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THE BORO (BODO) LANGUAGE MOVEMENT: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

BIJOY K DAIMARY

Abstract:

Human beings, alongside their development, create medium of communication by which the members of the group exchange their thoughts and ideas. Every group has a medium of intra-communication of its own. The more organized the groups are, the more developed their means of communications. As the groups grow in their knowledge, art, trade and social values, languages become more and more important and useful means of communication. It is through language that human society is organized and engages in productive activities. The need of communication between different ethnic communities and organizations, for productive activities or otherwise, forces the human organizations to create new languages. In the process, better and higher activities have come to being in the modern world. Languages have thus become indispensable and integral part of the human civilization, without which unified social action has become impossible.

KEYWORDS:

BODO , Language Movement , Intra-communication , Human Society .

INTRODUCTION

Language however has not remained confined to its original structure, but has overgrown to become emotive reflection and cultural heritage of the group. It has emerged not only as a means of communication but also as a cultural bond and unifying force of a group. Once subjective self-consciousness is attained through modernization, language becomes the vital symbol of consciousness and communal solidarity of the community. Language is also related to social and political power. The status of a particular language in the educational system or in the offices of the administration defines the political and social position of that community.

Language, as a powerful mobilizing symbol plays a major role in the nationality formation of a community. For an ethnic community attaining subjective self-consciousness, language has often been the vital force, mobilizing the community into communal solidarity. It plays different roles under different situations, particularly, in a multiethnic nation like India, where a tendency of dual nationalism, one at national and the other at the regional linguistic level are present. In such situations, the language of a dominant ethnic community is often super-imposed, undermining the languages of the ethnic minorities, resulting into resistance and assertive movements by those communities. In the regional level, like in the case of the Assamese, the language has been the prime-mover of their nationality formation, often even attempting to impose it on other ethnic communities of the province. Multilingual ethnic communities sometimes organize themselves into a nationality through the use of a link-language. The multilingual Nagas, identifying themselves as one nationality is the best example of the region. But the Punjabis, despite having a common language, broke themselves up into three cultural groups. Marxist scholars emphasise on the need of having a community language for nationality formation. But in reality, this is not always true.

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The purpose of community language can largely be served by wide-spread multilingualism or by the use of a link-language. Switzerland, the nation-state of multilingual Jews, the United State of America, with number of ethnic groups; or in that case, India, with one link-language for multilingual nationalities, are a few of such examples.

In the case of the Boros too, language has been the strongest identity bond and the single-most factor of nationality formation. It not only survived the bruises of centuries of assimilation, but also became the life-line of Boro nationality consciousness. In fact, the very dawn of Boro nationality consciousness broke with Boro intellectuals' strive to preserve and promote their culture, particularly the language. The literary works of the early 1920s were the pioneering steps towards this direction. Besides enriching the language, the literary works of this period became instrumental in mobilizing the Boros into consciousness and communal solidarity. Even at this stage of awakening, the Boro writers said to have laid emphasis of the need of having a "national literature" of their own. In the post-Independence Boro search for identity, language played even a greater role. When the politics of this community was in a state of doldrums, it was the language that brought the Boros together to struggle for the status of their language in the educational institutions, and later on, in the offices of the State. In fact, it was the quest for linguistic identity that prepared the ground for the political movements of the later years.

FORMATION AND ROLE OF THE BODO SAHITYA SABHA:

The history of an organized Boro language movement began with the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) a literary organization, on 16th November, 1952, at Kokrajhar. The convention, somewhat pan-Boro in character, was attended by the representatives of Boros living in Nepal, Bhutan and also by the delegates of closely allied Tripuri and Dimasa tribes of Tripura and North Cachar respectively. Late Joybhadra Hagzer of Dimasa community was elected the first president of the Sabha. The convention, besides other, resolved to use Assamese as the script for the Boro language provisionally, till it was decided otherwise by the Sabha. The formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha was the ultimate outcome of two years' hectic mobilization undertaken by the Boro intellectuals of Dhubri, the headquarters of Goalpara district. In the 1950s, a sizeable number of English educated Boros, many of whom were engaged in Government services, lived in Dhubri. Mr. Modaram Brahma and Gaurikanta Brahma, who later on became re-known literary figures of this community, were a few among them. They were touched and inspired by the reforming spirit of the time, particularly, when they were so close to Bengal, the epicenter of reformation. The ongoing intellectual awakening make them realize the importance of the language and the role played by it in bringing renaissance in the community or nation. This realization prompted them to form a precursor literary organization known as the 'Boro Literary Club' on 28th September, 1950. The new organization began its activities with Late Indramohan Brahma and Mr. Rajendra Nath Brahma as its president and secretary respectively. The objective of this budding Literary Club was to inculcate nationality consciousness among the Boro youths of the township, through their literary and social activities. However, they soon realized that confining the activities of the Literary Club within Dhubri alone would not serve the purpose of the community. They therefore decided to form a larger literary organization which would include all the Boros of Assam and elsewhere. With this objective in mind, the leaders of the Literary Club organized a convention at Korajhar on 26th September, 1952. Their call received overwhelming response from the Boros all over the country. In the meantime, another socio-cultural organization Called Boroni Onsai Afat had come into being under the leadership of Mr. Samar Brahma Choudhary and Mr. Prosenjit Brahma. The leaderships of this organization also attended the convention. The convention resolved to form a literary organization for the Boro community as a whole. For this purpose, the convention formed a 'Preparatory Committee' with the responsibility of looking into the related matters. Mr. Jogendra Basumatari was made the Chairman of the committee. The "Preparatory Committee", having decided to go ahead with the resolution of the convention, constituted a 'Reception Committee' on 7th October, 1952, with entrusted responsibility of making the necessary arrangements for the proposed meeting. The Reception Committee scheduled the proposed convention on the 15th and 16th November, 1952. The convention thus held, assumed somewhat pan-Boro in character, having had delegates not only from different parts of Assam but also from Tripura, West Bengal, Nepal and even from Bhutan. The convention was chaired by Mr. Dharanidhar Basumatari M. L. A., and also was attended by Rupnath Brahma, the 'grand old-man' of this community. As was the desire of the Boro intellectuals, on the second day of the convention, that is, on 16th November, 1952, the 'Bodo Sahitya Sabha' was formed. Initially, the office of the Sahitya Sabha was managed by its President Mr. Joybhadra Hagzer alone. Other officials were inducted only in the Haflon conference, held on 12th and 13th January, 1953. In this conference, Mr. Sonaram Thousen of the Dimasa community was selected as the General Secretary, while

Mr. Jogendra Basumatari as the Joint Secretary of the organization. Thus, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, a literary organization of the Boros came into existence.

At this stage, the prime concern of the Sabha was to move the government for the introduction of the Boro language as the medium of instruction in the primary schools of the Boro majority areas of Assam. The BSS passed a resolution to this effect and resolved to take up the matter with the State Government. The first memorandum was submitted by the Sabha on 26th February, 1953, to the then Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi. The two men delegation of Chatish Chandra Basumatari and Birendra Brahma duly apprised BSS desire to the Chief Minister. There was however no immediate response from the Government. The demand was reiterated in the 954 annual conference of the Sabha, held at Mahakaluri, West Bengal. Between the years of 1955 and 1962, the BSS appears to have maintained low profile. No record, referring to its demand for Boro medium may be found during this period of seven years.

The Assamese language movement of 1960, seeking introduction of Assamese as the official language of the state appeared to have given a new lease of life to the BSS. The effect of the Assamese language movement was quick and decisive on the hill tribes of then Assam. The non-Assamese communities of Assam plains also expressed their strong indignation by partaking in the convention of All Assam Non-Assamese Language Conference at Silchar, on July 2, 1960. The Conference passed a resolution registering its strong opposition to the language policy of the Assam Government. The resolution reads;

The Conference of the Non-Assamese speaking people of Assam strongly
Oppose the move to impose Assamese as the official language for the
State of Assam and that the status quo based on intrinsically multilingual
Character of the state must be maintained for the peace and security of
eastern region of India.

Attended by the representatives of different tribes and communities of both hills and plains, this conference manifested the polarization of Assam population on ethnic line. In reaction to the Assamese language policy, the hill tribes demanded English as their official language, the people of Cachar demanded Bengali for their district and the Boros demanded Hindi as the official language for the whole state of Assam. The repercussion of the Assamese Language movement thus threatened the very integrity of the state itself. Though the non-Assamese communities of Assam plains could not exploit the situation to their advantage, the fall-out of the language movement created a wide-spread fear of Assamese domination among the communities... a fear that became one of the main subjective factors of their search for separate identities.

The Assamese language movement appeared to have awakened the BSS from its dormancy, provoking it to restart its language movement afresh. During seven years of Sahitya Sabha's inactivity, the language issue was kept alive by a section of Boro intellectuals, especially, by the Boro student and social workers of Shillong. Hard-pressed by the public opinion, the Sahitya Sabha submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister titling 'Scheme for the Introduction of the Bodo Language in the Schools Situated in the Bodo Speaking Areas.' This memorandum gave a detail scheme prepared on the basis of population in various districts of Assam. The memorandum also furnished a detail scheme relating to the appointment of teachers, formation of the Text Book Committees and also advised the Government to select the schools having 20 per cent Bodo students in it. The BSS however could not remain dormant for too long. The occasion came on the 16th November, 1962, when thousands of men and women gathered at Kokrajhar to commemorate the birth day of the Sabha. The crowd raised slogans in unison and unceasingly, demanding introduction of their language in the schools of majority Boro populated areas. The magnitude and the spirit of the gathering might have been a booster to the morale of the Sahitya Sabha. It was at this juncture of time that a favourable development had taken place. Bimala Prosad Chaliha, who was not opposed to the Boro cause, became the Chief Minister of the State. He did not reject the Boro demand forthwith but constituted a 'Study Committee' with delegated power of looking into the feasibility of the Boro demand, as well as, making necessary recommendations. The Study Committee, headed by the Forest Minister, Rupnath Brahma, submitted its report in February, 1963, in favour of the Boros. On the recommendation of the Study Committee, the Chief Minister, in a ceremonial function, held at Kokrajhar on May 18, 1963, announced Government's decision to introduce Boro language as the medium of instruction in the Primary level of the Kokrajhar Higher Secondary School. This decision of the Government was later on extended to the other Boro areas where population factor was found feasible. Introduction of Boro language as the medium of instruction was a significant achievement for the Boros. Particularly, in the prevailing Assam situation, where fear of Assamese domination had become apparent in the minds of the non-Assamese population of

the state.

Initially, Boro medium was introduced only in the Primary level, after which, the Boro medium students were expected to switch over to Assamese medium in the Secondary stage. The State Government was bound by its responsibility to supply special kind of text books to those students. But it failed to produce such text books within speculated time. This was what the BSS was perhaps looking for. It responded to the situation by launching an agitation demanding extension of Boro medium into the Secondary stage. The State Government, being short of its own commitment, gave in to the Boro agitation launched from February 28 to March 11, 1967. The Government constituted an 'Expert Committee' under the chairmanship of the Education Minister, the Additional D.P.I., the Joint D.P.I. (Plains Tribal Education), the D.D.P.I. Mr. B.R. Kachari and Mr. B N Brahma, the Assistant Inspector of Schools (Plains tribal Education) as its General Secretary, to examine the feasibility of the demand. They were assisted by three representatives from the Boro and other tribal organizations, one representative from the Finance Department and by the Secretary, Board of Secondary Education, Assam. The Expert Committee was to make suggestions and recommendation on the following points; (a) to draw up a phased programme for the up-gradation of Boro medium to the Secondary Stage of Education, (b) to recommend the placing of regional language, Hindi and English in the curriculum, to recommend principles for selecting schools for introducing of Boro medium, (c) to recommend about the preparation of the text books and other ancillary literatures and (d) to recommend about the inspection and supervision of the schools. In the report, the Expert Committee, apart from other things, recommended up-gradation of Boro medium to the Secondary stage. The report of the Expert Committee received State Government's consent and thereafter, in a ceremonial gathering at Kokrajhar on September 23, 1968, the Chairman of the Expert Committee himself in a ceremonial gathering at Kokrajhar announced Governments' decision to up-grade Boro medium upto Class VII of the Secondary level. The problem of up-gradation came up once again in 1972, when Boro medium students passed Class VII and their admission to the next higher class was due. Warranted by the situation, the BSS once again resorted to agitation in 1973. In the same year, the State Government yielded to the BSS demand. The introduction and gradual up-gradation appeared to have been a significant achievement for the Boros so far as their move for linguistic identity was concerned. It not only enriched the language but enabled the Boro students to have education in their mother tongue, without having to learn in Assamese which the Boro intellectuals considered as an imposition on them. The first batch of the Boro medium students ultimately appeared the HSLC examination in 1976.

Another development of significant importance, in the history of Boro language movement was the recognition of Boro as one of the Major Indian Languages by the Gauhati University in 1977. Boro quest for linguistic identity made yet another score, when in 1985, hard pressed by the All Bodo Students' Union, granted Boro language the status of an Associate Official Language of the state. Records show that towards the end of the 80s and in the beginning of the 90s of the 20th century, the Sahitya Sabha maintained low profile, adopting Luke-warm policies. Recognition of Boro as an Associate Official Language of the State had been the ultimate result of prolonged agitation of the Students' Union alone.

Within a period of three decades, the Boros thus made a remarkable headway in their search for linguistic identity. Schools imparting education in their mother tongue, giving recognition to Boro as the Major Indian Language or granting the status of an Associate State Official Language to their language, unmistakably put the Boros in an advantageous position, in their struggle for a separate identity. They became more or less independent of the Assamese in educational matters. The only Assamese lineage prevailing was perhaps the script which the Boros had hitherto been using for their language. However, going by the trend of Boro nationality formation, it was almost evident that a move for an alternative script, replacing the Assamese, was not too far to come.

Movement for the Roman Script:

Adoption of Assamese script was debated among the members of the Sahitya Sabha and therefore, its use was made provisional, till a more suitable script was found and agreed upon. Hence, since the inception, the BSS said to have been examining the suitability of different scripts for the Boro language.

The chapter of script controversy was reopened by the Boro students and social workers of Shillong. In the 1960s, there had been a popular feeling among the Boros of Shillong, favouring adoption of Roman script for their language. With the patronage of the leading personalities like P C Brahma, Moniram Mosahari, U C Brahma, J K Rajkumar and J B Hagzer, their feeling was soon transformed into an aspiration of the community. Having established considerable ground, the student leaders and the social workers raised the Roman script issue in the BSS conference of 1964. Thereafter, the script issue was mounted year after year in the annual conferences, till the Sahitya Sabha agreed to take it up officially. Once the Roman

script issue was taken up officially, the Shitya Sabha formed expert committees to examine the feasibilities of the script for the Boro language. The final report was then placed in the Central Executive Committee Meeting of the Sahitya Sabha, held on 22nd December, 1970. The Executive Committee, in its turn resolved to adopt and introduce the Roman script in the Boro medium schools of the state from the academic session of 1972. But the Sabha could not execute its decision in the year 1972 due to its engagement in other problems of serious nature.

The year of 1974 has considerable significance in the history of the Boro movement for linguistic identity. In this year, the B.S.S., in its annual conference held at Khelmati of Darrang district resolved to implement the Roman script from the academic session of 1974. The Resolution 11 containing Sabha's decision reads;

This 15th Annual Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha ratifies the Resolution No. 7 of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha held at Salbari in the month of March, 1973 an unanimously has decided to implement the Bodo Primer Bithorai In Roman Script in Class I of Bodo Medium Primary Schools from the academic year of 1974.

Accordingly, the B.S.S. on the 12th of April 1974, introduced the Bodo Primer Bithorai (Balabse), written in Roman script in the Class I of the Primary Schools. The same day, in an inaugural ceremony, the Sabha declared Roman as the common script for the Boro language and literature through out Assam and elsewhere. It also appealed to all the Boro medium teachers to abide by the decision of the Sabha. The Sahitya Sabha, through a circular issued on the 1st April, 1974, requested all the primary units of the BSS to organize inaugural ceremonies in their respective areas on 22nd April, 1974, distribute the Bodo Primer Bithorai and start teaching it in the schools from the same day.

Introduction of the Roman script without the prior permission of the concerned authorities brought the State Government to the scene. The Government, as a mark of disapproval, withheld payment of salaries to the Boro Medium Primary School teachers of those schools where the Roman script was found introduced. Orders were also issued for the stoppage of grant-in-aid to those schools. Consequently, payment of salaries and disbursement of grant-in-aid to those schools were stopped from June 1974. Assam Government's decision to withheld payment of salaries to the Boro medium teachers and stoppage of grant-in-aid to Boro medium schools, forced the Sabha to take a tougher stand. Accordingly, the first phase of agitation was launched from the 12th September 1974, followed by second and third phase till 28th December, 1974. Several rounds of talks were held between the Sabha and the state government but failed to find an amicable solution to the problem. Ultimately, the state government shifted the responsibility to the Centre on the ground of education being a concurrent subject.

As the hope of solving the script issue at the state level was fast disappearing, the B.S.S. had no other option but to turn to the Centre for solution. But the Sabha soon discovered that the Centre too was equally unrelenting. It already had a priory determined proposal of sanctioning Devanagari script for the Boros. The proposal was communicated to the B.S.S. on several occasions, once through Mr. Dharanidhar Basumatari, the lone M.P. of this community and the other, through the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself. Hence, the talks with the Centre were equally disappointing, without bringing-forth the result, desired by the B.S.S. The Sabha now found itself between two unyielding Governments; the State which was determined to see Boro continuing with the Assamese script and the Centre, championing national integrity by imposing Devanagari on them. Finally, the B.S.S. representatives, Ramdas Basumatari and Thaneshwar Boro gave in to the Centre on 9th April, 1975. The two representatives, during their stay in New Delhi, agreed to accept the Devanagari script for the Boros. They prepared a scheme for the introduction of the Devanagari script and submitted to the Central Government. It is said that the two representatives had no prior permission of the B.S.S. to prepare the 'Proposal and Scheme', nor they were authorized to accept the Devanagari script on behalf of the Sabha. The Devanagari was officially adopted by the Sahitya Sabha in its 16th annual conference at Dhing on April 25, 1975. With this, the Boro movement for the Roman script came to an abrupt end.

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha's decision to adopt the Devanagari script created wide-spread reaction among the Boros. Particularly, the younger members of the Sabha strongly opposed it. The Dhing conference, where the B.S.S officially accepted the Devanagari script, witnessed uproar of opposition, the younger members even attempting to assault the two representatives physically. Finally, a compromise was arrived at on one condition that the use of the Devanagari script would be provisional and thus, leaving a possibility of reviving the script issue in future.

Articles and letters, decrying Sabha's decision appeared in different news papers, mostly

accusing the two representatives for their arbitrary action. A section of the Assamese intellectuals expressed their opposition to the acceptance of the Devanagari, along with an advice of continuing with the Assamese script. The opposing members of the B.S.S. however did not make an organized attempt to undo the decision of the Sabha. At this juncture of time, the question before the B.S.S. as a whole was perhaps to make a better choice between the two scripts, rather than engaging themselves in infighting and further decimation. The B.S.S. chose the Devanagari for the obvious reason of their desire to free themselves from the Assamese linguistic nationalism. Whatever was the reason, the B.S.S. decided to go ahead with the implementation of the Devanagari script, which, according to the Centre was “not estranged from the mainstream of education.”

REASONS BEHIND THE COMPROMISE:

Critics analyzed the failure of the Roman script movement from various angles. The eyes of the critics first fell on the B.S.S. leaderships themselves. Scores of critical write-ups against the B.S.S. leaderships, particularly, against the two men delegation who signed the agreement with the Centre, appeared. In the opinion of the critics, Boros were the victims of their leaders themselves. In their observation, the B.S.S. leaders lacked strong determination and steadfastness, which would otherwise pull them even through the most severe situation.

Opposition of a large section of the Assamese intellectuals appeared to have been a severe blow to the Boro script movement. Many Assamese intellectuals put separatist colour to it and suspected foreign hands behind it. For instance, a column in the Saptahik Nilachal described the movement as “a manifestation of strong anti-Assamese feeling” and related it to the 'Udayachal' demand of the Plains Tribals Council of Assam, terming them as “the two sides of a coin.” He also pulled strings attempting to show involvement of the missionaries in the Movement. Another eminent scholar of the state Mr. Mohendra Bora concluded his booklet, Ahomor Janajatyah Bahar Lipi (Script for the Tribal Languages of Assam), with a suggestion of continuing with the Assamese script “without politicalising the issue.” There were still other Assamese intellectuals who were even opposed to the introduction of the Devanagari script. For instance, the Asom Sahitya Sabha, which is the main platform of the Assamese intelligentsia itself refused to give recognition to the B.S.S. decision of accepting the Devanagari script. In Baganpara, the School Inspector, H Ahmed was found distributing Boro text books written in Assamese script, even long after the issue of Government order for replacement. Besides, the Assamese teachers of the Baganpara Primary School protested the use of Devanagari script and threatened to stop the payment salaries to the Boro teachers. Such an opposition of the Assamese intellectuals might have influenced the decision of the State Government.

The State and the Central Governments played the roles of their choices. The state Government preferred playing safe by throwing the ball into the court of the Centre. Though education is a state subject, the Assam Government, in sheer dereliction of its Constitutional responsibility, referred the matter to the Centre. Therefore, the Chief Minister Sarat Chandra Sinha, despite his laud proclamation of guardianship over the state education, waited for the final direction of the Centre. The attitude of the central Government was equally disappointing for the Boros. Like the Assam Government, the Centre too was more concerned with the expansion of the national culture by imposing Devanagari script on them. It was the pressure of the Central Government that ultimately compelled the B.S.S. to give in. Once officially adopted, introduction of the Devanagari script in the Boro medium schools began.

Declaration of Boro as a Major Indian Language and an Associate State Official Language:

By the year 1977, the first batch of the Boro medium students' appeared the HSLC examination which ensued yet another problem for the B.S.S. It foresaw the plight of the Boro medium students, having to join the college, without their language being upgraded to the status of the Major Indian Language (MIL), or without the ability of switching over to the Assamese medium as they had no knowledge of that language. Apprehending this situation, the Sahitya Sabha moved the Gauhati University to upgrade Boro to the status of the Major Indian Language. The move of the B.S.S and the Students' Union bore fruit when in May 1977; the Gauhati University announced its decision to recognize Boro as one of the Major India Languages. Recognition of Boro as one of the Major Indian Languages was a significant leap in the Boro struggle for linguistic identity. This declaration ultimately led to the opening of a diploma course in Boro language, in the same University, which was later on, upgraded into a full-fledged department for post-graduate studies in Boro language, in its extended campus at Kokrajhar.

The 'little Boro nationalism' and its search for linguistic identity did not end there. Having gained a convincing foothold in the educational arena, the B.S.S. began clamouring for the recognition of Boro language as the Associate State Official Language. The move officially began with the constitution of the Committee for Bodo Associate Official Language in the B.S.S. annual conference held at Bijni in 1978. The Committee, under the chairmanship of Mr. Ramdas Boro, Convener Mr. Thaneshwar Boro and assisted by three other members, submitted a five point report of feasibilities and recommendations. But in the following years, the Sahitya Sabha itself was found lying dormant, unable to mobilize the masses for the occasion.

However, with the change of leadership in 1982, the All Bodo Students' Union appeared to have regained its lost vigour, strong enough to catalyze the B.S.S. to revive its activities. In fact, after the change of leadership, the Students' Union played the key role in the Boro move for introducing their language as an Associate Official Language of the state. The student body submitted memoranda, gave representations, and in fact, it was the untiring move of the Students' Union that exerted enough pressure on the State Government to declare Boro as the Associate Official Language on April 4, 1985 in the Assembly. Once officially declared by the State Government, the Students' Union and the B.S.S. put pressure for its implementation. It became one of the major issues in the 92 points charter of the Union.

The Boro language movement however went on despite the script debacle. Though the pace might have often been slow and deviant, the original goal of the movement was not sidetracked. The agitating Boro organizations, whichever it was, tagged the language issue along. It was this feature of their movement that brought the Boro language and the community thus far. The Boro language took its last leap on February 10, 2003, when the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) signed an accord with the Centre, whereby inclusion of the Boro language in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution was agreed upon. In the following year, the bill, pertaining to the inclusion of the Boro language into the Eight Schedule of the Constitution received President's consent. This slated the Boro language on a par with other advanced languages of the country. With this, an important chapter in the history of Boro search for an identity came to an end.

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