Nature Worship in Bathouism: An Overview

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Abstract

The Bodos believe in Bathouism. Since the earliest time, they have practiced this age-old religion. This religion is often connected with the cult of Bathoubwrai or Sibwrai and is based around it. i.e. the highest god. They worship Sijou plant as the symbol of Bathouism by fencing strips of bamboo. The goals of this paper are: i. To highlight the philosophy of Bathouism. ii. How does Bathouism provide a philosophical way to respect nature and conserve it?

Methodology and Data Collection

The study deals with descriptive and analytical methods. Materials were collected through source primary and secondary. The process of interview and observation was performed for the collection and secondary data sources like books, journals, websites, etc. were referred.

Keywords

Traditional Religion, Bathouism, Nature Worship,

Introduction

The Bodos belong to the largest tribes and living mainly in Assam and its neighboring Indian states like West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Tripura, and foreign countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, etc. Linguistically, the Bodo is one of the Tibeto-Burman language family. For the first time, the word 'Bodo' was used by B.H. In 1846 the Bodo talks about Darjeeling District, Hodgson as an ethnological word to talk about the Meches.¹ The word 'Bodo' has since been used to refer to the various branches of the Bodo language community as a generic term. Thereafter, the later years' writers indiscriminately used this word. It needs mentioning here that the identity of the
Bodo is not consistent as a group of people. Various names are used for their classification. They are called Meches in West Bengal and Nepal.

**Meaning and Philosophy of Bathouism**

The term ‘Bathou’ consists of two meaningful words ‘Thou’ and ‘Ba’. ‘Thou’ refers ‘deep’ and ‘Ba’ refers ‘five’. There are 5 components - Bar (Air), San (Sun), Ha (Earth), Or (Fire) and Okhrang (Sky). The Bodos believe that these five elements’ maker is named Bathou Bwrai or God. They are also called as Obonglaori and anan Gosai. This ancient religion is continuously connected with Bathoubwrai or Sibwrai and revolves around them. i.e., Bodos' highest god. Thus, Bathouism is the religion of five principles or elements having meaningful philosophical thought. It is very difficult to feel and understand the power of Bathoubwrai without meditation.

The Bathou Bwrai is called God among the follower of the Bathou community. The term 'Bwrai' means to the eldest man with or in all respects, the supreme or strongest. He thus represents only the highest spirit, the poromatma that is all-powerful, all-informed and omnipresent. The fire could not burn him, water could not moisture him, the breeze could not dry him and his spear could not pierce him. He is the lighting machine of every object on earth and is the source of every information and light. He gives us everything in this universe we need.²

The altar of Bathou is the primary location of Bathou cultivation which is situated in the courtyard north-west corner. Bathousali is simply considered as the altar and consists of Sijou (Euphorbia splendon) in the middle, Thulansi plant (Basil tree) towards the right and Jatrashi plant towards the left which is surrounded by round fence of 18th small pairs bamboo five fasteners folded strips together known as "Thansali" or Bathousali. Among the Bathou followers, there is a Bathousali or Bathou altar in each village. The construction of the Bathou altar of the village community land is also the same with a particular family. The five fastenings of the Bathou altar symbolises and reflects Bathouism's theological and philosophical values.

As reported by Sidney Endle, “the religion of the Kachari race is distinct of the type commonly known as animistic and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear

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²Barmahalia F., Revivalism of Bathouism Among the Bodos, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSRJHSS) ISSN: 2279-0845 Volume 1, Issue 5, Sep-Oct., 2012, P. 42
or dead. Dr P.C. Bhattacharjee objects strongly “the religion of the Bodos is not animistic. They are worshippers of Bathou, the supreme God. They have other Gods and Goddesses. They believe in Ghosts and Spirits also. But the concept of the Supreme God is predominantly remarkable.” The Bodo scholars say that “their religion cannot be regarded as animistic. They worship Bathou and their God is known as the Bathou Bwrai.”

As the Bodos agriculturalist society, they had observed different kinds of pujas or worships like the Kherai, Garja, Amthisua, etc. since the earliest time. They offered many things and even sacrificed many animals in the name of these worships. Few sections of the Bodos still observe these worships by sacrificing animals as earlier for the welfare of cultivation and the individual family as well. But a section of the educated Bodo people formed the All Bathou Religious Organization in 1992 and started modifying their age-old way of worshipping and replaced flowers, fruits and other materials instead of animals under the direction of the ABRU. Though the Bodos worship some pujas or worship publicly they didn’t have any formal institution in Bathouism. Now Bathousali or Bathou Thansali was founded at their headquarters or regional office. It is to be mentioned here that there are many elements of Hinduism in the present Bathou religion that is adopted knowingly and unknowingly by the Bathouists because of living in the plain area and closely associated with the Hindu people.

**Nature and Bathouism**

Religion and environmentalism are a modern, multidisciplinary area, among others, with a focus on environmentalism and ecological values in the university field of religious studies, religious ethics, sociology and theology. Since time immemorial the people of the primitive society worshipped natural things like earth, sky, air, fire and water as the most essential part of their livelihood. The ethnographers of the colonial and missionaries were identified as traditional animism religion because of “the attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena.” It is to be said that fire, water, air, earth and sky are the most important

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4 Bhattacharja, P. 1997, *A Descriptive Analysis of the Bodo Language*, published by Publication Department, Gauhati University, p.17
elements of this universe. Apart from these, animals, plants, rocks, rivers, etc. are also parts of nature. Without these, it is impossible to live in this world. So, by observing the inner power of these natural elements the people started worshipping as their god since time immemorial.

Brief descriptions are given in the following:

i.  *Dwi* (Water)

The Bathouists believe that *Dwi* is the first creation of this universe. *Bathou* (God) created the water, whose function is maintained by the *Agrang mwdai* (deity of water). The *Bathou* philosophy is concerned with the inner powers and qualities of the water. Without water, nature remains always dry, even life becomes meaningless.

ii.  *Ha* (Earth)

‘*Ha*’ is also one of part of the nature worship of Bathouism. The worship of *ha* (earth) among the follower of *Bathou* has its cultural and philosophical origin since the earliest times. There is a myth associated with the creation of the earth. It is believed that the earth is their mother. The mother is very kind-hearted and truth; her love and affection to the people, she never discriminates and all are equal before the eyes of her. So, she welcomes and accepts all leaving beings: She embraces and gives shelter to the people including the plants, trees, insects, etc. So, the mysterious and divine power, to some extent of the earth is unseen and unthinkable. According to the Bathousim, a deity is known as *Hailung mwdai* (deity of the earth), who maintains the qualities, powers and functions of the earth.

iii.  *Bar* (Wind)

The third tenet of *Bathou* philosophy is *bar* or wind. The Bodos are knowingly or unknowingly devoting *Bar* (wind) as part of their belief system. Though wind is unseen we can feel it when it touches our body. Accordingly, the *Bathou Bwrai* shows his power through the wind without any form and shape. It is impossible to live without wind in the world.

iv.  *Or* (fire or Sun)

The fourth tenet of nature worship of Bathouism is *San/Or*. According to a follower of Bathouism, the world becomes dark if there is no light or sunshine. Without light, no natural
objects are grown up, and so the life of human beings will be meaningless. The living beings of this world will not be able to move, sustain and survive.

v. Okhrang (Sky)

The last or five tenets of Bathou philosophy is Okhrang which is very vast and large and endless. The human being, as well as living beings, are moving here and there without any hindrance inside the okhrang (Sky). So, it is a mysterious creation of God. Therefore, the Bathou followers believe that there is someone behind this creation of Okhrang who possesses endless love and affection. In this connection, we can mention the religion of Doniy Polo, the indigenous religion of Arunachal Pradesh and Sanamahi in Manipur among the Hindu Meites. In Doniy Polo, they worship ‘Sun’ (Doniy) and ‘moon’ (Polo) as their god. They worship the donyi as the creator. She created the donyi and the polo along with the planetary bodies including the earth. This creation is supreme. In this regard, Tana Showren says, the worship of the Sun amongst the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh has its cultural and philosophical origin since time immemorial. The tribal identified the Sun and Moon with the Supreme authority of the powerful life-giver and source of energy.  

Om Hring Khling Fwt Se is chanted before the prayer. Many scholars say that these five sounds are borrowed from Hinduism. In this regard, Trishita Shandilya, a non-Bodo researcher says,

“These five spiritual elements such as are Om (sky), Hring (earth), Khling (water), Fwt (fire) and Se (air)”. Consequently, these five deep elements are the five basic elements of nature. Comparing to other religions, it seems that Bathouism has a different worldview. The philosophical interpretations and other rituals of it show an ‘oriental worldview’.”

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There are many elements of nature worship in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc. The Bodos believe that among the trees Sijou is the first tree of nature created by Bathou who can live and survive in the desert place. The scientific name of this tree is Euphorbia splendon. As a symbol of Bathou Bodos, it is planted in the middle of the Bathou altar as the Bathouism symbol. It has a great medicinal value that has been used by the Bodos in different kinds of diseases as medicine. There is a belief that it can protect the thunder. Secondly, Thulunsi (holy basil) plant is a symbol of truth or sacred that has multiple values. It gives maximum oxygen to us. In the case of medicine, the Bodos believe that it is used as an anti-biotic and also in different kinds of diseases. Thirdly, Dabri Hagra (Bermuda grass) is also another herb that the Bodos are used as a sacred plant and anti-biotic. Since time immemorial, they have been using these plants as their medicine to treat different kinds of diseases. So, these plants are the part and parcel of their daily life and found beside their home.

Besides, the above-mentioned plants, some specific plants are very important and useful in their day-to-day life that are used in the Bathou religion. The plant Khangkhla, one of the most important plants which is used in the foundation of Bathousali, (Bathou altar) Kherai Hwnai, (Kherai worship) and traditional marriage of the Bodos. The eighteen pairs of khanxhlaplantsareplaced towards the eastern edge of the Bwiswmuthini Ali (the way of the earth) accordingly. Sixteen pairs of Khangkhla are also placed in different areas and are used to symbolize the men and women bound by the complexities and mysteries of the world.

Bamboo is the main important ingredient of the people of North-East Indian People. The massive use of Oua or bamboo plant also gets in the Bathouism.

Thalir (Banana Tree) is one of the important plants of mankind to be found everywhere. Different people use it in different tasks. In Bathou religion, the banana plant (thalir biphang) is used for many purposes. The top side of the leaf is called laijouis used for offering the Betel nut, flowers, fruits and Prashad to Bathou Bwrai. Moreover, it is also used by cutting the leaf of the banana in a particular shape called laisi to offer the prashad to the eighteen deities. Besides this, different worship of Bathouism also uses the banana leaf and its fruits.

Mai (Paddy) is the staple food of the Bodos, considered as a Mainao or Lakhsni a Goddess of wealth. Mainao is kept in a pot, called Maihendw and is placed in the north-east corner of the kitchen. The place where Mainaois placed and worshiped is called Mainao Bindwin Bodo community. Moreover, a granary of paddy (Maibakhri)is also worshipped as a place of Mainao.
Burwi. As a symbol of steadiness, a piece of stone is kept in Maihendw and Maibakhri (Storehouse of Paddy) so that MainaoBurwi, a Goddess of wealth stays forever in the family.

Goy-phathui (betel nut and betel leaf) has a significant place and role in Bodo society. These have been using in social and rituals practices since the earliest times. During the Bathou worship, a pair of Goy-Phathwi is offered to Bwrai Bathou and also offered in the name of eighteen deities by cutting it into a small piece.

The rinds of Thaigir (elephant apple) are used in Kati Gasa to light the lamp. On the last day of Assamese Asin month, the Goddess of wealth, Laxmi is worshipped for the betterment of the paddy field. On this day, in the very evening, earthen lamps are lit at the paddy field to get rid of the insects as well as the earthen lamps are lit at the Bathousali, the granary, the shed, and the backyard of the house(bari).

Onthai is also kept in the Bathou as a symbol of power and steadiness.

Worshipping nature is the main center that is assumed to be ‘supreme’ and the faith system of Bathouism emphasizes significant environmental components. Trishita Shandiliya observes, "Bathouism is distinct from other religions in worldview. Bathouism’s philosophical interpretations and rituals reflect an ‘oriental worldview’. Here, nature is viewed as 'supreme' and the framework of belief stresses essential ecological factors. Thus, the presence of the lithosphere, the hydrosphere, atmosphere and biosphere are linked to the presence of five 'deep thoughts,' namely earth, air, sky, waters and fire. Bathouism in turn promotes the preservation of peace between nature and man. Essentially, Harmony between humanity and nature is 'pleaded for' in the respect of nature and environmental harmony. While logical human thoughts and behaviour about the lithosphere, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere and the biosphere build a 'framework'." Further, she observes," A culture reflects the way of life of a particular community. A culture originating from the experiences, customs, traditions and beliefs of a particular community can be referred to as ‘folk culture’. Therefore, Bwrai Bathou represents the Omnipotent, all-knowing, and all-present supreme soul." Interestingly, the musical instruments used in Bathouism are Kham, Sifung, Serja, Jabkhring, and Jotha and these are made from different kinds of wood,
bamboo, etc. No metal and iron are used in their making. So, these are very much indispensable part of Bathouism and bearing the roots of Bodo culture.

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly the Bathou religion has close relation with nature. There is no idol worship is here. The Bodos worship Sijou plant as the symbol of Bathou, the supreme soul comprising five major elements of nature such as San (Sun), Ha (Earth), Bar (Air), Or (Fire) and Okhrang (Sky). These 5 philosophical elements of Bathouism are part and parcel of human lives. No one can live without these five elements and the universe will be meaningless too. In the age of science and technology, the traditional belief system of the people is on the verge of destruction. People of the world are constructing a building by cutting the trees of the jungles, constructing dam in the name of development. The Bodos believe that there is a possibility to get back their environment and ecology by worshiping nature and Bathouism helps the people of this world to rethink about protection and conservation of nature from religious perspectives.

**References**

6. [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/animism](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/animism)
10. Ibid