

## The Bathou Religion of Bodos: A Study of its Insight

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### ABSTRACT

*The Bodos belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family of Tibeto-Burman stock of the Assam-Burmese group. Since time immemorial, the Bodos, the aboriginal inhabitant of Assam are following Bathou religion which is solely composed of five elements viz. Sun, Earth, Air, Water and Sky. Bathouism is a form of forefather worship called 'Bwrai Bathou' or "Obonglaoree" (The Supreme God). Bwrai Bathou i.e. God is the source of all power, all strength, all energy and all vitality-physical, mental and spiritual. All greatness is his greatness, all glory is his glory, all goodness his goodness. He is the life of the living, the sentiency of sentient. It is his light that illuminates the mind enriches the heart. Bathouism is based on five moral and spiritual messages, namely (i) messages on holy realization, (ii) messages on holy practice (iii) messages on love (iv) messages on truth and (v) messages on hatred. ABRU has begun reviving and reforming their traditional Bathou religion.*

*Key words: Bodos, Religion, Bathou, Bathouism, ABRU*

### INTRODUCTION

Religion is an important part of life for many people. Even people who are not at all religious by nature consider it to be important. The question is why do they feel this way? The reason is largely down to the belief that society needs religion. As a society we benefit from our collective religious beliefs. In fact there are many people who would argue that we could not function without religion.<sup>1</sup> Religion is at the cultural center of societies. Even the most cursory reflection about society's customs, values, art, literature and music indicate that religious themes are integrally woven into every dimension of societal life. Religion achieves such prominence by holding up ideas that are practical as well as virtuous - ideas that promote social cohesiveness, that ensure individual adherence to activities that are in everyone's collective interest, and that offer comfort and hope in difficult times. Religion seems capable of providing the most fundamental source of norms, values and social solidarity. In an overall sense, religion leads a measure of sacredness to society itself, and to the aspirations of its members.

### THE BODOS

The Bodos belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family of Tibeto-Burman stock of the Assam-Burmese group. Rev. S. Endle identifies trans-Himalayan region between Tibet and China as the original home of the Bodos. S.K. Chatterjee is more specific when he suggests that 'the north-western

China between the head-waters of the Huang Ho and Yang-Tsze Kiang rivers was the early home of the Proto-Bodos who migrated to eastern India in waves between the second millennium B.C. to the first millennium A.D. Edward Gait holds the Bodos as the autochthons of the Brahmaputra Valley. Amalendu Guha, on the basis of the Census of 1881 thinks that in the late nineteenth century the Bodos formed one third of the indigenous population of the Brahmaputra Valley. They were first classified by Endle (1911) as the Bodo-Kacharies. Here, Bodo is derived from Bod which means Tibet and Kachari is derived from Kachar meaning area near the river. They are considered to have reached the Brahmaputra valley via Tibet and settled in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayan range which includes the whole of Assam, Tripura, North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. According to historians they are the aboriginal inhabitant (son of soil) of Assam.

The physical features of Indo-Mongoloid of great Mongoloid race are yellow or yellowish brown skin, square set face with broad nose, strong cheek bones, flat nose, almond shaped black or dark brown eyes, black stretches (sometimes wavy) and coarse head hair, scanty beard and moustache (Devi,1998).

The main objective of the present study is to analyze the Bathou religion of the Bodos and to highlight its insight. The method used in this paper is analytical or descriptive one. Various secondary sources of information collected from different books, journal, souvenir, news paper etc. are used and reviewed for the purpose.

## THE RELIGION OF THE BODOS

The Bodo group of the plain scheduled tribes (STs) of Assam practices different religions: some of them are Hindus, some Christians while some others profess tribal religion. The caste system and untouchability are foreign to them (Choudhury, 2007). Like the Hindu, the Bodos believe in different Gods and Goddesses. They believe in five traditional Gods, such as Ailong (God of earth), Agrang (God of water), Khoila (God of air), Sanjaborle (God of fire or light) and Rajkunbre (God of sky). The popular deities are grouped into two classes, i.e. (1) Household deities (na-ni madai) and (2) Village deities (Gami-ni madai). The household deities are worshipped inside the house, or in the house compound. On the other hand, the village deities are worshipped outside the houses, and usually near the sacred grove of trees or bamboo, often to be seen some fifteen or twenty yards from the village and known as the thansali (Devi, 1998).

## THE BATHOU RELIGION

The traditional religion of the Bodos is called 'Bathou' and since time immemorial the Bodos are following this Religion and this religion is part and parcel of the Bodo people. Bathouism is a form of forefather worship called 'Bwrai Bathou' or 'Obonglaoree' (The supreme God). Barmahalia (2012) explains that the word "Bwrai" signifies the oldest or most elderly man in power and knowledge or the supreme in all respect. Therefore he exclusively represents supreme soul, paramatma, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, fire cannot burn him, water cannot moisten, air cannot dry him and spear cannot pierce him. He is the illuminator of all earthly objects. Hazowary (2008) writes, Bwrai Bathou i.e. God is the source of all power, all strength, all energy, and all vitality- physical, mental and spiritual. All greatness is his greatness, all glory is his glory, all goodness his goodness. He is the life of the living, the sentiency of sentient. It is his light that illuminates the mind enriches the heart. Bhattacharjee (1997) observes that the religion of the Bodos is not animistic. They are worshippers of Bathou, the supreme God. They have other God and Goddesses. They believe in Ghost and Spirits also. But the concept of the supreme God is predominantly remarkable.

The Siju plant (belong to the Euphorbia genus) is taken as the symbol of Bathou and worshipped. Idol worship is not seen anywhere in Bathouism. A clean surface near home or courtyard is considered as an ideal place for worship. Besides this, the people of a village centrally establish Bathou Thansali (altar outside the village) to worship Bwrai Bathou. Usually, a pair of betel nut called 'goy' and betel leaf called "pathwi" could be used as offering. On some occasion, worship

offering could include fruits, rice, milk and sugar. The Kherai Puja is the most important festival of the Bodos. Other important festivals of the Bodos include Awnkham Gwrlwi janai (new rice eating ceremony), Bwisagu (spring festival), Domashi fwrwb falinai (observance of harvesting festival) etc.

According to Dhuparam Basumatary, the Bathou is associated with the numerical five in his quality and function. The Euphorbia splendens is characterized by five ridges which correspond to five elements of creation and represent truth, knowledge, power, beauty and goodness. This particular plant befittingly symbolizes Bathou. The Bodos believe that this plant was created first among the vegetations in this universe and men took shelter under its shadow, hence they accept it as a symbol of the Supreme God i.e., Bathou.

Historian Sailen Debnath (2008) while writing about Bathouism said, the term "Bathou" is composed of five elements viz. Sun, Earth, Air, Water and Sky. "Ba" means five and 'Thou' means idea or theory of philosophy of five. The term five is the abbreviated form of Mwnba meaning the five basic elements; and 'Thou' is the abbreviation of "Santhou" meaning "Logos" or knowledge or idea or philosophy or theory. Thus Bathou again is the abbreviation of Mwnba Santhou. i.e. Mwnba + Santhou = Mwnba Santhou. The world and human life exist because of a balance among and between all the primary elements. If there is any imbalance among these elements, there is the problem of existence. There are deities symbolizing the spirits of the five elements by the propitiations that a balance can be better maintained. In Bodos social life, personal life, art and aesthetics the principles of five are always observed and maintained. Even in Bodo dance there are five art forms or "Mudras" of the body, hands, figures and other limbless. Nearly in all other arts and expressions of things, always five forms, number and principles are followed as the embodiment of Bathou. The Bodos believe that as human beings they too were the outcome of offspring of the combination of five elements of Sky, Fire, Water, Air and Earth in appropriate proportions and that is why they used to call themselves "Saba Mwdaini Fishsa"(son of five deities) in short "Bodosa" meaning the offering of five elements. Bodo or Boro is the further phonetic transformation of the term Bodosa (children of the five elements).

Basumatary(1980) in his paper 'Some Ideas on Bathou' mentioned that Bathouism is based on five moral and spiritual messages, namely (i) messages on holy realization, (ii) messages on holy practice (iii) messages on love (iv) messages on truth and (v) messages on hatred. The messages of holy realization includes of Bathou as the supreme God. The realization of one's own soul is

the part of Bathou and realization of the need of good in this world. The message on holy practice emphasizes on meditation for God, conversation on religion and spiritual matters charitable donations to the poor. The message on love includes love for God, love for fellow being, love for family and love for all living beings. The messages on truth emphasizes on leading a truthful life and the messages on hatred urges one to abstain from committing sins like stealing, telling lies, adultery, murder and association with bad company.

According to Brahma (2008), Bathou religion thrusts on rigid maintenance of three ideals- sacredness of body, sacredness of mind and sacredness of soul. He who does not commit provident deeds enjoy peace, whose mind is not affected by impulses remain calm and, he who does not commit misdeeds enjoys peace. He who lives peaceful achieves sacred soul. Sacred soul reaches the supreme soul-Bwrai Bathou the almighty creator. To reach the supreme soul is desired more than anything else. Thus Bathou religion does not preach people to be obsessed for reaching, heaving, shunning his duties to people, society and family. People should be dutiful following the writ of Bandwba (five duties) i.e. duties when wife is conceived, duties during child's birth, duties of marriage, duties to be performed while living and duties on death. If people follow duties attached to these five phases of life after birth enjoy peace and can have prosperity in life.

## CONCLUSION

Unlike other religion there was lack of preacher of Bathou religion. No specific organisation and institution was initiated to take the responsibility to give a cohesive institutionalized shape to the Bathou religion. It was only in 1992 The All Bathou Religious Union (ABRU), an organization, was formed. The main aims and objectives of the organization are to revitalize Bathouism and propagate its religious preaching all over the world,

to enshrine ideas of the Bathouism along with its related traditional rites and social customs, to publish and highlight the philosophical matters, religious philosophy, thought and beliefs, moral teachings, hymns and to organize discussion, seminars, study circles and researchers as required on the Bathou religion and its philosophy from time to time. The branch organization of All Bathou Religious Union like *Mainao Afad* (Women wing), *Laimwn Afad* (Youth wing), preachers, prayer groups have been taking initiative regarding the changes and modification of social customs, tradition and belief. These changes of the Bodos have come under the impact of the changes in neighbouring developed other societies and religions. Workshops, seminars, discussions and conferences are frequently organised by the institution or respective branches of ABRU. Since its inception, the Union is encouraging the Bodo Community to stick to their own culture and identity. The union is of the view that the philosophy of the Bathou religion is a primitive and age-old tradition of the community and it is only through this religion the Bodos can give their true introduction and identity to others. As there has been a growing threat of conversion by the Bodo people to follow other religions, it has threatened the very existence of the Bathou religion. ABRU has begun reviving and reforming their traditional Bathou religion. The traditional role of the Douri who performed the role of priest and Doudini (female exorcist) are replaced by the Gwthari Asari (priest) appointed by the organization, and a band of singers who sing in a practice called Bathou Araj (prayer song). The construction of Bathousali, resembling churches and mosques called Bathou Thansali, has come into being. Bathou Araj is performed on Tuesday in Thansalies. The earlier practices of sacrifices of animals and fowls, and offering of rice beer as modes of worship have been replaced by offering flowers, fruits and the burning of incense but till now hundred percent have not achieved in this regard.

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