Sankaradeva was born in 1449 A.D. He began to compose literary works in propagation of his tenets towards the close of the century. He also composed religious songs and dramas which contain a large admixture of Brajabuli idioms. Sankaradeva's greatness was not only in composing masterpieces, but also in inspiring a number of writers among his followers.

The vaisnava literature made tremendous contribution for the cause of education, referring to which Bani Kanta Kakati has remarked "The enthusiasm for making scriptures accessible to the people in vernacular was so great that sometimes after

¹ Neog, D., NHAL, pp. 124-125.
Sankaradeva a certain teacher of the school of Sankaradeva named Bhatta Deva translated the entire Bhagavat Gita and the Bhagavat Puran into Assamese prose in about 1593. As S. Barkakati has said, Sankaradeva’s example was followed by a host of writers, the chief among whom was his disciple Madhavdeva. The profuse literary out-put of Sankaradeva’s school during this period known as vaisnavite period of Assamese literary history, also consists mainly of translations and adaptations from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Bhagavat Puran. The object of all these voluminous literature was religious, i.e., the propagation of Bhakti cult and monism as opposed to old Brahminical tantricism.

Sankaradeva’s message was like a clarion call rousing the entire people from torpor to a level of consciousness instilling into their hearts a deep yearning to know the unknown through the path of self-surrender, and in doing so he was successful in introducing people’s education, and considering this signal contribution to the cause of democratisation of education a whole chapter has been devoted to the role of Sankaradeva as an


educator at the end of the investigation.\textsuperscript{1}

(iv) Royal Patronage:

The medieval Assam saw the rise and fall of many kingdoms such as the kingdom of Chutiyas, the kingdom of Kamata, the Koch kingdom and Ahom kingdom. The earliest of the medieval rulers, the Chutiyas were Mongolians who migrated into Assam from China and Tibet in some remote past,\textsuperscript{2} and originally they had their own culture, religion and language of Bodo groups. But in course of time the royal family was Hinduised; and after the Ahom conquest of the kingdom, the Chutiyas who failed to develop their own language and literature adopted the Ahom language and finally switched over to the Assamese tongue along with the Ahom.\textsuperscript{3}

Durlabhanarayana (1330 - 1350) the ruler of Kamata encouraged the men of letters of his time to compose books in Kamrupi language.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Chatterji, S.K., 'the Eka-saran Dharma of Sankaradeva the Greatest Expression of Assamese Spiritual outlook,' 'Sankaradeva' edited by B.P. Chaliha, Guwahati, 1978.
   p. 6.
\item Barua, B.K., Assamese Language and early Assamese Literature, Aspects of the Heritage of Assam, pp. 56 ff.
\item (a) Kakati, B.K., Assamese - its Formation and Development, pp. 13 - 17.
   (b) Neog, M., Asamiya Sahityar Ruparekha, pp. 13 - 19.
\end{enumerate}
Under his patronage Kamrupi poets such as Hema Sarasvati, Kabiratna Sarasvati and Haribar Vipra composed poems in the Kamrupi language. The Koch kings exercised tremendous influence over the medieval Assam in the sixteenth century. Naranarayan the greatest of the Koch rulers was a peace-loving man, and leaving the reins of the kingdom to his brother Chilarai, he devoted himself to peaceful pursuits of art and literature. He patronised not only Sanskrit learning but also the culture of the vernacular, because of which some of the best books of the early medieval period was written during his reign. However, his greatest contribution lay in royal encouragement to Sankaradeva who had to take refuge at Barpeta because of the hostilities of the Brahmins of the Ahom kingdom where he first began his reformation movement.

The greatest literary progress was made under the patronage of Ahom rulers. The Ahoms originally came to Assam with their own language and culture, but in course of time they assimilated the language and culture of the subject peeples, and began to patronise the production

3. Kakati, B.K., AFD, p.16.
The greatest contribution of the Ahom rule is the production of Buranjis. Chronicles of the court and other documents were originally written down in Ahom language. "But as the bulk of the subjects who were Assamese speaking could not understand the alien language, the practice was developed of writing these records and land grant charters both in Ahom and Assamese. Later on, this policy was also given up and Assamese completely replaced the Ahom language. The 'Ahom' speakers merged themselves with the Aryan - Assamese speaking population." As Grierson has observed, "The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India, as a rule, is curiously deficient. This historical works or Buranjis are numerous and voluminous. Knowledge of Buranjis was an indispensable qualification to an Assamese gentleman." Closely allied to this notable branch of literature was vamsavalis which are genealogical history of families.

   b) - do - Assamiya Bhasha Aru Sanskriti, 1985, pp. 21-22.  
Ahom age is fruitful not only in the production of historical literature but also in creation of various other forms of creative literature in Assamese such as secular literature consisting of panegyrical lyrics and writings on erotics and sexology.¹ The Ahom kings were mainly instrumental in production of volumes of translation works. Under the patronage of Rudra Singha and Siva Singha, Kaviraj Chakravarty, the poet laureate translated Brahmavaivarta Puran, Sankha-chura-vadha, Gita-Govinda and Sakuntala kavya. Under the patronage of Rajeswar Singha, a portion of Brahmaivaivarta Puran was translated by Durgesvar Dwija.² It was however Hayanarayana of the Darrang-Raj family who patronised the translation of the whole of the Brahmaivaivarta Puran.³ Ruchinath Kandali was encouraged by Rudra Singha to translate the Chandi episode from Markandeya Puran. The poet also composed Kalika Puran.⁴ Some portions of Mahabharata were also translated under royal patronage. When the royal court came under Sakta influence with the advent of the Tungkhungias a body of Sakta hymns was composed under royal patronage.⁵ The Ahom kings also

1. Neog, M., Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha, p.179.
encouraged composition and staging of dramas.¹

Ahom rulers were mainly instrumental in the development of Assamese prose. The Ahom Buranjis were written in Tâî Ahom prose.² The Assamese writers in translating these works felt the utility of prose in utilitarian writings and the limitation of poetry in making exact, precise and accurate expressions as evidenced in the 'Darrang-Rajvamsavali' and 'Assamor Padya Bruanjî', prompted the medieval historians to compose Buranjis and vamsavalis in prose at the instance of Ahoms.³ Perhaps the Ahoms made the greatest contribution in the development of Assamese prose, and a systematic treatment of the development of Assamese prose is made in the following paragraphs considering that prose has become the only medium for imparting and receiving formal education.

(v) Development of Prose:

Development of prose is the most significant event in the educational history of Assam. Acquisition of knowledge is one of the principal aims of education, and prose is the most

2. a) Basu, N.K., AAA, pp. 268-269. 
suitable vehicle for dissemination of knowledge. The development of prose in the later part of the medieval age ushered in an era of mass communication. Since prose is the serviceable medium for exchange of ideas and expression of the material needs of life, the development of prose marked the intellectual maturity of the Assamese society. It also opened up vast possibilities in the field of education.¹

Attempts at writing in prose were first made in the sixteenth century and this literary practice gradually became extensive in the closing years of seventeenth century when Buranjis and Carit puthis were composed in prose.² But poetry predominated the whole of the seventeenth century. It was in the eighteenth century that prose became the dominant form of literary expression. Besides Buranjis, Carit puthis and Land grants, prose made its appearance in various other literary writings. Besides scriptures and religious texts many Sanskrit books were translated into Assamese prose at the instance of Ahom kings. They related to medicine, astronomy, arithmetic, dance and architecture. In them Assamese prose used as "medium for utilitarian

1. Barua, B.K., Asamiya Katha Sahitya, Guwahati, 1976, p.31
2. a) Dutta, D., HA, p. 144
   b) Kakati, B., AFD, pp. 13-17
knowledge. There were literaray-cum-technical documents and important specimens of contemporary prose for scientific expression. Most important was Hastividyarnava of Sukumar Barkath, compiled in 1734 under the order of king Siva Singh and his consort Queen Ambikadevi. Along with texts on medicine, were compiled books on astrology and divination both in Sanskrit and Assamese. Treatises on medicine included chapters on astrology also, as they discussed actual nature of diseases.¹

The above quotation shows the immense potentiality of Assamese in production of scientific and scholarly treatises in the medieval age and these would have served well the purpose of study materials in formal education if an indigenous system of education would have developed in Assam in absence of the English system introduced by the British.

(C) Power of Assimilation:—

The Assamese language has displayed tremendous power of assimilation. It has grown and developed through assimilation of various elements from diverse sources. Like the composite character of the Assamese culture its language has also absorbed

¹ Basu, N.K., AAA, pp. 269-270.
these various elements and like the Bodo and Austric elements constitute an essential substratum of Assamese vocabulary. In fact both Aryan and non-Aryan like Austric and Tibeto-Burmans have contributed in substantial measure to the development of the Assamese language. K.R. Medhi in his Assamese grammar has shown by preparing a list that there were words of Mundari, Santali, Gond, Juong, Khasi, Mikir, Chutia, Garo, Kachari, Latin and Zend origin in Assamese vocabulary. Although Assamese literature was profoundly influenced by the Sanskrit literature, the translations from which initiated the process of development of literary works, other influences also were at work during its formative period. Foremost amongst which was influence of Ahom language and literature about which reference has already been made in the fore-going paragraphs. Next comes the Islamic influence on Assamese literature.

(D) Islamic influence :-

Ahom-Mughal war ended by the middle of the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and in the beginning of the

2. Ibid, pp. 22-25
eighteenth century cultural exchanges began to take place between Assam and the Mughal India mainly due to the patronage of king Rudra Singha (1696 - 1716) and it was probably during his reign and in the following period that some of the most popular works especially of a profane and secular nature found their way into Assam through the Muslims and other settlers. There is however no direct evidence that any such work has been translated. Based on Sufi religious preachings, the Jikir and Jari Songs grew up in Assamese.

In tracing the love-themes in Assamese literature prof. M. Neog states "Some poets searched for fresh love-themes in literary pastures. One such new love romance is Ram Dvija's Mricaavati Charita, a work corresponding to the Sufi work of the same name written in A.D. 1500 by Kutban. It also appears that the poet was familiar with some elements of Jaya's Radmavat and the Jaina poet Maladharin Deva-prabta's Mrigvati Charita, a work based on the popular Udyanana legened. Another Sufi poem similar to Mrigvati is Madhamalati by Monjan."

The profound devotion of the man of letters in the medieval Assam to literature and learning led to the production of volumes of manuscripts of varying sizes and forms and it is through these manuscripts that the knowledge and civilisation of one generation was transformed to the other and the next and so on and so forth. These were the chief carriers of civilization in middle ages; and in those days when there were no printed books, the manuscripts were most essential for spreading education among the people.
Assamese alphabets during 13th Century
(Kanai-barasi-Rock inscription)

Assamese alphabets during 16th Century
(Nilachal Kamakhya rock inscription)
Assamese alphabets of 18th Century
(Brahmatra as Dowry copper plate inscription)