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TRADITIONAL BELIEFS OF BODO COMMUNITY: A STUDY ON LAKHIMPUR DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Assam is the easternmost outpost of Indian civilization from the remote past when the people belonging to different races and ethnic groups settled, and a composite culture was grown out of their living in close proximity for millennia. They contributed a lot to the growth in acculturation through synthesis and assimilation. Though the culture is termed as composite, in fact, a prominent one had absorbed many elements from others. The question as to who were the first settlers or who migrated first to this region, and who followed might be left aside in the present discussion. Scholars' traces the population of Assam consists of many heterogeneous elements. Since time immemorial Assam has been the meeting ground of divers ethnic and cultural streams—the principal migrants have been the Austro-Asiatic, the Dravidians, the Tibeto-Burman, the Mongoloid and Aryan. Over the years, various ethnic groups settled in different parts of North East India, especially Assam, forming a unique identity within the country and abroad. Every ethnic group had its own characteristics way different from others. And, frequent conflict within the state began to occur from time to time for various reasons that lead to demand for separate state. One such group is the Bodo community of Assam that demanded their own separate state, has become a major state of concern for the State and the central government. It will be worthwhile to state that the tribal of Assam are perpetually experiencing the problems of land alienation, poverty, indebtedness, severe unemployment, economic exploitation and political oppression. Besides, the tribal languages remained neglected till the attainment of Indian independence. The reorganization of the states primarily on a linguistic basis in North East India such as Nagaland for the Nagas, Manipur for the Manipuri's (Meitei's), Meghalaya for the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos and Mizoram for the Mizos also helped to strengthen other distinct tribal to set up political recognition on the basis of a particular language and culture in other states. At the same time, the growing consciousness of their identity and the right to manage their own affairs has led the tribal to the creation of new administrative units with varying degrees of autonomy. Thus, in this background, the Bodos started their movement in the quest for political power towards the end of the 20th century.

Keywords: Millennia, Acculturation, Assimilation.

INTRODUCTION

The Bodos belongs to the Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongoloid tribes of North East India. Linguistically, the Garos, the Rabhas', the Tiwa's, the Dimasas, the Hajongs, the Sonowals, the Deoris and many other cognate tribes are part of this Bodo race. The Bodos are believed to be the earliest settlers of Assam, though the date of migration from their original abode, namely. North western China, to this part of present India, is debated. However, scholars agree that the Bodo people settled in this region much before the Aryans. The Bodo people form the largest primitive tribe of the present demography of Assam. Though they are spread out into different parts of this region, as well as into neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal, the majority are found in Assam. In Assam, Brahmaputra valley, this tribe is concentrated in the present districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri, Dhubri, Goalpara, Darrang, Nowgaon and Morigaon, and despite scattered; the Bodos maintain a separate identity from others by virtue of their distinct language and culture. Having about 60 villages in Lakhimpur District it has not been focus in the mind. Historically, there are numerically small tribes in Assam having their own distinct culture and religion. It is believed that the Tribals are the first natives of the region. Admittedly, this shared homeland has shrunk substantially in the distorted process of the socio-economic transformation of Assam during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The various tribes in Assam have been over-reacting against the Assamese high caste hegemony which compel towards the sharpening of competition and conflict for 'space'. There is no available works on the Bodo and Assamese traditional beliefs and practices which carried out by the scholars and authors. But we have found few works done on customs, religion and culture excluding the customary rules of the Bodos and Assamese in details by the interested scholars and authors.

OBJECTIVE

- 1) To focus the main reasons behind their identity crisis with the nation state of the country.
- 2) To understand about the socio-economic and political structure of Bodo community
- 3) To highlight Assamese–Bodo acculturation in social upliftment



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METHODOLOGY

The Method consist mainly secondary source which collect; analyses and interpret the data from books, journals, government websites and government published reports and newspapers. The Bodos living in the Plains of Assam remain backward in every sphere of life. They had been neglected and exploited by non-tribal people. A succinct record is seemed after entering to study in the acculturation measures from organizational form for protect the rights of the Bodo people, tribal belt and blocks had been created but the large-scale encroachment of the tribal land by non-tribal people primarily the immigrant Muslims from Bangladesh results in ethnic and communal conflicts in the area killing hundreds of innocent people. Therefore, the Bodos under the leadership of ABSU had been struggling for a separate state since 1986 to preserve their distinct Socio-cultural identity. The Bodos were already given a separate territorial arrangement in 2003 i.e., BTAD consisting of four new districts. But their dissatisfaction with the autonomy assigned to them leads to a struggle for a separate state as ‘Bodoland’ on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River. Before acquiring the present socio-political identity through the Council, the Bodo people had passed through different stages of stress and strain.

BODO AND ASSAMESE ACCULTURATION

Various similarity and dissimilarities are found in the cultural affluence that synoptically depicted in this topic which can be analyzed as different way such as their social life, village life, homestead, occupation, fair and festivals, dress and ornaments, food habits and drinks, spinning and weaving, musical instruments and dances, languages and literature. The study of Assamese-Boro acculturation is very needful to sustain the conflicts between the communities. The similarities have been found in the traditional beliefs and practices of Bodo and Assamese in associate with religion and magic, God and goddesses, Sitala Devi and Aai Bhagawati, Apeswari, Subachani, Magic and Black/white Magic, belief and sacrifices in the Kherai etc. It is of perpetual existence throughout human history and has evolved out of dire necessity, “we may perhaps discern the moment when magic first fastened upon the human mind by considering how the use of weapons and snares by the primitive hunter impaired the sense of the mechanical continuity of work. In a struggle with prey to body, success was thoroughly understood; but with the use of weapons and snares it become conditional upon the quality of these aids and upon his skill with them: more and more conditional as the number of steps increased between the first preparation and the event; at any one of which unforeseen occurrences might frustrate his plans. Hence an irresistible desire to strengthen and ensure every stage of his task and to gratify this desire Magic arose. Magic consists in the direct control of the forces of nature by man. It is a belief system which involves certain rite, magical objects, a magic formula and a person officiating. The Magic, as Frazer so fully showed, is not merely a type of belief or a piece of man's intellectual apparatus, but an art, in which, theory and dogma at every step are translated into action. It is always a very practical affair. It has to bring rain to crops or game to the nets, to give stability to a house or lightness to canoe, to inflict or ward off misfortune, disease or death, to win a loved one, to give skill in war, speed in travelling, beauty at the feast or the dance. Magic has been defined by different writers in different ways. It is found in reference of Hunter & Whitten about the magic as the usual ritualized behaviour that is intended to control or at least significantly influence the basic processes of the universe without recourse to perceptibly instrumental acts. Firth also has emphasized this doubt when he states thus, Magic as commonly accepted, comprises a rite and verbal formula projecting man's desires into the external world on a theory of human control, to some practical end, but as far as we can see on false premises.

It is obvious that the recognition of the existence of occult power, impersonal or only vaguely personal, mystically dangerous and not lightly to be approached, but capable of being channeled, controlled, and directed by man. As a practice, magic is the utilization of this power for public or private ends, which are good or bad, orthodox or heterodox, licit or illicit, according to the estimate placed upon them by a particular society at a particular time. Every activity of their life is determined by some kind of religious practices. When something wrong happens in their home, they immediately make up their mind to offer something to the God or Goddess. The “Apeswari” (Angel) plays an important role in their traditional belief system. The Assamese people believe that if the angels of the heaven put beneficial sight on someone will be prosperous and healthy. If the opposite action happens that is, if the angel gives an evil look, then the family will suffer from misfortune. There is a wide spread belief that some children suffer from disease of unknown origin only because of evil sight of the angel. The extraordinarily thin child, a lame child, a deaf and dumb child, a child with continuous pain in the body, a girl child who do not attend puberty at age is considered to be affected by the evil sight of the angels. In such cases there is a tradition of organizing function to satisfy the angels.

Some of the important cultural features like the “Sitola Devi” is the Goddess of small pox. Generally, she is called ‘Ai’ or ‘Sitola’ and also known as “Ai Bhagawati” in the Assamese society. When somebody has suffered from small pox or chicken pox, people worship Sitola Devi or Ai Bhagawati. It is seen that relating to the worship of Sitola Devi, songs are sung by the group of women without using any musical instrument. There is no specific ceremony among the Bodos when a child attains the puberty age. It is secret among the Bodos which is known to her mother only. In this regard only few restrictions are to be followed when a girl has her first menstruation. But a formal ceremony of puberty is not found among the Bodos, which is most important part of Assamese. There is no place for male member in this puberty ceremony. Since early times, the Bodo and Assamese have maintaining traditional



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marriage system. There are as many as six types of marriage traditional marriage system prevalent among the Bodo society. On the other hand, Assamese society has eight types of traditional marriage system. Among these marriages, the formal marriage Swngnanwi lainai haba and Bor biya are popular among the Bodo and Assamese. But at present, other different traditional marriage systems are rare in the both societies. Besides this, the “Hathasuni kurnai” is a traditional marriage system of Bathou religion followers Bodos. The system of bride price has been customarily followed among them which are known as ‘Phon thaka’ and ‘Ga-dhan’ among the Bodos and Assamese.

There is no marriage between boy and girl if there is paternal or maternal blood relationship in Bodo and Assamese. The cousin and cross cousin marriage is strictly prohibited. The marriage takes place for a boy and girl within the same clan if there is no blood relationship between them. The widow or widower remarriage is permissible. We found that the pre-marriage ceremony or ritual ‘Juron’ is an important part of Bodo and Assamese marriage. The rice-beers, meats and fish are takes important place in the marriage ceremony of Bodos, but use of rice-beer is not seen in the Assamese marriage. The dresses of brides and grooms are different in comparison to Bodo and Assamese. Traditionally, Bodo and Assamese society cremates the dead bodies but they bury unnatural or immature deaths. As per traditional beliefs and practices, the Bodo society has celebrated dead rituals on the eleventh or the thirteenth day from the day of the death of a person. On the other hand, the Assamese society has performed dead rituals on the third day and on the tenth and eleventh day of the death. The Bodo and Assamese society believed that life after dead and the spirit of the dead goes to heaven or hell. Before burial or cremation, they poured water and red threads placed between the lips of the dead, that will make in rebirth, the lips thin and red, and a sign of beauty. They believe in rebirth but it is depending on the deeds one does in his or her worldly life. The dead body is highly honoured by the both societies. They make several formalities before the disposal of the dead. Generally, they have seen that the rice-beer, meat, fish etc. takes a significant role in the dead rituals of Bodos.

In the Bodo and Assamese society, the birds and the animals are taking an important place in their traditional beliefs and practices. They believed that the action of birds and animals brings good luck or misfortune, good or bad situation, unknowing danger calamity etc. The both societies believed that the black cat, crow, vulture and owl are symbol of dangerous. Among the domestic animals’ cats and dogs are associated with many beliefs. Such as if a person has seen a cat crossing his readjust before setting out on a journey, then it is believed that the journey will be an auspicious one or very bad omen of some dangerous accident. Again, digging up of earth in the courtyard by a dog is a bad omen or somebody will die immediately in the family. Whenever an accused person is found of being guilty or doing any harmful, he or she is liable to be punished with a penalty of some reasonable amount of cash or kind through penance, as determined by the village council. The traditional penance system of social offences is known as “Baad”, represents the acts of purify of the unholy or sin which is an important part of their traditional beliefs system. The strict social customs are called “Udrainai” (penance) in Bodos. The Bodo society believed that through the penance system the guilty persons can make pure or free from sin or guilty. Traditionally, the penance systems of social offences are divided into five categories among the Bodos, viz, Agar baad, Phoshlontha baad, Daokhi baad, Khawlia baad and Khoulobod baad. But this penance system of social offences is not found in the Assamese society. The house courtyard is an important part of Bodo and Assamese society. Traditionally, both societies have great belief on the courtyard of the house. There are some restrictions in connection with the courtyard among them. They believed that if the restrictions are violated by someone of house members, then it will bring great danger to the family. Generally, crossing courtyard of the house by a man or woman with spade and axe on the shoulder is strictly prohibited among them. Some other traditional beliefs or superstitions are also prevalent among the Bodo and Assamese in the district.

It has been found that the Bodo being less population in the district and the fact that their culture was less organized got gradually absorbed by the dominant culture in every aspect. As a result, many changes have occurred in their traditional beliefs and practices. Many traditional beliefs got gradually abandoned and practices of some rituals are merely symbolic in nature. Certain differences are found in their traditional beliefs and practices. One difference is the worship of nature as well as the ancestor worship in Bodos. The Bodos believed in the supernatural power of nature like air, water, lightning, forest and thunder and thereby perform their own rituals to appease them. Apart from the worshipping the forces of nature these two societies also have their own organized religion which they performed in their respective place of worship. However, their traditional beliefs and practices were based only on the worship of different customs, ritual and spirits. In due course of time, they got gradually Hinduised and thus many of their rituals became much similar. As a result, many of their traditional beliefs and practices are on the verge of extinction. Thus, it can be concluded that after many years of migration to the plains the traditional beliefs and practices of the Bodos and Assamese have been highly influenced by the Hinduism and to some extent by the Christianity and thus it has been greatly deviated from its original form and nature.

In short, in the late 20th century, the social movement of the Bodos exerted its greatest force. In the wake of the socio-educational reforms movement launched by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma in the first decade of the 20th century, the Bodo students,



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then mostly studying in the secondary level, felt the whiff of the modern age for the first time. The new light of Western education and the social awakening brought by the Brahma movement engendered a spirit of a renaissance amongst the few educated Bodos. Imbedded with such a spirit of a renaissance, the Bodo students formed the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan in 1919 at Dhubri, the then headquarters of the undivided Goalpara district." It was considered to be a seed time for the new and conscious generation and remedy for the degenerated social condition. The effort made by the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan to build a Bodo nationality was a unique contribution in the history of Bodo society. This student body took up issues concerning the Bodo society in the context of their cultural and educational environment as at that time, the Bodo culture and language was beginning to disappear with the influence of dominant Aryan language and culture.

Major Findings (Both Similarities and differences)

After analyzing traditional beliefs and practices of Bodo and Assamese, living in Lakhimpur District, the following major findings may be drawn –

1. Traditionally Bodo and Assamese have maintained to stay together in a joint family system. But now most of the households are adopting foster family type.
2. Traditional beliefs and practices system is replaced by modern socio-cultural system both in the rural and urban areas.
3. Regarding Transformation in dresses most of the people in the village wear traditional dresses at the home and wear modern dresses outside the village.
4. Significant changes have been noticed in the traditional beliefs and practices among them. There are some important causes have been observed for the transition of their traditional beliefs and practices system. These are may be due to the influenced of different religions, impact of modernization and socio-cultural assimilation.
5. Traditional religious practices are still prevailing among them. Transformation in the religious beliefs is more significant in urban areas than the rural villages.
6. The Bodos and Assamese believe in religious practices exhibits their sense of devotion and fear of deities and evil spirits and beliefs in religious practices exhibit their social integrity.
7. Social customs based on traditional beliefs of Bodos and Assamese are observed by them to maintain peace, tranquility and discipline in their folk lives.
8. The maximum numbers of traditional beliefs and practices are based on agriculture and religious matters.
9. In spite of the influence of various religious cults in Bodo and Assamese society the trend towards traditional beliefs is still found prominent among them. Due to conservatism in respect of their religious beliefs, strong and deep reverence to the religious practices of its masses, they carry out those practices especially in the villages.
10. The traditional conservative nature of Bodo and Assamese is loosening gradually due to influenced of different religions like-Hinduism and Christianity. The Bodos originated from worshipping activities of Gods and Goddesses during the religious festivals.
11. As worshippers of Bathou religion the Bodo has sacrifices of birds and animal in the name of God or Goddess and deities, viz. fowls, pigeons, ducks, goats and buffaloes.
12. The uniqueness Bodo peoples are under the grip of Christianity in recent years. The emergence of Christianity in their society is posing a severe threat to their traditional beliefs and practices. This is because the Christian converted people have to totally abandon their traditional beliefs and practices

CONCLUSION

Every community or ethnic groups has their own uniqueness, own sub-culture, traditions so on and so forth that creates their identity that is distinct from one another. These many ethnic groups along with the other general groups from together a greater state/country with a common identity of oneness, belongingness, brotherhood, peace and prosperity. But it is seen that from the past few decades, there have been conflicts, misunderstanding on various issues related to culture, the identity of various ethnic groups and that has led to their demand for another state which would constitute and restore their long-lost identity and history. There have been mass inter/intra-group and inter-state conflicts; many people protesting for their community had lost their lives. Many meetings at various levels were conducted by the government with the representatives of the ethnic community to negotiate the demands put forwarded. There has been a fault on both the sides. There could have been another way to demand their needs as well as fulfill their demands. There would not have been so much of conflict if the matter was looked into from a different angle. In comparison of Bodo and Assamese traditional magical beliefs and practices system, there are lots of similarities regarding the practices of white magic.



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