

# **SOCIETY AND ECONOMY OF THE BODOS DURING COLONIAL PERIOD**

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## CHAPTER VI

### Conclusion

The British colonialism in Assam had a direct and indirect repercussion on the society and economy of the people of Assam. The Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 more significantly reaped the opportunity to exploit the situation in Assam in favour of the British. The expulsion of the Burmese from Assam in disguise helped the British to expand their political suzerainty in the east. Thus, the treaty ushered a new epoch in the history of Assam. From the very beginning the British had been looking for this opportunity to expand the trade and territory towards the east.

Assam was ruled by small principalities and chiefs during that period. They were not politically unified. The *Buranjis* recorded many wars and disputes among the rulers in different periods of time for gaining political superiority over each other. The skirmish between the Ahom and Kacharis for upholding their political suzerainty became an important chapter in the history of Assam. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century due to political disputes Kacharis were scattered in different parts of Assam as well as in the neighbouring states. The British with a view of expanding their political influence adopted various administrative policies in Assam. Through the negotiations and agreements they succeeded to have political control over the small principalities one after another in the region. Consequently, it affected the demographic pattern of the greater Bodo race.

Prior to the advent of British, Assam had been a land of plural society with racial diversity of people belonging to the Mongoloids, Caucasoids, Austroloids, Dravidian and Indo-Aryans stocks. Various administrative policies adopted by the British East India Company throughout the region caused a significant impact mainly on the society, polity and economic life of the people. Moreover, for the interest of administrative and economic pursuits the British adopted various policies to encourage large scale immigration in Assam. In 1939, the establishment of 'Assam Tea Company' led to the import of labourer from Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Mymensing and Rangpur (present Bangladesh). The British also recruited immigrants into the government officials. For an instance, in the district court of Goalpara the judges were virtually employed from the Muslims of Burdwan and North West Province. The Marwaris carried multiple duties, as traders and *mauzadars* of the government.

They also acted as bankers, entrepreneurs and money lenders for the peasants. The introduction of railway in Assam in the year 1882, further paved the way for immigration into Assam valley. The labourers were imported from Bihar, United province, Chotanagpur and the central Provinces of India to employ in the newly introduced industries.

The British government with the objective of yielding more revenue sources adopted various policies to bring the vast waste lands under cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley. Thus, after the enactment of *Assam Land and Revenue Regulation I of 1886*, large numbers of immigrants were encouraged to settle in Assam. The intention of course was to increase revenue through agriculture, Assam having large tracts of unused land which the colonial government wanted to exploit for filling its coffers. The intensity of population increase in the Goalpara district was very high during 1881-1911. During 1881-1891 and 1891-1901 it increased by 1.36 percent to 2 percent. But, very surprisingly it increased by 26.07 percent during 1901-1911. This unnatural intensity of population increase in the district of Goalpara revealed that the magnitude of immigration was more deliberately encouraged than in the past decades. Therefore, observing the nature of large scale of immigration, C.S. Mullan in the Census Report of 1931 stated that the intensity of immigration would be much destructive in the culture and civilization of the people of Assam than the Burmese invasion of 1820.

In the Brahmaputra valley large scale immigration caused illegal squatting of lands by immigrant settlers which alarmed the internal security of indigenous people and mostly affected the tribal people of the plain areas. Further, it also led to the mutation of the demographic pattern in the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, with the aim to protect the lands and culture of indigenous people from the cause of alienation by the illegal immigrants, the British Colonial Government introduced a new devise known as Line System in 1916. Through this devise the influx of the immigrants was checked and was successful in protecting the interest of the indigenous people. But, with the change of political power that devise had its natural death.

The issue of immigration was an important factor for the changing pattern of demography in the Brahmaputra valley. After the introduction of the regular Census from 1881, the growth of population systematically measured. Variations in the field of population, language and religion began to be found in the successive decades of census. The census from 1921 to 1931 highlights the decline of the followers of animists or the traditional tribal

religious faiths. The decrease of number in variation from 264 to 251 in Assam was due to the influence of other culture and religion.

The advent of the British and the introduction of the western education system through the missionary activities changed the mode of educational system in Assam. The policy of Liberalism and Evangelicalism were adopted by the British in India. Charles Grant (1746-1823) adopted western education as the tool of missionaries in India. The missionaries established many English medium schools throughout Assam with the objective of spreading western ideas by imparting education among the people.

Along with evangelical activities the missionaries played a significant role in preserving historical evidences through their writings. The American Baptist Missionaries, the Lutheran Missionaries and the Roman Catholic were prominent in spreading gospel by imparting education among the Bodos and Garos. It is also an undeniable fact that the missionaries contributed a lot in the field of literature to both the tribes of same linguistic family. Before the British rule in Assam there was no formal education among the Bodos. The schools established in Assam during that period were far from the Bodo villages. But the educational system among the Garos was more accessible than the former. The process of imparting formal education was started when Francis Jenkins initiated functioning three public schools and a few numbers of private schools in Darrang in 1835. This initiative ushered the Bodos into limelight for the first time. But no serious educational policy for the tribals of Goalpara was adopted during nineteenth century. Till 1853, there were only 10 schools of all grades during the visit of A.J. Moffat Mills in the Goalpara district. David Scott was the pioneer in initiating the process of educational system among the Garos as early as 1925. Ramke Momin and Omed were the educated personalities among the Garos in elevating the educational process among their tribe.

The Christian Missionaries had set out their mission with dual purposes. Initially, to spread Christianity among the people they served by providing formal education. Secondly, the Christian Missionaries served as government agents, when the government machinery failed access to provide direct education to the people. Among the Christian Missionaries, the American Baptist Mission was the first to come in contact with the Bodos. Oliver T. Cutter, Rev. Cyrus Barker A.H. Danford were among the missionary activists who realized the need of education among the Bodos. In 1864, a new mission society with the name of 'Kachari Mission' was setup for the cause of the Bodos under the guidship of Rev. C.H. Hesselmeyer.

There were no separate schools and medium of instructions for the Bodos during colonial period. They also did not have recognized written script for their language. Therefore, the Bodo students studied in all other grades of schools. It was only in May 18, 1963 that Bodo language became the medium of instruction in the primary level of schools under the aegis of Government of Assam. Further, it was upgraded to the Middle English (M.E.) Schools in 1968 and to the Higher Secondary Stage of education in 1972. Again, in 1996, the Bodo language was introduced for M.A. course in Gauhati University. Above all, the Bodo language has been incorporated in the Eighth schedule of Indian Constitution in 2004. But the Garos from the very beginning accepted Bengali script as the medium of instruction. At the same time in schools of Garo Hills, they used both the Bengali and Damra dialect of Garo language.

The missionaries for the purpose of spreading evangelical activities among the Bodos adopted the Roman script as written form in Bodo dialect. In 1884, Rev. Sidney Endle wrote *An Outline Grammar of Kachari or Mech Language*, which mainly dealt with dialect of the Bodos of the Darrang district. It was written in Roman script and is regarded as the first ever book on Bodo language. Among the missionaries writers such as W.M. Dundas, G.A. Grierson, Rev. L.O. Skrefsrud, Rev. A. Kristiansen, J.D. Anderson, S.N. Wolfenden and Rev. S. Holversrud were the most prominent, who made contribution through their writings in the field of language and literary development among the Bodos during the colonial period. The missionary writers like Rev. Dr. M. Bronson, W.J. Williamson, Rev. T. J. Keith, I.J. Stoddard and Dr. M. Bronson were prominent among the Garos.

The emergence of literature and educational awareness among the Bodos brought new wave of change in society. The new ideas of the western education brought the wave of renaissance in the Bodo society. Many of the educated elite groups devoted themselves for the task of social reformation movement in various ways. The genesis of literature got a new impetus among them. In the first decade of twentieth century, the emergence of Kalicharan Mech alias Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma as messiah among the Bodos accelerated the momentum of revolution in the field of social, culture and economic life of the people. Kalicharan adopted Brahma religion as the tool of reformation movement among the Bodos.

In the field of literature the appearance of first customary law book entitled *Bodoni Phisa O Aiyen* in 1915, started the literary milestone of the Bodo language. The birth of the *Bodo Chatra Sanmilani* in 1919, further gave rise to the literary awareness among the new

generation of western educated Bodo youths. The emergence of *Bibar Age* (1920-1937) and *Alongbar Age* (1938-1951) in the colonial period, is an important landmark in the history of Bodo literature. Many of the educated Bodo literary architects of that period brought awareness and national consciousness among the people through their writings. It was undoubtedly their writings of poetry, prose, songs and dramas which contributed a lot in awakening the Bodo society from the darkness to the limelight.

Bodos had been retaining basic elements of the society till the penetration of the colonial rule in Assam. But, towards the second half of the nineteenth century, the introduction of western education gave rise to the consciousness among the Bodos. In addition to that, conversion of the Bodo masses into the Christianity and other sects also alienated them from the traditional faiths and beliefs. Besides these, the introduction of *Brahma Dharma* by Kalicharan Brahma with the view of refining social institutions led to the remarkable reformation movement in the society. Consequently, some elements in the social institutions of the Bodos were transformed under the influence of new thoughts and beliefs. For instance, the introduction of *Brahma Dharma* brought about many changes with slight modification of the traditional system mainly in the field of marriage institution, customary law, laws of inheritance and religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, the contribution of Kalicharan Brahma was not less in the field of social and economic domains of the society who initiated various steps to rescue the Bodos from the Dark Age to the limelight by organizing reformation movements.

Agriculture had been the backbone of the economy of the Bodos which has been continuing since their ancestors. They had an idea of the selection of the arable land for cultivation of variety of crops. Thus the land was categorically classified into four classes namely *khandina ha*, *hashrow ha*, *shwrab daria ha* and *jamphwi daria ha*. For the act of agricultural activities they used traditional methods of tools and technologies. Among the agricultural activities rice cultivation was the principal crop of the Bodos. For cultivation the land of the indigenous people came under encroachment of the immigrants resulting in friction and social tensions in times to follow.

Before the introduction of the metric system of measurement in the district of Goalpara, they commonly adopted traditional method of unit system of measurement for the purpose of calculating and measuring time, days, money, land, cloth, distances, liquid and solid substances. The barter system was predominantly rampant in place of currency for

exchanging and attaining other required commodities. There was no regular banking system in Goalpara till 1879. Therefore, in the society the land owning *mahajans* and the money lenders exploited the situation in the village economy of the Bodos. Sometimes, due to inability to repay the debt in the stipulated time, the debtors had to forfeit their land to the *mahajans* permanently. Besides that the landless labourers served the *mahajans* under various agreements in return for remunerations or wages.

The industrial revolution and subsequent inflow of cheap materials or products in the market, the traditionally manufactured implements or other products, be it for agriculture or sericulture or handloom could not withstand and compete and had its natural fall leading to unemployment.

The weekly *hats* or *hathai* and *melas* held in certain months and seasons gave scope for people to exchange their products and commodities with people from other areas. This exposure of the villagers made them realize that every product or commodity has values and its worth selling or procuring to satisfy necessities.

The people of Assam were entirely dependent on the traditional mode of transport and communication till the early part of the twentieth century. The introduction of the transport communication system by the colonial government not only served the commercial purpose of the company but also made it easier to travel long distances within a short period of time. This enabled people to come together and exchange views with one another and come to a common consensus and issues. The introduction of the transport and communication again had an indirect advantage for the common people. It facilitated to establish new business establishments with a view of upgrading economic status with abundance of valuable forests reserves, the region expanded its timber trade even with the neighbouring states like Bengal. This gave rise to emergence of new elite economic class in Bodo society.

While critically reviewing the changes in different aspects of the Bodos society, one cannot help opine that the colonial period in Assam was a blessing in many aspects for the Bodos. The introduction of the western education in Assam and the Bodos accessing it had far reaching effect in the socio-literary and political development of the Bodo society. While acknowledging it the British rule also brought about havocs in Assam affecting the demography, politics, and economy of the state. In short the colonial rule in Assam was not only a boon but also a curse.