

# Arabic Language in Assam

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## Abstract

The Arabic language holds a unique and historically significant place in the cultural and religious landscape of Assam, a north eastern state of India. Introduced through Islamic scholars, traders, and missionaries, Arabic primarily entered Assam as a liturgical and scholarly language associated with the spread of Islam. Over the centuries, it became an integral part of Islamic education in the region, particularly in madrasas and religious institutions, where it is still taught as a classical language for understanding the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence. While Arabic is not used as a vernacular language in Assam, its influence remains strong among the Muslim population through religious practices, education, and cultural identity. The state has produced several scholars and translators who have contributed to Arabic learning and Islamic literature. Additionally, modern madrasas and universities in Assam offer formal courses in Arabic, contributing to its preservation and development. Despite challenges such as limited resources and lack of mainstream educational support, Arabic continues to be a bridge between the local Muslim community and the broader Islamic world. This abstract highlights the historical roots, educational significance, and contemporary status of the Arabic language in Assam, underlining its enduring cultural and spiritual relevance.

**Keywords:** Islamic Literature; Arabic Language; Religious Institution; Historical Development

## Introduction

The Arabic language, one of the oldest and most widely spoken Semitic languages in the world, holds deep religious, cultural, and scholarly significance, particularly within the Islamic world. In the Indian subcontinent, Arabic made its way primarily through the spread of Islam, accompanying religious, educational, and cultural exchanges. In Assam, the north eastern region of India, Arabic was introduced around the 13<sup>th</sup> century through Sufi saints, Islamic scholars, and traders who travelled and settled in the region. Although Arabic never evolved into a spoken language among the general populace of Assam, it gained prominence as a sacred language among the Muslim community. It became central to religious education and spiritual practices, especially for the purpose of reading and understanding the Qur'an, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), and Hadith literature. Madrasas, both traditional and modern, have played a crucial role in preserving and promoting the Arabic language, often teaching it alongside Urdu and Persian as part of the Islamic curriculum. Today, Arabic continues to be taught in numerous religious institutions across Assam, and efforts are ongoing to integrate it into formal education systems through university-level programs and state madrasa boards. Despite being limited in functional use outside religious contexts, Arabic retains its position as a vital element of Islamic identity and heritage in Assam. This introduction explores the journey of Arabic in Assam from its historical roots to its present-day significance and its impact on education, culture, and religious life in the region.

## Statement of the Problem

The Arabic language holds a unique position in Assam due to its religious, cultural, and educational significance among the Muslim population. However, despite its importance, Arabic language education in Assam faces numerous challenges that hinder its growth and proper integration into the mainstream academic and linguistic landscape of the state.

1. **Limited Institutional Support:** Arabic is primarily taught in religious institutions like madrasas rather than in mainstream schools or universities. This limits the scope of Arabic as a language of broader academic, cultural, or professional utility in Assam.
2. **Lack of Trained Teachers:** There is a significant shortage of professionally trained Arabic language teachers in Assam. Many instructors lack formal education in language pedagogy, which affects the quality of instruction.
3. **Outdated Curriculum and Teaching Methods:** Arabic teaching in many institutions follows a traditional rote-learning model. There is a lack of updated curriculum and modern teaching aids, resulting in limited proficiency in reading, writing, and especially speaking Arabic.
4. **Absence in Public Discourse and Media:** Arabic has little to no presence in Assamese public life, media, or communication. This restricts learners' ability to engage with the language outside classroom settings, reducing motivation and practical exposure.
5. **Marginalization of Madrasas:** With increasing pressure on madrasa education to align with state curricula or convert into general educational institutions, the space for dedicated Arabic learning is shrinking.

## Objectives of the Study

The study on the status and challenges of the Arabic language in Assam aims to explore and analyse various aspects of its teaching, learning, usage, and socio-cultural relevance. The key objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the historical development and current status of Arabic language education in Assam.
2. To assess the role of Arabic in the socio-religious life of the Muslim community in Assam.
3. To analyse the institutional framework for Arabic education in Assam.
4. To identify the challenges faced in teaching and learning Arabic.
5. To explore the perception of students, parents, and educators toward the Arabic language.
6. To examine the policy-level support and government initiatives for Arabic education.
7. To suggest measures for the development and modernization of Arabic language education in Assam.

## Review of Literature

The study of Arabic language education in Assam is a relatively under-explored area, but several academic works, institutional reports, and historical accounts provide insights into its development, challenges, and sociocultural relevance. The literature can be categorized into the following themes:

1. **Historical Development of Arabic in Assam:** Numerous historical studies trace the introduction of Arabic to Assam with the arrival of Islam in the region during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Arabic was primarily introduced for religious purposes—Qur'anic education, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), and theology. Authors like Asgar Ali Engineer and M. Islam have mentioned how Arabic remained confined to religious instruction, especially in madrasas. Works on the history of education in Assam, such as those

by Dr. S. K. Choudhury, indicate that Arabic was never integrated into the mainstream curriculum, unlike Sanskrit or Persian during pre-colonial and colonial periods. Its role remained peripheral.

2. **Arabic in Madrasa Education:** Several studies, including those by Iqbal Husain and Riaz Ahmed, focus on the madrasa system in India and its linguistic framework. In Assam, Arabic remains a core part of madrasa education. Reports by the Assam Madrasa Education Board reveal that Arabic is taught in traditional madrasas following the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum, which emphasizes classical Arabic grammar and literature. However, research highlights the rote-learning approach and lack of modern pedagogical methods, which limit practical proficiency in the language. The National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) also documents this gap in its reports on minority education.
3. **Arabic in Mainstream Education:** There is limited literature on the presence of Arabic in government or private secular schools in Assam. Studies by Shaikh Mohammad Yousuf suggest that Arabic is rarely offered in general schools or colleges, unlike Urdu or Sanskrit, which enjoy broader curriculum integration. University-level offerings in Arabic, such as at Gauhati University or Assam University, have not been widely studied. However, a few dissertations have explored students' attitudes and the employability of Arabic graduates, often highlighting limited career prospects outside religious vocations.
4. **Pedagogical and Infrastructural Challenges:** Research by organizations such as NCERT and Jamia Millia Islamia's Centre for Arabic and African Studies indicate a national trend of insufficient infrastructure, untrained teachers, and outdated curriculum in Arabic education—issues echoed in Assam's context. Local researchers, such as Dr. Abdul Mannan, have pointed out that most Arabic teachers in Assam are trained in traditional madrasas with limited exposure to modern language teaching techniques or linguistic theory, affecting classroom effectiveness.
5. **Government Policies and Language Politics:** Policy-level neglect is a recurring theme in the literature. Arabic, being a "non-scheduled" language under the Indian Constitution, receives less institutional support. Studies on language politics in Assam, such as those by Sanjib Baruah, note that identity politics often marginalize languages associated with minority communities, including Arabic. Assam's socio-political tensions around immigration and religion have, as per Rohini Hazarika's work, led to Arabic being viewed solely as a religious symbol rather than a language of academic or cultural value.

## Discussion

Arabic has been one of the most important languages in the contemporary world. It is one of the most spoken languages of the world as well. Approximately 422 millions of people speak in Arabic. Moreover, Arabic is one of the six official languages of the United Nations Organization (UNO). It is also the official language in more than 22 countries. 18<sup>th</sup> of December is celebrated as the "World Arabic Language Day". December 18 was chosen as the date for Arabic language as it is the day in 1973 when the General Assembly approved Arabic as an official UN language. The importance of Arabic language has become vital in the contemporary world due to the changing economic and political contexts. Discovery of vast petroleum reserves in the Arab world has attracted geostrategic interests of the world towards this part of the globe.

Arabic reached to the western and southern parts of India as early as before the advent of Islam in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Arabic made its entry to the north east of India in general and Assam in particular since the

arrival of sufi-saint Shah Jalal Yamani in Sylhet. One of the chief architects of propagating Islam to the region of Bengal was this saint Shah Jalal (death 1346 A.D.) this legendary Sufi arrived to Sylhet (Bangladesh) from Delhi in 1303 A.D. with a group of 360 disciples (known as 360 Aulia) to preach Islam. He defeated Raja Gour Govind, the then despotic ruler of Sylhet and propagated Islam to the north-east of India. Sylhet came under the rule of Delhi Sultanate in 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Among the Sufi saints who came and settled in Assam was Shah Milan, popularly known as **Azan Fakir**. His zikirs or devotional songs are sung even today.

The first trace of Muslims settlement in Assam is found towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century when in 1198 a Turkish army led by Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal, that comprised parts of western Kamrup (old Assam). However, the first so called invasion by Muslim ruler/general in 1202 failed as most of Bakhtiyar Khilji's soldiers died due to unfavorable climate. Although Turkish army was defeated, some of the surviving soldiers stayed back and settled there, rather than going with their defeated general. They married local Assamese girls and gradually integrated with the local population. As per 2001 census report of India, there is a sizeable percentage of Muslims i.e. 30.90% are in the state of Assam, Alhamdulillah.

### **An Overview of Arabic Studies in Madrasas of Assam**

British policies have indirectly played a great role for promotion of Arabic language and literature to the north eastern region of India. To counter the spread and propagation of Christian teachings among the common masses, Muslim religious scholars resorted to the establishment of so many madrasas in north east of India, most particularly in Assam, Manipur and Tripura states. After the independence of India in 1947, a good numbers of madrasas were established in Assam. Before the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, two madrasas were established in South Assam. Madrasa-e-faiz-e-Aam Alia and Hafizia Madrasa was established in 1842 A.D. at Kanakpur village in Nilambazar of Karimganj district in south Assam. In 1856 A.D. "Madrasa Ashraf Al-Uloom" was established at Ratanpur village in Hailakandi. Madrasa-e-Najibia known as Madinatul Uloom, Baghbari in Karimganj was established by Molvi Qari Najeeb Ali Sb in 1872. Asimia Senior Madrasa in Karimganj was established in 1895. The largest and popular Islamic seminary or the pride of north-east "**Darul Uloom Baskandi**" was set up in 1897. **Deorail Senior Madrasa** which is the first madrasa which was taken up by the state government of Assam was established in 1931 by famous sufi saint Molana Shah Yaqub Badarpuri R.A. popularly known as Hatim Ali Sb. In 1938, Deoril Darul Hadith now called Deoril Title Madrasa was started in the premises of senior madrasa in 1938. These madrasas have been playing a vital role for promotion of Arabic language, literature and that of Islamic religious literature. Thousands of ulamas i.e. Islamic scholars graduated from these madrasas and are actively engaged in the service of Islam and Muslim ummat. These madrasas are actually the feeder institutions for the departments of Arabic of the colleges and universities. It is worthy to be mentioned here that as much as 80% of the Arabic learning institutes or madrasas of north east are in Assam and the rest 20% are in Tripura and Manipur. There are more than one thousand in this region. Some are Government aided madrasas and others are purely private. Nevertheless both are working for the development of Arabic language and literature in this North Eastern region of the country.

### **Impact of Universities and Colleges on the Development of Arabic Language in Assam**

As of now, there are three universities in Assam which have the departments of Arabic. Demand for an **Arabic University** in Assam is being raised since long. Government of Assam has promised to establish one Arabic University in the state, but till now it's only a dream. A detailed account of all these universities

has been given below:

### **1. Gauhati University (Estd. 1948):**

The University of Gauhati, popularly known as 'Gauhati University', is the oldest and largest University at the North East India. Since its inception in 1948, it continues to be a leading teaching and research institution, offering courses in a wide range of disciplines. It has 379 affiliated colleges, offering Under Graduate and Post Graduate courses in the Faculties of Arts, Commerce, Engineering, Fine Arts, Law, Management, Medicine, Science and Technology etc.

Department of Arabic was incepted in September, 1969. The department gives much emphasis on functional Arabic to train the students for better placements in public as well as private sector. Department of Arabic in Gauhati University offers M.A. and Ph.D. courses. There are 65 colleges having Arabic departments with Honours (Major) Courses are affiliated to Gauhati University. A large number of students, I mean 100 plus students get enrolled in the department every year. If we take in to account the number of students in various colleges affiliated to the department of Arabic in G.U. the number of students would be more than 5000 every year. Many of the graduates of the department of Arabic in G.U. have been well established in their respective fields.

Publication Board of Arabic Teachers is a publication wing in the department of Arabic, G.U. This board has published dozens of text books and other reference books for Arabic learners. Nukhabum Min Adab Al-Arab wrote by Late. Dr. Abdul Majeed Nadwi Sb is a series of text books for graduation and post-graduation courses of the University. Apart from this, teachers of the department and those of other affiliated Arabic departments are actively engaged in research and publication.

### **Cotton College State University (CCSU) (Estd. 2011)**

Cotton College State University (CCSU) was created vide an Act of the Government of Assam (Act XIX of 2011), with Cotton College as a constituent College of this new University. Along with other departments this new University has the Department of Islamic Studies (Arabic and Persian).

### **Cotton College (Estd. 1901)**

The Department of Islamic Studies (Arabic, Persian and Urdu) was started in Cotton College from the very inception of the College in 1901. Prof. Molvi Abu Nasr Mohammad Waheed as the founder head of the department who taught all the three languages i.e. Arabic, Persian and Urdu. This department has been playing a vital role in the expansion of higher qualitative education in the field of Perso-Arabic literature in the NE Region in general and in Assam particularly. Initially, Calcutta University accorded affiliation to Intermediate Course of Arts in Arabic and Persian in 1907. In 1909, the University extended affiliation to B.A (Pass) Course in both the subjects. Affiliation to Honours (now called 'Major') Course was granted to Persian in 1924 by Calcutta University and subsequently to Arabic in 1966 by Gauhati University. The Post-Graduate Courses in Arabic and Persian under Gauhati University was started in this department in 1922.

### **Assam University: (Estd. 1994)**

Assam University came into existence through Assam (Central) University Act, 1989 (Established under an Act of Parliament). It was established in 1994, since then the University is steadily becoming an excellent centre of learning. The University has sixteen schools on major disciplines. There are 35 Departments under these sixteen schools.

The Department of Arabic started functioning in 1997. Since inception, the departments endeavor has been to enhance exposure of students to Arabic language, literature and translation. The department has also been persuading colleges and madrasas in this region to adopt modern scientific methods for imparting



education on Arabic language and literature. Department of Arabic in Assam University offers the following courses.

M.A. (by course work) of four semesters duration. M.Phil. (by course work and dissertation) of three semesters duration. Ph.D. (by course work and research work) and D.Litt. (by research work).

Teachers in the department of Arabic in Assam University are actively engaged in research and publication. Professor Ashfaq Ahmad of the department of Arabic wrote the following books:

*Al Nathr al Arabi al Mua'asir fil Hind* (Contemporary Arabic Prose in India), Pages: 400, published in 2013 by Daro Omar Li al Tiba't Wa al Nashr, New Delhi.

*Tatawwur al Aadaab al Arabia wa Marakizuha fi al Hind* (Development of Arabic Studies and its Centers in India), Pages: 218, published in 2013 by Daro Omar Li al Tiba't Wa al Nashr, New Delhi.

*Musahamat –al- Hind fi-al-Nathr-al-Arabi Khilal –al-Qarn-al-Ishreen* (India's Contribution to Arabic Prose during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), Pages: 400, published in 2003, printed at: Makoff Printers, Delhi- 110006.

*Nafhat-al-Hind: Tarajim –al- Shakhsiyat-al- Hindia fi-al-Thaqafa-al-Arabia al-Islamia* (Fragrance of India: Biographies of Indian Personalities in the field of Arabic and Islamic Culture), Pages: 100, published in 2006, printed at: Printology Inc, New Delhi-110002.

*Certificate in Arabic Language: Listening and Speaking-II*, Pages-big size: 64, published in 2010 by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Dehi.

## Findings

Based on the available literature, field observations, and analysis of the educational and socio-cultural context, the following key findings have emerged regarding the status of the Arabic language in Assam:

1. **Predominant Association with Religious Education:** Arabic is mainly taught in madrasas and is primarily associated with religious instruction, such as Quranic studies, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence. The use of Arabic in everyday life or in secular educational institutions is minimal.
2. **Limited Institutional Presence:** Arabic is rarely included in the curriculum of mainstream schools, colleges, or universities in Assam. Very few government-recognized institutions offer Arabic as a subject, and it is mostly absent from competitive academic environments.
3. **Shortage of Trained and Qualified Teachers:** Many Arabic teachers in Assam are graduates of traditional madrasas and lack formal training in modern language teaching methods. There is a shortage of B.Ed.-qualified Arabic teachers, especially for higher secondary and university-level instruction.
4. **Outdated Curriculum and Teaching Methods:** The curriculum in most madrasas is based on the Dars-e-Nizami system, focusing heavily on grammar and classical texts with little emphasis on conversational or applied Arabic. Teaching methods are largely traditional, relying on memorization rather than understanding or practical usage.
5. **Poor Learning Outcomes:** Students often complete years of Arabic study without achieving functional proficiency in speaking or writing. Lack of modern resources such as digital tools, language labs, or interactive materials further hampers learning outcomes.
6. **Lack of Career Opportunities:** Arabic language proficiency offers limited job prospects in Assam beyond religious vocations such as imams, madrasa teachers, or scholars. The absence of Arabic in public services, administration, and media limits its practical utility and appeal among youth.
7. **Socio-political Marginalization:** Arabic is often perceived as a “foreign” or “religious” language, leading to its marginalization in the state's language policies. The socio-political discourse around

identity, migration, and religion in Assam indirectly affects the perception and promotion of Arabic.

8. **Community Interest but Institutional Gaps:** Despite systemic neglect, there is a strong interest among sections of the Muslim community to preserve and learn Arabic.

### Conclusion

The Arabic language in Assam occupies a unique but marginalized space within the state's linguistic and educational framework. While it holds profound religious and cultural significance for the Muslim community, its academic and functional scope remains limited. Arabic is primarily confined to madrasas, where it is taught with a focus on classical texts and religious instruction. However, the lack of integration into mainstream education, outdated teaching methodologies, insufficient government support, and a shortage of trained teachers have collectively hindered its broader development.

Moreover, Arabic is often perceived narrowly as a religious language, which, compounded by Assam's complex socio-political dynamics, has contributed to its exclusion from public discourse and educational policy priorities. This has resulted in a decline in the quality and spread of Arabic language education, restricting students' opportunities for academic and professional growth. To address these issues, a multifaceted approach is necessary. This includes modernizing Arabic curricula, investing in teacher training, integrating Arabic into secular educational institutions, and promoting it as a language of cultural and linguistic value rather than solely religious significance. By doing so, Arabic can regain its rightful place as both a language of heritage and a tool for global connectivity in Assam's multilingual society.

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