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## HOLINESS IN BODO SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES: *UNEARTHING SPIRITUALITY IN PHYSICALITY*

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### ABSTRACT

**G**od's demand for holiness is made clear in each individual's life and people respond to this demand through the socio-religious beliefs and practices specified in their society. The conception of human holiness which rests upon righteousness and truth and the possession of a contrite and humble spirit are in the heart of the Bodos. God, being Himself ethically holy, esteems justice, mercy and lowly piety more highly than sacrifice. For the Bodos, holiness has to be shown in love of their neighbor and in their everyday practices of socio-religious life. In this paper I have tried to unearth the intrinsic elements of holiness that are deeply engraved in the life of the Bodos. And in this endeavor, I have made substantial reference to the understanding of holiness found in the Bible in order to make the Bodo concept of holiness a more theologically oriented in parallel with an institutionalized religion. In order to achieve the goal of this paper information has been gathered from the reliable secondary data.

**KEYWORDS:** Bodos, Holiness, Socio-religious ceremonies, beliefs, festivals, society, family, gods, goddesses, Christianity.

### INTRODUCTION :

In all religious traditions, we notice that believers consider certain places, seasons, days, symbols, practices and persons sacred. They foster the awareness that God is present in a special way in some chosen places. Tribal traditions look on certain mountains, rivers, springs, lakes, groves, animals, birds, plants, flowers, and places with a sense of special reverence (Menampampil, 2010). For the Bodos too, nature itself is a symbol of God's presence. Everything around them is holy. Time and seasons are marked by religious observances. Holy places are held with great reverence. Religious places and religious objects are respected. The special moment in one's life is marked by rituals and strict norms are considered important on occasions of worship. Certain practices are considered holy and obligatory and certain taboos are considered binding in specific situations. Therefore, the sense of holiness about the life and the activities; revolving around the earthly existence is very much visible in the Bodo tribe.

### A GLANCE OF THE BODO TRIBE

The Bodos belong to the Mongoloid people who are described as the inhabitants of a country north of the Himalayas and west of China. This is known as Bod (homeland). The inhabitants of Bod country are known as *Bodo-Ficha*, *Bodocha* or *Bodosa* (Bodo means land and *Ficha* means children), children of the *Bod* country. In the course of time they come to be known as Bodo (Brahma, 1991).

Linguistically the Bodos include a large group of people who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman

languages of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma. The term Bodo is generic name of the race which comprises of *Boro* or *Boro-Kochari*, *Dimasas* or *Dimasa-Kochari*, *Koch*, *Rabhas*, *Lalungs*, *Tiparas*, *Sonowals*, *Hajongs*, *Mishings*, *Deouris* or *Chutias*. *Bodo* means all the Tibeto-Burman (Bodo) speaking group of Sino-Tibeto origin (Moshahary, 1997). *Boro* tribe or *Boro-Kochari* is one of the groups belonging to Bodo race (Tibeto-Burman family). They are particularly found in the districts of Kamrup, Sontipur, Mongoldoi, Barpeta, Khokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri and Jalpaiguri of West-Bengal. In the course of time all of them popularly came to be known as Bodos (Brahma, 1991). The total population of Bodos according to 2001 census was 9,30,404 (Brahma S., 2006).

### The Religion of the Bodos (*Bathou*) and its Main Teachings

The traditional religion of the Bodos is known as *Bathou Dhorom*. The traditional believers express their gratitude and worship to God through the practice of *Bathou Dhorom*, which incorporates rites, rituals, social norms, ethical life and religious life of the Bodos (Brahma S., 2006). The foreign scholars described the Bodo traditional religion as animistic along with other tribes, who have beliefs in ghosts and spirits (Brahma K., The *Bathou* Religion, 1997). It is not true because Bodo traditional belief speaks of one God whom they identify as *Bathou* or *Bathow Borai*. The Bodos worship *Bathou* as the Supreme God. However minor deities are also propitiated through sacrifices. They believe that gods and goddesses are manifestations of Supreme God-*Bathou*. Bodo belief system transcends their tribal stage and at the same time reveals wider outlook of the content of religious consciousness (Devi, 1998).

The term *Bathou* has a symbolical meaning. 'Ba' means five and 'thou' means deep. Therefore *Bathou* means five deep spiritual entities. It also means five principles of creation which must be followed by every devout member of the race (Brahma K., The *Bathou* Religion, 1997) and the '*Boro Borai*' (the boro elders) have five moral preachings (Brahma K., A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992).

Holiness According to the Bodo tribe

The Bodo term for holiness is *Gwthar*; which means morally and spiritually perfect, pure in heart, uncontaminated (Brahma K., 2008). It is shown concretely in faithful performance of their daily activities as they ought to be. Holiness is in following the rules and norms set by the community (Narzari, 2006). It revolves around the very existence and life activity of the people. Bodos are aware of their role in the vast universe. Therefore their idea of holiness is interwoven with their daily life and with that of their surroundings (Brahma K., 2008).

The main teachings of Bodo faith known as five deep spiritual entities can be summed up into two, that is; i) Love of God and; ii) Love of man. They can be called the two pillars of Bodo faith because all their religious norms and preachings base themselves on these two pillars. For a Bodo holiness is in relation to God and man. It implies performing his daily activities in the manner desired by God and also in loving his fellow being as himself. They are also known as the five-fold preachings, namely: i) Meditative prayer to God. ii) Conversing religious and spiritual matters. iii) Making charitable gifts to the poor. iv) Loving the fellow-beings. v) Doing things unitedly (Brahma K., A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992). The first two preachings are in relation to God and the other three are in relation to their neighbour.

The theme of love is similar to Jesus' command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," which is repeated in the New Testament in Mat 19:19; 22:39; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; and Jas 2:8. It also illustrates the central role of this command for the people of God in any era (Rooker, 2000).

### SPIRITUAL REALIZATION

The Bodos believe in the idea of soul '*Jiwma*'. The concept of self-realization is very evident in *Bathou* religion. Holiness lies in the realization of one's potentials and human life finds meaning in it. Therefore man has to aim for the supreme realization which is considered to be the realization of the Supreme Soul (God) (*Sijau*) (Brahma K., A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992). All their activities should lead to the fullest realization of the self, by becoming one with the Supreme Being; that is, God. A man has to develop his latent potentialities and realize his earthly existence to its fullest sense. This can be manifested in the form of material prosperity. For the Bodos the realization of wealth (*Mainao*) (Brahma K., A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992) is the symbol of success and blessing in their life. Holiness therefore is not in running away from the world but in realizing the daily activities

and responsibilities. The Bodos believe that the world is good and consider the realization of earth, water, air, light and ether as something holy (Brahma K. , A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992). Therefore body is not something unclean or bad but holy. This shows the close relationship that exists between man and nature. Through the worship and ritualistic celebrations (Endle, 2007) Bodos strive to realize the highest Supreme Being, God.

The human person created in the image of God, is a being with body and soul. The church teaches that every spiritual soul is created by God and its ultimate aim is to be in communion with God (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2012). They also believe in the union of the human soul (*Jiwma*) with the Supreme Being (*Sijou*) (Brahma K. , A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992). In the beginning Catholic Christians considered body as something evil. But Vatican II says that man through his very bodily condition sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are brought to their highest perfection. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life (II, 2004). The Bodo belief system is positive about the body because holiness means to live in this world and use it for the self-realization of, God, wealth, and thus develop one's potentialities. It is similar to the parable of talents (Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:11-27).

### 1. Holiness in Worship and Belief System

The Bodo life system is centered on agricultural activities, due to which they are basically farmers and they worship nature. They have a strong moral sense of duty. They consider that the prime duty is to the community rather than to the self. The Bodos have a worldview which determines the principles by which they live happily and peacefully (Devi, Ethics of the Bodos of Assam, 1997). They believe in God '*Bathou*'. Every traditional Bodo family makes an altar of '*Bathou*' in the North-Eastern corner of the inner courtyard (Narzari, 2006). When they shift to a new house in a new locality they worship *Bathou* and a number of gods and goddesses. A chicken is also customarily sacrificed in front of the *nomano* (the big house where the elder couples stay) before the door of the house is opened (Devi, Ethics of the Bodos of Assam, 1997). It is considered to be the dwelling place of their god *Bathow Borai* and goddess of wealth *Mainao* (Mao, 2010). God becomes the center of their worship and even family life. Holiness can be found in the house when God is remembered and appeased through sacrifices and made the master of the house. Hence, they take care of *nomano* according to their custom, because *nomano* is the centre of good living (Devi, Ethics of the Bodos of Assam, 1997). For the Bodos Holiness meant giving God his due place in their life and relying on him for everything.

The idea in the first commandment of the Decalogue, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve," (Mt 4:10) can be compared to the Bodo idea of faith and hope in *Bathou*. In Christian theology devotion and veneration of saints is very common. So, the minor gods and goddesses which are considered as part of Supreme Being *Bathou* can be looked at from that perspective.

### 1. Holiness in Priestly Life

The Bodo society does not have authorized priestly class. All their religious functions, its rituals are performed by the village elders, popularly known as *Deuri* (priest) (Endle, 2007). The main function of priests in the Bodo society is to offer gifts and sacrifices to god and goddesses on behalf of the community. The priest alone can direct and conduct religious ceremonies of the *Bathou* religion namely *Kherai*, *Garja* and *Doasa hatarnai* (sacrifice of fowl) (Basumatary, 2006). The Bodo society expects their priests to lead a holy life so that they become more worthy to intercede for others. They are expected to keep themselves ritually pure (Basumatary, 2006).

The priests should wear descent dress and conduct himself properly by not drinking liquor, not gambling. He must not give in to habits of anger, pride, jealousy, envy, hypocrisy and cheating. He has to observe *brod* (fast) and abstain from fish and meat on Tuesday (an auspicious day for the Bodo indigenous faith). He can go to see the dead body; but is not allowed to join at the funeral procession. He cannot eat the meals served at the *Shrada* (a ceremony remembering the dead). This is because a priest enters *Bathou thansali* (Bathou temple) and he should not be defiled. If there is a *goto aosiya* (defective child) in the family, the priest must take leave for one week. Only after one week of purification he can again enter the *Bathou thansali* (Bathou temple). He must keep himself separate from others, by not going to the house nor by eating food prepared by the girl having menstruation, lest he be defiled. The Bodo priests are always expected to remain ritually clean in order to be able to offer

sacrifices (Basumatary, 2006). The priests offer sacrifices to appease gods and goddesses for the cure of sicknesses and to ward off evil spirits (Basumatary, 2006). Holiness of priest lies in keeping themselves spiritually and ritually pure because they intercede for the people. The well-being of the entire society depends on their holiness.

Priesthood in Bodo society is different from that of Christian theology. A Bodo priest assumes his responsibilities mainly when there are rituals and ceremonies to be performed. But a Christian priest has to live his priesthood all through his life. A priest in Bodo society is chosen by the community. Christian priesthood is a call from God and the person freely and willingly responds to this call. There is similarity in the fact that; a priest in the Bodo society offers gifts and sacrifices of the gods and goddesses to obtain well-being of the community. In the same way priest in the Christian theology is defined as a person set apart to offer gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the community (Basumatary, 2006). Catholic priests are consecrated to God in a new way in their ordination and are made the living instruments of Christ. Christian priesthood is divinely instituted (II, Decree on the Ministry and the Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis, 2004).

## REALIZATION OF HOLINESS IN KHERAI AND GARJA FESTIVALS

### 1. Kherai Festival

*Kherai puja* is the greatest religious festival of the Bodos. It is a symbol of hope and desire. It is celebrated for the welfare of the private life as well as for the welfare of the villagers in order to get good harvest of crops. The Bodos are generally dependent on agriculture; therefore, before and after cultivation, they perform *Kherai Puja* and propitiate different gods and goddesses for the success in cultivation. By this they show their dependence on God.

The *Darshan Kherai* is performed to *Lakshi*, the goddess of wealth and welfare. This means that realization of one's full potentialities is manifested in the realization of wealth. This can be achieved not by one's effort; but in union with God. *Umrao Kherai* is held at the end of the *Amthi Sua* (the unclean period), for the welfare of the villagers as well as of the crops. *Nowani Kherai* (domestic *Kherai*) is performed by the family. The Bodo people depend on the *Kherai puja* and *Garja puja* for their welfare at all times. Whenever they face any trouble they perform the *Kherai puja* (Brahma K., The Bathou Religion, 1997). Through this Bodos try to seek God's help in realizing their fullest potentialities by their labour and hard toil and acquire wealth. To reach this end realization of the person with the Supreme Being through worship is very important for the fruitfulness of their cultivation and harvest. Paddy is considered to be wealth *Mainao*. Holiness therefore lies in hard work and manual labour. This festival can be compared to the Rogation Days of Catholic liturgy: a day of prayer and fasting formerly observed on April 25 (though unconnected with the Feast of St. Mark) to ask for God's blessing and protection upon the crops (Dues, 2000). The primary purpose of the prayers was to ask for protection, appease Divine Justice and beg for a fruitful harvest and also thanks for productivity of crops, for human labour (Fortescue, 2009).

### 2. Garja Festival

The *Garja puja* is important religious ceremony of the Bodos. It is a purificatory ceremony dedicated to the village deities to purify the uncleanliness of the entire village and its inhabitants once a year in the month of *Magha* (January) (Mosahary, 1997). The Bodo people believe that the village and its inhabitants become unclean due to contact with unclean things and people on various occasions during the year, such as festivities, marriages, day to day business transactions involving any act of omission and commission. They incur the wrath of the village deities, who unleash natural calamities in various forms, such as pestilence, drought, flood on the villagers and thereby impose on them untold miseries and sufferings. To avert this possible danger, the village deities must be appeased and the entire village community must be cleansed ceremoniously through worship and sacrifice.

The essence of the festival is that it is the ceremony symbolizing the act of discarding what is bad and evil and washing off the uncleanliness. The entire village and the household is sprinkled with holy water and ceremonially made clean once again. The people thereafter, proceed with the *Kherai* festival celebration (Mosahary, 1997). Such a belief of the Bodos helps them in maintaining sacredness and purity among themselves. The Bodos would consider that holiness lies in discarding the evil action. The purification of the village and people would bring blessings to the villagers with good harvest and successful crops (the goddess of

wealth 'Mainao' is propitiated). They would be protected and granted long life(Brahma K. , The Bathou Religion, 1997).

The ritual purification of sins through sacrifice and worship corresponds to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. For the Christians Jesus purifies them through his sacrifice on the cross (Heb 13:12). Thus we can give Christian colouring to idea behind the celebration of Garja festival of the Bodos.

## SOCIAL REALIZATION OF HOLINESS

The love relation towards God and man has to be communicated in concrete way in the daily interactions of social life. For the Bodos a man's love towards God (**Obonglaoree**) has to be manifested first in one's family through love of wife and children(Brahma K. , A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992). In the Bodo society the members live together at home as a family called **Nokhor**. It consists of the father; who is the head of the family, mother, sons, daughter, brothers and sisters. Father is the overall in-charge of the family. It functions according to the decision of the father. The wife plays a supportive role(Chaudhary, 2004).

### 1.Holiness in Family life

In the Bodo society father is generally the leader and head of the family. But women in the house are always accorded their due status and respect. In any social function almost every adult is equally treated and age alone commands respect and not any financial or official status(Roy, 1995). Holiness is realized by a man in performing his duties as husband towards his wife and as father towards his children. For a woman holiness lies in carrying out her duties as wife towards her husband and as mother towards the children. She has to perform daily chores like cooking, serving, washing utensils and other household work(Angeline, 2004). Husband and wife share the work load together in taking care of their family. Holiness is exhibited by them in doing their daily tasks like; ploughing, doing agricultural works like sowing, transplantation, weeding, harvesting, carrying paddy, threshing, cleaning and husking. They provide for their family, sustain it and educate their children. The church teaches that those who are married are bound by the special obligation to strive to build up their family; and because they gave life to their children parents have the most serious obligation and right to educate them(The Code of Canon Law, 2010). Children practice holiness through obedience and respect towards their parents. So, physical assault on one's own mother, father, grand-mother, grand-father is considered as sin in the Bodo society(Brahma K. , A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992).

A typical Bodo family builds several houses according to their necessity within the compound. The main house (*nomano*)stands in the north of the compound or homestead and the granary in the east(Endle, 2007). It is divided into three rooms. The first room, is used for sleeping (known as *khopra*); the second, is used for dining(*akhong*), and the third room(known as *ishing*) is used for cooking and the altars of *Bathou Borai* (chief deity) and *Mainao* (goddess of wealth) are placed there for worship. The guest house, known as *chourano* is built in front of the homestead.

The Bodos believe in some peculiar codes. The man of the family must not set foot on the courtyard early in the morning before it is swept and cleared; otherwise, it shortens his life span. So, women are expected to clean up the main house *nomano*. Another belief prevalent among Bodos is that; before marriage when the selecting party goes for negotiating they should see the prospective bride drying or husking paddy at the time of their arrival to her house. If they see her cleaning and sweeping the courtyard then it is believed that the bride would have a long life. Bride would be good, loyal wife and bring good fortune to the family(Mao, 2010). The idea behind is that it is in carrying out her daily chores that a wife can fulfill her duties towards her family and grow in holiness. Hence, they take care of *nomano* according to their custom, as *nomano* is the centre of good living(Devi, Ethics of the Bodos of Assam, 1997), the dwelling place of their god *BathouBorai* and goddess of wealth *Mainao*(Devi, Ethics of the Bodos of Assam, 1997).

The guest house is also used as dwelling house of young boys. Generally, young sons and daughters do not sleep in the same room with their parents. It is in a way respecting the dignity and privacy of parents. Children need to love and respect their parents because they owe their life to them. This is the reason for why incest, which is illicit sexual relation between related persons, is strongly condemned in Bodo society(Brahma K. , A Study of

Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992). When son is married the couple is provided a separate house for sleeping (Brahma S., 2006).

There are certain norms and boundaries laid down by the society to maintain unity, trust and love within the family members. Family is the basic unit of a society. For the Bodos the purpose of following the norms and principles is to lead a holy and healthy family life. Thus, they contribute to the growth of the society. Holiness in married life is upheld in Bodo society. It is something sacred and divinely planned. Therefore, a man cannot engage in illicit sexual relationship with female relatives, such as mother, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, younger sister, elder sister, niece, the wife of the younger brother or close female relative. He should not touch the body of the wife of his younger brother or of elder sister of his wife. Unnatural sex between man and man, with a bitch or a female pig or a cow is strongly abhorred (Brahma K., A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos, 1992). The above offences are called **Agar Badin** Bodo society.

The young people have to keep themselves holy through practice of chastity. If one indulges in such affairs, he or she has to undergo ritual purification along with traditional religious custom. In the case of a girl, it purifies the other sisters too, if she has any. In some case of a boy, he is penalized with fine by cash. If pregnancy occurs against the law of chastity; marriage between the lovers becomes absolutely compulsory (Brahma S., 2006). The accused has to feel that he has brought disgrace upon the village and is distinctly under a cloud. It is a sort of reformatory punishment where the guilty person is punished. It makes them repent for their misdeeds and reforms themselves accordingly. It prevents them and others from committing social crimes (Devi, Ethics of the Bodos of Assam, 1997). It also shows their respect to the female ones. The place of women in Bodo society is high. The husband treats his wife with love and respect and regards her as a companion in life's journey (Devi, Ethics of the Bodos of Assam, 1997). Holiness for the young man and woman lies in proper marriage, by which they are able to express their love for each other, procreate and educate their children. It is manifestation of love, security, acceptance, understanding and dignity.

God the Creator of all made the married state the beginning and foundation of human society; so the apostolate of married person and of families has a special importance for both the church and society (II, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2004). Vatican II speaks on holiness of marriage and the family, marital love, fruitfulness of marriage, respect for human life and duties pertaining to family life in *Gaudium et Spes* (48-52) (II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, 2004). The Bodo principles of sexual prohibitions echo in the New Testament for it also prohibits; incest (Mk 6:17-29; 1Cor 5:1-5), adultery (Rom 13:9; 1Cor 6:9; Heb 13:4), and homosexuality (Rom 1:27; 1Cor 6:9-11; 1Tim 1:10). Relationships outside of marriage are illicit. This truth seems to be the foundation of Jesus' teaching on divorce that a man should not divorce his wife and be joined to another since by marriage the two had become one flesh (Gen 2:24; Mt 19:3-6). In marriage the love of a couple for each other becomes part of Christ's unending love for the church. An inconsistent union of bodies defiles the temple of the Holy Spirit. Sexual intercourse is meant for a man and woman who have embarked upon permanent lifelong partnership. Sex of any form outside marriage detracts from what God intended sex to be. Sexual inevitably disrupts the "one flesh" relationship (Gen 2:24; 1Cor 6:16-17) and destroys the entire family. Therefore, God created man as male and female and destined them for each other in a bodily way as well. The Church declares that all homosexual relations in any form are contrary to the order of creation. Relying on the findings of psychology homosexual relationship is considered as either due to a faulty education or lack of normal sexual development. Some consider it a condition that is innate and permanent. Sexual relationships between persons of the same sex are intrinsically disordered according to the objective moral order. The Bodo society does not permit sexual perversion like homosexuality, lesbianism because it is abnormal and goes against the order of nature. The intrinsic value of complete faithfulness and total abstinence can be learned from the Bodo society to explain the sinfulness of sexual perversion. In the present day situation when we speak of sexual morality we can refer back to the Bodo customs and norms with regard to it and try to interpret it from the Bodo perspective in the light of the Church's teachings. If it is done so, we will find similarities between Christian and the Bodo norms on sexual morality.

## CONCLUSION

Holiness is the concept for which each one who owe an allegiance to God or to any supernatural being

endeavors to achieve although the sense of holiness conceived by each individual may differ. The Bodo traditions and social customs have played a significant role in forming the core values in the individual and the collective life of the Bodo people. Bodos seek happiness in the collective life of the tribe. For peaceful and happy living, they worship God and follow certain rules and customs; and these rules and customs directly or indirectly mold people to be holy to remain intrinsically united with their supreme God, *Bathwu*. As agriculture is the main occupation of the Bodos, they always obey rules derived from nature and respect nature. The various ceremonies and festivals are in relation to their life and agricultural activities. The Bodo society is tradition bound and cannot afford to do away with customs and traditions in which core values are engraved. The life of Bodo people is guided by these principles. They have been handed down generation after generation and have entered the very fabric of Bodo society. Most of these principles are not embodied in written laws and regulations but retained in memory and practices. If we analyze them with reflection in the light of Christian teaching, we find that the religious principles of the Bodos correspond to the Christian values in quite many ways. The Bodo concept of holiness found in the socio-religious beliefs and ceremonies is widely in conformity with the sense of holiness found in the Bible which is deeply engraved in the life of Christians as children of God.

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