

# RELIGION OF THE BOROS

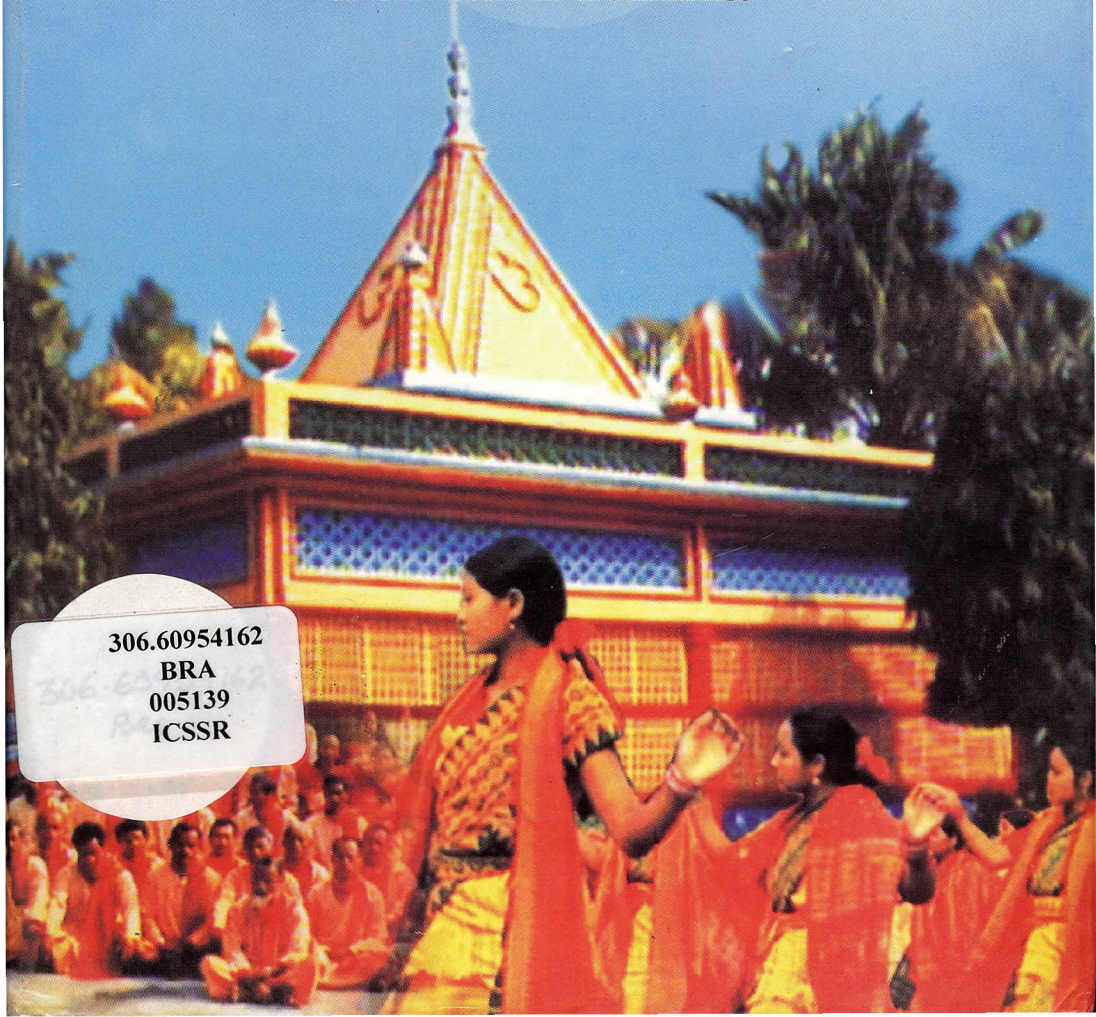
Sekhar Brahma

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**RELIGION OF THE BOROS  
AND  
THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSITION**  
*A Historical Perspective*

**By**  
**Dr. Sekhar Brahma**



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## **Dedication**

**In fond memory of my father**

**Maheswar Brahma**

**Who denounced all material pleasures**

**In his becoming a humble school teacher**

## PREFACE

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This book is the product of my research work as a doctoral project, where I tried to trace the history of social transition of the Boros and how far the religion is responsible for social mobility in the Boro society. My teachers, Professor J.B. Bhattacharjya, former Head of History Department, North Eastern Hill University and Ex Vice Chancellor, Assam University and my research Guide Professor F.A. Qadri, encouraged me to publish this work on the Boro tribe of North East India. I am convinced that the publication of this work would contribute to understand the aspect of the history of social development, from tradition to modernity, of the Boros. As desired by the publisher I have made some modification in the structure to bring out the doctoral thesis in book form.

My work, *Religion of the Boros and Their Socio-Cultural Transition* delves into the different religious cult that came into existence to break the sole domination of the traditional *Bathou* religion in the Boro society, and social reaction among the Boros as a result of the presence of new religions. I have tried to analyze systematically how different religions, which came among the Boros, moulded the Boro society and how far these religions were responsible for creating social tensions and urge for political aspiration among the Boros.

The study reveals that, the entire development process- the religious movement, upward social mobility, ethnic crisis, etc. are inter-related to each other and their roots were laid in the Brahma dharma movement or the spread of Christianity in the early part of twentieth century.

As a member of the same community, I could access more inside the grass root people and into their beliefs, practice, customs, and aspiration, and have better understanding of changing mode of every aspects of their life.

I have tried to present the facts and chronology as authentic as possible and analyzed them critically and objectively. Many of the facts are established facts, which I have just reproduced and interpreted them from various angles.

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I have tried my level best to use all the available sources both used and unused data to make this work as objective as possible, and before writing I had cross-examined the data from different sources. I hope this work will be able to highlight the true picture of the Boro society and its development since the beginning of the last century.

It gives me immense pleasure to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have cooperated me in the preparation of this thesis.

First of all I remain ever grateful to my supervisor Professor F.A. Qadri for his scholarly guidance and help, who was also my constant source of inspiration. This work might not have been done without his help.

Secondly, I am grateful to the Head of the Department of History, Professor David Syiemlieh, for his sympathetic help and valuable suggestion in completing this work.

I express my sincere gratitude to Professor J.B. Bhattacharjee, Professor I. Hussain and Professor M. Sharma of History Department who always helped and encouraged me to keep my spirit up in doing my research. I also express my gratitude to all the teachers of the Department of History and other members of the research committee for their suggestion to improve my work.

I am indebted to elderly persons and friends who rendered their knowledge and wisdom, while collecting materials and sources for this work, without any reservation.

I am thankful to Dr. Pradip Kr. Patra, Reader of Gauhati University, Kokrajhar Campus and Mr. Sikhna John Wary, Lecturer of Kokrajhar College, who sincerely helped me in many ways in bringing out this work.

I am also grateful to DVS Publishers, Guwahati, for taking the responsibility of publishing this work of mine.

Last but not the least, I am indebted to my family members for their encouragement in doing my research work.

**Sekhar Brahma**

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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The study of human society involves the study of culture. Any aspect or part of a society, which has the presence of cultural mode of transmission, is of the foremost importance in such study. "It includes art, music, architecture, literature, science, technology, philosophy, religion, and a million other things."<sup>1</sup> But the present study intends to deal with the culture relating to social life that throws light on the religion, social institution and behaviour of the Boros.

The Boros are one of the important indigenous tribes of the North East India. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongolian race. The fact that the Boros once wielded great power and influence in the entire North East is beyond doubt. Suniti Kr. Chatterjee writes, ".....the whole of Assam (barring the eastern part inhabited by the Kuki Chins) and North and East of Bengal was the country of the great Bodo people"<sup>2</sup> The Boros are now scattered all over Assam, North and East Bengal and in some part of Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland etc. However the majority of them are found on the northern bank of Brahmaputra valley. They have their culture, language and religion, although they are not immune to external influences, especially in their socio-cultural life.

From the primitive age to the modern, religion has played a very important role in moulding the socio-cultural life of the Bodo people. The social institutions of the Bodos are interwoven and interrelated with their religion, and in the traditional agrarian society, every sphere of life of a Boro man or woman, is guided by rites and rituals of his religion. Religion has also played a dominant role in changing their

social pattern and status, economy, mode of living and way of thinking and it has led to achieving higher education and modernization of their society.

With the advent of many new religious sects such as *Brahma dharma*, *Ek Sharan Nam dharma*, *Saivism*, *Vaisnavism* etc. the Boro society witnessed a new direction in all the spheres of life. Besides, the Christian missionaries have made inroads into the original religious beliefs and customs of a large section of the Boro people. Every new cult or religion of Boros undertakes some socio-cultural reforms, which brings structural change in the society. Thus the Boro society has been religiously divided into different groups and the simple traditional society is heading towards a critical period.

Other important factors of the socio-cultural transition among the Bodos are the spread of modern education and development of science and technology, which has, to a great extent, added to the normative and value changes in the Boro society.

The modern political system of India like democracy, secularism, republicanism, equality, rights, provided by the constitution of India, gave new experience to the Boro society and they began to strive, with new ideas and determination, for the uplift of their socio-economic position as a part of diverse Indian nation. It gave a hard blow to the conservative Boro society and finally they have emerged with liberal outlook, replacing some of their old belief and ideas by modern knowledge.

The traditional Boro culture, which was introvert in nature, came under external impact through historical contact and cultural domination of the great Indian tradition and inclined towards common cultural consciousness that has been formed among the Hindus of the sub-continent.

*Bathou* worship, which culminates in *kherai* and *marai* festivals, is the original form of religion of the Boros. It believes the existence of thousands of deities with Lord Siva as the head and their pacification through sacrificial rites. Later on the traditional *Bathou* religion manifested itself into several forms by originating new or refined cults, which came much closer to mainstream Hinduism. Today, *Bathou* is not a single cult but it has turned to be *Bathouism*, just like Hinduism, having many new sects, which has added some new rites and rituals to Boro society.

The Christian missionaries, along with the preaching of their religion, were instrumental in the matter of starting the written form of Boro language. They wrote Boro grammar book and translated the Bible into Boro language for spreading Christianity. The American Baptist missionaries were the first to come into contact with the Boro Kocharies. Though the first and chief aim of the Baptist missionaries was the spread of gospel among the Boros, it has a 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 (Kochari) 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 to the Boro society.

The Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church also played their roles in moulding the Boro society.

The process of conversion to different sects of Hinduism like *Brahma dharma*, *Satsang*, *Saivism*, *Vaisnavism* etc. brought many reforms in the traditional Boro society. Changes were brought in marriage institution, economic organization, rites, rituals and customs of the Boros. These changes and reforms have brought upward social mobility among the Boros, and they are able to receive good attention of other caste Hindus. *Ek Sharan Nam dharma* created a new caste among the Boros and made the Boro society almost similar to the mainstream Assamese society. Gradually some social division came into existence in the Boro society, though it was unknown to them, and it brought a tremendous change in the socio-economic and cultural setup among the Boros.

Even today, many new religious activities have made their appearance among the Boros, while a good number of them have tried to revive the traditional *Bathou* religious worship. One educated section of Boros has accepted *Brahma dharma* while the others have gone to *Satsang* group. As a result of the impact of various sectarian and religious forces the Boro people are likely to face a new social dimension in the near future.

The religious movement led by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma in the beginning of twentieth century brought the process of Sanskritization,

and his effort to modernize the society by spreading higher education, gave birth to the Boro Chatra Sanmilian (students' organization) in 1919. The Chatra Sanmilian brought about a great awakening among the Boros by their rigorous endeavour for unifying and developing the Boros of different part of the country.

The entire movement led by Kalicharan Brahma and the Boro Chatra Sanmilian led to development of education and self-awareness to the Boros, which in turn took them to search social identity and political rights. The formation of Boro Sahitya Sabha on 16th November 1952, at Basugaon town, for the preservation of language, culture and identity, was a landmark in the history of Boro society. It ultimately gave birth to new political parties and social organization in the Boro society and took them to several problematic issues. The Boros began to launch movement one after another, for the implementation of Boro language at schools of Boro areas in 1960's, for the self-rule unit Udayachal Autonomous region in 1970's, and the Bodoland movement by the All Bodo Students' Union in 1980's. It resulted in the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council within the state of Assam comprising contiguous geographical areas between river Sankosh to river Pasnoi, in February 1993.<sup>3</sup> But in the long run this political arrangement for self-rule could not satisfy the aspiration of the Boro people due to the adamant attitude of the political parties and lack of sincerity and good will of the government. The Boros again strived for better political autonomy and extension of geographical areas of Bodoland council within the state of Assam.

At one point of time Boro language came on the verge of extinction and Boro art and culture were in jeopardy. But today Boro language and culture have reached a certain level of development effecting far reaching changes in the life of Boro people. The Boros of the different parts of the country have been united under the banner of Boro Sahitya Sabha, and they have succeeded in restoring their culture and language, occupying a rightful place in the state. The Boro intellectuals played major role in the development of Boro language and literature and now Boro language has become a medium of instruction at Secondary level of schools and the Department of Boro literature has been opened at the University level. It has brought a renaissance in the history of Boro society and the Boro people are making attempt to achieve all round development in the days to come.

The Boro society is passing through a stage of transition. Many changes have taken in different aspects of their society, and many more changes are expected in the days to come.

### **THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE OF THE AREA OF STUDY**

The investigation of my research work is mainly based on the process of change, growth, progress and development of the socio-culture and religion among the Boros of Kokrajhar district. By Kokrajhar district I mean to cover the undivided Kokrajhar district (i.e. Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts) as well as the adjoining areas like Tipkai and Parbatjaware of Dhubri district of Assam, dominated by the Boro tribes, where the Boro socio-religious movement originated.

Kokrajhar district is the western most district of Assam, it falls in between  $90^{\circ}$  E to  $91^{\circ}$  E longitude and  $26^{\circ}28'$  N to  $26^{\circ}50'$  N latitude. It was one of the sub-division of Goalpara district and it was given the status of full-fledged district in 1983. Kokrajhar district is bounded by the International boundary between Bhutan and India in the north. Goalpara and Dhubri district on the south, Bongaigaon district on the east and Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal is situated on the west of the district. The geographical area of the district covers 3195.21 sq. Kms.

According to a basic table presenting population, published by the Director of census operation, Assam, it shows that total population of Kokrajhar on 1st March, 2001 stands at 9,30,404 persons out of which males are 4,78,242 and females are 4,52,162 representing a decadal growth of 15.05 percent during the last decade 1991-2001 as against decadal growth of 75.94 percent during the preceding two decades 1971-91. The density of population in the district has gone up to 294 per sq. km in 2001 as against 255 in 1991.<sup>4</sup> The total rate of literacy, in the district, is 52.55 (male 61.90 and female 42.65), which is lower than the state literacy rate of 64.28 and 65.38 for the nation as a whole.<sup>5</sup> As shown in the District Statistical Handbook of Kokrajhar district, 2002-03, Govt. of Assam, out of the total population 9,30,404 persons the total number Scheduled Tribe was 3,82,022 and Scheduled Caste was 35,373.<sup>6</sup> Out of the total area of land only 27.8 percent is available for cultivation and almost 60 percent area covered under forest area. The district as a whole can be described economically backward. There is hardly such an urban centre or industrial centre to

absorb the growing population 75.94 during 1971-91, which is more than state average, and 15.05 percent during 1991-2001.

The Kokrajhar district is a homogeneous geographical unit and a part of Brahmaputra valley. It is fertile tract of Brahmaputra valley except the foothill region of Bhutan (Himalaya).

Historically the district was included in the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisa, then Kamrup since the time of *Mahabharata*. In the first half of 16th century, this area was under the rule of Koch Kings. After 1826 the area went under British administration.

During the post independent period the whole administrative setup was changed and the present Kokrajhar district was included as a sub-division of Goalpara district. In 1983, when reorganization of civil district was carried out, Kokrajhar became an independent district of Assam.

The soil of the district is alluvial and fertile having a mixture of red and black soil. The northern part was fully covered by forest area with Sal, Teak, Gambari, etc. of important species. But in the recent years, many valuable trees have been cut down by illegal traders. The same climatic condition is prevalent in the district as in the other parts of the plain district of the state. The area has heavy rainfall and high temperature with damp and humid position in the year. The maximum rainfall in a year is 3330 mm and minimum 1305 mm with average rainfall of about 2405 mm. January being the coldest month, temperature ranges from 32o to 9o C in every year.<sup>7</sup>

The people of different communities, religion and languages inhabit in this region like Boros, Assamese, Bengali, Rajbanshi, Santal, Muslim, Nepalees, etc.

As per census report, 2001 and projected on the basis of 1991 population figure the District Statistical Handbook, Kokrajhar: states the classified figures of population of different communities, speakers of different languages and religion, in the district, as follows:- Assamese-191140, Boros-364481, Bengali-181239, Santali-93966, Nepalee-22606, Oriya-1577, Orang-11732, Rabhas-12273, Mundas-4198, Garos-500, Hindi speaking and others-46692 persons. Again the population was divided on the basis of religion, whose numbers are:- Hindus-611464, Muslims-178099, Christians-90413, Sikhs-52, Buddhist-885, Jains-867, others-48624 persons etc.<sup>8</sup>

The main occupation of this people in the villages is agriculture and more than 80 percent of the villagers are engaged in agriculture either in cultivation or as agricultural labours. The other tertiary activities are land-based and depend on the availability of local resources. Out of 202 persons in the villages only three persons are employed in the government services.<sup>9</sup>

## THE BOROS

The Boros are one of the composite parts of the greater Assamese society forms a major tribe of Kokrajhar district. Suniti Kr.Chatterjee writes, ".....The Bodos who spread over the whole Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal forming a solid block in eastern India and they form one of the main bases of the present day population of this tracts. Judging from the wide range of extension of their language, the Bodos appear to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra valley and extended into North Bengal."<sup>10</sup>

The Boros, also known as Bodo, is one of the major communities of Assam belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The generic name of 'Bodo' was first given by Hodgson to this group of languages. The Mech or the Kocharies call themselves as Bodo or Boro.<sup>11</sup> The neighbouring Assamese speakers call these people and their speech as Kochari or Kosari. Boros, who lived in Jalpaiguri district of west Bengal are known to their neighbour as Mech. "this word is probably a corruption of the Sanskrit 'mlechcha'...."<sup>12</sup>

The Boros have their own language and literature, which are known as Boro language and literature. The Boro women still wear their traditional dress known as *dokhna* and *sadri*. They have their own culture, tradition, belief and customs. They are originally worshipper of *Bathou* (the traditional religion of the Boros) the supreme god of the Boros. The *sijou* plant (*euphorbia splendens*) stands as an emblem of the supreme god at the altar.

But gradually a great section of people came into the fold of mainstream Hinduism, and with the advent of Christian Missionaries a considerable section of people converted to Christianity. An upward mobility of Bodo society, without losing their basic value and identity has been taking place as a result of the appearance of different religions

in their society. The Boros now call and consider themselves as Hindu (excepting Christians) and follow Hindu rituals.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The process of Hinduization and upward social mobility among the Bodos in the history started long back with the royal patronage of the Bodo rulers. Different royal dynasties of the Boros established domination in different parts of North-Eastern India in different periods. We find the latest record of their rule from the advent of Ahoms. In the word of Edward Gait, "...the fortune of the various Bodo rulers whose ancestors had dominated in Assam had lost much of their energy and martial quality by the long residence in the fertile and streamy plains."<sup>13</sup> The pre-Ahom history of the Bodos could not be reconstructed systematically owing to dearth of material, though they are the most aboriginal and earliest inhabitants of Brahmaputra valley. So the pre-Ahom history of Boros derives its sources from the old Sanskrit literature like *Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, *Yognitantra*, copper plates, inscription, travelogues, monuments etc.

In 1970 the king of Cachar Krishna Chandra along with his brother Govindra Chandra was formally converted to Hinduism. As a result, he was recognized as the *Kshatriya*, and he could claim to be descended from Bhima, one of the heroes of *Mahabharata*. The Hinduism might have been slowly progressing among the Kocharies before the transfer of the capital from Maibong to Khaspur towards the end of the reign of Tamradhvaj. A memoir compiled by a British army officer during the first Anglo-Burmese war gives information that Hinduism was prevailing in Cachar during the early years of the Nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

Another line of Boro Kings, the Koches ruled over the Koch Behar or Kamata. They are from the lineage of Dambambu Mech and his son Hariya Mandal. A Boro or Kochari who became converted to Hinduism became Koch.<sup>15</sup> During the reign of Hariya Mandal's son Visva Singha and his son Naranarayan the Koch kingdom became very powerful. The Koches came into contact with the Hindu world long before in the early centuries of Christian era. But it was under the patronage of their Kings, Visva Singha and Naranarayan, the Koch tribe came under the manifold Hinduism, and they also adopted Aryan culture and language. Thus rising in social ladder they changed their tribal name Koch to Rajbanshis. King Naranarayan's reign was highly

marked for his patronage to Assamese literature and other Cultural activities. The great Vaisnavite preacher, reformer and literary talent like Sankardeva and others assembled in the court of Koch Behar. Thus the Koches are Sanskritized Bodos who claimed higher status in the society by embracing Hinduism and giving up their tribal character.

The royal families were getting increasingly Hinduised. But the common people kept the fundamental of their religion although they live through various stages of Hinduism during the medieval period. The Koches were the most Hinduised people among all the Boro tribes.

The Vaisnavite movement, inaugurated by Sri Sankardeva converted different tribes like Boros, Kocharies, Chutias, Miries, Rabhas, etc. to Hinduism, and were henceforward known as Sarania. Thus they became more refined in custom, food and drink. The Sarania gave up their old religion, custom, and language and completely merged with Assamese mainstream.

Among the ethnic Boro community of the northern tract of Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal, those who still preserve their identity, language and traditional values have greatly been influenced by Aryan culture and religion. Many of the Boros with their tradition and custom agreed to accept Hindu ideologies, and consider themselves as Hindu with formal conversion. Their mind set, way of living, foot habit, culture and manner, are influenced by their fellow Aryans. Towards the first quarter of this century Kalicharan brought the Brahma religion from Siv Narayan Paramhansa and preach it among the Boros. Thus a great section of Boros came into the fold of mainstream Hinduism.

## **OBJECTIVE OF STUDY**

The present study, *Religion of the Boros and their Socio-Cultural Transition*, primarily deals with their religion in their past and present and the gradual induction of the Boros into the fold of mainstream of Hindu culture as well as into Christianity. The focus of attention in this study is the religious impact on the socio-economic and 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 levels like social customs, marriages, family-pattern and other organizations of the most aboriginal and earliest inhabitants of Brahmaputra valley particularly of Kokrajhar district.

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