

THE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT AMONG THE BODO (The Process of Conversion to different Sects of Hinduism)

***DR.SEKHAR BRAHMA**

**Registrar, Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, BTC, Assam-783370(India)*

ABSTRACT

Hinduism is the major religious belief and tradition of the Boros of the Brahmaputra valley. A thorough analysis shows that the origin and development of the Bathou religion is also a part of the evolution of the spirit of the Hinduism in the sub-continent, India. So, to study various developments of the religion of the Boros, it is also necessary to survey Hinduism.

Keyword: *Hinduism, Vedas, Polytheism, Henotheism, Ditheism, Monotheism*

INTRODUCTION:

It is very difficult to define Hinduism because of its manifold forms. Unlike the Muslim or the Christian religion, Hinduism is neither a particular sect of belief or social system, nor it is a founded religion. "But as eternal truth they have existed all times. Their validity does not depend on the historicity of any human being at all."ⁱ Hinduism can be defined as a deposit of different beliefs, practices, knowledge, and values of different human races of the subcontinent since the inception of Indian civilization.

"Hinduism always absorbs anything that is good and valuable, from whichever quarter it may come. At the same time it also shares its wisdom with whosoever seeks it. Its doors are open to all, different modes of worship are welcome; different styles of living among the people of the world are welcome too....."ⁱⁱ Thus Hinduism is not a static social or religious code but it is a living and growing dynamic spirit. "The present form, in which we find Hinduism today is the product of long continuous course of evolution of the spirit of Hinduism through hundreds of centuries."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Vedas are the basic religious texts of the Hindus, and these truths were revealed to the sages and seers. But as eternal truth they existed at all times and it is always willing to absorb newer elements of values. The

Vedas were handed down orally from one generation of Brahmin to another for nearly three thousand years, with hardly any error. The Rig Veda is the oldest of Vedas having been composed between 1500 and 900 B.C.^{iv} Many a time Brahmanism is perceived to be real Hinduism. But the fundamental distinction between them is that, Brahmanism is a religion synonymous with Vedism prevailing in ancient India, but Hinduism refers to the entire stream of religion of the sub-continent, which has gone through several stages in its evolution. Hinduism, from within itself, evolved numerous branches and sub sections in different times and it has apparently originated from conflicting ideals and standard of values, religious faith and Philosophical doctrines, social customs and rules of individuals conduct etc. Different doctrines of Hinduism like Polytheism, Henotheism, Ditheism, Monotheism Pantheism, Theism, Absolute Monism came into being in different period.^v

The religion is the potent source, which had resulted into positional change of the Boros in the Hindu society. To understand the social mobility and the process of Hinduization it is foremost essential to know the religious development among the Boros. Religion from primitive to the modern age occupied a very important place in all the societies. The Boro religion could not remain in seclusion for a long time as it was akin to some cult of Hindu religion. The traditional Boro religion came into contact and influence of other religion since long. And some of them adopted completely a new religion by abandoning their traditional religion, belief and culture.

CONTACT WITH HINDU RELIGION:

The traditional *Bathou* religion is a monotheism, which believes in multiple gods and goddesses. Though in the traditional religion the Boro Kocharies have numerous gods and goddesses, most of the less important deities have either disappeared, or the Hindu deities have taken their place. As a result of their contact with Hindu religion, only a small number seems to be their original pantheon, many have been borrowed from their Hindu neighbours.^{vi} The three spines of the *Sijou* plant symbolize three principle deities, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar and they are worshipped with other deities like, Gaija, I-lanbai, Bisahari, Mahadev, Ranachandi, Jarapagla and others.^{vii}

It is found that the Hindu deities like, Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar, Bisahari, Mahadev, Ranachandi, lakhi etc. have been occupying prominent place among the *Bathou* pantheons. Many deities with Aryan names must have been borrowed from Hindus or the original names were replaced by Hindu names as a result of blending of Aryan culture.

Endle categorized the pantheon of Boro Kocharies into household deities and village deities. *Bathou* is evidence through his living symbol the *Sijou* plant in the courtyard of a home surrounded by circular fence of split

Bamboo. Among the numerous village deities many such as Mero Raja, Bura Mahadev, Bura Gosai, Jal Kuber, That Kuber, Kuber Brai, Kuber Brui- Kuber is the Hindu god of wealth of the lower religion.^{viii} S.N. Sharma writes, "Saivism which was the dominant religion of the rolling dynasties and also of the Hinduised population up to the twelfth century A.D. bears certain affinities with Boro tribal deity, Sibray Bathou. Siva represented by a *Lingo* in Hinduism is similarly represented by a cactus shoot in the Boro traditional religious belief. Hara and Parvati are sometimes worshipped in popular Hindu religion as Burdha Gohai (old god) and Budhi Gohai (old goddess). The Bodos also worship them similarly."^{ix}

It appears that many elements of *Saivism* sect of Hinduism came within the pale of *Bathou* religion or vice-versa, as a consequence of the foundation of classical Hindu thought and practice, since long back. The *Saivism* and the *Bathouism* are two diverse forms of the same cult of Hinduism who lead themselves to the same ultimate goal.

ADVENT OF BRAHMA DHARMA:

In the early years of the 20th century a new religious movement led by Kalicharan Mech, latter known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, took place in the Boro society. The new and refined cult known as *Brahma Dharma* was founded by Sivnarayan Param Hansa Swami, which was brought and preached among the Boros by Kalicharan Brahma in 1906 (Bangla 1312) and onwards.^x

On the eve of the 20th century, Boro society sunk in the mist of evil disorder, superstition backwardness etc. perhaps it was the darkest period in the History of Boro society. That was degradation and degeneration in the socio-economic life of the Boros. Excessive and regular use of liquor and meat in the name of religion and festivity had demoralised the common people as a whole.

There was chaos and confusion in the traditional religion as it has lost the original spirit of spirituality but none came forward to rescue the Boro society by reforming the evil practices. In the mean time, the Christian missionaries had started converting some Boros into Christianity some Boros became *Sarania* by adopting *Ek Saran Nam Dharam* of Srimat Shankardev and abandoned their original culture and language. In the villages like Panbari and Alamganj of the present Dhubri district many Boros were converted to Islam and lost their original identity. Even Kalicharan himself saw the Boros of Bainyaguri, Malotijhora, Auabari, becoming *Saraniya*.^{xi}

In such a critical period Kalicharan appeared as a messiah of the Boro society who realised that the Boros needed to be educated and the entire socio- economic and political condition need to be transformed and the traditional

Bathou religion did not suit for the time. On the other hand, Islam or *Ek Sharan Nam Dharma*, would not protect their identity, language and culture. At last he saw a ray of hope in *Brahma* religion, which would save the Boro society from that critical stage.

GURUDEV KALICHARAN BRAHMA:

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma (Kalicharan Mech) was born in the village of Kazigaon of Parbat Jowar area, under the present Dhubri district in 1862. His father Kaula Mech was a wealthy person. He received very little education. After learning two years under the private tutor Bir Narayan Sarkar, he came to Tipkai primary School and finished his education at Puthimary M. V. School. Then he began to study religious scriptures, Gita, Bible, Koran, Veda, Upanishad, etc. He was married at fifteen years of age. After the death of his father he carried on the Timber business of his father as *Ejadar*. Once when Kalicharan came to Charan Mandai Mech's camp for business purpose, he happened to see a book *Sar Nitya Kriya* about the Brahma religion, written by Mohini Mohan Chattapadhyay. After reading that book, Kalicharan was determined to meet Siv Narayan Param Hansa, the founder of Brahma religion, at Calcutta. In 1905, Kalicharan along with his friends Karan Mandai Mech, Charan Mandai Mech and Jamadar Mech went to Calcutta and met Swami Siv Narayan Param Hansa at Bhabanipur Road. On the advice of Siv Narayan, Kalicharan devoted himself to the study of Amrit Sagar, Gita, Vedas, Upanishad, Ramayan, Mahabharat, etc. and from Swami he learnt about the teaching of Brahma Dharma and started preaching among the Boros.

In 1906, Kalicharan brought Phanindra Chatterjee, one of the preachers of Brahma religion from Calcutta and under his *Purohit* the first *Hum Yajna* was performed in the village Bainyaguri with the *Gayatri Mantram*.

Om Ayahi Barde Devi Tyagare

Brahma badini, Gayatri Chandasan

Mato Brahmajoni Namahastote.

Thousands of Boro people participated in the *Yajnahuti*. It was for the first time that the Vedic religion began to embrace thousands of Boro people within its realm. In the same year the second *Yajnahuti* was performed, on a large scale, at Kazigaon, the birth of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. Similar *Yajnas* were also performed at Gombhira Khata in 1907 and at Banshijora in 1908. In 1908, Kalicharan Brahma for the first time performed a *Yajnahuti* as *Purohit*, on the occasion of *Mahalaya*, at Borkella hill top of Rajdambra near Borshijhora village. It was attended by thousands of Boros, who accepted the new religion warmly.

SPREAD OF BRAHMA DHARMA:

Being enlightened on Vedic scriptures Kalicharan Brahma preached Brahma religion in the entire Parbat Jowar area of present Dhubri district, and in villages like Adabari, Auabari, Banargaon, Khashibari of Kokrajhar district and also in the villages like Roumari, 94Khagrabari, Bamungaon, Dangaigaon, etc. of present Bongaigaon district and gradually spread to many other areas.

By that time Christian missionaries had established schools or hospitals at Gaurang, Bengtal, Tukrajhar, Grahampur, Haraputa, Joima and converted many Boros into Christianity, along with other tribes like, Rabha, Santal, Garo, etc. but the spread of Brahma religion completely checked further conversion of Boros into Christianity. Even some newly converted Boro Christians came back to Brahma religion.

In his work of preaching, Kalicharan was not without obstruction, he was oppose by Rai Saheb Jagat Chandra Mauzadar of fourth division Sidli, who wanted to make Boros Saraniya with the Help of Ananta Narayan Goswami of Baithamari. But Kalicharan could convince him and Mauzadar admired his knowledge of Hindu scriptures. Thus many Boros came under the main fold Hinduism by accepting Hindu religion.

Besides Assam, he went to Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, where he was helped by prominent personalities, Bag Mandai, Biman Sing Khatam and Haridas Gabur, etc. and preached Brahma religion among the Boros of West Bengal.

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma was assisted by many prominent and enlightened Boros in his work of proselytizing, who were also his disciples like, Charan Mandai Brahma of Bainyaguri, Jamadar Brahma of Patakata, Bir Narayan Brahma of Daulabari, Kalicharan Brahma (Second) of Simbargaon, Bantri Kr Bralm1a of Bamunkura, Karan Mandai of Patakata, Malsing Brahma Choudhury of Patakata, Monbaru Brahrna of Bhalukmari, Dwijendra Bath Brahma of Basbari, Sabha Brahma of Bhalukmari, Shyam Charan Brahma of Daulabari, Rupnath Brahma (Ex Minister of Assam)938-1967), Padmashri Madaram Brahma (litterateur) etc.^{xiii}

From 1913 to 1914, Kalicharan visited Krishnai Dudnoi and Rangjuli of South Goalpara and gave sermon among the Boros. He was warmly assisted by Narapati Basumatary and Yudhisthir Hajoary of Kharalalpara village of Dudnoi and accepted by the people. In 1940, under the initiative of Yudhisthir Hajoary and Narapati Basumatary the *Dinananda Shanti Ashram* was established at Loreng hill near Daranggiri for the spread of *Brahma dharma* among the Boros.

In 1914-15, Gurudev went to Dibrugarh district along with his disciples, Kalicharan Brahma II, Yadav Chandra Khakhlary and Jadunath Khakhlary and preached among the Boros of the district. He also went to Nagaon district and converted large number of Boros to *Brahma dharma*.

The most remarkable development after embracing Brahma religion was the change of their Surname. Many Boros used to write Mech after their name, which was thought as *Mlechcho* (a non-Hindu) by the Aryans and they regarded Mech as *Sudra* caste and look down or despised them. When Kalicharan discussed the matter with Siv Narayan Param Hansa, he advised that Boros should write 'Brahma' after their name. In 1911 Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma appealed to the Deputy Commissioner and the census commissioner of Goalpara district to allow the change their surname and henceforth the followers of *Brahma Dharma* were entitled to write Brahma after their name. However they were given the right to take either Brahma or the original titles like, Basumatary, Narzary, Mushahary, Daimary, Goyary, etc. after their name.

BORO MAHA SANMILAN:

Along with the preaching of *Brahma dharma*, Gurudev went ahead with reformation mission to uplift the Backward Boro society. With a view to accomplish his missionary work he organized the first meeting of the *Boro Maha San milan* in 1921 at Bhauraguri village of Gossaigaon under Goalpara district (then). Thousands of people attended the *Maha Sanmilan*. It was the first socio-religious upsurge in the Bodo society. Rupnath Brahma then a student was the Secretary of the sub-committee. Along with the prolonged religious deliberation the conference resolved to work for the development of the Boro society and for the uplift of Education. With the increasing and wider appreciation of the value of reform, the spiritual life of man rose correspondingly higher in society.

The Second Boro Maha Sanmilao was held in Rangia of Kamrup district in 1925. The Chairperson of this *Sanmillan* was Madhav Sharma of Tejpur. Other important personalities of this conference were Sobharam Brahma, Yadav Chandra Khakhlary, Ravi Kochari, Yogendra Kochari, Sabha Uzir, Gopal Uzir, Durga Mauzadar etc. The Boros of different parts of Assam and Bengal had come to participate in the *Sanmilan*. As a matter of fact the huge Assembly experienced this height of spiritual ecstasy. The *Sanmilan* in the august presence of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, endorsed the resolution adopted in the first *Sanmilan* and further adopted some reformative resolutions. Some of the important resolutions with regard to social elevation are as follows.

1. Liquor is a source of miseries and evils in the society. The preparation and use of liquor be totally banned.

2. Pig breeding was to be restricted as it makes the whole compound of the house dirty and pollute the environment. Moreover, it was one of the reasons for being hated by the Hindus.
3. The only way to elevate the Boro Society was the spread of education among the mass people. So, education should be compulsory for all boys and girls.
4. The bride price was fixed to rupees fifty-ol"l:e only, which was unlimited, even sometimes it was more than thousand in those days. In case of widow, only rupees twenty-five might be demanded. If some body demands more than that he would be punishable by the society.
5. A periodical, in this respect, should be published to cultivate the intellectual faculty of the Boro people. The women organization should be formed and encouraged.

The propitiation of deities and spirit should be given up. In 1929 the third *Boro Malta Sanmilan* was held at Roumari near Bongaigaon. The *Sanmilan* was presided over by Yadav Chandra Khak.hlary and the distinguished guests, Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Nilmoni Phukan, the famous Assamese litterateurs, also attended the conference. The conference discussed the various aspects to popularize the *Brahma* religion among the Boros and to make the people conscious of their duty towards the new religion. The most important and interesting issue in the conference was Gurudev' s suggestion to forsake the traditional musical instruments like, *Kham* (drum), *Siphung* (flute) *Jotha* (cymbals) and the traditional Boro dances. He took a view that these traditional musical instruments and dances were associated with traditional religion *Kherai Puja* or with sacrifice of animals, birds and use of liquor or propitiation of deities or spirits. But his disciples like Phorlang Babaji (Nepal Chandra Basumatary), Rupnath Brahma and Satish Chandra Basumatary did not uphold the Gurudev's view. Phorlang Babaji, one of his disciples and preacher of Brahma dhanna, held the strong view that Boro culture and identity could not survive without traditional music and dance. Both religion and traditional culture should co-exist for the survival of great Boro race. Gurudev ultimately withdrew his proposal. ^{xiii}

Thus, simultaneously with the spread of Brahma dharma among the Boros, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma also gained firm ground for social reforms, which had far reaching consequences in the development of Boro_community as a whole. The era of Kalicharan Brahma marked a new epoch in Sanskritizing the Boros with new religion and culture. The period witnessed a significant development in the history of the Boro community, as for instance in the subsequent years a considerable number of Boros achieved higher education in various streams, the Boro language and literature began to develop in the hand of new generations and various intellectual and social organization came into existence with a new outlook and innovation. It has brought certain change in the position and status of the Boro Society. And gradually the Boros were able to secure a high position and good attention in the Hindu society.

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