

Vowel Alphabets of the Assamese Script in Pre-Sankardeva Era: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Several epigraphic resources have been found from different places in Assam dating back from the 5th to 15th century. These epigraphic resources are one of the important primary resources in expanding our understanding of the history and evolution of the Assamese script. Despite having such a resource, not much is known yet about the history and evolution of the Assamese script. In this paper, I attempt to summarize the findings on the evolution of Assamese vowel alphabets in the pre-Sankardeva era, primarily based on Lahiri (1991)'s observations on the alphabets of the scripts of Assam.

KEYWORDS: Assamese script, Assamese vowels, Inscriptions of Assam

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1. INTRODUCTION

A script is a set of characters used in orthographies of one or any related languages. Roman, Devanagari, Thai, Syrian, Cyrillic, etc. are some of the most common scripts used to write languages. The scripts are often related to multiple languages. There are several instances of developing new orthographies based on already existing scripts. The actual use of a particular script is quite specific to the writing system of a language for use or to be used by a significant percentage of the native speakers of the language (J. Page 2013). In this paper, I have discussed the history and evolution of the Assamese vowel alphabets based on the earliest fragments of evidence from various inscriptions recovered from time to time from different parts of Assam, dating back from the 5th to 15th century. Some linguistic evidence from these inscriptions, especially rock inscriptions and copper plates, have been taken into account in the present paper.

2. Inscriptions of Assam

Studies on the history and evolution of various Indian scripts show that the Indian scripts have developed mainly through two branches, the Kharoshthi script and the Brahmi script. The Kharoshthi script was originally written from left to right, but later it was written from right to left. On the other hand, the Brahmi script is written from left to right. It is believed that all modern Indian scripts have evolved from the Brahmi script. In the case of the Assamese script too, it is assumed that the script has emerged branching out of the Brahmi script (or Gupta/Kutil script) since the 5th century. Scholars like Sarbeswar Katak, Narayan Das, Bisweswar

Hazarika, Upendranath Goswami, Maheswar Neog, Ramcharan Thakuria, etc. have named the script as *Kamarupi script*, *Assamese script* etc. Despite having dissensions among the scholars, all have agreed upon the uniqueness and independent development of the script over time. In the following subsections, I have discussed various inscriptions discovered over the centuries which are the primary sources to understand the claim of the independence of the Assamese script by scholars.

2.1. Inscriptions in the 5th – 7th century

Nagajari Khanikargaon stone inscription and Umachal rock inscription are two of the earliest epigraphic sources discovered in Assam, dating back to the 5th century. While the Nagajari Khanikargaon rock inscription was found in the Nagajari area of Golaghat, the Umachal rock inscription of Surendravarm was found in the Nilachal Hills (also called Umachal), near Guwahati city. The language of both the scripts was Sanskrit. The inscriptions engraved in Nagajari Khanikargaon stone inscription were engraved completely in Sanskrit verse. On the contrary, the Umachal rock inscription was engraved in Sanskrit prose only. Sharma (1978:303) mentions that the stone of Nagajari Khanikargaon inscription is quite damaged, and only five lines of it have been recovered. The text is fragmented and could not be translated into English. It is, however, figured out that the inscription is related to a grant of land. Sharma (1978:2) provides the translation of the Umachal rock inscription, "This cave (-temple) of the illustrious Lord Balabhadra has been constructed by Mahārājadhīrāja of Srī Surendra

Varman." Another early epigraphic source discovered in Assam is the Barganga rock inscription. This inscription, dated back to the 6th century, was found by the side of the Barganga river in the district of Nagaon, Assam. The Bhutivarman with the performance of a horse (Asvamedha) sacrifice. Sharma (1978:5) provides the translation of this inscription as, "Let there be welfare to all. This religious asylum (āśrama) (has been made) by Avaguna, the District Governor (or, the Minister of states) with a view to securing longevity of His Royal Highness Śrī Paramadaivata Paramabhattachāraka Mahārājādhirāja Śrī Bhūtivarman, a performer of the *aśvamedha* sacrifice."

Apart from the rock inscriptions, the earliest evidence of epigraphic sources in Assam is the Dubi and Nidhanpur copper plate inscriptions of the 7th century. There are 5 copper plates in the Dubi copper plate collection, with 76 verses in Sanskrit. These were discovered in the village of Dubi, in the Barpeta district of Assam. The last plate of the collection is, however, missing.

2.2. Inscriptions in the 8th – 11th century

Most of the inscriptions discovered dating back to the 8th - 11th century are copper plate inscriptions, for example, Hāyūnthal copper plates of Harjaravarman (includes verse and prose), Tezpur copper plates of Vanamāla (includes 29 verses followed by a prose passage), Parbatīyā copper plates of Vanamālavarmadeva (includes verse), Uttarbarbil copper plates of Balavarman III (includes verse and prose), Nagaon copper plate grant of Balavarman III (includes verse and prose), Bargāon copper plate grant of Ratnapāla (includes verse and prose), Sualkuchi copper plate grant of Ratnapāla (includes verse and prose), Guwahati copper plate grant of Indrapāla (includes verse and prose), Guwākuchi copper plate grant of Indrapāla (includes verse and prose), Gachtal copper plate grant of Gopālavaarman, etc. In addition to these copper plate inscriptions, a rock inscription dating back to 829/830 AD was discovered in Tezpur, Assam. It is observed that these inscriptions were mostly engraved in both Sanskrit verse and prose.

2.3. Inscriptions in the 12th - 15th century

Some of the inscriptions dating back to the 12th – 15th century are Khanāmukh copper plates of Dharmapāla (12th century), Subhankarapātaka copper plates of Dharmalāpāla (12th century), Puspabhadra copper plate grant of Dharmapāla (12th century), Kamauli copper plate grant of Vidyadeva (12th century), Assam plates of Vallabhadeva (12th century), Kanai-Boroxi Boa rock inscription (13th century), Ambari rock inscription (13th century), Gachtal Inscription (14th century), etc.

3. Linguistic evidences

Sharma (1978), Lahiri (1991) discuss several instances of linguistic inaccuracies in the use of Sanskrit over the years in the early inscriptions of Assam. Increasing irregularities in the use of Sanskrit in the literary imply the diffusion of 'vernacular' in the literary context, thus the emergence of Assamese literary tradition. Some of the irregularities noted in Lahiri (1991) are as in the following:

A. Loss of *rephā* and reduplication of the remaining concerned consonant. For example, in the Nidhanpur copper plates, *karnasuvarna* is written as *kannasuvanna*. Also, in the Guwakuchi copper plates of Indrapāla, *Srāvastī* is written as *Sāvathī*.

- B. Shortening of vowels. For example, in the Umachal rock inscription of Surendravarman, the word *guhā* is used for *guhā*. Similarly, in the Bargaon plates of Ratnapāla *sāsanīkrtya* is used for *sasanīkrtya*.
- C. Lengthening of vowels. For example, in the Bargaon plates of Ratnapāla, in one line *tīrakrta* is used for *tīrakratā*. Similarly, in the Pushpabhadra plates of Dharmapāla, *bhūvam* is issued for *bhuvam*.
- D. Substitution of one vowel for another. The best example is the widespread occurrence of *Puskirini* for *Puskarini* which occurs, amongst others, in the Nidhanpur plates, Parbatīya plates and the Nagaon plates.
- E. Avoidance and irregularity of *sandhi*. For example, in the Parbatīya plates of Vanamālavarmadeva, *sandhi* is avoided in *abhūta gunanidhih*. Also, in the Barganga rock inscription of Bhūtivarman a vowel *sandhi* has been avoided in *visayāmātya avagunasya*.

4. Evolution of the vowel alphabets

Lahiri (1991:39-47) discusses the evolution of alphabets of the (Assamese?) script in the pre-Sankardev era in great detail. According to Lahiri (1991), the Nagajari Khanikargaon inscription and the Umachal rock inscription of Surendravarman do not have any instances of the *a* letter. This letter is very angular in the Barganga inscription that resembles the angular form of the early Gupta *a*. The letter became more curved in the inscriptions of Bhaskaravarman, however, there are some differences in the two inscriptions of this king. The lower curve of this letter is much developed in the Dubi copperplates as compared to the upper left curve. The lower left curve is drawn more angularly towards the right vertical in the Nidhanpur copperplates.

Like the letter *a*, the *ā* letter is also not found independently in the Nagajari Khanikargaon or the Umachal inscriptions. It appears for the first time in the Barganga inscription. The *mātra* is found to be placed like a curve at the bottom of the alphabet. The same is also observed with a shorter curve at the bottom in the seventh-century grants of Bhaskaravarman. On the other hand, the *mātra* was observed at the top of the alphabet with a curve in the Nidhanpur plates. From the middle of the eighth century, the alphabet developed further and came to take the appearance of the modern Devanagari *ā*. This modern form was maintained till the twelfth century with very minor variations (see Lahiri 1991).

The letter *i* in the Umachal rock inscription and the Barganga inscription resembles the Gupta '*i*' alphabet, in which two dots are placed on the left of a vertical. In the Dubi copper plate grant the right-hand line, while remaining vertical, assumes a curved bracket-like appearance. However, in the Nidhanpur plates, the appearance of the letter is like the late initial '*i*' of the north in which two dots are above and a tailed dot below. This form continues until the eleventh century with the lower tail, however, assuming a curved, comma-like appearance. However, in the eleventh-century grants, the Gauhati plates and the Gachtal plates, the horizontal line which was earlier below, is now placed above the dots. This resembles the roof-type, south Indian '*i*' in which the two dots are below a curve. In another eleventh century grant, however, once again the initial changes, becoming a three-dot type, in which the dots are arranged in the form of a triangle. However, by the twelfth century, the earlier form with two dots above and a squiggle below has reappeared

only to be replaced once again in the Kamauli grant by a curve above linked with one of the dots below.

Lahiri (1991) also says that the letter *ī* occurs in the epigraphs independently only in three places. In the Dubi and Nidhanpur plates, the letter resembles the form of the English, 'T' with a dot on either side of the vertical. However, in the Dubi plates, the top horizontal is roof-type in shape, while in the Nidhanpur plates it is a straight line. The other independent example is from the twelfth century Khonamukh plates of Dharmapala where the top of the letter resembles the top portion of the Devanagari 'ha' with two dashes on either side. The letter *u* occurs for the first time in the Nagajari Khanikargaon inscription - here it resembles a gently curving vertical line resembling the left bracket sign. It occurs two centuries later in the inscriptions of Bhaskaravarman where it has more or less assumed the modern form of the Devanagari alphabet - this form continues with minor variations till the twelfth century wherein the Pushpabhadra grant of Dharmapala, the bottom hook takes an extreme curve upwards till it is co-equal with the top of the letter. The *ū* letter is found independently only in the recently discovered Ulubari plates of Balavarman III. Here the letter resembles the above 'u' but with the *mātra* appended below the letter, like a short curved line falling. In the other inscriptions, this letter does not occur independently. Lahiri (1991) further mentions that the *e* letter occurs for the first time in the Dubi copperplates of Bhāskaravarman. Here it takes its shape after the triangle as can be seen in the inscriptions of north India as well; however, in this case, the triangle is not angular but cursive. By the middle of the ninth century, when it reappears, the shape has changed remarkably and resembles Devanagari 'pa.' By the twelfth century, as can be seen in the Khonamukh and Subhankarapataka plates of Dharmapala, it has

changed and now comes to resemble a huge loop with a curled top and a line appended on the right-hand bottom. This according to *Kāmarūpasāsanāvali* shows a remarkable propensity towards the modern Assamese shape of the letter.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the evolution of Assamese vowel alphabets in the pre-Sankardeva era based on Lahiri's (1991) observation. In the first part of the paper, we have observed that several inscriptions of stone, rock as well as copper were engraved dating from the 5th to 15th century under the reigns of different kings. These inscriptions are one of the most important resources in understanding various stages of the development of the Assamese script. We have also observed increasing irregularities in the use of Sanskrit in the inscriptions over time. Finally, I have presented Lahiri (1991)'s observation on the evolution of the vowel alphabets which calls for further study in this area.

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