

Academic Development of Arabic Language in Assam: An Overview in Historical context

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Abstract: This article presents the historical aspect of Arabic language education in Assam. It scans the political situation of Assam over the ages, the changes in its borders over time, its relations with Arab countries since the pre-Islamic era, the introduction of Islam here by scholars, preachers and nobles in the Middle Ages, and the reasons for the propagation and spread of Arabic language and Islamic knowledge.

Assam is a state where Arabic is taught by numerous institutions, both religious and secular, government and private. The article makes a historical study of the various levels of maktabs, madrasas and schools, as well as the colleges and universities working here for the propagation of Arabic language and literature. The article explores the reasons why Arabic language has not developed in the state in terms of speaking, communication and writing. The article concludes by discussing the role of scholars and professors practicing Arabic in Assam, as well as the role of students going to educational institutions outside Assam, who have especially reformed the curriculum and teaching methods.

Keywords: Assam, Islamic Education, Arabic language, Madrasa, Maktab, Sufi, Awlia.

Assam is the most important of the eight northeastern states of India. The northeastern states—Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim—are a mountainous region filled with towering mountains and dense forests. It is bordered to the east by Myanmar, to the north by China, to the south by the Bay of Bengal, to the northwest by Bhutan, and to the southwest by Bangladesh. Assam is a region of diverse dialects, languages, cultures, tribes, religions, castes, land and climate, fauna, and flora. Assam is famous for its diverse recreational culture, wildlife such as one-horned rhinoceroses and one-horned rhinoceroses, valuable timber such as sandalwood, and edible vegetables such as betel nut. Various dynasties ruled Assam for centuries until the British took control of western Assam in 1826 and then all of its borders in 1838. The Varmana, Salstambha, and Kamrupa-Palas dynasties ruled Assam in ancient times from 350 AD to 1100 AD. Assam was known as Kamrupa in those days. During the medieval period, it was ruled by the Ahom and Kutch dynasties at most. The Ahom dynasty ruled Assam for about 600 years. The center of the Ahom dynasty was Upper Assam (the present-day northeastern corner of the state). The Kutch dynasty ruled it for many years and controlled western Assam and northern Bengal. Other dynasties that controlled Assam during the medieval period included the Chutiya dynasty, which ruled northeastern Assam and some parts of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. The Kacharis ruled southern Assam for a long time and were repeatedly attacked by the Mughal dynasty over the centuries, but failed to achieve their goal until 1662 AD.¹ In that year, Mir Jumla, one of Aurangzeb's governors, occupied Garigaon, the then capital of Assam, but the Mughal government left in 1682 AD due to heinous fanatic attacks on its armed forces.²

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Assam

² Ahmed, Dr. Qasim Ali (2010), Muslims in Assam, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, p. 10

The relations between Assam and Arab countries existed long before the advent of Islam. Various sources indicate that the close relations between Assam and Arab countries were initiated by Arab traders, who often came to Assam for business purposes, carrying various types of timber, betel nut, rhinoceros horn and other valuable goods. They used to travel to China by land via northeast India, touching Assam for business. Before Islam, the Arabic language was not unknown to the people of Assam. However, it quickly penetrated Assam after the advent of Islam. Due to its geographical location, Islam entered Assam at the end of the 7th century AH. The credit for the introduction of Islam in the region goes to the missionaries and representatives of the Sufis, who played a leading role in propagating Islam and its teachings.³

The most famous of these missionaries and Sufis was Shah Ghiyasuddin Auliya, who came to the region from the Arabian Peninsula in 642 AH with his disciples Shah Gudur, Shah Jamal and Shah Buzrukh. He invited the people to Islam and built a mosque on the top of the Ghorachal mountain. Today, this mosque is known as "Fuwa Mecca", which means "a quarter of Mecca". It is claimed that the foundation stone of this mosque was laid with a handful of soil brought from Mecca. Among them was Sheikh Muhiuddin Baghdadi, also known as Shah Miran and famous as "Azan Fakir", who came to this region from Baghdad in the 17th century and settled in Gurgaon, Sibsagar. He married a woman from the Ahom family and his brother Shah Nabi accompanied him. Shah Miran was a follower of Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya of Baghdad. Among them was Sheikh Burhanuddin, who travelled to this region in the late 13th century. He spent his life in the Ambari area of Guwahati and built a mosque there known as "Bura Masjid". Among them were Shah Badruddin, Shah Ziauddin and Shah Adam Khaki, who made great efforts to spread the Islamic religion and culture in the Barak Valley of South Assam. They were followers of Sheikh Jalaluddin Yamani Mujrrad, who, along with his revered followers, known as the "360 Auliyas" (i.e. 360 saints), spread the Islamic faith throughout the united Bengal. Besides the above personalities, there were many preachers and noble personalities, such as Shah Asim, after whom the Asimganj region is named, located about 25 km from Karimganj, one of the famous towns of the Barak Valley. Shah Nataan, Shah Bakhsh Ali, Shah Maqbul Ali and Mir Arifin, all made all-out efforts to spread the Islamic faith and its teachings.⁴

It is worth mentioning here that the state currently has two valleys; the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. The Barak Valley consists of three districts of the state of Assam; Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi and its population is predominantly Bengali speaking. On the other hand, the Brahmaputra Valley consists of all the remaining districts (23 in number) except the Barak Valley and its population is predominantly Assamese speaking. According to the census conducted in 2010, the percentage of Muslims in the state is 30.92 percent.⁵ With the spread of Islam, the Arabic language spread in South and North Assam. This is because of Islam which emerged in the Arabian lands and its primary source is the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet, both in Arabic. This language is an essential part of Islam and understanding the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet is essential. With the spread of Islam, the Arabic language also spread in the state just as it spread all over the world. All this was possible because of the Muslim preachers, nobles and rulers who made commendable efforts to spread Islamic culture and establish Islamic religious schools and madrasas. It is well known that Arabic and Islamic education in this state began at the hands of the preachers and nobles. They taught the principles of Islam to new Muslims in the mosques built for the prayers and worship of Allah or in the corners of their Hujras (homes). As the number of Muslims increased, these Muslims continued to establish mosques, maktabas (morning schools) and madrasas and appointed teachers to teach the principles of Islam to children in the morning schools and madrasas. These teachers played a significant role in spreading the Islamic faith and its teachings. This work continues vigorously throughout the state. Morning schools are among the most important centers for the study of elementary Arabic and basic Islamic knowledge. Today, most of

³ Ahmed, Dr. Qasim Ali (2010), Muslims in Assam (English), EBH Publishers, Guwahati, p. 11

⁴ Ahmed, Hafiz Saeed (2009), A Comparative Study of Arabic Teaching in Madrasas and Other Educational Institutes in Assam with Special Reference to Problems and Prospects (English), A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Arabic, University of Assam for the Award of Doctorate, Chapter IV, Part-I

⁵ Government of Assam, (2010) Statistical Handbook of Assam, Department of Economics and Statistics, Guwahati, pp. 32-33.

these schools are run by various Islamic charities and Muslim societies, which select their curricula and organize examinations twice a year. In addition to these examinations, a final examination is held for adult students, both male and female, after five years of study. These final examinations are held once a year and certificates and prizes are awarded to the winning students. The most important of these organizations are the *North East India Emirat-e-Shariah and Nadwatut Tameer*, which run 3,795 morning schools (*Sabahi Maktab*) across the state.⁶ Apart from this organization, there are several other organizations, such as the Sunni Primary Education Board, which runs over 100 morning schools.⁷ The Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind also has a wing for the education of Muslim children in the state, which runs over 5,455 morning schools.⁸ Apart from these, there are many other separate schools which provide valuable services for the education of Arabic language and the principles and knowledge of Islam.

Regarding madrasas, their origins date back to the reign of Bakhtiyar Khalji, who took control of united Bengal in 1198 CE. The first madrasa in united Bengal is said to have been established in Shonargaon, the then capital of Bengal, in 1270 CE, built by Shaikh Sharafuddin Abu Tuwama. A large number of madrasas were subsequently established throughout Bengal. It is said that there were over 80,000 madrasas in Bengal before the British took control in 1757 CE. When the British colonialists ascended the throne of united India, including Bengal and Assam, they closed or demolished these madrasas for political gain.⁹ It is worth noting that the present-day Karimganj region in the Barak Valley and some parts of lower Assam, especially the Goalpara region of united Bengal in the Brahmaputra Valley, were long under the rule of Muslim dynasties. In other words, these areas were within the boundaries of united Bengal. Therefore, it is possible that madrasas existed during those times. In the early days of British colonial rule in Assam, i.e., before the 1857 Revolt, there were madrasas in present-day Assam, the most important of which was the Faiz-e-Aam Madrasa at Konakpur, Karimganj, founded by some scholars in 1842. It is the oldest surviving Islamic madrasa in present-day Assam. Beside this, another famous madrasa of that time is the Ashraf-e-Ulum Madrasa at Ratanpur, Hailakandi, founded in 1856 by Shaikh Ashraf Ali and Shaikh Sadr Ali, the latter a graduate of the Oriental College, Rampur.¹⁰

From the 1857 Revolt until India's independence in 1947, numerous educational institutions were established in the present-day state of Assam, some purely Islamic where only Islamic theological subjects are taught and some secular where general subjects are also taught. All Islamic institutions, by their very nature, offered Arabic as a compulsory subject as they were established for the study of the Holy Quran, Hadith, and related Islamic theological subjects, which could only be fully understood by those who were fluent in Arabic language and literature. Most secular educational institutions also offered Arabic as an elective subject. The Islamic madrassas established during this period were intended to protect Muslims from the instigation and deception of Christian missionaries, guide them to the true religion, and eradicate superstitions and heresies from Muslim society. These were established by Muslims in Assam, following Darul Uloom in Deoband, Mazahirul Uloom in Saharanpur, Madrasa Ulaya in Rampur, and other Islamic religious centers in northern India. Among the most famous madrasas established during this period in the present state of Assam are: Ahmadiyya Madrasa at Nayagram, in Hailakandi (1870), Baghbri Madinatul Uloom, in Karimganj (1873), Alia Madrasa Purahuria at (1877), Chargi Qaumia Madrasa at Chargi (1882), Alia Madrasa at Asimganj (1885), Darul Uloom Baskandi at Banskandi (1897), Alia Madrasa at Deorail, in Badarpur (1898), Jamiul Uloom Madrasa at Dabruigarh (1903), Idgah Ishaatul Uloom Madrasa, in Mullaganj Bazar (1920), Kazir Bazar Alia Madrasa at Kazir Bazar, in Ratabari (1922), Mazahirul Uloom at katarihara (1930), Assam Darul Hadith at Joy Nagar (1932), Deorail Darul Hadith, in Badarpur (1938), Hailakandi Alia Madrasa at Hailakandi Town (1938), and Markazul

⁶ The Annual report of the Secretary, *North East India Emirat-e-Shariah and Nadwatut Tameer*, 2003.

⁷ This information was obtained through an interview from Muhammad Azizul Haq, Secretary of the Board.

⁸ This information was obtained from Maulana AHM Luqman, Secretary, Karimganj, Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind.

⁹ Darul Uloom Madrasa Mirpur, Jatiya Madrasa: Itihas, Oitiya O Oboden (Bengali), Dhaka, 2009, pg. 14, 54.

¹⁰ Ahmed, Hafiz Saeed (2009), A Comparative Study of Arabic Teaching in Madrasas and Other Educational Institutes in Assam with Special Reference to Problems and Prospects, A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Arabic, University of Assam for the Award of Doctorate, Chapter II, Part 2.

Uloom Madrasa at Bhanga Sharif (1942). Among these madrasas, the two in Asimganj Alia and Deorail Alia, along with another madrasa, Deorail Darul Hadith were recognized by the Government Education Department in 1943 and 1946 respectively and affiliated with the Assam Madrasa Education Board, Sylhet. During this period, the British government also established several madrasas in United Bengal to meet the administrative challenges posed by non-native speakers of Bengali, Persian, Urdu, and Arabic. The oldest of these was the Alia Madrasa in Calcutta, established in 1780. The Government Madrasa, Sylhet (1913) was the most famous madrasa in Assam. Under this madrasa, there were also affiliated madrasas, including those in Asimganj and Deorail.¹¹

It is worth noting here that United Goalpara and the present-day Karimgunj region were part of United Bengal and came under British control after the transfer of customs rights to United Bengal from the Mughal Empire in 1765. In 1826, the British took control of Upper Assam after a losing war with Burmese aggressors. The political system was transferred to the British through the Treaty of Yandabo, signed between the British and the Burmese aggressors. This war was the first between the British and the Burmese aggressors and the longest, most costly, and most devastating war in the history of British India. In 1828, the Cachar Kingdom was absorbed into the British government under the doctrine of lapse following the assassination of King Gobind Chandra. The incorporation of all Assam into British India was completed in 1839 with the annexation of the Moran region in eastern Assam. This victorious region remained under the Bengal Presidency until 1873. However, it was separated from it along with Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) in 1874 and became a new Chief Commissioner's Province, with its capital in Shillong (now the capital of Meghalaya). After the partition of Bengal in 1905 into East and West Bengal, East Bengal was incorporated into the Chief Commissioner's Province, governed by a British Lieutenant Governor. Its capital was moved to Dhaka (now the capital of Bangladesh). In 1912, the administrative division of Assam and Sylhet was restored to an independent Chief Commissioner's Province with a legislative council, and then to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937. After the partition of India in 1947, Assam and some parts of Sylhet and East Bengal, including Karimganj in the Barak Valley, and Dhubri, Barpeta, and Gopalpara in the Brahmaputra Valley, were incorporated into India. Most of Sylhet was incorporated into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).¹² After India's independence, these three madrasas, which were registered with the Government High School/Government Madrasa Education Board, Sylhet and located within the new boundaries of Assam, became affiliated with the Assam Madrasa Education Board. Many other madrasas continued to receive financial support from the Government of Assam, including teachers' salaries. The Assam government established a separate Directorate of Madrasa Education in 2005. The Directorate was previously part of the Directorate of Secondary Education. According to the Assam Government Report 2010-2011, the Assam Directorate of Madrasa Education registered 707 madrasas by 2010; 524 pre-senior madrasas, 164 senior madrasas, 5 Arabic colleges, 14 Title madrasas, in addition to 500 charitable primary maktabs.¹³ All these government run madrasas were either abolished or converted to modern schools in December 31, 2020 by the Govt. of Assam.¹⁴

The curricula of the madrasas affiliated with the state Directorate of Madrasa Education had been carefully selected for all levels of education, combining traditional Islamic knowledge with useful modern subjects. The curricula focused primarily on the education of Muslim boys and girls, in addition to some essential modern subjects. Quranic commentaries, Prophetic hadiths, Islamic jurisprudence and its principles, the principles of hadith, and other diverse Islamic subjects are taught, in addition to modern subjects such as mathematics, science, geography, history, and computers. Various languages, including Arabic, Hindi, English, Urdu, Bengali, and Assamese, as well as their grammar and literature, are also taught. The educational levels in government run

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Assam

¹³ Project and Development Department, Government of Assam: Assam Economic Review 2010-2011, Guwahati, p. 194.

¹⁴ <https://radianceweekly.net/the-madrassa-education-in-assam-hit-by-states-repealing-act/#:~:text=In%20a%20controversial%20act%2C%20the%20Government%20of%20Assam%2C,an%20the%20basic%20objective%20of%20founders%20of%20Madrasas.>

Madrasas were 12 years, ranging from intermediate to advance.¹⁵ In addition to these madrasas, there was another government run madrasa, the Al-Jamiatul Arabiyatul Islamia in Badarpur, which has an autonomous body affiliated with the North East India Emirat-e-Sharia & Nadwatut Tameer. The organization had adopted a curriculum that differs from that of the Assam State Madrasa Education Board, with a strong emphasis on the study of Arabic and Islamic studies.¹⁶

In addition, there are hundreds of non-governmental madrasas are in Assam today, dependent on public donations. These schools were established under the patronages of Darul Uloom Deoband and other Islamic schools in northern and southern India and operate under the supervision of non-governmental religious bodies, such as the “Tanzimul Madarisil Qaumia Assam” (1955), the “Idaratu Madarisil Islmia” (1995), and the “Hai’atud Diniatil Hurra” (1973), which regulate the curricula of their affiliated madrasas. From its inception until 2012, the “Tanzimul Madarisil Qaumia Assam” registered 231 non-governmental madrasas, including seven offering classes from elementary to advanced and specialized levels. The most prominent of these are the Jamia Islamia Jalalia, Hojai (1956), Assam Darul Hadith, Joynagar (1932), and Darul Uloom Banskandhi (1897). The remaining 21 madrasas offer classes from elementary to advanced levels, along with 162 middle madrasas, seven primary madrasas, and 34 girls' madrasas at various levels. The “Idara Madarise Islamia”, a non-government Madrasa Board, has also registered 13 non-government Madrasas. All of these madrasas under the Idara Madarise Islamia, are located in the Karimganj district. In addition to these Madrasas registered under the above-mentioned bodies, there is several other non-government Madrasas in Assam that operate under their own independent bodies on a continuous basis.¹⁷ Beside, there are dozens of secular, government and non-government schools in Assam where Arabic language and literature are taught, including middle schools and more than 250 secondary schools operating under the “Secondary Education Board, Assam” (SEBA). Also, more than 50 higher secondary schools (10+2) operating under the Assam Higher Secondary Education Council (AHSEC), where Arabic is taught as an optional subject up to the 12th standard.¹⁸

In addition, there is also an independent educational system for Muslims that emerged during the British era, namely the Maktab (schools), the M.E. Madrasa (meddle schools), and the High Madrasas (high schools), in which Arabic is taught as a compulsory subject. These Islamic schools had been operated under the “Secondary Education Board, Assam” (SEBA) until 20. All these madrasas also abolished or converted to modern schools in December 31, 2020 by the Govt. of Assam.¹⁹ The clear difference between these madrasas and *Qaumi* madrasas is that Arabic is taught in these madrasas for linguistic and literary purposes only, like secular madrasas, while in *Qaumi* madrasas it is taught for religious, linguistic, and literary purposes. On the other hand, Arabic is taught as an optional subject in secular madrasas, but as a compulsory subject in these madrasas. There were 70 such high madrasas are in Assam and their certificates were considered equivalent to those of secular high schools in Indian educational circles.²⁰

There are two universities in Assam that offer Arabic studies at the MA, MPhil and PhD levels, including a regional university, the Gauhati University (1947), where the Arabic Department was established in 1969 and which has 70 affiliated colleges offering Arabic studies at the BA (General) and BA (Honours/Specialization) levels, and a central university, the Assam University, Silchar (1994), where the Arabic Department was established in 1997 and which has 13 affiliated colleges offering Arabic studies at the BA level. Both universities and their affiliated colleges have been running with vitality and activity since the establishment of their Arabic departments, and have

¹⁵ Syllabus of the Assam State Madrasa Education Board, 2008.

¹⁶ Al-Misbah, Annual Journal of the Jamia, No. 3, p. 19.

¹⁷ Ahmed, Hafiz Saeed (2009), A Comparative Study of Arabic Teaching in Madrasas and Other Educational Institutions in Assam with Special Reference to Problems and Prospects (English), A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Arabic, University of Assam for the Award of Doctorate, Chapters 2 Part. 3.

¹⁸ ibid., Ch.3 Part. 3.

¹⁹ <https://radianceweekly.net/the-madrassa-education-in-assam-hit-by-states-repealing-act/#:~:text=In%20a%20controversial%20act%2C%20the%20Government%20of%20Assam%2C,and%20the%20basic%20objective%20of%20founders%20of%20Madrasas>.

²⁰ ibid., Ch.3 , Part- 3.

adopted scientific curricula for the teaching of Arabic language and literature for their various academic stages.²¹

All the above mentioned *maktab*s, madrasas, schools, colleges and universities have been making significant contributions to the popularization of Arabic language and literature as well as the spread of Islamic education. They have produced many researchers, professors and scholars who have been playing an important role in the development of this language both in the field of education and teaching. Despite the presence of numerous Arabic institutions, the irony that cannot be ignored is that in Assam, Arabic language has not succeeded or developed to an excellent and commendable level in speaking, communicating and writing, except for a few individuals. There is no significant number of writers or speakers, who can regularly deliver sermons, write or speak in Arabic and their number is also quite small. Although there are many scholars, hadith scholars, mufassirs (the Quranic interpreters) and Faqih (jurists) who have been playing a real role in the Islamic religious field and have achieved wide fame in the educational, national and social circles and whose efforts deserve praise and acceptance. The reasons for the backwardness in the above mentioned fields are numerous, which include: the geographical location of Assam and its political situation. Throughout the past century, Assam was not under any government that showed favour to the Muslims, except for a few years when Muslims ruled it. The Muslims did not have qualified teachers to teach this language; both in speech and writing, and not all the eminent scholars of Arabic came here.

Moreover, its inhabitants generally could not travel outside to learn this language, except for a few people, because the state of Assam is located in a region surrounded by high mountains and dense forests. Also, since the Muslims of this state were still and still continue to be oppressed by intense tribal violence, this is also from a political and economic point of view. However, since independence, the economic condition of the Muslims of this state has improved day by day and many students are getting admission in the major Islamic schools and government universities located in North and South India. These students return home as eminent scholars in theologies and arts, including the Arabic language. Some eminent Arabic speakers from North and South India also come to Assam for government jobs. The professors of the Arabic Department of Assam University, Silchar and Gauhati Universities, as well as professors of various colleges and Islamic religious schools coming from abroad, have been rendering invaluable services in the development of the language and literature with the help of the locals. Today, the officials of both Islamic and secular schools and the Arabic departments of universities and colleges have brought about reforms and changes in their curriculum and teaching methods. From this point of view, we can say that Assam has a bright future in the field of Arabic language and literature and they can participate in the revival and enrichment of this language along with the people of North and South India.

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