

# **Bodo Identity Assertion And Revitalisation Of Bathou Faith: A Study On Tribal Politics, Political Configurations And New Claims.**

Jayashree Narzary  
Department Of Political Science  
University Of Delhi

---

## **Abstract**

*Bathou worship is claimed to incorporate the philosophy of the Bodos. Throughout its history, the community has experienced different waves of changes in its socio-cultural landscape. There are various local site-specific ritualistic articulations within the community. Before the waves of 'reformation', 'identity assertion' and 'revitalisation', the variations were based on fluid everyday lived realities and exchanges. But now we see the institutionalized and standardized manifestations of them in the multiple Bathou sects followed by people. In the context of Bathou worship, the changes in the cultural landscape is based on the relationalities between trends of 'revitalisation', Bodo identity assertion, current political configurations and new claims.*

---

Date of Submission: 01-12-2024

Date of Acceptance: 11-12-2024

---

We need to prospect the role of colonial knowledge to explore the complex socio-cultural dynamics of Bathou faith practiced by the Bodos. Colonial occupation was a matter of seizing, delimiting and asserting control over physical, geographical area - of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations, producing new boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves<sup>1</sup>. In the context of the Northeast, the Colonial coping strategy of ethno-territorial classifications of the populations created 'identities' – as 'tribes' – (further categorized as hills and plains tribes) and shaped notions of 'indigeneity'<sup>2</sup>.

Based on the civilisational linear progression of human history, the characterisation of 'tribal' people was controlled by ethnic stereotypes as *primitive, wild, uncivilized, degraded and backward*. This is the process of defining and constructing a 'tribal' identity and discourse on 'indigeneity'. Discourse around indigeneity then, often becomes an exercise in defending the fences and walls that colonial rulers had erected.

The popular understanding that exists today is that "*the word 'indigenous' itself is not only a symbol of religion but it also identifies culture, traditional and social system which is distinct and different from any other religion and culture.*"<sup>3</sup>

Before the 20th century, 'religion' as an objectified category was not defined, defended or proclaimed<sup>4</sup>. The census modality<sup>5</sup> was deployed to grasp the fuzziness and fixate the stereotypes into categorisations which then created a sense of consciousness and identification with these ideas. According to Sidney 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"<sup>6</sup>. One of the dominant characterisations of the tribes of Brahmaputra Valley is that of a semi-savage and pagan. In the later writings, W.W. Hunter, Waddle and Endle had characterized the Kachari tribe<sup>7</sup> as "semi-hinduised" to accommodate the complexities and fluidities under the

---

<sup>1</sup>Mbembe, *Necropolitics*

<sup>2</sup>Baruah, "*Territoriality, Indigeneity and Rights in the Northeast India*"

<sup>3</sup>Nabam, "Census 2022"

<sup>4</sup>John Thomas, "From Sacred Rocks to Temples: Recasting Religion as Identity in Northeast India", pp 3.

<sup>5</sup>Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, introduction.

<sup>6</sup>Endle, *The Kacharis*.

<sup>7</sup>used by anthropologists and linguists to define a collection of ethnic groups living predominantly in the Northeast Indian states of Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya.

umbrella as transition towards Hinduisation<sup>8</sup>. G.S. Ghurye defined the “tribes” as ‘aboriginal or backward Hindus’. They were also called ‘vanavasi Hindus’. The “tribes” of the Brahmaputra Valley had experienced a flow of various ideas and cultural practices, which were either incorporated in one or the other form or rejected according to their local socio-economic contexts<sup>9</sup>.

Orientalist shame, conversions to other sects or ‘organized religions’ and influences of ‘advanced’ neighboring cultures are major considerations here. With the rise in consciousness of ‘tribal’ identity, the socio-political-cultural imaginations and articulations of local reformers and activists were largely shaped by institutional legacies of colonial knowledge based on the borrowed idiom of remembered tribal hood and primitivism. These processes created the notion of ‘distinctiveness’ about their ‘identities’. The vulnerability and fear of loss of ‘traditional’ cultures, compelled the local ‘tribal’ activists and reformers to define, standardize, organize and systematize their existing fluid, overlapping beliefs and practices as ‘religion’<sup>10</sup> along with participation in modern temporalities.

It involved the three Rs-Reinvention, Reconstruction and Recreation i.e. formal structures with standardized sets of liturgy, hymns, prayers, books and construction of temples<sup>11</sup>. It involved translating their cultures, heritage and faith into a structure recognised as ‘religious’ by outsiders, thus preserving and developing it in an innovative and comprehensible form<sup>12</sup>.

We explore how Bathou worship has been influenced by these trends in its own local, differentiated and multiple contexts.

### **I. Bathou Worship- Basic Philosophy And Rituals**

According to Haribhusan Brahma,

*“Legend has it that the infinite Gods became tired of their formless existence and shaped themselves as a human being called Jwi Bwrai or Old Soul. It is based on the belief of an infinite and eternal god called Obonglaoree. Then, Mwnsinsin Bwrai amongst the Bodos received a lesson of life for the first time. He happened to get a plant (Euphorbia) as blessing of the Bwrai Bathou-the conceptual god of the Bodos. In Bathouism, this Sijou plant is accepted as the symbol of life-the immortality of the Soul. The Bathou Altar is to be understood as the replica of the body of a living being. For thousands of years, Bathouism has been dictating the entire social fabric as the guardian of the bodo society. It serves as the base of Bodo culture and facilitates the integrity of a strong social order.”<sup>13</sup>*

The Bodo community reveres, believes and worships the Siju plant<sup>14</sup>, which is considered to be the manifestation of *Bwrai Bathou*. ‘Ba’ means five and ‘thou’ means deep philosophical thought. The philosophies revolve around ‘ba/mwnba’ meaning five. This understanding is common to all the Bathou sects. The five natural elements - *ha* (land), *dwi* (water), *bar* (air), *or* (fire) and *okhrang* (sky) are worshiped which is inspired by the belief in *Mwnba Santhou* - the world and human life exist because of a balance among and between all primary elements. The spirits of *Ailong* (earth), *Agrang* (water), *Khoila* (air), *Sanjaborlee* (Fire) and *Rajkunbre* (sky) are revered. It is believed that humans are *saba mwdaini phisa or Bodos* i.e. offsprings of these five major natural elements/spirits. At both communal and individual level, the popular belief is that Bathou's blessing is sought to ward off *omongol* (inauspiciousness), *mwdai* (evil spirits) and to manifest *mangal* (good fortune) and well being.

It is practiced in its different interpreted forms, manifestations, vis-a-vis local socio-cultural contexts. The rituals related to placing the *Bwrai Bathou* (*sijou plant*) in the *Bathou altar*, the process of *Bathou Gaisonnai* (*Bathou fencing*) to offerings, the prayer site, general conduct of the prayers, the observance of events and the addressment of the chief practitioners are organized differently by the *Bathou sects*. *Kherai*, *Marai* and *Garja* are believed to be observed by the ancestors but over the years, different bathou sects have reconstructed their own models of worship by rejecting or retaining and borrowing certain aspects.

*Kherai* is believed to be an expensive communal event of the village where everyone pools in and engages in the preparations. There is no fixed time or date for its observance. The *Oza*, *Douri/Deouri* and *Doudini* are casual practitioners who act as the link/bridge between nature/spirits and human beings. Through

---

<sup>8</sup> Pathak, “Constructing ‘Tribalness’ : Colonial Ethnography and Plain Tribes of Assam.

<sup>9</sup> Pathak, “Tribal Politics in Assam :1933-1947”

<sup>10</sup> Religion is a specific system of belief and/or worship, often involving a code of ethics and philosophy

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Boro, *An Analytical Study on Bathou Religious Folk Belief and Traditional Knowledge of the Bodos*.

<sup>14</sup> Belongs to the family Euphorbia genus

her imitation of the spirits, dances and drama, the *doudini/deodini*<sup>15</sup> (oracle possessed by the spirits) attempts to impart knowledge about how best to worship Bathou. Kherai is perceived to be an institution-like a school where the teachers guides its students<sup>16</sup>. This is called *doudini alongikhangnai*. The *doudini* is supervised, guided and led by the *deouri* and both of them perform as the custodian of the *Kherai* worship under the guidance of an *oza*. The basic idea is to propitiate the spirits to bestow good fortune upon the village.

*Garja* is observed twice-during monsoon and post harvest season. It is also known as *garja mw dai* (garja spirit), *mw dai hogarbai* (release of the evil spirit) and *lama gathenai* (to stop from re-entering). As these names suggest, this event is observed mainly to detect the evil spirits in the village, to release and to stop them from re-entering the village by performing certain rituals. As mentioned earlier, the rituals are not uniformed and are performed differently by different villages and sects.

*Merai/Marai* is performed as a public event in the month of bwisagu (april-july). Some believe that buffaloes are sacrificed to satisfy the *Rwisundri burwi* to achieve victory in life. Some believe that it used to be observed in earlier days, whenever the village used to be plagued by deadly diseases, natural calamities like flood, drought etc. At present, it is hardly in practice in Bodo villages.

Over time, different socio-cultural and political trends have influenced the nature of Bathou worship.

## **II. The 3 Rs- Reinvention, Reconstruction And Recreation.**

late 19th century and early 20th century are considered to be chaotic due to the flow of new ideas, trends of acculturation and conversions. As part of Bathou worship, the practices of *bwli pratha*<sup>17</sup> offerings of *jou* (rice beer) and the overall general conduct of the tribe was considered to be uncivilized, crude and unfit by the “advanced” neighboring communities. Amongst Bodos, the colonial modernity which penetrated through education led to internalization of the colonial imagery of backwardness, primitivism and generated feelings of shame for the lack of organized religion.

The reformers and local activists mobilized on these ideas, which then paved the way for numerous efforts at the three R’s- Reinvention, Reconstruction and Recreation. The lack and the need of a uniform set of rituals, written documents (prescribed scriptures), preacher and lack of institutionalization was realized.

In the mid- 15th century, Shankardeva followed the policy of ‘detrribalization’ in the region. The converttee are called *Saranias* and till date, their identification as ‘Bodos’ remain weak. The conversions to neighboring ‘advanced’ cultures led to acculturation as well. Bathou was identified to be a branch of folk hinduism, *Bwrai bathou* as *Shiva* or trinity of *Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara*.

In the 19th century, Christian Missionaries carried out their activities of proselytization in the region. During this time, literature on the community was produced by them. These literatures marked one of the first modern documentations on the community. For eg : *The Kacharis*. This period is also marked by transitions, conversions, and anxieties amongst the educated elites, village elders about the loss of their indigenous culture.

The popular sentiment of the time is captured by Sir Edward Gait ;

*“The Bodo dialect though still spoken in Assam by more than half a million people, are in turn giving way to Aryan languages (Assamese and Bengali) and their complete disappearance is only a matter of time”*

Mangal Singh Hazowary added that;

*“You see, during earlier days, one had to take bath to have a meal with the ‘caste’ people, such kind of treatment made the people feel inferior, undeveloped and impure. The Bodos also took up Sankari dharma, Christianity, krishnaguru, and other sects. This triggered Kalicharan Brahma to bring the Brahma dhwrwm (faith) for better education, jobs and to progress and to develop as a community”*<sup>18</sup>

*Brahma Dharma* emerged from the reform movement led by Sri Kalicharan Brahma to save the Bodos from extinction and to bring order and stability in the region. After acquiring *dikkha* from *Sri Paramahansa*, Brahma founded this form of orthodoxy on the ideals of equality and wide accessibility amongst its adherents. Certain rituals and performances related to Bathou such as offerings of *jou* (rice beer), animal sacrifice, and alcoholism amongst the Bodos were identified to be hindrances in its development as a community. It came up with a new model of worship which rejected these Bathou rituals, songs, dances and musical instruments altogether. Rituals related to offerings of animal sacrifice and *jou* ( rice beer) were replaced by flowers, *prasads*, *jagyahuti* and overall inexpensive rituals. It preached observance of non-vegetarianism. In short, it rejected Bathou worship altogether. *Gurudev* Kalicharan also emphasized on the role of education in the

---

<sup>15</sup> See, Ishohari, *The One Taken By God*

<sup>16</sup> Tajendra Narzary (Practitioner) in discussion with the author, Kokrajhar (16 November 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Process of worship involving offering sacrifices of animals like chicken, pig, pigeon, goat and duck

<sup>18</sup> Mangal Singh Hazowary (Founder of All Bathou Religious Union) in discussion with the author, Tengapara, Kokrajhar (24 July 2022).

betterment and development of the society. Most of his disciples and beneficiaries of his efforts towards education<sup>19</sup> became important government post holders, reformers and leaders of various socio-political movements in the region.

Parallely, around the same time, different locally scattered counter-movements to Brahma Dharma emerged with the aim of 'revitalizing' and 'developing' Bathou worship. To name a few, *Bathou Chatra Sanmilan*, *Boro Maha Sanmilani* and *Sadao Asom Bathou Mahasanga* sprang up with the help of leaders - Nepal Chandra Brahmachari, Fwrlang Babaji, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Dhupa Ram Basumatary. Not much is documented about the activities of these organizations. Some of the ideas went on to influence the emergence of Bathou sects.

The phenomenon of the Bodo 'Tribal' identity assertion was opposed to the Caste Hindu Assamese Subnationalism and the rise of Caste Hindu anti-colonial movement in the rest of 'British India'. The trigger point was the 1921's non-representation of the 'Plains Tribes' in the Legislative Council for Assam's administration<sup>20</sup>.

By the 1930s, with the emphasis on defining and constructing a "tribal" identity, the Tribal League emerged as an organized political platform. . The League's construction of the "tribal" identity was broad based, and religion was a secondary criterion<sup>21</sup> .

Around this time, Bodo elites like Kalicharan Brahma, Rupnath Brahma and Bhimbar Deuri resisted the classification of tribes as "semi-hinduised" to assert their socio-political imagination of a unified "great Bodo/Kachari" tribe's past for political advancement and recognition. It was also a political effort on the part of middle class leadership to maintain a demographic balance. In 1931 and 1941, the colonial government did not include 'religion' as a criteria to avoid confusions and complexities in data tabulations. Compilations for communities was done with reference to "race, tribe and caste"<sup>22</sup> This was done as a response to complement the situation.

Deva Kanta Ramchiary's write up beautifully explains the reasons for the uncomfot and hesitance to be identified as "semi-hinduised" and reflects on the lack of acceptance of tribal philosophy, the questions of self and belongingness;

*"Gambari I am Mahishasur  
I am towards your head rest  
listen few words of me  
I am very tired  
Yet I will tell you the  
Sad stories of mine  
Durgashri, with her ten hands  
Beats with mace, cuts me with sword  
And stabs me with trishul"*<sup>23</sup>

Post-Independence, Indian census lists's religion column was popularly filled in as Hindus, if not Christian or Muslim due to lack of any other option given or understood. This further accelerated the anxieties among the tribal communities.

One of the popular poems written by the then PTCA leader and poet, Samar Brahma Chaudhary "Sijwu Geremsa" was based on the broad themes of fear of loss of cultural memory and identity. The harsh reality of life and politics of domination that obstructed the development of their language and culture inspired the new poets to write poetry on ethnic liberation and salvation.<sup>24</sup>

The popular sentiment of the time is captured in the words of Tikendra Boro, the present President of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, '*Bodos must keep alive the Bathouism which is regarded as the identity of the Bodo peoples through language, culture and religion*'<sup>25</sup>. Bathou was identified to be able to play an important role in capturing the process of cultural self-definition and re-establishment of their identity.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Brahma Boys Hostel* helped the Bodo youth receive quality education

<sup>20</sup> Mosahary, *Bodo Students Movements*.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Biswas, *The Tale of Mahishasur and Durga : The Missing Story of the Tribal Hero*.

<sup>24</sup> Boro & Narzary, *Memory, Identity and Politics of 'dis'location : loss of cultural memory in the poems of two Bodo Poets*.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

*“The Bodo society has been changing since the time of conversions to Sankari, Christianity, Brahma dharma. The formation of ABSU was very important and it provided a common platform to discuss, understand various aspects of Bodo society. Education, jobs, political rights, land rights, cultural rights were the major concerns and this is how people became conscious.”<sup>26</sup>*

At different points of time, *The Plains Tribal Council of Assam, All Bodo Students Union and Bodo Sahitya Sabha* emerged to demand education, jobs, political, land and cultural rights in the region. these Bodo organizations negotiated with the framework of the post-colonial nation state to articulate its demands for recognition of its ‘distinct political identity’ and autonomous territorial space-*Udayachal*<sup>27</sup>.

Around this time, we see the processes of consolidation of the trends of standardization and institutionalization of cultural practices in the region. *Bathou Dharma Mahasabha* was founded by Bhaben Swargiary in the present day Baksa district. He was popularly known as *Bhaben Fwrwngiri* (scholar) as he indulged himself in imparting the knowledge related to the faith. He did not believe in Idol worship. He is known to travel far and wide to impart these ideas. In 1974, Gaham Kochari, Boloram Boro and Jugen Basumatary installed the first *Bathou Thansali* (temple) in Khwirabari of undivided Darrang district. In 1975, *Sanja Darang Bathou* was formed by Bihuram Boro and Sambar Daimary. Sombar Daimary was selected and appointed as the village’s head priest.

By the late 80s, after the failure of the *Udayachal movement*, threatened by the Assam Movement, the Bodoland Movement was launched. Multiple groupings and organizations were involved with their own varied contextual perspectives. In 2003, after a series of violent episodes and talks with the government, Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District was created for the Bodo dominated areas.

### **III. RSS As The Friend, Guide And Philosopher.**

In northeast, the basic ideology of the RSS is also captured in the words of Sri Ramesh Shinde;

*“Let us at least consider these tribal people as our brothers and sisters, help them weed out the faults in their history,-thus contribute in uplifting them”<sup>28</sup>*

With emphasis on ‘revitalisation’<sup>29</sup>, the RSS has fashioned itself as a ‘reformist’ Hindutva organization to bind the ‘tribal’ cultural sensibilities i.e. “to bring forth the unique attributes of the Northeast and nourish the commonalities”<sup>30</sup>.

In the 1940s, autonomy movements from Northeast made the Hindu Nationalists anxious to ‘protect’ and ‘save’ the tribes from foreign influences, oppression and loss of their ‘indigenous’ traditions and cultures. Sunil Deodhar, BJP incharge for Tripura argues “*the idea is to counter the sense of alienation these tribes feel from the rest of the country. They too are part of Bharat and Bharat Mata is theirs too*”. Their aim is to foster unity among all different traditional faiths at regional and national levels to create civic and national spaces and to foster the spirit of ‘nationalisms’. By 60s, various Hindu organizations affiliated to the Sangh Parivar started functioning in the region, to name a few- Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Kendra, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, Seva Bharti and Ekal Vidyalaya.

Their understanding is that;

*“Hinduism is the largest indigenous tradition in the world, which is inclusive of all indigenous traditions. The notion of ‘indigeneity’ and ‘locality’ is used by the Hindu-right wing ideologues, aided by local indigenous elites who deploy the ‘indigenous religion’ to shape common practices in the service of a unifying national identity.”<sup>31</sup>*

Kaustabh Deka commented ;

*“The RSS could successfully identify their agenda with the claims and demands of those groups who perhaps are talking about their indigenous religion, who perhaps somehow feel that their original faith system*

---

<sup>26</sup>ibid

<sup>27</sup> Demand for separate states in the Indian Union led by the plain tribes of Assam.

<sup>28</sup> Accessed, August 10, 2022,

<https://www.hindujagruti.org/news/47864.html>

<sup>29</sup> putting renewed emphasis on certain aspects of culture which although exist but are losing momentum due to forces of culture change.

<sup>30</sup> Accessed August 26, 2022,

<http://gallery.vivekanandakendra.org/index.php/Cultural-Activity/Institute-of-Culture?page=1>

<sup>31</sup> Arlongkumer, *Is Hinduism the world’s largest Indigenous Religion?*

*has been neglected and feel marginalized. It is the Hindutva agenda with a softer version of it which incorporates tribal symbols, faiths and languages into its central idea.*"<sup>32</sup>

it claims that 'indigenous faiths' are localised belief systems of small-scale societies who do not engage in proselytization (different from "world religions" like Islam, Christianity and Buddhism) as they are mostly orally transmitted, intertwined with traditional lifestyles and are pluralist in nature. Homogeneity is claimed by emphasizing on the fact that in spite of their inherent diversities in definition, rituals, etc, it is an admitted fact that all indigenous faiths of Northeast are bound by one unifying thread of nature and nature worship.

They work with the Naga's *Heraka faith*, Arunachal's *Donyi Polo*, Mizos, *Bodos*, *Tiwas*, *Rabhas*, *Tiwas*, *Lalungs*, basically different *Janajatis* of the region encouraging and advising them to protect their cultural heritage and maintain social integrity. They guide on how best to perform the rites, and also encourage codification of their customary rituals. It also involves radicalisation of tribal political identities through selective appropriation and molding of tribal organization's structures based on the missionary model to socialize tribal people into the 'mainstream Hindutva fold'.<sup>33</sup>

RSS claimed mythological linkages of Bodos with the Hindu Pantheon ;

*"According to the Holy texts such as Mahabharat, Puranas and Yoginitantra the original name of today's Assam was 'Pragjyotishpur'. It was ruled by the demon king named Narkasur. Also, the original name of today's Dimapur was 'Hidimbapur'. It was ruled by the Kachari (Kirat) royal family. The princess of the Kingdom was Hidimba. The Pandavas had visited this place during their exile. At that time, Bhima married Hidimba. A son named Ghatotkach was born to them. There is a mention of the participation of the Kirat sect in the Mahabharat war. The descendants of this sect are the Bodos. The Bodos proudly claim that they are direct descendants of Ghatotkach. However Western historians claim that they migrated to Assam from Mongolia. These historians spread false information such as the Aryan Invasion Theory"*<sup>34</sup>

These narratives were internalized by certain sections of the community. These efforts also contributed to the trends of identity assertion as it allowed the distinctly fashioned Bathou sects to be easily comprehended and recognised by outsiders<sup>35</sup> and its general acceptability from within the community.

The *Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* has been active in its engagement with the Bodo community. One of the *ashram* workers commented *"Yes, we eat pork or rice beer whatever we are offered. Jaise desh waisa bhash (adhere to the country's rules wherever you reside). Where is the difficulty?"*<sup>36</sup> This speaks volume about its involvement and dedication.

*"The organization works to help the Janajatis to develop their own dharma sanskriti and live with self-respect. We do not disregard or hate anyone's dharam. We encourage Bodos to discard the bad elements from their faiths and embrace good elements from neighboring communities. We advise them to follow and practice whichever Bathou sect they find suitable but caution them from falling under the trap of the mainstream religions. We advise that if you do not know how to worship or follow Bathou or Brahma faith, call elderly people, invent a common way, codify and preach it. We tell them that by doing this they can protect their culture. We usually assume that the Khasia, Naga and Mizo people have become Christians, but this is not the case. They also follow indigenous faiths and rituals based on Sanatan Dharma. Likewise, among Bodo Bathou followers, we have the Bihar Bathou, Buli Bathou sects etc but it is all part of the Sanatan Dharma, let's not put it as Hindu.*"<sup>37</sup>

Amongst Bodos, it has tirelessly campaigned for codification of its cultural customs and rituals into scriptures- prayers, related to marriages, and general conduct of the society. Hostels for boys and girls have been constructed in *Gossaigaon* and *Udalguri* to socialize them into the Hindu fold. They also organize sports events to encourage and 'discover' talented sportspersons and facilitate their training. *Jamuna Boro*<sup>38</sup> was one such 'discovery'.

---

<sup>32</sup> Zahan, *the bitter sweet Hindutva experiment*

<sup>33</sup> Accessed on August 10, 2022,

<https://www.deshabhimani.com/english/articles/the-rss-and-politics-of-tribal-identity/259>.

<sup>34</sup> Accessed on August 10, 2022,

<https://www.hindujagruiti.org/news/47864.html>.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Baruah, *Where RSS Men Love Their Pork*

<sup>37</sup> Jaleshwar Brahma (Vice President of All India Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram) in discussion with the author, Telephonic medium, (27 August 2022).

<sup>38</sup> Indian boxer who won several International medals.

*“The RSS made inroads into the tribal dominated Northeast because of the internal tensions of these societies. These tensions are used in an advantageous way by RSS and its affiliates”<sup>39</sup>*

In the literature produced by them, the Roman script movement<sup>40</sup> is narrativised to be led by the Christian missionaries to keep the Bodos away from their inherent Hindu culture. It claimed that the Bodoland Movement was a polarized event between the Christian dominated N.D.F.B. (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) and the Hindu dominated B.L.T. (Bodoland Liberation Tiger).

Analysis of contemporary events of the region tells us about the influences and active involvement of mainstream fundamentalist groupings. *“We study the intra-societal rifts and try to mitigate the tensions. During the 2012-2014 Bodo-Muslim violent episodes, in Kokrajhar and Udalguri, we very much participated, created centers and our members volunteered on the field”<sup>41</sup>.*

Jaleshwar Brahma, the acting Vice President of the VKA added that;

*“You can call us conservative but we are against only one thing, i.e., conversion to Christianity and Islam. We are strongly campaigning for the withdrawal of ST status from Christian Bodos. We have filed petitions, carried out signature campaigns, submitted memorandums to the President and lobbied around tribal MPs and MLAs. we are hopeful that the proposed bill will soon be introduced in the Assembly floors”<sup>42</sup>*

Since the last few years, the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Vikas Ashram has been campaigning for the removal of ST status from Christian Bodos, to prevent them from enjoying ‘double benefits’ of both ‘tribal’ and ‘minority’ (religion wise) status. They claim that this will help in restoring ‘equality’ and ‘stability’ in the region

#### **IV. Contemporary Events**

The 2020 BTR Accord<sup>43</sup> marked the beginning of increased influence of BJP in the region. It is called the Bodoland Territorial Region Accord. It is widely critiqued to be an ambiguous document. Certain clauses of the accord were challenged in the Gauhati High court by non-signatory Bodo elites. This tells us about the tensions within the community.

The 2021 election replaced BPF, the oldest ruling party and established a BJP-UPPL<sup>44</sup> alliance in the region. The new government also mobilizes around the slogan of preservation and development of Bathou as a cultural marker of the community. Reformation of the society through religion and education is stressed. Recently, Biswajit Daimary<sup>45</sup> announced the decision of installation of the world's first ever bronze statue of one of the Guru's of Bathouism-Mwmsin Bwrai in Assam. He said *“ I feel that idolation of our gurus is important. Else towards whom people would look upto? Something tangible is required to encourage people. Hence I came up with the idea of having a statue of him last year itself”<sup>46</sup>.*

In September 2021, the Assam government created the Indigenous Faith and Culture Department. They were tasked with preserving indigenous faiths such as Bathou of Bodo community, Heraka of Zeme Naga community and others which are considered endangered because of conversions to mainstream religions and to keep the younger generation rooted to their indigenous faiths<sup>47</sup>. Registration of the tribal cultural organizations with the departments will facilitate its institutional support. This event can be read as paternalistic.

Post the 2021 BTR elections, RSS has been more active than ever. Shakhas, cultural events, and prayer gatherings are frequently organized. Recently, on 14th August 2022, silent rallies were organized for remembering the horrors of the division of *Akhand Bharat*<sup>48</sup> in all the twelve mandals of Kokrajhar.

---

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

<sup>40</sup> Demand for roman script to be used to develop the Bodo language

<sup>41</sup> Jalesh. To read more, see Saba Sharma, “Outsiders in Bodoland”

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> It is an agreement underlying supposed changes in the power sharing agreements signed between Bodo Students Union, UPPL, NDFB and other groups.

<sup>44</sup> UPPL is the political wing of the All Bodo Students Union.

<sup>45</sup> Present Speaker of Assam Legislative Assembly.

<sup>46</sup> Accessed on August 19, 2022,

<https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/bathou-older-than-other-religions-biswajit-daimary/>

<sup>47</sup> Accessed on July 30, 2022,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-vows-patronage-for-indigenous-tribal-faiths-and-cultures/article65230518.ece>.

<sup>48</sup>



## V. Bibar Bathou

“See, for people like us what matters is the progress of the Bodo society in every aspect. Creation of Bibar Bathou is one such effort in that direction. The 80s were a very crucial period in Bodo history. Along with political consciousness, cultural and religious awareness was also realized to be important for our assertion as Bodos. In 1993, with likeminded people as founders, the ABRU was founded, they hold annual conferences to sensitize people and spread cultural awareness. Reformation is very important, it is very important to go back to our roots. We, the organizers, try to control the bad elements of the society to maintain peace, unity, discipline and brotherhood.”<sup>49</sup>

On 16th May, 1992 All Bathou Religious Union (now known as All Bathou Mahasabha) was established to facilitate cultural awareness and unity amongst Bodos. It created the Dularai Gauthum Bodo Afat/ Bibar Bathou, one of the multiple Bathou sects followed in the region. It is popularly called Bibar (flower) Bathou because this sect preached offering flowers, *prasad*, *dhup*, *dhuna* and *Bathou Aroj* (prayer songs). It eliminated the rituals of animal sacrifice, offering *jou* (rice beer), *Kherai* and *Garja*. It can be understood to be a ‘construct’ based on the need to revive, modify and systematize the Bathou worship. They gave an institutionalized and cohesive shape to Bathou worship. The aim is to fashion it as inexpensive, accessible, comprehensive and attractive. Therefore, it is referred to as ‘modified Bathouism’<sup>50</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, the organization worked on standardization and codification of the principles (rejecting and borrowing certain rituals) of the faith. The Bathou scriptures were compiled in the form of a book “*Bathou Thandwi*”. It contains important guidelines about the positions and roles of religious representatives. At the local levels, *Asari*, *Douri* and *Dousi* are appointed. *Gwthari* is appointed as the religious chief of a district and the *Bathou Guru* is appointed to function as the religious head. The dress code of each one of them is also prescribed. It also involved construction of *Bathou Thansali* (temple) to facilitate a fixed common platform for performance of religious rites.

The rituals are based on the five principles of *ha* (earth), *dwi*(water), *bar*(air), *or*(fire) and *okhrang*(sky). This is referred to as *Pancha Bhoota*, *Pancha Tattva* and *Pancha Darshana*. Siju tree is worshiped as the physical manifestation of Bwrai Bathou, Supreme God. The Bathou Bedi (where the siju plant is situated) is fenced with 18 posts which represents the different spirits and gods that are worshiped as 18 pairs of forefathers. Among them, *Mwnsin Sibwrai* and *Mwnsin Siburwi* are considered to be the supreme founders. The *Asari* and *Douri* (priests) help in the ritual performances. *Rongjali Bwisagu* (post harvest celebration during April), *Domasi* (post harvest celebration during January/February) and *Bathou San* (a particular day observed to symbolize the importance of Bathou) are observed as major events and huge prayer gatherings are organized at that time. “We offer flowers, sing spiritual songs (*Bathou Aroj*) and pray to the Supreme Almighty, *Bwrai Bathou* for our wellbeing. Every Tuesday evening, we offer our prayers at the common *Bathou Thansali* (temple). Apart from these, the followers offer prayers at their own respective households as well. In the Thansali, we pray for the well-being and improvement of the conditions of the Bodo society as a whole”<sup>51</sup>.

This sect dominates the discourse on Bathou worship because of its socio-political alliances.

“The Kalyan Ashram has helped us in different capacities. Since the inception of our organization, they have guided us in constructing an organizational framework, helped us to connect to different communities and encouraged our work. Be it directly or indirectly, we have always remained in touch.”<sup>52</sup> Recently, Janakalyan Samiti awarded the organization for its commendable religious work in Assam.

The organization has also always received institutional support from the BPF party, which ruled the region for nearly two decades. The party heads and leaders have always graced the events and gatherings of the events. In 2019, it succeeded in achieving the State census’s recognition. This allowed the Bathou believers to register themselves as ‘Bathou’ instead of Hindu in the list<sup>53</sup>. Prime Minister Modi attended the Bathou gathering organized by them on the BTR Accord Day. This speaks volumes about its socio-political and cultural value.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Barmahalia, *Revivalism of Bathouism Among the Bodos*.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Accessed June 21, 2022,

<https://www.indiatodayne.in/assam/story/indian-constitution-shall-now-recognize-bathouism-officially-392371-2019-02-06>



## VI. Gudi Bathou

*Dularai Gudi Bathou Afad*, which is also known as the *Guddi Bathou* sect, was founded in the early 1990s in Samgaon, Kokrajhar. Here, the emphasis is on 'preserving' the 'traditional' way of Bathou worship. It can be understood as a counter-movement in response to the trends of 'reformation' and 'revitalisation' of the Bathou faith. They claim that a culture/tradition survives only when there is organization, discipline and unity. Seminars, conferences and various religious gatherings are held to spread awareness and consciousness. They have different branches which helps in the smooth functioning of the organization.

The basic principles of Bathou worship remains the same. Here, the altar of *Afa Bwrai Bathou* is surrounded by 16 fences, each fence symbolizes the spirits of Bathou gurus and forefathers. *Kherai and Garja* are observed in the village outskirts (*Garja and Kherai Shali*), practicing the rituals of animal sacrifice and offering *jou* (rice beer). The *Douri/Deori* and *Deodini/Doudini* perform the rites.

## VII. Shiba Bathou

As the name suggests, the *Shiba Bathou* sect worship *Bathou Bwrai* (siju plant) as the manifestation of *Shiba*. *Nobin baba* founded the sect in *Ultapani* (near Bhutan border), after acquiring *dikkha* from *Shankar Acharya*. The sect is a result of trends of acculturation and has a wide range of followers.

Here, the five basic principles are referred to as *Panchabuta*. *Bwrai Bathou* is considered to be the owner of *Panchabhuta*. In the *Bathou altar*, a *trishul* (symbolizes Shiba) is placed which is surrounded by two pairs of ten fences tied together in three layers. The fences are in pairs signifying the *purusha prakriti*. Two flags- red and white are also hoisted to represent male and female *jati-purusha prakriti*. The fences are tied in three layers owing to the logic of *three akars* (facets of life), for eg : morning, evening and night; child, youth and old age; *okhaphwr gwrlwi*, *purnima* and *amabaisha*. The ten fences also signify the *ten avatars of God*, the *ten karmas*, the *ten stages of life*.

*"We observe Kherai puja, Maagi Purnima and Shiva Ratri. We do both puja and homjogya. Apart from daily puja, guru purnima are observed as major events. There is no hard and fast rule about vegetarianism for followers but main Purohits of each xhaka (branch) abstain from meat consumption"*<sup>54</sup>.

## VIII. Rupamoni Bathou

The *Rupamoni Bathou* is based on the Vedic system. As the name suggests, it is a guru based Bathou sect. It is based on the preachings of *Guru Rupamoni*. Along with *Bwrai Bathou*, household deities- *Bima Bisahori*, *Lakhi Narayan* and *Maidangshri* are also worshiped. The big puja gatherings are observed on every Sundays, Thursdays, *Maagi Purnima* and *Rash Puja*. 14<sup>th</sup> April is also specially observed as it is considered to be the date when *Guru Rupamoni* established the sect at *Rongsaidham, Basugaon*. It is also famous for healing people from deadly diseases.

Out of the multiple Bathou sects, *Satyabahan Bathou Dharma*, *Rupamoni Bathou Dharma*, *Joynarayan Bathou* and *Tulusi Bathou Raja Dharma* are some of the guru based sects.

Bathou is an important cultural referent for the Bodos. It can be understood as a multi-branched phenomenon with different interpretations. *"We also need to understand that trends of acculturation are a result of the "tribe's" assertion to experience what they were denied. Their denial plays out"*<sup>55</sup>. For example, observance of national festivals and events- *raksha bandhan*, *durga puja*, *kali puja*, *Vishwakarma puja*, *ganesh chaturthi* etc in the region.

Therefore, our understanding of the cultural landscape of the region vis-a-vis Bathou worship is to be based on these multiplicities of socio-cultural and political influences and its manifestations.

## Bibliography

- [1] Barmahalia, Faguna. "Revivalism Of Bathouism Among Bodos." *Iosr, Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, 2012.
- [2] Baruah Sanjib, "Territoriality, Indigeneity And Rights In The North-East India," *Economic & Political Weekly*, 43 (12).
- [3] Baruah Kr. Sanjib, "Where Rss Men Love Their Pork," Accessed 25th August, 2022, <https://www.firstpost.com/India/Where-Rss-Men-Love-Their-Pork-6053551.html>
- [4] Basumatary, Dinanath Basumatary & Alaka. "Acculturation And Transition In Religious Beliefs And Practices Of The Bodos." *International Journal Of Advanced And Innovative Research*, Volume 6, Issue 11, 2014.
- [5] Bhaumik, Subir. *Troubled Periphery, Crisis Of India's North East*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2009.
- [6] Biswas, Dona. "The Tale Of Mahishasur And Durga : The Missing Story Of The Tribal Hero." *Adivasi Resurgence*, November 24, 2018.
- [7] Boro, Arabinda Kherkatary & Jadab. "The Bathou Religion Of Bodos : A Study Of Its Insight. ." *Asian Journal Of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2015.
- [8] Boro, Buddhi Raj. "Kherai : The Religious Festival Of The Bodos." *International Journal Of Applied Research.*, 2017.

---

<sup>54</sup> Kabindra Narzary (Vice-President of the Shiba Bathou Dharam Meru Afad) in discussion with author, Titaguri, Kokrajhar (30 July 2022).

<sup>55</sup> Dona Biswas (PhD candidate) in discussion with author, telephonic medium (20 September 2022).

- [9] Boro, Munmi. "An Analytical Study On Bathou Religious Folk Belief And Traditional Knowledge Of The Bodos." *Jetir*, Volume 8, Issue 5., 2021.
- [10] Hazowary, Mangal Singh. "Revitalisation Of Indigenous Faith : The Bathou Religion In Boro Society." *Heritage Explorer*, August 8, 2020.
- [11] Jain, Sandhya. *Bharata Bharati*. August 18, 2012. <https://Bharatabharati.In/2012/08/18/Bodos-Are-The-Victims-In-Assam-Riots-Sandhya-Jain-2/> (Accessed September 23, 2020).
- [12] Nabam, Joram Yalam. *The Arunachal Times*. June 27, 2021. <https://Arunachaltimes.In/Index.Php/2021/06/27/The-Need-Of-Indigenous-Adivasi-Code-In-Religion-Columnof-Census-2021/> (Accessed August 10, 2022).
- [13] Narzary, Anil Boro & Pranab Jyoti. "Memory, Identity And Politics Of 'Dis'location : Loss Of Cultural Memory In The Oems Of Two Bodo Poets." *Mizu Journal Of Literature And Cultural Studies*, Volume Iv, Issue 1., 2017.
- [14] Pathak, Suryasikha. "Tribal Politics In Assam : 1933-1947." *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol Xlv No 10, 2010.
- [15] Prasad, Archana. "The Rss And Politics Of Tribal Identity." *Deshabhimani*, March 12, 2018.
- [16] Scheid, Claire S. *The Religious Studies Project*. November 9, 2017. <https://www.Religiousstudiesproject.Com/Response/Complications-And-Contradictions-In-The-Usage-Of-Indigenous-Religions/> (Accessed August 15, 2022).
- [17] Sensarma, Alok Jwhlaw Daimary & Arjundeb. "An Introductory Study Of Bodo Culture, Religion And Its Relationship With Hinduism." *International Journal Of Innovative Research And Advanced Studies*, Volume 4, Issue 4, 2017.
- [18] Shandilya, Trishita. "How Does Bathouism Mediate Between Humans And Nature." *Youth Ki Awaz*, March 27, 2017.
- [19] Shinde, Shri. Ramesh. *Hindu Jaagruti Samiti*. June 1, 2015. <https://www.Hindujagruti.Org/News/47864.Html> (Accessed August 10, 2022).
- [20] Zahan, Syeda Ambia. *Outlook India*. May 30, 2022. <https://www.Outlookindia.Com/National/The-Bitter-Sweet-Hindutva-Experiment-Deep-In-Tribal-Dominated-Northeast-India--News-199256> (Accessed September 23, 2022).