

Bathou Religion and Its Philosophical Significance

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ABSTRACT: India is a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual land. It is a land of unity in diversity. Assam is a part of India which has witnessed various tribes and Communities existing together. The Bodo Community is regarded as the highest and largest group among the different tribes of Assam. They are most indigenous and aboriginal tribe of the North East India. They belong to the Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloid race inhabiting an extensive area in the northern bank of Brahmaputra valley of Assam. They have been known as Kiratas in Puranas. They have their own culture, Tradition, Custom, Language, and Religion. Their language is recognized by Sahitya Academy and also included in 8th schedule in the constitution of India. The Bodos follow their traditional religion known as Bathou religion. Bwrai Bathou (lord Shiva) is recognized as their supreme deity. Bathou religion of the Bodos is a composite name of various rituals, ceremonies and observances etc. It bears a special significance in moulding the Bodos' social, cultural and economic life. The religion is also based on deep philosophical thinking. Therefore, in this paper an attempt is made to understand the Bathou religion of the Bodos and its philosophical significance.

Keywords: Bathou religion, Bodo community, Bwrai Bathou, custom, tradition,

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I. INTRODUCTION

The prime religion of the Bodos is Bathou religion¹. Traditionally, all the Bodos were the adherents of Bathou religion. But as the time passed by, the Bodos came into contact with great religions and as a result many changes took place in their religious practices and beliefs which is quite inevitable. But, there are still some people who want to see Bathou religion in its original form. Therefore, an attempt is made to bring forth the nature of the Bathou religion in its pure form. Again, every religion incorporates some kind of philosophy in its background and therefore, philosophical interpretation of Bathou religion is also necessary. But, it is not an easy task to bring out the philosophical significance of Bathou religion. There are divergent views regarding the original form of Bathou religion and I think which is not a surprising fact. It is known that tradition are certain rituals which have been practised from generation to generation, hence it imbibes itself in a certain community or communities as tradition and culture. Tradition has progressive values; it is not stagnant and prone to changes. Nor it is anyone's individual property. It includes all what man has acquired in his individual and social life. It is the sum totality of morals, manners, customs, traditions and religious, political, economic activities of a nation or a caste. Religion, culture etc. is like a flowing river. The Bathou religion has also been changing. Even among the same community, some people observe it in different ways or the observance of Bathou religious practices differs from place to place and time to time. The form of belief and practices prevailed in Kokrajhar district is something different from that of Udalguri district or Baska. However, with my limited knowledge in this area of study I try my best to sum up philosophical aspects of Bathou religion.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The Bodos believed that 'Sijou' tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) is the living symbol of Bathou. Bathou is the highest God of the Bodo pantheon and it is also known as 'Jiu Bwrai', 'Siu Bwrai', or 'Sibrai' (father of life/soul) and probably due to the contact with Hinduism, some people tried to call it as lord Shiva. The powers of Creation, nutrition and dissolution of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara (of Hinduism) respectively are united in this single Supreme God, 'Bathou Bwrai' or 'Sibrai'. Here, mention may be made that Bathou religion is not a form of Hinduism (although in due course, they have carried certain elements of Hinduism).

According to philosophical interpretation, 'Ba' means 'five' and 'thou' means 'deep'. Hence, 'Bathou' means five deep spiritual entity. It is noteworthy that the Bodo religion or philosophy is intimately concerned

¹ Brahma, Liladhar: 1991, *The Religious Dances of the Bodos*. P-17

with the numerical 'five'. So, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Bathou religion is based on the 'philosophy of five' or the 'principle of five' (mwnba santhou).

In Bathou religion, the numerical 'five' has deep philosophical implication. Sailen Debnath in his '*Essays on Cultural History of North Bengal*' wrote, "According to Bathou, this world is composed of five elements. These are Earth, water, Fire, Air and Sky" i.e Ong, Hring, Khling, Fwt and Che respectively which are similar to 'panchabhuta' in Hinduism. This indicates that the Bodos are primarily nature worshippers. They are not idolater².

Five is supposed to be a significant number in Bathou religion. Some elements of Bathou religion have connection with this 'five'. For instance, the 'Out' fruit (dillenis indica) which is used in worshipping Bathou has five ridges; the Siphung(the long bamboo flute) which is used as instrument in prayer has five holes. The altar of the Bathou has also five knots (of bamboo strips); the 'Boro Borai'(the bodo elders) have five moral preaching. Their social customs are also based on five principles viz. (i) Agarbad, (ii) Phongalothbad, (iii) Daokhibad, (iv) Khoulobad, (v) Khaoalibad. These are the laws or Bads through which guilty persons are punished and purified. It can be said that in ancient times the bodos believed in five main gods, viz. (i) Ailong (the God of earth), (ii) Agrang (the God of water), (iii) Khoila (the God of air), (iv) Sanja- Borli (the Goddess of fire), (v) Raj-khungri (the Goddess of sky) which incorporates polytheism among the primitives. The original numbers were also found in five, viz. (i) Se (one), (ii) Nwi (two), (iii) Thom (three), (iv) Brwi (four), (v) Ba (five).

Fivefold preachings, found in different slokas, verses, stories and tales related to Bathou religion are mentioned below-

- (a) Five spiritual principles-
 - (i) Meditative prayer of God,
 - (ii) Conversing religious and spiritual matters,
 - (iii) Making charitable gifts to the poor,
 - (iv) Loving the fellow beings and
 - (v) Doing things unitedly.
- (b) Five senses of love-
 - (i) Love to Anan Gosai,
 - (ii) Love to fellow beings,
 - (iii) Love to the wife and children,
 - (iv) Love to other lower animals and objects of nature and
 - (v) Love to one's mother land and the world.
- (c) Hatred for the five sinners-
 - (i) Hatred for the murder,
 - (ii) Hatred for the thief,
 - (iii) Hatred for the liar,
 - (iv) Hatred for that one indulging in illicit and unnatural intercourses and
 - (v) Hatred for the association with a man of guilty or offences.
- (d) Five musical tone-

Sa, re, ga, pa, dha
- (e) Five musical instruments-

Kham, Shiphung, Serenja, Jotha and Gagana. (However, some social reformers report that originally Bathou followers use only three instruments namely Kham, Shiphung and Jotha with the tunes of holy hymns, which are recited in front of the Bathou altar.)
- (f) Five findings of life-

Birth, pleasure, suffering, marriage, old age and death.
- (g) Five holy realization-
 - (i) Realization of the 'Sijou', the supreme soul,
 - (ii) Linking up the Jiwma (human soul) with the 'sijou', the supreme being,
 - (iii) Realization of Mainao (lakhimi),

² Brahma, Dr. Kameswar: 1992, *An Introduction to The Traditional Practices of The Bodos*, p-12

- (iv) Realization of the five great elements, viz. Earth, air, water, fire and ether and their relation to five great gods- Ailong, Agrang, Khoila, Sanja-Borli and Raj-khungri and
- (v) Realization of the needs of the worldly affairs.

The altar of Bathou religion is a place or centre where the worship is done. It is also called 'Bathou Bindo'. It is divided into three parts- (a) The first part which is fenced by bamboo strips is the principal altar. In this part, supreme God of Bathouism is prayed, (b) A part of the altar which is extended spur like from the parent altar to the northern direction. In this part the 'Noni Mwdai' i.e the subordinate deities of 'Bathou' are prayed. (c) the 'Hagrani Mwdai' (the deities not belong to Bathou family) are prayed in the similar extended part to the southern direction. However, in the first part of the altar, a white piece of cloth is hung up above the ground in front side of the same. This indicates the formless existence of the Almighty Anan Gosai, the supreme God of Bathouism. In the middle of the principal altar, a Sijou tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) is planted, just before going to plant the same, an egg of hen and a stone are buried under the Sijou tree. The inherent meaning is that the Bodos believe that these are the symbols of creation of the universe. The stone stands for truth and longevity while the egg stands for reproduction and primitive stage of the universe. After that a full-blown small branch of Sijou tree is cut down from the parent plant as per religious customs and is made it fresh by spraying holy water either with 'Tulosi' (*Occimum Sanctum*) or Yatrachi branch (*Justica Assamica Clarke*). In upper region of the branch, five curl is made by a white fresh thread (Ewa Suta in Assamese). Bodos believe this to be worldly illusion and effection since the creation.

The Sijou tree is surrounded by a round fence of small bamboo strips woven by five other bits symbolising the religious and spiritual principles of Bathou. The fence is erected by eighteen pairs of bamboo strips with five knots and which are planted in vertical direction. Each pair symbolises a pair of minor gods-goddesses. The five knots signify from bottom: birth, pain, death, marriage and peace/ pleasure³. Three pairs of strips in the front side are twisted in traditional style and it is called 'Daothu Bikha Hebna'. The Daothu Bikha stands for three fold power of Bathou, viz. Creation, nutrition and dissolution.

The lamp wick is placed under the Sijou tree means the symbol of spiritual knowledge. Flower is the symbol of softness and beautiness. Fruit symbolises the result of action. Dhup- Dhuna means religious component or aid to worship God. Altar is the realization of oneness between Atman and Paratman. It symbolises a holy road from earth to the heaven. The complete altar is known as Bathou where the supreme God is represented by Sijou tree while Mainao, the Goddess-in-chief is represented by the basil Tulasi.

The Bathou altar is made with the help of five-fold bamboo sheet. They bear different philosophical significance which is mentioned below-

- (a) The lower one is believed as earth.
- (b) The second upper means water.
- (c) The third upper means air.
- (d) The fourth upper means sun and
- (e) The last upper means sky.

The last upper bamboo sheet contains three fold bamboo sheets which are believed to symbolize the cycling order of a life including birth and death of the living beings.

In another way it is explained as-

- (a) The lower one means embryo,
- (b) The second upper means birth,
- (c) The third upper means adulthood,
- (d) The fourth upper means marriage and
- (e) The last upper means death.

'Sijou' being the living symbol of truth stands as an emblem of the supreme God at the altar. The meaning of 'Sijou' is 'Paratman'. 'Si' means 'Atman' and 'Jou' means 'Eldest' / 'Highest', or 'Param' etc. It also needs to be mentioned that there is no seeds of Sijou plant and it can survive in every place. So, it is justified and logical to accept the Sijou tree to be the symbol of Supreme God. The different parts of the 'Sijou' tree has certain meaning viz.-

- (a) root indicates formless God,
- (b) body of the tree indicates one God (Ek Iswara),
- (c) branches indicate things and beings,
- (d) leaf and flower indicate Mainao,
- (e) Five edges indicate sun, vacuum, air, earth and water or truth, knowledge, power, beauty and goodness.

³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/bathouism

- (f) Pair of sting indicates male and female and
- (g) Three flowers indicate Swarga, Mairta and patal⁴.

Although Bathou religion is practised in the above mentioned ways yet, many old practices have been discarded now and many new principles and systems have been added. Today in place of birds and animal sacrifices, flowers and fruits are offered to deities. Animal sacrifices have been stopped. Due to the impact of modernity, now a days Bathou religion has spilt into different branches like Sonaton Bathou, Abru Bathou, Rupamoni Bathou, Narayan Bathou, Swrjigiri Bathou etc. However, a section of the educated and conscious people of the community have taken initiative to modify and innovate their religious practices. As a result, an organisation named All Bathou Religious Union (ABRU) was formed in 1992. Since last 21 years, ABRU has been making efforts to give an organised and institutionalised shape to the Bathou religion. Earlier, there was no written verses and scriptures in connection with traditional Bathou religion. But now, ABRU is bringing so many input publications of religious books as related to Bathou religion which is a good sign to preserve and protect the identity of the Bodos.

III. CONCLUSION

As society and religion are interrelated, religion tends to change when social changes take place. Again social changes will occur when changes in religion take place. The Bodos of the Brahmaputra valley, no doubt, are an aboriginal tribe of Assam. Their traditional religion and its intrinsic ideas are unique⁵. The religion of the Bodos are not animistic.⁶ It is essentially monotheistic in nature (although elevated through polytheism). It speaks of only one God whom they called Bathou. He is infinite, the creator of all creatures. They are the worshippers of Bathou, the supreme God. They have minor deities also. They believe in ghosts and spirits also. Like Hindus, the Bodos believe that different gods and goddesses are various manifestations of the one supreme deity which remind us the famous vedic quote '**Ekam Sadvipra Bahuda Badanti**'. Thus, the supreme God is predominant in Bodo religion which therefore transcends the tribal stage and reveals a very great enlargement of outlook and a significant deepening of the content of religious consciousness⁷.

Bathou religion is not only a religion, but an identity for the Bodo community. It is the backbone of Bodo community since their culture, tradition, customs, rituals, festivals etc has originated from it. It is the need of hour that the reformists alongwith Bathou followers should come forward to revive the depth philosophy and originality of Bathou religion as well as to install it in every individual's heart so that it can uphold the strength of unity, social harmony, peace, brotherhood and identity for the Bodo people.

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⁴ Narendra Das: 'God, Philosophy and Bathou religion' published in *Kishanian Thought*, 2010 p-52