



# Origin and Migration of the Bodos of Assam

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## Abstract:

The North East India is called semi India because of its diversity. Numerous ethnic groups inhabit both the plains and hills with their diverse culture, living style and language. Within the diversity, the anthropological studies have established one common point among the tribal groups of north east India that majority of them are belonged to Mongoloid race. One of the important tribal groups of Assam is the Bodos mostly inhabit in the northern part of Brahmaputra. Bodos were called with different names like Kacharis, Mech in different places of Assam. Studies have revealed that when the Aryan people made their presence in north western part of India, numerous tribal groups had also entered India by the way of north east. As the diverse tribal groups entered in different times using different routes, it is difficult to authenticate the route and time of migration of a particular tribe from their original home place. Scholars have extended different theories in regards of time and routes of their migration as well as their original home place. Thus this paper will try to discuss the origin and migration of the Bodo tribe of Assam plains.

**Key Words: Origin, Migration, Routes, Bodo**

## Introduction:

The Bodos are one of the important tribal groups of Assam plains particularly inhabiting in the northern part of the Brahmaputra Valley. They belonged to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family of the Mongoloid race. They were often mentioned in the Indian classical writings as the *Kiratas* and *Mlechchhas*. The nomenclature of different places and rivers of the region leads to believe that the people of this race ruled the region from the pre-historic period. The word Bodo is originally a linguistic term that covers different cognate tribal groups of north-east India e.g., Kacharis, Mech, Koch, Chutiyas, Barahis, Tipperahs, Dimasas, etc. While discussing about the origin and the migration of the Bodo tribe of Assam, anthropologist, ethnographers and historians do not able to come into any unanimous decision about their origin home and time and route of their migration. The present paper will try to focus on the origin and migration of the particular tribal groups namely, Kacharis and Mech who chiefly use the term 'Bodo' and mostly inhabit in the northern part of the Brahmaputra Valley.

## Objectives of the Study:

North-East India is a home of different tribal groups inhabiting from pre-historic period. The Bodos are one of the important tribal groups among them in Assam plains inhabited particularly in the northern part of Brahmaputra. The major objectives of the present study are: (i). To find out the origin and migration of the Bodos of Assam (ii). To focus on the relation of the Bodos with different tribal groups of Mongoloid origin of the region.

## Methodology:

This paper is a study on the origin and migration of the Bodos of Assam. The present study is based on historical methodology. It is an empirical study using both the primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are collected from the archives of Assam and West Bengal and secondary sources are collected from different libraries and persons concern.

## Review of Literature:

To understand the origin and structure of the population of India as well as migration of different tribal groups, a good numbers of works have been carried out in both national and regional level. In this regards, the European Anthropologist and Ethnographers had played a pioneering role to find out diverse ethnic groups in India in general and North East India in particular. The early Population Census Reports and Linguistic Survey Reports of India are also useful in studying the origin, ethnicity and migration. In national level, we have a good number of works like- *The People of India*(1908) by Sir Herbert Hope Risley, *The Kacharis* (1911) by Sidney Endle, *The Angami Nagas with some notes on Neighbouring Tribes* (1921) by John Henry Hutton, "The

Racial Affinities of the People of India” in *Census Report of India*, Vol. I, P. III, 1931 by B. S. Guha, *Races and Cultures of India* (1944) by D. N. Majumdar, *Cast of India: Its Nature, Function and Origin* (1946) by John Henry Hutton, *Kirata Jana Krti* (1951) by S. K. Chatterji, are some important books. Besides that early reports like *Census Report of India*, 1901 by H. H. Risley, *Census Report of India*, 1911 by Edward Albert Gait, *Census Report of India*, 1931 by J. H. Hutton, *Linguistic Survey of India* (1927) by G. A. Grierson are some important documents to understand the people of India.

In the regional context, a good number of ethnographers and scholars have published a good numbers of book namely- *A History of Assam* (1906) by E. A. Gait, *The Sema Nagas* (1921) by John Henry Hutton, *The Lotha Nagas* (1922) by James Philip Mills, *The Social History of Kamrupa* (1922) by N. N. Vasu, *Ancient Countries in Eastern India* (1922) by F. E. Pargiter, *Early History of Kamrupa* (1933) by K. L. Barua, *The Background of Assamese Culture* (1948) by R. M. Nath, *The People of Assam: Origin and Composition* (1987) by B. M. Das, *Dimasa Kachari, Asomar Janajati* in Assamese language by S. Thaoson, *Kiratas in Ancient India* (1990) by G. P. Singh, *History of the Dimasa* (1997) by S. K. Barpujari, *The Meches and the Totos of North Bengal* (1973) by C. C. Sanyal. These are some important books to understand the ethnic people of North East India.

## V. Discussion and Result:

### i. Racial Elements of North-East India

Since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different anthropologists have proposed several classifications of the Indian people. Among them the popular and widely accepted classification is the one that was forwarded by B. S. Guha (B. S. Guha, 1931). Guha identifies six main racial types with nine sub-types in the populations of India: Negrito, Proto-Austroloid, Mongoloid, Mediterranean, Western Brachycephal and Nordic. On the other hand, H. H. Risley recognized three principal types of people in India, viz. the Dravidian, the Indo-Aryan and the Mongolian (H. H. Risley, 1991). The first two are mixed in varying proportions in different parts of India, while the third is mostly confined to the North-East region of India. Risley traced the broad-headed or brachycephalic element in India’s population to the Mongolian or Scythian sources (D. N. Majumdar, 1965).

The geographical location and flora and fauna of Assam have invited large-scale migration from the pre-historic period and served as one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind. In the Brahmaputra Valley, two major races of mankind namely, the Caucasoid and the Mongoloid emerged. As a matter of fact, Brahmaputra valley served the purpose of a road linking India with Southeast Asia (B. M. Das, 2003). Regarding the Caucasoid race, Flower has subdivided the Caucasian into the dark group, which includes the Dravidian, and the fair, which includes the Aryan (E. A. Gait, 2008). Possibly the Austric people were the earliest inhabitants of this part of India (B. M. Das, 2003), though some are of the opinion that the Nagas with few elements of the Negrito race appeared first. The Austric people were the pre-Dravidian aborigines that were represented by the Monkhmer Khasi and Synteng whose original habitat was Southern Asia or Indian Archipelago (J. H. Hutton, 1931). Besides the Khasi-Synteng, other tribes of the Austro-Asiatic stock are believed to have migrated to this region from the Pacific area, perhaps from the Philippines. From the language pattern they have the similarity with the Mundas of Chota Nagpur and Nicobarese of Nicobar Island (S. K. Chatterji, 2008).

The people of Dravidian race were not the primitive inhabitants of India as believed at one time; they came subsequently as invaders from the west (K.L.Barua, 1966). They belonged to the Chalcolithic age, with a superior culture and inhabited in the whole of Northern India supplanting the Austric races from there in the remote past. The Aryan discovered the Dravidian more civilized than themselves and found not only in south India, but also in north India. The Baniyas and the Kaivartas of Assam are said to be of the Dravidian stock. But the early Dravidian got so mixed up with the early Indo-Chinese people that a new type of race called Mongolo-Dravidian originated (S.L.Barua, 1985).

The tribes of North-Eastern part of India are predominantly Mongoloid. Though these people would differ from each other in certain qualities like Physical feature, culture and language, one could refer to their Mongoloid origin and also to their linguistic group that they belonged. K. L. Barua asserts that after the appearance of the Aryan in India, hordes of Mongolian poured through the North East into India. The title ‘Mlechhas’ bestowed on them by the Aryan, which means foreigners, indicating their appearance in the later period (K.L.Barua, 1966). These Mongoloid people belonged to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Indo-Chinese group and their representatives of the present day are the Kacharis, Koches, Rabhas, Meches, Mikirs, Lalungs

(Tiwas), Garos, Nagas, Kukis, Chutias, and others. There was a constant flow of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Indo-Chinese stock to Assam through the mountain passes of the south-east.

J. P. Mills views that most of the Mongolian migrations to Assam took place through the north-eastern and southern routes of Assam via Burma (J.P.Mills, 1928). One wave of the Tibeto-Burmans came probably from the north, comprising the Akas, Mishmis, Garos, Mikirs, Kacharis, etc., another from the south, the Lushais-Kukis and another of an earlier wave, the Kol-Mon-Annam, extending over parts of the area, now occupied by the Nagas. The Bodos are also believed to have come from the north, and it is possible that they got mixed up with the Mon-Khmer-Munda in course of time (J.H.Hutton, 1922).

References about the Kiratas are being mentioned in the Indian classical literature, and epigraphic records and it is accepted that the term Kirata is a Sanskrit form used to mean the Sino-Tibetan tribal people (S. K. Chatterji, 2008). The classical writers from the fourth century B.C. onwards place them near the marshy regions in south-east Bengal and the hills of Assam. Depending exclusively on the classical testimony, the Kiratas of Pragjyotisha as mentioned in the epics, the *Puranas*, the *Tantras*, etc. can undoubtedly, be identified with the Khasis, the Jaintias, the Garos, the Kacharis, the Akas, the Nagas, the Tipperahs, the Mishmis, the Chutiyas and those tribes who were living during the times of Naraka and his successor, Bhagadatta and further settled in the neighbourhood of Lauhitya or Brahmaputra (G.P.Singh, 1980). This finding will further carry some weight, while forwarding the views of some authorities on the history of Assam. K. L. Barua identifies the Kiratas with the country inhabited by the tribes from the foot of the Garo and Khasi Hills to hill-tracts of Tipperah along the eastern coast of Brahmaputra. In the words of R. M. Nath, "The Austrics (the Khasis and the Jaintias), and the Bodo (the Garos, the Kacharis, the Chutias and the Hill Tipperahs) were termed as the Nisadas, Kiratas and Dasyus in the same way as the Dravidians were termed as the Danavas, Daityas and Negroids. They were at feuds with each other for establishing their position." N. N. Vasu has strongly expressed his view and said, "The modern Kacharis are no other than descendants of those Utkachas and the Kiratas, who inhabited the Eastern shore of this Eastern Sea mentioned in the Brahmanda and Kalikapuranas"(Satyendra Kr. Sarmah, 2017).

According to P. C. Bhattacharya, "the people known in the present day Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura as Boro, Rabha, Garo, Lalung, Miri (Mishing), Monpa, Aka, Dafla, Adi (Abor), Mikir, Khasi, Synteng, Dimasa, Meithei, Tipra, Hajong, Mizo(Lushai), Naga, Mishmi, Singphou, Apatani, Nokte, Wancho, Kuki-Chin, Khamti and a large number of so-called tribes residing in the hills and plains belong essentially to the Mongoloid or Kirata race"(Assam Research Society, 1964).

## ii. Origin and Migration of the Bodos

The Bodos, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman race are believed to be the aboriginal people of Assam. The *Yujurveda* and the *Atharvaveda* refers to the Kirata and suggests that their presence was as old as the Hindus. Suniti Kr. Chatterji mentions that the Kirata or Early Mongoloid entered probably through Assam, and their advent in the east might have been as old as that of the Aryan in the west, at some period before 1000 B.C. Their original home was at the upper course of Yang-Tse-Kiang and the Hoang-Ho in North-West China (G.A.Grierson, 1927 & B.C.Allen, 1905). They migrated to this region in different groups and in different periods of history through various routes.

C. C. Sanyal expresses the possibility of the emergence of a mixed tribe among the Bodos. According to him they are a combination of many tribes and caste like the Rajbongshis of the east and the Rajputs of the west of India. The Austric, the Aryan, the Mongol and the aborigines all appeared to have taken part in the formation of the great Bodo tribe of today. O'Malley says that Koches, Meches and Bodos or Baras, basically Tibeto-Burman, all connoted the same tribe. Hutton refers that the Nagas also formed one of the constituents of the Bodos (Census of India, 1931).

B. H. Hodgson applied the generic term 'Bodo' to mean this particular Tibeto-Burman linguistic group of people in his article "On the Aborigines of the North Eastern India" in 1846, when he writes about the Mech of Darjeeling. In the Brahmaputra valley the Kacharis called themselves Bodo or Bodo-fisa, sons of the Bodo. G. A. Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India* mentions that the Bodo or Bara was the name by which the Meches or Meses and the Kacharis called themselves. The people who speak this language call themselves 'Bara' or 'Bara-fisa', i.e., sons of the Bara. The word 'Bara' has been identified by the first English enquirers with their nationality, and is usually written 'Bodo'. They do not apply the name 'Kachari' to themselves (G.A.Grierson, 1967).

Some experts opine that the Bodos had acquired their name from their ancestral home. They mention that the region situated in the northern part of the Himalayas and western part of China was known as 'Bod' or the home-land. The inhabitants of this region were later known as Bodo-Ficha or Boddocha (Ficha-cha - children) or children of the Bod country, and were later known simply as the Boddoo or the Bodo (R.M.Nath, 1978).

The linguistic analysis and Mongoloid origin of the people reveals that the Bodos as a race would constitute the larger section including the Garos, Kacharis, Chutias, Rabhas, Koches, Lalungs, Meches, Dimasas, Hajongs, Tipras, Sonowals, Mishings, Deuris and even the Nagas, Kukis and Mikirs; where some of them got mixed up with the Shan at a later time. According to Sonaram Thaosen, a Dimasa scholar, "there are similarities in language and culture among the people living in different parts of Assam like the Bodos, Meches, Rabhas, Lalungs (Tiwa), Garos and also Meches of Northern Bengal, Tripuris and Riangs (of Tripura)" (S. Thaosen, 1962). B. M. Das mentions that the term 'Bodo' is originally a linguistic one, but very often it is used in ethnic sense also. In a narrow sense the nomenclature of the term Bodo is now applied to those people who speak the present form of Bodo language and residing in the area of present Bodoland Territorial Council Area and also those residing in North Lakhimpur, Karbi-Anglong, Dudhnai, Dhupdhara, North Bengal, Nepal and few other places (D.N. Basumatary, 2011).

The Indian classical literature, like the epics, *Puranas* and others, the histories of Assam, the British official documents and the Missionary records do not use the term "Bodo". These writings mainly used the terms Kachari or Cachari, Mech or Mlechchha and Kirata to identify them. While the Bodos of Goalpara are called as Mech, the Bodos of Kamrupa and Darrang are referred to as Kachari, pronounced 'Kosari', by the neighbouring Assamese people (Sidney Endle, 2007).

References about the migration of the Indo-Chinese Mongoloid race can be traced much before the first millennium B.C. and continued for a long time even in the later periods. The Bodo forms an important race of this group of migrants and are regarded to be one of the earlier settlers of this region. The various branches of the Indo-Chinese Mongoloid groups, who migrated at different intervals of history through different routes, settled in various parts of Assam.

There is no unanimity among historians with regard to when and how the Bodo group of the Mongoloid origin entered and settled in the Brahmaputra valley as well as in the other parts of North-east India, Bengal and Nepal. Suniti Kr. Chatterji mentions that the early Tibeto-Burman had penetrated within the frontier of India, either along the southern slopes of the Himalayas, through Assam (and established themselves in the sub-Himalayan tracts as far west as Garhwal and Kumaon), or by way of Tibet, going up the Tsangpo or Brahmaputra and then crossing the Himalayan barrier into Nepal and Garhwal-Kumaon (S. K. Chatterji, 2008). G. A. Grierson refers that from the upper course of Yang-Tse-Kiang and the Hoang-Ho in North-West China the Tibeto-Burman races entered Assam through the courses of the river Brahmaputra, Chindwin, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Menam and mountain passes of Assam and Burma through the north-east and south-west. Some of them travelled to Nepal and Tibet, some occupied the foothills of the Himalayas from Sadia to Punjab in the west and the rest occupied the hills of Assam, such as the Garo hills, Lushai hills, Manipur, Mikir hills, Cachar and the Naga hills and gradually spread over the plains in both upper and lower Assam, along the course of the Brahmaputra on both its banks (G.A. Grierson, 1927).

According to B. C. Allen, the Kachari (Bodo) are a section of the Indo-Chinese race, whose original habitat was somewhere between the upper waters of the Yang-Tse-kiang and the Hoang-ho, and that they gradually spread in successive waves of immigration over the greater part of Assam. R. M. Nath was of the opinion that the Bodo migrated to Assam from a place situated at the confluence of the Dila-Ubra (Big-water) and Changriba (small-water) after it was affected by a severe earthquake which changed the courses of the river and transformed the area into a desert. This was likely a part of the present Gobi desert lying at the confluence of the modern Khasgar-daria and Yarkand-daria. He also asserted that they came in batches and spread over the whole of Assam (R.M.Nath, 1978).

The view of H. K. Barpujari is that at one time a group of the Tibeto-Burman migrated from the upper courses of the Yang-tse Kiang and the Hoang-Ho in north-west China towards the south and somewhere in the north-eastern part of Burma they split up into two: one migrated further south, while the other moved westward along the foothills of the Himalayas to reach Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal, from where at a later date they migrated in successive waves to the south to enter into the hills and plains of Assam. They established themselves in different regions and came to be known by various names like that of Rabha, Kachari, Bodo, Karbi, and Dimasa (H. K. Barpujari, 1990). Supporting the above view B. M. Das mentions the possible routes of

migration as: Assam-Burma route on the eastern side, one of which is through the Patkai ranges; northern passes of Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal; and passes in the south and south-eastern regions (B.M.Das,2003).

C. C. Sanyal mentions that the Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongoloid Bodo migrated into India through Patkai Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal (present Bangladesh). They ruled over these tracts of lands for many years. It is probable that they marched towards three directions. One part went south up to Kachar and were called Kachari. The second part went along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in the whole of Assam up to Goalpara and parts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Bihar under the name of Bodo or Bada (C.C.Sanyal, 1973).

Edward Gait remarks that from the North-east corner of India, through Assam and the eastern Himalayas, there was an influx by a tribe of Mongolian origin, whose main physical characteristics are, a short head, a broad nose, a flat and comparatively hairless face, a short but muscular figure and a yellow skin. In Assam (excluding the Surma valley) and North-east Bengal the Dravidian type has to a great extent been replaced by the Mongolian, while the Surma valley and the rest of Bengal a mixture of races has taken place in which the recognizable Mongolian element diminishes towards the west and disappears altogether before Bihar is reached (E.A.Gait, 2008).

In this regard Reverend Sidney Endle refers to the possibility of at least two great immigrations from the north and north-east into the valley of the Brahmaputra, i.e., one entering North-east Bengal and Western Assam, through the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sankosh, etc., and founded there what was formerly the powerful kingdom of Kamrupa; and the other making its way through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys into Eastern Assam, where a branch of the widespread Kachari race, known as Chutiyas, undoubtedly held sway for a lengthened period (Sidney Endle, 2007).

Bhaben Narzi views that the Mongoloid people entered India from three different sides. The first group entered into the Ganges valley through Bideh, Mithila or present North-west Bihar and the North Bengal of ancient India. The second group spreads into the Brahmaputra valley through the tributaries of the Brahmaputra River and established small states in the foothills. The third group of the Mongolian entered through the South-east corner of India and established some states like *Pratyanta Bhumi*, *Purba Desh*, *Suskhma*, Tripura, etc. in ancient times and spread culture and civilization in West Bengal and Middle India. The *Pratyanta Bhumi*, *Purba Desh*, *Suskhma*, Tripura are presently known as Srihatta, Chattagram, Mymensing, Dhaka, etc (Bhaben Narzi, 2001).

## VI. Conclusion:

From the above discussion we can come into the conclusion that the Bodos are one of the important tribal groups of Assam plains belongs to the Mongoloid stock. The Bodos are a linguistic group coming down from the Sino-Tibetan linguistic form. As a major stakeholder of the Mongoloid race it can be believed that they were the earliest group to migrate to this region in the pre-historic period as referred in the classical writings of the Aryans. The nomenclature of different places and river located in Brahmaputra valley also talk about their earliest existence in Assam. Finally we may have the following findings and observation:

The north-east India is a mosaic of different ethnic tribal groups belonged to Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Austric and Negrito races.

The Bodos are one of the major stakeholders of the Mongoloid race in north east India.

The Bodos are one of the earliest migrant groups to Brahmaputra valley from the north western China.

The Bodos were the contemporary to the Aryans in India. When the Aryan people made their appearance in north western India, the Bodos also registered their presence in north east into India.

The Mongoloid people entered north east India in different groups, times and routs, particularly through mountain passes.

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