

The Socio-Economic & Religious Conditions of the Bodos in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract: The Bodos are believed to be the earliest settlers of Assam and of the regions known as the North East India. In ancient periods, the Bodos built powerful kingdoms in different names and in different places in the present North East India including the present north Bengal and Bangladesh. But in the modern period, the Bodos are now represented as the rural community with their modest living on their agricultural produce. Their medieval religious practices are still carried to this day, and during the period of the study that is second half of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century, the modern economic activities could not be seen, they did not have any polity of their own, nor any written character, hence, no written history to reckon with, the social practices were of rudest type. Such a state of things was bound to attract criticism, hatred and belittlement in the hands of other neighbouring communities. The consequence is the wide proselytization to other established religions after giving up their ancestral religion, social practices and their own language, culture and traditions. They were on the brink of losing in oblivion. From this critical juncture, the Bodos were rescued by the efforts of some of their community leaders and reset in the right track again to march ahead. This research study is an attempt to know what actually, were the conditions of society, religion and economic lives of the Bodos during the period of the study. Endeavour is also to highlight the issue for the sake of dissemination across all sections of people.

Keywords: *Bodo, Bathau religion, Brahmadharm, Ek-sarana Nama Dharma, saraniyas, assimilation, proselytization, Brahma Dharma, Social Reformation Movement.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bodos are the branch of the great Indo-Mongoloid people of Assam. They were the first settlers of this region and lived in scattered hamlets in the foothills of Bhutan from the river Sankosh in the west to Sadiya in Assam and also in the west, from Sankosh river to the river Tista in the north eastern Bengal. The other branches of the Bodo race- the Goros of Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya, the Dimasas of Dima Hasao district of Assam and the Tripuras of Tripura are the aboriginal inhabitants whose languages are closely allied to the Bodo speakers of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. They were believed to be from the same stock that in course of time, they got separated from each other and formed the states of their own in different names at different places. The Koch Kings of Cooch Behar, the Tripura Kings, the Dimasa-Kocharis of Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur and the Chutiya Kings of Sadiya were the powerful dynastic rulers who ruled with pride and honour for centuries before they were disintegrated into small principalities only to be taken possession of by the British East India Company in the nineteenth century. In the 19th and early part of 20th century, the Bodos of Brahmaputra valley, one of the branches of the great Bodo race, are now in the precarious conditions, hastened by the situation of dispossession of political, socio-economic powers. In the medieval period, they were deprived of getting themselves educated as the Brahmanical system did not allow any, other than Brahmin, boy to go to Sanskrit Tols. In the modern period, they were deprived of the opportunities to receive education because the most of their people lived in remote villages when the schools were conducted only in the towns, where substantial populations were available for enrolment. There were reports of the non-existence of bazaar or even the small markets, the avenues for economic activities in and around the places of Bodo settlements. Thus, deprived of everything that they required for modernization, they could not but left to their own fate and destiny. The degraded lives and destitute of all modern amenities were the conditions which hastened them to live a wretched life to be hated and pitied by the people of advantages.

They lived on their agricultural produce from their small holdings and their requirements were from hands to mouth. Since there was no market around, the concept of surplus and that of selling the surplus for cash was not the order of the day. Whatever surplus they got from their holdings were given in generous donations to someone poor, or kept in granary for years together, the practice of which they take pride of having vintage rice (unhusked) of seven or eight years. In absence of bazaar or market, they bartered everything they required and cash transaction was rear. At the annual fair of Udalguri in which Bhutiyas from Tawang came down, the little

trade they carried out was on barter system, the traders from the plain Hindu areas came on boats to the villages of the Bodos to exchange articles of high demand amongst the Bodos- the earthen pots, dried fish, salt etc were exchanged with rice (unhusked) at a rate very favourable to the Hindu traders. The clothes they required were produced in their homesteads. They grew cotton which the Bodo women spindled into threads and threads were woven into clothes. The Bodo women were also known for having expertise in rearing of Eri-Moth and for production of Eri clothes which were sold to Marwari merchants for cash. They kept pigs and fowls for their own consumption in their homesteads which was really a unhealthy practice in so far as the urine and animal droppings if exposed to under scorching sun gives a pungent stinging smells not only in the house where they were kept but also in the whole village. What the other Hindu neighbours hated most was the fowls which the Bodo households kept for their own consumption and they also offer the chick lets to their 'Garja' and 'Kherai' offerings. Thus hated by their Hindu neighbours and belittling treatments they got in their hands, the Bodos who gained little awareness tried to escape them by embracing other's Faiths and transforming into other's caste.

In the past under the influence of the Brahmins some sections of the Bodos or Mechs gave up wine and pig and became the followers of the Hindu Gurus who are now called the Saranias. Then, when the British came to occupy Assam in the first part of the 19th Century, another wave of conversion to other religious Faith started- now into Christianity from amongst the Bodos. The work of proselytization by the Christian Missionaries though vigorous in respect of organization and mobilization yet they failed to impress upon the majority Bodo population as the Bodo conversion to Christianity is far from impressive.

Then, here came the Brahma Sect in the first decade of the twentieth century as a counter measure to save the Bodos from conversion to Sarania as well as to Christianity and even to Islam. It was preached by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma who dug out the root cause of all these conversions in some miserable practices such as rearing of pigs and consumption of rice-beer. Hence, he launched the reformation movement along with the preaching of the Brahma Faith. The large chunk of the Bodo populations is now the followers of this Brahma Dharma.

The Bodo tribe is known in different names in different places- in the eastern Assam they are known as the Kacharis, in the Eastern Dwars as Mech or Kacharis and in the Western Dwars in N.E. Bengal the same people are known as Mech only. But, they call themselves The Bodo and in this paper the name 'the Bodo' for them will be used exclusively.

Objective of the Study

It is the objective of this research paper to present a systematic, comprehensive and graphic account of the socio-economic & religious conditions of the Bodos in the early 20th century.

II. METHODOLOGY

The proposed study is obviously a historical one. Accordingly, the work has primarily been based on all the literary texts which included consulting number of written sources and also on the official accounts left by the British administrator. However, a social anthropological approach is also proposed to study it. Accordingly, the work has been based on field investigation for collecting first hand information.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

No serious research based study on the socio-economic & religious conditions of the Bodos in the early 20th century has yet been made by any scholar utilizing all the available sources. But the fact is that some scholars have been brought to light the socio-economic & religious conditions of the Bodos in the early 20th in their respective works. However, still await thorough investigation and treatment within a wide canvas. During the period of study, two categories of the Bodo people could be seen- (i) those who had gained awareness from amongst the Bodos were converted into other religion and (ii) those Bodos who lived in the remote villages remained stick to their ancestral religion, culture and traditions. Their economic activities remained unchanged and economic growth was stagnant and remained so till recent times. But from among themselves, some sections who had gained awareness made efforts to rescue the tribes from missing in oblivion by introducing Socio-Religious Reformation Movement and they became successful in saving the identity of the Bodos. The following headings are the discussions on findings.

Religion

The indigenous religion of the Bodos is the Bathau, an animistic type, which means worship of the Objects of Nature, characterized by magical elements. Smriti Das may be cited here as saying, "some tribes (Includes the Bodos) follow a sort of animistic belief which means the worship of different forces of nature seen through its different manifestations" (Das, 2005:14). The Bodos believe in the basic Conception of FIVE which means five basic elements from which springs up everything- the Earth, the Water, the Air, the Fire and the Space(Sky), the whole human body is consisted of these five elements and hence the basic Principle of the

Bodos is also Five, the Rules of the Bodos is Five and restrictions are also Five (Mosahary, 1986: 49). Because of this, the Siju Plant (*Euphorbia Neriifolia*) with five ridges is installed as the Altar of their Supreme God called 'Bathou' in the north-eastern corner of their courtyard of each and every family. In tribal religion magic dominates the core of the religion. The majority of the Bodo population of the Brahmaputra valley, North Bengal and Nepal still practices the Bathau religion widely. In connection with their religion they observe many rites and ritual alongside the celebration of festivals in the summer and winter solstices of the year. Of course, there is no definite dates and auspicious time for all these observations (Brahma(76), informant, Joymaguri, interviewed on 12/03/2017). The date and occasions are decided according to the needs and situation thus arises like at the outbreak of diseases in epidemic forms. The offerings to 'Garja' (the author of evil) for propitiation and to 'Kherai' (the author of good) as worshipping of their beloved God are the two main rituals that the Bodos observe at least once in every year. The Garja is offered outside homesteads but within the village boundary, sometimes under the shades of a big tree or sometimes near the river bank or bil etc. They offer to their gods, the articles available around them or can be easily procured from their natural surroundings. The observances and celebrations of the rites and rituals are of simple nature and by seeing the articles of offerings one can easily guess how simple the Bodos are, in their thought. They use fleshes of animals as their article of food which they offer them to their own gods, they prepare some kind of spirituous drinks from rice called Zou (Rice-Beer), and this they drink it as well as offer to their gods. That is how the system of worship of the God came to the unsophisticated and simple lives of the Bodos. As Hunter observes in his report, "Their religious belief consists in the worship of two divine being- one the author of good and the other the author of evil. As usual among nearly all hill tribes, their religious rites consist chiefly of the propitiation of the evil spirit by means of sacrifices of fowls" (Hunter, 1982:118).

Ethno historians and the colonial administrators passed many comments and opinions regarding the religious practices of the tribes of entire North East India. They came into contact with them and observed that was going on in the lives of the Bodos which were recorded in their reports with their motives best known to them. The influences of the Hindu neighbours in their religious practices and also in other aspects can be felt through. The issue deserves a separate discussion. Due to prevalence of different Hindu and Buddhist tantric cults the country of Assam was known to the outside world as a land of mysticism and sorcery (Neog, 1998: 91). While citing William Crooks, M. Neog said that there were various types of magic rites among the different tribes of Assam. They attributed every evil; disease or untimely death to numerous spirits and it was up to their medicine men to keep off the spirits and cure the patients. According to him, such animistic beliefs and usages were rife among the uneducated common mass of the plain Hindus too (Neog, 1998: 91).

During the second half of nineteenth century and the first part of twentieth century scanty records in the forms of report, are available and from these reports we get wide variety of information about the Bodos. Another sort of authentic information we can gather is from the local oral traditions and oral history, the most of which are now recorded or written. The Bodos lived amidst nature, in the forests, in the rural areas away from urban lives where the enjoyment of modern amenities was out of question. Their living was from hands to mouth on their modest agricultural produce. Being far away from the influences of the modern civilization they kept themselves aloof from education, nor were there any civilizing agents worked to educate them especially from Indian populations. Rev. Endle observed and commented on the Bodos thus, "In mental and intellectual power they are undoubtedly far below their Hindu neighbours for they possess neither the quickness of apprehension, nor the astonishing power of memory etc characteristic of the higher caste among the Hindus. On the other hand, what they do succeed in mastering, often with much toil and painful effort, they digest and retain with much tenacity" (Endle, 1911 : I). The Bodos for practicing the Bathau Dharma or religion were called 'the Mech' and their religion as 'Mech Dharma' by the Hindu neighbours in derogatory sense (Brahma (Jr), Bang. 1364 :24). But the actual meaning of the term 'Mech', the tribes name is derived from the river name Mechi in present Nepal which has nothing to do with the Sanskrit word 'Mlechcha', which many scholars argue that the term 'Mech' was abbreviated from the Sanskrit word 'Mleccha'. Francis M. Hermann is of the opinion that the name Mech was an original designation and not a derivation of the Sanskrit word Mleccha (Hermanns 1954:116). It is also said that since the Mechs first lived on the bank of river Mechi in Nepal, they derived their name from the Mechi River and become known as Mechi, Mechia or Mechs. This equation of the former with the later is untenable and unacceptable, for both terms have separate meaning and connotation. The term 'Mech' was the earlier name of the Bodo tribe derived from a river name - 'Mechi' as they began their early settlement on the bank of that river. The 'Mleccha' is a Sanskrit term used to denote the non-Aryan people as 'barbaric', 'foreigner' or 'unclean' (Wisdom Library, 14/04/2017), who were actually outside the pale of the Aryan civilization. Now the meaning of these two terms had been equated to mean the people of low caste or outcaste origin. The Bodos, the followers of the Bathou Dharma or the Mech Dharma as the Hindu neighbours called it, were systematically isolated from the larger arena of social intercourse. 'Ye be away unclean, Mech; Ye presence pollute thee'- earlier, the Bodos while approaching the door steps of the Rajduar and Koch-Kalitas, they were treated as the above expression and sometimes even sprinkled with cow dung (Basumatary, 1999:5).

At this treatment the fellow Bodo tribes even prayed before the Altar of the Bathouborai in despair asking remedies from this, but no avail (Brahma (Jr), Bang.-1364 : 8). Belittling treatment meted out by other Hindu communities had been the lot of the Bodos, the feeling of which was so firmly entrenched in the minds of the Bodo people that they were haunted after words 'Mech' or 'Mleccha'. Now, the Bodos had also internalized the meaning of these two terms to be same and derogatory upon which the Bodos also felt themselves humiliated and ashamed of, if, they were called by the term 'Mech'.

The use of this term was to such an extent that even in the official records of the Census office, the Bodos were referred to as 'Mech' or 'Mleccha'. The use of these derogatory terms jointly or separate to address the Bodos encompasses all aspects of interaction between the Bodos and the other neighbouring communities. As has been reported they were not allowed entrance in public places and were denied accommodation in hotels and were forced to sleep on the verandah of the government offices (Brahma (Jr), Bang.-1364 : 9). They were also compelled to eat in separate utensils or in plantain leaves, which after use they had to wash. Besides, the place where they had partaken their food had also to be cleaned and purified with cow dung. The Mechs were not allowed to sit alongside with other communities, but to sit apart at a distance of 10/12 feet, the treatment worse than a dog as the dog is patted and allowed to sit alongside their master (Brahma (Jr), Bang.-1364 : 9). In such a state of isolation from the larger communities, the Bodos, often felt inconveniences and as such they succumbed to the Hinduisation to enable themselves to associate and move with their Hindu neighbours (Brahma (Jr), Bang.-1364 : 11). by whom they were looked down upon as a degraded class so long as they were not converted to. The conversion was lengthy a process which takes years to obtain the status of a complete Hindu. They were required to give up former tribal habits of eating of animal flesh and drinking of spirituous liquor and also to undergo a process of atonement known as 'Prayachitta' in which one has to keep fasting for a few days along with payment of money to one's Hindu Gossain (Mosahary,1986:155). This is also called the 'Jattantor'(Assimilation) which meant the complete transformation from one's caste to another by giving up everything their own religion, traditions, customs, language or the whole Culture. There was vigorous conversions to Neo-Vaishnavism of Sri Sri Sankardeva of Assam called "the Ek Sarana Dharma" from the ranks of the Bodos, Rabhas, Lalungs, Sonowals, Garos etc. In his Namaghosa, Madhavadeva refers to the acceptance of Namadharma by people of Garo, Bhota(Bhutia), Yavana (Muslim), Miri, Asama(Ahom) and Kachari origin, who, till the time of Sankara were outside the pale of Hinduism (Neog, 1998:369). An old work called Amulya-Ratna names together these Bhaktas of Assam- Gavinda (A Garo), Paramananda, a Miri, Narahari, an Ahom, Jayrama, a Bhutiya; Candsai, a muslim; and Bhattadeva, a Brahmin. Candsai (Can Khan) was converted by Sankardeva himself into the faith (Neog, 1998:369). The converts are said to differ from the primitive Mechs only by bathing calling on the name of a guru or spiritual instructor and abstaining from the use of pigs' flesh and liquor (Hunter, 1982:118). The other kind of conversion was simply taking Sarana, the complete surrender or refuge under Hindu Gossains who were allowed some concessions in matters of eating and drinking, the 'Madahis' (the Drunkards) and 'Barahis' (the eaters of pork) are examples. In the Eastern Dwaras, where the Bodos were in majority, they are fast becoming Hinduised and converts seem to have little difficulty in being accepted as brethren among the Rajbansis and mongrel Hindus. The Mechs who adopt Hindu customs are called Saranias, but the change does not seem to be very extensive (Hunter, 1982:118).

In the most recent time, it is reported that under the leadership of Mr. Jagot Chandra Maujadar of 4th Kanda Sidli, some leading members of the Bodo society, Khamsali Maharar (Road maharar) of Patgaon, Kalicharan Pandit of Banugaon, Sanibar Bastom, the son of Gundra Boro and Sikhiram Member of Putimari and Ruparam Ojha, son of Onaram Boro of Bansigaon had already decided to become Sarania under the Guru Ananta Narayan Dev Goswami of Alibari of Baithamari in exchange for rupees six thousand only. On certain appointed date and time he came and gave *Sarana* (not diksha) to all of them and thenceforth, they became Sarania (Brahma(Jr), Bang.-1364: 13).They, later on, tried hard to attract the other Bodo people from their locality to bring them into their fold.

The Hindus looked down upon the Bodos probably because the Bodos used every kinds of animal flesh, the fact which can be confirmed from the report of Hunter, the colonial administrator, as such, "The Cacharis have no scruples in the matter of diet; they eat almost any animal food and are particularly partial to pork. The only flesh of which they will not partake is that of the cow, a prejudice imbibed from contact with Hindus" (Hunter, 1982:118). He came across some people who always hover over intoxication and hence avoids the cleanly practice of taking bath and might have observed the eating of every kinds of animal foods – the flesh of rat, mongoose, hare, deer, hog, fowl and some insects- Monster Bucks, some kind of grasshopper found in ripe paddy, Crickets and what not. To quote Hunter as saying, "they are far from cleanly in their habits; and as might be expected from their indiscriminate use of almost any description of animal food, however, disgusting and their neglect of bathing, they are almost universally affected with some sort of skin disease" (Hunter, 1982:118). The Bodos lived amidst nature with full of grown up shady trees, bushes and shrubs that prevented sunshine to reach the earth, because of which soil remained damp throughout the year coupled with soiled by animal dung and stinging smells from hog sheds added the clumsy village scenario. Hunter observes,

“A Kachari village usually abounds in domestic live-stocks of various kinds, e.g. ducks, fowls, goats, pigs, cattle etc. with the abundance of live-stock, especially hogs, reared and kept by the Kacharis, it need hardly be said that the villages can scarcely be described as being cleanly; though.....separate buildings being provided for the pigs, goats etc at an appreciable distance from the family dwelling house” (Endle, 1911: 12). The people are dirty in their habits and extremely unsophisticated (Allen, 1905: 47).

This state of affairs continued unabated till the British came to this land and worked among the Bodos to educate them. We cannot deny this fact, as the available evidence proved it that the first Bodo to gain access in modern education, as per report available with us was ‘Aphinta’ (Mosahary 1986:169) from a village called Jhargaon in North Kamrup who got opportunity to join the Missionary School in 1846 at Gauhati conducted by the American Baptist Mission (Mosahary 1986:169). And the like Missionary workers namely Rev. Sydney Endle who worked closely with Bodos in Udalguri areas of the then Darrang district and established schools and also got the opportunities to establish his first Christian Church in Bengbari. JD Anderson’s observation on Rev. Endle is thus, “but his chief pride was in the church he built at Bengbari, to his great joy, was consecrated by Bishop Milman in person. Under its thatched roof has now been placed a tablet to the memory of its founder” (Anderson, 1911: XIV).

The waves of conversion to Christianity from among the Bodos, were started by different Mission Societies from the first half of the 19th century AD. American Baptist Mission with its head quarters at Gauhati was the first mission society to evangelize the Bodos of Assam (Mosahary 1986:169). Rev. Barker soon after he had established the Mission Centre at Gauhati in 1843, opened a school boarding house in which a number of Bodo Students were accommodated. In 1846, a twelve year old boy named ‘Aphinta’ from Jhargaon village of north Kamrup joined the school and in 1849 he was baptized at Gauhati to become the recorded first Bodo convert to Christianity (Mosahary 1986:169). The American Church started its operation among the Bodos of Darrang district in 1860s where Rev. S. Endle arrived at Tezpur to assist C.H. Hessemeyer as the tea garden Chaplain and carry out missionary work among the Bodos. They got a substantial number of Bodo converts into their fold. Rev. S.Endle had the credit of establishing first Bodo Church at Bengbari and of writing a monograph “the Kacharis” which was published in 1911, the first of its kind. The Santal Mission of Northern Churches planted a Christian Colony in the district of Goalpara, Assam. They established Permanent Mission Stations at Grahampur, Haraputa and Joema. The two missionaries Rev. H.P. Boersen from England and Rev L.O. Skrefsrud from Norway were the first to work among the Bodos in this part of Assam. Teklo Basumatary by name, was the first Bodo to be converted into Christianity in western Assam and others who followed his suit were Dorkanto, Sitaram and Dabaru. Skrefsrud established the first Bodo Church at Rajadabri and Ratia Basumatary the son of Teklo Basumatary was ordained as the first Christian Minister (Pastor) in 1911 followed by Dabaru Boro in 1914. By 1922, the Bodo Congregations increased and were found in many villages, such as Rajadabri, Mandabari, Patakata, Kolabari, Gumurgaon, Gaurang, Dumbajhar etc. To increase the effectiveness of the missionary works, the Mission Home Board commissioned Rev. and Mrs. Aksel Kristiansen from Denmark in 1927. Soon after his arrival, he established Permanent Mission Stations at Gaurang in 1927, Bongaigaon in 1938 and at Parkijuli in 1951 (Basumatary,2015: 4). The American Baptist Mission Society was found working among the Bodos and the Garos with its head quarters at Goalpara. During the period from 1894 to 1909, a few Bodo families of Fundibari village on the south bank of the Brahmaputra river of Goalpara district were converted to Christianity. Thus, the new converts gradually swelled in number and by 1940s, the Bodo congregations were found in Sidli, Tukrajhar, Baghpara, Debitola. In the West Bengal too especially in the Jalpaiguri district with Permanent Mission Station at Mahakalguri, many Bodo families were converted into Christianity (Mosahary,1986: 173).

Although, the works of the missionaries under different Mission Societies, were vigorous yet they could not impress so much upon the Bodos of Assam. On the basis of the available figure of the total Bodo converts that is 55,000 against at least 7,00,000 Bodos population which is 7% only, is far from being impressive (Mosahary,1986: 178).He attributed the failure of the Missionaries to evangelize the Bodo population to the effective obstacles offered by the Aryan forces which immensely succeeded in bringing about a total assimilation of many of the north Eastern tribes including the Bodos into the Hindu fold through the ideas, energies and resources that they brought with them (Mosahary,1986: 180). The feeling of hatred and opposition to Christianity were injected into simple minded Bodos by other religious leaders through malicious propaganda that Christianity was a ‘foreign religion’ and intruder designed to destroy the Bodo culture and identity (Mosahary,1986: 181). The Christianisation of the Bodos received a serious jolt from the Saranias and the Brahma Cults. In the early part of the 20th century AD Kalicharan Brahma launched a parallel religious movement among the Bodos against the Christianity and the traditional ‘Bathau’ religion. This undoubtedly hindered the growth and consolidation of the Christian Churches among the Bodos in Assam (Mosahary,1986: 181). Some sections from amongst the Bodos became rich and wealthy by engaging themselves in timber trade especially in the Parbotjoar Estate of the erstwhile Goalpara district and they gained awareness of their positions and later aspired for better status. They launched Reformation Movement among the Bodos in the early 20th

century and under their leadership the Bodo masses also gained awareness and thus the conspicuous consciousness among them grew. During 1910s & 20s there was the Socio-Religious Movement among the Bodos. At the initiative of the great Social Reformer and the religious preacher, Srimat Kalicharan Gurudev, a Reformation Movement was launched.

As it has been discussed, the social, religious and economic conditions of the Bodos were very deplorable. There was no religious unity among the Bodos. Many of them have become Saranias after they were proselytized into Hindu fold, when the British colonizers along with evangelizers came to Assam in the first half of the 19th century, many Bodos had already embraced Christianity and greater chunk of their population remained illiterate and ignorant with their ancestral religion of 'Bathau'. Thus, the Bodos, in the 19th and early part of 20th centuries were seen divided into different religious faiths and time was so ripped as to guess that the extinction of the Bodos was only a matter of time (Gait, 1926:6). Greatly perturbed by the situation, and thus hemmed in from all sides, Kalicharan Mech felt the need for reassertion of ethnic identity and unity among the Bodos which he thought was possible only through a total change in the Bodo society by bringing about a religious unity. At this juncture, providentially he came across a book, 'Sarnitya Kriya' by Parama Hansa Sibnarayan Swami which left indelible deep impression on him. Swami's message which deeply impressed Kalicharan was the idea on the Unity of God, simplicity of the processes of initiation and the simplicity of rituals of worship of the Supreme Being (Mosahary, 1986: 163). As has been said, his father Kaula Mech being a successful timber merchant of Kazigaon village had the contact with some big bosses, the Zamindar of Bogribari Estate (8-Anna part) was one of them through whom he was able to have personal contact with Swamiji Himself and had had the formal initiation into Brahma Dharma from Parama Hansa himself in 1905 at age of 38 (Mosahary, 1986: 161). Kalicharan after being initiated, and now his soul filled with religious zeal set his mission of its propagation. He propagated his new Faith by organizing community Homa-Yojna in different Bodo concentrated areas in Assam and the adjoining areas of West Bengal. He got ready acceptance of his new Faith among his compatriots (timber trading friends) the names of whom were Jamadar, Charan Mandol, Bijay, Adaiyananda, Kalicharan (junior), Sadak Nepal etc from the far flung areas of Parbotjoar and the erstwhile Goalpara district (Mosahary, 1986: 163). Through these neo-disciples, Kalicharan Gurudev secured the support and mass acceptance of his new Faith among the Bodos and within a short span of time his followers swelled greatly in number. Now the large chunks of the Bodo populations are the followers of this Religion.

Social Condition

The social condition of the Mechs is extremely low and they have not progressed beyond the stage of nomadic cultivators. As usual amongst nearly all rude tribes, the women have to perform the greater portion of the toil necessary to support the family. They have to assist in the field at seed-time and harvest, to husk the rice, carry water and above all to weave the clothes required for the household (Hunter, 1982:118).

Social Drinking of Zou

The Bodos or the Cacharis and other hill tribes had the expertise in the preparation of a kind of liquor called 'Zou' from rice which they consume sometimes in large quantities especially during the religious festivals, marriage ceremonies and in the observance of various rites and rituals. The excessive consumption of rice beer in the religious functions, marriage ceremonies and in the observance of various rites and rituals were to be held responsible for the backwardness of the Bodos in every spheres of their lives, the practice of which are so vividly described by Mr. Jogendra Kumar Basumatary, the former President of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, thus, "the expression 'the pond of wine, the ridges (small embankment) of rice and hunk (Akhai) of meat' (Jouni Pukhri, Ongkhamni Ali, Bedorni Akhai) is enough to explain the prevailing social practices of the Bodos. Rice beer is used practically for all purposes including propitiating deities, serving the guest, in community collective works (Shaori-Badali), in marriage ceremonies, in community feasting and many more. Wine is required even for curing sickness. The village medicine man would not cure the sick man unless he was served with rice beer and pork. Right from the start of marriage negotiation, rice-beer and pork occupies an important place in Bodo society. The girl's parents had to be pleased by offering rice beer and pork. The volumes of rice beer to be served were measured in terms of Mithiki (the rice beer prepared from half maund of rice) and Lukhra (Rice-beer prepared from one maund of rice). These demands for rice beer and pork also come from the maternal uncle side too. This demand was made in term of 'Mamaimara', in which the uncle took all of his friends and family members from his village for visiting the house of would be son-in-law. There was another term 'Dangdhara' which means all male members of the girl's village would visit the house of the parent of would be bridegroom who had to be served with rice-beer and a whole part of a pig. The villagers of the bridegroom also get their share of one 'Lukhra'. In such manner the Bodo marriage would continue for seven days and nights at a stretch during which all the villagers hover over intoxication" (Basumatary, 1999:5).

From this fact, one can easily form an estimate of the amount of Rice one needed for preparation of 'Zou' (Rice beer). If BC Allen is to be believed then he remarked that about half the produce of their rice fields

is consumed by the Mechs in the form of beer (Allen, 1905: 48). While working among the Bodos of Darrang district for the propagation of the gospel especially at Udalguri, Rev. S. Endle came across many Bodo villages and people and thereby gained much experiences which he recorded in his monograph 'The Kacharis' and that his statement is enough to testify the fact of the use or consumption of rice beer in large quantities by the Bodos. According to him, "as regard the moral character of the Kachari race, those who know them best will be the first to speak favourably of them. Like many of the sub-Himalyan hill tribes, they undoubtedly have a certain weakness for what may be looked upon as their national beverage (Zou), a form of rice beer. Of this in itself a comparatively harmless liquor when taken in moderation, they at times consume very large quantities, especially at weddings, funerals and at the January and April Bihu festivals and more particularly at what is known as the first eating of the new rice, which usually takes place about the middle of December or a little earlier" (Endle, 1911: 2).

Apart from this failing among them are to be found many simple virtues of great price, i.e. honesty, truthfulness, straightforwardness and a general trustworthiness deserving of all honour (Endle, 1911: 3). This observation of the Bodo virtues is true, so far as their modes of living, social and economic aspirations are concerned. Among them, when there was total absence of money economy, concept of surplus and on the whole the enjoyment of modern amenities, there was no question of coming into conflict with any other interest groups. They led a simple and innocent life amidst total ignorance about what was going on around them. Rev. Endle observes further, "but it must be clearly understood that all this holds good of the Kachari in his simple, patriarchal, village life, and there only. His innocence is the innocence of ignorance, not the innocence of experience and he is as a rule free from certain forms of evil because in his village life he has never come under any temptation to indulge in them" (Endle, 1911: 3).

Marriage System

In the lives of the Bodos, the woman were held in high esteemed position and they were treated equally with the man folk in all social functions and in the religious ceremonies their participations could be observed in equal terms with man. In short, the Bodo woman never faced negligence of any sorts in the society and as such, in the marriage of a girl, the parents had the upper hand in matter of decision making over the parents of the boy. Among the Bodos, there had been the practice of taking bride price from the parents of the boy if and when the daughter was to be given in marriage (Brahma (Jr), Bang.-1364 : 17). In those days, among the Bodos, the girl children were cared much because probably, they were less in number and were in great demand. The parent of the girls took pride of having girl child (Fisa Hinjao) and could demand anything from the parents of the boy (Brahma (Jr), Bang.-1364 : 18). In the normal process of negotiated marriage, the parents of the girl would take bride price ranging from of Rs 100 /- to Rs 400/-. At that time the price of a maund of paddy was only Rs 0.75 and it was the only source of income and wealth was measured in terms of how much paddy one gets in a year. Just imagine how many maunds of paddy would a man had to sell for collecting the just Rs 100/-, Rs 200/-, Rs 300/- and Rs 400/-. For poor parents, to get their wards married was far cry, since they could not afford to meet all these demands and requirements. So, they had to try their luck in another type of marriage, the 'Gwrjia Janai' by which the boy had to stay in the house of father-in-law for 2/3 years as servant without payment, during which he had to render rigorous services in order to satisfy the girl's parents. After completion of this type of rigorous ordeal, the boy, then only, would be allowed to bring his wife home (Basumatary, 1999:5).

This fact is also confirmed by BC Allen when he says, "Marriage is almost invariably adult and it is though desirable that the bride should be older than the groom. The price of a girl is usually about Rs 100 and if the man cannot provide this sum he works in her father's house, each year of service being valued at Rs 20" (Allen, 1905: 48). The third category of marriage among the Bodos was "Bwnai Marriage" (Abduction Marriage) in which the boy who do not agree with the 'Gwrjia Janai' marriage system or could not afford to go for otherwise costly marriage, used to resort to abduction or forceful elopement marriage (Basumatary, 1999:5). The chosen girl was forcibly abducted by the boy's party from the secluded places like while fishing in the rivulets; lakes etc and sometimes even from the home of the maiden, with the help of 10/12 strong able bodied man. In such case, sometimes a fierce fighting with Lathis between raiding party and the protectionist took place. The winning streak at the moment is the decision, since there would not be any complaint from either side. Regarding this type of marriage Hunter observes, "Their marriage ceremony still preserves the most primitive form, that of forcible abduction. The bridegroom proceeds with a company of friends to the residence of his intended. Her friends are assembled and endeavour to retain her and a mock combat ensues, in which, of course, the bridegroom's party is successful. Afterwards he gives a feast to the bride's friends and makes money present usually about Rs 60 to conciliate the father who is supposed by a fiction to be incensed and the rite is complete" (Hunter, 1982:119). Such an exhaustive, Lingering, Clumsy and costly marriage custom was bound to have an adverse impact on the Bodo society, economy and education.

Economic condition

The Bodos are primarily a rural community and depend on natural resources and the majority of the households are still sticking to their traditional occupation- agriculture. BC Allen in his Gazetteer of Goalpara writes on the Bodos thus, "Agriculture is their main occupation and rice is the staple crop grown. It is raised in fields which are irrigated from the hill streams, and which yields bumper crops though the soil is often poor and sandy. The water is brought in channels sometimes several miles in length, dug by the combined labour of the villagers" (Allen, 1905:47).

Though the Bodo villagers mainly depend on agriculture for their subsistence, there has not been any improvement in their agricultural technique and the Bodos continued their agricultural practice with outmoded forms of technology in their small holdings. Their agricultural and other implements are all of the very rudest description. Their mode of existence is from hand to mouth (Hunter, 1982:119). Some of them even do not wish to stay permanently in a single plot of land and roam in search of new plots. Till now many of them find it difficult to adapt themselves in the situations of modern life. This fact is confirmed by Hunter when he says, The Mechs or Cacharis are of very migratory habits and seldom stay at one place or cultivate the same soil for more than two or three years; but this can hardly be wondered at when they have so much virgin soil at their disposal. They prefer cultivating clearing in the forest when available and grow a good deal of cotton besides the ordinary crops of rice, mustard-seed etc (Hunter, 1982:117). The people in the Eastern Dwars are a purely rural community. There are no towns, nor even any villages with a Bazaar, except Bijni which possesses small bazaar; nor are periodical markets held anywhere (Hunter, 1982:120).

The practice of domestication of animals and fowls was prevalent among the Bodos and these were for their own consumption as food, ploughing and religious purposes i.e. for magico-religious sacrifices. The Bodos abound in live stocks- cow, ox, pigs, fowls, goats etc which they kept never for the purpose of an item of trade and commerce (Pakyntein, 1961: 17). Since there was no market, even a small bazaar in the Bodo concentrated areas of Assam the growth of enthusiasm for trade and commerce as main or subsidiary means of livelihood was out of question. The little surplus they got from their annual agricultural produce, were not sold but bartered liberally with the items of trade that the Hindu traders brought up to the Bodo villages along the river routes during summer season. The Bodo maidens were seen in their looms, but that too for weaving clothes for their own use- 'Dokhona' (Bodo woman's main garment), Babro, Eri clothes etc (Pakyntein, 1961: 19). The dictum of 'self sufficient village economy' applies here letter and spirit. There were poor parents in the villages who could not supply sufficient food materials i.e. the rice for feeding their families often go for begging rice from the wealthy cultivators of the village who was often called the 'Mahajon'. At this, the rich mahajon with pride would order the begging chap to take rice as much weight as he could shoulder in one lot (Brahma, 76, informant, Joymaguri (interviewed on 12/03/2017). This practice was quite interesting- the real test or a sort of punishment for not doing hard work for which they were poor. Some of them were heavy drunkards and because of that they were too weak to do hard work to support their families and some were naturally lazy chaps. Many of them could not afford to shoulder the offer of Rice (unhusked) and were destined to bring only a bamboo-basketful. With this sort of sufficiency, with no other wants, the Bodo villagers spent their days so happily that they forgot everything what future was in store for them. Hunter in his report rightly remarks, "the requirements of the people are very limited; everything in the shape of food and clothing is grown on their own fields and manufactured by themselves in their own houses, the little salt they require being purchased at one of the few shops found in certain villages" (Hunter, 1982:120.121). Over and above, since they lived in the isolated villages away and free from external tensions, the Bodo villagers spent the days carelessly for nothing before the colonizers came to this land. In the Eastern dwars, where the Bodos were numerous, they did not come under any external influences for changing their life style. Hunter is of the opinion that the inhabitants of the Dwars are all in good circumstances, happy and contented with no wants or care to trouble them. The necessities of life are cheap and easily procured and the means of gaining an honest and comfortable livelihood by agriculture are open to all; there is abundance of rich soil easily cultivable and as the rents are very light, their prosperous condition is not to be wondered at (Hunter, 1982:121).

In such condition, their economy is bound to be poor. Catching fishes from lakes, gathering firewood from the jungle and living happily with old custom and tradition on their little agricultural produce are the characteristic features of mode of living of the Bodos. In absence of bazaars or markets, the main centre of economic activities among the Bodo villagers the role of cash or currency was negligible, requirement was only for payment of revenue, that too when the erstwhile Goalpara district along with Eastern Dwars came under the arrangement of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal after 1822. Here Allen's comment is worthy of quoting, "they require but little cash except to pay their revenue and the little they require is obtained by the sale of mustard or where there is no land suitable for this crop by working in the forests of the districts" (Allen, 1905: 48). Dried fish (Na gran) is other delicacies of the Kachari and this item constituted one of the main items of export too. There was the trading activity between the Bhutias of Bhutan and the Kacharis or the Bodos. It is to be mentioned here that the Eastern Dwars areas till 1864 (Indo-Bhutan War) were under the control of the Dev

Raja of Punakha, Bhutan. During winters the Bhutias descended down to the plains with mule-loads of rock-salt, gold-dust, musk, yak-tails, Chinese silk and other items of medicinal value especially the 'Bishmao', which they exchanged with the Bodo's articles of trade – Dried fish, Eri Cocoons, Rice, different kinds of clothes etc (Das, 2005:67). For facilitating trading activities Fairs were organized by the border authorities at the places where border marts were already in existent (Das, 2005:67). The best example was the Udalguri Fair where the Tawang Bhutias came down to barter their goods with the Kacharis (Das, 2005:25). The other places where fairs were organized were Daranga and Subankhata in Kamrup district. Dried-fish (Na-gran), another delicacy of the Kacharis or the Bodos is worthy of mention here. The dried-fish was exchanged for much valued Eri-clothe (silk) produced by Bodo maidens with much toiling. Endle reported that this is (Dried-fish) collected in large quantities near the banks of the Brahmaputra and carried northwards to the Kachari Dwars, where it is exchanged for rice and silk (Eri) etc (Endle, 1911: 21). Again, the special weakness the Bodos had was the 'Earthenware vessels' (Dabka) without which the preparation of the national beverage 'Zou' could not have been possible (Endle, 1911: 12). Though it was very simple in terms of material and labour for its production, the Bodos did not know the technical know-how for its production. They were traded by the Hindu traders from the south who came on boats during summer and exchanged with unhusked rice.

Many of them hardly understand a word of Bengali or Assamese and such trade as is carried on is chiefly transacted by barter. They seldom go to market but during the rains traders come up the rivers and exchange earthen pots, dried fish, salt and other articles for rice at rates of exchange which are usually fixed by the panchayat. Typical rates are 5 seers of paddy for one seer of salt which is equivalent to about 12 annas a maund for paddy and 6 seers of paddy for an earthen pot while dried fish fetches about twenty times its weight in grain (Allen, 1905: 47.48).

The Bodos in all villages throughout Assam were in the same footing except a few variations. They were not conscious about their political, economic and social status. They just spent the days with no aspirations for change at all. The Mechs or Cacharis do not seem to have achieved any form of polity of their own; they have few traditions, no ancient songs, no monuments, no written character and no literature of any kind (Hunter, 1982: 119). The Bodos under both regimes- the Zamindary and the Colonial, were deprived in general from the privileges of educating themselves and so remained ignorant en-mass. The landholders who derive a large income from the people have paid very little attention towards the promotion of education among them and the deputy Commissioner is of the opinion that the time is still far distant when there will be a general diffusion of knowledge among the masses (Hunter, 1982: 52).

The Brahma Religious Preacher and Reformer Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and his votaries perceived that some of the prevailing Social Customs and religious practices might have rendered the Bodos into backwardness. This sorry flight of Bodos was attributed to the observance of their rites and rituals and religious practices, superstitious belief and the clumsy lengthy marriage customs.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Bodos who gained awareness had perceived shamefulfulness of the tribes' social practices and in order to escape from the belittling treatment at the hands of the other neighbouring communities; they tried to convert to other established religions leaving behind their own fellow tribesmen. Many Bodo tribes, in the undivided Kamrup, Darrang and Nogaon districts, had successfully converted into the Ek-Sarana Nama Dharma of Mahapuris Sankardeva who are now known as the Sarania Kocharis. Some of them have become the followers of Christianity.

At this critical juncture, some Bodo people from the Parbatjoar area or Estates became rich and wealthy with the rise and growth of Timber Trade who, now, may be called Elite Class among the Bodos and they gained awareness of the sorry flights of the Bodos and took recourse to get rid of the prevailing Social malice and that of belittling treatment in the hands of the Hindu neighbours. After coming into contact with the people of higher social strata in course of their trading, they began to aspire for same status. Such type of customs and social practices really created mental anxiety amongst these Bodo elites which they perceived, were the disastrous effects on the image of the Bodo Society and they also attributed these practices to the root causes for the derogatory treatment that the Bodos got from the neighbouring communities. They did not go for the first option of proselytizing into other established religions but they took a bold decision to save themselves from the total conversion and assimilation and ultimately they were able to arouse consciousness among their tribes about their prevailing social, political and economic conditions and thereby was able to arouse ethnicity feelings and the dire needs of the reformations of their Society and Religion to adapt themselves to the fast changing world was achieved. The Courses of actions and reactions in preaching Brahma Religion and Reformations is left for future researchers.

Thus, but, with regret it is to be said that the acts of proselytism is continuing even today.

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