

## Brahma Religion and Social Change among the Boros

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The Brahma religion is a monotheistic religion and is based on belief in the existence of a Supreme Being called *Brahma*, a corruption of Upanishadic *Brahman*.<sup>1</sup> The Boro protagonists of this religion ascribe the origin to Srimat Param Hansa Sibnanarayan Swami whose identity is shrouded in mystery, but is believed to be hailing from the West.<sup>2</sup> He was the author of *Saranitya Kriya* and *Amrit Sagar* which contained his sermons.

The basic tenets of this religion is that Brahma is the only God and manifests Himself in *Light* that emanates from the sun and the moon. *Hom-Yagya*, meaning burning and worship of fire, known to the Boros as *Ahuti shaonai*, is the symbolic adoration of *Light or Brahma*, and that is all what is required to lead one to *Brahma*. In its ritual the Brahma religion is Vedic, and in its philosophy it is Upanishadic.

The name of Kalicharan Mech,<sup>3</sup> born on 5 Baisaka, 1267 saka (1862) at Karigao village in the erstwhile Dhubri Sub-division of the district of Goalpara, Assam<sup>4</sup> goes down in the history of the propagation of this religion among the Boros. Kalicharan Mech, known to his parents as OKRA, meaning restless and mischievous while still in the prime of his life was much disturbed in his mind over the vices and abuses of the prevailing social and religious practices of his people. The traditional *Bathou* religion is based on belief in, and worship and propitiation of, *Bathou Burai* alias *Sibrai* and *Mynao* alias *Bathou Buri* as chief male and female deities respectively and starry host of lesser divinities. Propitiations of these deities with sacrifices of cock, pigeon, he-goats etc. are the basic practices of the *Bathou* worshippers. Among other social practices which have religious sanctions of the traditionalists is brewing and consumption of *ZOU* or *ZUMAI* (rice beer) as well as its offering to the deities at the time of worship. Kalicharan found no meaning in such religious beliefs and practices. The rearing of poultry birds and pigs practised at large by the Boro community are considered discreditable by the neigh-

bouring Hirdus. This practice, in the opinion of Kalicharan, led to the Boro community being looked down upon by the Hindu neighbours. But what upset him most was the lack of religious unity among the people. He was sad to note that many Boros had become *Sarania* accepting Hinduism and had assumed the titles Koch, Rajbansi, Chaudhuri, Das, Deka,<sup>5</sup> Saiba, Mondol, Karji etc.<sup>6</sup> with a view to getting their social status raised. Moreover, the conversion to *Sarania* cult by accepting Hinduism was not possible for each and every Boro, because it was a costly affair. It has been stated that one name Raisaheb Jagat Chandra Mosa-hary, the then Mouzadar of Patakata had on his initiation into the Hindu fold was required to pay Rs. 6000.<sup>7</sup> Besides, the Christianity was slowly but steadily taking its roots in the Boro Communities in various parts of Assam and North Bengal. In Goalpara district of Assam, the Santal Mission of the Lutheran Churches and the American Baptist Mission had absorbed a number of the Boros<sup>8</sup>, in Darrang and Kamrup districts, the Anglican and the Baptist Missions have drawn a sizeable number of the Boros into their folds.<sup>9</sup> The Scottish Mission had swept over a large number of the Boros of Mahakalguri area of Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal.<sup>10</sup> The Boros were thus breaking up as a community and the total extinction of the people as a distinct tribal group was therefore, feared to be imminent.

Kalicharan Mech perturbed by the above circumstances felt the need of preserving the unity and the true identity of the people and this, he thought, was possible only through a change in the Boro society and religion. At this juncture, he providentially secured and read *Saranitya Kriya* by Paramhansa Sibnarayan. The message contained in it left a deep impression on the mind of Kalicharan. It is, however, not known what particular point of Swami's message impressed him so much, but he found in it his answers to the problems. Thereafter his personal contacts with the Param Hansa who was then staying with Surendra Narayan Singh, one of his disciples and the Zamindar of Parbatjora Estate<sup>11</sup> near Dhubri finally paved the way for his initiation into the Brahma Dharma from the Param Hansa himself in 1905 at the age of 38 at Surendra's residence in Calcutta. On his return from Calcutta after being initiated, he set his mission of propagating his new religion among the Boros on foot by burning *Ahuti* (Hom-Yagya) at Bainaguri village in the auspicious presence of Late Phani Bhusan Chatterjee, an ardent disciple of the Param Hansa. The ceremony reportedly lasted for seven days and seven nights, in course

of which he bade fare-well to twenty six different traditional deities.<sup>13</sup> This ceremony drew unprecedented crowd of the Boro community who thronged to the site to witness the historic event in the spritual life of Kalicharan. Since then he organised annually community *Hom-Yagya* in the Boro predominated areas of Assam and North Bengal. In 1911, he petitioned to the Deputy Commissioner for permission to the effect that the converts of the Brahma Dharma might use *Brahma* as surname. A. G. Lainy, the then D. C. of Goalpara, granted the permission.<sup>14</sup> Henceforth the members of the Boro community converted to this religion were known by the title *Brahma* preceded by their real name. Since then, for an instance, Kalicharan Mech came to be known as Kalicharan Brahma.

The first batch of converts who took initiation from Kalicharan Brahma are named as Jamadar, Charan Mondol, Bijoy Kumar, Adaiyananda Swami, Baidyanath, Kalicharan(II) and Sadak Nepal. Among these converts, Bijoy put up a Brahma Ashram at Amritpur, six kms north of Goseaigaon Railway Station, Kalicharan II established two ashramas - one at his village Simborgaon, about 10 kms north of Kokrajhar, and another at Kokrajhar proper and Sadak Nepal, now popularly known as Farllang Babaji, established his ashram ar Roumari, 8 kms north of Bongaigaon.<sup>15</sup>

### **Kalicharan's Teachings**

Kalicharan Brahma called upon the people to do away with the traditional practice of Bathou worship with host of deities and their propitiations with sacrifices of fowl, pigeon, goat, wine etc. and instead to inculcate the philosophy of one God. Burning of *Ahuti* is sufficient for the realisation of His Self. Burning of *Ahuti* is occasionally followed by sprinkling of ghee, rice, frankienses etc. in the fire. Any ceremony social or religious is to be performed by burning of *Ahuti* only provided the purpose is declared at the begining of the ritual. On the day of burning *Ahuti*, eating of meat and fish curry is prohibited. The logs of the mangoe or aegle marmelos tree only is considered holy enough to be used for the purpose of burning *Ahuti*.<sup>16</sup> For each occasion, there is prescribed *Gayatri Montram* or *Brahma Gayatri* which is either recited or read out in course of the ritual. The ritual usually begins with the pronouncement of invocatory prayer '*OM SAT GURU*' and ends with benediction '*OM SHANTI*' pronounced three times.<sup>17</sup>

### **Social Reforms**

Along with the propagation of the Brahma religion, Guru

Kalicharan launched campaigns for social reforms. He called upon the people to give up the traditional practices of rearing pigs and poultry birds. Brewing and consumption of liquor are to be totally stopped. He encouraged trade, business, weaving, carpentry etc. He also discredited the practice of demanding the bride price at exorbitant rate. It was through his instrumentality that the Boro Mahasanmilan came into existence followed by the Boro Mohila Samiti. The Boro Mahasanmilan reduced the amount of bride price to the maximum of Rs. 51/-, which was later on further reduced to Rs. 25/- by the Mohila Samiti.<sup>18</sup> The people of this community have stopped the practice of conducting the marriage ceremonies with wine and meat curries.<sup>19</sup>

On educational front, Kalicharan urged the British government for more schools in the Boro-dominated areas. He also pleaded for the teaching of the Boro children in English language and provide the educated youths with employment opportunities.<sup>20</sup> He established Middle school cum weaving and carpentry centre at Tipkai in 1913 which was subsequently shifted to Sapatgram near Fakiragram in the present district of Kokrajhar and was upgraded to Sapatgram Amalgamated Academy. To facilitate the schooling of the Boro children, he established a Brahma Boarding house at Dhubri.<sup>21</sup>

Guru Kalicharan also pleaded before the Simon Commission for the reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly and jobs in the government. In the 1937 election to the Legislative Assembly of Assam, Late Rupnath Brahma contested the election from the reserve seat and was returned.<sup>22</sup>

The Brahma Dharma, though drew substantial number of the Boro population into its fold in Assam and North Bengal, failed to achieve the desired goal. The people accepting the Brahma religion continued the traditional practices of brewing and drinking of rice beer. Rearing of pigs and poultry birds continued. They are, according to the avowed principles and the religious ethics, supposed to eat meat or fish, but they appear to have given up this code of conduct.

The fact that the Brahma religion could not take deep root in the Boro society can be attributed to the following factors. First, many traditionalists disapprove of the offering of rice in the burning of Ahuti, because it might, they think, incur the wrath of the goddess Lakshmi. Secondly, Joynarayan Bosumatari and Satish Chandra Bosumatari launched counter movement against the Brahma religion. The progenitors of this movement were the

followers of Guru Kalicharan Brahma, but subsequently deviated from it and revitalised the traditional Bathou religion with its certain elements in the rituals reformed. For instance, he propagated the Bathou worship without sacrifices of fowl, wine, goat etc.<sup>23</sup> which were considered to be the basic shortcoming of the traditional Bathou religion. Thirdly, Jagat Chandra Mosahary, mouzadar of Patakata and a protagonist of the Sarania cult not only resisted the spread of this new religion but also objected vehemently to the use of Brahma as the title, by the Brahma converts.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, as noted earlier, the Christianity was steadily absorbing a large number of the Boro population into its fold. In the district of Goalpara, the seat of the beginning and the spread of Brahma religion among the Boros, Theklo Bosumatari launched a parallel movement against the Brahma religion and preached Christianity.

Whatever be the degree of resistance, the fact remains that most of the educated Boros accepted the new religious order and that the Boro elites of the present days are drawn from this religious group.

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