

CHAPTER-IV

BODO WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

The human social life is composed of different beliefs, traditions and practices. These adhere to the formation of beliefs system by which religion has its birth.¹ The word 'religion' has been explained in two ways; one from the word '*religere*' i.e., to execute by means of repeated effort and another '*religare*' i.e., to bind together, signifying that religion is bound of piety.² The constant changing of human thought and beliefs had developed into faith. The religion becomes a part of human life and it has continued till today. Every human individual is bounded by his own term of beliefs.³ The first phase of belief system helps in the development of different culture, traditions and practices in the society. Thus, in the early period, man used to worship the nature which formed animistic in characters. So, worshipping different natural phenomenal in the form of gods and goddesses are the result of emerging religion in the human society as stated by many social scientists.⁴

In the field of social anthropology, Taylor made an argument that religion had its origin by believing to different souls, which had its formation in different phenomena like stones, trees, rivers, animals or human being that existed independently. The word 'animism' is a Greek word *anima*, which means that referred to the existence of such soul or spirit.⁵ In fact, 'animism' is the groundwork of the philosophy of religion from that of savages' life to civilization.⁶

Religion is understood something in a way of phenomenal transmission from a constant ideological aspects to another. Transforming from primitive to modern and binding in one direction. According to Emile Durkheim, religion is a system of beliefs and practices that are sacredly prohibited under one's community's society.⁷ But many sociologists are of the view that the ancestral spirits were worshipped in the form of ghost.⁸ However, Dr. Jevons mentioned that the spirit of dead bodies never

happens to be god, since man is dependent on god and the spirit of dead ancestor are dependent on man.⁹ So, in such a perspective man is not to worship him compulsory.

In the primitive age, the men spent their lives mostly living with nature and worship hills, mountains, rivers, caves, sky, stones etc. Such habitat makes them worship the nature in different forms of gods. Probably, this might be the beginning of religion in the human society as concluded by different scholars. Thus far, forming a system of beliefs and later taken the shape of religion. The characters of primitive worship are still found among the indigenous tribal communities in Assam. It is mentioned that the existence of the old religious practices are still found and having few examples like sacrificing animals, animal worship etc. Animal sacrifice was the main character in the primitive traditions.¹⁰ Till today such sacrifices are found amongst others having ethnic cultures.

There are various examples of belief systems by which gods and goddesses are worshipped in the name of religion from the primitive age to present time. Therefore, in such practices the Bodos are in no exception and formed characters since the time immemorial. The Bodos worship plant, known as *Sijou* (euphorbia Splenden) which symbolizes *Bwrai Bathou*, which means an old god man.¹¹ Bodo believe in five different traditional gods that have been worship since the ancient time and they are *Ailong*, *Agrang*, *Khoila*, *Sanja Borli* and *Raj Khungri*¹² that indicate the god of earth, water, air, fire and sky respectively.

There has been a considerable work on the religion and culture of the Bodos. Some of the recent Bodo scholars who have studied regarding the Bodo religion are Anil Boro¹³, Bhaben Narzri,¹⁴ M Choudhury, K Brahma,¹⁵ M Brahma, R.N Moshahari,¹⁶ Mangolsingh Hazoari,¹⁷ and Sekhar Brahma.¹⁸ According to Sidney Endle, the Bodo people from the earliest time undoubtedly have been influenced by many 'fear' which instigate a beliefs system that turn this character and put into practices.¹⁹ It is known from the words of different foreign scholars and missionaries who worked among the Bodos. In the words of Rev. P.H. Moore, who mentioned that the Bodos are genuine Sadducees, who never believed on specific term and whose motto is to eat and drink, for men will die one day or the other!²⁰ In the words of Rev.

G.R Kampher, related that the Bodos were once spirit worshippers and superstitious for which the missions are established for them to work among Bodos.²¹ Again Rev. Sydney Endle remarked that the Bodo people worshipped to an invisible spirit being known as ‘*Modai*’ but did not see any idol worship that was inclined to use the power for evil and malicious rather than generous reason.²² These scholars had expressed that the Bodo people are spirit worshippers and had not found idol worship in the Bodo religion. The Bodo people continued to believe that the existence of an invisible spirit is no other but *Bwrai Bathou*.²³ It is in no doubt that the ancestor- worshippers can be denied but the matter of fact is that among the Bodo society there still exists that the offering food to deceased persons is still prevalent by setting up *Thafanas*²⁴ and pray to god.²⁵ The worship of natural forces was not seemed to be so common in the Bodo society even in the early period. But some evidence can be traced, for instance connection with the popular festivals and traditions of the Bodos like *Bwisagu* (bihu) a similar to Hindus which is called ‘*parwa* or ‘*bhotheli*’.²⁶ The *parwa* is built with a long bamboo pole tie around with a piece of torn clothe and the flag taken from the village on the last day of the *Bwisagu* and then put them alongside of the *Sijou* tree.²⁷ The people enjoyed dancing, wrestling and making tom-toming around it.²⁸ The ritual of offering a black pigeon (*Kala parwa*) or goat, mixture with *gaji* (mixture of gram seed, moong, rice etc) to gods and goddesses was practiced among *Kacharis* in North Bengal (Jalpaiguri area) to free themselves from the various sins and diseases. Thus Endle concludes that it might be possible a relic or survival of phallic worship as the *parwa* taking the place of the lingam phallus.²⁹

In the ancient period, the Bodos believed in five major gods. Such beliefs proved that the Bodos since the beginning worshipped different natural objects like earth, water, Air, fire and sky.³⁰ These are the five basic elements that represent the creation and *Bathou* as the supreme god, The Bodos are not aware of the fact that whether these elements determine the character of god or not but they are sure of the fact that these characters are reflected in the *Kherai* puja altar, which indicates the formless being of *Obonglaori* (god).³¹

4.1 BODO WOMEN AND BATHOISM

Bathouism is the traditional religion of the Bodos prevalent in society as the main religion till today. Compared to the ancient traditional practices, beliefs in *Bathou*, have slight changes in the post colonial period. It is due to the various religious reformation, educational advancement, scientific development, technological development, industrialization, colonisation etc. The major factors for changes are due to the spread of western education, activities of Christian missionaries in the Bodo villages. The post colonial period shows acceptance or conversion to the new teaching of religions in the Bodo society. The popularity of *Bathouism* is also now slowly declining however remained as a major traditional religion of the Bodos till today.

The situation later succumbed to the Hinduism or simply took *Saran* under *Hindu Guru* and embraced Hinduism. This opens a new door for the Bodo people to assimilate from traditional religious beliefs to new religion called '*Brahma Dharma*', here Gurudev Kalicharan was the first man to introduce this new religion in the Bodo society. He brought various reformations in the Bodo socio- beliefs and culture. The believers are considered as the monotheist one that they believe in one *Brahma* god, ultimately identified by saying *Obonglaori* (god) similar calling with the traditional *Bathou* religion.³² With the passage of time the *Bathou* religion has faced new challenges like the sacrifice of animals, fowls, offering and drinking of rice beer in the name of deities appears to be crude and unfit in the eyes of the educated and civilized people. Gradually, many Bodos within the educated class started to dislike it to continue. Moreover lack of uniformity in rituals also brought hesitation among them and splited into many *Bathou* groups like *Brahma Bathou*, *Bibar Bathou*, *Swrjigiri Bathou*, *Rupamoni Bathou* *Sagwr Bathou* etc.³³ In the earliest period, *Bathou* was not having different split groups and was only *Buli Bathou* that did not have proper worshipping place beside *Bathou* altar in the courtyard.³⁴ In order to institutionalize it in a proper shape, sections of the Bodo people have developed into an institution where cohesive institutionalized shape to *Bathou* religion has taken place which is known as *Bathou Thansali*.³⁵ It holds its salami puja annually but besides that pujas and prayer are also held regularly in their respective home and offered prayer

especially by the women in the house.³⁶ The modern education, transport and communication along with the new ideas on socio-cultural reformation and political implications among the Bodos have brought huge impact in the society that have witnessed forming different *Bathou* sects considerably around 30 different groups as per the source is concerned.³⁷ Therefore, section of educated and conscious Bodos, has taken initiative to modify and innovate their religious practices by forming different committees and organizations to come under one umbrella of uniform doctrinal teaching.³⁸ As a result, the new organization named All *Bathou* Religious Union was formed in 1992. This organization worked to bring the uniformity in the *Bathou* religion and this organization also works on the maintaining of written form of chanting mantras by forming separate committees but could not work properly rather creating of different groups continue.³⁹ The Bodo women in the *Bathou* religion have their extensive role in performing of the religious rituals in the society. Morning Prayer and casual prayer in front of the *Bwrai Bathou* are done by the women in the family. The different pujas within the practice of *Bathou* faith and its activities like cleaning the *Bathou* Altar, chorus chanting, group prayer, daily prayer were mostly done by the women folk in the family. *Bathou* also has different occasional functions and religious ritual practices in the Bodo religious society where women had its high position and place to perform and there lays no area where women are being neglected.

Christianity, among the Bodos is also one of the recent developments in the Bodo society. Christianity came in the Bodo society during the first half of the 19th century in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nawgaon districts of Assam.⁴⁰ By that time *Brahma Dharma* already had its place in the Bodo society. Different Christian missionaries' activities among the Bodos began to influence the Bodos and started accepting the new religion. This brought changes in the spheres of socio-cultural and religion of the Bodo people. The coming of western education carried out by the Christian missionaries also played a major role in becoming Christians among the Bodos.

4.2 BODO WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

The Bodo women play a significant role in the religious activities in the society. Their role, status, position and activities are mostly witnessed while performing religious rites and rituals. The traditional religion of the Bodos is *Bathou* which symbolizes by *Sijou* (euphorbia splendens) that stands as an emblem of the supreme God among the other gods and goddesses of the Bodos. *Bathou* follow significant five qualities i.e truth, knowledge, power, beauty and goodness.⁴¹ The Bodos believed in *Bwrai Bathou* throughout the ages. Different scholars have mentioned *Bathou* as the appearance of Siva the god, but while others assume it as the spiritual being that is the combination of so many gods and goddesses.⁴² The Bodos are not animistic as well as idol worshippers as observed by the different scholars.

The responsibility of the family in the Bodo society is vested upon women. They bear equal respect and status in the religious aspects too. Women have equal role and position while performing different religious rituals. Therefore, the role and activities of the Bodo women in religion and religious festivals is notable. In the Bodo society it is also noticed that they pay homage and deep respect to the departed souls of their family members. This tradition is observed once in a year. On the particular morning the elderly women of the family set up *thafanas* (altar bowl shape with leaf) and offer rice and pray to the departed souls mainly done by the elderly women of the family.⁴³

In *Bathou* altar, ritual prayers are done by the women, despite *Douri*. The *Douri* mostly perform in the community prayer and festival in the village. But daily prayers at home are done by the women of the family. The *Bathou* altar is installed in the courtyard of the house. The cleaning and maintaining of the *Bathou* Altar are done by the women. It is to mention that the Bodos celebrate different religious festivals throughout the year. So, the women are very significant to each and every festival observed in the society. In *Bathou* worship, women perform lighting the earthen lamp (*alari*) around altar and after every prayer, *Bathou* Altar is being cleaned and plastered with fresh mud mixed with cow dung. The *Bathou Buri* which means *Bathou* goddess or *Mainao Buri* looked upon as *Bathou bwrai's* wife is placed inside *Ishing*

(kitchen),⁴⁴ under the charge of women in the family. *Mainao* is considered as the guardian of the rice-field.⁴⁵ *Asu Mainao* and *Sali Mainao* are the two goddesses mostly related to the agricultural activities. Women also offer prayer to gods, namely- *Song Raja* and *Song Brai*, within the house.⁴⁶ During the worship of *Bwrai Bathou*, all men and women gather together by singing and playing musical instruments and chanting chorus in the *Bathou Tanshali*.

In the early period each and every member, especially women used to offer daily prayer usually every morning by lighting the *alari bathi* (earthen lamp). Not only this, looking after *Bathou* altars lies in the charge of women in the family. At the same time women arranged all the required materials for the ritual prayer which remains as the main duty of the women in the family prayer. The existence of *Bathou* worship is still in popular in the Bodo society and the women are actively participating in all the religious activities. Bodo society continues to have a strong practice on *Bathouism* till at present with utmost contribution and role performed by the women inside *Bathou* traditional religion.

4.3 WOMEN IN KHERAI PUJA

The Kherai puja is performed in the name of *Kerai bwrai*.⁴⁷ So, during this puja different gods and goddesses like *Bathou Bwrai*, *Bhandari*, *Bulli Buri*, *Ranachandri*, *Laokhar Gosai* are worshipped.⁴⁸ *Kherai* puja is social and religious festival performed with hope and desire. The purpose of performing *Kherai* puja is to preserve peace and welfare for the private and public life. Sometimes it is executed at respective homes while the main *Kherai* puja is performed outside in the villages. *Kherai* puja is performed before and after the cultivation of rice for the purpose of good harvest as the Bodo people are solely depending on the agriculture.⁴⁹ *Kherai puja* is being held for the greater interest of the village community and for agricultural means. *Kherai* is also known by two names *Janagur* or *Jimadari* as informed by the informant.⁵⁰

It is difficult to trace the origin of the *Kherai* festival. Some suggest that the legends and the folklores of the *Kacharis* traced and concluded by telling one folklore story that there was an old man named *Jarapagla* who got seven sons and the

youngest daughter in-law was so beautiful. Therefore, *Jarapagla* loved her so much, and then one day she ran away from home. He searched tirelessly and one day when he finally found her out, he decided to arrange a *kherai* puja which means *khe-* means flee and *Ai* –means goddess.⁵¹ It is believed that from that instance the performing of *kherai* puja existed in the Bodo society. It is considered that since this puja is associated with the female attributes therefore the major role is played by the women. There is another explanation about the origin of *Kherai*, as the sacrifice of animals is essential the sound *Khe* is produced when the goat or pig is killed by chopping neck.⁵² Therefore, from the sound of *Khe*, *Rai* is added which is chanting mantra. Thus, *Khe+Rai=Kherai* as stated by Dr. k Brahma.⁵³ It is the chanting of puja before the chief god, *Bathou*. In *Kherai* puja, the Bodo people worship the *kharia bwrai* who has all the qualities. *Kherai* puja is of four types, which are performed at different times and seasons, generally the *Kherai* puja is performed two times in a year. Different types of *Kherai* puja are- *Darshan Kherai*, *Umrao kherai*, *Phalo kherai* and *Noaoni Kherai*.⁵⁴ In this puja especially the women take part by doing simple ritual by lighting *Ahuti* and offer a prayer. The existence of *Bwirathi*'s during *Kherai* puja is also very significant and necessary as *Bwirathi* women keep ready all the necessary items required during the puja and keeping themselves closed to *Douri* and helping him throughout the puja performances.⁵⁵ The *Kherai* performing during *Magh* month offered chicken and at the *Aigunaka kherai* sacrifice of goat and pig is significant and it is also considered as the biggest *Kherai* amongst other *Kherai*.⁵⁶

4.4 WOMEN AS DOUDINI IN KHERAI PUJA

Douri is a male priest, while *Doudini* is a female who acts like mad women during *Kherai* who performs the *Kherai* puja with the support of *Ojha* (the Medicine Man).⁵⁷ In ancient period *Kherai* puja continued upto seven days and nights later came down to three or four.⁵⁸ The *Kherai* dance has been performed to please *Bwrai Bathou* and other gods. The male musician played the *Kham*, *Siphung*, *Jota*, *Serja* to help *Doudini* during Puja. The first activity of *Doudini* begins with *Anshransi* or *Alongikhangnai* (exorcist of the Body by the *Doudini*).⁵⁹

The main centre of attraction during the *Kherai Puja* is of course *Doudini* and this puja does not complete without the spectacular performance of dance by her. *Doudini* is basically designated only from the womenfolk while male counterpart becomes a part by playing musical instrument during the course of performing puja.

During puja, *Doudini* acted with looks of vermilion –strained forehead and untidy hair.⁶⁰ The *Doudini* sits on the ground motionless in front of the *Bathou bwrai*.⁶¹ The rhythm of moves, up and down, to and fro holding sword and shield along with the tune of playing music are seen during the puja. The recital mantras of dance are uttered by *Ojha*. The moment, *Doudini* becomes the forewarning between the spirit and the worshippers. She performed three different dancing steps, firstly - *Alongkhangnai* where *Doudini* becomes charmed by the chants of *Ojha*,⁶² secondly becoming unconscious and acted like mad woman and in the third stage returning from unconsciousness and then started jumping, jerking, trembling and shaking the body. The *Doudini* then goes round the *Bathou Altar* seeking blessings and sprinkling the holy water from a pot. Later, it is followed by other dances by playing musical instrument in the different cycle of dances by *Doudini*. Sometimes *Doudini* holds a long sword and a shield as a symbolic of demonstrating that was used during the battle in the ancient time. In the beliefs of the Bodo people, when the gods enter to the body of *Doudini*, she foretells that the fortune and misfortune of the family or the community and whatever the *Doudini* foretold, it is believed that it is the word of the god. There are twelve different forms of dances performed by *Doudini* in *Kherai puja*. They are- *Bathou gidignai*, *Chotrali*, *Khopri sibnai*, *Khoijama Phobnai*, *Gandeola bannai*, *Chanalaw bannai*, *Muphur Gelenai*, *Nao bonai*, *Laokhar gosai*, *Khamao barkhonai*, *Dao thwi lwngnai*, *Mashakaori mwshanai* and *Maoji mengbrang gelenai*.⁶³

In all of these dances, the *Doudini* is the central performer demonstrating different characters of animals, war fighting and technique, protection of land against enemy, characters of gods and goddesses, messenger, epidemic in the society etc.⁶⁴ The *Ojha* along with the Bodo worshippers dispel the unwanted gods and goddesses in the *Kherai puja* by chanting mantras but among these, the worshippers rescue the ‘*Mainao*’ the goddess of wealth from the earth through *Doudini*. At that moment the

worshippers along with the help of *Ojha* ascertain the reason of sitting of ‘*Doudini*’ and later when *Ojha* declared that *Doudini* has possessed the ‘*Mainao*’ then *Douri* sacrificed the animals like goat and pig and also offered *Zou* to the gods and goddesses.⁶⁵ In the final stage there lies a conversation between *Doudini* and *Ojha* and this conversation has been clearly depicted by Kameswar Brahma:

“*He Boro-phi sapor, nangsor angkhon mabeo langno?*

Nwngsor angkhon dano langgon gabanna daiao phanse,

Arao phanse khalamnanoi jagon;

*Ang thangnai nonga nangsor je lamajang phoidang be lamajang tangphin”.*⁶⁶

Translation: “O Boro children, where you will take me?

If you take me today, you will spread me some quantity of water.

Some at fire, you will neglect me

You will go back with the same way, from where you have come here”.⁶⁷

These dances are very significant having deep religious and philosophical values where the *Doudini* women are the main figures who take leading roles in the different dancing of *Kherai* puja. So, after performing all the dances the *Doudini* finally performed *Sarai nisla mwsanai*.⁶⁸ It is also cleared that without women this puja cannot be performed. In the present time the worship of *Kherai* puja is continuing in the Bodo society and almost all the *Kherai* dances are popularly performed by the current ‘*Doudini*’ and also followed by other worshippers as per the source is concerned.⁶⁹ Besides, that some of the *kherai* dances like *Chatrali* dance, *Kopri sibnai* dance, *Bathou gidingnai* dance are also displayed outside the *Kherai* Puja nowadays at cultural procession and demonstration programme or at cultural shows.⁷⁰ Surprisingly, the section of the Bodos like *Brahma Dharma* and other Hinduism sect followers and the converted Bodo Christians are no longer giving importance to the *Kherai* puja nor performed.

4.5 BODO WOMEN IN GARJA PUJA

The *Garja* is also another type of socio-religious puja performed by the Bodos. The correct meaning of the word *Garja* is still not exactly concluded even by the different writers. But many of the scholars have tried to give meaning of the term *Garja* as god. However, literally Bodo people called god as '*Modai*'.⁷¹ While some considered *Garja* as meaning 'to be free from danger'. Bhoben Narzi concluded that *Garja* is a '*niskriti*' in Assamese, which means to dispel anti social evils.⁷² The simple logic of the *Garja puja* is to expel or driving away evils from the villages known as *Bashainai*⁷³ in Bodo which means float away in the river according to Dr. Kameswar Brahma.⁷⁴ Thus, *Garja puja* is performed by the Bodos to purify themselves and the villages and it is celebrated after any seasonal festivals like *Bwisagu* etc.⁷⁵ Among the types of *Garjas*, the commonly practiced are *Lakhi Garja*, *Asu Garja*, *Kwber Garja* and *Bwrai Raja Garja*. Along with different gods and goddesses where women are found basically offering prayers and worship. In these pujas articles like *Zou* (rice beer) form an important item for offering during *Garja*. The puja is performed with the help of *Ojha* (male priest).

In *Garja puja* the women assembled at *Garjashali* the arena where *Garja* is being held. The women held some duties like in the arrangement of puja and keeping ready such items that are required for pujas before setting the pujas. They are also responsible for bringing '*Mainao*' which is known as *Mainao/ Loki lainai* from paddy field by holding *don* (basket) upon head filled with rice and betel nut and paan leaves by lighting *ahuti* to till *Garjashali* arena at the end of the *Garja* ritual performance got over and such activities are performed by women only. The preparation of *Zou*, weaving of *Dhokonas* which are needed in the pre *Garja* ceremony called *Salami*.⁷⁶ Besides these there are various off scene work done by the women during the *Garja puja*. The Bodo people still perform this puja at the recent time also. In the early period the *Garja puja* was performed outside the village boundary but at the recent time it is performed within the village area where readymade *Garjashali* are constructed fixed by the concrete design are also found available.

4.6 BODO WOMEN IN *BWISAGU* (BIHU)

Among all the festival of Bodos, *Bwisagu* is one of the most popularly festivals celebrated till at recent time. It is also joyfully celebrated by the other societies in Assam with sounds of playing folk music and dancing as a sign of enjoying the nature's glory. This celebration is in the spring season where full of nature's glory and merry making are found. *Bwisagu* is celebrated to welcome the New Year. In Assamese it is known as *Bihu*. The conjunction meaning of the *Bwisagu* is *Bwswrni Agu*- which means beginning of the year. This celebration lasts for seven days where all the Bodo people leave their works and set for celebration.⁷⁷

Bwisagu is basically the festival of merry making for all the sections of the people young, adult or old. The *Bwisagu* has more religious essence for which it is rightly called religious festivals. This celebration started with the cattle bath and the young boys and girls used to go house to house in dancing, singing, sharing joy in which *Kam*, *Sifung*, *Serja Jota* are played. The young girls visit their maternal uncle's family and barren wife would consider this particular visit to be a blessing for them.⁷⁸The Bodo women during *Bwisagu* cleaned houses and plastered with mud-mix cow dung and as well as other essential things at home. The old utensils for the preparation of *Zou* are replaced by the new one. The preparation of *Zou* before *Bwisagu* is the part of women's active requirement. As, such duty of preparation of *zou* is vested in the womenfolk as they are very skillful in that particular job. On the starting day of the celebration, women offered prayer to *Bathou Bwrai*. They also offered *Zou* and cock to *Ojha* (medicine man) and in return of that gave *Tabij* or *Kobos* (amulet) for the New Year. The delicious items which are cooked during *Bwisagu* are *Oma khaji* the curry of mix organs like ear, legs, Intestine, head, blood and *Gwka Gwkwi wngkri* (herbal jungle plants- mixture curry with pork meat). It is mentioned that the Bodo women in early period used to collect total number of more than hundred herbal plants and cooked together with pork meat.⁷⁹ The Bodo girls carried newly woven *gamcha* and *Dhokona* and presented to their elders and received blessings from them. During the time of *Bwisagu* the married girls also visit their parent's house. The young girls wearing new *dhokona* performed the delightful 'Bagurumba' dance or the butterfly dance and along with them the young boys are

also joined by playing *kham*, *siphung*, *jota*, *serja* and *gongina*. The Bodo women prepared various food items like *pitha* (rice *idli*), *laroo*, *ladoo*, *onnasi*, *entab* etc. In the *Bwisagu* religious festival, women have an active role. However, the celebration of *Bwisagu* in recent time has slightly changed. It is distorted by playing non *Bwisagu* songs, followed by different functions at night with slight changes, compared to the early time. The essence of traditional raga is started losing by the present scientific development and multiculturalism factors within the society.⁸⁰ These traditions and the practices are still in current in the Bodo society

4.7 BODO WOMEN IN DOMASHI

Another popular religious festival of Bodo is *Domashi* or *Domahi*, the harvest festival of the Bodos. In Assamese it is known as *Bogali Bihu*. This festival is all about having different food items enjoying with relatives, friends and sharing of harvest new food with joy and sharing love with each other. The elders of the family offered sacrifices to god *Bwrai Bathou* and this celebration lasted for around seven days. The most common activities of this festival are preparation of different food items, eating and drinking. Food items like *Zou*, *Pitha* or rice steam cake (rice *idli*), *sithao*, *Laro*, *entab*, etc are available. During this time the Bodos believe that if the trees are tied with cords or straw, the trees will bear more fruits.⁸¹

In this festival, the Bodo women took all the responsibility and role for preparing different food items which is the special character of this celebration.⁸² The different food items like the *Zou* is kept beforehand ready to serve and food items like *Pitha* (rice steam cake), *onnasi*, *sithao*, *laro*, with black sesame (*sibing*), *oma khaji* (pork curry), *entab* (rice powder dry cake) are also prepared. The women took part in singing, dancing, welcoming and serving guest. During this *Domashi* the Bodo women worshipped gods and goddesses by offering food items.

4.8 BODO WOMEN IN KATHI GASA

Khathi gasa saonai is one of the festivals of Bodos having essences with the religious activities. In this festival, the Bodo women offered prayer to gods and goddesses for the good harvest of crops and it is observed just before the harvest of

the paddy. It is observed in the month of *Kathik* of *Bangla* calendar and *Ahin* in Assamese month. During the festival, women lighted *Alari Bathi* (earthen lamp) in the paddy field, *Bakhri* (granary, *Mwswo Goli* (cow shed), *Bathou* (on altar of *Bathou*) and as well as surrounding the house. *Kati gasa* is performed for the protection of insects from any harm to crops and evil elements with the aim to good harvest.⁸³ It is mentionable that such practices are carried out in the Bodo society by women since the early period and still at present.

In this festival the women play an important role by performing the *Kathi Gasa Saonai*. This ceremony or rituals are only performed by women folk. All the female members especially the women of the family round-up to the paddy field with *sewari* at their hand (a long bamboo stick use in weaving) and light the *Kathi* (lighting the lamp). The *Kathi Saonai* lighted at the paddy field, cow shed, granary, *Bathou*, courtyard of the house etc. It was also believed in such a way that when women's hair touches the paddy rice while returning after lighting the *Kathi*, then the beliefs goes - paddy would grow longer, healthier and bear much fruits.⁸⁴ *Kati Gasa saonai* festival is still prevalent in the Bodo society with dignity and honour.

4.9 BODO WOMEN IN AMTHISUA

Amthisua is not merry making festival. During this time it is believed that the mother Earth gets menstruation.⁸⁵ Therefore, ploughing in the field, cutting the tree, digging the soil or entering *Bakhri* (granary) are not allowable.⁸⁶ In this festival, the young boys and girls enjoyed eating different fruits available during the season. On the seventh day of the festival, the women replaced the old brooms with new ones. They also plastered the house with mud and installed new equipments of household articles in the kitchen.⁸⁷ In this regard, women looked after the welfare of the family and worked on the preservation of different food items for use in the monsoons seasons. This tradition is found in the Bodo society since the early period.

4.10 BODO WOMEN AS AN INCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS *DAINI* (WITCHCRAFT)

The Bodo society is full of beliefs and spelled magic since the ancient days. So, among the Bodos too, witches are an accepted reality and so are the practice of witchcrafts are found in the Bodo society. In Bodo the witchcrafts are called '*Dainas*' and the term '*Daini*' is a female term, one who practiced witchcraft. The *Dainas* are mostly women yet there are some instances of males as well. *Dainas* are believed to possess special spirit of animals that perform services for them. The typical examples of witch-hunting including black cats, newts and snakes using plants, herbs, hairs, pieces of cloth, nails, spittle, etc to cast their spelled and indulged in destructive activities.⁸⁸ They are also believed to possess powers that can cure the diseases and illness by their power and even caused to dead if someone speaks anything against *Daini*. The misfortunes are greatly ascribed by the witchcraft characters which are found in the Bodo society since the early period. One of the popular witchcrafts prevalent among the Bodos was *Than-thin Daini*. It is believed that she could cast out evil from the affected person. Therefore, in order to please, people offered her food, cooked rice, chicken and vegetable.⁸⁹

From the various incidents and reliable sources it is known that the practice of witchcraft sometimes goes wrong. When there arises any misfortunes or dead person in the villages and in this connection when the *Daini* got detected then they are declared responsible for the diseases or misfortune broken out in the villages. In such case the *Daini* would be declared as the culprit. So, in this they are held responsible for the dead person and the village's court announced capital punishment such as prosecution, beaten, execution, boycotted from the society and even beaten to dead.⁹⁰ It is sometimes assumed that such person who constantly performed puja and chant mantras in the name of different gods and goddesses, their spirit continued to live with that person and slowly controlling her/him. In the Bodo society, the practice of witchcraft has been prevailing since the early period. *Daini* practices are still witnessed amongst the rural Bodo villages. But at present such practices are on the way to vanish from the society due to the rapid modern civilization, in terms of scientific education and technological development, economic development,

commercial development and multicultural influences of different customs and traditions and beliefs in the Bodo society.

4.11 BODO WOMEN IN *NEOSA GARNAI*

Neosa garnai is the religious rituals practiced in the Bodo society which means floating away or chasing away the evil curse into the river. *Gajra* is a flower garland wore by the women and this ceremony was called *aijwfwrni mala gannai fwrbw*, garland wearing festival by women.⁹¹

After *Bwisagu*, the Bodo people enjoy the festive New Year by eating, dancing, singing, along with friends and relatives. This celebration concluded as soon as the new *Jeth* (month in Assamese) arrived. The Bodos, especially in North Kamrup and Goalpara observed religious festival ceremony known as *Langamara* (worshiping *Mahadev* god).⁹² It differs, according to the area and location. In *Digli*, under *Dupdura* sub-division in the district of Goalpara, the Bodos people have been practicing *Langamara* since the ancient time. According to their convenience they observed this festival in two cycles in a year. One in the month of *fagun* (mid March-April) called as *fagunna Langa* and other in *jeth* (mid May-June) as *Jethua Langa*.⁹³ It is believed to the symbolic worship of *Bathou bwrai* and *Mahadev*.⁹⁴ The best months of the marriage is either in *fagun* or *Sethro* or *bwisag* or *jeth* (Assamese months) any of these four months is considered as the best months for marriage according to the beliefs of the Bodo. They performed the *jethua langnaiyao Neosa Garnai* festival to please Mahadev god.⁹⁵ It is celebrated either Tuesday or Saturday of the first week of the month *Jeth*. On that day early morning all the family members brought different items like *Kanthal* (jackfruit), *Nareng* (lemon), *Dao* (chicken), *Daodwi* (egg), *Farou* (pigeon) and everyone gather on the courtyard of the house, kneeling down and prayed together. The head of the family sprinkled the holy water upon the items that they've brought and recited chorus.⁹⁶ After doing ritual by *Douri*, the unholy spirits are chased.⁹⁷ So, after the ritual is complete they offered prayer to 'god' *Jethua langa* (the god of *Jeth* month). With the completion of the rituals all the people present have eaten together *oma bedor* with *ondla* (rice powder curry) which are cooked by the women. So, when all the ritual performances at the home got over

then the women in the village form a group under the guidance of one head women leader called *Hadangirini* and go house to house by holding sword or knife and collected all the necessary items required for the puja or *Neosa garnai* which later the whole puja ritual is performed by the male folk in the riverside of the village then *Neosa garnai fwr bw* or puja is performed.⁹⁸

So, *Gajra* festival (women wearing garland occasion) is linked with *Neosa* festival. Right after the *Jethua langa* feast, the wife of *Hadungwra* (village headman) invited all the women of the village to come to her house in the next day to celebrate *Gajra* festival or *bibar mala gannai fwr bw* (garland festival). On that day all the women come with the different collections of flowers and brought to headman's house. Before coming of the women group, headman's family cleaned up and plastered the whole courtyard of the house. As soon as the women group arrived, the family offered them a cup of rice beer. Out of excitement and joy the women sew garland from the collection of different varieties of flowers and in each piece of garland they also add *thilir mwikun* (banana flower) and bring all the traditional used customs ornaments. Finally, when everything is ready then the wife of headman placed the basket full of garland and jewellers then she sprinkled holy water on it and placed it open courtyard.⁹⁹ All the young, married and old women would be sitting in row and put oil in their body. *Abhir* (herbal oil) oil for widow and vermilion for the married women then they first put garland to the wife of *hadungwra* and bow to her as an honour. The women then put garland and the ornaments to each other. So after putting garland and ornaments women carry their *dwi hu* (water pot) and set for fetching of water from the streams.¹⁰⁰

This ritual festival is called *Jethuni mala gannai fwr bw* (month of jeth wearing garland occasion). One of the significant of this religious festival is that all the activities are performed by the women folk. Sometimes this puja is meant to discard the different skin disease by using different herbal flowers and plants.¹⁰¹ This practice is found slightly declining in the post colonial period. Therefore, it is cleared from the studies that the Bodo women turned religious system practices to dispel the nature's curse and get ready for their survival against the harmful evils in the society.

4.12 BODO WOMEN AND BRAHMA DHARMA

In the late twentieth century, the religious movement of *Brahma Dharma* became a new orientation in the socio-religious and cultural lives of the Bodos. This elevated a new position of Bodo women in the religious dimension to bridged traditional beliefs with *Brahma dharma*. The socio-religious movement was started in 1905 by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma earlier known as *Mech Gandhi* by local non Bodo people¹⁰², born in 1862 at Kajigaon in Dhubri Sub-Division in the district of undivided Goalpara.¹⁰³ It was the beginning of the cultural assimilation of the Bodos to other cast and culture. Along with that conversion to other religion like Hindu, Islam and Christians become a major threat for Bodos to lose their traditional religion. The then, Kalicharan initiated to *Brahma Dharma* and propagated his followers to write the surnames as *Brahma*. Thus, in the context of *Brahmanism*, the Bodo women initiated their status, role and activity in the new religious purview of the society. The main thrusts of *Brahma* movement were for the eradication and reformation of various traditional practices existed in the Bodo society. The practices like forced marriage, pig rearing, excessive consumption of *Zou* (rice beer), bride price, etc were found in the earlier days and the *Brahma Dharma* discarded such practices and also encouraged for hygienic living. In this connection, a new social law known as '*Boro ni Pandulupi*' was compiled in Kajigaon's *Mahasammlan* session in 1934 A.D.¹⁰⁴ There were total 126 social laws which had been drafted and finalized in the session. It was accepted as the new social laws of the *Brahma* Bodo society.¹⁰⁵ With the coming of *Brahma Dharma* in the Bodo society, various steps were taken to promote the women's status and position in the society. It encouraged more weaving activities, gender equality, girl's education etc.

On the eve of the *Brahma Dharma* movement, condition of Bodo women in the Bodo society went toward deterioration in the socio-religious aspects. Thus, holistic movement was carried out by Brahma to bring new awakening in the society. The *Brahma Dharma* ensured the position of women in the society by treating them with respect and providing them education.

The *Mahasnmilan* of the *Brahma* society did a tremendous work for the rightful status and position of women. In the first *Mahasnmilan* held at Bhouraguri in 1921 it was resolved that the action plan for the upliftment of the condition of women be done. It is also resolved to publish magazines for educating and writings about the Bodo youths by establishing primary and middle school. We can say that the beginning of the girl's enrollment to schools was started at that time. It is mentioned that the prohibition of using *Zou* (rice beer) in the marriage party, fixation of rate in the bride price and penalty for violators were penalized in the first *Mahasnmilan*.¹⁰⁶ In the 2nd *Mahasnmilon* held at Rangia in 1925 the most significant resolution made was for providing more education to the girls and formed women's organization.¹⁰⁷ The 3rd *Mahasnmilon* was finally held at Roumari in 1929 which had taken a decision to prohibit the women or girl from being going unnecessary to markets and *melas* (fairs). To considered stealing of girl for a forced marriage as unlawful in the society.¹⁰⁸ It also ensured to maintain the dignity of Bodos public area and further prohibited women from going to public places wearing unclean dress.¹⁰⁹ Kalicharan was of the viewed that, one half population of the Bodo society should ensure betterment otherwise it would remain incomplete in the mission.¹¹⁰ Therefore, *Brahma Dharma* advocated girls' education, eradication of social evil practice, encouraged weaving, taught hygienic living in the society.

Notable up-gradation was found in the hygienic living of the women in the *Brahma Dharma* society and got more space in pursuing of education. They were asked not to prepare and consume the *zou* (rice beer) rather encouraged weaving culture. For which, many girls had joined in the Vocational Institute in Dhubri.¹¹¹

In the early Bodo society, women were not allowed to go to the field when they got menstruation and also after giving birth to a child but under the *Brahma Dharma's* customs, it was made restriction of movement for a period of 4-6 days and 15 days respectively.¹¹² The celebration of traditional festivals went down in *Brahma* society. The role and position of women had fewer scopes in the line of religious activity in *Brahma Dharma*. Offering of rice beer was not entertained. But under the guidelines of the *Pandulupi*, women were granted performing as *Douri* or *Purohita*.¹¹³ Role of *Bwirathis* in the marriage remain as it is in the *Brahma Dharma* also. Widow

Remarriage was also encouraged and in terms of social responsibility more rights and liberty were added to the women.

In the religious practices the women in the *Brahma Dharma* offer prayer to *Brahma* god and lighted the *awati* (earthen lamp) every evening before the sunset.¹¹⁴ The women also performed all the prayers and pujas related to agricultures in the society. During the time of any sickness in the family the women performed prayer by lighting *ahuti* in order to dispel the evil sickness from the affected person. Thus, it is indeed notable attempt, by *Brahma Dharma* to introduce various reforms to uplift and respect the position and status of Bodo women in the *Brahma Dharma* society. In the recent trends of *Brahma Dharma*, many committed women have also come forward to serve the society and do ministerial works for the propagation of *Dharma* among the *Brahma Dharma* society. At present, women are given better privileges, options and equal importance in propagating the power over domestic matters along with their husbands.¹¹⁵ The *Brahma Dharma* ministerial work among the women was significant endeavour in the encouragement for education. The social code in the *Brahma dharma* does not restrict to participate in the social and political activities if they are capable of. The Bodo women are now seen their trends moving into new understanding and thought which were not there in the pre-*Brahma* period. The competent of the Bodo women in the society has been in progress and attained deserving improvement in the field like political, medical science, social work, business, research, education professional etc.¹¹⁶ Today Bodo women are having more competent within in each and every sphere of life in the society by the competent teachings and opportunities blessed by the *Brahma Dharma* religious society.

4.13 BODO WOMEN IN CHRISTIANITY

Christianity arrived in the Bodo society during colonial period. It has its birth in the society when the Bodos were in a miserable and deplorable stage at the early 20th century economically, socially and religiously. It was a time when the Bodos were being looked down by the elite Hindu Assamese society. The then, Bodo people started assimilating to other Hindu sects, changing their castes and surnames to other

elite society identified themselves as *Sarania*.¹¹⁷ The coming of new religious movement led by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma was successful in bringing thousands of followers to new religion and brought tremendous changes in the society. The *Brahma Dharma* movement however, could control sizeable Bodo people from embracing Christianity. But apparently a noble attempt made by the Christian missionaries brought huge changes among the converted Bodo Christians. The converted Christians came under the fold of the teachings of Christianity. Under the influence of socio-religious agencies of Christianity, the customs and traditions of the traditional Bodo society started losing its cultural beliefs and practices in the Bodo society. At the same time, the position of women which they had enjoyed in the traditional religious society declined among the converted Christian women. Their roles in different religious activities and festivals have been neglected and unidentified due to the frequent changing trends of social strata in the society. The Bodo women in the early post-colonial period also started losing their social domain in the family life, religious roles and societal positions. In the cultural aspects also the women lost various cultural affinities from the traditional society.

Earlier, the Bodo women in the society used to practice the making of various traditional medicines and also acted as midwife during the delivery of the child. Their roles in the society were also once recognized as the medicine women. When the section of the Bodo people accepted Christianity all such social traditional practices were neglected but among the converted Christians also the acting of midwife was continuing. At present, any sicknesses of the person go for allopathic treatment due to the scientific medicinal facilities available. Thus in some way or the other the traditional medicinal knowledge among the converted Christian women had lost the knowledge. The converted Bodo Christian women were restricted to the practice of traditional socio-religious rituals, functions, cultural festivals, dances and religious festivals such are not found among them in the post colonial period. In the field of religious activities, the Christian women have very few roles to play as compared to the traditional religion. In Christianity, the higher ranked like Priest, Pastor, Father, Bishop, Reverend, Pope etc are mostly selected from the men side.¹¹⁸ Therefore, compared to Christianity the traditional religious role of the Bodo women had enjoyed

much better position. The preparation of *Zou*, *Kherai* Dance and different traditional dances and religious practices are totally ignored by the Bodo Christians and started a new phase of life along with the new faith and customs. In fact it is to be mentioned that there are positive side of Christianity as well. The modern medical health care centres, educational institutions are established and female educations were greatly encouraged. Social evils and superstitious practices like *Daini* (witchcraft) are totally outcast. The encouragement of widow remarriage is reflected with a positive input in the society. Women in Christianity focused more awareness in the hygienic living. The most notable development in the Bodo Christian society is Bodo literatures contributed by the western missionaries. The development in the economic aspects also rooted on weaving cultures, establishment of schools, health care-centres and promoting vocational institutes for both boys and girls. These are some of the missionaries' contribution in the Bodo society that is accounted in the Bodo Christian society.

The living standards of the Bodo Christians were dependent on the missionaries to determine what was wrong and rightful in the society. From the missionaries point of view it is also cleared that they refused to admit or accept anything as they did not closely corresponded to their own concept of religion and faith.¹¹⁹ Therefore, they solely prefer missionaries' advisory to counter their socio-religious life.

In the Christian, the position and role of women have come down to a mark in all the areas as the religious activities are often performed by the male religious head in earlier time. It is often witness that the roles and activities of women in the Christian marriage are not fully changed compared to the role in traditional marriage. The system remains as the traditional role but the rituals in the marriage are changed. Among the Christian marriage steps, the process of pre-marriage and post marriage have few changes. The rituals are performed according to the western concept of marriages and the roles of *Bwirathis* have nothing to do.¹²⁰ The church rituals and religious activities are performed by the pastor, Reverend, Father, Church priest, etc. Women possessed limited role in the church.¹²¹

The reformation and development took place amongst the Christian society in term of women's role. In the spheres of women's role and function, major changes can be seen in the churches, society and family, Associations, in community centre, missionaries' activities and educational centre. In all these aspects the women's role is somehow presently improved and pertains to make a big contribution to the development and building of the Christian society as equal with the male counterpart. At the recent trends, constant changing of Christian society also witness that women's role continued to grow higher and involved at entire decision making in the family, society and organizations.

Furthermore, status and role of women in the Christian society gradually improved in achieving the position and designation like Pastress, role of sisters, women missionaries, evangelist, Deaconess, Reverend, secretaries, president, women committee, women organization, women conference, women Friday worship, women prayer group, women choir, women leaders in the main administrative, etc are being developed within the Christian society for the women.¹²² Along with that the Bodo Christian women started looking after the local church administration, leading services, leading praising and worshipping God, organizing different religious functions, chanting chorus, leading devotional ethics, holding portfolios in different Christian organization at different level of offices and organizations.¹²³ Such positions, status, rights and roles can be found now right from the local church society to the top level administration and organization in the Christian society. The women are highly labelled as equal to men in the ministerial development and building of the greater Christian society.¹²⁴ In the spheres of the family, the women's role remains the same, as they had in earlier traditions. But in the context of Christian social norms, perhaps the efforts and influence of the socio-religious agencies and the status of women in early post-colonial period to some extent remained vulnerable in position. At the recent context of new trends of Christianity, the Bodo Christian society turned more impressive development with more equality and fraternity towards status, role and position of the Bodo Christian women.

4.14 BODO WOMEN AND HINDU FAITH

In the post colonial period, besides *Bathouism*, *Brahmanism* and Christianity major flowed to other Hindu faiths are also noticed among the Bodos. The factors might be either due to the huge influx of the major religions from outside or multi-religious and cultural diversified surroundings. Alongside, the existence of different castes, creeds and faiths also brought major influences and engulfed to other faiths from their way of traditional beliefs. Since, sizeable numbers of Bodos are being assimilated to Hindu faith thus handful of Bodo women are also being found worshipping and attending like Shiv Puja, Shivratri puja, Durga puja, Saraswati puja, Dusherra puja, Diwali puja, Kali puja which of these religious pujas are actually of Hindu faith.¹²⁵ Nowadays in all of these, Bodo women are fully involved and participated in performing the pujas and offered prayers. It is cleared that the Bodo women are fully associated with pujas and functions of the other Hindu faiths besides following their own traditional religion as well.

No doubt, the *Bathou* is the main traditional religion of the Bodos through which many agricultural, seasonal festivals and cultural practices are having linked. There is no denying the fact that the Bodo women played a significant role in the religious activities since the ancient days. The Bodo women are also found associated with the performance of different religious pujas, prayers, worshipping and attending various religious gathering even in other Hindu faiths. However, in the different religious practices slight changes have been noticed in respect to the change of religious rituals due to the changing trends but women activities towards religious performances to some extent remain constant. In the *Brahma Dharma* the women are given free hand to perform in the exercising of the religious practices but much part for the women to play is not relevant in the *Brahma Dharma* practices.¹²⁶ They performed basic role in the religious practices amongst *Brahma* society. In the earlier period even in Christianity, women were having less opportunity and role to play. Later, it is come out with having important figure in the entire religious activities. The recent understanding has been offered wider scopes with having more opportunities that are drifted to the women to serve the society by religious participation. Therefore, it is felt that in order to bring equal development in the society equal participation of

women is utmost necessary. In such an instance, even gender barrier has no space to play. Thus, the Bodo women in the society have now more freedom of holding their own way of responsibility by playing a significant role, particularly in the religious activities. And therefore, their participation counts better society. At last, one may understand that the Bodo women attain deserving positions in the religious society, irrespective of the religion that they followed and cultures within the Bodo society.

Endnotes

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⁸¹ Dr. Kameswar Brahma, *op.cit.*,pp.110-112.

⁸² *Ibid.*

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⁸⁴ Dr. Kameswar Brahma, *op.cit.*, p. 112, and Interview with Mr. Dilip Basumatary, Occupation-Douri, Vill- Besorgaon , Kokrajhar, Assam- 4/05/2021

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*,p.143.

⁸⁶ Binoy Kumar Brahma, *op.cit.*,p.10.

⁸⁷ Dr. Kameswar Brahma, *op.cit.*, p.113.

⁸⁸ *Bibungthi the Opinion*, Quarterly English Magazine, Burlungbuthur publication, Kokrajhar, Assam, issue, Vol.01No.02 Nov, 2011,p.29.

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Dr. Arjun Basumatary worked as General Secretary for long time in the BBCA- one of the Baptist Church Association in Tukrajhar, Chirang, Assam and currently working as the Dean Academic, Shalom Bible College, Kokrajhar Town, Assam. India
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