

Aryanisation and Hinduisation of the Boros

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The northeastern region from the time immemorial had been the habitat of multi-racial and linguistic groups of non-Hindu affiliation. They had their own culture, language and religion. The Aryan intrusion into Western India took place around 1500-1200 B.C., and they brought with them to India more advanced culture, religion, language and literature, and once they set their feet on the Indian soil, they gradually and systematically began to absorb the pre-Aryan tribes into their system through influence, assimilation, proselytization and conversion. In this connection S. K. Chatterjee writes,¹

The Hinduisation of the Tibeto-Burman (mainly Bodo) people during the ancient period brought about a sanskritisation of the local pre-Aryan names of both Sino-Tibetan and Austric origin, and in bringing them in line with Brahmanical Hindu notions and religious notions current among the people. Sacred places of the pre-Hindu religious world were gradually Hinduised, with myths and legends which were being gathered in the Puranas."

The Aryan intrusion into north eastern region took place possibly one or two centuries before Christ, and began to sanskritise the existing tribal names of places and rivers in the northeast and progressively Aryanise the various non-Aryan tribes of the region in their culture, their outlook and their way of life. One of the aboriginal peoples of non-Aryan affiliation in the northeast are the Boros of Mongoloid origin who are described as the Dimasas in the chronicles of the Ahom kings and subsequently commonly called 'Kacharis' by the Hindu neighbours. They had their own culture, language and religion and lived within their own cultural and social limit following endogamy among themselves and exogamy wherever necessary, and for a very long time remained untouched by the process of Aryanisation. But gradually trade, commerce and industry began to develop rapidly and the Hindu traders wanted markets for their finished goods and the supply of raw materials. The Boros came in contact with the Hindu traders and gradually became de-

pendent on them for the supply of goods of pottery, black smithy and carpentry.

Aryanisation is not a physical transformation of a non-Aryan into Aryan. One of the basic conditions in the process of Aryanisation is the ability to speak the Aryan language. Speaking Aryan language became essential for the Boros for more than one reason. Number one, it was necessary to learn the Aryan language to transact the business with the Hindu traders. Number two, it was a matter of prestige and status for the primitive Boros to be able to speak in language other than their own. Besides, there were others who wanted to become Hindu to raise their status and for this, they wanted to be conversant in Aryan language, and the trading and commercial class of the Hindus was the channel through which the Aryan speech was initially passed on to them.

Sanskrit was the Aryan language which underwent modification on the Indian soil and assumed such a character as to be commonly acceptable, understandable and adoptable by all. As a result of such modification of the Sanskrit language, a number of Aryan dialects developed, and these are Assamese in Assam, Bengali in Bengal and Hindi in North-Western India. Aryanisation in Assam, therefore, means the conversion of the non-Assamese speakers into Assamese speakers, Aryanisation in Bengal means the conversion of the non-Bengali speakers into Bengali speakers while it means the conversion of the non-Hindi speakers into Hindi speakers in Hindi speaking areas.

The systematic and progressive Aryanisation of the Bodo people appears to have gained momentum in the 7th century A.D. under the patronage of the Varman and the Salasthamba line of rulers who are believed to belong originally to Mech tribe who with the passage of time became thoroughly Hinduised. The Kingdom of Kamrupa during their rule was bound by the Korotoya river in the west and hence, the western part of this kingdom was in close vicinity of the Aryan settlements in Magadha, Vaisali, Mithila etc. In this position, the kingdom of Kamrupa must have not only a close contact with the Aryans, but also have been continually receiving Hindu migrants. That was how the Varmans, the Salasthambas and other ancient Bodo line of rulers were influenced by the Hindus and thereby became Hinduised. So also their subjects who simply followed the tracks of their royal masters and protectors.

With the advent of the Ahoms and the establishment of their sovereignty in the Brahmaputra valley in the thirteenth century A.D.,

the process of the Aryanisation and Hinduisation of the Boros assumed a new dimension. The Ahoms are known to have more easily and speedily succumbed to the Hindu system although they also came to Assam with their own language, culture and religion. S. K. Chatterji holds that the Tai-Ahoms entering Assam consisted mainly of adult male members who had to provide themselves with the wives from among the local Bodo subjects,² and as such, numerous Boro women were absorbed into the Hinduised Ahoms. Besides, when the 'Kachari' (Dimasa) kings were expelled by the Ahoms from the Brahmaputra valley, a vast population of the Boro subjects did not follow their king and continued to live where they were under the Ahom kings. This facilitated the absorption of the Boro subjects into the Hindu system.

The greatest victim of this type of Aryan invasion were perhaps the Koches in the 16th century A.D. A section of the Boros settling down along the Mechi river in West Bengal mixed up with the Hindu migrants, gradually gave up their original Boro language, culture and religion, drew closer to the Hindu system and ultimately grew into a distinct cultural and linguistic group and called themselves *Koches*. Initially, they were treated as the *Sarania Koch*, meaning 'Koch initiated,' and when they had attained ritual perfection of a Hindu caste, they were raised to the status of a new Hindu *Koch Caste*, whose members were qualified to carry water for the Brahmans and were sacred thread. Now they call themselves *Rajbansi*. Haoria and his son Bisu originally belonged to Mech tribe but became Koch and assumed the names Haoria Mondol and Bisvasingha on being Hinduised. Similarly, any Boro or any member of any tribe when initiated into Hinduism was taken in the rank of the Koch caste.

The process of the Aryanisation and Hinduism reached its climax in the sixteenth century A.D. when their ruling ancestors welcomed with open heart the Hindu systems in their private and public life. There are references that Gopichandra Narayan's (1745-57) coronation was supposedly conducted by eleven Brahmans according to the Vedic rites and since then, the Brahmans had been acting as the spiritual advisers to the rajas and their aristocracies. The name of one high priest Aluraja is traceable as to have been the Chief spiritual adviser of the raja.³ Besides, from the very early days, the Kachari kings visited the Hindu shrines on pilgrimage far and wide, and came in close contact with various peoples of Hindu affiliation. Many Hindus also must have visited the Kachari kingdom and live there under the patronage of the

kings. Birdarpa Narayan (1643 - 1681) became Hinduised and declared himself true worshipper of Hindu god Vishnu and devoted a great deal of his time to the study of the Hindu scriptures followed by discussion and conversation on various aspects of Hindu religion. Haris chandra II (1757-1772 A.D.) was declared a pious Hindu and worshipper of goddess Kali. His conviction in Hinduism became so deep that he ascribed the birth of his two princes Krishnachandra and Govinchandra to his worship of Shiva in Hindu rites on the advice of the Brahmins.⁴

The Hinduised Kachari kings, however, were still treated as Mlecchas by the Srihatta Brahmans who did not take water from their hands until King Krishnachandra (1773-1813 A.D.) had performed the Haryana garbha Prayachitta according to the injunction prescribed in the sastras in 1790. It was a ceremony in which the king was reborn from the womb of a large brass idol of cow and the golden mettress on which the idol of the cow was kept standing was later on broken to pieces and divided among the Brahmins.⁵ Such was the formal conversion of the king to Hinduism who was then declared a pure Hindu of Kshatriya caste.

Here we have an extract of the account by Kennedy, the officiating Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong on the method of conversion of the aboriginals in the district. He writes that the Gosain or some of his subordinates usually selected certain families of aboriginal tribes who resided in the vicinity of the Hindu village and at a distance from the main village of the aboriginal tribes. The families were brain-washed with frequent counselling and lecture on the purity of the Hindu religion and how they could not only acquire honourable position in the advanced and civilised Hindu society, but also attain salvation if they accepted the Hindu religion and culture giving up their traditional habits of eating pork and other forbidden food as well as drinking of strong liquor. As the people in their state of isolation from the larger communities felt inconvenience, they easily succumbed to the Hinduisation and enabled themselves to associate and move with their Hindu neighbours by whom they are looked upon as a degraded class so long they were not converted. Tribals were given options, either to embrace Hinduism completely or simply take *Saran*, meaning religious instructions from the Hindu Gosain. The people opting for complete conversion would give up their traditional tribal habits and customs and become a perfect Hindu while those opting for receiving religious instructions only would remain free to keep their traditional habits of eating and drinking. The option for

complete conversion was, however, more gesture and the people making this option were required to undergo a process of atonement known as Prayachitta for which they were to fast for a few days and were to spend some money ranging from Rs. 5/- to Rs. 25/- according to one's ability. Kalicharan II, one of the chief disciples of Kalicharan Gurudev, a pioneer of the Brahma religion and social reforms among the Boros, however, indicated that the conversion to Hinduism completely was not that easy and cheap. It was a costly affair. He informs that one Raisaheb Jagat Chandra Mosahary the Mouzadar of Pathakata now under the district of Kokrajhar had to pay Rs. 6000/- for the purpose.⁶ The converts then received religious instruction and the mode of worship from the Gosein. From that day, the Gosain was looked upon as their spiritual guide. The people consequently changed their old utensils for the new ones, and also their dwelling houses and thus became quite Hinduised. The newly converted Hindus were then made over to a body of Hindu neighbours called *Khel* for guiding and keeping watch on them. The *Khel* members would eat and associate with them apart from keeping a close watch on them whether they take any forbidden food and drink, and if they were found to have entirely given up these things, they had to give feast to their new fellow beings. After having gone through all these processes, the converts were admitted into the Hindu society and were called *Sarania Koch*. For the first three generations from their conversion, they were not treated as pure Hindus and were not allowed to take any leading part in the society, but from the third generation onward they became as good as any Hindu of Koch caste.⁷ In this context, K. L. Barua writes that a Kachari, as soon as he became a disciple of a Vaisnava Gosein was called Sarania, meaning a Kachari initiated to the Eka Saran Dharma of Vaisnava Gosein' and his descendants in the third generation having eschewed pork and wine for the two or three generations were raised to the status of the Koches, and were considered clean enough to carry water for the Brahmins.⁸

The Hindu Brahmins adopted a device of manipulating the geneology, chronology and history of the royal line inventing fabulous myths and legends. For instances, the list of the Dimasa kings contains 103 kings beginning from Ghatatkocha, son of Bhima of Mahabharata fame down to Govindachandra. The list is suspected to have included the rajas belonging to other dynasties, because the names in the list do not seem to conform each other either in order or in number.⁹ This fear is strengthened by the fact

that Kunkara (1520 A.D.), Deisung (1535 A.D.), Sandikari (1765 A.D.)etc. who are known to be the Kachari kings are not included in the list of 103 kings of the dynasty.¹⁰ In the opinion of Hunter, with the exception of last few, the whole list is a Brahmaniacal forgery for the purpose of extolling the importance and pure descend of the family.¹¹ The name Haidimba kingdom is the case of Brahmanical forgery and is the sanskritisation of Dimapur. Haidimapur, therefore, does not seem to have anything to do with *Hedemba* or *Heremba*, the non-Aryan wife of Bhima. This Hedemba is mythologically projected as the Kachari woman and thus connection had been established between the Boros and the Aryan family. But the truth of the fact that Hedemba was a Kachari woman can not be certified. As noted earlier, Bisvasingha was the son of Haoria Mech by his wife Hira Mech. The Brahmins, however, invented a myth that he Bisvasinha had been a king of Divine origin, god Siva being his progenitor, and went on to say that good shiva being enamoured at the beauty of Hira Mech took the form of Her husband and had illicit union with her as a result of which Bisu was born.¹² Not contented with this, the Brahmins effectively counselled Bisvasingha to disclaim Haoria Mech to be his father, but of god Shiva.¹³

The direct effort of the Brahmins to Hinduise the non-Hindus were, however, limited primarily to the royal and aristocratic families and the extension of their activities to the laymen was not considered much necessary because they understood that the laymen simply followed the examples of the kings and the nobles.

The Aryanisation of the non-Aryans was also carried out through the official patronisation of the Aryan language and literature by the kings and the aristocracies. We have noted earlier that the Boros speak Assamese and Bengali side by side with their own language. These sanskritic languages served as the lingua-franca outside their family and tribal circles. In the plains of Cachar, the members of the royal family and the aristocracy conducted the state affairs through Bengali just as the Ahoms did through Assamese. The kings issued coins containing Hindu legends in sanskrit language in Assamese and Bengali characteres. Mahamanikya of the second half of the 14th century patronised to a great extent the sanskrit literature and caused the first translation of the Hindu epic Ramayana into Assamese¹⁴ In later period the Hindu sastras came to be rendered in the Boro language in Assamese or Bengali characters.

The process of the Aryanisation of the Boros spreading over the centuries intruded in the realm of their religion, thus bringing

about significant changes in their religious and social outlook. A large segment of them, though clinging to their traditional Bathou religion call themselves Hindus and identify their traditional deities with gods and goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon. For instances, *Bathnu Borai* and *Bathnu Buri*, the traditional chief male and female deities are identified with Shiva and Parvati, *Mainao*, the guardian of domestic wealth and the protectress of the paddy field is identified with Lakshmi *Bulliburi*, the deity of learning is identified with Saraswati, the traditional concept of Boro Trinity 'Rang, Rachi, Moitahachi gongongtham' is drawn in parallel with the Hindu Trinity - Brahma, Vishnu and Mohesvara and so on. The coming of the Brahma religion whose theology centres round the Upanishadic *Brahman* as the Supreme God and Ultimate Reality with Vedic ritual of worship, such as, chanting of Brahma gayatri (vedic hymns) at Yajna kunda and the acceptance of formal initiation in the teachings of Bengali saint Anukul Thakur, thus falling in line of Sat-sangi are the direct results of deep influence of Hinduism on the Boros. The Anukul authority ever since it established its grip over a sizeable Boro population is seen imposing on its followers all the Hindu injunction step by step. This authority prohibits eating of meat, fish, onion, garlic etc. as well as wearing of their traditional colourful and embroidered costumes by the Boro women. The complicated and elaborate rituals of the Bathou worship involving sacrifices of animals and other ills of the traditional religion have come under sharp attack. A traditional priest Ojha Joynarayan Bosumatari who runs a Bathou Ashram now begins to preach and practise the the worship of the traditional deities without sacrifices of fowls and offerings of country liquor and substitute them with offerings of flowers thus making the system more adoptable to the educated class of the people.

A change in religious outlook is bound to bring a similar change in their social outlook and hence, apart from the observance of their religious and social festivals, the traditional Boros actively and enthusiastically participate in the Hindu festivals. In this connection, P. Goswami remarks that it is difficult to differentiate a festival as Hindu or tribal, for both participate it.¹⁵

The Boro culture, language and religion though tended to be weakened very much by the policy of universal sanskritisation to transform and reorganise the aboriginals through occulturation, the people did not give up completely their traditional way of life which they retain to this day. Along with Hindu rites, even the Hinduised Boros like the Koches or Rajbansis continue to practise some of

their traditional rites including sacrifices for the health and safety of the people. In this context, Hunter writes,

“These sacrifices were handed down from the primitive times and could only be performed by the descendants of the native Cachari priests. Among them was a human sacrifice from the raja celebrated on certain occasions”.¹⁶

They still remain as backward as the unhinduised in economic and educational spheres. Certain cultural traits of original Boro culture, such as Boro woman's way of wrapping one piece of cloth round the body, Boro pattern of weaving and spinning including embroidery, food habits etc. are still lingering with the Koch people. From the fragments of Assam history it is gathered that the early Kachari Chiefs and soldiers of Koch king Narnarayana used to worship their traditional deities with sacrifices on the bank of the river Sankosh, accompanied by the traditional dances with beating of Kham (a long traditional drum), *shifung* (flute), *jota* (cymbal) etc. under the auspices of *Dori* (priest) and *Dudhini* (female oracle) to effectively propitiate their deities who supposedly derived extreme pleasure and satisfaction if worshipped in true traditional way and rites with offerings of fowls, pig, goat, wine, rice, fruits etc. In this connection, it can also aptly be referred to that while launching a military campaign against the Ahoms, the Hinduised Boro king Narnarayana of the Koch dynasty performed propitiatory sacrifices to the deity according to the Hindu rite. Shiva was angry and made his appearance before the king in his dream and rebuked him severely for attempting to give up his own traditional mode of worship and warned him that unless he worshipped him in true traditional rites, his worship would go in vain. The king, therefore, made arrangements for the performances of such rites on the bank of the Sankosh river. Thus, Koch king Narnarayana, though converted to Hinduism and accepted the Hindu mode of worship could not altogether abandon his traditional religious practices at his own will. The *Kachari Buranji* gives some details about the Bodo kingdom near Sadiya and their expulsion from there. In the neighbourhood of Sadiya was the copper temple of *Kachai kati*, the tutelary deity of the early Boros and their cognate tribes. Notwithstanding the steady Hinduisation of the people, they continued to worship this traditional deity even after the establishment of their rule in North Cachar and then in the palains.¹⁷ The worship of *Ranachandi* by the Dimasas in the North Cachar Hills still lingers with the Boros to this day in the form of worship of *Bon-Pagli*. These evidences suggest not only the continuance of the traditional religious pra-

ctices of the Hinduised Boros, but also that they had been following dual religion after their conversion to Hinduism. Besides, when the Ahom kings were bent on imposing Hinduism as a universal religion in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Moamorias resisted it. The Kacharis who remained in the valley as the subjects of the Ahom kings constituted a great force behind the Moamoaria rebellion. The Kacharis of Kachar too made a common cause with their kins in the valley. The Hinduised king Krishnanarayana actively patronised the Moamorias in the Ahom state. All these events go in support of love for an unbroken tie with their traditional religion.

After a thorough probe into the existing Boro culture, language and religion, one is tempted to assert that Hinduism did not and could not interfere with the basic social structure and the way of life of the people. In fact the tribe, inspite of being largely influenced by the Hindus, has retained its traditional socio-cultural traits and preserved the best of their customs and religious beliefs accommodating a great lot of Indo-Aryan practices. Hinduism actually brought in a benign moderating impact on the society and history of the Boros. The Boro culture and language, on the other hand, have greatly influenced the Hindu neighbours. The traditional Boro deity *Bathou Borai* alias *Siwa Borai* who had been looked down by the Hindus for being a non-Aryan god, had been accepted by them as one of their gods and has been placed in the third rank of the Hindu Trinity under the name *Mohesvara*. Today, he is worshipped by the Hindus as 'All Destroyer'. The Boro textile designs have captured the imagination and appreciation of the Hindu neighbours. Besides, they have learnt considerable amount of Boro language, no matter how perfectly they speak or converse with the rural Boro folks. We have many anecdotes relating how illiterate rural Boro folks try to speak in Aryan language to the Hindu traders in the local market places. One such anecdote goes that a Boro woman in the market while enquiring the price of a certain commodity which she intended to buy said, 'Noi harsha house, eita koto', meaning hello Hindu youth, what is the price of this? Another similar anecdote goes that a Boro male folk who could not speak any language other than his own went to a local market to purchase a blanket. In the shop, while he could just point out with his fignure to the thing which he wanted, he could not express the size of the cloth. So he said to the shop keeper in his own mother tongue 'Gangoi bima gailungjong angjong glom' meaning just enough to cover Gangoi's mother Gailung and myself (A lame woman is usually called Gailung). This situation compelled the Hindu

traders to learn the Boro language. Attraction of the rural folk customers to their shops was another factor which compelled the traders to learn the Boro language. Today, most of the Hindu traders dealing with the Boros speak the Boro language well and transact their business in the Boro language. Another anecdote depicts how a Hindu trader dealing in mill made cotton yarns and not well-verse in the Boro language mispronounced the Boro words. While beckoning the Boro women customers to come to his shop and buy from him, the shop keeper said,

Noi aiphor, noi agoiphor !

Angniao phoi,

Gomobo labdang,

Gosombo labdang

Gupurtbo labdang

Gojabo labdang

Gasoibo labdang

(Hello mothers, hello sisters, come and buy from me. I have brought yarns of all colours - yellow, black, white and red).

Thus in the whole process, there has been 'give and take' that is to say that if the Hindus have influenced the Boros, the Boros too have influenced the Hindus, which has helped to build up a healthy social relations between the communities.

Notes & References

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