

**RELIGION OF THE BOROS
AND
THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSITION
(ABSTRACT)**

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The Boros are one of the largest indigenous tribe of North East India. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman Family of Mongolian race. The fact that Boros once wielded great power and influence in the entire North East is beyond doubt. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee Writes, "The Bodos spread over all Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal forming a solid block in Eastern India and they formed one of the main bases of the present day population of these tract." The Boros now scattered all over Assam, North Bengal and in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, etc. However majority of them are found on the Northern Bank of the Brahmaputra valley. Although they have their own culture, language, and religion, they are not immune to external influence, especially in their socio-cultural life.

THE PROBLEM:

From the primitive age to the modern, religion has played a very important role in moulding the socio-cultural life of the Boro people. In the traditional agrarian society, every sphere of life of a Boro man or women is woven into the fabric of rites and rituals of his religion. *Bathou*, which culminates in *Kherai* and *Morai* festivals, is the original form of religion of the Boros. It upholds the existence the existence of thousands of deities with Lord Siva as the head of their pacification through sacrificial rites.

But with the advent of many new religious sects such as *Brahma dharma*, *Ek Sharan Nam Dharma*, *Satsang*, *Saivism*, *Vaisnavism*, etc., the Boro society witness a new direction in all spheres of life. Besides, the Christian missionaries have made inroads into the original religious beliefs and customs of a large section of Bodo people. The Christian Missionaries were instrumental in the matter of initiating Boro language into written form. They wrote Boro grammar book and translated the Bible into Boro

language for the spreading of Christianity. The American Baptist missionaries were the first to come into contact with Boro Kocharies. Though the first and chief aim of the Baptist missionaries was to spread the gospel among the Boros, yet it has great significance in the history of Boro society as the missionaries inspired them to develop Boro language in a scientific way by pioneering the creation of grammar of Boro language. It was thought that the Boro language would be disintegrated under the impact of dominating Aryan language, but the missionaries stood against the process of disintegration and added another dimension in the Boro society. The Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church played their role in moulding the Boro society.

Hinduism brought many reforms in the traditional Boro society. Changes were brought in marriage institution, economic organization, rites rituals, and customs of the Boros. The changes and reforms brought upward social mobility and political consciousness among the Boros and they were able to receive good attention of other caste Hindus. *Ek Sharan Nam Dharam* created a caste amongst the Boros and made the Boro society almost similar to the mainstream Assamese society. A large section of Boro people left their language and culture and merged themselves up with the *Sarania* section of Assamese society. Gradually some social division came into existence in the Boro society and it brought tremendous change in the socio-economic and cultural set up among the Bodos.

Even today many new religious activities are making their appearance among the Bodos and a good number of them have tried to revive the traditional *Bathou* religious worship. The educated section of Boros has, readily, accepted *Brahma dharma*, while others have gone to *Satsang* group.

As a result of the impact of various sectarian and religious forces, the Boro society have been facing new social dimensions from time to time.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE:

Most of the recent studies on the history of Boro society and culture did not pay attention to the transition of the present Boro society. The three relevant works- Bhaben Narji's *Boro Kocharir Somaj aru Snskriti*: Gauhati 1960; Dr. R.N. Mushahary's *Social History of Bodos*: NEHU, 1986; and Dr. Kameswar Brahma's work, *A Study of Socio-Religious Belief, Practice and Ceremonies of the Bodos*: Calcutta, 1992; are basically the studies of traditional aspects of the Boros. Dr. P.C. Bhattacharjya's *A Descriptive Analyses of Boro Language*: G.U.1977 makes only a few references of Boro society. Chandana Bhattacharjee's *Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement*: New Delhi 1996; Hiracharan Narjinarie's *Reassertiveness of the Great Bodos*: Calcutta, 2000; Unpublished M. Phil dissertation of Bijoy Kr. Daimary *Bodo Politics in Assam since Independent*: 1990 and unpublished M. Phil dissertation of Ajanta Brahma *The Emerging Role of All Bodo Student's Union*: NEHU, 1990; are primarily the studies of political aspects of the Boros.

Till today very few works have been done on them and many aspects still remain undone.

OBJECTIVE:

The focus of attention in this study is the impact of religion on the socio-economic and the cultural life of the Boros and transition from tradition to modernity. The work is an attempt to examine, evaluate and

make critical assessment of the process of development at various institutional level of the Boro society till the present time.

DATA:

The present study is mainly based on the primary sources like proceeding of the meetings of the *Boro Samaj*, *Boro Maha Sanmilan*, *Boro Sahitya Sabha*, by laws of religious organizations, *Pandulipis* of *Boro Samaj*, etc. and secondary sources like contemporary writings, manuscripts, etc. Besides, relevant secondary sources like published books, articles, journals, unpublished thesis have also been surveyed. Interviews with knowledgeable persons, designated religious workers, social workers have been conducted to present the major findings as objectively as possible. The contemporary books, journals, and articles are also studied in this work.

ORGANIZATION:

The thesis has been organized under the following seven chapters.

Chapter I: (Introduction)

This chapter deals with the Background of the study and gives brief account of land and people of their past history. From ancient time to the modern the traditional religion of the Boros has come into contact with different religion and culture, which has resulted in socio-cultural transition of the Boros. The traditional Boro culture, which was introvert in nature, came under the external pressure due to historical contact or cultural domination of great Indian tradition and could not remain immune to external forces. An upward social mobility of the Boros began with the appearance of different religion and culture in their society.

Chapter II: (The Bathou Religion and Traditional Boro Society)

This chapter deals with the aboriginal *Bathou* religion and the traditional Boro society and its present form. The *Bathou* religion concerns belief and social institutions and maintain the social relationship that exists in society. In the traditional society of Boros, individual, family and community lives in general are regulated by religion, which influence their behaviours, action faith for enforcing social norms and ethics. Religion is also responsible for their food habit, organization of institution, decision-making exercise of socio-economic life etc. Change in the traditional society and organization are also motivated by religion. So *Bathou* religion was a system of belief as well as the agent of value enforcement and action motivation till the recent days.

Though Endle describes *Bathou* religion as animist, scholar like P.C. Bhattacharjya and other gives different opinion regarding the *Bathou* religion. *Bathou Brai* the supreme of the Boros and his worship is related to origin and creation.

The *Bathou* dharma and Siva cult were identical at a time and must have originated from the same concept.

Like Siva is known Bhupati, Ganapati, Pretapati, Maheswar, Parameswar etc. *Bathou Brai* is also worshipped with different names such as *Bathou Brai*, *Song Raja*, *khuria*, *Khuria Brai*, *Mahadeo*, *Obong Laori*, etc. and his wife or Parbati is worshipped with the names, *Mainao*, *Lakhi*, *Songbrui*, *Burli Buroy*, etc.

Siva is believed to be originator of all forms of dance, music, play, and art. Like Nataraja, *Jarapagla* is another name of *Bathou Brai*, the devine dancer and singer who performs a cosmic dance (*Tandava Ntitya*) and

produce *Ragas* like *Basanta Bhairava Panchamas*, *Megha Parvati*, whome Boros call *Bhurlum Buri* or *Sibraini*.

The Boros worship *Bathou Brai* or *Siva* as their supreme god along with other gods and goddesses. Though idol worship is not prevalent among the Boros, yet they worship *Sijou* plant (*Euphorbia Splenden*) as the Symbol of *Siva*.

Kherai is another religious festival of the traditional Boro religion, which is generally performed in the month of *Kartik* and *Aghan* with a view to getting blessing of *Bathou Brai* and *Mainao Brui* (*Lakshmi*) for having bumper harvest and for the welfare of the village.

The *Bathou* religion and its philosophy based on *Asarba* or five principles uphold the whole fabric of social custom, economic institution, beliefs and rites of the Boro society.

The traditional Boro society, which came into contact with the different culture and societies, underwent a great change in the twentieth century. The change in the different institutional level have been taking place from time to time and this changes are visible in institutions like religion, marriage, economy, social customs and also in the position and status of men and women, food habit, dress and other spheres of life. Further, appearance of different religion brought some structural change in the traditional *Bathou* religion too. These changes are found in the forms of sanskritization and also westernization to some extend.

Though there was no social division in the traditional Boro society, an exposure to complex social system of caste Hindu fold has made an impact on it by forming new social division, the result of the strong influence of Hindu religion.

Chapter III: (Impact of Christianity among the Boros)

This chapter deals with the spread of Christianity and its impact on Boro society. In fact, Christian missionaries made a unique contribution towards the early creation of written Boro language and paved the way for its growth and development in the subsequent years. In the early part of early part of 9th century Christian missionaries came among the Bodos to preached the Christian religion and undertook some benevolent works for the elevation of humanity with a view to attract the people towards Christianity.

Though William Carey, the first British missionary was prohibited from preaching when he arrived at Calcutta for the purpose, the charter Act of 1813 permitted missionaries to reside in the company's territory under certain conditions. This resulted in the advent of the missionaries to reside in the company's territory in the advent of the missionaries to India as well as to Boro areas from England and America.

In 1914 Rev. G.K. Camphore was deputed to Darrang district to work for the American Baptist Mission. It was felt that it would be easier to preach the gospel among the Boro Kocharies at the foot of Bhutan hill in the northern tract of Brahmaputra valley. The simplicity of their behavior and life style and also the bulk of their population attracted the missionaries to work among the Boro Kocharies of this tract.

Various denominations of Christian missionaries came among the Boros with great missionary zeal. They are American Baptist Missionaries, the Australian Baptist Missionary Society, the Anglican Church, the Indian Home Mission Society, Lutheran Missionaries, Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church, etc. All of them have their share of contribution towards the Boro society.

The impact of Christianity on Boro language and society was great.

Firstly, it was thought by many great scholars that Boro language would be disintegrated and fell into disuse under the impact of dominating Aryan language and many had given up their mother tongue completely. It was during that time that the Christian missionaries came and made unique contribution of consolidating the very foundation of Boro language and literature through scientific study on Boro language along with the spreading of gospel. The missionaries also tried to introduce Boro textbook in the primary level of schools and Sunday schools.

Secondly it also checked to some extent the process of becoming *Sarania*, who gave up their own culture and language in order to become a *Sarania*.

The Christianity also brought about a significant change in the institution of marriage in the institution of marriage and socio-religious network in the Christian villages. Unlike the traditional marriage where the choice of the parents and relatives were given priority, individual choice or consent became must in the Christian marriage. The church is the smallest unit of religious and social administration headed by a pastor.

The activities of missionaries directly or indirectly freed the indigenous people from certain superstitious beliefs.

The contribution of the missionaries in the field of education cannot be underestimated. They establish and imparted education in backward Boro areas when there were hardly any institutions. The missionaries penetrated into interior areas where government welfare measure had hardly reached.

But the Christian missionaries could not do much headway with their Boro mission as the Brahma dharma movement headed by Kalicharan Brahma was going on simultaneously.

One of the striking factor of majority Boros in not embracing Christian religion even today shows that they are adverse to beef eating. Under the influence of Hinduism the Boros consider as holy creature, so eating beef is considered as committing sin.

The process of conversion to Christianity is still going on in Boro areas at a snail pace.

Chapter IV: (The Religious Movement)

This chapter deals with the conversion to different sects of Hinduism and its impact on Boro society.

It is difficult to define Hinduism because of its manifold forms. Unlike Islam or Christianity, Hinduism is neither a particular sect of belief or social system nor a founded religion. "The present form in which we find Hinduism today is the product of long continuous course of evolution of the spirit of Hinduism through hundreds and centuries." (A.K. Banerjee: *Discourses on Hindu Spiritual Culture*: Vol. I. New Delhi, 1989, p. XIII.) A thorough analysis shows that the origin and development of Bathou religion is also a part of the evolution of the spirit of Hinduism in the subcontinent, India. It appears that many elements of *Saivism* sect of Hinduism came within the domain of Bathou religion or vice-versa. The *Saivism* and *Bathouism* are the two diverse forms of the same cult of Hinduism.

In fact the Hindu religious movement began in 1906, when Kalicharan Brahma brought the *Brahma* religion from Siv Narayan Paramhansa Swami and preached it among the Boros. It was a socio religious movement, brought a tremendous change in the traditional Boro society and in different institutional level. By accepting *Brahma dharma*, religion of Boros directly came within the fold of mainstream Hinduism. It was the time that Boro

society witnessed all round development in education and social organizations. The pace of cultural assimilation with the Hindus became faster as a result of the spread of the *Brahma* religion and the Boros increasingly showed interest in the Hindu religious texts. And in the subsequent decades some new cults, admixture of *Bathou* and *Brahma* thoughts, originated in the Boro society and several other Hindu cults also made inroads into their society.

A *Saivism* sect, *Mani Bathou Siva dharma* was founded by Guru Rupamani Devi, of Gossaigaon (Basugaon) of Bongaigaon district in Bangla 1380. The *Mani Bathou* came into being as a conflation of the cumulative ideas of *Bathou* and *Brahma* cult along with some cult of Hinduism. Though the *Mani Bathou Siva dharma* made a comprehensive addition Hindu belief and practice in the traditional system, yet the traditional values and culture of Boros remain unchanged.

The *Satsang* religion of Thakur Anukul has gained a good ground among the Boros of Assam as well as other parts of India this religion has the most liberal views in drawing the people of various caste, creed, faith and communities towards the main Hindu fold to form a separate and refined religious society giving them high religious position. There are more than hundred designated workers and several thousand devotees of *Satsang* among the Boros of Assam.

Other important development of *Bathouism* is the appearance of refined *Bathou* cult with *Bhakti* movement. It was the old *Bathou* made to worship in the new mode by singing devotional songs and offering *Prasad* (mixture of edible things) to *Bathou Brai* and *Mainao Brui* at his altar.

There is another Branch of *Bathouism* Known as *Bathou Siva dharma* professed by Swani Nabin Brahmari, who established *Arjya Brahma Gyan*

Mat or *Baba Sidhya Yogashram* at Ultapani of Kokrajhar district of Bhutan border. The concept of Siva, the ultimate reality of this religion is completely drawn from the Hindu scripture like *Upanisad*, *Puran*, *Vedas* and adapted in *Bathou* belief.

Besides that an insignificant number of Boros have been converted to other Hindu cult like *Bhakti* cult of Saibaba, *Chaitanya*, etc.

The process of conversion to different sect of Hinduism has accentuated a new process of *Sanskritization* in the Boro society and has made it a critical one.

Chapter V: (A Brief Survey of the Growth and Development of Boro Language and Literature.)

This chapter deals with the process of the growth and development of Boro language and literature and the historical factors, responsible for giving present form to their language and literature.

The Boro language was first put into writing in Roman script in the year 1885 by Christian missionaries with the publication of Sidney Endle's *An outline of Kochari Grammar*. It was followed by *The Kocharies*, (1911) which gives the brief picture of the Boro society and it also comprises a collection of folklore tradition like folk tales, folk songs and beliefs of Boro Kocharies both in Boro and English languages.

Though the Christian missionaries did the premier works, yet the creative literature developed much latter as a result of great effort made by *Boro Chatra Sanmilan*, which under the impact and impulse of the great Boro leader Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma found a new direction of self-consciousness. The *Brahma dharma* movement culminated in the thought of self-identity and national integrity. The progress of *Brahma* movement and

the process of the development in the field of education and literature went hand in hand among the Boros.

In the *Bibar* age, (1919-1937) Boro literature originated through journals, periodicals, souvenirs in a simple and clear Boro language with the love and emotion for their society, and this group of writers were guided by the philosophy of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma.

In *Alongbar* age (1938-1951) the Boro literature took an independent form and litterateur were the real architect of Boro literature. It was the time that Boro society began to enjoy fruits of reformation movement of Brahma religion.

The literary creation of that period fulfilled the various needs of the Boro society by creating various cultural contents. The new enlightened Boros laid the foundation of elite group and this group could widen and developed the Boro culture through contact and exchange with other developed communities of India, which lessen the socio-cultural distance between the Boros and the fellow countrymen. The reformation period culminated in the thought of national integrity among the Boro writers and their literary contribution gave rise of national feeling among the common Boro people.

On 28th September 1950, the Boro literary club was formed at Dhubri town with a view to include Boro language in the academic curriculum of schools in Goalpara district and to work for Boro literature. But after working for one year, they realized that the only worker of Dhubri town were not enough to fulfill their mission, rather they needed active cooperation of the Boros of the all parts of the country.

In the same year Boro students under the initiative of Samar Brahma Chaudhury and Prasenjit Brahma founded the *Boroni Anchai Afat* to work for the development of Boro culture, language and literature.

As a result of their great effort a huge conference was held at Basugaon town on 15th and 16th November 1952, which was attended by the Boro delegates from entire Assam, Bengal, Tripura and Nepal. The most significant outcome of the conference was the formation of *Boro Sahitya Sabha* on 16th November 1962. It was a turning point from where the Boro society witnessed continuous social tensions with various demands.

The year 1952 is marked not only as the beginning of modern period of Boro language and literature but also Boro society as a whole. After the formation of the *Sabha* the Boro literature took a new direction, with new thoughts and inspirations, in giving a full shape to Boro literature. During that period all branches of literature made their appearance in volumes and quantity.

Chapter VI: (The Changing Patterns in the Boro society)

This chapter deals with the changes that have taken place in the field of socio- economic and political life of the Boros. Although the religion like Brahma dharma and Christianity played important role in reforming the traditional Boro society, changes also took place in their struggle to keep pace with other advance societies of the nation in the sphere of social status, economic condition and political privileges.

Prior to 20th century the Bodos lived in an introvert society with self-sufficient agrarian economy. In the traditional society knowledge of agricultural process or technology was transmitted by family, religious institution, villagers and by apprenticeship. But the arrival of mechanical age

has smashed all these concepts. New profession demands new kind of man. It requires skill and knowledge, which could neither be imparted by family nor by religious institutions. The Boros gave up *jhum* cultivation under the influence of the expanding Hindu society that introduced plough among the Boros by killing their traditional way of cultivation. Now many Boro farmers are compelled by the circumstances to look towards agricultural allied business for their livelihood because they were no more surrounded by west land for their increasing population.

The entire Boro dominated areas have been affected by problem of influx by the non-Bodo groups and that has greatly upset the demographic profile of the region.

Under the pressure of caste Hindu society Boros have almost forgotten the art of building their raised platform dwelling house or pile house and lost their inventiveness about technology and other things. In spite of deterioration of the general economic condition of the Boros, a section of them gained fate and prosperity. They are mainly a few government servants of different rank and status, businessmen, contractors, some political workers, small entrepreneurs, etc.

The forests are being destroyed and wealth goes into the hands of few contractors, timber merchant, illegal traders, and some employees of the department at the cost of future generation. Many, who were dependent on forest resources for their day-to-day life, lost their livelihood and it compelled them to look for alternative market products. Moreover, wastelands were occupied by the immigrants of neighbouring countries and compelled many Boro farmers to turn towards urban areas in search of livelihood.

The multifarious socio-economic problem of the Boros have pulled them in to a complex social crisis and ultimately led to the political crises since the second half of twentieth century.

The seeds sown by religious movement in the beginning of twentieth century exposed in the forms of political crisis towards the last part of that century. They launched movements for the preservation of their language and culture, economic interest, self-identity, and for the creation of self-rule political unit within Indian union. It finally led to the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council in 1993, and latter, Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003 within the state of Assam for all round development of the Boro society.

Chapter VII: (Epilogue)

The chapter deals with the observation and remarks on major findings of this work. The socio-cultural mobility, which emanated from the religious movement in the beginning of 20th century, has brought a multifarious social behavior among the Boros. It has not only made them conscious about their own identity but at the same time they emerged as an integral part of the great Indian culture.

Major Findings:

Though some important works have been done on Boro society, yet no detail and systematic study on the historical process and development of religion and society of the Boros has so far been done. The present study is therefore an attempt to reconstruct the social history of the Boros and interpret them to highlight the reality of the present Boro society

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1. The origin and development of the Bathou religion is also a part of the evolution of the spirit of the Hinduism.
2. The Bathou religion, at present, is not a single religion rather it has been divided into several new sects inducting many new elements of Hinduism.
3. The Brahma religious movement led by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma is responsible for initiating the process of socio-cultural change in the traditional conservative society of the Boros. It paved the way for other sect of mainstream Hindu religion to make inroads into the Boro society and brought upward social mobility among the Boros. Today Boro religion does not mean only Bathou religion but there are followers of Brahma dharma, Satsang, Saivism, Vaisnavism, and Christianity among the Boros.
4. The Christian missionaries rescued the Bodo language, which was at the verge of disintegration and gave an inspiration to develop it.
5. The Christian missionaries abolished some superstitious beliefs, which were prevailing in the Boro society.
6. The traditional Boro society with self-satiated agrarian economy could not accommodate the increasing Boro population due to sub-division and fragmentation of land and the land alienation problem led to a long social tension seeking new horizon for the protection of their socio-cultural and economic interest.
7. The influence of dominating Aryan culture on the Boro society was so strong that it brought tremendous change in their social customs, thoughts and beliefs.
8. Though the caste system was unknown to Boro society some religious sect like *Sat sang* and *Moni Bathou* have produced a religiously

purified class, which tends to bring a new caste system in disguise in the Boro society.

9. The process of social has given rise to many new issues like question of language, literature and political rights and turn the Boro society a problematic one. The Boro society has still been longing for their solution.
10. The formation of tribal league in 1933 was the first common platform of the tribal (mainly the Boros) from where they raised their voice against the socio- economic exploitation by the outsiders and it gave them political experience for the first time, and encouraged them for future political movements.
11. The socio-cultural transition is an on going process among the Boro.

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