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TRANSFORMING THOUGHT, INSPIRING CIVILIZATION: AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES' WORKS AMONG BODOS

Dr. Khanin Barman

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
 Madhya Kamrup College, Barpeta, Assam

Abstract:

This paper consists of fact findings concerning the civilizational impact of Christian missionaries' works among the *Bodos* in the BTAD region of Assam, India. The *Bodos*, as we find, were poor and leading miserable and deplorable life. Hence, the sufferings of the people were indescribable. The place was isolated from outside world for century together and remained backward and undeveloped. So the people of this area could not see the light of modern world and were rolling on a number of superstitious beliefs. There were various problems engulfing this region such as early marriage, animal sacrifice, superstition and illiteracy. While sickness or any calamity befell them, people solely depended upon sorcery, magic spells of local physicians and were dying without proper medical treatment. In such critical circumstance, the missionaries came to different regions of BTAD whose untiring works liberated *Bodos* by enlightening their belief system and transforming their thought from superstitious to rational which finally initiated the dawn of civilization. The missionaries established dispensaries and provided medical treatment, gradually their understanding changed. The *Bodo* Christians were taught to live a clean, hygienic and healthy life. The missionaries also contributed in the field of education by establishing schools in backward regions of the districts. The functions of serving humanity began and left by Christian missionaries in the region are still carried forward by various church organizations today. Thus, this paper is an attempt to focus the Missionaries' contributions to transform thought of the *Bodos* and also how to inspire them to be a civilized person.

Key Words: *Bodos*, superstitious beliefs, Missionaries, civilization, Cultures, Socio-religious.

Introduction:

The *Bodo* group is the most important ethnic group among the Kiratas or the Mongoloid people in Assam. Though the *Bodos* are found spread in all over the North-Eastern states of India, but most of them live in *Bodoland* Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) in Assam, which was created in the year 2003. Information have been collected from some works like books and magazine of different churches and from the personal interviews with individuals belonging to three different denominations namely CNI, Baptist, and Catholic. It is noticed that the *Bodos* were poor and leading miserable and deplorable life. Due to lack of proper education they have been suffering certain superstitious beliefs and practices. In fact, the people of this area could not see the light of modern world.

The region for the first time witnessed the coming of Christian missionaries' and their works of contribution around the 19th century. They brought visible changes among *Bodo* Christians in their custom, habit, values, belief system and education. Christian Missionaries' introduction of western values and education have greatly modernized the *Bodo* Christians and they have learnt to evaluate their values and cultural practices by means of rationalized ideas which has helped them to a large extent to free themselves from certain superstitious beliefs and practices. Thus, the *Bodos* in BTAD region witnessed a great change in their religious and socio-cultural life with the coming of Christian missionaries in the region. The rational mind introduced by missionaries interrogated the inner purport of social customs and religious forms. In course of time, a series of socio-religious movements with reformatory sinew began to renovate the *Bodo* society. The missionaries raised their voice against superstitions, blind beliefs and irrational practices. The missionaries were inspired with civilizing mission to eradicate the socio-cultural evils prevailed in the region.



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Advent of Missionaries among *Bodos*:

Missionaries first reached *Boros* in the first half of the 19th century. Among them the missionaries that are to be remembered are Captain J. T. Gordon (1840), Cyrus Barker (1843), Nathon Brown, Miles Bronson and Nidhi Levi (1844). Later, Rev. Hesselmeyer from 1846 made effort to evangelize the Boro people (Baglari, 2015). Mission work became effective among the *Boros* only after the arrival of Rev. Sidney Endle, who became the full-time missionary worker under the 'Kachari Mission' in 1864 (Baglari, 2015). Rev. Sidney Endle worked for the revival of the *Boro* language. He was the one to compile the first handbook on *Boro* language entitled "An Outline of grammar of the *Kachari* Languages", then his popular monograph "The *Kacharis*" was produced later (Baglari, 2015). He also translated the New Testament part of the Bible into *Boro* language, compiled *Boro Bhajan* that is *Boro* devotional songs. The first *Boro* Church in Udalguri district was founded in Bengbari village in the year 1865 under the leadership of Rev. Endle. To spread his missionary work he went around many other *Boro* villages like *Jamfrabari*, *Niz-ghagra*, *khwmabari*, *Khwirabari*, *Nalkhambra*, *Goraimari*, *Badagaon*, and *Belguri*. (Baglari, 2015). The next missionary work among the *Boros* in Udalguridistrict (one of the four districts in BTAD) was carried forward by Rev. Wilson Schrufrsud of Lutheran Church from the year 1887 onwards. Since then the Lutheran Church came into being in the region. There was lack of leadership among the *Boro* Christians after the death of Rev. Endle in 1907. There was no proper administration of the Church among the *Boros*. Hence, after seven years the members of Dawamakha (Borigaon) came in contact with Rev. George Richard Kampfer. Rev. Kampfer was the Baptist missionary from America. He celebrated Christmas in the house of Bhoot Pandit Rabha on 25th December, 1913. Under the guidance of Rev. Kampfer the first Boro Baptist Church was founded in Dawamakha in 1914 (Baglari, 2015). The important villages he had travelled mainly were Phasiagaon, Edenbari, Borigaon, Naoherua, and Ambagaon.

In 1928, some of the members of Dawamakha Baptist congregation switched on to Catholic Church. On the invitation of Sisuram Saikia and his followers, Father Piyacheski of Roman Catholic Church came to Dawamakha and baptized some people. This resulted in the foundation of the first Roman Catholic Church among *Boros* in Assam. In the course of time many more Christian missionaries came to Udalguri district and did many incredible contributions to the tribe in their socio-cultural, educational and especially religious life.

Contribution of Missionaries: A General Outlook:

By the time British rule began in Assam, the *Bodos* landed in a state of chaos and confusion since they lacked a good leader to guide them. In his work *The Bodos of Assam: A Socio-Cultural Study*, Dr. Harka Bahadur Chetri Atreya says, "An unhappy state of affairs was prevalent in the society. The social system was controlled by the high classes. The illiterate Bodo people were somewhere, illtreated, neglected, cheated, misused, misbehaved with, misguided, and converted into other religions (Atreya, 2007)." Dr. Surya Kumar Daimari in his article "Rev. G. R. Kampfer in the Land of the Gallows and Tigers (an excerpt from 'A Review on the Unpublished Notes of Rev. G. R. Kampfer')" has given a pen picture of the *Bodos*. He says that the land Rev. Kampfer first landed was perhaps the most terrific land where people were "spirit worshippers sunk in the depravity of ignorance"- "Driven back into the swamps and jungles". Rev. Kampfer calls the village he first visited "the village of the gallows", where people were half-dazed, half savage, half demonized, worshippers of devils (Basumatary, Rev. G. R. Kempfer in The Land of the Gallows and Tigers, 2014). But he raised a ray of hope for the despondent, hopeless, helpless, downtrodden and desolate people and heralded a new epoch in the history of *Bodos*. Missionaries' noble objectives were directed to changing the society. The missionaries had to struggle for existence in the initial stage but they never lost their spirits rather remained determined to continue the evangelical activities in this district in the face of all that came their way. Thereafter, the region witnessed a tremendous transformation in the socio-economic, educational, health and religious spheres. There was in fact historic leap from darkness to light, superstition to reason, illiteracy to literacy, ignorance to knowledge. The missionaries introduced and implemented some welfare programs for the development of the people and their work of mercy.

The missionaries keenly observed that most of the people were grossly illiterate, ignorant and superstitious. It was realized that without providing education, 'Gospel of God' would not reach to them. Therefore, the missionaries introduced



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education in this area which was blessing in disguise for the people in the long run. The American Baptist Mission worked for educational development of the people along with evangelization in different areas among Bodos. In Chirang district, “the Tukrajhar middle English School was flourishing and its enrolment in 1938 was 93. The school suffered due to shortage of teachers and Minaram Basumatari and his wife Minnie, have had to carry on only with the help of an untrained young man. Harisinga school received government recognition for one year. In 1938, there were 113 pupils on the roll. The people had done a good deal towards making this school permanent, and had built a dormitory for boys costing rupees 930 in 1937 (Sangma, 1992).” Rev. Sidney Endle established many schools in different villages of the region. One of them was established in Bengbari in 1865 in which he also provided hostel facility for the students coming from far. Another school was established at Borigaon in 1893. Rev. Sidney Endle established more than 15 schools in the Boro areas of the then Darrang district (now Udalguri). The aim of missionary education was to ensure moral enlightenment and economic security for the people and increase the desire for the readers and the new converts. The missionaries established Primary, Elementary, Upper Primary, M. E Schools, High Schools, Theological College, adult education, Sunday Schools, and Night schools for development of education in the region. They did a considerable amount of spade work for the growth and development of education in the region (Swarup Ghera Narzary of the Village Bengbari, 2018).

As an integral part of the society, religion exercises great influence on the people in their social habits. Prior to Christianity, the *Boros* were purely religious that worshiped “*Bathoubrai* or *Sibrai*” (Boro, 2010) and they were the “Lovers of Nature” and worshipping various elements of Nature. They were offering animals, cocks and hens etc. to their gods and goddesses to get their blessings. They were polytheists. They widely believed in supernatural powers like magic, spells, spirits, and sorcery. They also believed in animism and anthropomorphism. On the other hand, the missionaries went dead against polytheism, magic spells, sorcery, worshipping spirits, animal sacrifice, rites, rituals, ceremonies etc. and propounded monotheism. The missionaries were the only people who could realize the pathetic conditions of the people and tried to eradicate it and ultimately succeeded also. They tried to renovate and rationalize the traditional society where everything was out of order and full of restriction (Enus Daimari of the Village Khwmabari, 2018).

The missionaries laid emphasis on the development of character in the converted Christians. Virtues of Christianity like honesty, benevolence, decency, and respect for truth and love, were infused into their minds. They were expected to be the models of morality and humanitarianism. The missionaries built separate colony known as mission compound and took care of the converted Christians and provided all facilities so that they could live in the society, free from social taboos (Upen Daimari of the Village Dumbrugami, 2018). It should be mentioned that *the Bodos* that worshiped ‘*Bathuw*’ (traditional religion of *Bodos*) were not much happy with the Christianity due to alteration of some existing traditional socio-religious norms and introduction of new types of conceptual framework in the areas where people considered their beliefs, practices and values were apriori acts and hence sacred and inalienable although unscientifically grounded. Therefore, the group of people that accepted Christianity were considered to be unholy which was a kind of social taboos among *Bodos*. This was another specific hurdle for missionaries to have access into the faith journey of the people and to transform their understanding with the aim of introducing them a more enlightened and civilized way of life which they succeeded to some extent only with untold pains and struggles.

Bodos in various parts earlier suffered from various kinds of sicknesses such as malaria, cholera, and they were dying without proper medical treatment. During that time, sickness was viewed as the effect of supernatural power and people were taking help of sorcery and magic spells because those were considered to be the only ways of curing sick people (U. Baglary of the village Borigaon, 2018). They were economically exploited by sorcerers and even at last they were losing their valuable lives. The common belief was that they were attacked by *Mwdai*- a kind of evil spirit which took hold of them. Rev. Kampfer mentions in his notes how often he had witnessed scenes like driving out of the evil spirits. He wrote, “These people were heathen, given to vice and ignorance and superstitions, degenerated and dejected” (Basumatary, Rev. G. R. Kempfer in the Land of the Gallows and Tigers, 2014). The missionaries provided health care facility to the people by establishing clinics, and dispensaries. Witnessing the infant mortality, malnutrition, epidemic diseases like cholera, malaria etc. among the *Boros*, Endle considered that hospitals and other health centers were important to be established. He established many hospitals and one such was in Bengbari which was later shifted to Harisinga, Udalguri. Now hundreds of



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patients from faraway places are visiting these hospitals daily for their proper treatment and hardly going to the local physicians. The medical services initiated by the missionaries had a tremendous impact on the people and it is more relevant at the present moment (Dino Nazary of the Village Khwmabari, 2018).

Prior to the coming of the Christian missionaries the Bodos had remained subservient to superstitions and evil practices of some self-proclaimed illiterate leaders who ruined the lives of people in the name of disciplining them and protecting them from all kinds of physical and spiritual harm. People lived always in the midst of fear, anxiety, doubt and ignorance while some were exploitative of the situation. Today, the Bodo Christians have become mentally more fit than earlier in making constructive and collective decisions for the welfare of the society as well as individual members. The rapid civilization that we see among Bodo Christians today is because of the selfless sacrifices made by the missionaries that liberated people from physical, mental and spiritual blindness. In short, we can say that the Christian missionaries did what St. Augustine said regarding his daily duties as Bishop: *The turbulent have to be corrected, the faint-hearted cheered up, the weak supported; the Gospel's opponents need to be refuted, its insidious enemies guarded against; the unlearned need to be taught, the indolent stirred up, the argumentative checked; the proud must be put in their place, the desperate set on their feet, those engaged in quarrels reconciled; the needy have to be helped, the oppressed to be liberated, the good to be encouraged, the bad to be tolerated; all must be loved.*

Conclusion

The missionaries had been rendering philanthropic work among the *Boros* mainly in the areas of spiritual upliftment, health, relief and rehabilitation and other social issues. Due to the untiring, dedicated and selfless service of the missionaries, not only the spiritual life that was transformed to a great extent but also the socio-cultural life of the *Boros* underwent a sea change. They had released the people from the bondage of blind belief, superstition, illiteracy, poverty etc. By their unflinching and impartial love and compassion, they did away with the stigma of dreadful diseases like Malaria, cholera, small pox, etc. and treated the ill and fed the starved. The welfare measures like the residential schools, mid-day meals, relief measures, stipend system, education, and health were first begun by Christian missionaries in this region. The challenge of the missionary movement was followed by an emphatic indigenous response. The change of the traditional social structure evoked a sense of self-analysis in the minds of the educated *Bodos*. The general infiltration of the missionary propaganda to the social structure initiated a change in the thoughts of the people which is visible in the lifestyle of Christians today. Thus, the ideas and efforts of the missionaries acted and counter-acted to raise a reformed society among *Bodos*. The *Bodos* will remain indebted for ever for the selfless services rendered by the Christian missionaries.

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