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Satyendra Kumar Sarmah

The Bodo are one of the important tribal groups of Assam. The word Bodo is a from linguistic term. The British ethnographer Brian Hodgson first used the term to mean a particular linguistic group of people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. This linguistic group would include the tribes like Kachari, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Chutia, etc. Later on the term was used for the Kachari and Mech who called themselves Bara.[1] They live in Assam, West Bengal, Nagaland, Tripura, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. However, they concentrated mainly in the northern part of the Brahmaputra valley covering the area of the present Bodoland Territorial Council.

The movement for script was an important development among the Bodo leaving deep rooted impact on their socio-political ideas. The event is divided into four parts *viz*. origin, early developments later developments and outcomes.

(1)

The Bodo developed no script of their own. The royal family used the Bengali and Sanskrit languages for their official as well as literary purposes. Till the middle of the nineteenth century, formal education was unknown to the Bodo of Assam. It was only from the forties of the same century that the education started to spread among them through the Government and the Christian missionary schools. By 1849, a good number of students from the tribe enrolled in the mission school at Guwahati established by Cyrus Barkar.[2] In 1853, A. J. Moffat Mills reported that out of 275 students enrolled in the Government schools in Darrang district, 21 were from the Bodo tribe. In 1854, the Colonial Government sanctioned Rs. 50/- to the Anglican missionaries in Darrang to establish three schools among the Bodo of the district.[3] In these schools the medium of instruction was Assamese with marginal use of Bengali.

The Christian missionaries first gave the written form to the Bodo language.[4] In 1843, Barkar and his associates first published some prayer books in Bodo language. But it was Sidney Endle, missionary from the Society for the Propagation of Gospel, who had extensively used the language for religious, educational and official purposes and wrote the *Outline Grammar of Kachari (Bārā) Language* in 1884 and *The Kacharis* in 1901 using the Roman script. The script was formally introduced for teaching the Bodo children in the year 1904.[5]

Outside the missionary endeavour, the educated Bodo started producing their literature in the Bengali and Assamese script. The first published booklet, *Boroni Fisa O Ayen* (1915) was published in Bengali script. Simultaneously, the first magazine "Bibar" (1924-40) was trilingual (Bodo, Assamese and Bengali) in

Assamese and Bengali script. Again in 1952, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, their premier literary organisation, had decided to use solely the Assamese script for the Bodo language. In 1963, Bodo medium was introduced in Assam as a medium of instruction in primary stage and the Assamese script was adopted for the Bodo medium.[6]

In the absence of a common script, they used Roman, Assamese and Bengali scripts irrespectively in their literary works. While the Christian Bodo used the modified form of Roman scripts, others used Assamese and Bengali scripts.[7] The need for using a single script for the language was felt with the introduction of the Bodo medium of instruction in school education.[8] In consideration of a precise progress of education as well as their literature the Bodo leaders started to give stress on the adoption of a single script for the whole community from the early 1960's. Simultaneously, their aspiration for separate identity was accelerated by the idea of the Assamese people for imposition of their culture and language over other communities of Assam.[9] The Assamese language movement of 1960 had stirred up their keenness to have separate script other than the Assamese, preferably the Roman script.

(2)

The formal proposal for the Roman script first came before the Bodo Sahitya Sabha on its 6th Annual Conference held at Malaguri on 22nd and 23rd February, 1964 and was followed by the demand of students from Shillong in the next Annual conference in 1965.[10] The Sabha formed an 'Expert committee' in 1966 to examine the feasibility of the Roman script for the Bodo language.[11] Subsequently in 1968, the Sabha formed another 'Bodo Script Sub-Committee' with Saisingra Moshahari as the Convener.[12]

The Sub-Committee favoured the acceptance of the Roman script on consideration of some technical advantages like easy to hand, less number of alphabets, easy for mechanical manipulation, commercially economic, suitable for writing scientific and technological terms, etc. over the other two scripts, *viz.*, the Assamese and Bengali.[13]

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha at the Mahakalguri session (1970) accepted the recommendations of the Saisingra Moshahari Sub-Committee to introduce the Roman script.[14] The Sabha appointed an Implementation Sub-Committee[15] and it recommended for the introduction of the Bodo Text Books in Roman script from class 'I' (Ka-man) in the primary stage from the academic session of 1971.[16]

On 22nd December 1970, the Central Executive Committee unanimously resolved to introduce the Roman script from the academic session of 1972, in conformity with the proposed new curriculum of the Board of Secondary Education, Assam, in lieu of the academic session of 1971.[17]

On 30th August 1971, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha formally placed their demand for the introduction of the Roman script in Bodo medium schools in place of the existing Assamese script. The proposal was rejected by the State Government on the ground of its foreign origin. It was believed that the script would banish shortly from the country.[18] Simultaneously, the development raised alarm that it was another step towards further fragmentation of the state with the

demand for *Udayachal*, a Union territory, by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). In 1971, in a meeting the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi advised the Bodo leaders to opt for any script that was used in the Indian languages other than the Roman script.[19]

On 22nd April, 1974 the Bodo Sahitya Sabha without the approval of the State Government adopted the Roman Script as the sole script for the Bodo language. The Sabha declared its decision to introduce *Bithorai*, an elementary textbook written in the Roman script, in the school curriculum. The Sabha appealed to all the teachers of Bodo medium primary schools to introduce the *Bithorai* in Class - I in their own.[20]

The State Government took a firm stand at the unilateral action of the Sabha. The government ordered for holding-up the payments of the Bodo medium primary school teachers and stopped all grants of those schools where the Roman script was introduced.[21] In their turn, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha started a four-phased mass movement with active support from the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA).[22] The movement was believed to be a part of the *Udayachal* movement because of the active co-operation from the PTCA.[23] The third phase of the movement which lasted till 28th November 1974, proved to be the most fatal for the Bodo Script movement. Fifteen volunteers were killed in police firing and many more wounded and placed behind bars.[24]

The State Government emphasized on the maintenance of the status quo "in the spirit of better understanding, close relationship among the various people living in the state and national integrity"[25] to minimize the scope of further fragmentation of the state. The Asom Sahitya Sabha on their part adopted the view that, "For cultural integration and development of tribal languages in the state, the Assamese Script is enough and suitable."[26] The stand taken by the Asom Sahitya Sabha and the appeal of the State Government raised a fear among the Bodo of the state that the Assamese intellectuals were trying to impose the Assamese script on them.[27]

When dialogue failed, the State Government referred the issue to the Union Government. The Union Government convinced the representatives of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha for an alternative proposal of the Devanagari script instead of the Roman script which was not in their agenda.[28] The representatives of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha did not have much justification to influence the Union Government for the Roman script.[29] Eventually, for them it became a prestige issue to retreat and seemed mentally prepared to accept any other script except Assamese."[30] The representatives of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha signed a memorandum with the Union Government on 9th April, 1975, agreeing to adopt the Devanagari script for the Bodo language.[31]

The Sabha officially adopted the Devanagari script as the common script for the Bodo language in its 16th Annual Conference, held at Dhing from 25th to 27th April. 1975.[32] With this, the Bodo Script movement for the Roman script ended without achieving its desired goal, but with an alternative script in place of Assamese script.[33]

The Devanagari script for the Bodo language was an unexpected development for the Bodo people and disagreement was exprened all around.[34] The ABSU viewed the development as "imposition" on them.[35] The Bodo common people strongly reacted against the Devanagari script as an experiment.[36]

(3)

The adoption of the Devanagari script for the Bodo language failed to solve the script problem. The failure of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha to show sincerity on the implementation of Devanagari script in strict sense sent a wrong message to the younger generation. They thought that the adoption of the Devanagari script is a temporary arrangement. Taking the advantage, a group of Bodo writers continued the use of Assamese and Roman scripts instead of practicing the Devanagari script in their writings. In 1987, the ABSU in their 92 points 'Charter of Demands' to the State Government included the demand for introduction of the Roman script for Bodo medium. The demand was boosted by the state government's decision to introduce the Roman script for the Missing language.[37] The formation of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993 brought further impetus to the issue. In this changing scenario, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha decided to come back with their old issue totally ignoring their long journey with the Devanagari script. The 32nd Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1993 formed one Expert Committee to find out ways for the script.[38] The expert committee recommended for implementation of the Roman script from Class-I (one) onwards in the Bodo medium of education from the earliest possible academic year with due approval from the Government.[39]

The recommendation was further strengthened by the resolution of the Executive Body of the BAC on 4th January, 1994, to adopt the Roman Script for Bodo medium schools within the council area.[40] At the same time the Sabha tried to persuade the State Government to implement the script in the state. Accordingly in 1997, the State Government approved the Roman script for the Bodo medium of education in Assam.[41]

Meanwhile, new developments sidelined all speculations on the script issue. The ongoing negotiations between the Union Government and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), an armed extremist group of the Bodo, increased the possibility of inclusion of the Bodo language in the "Eighth Schedule" of the Constitution on the continuation of the Devanagari script as agreed before along with the fulfilment of the other conditions. Under that circumstance, ABSU along with a few Bodo intellectuals and well-wishers supported the view that the Devanagari script which was in use for last 25 years should continued at the greater interest of the Bodo student community.[42] In the 39th Annual Conference held at Simborgaon in 2000, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha finally decided to continue solely the Devanagari script for the Bodo language.[43]

From 2000, the Sabha, along with the active co-operation of the ABSU, concentrated on the development and extension of the Bodo language and literature through the Devanagari script. They emphasized to improve its standard for its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India and to get

recognition from the Sahitya Academy.[44] On 22nd December, 2003 the Bodo language was included in the "Eighth Schedule" by the Ninety-Second Amendment Act of 2003 along with three other Indian languages *viz.* Dogri, Maithili and Santhali. Subsequently, in 2005 the Sahitya Academy recognized the Bodo language.

(4)

The script movement of 1974 had important bearing on the community. The people's desire for a single script instead of three, *viz.* Roman, Assamese and Bengali for the Bodo language resulted in the selection of the Roman script. The issue was inspired by their identity question.

Because of political reasons and the apprehension compounded with it, the State Government rejected the demand. The movement ended with the loss of innocent lives and the adoption of the Devanagari script in place of the Roman for the Bodo medium of education and language with the assurance from the Union Government for the further development of the language only through the Devanagari script. The gross negligence and lack of sincerity of the Sabha helped in continuance of uncertainty on the script issue for a long hampering the interest of the community.[45] The issue attached to the emotion and sentiment rather than reasoning. Noticeably, in 1985 the Bodo language was given the status of Associate Official Language by the state government within the areas of the Kokrajhar district and Udalguri sub-division. The development had its own impact on the promotion of the Bodo language as subject into the higher level of education leading to the desire for raising the language to the national level.

The decision to continue the Devanagari script had cleared the path for the inclusion of the Bodo language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The status of Eighth Schedule gave a new impetus in the development of literature in the Bodo language with liberal support from the central agencies, leading to recognition by the Sahitya Academy in 2005. The development inspired the people to widen the scope of education within their area through their own language.

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N B: The term Bodo is itself a plural term. Because of this in this paper an attempt is made to use the term 'Bodo' instead of 'Bodos' only.