

Origin and Growth of Christianity among the Boros of Assam

R. N. Mosahary

The traditional religion of the Boros of Assam is *Bathouism*, characterised by the worship and propitiation of *Bathou Borai* and his consort *Mainao* alias *Bathou Buri*, and a starry host of lesser divinities with bloody sacrifices. *Bathou Borai* and *Bathou Buri* are the chief male and female deities, identified with Siva and Parvati of the Hindu mythology respectively.

The wave of Christianity reached different sections of the Boros in different pockets of Assam for the first time towards the first half of the Nineteenth Century A. D. under the banner of different Mission Societies. The first Mission Society to evangelise the Boros of Assam appears to be the *American Baptist Mission* with its head quarters at Gauhati. Its contact with the Boros was first made by Rev. Barker soon after he had established the Mission centre at Gauhati in 1843. There he opened a school boarding house in which a number of Boro pupils were accommodated. In 1846, a twelve year boy named Aphinta from Jhargaon village of North Kamrup joined the school. Three years later in 1849 he was baptised at Gauhati. *Aphinta* thus goes down in history of the evangelisation of the Boros of Assam and elsewhere in India as the first Boro Christian.¹

The *Anglican Church* started its operation among the Boros of Darrang district near Tezpur in early 1860's. Rev. Sydney Endle arrived at Tezpur in February 1864 being commissioned by the Society for the Propagation of Gospel to assist C. H. Hesselmeier as the tea garden Chaplain and carry out Missionary work among the Boros. This move was perhaps encouraged by the fact that few Boros of Darrang around Tezpur had already become Christians as a result of the work of Rev. Hesselmeier and G. Bauble. Although the details are not available it is understood that by 1864 a number of the Boros became Christians under the fold of the Anglican Mission. In 1896 following the death of Hesselmeier Rev. Sydney Endle took over the independent charge of the missionary work among the Boros. The noteworthy feature of his ministry among the Boros is the foundation of the first Boro Mondolo (church) at Bengbari.² Rev. Endle made extensive studies on the Boro language and culture. He translated a part of the New Testament into Boroni, and also a hand book on the Boro language. He wrote several papers on the Boro folklores.

His monograph, *The Kacharis*, edited by J. B. Anderson, the then Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, on behalf of the Government of Assam and published first in 1911 in London is the first of its kind on the Boros.

The Santal Mission of Northern Churches (Lutheran) began its work in India among the Santals of Bihar with its Headquarters at Dumka (Benagaria), Santal Parganas, Bihar. The Mission planted a Christian Colony in the district of Goalpara, Assam near Dingdinga³ about 40 kilometres north of Dhubri with the Santal emigrants from Bihar. As the missionary work steadily progressed, a permanent Mission Station was established at Grahampur, and then at Haraputa and Joema. Side by side with the Santals, the neighbouring Boros began to be evangelised. It was, therefore, this Santal Colony which provided a good base to the Santal Mission for evangelising the Boros in the neighbourhood of the colony with effect from 1887. The idea of evangelising the Boros along with the Santals perhaps developed due to the fact that many Boros too came to settle inside the colony. Rev. H. P. Boerson from England and Rev. Iars O. Skrefsrud from Norway were the two pioneering missionaries to have ever attempted to work among the Boros in this part of Assam, although the names of three Santal converts, such as, Siram Pastor, Singrai and Huka prominently occur as the supporting pillars of the missionaries dedicating themselves to the cause. The name of Teklo Bosumatari goes down in history of the evangelical work of the Santal Mission among the Boros of Goalpara as the first one to be converted to Christianity, and was baptised in the colony on the 7th January 1886. Others who followed the suit, as per record, and oral informations are Borkanta, Sitaram and Dabaru.⁴ Skrefsrud established the first Boro church at Rajadabri⁵, north of Gossai-gaon Rly. Station. Ratia Bosumatari, son of Teklo Bosumatari, brought up in Santal atmosphere, was ordained as the first Christian Minister (Pastor) on the 5th January 1911, followed by Dabaru Boro on 6th December 1914. Apart from Rev. Skrefsrud, other missionaries, such as Johannes Gausdal from Norway and Adderson Winding (Norway) who arrived in India in November 1915 and December 1916 respectively looked after the Boro congregations while carrying out their work primarily among the Santals in the colony. By 1922, the Boro congregations increased and were found in many villages, such as, Rajdabri, Nangdarbari, Patakata, Kolabari, Gumurgaon, Gaurang, Dumbajhar etc. on the north of the North Eastern Frontier Railway line. This con-

vinced the Mission Home Board of the need for a missionary worker for full time service among the Boros. The Mission Home Board, therefore, commissioned Rev. and Mrs. Aksel Kristiansen from Denmark in 1927 and set them aside exclusively for the work among the Boros. Immediately after their arrival, the Kristiansens established a permanent Mission Station at Gaurang, about 10 kilometre north of Kokrajhar in 1927. Similar other mission station was established at Bongaigaon in 1938 where Rev. and Mrs. Malme were stationed. From this base, the Malmes extended their work to the Boros of Kamrup and Darrang districts. On departure of the Kristiansens from Gaurang, the Malmes were moved to Gaurang and their place at Bongaigaon was taken by Rev. and Mrs. Haakon Halvorsrud who arrived at the end of 1938. A third mission station was instituted at Parkijuli in Kamrup district in 1951.⁶ The churches of the Santal Mission today are known as the *Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church*. This change was intended to suit the congregations of different communities, such as, the Boros of Assam, the Bengalees of West Bengal and the Santals of Assam and Bihar.

The adjoining areas south of the North Eastern Frontier Railway line was the field of the *American Baptist Mission* confining its work to the Garos of Garo Hills with its headquarters at Goalpara. In 1877-78, the headquarters was shifted to Tura in Garo Hills.⁷ It was from this base that the American Baptist Mission gradually started its work among the Boros of Goalpara. During the ministry of Rev. M. E. Stiffenson (1894-1909), few Boro families of Fundibari vilage on the bank of the Garlajhora river in Goalpara district were converted to Christianity. Although the first Boro convert escaped being recorded, the names of Buha Bosumatari and Dangkao Bosumatari both from Fundibari vilage, figure as the early converts.⁸ The converts gradually swelled in number and in 1940's congregations were found around Sidli, north of Bongaigaon. The American Baptist Mission handed over the Boro work in Goalpara to the Australian Baptist Missionary Society in 1965. The latter established its first Mission Station at Tukrajhar incorporating a Garo pocket at Baghpara north of Dhubri and another Rabha pocket at Debitola. In 1968 the Australian Baptist Missionary Society handed over the ministry to the local body and since then the Boro Baptist Mission of this area came to be known as the *Goalpara Baptist Church Union* retaining Tukrajhar as the main seat of administration.⁹

The Darjeeling Diocese of the *Anglican Church*, also known

as the Scottish Presbyterian Church (now Church of North India) whose working base was primarily among the Nepalese of Darjeeling and Kalimpong of West Bengal has embraced many Boros of Jalpaiguri district with their Mission station at Mahakalguri near Alipur duar. Many Boro Christians of Assam on the eastern fringe of the Sankosh river belong to this church denomination.

The *Roman Catholic Mission* did not come into contact with the Boros of Assam until 1928 when at the invitation of a Boro from Udalguri of Darrang district, Fr. Piasiski, known as the 'lion of the Brahmaputra Valley' went and baptised some of the Boros of Udalguri for the first time. Besides this event, there was nothing spectacular in the work of the Catholic Church till 1933-34 when Fr. Alessi and Fr. Ravalico launched real movement among the Boros in Kimauikata area in the district of Kamrup also received the faith through the effects of Fr. Scuderi. Uptil this time, the Baptists and the Lutherans being predominant in Goalpara, no efforts were being made by the Catholic Missionaries there. However, about the same time of evangelisation of the Boros in the district of Darrang in Mongaldai area, as a result of internal feuds in the Lutheran congregations at Nangdarbari village, a certain Phillip Phulsing with a handful of followers broke away from the Lutheran Church and went to Gauhati to invite the Catholic Fathers. Fr. Scuderi lost no opportunity. He visited them and accepted four family members into the Catholic fold forthwith. Thus was established the first Catholic congregation among the Boros in the district of Goalpara. During the period 1934-35, things took a new turn. Phillip Phulsing found a young man named Gendra Champramari, an orphan from Bengal. He was taken to Gauhati and baptised and then sent to Tezpur for some training under Fr. Orestes Marengo, the Rector. He was trained to become a catechist and a right hand man of Fr. Marengo in his work among the Boros. Goalpara became the field of their intense activities. Through their efforts, many Boros Baptists of Khagrabari, Digoldong, Ranisundri villages within the jurisdiction of Sidli Police Station on the north of Bongaigaon switched over to the Catholic fold. Thereafter, new villages, such as, Patgaon, Jolaigaon (Bilasapur), Dandupur, Bogriguti etc. came under the Catholic fold through the efforts of Fr. Guido Colissi.

The heart and soul behind the Catholic movement among the Boros was Fr. Marengo, the Rector of Gauhati who learnt the Boro language well. He prepared the first prayer book and catechism in the Boro language for the use by the Boro Catholic

congregations. After the departure of Fr. Marengo in 1936, Fr. Bonomi was put in charge of the Missionary operations among the Boros till Michael Develle and Thomas Lopez took over the charge of the Mission. In 1936, Barpeta Mission was detached from Gauhati and the Boro congregation was looked after from the Barpeta Mission Station. Under the charge of Fr. E. Zanon. Fr. Zanon too learnt the Boro language well, revised and edited prayer book and catechism previously brought out by Fr. Marengo. In 1953, Fr. Remus Morra took over the charge of Barpeta Mission as Rector from Fr. Zanon. A man of vision and farsightedness, Fr. Morra saw the importance of the work for the Boros and realised the need for preparing the field through education. Hence, a good number of Boro girls and boys were taken to Barpeta Mission School to prepare them as future leaders and the catechists. Fr. Joshep Zibizarreta came to Barpeta in 1956 with the idea of opening a Mission Station exclusively for the Boros. Consequently in 1966, a new Mission Station was instituted at Bengtal, north of Bongaigaon in the district of Goalpara (now Kokrajhar district), directly addressed to the Boros. In 1972, Bengtal Mission was bifurcated into two with the opening of another new Mission Station at Saraibil, about 25 kilometres north of Gossaigaon Railway Station. Through the efforts of Fr. Joshep and Fr. Edward D'Souza, more and more Boros from Kokrajhar, Dotma, Ramphalbil, Bijni etc. came under the fold of the Catholic Church. In Udalguri area, the congregations were first looked after from Gauhati and later from Barpeta. In 1951, Fr. Guide Colussi opened a Mission Station at Tangla and in 1967, another Boro Mission Station was established at Udalguri itself directly addressed to the Boros by Fr. Venturoli.¹⁰

Christian Population

At present no precise data pertaining to Boro Christian population in Assam is available, the reason being that most of the church denominations do not maintain any record exclusively for the Boros who are amalgamated with the members belonging to other communities. According to *Panji*, NELC, 1985, the Boro Christians belonging to the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church are 13,036 in number which exclude the minors covering 96 congregational groups (mondoli) as on 31 December 1984;¹¹ the number of the members belonging to the Goalpara Baptist Church Union, as per data available, stands at 4038 covering 65 congregations as on 31 December 1984,¹² while Fr. Palamtattel put-

the Catholics as 18,000¹³ No information are available as regards the number of the Boros belonging to other church denominations, such as, Church of North India, North Bank Baptist, etc. If the total number of the remaining church denominations is taken roughly to be 20,000, it appears that the total number of the Boro Christians throughout Assam comes to about 55,000.

Method of Evangelisation

Since the vast majority of the Boro population are farmers and live in the interior villages, they had to be evangelised wherever they were. The presence of the evangelisers in the midst of the people is of prime importance. Hence the mission centre in the country-side is of immense importance. An evangelist usually prepare the way by enterig non-Christian dominated villages or Christian families preaching the gospel. He is the contact man of the missionaries and is essential for carrying out the evangelisation plan, since as a local man, he is often able to enter the neighbouring villages or families without arousing any suspicion or hostility. The eveangelists are often assisted by the local congregation, if there is any. This approach had proved to be contributing factor for the growth of the Christian Churches among the Boros. The intending persons are converted by the local priest and other members of the congregation, and after having been given certain amount of instruction on catechism is baptised by the local pastor and then are admitted as full members of the congregation.

In changing Boro society where progress and realisation of its identity are high aspirations, education had played a vital role in the evangelisation work. A school is an essential part of any new mission that is opened. The Boros, having realised their inequality with more advanced and dominearing groups in the region and the need of education to cope up with others expect from the missionaries good educational facilities including the finance. The schools had been instrumental in the work of evangelisation of the Boros. In early days, primary schools were set up where education was imparted not only to the children of the converts but also to those of the non-converts in their own mother tongue. The text books were prepared for the beginners in the Boro language written in modified Roman scripts. Education was, therefore a great force in the method of evangelisation of the Boros, and every Mission Station was invariably marked by the presence of school of primary level at least to start with.

A highly successful method of evangelisation was found in

the organisation of camps, conventions and refresher's courses on catechism, leadership and Biblical matters. The participants include the recent converts and the older members of the churches both young and the old, male and female who gather in an atmosphere of joy, relaxation and brotherliness. The Catholic Church encourages the discussions on various problems apart from the religious matters, such as, tribe, language, culture etc. on such occasions.¹⁴ The Protestant Churches annually organise youth and leadership camps where the youths are not only imparted Biblical knowledge but also charged with leadership in the church and the community.

A Critical Evaluation

Although Assam served as an arena on intense activities of the Christian Missionaries belonging to multi-church denominations from the beginning of the British rule in India, so far their work among the Boros are concerned, there appears to be nothing spectacular. We have noted earlier that the Christian Boro population in Assam is about 55,000 as against the total population in the state numbering about 7,00,000. On this basis, the Christian Boro population constitute about 7% of the total Boro population in Assam. This figure, though not very precise, is far from being impressive. The Christian Missionary activities among the Boros in Assam, therefore, did not produce their desired result. A number of factors can be attributed to the cause of this dismal picture.

Firstly, the most notable factor is the Aryan forces which immensely succeeded in bringing about a total assimilation of many of the north-eastern tribes into Hindu fold through the ideas, energies and resources that they brought with them. Although the total assimilation of the Boros with the Aryans could not be effected, it certainly offered effective obstacle to evangelisation of the people.

Secondly, the personnel and resources allotted for the work among the Boros were extremely meagre. The means of evangelisation were perhaps over-centralised in some areas and communities to the detriment of the Boros. The history of the evangelisation as we have noted in the foregoing pages shows that there was no mission directly addressed to the Boros. For instance, the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches (Lutheran) had its strategy originally and primarily among the tea garden tribes of Bihar, Bengal and Assam, and these slowly spread their net over the Boros in the Santal Colony that they planted in the district of Goalpara of Assam. From this base, they started evangelising the Boros

of *Bahre Hasa**, meaning 'outside the colony'. The Boro converts were looked after by the missionaries whose primary work was among the Santals with their Headquarter at Dumka in Bihar and newly established Mission Station in the Santal Colony in Assam. It was not until 1927 that the Santal Mission set aside a separate missionary exclusively for the Boro work. Yet funds and other resources meant for the Boro work continued to be meagre depending on how much crumbs were left over after the Santal work. The Boro Lutherans, therefore, often alleged that they were the *Fisa Kornia*, meaning 'adopted child' of the Santal Mission. Similarly, the American Baptist Mission in Goalpara started its work among the Garos around Goalpara and Garo Hills, and thence slowly extended their work to the Boros of Goalpara, and it was not until 1956 that an independent Boro Baptist Mission was instituted at Tukrajhar under the name *Australian Baptist Mission*. It happened after the American Baptist Mission had handed over the Boro work in Goalpara to the Australian Mission Society. The Anglican Church on the North Bank of Kamrup and Darrang began its work among the Bhutanese and the tea garden tribes of the area under the chaplainship of Hesselmeier and G. Dauble and later on extended their strategy to the Boros in the neighbourhood, and it was not until the arrival of Sidney Endle that an independent missionary work among the Boros was undertaken. The Scottish *Mission* began its work originally among the Nepalese of Darjeeling and Kalimpong of West Bengal and subsequently extended its work to the Boros on the eastern and western fringes of the Sankosh river with its head quarter at Mahakalguri near Alipur Duar. *The Roman Catholic Mission* began its work among the tribes of Assam with its head quarter at Gauhati and BARPETA, and did not come into contact with the Boros until 1928. As noted earlier, during the period 1928-1966, a good number of the Boros of Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup districts accepted the faith under the Catholic Mission, yet, there was no mission directly addressed to the Boros, and the Boro Catholic congregations were looked after from Gauhati and then from BARPETA. It was only in 1966 that a Boro Catholic Mission was established at Bengtal, north of Bongaigaon. The facts cited above shows that the evangelisation of the Boros had never been a strategy of any Christian Mission in Assam.

Thirdly, hatred and opposition to Christianity are the feelings injected into simple minded Boros by the knowledgeable leaders of other religious sects through the malicious prepaganda and

this had been a corner stone of the failure of the missionary work among the Boros, When the Swaraj Movement in India assumed a new dimension inculcating the feelings of hatred towards the foreign rulers and the Christian missionaries, evangelisation of Assam as a whole received a set back. Besides, the Christianity was always projected as a foreign religion' and an intruder into the sacredness and the unity of the Boro race destined to destroy the Boro culture and identity.

Fourthly, Christianisation of the Boros received a stiff opposition from the Sarania and Brahma cults. In the early part of the twentieth century One Kalicharan Brahma launched a parallel religious movement among the Boros against the Christianity and the traditional *Bathou* religion. This undoubtedly hindered the growth and consolidation of the Christian Churches among the Boros in Assam.

Lastly but not the least, in modern world of media, literature is regarded as one of the most effective tools of evangelisation. The Boro apostolates had been handicapped very much by the dearth of printed materials in the Boro language. Consequently the missionaries had to begin from the scratch. Moreover, the Boros did not have script of their own in which the Boro literature could be produced. The missionaries, therefore, had to adopt the Roman script in modified form for writing books on catechism, Bible, hymns and text books for the school children in the Boro language. The adoption of the foreign script for the Boro language provided further scope for the sinister interpretation of the missionary activities. In this connection, it is to be stated that had the Boros inherited any script of their own, it was very certain that the Christian Missionaries would have adopted the Boro script just as the *American Baptist Mission* adopted Assamese script for the Assamese language and literature. The scarcity of literature coupled with the absence of script, non-availability of enough fund resulted in the lack of attention of the apostolates.

References

1. F. S. Downs, *Mighty Works of God : A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North-East India* (1836-1950), 1st edn., Christian literature centre, Panbalar, Gauhati. Assam 1911 pp. 84-90.
2. F. S. Downs *Christianity in North East India*, 1st edn., ISPCK in collaboration with the Christian Literature Centre, Pan-

- bazar, Gauhati, 1983, p. 113 ; S. Enale, *The Kacharis*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1911, p. ix ; Padre Wyld, *Eleven Plus*, 1st edn., published by self, Calcutta, 1962, p. 26.
3. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. XII, 1981 reprint, pp. 271-75. Originally published at Calarendon Press, Oxford, 1908.
 4. Interview with Thaneswar Bosumatari, Parkijuli, Kamrup, Assam.
 5. O. Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit : History of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches* (1867-1967), 1st edn., Bihar, 1967
 6. *Ibid.*, Panji, 1985.
 7. F. S. Downs, *Christianity in the North East*, p. 108.
 8. Sulen Bosumatari, *Goalpara Baptist Church Unionor 50 Bochor Jubilee souvenir*, Tukrajhar, Kokrajhar, 1977. pp. 4-7.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. Fr. Palamtattel, Unpublished Papers, Sacred Heart College, Shillong.
 11. Panji, *op. cit.*
 12. Jitendra Narzari, Secretary, Goalpara Baptist Church Union, 1984.
 13. Fr. Palamtattel, *op. cit.*,