Chapter 1

Introduction
CHAPTER I

Introduction

The Brahmaputra valley is a tropical region of Assam, located in between 25°44′N-28°N latitude and 89°41′E -96° 02′E longitude. There are plain lands on both sides of the river Brahmaputra. The Brahmaputra valley is the most extensive plain area bounded by the Himalayan foothills to the north, extending from the kingdom of Bhutan to the west of the Patkai range on the east of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. It is bounded in the south by the state of Nagaland, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Hills District of Assam and the state of Meghalaya, in the east by the state of Arunachal Pradesh, and in the west by the plains of North Bengal of the state of West Bengal. The Brahmaputra valley is surrounded by hilly terrain on all the three sides leaving only the west without any natural barriers. This valley is traversed by the Brahmaputra river from the extreme northeast corner near Sadiya in the east to Dhubri in the west and is intersected in the valley by its numerous tributaries which create the flood plain of the Brahmaputra valley. The Brahmaputra valley is a compact geographical unit and its area is 24,283 square miles and it covers a length of about 900 kms and a breadth of nearly 60 kms. On the other hand, the Surma or Barak valley is crossed by the river Surma from the east to west in the southern part of Assam and is intersected by its tributaries. The Barak valley is separated from the Brahmaputra valley by the two hill districts, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao mostly inhabited by a number of hill tribes of Assam. The Barak valley is a small
valley having an average length of 80 km, and its breadth is about 60 km surrounded by the hills of Manipur in the east and Mizo Hills in the south.\(^3\)

The Brahmaputra valley is the dominant physical feature of Assam having endowed with rich bio-diversity, natural beauty and natural resources. The eastern part of the valley shows high rainfall and low ranges of temperature. The valley is mostly alluvial plain. The fact that every year the Brahmaputra river flooded the nearby land with fertile silt and also provided irrigation facilities to its abundant crops in historical times. Being deep and large enough for navigation, this river was used as a means of communication thereby leading the country to have trade and other relations with foreign lands. Besides, the Brahmaputra valley also served as the main factor for the country to have close relations as well as for exchange of ideas and commodities with Bengal and other territories of India from long past. Thus, the physical geography of this land had a great influence upon the growth of its history and civilization. The history of Assam was actually the history of the Brahmaputra valley and her relations with the neighbouring plains and hills. The great civilizations of the past were flourished in the valleys of river Brahmaputra.\(^4\)

The Brahmaputra valley is very rich with a diverse culture and multitude of ethnicity. This valley was the abode of a large number of ethnic groups, different races and tribes who have maintained their different languages, religions, social customs, habits and culture since ages. The migration of different people to this valley from ancient times however, greatly contributed in making this region a center of cultural growth, assimilation and diversity. This enriched the local culture in many ways. In the Brahmaputra valley, the Bodos constitute one of the most ancient communities who are culturally assertive and independent. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group of Tibeto-Burman speech family. S. K. Chatterji remarks “The Bodos, who spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and North-Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid bloc in North-eastern India, were the most important Indo-Mongoloid people in Eastern India, and they form one of the main bases of the present-day population of these tracts.”\(^5\) It is apparent that the Bodos once held much power and influence in the entire North Eastern India, particularly in Assam during different historical periods. They are
now widely scattered over the north-eastern states, in some parts of north Bengal and neighboring countries of Nepal and Bangladesh but the majority of their populations is found in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. In fact, the Brahmaputra valley of Assam was the place of cultural assimilation and fusion. In this valley, the Bodos also maintained their own religion, culture and literature as well as their distinctive identity since ages. Traditionally, the religion of the Bodos is ‘Bathou’. It has been widely prevalent among the Bodos since the remotest past. In the course of time, a section of the Bodo people came in contact with many religions, such as Ek-saran-nam dharma, Christianity, Brahma dharma, Satsang religion and other sects of Hinduism. They adopted many cults of these religions. But the appearance of many new religions in the domain of the Bodo society made a great impact into the trend of traditional Bathou worship and the traditional Bodo society. Consequently, the traditional Bodo society underwent a great change at various institutional levels, such as marriage, economy, administrative system, social customs and traditions, rites and rituals, etc. The appearance of various religious sectarians among the Bodos pushed the Bodo society into a new dimension of cultural changes. However, a few works have been done recently on the history of the Bodos and their culture in Assam; but they are either some scattered contributions or partial analysis and still there remains some scope for further research on different aspects of the Bodos. In this matter, there is ample scope to study the continuity and various changes in the religions of the Bodos professed by them from the earliest times to the 20\(^{th}\) century CE. The 20\(^{th}\) century saw renaissance and a series of transformation in the traditional religion of the Bodos.

The present dissertation consists of seven chapters covering the period from the earliest times up to 20\(^{th}\) century CE. The first chapter deals with the introductory part and the background of the study which is being discussed now. The second chapter deals with the historical background, population, origin and the dialects of the Bodos. In historical background, the study focuses on land and people as well as their socio-religious background under the period of study. The Bodos belong to the Mongoloid or Kirata race and settle in the hills and plains in Assam and other areas surrounding it. The fact is that the Bodos were once the most powerful ruling tribe of Assam in different historical periods. They established the most powerful kingdoms and maintained their influence...
over one or another region of Assam during different historical times under the ruling names of the Chutiya, Kachari and the Koch. But during the course of centuries, they were suffered much from external pressure in the east by the Ahoms and the west by the Aryans. The kingdom of the Bodo-Kacharis however was stretched along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Dikhow to the Kallang or beyond and also included the valley of the Dhansiri and the present tract of North Cachar hills at the beginning of the 13th century CE. The Dikhow river remained as the boundary between the Bodo Kingdom and the Ahom kingdom. But in 1531 the success of the Ahoms in the battle against the Bodo Kacharis encouraged the Ahoms to move forward the Kachari capital at Dimapur. They also succeeded in capturing and sacking the Dimapur about the middle of the sixteenth century. The Bodo Kachari king shifted his capital to Maibong on the bank of Mahur river in the North Cachar hills.Probably the process of Hinduisation had already begun among the royal family members and the court officials at Maibong. It is recorded in the Vansabali of the Darrang Rajas that the Kachari king was also defeated by Chilarai, the brother and general of the great Koch king Nar Narayan about the middle of the sixteenth century. By this time, the greater part of the Nowgong district and North Cachar Hills, the present day Dima Hasao district constituted of the Kachari kingdom, and their rule was gradually extended into the plains of Cachar. Having been defeated by the Ahom king Rudra Singh in 1706 CE the Kachari king Tamradhaj fled and took shelter in the plains of Cachar at Khaspur where a new capital was established. It seemed that at Khaspur the Bodo-Kacharis had come increasingly under the influence of Hinduism. In 1790 CE the Kachari king, Krishna Chandra and his brother Gobinda Chandra were formally converted to Hinduism by making a public profession of Brahmanism. From this time, they were identical with Hindus of the Kshatriya caste. The conversion of the royal family members was then followed by the subjects.

The Chutiya kings, a branch of Kachari race are said to have ruled the country in the east of the Subansiri and the Disang rivers near the modern Sadiya. The Chutiyas were defeated by the Ahoms in the battle and at later periods, they became largely Hinduised after mixing up with some other tribes. Apart from the Chutiya kingdom, there was a Koch Bihar or Kamata kingdom which was ruled by the Koches, also a section of the Bodo-Kachari race. Their vast kingdom was extended from the Dikrai river in the east
to the Karatoya river in the west. Since the time of the Koch king Biswa Singh, the eldest son of Haria Mandal, his descendants and subjects all were converted to Hinduism and they came to be known as *Koch-Rajbangshi*. The Koches are the sanskritised Bodos who abandoned their tribal character after embracing the Hinduism. Besides, a large number of Bodos adopted *Ek-saran-nam dharma* of Srimanta Sankardev and became Sarania after merging completely with Assamese mainstream. Meanwhile, a considerable number of Bodos also became Muslims after adopting Islam religion and forgot their own culture, language and original identity. Thus the traditional Bodo society underwent a process of assimilation with other community in different historical periods.

There was no authentic report found available for the population of the Bodos in Assam. The fact is that the variance in population figure of the Bodos is believed to have taken place due to the deliberate falsification of the census figures by some census officials. The population figure of the Bodos furnished in the successive census reports was not accepted by the Bodo socio-political organizations to be perfect. In view of irregular trend in the decadal census of India conducted in Assam, it is believed to have presented the Hinduised Bodos and Bodo Hindu converts as Assamese in the census report.

The origin of the Bodos is a matter of controversy. The fact that the Bodos of the Brahmaputra valley call themselves as the *Bodo* or *Boro* and in some instances they are known as *Boro-Kachari* is remarkable. According to S. Endle, “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”. He could not give exact information in this regard. But on the basis of their feature and general appearance, he further describes them to be of the Mongolian type, and this would point to their original home being somewhere in Tibet and China. The origin of the Bodos is traceable to Tibeto-Burman stock from the use of their language and physical affinity.

The Bodos have different dialects. The Bodo or Boro is a language that has roots in the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese family of language. It is spoken properly by the Bodos living in different district areas all over the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. The Bodo language seems to have close relation to the Bodo-Naga group of languages which
was still current in Assam and Nagaland. It is spoken in Assam extending from the
district of Dhubri in the west to Sadiya in the north-east with variations in dialects in
various degrees. The Bodo language which was once spoken throughout the entire
Brahmaputra valley of Assam, North Bengal and erstwhile East Bengal began to be
disintegrated due to the domineering languages of the Aryans, namely Assamese and
Bengali Hindus. But it was the Christian missionaries who had made a great contribution
in consolidating the Bodo language and literature along with the propagation of gospel.

The third chapter deals with the social structure of the Bodos, especially clan and
family life, traditional administrative system, marriage system and economic activities.
The Bodos had 23 clans called *aris* or *maharis*\(^2\) in Bodo, such as *Swargiary*,
*Basumatary*, *Ransiary*, *Kerkhatary*, *Narzary*, *Muchahary*, *Goyary*, *Dainary*, etc. Earlier,
each clan had own distinct occupation in the traditional Bodo society. For instance, the
*Swargiary* was originally the priestly clan, but not like that of the Brahmins of Hindu
religion. They became *Douri* (priest) or *Oja* (man oracle) for religious rites and rituals.
But in the course of time, they were merged with the mass of cultivators. Similarly, the
*Basumatary* clan was landlords. The clan of the Bodos is generally referred to common
ancestry or ties of marriage and some socio-religious activities. A few of them seem to
have been originated from the name of their dwelling place. The Bodos were also strictly
exogamous and no marriage in the same clan could take place. Each clan had an equal
position and status in the Bodo society. From the recent past, the clan system of the
Bodos almost lost its significance in the social life of the Bodos. The family life of the
Bodos is primarily patriarchal and partly patrilocal too. However, a few elements of
matriarchal characteristics are also prevalent in the Bodo society.

The Bodos have their own traditional social customs and laws which regulated
the Bodo society from ancient times. For the sake of administrative convenience, the
Bodo society is organized into different levels of organizations, such as village council,
youth council and area organizations. The village council is the most powerful social
body of a village. It governs the village. In earlier times, this body consisted of a
*gamibwrai* (gaoburah), a *hadungwra* (head of locality), village elders, *halmaji*
(messenger) and *Douri* (priest). Likewise, the youth council renders social service to the
village community. The unmarried boys and girls are the members of this social organization. The Bodos also have certain area organizations. The area organization consists of several villages of a locality called mouza. Each mouza has a committee called (Boro) Samaj. This organization solves problems of concerning the locality and works for the growth and development of the members of that locality. Traditionally, the Bodos have also a ‘bad khanthi’ or bad institution by which any guilty or wrong doers if found against the social customs and laws of the Bodos in the society are justified. There are five categories of bads, viz., Ogorbad, Fongslobad, Daokhibad, Khawalibad and Khoulwbwrbad under which any wrong doers in the society are expiated in pursuance of gravity of the misdeeds. Each bad has own social rules and laws for dealing with social offences or the misdeeds of wrong doers in the society.

The Bodos give special importance to the marriage ceremony in their society. Marriage in traditional Bodo society has six types. Traditional system of marriage of the Bodos is hathasuni khurnai, necessarily held at night in the house of the groom. In the earlier period, it was widely accepted and practiced in all Bodo marriages prior to the advent of Christianity and Brahma cult in the traditional Bodo society. But the advent of the Christianity and Brahma dharma, Satsang religion and other Hindu sects, etc. among a section of the Bodos brought some significant changes to the institution of Bodo marriage.

The Bodos are mainly agriculturists and agriculture is their main economic activity. They mostly lived in villages and kept away from urbanization and urban centers. Their method of cultivation was quite traditional except a very few families who adopted modern method, like tractors, power tillers for ploughing and applications of fertilizers and pesticides. For cultivating the fields, the Bodos have several means, such as self cultivation, addi (share), bondok (mortgage), saori lengnai system, etc. Apart from the agriculture, some of their traditional economic activities also include the animal rearing, manufacture of muga and eri cloths, making of the various crafts of bamboo and wood, fishing and hunting, etc. Earlier, the Bodos did not prefer to carry trade and business and thought themselves unfit to carry it. But a few member of Bodo society are found to have carried the timber trade in the early years of 20th century CE. Although
their success was very negligible. Since the last two decades of the last century, the Bodos initiated the small business and traded on various items, such as vegetables, fishes, food grains, areca nuts, betel-leaves and various agricultural products in the rural and urban markets. A section of them also began to like the urban life and held a good position in different towns and cities. It was in this way that the changes occurred in the traditional economic system of the Bodos which contributed a lot towards the development of the Bodo society.

The fourth chapter deals with the traditional religion of the Bodos. The study focuses on the origin, philosophy and development of the traditional religion and the traditional Bodo society. The Bodos have their own traditional religion, Bathou. Bathou religion is a system of belief and worship Bathou Bwrai as Supreme God and Mainao along with other lesser divinities. The original form of Bathou worship culminates into Kherai, Garja and Marai festivals, etc. performed through the sacrificial rites. In former times, there was no fixed place of worship for the entire village community, but the ground of the village was made as Bathou thansali (place of worship) after cleaning and purifying it. There was also no system of idol worship among the Bodos since ages but the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai is symbolized by a Sijou tree (euphorbia splendens) at the center of the Bathou altar in the courtyard. The Bathou rituals usually consist of a regular affair of offerings to Bathou Bwrai and Mainao Burwi as well as other lesser divinities in the Bathou pantheon. The Bodos also worship and propitiate the evil spirits at their individual households but these spirits are considered by them to be more spiteful rather than benevolent. Religion is the most powerful source of social change in the society. The Bathou religion and its philosophy govern all social customs, traditions, norms, marriage system, administrative system, economy, rites and rituals in the traditional Bodo society. But the traditional religion came in contact with different religions since ages and in the subsequent years, the trend of Bathou was also greatly influenced by many other new religions or vice versa. As a result, the traditional Bodo society underwent a great change at various institutional levels due to the contact with different religions and culture of the society. And a section of the Bodo elites also initiated the modification in the original form of Bathou religious rituals which brought some changes in socio-economic and cultural life of the Bodos.
The fifth chapter deals with the religious transition of the Bodos and its impacts on Bodo society. There was a large number of Bodos who converted into different other religions in different historical periods. A section of them adopted ‘Ek-saran-nam dharma’ of Srimanta Sankardev and became Sarania after merging with mainstream Assamese society. The Sarania abandoned their social customs and traditions, old religion, culture and language of their tribes after adopting the Aryan culture. They now identified themselves as the Sarania Kacharis in Assam. Besides, a considerable number of Bodos became Muslims after adopting Islam religion and gave up their own culture, language and original identity. Thus the traditional Bodo society underwent a process of assimilation with other community. On the other hand, the advent of the Christian missionaries in the early years of 19th century CE among the Bodos to preach the Christian religion made the traditional Bodo society to face a new social dimension. The fact is that a considerable number of Bodos adopted Christian religion and forsook their age old beliefs and practices, social customs and traditions of the traditional Bodo society. The American Baptist Missionaries came first into contact with the Bodos. Later on, various denominations of Christian missionaries, viz., the Anglican Church, the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church appeared among the Bodos and did some benevolent works among the Bodos for the elevation of humanity along with the spread of gospel. It was through the spread of Christianity that the changes were occurred in the institution of marriage, in the pattern of living, custom, manner, belief and values of a section of the Bodo society.

The Brahma cult of Kalicharan Brahma was also widely prevalent among the Bodos from the early years of 20th century CE. It was usually introduced by Kalicharan Brahma among the Bodos in order to uplift the social status of the traditional Bodo society. The religious movement of Brahma cult under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma however initiated the process of socio-cultural change in the traditional Bodo society. Apart from this, a good number of Bodos also follow the Satsang religion of Sri Sri Thakur Anukul Chandra and other Hindu sects from the last decade of the 20th century CE. Thus the appearance of different religions and culture in the domain of Bodo society marked a turning point in the history of socio-economic and cultural changes of the Bodo community.
The sixth chapter deals with the religious fairs and festivals of the Bodos. The Bodos have some traditional religious fairs and festivals, such as Kherai, Garja, Marai, hapsa hatharnai, etc. Of all these religious festivals, the Kherai is the greatest. Most of their festivals are performed in the name of the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai and his consort Mainao Burwi along with other lesser divinities for the welfare of the human beings and for having bumper crops. Along with some religious fairs and festivals, they have also some other festivals and ceremonies which are primarily seasonal and agricultural in nature and the manner of their celebrations is carried out through certain specific religious rites. However, there is a good deal of local or regional variation in the rites and offering with respect to the worship of innumerable gods and goddesses. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to describe about the origin of the Kherai and Garja festivals and the role of Douri (priest), Oja (man oracle) and Doudini (female oracle) in its rituals. The most notable change occurred during these festivals in the last decade of the 20th century CE was that, instead of life sacrifices, the fowls and pigeons began to be set free in the name of deities. It happened due to the impact of Hinduism and spread of higher education among them. The Bodos have also the folk religious dance known as the Kherai dance. The Kherai dance is performed by a Doudini (female oracle) during the Kherai festival through which the oblations are offered to the gods and goddesses at Kheraisali. The most important aspect of Kherai dance is that it preserved the ancient ritual based dances and folk dances along with the later developed dance style of the Bodos. The shamanic dances of the Doudini (female oracle) are mostly filled with some symbolic connotations. The last seven chapters contains conclusion which deals with observation or the ultimate findings in this dissertation.
Notes and References


10. Endle, Sidney (1911): The Kacharis (Bodos), Delhi, p. 3.

11. Ibid.


