CHAPTER VII

THE DEITIES OF THE BODO-KACHARIS

Introduction

The Bodos or the Bodo-Kacharis claim themselves to be largest in number among the schedule tribes people of Assam. Their population, according to the statistical Hand Book of Assam, 1978, is six lakhs ten thousand four hundred fifty nine (6, 10, 459) in Assam. They are living in the both banks of the river Brahmaputra. Some Bodos are found in Cachar District too. They are known as Bodo, Kachari, Mech, Dimecha, Sonowal-Kachari in different places. The popular word to indicate the tribe is Bodo-Kachari. Their concentration is remarkable in our area of study. The tribe has experienced some changes in their religious out look. Some of them have adopted Hinduism, some christianity and lately Kalicharan Brahmacari has preached a new religion known as 'Brahma' which is akin to Hinduism. Yet, a good number of people are retaining their traditional religion. Bathyu is their principal deity. He is identified with Siva. They worship tree, rivers, rocks, animals etc. and some supernatural gods and godlings. To quote Rev. Endle, "In the typical Kacchari village as a rule neither idol nor place of worship is to be
found; but to the Kachari mind and imagination earth, air
and sky are alike peopled with a vast number of invisible
spiritual beings, known usually as "Modai" all possessing
powers and faculties far greater than those of man and
almost invariably inclined to use these powers for malignant
and malevolent, rather than benevolent purposes.¹ Now-a-days
temples dedicated in the name of Baitha are being constructed.
In some Kachari villages some thatched huts known as Than Salia,
are found. These Than Salia are used for congregational worship.
Rev. Endle has divided the Kachari deities as Nani Modai
(household deities) and Gami Modai (village gods).² He has
referred to Maulavi Mahinuddin Ahmed, who, in an interesting
paper, mentioned nineteen names of household deities and sixty-five names of village deities. Perhaps Ahmed's study was
confined to the Darrang District only. From our practical
experience, it is difficult to make a distinction of the
deities as the same deity is worshipped as household and
village deity in some places. Moreover, forest deities are
known as Kegiani maday and deities of the water Daini maday.

It has already been mentioned that the Bodos are
concentrated in the both banks of the river Brahmaputra. The

¹. Rev. Endle. The Kachari, p. 33.
². Rev. Endle. ibid, p. 38.
Bodos of the south bank have not heard some deities who are worshipped in the north bank and vice-versa. As for example, the Bodos of the South Bank worship Langa, a Rabha deity who is not familiar with the Bodos of the north bank. It may be due to co-habitation with the neighbouring people. The place of annual worship is demarcated as Garja Suli in the north bank and that of than Suli in the south bank. The Kacharir of south bank do not perform Garja Puja where as, it is an annual function of the people of North Bank. Sri B. Narzi has given a vivid description of the Garja Puja which is the yearly concluding function of the Bodos. It is not the worship of a particular deity; it is the worship of all the deities. In the Garja Puja about sixteen original deities of the Bodos and about twelve Hindu and Muslim deities (Harpa meday) are propitiated. The purpose of the Puja is the welfare of the villagers and to wash off the sins which some body may commit knowingly or unknowingly.3

Another popular religious festival of the Bodos is Kherai. Kherai is closely connected with the Bishnupur. Dr. S.K. Chatterjee has mentioned in his valuable book Kirata-Samskriti, that the Tiprais observed a ritual called Ker Puja.

which appears to be a ritual in honour of the Earth-goddess and the creation. The Kherai is also observed for the welfare of the corns and as such, there may be some link with the Kar or Kher Puja of the Tripuris who belong to the same Bodo stock. The Bodos observe three types of Kherai. These are Ayu Kherai, Seli Kherai and Kherai for curing undiagnosed diseases.

*Ayu Kherai* is held in the month of Ahar or Sason (July-August) at dark dead night and *Seli Kherai* in the month of Kati (October-November). There is no specific time for the Kherai observed for detection and curing diseases. The following articles are required for the Kherai:

(a) a pair of pigeons, (b) a chicken, (c) a cock (d) a pig (e) a pair of eggs (f) unboiled rice powder (g) Three pieces of *Bijuli* bamboo with their top uncut (h) a branch of *Biju* tree (*uphorbia*) (i) a *Tulasi* tree (j) nineteen pairs of *Kahi* weeds (k) nineteen pairs of fruit of the lily flower (l) areca-nuts and betel leaves (m) two bunches of banana (n) Vermillion (o) country liquor, and (p) weapons, namely ditch and swords.

As regards to Kherai the following lines of Sri M.M. Brahma are noteworthy "Kherai is the greatest religious

festival of the Bodes. It is performed in the form of worship in conjunction with dance and songs with a view to propitiating Siva, Maina and other deities for their good harvest and for their protection from misfortune. The oja (priest) recites Mantras and Dewini (Deodhani) speaks oracles in Kharai. Revellers sing and dance around the Bathau to the accompaniment of drums and siphung (flute) for the whole night. Sacrifices of birds and oblation of fruits, rice and wine are imperative in Kharai.

From the above discussion the following points may be noted:

(a) That Kharai is a socio-religious festival

(b) That Bathau (Siva ?) is the principal deity and along with him other deities are propitiated.

(c) That Shamanistic dance is associated with Kharai.

(d) Sacrifice of animals, and offering of wine, fruits etc. are indispensable.

(e) That songs and dances are part and parcel of the festival.

(f) And the festival is held for good harvests and welfare of the villagers.

Some are of opinion that Kherai is the only festival of the Bodos through which the Bodo culture is depicted. Like other tribes, there is no priestly class among the Bodos. A person who knows the methods and their traditional rites of the Puja, is appointed for the performance. He is called gis or gauri.

The meaning of the word Kherai in Bodo language is to pray to god by kneeling down (khe means kneel down, ra means to utter, i means god)

Now we shall make an attempt to describe some of the Bodo-Kasheri deities and their methods of worship.

1. Bathau/Gilā Dambra/Kheriya Berai/Sri Berai or Sibrai

Bathau is the supreme deity of the Bodos. His other names are Gila, Dambra, Kheriya Berai, Sri Berai or Sibrai etc. In every Bodo family earthen altar of Bathau is found. The deity is represented by a Siju (Euphorbia cactus) tree. The surrounding of the altar is fenced by split bamboo in a peculiar way. Earthen lamp is lighted every evening under the Siju tree. The deity is worshipped by the family on the eve of any suspicious occasion such as marriage, annaprashan etc. He is conceived to be the protector from all calamities. Besides worshipping individually, Bathau is worshipped annually
by the village folk. Bathau is not worshipped singularly, but always injunction with Mainao.

Now we shall try to give a description of congregational annual worship of Bathau. At first a place is selected at a little distance of the village preferably, under a big tree. The place is made clean by removing the grass or other jungle. Required quantity of earth is brought from the nearby hill to make the altar. The altar is about two feet broad and one foot high. On the left side of the altar a small path is constructed. The altar is made round and fenced by nine into five pieces of split bamboo. Then purified water is sprinkled on the altar. A branch of Siyu tree is planted. Beside the Siyu tree another branch of Tulasi tree is also planted. A round stone and an egg of a hen are kept under the planted Siyu branch offering to the deity varies place to place and the number of other deities who are propitiated along with Bathau also varies. In Kherai a pig is sacrificed in the name of Bathau and the blood of the beheaded animal is taken by the Deodhani. The severed head is offered to the deity. Pork curry prepared without salt, and mixing turmeric, spices, chilli etc. is offered. In some places (Kamrup) rice of Jaha paddy and curry of awa pulses are offered.

The meaning of the word Bathau, in Bodo language is five tatvas (ba means five and 'thau' means tatva) Some
The scholars of Bodo tribe have been trying to give a new interpretation to Bathau and his altar on the basis of Hindu cosmology and cosmogony. According to them, the five tattvas are earth (Ma), water (Qi), fire (Ag) air (Bro), and sky (Nakhram) or void (Lathukha). There is a belief among the Bodo that five Gurus (Super human) had taught the Bodoes how to worship Bathau and to observe social customs. The five Gurus are Aham Guru, Nanging Sing, Enathana and Phantscha Guru. Aham Guru was responsible for introducing the method of worship of Bathau. So, in any kind of worship, the Deuris utter the name of Aham in initial. Nanging Sing Guru introduced the social customs of the Bodoes. Ena Guru introduced the process of purification of a newly born baby. Even now, the Bodoes, just after the birth of a child, a piece of earth shaped round, an egg, little portion of rice, leaves of Tulasi, a pair of betel nuts and betel leaves tied with a bundle of Kahi grass by aya thread and are thrown the above articles into a river or big pond. Then the baby is bathed in the river or pond. Khana Guru taught the method of marriage. Phantscha guru introduced some rules of conduct for them who commit social crime.

The altar of the Bathau bears some significance. It is called Madah in Bodo language. The round shape of the altar indicates the roundness of the earth. It has already
been mentioned that a bamboo fencing is made round the altar. The erected split bamboos are ten or fifteen or sixteen or eighteen in number. The ten in number is associated with the ten incarnations of the Hindu mythology or the ten corners of the earth or the ten Indriyas (Sentiments) of the physiology. The fifteen number indicates the fifteen tithis of the month or fifteen gods and goddesses whom they call Panaariva and Panaarivanti. The sixteen erected split bamboos signify the sixteen families of the Bodo whose deities are propitiated along with Bathau. The eighteen in number indicate the eighteen Garima, the village deities, the Puranas of the Hindus etc.

It is interesting to note that a portion of the erected split bamboos is put under the earth and it is split into two to the point of touching the earth. The Bodo interprets it as day and night, man and woman, heaven and earth and sun and moon. The unsplit portion which is put under the earth is supposed to be the ultimate one, the soul or the great soul or the treasure house. Three or five split bamboos are put horizontally on the altar of the Bathau. According to their interpretation number three indicates heaven, earth and nether regions, Brahma, Visnu Maheswara, breast, belly and human skeleton and Satva, raja and Tama.
The Bodos generally construct their house containing three rooms. Similarly, the number five also interpreted as follows: five elements, five joints of the human body, five scales of the am fruit and five edges of the Siju tree, five holes of a flute etc.

The Siju tree, planted on the altar symbolised as Bathau i.e. Siva. Two thorns earring out of the branch of the tree indicate male and female, day and night etc. Five edges of the Siju branch indicate the five elements.

Planting of Tulasi tree on the altar symbolises goddess of the granary (Maing). After the above description as regards to the identity, method of worship and the theological interpretation forwarded by some scholar, the following points may be noted.

(i) Bathau is symbolised by Siju tree
(ii) Egg and stone are placed on the altar
(iii) Animal sacrifice is a must
(iv) Shamanistic dance is indispensable
(v) Offering of Jhan rice and Kay dal in some places besides other articles.
(vi) Bathau is identified with Siva.
Let us now discuss the above points. Plantation of Si1u tree to symbolise Bathau may be a reminiscence of the tree worship. Moreover, there is a legend among the Bedos that the creator at first created the Si1u tree. It is the common belief of the tribal people or of the Hindus that trees are the abodes of some gods and goddesses. Even now some big trees are supposed to be the symbol of some gods and goddesses. As such, the Bedos symbolise the tree to be their god Bathau.

Eggs and stones are perhaps connected with the productivity.

Shamanistic dance or Drodhani nac is an old practice of magical religion.

Animal sacrifice is an indication of the old method of worship.

Offering of jaha rice and Aep pulse cury in some places, is perhaps the influence of Vaishnavism or of their new Brahma religion. All these explanations and interpretations are put forth by the modern educated people of the Bedos. Bathau is undoubtedly an indigenous deity of the tribe. His identification with Siva may be a recent idea. It is also an exception that originally a matri-lineal tribe worship male god.

2. Nainao Nabthaftsri

Nainao/Naothansri is the household deity of the Bodos. She is revered next to Bethau. The eastern most room of the main house of a (Nama na') Bodo family, is called Isina where food is prepared. On the northern side of the woven an altar of mud about two inches in height is made. From the left of the altar there are thepasa for Nainao, Kamakhya and Bethau. A small road is made to demarcate the altar and the woven. Before the Thepasa of Nainao a jug full of rice is kept for family consumption. Inside the jug two pieces of round stone are kept. One stone represents Bethau and the other Nainao. In time of taking rice for preparation at first the jug is revered with devotion.

In Khorai Puja Nainao occupies an important place. She is propitiated lastly. A pig is sacrificed in the name of Nainao and offered to her in raw. The deadhapi dances a peculiar dance known as Nainao Bakhanonav. In the prayer it is invoked that mother goddess must visit their house. They cannot live without her presence. She is their life and hope. She will be placed on a Pira of gold and silver in the ichina and will be prayed in the morning and evening. Then the deadhapi who is overpowered by the goddess will speak
"You sons, let go. I shall stay in your house. You worship me every day. You will be prosperous." 7

There is a folk tale in vogue among the Bodos how Rainao becomes a household deity. Rainao was the sister of Dekhalu and Rangnalu. She was very fond of them. Once they went to far distant place for business. They constructed a cottage by the bulk of am fruit for Rainao. They advised her not to get out of the cottage. Her sister-in-laws being jealous of her, killed her by a Dhenki and floated in the river. She was rescued and resuscitated by a king named Dausha. Ultimately she met her brothers on their way home. Failed to ever some some tests her two sister-in-laws were killed by their husbands for killing Rainao. Then she was married to Santhai, the creator. From that time she got a place in the Ising of the Bodos and received invocation from the devotees. 8

The deity is identified with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and corn of the Hindu pantheon.

The meaning of the word Mai in Bodo dialect is paddy and nao to watch over. Rev. Endle has described as follows: Her special function is that of Guardian of the rice fields;

and among a purely agricultural community like that of the Kacharis, she is of course is held in very high regard. She is, in short, to the Kachari peasant very much what cere was to the old heathen Roman cultiver. 9

Mention is made of two Mainos in Kherai puja. They are Asu and Sali. These two varieties of paddy are cultivated in Assam. So for the welfare and protection of the crops the deity is propitiated.

If we carefully observe the death and resurrection of Maine as narrated in the folk tale mentioned above, the death may signify the harvest of the crops and resurrection the seedling.

Mailu-ma is the goddess of rice of the Tipras. The deity is identified with goddess Laksmi. 10 Maino of the Bodos and the Mailu-ma of the Tipras seem to be the same goddess.

3. Ailang

Ailang is the body guard of Bathau. The deity is worshipped by sacrificing a cock. A peculiar dance known as "Khafri chapanay" is danced in honour of him. The deodhani

taking a sword in her hand a disc on her left and exhibits a dance seemed to be connected with war.

4. Āgrang

Āgrang is the commander-in-chief of Bathau. A goat is sacrificed before him. The blood and head of the beheaded animal are offered.

5. Khelā

He is the messenger of Bathau. A cock is sacrificed to propitiate him. A dance called Ḫeṭa Ḫhāpā Ḫāpā is danced in his honour.

6. Āblā Khungur

Āblā Khungur is a powerful deity. A pig is sacrificed and its head along with a jug of country liquor is offered. The dance Chha galao Banay is danced by the deodhani.

7. Rājkhandrā

He is the grand son of Bathau. The deodhani exhibits a dance called Ḫhāma Ṭarkhona in his honour. A pig is sacrificed.
8. Sangraja and Sangrani or Jamon Jola and Jamon Bura

Sangraja and Sangrani are both husband and wife. They are very powerful deities. They are the deities of the animals. If they are propitiated, the hunters easily get their game. Moreover, they protect the human beings and domestic animals from the claws of the ferocious wild animals. In some places they are named as Kheksa Goral and Kheksa Buri or Sangchaliya maday. In Gerja Puja they are known as Jamon Jola and Jamon Bura. A red cock is sacrificed before them in Kherai Puja.

9. Manash

Manash is the name of a river. The river is known as Manash in Assamese. The river occupies a distinct place among the deities propitiated in Kherai Puja. It is a powerful deity in the mind of the Bodos. To please the deity areca-nuts and betel leaves are offered and a dance called Gondalia Banney is danced by the Deodhani.

10. Alay Kungri/Bilay Khungri

They are the daughters of Bathau. They are worshipped by sacrificing a pig.
11. Barli Buri

Barli Buri is perhaps, the river Bharali. The Bodos regard it as a deity of medicine and magical charms. No medicine or charm is effective if the deity is not pleased. A pig is sacrificed in her name in the Kherai Puja and the head and part of body of the sacrificed animal are offered to the deity. She is sometimes worshipped individually, when somebody suffers. Then a pair of black pigeons is sacrificed. She is called Khaohuli Buri when she is worshipped privately.

12. Kumari or Yokhini

When some one suffers from vomiting or diarrheaa, the Bodos believe that he or she is overpowered by Kumari. This is an evil spirit. A chicken is sacrificed before her.

13. Laokhar Gohai

Laokhar Gohai is the god of cowherd. The Bodos have adopted the deity from Hinduism. The deity is identified with Sri Krsna. A pair of pigeons is to be freed in his name.

14. Rancandi and Ran Pagli

Rancandi and Ran Pagli are the two forms of the same deity candi or kecakhaiti. The Bodos regard her with intense
devotion. The *daodhani* dance a war dance called *chatraoli*. She walks over a sharp sword and dances. It is believed that the *daodhani* is overpowered by the goddess herself. A cock is sacrificed before the deity and the blood of the killed bird is taken by the *daodhani*. A curry is prepared from the flesh of the bird and offered it to the deity.

15. Nabāb Badsāh

Nabāb Badsah is a Muslim deity. His altar placed in the western side of the Bathau. A cock is offered cutting it in Muslim custom and the Dauri utters the word "Bismillah". He wears his *Qhati* like a *Lungi*.

The Bodoa propitiate some evil spirits or supernatural elements. When somebody suffers from any disease, it is believed that he or she is overpowered by some spirits. Any medical treatment is fruitless unless and until the spirit is propitiated. There are some particular spirits who are responsible for some particular diseases. Only the village medicine man can identify that particular spirit by using magical devices. Now we shall describe some such evil spirits who are responsible for ailments.

16. Kuwir

Kuwir, the custodian of wealth of the Hindu mythology
is an evil spirit for the Bodos. When somebody becomes victim of the spirit he/she suffers from severe pain in the belly and the breast. If the patient is a woman, a pair of areca-nuts and betel leaves are offered on a banana leaf and the patient is to sit keeping her head towards south. In case of a male, he is to sit towards north. The village medicine man sits on the back of the patient taking a red cock in his hand and chants some mantras. The mantras are "you Jal Kuvir, Mal Kuvir, Kala Kuvir, Bage Kuvir! If your sons and daughters are kicked you should remove their anger by pleasing words. We offer you areca-nuts and betal leaves. When the patient will be cured, we shall worship you". Then the cock is whirled thrice over the patient. The cock will have to be put till the puja is held.

Generally the puja is performed after the complete cure of the disease. Puja is performed at an isolated place where the children do not go. The place is made clean and pieces of areca-nuts and betel leaves offered on a banana leaf. An earthen lamp is lighted. The red cock is beheaded and its blood is offered to the spirit. It is forbidden to bring home the offered things. In some places of Kamrup a curry of flesh prepared with dhokia seek or Papala is offered.
Kuvir is a very powerful spirit of the Bodos. There are nine kinds of Kuvir namely, Jal Kuvir, Kala Kuvir, Mel Kuvir, Baga Kuvir, haladhiva kuvir, Range kuvir, Dhan kuvir, man kuvir and bi-kuvir.

17. Khathra

Khathras are some evil spirits who are harmful to human beings. The victim dreams at night that he or she is attacked by elephant or tiger or bear. Sometimes it is dreamt that he or she flies in the sky and loses actual path in the forest. The victim gradually loses his or her health and ultimately embraces death. There are five Khathras as believed by the Bodos. They are Dabamatri, modom buger nay, Dai khathra, upay Sri Khathra and Mooha chodov.

Belief in khetar or khetra is a common phenomenon of the Assamese society. In this connection the following lines of B. Rajkhowa are cited: "The word comes from the Sanskrit Ksetra, a field, which again is an abbreviation of Ksetrapala, the presiding spirit of a field. This spirit lives in an open place. He deals particularly with children. A large number of children are annually carried off by him. There is another class of Kheter, whose business is to take off a new-born calf and keep it concealed."11

(i) Dāba matri

Daba is the name of a disease. Any child up to three years of age may suffer from this disease. The disease itself a khathra to the Bodos. It is to be propitiated properly. Otherwise the child may succumb to this disease within twenty four hours. In Goalpara region when a child suffers from asthmatic trouble, the disease is called Daba.

(ii) Madā'm Bugār nay

When somebody suffers from swelling disease the khathra is to be worshipped. A knife, a pieces of wick, raisins, a bundle of hay used for preserving fire, a pair of bats, a little quantity of vermillion, a piece of charcoal, areca-nuts and betel leaves, branches of eka and digamu tree, banana leaves, branches of bamboo, red, white and black coloured threads, a coin and a toad are required for the Puja. At a little distance from the house of the patient, the puja is performed. The place is made clean and an image of human being is drawn by ashes on the banana leaf. On both sides of the image nine spots of vermillion are given. Unboiled rice and areca-nuts and betel leaves are offered on banana leaves. Other articles are kept on left side of the banana leaf.
Then the village medicine man chants some mantras in praise of the spirit.

(iii) Dai Khathra

In Bodo language Dai means water. Disease occurs due to water may be Dai khathra. Articles required for propitiation are two pairs of pigeons, a chicken, a pair of eggs, red, black and white coloured thread and flowers, vermilion, wick and leaves of Tulasi. A small rafter is made of three banana plants. The rafter is placed on a leaf of banana. Following are the names of the deities who are worshipped along with dai khathra. Garmaj-Anajmai, Janbhere-Janburi and Jahara-Jahari. A rope about three feet long is made of red, white and black threads. The rope is marked with eighteen spots of vermilion. It represents Jahara-Jahari. Bhog prepared with pigeons is offered to Bar mail Anajmai. The village medicine man chants some mantras and at the end the rafter is floated in the river.

(iv) Usaychi Khathra

To please this khathra a pair of pigeons, coins numbering eighteen, a bamboo tray having holes and nine pieces of wicks are required. Eighteen naivedyas are to be prepared on banana leaves and are placed on the tray (galani)
Nine earthen lamps are lighted and placed on the banana leaves. Then the village medicine man chants mantras by taking the pigeons in his hand.

Upaychi khethra means Khethra of the sky or air.

(v) Baghnisar

Baghnisar is responsible for any post delivery disease of the women.

18. Sālmātri

The Bodos of the southern part of the District of Goalpara have perhaps adopted the deity from their neighbouring Rabhas. The deity has been described in the chapter titled "The Deities of the Rabhas". Only reason for repetition is that the method of worship of the Bodos differs from that of the Rabhas. The Bodos make two images of straw. An earthen cooking pot is placed and an arua plant is planted in it. The straw images are kept hanging on the pot. A chicken is beheaded on the roof of the house and is thrown to the courtyard. Then the bird is baked and offered to the deity. At the end of the Puja the cooking pot is filled with water to its brim and the excess water is kept

12. See before, Ch. VIII
in two pieces of bamboos. The bamboos full with water kept over the bed where the child sleeps. If the child suffers from fever any other disease the water from the bamboo pot is sprinkled over his or her body.


Bākhra is an evil spirit. When any one suffers from severe pain in any part of the body, the Bodos think that the patient is victimised by the spirit. The symptoms of victimised are that the victim wants to drink always and a smell of black pulse (māti gah) is smelt in the body of the victim.

An image is made of banana leaves. Two thorns of jatropha tree is put in the front side of the image. An altar of mud is made. The altar is demarcated by drawing nine lines with rice powder. The nine pathali containing leaves of jatropha tree, root of banana tree, powder of black pulses and rice powder are offered. Country liquor (jwali) is also offered. Then a chicken is sacrificed. The sacrificed animal is baked and equal proportion of it is offered in every pathali. Prasad of unboiled rice and soaked gram is offered in the name of Dharmas. The Puja is held preferably at dusk. At the end of the Puja all articles are thrown at a distant
place. The Bodoa of South Goalpara call the deity Sollan Gopini.

20. Sikhau Raday

Sikhau Raday is also a spirit of disease. When somebody feels intolerable pain in the stomach, it is believed that he or she is victimised by chikhau Raday. An idol of straw is made. Dried fish and jekra rice are put in a banana leaf and making a bundle, tied on the back of the image. Then the image is drawn binding it by a rope. The person who draws the image runs and dogs are caused to bark behind it. Afterwards the image is kept binding on a post. Perhaps contagious magic is working here.