CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

A. 1. THE BODOS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The Bodos belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family of Tibeto Burman stock of the Assam-Burmese group. They are one of the major tribes of Assam. It can be cited that their identity is not uniform as an ethnic group. Different names are used to designate them. In West Bengal and Nepal, they are known as Meches. In Upper Assam they are identified as Sonowal and Thengal Kachari, while in the western Assam they are more popularly known as Bodo/Boro or Boro Kachari. In the southern district of North-Cachar they are designated as Dimasa and Barmans and in Tripura they are known as Kok Borok respectively.

Linguistically the Bodos include a large group of people who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman speeches of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma. They are the Bodos or Boros of the Brahmaputra valley, Meches of Lower-Assam and West Bengal, Rabhas, Garôs, Dimasas and Kacharis of Cachar district, Tipras, Lalungs, Sonowals, Hajongs, Deuries, Chutias etc. Hence by the term
Bodo in general which is a generic name of the people, it means all the Tibeto-Burman Bodo speaking group of Sino-Tibetan origin.

M. Harmans said about them in his "Indo-Tibetan' in these words 'As is the case with the Meche (Mech) so also with the Kachari (Bodo) the Mongoloid features are very prominent: the strong check bones, slit eyes, a slight growth of hair in the body and scanty beard. They are shorter and stockier than the Indians of the North-East." The observations in broader terms hold good still now but some deviations in the physical features of the Bodo-Kacharis have of late been noticed under the impact of socio-cultural assimilation as well as marital alliances.

(i) **Origin of Bodo:**

According to R.M.Nath, when the Austrics were gradually weakened, either due to their conflicts with the negroid or due to their giving way to pleasure and ease a fresh invasion of their country started from the north along the whole northern front from across the Himalayas. There were various parts of the country-Hor Bod, Kur Bod etc; and in later times when Buddhism spread into that country, the southern part inhabited by Buddhist Lamas was known as Bsti (Lama) Bod which has now been transformed into Tibbot or Tibet. To east of

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1. Quoted from Bhattacharjee, P. C in A Descriptive Analysis of Bodo language, p-15 (Hermans, Fr. Mathias,: The Indo-Tibetans, Bombay, 1954, p-159 with illustrations and Map
the Bod country and on the Chinese border lived numerous hill tribes of which the Chaos were the most powerful. The corresponding Chaos word for Bod or homeland was Meung and the Bodo word la meant vast. Hence perhaps this area was later known as Meung-la or Mongla, very probably when the Chaos became a powerful power in China. Later on, the area came to be known as Mongolia. Further he said—"the inhabitant of various part of the Bod country were known as Boddoo-Ficha or Boddoo-cha (Ficha –cha-Children) or the children of the Bod country, and were later known simply as the Boddoo or the Bodo. The generic term 'Bodo' was first applied by Hudson to all speaking group of Tibeto-Burman languages like Bodo or Boro of the Brahmaputra valley. Meches of Lower Assam and west Bengal, Rabhas, Garos, Dimasas, Tipras, Lalungs, Sonowals, Hajongs, Deuris, and Chutias etc.

The exact sound is better represented by spelling Bada or Bara. Bodo or Bara is the name by which the Mech and Kacharis call themselves like other tribal names in Assam, the name probably once meant a male member of the tribe. In the closely allied Tripura language

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3. Ibid, 16
Barak means a ‘man’ and a Kachari or Mech call himself a Baro-sa, a son on Baro. Those of the Bodo who lives in the district of Sonitpur, Nagaon etc. are called Kacharis, pronounced Kosari by Hindus. According to some scholars, the name Kachari originated before 200 years ago. The king of hill Tipperah, when giving his daughter in marriage to the king of Maibong in the present North-Kachar, gave her as dowry the Surma valley in what is now known as the district of Cachar. The inhabitants of North Cachar, are the Dimasas whom the Assamese called Kacharis.

(ii) The Kacharis:

The Bodos of Cachar district, specially North Cachar, call themselves Kacharis. According to S.K. Chatterjee, this group of Bodos assumed their name from the name of the district of Cachar." They are simply known as Dimasa is associated with Di, Ma and Cha. Di = water, ma = big, (Dima = big river i.e., Brahmaputra, Sa or Cha = Son or Children, hence, Dimasa = son or children of the big river, the Brahmaputra).

On the other hand, the Bodos or Boros of the Brahmaputra valley, particularly of some districts like Kamrup, Sonitpur, Mongoldoi, Barpeta and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal are known as Bodo-Kacharis or

5 Chatterji, S.K. Kirata Jana Kriti, p-123
Boro-Kacharis, although all of them now are popularly known as Bodos.

(iii) MIGRATION, ORIGIN AND AFFINITY

The Bodos are the largest tribal group in Assam. It is believed that the Bodos first came from South-West China through Tibet and Burma. The date of migration from their original abode, namely North Western China, to this part of present India is debated and needs further research. According to Dr. S.K. Chatterjee, "the area of characterization for the primitive Sino-Tibetan speech appears to have been North-western China between the head waters of the Huang Ho and Yang Tse-Kiang rivers. Mongoloid tribes from western China speaking form of the Sino-Tibetan speech appear to have pushing south and west from their original homeland from prehistoric time. The Bodos, who spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra and North Bengal as well as East Bengal."  

Further he says "the Bodos who spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid block in the North Eastern India, were the most important Indo-

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6 ibid, p-21
Mongoloid people in Eastern India, and they form one of the main basis of the present day population of their traits.”

According to R.M Nath, “the first batch of the Bodos who migrated to Assam came from a place situated at the confluence of two rivers-Dila-Ubra (big water) and Changiba (small water), due to that area being disturbed and converted into a desert by earthquake. This was very likely a part of the present Gobi desert lying at the confluence of the modern Khasgar-daria and Yarkand-daria.”

About the origin of the Bodo Kacharis, Rev. S. Endle says, “the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. However on the basis of the Mongolian affinities of the Kacharis, he would point out to Tibet and China as the original home of the race.” In this context Bhuyan observes “there is bound to be diversity of opinions regarding their pre-Assam habitat as contemplated by some authorities to be in Tibet and China, whatever be their pre-Assam habitat, it has now been established that they are the original autochthones of Assam and later immigrants than the Aryans. This fact has been corroborated by K.L. Barua in his ‘Early History of Kamrupa’,

7. Chatterjee, S.K. Kirata Jana Kriti, p-46
8. Nath, R.M. A Background of Assamese Culture, p-16
wherein he states that after the arrival of the Aryan into the Indian soil, hords of later Mongolian poured through the north-east corner. This later Mongolian was described to be the Kiratas in the Mahabharata and other Hindu scriptures like 'Kalika Puran' and 'Yogini Tantra'. He goes on observing further that during the time of the Mahabharata war or even earlier, the Bodo tribes constituted the bulk of population of the Assam valley, northern and eastern Bengal and the surrounding and intervening hills.10

The Boro Kacharis living in the present North Bengal and in the western part of the Goalpara district are known as Mech. The people of the other communities believed that the Mlechas of those periods, who are mentioned in the Epics and the 'Meches' are the same people. It is believed that the Bodo-Kacharis living by the bank of the river Mechi flowing through Nepal call themselves 'Mech'. So, it may be possible that the word 'Mech' originated from the name of the river Mechi.

From the physical features, complexion and language, the Bodo Kacharis have close affinities with the Dimasas, the Tipras, the Lepasas and the Limboos. The ancient Indian literature specially the ancient Aryan Sanskrit literatures, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana describe

10. Baruah, B.K. Cultural History of Assam, p-78
the Indo-Mongolian and the Sino-Tibetan people as Kiratas. The Kalika Purana describe the Kiratas as having short stature, golden colour, sharpen head, rough skin and addicted to meat and drink. In the Yajur Veda and the Atharvaveda there is mention of Kiratas.

According to Rai K.L. Barua, the Kacharis, Koches, Rabhas, Meches, Mikirs, Lalungs, Garos, Nagas, Kukis and the Chutias are the present day representatives of Mongolians or the Indo-Monogoliod and the tribes speaking Bodo languages seem to have occupied the plains of Assam for very long time. In this connection Sir Edward Gait’s observations on the racial affinity of the tribe which has a great sociological implication and historical value in the context of growth and expansion of early Bodo Kingdom may also be referred too. He says, “The Kacharis are believed to be very closely allied to the Koches and also, so far atleast as language is concerned, to the Chutias, Lalungs and Morans of Brahmaputra valley and to the Garos and Tipperas of the southern hills. Having to their wide distribution and to the extent of country over which Bodo languages of a very uniform type are still current. It seems not improbable that at one time the major part of Assam and North East Bengal formed a great Bodo Kingdom, and that
some, at least of the Mlech Kings mentioned in the old copper-plate inscriptions belonged to the Kachari or some closely allied tribe.\textsuperscript{11}

(iv) BODO LIVING AREAS AND POPULATION

The Bodos are living in a scattered manner throughout the North-Eastern region of India. There are some small Bodo pocket areas also outside India that is in Burma, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.

Assam is the main abode of the Bodos. The Bodos of Assam scattered on the northern and southern bank of the river Brahmaputra, starting from Dhubri and Kokrajhar district, Goalpara district in the west, to Dhemaji sub-division of Lakhimpur district to the east. Kokrajhar is the highest Bodo concentrated district in the state of Assam. Though Assam is the main abode of the Bodos, they are still living West Bengal, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Borders of Arunachal and so on.

As per the govt. census report of 1971, the Bodos are the 8\textsuperscript{th} largest scheduled tribes of India. There are 1 million speakers. As per the census of 1991, the total population of the Bodos is 1.5 million, but as per the Bodo nationalist organization census report, the present Bodo population is not less than 4.5 million.

(v) DWELLING AND LIVELIHOOD PATTERN

\footnote{Gait, E.A \textit{History of Assam}, p-300}
The mode of living of the Bodo in compact villages and putting barriers all around the home-stead is a common sight to see. This speaks of their sense of privacy and aesthetic beauty in putting up a residential house. In respect of dwelling and livelihood pattern, Rev. S. Endle says "One prominent feature in the typical Kachari village cannot fail to strike the attention of any casual visitor at first sight. Each house with its granary and other outbuildings is surrounded by a ditch and fence, the latter usually made of ekra reed, jungle grass or split bamboo, etc. The ditch some three or four feet in depth, surrounds the whole homestead, the earth taken from it being thrown up on the inner side, i.e. that nearest to dwelling house; and on the earth works, some two or three feet in height, so thrown up are firmly inserted the reeds or split bamboo work firming the fence itself, this later often inclining outwards at a very obtuse angle; so that the ditch and fence are not easily surmounted from the outside by the would be intruders (The Kacharis). This type of semi-fort like residential complexes have also been adopted specially by the Rabhas of South-Goalpara and this trend of identical constructions must have gone to them from the neighbouring Bodo-Kacharis.

Their livelihood pattern is characterized by preponderance of Agricultural occupation. In fact it is a way of life. They practice both Ahu and Sali paddy and very much prone to the adoption of improved
techniques in production process. Their indigenous devices for preserving seeds and digging dongs and canals are widely acclaimed. The people are especially skillful in the construction of irrigation canals and earth work embankments for diverting water from river beds into their rice-fields.

(vi) ECONOMY

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Bodos. Generally it is seen in the selection of plain area is for the purpose of Agriculture. The Bodos mainly depend on the paddy cultivation. Before making settlement somewhere they first select the plots which are suitable for the cultivation of paddy crops. For their settlement, a highland, a vast grazing field, availability of rivers, ponds or lakes nearby jungles and forests for hunting the animals for meat and collecting firewood without scarcity are regarded essential. If any of these is not available they leave the place and select other place for their settlement where all such facilities are available.

The Bodos did not like to depend on the business as their livelihood. It was believed that in the profession of business the persons have to tell lie. They were not habituated to tell a lie and for which they could not prosper in business. They consider that telling a lie is a great sin. But now a days few Bodo people have started doing business.
sizeable section of people have entered into the teaching and other professions and government service.

(vii) LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

As Suniti Kumar Chatterjee has observed that the Bodo (Boro) language belongs to the branch of Barish section under Baric division of the Sino-Tibetan family, as per the classification given by Robert Shafer. The Linguistic Survey of India describes the Bodo or the Boro-Kachari as a member of the Bodo sub-section under the Assam–Burma group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan speech family.

The Bodo language is an ancient language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. There are no ancient records or literature written in the language. So, it has preserved by the speakers of the language as an oral language till the colonial days. The process of writing started in the language in the second decade of the 20th century.

It is noteworthy to mention here that no script in the Bodo language. In this regard, Bisnu Prasad Rabha, in ancient time there was a kind of Deodhai script among the Kacharis (Boros and Dimasas).\textsuperscript{12} The Bodo language has been introduced as medium of instruction in the primary level in Kokrajhar in 1963, Secondary school in 1968 and High School level in 1971. The Bodo language had attained as an associate

\textsuperscript{12} Quoted from Bhattacharja, P.C. 1977, \textit{A Descriptive Analysis of Bodo Language}, p-14
official language in Bodo dominated areas like Kokrajhar and Udalguri by an ordinance issued on 28th December 1984. Subsequently it had been included as a MIL subject in Gauhati University in 1976 and NEHU. Now the subject has gone up to Master Degree level. The Bodos used Assamese script for the first time, but after 1975, Devanagiri script is accepted as a script for the Bodo language and the same script is being used for the Bodo language. Now Bodo language has attained the status of a schedule language in 2004.

Till the nineteenth century, the Bodo literature existed mainly as oral literature such as folk songs, folk tales, ballads, proverbs etc. It is noteworthy to mention here that the written literature emerged first in the wake of the Brahma movement among the Boro-Kacharis. The reformatory writing in connection with the spread of Brahma cult did the spade work for the development of Bodo literature. In this connection the names and contributions of Promod Chandra Brahma, Isan Musahari, Satish Basumatary, Rupnath Brhma, Madaram Brahma and Bishnu Charan Basumatary shall always be remembered. The formation of the Bodo Sahity Sabha in the year 1952 was landmark in the history of the socio-cultural movement of the Bodo people. The language and literary movement launched by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Brahma Dharma movement created an identity consciousness and
intellectual environment in the Bodo society. At present the Bodo literature has been growing rapidly and the 'Bodo Sahitya Sabha' is making considerable effort in publishing Bodo literary work in all fields—short story, fiction, drama, poetry etc.

(viii) Matrimonial System

The Bodo society is a patriarchal system. A male child inherits his parents’ properties. An arranged marriage is generally accepted marriage in the Bodo society. Brides are married to live in the grooms’ house. Nowadays traditionally there are six kinds of marriage system in the Bodo society, now under the influence of other societies—love marriage, elopement, forced marriage etc. are not uncommon anymore.

(ix) Food habit

Rice is the staple food of the Bodos. Generally the Bodo people are not vegetarians. *Jumai* or *jou* (rice beer) is their commonly used drink. They use of *jumai* in social functions and farming activities is the common in the Boro society.

(x) Culture

The Bodo culture is a part and parcel of the Mongoloid culture. According to P.C. Bhattacharja, “the Mongoloid Bodo culture
has influenced to some extent the Indic (Indo Aryan) Assamese culture and the vice versa.”

The traditional religion of the Bodos is Bathouism. They accepted Hinduism through the process of Hinduisation. Now a days few of them have accepted Christianity. The religion of the Bodos of Assam is based on their belief in Bathou (the supreme god). Here, ‘Ba’ means five and gwthou means deep meaning, so the Bathou bears five great truth namely birth, growth, creation, decline and death. They regard the number ‘five’ is auspicious one. They regard sizu (a kind of euphorbia) plant as a symbol of god Bathou. The details of traditional religion of the Bodos have been discussed in the relevant chapter.

(xi) FESTIVALS

The Bodos observe several major and minor festivals and ceremonies throughout the whole year. The festivals and ceremonies can be classified into three-1. Religious 2. Seasonal and 3. Agricultural

There are four kinds of kherai worship in the Bodo society. These are—(i) Darshan Kherai, (ii) Umrao Kherai, (iii) Phalw Kherai and (iv) Naoni Kherai (family Kherai). These Kherai worship are observed in different occasions and months for the welfare of the people and the village.

13. Bhattacharjee, P.C. op-cit, p-15
14. Brahma, K. op-cit, p-175
There are three kinds of seasonal festival among the Bodos. These are Bwisagu, Khatigasa and Magw domasi. The ‘Bwisagu’ is the greatest seasonal and agricultural festival of the Bodos which is observed in the month of Bahag (mid April). It is the most important occasion of merry making in the social life of the Bodos. In Assamese this festival is known as Bihu. This occasion is most welcomed by each and every Bodo-Kachari as it is a spring time festival of the New Year. Khatigasa is observed in the month of Khati and Magw domasi is observed in the month of Magh.

Besides these, there are some minor ceremonies relating to Agriculture in the Bodo society. These ceremonies are observed with great care during the period of paddy cultivation where they perform several minor ceremonies, rites and practices.

The Bodo people are rich in the culture of music and dance. There are some dances associated with Kherai worships such as Jara-fagla mwsanai, Sikhri-Sikhla mwsanai, Khwijwma fonai, Kherai gwlao mwsanai etc. Besides these, there are some dances such Bagrumaba, Bardwisikhla, Rumbang etc. Kham (a Boro traditional wooden drum), Sifung (a unique bamboo flute with five holes), Serja (a typical violin type of wooden and string instrument) and Jotha (small metallic cymbals) are their traditional musical instruments.
(xii) **Dress**

The Bodo people have their own unique dresses. Bodo women are expert weavers. Bodo women wear *Dokhona*, a beautiful and particularly decorated dress woven by them. It is a dress of bright and attractive colours close to nature. Besides, Bodo women weave shawls, *aronais* (a Bodo muffler), bed-sheets, scarves and so on. Bodo males had their traditional dress though they have taken to wear western attires these days.

**2. NEO-VAISHNAVISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE BODO SOCIETY**

The Neo-*Vaishnavite* movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam in the latter period of the 15th century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam. The movement was at once unique in nature and revolutionary in terms of its impact. The uniqueness of the movement lay in the fact that unlike other contemporary cults in the rest of India, Srimanta Sankardeva’s *Neo-Vaishnavism* rested not on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but its emphasis was more on ethnic integration, societal reforms and spiritual uplift through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region, at a time when the society in Assam was in a turmoil fragmented and faction-ridden as it was.
This new creed of faith started by Srimanta Sankardeva is officially known as *Eka-Sarana-Nām-Dharma*. Sankardeva preached devotion to a single God, Lord Krishna or Vishnu, (*Eka Sarana*) who can be worshiped solely by uttering His various names (*Nām*). Srimanta Sankardeva considered the *sravana* and *kirtana* modes of *bhakti* or devotion as prescribed by the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* to be sufficient. They are accessible to the highest and lowest, men and women alike, irrespective of birth, caste or status and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary. Idol worship does not feature in Srimanta Sankardeva’s system. The Rādhā-Krishna cult is not acknowledged in this system of *Vaishnavism*, nor is any *shakti* (energy represented in a female form) of Lord Vishnu to be recognised.

There are four fundamental elements of Neo-*Vaishnavism* such as (i) God, (ii) *Guru* (the religious preceptor)(iii) the fraternity of *Bhakats* (devotees) and (iv) *Nām*. Of the different attitudes of *bhakti*, Srimanta Sankardeva advocated *dāsya* or servitude to God. *Eka-Sarana-Nām-Dharma* is also known as *Mahāpurushīa Dharma*, after *Mahāpurush* Srimanta Sankardeva, who founded it.

Regarding the process of conversion S.Rajguru observes, “The vaishnavite movement, was the most noteworthy contribution towards Hinduisation in this period, was that of the Vaishnavite movement,
inaugurated by Sri Sankardeva. It can be said that this movement succeeded in converting the people of different tribes and races to the vaishnava faith in a large scale for three main reasons. First, the votaries translated the epics and the *puranas* into the simple Assamese verse, in order to make the tenets of their faith easily understood by the common folk. Secondly, on finding that it was impossible to spread their religion through literature, they resorted to the medium of arts, such as dance, music, theatrical performance of devotional plays composed by them and religious festivals. They made the caste system more liberal and elevated the socially backward classes and tribes to the Hindu society after making them more pure, refined and unlighted with ethical-devotional codes and rules of conduct. By adopting these methods, the vaishnavite movement converted a large number of people of Hinduism.”

Sankardeva has mentioned in his second book of *Bhagavata Purana* in connection to caste sanctify thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kirata Kachari</th>
<th>Khasi Garo Miri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yavan Kanka Goel</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acama Maluka</td>
<td>Rajaka Turuka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuvaca Mlechha Chandal</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ano Papi nara</td>
<td>Krsna sevakara</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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English rendering: The Kirata, the Kacharis, the Khasis, the Garo, the Miris, Yavanas, the Kankans, the Turukus, the Kavachas, the Mleches, the Chandals and other sinners living in the company of the devotee of krsna, attain sanctity and can successfully proceed to Baikuntha, the abode of lord Krishna, crossing the ocean like world by dint of their devotion, acquired from them, i.e. the devotees.

From the above lines it is clear that the earliest attempted to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of Vaishnavism was made by Srimanta Sankardeva himself who accepted Govinda belonging to the Gāro tribe; Paramānanda, belonging to the Miri (Mising) tribe; Narahari, an Ahom man; Narottama belonging to the Naga community; Jayarama, a Bhutiya person and Candsai, a Muslim person as his disciples.

During the ancient times, the tribes of Assam had to confine themselves into their age-old administrative and psychic jurisdiction. The so called high level Brahmanical fold considered the tribes “quite untouchable and even barbaric” to assimilate them. On the other hand
tribal traditional organizations were very rigorous for free mobility. The traditional way of living in the Bodo society was unclean in nature. They did not have any limitation particularly in drinking and eating. Their way of worship was also unclean. Even death penalty was also executed for the liberty seekers. The converted people had to obey the rites and rituals of neo-vaishnavsim as well as the Satradhikar of Satra. But Sankardeva, the extra-ordinary genius, paved the way with a new horizon. In fact Sankardeva attempted to embrace all the sections of the people irrespective of caste, crees, sex, language etc. in his neo-vaishnavsim. He succeeded establishing Ek Saran Ek Naam Dharma in Assam. In this regard, S. Rajguru says, "the vaishnavite movement not only preached vaishnavism among these non-aryan people but also successfully brought these people into the fold of the one Assamese society. Because of the simplicity it enjoyed upon devotional matters and equality preached among all categories of people. The vaishnavite movement removed all the difference between high and low in the society and opened the door for the tribes to enter into the society. "

16 Further he mentioned regarding the intitiation adopted by the Satra institutions were "in charge of intititating people and teaching the codes and the rules of conduct. The vaishnavite movement penetrated into the

remote hill tribes also and credit for this must be attributed to a sect known as Kala Samhati but unlike the Koches, the Mikirs, the Garos, etc. who were converted into Hinduism are called Saraniyas, that is, may be classed as semi-Hinduised."

It is true to say that Assamese society is one composite society which has assimilated itself into various earstwhile tribals and non-tribals groups. Most of the tribal groups have moved the Assamese Hindu fold through integration, accepting customs and beliefs current in the non-tribal society. As a result the tribal features have made inroads into the broader Assamese Hindu society.

3. **SPREAD OF NEO-VAISHNAVISM ON THE BODO SOCIETY OF SONITPUR DISTRICT**

Srimanta Sankardeva, the founder of neo-vaishnavism in Assam established some religious and cultural institutions known as Satras. Satras are monasteries which propagate neo-vaishnavism and *Kirtan* and *Bhaonas* are performed there.

There are 38 branches of Satras in the district of Sonitpur. Under the satra there are many *namghars* to observe the social functions and ceremonies. No doubt the satra and *namghar* are the gifts of the neo-vaishnavite movement launched by Sankardeva. They are the main

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17 ibid, p-100
religious institutions which have been playing a major role in the social and cultural life of the Assamese people since 16th century. Through his disciples Sankardeva propagated neo-vaishnavism among the tribal people in every nook and corner of Assam. Such kind of movement also occurred in the Bodo people of Sonitpur district since its inception.

It is very difficult to say with in sentence that when and how the large number of Bodo Kacharis was converted to neo-vaishnavism. The exact situation, dates and times are not known, but it is true that generation after generation they had been showing allegiance and loyalty to the sattras and devotion and respect to the Satratdhikaras as the other devotees in the vaishnavite society. Certainly it is clear that after the demise of the Sankardeva and his disciples, the sattradhilkars of the different Sattras converted the Bodos in large number. Later, in course of time the number of such Bodos convert multiplied the number because of the growth of population.

O.K.Ojha writes, “Due to impact of Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by Srimanta many Satra institutions were set up here and there. Satras played a pivotal role in spreading of Neo-vaishnavite religion in the areas. The Gongmou Than at the juncture of Borgang tributary and the Brahmaputra, was set up by Sankardeva himself in 1516 A.D. He
spent here five years according to the *Katha Gurucharita* and he spent seven years and six months according to Lakshminath Bezbarua. However, he completed a lot of literary works such as *Pasanta Mardana, Ajamil Upakhyan, Prahlad Charita*. Chapters of the *Kirtana* were written during the period. After Sankardeva’s departure from Gongmou *than* to Duahiti Belguri, the *than* was looked after by Paramanda Atai, a staunch follower of Sankardeva belonging to the Miri (Mising) Community. Thus, the cult was accepted by many tribal people and the Mising in particular. There are a large number of Vaishnavite Mising in Gohpur area. The Vaishnavite Misings celebrate their marriage ceremonies according to the prescribed form of the *Sankar Sangha Nam Kirtan*; however they have not stopped Pig eating and rearing. On the other hand, there is instance of performing *bhaona* at Baligaon Mising village near the river Bharali”. For the better understanding of the spread of neo-vaishnavism in the Bodo society it is imperative to study the different Bodo living areas of Sonitpur district.

In 1725, Borgaon satra under Dhekiajui circle was established by Jagannath Ata. The boundary of this satra was covered up to Gabharu

river in the eastern side, Belsri river in the western side, Brahmaputra river in the southern side and Kabir Ali in the northern side.

The first satradhikar of this satra was Madhabram Goswami. This satra was known as Tokari satra. He was expert in music. Seeing the expertness of Tokari song, the Ahom king, Ahom Swargedeo Ratna Pal loved and donated 288 bighas of land and offered Tamra patra to him. The family background of the Gosay Tokari Satra were Madhabram Goswami, Madhuram, Gangaram, Loknath-Bishnuprasad Mahanta and Majyoati Mahanta.

As furnished by another informant of Bori Kachari village, their village started performing Bhaona since earliest times. They were closely associated with the Borgaon Satra was founded by P. Mahanta in the 17th century A.D. under the patronage of Ahom King. He occupied lots of land in the name of Satra. He distributed these lands to landless people particularly for the Bodo people of the locality to cultivate the same and thereafter the cultivator had to distribute the goods fifty and fifty between satradhikar and them. According to him, The Satradhikara belonged to Brahmin family. To work in the field was their taboo. So, they didn’t work and plough in the paddy field. Their duty was to look after the satra. As the care taker of the satra, they
advised them to work and produce more products for maintaining and running the satra.¹⁹

Another duty of them was to initiate the tribal people of the Borgaon area. Gradually lots of people started to take saran under them: I visited and took interview with the performer regarding the performance of *Bhaona* of my study area. The name of the performer was Mangala Barmahalia (56) of Amguri village, a farmer by profession. As informed by him, the village started the performance of *Bhaona* just after the independence. The *gosain* used to come to the village and stayed here with a view to initiating the Sankardeva’s ek saran nam dharma in the villages. The villagers also started initiating *ek saran nam dharma* and performing *bhaona* and *kirtona*. On the other hand they stopped worshipping their traditional *Bathou* religion and musical instruments *kham, sifung, jotha, serja* etc.²⁰

This satra had separate place in the role of freedom movement. The satradhikar of that time Loknath Mahanta arranged a meeting here to discuss about the movement. Lots of people joined in the Gandhji’s movement on the request of Omeo Kumar Das, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Prasad Rabha. The workers of this area are—Loknath Mahanta, satradhikar, Gangaram Koch, Phanidhar Das, Prajapati

Informant: Ranjan Daimary, M, 68, Botala, Thelamara
3. Ratneswar Boro, M, 62, Borikachari, Borgaon, Sonitpur, Assam
Rijal, Jaliram Koch, Maniram Boro, Bhadreswar Boro, Maniram Kachari, Jaliram Kachari and others. There was a *Santi Sena Sibir* formed by here to train the congress workers. The trainers were the Umakanta Bhuya and Bapuram Gogoi. Bishnu Rabha and Jyoti Prasad came here to attend rehearsal for singing a patriotic song.

Lastly this unity became strengthened and the local people formed *Mritu Bahini* for launching movement against the British. In this programme Omeo Kumar Das, his Puspalata Das were present.

Raghunath Satra is another Satra in Sonitpur district. No written history was found about the year of its establishment. Now, this satra is also known as Chirajuli. According to Someswar Das, the founder of this satra was Sri Ram Ata. The name of this Satra was named Raghunath Satra in the memory of Sri Ram Ata.²¹ He had close relationship with Gobinda who founded Khatra satra on the advice of Madhabdeva at Mongoldoi. According to some informants, the satra was established in the 2nd decades of 18th century. Amongst the saints of Sankardeva, Sri Ram Atai was also belonged to Kachari community. After Ram Ata, the most important people connected with this satra were Lerelu Medhi, Bapi Ram Koch, Bidur Bora and others.

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The role of initiating the Bodo people of this satra was immense. Chirajuli, Ghogara, Panbari villages etc. are known as the Koch gaon. Still they say that they were once the Bodos. They have relatives among the Bodos and offer prayers to few tribal deities during the various occasions.

There were lots of Bodo people in Balipara area. They have preserved their own language, culture and tradition and maintain their livelihood by agriculture. There are tribal people like Mising, Daflas in the neighbourhood. Among these tribes the Bodo people were the majority. The Nepali people migrated here in the 19th century. The Tea tribe people were brought by the British to work as a labourer in the tea garden from the central India in the first part of 19th century.

In 1751-69, Sri Kamdev, the Satradhikar of Dakhin Pat Satra, Majuli established a Satra near by the river Mansiri in the Southern bank which is now known as Bhakat gaon. The Bodo people of the Balipara area took initiation under this satra, and after that the Satradhikar made one or two people as head Deori and distributed the post of Deori to each villages. At the suggestion and advice of the Sattradhikar, each Deori family had to collect and give at least Rs.1.25
and 5 kg rice yearly in the name of Satra's development. In ancient times, other ethnic groups like Daflas, Mising, Kaibartos etc. lived in the broader areas particularly in the isolated places far from the light of the modern civilization and the place was full of forest. As a matter of fact that some of the Bodo people are still settling in the remote place far from the town where there is no good communication, educational institution, medical facility etc.

Another characteristic of the Bodos is that they were much more habituated to migration. After living for a few decades, they migrated from one place to another place in search of fertile land particularly forest areas convenient for catching, hunting animals, collecting fowls, rearing domestic animals etc. It was seen that they always prefer to live in the midst of the nature and serene places. They are nature worshipper and peace loving. They are not much concerned with the amenities of modern civilization.

A branch of Dakhinpat Satra was established in the 17th century at Diputa about 8 kilometers from the Tezpur town. According to Thaneswar Boro, there were lots of Bodo people living in this area. Few Bodo people are still here and some of them migrated to Khelmati and other places of Sonitpur due to certain reasons. And some of them

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22 Daimari, B. *Bwrl Serefang*, 2005, p-65
converted to neo-vaishnavism, now these people identify themselves as Koch\textsuperscript{23}. According to Kushal Bora “the forefather of Dekargaon area was the Bodo Kacharis”\textsuperscript{24}. The people of this area adopted Hazarika, Deka, Saikia, Kakoti, Bora, Koch etc. as their surname after embracing neo-vaishnavism. They totally discarded their language, culture and their relationship with the Bodos and now they have completely assimilated and merged with the Assamese speaking Hindu society.

Rangapara is a small town. There are the Bodo villages, comprising Bodo families who migrated from the ancient undivided Golapara district in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The Bodo people this town gave up their language, ethnic dress due to impact of neo-vaishnavism.

In Hugrajuli also there are also many Bodo villages that were migrated from the Goalpara region in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Some of the Bodo people converted into neo-vaishnavism in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and now they identify themselves as Koch. Their face and behavior are same with the Bodos. They could not completely merge with the Assamese society. Most of the converted Bodo into neo-vaishnavism also could

\textsuperscript{23} Informant: Thaneswar Boro, M. 68, Khamukhiya, Sonitpur

\textsuperscript{24} Informant: Kushal Bora, M. 67, Dekargaon, Sonitpur
not retain their language, culture and now they speak Assamese as their first language and even they are taking education through Assamese.

Apart from the Bodos, the ethnic tribes like Rabhas, Sonowals, Garos, Deoris, and Karbis also had been living in this district since time immemorial. The Rabhas, Sonowals, Deoris could not keep their mother tongue. Now they have accepted Assamese as their mother tongue like some section of the Bodos in the district. The Bodos are bi-lingual, who speak both Bodo and Assamese.

It will not be wrong to say that the converted people had got chance to take education through initiation. For the advice of the satradhikar they had to take education and thereafter they gave up habit of rearing pig, hen and drinking rice beer. On the other hand the government also provided special opportunity to them. They kept close contact with the Satradhikar and Assamese speaking Hindu people. After that this section of the people paid deep attention towards the establishment and improvement of education in the Bodo society. As a result of education and its subsequent effects, the Bodo people have been enlightened to a great extent. As the information furnished those persons who converted before independence became completely assimilated with the Assamese society. Now they have identified themselves as Koch. In fact, they are now highly educated holding
higher job and service of Central and State government. For example the area of Dekargaon, Baliapara area of Sonitpur etc. can be noticed. According to Kushal Bora, the forefather of these areas was the Bodo Kacharis. In the context of Assam, I have observed and found that the Saraniya and Koch already attained an enriched culture and social position in the Assamese society and gradually they are being merged with into the Assamese race.

Whatever it may be, in Sonitpur district, it is seen that the neo-vaishnavite Bodo people are more educated than the non-vaishnavite Bodo people. If we look at their thinking, feeling, emotion they are more clever than the non-vaishnavite Bodos. The literacy of them is higher than other non-vaishnavite Bodos. It might have wrong to say that they think themselves superior and more intelligent than other Bodos. Last few years back, they hesitated to identify themselves as the Bodo.

Generally the Bodos are always simple and good natured. They are proud of their present status. Sometimes it is seen that the non-vaishnavite Bodo people are looked down upon the uninitiated Bodos. They have already accepted the Hindu conduct of life. S.N. Sarmah has rightly opined saying that “They have also given up many of their unclean habits, discarded animism and have become more and more refined in their dealings.”
It is to be noted here that the Bodo people have been accepting the Assamese language as their 1st language as well as mother tongue after embracing Neo-Vaishnavism. They don’t know how to speak Bodo language. The devotees of the community go on reading the Assamese scriptures, namely Kirton, Dasama, Namghosa, Ratnawali, Bargits. In addition to their daily prayers they have been acquiring knowledge from the study of religious books written in Assamese and by constant touch or contact with the other Vaishnava of the Sattras.

It is also observed in the present social scenario that the Bodo equally take part in the congregational meet or prayer in the Sattra or in the functions held in the households of the villages. In the recent times it is seen that the messages of the Bodos with the others have taken place in the villages of Dhekiajuli, Charduar, Tezpur circles. It is also seen that people are agreeing to establish a nuptial tie with the other classes.

The Neo Vaishnavite Bodo people know the uses of the Khol, Dhol, Tal and other instruments of the vaishnavite society and culture, namely Sarai (trays made of bamboo) daba , (a drum made of clad and leather) in addition to the making and uses of musk.

I have already visited almost the areas of the district where the most of the neo-vaishnavite live by side by side with other people without malice, hatred or ill. In this why it is also seen that, they have
been merged with the Vaishnava circle in the district with all their human behavior and character.

It needs to mention here that the Sankardeva Sangha have taken the followers of the Sangha always bear liberal view in the matter of strict orders and rituals of the Sattra campuses. They don’t hesitate to lift the barriers between a Satradhikara and non Satradhikara’s Saranacharya and a disciple. They always advocate for a democratic outlook in the matter of propagating the faith by the non-satradhikara disciples irrespective of caste and creed. The preachers proclaim that all the Saraniya initiated ones are equal status. All the disciples of the Sangha are at liberty in the matter of taking food cooked by any disciple, simply becoming to the Sangha.

But they always oppose to take food cooked by anyone other than the disciples of the sangha. Besides they don’t prefer the headship of a Mahanta or a satradhikara in the assembly of devotees ready to chant the songs of God. The method of chanting the songs of the God by the Sankardeva Sangha disciples is also somewhat different. Such strict orders of that section have created a sense of disunity in some respects in the Assam vaishnaivite society.

According to the devotees of Sangha, there is a strict social order, rites and rituals in the Sattras and even the sense of high or low status
among the devotees of the same Mahapurusia stands as a hindrance on the path of preaching the vaishnava doctrine in the present day. So, the Sangha try to abolish all the age-old heritages or prejudices in the name of casteism, in the name of headship, in the Sattras or society for the greater interest of the Assamese society and even in the matter of propagating the faith and to allow to pray or discuss women equally in the assembly of devotees and so on.

They again say that the Sattradhikar and even the Goswami or Mahanata people of Bamunia satra hesitate to take food cooked by them but he doesn’t at all feel whom he takes his food in the railway compartment while travelling from one place to another place or in a big hotel, whenever necessary.

It is also seen that the people of Sangha don’t shave their hairs that lost their parents. In the previous, there was a tradition among the devotees of the Vaishnavism that the sons who lost their parents had to shave their hairs before the *sradha* ceremony as a sign of respect and bereavement to the departed soul of his mother or father and also as bodily cleanliness. But it is clear that the sangha’s disciples or devotees don’t want to honour such tradition. However they say that they don’t have reason as to why it is to be done. According to Non-Sangha
devotes, there was a healthy tradition in this regard. Unfortunately they disrespect it now.

Another informant says that the unity and majority of the Bodos and other tribals of Assam were destructed by Sankardeva’s. Sankardeva’s next generation were the dangerous than him, they completely destructed the tribal people. Before and after independence also, the Assamese intellectual took conversion as a major force to break down the whole tribal people particularly in Assam. As a result the tribal people became minority only because of having great politics inside the conversion.

There are great tense among the devotees of the different religious. It is unfortunate that the devotee of Anuku Thakur doesn’t drink water, tea and take food at the house of non Anukul house and even their brothers, sisters and relatives; they drink in their fellows only. Like that the devotees of Krishmaguru also do the same behaviour.

Therefore the Bodo people of Sonitpur district can be classified in terms of their religion into the six categories such as- 1.Follower of Neo-Vaishnavism, 2.Follower of Neo-Vaishnavism who still practices old tradition, 3.Follower of Bathouism,5.Follower of Christianism,6.Follower of Brahmanism and Follower of other religions
of Hindu sects. After embracing neo-vaishnavism most of the Bodos of Sonitpur district became Koch. Though they are the follower of neo-vaishnavism they observe the traditional customs of the Bodos like Dangaria puja, Habir puja etc. And they are not able to give up the tribal religious worship. Interestingly there are some Bodos who are the follower of neo-vaishnavite practices and old tradition that they observe their marriage such as tulani biya, bura biya and death ceremony and any other social functions with the neo-vaishnavite rites. But they have not seen giving up old traditional like making and drinking rice beer, bringing pigs, hens etc at home and offer as a meat in the social ceremonies. Still they use pig as a main food in their society. But among the extreme follower of neo-vaishnavism like Sankar guru and Krishna guru, they offer mutton, fish in place of pork in their marriage ceremony.
4. FOLK RELIGION AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF THE BODOS

Folk religion consists of ethnic or regional religious customs under the umbrella of an organized religion, but outside of official doctrine and practices.²⁵ Don Yoder has defined "folk religion" as "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion."²⁶

The term "folk religion" is generally held to encompass two related but separate subjects. The first is the religious dimension of folk culture, or the folk-cultural dimensions of religion. The second refers to the study of syncretism between two cultures with different stages of formal expression, such as the melange of African folk beliefs and Roman Catholicism that led to the development of Vodun and Santería, and similar mixtures of formal religions with folk cultures.²⁷ Folk Christianity, Folk Hinduism and Folk Islam are examples of folk religion associated with major religions. There is sometimes tension

between the practice of folk religion and the formally taught doctrines and teachings of a faith. In other cases, practices that originated in folk religion are adopted as part of the official religion. The term is also used, especially by the clergy of the faiths involved, to describe the desire of people who otherwise infrequently attend religious worship, do not belong to a church or similar religious society, and who have not made a formal profession of faith in a particular creed, to have religious weddings or funerals, or (among Christians) to have their children baptized.

Chinese folk religion retains traces of some of ancestral primal religious belief systems such as animism and shamanism which include the veneration of (and communication with) the Sun, the Moon, the Earth, the Heaven, and various stars, as well as communication with animals. It has been practiced by the Chinese people for thousands of years, and since the start of the Common Era alongside Buddhism, Taoism and various other religions.

It is also true to some extent but the existence of "Pluralistic God and Goddesses perhaps point to the primitive stage of folk religion. Apart from these, there are lots of characteristics to the certain point of folk religion such as acts like propitiation, purification, expiation,

avoidance, taboo, asceticism, orgies, revelation, divination, ritual and magic are common to the traditional religion of the world."^{29} The important features of Indian Tribal or folk Religion can be studied in the following:

**Belief in Mana**

Mana is thought to be a supernatural power which has the capacity of doing both good and evil things. According to Max Muller, "Mana is an attempt to define certain natural phenomena interns of an impersonal power. The high mountains, the river, the thunder and all other natural phenomena according to the tribal people act with the power of Mana. It is connected with the soul ghost and the living being".^{30}

**The Concept of Bonga**

* Bonga is a form of Mana. According to the Tribal people, *Bonga* is a mysterious and impersonal power backed behind the rains, cold, epidemic and the wild animals. The activities of *Bonga* are observed everywhere.^{31}

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^{29} Messenger, J.C. *Folk Religion* in Folklore and Folklife, R.M. Dorson ed, 1972, p-219
^{30} www.publishyourarticles.org/eng/articles/the-important-features-of-indian-tribal-religion.html
^{31} ibid
Animism

Animism is another important feature of folk religion. According to the European ethnographers, the religion of tribal is animism. There is a belief among the tribal people of the existence of supernatural powers behind the high mountains, flooded rivers, big trees and epidemic. Always the tribal people try to please these powers by means of propitiations and worships.

Animatism

The belief in Animatism is also one of the features of folk religion. It "proclaims the existence of impersonal power behind every material object. This impersonal power is being worshipped to sustain peace and prosperity in the group."\(^{32}\)

Faith in Magic

Another prominent feature of folk religion is the faith in magic. There are prevalent of different types of magical acts in different tribes in India. It is also seen that if a particular woman is declared by the magician as a witch, she is tortured by the villagers.

Totem and Taboo

An important feature of folk religion is the custom of totem. The people belonging to different tribes believe in different types of totems.

\(^{32}\)ibid
The totem is an object or animal which has a mystic relationship with the members of a tribe. The members of a tribe have much regard towards their totem. They cannot kill their totem if it is thought to be an animal. In this way taboos are linked with the totems.  

Totemism is the fundamental basis of the religious organization among the tribals or traditional society. It strengthens community consciousness and brotherhood among the members of the group. It acts as a symbol of group unity. It can undoubtedly be said that totem occupies an important place in tribal religion.

From the above discussion we have come to know about the concept and elements of folk religion. The Characteristics of traditional or folk religion like oppressive fear of benevolent high powers, overwhelming awe of divine might, luxurious sense dependence upon a benevolent and all knowing superior, re-assuming feeling of security through conformity, prideful conviction of right, grateful release from the burden of guilty conscience, grounding humiliates of self abnegation, ecstatic release of inner power, mystic sense of identification with or absorption in the divine essence are well in evidence in the traditional Bathou religion of the Bodos.

33 ibid
The traditional religion of the Bodos is called Bathou which have been practiced since time immemorial. This religion is invariably linked up with and centered round the worship of Bathoubwrai or Sibwrai. i.e. the supreme god of the Bodos. Hence it is known as Bathou religion. In the Bodo language, *a* means five and *thou* means ‘deep philosophical thought’. These five elements are- *Bar* (Air), *San* (Sun), *Ha* (Earth), *Or* (Fire) and *Okhrang* (Sky). Hence, Bathou means five principle of deep philosophical principles and significances which are mysterious: not easy to understand and feel without meditation.

The creator of these five elements is called Bathou Bwrai or the God. After creating physical form of a man with the composite elements, he confers his spirit to inanimate body which displays as the totality of living beings body. So, Bathou is religion and philosophy that embodies the spirituality of the creator or the God. The followers of Bathou religion express their spirituality through the prayers, offerings and sacrifices offered to the deities. The mantra performed in the Bathou religion is given in the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
    & Thaigir khonga khongba \\
    & Sijouni Siriya Siriba \\
    & Siphungni gudunga gudungba \\
    & Bathouni bandoa bandoba
\end{align*}
\]
Boro bwraini raoa phongba

English rendering

The ou fruit has five ridges

The Euphorbia plant has five edges

The flute has five holes

The alter of the Bathou has five rings

So the Bodos have five principles.

Many scholars have expressed their opinion regarding the religion of the Bodos. According to the Sindney Endle says “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.”34 He again says in the same monograph-“in the typical Kachari Village as a rule neither idol nor place of worship is to be found; but to the Kachari mind and imagination earth, air and sky are alike people with a vast number of invisible spiritual beings which is known as mwdai, all possessing powers and faculties far greater than those of man. Mwdai is a Bodo word which means deity (God or Goddess) and should be mistaken for invisible spirits.”35 Dr P.C. Bhattacharjee strongly objects to this view and says “the religion of the Bodos are not animistic. They are worshippers of Bathou, the supreme God. They have

34. Endle, S. The Kacharis, 2007, p-33
35. Ibid, p-33
other Gods and Goddesses. They believe in Ghosts and Spirits also. But the concept of the Supreme God is predominantly remarkable.\textsuperscript{36} The Bodo scholars and writers are of the opinion that their religion cannot be regarded as animistic. They worship Bathou. Amongst the follower of Bathou religion, God is known as the Bathou Bwrai. In Bodo language, the word Bwrai signify the oldest or most elderly man in power and knowledge or the supreme in all respects. Therefore, he exclusively represents supreme soul (poromatma). He bestows upon us everything we need in this world. The following mantra current in Bodo oral tradition embody the deep rooted belief of the devotees in Bathoubwrai:

\begin{center}
\begin{align*}
\text{Ai thwidwng aikhou gardwng}, \\
\text{Afaya thwidwng afakhou gardwng}, \\
\text{Nathay nwng afa Bwrai Bathou} \\
\text{Maharajakhou fujinw jwng nagarakhw} \\
\end{align*}
\end{center}

English rendering: When our mother and father die, we cremate them; but we haven’t forgotten to worship Bathoubwrai.

From these above mentioned lines we understand the mysterious and sacred powers and qualities of Bathou Bwrai in different manifestations. Accordingly, there is an owner behind the power and

\footnote{Bhattacharja, P. \textit{A Descriptive Analysis of the Bodo Language}, p-17, 1997 published by Register, Gauhati University Publication Department}
qualities of these elements and the custodian of these is recognised as *Bathou bwrai*.

Generally we or living beings in the world never see the *Bathou Bwrai* or the creator because of his or her invisible (*nirakar*), shapeless, formless. But we can imagine through his creation of five elements such as *ha* (earth), *dwi* (water), *bar* (air) or (fire) and *okhrang* (Sky) and we can imagine and see his divine powers and qualities. So, in this context, he is visible (*sakar*). According to Bathouism, he is omniscient, omnipresent, almighty and he himself is the earth, water, air, fire or light and sky as his form, shape and body. These five elements and its divine and mysterious powers and qualities have an owner or creator and the creator and the owner is known as *Bathou Bwrai* (the God in Bodo).

The main five tenets of the philosophy of the *Bathou* are concerned with the five deep and divine qualities and powers of earth, water, air, light and sky. These powers and qualities of the *Bathou Bwrai* are invoked in different names and styles, when mantras are chanted during the worship. These are-1. *Bwisumuthi* or *Hailung Mwdai* (deity of earth) 2. *Agrang* (*Dwi*) or *Mwdai* (deity of water) 3. *Khwila* (*Bar*) *Mwdai* (deity of air) 4. *Sanja Bwrali* or *San Mwdai* (deity of light/sun) and 5. *Raj Ukhumbri* (*Okhrang*) *Mwdai* (deity of
According to Bathouism, there is an owner behind the power and qualities of these elements and the owner behind these is *Bathou Bwrai*.

There are five principles in *Bathou* religion. These are - (a) *Agor bad* (b) *Phongslod bad*, (c) *Daokhi bad* (d) *Khoulobad* and (e) *Khowalibad*. These philosophical principles play role in the social structure and customs of the Bodos. According to Anil Boro, “the *Bathou* religion is based on five fold preachings as-(a) Prayer and meditation for God (b) Helping others to acquire religious knowledge (c) Helping and offering aims to the poor and needy (d) Love and affection for all and (e) United effort to solve problem.”

The *Bathou* religion believes in the five fold realization as follows: (a) To think constantly of *Sijou* or the Soul (b) Adoration of the Supreme Soul (c) To think constantly of *Bathou buri* (d) To realize the power of the earth, water and wind (e) To execute one’s duties on earth without negligence.

The religion enjoys upon the devotees the follow the five fold principles of love. These are: Love for God, Love for mankind and Love for lower animals, love for trees and vegetation and love for motherland.

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38. Ibid, p-39
39. Ibid, p-39
Bathousali (Bathou Altar)

The *Sijou* plant is the living symbol of *Bathoubrai*, the supreme God. It is to be mentioned here that there is no seed in *sijou* plant. Hence a branch from another plant is brought and planted at the *Bathou* altar. In the plantation ritual the family or the villagers have to provide some items and materials such as two young girls, a holier priest, one new sieve, a white cloth, *dwi gwthar* (holy water) one pot, two plantain leaves, five *dubri bijou* (*dubri bon*), two pairs of areca nut and three pairs of betel leaves, *alaribathi*, flowers, mustard oil, white thread, group of *Kherai* performance etc. There is a certain custom before bringing a *sijou* plant, the priest (*douri*) sprinkle holy water and foot earth of the *sijou* plant is cleaned and washed with water and a plaintain leaf is laid out carrying a pair of areca nut and betel leaves just before the lighted *Alari bathi* (earthen lamp). The *gothar douri* (priest) will knell down praying to the sijou tree verse:

The *Bathou* altar is the main place of *Bathou* worship. According to N. Narzari, every family who follows the *Bathou* religion, must have a *Bathousali* in the North East corner of the courtyard. Each village has to set up a *Bathou* altar in the community land. It contains a *Bathou* altar where *sijou* plant is planted and fenced with 18th pairs of small bamboos strips folded with five fastening which symbolises and
signifies the religious and spiritual principles of Bathouism as well as the eighteen gurus and deities. The pairs of part symbolically mean the married couple of gods and goddess, gurus as well as Mahagurus. In Bathou religion, these gurus have the prominent place. These are known as Mwnsinsin bwrai and Mwnsinsin burwi, Si Bwrai-Si Burwi, Aham Bwrai-Aham Burwi, Khuria Bwrai-Khuria Burwi, Eheo Bwrai-Eheo-Burwi, Mainao Bwrai-Mainao-Burwi, and so on. In the name of these god and goddesses, an alari bathi (earthen lamp) is highlighted on all the altars. The name and title of these eighteen gurus (dieties) as I found during the field study itself signify their act of preaching. The first three rounds of fastening from the bottom signify the three bando (bindings) of human beings such as 1. birth, 2. weal and sorrows 3. death. Another remaining two rounds of fastening signify 4. Marriage and 5. Peace and pleasure. Human beings have to compulsorily go through these bonds. According to the follower of Bathouism, no one can escape from these five bindings. These five bindings are called bandwba. Human beings have to proceed through these five bindings.

On every Tuesday each and every family use to light the Alari bathi (earthen lamp) in the morning or evening. Sijou is a kind of plant whose scientific name is euphorbia splendens. The term Sijou has inner
meaning i.e. *si* means soul (*atma*) and *gwjou* means supreme or *porom*. Hence *Sijou* means supreme soul or *poromatma*. This is the highest immortal *atma* who never die. Therefore the Bodo pick up this plant as the living symbol of supreme soul (*atma*). According to Bathousim, "*Bathou* created the *sijou* plant in this universe just after the creation of the world. Where there is a *sijou* there is a *Bathou* and Bodo community." The *Bathou* religion is deeply related with its every kinds of customs, tradition, culture of the Bodo society. In this regard Sidney Endle says, "*Bathoubwrai* is never represented in idol form, but is well in evidence through his living symbol the *Sijou* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) which is often to be seen in the Kachari homestead surrounded by a circular fence of split bamboo."\(^{41}\) Bishnuprasad Rabha, an artist and philosopher said, "the Bodos consider the *sijou* as the symbol of *Bathou*. As *Bathou* is eternal, *Sijou* is eternal, infinite. *Bathou* gives protection to male and female principles in the form of *sunwi* and *bilai* (lime and betel leaf).\(^{42}\) Anil Boro observes, "*sijou* plant is the living symbol of of *Bathoubrai* or *Sibrai* represents the five fold principles of *Bathou* religion."\(^{43}\)

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\(^{41}\) Endle, S. *The Kacharis*, 2007, p-36  
\(^{42}\) Rabha, B. *Boroni Harimuyao Siva*, 2005, p-24  
\(^{43}\) Boro, Anil. *The Flute and Harp*, 2004, p-47
In Bathou religion, the *sijou* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) has the importance place which has been widely accepted as the symbol of life or soul by the Bodo people since time immemorial. There is a *sijou* plant in every Bodo household. Along with the *sijou* plant a *tulsi* plant is planted in the northeast corner of the courtyard and encircled by a circular fence of split bamboo.

Another distinctive characteristic of Bodo religion is that it doesn’t have sacred scripture or scriptures as other religions do. The religious ethos is contained in the people’s hearts, minds, oral history and rituals. The Bodos religion does not have a historical founder or reformer. Their religion is instead centered on earth or creation.

I have already been said that traditionally, the religion of the Bodos didn’t have any institutionalised shape. In this way the religion has since time immemorial been practiced as a folk religion. But due to impact of modernisation and westernization, the society has changed. In this regard, N. Narzary observes, “the Bathou religion has faced some new challenges. The process of worship such as sacrificing animals and fowls, offering and drinking rice beer in the name of deities appears to be crude and unfit in the eyes of the educated and civilized people. Gradually people were going to dislike these processes or way of
worshipping." In fact, there was lack of uniformity in the rituals and other related matters in the same religions. On the other hand, being an indigenous and age old religion, there was no preacher, no organization, no institution and no written documents to the Bathou religion to give an institutionalized shape. Considering the necessity of modification and innovation to the Bathou religious practice, a section of the educated and conscious Bodos have taken initiative to reform the religious practices of Bathouism.

B. AREA OF STUDY

There area of my study is Sonitpur district. There are many communities living here since immemorial times. Sonitpur, according to some scholars, was the land of the Austric and then the Mongoloids occupied the land. Later on it becomes the dwelling land of the Mongoloids and the Aryans. Various tribes and castes used to live here together with cordial relation for which cultural interaction was occurred. Among these Mongoloid, the “Kiratas’ were the earliest inhabitant this district. They had the capital named Sonitpur, modern Tezpur, the most famous town. There was a most powerful ‘Kirata’ king named Bana or Banasur, contemporary to Narkasur, ruled once upon a time. The Bodo people claimed him as the Bodo king. There are some

44 Narzari, N, op-cit, p-62
sources to claim him as the 'Bodo' king which is current in the tradition of some Bodo people. Besides him, there were many Kirata kings such as Bhaskar Barman, Pushya Barman, Harjar Barman and so on. Among them Bhaskar Barman was the most powerful king of North east India who had close contact with the Bengal king Harshabardhan. Besides these there are many words to know the origin of rivers and mountains which are of Bodo words. As the earliest inhabitant of this area the name of the places remained in Bodo and some of them were later Sanskritised in some way or other. In this regard S.K. Chatterjee's comment is most acceptable one, "the steady Hinduisation of the Tibeto Barman (mainly Bodo) people during this ancient period brought about the Sanskritisation of the local pre-Aryan names of both Sino-Tibetan and Austric origin, and in bringing them in line with Brahmanical Hindu notions and religious notions current among its people saved places of pre-Hindu religions world were gradually Hinduised with the myths and legends which were being gathered in the puranas. Indirect influence of the Kirata people in the evolution of late vedic and Brahmanical Hindu ritual can also be postulated in this way.\textsuperscript{45}

Whatever it may be, Sonitpur is an administrative district in the state of Assam. The district consists of three subdivisions viz. Tezpur,
Biswanath and Gohpur. The head quarter is located at Tezpur. Geographically Sonitpur district is spread over an area of 5324 sq. kms. on north bank of Brahmaputra river. In terms of area Sonitpur is the second largest district of Assam after Karbi Anglong district. The District lies between 26° 30’N and 27° 01’N latitude and between 92° 16’E and 93° 43’E longitude.

During the freedom movement the people of Sonitpur district took great role. There were many martyrs such as Kanaklata Baruah, Mukunda Kakati, Maniram Boro, Lerela Kachari, Habang Kachari, Kuhuli Nath and so on.

Tezpur is considered to be the cultural capital of Assamese culture. Notable personalities like Jyoti Prasad Agarwal, Kalaguru Prasad Rabha and Dr Bhupen Hazarika were born here.

Boundaries of Sonitpur district is given below:

**North:** The state of Arunachal Pradesh.

**South:** Morigaon, Nagaon, Jorhat and Golaghat districts.

**East:** Lakhimpur district.

**West:** Udalguri district. (Pachnai River serves as the boundary)

**Physiography:** Located between mighty Brahmaputra River and Himalayan foothills of Arunachal Pradesh, the district is largely plain with some hills.
Rivers

Brahmaputra river forms the south boundary of the district. There are many rivers and rivulets in Sonitpur district which originate in the Himalayan foothills flow southwards and ultimately fall in Brahmaputra river. In Tezpur sub-division, Pachnai, Belsiri, Gabharu, Bhorali, in the Biswanath Chariali Ghiladhari, Burhigang, Borgang, Bihali and in the Gohpur sub-division: Buroi, Kharoi, Balijan, Morno are mentionable rivers in Sonitpur district of Assam.

Chars

There are number of river island in Brahmaputra river, known as Chars in local parlance. They are generally sandy. Some Chars are large enough and fit for habitation and cultivation.

Lakes & Ponds

There are lakes and ponds dotting every part of the District. The major lakes are -Rowmari, Dighali, Borsola, Rongapani and Dhandi. these water bodies along with the rivers and rivulets provide a lot of vistas for fishing in the District. Tourists can also do angling for pleasure, especially over the Bharali river at Bhalukpung.

Hills and Hillocks, Forest

There are many hills and hillocks in the district. The important hills include the Agnigarh, Bhomuraguri and Singri. The region has trees and
tea-plantations and paddy fields. The northern portion is made up of Forest Reserves and sparsely populated forest-villages. The region abounds in bio-diversity with evergreen and deciduous trees of several types. There is a National Park (*Nameri*), a few Wildlife sanctuaries (*Sonai-Rupai & Bor-Dikorai*), and a number of reserve forests (e.g.*Chariduar, Balipara reserve-forest*). In the extreme north of the region (*Bhalukpung, Sijushah, Pabhoi, etc.*), are hills and hillocks marking the starting of the Himalayan foothills. The main-plain is slightly sloping from east to west, and is at an average.

**Educational Institution**

There are many schools, colleges in the district. Besides these there is a Central Tezpur University, Indian Institute of Statistics, Tezpur Medical College. There is a Mental Health Research Institute and Hospital in Tezpur.

**Population**

As per the census report of 2011, there are 1925,975 populations in the district. The district has a population density of 365 inhabitants per square kilometres (950/sq mi. Its population growth rate over the decade 2001-2011 was 15.67. Sonitpur has a sex ratio of 946 females for every
There are many communities in Sonitpur district. They are discussed below:

**The Assamese**

There are many Assamese speaking Hindu people in the district. The majority people inhabiting the District are Assamese. They are among the original inhabitants of the place, and the typical culture of the place grew with them. Among the prominent castes among the Assamese include Brahmins, Kalitas, Baishya, Koch, Ahoms, Yogis, the Scheduled Castes, etc.

**The Nepali**

In Sonitpur district there are many Nepali community. They are fairly dominant in the central and southern part of the District, especially in the Biswanath Chariali and Gohpur sub-divisions. They speak Neplali language and maintain their Hindu religion.

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46. District Census 2011 .co. in. 2011, Retrieved 2011-09-30
The Bengali

The Bengali community came from erstwhile undivided Bengal, as officials and clerks of the British administration and the Tea Industry; and stayed back. Later, on account of the partition of India, people coming as refugees added significantly to the community. They speak Bengali, a language of the Indo-Aryan family. Of course, they use Assamese as a *lingua franca*. They follow the Hindu religion.

The Adivasis (Tea-Tribes)

The Adivasi people were brought by the British from Chotanagpur area and Orissa to serve as labourers in the Tea Gardens. In course of time, they assimilated themselves in the greater Assamese society, while retaining their basic cultural traits. Though they have adopted Assamese as their language, but have retained their mother tongue. The *Jhumur* dance is their contribution to the culture of Assam. They are Hindus and Christians.

Muslims

The district has a considerable Muslim population. Majority of Muslims have immigrated from the erstwhile East Bengal (present Bangladesh). They fill up a large portion of riverside areas of the district. They speak Bengali *and* Assamese language.
The Misings

The Mising people live in a scattered manner in the northern part of the Naduar and Biswanath Circles, i.e. east of the Bhorali River; and form a significant portion of the population of Gohpur subdivision. Generally they generally their language, belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family. But a lot of them also speak the Assamese language as a *lingua franca*.

Though they follow Hindu religion they have retained their distinct religion and culture. But many of them have also adopted Assamese ways.

The Bodos

The Bodo dominated areas include the northern part of Dhekiajuli, Chariduar, Naduar, Helem and Gohpur (Sadar) Circles. In course of time, they assimilated linguistically and culturally themselves in the greater Assamese society, while retaining their basic cultural traits. They generally speak the Bodo language, belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family. While a majority of them follows Hindu religion along with its variant forms, a certain portion of them follow Christianity. The Bodos perform *Bathow* worship. They have their own distinct culture, but many of them have also adopted Assamese ways.
Other Tribes

There are some major tribes in the district. They are Rabhas, Mechs, Nyishis, Garos, Adis, Apatanis, Lamas etc. Their population is sparse, and mainly confined to the foothills of the Himalayas near Arunachal Pradesh. They speak either their tribal language, or their variant of Assamese. Of course, they use Assamese as a lingua franca. The Rabhas and Mechs follow Hindu religion; Lamas and Nyishis are Buddhists; Garos are Christians; Adis and Apatanis either follow their traditional form of religion.

C. Aim and Objective of Study

The aim of my study is to explore the folklore materials of the neo-vaishnavite Bodos of Sonitpur district. Someone wants to say that religion is not folklore and so it cannot be studied and analysed through folklore. As folklore is the father of culture and tradition of the society, there are lots of folklore materials which can be observed, my research work is also nothing but part of that which can be studied through folkloristic point of view.

The main aim of my research is to bring out the folklore of the neo-vaishnavite Bodo people of Sonitpur. Due to impact of neo-vaishnavism, the socio-religious practices of the Bodos is completely changed which formed a society one. The neo-vaishnavite Bodos way of
worshipping, ways of living have been studied thoroughly. Moreover, socio-cultural transformations among the Bodos also have been observed and analyzed.

On the other hand, Neo-Vaishnavism and its various offshoots have been influencing the Bodo Society till today. Therefore the objectives of study are:

(a) The impact of Sankardeva’s Neo-Vaishnavism on religious and social life.
(b) The impact of Sankardeva’s Neo-Vaishnavism on the oral literature of the Bodos.
(c) The impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the material culture of the Bodos.
(d) The impact of Neo-Vaishnavism in bringing about the changes in the life style of the Bodos of Sonitpur District.
(e) The impact of Neo-Vaishnavism in social stratification.
(f) The impact of Sankardeva’s Neo-Vaishnavism on the revivalist tendencies of the Bodos of Sonitpur District.

D. Methodology of the Study

Folklore research primarily lays emphasis on the collection of folklore data from the actual field situation and analysis of these data for arriving at generalized conclusions. The basis of present study is the
field work as a primary source but secondary sources of printed and written materials have also been utilized. The data have been collected through occasional field trips last four years.

During my study I selected some peculiar Bodo villages where the traditional Bathou and modified Bathou religion are practiced; on the other hand, data were collected from neo-vaishanite Bodo villages where people are still practicing their traditional elements of Bathou religion. Though the primary data has been mainly concentrated among the rural people who are illiterates and the peasant folk of the village, the educated Bodo and Assamese Hindu people also have been concentrated during my field work.

Secondary sources have been used to collect data. The relevant and contemporary works on neo-vaishnavism in English, Assamese and Bodo have been utilized. In this regard, the books on Sankardeva, Satra Institution and charit puthi have been collected and used to develop my dissertation.

The field work includes both interview and observation methods have been used in the field to collect several oral narratives and verse narratives. The interview method has been used extensively to unearth the authenticity of the tradition as well as to collect the folklore
materials from the different people living in different areas of Sonitpur district. This experience has helped me to understand their folklore.

I used the digital camera, note book etc. to collect data during the field study. The present study attempts to give for the first time a systemic study on the impact of neo-vaishnavite elements on the Bodo society in Sonitpur district.

E. Limitations

Since time period for the completion of this research programme was only five years, so it was not quite impracticable to cover all genres of Bodo folklore and intricate it to the Neo-Vaishnavite influence. So, few major aspects of Bodo life and culture have been chosen. Secondly, insufficiency of Bodo written documents in this line, leads me to adopt oral sources to trace the authenticity. Thirdly, the Bodos are scattered in various nooks and corners nurturing distinct ethics and faiths. So, it becomes reasonable to confine the study only in Sonitpur District, with sizeable Bodo population.