

AN EVALUATION ON THE COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHERS, ETHNO HISTORIANS ACCOUNT ON THE HISTORY OF THE BODOS OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

In the Polyglot Assam, the Bodos form a very numerous sections among many groups of speakers and are believed to be the earliest settlers of Assam. They welded power at various places with varying names and capitals at Pragjyotishpur, Sonitpur, Sadiya, Dimapur, Maibong, Khaspur (Haritkar) and Koch Behar. They are found in the Brahmaputra valley, the Barak valley, North Bengal and Nepal. They constitute an important group of Indo-Mongoloid population of eastern India and Nepal. Various groups of people in various places call them in different names which they have retained as Boro, Kachari, Mech, Lalung (Tiwa) and Dimasa in Assam, Garo in Meghalaya and Tiperrah in Tripura. Some sections of these tribes become Hindus and speak language other than Bodo considering their status to be higher are known as Koch. Numerous historical testimonies like the historical monuments, names of rivers, names of places and villages proved that once upon a time the Bodos were the most dominant group and they were the only numerous population of entire north east India but now they are segregated in several ethnic groups. Due to lack of written character, there is the dearth of historical records except Rajmala of Tiperrah kings and some remnants of historical information found in the Buranjis of the Ahom kings. However, some section of scholars who dealt with the history of the Bodo depended on information left by colonial writers and other sources.

Key Words: *Asura, Bodo, Danava, Ethnographer, Ethnohistorian, Mech, Mleccha etc.*

INTRODUCTION:

Assam is a home to many races and many linguistic groups of people with distinct cultures. The Bodos or Kacharis who forms very numerous sections of these groups believed to be the earliest settlers of Assam. They had established powerful kingdom in many places with capitals at Pragjyotishpur, Sonitpur, Sadiya, Dimapur and

then at Maibong and Khaspur (Haritkar) and Koch Behar in the historical times spreading over the Brahmaputra valley, north Bengal and Tripura. They constitute an important group of Indo-Mongoloid people of East India. Those people who lived in scattered hamlets along the foothills of Himalayas in North East India and Brahmaputra valley called themselves Boro or Bodo although they are known as Kacharis in the Assam valleyⁱ. A section of this tribe who had gradually become Hindus speaking Assamese and considered their status to be higher than that of Kacharis were known as the Koch.ⁱⁱ In Brahmaputra valley, the greatest concentration of the Bodo tribe is in the district of Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Darrang, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Goalpara and Nowgaonⁱⁱⁱ. They also skirted the southern bank of Brahmaputra and occupied the Garo Hills where the Garos still show close affinity with them. In the borders of North Cachar hills and Dimapur, there are two distinct groups known as Dimasas and Meches who also called themselves as Bodo or Kachari. In the range of hill south of the Surma valley there are the Tipperahs whose language is a branch of the ancient Bodos^{iv}.

The colonial writers recorded many accounts on entire tribes of the North East India on language, economy, tradition and culture. The linguistic survey reports and anthropological studies are worthy of mention. After considering linguistic affinities of entire tribes of North East India colonial ethnographers or colonial writers made broad divisions like Bodo-Garo group, Kuki-Naga group and Arunachali tribes. The Bodo-Garo group is the largest group in terms of numeracy of their populations. The colonial ethnographers studied linguistic affinities of the Kacharis or the Bodos with the Garos as well as the tribes known under different names such as Dhimal, Chutiyas, Koches, Rabhas, Meches, Lalungs, Sonowal etc and colonial writers opined the possibility of existence of some ethnological relationship between those tribes^v.

THE BODO-GARO GROUP:

The generic term 'Bodo' is applied to all peoples speaking Tibeto-Burman group of languages like the Boros, Dimasas, Lalungs and Sonowals of the Brahmaputra valley, Meches and Rabhas of lower Assam and West Bengal, the Garos of Garo hills of Meghalaya and the Tipperahs of Tripura. The term 'Kachari' is also used as generic term like the 'Bodo'. The Boro-kachari, Dimasa-kachari, Lalung-kachari, Sonowal-kachari etc may be cited as examples^{vi}. For the Bodo group of people who dwelt in the Terai-sub montane tract under the hills of Bhutan, B.H.Hodgson, for the first time, took the term 'Bodo' for they called themselves 'Boro-ni-fisa' son of Boro, sons of man^{vii}. So, 'Bodo' word is of recent origin and it was he who first popularized it in his Essays on 'the Koches, Bodo and Dhimal tribes' published in 1847 which was confirmed by G.A. Grierson in his 'Linguistic Survey of India' Vol. III Part-II, 1903. He says, "the generic term Bodo was first applied by Hodgson to this group of languages". Nevertheless, this same Bodos of North Bengal and lower part of Assam are still

known as 'Meches'^{viii}. Colonial writers have put forward divergent views on the origin, derivation and denotation of the word Mech. Anderson asserted that the same Bodo tribes of North Bengal was given the name 'Mech' by their Bengali neighbours^{ix}. Francis M. Hermanns contended that the name 'Mech' was an original designation and not a derivation of the Sanskrit word 'Mleccha'^x. He also holds the view that since the Meches first resided on the bank of river Mechi in Nepal, their name has been derived from the Mechi River and known as Mechi, Mechia or Meches^{xi}. This contention can be corroborated by opinions of other scholars like C.C. Sanyal who, on origin of the name Mech, said that a section of the Bodos in course of their movement in Assam, moved towards the west along the foothills of the Himalayas up to the river Mechi between India and Nepal, settled down along the bank of the river and were called Mech after the name of the river^{xii}. R. M. Nath opines that the Meches derived their name from Mecha, the name of an area within the Bod country in Tibet^{xiii}. The basis of his opinion is that many scholars argue that from a centre East of Tibet, the Bodo-Garo tribes dispersed and entered India through Nepal^{xiv}. The Muslim Nawabs like Bakhtiyar Khilji of Bengal made several incursions into Assam during medieval period of Indian history and they were accompanied by their court chroniclers who left several interesting accounts of their expeditions and the people of Assam. Among those chroniclers Minhaj ud-din Siraj in his Tobaqat-e-Nasiri mentions the name of Mech as early as in 13th century along with Koch and Tharu^{xv}. Hermanns's contention is more tenable and acceptable so far as the connotation and derivation of the word 'Mech' is concerned. According to W.W. Hunter "Boros are known as Mech in the western part of the Eastern Duars district; but in the more eastern part they are called indiscriminately as Mech or Kachari and again further east, in Assam, they are called by the name of Kachari alone, losing their name of Mech altogether"^{xvi}. Rev. S. Endle divided the Kacharis into -western, eastern and southern Kacharis^{xvii}. On the other hand, views and opinions expressed by a group of Indian scholars differed substantially from the views of the colonial ethnographers or colonial writers in many respects. Most probably, some of this group of scholars who are well conversant with the Sanskrit literatures and has more inclination towards using Vedic and Puranic literary sources for their works. N.N. Vasu in his 'Social History of Kamrupa' maintains that the word 'Mech' is abbreviated from the Sanskrit word 'Mleccha' and belonged to Asura dynasty^{xviii}. He picked up the Sanskrit word 'Mleccha' and equated it with word 'Mech', the tribes name. Although Mleccha and Mech are two different words with different meaning and connotation. 'Mleccha' is a term commonly used by the Aryans in their Vedic scriptures to indicate the non-Aryan people as barbarians of whatever race or colour^{xix}, foreigners and impure. They referred those people who were not within the fold of Aryans cultures and races who were less civilised in ancient times as Mleccha or barbarins^{xx}. Among the Mlecchas are listed the Yavanas-the Greeks, Sakas, Scythians, Kushanas and later who came from west Asia-Arabs^{xxi} and people living along the frontiers of Indo-Aryan speech-Kambojas, Pahlvas (Dravidians) and Kiratas (Tibeto-Burman areas)^{xxii}, all they come under the ambit of the word 'Mleccha'.

Some renown scholars like B.K.Baruaexpresses the view that the word ‘Mech’ is simply a corruption of the Sanskrit word Mleccha^{xxiii}, which means foreigners, barbarians, impure or unclean, and also means ‘without caste’^{xxiv}(Non-Aryans). S.K. Chatterjee, G.A. Grierson also suggested that the word Mech is probably a corruption of the Sanskrit ‘Mleccha’ in the sense of foreigner, stranger^{xxv}. and Rev. S. Endle also suggested the same view. But the contention that the word ‘Mech’ is abbreviated from the Sanskrit word ‘Mleccha’ appears to be unacceptable and untenable as those two terms have different meaning and connotation.

BOROS IN ANCIENT PERIOD:

The Hindu scriptures referred to modern Meches or the Bodosas Danavas, Asuras, Kiratas and Mlecchasin ancient times. In the History of Assam, the Meches were the most numerous and ethnologically the most important group of people as those people had moulded and shaped the History of Pragjyotishpura and Kamrupa. Many scholars or historians put their arguments after borrowing sources of information from the records in the Epics- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata that in the North Eastern frontier kingdom of India a Mleccha territory ruled by the Bodo kings, referred to as Danavas and Asuras by the Aryans of the Gangetic valley, was known as Pragjyotisha and later as Kamrupa^{xxvi}. N.N. Vasu says, “in the History of Kamrupa we find evidence of the rise of the Mleccha or Asura dynasty even during the ascendancy of the Aryans”^{xxvii}. All those scholars picked up their contentions from the stories occurred in many Tantric, Puranic and the Vedic Scriptures. All such Puranic or Tantric stories composed by the Vedic bards depict the symbolic condemnation of all people of non-Aryan descent and were portrayed as uncultured or uncivilised. Naraka was said to be the founding ruler of the Bhauma dynasty of Pragjyotisha^{xxviii}. In the later post Vedic texts such as Brahma Purana and Vishnu Purana, he was said to be the son of Bhudevi^{xxix} fathered by the Varaha incarnation of Vishnu^{xxx}. In the 10th century Kalika Purana written in Kamarupa itself, he is claimed to have come from Mithila (Videha) to rule over the country of Mlecchas (non-Aryans) at Pragjyotishpura after overthrowing the last of the Kirata king Ghatakasura of Danava dynasty^{xxxi}. The legend of Naraka assumed importance in the history of Kamarupa as Narakasura is cited frequently as the progenitor of all three dynasties of Salasthamba, Varman and Pala those ruled Kamarupa in historical times^{xxxii}. He is also associated with the Hindu shakti goddess Kamakhya^{xxxiii}. So far as the sources discussed above is concerned, Naraka of Bhauma dynasty was an Aryan descent (civilized), but the pious Naraka became possessed by evil spirit when he came under the influence of another Asura King named Banasura of Sonitpur^{xxxiv/xxxv}. He was depicted even as extreme incivility of proposing, discourteously, to marry his own revered Goddess Kamakhya whom he had been worshipping with reverence^{xxxvi}.

Once Naraka motivated by his desire, wanted to marry Devi Kamakhya. When proposed, the Goddess playfully put a condition before him that if he would be able to build a staircase from the bottom of the Nilachal hill to the temple within one night before the cock crows to indicate dawn, then she would surely marry him. Naraka took it as a challenge and tried all with his might to do this huge task. He was almost about to accomplish the job before it was dawn. When Kamakhya Devi got this news, panic stricken she strangled a cock and made it crow untimely to give the impression of dawn to Naraka. Duped by the trick even Naraka thought that it was a futile job and left it half way through. Later, he chased the cock and killed it. Now the place is known as Kukurakata situated in the district of Darrang. The incomplete staircase is known as Mekhelauja Path^{xxxvii}.

Such story occurs in Kalika Purana written in 10-11th century is a Bardic construction with a view to showing the non-acceptability of the culture that was prevalent among the Mleccha (non-Aryan) populations. It is said that Naraka of Bhauma dynasty after coming into close association with another Asura or Mleccha ruler, Banasur of Sonitpur he assumed demonic thought which prompted him to made demoniac proposal to marry his own revered Goddess. While composing such Puranic or Tantric stories, the Vedic Bards used epithets Asura, Danava and Mleccha to denote the people of non-Aryan descents and portray them as uncivilised and uncultured construction.

As the meaning, connotation, and denotation of words ‘Asura’, ‘Danava’ and ‘Mleccha’ and the sense in which they were used lead one to conclude that they were derogatory words. The borrowing of such derogatory terms and usages as epithets along with the names of the kings of the non-Aryan descent set as glaring examples of portraying the people of non-Aryan descents as uncivilized while reconstructing their history. In the history books it is said that according to traditions, the earliest king of the Meches or Boros was Mahiranga Danava^{xxxviii}. The next king was Ghatak Asura. He was defeated and slain by another Asura named Narak Asura from Videha. After Narak Asura was slain by Krishna, his son Bhagadatta was installed as a king of Pragjyotishpura as mentioned in the Mahabharata^{xxxix}. The Mahabharata bluntly declares Bhagadatta as a Mlecchanan Adhipati i.e. the ruler of Mlecchas. H.C. Ray says, “if there is any historical fact in the description of the great Epic then it is reasonable to regard Bhagadatta as a prince of the non-Aryan Tibeto-Chinese races, referred to as Cinas, Kiratas in ancient Indian literature”^{xl}. The study of such fragmentary information it becomes crystal clear that the mythological kings of Assam and parts of Bengal racially belonged to the Mech or Bodo people. The epithets in question as Asura, Danava and Mleccha again surpass here as these are tagged with the King’s name like Mahiranga Danava. Would the kings who ruled with pride and honour ever choose such derogatory epithets for

them consciously? Indeed, all these disdainful epithets are tagged with the names of those kings while reconstructing their histories by the Ethno-historians consciously or unconsciously even in modern times.

The political history of the Meches or the Boros became comparatively clear from the 4th Century A.D., because from that period we get some authentic sources like SIYUKI of Hiuen Tsiang, Banabhatta's Harsha Charita, Nidhanpur and Doobi copper plate grants. SIYUKI and Harsha Charita firmly established the year of the reign of Bhaskarvarman from which Dr. P N Bhattacharya calculated the period of Pushyavarman's reign in the middle of the fourth century AD^{xli}. Harsha Charita also refers to the friendship of Bhaskarvarman and the Harsha Vardhana of Thanes war which described their friendship as 'undying association'^{xlii}. Nidhanpur grant of land to the Brahmanas of the locality was made by Bhaskarvarman to commemorate the triumphant entry into the capital of Karnasuvarna, the present modern districts of Burdwan, Birbhum and Murshidabad^{xliii}. According to the Doobi copper plate grant of Bhaskarvarman, Pushyavarman was the first king of Pragjyotishpura whose lineage was traced to Naraka of Bhauma dynasty^{xliv}. The Bargaon Copper-Plate grant of Ratnapala records that after the descendents of Naraka had ruled Kamarupa for several generations, a great chief of the mlecch as took possession of the kingdom^{xlv}. He was Salasthambhawho was a Mech by race who shifted the capital from Pragjyotishpur to Sonitpur and built a Shiva temple^{xlvi}. Kumar Bhaskarvarman was one of the kings of Bhagadatta line in whose reign the famous Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsiang visited Kamrupa in 643 A.D. From the writings of Hiuen Tsiang we get some ethnological information of the inhabitants of Kamrupa in the days when Bhaskarvarman was the king of Kamarupa. S.K. Chatterjee quotes from the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsiang's account of the people of Kamarupa, "the Mongoloid character of the people of the country is clearly noted by the Chinese writer; the men are of small stature and their complexion a dark yellow; their language differ a little from that of mid-India"^{xlvii}. These are the historical facts which can be corroborated by authentic sources and clearly indicate that the kings under discussion were all belonged to non-Aryan people referred to as Cinas, Kiratas, Asuras, Danava, Mlecchas etc.

BOROS IN MODERN PERIOD:

In modern period, a clearer written History of the Boros and the Koches can be found from the colonial writings. The once powerful kingdom of Kamrupa is now represented by the Kings of KochBehar, Bijni, Darrang (Mongoldoi) and Beltola. During the colonial period the colonial ethnographers like S.Endle divided the Kacharis into western, eastern and southern Kacharis^{xlviii}. The earliest notices of the eastern Kacharis were those of the Chutiyas. They had established a powerful kingdom on the bank of the River Subansiri in the present Sadiya region. Another branch of the Kacharis was ruling over a region west of Sadiya, east of Dikhaumukh under one

Manik Kachari. He was originally a small chieftain over twelve Kachari families who later on subdued the surrounding villages and became famous with the title 'Kachari Raja'^{xlix}. At the same time, the southern Kacharis under Susengpha were also ruling over the strips of land between Dikhau and Dhansiri River with their capital at Dimapur.

Sukapa of the great Shan or Tai race from Upper Burma (Myanmar), the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam came to Assam in 1228 A.D. after crossing Patkai hills. In 1229 A.D., he was able to establish friendship with Bodoucha, the king of Matak and Thakumtha, the king of Borahis and with other Kachari tribes after conquering and then conciliating them, Sukapawon over those tribes through mutual trust and was able to prove himself as unequal to none (Asama) from which the country, Assam got its present name¹.

Many more references can be found in the writings of the colonial ethnographers about the present Meches or the Boros of erstwhile Goalpara district, present north Bengal which was known as Eastern Duars. They were-B.C. Allen, W.W.Hunter, Bikramajit Harsat and Francis Hamilton. Bikramajit Hasrat made a comment about the Meches or Kacharis of Eastern Duars of Bengal and Assam. He says, "the Meches were a hard-working tribe and paid to the subah, the revenue in kind- rice, cloths, betel-nuts, cotton, butter and ghee"^{li}. W.W. Hunter also remarked about the poor plight of the Bodo polity. He says, "the Meches or Kacharis do not seem to have achieved any form of polity of their own; they have few traditions, no ancient songs, no monuments, no written character or no literature of any kind"^{lii}. These are some of the fragmentary information which indicates the various names for the same tribes like Asura, Danava, Mleccha, Mech, Koch, Kachari, Bodo or Boro which have been used by the administrative Historians, ethnographers, anthropologists while compiling various administrative reports and census enumeration on the Bodos.

The Bodo Kings, since the advent of the Aryans into the country of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa came under the influence of the Brahmanical Hinduism and became converts to it. In the process of Hinduisation, the Brahmins played a significant role in establishing the divine origin of kingship to claim assumed Kshatriya status for legitimising their power. The creation of myth for the purpose resulted in the universalisation of culture^{liii}. In the earlier occasions, only the ruling clique became proselytes, the common subject people remain untouched due either to Brahmins' lack of interest for converting the common subjects because it proved to be unyielding enterprise for them or the observance or the celebration of Brahmanical rites and rituals remain confined as the Kingly daily affairs. But when the Bhakti Movement in the form of Neo-Vaisnavism was preached by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam the common Bodo tribes became proselytes in large scale after giving their ancestral religious practices and languages up in favour of Eka-Sarana-Nama Dharma and Assamese language. This

process of transformation continued vigorously during 18th and 19th centuries so much so that the population of the Bodo speakers dwindled to a great extent. In the words of Sir Edward Gait, 'the Bodo dialects, though still spoken in Assam by more than half a million persons, are in their turn giving way to Aryan languages (Assamese and Bengali) and their complete disappearance is only a matter of time'^{liv}.

CONCLUSION:

Originally epithets- Asura, Danava and Mleccha are undoubtedly the derogatory words as they are being used in derogatory sense to denote the populations who are outside the pale of Aryan civilisation. It is seen that in modern times while reconstructing the histories of the mythological age such derogatory words as Asura, Danava and Mleccha are being borrowed up from the Vedic scriptures, Purana and Tantra sources by ethnographers and ethno-historians to denote the kings and the people of non-Aryan descent who had successfully moulded power and ruled their country with pride, honour and reputation. The epithets Asura, Danava are being tagged with names of the kings and dynasties of non-Aryan descent such as Mahiranga Danava and Ghatakasura^{lv} of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa. Vedic, Puranic or Tantric scriptures used words Asura, Danava and Mleccha in denotative context but question arises why the modern scholars are still adopting the process of 'pick up and use' of words under discussion in the same denotative context instead of indicative sense. Words Asura, Danava and Mleccha were used in the context of cultural and linguistic barrier between Aryan and non-Aryan people in the Vedic scriptures and also in later puranic and tantric literatures which are borrowed by some scholars of modern times to denote the kings and dynasties of non-Aryan descent.

The use of the words Asura, Danava and Mleccha have adverse impact on the present Mech tribes (Bodo). Interestingly, sometimes, if a Bodo could accomplish some kind of a demonic work he would take pride of having hailed from Asuravangsa. The equation of the Mleccha with word Mech, the tribe's name had a haunting impact on the Meches as they took the term to be derogatory as the word was used in derogatory sense by the Hindu neighbours. Now the Mech tribes on their part have internalised the derogatory sense of the word 'Mech' among them and as a result they felt embarrassed if they were called by the name 'Mech'. The traditional *Bathou* religion of the Bodos was also called the 'Mech Dharma'.

As such, the Bodos who gained awareness had perceived shameful of the tribes' social and religious practices and in order to escape from the disparaging treatment meted out to them by other neighbouring communities; they tried to convert to other established religions after leaving behind their own fellow tribesmen. Many Bodo tribes, in the undivided Kamrup, Darrang and Nogaon districts, had converted into the Ek-Sarana

Nama Dharma of Mahapurush Sankardeva and now they are known as the Saranias. Many of them had converted into Christianity too.

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