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Spread Of Christianity Among The Bodos Of Borshijhora Village: A Case Study

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Abstract: *The Spread of Christianity among the Bodos brought about different socio-cultural changes among them. The spread of Christianity among the Bodos of Borshijhora village began in about 1980 under Rev Fr. Joseph Zubizaretta and Fr. Edward D' Souza. The spread of the religion in the village, in due course of time, shaped the socio-cultural life of the villagers. This study aims to highlight the spread of Christianity in Borshijhora village, causes and impact of conversion to the faith.*

Key Words: *Christianity, Borshijhora, causes, impact, Social life.*

I. Introduction

The Bodos are group of people speaking Tibeto-Burman language in the north-eastern states of India concentrated mainly in the state of Assam and countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. They are the largest tribal group in Assam and are concentrated in the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. A great number of Bodos are also present in other districts of Assam like Bongaigoan, Barpeta, Sonitpur, Nagaon, etc. Besides these districts of Assam, they are also found in the other Indian states like Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, etc. They belong to the greater Kachari clan which also includes Chutia, Kachari, Rabha, Garo, Dimasa, Mech, Koch, Moran, etc. The 1971 census report records that the Bodos were the 8th largest ST group in India with a total population of about 6, 10,459 in Assam. According to 1991 census report, total population of Bodo speakers counts 5.3 percent of the total population of the state of Assam. In 2001 the Bodo speakers numbered about 13,52,771 against the 33,08,570 total ST population of Assam.

Religion has played a great role in shaping the socio-economic and cultural life of the Bodo people. They follow mainly three religions namely-Hinduism, Bathouism and Christianity. Traditionally, the Bodos practiced the worship of *Bwrai Bathou* or *Obonglaoree*. The *Sijou* tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) is taken as the symbol of Bathou and worshipped. Besides *Bwrai Bathou*, the Bodos also worshipped other deities such as goddess *Mainao* (Consort of *Bwrai Bathou*), *Mero Raja*, *Jal Kuber*, *Thal Kuber*, *Kuber Bwrai (Musculine)*, *Kuber Buri (Feminine)*, etc.

With the spread of Aryan culture in Assam large number of Bodos took up Hinduism. They began the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses as in other parts of India. Worship of gods like *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *Karthikeya*, *Viswakarma*, *Ganesha* and goddesses like *Kali*, *Durga*, *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati*, *Manasha*, *Ganga*, etc. became prevalent among the Bodos. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, a Bodo socio-religious reformer played a significant role in spreading Hindu culture among the Bodos

With the advent of the colonial rule in Assam after 1826, Christian missionary activities became active in the land. The Bodos came into contact with the Christian Missionaries, especially the American Baptist Mission, in the 19th century. Christianity thus, emerged as a result of colonial rule and these missionary activities. Various denominations of Christianity are prevalent among the Bodos. Some of them are- The American Baptist Church (First missionary to make inroad among the Bodos), The Anglican Church, The Presbyterian Church of Scotland, The Lutheran Church, The Roman Catholic Church, etc. About 10 percent Bodos at present follow Christianity and is predominantly the Baptist sect.

Borshijhora is a village under Dotma developmental block on the western part of Kokrajhar district of Assam. The major denomination of Christianity followed in this village is the Roman Catholic Church. Christianity came in the village in the year 1980. *The process of spread of Christianity, causes and impact of conversion to the religion in the village is studied as below.*

II. Objectives of the study

The study is undertaken with the following objectives-

- i. To highlight the spread of Christianity in Borshijhora.
- ii. To study the causes of conversion of the villagers to the faith.
- iii. To study the impact of conversion of the people in the village.

III. Methodology

Historical method of enquiry, based on both primary and secondary sources, has been used for the purpose of this study. During the study three main methods were used. These include-Questionnaire, personal interviews and source data collection. A set of questions were framed and distributed among individuals (Christian Bodos) for acquiring informations regarding the spread of Christianity in their village. Interviews were also held with the villagers (of age between 25-80 years) regarding the subject studied. Source data were also collected from church records, annual sabha publications, statues, buildings, libraries, souvenirs, photographs, books, journals, articles, internet sources, etc.

IV. Discussion

Borshijhora is a village on the western part of Kokrajhar district located at Dotma developmental block area. It is bounded by other villages on all four sides. On the east of the village lies the Dotma bazaar, Part 1 Borshijhora on the north (another village with the same name), Baghmara village on the west and Nawarbita village on the south. The village has only Bodo population. The denomination of Christianity followed in Borshijhora village is Roman Catholic.

Christianity first came in Borshijhora in the year 1980. Rameswar Basumatary of Borshijhora was the first Christian convert of the village. In November 1980, Rameswar met Rev. Fr. Joseph Zubizaretta (a Spanish father of the church) and Rev. Fr. Edward D'Suozza of Goa (commonly known as Fr. Eddy) at Bengtol Mission (Chirang) with the help of Sri Surju Borgoyari, who was the *Prosarok*(preacher) of the Bengtol Mission. Surju happens to be the cousin of Rameswar Basumatary who lived at Nangdorbari village of Bijni area (Chirang district). Both Fr. Joseph and Fr. Eddy were priests of the Bengtol Mission. Rameswar was concerned regarding the education of his children. He wanted to provide quality education to them which he saw only in the mission school. Therefore, Rameswar began associating with the two priests who promised to provide good education to his children. Four daughters of Rameswar named- Saroti, Bharoti, Arothi, and Biro were admitted to the convent of the Bengtol Mission for education. Rameswar gradually became attracted to Christianity. In November 1980, he and his wife Sushila Basumatary decided to convert to Christianity. Rameswar and his family members including his cousins, Nicharan Basumatary, Panchanan Basumatary and nephew Bhibishan Basumatary were thus baptized together on 24 November 1980 by Fr. Eddy at Rameswar's house in the presence of Fr. Joseph Zubizaretta. After them other conversions followed including those of Sushil Basumatary, Nityalal Basumatary, Bhim Basumatary, Kusum Basumatary, Tasen Basumatary, Biren Basumatary, Mahansing Basumatary, Kaparam Basumatary, Khagen Basumatary (Kharde), Nagendra Basumatary, Dhananjay Basumatary, Mahesh Ramchiary, Sandal Basumatary, and Rwtiya Basumatary. People from nearby villages also accepted Christianity following Rameswar and others. These include Karthik Basumatary, Anup Basumatary, Nakarsing Basumatary, Binan Basumatary, Panin and their families. Between 1st December 1980 to 31st March 1986, many villages witnessed spread of the faith. Churches were built in villages like Goramari, Puthimari, Kunguri, Patgoan, Athiabari, Banglajhora, Banglabari, Magurmari, Pakriguri, Singimari, Taigirguri, Ramfalbil, Gosainichina, Onthaibari, Mukuldang, Gambaribil, Batarmari, Kokrajhar- Bashbari, Daloabari etc.

With the increase in number of Christian members in Borshijhora, the need was felt to have a new Catholic Mission at Dotma. Therefore, Ramewsar and Mr. Chabiram Muchahary of Ghoramari Mondoli (missionary unit) applied for a new Catholic mission in 1983. The petition was granted and a new Don Bosco Catholic Mission for Dotma was announced by Rev. Fr. Provincial of Tezpur diocese in 1986 at Borshijhora. Rev. Fr. Eddy was appointed as the first priest of the Dotma Mission. The mission was built by the initiatives of Fr. Eddy at the land of Sushil Basumatary and Nityalal Basumatary who sold their land at very low price.

On 18 April 1986 Fr. Eddy arrived at Borshijhora with Miss Biro Basumatary (Rameswar's daughter) and Miss Elizabeth Basumatary and resided at the house of Rameswar for more than one year from where he had started all kinds of missionary works in the area. On 19 April 1986, the Mission at Borshijhora was inaugurated under the priestship of Fr. Joseph, the parish priest of Bengtol Mission. The Dotma Mission was started with a small school. Initially there were only two mistresses in the school. These were Miss Elizabeth and Miss Biro who came along with Fr. Eddy. At present, the Dotma mission at Borshijhora provides quality education in English medium.

Cardinal Goyary and Mahansing Basumatary, both of Borshijhora Mondoli supported Fr. Eddy in his mission work from the very beginning. At present the Church of Boshijhora holds about 35 Mondolis under its jurisdiction which includes the villages such as Kamarpara, Karigoan, Saralpara, Bishmuri, Sapkata, Ghoramari, etc.

The Dotma Mission was started under the great initiatives of the people of Borshijhora and Fr. Eddy in special. The missionary work received great support from the Catholics of western countries. Persons who contributed in building the school and the Church includes- Rev. Msgr. H. Michel, Rev. Msgr. T. Menampampil, Rev. K. Oerder SDB, Rev. Joseph Zubizaretta SDB, Frank Nardoni, Patrick De Souza, Fr. Eddy and family etc.

Reasons for conversion to Christianity

Prior to 1980s all the villagers of Borshijhora followed Hinduism or traditional Bathouism faith. Interviews with the people of the village revealed various reasons for the conversions. The reasons for conversion to the Roman Catholic faith may be noted as-

i. Growing complexity in the traditional Bodo religion: Traditionally, the Bodos followed Bathouism, while many followed Hinduism. The existing religion became very complex and the worship became expensive. There emerged various superstitious beliefs among the people. Witchcraft and witch-hunting were also seen in the Bodo villages. Interviews with the people of Borshijhora revealed that the villagers began to dislike the practice of the traditional religion Bathouism and Hinduism. So, they became attracted to the Christian faith.

ii. Simplicity of the Christian religion: The Christian religion seemed much simpler to practice to the people of Borshijhora than the existing religions. The religion does not have too many prayer ceremonies as in Hinduism or Bathouism. The worship is also inexpensive. So, the people of Borshijhora shifted towards the Christian faith.

iii. Better living style: The economic condition of the people of Borshijhora was not sound. Despite this many people were involved in intoxications and other vices. Many people consumed the traditional wine '*jou*' and '*abgari*'. They disregarded their family concern. As a result, various problems arose in the family regarding finance, food, health, children's education, etc. With

the acceptance of Christianity faith, the lifestyle of the people improved. They gave up their bad habits on religious grounds. Seeing the improvements in the lifestyle of the early converts many other conversions followed.

iv. Search for better education opportunities: The Christian Missionaries, in order to spread their faith, started missionary activities by establishing schools at various places that could provide free and quality education to the people. The Dotma Mission was also set up with the same purpose. The people of Borshijhora village, being concerned about their children's education looked towards the missionary school that promised quality education. In the process of acquiring education for their children they became attracted towards Christianity. Thus, many conversions followed. An example is the case of Rameswar Basumatary, who converted to the Christian faith in the process of acquiring education for his daughters.

Impact of Christianity in Borshijhora village

The acceptance of Christianity among the people of Borshijhora brought about remarkable change to their lifestyle. As opined by the persons interviewed, prior to the acceptance of Christianity in the village, people were involved in many vices like consumption of alcohol and gambling. Both men and women consumed alcohol. There were regular fights between husbands and wives and between kins and neighbors. There were no concerns for children's education and no sense of sanitation. With the acceptance of the faith many changes were seen in the village. Most of the people gave up the consumption of alcohol and other vices. They began to invest their time and energy for the well-being of their families. They also began to pay attention to their children's education.

With the coming of Christianity in Borshijhora the education of the children of the village in particular and nearby areas in general improved a lot. The Dotma Mission at Borshijhora has a boarding school and a convent in it. The mission provides free and quality education to the children of Christian converts. The people of Borshijhora and also of nearby areas could now access to quality education for their children.

The impact of Christianity in the village of Borshijhora was also seen in the marriage system. The traditional system of 'Hatasuni Marriage' or the Hindu system of marriage 'Yagya-Ahuti' were no longer followed by the people of the village. The marriages were now conducted in the Church (of Dotma Mission) in the presence of high priest.

However, the Christian converts of Borshijhora gave up the traditional and cultural festivals of the Bodos like *Bwisagu*, *Nangal Jhankra* (last day of cultivation), *Domasi*, etc. and celebrated only their religious festivals. However, no change was seen in their dressing style. They still wear on the cultural *Dokhona*, *Gamsa* and *Aronai*.

Conclusion

The Study made in the village of Borshijhora revealed various informations regarding the spread of Christianity in the village. The study gives an insight to the process of spread of the faith, the causes of conversion and its impact on the village. Certain observations can be made from the study. The converts adopted the Christian faith as they were no longer satisfied with the system of traditional beliefs and practices. Changes were seen in their marriage system. Improvements were seen in the family and social life. Education of the children improved. The villagers however, gave up certain cultural traditions which were not religious in nature, like the *Bwisagu*. No changes were however seen their food habits and their dressing style.

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Appendix-I

Informants

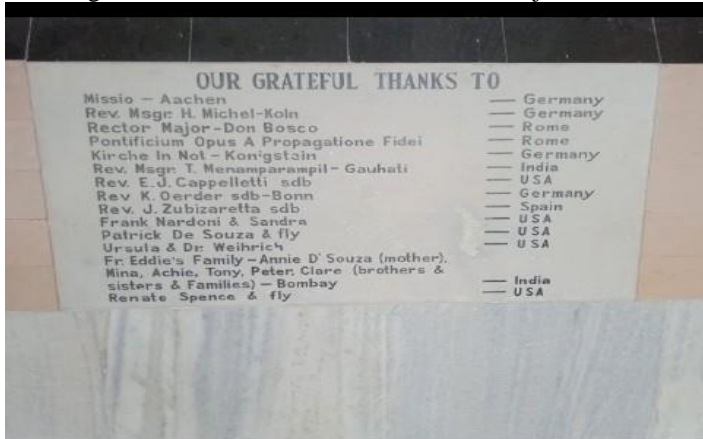
1. Dilip Basumatary (male), Borshijhora village, Dotma, Age-54 years
2. Minu Basumatary (female), Borshijhora, Age-50 years.
3. Albert Basumatary (male), Borshijhora, Age-26 years.
4. Ramesh Basumatary (male), Goybari village, Dotma, Kokrajhar, Age-55 years.
5. David Basumatary (male), Goybari village, Age-25 years
6. Nileswar Basumatary (male), Kamarpara village, Kokrajhar, Assam, Age-60 Years.
7. Tanuja Basumatary (female), Goybari village, Age-55 years.
8. Dhiraj Basumatary (male), Kamarpara village, Age- 48 years.

Appendix II
Related Photos

1. Dotma mission Catholic Church



2. Foreign contributors of Dotma Mission, Borshijhora, Stone slab



3. Christian Marriage, Catholic

