

## CHAPTER: II

### THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC & RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS OF THE BODOS BEFORE LAUNCHING THE BRAHMA DHARMA MOVEMENT

The Bodos are the branch of the great Indo-Mongoloid people of Assam. They were the first settlers of the region and lived in scattered hamlets in the foothills of Bhutan from the river Sankosh in the West to Sadia in the East in Assam and also in the Western direction from Sankosh river to the river Tista in the North-Eastern Bengal. The other branches of the Bodo race- the Garos of Garo Hill districts of Meghalaya, the Dimasas of Dima Hasao districts of Assam and the Tipperahs of Tripura are the aboriginal inhabitants whose languages are closely allied to the Bodo speakers of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. They are believed to be from the same stock that in course of time, they got separated from each other and formed the states of their own in different names at various places. The Koch Kings of Cooch Behar, the Tripura Kings, the Dimasa-Kochari kings of Dimapur, Maibong and Khaspur and the Chutiya Kings of Sadia were the powerful dynastic rulers who ruled with pride and honour for centuries before they were disintegrated into small principalities only to be taken possession off by the British East India Company in the nineteenth century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century, hastened by the situation of dispossession of political, socio-economic powers, the Bodos of the Brahmaputra valley, one of the branches of the great Bodo race, were in the precarious conditions. In the medieval period, they were deprived of getting themselves educated. The Sanskrit *Tols*<sup>1</sup> were the only educational institution where non-Brahman boys were not allowed to receive education under a Brahman Pundit. The colonial administrators opened schools only in the towns where substantial populations were available for enrolment<sup>2</sup>. The Bodos lived in the remote and scattered villages which deprived them of getting opportunities to receive education. There are reports of the non-existence of markets, the avenues for economic activities, in and around the places of Bodo settlements. Thus, dispossessed of everything that they required for modernization, they could not help to modernize themselves, but left to their own fate and destiny. The degraded lives and destitute of all modern amenities are the conditions

which hastened them to live a wretched life to be hated and pitied by the people of advantages.

The Bodos subsisted on their agricultural product since ancient days. Rice is the staple food not only of the Bodos but also of the whole Tibeto-Burman people of the region right from the recent past<sup>3</sup>. In the Bargaon Copper-plate grant of Ratnapala of the early 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. rice is mentioned<sup>4</sup> and their requirements were from hands to mouth. Since there was no market around them, the idea of surplus production and of selling the surplus for cash was not the order of the day. Whatever surplus they got from their holdings were given in generous donations to someone poor or kept in granaries for years together. There was a practice of taking pride of having vintage rice (unhusked) of seven or eight years old<sup>5</sup>. In absence of market or cash transaction, they bartered their required articles with unhusked rice<sup>6</sup>. The cash transaction was rare. At the annual fair of Udalguri in which the *Bhutias* from Tawang came down to carry out trade with the Bodos was on barter system<sup>7</sup>. The Hindu traders from the plain areas came on boats to the villages of the Bodos to exchange articles like Dabka, Daihu (earthen pitcher), dried fish, salt etc which were of high demand among the Bodos. Those articles were exchanged with unhusked rice at a rate very favourable to the Hindu traders. At that time, since the cash transaction was very rare, the price of the unhusked rice was beyond the guess of the Bodos<sup>8</sup>. The clothes they required were produced in their residence. They grew cotton which the Bodo women spine them into threads and threads were woven into clothes. The Bodo women were also known for having expertise in rearing of *Eri*-Moth and in production of *Eri* clothes<sup>9</sup> which were sold to *Marwari* merchants for cash. The cash transaction on *Eri* clothe was necessitated by situation, because articles on which the *Marwari* merchants dealt in were not required or wanted by the unsophisticated Bodos. They kept pigs and fowls for their own consumption in their homesteads and also for sacrificing the chicklets to their *Garja* and *Kherai* offerings<sup>10</sup>. But the rearing of pigs and fowls were considered as an unhealthy practice by the neighbouring communities, because the urine and stools were, if, exposed to scorching sun it gives a pungent stinging smell, not only around the house where they were kept but also in the whole village. Another reason for which the Hindu neighbours hated the Bodos most was for rearing of fowls<sup>11</sup> which the Bodo householders domesticated for their own consumption. Thus, hated by their Hindu neighbours and belittling treatments they got from them, the

Bodos who gained little awareness tried to escape themselves not only by embracing other's faiths but also by changing into other's caste<sup>12</sup>.

In the past, under the influence of the Brahmans, some sections of the Bodos or Meches gave up wine and pig and became the followers of the Hindu *Gurus* who were called the *Saranias*<sup>13</sup>. Then, when the British came to occupy Assam in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, another wave of conversion to other religious faith like Christianity started<sup>14</sup>. The work of proselytization by the Christian Missionaries though vigorous in respect of organisation and mobilisation yet they failed to impress upon the majority Bodo population as the Bodo conversion to Christianity was far from being impressive<sup>15</sup>.

Then, came the Brahma Sect in the first decade of the twentieth century as a counter-measure to save the Bodos from conversion to *Sarania* as well as to Christianity and even to Islam<sup>16</sup>. It was preached by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma who dug out the root cause of all those conversions in some miserable practices such as rearing of pigs and fowls, consumption of *jou* (rice-beer) etc<sup>17</sup>. Hence, he launched the social reformation movement alongside his preaching of the *Brahma faith*. The large chunk of the Bodo populations has become the followers of the *Brahma Dharma*.

### **Religion:**

The traditional religion of the Bodos is the *Bathou*. According to Smriti Das, some tribes followed a sort of animistic belief which means the worship of different forces of nature seen through its different manifestations<sup>18</sup>. The Bodos believed in the basic Conception of FIVE - the Sky (Space), the Fire (the Sun), the Air, the Water, and the Earth, the five basic elements from which springs up everything. The basic social laws of the Bodos is five and the rules and restrictions are also five<sup>19</sup>. Because of it, the *Sizou* Plant (*Euphorbia nerrifolia*) which is with five ridges is installed as the Altar of their Supreme God called *Bathoubrai* in the North-Eastern corner of the courtyard of every family. In indigenous groups' religion magic dominates the core of the religion. Most of the Bodo population of the Brahmaputra valley, North Bengal and Nepal still practices the *Bathou* religion. In connection with their religion they observe many rites and rituals while celebrating the *Garja* and *Kherai* festivals in the summer and winter solstices respectively. Of course, there is no particular specific date and auspicious time for all those observations<sup>20</sup>. The date and occasions are decided according to the needs

and situation thus arises, like while the outbreak of diseases in epidemic forms or other certain occasion. The outbreak of Cholera and *Kala Azhar* were very frequent. The offerings to *Garja* (as the master of evil) for propitiation and to *Kherai* (as the benefactor of good) as worshipping of their beloved God are the two main festivals that the Bodos have been observing at least once in every year. The *Garja* is offered outside homesteads but within the village boundary, sometimes under the shades of a big tree or sometimes near the river bank or *bils* etc<sup>21</sup>. They offer to their gods, the articles available around them or could be easily procured from their natural surroundings. The observance and celebration of the rites and rituals are of simple nature. By seeing the articles of offerings, one could easily guess how simple the Bodos were in their thought. They use the flesh of animals as article of food which they offer them to their deities, they prepare a kind of spirituous drinks from rice called *Jou* (rice-beer) for drinking and they offer it to their gods.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the simple system of worship of gods and goddesses came to the lives of the unsophisticated and simple Bodos. Hunter observed in his report that their (Bodos) religious belief consisted of in the worship of two divine beings - one the benefactor of good and the other the master of evils<sup>23</sup>. As usual among nearly all hill tribes, their religious rites consisted chiefly of the propitiation of the various evil spirits by means of sacrifices of fowls<sup>24</sup>.

The Bodos' worship of the *Bathou* predates the Hinduism or the Hindu culture in the area. With the ascendancy of the Aryans into the area which then was known as the Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha, their worship of *Bathou* came under the influences of the more sophisticated Aryan religious practices<sup>25</sup>. Now they began to refer to their Supreme deity *Bathou* as a name for the God Siva. However, the relationship of traditional *Bathou* religion of the Bodos to Saivite and *Shakta* form of Hinduism is rather a complex one. In Assam, Hinduism had traces of the pre-Hindu religions of the area. Looking at the broad category of the 'Hindu', the inclusion of some of the tribal peoples with their ancestral religion in the category of the 'Hindu' was conventional, but not unproblematic<sup>26</sup>. Many peoples of Assam such as the Bodos performed the pre-Hindu religious practices before the ascendancy of the Aryans into Assam which was a distinct form distinguishable from their Hindu neighbours<sup>27</sup>.

Ethnohistorians and colonial administrators observed and expressed opinions on the religious practices of the tribes of entire North-East India. They encountered them

and observed those were going on in the lives of the Bodos which were recorded in their reports with their consciences best known to them. The influences of the Hindu neighbours in their religious practices and also in other aspects could be felt through. Due to the prevalence of different Hindu and Buddhist tantric cults, the country of Assam was known to the outside world as a land of mysticism and sorcery<sup>28</sup>. While citing William Crooks, M. Neog said that there were several types of magic rites among the different tribes of Assam<sup>29</sup>. They attributed every evil; disease or untimely death to numerous spirits and it was up to their medicine men to keep off the spirits and cure the patients. According to him, such animistic beliefs and usages were rife among the uneducated common mass of the plain Hindus too<sup>30</sup>. Animism was described as a belief system in which the world was home to a plethora of spirit-beings that might help or hinder human endeavours. It was found often in conjunction with Shamanism originated among cultures of the indigenous groups in which oracles were believed to have direct intercourse with the transcendent world that permitted him or her to act as healer, religious leader and counselor<sup>31</sup>.

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century scanty records in the forms of report were available and from those reports a wide variety of information about the Bodos could be retrieved. Another sort of authentic information that could be gathered is from the local oral traditions and oral history, the most of which are now recorded or written. The Bodos lived amidst nature, in the forests, in the rural areas away from urban lives. Their living was from hands to mouth on their modest agricultural product. Being far away from the influences of the modern civilization they neither kept themselves abreast with education, nor were there any civilizing agents working for educating them especially from Indian populations. Rev. S. Endle observed that in mental and intellectual power the Bodos were undoubtedly far below their Hindu neighbours for they possess neither the quickness of apprehension, nor the astonishing power of memory etc. the characteristic of the higher caste among the Hindus. On the other hand, what they did succeed in mastering was often with much toil and painful effort and they digested and retained with much tenacity<sup>32</sup>. Before the colonial administration took over Assam, it was the country of abundant land. The indigenous peoples including the Bodos lived at ease on shifting cultivation. They hardly bothered to remain fixed at any single spot. They kept on

moving clearing jungles for a new plot of land expecting higher productivity. In absence of a recorded land right system which came only with the introduction of the colonial administration, they were free to occupy and leave again any plot of land at will. Living in such an ease, they were free from any kind of pressure - external or internal. It was but natural for the indigenous peoples of Assam to remain mentally idle which was observed by the colonizers when they encountered them.

Those Bodos who practised the *Bathou Dharma* or religion are called *Mech* and their religion as *Mech Dharma* by Hindu neighbours in a derogatory sense<sup>33</sup>. The actual meaning of the term *Mech*, the tribe's name was derived from the Mechi river in present Nepal which had nothing to do with the Sanskrit word *Mleccha*<sup>34</sup>. Many scholars argued that the term *Mech* was abbreviated from the Sanskrit word *Mleccha*<sup>35</sup>. Francis M. Hermann believed that the name *Mech* was an original designation and not a derivation of the Sanskrit word *Mleccha*<sup>36</sup>. It was also said that since the *Meches* first lived on the bank of river *Mechi* in Nepal, they derived their name from the *Mechi* River and known as *Mechi*, *Mechia* or *Meches*. The equation of the word *Mech* with the *Mleccha* is untenable and unacceptable, for both terms have separate meanings and connotations. The designation *Mech* was the earlier name of the Bodo tribe which was derived from a river name *Mechi* as they began their early settlement on the bank of that river. The *Mleccha* is a Sanskrit term used to denote the non-Aryan people as 'barbaric', 'foreigner' or 'unclean'<sup>37</sup>, who were outside the pale of the Aryan civilization. Now the meanings of those two terms have been equated to mean the people of low caste or outcaste origin. The Bodos, the followers of the *Bathou Dharma* or the *Mech Dharma* as the Hindu neighbours called it, were systematically isolated from the larger arena of social intercourse. The Bodos who were the followers of the *Bathou Dharma* while approaching the doorsteps of the *Raj Duar* and Koch-Kalitas, they were treated as the expression- 'Ye unclean *Mech*; Ye be clean by taking bath' and sometimes even sprinkled with cow dung-soaked water<sup>38</sup>.

At such insulting treatment, the fellow Bodo tribes even prayed before the Altar of the *Bathoubrai* in despair asking remedies from it, but no avail<sup>39</sup>. Belittling treatment meting out by Hindu neighbours had been the lot of the Bodos. The feeling of hatred was so firmly entrenched in the minds of the Bodo people that they were haunted after by designations *Mech* and *Mleccha*. The Bodos had internalized the meaning of those two

terms to be same and derogatory. The Bodos felt humiliated and ashamed of, if, they were called by the name *Mech*. For that reason, to escape from such humiliating treatment, there was a prevalence of general tendency among the elite sections of the Bodos to change from tribe to caste by converting themselves into others' faith<sup>40</sup>.

The use of the term *Mech* or *Mleccha* was to such an extent that even in the official records of the Census office, the Bodos were referred to as *Mech* or *Mleccha*. The use of those derogatory designations *Mech* or *Mleccha* jointly or separately to address the Bodos encompasses every aspect of the interaction between the Bodos and the other neighbouring communities. As has been discussed above, they were not allowed to enter to public places and were denied accommodation in hotels and were forced to sleep on the verandah of the government offices<sup>41</sup>. They were also compelled to eat in separate utensils or in plantain leaves, which after use they had to wash. Besides, the place where they had partaken their food had also to be cleaned and purified with cow dung. The *Meches* (Bodos) were not allowed to sit alongside the other communities, but to sit apart at distance of 10/12 feet, the treatment worse than a dog as the dog was patted and allowed to sit alongside their master<sup>42</sup>. In such a state of isolation from the larger societies, the Bodos often felt inconveniences and as such, they succumbed to the processes of Hinduisation to enable themselves to associate and move with their Hindu neighbours<sup>43</sup>. Lest, they would be looked down upon as a degraded class so long as they would not accept the processes of Hinduisation. In sociological discourse, the process of changing from tribes to caste is termed as the 'social mobility' which is very common in 'Indic Cultures'. Contrary to that process in Assam, the same phenomenon was described as 'assimilation'- assimilation into 'Assamese subnational formation' which was started from the Ahom days. In other words, the process of ethnic change from Kachari (Bodo) to Assamese was in evident. The most of the Bodo (Kachari) tribes like the Sonowal, Tengal, Chutias, Moran, Motok and Borahis of the former districts of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, who were within the ambit of the Ahom kingdom assimilated en-mass to the Assamese society. The Ahom kingdom could be regarded as more constitutive of what became modern Assamese culture than any other kingdoms or areas<sup>44</sup>. The conversion was lengthy a process which took years to obtain the status of a complete Hindu. They were required to relinquish former tribal habits of eating of animal flesh and drinking of spirituous liquor and also to undergo a process of atonement known

as *Prayachitta* in which one had to keep fasting for a few days along with payment of money to one's *Hindu Gossain*<sup>45</sup>. That was also called the *Jattantor* which means the complete change from one's tribe to caste by giving up their own religion, traditions, customs, language and the Culture. There were vigorous conversions to the Neo-Vaishnavite religion of Sri Sri Sankardeva of Assam called the *Ek Saran Nam Dharma* from the ranks of the Bodos, Rabhas, Lalungs, Sonowals, Garos etc. In his *Namaghosa*, Madhavadeva referred to the acceptance of *Nam dharma* by people of Garo, Bhota (Bhutia), Yavana (Muslim), Miri, Asama (Ahom) and Kachari origin, who, till the time of Sankaradev were outside the pale of Hinduism<sup>46</sup>. An old work called *Amulya-Ratna* (manuscript) mentioned those *Bhaktas* of Assam- Gavinda (A Garo), Paramananda, a Miri, Narahari, an Ahom, Jayrama, a Bhutiya; Candsai, a Muslim; and Bhattadeva, a Brahman. Candsai (Can khan) was converted by Sankardeva himself into *Ek Saran Nam Dharma*<sup>47</sup>. The process of conversion for the primitive *Meches* (Bodos) differ from others. In their case, they required to take bath by calling on the name of a *Guru* or spiritual instructor and abstaining from the use of flesh of pigs and liquor<sup>48</sup>. The other kind of conversion was simply taking *Sarana*, the complete surrender or refuge under *Hindu Gossains* who were allowed some concessions in matters of eating and drinking, e.g. the *Madahis* (name of tribe, but literal meaning is Drunkards) and *Barahis* (name of tribe, but literal meaning is eaters of pork). Thus, Bodo tribes who had taken *saran* or refuge under a Hindu Gossain came to be known as *Sarania Kacharis*<sup>49</sup>. Rev. S. Endle wrote that within the boundary of Assam, the Kacharis (Bodos) constituted 1,000,000 souls; many of whom have become Hinduised and have lost the use of their mother tongue. The Morans and Chutiyas of upper Assam have got their mother tongue dying out who were closely akin to the Kachari race<sup>50</sup>.

In the Eastern *Duars*, the Northern portion of the undivided Goalpara district, Kamrup and Darrang where the Bodos were in majority, they were fast becoming Hinduised and the new converts were accepted as brethren among the *Rajbansis* and mongrel Hindus with only a little difficulty. The *Meches* (Bodos) who adopted Hindu customs were called *Sarantias*, but the change did not seem to be very extensive<sup>51</sup>.

During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma was preaching his *Brahma Dharma*, it was reported that under the leadership of Mr. Jagot Chandra Mushahary, the *Mouzadar* of 4<sup>th</sup> Kanda Sidli, some leading members of



the Bodo society, Khamsali Maharar (Road Maharar) of Patgaon, Kalicharan Pandit of Banugaon, Sanibar Bastom, the son of Gundra Boro and Sikhiram Member of Putimari and Ruparam Ojha, son of Onaram Boro of Bansigaon had already decided to become *Sarania* under the Guru Ananta Narayan Dev Goswami of Alibari of Baithamari in exchange of rupees six thousand only. On certain appointed date and time, he came and gave *Saran* (not Diksha) to all of them and thenceforth, they became *Sarania*<sup>52</sup>. They, later, tried hard to attract the other Bodo people from their locality to bring them into their fold.

The Hindus looked down upon the Bodos probably because of the use of every kind of animal flesh, the fact which could be corroborated from the report of W.W. Hunter, the colonial administrator, who said that the Kacharis (Bodos) had no scruples in the matter of diet; they ate almost all the meats of all kinds of animal. They were particularly fond of pork. The only flesh of which they would not partake was that of the cow, a prejudice imbibed from contact with Hindus<sup>53</sup>. He came across some people who always hover over intoxication and hence they avoided the cleanly practice of taking bath and he himself (Hunter) might have observed the eating of every kind of animal foods – the flesh of *Anjor* (rat), *Neolai* (mongoose), *Sesha* (hare), *Mwi* (deer), *Omah* (hog), *Dao* (fowl) and some insects- *Gangzema* (Monster Bucks), *Guma Gwthao*<sup>54</sup>, a kind of grasshopper found while reaping the harvest, Crickets, Crabs, Snails and others. According to Hunter, the Bodos were far from cleanly in their habits and from their indiscriminate use of all animal food, however, disgusting and their neglect of bathing, they were affected with some sort of skin disease<sup>55</sup>. The Bodos lived amidst nature with full of grown-up shady trees, bushes and shrubs which buried the houses of the villagers prevented sun-rays to reach the earth. As a result, soil remained damp throughout the year and it was added by animal dung and stinging smells from hog sheds which turned the village scenario into a clumsy one<sup>56</sup>. Hunter's observation corroborates the fact that a Kachari (Bodo) village usually abounds in domestic live-stocks of various kinds, e.g. ducks, fowls, goats, pigs, cattle etc. and with the abundance of livestock, especially hogs, reared and kept by the Kacharis (Bodos), it needed hardly be said that the villages could scarcely be described as cleanly; though separate buildings being provided for the pigs, goats etc at an appreciable distance from the family dwelling house<sup>57</sup>. B.C. Allen also described the Bodo people as dirty in their habits and extremely unsophisticated<sup>58</sup>.

The uncleanly practices of the unsophisticated Bodos continued unabated till the British came to the land and worked among the Bodos to educate them. The available evidence proved that the first Bodo to get access in modern education was 'Aphinta'<sup>59</sup> from a village called Jhargaon in north Kamrup who got the opportunity to join the Missionary School in 1846 at Guwahati which was conducted by the American Baptist Mission<sup>60</sup>. And the like Missionary workers namely Rev. S. Endle who worked closely with Bodos in Udalguri areas of the then Darrang district established schools and also got the opportunities to establish his first Christian Church at Bengbari. J.D. Anderson's comment on Rev. Endle's erection of the church at Bengbari on which he could take his chief pride was a clear testimony of the fact. He said that to his great joy that Church was consecrated by Bishop Milman in person where under its thatched roof a tablet to the memory of its founder had now been placed<sup>61</sup>.

The waves of conversion to Christianity from among the Bodos were started by different Mission Societies from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. American Baptist Mission with its headquarters at Guwahati was the first mission society to evangelize the Bodos of Assam<sup>62</sup>. Rev. Barker soon after his establishment of the Mission Centre at Guwahati in 1843, he opened a school boarding house in which a number of Bodo Students were accommodated. In 1846, a twelve-year-old boy named 'Aphinta' from Jhargaon village of North Kamrup joined the school and in 1849 he was baptized at Guwahati to become the recorded first Bodo convert to Christianity<sup>63</sup>. The American Church started its operation among the Bodos of Darrang district in the 1860s where Rev. S. Endle arrived at Tezpur to assist C.H. Hesselmeyer as tea garden Chaplain and carry out missionary work among the Bodos<sup>64</sup>. They got a substantial number of Bodo converts into their fold. Rev. S. Endle had the credit of establishing first Bodo Church at Bengbari and of writing a monograph *the Kacharis* which was published in 1911, the first book of its kind<sup>65</sup>. The Santal Mission of Northern Churches planted a Christian Colony in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. They established Permanent Mission Stations at Grahampur, Haraputa and Joema. Two missionaries Rev. H.P. Boersen from England and Rev L.O. Skrefsrud from Norway were the first to work among the Bodos in that part of Assam<sup>66</sup>. Teklo Basumatary by name was the first Bodo to be converted to Christianity in Western Assam and others who followed his suit were Dorkanto, Sitaram and Dabaru<sup>67</sup>. Skrefsrud had established the first Bodo Church at Rajadabri and Ratia Basumatary the

son of Teklo Basumatary was ordained as the first Christian Minister (Pastor) in 1911 followed by Dabaru Boro in 1914. By 1922, the Bodo Congregations increased and were found in many villages, such as Rajadabri, Mandabari, Patakata, Kolabari, Gumurgaon, Gaurang, Dumbajhar etc<sup>68</sup>. To increase the effectiveness of the missionary works, the Mission Home Board Commissioned Rev. Mr. Aksel Kristiansen from Denmark in 1927. Soon after his arrival, he established Permanent Mission Stations at Gaurang in 1927 and Bongaigaon in 1938<sup>69</sup>. The American Baptist Mission Society was found working among the Bodos and the Garos of the Southern part of undivided Goalpara district with its headquarters at Goalpara town<sup>70</sup>. During the period from 1894 to 1909, a few Bodo families of Fundibari village on the South bank of the Brahmaputra river of Goalpara district were converted to Christianity. Thus, the new converts gradually swelled in number and by 1940s, the Bodo congregations were found in Sidli, Tukrajhar, Baghpara, Debitola. In West Bengal too especially in the Jalpaiguri district with permanent mission station at Mahakalguri, many Bodo families were converted to Christianity<sup>71</sup>.

Although, the works of the missionaries under different mission societies, were vigorous yet they could not impress so much upon the Bodos of Assam. On the basis of the available figure of the total Bodo converts i.e. 55,000 against at least 7,00,000 Bodos population was 7% only, which was far from being impressive<sup>72</sup>. R.N. Mosahary attributed the failure of the Missionaries to evangelize the Bodo population to the effective obstacles offered by the Aryan forces which immensely succeeded in bringing about a total assimilation of many of the North-Eastern tribes including the Bodos into the Hindu fold through the ideas, energies and resources that they brought with them<sup>73</sup>. The feeling of hatred and opposition to Christianity were injected into simple-minded Bodos by other religious leaders through malicious propaganda that Christianity was a 'foreign religion' and intruder designed to destroy the Bodo culture and identity<sup>74</sup>. The Christianization of the Bodos received a serious jolt from the *Saranias* and the *Brahma* Cults. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Kalicharan Brahma launched a parallel religious movement among the Bodos against the Christianity and the *Bathou* religion. That undoubtedly hindered the growth and consolidation of the Christian Churches among the Bodos in Assam<sup>75</sup>.

Some sections of the Bodos became rich and wealthy by engaging themselves in timber trade especially in the Parbotjoar Estate of the erstwhile Goalpara district. They

gained awareness of their positions who later aspired for better status<sup>76</sup>. To improve their social positions, they launched Socio-Religious Reformation Movement among the Bodos in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under their leadership, the Bodo masses also gained awareness and thus the conspicuous consciousness among them grew. At the initiative of the great social reformer and the religious preacher, Srimot Kalicharan Gurudev, a reformation movement was launched during the 1910s and 1920s among the Bodos<sup>77</sup>.

As it has been discussed above, the socio-religious and economic conditions of the Bodos were very deplorable. There was no religious unity among the Bodos. Many of them had become *Saranias* after they were proselytised into Hindu fold when the British colonizers along with evangelizers came to Assam in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Bodos had already embraced Christianity and a greater chunk of their population remained illiterate and ignorant with their ancestral religion, *Bathou*. Thus, the Bodos, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early part of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were seen divided into different religious faiths and time was so ripe as to guess that the extinction of the Bodos was only a matter of time<sup>78</sup>. Greatly perturbed by the situation, and thus hemmed in from all sides, Kalicharan Mech (surname used by his parents) felt the need for a reassertion of ethnic identity and unity among the Bodos. He thought that it was possible only through a total change in the Bodo society by bringing about a religious unity<sup>79</sup>. At that critical juncture, providentially he came across a book, *Sarnitya Kriya* on Parama Hansa Sibnarayan Swami's preaching of *Brahma* religion written by Phani Bhusan Chattopadhyay which was able to create a deep impression on him. Swamiji's message which deeply impressed Kalicharan was the idea of the Unity of God, the simplicity of the processes of initiation and the simplicity of rituals of worship of the Supreme Being<sup>80</sup>. His father Kaularam Mech being a successful timber merchant of Kazigaon village had a cordial relationship with the Zamindar of Bagribari Estate (8-Anna part). Through the Zamindar, Kalicharan Mech could establish personal contact with Swamiji and had had the formal initiation into *Brahma Dharma* in 1905 when he was at his 38<sup>81</sup>. Kalicharan after initiation, his soul filled with religious zeal, set his mission to propagate it among the Bodos. His method of propagation of the new faith was the organisation of community-*Homa-Yogya* in different Bodo villages or areas in Assam and the adjoining areas of West Bengal. Kalicharan with his impressive leading role and convincing religious conviction, he got ready acceptance of his new faith first among his compatriots (timber trading friends).

The names of some of the notable personalities were Jamadar, Charan Mandal, Bijay, Adaityananda, Kalicharan (junior), Sadak Nepal etc from the far-flung areas of Parbotjoar in the erstwhile Goalpara district<sup>82</sup>. Through those neo-disciples, Kalicharan Gurudev secured the support and mass acceptance of his new Faith among the Bodos and within a short span of time his followers swelled greatly in number. Large chunks of the Bodo populations were the followers of the *Brahma Dharma*.

### **Social Condition:**

The social condition of the Bodos (Meches) was extremely deplorable and they had not progressed beyond the stage of nomadic cultivators<sup>83</sup>. The expression ‘abundant land’ was a vital factor and was usual amongst nearly all rude tribes that shaped and moulded both the character and habits which best suited them along the general atmosphere and landscape of the country. Sparsely populated and abundance of land at their disposal coupled with the total absence of administrative interference left them totally carefree mode of living in accordance with their own suit will<sup>84</sup>. The man folks were more prone to laziness, lascivious than the woman counterpart. The women, almost among all tribes, had to perform the greater portion of the toil necessary to support the family. They had to assist in the field at seed-time and harvest, to husk the rice, carry water and above all to weave the clothes required for the household<sup>85</sup>.

#### **a. Social Drinking of Zou:**

The Bodos (the Kacharis) and other hill tribes had the expertise in the preparation of a kind of liquor called *Jou* from rice which they consume sometimes in large quantities especially during the religious festivals, marriage ceremonies and in the observance of various rites and rituals. In the life of the Bodos, the celebrations of main religious festivals i.e. the *Kherai* and *Garja* offerings and the occasions of marriage ceremonies were favoured as occasions for merrymaking. The proverbial expression *Duphang Bwtwrao Haba-Kherai Ja, Gwjang Bwtwrao Gwjang Ja* which means in winter you bear the severe cold, in autumn you enjoy marriage ceremonies and *Kherai* festival connotes the true meaning of celebration of those festivals<sup>86</sup>. It was a usual fact that every human being has an instinctual urge for enjoyment or merrymaking. The Bodos’ avenues for merrymaking or enjoyment were limited by circumstances to drinking of their spirituous liquor called *Jou*, since among them most of the social and religious

practices were carried forward from the medieval days. The pleasant sweet-sour flavour and the state of ecstasy gains after a mild intoxication from a bowl of *Jou* (rice-beer) one becomes always haunted after. The momentary pleasant feelings boggle one to the romantic imagination of winning all one aspires. *Jou* was regarded as a national drink for enjoyment by the Bodos which no one was able to discard<sup>87</sup>.

The drinking of *jou* (rice-beer) was not unproblematic because of its excessive use in all aspects of the Bodo life. The excessive consumption of *jou* (rice beer) in the religious functions, marriage ceremonies and in the observance of various rites and rituals was held responsible for the backwardness of the Bodos in every sphere of their lives. The expression *Jouni Pukhri* (*pond of Rice-beer*), *Ongkhamni Ali* (*ridges of rice*), *Bedorni Akhai* (*hunk of meat*) was enough to explain the prevailing social practices of the Bodos<sup>88</sup>. *Jou* (rice beer) was used practically for all purposes- in propitiating deities, serving the guests, *Shaori-Badali* (*community collective works*), marriage ceremonies, community feasting and many more occasions. *Jou* (wine) was required even for curing sickness. The village medicine man would not cure the sick unless he was served with *jou* (rice beer) and pork<sup>89</sup>. Right from the start of marriage negotiation, *jou* (rice-beer) and pork occupied a key place in Bodo society. The girl's parents had to be pleased by offering *jou* (rice beer) and pork. The volumes of *jou* (rice beer) to be served were measured in terms of *Mithiki* (*the jou prepared from half maund*<sup>90</sup> of rice) and *Lukhra* (*jou prepared from one maund of rice*). The demand for *jou* (rice beer) and pork also came from the maternal uncle side too. That demand was made in term of *Mamaimara*, in which the uncle took all his friends and family members from his village for visiting the house of the expected son-in-law. There was another term *Dangdhara* which meant that all male members of the girl's village would visit the house of the parent of the expected bridegroom who had to be served with *jou* (rice-beer) and a whole part of a pig. The villagers of the bride also get their share of one *Lukhra*. In such manner, the Bodo marriage would continue for seven days and nights at a stretch during which all the villagers hover over intoxication<sup>91</sup>. B.C. Allen opined that the *Meches* (the Bodos) consumed about half the produce of their rice fields in the form of beer<sup>92</sup>. From his opinion, one could easily guess the amount of rice one used in preparation of *Jou* (rice beer).

While working among the Bodos of Darrang district for the propagation of the Christian gospel especially at Udalguri, Rev. S. Endle came across many Bodo villagers and thereby gained much experiences which he recorded in his monograph *The Kacharis* and that his statement was enough to testify the fact of the use or consumption of *jou* (rice beer) in large quantities by the Bodos. S. Endle wrote favourably about the moral character of the Kachari race that those who know them best would be the first to speak favourably of them. Like many of the sub-Himalayan hill tribes, he compared, the Kacharis undoubtedly had a certain weakness for what might be looked upon as their national beverage, a form of rice beer (*Jou*). It is comparatively a harmless liquor when taken in moderation but they at times consume very large quantities, especially in weddings, funerals and in the January and April Bihu festivals and more particularly at what was known as the first eating of the new rice, which usually took place about the middle of December or a little earlier<sup>93</sup>. Apart from that ruination among them there were to be found many simple virtues of great price, i.e. honesty, truthfulness, straightforwardness and a general trustworthiness deserving of all honour<sup>94</sup>. That observation of the Bodo virtues was true, so far as their modes of living, social and economic aspirations were concerned. Among them, when there was the total absence of money economy, the concept of surplus and the enjoyment of modern amenities, there was no question of coming into conflict with any other interest groups. They led a simple and innocent carefree life amidst total ignorance about what was going on around them. Rev. Endle's observation of the Kacharis' qualities of simplicity, truthfulness and straightforwardness was to be clearly understood as limited to their simple patriarchal village life and there only. Their innocence was the innocence of ignorance, not the innocence of experience and they were as a rule free from certain forms of evil because in their village life they had never come under any temptation to indulge in them<sup>95</sup>.

#### **b. Marriage System:**

In the Bodo society, the women are held in exalted position. They are treated equally with the man folk in all social functions and in the religious ceremonies. Their participation in both social and religious ceremonies could be observed in equal terms with a man. In the *Kherai* offering (Puja), the officiating personalities - *Ojah* (male) one who invokes the Chief God, the *Bathoubrai* to take in possession off the *Doudini* (oracle female dancer), who is as a rule a woman, a *Douri*, the sprinkler of holy water for

bringing back the *Doudini* to normal human being may be either from male or female<sup>96</sup> are the examples of woman participation in the main religious functions of the Bodos. The Bodo woman never faced negligence of any sorts in the society and as such, in the marriage of a girl, the parents have the upper hand in matter of decision making over the parents of the boy. Among the Bodos, there was the practice of taking bride price from the parents of the boy when the daughter was to be given in marriage<sup>97</sup>. In those days, the girl children were cared much because probably, there was lesser number of girl child in the society. The parent of the girls took pride in having girl child (*phisa Hinjao*) and could demand anything from the parents of the boy<sup>98</sup>. There were five types of marriage system among the Bodos- 1. *Swngnanwi Lainai Haba* (marriage by negotiation) 2. *Gwrgia Lakhinai Haba* (the bridegroom staying at the house of the Bride for 2-3 years) 3. *Kharsonnai Haba* (Bride's coming in the house of the bridegroom without pre-negotiation but with the consent of the former) 4. *Bwnanwi Lainai Haba* (forcible abduction marriage) 5. *Dongkha Habnai Haba* (a man remarrying a widower by living together with her)<sup>99</sup>. Among those marriage systems, the first four practices were more prevalent, and the last system was rear<sup>100</sup>. In the normal process of negotiated marriage, the parents of the girl would take bride price ranging from Rs 100 /- to Rs 400/-. In those days, the price of a *maund* of paddy was only Rs 0.75. Cultivation of paddy was the only source of income and wealth was measured in terms of how much paddy one gets in a year. In such a situation, one could imagine how many *maunds* of paddy would a person had to sell for collecting the just Rs 100/- or Rs 200/-or Rs 300/- or Rs 400/-. For poor parents, to get their wards married was far cry, since they could not afford to meet all those demands and requirements. So, they had to try their luck in another type of marriage - the *Gwrgia Janai*. In that system, the boy had to stay in the house of the expected father-in-law for 2/3 years as a servant without payment, during which he had to render rigorous services in order to satisfy the girl's parents. After completion of that type of rigorous ordeal, the boy would be allowed to bring the wife at his home<sup>101</sup>. The fact could be corroborated by B.C. Allen's report which said that the marriage was solemnized at an adult stage and the bride older than the groom was considered desirable. The usual bride-price of a girl was about Rs 100 and if the man couldn't provide that sum he had to work in her father's house and each year of his service would be valued equivalently to Rs. 20<sup>102</sup>.



The fourth category of marriage among the Bodos was *Bwnai Marriage* (Abduction Marriage) in which the boy who did not agree either with the *Gwrjia Janai* marriage system or could not afford to go for otherwise costly negotiated marriage, used to resort to abduction or forceful elopement marriage<sup>103</sup>. The chosen girl was forcibly abducted by the boy's party consisting of 10/12 strong able-bodied man from the secluded places like while fishing in the rivulets or lakes or any other opportune moments, sometimes, even from the home of the maiden with more aggressive posture. In such case, sometimes a fierce fighting with Lathis between raiding party and the protectionist took place. The winning streak at the moment would be the decision since there would not be any complaint from either side. Regarding the types of marriages those prevailed among the Bodos, Hunter observed that the Bodos preserved the most primitive form of marriage ceremony like a forcible abduction. In that system, the bridegroom targeted the bride and proceeded with a company of friends to the residence of his intended. The bride, on her side, would make an endeavour to retain herself with the help of her assembled friends and in the process, a mock combat ensued where the bridegroom's party was decidedly successful. After a successful raid, the bride's friends were given a feast. Those would follow the making of the present in the form of money usually about Rs 60 to conciliate the father of the bride, who was supposed by a fiction to be incensed and thus the marriage rite became complete<sup>104</sup>. Such an exhaustive, lingering, clumsy and costly marriage custom was bound to have an adverse impact on the Bodo society, economy and education. In the subsequent periods, the issue of marriage system of the Bodos came up for discussion in many forums among the elite sections of the Bodos. The issue seemingly occupied the centre stage in the successive *Boro (Bodo) Mahasanmilani* Conferences starting from 1921. The in-depth discussion on the issue and adoption of an appropriate resolution and its further reiteration in every session was a clear sign of the gravity of the problem that demanded an immediate end. Individually, some progressive thinkers among the Bodos resented and opined against the prevailing marriage system which was found expressed in the articles written in the *Bibar* magazine when it was brought out in 1924. The noteworthy article written in that field was by Srijut Darbaru Narayan Brahma in the 3rd issue of October 1924<sup>105</sup>.

### **Economic condition:**

The pre-colonial society in Assam was semi-feudal and semi-tribal in which classical mode of production prevailed. The society was basically rural, and the economy was self-sustaining in those days. A.R. Desai argues that in pre-British India the structure of agricultural production in the villages remained uninterfered with for centuries. Further, he says that village agriculture produced for the needs of the village. All exchange of products produced by the village agriculture was limited to the village community and hence were restricted in scope for trade. The village population consumed almost the whole of what it produced<sup>106</sup>. As in the case of others, among the Bodos, the concept of surplus or commercial production was practically unknown. They cultivated a meagre area of land which supplied them paddy just required for their families in a year. Before the introduction of modern administration by the British, the common Bodo people continued their age-old practice of shifting cultivation. The recorded land ownership system was introduced by the colonizer in Assam after their occupation in 1826 and in the subsequent periods the categorization of land into permanently settled and wasteland areas were made<sup>107</sup>. The huge vacant areas along both side of the river Brahmaputra was declared wasteland and for boosting up agricultural production new population settlement was encouraged. That was how the recorded land ownership system of Bengal was brought to the district of Goalpara as early as 1822<sup>108</sup>. But the Northern portion which was not the part of the Goalpara district was under the control of the Dev Raja of Bhutan until 1865. Those areas were known as *Duars* where the clusters of Bodo settlements could be found. The *Bhutia* governors known as the *Subah* were the in-charges of those *Duars* who collected annual tribute in the form of articles among which certain articles had a great demand in Bhutan<sup>109</sup>. In such a state of affairs, there was no question of land settlements with their residents in the *Duar* areas. As the main settlers of the *Duars*, the Bodos had every opportunity to occupy any portion of land they wished. S. Baruah's conclusive remark on the relationship of the Bodo settlements with the new property regime of recorded land rights introduced by colonial rulers was very convincing. Because, even after the measure was introduced many Bodos continued to move around cultivating lands at the colonial regime designated public lands, such as protected forests and grazing lands<sup>110</sup>. So, 'occupy and leave' had continued to prevail as the main mode of landholding for the Kacharis (Bodo) in the

*Duar* areas. Even though such freedom in matters of occupation of land was enjoyed by the Bodos, they were least bothered to occupy as much land as they could for surplus production. The *Duars* with abundance of productive land and a sparse population, the settlers were comparatively well-off who lived in relative comfort and ease. Some of them even didn't wish to stay permanently in a single plot of land and roamed in search of new plots. Until then, many of them found it difficult to adapt themselves in the situations of modern life. The fact was confirmed by Hunter who said that the Bodos (Meches or Kacharis) were of very migratory habits and seldom stayed at one place or cultivated the same soil for more than two or three years; but that could hardly be wondered at when they had so much virgin soil at their disposal. They preferred cultivating clearing in the forest when available and grow a good deal of cotton besides the ordinary crops of rice, mustard-seed etc<sup>111</sup>. It was also reported that their wants were limited-food, clothing and shelter. In absence of markets the food items were inexpensive. The people in the Eastern *Duars* were a purely rural community. There were no towns, nor even any villages with a Bazaar, except Bijni which possesses small Bazaar; nor were periodical markets held anywhere<sup>112</sup>.

To meet their meagre want they didn't bother to engage themselves in trade and commerce except the small volume of border trade with *Bhutias* in the North which they continued to maintain from medieval times until 19<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of *Kachari-Duars* or passes or routes indicates that a considerable volume of barter trade between the Tawang hill tribes and the Bodos of Udalguri were carried on<sup>113</sup>. By taking cognizance of the main food items like Rice (paddy), *Pitha* (steamed cake prepared from rice powder), *Laru* (sticky powdered rice fried in fats of pig), *Jou* or rice-beer (traditional Bodo beverage), the Bodos chiefly depended on rice product only. Hence, Bodo's economy was the rural agro-based economy. And thereby the Bodos were attached to the land. No land for the Bodos meant no economic activity. Before the coming of the British into Assam vis-à-vis Goalpara district or before the introduction of modern administration by the British, sparsely populated Bodo villagers probably didn't attract the attention of the *Zamindars* to survey and make revenue assessment except in some settled cultivated land areas. Hence, they enjoyed land virtually free of taxes. That evasion though not intentional was made possible due to inaccessible forest villages coupled with the absence of road-communication. But with the coming of the British and

subsequent introduction of modern administrative system, a complex economic situation had developed in the societies of Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The semi-feudal semi-tribal nature of economic production was replaced and linked with the capitalist world economy. The colonial rulers introduced the regime of recorded land rights system which had founded the policy of turning Assam into a capitalist plantation economy. Later, as per the policy, the region which had a lot of available wastelands were given for settlement to cultivators from the over-populated regions of East Bengal<sup>114</sup>.

The Bodos, in general, suffered economically due to the British land revenue policies which made payment in cash mandatory. The British government got all the cultivated land surveyed and land revenue assessed which made the Bodo-life more complex ever due to the absence of habitual cash transaction activity coupled with the habit of moving around cultivating land declared by the colonial rulers as public lands and grazing field. Most of the Bodo settlers of the *Duar* areas didn't bother to get their land recorded. The little volume of trade that they carried out with the *Bhutias* was bartered without cash. As the monetary system replaced the old bartered system the Bodo traders could not cope with the requirement of capital in their smallest transactions. The Bodo cultivators began to borrow cash from money lenders. They soon became indebted to rich *Barpetiah* and *Marwari* money lenders due to their tricky money lending system. The land of the Bodos in subsequent periods passed into their hands and their land alienation started thereof<sup>115</sup>. Moreover, the British administration tried to bring more and more land under cultivation for boosting land revenue collection, because the land revenue was the only and chief means of sources of the British administration. In their endeavours, sometimes the defaulters of land revenue were given more land for cultivation as they were not in a position to bear the brunt of the pecuniary punishment. As the defaulters were given more land, their revenue increases which become almost impossible to pay the default revenue and as a result, the cultivators were compelled by situation to run away from his holdings and absconded somewhere in the deep jungle to escape from the *Barkandazes* of the Zamindars. The *Barkandazes* were notorious and very harsh towards defaulters of land revenue<sup>116</sup>. In some cases, in order to avoid heavy burden of taxation, many poor Bodo peasants engaged themselves in wage-earning jobs in the tea plantations initiated by the British. In this case, too freedom-loving Bodos could not be effectively utilized by the British Tea planters. There were reports of

frequent revolt and protest against them. They were soon substituted by other tribal communities from other regions of Indian subcontinent<sup>117</sup>.

The land is an important factor for the stability of the Bodo economy, the question of giving protection to their land became by far the greatest economic issue for them. The introduction of the new capitalist economy brought about by the new colonial administration hit hard to their economy. As a result of the new regime of recorded land rights, in the declared wasteland of Assam vis-à-vis in the district of Goalpara huge new settlers were encouraged and settled for cultivation. The ease at which the indigenous populations of Assam lived faced challenges from the new settlers. Due to hard working nature which they carried from their country of origin, the habit which they imbibed from the situation of over-population factors the new settlers were able to place themselves in a more advantageous position than to the indigenous population. In matters of hard-working nature and numeracy of the population strength of the new settlers, the indigenous populations were turned into no match to compete with them. There was a report of large-scale land alienation of the indigenous populations including the Bodos as a result of the wasteland management policy of the colonial rulers. The colonizers introduced the Line System as a measure to limit the damages done to the indigenous populations by their policy of population immigration. But, it remained ever weak to serve its original purpose<sup>118</sup>. Virtually there was no effort made to improve the cropping techniques and as a result, the land productivity remained ever low which made the Bodo villagers indebted to rural money lenders and it was that indebtedness, in turn, had resulted in landlessness. The question of the loss of land was very serious for tribes because it practically meant the loss of the only means of livelihood<sup>119</sup>. The money economy, new system of taxes, commercialization of agriculture all of which were hitherto unknown to the Bodo villagers gave the greatest blow to the Bodo economy with which they failed themselves to cope with. The Bodos were mainly agriculturalists whose only market economy was confined to a meagre sale of vegetables, muster seeds and jute.

The Bodos were primarily a rural community and depend on natural resources. The majority of the households were still sticking to their traditional occupation-agriculture. While reporting on the economic life of the Bodos in his Gazetteer of Goalpara, B.C. Allen observed that agriculture was the main occupation of the Bodos where rice was their staple crop. It was raised in fields which were irrigated from the hill

streams, and which yields bumper crops although, the soil was often poor and sandy. The water was brought in channels sometimes several miles in length, dug by the combined labour of the villagers<sup>120</sup>.

Though the Bodo villagers mainly depended on agriculture for their subsistence, there had not been any improvement in their agricultural technique and the Bodos continued their agricultural practices with outmoded forms of technology in their small holdings. Their agricultural and other implements were all of the very rudest descriptions. Their mode of existence was from hand to mouth.<sup>121</sup>

The practice of domestication of animals and fowls was prevalent among the Bodos and those were for their own use like as meat, plough-animal and religious purposes i.e. for magico-religious sacrifices. The Bodos abound in live stocks- cow, ox, pigs, fowls, goats etc which they kept never for the purpose of an item of trade and commerce<sup>122</sup>. Since there was no market, even a small bazaar in the Bodo inhabited areas of Assam the growth of enthusiasm for trade and commerce as main or subsidiary means of livelihood was out of the question. The little surplus they got from their annual agricultural product was not sold but bartered liberally with the items of trade that the Hindu traders brought up to the Bodo villages along the river routes during the summer season. The Bodo maidens were seen in their looms, but that too for weaving clothes for their own use- *Dokhona* (Bodo woman's main garment), *Babro*, *Eri* clothes etc.<sup>123</sup> In the colonial administrative report of River-borne trade, it appears that the Eri-cloth and Eri-cocoons were exported to Kolkata<sup>124</sup>. The dictum of self-sufficient village economy applies here letter and spirit. There were poor parents in the villages who could not supply sufficient food materials i.e. the rice for feeding their families often go for begging rice from the wealthy cultivators of the village who were often called the *Mahajans*. At that moment, the *Mahajan* (rich man) with pride would order the begging chap to take rice as much weight as he could shoulder in a single lot<sup>125</sup>. That practice was quite interesting- the real test or a sort of punishment for not doing hard work for which they were poor. Some of them were heavy drunkards and because of that they were too weak to do hard work to support their families and some were naturally lazy chaps. Many of them could not afford to shoulder the offered Rice (unhusked) and were destined to bring only a bamboo-basketful<sup>126</sup>. With that sort of self-sufficiency, with no other wants, the Bodo villagers spent their days so happy that they forgot everything what future was

in store for them. Hunter in his report rightly remarked that the requirements of the people were very limited; everything in the shape of food and clothing was grown on their own fields and manufactured by themselves in their own houses, the little salt they required were being purchased at one of the few shops found in the certain village<sup>127</sup>. Over and above, since they lived in the isolated villages away and free from external tensions, the Bodo villagers spent the days carelessly for nothing before the colonizers came to that land. In the Eastern *Duars*, where the Bodos were numerous, they did not come under any external influences for changing their lifestyle. Hunter was of the opinion that the inhabitants of the *Duars* were all in good circumstances, happy and contented with no wants or care to trouble themselves. The requirements of life were cheap, easily procured and the means of gaining an honest and comfortable livelihood by agriculture were open to all; there was an abundance of rich soil easily cultivable and as the rents were very light, their prosperous condition was not to be wondered at<sup>128</sup>.

In such condition, their economy was bound to be poor. Catching fishes from lakes, gathering firewood from the jungle and living happily with old custom and tradition on their little agricultural produce were the characteristic features of the mode of living of the Bodos. In absence of bazaars or markets which were regarded as the main centre of economic activities, the role of cash or currency was negligible among the Bodo villagers. The requirement for currency was only for payment of revenue and that too when the erstwhile Goalpara district was brought under the arrangement of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1822. B.C. Allen's comment was worthy of quoting which said that they required but little cash except to pay their revenue and the little they required was obtained by the sale of mustard or where there was no land suitable for that crop by working in the forests of the districts<sup>129</sup>.

Dried fish (Na gran) was yet another favourite item of food of the Bodos (Kacharis) and that item constituted one of the main items of export too. There was the trading activity between the *Bhutias* of Bhutan and the Bodos (the Kacharis). It is to be mentioned here that the Eastern *Duar* areas until 1864 (Indo-Bhutan War) were under the control of the Dev Raja of Punakha of Bhutan. During winters the *Bhutias* descended down to the plains with mule-loads of rock-salt, gold-dust, musk, yak-tails, Chinese silk and other items of medicinal value especially the *Bishmao*, which they exchanged with the Bodo's articles of trade – Dried fish, *Eri* Cocoons, Rice (sticky), different kinds of

clothes etc<sup>130</sup>. For facilitating trading activities trade fairs were organized by the border authorities at the places where border marts were already in existent<sup>131</sup>. The best example was the Udalguri Fair where the Tawang *Bhutias* came down to barter their goods with the Bodos (Kacharis)<sup>132</sup>. The other places where trade fairs were organized were Kherkheria, Daimara in Darrang and Daranga, Subankhata in Kamrup district<sup>133</sup>. The preference of dried-fish (Na-gran) as item of delicacy by the Bodos was worthy of mention here. The dried-fish was exchanged for much-valued *Eri*-clothe (silk) produced by Bodo women with much toiling. S. Endle reported that dried-fish was collected in enormous quantities near the banks of the Brahmaputra and carried Northwards to the Bodo (*Kachari*) *Duars*, where it was exchanged for rice and silk (*Eri*) etc<sup>134</sup>. Again, the Bodos had a special preference for *Dabka* (Earthenware vessels) without which the preparation of the national beverage *Jou* could not have been possible<sup>135</sup>. Though it was very simple in terms of material and labour for its production, the Bodos didn't know the technical know-how for its production. They were traded by the Hindu traders from the South who came on boats during summer and exchanged with unhusked rice.

The Bodo villages consisted of nuclear families and each family had their own several houses built in separate free standings around the courtyard. The building materials were simply the thatch used for roofing, Bamboo used for roofing frame, walls (splits of bamboo) and sometimes as posts and materials such as the canes which were rendered into lace for using as a fastener in tying the beams against posts. The bamboo-splits were used for walling the houses which again was plastered with mud<sup>136</sup>. A single nuclear family of the Bodos used to have 4 to 5 houses consisting of the *Nomah Noh* (main house) constructed in the North facing South, *Bakhri* (the granary) for storing the unhusked rice, *Ongkham Songra* (kitchen), *Golih* (cowshed) for housing the cattle and *Choura Noh* (other smaller houses) for accommodating all the members of the family. So, the traditional houses of the Bodos were a thatch roof mud-plastered house with a single room provision<sup>137</sup>.

Many of the Bodos hardly understood a word of Bengali or Assamese and as such trade carried on with them was chiefly transacted by barter where only a slight communication along with gesture was enough. They seldom went to market but during the rainy season traders came up the rivers and exchanged *Dabka* (earthen pots), *Na Gran* (dried fish), salt and other articles for rice at rates of exchange which were usually



fixed by the *Panchayat*. Typical rates were 5 seers of paddy for one seer of salt which was equivalent to about 12 annas a *maund* for paddy and 6 seers of paddy for an earthen pot while *Na Gran* (dried fish) fetched about twenty times its weight in grain<sup>138</sup>.

The Bodos in all villages throughout Assam were on the same footing except a few variations. They were not conscious of their political, economic and social status. They just spent the days with no aspirations for change or upward mobility at all. The Bodos (Meches) didn't seem to have achieved any form of the polity of their own; they had few traditions, ancient songs, monuments, written character and literature of any kind<sup>139</sup>. The Bodos under both regimes- the Zamindari and the Colonial, were deprived in general from the privileges of educating themselves and so remained ignorant en-mass. The *Zamindars* who derived a large income from the people had paid very little attention towards the promotion of education to them. The deputy Commissioner was of the opinion that the time was still far distant when there would be a general diffusion of knowledge among the masses<sup>140</sup>.

The *Brahma* Religious Preacher and Reformer Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and his votaries perceived that some of the prevailing Social Customs and religious practices might have rendered the Bodos into backwardness. The sorry plight of Bodos was attributed to the observance of their rites and rituals and religious practices, superstitious belief and the clumsy lengthy marriage customs. The economic life of the Bodos was static or unprogressive. They didn't move out from their village for alternative means of livelihood nor did they engage themselves in alternative economic activities other than the agriculture. Such a state of affairs really created mental anxiety among the elite sections of the Bodos. At the beginning of the twentieth century, some sections of them got themselves educated. They gained awareness of the sorry plights of the Bodos and aspired for unity for achieving the goal of the Bodo national identity.

**Endnotes:**

- 
- <sup>1</sup> W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of the District of Goalpara*, vol. 2, (rprnt)1982, p.99.
  - <sup>2</sup> S. Barman, *Zamindari System in Assam During British Rule (A Case Study of Goalpara District)*, Spectrum publications, Guwahati, 1994, p. 199.
  - <sup>3</sup> B. Goswami (cited B.K. Barua), “A Breif Sketch of Economy in Ancient Kamarupa” in Dr. N. B. Goswami (ed) *The Heritage*, no. 2, vol. I, 2011, p. 28.
  - <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.
  - <sup>5</sup> Regekhanda Narzary, informant, age-81, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Kokhlingbari, P.O. Binya khata, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/11/1998; Gotiram Basumatary, informant, age-79, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Barzabil, P.O. Ballimari, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 22/06/2015.
  - <sup>6</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p. 131.
  - <sup>7</sup> Hiramani Deka , *Politics of Identity and the Bodo Movement in Assam*, Astral International, Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi,2014, P. 21.
  - <sup>8</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.132.
  - <sup>9</sup> Piyari Mohan Brahma, informant, age-86, occupation- Social worker, Vill.-Chakma, P.O. Chakma, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/07/1998.
  - <sup>10</sup> E.H. Pakyntein, *Census of India 1961* vol.III, Assam, Part VI, village Survey Monograph, Titaguri, Janagaon, manager of Publications, Civil Lines, Delhi-6, p. 17.
  - <sup>11</sup> Sailendra Brahma, informant, age-71, occupation- former Teacher, Vill.-Turibari, P.O. Aflagaon, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 24/11/2015; Kamal Brahma, informant, age-68, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Jinjribil, P.O. Kamalsingh, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 24/07/2015.
  - <sup>12</sup> J.K. Basumatary, “Boro Somajniphrari Boro Mahsanmilanni Lama”, *Aronai*, XIII(3),1999.
  - <sup>13</sup> B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 1986, p.9.
  - <sup>14</sup> A. C. Brahma, “Brahma Dharamni Gejerjwng Boro Mahari” (in Bodo), in G. Mushahary (ed) *Daimu*, Gossaigaon District Bodo Sahitya Sabha, 1998, p. 19.
  - <sup>15</sup> R.N. Mosahary, *Social History of the Boros of Assam: A Study of Oral History*, Ph.D. Thesis submitted in HEHU, Shilling, 1986. p.178.
  - <sup>16</sup> K. K. Brahma, “Kalicharan Gurudev: Samajao Bhandari”, in (ed) Janil Kumar Brahma, *Aronni Lajjam*, Souvenir, Silver Jubilee edition, 1981, p. 42.
  - <sup>17</sup> Pradip Raja Brahma, informant, age-71, occupation- Cultivation, Vill. & P.O. Patakhata, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/02/2015; Sunilal Brahma, informant, age-

- 
- 74, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Turibari, P.O. Kamal Singh, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 05/01/2014.
- <sup>18</sup> S. Das, *Assam-Bhutan Trade Relations 1865-1949*, Anshah Publishing House, Delhi-92, 2005, p.14; Oinam R. Singh & K.R.Basumatary, “The Socio-Economic & Religious Conditions of the Bodos in the Early 20th Century” in *IOSR-Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, vol. 22 issue 6 ver. 6, 2017.p. 14.
- <sup>19</sup> R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit*, p. 49; T.C. Basumatary, *Gudi Bathou Dharam*, Ist Edition, P. Mwshahary, Jharbari, Kokrajhar,1998, pp. 1,2; B.G. Basumatary, *Boro Harimuni Mahar Mushri*, TRI, Assam, Guwahati, 1993, P. 49; Oinam R. Singh & K.R. Basumatary, “Sketching on the Economic and Religious Life of the Bodos: Changes and Continuity”, in *International Research Journal of Human Resources & Social Sciences*, vol. 4, Issue. 10, 2017, p. 47.
- <sup>20</sup> R.N. Brahma, 76, *formerly a school teacher*, informant, Joymaguri, interviewed on 12/03/1998.
- <sup>21</sup> Majendra Basumatary, informant, age-79, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Persuabari, P.O. Patakhata, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/11/2015.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p. 46.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.118.
- <sup>25</sup> Bani Kanta, Kakati, *The Goddess Kamakhya*, PBA, Guwahati, 1989, p. 16.
- <sup>26</sup> S. Baruah, *India Against Itself Assam And the Politics of Nationality*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.p. 184, 19.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.
- <sup>28</sup> M. Neog, *Early history of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankardeva and his Times* (LBS publications, Guwahati, 1998), p. 91.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Britannica ready reference Encyclopaedia*, Encyclopaedia Britannica (India) Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi,2005, p. 96.
- <sup>32</sup> S. Endle, *The Kacharis* (Low Price Publications, Delhi-52,1911), p- I.
- <sup>33</sup> K. Brahma (Jr), *Jieu Kourang Arw Saya*, (Bang. -1364, Kokrajhar), p.24.
- <sup>34</sup> Fr. M. Hermanns, *Indo-Tibetans* (K.L. Fernandes, Bandra, Bombay 20, 1954), p.116.
- <sup>35</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p. 46.
- <sup>36</sup> Fr. M. Hermanns, *op. cit*, p.116.

- 
- 37 Wisdom Library, retrieved from [www.wisdomlib.org/definition/Mleccha\\_addition](http://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/Mleccha_addition) of 30 Jan, 2015 from *Wikipedia: Indian Culture*, on 14/04/2017.
- 38 J.K. Basumatary, *op. cit*, 1999.
- 39 K. Brahma (Jr) *op. cit*, p. 8.
- 40 K.K. Brahma, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- 41 K. Brahma (Jr) *op. cit*, p. 9.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid*, p. 11.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit*, p.155.
- 46 M. Neog, *op. cit*, p.369.
- 47 *Ibid*, p. 369.
- 48 W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.118.
- 49 S. Hossain, *Tomalokar Babe Sarania Kachari Samaj*, Nandan Prakashan, Guwahati, 2013, p. 9.
- 50 S. Endle, *op. cit*, p. 5; D. Bwiswmatha and B.N. Deb, Koch-Rajbonshi Jatir Porichiti, M/s Bwiswmatha Publications, Kokrajhar, 2003, p. 'h'(i).
- 51 *Ibid*, p.118.
- 52 K. Brahma (Jr) *op. cit*, p. 13.
- 53 W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.* p.118.
- 54 Sarbeswar Brahma, informant, age-70, occupation- former Teacher & Cultivation, Vill.- Haripara, P.O. Khalipukhuri, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 09/11/2015; Charan Brahma, informant, age- 82, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Silki Khata, P.O. Tipkai, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 14/07/2015.
- 55 W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.118.
- 56 B.C. Allen, *District Gazeteers of Assam, Goalpara (1905)*, p. 31.
- 57 S. Endle, *op. cit*, p. 12.
- 58 B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, p. 47.
- 59 R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit*, p.169.
- 60 *Ibid*, p. 169.
- 61 J.D. Anderson, Introduction, in S. Endle's *The Kacharis* (Low Price Publications, Delhi-52,1911), p. XIV.
- 62 R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit*, p.169.
- 63 *Ibid*, p.169.
- 64 *Ibid.*

- 
- <sup>65</sup> JD Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.XIV.
- <sup>66</sup> R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit.* p. 169.
- <sup>67</sup> M. Basumatary, “Genesis and growth of Christianity Among the Boros of NELC with special reference to Shyamaguri Congregation”, in M. Basumatary, (ed) *AINA*, a Souvenir, Gossaigaon,2015. P. 4.
- <sup>68</sup> R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit.*, p.170.
- <sup>69</sup> M. Basumatary, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- <sup>70</sup> R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p.173.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p.178.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p.180.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p.181
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>76</sup> K.K. Brahma, *op. cit.*, p.42; Satiram Brahma, informant, age-78, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Alupara, P.O. Bashbari, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/01/2016.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p.42.
- <sup>78</sup> E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (Lawyer’s Book Stall, Guwahati,1926), p.6.
- <sup>79</sup> K.K. Brahma, *op. cit.*, p.42.
- <sup>80</sup> R.N. Mosahary, *op. cit.*, p.163.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p 161.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p. 163.
- <sup>83</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p.118.
- <sup>84</sup> Manindra Narzary, informant, age-87, Occupation-Cultivation, Vill & P.O.- Patakata, District- Kokrajhar Assam. Date of interview 16.7.1998.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>86</sup> Phanindra Lahary, informant, Age-78 years S/O Lt. Nibaron Lahary, Occupation- Retired Teacher, Vill.-Baman Kura P.O.- Binya Khata, District- Kokrajhar, Date of Interview 29.05.16.
- <sup>87</sup> Sailendra Brahma, informant, age-57, occupation- Teaching, Vill.-Dangarkuti, P.O. Dotma, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/11/2015; Dinendra Basumatary, informant, age-78, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Alupara, P.O. Bashbari, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/01/2016.
- <sup>88</sup> Kudiram Brahma, informant, age-78, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Batabari, P.O. Dotma, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/07/2015.
- <sup>89</sup> J.K. Basumatary, *op. cit.*,1999.

- 
- <sup>90</sup> *Maund* is a measure of weight equal to 40 kg.
- <sup>91</sup> J.K. Basumatary, *op. cit*, 1999.
- <sup>92</sup> B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, p. 48.
- <sup>93</sup> S. Endle, *op. cit*, p. 2.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p .3.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.
- <sup>96</sup> Lahendra Basumatary, informant, age-79, occupation- Lawyer, Gossaigaon, P.O. Gossaigaon, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 14/11/2015.
- <sup>97</sup> K. Brahma (Jr), *op. cit*, p 17.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.
- <sup>99</sup> B. Narzi, *Boro- Kacharir Geet-Mat*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 1991, p.30.
- <sup>100</sup> K. Brahma, *Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos*, Shri Chiranjib Brahma, Gossaigaon, (Reprnt), 1995, p. 17.
- <sup>101</sup> J.K. Basumatary, *op. cit*, 1999.
- <sup>102</sup> B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, p. 48.
- <sup>103</sup> J.K. Basumatary, *op. cit*, 1999.
- <sup>104</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.119.
- <sup>105</sup> Darbaru Narayan Brahma, *The Bihar*, Kokrajhar District Bodo Employees' Literary Society, Kokrajhar, 1992, p. 94.
- <sup>106</sup> A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, (Rprnt) 1987, pp. 9,10.
- <sup>107</sup> C.G. Dingwall Fordyce, *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1900-1901*, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1901, p.4.
- <sup>108</sup> S. Barman, *op. cit*, p.199.
- <sup>109</sup> Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, DHAS, Assam, Gauhati, 1963, p. 32.
- <sup>110</sup> S. Baruah, *op. cit*, p.190.
- <sup>111</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p. 117.
- <sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.
- <sup>113</sup> H. M. Deka, *op. cit*, P.21; A.K. Baruah, *The Koch Kingdom*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2011, P.141.
- <sup>114</sup> S. Baruah, *op. cit*, p.190.
- <sup>115</sup> H. M. Deka, *op. cit*, P.21.
- <sup>116</sup> Ajit Kr. Brahma, informant, age-82, occupation- cultivation, Vill.-Kamalsingh, P.O. Kamalsingh, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/02/2014.
- <sup>117</sup> H. M. Deka, *op. cit*, P.21.

- 
- 118 S. Baruah, *op. cit*, p. 190.
- 119 H. M. Deka, *op. cit*, P.21.
- 120 B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, P.47.
- 121 W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.119.
- 122 E.H. Pakyntein, *op. cit*, p. 17.
- 123 *Ibid*, p. 19.
- 124 F.J. Monahan, *Report of the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam for the year 1895- 96*, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong,1896, p.3.
- 125 R.N. Brahma,76, *formerly a school teacher*, informant, Joymaguri, interviewed on 12/03/1998.
- 126 *Ibid*.
- 127 W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.p. 120.121.
- 128 *Ibid*, p. 121.
- 129 B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, p. 48.
- 130 S. Das, *op. cit*, p. 67.
- 131 *Ibid*, p. 67.
- 132 *Ibid*, p.25.
- 133 A.K. Baruah, *op. cit*, P.141.
- 134 S. Endle, *op. cit*, p. 21.
- 135 *Ibid*, p.12.
- 136 Anaram Brahma, informant, age-71, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Nasraibari, P.O. Panbari, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/12/2016.
- 137 *Ibid*.
- 138 B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, pp. 47.48.
- 139 W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p. 119.
- 140 *Ibid*, p. 52.