

History of Social Change Among the Bodo-Kachari Tribes of Assam During the Pre-Independence Period

Dr. Asha Basumatary

Associate Professor, Dept. of History, Tangla College, Tangla

Abstract

The paper explores the historical context of social change that occurred through religious conversion among the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam during India's pre-independence period. The Bodo-Kacharis were once one of the most powerful tribes of Assam, who preserved their unique cultures, traditions and customs along with the traditional *Bathou* religion for ages. Before independence, they faced new ideas and values from many institutionalized religions, such as Neo-Vaishnavism, Christianity and Brahma dharma as well as other minor sects, which made inroads into their society. The advent of these religions among them is so significant that it made immense contributions to the socio-cultural, economic and political changes in their society. The Bodo-Kacharis, popularly known as *Boros* or *Bodos* are the primitive tribes of India's Northeast, particularly of Assam. To many scholars, they are very simple-minded people and fond of natural life. Accordingly, they worshipped nature God for ages. However, during the pre-independence period, a section of them adopted many new norms and values from other institutionalised religions, such as Neo-Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankardeva, Christianity, Brahma dharma, a Hindu denomination, and other sects, instead of the *Bathou* religion. Besides this, after independence, many sects of the Hindu religion, like Satsang Vihar, Krishna guru and Joy guru also came into contact with Bodo-Kacharis, which brought about some changes in the socio-economic, cultural and religious doings. The entire process of change usually continued in the form of assimilation and acculturation among the Bodo-Kacharis, probably from the mid-17th century onwards, when they firstly faced a new religion, Neo-Vaishnavism as per the evidence found in some historical texts.

Keywords: Social Change, Religion, Conversion, Acculturation, Bodo-Kacharis, Assam

Introduction

Before India's independence, the society of Bodo-Kacharis underwent various changes due to the cultural assimilation and acclimatization with many other Hindu castes of people in Northeast India, particularly in Assam. As well, a section of them accepted western values and norms after having converted to Christianity. For ages, the Bodo-Kachari tribes have maintained unique cultures, traditions and customs in the name of their traditional religion, *Bathou*. The socio-cultural activities of the tribes were indeed, acted in accordance with the philosophies and doctrines of their traditional *Bathou* religion. This religion is mainly based on nature worship, where Almighty God is worshipped in the name of *Bathoubrai* (Boro, 2004:38). But the situation changed tremendously when many other religious sects penetrated among the tribes of Assam. The changes had occurred in all the fields -social, cultural,

religious, economic and political. The religions that made inroads among them were the 'Eka-sarana naam' Dharma of neo-Vaishnavite religion of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Christianity, Brahma Dharma, Islam and other small sects. The fact is that in due course of time, the religion of Bodo-Kacharis once came under the onslaught of all these religions. In contrast, probably from the mid-17th century onwards, the *Bathou* religion could not pacify a section of the people for its redundant practices of rites and rituals. At that time, thoughts in connection with the upward social mobility among the people had already been spread not only in the Northeast states but also all over India, as reflected in some literature. This is clearly evident from the fact that a section of Bodo-Kachari tribes tried to upgrade their social status in society by way of two means, either conversion into another religion or adoption of other cultures after having discarded their social customs, traditions and religious functions. This, in fact, led to the process of socio-cultural acclimatization, assimilation and acculturation among the Bodo-Kachari tribes with other caste people of Assam. As a result of it, they faced many new thoughts, ideas and concepts, manners especially derived from doctrines of other religions that had already arrived among them during the colonial period. Besides this, it is also clearly apparent that social transformation in the form of acclimatization and adoption of culture mainly occurred in the two forms, namely westernization and Hindunization or Sanskritization. It is true that if there is a change in religion, there is a change in society and culture because both society and religion are closely interrelated. So, the conversion and adoption of other religions and cultures by a section of the Bodo-Kachari tribes sometimes, brought some complex problems into their community's social and religious functions. But the changes with regard to education, social and political cognizance among them, could be observed from the days of the adoption of other cultures after having converted into other religions, while traditional religious ideas could not appease the thirst of a section of them during that time.

Materials and Methods

The present paper aims at exploring the historical milieu of social transformation that occurred among the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam through religious conversion into different sects during the pre-independence period. The process of acclimatization and acculturation, and reasons thereof, in their society will be analyzed historically. The study for this paper is mainly based on descriptive, historical and analytical research. The relevant data, whatever is collected from reliable sources, mainly includes both primary and secondary. The primary data comprises field study and personal interviews, especially taken from prominent social workers and religious devotees. The secondary sources include published books, journals, magazines, mouthpieces and web sources, etc.

Historical Background of the Bodo-Kacharis

The Bodo-Kacharis are the autochthonous and ethnic tribes of Northeast India, particularly of Assam. They belonged to the Tibeto-Burman speaking tribes, which were mainly descended from the Mongoloid. Regarding the Mongoloid, S.K. Chatterji in her book '*The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*' refers to their early settlement in Assam and formation of the parts of India's civilization from ancient times, as well as becoming a part of India's body politic. (Chatterji,1991:5-6). This suggests that the Bodo-Kacharis belonged to Mongoloid and the non-Aryan tribes of Northeast India. According to L. A. Waddell, the Bodo-Kacharis are semi-Hinduised Mongoloid tribes as they adopted many externals of Hinduism (Waddell,1901:45). However, they indeed consist of one of the most important groups of Indo-Mongoloid tribes. Accordingly, it seems that they settled very early in

the valley of river Brahmaputra. They are popularly known as Bodo/Boro or Bodo-Kacharis. They are the largest ethnic and linguistic groups of people in the valley. Many of their other groups included the Koch, Sonowal, Garo, Lalung, Dimasa, Rabha, Tipra (Kok-Borok), Moran and Chutiya, etc. They inhabited the hills and plains of Assam independently. Additionally, historical literature reveals evidence that the Bodo-Kachari were once the most powerful ruling tribes in Northeast India before the arrival of British colonists. They had the most powerful kingdoms, which represented the names of different historical dynasties during different historical periods. These powerful dynasties are popularly known as Kacharis, Chutiyas and Koches in the history of Assam (Barua, 1969:7). Of course, the word 'Kacharis' is applied to many indigenous tribes of Northeast India, like Bodo-Kacharis, Rabha-Kacharis, Thengal-Kacharis, Sonowal-Kacharis and Dimasa-Kacharis, etc. They all belong to the Bodo group of people, but probably due to some reasons, such as geographical and economic, they were identified as separate community's name of tribes. However, the paper will only look at the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam.

Based on their physical feature and general appearance, Rev. S. Endle in his book *'The Kacharis'* (Baras) termed these tribes as Mongolian type identifying their original home somewhere in Tibet and China (Endle, 2010:3). Thus, the Bodo-Kachari tribes are one of the largest ethnic and linguistic groups of the people who have dwelled in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam since time immemorial. They were very simple, brave and hard-working people. They loved nature very much and liked to reside near forests. Earlier, they mostly preferred village life, simply living in rural and backward areas where there was no chance or scope to access modern amenities. But, in the early part of the twentieth century, when self-consciousness and socio-political realization came up among them, they tried to exert their vigour in bringing about growth and development in their society. Accordingly, a mass movement so popularly known as Bodoland Movement began in 1987, which aimed at all-round development of the Bodo-Kachari tribes, for instance, in the fields of social, cultural, economic, education and political. Their prime demand was to achieve full-fledged Bodoland statehood for all the residents of its specific jurisdictions irrespective of caste, creed and religion. This movement gradually brought about socio-political consciousness among them. Consequently, Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was formed in 1993 within the state of Assam under the framework of India's constitution, comprising the adjoining geographical areas stretched from the Sonkosh river in the west to Mizhat or river Pasnoi in the east, where the Bodo-Kachari tribes are largely populated. Of course, they are widely scattered all over the Northeast India, in some parts of North Bengal and neighboring countries, like Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan but majority of them are now found on the north bank of river Brahmaputra, where Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) again created in February 2003 under the intense pressure of Bodoland Movement within the state, comprising the four districts of Assam, namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri below the foothills of Bhutan Kingdom and Arunachal Pradesh in the east. This is a sixth schedule administrative area within the framework of India's constitution for social, educational, ethnic, cultural and economic advancement of the tribes residing therein. On 27 January 2020, Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was again modified and renamed as Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) with more legislative and administrative powers as per the agreement made between the Government of India and the Bodo organizations. This region generally covers an area of over 9,000 sq. kms. predominantly inhabited by the Bodo-Kachari tribes and other indigenous groups of people of Assam. The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) lies in the Northwestern part of Assam, and geographically, its boundary is located between 26° 7' 12" N to 26° 47' 50" N Latitude and 89° 47' 40" E to 92° 18' 30" E Longitude. Their main headquarters is situated at Kokrajhar town, approximately between 26° 25' N latitude and

90° 16' 38" E Longitude (Ref. No. 12). The Bodo-Kacharis who live in Nepal and in some parts of North Bengal are generally called as *Meches* because they dwell on the bank of the Meche river.

Result and Discussion

From the days of the emergence of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion of Srimanta Sankaradeva, the Bodo-Kacharis' social transformation might have occurred through the process of religious conversion in particular and the adoption of other cultures in general during the pre-independence period in Assam. Accordingly, decaying on the Bodo-Kacharis' traditional beliefs and practices began. For ages, the Bodo-Kacharis primarily practised agriculture, and partly domestication of animals and birds. So, till the last part of the twentieth century, they were largely drawn towards agricultural production. Though they maintained some border trade relations with the neighbouring foreign tribes, namely the Bhutanese and Tibetans, yet they were not fully developed into trade and commercial activities. Thus, this could not bring much change into their social, economic, political and religious life except religious conversion during British rule in India.

Impacts of Neo-Vaishnavism

The advent of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion of Srimanta Sankaradeva among the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam, probably in the mid-17th century, has far-reaching effects on the social and cultural history of Assam. The Neo-Vaishnavite religion generally brought about some socio-cultural and religious revolution in Assam. The depth concept and dogma of the Neo-Vaishnavism is popularly known as '*Eka-sarana-naam*' Dharma, which means it believes in only one God. Before the emergence of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion, the primitive religions, like *Saivism*, *Shaktism* and some minor Hindu cults, along with tribal beliefs and practices, were a dominant into the socio-religious and cultural system of Assam. The Neo-Vaishnavite faith movement not only brought about various changes in every aspect of life for the well-being of human beings but also caused socio-cultural and religious transition, acclimatization and acculturation. At that time, the Bodo-Kachari tribes who inhabited largely on the north bank of river Brahmaputra below the foothills of Bhutan kingdom and Arunachal Pradesh in the east, practiced traditional *Bathou* worship, which was not spared under the onslaught of this Neo-Vaishnavite religious movement spearheaded by saint Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva, in his Vaishnavite cult, believing in only 'one God', used *satras* as the religious preaching places in erstwhile Kamrupa (Chhetri Atreya, 2007:48). However, during this time, the Ahoms did not accept his religious preaching '*Eka-sarana-naam*' Dharma. So, Sankaradeva moved to Koch Bihar while Koch king Nar Narayan was ruling in the sixteenth century, but the large number of people of that time had already become Hinduised. The fact is that the prayers and the hymns of Saint Sankaradeva in respect of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion began to influence them. Meanwhile, the Bodo-Kacharis had a tradition of rearing and keeping of fowls, pigs, ducks and goats for generating a small source of family income for ages, but their practices and habits were considered unclean by a section of people, so-called Aryans in Assam. Many Assamese people neighbouring Bodo-Kachari villages had already become devotees of the '*Eka-sarana-naam*' faith in the districts of erstwhile Darrang and Kamrupa. Rev. S Endle says that the minds of the Kachari tribes were very easy to be twisted. So, the priests of the Hindu religion, knowing these facts, carried out the task of conversion among the Bodo-Kachari people simultaneously, and as a result, it was successful to a large extent that a large number of Bodo-Kacharis adopted '*Eka-sarana-naam*' Dharma and then assimilated with the Assamese culture. Their original culture declined gradually. For

instance, a section of Bodo-Kacharis adopted the Hinduised names along with different surnames, such as Sarania, Das, Deka, Bora, Hazarika, Choudhury, etc. (Brahma,1992:163). Henceforth, they would identify themselves as a Hindu caste, and then assumed to be respected in society as caste Hindus. The acceptance of different titles or surnames after their names was nothing but to indicate only the adoption of their culture after having converted into the fold of Hinduism. In addition, this section of people also abandoned their primitive traditional beliefs and practices and thereafter, accepted the ways of life that mostly generated from the doctrine of the Neo-Vaishnavite faith. One important fact is that a section of them gave up speaking their own Bodo language completely, and even discontinued the wearing of their traditional cultural attires. It became clear that their prayer was made into the *Namghar* or *Sastras* in accordance with the *Sankari Kristi*. Apart from this, rearing of pigs and fowls was also obliterated, considering such activities were unhygienic, but their high expectation of becoming socially and economically upward caste remains vague. As a result, they were neither accepted as upper caste Hindus nor able to re-assimilate themselves into the culture of their aboriginal community, -Bodo-Kacharis. Later on, finding no other alternative paths, these people identified themselves as *Sarania-Kacharis* and *Modahi-Kacharis* in Assam, who are now largely found in the districts of Nalbari, Baksa, Sonitpur, Darrang and Udalguri. However, a large number of people in this section who used to live in Kokrajhar district usually came back under the fold of the Brahma faith, which Kalicharan Brahma propounded in the early part of the twentieth century. In case of Koch, some occupied the highest position among the converts, and others remained at a lower status. Thus, the Neo-Vaishnavite religious movement brought about some changes in the socio-cultural and religious ethos of the Bodo-Kachari tribes in Assam.

Impacts of Christianity

The appearance of Christian missionaries among the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam in the early part of the 19th century led to socio-cultural, religious and educational changes. Through the adoption of various charitable activities and the establishment of missionary English schools, they mainly started spreading the Christian religion among them in Assam. The responsibility to spread Christian faith among the tribes of Northeast India was usually shouldered by William Carey, the first British missionary. During these times, outsiders considered the tribes of northeast India as very rude, so the process of their evangelization became very slow. In 1813, missionaries arrived among the Khasi tribes and then the Singphos and Khamtis. Accordingly, they opened Christian centers at Sadiya, Nowgang and Guwahati for the spread of the Christian faith. As a result, in 1841, they could successfully convert a youth named Nidhiram which was first Assamese convert and was then followed by Bati Ram, Ramsing and Kalibar. Henceforward, it came to light that it would be easier to propagate the gospel among the Bodo-Kacharis who used to live in the foothills of Bhutan in the northern valley of river Brahmaputra. The fact is that their lifestyles and behaviours were very simple, and the population was so large that it directly attracted Christian missionaries to propagate the gospel among them. In 1841, the American Baptist Mission firstly sent Rev. G.K. Campor at Darrang to work among the Bodo-Kacharis who largely inhabited. Accordingly, the American Baptist missionaries became the first to come into contact with the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam. With the passage of time, the missionaries having different names and denominations, came into Assam in order to propagate the Christian faith among them. In 1846, there was a boarding school opened at Gauhati, where a few numbers of Bodo pupils were admitted. One of the pupils among them by named Apintha of Thargaon village under North Kamrup, was firstly baptised in 1849 at Guwahati Church. When the American Baptist Church was required to give much attention

towards Garos at Goalpara, this task was handled by the Austrian Baptist Missionary Society for years, but subsequently, they too left this work to the local management, where the Bodo Baptist Mission, popularly known as the Goalpara Baptist Church Union, was formed at Goalpara. As a result of this, many Bodo villages, which had already been converted a few years ago, were brought under this umbrella gradually. This Union, in fact, played a very important role in spreading the Christian faith among them, and accordingly, the number of converts increased sequentially. The conversion caused many social transformations among the Bodo-Kacharis in Assam. In 1938, Goalpara became the center of the mission where two Bodo converts, namely Minaram Basumatary and his wife were office bearers who looked after the school located at Tukrajhar. In 1940, approximately one hundred persons were baptised under the guidance of Minaram Basumatary. The mission school usually provided good facilities to the people along with the proliferation of the Christian faith among them (Sangma,1987:141).

There was no well-trained leader to handle the missionary activities, but only a few literate women were existed. During this time, there was a tradition of taking more than one wife by a rich Bodo-Kachari man. Though it was not permissible in Christian Bodo society, yet an older Bodo-Kachari convert could not abandon it completely. Besides, they also continued the practice of drinking *zumai* (rice beer) and *sereb* (distilled alcoholic spirit) that sometimes, created disturbance in the village's churches (Sangma,1987:142). Nevertheless, missionary still continued to work for its reformation. On subsequent years, many missionary centers were opened at different areas of Assam, where the population of the Bodo-Kacharis was very high. Such places include Gaurang of Kokrajhar district, Bongaigaon and Parkijuli of the present district of Baksa and then Mangaldai in the Darrang district in the state of Assam (Ayilookunnel,1997:44). Another denomination of Christian missionaries was then the Anglican Church, where Mr. Hesselmyer worked and then propagated the gospel at Tezpur. As a result, the S.P.G. society was established under his leadership. Thereafter in 1864, the S.P.G. society sent Mr. Rev. Endle to help Mr. Hesselmyer, the charge of the Kachari mission at that place to spread the Christian messages at Tezpur in the Darrang district. However, a large number of Bodo-Kachari tribes in the district of Darrang had already been converted into the fold of Christianity, and accordingly, they adopted Christian faith and practices. At *Bengbari* near Narasinga church was established under the leadership of Rev. Endle who broadly studied Boro language and culture (Endle,2010: Intro., pp. xiii-xiv). Later, he translated the part of New Testament into Bodo language and then published several papers on folklores, traditions and customs of the Bodo-Kacharis. Such translation and publication of several papers greatly helped the people in understanding the Christian messages where conversion into Christian faith was gradually increased among them. Besides, in 1911 his monograph entitled '*The Kacharis (Bodo-Kacharis)*' edited by J D Anderson, then the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang district, in the best interests of the Govt. of Assam was firstly published in London. This monograph was the first book specially written on the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam at that time which greatly contributed to the growth and development of the Boro language and culture.

Apart from this, in 1933, two Catholic missionaries, namely Fr. Alessi and Fr. Ravalico worked extensively for the spread of their faith among Bodo-Kacharis in the undivided Darrang district, etc. Consequently, many Bodo-Kacharis accepted the Catholic faith and began to give up their traditional habits (Ayilookunnel,1997: 47).

In such a way, the Christian religion spread among the Bodo-Kacharis, but it was very slow as compared to hilly tribes, like Nagas, Khasis and Mizos in northeast India. The fact is that before the arrival of Christian missionaries in Assam, there had already been depth influences of Hinduism among the Bodo-

Kacharis, whose religious philosophy and ideas were not suited to their community during that time. And, a section of them had identified themselves as Hindus after the adoption of their cultures, traditions and societal activities. Though the foreign missionaries termed Bodo traditional religion as animistic, having faith in ghosts and spirits, and were not able to elevate human beings yet firstly they faced many problems in changing their faith (Roy,1995:38-39). However, the task of spreading the gospel among them continued, and very little was accomplished.

The Bodo-Kacharis were very simple, and their minds were so easy to be bended as said by the foreign writers. That's why, missionaries could easily change their mind by adopting charitable relief, sickness care, as well as showing love to them (Brahma, 2006: 46-47). A good number of church and missionary schools were opened where the Bodo-Kachari people dwelled largely. The Bodo-Kachari converts gave up some of their age-old beliefs and practices. They were mainly drawn towards western English education. In socio-religious functions, the use of liquor was common in traditional Bodo society. Although it was prohibited in Christian society, yet it was not completely wiped out. Earlier, in traditional society, rich Bodo men had the habit of marrying more than one wife. Since it brought an unhealthy social atmosphere, it was forbidden in Christian Bodo society. But there is evidence of having more than one wife among them. Some converts adopted western-style names, but titles remained the same. It is true that the Bodo-Kachari women convert still wore their traditional dress, *dokhna*, during their stay-at-home village, and all of them, regardless of male or female, still speak the Bodo language properly.

It seems that there is no difference between the Bodo-Kachari converts and universal Christians with regard to beliefs and practices. However, in their prayer, the Bodo language is seen to have been used as a medium of service. The converts gave up celebrating all the traditional religious fairs and festivals of the Bodo society, like *Kherai*, *Garja*, *Marai*, etc. Besides, they also refused to observe the seasonal and agricultural festivals, namely *Bwisagu* (spring festival), *Maghw-Domashi* (post-harvest festival) and *Katigasa saonai* (harvest festival). In its place, they celebrated some fairs and festivals compliant to the common Christian faith, for instance Christmas, Easter and Good Friday. But belief in evil spirits and witchcraft was not completely wiped out from their society.

The changes occurred in terms of marriage, in that Bodo-Kachari converts marriage was performed at the Church (*Girja* in Bodo), unlike traditional Bodo marriage. Besides this, like Hindu married women, Christian married women also did not take vermilion on their foreheads. However, it is seen that the differences in manner, attitudes and conduct often cause disconcertment in society when a marriage between a Bodo-Kachari Christian and a non-Christian Bodo-Kachari occurs.

The opening of schools by missionaries provided many opportunities to the Bodo-Kachari converts. Besides, they also opened dispensaries and hospitals, where many poor Bodo-Kachari converts could take these opportunities. For instance, hospitals situated at Parkijuli of the present Baksa district and the mission hospital at Tezpur are popularly well known, especially for their health care services to poor converts.

The changes in education brought about the growth and development of the Bodo language and literature. No doubt, the Bodo language was once spoken all over the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, in some parts of North Bengal and erstwhile East Bengal, but it has declined due to the dominance of Assamese and Bengali Hindus. The fact is that after the adoption of Hinduism, a section of Bodo-Kacharis gave up their language and traditions. On the other hand, Christian missionaries firstly undertook the scientific study of the Bodo language, where a few books on socio-religious, rhymes, tales

and songs were composed. However, it was also meant to convert the Bodo-Kacharis into the Christian faith. Among the books, mention may be made regarding Rev. Sidney Endle's 'An Outline Grammar of Kachari Language' written in 1884, which dialect mainly articulated in the district of Darrang. Such activity helped many scholars, in particular and the Bodo-Kachari people in general, to know about the Bodo language and grammar (Boro, 2010:19). Besides this, some mission schools and churches came into existence in Bodo-Kachari-populated areas. This, in fact, inspired Christian Bodo-Kacharis to learn western education. Accordingly, some western values and culture made inroads in Bodo-Kachari society, which brought about changes in the fields of socio-cultural and the education system. However, social deviation cropped up among them in terms of socio-religious roles and marriage rituals. But the feeling of camaraderie remained the same.

Impacts of Brahma Dharma

In early part of the 20th century, the Bodo-Kacharis again faced a new social transformation after the arrival of Brahma *dharma*, a denomination of Hinduism among them. The change was a historic event where new socio-religious reform movements occurred under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma, who preached Brahma *dharma* among the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam for elevating their social status. This specially gave a new phase of life to a section of this community who had already sought change in the redundant rites and rituals of their traditional religion. The traditional religion, *Bathou Dharma* at that time was a sacrificial form of worship where *Bathou Burai*, Almighty God and other lesser divinities were worshipped. In their devotion, superfluous usage of *jou* (rice beer) and *sereb* (refined alcoholic spirit) was common. Then again, the Hindu caste society that dwelled in proximity to Bodo-Kachari families sometimes hated them openly in Assam, looking at unhealthy and unhygienic practices at their home, like pig rearing, fowls and ducks, etc. This came into light while a group of these tribes, who dealt in timber business in Dhubri town, were not given lodging and food in hotels. Besides this, they were called as '*Mech or Mleccha*', meaning unclean (Basumatary, 2005:53). During this time, uncertainty loomed large in their social set-up. The fact was that a section of Bodo-Kacharis had already adopted '*Ek saran nam*' dharma of Neo-Vaishnavite religion and accordingly, became Sarania-Kacharis after renouncing their own language and culture in colonial Assam. On the other hand, a section of Bodo-Christian adopted western cultures and values; some became Muslims after converting to Islam. In this way, the traditional society of Bodo-Kacharis gradually decayed in its inimitable strength. Undeniably, some Bodo-Kacharis adopted other religions and cultures, but they continued to be treated as low caste people and untouchable in society by other Hindu castes. In such a grave moment, Kalicharan Mech, popularly known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, born in 1862 at Kazigaon village of Parbatjhora in the present Kokrajhar district, came up to undertake the reformation of Bodo-Kachari society. When he studied Sibnarayan Swami's book, '*Sar Nitya Kriya*' in Bengali, he realised that whatever it contains, the main teachings in this book would be best suited to check mass religious conversion taking place among the tribes. Religious conversion took an ugly turn during this time, which threatened the very existence of their society. On being influenced by his ideals and teachings, Kalicharan Brahma at Kolkata held face-to-face depth discussions with Paramhansa Sibnarayan, a Brahmin originally from Uttar Pradesh, and then became his disciple. Accordingly, he adopted Brahma dharma. In its concept, only one God exists, and that is the '*Brahma*' venerated in the form of 'fire' or 'sun God' (Brahma, 1992:201). Unlike *Bathou Dharma*, there is no place of sacrificial worship, but only the burning of '*yagya*' is performed on each occasion.

First of all, Kalicharan Brahma commenced to preach the message of the Brahma cult among the Bodo-Kacharis at his own Kazigaon village of the present Kokrajhar district. Since the Bodo-Kacharis' minds are easily bent, the people in large number renounced their age-old beliefs and practices, and then adopted Brahma *dharma*. Accordingly, in 1906, the burning of *hom-yagya* (*yajna*) called '*aawati-saonai*' in Bodo was firstly performed at Bainyaguri village, where thousands of people attended, and thereby, mass conversion took place after having forsaken *Bathou* religion. Thereafter, to spread the Brahma message, Kalicharan visited different places of Assam where the Bodo-Kachari tribes largely peopled. Along with this, *yajnas* were performed consecutively where many *Bathou* devotees promised to adopt the Brahma faith (Brahma, 1992:197). This was really a great success of Kalicharan Brahma that mass conversion into the Brahma cult continued till the last part of the 20th century.

Religious transition among the Bodo-Kacharis has a far-reaching effect on socio-cultural, economic and educational changes. It is clearly evident that the adoption of the Brahma faith among them primarily checked the conversion into other religions, like '*Ek Saran Nam*' Dharma, Christianity and Islam. Though the Brahma movement was religious in nature yet it was also a part of the social reform movement. With this movement, many Bodo-Kachari Christians reverted to the Brahma faith, especially in the mid-20th century. As already stated, a large number of Bodo-Kacharis who adopted '*Ek Saran Nam*' Dharma was gradually merged with the mainstream of the Assamese community of Assam. But things did not go so easily for Gurudev Kalicharan when he tried to check the conversion. However, he faced very harshly, for instance, facing with a rich landlord, Jagat Chandra Muchahary who already became Sarania under the priest, Ananta Narayan Goswami of Baitamari, while preaching Brahma faith in the Bijni town of the present Chirang district. But later Jagat Chandra Muchahary became his disciple due to his deep and wide Brahma knowledge. Besides, it is also reported that Kalicharan Brahma organised a group of volunteers who imposed a crusade on *Bathou* devotees when the latter were unwilling to relinquish their age-old beliefs and practices. Though it created sharp criticism and reactions from the community, yet problem was solved harmoniously later on. However, the expectations of the Bodo-Kacharis were not fulfilled as Bodo-Kachari Hindus did not get an upper social status, and melding with the Hindu caste people, even though they adopted the Hindu faith, became a matter of concern only. The reason was that Bodo-Kacharis' title or surname was the main identity that they belonged to the lower class. It was also changed whenever they gained to add '*Brahma*' into their surname instead of their original surname, which was officially conferred by A G Lainy, the Deputy Commissioner of the then Goalpara district. With this, it was perceived that they would be known to others as of the upper caste people (Mooshahary, 2008:13). Accordingly, some Brahma cult followers wrote the surname '*Brahma*' in place of their original surnames. The change was nothing but to get rid of racial derogation.

Apart from this, performance of *Mahasannmilans* consecutively in 1921, 1925 and 1929 at different Bodo-Kachari populated places in order to reform the social evils rampant in their society is very remarkable. This was the first platform where reformation into their socio-cultural and religious affairs was raised. The Brahma Dharma movement really brought about various changes in the socio-cultural, economic and educational aspects. For instance, in traditional Bodo-Kachari society, there was no system of birthday celebration if any baby was born in a family, but the *Shraddha* ceremony was performed elaborately with villagers and adjacent villagers along with relatives in the family of the deceased person to pay reverence to the dead person. But in birthday and *Shraddha* celebration, the

Brahma converts used to perform '*homa-yogya*' with the help of a Brahma priest (*purohit*). Besides, they also performed *home yoga* on all occasions.

In terms of the Bodo-Kachari marriage, many changes happened immensely after the advent of the Brahma *dharma* into their society. For ages, the Bodo-Kacharis have had a traditional marriage system called *hatha-suni-kurnai* in Bodo. But after the adoption of the Brahma cult, a society got a new form of Bodo-Kachari marriage called 'Brahma marriage' performed in accordance with Vedic rites and rituals, alike to Hindus. Of course, this system was accepted by the Brahma adherents only. Marriage was usually held at night at the house of bride on *subha lagna* (sacred time) in compliance to '*panjika*' a Hindu calendar with burning of '*yogjaahuti*' on *mandop* (a place of *ahuti*), a beautifully decorated place (Khakhlary & Basumatary, 2010:69). The whole processes are carried out by Brahma priest in presence of villagers, relatives and groom's villagers but in traditional marriage system, it was only held at night in groom's house in keeping with doctrine of *Bathou dharma*. In case of food, the changes have been observed where tea and sweet became common in Brahma marriage, whereas *Bathou* devotees continued to use the *zuo* (rice beer) or *sereb* (distilled alcoholic spirit). Earlier, in the traditional system, where dead bodies were either mostly buried or kept at an open place but Brahma followers mostly preferred the burning of dead bodies, akin to Hindu rites and rituals. Besides this, the post-funeral ceremony was also conducted in keeping with Hindu dogmas.

Traditionally, many seasonal and religious festivals have been performed in relation to farming for ages. The festivals and occasions include *Bwisagu* (*Bihu* in Assamese), *Maghw* (*Rongali Bihu* in Assamese) and *Wngkham-gwrlwi-janai* (eating new rice), etc. On these occasions, Brahma followers used to perform *Hom-yagya* at their village temple or personal home in accordance with Hindu rites and rituals. This is clearly evident that each Brahma village has a Brahma *mandir* (temple) for burning of '*ahuti*' in their village courtyard. On the other hand, *Bathou* devotee's village has *Bathou Thansali* (temple) into their village. But this is not the fact that the Brahma faith had already given up all its traditional beliefs and practices. They still held up some of their traditional culture, and still spoke proper Bodo language. Apart from this, like *Bathou* followers, some Brahma cult devotees still kept a '*Sijou tree*' (*euphorbia splendens*) at the courtyard of their family, wherein an earthen lamp was burned. This indicates that they still gave much value on their traditional cultures, values and norms.

The growth and development of the Bodo-Kachari tribes in social, religious and educational aspects usually began from the days of the Brahma religious movement. Excessive use of rice beer in society was reduced. Earlier, the cases of girls being stolen for marriage were rampant in society, but it was decreased after the arrival of the Brahma cult. Instead of this, they gave much importance in educating girls' children as well as in bringing about awareness about the importance of education in society. This is clearly evident that many Bodo-Kachari intellectuals who appeared first among them were especially the products of the Brahma movement. For instance, it can be referred to the great personalities, such as Rupnath Brahma, Padmashri Madaram Brahma, Jadav Chandra Khakhlary and others. While many parents became aware of importance of education, they started sending their children to school. In such a way, a Brahma boarding school came up at Dhubri town with a view to helping the poor Bodo students in learning education. It is learnt that in 1915, Brahma boarders mostly from the Brahma faith tried to form a Bodo student organisation, and subsequently, in 1919, a Bodo students' organisation was first formed at Kokrajhar under the leadership of Rupnath Brahma and Madaram Brahma, the fervent followers of Kalicharan Brahma. The organization was popularly called as '*Boro Satra Sanmilan*'. It was a really historic moment for the whole Bodo community, where a renaissance, socio-political

consciousness transpired among them. From this time, the organisation played an important role in fashioning the Bodo community in many aspects, like social, education, language and literature (Brahma, 2006:84-85). The growing political awareness among them could also be observed when the demand for reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly, as well as in Govt jobs, was placed before the Simon Commission at Shillong on January 2, 1929. As a result of it, in the year 1933, a new political party so-called Assam Plains Tribal League (APTL) was formed, aiming at the interest of protecting the tribal people in Assam (Brahma,1993:55-56). Later, these political leaders shouldered the responsibility for the growth and development of the tribal people in all fields, -social, economic, educational and political.

Conclusion

Thus, the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam faced many challenges in the context of social, cultural and religious change before India's independence. The challenges that usually came from the onslaught of various institutionalised religions, such as Neo-Vaishnavism, Christianity and the Brahma cult, which penetrated into the domains of the Bodo-Kachari society. Unquestionably, they accepted any changes into their social, cultural and religious affairs. For that reason, to some extent, changes greatly impacted in breaching the socio-cultural solidarity and harmony of the archaic society of the Bodo-Kachari tribes. It is clearly eye-catching that the process of Sanskritization on rites and rituals concerning their cultures and traditions occurred unabatedly due to the onslaught of '*Ek Saran Nam*' Dharma of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion and Brahma cult. Accordingly, some Hindu cultures, rudiments, values and norms were unswervingly acclimatized into the domains of Bodo-Kachari society. Despite this fact, such changes really brought about some socio-political awareness among them, and later on, this pushed them to pursue the very existence of their cultural legacy, political rights and identity. Besides this, a section of Bodo-Kacharis also followed some western values and norms after having converted into fold of Christianity. So, the social change that occurred among them during the pre-independence period is so meaningful in history that it was in fact, not only a movement for social change but also for total change in all the domains, cultural, religious, political, economic and educational.

References

1. Ayilookunnel, S. (1997). Christianity among the Bodos, in Pulloppillil, Thomas, *et. al.*, (ed.), The Bodos Children of Bhullumbutter. Delhi, Guwahati, pp. 44-47
2. Barua, B. K. (1969). A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period) Vol.-I. Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, p.7.
3. Basumatary, K. R. (2005). Gurudev Kali Charan Brahma and the Bodo-Kacharis in modern times, in Basumatary, Uthrishar Khungur, *et. al.*, (ed.), Mugani Sakhi, a mouthpiece, Baksa: ABSU.
4. Boro, Anil. (2004). The Flute and Harp. Good Books Distributors Publishers, Kolkata-16, p. 38.
5. Boro, A. K. (2010). Brahma movement and the Socio-religious reform in Bodo society in the early twentieth century, in Uzir, Nailojalo, *et. al.*, (ed.), Jwhwlaofurini Thandai. Baksa, p.19.
6. Brahma Chaudhury, B. L. (1993). Bodo-Kacharis (Kachari) at a Glance. Tribal Cultural Institute, Bongaigaon, pp.55-56.
7. Brahma, K. (1992). A Study of Socio Religious, Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of Bodo-Kacharis. Punthi Pustak, Calcutta.

8. Brahma, S. (2006). Religion of the Boros and their Socio-Cultural Transition. DVS Publishers, Guwahati, pp. 46-47
9. Chatterji, S. K. (1991). The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India, Gauhati University, pp. 5-6.
10. Chhetri Atreya, H. B. (2007.) The Bodos in Assam, A Socio-Cultural Study. Towards Freedom, Kolkata, p. 48.
11. Endle, S. (2010). The Kacharis (Bodos), Delhi.
12. <https://bodoland.gov.in/aboutbtr#:~:text=The%20geographical%20boundary%20of%20the,North%20Western%20part%20of%20Assam>.
13. Khakhlary, H. N. & Basumatary, G. (trans.). (2010). Boro Kocharini Somaj Arw Harimu, written by Bhaben Narzi, Chirang Publication Board, Kajalgaon.
14. Mooshahary, R. S. (2008). Faith and Practices Religion and Reform in the Bodo society, in Narzary, Pranab Jyoti, *et. al.*, (ed.), Swrangsali. SBDPS, Guwahati, p.13.
15. Mosahary, R. N. (1997). Brahma Religion and Social Change among the Bodo-Kacharis, in Pulloppillil, Thomas, *et. al.*, (ed.), The Bodo-Kacharis Children of Bhullumbutter. Spectrum Publications, Delhi.
16. Roy, A. (1995). The Boro Imbroglia, Guwahati, pp. 38-39.
17. Sangma, M. S. (1987). History of American Baptist Mission in North-East India (1836-1950), Vol.-1. Delhi, p. 141-142.
18. Waddell, L.A. (1901). The Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley. Logos Press, New Delhi, p. 45.