

Rise of Brahma Dharma and its Contribution on Bodo People: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract:

Bodo people are the largest plain tribes of the state of Assam, India. They have a rich cultural history and fought for identity for a long time. The paper is a part how the Bodo people under able leadership of some distinguished personality like Guru Kalicharan Brahma strive for the social betterment of the Bodo people who are designated as Scheduled Tribe (Plain) in Assam.

In the early years of the 20th century a new religious movement led by Kalicharan Mech, later on known as Srimat Kalicharan Brahma, (1860-1938), took place in the greater Bodo society. On the eve of the 20th century, there was chaos and confusion in the traditional religion among the Bodo people as it has lost the original spirit of spirituality but none came forward to rescue the Bodo society by reforming the evil practices. 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, Khasibari of Kokrajhar district and also in the village like Roumari, Khagrabari, Bamungaon, Dangaigaon, etc. of present Bongaigaon district and gradually spread to many other areas.

The contribution of the Brahma Dharma movement was multi-dimensional. It was the Brahma Dharma movement under the able leadership of Guru Kalicharan Brahma which provided the much needed self-confidence which is essential for a social group. It had not only brought social reformist agenda but also undertook economic, political as well.

Brahma Dharma movement was more than a religious movement. The movement encompasses economic, political, educational and socio-cultural interest of the Bodo people. The contribution of Guru Kalicharan Brahma to Indian society in general and to the Bodo in particular in regard to Brahma Dharma was very crucial in contemporary national and regional movement perspectives.

Keywords: Brahma Dharma, Bodo people, Guru Kalicharan Brahma

Introduction and Method of Study

In the early years of the 20th century a new religious movement, i.e. Brahma Dharma led by Kalicharan Mech, later on known as Srimat Kalicharan Brahma, (1860-1938), took place in the greater Bodo society. He was born on 18th April 1860 in the house of Khaularam Mech and Srimati Rangdini Mech. He went school in course of time, passed primary and middle school from Tipkai in Dhubri, of Kokrajhar of undivided Goalpara Sub-division.

On the eve of the 20th century, 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

religious and festivity had demoralized the common people as a whole.¹ 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 Bodo society by reforming the evil practices. In the meantime, the Christian missionaries had started converting some Bodos into Christianity and some Bodos became Sarania by adopting Ek Saran Nam Dharma of Srimat Shankardev and abandoned their original culture and language. In the villages like Panbari and Alamjanj of the present Dhuburi district many Boros were converted to Islam and lost their original identity. Even Kalicharan himself saw the Boros of Bainyaguri, Malotijhora, Auabari, becoming Sarania.²

One day at noon, he went to Sri Charan Mandal's house, a neighbor residing at some distance from his place. His mind was full of bitter feeling, torture, and unrest and tired at broad daylight. He lay down on the bed of Charan Mandal as he was not at home. He saw a book named 'Saar Nitya Kriya' (a religious book) and read it attentively. It inspired him to do something for the aimless people to bring them back to the right path.³ Book 'Saar Nitya Kriya' was written by Srimat Parahansa Sivanarayan Swami of Calcutta. Kalicharan went to Calcutta (now Kolkata) along with his friends Karan Mandal Mech, Charan Mandal Mech and Jamadar Mech. He became the disciple of Srimat Paramhansa Sivanarayan Swami and learnt attentively the way of enlightenment. On his advice, he studied Amrit Sagar, Gita, Vedas, Upanishad, Ramayan, Mahabharat, etc, and from Swami he learnt about the teaching Brahma Dharma and started preaching among the Bodos.

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. Thousands of Boro people participated in the Hum Yajna. In 1908, Kalicharan Brahma for the first time performed a yajnahuti as Purohit, on the occasion of Mahalaya, at Borkella hilltop of Rajdambra near Borshijhora village. It was attended by thousands of Boros warmly.⁴

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, Khasibari of Kokrajhar district and also in the village like Roumari, Khagrabari, 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, Santhal, Garo, etc. but the spread of Brahma religion completely checked further conversion of Bodos into Christianity. Even some newly converted Bodo Christians came back to Brahma religion.

In his work of preaching, Kalicharan was not without obstruction, he was opposed by Rai Saheb Jagat Chandra Mauzadar of 4th division, Sidli, who wanted to make Bodos Sarania with the help of Ananta Narayan Goswami of Baithamari. But Kalicharan could convince him and Mauzadar admired his knowledge of Hindu scriptures. Thus many Bodos came under the manifold Hinduism by accepting Hindu Religion.

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

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma was assisted by many prominent and enlightened Bodos in his work of proselytizing, who were also his disciples like, Charan Mandal Brahma of Bainyaguri, Jamadar Brahma of Patakata, Bir Narayan Brahma of Daulabari, Kalicharan Brahma (Second) of Simbargaon, Bantri Kr. Brahma of Bamunkura, Monbaru Brahma of Bhalukmari, Dwijendra Nath Brahma of Basbari, Sabha

Brahma of Bhalukmari, Shyam Charan Brahma of Daulabari, Rupnath Brahma (Ex-Minister of Assam, 1938-1967), Padmashri Modaram Brahma (litterateur), etc.⁵

The most remarkable development after embracing Brahma religion was the change of their Surnames. Many Bodos used to write Mech after their name, which was thought as Mlechch (a non-Hindu) by the Aryans and they regarded Mech as Sudra caste and looked down or despised them. When Kalicharan discussed the Siva Naraya Param Hansa, he advised that Bodos should write 'Brahma' after their names. In 1911 Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma applied to the Deputy Commissioner and the Census Commissioner of Goalpara to allow the change of the 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, Gayary, etc. after their name.⁶

As the introduction part depicts the paper is a descriptive one. Sources are basically secondary. On the basis of those sources an analysis is made.

Objective:

The principal objective of the study is :-

1. Socio-economic and political contribution of Brahma Dharma over Bodo People in general and the larger impact of the same in particular.

Contributions of Brahma Movement

The contribution of the Brahma Dharma movement was multi-dimensional. It was the Brahma Dharma movement under the able leadership of Guru Kalicharan Brahma which provided the much needed self-confidence which is essential for a social group. It had not only brought social reformist agenda but also undertook economic, political as well.

1. Social Reformist Program

The first meeting of the Bodo Maha Sanmilen was held in 1921 at Bhauraguri village of Gossaigaon under the undivided Goalpara district. Along with the prolonged religious deliberation the conference resolved to work for the development of the Bodo society and for the uplift of education. The reformative steps upheld in the Second Bodo Maha Sanmilen can be out-lined in the following way-

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 Bodo 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-one, 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 somebody 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 Bodo people. The women organization should be formed and encouraged.
6. The propitiation of deities and spirit should be given up.

Formation of women organization and publication of periodical mouthpiece for the growth of socio-cultural consciousness among the man and women constituted an agenda of reformed movement. This

resolution was made in tune with reform movement that was taken in other places of India.

In the second Mahasanmilani which was held at Rangia a resolution was adopted to submit a memorandum to the District Commissioner of Goalpara for keeping Goalpara district within Assam.

In the Third Bodo Mahasanmilani which was held at Roumari Jyoti Ashram, Bongaigaon, was attended by many social workers and leaders like Phurlung Babaji, Katimal brahma, Narapati Basumatari, Belbung Sardar Bahadur, Karendra Narayan Mandal, Gopal Uzir, Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, Bali Chand Debkhari, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Malsingh Brahma, Dinananda Swami, Adityananda Swami and others. In the Sanmilani some important social measures were resolved. Those measures were-

1. To avoid jau (rice beer), considering it as the curse for the Bodo people;
2. To stop rearing pigs;
3. To stop Bodo girls and women from going to public places in dirty dresses; and
4. To stop dragging and stealing young girls of the society.

The fourth Mahasanmilani of the Brahma Movement a 'Pandulipi' (manuscript) of one hundred and twenty six clauses, all about the socio-cultural-religious-economic-political ethics, etc., was submitted. In that Mahasanmilani many Bodo leaders and social workers from West Bengal, Kamrup, Nowgoan, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh attended with great hope and curiosity. The clauses relate to religious ceremony, ashram, priest expenditure, prohibition of rice wine, pig rearing, illicit physical relationship and punishment, religious rites on the dead body, purification through Ahuti, etc.

A few other clauses refer to limitations of power of the Mouza (joint villages) in reference to Brahma religion, marriage, widows' benefits, adoption, dress, ornaments, culture, language upliftment, etc. The book has focused light on all sides of the Bodo society to bring and uplift them from their slumberous stage to enlightenment.⁷

2. On Educational Field

The contribution of Brahma Dharma Movement on educational life can be listed as follows-

1. "When the Chief Commissioner, Assam visited Dhubri, Kalicharan with the help of the Deputy Commissioner of Dhubri, Mr. A.J. Ley, met him and submitted a memorandum requesting him to establish educational institution in the Boro areas as the poor Boros could not afford to go for study to Dhubri or the other town. As a result of this effort an amount of rupees thirty thousand was sanctioned for the establishment of three institutions, one Middle School, one Weaving centre and one Carpentry centre at Tipkai near railway station, and several primary schools came into existence in 1921. But these institutions were shifted to Sapatgram against the will of Kalicharan Brahma."⁸
2. Till 1917, the Bengali language was the medium of instruction in the schools of the Kokrajhar sub-division of undivided Goalpara district, whereas the Bodos were much closer to the Assamese culture and society. In 1916, Kalicharan Brahma submitted a memorandum to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, pleading to introduce the Assamese language as the medium in the subsequent years. The Bodo language was introduced as medium of instruction in the primary level of schools much later in 1963, and subsequently it was upgraded to Secondary level.
3. With view to assisting the Bodo students in pursuing education Kalicharan founded the 'Brahma Boarding' at Dhubri. As the first step, Brahma Boarding decided to form a student organization in 1915 and to mobilize mass opinion. And under the active initiative and leadership of Rupnath Brahma and Modaram Brahma., the disciple of Kalicharan Brahma, the Boro Chatra Sanmilani took birth in 1919 at Kokrajhar town.⁹ The important measures of the Sanmilai were-

1. To encourage the poor students in pursuing education, Sanmilani introduced a fund namely, *Daridra Boro Chatra Bhandar*. Late Joy Chandra Brahma was the Secretary of the trust. The amount of the scholarship was rupees three for the students of High School and rupees two for the students of Middle School.
2. To award silver medals to the outstanding students. This decision was taken in the fifth session of the Sanmilani.
3. The Sanmilani organized huge gathering and distribute awards to talented students, every year for the cause of uplifting education in the Boro people. On 10th January 1925, another gathering of the Sanmilani was held at No. 190 Gilaguri Primary School and it provided all the required books, papers, pen and other materials in their school curriculum to those students: (a) who secured position in the scholarship examination, (b) who skilled for the best handwriting, (c) who had good moral character.

Gurudeva Kalicharan Brahma gave importance to education and so established an M.E. School at Tipkai in A.D. 1912 along with the Weaving and Carpentry school with the help of the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara. He tried to upgrade the school he had established to a high school in the year 1916.

3. In Economic field

After the emergence of the *Brahma Dharma*, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma formed the *Riot Sabha* or *Raijoni Affat* to make the peasants conscious about their pitiable condition, and Gurudev himself became the Chairman of the Sabha for life. Through that Sabha he worked for the cause of the illiterate peasants and saved them from the exploitation of corrupt businessman. Thus he enabled the peasants to get appropriate price for their product. It improved the condition of the cultivators to some extent.¹⁰

Gurudev Kalicharan realized that though many of Bodos were involved in timber trade, they made little progress due to lack of sound capital formation, and because of unorganized system of trade. With a view to assist these traders Gurudev Kalicharan founded the Brahma Company in 1872. Each and every member of the company had to contribute a share of rupees fifty to the company's fund in the time of need to run his business. The Brahma Company was successful for a few years, but it could not last very long time due to proper management. Yet, it led to a section of people to be economically prosperous in Bodo society.¹¹ Kalicharan Brahma founded a co-operative society known as Gram Hitaishi Sammittee in 1925 to assist the poverty-stricken farmers in the village. A memorandum was submitted to District Commissioner of Goalpara for minimizing taxes imposed upon the peasants.

4. On political field

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma gave his strong support to non-violent movement led by Mahatma Gandhi through a resolution adopted in a meeting of Brahma Company in 1920. He appealed the Zaminders of Bagribari and Rupshi and the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara for reduction of taxes of timber trade. In 1927, Gurudev submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission at Shillong for the solution of genuine grievances faced by the Tribal people of Assam and put an urge for the formation Tribal League. In 1932, Gurudev revolted against the oppressive measure taken by the Zaminders on Bodo people. He met Mahatma Gandhi when he attended a public meeting at Rupshi, in 1921. Gurudev apprised Mahatma Gandhi about the miserable socio-economic conditions of the Bodo people. Mahatma Gandhi warmly embraced and appreciated Gurudev Kalicharan for his leadership in reformation of Bodo society. Due to his innumerable and untiring services rendered to Bodo community the non-Bodo people

called Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma as ‘Mech-Gandhi’. What Panchanan Varma worked for Namasudras in Bengal, in similar tune Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma worked for the upliftment of the Bodos in Assam. His central theme of movement was Brahma Dharma and other reformation activities were revolved around the religion.¹²

Conclusion:

Concluding remarks of Brahma Dharma movement can be stated as follows.

1. Brahma Dharma movement was more than a religious movement.
2. The movement encompasses economic, political, educational and socio-cultural interest of the Bodo people.
3. The formation of Tribal League, retention of Goalpara district within Assam, retention of Assam with Indian union, his initiative and vision for the development of education, social and economic reformation etc. are some areas of great contribution of Brahma Dharma
4. The able leadership of Kalicharan Brahma which project him more than religious guru but as great visionary, master, friend, philosopher and leader of the Bodo society. In the words of Binoy Kumar Brahma “His contribution to Indian society in general and to the Bodo in particular will only come into total focus when we examine his works, activities and roles during his life time with reference to contemporary national and regional movement, perspectives.”¹³

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