

Survival of Boro Language in the Face of Various Challenges (with Reference to Modern Period)

Abstract

This paper tries to give an idea on how the Boro peoples are struggling in different periods to keep them and their language alive. Starting from the medium of instruction in their language to the movement demanding Roman script to write their language as well as Bodo accord for formation of Bodoland Autonomous Council in 1993 and later on Bodoland Territorial Area District in 2003 they are not getting it without fighting and without sacrificing the valuable lives of the innocent peoples.

Keywords: ABSU, bodo accord, BPAC, Dhubri Boro Literary Club, PTCA.

Introduction

Boro language is a language belonging to Assam and is recognized as a schedule language under Indian Constitution from the year 2003. The history of survival of this language and its speakers is a big challenge whether it is language, literature, culture, politics or economics. Therefore, when going to discuss on the topic Survival of Boro Language in the Face of Various Challenges, one cannot discuss only the language in isolation, the two other fields literature and politics will come up side by side. Considering this, discussion will cover the period from the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the apex socio-literary organization of the Boros on 16th November 1952 as it is considered by the Boro intellectuals and the litterateurs not only as the milestone of the beginning of modern Boro literature but also as the year of the revival of language and the community as a whole.

The Boro peoples accepted a very broad view from the beginning of their language and literature. Therefore, when the first book by the Boro native speakers got published they started it with two languages Boro and Bangla and script was Bangla. It is important to mention here that the Boro peoples have not their own script. In their first magazine *Bibar* (flower, April 1924) they included three languages Boro, Assamese and Bengali and two scripts Bengali and Assamese. This broad view continued even during and after the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952. The Sabha was not formed in a single day. As the first initiative of formation of the Sabha mention is to be made about the peoples residing at Dhubri and engaged there in different capacities. The educated and enthusiastic Boro peoples residing there have deeply thought and observed about the survival of their language and their duties and obligations towards it. Therefore, to do something for the promotion of literature and survival of their language they formed Dhubri Boro Literary Club on 17 July 1952. An important meeting of this Club was called on 7 September 1952 at the Hall of the Dhubri Local Board where many enthusiastic and promising literature lovers participated whole-heartedly. The Club had no other motive and interest other than the creation and promotion of literature and survival of their language as well as to attract the youths of the community towards this job. The Club also had a high interest towards drawing educational interest of the Boro students. The first president of the Club was Birendra Narayan Brahma Chaudhury and General Secretary was Rajendra Nath Brhama. Though the Club is formed at Dhubri, Club was not interested to cover only the proper Dhubri. Therefore, after proper discussion they proposed to cover all the areas coming under Dhubri sub-division and with that purpose in view a meeting was called on 26 September 1952 by bringing all the leaders, activists, litterateurs, dramatists and other peoples of the area under a single umbrella. All the areas presently coming under Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Chirang districts were covered under Dhubri sub-division at that time. The meeting held under the chairmanship of Bandhuram Kachari had the thought that if we want to develop our language and literature; want to educate our children by mother tongue Boro, we can't achieve that goal with a handful of peoples of a particular area or locality but to embrace



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all. This meeting was called at Kokrajhar High School. They also decided to call the Boro peoples residing in different areas of Assam as well as North Bengal area of the state of West Bengal. They also proposed to call the Dimasa and Kokborok speakers who have very close affinity with the Boro peoples and language. Accordingly, they fixed 15 and 16 November of 1952 for this meeting and the venue was Basugaon High School of the Dhubri sub-division. This meeting was named All Boro Language and Literary Conference. To call the delegates, representatives were sent to different areas of Assam and Prasenjit Brahma was sent nearby his father Rupnath Brahma to Shillong, the minister of Assam during that time to send the letters if somebody from the Dimasa and the Kokborok community pay visit to him. Prasenjit himself met Jaybhadra Hagjer of Haflong and Shyamacharan Tripuri coming from Tripura nearby his father and delivered letters to them. This meeting was sponsored by local peoples including Boros and non-Boros and became a grand success. On second day of the conference a discussion was held on the nomenclature that is proposed to work for the development of the language and literature of the community. The Boro speakers were in favour of naming it Boroni Thunlai Aphad (the literary society of the Boros), but was opposed by the Dimasa and Kokborok speakers and was later named as Bodo Sahitya Sabha which is known by this name till date. It was Sabha not only of the Boro language speakers but also for the peoples of Bodo group in general. The responsibility of thinking on the script was assigned to the Boro native speakers. In this conference a details discussion was held on 16 November 1952 morning regarding introduction of Boro language as medium of study and its future possibilities. Bandhuram Kachari, a school inspector by profession dwelt in length on the problems faced by the Boro students who get it difficult to communicate with the teachers in schools because of their lack of knowledge in Assamese and their subsequent failure in the examinations and drop out from the schools which is a very serious matter and is to be considered as spoiling of their precious life and time. So he thinks that to tackle this problem there is no way than introduction of Boro medium schools. In the delegate session Minister Rupnath Brahma and MLA Dharanidhar Basumatary passed their comments against the motion. Rupnath Brahma's comment against introduction of Boro medium in schools was strongly objected by his son Prasenjit Brahma and later Rupnath Brahma supported the wishes of the peoples. Dharanidhar Basumatary was also not in favour of introduction of Boro medium but with the active advice of Rupnath Brahma when he was called for chairing the open session he accepted all the proposals taken by the delegates with full enthusiasm. A proposal was also taken to accept Assamese script for writing Boro language.

After the formation of the Sabha the members of The Expert Committee on Boro Language and Literature came to know about the annual conference of Assam Provincial Congress Committee going to be held on 26 and 27 of December 1952 at Dhubri where the Chief Minister of

REMARKING : VOL-1 * ISSUE-9*February-2015 the State Bishnu Ram Medhi was also likely to attend. With the help of MLA Dharanidhar Basumatary they met Chief Minister at Dhubri Circuit House in the morning of 26 December and submitted their memorandum regarding introduction of Boro language as medium of instruction in lower primary level schools in Boro dominated areas. The same copy was also given to the then president of Assam Provincial Congress committee Bimala Prasad Chaliha on the same day at 2 pm. Going thoroughly through it Chaliha commented- *If one can impart primary education through mother tongue then it can be well developed-I strongly support your comment. But how can I help you. I am nothing but a worker of the ruling political party of state.* (Sangram, Jagendra Kr. Basumatary, 2008:67) With due permission of Chaliha the Expert Committee Members on Boro Language and Literature entered in the meeting hall of the delegates held at Dhubri Govt. High School and distributed one copy each of their memorandum to the delegates. When they came out of the hall then some of the congress members commented on them like this- *Today they are asking for the language, if they get the recognition of language then like the Nagas they will demand for state one day or the other.* (Ibid, 2008:68) This view of the Congress delegates give the idea that they are neither in favour of development of Boro language nor Boro peoples and this mentality is still not going out from them that is making the Boro peoples more and more adamant towards their rights and identity.

It was not only the Boros who were always deprived of their rights. Other tribal peoples of the state and the region also suffered and are suffering from same problem. Therefore, to revive personal identity and status the All Assam Tribal League was formed at Roha, Nagaon on 17th April 1938. It is due to the attempt of this League that under the Govt. of India Act, 1935 provision of separate electorates to the plains tribals, reservation of four seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly was made and this awakened the self-confidence of the tribals of the state. But the growing political consciousness of the tribals under the banner of the All Assam Tribal League was discouraged and betrayed by the Congress *The Tribal League Nominee, Bhimbar Deori, was turned down by the Congress, which elected the Congress nominee Dharanidhar Basumatary to the Constituent Assembly on 16th July, 1946.* (Dream For Udayachal and The History of the Plains Tribals Council of Assam, PTCA, 1967-93, 2011:36)

The independence of India on 15 August 1947 brought a new political scenario in the entire country including Assam. The plains tribal leaders now under the changed circumstances was no more interested to continue the All Assam Tribal League as a political party. *In 1953 the Assam Tribal League abandoned its political character and converted itself into a socio-cultural organization called the All Assam Tribal Sangha* (Ibid, 2011:39) and this Sangha is continuing till date. In the absence of a common political platform the leaders of the League joined hands in different political parties of their choice and benefitted themselves but weakened the tribal unity.

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The government also paid no heed to the grievances which the All Assam Tribal Sangha placed before them as the well wishers of the plains tribals. The declaration by Prime Minister of India Smt. Indira Gandhi on reorganization of Assam on federal structure to meet the demand for a separate Hill State as demanded by All Party Hill Leaders' Conference on 13th January, 1967 was behind the formation of Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) on 27th February 1967 at Rangjashali Hall, Kokrajhar with the purpose to carry political movement. It was basically run by the Boro native speakers like Satish Chandra Basumatary, Samar Brahma Choudhury, Charan Narzary and others. These leaders met the then President of India Dr. Zakir Hussain on 20th May 1967 at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Before their departure from the Bhavan the Hon'ble president of India said to them-*Knock, knock and knock at the door and the door will open.* (Ibid, 2011:58). This very comment of the President gave extra energy to the leaders to raise their demands repeatedly. The PTCA after its formation became and remained conscious about the preservation of Tribal Belts and Blocks and full autonomy for the plains tribal dominated areas of the north bank of the river Brahmaputra from river Sankosh in the west to Sadiya in the east. Among the other initial demands of the organization few important demands were- *i. Conserve their language, culture, customs, and all that best in them and ii. Prevent political domination by the non-tribals and imposition of anything which would disrupt their traditions and customs.* (Ibid, 2011:55).

Along with the development of time tribal identity was becoming more and more insecure. So to strengthen their identity the PTCA demanded to carve out the northern tracts of the Brahmaputra valley and create UDAYACHAL, a separate state for the tribals. Charan Narzary made its announcement on 2 December 1972 at a press conference in New Delhi and the mass rally for this was started at Kokrajhar on 7 January 1973 during the returning of Samar Brahma Choudhury and Charan Narzary from Delhi. The demand of Udayachal under PTCA got full support from the mass. PTCA was not only interested in political activities but was also equally interested towards the upliftment of the education as well. They did the rehabilitation work of the landless Boros at Haltugaon Division of Reserve Forest when Samar Brahma Choudhury was forest minister under Golab Borbora ministry in Assam. They filed candidates for parliamentary elections on different occasions. The voice raised by the PTCA and the mass support they are getting from the plains tribals made the state machinery angry and they tried to stop their voice by arresting the top leaders of the group. But doing so was also not easy for the state government because they continued their demand under the purview of the law. So, when Binay Kumar Basumatary the two times MLA on the PTCA ticket in 1979 and 1983 began to give derogatory statements against the party leaders and created UTNLF (United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front) for achieving the goal of the Udayachal through insurgency he was expelled from the Primary Membership of the party. However, this peace loving PTCA, its volunteers and leaders were

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tortured in different occasions of mass demonstration during blocking the highways and railway tracks in different places of Assam. As mentioned earlier the activities of the PTCA was not only political, so to enrich the Boro language and the society the party hold meetings with the Information and Broadcasting Ministry during 1977's to set up a Radio Centre at Kokrajhar. At that time Boro language was already broadcasted from All India Radio, Guwahati for 30 minutes duration and today it is extended only up to 45 minutes in a day. But the demand of the party for setting up a Radio Station at that time was not fulfilled.

Coming back to the Bodo Sahitya Sabha it is to be said that from the very inception of the Sabha the Boro peoples showed strong interest towards the introduction of Boro as medium of instruction in schools. This dream came true when after the repeated request of the Sabha, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the Chief Minister of Assam introduced Boro language as medium of instruction in lower primary class. It was formally inaugurated on 18 May 1963 at Kokrajhar. However, the supply of textbooks from government side was not on time and satisfactory which highly hampered the students in getting proper education and on time study. The Boro medium students passing out primary education from the Kokrajhar Panchayat area by 1968 was around 480 but they were not admitted in any middle schools. Their study scope became blink. At that time the guardians of the students blamed and cursed the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the initiative of introduction of Boro medium. The members of the Sabha rushed to Shillong on 31 January 1968 to meet the Chief Minister of the state. At that time education minister was Joy Bhadra Hagjer, who was then in the president post of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. When the Sabha persons requested the government to solve the problem created by them (in 1st January 1968, 100 lower primary teachers were deputed for basic training from Kokrajhar sub-division) then the education department officials informed to them in the meeting – *No regional language which has not been included in the 8th schedule can't be the medium of instruction in middle school.* (Sangram, 2008:107). Under the banner of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, peoples supported the demonstration for introduction of Boro medium in middle schools and a peaceful revolutionary step started from 28 February 1968. The government official order for extending Boro medium up to class X was released on 2 April 1968, No. EMI 167/66/PL, 2, Shillong from S M Rahman, Secretary, Govt. of Assam, Education Dept., Shillong. It was a grand success for the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the Boro peoples. Today this language has been introduced as MIL, Elective and Major in Degree level under Gauhati and Dibrugarh university of Assam and as MIL under Assam University, Silchar. It is also a subject of study under Gauhati University and Bodoland University, Kokrajhar.

As other organizations mentioned above, All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) has also a great role towards the survival of Boro language and its development. It was formed on 15th February 1967 at Kokrajhar College under the aegis of senior Boro

student leaders studying at Kokrajhar College to form a common platform of the Boro students scattered in different areas of the state. The ABSU, a non-political organization in its 18th annual conference held at Rowta Chariali the then Darrang district of Assam on 29th -31st May 1986 split into two taking the issue of separate state of Bodoland under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma later named as Bodofa (the father of the Bodos). A mass movement of ABSU started from 2nd March 1987 and its popular slogan Divide Assam Fifty Fifty and Do or Die was first uttered on 12th June 1987 at a massive mass rally held in Guwahati. The ABSU movement slowly became violent. Later, the underground group Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) evolved to involve itself in different subversive activities to press the demand of separate Bodoland. ABSU (All Bodo Student's Union)-BPAC (Bodo People's Action Committee) came to an agreement with the Central and State government on 20th February 1993 known as Bodo Accord. Under this accord Bodoland Autonomous Council was formed and its Interim Executive Council became functional on 20th May 1993. During continuation of the Interim Council of BAC, movement for Bodoland Territorial Council was erupted and its agreement was held on 10th February 2003. This movement under the banner of ABSU has so many positive and negative effects for the society and the region where the movement has erupted. It is due to this movement that the Boros came to be known in the national level; their language included in the 8th schedule; examinees got the opportunity to appear in different competitive examinations in their own language in national and state level examinations and peoples became more and more conscious towards the revival of their language; the identity of the society became stronger than before. A few of the negative effects were-Boros became socially, educationally and economically backward during the movement period, many non-guilty peoples were killed, became handicapped, women were raped and what not? About this Upendra Nath Brahma has mentioned in one of his writing- *The Fundamental Rights guaranteed in Article 21 of Indian Constitution and Article 3 of UN Human Rights Charter provide- "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." But the Bodos have no right to life or security to person; they can be shot dead by police at any pretext and their bodies thrown out in rivers, streets and jungles.* (Bodofani Lirbidang, 1998:115)

The Boros have to revolt not only for the survival of their language and to establish their identity but were also compelled to revolt for the script of their choice known as Roman Hangkhaw (Roman script) and the movement related to it known as Roman Hangkhaw Swmaosarnay (Roman Script Movement) under the banner of Bodo Sahitya Sabha starting from 18th September 1974. During this movement two became martyrs for the first time in police firing at Barpeta Road on 28th September 1974, which is observed as martyrs' day every year by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. In this movement 18 peoples were to pay their valuable lives in police firing, many peoples became handicapped for life and women were to lose their sanctity. In this movement,

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 police either fired or physically tortured the peaceful protestors in different areas of the state. They have not even spared the women and school going children. At that time Boro medium education was imparted in very limited areas and the protestors along with the conversion of script from Assamese to Roman have also demanded introduction of Boro medium in all educational institutions having Boro language speakers. At that time the Asom Sahitya Sabha and the Assamese intellectuals were completely against the Roman script which they considered as a foreign script. Here, I am going to quote a reflection of this thinking from a local English daily published during that period by title Plea for Use of Assamese Scripts for Local Languages- *Dr. Neog appealed to the Bodo students and the BSS to give up the step taken by them which he said would go against the interest of both the Assamese and the Bodos. Dr. Neog assured the Bodo community that the Asom Sahitya Sabha would come forward with help for development of Bodo language. He opined that adoption of a foreign script would only go to jeopardize the unity among the people of Assam and appealed to the Bodo community not to contribute to the degeneration of the Assamese culture.* (The Assam Tribune, Nov.4, 1974, p-3)

The above discussions give us the idea that from the very beginning the Boro language is coming through so many challenges to get their dreams fulfilled. For achieving these goal sometimes they are adopting democratic means and where it is not doing sometimes they are not hesitating to accept even undemocratic means, but despite all these they are trying to survive, trying to keep alive their identity through the medium of language, literature and culture and I firmly believe that this language speakers have a very brave heart and dedication to keep themselves alive in every front and it will make the survival of this language a reality. Today also the challenges and their wish to survive are not coming to an end. The recent emergence of violence between Boros and Muslims to safeguard the tribal belts and blocks and the forest land from the evil hands of the encroachers; demands like creation of separate Directorate for Boro medium schools; provincialization of Boro medium schools of all categories; introduction of Boro as one of the official languages of Assam; appointment of SI of schools for Boro medium schools; appointment of subject wise lecturers in SCERT having knowledge in Boro language; introduction of Boro as a medium of instruction in Higher Secondary level; programme of publication of books in different disciplines in coordination with different institutions like Commission for Scientific and Technical Terminology, Central Hindi Directorate and Central Institute of Indian Languages, and Bodo Sahitya Sabha and other enthusiastic persons and publishers; proposal for upgradation of All India Radio, Kokrajhar; installation of Doordarshan Kendra at Kokrajhar; introduction of All India Radio Boro programme at Dibrugarh and introduction of Boro news bulletin from All India Radio, New Delhi are appreciable steps taken by Bodo Sahitya Sabha and other social and political organizations of the Boros.

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