

📖 Topic Page: [Assamese language](#)

Definition: **Assamese** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*
Official language of the state of Assam, India. It is an Indo-Aryan language. Although the name of Assam itself is of Thai origin, the Assamese adopted a language and script akin to Bengali from about AD 1300. Modern Assamese literature dates from about 1840.



Summary Article: **ASSAMESE**
From *Dictionary of Languages*

12,000,000 SPEAKERS

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India

Assamese is the easternmost of the INDO-ARYAN LANGUAGES of India. It is spoken in the Indian state of Assam, in the middle Brahmaputra valley, where that wide river flows south-westwards eventually to reach the Bay of Bengal.

Until modern times this was the eastern outpost of the whole Indo-European language family.

Assamese, called by its own speakers Asamiya, is named after the Indian state (Assamese Asam, pronounced Ohom) which in turn gets its name from the Tai people who dominated the region from the 13th to the 19th centuries (see AHOM).

Assamese developed its special character because, unlike Bengali and Hindi, it was not simply a language of the Indian plains. Mountains shadow the lower Brahmaputra valley on both sides. Their inhabitants speak numerous quite unrelated languages, Tai, Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan. Assamese became the lingua franca of all these peoples, and in the process lost many of the features that almost all other Indian languages share – notably the retroflex consonants made by curling the tongue backwards towards the palate. Assamese, by contrast, shares with English the unusual feature of alveolar consonants (English *t*, *d*): these are formed when the tongue touches the alveolar ridge above the upper teeth.

Assamese vocabulary, basically inherited from SANSKRIT, includes borrowings from Khasi (*bhur* 'raft'), from Munda languages (*kadu* 'gourd') and from Ahom (*jeka* 'moist'). Bodo and related Sino-Tibetan languages are the source of many borrowed words (*celek* 'lick'; *gaba-mar* 'embrace'; *thalamuri-mar* 'slap') and apparently of the diminutive suffix *-ca* (e.g. *kala* 'black'; *kalca* 'blackish'). Bengali and English have both influenced Assamese strongly. For a table of numerals see BENGALI.

Assamese is first recognisable as a separate language from Bengali in poetry of about 1400 onwards. Sankara Deva, greatest of the Vaishnavite devotional poets, flourished around 1500. Assamese prose writing begins with translations of the Sanskrit *Bhagavadgītā* and *Bhāgavatapurāna* a century later. All this literature came from the small kingdoms of western Assam. Meanwhile at the Ahom court, to the east, Assamese became the court language in the 17th century, and prose chronicles, earlier composed in Ahom, began to be written in Assamese – of a noticeably modern form. Literature faded in the last half-century of Ahom rule, a chaotic period with rebellions, Burmese and British interventions, and

massacres.

The British, who finally took control of Assam in 1826, tried to impose Bengali as the language of courts and education, but gave up in 1873 and made Assam a separate province of their Indian empire. *A few remarks on the Assamese language and on vernacular education in Assam*, by 'A Native' (Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan), published at Sibsagar in 1855, influenced the change of policy. So did the publications of the American Baptists at the Sibsagar Mission Press, which encouraged the use of modern, colloquial language in Assamese literature.

Oriya, Bengali, Assamese: the map

Oriya is the language of Orissa State. *Sambalpuri* is the dialect of the Sambalpur lowlands, while *Bhatri*, a quite distinct dialect, is spoken in Bastar District of Madhya Pradesh.

Malpaharia, an aberrant western dialect of Bengali, is spoken in the Rajmahal hills, in the Santal parganas of Bihar, where Malto was spoken until recently.

Bengali is divided into several dialect groups. Calcutta, whose language helps to form the standard in Indian West Bengal, belongs to the Central group; Dacca, which increasingly sets the standard for Bangladesh, speaks an Eastern dialect.

Sylheti, often counted as a separate language (see BENGALI), has as many as 5,000,000 speakers in Sylhet District, a hundred miles north-east of Dacca.

Rajbangshi and a group of related dialects extend Bengali northwards from Rangpur in Bangladesh towards the Darjeeling Terai and south-eastern Nepal.

The *South-eastern Bengali* dialect of Chittagong and Noakhali is so different from the standard that it has been considered a separate language.

Chakma, spoken in the Chittagong Hills, has its own script, resembling that of some southeast Asian languages. It claims 68,000 speakers in Tripura and Mizoram, India, and more in Bangladesh.

The influence of the Mission Press at Sibsagar (continuing that of the Ahom court!) ensured that the dialect of eastern Assam would become the modern standard for *Assamese*. This eastern dialect, fairly uniform because the region has been politically unified for several centuries, is spoken on both banks of the Brahmaputra from Sadiya down to the modern capital Gauhati.

The western dialects of Kamrup and Goalpara Districts (historically separate small kingdoms) are very different from eastern Assamese and from one another. Kamrupi stresses initial syllables of words, like Bengali.

Naga Pidgin or *Nagamese* is a variety of Assamese – perhaps a kind of creole, but linguists differ over definitions here – that has become the lingua franca of the polyglot Indian state of Nagaland. It has at least 500,000 speakers. Among some Naga peoples it has been used for 150 years or more in trading with one another and with the valley of Assam. Although now used informally in many schools, Naga Pidgin has so many variant forms that it is difficult to produce an acceptable set of textbooks in it.

Assamese script

অ আ ই ঈ উ ঊ এ ঐ ও ঔ কখগঘঙ চছজঝঞ ঠাডঢণ তথদধন পফবভম য়রলৱ শষসহ
a ā ī ū ē ai o au k kh g gh ṅ c ch j jh ṅ ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh ṇ ṇ t th d dh n p ph b bh m y r l v ś ṣ h



Assamese in writing

The Assamese alphabet is almost the same as the Bengali, though the sound system is quite different. Assamese spelling is not phonetic, but it does help to show the origins and derivations of words. In the early 19th century the influential Baptist Mission Press introduced a modernised spelling closer to actual pronunciation, but then gradually reverted to the traditional Sanskritised spelling familiar to educated Assamese readers.

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Assamese. (2004). In A. Dalby, *Dictionary of languages* (3rd ed.). London, UK: A&C Black. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/assamese_language

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