

# Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma-The Emergence of Bodo Ethnic Consciousness in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Abstract

*The Bodos were the earliest settlers of the present state of Assam. In ancient and medieval period they molded a powerful kingdom in different names at different places. They were Asura dynasty, Danavas, Salasthambas, Palas, Burmanas, Chutiyas, Koches, Kacharies and Tiprahs. But all these powerful kingdoms are now represented by remnants of Koch kings of Bijni, Mongaldoi, Raja of Rani and Beltola. All these kings by the influence of Brahmins became Hinduised Kings. But their subjects did not follow their suit. In recent times, with the spread of Neo-Vaishnavite religion large chunk of common Bodo people became saranias after being proselytized into this new faith and this again was followed by another wave of converts into Christianity after the coming of the British into Assam in 1826. Thus, hemmed in from all sides some sections from among the Bodos became alarmed that extinction of the Bodos with their own culture and language was only the matter of time. To rescue the tribe from imminent peril, the new middle class Bodos became alerted and endeavoured to arouse consciousness by launching Socio-religious reformation movements under the leadership of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma.*

**Keywords**—Awakening, Ethnic consciousness, Feeling of Ethnicity, Past glories, Zaminders, Barkandazes, Civilizing efforts, Subah, Bodos, Meches, Koches, Brahma Dharma, Ignorant, Enlightenment, Illiteracy, Medieval Practices.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Change is the way of life. The World is not static but dynamic. Change is necessitated for a society to cope with the changing nature of the world. The growth of ethnic consciousness at certain point of time is the sign of coping with along the changing world and this type of change may be in the field of social, economic, political and religion. The bringing about a change in any society is always accentuated by some vital factors- internal and external. Internally the self realization is vital point and it is emanated from

historical factors or past glories achieved by ancestors and aspirations for revival of the ancient glories leads to re-direction of the societal activities which may be termed as awakening, consciousness, movements, sometimes revolution etc. Externally, factors like influences of other civilization or achievement made by other neighbouring societies or inspirations drawn from changes brought about by other revolutions around the world are important elements for arousing ethnic consciousness or awakening. An external factor may also be the indirect, in disguise form of contributions of various agencies working for one's own interest but later becomes mutually beneficial. The British colonial empire in India achieved political unity of Indian subcontinent which Indian since ancient times could not achieved even by Ashoka the great and the Emperor Akbar the great. United India gave British colonial empire an opportunity for resource mobilization for administrative purposes for their own benefit, but it also gave Indians a politically united India, the source of strength. The western modern education introduced by the colonial rulers brought all sections of Indian society especially the down troddens to schools. Educated in modern fashion, the new elite class not only revived but also gave their own language in written and printed form and gained prominence in their respective regions. It is alleged that the colonial intention of introducing English education in India was for creating cadres for only clerical jobs requiring helping them in administration- home and abroad. But also it acted as blessings in disguise for the people classed as Vaishyas, Sudras and Nishadas who were not allowed to receive education alongside the sons of Brahmins and Kashatriyas in Sanskrit tolls under a Brahmin Pandit. Not to speak of education for wild tribes of North-East India, they remained totally untouched and isolated and were quite ignorant what is going on in other parts of India nor was there any civilizing agent so as to bring them unto the light of education. During medieval India, education system was not universal but monopoly of a few sections of people. In that sense other sections of society remained largely deprived, oppressed, exploited, down-troddens and on the whole

remained as servile groups. The tribes especially of north-east India were brought under education by the efforts of Christian Missionaries though intention was to convert them to Christianity. But it was a great blessing for the tribes where there was no effort made to bring them under education. The emotional feeling for Indians by the Indians was not the order of the day nor was there any civilizing efforts came forward from other side. Hence there is nothing wrong when this void was filled up by other people from outside who were somehow better off in so far as the feeling for humanity is concerned.

Fortunate enough, for the Bodos the civilizing efforts, awakening, awareness, consciousness and on the whole feeling of ethnicity sprang up from within by the efforts of some sections of their population who gained awareness by virtue of little education they received and economic advantages they gained by involving themselves in Sal timber (*Chorea Robusta*) trade specially of Parbotjoar area of present districts of Dhubri and Kokrajhar<sup>1</sup>. They tried to reorganize their social system in modern fashion by removing some of the medieval practices. They were responded enthusiastically by their people and the response was spontaneous for removing some evil social practices like the excessive consumption or use of Zau (Rice-Beer) and rearing of pigs in an unhygienic conditions, taking bride price, unsolicited marriage practices etc which actually became the source of mental anxiety for the educated Bodo elites who perceived shameful of and deliberately hid their antecedents and ethnic identity for fear of being hated by other neighbouring advance communities<sup>2</sup>. With regret it is to be mentioned here that the Bodos were denied food and accommodations in hotels, seats in hostels in Dhubri and Cotton College, Guwahati<sup>3</sup>. As the social reformation movement and the spread of Brahma Faith continued the effort to establish schools in Bodo inhabited areas for bringing their children to school were made. As there was none to help them in granting schools at decision making level, they necessitated political representation<sup>4</sup>. Hence, this hastened the formation of associations like the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan, the Bodo Mahasanmilan and later the Tribal League (the incipient political organization). Through these organizations, activities like social reformation, spreading of Brahma Faith and efforts to educate the Bodos continued in ever expanding horizon.

The external factors like the spread of Christianity among the Bodos especially in the present district of Udalguri and the conversion of the large chunk of the Bodo population into Saraniya after giving up their own language, religion and culture in favour of the Assamese language and Ek-sharan Dharma of Sri

Sri Sankardev are another cause of concern for the Bodo elites who felt that the extinction of the Bodos as an ethnic community with language, religion and culture was only the matter of time. Thus, hemmed in from all sides, the Bodo elites felt for their fellow tribe who were actually at the mercy of the cruel situation during 19<sup>th</sup> and early part of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>5</sup>. This ethnicity feeling accentuated for arousing ethnic consciousness or awakening among the Bodos on their past glories. The awareness of the past glories of the Bodos came from the pages of history, the Epics, the Puranas and the Tantras of the medieval period. Besides many historical ballads, legends are still extant amongst the Bodos in the form of Oral History and Oral Traditions.

## II. THE BODOS

Assam has multi-racial and linguistic groups with distinct cultures of their own which are quite different from one another. The Boro Kacharis or the Boros forms a very numerous section of these groups and are believed to be the earliest settlers of Assam. At one point of time, they built a powerful kingdom with their capitals at different places in the entire North-East India. Starting from Pragjyotishpur, Tezpur, Sadiya, Dimapur and then at Maibong and Khaspur (Haritkar), Tripura, Koch Behar, Bijni, Mongoldoi, Rani, Dimarua and many more bear testimony to the fact that the Bodos welded power in the entire North-East India, North Bengal and some parts of the present Bangladesh from the ancient till recent times. The builders of these kingdoms were all closely allied to the great Bodo Race. They spread over the Brahmaputra valley, North Bengal and constitute a very important group of Indo-Mongoloid people of east India. Those people who lived in scattered hamlets along the foothills of Himalayas in north East India and Brahmaputra valley called themselves Boros or Bodos although they are otherwise known as Kacharis in the Assam valley<sup>6</sup>. A section of this tribe who had gradually become Hindu speaking Assamese and considering their status to be higher than that of Kacharis is known as the Koch. In Brahmaputra valley, the greatest concentration of this tribe is in the district of Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Darrang, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Goalpara and Nowgaon. They also skirted the southern bank of Brahmaputra and occupied the Garo Hills where the Garos still show close affinity with them. In the borders of north Cachar hills and Dimapur, there are two distinct groups known as Dimasas and Meches who also called themselves as Bodos or Kacharis. In the range of hill south of the Surma valley there are the Tipperahs whose language is a branch of the ancient Bodos<sup>7</sup>.

Considering the linguistic affinities of the Kacharis or the Boros with the Garos as well as the tribes known under different names as Dhimal, Chutiyas, Koches, Rabhas, Meches, Lalungs, Sonowal etc many ethnographers opine the possibility of existence of some ethnological relationship between these tribes.

The generic term 'Bodo' is applied to all peoples speaking Tibeto-Burman group of languages like the Boros of the Brahmaputra valley, Meches of lower Assam and West Bengal, Rabhas, Garos, Dimasas, Tipperahs, Lalungs, Sonowals etc. The term 'Kachari' is also used as generic term like the 'Bodo'. The Boro-Kachari, Dimasa-Kachari, Lalung-Kachari, Sonowal-Kachari etc can be cited as example. For the Bodo group of people who dwelt in the Terai-submontane tract under the hills of Bhutan B.H. Hodgson took the term 'Bodo' for they called themselves 'Boroni-fisa' son of Boro, sons of man<sup>8</sup>. So, it seems that the term 'Bodo' is of recent origin and it was he who first popularized it in his essays on the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal tribes published in 1847. This was confirmed by G.A. Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India Vol. III part-II, 1903. He says, "the generic term Bodo was first applied by Hodgson to this group of languages". But this same Bodos of north Bengal and lower part of Assam are still known as 'Meches'. Ethnographers have put forward divergent views on the origin, derivation and denotation of the word Mech. Anderson thinks that the same Mech was given to the Bodos of north Bengal by their Bengali neighbours. N.N. Vasu in his 'Social History of Kamrupa' maintains that the word Mech has been abbreviated from the Sanskrit word Mleccha and that they belong to Asura dynasty. Likewise K.L. Barua, G.A. Grierson, Rev. S. Endle and S.K. Chatterjee also expressed the same view that the word Mech is simply a corruption of the Sanskrit word Mleccha, which means 'barbarians', or unclean, foreigner (Non-Aryans). Francis Hermann is of opinion that the name Mech was an original designation and not a derivation of the Sanskrit word Mleccha. It is also said that since the Meches first lived on the bank of river Mechi in Nepal, they derived their name from the Mechi River and become known as Mechi, Mechia or Mech. According to hunter "Boros are known as Mech in the western part of the Eastern Duars district; but in the more eastern part they are called indiscriminately as Mech or Kachari and again further east, in Assam, they are called by the name of Kachari alone, losing their name of Mech altogether". Rev. S. Endle divided the Kacharis into western, eastern and southern Kacharis<sup>9</sup>.

The modern Meches or the Boros were regarded in ancient times as Danavas, Asuras, Kiratas and Mlecchas by the Hindu scriptures. In the History of

Assam, the Meches were the most numerous and ethnologically the most important group of people as these people had moulded and shaped the History of Pragjyotishpura and Kamrupa. Many scholars argue that from the records in the Epics- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata it is known that in the north eastern frontier kingdom of India a Mleccha territory ruled by the Bodo kings, referred to as Danavas and Asuras by the Aryans of the Gangetic valley, was known as Pragjyotisha and later as Kamrupa. N.N. Vasu says, "in the History of Kamrupa we find evidence of the rise of the Mleccha or Asura dynasty even during the ascendancy of the Aryans"<sup>10</sup>.

According to traditions, the earliest king of the Mech or Boros was Mahiranga Danava. The next king was Ghatak Asura. He was defeated and slain by another Asura named Narak Asura. After Narak Asura was slain by Krishna, his son Bhagadatta was installed as a king of Pragjyotishpura as mentioned in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata bluntly declares Bhagadatta as a Mlecchanan Adhipati i.e. the ruler of Mlecchas. H.C. Ray says, "if there is any historical facts in the description of the great Epic then it is reasonable to regard Bhagadatta as a prince of the non-Aryan Tibeto-Chinese races, referred to as cinas, Kiratas in ancient Indian literature". Thus we find that the mythological kings of Assam and parts of Bengal racially belonged to the Mech or Bodo people.

The political history of the Meches or the Boros became comparatively clearer from the 4th Century to the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. for during this period we get some authentic sources like SIYUKI, Harsha Charita, Nidhanpur and Doobi copper plate grants. According to the Doobi copper plate grant Pushya Barman was the first king of Pragjyotishpura. H.C. Ray says that Pushya Barman belonged to the Bhagadatta dynasty and his lines were closely related with those of Salasthambha line. Now, Salasthambha was a Mech by race who shifted the capital from Pragjyotishpur to Sonitpur and built a Shiva temple<sup>11</sup>. One of the kings of Bhagadatta line was Kumar Bhaskar Barman.

It was during the reign of Kumar Bhaskara Barman that the famous Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsiang visited Kamrupa in 638 A.D. From the writings of Hiuen Tsiang we get some ethnological information of the inhabitants of Kamrupa in the days when Bhaskara Barman was the king of Kamrupa. S.K. Chatterjee writes, "the Mongoloid character of the people of the Country is clearly noted by the Chinese writer; the man are of small stature and their complexion a dark yellow; their language differ a little from that of mid-India"<sup>12</sup>.

During the medieval and modern period of Indian history a clearer written History of the Boros and the Kochs can be found from the Muslim and colonial writings.

The once powerful kingdom of Kamrupa is now represented by the Kings of Koch-Bihar, Bijnur, Darrang (Mongoldoi) and Beltola. During the colonial period the colonial ethnographers like S. Endle divided the Kacharis into western, eastern and southern Kacharis<sup>13</sup>. The earliest notices of the eastern Kacharis were those of the Chutiyas. They had established a powerful kingdom on the Bank of the River Subansiri in the present Sadiya region.

Another branch of the Kacharis was ruling over a region west of Sadiya, east of Dikhaumukh under one Manik Kachari. He was originally a small chieftain over twelve Kachari families who later on subdued the surrounding villages and became famous with the title 'Kachari Raja'<sup>14</sup>.

At the same time, the southern Kacharis under Susengpha were also ruling over the strips of land between Dikhau and Dhansiri River with their capital at Dimapur.

In 1229 A.D. Sukhapa, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam of the great Shan or Tai race who came to Assam in 1228 A.D. after crossing Patkai hills established friendship with Bodoucha, the king of Matak and Thakumtha, the king of Borahis and with other Kachari tribes<sup>15</sup>.

Many references and mentions can be found in the writings of the colonial ethnographers about the present Meches or the Boros of erstwhile Goalpara district, present north Bengal which was known as Eastern Duars. They were B.C. Allen, W.W. Hunter, Bikramajit Harsat and Francis Hamilton.

Bikramajit Hasrat made a comment about the Meches or Kacharis of Eastern Duars of Bengal and Assam. He says, "the Meches were a hard working tribe and paid to the subah, the revenue in kind- Rice, Cloths, betel-nuts, cotton, butter and ghee"<sup>16</sup>. W.W. Hunter also remarked about the poor plight of the Bodo polity. He says, "the Meches or Kacharis do not seem to have achieved any form of polity of their own; they have few traditions, no ancient songs, no monuments, no written character or no literature of any kind"<sup>17</sup>.

### **III. Theoretical Framework and Some Conceptual Definition of Terms.**

#### **A. Ethnic group:**

Historically the term *ethnos* has a pejorative connotation. Aristotle used this term to denote natural inferiority of the slaves to the citizens. There is however no general agreement as to what actually the term ethnic group means<sup>18</sup>.

The concept of ethnic group refers to a community-type group of people who share the same culture or to descendants of such people who may not share this culture but who identify themselves with this ancestral group.

In America normally minority groups are categorized as ethnic groups but in ethnic conflict the connotation of minority is by and large absent (1990). Glazer and Moynihan (1976) describes ethnic group as a social group which consciously shares some aspects of a common culture and is primarily by descent. Basing on Barth (1969), Hirs and Leis (1969) and others, Pathy (1988:18) observes that ethnic group is used in anthropological literature to designate a population which is a part of a plural society and yet is largely biologically self-perpetuating, shares a common cultural tradition and language, has an ascribed membership which identifies itself as being alike by virtue of a real or fictitious common ancestry, and is identified by others as constituting a distinct category in a plural society<sup>19</sup>.

In the same wave length Epstein (1978) describes ethnic group as interest groups exploiting parts of their traditional culture in order to articulate formal organizational functions that serve in the struggle of these groups for power within the formal power structure. Geertz (1963) however seems ambiguous about power dimension. He considers ethnicity as an activated primordial consciousness, not grounded on the demand for separate sovereign state<sup>20</sup>.

The majority or dominant ethnic groups are those who determine the character of the society's basic institutions, especially the main political, economic and cultural institutions. They determine the character of the norms of society as a whole including the legal system. Their culture becomes the culture of the total society into which minority ethnic groups assimilate. The minority groups may preserve their institutions and culture in larger or smaller degree or they may influence the character of the dominant institutions in larger or smaller degrees, but usually, the framework for intergroup processes is provided by the institutions deriving from the culture of the majority groups<sup>21</sup>.



Sociologically the concept of majority and minority does not refer to number but to power. The distinction between the two is simply that those which have power or which does not have power. Very often the concept of ethnicity is confused with that of minority and hence all ethnic groups are seen as minorities<sup>22</sup>.

### **B. Ethnicity:**

There is however hardly any consensus about what constitutes ethnicity. The term ethnicity was first used by David Riesman in 1953 as referred to the 1972 supplement of Oxford English Dictionary<sup>23</sup>.

Ethnicity is an ascribed identity or assigned status, something inherited from one's ancestors. Ethnicity is a very deeply rooted primal bond to one's ancestral bloodline.

The important corollary of ascribed identity is ethnic boundaries, which demarcates who is a member of an ethnic group and who is not, are fixed or immutable. Ethnicity is static. The determining factor of ethnicity is common ancestry. In other words, people belong to an ethnic group because members of that group all share common biological and cultural origins<sup>24</sup>. Philip Q. Yang quotes primordialists, Geertz 1973, Issacs 1975, van den Berghe 1981 as saying that it is the primordial bonds that give rise to and sustain ethnicity.

Within primordialist framework, Philip Q. Yang indicates two variant views. The one is Sociobiological perspective which emphasizes the importance of a Sociobiological factor- kinship- in determining ethnicity. Van den Berghe (1981) argues that ethnicity is an extension of kinship. Ethnic affiliation originates from membership in a nuclear family, then an extended family and finally the ethnic group. Ethnic identity develops and persists due to the common ancestral bonds of group members. An implication of this view is that ethnicity will never perish because kinship always exists.

Another is Culturalist perspective which underscores the importance of a common culture in the determination of ethnic group membership according to which common culture determines the genesis and tenacity of ethnic identity even in the absence of common ancestors<sup>25</sup>.

Opposite and contrasting of primordialists as the Yang puts, are the Constructionists, according to whom, ethnicity is a socially construct identity, something that is created. For them the ethnic boundaries are flexible or changeable or dynamic.

Ethnic affiliation or identification is determined or constructed by society. Ethnicity is a reaction to changing social environment.

The third school of ethnicity is Instrumentalist which views ethnicity as an instrument or strategic tool for gaining resources. According to this theoretical frame work, people becomes ethnic and remain ethnic when their ethnicity yields significant returns to them, which means ethnicity exists and persists because it is useful. Philip Q. Yang quotes Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (1975) who are among the pioneers of this school, as "ethnicity is not simply a mix of affective sentiments, but like class and nationality it is also a means of political mobilization for advancing group interests". Ethnic groups are also interest groups<sup>26</sup>.

Ethnicity on the primordial system of categorization is an ascribed identity a status which is given to an individual or which one inherits from one's ancestor and this ascribed identity are fundamental and fixed. The most of the scholars apprehend ethnic group and ethnicity in the sense of consciousness of collective identity and historically crystallized sentiment associated with the identity in the context of the state<sup>27</sup>.

Primordialist argue that ethnicity is something given, ascribed at birth, deriving from the kin-and – clan-structure of human society, and hence something more or less fixed and permanent<sup>28</sup>.

The concept of ethnic group is the most basic, from which the others are derivative. He (Isajiw) argues that the concept of ethnicity is derived from the concept of ethnic group which refers to ethnicity as the collective phenomenon. Ethnic identity refers to ethnicity as an individually experienced phenomenon. Thus ethnicity itself is an abstract concept which includes an implicit reference to both collective and individual aspects of the phenomenon. According to him, ethnicity has both subjective and objective dimensions. Objective aspects are those which can be observed as facts in the existence of institutions, including that of kinship and descent and in overt behavior patterns of individuals. The subjective dimension refers to attitudes, values and pre-conceptions whose meaning has to be interpreted in the context of the process of communication.

Isajiw also defines Culture in the traditional anthropological sense as involving a total way of life. The total way of life refers to a unique historical group experience. Culture is in essence a system of encoding such experience into a set of symbolic patterns. A distinct culture is a manifestation of a group's distinct historical experience. Its product is a sense of unique

people hood. Ethnic group also refers to persons who include themselves in an ethnicity would have a relation to a group who either now or at some point in the past has shared a unique culture.

The terms ethnicity and ethnic group are often used interchangeably. But in actuality there is a nuance dividing them. While ethnic group is a social group based on ancestry, culture or national origin. Ethnicity refers to affiliation or identification with an ethnic group.

### **C. Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic Identity may be defined as a manner in which persons, on account of their ethnic origin, locate themselves psychologically in relation to one or more social systems and in which they perceive others as locating them in relation to those systems. By ethnic origin is meant either that a person has been socialized in an ethnic group or that his or her ancestors, real or symbolic have been members of the group. The social system may be one's ethnic community or society at large, or other ethnic communities and societies or groups or a combination of all these <sup>29</sup>.

Isajiw identifies two aspects of ethnic identity - internal and external. External aspect refers to observable behavior both cultural and social such as (I) speaking an ethnic language, practicing ethnic traditions (II) participation in ethnic personal networks, such as family and friendships (III) participation in ethnic institutional organizations such as Churches, schools, enterprise, media (IV) participation in ethnic voluntary organizations such as clubs, societies, youth organizations (V) participation in functions sponsored by ethnic organizations such as picnics, concerts, public lectures, rallies, dances.

## **IV. NATION**

Peterson (1975) define Nation as a people, a folk held together by some or all of such, more or less, immutable characteristics as common descent, territory, history, language, religion, way of life or other attributes that members of a group have from birth onward.

Basing on denotative definition of Peterson, Oommen (1988, 35) observes that the concept of nation is essentially cultural in content and it encapsulated a variety of attributes and nationhood is the product of the conjoint existence and interaction of these attributes.

After close looking at Peterson presentation Roy Burman (1988) observes that the concept of

nationhood moves along two axes- one is culturological, the other is political-economic.

The idea that nation state is a myth; the reverse, that is state perpetually in tension to create and sustain the nation, is closer to the reality. In that case one should speak of state-nation and not nation- state. In the process of creating and consolidating state nations the dominant ethnos is equated with the nation (Seth:1989) and the state operates "to reduce the intensity of subordinate ethnic claims". Over time hegemony in one form or the other as envisaged by Gramsci (Femia 1987) comes into existence. Gramsci relates the supremacy of a social group or class as manifesting itself in two different ways domination or coercion and intellectual moral leadership and it is the latter type of leadership which constitutes hegemony. Jain (1996) however points out that hegemony is beset by contradictions and sustained by deception. It is thus characterized by equivocal consent or why Femia calls the superficiality of consent<sup>30</sup>.

### **A. Nationality and Ethnic group:**

B.K. Roy Burman in his attempt to differentiate between nationality, ethnic group and tribe argues that in case of nationality membership can be acquired by volition whereas in case of ethnic group membership is ordinarily acquired by birth. Besides, primarily moral bindings and shared cultural symbols, rather than coercive state power keep the members of the ethnic together. He further argues that generally tribal people have historical association or prerogative in respect of some productive resources. Tribal people constitute relatively closed societies. Generally tribal social organization is associated with eco-friendly simple technology, lack of specialization except those based on sex and age and has little internal stratification. The intervention of external agencies like state has a little influence on tribal people. But their frequent exposure to new technology and market economy coincides with the expropriation from traditional land resources cannot stabilize their position as settled cultivators, much as they want to. The post-primitive tribal people took to become plantation labourers or go to work in mines and factories. As a result, a small number of them choose the territory sector and to become professionals, technocrats and bureaucrats. Thus not only social differentiation takes place but an incipient middle class emerges from among them and they look beyond.

B.K.Roy Burman puts some reasons as to why the primal peoples do not give up their tribal framework:

1. The tribal identity provides the means for functioning as a pressure group in a welfare bureaucracy.
2. Frequently the corporate rights over resources are associated with tribal social organization. The reinforcement of tribal identity at least partly assures the continuation of rights where they do exist.

From the forgoing, it is easy to understand why the post-primal peoples of today not only affirm their tribal identity but take pride in it<sup>31</sup>.

In the discourse of Social Science, the Bodos can be categorized as an ethnic group within Indian State-Nation, the characteristic features of which can be attributed to religion, sect, tribe, region, language, descent, race and culture. All these attributes are often used to define ethnic group and ethnicity. George De Vos defines ethnicity as "subjective, symbolic or emblematic use" by "a group of people----- any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other group. Paul Brass, however, modifies the last phrase to read in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from groups". The phenomenon of ethnicity is the expressive aspect of ethnic group identities<sup>32</sup>.

### ***B. Bodo identity formation:***

A long historical process of identity formation among the Bodos took a nascent birth in the colonial period and in the post-colonial period it became more assertive. In the first half of the twentieth century some momentous changes in the collective life of the Bodos has taken place<sup>33</sup>. The strategic location of the Bodo settlements in the district of erstwhile Goalpara, opened up avenue for Timber Trade. In the erstwhile Goalpara district the Bodo occupied the strip of land lying north of present Gauripur Town starting from Rupsi covered with deep forest of Sal trees, further widening towards north-east direction, covering the areas of Parbotjhora, Guma, Ripoo, Cheerung, Sidli and Bijni Duars and this along with the spread of modern education led to the emergence of a small number of Bodo elite class which felt the need to reform the Bodo society to save it from the onslaught of religious conversion as well as complete assimilation to the greater Assamese society after becoming saranias. The pioneering leader in this direction is Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma who is regarded as the father of Brahma Movement. He was tireless in his work for reforming and developing Bodo society by removing its medieval practices. In his endeavours to uplift the Bodo society he was able to convince and enlist the support and assistance of the

Bodo elite organizations. In this direction, the organizations like Bodo Chatra Sanmilan, Kachary Yubak Sanmilani, Bodo Mahasanmilan etc contributed a lot. This movement can be said particularly for establishing a distinct linguistic and cultural identity of the Bodos as a separate community<sup>34</sup>.

Meanwhile the British government policy to provide special privileges to the tribal people of Assam led to the formation of a united political organization of all the plains tribal of Assam- the formation of Tribal League in 1933 and PTCA in later period can be attributed to this. After creating a strong political platform, the Bodo vis-à-vis the tribal leaders used this Tribal League to articulate their political aspirations and could play an important role in colonial Assam's legislative politics<sup>35</sup>.

After the Treaty of Yandaboo, the British made Assam an Indian province and brought it under one political formation. During British administration the entire north-east India, the home to various ethnic groups, directly or indirectly helped in developing identity consciousness -based on preservation of their own language and culture. The political power too considered necessary for acquisition of economic equality and opportunities for the respective communities<sup>36</sup>.

The pre-colonial society in Assam was semi-feudal and semi-tribal in which classical mode of production prevailed. The society was basically rural and the economy was self-sustaining in those days. Especially amongst the Bodos, the concept of surplus or commercial production was practically unknown. They cultivated a meager area of land which supplied them paddy just required for their families in a year. Before the introduction of modern administration by the British, the common Bodo people continued their age old practice of shifting cultivation. To meet their meager want they did not bother to engage themselves in trade and commerce except small volume of border trade with Bhutias in the north which they continued to maintain from ancient times upto 18<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of Kachary-duars or passes or routes indicates that a considerable volume of barter trade between the Tawang hill tribes and the Bodos of Udalguri were carried on<sup>37</sup>. Hence, taking cognizance of the main food items like Rice (paddy) pitha (steamed cake prepared from rice powder), Laru (sticky powdered rice fried in fats of pig), zau or rice-beer, the traditional Bodo beverage, the Bodos chiefly depended on rice product only. Hence, Bodos economy was rural agro-based economy. And thereby the Bodos were attached to the land. No land for the Bodos means no economic activity. Before the coming of the British into Assam

vis-à-vis Goalpara district or before the introduction of modern administration by the British, sparsely populated Bodo villagers probably did not attract the attention of the zaminders to survey and make revenue assessment except in some settled cultivated land. Hence, they enjoyed land virtually free of taxes. This evasion though not intentional was made possible due to inaccessible forest village couple with absence of road-communication.

But with the coming of the British and subsequent introduction of modern administration, a complex economic situation had developed in the societies of Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The semi-feudal semi-tribal nature of economy and mode of production was replaced and linked with the capitalist world economy.

The Bodos in general suffered economically due to the British land revenue policies which made payment in cash mandatory. The British govt. got all the cultivated land surveyed and land revenue assessed which made the Bodo-life more complex ever due to absence of habitual cash transaction activity. The little volume of trade carried on by a few section of Bodo people with the Bhutias was bartered without cash. As the monetary system replaced the old bartered system the Bodo traders could not cope with the requirement of capital in their smallest transactions. The Bodo cultivators soon became more and more indebted to Barpetiah and Marwari money lenders due to their tricky money lending system and the land of the Bodos in subsequent periods passed into their hands and their land alienation started thereof<sup>38</sup>. More over the British administration tried to bring more and more land under cultivation for boosting land revenue collection since land revenue was the only and chief means of sources of the British administration. In their endeavour, sometimes the defaulters of land revenue were given more land for cultivation as they were not in a position to bear the brunt of pecuniary punishment and as the defaulters were given more land the cultivator become more defaulter and as a result the cultivators were compelled by situation to run away from his holdings who absconded in somewhere deep jungle to escape from the Barkandazes of the Zamindars as they were known for their notoriety towards defaulters of land revenue. In some cases, in order to avoid heavy burden of taxation, many poor Bodo peasants engaged themselves in wage-earning jobs in the tea plantations initiated by the British. In this case too freedom loving Bodos could not be effectively utilized by the British Tea planters. There were reports of frequent revolt and protest against them. They were soon substituted by other tribal communities from other regions of Indian subcontinent<sup>39</sup>.

The land being an important factor for the stability of the Bodo economy, the question of giving protection to their land became by far the greatest economic issue for the Bodos. The introduction of new capitalist economy brought about by the new colonial administration hit hard the Bodo economy. Virtually there was no effort made to improve the cropping techniques and as a result the land productivity remained ever low which made the Bodo villagers indebted to rural money lenders and it was this indebtedness in turn had resulted in landlessness. The question of the loss of land is very serious for tribes because it practically means the loss of the only means of livelihood<sup>40</sup>. The money economy, new system of taxes, commercialization of agriculture all of which were hitherto unknown to the Bodo villagers was the greatest blow to the Bodo economy with which they failed themselves to cope with. The Bodos were mainly agriculturalists whose only market economy is confined to a meager sale of vegetables, muster seeds and jute.

## V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Bodos are one of the major ethnic groups of Assam. An extensive amount of study appears to have been done on them. The colonial ethnographers and official historians wrote on Bodo history and society. The first of this kind was The Kacharies by Rev. Sydney Endle.

Rev. Sydney Endle<sup>41</sup> in his valuable work The Kacharies(1911) presents an interesting facts on Bodo Society and history which is an original work accomplished after encounters with the Kacharies while working Missionary works in Darrang district. He, as a great sympathizer and a well wisher of the well being of the Bodos, was able to present in details the society, history and domestic life of the Bodos of Darrang district.

Hira Moni Deka<sup>42</sup> in her book Politics of Identity and the Bodo Movement in Assam presents an original and lucid interpretation of Bodo Movement from 1987 to 2003 and able to present successfully the overall history of Bodo identity assertion in Assam in a very comprehensive manner. It is indeed an excellent piece of her work so far she has done.

Bidyasagar Narzary & Malabika Mitra<sup>43</sup> in their work Journey towards enlightenment: Gurudev and the Bodo Society present valuable contributions of Kalicharan Gurudev, the great soul, towards the Bodo society. Although the Gurudev was the saviour of the Bodo community no comprehensive book on him in English was written so far. In his work the author successfully presents the great contribution made by Gurudev who had salvaged the Bodo community from



darkness, illiteracy, ignorance and medieval practices and shown them the path of enlightenment and progress in all spheres of life. This book really is able to serve the purpose of disseminating information about valuable contribution made by Gurudev Kalicharan to uplift the Bodo society.

Smriti Das<sup>44</sup> in her work Assam –Bhutan Trade Relations 1865- 1947 presents yet another valuable work which gives us information regarding trade relation between Assam and Bhutan which developed through the Duars and its working not only as the channel of communication but also as a conduit of trade and commerce between the two countries. Through her book Smriti Das has shown how this trade relation had major socio-economic impact on Assam.

Jadav Pegu<sup>45</sup> in his work Reclaiming Identity: a Discourse on Bodo History, presents a valuable fact and in dept analysis on the Bodo identity movement in 1980s and 1990s and it is also an attempt at defining the identity of the Bodos from a historical perspective

Bikramajit Hasrat<sup>46</sup> in his book History of Bhutan (Thimphu;1980) made a comment about the Meches or Kacharis of Eastern Duars of Bengal and Assam. He saying, “the Meches were a hard working tribe and paid to the subah, the revenue in kind- Rice, Cloths, betel-nuts, cotton, butter and ghee” is indeed a testimony of the real fact that the Bodos or the Meches of Eastern Duars had the political relationship with the Dev Raja of Punaka, Bhutan.

Devendra Nath Sarma<sup>47</sup> in his book Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma (1983) (in Assamese) is a pioneering work on the life and works of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. He was successfully able to highlight the contribution made by Gurudev Kalicharan not only for the upliftment of the Bodos but also for the unity, communal harmony and integrity of Assam.

Kalicharan Brahma (Junior)<sup>48</sup> wrote Jieu Kourang Arw Saya, that contains full information on the life and works of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. This book gives valuable information in details regarding various activities of Gurudev and his compatriots from his own life experiences as he was contemporary to his Guru.

Dr. K. Brahma<sup>49</sup> in his book Srimot Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma (in Bodo) is yet another work on the life and works of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. It gives us valuable information regarding how Kalicharan accepted the Brahma Faith and spread it among the Bodos and how he along with the spread of his Faith did social reformation movement for removing the evil practices from the Bodo society.

Jagendra Nath Basumatary<sup>50</sup> in his book Fwrlang Babaji, (in Bodo) deals in details the contribution made by Babaji in spreading the important messages of the Brahma Religion and the helping hand he rendered for the social reformation movement launched along with the spread of Brahma Dharma among the Bodos. His work is basically on the life and works of Fwrlang Babaji who can aptly be called the chief disciple of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma.

Hira Charan Narjinari<sup>51</sup> in his article A Study on the Bodos of North-East India presents a valuable historical account of origin of the words Bodo, Mech, Koch and Kachary and their denotation, connotation and derivatives which are found expressed in the writings of various anthropologists, ethnographers, linguists and historians. He explains at length the Bodo ruling families of Kamrupa, Pragjyatisa, Dimapur, Tripura, Cooch Behar and other places.

Dr. K. Brahma<sup>52</sup> in an article Impact of Socio-Religious Reforms of Srimot Kalicharan Brahma on the Bodo Society, discusses at length the contribution made by Kalicharan Gurudev through his preaching of Brahma Faith and his Social Reformation Movement. His contribution was all embracing- in the field of social practices of the Bodos, in the field of politics, education and also contributed a lot for harmonious living amongst various sections of society of Assam.

Dr. Anil Boro<sup>53</sup> in an Article Rise of the Bodo Middle Class: Its Impact on literature, culture and Society of the Bodos, presents a detail discussion on middle class people and their rise in every society. He drew the example of the rise and growth of Assamese middle class vis-à-vis the Bodo middle class who were responsible for carrying out social and religious reformation movement in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century amongst the Bodos.

Dr. A. Boro<sup>54</sup> in another article Folklore and Oral History: the search for Identity among the Bodos he dwells at length the importance of Oral Traditions and Oral History for the reconstruction of history of the people who do not have the written scripts or literature. In the search of identity of the people, the role of history is regarded important for establishing or claiming past glories and pride that their ancestors had in the past in political and cultural achievements. The Bodos did have the ancient glories and historical achievements but unfortunately they did not have written script and hence did not have the written history, in absence of which it is difficult to establish link with the glorious past of the ancient Bodos.

Sobha Brahma<sup>55</sup> in an article Bodo Sahitya Sabha: Appraisal in Retrospect, dwells at length the

history of the struggles of the Bodos to survive their language, culture and traditions against all odds throughout the ages. He also deals in details the contributions, life-long efforts, constant endeavours and sacrifices made by some Bodo heroes at the altar of the Bodo literature for its survival whom he prays by bowing down his head. As a background, he made a brief mention of historical narratives which still in extant amongst the Bodos as memories handed down from generation to generation by the words of mouth as traditions and oral history.

Rupnath Brahma<sup>56</sup>, an ex-minister of Assam, in his article (in Assamese) Boro Jatir Songkipto Farichoy, presents an interesting historical explanation as to how the Bodo Kings from time immemorial had been ruling over the vast areas of Assam, present Bangladesh, Tripura and Bengal and who later after coming into influence of the Brahmins of the Aryan descent had given away to become Aryanised Kings after they were being given the status of Kshatriya, the ruling class of the Brahmanical social stratification which after them the common subjects of their race followed the suit and became assimilated into Aryan fold for which the size of the Bodo population dwindled.

Dr. Santo Barman<sup>57</sup> in his work Zamindari System in Assam during British Rule: A Case Study of Goalpara District is an original contribution of a high order to the economic and political history of the North East region of India. His work adequately focuses on the agrarian relations of the permanently settled areas in the region under the British Raj. Dr. Barman has brought for the first time under scientific scrutiny the relations of Zaminders and Peasants of permanently settled areas of Goalpara district in historical perspective. It also traces the roots of the system back to the Moghul days for its origin. His work is based on massive sources and a meticulous and pioneering study which were never tapped before by any other scholar.

Prof. Surath Narzary<sup>58</sup> In his seminar paper entitled Literature for the Growth of Indian Nationality with reference to Unscheduled Languages like Bodo, which was presented in a seminar held at International Youth Centre, New Delhi, he highlighted the various aspects of the Bodo life embracing religion, language, history and on the whole the culture which was found expressed in the writings of various scholars, ethnographers, historians linguists and anthropologists from the hoary past till recent times. He drew the attention of the participants and audiences of the seminar to the writings of various writers starting with D. Mackenjie Brown, Dr. Suniti Chatterjee, B.K.Kakati. Dr. PC Bhattacharya and others on the

Bodo history, language, religion and culture. He opines that the Christian Missionaries and European scholars have got something to do with the growth and development of various regional or vernacular languages across India because for spreading of Christian gospel they used those vernacular languages. Earlier, during the ancient period, Sanskrit was the only language which was used in literature, but during medieval period- from the age of Bhakti cult the regional or vernacular languages came into prominence in various parts of India.

WW Isajiw<sup>59</sup>, in the article Definition and Dimensions of Ethnicity: a Theoretical Framework, presented in details the theoretical aspects of ethnic group, ethnicity and ethnic identity. In the article methodological framework of research and the theoretical framework for the studies of ethnicity is discussed in a comprehensive and lucid manner. Various dimensions of the theoretical and conceptual terms are discussed in detail. He resorted to the method of singling out the number of approaches for the study of ethnicity and critical evaluations into a synthesized one.

Philip Q. Yang<sup>60</sup> in his book Ethnic Studies: Issues and Approaches, presents the existing theoretical perspectives of ethnicity into three schools of thought with initial introductions and analyses on the basic ideas and specific variants of each school. Lastly an integrated approach on the three competing theories of ethnicity is presented.

## **VI. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objective of the study is to enlighten the people what actually had happened in the lives of the Bodos of Assam and how some section of their populations have become elite class who later on awakened their people to become conscious of their status in the larger society, economy and politics. The objective of the study is also to test that there was the emerging Bodo elite class who actually tried hard to awaken their own community by socio-religious reformation movements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and to highlight how as a result of this socio-religious reformation movements, the ethnic consciousness among the Bodos emerged.

### **Chapterisation**

1. Introduction
2. The General Condition of the Bodo Society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
3. The British Administration and its Impact on the Bodos.
4. The Rise of the Bodo Elite Class.

5. Politics of Associations among the Bodos.
6. Conclusion  
References  
Appendices

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