



Research Unit

Press Information Bureau

Government of India

Classical Status Granted to Assamese Language

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Introduction

Language is a vital component of individual development and plays a significant role in shaping culture. Through language, people often cultivate their sense of identity and pride. India is a vibrant tapestry of countless languages and dialects. To protect and promote these languages, the government has introduced various initiatives, including the conferral of classical status to select languages. Recently, the cabinet approved the inclusion of five additional languages in this prestigious category, one of which is Assamese. This decision marks a significant milestone in the preservation and promotion of Assamese literature and culture.

History

The people of Assam, known as "Asomiya" (or Assamese), share a rich linguistic heritage that reflects the state's cultural identity. Assamese, the official language of Assam, has its roots in Sanskrit, with its development tracing back to as early as the 7th century A.D. Its direct ancestor, however, is the Magadhi Apabhramsa, a dialect closely linked to the Eastern Prakrit. Linguist G.A. Grierson noted that Magadhi was the predominant dialect of the region, while the eastern counterpart, Pracya Apabhramsa, spread south and southeast, ultimately evolving into modern Bengali. As Pracya Apabhramsa expanded eastward, it crossed north of the Ganges and reached the Assam valley, where it transformed into Assamese.¹

There are various theories regarding the origin and evolution of the Assamese language. Scholars such as Grierson, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, and Banikanta Kakati believe that Assamese belongs to the Magadhi-Prakrit group. In contrast, others, like Beni Madhab Barua and Dimbeshwar Neog, argue that it has roots in the Kamrupi-Prakrit. The esteemed grammarian Kaliram Medhi posited that Assamese is a hybrid of both eastern and western Prakrit dialects.

¹ <https://www.indianculture.gov.in/rarebooks/linguistic-survey-india-vol-i-0> Page No. 125-126 of Indian Linguistic Survey

The earliest recorded mention of Assamese can be found in the *Katha Gurucharit*. The etymology of the term "Axomiya" (Assamese) is subject to diverse interpretations; some scholars link it to geographical features, while others connect it to the Ahom dynasty, which ruled the region for six centuries. The Brahmaputra valley, including North Bengal, is referred to as Pragjyotishpura in the *Mahabharata* and as Kamrupa in the pillar inscription of Samudragupta from the fourth century A.D. The anglicized term "Assam" originated from "Axom," denoting the Brahmaputra valley, and from this evolved "Assamese," referring to the language spoken in the region. By the eighth century A.D., Assamese was already flourishing as a language. Assamese shares a common linguistic heritage with Oriya and Bengali, all of which descended from the same parent dialect, Magadhi Apabhramsa.²

A pivotal moment in the language's history occurred during the 1959-60 language revolt, which led to Assamese being declared the official language of the state. In 1987, the Assam Official Language (Translation of Central Laws) Commission was established to facilitate the translation of all central laws from the Central Government to the Assam Government. Once these translations were authenticated by the President, they were published in the Official Gazette by the Legislative Department of Assam, further cementing Assamese as a language of governance in the state.³

Literary Contribution of Assamese Language

The earliest example of pre-modern Assamese script can be found in the *Charyapadas*, which are ancient Buddhist Tantric texts composed by Buddhist Siddhacharyas and dated between the 8th and 12th centuries. The *Charyapadas* share a close relationship with Assamese and other Magadhan languages, shedding light on the evolutionary phases of several Indian languages. The vocabulary found in the *Charyapadas* contains words that are distinctly Assamese. Furthermore, in terms of phonetics and morphology, the vocabulary closely resembles typical Assamese words, many of which have persisted into the contemporary language.

The history of Assamese literature can be divided into five distinct periods:

- (a) **The Formative Phase (800-1300 A.D.):** This period features the esoteric verses of the Buddhist *Charyapadas* and the Sanskrit *Srikrishna Kirtan* literature.
- (b) **The Pre-Vaishnavite Literature (1300-1550 A.D.):** This era includes the works of Hem Saraswati, Madhav Kandali, Harihar Vipra, Kaviratna Saraswati, and Rudra Kandali.
- (c) **The Era of Sankari or Vaishnavite Literature (1550-1650 A.D.):** This period marks the crystallization of a fully distinct form of Assamese.

² <https://bhasharesearch.org/plsi/scheduled-languages#id-1f3b5e507158>

³ [https://legislative.assam.gov.in/portlets/assam-official-language-wing#:~:text=Translated%20Central%20Act%20\(Assamese%20Version\)&text=The%20Assam%20Official%20Language%20\(Translation%20of%20Central%20Laws\)%20Commission%20was,control%20of%20the%20Legislative%20Department.](https://legislative.assam.gov.in/portlets/assam-official-language-wing#:~:text=Translated%20Central%20Act%20(Assamese%20Version)&text=The%20Assam%20Official%20Language%20(Translation%20of%20Central%20Laws)%20Commission%20was,control%20of%20the%20Legislative%20Department.)

(d) **Post-Sankardeva Era Literature (1650-1850 A.D.):** This period encompasses the *Buranjis* (chronicles of the Ahom court), *Charit* (religious biographies), and the emergence of modern Assamese writing.

(e) **Contemporary (Modern) Era (1830 onwards):** This period witnessed the evolution of standard Assamese, with the influence of pre- and post-missionary literature. It also saw the development of new genres such as drama and novels, reflected in the works of Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, and Jonaki-era literature, with the language continuing to evolve to the present day.⁴

Assamese Awards and Recognition

The Sahitya Akademi, renowned for honoring literary contributions in various languages, was officially inaugurated by the Government of India on 12 March 1954. The first Assamese work to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award was *Bana Phool*, a poetry collection by Jatindranath Dowerah, in 1955. More recently, in 2023, Dr. Pranavjyoti Dekar was honored with the Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of short stories titled *Srestha Galpa*. These recognitions highlight the rich literary tradition of Assam and the ongoing contributions of its authors.

Impact of Status

The conferral of classical status to the Assamese language holds significant importance for its preservation and promotion. This recognition acknowledges the rich literary heritage and historical significance of Assamese. Classical status enhances the language's prestige, fostering a renewed interest in its literature, culture, and linguistic studies. It also paves the way for government support in the form of funding and resources for research, education, and cultural initiatives, ensuring that the language is not only preserved but also thrives in contemporary society. Overall, the classical status serves as a vital catalyst for the continued development and vitality of the Assamese language.

⁴ <https://bhasharesearch.org/plsi/scheduled-languages#id-1f3b5e507158>

Reference

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