

## CHAPTER: III

### DETERMINANTS OF CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AMONGST THE BODOS

#### 3.1 Introduction

The Bodos are one of the most notable and earliest tribal groups in North-East India, who are thought to have been among the first people to live in Assam and had strong kingdoms at Dimapur, Maibong, and Khashpur.<sup>1</sup> According to S.K. Chatterji, the Bodos belonged to an Indo-Mongoloid people who lived in the Brahmaputra Valley, North Bengal, and East Bengal.<sup>2</sup> They interacted with people of different races at different historical points, resulting in racial fusion and cultural assimilation.<sup>3</sup> The Bodos, known for their distinctive linguistic and cultural characteristics, are native to Assam and other regions of North-East India. Additionally, B.K. Baruah argued that the Bodos were the most significant tribe of the Tibeto-Burman race and that they had formed a significant portion of the non-Aryan population in the Brahmaputra Valley.

In contrast to Hindu society, class division has never been practised in the society of the Mongoloid races. The Indo-Mongoloid Bodos go by many different names depending on where they live. For example, Meches, Kacharis in the Kachari Hills, Dimasa in Dimapur, Tripuri or Kok-Borok in Tripura, and other names refer to the Bodos. The latter live between the Sankosh River and the Brahmaputra River.<sup>4</sup>

The Bodos of the Northeastern part of Assam mingled with the Moria sect of Austric, who later identified themselves as the Moran tribe.<sup>5</sup> The smaller tribes intermingled with the Aryan culture, but the Bodos maintained strict aloofness. Bodos, therefore, gradually shifted towards the bordering belt in the eastern hills and called themselves Kachari in general.

The ideology of the caste system appears in the Hindu law books *Dharmashastras* and *Bhagavadgita*. The book argues on Sanskritization, where the Brahmins and the

Kshatriyas were considered the Hindu faith's patron and protector and custodian of Hinduism. This belief affects the category of people who belongs to the lower strata of the caste system and also the people who do not belong to the caste system. Srinivas defined Sanskritization as the process where the people belonging to the lower caste or tribe take over the higher caste's customs, beliefs and ideology, particularly a 'twice-born' (dwija) caste. The higher and more advanced castes influenced them to improve their economic, political position, and social respect.<sup>6</sup> The political wave among the Bodos was responsible for the transition in the society, which led to change according to constitutional privileges. The new ideas of thought guided toward better socio-economic status and transformation of society. The modern concept replaced the conservative thoughts and primitive beliefs of the Bodo society. The conscious state impacted the cultural beliefs and traditions under external factors like religious changes.<sup>7</sup> The advent of Christian missionaries advocated their religious virtue, which led to translating the Bible into the Boro language, eventually developing Bodo Grammar. It helped in the spread of the Christian religion among the Bodos. The twentieth century brought many changes in the Bodo society and awakened the ignorant Bodos. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma tried to reform the society's socio-cultural and economic condition, which was the most novel move by educating the Bodo society. The Bodos also converted into Brahma Dharma, Satsang, Saivism and Vaisnavism.

The disintegration of the traditional religion made the traditional Bathou religion resolute. The process of Sanskritization in the early phase of the twentieth century evolved and brought political consciousness to the Bodo society, which ultimately led to its zenith of the cultural identity among the Bodos around the world<sup>8</sup>. In early times, major Mongoloid groups converted themselves to Hinduism. The Kacharis were influenced into conversion to Hinduism<sup>9</sup>, and a considerable population of Sonowal Kachari accepted *Vaishnavism* preached by Srimanta Sankardeva. There were several Satras established at Auniati, Kamalabari, Dakhinpat, etc., headed by the Chief Gohain or Gosai, who often collected vast quantities of foodstuff and money from the Kachari Saran. This weakened the Bodo population on the grounds of culture, politics and economy. They were also subjected to political domination, which led to the urge for consciousness. Of the Kacharis into Hinduised and besides Rajbonshis, Saranias of lower Assam, the Sonowal and Thengal Kacharis from upper Assam, the Barman Kacharis and Karbi-Anglong district measured them as Hinduised Bodos.<sup>10</sup>

Several reasons led to cultural assimilation in the Brahmaputra Valley in the twentieth century. The Bodos of the Northeastern part of Assam mingled with the Moria sect of Austric, who later identified themselves as the Moran tribe.<sup>11</sup> The smaller tribes intermingled with the Aryan culture, but the Bodos maintained a strict aloofness. The Bodos gradually shifted towards the bordering belt in the eastern hills and called themselves Kachari in general. Over time, different tribes migrated to Assam, leading to a racial admixture of the population of Assam. Rather than living near the tribals within Assam, the Bodo-Kacharis maintained their customary laws and practices, i.e. observance, religious notions, etc., beliefs in certain myths and worshipping Gods and Goddesses in their self manner.<sup>12</sup> The ideology of the caste system appeared in the Hindu law books *Dharmashastras* and *Bhagavadgita*. These books point toward Sanskritization, where the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas were considered the patron, protectors of the Hindu faith, and custodians of Hinduism. This belief affects the category of people who belongs to the lower strata of the caste system, including the people who do not belong to the caste system. The conscious state impacted the cultural beliefs and traditions by external factors like religious changes.<sup>13</sup> The advent of Christian missionaries advocated their religious virtue. It helped in the spread of the Christian religion among the Bodos. The twentieth century brought many changes in the Bodo society and awakened the ignorant Bodos. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma tried to reform the society's socio-cultural and economic condition, which was the most novel move by educating the Bodo society.

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The main occupation of the Kacharis was farming. They mainly depended on agriculture and cultivated a variety of crops. Their agricultural practice was advanced, unlike

the Mikirs, who practised shifting cultivation and used hoe sticks to till the ground. However, tea production in Assam led to a change in the demography of the state. Many labourers migrated from other parts of the state, especially from Bengal. The Kacharis from Kamrup worked as paid labours in the Upper Assam tea garden only for a contract period and returned to their respective places. The Census Report of 1872 states that the immigrant labours rendered their service for free and settled permanently in the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>16</sup> However, due to the scarcity of settled labours in 1901, the tea planters came up with a rigid policy to extract revenues from the temporary tribal labourers in the tea plantations. This resulted in a revolt by the labourers against the authority in Kamrup and Darrang, which was later suppressed.

Consequently, it became effective for the tea producers as there were 307,000 workers in 1901, of which 20,000 were local, and 14,000 were Kachari labourers.<sup>17</sup> The discovery of tea by Robert Bruce in 1823 in upper Assam played a substantial role for the British tea planter in employment generation. Initially, the tea producers brought labours from China which became challenging to manage subsequently. Therefore, they decided to employ Kacharis, a diplomatic negotiation between them. The Kachari labours mostly went on the lean season to meet their due payment for revenue.<sup>18</sup> These caused a problem for the tea planters, ultimately leading to demographic change in the state as labourers were hired from other places. The policy alteration led to the hiring of labours like Santhals, Oraons, Kols, Bhils, Mundas, etc., from other states. The Bodo-Kacharis were least interested in working at the tea company, which eventually led the manager of the tea company to compel to study the psychological stance of the Bodo-Kachari. PrabanBargayary mentions Sidney Endle's contribution to simplifying the problem between the company and the Bodo-Kacharis due to communication. Thus, Endle prepared Bodo Grammar to simplify their communication skill. This language development also later facilitated the Bodo-Kacharis towards identity building among the Bodo society.<sup>19</sup>

The irrigational site in the Paimali valley gives evidence of Bodo-Kacharis, where they practised shifting cultivation and used hoe for tillage.<sup>20</sup> Later, the conflict with the Ahoms led to migration toward the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>21</sup> According to Hodgson, the Kacharies used a hoe and practised shifting cultivation until the influence of Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh and Khasis of Meghalaya in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> The Koch, who converted to Hinduism and called themselves Rajbansis, also used the plough for cultivation. The Bodo

Kacharis, in contact with this advanced neighbour, started to use plough for cultivation.<sup>23</sup> Butler also mentioned that the Bodo Kacharis started settled cultivation and grew crops like *Ahu*.<sup>24</sup> These indicate the transition of the Bodo-Kacharis, which was reflected in their agricultural activities. The advanced Hindu neighbour in Lower Assam influenced their socio-economic activities, which contributed to the economic transformation of the community. It was evident from the cultivated variety of crops like *Ahu* and *Sali* in dry and wetland which was only possible with the advanced plough method.<sup>25</sup>

The twentieth century saw rapid assimilation and fusion regarding language, caste, religion, etc. The political hegemony flourished within the landowner framework, leading to a social division among the tribals and Assamese-speaking people. The Bhuyans took advantage of their hegemony under the overlord (bar-rajā).<sup>26</sup> In the later phase of outright integration of the Assamese society, they tried to safeguard their position based on the neo-Vaishnavite movement and feudal political stance. The religious conversion was a quest to attain a higher societal status. Neo-Vaishnavism and feudalism brought forward the anti-tribal attitude in society. Thus, the Darrang and Kachari kings fell prey to stabilized them as vassalage kings (*thapita-sanchita*) vis-a-vis the Ahom regime as their patron.<sup>27</sup> It is evident from the Bhakatpara area where the entire villages were swept away by the wave of neo-Vaishnavite till 1970 as the last generation affected the Bodo language as Assamese was used for communication. The Bodo Kacharis adopted Sanskrit, the neighbour's language, in the guise of skipping their tribal language. According to E. P. Stack, the Bodo Kacharis first became Sarania, Madahi, or Totila and gradually developed into Koch as proper Hindu in Lower Assam.<sup>28</sup> The (ABSU) All Bodo Student Union often visited the areas around Mongaldoi under the guise of reformatory measures, whereas Bodos often converted to Koch. There was ample evidence of people using surnames such as Boro or Kachari, but they communicated in the Assamese language instead of Bodo.

On the other hand, the emergence of Bodo Sahitya Sabha germinated a new ray of hope in socio-cultural consciousness among the Bodos. However, the political force was reckoned with consciousness moves by the elites like Sobharam Brahma Choudhary, Satish Brahma Choudhary and Sitanath Brahma Choudhary. However, the language hassle between the Assamese and Bengali aggravated in the latter period. It created hue and cry resentment among both the linguistic people in Assam.<sup>29</sup> It led to a declaration of Assamese as the

official language and the medium of instruction in schools and colleges and challenged the Bengali-dominated areas.

Intercaste marriage was another reason for assimilation. The advent of *Bengali Gosain*, who guided religious institutions at Kamrup in the middle of the seventeenth century who immigrated to Assam, married the natives and affected most of their distinctive religious customs. However, the principles of social laws and customs were maintained.<sup>30</sup> The Brahmins came single-headedly; thus, presumably, intermarriage took place with the local womenfolk. The inter-caste has also been reported on *srimiti*, where a Brahmin could marry a woman from a Sudra caste. It could also be seen among the *Jaisia* caste of Nepal and Nairs of Malabar, where a man married a Sudra woman. V. D. Mahajan also expressed the same concern among the Bodos to attain higher status; there was inter-caste marriage with the higher status. These adversely affected the identity of the community and its population in general.<sup>31</sup>

### **3.2 Cultivation/Tea Industries**

The Kacharis cultivate with varieties of crops in their settled agricultural ploughland, but on the other hand the Mikirs they simply followed a nomadic form of tillage with the hoe. In earlier period, though immigration of labourers in Kamrup district was quite limited, but gradually immigrants mainly from the different background of agriculturalist and manufacture of tea from Chutia community and from Bengal province entered in to Kamrup district. However, there was no any permanent labours in the tea industry in Upper Assam except those Kacharis from Kamrup who work as paid labour for certain contract period and then returned to their respective Kamrup district which is mentioned in the census report of 1872.<sup>32</sup> The policy became a burden on peasants for plantation tea with the scarcity of settled labours in 1901, with a stiff policy of extracting taxes from the common dwellers among the tribals in Assam on land revenue. Even the peasants revolted in Kamrup and Darrang, suppressed by the authority. Thus the current policy made it effortless for the tea planters in Assam, of which 307 thousand workers in 1901 and 20000 were local, of whom 14000 were Kachari tribal labourers.<sup>33</sup> However, the discovery of tea by Robert Bruce in 1823 in upper Assam played influential role for the British tea planter in the employment generation earlier, and they had to be defended against foreign labour from China which is often a tricky measure. Thus, they have to employ the local labour from the Kachari community, which is

often diplomatically negotiable most of the time where the Bodo labours went to the garden not as 'serf' or 'coolies', instead they worked only in a lean season to meet their due payment for land revenue<sup>34</sup>, which made the tea company felt shortage of labours. Further, the Kacharis as lean season labours often revolted for hike in the wages since 1848 and 1869. Thus the tea company is compelled to take alternative measures on hiring coolies from Bengal province which eventually disfigured the demography structure of Assam by tea labours like Santhals, Oraons, Kols, Bhils, Mundas, etc.

Moreover, the tea company manager are compelled to study the psychological stance of local Kacharis for less employ in the garden, for which the company manager directly or indirectly seeking help from Rev. Sidney Endle in order to communicate with the Kacharis labour, according to Praban Bargary regards Endle however managed on Tea company's request to established communication link between Kacharis, Endle could understand the psychology stance on Bodo-Kachari with regardless to drive the local labours was not accessible unless they need to simplify their communication skill. Thus, Endle prepared Bodo Grammar to understand more complexities between the British tea planters, negatively impacting language development into different outlooks of Bodo national consciousness in the twentieth century. Instead, it's a boon for the Bodo society, which made easy access to identity-building among the Bodo society.<sup>35</sup>

Though the Bodo-Kachari having migrant habit, with the slightest interruption to their livelihood that can be seen as example in Paimali Valley leaving their irrigated sites by the disturbance of Ahoms, but gradually the Kacharis have settled agricultural life where they could precisely used the technique of hoe in shifting cultivation since the thirteenth century, but in the later period of nineteenth-century where mentioned by Hodgson in 1847 that both shifting plough and hoe systems were used by the Kachari till the nineteenth century<sup>36</sup>, by the influence of Apatanis of Arunachal and Khasis of Meghalaya. In the transition period of the Bodo-Kachari from hoe culture to ploughs on the contact of their advanced neighbours, those formerly the same Bodo-Kacharis called themselves Rajbansis (Koch) and those converted to Hinduism.<sup>37</sup> However, it cannot be concluded the shifting and settled agricultural activities of the tribal populace, neither exception the Bodo-Kacharis also cultivates *ahu* crops by ploughing extensively on the shifting mode mentioned by 'Butler', which are also practised by the Bodo Hindu converts, which is thereof the transition of the plough culture in a settled manner on the influenced by more advanced Hindu neighbour in

lower Assam which involved more economic transformation within the Bodo-Kachari on the pretext of Hinduisation with more advance variety of crops system, i.e. *ahu*, *Sali* in both dry and wetland.<sup>38</sup>

The diversity of its caste, creed, religion and customary laws maintained by the aboriginal tribe in Assam mesmerized the visitors; but it was only after the Chinese war of 1962 the central Government took its interest in political and economic policies indeed towards the periphery entity of the region.<sup>39</sup> It is a land of fertile and pleasant atmosphere where one can easily attract to incursion by the more brutal tribes from its neighbour. Thus, the plain tribes are intermixed origin of Aryan, Dravidian and Mongoloid traits features.

Prior to twentieth century, the rapid assimilation and fusion in terms of language, caste, religion, technology, etc. some segments of the Assamese society evolutes with several distinctive features towards Indian society, though there are pretty limited skilled labours in the society and thus compel every women in the society took measures in weaving in their household looms, besides its political hegemony flourished within the framework of landowner which ultimately leads social division among the tribal and Assamese speaking people. Therefore, Bhuyans often took advantage of their hegemony under the overlord (bar-*raja*).<sup>40</sup> The later phase of outright integration of the Assamese society into the dual process of root-based on a religious stance of the neo-Vaishnavite movement and politically attempts to safeguard its feudalism. In such a mischievous stance as anti-tribal perspectives instead of anti-feudal with the framework of Neo-Vaishnavite reform in the society becomes heyday within border tribal politics of hereditary rajas, i.e., Where in Darrang the Kachari Kings fell prey to stabilized their kingdom rather became as vassalage king (*thapita-sanchita*) vis-a-vis to the Ahom regime, as their patron.<sup>41</sup>

### **3.3 Language: Influence on Bengali and then later to the Assamese language, which led to a consciousness of political revolution among the Bodo community**

In the context of the prefix of the name of Brahmaputra River name in the Ahom language, like '*di*', i.e. in the Bodo language means 'water' or 'river'. Many writers have opines on the language hassle among the Assamese and Bengali that aggravated in the latter period with hue and cry resentment among both the linguistic people in Assam,<sup>42</sup> which finally



oblige the situation for the declaration of Assamese as an official language and the compel the medium of instruction in School and colleges that made a challenges in some Bengali dominated areas in Assam.

Over the century, impetus of religious conversion is somewhat simply obnoxious phase of wanting higher status by adopting some Sanskrit elements from its neighbouring languages on the guise of skipping their mother tongue and the prejudice of consuming rice-beer, contrary it becomes an indirect advantage of lusting for opium in the later period by the typical converts which have mentioned in the works of E.P. Stack, further the process of conversion among the Bodo-Kachari, firstly they become Sarania, Madahi or Totila (Totla) and then they gradually developed into Koch in lower Assam and proper Assam as Hindu Caste in general.<sup>43</sup>

It is evident from the Bhakatpara area, where the entire villages were swept away by the wave of neo-Vaishnavite till 1970, as the last generation, the majority of the Boro speakers frantically forgot their mother tongue; instead, they used Assamese as their domestic language. In the meantime (ABSU) All Bodo Student Union organizational often visits at Mongaldoi area by some spirited leaders under the guise of reformative measures where often Bodos seem converted to Koch, and there is ample evidence people writing their surnames as Boro or Kachari but unfortunately difficult to find any villagers speaking pure Bodo language instead they used refined Assamese language and horrible Bodo speaking<sup>44</sup>, like

*Kaoriamathayaohagilangbai* (The crow passed excreta on the head)

*Halikayauridwing* (Salika bird is flying)

*PhithaikhouKatidw* (Cut the fruit)

*Pitaya dongfangaouthibai* (Father climbed tree)

*Mathayaotelmakhidwng* (Put oil on head)

*Dourinanwiphai* (Run and come)

But later, the emergence of Bodo Sahitya Sabha germinated a new ray of hope in socio-cultural consciousness among the Bodos along the converted Bodos. However, the political force reckoned the consciousness move by the elite section of the Bodos, like Sobharam and Satish Brahma Choudhury both the persons becomes an evidence who could have the opportunity to study at Dhubri High School, where it is to be mentioned that Sobharam was the first ever who could succeed (I.A.) Intermediate Arts Examination amongst

Bodo community, formerly educate himself in Bengali primary medium School and thus transition of the Assamese medium was introduced in the Schools of Assam gradually when Sitanath Brahma Choudhury could educate himself through Assamese medium.<sup>45</sup> Thus he made a legacy for the generations of the Bodo community to educate the children through Assamese medium Schools.

### **3.4 Inter-Caste Marriage/Custom and Traditions**

The advent of Bengali *Gosain*, who guided religious institutions at Kamrup in the middle of the seventeenth century and emigrated to Assam, had intermarriage with natives and affected most of their distinctive religious customs. Still, they maintained principles of social laws, probably elapsed their primary roots of traditions.<sup>46</sup>

Over time, the different tribes migrated into Assam, creating a racial intermixed population in Assam. However, the proximity of the tribals living within Assam lived in isolation that can be seen to the great race of Bodo-Kacharis having maintained their customary laws and practices, i.e. observance, religious beliefs, etc. in their traditional measures in practices and beliefs for certain myths and worshipping Gods and Goddesses in their self style.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, the immigrants Brahmins came single-headedly in Assam and in due course of time intermarriage took place with the local womenfolk, which have made accounts as srimiti for generations either to become Brahmins from a Sudra caste on intermarriage, like that of Jaisia caste of Nepal and Nairs of Malabar whereby intercourse illegally with Sudra women, in such process majority of Bodos are not an exception in the attainment of Hindu caste to that of Brahmins which adversely affecting the identity and its population in general, stated by V.D. Mahajan.<sup>48</sup>

The cultural assimilation among the Bodos started long back within the royal patronage of Bodo rulers.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the ages, different rulers have ruled various parts of Northeast India. Edward Gait mentioned Bodo Kacharis as Brahmaputra Valley's aboriginal and earliest inhabitant<sup>50</sup> and resembled the Mech residing in Goalpara and North Bengal. The symbolic jargon of *Kirata* or Mongoloid chief who first came under the influence of the Brahmanical fold was none other than Bhagadatta.<sup>51</sup> He accepted the composite culture and

religions of the Gangetic Indians by the non-Aryan tribe in Brahmaputra Valley. The Sanskrit language became the vehicle for further Sanskritization, which became evident from the name of Brahmaputra and Lohitya, the rivers of Assam. The conjunction of the Austric group of words for Pragjyotisa after Sanskritization like *pau* (=hill) + *ger* (=hill) + *jo* (=high) + *tic* (long) = "(Banikanta Kakati mentioned the land of) high and long mountains". Bishnu Rabha stated that the Brahmaputra was called *bhullambuthur* by the Bodos, which meant "making a gurgling noise." Thus, the current Sanskrit names of places have elements of Austric and Mongoloid origin.<sup>52</sup>

The Bodos were the believer of *Bathou Bria*, symbolically a plant sprouting from the ground called *Sijou* (*Euphorbia Necrophilia*).<sup>53</sup> The early period witnessed the Bodos of the northeastern part of Assam had an admixture of blood with that of the Moria sect of Austric. It led to the development of a new tribe called the Moran tribe.<sup>54</sup> However, some maintained isolation from other tribes living on bordering hills in the east called border-landers or the Kacharis.

The process of assimilation to the Indo-Aryan way of life during the period of Ahom in the sixteen century in Assam was the turning point with rapid assimilation in respect of language, religion, caste, technology, etc.<sup>55</sup> Thus in the early period the state formation depends upon the kingship and feudal ties, where there are various kinds of hurdles and competitors against the monarch. Therefore the authority stabilized the revolter and obliged universal religion to control and acknowledge the ordinary people to live a disciplined way of life under their supremacy like the Koch and later by Kachari kings.<sup>56</sup> Although the process of Sanskritization and detribalization for a century and a half, the ruling tribal monarch family had adopted and formed a new caste much inferior to that of the prominent fold Hindu caste, including the peasant caste Kalita.<sup>57</sup> Thus the emergent of neo-Vaishnavite movement made a plea to the peasantry community in Assam to embrace themselves in to Vaishnavism by becoming *bhakats* where they could be even exempted from manual service to the monarch; but in the later period they turned to militant move in the second half of the eighteenth century to be free from that conditions.<sup>58</sup> Cultural assimilation is, however, associated with contact with other races, which S.K. Chatterji previously observed. Cultural assimilation went hand in hand among the Bodos with a large amount of racial fusion of people with Austric, Dravidian, Aryans and with the Mongoloid or Sino-Tibetan speaking community in the Himalayan and northeastern part of India.<sup>59</sup>

### 3.5 Conversion to Religion

The Bodo society and the religion had gone through assimilation and changes over many centuries. However, the Bodo kings first converted to Hinduism, followed by his subjects.<sup>60</sup> Before the British regime, the traces of Hinduism among the Bodos can be seen, i.e. a memory stated by a British army officer during the Anglo-Burmese war in the early phase of nineteenth-century the Hinduism already prevailed in Cachar.<sup>61</sup> In 1970 the Cachar king called Krishna Chandra, and his brother Govinda Chandra formally converted to Hinduism.<sup>62</sup>

The Bodo-Kacharis, although they had their specific customary laws and practices, observance and religious systems.<sup>63</sup> The Bodos have their unique style of following myths, beliefs and practices in building their houses. They also worship various gods and goddesses in their unique ways. The Bodo people pursued a mixture of different forms of religion<sup>64</sup>, while some of them converted to Hinduism and started worshipping Hindu deities. But some of them still retain their traditional practices described by Endle; Bodo religion "*animism*" and its principles are characteristically one of the fears and the dread<sup>65</sup> to delve with the Bodo converts to different Hindu sects.

### 3.6 Neo-Vaishnavite

Some sections of the Bodo people are gradually converted to the neo-Vaisnavite cult professed in the sixteenth century by Srimanta Sankardeva, delivering *Ek Charan Nam Dharma*<sup>66</sup>, a religion based on worshipping Visnu<sup>67</sup> involved chanting hymns. But thereof, a hindrance of the Ahom regime in Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva, probably prevented the spreading of the '*Eka Saran*' faith outside Assam.<sup>68</sup> Thus he was obliged to flee to Koch Behar and propagated his neo-Vaishnavite religion to the Bodo Kacharis under the helm of Nara Narayan in the sixteenth century under the Koch Kingdom, especially in Darrang and Kamrup district.

It is estimated that the number of converts to neo-Vaisnavite religion among the Bodo-Koch origin is about seventy percent.<sup>69</sup> As there is an example of a tribe migrating to the Hindu caste through conversion like Jamindar of *Mechpara*. The living example stated by

Srijut Bolicharan Basumatary where the Jamindar and his villagers renounced their surname from 'Mech' to 'Choudhury' and have discarded their community identity as Bodo<sup>70</sup> in their desperation to acquire higher status or to be part of the mainstream Hindu fold and to avoid social disparities.<sup>71</sup>

During the neo-vaishnavite movement, most converts were Sonowal Kacharis, who built Satras in Auniati, Kamalabari, Dakhinpat, etc. *Gokhai* or *Gosai* maintains each Satra. The Kacharis took shelter or '*Saran*'<sup>72</sup> under *Gokhai*. Further, *Gokhai* usually trained each new follower to ascertain new rules and regulations of Vaishnavism; thus cultural configuration made impetus in Assam, especially in lower Assam the Rajbongshis and the Saranias and in upper Assam like the Sonowals Kacharis, Thangal Kacharis they to have also embrace into Vaishnavism. Besides, the Barmans of Kachar and the Bodos of Karbi-Anglong become Hinduised on acceptance of Vaishnavism.<sup>73</sup>

### **3.7 Brahma Dharma**

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma introduced the Brahma Dharmain the twentieth century to uphold the ageing traditional customs and beliefs of the Bodo people. It was a turning point to awaken the Bodo society to modernize, educate, and set them free from isolation. The hostile force of the upper caste condemning the traditional material life of the Bodo also made the Bodo people conscious. It, therefore, took the initiative to safeguard its culture and identity.<sup>74</sup> Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma was from a book called '*Saranityakriya*', which inspired him to spread Brahma Dharma amongst the Bodo people.<sup>75</sup> He organized a religious gathering called '*Maha Yajna*' at Banyaguri village in 1906 A.D., where thousands of Bodo people legally accepted the Brahma Dharma.<sup>76</sup> Thus Brahma Dharma has its roots in Vedic philosophy; hence Sanskritized the aboriginal rituals and cultures of the Bodos and initiated social versatility with refined culture and practices.<sup>77</sup> Despite massive conversion into *Brahma Dharma*, the converts retained their socio-cultural identity.<sup>78</sup> The mainstream Hindu society would still look down on the converts of *Brahma Dharma* followers and also consider them Hindu. They did not consider the converts of *Brahma Dharma* as part and parcel of the Hindu social hierarchy.<sup>79</sup> But in the second decade of the twentieth century, Brahma Dharma gave an impetus to a reformist

movement that ultimately created a unity of social progress and gave rise to the collective consciousness and aspirations among the Bodos.<sup>80</sup>

### **3.8 Saivism or Mani Bathou Siva Dharma**

The new sect of *Saivism*, or *Mani Bathou Siva Dharma* set foot among the Bodo society just after the massive conversion to Brahma Dharma. Mani Bathou Siva Dharma was founded by the Guru Rupamani Devi of Gossaigaon (Basugaon) of Chirang district in 1973 (Bengali 1380). The *Saivism* sect, or *Mani Bathou* came into prominence as a conflation of increasing ideals of *Bathou* and *Brahma* cults along with some elements of Hinduism. Further, this religion contributed immensely to altering the concept and practices of traditional *Bathouism*. However, the sect had substantial followers throughout Assam and was rooted primarily in Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Bongaigaon districts among the Bodos.<sup>81</sup>

### **3.9 Sat Sang**

The *Sat Sang* was introduced by Thakur Anukul, who could also venture a good hold among the Bodos of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and other parts of India. It had magnificent principles with a shrewd liberal viewpoint where people quickly admired and accepted the religion. There were many followers from different castes, creeds, faiths and communities. They set a goal to form a distinct and refined religious society. *Sat Sang* had its philosophy advocating any person living by religion; he is *Param Purus*. According to *Sat Sang* religion, the religion is one, where it cannot be many or does not have another form. *Sat Sang* is a monotheist in nature and always believes in the incarnation of *Purushottam*. Thus, the *Purusattam* who incarnates for the welfare of humankind on this earth is also the creator of this whole universe; however, Sri Anukul Thakur is the *Purusattam* who incarnates on the earth for religious inculcation.<sup>82</sup>

### **3.10 Christianity**

Some sections of the Bodos embraced Christianity under the influence of Christian Missionaries. They comprised 5% (percent) of the total Bodo in the region, although Bodo

people embraced Christianity without discarding their traditional language and culture. However, the missionaries have made a kind contribution to preserving the Bodo language.<sup>83</sup>

After the Charter Act of India in 1813 CE, Christian Missionaries were allowed to propagate their Christian religion in India, including Brahmaputra Valley. Missionaries like American Baptist Church, Presbyterian Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic Church ventured into Bodo-Kachari habituated areas of Brahmaputra Valley. It was possible that based on the request of the Magistrate of Sylhet, William Carey deputed Krishna Pal, his earliest convert to northeast India, for spreading the good news. Krishna Pal initially started his missionary work in Goalpara and Kamrup districts. Meanwhile, in 1829, James Rae, under the patronage of David Scott, agent to the Governor-General of India North-East Frontier, had set up a branch of mission at Gauhati. Later, many others like Nidhi Ram of Assamese society converted at Jaipur in 1841, followed by Bati Ram, Ram Singh and Kaliber. In 1914 Rev. G.K. Camphor was deputed to the Darrang district to work for the American Baptist mission<sup>84</sup> and felt that preaching the gospel in the foothill of Bhutan and the northern tract of Brahmaputra Valley towards Bodo-Kacharis. They accepted the gospel of Christianity among the Kacharis stated by Barker's report on an excursion. However, American Baptist Church missionaries were the first to have contact with the Bodo-Kacharis in the Brahmaputra Valley.<sup>85</sup>

### **3.11 Islam**

Hinduisation among the Bodo Kacharis, as similarly some sections of the Bodos also embraced to Islam in the nineteenth and towards the first part of the twentieth century in conducting the population Census during the British regime regards the population on caste and race dimension, whereby reflection of mass conversion of Mech or Bodos and other people of Bodo origin into Islam.<sup>86</sup> Especially in the Dhubri district, some sections of the Bodo people were converted to the Muslim religion.<sup>87</sup> It is evident from the statement by Kamrun Nahar that there were converts from Hindu, Buddhist and Animist. The lower-class Hindus were outnumbered by the higher class on coercion but primarily based on influence or willingness to convert to Islam<sup>88</sup>. Most of the conversions took place on compulsion, while some willingly converted. Bakhtiar Khilji captured the *Mech* tribe, converted them to Muslims, and named them '*Ali*'. Mostly the *Koch*, *Mech* and *Tharu*, who live

in the foothill of the Himalayas in north Bengal, were converted. Thus, the influential Ali Mech converted many animist followers to Islam.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.12 Sanskritization

Sanskritization was firstly coined by M.N. Srinivas in his doctoral thesis submitted to Oxford University in 1947 on the Coorg culture of Indian society. Later, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee also contributed to the work on Sanskritization in 1950. Thus the word Sanskritization was included in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1971. Although Sanskritization is often used in the modern context, a broader sense of Sanskritization is spreading to all regional languages, including tribal ones, except the Tamil ones. Perhaps the module for using the standard language in education, administration, print and electronic media and in another sector, which possibly happens mostly in case of migration from rural areas. The concept of Srinivas maligned the whole process used as a hybrid word Sanskritization in the regional language.<sup>90</sup>

Sanskritization was not just confined to a single part of the country. The context could be seen in different subcontinents, including the tribal regions of Brahmaputra Valley. In some corners of the country, a specific new group of god-men like *babas*, *bapus*, *gurus*, *swamis*, *acharyas*, *maharajas*, which also includes god-women like *mas*, *mais*, *matas* etc. In recent times Sanskritization had evolved to spread the legacy of some religious virtues spreading hybrid thoughts, beliefs, and cultures through different modes of segregating cults and sects with some followers and eventually building temples.<sup>91</sup> The Bodo community also witnessed an unprecedented wave of Sanskritization over the ages. The twentieth century became the turning point for the Bodo community to redress its traditional religion *Bathou*. The intermingling of the Bodo community and inter-caste marriage continued.

Nevertheless, the Bodo society embraced the hybrid religion. The royal family renounced their caste. During the British regime and post-independence tribal society modernized their communication through new education. They also occupied new occupations.<sup>92</sup> In the Bodo community, Gurudev Kalicharn Brahma replaced the primitive beliefs and customs of the Bodo society by performing '*Jagya-Ahuti*' for '*Param Brahma*' as the primary basis of his *Brahma Dharma*.<sup>93</sup>



Amalendu Guha in *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam* furnishes a list of Bodo Tribes uninfluenced by Hinduism and Bodo Tribe in the process of conversion as given under:

**Table No.3.1: Bodo-Kachari Tribe uninfluenced by Hinduism**

Tribe	Population
Kachari	2,65,418
Mech	57,885
Lalung	46,077
Hajong	3,689
Garó (plains)	23,373

Source: Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 1991, p.18

**Table No. 3.2: Bodo-Kachari Tribe in the process of conversion**

Tribe	Population
Rabha	56,285
Madahi	13,149
Mahalia	6,198
Sarania	4,718
Totila (Totla)	2,539

Source: Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 1991, p.18

On the onslaught of Sanskritization, the Bodo society got fragmented with some sections of the Bodos they tried to recognize themselves as the mainstream Hindu fold in the society, especially in the district of Darrang a section popularly known as 'Totila' or 'Totla', according to the Sydney Endle 'Totla' is a nickname for the tribe Rabhas.<sup>94</sup> Besides, 'Totlas' are also known as *Datiyalkachari*, living in the bordering areas,<sup>95</sup> while the word 'Totla' is shrouded with mystery. Further, Sydney Endle stated that the tribe descended from the Hindu father, who had lost his caste by marrying Kachari women.<sup>96</sup> *Totlas* had their traditional language. Still, when they came into contact with the Hindu neighbours' Sanskrit language, perhaps their language became inflexional.<sup>97</sup>

Again another section of the Bodo tribe called *Madahihad* converted to the onslaught of Sanskritization and maintained a separate identity called Koch.<sup>98</sup> Referring to the

population census report of 1881, Amalendu Guha highlighted that the *Modahi* population in Assam was 13,149.<sup>99</sup> However, the conversion of the *Modahi* becomes clear from the statement of E.P. Stack, where he stated that the converts were acknowledged first as *Sarania*, *Madahi*, or *Totla (Totila)* and then developed into *Koch*.<sup>100</sup> As a result of the assimilation the surnames have probably been written as *Sarania*, *Deka*, *Bora* and *Das*, etc. to signify themselves a new identity by renouncing their aboriginal customs, language, etc. to maintain the status quo to their Hindu neighbour, further they have advertently mingled with the Assamese culture and represented themselves as an independent community. However, the process of Sanskritization is concerned with the Hindu hierarchy system, the most influential position among the Bodo converts is the Koch tribe. Still, the other tribes are regarded as of lower status.<sup>101</sup>

The Saranias are scattered in different parts of the country; of course, they can be found primarily in the present districts of Darrang, Udalguri, Baska, Goreswar, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon and Barpeta.<sup>102</sup> Though the Sarania-Kachari belonged to the mongoloid Bodo group, they represent themselves as a separate identity as an independent community of Bodo-Kachari<sup>103</sup>. The appellation Sarania made by Bakul Chandra Basumatary opines that those who had taken refuge at the feet of Lord Krishna<sup>104</sup> are the Saranias. According to the 'Hemkosh' Dictionary of Anglo-Assamese Language of Hemchandra Baruah in 1900, preceptors of Vaishnavism coming under the banner of Hinduism became Saranias and took their surname Saranias. In contrast, Bhaben Narzi stated that a few sections of the Bodo-Kachari took shelter under Vaisnava Saint (Goswami) and became known as Saranias.<sup>105</sup> Again W.W Hunter admits that the Saranias are basically from local tribes like the other tribes in Assam.<sup>106</sup> Rev. Sydney Endle remarked in his book called 'The Kachari' that he simplified the Kachari people living in the Brahmaputra Valley into two groups, namely Saranias, Mahalia and Fulgora, those who are living on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and some of the groups living in the southern bank of Brahmaputra in his perception. So Saranias are Kachari people, including Boro, Rabha and other allied Kachari or Kirat people. And hence the erstwhile Sankardeva happen to unite those tribals living in ancient Assam under the banner of Vaishnavism.<sup>107</sup>

Though the converts tried to deter their original identity, the high caste Brahmins regarded them as low status, even treating them as untouchable and polluted; perhaps the Bodos are regarded as '*Mleccha*' or '*Mech*'. Hence, some sections of the Bodo people try to

avoid discrimination and callout derogatory remarks; finally they have converted to Hinduism. Moreover, the distinction of the ascendancy to Hinduism that is stated in the census report of 1881, like influenced by Hinduism, on the verge of conversion into Hinduism and those who are converted.<sup>108</sup> However, the Bodo-Kacharis, despite their conversion into Hinduism, still treated the high caste Hindu Brahmins as lowly. Also, they called them 'Asura' or 'Mlechhas' and, most of the time, debarred from the congregation of the socio-cultural programmes made in the Hindu society. Further, the trends of cultural differentiation towards the Bodo community can be noticed in the sphere of religious practices; perhaps the educated section of the Bodo society returned towards the traditional *Bathou* religion and made a focal point on re-establishing the erstwhile *Bathou* religion as the prime religion of the Bodo is in the process.

**Table No. 3.3: Population distribution religious wise**

Year	Hindu	Muslims	Animistic	Christian	Buddhist	Brahma	Jain	Sikh	Misc.
1901	3429033	1581317	1068334	35967	8911	360	1707	505	51
1931	5204650	2780514	992399	249246	15045	Included in Hindu	2803	2789	480

Source: M.L. Bose, *Social History of Assam*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2003, p.73

After the British annexation of Assam in the nineteenth century, the whole demography changed significantly and emerged a newly fabricated interplay in the social dynamic.<sup>109</sup> Adding to English education becomes the sole factor contributing to changing society. Another important contributing factor that changed the society in Assam with the great extent of proselytization by the Christian missionaries under the pretext of the British regime. However, they could hardly convert the tribals in the plain Assam to a large extent, rather they could establish the canopy of the religious centres, like that of Sri Rama Krishna Mission, The *Brahmo Samaj*, The *Arya Samaj*, and the theosophical society by the Muslims, which could gradually emerge a new Anglo-Indian society in the region of Assam.<sup>110</sup>

The new social order of the British regime with the elements of synthesis culture of Bengali and European rather than Victorian British, perhaps the traditional Assamese culture have a little mixture of Hindustani.<sup>111</sup>

Upper and lower-class Hindus accept Muslims willingly or forcefully, and sometimes lower-class Hindus are outnumbered by influence or willingness. Animism took a turning point in changing their traditional religion, which had a link. For instance, Baktiyar Khalji, on his expedition to Tibet, forcefully captured the *Mech* tribe and converted to Muslim and named him 'Ali', and also from different tribes, he took advantage of those living in the foothill of the Himalayas like *Koch*, *Mech* and *Tharu* people. On the other hand, Buddhists were persecuted in Bengal in 1095 during the *Sena* dynasty, with stiff oppression by the Brahmins. In the pretext of specific regimes, Muslims retain power, thus obliging the Buddhists to embrace willing conditions they accept Islam.<sup>112</sup>

In the census report of 1931, it was compared to that of the Burmese invasion in 1820, perhaps the magnitude of invasion by Muslims have changed the whole structure of the Assamese culture and civilization, including the Bodos, the hordes of land-hungry invader those are mostly of Bengali immigrants Muslims from the East Bengal, and thus the Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup and Darrang districts are affected mainly by the enormously Bengali immigrants displacing the tribals and its cultures.

Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, the *Sena* regime gained momentum in spreading *Brahmanic* Hindu in the Cooch Behar kingdom; which follows by the beginning of the twentieth century, the erstwhile Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma albeit the dark era for the Bodo community in a certain period he took bold decision to uphold the downtrodden community with his multifaceted talent, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma emancipate the religious beliefs of the Bodos and encourage to education in order to enlighten Bodo people by setting up schools in certain Bodo dominated areas. Further, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma instigated the Bodo people to believe in one God (Brahma) by uttering Vedic hymns.<sup>113</sup> Thus ultimately retains the virtue of *Brahmanic* Hinduism among the Bodo community.

Prabin Bargayary pointed out that Baptist missionaries, in collaboration with the East India Company, propagated Christianity among Assamese and Bodos in 1853 at Mangaldai,

which is evident from Baptist Missionary Magazine (BMM) of 1855. Further, the missionaries undoubtedly focus on the Bodo-Kacharis and Assamese to convert to Christianity to illumine.<sup>114</sup> Thus the gradual conversion peaked among the Bodo-Kachari by increasing till today.

The work of Bakul Chandra Basumatary opines that the Saint Mahavira has blood relation with *Licchavis* Mongoloid in ancient India from whom the progenitor Bodos originated.<sup>115</sup> Following Ahimsa (non-violence), Jainism maintained less strict *anuvrata* (lesser Vowes) to defend themselves for particular stances. When Mahavira propagated Jainism, Indo-Mongoloid saints, probably the Bodos, were influential in propagating and thus spreading the Jainism religion.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps the number of Jain followers gradually increases in the region of Assam.

Besides the problems of the influx of the non-Bodos groups in the Bodo-dominated areas made resentment in demography profile within the Bodo-dominated region, on the other hand, Hindu expansionist policy has pushed the Bodo traditional culture to the periphery, and even some of the Bodo people nearly forgot their mother tongue on the verge of advance communities.<sup>117</sup> Contrary to the modern plural Bodo society can be seen multi religions like Christianity, Brahma, *Bathou*, Saivism, Sat Sang, Vaisnavism, etc. setting free from isolation and live extrovert in nature and thus despite the disintegration of religion they are living interdependently with each other thereof religious tolerance among themselves<sup>118</sup> and to others.

*Sanskritization* created fragments in the Bodo society; it was just after they came into contact with the Hindu neighbours and ultimately germinated Hindu culture among the Bodo community. However, the traditional beliefs of the Bodos are polluted with the rituals of Hindus, bringing a gradual disintegration of the conventional Bodo society. Moreover, a section of Bodo society that had assimilated into the mainstream fold of Hinduism created differences in a line of family-related economic benefits and the performance of the rites and rituals in the society which is also apparently by the process of Aryanization, though the Bodos are once powerful tribe monarch that has disintegrated into smaller groups and communities. Thus they have intermingled Aryan socio-cultural values and practices with the prevailing facts of the Bodos tribe.

Moreover, Sanskritization in Assam was part and parcel of a policy of the high caste Hindus to increase the fold Hindu population alienation of Bodo-Kachari caste because, in Assam, the Tribals were in the majority as compared to the Brahmins Hindus. Thus, Sanskritization affected the socio-economic and cultural values of the aboriginal Bodos in the Brahmaputra Valley. However, the arrival of Christian missionaries among the Bodo community and some prominent leaders set a new tradition of social change based on liberty, equality, welfare, and development, and thus the society made progress in its material culture, by eradicating superstitious beliefs with the scientific approach in the twentieth century.

With the emergence of the scientific temperament preceding techniques for building houses have drastically changed, further treating less importance to many activities like the traditional housing design. Instead, they made bricks and other concrete materials and replaced conventional materials like straw, bamboo, and thatched roof. Thus, it can be observed from the above discussion that Bodos have rich and varied material cultures handed down from generation to generation.

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- <sup>112</sup> Bakul Chandra Basumatary, *Op.cit*, p.144
- <sup>113</sup>*Ibid*,p.148

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<sup>114</sup> Jadav Pegu, *Op.cit*, pp.73-74

<sup>115</sup> Bakul Chandra Basumatary, *Op.cit*, pp.29-30

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, pp.32-33

<sup>117</sup> Sekhar Brahma, *Op.cit*, pp.128-29

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*