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EDITORIAL

The 'X' sound in Assamese language

— Rajen Barua

Assamese is the eastern-most member of New Indo Aryan (NIA) languages in India, and is spoken in the Brahmaputra valley in Asom. It is also the easternmost member of the Indo-European group of languages which is the largest language group in the world with a total number of speakers of more than half of the world population. All the modern European languages as well as those of Iran, India and Pakistan fall into this Indo-European group. Amongst the NIA languages, Assamese bears some unique characteristics which are not found in other Indian languages.

Assamese is a very ancient language, a fact not very well recognized even by the Assamese. From that ancient past, the Assamese language evolved in partial isolation from mainland India, and developed some distinct characteristics. Being the farthest outpost of Aryan migration towards the east, Assamese falls in the outer belt or in the peripheral Indo-Aryan languages. As such Assamese has retained certain characteristics of the parent Indo-European (IE) languages which have been lost in other parts of India.

Besides the absence of the cerebrals, Assamese has the unique /x/ sound which is absent in Sanskrit and other NIA languages. This was duly observed by the Baptist Missionaries in the early nineteenth century when they encountered the language and has opined correctly that Assamese has the unique /x/ sound which is similar to the Greeks. Phonetically, this /x/ sound is pronounced somewhat in between the sounds /s/, /kh/ and /h/ and is similar to the German sound /ch/ as pronounced in the word 'Bach' or the Scottish sound as found in the word 'Loch'. Thus in Assamese, all the three Indo-Aryan Sibilants: s, s' and s'' are pronounced as /x/. This is a unique characteristic of the Assamese language. On this point, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the leading Indian philologist, remarked, "The change of initial, intervocal and final (sibilants) to the glotal spirant x in Assamese is something remarkable and is paralleled by what we see in Singhalese and Kashmiri. This is also noticeable in Iranian, Hellenic and Celtic." In many languages this original Indo-European /x/ sound was lost which either evolved to s, kh or h. According to Kaliram Medhi, "The Assamese pronunciation of the sibilants is peculiar in Assamese, and evidently a relic of pre Vedic Aryan pronunciation." Dimbeswar Neog also agrees, "Next to the above peculiarities is the Asamiya X pronunciation of the sibilants which also must have been brought by the Early Aryans called the Mediterranean." Thus we see that this x sound in Assamese is not something which developed in Assam, nor it is a sound which was inherited from any of the non-Aryan languages in Asom, but it simply marks an earlier Indo-European pre Vedic heritage. The /x/ sound was there in the pre-Vedic Aryan language also before the evolution of the classical Sanskrit language. Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, writes "It seems that in certain forms of OIA (Old Indo-Aryan languages the /x/ sound was the actually one employed for S as can be inferred from a medieval pronunciation of S as /kh/ being the nearest approximation to the traditional /x/'. Dimbeswar Neog further writes, "When the Nordic of Vedic Aryan immigration into India took place in the second millennium B.C., the /x/ sound as in Asamiya was prominent. Chatterjee thinks that "tatax kim" was the actual pronunciation at the time of the Rig Veda. It came to be pronounced as "tatah kim" in later times owing to the loss of /x/ sound due to non-Aryan influence predominating over the Aryan. But it remained almost intact in the Dardic or Pisaci speech which like the Asamiya is a language of the outer band."

Scholars have now correctly identified this unique Assamese sound to be a 'veller fricative' sound. Dr. Banikanata Kakoty, states that in Assamese it is an 'unvoiced velar fricative' sound. Dr Golok Ch

Goswami describes it as a “velar voiceless aspirant’. The International Phonetic Association (IPA), has identified all the sounds of all the languages in the world and have assigned some unique symbols. The IPA symbol of the ‘velar fricative’ sound as found in Assamese and other languages is the Roman letter X. (See IPA Chart).

Some of the Indo-European languages have retained this sound although today in each language, the actual pronunciation is slightly different. In the European languages this sound is spelled either as x or ch. In the Greek language it is spelled as x as in the word Xarish (meaning favor). In the Russian language it is spelled as x as in the words Xrushchev or Chexov. In the German language it is spelled as ch as in the words Dach (meaning roof) or Bach (meaning brook). In Scottish language also this sound is there, and is spelled, like the Germans, as ch as in the word Loch (meaning hole).

Thus our Assamese language is a unique language which is one of the few which has still retained this X sound. It is believed that in Assam we have this sound from the early days of Narakaxura who belongs to an Axura tribe which is an earlier pre-Vedic Aryan group, the main branch of which immigrated to Persia and later established the worship of the supreme deity, Ahura Mezda as the formless God. It is interesting to note that even today Assamese culture has some striking correspondence with the old Persian culture as found in Zend-Avesta. The Persian language has also some correspondence with the Assamese language in many respects including the common /x/ sound.

From these ancient past, the Aryan roots of the Assamese language has greatly assimilated various other elements into its body in Assam, notably of Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman family; and the old Assamese language evolved as the dialect of the of the common people. In course of time, several waves of Aryan immigrants entered Assam. According to one theory, these early immigrants were Alpine Aryans from the Mediterranean. “During the third millennium B.C.the Alpine immigration poured into India, one branch of them moving toward the western coast of India through the Indus valley and the other branch pushing towards Eastern India.” They must have come through the foothills of the Himalayas bypassing the mainland India. Assamese language bears some interesting correspondence to some languages of the Himalayan foothills. It is also probable that some of them came through one of the northern trade routes thru Tibet and Bhutan, which were in common use in those times.

In keeping with the IPA (International Phonetic Association) this sound should be represented by the letter X. Assamese should start writing this sound in their many words which have this sound. Thus the correct spelling of the word Assam in Assamese should be OXOM. There has been some attempt to write the word with the spelling ASOM. Needless to say that the spelling ASOM does not represent the proper Assamese pronunciation.