

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's Contribution towards the Assamese Language and Vernacular Education System in Assam: A Philosophical Outlook

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Abstract: The paper focuses on Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's Contribution towards Assamese Language. For him the vernacular medium is the necessary needs of students in the primary level. Without getting basic knowledge in one's own language, he can't raise himself depending on foreign language only. By foreign language here, Bengali is depicted by him. The paper further includes within its province, his fight for the restoration of Assamese Language both in court as well as in education system. By mentioning various points towards the richness of Assamese Language he tries to give intrinsic value to it. Further, in discussion of all these, the distinctiveness of Assamese and Bengali languages are also come within its purview. In the concluding remarks, a query raised, i.e. by seeing Phukan's contribution towards the restoration of Assamese Language can he be termed as a philosopher? With certain positive comments the paper comes to a conclusion. However, the restoration of Assamese Language is the main trust area of this paper.

Keywords: Assamese Language, Education, Vernacular Medium.

Introduction:

Language is the mirror of a society. When this language is in the state of banishment, the entire community will strive for the existence. The same problem emerged in the land of Assam once where, the Assamese language was replaced by Bengali in school, colleges and offices. The dark age of Assamese language is a thirty seven years long time-frame. This was happened at the time of arrival of the Browns and Bronsons in Sadiya (one of the places in Assam). These two people knew the negativity of replacement of native language and to restore this both the missionaries sent objections to the Calcutta govt. but unable to get positive results, since there were no Assamese people to create any mark in front of the Calcutta govt. officials. In that mean time one energetic, versatile, young Assamese officer Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, who was then a sub- assistant to Nowgaon, with the help of these two missionaries, able to restore the Assamese language and reintroduce it in the offices and education system and make Assam proud.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and His Contribution towards Assamese Language:

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan is a giant personality of Assam. The seed of renaissance of Assam was started by his father Haliram Dhekial Phukan by writing his first historical work- "Assam Buranji" and by supporting the women education system in Assam, he showed Anandaram Dhekial Phukan a way towards the noble cause of Assam. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the true representative of the new awakening in the modern age of enlightenment. He was regarded as the Raja Ram Mohan Ray of Assam. He came to realize that without education no real progress of the society is possible. He was concentrated on getting education in vernacular medium, so that people can better understand the concepts and real life situations. No doubt to compete with world education and progress we have to learn foreign languages like Bengali, English etc. But without knowing the mother tongue the basics cannot be obtained. We cannot uplift ourselves by neglecting the mother tongue. So he focused on uplifting ourselves from the roots and by concentrating on Assamese language first.

Language of Courts and Education:

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan is an Assamese by born, heart and with his whole soul. By seeing the province of Bengali in Assam everywhere, starting from education system to court language, Phukan then realized that if this will be the case, in near future we will lose the identity as Assamese. In his book *Observations* Phukan objects to the use of Bengali in the schools of primary standards, by saying that one should learn his first lesson in his mother tongue. Since, Bengali is a foreign language, even the teachers along with all locality are not familiar with that language, which further causes understanding problems among the students. If teachers cannot make out the whole meaning, how can they teach the students? Again, the few books that are used on the different branches of elementary learning are composed in a foreign tongue, which necessarily prevents their being of any popular use. So much time is in the first instance wasted to acquire the knowledge of Bengali language. Moreover, while searching the reason for using Bengali as the primary language is that, Bengali is the language adopted in the courts. However, this gives rise to another very crucial problem related to it is that, it is the violation of Assamese People's right i.e. "our right to use our native language, both in education of the people and in the dispensation of justice."¹ So Phukan opined that popular education will never advance in the country unless the system at present pursued in the vernacular schools be remodeled. So he proposed, substitution in of Bengali in the schools, publication of series of popular books in Assamese language, establishment of schools for teacher training in native language, add Sanskrit studies in the schools separately etc.

However, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was not saying the abolition of Bengali language from the Assam totally. He suggested using standard Bengali works in the higher studies, because to learn a different language apart from our native language is not bad. In fact it is good to learn other languages to have better communication with people of different community. He only opposed exclusive adoption of Bengali as a medium of instructing the people in literature, science and other useful branches of knowledge.

After that Phukan was focusing on abolishing the Bengali language from the court and, make Assamese as the language of court. He said that Assamese 'was used with great facility and

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convenience and with universal satisfaction to the people, for above fifteen years, in almost every department of public affairs', was banished from that position and the Bengali was substituted in its place. This simply had no logic whatsoever, and spoke clearly of any wisdom on the part of people who passed the above act. Substituting Bengali to Assamese gives no newness, better understanding of the court matters. It is only to the officers and other persons who are constantly related to the court works are intelligible to the Bengali language. Apart from them the general masses are unable to have knowledge about it. Even the native judges are not totally familiar with Bengali language; it seems they are doing the works in Bengali because of imposition only, not with their will. European judges also find Assamese as comfortable language than that of Bengali. They can fluently say Assamese but not Bengali. These all focus on the proper communication gaps in various court dealings. By referring to the negativity of using foreign language, Phukan refer to the orders of the govt. under the provisions of Act XXIX of 1837. The act says about, "wisely abolishing the Percian from the courts of Bengal and Hindustan and substituting the Bengali and Hindustani languages respectively in the provinces."²Phukan's argument is that if this law can follow in removing Percian language from the court of Bengal, why don't we use this law in restoring our Assamese language in the land of Assam?For more than ten years after the annexation of the province finally Assamese becomes the language of the court. It is very helpful for the Assam and Assamese people for using Assamese language in the court matters. Since Assamese judges are in most numbers in the Assam courts so it becomes very useful that they totally understand all the things and the general masses also felt comfortable and able to understand the judicial things properly.

After these, the then Lieutenant Governor Sir George Campbell considered that Assamese must now be introduced in the court of Assam and schools i.e. primary schools, lower middle schools and lower middle classes of higher schools of the valley district of Assam. But he put certain limitations i.e. 1) If there is (Assamese) book availability issue on higher classes, then Bengali books must be used. 2) When Assamese technical terms are not available in both Assamese and English, we can take help of the Bengali words. 3) If in upper classes of higher schools Assamese books are not available or not exist then every subjects can be taught in either Bengali or English. However, with some restrictions (which are indeed necessary), Assamese becomes the language of education and courts with the efforts of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan.

Intrinsic Value of Assamese Language and its Distinctiveness from Bengali:

Phukan was searching the roots of using Bengali language which is foreign to Assamese. Reason was two-fold. Firstly, the main culprits, in introducing Bengali, were the British officers who did not have the initiative to learn the Assamese language and maintain that Assamese language was the local form of the Bengali language³. Secondly, there was a misconception of some people that Bengali and Assamese are same. Since alphabet of both the languages is same both are considered as equal. The Bengali advocates of Assam mentions that "the Bengali spoken in Assam is essentially same as spoken in Bengal."⁴ They again said that only spelling and pronunciation are to some extent different. After listening from them Phukan was shocked and tries to proof that both the languages are different from each other and both have different test of uses and beauty. In his book *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam*, in a chapter entitled "A

Native” he tries to remove this misconception and gives Assamese language a unique status totally different from that of Bengali. Similar alphabet does not imply similar languages. However he points out that alphabet of both Assamese and Bengali are also to some extent differ from each other. We can analyze his findings and discussions in some points. Firstly, from the book *Kabita Ratnakara* he took a passage, which he writes both in Assamese and Bengali to see whether both the languages have any difference or not. After that what he finds is that, out of 287 words in Assamese, 112 words do not have any resemblance with Bengali. 98 words are derived from Sanskrit which is regarded as common source for both the languages. Only 77 words have partial or total resemblance with Assamese. So we cannot term Assamese and Bengali languages are same. In his second analysis, he provides 114 common day today words that we use. He writes the words both in Bengali and Assamese (also in English, for those who don't know the Assamese or Bengali name for the words). In here also 90 words are totally different from each other. Only few words have near resemblance with Bengali. This also shows the difference of both the languages. Thirdly, he tried to refute the contention that the difference between Bengali and Assamese language can be seen while comparing it to a refine language of Bengali book. For this he took a passage from a Bengali *Masik Patrika*, which is nothing but some dialogue between husband and wife. He writes it in both Assamese and Bengali and compares it. The result is that difference is wider in spoken than in written language. He further puts up his challenge to the reader and asks them to judge whether Assamese and Bengali language are same or different. Phukan points out that in India Sanskrit is regarded as the origin of (almost) all the languages. He took a passage from *Yogavastha Ramayana* and writes it in three parallel columns in Assamese, Bengali and in Hindi language. By writing it, he wanted to show that among these principal dialects of India, all bears a close resemblance to each other. So it does not mean that close resemblance implies same language. If that is the case then all languages of India are considered as one and the same⁵.

After comparison and proving that Bengali and Assamese are not same but different languages, he then tries to prove the individuality of Assamese. First of all, he respond to the view that was popular that time, i.e. Assamese language is a mere jargon, a vulgar, and uncouth dialect, not sufficient enough to express sentiments that are needed in science and literature etc. To disprove this he select an extract from a book, *Natural Philosophy*, and an excerpt from an essay, ‘*Folly of Anger*’ from the Rambler 24th April 1750, and gives their purport in Assamese. He feels fully confident that he has not failed in conveying the full meaning of the original English writers to the Assamese reader. As a conclusion Phukan remarks, since both Bengali and Assamese are founded on Sanskrit, any Sanskrit word which is used in Bengali can equally use or introduce in Assamese compositions. Again if any word is not there in either Assamese or Bengali, we search it in Sanskrit. And this can be happened in anywhere like Religion, Law, Philosophy or Science. Secondly, Phukan responded the dictum i.e. Assamese language has no distinct literature of its own. He points to the literary history of Assam and says that Assam has many Assamese literature of its own. He groups Assamese books in categories which are accordingly: (a) Hindu religious works (b) history (c) medicine (d) drama (e) arithmetic (f) geography (g) dictionary (h) law and (i) schoolboy readers. Apart from this he again mentions about the Assamese books published by the Sarampore Mission and the American Baptist Mission in Assam and also state that many literatures were lost and destroyed also. So it is noticeable that Assamese literature is not less rich in literature as some people wanted to say. Edward A. Gait in his report on the progress of Historical Research in Assam, 1914,

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calls Phukan's book 'a well written indication of the claim of Assamese to rank as separate language'. With this Anandaram Dhekial Phukan first time has been able to establish the individuality of Assamese language and successful in giving it a unique status and intrinsic value⁶.

Conclusion:

The life span of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was very short. But his contribution and tremendous effort for the restoration of Assamese language is highly remarkable. When we observe his efforts and his long term thinking to restore one language then certain doors of query opens up. At this point Phukan's philosophical perspective is manifest. Can we term him as philosopher is a demand coming to the purview. If we search the meaning of philosophy and philosopher; as we go through the Oxford dictionary we get the meaning of philosophy as the search for knowledge and philosopher implies a person who lets reason govern his life or a person who has developed life or a person who has developed a set of ideas and beliefs about the meaning of life. Now, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's every step was to make the life meaningful. His idea, thoughts about the existence and survival of Assamese language is highly commendable. His every steps move only for the betterment of the society and people. He understood that the existence of one community is dependent upon its language and communication skills. This thinking definitely leads him to a philosophical standpoint. Various philosopher of the different eras, like Socrates from west, or Gandhi from India were devoted their lives in the betterment of the society. In this perspective by noticing Phukan's contribution we definitely project him as an Assamese Philosopher, who worked for Assam, Assamese community and Assamese language.

Notes and References:

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1. ¹ Neog, M. "Anandaram Dhekial Phukan: Plea for Assam and Assamese", *The Resuscitation of the Assamese Language by the American Baptist Missionaries*, Omsons Publicatons, 2008, p. 59.
 2. ² Ibid, p. 78.
 3. ³ Neog, M. "Bronsonar Peratot ki Ase", *Prantik*, 20th Issue, 1983.
 4. ⁴ Ibid, p. 59.
 5. ⁵ Phukan, A. D. A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education in Assam, Mission Press Assam, 1855, pp. 3-27.
 6. ⁶ Intrinsic value implies property of anything that is valuable on its own. Intrinsic value is always something that an object has 'in itself' or 'for its own shake', and is an intrinsic property. It also implies a thing which has an end-in-itself.