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Bodo Community & Religion: A Sociological Study

Chithum Basumatary

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Bodo People in North-East India

The generic term, Bodo of Tibeto-Burman Languages was first applied by Hudson to a group of people of the Brahmaputra valley. The Bodos live in a scattered manner throughout the North–Eastern region of India. Linguistically, Bodo is a Tibeto-Burman language of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma.

The Bodos belong to the greater Mongolian stocks who are described to be the inhabitants of a country north of the Himalayas and west of China. According to Kameswar Brahma, this land is known as “Bod” which meant a “Homeland”.

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In fact, *Bodo* is a generic term which includes a large number of the tribes settled in Assam. In our discussion, we shall proceed with the Bodo language speaking people of Assam who form a large ethnic group of Assam. According to the recent Census of 2011, the Bodo population in Assam is approximately 15,00,000 of the total state population of 3,11,69,272.

History of Migration

In several research works, the term *Kirat* is used to describe the groups of people including the Bodos. According to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the Kirat came to Assam in 2000 BC. They seem to have come from North-Western China between the head waters of the Huang-Ho and the Yangtze Kiang Rivers.

According to Rajmohan Nath, different groups of people came across the Himalayas from the north when the early dwellers of Assam, the Austric people, became weak in power. They were the primitive people of the area north to the Himalayas and west China.

According to Rev. Sidney Endle, the origin of the Kachari (Bodo) race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. In features and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type, and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race.

Bodo Groups

There were many historical figures of Bodo who include eminent rulers like Raja Iragdao, Sikhwna Jwhwlau, Swmdwn Jwhwlau, Gambari Sikhla, Birgwsri Sikhla, etc. Different dialects of the language changed to different sub-languages and the community was divided into sub communities with different names like Bodo, Garo, Rabha, Tiwa, Sonowal, Karbi, Dimasa, Kokborok, Mishing, Ahom, Chutiya, etc.

About the earliest mentioned king of Kamrupa or Pragjyotisha, K.L. Baruah writes that the king was non-Aryan and he might belong to the Bodo dynasty. He writes: “the earliest mentioned king of Kamrupa or Pragjyotisha, as it was known in more ancient times, was non-Aryan named “*Mahiranga Danava*”. His name was evidently “*Mairang*”, for a hill on the seventh mile of the Gauhati & Shilong road is still known as “*Moirang Parbat*”. It is shown in the modern map as “Moirangka”. The word “*Mairong*” was sanskritised into “*Mahiranga*”. It is clearly a Bodo name and the people of this race who then inhabited the country were called Kiratas and Mleccha as they were Mongolian immigrants (Kameswar Brahma, 1992).

Kachari (Bodo) people have prominent mongoloid features: the strong cheek bones, slit eyes, a slight growth of hair on the body and scanty beard. They are shorter and scantier than the Indians of the north-east (Anil Kumar Boro, 2010).

Historians and Social Scientists are of the opinion that the Bodo-Kocharis have, in different epochs in their history, been instrumental in exercising and maneuvering royal power. According to R.M. Nath, when Buddhism spread into Bodo countries, especially the Southern part, inhabited by the Buddhist Lamas, was known as Bsti (Lamas), Bod and later on it transformed into Bsti-Bod-Tibod-Tibbot-Tibet.

Traditional Religion of the Bodos

The traditional religion of the Bodos is called *Bathou* which has been practiced since time immemorial in South East Asia. This religion is invariably linked up with and centered around the worship of *Bathoubwrai* or *Sibwrai*, i.e., the supreme god of the Bodos. Hence it is known as Bathou religion. In the Bodo language, *Ba* means *five* and *thou* mean “*deep philosophical thought*”. The five elements are- *Bar* (Air), *San* (Sun), *Ha* (Earth) and *Okhrang* (Sky). Hence, Bathou means five principles, significance of which is mysterious, not easy to understand and not easy to feel without meditation.

Amongst the followers of Bathou religion, God is known as the Bathou Bwrai. In Bodo language, the word *Bwrai* signifies the *oldest* or most elderly man in power and knowledge or

the Supreme in all respects. Therefore, he exclusively represents supreme soul, *poromatma*, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Fire can't burn him, water can't moisten him, air can't dry him and spear can't pierce him. He is the illuminator of all earthly objects. He is the source of all knowledge and light. He bestows on us everything we need in this world. The creator of these five elements is called Bathou Bwrai or the God. After creating the physical form of a man with the composite elements, he confers his spirit to the inanimate body which displays as the totality of living being's body. So, Bathou is religion and philosophy that embodies the spirituality of the creator or the God. The followers of Bathou religion practices spirituality through prayers, and offerings and sacrifices offered to the deities.

Animistic or Non-Animistic?

According to Sindney Endle, "the religion of the Kachari race is animistic and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear of the dead." He again says in the same monograph - "in the typical Kachari Village as a rule neither idol nor place of worship is to be found; but to the Kachari mind and imagination earth, air and sky are alike people with a vast number of invisible spiritual beings. Mwdai is a Bodo word which means deity (God or Goddess) and should not be mistaken for invisible spirits."

P. Bhattacharjee strongly argues that "the religion of the Bodos is not animistic. They are worshippers of Bathou, the supreme God. They have other Gods and Goddesses. They believe in Ghosts and Spirits also. But the concept of the Supreme God is predominant."

Bathou Altar

Sijou is a plant whose scientific name is *euphorbia splendens*. The Sijou is planted in the Bathou altar at the centre as the symbol of Bathou religion of the Bodos. In Bathou religion, the Sijou plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) has an important place and this Sijou has been widely accepted as the symbol of life or soul by the Bodo people since time immemorial. The Sijou plant is the living symbol of Bathoubrai, the supreme God. It needs to be mentioned here that

there is no seed in Sijou plant and it can survive in every place. Hence a branch from another plant is brought and planted at the Bathou altar.

The Bathou altar is the main place of Bathou worship. Bodo families, who follow the Bathou religion, must have a *Bathousali* in the North East corner of the courtyard. Apart from this, each village has to set up a Bathou altar in the community land. In a Bathou altar, Sijou plant is planted and fenced with 18 pairs of small bamboo strips folded with five fastening which symbolises and signifies the religious and spiritual principles of Bathouism as well as the eighteen gurus and deities. The pairs of the part symbolically mean the married couple of gods and goddess, gurus as well as Mahagurus.

Earthen Lamp

In the name of the above mentioned god and goddesses, an *Alari Bathi* (earthen lamp) is lighted on all the altars. The first round of fastening from the bottom signifies the three *Bando* (bindings) of human beings: *birth*, *sorrows* and *pains* or troubles and distress and death which have to be compulsorily borne by human bindings. No one can escape from these things. Another remaining two rounds of fastening signify the two other bindings - marriage and peace and pleasure from which one may escape.

Folk Religion

It can be observed from the above discussion that the Bathou is an ancient religion of the Bodos which has been practiced by the followers since time immemorial. So, the colonial ethnographers and missionaries called the indigenous tribal religion animism. It is also true that to a certain point the existence of Pluralistic God and Goddesses perhaps point to the primitive stage of folk religion. Besides these, there are lots of characteristics of folk religion namely propitiation, purification, expiation, avoidance, taboo, asceticism, orgies, revelation, divination, ritual and magic which are common to the traditional religions of the world.

Lack of Institutionalization in Early History

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Traditionally, the religion of the Bodos did not have any institutionalized shape. But in course of time and due to the rapid changes in the society this Bathou religion has faced some new challenges. The process of worship such as sacrificing animals and fowls, offering and drinking rice beer in the name of deities appears to be crude and unfit in the eyes of the educated people. Gradually people started to dislike these processes or way of worshipping. Moreover, there was lack of uniformity in the rituals and other related matters in the same religion.

Community Rites – Modern Developments

Community rites are performed once or twice in a year. A priest performs and initiates rites. In these rites a selected woman performs the role of “*Doudini*”, which is considered as the spirit or deity. The *Douri* (male priest) and the *Doudini* (female priest) who used to play pivotal roles in traditional Bathou religion are being shifted to the background. They are replaced by Gwthari Asari priest appointed by the village and a band of singers who sing, i.e., Bathou Aroj at the time of worship. The Douri explains the reason *Raisongnay* in Bodo why and to whom this worship is performed or offered in the beginning and again the worship comes to an end with his *raisongnay* (concluding mantra).

The preachers and the followers of modified Bathousim have given importance to Douri instead of Douri (male priest) and Doudini (female priest) combination. Earlier, during the Kherai worship, Doudini had to play a great role in the worship.

The Kherai is a religious festival, and in Kherai the deities are propitiated with the ritual dance and drama. The doudini is the key dancer. As soon as the priest or *Oja* chants the mantra, she starts dancing rhythmic dances. The doudini moves in a circular way round the Bathou altar where deities are positioned. The oja and the deouri and the elderly members of the village follow her dancing and making hand gestures. There are eighteen varieties of dances performed by the doudini, viz: *Dahal sibnay*, *bathou gidingsay*, *Cha gwlaow bwnay*, *khwijema fonai*, *dahal thungri sibnay*, *thungri sayao ganay*, *mwisw gelenai*, *gorai dabrainay*, etc. These dances are

performed with the traditional musical instruments like *Kham* (big drum), *Sifung* (long flute), *Serza* (violin) and *Zotha* (cymbal).

A section of the Bodo populace has embraced Christianity or other religious faiths.

Bodo Community & Religion

Every society has a religious system. Srimat Kalicharan Brahma started preaching Vedantic religious cult among the Bodos. After becoming adept in Brahma faith under the teaching of Guru Paramhansa in Calcutta, Kalicharan endeavored to unite the religiously disunited Bodos within the framework of his new outlook based on the Brahma faith. He preached Brahma religion, a new Vedanta based religion among the Bodos. In this way, another new religion emerged among the Bodos that influenced the socio-cultural life of the Bodos in broader way.

In the aftermath of the various socio-religious and socio-political situation during the last quarter of the 19th century and in the 1st half of the 20th century, a great change came to the life of the Bodos. Thus, a section of the Bodos is attached to the some religions/sects like Krishaguru, Vaisnavasim, etc.

Bodo Religious Philosophy

The Bodo philosophy in itself is unique. The five holy sermons of the Bathou Borai or the five sacraments for all the Bodos include prayers to God, conversing religious and spiritual matters, being charitable to the poor, love the community people and be united. The five holy realizations are – Realization of Sijau, the supreme soul, merger of atma (human soul) with the supreme soul (Sijau); Realization of Mainao; Realization of the Panch Mahabhutas corresponding to the five main gods: Ailong, Agrang, Khoila, Sanja-Borli, and Raj Khungri; and Realisation of the need of wordily affairs. The five senses of love: love to God, fellow-beings, wife and children, poor animals and nature, motherland and the world. There are other moral and spiritual preaching which the followers of Bathou continue to believe in.

Magic

Magic is practiced and it cannot be separated fully from the worship of Gods. While the gods are moved by prayer, and the gods are petitioned for general wellbeing, magic is always used with reference to specific problems. Magic is an integral part of the tribal religion and its importance is equally noteworthy in the case of Bodo traditional religion. The chants of the Deuris, the oracles of the Doudini, and the different performative feats during the religious festivals are important aspects of the ritual.

Brahma Religion

Brahma Religion, a direct product of the Brahma Dharma Movement under the leadership of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, is a Bodo socio-cultural movement, which heralded a radical change in Bodo society. Kalicharan Brahma can rightly be considered as the morning star of social and cultural reformation of this society. It was the first intrinsic effort of a few literate Bodo people to reform their own society when the outside cultural processes of Sanskritisation and Shankarnisation were unable to bring a complete change of their traditional life and their social, moral and spiritual aspects. By that time Christian Missionaries could not also penetrate into the centre of Bodo society for such a major reformation. After Kalicharan, there was a new Brahma consciousness among Bodo people under the initiatives of Gurudev Shankaracharya who influenced Fwrlanga Babaji, Gurudev Nabin Chandra Brahmachary and Lanka Brahma who initiated an ethnic fusion of Hindu religion, a mixture of Hindu and Bathau cult.

The first stage of Brahma religion worships only the Brahma, the supreme God of Hindu, the second stage of Brahma religion worships Bathau as an absolute image of Trimurty, three Hindu Gods; Brahma, Bishnu and Moheswara (Brahma, Bishnu arw Moheswar; sathamjungwung saselo Iswar). Though Bathau is often considered as different ethnic cult or God, Mwnsingsing Bwrai, Bathau Bwrai, Brahma religion allows itself to interpret it in different ways. Brahma religion opened a link between Bodos and mainstream Hindu people; it provided opportunities

for intercultural communication, acculturation and Hinduisation. Brahma religion truly brought a spiritual enlightenment in Bodo society which paved the way for the present society. Religious culture has the capacity to bring other changes simultaneously along with its development. It can also be claimed that Brahma Dharma Movement carried the idea of modernization and standardization to this society. It was a period of socio-cultural transformation that lifted up the Bodos to the present stage of life. Idea of Brahma Religion touched most of the Bodo dominated areas and gave a new turn to people's life. This religion was successful in giving a new outlook and a new way of life to the people of this community.

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