

## BRINGING TO LIGHT THE ACTIVITIES OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES ON BORO LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE DURING THEIR INITIAL STAGE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The spread of Christianity has brought about far reaching socio-cultural changes among the Boro. The advent of Christianity and its impact in the social sphere of the Boros is immense. The Christian missionaries have brought outstanding social change and transformation through their commendable contribution in the field of education even in the far flung area of the Boro domicile. The Christian missionaries made a unique contribution towards the early creation of written Boro language and paved the way for its growth and development in the subsequent years.*

**Keywords:** *Missionaries, religious activities, language, literature, contribution.*

Boro language is the most important of the languages of the Tibeto-Burmese language group in Assam. This language is spoken in the Brahmaputra valley, Cachar district and in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Apart from the area mentioned above a small group of Boro are also found in other localities, e.g. Nepal, Bhutan, Garo Hills, even in Pakistan (Bangladesh) (Holvorsrud:1959:1).

It was thought that the Boro language prior to the arrival of the missionaries would gradually disintegrate and fall into disuse under the impact of dominating Aryan language. By that time a substantial adoption had been taking place. The adult male population of the tribe was wholly bi-lingual and it not only had impact on the Boro language but many terms from Hindi, Bengali, Assamese languages were being adopted and partly assimilated according to the phonetic rules of the languages. Even the structure of the language had slowly been changing under the influence of the dominating medium of speech. Apart from that many had given up their mother tongue completely (Holvorsrud:1959:1&2). As a result, local variation in Bodo dialects became wider due to the influence of other languages.

In such a state of affairs some missionaries came forward to have scientific study on Boro language along with the spread of gospel. Whatever motive might be there behind such nobles purpose, it cannot be denied that the Christian missionaries had unique contribution in consolidating the very foundation of Boro language and literature. Now, whether or not the creation of written Boro language and literature by the missionaries was connected with their main object of conversion or the conversion of the Boros to Christianity, as their sole occupation needs to be examined.

Missionary urge for literary work can be seen from the following words of the Assam Mission Paper (1886) “We regard it as fundamental rule that all classes must hear their own tongue the wonderful work of god. We see no reason to the Assamese on exception”. In case of Hills and plains tribes they adopted the same principle. The principle was that, gospel must be preached in their own tongue. But in order to check the multiplication of language the missionaries avoided work on less important dialect. But it was found that they had paid special attention to great tribes such as Nagas, Kookies or Kocharies, those who gave special promise of receiving gospel (Borpujari,1968:117&118). So it became necessary for missionaries to learn and developed the local dialect in a scientific way in order to make it suitable for spreading the gospel and also for the Bible translation work.

According to Bronson, “Kocharies in the Bhutan frontier have become less trained with Hindu superstitions. Moreover, a number of Kochari chiefs, living on the Bhutan frontier, had been to Tezpur, and requested missionaries to establish schools among them. For that reason the missionaries under took to learn and develop Boro Kochari Language, which is spoken by a large population in the northern tract of Brahmaputra Valley on the foot of Bhutan and also in a part of Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal. According to H. Halvorsrud, “Boro Kochary is the most important of the languages of the Bodo sub-divisions of the Tibeto-Burmese language group. The number of people speaking this tribal tongue in the Brahmaputra valley, Cachar district and in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal are estimated at about 3,00,000 possibly 4,00,000. Apart from the area mentioned, small group of Boros are found in other localities e.g. Nepal, Bhutan, Garo Hills etc. and even in Pakistan (present Bangladesh) (Holvorsrud:1959:1). But the actual figure might be more than the estimated figure in the year 1959. Secondly, through the Kocharies of Darrang district the missionaries wanted to have an access to Bhutan hills for gospel work. Because thousand of Bhutanese came down to the Kochari villages for trade in the cold season. Rev. E.W. Clark expressed, “The Bhutanese are pretty Buddhist and might be slow to receive gospel, yet it should be faithfully presented to them. Christ has made it duty of his disciples to preach the good news of his kingdom to every creature” (The Assam Mission:1886:219&220).

Thirdly, physical structure of the Boro Kocharies attracted the Europeans to use them as laborer in tea gardens. E.T. Dalton writes about the Kocharies, “They are in comparison with the average run of the people of the plains, their neighbors, a fine athletic race, industrious and thriving of light olive complexion and rather strongly marked Mongolian feature” (Dalton:1872:82). According to Capt. Butler, “The Kocharies who resides at the foot of the hills are the most useful and industrious as well as the most athletic in Assam and allowed to be the best cultivators”. The fact is supported by Endle’s remark in the preface of the *An Outline Grammer of Kochari Language*, A further reason for at once publishing the Outline Grammar, in spite of many short comings, is supplied by the desire to have a manual of this kind for the use of managers of tea factories etc.” (Endle:1978:II). He further said, “If they are not to be easily driven, they can be easily led: and undoubtedly one of the most powerful influences which employer can bring to bear upon them is to be found in a command of their national form of speech to which they are strongly attached” (Endle:1978:II). Thus it cannot be denied that the missionary urged of the study of Boro language was the outcome of their necessity.

In 1884 Rev. Sidney Endle pioneered the creation of written Boro language by his book *An Outline Grammer of Kochari Language: As Spoken in the District of Darrang*. As a result, the Boro language got written form for the first time and paved the way for giving shape to the present Boro language and literature. *An Outline Grammer of Kochari Language* was confined to the dialects of the Boros of Darrang district only and the book also contained a few Boro folk tales and stories both in English and Boro language. Thus it is regarded as a book grammar as well as of literature (Brahma:2006:54). After Endle, Rev. L.O. Skrefsrud wrote *A Short Grammar of the Mech or Boro Language* in 1889. The book studied the Boro dialects comprising several localities and gave them grammatical form.

The Boro folk literature gained momentum with J.D. Anderson’s publication of *A Collection of Kochari Folk Tales* in 1895. In 1904 Rev. A. Kristiansen wrote “Grammar and Dictionary of Kochari Language”. Rev. H. Holvorsrud also brought out *Boro Grammar* in 1959 from Gaurang Mission of Haltugaon. This book deals with the grammatical rules of the Boro language of Kokrajhar district. Even earlier to that, he, with the help of Dinesh Narzary, brought out monthly magazine *Phungni Hathorkhi* in 1949. Rev. Holvorsrud and Rev. Maguram Mushahary wrote several books on Christianity in Boro language. They are, *Baibelni Godan Radai*, *Gojam Radaini Bathra*, 1939; *Jisu Kristoni Modoini Solo*, 1944; *Jisuni Maonai Dangnai*, 1938; *Nokhrangni Lama*, *Boroni Rojabgra Bijab*, 1954; *Undoi Rojabgra Bijab*, 1953, *Sadhu Sundarsing*, *Chandra Lila and Baibelni Solo*, 1942 (Narzary).

Besides that some great works such as, *Specimens of Languages of India* by Sir G. Cambell, *Linguistic Survey of India* by Grierson and the *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* by Dalton extended good contribution towards the study of Boro language, culture and history. But the British and Foreign Bible Society of Calcutta made a great effort to translate the Bible in pure Boro language. The remarkable point of this book was that only pure Boro words were used in writing that book. The missionaries also tried to introduce Boro textbook in the primary level of school. With this aim in view they published books viz. *Gothoni Lekha* in 1951; *Boroni Phopraigra Bijab* (for class I) and *Foraiganoi Bijab* (for class II), in 1952. But it failed to draw the attention of mass Boro people. So reading of those books was confined in the Sunday schools and adult school of the missionaries. From 1890 to 1930 most of these schools used Roman script as medium of writing but latter on it was replaced by Assamese and Bengali script (Islary,1998:106&114).

Now it is obvious that demand for the introduction of Boro language as medium of instruction in primary and secondary level in 1960's and Roman script movement in 1970's were not the new origin, but the missionaries had sown the seeds some decades ago. The missionary activities directly or indirectly encouraged the enlightened Boro people of that time to work for the uplift of their language and culture. And a section of people became a strong supporter of using Roman script for Boro language and literature, which gained momentum since 1970's with the support of young generation.

If we judge from the viewpoint of their main object of conversion, the missionaries could not make much headway with Boro mission. The Christian missionaries who achieve grand success on hills tribes of North East India, in conversion work, could not accomplish much on the Boros. They were successful to convert only a small minority of the bulk Boro population. Under such circumstances the Christian missionaries had to remain satisfied with their moderate success. But they did not give up the work of gospel and the missionary works are still carried on. New missionary schools, Churches have come into existence within last few years in the Boro dominated areas. Although the missionaries gained very little success in spreading Christianity among the Boros, their activities made an impact, which was felt throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century. The amount of energy and resources, which was spent for the service of humanity, was much higher than their success. The period was marked as enlightened awakening and zeal for creative activities among the Boros.

Judging the facts, it can be stated that in spite of failure of the missionaries, in their effort to Christianize the Boros as a whole, they made a lasting contribution towards the social development of the Boros. Along with the gospel the missionaries also initiated a broad based programme by setting up educational institutions, hospitals and by understanding some welfare measures. The contribution of the missionaries to the

Boro language and literature is worth mentioning. They showed a new direction to the already disintegrating Boro language in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The missionaries penetrated into such interior place where no government's welfare measures had ever reached. Though European missionaries are no more in this land, yet various Christian organizations are still active among the Boros with benevolent programme like imparting modern education, helping the needy persons through hospitals and other services including the work for spreading the gospel.

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