

Socio-Cultural Changes of the Bodos in the 20th Century with Reference to Brahma Religious Movement

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Abstract

The arrival of Brahma dharma in Assam led to the emergence of Brahma Religious Movement among the Bodo tribes in the beginning of the 20th century. This was a movement for socio-religious reformation through the propagation of Brahma dharma led by Kalicharan Brahma. Brahma dharma, a Hindu denomination was very new religion to the Bodo people but later on, became one of the most important religions of a section of the Bodo people for the upliftment of their socio-cultural, economic and political. In actuality, the movement's pioneer, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma realized the need to reform the Bodo people's socio-cultural and religious practices. Traditionally, the Bodos have followed the religion so-called *Bathou dharma* where *Bathou Bwrai*, Almighty God was worshipped with the numerous festivals. In connection with this, they used an excessive amount of wine along with sacrifices of birds and beasts during the festivals, which were inappropriate for a portion of the Bodo population at that time. Then again, when the upper caste Hindus living close to the Bodo villages witnessed their unclean domestic practices, such as rearing pigs, ducks, and fowls, etc., they would occasionally openly loathe the Bodo tribes. Besides, the Bodo people at that time were also treated as unclean and *Mleccha*, everywhere. Thus, in order to elevate the Bodo people, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma preached Brahma dharma among them. Since the Brahma dharma originated in Vedic philosophy, it brought sanskritization to Bodo customs, ceremonies, and culture. Therefore, the present paper intends to highlight some changes that had occurred in the socio-cultural life of the Bodo people in the 20th century due to the Brahma religious movement.

Key words: Religious Movement, Brahma Dharma, Socio-Cultural, Change, Bodo Society.

Introduction

The society and religion are intertwined, and when there is a change on religion there is a change on socio-cultural. The Brahma religious movement through the propagation of Brahma dharma by Kalicharan Brahma among the Bodo tribes gained momentum in the early 20th century. This movement was a historic where the changes in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the Bodo community occurred unabatedly. Since ages, the Bodos have practiced the traditional religion, *Bathou dharma* wherein sacrifices of birds and beasts were made to pacify the gods and goddess with performing some festivals. But at that time, such practice was not suited to a section of the Bodo people who wanted the change, and tried to get rid of these redundant rites and rituals performed in the name of the religion. This section of the people belonged to the followers of Brahma dharma of Kalicharan Brahma. Kalicharan actually propagated the Brahma dharma among the Bodo people for the purpose of upliftment of the social status of the Bodo community. The Bodos are the earliest and aboriginal tribes of Assam. Racially, they are Mongoloid and speakers of Tibeto-Burman dialect. (Chatterji, 1974:23). Once, they were the most powerful tribes in Assam, and maintained powerful kingdom too before the advent of the British. They are now widely scattered in all over northeast India, in some parts of North Bengal and neighboring countries of Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Now a days, they are largely found in Bodoland Territorial Council, the sixth schedule area comprising of four districts of Assam, namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. Historically, the Bodos are non-Aryan tribes of northeast India due to their Mongolian lineage. However, after coming into contact with caste Hindus and thereby adopting the Brahma dharma, a Hindu denomination by a section of the Bodo people under the guidance of Kalicharan Brahma, their socio-economic and culture underwent various changes due to the impact of Aryanization or Sanskritization.

Methodology

The study for the present paper is historical, descriptive and analytical research. The relevant data is collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources mainly consist of personal interviews taken with the religious followers and prominent social workers. The secondary data are published books, journals and web sources, etc. Here, more personal observation and extensive field study is made while preparing this paper.

Discussion and Analysis

Bodos before arrival of Brahma dharma

In the early part of the 20th century, there was a social and religious unrest that every society sought the reformation in their socio-cultural and economic practices for the development of the society. During this time, the traditional religion of the Bodo people was the *Bathou dharmaw* which became unsuitable to a section of the people in the Bodo society. Meanwhile, Kalicharan Brahma who was called pioneer of the Bodo society, brought Brahma dharma which is a Hindu denomination, and preached it among the Bodos. Of course, during this time, there was a sizable number of Bodo people who had already believed and became Hindus in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. But a majority of the Bodo people at that time adhered to their original *Bathou* religion with worshipping the *Bathou Bwrai*, the supreme God and other lesser divinities. In the beginning of the 20th century, the traditional faith lost its original spirit of spirituality because of the excessive use of *zumai* (rice beer), *sereb* (distilled alcoholic spirit), and sacrifices of birds and beasts during the festivities in association with *Bathou* devotion. This was the fact that the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the traditional Bodos depreciated gradually. On the other hand, the upper caste Hindu society who were proximity to Bodo villages in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, despised the Bodos publicly after seeing their unclean practices at home, like pigs rearing, ducks and fowls, etc. This is clearly evident from the fact that in Dhubri town, some Bodo people while dealt timber trade with upper Hindu caste neighbours, were sometimes deprived of food and lodging in hotels and then, everywhere they were publicly named 'Mech' or 'Mleccha' meaning polluted (Basumatary, 2005:53). However, at that time a group of Bodo people had already accepted the different sects of Hindu religion because of the strong provocation of high caste Hindu Brahmins. Besides, a great number of Bodos also became Sarania after having adopted 'EK saran nam' dharma of neo-Vaishnavite of Srimanta Sankardev and then abandoned their own culture and language (Brahma, 1972:163). These people adopted the Assamese language and culture as well as were also gradually merged with Assamese Hindu society. On the other hand, the Bodo Christian converts adopted some of the western values and culture. There is also evident that a section of the Bodo people was converted into Islam and then became Muslims during this time. The social customs and traditions of which the Bodos had regulated in connection with *Bathou dharmaw* since ages was gravely dazed. There was an uncertainty rampant in their social affairs. At this crisis, nobody, even of educated and intelligent among the Bodos realized the necessity of reformation in the practices of *Bathou dharmaw* with keeping its inherent values to face with other religions. The age-old unity among the great Bodos, however started decaying in its original strength. Apart from this, though a section of the Bodo people had already adopted the Hindu faith before the advent of Brahma religion, yet many incidents of which had been occurred with

Bodo people during that time, reveals that they were in fact, given a low status and continued to be treated as *Mleccha* and unclean as well as 'untouchable' for their social customs and traditions (Basumatay, 2005:54).

In such a critical moment, a great pioneer, Kalicharan Mech later popularly known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma came up as a modern social reformer of the Bodo community. Accordingly, in the early decade of 20th century, he executed reformation in the different facets of the Bodo tribes, like social, economic, religious and political. His reformation may be called as New Socio-Religious Reform Movement in the history of Bodos. This was acted through the propagation of a new religion called the *Brahma dharma* among the Bodos (Boro, 2010:118).

Kalicharan Brahma As a disciple

Kalicharan Brahma, born in 1862 at Kazigaon village of Parbatjhora area under the present Kokrajhar district continued his father's profession of timber business. Luckily, while dealing in business, he got to read a book named '*Sar Nitya Kriya*' written by Sibnarayan Swami in Bengali from his business partner, Charan Mandal. This book mainly contained the main teachings of Paramhansa Sibnarayan Swami, the founder of Brahma religion. When he studied this book, he was greatly influenced by the message contained in it and then, he realized that the teachings of Paramhansa Sibnarayan Swami would be ideally suited for the Bodo people in checking for their religious conversion which had already threatened the very identity of the Bodo community. Thereafter, in 1905, he, in accompanied with his three friends, namely Karan Mandal Mech, Charan Mandal Mech and Jamadar Mech met Paramhansa Sibnarayan at Bhabanipur road, Kolkata. When a discussion was made on the principles of *Brahma dharma* he was greatly influenced by the personality of Paramhansa Sibnarayan, who was a Brahmin originally hailing from Uttar Pradesh. Kalicharan studied some religious scriptures, like, *Purna Sadhana*, *Param Kalyan*, *Amrit Sagar*, etc. (Brahma, 1972:195-196). He then became a disciple of Sibnarayan and accordingly, adopted *Brahma dharma*.

Propagation of Brahma Faith

Kalicharan Brahma propagated his *Brahma* faith among the Bodos with a view to elevating the social status of the Bodo tribes. According to the basic tenet of Brahmanism, there is only one God. '*Brahma*' is the main force around whom the life in this universe revolves. According to Brahma dharma, Almighty is worshipped in the form of 'fire' or 'sun god' through '*yagya*'. Unlike *Bathou dharma*, there is no place of sacrifices of birds and beasts. With these principles and religious messages, Kalicharan Brahma firstly began to preach a new Brahma faith among the Bodos at his own village Kazigaon and

then at Bonyaguri where the Bodo people were convinced about the necessity of renouncing of their old religious practices. The villagers however, were pleased to hear the religious messages of Kalicharan, and consequently, a large number of villagers adopted the new Brahma faith. In 1906, according to the doctrines of Brahma dharma, the first *yajna* (*Hom-yagya*) called as '*ahutisaonai*' in Bodowas performed at Bainyaguri village with chanting of *gayatri mantra* attended by thousands of Bodo people. This occasion lasted for seven days and seven nights. This was in fact, a very important religious affair where mass conversion of the Bodo people into Brahma faith began in the society. In the same way, the consecutive *yajnas* were held persistently at different Bodo villages, where the *Bathou* devotees promised to adopt the Brahma faith after abandoning the *Bathou* worship (Brahma, 1972:197). Thereafter, in 1915 Kalicharan Brahma visited the districts of Nagoan, Darrang, Dibrugarh, Tezpur and many other places of Assam, and then preached the essence of Brahma dharma among the Bodo people. Further, in 1916, he made extensive tour to different places of Kamrup along with his friends, Dwarendra Basumatary, Charan Mandal, Junior Kalicharan and others. Not only this, he also visited the different places of Bodo inhabited areas at Jalpaiguri district of the West Bengal state, such as Satali, Gaburpara, and Salkumar etc. In the last decade of the 20th century, Kalicharan Brahma was successful in converting a large number of the Bodo people into the fold of Brahma cult.

Socio-Cultural Change

The socio-cultural change may be defined as the people's perception and response to various cultural alterations in various circumstances. The socio-cultural alterations among the Bodo tribes usually witnessed after the arrival of Brahma dharma in Assam. Prior to this, a large number of Bodo people had already converted into Christianity, and thereby adopted some western cultural values and norms. But Kalicharan Brahma's religious movement for propagation of Brahma dharma certainly checked the process of conversion among them to some extent. This is evident that a large number of Christian Bodos had been reverted to Brahma faith during the middle part of 20th century. There was also a section of the Bodo people who adopted '*Ek Saran nam*' dharma of neo-Vaishnavite of Srimanta Sankardev. These people were gradually merged with the Assamese culture which created much trouble in the propagation of Brahma faith. This is clearly evident from the fact that in Bijni, a rich land lord and mouzadar of fourth-division Sidli of present Chirang district, named Jagat Chandra Muchahary invariably encouraged the Bodo tribes to accept '*Ek Saran nam*' dharma of neo-Vaishnavite of Srimanta Sankardev and thereby to become Sarania under the guidance of Ananta Narayan Goswami of Baitamari. Interestingly, when he faced Kalicharan Brahma, he was greatly influenced by the wide and deep knowledge of Kalicharan Brahma and consequently, he became his disciple. In this way, it can be said that the Brahma religious movement under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma was really a great achievement in checking the

process of conversion among the Bodo people into different religions, namely neo-Vaishnavite, Christian and Islam.

There is saying that some Bodo people were reluctant to abolish their age-old beliefs and practices. So, Kalicharan Brahma organized the group of volunteers to execute a crusade on the traditionalist Bathou followers. However, some members of the campaigners, sometimes created their extremes which brought widespread criticism and sharp reactions against them in the villages and so, the outburst of anger engulfed in many places of the Bodos. But later on, this problem overcame amicably.

Though Bodos adopted Hindu faith yet they were not accorded upper social status and prohibited to intermix with the caste Hindus. However, the nomenclature “Brahma” was added as their surnames that officially accorded by A.G. Lainy, the Deputy Commissioner of the then Goalpara district. From that, Brahma converts started to change their surname with Brahma. Of course, many Brahma devotees also did not change their surnames, and still retained their original titles (Mooshahary, 2008:13). This change was nothing but it meant to identify themselves as high class people equivalent to Hindu neighbours, and to free themselves from racial derogation. So that, they would be accorded same social status with the upper caste Hindus in the society.

There were three Boro Mahasanmilans held under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma who endeavored consecutively with a view to reforming the social evil practices, which plagued the Bodo society since ages. Firstly, the Mahasanmilan was held in 1921 at Bhawraguri village of present Gossaigaon sub-division of Kokrajhar district. Secondly, after four years in 1925, it was convened at Rangia, and thirdly, held in 1929 at Roumari village near Bongaigaon. It is stated that the Mahasanmilan was the first platform for the Bodo tribes to reform their social evils prevalent in the society. Thus, the convening of Mahasanmilans in the name of propagation of Brahma cult among the Bodos brought about awareness, reformation and development in the society.

The Brahma religious movement actually brought about various changes on the social-cultural, customs and traditions of the Bodo society. As a result of this religious movement, some followers of the Brahma cult gradually abandoned their old-aged social and religious practices, which was once connected with the traditional *Bathou* worship. Earlier, in the doctrine of *Bathou dharma*, there was no system of birthday celebration if any baby was born in a Bodo family but shraddha ceremony with elaborate rites and rituals in association with principles of *Bathou dharma*, was performed in the deceased house where the villagers and adjacent villagers attended to pay reverence to the dead person. But the change came up among the Bodos after the adoption of the Brahma faith that, since some Brahma devotees followed the

tradition of Hindu rites and rituals, they used to perform *Homa-yogya* in all occasions from the birth to the death of a person.

Traditionally, the Bodo people practiced age-old marriage system so-called *Hathasuni Khurnai* in Bodo. But, after the arrival of Brahma cult among them, a new form of Bodo marriage called as Brahma marriage specially introduced among the followers of Brahma cult in the Bodo society. According to this new system, the Brahma marriage began to be performed in accordance with the Vedic rites and rituals. Like traditional marriage system in respect of pre-marriage and post-marriage ceremony of the Bodo society, there were certain long drawn formalities that followed in modified manner even in the new form of Brahma Bodo marriage. The Brahma marriage is usually solemnized at night at the house of the bride, whereas traditional marriage was usually held at night in the house of groom in accordance with the doctrine of *Bathou* religion. The Brahma marriage was only held on the *subhalagna* (sacred time) in accordance with '*panjika*', the Hindu calendar through the performance of *yagya ahuti* (Khakhlary & Basumatary, 2010:69). This marriage was generally performed in a particular *mondop* or a place of *ahuti*. The Brahma followers prepared *mondop* with four banana trees which is planted on four corners of the *mondop* beautifully decorated with some colourful paper cuttings around the banana trees. And, in the middle of these four trees, an altar was raised on the ground where *yajna* fire was ignited. Both the bride and groom sit near the *mondop* facing eastward in front of the *yajna* fire. The priest (*purohit*) performed the marriage chanting the *Gayatri* mantra. There was also a tradition that father of the bride prayed by uttering the Brahma *Gayatri* before the *yajna* fire for blessings to the newlywed couple. After that, the father of the bride offers *prasad* on the fire, sprinkles holy water and again chants the *Gayatri* mantra as per the directives of the *purohit*. Then the father of the bride handed over his daughter to the groom keeping fire as witness, and declared the accomplishment of the nuptial rites in the marriage ceremony openly. This is called *sampradan* (offering) in the Bodo society (Brahma, 2006:23-24). The offering of gifts is called *ashirbad*. This offering *ashirbad* not only existed in Brahma marriage but also found in earlier the traditional Bodo marriage system. The followers of the Brahma cult usually preferred the burning of *ahuti* which is much similar to the Hindu '*hom-yagya*' in the form of their marriage ceremony. But in the traditional form of marriage, an earthen lamp was burnt at the *Bathou alter* in the courtyard of north-east corner of the homestead.

In the Brahma form of marriage, after the end of *sampradan*, the bride was brought at the house of the groom and then a big feast was arranged at the house of the groom. Earlier, the use of rice beer and pork were discouraged in the Brahma form of Bodo marriage and instead of it, tea and sweets were used. But again, the changes taken place in the last part of the 20th century that the marriage began to be

performed either at the house of bride or groom. Thus, the Brahma dharma brought a significant change in the institution of the Bodo marriage.

In certain religious occasions and ceremonies of the Brahma cult, there was no tradition of drinking the *zumai* (rice beer) or *sereb* (distilled alcoholic spirit). But they still brew and drank *zumai* (rice beer) or *sereb* (distilled alcoholic spirit) at their home. They also continued the rearing of pigs, fowls and ducks, etc. for their small family income.

Traditionally, the Bodo people disposed the dead body either by burial or by keeping it at the open place. But most of the Brahma cult followers preferred the cremation of the dead body in accordance with the Hindu rites and rituals. The post funeral ceremony was also performed in accordance with the Hindu rites and rituals. However, due to the influence of the Brahma cult, some of the Bathou followers also began to follow the Brahma tradition and accordingly, preferred the cremation of dead body as well as observed post-funeral ceremony in accordance with the Hindu rites and rituals.

Since Bodo civilization was an agrarian society, they used to perform many festivals in relating to the agriculture. Like traditional Bodo people, the Brahma devotees also observed many festivals in connection with the farming. During the festivals and occasions, like first day of *Bwisag*, *Shraddha* ceremony, *wngkhamgwrlwijanai* (eating new rice), marriage, etc., they performed *Hom-yagya* at their individual home and village *mandir* or temple. Besides this, they consulted with the calendar book called '*panjika*' of Hindus and performed the *Hom-yagya* on some special occasions, like *Mahalaya*, *Magh Purnima*, *Purnima*, etc. Like Bathou followers, they also regarded the first day of month of *Bwisag* (*Bohag* in Assamese) as the New year but herein, they performed *Hom-yagya*. It is evident that each village had a permanent place of *Hom-yagya* called *Brahma Mandir* in Bodo. But there are few references of the Brahma dharma followers who still kept a '*Sijou*' tree (*euphorbia splendens*) at the courtyard of their family, like the worshippers of the Bathou religion (Informant). Of course, this reveals that some Brahma followers still held their traditional religious beliefs and practices.

Prior to the advent of Brahma dharma among the Bodos, no ceremony was performed without the use of rice beer and meat. It charged heavy expenditures and then became very difficult for the poor people to hold such a ceremony. So, with the help of some prominent personalities, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma was successful in eradicating the social evil practices prevalent in the Bodo society. For instance, bride price demand was fixed and its importance decayed gradually. Earlier, the cases of stealing the girls were very high in the society but it slowly reduced because of the arrival of Brahma dharma among the Bodos. Besides, the Brahma movement also brought some awareness and consciousness among them regarding the importance of education, and accordingly, the beginning of upward social mobility along

with the culture and behaviours of Bodo people happened. This is clearly evident that in the 20th century, most educated and intellectual people of the Bodos were the products of the Brahma movement. Among the great Bodo personalities, Rupnath Brahma, Jadav Chandra Khakhlary, Padmashri Madaram Brahma and others were worth mentioning.

Traditionally, the Bodo people did not have much knowledge about the business. Even, they felt shyness in doing the business. But Kalicharan Brahma brought some changes among the youths of the Bodo people. He encouraged the Bodo youths to join the business by organizing the Brahma Company at Dhubri. As a result of this, some Bodo youths started the doing business and earned a lot of profits for their family. Besides this, he also founded Brahma boarding at Dhubri town with a view to help the poor Bodo students in education but it is known that most of the boarders specially belonged to the Brahma faith. However, it is mentionable that in 1915, the residents of boarding decided to form a student organization and consequently, the first Bodo student's organization so-called *BoroChatraSanmilan* was formed in 1919 at Kokrajhar under the leadership of Rupnath Brahma and Madaram Brahma who were also the devout followers of Kalicharan Brahma. The formation of *BoroChatraSanmilan* was a historic event for the Bodo student community, and this was the first organization in bringing the renaissance and social consciousness among the Bodo people. This organization in fact, greatly contributed towards the growth and development of the education, language and literature of the Bodo community (Brahma, 2006 :84-85).

The Brahma religious movement not only brought some changes in the field of social and religion but also made the political awareness and consciousness among the Bodo people. When Simon Commission came to Shillong on 2nd January, 1929, Kalicharan Brahma pleaded before them for reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly and jobs in government. Later on, in 1933 as a political party the Assam Plains Tribal league was formed on the suggestion of Kalicharan. The political party in fact, aimed at protecting the interest and identities of the tribal people in Assam (Brahma Chaudhury, 1993:55-56). There is evidence that many political leaders who shouldered responsibility for the development of socio-political life of the Bodos, were mostly the Brahma converts. For instance, Rupnath Brahma was an educated person and the first political elite who once became a minister of Assam Government. In 1936, the first graduate among the Bodos was Sitanath Brahma Choudhury who also became the first Bodo Member of Parliament (MP) in 1952. This is true that the trend of higher education has grown since among the Bodos mainly through the converted Brahmas. This certainly reveals that many converted Brahma educationally and politically became more advanced than the unconverted brethren (Bordoloi et al., 1987:18). After becoming the more aware socially, economically and politically, the premier Bodo literature body so-called as Bodo Sahitya Sabha was formed on 16th

November 1952 at Basugaon which was a turning point in the history of the Bodo society. Thereafter, in 1960's, the Bodo people understood the importance of inclusion of the Bodo language as the medium of instruction in the schools of their inhabited areas, and on subsequent years, they started the language movement for its growth and development. Thus, it may also be said that through the messages of Brahma dharma, the religious movement of which primarily started to reform the social evils rampant in the Bodo society, mainly brought the socio-political consciousness among the Bodo community.

Conclusion

The Brahma religious movement which was started under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma in the name of proliferation of Brahma dharma during the 20th century, brought about a great change in the socio-economic, cultural and religious aspects of the traditional Bodo society. The Brahma movement, in its form and content was more than a religious turmoil. It was, in fact, a movement for total change of outlook in all the fields—social, religious, political, economic and educational. It was through the propagation of Brahma dharma that the process of Sanskritization on the rites and rituals as well as the culture of the Bodos was continued unabatedly. It is seen that some elements of Hindu religion and culture were directly adapted within the domain of the Bodo society. But it also brought some socio-political consciousness among the Bodo people. Such political awareness, development in self-awareness and social consciousness among them usually stirred them to quest for the very existence of their cultural heritage, identity and political rights. However, the conversion of many Bodos into different religions fragmented the traditional Bodo society into several religious sects during the 20th century.

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