# The Contributions of the Christian Missionaries to Modern Assamese Language and Literature

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**Abstract**

The Baptist Missionaries who came to Assam in 1836, contributed to the Assamese social life in various aspects. Primarily, coming for advocating the Christian religion, initially set their foot in Sivasagar, Nagaon, and Guwahati. Then, they preached the religion establishing schools and asylums. But at that time, in the schools, courts and administrative system of Assam, Bengali language was prevailed. By the efforts of the Missionaries in 1873, in the schools, courts, and administration the Assamese was reestablished. In this course of time, the Christian Missionaries contributed to the Assamese language and literature. These aspects are discussed in this seminar paper.

## Keywords

- Baptist Missionaries
- Assam
- Christian religion

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## Article Details

- **Article History:**
  - Received Date: 10/08/2019
  - Revised Date: 17/08/2019
  - Accepted Date: 24/8/2019
  - e-First: 28/08/2019

## 1. Introduction

In the history of the Assamese national life, the year 1826 AD is significant because in the year the long independence of six hundred years was ended and along with it, the Assamese language and literature started to be almost demised. As soon as Assam came under the control of the British government, the Bengali educated people were employed and from 1836 to 1873, the Bengali language had prevailed in schools and courts. Although the year of 1836 was an unfortunate year for Assam, it was also an important year for Assamese language and literature from another aspect. Because in the very year 1836, the Christian Missionaries from America arrived in Assam to promote the Christian religion. It would not be wrong if it is said that the Missionaries shielded the almost extinct Assamese language and literature giving a new life to it. To retrieve the fair dignity of Assamese language which was removed from schools and courts, the Missionaries debated with the British government. They were actively supported by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. As a result, in 1873, the Assamese language was retrieved in the schools and the courts of Assam again.

## 2. Objectives and Significance of the Study:

In this paper, it is studied that the Christian Missionaries who came in 1836 to Assam and contributed towards Assam and Assamese language and literature. The contribution to the field of the Assamese language and literature by the Christian Missionaries are very significant. To study the aspects of the history of Assamese language and literature, it is observed that, studying about this becomes a significant aspect.

## 3. The Contributions of the Christian Missionaries to Modern Assamese Language and Literature:

### 3.1 Establishment of Schools

The main objective of the Christian Missionaries was advocating the Christian religion in Assam. They knew a thing very well that any subject matter is realized through the mother tongue very easily, but through another language, it is not that easy. Hence, they gave importance to Assamese language education. The Missionaries established schools in various major laces of Assam and by their efforts only in Sivasagar, six schools were established. These schools started a revolution in the field of education in Assam. So, among the contributions to Assamese language and literature by the Missionaries, ‘school establishment’ was the first notable contribution.
3.2 Textbook Publication

In the field of Assamese language, the second contribution of the Missionaries was textbook publication. They printed some school textbooks- Barematara, Pratham Kitap, Sadhukatha, Pratham Ganana, Dutiya Ganana, Padartha Bidya, etc. For the sake of advocating the Assamese language, the historical significance of these textbooks is highly notable.

3.3 Establishment of Printing Press

Christian Missionaries are the pioneers in establishing the printing press in Assam. After establishing the printing press in Assam, numerous school textbooks and Christian religious books were authored. As a result, in Assam, an environment of education was started. As soon as the printing presses were published, the number of printed books was increased.

Without dictionaries, grammars, and textbooks no one can acquire a language. The Missionaries, authoring grammars, and dictionaries established the foundation of Assamese literature. William Robinson’s first Assamese grammar book “Asomiya Bhasar Byakaran” was published in 1839. Dr. Nathan Brown’s second Assamese language grammar “Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language” was published in 1848. With fourteen thousand words, in 1867, an Assamese dictionary was published from Sibsagar Missionary Press by Dr. Miles Bronson. The pastors illumined the Assamese vocabulary with their efforts. They coined many new words by colouring many English words and those sweet words of Assamese language were unused, were started to be reused.

Dr. Nathan Brown published translating the “New Testament” naming as “Trankarta Prabhu Zishukhristar Natun Niyam” in 1848. Besides this, named as “Zishukristar Tutigit” he translated 60 hymns into Assamese. Although these are not very standard, Dr. Brown’s these hymns are notable contributions towards Assamese lyrical literature. Dr. Miles Bronson also translated many parts of the Bible into Assamese and translated Christ’s twenty hymns into Assamese. A. K. Garny translated “Old Testament” of the Hebrew language into Assamese. A. K. Garny translated Miss M. E. Lesley’s an original Bengali novel naming as “Alokeshi Beshyar Katha” into Assamese. Miss Garny translated Miss Mullen’s book “Phulmoni aaru Koruna” into Assamese. Although, the main objective of these writings was advocating the Christian religion, yet these writings helped in creating an educational environment in Assam.

Besides these noted translation writings, the Christian Missionaries authored and published some Christian religious original books. Among the original books, “Padartha Saar” by Nidhi Levi Farwell is notable. Besides this, a weak foundation of various aspects of Assamese literature, namely poetry, short story, etc. was established by this writer.

3.4 Children’s Literature and Publication of another book

The viewpoints of the Christian Missionaries were realistic and scientific. By their efforts, various children’s literature was created. These children literature made the children interested in education as well as established the foundation of Assamese children's literature.

Dr. Nathan Brown published almost forty old books collecting from 1840 to 1850, including “Assam Buronji Puthi”, Ganitor Puthi Dubhag” and “Chutia Buronji”. Retrieval, Collection, and publication of old books helped people to create national consciousness as well as contributed to Assamese language, literature, and culture.

To make the British understand that Assamese is an independent language, the Christian Missionaries published some books in English also. In this aspect, in 1948 the grammar-related book written in English was notable. Proving the originality of Assamese language with reasonable arguments, this book is a priceless resource of Assamese language.

When the Assamese language was dying, for the fair dignity of the language which was lost, the applications with arguments to the then British government by the Missionaries were precious resources for modern Assamese language and literature. In these applications, it was argued that there are no reasons for establishing the Bengali language in the schools and courts of Assam instead of the Assamese language. As a result, in 1873 the Assamese language was retrieved in the schools and courts of Assam.
3.5 First Magazine Publication

By the efforts of the Missionaries, in 1846, the first Assamese magazine “Arunudoi” was published. Before the Arunudoi Age, the Assamese literature was not influenced by western science. Through Arunudoi, for the first time, a ray of western science touched the yard of the Assamese language and literature.

In the birth and development of modern Assamese prose literature also the contributions of the Missionaries were significant. Various Christian authors published articles on various topics in Arunudoi. Nidhi Levi Farwell and other Missionary authors wrote poems in Arunudoi. These poems were the pioneers to the development of modern Assamese poetry.

In the development of the Assamese literature, another notable contribution of the Missionaries was promoting the spoken language of Sivasagar to the standard language by establishing a printing press in Sivasagar. Through the medium of the spoken language of this region authoring literary works the spoken language of Rangpur region was regarded as the standard language, and as a result through this medium of language, the Assamese language and literature was improved.

Instead of the words of foreign languages, usage of the words of the native language was another contribution of the Missionaries. Trying to give the shape of Assamese form of foreign words, they attempted to convert words like grape ‘angur’ to ‘Lata Poniyal’, Cross to “perengani”, ice ‘borof’ to “silpani” etc.

To bring interest to the mother tongue among the Assamese people, the Missionaries created various literary works.

The magazines also determined the pace of Assamese literature. The pioneer of the magazines was the “Arunodi”. The foundation of Assamese language and literature and magazine was established by the “Arunodi”. Arunudoi created some Assamese authors like Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, etc. This magazine imported news of the overseas, science, history, moral education, etc. to the Assamese literature. As a result of the inspiration of this magazine, some other Assamese newspapers were also published. For example Assam Bilasini, Assam Mihir, Assam Darpan, etc. It should be admitted that the famous newspaper ‘Junaki’ which was published from 1889 to 1940 was a model and inspiration of “Arunudoi”.

4. Conclusion

By the efforts of the Missionaries, not only the life of the Assamese language and literature was given, but also in the minds of the Assamese people, a sense of deep confidence, national consciousness, and love for heritage was born and this helped in the development of the Assamese literature. The Christian Missionaries reestablished the destroyed foundation of the Assamese language, literature, and culture and gave life to it with various new genres of literature.

To conclude, it can be said that, the contributions of the Christian Missionaries in giving a new greater world to the Assamese language, literature, and culture, will always be remembered in Assamese national life.

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