

Revivalism of Bathouism Among the Bodos

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Abstract: Bathou is the traditional religion of the Bodos. This paper attempts to study on the Bathou religion of the Bodos. The main goals of this study are to explore the origin and philosophy of Bathouism, the socio-cultural significance and the role of its in Bodo society. Moreover, I will try to find out the cause of revising and giving new shape to the Bathouism.

Key words: Bathouism, traditional practices, modification, revivalism

The Bodos belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family of Tibeto Burman stock of the Assam-Burmese group. They are one of the major tribes or tribals of Assam. It can be cited that their identity is not uniform as an ethnic group. Different names are used to designate them. In West Bengal and Nepal, they are known as Meches. It is believed that the Bodos first came from South-West China through Tibet and Burma. The date of migration from their original abode, namely North Western China, to this part of present India is debated and needs further research.

The generic term 'Bodo' was first applied by Hudson to all speaking group of Tibeto-Burman languages like *Bodo* or *Boro* of the Brahmaputra valley,¹ Meches of Lower Assam and west Bengal, Rabhas, Garos, Dimasas, Tipras, Lalungs, Sonowals, Hajongs, Deuris, Chutias and other tribes. The Bodos are living in a scattered manner throughout the North-Eastern region of India including some small Bodo pocket areas outside India in Nepal. Linguistically the Bodos include a large group of people who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman languages of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma.

I. Bathouism as the traditional religion of the Bodos :

The traditional religion of the Bodos is called *Bathou* which has been practiced since time immemorial in South East Asia. This religion is invariably linked up with and centred round the worship of *Bathoubwrai* or *Sibwrai*. i.e the supreme god of the Bodos. Hence it is known as *Bathou* religion. In the Bodo language, *Ba* means five and *thou* means 'deep philosophical thought'. These five elements are- *Bar* (Air), *San* (Sun), *Ha* (Earth), *Or* (Fire) and *Okhrang* (Sky). Hence, *Bathou* means five principles, significances which are mysterious: not easy to understand and feel without meditation. Amongst the follower of *Bathou* religion, God is known as the *Bathou Bwrai*. In Bodo language, the word *Bwrai* signifies the oldest or most elderly man in power and knowledge or the supreme in all respects. Therefore, he exclusively represents supreme soul, *poromatma*, who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. Fire can't burn him, water can't moisten, air can't dry him and spear can't pierce him. He is the illuminator of all earthly objects; He is the source of all knowledge and lights. He bestows us everything we need in this world.

The creator of these five elements is called *Bathou Bwrai* or the God. After creating physical form of a man with the composite elements, he confers his spirit to inanimate body which displays as the totality of living beings body. So, *Bathou* is religion and philosophy that embodies the spirituality of the creator or the God. The followers of *Bathou* religion is spirituality through the prayers, offerings and sacrifices offered to the deities. Many scholars observe regarding the religion of the Bodos. According to Sindney Endle, "the religion of the Kachari race is distinctly of the type commonly known as animistic and its underlying principle is characteristically one of *fear or dead*."² He again says in the same monograph-"in the typical Kachari Village as a rule neither idol nor place of worship is to be found; but to the Kachari mind and imagination earth, air and sky are alike people with a vast number of invisible spiritual beings. Known usually as *mwdai*, all possessing powers and faculties far greater than those of man. *Mwdai* is a Bodo word which means deity (God or Goddess) and should be mistaken for invisible spirits."³ Dr P. Bhattacharjee strongly objects "the religion of the Bodos are not animistic. They are worshippers of *Bathou*, the supreme God. They have other Gods and Goddesses. They believe in Ghosts and Spirits also. But the concept of the Supreme God is predominantly

¹ . Hudson, B.H.1846, Miscelenous Essay Relating to Indian Subject, 105, Rev. Narzinary. Hira Charan, 1855, *In Search of Indentity: The Mech: Introductory*: p-21

² .Endle, S. *The Kacharis*, 2007, p-33, Bina Library, Gauhati, Assam, India

³ Ibid, p-33

remarkable.”⁴ The Bodo scholars and writers are of the opinion that their religion cannot be regarded as animistic. They worship *Bathou*. He is the illuminator of all earthly objects; he is the source of all knowledges and lights. He bestows us everything we need in this world. Frankly speaking the Bodo peoples are fundamentally nature worshippers. They are believers in the hidden power of the nature which can strongly dominate the social life. It is thought that the nature is the cause of peace and sorrow.

Sijou plant (Euphorbia splendens)

Sijou is a kind of plant whose scientific name is *euphorbia splendens*. The *Sijou* is planted in the *Bathou* altar at the centre as the symbol of *Bathou* religion of the Bodos. In *Bathou* religion, the *Sijou* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) has an important place and this *Sijou* has been widely accepted as the symbol of life or soul by the Bodo people since time immemorial.

The *Sijou* plant is the living symbol of *Bathoubrai*, the supreme God. It needs to be mentioned here that there is no seed in *sijou* plant and it can survive in every place. Hence a branch from another plant is brought and planted at the *Bathou* altar.

Bathou Altar (Bathousali) and Worship of Deities

The *Bathou* altar is the main place of *Bathou* worship. Bodo families who follow the *Bathou* religion, must have a *Bathousali* in the North East corner of the courtyard. Apart from this, each village has to set up a *Bathou* altar in the community land. It contains a *Bathou* altar where *sijou* plant is planted and fenced with 18th pairs of small bamboos strips folded with five fastening which symbolises and signifies the religious and spiritual principles of Bathouism as well as the eighteen gurus and deities.

The pairs of part symbolically mean the married couple of gods and goddess, *gurus* as well as *Mahagurus*. These *gurus* who occupy the prominent place in the *Bathou* religion are: 1. *Mwnsinsin bwrai* and *Mwnsinsin burwi*, 2. *Si Bwrai-Si Burwi*, 3. *Aham Bwrai-Aham Burwi*, 4. *Khuria Bwrai-Khuria Burwi*, 5. *Eheo Bwrai-Eheo-Burwi* 6. *Mainao Bwrai-Mainao-Burwi*, 7. *Bwlli Bwrai-Bwlli Burwi*, 8. *Deva Bwrai-Devi Burwi*, 9. *Gongar Bwrai-Gongar Burwi*, 10. *Joumwn Bwrai-Joumwn Burwi*, 11. *Song Raja-Song Rani*, 12. *Hasung Bwrai-Hasung Burwi*, 13. *Rajong Bwrai-Rajong burwi*, 14. *Agrang Bwrai-Agrang Burwi*, 15. *Hazw Bwrai-Hazw Burwi*, 16. *Emao-Bwrai-Emao Burwi*, 17. *Mohela Bwrai-mohela Burwi* and 18. *Hafao-Bwrai-Hafao-Burwi*. In the name of the above mentioned god and goddesses, an *alari bathi* (earthen lamp) is highlighted on all the altars. The first round of fastening from the bottom signifies the three *bando* (bindings) of human beings: birth, sorrows and pains or troubles and distress and death which have to be compulsorily borne by human bindings. No one can escape from these things. Another remaining two rounds of fastening signify the two other bindings are marriage and peace and pleasure from which one may escape.

It can be observed from above discussion that the *Bathou* is an ancient religion of the Bodos which has been practiced by the followers since time immemorial. So, the colonial ethnographers and missionaries called the indigenous tribal religion animism. It is also true that to a certain point the existence of Pluralistic God and Goddesses perhaps point to the primitive stage of folk religion. Beside these, there are lots of characteristics of folk religions such as acts like propitiation, purification, expiation, avoidance, taboo, asceticism, orgies, revelation, divination, ritual and magic are common to the traditional religion of the world.

Bathou Religion in the Past

Traditionally, the religion of the Bodos did not have any institutionalised shape. In this way the religion has since time immemorial been practised as a folk religion. But in course of time and due to the rapid changes in the society this *Bathou* religion has faced some new challenges. The process of worship such as sacrificing animals and fowls, offering and drinking rice beer in the name of deities appears to be crude and unfit in the eyes of the educated and civilized people. Gradually people started to dislike these processes or way of worshipping. Moreover, there was lack of uniformity in the rituals and other related matters in the same religions.

Role of Organisation

For a long time there were no preachers, no organization, no institution and no written documents to give a cohesive institutionalised shape to the *Bathou* religion. The modernization that comes to contact in the form of development in education, communication and exchange of ideas along with socio-economic and political implications among the tribes previously untouched by modern civilizations have huge impact in the thinking and perception of the people. Therefore, a section of the educated and conscious Bodos have taken initiative to modify and innovate their religious practices. As a result an organization named All *Bathou* Religious Union was formed in 1992. Now this organization has introduced and initiated new practices of

⁴ Bhattacharja, P. *A Descriptive Analysis of the Bodo Language*, p-17, 1997 published by Registrar., Gauhati University Publication Department

worship in the name of several deities. Since last 18 years All *Bathou* religious Union has been making efforts to give an organized and institutionalized shape to the *Bathou* religion. The main aims and objectives of the organization are to revitalise Bathouism and propagate its religious preachings all over the world, to enshrine ideas of the *Bathousim* along with its related traditional rites and social customs, to publish and highlight the theosophical matters, religious philosophy, thought and beliefs, moral teachings, hymns and to organize discussion, seminars, study circles and researchers as required on the *Bathou* religion and its philosophy from time to time. The branch organization of All Bathou Religious Union like *laimwn afad* (Youth wings), *Mainao Afad* (youth wings), preachers, prayer groups have been taking initiative regarding the changes and modification of social customs, tradition and belief. These changes of the Bodos have come under the impact of the changes in neighbouring developed other societies and religions. Workshops, seminars, discussions and conferences are frequently organised by the institution or respective branches of ABRU. The recent moves to introduce modification and innovation in the religious practices are necessary to give the traditional religion a cohesive and institutionalised shape and to vitalise the religion in the days of ethnic assertion.

Publication of Religious Books

There was no written scriptures and verses in traditional *Bathousim* but now the ABRU is bringing out so many written holy verses, books, journals as its media of publicity, *Gwthar Mwikhun* (1990) is a mentionable religious concerned book which was published by *Bathou* publication Board, Harisinga, Assam. The central body of ABRU has also published some input publications of religions books related to *Bathou* religion.

Establishment of Temples

Earlier the followers of Bathousim did not have temples. Though the *Bathou* religion had no temples there was a worship place. Nowadays the modified Bathouism has temples known as *Thansali*. This is like a church of Christianity and mosque of the Islam.

Now the organisations of Bathouism are establishing their *Bathousali* or *Bathou Thansali* at their homes, head offices or regional offices. This organisation of ABRU has been playing an active role to build up its common platform.

Food offerings

In the age old *Bathou* religion, there is a tradition of animal sacrifices during the observance of some worships such as *Kherai*, *Garja* and others. This process is now being revised and modified under the aegis of Union. The followers of modified *Bathousim* offer flowers, fruits and *prasads* in the name of respective deities in place of the early and primitive practices. They have shifted the place of worship from the temporary place of worship located outside the village, to the *Bathou* altar in the court-yard. It can be observed that Hindu religion has influenced the modified *Bathou* religion, for example the use of *prasads*, flower, *Dhup dhuna* are the clear evidence.

Invention of prayer songs

On every Tuesday, a band of singers sing prayer songs known as *Bathou aroj* in the *Bathou* altar for the well being of the people. At the same time, to get rid of the curses and abuses (*groho nangnay*) suffered by any family member, the band of singers sing prayer songs on behalf of that member in the name of the *Bwrai Bathou*.

Role of religious specialists

The *Douri* (male priest) and the *Doudini* (female priest) who used to play pivotal role in traditional *Bathou* religion are being shifted to the background. They are replaced by *Gwthari Asari* priest appointed by the village and a band of singers who sing i.e *Bathou Aroj* at the time of worship. The *Douri* explains the reason *Raisongnay* in Bodo why and to whom this worship is performed or offered in the beginning and again the worship comes to an end with his *raisongnay* (concluding mantra)

The preachers and the followers of modified *Bathousim* have given importance on *Douri* instead of *Douri* (male priest) and *Doudini* (female priest). Earlier, during the *Kherai* worship, *Doudini* had to play great role in the worship. The *Kherai* is religious festival, and in *Kherai* the deities are propitiated with the ritual dance and drama. The *doudini* is the key dancer. As soon as the priest or *oja* chants the *mantra*, she starts dancing rhythmic dances. The *doudini* moves in a circular way round the *Bathou* altar where deities are positioned. The *oja* and the *deouri* and the elderly members of the village follow her dancing and making hand gestures. There are eighteen varieties of dances performed by the *doudini*: *Dahal sibnay*, *bathou gidignay*, *Cha gwlaow bwnay*, *khwijema fonai*, *dahal thungri sibnay*, *thungri sayao ganay*, *mwisw gelenai*, *gorai dabrainay*, etc. These dances are performed with the traditional musical instruments like *Kham* (big drum), *sifung* (long flute), *serza* (violin) and *zotha* (cymbal).

II. Conclusion

Bathouism is the aboriginal religion of the Bodos which provides a wide scope to wide and all embracing discipline which covers everything concerning the life, thoughts and activities of the folk. Followers of Bathouism can never run their life and society beyond their social customs and traditions as well as principles which is part and parcel of Bathouism. Bathouism have their own customs, costumes and principles relating to birth, marriage, beliefs and practices and death rites. So, Bathouism embraces all the matters. The *Bathou* religion plays a pivotal place in Bodo society and culture. It governs the lives of the people in their day life and in their rituals, seasonal and religious festivals. Both the life cycle ceremonies are observed according to the tenets of *Bathou* religion. The deep philosophical principles of *Bathou* exert influence on the moral character and thought of the Bodos.

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