



THE HUMANITARIAN SERVICE OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AMONG THE BODOS

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Abstract: *This article opens up the ministry of charity of the Christian missionaries among the Bodos. Before the advent of the Christian missionaries the overall condition of the Bodos was one of being looked down upon by advanced communities in the society. Socially and religiously they were superstitious and economically and educationally very backward. This state of affairs was realized by the Christian missionaries and they took up as their responsibility to uplift the Bodos and other natives from all possible fronts besides evangelizing them. Together with mission centers they opened educational institutions, health centers, orphanages and undertook relief works and village development activities. Here the focus will be on the humanitarian service specifically on the orphanages, relief works and village development activities. They heartily welcomed all classes of people and generously extended their services. They tried to instill in them a sense of better self identity in society and have a share in the global human relationship and to walk at equal pace with advanced societies and cultures. Therefore all efforts of the Christian missionaries were to uplift the Bodo society and enable them to face the ever emerging challenges and to live a life with dignity.*

Keyword: Christian, Missionaries, Bodo, Service, Evangelizing.

Introduction: The contribution of Christian missionaries in the service of the humanity is one of the biggest boons for the Bodos. The uplift of the Bodos was one of the concerns of the Christian missionaries. They pioneered to clear the dark cloud of ignorance of the developmental changes taking place in the society. Today we can see most of the Bodos in Christian dominated areas educated, freed from superstitious belief, self-dependent and economically better. When the missionaries arrived among the Bodos in Assam, the socio- economic, political, and religious condition was stagnant. It was not before the middle of 19th century that the missionaries started to work among the Bodos with the real zeal to preach Christianity and undertake some benevolent works for their elevation. They adopted different project in their mission such as socio-economic development programmes, medical assistance, spreading education, running orphanages, undertaking relief work and village development. This in turn brought about tremendous change in their outlook and progressed steadily in different areas.

Objective: The purpose of the study is to highlight the contribution of the Christian missionaries in humanitarian services among the Bodos.

Methodology: The methodology to carry out the study consisted of two sources viz., Primary source and Secondary source. In the primary sources include unpublished thesis, interviews, conducting field survey etc. The secondary sources incorporate the published books and journals.

Result and Discussion:

Humanitarian service provided by the Christian missionaries has brought a tremendous impact on the Bodo society. It was in the middle of the 19th century that the missionaries started to take up the humanitarian works among the Bodos besides preaching Christian religion. They adopted different projects in their mission such as socio-economic development programmes, medical assistance, spreading education as well as humanitarian services which included running of **orphanage, relief work and village development.**

In response to the needs of the native people, the Christian missionaries' followed different methods to reach out to them. Imparting education, extending medical aids, translation of literary works, preaching etc. were some of the ways to win over the Bodos. Their objectives were to transform and save the lives of the Bodos who could be creating a new community living on Christian values. In this noble task they risked themselves and their families, fought all odds such as famines floods, pestilences, plagues etc. In the words of Ratul Basumatary, Some of the early missionaries to Asia set examples for today's "only soul winning" missionaries by *establishing school, hospitals, medical colleges, clinics, orphanages, leprosaria and home for old.*¹

The efforts of the Christian missionaries had much impact in the Bodo society. All those who came in contact with the missionaries were transformed internally and externally. The attitude of reaching out to the poor and the needy influenced many Bodos. After the example of the missionaries the converted Bodos also ventured to take up risky tasks even at the cost of threat to their lives. In 1950, when a communal riot broke out between the Hindus and Muslim in India it had a far reaching impact in different parts of the country. Its impact was felt even at Tukrajhar, a remote place in the present district of Chirang in B.T.A.D (Assam). The Headmaster of a school, at Tukrajhar, Lawrence Narzari by name and his assistant Agonsing Narzari stood firm for the sake of gospel and humanity. Wilf Croft says that one Asaru Basumatary, a Bodo preacher saved the Tukrajhar mission compound from being burnt to the ground.²

They also established J.D William English school, in 1984 at Tukrajhar with the aims to impart quality education to people around there.

Principal Heman Ch. Borgoyary asserts that, John David Williams English School had been established in 1984 with a motto "Light the light" to impart quality of education.³

The School has been named after ABMS (Australian Baptist Missionary Society), Secretary John David Williams who took special care and concern for the Bodo people. The school has classes from KG A to X. Besides local teachers,

experienced teachers come from the local and also from the other states are appointed to give quality education. The students were involved in two projects, *School of Social Work (SSW)* funded by World Vision of India and the *Save an Orphan (SAO)* programme from Australian Aid, Ms. Alpona Basumatary, vice- Principal and Secretary-Cum-Superintendent of the SSW gave the history of the project.⁴

SSW project started from the month of October 1998. They first enrolled students into projects were 120 and the list became 150 to 200 Children. The total sponsored children till were 200. Apart from school fees, uniform and health check up were also given and it also conducts Union Biblical Seminary (UBS) for all the school children which had been a great help on the children. The project also gives development skills like tailoring, etc to the families of the sponsored children. The immunization programme was first given to the little children by the project followed by vaccine against the deadly child diseases, such as tuberculosis, measles, polio and tetanus which have been great achievements of the project and the project came to an end by the year 2000. Another programme that is sponsoring 130 children is the *Save an Orphan (SAO)* programme itself from foreign aid. Students from very poor background from Christian families are selected and given schooling free of cost under agreement.⁵

Keeping in view the missionary zeal different Bodo Christian organizations also undertook several humanitarian services for the needy. *Swrang Family Development Project (SFDP)*, a wing of the Boro Baptist Church Association, started in October of 2002 rendered services in different sectors in 18 different villages which are spread over present Chirang and Kokrajhar districts of BTAD (Assam). It dealt with the children sponsorship, adult literacy, health, agriculture and livestock, vocational trainings, Self Help Groups, etc. Now the project discontinued due to financial crunch.⁶

In 2004, in collaboration with the North East India Committee on Relief & Development (NEICORD), Shillong the BWAA also carried out relief services to the flood affected families in Chirang and Goalpara districts of Assam. In all 740 families received relief packages from the organizations. 140 families from Chirang district and 600 families from Goalpara district benefitted. Besides 31 families of flood affected of No. 1 Burihar and No. 2 Aiempoali in Tukrajhar and Bengtol area of Chirang district.⁷

The Associations' Boro Baptist Aid & Development (BBAiD) agency also contributed relief during the ethnic clashes between the Garos and the Rabhas which took place on the New Year day of 2011 on Assam – Meghalaya border. Altogether 590 (five hundred and ninety) families 274 (two hundred and seventy four) Garos and 316 (three hundred and sixteen) Rabha families benefitted from the relief distribution packages programme carried out on 27th June 2011. In this noble venture Lower Assam Baptist Union (LABU) with its constituent members such as Boro Baptist Church Association, Rabha Baptist Church Union and Anchalik Baptist Convention also witnessed the relief distribution programme.⁸

In 2008 when a communal clash took place between the Bodos and the Muslims in Udalguri district, the Boro Baptist Convention also reached out in alleviating human needs during the time of sickness and natural calamities. **Boro Baptist Church Association (BBCA)** and its Churches took active part in relief operation to the victims. Again in 2012, when similar communal clash took place in Kokrajhar, Chirang and Dhubri districts of Assam between Bodo and Muslim communities, BBCA came forward with open mind to help the victims. There were contributions in both cash and kind.⁹

Roman Catholic Church also equally rendered humanitarian service during the ethnic clash that broke out between the Bodos and the Santals in the districts of Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Kokrajhar and more particularly in the Gossaigaon subdivision of Assam on May 13th, 1996 and a repetition of the same in 1998. As per records and statistics available there were 1,77,240 persons from 24,370 families being displaced in 48 relief camps leaving their 341 original villages. Several lives and properties were destroyed. People had to take shelter in the refugee camps. Education of the children was affected. The church activities in reaching out to the people their religious needs ceased. What they could do was to provide sacramental, medical and material help. But it cannot be denied that **the Roman Catholic Church** was the first to come forward at the very outset of this incident. They came out with relief material for the Bodos refugees. The CASA (Church's Auxiliary for Social Action) office in Guwahati was approached for some humanitarian aids by Charan Basumatary (60) of Mushalpur and Joseph Basumatary (55) of Darrang.¹⁰ In this connection Rev. Archbishop Thomas Menampampil cannot go without being mentioned because it was under his leadership a large team of volunteers including religious doctors, nurses, and people of good will from different parts of the country came forward to give service to the affected people. The scorching heat of the month and all other obstacles could not be reason for them to deter from rendering service. Along with the Catholic Church other denominations also contributed in all possible ways to the affected people.¹¹

Other than the material aids human services were also extended. The mission tried to create a peaceful and co-existing atmosphere. It tried to bring the youth of different ethnic groups to communicate with others and to enable them to feel secured among them. They organized family visits, family counseling, cultural exchange, inter-religious dialogue and awareness programme on the need for peace and prosperity. Bongaigaon Gana Seva Society had formed Peace committee in five centers.

The Lutheran church was no less in coming to the aid of the victims of the ethnic clashes. **Lutheran World Service India Trust** a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) based at Gossaigaon (Assam) established in 1996, had introduced Village Development Council (VDC) in riot affected areas, providing tremendous help to the riot victim. They arranged for stipends for the riot victim girls, and distributed bicycles to the women to go for their work. They also distributed free books. They insisted for primary education for the girls as gave them free tuitions.¹²

It is worth referring here the co-operative 'Dayalu Somoria Fund', i.e. Kind Samaritan Fund, instituted by the Goalpara Boro Baptist Church Union (GBBCU) in order to grant loan to the farmers to buy seeds, agricultural implements, fertilizer etc.¹³ In conclusion it may be expressed that all the Bodos are depending on agricultural products. They are also skillful in carpentry, weaving and other equally useful trades. Missionaries working among the Bodos should be able to exploit all these talents in order to raise the living standard of the Bodos. The larger goal is to improve the well-being of the community. In either case it should be the missionary's aim to support the people to help themselves and not just give them handouts.¹⁴

The Christian Missionaries instilled in the minds of the Bodos a sense of self confidence, a sense of self-identity, economic sustainability and taught them to be rational. Through education and other humanitarian services they moulded the Bodo psyche and many who came in contact with them are confident, assertive, humanely rational and educationally and economically better. Thus it may be concluded that the services rendered by the Christian Missionaries have changed the lives of a section of the Bodos to a great extent.

Endnotes:

¹Basumatary, Ratul., 1993, Gospel and Bodos: An Ethnography study, New Delhi, p. 123.

² Cheney, D.N. and Webster., J.V., 2000, Not By Chance, Victoria, Published by Australian Baptist Missionary Society, Moore Potter House, 597 Burwood Road Hawthron, Victoria, 3122, p.126

³ Borgoyary, Hemen Ch., 1998, "J.D. William English School", in Jiu Dinga, 10th Issue, Chirang, p.38.

⁴ Basumatary, Alpona ., 1999, Report on the SSW project, 4th June, Tukrajhar, pp. 1-2.

⁵Basumatary, Ajit., Age-50., Vill: Tukrajhar, Dist-Chirang(Assam), Principal:Shalom Bible College, Tukrajhar (An informant), 20-07- 2015.

⁶ Half Yearly Council Minutes (Swrang Family Development Project Report) of the Association, 27 January 2006, Tukrajhar, pp. 1-2.

⁷ Taken from Three Years' Report (2004- 2006) of the Goalpara Boro Baptist Church Association (now Boro Baptist Church Association), Chirang, p. 2.

⁸ Annual Council Minutes (Boro Baptist Aid & Development or BBAiD Report) of the Association, 30,31 January and 1st February 2012, p. 1.

⁹ Daimary, Rev. Pravin., 2015, The Canaan: Mission and Vision of the Boro Baptist Convention, Udalguri, p. 16

¹⁰ Brahma, Pramila Rani, 1991, "Afatgirini Bibungthini: Sangdan, The Second Annual Conference, AATWWF, February, pp. iv-v.

¹¹Ignatius, Fr. Selvaraj., 2008, History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Bongaigaon, Bongaigaon, Published by Christ Light of the World Publications, Bishop's House, pp.19-20.

¹² Borgoyary, Rtd. Bishop Rev. Nityananda., Age-70, Vill: Tinali, Dist: Kokrajhar (Assam), An informant, 2-06-2015.

¹³ Basumatary, Ratul., 1993, Gospel and Bodos: An Ethnography study, New Delhi, pp.122-125.

¹⁴ Kane, Herbert., 1985, Understanding Christian Mission, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, p.335

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8. Daimary, Rev. Pravin., The Canaan: Mission and Vision of the Boro Baptist Convention, 2015, Udalguri (Assam)
9. Ignatius, Fr. Selvaraj., History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Bongaigaon, 2008, Bongaigaon.
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11. Half Yearly Council Minutes (Swrang Family Development Project Report) of the Association, 27 January 2006, Tukrajhar.
12. Taken from Three Years’ Report (2004- 2006) of the Goalpara Boro Baptist Church Association (now Boro Baptist Church Association), 2006, Chirang.
13. Annual Council Minutes (Boro Baptist Aid & Development or BBaiD Report) of the Association, 30,31 January and 1st February 2012, Chirang.