



Kaliram Medhi's views on the Origin and Development of the Assamese Language

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Abstract:

Assamese, one of the most widely spoken languages in North-East India, has been the subject of research and discussion by various linguists and researchers at various times. Kaliram Medhi is one of these influential linguistic analysts who studied language and literature during the diasaster of Assamese language and literature in the pre-independence period.

Medhi studied the Assamese language scientifically and published his book '*Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*' in 1936. This book can be considered one of the most valuable books of Assamese language as despite being a science student, he has written about almost all aspects including the origin, development, phonology, morphology etc. of the Assamese language.

This paper will introduce Kaliram Medhi and analyze his views on the origin and development of the Assamese language in his book '*Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*'.

Keywords: Kaliram Medhi, Assamese Language, Origin and Development of the Assamese Language

0.1 Introduction:

Kaliram Medhi, who paved the way for genuine linguistic studies in the Assamese language, focused on linguistics, literary criticism, etc. during the disaster of the Assamese language and literature. He did not practice literature since childhood but became involved in literature

after completing his formal education. He was a pioneer in the scientific study of the Assamese language. He was able to fill and develop the intellectual world of Assam by studying linguistics, literature and culture.

Medhi's most important work is '*Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*'. This book is a contemporary and milestone in the linguistic discussion of the Assamese language. The book is a historical evolutionary work of the Assamese language. The 'Introduction' section, written in English, gives a brief introduction to the historical evolution of the Assamese language, sociolinguistic thought and Assamese literature. The main book analyzes almost all aspects of the sounds, forms and words of the Assamese language and gives a detailed account of how they passed from the original Vedic Aryan language through the Prakrit and Apabhramsa stages to the Assamese stage or Assamese language.

0.2 Aims and Objectives of the study:

- Introduction of Kaliram Medhi.
- Present the history of the Origin and Development of the Assamese Language as accurately as possible.
- Kaliram Medhi was the first person to discuss and present the evolution of the Assamese language in a reliable manner. This study is important in bringing to light his views on the origin and development of the Assamese language.

0.3 Scopes:

This paper covers the life of Kaliram Medhi and his views on the Origin and Development of the Assamese language in his book '*Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*' published in 1936.

0.4 Methodology:

This paper is based on the study of Kaliram Medhi's book '*Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*'. Two methods have been used in preparing the paper namely Descriptive Method and Analytical Method. Kaliram Medhi is introduced using a Descriptive Method. The origin and development of the Assamese language is discussed using Analytical Method.

1.1 Introduction of Kaliram Medhi:

Kaliram Medhi was born on 18 October 1878 in Ramdia village near Hajo in North Kamrup. His father was Bhukoli Medhi and his mother was Sontora Medhi.

Kaliram Medhi, the eldest son of Bhukoli Medhi and Sontora Medhi, was called 'Kalia' at home as a child. He had three younger brothers, Baliram Medhi, Cheniram Medhi and Dinnath Medhi respectively. Kaliram Medhi began his primary education at 'Satraghar', a primary school in the village.

In 1891, Kaliram Medhi enrolled in the Government Higher Secondary School, Guwahati. In 1897, he passed the entrance examination in first division and obtained the highest marks in Sanskrit. He received a scholarship of Rs. 20 for passing in first division and two medals for obtaining the highest marks in Sanskrit, the Hemchandra Barua Medal and the Hemrath Barua Medal respectively.

He later enrolled in City College, Calcutta for higher education. In 1899, he passed F.A examination with First division and received a scholarship of Rs. 20. He studied English and Mathematics as well as Physics and Chemistry with honours. In 1902, Kaliram Medhi obtained fourth place in Class II in B.A. examination and received the Vishnupriya Devi Award with the highest marks. After that, he was enrolled in M.Sc. in Physics from Presidency College, Calcutta. He obtained fourth place in Class II in this examination and he was the third Assamese student to receive a M.Sc. degree.

After completing his education, Kaliram Medhi joined the Settlement Camp in Guwahati on 24 April 1904 as a land judge. He was appointed to the Nagaon tahsil on 16 September. He was a land judge in Dhing sub-division of Nagaon from 1 October 1908 and was transferred to Dibrugarh. He was promoted to the post of E.A.C and spent two years in Dibrugarh. He was transferred to Tura and Golaghat in 1912 and 1913 respectively. Later, on October 25, 1914, he joined in Goalpara as E.A.C. There he was promoted to Sub-Divisional Magistrate. He spent most of his career in Goalpara. Kaliram Medhi was twice the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Goalpara.

Medhi retired from Mangaldoi in 1936 and after his retirement he served as Special Magistrate for two years and as Special Officer of War Risk Insurance for eight years.

He was the President of the Third Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha held at Barpeta on 26 December 1919. He was also involved in the Kamrup Research Society and was an active member of the Journal of the Assam Research Society.

Kaliram Medhi worked as a responsible government servant and as an enthusiast of language, literature, science, culture simultaneously. He discussed each and every subject in very simple words. He used to write in 'Axom Bandhob' and many other magazine and journals. His first article 'Pralay' was published in Satyanath Bora edited 'Junaki' magazine in 1903 when he was pursuing his masters. His first contribution to literature was 'Poetry Criticism of the poet Hem Saraswati'. He collected the scattered great sayings of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva and published a book titled 'Mahapurusha Sankardevar Vani'.

His other works towards language and literature are as follows –

Literature Related Works:

- Prahlad Charit (Edited)
- Mahapurusha Sankardevar Vani (Edited)
- Manasha Kavya (Part-I)
- Angkawali (Part-I) (Edited)

Language Related Works:

- Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language
- Axomiya Vasha (Unpublished)
- Axomiya Vashar Mul (Unpublished)

Others:

- Axomiya Prathamik Prakritik Vigyan (Unpublished)
- Bijganit (Unpublished)

Assamese Articles:

- Pralay
- Axomiya Naat
- Helir Nejal Tora
- Gaurav
- Likhari Sajuli
- Top
- Prithivi
- Surjya etc.



English Articles:

- The Kalitas
- The Brajavali literature of Assam
- Philosophic aspects of the Assam Brajavali literature
- Origin of Assamese drama
- The Brajavali literature of Assam, Bhakti

1.2 Thoughts on the origin and development of the Assamese language:

In the first part of the introductory section of his book 'Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language' written in English, Kaliram Medhi discusses almost all aspects of the origin of the Assamese language. He has also tried to determine the roots of the Assamese language through his own judgment and analysis. He commented that the task of judging the source of the Assamese language is complicated.

According to Medhi - *"The Origin and growth of the Assamese language are not so simple and clear as we generally suppose."*¹

He argues that the Assamese language originated from the same source from which Sanskrit originated. According to him –

*"Its origin is to be found in the popular dialects of Assam or of a part of India. It is a branch of the living speech of India springing from the same source from which Sanskrit itself sprang when it first assumed its literary independence. Like Hindustani Assamese is Vedic or pre-Vedic Sanskrit in a new form although it has greatly assimilated various other elements into its body notably of the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman family."*²

Kaliram Medhi quotes the comments of the Chinese traveler Huyen Chang on the spoken languages of Kamrup, refers to the migration of Aryans from time to time, their position and settlement, and refers to the classifications of Indian Aryan languages by linguists on the basis of linguistic characteristics.

"The philologists have divided the Indo-Aryan languages of India into three groups (1) Midland, (2) Intermediate and (3) Outer, - according to their special linguistic characteristics. (1) The Midland group comprises Western Hindi of the Genetic Doad and the eastern part of the Punjab. It was in this country that the hymns of the Rig-Veda were composed. (2) Round this country there is a band of territory where mixed languages, the

Intermediate group, prevail. This includes Gujarati, Marwari, Central Punjabi, Nepali and Eastern Hindi of Oudh and the country to its south. (3) Round the Intermediate group is the belf of outer languages. These include on the north Kasmiri, Western Punjabi and Sindhi, on the south Marathi and on the east Bihari, Oriya, Bengali and Assamese.”³

Thus, Medhi pointed out some of the characteristics of Assamese language related to Greek, Vedic, Avesta etc. and the antiquity of some Assamese cultural elements and said that the Aryans settled in Assam before the Rig Veda was written. He wanted to prove that the source of the Assamese language is not Sanskrit but Sanskrit and Assamese are derived from the same source.

Medhi discusses the development of the Indian Aryan languages in four parts. Those sections are –

1. The Primary Prakrts
2. Secondary Prakrts
 - (a) Pali
 - (b) Prakrt
 - (c) Apabhramsa
3. The Tertiary Prakrts

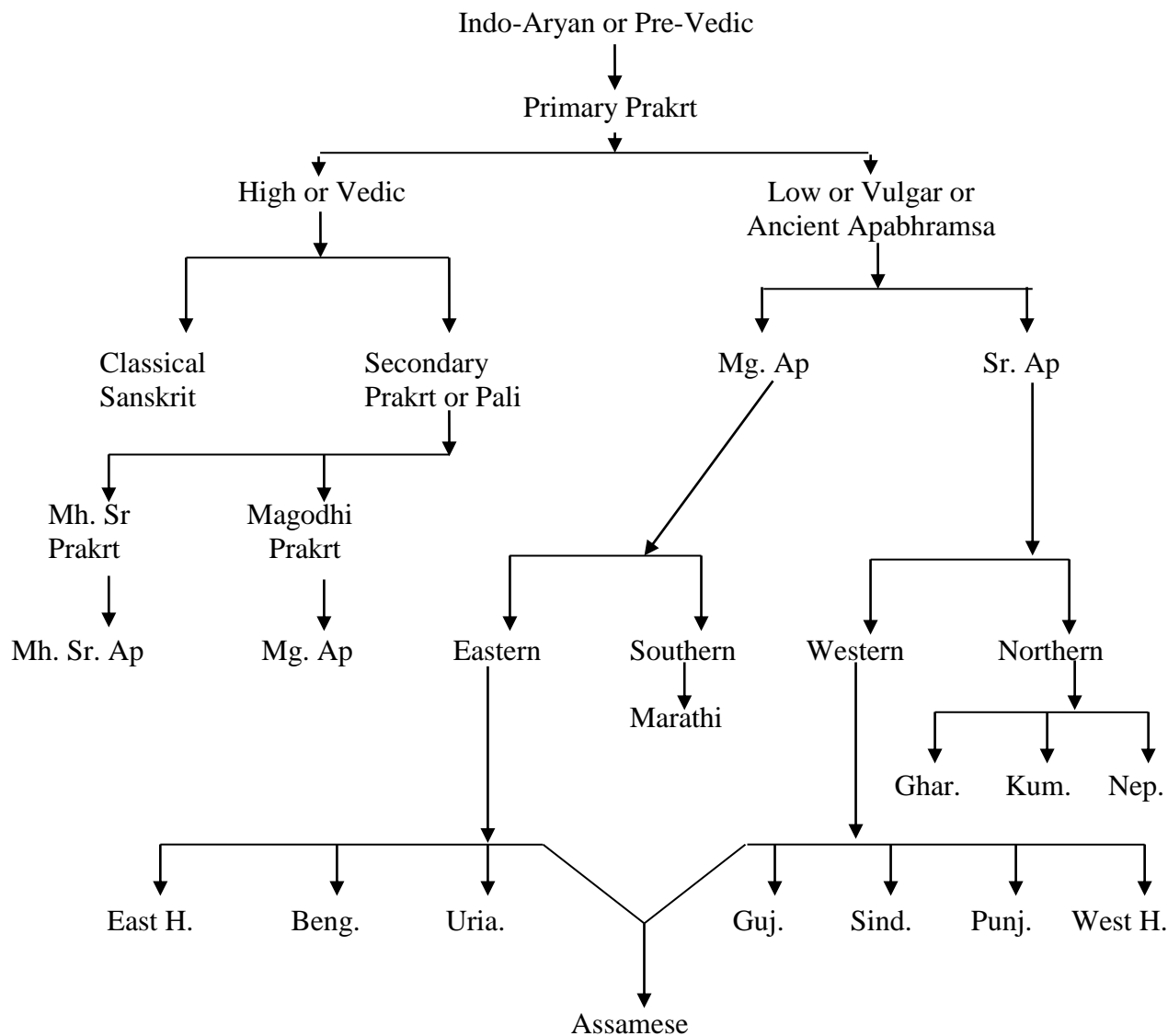
Thus, Kaliram Medhi shows three stages of development of Indian Aryan languages and quotes Max Müller's definition of Neo-Indian Aryan languages and emphasizes that Assamese language developed from an ancient Prakrit or local dialect –

“Maxmuller arranges the modern vernaculars under the following groups:- The spoken languages of India which have been called Neo-Aryan, Neo-Sanskrit or Gandian, seem to me to have a perfect right to the common name of Prakrtic, which would at once distinguish them from the old Prakrts, and would at the same time indicate their real origin. They are not derived from Sanskrit but from the old Prakrts, or more truly still from the local Apabhrabamsas.”⁴

Like Max Müller, Medhi divides the prevalent Prakrit dialects into four categories - Western, Northern, Southern and Eastern. He classifies Assamese as belonging to the Eastern branch and argues that the Neo-Indian Aryan languages belonging to these branches are not the descendants of Sanskrit or any grammatically rich Prakrit language. These are developed by local dialects current in different parts of India, which perhaps became grammatical when

they reached a literary form. Finally, Medhi concludes that although linguists have included the Assamese language in the Maghadi group, it contains some characteristics of the Western branch and some of the characteristics found in the Avesta. Therefore, the Assamese language is a mixture of Eastern and Western branches.

Medhi shows the origin of the Assamese language with the help of diagrams as follows ⁵ –



Thus, Medhi tries to strengthen his argument by discussing the linguistic elements of pre-Vedic, Vedic, etc. in Assamese in Part 'B' of the Introduction section (*DIFERENT ELEMENTS IN ASSAMESE*) by saying that Assamese language originated from a mixture of East and West. According to Medhi -

“But we cannot ignore the pre-Vedic and other elements that took firm root in Assamese. We shall begin with the pre-Vedic elements. It will be seen that certain peculiarities of Assamese are connected with those of the Aryan Languages of Persia

and Europe. Thus, there is a certain similarity in sound and meaning between some Assamese words and words belonging to such languages.”⁶

The pre-Vedic lexical elements mentioned by Medhi are as follows:

Assamese Word	Meaning	Derived from
Abu	Grandmother	Latin - ar – as Telegu - ara – a
Aata	Grandfather	Latin – atta Vedic - tatamaha Greek – atta
Uruli	A kind of sound or voice uttered by a woman in a sacred ceremony	Latin – ululo Greek - Olo - luzo English - Howl Vedic – Ululih
Juii	Fire	Vedic – juhva Greek - daio dedaumai Sanskrit – dava
Zohora	Someone who’s father is unidentified, Bustard	Zend – Jahi Zend – Jahikayan
Dew	Ghost, Evil soul	Zend – Daeva
Mina		Latin – mina Vedic – mana
Morkuchia		Zend – Mahrkusa
Raha	Name of a River or a place	Vedic – Rasa
Xuhuri	A kind of sound made by the mouth in joy, whistling	Latin - Su-Surr-us
Bon	Work, Action	Sanskrit – pan Greek - pon - os, pon - eo Vedic - Savanam, Vana

Thus, Medhi compares the similarities of twenty-nine (29) words with the languages of the pre-Vedic level and says that some words come directly from Fali and Prakrit, not from Sanskrit. Medhi also explains some grammatical features. The relationship between the

pronunciation characteristics, phonetic changes, plural suffixes, etc. of the Assamese language is drawn to the pre-Vedic level. Some of the characteristics he mentioned are –

1. (Śa), (Ṣa), (Sa) - These sounds are pronounced differently in the Assamese language. Sometimes it is 'X' e.g.: Shiva, Sixteen, Seven; and sometimes 'kh' such as: 'Xekh', 'Kekh'. There are ways of making the sound ṣ > kh in Vedic and Sanskrit languages. For example: 'Paxanda' > 'Pakhanda'. Again, the 'S' becomes 'H' in Iranian and the 'S' in the original place becomes 'H' in Greek.
2. The Sanskrit 'Khya' becomes 'Ska' in Magadhi and 'Ccha' in the suffix.
3. In Iranian it becomes 'Khs' again, and in Assamese it becomes 'Kh'; For example: Makkhi > Makhi.
4. The initial 'y' in Sanskrit becomes 'z' in Iranian. The same is true in Assamese.
5. The plural suffix in Iranian is 'henti' and in Assamese it is 'hant'
6. Like Iranian, the elemental sign in Assamese is – 'para'.
7. Similarly, Medhi discusses the Vedic elements. In order to prove that Assamese and Sanskrit languages have the same roots, Medhi does not limit himself to linguistic analysis, but also believes in the Aryan settlement in Assam, the history of the Kalita tribe, the rituals and festivals of Assamese culture (Bohag Bihu, Kati Bihu, Magh Bihu), customs, dress, ornaments (jewels, necklaces, etc.). He also describes similarities between the pre-Vedic and Vedic periods.

Thus, Kaliram Medhi has carefully tried to determine the roots of the Assamese language by quoting various contexts with his own thoughts. Linguists and researchers have seriously analyzed, described and discussed this view of Kaliram Medhi in their discussions on the origin of the Assamese language.

Footnote:

1. *Kaliram Medhi : Assamese Grammer and Origin of the Assamese Language, 2019, Introduction, Page: 19*
2. *Kaliram Medhi : The aforementioned book, Page: 19*
3. *Kaliram Medhi : The aforementioned book, Page: 21*
4. *Kaliram Medhi : The aforementioned book, Page: 32*
5. *Kaliram Medhi : The aforementioned book, Page:33*

6. Kaliram Medhi : The aforementioned book, Page: 34

Conclusion:

The above discussion gives us an introduction to Kaliram Medhi's personal and professional life and his thoughts on the origin and development of the Assamese language.

The following findings can be achieved through the study –

- The discussion finds about Kaliram Medhi's birth, parents and early schooling at 'Satraghar'. He received Hemchandra Barua award and Hemrath Barua award along with scholarships. Later pursued B.A. and M.A. degree from Calcutta and started his worklife as Sub-divisional Collector.
- The discussions on the origin of the Assamese language have given a clear understanding of the origin of the Assamese language. He argues that the Assamese language originated from the same source from which Sanskrit originated. This suggests that the source of the Assamese language is not Sanskrit. Instead, Assamese and Sanskrit languages originated from the same source. Medhi argues that Assamese is a mixture of Eastern and Western branches and originated from a mixture of Eastern and Western branches.
- The discussions on the development of the Assamese language in '*Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language*' gave a clear idea of where and how the Assamese language developed. The Assamese language developed from an ancient or local dialect.

Referances:

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