

THE
BODOS
CHILDREN
OF
BHULLUMBUTTER

EDITED BY

THOMAS PULLOPPILLIL & JACOB ALUCKAL

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The Bodos have attained national and international prominence due to their on-going agitation, but not much is known about their customs, religion and ethics. This book provides an insight into all these aspects and much more. Penned by various scholars the chapters of this book throw much light on the Bodo psyche thus giving us a means to understand their anxieties and problems.

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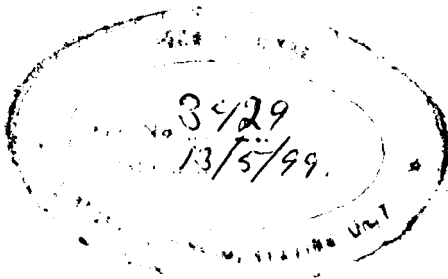
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CONTENTS

Foreword	v
Preface	vii
1. The Bodos: An Introduction <i>Thomas Pulloppillil</i>	1
2. The Racial Name of the Bodos <i>Moniram Mochary</i>	9
3. The Bathou Religion <i>Kameshwar Brahma</i>	17
4. Brahma Religion and Social Change among the Bodos <i>R.N. Mosahary</i>	38
5. Christianity among the Bodos <i>Sebastian Ayilookunnel</i>	44
6. Ethics of the Bodos of Assam <i>Premlata Devi</i>	51
7. Fairs and Festivals of the Bodos <i>R.N. Mosahary</i>	58
8. The Marriage System of the Bodos <i>Milon Narzary</i>	65
9. The Bodo Mass Movements since Independence <i>Noas Swargiary</i>	78
<i>Bibliography</i>	99
<i>General Bibliography</i>	103
<i>Index</i>	106

1

THE BODOS: AN INTRODUCTION

The term Bodo means 'man.'¹ *Kachari* is a generic term for a number of groups speaking a more or less common dialect or language and claiming a common mythical ancestry.² E. Gait and others regarded the Kachari as the aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley i.e., the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. They ruled the whole of Assam up to the twelfth century A.D. and moved to the western part of the Brahmaputra valley, North Cachar Hills and the plains of Cachar in the sixteenth century A.D. to evade the Ahom onslaught.³ In the course of time they dispersed over a larger area, and some of their groups became isolated from others.⁴ The census of 1881 listed twelve subgroups of them, whereas Endle (1911) counted fifteen of them. Grierson (1927) identified nine

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1. First applied by Hodgson. (Hodgson, "Essay on the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes," in *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects*, Vol. 1, London, 1880, p. 1 ff.) A Kachari or Mech will call himself Bara f'sa to distinguish from Sim-Sa (Bhutia) or Chin-fsa. The Bodos west of Kamrup District were called Mech and those east, Kachari. It has been argued that the word Kachari may be after all the original word that would aptly describe the Bodos.
 2. It has been suggested that the word Kos-ari is derived from *Kos-arui*-the sons of the *Kos*. Ari or arui is the patronymic commonly used by the Bodo people in naming their clans.
 3. E. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati, Lawyer's Bookstall, 1926, (reprint) Cf. Also, Siddheswar Sarma and Premlata Devi, *A Brief Account of the Boro Kacharis of Assam*, Proceedings of North East India History Association, Shillong, 1993, pp. 96-100; C.C. Sanyal, *The Meches and the Totos of North Bengal*, Darjeeling, North Bengal University, 1973, p. 1; B. K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, New Delhi, National Book Trust, 1972, p. 7. "With the exception of the isolated Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the whole of Assam (barring the eastern parts inhabited by the Kuki-chins) and North and East Bengal was the country of the great Bodo people." Debabrata Datta, *Assam (Upto Company's Rule)*, Calcutta, Shribhumi, 1974, p. 10.
 4. Among others ref. N.N. Acharya, *A History of Medieval Assam (13-17 c.)*, Guwahati, Omsons Publications, 1984, p. 211 ff.

communities as members of the Bodo speaking group.⁵ If we combine the lists of Grierson (1927), Endle (1911) and of the census of 1881, we get a list of eighteen groups, e.g. Bodo, Dimasa, Lalung, Madani, Mech, Rabha, Saraniya, Hojai, Garo, Rajbangshi or Koch, Chutiya, Moran, Hajong, Tippera, Mahalia, Dhimal, Solaimiya, Phulgaria.

Out of them, the Chutiya, Moran, Saraniya, and Koch or Koch-Rajbangshi have become Hinduised and do not any more identify themselves as the Kachari. The Bodo or cognate language speakers from Tripura, due to their long isolation from the parental stock, have drifted apart, and have established their separate identity. Playfair⁶ observed some linguistic and cultural similarities between the Rabha and the Garo and stated that once the former were a matrilineal society like the latter. The other Kachari groups, who followed the rule of matrilinearity earlier, are the Lalung and Hajong.

The Kachari are now represented by the Mech in western Assam, the Bodo in central Assam, the Dimasa and Hojai in the north Cachar Hills and the Sonowal and the Thengal in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. In the Cachar plains the Kachari are also known as Barman. As the Thengal are not a scheduled tribe, they have to be treated separately. The Dhimal, Mahalia, Solanimiya and Phulgaria groups of the Kachari could not be traced during the 1991 census.⁷

Do these various groups form one ethnic group? Ethnic group is a group of people sharing an identity which arises from a collective sense of a distinctive history, culture, customs, norms, beliefs, traditions and usually a common language. Ethnicity is the term used by social scientist to indicate a particular group within a national group following main patterns. For Julian V. Bromley ethnic process consists of six different types.⁸ According to Vernon

5. S.K. Bhuyan also held that the Kachari are closely allied to the Koch, while linguistically they are akin to the Chutia, Lalung and Moran of the Brahmaputra valley, and the Garo and Tippera of the southern hills. S. K. Bhuyan, *Kachari Buranji*, Guwahati, DHAS, 1936.

6. Major A. Playfair, *The Garos*, Guwahati. Reprint

7. K.S. Singh, *The Scheduled Tribes*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 431.

8. Julian V. Bromley, *Ethnic Process*, 1983; Also by the same author, *Theoretical Ethnography*, 1984.

(i) Ethnogenetic divergence, where an ethno-social organism (tribal) is isolated from individual parts of a large ethnos, e.g. the various Naga or Mizo tribes.

Hewitt⁹ ethnicity does not relate to some primordial loyalty; it is created and recreated when societies undergo socio-economic change and structural transformation. P.I. Bereges observes that ideology plays an important role in structuring and restructuring ethnic and national identities.¹⁰ B.K. Roy Burman is of the opinion that as the ethnic boundaries of various communities are not rigidly fixed and as they are constantly subjected to the process of fission and fusion, an ethnographer is to apply his judgement whether some of the names occurring in the lists of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are to be treated as distinct entities or as synonyms/sub-castes/sub-tribes or communities of the same or a different category.¹¹ In the context of the Bodos it would seem that all the above tribes, though they have attained a certain degree of autonomy, together, they form a larger ethnic group.

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- (ii) Inter-ethnic consolidation which is the negation of the process of ethnogenic divergence, e.g., the integration of the Khasi ethnos from the four tribes or the Garo ethnos from twelve tribes.
 - (iii) Ethnogenic mixing, e.g., the Zeliangrounds of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. (Among the Zemis, Liangmois and ROUNGMEIS)
 - (iv) Inter-ethnic consolidation where the intensity of cultural distinctions among the ethnographic groups belonging to an ethnos is on the wane. e.g., The Upper Assamese and the Kamrupi Assamese.
 - (v) Inter-ethnic integration or homogenisation where a new ethnos comes into being from various ethnolinguistic communities through a meta-ethnolinguistic entity. e.g., the Nagamese among the Naga tribes, the Khasi language among the Khyntriams, Pnars, Bhois and Wars.
 - (vi) Assimilation as the last ethnic process is a combination of the transformatory process from the standpoint of the ethnos that is being assimilated, and evolutionary from that of the assimilated ethnos. (This is the ethnic process where as a result of the interaction between two groups of people one group is dissolved and acquires new ethnic attributes of the other group, e.g., The Ahoms, Morans or Chutiyas who had been assimilated by the Assamese; the Jaintias by the Khasis; The Raaltes, or Paites by the Mizos. Cf. B. pakem, *Ethnicity and Ethnic Processes in North East India*, Paper at the seminar "Focus on India's North East", Delhi, 1995.

9. Vernon Hewitt, *Ethnicity, Sub-nationalism and Federalism*, University of Hull, 1989.
10. P.I. Bereges, *Facing into Modernity*, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 155.
11. B.K. Roy Burman, *Tribes in Perspective*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 1994, p. 2.

The Kachari language¹² belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.¹³ Grierson has convincingly proved that the languages spoken by all the above groups are of the Bodo family.¹⁴

The Bodos are divided into a number of clans like Sargawari, Basumatari, Musahari, Narjari, Sibirgri, Doimari, Gayari and Brahmari. The followers of the Brahma cult use Brahma as their surname. According to the 1971 census, the Bodos form the 8th largest tribal group in India and Bodo is spoken by 867,017 persons.

The number given by the census report is however disputed. A survey conducted by the All Assam Bodo Students Union and the Bodo Peoples Action Committee in the North Bank of Brahmaputra in 1990 claims that 70% of the total population is of Scheduled Tribe Origin and of them 51% are Bodos. Undivided Lakhimpur District with 81% of tribal population is the largest tribal population in one single district. According to Dr. R.N. Mosahary,¹⁵ the authenticity of these figures may be called to question but one has to admit that the number given out by the Census Commission of India is also flawed.

The largest tribe of the Brahmaputra valley, the Bodos have been conscious of this larger linguistic and spiritual heritage than their territorial spread suggests. The Pan Boro movement and the Pan Boro literacy movement has to be seen in this context.

Aryanisation of these tribes began with the migration of the Aryans to these parts. The exact time of the arrival of the Aryans in this part of the country remains obscure.¹⁶ The names of royal families were changed; places and rivers were given Sanskrit

12. The Aryan invaders of Assam held the tribal languages in utter contempt. For example, *Padmapurana (Srutikhand, 53) syas*, "First, the Kuvach (or Koch) and then the Mlechchha (or Mech)- both are of base origin. They speak the *pisacha* (devil's) tongue."
13. According to Shri Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the Bodo language had a script of its own and was called *Deodhai* script. Shri Rabha has gathered a few specimens of *Deodhai* alphabet from informants at Dimapur, Cf. D.P. Baruah, *Assam District Gazettters, Goalpara District*, Guwahati, Assam, 1979, p. 96.
14. G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Calcutta, The Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1904, Vol. II.
15. R.N. Mosahary, *The Plains Tribals Autonomy: The Boro Experience*, Paper submitted at the CISRS Consultation: Society and Culture in North East India- A Christian Perspective, (mimeographed notes) 1992.
16. G.P. Singh, *The Kiratas in Ancient India*, New Delhi, Gian Publishing House, 1990, p. 355.

names.¹⁷ As D. Nath has noted, all such Aryanisation stopped at the royal houses, until sixteenth century. Sankaradev, the great social and religious reformer, succeeded to a certain extent in achieving this. D. Nath wrote,

While no recorded evidence of the Hinduisation of the people is available, epigraphic evidence shows that it began to penetrate into the royal household as early as the fourth century A.D. (...) But it is not until the time of Sankaradeva (1448-1569), the great 16th century reformer of Assam, that attempts had been made to Hinduise the masses. (...) impact of Hinduism among the tribes were very little.¹⁸

As far as Aryanisation was concerned, it was the Bodos settled in west Bengal who were mostly affected. During the initial days of conversion, they were known as *Saraniya Koch*. After going through Hindu ritual purification, they were honoured with the status of using sacred thread and were made into a caste within the Hindu Varna system. Now these people are known as Koch-Rajbongsi. Any Bodo or any member of any tribe which accepted Hinduism was given the rank of *Koch*.¹⁹ In Assam they are given Scheduled tribe status in 1996 whereas in Bengal they are a Scheduled caste.

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17. Chandana Bhattacharjee, *Ethnicity and autonomy Movement: Case of Bodo-Kacharis of Assam*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1996, p. 45.
 18. D. Nath, "Early Hinduisation of the Ruling Tribes of North-East India," in *Proceedings of North-East India History Association*, Pasighat, 1986, p. 256.
 19. R.N. Moshary, "Aryanisation and Hinduisation of the Bodos," in *Proceedings of NEIHA*, Shillong, 1989, p. 167. James Hastings describes Aryanisation thus; "In the Assam valley the Koch caste is usually allotted to converts a circumstance not without interest when it is considered that Koch was originally the name of a race whose members in Northern and Eastern Bengal, changed their name to *Rajbansi* or *royal-born*, when they adopted Hinduism. The true Bodos of the Kachari Dwars usually enter this caste, while their highland cousin, the Dima-fisa, as already related; have been raised to *Khatriya* rank. But even the name Koch cannot be assumed all at once. A *Kachari*, for instance, begins by placing himself under the protection of a '*gasain*' and taking the oath of obedience, or '*saran*.' He then is called a *Saraniya*. At his stage he still eats pigs and fowls, and continues to drink beer and less frequently, distilled spirits. Next, he becomes a *Modahi* which implies the renunciation of alcohol. By slow degrees the ancestral yearning for unholy food and drink diminishes or disappears and having become a ceremonially pure Hindu, the aforesaid *Kachari* is accepted as *Kamtali* or *Bar Koch*. Even then, however, he is subject to relapses, especially in the matter of pork as the presence of pigs in Koch villages sufficiently testifies." James Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. II, p. 137.

From the Aryan mythological sources we know that the earliest rulers were Asuras. *Asura* is an appellation used by the Aryans to the non-Aryans, meaning a demon or a dashing and courageous person. The dynasty of Salastambha (664 A.D.), that replaced the dynasty of Naraka Asura was a Mleccha—a name used by Aryan invaders for the Bodos.²⁰ N.N. Acharyya suggests that when Brahmapala in 1000 A.D. defeated the Bodos, they retreated to the valley of Dhansiri and established their capital at Dimapur. According to Fisher, the Kacharis of N. Cachar believe that they once ruled in Kamrupa, and their royal family traced its descent from Rajas of that country on the line of HA-TSUNG-TSA.

Political History

C. Bhattacharjee, quoting Greirson, states that the Mech rule of Pragjyotishpur lasted for 4000 years.²¹ E.A. Gait who has done original research in this field is of the opinion that there are, properly speaking, no historical data available till Hiuen Tsiang wrote his travelogue.²² After narrating all the stories relating to the Kings and others before the historical accounts of Hiuen Tsiang (AD 640) Gait remarks; "From these stories, all that we can gather with certainty is that the Brahmaputra valley was known to the Aryan invaders of India at a very early period and that the process of converting the aboriginal tribes to Hinduism, which is going on before our eyes today commenced long before the time of which we have authentic record."²³ At the time of the visit of the celebrated Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsiang to Kamarupa, Bhaskara Varman was on the throne. According to Gait, Varman was an aboriginal. "Barman is a well known Kshattriya title, and is one which is commonly adopted today by Kacharis, when they accept Hinduism and assume the sacred thread, on the fiction that they are concealed Kshattriyas." According to him, "the presumption is further strengthened by the fact that the subjects are described as of small stature with dark yellow complexions and by our knowledge that

20. N.N. Acharyya, *A History of Medieval Assam (13-17 c.)*, Guwahati, Omsons Publications, 1984, p. 215, A copper plate of the eleventh century speaks of the Mleccha king Salastambha displacing the dynasty of Naraka.

21. C. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

22. E.A. Gait, *The Koch Kings of Kamrupa*, Manuscript, 1895, (Oriens Theological College Library) p. 5.

23. *Ibid.* p. 5.

subsequent rulers were nothing more than Hinduised aborigines.”²⁴ The Kyen dynasty which was established by Niladhvaja was certainly of tribal origin. Nilambara of this dynasty was overthrown by Husain Sha in 1498 A.D.

Gait narrates the origin of the Koch²⁵ dynasty thus. A certain Hajo Koch had two daughters, Hira and Jira (Meches). Hajo seems to have been a person of great vigour and brought under his government the whole of Rangpur, together with a large portion of Assam, including the government of Kamrup.²⁶ From Hira, Hariya Mech leader of the twelve Mech families, had a son called Bisu Mech who was given the name of Visva Simha and began his rule in 1509 AD. Those who accepted Brahminism²⁷ along with Bisu Mech are known as Rajvangsis. All his twelve ministers were Meches. According to Hamilton, it is Hajo Koch who founded the kingdom of Pragiyotishpur.²⁸ Visva Simha (Bisu Mech) was succeeded by Malladeva (Naranarayana) who gave away part of his kingdom (east of Sankosh) to his brother Sukladeva (Sukladhvaj or Silarai). According to the Mohammedan Historians, the eastern part was known as Koch Hajo and the western part as Koch Bihar. Naranarayana was known to them as Bal Gosain and Sukladhvaja as Sukul Gosain. Malladeva of the West died in 1584 and was succeeded by Lakshmi Narayana whose rule came to an end in 1622 A.D. Prana Narayana was the last King in this line (1627-1666). In the east, Sukladvaja was succeeded by Raghudeva (1582-1593).

24. Ibid.

25. In Assam proper, KOCH has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which the converts from the race of the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir and Garo are received. In North Bengal and Goalpara they are known as Rajvangsis. N.N. Acharyya, op. cit., p. 187, According to E.A. Gait, Buchanan classed the Koch with the Bodos and Dhimals. Koches are a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to the Meches and Garos. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, 1926, Reprint, Guwahati, Lawyer's Book Stall, p. 47.

26. W.A. Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1884, p. 152.

27. Though Brahminism was accepted, the King and the Rajvamsis continued to practise the tribal religion. For example, Gait narrates the following about Narnarayana, “Naranarayan prepared to start (to conquer the Ahoms). But before doing so, he organised a Kachari dance on the banks of Sankosh, and calling in the aid of a Shamanist, went through the aboriginal rites of his tribe. This leaning to his old tribal superstitions being justified in the Vamsavali by the statement that Siva himself had directed him to observe them.” p. 18.

28. Moniram Mosahari, author of *Bodo-English Dictionary* and past President of Bodo Sahitya Sabha has suggested that Pragiyotishpur is the Sanskritised form of *Pra-Jutuoi-puri* in Bodo, meaning ‘a powerful kingdom by the sea side.’

Parikshit who followed him died in Patna in the year 1606. One of his sons Vijita Narayana became the King of the Bijni and another son Bali Narayana King of Darrang and died in the year 1634. His son Mahendra Narayana who died in 1643 AD was succeeded by Chandra Narayana with whose death the dynasty came to an end.

Among the other Bodo kingdoms, mention may be made of the powerful Kachari kingdom. Its capital was Dimapur. When the Kachari King Darsangpha (1536 A.D.) was killed by the more powerful Ahoms and defeated the Kachari army, they shifted their capital to Maibong in North Kachar Hills and then to Khaspur on southern Barail.²⁹ The last but one Kachari King Raja Krishnachandra tried his hand at Aryanisation which was resented by the people. His younger brother Govinda Chandra succeeded him. His patronising Brahmanical Hinduism and his recruiting of officials from the Bengali community provoked the people so much, that they rose in revolt against the King and the colonist British annexed the kingdom.³⁰

Conclusion

Bodos, the eighth largest tribe of India have a valiant past and are working towards a future that is more prosperous. Their language, culture and world view are a valuable contribution to the pluralistic culture that make up the great Indian culture.

29. B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Vol. VI, Nowgong*. Calcutta, City Press, 1905.

30. Chandana Bhattacharjee, op. cit., p. 51.