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Influence of Christianity to the Bodos Society

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The first missionaries to come to contact with the Bodos of Assam were the Baptist Missionaries of America. In 1943, they established a centre at Gauhati. In 1946 they started a boarding school and numbers of Bodo students were admitted to the school. For the first time in the history of Bodos a village name Jhargaon from North Kamrup was baptized in 1949 at Gauhati.

In the beginning the American Baptist mission mainly concentrated on the Garos but after sometimes they have given much important to work with the Bodos people. American Baptists after long years entrusted the work among the Bodos society in 1965 and they in turn handed over to the local management and since then the Bodo Baptist Mission in Goalpara came to be known as the Goalpara Baptist Church Union. But they retained Kokrajhar as the main centre of Church administration.

The Church of England which is also known as the Anglican Church started its works with the Bodos in 1860 in the district of Darrang and many Bodos in and around Tezpur accepted the faith. Rev. Sidney Endle was deputed by the society for the propagation of the Gospel and arrived at Tezpur in the year 1864. By this time a number of Bodos of Darrang around Tezpur had already accepted the Gospel. Rev. Endle succeeded in establishing a full fledged Church at Benhbari near Harisinga. He made extensive studies on the Bodo language and culture. He translated a part of the New Testament into Bodo and prepared a handbook on the Bodo language. He wrote several papers on the Bodo folk-lore. His monograph "The Kacharies" edited by L. B. Anderson, the then Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, on behalf of Government of Assam and published first in 1911 in London is the first book of its kind on the Bodos.

The Santal Mission with its headquarter at Dhumka(Bihar) had established a colony in Goalpara district mainly to evangelize the Santal.They came into contact with the Bodos and invited them to the Church. As a result large number of Bodos came to the Church as early as 1887. To take the foreign Missionaries who did the pioneering work,a number of local leaders were chosen and appointed pastors paving the way for a truly local Church. Slowly and steadily the numbers of Bodos community villages in the Northern bank of embraced Christianity. Numbers of centers were also established at Gaurang in Kokrajhar, in Bongaigaon and Parkijuly in Kamrup.

The Scotish Presbyterian Church which started its work among the Nepalis of Darzeeling extended its service to the Bodos of Jalpaiguri district and initiated a number of them to the faith. As times passed by a large numbers Bodos villages were also embraced into the Christianity.

It was only in the year of 1893 that the Catholic Missionaries began to work of spreading their faith. In the very beginning they were concentrated in hill tribes. The plain of Assam and specially the Bodos were not given due attention because of shortest of men power. It was only in the year of 1928 that Father Piaseski arrived in Udalguri at the invitation of a Bodo and baptized him along with a few others. Two missionaries Fr. Alessi and Fr. Ravalico started their work among the Bodos in Darrang district from 1933. They had extensive tours to the Bodos villages to take stock of the possibilities of contacting more and more communities. During their visit Beha basti(Kamrup) and few villages of Kumarikatta area embraced with the Catholic Church.

For the first time because of Fr. Marengo Catholic Church was established various villages in Kokrajhar at Nangdorbari, Kagrabari, Dangtol, Ranisundri, Patgaon, Jolaigaon, Dandupur etc. and embraced with Catholic Church. In Kamrup district also number of Bodo villages like Kalajhar and Bogriguri etc. embraced with the Church. The heart and soul of the movement was Fr. Marengo, the young rector of Gauhati who also learned very well Bodo language. He was a man with extra ordinary zeal and prepared the first prayer book and the catechism book in Bodos. Though he was toured only two years, his zeal and love endeared him to the Bodos and his memory is cherished even today as the father of the Bodo Chatholic community of Goalpara.

In 1936, Barpeta was separated from Gauhati and a new centre was established. As a result more and more Bodo villages were embraced with the Catholic Church. To prepare future leaders and catechists a boarding school was opened at barpeta. A new Mission was

opened at Bengtal in 1966. In the year 1972 Soraibil Mission was opened followed by Gossaigaon, Dotma, Basbari, Bongaigaon and Ballamguri to care the Bodos who had become Catholics. In the year of 1951 the Parish of Tongla was opened and in 1966 a new mission was started at Udalguri. At present we have seven centers namely, Mongoldai, Ambagaon, Rowta, Dimakuchi, Udalguri, Tangla and Majbat. With the opening of these new centers, the Catholic Church has made tremendous progress. With a network of projects undertaken for the socio-economic, cultural, educational and spiritual growth and development of the people of this area, the Church has become a source of grace for the people not only the Bodos but also people of every caste and community.

Impact of Christianity:

Right from the beginning, Christianity has been a catalyst in drawing peoples and nations to truth, Love and Justice. Ever since the Gospel came to be preached to the Bodos, it has been a transforming power bringing about growth and progress to the Bodos in various ways. The traditional religion, Bathou could not ensure the inevitable process of growth and development which every tribe and nation has to go through for its very survival and existence. Thus, many came to look upon Christianity as a religion that will satisfy their inner yearnings. The traditional religion and philosophy of the Bodos, Bathou could not fulfill the longings of the Bodos. Many had taken refuge in the Aryan philosophy and religion. Some giving up tribal identity even embraced Hinduism. This did not satisfy most of the Bodo community. The Brahma sect was an attempt to keep their tribal identity and yet absorb the Hindu philosophy. This too did not quench the desire of the Bodos for ever greater heights. It led some among them to look for a newer world view and philosophy of life and religion. Christianity was just the religion that they were looking for. Christianity offered the Bodos an opportunity appeal and solidarity without losing their tribal solidarity. Christianity offered them a chance to be a part of a global family even as Christianity cemented their allegiance to the great Indian nation and other tribal of north east India.

The advent of Christianity with its universal appeal and transforming power to enrich and elevate every culture and language, was an occasion for the Bodos with an open mind to give a new lease of life to their national, cultural invasion of Hinduism. The Bodos had lost their political power long ago and were on the verge of losing their identity. Many had abandoned their traditional dress and costumes which speak volumes about their rich heritage. The language spoken by them for centuries was neglected and a good number of Bodos had adopted Assamese as their mother tongue. A section of Bodos changed their

titles and adopted non-Bodo titles to disguise their identity as tribal. Had it not been for the advent of Christianity, this trend would have continued to the detriment of Bodo culture. The history of the Bodos would have been something different but for the Church that imparted education and made them realise their own worth. It can be rightly said that Christianity brought new life and vitality to the Bodo people. The education that the missionaries imparted had a lot to do with the formation of a national consciousness which helped them to understand their genius and ethos.

Education and Health:

The Christian missionaries established number of educational institutions and health care centers. Seeing the high standard of these educational institutions and the excellent results many educated non-Christian Bodos made critical evaluation and arrived at the truth of Christianity. Dedication and selfless service of these missionaries for the uplift of the Bodos opened the mind of several Bodo intellectuals.

Development:

Development has always been part of the Christian mission. An awareness of human dignity and love of neighbors as a commandment have driven Christian missionaries to work for the upliftment of the people of Northeast India as it has done everywhere. The Churches have produced thousands of graduates, leaders, teachers and others Church has been the only agent of change and development.

The Church has always encouraged enculturation and adaptation of cultural values as assign of its deep appreciation and acceptance of everything that is genuine in every culture. In case of the Bodos, the Church, true to its nature has always played a supportive role in its growth and development. The number of educational institutions established in the far-flung villages, the health centers to cater to the sick and suffering, the vocational training centers to train and equip the young to face the future with self confidence, the socio-economic and developmental programmes undertaken to improve the lot of the poor people are proofs of the genuine concern of the Church for the people of this vast and backward region.

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