

## The Trajectory of Modern Education of the Bodos: A Historical Overview

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### Abstract

*Pointing out the educational scenario of the Bodos, known to be one of the earliest settlers in the northern side of the Brahmaputra Valley, during the period prior to colonial annexation, this paper has made an attempt to briefly analyse how has the scenario gradually changed in the subsequent period. It has been argued that the social reform movement that played a historical role in reconstructing the Bodo society during the colonial era, helped subsequent emergence, growth and consolidation of a distinct identity of the Bodos. Especially, the visible apathy of the power structure towards expansion of educational infrastructure and acceptance of Bodo as a medium of instruction not only restricted enrolment of the Bodo students in the school but also reinforced the identity movement launched by the Bodos. The primary concern of this paper, however, is to comprehend the historical processes associated with expansion of modern education among the Bodos.*

Being a continuous process, education keeps influencing human progress and plays a crucial role in construction and reconstruction of subjectivity, both individual and collective. Especially for the weaker sections of a society, education is an input not only for their economic development but also for instilling in them self-confidence and inner strength, thereby enabling them to face the new and unforeseen challenges. The Bodos of Assam provides a unique example to comprehend how modern education helps invigorating a collective identity capable of politically asserting itself to pave the way for socio-cultural as well as economic development. Before beginning of the colonial era, the Bodos were on the verge of extinction. Being unaware of their pride, honor, and dignity, they got oriented to structural assimilation to Islam or Hinduism (Brahma, 2008). With gradual spread of modern education during the colonial era, the outlook of the community had, however, significantly changed and started asserting as a distinct community with self-respect. The movement for reassertion started with the Brahma Dharma movement, which appeared as a series of movements such

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as the movement for language, the movement for education, demand for political autonomy besides economic safety and security. This paper is essentially an attempt to comprehend the process historically.

Sociologically, the Bodos of the Brahmaputra Valley belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongolid stock. Defined as a linguistic form, Brian Hodgson referred the Bodos to an ethnic community speaking the Sino-Tibetan Bodo language. Bodo was the name given to a race of Mongolid people who are inhabitants of the north Himalayas and west China. It is derived from the land of Bod (Bod- means the Homeland). It is one of the earliest and numerous Bodo<sup>2</sup> Tribes settled in the Brahmaputra Valley, and demographically, there are now around 1.3 million Bodos in Assam, recognized collectively as Scheduled Tribe. According to S.K Chatterjee, the Bodos are distributed among the Brahmaputra valley, North Bengal as well as East Bengal. He was of his opinion that the Bodos formed a solid block in the Northeast since the epic era. As he pointed out, they are one of the significant Indo-Mongoloid groups who came along in the Eastern area of India. The Bodos, first settled in the Brahmaputra Valley and extended towards the west to Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Koch Behar, and some of them must shifted over North Bihar (Chatterjee, 1974). However, majority of them settled on the Northern side of the Brahmaputra River of Assam constituting the present Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) (Brahma, 2006), which includes the present districts of Baksa, Udalguri, Chirang and Kokrajhar.

### **The Educational Scenario of the Bodos during the Pre-Colonial Period**

The ancient rulers of Kamrupa, especially Bhaskar Barman (594-650 A.D.), supported education (Choudhury, 1959). In those early periods, Indo-Aryan system of education was already in trend and marked by the initiatives by the Hindu rulers of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Varnasrama Dharma<sup>3</sup> was prevalent and education was transmitted orally in the Tols, Pathsalas and Gurugrihas<sup>4</sup> (Choudhury, 1959). Even during the medieval period, Srimanta Sankardeva, the Vaisnavite saint of Assam first received his education from Mahendra Kandali, a Brahmin Guru (Sarma, 1989). It is, therefore, evident that the Ahom state, which made a beginning in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, subsequently adopted the culture and language of the Assamese Hindus and continued the earlier form of education (Chakravarty, 1989). The education imparted through Pathsalas, Tols and Gurugrihas, however, remained confined to the upper-class categories such as the Brahmin, Kayastha and Kalita (Sarma, 1989). There

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<sup>2</sup> The Bodos are the indigenous groups of about 18 different tribes viz. Lalung, Madani, Tippera, Mech, Dimasa, Bodo, Chutiya, Rajbanshi, Hajong, Dhimal, Mahalia, Solaimiya, Phulgariya, Garo, Rabha, Saeaniya, Moran living in Assam, West Bengal, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya.

<sup>3</sup> It mentioned four stages of Hindu sastras in life. First is acquiring education under Guru in Gurugriha abstain from home for the whole period, second is family life, third is religious and fourth is asceticism.

<sup>4</sup> Tol was a Sanskrit teaching school, Pathsala was a school, Gurugriha was a Sanskrit residential school maintained at the house of the Guru. During the ancient times, these three terms were used as a Sanskrit oriented.

is no evidence to show that the non-Aryan indigenous people living in this region had any form of formal education (Barpujari, 1990). The spread of Ek Sharan Nam Dharma, propagated by Sankardeva through Namghars and Satras, had led to certain changes. Religious teachings were passed on to the disciples across the fossilized caste categories. Satras and Namghars became an important meeting ground for all the cultural and religious education (Sarma, 1989). Village temple became a centre of popular education by regular exposition and recitation of Puranas and epics (Barua, 2003). According to B.K. Kakati, “Namghars combined the functions of village parliaments, a village court, a village school and a village church” (Das, 1990).

Nevertheless, formal and professional learning was presumably not much familiar to the tribal people around. While discussing the tribals of Assam, Anil Boro observed, “Apart from the traditional village communities, Khels and Mels, there is no evidence of other traditional institutions, be it educational or economical” (Boro, 2000). Therefore, it is said that during ancient and medieval periods, formal education was unknown to the tribal society of Assam except to the few members of the royal families.

### **Half heated attempt of the Colonial State to Educate the Bodos**

Evidently, the tribes of pre-colonial Assam remained beyond the horizon of the existing Hindu education system (Foreign Department, 1853). Nor did the colonial state had well planned policy for spreading modern education among them. In the beginning of the colonial era, most of the schools were located outside the Bodos areas, or they were far from their villages. Consequently, education remained beyond the reach of the common Bodos (Bengal Educational Proceedings, 1870).

It must, however, be mentioned that Francis Jenkins, who was the Commissioner of Assam, had taken some initiative for bringing Western education near to the Bodos. By 1835, three public and few private schools were functional in Darrang district. The number of primary schools rose to eight in 1847. The educational progress was slow, and in 1853, there were nine vernacular schools in the district. From 1854, the provincial government started granted a specific educational policy concerning the Bodos of Darrang district through the Christian missionary. At the end of the nineteenth century, there were around four high schools in the districts, which were situated at Gauripur, Abhayapuri, Dhubri, and Goalpara (Allen, 2005). The other categories of schools were Middle English schools at Dalgoma, Manikarchar, Bilasipara and Manikarchar, and Middle Vernacular schools at South Salmara, Bijni, Patamari, Goalpara, and Dhubri. By 1903-04, there were 192 lower and 16 upper primary schools in the district. A few Bodos from the north bank of the Brahmaputra got enrolled in those schools (Allen, 2005). Till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bodo groups

of people were not much allured with the new education system<sup>5</sup>. The tribal parents thought that the timings of the school were too long, and therefore, regarded it as loss of time in managing the household activities. Therefore, the existing conditions had hardly changed the life of the community while absence of educational institutions in the Bodo inhabited areas added further to their educational backwardness.

### **Appearance of the Christian Missionaries**

The role played by the Christian missionaries in spreading education, particularly among the tribes of north-eastern India, was undoubtedly crucial for reconstruction of collective subjectivity of the tribal communities (Sarmah, 2016). When the British officials were engaged with establishing schools in certain places to win the confidence of the Assamese gentry (Barpujari, 1990), the Christian missionaries took part for their educational activities along with the missionary works among the tribal people residing in North-East India. The Christian missionaries made efforts to serve the people with the primary objective of spreading Christianity among the people, who did not have access to formal education, as the government failed to provide them direct access to education<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, the contributions made by the missionaries in preservation of the languages as well as development of scripts have historical significance in shaping the collective identities of the tribes.

The American Baptist Missionaries were the first to reach the Bodo-Kacharis. After their establishment of a centre at Guwahati in 1843, they formed a boarding school in 1846 with a few Bodo students. One of them from the Jhargaon village of North Kamrup, namely Apentha, got baptized in 1849 at Guwahati Church. However, the American Baptist Church was mainly concentrated on the Garos, and in 1965, they handed over the responsibility to the Australian Baptist missionary to work among the Bodo community (Sabastian, 1997).

Mr. Hessel Mayor who came to Tezpur for the spread of gospel and for establishing S.P.G. society belongs to the Anglican Church. The S.P.G worked for the Boros or Kachirs in and around Tezpur. Rev. Sidney Endle, who was deputed by the society for the propagation of gospel, arrived in the year 1864 at Tezpur. By that time, some of the Boros got converted to Christianity. Rev. Endle was successful in establishing a full-fledged Church at Bengnabari near Harisinga (Sabastian, 1997) in 1841 when the mission was launched. "In 1881 Rev. J.P. Smitheman and S. Endle were the missionaries who were assisted by three preachers, ten Christian teachers, and ten

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<sup>5</sup> As pointed out in the Report on the progress of education in Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1901-02 to 1906-07, a large number of primary schools of the district had no house of their own. Classes were held in any places available, like in the verandas of the private houses, in the village Namghars or even under trees or any other place where space were found. After the creation of Upper primary classes, some of the Upper primary schools had been furnished with buildings, but were in most cases unsuitable. They were situated in the vicinity of some dwelling house or in a market place.

<sup>6</sup> Letter No. 64, Jenkins to William Grey, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 1st July 1855. (Capt. Jenkins mentions that the Government schools were little adapted to meet the wants of the Kachari).

non-Christian teachers. The native Christians numbered three in 1851: seventy in 1861, one hundred and thirty in 1871, and two hundred and ten in 1881. In the later years, there were thirty-five communicants and four adult baptisms and two congregations” (Assam Mission, 1886).

In Goalpara, the Lutheran Missionaries established a colony and contributed interesting work among the Santals groups. Rev. L. Skrefsruds arrived in India in the year 1863 and dedicated prosperous tasks among the Santals. An agricultural colony or Christian settlement in 1880 was formed in the Western Assam of the Dingdinga area by the group of Santal families. It was successful in containing several hundred Christians; and a church was built to make room for one thousand people, and schools were opened. The missionaries, however, came into contact with neighboring Boro villages. In 1887, and a good number of Bodos started attending church and reading the gospel. The number of converts among the Bodos got increased, and many centers were opened at Gaurang (near Kokrajhar), Bongaigaon, and Parkijuli in Kamrup in 1922 (Sabastian, 1997).

In 1870, the Scottish Presbyterian Church began to start its work among the Nepalis of Darjeeling, and gradually it extended its service to the Duar areas inhabited by the Bodos. After entering the Boros areas, they learnt the Bodo language to propagate the gospel. They established a missionary work centre to carry out their activities at Panbari. They did remarkable job among Boros of West Bengal in Jalpaiguri district and initiated many of them to their religion. “Ranglal Narzari and Rev. Jitnal Narzari had done a pioneering work among the Boros of Jalpaiguri district” (Sebastian, 1997).

The Roman Catholic Church, the last group who started working among the Bodo of Assam. They did not have any contact with the Bodo during the time in the nineteenth century when the Anglicans and Lutherans were busy with their work among the Bodo. Sisuram Saikia, who came under the Baptist mission from Borigaon, invited Fr. Piaeski to the Darrang district in 1928 for internal feuds among themselves. Fr. Piaeski baptized some Bodo people there and established Catholic Mission at Damarugaon (Sword and Burnhalm, 1946). There was hardly any kind of activity undertaken by the catholic mission from 1928-1933 on both the educational and evangelical lines. But, the arrival of Fr. Ravalico and Fr. Alessi had seen marked progress in the evangelical works in 1933. Later their work got expanded to Beha Basti of Kamrup, and a few Bodo families at Kumarikata came to the Catholic faith.

In 1850, after reviewing the history of the education of the Bodos, the Anglican missionaries endeavoured to open mission schools to introduce formal education. At that time, the Bodo language was a scattered mother tongue that did not have any script or written literature (Risey, 1975). Therefore, it would imply that there was no existence of the Bodo language to be used in those new schools which were established by the missionaries. As a result, Assamese and Bengali were considered for teaching the Bodo students in the schools. Teaching and preaching among the Bodo, as realized by

the missionaries, would be much easier through Bodo language rather than Assamese. However, to use the Bodo language, the Christian missionaries adopted the Roman script. In addition to the schools, the Bodo language became the medium of explanation in the church in the Sunday deliberations (Home Education, 1879). Whatever it might be the motive, the fact cannot be denied that the Christian missionaries were responsible in creating the foundation of Bodo literature and language providing a basis for emergence of a collective subjectivity.

### **Brahma Movement as an Alternative to Christianity**

Regarded as the father of the historic Brahma movement, Kalicharan Brahma's contribution in restructuring the Bodo identity is unequivocal. Prioritizing education for liberating the Bodos from the hitherto existing condition of underdevelopment, Kalicharan Brahma initiated a multitude of reforms which together constituted the core of the Brahma Dharma he propagated. In 1905, he visited Calcutta to interact with literate people there in order to strengthen the spread of education among the Bodos. He came into contact with Sivanaryan Paramahansa at Calcutta <sup>7</sup> and in 1906 he performed the Yajnahuti to mark the beginning of a new faith and to preach it as the Brahma Dharma. He visited places outside to propagate the Brahma Dharma in village and district such as West Bengal, Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang and Dibrugarh. The reforms he initiated brought a watermark development for the Bodos (Brahma, 2006). This made a successful movement in realizing the people on the making education important and developing identity and self-respect. As "The greatest contribution of the Brahma movement was in the field of education" (Chaudhuri, 2004).

As it has already been indicated, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the progress and growth of education amongst the Bodos were extremely limited. It is reinforced by the submission Kalicharan Brahma before Simon Commission in 1929 (Brahma, 1992). They showed their impotence to assemble the memorandum themselves due to the inaccessibility of any educated people from within their rank (Brahma, 1992). The situation, however, started changing since the second decade of the twentieth century with a constant inflow of educated immigrants from Bengal and Nepal who came for employment. This had inspired the indigenous Bodos and Kalicharan Brahma took the lead along with the newly emerged tiny educated section. The perception was that growth of literature and preservation of culture, and hence, the status of the society could be uplifted only through education (Narzary, 2009). Kalicharan Brahma, as a timber merchant came into the contact of the enlightened Assamese

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<sup>7</sup> Teachings of Sivanarayan Paramahansa are: (i) Keep the world pure, so that no uncleanness may attach, within or outside, to the physical body, the sense, mind, food, raiment, dwellings, roads, bathing places and so forth. Prevent the adulteration of food in every form. (ii) Be "equal-sighted" to sons and daughters, and educate them equally; secure equal rights to man and woman. Looking on all individuals as God and your own soul, cherish them, so that want and suffering may come to none. (iii) Let each, to the extent of his power, lovingly, in God's name, make offerings in the fire of things fragrant and sweet, such as clarified butter, sugar, etc., and help and encourage others to do so. This purifies the air, secures timely rain and abundant crops. Such is God's law and others, cited from J. N. Farquhar, op. cit., p. 133.

and Bengalis, and also he closely observed the Christian missionaries. He initiated his reform movement among the Bodos of Assam by restructuring their religious faiths and spread of education to convince the Bodos that they would attain a social position equal to their neighbouring societies (Roy, 1995). Establishment of schools was demanded in the Bodo living districts. At the same time, they realized that the household atmosphere of every individual was a determining factor for progress, and therefore, emphasized on eradication of social evils. Similar emphasize was on the status of women and their education. This had inspired the people to work together for the community. Bodo Chatra Sanmilami (The Bodo student's association) was formed by Kalicharan Brahma in 1919 at Dhubri. This took up the activities on the issues of employment opportunities for the Bodos as well as the improvement of their culture, education, and language. This substantially contributed to the growing consciousness among the people for the advancement of their community and a platform to safeguard all-round development and interest (Farquhar, 1967).

Kalicharan Brahma, in 1911, went to the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, Mr. A.J Laine, and asked him to take initiative for expanding educational facilities to the areas dominated by the ignorant Bodos. Mr.Laine supported Kalicharan Brahma in appealing to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr. Archdale Earle, who then visited the Dhubri district in the early year of 1912to encourage education among the Bodos. Kalicharan Brahma explained to the Chief Commissioner that due to the non-availability of school in Parbatzoar estate, Bodo children were deprived of education. Mainly due to lack of money, many people could not afford or go to other towns and Dhubri for their studies. Further, he explained to the Chief Commissioner that mere schooling would not improve their condition; instead, he apprised for opening one upper primary school with vocational courses of both weaving and carpentry since they were oriented toward getting a job (Brahma, 2001). Mr. Archdale Earle approved and endorsed a grant of thirty thousand rupees for building of three institutions namely one Middle English school, one carpentry center at Tipkai and one weaving center (Mushahary, 1992). The three institutions as a whole were named Technical school and Tipkai Middle English School. Kalicharan Brahma took part in constructing hostels for the students of this school (Sarma, 1983). Educational facilities got expanded in the Bodo inhabited areas, as Mr. Laine, the Deputy Commissioner, made provision for launching primary school from the local board. He advocated the cause for the extension of the number of middle schools with the required number of students from primary to high school at Kokrajhar (Brahma, 2006). The joint initiatives of Kalicharan Brahma and Mr. Laine had led to establishment of primary school in the Goalpara district. Around 36 primary schools were established in 1914 for the local people (Assam Secretariat, 1914), which had considerable impact on the development in the later periods. Besides expansion of the educational infrastructure, which now became available at least to some rural Bodo people, the colonial administration paid attention to quality of teaching. Deputy Commissioner Mr. Laine had shown his interest in Tipkai Middle School and Technical School, which became a centre

of attraction. According to the official records, he proposed to upgrade the pay of the school headmaster from the existing Rs. 50/- to Rs. 70/- per month to attract qualified person for the post (Assam Secretariat, 1915).

With the growing number of educational institutes in the Bodo dominated areas of the district of Goalpara, Kalicharan Brahma now had to work with the idea of compulsory education. Alongside motivating the children to attend schools, he imposed penalties on the parents who refused to send their children to school. To make school education attractive, he also made provisions for awarding scholarships to meritorious students, mobilizing the required fund in the form of public donations (Sarma, 1983). Alongside, Kalicharan Brahma took initiatives for standardizing the Bodo language. To enrich the language, he also borrowed suitable words from Bengali or Assamese. His pioneering literary works was further reinforced by many others people such as Rupnath Brahma, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Ishan Mushahary, Promod Brahma, etc. However, Kalicharan Brahma became the symbol of inspiration for the Bodo community at the time when Bodo society is falling down, and the Bodo community recognised him as “Mech Gandhi” (Basumatary, 2004).

For reforming the Bodo society, Kalicharan Brahma took initiatives to organize the Bodo Mahasanmilanis with the help of prominent personalities. The Bodo Mahasanmilanis, for the first time, became a platform to discuss myriad social and economic issues that plagued the Bodo community. Aiming at social reforms by eradicating some of the persisting social evils, the First Bodo Mahasanmilani was held in 1921 at Gossaigaon in undivided Goalpara district. The convention emphasised on the development of education, nevertheless, in his presidential address, Jadav Chandra Khakhlyari, General Secretary, Assam Kachari Juvak Sanmilani talked about the glorious past of the Bodo society and regretted the present situation of the Bodos. He appealed to the people to unite and marched toward the progress and growth of western education by discarding ignorance (Narzary, 2003). The First Mahasanmilani also passed the resolutions to publish magazine for the literary pursuits of the school and college students and to take initiatives for establishment of more primary and middle schools in the Bodo-dominated areas to ensure enrolment of both and girls and boys (Narzary, 2003). The Second Mahasanmilani was held at Rangia in 1925 and the session was taken over by Mahadev Sarma from Tezpur. This session also adopted some resolutions with regard to social elevation. The third Mahasanmilani which was held at Roumari near Bongaigaon in 1929, besides endorsing the resolutions passed by the previous two sessions, adopted some concrete steps. Though all the resolutions were not implemented, they had a positive impact on the common people inspiring them for modern education.

To fulfil educational, social, and political aspirations of the Bodo community. Kalicharan Brahma, along with Srdar Belbung Ram Kachari, Baburam Brahma, Jadav Chandra Khakhlyari, Karendra Narayan Mandal, Md. Giasuddin Ahmed, under the banner of the Bodo Association approached the Simon Commission at Shillong



on 4 January 1929. They submitted a memorandum with the clauses related to socio-economic, and political demands of the Bodos. The Clause Eight of the memorandum mentioned that “we the undersigned beg to lay before you the community should receive special treatment at the hands of the govt. in matters of Appointments and Education. Our community is most backward in points of education... To remove this drawback there should be compulsory free primary education and special scholarships for giving facility to higher education of the Bodo students be provided for” (Narzary , 2003). Thus, the submission of the memorandum had marked a new approach in the history of the Bodo society. The collective efforts organized by tiny enlightened Bodos laid the foundation for emergence of an educated elite class which subsequently contributed to the development of Bodo literature and language alongside flourishing new socio-political organizations. This process resulted in bringing changes in the status and position of the Bodos, making them capable of drawing attention from the non-Bodo counterpart, especially of caste Hindu Assamese society (Brahma, 2006). But at the same time, the ‘Brahmas’ among the Bodos became educationally and culturally more advance than their unconverted” (Brahma, 2008).

Besides the Bodo Mahasanmilanis, the Bodo students, however small in number, also started mobilizing themselves under the banner of the Bodo Chatra Sanmilani. The first Annual Conference of the organization was held in 1919. Kalicharan Brahma, who was invited as the Chief Guest, made a strong appeal to the Bodo student community and the mass people to take a keen interest in education in his speech. The Bodo Chatra Sanmilani was also instrumental in making the modern Bodo society and exerting influence on the new generation of western-educated Bodo youths in the state. Many students from Kamrup, Goalpara, Lakhimpur, Nagaon, and West Bengal participated in the annual sessions of the Sanmilani. These sessions had brought unity among the scattered Bodo population to work together for the growth of the Bodo language and the development of literature by sharing their news thoughts.

As the Bodo Mahasanmilanis in 1921 emphasized on publishing a magazine, the Bodo Chatra Sanmilani started publishing “Bibar” in 1924, and the quarterly magazine continued till 1940. Making an epoch in the history of Bodo literary movement, the Bibar became a platform for the literate section to express their feelings through writing. This ultimately developed a healthy practice of writings on the one hand and enriched literature on the other. This magazine was only for a short period, but it significantly contributed in shaping the future literary works in Bodo society.

The reforms initiated by Kalicharan Brahma were enthusiastically responded by the new generation of educated Bodo youths. For instance, Rupnath Brahma’s contributions in reshaping the Bodo society through expansion of the sphere of education is particularly worth considering. As he was elected to the Dhubri Local Board, he upgraded the Kokrajhar Upper Primary School to M.V. School and Kajigaon L.P.School to M.V. standard. At that time, Puthimari M.V. School was the only middle school in the eastern Duar region which was situated between Manas in the east and Sankosh in the west

(Basumatary, 2005). Along with Sarat Chandra Goswami, School Inspector, Assam Valley circle, Rupnath Brahma established many Middle English Schools and Primary Schools in Bodo villages, in Kokrajhar and Dhubri Sub-divisions (Kachari, 1981). For a very longer period of time, he was appointed as the Cabinet Minister in the State Government, and as a strong leader, he engaged in the growth of education in tribal society and tried his best for the people. He mentioned in his speech “Education is the primary and principal ladder for development and prosperity” (Basumatary, 2004). Similarly, Madaram Brahma was also closely linked with the expansion of school education at the Kokrajhar sub-division. He brought a drastic change by establishing the Kokrajhar college in 1956 (Choudhury, 1993) and advocated the cause of women’s education and having compulsory primary education (Mochahari, 2008). Satish Chandra Basumatary, who became the Vice-Chairman of the Dhubri Local Board in 1946 played an important role in establishing schools in the district. Emphasizing on vocational courses, he made provision for compulsory weaving classes in Ramfalbil M.E. School which was particularly for girl students (Basumatary, 2003). His thoughts and writings were great sources of motivation for the guardians and parents for the development of consciousness for education.

### **Educational Scenario of the Bodos after Independence**

Despite several initiatives taken by the state government to make education free and compulsory in accordance with the constitutional provisions and influences of the reform movements discussed earlier, the overall educational scenario of the Bodos had remained far from satisfactory for decades after independence. Although the participation of people in educational development revealed a positive trend in the post-colonial era, it was seen that the growth was not up to the mark in many places. It needs to be mentioned here that the increasing number of educational institutions or students alone does not imply growth in education. Material conditions of life of the people influenced by a multitude of economic, social, and geographical factors prevented the common Bodo people from reaching the desired level of educational attainment even after independence. The leadership of the reform movement and many prominent people helped in establishing schools in the Bodo areas. But, most of the schools were primary schools (Boro, 1987). Besides a poor student-teacher ratio, the attendance rate was low because of the prevailing socio-economic conditions coupled with a general apathy for education. Consequently, the literacy rate remained low, and till the 1970’s, the majority of the Bodo people were first-generation learners. Due to the non-availability of schools within their reach, particularly the Middle English and High English schools, and the lack of awareness of the significance of education among the parents were the contributing factors. In addition to the economic and geographical factors, the language barrier added to the conspicuously low level of education among the common Bodo people (Bordoloi, 1991). “The Bodo pupils could neither understand properly from the books (Assamese books) nor from the teachings (in the Assamese language) in the classes and they were subjected to punishment in the school every day and they had to leave school and abandon their study” (Mochahari, 1993). In the

case of the Bodo women, the situation was more pathetic. The female literacy rate was only 9.3 percent against the male literacy rate which was 29.88 percent in the year 1961 (Census of India, 1961). Perhaps, certain conservative attitudes towards the education of women till the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also contributed to the remarkably poor literacy rate of women. The popular perception was “*Likha Parha janile Charitra Beya Hoi*” (education destroys the morality of women). Therefore, the women were expected to have only the knowledge and skill for day-to-day household works.

After independence, some of the mission schools were taken over by the state government while many others got converted into different non-governmental educational boards. A section of the vernacular primary school lost its eminence when many schools were established with English as the medium of instruction (Brahma, 2006). Such efforts, however, remained confined to the basic purpose of religious conversion. The primary concern for making the Bodo language the medium of instruction, therefore, soon became a major issue that assumed a political character.

### **Demand for Introduction of Bodo as a Medium of Education**

Unequivocally, the demand for the introduction of Bodo as a medium of instruction at the schools was intrinsically linked with the primary concern for the educational development of the Bodos. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, which came into being in 1952 with its commitment to the development of Bodo literature and language, along with other organizations inspired the people to get an education in the mother tongue (Brahma, 2010). It was realized that the progress and growth of education cannot be achieved without introducing Bodo as the medium of instruction. Such a move, however, was opposed by a few leaders such as Rupnath Brahma (Cabinet Minister, Govt. of Assam), and Dharanidhar Basumatary (MLA, Assam) as they believed that the Bodo language was yet to get its maturity to be a medium of instruction. For them, such an issue would disturb the growth of literature as well as education. On the other hand, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha contested this position with the assertion that the literary achievements of the Bodo language since the era of the Bihar made the language strong enough to be a medium of instruction (Basumatary, 2008). A delegation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (Satish Chandra Basumatary, Dharanidhar Basumatary, Birendra Narayan Brahma, Modaran Brahma, and Jogendra Kumar Basumatary) visited Bishnu Ram Medhi, the Chief Minister of Assam, on 26 December 1952 when a conference of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was held in Dhubri. Through a memorandum, they placed a demand for the introduction of the Bodo medium of instruction in the primary schools in the Bodo living areas (Basumatary, 2008). In the memorandum, it was mentioned that the Bodo language was spoken in Kamrup, Goalpara, Naga hills, Cachar, Darrang, and Nagaon districts, and justified the introduction of the Bodo as a medium of instruction (Atreya, 2007).

However, a remarkable change occurred in 1960 when the Government of Assam decided to accept Assamese as the official language of the state. Inevitably, the non-

Assamese-speaking people, particularly those in the hills, sharply contested such a decision as they perceived it as a violation of their language right. The issue was resolved by accepting Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley, Bengali in Barak Valley, and English in the hill districts (Basumatary, 2008). Though the Bodos did not oppose the official language movement, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha holds an executive meeting at Kajolgaon and decided that the Bodos would report the Bodo language instead of Assamese as their mother tongue in the next census enumeration. Similarly, in the column on religion, they would report Bathou (traditional religion) or Brahma or Christianity as their religion (Daimary, 2009). This essentially witnessed their resentment against the socio-cultural and religious domination of the caste-Hindu Assamese society and a renewed concern for the preservation of the racial identity of the Bodos.

For an understanding of the complex issue of medium of instruction, on 18 May 1963, Bimla Prasad Chaliha, Chief Minister of Assam instituted a one-man inquiry committee with Rupnath Brahma who was a cabinet minister. In broad agreement with the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the committee recommends the introduction of the Bodo language in primary schools as the medium of instruction. Accordingly, the Bodo language became the medium of instruction in the academic year 1963 in primary schools and at Kokrajhar Government High school (Brahma, 2006). It was decided that the Bodo medium would be introduced in the Lower primary level up to class III in the Bodo-dominated areas of Kokrajhar Sub-division (Statement given by Chief Minister, 1968) and then Assamese medium from class IV onwards (Narzary, 1993). In 1963, out of 119 primary schools, Bodo medium was introduced in 75 schools under Kokrajhar Anchalic Panchayat (Annual report, 1962-1963). In the next year, it got extended to Sidli and Dotma Anchalic Panchayat too. Out of 164 and 84 primary schools, the medium was introduced in 90 and 60 schools, respectively. In the year 1964-1965, some of the selected schools from Kachugaon and Gossaigaon Anchalic Panchayat were also undertaken as the Bodo medium (Assam Report, 1964-1965). Accordingly, teachers with the knowledge of Bodo language were appointed in the Bodo medium schools in Kokrajhar and other schools. This historical decision contributed to regaining the lost hopes of the Bodos. Enthusiasm among the people was reflected by the formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha in different districts. This also inspired the student community to form a district student organization (Brahma, 2007). In the year 1962, the Goalpara District Bodo Students Union was formed. It is worth mentioning in this context that the merger of the All Assam Plains Tribal League in 1946 with All India National Congress, there was a political vacuum in the Bodo society in absence of any organised political party till the 1960's. The Goalpara District Bodo Student's Union took the form of the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) in February 1967 (Memorandum submitted by ABSU, 1991). The emergence of ABSU supplemented to the strength of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, and the combined efforts helped in the development of socio-political and cultural consciousness among the common Bodo people.

The persistent demand of both ABSU and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha resulted in introduction of Bodo as the medium of instruction at the middle and the high school

level of education. It became the medium of instruction in 48 Middle English and High schools in the first phase (Minutes of the expert committee, 1971). Gradually from the late 1960's, education in the Bodo medium started spreading to different districts such as Darrang, Kamrup and Lakhimpur. By the year 1973, the medium was introduced in about 1500 primary schools, which covered almost ten educational sub-divisions in the plain districts of Assam, viz, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Rangia, Tezpur, Dhubri, and in 87 middle schools in Kokrajhar and Mangaldai sub-divisions (Memorandum to the Vice-Chancellor, 1973). The venture was set out by District Bodo Sahitya Sabha of the respective districts. The Assam government accepted the Bodo language as the Modern Indian Language (MIL) on 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1973. The first batch of Bodo students educated in Bodo medium school appeared in the High School Leaving Certificate Examination (HSLC) in the year 1976.

The level of political consciousness of the Bodos boosted by the issue of the introduction of Bodo as the medium of instruction also culminated in their movement for a won script of their language. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1971, demanded for introducing the Roman script for the language in place of the existing Assamese script. The Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, however, rejected their demand on the ground that the Roman script was a foreign script and would remove shortly from the country (Narzary, 1993). Replacing the Assamese script by the Roman script became quite a difficult issue for the political leadership of the state. Subsequently, when the Bodo leaders meet Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister, in 1971, she pointed out to the Bodo leaders and advised them to take any script other than the Roman script (Basumatary, 2008). The executive members of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha along with the presence of Bodo Students Union and other teachers' association held on 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1975 at Barama, accepted to embrace Devangari script for the Bodo language for national and wider cultural contacts and integration. Finally, Devanagiri script was adopted by the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha held at Dhing from 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1975. This was followed by a visible concern for getting Bodo language recognized as an official language. Accordingly, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha placed the demand to the State government for giving the status of official language. On 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1985, the Bodo language was recognized as an associate official language and was operational in the Bodo inhabited area of Kokrajhar and Udalguri sub- division.

The linguistic nationalism of the Bodos, thus, began with a remarkable concern for education, considering it to be the effective instrument for socio-economic development of the community located at the fringe of a relatively developed society marked by the domination of a Hindu social system. Undoubtedly, the demands for introduction of Bodo as the medium of instruction and a separate script for the language assumed a sharp political character when such demands were rejected by the dominant political structures. A section of the consolidated linguistic identity, therefore, started a hitherto unknown form of political response resorting to separatism. This first appeared in the form of a demand for Udayachal, a Union Territory for the plain tribes of Assam and

then to a separate state for the Bodos in the form of Bodoland, horizontally dividing the present state of Assam. The separatist movement with its substantially strong popular support base finally culminated in a violent political movement creating space for armed militancy. The phase of militancy, however, came to an end with the signing of the Memorandum of settlement between Union Government, State Government, and one of the militant organizations, the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), on 10 February 2003. The peace negotiation resulted in formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003, an autonomous body under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. As a part of the same peace negotiation, the Bodo language was included in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution by the Ninety-Second Amendment Act of 2003. The formation of the BTC was followed by establishment of the Central Institute of Technology (CIT) at Kokrajhar in 2006, Bineswar Brahma Engineering College in 2008 at Kokrajhar, and the Bodoland University, again at Kokrajhar, in 2009. All such institutions of technical and higher education were part of the peace negotiations between the leadership of the Bodo movement and the government, both at the centre and the state.

### **Conclusion**

Bodo as a distinct social category and the identity movement launched by the community to contest prolonged socio-economic deprivation, especially the violent phase of the movement, has drawn substantial academic attention. However, their concern for education has generally been overshadowed by the analysis of other political factors responsible for the outbreak of what has commonly been perceived as “Bodo insurgency” leading to the peace negotiation followed by constitutional amendment to provide them autonomy. With the beginning of colonialism, the colonial administration made some faint efforts to provide education to the Bodos who were historically deprived of education. The pace of expansion was accelerated by the missionaries, nevertheless, the ethos was conversion of the Hinduised Bodos to Christianity. Pointing out the educational scenario of the Bodos during the pre-colonial era, and the efforts made by the colonial administration followed by the initiatives of the missionaries, this paper has emphasized the historical role played by the Brahma Movement propounded by Kalicharan Brahma. With the basic tenants of a historical social reformist movement, the Brahma Movement provided an alternative paradigm of socio-economic as well as educational development of the Bodos on the one hand, and contested the growing influences of Christianity in the Bodo society on the other. It was instrumental in the historical process of emergence, growth and consolidation of the Bodo as a distinct socio-political identity to assert itself refuting the peripheral position given to it by the caste Hindu Assamese society. In the entire complex sociological context, as it has been argued in the paper, expansion of education, though it remained extremely limited, played a historical role.

Irrefutable aspirations for modern education resulted in expansion of limited educational infrastructure, especially of schools, in the Bodo dominated areas during the post-

colonial phase. The medium of instruction in the schools, nevertheless, restricted enrolment of the common Bodo students. Consequently, the literacy rate, especially of the women, remained pathetic during the decades immediately after independence, as the caste Hindu Assamese hegemony on the power relations constrained the vision of the power elites. The Bodo identity movement, therefore, was consolidated with the demand for introduction of Bodo as the medium of instruction at the school level. Though the demand was considered favourably, the question of a separate script for Bodo language was a logical consequence of the process. Finally, this vital issue was resolved while the Bodo civil society decided to accept the Devangari script.

In the meantime, the linguistic nationalism of the Bodos, which emanated from the Brahma Movement inspired by a visible concern for modern education and reinforced by the questions of medium of instruction and script, assumed a discernible political character. The leadership of the reconstructed “Bodo Movement” now started contesting the prevailing political hegemony of the caste Hindu Assamese leadership. Thus, the movement adopted an agenda for a separate “Bodoland”, and it soon assumed a violent character providing political space for insurgency. Finally, the peace negotiations initiated by the Indian state culminated in making provisions for accommodating the political aspirations of the Bodos, and accordingly, the Constitution was amended. The Bodo Land Territorial Council was formed under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution to fulfil the basic aspirations of the Bodos ensuring their socio-economic and educational development.

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