

Bodo Religion in Transition: A Historical Analysis with the Special Reference to the Expansion of Christianity.

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Abstract : *The Bodos are one of the largest ethnic and linguistic groups of Northeast India in terms of population, who bears an eventful history. Unlike, the others ethnic and linguistic communities the Bodos are also maintaining a rich socio-cultural as well as a unique religious life. If we observe historically, Bathouism, which culminates in Kherai and Marai festivals, is the original form of religion of the Bodos. Further, they worshipped nature as well as connected with Joni and Linga worships and mystery arts. With the Aryanization, subsequently various elements of Hindu sects entered into their mainstream of religious practice. More importantly, since the colonial period various evangelize groups of Christian missionaries have been preaching Christianity among the different tribes of Northeast India. The Bodos are not exceptional in this procedure. As a result many Bodos now and then attracted towards Christianity and willingly accepted it. Nevertheless, they are now living united and working together for the growth and development of their race.*

Keywords: Bodo; Bodo Society; Trational religion of Bodos

Introduction

The Bodos are one of the largest indigenous tribes of the North-East India in terms of population. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid race. The Bodos are now scattered all over Assam, Northern part of west Bengal and in some part of Bhutan and Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland etc. However the bulk portion of them is found on the northern bank of Brahmaputra Valley. They have their distinct tradition, culture, language, folklore and religion. From the primitive to the modern age, religion has played a dominant role in changing their social pattern and status of culture, economy, mode of living and way of thinking and it has led to achieving higher education and modernization of their society.

Bathou worship, which culminates in Kherai and Marai festivals, is the original form of religion of the Bodos. It believes in the existence of thousands of deities with Lord Siva as the head and their pacification through sacrificial rites. Later on the traditional Bathou religion manifested itself into several forms by originating new or refined cults, which came much closer to mainstream of Hinduism. With the emergence of many new religious sects such as Brahma Dharma, Ek Sharan Nam Dharma, Saivism, Vaisnavism etc. the Bodo society witnessed a new direction in all the spheres of life.

More importantly, since the colonial period various evangelize groups of Christian missionaries are preaching Christianity among the different tribes of Northeast India. The Christian missionaries have made inroads into the original religious beliefs and customs of a large section of the Bodo people.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study are:

(a) to highlight the transition and social mobility which occurred due to the prevalent of different sects of religion among the Bodos.

(b) it primarily deals with Bodos religion in their past and present and the gradual induction of the Bodos into the fold of mainstream of Hindu culture as well as into Christianity.

Materials and Methods

So far as Methodology concerns, the Historical Method has been adopted in the procedure of the composition. The work has been accomplished through secondary source of materials collected from books, journals, magazines, articles etc.

Primitive Practices of the Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley

Before the advent of Aryan, the entire society of Brahmaputra valley was under tribe domination. Folk beliefs and tradition was prevailed instead of distinct religion. These folk beliefs and traditions gave birth to new religion or not so, it is under dispute. Of course, in the primitive age before the emergence of distinct religion many practices such as folklore, customs, traditions, folk beliefs etc was prevailed in all the corner of the world. The tribes of Brahmaputra valley all the same worshipped nature such as trees, rocks, hills, air and other non-living materials considering as gods and goddesses (Baruah: 2007:p-158). Earth was considered as the sole of production, thus the agro-based tribe people worshipped earth as mother goddess. The tribes also worshipped Yoni and Linga as it was believed that deals with creation. The primitive tribes basically emphasized on production and rapid increasing of population. Subsequently, they had been connected with incantation and mystery arts.

With the Aryanization, peripheral changes occurred in tribal society (*Barpujari:2007:p-302*). The Bodos (Mech) are the earliest settlers in the Valley of Brahmaputra. Thus, it seems they were not exceptional in this procedure. Further later, with entry different Hindu sects and Christianity, many dynamic changes took place in Bodo society. Observing the present situation it seems that Hinduism and Christianity have acquire a dignified status in Bodo society.

The Traditional religion of Bodos

The traditional religion of Bodos is known as Bathou Dharma, which incorporates rites, rituals, social norms, ethics and philosophy of the Bodos. Endle describes the Bodo religion as “animist and its underlying principle is characteristically one of the fear and dread” (*Endle:1997:p-33*). Leaving aside ‘Bathou’, no God and Goddesses of Bodos can be imagine. Bathou refers to ‘The Religion of five philosophies’. In other words, the word ‘Bathou’ does not mean ‘The Eternal’ but a kind of religion that is related very closely with pentagonal faiths and traditions. The Eternal of this religion as per beliefs and faiths of the Bodos is called ‘Apha Bwrai Bathou’ i.e., he is the supreme God (*Brahma,L:2011:p-47*). The supreme God is also known as Sibrai (Siva in Hindu). He with the help of his wife Sibrui, created the universe, and the first man Monsinsin. But Monsinsin was celibate for life. So Sibrai and Sibrui created man ‘Darimuba’ and woman ‘Singrimuba’ for the propagation of mankind and the Sijou tree (*Euphorbia Splenden*) was created as an emblem of supreme God at the altar.

M. Hajowary describes that the Bodos worship Sibrai or Siva in different names, such as Bathou Bwrai, Khuria Bwrai and Mahadeo, and his wife Parvati is worshipped with the names- Mainao, Lakhi, Songburi and Burli Buray etc. According to Bathou religion Siva or Sibrai is not a deity, but he is above all the deities. He is the supreme God, Almighty and Creator of all beings. Every existence is his creation and he nourishes them all but sometimes he in furious mood causes destruction. So the Bodos worship him for the prosperity of mankind (*Brahma,L:2011:p-15*).

“Jiw Bwrai” is supposed to be holy prophet by the Bodos. This great holy prophet “Jiw Bwrai” or “Siw Bwrai” from the most ancient time down through the ages has been believed by the Bodos to have five heads to preach the religious and spiritual things and five eyes to look into the troubles and distress of the people on earth and so he is also known as the ‘Bathou Bwrai’. Hence, in view of these facts available from the hitherto prevalent religious tales of the Bodo people, ‘Siw Bwrai’ or the Sanskritized ‘Siva’ may be treated as Divine prophet of Bathouism or the Divine preacher of the Bathou philosophy(*Brahma,L:2011:pp-47-48*).

Mohini Mahan Brahma, great Bodo litterateur states that “Siva was called Kharia when he

assumed angry mood (Rudra Murti) to destroy the world. So to protect themselves and their properties men worship ‘Kharia Bwrai’ with meat, rice and fruits for his propitiation. It was not improbable that that the word Kharia Bwrai was shortened as Kharia which was gradually corrupted to ‘Kherai’. This is an important religious festival of the traditional Bodo religion. The Kherai puja is generally performed in the month of Kartik and Aghon, with a view to getting blessings of Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Buri (Lakhsmi) for having productive harvest and for the welfare of the village collectively by the villagers in an open field. Along with Siva and Parvati all other deities are worshipped in Kherai. The Kherai puja is performed for the whole night where all the people from the village as well as from neighbouring village take part in the festive religious occasion. The Daodini (female shaman) plays the main role by performing shamanistic dance through whom oblation are offered to the gods and goddesses. She speaks prophecies and advice the villagers to live in righteous and virtuous path (*Brahma,S:2006:p-14*).

Kherai is a prayer institution of Apha Bwrai Bathou and his associates along with some optional. Excluding Bathou, Kherai institution is never carried out whereas Bathou institution might be carried out without Kherai. There is praying seat of Ba-Raja (five gods for five basic elements) to the south whereas Mainao to the north from Bathou praying seat. In Kherai puja, the gods and goddesses can be classified into two principal classes - (i) Noni Mwdai i.e. gods and goddesses belonging to Bathou family, (ii) Hagrani Mwdai i.e. gods and goddesses not belonging to Bathou family. During Kherai puja Hagrani Mwdai may be excluded due to any reason whereas Noni Mwdai must be prayed. The Noni Mwdai are as follows :- (a) Ailong (b) Khaji (c) Ablu Khungur (d) Agrang (e) Khwila (f) Rajphuthra (g) Rajkhandra (h) Sanjani Aliburah (i) Ai Dibaoliya (j) Ai Bima (k) Mwnasu (l) Burlee Burwi (m) Jwmwn (n) Bagraja (o)Basumwthi (p) Choudri. The other number and names of said gods and goddesses may vary to a little extent from place to place. It is nothing but for reasons of oral practices which have been being carried out since long ago without proper study and culture (*Basumatary:1981:p-17*).

Hinduism in Bodo Society

Bathou worship, which culminates in Kherai and Marai festivals, is the original form of religion of the Bodos. With the Aryanization subsequently, several Aryan sects entered into their mainstream of Bodo religion. In the early years of the twentieth century a new religious movement led by Kalicharan Mech, later known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, took place in the Bodo society. The new and refined cult known as ‘Brahma Dharma’ was founded by Sivnarayan Param Hansa Swami, which was brought and preached among

the Bodos by Kalicharan Brahma in 1906 and onwards (*Brahma, K:2009:p-19-20*).

Then the sect of Saivism or Mani Bathou Siva Dharma was founded by Guru Rupamoni Devi of Gossaigaon (Basugaon) of Chirang district, in 1973 (Bengali 1380). The sect of Saivism or Mani Bathou came into existence as a conflation of the cumulative ideals of Bathou and Brahma cults along with some elements of Hinduism. This religion has brought a major modification of the conception and practice of the traditional Bathou religion. This religion has a considerable number of followers throughout Assam and mainly in Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Bongaigaon districts among the Bodos (*Brahma, S:2006:p-70*).

The Sat Sang religion of Thakur Anukul has also gained good ground among the Bodos of Assam as well as the other parts of India. The most important aspect of this religion is that it has the most liberal view in drawing the people of various castes, creeds, faiths and communities towards the main Hindu fold to form a separate and refined religious society.

The Sat Sang manifest on its philosophy that the basis on which man lives in religion and he is Param Purus. The religion is one, it cannot be many or it does not have other form. The Sat Sang is monotheist in nature and it believes in the incarnation of Purusattam. Purusattam, who incarnates for the welfare of human being on this earth is the creator of the whole universe. Sri Sri Anukul Thakur is the Purusattam who incarnates on the earth for religious inculcation (*Brahma, S:2006:p-79*).

Advent of Christianity in Bodos

The Christian missionaries made a great contribution towards the creation of written Bodo language and paved the way for its growth and development in the subsequent years. In the early part of nineteenth century the Christian missionaries came among the Bodos to preach Christian religion and undertook some benevolent works for the elevation of humanity with a view to attracting people towards Christianity.

Towards the close of the eighteenth century the East India Company having established itself as a permanent power in India, followed a policy of neutrality, as "in the matter of religion the natives of India were peculiarly sensitive". So, William Carey, the British missionary was prohibited from preaching when he arrived in Calcutta for the purpose. He was compelled to make Serampur his head quarter under the Danish flag. The Charter Act of India, 1813, permitted the missionaries to reside in the company's territories under certain conditions. This resulted in the advent of the missionaries in India from England and America (*Barpujari:1968:p:11-12*).

Expansion of Christianity

On request of the Magistrate of Sylhet, William Carey deputed Krishna Pal, his earliest convert, to

North East India for the spread of Gospel. Krishna Pal started his missionary work in Goalpara and Kamrup. In 1829 James Rae set up a branch of the mission at Gauhati, under the patronage of David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier. In 1841 Nidhi Ram, the first Assamese, was converted to Christianity at Jaipur and he was followed by Bati Ram, Ram Sing and Kalibar. In 1838 they brought Gauhati mission in their hand. In 1914 Rev. G.K. Campor was deputed to Darrang district to work for the American Baptist Mission (*Islary:1998: p-211*).

It was felt that it would be easier to preach the gospel among the Bodo-Kocharies at the foot of the Bhutan hills in the northern tract of Brahmaputra Valley. The simplicity of their behaviour and life style and also the bulk of their population attracted the missionaries to work among the Bodo-Kocharies of this tract. Apart from religious prejudices, the Kocharies at the foot of the hills, north of Kamrup and Darrang were found apparently ready for receipt of the gospel. Barker is reported to have made several excursion among this tribe and had discussions on the subject with those who came to Gauhati Church.

Activities of Different Christian Missionaries

The activities of the Christian missionaries among the Bodo-Kocharies have significance in the social development of the Bodos. But no enquiry has been made into the attitude of the missionaries towards Bodos, among whom they experienced. Various denominations of Christian missionaries came among the Bodos with missionary zeal. The various missionary denominations, which came among the Bodos are as follows –

a. The American Baptist Missionaries

They were the first to come into contact with the Bodo-Kocharies. After the establishment of a centre at Gauhati in 1843, they started a Boarding school in the year 1846, where a few number of Bodo pupils was admitted. However, the American Baptist Mission was concentrated mainly on the Garos and in 1865 they entrusted the Australian Baptist Missionary Society to work among the Bodos. The Australian Baptist Mission, in turn, landed over the task to local management and since then the Bodo Baptist Mission in Goalpara has been known as the Goalpara Baptist Church Union. The villages like Bamunigaon, Tukrajhar, Haraputa and some more villages came under their mission.

b. The Anglican Church

Mr. Hessel Mayor who belongs to Anglican Church came to Tezpur for the spread of gospel and established the S.P.G Society. The S.P.G. worked among the Bodo-Kocharies in and around Tezpur. Rev. Sidney Endle was deputed by the Society for the propagation of gospel and he arrived at Tezpur in the year 1864. By that time a large number of Bodos had already been converted to Christianity. Rev. Sidney Endle was successful

in establishing a full-fledged church at Bengnabari near Harisinga (*Islary:1998: p-212*).

c. The Scottish Presbyterian Church

By 1870 onwards the Scottish Presbyterian Church, extended its service to Bodos of Duar areas. They entered among the Bodos, learned Bodo language and propagated the gospel. They established a centre at Panbari to carry out the missionary work. They did extensive work among the Bodos of Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal and initiated a number of them to their religion. Several Bodo people helped the Scottish Missionaries in their mission. Among them, Ranglal Narzary and Jitnal Narzary is rememberable for their pioneering work among the Bodos of Jalpaiguri district (*Brahma,S:2006:p.45*).

d. The Indian Home Mission Society

The Indian Home Mission Society (Lutheran Missionaries) had established a colony in Goalpara district and worked successfully among the Santhals (*Islary:1998:p-212*). The missionaries also came into contact with the neighbouring Bodo villages and invited them into the Church. As early as 1887 a large number of Bodos increase and centres were opened at Gaurang near Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Parkijuli in Kamrup. In between 1927- 28, Aksel Khristiansena took independent charge to run the Bodo church. As a result the Gaurang district was formed in 1929, and after the arrival of Norwegian missionaries Andries Malme and his wife Else Malme, Gaurang district was divided into two districts, Bongaigaon and Gaurang (*Brahma,S:2006:p-44*).

e. The Roman Catholic Church

Though late the Roman Catholic missionaries began their work in Assam under the initiative of two Catholic priests, Fr. Stepen Cacella and Fr. John Gabral in the year 1893. By 1928 Fr. Piasiski was invited to Udalguri by some Bodos, where he baptized them. From 1933 two missionaries Fr. Alessi and Fr. Ravalico carried out their work among the Bodos of Udalguri district.

The first catholic community was established at Nandorbari village of Kokrajhar district. At the invitation of Phulsing, a Bodo leader, Fr. Scunderi visited and brought them into the Catholic Church. A person named Gendra Champramari of Bengtol was send by Phulsing to Guwahati, where he was baptized. Then he was given training at Tezpur. After that he became main instruments of Fr. Morengo in pursuing evangelical work among the Bodos. The villages such as Digholdong, Ranisundri, Patgaon, Jolaigaon, Dangdupur and in Kamrup, Kalajhar, Bogriguri etc. accepted the catholic faith. New missions were opened in 1966 and at Saraibil in 1972, and then followed by Gossaigaon, Dotma, Basbari, Bongaigao, Ballamguri and Kokrajhar. In Darrang district the Parish of Tangla was opened in 1951 and Mission was established at Udalguri in 1966. They have

also established centres at Mangoldoi, Ambagaon, Rowta, Dimakuchi and Masbat.

The relationship between the missionaries of different denominations seems to be close and sometimes fluctuating. All of them are independent and have very little co-ordination among themselves. Very often they do not hesitate to criticize one another in the matter of functioning. The differences between denominations prevent the Christian missionaries from acting as united. The denominational differences especially between the Protestant groups and the Catholic faith, is reflected in even school administration. The students of other sect of Christianity in missionary schools do not enjoy the concessions, which are enjoyed by the students of the same denomination (*Brahma,S:2006:pp-45-46*).

Impact of Christianity in Bodos

Bodo language is the most important language of the Tibeto-Burmese language group in Assam. This language is spoken in the Brahmaputra Valley, Cachar district and in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Apart from the area mentioned above a small group of Bodos are also found in other localities i.e., Nepal, Bhutan and Garo Hills. It was thought that the Bodo language prior to the arrival of the missionaries would have gradually disintegrate and fall into disuse under the impact of dominating Aryan language. By that time a substantial adoption had been occurred. In such a situation, some missionaries came forward to have scientific study on Bodo language along with the spread of gospel. Whatever motive might be there behind such noble purpose, it cannot be denied that the Christian missionaries had unique contribution in consolidating the very foundation of Bodo language and literature.

In 1884 Rev. Sidney Endle pioneered the creation of written Bodo language by his book "An Outline Grammar of Kochari Boro language: as spoken in the District of Darrang". As a result, the Bodo language got written form for the first time and paved the way for giving shape to the present Bodo language and literature. This book also contained a few Bodo folk tales and stories both in English and Bodo language. Thus nit is regarded as a book of grammar as well as of literature. After Endle, Rev. L.O. Skrefsrud wrote "A Short Grammar of the Mech or Bodo language" in 1889. The book studied the Bodo dialects comprising several localities and gave them grammatical forms.

The Bodo folk literature gained momentum with J.D. Anderson's publication of "A Collection of Kochari Folk Tales and Rhymes" in 1895. In 1904, Rev. A. Kristiansen wrote "Grammar and Dictionary of Kochari language". Rev. H. Holrorsrud also brought out "Bodo Grammar" in 1959, from Gaurang Mission of Haltugaon. This book deals with the grammatical rules of the Bodo language of Kokrajhar district (*Narzary: 2000*).

Although the missionaries gained very little success in spreading Christianity among the Bodos, their activities made an impact which was felt throughout twentieth century. As a result of the spreading of Christianity among the Bodos, the Bodo Christians came out of the traditional Bodo society and found the formation of new Bodo-Christian society. The Christians gave up old customs and rituals without changing the basic norms and values. This division stood as barrier in between two societies in the matter of matrimonial relation and socio-religious activities.

The Bodo-Christians have abandoned all traditional festivals, like religious, seasonal and agricultural. Not to speak, the religious festivals like 'Kherai Puja' and 'Garja Puja' but they have also abandoned the popular seasonal festival Baisagu (spring festival) and the important agricultural festival 'Domashi' the harvest festival of the traditional Bodo society. On the other hand, they, with special pomp and grandeur observed Christian festivals like Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter etc. conforming to the universal Christian faith.

The Christianity brought about a significant change in the institution of Bodo marriage. A Christian marriage takes place in the Church because it is considered as religious union of the two persons and cannot be dissolved unless either of the two dies. Unlike the traditional marriage where the choice of the parents and relatives is given priority, in Christian marriage the individual choice or consent is must. Before they get married in the church the girl and the boy are required to give their consent before the religious priest that they will marry each other. But in practice it is also seen that at times Bodo parents or relatives force their boy or girl to give consent against his or her will (*Brahma, S:2006:p-54*).

Contribution to Bodo society

The spread of Christianity has a great contribution to the Bodo society. The Christianity has brought some remarkable changes in their pattern of living, education, custom, habit, belief and values. It was through Bodo Christian society that some of the Western values and culture came among the Bodos, which enabled them to evaluate their own culture and society. It also resulted in the transition of Bodo society from traditional to modernity to some extent. The activities of the missionaries directly or indirectly liberated the indigenous people from

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certain superstitious beliefs and practices. It seems the main objective of the Christian missionaries to spread Christianity. Though the Bodos now are divided in Hindu Bodos and Christian Bodos in the prospect of religion but there cannot be seen any heartache among them. All the sections of Bodos are now peacefully living united and contributing their respective shares to the growth and development of greater Assamese society.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural mobility, which emanated from the religious movement in the beginning of the twentieth century, has brought about a new and multiple socio-behaviour among the Bodos. The new religious cults added new behaviour, ideas, rituals etc. among the followers of those cults in the Bodo society. The differences between different religions or sects are distinct among the followers but they have never come to the surface to create unfair situation in the Bodo society. Rather, they helped the Bodo society to have a secular outlook towards the development task of their society. Religion plays important role in their family and village life but it does not hamper the relations with the followers of other religion or communities as they have learnt to live amidst the multi religion and culture with respect and tolerance. The peaceful co-existence of different religions among the Bodos may continue for long time, unless they are disturbed from the outside.

The process of conversion to different sects of Hinduism like Brahma Dharma, Sat Sang, Saivism, Vaisnavism, etc. brought many reforms in the traditional Bodo society. Changes were brought in marriage institution, economic organization, rites, rituals and customs of the Bodos. Besides, the Christian missionaries have made inroads into the original religious believers and customs of a large section of the Bodo people. The undertaking of some socio-cultural reforms in every new cult or religion of Bodos brought structural change in the society. Even today, many new religious activities have made their appearance among the Bodos, while a large number of them are trying to revive their traditional Bathou religious worship in a peaceful way. Further, they are now living united and working together for the growth and development of their race which is a recent example of unity in diversity.