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Missionary's Role on Boro Language and Literature During Colonial Period

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Abstract:

The research paper tends to delve into the role of Christian missionaries towards the growth and development of Boro language and literature during colonial period. Although Boro or Bodo is an antique language having an affluent in oral traditions yet there was no trace of written works on this language until the second decade of the twentieth century CE. This language was once spoken throughout the entire Brahmaputra valley of Assam, North Bengal and erstwhile East Bengal, but it began to decline due to the domineering languages of the Aryans, namely Assamese and Bengali Hindus. For this reason, some local variations are said to have appeared in their dialects. But the Christian missionaries who entered among the Boros in early years of 19th century CE were the first to make a great contribution in bolstering the Boro language and literature along with the propagation of their gospel. This is clearly evident from their undertaking for the scientific study firstly on Boro language.

Keywords: Boro, language, literature, missionary

1. Introduction

Boro or Bodo is a language, belongs to a branch of the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman family of language. The term 'Bodo' was known firstly from the writing of B.H.Hughson in 1846, referring to a group of language family.¹ But, no any reason is found using his word 'Bodo'. Presently, the term 'Bodo' or 'Boro' is referred to as both the language and the community. In view of language, it is consisted of a number of different dialects. In the words of Suniti Kumar Chatterji, it is found that this language is of Bodo-Naga group of people under the Assam-Burmese segment of Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibeto-Chinese speech family.² The generic name 'Bodo' was consistently used as well naming the Bodo group of tribes like, Bodo or Boro, the Kok-Borok (Tipra), Deuri, Dimasa, Sonowal, Moran, Matak, Garo, Rabha, Mech, Thengal, Lalung (Tiwa), Chutia, Dhimal, Hajong, etc.³ Of them, the Boros are now the largest inhabitant tribes in Assam. Some scholars are of the opinion that they are descended from the Mongoloid stock of northwestern China of the ancient Tibet which is supposed to be the 'Bod'. Even, in the Mahabharata, Ramayana and a number of Aryan literatures, they are named as *Kiratas*, *Mlechehas*, *Danavs* and *Asuras*.⁴ Originally the Boros were ruling tribes of ancient Assam. Their identity however, was not homogeneous as an ethnic group. Yet, the widely distribution of their population is found all over Assam, in some part of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Meghalaya and in some parts of North and East Bengal, and other neighbouring foreign countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. They had no tradition of writing on their Boro language until the second decade of the 20th century CE. Even with, this language was once spoken throughout the entire Brahmaputra valley of Assam, North Bengal and erstwhile East Bengal, but it began to decline due to the domineering languages of the Aryans, namely Assamese and Bengali Hindus. Meanwhile, the Christian missionaries who came to India for the purpose of spread of their religion were the first to contribute towards the development of Boro language and literature.⁵

2. Methodology

The methodology used for this article is historical. It is a descriptive and analytical research. The data for preparing this paper is collected mainly from the secondary sources found in the locally available journals and referred books.

3. Discussion

3.1. Advent of Missionary among the Boros

By the passage of Charter Act of India in 1813 CE, the Christian missionaries got permission to propagate their religion in India.⁶ For this purpose, various denominations of missionaries, viz., the American Baptist Church, the Anglican Church, the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church also entered among the Boro-Kacharis in early years of nineteenth century CE, and did some charitable works as well. Of them, the American Baptist missionaries were the first to

come into contact with the Boro people.⁷ Ideally speaking, the advent of Christianity among a section of the Boro society led to the westernization of their cultures.

The main catalyst of Christian missionaries for preaching their faith among the Boro-Kacharis was various charitable activities adopted for their development so that they might be drawn towards Christian religion. Traditionally, the Boros were Bathou by religion. But prior to the coming of Christianity in their society, a large number of them had already embraced the Hindu religion, and thereby adopted the Aryan culture.⁸ Besides them, there is also reference of a few members of this society who were converted to Islam. But the situation was changed promptly from the last decade of the nineteenth century CE where the rapid growth and development of Christianity in the Boro populated areas influenced a large chunk of Boro population affecting the authority of the traditional Boro religion. Surviving solely based on oral history and folktales, the traditional religion of the Boros had little chance against the four-front onslaught of the Hindu and the Christianity which had stronger religious literature.

3.2. Missionary's Role on Boro Language and Literature

The Christian missionary played a very important role for the development of Boro language and literature. Although Boro is an antique language yet it did not have any written form of literature before the missionary's works. This language was used as a spoken language by the Boro community since ages. Of course, the evidence from the observations of some researchers show that earlier, there was a script called *Deodhai* officially used in the

Boro language during the Kachari reign in Dimapur erstwhile capital of the Bodo-Kachari kingdom.⁹ It is now a matter of ambiguous as to how this inherited independent script had since been lost. And it might also be the fact that some of their works on this language were wiped out long back. It may be referred that there are some other developed languages of their neighboring community namely, Assamese and Bengali of which the traditions of their writing literatures were available from the fourteen century CE or earlier.

Albeit, the missionaries entered among the Boros to spread their religion yet their contributions in the field of Boro language and literature is noteworthy. This is clearly evident from the publication of their books on religion, tales, rhymes, songs and grammar using Boro language. The books of that time were mostly written in English with citing ample examples in the Boro language. For instance, in 1884 CE, a book on grammar entitled 'An Outline Grammar of Kochari language' written by Sidney Endle in Roman script is worth mentioning. This book is mainly based on a dialect of the Boros spoken especially in the district of Darrang. Notably, it paved the way for using the Boro language in a written form for the first time. Besides, this book also contains a few Boro folk tales and stories using of both in English and Boro language. This book was regarded by the Boros as grammar and literature.¹⁰ From this point of view, it can be rightly said that Endle's book fashioned the creation of writing literatures using the Boro language. Besides, his extensive study on Boro language and culture is known from his translation on the part of New Testament on Boro language and the preparation of his handiwork as well. His monograph on the ethnic community entitled 'The Kacharis' edited by J.D. Anderson, then Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, on behalf of the Government of Assam was published firstly in 1911 CE in London. It usually contains some chapters dealing with social customs, agriculture practices, festivities, food habits, life cycle rituals, crafts and textiles of the Boro-Kacharis. Besides, the incorporation of some specimens of Boro folktales, rhymes and grammars are clearly seen in his book which seems to be the first book of its kind written especially on Boro-Kacharis in addition to his several papers on Boro folklore, customs and traditions, etc. Rev. **L. O. Skrefsrud's** 'A Short Grammar of the Mech or Boro language' (1889) especially dealing with the study of the Boro dialects of several localities is also very momentous to be acquainted with the Boro language and its grammar.¹¹

J.D. Anderson's book entitled 'A Collection of Kachari Folktales and Rhymes' (1895) preceded the monograph compiled by Rev. Sidney Endle. His collection especially deals with seventeen folklores of the Boros in English translation in addition to the original versions in Boro language. These original versions provide us the specimen of the Boro language as spoken in the district of Darrang in Assam. The folklores together with a number of interesting folk songs¹² however, gave impulsion to the folk literatures of the Boros.

Yet, on subsequent years, a few more numbers of books in Boro language and its dialects were published. For instance, Anderson's book on 'Dimasa Vocabulary' (1895), Rev. A. Christiansen's compilation of a book entitled 'Grammar and Dictionary of the Kachari language' (1904), Bastold's 'Dimasa Grammar' (1906), Wolfenden's 'Outline of Tibeto Burman Linguistic Morphology' and also his note on 'Borofisa' are worth mentioning. The great works like, G. A. Grierson's 'Linguistic survey of India' and E.T. Delton's 'A Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal' (1872) are also an erudite contribution for the study of Boro language and its dialects as well as the literature, culture, history of their community. Rev. Holvorsrud and Rev. Maguram Mushahary wrote numerous books on Christianity especially in Boro language. They are *Jisuni Maonai Dagnai* (1938), *Baibelni Godan Radai, Gojam Radaini Bathra* (1939), *Jisu Kristoni Modoini Solo* (1944), etc.¹³ In fact, the writings of various individual writers and the literatures other than missionaries in the field of Boro language and literature represented the unfolding of their rich folklores, enrichment of language and literatures.

Apart from using the Boro language in writing of diverse literatures, some missionaries learnt the Boro language and are seen to have used it for propagating the gospel among them. For instance, the Scottish Presbyterian Church missionaries while began its work of spreading their faith among the Boros of Jalpaiguri district of Duar areas, propagated the gospel using the Boro language. In addition, Fr. Marengo, the young rector of Guwahat learned the Boro language well, and his first prayer and the catechism book were found prepared in Boro language, which greatly contributed to the enrichment of Boro literature and language.¹⁴ It may be referred that the missionaries also undertook to learn and develop some local language of the north-eastern tribes like, Garos, Khasis, Nagas, Mizos and Kukis, etc. to discourse upon the gospel among them in their local languages.

Even if, there is a little difference about the periodization of the history of their literature some Bodo litterateurs defined the period from 1884 CE to 1919 CE as the missionary age of Boro literature. The fact that most of the books in this period were brought out

on Boro language and literatures. These books contributed a lot towards the buttressing of Boro language and literature. In view of this fact, it may be amply said that the tradition of writing with a spirit of self awaking and enlightenment was emerged with time under the impact of western education and gusto. And that was mostly caused by missionaries. In 1915, a book named '*Boroni Phisa O Ayiyen*' on Boro customary laws was published by Habarghat Boro Sanmilani of Dhudhnoi. But it does not cope with any sort of creative literature. Again, in 1920 the first Boro magazine entitled '*Bibar*' in Boro language was published by Boro Chattra Sanmilani.¹⁵ But in this regard, the Brahma movement of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma cannot be denied, that it also caused the awareness towards Boro literary efflorescence.

The writing of Boro language usually took place due to ingenuity of the Christian missionaries but it might be their catalyst for converting them into the fold of their faith. Despite of this, their role in stimulating the Boro language and literature is very praiseworthy. This is clearly apparent from their undertaking for the scientific study firstly on the Boro language. But their writing was not creative literature as the most of their writings was the record and document of oral tales, rhymes, songs and specimen of Boro language. Yet, it paved the way for the Boros to develop their Boro language and literature on subsequent years.¹⁶

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be rightly said that the writing of Christian missionaries on Boro language during colonial period led to the unfolding of veiled treasure of the language, literatures as well as folklores of the Boro community. Had it not been written or recorded by the missionaries and colonial administrative officials the development of their language and literatures would be entirely lethargic. Nevertheless, the tradition of writing creative literature on Boro language proper began to be developed gradually when the aboriginal Boro speakers were stirred up to style the significance of the writing culture among themselves in their society.

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