



HISTORY AND HISTORY NARRATIVE BY THE COLONIAL WRITERS ON THE BODO: A FRESH INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century in the history of Assam is remarkable witnessing paradigm shifts in the spheres of polity, economy and society. One of the most crucial developments of the period was the coming of the Christian missionaries to Assam that brought about a new dimension to the social engagement of the society with the changing context of nineteenth century. The spread of Christianity has brought about far reaching socio-cultural changes among the Bodo. The advent of Christianity and its impact in the social sphere of the Boros is immense. The Christian missionaries have brought outstanding social change and transformation through their commendable contribution in the field of education even in the far flung area of the Boro domicile.

Key word: Colonial writers, Society, Culture, Tradition, Custom, etc.

Introduction

Literature became an important domain of the colonial writers whereby the various traditional practices of the Bodo were analyzed. The information supplied by the colonial writers, ethnographer, religio-ethnographer etc. is still very useful as well as important to know and

understand the history of the Bodo. Such a significant discourse, premised upon hegemonic idea with an end to spread the evangelical activity also needs to be understood with fresh interpretation. This paper made an attempt to examine the authenticity of information supplied by colonial writer in the history and society of the Bodo.

In respect to the village sanitation of the Bodo, we may recall and analyze the observation made by the different colonial scholars. Rev. Sidney Endle¹ remarked that the Bodo-Kachari reared different kinds of domestic livestock. Because of the livestock as they reared, village became uncleanness. William Robinson² in his book *A Descriptive Account of Assam* also stated that “their poultry and all their live stock rest under the same roof”.

However, it is also fact that the Bodo had been constructed separate buildings for different livestock, a little away from the main house. As for example, *Goli* is the cowshed of the Bodo where they kept all their cows and oxen, *Oma Gondra* for pig, *Dao Gondra* for fowls and ducks. The keeping of different livestock separately from the main house by constructing different dwelling places can be proved that the Bodo had good sense of hygiene, sanitation, civic sense and attention to the health to some extent even in the early days³. The word of William Robinson who commented that the poultry and livestock were kept under the same roof along with themselves cannot be wholly acceptable with the evidence of the existence of different dwelling places for different poultry and livestock. But, it is also cannot be denied that some family might not be able to construct separate buildings for their livestock due to poor economic condition. It does not mean that all the Bodo were ignored for the construction of separate buildings for their livestock. Even today, the Bodo continued to practice the keeping of livestock separately by constructing separate dwelling places for those livestock a little away from the main house. From this evidence it can be clearly state that the Bodo have good conventional knowledge on hygiene, sanitation, civic sense etc.

Some contradictory information on traditional practice of child birth was also supplied by the colonial writers. According to Rev. Sidney Endle⁴ during the time of delivery, the duty of midwife was performed by elderly women of the village who possess the knowledge and experience of child birth. Sometimes, two or more midwives are also attended in course of delivery. Elderly women of the village assembled and helped each other for delivery.

However, B. H. Hudgson⁵ supplied a very divergent view on the same practice of the Bodo saying that at the time of delivery any midwife was not required as mother did everything without the help of any one. At births the mother herself cuts the navel-string, so soon as she has recovered strength for the act. No midwives are found, so that nature must do all, or the mother and offspring perish together. But his information is somewhat different from the social system as the Bodo society and their traditional customs related to the child birth. The Bodo followed age old customs, traditions and methods at the time of child birth. Nowadays, the past practices are not adopted because of modern medical knowledge and facilities. However, some peoples who are living in remote areas where modern advanced knowledge and medical facilities are not reached, they still used to continue the past practices of delivery. During the time of delivery, the duty of midwife is performed by elderly women of the village who possess the knowledge and experience of child birth. Sometimes, two or more midwives are also attended in course of delivery. Elderly women of the village assembled and helped each other for delivery. It is asserted that among the Bodo there was no formal midwives and any experience persons or competent matron could give attendance and assistance at the time of delivery.

The observation of B. H. Hudgson may be in some exceptional cases, not in general. But it also can be presumed that all the Bodo women had a good knowledge of child birth in the past. Such knowledge was procured from their elderly women or mother during unmarried time or after marriage which have been handed down from generation to generation.

Regarding the traditional main house of the Bodo, B.H. Hudgson⁶ remarked that “there is only one division of the interior which separates the cooking and the sleeping portions of the house, which has no chimney or window and but one door”. But his information is partly right and partly wrong. In generally, the traditional main house which is called *Noma No* in Bodo has three rooms. The eastern most room is known as *Ishing*, the middle room is called *Okhong* and *Kopra* is the third one in the extreme west. Though, *Noma No* has three rooms but its door is only one at the front side of the house and all the rooms are interlinked with each other. His view on absent of chimney or window and one door is absolutely correct but his information on division of rooms is totally wrong⁷.

On the question of presence of public laws or polity in the Bodo society B.H. Hudgson⁸ urged that “it having been already stated, that these people are, and have been, for ages, in the

condition of subjects of foreign Governments, I need hardly observe that they have no public laws or polity whatever, nor even any traces of that village economy which so pre-eminently distinguishes Indian-Arian societies. Their habits are too simple and migratory to allow of the existence of the village system, with its train of hereditary functionaries and craftsmen. They dwell in the forest in little communities, consisting of from 10 to 40 houses, which they are perpetually shifting from place to place. Each of these communities is, however, under a head called *Gra* by themselves, Mondol by their neighbours”.

But his information is totally unacceptable and he committed serious mistake in this regards. It is true that the Bodo village, in general was a loose unit in the early days. Each and every family or household had a freedom to remain in the village as long as they desired. In the past, the Bodo had the tendency of migration and to settle to the new place by leaving their original settlement. It was a common phenomenon that whenever they faced any trouble or difficulty in their respective villages, they were free to leave the said village and migrated to another place or they were free to search a new settlement which is known as *Hadan Nagirnai* even today. The Bodo word *Hadan Nagirnai* means searching of the new place for settlement. This word *Hadan Nagirnai* clearly indicated that the Bodo had the habit of migration. This migration was not only for the purpose of the settlement but also might be in search of fertile land. The different families or members of migrant when they settled down together in a particular place, that area emerged as village. The bond of unifying between the household in a village was very much unfastened. The member of the Bodo village owes strong allegiance to *Bahagi* (relative from father side) and *Kurma* (relatives from mother side) firstly and secondly to his village as the Bodo belief that their allegiance to the village was secondary one. When any dispute arose between two different individuals, they used to seek help of their respective closest relatives whether it might be *Bahagi* or *Kurma* to sort out the matter. And dispute between the two individuals of the village was regarded to be the dispute of the respective *Bahagi* and the respective *Bahagi* tried to defend and protect their own person who belonged to the particular *Bahagi*⁹. The Garo, one of the cognate tribes of the Bodo also followed the same rule in their respective village. The past tradition and practices are still not extinct.

Each and every Bodo village has been governed by their traditional customary laws and managed by village council. The traditional village administration formed a very important mechanism for the social control of the Bodo society which directly related to their socio-cultural

and religious life. The traditional village council of the Bodo retained vast power to solve all types of cases, be it civil or criminal and settled the disputes under the rule of the customary laws. Any individual who intended to seek justice had to file their petition orally in the past but written application is at present. Before the knowledge of the use of money, the people might have been offered something whether it would be rice-beer or something else as a court fee. Afterward, when money came to be used in the society due to the advancement of civilization, a nominal fee in the form of money was most probably introduced as a court fee. The Bodo have their own unwritten constitution or customary laws since the ancient day which is popularly known as *Bad. Bad* or customary laws were composed orally and handed down from one generation to another generation. The polity was based on convention and nothing written laws belonged to ancient time. The primary objective of the village administration is to maintain peace and order and established harmony between the individuals, peaceful livelihood, justice, prosperity etc. in the village. The members of the village council discharged their duty sincerely. Justice is delivered quickly and it became inexpensive and free from complex procedural. Justice is given equally to everybody irrespective of sex and no difference between poor and rich and all are eligible to obtain justice as all are treated equally in the eyes of law. Even after having well established laws of the country, the Bodo still followed their traditional customary laws in many cases. His shortest of knowledge or information on this subject matter can be proved from the above discussion.

Again, the same person who insisted about the absent of any public laws or polity among the Bodo supplied us very important information which proved prevalence of traditional rules or public laws related with the divorce by mentioning “if the divorce be occasioned by the wife’s infidelity, the price paid for her to her parents, must be refunded by them”¹⁰. Here he stated the existence of the conventional rule. It is his self contradictory of his statement of the non-existence of the public law or polity.

B.H. Hudgson¹¹ stated that “Marriage is rather contract than a rite”. But his statement is not totally correct as we have notice that in the traditional marriage of the Bodo deem to be a union of male and female not only to satisfy biological needs but also contained religious nature and element which can be evident from *Hathasuni* (traditional form of marriage) marriage of the Bodo in which ritualistic ceremonies like worshipping Almighty god, the *Bathao Bwrai* and deities, offering of oblation etc. are associated. It is appropriate to mention that if we considered

the marriage of the Bodo is only to get social sanction for becoming husband and wife, for satisfaction of biological needs, to beget children, to struggle together or if we think marriage is nothing more than a social contract and most of male undergo marriage to fulfill the desire for children and sex satisfaction, it will be inappropriate and may lead to wrong notion. Thus marriage of the Bodo becomes an institution having religious character attached there to.

In respect to the distribution of parental property B.H. Hodgson¹² stated that “all the sons get equal shares, nor is there any nice distinction of sons by marriage, adoption or concubinage”. But the fact is that in the Bodo society the question of legitimate or illegitimate arises mainly at the time of inheritance of property and succession. The legitimate child is the person who is born by performing all norms of marriage. A child who is born within a law full wedlock is known as legitimate child since he or she is born after fulfilling all social norms of marriage. On the other hand, an illegitimate child is the child who is born without fulfilling of social norms of marriage. In another word, a child born outside the law full wedlock or outside proper norms of marriage or born from the illegal sexual relationship is called illegitimate. The illegitimate child is related to his or her parent by illegitimate relationship. A natural son or daughter or legitimate son or daughter has absolute right and duty as well as privileges of the property of the father or family property including other individual and social obligations. As illegitimate child falls outside the category of legitimate inheritor, he or she has no right to claim property. He or she cannot enjoy the right, benefit and privileges which enjoyed by legitimate offspring¹³. But we cannot fully accept his view on the ground that the traditional custom of the Bodo society as a rule does not encourage illegal sexual relation and in the eye of law it is a punishable offence.

Thus the colonial historians have supplied lots of valuable information on the history and culture of the Bodo which help us to reconstruct our past history. However, their information needs to be examined and verified in a systematic way to have accurate picture as some of their information are found contradictory with the social and cultural lives of the Bodo. So, authenticity of the statement given by colonial writers is required to reexamine before drawing any conclusion.

Notes and References

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6. *Ibid*, p. 186.
7. Nushar Bargayary, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-108.
8. B. H. Hudgson, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
9. Nushar Bargayary, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.
10. B. H. Hudgson, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
11. *Ibid*, p. 159.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Nushar Bargayary, *op. cit.*, p. 97.