



## Goddess Of Wisdom And Brahma Religion

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### ABSTRACT

In Hinduism, knowledge, learning, aesthetics, arts and music embody Devi Saraswati. She is the goddess of education and wisdom. With the passage of time Devi Saraswati has also been worshipped in different forms in our society to remove all its impurities. Hindus worship Devi Saraswati on 'Vasant Panchami' i.e. the fifth day of the season spring. People worship the goddess in different parts of the country India, more particularly in West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. In these states Devi is worshipped in the same form. But, if we consider the variation in the worshipping pattern of the goddess than we must discuss the most significant one which is practiced by the people of Bodo community and followed mainly by the people from Bathou religion. The history of worshipping Devi Saraswati has its roots in another segment of faith and belief of Bodo community, popularly known as Brahma religion. This religion was introduced by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and there was no evidence of Saraswati Puja among Bodos before the introduction of Brahma religion. In this particular paper focus will be given on the status and significance of Devi Saraswati in Hinduism along with the introduction and practice of the same among the Bodos.

**Keywords:** Devi saraswati, brahma religion, religious and cultural practices in India

### INTRODUCTION:

In Hindu religion, Devi Saraswati is considered as the goddess of knowledge and wisdom. She is the symbol of inner power and strength. Indians also remember her as the forgotten holy river Saraswati. In India, it has been witnessed in Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and history that Saraswati is worshipped as a goddess or river differently in different parts of the country. With the passage of time and a lot of changes, the image of Devi Saraswati has been developed and established in our modern society. She is *Veena-pustak-dharini*, as we can see the musical instrument Veena in her hand; *Hansa-vahini*, which indicates her presence on the swan; and *Shubhra-vasana*, as we see her always dressed in white. Veena and Books are also considered as a significant part of the goddess as these are the symbols of music and education. She is the goddess of consciousness who removes the darkness of ignorance. She brings the serenity of the spirit.

Indians worship the goddess particularly on the *Vasant-Panchami tithi* in the Indian month of Magha (January-February). Here, Buddhists and Janis also adore the goddess along with Hindus. Countries like Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar and Bangladesh have also witnessed worshipping the goddess in its different parts as a goddess of 'music' and 'art'. Like other regions of India, Devi Saraswati is worshipped with great devotion in the states like west Bengal, Assam and Tripura. The image or structure of the goddess is quite similar in these states like; the idol is basically made of clay, presence of the musical instrument *Veena*, swan, books etc. The figure of the goddess beautifully described as *Shubhra-vasana* (dressed in white), *Sveta-varna* (very fair), *Sweta-padmasana* (sitting on a white lotus), *Muktahar-bhushita* (embellished with pearls) and *Veena-pushtak-dharini* (who carries Veena and Books with her).

The process which is followed in worshipping Devi Saraswati is also very unique as it requires flowers, Indian bael leaves, Pancha-shasya (five types of crops), Pancha-gavya ( a mixture of five ingredients i.e. cow dung, cow urine, cow milk, curd and *ghee*), fruits, sandalwood etc. and everything is offered with hymns framed in Sanskrit.

Vedic literature describes different elements and rituals of worshipping the goddess. Saraswati is also known as an early and holy Aryan boundary river which flows from the Himalaya and believed as a sacred source of purification, fertility, and good fortune. John Muir, in his famous book, '*Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and History of the People of India, Their Religion & Institutions*' (1885) mentioned that in the initial passages the word referred the river Saraswati mainly. It was mentioned as one among the different north-western Indian rivers and later Saraswati was connoted as a river deity. In Rigveda, the word Saraswati appears both as a reference to a river and as a significant deity. In 'Book 2' of Rigveda, it is also mentioned that "*Ambi tame nadi tame devi tame saraswati*" (Rigveda, 2.41.16) which means Saraswati is considered as the best of mothers, of rivers, of goddesses. Again, in the *Taitreyee's Brahmana*, the goddess has been identified as *Vak-devi* (Goddess of speech) and *Sangeet-mata* (Mother of Music). Gradually, people started worshipping goddess Saraswati as the deity of wisdom and prosperity in the Hindu culture. Hindu mythology depicts various facts about Devi Saraswati. Vedas depict her as a river which provides food, water, knowledge and education.

Again, in the same era she was deified merely as a river. She was not considered as the goddess of knowledge in the beginning. The Rigveda only gave us the idea about the abolished river Saraswati. This river was the base of vedic civility. The 61<sup>st</sup> hymn of Rigved-Sanhita (4<sup>th</sup> Ashtaka, 8<sup>th</sup> Chapter, 5<sup>th</sup> Mandala) described goddess saraswati elaborately. The hymns mentioned there described Saraswati both as a river and a goddess. Though there are differences in views regarding the origin of the river and her transformation as a deity, but in India, at present she is worshipped as a goddess of education and learning there is no doubt about it.

The North-Eastern regions of India also worship the same image of the goddess with Vena, books and swan. Idols are made with the help of clay generally. But, sometimes the idol is also replaced by '*Mangal-ghat*' (an earthen pot which is prepared specially for worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses) and '*Shalagrama*' (a fossilized shell used as an iconic symbol of Lord Vishnu). Various rituals and *mantras* (hymns) are also practiced to convert this iconic image of Devi Saraswati into a living goddess. Rigveda first cited the existence of Devi Saraswati and after that it gradually gained popularity in the Hindu culture as a goddess of wisdom.

But a very significant difference can be seen in worshipping the goddess in Bodoland area of Assam (India). Starting from the idol to the rituals everything is practiced differently here from the rest of the country. One similarity between Hindu and Brahma religion is prayer through sacrificing fire or *yajna*; popularly known as '*Hoom Yajna*' among Bodos. They worship Devi Saraswati also by practicing the *Hoom Yajna* and without worshipping any idol. Now, while searching the roots of such practices, some important questions or facts has come to the limelight like is there any similarity in Goddess Saraswati of the followers of Hinduism and Bathouism? Is she a goddess of wisdom in Bathouism too? Facts depict that worshipping Devi Saraswati through *Hoom Yajna* and in an idol follow completely rituals. Hence, there is no doubt that it is quite interesting to investigate the origin and development of different practices related to worshipping goddess Saraswati and thus it automatically attracts the researchers in this field.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the present study can be mentioned below-

1. To study the origin of the rituals and cultural aspects of worshipping Devi Saraswati.
2. To find out the different religious practices among the Bodo community related to Devi Saraswati.
3. To study about the religious and cultural practices followed by the people of Brahma religion in worshipping Devi Saraswati.

## METHODOLOGY

For conducting the present study the investigator has used the Historical Method. Data were collected from various secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, theses etc.

## DEVI SARASWATI IN BODO COMMUNITY

*Bodos* belong to the largest ethno-linguistic group in Assam and more particularly in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). Bodos are mainly the followers of Bathouism. Just like Hindus, the followers of Bathouism also celebrate Saraswati Puja on *Vasant Panchami*. Saraswati is generally worshipped by Hindus. Hence, it is very interesting to find the facts behind the popularity of worshipping the goddess among Bodos. They are recognized as the plains tribe who traditionally practice Bathouism which indicates the worshipping of *Obonglaoree* (forefathers).

Bodos have their own culture and rituals to pray different gods and goddesses but surprisingly there is no evidence of any goddess with books and *Veena* (musical instrument) in their iconography. Even in their very famous religious function '*Kherai*', which describes different gods and goddesses of Bodo community, there is no evidence of any deity which resembles Devi Saraswati. Here, it is important to mention that the followers of Bathouism do not worship any idol. It is one of the basic differences between the Hinduism and Bathouism.

Hence, naturally, Bodos accepted Devi Saraswati also without any iconography. Here, the goddess is worshipped in a completely different form though they celebrate the festival on the same day just like the Hindus with the same purpose to bring wisdom and prosperity in the society.

Bodos also pray to the goddess with all devotions for the same purpose of gaining knowledge. But, in the region of Bodoland (Assam, India), Bodos worship the goddess specially by performing yajnas or fire sacrificing ceremonies. Bodos, who follow Bathou religion, do not believe in worshipping any idol. Still, worshipping Devi Saraswati got a very significant place in the form of yajna on the same day of Vasant Panchami. Now, the question may arise like do they worship the same goddess Saraswati of Hindus or only the name is similar? If Bodos worship the same goddess like Hindus then it again creates interest the researchers to know their rituals and significance.

Bodo community believes in worshipping different deities and to some extent also have faith in performing different superstitious activities. But they do not believe in worshipping any idol and thus, they do not worship Devi Sarawati in the form of any structure made of clay. They primarily worship two deities viz. '*Bathou*' and '*Mainao*'. They perform a very special dance form called '*Kherai*'. It is dedicated to all the deities that are worshiped by the followers of Bathou religion. But in '*Kherai*' the name of Devi Saraswati is not included. The major difference between the followers of Bathou and Hindu religion is that Hindus worship idols which is completely absent in the other. Again, many similarities can also be marked between these two religions regarding worshipping different gods and goddesses. In this regard Premlata Devi said that, "Like the Hindus, the Bodos believe in different gods and goddesses. They believe in five traditional gods, such as Ailong (God of Earth), Agrang (God of Water), Khoila (God of Air), Sanjaborle (God of Fire or Light) and Rajkumbre (God of Sky)"

As Bodos do not believe in worshipping any idol, they perform all the rituals for praying goddess Saraswati by sacrificing fire. This ritual is popularly known as 'Hom Yajna' or 'Yajnahuti'. Again, the section among Bodos who performed fire sacrifice for the first time to worship Devi Saraswati were not the followers of Bathou religion, they were the followers of Brahma religion. Followers of Brahma religion are also the part of Bodo community only.

#### **DEVI SARASWATI AND BRAHMA RELIGION**

When the investigator tried to conduct a detailed study about the practice and development of hom-yajna, it was found that the roots of yajna lie inside the Brahma religion. Before discussing the other facts related to this, it's better to highlight some facts related to Bodos. Though Bodos are mainly the followers of Bathou religion, but many of them converted to other religions especially when they came to the close contact of the religions like Hinduism and Christianity. It weakened the base of Bathou religion and slowly Bodos started to adopt many other religions which were the sub-religions of Hinduism only. After that the expansion of religions in Bodo community gained more popularity in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma showed a new direction to the Bodo community and enriched them with some new and modified faiths and beliefs.

Brahma religion gradually found its identity as a separate religion. In this regard Kameswar Brahma said, "Srimot Kalicharan Brahma introduced Bhrahma Dharma among the Bodos. The Brahma Dharma followers are largely found in the districts of Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darang, Nowgong, Mikir Hills, North Lakhimpur, the entire areas of the Brahmaputra valley and in the North-Eastern portion of West Bengal state. They have given up the primitive religious systems and follow the Hindu system of yajnahuti." Brahmaguru Shivnarayan Paramhansadev, who lived in Kolkata was the initiator of Kalicharan Brahma and guided him a lot in promoting Brahma religion among the Bodos and that particular period 'yajna' or 'fire sacrifice' was practiced among the followers of this religion. This religion believed that there is only one eternal power and peace can be achieved only by worshipping that power. In a book '*Alokar Sandhanat: Gurudev aru Bodo Samaj*' Vidyasagar Narzary said that there is only one power and that power is worshiped in the form of Fire or Sun. 'Om Parambrahma' or the universal power is nothing but the form of fire. Therefore worshipping fire gives blessings and fulfils all the desires of men.

Studies reveal that the base of Brahma religion is 'yajnahuti' or 'fire sacrifice'. They believe it is compulsory to perform 'yajna' before doing any activity that is impeccable. Hence, we can also say 'Vedas' formed the base of this religion, because the whole procedure of 'yajna' is introduced by Vedas only. This belief is also supported by Kameswar Brahma in his Book, '*A study of socio-religion believes practices and ceremonies of Bodos.*' After adopting the Brahma religion, Kalicharan Brahma organized 'yajna' ceremony in a village named Banyagudi for the first time in the year 1906 for the Bodo Community. Vidyasagar Narzary in his book also mentioned after the ceremony of fire sacrifice at Banyagudi, Kalicharan Brahma became very popular among Bodos. He also became a holy preacher of Brahma religion and people started to call him Gurudev. From the year 1906 Brahma religion also gained popularity in the Bodo community along with Bathou religion.

Among the followers of Bathou religion, the supreme power is worshipped as *Bathou*. After Bathou the next place is given to his wife *Mainao* i.e. the goddess of wealth or popularly known as goddess *Laxmi* among Hindus. Besides these, in some religious functions like '*Kherai*' and '*Garja*' different names of gods and goddesses are mentioned like *Ailong*, *Agrang*, *Khoila*, *karji*, *Bhandari*, *Ron Fagli*, *Bulli-buri* etc. But in these rituals, the name of goddess Saraswati is not mentioned. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma for the first time practiced worshipping the goddess of wisdom by sacrificing fire in the Bodo community.

If we analyse the origin and development of Saraswati puja among Bodos on the occasion of Vasant Panchami, we may find that the rituals are quite similar with Hindus. Offering yajna was introduced among Bodos after the introduction of Brahma religion only. Hence it can be said that the fire sacrificing ceremony which is performed by the Bodos is not originated completely from Brahma religion; it is somehow a modified version of yajna which is practiced by Hindus starting from the Vedic era. The offerings rituals have changed a lot with the passage of time among Hindus; in the same way the yajna offering ceremony has also gone through a lot of changes among Bodos.

A unique feature of yajna is that they build 'vedi' for this. Vedi is an elevated outdoor enclosure with receptacles for sacrificial fire. It is usually narrow in the middle and covered with different natural materials. People do not use water to construct 'vedi'. There is no religious restriction in using water still it is designed only with clay. They collect some special type of clay especially from outside for this purpose only.

For keeping the ingredients of yajna, a square-sized hole is made in the centre of the Vedi. Fruits, mango wood, shal tree (*shorea robusta*) wood, bael leaves, betel leaf, betel nuts etc. are placed on a banana leaf inside the hole of Vedi and they offer it with fire. The priest recites various mantras (hymns) while offering all the ingredients to fire. Hindus strictly practice various rules and rituals regarding the construction of Vedi, offering fire, and the use of fire wood for yajna. In Purohit Darpan, use of three types of Vedis are mentioned viz. Vedi, Sthandil and Kund.

But, there is no restriction among Bodos in this regard. They form their yajna-vedi independently. All the followers of Brahma religion are allowed to participate in the fire sacrificing ceremony. In Hindu religion, only the priest is allowed to recite the hymns and perform all the activities in *yajna*. But, in Brahma religion, all the followers are allowed to recite hymns along with the priest and help him in all activities while performing *yajna*. After finishing the *yajna*, the priest collects the ashes and applies tilak (a holy mark on the forehead). This ritual is also practiced among Hindus.

The followers of Brahma religion adopted a completely new way of worshipping the goddess of wisdom with offering yajna – there is no doubt that it is a milestone towards the development and practice of worshipping Devi Saraswati among Bodos. To understand the Hom-yajna ceremony more clearly it is important to mention its different steps clearly. Before starting the ceremony, the priest recites the Guru-Mantra (primary hymn) "Om Purna Paramjyoti". After this they start offering flowers with the hymns. Then they invoke the goddess with another hymn popularly known as *Awahan Mantra*.

By reciting this *Awahan Mantra* the priest places fire-wood in the *vedi* and lights the fire. After offering the flowers, recites the *Shanti Mantra* (hymn for peace) viz. '*Om Shanti*' three times and mitigates the fire by using water and a bunch of mango or tulsī (basil) tree. Here, this water is also considered very holy. They call it *Shantijal* where '*shanti*' means peace and '*jal*' is water. When the yajna is over they sprinkle this holy water everywhere to bring peace and prosperity and they complete the ceremony by praying to the goddess with folded hands or *Pranama*.

## CONCLUSION

We can observe that the yajna performed for worshipping Devi Saraswati is very closely connected with the yajna which is mentioned in different Hindu scriptures like Vedas and Puranas. The hymns are also adopted from Vedas and Upanishadas, which are formed in Sanskrit language. Though, there are some major differences among the rituals of Hindus and Bodos in worshipping the goddess; but the most common and significant feature is that they offer their prayers to gain knowledge and wisdom. Hindus prepare earthen idol of the goddess whereas Bodos offer yajna for fulfilling the same purpose of gaining knowledge. Every year this puja is gaining more and more popularity among Bodos in the form of yajna. Starting from preparation of the yajna-vedi to the decoration of the yajna-premises, change can be witnessed everywhere and this betterment is giving a new vogue to this ceremony. Bodos celebrate this occasion with a touch of modernity; but there is no change in the rituals of performing the yajna. At present, this ceremony is no longer limited to the followers of Brahma religion. In BTR, it is practiced almost in all the educational institutions like schools, colleges and universities. All the students unitedly participate in this yajna ceremony on Vasant Panchami to worship the goddess of education irrespective of their class, caste, gender, community and religion.

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