



CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES ON THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF BODOS OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT: *This paper deals with the contribution of Christian Missionaries on the economic development of the Bodo people in North East India. It reveals that throughout the centuries after their settlement Bodos are though economically self sufficient on agriculture activity, animal husbandry, rearing of silkworm and barter trade activities, it describes us that today in recent times the Bodos could also come up with the growing competitor as many socio- religious reformer have extended their hand for the all round development of the society such as the Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, who introduced Brahma Dharma, Christian Missionaries, Rupamoni. Here the article tries to focus on the contribution of Christian Missionaries on the economic development of the Bodos by different denominations. Although we could see huge changes in the economic development of the Bodo, the respective hill authorities, Maomaria rebellion, Burmese invasion, the British administration, Marwari traders, Barpetiah traders, establishment of large scale plantation industries as well as the inflow of refugees from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, and migrants from other states, which had already flooded during the partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon and during the 'Grow more food' campaign headed by Md. Saadulla had always come on the way of sound economic life of the Bodos. At the same it also describes us that today in recent times the Bodos could also come up with the growing competitor.*

Key words—Bodo, economic, Christian, Reformer.

Introduction:

The Bodos are one of the important indigenous tribes of the North East India. They are believed to be a Tibeto- Burman family. It is due to a lack of the authentic historical records, the origin of the Bodos is still very largely remains as matter of conjecture and inference. But it is generally accepted that the Bodos are a race of great Mongolian people. They are said to have lived in the Hoang- Ho valley of China and Tibet for several centuries, where they were known as Bod, which means homeland or man.

Observation at the close approximation/affinity in the general physical feature and appearances between the Bodos and the Mongolian people, Endle suggest Tibet and China as the original home of the Bodosⁱ and thus, it can be traced the Bodos as the descendents of the ancient Mongoloid family who lived around 2000BC in Siberia and Mongolia. The Bodos are one of the earliest settlers of Assam belonging to the descendants of the great ancient Mongoloid family.ⁱⁱ

Ethnologically, the Bodo race exists, in a more or less pure state, all over Assam proper, in Koch- Behar and Northern Bengal, and in the valley of the Surma River, now part of the Eastern Bengal. The Bodos are now represented by the Meches in Western Assam, the Bodos in central Assam, the Dimasa and Hojai in the North

Cachar Hills and the Sonowal and the Thengal in the Eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. In the Cachar plain, the Bodos are also known as Barman.

Methodology: The methodology to carry out the study consisted of two sources viz., Primary source and Secondary source. In the primary sources include unpublished thesis, interviews, conducting field survey etc. The secondary sources incorporate the published books and journals.

Objectives: The objectives are to show the valuable contribution made by Christian Missionaries for the economic development of Bodos. It is to review the economic development of Bodos as well as to suggest the Bodo people for further major measures to extend the economic growth.

Result and Discussion:

The economy of the Bodo people is predominantly agrarian in character. Ninety-nine per cent of the Bodo population lives in the villages and therefore agriculture is the mainstay of their economy. With the primitive tools they produce rice vegetables and different types of fruits. The Bodo village economy is also dependent upon domestic livestock of various kinds like ducks, fowls, goats, pigs, cattle etc. Besides rice growing, the cultivation of jute, oil seeds and various kinds of pulses is done side by side. Another fruit bearing tree which brings more economy to them is the areca nut tree. The 'Endi', 'Muga' rearing is another traditional culture of the Bodos. Bodo women are expert weavers. They produce Endi, Muga, and silk of high standard. The economy of Bodo people lies in the immense natural resources. It has vast forest area and water resources that can be tapped for electricity, irrigation and other possibilities. Fishing industries can be one of the most boosting economic activities in the Bodo area. Besides the land in the Himalayan foothills is situated for rubber plantation. The experimental rubber plantations have shown good progress through large-scale plantation and government, initiative is yet to be seen.

It is clear from the above discussion that the Bodos have survived the economic system through the primitive method and through this they could not compete with the latest technology of economic development. Bodos were here today fortunate enough to have the help and support of the Christian Missionaries. Different denomination of Christian Missionaries came forward to extend their help for economic development of Bodos. Such as, The *Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS)* established schools, dispensaries, vocational training centers and purchased a huge area of cultivable land to make mission self sufficient in every sphere of its existence.ⁱⁱⁱ They brought a large area of cultivation land, a tractor and a water pumping machine to irrigate the water inaccessible land. In doing this, the missionaries had two ideas in their mind, i.e. self sufficiency of the mission and a demonstration of the high-tech agricultural system to the people. They also were able to establish a vocational training institute for the young people to give them good vocational training.^{iv}

T. Aonok, one time revivalist to GBBCU Churches in 1980-81 brought the GBBCU and the World Vision of India (WVI) into a partnership in 1985. For the concern of the Amteka Areas, who were facing serious great water scarcity, health problems, etc due to droughts, lack of communication, etc, the World Vision of India funded Amteka Seed Project^v in the same year to work social and economic developments. The Amteka Seed Project was later promoted to Amteka Community

Development Project in 1986, which continued for eight years. It met with great success and Enosh Basumatary, the Secretary- cum-Officer highlights the Amteka Community Development Project that 15 feet dept of 30 ring wells were constructed, Immunization programme and other vaccine facilities were first given to the people concerned. Development skills like weaving, tailoring, agricultural training, etc. were provided. Adult education was imparted which help people to read and write. Apart from health and economic awareness, the Amteka Community Development Project promoted peace and harmony among various sections of people irrespective of their religions. There was good deal of social interactions among women as they came to collect water from common ring well both in the morning and evening. It also promoted female status through their programmes like weaving, tailoring, adult education, etc. The effect of the Amteka Community Development Project is still evident in the life of the Amteka people as they drink water from the ring well, among other reasons, and thus prevent them from walking to a far place to get water.^{vi} Boro Baptist Convention Development Board further serves as a resource agency of the convention for the development and execution of plans and programme implementation for community upliftment through trainings, seminars and sponsorships. It initiates and implement schemes, design new projects and maintain income generating project foe self sustenance of the association and its churches.^{vii}

The economic upliftment was also felt important and necessary by Sulen Basumatary, the then Principal of Tukrajhar Higher Secondary School, and Secretary of the GBBCU from 1967 to 1993 about 25 years. And the year 1992 was declared as “*Year of Self Sufficiency*” under the *Bodo Vision 2000 (BV2000)*- which would motivate and train the Church on the family economy, especially in the field of agriculture, as most of the people come from this category, teaching them to adopt improved methods to increase their agricultural output, thus preparing them to give more to the Lord’s service.^{viii} Although the government has agencies to help in such matters the *Gaolpara Boro Baptist Church Union (GBBCU)* may also through guidance and arranged training in collaboration with the government could serve as catalyst towards the economic upliftment of the Church members. In order to look after this matter the proposal was there to allocate the work to someone who could be designated as coordinator of the social action but no tangible action had yet been taken on this matter. The *Goalpara Boro Baptist Church Union (GBBCU)* office bearers, especially the President and the Secretary will be over all in-charge of the GBBC. It is assumed that the Gospel has a bearing on the socio-economic life of the Church members. And the Church should not only be concerned with the soul and thus neglected the body. This implication of the Gospel was well understood and attempts were made by *Sulen Basumatary* to uplift the Church members economically. It may be further area in which the present leaders of the GBBCU need to explore the possibility of working in partnership with the government for transformation of the life o the Church members. GBBCU’s BV2000 in which *Sulen Basumatary* was deeply committed was a reflection of *MI2000 (Mission India 2000)* which was rooted in the World Wide Church Growth movement. Dr. Donald A. McGravan is known as the Father of Modern Church Growth Movement. He worked as a missionary in India for 30 years. The Church Growth philosophy believes in the most effective and pragmatic approached to world evangelization through adopting

and evangelizing groups after groups, caste after caste, kindred after kindred discipline from Christ.^{ix}

MI2000 was such an offshoot, which was, adopted in 1991 for discipline the responsive peoples of India. In Assam, BV2000 was adopted in 1991 to reach the unreached Bodos living inside and outside Assam. Boro Christian Board was also not far from taking the income generating project to progress its economic position.^x

Next the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church also have shown much concerned for the economic growth of the Bodo society such as they established **Tabitha weaving centre** at Gaurang for skill development and were giving training to both the boys and girls and **Mary Martha weaving centre** at Tukrajhar which is run by the Boro Baptist Church Association, Tukrajhar, is also not far from giving training to women to build them economically independent in the society. **Gramphur Agricultural School** project has been developing under the leadership of Mr. Nordtveit which was established in 1926. This project had been made possible with the aid of the Lutheran World Federation, Geneva.^{xi}

The church ministries have attempted to use every span of time and even engage the patient person in the specific areas of economic growth. Rev. & Mrs. Fossland founded a Santipara leprosy home and hospital in 1939 where the patients were taught handicrafts and engaged in several kinds of occupations such as farming, house building, road making, keeping animals, etc. A huge cultivable land, donated by the government in the name of hospital was cultivated by the workers as well as by the leprosy patients who could work during their free time and thus the need of food and other necessities for the patients was met. According to Dr. Hodne, with the treatment of new and better drugs, surgery, physiotherapy in this hospital, and number of leprosy patients have been cured and could return to their homes and villages to live normal life. When they returned their homes they not only came out cured from diseases but also with some kinds of skill and education for better livelihood and to give witness to God's love for humanity.

Lutheran World Service India Trust a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) based at Gossaigaon (Assam) established in 1996, had introduced Village Development Council (VDC) in riot victim areas, where they introduced peace committee to resolve the riots, introduction of self help groups has also helped the people to be economically independent.^{xiii} It is mentioned by the Rev Sulen Narzary that it promote peace and harmony in the society and helping the society to develop economic growth by giving trainings on agriculture and supplying seeds and agricultural equipment like tractors and helping the poor students with scholarship to continue their studies. Another NGO under Bongaigaon Diocese, the Agriculture Integrated Development Project (AIDP) initially helps the poor families to develop their kitchen garden and other agricultural related works and thus gain economic development.^{xiii} Further, foundation of *Socio- economic development project* at Haraputa (Assam) is also making a progress. This has brought a great change and development in the village.^{xiv}

The honour of discovery of Assam Tea Plants is usually attributed to Robert Bruce while visiting Assam in 1823 on trading mission while visiting Assam. After his death, C.A. Bruce, his brother, carried the discovery towards the commercial plantation as well as potential business. It is worthy to mention that Rev. Sidney

Endle with the help and leadership of Bhat Pandit (the forefather of Bhubora Family, Dowamokha) built a church at Bengbari [1865-1873] and primary school in 1893 at Dowamokha village. Bhat Pandit (Khakhlyar) accepted Christianity under the influence of Rev. Endle who had joint hands on missionary works as well as spreading Education as Teacher in primary school. Being an important missionary helper of Rev. Endle, Bhat Pandit had a free access to meet various Tea Garden Managers whenever he wished to visit on missionary works. During his visiting of various gardens on missionary works, an idea was sparked in his mind of learning tea plantation technique from tea garden Managers. Bhat Pandit was a great visionary and clever minded guy who wanted to start an extra ordinary example of work culture among his own community and for the society. As a result, he became greatly interested tea plantation of his own and in 1865 he started tea plantation practically by covering 15 bighas of land at Dowamokha village by collecting seedling/tea plants from Ghagra garden. Without doubt, Bhat Pandit (Khakhlyar) became the first tea grower among the Bodo Kacharis who took high risk as well as an initiative to introduce tea plantation in this part of Assam. They used to supply green leaf to Ghagra Factory through horrible road connectivity and risking wild animals. Unfortunately, this family property of tea plantation is disappeared due to lack of maintenances and the fragmentation of land ownership among Bhubora family.

The first generation on commercial small tea growers came up again from the same village (Dowamokha/ Borigaon) to start tea plantation in 1991 among 10+1 (one from Badagaon village) members who formed a firm known as **“Brotherhood Tea Growing Firm”**. They are Christian Entrepreneurs and pioneers who started **Mwider Tea Garden** at Amjuli. A new chapter of Revolution on small scale tea plantation was introduced in 1991 by these 11 growers in commercial approach who are fortunate to supply green leaf to **Corramore T. Estate**. It is worthy to mention two gentlemen viz Mr. Boldip Singh, Manager of Corramore Tea Estate and Mr. Pronoy Basumatary, Asst. Manager of Bahipookhi T. Estate under Udalguri District who provided and assisted the required technical guidance and necessary advice. It is the great opportunity to writer to be associated in these 11 member entrepreneurs. The same 11 members have established a factory in 2009 known as **“Mwider Co-operative Tea Industry Society Ltd”** which produced **“Mwider Tea”**. As on today, the quantity of tea growers within Bodoland Terretorial Area Districts has gone up to 5000 whereas Udalguri District consists of 3500 growers. Growers of Udalguri District alone produce 3 crore kg of green leaf per year fetching crore of revenue.^{xv}

Roman Catholic Church is also not far from the extending help and supports the Bodo people in economic development. They introduced the Home Science training center at Bongaigaon which is run by the sisters of Congregation of Sisters of Nazareth and the Industrial Training Institution run by the Brothers belonging to the Congregation of Missionary Brothers of St. Francis De Sales. The vocational training and health care center at Kokrajhar is run by the Daughters of Mary help of Christians (FMA). Fatima sisters (FS) in Barama and Congregation of Sisters of Nazareth (CSN) in Gossaigaon own the responsibility of Girihini schools in the respective places. ‘Ashirvad’- Mahila Vikash Kendra, run by sisters from Congregation of Jesus (CJ) at Saprakata is another blessing for young and drop-out girls. They have already brought in tremendous impact in the field of empowering the poor and school drop outs.

Bongaigaon Gana Seva Society which was established in the year 1998 for the social upliftment of the people area. It is also meant to educate, train and assist financially, in education and training of students, teachers, staff and social workers. Other social activities like health service assist the needy in self employed schemes, to make people conscious and concerned about social justices, self reliance and cooperation, promote and provide training in leadership, effective communication, management and public relations. It also undertake projects, schemes and programme for the self substances, social and economic uplift, of rural and urban areas of poor, physically and economically handicapped persons, victims of natural calamities and others. It also meant to arrange meetings, seminars, workshops, conference, camps and programme relating to one or more of it's objects. Peace promotion, Gender and development are cross cutting themes in all the programs implemented.

Thus the establishment of *Bongaigaon Gana Seva Society* has proved to be fruitful for the people around as the people have improved access to financial resources (saving and Credit), better quality of life. It is to help people to improve their income from micro enterprise and at the same time to be self sustained or even profitable for the institution which provide it. The mission is to create gainful self-employment for the rural areas especially the disadvantaged sections, ensuring sustainable livelihood, improved quality of life and good human values. This is achieved through the effective use of local resources, extension of appropriate with community participation. The goal is the empowerment of people to self-reliance through Self –Help Groups.

People have improved capacity and skills of modern methods of agricultural and livestock while optimally utilizing natural resources (land, water) which enhance their income. Community/Family promotes eco-friendly measures for better production and better living. Awareness, Conscientization through Seminar, Audio Visuals, Discussion on the practices of eco-friendly measures, capacity building on organic farming, promotion of water and soil conservation measures, Kitchen Gardens in every family, Awareness programme for students on environmental population and its adverse effect, Trees plantation like Jatropha Plant (Nitrogen fixation plant), Environment day celebration and Sensitization on optimum utilization of natural resources are the strategies of the programme.

Fr. Morra of Barpeta Road Parish put up elegant structures for the school, the boarding and finally a magnificent church. He also established a cattle farm with exotic breed of cows. There was also a large poultry and a well- stocked piggery. Agriculture was also carried out extensively within the vast land of the Mission. His successors have tried, with more or less success to carry on farm where he left off on the farming front.^{xvi}

Conclusion:

Thus Christian Missionaries efforts have today leads the Bodo people to face the challenging materialistic world. Initially, the Bodos were not very keen on government jobs which were grabbed mostly by outsiders. But with the passage of time and the spread of education by the Christian Missionaries, Bodo youths are now exploring different avenues and are joining services in the government department, private and public sectors and also launching professional and business careers. Efforts are being made to translate household skills like weaving into opportunities

for rural livelihood by developing markets outside the region for their products and thus leading themselves to the path of self reliance. The present generation has realized that only agricultural and allied activities will not help the community prosper. Trade, commerce, industry, etc. are all pre-requisites for economic empowerment. Although the Christian Missionaries sincere efforts to uplift the economic growth of the Bodos, with the passage of time, they had to face different economic hardship to come up. Regular marauding sent by the hill authorities in lieu of late payment of tributes or compensation, Maomaria rebellion, Burmese invasion, Marwari traders as well as Barpetiah trader had come on the way of the economic development of the Bodo people. Regular inflow of immigrants from Bangladesh, East Pakistan, and other states, who had illegally, encroached upon the tribal land and made the tribal people landless poor people, the government constitution of tribal belt and block also could not provide any protection for the poor landless tribal people as they were only busy on using the immigrant as vote bank for their success in their election process. All this resulted, violent rebellion among the tribals, such as Bodoland movement which is running on till today. Therefore, we the citizen as well government should always be aware of our duty, so that any other factors could not come on the way of our economic development.

Endnotes

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