

CHAPTER 4

THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF BODO LANGUAGE

This chapter of the research deals with the history and development of Bodo language in brief. The first part of the chapter deals with Bodo community in general and the second part of the chapter deals with Bodo language and its struggle for existence and recognition as an official language of Assam as well as India. It also deals with the progress and development of the language over 19th and 20th century.

In the course of its existence the Bodos as a linguistic community has had contact with various linguistic communities which have influenced them linguistically as well as traditionally. Linguistically lots of influence of contact languages such as Hindi, Assamese, Bengali is very evident apart from English. However, the language of focus in this research has been the contact language English. Indeed traditionally and in terms of food habits too the Bodos have been influenced by the mainland India unlike many of the hill tribes of North East Indian states.

4.1 The Bodo Community

The Bodos are one of the ethnic and linguistic communities and early settlers of Assam in Northeast India. The word 'Bodo' denotes both the language as well as the community, whereas Boro is used as one of the surnames of the Bodos (Brahma A 1). The Bodos belong to a larger group of ethnicity called the 'Bodo-Kachari.' Racially they belong to Mongoloid stock of the Indo-Mongoloids or Indo-Tibetans. According to Suniti

Kumar Chatterji a well known historian the 'Bodos' are the offspring's of Vishnu and Mother-Earth who were also termed as 'Kiratas' during the Epic period. According to Grearson, B.H Hodgson used the word 'Bodo' to name the language and the race. According to Rev. Sydney Endle, 'the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history'(Ibid 2). In features and general appearance the 'Bodos' have close resemblance to the Mongolian type and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race (Ibid 2).

It is said, that the lack of an authentic written history of the Bodo Language is one of the main drawbacks of the Bodo people of the ancient time. They were mostly concerned with ruling/governing and were least bothered about preserving the language in the written form. This is evident by the fact that most of the historical legendary figures of the greater Bodo community were eminent rulers like Raja Iragdao (the last king of the Bodos whose kingdom was invaded by the East India Company in 1824 through the Doctrine of Lapse; He is also known as Gobinda Chandra in history). The other prominent rulers of the Bodos were Sikhwna Jwhwla, Swmdwn Jwhwla, Gambari Sikhla, Birgwsri Sikhla (Brahma A 2; (Lahari)).

Another possible reason for lack of record may be the lack of habit of preserving old books and records among the Bodos. The Bodos traditionally had the habit of destroying all the belongings of a person at the time of his/her funeral ceremony, consequently some of the important written records that might have existed at some point of time in history too were lost (Brahma A 2; (Lahari)).

The Bodos are said to be the largest minority (Scheduled tribe) group in Assam and are concentrated in the northern areas of the Brahmaputra river valley. Though they formerly practiced shifting cultivation today most of them are settled farmers. Broadly speaking the Bodos consist of a large number of tribes such as Cutiya, Kachari, Rabha, Garo, Mech, Koch, Dimasa, Galong, Tipera, Moran etc., The Bodos were formerly dominant in Assam until about 1825. The total number of speakers of Bodo languages in India was estimated at about 2.2 million in the late 20th century. The Bodo tribes are not culturally uniform. The social system of some, such as the Garo, is matrilineal, while other tribes are patrilineal. Some Bodo tribes were also influenced by Hindu social and religious concepts in fact, in modern times some of them regard themselves as belonging to Hindu castes (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica; Sarmah 8-9).

The Bodo tribe is divided into clans named after aspects of nature such as heaven, earth, rivers, animals, and plants. When it comes to property rights descent and succession to property are in the male line. The Bodos have a tribal (Animistic¹) religion, with an extensive pantheon of village and household gods. The Marriage ceremony among the Bodos used to be usually arranged by the parents and often it would involve the payment of a bride price. There also used to be the practice of having community house for bachelors. The various other features of the Bodo religion link them with the Naga and other hill tribes of Assam because such practices are found to be very similar also among the hill tribes. However the growing influence of Hindu ideas and customs works toward assimilation into the caste society of the Assam plains (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Sometimes, the Bodos are described as a race of the Mongolian people who were inhabitants of a country north of the Himalayas and West of China. This land used to be known as 'Bod' and the word 'Bod' is supposed to mean a homeland. It is also said that this ancient country had many parts some of them were known as 'Hor Bod,' 'Kur Bod,' etc. (Brahma K 'Aspects' i

4.2 The Bodo Language

It is said that the Bodos are a group of Tibeto-Burman language speaking people residing in parts of North East Indian states as well as in Bangladesh and Nepal. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica; Sarmah 8-9). According to Robert Shafer's classification the Bodo language is said to belong to the western branch of the Barish section under Baric division of the Sino-Tibetan family. The linguistic survey of India describes the Bodo as a member of the Bodo sub-section under the Assam-Burma group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese speech family. The standard form of the 'Bodo' language may be taken as that of Darrang which had the privilege of being illustrated in Rev. Sydney Engle's excellent little grammar (Brahma K 12-13; Brahma A 5).

The 'Boro'/'Bodo' language is spoken primarily by the Bodo people of Northeast India, Nepal and Bengal. At present it is the official language of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts and associate official language of the state of Assam. It is also one of the twenty two languages listed in the eighth Schedule of the India Constitution. Since 1975 the language has been written using the Devanagari script. It was formerly written

using Latin, Bengali and Assamese scriptsⁱⁱ. Some scholars suggest that the Bodo language used to have its own (now lost) script known as Deodhai. However, over the years the script lost its popularity and usage for some unknown reasons (“Boro Language (India)”).

The Bodo language had its ups and downs, the language had to face numerous hurdles to survive and flourish. Since 1913 there were many socio-political awakenings and movements by different Bodo organizations. After a long struggle the language was at last introduced in 1963 as a medium of instruction in the primary schools in Bodo dominated areas. Today, the Bodo language serves as a medium of instruction up to the secondary level and it is an associate official language in the state of Assam. Also Bodo language and literature has been offered as a post graduate course in Guwahati University since 1996. Today there are a large number of Bodo books on poetry, drama, short stories, novels, biography, travelogues, children’s literature, and literary criticism. Though there exists different dialects, the form used around Kokrajhar district is considered standard at present (“Boro Language (India)”).

4.3 The Bodo Script Movement

Since the Bodos don’t have the script of their own there was a time when Bodos had to decide which script to adopt. The Roman script movement, which was launched by the All Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1974 involved the whole Bodo community all over the state of Assam. The All Bodo Sahitya Sabha suggested the use of roman script. This activity which became political in nature was slowed down by the PTCAⁱⁱⁱ (Narzary 82).

The Roman script agitation took a very serious turn followed by massive police operations in the Bodo dominated areas resulting in countless miseries of the ordinary people. During this time the prominent leaders of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the top PTCA leaders belonging to the Bodo community had to go underground in order to evade arrests and repressive police actions. Many of them in fact were put behind bars for supporting the movement. A reign of terror was unleashed under the then state Home Minister Shri. Hiteswar Saikia. Many innocent people lost their lives in unprovoked police firing. Thus, the movement for Udayachal by the PTCA lead to violence and protests resulting in social and political unrest in the region (Ibid 82).

As mentioned earlier it is said that the Bodo and the Dimasa languages used a script called Deodhai that is no longer exists today. The Latin script became one of the first scripts used in modern times to write down the Bodo language. One of the first written Bodo literature was a prayer book published in 1843 and then extensively used by Rev. Sydney Endle beginning 1884 and in 1904. The Roman script was also the script which was used to teach the children at that time (“Boro Language (India)”).

The first use of the Bengali script occurred in 1915 in the form of (*Boroni Fisa O Ayen*) and the first magazine *Bibar* (1924-1940). These works were tri-lingual in nature that is, it was written in Bodo, Assamese and Bengali (the script that was used was Bengali). In 1952, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha decided to use the Assamese script exclusively for writing in Bodo language. In 1963 Bodo was introduced in schools as a medium of instruction, in which Assamese script was used. In the 1960s the Bodo language was predominantly written in Assamese script, though the Christian community continued to use Latin script (“Boro Language (India)”).

When the Assamese Language movement in Assam reached its peak in the 1960s the Bodo community felt threatened and retracted their earlier stand and thus decided to not use the Assamese script. After a series of proposals and deliberations by expert committees the Bodo Sahitya Sabha reversed itself and unanimously decided to adopt the Latin script for the language in its 11th annual conference in 1970. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha submitted this demand to the Assam Government in 1971 which was rejected on the grounds that the Latin script was of foreign origin. This instigated a movement for the Latin script which became a part of the movement for a separate state, Udayachal, then led by the Plains Tribe Council of Assam (PTCA). Thus we see the struggle of the Bodos for the linguistic identity and existence of the language (Brahma K 12-13; “Boro Language (India)”).

In defiance of the Assam Government the Bodo Sahitya Sabha went ahead and published *Bithorai*, a Boro textbook, in April 1974, in Latin script and asked school teachers to follow it. Retaliating against this unilateral decision, the Assam Government withheld grants to schools using the Latin script. This triggered a phase of active movement that was joined by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the PTCA. This led to a very unfortunate incident in November 1974 where fifteen volunteers of the movement died in a police firing and many sustained injuries. Unable to resolve the issue, the Assam Government referred the matter to the Union Government. The Bodo leaders were advised by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to choose any Indian script other than Latin. In the discussion, the Union Government suggested Devanagari script as the solution to the problem, which the Bodo Sahitya Sabha accepted in the Memorandum of

Understanding in April 1975, and adopted it later in the Annual Conference. This ended the Bodo Script Movement (Brahma K 12-13; “Boro Language (India)”).

The writing of Bodo language textbooks for secondary schools in Devanagari script began soon after the 1975 acceptance by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The Devanagari script for Bodo was an unexpected development and it was not immediately accepted by the wider Bodo community. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha failed to implement the use of the Devanagari script, and writers continued to use the Assamese, Bengali and Latin scripts. Again in 1982 ABSU included the demand of the Latin script in Bodo schools in its charter of Demands. Following an expert committee report, constituted by Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the Bodoland Autonomous Council adopted a resolution to use Latin script in its territory, which the Assam Government too accepted. Nevertheless, in the discussion with the Bodo Liberation Tigers, the Union Government demanded the implementation of the earlier agreement with the Bodo Sahitya Sabha on the use of the Devanagari script if the Bodo language was to be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (by 92nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution). Following this, the All Bodo Students Union and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha agreed to use the Devanagari script exclusively, and the matter was finally settled in 2003 (Brahma K 12-13; Brahma A 7-8; “Boro Language (India)”).

4.4 The Bodo Phonology

The Bodo language has a total of 30 phonemes, 6 vowels, 16 consonants, and 8 diphthongs with a strong prevalence of the high back unrounded vowel /u/. The Bodo

language use tones to distinguish words. There are three different tones used in the language: high, medium and low. The difference between high and low tone is apparent and quite common. Devanagari script is imposed and used to write the Bodo language since 1975 though it cannot represent all the sound segments and supra segmentals of the Bodo language (Brahma A vi).

However at present it looks like the language and the literature written in this language are well settled in this script. Most of the Bodo (second language) learners mispronounce most Bodo words due to the absence of correspondence between a few sounds and the letters they are represented with in Devanagari script of the Bodos. The phonological system of this language is very much influenced by the contact languages and loanwords (Brahma A vi).

4.5 The Bodo Dialects

According to P.C. Bhattacharya theoretically speaking there are not less than four dialects of Bodo language. The first is the North West dialect which is spoken in the northern regions of Goalpara and Kamrup districts. The second is south west dialect which is spoken in south Goalpara, Garo Hills and a few places of south Kamrup. Third is north central Assam dialect spoken in the district of Darrang, Lakimpur and Auranachal Pradesh. And the fourth is the Southern Assam dialect spoken in Nowgong, Dima-Hasao Mikir Hills, Cachar and adjacent areas (Brahma A 5). However, the problem here is that it is very difficult to find out the different varieties of the Bodo language on the basis of the different geographical areas. Because their settlement in the Northeast

India have been shifting from one place to another which makes the presence of different varieties of the language scattered in a single area. Therefore, it's almost impossible to identify the dialects based on the geographical location today (Brahma A 5-6).

It is also said that the Bodo language over the years developed into different dialects of the language. These dialects might have gradually formed different languages and hence the community might have been divided into some communities with different names like Bodo, Garo, Rabha, Deuri, Tiwa, Sonowal, Dimasa, Borok, Reang etc. thus, development in the dialects has given rise to what we know of today as tribes of North East India (Brahma A 2; (Lahari)).

4.6 The Bodo Literature

The Bodo literature consists of the vast amount of oral literature including folksongs, folktales, ballads and proverbs. The Bodos also has a considerable amount of written and published literature in Assamese and Roman scripts. The published literature comprises of books relating to prayers and songs, poems, stories on the one hand and journals and magazines with different types of prose and verse on the other hand. There are unpublished novels and dramas as well (Brahma K 14).

The few books written on or about the Bodo tribe and language in the 19th and early 20th centuries were: *the First Essay On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes* (1847) by B.H Hodgson, *An Outline of Kachari Grammar* (1884) by Rev. Sidney Endle, *A Short Grammar of the Mech or Boro Language* (1889) by L.O Skrewsfor, *A Collection of Kachari Folk Tales and Rhymes* (1895) by J.D. Anderson, *Grammar and Dictionary of*

Kachari Language (1904) by A Christensen and *The Kacharis* (1911) by Rev. Sidney Endle (Brahma A 3).

4.7 The Bodo Medium of Education

In the early 19th century the Bodos still used Assamese and Bengali scripts to write. The Bodos were left with no possibility to decide in which script to write as they were greatly influenced by the larger neighbouring language groups. It was only in the late 19th century and early 20th century that awakening began among the Bodos with regard to the importance of having an independent script and medium of learning. That's how the Bodo medium schools began in 1963, ever since Bodo language has had its ups and downs till the final settlement of the Devanagri script as the final and official script for writing in Bodo language in 2003 BTC accord (Brahma K 12-13; "Boro Language (India)").

The PTCA and its leaders made serious effort to set up primary schools, middle schools and higher education institutions. For instance it was Shri Kamleshwar Brahma a prominent PTCA activist who was the pioneer in the honest efforts to establish a college at Serfanguri in Kokrajhar district. He organized meetings in the month of November in 1975 and constituted a committee with Shri Saniram Brahma, Shri Harendranath Barumatary, Shri Thaneshwar Narzary, Shri Sarad Chandra Brahmadata, Shri Upendranath Brahma, Shri Dukeshwar Basumatary, Shri Manindra Basumatary, Shri Bhabani Prasad Rai, Shri Brijendra Nath Brahma and Kakaleshwar Brahma as members. The college was named Janata College sometime after 1977. These are the ways in which

the awakening and development in the field of education took its first steps among the Bodos (Narzary 118-120).

ⁱ Animism attributes a living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena; it believes in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe.

ⁱⁱ The Assam Official Language Act was passed in 1960, recognizing Assamese as an official language in Assam. Thus, the use of Bengali in Assam as the language of the courts was resented by the Assamese people.

ⁱⁱⁱ PTCA stands for 'The Plain Tribals Council of Assam.' It was a political party in the Indian state of Assam. In 1966, the PTCA launched a militant agitation for a separate tribal state called 'Udayachal' under the leadership of Samar Brahma Chowdhury and Charan Narzary, President and General Secretary of PTCA respectively.