

Legendary origin of the Boro Clans and their ramifications

R.N. Mosahary

The Boro Mahari system is based on *totemism*. J.G. Frazer and A.A. Goldenwised define totemism as a relation, a type of intimate association of various material objects or animals with social units like clan. Each Mahari bears the name of a specie of animal, tree or some material object, and the name of the totem is suffixed by *aroi*, *roi* or *auri* - the patronymic commonly used by the people in naming their clan or sept².

Origin

It is not known how the Boro clan system originated, nor can the exact nature of relationship of the people with their respective totems be precisely ascertained in the absence of any historical evidence. There are, however, oral traditions current among the people as regards its origin. Here we present a few of such traditions. One tradition goes that in the remote past, the Boros in course of their wanderings in quest of place for settlement halted at one place for rest and meal. While cooking was in progress, the enemy appeared from the blue and attacked them. The people fled helter and skelter for the safety of their lives leaving behind their food half-cooked, and sought refuge in all possible ways. The people who were cooking food ran away in one group and took refuge elsewhere away from the spot. This group came to be known as the *Sampramarois*, meaning 'the people who left food half-cooked'. Some among them did not leave the spot and decided to resist the enemy at all costs. These people were called *Borgoaris*, meaning 'the strong and courageous people'. Again some of them remained on the spot depending on the mercy of God and they were called *Isorarois* or *Sargoa-rois*, meaning 'God folks' or 'Heaven-folks'³. Some

of them sought refuge entering into a *Narzi Ko'* (container of dry jute leaves) and they came to be known as the *Narziarois*, meaning dry jute leaf-folks. Some took shelter entering into the crevices of the earth and hence came to be called *Bosumatarois*, meaning 'earth-folks'. The people fleeing into the deep forests infested by tigers constituted a clan known as *Mosarois*, meaning 'tiger-folks'. At places in the district of Darrang (now Darrang and Sonitpur), these people call themselves *Baghlarois*. The people escaping into the nearby hills were called *Hajoarois*, meaning 'hill-folks'. Some jumped into the nearby river and were called *Doimarois*, meaning 'riverfolks'³. As regards the origin of the *Doimari* clan, Endle has a different version. He writes that in olden days, those Boros who were living by the side of the river constituted a fisherman class and were called *Doimarois*⁴.

According to the second tradition, a group of the Boros in course of their wanderings in quest of place for settlement, came upon a big tree that had spread its branches far and wide. They selected the spot for their habitation, but the tree must be felled to make the place habitable. Some of them accordingly began to cut the tree while others were engaged in cooking their meal under the tree. When the tree was about to fall, the fellers asked all others to move away to a distance. Some people moved away from the spot and some did not. Different groups scattered in different directions and took refuge in different ways in different spaces as noted in earlier tradition. Each group taking refuge in the same space constituted a clan, and the space or the mode of refuge of each group became the name of the clan⁵.

E.H. Pakyntein traces a similar tradition as regards the origin of the Boro clans. According to the tradition recorded by him, there were originally twelve Boro families and that a certain *Rakshasa* (demon) appeared one day to devour them

all whereupon the Boro families ran away from their respective homes. One family rose to heaven and were called *Sorgoarois*, another took refuge under the earth and took the name *Bosumatarois*, another took refuge behind the gourd and were known as the *laoarois*. At places, the *laoarois* are called *Kaklouarois*, meaning pumpkin-folks, and so forth. From this tradition it emerges that there were originally twelve families and so also the original number of the Boro clans. Bhuben narzi refers to this number of original Boro clans, viz., *Sorgoarois*, *Mosarois*, *Ramchiarois*, *Narzarois*, *Bosumatarois*, *Sompramarois*, *Laoarois*, *Doimarois*, *Kerkatarois*, *Laharois*, *Kaklarois* and *Hajoarois*.

The above tradition referring to twelve Boro families and the emergence of twelve Boro clans from these families, apparently corroborated by Narzi's reference to twelve original Boro clans appears to bear certain amount of historical validity. S.K. Bhuyan refers to an early 'Kachari' village near Sadiya where twelve 'Kachari' families settled in pre-historic period. This was perhaps in the earliest stage of social formation under our review.

Different traditions referred to above are more or less identical and puts emphasis on the fact that the totems appeared as protectors to some group of the people while for some other groups, it was certain experiences with them that led to the establishment of their relationship with the totems, and this lies at the background of the origin of the totemic clan system of the Boros.

Sub clans

The twelve original sub-clans subsequently underwent further division into sub-clans, and apart from those clans referred to earlier, he includes in his list the following: *Sibingarci*,

the sesamum folks; Gandleario, the snail folks; Goiaroi, the areca nut folks; Dingdingaroi, the vessel folks; Moarois the moa fish folks; Oaroi, the bamboo folks; Kerketuaroi; the squirrel folks; Padamaoi, the Padam tree folks; Sobaiarois, the black gram nut folks; Mohilario; the Mohila folks; and so on. Sanyal refers to a number of Boro clans within the districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling of West Bengal, such as, Bamondas, Changputang, katajare etc.¹⁰ which are hardly heard of today either in Bengal or Assam. Rup Nath Brahma refers to Brahmaroi clan¹¹. Similarly,¹² Das Gupta refers to Sijouarois, the Cactus-folks.

Functions of Clans & Sub-clans

Each clan had its own specific area of social and economic activities in early days of social formation. In this respect, Bhuben Narzi writes that the first man Monsinsin descended from heaven and assigned a particular job to do to each clan. For instance, the sorgoarois alias Isorarois were to devote themselves exclusively to priestly activities, such as, chanting of mantras, officiating social and religious ceremonies like marriage, funerary, propitiation of deities etc. and were not supposed to work as cultivators. The members of the Sompramaroi alias Yaopramaroi clan were to engage themselves as cooks and were included in the priestly class. The narzarois were qualified to sprinkle holy water of peace during the religious and social ceremonies while the Ojhas from Sorgoaroi or Isoaroi clan are in the process of chanting mantras. The narziarois, therefore, are included in the quasi-priestly class¹³. Rup Nath Brahma considers the Brahmarois or Brahmaris¹⁴ to be qualified to perform the priestly activities thus fitting them into the same rank with the sompramarois alias yaopramarois, and Sorgoarois alias Isoarois. Endle¹⁵ categorises them into the quasi-priestly Class¹⁵. The people of the Bosumataroi clan are classed as the land owners or the land lords who

njoyed special privileges of using lands free of cost for the disposal of the deads by the way of cremation or burial which others did not. The Osaroi alias Baghlarois were required to confine their activities to hunting. So also the Doimarois to fishing. The Kerkatarois alias jigabarois were supposed to work as the suppliers of thatch grasses and fire woods.

The division of the original twelve Borolans into many sub-clans is the unique development of an ordinary social phenomenon and naturally invests its history with special importance. The multiple of Sub-clans that spring up subsequently appear to occupational designations¹⁶. For instances, *Bibingarois*, the sesamum folks were allowed to cultivate sesamum plants only, *Bingbingarois*, the music folks were to earn their livelihood by begging with the help of their music, *Dingarois*, the vessel folks were supposed to live on making and selling bamboo vessels, *Goiarois*, the areca nut folks devoted to the cultivation of areca nut trees, *Obaiarois*, the black gram nut-folks to the cultivation of black gram nuts, *Moarois*, the moa fish-folks to the catching and selling moa fish and so on. Besides, some of the sub-clans derived their names from those of the localities they dwell in while some from peculiar experiences they had in their lives. Endle has given some illustrations to this effect. He writes that the *Ramchiarois* were so called because they lived in Ramcha mouza of Kamrup. Again, a group of people while crossing a river were about to get drowned as the water got deeper and deeper. Some of them saved themselves by catching hold of *Kagras* (rushes) while some other by holding the *nolos* (reeds) and as such, were known¹⁷ as the *Kagrabariarois* and *Nolobariarois* respectively.

The division of a few principal clans of the Boros into numerous sub-clans based on vocation as illustrated above is not isolated case. This

is so particularly among the Hindu castes. R.C.Majumdar and others write,

"In place of four original varnas or class groups, there are today thousands of caste divisions and sub-divisions, and the number still is growing"¹⁸

The above class-groups were vocation based. The Bhagavat Gita says,

'Caturvarnyam maya srstam
gunakaramavi bhagasah
tysakartam api man
viddyaya akartaram auyayam'¹⁹

(The four fold order was created by me according to the division of quality and work. Though I am its Creator, know me to be incapable of action or change)

Social Status of the clans

Keeping the various Boro clans and the areas of their activities in view, C Sanyal assigns the highest social status to the people of sompramarois alias Yaopramarois, The Narziarois being placed in the second rank. the Bosumatarois ranked third while the Mosarois and Doimarois belonged to the lowest status²⁰. Endle described the Sorgoarois alias Isoarois as non-cultivating class, but as deoris or ojhas etc. The people of this class, therefore, can be assigned to the rank with the sompramarois alias Yaopramarois. The Brahmarois alias Brahmaris being qualified to perform the priestly activities²¹ can well be fitted into the first rank along with the sompramarois, yaopramarois or sorgoarois. In the opinion of Endle, the Brahmarois constitute a quasi priestly class²². With the exception of the above few clans, nothing is heard of others in relation to their position in the society. It is very likely that other clans were included within the rank of one or the other group whose place in the society have been indicated a while ago. This can be illustrated by the fact that the Mosarois and Doimarois

though basically differed from each other in their origin and functions belonged to the same social rank. So also the sompramarois, sorgoarois and Brahmarois, who belonged to the same priestly and quasi-priestly classes.

Hindu Influence

The influence of the Hindu culture which is known to be far more advanced than any other culture of the aborigines is felt in many aspects of the Boro society. This influence is markedly visible in the clan system of the Boro society. The division of work among the various clans and sub-clans suggests considerable degree of influence of the elaborate institution known as the caste system or *Varna* among the Vedic Hindus on the Boro society and culture. The society of the Vedic Hindus are classed into four distinct and rigid caste groups based on birth, viz., the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras²³ and it is without parallel in the world. The Aryan conquests of various non-Aryans or the aborigines of North East India, their absorption into the Aryan society by being progressively aryanised in their culture, their outlook, their ways of life and the inevitable acceptance of the sanskritic culture and language by them are too glaring the event to go unnoticed. Under these circumstances, the contention that the Vedic Hindus largely influenced the traditional Boro society and culture can not be dismissed merely as a myth and conjecture. In partial explanation of the terms used to denote the names of the Boro clans and sub-clans, it is to be observed that Sorgoarois and Bosumatrois are obviously sanskritised forms if not of Hindu origin altogether, the Boro suffix *aroi* or *roi* being attached to the sanskrit formations Swarga (heaven) and Vasu (Earth) or Vasumata (Mother Earth). As for the name Bosumataroi it is not definitely known under what circumstances, a non-Boro formation came to be applied to this particular Boro clan. The

term 'Bosumataroi' means 'Earth-folk', and if at all the origin of this clan is associated with 'Earth' in any way as narrated in the Tradition as referred to earlier, the proper name of this clan should have been founded on Boro formation 'Ha' meaning 'Earth', the equivalent sanskrit term being 'Vasu', and thus 'Hasari' or 'Hasaroi' should have been the proper name of the clan. Nevertheless, the possibility of 'Hasari' or 'Hasaroi' being original name of this particular clan can not be ruled out altogether and that in the process of the sanskritisation of the Boros, the original name 'Hasari' or 'Hasaroi' had been changed into 'Vasumataroi' and then into 'Bosumataroi'. So also the 'Sorgoaroi' or 'Isoaroi'. These names are founded on sanskritic 'Swarga' and 'Iswar' meaning 'Heaven' and 'God' respectively. At places, 'Mosaroi' is called 'Baghlaroi', the name of sanskrit formation 'Bagha' meaning 'tiger'.

The above few illustrations go a long way to show the direct influence of the Hindus on the Boro society.

Reference to 'Brahmaroi' or 'Brahmari' by Rup Nath Brahma and Endle as clan name as noted earlier is subject to our critical review, and is of latest origin based on the formation 'Brahma', a new religious cult suffixed by the boro patronymis 'roi' or 'ri'. It is precisely known that the followers of 'Brahma' religion preached by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, a desciple of Srimat Param Hansa secured permission from the Government to use 'Brahma' as their surnames. Permission to this effect was accorded in 1911 by the then Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, A.G.Lainy²⁴. The use of Brahma, Brahmaroi or Brahmari after one's name, therefore, indicates the one being follower of 'Brahma' religion, and not the clan he belongs to. This can further be corroborated by an illustration that many Boros belonging to Mosaroi, Bosumataroi, Narzaroi clans write 'Brahma' on their admittance into this new religious order.

Totemic Rules

J.H.Heckles mentions taboos and rules of avoidance, such as, totem must not be touched, killed or eaten; rituals and mourning for the totem as the main characteristics of the Indian totemism²⁵. These characteristics of totemism are found in perfect conformity with those of the Boro system of totemism. In the primitive days, the Boros are rigidly bound by totemic rules. For instances, the *Narzarois*, the jute-folks held the jute in special reverence, and as a rule, they were bound to chew certain quantity of their totem (jute leaves) on ceremonial occasions²⁶. The killing of a tiger was a taboo for the people of *Mosaroi* clan, and that they were required to mourn the death of a tiger²⁷. Herbert Risley upholds this view stating that the members of this clan were required to throw away their earthen utensils by the way of atonement when a tiger was killed in the neighbourhood²⁸. J.D. Anderson is quoted as having contended that, not to speak of killing a tiger, they were not even allowed to speak disrespect fully of tigers, and if they²⁹ killed one, they had to give a feast in atonement. The *Gandlearois*, snail-folks, could under no circumstances kill or trample under the foot their totem although they were required to chew a snail with vegetables as a purificatory ceremony after the death of a member of the family³⁰. The *Sijouarois*, the cactus-folks, held the cactus plant in special reverence³¹, although people of all clans too considered it holy as the symbol of their traditional Supreme God *Bathou Raja*³². Similarly, the people of other clans were bound by such totemic rules in one way or other. The vocation based sub-clans too strictly adhered to their respective spheres of activities. The members of various clans, however, ate and drink together freely³³ which was the unique feature of the Boro society in contrast to the Hindu society ridden with caste groups rigidly bound by rules of avoidance and inequality.

The above account of clan system establishes the fact that originally the Boros, as a tribal society were egalitarians with no differentiation in their status, functions and profession. Under the circumstances, such as, rise in population, the society must have been stratified into septs with clear cut areas of social and economic activities for their livelihood. With the emergence of property, scope for economic pursuits and rise in population, the principal septs underwent further stratification into more classes of differentiated spheres of activities and professions. The pleasant part of the society, however, lies in the fact that there had been no differentiation among the various groups in their status as they ate and drank together freely.

Notes & Reference

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3. C.Sanyal, **The Meches and Totos**, p. 6
4. S. Endle, **The Kacharis**, p. 6
5. C. Sanyal, **op. cit.**, p.6
6. E.H. Pakyntein, **Census of India**, 1961, Vol.III, part V-A, 1964, p 58
7. B. Narzi, **Boro Samaj Aru Samskriti**, p 131
8. S.K. Bhuyan, **Kachari Buranji**, p . 1
9. S. Endle, **op.cit.**, pp 26-27
10. C. Sanyal, **op.cit.**, p.6
11. R.N. Brahma, **Boro Yatir Sangkipta Parishay**, p. 16
12. R. Das Gupta, **Art in Mediaeval Assam**, p.20
13. B. Narzi, **op.cit.**, pp 131,149; Endle, **op.cit.**, pp 24-25
14. R.N. Brahma, **op.cit**, p.16
15. Endle, **op.cit.**, pp 24,25
16. **Ibid.**, p 16
17. **Ibid.**, pp 9-10
18. R.C. Majumdar and Others, **The Vedic Age: The History and culture of Indian people**, Vol. 1, p. 388

19. S. Radhakrishna, **Bhagavat Gita IV** : 1 3
20. Sanyal, **op.cit.**, p.6
21. **Ante**, fn.14
22. **Ante**, fn. 15
23. **Rig Veda**, Purusha Sukta X: 90
24. M.C. Saikia, 'Brahma Movement' in K.S. Singh, ed., **Tribal Movements in India**, Vol 1, p 242
25. John V.P. Ferriera, **op.cit** p 3
26. Endle, **op.cit.**, pp 24-27
27. Ibid.
28. H. Risley, **The People of India**, p. 103
29. E.H. Pakyntein, **op.cit.**, 1961 : Assam, Vol. III, part V-A, p 58
30. Endle, **op.cit.**, p. 25
31. Das Gupta **op.cit.**, p. 20