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Gurudev Kalicharan and the Change of Bodo Society in Colonial Period

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Abstract After the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 the British established their rule in Assam of North East India. Their rule brought about many changes in the socio-cultural, political and economic conditions of the people. The political administration of the British in Assam had direct or indirect impact on the greater Assamese society in general and the Bodo society in particular. Bodos are the aboriginal tribe of Assam living from the primitive ages. They have their age old culture and traditions, language and literature. But in due course of time due to various factors their culture, language and literature underwent changes. Situation came to such a pass that anything of others began to fascinate the Bodos. Bodos began to consider others' culture superior and accepted whatever the leaders of other community preached. Some accepted religions other than their own (Bathou). Results were the loss of culture, language and their identity. Kalicharan Mech who later came to be known as Gurudev kalicharan Brahma observed closely the then trend of society and introduced Brahma religion. This religion brought about a socio-political awareness in the Bodo society. Politically, culturally and socially the Bodos began to see new faces in their own identity. The introduction of the Brahma religion by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma encouraged foundation of several social organizations among the Bodos. These socio-political organizations became the torch bearers in the transformation of the Bodo society. This paper attempts to explore how and when the Bodo society became a transformed society in the colonial period.

Keywords: Colonial, Brahma religion, Mahasanmilani, Bodo Society, Gurudev Kalicharan.

Introduction:

Bodos are mainly concentrated over the whole of Brahmaputra valley as far as north and east Bengal forming a solid bloc in North Eastern India.¹ Edward Gait stated the Kacharis as the “aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants, of the Brahmaputra valley. They are identical with the people called Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal. In the Brahmaputra valley the Kacharis call themselves Bodo or Bodo fisa (sons of the Bodo). In the North Kachar Hills they call themselves Dimasa, a corruption of Dima fisa or ‘sons of the great river’. They were known to Ahoms as Timisa clearly a corruption of Dimasa, so that this name must have been in use when they were still in the Dhansiri valley”.²

Theoretically, the social transformation implies a fundamental change in the society. Its growing changes can be differentiated over a period of time.³ The concept

of change is very broad. The changes in society are related to changes in culture. Due to various factors the social changes occur viz; demographic factor, technological factor, cultural factor, political factor, economic factor, education factor etc⁴. To define the social change different social scientists have argued their opinion in different ways. H.T. Mazumdar argued, "Social change may be defined as a new fashion or mode, either modifying or replacing the old, in life of people, or in the operation of a society."⁵ M.D. Jenson also opines, "Social change may be defined as modification in ways of doing and thinking of people."⁶ Thus, the word 'change' denotes a difference in anything observed over some period of time. Social change therefore, would mean observable differences in any social phenomena over any period of time.⁷

Being the social animal every human being thus cannot live without forming a society of their own. The so called primitive societies or tribal societies were bounded by certain norms and guidelines based upon their customs and traditions. Like any primitive societies, the Bodo Kacharis have been keeping alive many elements of tribal way of living based on their customs, traditions, taboos and rituals in spite of the fact that, the wind of change has intruded in their social life also.⁸

Society of Bodo on the eve of colonial period:

Before the introduction of the Brahma religion among the Bodos till the beginning of the 20th century the social and cultural traditions of the community were almost in a state of entanglement in regard to religious beliefs and activities compounded by some undue elements and illiteracy. At that period, bulks of Bodo community were all followers of *Bathou*, a primitive traditional religion of the Bodos. As a tradition at worshipping they offered homemade rice beers to appease the almighty Gods and Goddesses.⁹ Even the sacrificial activities were also in vogue. Domesticated Birds and animals were offered to Gods as in the form of sacrificial item.

People belonging to other community at the same time lived far better than the Bodos. The prevailing social customs and rituals were quite unreasonable at that time. The excessive uses of liquor, forceful marriage of girls, going of womenfolk in market and melas in large scale, acceptance of high rate of pans in lieu of a daughter's marriage were unreasonable practices.¹⁰ It was perhaps due to that reason the upper caste more particularly the Hindu neighbours called them as *Mlechch* and treated them as much as untouchable. Some people among the Bodos sensed the truth that the ways they were adapting and the like they were nursing their progenies were all nothing but worthless to follow. Apparently, they were induced by advanced factors of other social groups.¹¹ The educated and well to do Bodo families were also looked down upon and treated disparagingly. To escape from these sorts of disrespectful and disgraceful manner large section of the Bodo people had converted from the traditional *Bathou* religion to Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Ek Charan Namadharma of Sankardeva.¹² Most importantly the Bodo inhabitants of Panbari area of the district of Goalpara converted to Islam. It was absolutely a kind of social aggression of the Bodos by the other social groups which might lead to a complete loss of self identity. The advent of the twentieth century witnessed the spread of Vaishnavism rapidly in the interior tribal areas of Assam.¹³

Gurudev Kalicharan and his task of social reformation:

Kalicharan Mech observed all these happenings and events of the society that he lived in. In that situation he realised to find a way to safeguard the Bodo society from the gradual aggression by those religious groups. Although, he was not against the philosophy of any other religions namely, the Vaishnavism, Christianity, Islam and *Bathou*, he did not support the ways of practices of *Bathou*. He had well presumed that there must be reformation in the traditional thoughts of the people and their cultural practices as well. At the same time he also felt that it is impossible to eradicate all the evils at a time. It was because the people were so conservative and the direct reformative measure against the conventional religion and believe would be disastrous. He intensely analysed logically on the different aspects of possible changes in the society. To his observation, he could able to identify the leading social factors which would be working against any reformative actions. The excessive use of liquor was the main factor that resulted into the indulgence and negligence of people from the work culture. Secondly, the undue charity functions through the *Kherai* dances in the name of worshipping *Sibrai* had dithered children from going to schools for education. Thirdly, beliefs in many gods and goddesses imprinted various misbelieves and superstitions in the mind of the young groups. Above all, the lack of education and the illiteracy was the sole cause of the reality.¹⁴

To eradicate these social evils he determined to find a better alternative with a hope to make a refined society. Kalicharan was aware that there were some fundamental customs and practices in tradition, which in any terms of circumstances could not be totally denied to conservation. Eventually to bring reformation in the society he adapted to the philosophy of the ‘religion’ as one of the single competitive mediums to cover all social phenomena for security, progress and development of the community.¹⁵

Search and finding of new thought:

Kalicharan was in search of a religion which would help him embrace all aspects of the present day needs for development. He was able to note the branches of philosophy –faith, education, economics and lastly the politics. These were the essential elements for development of a nation. Without these branches of knowledge a society or nation is unable to progress. He felt the need of a religion which had the scope to preserve the necessary elements of the Bodo culture without any harm. The necessary elements were the art and crafts, the language, the customary law, traditional festivals, any attractive and valuable cultures and such that had social merits. He wanted his way of religion very simple and austere function and easily manageable by anybody. Lastly, God helped him. Once on a certain day in 1903,¹⁶ it was for some business purpose he travelled to Bikribada and due to daylong tiredness he decided to take rest at his friend Charan Mandal’s camp. Incidentally, on that fateful day, Charan Mandal was on the way to Calcutta for his business purpose. Kalicharan found a book that was underneath the pillow, and suddenly his curious mind would not be satisfied without browsing through it. The book was none other named ‘Saranritya Kriya’ written by Mohini Mohan Chattopadhyaya in Bengali and a descriptive opinion on the philosophy of Brahma and a theory on the creation of the universe and the doctrine of oneness of God. This was the first encounter with the

Brahma religion. This book was based on the Brahmanism and carried the preaching of Swami Sivanarayan Paramahansa, the founder of the Brahma religion.¹⁷ He was fully satisfied with the subject matter of the full text of the book and found that the contents were very logical and felt that he had got what he searched for a long time.¹⁸ He found there the real means to worship God. He also believed that God is one and did not believe in the diversity of God.¹⁹

In Brahma religion the God is worshipped in the form of fire or sun. He is the main force around which life in this universe exists. It is also assumed that Brahma is fire; he is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of this universe. *Yogyahuti* is an important aspect of the Brahma religion. Moreover, the *Yogyahuti* purges the human minds and instills in men a greater inner strength and confidence.²⁰ Thus, the process of conversion of the Bodo community into Brahma religion began. On the efforts of Kalicharan Mech the process became more rapid, as hundreds and thousands of Bodos accepted the new thought of religion. They accepted Kalicharan as their Guru, and henceforth, addressed him as Gurudev, since then he guided them spiritually, religiously and otherwise towards the path of progress and reformation.

Pandulipi and Customary law:

Gurudev Kalicharan played an important role in the task of reformation of the Bodo society. Besides preaching the Brahma religion among the masses he encouraged them to accept new social changes, and adopt a new way of life.²¹ In order to challenge the complex social situation arising out of social-economic intercourse it was felt necessary to bring certain changes in the prevailing customs and practices. Hence, basing on traditional laws of the community he with some followers initiated a written standard codes known as '*Pandulipi*' or *Boroni Pandulipi*.²² It is a social law book which deals and guides them in their day to day activities and on social matters. Gurudev felt that to follow the standardized social practices endorsed in the *Pandulipi* would be fruitful in establishing sense of oneness among the Bodos.²³ After a long day's hardship of compilation of *Pandulipi*, it was finally able to place before the masses in 1934 at the Fourth Bodo Mahasammlani which was held at Kajigaon the native village of Gurudev. In the cultural and social history of Bodos the introduction of the *Pandulipi* had landmarked the beginning of new era. It was for the first time that it established a common code of conduct among the Bodos. It proved to be the unity, integrity and brotherhood among the Bodo community.²⁴

Phon Thaka and Dowry:

In the early Bodo society the *Phon Thaka* system played its role side by side. The meaning of *Phon Thaka* in Bodo is bride price. The system of realisation of *phon thaka* was compulsory tradition of the Bodo society and was unlimited. In those days sometimes it was exceeded more than rupees one thousand. Later, under the initiative of Gurudev Kalicharan the rate has been reduced and fixed at rupees one hundred and five only. Gradually, in the present Bodo society the *phon thaka* has been discouraged and it has become a nominal one. There is no dowry system in the society among the Bodos as it is common among the Hindu Aryans of other parts of India.²⁵

Education:

Kalicharan Brahma knew that the society cannot rise without the development of education. During those there were no schools in Bodo villages. In fact the authorities also did not take any initiative to expand the education in these remote places where the Bodo peoples lived. It was only when Kalicharan met Mr. A.J. Laine the then Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district the educational matter of the Bodos came into light. The Commissioner guided him to meet Mr. Archdale Earle the then Chief Commissioner of Assam, who could solve the matter.²⁶ Finally, Kalicharan met the Chief Commissioner during his visit at Dhubri. He very impressively narrated the depriving conditions of the Bodos with regard to education. Finding the exponent zeal of Kalicharan towards education, Chief Commissioner granted sum amount of thirty thousand rupees at once to establish an M.E school at Tipkai along with the introduction of two vocational courses. In 1912 the first school was thus established.²⁷ In the very next year in 1913 due initiative was taken by Mr. Laine, and another primary school was sanctioned at Tipkai. It is to be mentioned that to encourage the weaving and carpentry course a sum of Rs. 10 and Rs. 5 respectively was fixed as stipend for the students.²⁸

This positive step of Kalicharan initiated the mass awareness among the people of the community and gave the impetus of collective efforts to focus the value of education. The schools were established in many Bodo villages and started to impart education to boys and girls.²⁹ The establishment of Brahma boarding at Dhubri paved the way for the development of Bodo nationality. Kalicharan encouraged the students of boarding to take initiative to bring awareness among the Bodo people living in different parts of the country to unite socially and politically. Some educated youths of that period namely Satish Chandra Basumatary, Rupnath Brahma, Modaram Brahma, Iswan Ch. Mushahary and few more came forward and joined hands with Gurudev and founded a student's organization called *Goalpara Zila Bodo Chatra Sanmilani* in 1915. Later in 1919 this organization was rechristened as *Bodo Chatra Sanmilani* in the first session of its meeting held at Kokrajhar.³⁰

Gurudev and Bodo Mahasanmilanis:

There was a time when the Bodos were fast converting to Hinduism, discarding even their language, culture and titles. Their numbers were found decreasing in Assam, rather a bulk of them had completely been assimilated into the fold of Assamese. Of late, under the turmoil of the politics of self-restoration of the high-caste Hindus and the Muslims in the pre-independent India which stirred this North-Eastern region, the indigenous tribal leaders were somehow awakened and formed "The All Assam Tribal League" in April 17, 1933 at Roha of the then Nagaon district under the presidentship of Jadav Chandra Khakhlary and Bhimbar Deuri as its secretary. But it is to mention here that the Bodos of the southern bank of the Brahmaputra of the erstwhile Goalpara district gave birth to a social organization called 'Habraghat Boro Sanmiloni' in the year 1912. They also formed another literary organisation named 'Dakshinkul Boro Sahitya Sanmiloni' in 1918. Meanwhile the Bodo students of that time formed 'Boro Satra Sanmilani', a Bodo students' organisation with its president in the person of Sobharam Brahma and its secretary Satish Chandra Basumatary in 1919. This Bodo Satra Sanmilani exalted vigorous literary revolutions among the

Bodos by publishing many magazines, books and dramas etc. thus those Bodo organizations gave awakening among the Bodos for their right of survival.³¹

The early 20th century, of colonial period shows the trends of social reformation among the Bodos. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma's place of primordial importance in the Bodo history today rests not only on his role as a preacher of the Brahma religion but also as one of the greatest and earliest reformers of the Bodo society.³² With a successive span of time they convened four Mahasanmilanies.

First Bodo Mahasanmilani:

The task of reformation of the Bodo society indeed went a long way after the introduction of Brahma religion among them, meanwhile a secular movement was required that would side by side complement the religion towards nurturing unity and reformation which was the pre-requisite then. Thus, Gurudev along with a few other Bodo prominent personalities who thought on similar lines, joined hands to convene the first Bodo Mahasanmilani. It was in 1921, that Gurudev with the help of educated young boys and girls organized the first Bodo Mahasanmilani at Bhaoraguri under Gossaigaon police station of the then Goalpara district. A coordination committee was formed with Rupnath Brahma as the Secretary and Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma as the Chief organiser. Jadav Chandra Khakhlary from Kachari Pathar village near Dibrugarh was its first president. The Bodo Mahasanmilani for the first time provided a platform where the problems plaguing the Bodo society were taken up for discussion and a comprehensive declaration was adopted for the upliftment of the society and to do way with the social ills. As a stepping stone towards this direction the Bodo Mahasanmilani was a considerable success. In this congregation, which talked at length about the then situation, problems, resolutions and prospects of this community, also adopted some action plans that would be able to address these issues and work towards the greater interest of the people. Among the important resolutions adopted establishment of primary and middle schools in the Bodo dominated areas and ban of use of liquor in marriage and other social ceremonies be stopped were worth mentioning.

Therefore, Gurudev wanted the Bodo Mahasanmilani to be instrumental in preaching, spreading and propagating the Brahma religion, for it had the maximum potential to remove these negative aspects of the Bodos.

Second Bodo Mahasanmilani:

Due to various reasons most of the resolutions adopted in the first Bodo Mahasanmilani remained unfulfilled. It was only after four years in 1925, the Second Bodo Mahasanmilani was held in Rangia and Jadunath Khakhlary was made president in this session.

With the helping hands by his followers and disciples, Gurudev played an important role in it also. In this second meeting by adding three more resolutions all the resolutions of the first Bodo Sanmilani were adopted in the second Mahasanmilani. Those were follows-

1. It was resolved that henceforth, pigs should not be reared by the Bodos, as they are unhygienic, spoil the surrounding and cause diseases.
2. It was resolved that both boys and girls must be provided education equally, only then the Bodo society can progress.

3. It was resolved that the Brahma religion shall be the one and only religion that will be practiced by the Bodos, since *Bathou* and other religions that had been followed by them so far have failed to bring about any improvement in their lives. By following the Brahma religion it is possible to usher in unity and progress among the Bodo people.³³

Third Bodo Mahasanmilani:

It was again successively after the span of four years in 1929, the third Bodo Mahasanmilani was organized at Roumari near Bongaigaon. In this session, again Jadav Chandra Khakhlary, the first president of the Bodo Mahasanmilani was chosen as the president. It is worthy to mention that besides the Bodos of Assam people of the neighbouring state of West Bengal also attended in the meeting.

Besides adopting the resolutions passed by the two sessions, the Third Bodo Mahasanmilani additionally took up new resolutions. These were-

1. It was resolved that the consumption of liquor be stopped and volunteers would move from village to village to inspect on this, and even to break the utensils used for making the country homemade liquor.
2. It was resolved that to ensure the honour of the Bodos, womenfolk be prevented from going to public places in unclean dresses.
3. It was resolved that the animal sacrifices should be banned in the Bodo society and only Brahma religion be accepted as their religion.³⁴

However, there was one issue that was very close to Gurudev's heart and on which he was keen that a resolution be passed at the Roumari session of the Bodo Mahasanmilani. This was on the issue of the abolition of the musical instruments of the *Kham*, *Siphung* and *Jotha*. Gurudev in that congregation had broached the topic of disallowing the use of these three musical instruments, for that he argued and reasoned that use of them in the religious ceremonies and *yogyahutis* rather than helping one to concentrate his attention on God, only distracts him. This is true for both the devotee and the priest. Therefore, he appealed to the participants of the third Bodo Mahasanmilani to adopt some concrete steps towards their abolition, and if necessary even a resolution be passed to that effect.

The proposal of the Gurudev raised a furor among the people and majority of them staunchly rejected such a view. There were heated discussions on this issue and most of them opposed his proposal to forbid the use of musical instruments like *Kham*, *Siphung* and *Jotha*, as they felt it would be tantamount to giving up their very identity as a distinctive community. They believed that such a move would definitely contribute to the loss of their identity. On this controversial issue Nepal Chandra Brahmachari popularly known as Fwrlang Babaji opposed the recommendation of Gurudev. Besides that many educated Bodo of the period like Rupnath Brahma, Satish Chandra Basumatary, etc. were the great admirers and followers of Gurudev, on this matter sided with Nepal Chandra Brahmachari.³⁵

Fourth Bodo Mahasanmilani:

The fourth Bodo Mahasanmilani was held in the year 1934 at Kajigaon, the native village of Gurudev. It was due to his deteriorating health condition he was wished to convene this Mahasanmilani in his place. Among the important agendas of the session the main objective was to place and discuss on the Bodo's *Pandupi*. In this

congregation thousands of Bodo and non-Bodo peoples were gathered and actively participated. General discussions were placed and mainly on the issues and problems and sufferings of the Bodo society and the importance of Brahma religion. Through the meaningful discussion in the Mahasanmilani *Bodoni Pandulipi* was accepted as the social law book of the Bodos comprising 126 by-laws. This historical passed resolution ushered the beginning of new era in the culture, social and economic life of the community as a common code of conduct.³⁶

Kalicharan had in-depth socio-political approaches to reform the Bodo community. Taking the advantage of Simon Commission's visit at Shillong, to achieve the socio-political and educational aspirations of the Bodo community Kalicharan along with Sardar Belbung Ram Kachari, Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, Md. Giasuddin Ahmed, Karendera Narayan Mandal and Baburam Brahma under the banner of the *Goalpara district Bodo Association* met the members of Simon Commission at Shillong on 4th January, 1929 and submitted a memorandum to them.³⁷ Among the most important twelve point memorandum submitted to Simon Commission by them were- to provide compulsory free primary education and facilitating special scholarship to Bodo students for pursuing higher education. Secondly, there should be four seats for Assam in the Central Legislature, one for Mahammadan and three for non Mahammadan and one of the three non Mahammadan seats should be reserved for the Bodos of Assam. Thirdly, there should be separate Regiment as the Bodo Regiment for the Bodo people of Assam.³⁸

Under the initiative and guidance of Gurudev Kalicharan many other social sanmilanias were organized with the view to social reformation among the Bodos. Viz;

Danguri Jubak Sanmilani:

As according to M.K. Brahma this Bodo nationalistic organization was formed in 1920 and was the only organization in upper Assam.

Purba Goalpara Jubak Sanmilani:

This Sanmilani was formed in Goalpara in 1922 and its third session was held in 1925 at Bijni Subhaijhar under the presidentship of Satish Chandra Basumatary. This organization in accordance with the Gurudev's policy of enhancement of education among the community, resolved to establish primary schools extensively in the Bodo villages.

Kamrup Bodo Unnati Sadhini Sabha:

In the beginning the Bodo people of Kamrup district were unaware about the reformation movement in the Goalpara district. Later, they got an opportunity to communicate with the social workers of Goalpara and discussed on the contemporary issues and problems of the Bodo people. Finally they founded the *Kamrup Bodo Unnati Sadhini Sabha* and on the 25th December, 1925 its first session was held at Agra village in Nalbari district. For the first being Gurudev Kalicharan presided over this session. It was the first organization of its kind in kamrup district for the Bodos.³⁹

Gram Hiteishi Samity:

This organization was constituted in 1925 under the Parbatjhora estate of Goalpara district. The main objective of the Samity was development of health education and economic development in the villages.⁴⁰ Gurudev from the very

beginning was aware of the backwardness of the Bodo villages. With this intention to eradicate the economic disparity The *Gram Hiteishi Samity* was formed with the vision of village economic development. The Samity rendered financial help to the farmers to purchase important agricultural equipments, livestock, seeds etc. further they helped the peasants to fetch their agricultural products at the market at the suitable price. The volunteers of the organization visited from village to village to educate and equip knowledge on methods of farming to the farmers on agriculture and different seasonal crops. ⁴¹

To help the womenfolk they encouraged and imparted trainings on weaving through this Samity. In addition, it successfully able to set- up weaving centre in the village of Banyaguri, this became its central office. Harimahan Brahma and Shibnath Marak happened to be its office bearer for the first time being. In simple words this Samity under the guidance of Gurudev played the role of co-operative society for the wellbeing of the poor Bodo village farmers.⁴²

Ryot Sabhas:

Gurudev with his inspiring zeal for the wellbeing of the village people he encouraged to establish Ryot Sabhas in the Bodo villages. He enrolled the farmers of the respective village as its member and he himself became the president of the Sabha. The main objective of the Sabha was to help the needy and poor farmers and to protect them from the clutches of money lenders. Its members hold discussions with the farmers on different issues and problems faced by them. Besides improving the cause of the farmers this organization in a long run played the role to serve as a nation building and sense of common togetherness in the village.⁴³

Mahila samity:

The Bodo society from the ancestral period follows patriarchal line with few elements of matriarchal characteristics.⁴⁴ During the time of Gurudev Kalicharan the condition of women in Bodo society was pathetic one. They were subjected to forceful marriage, had no share in the family property and treated as inferior to men. Gurudev observed that without empowering the women the reformation of the society would be stagnant, and therefore to get rid of from this he made up an idea to form women's organization to look after women's welfare and right. Thus the Mahila Samiti was established in the Bodo dominated villages and very frequently many women became its member. They gathered and took up discussions on different problems faced by the women and tried to find out the definite solution of it.⁴⁵

The Mahila Samity also convened annual conference. In this convention the women representatives from different villages attended. This Samity emphasized on the ensuing education to the female child and asked all the Bodo mothers to send their daughters to the school for the greater interest of the society. This Samity also focused on the need and importance of hygiene and cleanliness.⁴⁶

Conclusion:

At this critical period the much needed requirement of an able leader to guide the stagnant Bodo society was fulfilled by Gurudev. Indeed it is rather doubtful if anybody could have done it better, in a more efficient and successful manner than what he had done. With a capacity of feeling the need of his community and a profound comprehension of the drawbacks that was damaging the image of their

society; he had realized long ago that reformation was a must. Unfortunately, the Bodo masses were not in a position to realize it in that moment. However, with the attitude of reformation in mind that he propagated the Brahma religion among them, which he felt was most suitable for their community and could successfully do away with the evil practices of Bathou. Thus, Gurudev with an utmost zeal, dedication and a sense of purpose carried the message of the Brahma religion far and wide among the people.

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