Chapter 7

Conclusion
CHAPTER VII

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Religion plays a very crucial and influential role in traditional culture as well as brings change in the society. The Bathou is the traditional religion of the Bodos. It has been widely practiced by the Bodos as an oral religion since time immemorial. The evidence from the traditions reveals that the origin and philosophical development of the Bathou religion is primarily based on the belief of the superpowers of Bathou Bwrai, the supreme God. Conceptually, 'Bathou' is the power of the infinite, the eternal called Obonglawri, Anan Gosai and Aham Guru. The Bodos seem to have worshipped natural objects as God. They are monotheistic by religion, but the form of their worship may also be characterized as polytheistic. The Bodos worship the Supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and his consort, Mainao Burwi along with other lesser divinities at the Bathou pantheon. They also believe in ghosts and spirits, but the belief of the Bodos in the existence and conception of the Supreme God is predominantly remarkable.¹ The Almighty God, Bathou Bwrai is worshipped by the Bodos under various names, such as Anan Gosai, Bathou Bwrai, Bathou Raja, Khoria Bwrai, Sijou Bwrai, Sijou Gosai, Sijou Raja, etc. on the basis of different aspects of His creation. The religious philosophy of Bathou which is based on five philosophical thoughts concerned with the entire social customs and traditions, norms, values, economic institution, beliefs, rites and rituals of the Bodo society.

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The idol worship is not prevalent among the Bodos, but symbolizing Bathou Bwrai, the supreme God by a Sijou tree (Euphorbia splendens) at the centre of Bathou altar the Bodos worship Bathou in their society. They accept the Sijou tree as the symbol of life or soul. In earlier times, there was no fixed place of worship for community worship. The place of Bathou worship which was called 'Thansali' for the community worship was made by the villagers outside the house compound usually near the sacred grove of trees or bamboos after cleaning and purifying the ground and there the Bathou altar was raised. The making of the Bathou altar however, is very simple and easy but there are certain rules to be followed in preparing the Bathou altar. A gradual change, cropped in this practice over the time and Bathou thansali for the community worship is now shifted to Bathou temple located within the courtyard of the village.

The most important change that did happen in Bathou religion from the last decade of the twentieth century CE was that the Bodos began to worship Supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and his consort, Mainao Burwi in a new mode by singing devotional prayer songs and offering eatable things (prasads), etc. In the new mode of worship, they are worshipped by a chorus of Bathou devotees at Bathousali (Bathou temple) singing prayer songs accompanied by traditional music from instruments, like kham (drum), sifung (flute), jotha (cymbal) and sherja (violin). The practice of this Bathou is comparatively easier and simple whereas no sacrifices of life or zumai (rice beer), and sereb (distilled alcoholic spirit) are required. The burden of ritualism is also not very elaborate. On every Tuesday, Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi are worshipped by a chorus of Bathou devotees at the Bathou temple of the village community for getting their blessings and for the welfare of human beings. This form of Bathou worship has now occupied almost a dominant position among the Bodos except in a few interior areas of the Bodo villages where the earlier form called 'Bwli Bathou' is still prevalent. This new religious practice however, appears to be like that of Bhakti cult of Vaishnavism of Assamese Hindu society.

The religious reformation of Bathou brought some significant changes in the social-cultural and religious life of the Bodos. The emergence of the Bathou religious organizations from the middle part of the 20th century came as counteract to the attitude
and works of the Hindus and Christian missionaries among the Bodos. The religious organization was also held responsible for the process of initiating the innovations and modifications in the Bathou religion. This process was an effort to transform the traditional Bathou religion into a cohesive and institutionalized shape. The fact is that in earlier times, no uniformity was prevalent in the religious rituals of Bathou religion.

The adherents of the Bathou religion did not change their offerings of fruits, like banana, areca-nut, betel leaf and even lighting of alaribathi (earthen lamp) in the name of Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi as well as other lesser divinities although the sacrifices of life were abolished in the new form of worship. But the eatable things called prasads, flowers are added in their offerings. The change was also noticed in some Bodo places that all feasts related to religious affairs are served with vegetarian eatables. The majority of the Bodos are now drawn to this modified form of Bathou worship popularly known as ‘Bibar Bathou’. This cult of Bathou might have been greatly influenced by the Hindu religion.

Although Bathou was originally a single sect of Bodo religion, yet it was divided into several sects, such as Bwli Bathou (Gudi Bathou), Zangkhraw Bathou, Bibar Bathou, Moni Bathou, Bathou Siva dharma, etc. The two sects, namely Moni Bathou of Rupamoni Devi and Bathou Siva dharma of Swami Nabin Brahmari are identifiable to Hindu religion.

Another significant development of the Bathou religion was the emergence of a few Bodo Bathou gurus (teacher) among the Bodos who imparted religious messages to their disciples on the philosophy of Bathou religion for bringing cultural and spiritual development among the people. Although in earlier times, the Bodos did not have any religious scriptures, no preacher and no formal institution in the Bathou religion, yet a good number of Bathou religious texts and prayer songs to explain their religious thoughts and philosophy have emerged from the recent past, a turning point in the history of development Bodo religion. However, the Bathou prayer songs are derived mostly from the Bathou mantra which the Douri (priest) and the Oja (man oracle) chanted on Bathou rituals.
In view of the whole religious system, the Bodos are too ritualistic. Their religious and seasonal or agricultural festivals as well as societal ceremonies are performed through certain religious rites. The festival and ceremony are observed according to the tenets of the Bathou religion. For instance, the Bodos observe the Kherai festival on some specific occasions with great pomp in the name of the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi along with other lesser divinities for the welfare of people and for having bumper harvest. But some of their religious fairs and festivals are found almost similar in practice, manner and content to that of many other tribes and neighbouring Hindu people.

Although the role of the Oja (oracle man) in earlier times was important in every aspect at the time of performance of the traditional Bathou religious rituals; in the performance of the modified Bathou religious rituals his role has become more or less obsolete. Instead, most of the Bodo villages now gave much importance on the role of Douris (priests) now called ‘gwrhari asari’ in performing all religious rites. However, both traditional and modified forms of Bathou religion played an important role in the Bodo society.

In regards to the language, the Bodos had different dialects called Bodo or Boro, but it underwent various changes from time to time since ages. Of all dialects, Kok rajhar dialect has been adopted as the standard language for the Bodos. The growth and development of Bodo language have been one of the prominent developments in Assam. This is evident from the inclusion of the Bodo language in the 8th schedule of the constitution of India as a scheduled language in 2003 recently and also it has been recognized as an official language of the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts in Assam.

In respect of the clan system, the Bodo society is a social-family group primarily based on a male lineage of descent. Although each clan had their own occupation in the traditional Bodo society, yet it lost its importance in the society and such social division of former times still remained with surnames only without having any duty or works in the society. The clan of the Bodos also did not have any political significance in the traditional Bodo society.
As regards to administration, the Bodos have their own traditional system in the society. They have a village headman called ‘Gamibwrai’ (gaoburah) and hadungwra (head of locality) who look after any problem of the village in consultation with the village elders. But long back the role of the hadungwra became redundant from the society. The Bodos have also ‘bad khanthi’ or institution of law by which the five categories of socio-religious gravity of crimes or irregularities committed in the traditional society are decided. It was widely observed that there is a good deal of local and regional variation with respect to the manner of performance of penance ‘udrainai in Boro’ through the institution of ‘bad’ among the Bodos.

Agriculture was the mainstay of the Bodo economy since ages. So, the Bodos were agrarian people and mostly lived in villages, shying away from urbanization. Their economy was primarily the self-sufficient agrarian economy. Their method of ploughing the field of earlier days was primitive employing simple tools, but the change was in the method of cultivation in the use of modern techniques and tools, such as tractors, power tillers and other modified implements in their cultivation since the last two decades of the 20th century. Despite this, for the purpose of better agricultural crops, the Bodos perform various seasonal and agricultural festivals according to the tenets of the Bathou religion. There is no professional craftsman and manufacture of muga and endi cloth among the Bodos, although these were their traditional economic activities.

The changes occurred in the traditional economic structure of the Bodo village. For instance, a good number of small markets grew up in the rural Bodo populated areas and thereby the Bodos were motivated and encouraged to sell their products and domestic commodities in the nearby market. A section of them became economically sound engaging themselves in various economic activities, like dealers, contracts, business, etc. But a good number of Bodo family still lived below the poverty level too. It was due to the fact that the gap between rich and poor in terms of economic status gradually became wider in the Bodo society.

Most of the Bodo people in the ancient times were fond of dwelling in the nearby forest for advantage of agriculture and domestication of animals as well as for availing access to forest resources, etc. But this trend had been reversed from the last two decades.
of the twentieth century and most of the Bodo people were drawn towards the urban life. A section of them also migrated to distant cities and towns seeking alternative livelihood and took up even the untraditional occupations, like daily wage earner, manual labour, etc. It was in this way that many new elements of culture made inroad in the Bodo society and the very outlook of the Bodo people in view of socio-religious affairs underwent a major change. However, most of the Bodo people found it difficult to adjust themselves with urban and alien culture due to their deep-rooted tradition into their rural life.

In view of the religious transition, the traditional Bodo society underwent a process of assimilation with other neighbouring Assamese Hindus society in the Brahmaputra valley. This is evident from a large number of the Bodo people who adopted ‘Ek-saran-nam dharma’ of Srimanta Sankardev and became Sarania. The Sarania identified themselves as a new purified caste and assimilated with the mainstream Assamese Hindu society after giving up their original culture and language. The main reason behind this adoption was the derogatory remarks which the high caste Hindu people attributed to them. They became an independent community of the Bodos known as the Sarania-Kacharis in Assam. Consequently, a new social division cropped up among the traditional Bodos.

The advent of the Christian missionaries among the Bodos in the early years of the 19th century with a view to propagating the Christian religion led to the emergence of a new Christian Bodo society within the traditional Bodo society. Henceforth, the traditional Bodo society witnessed a new direction in the institution of marriage, in the pattern of livings, customs, habits, beliefs and practices, and even in terms of observances of various religious fairs and festivals. After embracing Christianity, the Bodo converts became free from certain age old superstitious beliefs and practices to some extent in the society. The Bodo parents also sent their children to the missionary schools for the western English education. It was through the Christianity that the Bodos got an opportunity to a worldwide solidarity without losing their tribal identity and still speaking the Bodo language, but some western values and culture made inroads into the Bodo society. The Christianity greatly contributed in the field of Bodo language and for the first time, the Bodo language got its written form. It paved the way for the Bodos to
develop the Boro language in the subsequent years. Although a large number of Bodos adopted Hindu culture yet the Christian Bodos were found outside the influence of Hinduism in Brahmaputra valley.

The introduction of Brahma faith by Kalicharan Brahma in the early years of 20th century CE wanted to uplift the social status of the traditional Bodos. The fact that there was a gradual degradation of Bodo social customs and traditions concerned with the Bathou worship and the appearance of uncertainty in social affairs in the society. The advent of the Brahma cult among a section of the Bodo people caused the culmination of the Sanskritic influence on the Bodo society. The Brahma cult had greatly influenced on some traditional pattern of the culture of the traditional Bodos. For instance, the Bodos had their traditional belief in building the houses in the society. Traditionally, they had a main house called Nomano or gwrthar Nomano (sacred big house) which had a small altar of Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi inside the ishing (kitchen). But it was under the influence of Hinduism that a typical Bodo family built an extra kitchen and the use of Nomano as sacred big house became redundant. The traditional Bodos mostly depended on forest resources for their livelihood, housing materials, food, wild-vegetables, etc. Houses are basically built of bamboos and collected materials, mostly from forests like, woods, reeds, timbers, thatch, etc. for it. But ‘hadan janai’ or the migration to other places for new settlements in case of non availability of forest resources near their settlements was the main characteristic of the Bodos.

Another significant change on the traditional Bodo society was that a section of the Bodos burnt the dead body in their society. Traditionally the dead body of a person was either buried or kept open in the field by the Bodos. But the burning of a dead body in the Bodo society was the clear evidence of the influence of Hinduism upon the traditional Bodos. Besides, in some Bodo villages the post funeral ceremony is also observed through the Hindu rites. The fact is that most of the Bodo elites accepted the new religious order of Brahma cult.

The cultural assimilation of the Bodos with the Hinduism became faster with the advent of the Brahma cult among a section of the Bodos in the early years of 20th century and many Hindu cultural elements were directly adapted into the Bodo society. In the
case of marriage, the Bodos of earlier times were found to be strictly endogamous and even inter caste marriage was also prohibited with cognate tribes. But such tradition became flexible long back in the society due to the influence of Hindu culture on the traditional Bodos. The Brahma form of marriage is a new form of Bodo marriage to the traditional Bodos which is performed with Vedic rites associated with some traditional customs and rituals. It is held at the house of the bride and the burning of ahuti seems to be much similar to the Hindu hom-yogya which was not ever seen in the traditional Bodo society earlier. The purohit (priest) of the Brahma cult however, is not like that of the Brahmins of Hindu religion, but an ordinary person having knowledge about rites and rituals in their society could perform the marriage. Although the Bodo women traditionally did not take vermillion on their forehead after their marriage yet it was under the influence of Hindu culture on the Bodos that taking of vermillion by Bodo women on their forehead after their marriage became common in the Bodo society. The married Bodo women of former times for their identification as married women, wore ornaments, like asan muthi (bangle), sabtimala (necklace) or garphata which are given by the groom at the time of marriage.

The change was also noticed in the use of rice beer and pork in the traditional form of Bodo marriage although not compulsory, was discouraged in the Brahma marriage. The influence of Hindu culture among the Bodos was so strong that a very few traditional Bathou followers and other Hindu sects also adopted the Brahma form of marriage in the society. On the other hand, the traditional form of Bodo marriage called ‘hatasuni khurnai’ remained confined in a few interior areas of Bodo villages. In fact, due to their large scale contact with Hinduism, the Bodos lost many of their traditional beliefs, practices and culture and preferred to identify themselves as Hindus.

The coming of Satsang religion and other Hindu cults among a section of the Bodos in the last decade of twentieth century brought some significant changes in the social customs, beliefs, traditions and thoughts, etc. Most of the Bodos of these cults consider themselves more refined in their customs, traditions, foods, drinks and beliefs, like religiously purified class in the Bodo society. However, this is a sign of the emergence of a new social class among the traditional Bodos.
Although Bathou was the prime religion of the Bodos yet many other religions, like Saivism, Vaishnavism, Christianity, Brahma dharma, Satsang religion and other Hindu sects also held a good number of followers among the Bodos. The cults of these religions however, brought a tremendous change in the traditional Bodo society and most of the followers of these cults adopted many new customs, traditions, behaviour, rituals, norms, ideas and values, etc. which greatly affected the core of their culture to some extent. Thus, the process of conversion of many Bodos into different religions and their assimilation with different societies and cultures tried to disintegrate the age old social fabric existent among the Bodos. It also adversely undermined the age-old religious practices among some of the Bodos. In the process of all these changes, the traditional religion of the Bodos had lost its original character and turned the traditional Bodo society into a state of complexity socially and culturally.

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