

## Religion and its Reflection on the Culture of the Bodos of Assam

### Abstract

The Bodos are one of the important tribal groups of Assam belonging to the Mongoloid race. The original religious belief of the Bodos is *Bathou Dharma*. In *Bathou dharma*, *Bathou Brai*, the Supreme God, is the chief God and *Mainao*, the goddess of crops and prosperity, is the chief goddess. Besides them, there are many other gods and goddesses which are being worshipped by the Bodos. The society is basically an agrarian society and they inherit a rich cultural heritage. Their culture is essentially a tribal culture, flourished on agricultural practices and nurtured by traditional religious beliefs and practices.

**Keywords:** Bodo, Religion, Culture.

### Introduction

The Bodos are one of the important tribal groups of Assam belonging to the Mongoloid race. They are mainly concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley though spread over many parts of north-east India, West Bengal, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. The word Bodo originally comes from a linguistic term used for a branch of language belongs to Tibeto-Burmese linguistic group. This linguistic term covers a number of Mongoloid tribal groups like Kacharis, Meches, Garos, Chutias, etc. At present the term represents chiefly the language spoken by the Kacharis and Meches and the group of people speaking this particular dialect. The Bodo society is basically an agrarian society. Their culture is essentially a tribal culture, flourished on agricultural practices and nurtured by their traditional religious beliefs and practices.

### Review of Literature

A good number of studies have been carried out on Tribal religion in general and Bodo in specific in national and regional level. Due to paucity of space a brief review of literature forwarded here. Rynjah (2011)<sup>1</sup> deals with the tribal religion of North East India which was basically developed in non-literate societies and passed on orally. Mibang & Choudhury (2004)<sup>2</sup> have tried to highlight on different elements of religious beliefs and practices of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Majumdar (1965)<sup>3</sup> focuses on the Indian races and culture particularly dealing with the impact of non-tribal cultures upon the ways of life of Indian tribes. Brahma's (1992)<sup>4</sup> focal point rest on the society, traditions, customs and religious beliefs and practices of the Bodos. Brahma's (2006) work<sup>5</sup> is an attempt to give an account on the socio-cultural transition of the Bodo society with the emergence of new religious faiths among the Bodos. Narzy (2001)<sup>6</sup> has carried out a comprehensive study on the culture of Bodo community of Assam. Goswami (2012)<sup>7</sup> tries to conceptualise on the aspects like the ethnic background of the Bodos, their religious philosophy, economy, traditional institutions and their struggle since independence. Kherkatary (2015)<sup>8</sup> made an in-depth study on the principles of Bathou religion, focusing on the rituals incorporated with the Bathou religion and on the process of reformation in Bathou religion. Hmar (2013)<sup>9</sup> carried out a conceptual and contextual study among the different tribes of north-east India concentrating primarily on how in tribal society, religion, beliefs and practices govern all aspects of life. Chakma & Pakhuongte (2015)<sup>10</sup> throwing light on how religion is an important component of culture with illustration on religion wise population data of north-east India. Singh (2018)<sup>11</sup> deals with the various ancient traditions of spiritualism followed by the indigenous people of north-eastern region. Karakombil (2019)<sup>12</sup> tries to counter the claims of some Hindu organisations that India's north-eastern states have lost their cultural identities due to their acceptance of the Christian faith, by focusing on the distinct dialects, beliefs systems, social structures, traditions, rituals and economic system of the people of the region.



**Satyendra Kumar Sarmah**

Associate Professor,  
Dept. of History,  
Tangla College,  
Tangla, Udalguri, Assam, India

**Problem of the Study**

The dictionary meaning of religion is a particular system of faith and worship and the culture covers the arts, customs and institutions of a nation, people or a group of people.<sup>13</sup> Like any other tribal religion of the world, the religious belief system of the Bodos also passed on orally. Their religious beliefs involve the principles or activities of their careful devotion concerning the points of belief. It is related with their day to day activities. The Bodo religious beliefs are associated with their festivals, birth, marriage, death, etc., agricultural activities, sickness, magic and sorcery, sin and taboo and so on.

**Objectives of the Study**

The major objectives of the present study are: (i). To focus on the religious beliefs and practices of the Bodos of Assam and (ii). How the culture of the Bodo tribe is nurtured by their religious beliefs and practices.

**Methodology**

The present study is based on historical methodology. It is an empirical study using both the primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are gathered from personal interviews and field study and secondary sources are collected from different published reports, books and magazines.

Since ancient time, religion has been playing a very dominant role in shaping the socio-cultural life of people and the Bodos are not exception to it. The social institutions of the Bodos are interwoven with their religious beliefs and practices. In the traditional agrarian society, every sphere of life of a Bodo man and woman is guided by rites and rituals based on their religious practices. Durkheim, therefore, defined religion as composed of 'beliefs' and 'rites', beliefs about sacred things and rites addressed to them. Mere beliefs do not constitute religion; it is rites which makes religion a living force. Durkheim's social theory of religion focuses on the social life at those points at which it is felt most intensely.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, religion played a very important role in formatting their social pattern and status, economy, mode of living and way of thinking.

The traditional religious belief of the Bodos is known as the *Bathou Dhohorom* or *Bathou dharma*. In Bodo, the word *Dhohorom* has a deep meaning. *Dho* means firm, *ho* means binding, *ro* means safe and *m* means beings or human beings. Thus in Bodo, *dharma* means principles that keep the human beings safe with firm bindings.<sup>15</sup> It incorporates rites, rituals, social norms, ethics and philosophy of the Bodo society. Sidney Endle describes the Bathou religion as "animistic and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear or dread",<sup>16</sup> and is also supported by other European writers.<sup>17</sup> But the people firmly disagree with the view of European writers.

The Bodos worship *Bathou Brai*, the Supreme God, along with other gods and goddesses. In Bodo *Ba* means five (*pancha*) and *thou* means deep or profound principle or philosophy (*tatva*). Hence, *Bathou* means the five deep spiritual entities. These are *pancha-bhoot* (five elements of creation), *pancha-son* (five types of meditation), *pancha-bakya* (five hymns), *pancha-sheel* (five characters) and

*pancha-dhani* (five tunes). The *Bathou Brai* is the custodian of this five basic elements of creation (*pancha-bhoot*), *Ha*, *Doi*, *Bar*, *Or* and *Nokhrang* (earth, water, air, fire and ether), with which body of living being is formed.<sup>18</sup>

Idol-worship is not practiced in *Bathou* religion. The people believe in the invisible i.e., the *nirakar* form of the Supreme Being which is shapeless and formless. But at the same time the divine power and qualities of the Supreme Being is being reflected through the five basic entities. In this context the Supreme Being is visible or *sakar* and regards as omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and almighty.<sup>19</sup> God to them is being referred to as the Generator or *Rang-rasi*, the Operator or *Gwhw-rasi* and the Destructor or *Mwitha-haji* of the universe.<sup>20</sup> In their worship the word *I* or *Aham*, believe to be Sanskrit form, is being uttered to realise the presence of the Supreme God everywhere and in every form.<sup>21</sup>

Bodos worship the *sijou* plant (Euphorbia Splenden) as the symbol of the Supreme God. In Bodo *Si* means soul and *Jou* means supreme.<sup>22</sup> Thus, *Sijou* represents the Supreme Soul (*Param atma*) or the Supreme God. The *sijou* plant has some peculiar characteristics and because of that it might have been adopted as the symbol of this religion. Its botanical name is *Nerifolia* and belongs to the cactus family. It has five ridges and five depressions. Its ridges signify the five entities of the *Bathou* religion. Its everlasting and easily surviving nature symbolizes immortality of the Supreme Soul. The *sijou* is planted on the elevated altar encircled with a bamboo fencing of eighteen pairs of posts weaved with five pieces of bamboo split. The eighteen pairs of posts represent the lesser gods or gurus in their religion and the five rounds of folded fastening bamboo strips signify the five bindings of *Bathou*, viz. (i) birth, (ii) marriage or procreation, (iii) sorrow, (iv) happiness and (v) death.<sup>23</sup> Three pairs of posts on the western side are twisted downward to create a pass. At the time of planting the *Sijou* tree on the altar, a stone and an egg is placed below the tree. Both the object would symbolize firmness of their religion and its relation with fertility. The *Tulsi* (basil) and *jatras* plant (a kind of shrub) are also planted near the *sijou* tree. In the northern side a small embankment is erected and eighteen pairs of small bamboo posts are places for eighteen gods and goddesses. The altar comprising all these materials is termed as the *Bathou*.<sup>24</sup>

The *Bathou* religion believes in polytheism. Besides the *Bathou Brai*, the chief God, there are many other gods and goddesses which are being worshipped by the Bodos. They are *Bura Ailong*, *Bura Khajji*, *Abla Khungur*, *Agrang*, *Khoila*, *Rajputhur*, *Raj Khandra*, *Ali Bura*, *Aidibaoli*, *Manaso*, *Jaman*, *Bagh Raja*, *Bas Muti*, *Chaudri* and others. *Mainao*, the goddess of crops and prosperity, is the chief goddess and she is regarded as the consort of *Bathou Brai*. Hence, she is also known as *Bathou Buroi*, *Kharia Buroi*, *Bulli Buroi* and *Siw Buroi*. Various *Mainao* goddesses are associated with the different varieties of paddy and other seasonal crops.<sup>25</sup>

Another important aspect of *Bathou* religion or philosophy is that, it is intimately connected with

the number *five*. An examination of the *Bathou* philosophy reveals that the existence of the Supreme Soul or God is integrally attached to the fifth element of the *pancha-bhoot*. While the first four elements (earth, water, air and fire) are concrete objects to form the body of a living being and these objects ceased to function with the last breath of that being. But the fifth element "Nokhrang" (ether) is supposed to exist in the sky under the guise of air. This fifth element is the shelter of the immortal soul, which represent the Supreme God in the form of *Sijou* and it is immortal. Thus, *Sijou* symbolizes the immortality of the Supreme Soul.<sup>26</sup> Based on this philosophy, the number five is regarded as the most important number for the *Bathou* religion. This idea is extended to the *Bathou* five bindings as mentioned earlier and the *Boro Borai* (the Bodo elders) five moral preaching, viz. (i) love, (ii) purity, (iii) forgiveness, (iv) honesty and (v) unity. The number five also has its significance with their five bads (sin) viz. *Agar bad; Phongslath bad; Daokhi bad; Khoulobod bad* and *Khaoali bad*. It also adds up to the five realizations for the followers of *Bathou* religion, namely with (1) *Sijou*, the Supreme Soul; (2) *Jiwma* (human soul) with *Sijou*, the Supreme Being; (3) *Mainao* (the Goddess of wealth and crops); (4) their five related gods: *Ailong, Agrang, Khoila, Sanja-Borli and Raj Khungri*, and (5) the need of worldly affairs.<sup>27</sup> The people also observe the five seasonal festivals like that of *Baisagu, Amuthi-suwa, Khati Gasha* (Mainao Kaubau), *Nakhuwa* and *Magau Domashi*. Their belief also extends to some other things essentially used in their religious practice, viz. the *Ou* fruit (*dillenia indica*) which has five rinds; the *Sijou* tree with five ridges and the *Siphung* (a long bamboo flute which is being used in *Kherai* worship) with five holes.

The Bodos regards the alter of the *Bathou* as holy. Animal sacrifice was common among the followers of the *Bathou* faith, but the followers of the new (reformist) *Bathou* faith would prefer to offer their worship with fruits and flowers<sup>28</sup> along with the accompaniments of the *Kham* (drum), *Siphung* (flute) and *Madal* (another type of drum) and singing *Araj* (prayer songs). The *Bathou* worship is known as *Kherai* and elaborate ritual and sacrifices of cocks, goats and pigs would be carried out. Followers of this religion would offer prayers before the alter of the *Bathou*, individually or collectively. Prayers are normally offered for the wellbeing of the society, the family and their cultivation.<sup>29</sup>

Art is the outlet for human emotion and the religious beliefs and practices are the desire of people to realise the Supreme power through art. The Bodo dancing, singing, music, house-whole structure and other branches of culture are indispensably associated with their traditional religious practices.<sup>30</sup> While the festivals and ceremonies of the traditional Bodo society can be classified as: Religious, Seasonal, and Agricultural, but all are directly or indirectly connected to each other. A few reflections of their religious practices on their culture are listed below:

#### Pattern of household

One essential part of their culture is type of construction of houses. A typical Bodo family builds several houses within the compound depending on their necessity. Before constructing their main residential house the people would build the *Bakri* or the granary first, in the east. The next would be the *goli* or the cowshed which would be constructed in the south-east corner.

The main house *namano* would be constructed in the north of the courtyard in east-west direction. It was divided into three rooms. The first room, *khopra*, was used for sleeping of the unmarried girls, the second, *akhang*, was used for dining while the third room, *ishing* was used for cooking and the altars of *Bathou Borai* (chief deity) and *Mainao* (goddess of wealth and crops) are placed there for worship. The guest house, known as *choura* was built in front of the homestead and also used for dwelling of young boys.

The courtyard has a special importance for the people. At the north-east corner of the courtyard and in front of the granary house, parallel to the *ishing*, the *Bathou* altar with a *Sijau* plant is built. That corner of the courtyard is regarded by the Bodo as very auspicious. The complete altar is meant for *Bathou Brai*, the Supreme God and *Bathou Buri*, the chief goddess.

#### Festivals

Some major festivals observed by the Bodos are mentioned below.

#### The Kherai Festival

The *Kherai* is an important religious festival of the Bodo. It is a symbol of hope and desire.<sup>31</sup> *Khe* means worship and *Ra* means god. It originates from worshipping of god, *Khe > rai > e = Kherai*.<sup>32</sup> The *Kherai* worship is performed for the welfare of both private and public life and is being offered to the *Bathou Brai* and the other gods and goddesses. This religious practice is being carried out at the individual level or at times collectively. This worship is carried out basically to invoke the interference of the supernatural to improve the welfare of an individual or that of a family member who had fallen ill or for that matter for the prosperity of the entire village and for a good harvest.<sup>33</sup>

*Kherai puja* is of four kinds:

#### Darshan Kherai

It is performed during the first week of the month of *Kati* (September-October, seed bearing season). This *Kherai puja* is meant for *Mainao*, the goddess of wealth and crops. It is also called as *Sali Kherai*.

#### Umrao Kherai

It is performed at the end of the *Amthi Sua* (the unclean period of Ambuvasi/mother earth) which falls in the month of *Ashar* (June-July, main harvesting season), for the welfare of the villagers as well as of their crops. This *Kherai puja* is also known as the *Ashu Kherai*, being connected with the *asu* or a summer season crops.

#### Phalo Kherai

This ceremony is being performed in the month of *Magh* (January-February) especially on the

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day of *Maghi Purnima* or full-moon night. Since it is performed on a full moon night it is also known as *Danshrang Kherai*, where *Danshrang* would mean full-moon.

## **Noaoni Kherai**

It is basically a ritual that is being performed by a family which seeks to appease the gods for the welfare of the family.<sup>34</sup>

The Bodo use no temple or a fixed shrine for the worship of *Kherai*. They select a suitable place in the midst of a paddy field to worship their gods and goddesses. After thoroughly cleaning and showering with purified water, one branch of *Sijou* tree and a *tulansi* (basil) tree are planted in the altar. Along with the other essential commodities for the worship, one round stone and an egg are kept in front of *Bathou* as the symbol of creation. The worship or *puja* continues for three days and nights. In earlier days the *puja* would last for seven days and nights. Throughout the three days and nights *Kherai* dance are being performed to please the *Bathou Brai* and other gods and goddesses by the *Doudinis* or the female shamanic dancer. The *Doudini* performs most of the essential rites with the help of the *Oja* (medicine man) and a *Githal* or *Gidal* (*Githal* or *Gidal* is a follower of *Oja* as a helper during the *Kherai puja*). Besides, two *Kham* (drum) beaters, two players of the *Siphung* (bamboo flutes) and two players of *Jotha* (cymbals) are also essential to help the *Doudini* to perform the *Kherai puja*. Altogether eighteen types of dances are being performed by the *Doudinis* to invoke eighteen male and female deities. During the dance prediction on weather, ensuing diseases, cultivation and disasters to the villagers are being made. Solutions for the same are also being made by the dancers.<sup>35</sup>

## **Main Seasonal as well as Agricultural Festivals of the Bodos**

The Bodo people traditionally observe some seasonal festivals as mentioned below.

### **Baisagu**

*Baisagu* refers to the beginning of a New Year. The word *Baisagu* comes from the original word *Baisa*, which means year or age and *Agu* means to start.<sup>36</sup> This festival is being carried out to seek blessings from the supernatural for their growth and prosperity.<sup>37</sup> It is linked mainly with the agricultural practices and they start their cultivation after the celebration. *Baisagu* is celebrated for seven days with a lot of rituals and merry-making. During this period no manual work is being carried out.

On the first day of this festival, which corresponds to the last day of the *Chait* month (last month of Assamese calendar), they would sanctify cattle worship or *mosou puja* as a token of respect for the services rendered by cattle. This would start by giving them a ritual bath and offering them a new *pagha* (rope) and arranging *joga* (smoke) to keep them away from mosquitoes and houseflies. The first day of the New Year, known as *Manuh Bihu*, is the second *Bihu* day for the worship of *Bathou* in individual houses or jointly at the house of the village priest. Offering of rituals to the deities and worshipping of ancestors would carry out. Exceptional respects are being offered to elders and teachers

(Gurus) and gifts would be exchanged as a token of love and appreciation. Bitter vegetables are being consumed as a mark to bid farewell to the previous years. All these would culminate in songs and dance.<sup>38</sup>

An interesting feature during the festival is the role played by the young boys and girls. They would go to people houses and move from door to door singing and dancing the *Bagrumba* dance and collecting alms. They would also play their traditional musical instruments like that of the *Siphung*, the *jotha*, and the *Kham*, along with the others. The children would be welcomed and barren couples would consider this particular visit as a blessing for them. At the end of the *Baisagu* festival a gala feast would be arranged from the alms that they have collected.<sup>39</sup>

On the seventh day of the festival the *putuli haba* or doll marriage would be carried out. The dolls would be personified with the legendary names of *Raona* and *Raoni* who are being recognised by the people as deities. The general perception is that, the deities once pleased with the offerings of the people will shower the earth with wind and rain (good monsoon) and the cultivable lands would be laden with good crops. Young men and beautiful maidens known as *Joholaos* and *Bardoi Sikolas* would be treated as matching partners respectively. Barren couples would also seek the blessings of these deities. Along with the above they would also worship deities like, *Diba-Burha* and *Dibi-Burhi*, to free themselves from epidemics.<sup>40</sup>

### **Domashi or Domahi**

This is a post-harvest festival. *Domashi* is celebrated in the middle of January. This festival is celebrated with liberal consumption of different foods and rice beer (*jau*). They would entertain friends and relatives with good food and drinks along with the accompaniment of songs and dance. The celebration continues for seven days.

On this occasion the women folk would prepare different types of rice cakes or *pitha* and other pulses. The elders of the village would offer sacrifices of fowls to *Bathou Brai*. The male members of the family would tie cords around the fruit-bearing trees in their garden. It is believed that the fruit-bearing trees would bear more fruits if the trees are tied with cords of straw during the festival period. Food is also being offered to birds, fish and animals.

A special feature of the *Domashi* festival is the construction of *Bilagur* or *Bhelaghar*, by the young boys particularly the cowherds, with dried banana leaves and green bamboo. They would collect food-grains and other things from the villager, spend the night in the *bhelaghar* amidst much merriment and would have their dinner by midnight. With the break of dawn and after taking their baths, the *Bhelaghar* would be set on fire with the recitation of hymns and prayers for the well-being of their cattle and the prosperity of the village.<sup>41</sup>

### **Katri Gasa Saonai**

The *Katri-gasa saonai* is another seasonal festival of the Bodo. This festival is observed by the people to welcome *Mainao Buri* or the goddess of wealth and crops. On the last day of the month *Ahin*

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(September-October), the festival would be carried out but in a simple manner. This is being done by lighting the *gasa* or the earthen lamp at the paddy field, at the altar of the *Bathou*, at the *gali* (cowshed), at the *Bakri* (granary) and in the gateway of the house in the evening. The unmarried girls would go to the paddy field with a *sewari* or a long bamboo stick used in weaving, smeared with mustard oil. They would touch the paddy plants with the *sewari*. The general belief with the people is that such acts would bring about a good yield and harvest.<sup>42</sup>

## Amthisua

The word, *Amthisua*, stress on the period of menstruation of the Earth. This is mainly carried out on the month of June and July for a period of seven days. During this time the people were not supposed to plough their land or to cut trees or even to go to their granaries. On the seventh day a thorough cleaning of the house and the other implements would be carried out. At times the old ones would be discarded and the new one would be used.<sup>43</sup> The entire philosophy behind this practice and observation is that they regard the earth as their mother and observe the fertility process of the earth for the good harvest and other related activities.

## Engkham Godan Janai

This ceremony would relate to the partaking of the first new grain of the season and the same would be offered to the *Bathou* and the other gods and goddesses. It is an important ceremony in the sense that the whole village community would participate in the event. Before taking anything the followers of the traditional religion would offer a little quantity of cooked-rice and curry of pork to *Bathou Brai* and *Bathou buri*.<sup>44</sup> The occasion is marked by a lot of merry making along with the consumption of rice beer. It is mainly observed in the month of November.<sup>45</sup>

Besides the major festivals like *Baisagu*, *Domashi* and *Katri Gasa*, the Bodos also observe some minor ceremonies that are performed during the course of their agriculture like- *Khotia phonai*, *Khotia phunai*, *Mai gainai*, *Mainao Lainai* or *Aglainai* and others.

## Conclusion

Assam is a beautiful garden of so many tribal groups that inhabiting in the state. It is observed that in the plains there is a cultural assimilation of most of the tribal groups with the Hinduized Assamese culture and Bodo are not exception to that. In spite of that the Bodo are privileged with the advantage of preserving most of their cultural elements and to stand for self identity in modern times. In the twentieth century, the spread of modern education brought realization among the Bodo and the educated class started a revival movement among them.

Religion had an important role in shaping the Bodo culture. Up to few years back they practiced shifting cultivation. Their continuous engagement with the nature for their livelihood gave birth of their traditional religious faith. For the same, the European ethnographers and writers called their religion as animistic. Though essentially it is not an animistic religious faith, but it developed from their day to day

needs and observations. At the same time, culture also grows from the needs and practices of the people. While their culture and religion has close connection to each other, religious beliefs and practices have its own place in their culture. We cannot look separately the religion and culture of the Bodos, it simply indivisible.

At present the Bodo society is religiously divided into so many groups. Some religious groups had tried to discard their traditional culture on religious ground which, according to their principle, is outlaw in their faith. But the growing consciousness for identity has narrowed down all such differences. While the followers of traditional *Bathou* religion brought reform in its practices, other non-Bathou groups have adopted the culture as their community identity. Now all of them feel proud of their culture and all practice the same irrespective of their religious background. The Bodo culture is now become the symbol of unity among the Bodos of the Brahmaputra valley in particular.

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45. Kameswar Brahma, op. cit., pp. 115-16.