

# Religion As A Catalyst For Mobilization: Defining and Redefining Religion in the Bodo Movement

Pankaj Borah\*

Assistant Professor in Political Science Dhakuakhana College (Autonomous), Assam.

\*Corresponding Author Email: pborah6@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Religion has often been used with evil intentions, becoming a key factor in spreading hatred in many parts of the world today. However, it can also serve as a powerful tool for mobilizing and organizing people for positive causes. Though it is generally viewed religion as a private matter but close observation reveals its significant role in various social interactions also. Religion has become a powerful mobilising force globally. Regarding Bodos, the largest plain tribe of Assam, it has been observed that a portion of them has embraced various sects of Hinduism through a long process of assimilation, while a fraction has converted to Christianity. In the early 20th century, the Bodo people witnessed the rise of the 'Brahma Movement,' aimed at reducing conversions and unifying the community. While the movement was somewhat successful, some individuals, having been initiated by different Hindu Gurus, retained their new identity as 'Saraniya,' a separate identity from the Bodos. Then with a revivalist ambition Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha was established in 1990s and since its establishment the Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha has been working tirelessly to revive religious traditions and promote the unification of the Bodo people. This revivalism plays a key role in their movement for a separate socio-cultural and political identity.

**Keywords:** Assamese, Bodo, Mobilisation, Religion, Revivalism.

## INTRODUCTION

The use of religion with vested interest and with evil intentions has made it the prime factor of spreading hatred among people in many parts of the present day world. But at the same time, religion can be a means of mass mobilization and device of organizing people for a good reason also. Though in a general manner, religion is considered as an exclusive private matter, but close observation reveals the fact that religion plays the role of a determinant of various social transactions too. While discussing the relationship between state, society and religion, S.K. Mitra observed that 'religion provides the moral basis of state's authority, as well as an institutional and metaphysical structure for social transactions.' (Mitra, 1991:755-777)

It is said that 'religions by and large, tend to accommodate their ethical codes to existing social circumstances. It may, then, happen that a religion or certain aspects of a religion become popular as they adjust better to the changes in the economic and social order. This is what Marx said in 1867 with respect to Christianity, but specially its bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, & c. as being more suited to the conditions of rising capitalism' (Habib, 2012: xii). In this context Marxist aphorism 'religion is the sigh of oppressed creatures, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people' (Marx, 1844) sees economic transaction as the driving force of history, has importance. Despite the postulation that religion is an epiphenomenon of an exploitative economic structure works as an instrument of smooth exploitation, its role to organise people, to fight against the exploitative social order is now widely recognised. Religion is seen by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to have a direct relationship to the socialist revolution and to revolutionary forms in general. For Gramsci "production is both physical and mental. Consequently, the resultant so called 'material infrastructure' and 'cultural superstructure' of societal institution one so often meets in Marxist sociology or seen by him as co-determining in a dialectical sense, rather than the former determining the later." (Fulton, 1987: 197-216).

In any event religion is always a political force. In the context of the relationship between religion, politics and social change Max Weber's (1864-1920) *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit Capitalism* (1905) says that the protestant ethic was an important force behind the development of capitalism in northern Europe. Rebert N. Bellah (1927-2013) in his *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (1957) however demonstrated that it was not only Protestantism that helped capitalism grows but religions in

other social context too possessed such potentiality (Sharma, 2011). Religion is being used widely as a mobilizing force in the whole world. In this context, the religious revivalism by the Bodos has importance. It is seen that, the Bodos have been trying to unite members of their community on the basis of religious beliefs, who were fragmented on the same ground in the movement for a separate socio-cultural and political Bodo identity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional religion of the Bodos which is current among them since time immemorial is invariably lined up with the worship of *Bathow brai* or *Sibrai*, the supreme god of the Bodos. After the name of the supreme god *Bathow brai* their religion is known as *Bathow* religion (Bodo, 2010:8). According to P.C. Bhattacharya '*the Bodos of the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley narrate their origin of creation in relation to the worship of Bathow. Bathow represents the five basic elements of creation. He is also known as Sibrai (Siva). Bathow or Sibrai with his wife created this universe. Bathow created the sizu plant (Euphorbia Splendens), the first tree which stands as an emblem of the supreme god in altar*' (Narzi, 2015: xvii).

It is worth to mention that traditional religion of the Bodos is worshipping the God *Bathow*. But time has brought many changes to the religious traditions of the Bodos. Especially, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, various discords and disorders took place among the Bodos regarding the issue of religion. As a result of constant supervision and efforts of the Christian Missionaries many tribal people went through the process of conversion. A section of the Bodos too showed the tendency to convert to Christianity and a large number of Bodos accept Christianity within a short span of time. At the same time, another group of people got attracted towards Hinduism rather than their traditional way of worship. This group especially went to take *sarana* from the *gossains* of the *satra* institution. By taking *sarana* to the vaishnavite *gossains* they started identifying themselves as *saraniya* and started considering themselves as more pure than the others. Regarding the rise of *Saraniyas* among the Bodos Bhabendra Narzi states "A few Bodo-Kacharis are disciples of some Aryan *Goswamigurus*. They received 'initiation *mantras*' from such gurus and became popular as *Saraniya*. They considered themselves as 'pure' from the day they were initiated. They discarded their traditional language and culture and started to speak in Assamese (Ibid.18)". Hence, in this period a large number of Bodos either became Christians or Hindus and the rest continued to carry forward their traditional *Bathow* worshipping. This religious division acts as hindrance of unity among all sections of the Bodo people and the fact became distinct soon. The religious difference posed as a big challenge to all Bodos to come forward to tackle various common problems. It is worth to mention that the conflict between the Christian Bodos and the other Bodo groups took an unexpected turn later.

Regarding the religious divisions among Bodos Bhabendra Narzi says, "The Bodos or the Bodo-Kacharis are permanent settlers of the Brahmaputra Valley, North Bengal, Cachar district, Tripura and South Nepal. It is seen that they have accepted many religions as Christianity, *Brahma*, *Saraniya Kachari* and some became *Sarukoch* from *Saraniya* etc. Those who became Christians now follow the Christian way of life. Though they use the ancient Bodo-Kachari

language, but they no longer follow the traditional beliefs and rituals of the Bodos. They sing folk and prayer songs in Missionary taught English tunes. (Ibid. p. 17).

One of the main reasons of the religious divisions in the Bodo society was the process of assimilation of the Bodos to the Assamese formation. Analysing the position of the Bodos in Assamese formation M.S. Prabhakara wrote 'it is doubtful that Bodos were really considered part of Assamese society while they remained Bodos. Their acceptance into the Assamese society was dependent on their acceptance of Hinduism, which also meant, in course of a few generations the loss of the native speech and the adoption of Assamese language. Those who remained outside Hindu caste order remained '*Kacharis*' a term which at least in private conversation among caste Hindu Assamese, continues to have traditional pejorative connotations.' (Prabhakara, 1974:2100) The history of the assimilation of the Bodos and of many tribal peoples into Assamese formation provides one of the most dramatic examples of how Indic civilisation of India's north eastern periphery managed to recruit converts from the primitive peoples, and of the continuity between caste and the supposed 'primitive isolates' the tribes (Baruah, 2003:108). It is mentionable that due to the practice of *Bathowism*, like consumption of pork, chicken and brewing and drinking *zou* and *zumai*, the upper caste Hindus often relegated these tribal groups to a somewhat subservient ranking in the socio-cultural hierarchy (Saikia, 2011:56). In the cultural trend of differentiation among the Bodos today are those in the realm of religious practices. There is a revival of the worship of *Bathow* as the supreme god. *Bathowpuja* has become the most common form of religion-especially noticeable among the educated sections, who have returned to the practice. The courtyards of many Bodo families have an altar of *Bathow*. While the intent to differentiate from the Assamese vaishnavite Hindu practices is apparent, the relationship of Bodo traditional religion to Saivite and Shakta Hinduism however is more complex. For the history of Bodo interaction Hindu culture precedes the conversation of Bodos under the vaishnava *gosains* since the sixteen century. Some Bodos refer their deity *Bathow* as name of Hindu god Shiva (Baruah, 2003:184).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study is multi-dimensional with a focus on qualitative interview and participatory observation as the main research methods. Leaders of Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha is being interviewed and conferences of these organizations attended. The interviews were open-ended. The present work is of a qualitative and interpretative nature. Attempt was made to make the study as rational and scientific as possible without being influenced by prior objectivity and ideological influence.

## DISCUSSION

### The Brahma Movement and Religious Revivalism

The overall impact of the religious divisions among the Bodos in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a negative one for the existence of the community. In this environment when the Bodos almost drifted apart from each other on the pretext of religion, Kalicharan Brahma (1860-1938) started the *Brahma* Movement in 1907. The movement worked as a positive catalyst in unity of the Bodos. It tried to bring Bodo people together under a particular religious doctrine

that was otherwise divided in the name of religion. Rather than calling it only a religious movement, we should consider the *Brahma* Movement as a socio-economic reform movement. Kalicharan's intellectual and philosophical conceptions were deeply influenced by Bengal renaissance and more particularly, the socio-religious reformation of *BrahmaSamaj*, which later culminated in the foundation of the *Brahma* religion. In addition, Sankaradeva's teaching of Vaishnavism remained an integral part of Kalicharan's philosophy (Bhattacharjee, 1996:72-73.).

It is noteworthy that the reform centric socio-cultural as well as religious *Brahma* Movement initiated by Kalicharan *Brahma* emerged as a strong pillar of unifying process of the Bodos. The socio-economic reformist activities of the movement paved a new way for Bodo people. The religious side of the movement brought the Bodos together. The entire activities of the *Brahma* Movement immensely attracted the Bodos. Within a very short period of time a large number of Bodo people started to accept and use the surname *Brahma* as a sign of faith and loyalty to '*BrahmaDharma*'.

Regarding '*BrahmaDharma*', Narzi comments, "*Arya samaji* Kalicharan Brahmachari propagated *Brahma Dharma* among the Bodos. The Bodo-Kacharis initiated to this *dharma* are found in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, the Mikir Hills and Lakhimpur district etc. The *Brahmas* follow the same ancient language and ways of expression of the Bodos. The items and elements used by the Bodos-Kacharis as a part of their culture are used by the Bodo-Kacharis who initiated *Brahma* too. But on the occasions like marriage, birth, death and some other social functions they offer *Hom Jagya*, unlike their traditional system of worshiping. They do not perform *pujas* or rituals to satisfy any God or Goddess or cast away evils like the traditional beliefs of the Bodos. The *Brahmas* too offer '*Kherai*' to celebrate the *Kherai* festival. But they stay away from the rituals of sacrifice which is customary to the Bodos. Instead, the *Brahmas* offer '*prasadas*', fruits and flowers during their worship. The *mantras* used during the *puja* or worshipping ceremonies are same as followed by the Bodo-Kacharis. Most of the *Brahma Dharma* initiated Bodos are spiritual in nature" (Narzi, 2015:17-18.).

The *Brahma* Movement by Kalicharan *Brahma* not only strengthen the socio-economic base of the Bodos through their various reform programme, but gave them a single 'religious ideology' too which united the Bodos otherwise separated by religion. This reformist movement had a far reaching effect on the Bodo society as it brought the Bodo society into the wider contract with the outside world and gradually generated a level of consciousness among them in terms of their ethnic identity.

### Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha and Religious Revivalism

In the process of organising the Bodos on the basis of religion and fighting for common issues of the society, Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha (All Bathow Confederation), the religious organisation, established in the early 90s has great importance. Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha was formally established on 16 May 1992. The main aim of the *Mahasabha* was to unite the Bodos on religious ground. Rupnath Basumatary was the first president of the *Mahasabha*. Banewar Basumatary and Mangalsing Hajowari were general secretary and chief organising secretary of the *Mahasabha* respectively. With an aim to reach all the Bodo people living in every corner of the state and to organise them

on religious ground the objectives of the *Mahasabha* are: 1. Conservation, transmission and publicity of the thousand years old *Bathow* religion among of the Bodos of the different parts of the country. 2. Revival of extinct or nearly extinct rite and rituals related to *Bathow* religion. Establishing *Bathow* as a reformed religion by eliminating religious superstitions and social evils. 3. Carrying the main teachings of the *Bathow* to the mass. 4. Establishing *Bathow* religion among religiously multi-diverged and geographically scattered Bodo people and unite them.

It is worth to mention that the 1992 born organisation has built a strong organisational foundation for itself. It has taken many steps to spread *Bathow* religion among the Bodo people through various meetings and conferences. Its grassroots level organisation '*Anchalik Bathow Sangathan*' has been playing the most influential role in this regard. These organisations arrange discussions, meetings or conferences in their respective areas to highlight the original religion of the Bodos, i.e. the *Bathow*. They also focused its significance and glory, the importance of discarding evil practices and tradition from the society and religious unity etc. The organisation goes beyond its religious periphery and takes various social problems of the society for discussion and come out with solutions too. Another main topic of discussion hold by the organisation in various levels is the religious unification of the Bodo society.

It is an interesting fact that conversion to *Bathow* religion of many practitioners of other religions during meetings organised by the *Bathow Sangathan* have become a regular phenomenon. One such example is the meeting organised by Marigaon Anchalik Bathow Sangathan on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> December 2016. After the opening ceremony, fifteen families who had been practicing religion like *BrahmaDharma*, *Satsang* and *Krishna Guru* again embraced *Bathow* publicly.

Religion plays an important role to organise people of all strata of a particular community so that they can move together to solve their common problems. It is noticed that Bodo people from all walks of life have actively come forward to preserve and revive their religious rites-rituals and tradition. Analysing the situation Mongalsing Hazowari remarks.

'Though the Bodo-Kacharis living in various regions of Assam, speak different languages, yet they all can be proud of the fact that they all are believers of the *Bathow* rituals and tradition. *Bathow* is not only a religion, but a civilization, a culture as well. The Bodo-Kacharis of all over Assam may speak different language, they may practice *Krishna Guru*, *Satsanga* or *Shankari* philosophies, but they have been following *Bathow* as their common culture. Own religion, own tribe and own culture are inseparable entities. It is the pious duty of every individual to keep alive one's own religion, own tribe and own culture. Therefore, the Bodo-Kacharis of all strata should come forward to follow their own religion-Bathow.'

A continuous process has been going on among the Bodo-Kacharis to revive the religious tradition and mobilising people on the basis of religion. Many politically motivated organisations along with the religion based organisations like Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha have been playing active roles in this regard. '*Asom Bodo-Kachari Jatiya Parisad (Asomiya Bhasi)*' is another organisation which works to revive, preserve and enrich the ethnic existence, language, art and culture of



the Bodo-Kacharis (who speak Assamese) living outside the BTC areas. In this regard, celebration of its foundation day as the 'Siju Day' by 'Asom Bodo-Kachari Jatiya Parisad' which was established to ensure the overall development of the community in educational, socio-economic and spiritual field has significance. The organisation has been working for the overall development of the Bodo-Kacharis living outside the BTC area. The same organisation has been demanding the formation of the 'Boro-Kachari Autonomous Council' under the Indian Constitutional perimeter to ensure all round development of the Bodo-Kacharis. They explain the reason behind celebrating their foundation day as the 'Siju Day' "The *Siju* plant is a treasure of national life of the Bodo-Kacharis. This national plant bears spiritual and historical significance. The *Siju* is the symbol of the main God Shiva as believed by the Bodo-Kacharis, all spiritual rituals are conducted under the plant from ancient time. People listen to religious sermon, remember their rich tradition and play homage to Lord Shiva under the *Siju* plant. People regarded the plant as a benevolent God and pray to it for unity, peace, harmony and well-being. Honouring the relationship of the *Siju* plant with the history, religion and society of the Bodo-Kacharis, 'Asom Bodo-Kachari Jatiya Parishad' has decided to celebrate its foundation day as the 'Siju Day'. Interestingly the mouthpiece of this organisation is also named as 'Siju'.

It became very essential for the Bodos to differentiate their cultural elements from Assamese and establish them separately to revive the cultural heritage of the Bodo-Kacharis and to organise them on the basis of their heritage. The same differentiation is clear in the revival process of religious rules and rituals as well as tradition. Among practices of Bodos today that underline the urge to differentiate from the Assamese is a preference for burial over cremation. It is noteworthy that *Bodofa* Upendra Nath Brahma was buried and not cremated. Referring to the explanation of a Bodo activist regarding Upendra Nath Brahma's cremation Sanjib Baruah noted "the activist explained that the practice had stopped as a result of Assamization. *Bodofa* Upendra Nath Brahma wanted Bodo people to return to the practice of burying the dead and willed a burial for himself. According to the activist burials even have an additional advantage, it will ensure that our bones will tell future generations about us (Baruah, 2003.:184).

## CONCLUSION

Culture validates the existence of a nation or a particular ethnic group. It is the basic requirements to have the cultural elements such as religion, language, song, dance etc. unadulterated among people of the particular group which is trying to establish its unique socio-economic and political existence. It is well discussed that a part of the Bodos has accepted various sects of Hinduism as a result of a long assimilation process. Likewise, another small fraction has become followers of Christianity. There raised a

resurrection movement among the Bodos in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century named the '*Brahma* Movement'. Though, the movement was to some extent successful in reducing the rate of conversion and to unite the people but, a few who were initiated by different Hindu Gurus refused to discard their new identity of '*Saraniya*' an identity separate from Bodos. Nikhil Bathow Mahasabha, founded in the beginning of the 1990s has been trying ceaselessly for religious revivalism and unification of the Bodos from the day of its inception. It has been observed that the use of religion as a mobilizing force has proven crucial for the Bodo's efforts to unite. Religious revivalism has not only reinforced their separate cultural identity from Assamese but also provided a foundation for solidarity in their socio-political movement.

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