Colonial Knowledge and the Quest for *Unnati* among the Boros of North-East India, 1880s-1940s

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis titled "Colonial Knowledge and the Quest for *Unnati* among the Boros of North-East India, 1880s-1940s" is an outcome of my own research work carried out in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati (IITG), under the supervision of Dr. John Thomas, Department of HSS, IITG.

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Certificate

This is to certify that this thesis titled “Colonial Knowledge and the Quest for *Unnati* among the Boros of North-East India,1880s-1940s”, submitted by James Daimari, Research Scholar at the Dept. of HSS at IITG, to IITG in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, embodies research work carried out under my supervision. The present thesis or parts thereof have not been submitted anywhere else for award of any degree or diploma.

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Abstract

The thesis examines the formation of Boro identity from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, especially in the light of the knowledge that came to be produced on Boros by British administrators and ethnographers, and the consequent engagement with that knowledge among the Boros, as they strove for *unnati* (progress) and respectability in the existing social context.

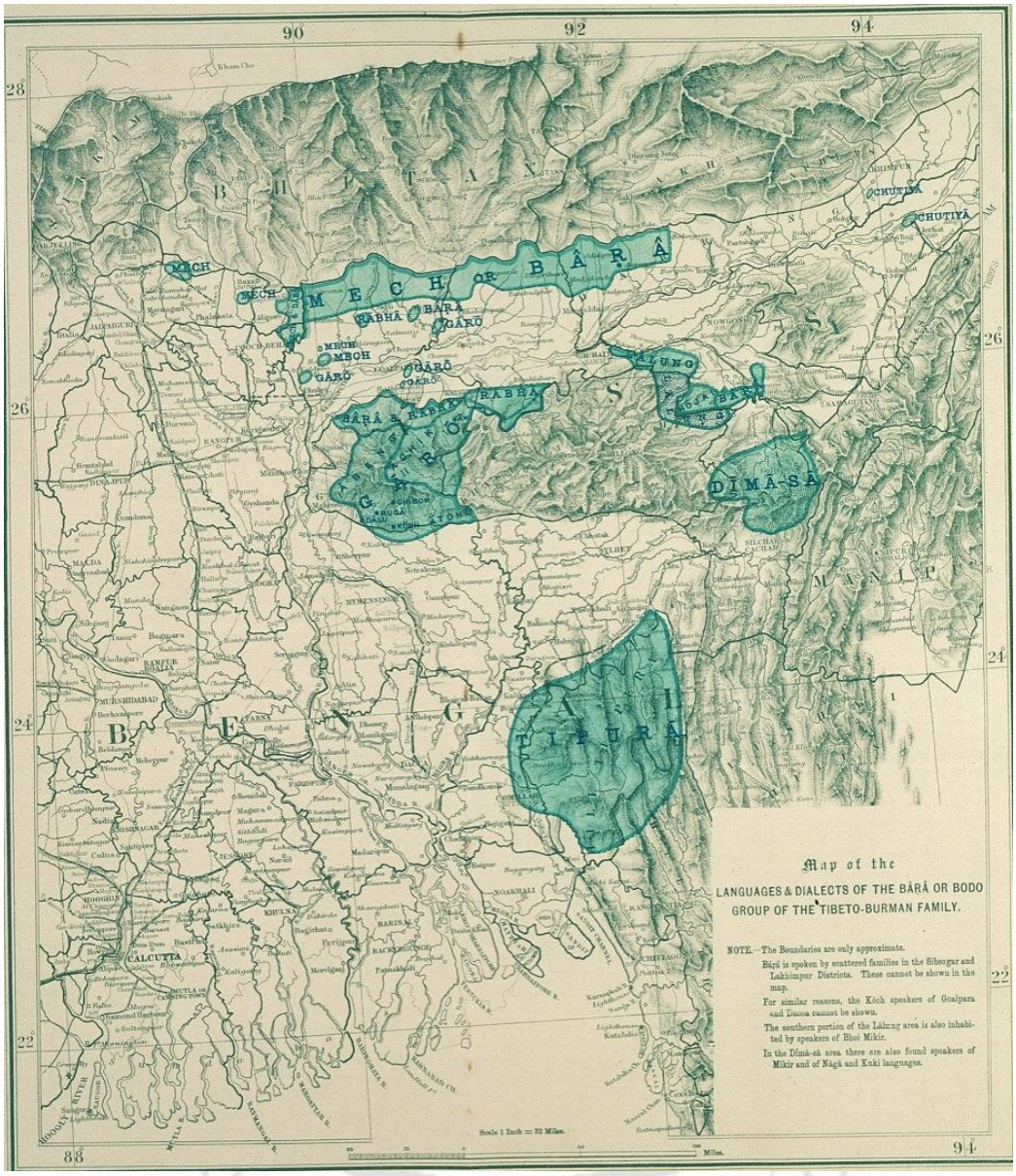
Boros were, what could be termed as, a 'fuzzy' but 'practically precise' community, sharing kinship ties with various other communities in the North Eastern region of the Indian sub-continent. However, the ethnological and classificatory exercises of the British during the nineteenth century gradually fitted them into more definite and rigid categories, wherein they came to be placed within a racialised hierarchy of castes/tribes.

Boros, rather than being docile subjects, engaged with this knowledge produced about them and attempted to use it to chart out their own path. They appropriated this knowledge to strive for *unnati* (progress) and respectability within the increasingly racialised social relations of early twentieth century Assam. The articulations of the Boros were varied and sometimes divergent, but the thesis argues that what was common in all these multifarious articulations was the quest for *unnati* and 'regeneration'. The religious conversions, socio-religious reform, political mobilisation and attempts to reclaim histories, prevalent among Boros in the first half of the twentieth century were all placed within the desire for 'progress' of the self, as a *conscious* collective community. In this respect, while acknowledging the overarching dominance of colonial knowledge, the thesis also tries to be acutely aware of the agency of Boros themselves in the making of their modern selves.

List of Abbreviations

AAMSU	All Assam Minority Students Union
ABFMS	American Baptist Foreign Mission Society
ABHSA	American Baptist Historical Society Archives
ABMSU	All Bodoland Muslim Students' Union
ABSU	All Bodo Students' Union
AKJS	Assam Kachari Jubak Sanmilani
ASA	Assam State Archives
BBC	Boro Baptist Convention
BLTF	Bodo Liberation Tiger Force
BPF	Bodoland People's Front
BSS	Bodo Sahitya Sabha
BrSF	Boro Security Force
BTR	Bodoland Territorial Region
CBCNEI	Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India
HBS	Habraghat Boro Sanmilani
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Boroland
OBSM	O'Bodo Suraksha Mancha
SJA	Sanmilani Janagosthiya Aikkyamancha
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam

Colonial Linguistic Map of the Bodo Group, 1903



Map in the Linguistic Survey of India, 1903, showing the concentration of speakers of the languages (Mech, Boro, Dimasa, Garo, Tipura, Lalung, Hojai, Rabha, and Chutiya) of the 'Bodo group', in different locations of the North-East region.

Source: G. A. Grierson. "Map of the Language and Dialects of the Bârâ or Bodo Group of The Tibeto-Burman Family". Map. *Linguistic Survey Of India. Vol III. Tibeto-Burman Family. Part II. Specimens Of The Bodo, Nágá, And Kachin Groups*. Calcutta: Government Of India Central Printing Office, 1903. From Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Languages_and_Dialects_of_the_B%C3%A2r%C3%A2_or_Bodo_Group_of_the_Tibeto-Burman_Family_(cropped).jpg (Accessed on 15/11/2022).

Introduction

This thesis examines the formation of Boro identity from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, especially in the light of the knowledge that came to be produced on Boros by British administrators and ethnographers during the course of the nineteenth century, and the consequent experiments with that knowledge among the Boros, as they strove for *unnati* (progress) and respectability in the existing societal structure. Colonial knowledge production and classificatory practices assigned a place for the Boros within a racialised hierarchy. Boros were not only mindful about this, but deliberated on how this ought to be engaged with and used to their advantage, especially in a context where communities across Assam were organising themselves and aspiring to a higher social position. Boros began to chart out the paths on which they needed to travel in the 'modern' times. The *paths* trodden upon were many and sometimes divergent, yet they were all deeply imbued with a longing for *unnati* (progress) and efforts to carve out a distinct identity.

Boros are an ethnolinguistic group settled predominantly in Assam and to a lesser degree in the states of West Bengal, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Within Assam, a majority of the Boros are domiciled in the semi-autonomous region known as the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR).[1] BTR comprises of four geographically contiguous districts - Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang, and Kokrajhar; with Udalguri being the easternmost, and Kokrajhar the westernmost, sharing a border with West Bengal. These four districts are situated on the north bank of the River Brahmaputra. They all share their northern borders with the country of Bhutan. Earlier, parts of this region, bordering Bhutan, were called the *Duars* (Doors, mountain passes). Often

[1] Boros are also present in other districts, all over Assam as a result of migration both during the colonial and post-colonial period for various reasons, but primarily in search of new cultivable lands. A few scattered settlements of Boros are also found in neighbouring country of Nepal, where they are referred to as Meches.

described in colonial documents and sources as a 'sub-montane' belt, they opened up to numerous passes in the hills of Bhutan. These passes were known to have facilitated exchanges between the valley and the hills, all the way up to places like Lhasa, in Tibet.

The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order of 1950 had listed Boros (also mentioned as Boro-Kachari) as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in the state of Assam — which, at the time, also included the present day hill states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya.[2] Meanwhile, Boros domiciled in West Bengal, who were termed as Meches, were also listed as a ST. However, an added classification in terms of the STs in Assam, wherein Boros came to be categorised as ST Plains, made it impossible for Boros living outside the Bodo 'autonomous districts' or in the scheduled 'tribal areas' (which were mostly the hill districts) to claim themselves to be ST and therein, access the constitutionally guaranteed affirmative actions that STs were entitled to.[3]

Boros belong to the 'Boro-Garo' group of languages, occupying the lower levels of the larger Tibeto-Burman language classifications.[4] Francois Jaquesson, a linguist, describes 'Boro-Garo' as a 'closely related' group of languages, mostly spoken in the North Eastern

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[2] *The Gazette of India, Extraordinary, Part II—Section 3, The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order of 1950,* September 6, 1950. https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/CLM/CLM_1/1.pdf . Accessed on 2/03/2022.

[3] *The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order of 1950, C.O.22.* https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/19_The%20Constitution%20%28ST%29%20Order%201950.pdf . Accessed on 2/03/2022.

[4] François Jacquesson, "Discovering Boro-Garo. History of an analytical and descriptive linguistic category", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research,* no. 32: 14-49, (2008), https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ebhr/pdf/EBHR_32_02.pdf . Accessed on 2/03/2022; Scott DeLancey, "On the Origins of Bodo-Garo", in *North East Indian Linguistics Volume 4,* ed. Gwendolyn Hyslop, Stephen Morey, Mark W. Post (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press India, 2012), 3.

region of India.[5] It is, as a language, listed under the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution. The 2011 census put the figure of Boro speakers at 14,82,929.[6] This effectively makes Boros the largest tribal group in North-East India, as speakers of a common language. And within Assam, they comprise 40 per cent of the tribal population.[7]

In terms of religion, the Boros do not form a homogeneous whole. There are adherents of the traditional religion (Bathou), and Brahma Dharma followers who are generally classified as 'Hindus', then there are Vaishnavites, as well as Christians. Accurate religious statistics are hard to come by due to the fluid or porous boundaries between the followers of Bathou, Hinduism, and Brahma Dharma, and the presence of a small number of Vaishnavites. The complexity is also compounded by the presence of many different sects of Bathou, some of which are 'revivalist', while others are 'reformist'. The situation is also somewhat similar in Brahma Dharma. Nevertheless, both together form a large majority of the population, while Christians and Vaishnavites comprise a small minority.[8] As such, among the Boros, the processes of identity making and political assertion have never explicitly resorted to or pivoted

[5] Jacquesson, "Discovering Boro-Garo", 14–15. Some of the languages that are considered as part of this group are Boro, Garo, Tripuri (Kok-Borok), Dimasa, Rabha, Koch, Deori, and Lalung, but Jaquesson also calls this classification 'highly debatable'. Garo and Kok-Borok speakers are also present in Bangladesh.

[6] "ABSTRACT OF SPEAKERS' STRENGTH OF LANGUAGES AND MOTHER TONGUES – 2011". https://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language-2011/Statement-1.pdf . Accessed on 2/03/2022.

[7] "Assam, Data Highlights: The Scheduled Tribes", Census of India 2001, https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_assam.pdf . Accessed on 1/03/2022.

[8] R.N. Mosahary, a historian, estimated the Christian Boro population at around 7 percent in 1986. Even if we assume a certain increased rate of conversions to have taken place — in the post-independence period — owing to local evangelising efforts of Christian Boros, the percentage of Christian population can safely be estimated at the present to not exceed 10-15 percent. Please see R. N. Mosahary, "Origin and Growth of Christianity among Boros of Assam", *Proceedings of Northeast India History Association* (Shillong, 1986), 279.

around an articulation of a homogeneous religious identity; as it often becomes the case with some other nationalities in the North-East, such as the Nagas and the Mizos.[9]

The efforts to 'revive', 'reform', 'standardise', and 'preserve' the traditional religion of Boros, is an important phenomenon in the religious landscape among Boros. These efforts have resulted in the traditional faith increasingly transforming itself into an 'organised' religion, and is now being commonly referred to as Bathouism.[10] Efforts to accord this 'animistic' faith a measure of 'respectability', and associate it with Boro identity started during the colonial period. But more formal efforts to 'institutionalise' this traditional faith started in the 80s of the twentieth century. Again this reformation and revivalism is a complex process with pulls and pushes in different directions. An element of this also entails the projection of Bathouism as the 'original' religion of the Boros. And hence there are attempts to relate it to an authentic Boro identity. The issue is also further complicated by the presence of the Sangh Parivar actively working among a multitude of Bathou organisations.

Statement of the Research Problem

Prior to the coming of the British and being subjected to their ethnological inquiries and census enumerations, Boros were, what could be termed as, a 'fuzzy' but 'practically precise' community, sharing kinship ties with various other communities in the North Eastern region

[9] Naga and Mizo identities to a large extent have pivoted around a Christian identity. Please see, John Thomas, *Evangelising the Nation: Religion and the formation of Naga political identity* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2016); Arkotong Longkumer, "Along Kingdom Highways; "Along Kingdom Highways: the proliferation of Christianity, education, and print amongst the Nagas in Northeast India," Contemporary South Asia 27, no. 2 (May 2019): 160-178, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1471041 ; Joy Pachuau, *Being Mizo: Identity and belonging in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[10] Please see, Roshni Brahma, "Bathou Revival and Hinduisation among the Bodos" (master's dissertation, IIT Guwahati, Dept of HSS, 2019).

of the Indian sub-continent.[11] However, as they became colonial subjects, Boros increasingly transitioned from this fuzzy existence to a more definite and defined category. One of the factors facilitating this transition, was the knowledge produced by British administrators and anthropologists through descriptive accounts, ethnographies, ethnologies, gazetteers, and subsequently, the censuses. Their attempts to generate knowledge about the Boros accorded them with a certain fixity and position in the existing hierarchy of races/castes/tribes. More specifically, this involved speculations and descriptions about their racial, socio-cultural, moral, religious, and linguistic characteristics. Inquiries were made into their 'history' and 'origins', through which they came to be characterised as 'semi-savage' and 'non-Aryan'— as opposed to the 'savage' tribes of the hills and dominant higher caste groups of the province.

Further, these classificatory exercises led to the making and ossification of the category, or notion, of what came to be known as the 'Great Bodo Race'. This race constituted a collection of communities, some of whom were generally referred to as *Kacharis*. They were supposedly a group of 'cognate' tribes/communities bearing racial and linguistic similarities and sharing common origins and histories. Numerically, Boros formed the largest community within this so called Bodo race. The conjuring of this race gave the British a means of making sense of the bewildering heterogeneity and 'fuzziness' existing among communities. It suited their administrative sensibilities and their requirements to assert dominance over an 'epistemological space' — Assam.[12] The process of ossification of this Bodo race started in the middle of the nineteenth century. And by the beginning of the twentieth century it became

[11] These terms have been borrowed from Sudipta Kaviraj's conceptualisation of pre-census 'fuzzy communities'. Please see Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 56.

[12] Bernard S Cohn, *Colonialism And Its Forms Of Knowledge: The British In India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6.

a much used officially sanctioned dominant framework, through which these 'cognate' tribes/caste/communities constituting the Bodo race came to be classified and addressed.

The concept of this Bodo race was imbued with a specific 'racial element'. This race was classified as a 'Mongolian type', a 'non-Aryan' race placed in opposition to the 'Aryan race'.[13] Such racial classification also made a connection between the specific caste/race/tribe within this race and the religion they followed, wherein it was qualified as Aryan only if it was Hindu. However, at the same time, there was also much ambiguity in this classification. A collapsing of race and religion into a single neat category (Bodo race) could not always be achieved. The classification of groups considered as Hindus did not always necessarily translate into them being seen as Aryans. In fact, the ambit of this race became wide enough to accommodate a large number of heterogeneous groups from different 'races' and not just from the 'non-Aryan', Mongolian type.

Koch was one such group, placed within the larger Bodo race, that became emblematic of the racial, linguistic, and religious ambiguities which characterised this category.[14]

[13] B.H. Hodgson had written that, '. . . the faintly yet distinctly marked type of the *Mongolian* family is similar in all three [Boro, Dhimal, and Koch], but expressed (so to speak) in the Bodo features and form [emphasis added].' Describing the physical features of what he called the Kacharis or Bodos, Edward Dalton wrote, 'They are in comparison with the average run of the people of the plains, their neighbours, a fine athletic race, industrious and thriving, of light olive green complexion and rather strongly marked *Mongolian* features [emphasis added].' Similarly, the census report of 1881 described a Kachari as, 'In feature he approximates sometimes very closely to the *Mongolian* type, with projecting cheek-bones, scanty beard and moustache, and strongly marked almond-shaped eyes [emphasis added].' Please see, B. H. Hodgson, *Essay The First On The Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál Tribes* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1847), vii–viii; Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology Of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), 82; *Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881* (Calcutta: Office Of Superintendent Of Government Printing, India, 1883), 70.

[14] Koch among many things was also perceived as those Bodos who had 'converted' to 'Hinduism'. Regarding this, the census of 1881 had written:

Regarding the ability of the Koch 'caste' to stretch itself, historian Amalendu Guha had stated that, 'Koch was an *omnibus* caste which accommodated within itself tribal neophytes from different Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups [emphasis added]'.[15] The 1881 census essentially saw it as a category that progressed from, '. . . the converted Bodo, who first becomes Saraniya, Madhahi, or Totila, and then develop into a Koch'.[16] But while seen as part of the Bodo race, there was also the realisation that all its members need not necessarily be from the 'Bodo race'.[17] The ambiguities within Koch could not be easily reconciled. Even as Koch was seen as part of the great Bodo race there was not much agreement on their 'racial' features. While a 'Mongolian type' physiognomy was attributed to the Bodos in general, there were disagreements on the features of the Koch. Edward Dalton in his *Ethnology of Bengal* opined that 'this dark-skinned people [Koch]' had 'erroneously. . . been classified as belonging to the

> The Bodo. . . are found in every district, but occur, in greatest numbers in the lower and middle parts of the valley, namely, in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong, where, under the name of Koch; they are mixed up with the Hindu population, while the unconverted portion, whose special habitat is the submontane, tract on either bank of the Brahmaputra, are known as Kacharis, Meches, and Rábhas living mainly on the northern, and the Lalungs who live altogether on the southern side.

Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881, 64–65.

[15] Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam* (Guwahati: Anwesha Publications, 2015), 112.

[16] *Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881*, 66.

[17] As already mentioned, Guha called it an *omnibus* caste, which could draw members from across the spectrum. Edward Gait called it 'the great caste for converts' in the Assam Valley, 'into which are absorbed converts from among the Káchári, Lálung, Mikir, and other aboriginal tribe'. Please see, E. A. Gait, *Census Of India,1891. Assam. Vol.I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Department, 1892), 83–84.

Lohitic or Indo-Chinese race' and should have been classed as 'Dravidians'.[18] In the later censuses, Koch as a category would be accorded the status of a caste group rather than a tribe.

Despite these ambiguities, as seen in the case of Koch, the concept of the Bodo race, to a large degree, became firmly placed as an epistemological tool for classifying heterogeneous 'racial' and 'linguistic' communities — who were seen as 'cognates' — by the beginning of

[18] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology Of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), 82; *Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881* (Calcutta: Office Of Superintendent Of Government Printing, India, 1883), 1–2. Koch as a caste/tribe category still continues to be a loaded term with many connotations. The 'ambiguity' is also augmented by the fact that there is another 'ethnic' category called the Koch-Rajbanshis. The latter is sometimes seen as synonymous with the caste category of Koch, but at other times, Koch and Koch-Rajbanshi are seen as two separate entities. In present day Assam, all individuals from the Koch caste would not necessarily identify themselves as Koch-Rajbanshis. One of the main demands of Koch-Rajbanshi organisations of Assam is their inclusion in the category of Scheduled Tribe (ST), while their counterparts in Bengal belong to the category of Scheduled Castes (SC). There is also a sense of 'identity crisis' from within the Koch-Rajbanshi community regarding this. Please see, Arup Jyoti Das, *A Report on Kamatapur Movement of the Koch Rajbongshi People: A Study of the Identity Crisis of the Koch Rajbongshi People*, (Guwahati: Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, 2014). The picture becomes even more complex when one takes into account the presence of *tribe* called Koch in parts of Meghalaya and lower Assam who speak their own language and identify closely with the Rabhas, and the claims and counterclaims regarding their status. Please see, Alexander Kondakov, "Koch dialects of Meghalaya and Assam: A sociolinguistic survey," in *North East Indian Linguistics: Volume 5*, eds. Gwendolyn Hyslop, Stephen Morey, and Mark W. Post (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press: 2013), 3-59. For further recent anthropological inquiries of the politics of naming and identification of Rabhas as 'Kochas', 'Koch', in the North Bengal Duars please see, B. G Karlsson, *Contested Belonging: An Indigeneous People's Struggle For Forest And Identity In Sub-Himalayan Bengal* (Oxon: Routeledge, 2008), 3, 25–49. A reading of the colonial documents shows that the appellation Rajbanshi, was in vogue mostly in the regions of Bengal in Rangpur and Goalpara during colonial times and was not indiscriminately used in what was then considered as Assam proper. Amalendu Guha agreeing with such a reading wrote that:

> However, all Koches of Goalpara, like those of north Bengal, who claimed descent from the original ruling tribe that had first adopted Hinduism, preferred to call themselves Rajbansi in due course rather than Koch.

Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 112.

the twentieth century. Meanwhile, as the census enumerations were beginning to assign a fixed place to communities in a certain caste/tribe and racial hierarchy, many communities were naturally keen to be assigned to, what they and others would have deemed as respectable positions. These demands became more evident by the beginning of the twentieth century with community mobilisations. For instance — as the thesis will later look into — from within the Rajbanshis there would be a movement to be enumerated as Kshatriyas.

Such mobilisations did not go unnoticed by Boros, especially by individuals who had gained access to a certain amount of education and a consciousness of the then prevailing social-political mobilisations, and aspired for upward social mobility. Attempts were made to emulate the 'successes' of other communities. Their efforts manifested in various forms, through conversions, socio-religious reforms, formation of *sanmilanis* (organisations), and mobilisations to influence census enumerations. These attempts at reforms, conversions and mobilisations were not always in sync with one another. Many a times, they seemed *disconnected* and *oppositional* to each other. For instance, even if there was a realisation of the 'need' for socio-religious reforms, it did not necessarily elicit similar reactions from Boros. The varied reactions laid bare the heterogeneous thought processes within the community. Individuals took different paths and *experimented* with different religious traditions.

However, this thesis suggests that these seemingly divergent and complex ways in which Boros responded and attempted to remould a new self — whether through conversions to different religions, socio-religious reforms, or secular mobilisations of the community — were all imbued with a profound yearning for *unnati* and a desire to be accorded 'respectability'. Towards this end, Boros appropriated and used the colonial knowledge produced about them as they deemed fit. For instance, the idea of the great Bodo race became a tool in the hands of Boros to reclaim and remember a glorious past. It became a heuristic device through which Boros countered their classification as a lowly 'non-Aryan', 'animistic',

'semi-savage' tribe, in an environment where a racialised hierarchy of communities was being ossified in how Assam was being (re)imagined.

As Assam was also being spatiality reimagined as part of the larger Hindu-Aryan geography, Boros also tried to place themselves within this space. They did so by reclaiming a Kshatriya past, through a rereading of the Hindu epics and contextualising them within the prevalent lores in the province. The mediaeval Kachari kingdom became a symbol of the Kshatriya past of the Bodo race. This was also tied to the questions and objections raised by Boros of being classified as degraded animists, as *bhoot pujoks* (demon/spirit worshipers). Even though classified as a 'Mongoloid', 'non-Aryan' race, it was now possible to claim a Kshatriya heritage because of the very histories and knowledge produced on the Bodo race by colonial administrators and ethnographers — which declared that the Bodo race at various points in time, in the distant and near past were the ruling people of Assam. As such, the medieval Kachari kingdom became a metaphor for the past glories of the community, just as its ruins became for the then apparently, *decadent* state of the Bodo/Kachari *jati*. The rejuvenation of this race became tied again with the idea of *unnati*.

As mentioned earlier, the responses of Boros were varied. It was clearly evident in the way Boros tried to remould their selves through conversions to different religions and involvement in socio-religious reforms. One way for upward social mobility was through a gradual process of conversion to 'Hinduism' and adopting practices closer to those of upper castes, and in the process gaining membership to a higher caste. In the province of Assam, converting to Vaishnavism and gradually becoming a Koch, was one such option. While in the regions of North Bengal and Goalpara, conversion to Hinduism and taking up the ways of higher castes by adopting the appellation of Rajbanshi as a means of social mobility, was another possibility open to many communities.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a section of the Boros in Goalpara converted to a new religion that had been introduced to the region, which was called as Brahma Dharma. This new religion entailed an emulation and adoption of many Hindu upper caste orthodox practices. But the 'radicalness' of the whole process of conversion to Brahma Dharma was the possibility of gaining access to these practices, by still retaining a 'tribal' Boro identity.

While Brahma Dharma came in as a new religion among the Boros, Christianity was also starting to make small but significant inroads at around the same period. Though there were sporadic encounters of Boros with Christianity going back to the nineteenth century, it had not resulted in any significant conversions. The attitude of Boros towards missionary endeavours remained lukewarm at best. Moreover, there were no dedicated missions of any particular Christian denomination among the Boros endeavouring to spread the gospel. During the second half of the nineteenth century it was only Sidney Endle, a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), who could be said to have had made close contacts with the Boros of the Duars (Khalling Duar, Buriguma Duar, and Kariapara Duar) in Darrang district. By the late nineteenth century there were also initial encounters between Scandinavian Lutheran missionaries and the Boros of Goalapra.

But by the beginning of the twentieth century, especially by the second decade, there was a sudden spurt of conversions to Christianity. During that period, there were significant number of conversions of individuals as well as of entire villages to Christianity (Baptist denomination) in the Duar areas of Darrang district. In these areas, where the American Baptists had no prior presence, Boros actively sought for their intervention. They themselves played a leading role in the spread of Christianity, often in the absence of formal institutional support from the American Baptist Mission. Similarly, during the same period, Goalpara also saw significant Boro conversions to Christianity (Lutheran) in certain pockets. While in this region the encounter with Lutherans went back to the last two decades of the nineteenth

century, discernible conversions took place only in the first few decades of the twentieth. And as Brahma Dharma was also gaining adherents and becoming more established during the same period, conversion to Christianity was often seen as an alternative to attain tangible material progress.

As such, the thesis suggests that one way of looking at Boro conversions to Christianity is through the lens of a yearning for 'progress'. Conversion to Christianity too was imbued with a sense of this aspiration. Individuals experimented not just with different denominations, moving in an out of them, but they also moved in and out of religions — often between Brahma Dharma and Christianity. And in doing so, individuals were bringing their own meanings and often in the process making a calculation of that which best served their interests.

While conversion to Brahma Dharma was one clear articulation of the efforts of a certain section of Goalpara Boros to remould their self and engage in socio-religious reforms, there were other efforts too from the district. From south Goalpara, in the southern bank of Brahmaputra, Habraghat Boro Sanmilani (HBS) tried to mobilise people and embark on a path of *self-discovery* and socio-religious reforms. The emphasis of HBS lay not in changing one's tribal membership to a higher caste, but on an assertion of a Boro identity. Its members emphasised on reforming the traditional religion, and advocated adopting seemingly upper caste practices and norms of social conduct.

Both of these were ways through which individuals tried to negotiate the heterogeneous religious practices that were prevalent within the community. It was also a negotiation to inhabit two different worlds/spaces. One was where their practices would be respectable and acceptable according to the standards of upper caste practices — a situation which one could argue, was engendered by the close proximity that Boros, being a 'plains tribe', shared with other higher caste/communities. And the other was a distinct Boro (tribal) space, which could

be differentiated from those of the very upper castes who they were emulating. Again, these conversions and reforms were imbued with the idea of *unnati* and a desire to be treated as equals.

For the Boros, who came together to achieve their goals of progress and social mobility, a discovery of a glorious past and history became one important means through which they could claim an equal status with other higher castes. The appropriation of the histories of the great Bodo race produced by colonial knowledge became a means through which such articulations were made possible. As such, the thesis suggests that Boros became active agents in remoulding a modern Boro self, by strategically picking and choosing parts of the colonial knowledge produced about them — such as associating with the medieval Kachari kingdom and claiming a Kshatriya heritage. The thesis then, in tracing the process of (re)making a modern Boro self, examines the divergent and complex efforts imbued with a desire to place oneself and the community on a path of *unnati*.

Terms of Reference

In line with the larger argument that the thesis is trying to make, the term *Bodo* is being used as a *colonial construct*, which came about as a result of the classificatory and enumerative practices of the British. As a result of which the concomitant idea of a 'great Bodo race', which could accommodate within it several other communities was also gradually conjured up. As has been previously mentioned the thesis suggests that the idea of a 'great Bodo race' and consequently 'Bodo' came about as a result of the British trying to make sense of the complexity of ethnicities and classifying them into neat categories.

On the other hand, the thesis has used *Boro* — and sometimes *Borofisa* — in a particular and limited way, as a self-referential term used by members of the community, and hence with more 'authenticity'. It is extremely rare to come across an individual — in the present — who

will refer to himself/herself as 'Bodo'. Invariably it is always as Boro, with a distinct emphasis on the 'r' sound. In fact, colonial officials seemed aware that Boro was a self-referential term. For instance, in 1838 Martin Montgomery reported that:

> The Kachharis form a tribe. . . in the lower hills of Bootan, and in Assam . . . my informants say, that the proper name of the people is *Boro* [emphasis added].[19]

Sidney Endle too, a British missionary among the Boros, remarked that:

> In western Darrang and North Kamrup, they very commonly speak of themselves as "Bårå" . . . or "Bårå fisá" . . . and this title seems to be largely used by them in North-East Bengal.[20]

As such, whenever Bodo is used in the body of the thesis, it is used as a *colonial construct*, with connotations of a larger/greater race. Similarly, whenever Boro is used, it is to directly refer to a *particular* community — who also speak the language.[21] This is despite the fact that

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[19] Martin Montgomery, *Histories, Antiquities, Topographies, And Statistics Of Eastern India, Volume III, Praniya, Ronggopoor, And Assam* (London: W^m. H. Allen & Co, 1838), 549.

[20] Sidney Endle, *Outline Grammar Of The Kachari (Bårå) Language As Spoken In District Darrang, Assam* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), vi. In this grammar book Sidney Endle also wrote instructions towards the pronunciation of the term which he spelt as *Bårå*. The 'å' symbol he told his readers was to be pronounced as a 'broad sound, as in "call", or like "o" in "order", "for"; eg "Gåthå", a child'. Please see Endle, *Grammar Of The Kachari (Bårå)*, 2. Even during the early twentieth century when the concept of a great Bodo race became much used, some officials were still aware of the difference between Boro and Bodo. For instance, J D Anderson describing the Boros of Kamrup wrote:

> The Kacharis or Bara (*mispronounced Bodo*), as they call themselves *belong to the great Bodo* [emphasis added].

B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers. Volume IV. Kamrup* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1905), 77.

[21] While Boro also refers to the language spoken and understood by a large section of the community, it is not always necessary — in the present — that everyone individual who identify as a Boro, can speak or understand the language.

'Bodo' is also used in official circles in the present to refer to the community (Boro).[22] Writings, both academic and non-academic, by Boros themselves and others often use 'Bodo' to refer to the particular community 'Boro'. And Bodo has come to be largely accepted as equivalent to Boro. But for the purposes of the thesis, a distinction is being maintained here. To put it simply, 'Bodo' is being used as a term which evolved as a result of colonialism. While 'Boro' is being attributed with a certain organic 'essence' untainted by colonial knowledge. But it needs to be asserted here that the thesis does not try to argue for a *legitimisation* or *delegitimisation* of any of the terms.

Mech is another term, an exonym, which has been used to refer to Boros, especially during the colonial period, in the districts of Northern Bengal and Goalpara, and in their *duar* regions. Whenever Mech has been used in the sources — colonial and vernacular — it has been automatically assumed to mean as references to Boro speakers. Similarly, *Kachari* following centuries long tradition of its usage, is used in reference to a larger 'heterogeneous' but 'cognate' groups. For instance, Dimasa-Kachari, Sonowal-Kachari, Rabha-Kachari, Lalung Kachari, Mech-Kachari, Boro-Kachari etc. The term Kachari, an exonym, has been loosely used by others including caste Assamese to refer to the tribes within this group and often was imbued with a *derogatory* connotation. Since historically the term Kachari has been used also as a term of reference to groups who form a part of this so called larger 'Bodo group', attempts have been made while reading the sources as to understand what could have been the possible denotations of the term in those particular contexts.

[22] For instance, the autonomous region of BTR is spelled as Bodoland Territorial Region. And in government official documents too Bodo is used.

Historiography

Colonial Power and Local Agency

Post-colonial studies have demonstrated how colonialism, as a means towards exercising domination, also instituted dominant ways of 'seeing' and 'understanding' the local subjects and hence classifying and 'freezing' them. In turn, the latter reconfigured their own communities and their relationships with others by mapping out their place in the larger constellation of communities.

In his essay 'Governmental Roots of Modern Ethnicity', Dipesh Chakrabarty writes that what essentially colonialism effected was the creation of a modern state, as opposed to a nation state imagined by an anti-colonial nationalist movement.[23] The power that emanated from this modern state was cultivated to a large extent by its practices of classification and measurement of peoples, languages, customs, religious practices, topography, etc. Chakrabarty opines that 'a generalised accounting mindset' that, seems to characterise modernity was partly responsible for the way a modern colonial state was obsessed with these classificatory practices, which also differentiated it from mediaeval states. The decennial censuses carried out by the colonial state, he says, is a 'dramatic' example of its characteristic obsession with classification and creating new knowledge to govern. While arguing that these practices of the colonial state reconstituted communities and redrew its boundaries, Chakrabarty also argues that these achieved a reorganisation of politics around competing ethnicities 'compatible with liberal political philosophy'.[24]

Similarly, regarding the creation of new ethnic boundaries, Sudipta Kaviraj writes that the 'cognitive identification of communities changed as a result of colonial rule and the

[23] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 80.

[24] Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 88.

incursion of western education'.[25] Contrasting between the communities of a pre-colonial 'traditional' India and a modern nationalist state, he states, '[T]he main difference between traditional communities and the modern community of the nation is not in their size, but in their internal constructive principles of which size was a function'.[26] Kaviraj's theory is that pre-colonial un-enumerated communities were 'fuzzy' as opposed to bounded modern communities, especially in two distinct aspects. First, these fuzzy communities would not 'claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of their complex selfhood'.[27] Second, this fuzziness would not be imprecise, but instead would be 'practically precise, and adequate to the scale of social interaction'.[28] It would be just that. As opposed to a modern idea of a community, it would not have required people to 'inhabit a conceptual world which could contemplate collective transformative actions on a large, universalist scale'.[29]

A good illustration of the scholarship that strongly argues for the overwhelming and all-encompassing power of colonialism reconfiguring caste is Nicholas Dirks' *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of India*. Dirks makes his case for the 'power of colonial history' following the 'canonic demonstrations by Bernard Cohn and Edward Said of the hegemonic character of colonial rule on the history of the colonized'.[30] He strongly argues that 'cultural technologies of rule' had a greater role in sustaining and strengthening colonialism,

[25] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 55.

[26] Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India*, 56

[27] Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India*, 56.

[28] Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India*, 56.

[29] Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India*, 57.

[30] Nicholas B Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9.

transforming and reconstructing the traditional production of knowledge and this knowledge being 'what colonialism was all about'.[31]

In a similar vein, Gyanendra Pandey in his book *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* argues that 'communalism', with all its sub-continental peculiarities, is a colonial construct.[32] Pandey is clear that though, undoubtedly, there were clashes between 'communities', these were not 'Hindu vs. Muslim' clashes. In the colonial period these clashes became 'communal' as a result of the repeated classification and observation by the British of the people involved, as either Hindus or Muslims. He seems to suggest that colonialism was such a politically constraining force that religion, and the search for its purer version, language, and history became spaces where Indians found inviolability; with gradually the various structures of colonialism making it possible for Hindus and Muslims to form a larger pan Indian solidarity, and imagining themselves as nations.

All of the above can be seen as broadly representing the historiography that strongly emphasises on the overarching power of the coloniser to set the terms of exchanges that occurred in colonised societies, especially in the context of the Indian sub-continent. However, it is being suggested here that — however convincing and perhaps rightly so — one needs to understand the *particularised context* of the various different forms of encounter between the coloniser and the colonised. And hence, acknowledge that cultural transformations, reorientations, and reproductions went a little beyond the terms set by the coloniser alone. If castes and tribes were being reconstituted and transformed, one needs to attempt to locate them at the moment of their 'making', within the structures that were conditioning them. In other

[31] Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 9.

[32] Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

words, to borrow from E.P Thompson, to understand the whole process of 'making' as an 'active process owing as much to agency as to conditioning'.[33]

In this vein, it becomes important to look at Sumit Sarkar's criticism of the later Subaltern studies of eliminating the possibility of writing 'histories from below', and disagreeing with the conception of domination (colonial) 'overwhelmingly in cultural, discursive terms, as the power-knowledge of the post enlightenment west'.[34] Critiquing the adoption of a Saidian framework of an 'overwhelming colonial power-knowledge', by the Subaltern school, he contends that it robs the 'colonised intelligentsia' of their agency and portray them as 'capable of only derivative discourses'.[35] Sarkar argues that this understanding of a hegemonic colonial power-knowledge is applied in their understanding of the colonial situation where the colonised is assumed to have been 'literally constituted by colonialism alone'.[36] Similarly, in a lucidly written introduction to her book, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and the Nation*, Tanika Sarkar argues against the reductiveness of post-colonial scholarship with its tendency to explain the origins of Indian modernity to a hegemonic west denying agency to people, overlooking the *internal conversations* that they were having as a response to the colonial situation. Her work, she writes, is an attempt to engage with, 'the concrete, the palpable, the sensuous- the lived experience within the historical activities of people', rather than 'the categories of reified relationships'.[37]

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[33] E. P. Thompson, *The Making Of The English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 9.

[34] Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 84.

[35] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 91

[36] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 92.

[37] Tanika Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and the Nation* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), 7.

Here, it becomes important to look at the work of Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India*. Irschick's work becomes particularly important because it 'focuses less on the willed or repressive aspect of a colonial state as part of the construction of knowledge than on the dialogic, heteroglot productive process through which culture is formed'; and seeks to provide 'a necessary corrective to what has been an unbalanced picture of a complex process'.[38] He argues in his work that the construction of a 'Tamil golden age' was a *dialogical process*, between the coloniser and the colonised, as a result of them coming together to 'resolve tensions implicit in the development of a new society'.[39] This work is placed almost in direct 'opposition' to Edward Said's conception that 'Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine *willed* over the Orient'.[40] Irschick argues that his work:

> . . . questions this claim that knowledge is constructed by willed activity of a stronger over a weaker group. It suggests instead that changed significations are the heteroglot and dialogic production of all members of any historical situation, though not always in *equal measure*: this is so whether they have a Weberian monopoly on violence or not.[41]

Following the works discussed above and the research question, the thesis largely locates itself within this larger debate, and tries to understand how an idea of a larger Bodo race was constantly being generated by colonial knowledge, and how Boros themselves, as a part of this 'race', strategically through a process of selection and appropriation, accommodated and rejected the various classifications made of them. It attempts to see this as an 'active process',

[38] Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing south India* (California: University of California Press, 1994), 10.

[39] Irschick, *Dialogue and History*, 1.

[40] Irschick, *Dialogue and History*, 8.

[41] Irschick, *Dialogue and History*, 8.

a negotiation, uniquely associated with the peculiarity and particularity of the situation then prevailing in Assam. At the same time, the thesis also tries to demonstrate the overarching power of colonial knowledge and the manner in which it continues to have a bearing on the present. *But*, then again, this thesis also tries to be aware and remind itself that 'histories written within the Saidian mould homogenize' and 'tend to impose closures by suggesting ready answers to issues that could have developed into interesting inquiries'.[42] And as such the thesis seeks to write itself from below and understand the 'Boro world' of the first half of the twentieth century, or at least a part of it.

Boros and North-East India

The colonial notion and heritage of a greater Bodo race/group continues to inform academic and popular writings on North-East India. Chandan Kumar Sharma traces the role that oral traditions play in the construction of 'the genealogy of identity' among the 'Bodos' in "Genealogy Contested: Oral Discourse and Bodo Identity Construction".[43] One very important aspect that the article touches upon is the 'claims' of the Boro leadership, of various nationalist organisations, upon the medieval Kachari kingdom, which Sharma says 'belonged to the Dimasas'; and who are not ready to 'surrender the past glory of the community to the Bodos'.[44] While there are oppositions by the Dimasas against such appropriations, Boro leadership falls back on the argument that Dimasas are nothing but the 'offshoot of the greater Bodo stock', which incidentally Sharma insists 'is a historical fact'.[45] Sharma is extremely nuanced in his understandings of appropriations of myths and histories and writes that, 'the attempt of the

[42] Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 17.

[43] Chandan Kumar Sharma, "Genealogy Contested: Oral Discourse and Bodo Identity Construction", in *Folklore as Discourse* (Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre, 2006), 73–94.

[44] Sharma, "Genealogy Contested", 84.

[45] Sharma, "Genealogy Contested", 84.

Bodo leadership in the construction of a *Bodo history* has come to face contestations from other groups originally belonging to the *Bodo stock* [emphasis added]'.[46] But he does not complicate this very concept of the 'great Bodo race', which lays the ground for such appropriations. As such, much room for ambiguity is still left, in terms of reading the histories of the region, vis-a-vis the idea of a Bodo race. For instance, he writes that, 'the identity of the Bodos is not uniform as an ethnic group', and that 'groups belonging to the Bodo stock were politically and culturally quite dominant in parts of Assam'.[47] Nevertheless, Sharma meticulously, using Boro vernacular sources, demonstrates how the project of identity formation is bolstered by strategic use of folklore.

Another recent article which makes use of this same colonial construct of the Bodo race is Jae-Eun Shin's article "Descending from demons, ascending to Kshatriyas: Genealogical claims and political process in pre-modern Northeast India, The Chutiyas and the Dimasas".[48] Taking up the case of the Chutiyas and the Dimasas, Shin tries to trace the legitimation of local powers as Kshatriyas, from the earlier designation of a *asura* (demonic) ancestry. As such exercises invariably need to dwell upon the origins of the groups under scrutiny, the article claims that 'The Chutiyas belong to the Bodos, a linguistic group of the Brahmaputra valley, speaking a Tibeto-Burman language and having different cognate groups within them'.[49] In another instance while taking into account the possibilities of the Chutiyas and the Sadiya Kacharis — who Shin prefers to call as Dimasas — being identical, Shin writes that this 'possibility is supported by apparent similarities in religious traditions, including the worship

[46] Sharma, "Genealogy Contested", 85.

[47] Sharma, "Genealogy Contested", 75–76.

[48] Jae-Eun Shin, "Descending from demons, ascending to kshatriyas: Genealogical claims and political process in pre-modern Northeast India, The Chutiyas and the Dimasas," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 57, no. 1 (2020): 49–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464619894134

[49] Shin, "Descending from demons", 51.

of the ferocious goddess associated with both groups, *and by the conclusive view about their* [Chutiyas and Dimasas] *common origin from the Bodos* [emphasis added]'.[50]

Continuing in a similar vein, Sujit Choudhury in his book *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion Of An Ethnic Identity* acknowledges the fact that the term 'Bodo' has many connotations in both political and academic discourses.[51] While informing his readers that the earlier usage of the term was meant to denote a group who were 'the earliest Indo-Mongloloid migrants to eastern India', he uses Bodo to mean a specific tribal group of Assam whom he calls the 'Bodo-Kacharis'.[52]

While works that explicitly talk about the effect that colonial knowledge had on the making of a Boro identity are relatively few, a recent article "Colonial Ethnography and the Rhetoric of Bodo Identity" by Jeetumoni Basumatary, tries to argue how colonial anthropology still has an impact on the process of identity formation.[53] Analysing the accounts of Sidney Endle and B.H. Hodgson in conjunction with Boro poetry, she argues that, such accounts have contributed to the construction of the 'Bodo identity as that of an ancient and glorious people who had ruled the entire Brahmaputra valley till the advent of the Ahoms in the 13th century'.[54]

Taking these works as a departure point, part of the thesis, especially the first chapter, attempts to understand and chart the manner in which the colonial state through its ethnological

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[50] Shin, "Descending from demons", 62. In another instance Shin writes again that, 'Hāchengsā, referred to as the ancestor of king Vīravijayanārāyaṇa in the coin, *is unquestionably a Bodo name'*. Shin, "Descending from demons", 62–63.

[51] Sujit Choudhury, *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion Of An Ethnic Identity* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2013), 1.

[52] Choudhury, *The Bodos*, 1.

[53] Jeetumoni Basumatary, "Colonial Ethnography and the Rhetoric of Bodo Identity," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (Dec 2021). https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2021.2015700

[54] Basumatary, "Colonial Ethnography and the Rhetoric of Bodo Identity," 4.

gaze created the category of the 'great Bodo race' capable of subsuming many other communities under its ambit. Consequently, it also then looks at how it continues to inform present day claims.

Jayeeta Sharma in her book *Empire's Garden: Assam and the making of India* argues that, 'the varied, protean, and contested meanings of improvement and progress . . . form a broad unifying theme to understand the modern making of Assam'.[55] Sharma's work becomes important to understand the impact that colonialism and consolidations of ethnic identities had on the imaginations and aspirations of different communities. It shows that while the caste Assamese were trying to insert Assam within the imagination of a Hindu-Aryan community, there were others too who had their own imaginations. For instance, the contradictory pulls that Ahom as a community experienced and negotiated, in trying to define an ethnic self; as a result of which, they had to sometimes try to integrate into the larger Assamese *jati,* but at other times, oppose the hegemony of the upper caste Assamese and form alliances with the tribals in search of a 'Mongoloid' racial solidarity.[56]

In her work, Sharma also briefly touches upon 'Kachari Aspirations' and 'Bodo Progress' as part of an argument on progress being the main factor in ethnic mobilisation in the twentieth century colonial Assam; and traces the first usage of the term Bodo to B. H. Hodgson, which had a lasting impact on the conception of the group. In her description of the Kachari/Boro aspirations of the early twentieth century, she briefly, but very importantly, touches on the socio-religious reforms and the formations of associations/organisations. For instance, conversion to Brahma Dharma is seen by her as a rejection 'of ritual and caste

[55] Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

[56] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 221.

hierarchies'.[57] The adoption of rituals formerly reserved for higher castes and Boros acting as 'officiating priests', Sharma notes, was a challenge to Brahminical 'exclusivity'.[58] She also briefly touches upon the attempts of Boros to associate themselves with the larger Kachari heritage.[59]

But she also acknowledges the difficulty to 'reconstruct the thoughts and actions of this nascent Bodo public, since constituents had limited access to social capital and print media', and hence the reason for a brief description.[60] This brief but insightful look at Boros is used as one of the springboards to look deeper into the process of consolidation of Boro identity in the twentieth century. It tries to reconstruct the thought process of this nascent and early Boro public through a reading of the limited, but revealing sources that were published during that period in Boro, Assamese, and Bengali.

Continuing in this context, Suryasikha Pathak's dissertation titled *Tribal Identity Politics In Colonial Assam: Plains tribes Of The Brahmaputra Valley, 1860-1947*, becomes another important work to be engaged with.[61] Pathak while inquiring into the formation of a "nascent 'tribal' consciousness" during the colonial period, looks at the consolidation of 'these [tribal] fixed identities as an essential creation of colonisation'.[62] And so she traces the way the category of tribal was created, imbued with ambiguities and characterisations that often changed. But at the same time, she also argues that 'Tribal identity politics cannot be solely located in terms of the role of a catalyst played by the colonial state… But one needs to locate

[57] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 211.

[58] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 211.

[59] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 213.

[60] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 212.

[61] Suryasikha Pathak, "Tribal Identity Politics in Colonial Assam: Plains Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley, 1860-1947" (PhD diss., JNU, Delhi 2004). http://hdl.handle.net/10603/16919

[62] Pathak, "Tribal Identity Politics", 6.

it vis-a-vis the caste Hindu Assamese society'.[63] As such, Pathak also shows the manner in which tribal consciousness and assertions manifested in the formation of the Tribal League. And within this framework, she traces the construction of Boro identity as a result of the efforts of an emergent middle class who are increasingly conscious of their social and political status; and the Brahma Dharma movement initiated by Kalicharan Brahma as a reflection of this new modern consciousness of the emergent Boro middle class.

While some of the works mentioned so far examines the situation in a pan Assam context, any work dealing with the Boros cannot ignore the situation that was prevalent in colonial Goalpara. Due to certain unique circumstances, starting in the early twentieth century, it became the nerve center of Boro assertions. For instance, Kalicharan Brahma's socio-religious reform movement started in Goalpara, and it was in this district that prominent Boro organisations were formed and produced some of the earliest literature. As such, to get a comprehensive picture of the situation then, it becomes important to engage with Sanghamitra Misra's book *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India*, where she specifically deals with the region of Goalpara and its surrounds. Her work deals with the 'the ways in which political conquest and economic domination forcibly and irrevocably alters pre-existing orders of space', and consequently how 'another spatial imagination and order entrenches itself in the region, only to continue in different forms as a legacy that the post-colonial state inherits'.[64] As Goalpara was re-incorporated as a part of Assam, Misra contends that it 'created conditions for the writing of new history of Assam'.[65] This new history, Misra further states, was made possible by the 'inevitable appropriation and

[63] Pathak, "Tribal Identity Politics", 131.

[64] Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (Routledge: New Delhi, 2015), 1.

[65] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 165.

repression of other competing narratives, such as histories from the borderlands'.[66] This was countered by the residents of Goalpara who also started composing alternative histories that resisted, nationalist histories from Assam and Bengal. But the resistance was led by people who had resources and mostly concerned the landed Rajbanshi elites and zamindars of the region. Nevertheless, a Goalpariya identity was mobilised as part of this resistance to nationalist appropriations.

While Misra herself calls for the need to recognise the fluid character of the various groups that inhabited this 'borderland', Manjeet Baruah problematizes Misra looking at Assam and Bengal as two distinct monolithic blocs, and the concomitant assertion of a Goalparia identity in response to their appropriating tendencies.[67] More importantly, Baruah highlights the non-presence of the 'Bodo-Kacharis' in Misra's work, as to how they while being 'indigenous to the area, viewed this identity or participated in its politics [Goalpariya identity]'.[68] He tends to suggests that Misra's work would have been much more critical if it had incorporated and 'taken into account the social mapping and political mobilisation among the Bodo Kachari people of the area, the historical trans-spatial people of the region, during the period'.[69] As such it becomes important for the thesis to try and locate itself in this 'absence'. Because, part of the thesis deals with the responses of Boros in Goalpara having internal conversations and asserting a distinct Boro identity, and engaging in socio-religious reforms as a reaction to the socio-political and cultural flux there, and identity assertions of communities such as the Rajbanshis.

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[66] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 166.

[67] Manjeet Baruah, "Space and community between the local and the global: two examples from the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam", *Asian Ethnicity* 14, no 3 (February 2013): 276-292. https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2013.764051 .

[68] Baruah, "Space and community", 277.

[69] Baruah, "Space and community", 278.

Such readings of the responses of the Boros then becomes a particular way of looking at the Brahma Movement initiated by Kalicharan Brahma — conversions and socio-religious reforms all tied with the desire for social upliftment — as taking place in the midst of forceful assertions of a Goalparia identity in the early twentieth century. In most of the works by Boro writers, Kalicharan Brahma's socio-religious reforms are seen as one of the important factors responsible for the 'regeneration' of the community. Related to this idea of regeneration, there also prevails amongst the writings of Boro scholars the notion that, Kalicharan Brahma was perturbed by conversions to religions such as Vaishnavism and Christianity. This supposedly drove him to unite and uplift the Boro community under the aegis of Brahma Dharma, as the institutions of the traditional religion were 'weak' and could not stand up to the 'aggression' of other religions.[70] While there are no primary sources available attributing such thoughts to Kalicharan Brahma, undoubtedly, there were interactions going on between Brahma Dharma followers and followers of other religions. Departing from these dominant narratives, the present thesis attempts to understand Brahma Dharma movement as one among the *many* attempts that Boros made at socio-religious reforms. The thesis suggests that it was one of the avenues among many that was available to the Boros, specifically in Goalpara. And sometimes, Brahma Dharma rather than 'unifying' Boros raised concerns among Boro leadership,

[70] For examples of such works by Boro scholars please see, Bidyasagar Narzary, *Aalokar Sandhanat: Gurudev Aru Boro Samaj* (Guwahati: N L Publications, 2016); R. N Mosahary, "Brahma Religion and Social Change Among The Bodos" in *The Bodos: Children of Bhullumbutter*, eds. Thomas Pullopillil and Jacok Aluckal (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1997), 38–43; Manik Kr. Brahma, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma: His Life And Deeds* (Kokrajhar: N L Publications, 2001), 8–9; Kumud Ranjan Basumatary, "Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma-The Emergence of Bodo Ethnic Consciousness in the Early 20th Century," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 2 (March-April 2017), 25–36, https://www.internationaljournalssrg.org/IJHSS/paper-details?Id=48 . Accessed on 28/02/2022.

regarding the possibility of further fragmentation in an already heterogeneous socio-religious landscape.

As mentioned, conversion to Christianity has been portrayed as a 'concern' that drove Kalicharan Brahma to introduce new religious traditions in order to 'save' Boros from losing their identity. Scholars who have written about Boro conversions to Christianity have also sought to understand it in terms of the 'hegemony' of colonialism and the missionary enterprise. Barnali Sharma, thus asserts that the process of conversion can be seen as 'superimposition of an alien culture on highly traditional tribal culture, which in other words could be illustrated as a case of detribalization'.[71] It is ironic that though Sharma takes into account the importance of local agency in the spread of Christianity among the Boros of Udalguri, and the prevalent situation of 'crisis' that facilitated it, she presents it as a hegemonic process initiated by the missionaries. Interestingly, she also suggests that historically, conversions happened when a certain section of Boros in Udalguri, 'felt betrayed by the middle classes of both the Bodos and the Assamese'.[72] But she does not elaborate further on what this 'betrayal' was.

Similarly, Shekhar Brahma while acknowledging the 'contribution of missionaries to the Boro language' and 'benevolent programme like imparting education', largely sees conversion as a process that entailed abandoning of traditional practices, driving a wedge between the converts and followers of other religion.[73] Giving reasons for the limited success

[71] Barnali Sharma, "Conversion to Christianity Among The Ethnic Groups Of Udalguri In Assam, 1843-1953" (PhD diss., Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2015), 228–229. http://hdl.handle.net/10603/132563

[72] Sharma, "Conversion to Christianity", 214.

[73] Shekhar Brahma, *Religion of the Boros and their Socio-Cultural Transition: A Historical Perspective* (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2011), 44–61.

of the missionaries among Boros, Brahma says it was mainly because of factors such as proximity to Hinduism, conversions to Vaishnavism, and the spread of Brahma Dharma.

While there are merits to the above discussed arguments and much can be borrowed from them, the thesis suggests that the smaller scale of Boro conversions to Christianity ought to be seen in the light of the then prevailing situation of Boros desiring progress. As such, the thesis sees conversion as a highly agential process, where people often experimented and interacted with other religions, wherein they brought in their own understandings of Christianity.

For Boros, experimenting with religion has been an ongoing process. Its own 'traditional religion' is a product of influences from many different sources. Historically they have adapted, adopted, and 'converted' to, 'Hinduism'. Hence it becomes important for the thesis to dwell in brief here on the different connotations and meanings of *conversion*. The thesis tries to understand the complexities of conversion by borrowing some of the ideas put forward by Peter Berger and Sarbeswar Sahoo, especially their coinage of the term 'Godroads'. In their edited book, *Godraods: Modalities of Conversion in India*, they put forward the idea that roads are 'liminal spaces', and as a 'metaphor . . . helps to capture the complexity of the phenomenon of conversion'.[74] This leaves one with the possibility to move away from the understandings of conversions primarily seeing it as a phenomenon of abrupt change. It can also be thought of as a slow ongoing process, as a journey, where an individual travels through different points in search of an end. As such one can move away from the idea of conversion being strongly associated only with Christianity. This becomes particularly important to understand the heterogeneous religious influences on the 'traditional' religious systems of the

[74] Peter Berger and Sarbeswar Sahoo eds., *Godraods: Modalities of Conversion in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1–2.

Boros. And the process wherein many of them came to be absorbed and accepted into Vaishnavism — gradually moving up the caste hierarchy over generations — or being influenced by various strands of Hinduism both before and during the colonial period, within the context of Assam. Berger's and Sahoo's volume also contain other reformulations and reorienting of the meanings of conversion which are important for the thesis. Particularly Fernande W. Pool's re-evaluation of viewing conversion simply as a 'religious change'. Pool seeks to demonstrate that 'conversion to [Islamic reformation] . . . is part of a larger process of *social renewal* and moral *regeneration* deeply embedded in . . . the contemporary sociopolitical context [emphasis added]'.[75] She argues that looking at conversions merely in terms of 'religious change . . . not only fail to understand the full spectrum of factors involved in conversion, but they also reproduce the same exclusionary mechanisms as modern modes of categorisation and similarly constrain the potential for ethical transformation and *modern aspirations* among ordinary people [emphasis added]'.[76] This conceptualisation again becomes important when the thesis later dwells on the process of socio-religious reforms being initiated by Boros; where the dominant narrative is an intense desire to *regenerate* the self and awaken the community from a 'deathly stupor' and walk on a path leading to *unnati* while becoming modern.

Chapters

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with the manner in which the colonial state, as part of its efforts to administer and control an 'epistemological space'

[75] Fernande W. Pool, "Religious Conversions as Ethical Transformation: a study of Islamic Reformation in Rural West Bengal" in Peter Berger and Sarbeswar Sahoo eds., *Godraods: Modalities of Conversion in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 87.

[76] Pool, "Religious Conversions as Ethical Transformation", 87.

(Assam), produced knowledge about the region, and specifically, about the Boros.[77] The chapter suggests that colonial knowledge production transformed the contours of the community. It traces how, gradually, by the beginning of the twentieth century colonial knowledge and the frameworks that were developed to classify the Boros became a dominant one laying the foundation for how a modern Boro self would be imagined and made. This it does by discussing in detail the manner in which, starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century, colonial officials wrote about the Boros; and how by the fourth decade of that century, owing to the works of colonial anthropologist such as B. H. Hogdson, the idea of a great Bodo race began to take shape.[78] The chapter then gradually looks at the decennial censuses and other ethnological and linguistic treatises that further attempted to 'refine' the classification of Boros/Bodos and what constituted the 'Bodo race'. It argues that by the first few decades of the twentieth century this category of a great Bodo race became a dominant heuristic device to classify many heterogeneous groups as belonging to one group (Bodo). The chapter concludes by trying to show how colonial ideas of the 'Bodo race' continues to inform present claims of Boro identity and politics.

The second chapter deals with the encounter of the Boros with different Christian denominations, during the colonial period. While Brahma Dharma was a movement which was initially attractive to educated Boros, with connections to important towns such as Dhubri in Goalpara, Christianity did not necessarily emerge in these urban centers. Even in Darrang district the Christian encounter took place mostly in the Duars, away from the urban centers. As such a part of this chapter looks briefly at the Duars, historically, to draw a larger picture

[77] Bernard S Cohn, *Colonialism And Its Forms Of Knowledge: The British In India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6.

[78] Hogdson wrote a monograph, *Essay The First On The Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál Tribes*, on the Koches, Meches [Boros], and the Dhimals, speculating that they were part of the same Bodo race.

of the spread of Christianity there. Consequently, the second chapter has been divided into two main segments. The first segment deals with Boros residing in the Bhutan Duars, their traditional religious practices, and their social structure. These are also the places where Boros and other tribes existed in the middle of a shared sovereignty between the hill state of Bhutan and the state powers of the plains.[79] As such, Boros there retained a lot of social, cultural, and religious practices that can be seen as 'unique', but at the same time influenced by various heterogeneous strands of Hinduism that was practiced in neighbouring areas. Then following from the arguments in the first chapter, a part of the chapter dwells on how 'semi-savage' became a way for the British to make sense of the diverse influence among the Boros; inhabiting a liminal space between the 'savage hills' and the 'civilised' valley.

The second segment deals with the encounter of Boros with missionaries of different denominations — Society for the Propagation of Gospel (SPG), Scandinavian Lutherans, and the American Baptists — and the subsequent conversions. It attempts to link the small scale but significant conversions to Christianity during the early twentieth century, to that time period when Boro society was in a state of flux with many experimenting with different religions. It tries to do so with the help of individual stories and the different ways in which Christianity was being interpreted by local converts contrary to missionary ideas. Especially in the context of Goalpara and the Scandinavian Lutheran Mission, the chapter dwells on the

[79] Ashley Eden had reported that:

> The whole of this tract is inhabited by Mechis and Kacharis, the only classes apparently able to live there in consequence of the atrocities of the Booteas and the malaria generated in these vast jungle tracts. . .

Ashley Eden, "Report on The State of Bootan, and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64" in *Political Missions to Bootan, comprising the Reports of The Hon'ble Ashley Eden,–1864; Capt. R. B. Pemberton, 1837, 1838, with Dr. W. Griffiths's Journal; and the Account by Baboo Kishen Kant Bose* (Calcutta : Bengal secretariat Press, 1865), 9.

paths many individuals took before arriving at Christianity. Similarly, it talks about how in the Duar areas of Darrang district, adherents of the Baptist denomination grew in number during the early decades of the twentieth century. Boros there, who joined the Baptist denomination, suddenly became a zealous lot. They organised intensive preaching tours and made efforts to convert others. While all these resulted in a significant number of conversions, these sorts of expressions of faith and the millenarian tendencies of the Baptist converts, were not always appreciated by the missionaries. It gave rise to consternations regarding the growth of a distorted type of Baptist Church. But in spite of all these, this chapter tries to show that there was also an element of progress present in these conversions.

If the first chapter tried to show that colonial knowledge was exerting an epistemological hegemony in the (re)making of Boro, the third chapter, as a culmination, tries to understand the process of forming a new identity from the point of view of the Boros, in the first half of the twentieth century. As such, it tries to reconstruct the thought process of the nascent Boro public/intelligentsia and how they reacted to the colonial knowledge being produced about them and participated in the process. The chapter argues that running parallel to the ideas of *unnati* prevalent in the province, the efforts of Boros towards constituting a new Boro self too were imbued with such a rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, it tries to locate the various socio-religious reforms within this framework. While a part of the chapter deals with the efforts of Goalpara Boros, it also examines the pan-Assam Kachari/Bodo solidarities being formed by individuals from other places. Following from that, it tries to demonstrate how the idea of a greater Bodo race was appropriated to bolster their claims to a glorious past and efforts to move on the path of progress. This was specifically done with the aims of obtaining a respectable place in the classificatory practices as well as the racialised hierarchy. However — as the chapter will try to show — even as a notion of a distinct identity was being realised,

sometimes in opposition to the dominant caste Assamese, a distinct identity outside the ambit of the greater Assamese *jati* had not been imagined yet.

Sources: Possibilities and Limitations

Colonial Sources

Since the thesis partly looks at the process of classifying and identifying Boros and the consequent making of the great Bodo race by the British, the 'colonial archive' forms an important part of the sources used. These colonial sources are mostly in the forms of, early nineteenth century accounts of the province, reports of British-Bhutanese relations and the Duars, linguistic descriptions and accounts of the region, grammar books (Boro, Deori-Chutiya), ethnological account of tribes and castes (Assam, Bengal, and North Bengal), Gazetteers of the districts of Assam, statistical accounts (Assam and North Bengal districts), ethnographical monographs (Boros and Dimasas), administrative reports, land settlement and (re)assessment reports, and census reports. Most of these were written as a part of the ethnological and classificatory exercises conducted by the colonial state, while some of them, especially the grammar book on Boros and the ethnographical monograph were written out of missionary endeavours. But these varied colonial sources all serve to understand the process in which the Boros were being seen and classified and their histories being speculated. A chronological reading of these sources, which the thesis has attempted, starting from the early nineteenth century show, lays bare the manner in which the theory of a great Bodo race was constructed, in the process of the British trying to understand the Boros as colonial subjects. The early descriptive accounts — when the East India Company was trying to make forays in to Assam in the early nineteenth century — linguistic accounts, to later official census classifications, they were the means through which this race theory came to be gradually largely accepted. Hence they form an integral part in the body of the sources used for writing the thesis. Among these, sources from the early twentieth century throw light on the changes that were

taking place in the province. Especially the census reports and the gazetteers help to understand the aspirations of caste/tribes/communities in the province who wanted to move up the caste hierarchy and the strategies they employed to be enumerated as such. They also show the contradictions, inabilities, and the difficulties faced by the officials in attempting to neatly classify such communities. They also give some insight into the process of socio-religious reforms being undertaken by Boros especially in the context of Brahma Dharma. The censuses too give further insight, especially in the twentieth century, into how the Boros through mobilisations were trying to be enumerated as a distinct tribal group. The ethnological monographs give an insight into the social, cultural, and religious practices of the Boros.

But these accounts while containing useful information and certain details, were also coloured by the material and utilitarian concerns of the British. These descriptions sought to portray the Boros as a labouring class who could be put to use for gainful employment. For instance describing them as 'valuable', Hodgson saw in the Boros the same potential as the British had 'discovered' in the Kols — the ability to populate 'malarial belts' and possessing 'cheerful docility, and peaceable industrious habits and temper'.[80] Similarly Sidney Endle's account, who was a British missionary, of the Boros are coloured by his concerns of improving labour relations between them and the British plantation owners describing them as the 'navvies of Assam'.[81] Moreover his accounts of the religious practices and their socio-cultural life are influenced by his evangelising and civilising mission. But in the face of scant and almost absent alternative sources, through a careful reading they can be utilised to try and reconstruct the Boro world of the nineteenth century.

[80] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál*, 149.

[81] Sidney Endle, *Outline Grammar Of The Kachari (Bårå) Language As Spoken In District Darrang, Assam* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), ii.

To reconstruct the situation in the Duars, the reports and accounts of British transactions with the Bhutanese and the Administrative reports of the province have proved invaluable. They provide a means to (re)imagine the Duars as a liminal space and the interactions and exchanges going on there between the Boros (and others), and the Bhutanese and Tibetans.

Missionary Sources

The thesis has utilised Christian missionary sources from primarily three different denominations or missions, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), American Baptist Mission, and the Scandinavian Lutheran Mission. These sources are mostly in the form of annual missionary reports, correspondences and letters with home missions, annual conference reports, field station reports, local churches' Baptism records, early translations of hymns, and missionary memoirs (published and unpublished).

The SPG reports are mostly from the nineteenth century and mostly during the period when Sidney Endle, a British missionary, was active. These are in the forms of short accounts and descriptions, accessed from the compiled reports of the annual reports of SPG which were published from Calcutta. They provide insights into the missionary encounter of the Boros of Darrang Duars. Through these one can understand that, while Endle was in charge of something called the Kachari mission, the conversion rates were very low in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. These reports read in conjunction with Endle's monograph *The Kachari* gives a fuller picture. But these SPG sources are few and limited only to the eighties of the nineteenth century. Already the sparse reproduction of Sidney Endle's correspondences and reports in the SPG annual compilations, often described as having 'much sameness in them',

were not very comprehensive,.[82] And from towards the late nineteenth century, with Sidney Endle's failing health the reports become rarer and inaccessible. These SPG sources were all collected from Bishop's College in Kolkata.

While there are mentions of American Baptist Missions' encounter with 'Kacharis' and conversions of Kacharis by the middle and second half of the nineteenth century, these are sporadic. Boros, especially of the Darrang Duars, start to find mention in American Baptist records by the second decade of the twentieth century. These are mostly in the form of annual reports, correspondences, missionary tours, conference reports, field reports and memoirs. A bulk of these sources have been taken from the archives of Council for Baptist Churches in North East India, Guwahati (CBCNEI) and Eastern Theological College (ETC), at Jorhat. Apart from these, files related to the missionary George Kampfer, who was the first American Baptist to come visit the Boros in Darrang, were remotely accessed through 'research by mail' from American Baptist Historical Society (ABHS), at Atlanta. These files in the form of reports, correspondences (handwritten) add more to the sources collected from CBCNEI and ETC. These files also contain some of the unpublished writings of George Kampfer which he had intended to publish, but could not. They give more insight into his concerns with the manner in which Boros were interpreting Christianity. But these sources, while sometimes rich in details, are not vast. This was also due to the fact that American Baptists did not have a dedicated mission station in these Boro areas nor a dedicated missionary, and so the reports and correspondences generated were few.

To write about the Lutheran encounter apart from secondary sources, the thesis has utilised three primary sources. The first is in the form of a travelogue who had travelled to a

[82] *The Forty-Ninth Report of the Calcutta Corresponding Committee Of The Incorporated Society For The Propagation Of The Gospel in Foreign Parts, Being For The Year 1883* (Calcutta: T. Black & Co., 1884), 23.

Santal colony for Lutheran converts in Mornai, Goalpara. Among the remaining two, the first is personal account by Aksel Kristiansen published in 1934. He was the first Danish missionary working exclusively among the Boros in Gaurang, Goalpara. And the second is an account of the work of Scandinavian Lutheran Mission among Boros based on interviews with missionaries who were stationed in the area and published in 1947. From reading these accounts it can be gleaned that the process of conversion often entailed a travel on different roads — a negotiating of religions and denominations. The individual stories of Boro converts in them contain rich details and give insights into their motivations.

One limitation of these sources is the fact that they remain *missionary* sources, written by non-locals. Hence care is required to be maintained in reading them, as they hardly contain any local Boro voices. And as such linking it to the overarching theme of the thesis requires a careful reading, which nevertheless has been attempted here. This limitation is also exacerbated by the fact that — Boros having had comparatively less access to education and print — local churches and individuals have left behind almost no records from that period. Only few early Baptism records (from mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century) have been unearthed, which nevertheless helps to corroborate and imagine the situation in the early years. Stories of conversion have mostly remained in the realm of 'oral history' among the locals.

Vernacular Sources

The vernacular sources used are primarily in Boro, Assamese, and Bengali. A major portion of these sources are in the form of (news) magazines, booklets on (re)formulation of 'customary laws', religious treatises, commentaries on religious reforms, booklets of speeches, newsletters of tribal organisations, and newsletters of Boro organisations. A good example, and an important primary vernacular source, is *Bibar*. It was a trilingual publication, with editorials, news, social commentary, poetry, articles, fiction, in Boro, Assamese, and Bengali. It was published by a group of Boro students from Dhubri. Although the editorials were primarily in

Bengali, it gave space to concerns of 'Bodos'/Kacharis from all over Assam. There were articles and news published regarding the concerns of other 'Bodo' members such as Sonowal Kacharis and Lalungs. While the earliest handwritten editions of the magazine can no longer be traced, the editions from 1924-25 are available, and have been reprinted. As a rich source, it is singularly important to understand the thought process of the early Boro intellectuals, and the solidarities and the socio-religious reforms that they wanted to initiate in a quest for *unnati*. Another such source that has been used is the *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* published by the HBS. It was a bilingual booklet in Boro and Bengali — primarily a compilation of reformulated social and religious laws and rules of conduct for Boros. But it also contained their larger manifesto for attaining progress. This booklet becomes an important source to understand that Brahma Dharma and conversion to Christianity were not the only paths to progress and of redesigning a new modern Boro self. Some other important Boro vernacular sources from that period that have been used are *Boroni Gudi Sibsa Arw Aroz* and *Bathunaam Bwikhaguni Gidu*. They both give insights into the attempts of Boros to accord their traditional religion with a certain kind of 'respectability'.

But while being rich, these sources are also limited by the fact that though they are Boro voices, they are not always of the ordinary Boro peasants. While educated Boros themselves had very less social capital, the uneducated lot must have had even lesser access to resources. If *Bibar* and *Boroni Phisa* lays bare the desires of a certain educated section of, it does not do the same for the Boro peasants in different districts. These sources hardly contain the voices of this class. And hence it often does not give a complete picture of how ideas of *unnati* and reforms permeated among this class of people. For instance, Brahma Dharma, undoubtedly started as a movement amongst the educated and elite Boros, but how it became popular with the masses, is not very clearly evident in these sources. Scholars writing on the Boros have lamented on the lack of Boro sources from the period 'to reconstruct the thoughts and actions

of this nascent Bodo public, since constituents had limited access to social capital and print media'.[83] Still the above mentioned sources, though constrained in their vastness, are extremely rich.

[83] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 212.

Chapter 1: Identifying the 'Great Bodo Race'

This chapter tries to understand the gaze of the British through which they created categories to classify the Boros, which had/has a far reaching impact. This gaze was directed at the Boros, along with other communities in the subcontinent, as a part of the colonial state's will to understand its subjects and conquer an epistemological space. In this process, of the British directing their epistemological gaze on their Boro subjects, they generated knowledge about their racial characteristics, language, origin, and past histories. This knowledge, in turn, was used to classify them, fitting them into neat conjured categories. One such category was of the 'great Bodo race', a racial-linguistic category, where several 'cognate groups' were inserted, including the Boros themselves. Gradually it became a dominant framework for everyone concerned with the Boros and members of this race, including the Boros themselves. This chapter is about this process. The chapter tries to trace the trajectory that the making of this race took, through a chronological reading of the colonial sources, starting in the early nineteenth century. It discusses in detail how the making of this race, and the incorporation of many heterogeneous groups within it was often contradictory and filled with ambiguity. Nevertheless, it tries to show the gradual 'hegemonic' grip of colonial knowledge, which also impacted the Boros and how they imagined themselves.

The Present

In the 2014 elections to the lower house of the Indian Parliament, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power with a resounding majority. In Assam too it won seven out of the fourteen seats, bettering its tally from four in the previous election. Naba Kumar Sarania, an independent candidate and a former militant of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), was elected from Kokrajhar Lok Sabha Constituency in Assam. It is a seat reserved for contestants from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. His election to the Lok Sabha was read by many as the

natural outcome of a deep wedge that had lodged itself between the Boros and other communities residing in the then Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD).[1] The candidature of Naba Sarania was backed by a conglomerate of organisations such as the Sanmilani Janagosthiya Aikkyamancha (SJA), All Bodoland Muslim Students' Union (ABMSU), All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU), and O'Bodo Suraksha Mancha (OBSM). These organisations together were generally referred in public discourses as *O'Boro* organisations — O'Boro meaning non-Boros in Assamese — who were largely opposed to the Boro demands for greater autonomy, often calling for the dissolution of the then Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). With his win, he was hailed as the first 'non-Bodo' Member of Parliament (MP) from the Saraniya-Kachari community to be elected from Kokrajhar constituency which had all along been electing a Boro. In interviews that followed, he even demanded the dissolution of the BTC accord in order to 'give everyone a level playing field'.[2] What made the win even more impressive was the sheer number of votes that he was able to garner, which was more than the combined votes of all other Boro candidates.[3] Both before and after the elections, he came across as the symbol of the opposition of *O'Boros* to Boro aspirations for greater autonomy and hence, in the public discourse among Boros, he became

[1] Rahul Battacharya, "Assam 2012: The Story of a Riot", *Open*, June 02, 2016, https://openthemagazine.com /features/india/assam-2012-the-story-of-a-riot/ . Relationship between communities in BTAD had been tumultuous in the years and months leading up to the elections. In 2008 and 2012 riots erupted between Boros and the Bengali Muslims in Udalguri and Kokrajhar districts, killing hundreds and displacing lakhs.

[2] Simantik Dowerah, "No Regrets about my past as Ulfa leader", *Firstpost*, June 21, 2014. https://www.firstpost.com/politics/no-regrets-about-my-past-as-ulfa-leader-says-kokrajhar-mp-naba-sarania-1581149.html . Accessed on 1/4/2021.

[3] "Kokrajhar ST Results", Accessed on 5/5/2021, https://www.elections.in/results/kokrajhar-st-as.html . Naba Saraniya got 634428 votes while his nearest rival, Urkhaw Gwra Brahma, managed to garner only 278649 votes.

a much despised figure, always at odds with leaders and organisations who claimed to represent their [Boro] interests.[4]

After the announcement of the results Janak Lal Basumatary, a Boro, filed a petition in the Gauhati High Court challenging the validity of Naba Kumar Saraniya's election, appealing it to be set aside. He contended that the elected person did not belong to any notified ST community in Assam and that his nomination papers were improperly scrutinised and accepted by the returning officer before the elections.[5] While submitting his documents to the returning officer, Naba Saraniya had furnished a ST certificate issued by the All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS) which stated that he belongs to the 'Boro-Kachari' community, a notified ST community. The petitioners alleged that, Naba Saraniya was not a member of the Boro Kachari community but of Saraniya-Kachari community as was evidenced by his usage of the surname Saraniya, and that this community was distinct from Boro-Kachari, and was not notified as a ST community. Naba Saraniya *contested* the allegations of the petitioners by *claiming* that he was in fact a Boro-Kachari and that his surname Saraniya is simply a surname and challenged the claims that Saraniya is a distinct community not forming a part of the Scheduled Tribes living in the BTAD area. This in itself was a remarkable claim from a person who stood for elections on the promise of fighting for the 'rights' of non-Boros (*O'Boros*). While there was no dispute over the fact that the Kokrajhar constituency was reserved for ST, the fact that Naba Saraniya contested the elections claiming eligibility as a Boro never really became a big talking

[4] For further analysis of the events before and after this elections please see, Anwesha Dutta, "The Politics of Complexity in Bodoland: The Interplay of Contentious Politics, the Production of Collective Identities and Elections in Assam," *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39, no 2 (April 2016): 478–493, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1163776.

[5] *In the Gauhati High Court, Janak Lal Basumatary and another (Petitioners) vs Naba Kumar Saraniya (Hira) Respondent Before Hon'ble Mr. Justice Suman Shyam.* http://ghconline.gov.in/Judgment/ElPet32014.pdf . Accessed on 4/4/2021.

point and was rarely brought up in the ethnically charged and volatile situation that prevailed before and after the elections.

Subsequently, the Gauhati High Court gave its verdict in favour of the respondent, Naba Kumar Saraniya, stating that the courts have no reason whatsoever to doubt the claims of the respondent as being a Boro-Kachari since he holds a valid caste certificate. But a close reading of the judgement and the arguments forwarded by both the parties point to the complex layers that define the claims of ethnicities, both in the past and the present, and how these claims and counterclaims cannot completely disentangle themselves from different forms of colonial knowledge. It also shows how communities view themselves in the present and make use of religious and cultural symbols to claim to an identity; where sometimes there are consonances, dissonances, and overlaps informed by particular readings of historical facts and processes.

The petitioners and their counsels put forward the argument that Saraniyas are distinct from Boro-Kacharis as the former based their religious practice around the teachings of Sankardev following the tenets of *Guru, Deva, Nama,* and *Bhakat* and congregate in *Naam Ghars* (places where Vaishnavites congregate) to sing *Kirtans* (hymns); while the Boro-Kacharis base their practice around the worship of *Bathou Bwrai*— equated with Shiva — symbolised by the worship of the *Sizou* tree.[6] It was claimed that in the village of Naba Saraniya there was a *Naam Ghar*. Apart from this point the arguments between the parties also revolved around the composition of the Saraniya community. Here there seemed to have been an agreement between both the parties regarding the fact that this community was formed as a result of people accepting *Saran* under Mahapurush Sankardeva. Both the parties also agreed upon the point that a number of recruits in the ranks of Saraniya were from Kacharis and other tribes of Assam. They also a made use of Sidney Endle's monograph *The Kacharis* to put

[6] *Janaklal vs Naba Kumar Sarania*, 13.

forward their respective arguments and the counsels for Naba Saraniya also additionally referred to Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*. While the petitioners tried to impress upon the court that the practices of Vaishnavism disqualified one from a membership of Boro-Kachari, the party of respondents contended that this process of conversion to Vaishnavism and changing surnames to such as Das, Deka, Saikia, Barua, did not necessarily mean that they would have lost their tribal identity; and to bolster their argument they brought in records to show that people with surnames such as Das and Deka have been previously elected to the Assam Assembly from constituencies reserved for STs. Another very interesting piece of evidence which the petitioners produced in court, which was challenged by the counsel for the respondent as inadmissible, was government land records that showed Naba Saraniya's father's name to be Lakhi Kanta Soru Koch. This effectively meant that the respondent belonged to the *Soru-Koch* community which is notified as an Other Backwards Class (OBC) in Assam.[7] This evidence was not taken into account by the court on certain technical grounds.

While legal technicalities remain beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to understand the historical complexities that have arisen as lower castes and tribals, from the hills and plains, converted to Vaishnavism over the centuries in order to move up the caste hierarchy — a process that has resulted in making the boundaries between communities fluid and liminal, where identities often overlap.[8] Such fluidity, in all probability, must not have been seen as an

[7] *Soru Koch* in Assamese means 'Minor Koch'; Though the literal meaning of the word *Soru* is small, the usage in this context connotes minor or inferior, in turn indicating a stage in the process of upward mobility where members have not yet fully attained the status of a full-fledged Koch but somewhere below it.

[8] Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam* (Guwahati: Anwesha Publications, 2015), 29-30.

impediment, but instead as a situation 'adequate to the scale of social interaction'.[9] But colonial classificatory systems would not have been comfortable with such a fluidity. In its schematic formulations, mappings, and racial hierarchies of tribes and castes, such overlaps and fluidity were sought to be glossed over and almost erased. A complex pre-colonial web of relations and hierarchies were sought to be simplified. The case of Naba Saraniya claiming to be a Boro — while also being able to identify as a 'Saraniya and Koch — speaks volumes about the complex web of ethnicities in the past. The vestiges of which still remain. It also indicates, if one looks close enough, the ways in which census classifications worked to accord a fixed space to communities and individuals but how the memories of the past ties are still strategically invoked.

This chapter as such tries to trace the trajectory of (re-making) and (re)defining of Boro as a community, during the colonial period, as a result of the efforts of colonial knowledge production. It looks at the manner in which the colonial state saw the Boros. The chapter then suggests that the category of the 'great Bodo race' was conjured up and gradually strengthened along the way with official validation, to make sense of the complex racial, linguistic, religious, and cultural overlaps between what were described as 'cognate' groups. It then in essence becomes an attempt to demonstrate the process of identification of the great Bodo race, under which many tribes could be subsumed — Boros being an important part of this. Further the chapter suggests that this epistemological dominance of colonialism was often overarching, the effects of which have implications in present day politics of Boros and 'others'. As was evident in the case of Naba Saraniya, and the strategic use of colonial classifications, anthropological, and historical works continue to be used to inform the arguments and settle political claims

[9] Sudipto Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 56.

related to identity in the present. It only points to the continuing influence that colonial texts exert on both official and unofficial public discourses around questions of identity.

Colonial Knowledge Production

In his book, *Colonialism And its Forms Of Knowledge*, Bernard Cohn writes:

> In coming to India they (British), unknowingly and unwittingly invaded and conquered not only a territory but an epistemological space as well. The facts of this space did not exactly correspond to those of the invaders. Nevertheless, the British believed they could explore and conquer this space through translation: establishing correspondence could make the unknown and the strange knowable.[10]

If so, then ability to dominate through epistemological violence/might was as important, if not more, as the ability to dominate through military technologies. It gave rise to, what Cohn mentions as, the 'investigative modalities' to rule and govern the Indian subjects. These modalities based themselves on ordering and classification of people, their social as well as their natural world. This was done, among others, through enumerative and descriptive reports. In a similar vein, Nicholas Dirks while arguing about, 'the hegemonic character of colonial rule on the history of the colonized', asserts that caste in its present form was nothing but a result of the British imposing their 'investigative modalities', most notably through the censuses.[11] What was/is taken as the traditional was/is nothing but the simplified colonial

[10] Bernard S Cohn, *Colonialism And Its Forms Of Knowledge: The British In India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6.

[11] Nicholas B Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9.

construct glossing over the complexities that defined relationships between individuals and groups.

Colonial Assam was not an exception to such attempts at epistemological dominance through ordering and classification of people. In Assam, such an exercise was wrought with, on the one hand, an inability to capture the various intricacies and nuances of a highly heterogenous social world; on the other, an urge, in the interest of colonial governmentality, to address such complexity by boxing people and communities into certain neat categories. This is clearly evident in how colonial administrators navigated through the complex maze of caste and tribes that existed in Assam, and tried to make sense of them.

They found it extremely difficult to clearly separate 'tribes' from 'caste groups' as practices often overlapped, especially in social spaces where members of tribes sought to move up the caste hierarchy by converting to Vaishnavism, and thereby emulating upper caste socio-cultural-religious practices. Moreover, the creation of 'intermediate groups' between higher castes and tribes compounded the problem as they often retained practices from their previous group memberships.[12] This was further complicated by the multiplicity of ethnicities, languages, and religious practices in colonial Assam.

However, this difficulty of negotiating through and more clearly identifying 'tribes' and 'caste groups' did not hinder colonial administrators from working towards a resolution of their ethnographic dilemma by constituting consolidated categories that could accommodate

[12] An apt example of such an intermediate group would be the category/caste Koch. Conversion to Vaishnavism as discussed also required emulation and adhering to upper caste practices by the tribals and discarding their own. But at the same time a complete break from one's past was also not possible. A number of converts continued to carry on with dietary practices such as consumption of liquor and eating of animal food. For instance, Madahi a 'sub-caste' within Koch would imply a stage where the converts are still consuming alcohol. Please see footnote no 143.

varied sets of people with common social interests. For instance, one such category was the Koch. It became a 'space' that could recruit members from varied communities, accommodate heterogeneity and contradictions, yet consolidate on the basis of aspiration to upward social mobility. Madhumita Sengupta and Jahnu Bharadwaj demonstrate, through meticulous reading of colonial ethnographies and census reports, how Koch came to be constituted as a caste that could accommodate claims of heterogeneous people desirous of upward social mobility. This they argue offered the British a way out to make sense of the divergent and bewildering caste claims.[13] They also argue that prior to the process of caste enumerations in Assam 'caste in Assam was never a rigid and impermeable social grid'.[14] But that enumerations resulted in a 'proliferation of caste and hardening of caste boundaries, as well as the consolidation of Brahmanical Hindusim'.[15] This is something Amalendu Guha had also hinted at when he stated that 'specialization on caste lines did not go far in medieval Assamese society'.[16] As such it can be argued that caste practices in Assam did not necessarily follow the demands requiring strict demarcation on a functional criteria, but was much more loosely organised.

Here one needs to tread carefully, and not seem to imply that caste didn't exist in pre-colonial Assam. While caste was reconfigured in Assam like elsewhere in British India, the

[13] Madhumita Sengupta and Jahnu Bharadwaj, "Caste census and the impact of colonial sociology in British Assam," *Asian Ethnicity* 22, no. 4 (2019): 516-541. https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1709802

[14] Sengupta, 516.

[15] Sengupta, "Caste Census", 534.

[16] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 29. Guha mentions that enterprises such as weaving and spinning were not confined to a particular caste, but engaged in by women from every caste and class groups. He also typifies Assam as a place where technological advancements lagged behind other parts of India, with people engaged in shifting cultivation and the use of hoe instead of plough. Elsewhere too, Guha further states that the 'multi caste village economy was unknown to Assam'. Please see Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 99.

intention should not be to imply that caste 'was simply invented by the too clever British'.[17] The fact that Brahminical Hinduism was consolidated as a result of the caste censuses, should not lead one to think erroneously that practices of 'discrimination' based on an idea of difference around groups or communities did not exist; or that a ritual hierarchy based on access to different forms of power was not in place. Though Vaishnavism propagated by Sankardeva made room for people from different communities, some which were considered lowly, it did not necessarily make room for their traditional socio-religious and cultural practices.[18] While Vaishnavism kept its doors open, conversion to it also demanded a rejection of dietary practices considered unclean and other religious traditions, such as emphasis on animal sacrifices.[19] Sengupta and Bharadwaj also point towards this fact in their own essay saying that there is further need to critically examine the widely held notion that Sankardev's movement worked towards removing caste barriers and prohibitions.[20] The gradual process through which

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[17] Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 5.

[18] Accepting adherents from lower strata of society and hence 'inclusiveness' has been a feature of Assamese Vaishnavism. This 'liberal Vaishnava movement', as Guha calls it and argues, resulted in 'mass conversion of the Bodo Kachari tribe'. Please see Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 29–30.

[19] Maheswar Neog described Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism as:

> . . . And loving-kindness is to be bestowed on all forms of life, dumb or tongued. Within the limits of human life none are to be excluded and all are to be embraced in the fold of fraternity so long as the basic principle of cleanliness of faith and ethics is accepted. The Vaisnava Order in its primal glory saw 'the Garo, Bhota and Yavana saying prayers to Hari' and 'the Miri, Asama and Kachari securing salvation through Rama-nama', as Madhavadeva tells us. On the other hand, the Order was intolerant of creeds, that closed the door on the 'impure castes' or made blood sacrifices an essential form. *Toleration in such cases would mean the very negation or defeat of the faith* [emphasis added].

Maheswar Neog, "Preface (First Edition)," in *Sankaradeva And His Times: Early History Of The Vaishnava Faith And Movement In Assam*, 8th ed. (Guwhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1998), ix.

[20] Sengupta, "Caste Census," 12. Cf., Birendranath Dutta, "Sankaradeva and the Tribals of North-East India", in *Sankaradeva: Studies in Culture*, eds. Bhaba Prasad Chaliha, (Guwahati: Srimanta

Vaishnavism came to be one of the dominant religious traditions in Assam — and at the same time evolving into multiple heterogeneous strands — can also be read as an act of othering the practices of communities and open up ways to think about the manner in which caste operated in precolonial Assam, through dietary and religious practices.[21] It was necessary to take this small detour to emphasize the fact that practices around diet, and socio-religious and cultural practices must have played a role in hierarchizing communities in pre-colonial Assam. And it certainly played a role in the way the later censuses and ethnographies thought about questions of tribes vs castes, or Animists vs Hindus and influencing the outcome of these enumerative exercises to distinguish communities.

Early Nineteenth Century

This section will take a look at certain instances in the censuses and ethnographies which will demonstrate that categories such as Koch, Kachari, Mech, Bodo (Boro) — and perhaps many more — existed in various ways sometimes overlapping, sometimes distinctively, and frustrated attempts at neat categorisations.

Sankaradeva Sangha, 1998). http://www.atributetosankaradeva.org/tribal.pdf . Accessed on 5/4/2021. Claiming that, 'Assamese Hindu society is remarkably free from the scourge of virulent casteism that afflicts Hinduism in most other parts of India', Dutta credits the form of Vaishnavism preached by Sankaradeva in medieval Assam for this.

[21] Guha argues that during the 'liberal' phase of the Vaishnava movement it was able to gain mass converts among the tribal population. But the state powers depending on the political situation, favoured particular religious traditions. For instance, in the seventeenth century during the reign of Pratap Singha, adherents of the Mahapurushia sect of Vaishnavites were persecuted. By the middle of the eighteenth century the Ahom monarchy was generally tolerant of Vaishnavism and even patronised them. But this period also saw the splintering of neo-Vaishnavism into many different strands, often based on the caste backgrounds of the leadership and adherents. Please see, Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 29, 108–111.

To get a clearer picture and a sense of the development and 'refinement' of colonial classificatory practices it will be fruitful to look at the sources available from the first half of the nineteenth century and gradually move along. During the years 1808 and 1809 Francis Hamilton collected various information on Assam from residents of Bengal who had been to the territories of Assam and from residents of Assam living as fugitives in Bengal.[22] This he did staying in Goalpara, in Rangpur district, a place that was considered outside of Assam at the time. Though he himself acknowledged that some of the information could sometimes be far from the truth, he mentions that he took the help of a 'sensible Brahmin' who was in the employ of the king to sort the information. The fact that Hamilton collected certain information through informants, without ever setting foot in Assam, rather than diminish the 'authenticity' of his account, can be served as a means to investigate the very ideas of these informants as to how they viewed the prevailing conditions in Assam during the early nineteenth century; and the purpose here is to imagine the kind of social (caste) relations that might have existed between various communities 'described' as the Koch, Mech, Bodos, and Kacharis.

In this account the description of Koch as a community and its characteristics change depending on the place. In the territories of Assam, west of 'Koliyabor'[23], numerically speaking, Koch as a community is described as almost equal to the 'Kolitas'.[24] They are

[22] Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, ed. S. K. Bhuyan (Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies Assam, 1987), 1.

[23] Koliyabor, also written as Kaliabor, at the present is a town and a sub-division in Nagaon district. The town is situated roughly 40-50 kilometres west of Nagaon town. The Kaliabor sub-divisional area forms the westernmost part of Nagaon district, and is situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra.

[24] Hamilton, *Assam*, 56. Kolitas (also Kalitas) are a caste group in Assam. Since caste was not always a functional category in Assam, individuals of this caste were engaged in different occupations. But even then they were considered as occupying a higher status than the Koches. Dalton had initially thought them to be occupying the ranks of the *Shudras*. The census of 1881 census records them as the most numerous Hindu caste group in the province. By the census of 1891, Kolitas had started to claim

described as often engaging in the same occupations as the Kolitas, such as blacksmithing and haircutting, without caste playing an explicitly distinctive role.[25] They were described to even inter-marry among themselves. Nevertheless, they were perceived as being lower than the Kolitas in the caste hierarchy because of them being less abstinent in dietary aspects. Yet, they were said to have received religious instruction from the Kolitas, and were 'admitted to be pure', an indication that they were certainly not considered as occupying the lowest position in the caste hierarchy.[26] A difference based on racial features was also implied when the Kolitas were described as being characterised by features 'less strongly marked as being of Chinese origin than those of the Koch'.[27] The Koches were also said to be ethnically linked to certain families who ruled over certain small principalities — such as in Darrang (Desh Darrang) and Beltola. In Assam proper, the Raja of 'Dorong' (Darrang) and the Raja of 'Beltolya' (Beltola) are mentioned as Koches belonging to the same family, and that the latter even claimed descent from Shiva.[28] Meanwhile, towards the west, in places that fell under Goalpara and certain parts of Rangpur district, the figures who had authority over estates or districts were described, ethnically, not just as Koches but also as *Rajbanshis*—meaning of the Royal family.

Hamilton seems to have used Koch and Rajbanshis interchangeably. He writes about two brothers named Gentaka and Bohot Singha, who had occupied a district called Raymana

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a Kshatriya heritage. In the present Kalita is categorised as a 'forward' caste group. Please see, Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology Of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), 79; *Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881* (Calcutta: Office Of Superintendent Of Government Printing, India, 1883), 64; E. A. Gait, *Census Of India,1891. Assam. Vol.I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Department, 1892), 210.

[25] Hamilton, *Assam*, 57, 62, 66. In the context of providing information about slaves in Assam, Hamilton mentions that a Koch boy costs 25 rupees and while a Kalita boy costs 50 rupees.

[26] Hamilton, *Assam*, 56.

[27] Hamilton, *Assam*, 56.

[28] Hamilton, *Assam*, 52.

on the western banks Sankosh river, being described as Rajbanshis and also as Koch.[29] It becomes amply clear here that, among families which were in positions of power and authority with claims to a royal lineage, there were some who could have been identified — by themselves or others — as Koches; with the minor difference being that in Assam proper the title of Rajbangshi was not accorded to all these families.[30] Apart from a set of ruling families being identified as Koch or Rajbangshi, in parts of the Duars, Hamilton also mentions of certain Koch and Rajbangsi subjects of the Deva Raja of Bhutan as nothing but 'mere Bengalese'.[31] This also points toward the fact that by the beginning of nineteenth century, the term Rajbangshi was used to refer not only to family groups who could draw or claim lineages from gods and royalties but also 'commoners'. In the context of the inhabitants of the Duar areas, Hamilton calls Mech and Kacharis as part of 'rude tribes' who occupy the higher reaches while Koch or Rajbanshis as those occupying the lower stretches.[32] The Kacharis are described as people who have not taken to the plough yet and were still cultivating with the hoe.[33]

Parallelly, in the early nineteenth century, ideas indicating Koches (Rajbanshis), Meches, and Kacharis as contiguous entities was also widely prevalent. Commenting on the origin of Koches, Francis Buchanan-Hamilton[34] records that several families that descended

[29] Hamilton, *Assam*, 74. The area on the western banks of the Sankosh river did not fall under Assam.

[30] Hamilton, *Assam*, 34.

[31] Hamilton, *Assam*, 69.

[32] Hamilton, *Assam*, 70.

[33] Hamilton, *Assam*, 76. One important thing to understand and remember here is the notion (colonial) that moving up from the plains to the hills often sometimes acted as a measurement of civilizational progress, both materially and intellectually, which fits with Hamilton's account of Meches and Kacharis occupying the areas near the actual foothills and the Koch and Rajbanshis residing in the lower parts of the Duars.

[34] Francis Buchanan later on in his life used Hamilton instead of Buchanan. When referring to his accounts, reproduced or quoted in other primary and secondary sources, Buchanan-Hamilton will be used to avoid confusion — as later colonial sources refer to him as Buchanan or Buchanan-Hamilton

from the Koch royalty, who had become subjects of the East India Company, traced their descent to a person named *Visu*. He is said to be the founder of the Koch kingdom and was subsequently known as *Viswa Singha*.[35] Visu was borne out of the union between *Herya* and his wife, *Hira*. Herya was supposed to be a Mech, a community considered to have been *impure*.[36] However, at the same time, there also prevailed the idea that Herya and his wife were not, strictly speaking, of impure origins but had descended from divine beings. Buchanan quoted the *Yogini Tantra*, which mentions the myths surrounding this family, to support his assertion. In fact, in the beginning of the nineteenth century such histories, which attributed divine origins to the Koch dynasty, but also maintaining kinship ties with their subjects, were prevalent. *Daranga Rajavamsaali* was one such account, which dealt with the origins of the Koch kings and of the minor kings of Darrang.[37] It was commissioned by the Raja of Darrang Samudra Narayan to be written by Suryakhadi Daivajana, in all likelihood during the early years of the first decade of the nineteenth century.[38] It provides a history and genealogy of the origins of the Koch dynasty and their families, which became the template for much of the historical writings and claims on the region subsequently — for instance, Edward Gait's *A History Of Assam* — and continues to remain so even in the present. In this genealogical account, the ancestors of the Koch kings were said to be twelve Kshatriya brothers who took refuge among the Meches to escape the murderous wrath of *Parasuram*. They intermarried

— except where his name appears as it is in a direct source, such as his *Account of Assam,* where Hamilton is used.

[35] Francis Buchanan, "General View Of The History Of Kamrup', reproduced in *Kamrupar Buranji*, ed. S. K. Bhuyan (Guwahati: DHAS, 1930), 141–143.

[36] Buchanan, "History of Kamrup", 143.

[37] Suryakhadi Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, eds. Biswanarayan Shastri and Bhaba Prasad Chaliha (Guwahati, Lawyer's Book Stall, 2013).

[38] Gait speculates the year in which the genealogy was written to be 1806. See Edward Gait, 'The Koch Kings', in *History of Assam* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, 2011), 47.

with the Meches and adopted their way of life and in the course of time, their numbers increased, evolving into twelve clans. From among the twelve Mech clans, a person named Hariya Mandal was described by the *Daranga Rajavamsaali* as being their head and married to two sisters named Hira and Jira.[39] Hira, who was also said to be *Bhagawati* (goddess Durga) in her previous life, gave birth to a son as a result of her liaison with Shiva, who would later become the first Koch king, Biswa Singha (Visu, Viswa Sinha).

Even as divine origin was attributed to the Koch royalty, elevating them in status, the kinship ties that existed between them and the common Koch, Mech, and Kachari subjects was also acknowledged by the *Daranga Rajavamsaali*. It happened around a particular incident involving Koch king, Viswa Sinha, who was on his death bed as a result of being cursed by a Brahmin. He summoned his ministers and family, and instructed them that no women of '*other jatis*' should be brought as brides into his *bansh* (family).[40] Instead, he ordered, the brides should be from the Koch, Mech, and Kachari community—which the king implied was his real jati. In another instance, the Koch king, Naranarayan, was on his way to carry out a military campaign against the Ahom kings. Having failed an earlier attempt to defeat the Ahoms, this was the second attempt that was being waged with better preparation. On the first night of the war, Shiva came to Naranarayana in his dreams and questioned as to why he had *forsaken* his old religion.[41] Shiva instructed him to worship him in the manner of the Kacharis, which if he did, Shiva would then grant him success in his campaign.

The above two references from *Daranga Rajavamsaali* clearly show that even as there were attempts to grant legitimacy to Koch kings by attributing to them divine origins, it was a complex situation where one could not simply wish away the old bonds and ties of kinship

[39] Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, 9.

[40] Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, 53.

[41] Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, 62.

between royalty and commoners. Such a situation existed perhaps because the idea of a separate ethnic composition of royalty—despite their claims of divinity—from their subjects simply could not be imagined in the social milieu of the early eighteenth century. As such, marriage ties and religious practices from the past continued to inform the political situation of the Koch kingdom. The Koch king's edict, directing the royal family to marry within one's *own* jati—specifically the Koch, Mech, and Kachari—clearly gives us an indication of this fact: that there may have been political reasons, which required the ruling family to maintain kinship relationship with kin groups who were subjects; even as the Kshatriya claims of the ruling family would have had the tendency to differentiate them from their common subjects.[42] The maintenance of this relationship was of such importance that the king warned that if members of the royal family was to marry outside one's own *jati*, apart from Koch, Mech, and Kachari, or oppress Brahmins, they would lose their political status and their rule would come to an end.[43]

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[42] This directive came from Viswa Singha, even as he was stated to have married women from different communities and places such as from Kashmir, the Kingdom of Gaur, Kashi, and Nepal. Please see, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, 44–45.

[43] Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, 53. The instruction not to oppress Brahmins indicates that in the Koch polity of the sixteenth century Brahmins also became an important influence and component in the power relations. Though the need to maintain a relationship with Brahmins and with the Koches, Meches, and Kacharis can seem to be contradictory, it needs to be read keeping in mind the complex interplay of power, ethnicities, and hegemonic influence of Brahminical ideas, in the need to maintain a control over subjects who had not necessarily fully accepted notions propagated by Brahminical Hinduism. In giving an account of the origin of the Koch dynasty B. H. Hodgson had written:

> Nevertheless, the successors of Hájó speedily abandoned that policy, casting off the Mecch (Bodo) with scorn, and renouncing the very name of their own country and tribe with their language, creed, and customs, in favour of those of the Arians who, however resolutely they may eschew the aborigines, whilst continuing obscure and contumacious, *never fail to hold out the hand of fellowship once they become powerful at once and docile* [emphasis added].

This also points to the ideas of kinship, ethnicity, or of belonging to a certain community, that were in circulation during the early nineteenth century. While Brahmins as a group were distinguished from other caste groups, the boundaries between groups considered lowly, as Koch, Mech, and Kachari and others who aspired a higher status such as Kshatriya, were not necessarily well defined. There was enough manoeuvrability for one to claim a different status to suit political exigencies. Koch, Mech, and Kachari were thought to be as belonging to one *jati*, even as *Daranga Rajavamsaali* records Mech as the community from among which the Koch kingdom arose. Similarly, in the case of Shiva instructing the king to worship in the manner of Kacharis, it is pertinent to keep in the mind that it was in the form of a rebuke to the king for adopting 'other' (read Brahminical) religious practices. While there definitely was the influence of the Brahmins on the practices of the royalty, it was also important not to sideline the religious practices of the Kacharis, who also would have formed a part of the Koch king's campaign against the Ahoms; and incorporating their religious practices in war rituals would have also secured their confidence.

If in Darrang district it was important for the upper caste chronicler of *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, with the approval of the Darrang Raja, to remember the old ties between the Koch (commoners) and the Rajbanshis (royalty), towards the west of Kamrup the association with the term Koch would not have been always desired. Buchanan wrote that in '*Koch Vihar*, (Coos Beyhar R), but all remembrance of the Koch is disagreeable to its princes, and at their capital all additional appellations given to Vihar are considered as exceedingly uncourtly'.[44]

B. H. Hodgson, *Essay The First On The Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál Tribes* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1847), 144.

[44] Buchanan, "History of Kamrup", 147. For a history of the Khsatriya movement among the Koch during the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth, please see Arup Jyoti Das, *Kamatapur And The Koch Rajbanshi Imagination* (Guwahati: Montage Media, 2011), 69-75. Das informs that there were mobilisations to be enumerated as Kshatriyas (Rajbanshi) in the censuses with

Reading the *Daranga Rajavamsaali* alongside Buchanan's commentary on the situation in the early part of the nineteenth century, a picture emerges of a complex web of relationship between communities. Buchanan dismissed the history attributing divine origin to the Koch kings. Based on a racialised understanding he wrote that, 'the features of both Chinese and Koch seem to me insuperable objections against the theory' that these two groups stem from among the Hindus.[45] Calling such histories as founded on 'national vanities', Buchanan attributed it to the 'natural desires' of the Koch, 'of procuring some means of being raised from the dregs of impurity'.[46] This according to him was the reason why the Koch seemed to have taken up many of the Hindu practices considered pure while abjuring their own ones considered as impure and taking up the appellation *Rajbongsis*—while other groups such as the Meches, Hajongs, Rabhas etc., were emulating the Koch in adopting Hindu practices.[47] It was no longer always possible to restrict its usage and could be strategically used by anyone desirous of upward mobility, drawing upon past kinship ties, which further led to a complex set of new

hopes of obtaining a higher castes status, often dissociating themselves from other tribes who were also desirous of upward mobility and instead opposing their efforts.

[45] Buchanan, "History of Kamrup", 144. Buchanan was refuting a theory, quoted by one Sir W. Jones, attributed to Manu, the ancient Indian law giver, where Manu seems to suggest the origin of the Chinese from Hindus based on the Parasuram story. Hindus here very much could have been used by Buchanan to connote the then dominant idea of Hindus as a racial group, which distinguished them from other 'non-Hindus'.

[46] Buchanan, "History of Kamrup", 144.

[47] Martin Montgomery, *Histories, Antiquities, Topographies, And Statistics Of Eastern India, Volume III, Praniya, Ronggopoor, And Assam* (London: W[m.] H. Allen & Co, 1838), 552. Here a chief of a group of Hajongs, near a placed called Linggimari in Rangpur district, was described by Martin Montgomery as one who "pretended to be a Rajbongsi and observed some decency", by not consuming pork and fowl, not drinking alcohol in public, and by receiving religious instruction from a Brahmin; while other members of this tribe were said to "continue the delight in all the impurities of the Pati Rabha".

understandings of identity.[48] This usage of the term Rajbanshi operated through and within groups lying both horizontally and vertically to one another, with varying degrees of adherence to a notion of acceptable practices based on prevalent notions of pollution and purity. And as such the term was found to be imbued with peculiar and localised meanings depending on the group using it in different places. Writing about the situation of the Koch in Rangpur district, Martin Montgomery mentions that that in places where the notions of pollution and purity had taken a strong grip on the Hindu population due to their large numbers, the term Rajbanshi was conferred only upon Koches who had proved to have stuck to the strictest requirements demanded by such notions.[49] But in places where there was certain amount of laxity granted to people, Rajbanshi could be used without any objections with Koch being reserved only for the most lowly; and in the Khungtaghat area, under the Bijni estate governed by a chief designated as a Rajbanshi, almost all the peasants were also called as such.[50] This seemed to have created

[48] The operational logic of these system of organising ethnicities confounded the early British officials engaged in surveying and writing of histories and accounts of Assam. John M'Cosh described in 1837 that it was largely difficult to distinguish the 'pure Assamese' from the large number of tribes, who had overrun Assam and intermarried with the Assamese. He also disagreed with a notion which seemed to have been prevalent that the Assamese were a 'degenerate and weakly race', and mentions that they have the physical characteristics of the 'Chinese'. Please see John M'Cosh, *Topography Of Assam* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1837), 21.

[49] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 544-545, 552. Montgomery mentions of certain Meches who had adopted 'Bengali languages' and 'Hindu practices' but had not been able to completely adhere to the norms of purity and as such were to not allowed to call themselves as Rajbanshis. He also wrote that:

> The Kolitas have so far not separated from the Koch, as to reject intermarriages, and frequently honour a Rajbongsi by accepting the hand of his daughter.

Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 544.

[50] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 545. Based on the papers of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton many other accounts were (re)produced during the East India Company's rule which gave accounts of the Meches, and Koches, and the adoption of Rajbanshi as a title. For instance, Walter Hamilton in 1815 wrote in a gazette:

a situation among certain section of the Koches and the Rajbanshis where they were divided into two main groups. The first, closer to adopting Brahminical practices, were generally called as *Bhokots*, and the second group were called *Goramis* described as those 'who eat pork and other abominable food, and who openly abandon themselves to strong liquors'.[51] In another zamindari estate called Mechpara, it was said that the person in charge named Mohiram Chaudhuri was in fact a Rabha – a claim apparently made by his subjects in private – but who *pretended* to be a descendent of Kshatriyas.[52] These terms to identify oneself and imagine as belonging to part of a community had enough room for many who could strategically manoeuvre into it, from the lowly fishermen, pork eaters, alcohol drinkers, and peasants, to the chiefs of zamindari estates and royalty.[53] While these processes might have started much before the nineteenth century, by its beginning it was very much in practice with its own logic, which would later frustrate the enumerative efforts of the British. Such ideas of the heterogeneity and complex intermixing of identities would go on to be reproduced in other colonial accounts of

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> The Mech tribe, from whom the tract [Mechpara] derives its name, appears to have been once more numerous than they are at present, and to have undergone great changes; at least in this territory they have wholly disappeared, and are supposed to have assumed the more elevated title of Rajbungsies. A few families of Mech, who according to Brahminical ideas continue to wallow in the mire of impurity, frequent the borders of the Rungpoor district, towards the frontiers of Bootan and Ncpaul.

Francis Buchanan, quoted in Walter Hamilton, "Measpara", *The East-India Gazetteer*, 2nd ed. (London: Parbury, Allen, And Co., 1828), 219.

[51] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 545. This is a situation described in Kamrup.

[52] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 538.

[53] B. H. Hodgson too describes this situation among the Koches and the Meches while giving identical account of the origins of the Koch dynasty. He attributed such a situation to the:

> "*character and genius of Hinduism*, which is certainly an exclusive system, but not inflexibly so [emphasis in original]."

Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál*, 144.

Assam and would find mentions.[54] All these theories would have an impact on the way communities would be enumerated and classified later on.

To further understand the complexity of these identities, which sometimes overlapped and sometimes distinguished itself, it will be illuminating to look into the example of a community called *Pani Kocch*, from the accounts of Buchanan-Hamilton, later reproduced by Montgomery and Hodgson.[55] They were described as 'unconverted Koch', living in a 'very rude state of society', whose speech and manners were different from those of the 'converted Koch', holding on to what were their primitive original practices. Itinerant cultivation with the

[54] William Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Assam* (Calcutta: Ostell And Lepage, 1841), 262-263. Robinson in his account reproduces the myth of the origin of the Koch dynasty from the Meches through the divine intervention of Shiva and the consequent adoption of the title Rajbanshi by a large number of Meches. He also mentions that the 'Kolitas', who earlier purportedly acted as the spiritual guides of the Koches and Meches, were downgraded in status as 'Sudras' when Brahmins brought in by the Koch kings took over the reins of the religious practices. In reading these kind of sources it needs to be understood that the authors were not always relying on first-hand information and had to sift through sources and apply their own 'judgement' in interpreting. Robinson in his preface had informed his readers that:

> "The sources of his [Robinson] information were further scattered in a great variety of repositories. It sometimes lay in considerable portions, but often mixed up with subjects of a different nature: and even where information relating to his object stood disjointed from other subjects, a small portion of what was useful, commonly lay embedded in a large mass of what was trifling and insignificant. *It was his task to explore this assemblage of heterogeneous things, and to separate, for his own use, what was true, and what was false* [emphasis added]".

Robinson, 'Preface', *Account Of Assam*, vi.

[55] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 501, 539–542; Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál*, 145–147. Montgomery's account of Rangpur district, of which certain areas of Goalpara were a part, was also partly based on the papers and accounts written by Francis Buchanan-Hamilton. B. H. Hodgson too borrowed from Buchanan-Hamilton for his monograph. But nevertheless again as mentioned earlier it serves our purpose here to draw a clearer picture of the complex ties of ethnicities and identities, as accounted both by the colonial officials and the local informants.

hoe, rearing fowls and pigs, brewing rice beer were some of the characteristics that were attributed to them. While being relatively unrestricted in terms of food, beef was forbidden among them.[56] Though curiously they were said to be looking up to the Garos as superiors, as they ate beef, because apparently they considered that, 'he who is least restrained is most exalted, allowing the Gárós to be their superiors', while assuming 'a precedence over the Rajbongsis, who reject most kinds of animal food'.[57] They were said to be an endogamous tribe, who followed matrilocality and transfer of property to women, and having a system of settling disputes by a jury of elders.[58] For their religious system they were described as principally worshipping two chief gods *Rishi* and his wife *Jágó* and offering sacrifices in times of distress among other occasions, such as during harvest and as offerings to dead ancestors.[59]

[56] Across sources it is found that beef consumption was not a prevalent practice – even if almost all other forms of animal food was permitted – among the tribes described as the Kacharis, Bodos, Koches, Meches, etc., who were in close contact with 'Hindus' in the plains; as compared to tribes in the hills and in this case the Garos. Even among the Dimasas in North Cachar Hills beef was forbidden. See C. A. Soppitt, *An Historical And Descriptive Account Of The Kachari Tribes In The North Cachar Hills* (1885; repr., Shillong: Assam Secretariat, 1901), 83.

[57] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo, And Dhimal*, 146; Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 540.

[58] Letting women own and inherit property was interpreted by Buchanan-Hamilton as 'gallantry' on the part of Pani Koch men.

[59] Rabhas too were said to be worshipping a god named Rishi who occupied a prime status and shared a lot of similar religious practices with the Pani Koches. They were reported by Buchanan-Hamilton as being primarily divided into two groups the *Pati* and the *Rongdaniyas*. The Pati Rabhas were said to have largely adopted 'Bengali' as a language, while the Rongdaniya retained their own. Even then, there were intermarriages between them and the adoption of Bengali by the Pati Rabhas did not necessarily mean a complete conversion to 'Hindusim'. Please see, Montgomery, *Histories of Eastern India*, 546–547. On the other hand, in 1905, B. C. Allen described the Rabhas in Darrang as having adopted certain practices, such as smearing of vermillion on the forehead of a new bride, while the Pati Rabhas were said to have gone even further to accommodate Hindu practices. Please see, B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Volume V, Darrang*, (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1905), 95.

While ideas of kinship and belonging to a community seemed to be blurry with liminal spaces in between groups, there also existed ideas which differentiated them, an idea of self which sometimes manifested themselves in marriage practices. Even as intermarriages existed between communities sometimes there were injunctions against marrying someone from outside. For instance, Buchanan-Hamilton mentioned that:

> A Rabha cannot marry a strange woman; and if his wife has connection with a strange man, he must expiate her crime at a considerable expense. If the adulterer has been a Rabha, a hog and a little alcohol are sufficient.[60]

Similarly for the Kacharis it was said that men were prohibited from marrying a woman from a tribe considered lower in the hierarchy, such as the Rabhas, with excommunication being a punishment for such an act.[61] But at the same time it was acceptable to take the hand of a Rajbanshi woman.[62]

Though the situation among the Pani Koches, Rabhas, and Kacharis are descriptions given by Buchanan-Hamilton of Kamrup districts. It would be fruitful for one to keep in mind here that he never stepped foot into Kamrup — or what was then considered as the territory of Assam — and it was through processing of information supplied to him which led to conclusions such as:

[60] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 548.

[61] But in other places colonial sources tell us that it was the Rabhas who considered the Kacharis to be lower than them in hierarchy. In the census of report of 1901, it was mentioned that the Rabhas were described as "a section of the Bodo tribe closely akin to the Kacharis, to whom however, they profess to be a little superior". Please see, B.C. Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I. Report*, (Shillong: Assam Secretariat, 1902), 142.

[62] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 550.

> Although Kamrup is considered by the natives as very distinct from Bengal; and although all its original tribes have features which, *in my opinion*, clearly indicate their having a *common origin with the Chinese and other nations that compose the great race of the eastern parts of the ancient continent* [emphasis added].[63]

This racialised understanding, underscoring the basis of distinction would also constitute an element which would go on to influence official classifications of communities, discussed so far, into tribes or castes and Animists or Hindus.

Identifying Boro/Bodo

The efforts of colonial officials and others — such as Christian missionaries — to understand and classify the Boros through censuses, ethnographic accounts, linguistic surveys, grammar books, and historical accounts contributed towards shaping the contours of the community. Through these exercises a particular form of knowledge about the Boros was created which would go on to further embed itself into the very systems that created it. It was a circulation of 'knowledges' and histories 'discovered' and interpreted by colonial officials and the institutions that they were part of that created a loop, feeding into each other's writing of reports and accounts. These reproductions and repetitions lent validation and credibility to notions that were proposed by earlier colonial officials. While looking at the processes of these classificatory exercises and a subsequent evolution of a Boro identity, it will not be the main focus or attempt to point out the veracity of the 'facts' and 'information' written in such accounts and reports — but at the same time not ignoring the likelihood or unlikelihood of certain situational realities. Rather the effort will be to go a little further to trace the way Boro identity was *perceived* and *made to be* by the whole colonial knowledge production system; to

[63] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 501.

recover how it attempted to make sense of the heterogeneity, contradictions, and overlaps with other communities while at the same time trying to recover the *essence* of being Boro.

Accounts of Boros were already making into official British reports of Assam and of areas around Goalpara in Rangpur, by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Buchanan-Hamilton's was one of the first accounts which produced fairly large amount of details. In his accounts he called them 'Kacharis'. Delving a little on the manner in which he used the term Kachari would illuminate the multiple connotations of the term itself and the manner in which such connotations were manifested. As mentioned earlier, Kacharis were described by Buchanan-Hamilton not only as part of the 'rude tribes'— engaged in primitive forms of cultivations, concentrated largely in the sub montane belts of the Duars — but also as part of a tribe that had achieved state formation and had a kingdom. When he mentioned that they had achieved a certain level of state formation, his informants were, as a matter of fact, telling him about the Kachari kingdom. Describing the Kacharis as inhabiting the eastern fringes of Kamrup and the foothills of Bhutan, he wrote of a claim apparently made by a few Kacharis that they were formerly the subjects of the king of Cachar. They supposedly even after long years of separation from their king and migration into different places still vowed allegiance to him, each family sending 1-5 rupees as a tribute.[64] Though it was conjectured by Buchanan-Hamilton that they derived the name Kachari from the place Cachar, he does not fail to mention that the proper term to refer to them was *Boro*.

To take a pause here and to try and understand the terms of nomenclature and to take into account the geography, and the entire situation itself, would be important to shed more light upon the complexities. Buchanan-Hamilton wrote this as he was describing what he called

[64] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 549. The number of such families was said to be around only 200 in Kamrup.

the aboriginal tribes of the Kamrup.[65] While it could very well be that former subjects of the Kachari kings of Cachar— while having migrated to different places which would put them in closer proximity to the Brahmaputra valley—still maintained ties of allegiance, it would be erroneous to assume the presence of Boros in the Duars (foothills of Bhutan) to such a migration. He was talking about the *eastern* parts of Kamrup, which in his imagination could have been anywhere in the east, reaching Darrang and Nagaon, and possibly even beyond. In such a case it would have been very much possible for subjects of the Kachari kings to have come up north to the plains of Nagaon into the valley plains from the hills of Cachar — or to have been residing there, for instance Hojais who spoke Dimasa.[66] Such people, undoubtedly, would have been Dimasa speakers—or some dialectical variation of Dimasa—and *not* Boro speakers.[67] In the situation where Buchanan-Hamilton was trying to make sense of 'facts' and information supplied by his informants, it can only be said that Kachari as a term of reference was already widespread and prevalent in the early years of the nineteenth century, and was casually used as an umbrella term to denote a heterogeneous group including Boro and Dimasa speakers. Though the tribute paying group of Kacharis, and the other group who were called

[65] Though Montgomery's account is being used here as a source, he had taken as his sources the accounts written by Buchanan-Hamilton, and hence the reference to Buchanan-Hamilton in the first person.

[66] W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account Of Assam. Volume I* (London: Trùbner & Co., 1879), 184. Hunter had written:

> The Cacharis living in the plains are said to have migrated into Nowgong from Cáchár during the rule of the Aham kings.

[67] In 1903 the *Linguistic Survey Of India* would note that:

> The Kacharis of North Cachar do not call themselves by this name [Boro], but speak of themselves as Dīmā-sā.

G. A. Grierson, ed., *Linguistic Survey Of India. Vol III. Tibeto-Burman Family. Part II. Specimens Of The Bodo, Nágá, And Kachin Groups* (Calcutta: Government Of India Central Printing Office, 1903), 56.

as Boros were mentioned in the same context, they were in all probability two different groups. And as such it would also be important to maintain care to see as to the context in which the term Kachari was being used in such sources — if as an umbrella term or to point towards a specific community. Here we can safely assume that Buchanan-Hamilton indeed meant the Boros—not taking into account the stray reference to tribute paying Kacharis(Dimasas) — as is evident from the description of their religious practices, which was said to be centred around the worship of what was described as the *Siju* and the female deity *Moynong*, as these are deities specifically worshipped only by them and not by any other community.[68] Similarly, a group of Meches living close to the borders of Nepal and Bhutan were also described as being similar to the Kacharis (Boros), in view of the fact that they too worshipped the Siju as a principal deity.[69]

In 1847, B. H. Hodgson wrote an account titled *Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál Tribes* which would play a very important role in shaping the idea of Boro as a community.[70] It contained a detailed section on the vocabularies used in the languages of these three communities along with what he referred to as the location, numbers, creed, customs, conditions, and physical and moral characteristics of the people. This account becomes important as it was one of the main accounts on which future ethnographic accounts, censuses, and even linguistic surveys came to rely on as an authority, reproducing passages from it, and in turn shaping the basis of enumeration and classification of the Boros. It was Hodgson's account that germinated the idea of a '*great Bodo race*', giving rise to the notion of Bodo as a larger group – racially and

[68] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 551. Undoubtedly these two deities are references to the *Sizou* plant, which is revered by Boros, and the female deity *Mainao*, both an integral core of traditional Boro religion.

[69] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 552.

[70] B. H. Hodgson, *Essay The First; On The Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál Tribes, In Three Parts* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1847).

linguistically – which could accommodate a number of other cognate groups, ethnically and linguistically. [71] He wrote:

> . . . for the Káchárians, Khasias and Gárós are, in creed, customs and languages, either identical with, or most closely affined to, the Bodo, while the Kúdi, Rábhá, and Hájóng, if not rather nominal than real distinctions (Hajing, Hojai Kachari) are but steps of the great Bodo or Mecch family, whose proper habitat be it remembered is the plains and not the mountains.[72]

Furthermore, in the same paragraph he mentions again that the Kachárians are 'demonstrably identical with the Bodo'. Even though some of his classifications, such as calling Khasi linguistically closely related to Boro, would be seen as an anomaly later, a look at the terms of reference employed by Hodgson is required, especially in reference to what he called the 'great Bodo or Mecch family'.

Hodgson was interacting with Boros who were living in what would today be the North Bengal region, a swathe of land which has Nepal on its west, Sikkim to its north, and Bhutan to its north-east. More specifically, it was with Boros living on the banks of the Mechi river which forms the present day boundary between India and Nepal.[73] Even as they were referred to as Mecches by others, Hodgson discovered that they, along with what he called the 'Kacharis

[71] This account was a part of his attempts to discover a fundamental unity between a group of people who he called as the *Tamulians*, the aboriginal inhabitants of India, contrasted with the 'Aryan Hindu'. This he set about to do with the help of anthropomorphic data and linguistic analysis. While he wrote on the vocabulary and grammar of the Boros, Koches, and the Dhimals, he took anthropomorphic data and measurements of only a Boro man, saying that, "the faintly yet distinctly marked type of the Mongolian family is similar in all three, but best expressed (so to speak) in the Bódó features and speech". Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, viii.

[72] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, 141–142.

[73] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, 152

of Kamrup', referred to themselves as Boros. The Kacharis and Meches for him were the same people as they both worshipped the same deities, viz., Sizou (Bathou).[74] It is evidently clear that he used the term Bodo in two specific contexts. First to mean a community which was referring to itself as Boro and the second to mean a larger umbrella term to include communities that had been mentioned earlier. These communities constituted the Bodo race in varying degrees of racial, linguistic, and religious affiliations. For Hodgson, Koch were therefore former Boros who disliked any affiliation as such with their former selves and had adopted Bengali as a language.[75] The Rabhas were said to be, 'merely the earliest and most complete converts to Hinduism', similar to the Hájóngs, who supposedly were horrified 'at being confreres in speech or usages with the Bodo'.[76] Even as Bodo was used as an umbrella term, Hodgson also used it specifically, as he wrote:

> I do not however, at the present include the Gárós, or Rábhás or Hájóngs among the Bodo, who[Bodos] are now viewed as embracing only the Méches of the west and the Kacharis of the east and south.[77]

Hodgson was also aware and well informed by other colonial officials—such as Major Jenkins—of the fact that Boros had settled in different parts of Assam and all along the foothills of Bhutan along with cognate tribes and hence claimed:

> Thus the Bodo race extends from Tipperah and the country of the Kúkis on the south-east, to Morung and the country of the Kichaks to the north-west, circling

[74] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo,* 142. That the Kacharis and the Meches call themselves as such and his opinion that they are the same, was put in a footnote.

[75] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo,* 108. Hodgson called Koch forms of speech as corrupted Bengali and in a footnote mentioned that he was unable to get a sample of the original Koch language.

[76] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo,* 152.

[77] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo,* 152.

> around the valley of Assam by the *course of the Dhansri*, en route to the north, though Major Jenkins assures me that Bodos may be found even east of that river in the Assam valley [emphasis in original].[78]

Along with the idea of a greater Bodo race, the wide geographical spread of a linguistic group affiliated with this 'great race' also came up. At the time of his writing the account, he mentions certain figures, such as Tularam—a former official in the Kachari kingdom in Cachar district—as Bodos who had held certain amount of authority.[79] But according to Hodgson, Bodos had a greater 'political consequence' (authority) in the past which declined as the later Koch kings followed what he called the, 'illiberal Arian maxims of Viswa Sinh', as a result of which the Bodos were driven to the margins, both socially and geographically, as they now lived in forests.[80] The idea of invading 'Arians' also helped to further Hodgson's point about the racial distinctiveness of the Boros and the *Tamulian* race from other Hindus. So even as the Koch would sometimes deny relationship with the Boros and others, Hodgson had no doubts about

[78] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, 152.

[79] Soppitt, *Kachari Tribes*, 9–10. Tualaram was an official in the employ of the last Kachari kings when the kingdom was annexed in 1830. The British acknowledged his independence and granted him sovereignty over north of the Barail range till his death in 1854.

[80] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, 153. Viswa Sinh the first Koch king. Regarding the scattered locations of what Hodgson called the Tamulian race, of which Boros were supposedly a part, he wrote:

> "My belief is, that most of the Tanulians, on the Arian conquest, retired to the mountatins and jungles, and that those who remained were reduced to helotism and became the artisans of the Arian Society, such as we see them. Ages afterwards some of them passed into the fastnesses and wilds occupied by their Tamulian brethren, in freedom, and fierce defiance, for the most part of their Arian enemies."

Hodgson, *Koch, Bodo*, 156.

the Koches being Boros in former times, as they had more racial similarities with the Boros and not so much with the 'Hindus'.[81]

While laying foundation for further advancement of the idea of Bodo as a larger racial category, Hodgson's ideas was to find both acceptance and challenge from later ethnographers and census officials — but not ignored. In 1859, Robert Gordon Latham in a chapter on the Koch, Bodo, and Dhimal in his *Descriptive Ethnology*, reproduced a fair amount of Hodgson's ideas and passages.[82] But he would go on to emphasise that they exhibited an 'intermixture of Hindu and Himalayan elements: sometimes of language, sometimes of creed, sometimes of blood'.[83] For Latham, the 'Hindu' influence on the physical characteristics of Koch, Boro, and Dhimal were seen to be as strong enough so as to be able to hide the real ethnic characteristics of these people. But in 1866 George Campbell wrote of his encounter with Meches living on the forested foothills of Sikkim and Bhutan in the following manner:

> I understand that these people are the same as the Bodos of Hodgson, who are of an Indo-Chinese family. I shall rank them and other similar tribes as 'Borderers' and now only notice them for the purpose of comparison. They are

[81] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, 149. He strongly believed that there were similar physical characteristics between the two groups, and went on to describe the peculiar physical features of each as he thought was the case. He also wrote:

> In other words, the physical type in *all* the Tamulians, (of this frontier atleast) tends to oneness. A practised eye will distinguish at a glance between the Arian and Tamulian style of features and form—a practised pen will readily make all the distinction felt—but to perceive and to make others perceive, by pen or pencil, the physical traits that separate each group or people of Arian or Tamulian extraction from each other group, would be a task indeed! [emphasis in original].

[82] Robert Gordon Latham, *Descriptive Ethnology. Vol I. Eastern And Northern Asia—Europe* (London: John Van Voorst, 1859). 92–124.

[83] Latham, *Descriptive Ethnology*, 93.

> described as very Mongolian or Indo-Chinese in feature, fairer than the Hindus and of a yellow tinge, taller and larger than the Nepalese cultivators, addicted to spirits and to smoking opium.[84]

This he wrote, as he was of the opinion that Hodgson had wrongly classified the Boros as belonging to the Tamulian group, when in fact they did not share any similarities with whom he called the 'aborigines of South India'.[85] Subscribing to Hodgson's idea of a Bodo race, Campbell also described the people of Cachar district as being the same as the Meches of the Duars.[86]

Early Censuses: 1872 and 1881

By 1872 when the first census was conducted, the concept of a 'Bodo race' was more or less in place, but imbued with all sorts of ambiguities and complexities. The reports were further shaped by Edward Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology Of Bengal* published in the same year. The census report of 1872, in describing the section of Boros living in the Bengal Duars, also borrowed again from Hodgson. It wrote of the Meches there as belonging to the 'same stock as the Bodo or Kachari race'.[87] In the provinces of Assam, the Kacharis— identified with the Bodo of Hodgson—were said to have been once the ruling race, now scattered and losing their language in the process of adopting Hinduism.[88] A number of communities from Assam were also incorporated into this Bodo race namely the Chutiyas, Lalungs, Bihiyas, and Deoris. The inclination to incorporate Chutiya as a part of this race was as a result of Dalton's

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[84] George Campbell, "Ethnology Of India", *Journal Of The Asiatic Society, Part II 1866, Special Number, Ethnology* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press,1866): 50

[85] Campbell, "Ethnology Of India", 48.

[86] Campbell, "Ethnology Of India", 149.

[87] H. Beverley, *Report On The Census Of Bengal 1872* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press,1872), 180.

[88] Beverley, *Census Of Bengal 1872*, 201.

classification.[89] Dalton mentioned about the different communities a little more comprehensively—for instance he had a very detailed description of the Garos calling them the 'primitive type' of the 'great Mech Kachari, or Bodo nation'.[90] In the case of Chutiyas—said to have held power previously in upper Assam—though Hinduised to a great extent, Dalton cast doubts about their 'Aryaness'. According to him, their skin complexion and facial characteristics 'militated against the theory of their Aryan origin'.[91] The situation of the Koches, though similar at times, was often ambiguous. In one place, he called Koches (Rajbanshis) as cognates of the Kacharis, Meches, and Garos, with different 'skin complexions', but 'darker'. He cites a certain Dr Campbell, who had described the Koches to have had a 'Hindu physiognomy'.[92] But Dalton firmly placed the Koches among what he called

[89] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology Of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872), 1–2. He used Kachari and Chutiya interchangeably.

[90] Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 58.

[91] Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 78. The 'Deori Chutiyas' were also 'discovered' to have had linguistic affinities with the Boro and Garo. And if the language spoken could be said to be the 'original' language of the Chutiyas then could be placed within the Bodo race.

[92] Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 90. This Dr Campbell also apparently commented that the Meches were fairer than the Koches. Dalton's own note written in 1847 read as:

> It is remarkable that whilst the facial line of the Garos is nearly vertical, in some of the Kocch tribes I have observed it exceedingly angular, though with as little prominence of nose as in the Garo tribes. The upper line along the forehead continuing in the Kocch tribes in one direction to the extremity of the upper lip, then suddenly receding to the bottom of the jawbone in the most unintellectual form imaginable.

Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 90.

the 'Dravidian stock'.[93] The census report of 1872 too cited him as an authority to justify its own classifications to distinguish the Koch from the Mech, and the Kachari.[94]

The ambiguity regarding the classification of communities and invention of racial-linguistic categories such as Bodo race, should also be seen alongside the ways in which colonial officials were trying to make sense of the heterogeneity prevalent in the province of Assam in the nineteenth century. While the categories of Hindu and *Others* created much ambiguity—the word 'Hindu' was, 'used in a two-fold sense, implying a distinction of race as well as of religion'—there was also the issue of 'race' to contend with in Assam.[95] 'Assamese' as a people were seen as a 'mongrel' race by both Dalton and the census of 1872. The census report said:

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[93] Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 92. Arguing for placing Koch among 'Dravidian stock' he wrote:

> Physical attributes are after all the most indelible indications of race. Even where blood is mixed, the source of the different streams may be often traced, one or the other fitfully dominating in different generations. . . . The Koch appear to me equally out of their element amongst the Lohitic tribes, and from all that I have been able to glean from regarding them, it seems more likely that they originally belonged to the dark people whom they resemble . . .; in short I consider they belong to the Dravidian stock.

[94] Beverley, *Census Of Bengal 1872*, 183.

[95] Beverley, *Census Of Bengal 1872*, 129. This census divided people into religious groups of Hindus, Mohammedans, Christians, Buddhists, and Others. The definition of Hindus and Others created ambiguities in classifications. Beverley regarding this wrote:

> "In the absence of any definition of the term *Hindu*, it is possible that some tribes have been shown as such who might more fitly have been included under the heading of *Others*. The word 'Hindu' is used in these forms in a two-fold sense, implying a distinction of race as well as of religion [emphasis in original]."

He further wrote:

> "It will be understood, then, that I place no great confidence in the table in which the population is classified according to religion, so far as the two classes of *Hindus* and *Others* are concerned [emphasis in original]."

Beverley, *Census Of Bengal 1872*, 130.

> At the other extreme of Bengal, we find another distinct nationality in the Assamese—a race speaking a language very similar to Bengali, but largely tainted in descent by the mixture of Indo–Chinese blood. The valley of the Brahmaputra has been the scene of frequent revolutions, by which one tribe has succeeded to another, and each has left its traces on the character and physique of the present inhabitants. The purest Assamese, it is believed, are the Ahoms of the Seebsaugor district, but few have kept their lineage undefiled; and the present inhabitants of the province may be described as a *mongrel* race with Ahom, Chutiya, Koch, Bodo, and Aryan blood in their veins [emphasis added].[96]

This racial ambiguity in turn was also tied to the *semi-Hinduised* state of certain communities described as 'aboriginals'.[97] In fact, Hodgson in 1847 had not failed to notice these ambiguities and had written:

> I should add, that it is a mistake to suppose the mass of the population in the *valley* of Assam to be of Arian race. I allude to the Dhékrás or common cultivators of the valley, who, as well as the Kácháris and Kocch of that valley, are Tamulians, as is proved beyond a doubt by their physical attributes, and in despite of that Bengálí disguise of speech and customs, which has misled superficial observers [emphasis in original].[98]

As a means to reconcile the ambiguities of race and religion in Assam, Dalton through a reading of Hindu mythologies and ancient texts postulated that Assam—before the visible

[96] Beverley, *Census Of Bengal 1872*, 152. In fact, according to the census the 'up-country Hindustanis of Bihar', were decidedly more Aryan than any other people in Bengal.

[97] Beverley, *Census Of Bengal 1872*, 147.

[98] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, 141.

presence of the racial and linguistic influences of the 'non-Hindu', 'non-Aryan' upon its inhabitants— was colonised by 'Hindu Aryans'. He wrote:

> I believe we have good grounds for supposing that Asam[sic] or Kamrupa was amongst the earliest established of the Eastern Aryan settlements,—Bhagadatta, king of Kamrup, is mentioned as a warrior in the Mahabharata and in the antiquities, and traditions of the country, § and we have proof of its having passed through several phases of faith,— Budhism, Sivism, and Vishnuism,— and indications of many fierce struggles for ascendancy by the different sects.[99]

This Aryan settlement or ancient Kamrup was supposedly run over by 'barbarian' hordes of Kacharis, Bodos, Chutias, Lalungs, and Meches who unseated the Aryans and established their own rule, but in the process adopted the language and customs of the Aryans. As a proof of the remnants of the Aryan Hindus, the example of Kolitas were cited.[100] Such a theory found a way to explain the racial and linguistic intermingling of 'Hindus' and 'Others' and reconcile the seemingly Hindu practices of communities such as Kacharis, Ahoms, and Chutiyas, among

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[99] Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 79.

[100] Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 1. Dalton claimed that even as these tribes dislodged the Hindus, the Hindus retained their 'mental superiority' and were successful in imparting their religion and way of life upon these tribes. Dalton inferred that Kolitas were the remnants of the earliest Aryan settlers of the Assam valley, who took many Bodos into their religious fold. But he cautioned against putting the two together as the Kolitas supposedly had distinct observable Aryan origin. He further wrote of them as:

> They are not only themselves a good-looking race, but they are the people to whom the Assamese population generally owe the softening feature, which has so improved their Mongolian descent. The Kolitas exhibit a greater variety of complexion, and, on the whole, are not so fair as the Ahoms and Chutias or as the people of the hills, but they have oval faces, well-shaped heads, high noses, large eyes, well–developed eye-lids and eye lashes, and the light, supple frame of the Hindu.

Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 79.

many others, with their 'Mongoloid', non-Aryan, non-Hindu, physical characteristics.[101] In this context it should be understood that by the beginning of nineteenth century itself anthropometry and racialised ideas of categorising humans on a vertical hierarchical level had already been adopted by most officials engaged in ethnographic and enumerative processes.[102] These theories along with that of Aryans dominating over aboriginals and displacing them would largely go on to shape the way reports would be written and data interpreted. Regarding the reading of such colonial sources, underlined with theories of racial supremacy, Susan Bayly makes the point that though they may seem 'abhorrent to us today', they need to be engaged with to understand the trajectory and shaping of, and relationship of Indians themselves with these classificatory practices.[103]

As the categories of Aryan and non-Aryan based on physical features and physiognomy came to the forefront, the concept of a non-Aryan language as spoken by the non-Aryan races was not far behind. In 1877, E. L. Brandreth read his journal article, "On The Non-Aryan Languages of India", at a meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society, in which he stated that his objective was to give a brief sketch of these languages. This work was supposed to be an addition to what Max Müller had done some twenty-three years ago. In the light of new material and information collected, it was also supposed to be a refinement of certain errors in Müller's

[101] If elsewhere the census of 1872 called the Ahoms 'purest of the Assamese', they were seen as 'semi–Hinduised aboriginals'. Described originally as a 'Shan people by extraction', they were said to have entered into marriage alliances with the locals they had conquered and adopted their religion, language, and customs, so much so that they could not then be distinguished in their habits from the Hindus except in their physiognomy. See Beverley, *Census Of Bengal*, 202.

[102] For a history of how anthropometry made way into colonial ethnographies please see Crispin Bates, "Race, Caste And Tribe In Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry", in *Concept Of Race In South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 219-259.

[103] Susan Bayly, "Caste And Race In the Colonial Ethnography Of India", in *Concept of Race In South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 215-216.

work. In the first category of non-Aryan language group Brandreth specifically clubbed together, Kachari, Garo, Pani-Koch, Deori-Chutiya, and Tripura[sic].[104] These languages according to him were not really different languages since they were all supposed to be mutually intelligible, separated if at all only by dialectical differences. In including these different 'dialects' in a single group, the wide geographical spread of this group was acknowledged. In the west, Pani-Koch as the remnant of the original tongue of the Koches was spoken in Northern Bengal, Kachari would dominate in the Assam valley, Deori-Chutiya would inhabit the eastern parts of Assam, while Tripura towards the south of Assam would reach all the way to Chittagong.

In this section a detailed look will be attempted to try and understand the extreme complexities the census of 1881 had to cope with regarding the classification of communities constituting the Bodo race. Taking up from the census of 1872 it attempted a much more detailed exercise, but had to grapple with ambiguities in various ways. The inability to classify communities neatly was often acknowledged by the census report itself, with doubts being cast about the accuracy of the returns. These ambiguities that arose was partly because of the way religious, caste, tribal, and speech, practices overlapped and interacted with each other. But it was also because of the very framework — the idea of Bodo race in this case — with which the census was trying to make sense of these complicated and fuzzy relationships. Though these relationships probably would not have been 'complicated' for the people themselves. These ambiguities and arbitrary use of terms of reference in the report also tells a lot about the manner in which categories were being conjured up by colonial officials in their quest to achieve neat classifications.

[104] E. L. Brandreth, *On The Non–Aryan Languages Of India* (London: Trübner & Co.,1878), 14.

The census of 1881 racially divided the population of Assam into four groups, largely following the idea of Aryan vs non-Aryan binary. The first three were the 'Bodo', 'Shan tribes', and 'Tribes of the mountains east of Bhutan', all classed as belonging to the non-Aryan group, while the 'Hindus' constituted the last. Now declared as the oldest inhabitants of the valley, Bodo according to the scheme of classification became numerically the largest, even more so than the Hindus. Their total population was calculated at 875,233 while the Hindu population was fixed at 857,450.[105] This resulted in Bodos comprising one–third of the entire population of what was considered then as Assam. The Bodo group was further sub-divided into three based on the perceptions of their affiliation to Hinduism. In first sub-division, called '*Uninfluenced by Hinduism*', Kachari, Mech, Lalung, Hajong, and Garo (plains) were placed. Rabha, Madhahi, Mahalia, Sarania, and Totila, were placed in the second as '*In the process of conversion*'. Thirdly as part of '*Wholly converted'* category were the Chutiyas, Koch and Rajbanshi. Numerically largest were the Koch and Rajbanshi at 336,730, followed by the Kacharis at 265,413. To these figures if Kacharis of North Cachar—who were called 'Bodos of sorts'— and the Garos of the hills were to be added the total population of 'Bodos' would have been close to a million people.

While the census credited Hodgson as the first person to use Bodo as a 'generic' term to denote this idea of a race in itself, the criteria for the membership of this race was based on a mixture of language, religious practices, physical characteristics, and also history. It needs to be understood here that the census was not a process which was being conducted in ideological isolation. Colonial officials were talking to each other and also to various others in the larger colonial enterprise such as missionaries. As such, the account of Bodo in the report was heavily influenced by unpublished manuscripts of a Boro grammar book shared by Sidney Endle—an

[105] *Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881* (Calcutta: Office Of Superintendent Of Government Printing, India, 1883), 63–64.

English missionary working among the Boros of Darrang District—with census officials.[106] Through the manuscript, the census officials were aware that Boros spoke of themselves as Boro or *Boro-fisa*.[107] Endle's grammar book shows that by then he had gained a high level of proficiency in Boro, with the ability of a native speaker to differentiate the nuanced differences in speech patterns of different villages of Darrang district. As such he would also have been able to understand and 'make sense', however little, of the scattered accounts of languages described such as Garo, 'Hill-Tippera', Mech.[108] In his manuscript, Endle postulated that the Kacharis (Boros) dominated the whole of Brahmaputra valley. As evidence he took recourse to linguistics, and made the point that Kacharis/Bodos/Boros left behind traces of their language in important geographical landmarks. He noticed that names of many rivers in Assam being with the prefix 'Di', citing the examples such as Di–hing, Di–bong, Di–bru, Di–hing, Disang, Di–puta, Di–soi, Di–ju, Di–mu Di–mangal, Di–krang, Di–kurai, Di–puta, and Dima–gasum.[109] Taking into account that the Kacharis of North Cachar referred to themselves as

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[106] *Report On Census Of Assam 1881*, 67. In a footnote the report acknowledged the contribution of Sidney Endle.

[107] Sidney Endle, *Outline Grammar Of The Kachari (Bårå) Language As Spoken In District Darrang, Assam* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), vi.; *Report On Census Of Assam 1881*, 67. 'Boro-fisa' literally translated means 'children of Boro'

[108] Though 'Hill Tippera' would not be used today and the correct name for the language would be Kok-Borok, it is reproduced here as Endle mentioned it. Regarding the affinity of this language with Boro he wrote:

> A hurried examination of the "Specimens of the Languages of India" (published at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1874), pages 186–217, has led me to the conclusion that even the language described as "Hill Tipperá has very much in common with the Kachári of Darrang, and may indeed be regarded as virtually the same form of speech.

Endle, *Grammar Of Kachari*, vii.

[109] Endle, *Grammar Of Kachari*, iv. In the languages of, what present day linguists classify as the Boro-Garo group, 'Di', 'Ti', 'Dwi' and many other variations, literally means water. In Boro *dwi* means water and when prefixed before *ma* or *sa* to form *dwima* or *dwisa*, denotes a river. Cf., Bodhisattva Kar, *What Is In A Name? Politics Of Spatial Imagination In Colonial Assam* (Guwahati: Omeo Kumar Das

Dimasas, he could make a connection to Dimapur, where ruins of the Kachari kingdom were to be found.[110] Following this the census report could speculate the past dominance of 'Bodo race' and wrote:

> Thus it is noteworthy that the names of not a few of the principal rivers in the Assam Valley begin with the syllable "di", which is perhaps the Káchári word for water (dai, di) . . . But however this may be, *the evidence of language points very strongly to the inference of some ethnological relationship with Kácháris and the Garos, as well as the races known under the different names of Dhimal, Chutiya, Koch, Mech, &c.*, all of whom are to be found in the western districts of the Assam Valley or the adjoining territories of Eastern Bengal and Koch Behar [emphasis added].[111]

The census could now link ethnicity (race) and language. It reproduced few samples of comparative vocabularies of Kachari (Boro) and Garo along with basic grammatical rules of both to prove the familial ties. Lalungs, described as Kacharis of the south bank inhabiting the foothills of Jaintia Hills, too could be 'proved' linguistically connected to the Kacharis.[112] But the report did not have any comparative vocabulary for Lalung. It only cited the Lalung term for god *midai* a close equivalent of Boro *mwdai* for the same. They were said to be more or

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Institute of Social Change And Development, 2004). 29–30. Kar talks about the re-imagining of Assam as a part of the larger Indian tradition in the early twentieth century, for instance, how the Vedic river of 'Drisadvati' 'corrupted' into Dihing. Here we have an example of contending opposite theories of the landscape of Assam, Aryan vs non–Aryan, Hindu (Vedic) vs non–Hindu.

[110] Endle, *Grammar Of Kachari*, vi. Endle was informed by C. A. Soppitt, a sub–divisional officer posted in North Cachar, that Dimasas there referred to themselves as such. Furthermore, Endle also speculated that *Dhimal* — Hodgson's Dhimals — could be a derivation of Dŭímál, an etymological play on the Kachari *di* (water)

[111] *Census Of Assam 1881*, 67.

[112] *Census Of Assam 1881*, 71.

less similar to the Kacharis — though also described as less 'stalwart' and their 'race characteristics less plainly marked'.[113]

But other ambiguities remained, race and religion could not be neatly delineated. The Rabhas though classified as 'in the process of conversion' to Hinduism, were thought of as closer to the unconverted Kacharis (Boros) than the Lalungs were, in terms of their physical features.[114] But for the Koch and Rajbanshi, even as they were called 'wholly converted Hindus' among the Bodos, the census report acknowledged the shaky grounds of such classification saying, all the Koches may not have been of a 'pure Bodo descent', and that in-fact many may not have had Bodo ancestors at all.[115] Similarly grouping of Chutiyas under the Bodo race too had its own incongruities. The report described them as having established a state at Garhgaon before the advent of the Ahoms and ultimately being defeated by them. They were subdivided into four groups, 'Hindus', 'Ahoms', Boráhi, and Deori, the first two said to

[113] *Census Of Assam 1881*, 72. Their supposed physical 'inferiority' was attributed to the 'more relaxing climate of the jungle and swamps under the low hills of the south bank, as compared to the open gravelly plains midway between the mountains of Bhutan and the Brahmaputra'.

[114] *Census Of Assam 1881*, 73.

[115] *Census Of Assam*, 63. But the resulting anomaly that should have resulted in numbers, through an actual decrease in the number of Bodos would have been offset by, "the large number of Bodos by race who have escaped classification as such, because they are Musalmans by religion". On the history of conversion and transformation of the Koch kings and their subjects, Hodgson had written:

> Hájó the founder, having no sons, gave his daughter and heiress to a Bodo or Mécch chief in marriage; . . . Nevertheless the successors of Hájó speedily abandoned that policy, casting of the Mecch (Bodo) with scorn, and renouncing the name of their own country and tribe . . . in favour of the Arians . . . In a word, Visva Sinh, the conqueror'' grandson. with all the people of condition apostatised to Hinduism . . . so that none but the low and mean of this race could longer tolerate the very name of Kocch, and most of these, being refused a decent status under the Hindu regime, yet infected, like their betters, with the disposition, to change, very wisely adopted Islám.

Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo*, 144.

be Hinduised.[116] While the fact that a sub group of Ahom was put within Chutiya again shows that communities were not bound by impermeable boundaries—especially since Ahoms were seen racially belonging to the Shan tribes, along with Khamtis and Shans. The primary reason why Chutiyas were classified as Bodos was because of the linguistic affinities of Deoris with Kachari, (this was of course following Dalton and Brandreth). So confident was the report of its own understanding, rather than of locals, it claimed that the connection with Kacharis was, 'unknown to themselves[Deoris], and indignantly denied if suggested'.[117] But despite these the classifications stood on shaky grounds and acknowledged the unreliability of the returns for Hindus. It conceded that a 'sound basis' had not been 'laid for a comparison of the religious statistics of the present with a future census'.[118]

Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned here that in the years between the censuses of 1881 and 1891 these classifications were starting to have tangible implications in governance. In 1876 and in 1879 W. W. Hunter had published his voluminous statistical accounts of the districts of Bengal and Assam respectively. In the account on the 'Kuch Behar state', Hunter mentioned Koches (Rajbanshis) as *semi–aboriginal* tribes who had come to constitute a Hindu caste group.[119] Similarly, in the accounts of Assam districts too, he designated them as 'semi–

[116] *Census Of Assam 1881*, 75–76.

[117] *Census Of Assam 1881*, 77.

[118] *Census Of Assam*, 36. It cited the example of Kacharis and Meches who would be called as Koches and Saraniyas as they gradually progressed along the ladder of conversion. But the report stated that for all practical purposes the Kacharis and Meches as long as they are called as such, they should be thought of as professing a creed alien from Brahmanism.

[119] W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account Of Bengal Volume X. Districts Of Dárjíling And Jalpáigurí, And State of Kuch Behar* (London: Trübner & Co., 1876), 255.

Hinduised aborigines'.[120] In 1889, a case of dispute over ancestral landed property was brought up before the Calcutta High Court.[121] Both the parties involved belonged to the Koch community from 'Nowgong', Assam. The court held that the Koches, though aboriginals, had given up their 'rude habits and customs and embraced Hinduism', and as such the case would be decided on the basis of the Hindu Law of Bengal School, overturning the appeal of one of the parties against the implementation of the Hindu law. As a justification for its decision the court cited Hunter's description of the Koches in Nowgong district as aboriginal converts to Hinduism.[122]

(Re)reading Histories of Bodo Race

As mentioned earlier a reading of history was also employed in the making of an idea of a Bodo race. It was seen as a part of a historic race which ruled various parts of Assam, notably in the east in the form of Chutiya kingdom, who were unseated by the Ahoms and engaged in confrontations with various other kingdoms. The 'facts' surrounding this history was interpreted by C. A. Soppit in his *An Historical And Descriptive Account of the Kacharis of North Cachar Hills* and to make sense of the speculated 'kinship' ties among groups of Bodos or Kacharis.[123] His attempt was to provide an explanation through a reading of history as to why people of this 'race' were scattered all over Assam. Acknowledging the difficulty of a quest to find the origins of Kacharis, he took the help of oral traditions prevalent which seemed

[120] W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account Of Assam Volume I*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1879), 29, 114, 186, 235, 237, 307.; W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account Of Assam Volume II*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1879), 31–32.

[121] *Dino Nath Mohunto v. Chundi Koch,* in Calcutta High Court (July 30, 1889). https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/5721afad607dba2e3c88930e . Accessed on 6/6/2021.

[122] Hunter, *Assam Volume II*, 186–187.

[123] C. A. Soppitt, *An Historical And Descriptive Account of the Kacharis of North Cachar Hills* (1885; repr., Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Department, 1901).

to suggest that the origin of the Kacharis was somewhere in the hills north of Brahmaputra.[124] This seemed to fit in seamlessly with the understanding that the Chutiya kingdom was pushed further down by the Ahoms sometime in the sixteenth century and eventually to the south bank of the Brahmaputra, first in Dimapur and subsequently to Maibong from where the Kachari kingdoms sprang up. But even as the Kachari kingdoms spread down towards the south of the Brahmaputra valley, he speculated that a large number of Kacharis were left behind, spreading all over Assam and intermingling with different communities; and that through this intermingling and migration the communities such as Garo, Boro, Mech, Lalung, and Hajong came into being and even contributing to the ranks of the Koches.[125]

(To further our understanding of the overlaps and complexities of identities a minor deviation from our analysis of Soppit's theorisation of a larger Kachari race is required. Soppitt was using Kachari as a term to mean the Dimasa speaking people of North Cachar Hills. Kachari again was also used to denote the Boro speakers in the plains of Assam, whom he

[124] Soppitt, *Kacharis*, 1. For further analysis of Dimasa oral histories of their migrations in recent years please see Uttam Bathari, "The Kamrupa State as They Remember: Interpreting Dimasa Social Memory", in *Studies On Dimasa History, Language And Culture Vol. I*, ed. Monali Longmailai (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2017), 16–40.

[125] Soppitt, *Kacharis*, 2. For more colonial sources which try to explain the 'separation' of Boro and Dimasas please see Sidney Endle, *The Kacháris* (London: Macmillan And Co., Limited, 1911), 9–10. Endle tried to find if there was any memory, or tradition among the Kacharis of Northern Duars, of being subjects of the Kachari kings of Dimapur, of which he could find none. But he narrated a story, supposed to have taken place during the defeat of the 'Chutiya Kacharis' at the hands of the Ahoms. As the Kacharis, now defeated, were making way across the Brahmaputra, their crossing was interrupted as the water, which had moved away to make a shallow passage, came back rushing and washed the people away. As a result of which people were scattered and separated, with some managing to cross over to the south bank, who became the Dimasas. Sidney Endle, though he called this story a result of the 'oriental love for the grotesquely marvellous', also thought that it had certain 'historic value', as a metaphor for the 'closing scenes in the protracted struggle for supremacy between the Ahoms and the Chutiyas (Kacharis)'.

called the Bodos. For the Kachari language spoken in the plains he describes it as a slight deviation from the 'pure dialect' in use in North Cachar. This deviation was to emphasise the multiple ways in which terms were employed in official colonial accounts.)[126]

Taking a cue from Endle, Soppitt too claimed that the apparent Kachari names of many rivers in Assam is only but a natural corollary of the migration and spread of Kacharis and their language. The stress on linguistic similarities helped Soppitt to assert that the Dimasas and the Boros were 'proved to be one and the same race'.[127] But the difficulty that arose was how could one reconcile the differences in the religious, social, and cultural, practices of the two.[128] Soppitt explained that such a situation of different practices arose when there was a split between the two communities during the migrations. The Kacharis (Boros) who settled in the plains of Assam were said to have separated from the aristocrats and the 'law givers'.[129] As a result of which they had to improvise laws to govern themselves and borrow the practices of their 'conquerors' resulting in distinct practices. This helped to explain the common origin of both, and hence could be termed together as Kacharis.

Census of Assam 1891

Though this census attempted to 'refine' categories, it found it difficult to shake off the older formulations and continued to meander through ambiguities like its predecessors. The census

[126] The ambiguity of the term was admitted by Soppitt himself when he wrote:

> The origin of the term 'Kachari' is somewhat doubtful. The name is unknown to the people themselves, who speak of each other as [Bada], [Barafisa], or Bodo in the plains of Assam; and as Dimasa, Dimasazao, in the North Cachar Hills and in the Cachar district generally. Barafisa signifies the children of Bara, while Dimasa means the descendant, or son, of the head or big river.

Soppitt, *Kacharis*, 12.

[127] Soppitt, *Kacharis*, 79.

[128] Soppitt, *Kacharis*, 81–85.

[129] Soppitt, *Kacharis*, 79.

of 1881 had enumerated the whole of 'Bodo race' as Hindus by religion even though it had three internal groups based on the nearness to or distance from Hinduism.[130] In 1891, there was separation in the returns of the religion of the 'aboriginal tribes', as Hindus and Animists according to what individuals of a particular tribe claimed.[131] As such, it also resulted in the re-positioning of communities according to their perceived closeness or distance from 'Brahmanical' Hindu practices. The classifications of this census was also effected by H. H. Risley's evolving 'scientific' ideas on the racial basis of caste. In the same year that the census was published, Risley also published his *Tribes And Castes Of Bengal* — which was to be 'circulated for criticism' among officials.[132] Risley had complete faith in the scientific basis of his methods and as Bernard Cohn describes, "had a theoretical axe to grind . . . which was that 'race sentiment' was the basis of caste system".[133] Based on this science he had distinguished three main races in India, Aryan, Dravidian, and Mongoloid— the first two placed at extreme ends of the race spectrum and the last in between.

Through anthropometrical measurements, opinions, and his own observations, Risley was convinced that the 'Koch tribe'—despite their infusion with 'Mongolian blood'— were a 'Dravidian tribe' and as such they were 'unquestionably non-Aryan and non-Hindu.[134] Despite this, 'Bodo' was mentioned by Risley as a 'sub-tribe' of the 'Koch tribe' in Northern and

[130] *Census Of Assam 1881*, 35.

[131] E. A. Gait, *Census Of India,1891. Assam. Vol.I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Department, 1892), 82.

[132] H. H. Risley, *The Tribes And Castes Of Bengal. Ethnographic Glossary. Vol.I.* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1892).

[133] Bernard S. Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia", in *An Anthropologist Among The Historians And Other Essays*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 247.

[134] Risley, *Tribes And Castes Vol. I*, 491–492. Their admixture with the Mongolian races were conjectured to be a result of them being driven to the 'swamps of North and north eastern Bengal' from the Gangetic valley by advancing Aryans, where they met these races.

Eastern Bengal.[135] Therein lay an ambiguity/contradiction in Risley's classifications, as he also had classified the Meches as a 'Mongoloid tribe'.[136] Similarly, with the Dhimals, Risley cited a certain Fr. Müller who had referred to them as of the 'Lohitic' races— while he himself mentioned them as belonging to the 'main stock as the [Kochh]'.[137] As such, Risley's 'scientific' classification could not place Koch, Bodo, Mech, and Dhimal together and they occupied different positions along the spectrum of race.

This uncertain placement on the spectrum of race would result again in the subjective enumeration of communities in the census of 1891. For instance, the case of the classification of the Koch would show how the making of Bodo race was 'arbitrary'. Gait in the report mentioned that, the Koch-Rajbanshis in Bengal had been 'proved' to be 'nearly allied' to the Dravidian race by Risley, but that the situation in Assam demanded a further investigation into nuances.[138] This also followed the 'debate' around the classification of Koch that had been going on for some time, with Dalton—who had classified the Koch as Dravidian—disagreeing with Hodgson's classification of Koches as a part of the 'Mongolian' Bodo race. Gait in his report did not take a distinct positon, though he mentioned, citing historical sources and through his own 'observations', that the descendants of the Koch royalty such as the Raja of Darrang

[135] Risley, *Tribes And Castes Vol. I*, 140.

[136] H. H. Risley, *Tribes And Castes Of Bengal. Ethnographic Glossary. Vol. II* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 86.

[137] Risley, *Tribes And Castes Vol.I.*, 225. Max Müller spoke about a 'Lohitic class', comprising of languages such as, Burmese, Dhimal, Kachari-Bodo, Garo, Mikir, Dophla, Naga tribes, Kuki among many others. See Max Müller, *Lectures On The Science Of Language* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1862), 271, 281, 333.

[138] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891*, 212–213.

and the Raja of Beltola had 'unmistakably Mongolian features'.[139] He opined that in the context of Bengal that, 'it[Koch] has mixed so much with the Dravidian races around it that its physical type would in any case have partaken largely of the Dravidian element'.[140] Nevertheless Gait in the context of Assam was convinced of the dominance of the Mongolian element among the Koches. This according to him was because they had been 'surrounded by Mongolian tribes' and had intermixed with them. Gait argued that it was 'desirable to treat the Koch as allied to the Bodo, and through them as a branch of the Mongolian stock'.[141] But, most importantly, in the midst of all these ambiguities, Koch in the census was classified as a *Hindu caste* group. It was seen as heterogeneous caste group, into which converts to Hinduism from among tribal communities—such as the Kacharis, Garos, and Lalungs, to name a few—were admitted rather than as a specialised functional caste.[142] The census divided this caste group into further sub-divisions, which were, Kamtali or Bar Koch, Saru Koch, Heremia Koch, Saraniya Koch, and Madahi Koch.[143] These groups represented the various stages of the conversion of tribes to the ranks of Hinduism – Saraniya and Madahi generally implying the early stages of conversion. As such, all these sub-castes were classified as Hindus, but with the acknowledgement that

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[139] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891,* 213. The report cited Muslim sources dealing with the twelfth century invasion of Bengal by Bakhtiyar Khilji, where Koch and Meches were mentioned as 'Mongloid' tribe. It also cited Ralh Fitch, a visitor to the Koch kingdom in the sixteenth century who had written:

> The people have ears which be marvellous great, of a span long, which they draw out by devices when they be young.

Gait contended that since this was still practised by the 'Mongolian Garos', though now abandoned by the Koches, they (Koches) too must have been 'Mongoloids'.

[140] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891,* 213.

[141] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891,* 213. Regarding the history of the Koch, Gait opined that they were the only one, among many other Bodo tribes who rose to power, whose 'traditions merit the name of history'.

[142] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891,* 213.

[143] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891,* 216.

they were ‘allied’ to the Bodo group. Linguistically, the census of 1891 classified the Bodo group consisting the languages Chutiya, Garo, Hajong, Kachari, Kachari Hojai, Koch, Lalung, Mech, Rabha, and Tipperah.[144]

Twentieth Century

The later censuses, in the twentieth century, was carried on within the framework of the previous ones in their mode of classifications of the Bodo group, with some minor ‘refinements’. For instance, in 1901 the report stated that Boro and Dimasa were in fact two different languages. But here again it needs to be reiterated the kind of ambiguity that would characterise such classificatory exercise. The ambiguous usage of terms such as Kachari and Bodo were something that could not be done away with, demonstrating the complex and multiple connotations of the terms themselves. As an example of one such ambiguous usage a passage describing the Boros and Dimasas is being reproduced here. The census report of 1901 had written:

> In 1891, Bodo and Dimasa were shown under the same head (Kachari), but Dr. Grierson informs me that they have less in common than French and Spanish, though they both no doubt had a common ancestor. Chutia is the language of the old Chutiya kingdom, which was overthrown by the Ahoms at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and appears to have preserved the oldest characteristics, and to most nearly approach the original form of speech from which the Bodo group was derived; it and Kachari represent the two extremes, the least developed and the most developed of the two group.[145]

[144] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891*, 155.

[145] B. C. Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1902), 88–89. Dr. Grierson would go on to author the Linguistic Survey of

The same report also described the Kachari (P) tribe as:

> A section of the great Bodo tribe, which at one time seems to have been in occupation of a large part of the valley of the Brahmaputra. They are found to be as a rule living on the grassy plains at the foot of the Himalayas, and are most numerous in Kamrup and Darrang, but the Kachari kingdom once extended into the Surma Valley.[146]

The above two passages quoted clearly show that while Bodo was being used as a term to mean a larger group — Bodo race — it was also used to mean a smaller group (Boro) within Kachari. At the same time, Kachari was also used to designate a smaller group — Boro — within the larger group of Bodo race.[147] In this context, it also needs to be mentioned here that in 1891 itself the census report had noted that Kachari as term was used indiscriminately by the 'Hindus' to many communities. They were not very sensitive towards the accuracy of the term and used it as a term even to refer to the Rabhas.[148]

India which would give further currency to the idea of a larger Bodo linguistic group. But Grierson was also acutely aware that Boro was a self-referential term for who were generally called as 'Mech', 'Mes' or as Kacharis. He also understood that the differences among languages in the Bodo group went beyond mere dialectical variations — for instance he classified Boro (which he called 'True Bârâ', Kachari or Mech), and Dimasa (Hills Kacharis), as two different languages and not as mere dialects of a particular language. Along with them Grierson put Rabha, Lalung, Garo, Trupuri, Koch, and also Moran among the Bodo group. See Grierson, *Linguistic Survey Of India*, 1–191.

[146] Allen, *Assam Report 1901*, 132. The (P) indicated 'Plains' Kacharis or Boros.

[147] Here it would be important, to again remember that Sidney Endle too used Kachari to refer to the Boros (Bårå) of the Darrang Duars. The title of the book itself was *Outline Grammar Of The Kachari (Bårå) Language As Spoken In District Darrang, Assam*.

[148] Gait, *Census Of Assam 1891*, 232. As such the Rabhas were often enumerated as Kacharis (Boro speakers).

B. C. Allen, the census writer of 1901, later, in 1905, in his gazetteer of Kamrup district again wrote of the Boros in the following manner:

> The Kacharis or Baras (*mispronounced Bodo*), as they call themselves, belong to the great *Bodo tribe*, which is found, not only in the Brahmaputra Valley but in the Garo Hills and in Hill Tippera, south of the Surma Valley [emphasis added].[149]

He speculated a history for the Kacharis — Bodo group — saying they were the descendants of an Indo-Chinese people who were spread all over Assam. He compared this historical past with a reference to a Dimasa 'prayer'(myth), which supposedly recalled the origin of the Kacharis at the confluence of the Dilao (Brahmaputra) and the Sagi and from where the 'Kacharis' proceeded to Kamakhya temple and subsequently to Dimapur.[150]

This search for an 'origin' was also because of the colonial 'desire' to have a discernible history for people as a part of its project to classify them. Different variations of the theory of origin for Bodo race—described in the previous paragraph—had gained acceptance among colonial officials and others by the twentieth century. Writing in 1909 J. D. Anderson too speculated the historical origins of the Bodos in such a manner, based upon their physical characteristics which supposedly pointed towards an origin 'beyond the mountains to the N.E. [north east] of the Assam valley.[151] In fact, Anderson in his attempt to define Bodo went a step further than his predecessors and held that the 'generic term Bodo' had by then become a term, 'for convenience, applied to all peoples speaking the Tibeto-Burman languages', even

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[149] B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers. Volume IV. Kamrup* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1905), 77–78.

[150] Cf. Uttam Bathari, "The Kamrupa State as They Remember".

[151] J. D. Anderson. "Bodos", in. *Encyclopaedia Of Religion And Ethics, Volume II*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1909), 753–755.

speculating that the 'semi-Hinduized caste of Chandals and Namasudras' were of Bodo origin.[152]

By the early decades of the twentieth century the concept of a Bodo race in Assam, and in parts of Bengal was already a dominant framework of understanding among individuals who were producing monographs and histories of the Bodo, Boro, or Kachari, as to how one chose to call them. Sidney Endle's *The Kachari* was published in the year 1911 posthumously after his death in 1907. Even though it was titled 'Kachari', it was primarily about the Boros living in the Duar areas—Kariapara Duar, Buri Guma Duar, and the Khalling Duar—of the then Darrang district. In the introduction of the monograph it J. D. Anderson called it a 'monograph treating that branch of the *Kachari race*', living in these duars—even if he very well understood that the subjects of the monograph referred to themselves as Boro.[153] Endle too very well knew that the Boros of the Duars called themselves as such, but even he, all throughout, decided to call them as Kacharis. As such he oscillates between using Kachari as a specific term for Boros and sometimes to talk of a larger Kachari/Bodo race. For instance, at one place he talks about the probability of the, 'internal and tribal organisation of the *Kachári (Bara)* race', on a totemistic basis.[154] But the description that he gives of the 'internal organisation' is specifically of the Boros, which are not to be found among other tribes. This monograph when published must have been well received among colonial officials and it even attracted the notice of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss and elicited a review from them. In their review they made the

[152] The census report of 1901 had speculated that the Abors, Miris, and Daflas were probably connected to the Bodo race. See Allen, *Assam Report 1901*, 120.

[153] Endle, *The Kachári*s, xv.

[154] Endle, *The Kachári*s, 24.

presumption based on their reading that the, 'Kacharis were an ethnic group of Tibeto-Burmese origin . . . whose language is called Bodo or Boro'.[155]

Edward Gait's *A History Of Assam* is another work which probably took the concept of a Bodo race to a larger audience. His book is replete with references and examples of this race. It can be seen as a culmination and a compilation of all that had been speculated, researched, and written about Bodos, beginning with Buchanan-Hamilton's accounts in the nineteenth century. *History Of Assam* also becomes important as it was the first to attempt a 'scientific historiography' and became a template for historians and also others to imagine the (re)making of Assam and Assamese. Regarding this, Manjeet Baruah in an article informs his readers that S. K. Bhuyan—a pioneering historian of Modern Assam, who started his career during the colonial period—was inspired by Gait's methodology of using the *Buranjis* (chronicles) to write a history of Assam.[156] The introduction to the *Kachari Buranji* edited by S. K. Bhuyan, first published in 1936, is also a testament of the extent to which the theory of a Bodo race had influenced even local intellectuals and perhaps the larger reading public. This *Kachari Buranji* (chronicle) was primarily a record of the dealings and relationship of the Kings of Cachar with the Ahoms. But in his introduction Bhuyan links this 'localised history' with the larger Bodo race.[157] Citing Gait, Bhuyan had also argued that there were evidences to prove that 'Kachari or Bodo sovereignty' was present in Assam in different epochs.[158] In the context of the

[155] E. Durkheim and M. Mauss, "Review of Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*" in *L'Année sociologique (1896/1897-1924/1925), 12e Année (1909-1912),* 375–379. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27883495 .

[156] Manjeet Baruah, "At the frontier of imperial history: revisiting Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*", *Asian Ethnicity* 18, no. 4 (June 2016): 452–469, https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2016.1194741.

[157] S. K. Bhuyan, ed., introduction to *Kachari Buranji*, 4th ed. (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 2010), i–xvi.

[158] Gait had previously written:

influence of Gait's historiography, Manjeet Baruah reminds his readers of Bishnu Rabha—a communist peasant leader—who had made use of this idea of the history of a Bodo race to imagine an alternative present for Assam. According to Baruah, Rabha's imagination of such a history of Assam dominated by Bodo 'heritage' can be seen as his 'critique of one trend in nationalist writing . . . that emphasized the Sanskritic connection of Assamese heritage'.[159]

Conclusion

But the most important influence of the theory of a great Bodo race was on the people themselves — people and communities who were presumed to be part of that race. Various Bodo and Kachari organisations came up in first half of twentieth century, which often brought together on common platforms the Sonowal Kacharis, Boros, Rabhas, Lalungs — with all their divergent heterogeneity. *Bibar*, a magazine published by Boros of Goalpara district from Dhubri town, was emblematic of such attempts to form alliances of different Bodo groups. It gave space to the concerns of communities such as Lalungs and Sonowal Kacharis, apart from those of Boros. Observing such attempts to form alliances S. K. Bhuyan had written:

> The bonds of union among the Kacharis whether living in Cachar or outside that district are community of blood and language as well as of religious rites and customs. There is no record of any attempt to fuse the scattered Kacharis into one political unit . . . *Racial consciousness is*

> Having regard 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 Mlechcha kings mentioned in the old copper-plate inscriptions belonged to the Kachari or some closely allied tribe [emphasis added].

Gait, *History Of Assam*, 248.

[159] Baruah, "At the frontier of imperial history". Also please see Bodhisattva Kar, *What Is In A Name?*

> *mainly a product of the modern times*. The Kacharis or Bodos all of whom are now living under British authority have initiated movements for the unification of the race, Bodo conferences are a common feature of the political and cultural life of Assam [emphasis added].[160]

Even in the present, a critical look at the way Boros imagine their (political) history shows how the idea of a great Bodo race persists — among organisations and individuals, and in sanctioned 'official historiography'. In one such instance of articulating a political identity, the manifesto of the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) refer to the 'Boro people' as comprising, 'Borok, Dimasa, Deuri, Chutia, Tiwa [Lalung], Sonowal, Rabha, Garo, Hajong, Koch and Boro', all sharing a common ancestry.[161] According to the manifesto the coming of the British and the annexation of the 'sovereign territories of King Erakdao [last Kachari King Gobind Chandra] . . . General Tularam', was the beginning of the loss of political power of the Boros. Similarly, the 'Indian annexation of Koch Behar and Tripura' was seen as the 'last nail on the coffin of their [Boros] sovereignty', subsequent to which the Boros were victims of 'Indian occupation and colonialism'. To take another example of a political organisation which has at its core the idea of a Bodo race would be the powerful All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). Their understanding of Bodo race and history — similar to that of the NDFB — imagines Bodos as autochthones of the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley, who had exercised their sovereignty in the past. A section of a history brochure published by ABSU on the occasion of its 50th year observation read:

> Starting from Mahiranga Danava's rule which is believed to have been around in 2500 B.C. till the eclipse of the independence of Kachari

[160] Bhuyan, *Kachari Buranji*, iv–v.

[161] *The Manifesto of the National Democratic Front of Boroland*, (1st Edition 1998, 2nd Edition 2002), unnumbered pages.

> Kingdom (1854), Koch Behar (1949) and Tripura (1949) several hundreds of kings and rulers of different dynasties of this ethnic group ruled in different areas of the region in different time. Earlier they had one identity with the generic name of either Mlechcha or Asura or Danava or Kirata or Kachari or Bodo for the entire ethnic group, however in the present days they are known with the different ethnic names – such as – Bodo or Boro, Borok, Barman Kachari, Chutiya, Dimasa, Deuri, Dhimal, Hajong, Mech, Modahi, Koch, Rabha, Sonowal, Thengal and Tiwa. [162]

The imagination and concept of a Boro nation — for both the NDFB and ABSU — is broad enough to accommodate and make spaces for the histories of the Kachari Kingdom, and the princely states of Koch Behar, and Tripura. This was while the NDFB was engaged in an armed struggle against the Indian state and the ABSU was involved in a 'democratic' movement for greater autonomy, *primarily* for the Boro speaking people of Assam.

'Official' histories of the Boros too, make room for the incorporation of Dimasa histories. The most common example of this would be the story of Sombadan, of whom there are multiple accounts in the colonial sources — for the sake of consistency Soppitt's account will be referred to here.[163] Soppitt records the incidents surrounding Sombadan in the year 1882.[164] For some time, Sombadan had established himself among Dimasas in North Cachar Hills as a figure who could cure physical ailments through his magical healing powers. He, along with a dedicated band of followers, built a village at Maibong, one of the erstwhile capital

[162] Pratibha Brahma, ed., *History in Glimpse, All Bodo Students Union (1967–2017) A Journey of Struggle* (Kokrajhar: All Bodo Students Union, 2017), 4.

[163] Soppitt, *Kacharis*,13–15. Other colonial sources refer to him as Sambhudan. Please see *Report on the Administration of Assam, 1911–1912* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1913), 44.

[164] An account of Sombadan was given by Soppitt as to corroborate his argument that the Dimasas were a people given to superstitious beliefs.

of the Kachari (Dimasa) kings. According to Soppitt's account confrontation with the British started when Sombadan started to forcefully extract labour from people. The British issued summons to Sombadan, which were rejected. Instead a threat of 'annihilation' was issued, if the British were to come up to Maibong. Major Boyd with few soldiers went up to Maibong and in the confrontation that ensued some of Sombadan's followers were killed. Major Boyd died later, as result of a blow he had received from one of the rebels. Sombadan himself was killed the next year in a confrontation with troops. This story has been consistently reproduced in Boro text books as an example of a Boro (Bodo) individual who fought against the British for independence. A brief look will be taken at one such text.

"Zwng Baolangnai Sase Zwhwlao" (A Forgotten Hero) is an essay piece in a Boro text book for the ninth standard, published by the Assam Government.[165] Prasenjit Brahma, the writer of the essay, portrays Sombadan as an individual who was trying to free the *Boros* from the British. After the annexation of the Kachari kingdom by the British, Boros are described to be in a sorry state of affairs. Adding to their woes, the British had supposedly encouraged Christian missionaries by giving them a free hand to proselytise among the Boros. According the essay, the missionaries came down like 'vultures in droves'. Sombadan was much concerned about the spread of Christianity and the fact that the Boros now had to 'lick the dust

[165] Prasenjit Brahma, "Zwng Baolangnai Sase Zwhwlao", *Gwdan Khonsai Bidang, Bathi Bahagw, Gu Thakhwni Thakai, Class IX*, 7th ed., ed. Madhuram Boro (Guwahati: ASTPPCL, 2016), 33–41. For more examples of an essay and a play on Sombadan in Boro textbooks please see Manorajan Lahari, "Zwhwlao Sombudhon Phonglo", in *Suzunai Bizab (For Higher Secondary 1st Year)*, 6th edition, ed. Madhuram Boro, Birupaksha Giri Basumatary and Umesh Boro (Guwahati: ASTPPCL, 2019), 42–49; Mangalsingh Hajoary, "Swmdwn", in *Bithorai Dainthi Bahagw (For Class VIII)*, 6th ed., (Guwahati: ASTPPCL, 2017), 52–58.

off the soles of the British'.[166] Therein, he gave the call for 'Boro-Bima' (Mother Boro) to liberate the Boros.

The concept of a Bodo race also has potential political implications in the present, depending on the way it is employed. One such issue is related to the demand of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by the Koch-Rajbanshi community in Assam. This is also connected to the demand of separate 'homeland', *Kamatapur*, for Koch-Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Assam — which mostly overlaps with the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and comprises parts of North Bengal. The demand draws on memories, past glories, and symbolism of the Koch kingdom. In a book titled *Saga of the Bodos,* Hira Charan Narjinari recalled a controversial incident, centred around the ethnic origins of the Koch Kingdom. In 2013, the president of an organisation called World Bodo Historical Society (WBHS), asserted that Herya Mandal — father of Viswa Sinha, the first Koch king — was a Mech.[167] This statement was opposed by members of the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), the then ruling party in the BTR, on the grounds that association of the Koch Kingdom with Mech or Boro would presumably hurt the sentiments of the Koch-Rajbanshi community — who saw the Koch Kingdom as a part of their own heritage. In this context, it is important to point out that historian Amalendu Guha too had described the Koch Kingdom as 'obviously of Bodo-Kachari origin'.[168] Meanwhile, the Koch-Rajbanshis themselves have also utilised their 'association' with the idea of a larger Bodo race as a strategy to justify their demands for ST status. In memorandums of various Koch-

[166] In Manorajan Lahari's essay the story is told as a Dimasa story, and Sombadan as a Dimasa character, but it is placed in the larger context of a Bodo race. Also in Lahari's version Sombadan is portrayed as concerned with the incursion of what is referred to as 'Hindu Cult' and 'Sanskrit Culture', rather than with Christianity. There are also no records or sources of missionary activities among the Dimasas during that time period. See, Lahari, "Zwhwlao Sombudhon Phonglo".

[167] Hira Charan Narjinari, preface to *The Saga Of The Bodos,* (Kokata: Self Published, 2014), vii.

[168] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 17.

Rajbanshi organisation to the government, they traced their descent from the Bodos or 'Bodo-Kacharis'. And since these two communities are Scheduled Tribes in Assam, they demand that they too should be accorded such a status — notwithstanding the fact that in West Bengal the Koch-Rajbanshis are accorded the status of a Scheduled Caste (SC).[169] In this context, Hira Charan Narjinari criticises the 'hankering after' ST status by the 'advanced' Koch-Rajbanshi as a futile and unnecessary exercise. Instead, he suggests that the Koch-Rajbanshis should recognize their origin and launch a movement for 'reconversion' to Bodo. [170]

The above discussion of history writing, histories taught in classrooms, and political and ethnic mobilisations, all point towards a continued influence of colonial knowledge in the post-colonial landscape. Though it is tempting to see it as a total continuation of colonial hegemony, the strategic deployment of such histories also need to be taken into in the picture. For Narjinari, the inclusion of Koch-Rajbanshis into the Bodo fold will result in the swelling of Bodo/Boro population, which could potentially and radically alter the physical and political geography in the demand for greater autonomy where numbers play a big role. Nevertheless, such an understanding can only be read as a deliberate or a calculated political reading of histories, or as a manifestation of the *powerful grip* that colonial historiography —the idea of a Bodo race — continues to have over present understandings of the past, thus making it possible for Boros to 'appropriate' histories, a charge often labelled on Boros by Dimasa scholars. It has become impossible to imagine a Boro nation without talking about, and taking

[169] *The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 1996, Report of the Select Committee, Presented to Lok Sabha on 14 August, 1997* (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1997), 3–4. https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/757628/1/jcb_11_1997_scheduled_tribes.pdf . Accessed on 5/6/2021.

[170] Narjinari, *Bodos*, 162–164. Narjinari opines that the 'reconversion' to Bodo would be an easier way out for the Koch-Rajbanshis to claim a ST status and that the Bodos would be 'happy to welcome them back to the fold'.

into account, the medieval Kachari states during different time periods at Dimapur, Maibong, and Khaspur. As one takes a southward turn at Karigaon, from National Highway number 27, towards Kokrajhar town, the 'capital' of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), a larger than life statue of Dwimalu — a mythical hero associated with the Kachari Kingdom — greets travellers, along with signs of 'Welcome To Kokrajhar'. The placement of the statue of a Dimasa mythical hero in an area, which historically was never under the Kachari Kings but under the Koch kings or the Mughals, demonstrates how colonial theories continue to inform present day politics and often becomes unquestioned practices.

Perhaps some light can be thrown into the ambiguous mix of colonial theory and claims in the present by looking at what modern linguists have to say. Scott-DeLancey, a linguist, proposes that some form of Proto-Bodo-Garo came about in the Brahmaputra valley prior to the establishment of the Kamrupa state by Indo-Aryan groups. And as a lingua franca for communities — who sometimes were not necessarily native speakers of this proto language — it spread extensively all over the 'North East'.[171] This lingua franca, he suggests, was taken up later on by the rulers themselves to establish a stable polity, while they themselves spoke an Indo-Aryan language — resulting in a bewildering mix of languages, 'ethnicities' and exchanges of social, religious, and cultural practices over millennia.

[171] Scott DeLancey, "On the Origins of Bodo-Garo", in *North East Indian Linguistics Volume 4*, ed. Gwendolyn Hyslop, Stephen Morey, Mark W. Post (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press India, 2012), 3-20.

Chapter 2: "Following one's head": Conversions and Agency

This chapter tries to tell the story of Boro conversions to Christianity. In doing so it tries to place the conversions to Christianity within the larger framework of quest for progress. As was briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter, unlike Brahma Dharma, Christianity did not have much influence among Boros in towns such as Goalpara or Dhubri. And in Darrang it was in the sub-montane tracts of the Duars. But the chapter will try to demonstrate that much like the aspirations of Brahma Dharma adherents, Christianity too, to a large extent, was seen as a means to achieve 'progress'. In doing so, to get an overarching larger view, it becomes essential to try and understand the situation in the Duars. As such, it becomes important to historicise and understand the peculiarities of these areas. Understanding the Duars' history and context also becomes important because these areas now form a part of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), a semi-autonomous region within Assam.[1]

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part through an examination of the lives of Boros residing in the Duars, attempts to illustrate the extent to which the socio-religious life of the Boros, while bearing imprints of the varied traditions of Hinduism, remained distinct in

[1] These Duars were divided into what were known as the Bengal and Assam Duars. Eleven of these were in the territory of Bengal, and seven were in what was then then considered as the province of Assam proper. At present the seven Assam Duars all fall within the BTR. The Duars, which fell under Goalpara, also fall within the BTR. In addition to that, Kariapara Duar region — which formed a part of tract called as the extra-Bhutan Duars, sometimes under the control of the Towang Raja, a direct tributary of Lhasa — forms the easternmost part of the BTR in Udalguri district. Please see, Alexander Mackenzie, *History Of The Relations Of The Government With The Hill Tribes Of The North-East Frontier Of Bengal* (Calcutta: Home Department Press, 1884), 9–10; Ashley Eden, "Report on The State of Bootan, and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64" in *Political Missions to Bootan, comprising the Reports of The Hon'ble Ashley Eden,–1864; Capt. R. B. Pemberton, 1837, 1838, with Dr. W. Griffiths's Journal; and the Account by Baboo Kishen Kant Bose* (Calcutta: Bengal secretariat Press, 1865), 8–9.

many respects. For the colonial administrators, the Boros of the Duars inhabited an 'in between' status, in the middle of the 'savage' hill-dwellers and civilised valley dwellers, therein describing them as 'semi-savages'. The second part of the chapter will discuss the encounter of Boros with Christianity, in the Duars and also elsewhere. Significant conversions took place mostly in the first half of the twentieth century, in a context where Boros were actively engaged in socio-religious reforms as well as growing in modern political consciousness. Through examples of individual conversion stories, this section will seek to argue that conversion for Boros was one among the many deliberated and consciously negotiated acts, as they strove to access modernity and consolidate their identity.

Boros in the Bhutan Duars

Boros resided in different parts of Assam, as they still do today. This included the floodplains of Brahmaputra (both the northern and southern banks) as well as the sub-montane tracts with passes (Duars) to the hills—both in the north and the south of Brahmaputra. However, in this section of the chapter, it is those Boros residing in the Bhutan Duars that will be the subject of discussion. Bhutan Duars was a 'liminal' space where the political and physical geographies of states based in the hills (Bhutan) and the riverine plains (Ahoms and Koch) overlapped, both in cooperation as well as competition. This was a space where the political and cultural power of the state reached its limits. But this is not to suggest that the Duars were a kind of *terra incognita*—far from it, they were the places where thriving exchanges of commodities and people took place between the hills and the plains.[2] But the liminality and the lack of an complete control by any state entity, also created a situation where people of the Duars were less affected by the overwhelming religious and cultural influences of both the hills and the plains. To be precise neither Buddhism nor Vaishnavism (Brahminical Hinduism) had absolute

[2] Please see, Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011).

sway over the people living there creating a situation where people could continue their 'own' practices. Again this is not to suggest an absence of 'state', but to stress the peculiarity with which these places were governed. There was some sort of a shared sovereignties by the opposing polities of the Brahmaputra valley and the Bhutanese.[3] From the time of British incursions into Assam and the beginning of the surveys it did not take long for the British to realise this peculiar nature of the Duars.[4] As such — coming back to the question of specifically looking at the Duars — the Boros (Kacharis) and others could relatively be 'free' from the influences of the cultural and religious practices at the core of the Brahmaputra valley to a certain extent. This was something acknowledged by R. Boileau Pemberton in 1839 when he wrote:

> The Kacharee tribes, by which these Dooars are principally inhabited, appear to be a race quite distinct from the aborigines of the Assam valley . . . and speak a

[3] For instance, it was noted by Ashley Eden a British envoy to Bhutan that:

> . . . the Bootanese were never able to obtain absolute possession of the Assam Duars like they had of those of Bengal but they so harassed the Assam Princes by Frontier outrages and incursions that the Assamese were only too glad to purchase security by making over their seven Dooars to the Bootanese in consideration of an annual payment.

Eden, "Report on The State of Bootan", 8. He further reported that:

> These engagements were somewhat of a complicated nature . . . In the first place, though the five Kamroop Dooars were held exclusively by the Bootanese, and were subject to no interference with their management either by the Assamese or ourselves, the two Durrung Dooars, Booree-Goomah and Kalling, were held under a very peculiar tenure; the British Government occupied them from July to November in each year, whilst the Bootanese held them for the remainder of the year.

Eden, "Report on The State of Bootan", 10.

[4] See Bodhisatwa Kar, "Framing Assam: Plantation Capital, Metropolitan Knowledge and a Regime of Identities, 1790s to 1930s" (PhD diss., JNU, 2007), 24–102, http://hdl.handle.net/10603/29561 . Accessed on 5/8/2021.

> language peculiar to themselves: they are found within the British limits, as well as in those Dooars over which the Bootan Government exercises control.[5]

Two things are made clear from the above statement. The distinctiveness of the 'Kacharee' and they being the 'principal' inhabitants of the Duars.

When the British took over Assam and subsequently started their campaigns to gain possession of the Duars, they also noticed that it had inherited the 'unsatisfactory relations of the Assamese with the Bootanese'.[6] This was part of a picture seen through a lens which showed Assam and the Duars as being chaotic.[7] The subsequent British possession of the Duars was not a smooth affair. It led to many skirmishes, confrontations and Bhutanese 'raids' into British territories. The raids were often very intense and reached deep into British territories.[8] Naturally, they were a result of the dispossession of fertile tract of land that had for long supported the economy of Bhutan.[9]

The Bhutanese raids are part of the social memory of Boros living in the Duars, which exist in the form of different oral narratives. A dominant strand that remains in these memories is one of Bhutanese 'oppression' tinged with 'fear'. But these have also been interpreted to articulate the idea of Boro 'sovereignty'— an idea of a Boro homeland in the Duars. These

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[5] R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report On Bootan*, (1839; repr., Calcutta: Indian Studies, 1961), 13.

[6] Eden, "Report on The State of Bootan", 7.

[7] Kar, "Framing Assam", 26. Kar contends that:

> Ever since the Welsh Mission, chaos remained the key official term to explain the plurality of political forms and alignments in the expanding northeastern frontier of British India.

[8] Eden, "State of Bootan", 18–20.

[9] Alexander Mackenzie, *History Of The Relations Of The Government With The Hill Tribes Of The North-East Frontier Of Bengal* (Calcutta: Home Department Press, 1884), 13. Pemberton calculated the total revenue of Bhutan to be at Rs. 200,000, which included Rs. 40,000 collected from the Duars alone. See, Pemberton, *Report On Bootan*, 63–64.

social memories/stories revolve around individuals who defend the Boros against the oppression of the Bhutanese. One of the characters in such oral narrative is Basiram Zwhwlao, who defends Boros from the unjust extractions of the Bhutanese. The story of his exploits are also taught in schools as part of the official curriculum.[10] Birgosri and Jaoliya Dewan are two other individuals whose intertwined stories form a part of the social memories of the Boros—mostly among Boros living in the Goalpara Duars around Sidli and Bijni. Their stories too have made the transition from oral to written traditions in the form of novels and have come to represent the 'experience' of the larger Boro community as a whole, from its very particular localised context.[11] In the novels, Birgosri is described as a 'Tehsildar' and Jaoliya as a 'Dewan', both in the employ of the Bhutanese, primarily entrusted with collecting taxes on behalf of their employers. Their stories culminate in the Anglo-Bhutan wars of 1864–65, following which the Duars were ceded to the British. Though in the employ of the Bhutanese, Birgosri is imagined as a Boro warrior who was trying to establish a sovereign Mech kingdom and 'sacrificed her life for the noble cause'.[12] Likewise, Jaoliya is also said to have fought alongside Birgosri to establish a Boro kingdom. Notwithstanding, the variations in the oral narratives and in their written form, they provide a way to imagine the political situation in the Duars and consequently the condition of the Boros. For instance, Bodhisatwa Kar analysing the implication of British occupation of Duars writes:

> The slow and gradual occupation of the Duars had a tremendous implication for the surviving subjects of the Deb Raja: it turned the Raja's territories into a Hill

[10] "Basiram Zwhwlao", in *Bithorai, Dothi Bahagw, Thakhw Do'ni Thakhai* (Guwahati: ASTPPCL, 2020), 81–84.

[11] See, Bidyasagar Narzary, Preface to *The Sword Of Birgosri*, trans. Krishna Dulal Barua (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012); Bidyasagar Narzary, *Legendary Hero of the Bodo: Jaolia Dewan* (Guwahati: GBD Publishers, 2004).

[12] Narzary, Preface to *The Sword Of Birgosri*.

> State, disrupting and denying the *mobile and flexible order of circulation* between the administrative cores of state space in the hills and the surplus-producing quarters scattered in the valleys beneath [emphasis added].[13]

Boros were very much a part of this 'mobile and flexible order of circulation' in the Duars—in fact in many ways, the *core*. They were the people who comprised the 'surplus-producing quarters', who produced the food grains necessary to sustain the economy of the hills.[14]

Though British records from the first half of the nineteenth century show the Bhutanese as 'savage' raiders, the relationship between the Boros and the Bhutanese was complex and sometimes went beyond a simple, confrontational or extractive relationship. Boros, when subjects of the Bhutanese, also acted in the interest of the Bhutanese state. For instance, Jaoliya is mentioned in British sources as a Bhutanese official who took part in the raids to British territories and in the kidnapping of British subjects.[15] Pemberton's report records further incidents which show that Boros also comprised a section of the Bhutanese state's officials and subjects who were frequently labelled as 'delinquents' and 'robbers' by the British officials.[16] William Robinson had also recorded an incident involving a Kachari chief named Gumbhir

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[13] Kar, "Framing Assam", 75.

[14] Eden, "State Of Bootan", 9. Eden wrote in his report:

> The whole of this tract is inhabited by Mechis and Kacharis, the only classes apparently able to live there in consequence of the atrocities of the Booteahs and the malaria generated in these vast jungle tracts.

Also please see, Amalendu Guha, *Medieval And Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity And Economy* (Guwahati: Anwesha Publications, 2015), 14–16.

[15] Eden, "State Of Bootan", 42.

[16] Pemberton, *Report On Bootan*, 22–25. Pemberton reported the incident involving a person named Boora Talukdar. He was described as a 'Kachari chief', in charge of the 'Buksha Dooar', and was supposedly directly appointed by the Deb Raja. He was charged with conducting raids and robberies in British territories. The Bhutanese had refused to surrender him to the British, which was later effected only upon a confrontation.

Wazir, who was murdered by the Bhutias as he made his way into British territories after deciding to switch allegiance.[17]

In fact, these alliances of the residents of the Duars and the Bhutanese went back to the medieval period, during the dawn of the Ahom and Koch states. The Duars were a place where the pre-Ahom power, the *Bhuyans*—known as the *Barobhuyan*—were in frequent confrontation with the Bhutias and the Kacharis. Regarding this, Amalendu Guha contends that it was the Barobhuyan who provided protection to the various classes of people in the valley from the 'frequent Bhot [Bhutanese] and Bodo-Kachari incursions'.[18] The *Daranga Rajavamsaali* provides us with further clues of how difficult it was for state power of the plains to exercise their absolute power upon these sub-montane tracts. It mentions of a 'treaty' (understanding) between the Koch king, Naranarayan, and the Bhutanese and the Kacharis.[19] The treaty gave the Bhutanese and Kacharis the liberty to carry on with their *own* religious and cultural practices in the Duars. It also gave them the rights to make use of the lands as they wished, in return for a tribute comprising of gold and horses. This understanding between the Koch king and the Bhutias and Kacharis, among other things, point to the absence of an absolute dominance of a single state power in this region.

Even after the complete annexation of the Duars by the British, 'skirmishes' and 'transgressions' by the Bhutanese into the British territories continued. The administrative reports for the province, of the late nineteenth century into the first decade of the twentieth century show that 'exactions' and 'transgressions' by the Bhutanese continued.[20] These

[17] William Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Assam* (Calcutta: Ostell And Lepage, 1841), 293.

[18] Guha, *Medieval And Early Colonial Assam*, 51.

[19] Suryakhadi Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, eds. Biswanarayan Shastri and Bhaba Prasad Chaliha (Guwahati, Lawyer's Book Stall, 2013)63–64.

[20] For instances of Bhutanese 'transgressions' see, *Report On The Administration Of The Province Of Assam For the Year 1886–87* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1888), 4; *Report On The*

infractions were often centred around exchange of commodities between the Bhutanese and the Boros. The Bhutanese would often forcefully try and exact a more favourable deal for their salt and spices in exchange for commodities such as dry fish[21], rice, betel nuts, and cloth (endi)[22]—Bhutanese salt had become expensive as compared to salt imported from England.[23] But even during this period the old ties remained and people in the Duars did not necessarily always see the relationship with Bhutanese as an extractive one. In 1900, there were some 'complaints' regarding the workings of the barter trade between the Boros and the Bhutanese and the levy of a 'tax' by the Bhutanese called *tang*— but the Chief Commissioner, after going through reports dealing with the matter, came to the conclusion that, 'too much had been made of the matter', and that in fact, the Boros of the Kamrup and Darrang Duars did not think of the 'taxation' by the Bhutanese as a 'serious grievance'.[24]

But these relationships were also structured in a manner in which some section of the Boros had to traditionally render 'services' to the Bhutanese and the Towang Tibetans — the Kariapra Duar, presently a part of the Udalguri district, known as part of the extra Bhutan Duars was held by the Towang Rajas, who themselves were directly under Lhasa — and were called *Bohotiyas*.[25] In the pre-British period such relationships *may* have been tinged with an element

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Administration Of Eastern Bengal And Assam, 1907–1908 (Shillong: Eastern Bengal And Assam Secretariat Press, 1909), 4.

[21] W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account Of Assam Volume II*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1879), 23.

[22] The Boros of the Duars were the main producers of *eri* cloth. Please see, B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Volume V, Darrang*, (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1905), 155.

[23] *Report On The Province Of Assam For The Year 1895-96* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1896), 18.; *Report On The Administration Of The Province Of Assam For The Year 1892-93* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1893), 98.

[24] *Report On the Administration Of The Province Of Assam For The Year 1900-1901* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1901), 9.

[25] R. Boileau Pemberton, "Report On Bootan" in *Political Missions to Bootan, comprising the Reports of The Hon'ble Ashley Eden,–1864; Capt. R. B. Pemberton, 1837, 1838, with Dr. W. Griffiths's*

of coercion on the part of the Bhutanese along with a presence of co-operation and trade. But such relationships continued even into the twentieth century with consolidation of British power and the Boros no longer needing to subject themselves to the Bhutanese. A land assessment report of 1908 of the Kariapara Duar, called such Boros as 'hereditary servants' of the 'Tibetans' who in turn were described as 'masters'.[26] These people continued paying tribute to the Tibetans in the form of rice, paddy, betel nuts and leaves, and *eri* cloth. They also took care of the needs, such as accommodation and food, of the Tibetans when they came down to the plains.[27] Such practices went on even till the third decade of the twentieth century. Another assessment report of 1931 mentions the prevalence of such practices and the presence of *bohotiyas* in the Duars.[28] The fact that such relationships went on even after the consolidation of British power suggests that they were not always coercive in nature and were remnants of past ties that had been carried into the colonial period. *Khurma,* is a term sometimes used by

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Journal; and the Account by Baboo Kishen Kant Bose (Calcutta : Bengal secretariat Press, 1865), 14; *Report On the Administration Of The Province Of Assam For the Year 1897-1898* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1899), 22.

[26] J McSwiney, *Assessment Report Of The Kariaparaduar Group, Darrang District* (Dacca: Gandharia Press, 1908), 9. A report in the late nineteenth century records an incident where a Bhutanese interferes as an adjudicator in a personal matter of his Kachari 'vassal'. The Bhutanese man had forcibly taken away a woman from her husband and gave her to his Kachari *bohotiya*. See *Report On The Administration Of The Province Of Assam For The Year 1896-97* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1898), 22.

[27] It was reported that:

> The Bhutias still travel around the country and distribute small quantities of salt, chillies & c., for which they take in large supplies of paddy, more or less by force: this is a continuance of the old custom when they held the *duar*. The people are still impressed with the importance of the Tibetans by their show of state at the *durbar*, . . . and our acknowledgement of their suzerainty. . . The mauzadar . . . collects large quantities of fowls, pigeons, ducks, and rice from the rayats [for the duarbar].

[28] *Assessment Report Of The Kariapraduar Group Of Darrang District 1931,* (Assam State Archives), 7.

Boros to describe their relationship with the Bhutanese, suggesting closer ties of familiarity and 'extended kinship'.[29]

Traditional Religious Practices

This section will look into certain aspects of traditional social, religious, and cultural practices of the Boros as it had existed before and during colonialism. Religion itself was not a 'standardised' entity for the Boros. Closely related to the materiality of everyday lived realities, it did not claim a singular universal truth for itself. Instead, religious practices were marked by flexibility, accommodation and room for multiplicity of interpretations, which could also be described as 'one that was rooted in and confined to a particular space'.[30] First, a very brief look at the way religious practices and traditions have evolved in Assam.

Nayanjot Lahiri, in her book *Pre-Ahom Assam*, suggests—on the basis of epigraphic records and reading of myths—that Assam since, at least, the fifth century A.D. was well within the realm of the larger Indic-Sanskritic traditions, with its earliest Sanskrit speaking rulers connected by ties of 'blood and heritage to the traditional rulers of north India or Madhyadesha'.[31] The epigraphic records, inscribed in Sanskrit, that Lahiri relies on to construct such a past, are also interspersed with Prakrit words along with others of a non-Sanskritic origin.[32] These, Lahiri suggests, following other scholars before her, are words of 'Bodo' origin. Such a situation points to a scenario where in the early stages of state formation, the

[29] Though sparingly used in the present, Boros often used the term 'Simsa Khurma' to describe the Bhutanese and certain Tibetan tribes of present day Arunachal Pradesh, with whom they shared close ties. In the Boro language, Simsa refers to the Bhutanese and Khurma means extended family members.

[30] John Thomas, "Boulders that speak no more", *Seminar*, vol.740, (2021), 35-44. https://www.india-seminar.com/2021/740/740_john_thomas.htm

[31] Nayaonjot Lahiri, *Pre-Ahom Assam* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1991), 64–65.

[32] Lahiri, *Assam*, 105.

early rulers were 'Aryan outsiders', with the presence of local indigenous population, and a certain amount of interaction among them, which invariably would have resulted in exchange of more than linguistic practices—more specifically, religious and cultural practices. In this regard, Lahiri lets her readers know that by that period, the records show the presence of an 'all-pervasive religious attitude', with references to gods and goddesses from the Hindu pantheon.[33] Assam and its people, as such, were by no means left untouched by the larger heterogeneous strands of Hinduism.

Among the important characters from the Hindu pantheon, Siva seemed to have been particularly important and popular god. Scholars seem to be in agreement with such a portrayal of the ancient past as most epigraphs and records begin with an invocation of Siva in one or the other of his many forms. Before Nayonjot Lahiri, scholars like Bani Kanta Kakati had also highlighted the centrality of Siva in the local religious practices, both among the 'Aryanised' people and the 'aboriginals'.[34] Kakoti, in his work, divides the traditions of Siva worship into two periods. In the first phase, he suggests, Siva though popular among the aboriginals, his prominence was also contentious. Citing the *Kalika Purana*, he retells the story of *Naraka*, a mythical king, who settled 'twice-born' people in Assam, who in turn instructed Naraka not to worship any other god except Kamakhya, the penalty for which would be death.[35] In his interpretation, Kakati suggests that in such a situation Siva continued to be worshipped by the aboriginals, but was 'driven underground'. But situations change later and Naraka becomes a

[33] Lahiri, *Assam,* 122–128.

[34] Bani Kanta Kakoti, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, (1948; repr., Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1989), 10–22. For further illustration of Saivism in ancient Assam please see Maheswar Neog, *Sankaradeva And His Times: Early History Of The Vaishnava Faith And Movement In Assam*, 8th ed. (Guwhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1998), 80–82.

[35] See also Lahiri, *Assam*, 61–66. Naraka is 'considered' as the first king of the Bhauma-Naraka dynasty to have ruled in Assam. Lahiri describes him as an 'Aryan outsider'.

follower of Siva and becomes possessed by *asuram bhavamasadya* — demonic tendencies — and starts persecuting the Brahmins. In the second phase, according to Kakati, the worship of the cult of mother goddess, manifest in the worship of *Kamakhya* introduced by the 'twice-born' castes, was no longer patronised. Instead, Siva became a popular god, particularly among the non-Aryan population, and practices surrounding his worship intermixing with *tantric* ones. This phase was also characterised by what has been called as the *vāmācāra* (left-hand) practices by Kakati, connoting a 'degraded' form of practice and a general divergence from standard Brahminical notions of religious propriety.[36] These were practices related to Shiva worship which called for the 'unrestrained use of wine, women, and flesh', and with 'veritable orgies' being organised in Siva temples — practices which supposedly came about as a result of the curse of a saint upon Siva to be worshipped by his followers who were degraded to the ranks of *Mlecchas* [read: tribal groups].[37] Nevertheless, Saivism continued to be a 'living religion' and Siva himself was appropriated by different groups, in a heterogeneous religious landscape till the ascendancy of the Koch kings and even with the rise of Sankardev and his brand of Vaishnavism.[38] Saktism was another religious tradition prevalent which was also characterised by the 'left-hand' practices. Its practice demanded blood sacrifices of both humans and animals and seemed to have had a strong hold on the 'non-tribal' — Indic language speakers and caste groups — population too. Maheswar Neog in his book *Sankaradeva And His Times* cites various instances in Vaishnavite sources where such practices were mentioned. He mentions one such incident recorded in the *Kathā-Guru-Carita* where a person offered the *Devi* his own

[36] Kakati, *Kamakhya*, 19.

[37] Kakati, *Kamakhya*, 19-20.

[38] Neog, *Sankaradeva*, 81.

blood.[39] Regarding the ubiquitous practice of animal sacrifice Neog also gives examples where Sankardev's own followers sacrificed animals in his presence.[40]

Nevertheless, the rise of Vaishnavism in Assam in the sixteenth century did bring about major disruptions in the religious landscape, laying a part of the foundation in the making of an exclusive 'Assamese'. It did away with a lot of 'left-hand' practices considered as incompatible with Sankardev's brand of Vaishnavism. One such primary practice associated with different strands of Saivism and Saktism was animal sacrifice. It completely opposed blood sacrifices and did not tolerate such practices. The conversion of Madhavdev—one of Sankardev's illustrious followers—from Saktism to Vaishnavism can be seen as an example of the 'triumph' of Vaishnavism over other religious traditions. Before his conversion he was a 'staunch' Sakta, and came to Sankardev in a combative form ready to defend his tradition.[41] But ultimately he was convinced by the reasoning put forward by Sankardev arguing for the futility of such practices. Sankardev had argued that there was no need for other forms of worship when one became a *bhokot* (believer) of Vishnu-Krishna, as they were like the main root of a tree, the nourishment of which would result in the nourishment of all other parts. Such staunch opposition to prevalent forms of practices must have surely resulted in the marginalisation of, long practised and rooted religious traditions—including tribal practices—pushing them further into the periphery beginning in the sixteenth century.

By the sixteenth century the religious practices of the Boros bore discernible imprints of the influences of the various localised strands of Hinduism prevailing in the region. As discussed previously, Siva had come to occupy a place of prominence, at least among certain sections of the Boros. That this was the case is made amply clear by the *Daranga*

[39] Neog, *Sankaradeva*, 84.

[40] Neog, *Sankaradeva*, 85.

[41] Neog, *Sankaradeva*, 110.

Rajavamsaali.[42] The Koch king Naranarayan upon being instructed by Siva to worship him in the manner of Kacharis proceeded to do so. He gathered his Kachari subjects, who started to worship Siva by offering him alcohol and sacrificing various animals and birds, coupled with frenzied dancing and loud banging of drums. The *Deodhai* — priest — now possessed worked himself into a frenzy and became a medium for Siva who then announced that he was now pleased. Another reference to Kacharis in the same source pointedly demonstrates that their religious traditions contained the essential and ubiquitous usage of alcohol. Naranarayan while allowing a certain degree of 'freedom' to the Bhutanese and the Kacharis in matters of land usage, he also tells them of his policy of non-interference in matters of religion and that they could go on consuming *mod-bhaat* (literally translated as alcohol and rice).[43] It can, as such, be safely assumed that during that period, with the concomitant rise of Vaishnavism — and its influence in the royal court of the Koch kings — the religious practices of the Boros were somewhat in the margins of the mainstream religious practices prevalent in the valley, but imbued with vestiges of the past.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century sporadic accounts of the Boros appear in colonial documents which also shed some light into the kinds of religious traditions prevalent among them — a few of them will be engaged with here to describe such traditions. These sources paint a picture where the then Boro religious world had been influenced by larger Hindu traditions to an extent but also distinguished themselves with *improvisations*.

The pantheon of Boro had many gods and goddesses 'borrowed' from the Hindu pantheon. The chief god Bathou was said to have been equated with Siva in Goalpara district

[42] Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, 62–63.

[43] Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, 64.

and North Bengal.[44] Though in Darrang there seemed to have been no explicit replacement of Bathou with Siva, he was worshipped in his different avatars — *Bura Mahadeo* was a village deity. Also among the Boros of Darrang residing in the Duars, Sidney Endle recorded the presence of Kuber — a Hindu god generally associated with wealth and riches — in six different forms.[45] Hodgson too observed the presence of Kuber among his Boro subjects in the Duars of North Bengal.[46] The comparison of the list of gods and goddesses of both Hodgson and Endle also shows that though there were sometimes overlaps and similarities, there was not much of a 'standardisation'. In certain situations, an important god for a particular village or a section of people, was unimportant for others even if they were living in close proximity— for instance, a spirit called *hasung mwdai*.[47] Hodgson mentioned a long list of gods and goddesses numbering about fifty-four who were to be worshipped depending on various circumstances. It would be apt to mention here that the gods and goddesses that constituted the religious universe of the Boros were divided into two categories. First was a group called *noni mwdai* (household gods), the second *gamini mwdai* (village gods).[48] The household gods were described as 'national gods', and artefacts relating to their worship could be mandatorily found

[44] H. H. Risley, *Tribes And Castes Of Bengal. Ethnographic Glossary. Vol. II* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 88.; Sidney Endle, *The Kacháris* (London: Macmillan And Co., Limited, 1911), 82.

[45] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 38. These different adaptations of Kuber were namely Jal Kuber, Thal Kuber, Ih Kuber, Bih Kuber, Kuber Brai, and Kuber Brui. J.D. Anderson too recorded a tale about the creation of rivers among the Boros of Darrang district, where Kuber is a character of consequence. See J.D.Anderson, *A Collection Of Kachari Folk Tales And Rhymes* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1895), 3–8.

[46] B. H. Hodgson, *Essay The First On The Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál Tribes* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1847), 167.

[47] Sidney Endle, *Outline Grammar Of The Kachari (Bårå) Language As Spoken In District Darrang, Assam* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1884),79.

[48] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 35–39; Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál*, 165.

in every Boro household without exception. The pantheon of the village gods had greater room for improvisation, accommodation, and borrowings from different sources, taking in a number of gods also found in the Hindu pantheon. The accommodative nature of religious practices also went beyond supernatural beings. For instance, Endle lists Sila Rai — the brother of Koch king Naranrayan and a general in his army responsible for the many military victories of Naranarayan — as a village deity worshipped by the Darrang Boros.[49] That a past *living* hero could also be included as a god speaks a lot about the accommodative nature of the religious traditions.[50]

The flexibility of the religious practices was also often influenced by the topography and political geography of where Boros lived. Hodgson's list of gods and goddesses contained a large number connected to rivers. And since he was among the Boros of North Bengal Duars, the list had gods associated with the river Teesta, which originates in the mountains of Eastern Himalayas. Another example in the same list is perhaps more telling of the influence of geographical location on religious traditions and its flexibility is the presence of a god described as *Gongar*, who Hodgson translated as Bhutanese deity. It is a term by which Boros of Goalpara district and North Bengal referred to the Bhutanese and still do in the present. Some of the Boros in these Duars must have been the subjects of the Bhutanese, as some areas in these Duars were also under their occupation, and as such among the household deities, were also included the deity called Gongar—a sign of the importance of Bhutanese, that they were

[49] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 38.

[50] In this context Haldan Siiger records an interesting personal life story a Boro informant who narrated to him in 1950 an incident about an earthquake when people invoked Gandhi's name as a god to protect them from harm. See, Halfdan Siiger, *The Bodos Of Assam: Revisiting A Classical Study From 1950*, ed., Peter B. Anderson and Santosh K. Soren (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015), 82.

accorded a status of god, in fact a 'national god'.[51] In fact, in this regard, in 1872, Dalton had mentioned that there were supposedly a class of Boros who under the influence of Tibetans and Bhutanese were being converted to 'Lamaism' and as such referred to themselves as 'Shargiah Butias' (heavenly Bhutias).[52]

The numerous gods and goddesses present in the pantheon are called by the Boros as *mwdais*. They were beings who needed to be worshipped and propitiated with different rituals and sacrifices. The element of *propitiation* led Endle to conclusions that such religious practices are nothing but of 'animistic' character informed by 'fear and dread'.[53] In describing the Boros as animists, Endle was also simply reproducing the kind of definitions of 'animism' that were in circulation among colonial officials and missionaries alike, and used in official classifications of communities as either Hindus or Animists. These definitions exhibited a tendency to describe such practices as in a primitive stage of a naïve mind, incapable of grappling a higher truth. For instance, in the census report of 1891, Edward Gait too, while outlining the primary characteristics of animism, had written:

> . . .Then come a number of evil spirits, who are *ill disposed* towards human beings, and to whose malevolent interferences are ascribed all the woes which afflict mankind. To them therefore, sacrifices must be offered. Those malevolent spirits are sylvan deities, spirits of the tress, the rocks and the streams, and also sometimes of the tribal ancestors. . . . When a calamity occurs, one or more of these diviners, shamans, or soothsayers, is called on to ascertain

[51] That the Boros did not require a purification process for entering into a marriage alliance with the Bhutanese as they were considered their 'Gurus' or 'masters', was observed by Siiger. Please see, Siiger, *The Bodos*, 130.

[52] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology Of Bengal* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent Of Government Printing1872), 84.

[53] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 33.

> the particular demon who is offended, and who requires to be pacified by a sacrifice [emphasis added].[54]

Of course here it needs to be kept in mind that Sidney Endle, though a keen observer, was a missionary whose primary concern must have been the prospects of conversion among Boros to Christianity. Hence, as such he made direct comparisons of Boro religious practices and ideas with those of Christianity. He was of the opinion that since it was characterised by 'fear and dread', it stood in 'violent contrast' to the teachings of Christ and incapable of *love*—the gods could not love the people and the people could not in turn love the gods.[55] According to both Endle and Hodgson, Boros believed in these gods as 'preternatural agencies', who brought diseases and sufferings upon humans and a solution could be found only through 'exorcisms' and sacrifices.[56]

Notwithstanding the lens of graded hierarchy that such ethnographers and officials employed to see and describe religious practices, these observations throw open ways to imagine the underlying conceptions of how Boros themselves imagined how or what their religious practices should be in reaction to the challenges thrown up by the environment. The element of uncertainty was always present. The Duars were a thinly populated belt where diseases such as cholera, malaria, and kala azar related deaths were common occurrences.[57] The Boros living there were often seen by officials as 'immune' to these sicknesses, when

[54] E. A. Gait, *Census Of India,1891. Assam. Vol.I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Department, 1892), 93.

[55] He cited Matthew 22:37, 'Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.'

[56] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál*, 163.

[57] Between 1898 and 1902-03 there was a population decrease of 11% in Khalling Duar due to Kala Azar. Please see, "Proceedings of the Board of Revenue", in J. McSwiney, *Assessment Report Of The Khallingduar Group, Darrang District* (Dacca: Gandaria Press,1908).

others succumbed to their effects.[58] But, the Boros were not so immune to such diseases. Whenever afflicted by a particularly virulent strain of malaria, a person would go into delirium and the prognosis of such affliction would be described by a phrase *mwdai homdwng* — literally meaning that the 'spirits have taken hold of the person'.[59] Such affliction required propitiation of specific gods who were thought to cause such sickness and also required specific kinds of animal sacrifices and offerings — rice, chicken, roosters, eggs, pigs etc., according to the demands of the gods.[60] In certain cases, rivers too had to be worshipped to cure diseases. Endle mentioned a puja called *morong-puja* which was conducted to propitiate the 'cholera demon'— it demanded male goats, pigeons, fowls, and betel-nuts among many other things.[61] Though described as a demon, the Boros themselves tended to think of it as another *mwdai*, another spirit in the long line of spirits that needed to be propitiated for a healthy life and security from death. The offerings made to this spirit would then be placed on a raft and floated down the river, as the cholera causing *mwdai* was a *dwini-mwdai*—a god who resides in rivers. Endle

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[58] Pemberton's *Report on Bhutan* mentions an incident where a number of British troops succumbed to diseases in the Duars on their campaign to check Bhutanese incursions. He had written:

> A very considerable proportion of the detachment of Light Infantry which had been employed in the Bijnee Dooar, was destroyed by the extreme unhealthiness of the tract, and Zalim Sing, its gallant leader, . . . was included in the melancholy list of victims to the climate. So strong was the impression of the deadly nature of the duties of the Dooars, to any, but men born in the neighbourhood, that an additional corps, called Assam Sebundies, was raised for their performance and was almost entirely composed, either of natives of that part of the country, or of men bred in tracts similar to those, which they were now appointed to defend.

Pemberton, *Report On Bootan*, 20. For another example in colonial records where Boros are described as immune to malaria please see, W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account Of Bengal, Volume X. Districts of Darjiling And Jalpaiguri, And Kuch Behar* (London: Trübner & Co., 1876), 67.

[59] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 33.

[60] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 101–102.

[61] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 39.

observed that the sight of such rafts floating down rivers was a sign of an epidemic in the 'Kachari country' of Darrang.[62] Among the Boros of Parkijuli in Kamrup District, Siiger recorded variations of religious practices surrounding epidemics. They were seen as a result of a village member committing adultery. In such cases too, the puja conducted would be on the banks of a river. [63] Here it needs to be mentioned that propitiation of gods living in specific spots and thought to have caused diseases were not totally unique to Boros alone. The census report of 1911 also mentions similar practices among *lower caste* Assamese.[64] They too propitiated gods and goddesses in case of diseases and natural calamities and offerings of rice, eggs, betel nuts, etc., were also made to gods such as *Buradangoriya,* believed to be living in trees.

In the midst of all these, a singular feature that would stand distinctively among the religious practices of the Boros from those of their neighbours, would be the *concept* of *Bathou* prevalent among all Boros wherever they may have resided. The term Bathou has many connotations. As deity, he is the primary and most important household god, 'the guardian of the family interests and family honour', a 'national god'.[65] Frequently and consistently he was represented in the physical form through the worship of the *sizou* tree — a fact mentioned consistently in sporadic colonial accounts from early nineteenth century onwards, mentioning

[62] In the context of Darrang District, the belt between the Gohain Kamala Ali road and the hills of Bhutan were often called by officials as 'Kachari country'. Please see, B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers. Volume IV. Kamrup* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1905), 2–3.

[63] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 131. An iron hoe would be heated and people had to throw it backwards over their head. In the process the guilty individual would suffer burns.

[64] J. McSwiney, *Census Of India, 1911.Volume III. Assam. Part I. Report.*(Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1912), 42.

[65] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo And Dhimál*, 166.; Endle, *The Kacharis*, 36.; Siiger, *The Bodos*, 101.

the religious practices of Boros.[66] At times, Bathou and Sizou were also used interchangeably. The space — also referred to as Bathou — around the plant would often be kept neatly and a bamboo fence erected around it, and offerings made to keep the household safe from natural calamities and sicknesses.[67] As a chief god, he was not considered an individual who 'intentionally' brought upon misfortunes. As mentioned a little earlier, Boros believed that certain epidemics and misfortunes were caused by the transgressions of an individual such as adultery. In such a scenario, the *sizou* tree or the Bathou (as a space) could also help in detecting such misdemeanours. Regarding this, both Martin Montgomery and Sidney Endle wrote about variations in such practices.[68] Montgomery described the raising of a small heap of earth — which he called 'Siju' — where offerings were made and people swore an oath by touching the raised heap. Endle's version of the practice consisted of burying overnight a small quantity of rice at the foot of the Bathou, the sacred tree. The next day the family would gather around it. Female members who were suspected of being 'unchaste' were then made to chew the buried rice, during the course of which the guilty would upon 'fear of imminent detection' become unable to chew her portion.

Apart from these practices, Halfdan Siiger recorded conversations with informants and recorded 'chants' or phrases which give a more 'nuanced' enunciation of the concept of Bathou. One such often repeated phrase went as:

Sizou hwnw gorongba

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[66] Martin Montgomery, *Histories, Antiquities, Topographies, And Statistics Of Eastern India, Volume III, Praniya, Ronggopoor, And Assam* (London: W[m.] H. Allen & Co.), 551. Here 'Siju' was described as the heavenly creator of the world. For an example of references to Sizou plant's centrality in religious practices among Boros in colonial sources please see, Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 85–89.

[67] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 103–104. All throughout Siiger the informants of Siiger used bathou to refer to a god and also to the space around the sizou tree, including the tree itself.

[68] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 551; Endle, *The Kacharis*, 30.

Bathou hwnw bandwba

Bathoua dumdwng sari sari

Bosumatani ali.[69]

Though it is difficult to capture the 'essence' of the phrase adequately — as the phrase itself can be interpreted in different ways — it may be loosely translated as follows:

The sizou tree has *five* grooves (layers)

Bathou (altar, sacred space around the tree) has *five* rows

Bathou is constructing an *ali* (road) through *basumati* (mother-earth in Bengali and Assamese).

This was interpreted by Makoram, an informant of Siiger, as being connected with the existence of 'five elements', in nature which also constituted the corporeal body of a human and hence Bathou is also built with 'five divisions'. Siiger connected these five elements to the same 'common Indian elements', which are, earth, water, fire, air, and sky. It also needs to be remembered that Makoram was a Christian convert who was literate and also seemed to have been well versed with Hindu scriptures. Hence, it can be conjectured that he also must have seen and suggested such a connection keeping the larger Indic-Hindu traditions in mind.[70]

Makoram also narrated a 'folktale', a creation myth, which accounted for the origin of Bathou as a god.[71] What is striking about this tale is the fact that it demonstrated the element of improvisation that is incorporated into the telling and retelling of 'oral histories' among Boros. In the tale, *Bathou Raja* is the first born son from the union of a heavenly prince named Alari Damra — who settled among humans — and Asagw Bwisagw, an earthly woman. Asagw Bwisagw later on laid a large number of eggs from which more children were born, the care of

[69] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 207–209.

[70] In the present Bathou is generally understood as constituted by two words *ba* and *thou*, meaning 'five' and 'deep' respectively, and hence Bathou or 'five deep thoughts or philosophy'.

[71] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 148–163.

whom fell upon Bathou Raja. They all grew up and dispersed to different parts of the world and established their kingdoms. For instance, the one who went to north became the regent of Bhutan (Deb Dharma Raja), another became the king of Nepal. There was also a reference to a sibling who went over to Europe and supposedly became a 'great Queen' (which was interpreted by Siiger as a reference to Queen Victoria).[72]

The worship of the female deity *Mainao*, often described as the consort of Bathou[73], was another deity whose worship underlined an important commonality in Boro traditional practices, which also lent it a distinct character — but she was also sometimes equated with the Hindu goddess Lakshmi.[74] Boros themselves described Mainao with a phrase *Mainάuά zánŭ langnŭ thŭhŭiŭ*—the *essence* of which would be, 'Mainao provides for us and makes sure that we have enough to eat'.[75] That she was a deity associated principally with the production of rice is clearly demonstrated by her different forms, among many, such as *Asu Mainao* and *Sali Mainao*—asu (ahu) and sali being two different varieties of rice sown in Assam.[76] In this context, Amalendu Guha contends that cultivation of Asu rice and Sali rice was a prominent feature of the Boros in the sub-montane tracts.[77] She was an extremely important deity and rituals to worship her existed whenever a shortage of rice grain came about.

[72] For another example of a legend which connects a section of Boros with Limbus and Nepalese please see, Risley, *Tribes And Castes Vol.II*, 87.

[73] Dalton, *Ethnology Of Bengal*, 86.

[74] Siiger, *The Bodos*,111

[75] Endle, *Grammar Of Kachari*, 79.

[76] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 36.

[77] For a detailed historical analysis of rice cultivation in medieval Assam please see, Amalendu Guha, "The Tai Migration and Its Impact on the Rice Economy", in *Medieval And Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity And Economy* (Guwahati: Anwesha Publications, 2015), 74–98.

Such shortages were attributed to what Boros termed as *Mainao Kharbai*— Mainao has 'ran away'— and elaborate rituals had to be performed to coax her back to the household .[78]

Boros also did not have a designated group of people or a class to carry out different roles in religious ceremonies. Any 'eligible', elderly and respectable person, could become a *Douri or Deodhai* (priest), and an *Ojha* (a man who could predict things through a reading of cowrie shells). [79] In the case of a *Doudini* — exclusively a female who acted as a medium of the gods and goddesses — she could be selected by the Douri or the Ojha or sometimes she could simply be found by virtue of the fact that whenever drums were played she would invariably come to be possessed. Though there was no visible presence of a hereditary priestly class, both Endle and Siiger mentions the presence of a certain class of people designated as 'Brahmins' among the Boros, who were given certain special duties. Among Siiger's informants they were called as *baman douri* — baman being an Assamese word for Brahmin — who could only belong to the *Narzary hari* (Narzary 'clan'). Endle mentioned a class of people in Kamrup designated as 'Brahmaroi'. Though it can be asserted with certainty that Boros never 'imported' Brahmins to officiate their religious ceremonies — one of the 'criteria' for classification as animists — the fact that a class of people were designated as such only points to the complex interaction between Boros and their 'Hindu' neighbours and their influence.

[78] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 118–121. In the present, even among converted Boro Christians, a phrase 'Lakkhi Khargwn' (Lakshmi will go away) is used to admonish someone who wastes food/rice by not finishing his/her portion.

[79] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 122–125; Endle, *The Kacharis*, 39–41.

Social Structure

In the second half of eighteenth century, especially towards its end, Sidney Endle observed the presence of a number of *ma-haris* or *haris*, which he called 'septs' or 'sub-tribes'.[80] People belonged to one of these groups or 'clans', and in the present they have come to mean one of the many *surnames* that Boros use. Whatever 'special designations' and functions associated with the clan, which would have largely drawn clear lines of distinctions between such 'clans', however, were largely absent seeming only to be remnants of past practices — and most certainly they were not uniform over different places. Endle did try to 'reconstruct' a plausible origin for such group based on etymology, but it only goes on to show that in different places it could have meant different things—though it also points to a distant past where such 'clans' could have meant a lot more. A comparison of Endle's account with Siiger's makes these points clearer. Siiger's informants also told him mythical folk-tales which accounted for the origin of twelve such *haris*— Endle recorded twenty.[81] In Siiger's account, Narzarys are said to be a 'priestly' class 'equal to the Brahmins', while Endle mentions them as a group who during religious ceremonies had to 'chew a certain quantity of jute'. The association with jute leaves comes through etymology — *narzy* in Boro means dried jute, and hence 'dried-jute-folk'. To take another example *Basumatarys* — clearly a variation of *basumati* from Bengali/Assamese — is described by Endle as a group having 'special rights' such as not having to pay money to purchase land for burial. But in Siiger's account, they are spoken of as people who cannot take part in cultivation. Similarly, the *Goyaris* — *goy* meaning betel nut — Endle conjectures that they held monopoly in betel nut cultivation. But Siiger's informant Makoram told him the opposite, *Goyaris* could not neither plant nor consume betel nuts. A point of similarity could

[80] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 24–29. *Hari* or *Mahari* in Boro means a distinct group of people, primarily based on race, ethnicity, kinship, language or even location. For instance, *Boro-hari* would mean the Boro 'race' or Boro 'nation'.

[81] Siiger, *The Bodos*, 134–136.

be found in the description of *Mosa-hari* — *mosa* meaning tiger, hence the 'tiger-folk'. Both their accounts mentioned the observance of certain rituals of mourning whenever a tiger was killed. In this context, it needs to be again reiterated that Siiger's informant Makoram was a literate man leading a Christian congregation, who could also probably read and write English by then, and it must have been possible that he may have come across Sidney Endle's monograph. If he had read the monograph and chose to narrate the origin of *haris* differently, it could be that he had chosen to disagree with Endle as he himself must have been part of a different tradition.[82] Nevertheless, despite the existence of differences and variations in the understanding of these *haris*, they remained a feature of Boro social structure.

The sources discussed so far do not point to the presence of any distinct 'national' festival exclusive only to the Boros. The common festivals celebrated and observed are almost the same as that of all other communities in Assam, including the caste Hindus, though they would have had their own distinct nuances — the celebrations would often be accompanied by more than usual consumption of rice beer, a practice which would have been frowned upon by certain communities that had accepted Vaishnavism.[83] In fact, rice beer as a dietary practice was a prevalent practice, so much so that one third of the total rice production of Boro families went into its production.[84]

The social life in the Boro villages of the Duars was characterised by a very distinct practice called *Saori*, which was based on notions of reciprocity and the collective whole. Every household and individual was integrated through circuits of exchange, primarily of labour, requiring everyone's compulsory participation. While this institution existed in many different forms, it manifested most clearly in the agricultural practices—sowing, harvesting,

[82] Makoram informed Siiger that he was told the tale of the origin of *haris* by his father.

[83] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 50.

[84] J. McSwiney, *Report of Khallingduar*, 7.

and irrigation. The exchanges involved were devoid of 'mercenary elements' with no money being exchanged.[85] The sub-montane tracts are places where rice cultivation is carried out through an extensive network of irrigational canals called *dongos*, by artificially altering the course of small streams and rivers arising out of the hills of Bhutan.[86] This was labour intensive and required collective effort; it would not have been possible for an individual household to do it alone. Rivers had to be dammed and repair works continuously taken up in the dry months. As such it had to be a 'compulsory' collective practice and fines were imposed if there were absentees on the days decided by the *gaon bura* (village headman) for such works.[87]

As one moves south, towards the Brahmaputra valley, the influence of 'Hinduism' which also resulted in complicating ethnic boundaries as a result of conversions became more obvious. From the 'relatively homogeneous' population in the northern belts, communities described as Koches, Rabhas, Saraniyas, Jaldhas, Mahalias, Madahis among others could now be found. Their nomenclature being linked to the different stages that they had occupied in their process of conversion to Hinduism or Vaishnavism. For instance, Mahalias was a term applied to converted Boros in Darrang.[88] In the midst of all these through a mixture of the discussed religious and social practices Boros themselves had developed a sense of a distinct identity. That such distinction existed is evident by the usage of a word *harsa* or *hasa* by Boros to describe people who have closer proximity to Hinduism, in manners and customs—generally connoting a closer proximity to Assamese speakers and stronger influence of Vaishnavism. It continues to be used even in the present. The earliest reference in colonial sources of the usage of the term *hasa* is found in Martin Montgomery's account, where Kacharis refer to Koches as

[85] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 13.

[86] Hunter, *Assam Volume II*, 111.

[87] McSwiney, *Report Of Kariaparaduar*, 4.

[88] Allen, *Assam Census Report 1901*, 137.

Hasa.[89] Another reference to it is found in the Kachari grammar book by Sidney Endle where a Boro is referring to 'Hindus' as *harsa*.[90] But even in this situation the boundaries were not completely impermeable. People could move out of a community and take membership in a new one. For instance a Boro could also become a Rabha or a Koch without much complication by following certain rituals and 'purification' process.[91] And if he/she was desirous of taking up *Saran* under the tutelage of a Vaishnavite guru one started a long journey of reaching a respectable position of *Bar Koch*, through a processes of first becoming a Saraniya.

Semi-Savage Boros

Often British officials described Boros as 'semi-savages'— others too such as the Rabhas, Lalungs, and Hajongs were also described as 'half-wild tribes' living on the *lower slopes* of the hills.[92] One of the most prominent examples of such a description in found in the introduction by J.D. Anderson to *The Kacharis*. In the light of all that has been discussed so far it can be contended that perhaps one of the reasons for such a description was because of the fact that Boros and other tribes in their proximity, exhibited some 'characteristics' of what were official descriptions of Hindus and Animists. The idea was that while the valley as a core had attained a certain level of 'civilisation' the hills were still in a primitive stage, hence complete 'savages'. Tribes living in sub-montane belts, in the lower slopes, relatively free from

[89] Montgomery, *Histories Of Eastern India*, 538.

[90] Endle, *grammar Of Kachari,* 61. In opposition to this—as has been previously mentioned—Boros also frequently referred to themselves as also *Boroni-fisa*. The term would simply mean 'children of Boro',though what Boro exactly means is a matter of pure conjecture.

[91] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 83–84. Endle mentions that the Rabhas in Darrang district were also called as *Datiyal Kacharis*—daityal meaning 'edge', and as such the term can be translated to refer to 'Kacharis on the edge'. What this 'edge' refers to is left to conjecture, whether to mean metaphorically or geographically on the edge of the Kachari community.

[92] *Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881* (Calcutta: Office Of Superintendent Of Government Printing, India, 1883), 36.

influence of mainstream Hindu practices and retaining to a large degree their own language thus fit the bill of 'semi-savage' tribes. Anderson had also elsewhere described the Boros as:

> The Bodos of the plains are a very simple and guileless race, they live on a soil which yields them rich rewards for comparatively easy toil, and, their wants are few, they lead a *joyous* and *childish existence*. Like other *human children*, they are occasionally given to fits of *sulks*, are very *clannish*, very *obstinate*, and somewhat *suspicious* of more intellectual and ingenious races. But they readily make friends with kindly and sympathetic Europeans; and with the sole exception of the Garos . . . *they have long lost the martial tendencies* the race must have once possessed [emphasis added].[93]

The above quoted description is important to dwell upon because it touches upon many important points. Boros—the plains branch of the great Bodo race—losing their 'martial tendencies' while the Garos retained it fit in very neatly with the theory then in circulation which stated that the 'soft, enervating, and malarious climate of Assam invariably produced physical and moral decay in the fine and manly Indo-Chinese races that invaded the country'.[94] This idea of Boros being semi-savages—childish, clannish, obstinate, un-martial— was also strongly associated with the idea that such people could be easily tamed for the purposes of the empire. Hodgson was one of the first to suggest that the 'Bodos' could be employed by Europeans, just as they had employed Kols to cultivate malarial belts.[95] Even though the Boros formed two-thirds of the Darjeeling Corps, he thought they were better suited for the 'homebred

[93] J. D. Anderson. "Bodos", in. *Encyclopaedia Of Religion And Ethics, Volume II*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1909), 755.

[94] J.D. Anderson, "Assam", in *Encyclopaedia Of Religion And Ethics, Volume II*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1909), 134.

[95] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo, Dhimal*, 149.

and tranquil cares of agriculture', since they had already passed by the 'savage or hunter state', but still not having reached a sophisticated civilised system of agriculture.[96] Hodgson even cited his anthropometrical data to prove his point of Boros being semi-savage and wrote:

> He [Boro] is well made and stout enough, sufficiently fleshy, but without any striking muscular development. His calves in particular, though not quite equal to those of the mountaineers, are very superior to any thing of the sort to be seen amid the people of the plains.[97]

Sidney Endle gave a clearer enunciation of such concerns of the British which were directly connected with tea. There were many Kacharis who had worked on tea gardens, but they were far less 'reliable' than indentured workers who were brought in from elsewhere, taking up work only when hard pressed for cash and often unwilling to work on the terms dictated by the tea garden managers.[98] Endle through the publication of his grammar book had intended to teach a basic amount of Boro language to Europeans who had a stake in tea and in the employment of Boros, who he called 'navies of Assam', a nation of 'hewers of wood and drawer of waters' and suited for tasks that required 'strength rather than skill'.[99] Its publication was supposed to mitigate the many labour problems caused by the 'clannish', 'stubborn' character of the Boros.

Encounter with Christianity

The encounter of Boros with Christianity was multifarious, spanning across different districts and time-periods, with the presence of different American and European Protestant denominations as well as the Catholic Church. No single missionary group or church could be said to have had monopoly over missionary work. As Boros have mostly inhabited the

[96] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo, Dhimal*, 154, 191.

[97] Hodgson, *Kocch, Bodo, Dhimal*, 194.

[98] Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 307.

[99] Endle, *Grammar Of Kachari*, ii.; Endle, *The Kacharis*, 1.

submontane foothills of Bhutan, across its western and eastern proximities, it was only natural that no single missionary group would have had the means to cover the entire stretch. In the east (Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong) the Anglican missionaries and the American Baptists came into contact with the Boros while in the west and parts of North Bengal, the Scottish Missionaries and the Lutherans, were active. But in the nineteenth century, the number of people embracing Christianity was minuscule. While records show that a handful of people were converting to Christianity in the later decades of the nineteenth century, the highest number of churches, across various districts, were established only in the early decades of the twentieth century.

It is important to keep in mind that during the initial years, Boros were not the main constituency of missionary endeavours. Initial contacts with them were made as a result of missionary activities among other groups and as part of certain colonial enterprises, such as tea plantations. Owing to the fact that Boros lived in close proximity with other communities, if not in their midst, Christian missionaries often followed a model of common proselytization which would cater to all communities, especially in the plains of Assam.

To understand conversion of Boros to Christianity in the late nineteenth century and more importantly in the early part of the twentieth century, this section will trace the coming of the missionaries, from different denominations, among the Boros. It will also examine how Boros themselves *negotiated* the new religion and its ideological and theological concerns; how, especially during the first half of twentieth century when socio-religious reform and modern political consciousness was spreading among the Boros, they brought their own concerns and terms to the table, often in contradiction to the interests of missionaries.

The Lutheran Mission

During the nineteenth century there was no direct contact between the Lutheran Missionaries or a dedicated Lutheran Mission among the Boros. The beginnings of the Lutheran Mission among the Boros need to be traced to be traced to the work of the Lutheran Missionaries among the Santals of the Santal Parganas in Bengal. Missionaries of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) were one of the earliest missionaries to come into contact with the Santals in central India in the first half of the nineteenth century. A missionary of the society Rev. A. Lesley stationed himself in the Raj Mahal Hills among the Santals.[100] After his departure from India, the BMS work among the Santals was discontinued and it would only be in the 1860s that BMS would once again engage in some kind of a mission work among the Santals. A former soldier named E.C. Johnson, who had offered his services to the British in 1857, established the BMS's headquarters in the Santal Parganas. But soon, he too left the field and returned to England. While living in the Santal Parganas, Johnson came into contact with the Scandinavian missionaries L. O. Skrefsrud and Hans Peter Boerresen, the former was a Norwegian and the latter a Danish.

Both Skrefsrud and Boerresen did not come from a family that was necessarily connected with the Church nor had any sort of missionary zeal in spreading the gospel. They belonged to ordinary working class families.[101] Trained as a mechanic, Skrefsrud was an alcoholic and had run into trouble with the law. He was incarcerated for a period of three years till 1861.[102] This was to be a period of transformation for him and subsequently, he became a

[100] Olav Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit: A Short History of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches 1867-1967* (Calcutta: C D Media, 1982), 1.

[101] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 4.

[102] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 4.

'committed' Christian, imbibing very strong and zealous evangelistic principles.[103] He declared that he experienced 'a burning desire to become a missionary… that I, the most unworthy of all, might be permitted to declare to the *heathen* what I had experienced in my own heart'.[104] A blacksmith by profession, Hans Peter Boerresen was from Copenhagen, Denmark but had settled in Berlin and married a German woman named Caroline Hempel. Though he himself was not an individual inclined towards religion, by virtue of his wife being devout, he had come in contact with a church in Berlin that preached evangelical Christianity.[105]

After arriving in India, evangelistic work could not be carried out as smoothly as desired by the missionaries. Apart from financial difficulties, there were also denominational divergences and disagreements. E.C. Johnson, the Baptist missionary, was willing to take on the services of the two new European missionaries but there were some hurdles as they were Lutherans and had not received adult baptism. Eventually, L.O. Skrefsrud, though, a confirmed member of the Lutheran Church, agreed to be baptized again as an adult according to the teachings of the Baptist creed.[106] This act of Skrefsrud is particularly important as it points to a further shift in his religious inclinations towards a stronger emphasis on receiving of baptism only as an adult with a complete *understanding* and complete *transformation* of the self. And hence a consequent demand on potential converts for greater breakage from the past. This is important, especially in terms of the demands that later came to be made by Skrefsrud and other

[103] Charles Lindquist, *Skrefsrud.* July 1, 2012. https://wmpl.org/lo-skrefsrud/#fn-2319 (accessed November 13, 2019).

[104] Lindquist, *Skrefsrud* .

[105] Olav Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit: A Short History of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches 1867-1967,* (Calcutta: C D Media, 1982), 3-4.

[106] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit,* 3-4.

missionaries from their new converts — both Santals and Boros.[107] While also seeming to move towards a particular definition of what it meant to be a Christian, Skrefsrud differed from his colleague Boeressen, who was much more open towards differences and declared that he owed no particular allegiance to any one theology or denomination.[108] In fact, the adherence of Skrefsrud to his Baptist principles made it difficult for him to collect funds for mission work among the Scandinavian Lutheran congregations confining his addresses to mainly Baptist Congregations in England. It was Boeressen who succeeded in speaking to various denominations and congregations in Europe and collected resources for the mission.[109]

But the picture will not be complete if one does not take into account the complexities and contradictions of the characters — Skrefsrud and Boeressen — and of the circumstances itself. For instance, Skrefsrud in order to bring about a friendly relation among Santals, which had been affected by conversions and the consequent divisions, brought in certain ideas which seemed, for many at that time, to go against the basic tenets of Christianity. He equated the traditional God of the Santals '*Thakur'* with the Christian God saying that the Christian God, if anything, was the same God who had been worshipped by their ancestors. It was argued by Skrefsrud that the approach of preaching to the Santals by telling them that the Christian God was their old God *Thakur* resulted in more Santals accepting Christianity or at least made them willing to listen to what the missionaries had to say.[110] He placed no special restrictions on

[107] Even as Skrefsrud would veer towards a 'dogmatic' understanding of the Christian faith and would demand a break from the pre-Christian past, he would also seem to understand the contextualization of the gospel among the new converts. In one of this addresses in Norway he exclaimed, 'We came to the Santals to bring them Christianity, and not to take away their nationality'. Please see, Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 24.

[108] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 3.

[109] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 27-28.

[110] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 17.

intermingling of Christians and non-Christians, and also impressed upon village councils to the need for such an arrangement which would try and blur the lines between Christian and non-Christian practices.[111] But for many, this was a sacrilegious thing to do, diluting the meaning of being a Christian. Rev. P. O. Bodding was one such critic calling such policy a blot on mission history.[112]

Similarly, during the period of the great Bengal Famine, Boeressen's policy of conversion was criticised by others. The famine necessitated arrangements of sorts between the administration and the missionaries. Being in tandem with the state, Boeressen saw this as an opportunity to bring the gospel to unconverted Santals. Working as a correspondent of *The Times* Rev. G. Kerry was a Baptist minister who was highly critical of the methods employed by Boeressen, accusing him of first baptising famine stricken people and later handing over food that they were anyways supposed to receive as 'relief'.[113]

[111] Both Skrefsrud and Bodding were complex characters who also exhibited an 'understanding' of cultures other than theirs. Regarding evangelization among the Santals, they were both critical of some missionaries and their attitudes, who assumed that the 'natives' had primitive or unsophisticated religious world views, often resulting in hostilities. They were of the opinion that many younger missionaries failed to 'combine their zeal for God with knowledge'. Skrefsrud especially made attempts to understand the traditions of the Santals. Instead of preaching to them, 'he first let them preach'. He 'admitted' himself under a Santal sage to learn about their traditions. Please see, K. B. Birkeland, *The World In Snap Shots Or Light In The Darkness* (New York: The Abbey Press, 1901), 194-198.

[112] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 17. Bodding would later in his translations go on to equate the main Santal god *Bonga* to the biblical Satan, and use the generic Indian word *Iswar/Isor* in place of the Santal *Thakur Jiv*. Skrefsrud on the other hand had retained the Santal word *Thakur Jiv* to mean the Christian God in his Bible translation. Please see, Timotheas Hembrom, "An Indigeneous Theologian's Perspective on the Bodding Era." *Norsk Tidsskrift For Misjonsvitenskap* (The Egede Institute), no. 3 (2017): 43-50.

[113] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 20.

Despite the sometimes 'divergent' theological practices of these two missionaries, gradually the Santal Mission came to be fully supported by Lutheran churches in Norway and Denmark, with a permanent headquarter being established at Dumka.

Lutheran Mission in Goalpara

The Lutheran connection with Assam begins with the migration of the Santals to Assam in search of new cultivable lands. Apart from being a capable missionary Skrefsrud was also not without friends in the administrative circles who would expedite things for the mission. Upon the request of certain sections of the Santals to help them relocate to a new place, Skrefsrud used his connections to help the mission secure, in 1880, a tract of thirty square mile of land east of the river Sankosh, in the then colonial Goalpara district.[114] This tract which would be called the *Assam Colony* was about thirty miles north of Dhubri town in Goalpara. The first migration took place in the year 1881. The missionary Hans Peter Børresen and his wife went there along with the first Santal settlers. And this was the beginning of initial contacts being made with the Boros.

The colony was to be 'the city on the hill', in the midst of 'paganism', which could not be hidden from view — meaning it was to be an example of what was good about Christianity as opposed to the 'heathenism' around it.[115] It was to demonstrate the transformative — progress — power that Christianity had over people lives.[116] The colony was envisioned as pastoral in nature — 'shut off from the pagan world', 'like an oasis in the desert, like a light in the pitch dark night' — which would be based on Christian principles, but without totally

[114] Jakob Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne* (København: I Hovedkomission Hos, Lohses Forlag, EFTF, 1947), 12; Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 40.

[115] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 12.

[116] Birkeland, *The World In Snap Shots*, 591.

abandoning old forms of village institutions.[117] But even then the missionaries had an upper hand in the running of the colony and much more say in the day to day affairs of its running. Restrictions on practices that seemed to contradict the Christian principles, as interpreted by the missionaries, were put in place. Apart from the complete restriction on the brewing and consumption of alcohol, other restrictions such as singing of traditional songs, traditional dances, and working and setting up of markets on Sundays were introduced; most importantly whatever remnants of the old gods remained, they were sought to be banished.[118] The colony was envisioned as an idyllic pastoral place, where new converts would leave their heathen past behind and demonstrate a transformed Christian life, both in material and spiritual terms. While there was a semblance of a continuation from the past in terms of the organisation of the village administrative system and its management, it was the missionary who, in his role as the superintendent of the colony, had the final say in all these matters. He could 'control' the dispensation of justice.[119] Skrefsrud also wanted the colony to be modelled on lines, where the inhabitants would be tilling their own land and live in relative isolation from the 'non-Christian' influences of the outside world. While the colony was being set up, a tea garden by the Eastern Duars Tea Company was also coming up on its peripheries. The setting up of this tea plantation was vehemently opposed by the missionaries. It was their contention that having lured them with employment opportunities and money to be made, the plantation was bound to have a bad effect on their Christian life; apart from the fact that they were now no longer

[117] Birkeland, *The World In Snap Shots*, 591-592.

[118] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 44. Skrefsrud was also described as:

> He is the terror of the gods . . . The idol priests, the usurers and the liquor sellers can verify this statement.

Please see Birkeland, *The World In Snap Shots*, 140.

[119] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 43.

interested in tilling their own lands.[120] So strong was his opposition that the government had to limit the area of the plantation and forbade the inhabitants of the colony to work in the plantation.[121] The mission ultimately acquired the tea garden and ran it as part of their missionary enterprise, but even then, Christians were not allowed to work in it; they were expected to till their own land— only the 'pagans' would be employed in the plantation.[122]

The evangelistic zeal with which the early missionaries such as Skrefsrud and Bodding sought to mould the fabric of the colony was not without results. Newly converted Santal missionaries took it upon themselves to preach the gospel among communities such as the Rajbanshis, Boros, Rabhas, and Muslims living outside the colony. As a result of which, it was a Santal missionary named Sriram who baptised the first Boro family in January 1888.[123] But the mission work among the Boros proceeded rather slowly compounded by many factors, such as lack of dedicated missionaries, funds, language barrier, and importantly the reluctance of the Boros themselves to listen to the missionary preaching, which in certain cases amounted to open hostility. The slow process of acceptance of Christianity among Boros can be judged from the fact that while, in all probability right from the beginning of the settlement there must have been contacts and transactions between the residents of the colony and Boros, it was only in 1888, after a period of seven years, that the first baptism took place. While the reluctance of the Boros themselves was responsible for the slow pace of conversion among them, the beliefs and expectations of the missionaries too played a major role in it. These were centered around

[120] Birkeland, *The World In Snap*, 585-586.

[121] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 70.

[122] This tea garden in the present is called the Mornai Tea Estate, located in Kokrajhar district, the ownership of which lies with the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church (NELC).

[123] Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, 104. Later in the same year Sriram baptised another group of Garo and Rajbongshi family.

the ‘meanings’ of conversion and the changes it demanded, both in material and metaphysical terms.

These ideas of a complete transformation — a break from the past — as demanded by the missionaries was also imbibed by the early Santals missionaries. Sriram, a Santal, was the first Lutheran missionary to work among the Boros living outside and far away from the colony. Often times, Boros were willing to listen to his preaching and also set up a mission station among their midst. Subsequent evangelising missions were also well received by Boros. As a result, Sriram also brought a few Boros to live in the colony. They were allowed to settle on the conditions that they do not work on Sundays, that they send their children to schools, not sell or provide Santals with alcohol, and obey the Santal chiefs.[124] These Boro settlers were enrolled in baptism classes where they were expected to receive instructions on Christian teachings. But even if they were ready to convert and receive baptism it was not to be so. They were denied baptism on the grounds that they did not show the ‘necessary seriousness’ and did not ‘believe with all their heart’.[125] This demand for ‘necessary seriousness’ combined with attending mandatory baptism classes further shows that the early missionaries, both European and local, were clear as to what they meant to become a Christian. It did not mean a mere professing of the faith through spoken words but a discarding of certain dispositions that existed in the moral, physical, and spiritual universe of the pre-Christian past; in other words, a moving away from the habitus of the heathen. Missionary attitudes oscillated between a strong desire to gain as many new converts as possible and the idea of welcoming only people who had deeper understanding of the theological underpinnings of Christianity. But the process of conversion among the Boros was slow, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, in

[124] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 16.

[125] Aksel Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle: Boroerne*(Copenhagen: Danish Santal Mission, 1934), 45; Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 13.

1914, the number of Boro Lutheran converts were only one hundred and twenty five, and most of them were people who had taken up residence in the colony.[126]

Agency of Converts and Religious Ambivalence

While there were dedicated men and women among the early Boro converts who were more than willing to assist the missionaries in their activities, the same zeal did not translate into large scale conversions among Boros. Teklo, the first Lutheran Boro convert, was described by the missionaries as an eloquent and pious man who had completely committed himself to Christ, and so was his wife.[127] But it so happened that soon after his conversion, in 1888, he fell ill and died. Upon his death, as recorded by Boeressen, while Teklo 'went home blessed as a living child of God', his wife turned back to the 'gentiles' leaving behind their two children in the care of the missionaries. While it is impossible to completely know the circumstances under which the widowed mother had to give away her children, the fact that she went back to the old fold and to her kinfolk (*gentiles*) show that her old self had not been completely severed from the new. Another early convert was a person named Dorkanto who was so taken up by missionary zeal that he even went along with the missionaries to Benagaria, in Dumka, to assist Skrefsrud with translation work. But his wife, according to the missionaries, would not give in to the callings of Christianity and would not be baptised. While Dorkanto was baptised in 1888 at Benagaria, his wife was baptised only in the year 1894.[128]

A certain continuity was maintained and the lines that separated the old and the new religions were seen as rather porous allowing for mobility from one to the other. And this was certainly not the only case, in which a person thought of conversion not as an act of complete

[126] Hodne, *The Seed Bore*, 105.

[127] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 47-48.

[128] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 51.

severance from the past and an inversion of the old religious structure, but rather as a continuation from the past with only a slight divergence. This kind of thinking rather seemed a feature of the early period of conversion both in the nineteenth century and even in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the people who heard the gospel or were willing to convert did not make much of the difference either between the denominations or between the Christian present and the pre-Christian past.

While the Santals in the colony more or less adhered to what the missionaries demanded of them, the Boros 'seemed' to not really care about these demands of observances of these 'Christian precepts' and transformation. It was reported in 1897 that the Boros in and around the colony had reached 'a state of dull silence and passivity'.[129] This perceived 'passivity' must have also been an outcome of the incompatibility between the moral and religious universe of the Boros and that of the missionaries. From the point of view of the missionaries, the existing religious, social, and cultural practices were 'heathen' deserving only to be discarded or ridiculed.[130] This dichotomy that the missionary himself had internalized prevented him from fully appreciating how important an element existing religious practices were in constituting the totality of their everyday lived reality. The missionaries often failed to understand the significance of traditional religious practices often placing them on a lower level as compared to Christianity, and trivialising them.

Aksel Kristiansen, the first Danish missionary to exclusively work among the Boros, was of the opinion that Boros were not in awe of their religion nor did they have any kind of

[129] Annual Report of Santal Mission 1896-97, quoted in Aksel Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle: Boroerne.*(Copenhagen: Danish Santal Mission, 1934), 51.

[130] Early missionaries such as Skrefsrud and P.O. Bodding had banned, along with traditional religious practices, dancing, singing of non-Christian songs, and playing of traditional drums among the Santals. The same set of prohibitions can also be assumed to have been extended to Boro converts.

affection towards it. A particular incident in a Boro village led him to such a conclusion. On an interaction with some Boro villager he commented that their gods must be terribly small to live in such small houses that they had built for them because they were suitable only for puppies; and upon seeing the chickens eating the eggs which were offered to the gods he again told them that now their gods were devouring the sacrifices. This interaction between Kristiansen provoked laughter from the Boros which according to Kristiansen was a sign of the rather tenuous relation that they had with their gods, which was built not on the foundations of *love* and *devotion* but rather on *fear* of the malevolent characteristic of their gods. Keeping in mind his Danish audience, he commented that if it were the opposite he would not have dared to violate their religious sentiment.[131]

One such practice, which according to missionaries apparently stood in the way of conversion to Christianity, was the consumption of alcoholic drinks such as rice beer. It was out rightly condemned as *sinful* and something which, among other things, had to be discarded by the new converts.[132] This was something that Boros could not easily give up as it formed a very important component of everyday dietary practices. What seemed to the missionaries as a people wallowing in drunkenness and sinfulness was nothing but an essential part of bodily sustenance and nourishment. Apart from the fact that it was un-Christian, this practice was perceived as being an impediment in the realisation of the Christian truth. And this was a 'problem' for the missionaries right from the beginning. In 1892, Boerresen reported that 'while the Boros are willing to hear the gospel, it is drunkenness that prevents them'.[133] The

[131] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 41.

[132] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 29. The report of 1887-88 notes that 'the Boros are gentle peaceful people and despite their sinfulness and drunkenness, lovable people'.

[133] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 50. Even Dorkanto, the trusted Boro aid of Skrefsrud, once caused 'great sorrow', by drinking with some of new converts. See Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 22.

same report states that while they (Boros) are willing to gladly listen and declare that they believe in the Christian God who created everything, when it came to giving up drinking rice beer they simply refrained from doing so. This demand of giving up rice beer to become a Christian and to be able to remain in the colony was not something that could be strictly followed by the Boros. While there were 532 Boros living in the colony in 1893, in the succeeding years, there were almost no conversions among them. They continued the consumption of rice beer. One can conjecture the kind of anxieties that this act must have created in the minds of the missionaries, as on the one hand they tried to impose strict rules but on the other, the potential Christian converts were continually breaking those rules. Under such conditions, the Boro residents of the colony took flight and settled in other places. In 1899, a physician noted in a report that many Boros had run away, and which, in fact, was a good thing for the colony, 'since they had been sacrificing animals and indulging in drunken revelry', despite the precepts that governed the colony.[134] This source of anxiety continued even in the early years of the second decade of the twentieth century when Boros became more willing to accept Christianity and the number of converts were on the rise.

In the beginning of the early decades of the twentieth century, when conversions were happening and small congregations were being established, the agency of the new converts in the process was not always appreciated. For the missionaries, it did not demonstrate a radical shift from the old ways of understanding religion as the new converts tried to accommodate Christianity into their lives. This tension manifested in various ways in how the new religion was practiced. The old religion involved rituals for which often large expenditures had to be borne. These took the form of sacrifices of pigs, pigeons, chickens, goats and offerings of eggs. When new converts made statements which seemed to imply that one of the advantages of

[134] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle,* 50.

being a Christian was that it involved less expenses as there was no longer a need for the elaborate sacrificial rituals unlike the old religion, it was not taken too well by the missionaries. Aksel Kristiansen mentions of one such incident where a church elder expressed such a sentiment, which he did not appreciate. In fact, he emphasised just how much the non-Christians spent for their worship and similarly, the Christians too should not be left behind in this aspect.[135] This was a concern for the potential converts even in the early days of missionary contact. L. O. Skrefsrud, in one of his visits to a village, was told by the villagers that they were tired of sacrificing hens and pigs to the spirits as they were not getting results.[136] When they were told about the teachings of Christ and his love and his suffering and death new converts warmed up to the preaching.[137] But their main concern was if it was possible to discard sacrifices in the new religion. These facts demonstrate that the early Christians tried to bring in their own understanding of the new religion which was contingent with their everyday life and requirements, which in turn was affected by several factors, such as geography, topography, environment, etc. If they were curious about the efficacy of the Christian prayers over sacrifices, it was so because of the prevalence of various life threatening diseases brought in by the physical conditions and the environment. As far as they were concerned, finding cure for such sicknesses, and the arrival of a good harvest was more immediate than saving of souls. The total inversion of the moral universe in which the old gods and goddesses would come to be equated with the Christian conception of the devil could wait. For them, Christ could have

[135] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 43. Kristiansen and the other missionaries were always trying to impress upon the local churches a need to be self-sustaining and not to be too dependent on the support of the missionary. And for the new converts Christianity as a religion which did not require much personal contribution would have been counterproductive to the missionaries' efforts.

[136] Results here could mean many things, but definitely includes material and tangible in nature, such as a prayer for good harvest or cure from sickness.

[137] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle* , 47.

been any other new spirit in the pantheon of spirits whose methods might be different, but effective. And often, the 'powers' of healing promised by the Christian god was one of the reasons for conversion among Boros, across class lines. In 1913, a missionary named, Skat Petersen, wrote that in a congregation of new converts whose leader was a rich man, a woman who had fallen sick with cholera like symptoms was healed 'immediately' after prayers were offered.[138] Such diseases, which earlier could lead to probable death, being cured by mere prayers would have certainly contributed towards realising the 'usefulness' of the new religion.

While many beliefs and attitudes from the old religion were carried over into the new, it also contributed to the blurring of lines between them. The missionary accounts show that the early converts were often not particularly concerned with maintaining a strict differentiation often moving across the perceived boundaries of different religions, which again was a source of frustration for the missionary. With the setting up of a permanent Lutheran Mission station among the Boros at Gaurang in Goalpara, Aksel Kristiansen became the first missionary to head the mission and the station. With this, a new emphasis was given to develop the potential to read Christian religious texts and understand them. Along with that, an added emphasis was given on maintaining a life that would be guided by Christian principles, nurturing a deeper appreciation of the 'meanings' of being a Christian. Of course, such missionary expectations often remained unfulfilled. As a result of which, a lot of the converts were often asked to leave the congregation and fines were imposed for any apparent transgressions.

But reading the missionary account one also gets the sense that missionaries were not too happy with local converts who tried to assert their own understandings. They were sometimes described in unflattering terms. Bahadur was one such individual, a second generation Christian. He was the son of a man named Dorkanto, who had assisted Skrefsrud in

[138] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 53.

his translations and preparation of a book on Boro grammar and vocabulary. As such, he was a 'privileged' person and got an opportunity to study at the headquarters of the Danish Mission at Benagaria.[139] He was described as a smart and intelligent boy but with a tinge of an 'independent attitude' and 'over-confidence' with a 'volatile' personality.[140] But he was also described as a 'determined character' with a certain 'spiritual clarity and a maturity', who had in his heart a 'the salvation of his people'.[141]

Upon his return to Goalpara, he was ordained as a minister of the church but was soon accused of being immoral and living in sin, leading an 'unclean life'.[142] At a congregational meeting, he was charged and was forced to ask for forgiveness and openly confess his sins. Though requested by Kristiansen to stay back in Goalpara to assist him in his literary works he left for Darrang district to work among the Boros, willing to take up that work even without pay. But it so happened that he was again accused of 'sinning' and this time he was excommunicated from the church. Upon his exclusion from the congregation, it was heard that he was visited by the Catholics in Darrang district, who did not have much difficulty in accepting him into their fold. Given this opportunity, Bahadur quickly changed allegiance and moved over to the Catholicism, taking along with him most of the Lutheran converts in Darrang district.[143] Though there are no elaborate details surrounding this incident, there is evidence to suggest that it had to do with the demands of teetotalism that was made by the missionaries.[144]

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[139] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 78.

[140] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 78. His father Dorkhanto was also described as an 'independent' person and as such it was necessary to 'keep an eye on him'. Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 17.

[141] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 78.

[142] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 20.

[143] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 79.

[144] Regarding the constant 'setbacks', of converts falling back into sin, the missionaries were of the opinion that:

The Catholics seemed to have not much of a problem with the consumption of alcoholic drinks by the new converts. This also was a cause of concern for the protestant missionaries, who accused the Catholics of engaging in sheep stealing by luring the protestant converts over to them, instead of working among the non-Christians. Knowing this, the Boros too used it as a leverage against the Lutheran missionaries, often threatening to go over to the Catholicism if their demands were not met in case of a conflict between them and the missionaries.[145] Moreover, the promise of higher education by the Catholics was also becoming a determining factor in Boro Lutherans changing denominations.[146]

Apart from the movement of converts between denominations people also moved in between religions in seemingly easy manner without much concern for the differences between them. By the second decade of the twentieth century, Christianity and Brahma Dharma had become the two new religions which were making inroads into Boro society, in which the latter could be considered as requiring primarily an internal conversion. This traversing of different religions mostly seems to have been undertaken by people who were literate, multilingual and who had travelled through different parts of Bengal and Assam. Naturally, such individuals had access to information about the political, economic, and social situations.

Shorendro was a person, who at the relatively early age of nineteen got an opportunity to listen to the gospel and soon enough accepted the new faith along with his wife, taking

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> Several such things [setbacks] could be mentioned; but we must not forget that the Boros – surrounded by Paganism on all sides - are facing many temptations and that the unhealthy climate, which places great demands on their physique, does not make the temptations easier to resist.

Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 20.

[145] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 95.

[146] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 27. The Catholics apparently sought to get hold of Boros with influence in the Lutheran Church with ‘enticements of higher education’.

membership in the Scottish Church Mission. The fact that he could also speak Bengali was something that was noticed by the missionaries who insisted that he should also learn a little Hindi. He also learned how to read and write. This was something, as he mentions, that stopped him from leading a life 'worse than that of cows and pigs'.[147] In narrating his life story, he mentions that since the time he was around the age 9-10, he had a great desire to be able to read and write, but his family owing to poverty could not send him to a school. Gradually, he moved up the Church hierarchy and became an elder first in a church of the Scottish Mission in North Bengal and later, in the Lutheran Church in Goalpara district.[148] But after few years, he decided to move away from Christianity and become a follower of Brahma Dharma, even though his life as a follower of Brahma Dharma lasted only for two years. In becoming an adherent of the Brahma dharma, according to him, he '*followed his own head* (mind)'.[149] This claim of following "one's own head" by Shorendro, demonstrates clearly the ways in which the Christian converts and potential converts, inhabited a socio-political and economic world that was in a state of flux, effected by colonialism where Christianity often provided a means to negotiate this terrain. At a time when only a few individuals from among the Boro community must have been able to read and write, he claimed to have harboured a dream to become literate. Even though he converted when he was barely out of his teenage years — and described the change that came about in him as a result of the ability to read in terms of a deliverance brought about by the Christian God's love and as an opportunity to escape a beastly existence — he was acutely aware of the doors that Christianity would have opened to him; or at least he had become aware of it early on.

[147] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 86.

[148] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 27.

[149] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 87.

The opportunities that conversion to Christianity threw open, was also not lost on other converts too. In fact, people were willing to convert as they thought that this would give them an opportunity to learn English and gain employment in professions ushered in by colonial modernity. As such they did not necessarily look at Christianity merely in terms of a spiritual awakening and transformation but also as a ladder to move up the hierarchy. Olishoron a convert who also later became a close aide of Aksel Kristiansen, was another individual who was ambitious and tried to use Christianity as a means to fulfil them. He had a brother who after having finished high school education was appointed as a school teacher, as such he was exposed to education early on. The brother after sometime decided to become a Christian by moving to Kalimpong to join the mission set up by Dr. Graham, a Scottish missionary.[150] The idea was that doing so would enable him to learn English. But it so happened that the plans did not materialize and he had to come back. On his return, he decided to accept the new Brahma Dharma which was also fast gaining adherents and also influenced other members of his family to convert including Olishoron. After some years, following in his brother's footsteps, Olishoron too made a trip to Kalimpong along with two other companions to meet Dr. Graham with the aim of becoming Christians. But he too returned back without converting as the two others with him decided against conversion. In the meantime, Olishoron tried his hands at different trades but not meeting with much success. After working for a year as an assistant for a *Mouzadar* (Land Revenue Collector) he too decided it was time to learn English and decided to become a Christian. Eventually, after two years, he received Baptism and joined the Lutheran Church.

People like Olishoron and Shorendro by dint of their exposure to the workings of colonialism and the missionary enterprise were also acutely aware of the ways in which both

[150] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 89.

ran parallel to each other sometimes. They became aware of the relative ease with which one could negotiate the colonial political economy sometimes with the help of the missionaries which would then result in material gains for them — Shorendro was from an impoverished background.[151] (But of course it is a different matter that such planning on the part of the local people were not always successful.) Shorendro, while living as Brahma Dharma follower, wrote to the Danish missionary Winding that he would come back to the congregation and 'do God's work' only if Winding helped him to get hold of a piece of land.[152] Similarly Olishoron too with the help of the missionaries tried to get employment in the Forest Department. But on being unable to secure the employment, he relocated to Grahmapur, in Goalpara and started learning the English language. Upon coming into contact with another Christian who promised him to put him in school at Jorhat, he left Grahampur without informing the Danish missionaries. In Jorhat, not satisfied with the progress of his education he tried to study in Serampore, but was unsuccessful. Finally, he came back to Grahampur, but again had a tiff with Tromborg, the Danish missionary stationed there. Olishoron mentions that he had wanted to become a *Mouzadar*, but seeing that Tromborg did not want to help him in this, he left the place in anger.[153]

This was also a time when with the spread of Christianity and Brahma Dharma there were temperance movements being initiated by people across religions and also by government servants. People like Shorendro and Olishoron who had certain notions of the changes happening around them saw an opportunity to better their material circumstances in these two religions. Though later on in life they would be devout Christians and church elders there is no mistaking the fact that in the initial years they were exercising their own agencies in seeking

[151] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 27.

[152] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 87

[153] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 90.

out both these religions. And, in fact, it was an act of active seeking out on their part, experimenting with the workings of these two new religions and what it had to offer them and in the process, moving in and out.[154] This obviously did not find much favour with the missionaries who labelled them as volatile and unstable.[155] They, even when willing to take on missionary activities, were denied the chance to do so, as the missionaries thought that they would do more harm than good. And when they were taken back into the Church they had to start from the bottom up. Shorendro when he decided to come back to being a Christian wanted to be a church elder but this was denied to him by Aksel Kristiansen.[156] Instead, he was told by Kristiansen that he had to be his 'cook servant'. The missionary's intention was to instil in him a 'humility', and Shorendro too often reiterated in his public utterances that the humiliation he faced was good for him. It was only after two and a half years when he publicly confessed his *'sins'* that he was allowed again to be part of the preaching tours. But even after being reinstated as an Elder, he had to be dismissed again as he was accused of having an 'evil heart'— he had attempted to get the Preachers to go on a 'strike' against the mission.[157] Kristiansen wrote of him as living in penury with one blind eye '*as a result of the sins of his youth*'. Olishoron too,

[154] There were apparently instances, where tribals had experimented with Christianity before converting to Hinduism. J.D. Anderson gave the example of a Boro man who had studied in a missionary school and had converted to Christianity. He had also managed to land a well-paying job. Later the man wanted to marry a second time, which according to Anderson was because 'to a man of his race it seemed natural that he should invest his savings in a polygamous union'. The man tried to argue with the missionary that he could find nothing in the New Testament (Bible) that prevented him for getting a second wife. While the missionary disagreed, he nevertheless went ahead and married a Koch woman and he too converted into a Koch Hindu. J. D. Anderson. "Assam", in. *Encyclopaedia Of Religion And Ethics, Volume II*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1909), 138.

[155] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 27. Shorendro was described as an 'excellent speaker' but a 'fierce and volatile character'.

[156] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 87.

[157] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 27.

finally after failing in his ventures, came back to the missionaries. After he left Grahampur he tried his hand at running a grocery store. But that too failed and he gradually lost his lands. He then travelled to Darrang district with his family and few other families in search of new lands to settle on. There too he was not very successful, losing all his livestock. He eventually came back to the missionaries at Goalpara.[158]

Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) among the Boros

The encounter of the Boros with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) began in 1862, with it assuming charges of a mission that had earlier been supported by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) and other English individuals in Tezpur.[159] A German Lutheran Rev. C. Hesselmeyer was in charge of this mission. On the whole, the mission seemed to have been of an ad hoc nature on a 'precarious footing'. The mission had been started with the aim of evangelizing the tribes inhabiting the hills north of the Brahmaputra valley, but this was soon found to be 'impracticable' and hence, the missionary efforts came to be directed towards the Kacharis. This was the beginning of what came to be known as the Kachari mission of the SPG. In 1864, Sidney Endle was appointed and sent to Tezpur to assist Rev. Hesselmeyer in his work—later on, upon the death of Rev. Hesselmeyer in 1869, Sidney Endle was put in charge of the mission.[160] As part of the Kachari mission, a number of vernacular schools were established for the enrolment of the Boros, and from these schools, a few converted to Christianity—these converts were supposedly the first local converts in Assam to be 'confirmed'.[161] These schools, apart from being in and around the vicinity of Tezpur town,

[158] Kristiansen, *Blandt Urfolk I Assams Jungle*, 91.

[159] Charles Frederick Pascoe, *Classified Digest of the Records Of The Society For The Propagation Of The Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1701-1892* (London: SPG, 1894), 609.

[160] Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1911), xi-xii.

[161] Pascoe, *Classified Digest*, 609.

were also established in the Duar areas, mostly in the Boorigumah Duar where a majority of the population were Boros and other cognate tribes.[162]

The establishment of Kachari mission and the appointment of a full time missionary did not necessarily result in a sudden spurt of conversions among the Boros during the second half of the nineteenth century – baptism records show only few and sporadic conversions.[163] The nature of the mission itself, though often called Kachari Mission, was not one entirely dedicated to winning converts from among the Kacharis. Apart from his primary role as a missionary, Endle was also a 'planter's chaplain', often having to look into the needs of Europeans who were engaged in tea plantations.[164] Added to this, there was also the work among tea plantation labourers, who were primarily from the Chota Nagpur area — many of these indentured labourers were already Christians when they were brought to Assam. Reports show that even by the 1880s, it was perceived that the Tezpur mission and by default the Kachari mission was not a very 'developed' mission. Sidney Endle was often the lone missionary stationed there and though his work was often seen in a positive light by the SPG and was appreciated for the fact that the newly initiated evangelisation programmes were bearing results, it also admitted that 'in certain other cases experience has not confirmed the expectation of those who have been working on them'.[165] The society's report, though

[162] Boorigumah Duar was the easternmost Duar which was fell under the Bhutanese Duars. The Duars to the east of this duar were classified as the extra-Bhutan duars which did not historically fall under the direct influence of the Bhutanese government.

[163] These baptism records were accessed at the archives of the All Saint's Cathedral, Shillong.

[164] *The Forty-Eighth Report of the Calcutta Corresponding Committee Of The Incorporated Society For The Propagation Of The gospel in Foreign Parts, Being For The Year 1882* (Calcutta: T. Black & Co., 1883), 18

[165] *The Forty-Sixth Report of the Calcutta Corresponding Committee Of The Incorporated Society For The Propagation Of The Gospel in Foreign Parts, Being For The Year 1880* (Calcutta: T. Black & Co., 1881), xiii-xv.

sympathetic towards the efforts of Sidney Endle, also cautioned against 'settling down in to a passive rest with no thought of assailing the heathenism around', an explicit expression of concern of not achieving the desired results even after two decades. Nevertheless, there was certain amount of conversions and establishment of churches among the Boros. The conversions and the establishment of these churches happened mostly in the Khalling Duar and Booriguma Duar areas—presently situated in the north western part of Udalguri district—60 miles west of the mission station in Tezpur. Church records show that, in 1875, there was consecration of a church named St. Paul's Church, at Bengbari in Booriguma Duar by the Bishop of Calcutta during his visit to Assam.[166]

Even as the Kachari mission chose as its primary location the area around the Bhutan Duars in the Darrang district, the headquarters of the mission remained in Tezpur. There a normal school was established where students from different ethnicities joined. The students who joined the normal school were not necessarily Christians. In fact, the school was designed in such a way that it would become a means of familiarizing students to Christianity so that one day, they would propagate the gospel among their own people.[167] It was from this school that a few Boros, during their stay, became drawn to Christianity and converted. Apart from the school in Tezpur, the mission also had a network of schools in the Duars, established keeping the Boros in mind. By 1880, there were thirteen such schools, which were run with

[166] Petition and Consecration of Church Bengbari, Darrang Assam 2nd August 1875. All Saint's Cathedral, Shillong.

[167] In a report Sidney Endle wrote:

> The youths forming this class are generally not Christians, but it is found that a small portion of them do become Christians during the time of their instructions in the class. In the case of those who do not, there is at least a great moral improvement which must tell good for the schools that they are sent out to teach.

The Forty-Eighth Report 1882, 17.

financial assistance from the government. Though financed by the government, the curriculum of these schools was determined by the mission and even the teaching staff were those trained by the mission. It was the opinion of the mission that they be run as both 'evangelizing as well as civilizing agencies'.[168]

In spite of all this, conversions among Boros was slow—in 1881, only 21 candidates were readied for confirmation.[169] This was despite the fact that the mission among the Boros was not regarded 'as a wholly unfavourable one'. Endle attributed the chief cause for the small number of conversions among the Boros to the perceived lack of 'quickness of apprehension, nor the astonishing power of memory &c., characteristic of the higher the castes among the Hindus'.[170] And hence, the reluctance and the difficulty of the Boro to convert to Christianity was in his eyes 'an intellectual and a moral one'.[171] These reports do not explicitly talk of any active opposition to the preaching of gospel. In fact, people often welcomed the missionaries with gifts and listened to what they had to say. The inability to grasp the meanings of the gospels was also related, according to the reports, to the Boros not being able to fully understand and speak Assamese.[172] Endle struggled in his preaching tours to find words in

[168] *The Forty-Sixth Report*, 27. With the schools being run with funds from the government the students upon completion of their studies were obligated to teach in other schools for a period of two years

[169] *The Forty-Seventh Report of the Calcutta Corresponding Committee Of The Incorporated Society For The Propagation Of The Gospel in Foreign Parts, Being For The Year 1881* (Calcutta: T. Black & Co., 1882), 23.

[170] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 1.

[171] *The Forty-Sixth Report 1880*, 26.

[172] *The Forty-Seventh Report 1881*, 24. Endle in his reported that though there was a spread in the usage of Assamese in the Duars, it was only a few men who were familiar with it, while the women and children could only speak Boro.

Boro which would convey the 'clear idea of the distinctive doctrines of Christianity'.[173] In terms of the possibilities of winning converts among the Boros, Sidney Endle wrote:

> Their character is marked by a simple and straightforward truthfulness and honesty which are always too prominent among their Hindu neighbours. Nor have they an ancient civilisation closely bound up with a creed and social system reaching far back into the far distant past.[174]

Giving a clue about the slow pace and the general reluctance of Boros to convert, Endle candidly admitted in his reports that he could hardly cite an instance where, 'conversion to the Faith of Christ has been brought about by preaching alone *i.e.,* as the sole human agency employed'.[175] It was hoped that only the persistence of the missionary would gradually help the Boros realise that the 'Missionary is influenced solely by a desire to promote their truest and highest wellbeing, and that he comes to their country not for his own good but for theirs'.[176] Even during the cold months, Endle would repeatedly visit the Boro villages with the same set of teachings. According to him, there was a world of difference between the thought processes of the Boros and the Europeans, so much so that it was 'not easy to bring the two into *healthy life-giving* contact [emphasis added]'.[177] The mental faculties of the Boros were seen as too rudimentary, residing at the level of 'everyday wants and wishes', and hence, unable to involve itself in the 'assimilation of higher ideas'—Christianity.[178] It was here that both the

[173] Even as Sidney Endle published his book of Boro grammar in 1884, the schools in Tezpur and in the Kachari areas would most likely have had Assamese as a medium of instruction.

[174] *The Forty-Ninth Report of the Calcutta Corresponding Committee Of The Incorporated Society For The Propagation Of The Gospel in Foreign Parts, Being For The Year 1883* (Calcutta: T. Black & Co., 1884), 23.

[175] *The Forty-Ninth Report 1883,* 24.

[176] *The Forty-Sixth Report 1880,* 27.

[177] *The Forty-Seventh Report 1881,*24.

[178] *The Forty-Ninth Report 1883, 24.*

'evangelising and the civilising' functions of the schools would come to play. They were to supply the local church leaders and preachers, among whom, it was hoped that some would occupy higher roles in the church hierarchy, who would have better insights into the workings of the 'Asiatic character, which the European foreigner could hardly ever hope to attain'.[179]

Though the establishment of schools and the efforts of the SPG did not necessarily result in significant conversions among the Boros, it did introduce certain levels of 'familiarity' with Christianity. Undoubtedly, Endle's presence as a missionary among the Boros must have contributed to such a familiarity. Regardless of his ethnographic monograph on *The Kacharis* being largely coloured by his evangelising concerns, it shows a deep familiarity with the Boros; and his grammar book too demonstrates that he had attained a very nuanced and fine understanding of the language. J. D. Anderson in his introduction to the monograph recalled that he was often referred to as *gami ni brai*—the village old man—as a term of endearment by the Boros. He had spent little over four decades in the field as a missionary—starting in 1863 till his death in the year 1907. In fact, the close association that Endle had with the Boros was even noted by other communities. In his own words, often the 'uncomplimentary epithet of *mlech padre*'—Mlech as a variation of Mech— was hurled at him by high caste Hindus.[180] Endle's work laid the groundwork for the initial spread of Christianity (Baptists) among the Boros in Darrang starting in the second decade of the twentieth century. In fact, it was people who already had certain familiarity with Christianity that actively reached out to the American Baptist missionaries to come and establish a mission among them. By the time American

[179] *The Forty-Eighth Report 1882, 17.*

[180] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 82.

Baptist missionaries had begun mission work in 1914, 'there were a few Kachari villages where people did not get to hear the gospel in some form or the other'.[181]

American Baptists

American Baptists' contact with the Boros on the north bank of the Brahmaputra was established during the first half of nineteenth century itself. However, despite frequent proposals to open a permanent mission centre there, it remained 'neglected' till the second decade of the twentieth century. Frederick S. Downs, in his history of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI), states that the first contact with the Kacharis (Boros) was made by Rev. Cyrus Barker in 1843, subsequent to the establishment of the American Baptist Mission center in Guwahati.[182] He mentions the baptism of a Kachari individual named Apinta in 1846, in a village in North Kamrup, who was also appointed as a worker of the mission. A school was established and within his community, he apparently rose to a position of prominence. But apart from that, there seems to be no other records of conversions among the Boros in that period, which could be attributed to the evangelizing efforts of the American Baptists. Downs talks of Apinta as someone who found it 'increasingly difficult to maintain a Christian life in isolation' in his village and hence returned to the mission station in Guwahati.

Following the death of Sidney Endle, the SPG mission was not able to provide as much attention to all its congregation members, and was struggling to maintain itself. Though there is lack of detailed records pertaining to that period, the prevailing 'oral histories' talk about individuals who had previously been in contact with the SPG travelling to the Baptist mission station at Guwahati and requesting the missionary, Rev. G. R. Kampfer, to start a mission

[181] G.R. Kampfer, "Field Report for 1914-15, North Kamrup and Mangaldai Fields", microfilm, American Baptist Historical Society Repositories (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: FM0195.

[182] Frederick S. Downs, *The Mighty Works Of God* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 2014), 72.

among the Boros.[183] This is also corroborated by V. H. Sword in his report of 1940 for the Mongoldoi field.[184] He wrote of ten Christians who had come to Guwahati and asked 'Rev. Kampfer to *come and help* them [emphasis added]'. This group of Christians included a combination of individuals who had been previously with the SPG and some had even been to the schools run by the missionaries at Jorhat. Among the people who had studied in the mission school at Jorhat was an individual named Alfred Kachari. Romanus Daimari was another individual who had studied in a school run by the SPG and went on to become a teacher in one of the SPG schools. He would also go on to be an important evangelist who, for over three decades, was to be largely responsible for spreading the gospel among Boros, not just in Darrang but also in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara.

To get a sense of the manner in which conversions happened in the second and the third decade of the twentieth century, an examination of the reports left behind by Rev. Kampfer in the form of personal notes, reports, and letters shed much light. In his report for the year 1914-15, Rev. Kampfer described the situation as one of 'retrogression' among people after the death of Sidney Endle; combined with an 'awful scourge of *Kala azar*', which had resulted in numerous deaths. A situation of desperation had prevailed with deaths and people 'relapsing into heathenism', and an increasing frequency of 'opium eating and drunkenness'.[185] But

[183] Protul Kumar Bhobora, *Mongoldoi Baptist Christian Hobhar Para Boro Baptist Conventionoloi–Christiya Paricharjar Ahota Basar* (Udalguri: Sulekha Chakravarty, 2015),1; Khalason Muchari, "Rev. Romanus Daimarir Somu Jivoni", in *Smriti Grantha, Hirok Jayanti, Darrang Baptist Christian Xobha*, ed. Hemol Basumatary (Harisinga, 1989).

[184] V. H. Sword, "Gauhati: Mongoldoi, Evangelistic and Education", in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, Thirty-Seventh Session, Jan 4-9, Jorhat Assam 1940*, 22. CBCNEI Archives. Mongoldoi was a subdivision of the then Darrang district, which also included the areas of present day Udalguri district. Most of the areas where SPG was active previously and later the Baptists, fell under this subdivision.

[185] Kampfer, 1914-15 North Kamrup and Mangaldai Field Report, ABHS, FM-0195.

among them, he found people who were actively seeking out the missionaries and willing to convert—these included both ex-members of the Church of England and new candidates. Baptism records of the Barigaon Baptist Church show that in January 1914, twenty-one individuals were baptised by Rev. Kampfer, some new converts and others who had earlier been with the SPG.[186] Later, in the same year an apparent 'crisis' was brewing up with more number of people willing to convert and a rise in instances of 'persecution' - of assault and physical violence - against people who were willing to do so.[187] In spite of this, there was a steady stream of people eager to be baptised.

Rev. Kampfer, in his field report for the year 1916, noted the change that came about among the new churches.[188] The churches organized themselves to establish schools and Sunday schools and sent out men and women to places such as Jorhat to train as pastors, teachers, and evangelists. As financial support was not forthcoming for evangelists and schools among the Boros, the churches usually raised money through the cultivation of rice.[189] As such, even during these initial years, these churches were identified to be 'self-supporting and self-propagating' and found to be 'erring' on 'the side of over-rigourous discipline', engaging also in evangelistic activities among other communities.[190] Yet, it was lamented by Rev. Kampfer

[186] *Baptism Record Book*, Barigaon Baptist Church, Udalguri.

[187] Kampfer, 1914-15 North Kamrup and Mangaldai Field Report, ABHS, FM-0195. A local *mouzadar* (tax collector) had been physically assaulting and locking up people who were professing a desire to convert to Christianity. Rev. Kampfer mentions in his report that he negotiated on behalf of the assaulted people with the *mouzadar* (tax collector), who ended up paying a fine of ten rupees, which apparently 'lifted the fear from the hearts of the Kacharis'.

[188] G. R. Kampfer, "Mangaldai", in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report–II, Fifteenth Session 1917*. CBCNEI Archives.

[189] G.R. Kampfer to American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (ABFMS), April 9, 1923, microfilm, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: FM-0246.

[190] G. R. Kampfer, Mangaldai Field Report 1922, microfilm, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: FM-0246.

that there was a 'crying need for leadership', and concerns were also raised that if it continued to be so the progress achieved could come to a standstill.

The new converts continued with their itinerant preaching tours. Within a span of three years by 1916, three more churches were established with a total membership of 448 individuals.[191] In a span of 25 years, by 1940, the number of Baptist Christians in the Mongoldoi area had increased to 10000.[192] To such an exponential growth it would be tempting to credit the American Baptist missionaries, but doing so would mask the process through which Boros of these region became active agents in these conversions. The Mongoldoi field had, in a lot of ways, never been a 'priority' area for the American Baptists. Though often talked about in reports as a 'promising field' and 'the most hopeful thing in Assam', there was never a mission station or any effort that was directed solely at the Boros.[193] Right from the beginning, this field was overseen by missionaries who gave only a 'part of their time' to this work with not a 'single penny' allocated by the mission for tours—it was the missionary who spent his own salary in preaching tours.[194] Even by the fourth decade of the twentieth century the Mongoldoi field was 'cared for by missionaries who had been able to give only part of their time for the work' and had to 'depend on its own leadership'.[195] The reports give a sense of the fact that the converts were always eager for the missionaries or some representatives to constantly visit them, which however, did not happen. V. H. Sword in his reports implored

[191] G. R. Kampfer "Mangaldai", in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report–II, Fifteenth Session 1917*. CBCNEI Archives.

[192] Sword, Mongoldoi Evangelistic and Education, 1940.

[193] V. H. Sword, "Mangaldai Field Report", in *Assam Baptist Mission Field Reports 1937*. CBCNEI Archives.

[194] Sword, "Mangaldai Field Report 1937".

[195] V.H. Sword, "Mongoldoi, Evangelistic" in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, 34th Session 1936,* (Gauhati: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1936), 39. CBCNEI Archives.

upon the mission and other missionaries to visit this field. In 1937, when the Assam Baptist Convention was scheduled to be held at a place called Harisinga (Mongoldoi field), he had written:

> You are cordially invited to attend. No! you are earnestly urged to attend and to see, too, that your people attend, because if you fail to show up the Kacharis will be most disappointed and I fear it could be more than they could stand. For years they have *felt neglected by the mission and by their fellow Christians* and your failure to come and encourage them now would be fatal. . . . They are looking forward with great hope while they see little or no help from the mission they are determined that in their own strength, under God, they shall go forward [emphasis added]'.[196]

Meanings of Conversion

As mentioned earlier, Boro Baptists from the start were very much 'self-supporting and self-propagating'. In the initial decades, this gave rise to a situation where even though there were significant conversions, the missionaries were not always supportive of the manner in which the number of churches and members were increasing. The meanings and motives that missionaries attributed to the conversion were not always in sync with the expectations of the mission. The American Baptist missionaries saw the prevailing cultural, religious, and social practices of the Boros as largely incompatible with their kind of Christianity. It goes without saying that the missionaries saw themselves as superiors. They saw the Boros as 'primitive, 'childlike, 'demon-worshippers', 'dwelling in the darkness of heathen superstition' and the language used was of 'conquest' over these souls.[197] A complete transformation was required

[196] Sword, Mangaldai Report 1937.

[197] Kampfer to ABFMS, April 9, 1923.

from the heathen past. Candidates were vetted prior to baptism. It was required of them a certain familiarity with the concepts of Christianity and a test of their sincerity.

However, the meanings the converts attributed to the conversions varied from that of the missionaries. Potential converts would give many reasons for their willingness, couched in terms of 'improvement' and 'social betterment', which they hoped Christianity would confer upon them.[198] This was despite, what must surely have been an enormous social and economic cost to pay. Conversion would entail along with abandoning traditional religious and cultural practices the alienation of the convert from his or her larger societal relationship. Often there were skirmishes which was seen as persecution by the missionaries and converts. In some places, it was as though with the 'advent of the evangelists not peace but the sword has come'.[199] They were also stopped from working and engaging in trades on the number of *hats* (markets) on Sundays. Rev. Kampfer noted that among the many requirements, a familiarity with the 'ten commandments' was one that was prominent. However, most of the converts could only remember the first one — thou shall have no other gods before me. This, according to Rev. Kampfer, became the *basis* for their new religion — a change from believing in a multitude of spirits to belief in a singular God. Even as the new religion centered around Christ as the sole authority, for some of the converts, he was someone to replace their old gods with as circumstances changed, capable of curing sicknesses — 'Jesus will help me in sickness', was one reason given by a candidate.[200] In a region plagued with malaria and other deadly diseases, the new religion was looked up to for cure and protection. It was believed by many

[198] Kampfer, 1914-15 North Kamrup and Mangaldai Field Report, ABHS, FM-195-2-1.

[199] Protul Kumar Bhobora, ed. *The Unpublished Notes Of Rev. G. R. Kampfer* (Udalguri: Rihon Daimari, 2010),35.

[200] Kampfer, 1914-15 North Kamrup and Mangaldai Field Report, ABHS, FM-0195-2-1.

that Christians had a 'secret prayer over diseases'.[201] Among them were also people who had been associated directly with traditional religious practices, but who no longer believed in the efficacy of the powers of the spirits. Bairi, a former 'priestess' was one such person who had come forward to be baptised. She was described as a person who would take part in the 'orgies', 'dances and drinking bouts' of the heathen festivals, possessed by 'evil spirits'. In her own words, 'she had served these demons', but in return they had given her only, 'fear, sickness, death and poverty'. [202]

In the twenties there was another 'revival' that resulted in many more people and villages converting to Christianity and establishing churches. This was again due to the evangelising efforts of the newly established Boro Baptist churches and their 'self-propagating' characteristics. It was very much in line with the goals of the larger missionary enterprise to make the local converts not rely on the mission for financial help or for the spread of the gospel. But again the manner in which the churches were propagating the gospel and the reasons for large scale conversions were not always approved by the missionaries and remained a matter of concern. Rev. Kampfer wrote in one of his report that the 'manifestations of chiliastic tendencies' among the new Boro churches had left him with much anxiety.[203] These anxieties were based around the manner in which the churches and its leaders were bringing about their own interpretations of Christianity, who were described as, 'wolves in sheep's clothing', leading astray a 'multitude of unlettered, simple hearted converts'. Zealous Boros formed numerous preaching bands and went around 'heathen' villages to 'open them up'—

[201] G. R. Kampfer, "Sowing the Gospel Seed", October 25, 1915, Report for 1911-15, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: RM-0195-2-1.

[202] G. R. Kampfer, "A Converted Priestess", Report for 1911-15, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: RM-0195-2-1.

[203] G. R. Kampfer, "Mangaldai Field Report 1925", microfilm, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: RM-246-2-2.

Christianise them. These preaching bands would be mostly headed by an individual who played the role of a 'demon driver', and generally would be a person who was formerly an 'animistic priest'. They would go about villages, destroying things associated with traditional religious and cultural practices. The sacred *sizou* tree would be slashed down and the 'satan houses' — small houses where offerings to spirits would be kept — were burned down along with tufts of hair cut from the heads of men and charms tied around the arms of babies.[204] It would seem that to a large extent people who were formerly associated with the traditional faith played certain roles in convincing the people to convert. Apart from these male demon drivers, there were also women who played a role — an example of an ex-priestess was cited before. These women 'priestess', *doudinis,* were the ones who could act as the medium between aggrieved spirits, who would tell her the things to be done in order for them to be pleased. Rev. Kampfer was told of one such woman who now went around village to village seeking out such preaching bands and inviting them to their own village. She too started preaching the new religion to her own kith and kin, as a result of which she was able to convert her entire village.[205] In fact, in the newly formed churches it would be mostly women who would be at the forefront of an 'ecstatic' experience that would result in the whole congregation experiencing the 'revival'. Members would see visions of 'clouds', 'blood', 'stars and constellations'' and 'flames of fire' and some went inside forests for days to fast and pray.[206] During this state of

[204] Bhobora, *Notes Of Rev. G. R. Kampfer,* 36.

[205] G. R. Kampfer, "A Season's Harvest", microfilm, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: RM-246-2-2.

[206] Bhobora, *Notes Of Rev. G. R. Kampfer,* 41–42. In this particular incident, people were apparently driven to a frenzy and went inside forests for days, while thieves stole their belongings from their houses.

ecstasy, women would also talk in tongues and spell out their dreams where the *sins* of the church members were *revealed* to them.[207]

Though a large number of people were being drawn to Christianity — in the cold season of 1924-25 itself over a thousand people accepted Christianity[208] — Rev. Kampfer was 'depressed with the hopelessness of ever doing this work *as it ought to be done* [emphasis added]'.[209] Such forms of evangelisation were seen as, not confirming to the standards of a 'sound doctrine' and of not being 'grounded in truth'. These incidents were labelled as a 'strange revival', sweeping across 'heathen villages' and gave rise to serious concerns about the growth of a 'distorted type of Baptist Church'.[210] Rev. Kampfer himself admitted that many of these conversions were also inspired by 'mixed motives'— the 'economic and educational factors'. He accused newly formed churches of 'exercising its own judgement against the advice of the missionary than . . . any other field in Assam' and of being 'carried away by every wind of doctrine that blows'. There was a 'spirit of non-cooperation with the Mission' that had broken out among church workers.[211] (This, in fact, led to almost no ordination of individuals among these Boro Baptist churches, with the exception of Romanus Daimari, till 1947, when American Baptist Missionaries left the country).

In spite of all the reasons and motivations that can be attributed to the conversion of Boros in the Mongoldoi field, there seemed to have been certain perceived 'positive' changes

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[207] Bhobora, *Notes Of Rev. G. R. Kampfer*, 47.

[208] G. R. Kampfer to Mr Longwell, Udalguri Rest House, Good Friday, 1925, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: RM-246-2-2.

[209] G. R. Kampfer to Mr. Longwell, Camp Udalguri, April 8, 1925.

[210] Kampfer, "Mangaldai Field Report 1925", ABHS.

[211] G. R. Kampfer to Dr. Robbins, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society April 20th, 1925, microfilm, American Baptist Historical Society Repository (ABHS), Atlanta, Microfilm Number: RM-246-2-2.

among these converts, which was also observed by colonial administrators. The land revenue assessment report of 1931 report for the Kariapara Duar areas, noted that there had been 'some improvement in the standard of living among the Christian converts', who by then comprised half of the Boro population in that tract.[212] The report noted that even as there seemed to be no 'perceptible change yet among other sections of the indigenous [Kachari] population', who were the most backward among all communities in the Mangaldai subdivision, the Christian Boros were presumably 'as a rule a little more advanced than the rest', in terms of their economic condition.[213] This was attributed to abstaining from drinking rice beer. The non-converts apparently still used a large portion of their rice in producing the drink. The report also noted that the sale and consumption of opium too fell down drastically in the Christian areas within a span of five years, ending in 1929-30, from an annual average of 14 maunds 4 seers, to 5 maunds 23 seers.[214] A fair amount of progress in attainment of education was also said to have occurred among the Christian conversions, with no less than 21 schools for boys and 2 lower primary schools for girls among the Christians — in comparison the local board maintained only 5 lower primary schools.[215]

In fact, from the initial years itself the local churches were concerned with secular education and establishment of schools. A missionary report in 1923, a period when 'revivalism' was taking place, noted that dozen or so schools were supported by the local

[212] *Assessment Report of The Kariaparaduar of Darrang District* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1931). Assam State Archives (ASA) Library, 14.

[213] *Assessment Report of The Kariaparaduar of Darrang District* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1931). Assam State Archives (ASA) Library, 14.

[214] *Assessment Report of The Kariaparaduar of Darrang District* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1931). Assam State Archives (ASA) Library, 14

[215] *Assessment Report of The Kariaparaduar of Darrang District*, 14.

Association (Boro Baptist Churches) and also privately by several individual churches.[216] And while many schools in the villages were established during the initial period of conversions, by the fourth decade the emphasis on education grew further. One such example was the establishment of a Middle English School in 1931 at a place called Harisinga, in Darrang district, which by then had been connected with the railways. Earlier this school was in a village called Burigami, situated at the foothills of Bhutan in Buriguma Duar, where the first conversions to Baptist Christianity had taken place in 1914–15. The Association (of Boro Baptist Churches) decided to shift this school to Harisinga. But this initiative was *entirely* an endeavour of the local churches. The field reports of 1931 by American Missionaries acknowledged that 'not a pice of mission money ever went into the old plant [the school at Burigami]' and 'not one pice has gone into the new [school at Harisinga].[217] The report mentions that the local Association and churches did ask for help from the American Baptist Mission, but were informed that there were no funds for such purposes. As such the local churches replied to the mission saying 'then we will have to do it ourselves'.[218] The 50 odd churches of the association went about mobilising their own resources of men and material, cleared a piece of land and built the school structure. The finances and maintenance of such schools were often made possible by collective cultivation of rice and by 'volunteer labour' from church members.[219] By the 1937 the standards of the Harisinga M. E. School was said to have 'raised considerably' that it had become 'a pleasure to visit the school'.[220] In this context,

[216] "Schools Mongoldoi" in *Assam Baptist Mission Field Reports 1923*. CBCNEI Archives

[217] "Mongoldai 1931" in *Assam Baptist Mission Field Reports 1931*. CBCNEI Archives.

[218] "Mongoldai 1931" in *Assam Baptist Mission Field Reports 1931*.

[219] V. H. Sword, "Mongoldai, Educational" in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, 34th Session, 1936*, (Gauhati: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1936), 40. CBCNEI Archives.

[220] V. H. Sword, "Mongoldai, Evangelistic and Educational" in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, 35th Session, 1937,* (Gauhati: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1937), 32–33. CBCNEI Archives.

here it needs to be mentioned that this school also had Boro teachers who were not Christian converts. One among them was Modaram Brahma, from Goalpara.[221] He was a second generation Brahma convert and had graduated from Cotton College. He was by then actively involved with student mobilisation and socio-religious reforms in Goalpara. There was a palpable enthusiasm among the students of this school, they started further experiments with cultivation towards self-sustenance. This was noticed by the government who then sent an 'Agricultural Inspector to teach the boys the art of cultivation'.[222] In general there was an enthusiasm related to establishing schools by the local churches. Many young educated young people volunteered to teach and take active part in the running of such schools. For instance, an individual named Kalasing Basumathari, who was a school teacher in a Local Board School, was described as an individual who received no pay but took up supervising work of the schools run by the Churches. The reason for him taking up this task was noted as because of 'his love for his people'.[223] The enthusiasm and pre-occupation of local churches with education was such, that the apparent 'diverting of attention' and resources towards this end was seen as one of the probable causes for the 'setback' in the 'spirit of evangelism that had characterised this field for many years'.[224]

In this context it is important to note here that individuals such as Kalasingh Basumathari and Rev. Romanus Daimari, while actively engaging with churches at a very local

[221] Mangalsingh Hajoary, "Modaram Brahma" in Laxmi Nath Tamuly ed., *Barenyo Byaktityo* (Guwahati: Assam Prakashan Parishad, 2005), 9.

[222] Sword, "Mongoldai, Evangelistic and Educational" in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, 35th Session, 1937,* 32.

[223] Sword, "Mongoldai, Educational" in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, 34th Session, 1936,* 40.

[224] Sword, "Mongoldai, Evangelistic and Educational" in *Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, 35th Session, 1937,*

level, were also connected to the larger tribal/Boro solidarities that were being forged in Assam in the late 1930s. They were involved with The Assam Tribal League, which was formed under the initiative of tribal leaders such as Rupnath Brahma and Bhimbar Deori. On 16th June 1938, in a meeting of the Tribal League at Kokrajhar both Kalasingh Basumathari and Rev. Romanus Daimari were inducted as members of its 'Working Committee'.[225] In that meeting a decision to demand the status of 'government aided' for schools in the tribal areas was taken up. The Middle English School at Harisinga, funded by the local Baptist Churches of the area was also included in that list.[226] As such they were also actively involved in its 'tribal politics'. The Tribal League during that period was also concerned with the upcoming census of 1941. It had been concerned with instances of a large number of tribals being enumerated as caste-Hindus in the census of 1931, which reduced the tribal numbers. In a meeting on 10th September 1938, at Shillong the Tribal League had signed a 'pact' with the Assam Congress Party. In that pact, among many points, such as reservations in jobs, there was also the demand for tribals who had converted to 'Hinduism' and 'Christianity' to be enumerated as tribals in the census of 1941, if they desired to be classified as such.[227]

Conclusion

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Christianity became one of the religions to which Boros in the Duars, and elsewhere, could convert to, in a context where others in adjoining areas were experimenting and undertaking socio-religious reform. While in the nineteenth century missionary activities did not necessarily result in large scale conversions, by the second decade of twentieth century, there was significant rise in instances of conversions

[225] Bhimbar Deori, ed., The Assam Tribal League: Bulletin No.1 (The Assam Tribal League, 1938), 8.

[226] Deori, ed., The Assam Tribal League: Bulletin No.1, 9.

[227] Deori, ed., The Assam Tribal League: Bulletin No.1, 13.

to Christianity. These were also decades when there were efforts for political mobilisations and a 'rethinking' of identity among the Boros. In the Goalpara region, where people were seeking out different forms of 'improvement' and 'betterment' of their socio-cultural-economic status, Christianity along with Brahma Dharma provided one of the possible routes that could be taken as a means to achieve those. Apart from the instances of the Lutheran converts in Goalpara experimenting with both the religions, Halfdan Siiger too during his field work in the Patkijuli area, under Kamrup District, found individuals who had experimented with both Brahma Dharma as well as Christianity. He was told by one of his informants, named Tanesar, about a Christian preacher named Sotis Basumatary who could perform 'miracles', because of which Tanesar converted to Christianity.[228] Sotis Basumatary had previously worked as a teacher in a High Primary School run by the Darjeeling Mission. He came back to Assam and became a priest in the Lutheran Mission. But even after being associated with Christianity for years, he later became a follower of Brahma Dharma. Maguram Musahary — referred to as Makoram by Hafdan Siiger — was another such individual who had apparently led an interesting and eclectic life before fully embracing Christianity and becoming a leader of the Boro Lutheran Church. He is today considered as one of the tallest Christian leaders among the Boros across denominations, having played a seminal role in the translation of the Bible to Boro. He was described by a Scandinavian missionary as a 'religious seeker', who had also dabbled in the Hindu scriptures and lived like an ascetic leading to him being described as a *Christian Sadhu* — a holy man.[229]

[228] Halfdan Siiger, *The Bodos Of Assam: Revisiting A Classical Study From 1950*, ed., Peter B. Anderson and Santosh K. Soren (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015), 93.

[229] H. E. Wisløff, *Vid Foten av Himalaya* (Oslo: Lutherstiftelsen, 1959), 134–137, quoted in Halfdan Siiger, *The Bodos*, 94–95. Also please see, Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*,37.

As Brahma Dharma initially started as a socio religious reform movement in Goalpara, it did not have a strong influential force in the Darrang Duars and naturally did not offer itself as an alternative to Christianity for the Boros there. Though there are no available records detailing Boro conversions to Vaishnavism in this area, there are prevailing oral histories that talk about such conversions. One missionary field report of 1923 noted that while Kacharis were 'open to preaching of the Gospel . . . the *Mahapurishias* . . . were also active and are believed to have won over these Kacharis'.[230] Though this report was of Kamrup district in areas north of Tihu town, the situation could have well been similar in Darrang. Kapurpura Baptist Church, in Udalguri, is one such example where in the late twenties, the villagers had an option to choose between Vaishnavism or Christianity.[231] They apparently went along with the Christians as they thought that becoming Christians would be more beneficial in terms of education.

In spite of the fact that in the initial phases Boros may have attributed different reasons and meanings for conversion, later on many of them, to a large extent began to imbibe the ideas instructed by the missionaries. From trying to fit in Christianity to their lives, they now tried to fit in their lives to the demands of particular types of Christianity. But more importantly this too had the underlying theme of *regeneration*. The non-Christian past was seen as 'deathly'. Boros needed to come out of this past, with only the saving grace of Christ promising deliverance. In a letter thanking the Secretary of the British Bible Society for facilitating the publication of the New Testament in Boro, the Christian Sadhu Makoram had written:

[230] "Field Report, Kamrup (North Bank)" in *Assam Baptist Mission Field Reports 1923*. CBCNEI Archives.

[231] Pronoy Daimari, interview by author, Harisinga, October 2018. Rev. Pronoy Daimari recalled being told of prevailing oral traditions in the village of Kapurpura, wherein in the late 1920s a Vaishnavite preacher, seated on an elephant, would come to the area and try to get converts.

> . . . They (missionaries) have loved us poor Boros, who have been dead since the creation of the world. In order to give us life and teach the eternal word you have translated the Bible into our native tongue . . . For we have never known a word that ever gives us joy and peace, but we only had what led us to death. There was only grief and sorrow in our hearts . . . And because we have now received the Holy Word, *we Boros have come back to life from the dead, and we believe that all Boros will come to life* [emphasis added, translated from Danish].[232]

Similarly, among the Boro Baptists of Darrang too, the missionaries were seen as the agents of change who brought the converted Boros out of the 'darkness into the light'. In a note, Rev. Romanus Daimari had written:

> We thank you Lord for the work that you have been doing through the American missionaries among us for the last 33 years, to deliver us Boros *wallowing in darkness*. . . It is through the endeavours of our American brothers and sisters that we Boros have been able to take small steps towards the *light* [translated from Assamese, emphasis added].[233]

But notwithstanding the varied motivations and multiple trajectories of conversions to Christianity, the chapter has tried to show that these were also linked to the larger idea of progress and regeneration of the self and the community.

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[232] Rod, *Evangeliet Blandt Boroerne*, 36–37.

[233] Romanus Daimari, quoted in Khalason Mochari, "Rev. Romanus Daimarir Somu Jivani" in *Smriti Grantha, Hirok Jayanti, Darrang Baptist Christian Xobha*, ed. Hemol Basumatary (Harisinga: DBCA, 1989), unnumbered page.

Chapter 3: Making the Modern Boro Self: Early Twentieth Century

This chapter will try to demonstrate that Boros were present at and inserted themselves into the process of their making in the early twentieth century as active agents. So far the thesis has dealt with how enumerative and classificatory exercises of the colonial state actively changed the contours of Boro as a community — by placing them within the ambit of a once glorious and ancient 'great Bodo race'. The first chapter had set out to do this and traced the processes through which this race theory was legitimised. The chapter on conversions to Christianity, tried to place conversions within the overarching theme of the desire for progress and regeneration. This chapter to culminate, tries to lay out in detail the efforts of the Boros to reconstitute a new modern self in the early decades of the twentieth century. While colonial knowledge was undoubtedly hegemonic in its attempts to classify the Boros — and though a cursory reading might seem that Boros took recourse to the very same colonial knowledge that were being circulated and propagated in colonial official circles — it sets out to clearly demonstrate that Boros were not docile recipients of that knowledge, but were active agents in the making of their own self. They picked and chose parts from the repository of colonial knowledge on races, languages, and histories to claim a space within the *heritage* of the once glorious Bodo race. It went beyond a simple unquestioning acceptance of all that was expounded by colonial knowledge. If they accepted the colonial ideas of a Bodo race, it was to get 'legitimate' access to histories, to place themselves at a position of respectability in the racialised hierarchy of castes and tribes — Aryan vs non-Aryan. And when they rejected certain aspects of colonial knowledge it was because they were at odds with their attempts to re-organise, reinvigorate, and reform Boro society; and also their endeavours to embark on a path of *unnati*. It was a period of intense introspection where Boros were actively trying to negotiate, locate and place themselves in the caste/racial hierarchy of things, while being subjected to

colonial classifications. Such attempts resulted in the formation of various associations, attempts at publishing, 'conversions', and socio-religious reforms.

These profound changes that went into reconfiguring Bodo identity have to be read alongside the socio-political mobilisations that were changing the contours of the larger Assamese *jati* in the early decades of the twentieth century. Though the beginning of this process of defining an Assamese *jati* can be traced to the nineteenth century, it became much forceful from the early twentieth century onwards, penetrating the social fabric of communities in Assam — of both castes and tribes — and affecting them in various ways. Pre-colonial 'Indic knowledge' systems had often described Assam as a backward and 'inaccessible . . . land of witch craft and demonic people' and hence automatically residing outside the pale of the large Indic-Aryan geography.[1] As a part of the process of the consolidation of an Assamese *jati*, the Assamese gentry 'articulated exclusivist claims to Indo-Aryan racial and cultural belonging', often aided by colonial knowledge.[2] While an assertive and aggressive Assamese nationalism was being forged it took recourse to this construction of a racialised hierarchy of communities. It left the Boros questioning their positionality within the imaginations of a 'greater Assamese *jati*'— this was also felt by lower caste groups who were also starting to form caste associations seeking upward mobility. And an important part of this process of making the greater Assamese *jati* was the appropriations and assimilation of the heritages and histories of communities and regions, which otherwise may not have strongly identified with the idea of this hegemonic Assamese *jati*.

[1] Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

[2] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 10.

The chapter tries to show that Boros reacted to all that was happening, through an acute understanding of their social, political, cultural, and religious situation. They strongly imbibed the rhetoric of *unnati*, which was then a dominant framework for community mobilisations in the province. In the process they often inverted the existing notions of caste/racial hierarchies. For instance, appropriating the idea of a Bodo race, they claimed the medieval Kachari kingdoms as their own, and as a past ruling race, they laid claims to a Kshatriya heritage. And thus they attempted to place themselves within the large Indo-Aryan heritage and not be left behind. The chapter discusses the various socio-religious reforms movements that Boros undertook for community upliftment, and their attempts to accord a structured semblance to their traditional religion. While these attempts were filled with contradictions and moved along divergent *roads*, the chapter demonstrates that what tied them all together was the yearning for regeneration, progress, and respectability, while trying to carve out a distinct Boro identity.

Goalpara: Early Twentieth Century

The impact of these ideas, which were shaping the idea of being Assamese, were also being profoundly felt in western Assam specifically in Goalpara. Sanghamitra Misra in her book *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* cogently demonstrates that the region of Goalpara was transformed by colonialism into an 'economic hinterland . . . a culturally peripheral space'. [3] As a result of which the region became a 'fractured region . . . fraught by contesting narratives and counter narratives often pertaining to cultural identity'.[4] Misra informs that the articulation of a separate local Goalparia identity, by people from Goalpara, tied to a region resisted the efforts of appropriations of the

[3] Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015), 1.

[4] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 1.

nationalism of both Assam and Bengal.[5] In pre-colonial times, Goalpara was a region that was characterised by overlapping sovereignties, therein a unique space with its own context. The region facilitated the interaction of people from all four directions engaging in trade and other dependent activities. Within this situation of overlapping sovereignties and territorial claims by petty chiefs and monarchs, the people inhabiting the space often traversed and crossed over the boundaries of ethnicity, owing their allegiance to different 'rajas' and monarchs. During the colonial period, the officials were of the opinion that in Goalpara a significant amount of the population comprised of people who claimed to be from the (Koch) Rajbanshi community. While this was the case during the colonial period one also has to keep in mind the presence and close kinship ties that different communities shared, complicating matters—and also as has been discussed in the first chapter, Rajbanshi as term had become an 'open' category which could be aspired for even by peasants across tribes and lower caste groups. The observations of the officials that colonial Goalpara was a place marked by the widespread presence of individuals identifying themselves as Rajbanshi — both as a linguistic and ethnic community — was also underscored by the fact that in the beginning of twentieth century, there was a conscious attempt to produce a counter-narrative of a distinct identity on the part of the landed elites and the intelligentsia from Goalpara. It was to resist the attempts of an aggressive Assamese nationalism and Bengal to appropriate them. Which they did through assertions of distinct speech practices — claiming a distinct 'Rajbanshi bhasa' (Rajbanshi language) — and writing histories to counter the histories of Assamese nationalists.[6] These were mostly

[5] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 1–2.

[6] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 144; 173–183. Zamindari system in Goalpara was abolished only in 1956. These *zamindars* owned large swathes of land/estates which at various points of time were semi-independent, but also acknowledged the suzerainty of powers such as the Mughals paying them tribute. Please see Santo Barman, *Zamindari System in Assam during British Rule: A Case Study of Goalpara District* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1994), 2.

zamindars and landed elites of Goalpara who tried to tie down their speech practices to the regions and their distinct identities and resisted attempts to see it as 'vestiges of the now more modern forms of vernacular being imagined for Assam and Bengal'.[7] The efforts of this assertive Assamese nationalism also involved the appropriations of the medieval Koch kingdom as repositories of histories, culture, and heritage which formed an integral part in the making of a greater Assamese *jati*.

While the cultural and distinctive localised speech/linguistic practices (Rajbanshi bhasa) led to Goalpara being often constituted as an in between space — in the middle of contesting claims of both Bengalis and Assamese — it also, as mentioned, gave rise to forceful assertions of a distinct Goalparia identity. But there would have been communities who would not have necessarily and seamlessly fit into this Goalparia identity. Apart from the landed elites there were several other communities who may not have been prominent in the larger picture. The tribal peasant class in Goalpara, and for the purposes of this thesis the Boros, can be placed a little distant from the process of this identity assertion — Boros there had asserted that they saw themselves as part of the Assamese heritage.[8] But nevertheless Boro in Goalpara were also acutely aware of the identity politics that was being played out in that district, and often also

[7] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 144.

[8] A memorandum by Boros of Goalpara to Simon Commission opposed the demands of certain individuals for the transfer of Goalpara to Bengal. It was written there:

> Some interested person of our districts are agitating for the transfer of the district of Goalpara to Bengal. So far as we are concerned we oppose it. Goalpara is part and parcel of Assam. . . The habits and customs of the people of this district are more akin to Assamese then Bengalese. We the Bodos can by no means call us other than Assamese.

"Memorandum by Bodo Community of Goalpara District to Indian Statutory Commission" in Binai Khungur Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission or The Indian Statutory Commission* (Harisinga: The Beacons, year of publication not mentioned), 6.

placed themselves within it. Placing themselves in the middle of this situation they opined that, 'Boros have stepped upon the threshold of ascendancy and progress, and alongside the resurgence of this district [Goalpara] has also taken place. . . and we hope that every community will do its part to keep alive this spark of resurgence'.[9] It was in the backdrop of this social and political climate of the early twentieth century in Goalpara that a yearning for *unnati* and socio-religious reforms brought together Boros — of Goalpara — who had achieved a certain amount of success in trades or were employed in various departments of the colonial administration. These Boros were an aspirational class, aware of the social and political climate and the opportunities that organising around ethnicities could engender.

As has been discussed previously, in the pre-census period, lines between communities were often not clearly defined and people only tended to claim a higher status in the caste hierarchy. But this desire for social mobility became much more urgent and desirous with census enumerations. To be enumerated as a higher caste in the census would have lent one's aspiration and claim for higher status an official legitimacy.[10] And to be enumerated as a higher caste would have also meant meeting the standards and criteria set by the census officials and enumerators—many of whom would also have been from higher caste groups, and all of them

[9] The process of assertion of a Goalparia identity was a complex process and it had different reactions from different communities. While Boros also often sided with the Assamese, there was also some ambiguity. They lamented the 'sad state of affairs' in the district, where both Assam and Bengal were 'tossing Goalpara around like a football', and even the educated Goalparias had to be subservient to both the Assamese and Bengalis'. Please see, "Dosh Kotha" in Phukan Ch, Basumatary, Biswajit Brahma, and Kamalakanta Mushahary, eds., *Bibar: A collection of Quarterly Magazine 1924–1925* (Kokrajhar: Bodo Publication Board, 2019), 183.

[10] The efforts of many caste groups move up the hierarchy by being enumerated as such, in the censuses was described by a census official as the 'old tendency to use the census as an opportunity to press for recognition of social claims'. Please see C.S. Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1932), 203.

undoubtedly literate and able to exercise their agency in certain situations.[11] As such, these aspirations would have to be heavily reliant on visible everyday practices — cultural, social, and religious — which would have had to be considered as closer to the practices of upper caste Hindu groups and their standards of 'purity'. This aspirational class of Boros must have also desired and seen for themselves the 'perceived benefits' that being classified higher up in the hierarchy of caste/tribe could bring upon communities. This in turn was very closely related to the socio-religious reform movements that would take root among Boros, starting in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Brahma Dharma

Brahma Dharma was one such novel interpretation of a particular reformist strand, among the vast heterogeneous traditions that characterised Hinduism, which would take root among the Boros; and would be a means to articulate their aspirations for upward social mobility and social acceptability. It would be a factor influencing the minds of the early Boro intellectuals of Goalpara, providing them with a means to reconcile and negotiate the divergent avenues for progress, while maintaining the need for a distinct identity. In an environment where the quest for a separate Goalparia identity, was mostly led by the landed zamindars and intelligentsia, it must have had little space for other marginal communities such as that of the Boros. While

[11] Regarding the 'difficulties' of caste returns and the contentions of lower castes to be enumerated as higher castes with respectable names, the census of 1931 had quoted the report of the Additional District Magistrate of Silchar, who had written:

> The caste entries raised unnecessary difficulties and agitation. . . The high caste Hindus, however could not appreciate the idea of low caste Hindus calling themselves as they chose and sometimes the enumerator also grumbled. Warning had to be given to some enumerators to act as directed. A general order was given to all supervisors to enter the caste of each person as he himself described it . . . Many supervisors and enumerators at first resented this but timely warnings and persuasion had its effects.

Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report*, 203.

myths and histories were (re)written, Sanghamitra Misra contends that this 'mobilisation of the idea of a Goalparia, would marginalise its historical others in the very act of forging this identity'.[12]

In such a scenario, Kalicharan Mech—later known as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma—found Brahma Dharma as a suitable means for the 'upliftment' of the Boros of Goalpara, at least in the initial stages. It provided him with a means to craft and shape a new religious tradition and set of practices among the Boros, which would accord the educated Boros with the respectability and upward mobility that they were aspiring for as a collective, which was otherwise being sought only at an individual level.[13] Though the making of a new religion was within the ambit of the vast and heterogeneous Hindu traditions, it had its source in the religious dialogues that were prevalent in the zamindari households of Goalpara.

More specifically, it was inspired by the religious ideas of an individual named Sib Narayan Swami, also referred to as Swami Sib Narayan Paramhansa. Though there are not many sources that record his interaction with Boros directly, there is reference to him in the census report of 1911, indicating him coming in contact with the Boros right at the beginning of the twentieth century.[14] He was described as an itinerant preacher an 'upcountry Brahman' (North Indian) who went about preaching in various regions of the sub-continent, and subsequently came to be based in Calcutta. The census report mentions that he 'was received with favour by the Rajbansi zemindars of Goalpara', and that it was through them that he came

[12] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 177.

[13] Brahma Dharma in its initial years was accepted mostly by the 'educated classes' among Boros of Goalpara. Please see, C.S. Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1932), 194.

[14] J. McSwiney, *Census Of India, 1911.Volume III. Assam. Part I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1912), 37.

into contact with the Boros.[15] His Hinduism was drawn from an interpretation of what he claimed as 'a form of the Vedic Hinduism'.[16] *Sar Nitya Kriya* is a book in Bengali, ascribed to him which contains the essences of his philosophy and teachings. The title of the book, translated into English, roughly reads as *The Essential Daily Rituals* or *The Essence of Daily Rituals*. The booklet was written in a manner that would be accessible to common people, as a guide for them to attain or understand *Purna Para Brahma*, a knowledge and understanding of the idea or the essence of a supreme, omnipotent, formless—but, also, at the same time corporeal—Brahma.[17] In the very first page of the book, he indicates that for the common people, it is an impossible task to find out the truth or falsity contained in the religious texts of different religions—the Vedas, the Quran, or the Bible. Hence, the aim of the book was to unlock the 'vast ocean of truths' that were contained in the Vedas, which a normal person could not possibly have access to in a lifetime. As such, there were several chapters in the book that explained, through simple illustrations, the philosophical ideas contained in the Vedas. It also claimed that the Vedas were of divine origin while other religious texts were of recent origins, a product of human imagination and hence erroneous.[18]

[15] McSwiney, *Census Of India, 1911 Assam. Part I. Report*, 37; Mohini Mohan Chatterji, *Indian Spirituality: The Travels and Teachings of Sivanarayan* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1907), 8-10, 137, 141. He was said to have left home at the age of 12, travelling to all the British provinces in the sub-continent, in a quest for spiritual enlightenment. He came to Assam and visited the prominent places of Guwahati, Shillong, Tezpur, Dibrugarh, and Sibsagar. He entered the province on a steamer from the river port of Gaolundo, in present day Bangladesh. As such he passed through the town of Dhubri, in Goalpara which was an important town on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. It was here, in all likelihood, that he must have been warmly welcomed by the Rajbanshi Zamindars of Goalpara, and perhaps spent a few days, getting a chance to meet a few Boros.

[16] McSwiney, *Census Of India, 1911 Assam. Part I. Report*, 37.

[17] Swami Shib Narayan, *Sar Nitya Kriya* (Purna Chandra Ghosh: Calcutta, 1897), 37.

[18] Narayan, *Nitya Kriya*, 41-42.

More importantly, apart from expounding Vedic philosophical ideas, the book contained instructions and strict guidelines in how daily ritualistic practices ought to be observed. For instance, the ways in which the *Gayatri Mantra* ought to be recited and the manner in which the altar for the performance *yagya* — rituals in front of a sacred fire— ought to be prepared. *Sar Nitya Kriya* can also be translated as the *Essential Everyday/Eternal Rituals*. In a chapter titled 'Sar Nitya Kriya Kahake Bole?'— What does Sar Nitya Kriya mean? — it was stated:

> Truth, cleanliness, consciousness, Purno Para Brahma, Jyoti Swarup (Sun as the embodiment of the eternal light) are the essence, or in other words *Nityo* (eternal). The daily rituals, that one has to perform, in order to fully understand and attain these eternal essences and to be one with the *Parmatma* (supreme being/soul), are known as *Sar Nitya Kriya*. It is extremely important that such rituals be performed daily with extreme care and deliberation [translated from Bengali].[19]

In almost all the biographies of Kalicharan Brahma, it is invariably mentioned that the turning point in the life of Kalicharan Brahma was him reading *Sar Nitya Kriya*.[20] Most of the biographies of Kalicharan Brahma are hagiographical and have been written without the aid of

[19] Narayan, *Nitya Kriya*, 1. He had also proclaimed:

> The invocation of God by his name OM, the Gāyatri-worship, the end whereof is the acquisition of this knowledge which reveals God, who is all-comprehending, complete, expressed as Light, these constitute the true study of the Vedas . . . This true wisdom, is one, . . . manifested to your senses as Light.

Chatterji, *Indian Spirituality*, 220.

[20] Please see, Bidyasagar Narzary, *Aalokar Sandhanat: Gurudev Aru Boro Samaj* (Guwahati: N L Publications, 2016), 15–17; Manik Kr. Brahma, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma: His Life And Deeds* (Kokrajhar: N L Publications, 2001), 11–14.

any primary sources — he himself never left behind any written documents as such. But these biographies, although often creatively embellished with 'probable' incidents surrounding Kalicharan Brahma's life — nevertheless point towards the existence of certain oral traditions that celebrate his importance to the modern history of the Boros. For instance, Bidyasagar Narzary's biography titled *Aalokar Sandhanat: Gurudev Aru Boro Samaj*, which relies largely on interviews done with Kalicharan Brahma's granddaughter and grandson. Yet, there are certain things in these biographies that can be said with a high degree of certainty. Such as, Kalicharan Mech did not come from an 'ordinary' family of Mech/Boro peasants/ryots. There is almost unanimous acceptance that his father, a Khoula Mech, was an *ejadar/duffadar* under the direct employment of a *zamindar*. As such, he was directly linked to the extraction and sale of timber in the forests of Goalpara, especially of *sal* trees, a flourishing trade in the second half of nineteenth century.[21] This would have accorded him a certain status above ordinary cultivators — he was said to have owned two elephants and a licensed gun — even as he was called a Mech, and had the opportunity to mingle with other landed elites.[22] Kalicharan Mech purportedly continued the timber trade after the death of his father. Similar to his father, he too would have been in close contact with the landed elites and zamindars of Goalpara and hence, a part of their social world—but he would still have been considered as a lowly Mech.

[21] For a historical understanding of the sal timber trade in Goalpara during the colonial period please see, Jaysagar Wary and Oinam Ranjit Singh, "Sal Timber Trade in goalpara District During Colonial Period", *The NEHU Journal*, Vol XIV, no. 2 (July-December 2016), 87–99, https://nehu.ac.in/public/downloads/Journals/NEHU-Journal-July-Dec-2016-A6.pdf . It would seem that a number of Boros who were early followers of Kalicharan Brahma and Swamy Sib Narayan were engaged in timber trade. A report in 1925 in *Bibar* mentions of Boro timber merchants being associated with 'Brahma Company' and taking active part in the deliberations of a meeting of Bodo Mahasanmilani members at Dhubri. Please see, "Sanmilan Kotha: Bodo Mahasanmilani", in Phukan Ch, Basumatary, Biswajit Brahma, and Kamalakanta Mushahary, eds., *Bibar: A collection of Quarterly Magazine 1924–1925* (Kokrajhar: Bodo Publication Board, 2019), 222.

[22] Brahma, *Gurudev*, 2.

Apparently his chance encounter with the book *Sar Nitya Kriya*—through an acquaintance engaged in the timber trade—was a moment of realisation that made him accept the teachings of the Swamy and embark on a path of socio-religious reform. Though it is extremely difficult, in the absence of sources, to say with any certainty the reasons that may have played a direct role in Kalicharan and his followers being attracted to the Swamy's teachings, certain possibilities and scenarios can be imagined taking into account the then prevailing climate, among Boros — in Goalpara and other parts of Assam in general — of a desire for socio-religious reforms and progress. The reason for certain Boros being drawn to Brahma Dharma can also be imagined taking into account the way in which its teachings and practices would be (re)interpreted and (re)crafted to suit their agendas for reforms. The fact that Kalicharan by the third decade of the twentieth century was described as 'Goalparar Boro Jaitiyo Jiboner Srosta' — architect of the social/modern life of Boros of Goalpara — and addressed as 'Gurudev' (teacher/master), points to the fact that Brahma Dharma was seen not just a new religion to convert to, but the process of conversion itself was underscored by the desires for reform and progress.[23]

In the present, Kalicharan Brahma is considered as one of the most important persons to have shaped the trajectory of modern Boro history, not just as a socio-religious leader, but also as a person who was largely responsible for the political 'awakening' of Boros in the first half of twentieth century. In Bidyasagar Narzary's version of his biography, he starts with the mention of the 'apparent relegation' of Boros to a degraded status after the collapse of the Kachari Kingdom.[24] Devoid of political power, they began to be contemptuously referred to as Mech or Mlech by other communities. In response, several Boros attempted to rise above their

[23] Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar*, 334.

[24] Narzary, *Gurudev Aru Boro Samaj*, 2–4.

lowly status by converting to other religions such as Christianity, Islam and Vaishnavism. This according to Bidyasagar Narzary resulted in further weakening of the already precarious social and political condition (solidarity) of the Boros, as many of these converts to other religions no longer identified themselves as Boros. He describes Kalicharan Brahma as a representative of God, sent to alleviate the sufferings of Boros by bringing about social change; and as a person who had in his heart a burning desire to uplift the Boros from their degraded status. He apparently came to realise that the traditional socio-religious practices of the Boros centred around the worship of Bathou — filled with superstitious and primitive practices — would not be able to 'unite' the Boros, and hence 'save' them.[25] It was in such a situation that he purportedly became attracted to the teachings and philosophy contained in *Sar Nitya Kriya*.

Notwithstanding the initial personal reasons that attracted Kalicharan Brahma to the teachings of Swamy Sib Narayan, it is important to think about certain aspects of his teachings that Boros desirous of upward social mobility may have found appealing. The peculiar teachings of the Swamy or the interpretations of his teachings, in many respects, provided Boros with possibilities to negotiate and bypass caste sanctions and requirements needed to move up the social hierarchy.[26] His followers were not expected to remain subordinate to Brahmins or have them officiate over rituals. He simplified religious practice and made it

[25] Narzary, *Gurudev Aru Boro Samaj*, 15–16.

[26] He was in favour of allowing women and lower castes to make offerings to the holy fire and perform the associated rituals, which were reserved only for Brahmins. In fact, he even allowed 'non-Hindus', an Englishman, to make offerings to the Holy fire. But that did not necessarily mean that caste was discarded. A higher caste 'status', such as a Brahmin, was seen as a state which could be attainable even by lower castes who looked for the 'truth' in the Vedas. He had apparently proclaimed:

> Let the outcast *chandāla*, or one deemed lower even than he, study the Vedas and other scriptures, receive the true spirit thereof, and inspired by that spirit perform his duties, human and divine.

Please see Chatterji, *Indian Spirituality*, 142-143, 162, 218-222.

accessible to all. However, a strict adherence to the *Nitya Kriya*—daily rituals-was a requirement. The recitation of *Gayatri mantra* and the performance of the *yagya* were central to the observance of rules according to Brahma Dharma. However, such practices, which were generally reserved for the Brahmins and hence constituted a core part of orthodox Brahminical Hinduism, was now made accessible to all.[27] Boros having access to such forms of orthodox Hindu practices would have been quite a novel thing and may have been perceived as an uncomplicated way to attain a ritually pure status. In theory, it was no longer a requirement to be under the tutelage of a Brahmin or a religious leader—one could bypass them, both in the quest for social mobility and in the personal search for the supreme being, *Purno Para Brahma.*

A booklet in Bengali, titled *Kriya Darpan*, published in 1926, gives some insight into how the early Boro converts perceived the teachings of Swamy Sib Narayan Paramhansa and also the ways in which they were appropriated to fulfil the aims of socio-religious reform taking place among the Boros in the early decades of twentieth century. The book was written by a Boro named Bijoy Singha Narayan Brahmachari, of Amritpur Sanatan Brahma Dharma Ashram, and was supposed to be a compilation of the teachings and rules laid down by Swamy Sib Narayan. In it, the Swamy was described as the founder of Brahma Dharma and was compared to socio-religious reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ramkrishna Paramhansa.[28] Before Boros took to his version of reformed Vedic Hinduism, they were said to have been in a state of *jivanmrit* (living dead), devoid of *dharma* (religion). This was linked

[27] Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-religious reform movements in British India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 79. Jones described a meeting of the Bharat Dharma Mahamandala, an association of orthodox Hindu elites, as:

> Two pavilions, one small and one large, stood at the meeting place. The smaller contained 125 Brahmans reciting the *gāyātri mantra*, . . . It was a grand setting that illustrated the dreams and hopes of orthodox Hindus.

[28] Bijoy Singha Narayan Brahmachari, *Kriya Darpan* (Kokrajhar: Amarendra Brahma, 2011), 5–8.

to the idea that the true essence of religion had become extinct when Hinduism and its rituals were infiltrated by tantric practices, though traces of the former could be seen in the traditional religious practices of the Boros. In fact, it was argued that Boros were being stifled by the tantric religious practices on the one hand and the oppression of Brahmins on the other. It is to escape from such a situation that many Boros became *sharan* —initiates to Vaishnavism— under the exploitative religion of the *Goswamis* and the Brahmins, to keep one's honour intact and gain (self) respect. Bijoy Singha described the day when the message of Swamy Sib Narayan reached the Boros and echoes of *Om! Satguru* was all around, a 'happy day'. He wrote:

> The awe struck Boros realised—that they were born not just to be ignored and disregarded, that if one embarks on the path of true *dharma* it is no longer required to throw oneself at the feet of Brahmins and under their pride. In fact, by walking on this path of true *dharma* one gets to occupy the same status as others. Why should we then wait any longer? Hence Boros have started to walk on the path of *jagaran* (awakening). They want to establish their own respectable position in this world.[29]

Towards the end of the first decade of twentieth century, Brahma Dharma and its proponents were able to gather a significant number of followers to be reflected in the enumerations and effect census statistics. The census report of 1911 reported an 'extraordinary decrease' in the number of Animists in Goalpara, from 125, 618 in 1901 to 47, 339 for that year,— a difference of 78, 279.[30] This decrease happened in Goalpara even as there was a growth of 16% in the overall population of Animists in the whole of Assam, — attributed to a 'greater accuracy in

[29] Brahmachari, *Kriya Darpan*, 6.

[30] McSwiney, *Census Of India, 1911 Assam. Part I. Report*, 37.

the record of religions' — as compared to the previous census in 1901. In districts such as Darrang, Sibsagar, Nowgong, and Lakhimpur there was an increase of 38%, 42%, 327% and 35% respectively. The overall decrease in Goalpara was directly attributed to 'conversion by one Sib Narayan Swami of a large number of Meches to what they style the Brahma religion'.[31]

This large scale conversion of Boros to Brahma Dharma also involved adopting practices which closely resembled those of upper caste Hindus. They mostly revolved around everyday practices which would be acceptable according to the norms of Hindu orthodoxy. Regarding this the district Gazetteer of Goalpara in 1914 observed, 'a definite movement towards Hinduisation' among the Boros of Goalpara.[32] It described the followers of this new religion as 'believers in Brahmo, the Supreme Soul', who, 'conceive the infinite as the source of Light', and the 'Sun as his visible representation'.[33]

The report in the Goalpara Gazetteer reported that though the Brahma converts were moving towards Hinduism, they were not necessarily submitting to 'Brahminic superiority and *the observance of caste rules* [emphasis added]'.[34] They were also said to have discarded practices of idol worship and abstained from alcohol consumption as it was perceived to be a form of 'social and religious vice'.[35] Brahma Dharma also entailed a move towards

[31] McSwiney, *Census Of India, 1911 Assam. Part I. Report*, 37.

[32] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1914), 2–3.

[33] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 2.

[34] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 2.

[35] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 2–3.

monotheism. Followers were no longer allowed to worship the numerous gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon.[36]

While there was a large scale spread of Brahma Dharma, different classes among the Boros interpreted its precepts and practices in different ways. Even though reforms received widespread support, the same report in the Gazetteer mentioned that an influential class among Boros, 'as a reactionary step' took to 'Orthodoxism'.[37] Meaning, they went in the opposite direction of the reforms initiated by Brahma Dharma and took up idol worship and the 'observance of strict caste rules and Brahminic rites'.[38] And in the process, they were aspiring to be counted as a Hindu sub-caste. Initially many Boro 'elites' came to be counted among Brahma Dharma's early converts and gradually paving a way for the common Boro to 'feel' a sense of upliftment. But it must have been also perceived as being too plebeian and rooted among ordinary Boro peasants — now that it was moving out of the confines of being associated with elite Boros and becoming popular with the masses. And thus offering no real solution to the problem of actual upward mobility and to gain membership in a higher caste group — hence the reactionary step. It helps to understand and underscore the ways that Brahma Dharma gave its followers to accommodate and negotiate a complex interplay between the desire to be *perceived* as a purer caste/tribe group, but also a consciousness of a need for a distinct Boro identity. It did not require changing one's ethnic identity or migration to a new

[36] Bidyasagar Narzary and Malabika Mitra, eds,. *Boroni Padulipi: Social Laws of the Boros: Codified for the followers of Brahma Religion in 1934* (Kolkata: GBD Publishers, 2005), 3. A fine of Rs. 5 was proposed for violation of the injunction against idolatry for followers of Brahma Dharma followers.

[37] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 3.

[38] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 3

higher caste group. One could simply adopt their practices as this new religion gave them access to these. And hence one could still technically be enumerated as a 'tribal'.

As mentioned earlier, the spread of Brahma Dharma resulted in the enumeration of a large number of Boros as Hindus in the census of 1911, which *may* have led to perceptions of a change in the caste status too. In the census of 1921, there was further decrease in the Boro population in Goalpara who were enumerated as Animists. But what was significant in this census was that there were Brahma converts who were starting to describe themselves as 'Boro by caste and language and Brahma by religion'.[39] This was taking place as an acute consciousness and realisation of one's identity as a Boro — or the concept the larger Bodo race — was beginning to dawn upon educated Boros all over Assam. The conversion to Brahma Dharma — rooted in the classical texts of Hinduism — but at the same time identifying as a member of tribe, was one of the very specific ways through which a certain section of Boros in Goalpara negotiated and reacted to, a political consciousness of ethnicity and the desire to attain a respectable position among communities.

On the path to *Unnati*

It has been discussed in the first chapter how boundaries between caste and tribe were not always clearly defined. These boundaries were relatively porous and the overlaps provided people with opportunities to strategically *claim* a higher caste status. Koch/Rajbanshi as a caste group was one such category to which people from almost all strata of society aspired to, from the landed elite to the lowly peasants working for them. Towards the end of the nineteenth century itself, Edward Gait in his census report of 1891, had observed that Rajbanshi as a term to identify oneself was 'gradually becoming fashionable, and that more persons are annually

[39] G. T. Lloyd, *Census Of India, 1921. Volume III. Assam. Part I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1923), 146

adopting it in preference to the less pretentious title of Koch'.[40] With census enumerations becoming an important process through which one acquired official recognition of one's caste status, in 1901, it was observed that 'the great majority of the Hindus of Goalpara are Rajbansis, who are *mostly persons of the Koch and Mech tribes*, who have assumed this name on conversion to Hinduism [emphasis added]'.[41] It was also mentioned in the report that 'like most persons who do not feel quite sure of their position, they are very particular in matters of etiquette'.[42] Afraid of potential accusations of being animists and indulging in ritually unclean practices, they were a zealous lot who were far more stricter than the 'Hindus in their observances of the dictates of the law'.[43]

While Rajbanshi remained an aspirational caste category in the earlier censuses, by the second decade of the twentieth century, there was a movement demanding an even higher Kshatriya caste status from within it.[44] They took recourse to myths from the larger Hindu mythological universe. And identified themselves with the 'Khatriyas of Aryabarta', claiming that they came here with a view to conceal their identity when Parasuram was leading a devastating campaign against the Khatriyas'.[45] By the third decade, the effects of this movement was far more discernible. The census of 1921 reported that as a result of this movement, there was a massive decrease of 30 percent in the population of Rajbanshis in Goalpara as people who had formerly enumerated as such were now returning themselves as

[40] E. A. Gait, *Census Of India,1891. Assam. Vol.I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Department, 1892), 216.

[41] B. C. Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I. Report* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1902), 67.

[42] Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*, 142.

[43] Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*, 67.

[44] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 3.

[45] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 3. The myth of Parasuram would also be taken up by the Boros as will be discussed later.

Kshatriya by caste.[46] The report mentioned that the movement was mostly initiated by people within the Rajbanshi community, striving for a 'higher social and religious status, and *reforming their manners and rites* according to a strict interpretation of the *Shāstras* [emphasis added]'.[47] By starting to call themselves as Kshatriyas they had started wearing the sacred thread as a symbol of their claimed high status.

This assertion of a group of people who were beginning to style themselves as Kshatriyas undoubtedly affected the overall psyche of Boros and their efforts at socio-religious reform — as has been previously discussed. While Brahma Dharma was one such means through which socio-religious reform was taken up, there were Boros resorting to even more orthodox positions as a reaction to all that was taking place. These assertions would inspire Boros of Goalpara to desire some kind of a social acceptance, respectability, or to simply not be considered as degraded Animists engaged in superstitions and primitive practices. If a group such as Rajbanshis, partly composed of former members of lower caste groups and tribes could claim a higher ritual status and be enumerated as such in the census, it would seem that there was hope for the Boros too, to move up the hierarchy.

As different caste groups were demanding to be considered as belonging to higher castes, the tropes that they applied invariably rested upon claims derived from the reading and interpretation of Hindu mythology and its traditions — this was also in a context where caste distinctions and boundaries were also being solidified giving them a certain fixity. Like elsewhere in the subcontinent there were contentions and claims on the part of many caste groups in Assam to get precedence in the caste hierarchy over other competing groups. The

[46] Lloyd, *Census Of India, 1921. Volume III. Assam. Part I. Report*, 146.

[47] Lloyd, *Census Of India, 1921. Volume III. Assam. Part I. Report*, 146.

census of 1901 had reported the, 'refusal of those at the bottom of the scale to acquiesce in the humble positions assigned to them' and had written:

> The Kayasthas and Kalitas are putting forward claims to take precedence of the Ganaks. The Kalita, who has reached a position in which it is no longer necessary for him to drive the plough, calls himself a Kayastha; the Dom is no longer contended with the name Nadiyal, and wishes to be called Jaliya Kaibartya; and the Kewat in fear of being confounded with the Nadiyal, styles himself as Maheshya Vaishya. The Hari returns himself as Brittial Baniya ,and denies all connection with the sweeper caste; the Jugi poses as one of the twice-born.[48]

This process of trying to claim a space within the higher strata of Hindu fold was framed within the increasingly dominant narrative of *unnati* prevalent among the various communities in Assam — civilisational progress/improvement. This required constant evocation of their glorious past and of their divine origin – something prevalent among both higher caste as well as lower caste groups. In this context, Jayeeta Sharma in her book, *Empire's Garden*, contends that:

> The varied, protean, and contested meanings of improvement and progress—whether plans for agrarian improvement dear to imperial scientists, policymakers, and tea capitalists, or projects of cultural and political *unnati* (progress) reiterated in the writings and speeches of local intellectuals and

[48] Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*, 117.

> entrepreneurs—form a broad unifying theme to understand the modern making of Assam, and beyond that, the making of modern India and South Asia.[49]

Subsumed by or rather running parallel to this rhetoric of *unnati*, there also emerged a division between the upper caste intellectual elites and the lower castes/ tribes of Assam. As Sharma further argues, 'Overall in colonial Assam's changing cultural landscape, myths of origin and distance, whether for Brahmins or Muslims, or the Ahom warrior elite, emphasized a common theme of elite superiority over subordinate groups who they viewed as autochthones'.[50] She argues that it was a narrative which was one based on a racial hierarchy, placing all the caste Hindu Assamese above everyone else. Such assertions, Sharma contends, drew its legitimacy from the colonial knowledge production systems, which was further bolstered when upper caste Assamese 'gentry accrued a significant amount of cultural capital through their scribal and literate skills'.[51] This upper caste group drew and imagined connections and placed themselves — and also Assam — within the 'existing repertoire of Indic affiliation to fit in with newly racialized, pan-Indian narratives of Indo Aryanist belonging'.[52] This threw open a large divide between them and the tribes, who were seen as inferior and of non-Aryan stock— the hill tribes were relegated to an even lower civilizational status, as savages.

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[49] Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

[50] Sharma, *Empire's Garden,* 60–61.

[51] Sharma, *Empire's Garden,* 30.

[52] Sharma, *Empire's Garden,* 30. For an extremely nuanced understanding of how Assamese intellectuals in the early decades of twentieth century embarked on a project to place Assam within the imagination of a larger geography of Indo-Aryan heritage please see, Bodhisattva Kar, *What Is In A Name? Politics Of Spatial Imagination In Colonial Assam* (Guwahati: Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change And Development, 2004).

The creation of this caste-racial hierarchy affected the social world of the Boros in early twentieth century who had managed to secure employment in different branches of the colonial infrastructure, in various capacities such as clerks, soldiers, forest guards, etc. Generally, they would have had different ways through which they could negotiate their status in the caste hierarchy. The first was to convert and try to obtain membership in a caste group with higher ritual status, such as the Koch-Rajbanshis. But it was also a path fraught with various roadblocks. Converting to Vaishnavism and being 'accepted' would have been a long process and sometimes required a generation or two if not more; and even after that there was no assurance of being accepted as member of a higher caste. And in Goalpara, the assertions of Rajbanshis to be considered as Kshatriyas was also being increasingly met with resistance by upper castes. It was reported that:

> This [assertions of Rajbanshis] has led to misunderstanding if not positive ill-feeling between the Rajbanshis on the one hand and the Brahmins and the Kayasthas on the other. Naturally some of the high caste Kayasthas are jealous of the attempt on the part of the Rajbansis to secure a position over them in the social scale.[53]

Another option, in a complex socio-political milieu being shaped by the calls for reform and *unnati*—engendered by the census themselves— in the early late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, was to stay within the ascribed caste/tribal group and claim a higher status for the group itself by initiating reforms which would seem to make the practices of the group comply with the standards set by higher castes. While Brahma Dharma was one such

[53] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 3.

attempt, there were also other parallel attempts to embark on a path of socio-religious reforms, without giving up their Boro identity.

While Brahma Dharma was being actively propagated on the northern bank of Brahmaputra, in Goalpara district, Habraghat was a town on the southern bank in the same district, with close proximity to the Garo Hills. And another organisation called Habraghat Boro Samilani (hereafter HBS) hoped to give voice to the concerns of Boros residing in the southern bank. This organisation was formed in 1913 by individuals, described by the booklet *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, a publication of the HBS, as 'prominent personalities' of the Habraghat Pargana, who had come together for the *uunati* of the *jati* (Boros).[54] On the 3rd of February 1914, the *Sanmilani* had their third meeting where there were deliberations and discussions on how to go forward with reforms. Thereafter, the booklet mentioned above was published in the subsequent year, 1915, which was essentially a compilation of the discussions carried out and proposals made in the meeting of 1914. *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, loosely translatable in to English as *Children/Sons of Boro and their Laws*, was edited by Gangacharan Kachari and Narapati Kachari and was written in a mixture of Bengali and Boro. Gangacharan Kachari who was also known as Gangacharan Das, was a clerk in the *Kachari* (court) at Rangjuli, a small town in Goalpara district. The fact that he also used Das as his surname points towards the fact that if not him, his predecessors in the family may have aspired for a certain amount of upward social mobility through adopting higher caste practices — hence the adoption of Das as a surname. Narapati Kachari was mentioned to have been an Inspector.[55] Other seemingly prominent members were Madhoram Kachari and Kamalakanta Das who were mentioned as a *Havildar*

[54] Gangacharan Kachari and Narapatichandra Kachari, eds., *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* (Habraghat Boro Sanmilani, 1915), 0.

[55] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 55.

(a soldier in the British Army) and a *Tehsiladar* (tax collector, equivalent to *mouzadar*) respectively.

In fact, a look at the names of the people who were a part of the HBS reveals a lot about the aspirations of this class of people. While a few individuals had also affixed *Sarkar* to their names, a majority of the people had *Mahalia* as their surnames. Mahalia as a surname during the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century was generally a designation 'applied to a Kachari in one of his stages to conversion' to Hinduism.[56] It was in all likelihood an aspirational status and certainly indicative of an in between position between higher castes, and Boros whose practices would have been considered as animists/'non-Hindus'. In terms of social hierarchy, they would be considered as occupying a position above these Boros. There were in place certain restrictions in matters relating to marriages and commensality between persons designated as *Mahalias* and other unconverted Kacharis.[57] This leads up to a possibility to infer upon the social status of the people who were behind the formation of the HBS and their aspirations. They were individuals who had gained a certain amount of socio-economic and cultural capital either through their own merits or courtesy of predecessors in their family. But who were now increasingly desirous of carving out a distinct place for themselves in the socio-religious order/scale and no longer willing to be in a position which may have been deemed in between — not exactly members of a tribe but not yet in the company of higher castes — but nevertheless occupying a low status. The title of the booklet itself where they proclaimed themselves as *Boroni Phisa* — Sons/Children of Boro — was a clear indication of how they now identified themselves.

[56] Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*, 137.

[57] Gait, *Census Of India,1891. Assam. Vol.I. Report*, 236.

The stated aim of the organisation and the reason for the publication of the booklet was to shed light on the origins of the Boros, their history and their customs. This again has to be read alongside the then all too common search for historical origins in the censuses, colonial ethnographies and by caste/tribe groups themselves. While there were certainly myths of origin prevalent among communities, and among the Boros too, by the beginning of the twentieth century, these were being reiterated aggressively or being strategically embellished to suit their needs. For the HBS, such articulations of origin myths served to help their agenda to remain within the Boro fold, but by according it a legitimate respectable status.

This need for a respectable position came about with what would seem as a painful realisation and a poignant lamentation of the lowly status that they occupied and the limited means that they had to better their situation. These group of people were acutely aware of the racialized hierarchy and they too were taken in by the rhetoric of *jatiyo unnati*. Imbibing the notion that the caste Hindu Bengalis and Assamese were of a superior racial stock, they were extremely self-critical and self-deprecating. It was written:

> O Bothers! How much longer will we lie defeated in the grip of deathly sleep? How much longer shall we walk on the path of vanity? How much longer shall we be severed from our own religion bringing shame upon ourselves? With the rise of a new dawn in Bharat every person has awakened. It is only us, degenerate Boros, who are still asleep. We have been turned into a cursed race and there seems to be no possibility of the curse being removed anytime soon [translated from Bengali].[58]

[58] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 1.

They implored Boros to wake up from their state of stupor and laziness, which they diagnosed as the reason why higher caste groups looked down upon the Boros.[59] This call was made all the more necessary by the apparent gains made by other communities who had accepted change and had started to walk on the path of progress. References were made to the Garos and the Rajbanshis. The Garos, who they claimed had formerly no religious virtues, whose very mention used to induce hate and repulsion, and did not even hesitate to consume human flesh, were now 'hardworking' and 'progressing'.[60] Garos by virtue of being mainly hill dwellers, were placed at the lowest strata. Often Boros in the plains would profess a superiority over them and, 'decline to admit Garos . . . into their community'.[61] The HBS was of the opinion that such a transformation was possible because of their conversion to Christianity as they had now accepted the 'excellent teachings of the missionaries and Christ' and 'having abandoned their worldly desires, their hearts were now filled with godly love, they were on the path to progress'.[62] In fact, at the time, there was a prevalent notion, even within the official circles, that conversion to Christianity had brought about changes in the material condition of the Garos. The Goalpara Gazetteer in 1905 had reported of a group of converted Garos, founding a village at a placed called Nisangram, located just at the border of Garo Hills and Goalpara, close to Rangjuli, and falling within the Habraghat pargana. It was described as the 'most prosperous Christian village', with their 'fertile and well irrigated rice lands', self-funded schools, and a 'chapel with belfry and bell, glazed doors and windows', where former savage

[59] Jayeeta Sharma contends that the narrative of the 'lazy native' was a colonial construct which was applied on to locals of Assam when they became unwilling to take part in various colonial enterprise such as tea. Please see Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 62–65.

[60] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 2.

[61] B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers Volume III Goalpara*, (Calcutta: City Press, 1905), 47.

[62] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 2.

tribesmen through conversion to Christianity and transformation had become an example of 'thrift, prosperity, and general respectability'.[63]

The Rajbanshi movement for Kshatriya status and the demand of castes like the Jugis were also seen as attempts at collective mobilizations for progress.[64] The Jugis at the beginning of the twentieth century were described as 'low caste whose traditional occupation is weaving, and who are looked down upon by their superiors in the social scale'.[65] But, 'like other humble castes' assert to a 'high origin', and claim to have descended from Brahmins, but sometimes also from Shiva.[66] By the second decade of twentieth century, to gain legitimacy, they had started a movement through which they attempted to adopt the wearing of the 'sacred Brahminic thread'.[67]

These caste mobilisations, and the 'progress' of converted tribes deeply affected members of HBS and presented themselves as models which were worth emulating. While other communities were organising themselves and moving forward, an apparent lack of unity and organisation among the Boros was diagnosed as the cause for the failure of the Boros to do so. They were found lacking the concept of *samaj*— an organised community— which was said to be one of the reasons why Boros had become a 'laughing stock for upper castes'.[68] This apparent lack of 'unity' and the absence of a *samaj* was also lamented by members of the HBS. The bargaining power of the organised collective in a context engendered by census enumerations, which were increasingly defining communities rigidly was not lost on them.

[63] Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers Goalpara*, 58–59.

[64] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 2.

[65] Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers Goalpara*, 41.

[66] Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers Goalpara*, 41.

[67] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 2.

[68] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 3.

Taking examples from the animal world, they compared an organised community to bees and a disorganised community to flies. Bees were metaphorically linked to a highly organised and united caste/tribe group, who held on to honey as their *right* and from whom it was difficult to *steal* it. It was hoped that Boros would organise themselves on such lines, as that would only strengthen their claims. The importance of being bound by a single chain of unity, notwithstanding their differences was asserted. '*Bhai Bhai Ek Thai! Bhed nai Bhed Nai!'*— Brothers on an equal footing without differences — became their call to action.[69]

As mentioned previously there were two options for them to better one's social standing, conversion to 'Hinduism' with the hope of gaining access to membership of a higher caste, or to stay within the ascribed group and introduce reforms towards forging unity. The HBS members were extremely critical of individuals who had chosen the first option. They were accused of being pretentious in fashioning themselves to be of an advanced or higher group. Boros and Rabhas who had converted to Vaishnavism were declared as an embarrassment for the community.[70] The embarrassment stemmed from the fact that these people, though educated had taken *sharan* and threw themselves under the feet of other (higher) communities — which was according to them was nothing, but mere pretensions of belonging to a higher status. In this context, it was reported by the census of 1921 that many literate Kacharis were returning themselves as Kshatriyas and were adopting Hindu caste names, as a result of which there was a decrease in the number of literate Kacharis.[71] And even if such people were educated, they were accused of jumping ships and abandoning their brethren while

[69] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 3–4.

[70] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 4.

[71] *Census of India, 1921, Voll III, Assam, Part I Report*, 106. Though this was reported in the Census of 1921, a reading of the sources sheds light on the fact that aspirational Boros may have been very much a part of such processes since the beginning of the twentieth century itself.

their boat sank. Their act of conversion and taking membership in a different community were seen as cowardly acts of betrayal. They were likened to 'jackals pretending to be lions', but in the process occupying a subordinate status. 'Is it not better to remain a jackal and be free?' was the question that was posed.[72] The reason such converts were berated sharply was that, being educated and possessing a certain amount of social, economic, and cultural capital, they were expected to play an active role in the awakening and rediscovery of the true essence of the *jati*, and its *unnati*. They were supposed to be the pioneers in finding the origin and hence the restoration of the ancient pride of the *jati*.

Purifying the Community

As described in the case of Brahma Dharma, socio-religious reforms among the Boros also entailed adoption and emulation of Hindu orthodox practices, which did not necessarily mean trying to gain membership into a higher group. The efforts of the HBS too, at social reforms—while being critical of trying to gain membership into a higher group — depended on adopting socio-religious and cultural practices that closely resembled those of Orthodox Hindus. Meanwhile, a number of socio-religious practices which were generally associated with the Boros were sought to be abandoned. These were primarily dietary practices that had been perceived to be lowly. Among such dietary practices, consumption of rice beer/alcohol was seen as one reason why Boros had not been able to progress and in many cases had led to the downfall of individuals and the community. Its consumption was to be strictly discontinued. *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* contained an anecdotal story about two brothers, one of whom turns out to be an alcoholic, who squanders his money and property, and eventually dies.[73] In colonial Assam and more so from the end of nineteenth century, reinforced by colonial anthropology

[72] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*,5.

[73] *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, (Goalpara: Habraghat Boro Sonmiloni, 1915), 32-43.

and census enumerations, alcohol consumption was largely associated with tribal primitiveness and low-caste food habits. In this context Jayeeta Sharma has argued that:

> In the labour discourses that subsequently circulated in colonial Assam, there is a definite similarity between the ritual purity-obsessed superiority displayed by Assam's high-caste groups, who disdained alcohol use as a lowly habit, and the British condescension toward primitiveness.[74]

She also attributes to officials like Colonel Jenkins the idea, that the impoverishment of Kacharis/tribes in the colonial economy and often times their inability to pay taxes and land revenues was because they used large quantities of their rice to brew rice beer, instead of engaging in trade.[75] But such ideas in a changed colonial economy quickly became accepted. Assamese intellectuals too, advised the Boros not to waste the surplus produce of rice by brewing beer, but to instead earn extra money by selling it.[76] Land Revenue Assessment Reports of the early twentieth century tended to point out consumption of rice beer as one of the reasons for the inability of Boros to pay their land revenues and their petitions for lowering land revenues rates. Their economic situation was also hence construed as not being sound as those of their converted kin groups, or other 'higher' castes. In one such report it was written:

> The Kacharis, Rabhas and Jaldhas are as improvident as those described in the Kariaparaduar group: At least one-third, if not one half of the rice crop is spent

[74] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 68.

[75] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 68.

[76] Nilomoni Phukan, "Sadou Axam Boro Chatra Sanmilanir Prothom Adhibeshanar Xobhapotir Abhibhashan" in Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar*, 247.

> in making rice beer. The *Saranias, Mahalias, and Koches* are generally more prosperous owing to their abstinence from liquor.[77]

Consumption of rice beer was an essential part of the cultural and socio-religious practices of the Boros. It would not be too much of a stretch to assume that it formed an integral part of the Boro diet and a rich source of nutrition, especially for a people engaged in hard physical labour. While being an essential element in the socio-religious life of Boros, it was not a situation where people were always in a state of drunken stupor. Though a missionary who would have wanted his converts to abjure drinking, Sidney Endle, it would seem, did not see much of a harm in the drinking of rice beer by Boros and did not observe its abuse. Though there were apparent instances of 'immoderate consumption', it was brewed only when there were special events and 'occasions that break the monotony of village life'; and Endle himself described it as a, 'thoroughly *wholesome* drink or at least a comparatively harmless one [emphasis added]'.[78] In fact, the important role that rice beer played in the lives of Boros— and obviously for other tribes too outside the influence of Hinduism both in the hills and plains— was acknowledged by the officials who was assessing land revenues. In spite of the idea prevalent among colonial officials that they were unable to sell any of their rice because of the manufacture of rice beer, and hence the difficulty in paying their revenues, J. McSwiney in his *Assessment Report Of The Kariaparaduar Group*, acknowledged that it was something which 'people regard as a necessity if one wishes to keep in health and be able to work'.[79] But the

[77] J. McSwiney, *Assessment Report Of The Khallingduar Group, Darrang District* (Dacca: Gandaria Press,1908), 7.

[78] Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (London, Macmillan And Co., Limited, 1911), 53, 17–19.

[79] J McSwiney, *Assessment Report Of The Kariaparaduar Group, Darrang District* (Dacca: Gandharia Press, 1908), 8.

association of tribal degeneracy and tribal primitiveness with consumption of alcohol became stronger as one moved into the twentieth century.

The call for temperance also ran parallel to the efforts of Assamese intelligentsia to eradicate consumption of opium, a practice that was adopted by the Ahom nobility and had remained as a marker of class and caste distinctions, even finding religious sanction through *kaniya sabhas* (opium assemblies).[80] By the twentieth century, eradication of opium consumption for the Assamese nationalists, 'became inextricably associated with the task of bringing progress'.[81] Following this line of reasoning, the early Boro intelligentsia's efforts to eradicate alcohol or rice beer consumption can be read as symbolic of their efforts to place the Boro community within the march of progress and towards modernity.

In this context, the efforts of Brahma Dharma followers were similar to those of HBS. They both attempted to codify their laws and rules of conduct. A series of meetings of Brahma Dharma followers starting on the 12th of April 1934, attempted to codify the rules and laws that had to be followed by Brahma Dharma followers, failing which punitive actions would be taken and fines would be imposed.[82] Prohibitions were placed on Brahma Dharma followers in regard to brewing and drinking alcohol, violations of which would invite fines.[83] Earlier, when rice beer consumption was an integral part of festivals and harvests, such occasions were no longer supposed to be used as 'excuses to indulge in drinking and eating meat'.[84]

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[80] Sharma, E*mpire's Garden*, 62, 155.

[81] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 161

[82] Bidyasagar Narzary and Malabika Mitra, eds,. *Boroni Padulipi: Social Laws of the Boros: Codified for the followers of Brahma Religion in 1934* (Kolkata: GBD Publishers, 2005).

[83] Brahma and Mitra, *Boroni Pandulipi*, 2. A fine of Rs.5 was to be imposed on any Brahma Dharma follower found brewing and drinking rice beer.

[84] Brahma and Mitra, *Boroni Pandulipi*, 4.

Similarly, in *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* too, there were a 'strict set' of rules and laws along with mention of the fines that would be imposed for breaking them and rituals to be performed for personal purification in situations where one became defiled by engaging in 'contaminating' acts in day to day life.[85] A reading of these 'codified' laws of both, Brahma Dharma and the HBS, shows how the goal was to attain an *undefiled* way of life. Many of these laws and rules reflected practices of the then upper caste Hindus, designed so as to give a semblance of leading a ritually pure life but at the same time being counted as a member of a tribe. So, not just rice beer, but there was also a concerted effort to adopt vegetarianism and the total abdication of animal food, which was deemed unclean. Animals such as buffaloes, rats, frogs, mongoose, and jungle cats were deemed polluting for the Brahma Dharma followers.[86] Similarly HBS also tried to stop eating of dogs, snakes, civet cats, mongoose, wild birds, and fermented dry fish upon the threat of fine.[87] In terms of the food, it was suggested that only those which were 'sanctioned by Hindu scriptures' should be consumed.[88]

Ideas about hereditary caste occupation and notions of purity-pollution associated with caste also came up when it came to *unnati*/progress. It was argued that engaging in more than one trade is not a feasible idea and that hereditary caste occupation was something that had been designed and sanctioned by *Aryan Rishimunis*— Aryan Saints/Holy men— for every *jati*.[89] The idea of caste sanctioned hereditary occupation was sought to be propounded to stop Boros from engaging in certain trades and occupation which were deemed 'polluting'. Fishing was one such activity which Boros and many communities in Assam had been practising at an

[85] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 56–82.

[86] Narzary and Mitra, *Boroni Pandulipi*, 2. A fine of Rs.5 was to be extracted for its violation.

[87] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 74, 77–78.

[88] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*,, 33.

[89] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 45.

individual level and also at the level of community, and fish formed an important part of the everyday diet. Yet, fishing became an economic activity that was looked down upon as a lower caste occupation. People engaging in it as a commercial enterprise were mostly from the lower castes such as Jhalo, Dom, Nadiyal, Hira, Manjha, and Malla among the Hindus and Datiyas among the Muslims, along with tribes such as Boros and Rabhas.[90] While conceding that fishing for one's own personal consumption is acceptable, the HBS members wanted Boros to completely dissociate themselves from engaging in buying and selling fish.[91] Along with it, they also said the practice of selling dried fish and other food items such as rice cakes were also shameful, and since Boros were traditionally agriculturalists, they should remain as one. The reason why these activities, in market places, were sought to be discontinued was because they involved an interaction with the 'lower castes', such as the Garos, Mikirs, Mochis (cobbler caste), Methors (Manual scavengers etc).[92] In fact, in *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, certain situations were mentioned, during which if one came to close proximity of 'certain communities' it would have been considered as defiling and the person would have had to perform *prayaschit*— acts of redemption. For instance, sharing a smoking pipe with a *Bangal*— a Muslim—, drinking with Garos and Rabhas, eating food prepared by Garos, would invite fines and acts of redemption would also have to be performed.[93]

[90] B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Volume V, Darrang*, (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1905), 171; Allen, *Assam District Gazetteeers Goalpara*, 90. Some of these terms are today considered as highly offensive and their usage inappropriate. Here it is being used in a very conscious manner with full awareness of the offensive nature of the terms for the sake of argument, and hence they are being reproduced as they appear in the source material.

[91] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 46.

[92] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 46.

[93] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 73–74.

These reforms towards attaining purity also sought to bring about changes in marriage practices and gender relations by emulating the practices of the upper castes. The HBS and the Brahma Dharma movement put in place rules which attempted to regulate women's bodies and their sartorial practices. The accessing of markets and engaging in trades by women were sought to be discouraged as they often became a source of male anxiety, where the honour of the community would be at stake. And both, Brahma Dharma followers and HBS restricted women between certain ages from going to markets — only elderly women and pre-pubescent girls were allowed to visit markets in the Brahma dharma rule book.[94] As such, it would seem that Boro women had some access to public spaces such as markets. They would sell their vegetable produce, fish, betel nuts, and foods such as rice cakes in the markets.[95] But, the HBS said that Boro women were simple minded and hence, could not stand up to the guiles of men from other communities.

The way in which Boro women traditionally 'dressed' was also a source of anxiety for them. Boro women usually wore a rectangular dress which was tightly drawn across the breasts and reached their calves.[96] The HBS feared that 'when they dress half-revealing their breasts, their open hair, and laugher emanating from their crimson coloured lips', women would become easy prey to the devious schemes of men from other communities.[97] Though women must have contributed through their labour a fair share to the household income, their engagement in trade was seen as despicable and as a *kalank* — blot— on the character of the jati.[98] They rhetorically asked, 'can we not go on if we do not send our women to markets?'

[94] Narzary and Mitra, *Boroni Pandulipi*, 14.

[95] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 47.

[96] Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers Goalpara*, 95.

[97] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 47.

[98] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 48.

Thus the HBS called upon the community to stop young girls and widows from going to market places so as to preserve the honour of the community. In this manner, women's bodies became one of the sites upon which the honour and purity of the community came to be hoisted upon., in the march towards progress.

Another way in which social practices among the Boros were to be brought closer to Hindu Orthodox practices was by bringing in marriage reforms and advocating early marriage for girls. Again, here it was an emulation of the practices that must have been prevalent among the upper castes. In 1891, Herbert Risley observed that the Rajbanshis professing to be 'pure Hindus' had recently started practicing child marriages for girls 'towards the adoption of what was believed to be the more orthodox usage'.[99] And by 1901, it was reported that nearly ten percent of Rajbanshi girls below the age of twelve were married.[100] Saying that, 'even the gods are unaware of a woman's character and a man's luck' they pushed for an early marriage of Boro girls.[101] Marriage, according to HBS members, was primarily for procreation, preferably, to bear sons and since women can become mothers by the age of thirteen, the ideal age for marrying them off was proposed to be between 10 and 12.

While both the efforts of the Brahma Dharma and HBS were similar in many ways, one fundamental difference lay in the fact that HBS did not advocate for the explicit adoption or altogether converting to a new religion. Rather, they were very much for remaining within the traditional religion and its ceremonial practices, centred around the worship of Bathou. While HBS made laws and passed injunctions against many prevalent practices, nothing was instituted which sought to drastically reform or depart from traditional religious practices and

[99] H. H. Risley, *The Tribes And Castes Of Bengal. Ethnographic Glossary. Vol.I.* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1892), 494.

[100] Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers Goalpara*, 52.

[101] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*,50

rituals. In fact, even as they called alcohol a 'poison' and a cause for backwardness, they did not call for its complete abandonment as it formed an integral part of the existing rituals. *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* had claimed that it was divinely sanctioned and formed an important part of the worship of Shiva.[102] Hence, during religious functions, drinking of rice beer in moderation was allowed .

While the efforts of Brahma Dharma and HBS at social reforms were the most obvious, the ideas and 'need' of social reforms had also permeated, in general, among educated Boro individuals. A prominent example of one such effort was a small booklet entitled, *Bathunaam Bwikhaguni Gidu*. It was first published in 1920 by an individual named Pasanna Kumar Boro Khakhlary, with the help of a hand press.[103] The booklet was mostly concerned with the reformation of practices associated with the celebration of *Bwisagu*, the equivalent of Assamese Bihu and contained six *gidu* or *naams* (hymns) composed by the author. These hymns were in the form of exhortations of Shiva, Bathou, the numerous Boro gods and goddesses, and a song to be sung while harvesting. In these, the influence of the *naam* — hymnal practices of Assamese Vaishnavism— can be traced. In the booklet, a certain kind of discomfort with the practices of revelry and 'risque' songs that were associated with *Bwisagu* was also seen, and hence the attempt to rewrite such songs making religious devotion a central feature of the celebrations.

(Re)reading 'Origin' Myths

Attempts to purify Boro community and justify the adoption of orthodox Hindu practices required reworking on the existing origin myths. Through improvised readings of mythology

[102] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 11–12.

[103] Pasanna Kumar Boro Khakhlary, *Bathunaam Bwikhaguni Gidu* (Kokrajhar: N. L. Publications, 2008), 3.

and prevalent social practices, an origin that was largely based on a mythic Kshatriya past came to be generated. For instance, among the many different kinds of marriage practices prevalent among the Boro community, a kind where women were 'forcibly' kidnapped by men and married off had existed. Regarding the prevalence of such practices Sidney Endle had written that:

> From certain scattered scraps of information on the subject that have incidentally come to the writer's knowledge during the past forty years, it would seem that *marriage by capture* was hugely, if not universally, in vogue among the Kacharis in earlier days. Some traces of this practice would seem to survive in the ordinary marriage ceremonial which still to a large extent holds the field [emphasis added].[104]

The HBS found this practice a deplorable one. While condemning this practice they took recourse to their claims of Kshatriya heritage, to change this practice. They claimed that in earlier times Kshatriya men would kidnap women and marry them as a demonstration of their strength and courage, which was, but, the *asura* way of marriage.[105] They claimed that the correct way was that of the *Gandharva* way, which had more respectability.[106] Kshatriyas, they

[104] Endle, *The Kacharis*, 43. But Endle also informed his readers that in instances of such marriages, 'no actual violence apparently occurred . . . and very likely there had existed for some time previously a private understanding between the two young people concerned'.

[105] Boroni Phisa O Ayen, 1915, 49.

[106] Ancient Hindu law codes that deal with marriages talk about different forms of marriages, generally six to eight types, *viz.*, Brahma, Prajapati, Seer, Divine, Demonic, Gandharva, Fiendish, and Ghoulish. The first four were said to be suited for Brahmins. Gandharva marriages were generally seen as the type where the man and the woman got into a relationship willingly with mutual consent. Though apparently unsuited for the higher castes, it was also recommended, because 'it flowed from love'. Fiendish marriages were the ones where Kshatriya men would forcibly take away the bride. The law codes talk of Gandharva and Fiendish marriage as stemming from the 'Kshatriya nature'. Please see,

said, had already abandoned the *asura* way of getting married. And since they were beginning to also claim a Kshatriya status such practices according to them would accord them to be of a low pedigree.

In *Becoming a Borderland*, Sanghamitra Misra has shown that early twentieth century Goalpara was in a state of flux, where the dominant Rajbanshi elites and landlords were trying to rewrite and reimagine the history of the people and the place itself as 'illustrations of the historical memory of its inhabitants and of the complex trajectories of counter discourses in the region'.[107] Mostly in the forms of family histories and genealogies, they often went back centuries to the period of the Koch kingdoms and spoke of these landed elites as having descended from the Koch kings. Such chronicling of history would have been relatively easier for the Rajbanshi elites of the zamindari estates to commission; and may have even found large scale acceptance, owing to their social, cultural, economic, and political standing. But Rajbanshi as a term and as a caste/race category was imbued with multiple connotations and the 'non-elite' Rajbanshis too laid claim to a glorious past and a mythic origin.

In such a socio-political context, it became imperative for Boros not to be left behind. They felt the urge to respond to the circumstances. This response was not a clearly delineated one. It was the result of heterogeneous practices that existed within. By the twentieth century census officials classified majority of the Boros as animists, which meant occupying a lowly position outside the caste system. Invariably it also meant that racially they were of 'non-Aryan' stock. This did not seem to sit comfortably with the Boros coming together to form associations and they often opposed such classifications. And often such opposition in turn

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Patrick Olivelle ed., *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Apastamba, Gautama, Baudhayana, and Vasistha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 162.

[107] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, 173.

took recourse to the claims of a mythic Kshatriya past and efforts to place themselves within the ambit of the twice born castes, hence within the larger heritage of the 'Indo-Aryan' race.

The HBS in its booklet *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* had stated that one of its aims was to conduct research into the origins of the Boro community. They had asked, 'Whose descendants are the Boros? Where did we come from?'[108] While there were social and political pressures to be organised, one important theme to focus here is on the quest for an origin. As different communities around were, along with politically organising themselves, conjuring up mythical historical origins to claim a higher status, the lack of concrete proofs of origin was a source of uneasiness for members of HBS. While they berated Boros turning into Rajbanshis, they also looked at the movement for gaining Kshatriya status among the Rajbanshis with a certain kind of admiration. In the context of the need to find an origin for the Boros, looking upto the efforts of Rajbanshis they stated:

> Rajbanshis have formed associations for their *jatiyo unnati*. They have started to claim a Kshatriya status and are doing so with proofs, and hence they are trying to change their surnames to such as *Burman* and *Singha*.[109]

This lack of clarity on the origins of Boros was also seen as one of the reasons why Boros were in a degenerate state and unable to progress as compared to others who had managed to conjure up a glorious past. The HBS called upon Boros saying:

> O brothers, nothing is impossible for men. Communities across the country for the progress of their communities are coming together and pouring over religious texts to find out the truth about their true religion and their true *jati.*

[108] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen,* [Bigyapan, Introductory pages]

[109] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen,* 2.

> We too should take sincere steps to *discover the true religion* we actually belong to[translated from Bengali].[110]

The implicit idea in this was to conjure up a 'true' origin based on religious scriptures which would then accord a respectable status to them at the present. This act of searching for a true origin in the distant past through myth and oral histories in turn demonstrated the various divergences and strands of aspirations, which were sought to be reconciled through (re)reading of prevalent local oral lore and legends and appropriation of histories of Kachari kingdoms.

The members of the HBS went about collecting oral histories from various places which they hoped would be in sync with their claims and prove them right. But, at the same time, it was also aware that some of these could be nothing but mere myths and legends that had very little historical accuracy. In its account of a certain origin myth, as a footnote, it referred to myths collected from old people in various places as *Roop Kotha*, a Bengali term that could be loosely translated as *imaginative* tales.[111] This origin myth was one that was rooted in Hindu mythology and centred around Shiva. A short reproduction of the myth is required here to understand the way in which it tried to give an account of the origin of Boros and which also included etymological explanations.[112]

It so happened that during *pralay kaal* — an epoch in which the universe was in state of nothingness— when the earth was under a great deluge, people called upon Shiva to rescue them. After Shiva pulled the earth out from beneath the deluge, a feast was thrown, where the fish being served became insufficient. And so Shiva had to cut off a piece of flesh from his arm and give it to *Kartik*— son of Shiva and Paravti. *Kartik* in turn threw the piece of flesh into the

[110] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 5.

[111] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 7.

[112] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 7–14.

jungle and out of it a boy child was born. Hearing the cries of the child, Parvati took pity on it and nursed and placed him under a *sizou* tree. As the child grew up, he began to eat the *kaccha* (raw) leaves of the *sizou* tree, and hence, Parvati started calling the child *Kachari*. His descendants later came to be also known as Kacharis. In the later part of the myth, the child starts to ask Parvati questions about Shiva. She tells him that Shiva used to meditate under the *sizou* tree where he was found, and that the one who meditates under this tree will find favour with him. Parvati further told him that Shiva had not taught the art of worshiping him to any other and it is only to the boy that he wished to teach first, as he was born of the 'left hand' of Shiva and hence a *Shivbansi*, a descendant of Shiva. She further prophesised that through the boy's *bahubal* (might), *Shiv dharma* will spread all over the world. Later on, pleased with the child's devotion Shiva accorded him the title of his chief devotee and declared that he will become a mighty ruler and defeat all his enemies. Eventually, upon becoming a ruler he was known as the *Boro Raja* (Great King) as he was Shiva's *Boro Bhokto* (Great Devotee) and the city he founded came to be known as *Borpeta* — in all likelihood a reference to the present town of Barpeta.[113] His descendants and subjects later spread in different directions and reached Cachar district where they established the Kachari kingdom.

In this part of the origin myth, the creative re-reading and appropriation firmly placed Boros as within and as a part of the larger traditional claims, going back to centuries, at least to the sixteenth century, of erstwhile Koch royalty and the minor Rajbanshi rajas and zamindars, of being a *Shivbanshi*. The etymological play on the words Boro (Boro Raja- Boropeta, and hence Boro as the name of the community) and Kachari (Kaccha- Kachari- Cachar- Kachari kingdom), was not very different from what was then being done by Assamese

[113] *Boro* in Bengali means great.

intelligentsia — trying to place Assam at the core of the larger Indo-Aryan physical geography through etymological interpretations of place names mentioned in Puranic texts.[114]

Reclaiming Histories

Claiming a Kshatriya status through mythical claims had been one of the most prominent ways in which a community aspired for upward caste mobility. By the turn of the century, even the Ahoms were demanding a Kshatriya status by claiming to be 'Daityakul Kshatriyas'.[115] Here it is important also to note that the Chutiyas, considered as a part of the Bodo race, were also mobilising and forming organisations to reclaim a Kshatriya heritage at around the same period in the twenties of the twentieth century.[116] With even the Ahoms — racially of the 'non-Aryan' stock — and the Chutiyas claiming for a Kshatriya status, along with the Rajbanshis in Goalpara, this model of claiming such a status found resonance among Boros too. It provided one of the many possible avenues for upward social mobility. It was with this hope that Boros started to lay claims to an ancient Kshatriya past and locate themselves within the acceptable narrative of the overarching Hindu civilisation.

A way in which Boros tried to accord themselves a Kshatriya status was by appropriating the mythical story of *Parasuram* on a vengeful mission to kill Kshatriyas, a story prevalent among many communities in the region, in different variations.[117] It was important because, even as claims of Kshatriya lineage by Boros was being laid, it would not have been

[114] Please see Bodhisattva Kar, *What Is In A Name? Politics Of Spatial Imagination In Colonial Assam* (Guwahati: Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change And Development, 2004).

[115] Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*, 117.

[116] Joy Kanta Barua, "Jaityo Khed" in Rajni Kanta Bordoloi, ed., *Axam Sanmilan Chutiya Buranji* (Joy Kanta Barua, 1925), unnumbered page.

[117] The story of Kshatriyas fleeing from Parasuram had become one of the ways through which the history of the region was being written and imagined by both British and Indians. Please see, Nagendra Nath Vasu, *Social History of Kamarupa Vol I* (Calcutta: Published by the author, 1922), 45–47.

as easily acceptable — just as the claims of Rajbanshis were being disputed by higher caste groups. The larger idea that Boros were an autochthone Mongoloid tribe, outside the Varna system would have also ran contrary to ideas of race being a marker of caste.[118] The *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, giving an account of the Koch kings, had mentioned them as descendants of Meches who in turn descended from Kshatriyas who had taken refuge from Parasuram's murderous campaign.[119] These Kshatriyas according to the *Rajavamsaali* had taken up the customs of the Meches, such as drinking rice beer, to remain hidden from Parasuram. This myth was one which was also being adopted by the Rajbanshis to foster their claims of being Kshatriyas. It was also often cited in the censuses and other accounts as an oral lore prevalent among the Kalita— caste/community which was considered as low in the caste hierarchy— to account for their origin. In the census of 1881, a possible account of the origin of this caste was given as:

> The Kolitas are the highest of the Sudra castes native to the Assam valley. One tradition derives them from Kshatriya refugees, who flying eastwards across the Tista from the vengeance of Prasu Ram, dissembled or forgot their caste and became known as Kul-lupta, or those whose caste had been obliterated.[120]

[118] The claims of Ahom gentry to a Kshatriya status was not taken seriously by census officials as it would place them ahead of other Hindu castes, and because they were also considered as an 'indigenous' (non-Aryan) group. Please see Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*, 118.

[119] Suryakhadi Daivajana, *Daranga Rajavamsaali*, eds. Biswanarayan Shastri and Bhaba Prasad Chaliha (Guwahati, Lawyer's Book Stall, 2013), 7–11.

[120] *Report On The Census Of Assam For 1881* (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1883), 93. Also please see, Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*, 132

Again, an etymological association of words, Kalita as a derivative of Kul-lupta. The HBS in *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* reproduced a similar version of the story.[121] In their version, the descendants of the fugitive Kshatriyas who remained under the protection of the Brahmins remained as Kshatriyas, some who ran to the jungles became Kul-lupta (Kalitas) — Kul-lupta means to lose one's caste. Among these were some Kshatriya women, who took their children in their কোচে (Koche) — to hold a child close to one's bosom so as to protect them — taking refuge in the jungles. They eventually came to be known as Koch — derived from কোচে — and took on the title of Rajbanshi saying that they were the descendants of a royal family. From among these Koches, a group settled in the jungles of Mechpara, which was then a zamindari estate in Goalpara. During the course of their stay in the jungles they took on the practices of *neech jati* (low castes), and came to be known as Meches. As such, certain prevalent practices associated with tribes, such as consumption of alcohol and meat, which would not have conformed to upper caste orthodoxy, were sought to be presented as practices that crept up along the way due to interactions with other lowly communities. This version of the myth also reworked on and drew from the prevailing memories and ideas of past kinship ties between different heterogeneous groups that may have still existed in the early twentieth century, and also linked Boros to the larger heritage of the Koch kingdom.

In the early twentieth century, the awareness of a medieval Kachari kingdom in the past and the spread of Kachari/Bodo population across the hills and valleys of Assam came to be further enhanced by the objective of the colonial state to classify, enumerate and produce knowledge about its subjects. Accounts of the origins of Boros, Dimasas, and other groups tied to the larger Kachari group became a fairly staple feature in gazetteers and a few anthropological works. Certain myths of origin and ancestry seemed to have made rounds in

[121] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 13–14.

various official and non-official works, albeit with minor variations and distortions and even made their way into the writings of Boros and their larger consciousness of a collective identity. In order to further legitimise the claim to a higher Kshatriya status, Boros too started to claim/appropriate the legacy of the Kachari kingdom. Though it would seem that the knowledge about the Kachari kingdom would not have permeated much among the general Boro population, by the second decade of the twentieth century there seems to have been a fair amount of awareness of this history among the literate class of Boros.[122] They now had access to published histories and myths and through a re-reading, employed them for their purposes. This made it easier to claim a shared heritage of the Kachari Kingdom of Cachar. Making of historical connections with the Kachari rule certainly gave such claims a more believable and a historically veracity; just as the concept of a 'Great Bodo Race', as a larger category was beginning to be firmly established among intellectuals and the reading public in Assam, and under which Boros could be comfortably placed.

In this regard, Edward Gait's *History of Assam* published in 1905 is one such text which seemed to have had a significant role in the dissemination of such theories of origin and ancestry. In his chapter on the Kacharis, he describes the alleged process whereby the Kachari King, Krishna Chandra, and his brother Govinda Chandra through a symbolic emergence from inside the body of a copper cow, as part of a ritual purification process, were conferred the title

[122] B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers Volume III Goalpara* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1905), 43. The Gazetteer had observed that:

> 'The ordinary Kachari of the north bank is an illiterate villager who has only vaguely heard of the Kacharis of Nowgong…He is quite innocent of history and has never heard of the Kachari Raj.'

But by the second decade of the twentieth century historical works such as Edward Gait's influential *A History of Assam* containing accounts of the Koch Kings and the Kachari Kingdom, were already influencing local perceptions of history and history writing.

of Kshatriyas.[123] This process also involved the Brahmins concocting an imaginative genealogy which would go back to hundreds of generation all the way to Bhima of Mahabharata, to legitimise the now conferred title of Kshatriya on the Kachari royalty. This genealogy, written by the Brahmins, was seen as highly imaginative and with no historical value by Gait himself who called it 'a compound of oral tradition and deliberate invention'.[124] But nevertheless it had made its way even into official accounts.[125] This account was in turn seized upon by literate Boros, for instance HBS, who were starting to form a historical consciousness of a glorious past. The appropriation, interpretation, and rereading of this mythical/historical account by the Boros in Goalpara and elsewhere involved reframing and embellishments to the narrative to suit their own objectives. The association with kings and kingdoms of the past was an important part of the origin myths of Boros because it was one of the means through which a claim could be made to a martial Kshatriya past.

The emergence of the then Kachari King, Krishna Chandra and his brother Govinda Chandra, from the body of a copper cow was also reproduced in *Boroni Phisa O Ayen.* But in that version, the embellishments to the main narrative was made in such a manner that it served the purpose of trying to show that Boros were of a divine and Kshatriya ancestry. The booklet claimed that during the havoc and killings unleashed upon Kshatriyas, *Hirimba* — Bhima's wife — a Kshatriya lady took refuge in jungles to escape the wrath of Parasuram.[126] (The term *Hirimba* was another term used to refer to the medieval Kachari kingdom and the kings were

[123] Edward Albert Gait, *A History of Assam* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2011), 257.

[124] Gait, *A History of Assam*, 257.

[125] For an example please see, W. W. Hunter's *Statistical Account of Assam, Vol II* (London, 1879), 403.

[126] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* 15. Even as Hirimba wasclaimed as a Kshatriya lady, the *uncertainty* of this 'fact' was also acknowledged.

addressed as 'Lord of Hidimba'.)[127] She 'lost' her caste while living in the jungles and came to be known as a *rakshashi*— demoness.[128] She bore Bhima's son Ghatatkoch, who fought in the battle of Kurukshetra in Mahabharata. A genealogy going back 103 generations to Ghatatkoch was claimed to be in the possession of HBS, courtesy of a retired government official.[129] In this narrative in *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, Krishna Chandra is described as a devout Hindu who surrounded himself with learned Brahmins and who had a considerable command over Sanskrit. In spite of this, Krishna Chandra was pained by the fact that he was not accorded adequate respect by the Brahmins who had concocted a genealogy for him, as they would not even consume food and water from his hands. He was informed by the Brahmins that this was because he was not absolved of his mother's crime of being designated a *rakshashi*. As a solution to this problem, the Brahmins suggested the ritual involving emergence from the inside of a golden cow as a symbolic rebirth as a Kshatriya. It was claimed that this became a way for many Kacharis to convert to Kshatriyahood and call themselves *Burman*, to denote their Kshatriya status.[130]

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[127] Gait, *History of Assam*, 251. Regarding this Gait had written:

> It has been suggested that it [Hidimba] had been long the name of the Kachari kingdom and that Dimapur is in reality a corruption of Hidimbapur, but it seems more like that Hidimba was an old name of Cachar, which the Brahmans afterwards connected with the Kachari dynasty, just as in the Brahmaputra valley they connected successive dynasties of aboriginal potentates with the mythical Narak.

[128] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 24.

[129] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 16.

[130] Though these myths gained a lot of currency, they were not accepted by all. Dwarika Nath Rabha, in an address to Boros called such genealogy and claims of Kshatriya by, Boros, Koches, and Rajbanshis as 'laughable'. Please see, Dwarika Nath Rabha, "Soshtho Barshik Boro Chatra Sanmilaner Sabhapatir Abhibhashan" in Phukan Ch, Basumatary, Biswajit Brahma, and Kamalakanta Mushahary, eds., *Bibar: A Collection of Quarterly Magazine 1924–1925* (Kokrajhar: Bodo Publication Board, 2019), 108–109.

In this regard, it needs to be mentioned here that the process of returning oneself as a Kshatriya was not limited to Goalpara alone. A section of 'converted Kacharis' of the Surma valley — Dimasa speakers — too were, by the beginning of the twentieth century, laying claims to Kshatriya status and taking up the title of Khatri.[131] By the second decade of the twentieth century, among the Dimasas, an 'impulse towards Hinduism' was observed, as part of an ongoing campaign to persuade them to 'describe themselves and their language as Hairimba', drawing their lineage from their 'queen-ancestress Hirimba'.[132] Running parallel to this campaign was also the socio-political movement among the Dimasas to be able to return their 'race or caste as Kshatriyas'; which in conjunction with the process of 'Hinduisation', led the colonial officials to believe as the reason for the reduction of the Dimasa speakers— as the assumption was that under such circumstances many Dimasa speakers had returned their language as Bengali.[133]

While there were attempts to re-read history and mythology to suit their agenda, the fact that many Boros were employed in the British army in places such as Lushai Hills, Dacca, Lakhimpur, Burma, Garo Hills, etc. was also seen as manifesting the fact that they were of a Kshatriya bloodline.[134] Even in the third decade of the twentieth century when sometimes grand mythical concoctions seemed to have been discarded for more pragmatic questions of origins and identity, the idea of historical military glories and conquests were used in conjunction with the then prevailing situation, wherein some Boros were employed as soldiers in the British

[131] Allen, *Census Of India, 1901.Volume IV. Assam. Part I.*,135.

[132] Lloyd, *Census Of India, 1921. Volume III. Assam. Part I. Report*, 122.

[133] Lloyd, *Census Of India, 1921. Volume III. Assam. Part I. Report*, 122. For another example which illustrates how Kacharis were being described as descendants of Bhima please see, Nagendra Nath Vasu, *Social History of Kamarupa Vol II* (Calcutta: Published by the author, 1922), 43–45.

[134] Kachari and Kachari, *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, 24.

army. Jadunath Khakhlary in a speech at the first meeting of the Boro Mahasanmilan in 1925 asserted that:

> This jati [Bodo] once wore the crown of glory, and had their own kingdoms. They were the first ones to join the British in their efforts against the Burmese invasion. Boros are still an integral part of the British army and played an important role in the First World War by being part of the battalions raised from Burma and Dhaka. During the reign of the Kachari and the Koch kings Boros were the important officials in running the affairs of the state [translated from Assamese].[135]

Though the reference to and appropriations of the Kachari kingdom and its legacy by Boros in Assam started with *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* in the second decade of the twentieth century, these ideas and theories became firmly entrenched by the third and fourth decades. They would continue to play a central role in the efforts of Kachari (Boro) intellectuals to form a larger Bodo/Kachari solidarity which would encompass all the groups. Articles and poems which sought to mobilise people would often invoke the ruins of the Kachari Kingdom in Dimapur and Cachar. A poem titled "Dimapur" in Assamese, was published in *Bibar* which metaphorically compared the ruins of the Kachari kingdom in Dimapur to the 'degenerate' state of the Kachari jati and urged upon Kacharis to be aware of such a history.[136] It sought to portray Dimapur as a *jugyo sthan* — a place which formed a central point in the historical consciousness of Boros and as proof of the warrior past and conquests of past kings. Another poem in Assamese titled "Ahbaan", published in *Bibar*, nostalgically remembered the past

[135] Jadunath Khakhlary, "Boro Mahasanmilanir Xobhapotir Abhibhasan", in Phukan Ch, Basumatary, Biswajit Brahma, and Kamalakanta Mushahary, eds., *Bibar: A collection of Quaterly Magazine 1924–1925* (Kokrajhar: Bodo Publication Board, 2019), 263.

[136] Binanda Chandra Barua, "Dimapur" in Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar*, 69.

when Boros were an independent *jati* (nation) and mentioned about the later capital of the Kachari kings at Maibong.[137] In two verses of the poem it was written:

কত সেইদিন মনৰ গৌৰবে
হাঁহিছিল বোৰো যি দিন সুখত?
কত এতিয়া স্বাধীনতা ধন?
পৰনি পীড়ন, বোৰোৰ বুকত
. . .
ভাবি চোৱাহে সেই দিনৰ কথা,
যিদিন 'বোৰো'স্বাধীন আছিল;
সেই শুভ দিন মনত কৰা সবে
যিদিন শত্রুদমন জন্ম নিছিল।

Translation
Where have the glorious days vanished,
When Boros could smile with pride?
Where is the freedom that once filled their hearts?
Which is now burdened with repression/oppression.
Let us remember those days,
When we were a free people.
Those days of peace,
When our enemies were at our feet.

But the narratives of the mythic past that were re-read, reinterpreted, and embellished to accord respectability to the Boros, while being rooted in the large universe of Hindu mythology, sometimes diverged from one another. An article in *Bibar* titled "Kacharir Kotha", began with the claim that, in ancient past the forefathers of the Kachari kings resided at a place in Bharatvarsha where the rivers Ganga and Jamuna met.[138] The place apparently was named

[137] Bishnucharan Basumatary, "Ahbaan" in Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar,* 91

[138] Manikanta Brahma, "Kacharir Katha"in Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar,* 31–33.

as Di-lao by the Kachari forefathers which was identified as Allahabad or Prayag, and with one sweep placed the origin of the Boros within the Aryan-Hindu physical geography. Their descendants, later on migrated towards the east—Assam— and established a kingdom. One of the kings later had a son and a daughter named Hirimbo and Hirimba. The ensuing events took such a turn that the Pandavas of Mahabharata happened to reach the kingdom and Bhima and Hirimba were married. Hirimba bore a son named Ghatatkoch. The writer of the article informs that in the epic, Hirimba and Hirimbo were described as *rakshasi* and *rakshasa* (demoness and demon), and that such a description is only a manifestation of prejudice and malice towards the Boro community.[139] This was again an attempt to locate the Boros within the larger Indo-Aryan, Hindu mythological traditions which imagined a connection with the 'mainland' while being on a perceived 'civilisational periphery'. It was to *reconcile* the complexities of divergent narratives and an effort to trace the 'downfall' of the community from high to low status — as *Mlechas, rakshasas, asuras* outside the caste system.

The claims and consciousness of a glorious past was also often employed as a tool to mobilise people around agendas of 'progress' of the community. If Boros were a 'fuzzy' community earlier, the early twentieth century was certainly a period when as a result of the social and political developments, they too saw the benefits of organising. Before census enumerations and an officially sanctioned social gradation, Boros may not have bothered to 'ask how many of them there were in the world, and what they could wreak upon the world if they decided to act in concert', but now it was important to represent themselves as part of a 'large universalist collective group'.[140]

[139] Brahma, "Kacharir Katha"in Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar*, 33.

[140] Sudipto Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 56–57.

The early Boro intellectuals in their quest to form solidarities employed the very concepts and tools that colonialism had engendered. In this case, it was the official historical ethnographies, enumerative documents such as census, gazetteers, and the concept of a great Bodo race that they tended to project. In 1925, Jadunath Khakhlary, in his inaugural presidential address at the Boro Maha Sanmilan, made this point amply clear.[141] He declared that the Boros are the largest community in Assam, from North Bengal, Goalpara till the easternmost part of Assam in Sadiya. He cited figures from the Census of 1921, where Kacharis and allied groups totalled 7,56,076.[142] This figure was estimated by including all the people classified as Kachari and those belonging to allied groups, namely Mech, Dimasa, Sonowal, Hajong, Rajbanshi, Koch, Rabha, Lalung, and Chutiyas. The inclusion of these various groups within the ambit of a lager Bodo jati was an acknowledgement of the fuzzy past of these groups where identities often overlapped and merged into one another, but now demonstrative of an increasing realisation of their collective strength to 'wreak havoc'.

In fact, people like Jadunath Khakhlary very well understood the complex kinship ties in the past and employed various narratives to make sense of the past. He claimed that Mech and Koch are two branches of the Boro *jati* sharing close kinship ties.[143] He also added that if Boro, Dimasa, Hajong, Lalung, Rabha, Koch, and Chutiya languages were compared, similarities can be found and it could be inferred that all of them at one point of time spoke one language. It was contended by him that only with the influence of the Brahmins among the Koch that there came to be a divergence in their ways. Such an argument also sought to make

[141] Khakhlary, "Boro Mahasanmilanir Xabhapatir Abhibhasan", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 264.

[142] Khakhlary, "Boro Mahasanmilanir Xabhapatir Abhibhasan", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 264.

[143] Khakhlary, "Boro Mahasanmilanir Xabhapatir Abhibhashan", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 261.

sense of the fact that Koch was seen as a category that took in Hinduised converts with pretensions of being a higher caste; while Mech as a term was still associated with being member of a lowly tribe. This also paved the way for laying certain claims on the legacy of the Koch kingdom as a core part of the larger heritage of the Bodo race.[144] Jadunath Khakhlary's larger concern here, representative of the larger concern of certain Boro intellectuals, was also the 'shame' experienced by some educated Boros, as result of which people usually changed their surnames upon conversion.[145] Such associations with past glories could also be read as trying to instil a sense of pride in being a Boro among such people. He argued that instead of feeling a sense of shame on being called a Kachari, one should re-appropriate such terms and imbue it with new meanings.

Socio-Religious Reforms and Identity

The formation of a socio-political identity among the Boros in the early decades of twentieth century was interrelated and enmeshed with the new and old religious traditions and with the transformation of practices. The articulation of an identity outside the influence of religion was difficult for Boros. The avenues offered by Brahma Dharma in adopting Hindu orthodox practices offered them a means of resistance especially to the hegemony of Assamese Vaishnavism, but by claiming to be a Boro. By the third decade of the twentieth century, Brahma Dharma converts in Goalpara who were earlier enumerated as Meches started to return their caste as Boro and religion as Brahma. Mech as a term to describe Boros, especially of Goalpara, was considered to have derogatory connotation, the usage of which was actively resisted by both Brahmas and non-Brahmas in Goalpara. This was highlighted by an

[144] The Koch kings were being described as *Borobanshi*. Please see Rabichandra Kachari, "Assam Boro Chatra Sanmilanir 7th Barshik Adhibeshanor Abhyarthona Samitir Xompadokor Abhibhashan", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 275.

[145] Jadunath Khakhlary, *Kacharir Katha*, (Jorhat: Published by Author, 1927), 17–18.

increasingly assertive educated Boros who actively opposed the usage of the term Mech in official public spaces. In 1925, a protest march was taken out in Dhubri, against the Chairman of Dhubri local board who had used the term Mech to describe Boros. A statement was issued to express displeasure at this act of the Chairman. It was argued that while 'Sen' had become 'Sharma', and 'Rajbanshi' had turned in to 'Burman', Boros too had a right to use Boro as a self-referential term which was allowed by law and has been in 'usage since time immemorial'.[146]

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Kalicharan Brahma and other converts apart from their main concern of socio-religious reform also tied their efforts with the spread of education among Boros. They started lobbying for schools in Goalpara which would serve the needs of Boro students, as most Boro students had to travel and stay in towns like Dhubri to pursue their education. Through the efforts of Kalicharan Brahma, a normal school was established at a place called Tipkai in Goalpara.[147] A 'company' named the Brahma company was established in Dhubri and a boarding house for both non-Brahma and Brahma students was built which made it easier for students to stay and pursue education at the Dhubri High School.[148]

By the twenties, the activities of second generation Brahma converts took a more political tone and they did not shy away from letting their opinions heard. They were mostly men, who after having completed their schooling in Goalpara, moved to Guwahati to pursue their college education at Cotton College. Among them, three students namely, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Rupnath Brahma, and Modaram Brahma played a pivotal role in articulating the

[146] Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 299–300.

[147] Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 188.

[148] *Assam District Gazetteers. Supplement to Volume III Goalpara*, 3; Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 222.

aspirations of younger Boros. Much similar to the exposure that Assamese students had while pursuing their education in metropolitan Calcutta, the stint of these young men in Guwahati would have given them a first-hand experience of the rise of Assamese nationalism and the discriminatory caste practices that were still on. Even in colleges such as Cotton College— which was by then considered a premier educational institution of Assam— inter-dining was still a contentious issue and there were separate dining places for students based on their caste. The upper caste students had access to 'general halls' and the lower castes/tribes used to take their meals in separate dining halls.[149] Though castes such as the Jugi and Nath agitated against this later and were accepted in the 'general dining halls', till the end of the third decade, tribes and castes such as the Miris, Deori, Kaibartta, Bania, Lalung, and Kachari still had to take their meals in the halls designated for the 'backward' or 'depressed class boys'.[150] Such experiences must have also made individuals like Rupnath Brahma and Modaram Brahma, realise the sometimes futile nature of their claims to equality with upper castes through social reforms by accepting Brahma Dharma, as they were still not considered as *equals* by the upper castes.

From Dhubri, these students formed an organisation called the Boro Chatra Sanmilani, which was initially concerned with matters relating to Goalpara Boros.[151] They started publishing a quarterly magazine called *Bibar* — meaning a 'flower in full bloom' — from Dhubri. The town of Dhubri, in Goalpara, had by that period emerged as an important intellectual hub. Regarding this Sanghamitra Misra has noted that:

> At the turn of the nineteenth century, the pre-eminence of the zamindars and other landed classes, . . . was being replaced by a new middle class with better

[149] C.S. Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1932), 213.

[150] Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report*, 213.

[151] Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 268.

> potential for political investment for the colonial state. The intelligentsia that emerged in towns such as Dhubri and Goalpara was a part of this intelligentsia.[152]

Satish Chandra Basumatary was the editor of *Bibar*. The first few issues of the magazine were said to have been handwritten by Satish Chandra Basumatary himself. It was a trilingual periodical where articles, news, and poetry were published in Boro (Assamese script), Assamese, and Bengali. The early issues of the magazines can no longer be traced and there seems to be no surviving copies either. Only issues for the years, 1924 and 1925, can still be found and have been reprinted. Nevertheless, they shed immense light on the times and the ways in which this group of Boros and from all over Assam were negotiating and refashioning their collective selves, while at the same time, tried to reclaim their history, pride, and carve out a space within the socio-political order of Assam. Some of the themes that permeates across *Bibar* include change and progress, nostalgia for past kingdoms, social reform, and religious identity. It articulated the sometimes divergent visions of how Boro community should move along the path of progress. The April 1924 issue, while stating that the objective of the magazine was to provide space for members of the community and their views, lamented the decadent state that Boros were in. It was written there:

> Once this great Boro race in all its glory was the ruler of the whole of Assam, but now looking at its *decadent* state it becomes impossible to fathom that it was such in the distant past [translated from Bengali].[153]

[152] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland,* 143.

[153] Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar,* 3.

It was on this perception, of being in a decadent state, much like the concerns of the HBS, that their endeavours to tread on the path of progress also rested.

The magazine, while being published by second generation Brahma converts — if we consider the people involved with it — seemed to favour older forms of religious practices based on the worship of Bathou. This was a remarkable change from what their fathers had envisioned, which was adopting the ways of a certain kind of Hindu orthodoxy and Vedic Hinduism and moving away from worship of Bathou. Rupnath Brahma in a poem titled "Methai: Garang Serzani Nashini" implored the Boros saying:

> Do not forsake! Do not forsake!
> Mothers and Fathers!
> Be conscious of
> The essence of *Sizou*
> You'll have to protect
> The legacy of Bathou
> . . .
> Do not go over
> to join the others
> by forsaking your own kith and kin [translated from Boro].[154]

He appealed to those who were planning to convert to other religions to stay back within the Bathou fold by arguing that Bathou is as respectable a religion as any other with a profound philosophy. It was only the inability of the Boros to think critically that was leading them to believe that worship of Bathou symbolised decadence. While also being beneficiaries of

[154] Rupnath Brahma, "Methai: Garang Serzani Nashini" in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 5.

whatever gains that conversion to Brahma Dharma might have brought them, they were more inclined to 'preserve' and 'revive' traditional religious practices and beliefs. In 1926, Modaram Brahma, a second generation convert and a contemporary of Rupanath Brahma, wrote a booklet *Boroni Gudi Sibsa Arw Aroz*. It contained a collection of prayers in the format of hymns and poetry that dealt with questions and stories surrounding Bathou, such as "Who is Bathou?" It was one of the first attempts to portray traditional Bathou as an 'organised religion'.[155] Such portrayal was a socio-political necessity, especially given the competing religious claims in the modern times as well as the sense of pride it instilled on being a Boro.

Rupnath Brahma seemed to have understood the 'legitimacy' that an association with Bathou seemed to give to the Boros — a claim to distinction from other caste Hindu groups. Besides instilling a sense of self-confidence, it could be employed to counter the caste Hindu understanding of racial superiority. They were a generation of educated individuals who were 'challenging' the Assamese and their claims to higher 'Aryan' status while relegating the tribes to a 'non-Aryan' subordinate status.[156] They could seize history and 'knowledge', and use it to

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[155] Modaram Brahma, *Boroni Gudi Sibsa Arw Aroz* (Kokrajhar: N. L. Publications, 2008).

[156] Individuals like Rupnath Brahma were much aware of the rewriting of nationalist histories from Assam and the claims of caste Assamese to an Aryan heritage. He called such claims 'fictitious' and 'imaginative'. He remarked that, 'we too can conjure up such grand fictitious origins and claims, but we won't do so. Because we will stand on what is historically accurate and try and move along with the rest of the civilised world.' Please see Rupnath Brahma, "Kinchit Nibedon" in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 27. Further criticising such assertions by caste Assamese he retorted:

> The Assamese should realise that by designating the Kachari *jati* as 'parbatiyo' (hill dwellers/tribals), 'savage', and 'non-Aryan', they too, including the Brahmins, should be wearing these three qualities as an adornment around their neck. Apart from the Brahmins entire Assamese *jati* are descendants of the so called savage hill dwellers. . . The act of Assamese trying to make Boros outcastes by clothing them in a cloak of inferiority only proves their degenerate minds.

Rupnath Brahma, "Bolbar Kicchu" in in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 215.

counter such caste Assamese narratives. In an article, "Kinhchit Nibedon", Rupnath Brahma stated that:

> Even if according to destiny's inviolable rule Boros (Kachari) have lost their former glory, the fact that their descendants are scattered all over Assam and Bengal, the names of rivers in Assam, and the ruins at Dimapur speak of the *superiority* of this race in the past [translated from Bengali, emphasis added].[157]

The association with Bathou as such was also a necessity to accord, a religious identity which could be said to an exclusive and distinct characteristic of the Boros. As more often than not the concerns of a common religious identity of the Boros often came to the fore. A reading of the census reports sheds light on the various difficulties and confusion that arose while trying to classify the religion of the Boros. While trying to address the question of religious identity, Rupnath Brahma had further written:

> 'We [Boros] are what we are. If what we practice is called Hinduism so be it, if it is called as something else, we will consent to that too. Many among us read and revere the Hindu epics and worship various Hindus gods and goddesses such as Durga, Kali, and Laskmi. *Well to do Boros* have been worshipping all these gods and goddesses. We respect the learned Brahmins even though we do not have the institution of Brahminism. We respect *gaumata* and hence do not eat beef. *Bathou Bwrai* is the object of our worship and reverence. And he is manifested in the worship of the *Sizou* tree [translated from Bengali, emphasis added].'[158]

[157] Brahma, "Kinchit Nibedon" in *Bibar*, 26.

[158] Brahma, "Kinchit Nibedon" in *Bibar*, 28.

In a similar manner, Rabichandra Kachari also tried to address concerns of reconciling religious heterogeneity and identity.[159] He was of the opinion that if by Hinduism it means every other religious practices excepting Islam and Christianity, then Boros could be considered as Hindus. But he also tried to make his readers aware that if they were to be considered as such, then they would be placed at the very bottom of the Hindu society — he cited the caste Hindu Assamese attitude towards Boros as a proof of that. As such, he tried to assert that Boros had their own *Bathou Dharma*, which was different from Hinduism.[160]

If it became important to portray a coherent religious identity to others, there were also internal tensions around questions of religion and common identity. This especially came to the fore when associations such as Boro Chatra Sanmilani started to form linkages with other Kachari groups outside of Goalpara and *Bibar* too, and attempted to establish a larger platform for Kachari/Bodo identity. The divergent religious practices and conversions to new religions became a source of anxiety as it would seem that this had the potential to fragment the Boros based on religion. This was also informed by an historical understanding of the larger heterogeneous Kachari identity which had undergone numerous fragmentations due to conversions in the past. In 1925, Jadunath Khlakhlary in his speech at the Boro Mahasanmilan, gave vent to such concerns.[161] He hoped that the conversions to Brahma Dharma, Vaishnavism,

[159] Rabichandra Kachari, "Assam Boro Chatra Sanmilanir 7th Barshik Adhibeshanor Abhyarthona Samitir Xompadokor Abhibhashan", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 271–280.

[160] While asserting the separateness of Bathou as a religion he tried to reconcile the fact of Boro conversions to Brahma Dharma and Vaishnavism by saying that these were processes of 'modernisation'. He also opined that since *Boro dharma* (Boro religion) had been living alongside Hindu religion, it was only natural to be 'attacked' by it. Please see, Rabichandra Kachari, "Assam Boro Chatra Sanmilanir 7th Barshik Adhibeshanor Abhyarthona Samitir Xompadokor Abhibhashan", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 272.

[161] Jadunath Khakhlary, "Boro Mahasanmilanir Xobhapotir Abhibhasan" in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 264–265.

and Christianity would not further fragment the Boros/Bodos and asked the people to be mindful of situations had the potential to divide.[162] If a section of Boros from Goalpara were more inclined towards Brahma Dharma, 'resisting' the influence of Vaishnavism, this very localised form of Assamese Vaishnavism formed an integral part of lives of a large number of Boros elsewhere which simply could not be wished away.[163] Jadunath Khakhlary's concerns stemmed from the historical reality of Boros in the past, who after conversion to Vaishnavism would generally join the ranks of the Koch. The concern with the presence of various religious traditions was not so much based on contesting theological claims but on questions of the effect it could have on the formation of a political identity, on the power of the collective as well as the increasing possibilities of conversion to different religions resulting in decreasing 'numbers' of the collective.

The apparently 'undefined' character of their religious practices of Boros was also a source of anxiety for the Boros, in relation to the theories of racial/civilisational hierarchy, which in turn was brought about by the census enumerations and tight compartmentalisations. Boros/Kacharis were often classified as 'animists'— which automatically also implied non-Hindus— in the census, in conjunction with the ideas of dichotomy between Aryan and non-Aryan civilisations among the inhabitants in Assam. As such, the tribes both in the plains and the hills were seen as occupying a lower stratum. Boros strongly objected to this 'relegation' to the status of animist non-Aryan tribes as an incorrect classification. To counter being labelled animists, Rupnath Brahma in "Kinchit Nibedon" wrote about the mythological origin story of

[162] Elsewhere Jadunath Khakhlary had stated that 'tangible progress' could be achieved only if Kacharis were united by a 'single religion and worship one God'. Please see, Jadunath Khakhlary, *Kacharir Katha*, (Jorhat: Published by Author), 1927, 22.

[163] Jadunath Khakahlary had acknowledged that *Mahapurishiya Dharma* (Vaishnavism) had entrenched itself so deeply into Kachari Samaj that it was impossible to root it out. Please see Khakhlary, "Boro Mahasanmilanir Xobhapotir Abhibhasan", 265.

Boros in *Boroni Phisa O Ayen*, and the fact that many 'educated' Boros had accepted Brahma Dharma, leading their lives according to Vedic rituals.[164] Hence, it was unjust to label Boros as animists or *bhoot pujak* (spirits worshippers). It was argued that no traces of *bhoot puja* can be found in either the old or the new religious traditions that had been adopted by the Boros.

Just as the official census enumerations and classifications were often ambiguous over the religious and caste claims of not just the Boros but of all within the ambit of the Bodo race, Boros too often found themselves being pulled in different directions regarding their claims and counterclaims, especially in relation to Hinduism. Both Brahma Dharma and the local Assamese Vaishnavism were considered as part of Hinduism. While sometimes there was also a rejection to be classified as Hindus, as has been discussed, there were appropriations of myths from the larger Hindu universe. Though a cursory reading of the sources points to often 'contradictory' statements, it was an attempt to negotiate a distinct identity.[165] 'Boros do not want to be considered as Animists nor aspire to be inducted into the Hindu fold, they want to be classified as a separate Bodo community', Rupnath Brahma had declared, while trying to explain the religion of Boros.[166] Similarly the memorandum of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilani (hereafter AKJS) to the Simon Commission put forward a claim for a distinct category saying:

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[164] Brahma, "Kinchit Nibedon" in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 29.

[165] A line in a memorandum to the Simon Commission from the Boros of Goalpara read:

> Out of one lac and fifty thousand, some thousands have been treated as Hindus which is the cause of the decrease in the number of the Bodo population of the district of Goalpara. The Bodos have a distinct civilisation of their own. There should be a separate category the Bodos in the census.

Please see, "Memorandum by Bodo Community of Goalpara District to Indian Statutory Commmission" in Binai Khungur Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission or The Indian Statutory Commission* (Harisinga: The Beacons, year of publication not mentioned), 4.

[166] Brahma, "Kinchit Nibedon" in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 29

> This community as has been alluded to above does not bind itself to the chariot wheels of the big Hindu community but prefers to take its stand above and independent of them and earnestly hopes that the commission would be pleased to class them under a separate heading together.[167]

The rejection of Hinduism for the AKJS was also tied to the fact that Boros even when considered as Hindus were accorded a lower status as 'the Hindus do not receive them into their society, do not dine with them and are mostly unsympathetic to their ideals and aspirations'.[168] But the same memorandum would also allude to Hindu mythology to claim that the Kacharis were descendants of Bhima, one of the Pandavas, to support their claims of a glorious past. The efforts at dissociating themselves from Hinduism was also not so much about rejecting Hindu religious understanding or philosophy, but to create a separate Bodo/Kachari identity which they perceived would bring benefits to the community.[169]

It was also tied to an understanding and dissatisfaction with electoral reforms. The Goalpara Boros were not in favour of 'mixed electorate' and demanded that 'every section of

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[167] Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission*, 10

[168] Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission*, 9.

[169] Boros often explicitly acknowledged the grip that different strands of Hinduism had on their religious practices. Regarding its influence, it was written in *Bibar*:

> The Boros of North Goalpara similar to Boros from other districts have not been able to save themselves from the influence of Hinduism. Even if we did have our own religion in the past, the জঞ্জাল (trash, bad teachings) of Hinduism has permeated among us. Hinduism has rooted itself so deeply among us that we have been forced — of course without losing our *jatiyo* (national) essence — to take refuge under it.

Please see, "Sadhu Sanmilani Katha", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 186. Also please see, Rabichandra Kachari, "Assam Boro Chatra Sanmilanir 7th Barshik Adhibeshanor Abhyarthona Samitir Xompadokor Abhibhashan", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 272.

people should have the liberty of sending in their representative in the local council'.[170] They had written:

> The peculiar position in which we are placed offers us practically no chance of sending our representative in the council, though there are large numbers voters in our community.[171]

It was felt that they, in spite of having a large population, could not enjoy the 'advantages' of the reforms as other communities did, and the gains were being usurped by either 'a Brahmin or by a Kshatriya or by a Sudra'; and as such they demanded a 'separate representative in the council' to 'safeguard the interest' of their community'.[172]

This demand for a separate category also needs to be seen in the context of a campaign being run by the Hindu Sabha, starting in the late twenties, to enumerate the tribals of the province as Hindus in the census of 1931.[173] This campaign seemed to have achieved mixed results with its effects mostly visible in the plains and most notably in Nagaon district and many tribals as such were returned as Hindus. But there was also opposition from certain sections of the Boros to them being enumerated as such. It was noted in the census report that numerous petitions were received from 'Kacharis in Kamrup district that they had been returned as Hindus in the census schedules and that they objected to the action of the enumerators recording their religion as Hindus'.[174] This points to a situation where the efforts

[170] Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission*, 5.

[171] Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission*, 5.

[172] Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission*, 5.

[173] Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report*, 188–191. The Hindu Sabha was in favour of enumerating the tribes as Hindus by religion and their caste as Kshatriyas.

[174] Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report*, 190.

of various Boro associations and socio-religious reforms were also making the masses consciousness of a Boro self.[175]

A note written by Rupnath Brahma describing the Boro religion was quoted in the census report, which was much like his description in *Bibar*, which went as:

> They have a distinct religion . . . worshipping from time immemorial one supreme Lord through the *Siju* tree . . . and never allowed their tribal peculiarities to be merged into the Hindu society. Some 30 years ago a new form of Vedic religion was introduced . . . they recite *Gayatries* [Gayatri Mantras forms an essential part of Brahma Dharma rituals]. Thus from the religious point of view they may not be treated as Animists. They may fairly be treated as Hindus. *But the majority of them are not willing to recognise themselves as Hindus simply because, according to their views they would be losers thereby in the social and political sphere* [emphasis added].[176]

This understanding of losing out if classified as a Hindu, points towards the acute realisation that leaders like Rupnath Brahma had of the power of the collective in the new socio-political order. This was a negotiation which tried to manoeuvre and acknowledge the prevalent divergent and heterogeneous religious practices and at the same time demonstrate a coherent

[175] An organisation called the Kamrup Boro Unnati Sadhani, Sabha had its first meeting on 25th December 1924 at Nalbari in the then Kamrup district. The formation of this organisation was cited by *Bibar* as an instance of Boro *jati* beginning to be 'showered with blessings'. The Boros in Kamrup were described as being 'unresponsive' earlier, but the formation of this organisation was now seen as the 'conscious efforts of the Boros in Kamrup district to uplift themselves'. Please see "Kamrup Boro Unnati Sadhani Samiti" in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 334.

[176] Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report*, 194.

and separate Boro identity. The mobilisations resulted in the large number of Boros returning themselves as 'Boro by religion and Boro by caste' in the census of 1931.[177]

Boro identity vs the Greater Assamese *jati*

The various associations and the emergence of print culture in first half of the twentieth century also laid bare not just the religious heterogeneity among the Boros/Kacharis but also the different cultural and speech practices in different districts. The magazine *Bibar* was a perfect embodiment of this. As mentioned earlier, it was a trilingual magazine which carried articles in Boro, Assamese, and Bengali. It was a necessity brought about by the absence of a common 'dialect' which could be understood by all.[178] The important articles were either in Assamese or Bengali, as the publishers wanted them to reach a wider audience. This usage of three languages also laid bare the tensions that was there vis-à-vis an aggressive Assamese nationalism. The usage of Bengali in the magazine earned the displeasure of certain sections of the Assamese community. The Assamese news magazine *Chetana*, edited by Ambika Giri Rai Chaudhary, was critical of Boros using Bengali.[179] It claimed that the Boros were an integral part of Assamese society and shared more similarities with the Assamese than with the Bengalis. While praising the articles written in Assamese as good, it criticised the ones written in Bengali as poor in quality and as having the characteristic of being 'unnaturally forced'. In

[177] Mullan, *Census of India 1931 Vol III Assam Part I Report*, 194.

[178] In 1938, more than a decade after *Bibar* another magazine *Alongbar* was started by Pramod Chandra Brahma which had similar goals. Only the first issue of the magazine has survived. Like *Bibar* it was also a trilingual magazine, in Boro, Assamese, and Bengali. One of its aim was to bring 'Bodos' from all over the region and through linguistic exchanges and borrowings from different languages — such as Boro, Dimasa, Kok-Borok (Tripuri)— *construct* a new standardised language which would be understood by all. Please see, Pramod Brahma, "Tipari O Boro Bhasha", in Birupaksha Giri Basumatary ed., *Alongbar* (Hajo: Nal-Khagari-Birina Publications, 2019), 62–67.

[179] Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury, ed., *Chetana Vol V*, compiled by Paramananda Majumdar, (Guwahati: Pragjyotish College Publication, December 2018), 564–565.

a patronising tone it declared that while they appreciated the efforts of the Boro students they would not hesitate to point out mistakes in such efforts, and asked the Boros to walk on the path of progress by 'standing upon the foundations with which they had close links to'.[180] Simply put, they wanted *Bibar* to stop publishing articles in Bengali and concentrate more on writing in Assamese. This was met with a very sharply worded retort in *Bengali* by Rupnath Brahma.[181] He accused the 'Assamese' and *Chetana* of discrimination against Boros and their endeavours. Apparently the publishers of *Bibar* had earlier sent a copy to the offices of *Chetana* with the hope that they would receive 'guidance' and help from them to which they got no reply. It called out the double standards of the Assamese whereby they would accord a lowly status to the Boros but still would want to co-opt them as Assamese. Rupnath went on to criticise even the historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan and the then president of Assam Sahitya Sabha, Lakshminath Bezbaruah for calling the Boros and their language as belonging to the non-Aryan family. He also accused *Chetana* of showing more concerns with the happenings of other communities in the hills and their conversion to Christianity, while being blind to the racist unjust blows that Boros faced in the hands of the Assamese, compelling the former to convert to Christianity. For the publishers, it was imperative that the magazine be in all the three languages as it was supposed to give voice to Boros of Bengal, Goapara, and Upper Assam districts.

In this regard, it also becomes important to understand that Boros even though they sometimes seemed to adopt a combative stance against Assamese nationalism/hegemony, they

[180] Choudhury, ed., *Chetana Vol V*, 564.

[181] Rupnath Brahma, 'Bolbar Kicchu', in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 214–218.

never completely rejected the very idea of that nationalism/hegemony.[182] A complete existence outside the sphere of a greater Assamese *jati* was not quite possible to imagine.[183] Even as Rupnath Brahma sharply criticised the Assamese nationalists, his criticism was also directed at their insecurities regarding where the Boros stood. He reassured them that the Boros by writing in Bengali were not rejecting Assamese or Assam, but that it was a mere necessity. Jadunath Khakhlary in this regard saw Boros as an essential part of the greater Assamese *jati*. Such was his strong identification with the larger Assamese *jati* that he implored Boros students to not read popular Bengali novels, which according to him were fanciful imaginations and instead of enriching the readers mind sowed confusion and discord. Instead, he advised the Boros students to read Assamese *dharma puthis* along with the classical Hindu literatures.[184] While calling it shameful that 'Kacharis' have not got their rightful place in the Assamese society, he called upon the Boros to walk on the path of progress and stand together to form a *Mahan Axomiya Jati* (Great Assamese Society).[185]

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[182] In the second decade itself when the issue of language (Bengali vs Assamese) had come up in Goalpara, there was counter campaign by Boros for the introduction of Assamese in a schools Goalpara. Please see Misra, *Becoming a Borderland,* 154. In another instance a memorandum submitted by Boros, Rabhas, and Garos from Goalpara to the Simon Commission strongly urged the colonial government not to bring into effect the transfer of Goalpara to Bengal. The memorandum stated that during one of the sittings of the Boro Mahasanmilan, a resolution was passed which opposed the transfer of the district to Bengal. Please see, Basumatari, ed., *Plains Tribals Before The Simon Commission or The Indian Statutory Commission,* 14–15.

[183] This was also related to the claims of the past histories and dynasties of ancient Assam, or ancient Kamrup, as falling within the ambit of the heritage of the larger Bodo group. As such 'Bodos' were described as the 'first sons' of '*Aai Assam*' (Mother Assam). Please see, Sri Dwarik, "Bodo Jatiyo Sangeet", in Basumatary, Brahma, and Mushahary, eds., *Bibar*, 73–74.

[184] Jadunath Khakhlary, "Rangiya Adhibeshanot Keiacharman" in Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar*, 317.

[185] Jadunath Khakhlary, *Kacharir Katha*, 21–22. This rightful place according to him was also denied because Kacharis had failed to educate themselves. He asserted that even if one accepted the

Conclusion

This chapter has placed Boros at the center of the process of the making of their modern selves in the first half of the twentieth century. It tried to demonstrate their agency in this process. Through a reading of the writings of the early Boro intellectuals the chapter attempted to reconstruct the thought processes of these individuals. They had become increasingly aware of the racialised hierarchy that was being brought into place in the province and resisted attempts to assign them a lower place. And hence Boro mobilisations and attempts at socio-religious reforms were sought to be placed within the larger context of the socio-political situation prevailing in the province. While in these processes some converted to new religions, there were also attempts to accord respectability and restructure the existing traditional religious practices. While the attempts of the Boros at mobilising and organising seemed to be often divergent the chapter sought to tie them all together by seeing them through the lens of a yearning for *unnati* and regeneration of the community.

teachings of the Paramhansa (Sib Narayan, propagator of Brahma Dharma) and changed one's surname to 'Brahma', or called themselves 'Burman' or 'Koch', one could not get rid of the *jatiyo kalank* (national shame) and get equal status. Elsewhere, Jadunath Khakhlary also made appeals not to be classified and equated with *paharis* (hill people). He claimed that Boros were *different* from the hill tribes and that the Boros shared much more similar cultural practices with the Assamese. Please see Jadunath Khakhlary, 'Boro Mahasanmilanir Xobhapotir Obhibhason' in in Basumatary, Brahma, Mushahary eds., *Bibar*, 265–266.

Conclusion

This thesis has tried to examine the making of Boro identity, from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, in the light of the knowledge that came to be produced on Boros by colonial knowledge production systems during the course of nineteenth century, and the consequent engagement with that knowledge by the Boros as they strove for *progress* — with all its varied meanings — respectability, and acceptance in the existing societal structure. As the colonial state classified and fixed Boros into compartmentalised categories, the thesis tried to show how Boros reworked colonial knowledge towards, and remained active agents in, the making of their own history. Though the process of knowledge making on the Boros started when the EIC was making forays in to the region in the early nineteenth century, it was in the twentieth century that its impact came to be more strongly felt. The early decades of twentieth century Assam was a period characterised by a socio-political flux. Borrowing from colonial knowledge, the local people in Assam were attempting to re-imagine Assam within the history and geography of the larger Aryan-Hindu heritage, leading to a racialised hierarchy being popularised in the province. Community and caste mobilisations were also rampant with the underlying theme being the quest for *unnati*. Boros had become aware of such racialised hierarchy and the low status that such a hierarchy accorded them — as 'tribals'. Through the rhetoric of *unnati*, they set out to challenge dominant narratives and worked towards producing alternative narratives. The thesis tries to illustrate that if colonial knowledge was overarching and hegemonic, it also came to be inverted and twisted by their very subjects. And this is what the Boros precisely did.

The thesis began in the early nineteenth century. It tried to demonstrate that the attempts of the British to classify Boro subjects was fraught with contradictions and ambiguity — because of the manner in which the boundaries of communities/groups started, ended, and

overlapped. Through an engagement with the colonial sources, it described in detail how the category of a 'great Bodo race' came to be conjured up gradually — a race that was able to place within it a group of heterogeneous communities/tribes/castes as cognates, of which the Boros themselves were supposed to be a part of. While one could not fully gloss over the internal contradictions within this race, it gradually became the dominant framework during the colonial period — and continues to be so, even in the present, with all its contradictions.

Meanwhile, Boros had embarked on a journey, taking many different *roads*, to fulfil their aspiration for progress and regeneration. The varied paths taken by Boros was a product of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of practices that were prevalent among the community itself. They converted to different religions, introduced socio-religious reforms, reclaimed histories, all often seemingly contradictory, but as the thesis has argued and demonstrated, tied together by an intense desire for *unnati* — educational, political, social, cultural.

Further on, the thesis tried to place the conversion to Christianity by certain sections of the Boros in the context of the yearning for progress. It showed that even though there were sporadic missionary encounters since the nineteenth century, Boros never found it attractive enough. It was only in the changed socio-political milieu of the early decades of the twentieth century that Christianity became an attractive option for some sections of the Boros. Christianity became one of the many experiments that Boros undertook. Trying to place the encounter with Christianity in this context, the thesis has argued and demonstrated that the conversions were highly agential — in fact an active seeking out — with converts bringing many different meanings and *desires* to the table in their interactions with different missions and their missionaries. In doing so, it places itself a little differently from, the sometimes often cited argument of the overwhelming hegemony of Christianity over converts. It was also important for the thesis to delve a little on the Duars as these areas were also the places, especially in Darrang where Christianity spread rapidly.

Towards the end, the thesis has described in detail the manner in which Boros in different parts of Assam came to be actively involved in socio-religious reform, explicitly articulating a yearning for *unnati*. As mentioned, such attempts were varied. Brahma Dharma and the conversion to it, was one such important phenomenon that clearly demonstrated the goals of the Boros — a search for a dignified place within the social hierarchy. While initially drawing adherents from a class of Boros who were better off, it soon became an attractive option for the masses. It was a religion which gave Boros access to rituals usually reserved for upper castes, but at the same time a way out to assert a distinct Boro identity. While being extremely important, the thesis then has shown that Brahma Dharma was not the only one of such attempts. It describes and shows that running parallel to it were also the attempts of the HBS. Much like Brahma Dharma, HBS members too, introduced and codified laws that were more in line with the practices of higher castes. This, the thesis has argued, was an attempt at 'purifying' the community. An important aspect that it further delved on was the appropriations and reclaiming of histories of a 'glorious' past, which was achieved by borrowing the concept of the great Bodo race. It gave Boros a way to claim higher status and thus challenge their ascribed lowly position.

The post-independence period has been a period of linguistic and ethnic assertions for the Boros. A few years after independence the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) was formed in 1952. As an apex literary body it has been at the forefront of linguistic assertions. The period of 1960s was one that was characterised by the demand for a separate state of *Udayachal* by Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA), imagined as a homeland for the plains tribals — such as Boros, Misings — living on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. In the 1970s, there was a movement spearheaded by the BSS demanding the use of Roman Script for writing Boro. The Assam government was insistent on Boros using the Assamese script to write Boro. Later, a

settlement was reached where Devanagiri was opted. The period of 1980s saw turbulent times with the movement of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) demanding a separate state of Bodoland. The late eighties also saw the formation of an armed group Boro Security Force (BrSF), which later transformed itself into the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), demanding a sovereign homeland for the Boros. In the 1990s, the NDFB carried out a protracted insurgency against the Indian state.

The Government of India (GOI) has, due to the demand of various organisations, signed a series of memorandums with different Boro groups. In 1993, Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was formed, as a result of an accord between the GOI and ABSU. In 2003, another accord was signed between the Boroland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) and GOI. It resulted in the formation of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) — now Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) — a semi-autonomous region under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution granting it more powers than the previous BAC. The area it covers, runs along the foothills of Bhutan. The latest accord was signed between the various factions of NDFB and GOI in 2020. The BTR is generally seen as a culmination of the ethnic assertions of the Boros. It was envisioned as a means to 'fulfill economic, educational and linguistic aspiration and [for] the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos'.[1]

Throughout this period — post-independence — Boros have managed to carve out a distinct ethnic and linguistic identity within Assam. It has become more visible gradually. The language and certain ethnic-cultural markers, such as dances and sartorial practices, have been 'standardised'. And they serve as the primary foundation upon which a distinction is maintained, vis-à-vis others. But it remains a heterogeneous community in so far as religious

[1] "Bodoland Territorial Council: Constitution Of BTC & Its Objectives", *Government Of Assam*, https://wptbc.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/bodoland-territorial-council . Accessed on 3/03/2022.

practices are concerned. There have been attempts by various Bathou organisations to further transform the traditional religious practices into an organised religion, Bathouism. Often this results in Bathouism being seen as the repository of the 'authentic' markers of being Boro. Many have 'reconverted' back to Bathouism from other religions such as Vaishnavism, and in the process, consciously severing connection with an Assamese identity. There are also instances of Brahma Dharma adherents converting to Bathouism. From the concerns — among followers of other religions — arising out of the narratives of Bathouism being the repository of authenticity, if one looks close enough, *subtle* manoeuvres and realigning from followers of other religions can be seen. For instance, there are calls from certain Boro churches to 'revive' and 'celebrate', traditional festivals within a 'Christian framework', which were discarded in the process of conversion to Christianity; as they were also often associated with a 'heathen past'. There are now debates within the Boro Baptist Convention (BBC) regarding the celebration of festivals such as *Bwisagu* — which is seen as an integral part of Boro 'culture'— with some Churches banning it and others celebrating it. And as mentioned in the introductory chapter, the Hindu right has also made inroads into the socio-cultural and political life of the Boros, further complicating the picture. Things get even more complex if one considers the politics of ethnicity in BTR, as it is a *multi-ethnic* region. No one ethnic group forms an absolute majority. Boros comprise 30% – 33% of the entire population. As such, BTR has witnessed a politics of competing ethnicities. Many among Boros, realise that as an ethnic group they cannot afford to be politically fragmented on the basis of religion. Many attempts have been made in the past to bring together people from different religions under one umbrella to formulate common 'customary laws', and to bring about more solidarity among Boros.

Though this thesis has been mainly concerned with the colonial period — and it is not its primary job to be prescriptive, especially with regards to the future — nevertheless it is important to try and at least imagine a possible future. Undoubtedly the formation of the semi-

autonomous region has brought in certain perceptible changes in the lives of some *sections* of both Boros and others. But it needs to understood that the flow of capital and 'contract economy' have also resulted in massive inequalities. What often remains hidden in the rhetoric of identity politics is the fact that extreme poverty and landlessness remain a perennial problem. And the districts comprising BTR are some of the worst performing districts as per the various development indicators. Boros and other tribals groups, and other communities such as the Muslims and Adivasis (ex-Tea Garden Tribes) still remain some of the most exploited, landless, and poverty stricken people. As such, it remains important for Boros to understand the particular situation that they find themselves in at the present, as much as it is for *others.*

If *unnati* was the rallying cry for Boros to remake a distinct new modern self, in the early twentieth century, there is a need in the present to rethink and reorient its meaning, not just for Boros but for everyone else. Identity need not always be a zero sum game of competing ethnicities, not just in the context of BTR but in entire Assam. And importantly, this ought to be also understood, perhaps more so than others, by the dominant caste Assamese. With its unique experience of colonialism — and its effects in the present — the region cannot but look for alternative forms of doing politics rather than the one prevalent now, which is increasingly being characterised by *exclusions* based on religion, language, and ethnicity.

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