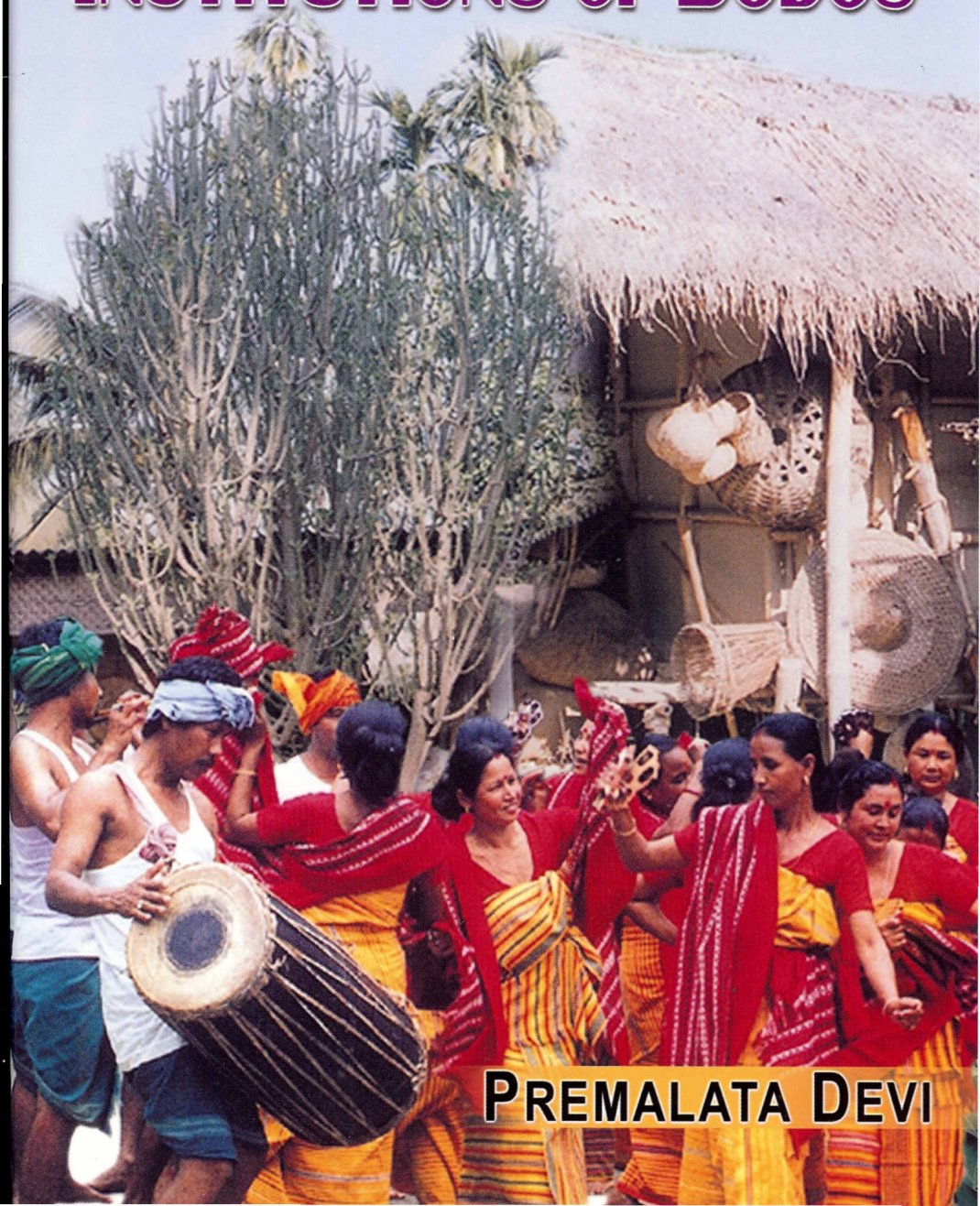


# **SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS OF BODOS**



**PREMALATA DEVI**

## About the Book

The Bodos of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam are 'sons of the soil' (*bhumi putra*). In other words, they are the earliest settlers in the Brahmaputra Valley and are believed to be the migrants from Bod country of Tibet. Some of the names of the rivers of Assam and epics like *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* strongly support the evidence of settling down of Bodos in this Valley region since time immemorial. In the *Vedas* they are mentioned as *Kirātas* and Anthropologists include them under Indo-Mongoloid stock.

The Census of India reveals that the Bodos are the single largest tribe of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Beginning with the geographical location of the study area, the book provides a brief account of the entire Bodo speakers in Brahmaputra Valley. The book explains the traditional socio-religious institutions of the Bodos from philosophical point of view. Man, society, ethics and gods as believed by the Bodos have been discussed in detail. Though there have been socio-religious transformation among the Bodos with the introduction of *Brahma dharma*, Hinduism and Christianity through ages, still it seems that their rich traditional culture is the back bone of their identity.

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OF BODOS**

**PREMALATA DEVI**



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Dedicated to my  
*mother*  
**Late Sumitra Devi**

## *Foreword*

The Bodos are a great community, who now number more than two million and are the biggest single tribe of the plains of Assam, when one considers that the Adivasi community of the tea gardens of Assam are not recognized as 'tribal' in Assam. The Bodo family seems to be the earliest settlers of Assam and had once ruled a kingdom stretching from Cooch Bihar to Naga Hills with Dimapur as their capital. Sanjoy Hazarika calls them "the true indigenous people of Assam" in his widely read work *Strangers of the Mist*. Even though a large portion of the Bodo community has now changed their religion either to Hinduism or Christianity and the community as a whole has been swept by the process of Sanskritization, Premalata's study reveals that Bodo's today are in a process of reviving their traditional culture, religion, language and identity. Any process of revival or reformation requires a strong intellectual framework where meanings are laid bare. Such a framework also sets a strong edifice for the reinterpretation of traditions, which is part of any dynamic process of revival. I hope that Premalata's work paves the way for the creation of such an intellectual framework for taking a serious look back into the traditional moorings of Bodo culture.

Premalata is not new to genuine exercises in the philosophy of culture and religion. Besides her doctoral research in a similar field, she was involved with me in the early 90s for a research project on 'Communalism in Assam: a Civilizational Approach.' Moreover, as a native of Nalbari in Assam, Premalata

has lived in close proximity to the Bodos and, I am sure, she has learned by observation about the rich cultural heritage of the community. I salute her attempt in trying to penetrate the cultural landscape of a community that is not her own. I believe that such endeavours make us more human because we then realize how close we are to each other and that our differences are not walls that set us apart.



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## *Preface*

North-East India is the habitat of many tribes with diverse ethnic origins. Assam is one of the states of North-East India where many tribes and non-tribes have settled together. Brahmaputra Valley is the largest plain in North-East India where the Bodos are considered to be the largest tribe. The Bodos in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, intermixed with the Assamese people, but still they have preserved their language and traditional socio-religious beliefs and practices at some levels. Like all other tribal groups of North-East India, the Bodos also have their traditional religion based on the belief in a number of spirits, benevolent and malevolent. A Hindu religious reformer named Guru Deva Kalicharan Brahma introduced a simple form of Hinduism among them. In the western part of Assam many Bodos became his followers and started to call themselves Brahma. In middle Assam many Bodos show the impact of the process of sanskritization and they are in the process of assimilation into the greater Hindu society. In the eastern part of Assam a large number of Bodos got themselves converted into Christianity. In the extreme eastern part, the Sonowal, on the other hand, gave up their traditional life and merged into Hindu religion. Presently, there has been a tendency among all the Bodos to revive their traditional culture. In the Indian situation, religion plays a pivotal role in building up and maintaining identity. The present work is an attempt to study the philosophical aspect of the social and religious institutions of the Bodos of Brahmaputra Valley.

The study starts with the origin of the Bodos of the Brahmaputra Valley and their geographical extension, which is described in chapter 1. In this chapter, the distribution of Bodo speakers in the different districts of the Brahmaputra Valley is also highlighted. God is the ground, guide and goal of man. Different religious groups of the world interpret God as supreme power in different ways. Concept of God in Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity are discussed in chapter 2. The Bodo's concept of God is also discussed in this chapter. The ethics of the Bodos is discussed in chapter 3. Man is a wonderful creature of God. The image of man as presented in the religious tradition of the Bodos is described in chapter 4. It also deals with the structure of Bodo society and its evolution and progress. Rites, rituals and festivals are the ways of life of any society. Ancestral rites, rites of passage, agricultural rites of Bodos are described in chapter 5. It also deals with the festivals of Bodos. *Baisāgu*, *Domāsi*, *Putuli hābā/Phusi hābā* are the ways of enjoyment celebrated annually on specific dates. *Kherāi pujā* is the worship of *Bāthou* to get more products from agriculture while *Garjā pujā* is performed by traditional Bodos for the welfare of the villagers. *Jau* (local made rice beer) consumption, the way of enjoyment that Bodos love to have almost in all festivals and on certain occasions is also explained in this chapter.

An elaborate study has been made on Bodo religion in chapter 6 on the basis of different literature and folksongs. In the conclusion, an attempt is made to assess the role of traditional religion in the social life of modern Bodos.

In spite of every care taken to avoid mistakes of printing or otherwise, it is futile to expect no mistake due to a lot of vernacular folksongs and pronunciations of various languages. There is always room for improvement, so I shall thankfully acknowledge and feel obliged, if mistakes and suggestions are pointed to me. It will be a great pleasure to share your experiences with the book and honour your suggestions.

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