

Contributions of Missionaries and Linguistic Studies to the Bodo Language: A Scholarly Overview (Prior to the Establishment of Bodo Sahitya Sabha on 16 November 1952)

Dr. Bridul Basumatary

Assistant Professor, Department of Bodo, Dibrugarh University

Abstract

The Bodo people, one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Assam, have a rich cultural and linguistic heritage. This paper examines the contributions of missionaries and scholars to the development and preservation of the Bodo language prior to the establishment of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha on 16 November, 1952. It reviews early linguistic studies, beginning with the first lexicon of the Mech dialect published in 1839 by Dr. Archibald Campbell. Subsequent works, including those by B.H. Hodgson, Reverend Sidney Endle, and L.O. Skrefsrud, provided foundational grammatical and lexicographic insights into Bodo. Missionary efforts also played a key role in the promotion of literacy, notably through publications such as A.F. Williams' "A Mech (Bodo) Reader for the Beginner" (1920) and the translation of Christian hymns and the Bible into Bodo. These scholarly and missionary efforts significantly contributed to the documentation and standardization of the Bodo language, preserving its rich oral traditions and facilitating its transition to written form. The article highlights the critical role these contributions played in shaping the linguistic landscape of Bodo prior to its institutionalization in the 20th century.

Keywords: Bodo language 1, Linguistic Studies 2, Missionaries 3, Documentation 4, Lexicon 5, Grammar 6, Oral Traditions 7, Cultural Preservation 8.

Research Methodology

The research methodology in this paper is primarily qualitative and historical in nature. The author utilizes an extensive review of historical documents, academic publications, and missionary contributions to examine the development of the Bodo language. The methodology includes Documentary Analysis, Comparative Analysis, and Historical Contextualization.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the paper are:

- To Examine Early Contributions to Bodo Linguistics.
- To Analyze the Role of Missionaries in Language Standardization.
- To Highlight the Importance of Lexical and Grammatical Works.

- To Document the Preservation of Bodo Oral Traditions.
- To Evaluate the Impact of Early Language Efforts on the Bodo Community.
- To Provide an Overview of Bodo Language Preservation Efforts.

Introduction

The Bodo people, among the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Assam, possess a distinct cultural and ethnic identity as part of the Bodo Kachari group, which includes several other indigenous communities within the region. This ethnic group of Mongoloid origin maintains a unique linguistic and literary heritage that reflects its cultural history and identity. Traditionally, the Bodo community has been primarily engaged in agriculture, though they have diversified into other professions in recent years. Known for vibrant festivals such as Bwisagu, a celebration marking the onset of spring, and distinctive traditional dance forms, the Bodos preserve a rich cultural presence in northeastern India. The Bodo language, a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family, is primarily spoken across the northeastern Indian states of Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and extends into regions of Nepal and Bangladesh. Recognized as one of India's 22 scheduled languages, Bodo holds official language status in Assam. While currently written in the Devanagari script, Bodo has historically employed Roman, Bengali, and Assamese scripts. As a Tibeto-Burman language, Bodo has attracted scholarly attention since the early 19th century. This paper reviews early efforts in Bodo language documentation, preservation, and linguistic analysis prior to the establishment of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha on 16 November, 1952, highlighting the critical contributions of scholars and missionaries. These studies provided valuable insights into Bodo grammar, lexicon, and oral traditions, significantly contributing to the preservation and standardization of the Bodo language and enhancing its cultural heritage.

Discussion

Early Documentation and Lexicographic Studies: The initial efforts to document the Bodo language began in 1839, when Dr. Archibald Campbell published *“Note on Mechis, Together with a Small Vocabulary of the Language”*, introducing an early lexicon for the Mech dialect, a sub-group within the Bodo-Kachari linguistic family. Published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society, Campbell's work offered insights into the linguistic structure of the Bodo language, spurring scholarly interest in its study. In 1847, B.H. Hodgson, a British civil servant and linguist, expanded upon earlier works with *“Essay the First: On Koch, Bodo, and Dhimal Tribes”*, highlighting the ethno-linguistic diversity of the region. Hodgson's comparative study underscored both the similarities and distinctions between Bodo and other Tibeto-Burman languages, laying a foundation for more detailed grammatical research.

Grammatical and Linguistic Studies: Reverend Sidney Endle's *“Outline Grammar of the Kachari (Bara) Language (1884)”* was the first comprehensive examination of Bodo grammar. Based on his experiences as a missionary among the Kachari people, Endle documented the Syntax, Morphology, and Phonetics of Bodo, providing a crucial foundation for understanding its grammatical structure.

In 1887, J. Avery's *“Short Grammar of Hills & Plains Kachari”*, published in the Journal of the American Oriental Society, further advanced the study of Bodo linguistics by examining linguistic variations among Kachari speakers in different geographic regions. This Bodo, demonstrating how regional influences contributed to linguistic evolution and helping to inform future standardization efforts.

L.O. Skrefsrud's "*A Short Grammar of the Mech or Boro Language (1889)*" refined the analysis of Bodo grammar by focusing on syntax and morphology, identifying linguistic features common to Bodo dialects. Skrefsrud's work provided essential resources for missionaries and scholars alike in their efforts to understand and document the language.

Preservation of Oral Traditions and Cultural Documentation: Linguistic studies of Bodo also encompassed efforts to preserve oral traditions and document cultural expressions. In 1895, J.D. Anderson published "*A Collection of Kachari Folk-Tales and Rhymes*", marking a significant shift towards safeguarding Bodo folklore and oral traditions. Anderson's work captured cultural narratives and poetry, adding literary depth to the Bodo language.

In 1909, G.A. Grierson's "*Linguistic Survey of India (Vol. III, TB Family, Part II: Specimens of the Bodo, Naga, and Kachin Groups)*" provided a comparative analysis situating Bodo within the broader Tibeto-Burman language family. Grierson's survey was a landmark reference for Bodo linguistics, offering insights essential to future research.

Missionary Contributions to Literacy and Written Tradition: Missionaries were pivotal in promoting Bodo literacy and the development of its written form. In 1920, A.F. Williams of the Church of Scotland published "*A Mech (Bodo) Reader for the Beginner*". This book is published in the Devanagari script to support literacy among Bodo speakers. This foundational reader contributed to the standardization of the Bodo language and its accessibility to a wider audience. Expanding his contributions, Williams published "*Dhwrwm Sannaini Mala*", in 1930 which is a collection of Christian hymns in Bodo language, further strengthening the written tradition by introducing religious texts.

In 1942, Reverend Maguram Mosahari completed one of the earliest Bible translations into Bodo language with "*Baibelni Solo*". This work was instrumental in encouraging literacy and fostering a literary tradition in the language, establishing a bridge between oral and written forms within the Bodo community.

Conclusion:

The scholars and missionary efforts to document, preserve, and develop the Bodo language prior to the founding of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha reflect a profound commitment to sustaining Bodo linguistic and cultural heritage. The contributions of early vocabularies, grammars, and cultural documentations have played a central role in preserving the language. These foundational studies have enabled the Bodo language to thrive, paving the way for a vibrant contemporary linguistic community.

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