



Cultural Revivalism Among The Bodos Under Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma

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Abstract:

The Bodos are an indigenous group primarily residing in the North-eastern India, particularly in the states of Assam. They have rich and vibrant history that dates back several centuries, and had played a significant role in shaping the cultural and social landscape of the region.

The socio-economic conditions of Bodos before the advent of Kalicharan Brahma was mark by a mix of traditional beliefs, cultural practices and economic challenges. It was a period of dark age as the socio-cultural traditions of that time were stagnant. These conditions had impregnated social mobility of the Bodos in stagnation. Before the advent of Kalicharan Brahma, the Bodos followed traditional belief system, worshipping a variety of spirits and deities that were believed to be governed different aspects of their lives.

Bodo farmer faced economic challenges and struggled to make ends meet. In terms of social structure, the Bodos were organised into tightly-knit communities governed by village councils which is maintained by traditional customs and values within the community. Under such circumstances Kalicharan Brahma wake up as a reformer to mobilise the Bodo community, raise awareness about their rights and identity and empower them to seek socio-economic, educational progress and cultural preservation. Therefore, in a bid to reform the Bodo society he adopted Hinduism through Brahmo Religion which he had initiation from Swami Narayan Paramhansa in 1905. Brahma advocated for social reform, economic empowerment and cultural revival. He sought to modernise agriculture, promote education, and eradicate social evils such as alcoholism and superstition that were prevalent among the Bodo population.

Kalicharan Brahma succeeded to mobilise the Bodo community, raise awareness about their rights and identity and empower them to seek socio-economic progress and cultural preservation. His reform movement paved the way for the socio-economic development of the Bodos, leading to improvement in education, healthcare and economic opportunities for the community.

Keywords: traditional belief, cultural practice, economic challenge, stagnant, social reform, education

Introduction:

The Bodos were the earliest settlers of the present state of Assam. They are one of the most important indigenous tribes of the North-East India. The Cultural revivalism among the Bodo society was marked by an intellectual and artistic development under the leadership of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. Brahma, a prominent Bodo spiritual leader and social reformer, played a pivotal role in redefining the Bodo community during late 19th and early 20th century.

Brahma's teaching and writings emphasised the importance of education, self-respect and unity among the Bodo people, inspiring a sense of pride in their language, culture, and heritage. His efforts to preserve and

promote the rich tradition of Bodo literature, music, and folklore have had a lasting impact on the cultural landscape of the region.

Under Brahma's leadership, the cultural revivalism witnessed a significant resurgence in literary and artistic pursuits, with poets, writers, and musicians producing a wealth of creative works that celebrated Bodo identity and values. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma continues to inspire generations of Bodo intellectuals, activists, and artists to strive for social justice, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. Thus, cultural revivalism in Bodo society is shaped by the ideals and teachings of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, represents a profound chapter in the history of the Bodo people, highlighting their resilience. Under the visionary leadership of Gurudev Kalicharan the Bodo society marked a resurgence of cultural, social, and intellectual development.

Study Objectives:

This study aims to explore the objectives of this transformative era, focusing on the enduring legacy left by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma.

1. To revitalize and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Bodo people, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma emphasized the importance of traditional art, literature, and religious practices.
2. To promote education and literacy among the Bodo community, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma established schools and educational institutions to ensure access to quality learning opportunities.
3. To advocate for social justice and equality, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma worked tirelessly to address societal issues and empower marginalized communities.
4. To foster a sense of unity and solidarity among the Bodo people, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma promoted a collective identity based on shared values and aspirations.
5. To encourage economic development and self-sufficiency, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma spearheaded initiatives for sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship within the Bodo community.
6. To instil a sense of pride and confidence in the Bodo people, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma inspired individuals to embrace their cultural roots and heritage.
7. To promote environmental conservation and sustainable development, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma advocated for ecological stewardship and respect for nature.
8. To challenge discriminatory practices and promote gender equality, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma advocated for women's rights and empowerment within the Bodo society.

Gurudev Kalicharan and his Socio-Religious Reform Movement:

Kalicharan Mech was born in 1862 at Kazigaon village under Dhubri Sub-division, the then Goalpara district. He belonged to a well do to family and his father Kholuram Mech was a rich timber merchant. For two years Brahma learned under the private tutor Bir Narayan Sarkar then he came to Tipkai Primary School and finished his education from Puthimary M.V School. After the death of his father he carried his father's business as Ejadar of Parbatjoar Estate.

Srimant Param Hansa Sibnarayan Swami the founder of new and refined cult known as Brahma Dharma, was the author of a few books like Sarnitya Kriya and Amrit Sagar which contained his sermons. Brahma happened to come in contact with the book Sarnitya Kriya when he visited Charan Babu alias Charan Mandal of Banyaguri Dhubri for business purpose. He was fully satisfied with the subject matter of the full text of the book and found the contents were very logical and felt that he had got what he searched for a long time (Brahma 2001: 13). He also found there the real means to worship God. He also believed that God is one and did not believe in the diversity of God (Brahma 2001:13-14). The book made a tremendous impact on him. After Brahma met Sib Narayan Paramhans at Calcutta, he became a disciple of him and founded the Brahma Religion for the Bodos.

In 1906, Kalicharan Brahma organised a religious rite, '*Maha Yagna*' at Banyaguri village that was initiated by Phani Bhusan Chatterjee who was especially invited for the purpose from Calcutta. It was for the first time that Vedic religion began to embrace thousands of Boro people within its realm, without sacrificing their ancestral socio-cultural identity (Brahma 2008: 241). Kalicharan felt that the identity and unity in people could be preserved only through a change in society and religion. The Brahma Religion, which has its root in Vedic philosophy did tremendous work in sanskritizing the rituals and culture of the ethnic boros (Brahma 2006:84)

According to Brahma Dharma there is only one god. Almighty is worshipped in the form of the 'fire' or 'sun god' through 'yagya'. In Brahma Dharma there is no animal sacrifice. According to the ethical dictums of the Brahma Cult, neither idolatry nor sacrifices are permissible. The followers of the cult abstain from rice-beer, meat, fish, and rearing of pigs and fowls. The 'hom yagna' is thought to be sufficient to discharge all sacramental obligations, including auspicious functions (Saikia 2006: 243). So Kalicharan thought Brahma Dharma will be the best instrument to reform the Bodo society. The Brahma religion, besides proselytizing, transformed the Boro society from a tribal character to a fair Hindu society (Brahma 2006: 84).

Gurudev realized the need for a *Pandulipi* or a social law book which would guide the community on social matters and in their daily activities (Mondol 2011:238). During fourth Bodo Maha Sanmilani Gurudev's '*Boroni Pandulipi*' was accepted which marked the beginning of new age in the cultural and social history of Bodos.

On the eve of the 20th century, Boro society sunk in the mist of evil, disorder, superstition, backwardness etc. perhaps it was the darkest period in the History of Boro Society. That was degradation and degeneration in the socio-economic life of the Boros. Excessive and regular use of liquor and meat in the name of religion and festivity had demoralised the common people as a whole (Brahma 2006:61). Bodos being an ardent follower of Bathou religion were so only on a very superficial level. Slowly their traditional belief and practices were being drifted away from the main content of the religion.

In the mean time we find there was no one who would lead them out of this situation. There was chaos and confusion in the society. Many adopted *Ek Saran Nam Dharam* of Srimat Shankardev and became *Sarania* by abandoning own religion, culture and tradition. Some Boros converted to Christianity. In the villages like Panbari and Alamganj of the present Dhubri district many Boros were converted to Islam and lost their original identity (Brahma 2006:61).

The economic condition of Bodos was challenging and they struggled to make ends meet. As Kalicharan Brahma belonged to well-to-do family, he understood the need of economic growth for improving the quality of life of Bodos. This also means contributing to social stability and reducing inequality. Brahma was a learned man, so he emphasised on educating the young Bodo youths

So, under such circumstances the socio-religious reform movement was launched by Kalicharan Brahma which was a strong movement that paved the way for education, literacy, economic development, self-sufficiency, social justice and equality among the Bodo Community. He declared a crusade against illiteracy, superstition, social malpractice, habit of drinking and brewing liquor.

Bodo Maha Sanmilani: The first Bodo Maha Sanmilani was held in 1921 at Bhaoraguri under Gossaingaon of the Goalpara District. To accomplish his vision the Bodo Mahasanmilanis were convened with the help of a few Bodo prominent personalities. A committee was formed with Rupnath Brahma as the secretary and Gurudev Kalicharan as the Chief organiser. Jadav Chandra Khakhary from Kachari Pathar Village near Dibrugarh was its first President. For the first time it created a platform to discuss various socio-economic problems that were prevailed at that time. During the Sanmilan they adopted few resolutions for the upliftment of Bodo community like establishment of primary and middle schools in Bodo dominated areas, ban of use of liquor, discourage to customary practice of bride price and other social ceremonies. Formation of women organisation and publication of periodical mouthpiece for the growth of socio-cultural consciousness among men and women constituted an agenda of reformed movement (Brahma 2008: 244). To challenge discriminatory practices and promote gender equality, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma advocated for women's rights and empowerment within the Bodo society. This session helped to lay the foundation for

future generations to thrive and prosper, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma envisioned a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable Bodo society.

To promote cultural exchange and dialogue with other indigenous communities, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma fostered relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. To build strong interpersonal relationships and foster community spirit, Brahma encouraged collaboration and cooperation among the Bodo people. The Sanmilan also undertook a project for building a 'Greater Bodo' race by uniting all Bodo groups of people like, Boro, Kocharies, Sonowals, Lalung, Dimasas, and Garos into one stream. But it could not be accomplished due to lack of adequate manpower and resources (Brahma 2001: 90).

Gurudev Kalicharan's Role in Education and Literature

One of the greatest contributions of Gurudev Kalicharan was in the field of education. During his visit to Calcutta in 1905 he came in contact with many literate people. He realised that the root cause of backwardness in Bodo Society is due to lack of education.

With a view to educate Bodo Society, Gurudev with the help of Deputy Commissioner of Dhubri, Mr. A.J. Laine approached the Chief Commissioner and submitted memorandum to take initiative for the extension of education facilities to the Bodo inhabited area. As a result of this effort an amount of rupees thirty thousand was sanctioned for the establishment of three institution, one Middle school, one Weaving Centre and several primary schools came into existence in Boro areas in 1912 (Brahma 2006: 89). This positive step of Kalicharan initiated the mass among the people of the community and gave the impetus of collective efforts to focus the value of education. The schools were established in many Bodo villages and starts to impart education to boys and girls (Brahma 2001: 55-56). To foster a sense of unity and solidarity among the Bodo people, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma promoted a collective identity based on shared values and aspirations. In regard to this view Gurudev Kalicharan founded the 'Brahmo Boarding' at Dhubri and also for assisting the boro students in pursuing education. Some educated youths of that period namely Satish Chandra Basumatary, Modaram Brahma, Iswan Chandra Mushahary and few more came forward and joined hands with Gurudev and founded a students' organisation called Goalpara Zila Bodo Chatra Sanmilani in 1915. Later in 1919 this organisation was rechristened as Bodo Chatra Sanmilani in the first session of its meeting held at Kokrajhar (Sharma 2017: 107).

The formation of Boro Chatra Sanmilani in 1919 didn't bring only development in education and literature but also brought renaissance period in Bodo Society. It made an epoch-making ground as it took resolution to publish *Bibar*, the first magazine in Bodo language. From here on starts the literary enlightenment period where many prominent Bodo youths got a platform to write in own language. Being inspired and enthused by the socio-religious reform movement launched by Kalicharan Brahma, younger student leaders thus proceeded to create a new history of the ethnic community by laying the foundation of written literature in Bodo language (Boro 2010: 23). To inspire creativity and innovation, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma supported emerging artists, writers, and intellectuals to showcase their talents and contribute to the cultural renaissance. The First Bodo Mahasanmilani held in 1921 equally emphasised the spread of education among both the boys and the girls.

Gurudev Kalicharan's role was not only limited as a spiritual leader or as socio-religious reformer. To cultivate strong leadership and governance within the Bodo society, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma mentored young leaders and advocated for democratic values.

On January 4, 1929, Gurudev submitted a representation to Simon Commission requesting thereby the government to consider certain aspects concerning the Bodos which are, among others as follows: -

- (i) Separate electorate for the Boro Kacharies
- (ii) Creation of Boro Regiment
- (iii) Reservation of one seat for the Boros of Assam in the legislature
- (iv) Provisions for Boro representative in the Councils as well as Local Boards of Goalpara and Dhubri
- (v) Provision for, free and compulsory primary education, and scholarship forbore students
- (vi) Reservation for executive posts in provincial services for educated Boros

- (vii) The memorandum also opposed the transfer of Goalpara district from Assam to Bengal (Brahma 2006: 132-133)

Gurudev also encouraged trade and business. He established 'Ryot Sabhas' in the villages to help the needy farmers (Mondol 2011: 238). To encourage economic development and self-sufficiency, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma spearheaded initiatives for sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship within the Bodo community.

Conclusion:

At this period of dark age when the socio-cultural traditions of that time were stagnant, Gurudev with its utmost zeal and dedication brought the reformation in the Bodo society. Brahma was farsighted person he promoted education and literacy to bring able leaders among the society for future generation. Gurudev challenged the discriminatory practices and promote gender equality, and advocated for women's rights and empowerment within the Bodo society. To advocate for social justice and equality, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma worked tirelessly to address societal issues and empower marginalized communities. To foster a sense of unity and solidarity among the Bodo people, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma promoted a collective identity based on shared values and aspirations. He also encouraged economic development and self-sufficiency, and spearheaded initiatives for sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship within the Bodo community. To instil a sense of pride and confidence in the Bodo people, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma inspired individuals to embrace their cultural roots and heritage.

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