

CHAPTER FOUR

LITERARY BODIES IN COLONIAL ASSAM

Literary bodies have played a very formative role in shaping the literary culture of Assam. In this chapter I shall study how the youths receiving modern/western education became conscious of the condition of the Assamese language and how they made an organised effort to strive for the development of the language and literature. The result of the organised effort was a number of literary bodies that were formed from time to time. Of these a few like the Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUSS) established in 1888 and the Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1917 are particularly noteworthy and a study of their formation and agenda are quite important from a book history point of view.

In the chapter on periodicals of Assam, I have tried to throw some light on the formation of the Assamese middle class and how the members of this class exerted itself to construct modern Assam. As they set forth to shape a nation out of the various groups and classes of people they used tools and structures new and old. Language became a very crucial factor in this venture of nation-building; it could strike a chord in many a heart which was essential for the middle class. As we know the middle class did not come in direct confrontation with the British for a long time and instead of trying to form a politically independent nation it followed the ideology of linguistic nationalism. Here it will be seen how the literary bodies were institutionalised and used by the middle class to shape, develop, and establish the unique identity of the Assamese language and its literature.

In this chapter, the focus will be on the circumstances leading to the formation, the social profile of the members, and the agenda of the ABUSS and the Asam Sahitya Sabha. Most of the other literary societies did not enjoy a long life span or make an effective mark in the linguistic and literary field. Some of them ultimately merged with these two bodies. But each society was a step forward in this organised effort. As the story of these two organisations unravels it will be seen that a study of their agendas is particularly crucial in attempting to contribute toward a book history of Assam. The

young Assamese students studying in Kolkata who formed the ABUSS realised among with other things that printing and publishing of books in Assamese were very vital for preserving the identity of the language. During the period from 1836 to 1873 when Assamese was refused its official status, the language had suffered great damages the effect of which continued for a long time. A critical study of the early efforts of the Asam Sahitya Sabha is even more important as the Sabha is functioning fully even at present. In the early years the Sabha tried to form itself into an organisation for the entire state of Assam. For this various branches were established in different parts and districts. But the crucial feat is the accomplishment of fixing the language which is a pre-requisite of print. I have underlined how the founding of the first printing press in Sibsagar in Upper Assam had a very important effect in fixing of the language.

The question of language has always been vital to the identity of the Assamese people. Assam has had cultural and economic relationship with its neighbour Bengal for a long time. So it was not a strange matter for the people of Assam to have knowledge of the Bengali language. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Maniram Dewan, and a few others had written books in the Bengali language (Mahanta 2009: 17-18). A reference to it has been made in the earlier chapter. The circulation of Bengali newspapers and books is another evidence of the people of the region's acquaintance with the language. When the British began their rule in Assam they brought Bengali office assistants as they were already trained in the new form of administration. After the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 1826 between the British and the Burmese invaders, the British, though first made their appearance as a protector of the Assamese people, gradually took over the reins of administration of the entire region. After ten years in 1836 the Colonial rulers declared Bengali as the official language of Assam. It was the pioneering members of the Assamese middle class and the American Baptist missionaries who raised their voices against this decision of the new rulers. Both groups had their own interest in doing so. Keeping in mind the scope of the chapter I would try to analyze the involvement of the middle class in the language question.

In the early years of colonial rule the members of the aristocratic class were not able to take part in the British administrative system due to their lack of English education. Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam (1834-61) felt that the "state of things" was "pregnant with evil". At his initiative an English School was established at Guwahati in 1835. Gradually schools came to be established at district and village level

as well. The schools had two “departments” vernacular (which was Bengali) and English. Though steps were taken by the authorities to run the education department in a systematic way there was not much success. “The book of instruction was issued, but it was seldom opened; neither was there a fixed curriculum nor any list of text-books and, in fact, text-books were so scarce that teachers were compelled to devote much of their time to writing letters, petitions and keeping accounts or engaged in religious studies” (Barpujari 2007 [vol. iv]: 353). This ill-organised education system coupled with the fact that students instead of receiving education in their mother tongue had to learn a foreign language took its toll on the novices. Thus the situation was not at all conducive for the development of the Assamese language.

Historical circumstances did not lead to the formation of a strong business class in Assam. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when the Ahom rule was experiencing its downfall, the royal officials and the elite religious class were busy amassing wealth by exploiting the subjects and thus transforming into a considerably rich class. But under the new British rule the class was not able to convert its wealth into modern capital. The colonial rule did not provide an atmosphere conducive to the growth of local trade and industry. Hence it did not help in the emergence of a commercial bourgeoisie class. Except a few tea planters, businessmen and those connected to the Vaishnava *Satras*, most of the members of the Assamese middle class who received western education were government service holders (Mahanta 2009: 148-50). They came to consider the Bengali *babus*, who were recruited by the British Government, as their contenders in the job market. Another aspect of this issue was that when Bengali was declared as the official language and Assamese ceased to be the language of instruction in schools. This had a very dismal affect on the Assamese language. Moreover, the Assamese youths who travelled to Kolkata for higher education were greatly impressed by the various individual as well as organisational efforts made in Bengal for the development of Bengali language (156-157). The ABUSS formed in 1888 was a result of the hard work of these youths.

The colonial rule introduced a very new way of life which affected not only the administrative but also the socio-economic and cultural aspects of existence. As already mentioned without a strong capitalist class the newly educated class was dependent on the British Government. Another important factor was that the British made their entry into Assam when the region was ravaged by an external enemy, namely the Burmese,

and domestic matters like the Moamoria revolt and internal bickering of the Ahom ruling class. The important members of the society felt that the colonial rulers were responsible in bringing peace and at least some semblance of administrative discipline and further progress and development was possible only under the beneficial rule of the British. Except in the early years, for a long time they could not think of revolting against the British rule. In return for their loyalty the members of the middle class were in the good books of the rulers but this did not immediately procure for them the support of all the sections of the society. These important members of the society embarked upon forming a nation by uniting the different sections of the society. For this they made use of tools that everyone would relate to. As mentioned earlier one such was language which could touch almost every heart. Soon service to the language came to be equated with service to one's nation. Thus nationalism took the form of linguistic nationalism. It was an issue which would not hurt the feelings of the rulers rather on various occasions they received the blessings and help of the British.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Barua, and a few other Assamese persons along with the American Baptist Missionaries were first to fight for the Assamese language. The Baptist missionaries had entered Assam in 1836 along with a printing press and Mission Press came to be established in Sibsagar in Upper Assam which had very important consequences for the Assamese language. The Mission Press was the first printing press of Assam and the periodical *Orunudo* published from this press created a platform for the upcoming Assamese writers. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, and others wrote books and articles in the Assamese language and called upon the Assamese people to write in their mother tongue, to prove its independent identity and convince the British rulers to declare it as the official language of the province.

The neighbouring province of Bengal where the modern way of life entered about a century ago along with colonial rule greatly influenced the educated Assamese. The lack of institutions for higher education in Assam compelled the youths to travel to Kolkata. Here many of them were impressed by the way in which the Bengali language and literature was developed on the basis of the English language and literature. They were also greatly influenced by the various societies and organisations that were formed for the development of the Bengali language and literature. Hence the small number of students from Assam formed a literary organisation in 1872 and christened it as

Asamiya Sahitya Sabha (Assamese Literary Society) and later Asamiya Chatrar Sahitya Sabha or Assamese Students' Literary (ASL) Club. The persons who steered forward this club were Ganga Gobinda Phukan, Jaganath Barua, and Manik Chandra Barua; the club became the confluence of the Assamese students living in different parts of Kolkata. The club held two sessions in a week; the one on Wednesdays was meant for light topics intended for leisure and enjoyment, the other held on Saturdays was devoted to serious topics related to Assamese language and literature. With the increase in the number of high schools in Assam the number of seekers of higher education in Kolkata also increased. The students who were educated in English could realise that the Assamese literature was yet to be influenced by English literature. English romanticism which was influencing the various Indian vernaculars had not yet influenced Assamese literature (Talukdar 1975: 49-50).

Up to the first half of 1888, the ASL Club was working at a very slow pace under the secretaryship of Debicharan Barua. Once during a Saturday session of the club it was decided that Assamese literature was to be regenerated with the spirit of European, particularly English, literary renaissance. To fulfil this aim the Kolkata Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha (ABUSS) was formed in place of ASL Club on 25 August 1888. Sibram Sarma Bordoloi was elected as the secretary of this newly formed organisation based at a students' hostel in No. 67, Mirzapur Street in Kolkata. All the hostel boarders enrolled themselves as members of ABUSS. Some of the important residences of the Assamese students in Kolkata were No.14, Pratap Chandra Chattarjee Lane, No. 2 Bhabani Charan Dutta Lane, and No. 62 Sitaram Ghose Road. The different sessions of the ABUSS were held at these various residences (Talukdar 1975: 51).

The architects of the ABUSS were young Assamese students who went to Kolkata in search of higher education. It is interesting to note how these young minds could commandeer a well organised movement for the development of their mother tongue suffering the ravages of the socio-political scenario. Print technology came to be used by these crusaders as a weapon. That they realised the power of print is underlined by the fact that they considered a periodical to be an essential requisite for their drive. When Sarma Bordoloi was the secretary, the need was felt for a journal for the development of the Assamese language on the new path of European, especially English romanticism. It would also act as a vehicle of dissemination of the new ideas in the field of literature and publication of the various articles and other literary creations read out

in the sessions of the Sabha. As most of the members were students living in hostels they could not afford to publish a periodical. Ultimately in 1889 due to the help put forward by Chandra Kumar Agarwalla who belonged to a business family, *Jonaki* came into existence and it functioned as the official organ of the ABUSS. Agarwalla could acquire the help of the members of the ABUSS. *Jonaki* was able to fulfil much of what it set forth to do particularly infuse romanticism into Assamese literature. It is to be noted that another periodical *Bijuli* was brought out by a group of youths who had disassociated themselves from the Sabha. But neither these young men nor their journal were against the Sabha in principle (Talukdar 1975: 51).

Another noteworthy attempt of the ABUSS was the compilation of a descriptive catalogue of Assamese books. This sixty-five pages catalogue, published in 1895, contained the description of seven hundred and thirty books. The name of the book as well as the author or compiler, whether it was in print, the year of publication, the genre of the book, and such other information was included in the catalogue. As print technology had made late entry into Assam most of the books were in manuscript form. As has been already stated Assam had a rich manuscript culture. The carrier was mostly of the bark of the *Sanchi* tree, *Muga* or *Eri* silk. These manuscripts existed in *Satras*, *Namghars* as well as private residences. The members of ABUSS were concerned about their preservation. The joint editors of the catalogue, Ramakanta Borkakati and Kanaklal Barua, in its foreword wrote that the list of books would give an idea of the earlier stages of Assamese literature and prove to the skeptics that it was not a language of recent origin. It would also inspire people to collect names of other existing books as the list was not an exhaustive one (Talukdar 1975: 58).

The founding of a library by the Sabha further underlines the fact that books were becoming a part of the socio-cultural life. These books were donated by Hemchandra Barua, Dinanath Bezbarua, Radhikaram Dhekial Phukan, Purnakanta Sarma, Upendra Nath Barua, Basanta Kumar Goswami, Panindranath Gogoi, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Kalinath Hazarika, Hemchandra Goswami, Ratneswar Mahanta, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Shivadev Goswami, Sridhar Barua, Barada Prasad Chaliha, and others. About 72 books got accumulated. It was a good number keeping in view of the fact that the number of books published in the Assamese language was not great (Talukdar 1975: 61).

In the editorial reports of “the 3rd-4th year and that of the 5th-6th year of the literary organisation, the goals are clearly stated” (my translation) (Talukdar 1975: 56). Lakshminath Bezbarua’s memoir *Mor Jivan Sowaran* is another source where we come across these objectives. Here he states that the primary aim of the Sabha was the development of the Assamese language and its literature by any means whatsoever. “To fulfil this aim the society is trying to collect all the existing books in Assamese in one place. The Sabha is also taking steps to preserve the manuscripts so that those can ultimately be printed and published. The Sabha would endeavour to draw the attention of the authorities to the fact that the Assamese language should be the medium of instruction in schools so that the young children get the opportunity of receiving instruction in their mother tongue; to strive for the use of correct language with regard to grammar and spellings by one and all by removing defective books from schools; to write the biographies of ancient writers like Sridhar Kandali, Sankardev, etc. and as well as provide notes for difficult matters in their compositions; to comment on the various aspects of their writings; to make translations of works in Sanskrit or other languages and also summarise the contents of others in the Assamese language; to write a comprehensive history of Assam; to find easy ways of educating the undeveloped classes of the society; to create interest among the masses for newspapers; and to create one written language for the entire state” (my translation) (Bezbarua 2008: 82).

These aims and objectives of the ABUSS are worth mentioning for they are pointers to the fact that the young members had an accurate understanding of the problem, namely the condition of the language and its literature. The Assamese language was as ancient as the Bengali language yet it came to be referred to as a dialect of the Bengali language. Hence the need for restoring ancient manuscripts from lofts where they were kept as objects of veneration beyond the reach of lowly classes. They were to be preserved for the future as well as presented before the world as evidences of the rich ancient manuscript culture of Assam. The lives of ancient writers and their writings should be made familiar so that the Assamese could take pride in their heritage. The members of the ABUSS comprehended the fact that the erroneous language policy followed in schools hampered the progress and development of Assamese. Defective school books and a foreign medium of instruction coupled together to provide a flawed knowledge of the language to the students. A very crucial matter realised by these early members of the middle class was the need for a common language for the entire region

inhabited by different groups of people using different language and dialects. They must have realised that a single language would be a powerful tool for uniting the people into a nation and also that fixing of the language was necessary for print. They also stressed the fact that the common people should take interest in newspapers—a print media that could reach out to people in large numbers and widen their mental horizon. The ABUSS provided an agenda that touched almost every aspect of the issue of the development of the Assamese language. It was an agenda that was to be followed by all those who ventured on the path of linguistic nationalism.

The ABUSS was an organisation formed by the young students of Assam studying in Kolkata. But the plan of action that was chalked out by them was of grave importance. So the pertinent question was how these young champions would fulfil such a momentous task. Keeping this in mind the Sabha decided to form branches in the districts and subdivisions of Assam wherever there were at least ten members. The Sabha at Kolkata would be the mother organisation whereas the others would be its branches. A number of branches came up at places like Guwahati, Nagaon, Tezpur, and North Lakhimpur. There were a number of educated and intelligent people who did not go to Kolkata. They could now participate directly in the programs of the ABUSS. Moreover, the students very often came back to Assam after completing their education. Along with the branches, the two journals *Jonaki* and *Bijuli* were instrumental in spreading the ideas and objectives of the ABUSS. They were successful in accomplishing one of the key objectives of the Sabha, that is, to regenerate the Assamese literature with the spirit of English romanticism (Talukdar 1975: 60).

After about eight years of existence the Kolkata ABUSS became inactive though some of its branches in Assam were still functioning. The need was felt for a literary organisation that would enfold the entire state and it was with this aim that the Asam Sahitya Sabha was established. Though the Sabha was formed in 1917 the preparation for it had started some years back.

Saratchandra Goswami the founder secretary of Asam Sahitya Sabha comments on the rationale behind the formation of the Sabha.

It was in about 1905-06, . . . the people of Upper Assam (*Ujoni*) would make fun of the speech of Kamrup (located in Lower Assam) as *Dhekeri*. During those days

Assam Bandhav made its appearance. Its editor was Pandit Taranath Chakravorty Kavyabinod. The other patrons were Dr. Hari Krishna Das, Srijut Kaliram Medhi, Late Bharatchandra Das and Gangaram Choudhury. I was then reading in college. I would send articles and other compositions to *Assam Bandhav*. I used to publish articles in *Usha*, *Banhi*, and other magazines. There used to be bitter quarrels between *Banhi* and *Assam Bandhav* over the matter of the language of Upper and Lower Assam which would at times take ugly turn-particularly from the side of Lakshminath Bezbarua which would greatly sadden me. I firmly believed that such conflicts would be harmful for the cause of our language. So I too contributed a few hundred rupees to *Assam Bandhav* while I was doing my job. . . . (my translation) (Goswami 1987: 150-51)

Pratapchandra Goswami, the elder brother of Saratchandra Goswami, had also expressed his unpleasant experience and concern as regard to the conflict between the two regions of Upper and Lower Assam over the use of the Assamese language. He writes in his memoir *Jibansmriti aru Kamrupi Samaj*,

Just as I stepped into the field of literature I realised that the Kamrupi language was unusable. According to the literary stalwarts of the time like Raibahadur Padmanath Gohain Barua, Satyanath Bora and such others the employing of words of Sanskrit origin or those used in Kamrup made literature worthless and created problem for Assamese literature. Such gesture on their part was may be because they felt that any deviation from the pattern they followed would make the writing Bengali and the Bengali people would get the opportunity to prove that the Assamese language was a corruption of the Bengali language. In those days, there was hardly anyone from the rural areas of Kamrup in the field of literature besides me and Taranath Chakravorty Kavyabinod. A few who were in the literary field or had started writing books resided mostly in the city. A very

small number from the villages also lived in towns because of their jobs. They wrote books for financial benefit and their models were those literary stalwarts. Hence even if they wanted to use Kamrupi words they did not do so due to the fear of not being recognised as writers by their models and also as they wished to be liked by the readers of the Lower and Upper Assam they did not comment on this matter. Except the schoolbooks, if any article was sent to *Jonaki* it was published only after much transformation. As such I never wrote for *Jonaki* and most probably Taranath Chakravorty also did not do so. Hence after consulting with Chakravorty we started the *Assam Bandhav*. (my translation) (Roychoudhury 2012: 65-66)

It was his concern over this tussle that urged Saratchandra Goswami to feel the need for a literary society that would represent the entire region. Though there were some branches of the ABUSS in Assam, their activities were concentrated only to some parts of the province. Instead of taking into its fold the entire region the organisation tended to create friction in the later period. Moreover, it was more biased toward the dialect of Upper Assam. The conflict became so intense that people of Goalpara thought that it was better to use Bengali language than to tolerate the hegemony of the Upper Assam dialect. All these developments alarmed Saratchandra Goswami and as he was posted at Jorhat as the Deputy Inspectors of Schools, he discussed the matter of eliminating the differences between the two groups with intellectuals of the town like Durgeswar Sharma, Chandradhar Barua, and Debeswar Chaliha. These efforts led to the formation of the Jorhat Sahitya Sabha and later on the Asam Sahitya Sabha (Goswami 1987: 151-52).

The two literary organisations, the Kohima Sahitya Sabha of undivided Assam and the Jorhat Sahitya Sabha, were already established in 1895 and 1914 respectively. The founding president of the former was Nabin Chandra Bhattacharya, a Bengali gentleman, and the secretary was Padmanath Gohainbarua (the first president of the Asam Sahitya Sabha). The first president and secretary of the Jorhat Sahitya Sabha were Debicharan Barua and Sarat Chandra Goswami (the first general secretary of the Asam

Sahitya Sabha) respectively. In the second session of the Jorhat Sabha, Goswami in his speech said that the Sabha followed the footsteps of the ABUSS (Baishya 2010: 16-17). On various occasions like the State Exhibition arranged by Colonel P. R. T. Gordon in July 1915, at a meeting of the Guwahati branch of the ABUSS, and at a literary conference at Dibrugarh on 30 December of the same year the need for a literary organisation was discussed but nothing fruitful came out of it. Nonetheless, matters came to a head in 1916. In that year, under the presidentship of Ganga Gobinda Phukan the annual session of the Assam Association was held at Guwahati. In the same premises the first session of the Asamiya Chatra Sanmilan took place under the leadership of Chandranath Sarma, a highly energetic youth leader of the times (Neog 1976: 4-7). The function was attended by the students and also young and senior litterateurs. They were much impressed by the success of the inaugural meeting of the Sanmilan presided over by Lakshminath Bezbarua. Chandranath Sarma, who was selected as the president of the reception committee, underlined the need of the moment in his welcome speech:

You have all assembled here in the name of a literary association. You have come to join in the service of the mother tongue, to give offerings in this worshipping of the mother. Many of you are selfless servants of literature, . . . but many of you might believe that these kinds of organisations are not a necessity. Many of you may be

of the opinion that service of literature is a pure thing, a matter of in depth research, a matter of meditation. So if it is done in a solitary place, great things could be achieved. This is completely true. But due to the present condition of the Assamese language there is a dire need for these kinds of organisations and associations. (my translation) (Hazarika 2004: 201-02)

The organisation was formerly named as Asamiya Chatrar Sahitya Sanmilan (Assamese Students' Literary organisation) but as it would limit the activities of the organisation its name was changed (Neog 1976: 6-7). Chandradhar Barua who presided over the second session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha held in Goalpara in 1918 remarked about the

activities of the Asamiya Chatrar Sahitya Sanmilan: “Assamese literature has been significantly benefitted by the three sessions of the Asamiya Chatrar Sahitya Sanmilan. The enterprise of our students is greatly praiseworthy. They have accomplished a number of useful activities and have under taken to do a lot more” (Hazarika 1955: 29). The agenda of this Sanmilan is interesting to note for it included a number of printing and publishing projects. The Sanmilan published a series of articles by the title *Sanmilan Prabandhavali*. At least five editions were published by the first, second, third, fourth, and tenth sessions of the association. Moreover, it aspired to publish a series of works in the memory of the great linguist Hemchandra Barua. As a part of the venture three books were published: first a rendition of the plays of the German playwright Wagner into tales and then translated into Assamese as *Wagneror Sdhukotha* by Basanta kumar Barua; a translation of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, *Rahashyar Sadhu* by Ratnadar Sharma and Gunabhiram Sharma; and a biography of Hemchandra Barua by Sarbeswar Sharma Kotoky. Twelve other works were prepared for printing but could not be done due to lack of funds. The literary association published a three-monthly journal as its mouthpiece which was named *Milan*. The journal provided a space for the students to publish their literary creations and at the same time the works of experienced and senior writers were also printed in those pages. *Milan* thus brought out by a students’ organisation proved to be a significant contribution to the Assamese literary world. The journal was later brought out after every two months and was also illustrated (Hazarika 2004: 246-51).

As the senior litterateurs were highly impressed by the first session of the Sanmilan, a meeting was held under the leadership of Ambikagiri Raychoudhry, an advocate of linguistic nationalism, in which a decision was taken to form a literary organisation with the cooperation of the people of Sibsagar. A committee was formed under the nationalist leader Chandranath Sarma. The final discussions for the formation of the Asam Sahitya Sabha took place in the annual session of the Assam Association held at Sibsagar in 1917. A reception committee was formed and Padmanath Gohainbarua, the literary stalwart was called upon to preside over the first session which was held on 26 and 27 December. The session was attended by about 800 people from different parts of Assam and the Asam Sahitya Sabha became a reality. The literary body was at first named as Assam Sahitya Sanmilan, then in 1924 it was registered as Assam Sahitya

Sabha and ultimately in 1944 as per the advice of Lakshminath Bezbarua it was renamed as the Asam Sahitya Sabha (Neog 1976: 22).

From 1917 to 1920 the annual sessions of the Asam Sahitya Sabha were held in the same premises where the annual sessions of the Assam Association were held. This was so because the Asam Sahitya Sabha was formed under the aegis of the Assam Association. Formed in 1905 the association was the political organisation of the Assamese middle class and its ideology influenced that of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. “The Association served as the mouth-piece of the people of Assam in presenting to the authorities their needs and grievances, hopes and aspirations.” Its sponsors did not believe in action-oriented programmes of the *Raijmels* or village assemblies, but pinned their faith on constitutional agitation, that redress of grievances of the people and reform in administration could be affected in prayers and petitions (Barpujari 1999[vol i]: 172-73). However, the Asam Sahitya Sabha, as it had resolved to keep political matters at bay, distanced itself from the Association when “At the annual session of the Assam Association held at Tezpur in December 1920 under the presidentship of Prasanna Kumar Barua, it was resolved to adopt the programmes of non-cooperation as outlined by the Nagpur Session of the National Congress” (174-75).

The sole aim of the Asam Sahitya Sabha was the all round development of the Assamese language, literature, and culture. In its fifth annual session, the ‘*inter-alia*’ decided to get the Sabha registered. It was registered on 17 March 1924 under the Act for the Registration of Literary, Scientific, and Charitable Societies (Act XXI of 1860) and the Memorandum of the Association stated the objects of the Sabha as below:

The objects for which the Association is established were:

- (1) To effect all round improvement of the Assamese Language and Literature.
 - (a) To revise and bring up-to-date the Assamese Dictionary and Grammar.
 - (b) To encourage the research in and study of the Ancient Assamese Literature, such as old *puthis*, *buranjees*, *bargeet*, folk-lore and proverbs (*phakaras*).

- (c) To publish and encourage the publication of works on subjects in which the Assamese literature is generally poor.
 - (d) To publish or assist in the publication of useful works by authors who cannot afford to do so themselves.
 - (e) To prepare gramophone records of *bona fide* ancient Assamese tunes.
 - (f) To grant scholarships, rewards or prizes for encouraging the study and culture of Music and Arts.
 - (g) To publish a periodical organ of the Sabha.
 - (h) To carry on the propaganda work for the spread of the study and research in the Assamese Language and Literature among the general public.
- (2) To invite and collect subscriptions and donations from the public for the aforesaid objects.
 - (3) To hold and manage all funds collected for the above objects.
 - (4) To hold as trustees of such trusts which may be created in favour of the Sabha, either singly or along with other trustees nominated by the creator of the trusts, in furtherance of any of the objects of the Sabha.
 - (5) To purchase or acquire on lease or in exchange or on hire or by gift or otherwise, of all real and personal property and any rights or privilege necessary or convenient for the purpose of the Sabha.
 - (6) To sell, improve, manage and develop all or any part of the property of the Sabha.
 - (7) To do all such other things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objects of the Sabha or any of them, including the founding and maintaining

of libraries, museums, laboratories, studentships and chairs on literary, scientific, philosophical, and theological subjects. (Neog 1976: 11-12)

A study of the agenda of the Sabha throws light on the thought process of its architects. Before formulating the objectives they deliberated about almost all aspects of the organisation. Steps were to be taken not only to preserve and study the literary heritage of the region, to further develop and improve upon the existing grammars and dictionaries of the language but also to acquire what was deficient in it. The agenda also included programs for helping poor writers in publishing their works on the one hand and awards for encouraging upcoming writers on the other. They also thought of bringing out a journal which would provide a platform for writers. There are many similarities between the objectives of the ABUSS and that of the Sabha. This was because the ideology of linguistic nationalism that guided the former was also adopted by the later. In fact the Sabha was the successor of the ABUSS. In 1917 the Asam Sahitya Sabha brought many of the branches of the ABUSS under its banner and rejuvenated them. This proves the similarity of the aims and objectives of the two organisations.

The Asam Sahitya Sabha was formed as a literary organisation for the entire region, an organisation belonging to the entire nation. Its aim was all round development of the Assamese language for which the Sabha took steps from its very first session. However, various attempts at achieving that aim were made on different occasions by individuals and organisation long before the inception of the Sabha. The achievements of persons like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Barua, and Lambodar Bora were indeed great but were at individual level. These could not attain organisational level or initiate a movement (Hazarika 1977: 5-6). The ABUSS formed in 1888 is regarded as the predecessor of the Asam Sahitya Sabha, the latter adopting the agenda of the former. The literary body was based at Kolkata though it had some branches in Assam. No doubt the organisation did commendable work for the Assamese language but it lost its driving force after some years of its existence as many of its members returned to their homeland. The Asam Sahitya Sabha, on the other hand, exists still today with only a few years to complete its hundred years of existence.

In the period from 1917 to 1947 the Sabha was in its nascent stage. It was a formative phase when the literary body had to establish itself on a sound footing paying attention to organisational side as well as to the shaping of the literary culture of the region. It had also to launch itself as a literary body for the whole region comprising of people speaking in different dialects as well as languages. Though a “small batch of Government servants was at the helm of the Sabha’s affairs all through the beginning” (Neog 1976: 43) the Sabha did not receive adequate financial help from the government. In spite of the fact that the members were vocal in expressing their loyalty to the British rulers the meager amount of government fund (Rs 1000) was stopped during the Civil Disobedience Movement (43). Thus the Sabha had to initiate a drive for accumulating fund in the form of donations from the public. Moreover, the Sabha had to ensure the participation of the masses in its activities both organisational and literary.

During this stage the Sabha in its annual conferences undertook some important resolutions which would help in fulfilling its main objective. It had resolved to publish a number of works like *Vrittamanjari*, a work on Sanskrit metrics by Mahamahopadhyaya Dhireswaracharya Kaviratna, *Sri-Sri-Deva-Damodara-charita* of Nilakantha Dasa and *Sri-Sri-Vanamalideva-charita*, to bring out a second edition of the Assamese dictionary *Hemkosh* by Hemchandra Barua, to compile another dictionary *Chandrakanta Abhidhan*, as well as to publish a journal which was to be the organ of the Sabha. Of these the *Hemkosha* could not be published due to some unsolvable issues with the copyright holders (Neog 1976: 8-23). In the eighth conference of the Sabha held in Nagaon in 1925 the resolution to publish a three monthly research journal was taken. The *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika* was published in the very next year in 1926 (Baishya 2010: 34). *Chandrakanta Abhidhan* could be published owing to the donation offered by Radhakanta Handique and efforts of several persons like Kuhiram Das (Sarthebari in Lower Assam), Rudrakanta Goswami (Nagaon in Middle Assam), and Nakulchandra Bhuyan (Jorhat in Upper Assam). It was indeed a commendable task on the part of the Sabha. There arose some confusion regarding to the printing of the dictionary. Saratchandra Goswami, the first general secretary and an indefatigable worker of the Sabha, informs us that when the compilation of the dictionary was over, a decision could not be made whether it was to be printed in Chandradhar Barua’s Darpan Press, a very old press of Jorhat or in the Das Company Press which at the time was doing commendable work. But ultimately the great work came to be printed at the

Annada Printing Press of the Borkotoky Company of Jorhat (Goswami 1987: 175-76). In this period the Chandrakanta Bhavan was constructed with the financial help offered by Radhakanta Handique and was inaugurated in the year 1926 (Neog 1976: 42). The central office of the literary body was located in this building in Jorhat. Tea planter Sri Radha Nath Goswami had donated an amount of Rs 2000 for constructing a building for the Sabha but when it received a greater amount of money from Radhakanta Handique the said amount was put into a trust for publishing literary works for children (Baishya 2010: 18-19). From this fund “Binandachandra Barua’s *Maharaja Naranarayana*, meant for children, was accepted for publication” and “Roseswar Sarma a teacher of Jorhat, received a prize for his *Katha-Mahabharat*, written for children” in 1926. A prize declared for novel was won by Dandinath Kalita for his novel *Sadhana* (Neog 1976: 16-17). During this period two of the greatest litterateurs were honoured by presenting them with a letter of felicitation (*abhinanadana-patra*): Lakshminath Bezbarua in 1931 and Padmanath Gohainbarua in 1933 (Neog 1976: 17-18). From time to time the Sabha would also ask the government to take up certain steps that would be beneficial to the field of Assamese language and literature. In the second session held at Goalpara in 1918 the Sabha made two requests to the Government of Assam, one to appoint a whole-time Professor of Assamese at Cotton College in place of the part-time Lecturer so that proper investigations might be carried on into Assamese language and literature and the other to give it the power to nominate a member of the Assamese Text-Book Committee. In 1933 during the fourteenth session held at North Lakhimpur another request to the government to grant a literary pension to Lakshminath Bezbarua who was considered as an authority on the Assamese language and literature. Of course it was another matter that the government did not always comply with the requests. Another important task performed was the purchase of books for the Sabha library. In the eleventh session of the Sabha that was held in Jorhat in 1929, Purnananda Sharmapathak was elected as the General Secretary. During his tenure books up to the value of Rs 1500 was procured and added to the existing collection in the library (Hazarika 1977: 57).

The Asam Sahitya Sahitya was formed as a literary body belonging to the entire region. In the first conference of the Sabha (then Sanmilan) the Executive Committee was formed with members from different towns of Assam, Nalbari, Barpeta, Nagaon, Tezpur, Goalpara, Mangaldai, North Lakhimpur, and also members based at Kolkata.

These members were established litterateurs of the time. Moreover, the different sessions were held at the various places so that the people of the entire region could be involved in its programs and activities. The actual work of making the organisation a popular one was carried out by the branches of the Sabha through activities in which the participation of the masses was drawn in. These are named Sakha Sabhas. In the 1918 the Sabha recognised some of the already existing literary bodies as its branches: Jorhat Sahitya Sabha; Guwahati, Tezpur, and Nagaon branches of the ABUSS; and North Lakhimpur, Nazira, Nalbari, Sibsagar, Gauripur, and Golaghat Sahitya Sabhas. By 1921 there were 16 Sakha Sabhas, 498 in 1976 and by 2013 more than 1200 (Baishya 2010: 17). These literary bodies were formed by a group of persons based at small localities. These persons may or may not be writers yet they tried to serve the cause of language and literature. They created a platform for upcoming writers and also an atmosphere conducive for the existing writers through publications, workshops, lectures, discussions, and such other activities (Sharma 2013: 494-95). Whenever an annual or biennial session was held in a particular area, all the Sakha Sabhas actively cooperated for the smooth functioning of the session. Not only the members but all the people of the area offered their service for the cause of the Sabha so that each session became a grand success. For this the Sabha took definite steps as early as 1924 when during its seventh session at Guwahati Benudhar Sarma was appointed as its *pracharak* or person in charge of publicity. It would be his duty to establish branches of the Sabha at different parts of Assam and spread the message of Assamese language and literature. Such persons were also appointed in different places of Assam as well as in Kolkata and Dhaka (Baishya 2010: 17-18). At times it was not a very easy task to establish a branch of the literary body.

Each session of conference of the Sabha has been a great achievement on the part of the organisation. This has been possible due to the untiring efforts of its members, workers, the common people as well as the persons who have been selected as its president, general secretary, other office bearers, and the litterateurs with their speeches which are all great pieces of literature. Today, not just thousands, but lakhs of people gather at the sessions. The newly elected president is taken out in a magnificent cultural procession. Huge crowds gather around the different platforms constructed for various activities. In the early years though things did not take place at a grand scale yet from the very first conference there was great popular response with about 800 persons attending it

(Gohain 1977: 10). It was a time with a relatively smaller population and poor transport and communication facilities. As time went on more and more people came to participate in these sessions. From the report of the 1927 session held in Goalpara that was published in the first issue of the second year of the journal of the Sabha, *Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, it is known that about 3000 people participated in that session (54).

During those days women hardly attended public meetings: women belonging to aristocratic families moved out of their houses covered by *Barjapi*, a kind of hat with a very wide brim. They participated only in socio-religious functions and gatherings that were meant exclusively for ladies. However, a unique incident took place in the third annual session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha held in Barpeta in December 1919. As Atul Hazarika writes in his account of the literary association,

In those days women were inside their houses and under the cover of the *Barjapi*.

They did not present themselves in open meetings and assemblies. But in the

Barpeta session a beautiful young woman took her seat among the male audience.

Many were astonished when they saw this. She not only attended the meeting but

also delivered a lengthy speech despite being forbidden by the president of the

session. That brave lady was Chandraprova Das (later Saikiani). (my translation)

(Hazarika 1977: 27)

Earlier in the month of October of the same year she had also attended the annual session of another organisation, Assam Chatra Sanmilan held that year in Tezpur, and was actively involved in the reception committee. There she delivered a speech on opium prohibition. "This was the first speech given by woman in a public platform before a mixed audience" (Mahanta 2008: 94). Another unprecedented incident was the participation of the head of the Garmurh Satra, Sri Sri Pitambar Deva Goswami in the Asam Sahitya Sabha session held in Dibrugarh in 1924. Most probably this was the first incident of a *Satradhikar* attending such a public meeting (Hazarika 1977: 38). Both these incidents underline the fact that different sections of the society were participating in this national association.

From 1917 to 1947 there took place twenty sessions and nineteen presidents have captained the Sabha. The presidential speech of every president is not only an expert comment on Assamese literature and language but also a document of the entire socio-cultural life of the Assamese nation. It has already been mentioned that in fulfilling its aim of nation-building, the Assamese middle class followed the ideology of linguistic nationalism. Language and literature becomes a crucial tool for them. This is clearly reflected in the presidential speech of Padmanath Gohainbarua, the president of the first session of the Sabha held in 1917 in Sibsagar.

. . . if a nation has to introduce itself to the world it has to do so primarily through its national language and literature. This is so because there is no better way to express a nation's inner most thoughts, ideas, talents, and qualities than its language and literature. Moreover, literature always remains a step ahead of language. So to present the nationality of a people, its national literature will do so by remaining a step ahead of its language. Hence though a people's nationality and religion are the base of its literature, they can progress only by relying on national literature. . . . literature is the true identity of a people's nationality, literature is the true life of a nation; a nation cannot exist without its literature. The language of a nation that does not have literature is only a dialect – only a rung above the language of birds and animals. A group's national life is not defined until its literature is developed. A nation that is not able to develop and shape its literature will not be able to survive. . . . it will ultimately blend with another neighbouring nation with a well-developed literature and its unique identity. It is only a natural process; there can be no other alternative. (my translation) (Hazarika 1955: 2-3)

Similar sentiments are expressed by Tarunram Phukan the president of the tenth assembly held in Goalpara in 1927.

Of all national resources, national literature is the greatest. Even all rishis are of the same opinion; the masses also agree to it. . . . A nation's thoughts and corresponding actions are as developed and restrained as its language is developed and restrained. . . . (likewise) A nation is as developed and restrained as its literature. If one wishes to contribute toward national progress one has to work toward the development of national literature. (trans.) (Hazarika 1955: 227-28)

Kaliram Medhi presided over the third session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha held in Barpeta in 1919. He makes certain remarks in his presidential speech which are interesting from a book history point of view; he expresses his concern about the dearth of quality books in the Assamese language on the one hand and the lack of buyers or readers of the available books on the other. He offers an analysis of the phenomenon.

Till now a number of books have been published in the Assamese language. But the pace is very slow. Last year only five books were submitted before the Text-book Selection Committee; however, fourteen went from the Surma Valley. When we consider the fact that most of the books published from the region are textbooks, the number is very discouraging. There is a want of both our readers and writers. The aim of few who write is to prepare textbooks; if they do not do that they have to incur loss, moreover, when there is such a condition the writers cannot make use of their true talents and capacities. Besides the textbooks have to follow the norms set by the education department. . . . True poetry or fiction or non-textbooks are almost not there. On the other hand, due to lack of readers even the available newspapers are facing problems; the future is dim. Ancient poetry, sayings of Daak, songs, etc. have been passed on orally by illiterate people and are the property of the common masses. The books of today are meant for schools; hence they are not for laymen. . . . After receiving western education we have forgotten the common people. . . . English literature is for urban dwellers,

royal priests, bureaucrats, landlords, and well to do people. The masses have no part in it. . . . The books that are published today are not read by the common people. (my translation) (Goswami and Das 1979: 4-5)

Similarly Rajanikanta Bordoloi in his speech as the president of the eighth assembly held in 1925 in Nagaon comments on the pathetic condition of the presses in Assam. “At present printing presses are found in almost all the towns of Assam. But so what? Due to the errors or inattention of the compositors or as because the owners of the presses would purchase old letters or due to the unavailability of good bookbinders the books printed in Assam are unattractive. The printing in Kolkata is good but there letters take Bengali shape” (my translation) (Hazarika 1955: 169). Hence he felt that the Asam Sahitya Sabha should take constructive steps for improving the quality of printing in Assam.

As mentioned earlier the architects of the Asam Sahitya Sabha were mostly the members of the Assamese middle class who came from families that occupied influential positions in the pre-British era. In the changing scenario these persons wished to achieve the popular respect of the past. Nation-building became a means of gaining mass appeal and support. The Sabha was one of its tools and it tried to form itself into national body involving itself not with the literary life but its entire civilised existence. It mobilised public opinion on matters related to the national life and strove to give direction to it. An instance of this was the part played by the Asam Sahitya Sabha at the time when the matter of separation of Goalpara from Assam arose. Goalpara along with Sylhet was a part of Bengal before 1874. In that year when Assam was made a Chief Commissioner’s province separate from the Province of Bengal, Goalpara and Syhet were attached to it. The Bengali speaking people of these regions were always apprehensive of their academic and cultural life. In about 1912 the Bengali speaking intelligentsia wished for severance of Goalpara from Assam and reunion with Bengal. This was not accepted by the British Government and there cropped up embittered feelings between the Bengali and Assamese speaking people. Though Goalpara wished to be a part of the permanently settled area of Bengal for economic reasons the emotional issue of language was raised (Barpujari 1999 [vol i]: 296). A demand was even made that Bengali should be used in the schools of Goalpara. The leaders of Assam ardently wanted that Goalpara should remain a part of Assam

(Barpujari 1999[vol i]: 232). In this matter the Asam Sahitya Sabha played a very crucial role. In 1918, the second annual session of the Sabha was held at Goalpara, the nerve centre of the Goalpara dialect of the Assamese language. It was an important step on the part of the Assamese leadership in keeping Goalpara with Assam. The Zamindar of Messapara, Jatindranarayan Choudhury was made the president of the reception committee of the conference whereas the manager of that Zamindari, Durgeswar Sarma and its settlement officer, Kaliram Medhi were designated as its advisers. The fact that Jatindranarayan Choudhury delivered his speech in the Assamese language had its significance. This was because most public correspondence at that time was done in the Bengali language; the Zamindars were especially enthusiastic in this matter. Another conference of the Sabha was held in the town of Goalpara in 1927 and one in 1926 in Dhubri then in the Goalpara district.

In the speeches of the general presidents and the presidents of the working committees, there were references to how Goalpara had been a part of the socio-cultural life of Assam. Chandradhar Barua was the president of the second session of the Sabha held in Goalpara in 1918. In his speech he states that Goalpara should be described as the finest part (*uttamanga*) of Assam as it was known for its excellence in financial as well as cultural and literary sphere. The zamindars of Assam were centralised in Goalpara. Barua points out that at times when Assamese language was being used throughout Assam, then the rulers as well as the subjects of Koch Bihar, Rangpur, and Dinaajpur exercised their literary activities in the Assamese language. The Assamese literature gained excellence under the patronage of the Koch king Naranarayan. Hence it was justifiable that the second session was held in Goalpara just as the first session of the Sabha was held in Sibsagar the place where the Assamese language gained a new shape under the aegis of the American Baptist missionaries. Chandradhar Barua further adds that those who wished to take away Goalpara from Assam and were spreading the rumour that the zamindars and the subjects had disrespect for Assamese language should witness the situation in Goalpara during the days of the session. Barua also states that he felt that the zamindars as well as the common people would never like to leave their own society and join a foreign one for then they would have to forego the position of honour that they were enjoying in their own society (Hazarika 1955: 26). Ultimately the district continued to be a part of Assam and the role played by the Sabha was one of the important factors in this matter.

The seventh session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha was held in Guwahati in 1924 and was presided over by the literary stalwart Lakshminath Bezbarua. The speech he delivered as the president of the session is considered as one of the greatest speeches on the Assamese language (Hazarika 1977: 39). Along with Bezbarua's observations on various aspects of Assamese language and literature, his comments on the duties of the literary body are equally noteworthy. He expressed his opinion that the Sabha should take steps in preserving the glorious past of Assam so that youth could be acquainted with it. It would instill pride and self-respect in them which would then inspire them to put in their effort in nation-building. The link between the past and present should be preserved. For this the Sahitya Sabha should establish relationship with the Museum in Guwahati and also strive to create centres for discussions on "Ancient Indian History and Culture", arrange for "Sanskrit Historical Lecture" as well as provisions for pursuing M. A. in the Assamese language in Cotton College, the only college in Assam of the times. According to him the Sabha should arrange for the compilation of two, one conventional and the other philological, histories of the Assamese language and literature. Bezbarua felt that a very important duty of the Sabha was to strive for the spread of education especially primary education. It should arouse in the hearts of the youth love and respect for the language, literature, and education of their own state. Composition of children literature should also be a point in the agenda of the literary body for according to Bezbarua they were the future of the nation and literature should be able to instill all positive qualities in them at a tender age. If the Sabha was able to create a group of selfless, patriotic lovers of literature the members of which would venture into different parts of Assam, establish branches of the literary body, reach out to the masses and infuse in them the desire to serve the language as well as to observe if the desire had borne fruit, then according to Bezbarua the Sabha would have achieved a great feat. Thus Bezbarua's speech which is a great document of Assamese language and literature includes the practical steps to be taken by the Asam Sahitya Sabha so that it could be an organisation for the masses (Hazarika 1955: 120-21).

The influence of the Asam Sahitya Sabha in the literary life of the Assamese people is multifaceted and boundless. The scope of this chapter is not enough for making an exhaustive study; it is only indicative of that achievement. During the nascent stage the journey of the Sabha was not a smooth one. In the years between 1920 and 1923 the Sabha was hardly attended by people due to the ongoing non-cooperation movement.

Saratchandra Goswami writes in his substantial article on the literary organisation, *Sahitya Sabhar Kotha*, “Mahatma Gandhi came to Assam in August 1922. He also visited Jorhat. There was lot of excitement everywhere. No one showed any interest in literature. . . . Nothing could be achieved. The session that was scheduled for the Christmas holidays did not take place. . . . 1922 commenced. But there was no activities in Sabha. . . . During those times people would hear about only the non-cooperation movement” (my translation) (Goswami 1987: 163). The organisation was adversely affected during the World War II. The central office at Jorhat was occupied by the soldiers of the war and its library along with other official documents was destroyed; the members had to start from a scratch. Conflict within the Sabha raised its ugly head in 1940 (Neog 1976: 20-21); however, it was submerged by the better reasoning of some of its members. Lack of developed transportation and communication facilities, print and publishing being in its early stage, defective education policies, the rising waves of the national movement, all these acted as hurdles in the path of progress of the literary body. Yet the Sabha overcame all those and was able to shape itself into a people’s organisation. It also became an inspiration for the various tribes occupying the region.

The endeavour of the Assamese middle class in the establishment of the unique identity of the Assamese language, in structuring the cultural identity of the Assamese, and encouraging mass participation in the development of the Assamese language and its literature and the role of the literary bodies like the ABUSS and more significantly the Asam Sahitya Sabha in this venture had its influence on the various tribes and communities inhabiting the province. The tribes like the Bodo, the Rabha, the Deuri, and the Mising experienced national consciousness influenced by the western education and took organisational steps in establishing the unique identity of their cultures through literary along with other socio-cultural activities during the colonial period and in this print and publishing were greatly helpful. The Bodos, a Mongoloid tribe, though rich in folk culture their language did not have a script of its own and hence no written records. The first books about the language were the result of the efforts of Christian missionaries and British officers, some of them are: *An Outline of the Kachari Grammar* (1884) and *The Kacharis* (1911) by Sidney Endle, *A Collection of Kachari Folktales and Rhymes* (1895) and *Dimasa Vocabulary* (1895) by J. Anderson, *A Short Grammar of the Mech or Bodo Language* (1884) by Reverend L. A. Screfshrud, and

Grammar and Dictionary of Kachari Language (1904) by A. Christian (Boro 2010: 19). As pointed out by Anil Kumar Boro in his book *A History of Bodo Literature*, these works were produced to facilitate evangelisation and administration and not for encouraging literary activities by the members of the tribe. Such activities, both on individual and organisational level, commenced under the aegis of the Bodos in the early part of the twentieth century; it was a time when some of the members received western education (20). The Bodos who were spread out in different parts of Assam were influenced by the agenda of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. The Habraghat Sanmilani was formed in 1912 as a result of the efforts of some educated Bodo persons, like Prasanna Kumar Khaklari, Narapati Khaklari, Yudhisthir Hajowari, Panchannan Kachari, and Gangacharan Kachari, of the Goalpara region in the south bank of the Brahmaputra. The objective of this body was to encourage education by establishing schools and to financially support those who undertook to write books in the Bodo language. The first literary assembly of the Bodo language was a fruit of the labour of this organisation; the Dakhinkul Bodo Sahitya Sanmilani was formed in 1918 (Basumatari n.d.: 303-04). “Of course there is much scope to consider this as the result of the encouragement and contribution of the Asam Sahitya Sabha formed in 1917” (my translation) (304). These and other efforts like the formation of the Bodo Chatra Sanmilani in 1919 and the Bodo Literary Club in 1950, ultimately led to the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952. The aim of all these organisations was the development of the Bodo language, literature, and culture. *Bibar*, the first journal in the Bodo language was the mouthpiece of the Bodo Chatra Sanmilani and published in 1924. The journal provided a platform to the upcoming writers for publishing their creations and thus fashioned an atmosphere favourable for such activities. *Bibar* was followed by a number of such literary magazines as *Jenthakha* (1926), *Bitharai* (1932), *Rup O’ Chintadhara* (1937), *Alongbar* (1938), *Hatharkhiala Aru Nayak* (1940), and others. Similarly books also came to be published in the language authored by indigenous writers such as *Khonthai Mathai* (1923), a collection of poems co-authored by Rupnath Brahma and Madaram Brahma; and *Bodoni Gudi Sibja Arw Aroj* (1926) by Madaram Brahma (304-05). Print genres were thus used by the Bodos in their effort to uplift their language.

Similarly though the Deuri Sahitya Sabha was formed in 1965, the Deuris experienced a kind of renaissance as early as in 1936, that is, with the formation of the social

organisation, the All Assam Deuri Sanmilan. This association headed by the popular leader Bhimbar Deuri engaged itself in the growth and development of the Deuri language (Deuri 2007: 50-52). The members of the various tribes and communities inhabiting the province of Assam during the colonial period, who received education, did so in the Assamese, English, and Bengali medium schools. Hence it was inevitable that they witnessed and at times participated in the various steps taken for the establishment of the unique identity of the Assamese language and its all-round development. The Asam Sahitya Sabha provided them a ready model for arousing consciousness in the masses for preservation and development of their indigenous languages and taking up organisational effort in that direction. The steps taken by the tribes resulted in the formation of literary bodies by the Karbi in 1966, the Mising in 1972, the Rabha in 1973, and the Tiwa as well as the Tai-Ahom in 1981 (Taid 2014: 56-57).

I have here tried to present an overview of the literary bodies which came forward to work for the development of the Assamese language and its literature when it was going through a critical phase in its existence. Thus the organisational effort of the Assamese middle class which was engaged in constructing the cultural identity of the Assamese people resulted in the formation of these bodies. It can also be said that these were the consequence of the educated section of people venturing to contribute toward the growth and progress of the Assamese language and its literature and striving to bring in mass participation in this effort. No doubt such literary associations emerged in different parts of the region as well as in Kolkata, yet of these the ABUSS and the Asam Sahitya Sabha proved to be most significant in their contributions. The ABUSS was formed by young students pursuing higher studies in Kolkata, yet the agenda they formulated covered a range of issues related to language development reflecting the depth of their appreciation. A number of branches of the organisation were formed in Assam and it is interesting to note the Tezpur branch is functioning till date. The Asam Sahitya Sabha is often termed as the successor of the ABUSS for there were significant similarities between the objectives of the two literary bodies and as they were guided by the same ideology of linguistic idealism. The Asam Sahitya Sabha endeavoured to form itself into an organisation for the entire state and has been successful in engendering mass participation. The association is functioning even today and will complete its hundred years in 2017. A study of the literary associations is significant from a book

history perspective for they not only played crucial roles in structuring the cultural identity of the region but also print formed vital component of their agenda.