**Origin of the Bodos: An Introduction *Dr. Subung Basumatary***

The Bodo Kacharis of today constitute one of the most important sections of different ethnic groups and races settling in different parts of Assam with their distinctive cultural and linguistic traits. It is now widely accepted fact that the people of the greater Bodo race were the aboriginal or the earliest inhabitants of Assam and its neighbouring areas. It is quite interesting to note here that the word “Bodo” to mean this particular section of people was for the first time used by B.H. Hodgson as an ethnological term to refer to the Meches, the Bodo speaking people of Darjeeling district in 1846 while writing about them. Since then the term Bodo has been used as the generic name of the people of this language group.1 Thereafter the authors of the later years have used this term indiscriminately. Hodgson himself gave no reason for the use of the term “Bodo”. This has consequently divided the historians over the use and proximity of the meaning of this terminology. Probability is that this very word and approximate to this word “Bodo” might have been used long years back by some sections of the people to mean this group of people. Raj Mohan Nath, on the contrary, put forward a hypothetical theory by which he traces the origin of the term “Bodo” in the Tibetan word “Bod” used for their country in the ancient time.2 Grierson writes that in the early days the Tibetan called their country “Bodyut”, their language “Boksat” and a Tibetan person “Bodpa”. 3 E.T. Ail Kinson and John Bowl hold the similar view. Their opinion attempts to suggest “Bod” as the source of the word “Bodpa”. Likewise, if the Bodos migrated from the North-eastern China, which comprised the ancient Tibet known as “Bod”, they too might have derived their name from the word “Bod”. So, this also might be true that Bryan Hodgson simply picked up the already existing word Bodo to mean this group of people.

In this regard question may arise as to by which name this group of people was known to others before they came to be called Bodos (by the name Bodo). From their physical feature and appearances, their ways of life, racial affinities and resemblance in language and culture they are thought to be a section of Mongoloid origin. Commenting on the racial features of the Bodos Matthias Hermanns says:

“As is the case with the Meche (Mech), so also with the Kachari (Bodo)- the Mongoloid features are very prominent: the strong check bones, slit eyes, a slight growth of hair on the body and scanty beard. They are shorter and more scanty than the Indians of the North East.”4

Historically the Bodo people are known to be the inhabitants of a vast track of land, south east of the Himalayas and west of China since 5000B.C. Ethnically they are of Sino-Tibetan origin of Mongoloid race and linguistically Tibeto-Burman group of family. Though they are widely accepted from their appearance and physical structures as an important section of Sino-Tibetan origin of Mongoloid race, it is not an easy task to trace their origin with facts and figure. Still then, attempts have been made by scholars and researches in that direction. In this regard Sindney Endle rightly remarks that “the origin of the Kocharis race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history.” 5 Simply on the basis of their physical feature and appearance Endle made an assumption “that the Bodos approximate very closely to the Mongolian type; and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race”.6 With reference to these facts based on the assumption, S.K. Chatterjee writes:

“The area of Characterization for the primitive Sino-Tibetan speech appears to have been North-Western China between the head waters of the Hwang-Ho and the Yang Tzse-Kiang river.” 7

In his opinion also “North-Western China between the head waters of these two great rivers is the original homeland of the Mongoloid Tribes. If this is to be true, the original homeland of the Bodos should be North-western China or between the head waters of the Howang-Ho and the Yang-Tzse Kiang. S. Endle refers to a folk belief among the Garos. It says that their ancestors including those of the Bodos, Dimasas etc. came down from the northern mountains.8 About the migration of the Mongoloid tribes who speak Sino-Tibetan speech family from western China. S.K. Chatterjee says that “they appear to have been pushing south and west from their original homeland from pre-historic times, but certain large scale movements of which we have faint inklings seem to have begun in the early part of the first millennium B.C.” 9

Thus, the Bodos including other Tibeto-Burman groups of Mongoloid race migrated to Tibet from their original homeland and then to Burma. From Tibet this Mongoloid people might have migrated and taken a different route in search of suitable place for their settlement. The Tibeto-Burman group of people who came down to Burma in succeeding waves of migration became a common ancestor of different speech families of Mongoloid stock who took up the track along the Brahmaputra river valley. This Tibeto-Burman group of people who entered into India through the mountainous regions of the eastern most of Assam later on came to be known by the name “Kiratas” as designated by the Aryan settlers. Thus, the ancestors of the Tibeto-Burman found their way into India either along the southern slopes of Himalaya through Assam or by way of Tibet. By another name, as Suniti Kumar Chatterjee writes, “they may for convenience be described in English as Indo-Mongoloids; and this is a term which defines at once their connection and their place within the cultural milieu in which they found themselves, as well as their original racial affinity.” This word has been formed on the model of Indo-European, Indo-Aryan, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Chinese, Indonesian etc. to make the people know about the Kiratas and to indicate all those Sino-Tibetan speaking tribes who entered into India.10 These Indo-Mongoloid groups of people or Kiratas in their earliest part in India were very primitive people, being mostly hunters and food gatherers who also used caves for habitation for which they were known as Asuro. Again about the settlement of the Mongoloid people or Kiratas S.K. Chatterjee writes,

“When the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were taking shape between 500 B.C. to 400 A.D.; particularly in pre-Christian centuries, they had occupied the southern tracts of the Himalayas and the whole of North-Eastern India, North Bihar contiguous to Nepal and to the North of the Ganges, the greater part of Bengal and Assam including the areas through which the Ganges passed into sea. Eastern Nepal and the Laurite or the Brahmaputra valley were the lands specially connected with them.” 11

The Mongoloid tribes after their settlement within the frontiers of India and in the contiguous tracts came to have a contact with the Aryans in a subsequent period as their neighbours and dwellers in the same land were later on designated as Kirata. The presence of the Indo-Mongoloid people in India who were later known as ‘Kirata’ was noted by the 10th century B.C. when the Veda books were compiled. But they might have entered Into India several hundred years back before they came into contact with the Aryans. As the Mongoloids came into contact near about 1000 B.C. with the Aryans in Indian soil, we have got the different episode of the Mahabharata. Even the older Sanskrit texts like the Yajurveda, the Atharva Veda and the Ramayana mention the physical features of the Kirata people apart from the later description in the Mahabharata, the Kalika Puran and Yogini Tantra. Assamese books like Darang Raj-Vanshabali and Kacharir Buranji give proper accounts of the reign of the Kirata people usually known as Kacharis in Assam.12

After having settled, they came to be known as Kirata which include the Himalayan tribes, the Bodo, the Nagas, the Khuki Chins, the Ahoms, the Indian Tibetans, the Khasis and the earlier tribes in the Tibeto-Burman branch. The Bodos, the most important Indo-Mongoloid people settling in North and North-Eastern India, are spread over the entire Brahmaputra valley; North Bengal and parts of East Bengal. S.K. Chatterjee writes,

“Judging from the wide range of extension of their language, the Bodos appear first to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra valley and extended West in to North Bengal (in Kooch behar, Rangpur and Dinajpur districts). They may have pushed in to North Bihar also, and the Indo-Mongoloid who penetrated in to North Bihar might equally have been either Bodos or Himalayans. Tribes allied to the Newars.” 13

The date of migration from their original abode namely, North-Western China to this part of present India is debated and needs further research. However, the historian and the scholars agree that the Indo-Mongoloid people settled in this region much before the Aryans. As time passed on, this group of people spread out through eastern part of India specially along the Brahmaputra river valley and also along the Barak/Surma valley.

From mythological to historical period kings of this Indo-Mongoloid people, the ancestors of today’s great Bodo groups’ ruled in different capacities the whole eastern parts of India under different dynasties. The first mentioned king of Pragjyotishpur was Mahiranga Danab of Asura dynasty. Several kings of the Asura dynasty ruled the kingdom of Pragjyotishpur. The Asura kings and their subjects were none other than the Bodo group of people. Then came the Kirata dynasty. Narakasura and Bhagadatta were two famous kings of this dynasty. Scholars have identified the Kiratas of Ancient Assam with the Bodo group who took part in the Mahabharata war. Sanskrit literatures of the ‘Epic-Era’ have mentioned the Eastern Kiratas in several places. The kingdom of Tripura has particularly been mentioned as the Kirata Desha of the North East in ancient time. The Indian epics i,e. the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are supposed to have been written in between 500 B.C. to 400 A.D. This proves that the Bodo group of people had powerful kings and kingdoms even before 500 B.C. in the eastern part of present India at the time when the Aryans were confined to the Indus valley.

Under different dynasties many kings of the Bodo group, all of them being the off-shoots of the Indo- Mongoloid origin, came to power one after another in the kingdom of Pragjyotishpur, later on known as Kamrupa; in the subsequent period it came to be known as Assam. We can arrange the dynasties chronologically as the Asura dynasty, the Kirata dynasty, the Mlecha dynasty, the Verman dynasty , the Sala Stamba dynasty , the Pralamba dynasty, the Pala dynasty, the Kena dynasty, the Koch dynasty, the Kochari dynasty and lastly the Borok or Tripuri dynasty who ruled the whole north-eastern parts of India. But later on this part of north-eastern India came under the British rule deceitfully. Thus there came the end of the great dynasties ruling through out this north-eastern parts of India. But before the British came to this part of India, the Ahoms, the late arrivals (Sino-Siamese) who belonged to a distant branch of the same Sino-Tibetan stock, occupied and ruled the area. The Ahoms belonged to the Tai or Shan section of the Siamese-Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetans. They arrived in Assam by way of North Burma through the course of the Noa- Dihang river at the beginning of the 13th century..

Colonization Process of Bodo dominated areas by different foreign nations:

The different sources of the History of Bodos and their origin like Ramayana ,Mahabharata, Puranas Tantras and the Vedas confirm the fact that since time immemorial the Bodo people and their areas of settlement (state) in different parts and in different times by whatever name had they been known were independent and ruled by themselves. These independent states were ruled by eighter the Bodo Kings or the Bodo Chieftains according to their traditional system. The Kings or the chieftains had full control over their land.

But starting from the coming of the Ahoms the peace loving Bodo people were in trouble to hold on their areas of settlement as an independent states. So, since 1490 the Ahom started invading the Bodo-Kachari kingdoms and in a short span of time encroached over large area of the Bodo territory specially the kingdoms of the Chutiyas and the Kacharis in the southern part of Brahmaputra of the present upper and middle Assam and colonized them.

Then again towards the lower parts of present Assam in the northern side of the Brahmaputra river there came another colonization process of Bodo dominated areas (states)in the foot hills of Himalayan ranges known as Duars area initiated by the Bhutanese and ultimately brought under the British rule in the second half of the 19th century.

The Govt. of India under the British rule did not have any noticeable connection with the Bhutan other than the trade and commerce relation. But at the end of first Burmese war (1825-26) the British turned their attention towards lower Assam and ultimately occupied it in 1828 except the Duars area. After having occupied the lower Assam the British found themselves in serious conflict with Bhutan in the territories known as Duars. It appears that the Bhutan government had secured the possession of the Assam Duars from the weak (Assam) rulers on certain specific terms like in the form of an annual tribute in terms of Yaktails, musk, gold dust, ponies blankets and knives to the value of 4,785Narainee rupees. As it is found in the history of Bhutan written by B. Kramjit Hasarat that “these Duars and those called the Bengal Duars, embraced “a narrow tract of the country extending along the foot of the lower range of the Himalayan mountain and separated British territory from Bhutan Proper.” 15 The Assam Duars totalling seven in numbers, namely- Boree Goomch, Kalling, Shurkolla, Banska, Chappagoorie, Chapkahama and Bijni were situated in between the rivers Manas and Dhunseeree which stand as a buffer states in between the British Indian territory and the Bhutan. These Duars opened a number of passes in to the hills of Bhutan . Each passes was under the control of a Subah or Dzongpon . When the British Indian annexed Assam to the East India company it also inherited the existing arrangements of Assam with Bhutan concerning the Duars. These existing arrangements were however allowed to continue by the British Government as a matter of expediency on receipt of annual tribute to the value of 4,785 Narainee rupees.

Almost the entire area known as the Assam Duars was inhabited by the Mechi and the Bodo Kachari tribes who were still occupying the same area of Duars. The Bhutan Government rules these territories through officials appointed by the Deb(the Temporal ruler) on the recommendation of the Dzongpons or Subahs in charge of the districts to which these Duars were attached .” The Mechis or the Bodo Kacharis , as it is found in the history of Bhutan were a hard working tribe and paid to the Dzongpons, who lived in the forts of the lower range of hills, revenue in kind like- rice, cloth, betel nuts, cotton, butter and ghee. The rule of the Bhutanese Government was firm and absolute.

But the existing arrangements on the Duars area in between the British India and the Bhutan did not last long because of the complaints / Charges levelled by the British on the pretext of evasion of annual tribute to the British government and encroachment of border by the Bhutanese; their involvement rampantly in extortion and burglary in the Duars area. These charges levelled by the British against the Bhutanese were the factors that led to the serious conflicts between the British India and the Bhutans.

Ultimately in the year 1841, Lord Auckland, the then Governor General; wrote latters both the Deb(Temporal ruler) and Shabdrung ( Spiritual ruler) pointing out to them the state of anarchy prevalent in the Duars, and warned them that if it continued the British Government would be compelled to occupy the whole Assam Duars. Accordingly, on 6th September 1841, Lord Aukland issued an order for taking over the whole management of the Assam Duars. As compensation for the loss of its revenue, the Bhutan Government was to be paid 10,000 rupees per annum.

But still then the Bhutanese did not remain as silent spectators of all the arrangement made by the British for their two Governments. Being unsatisfied with the present arrangements made by the British the Bhutanese were always in conflict with the British on the matters relating to the affairs of Duars area. They even raided quite often the Duars areas which were already included in the British Territory. As a result of which the British Government in India sent British missions to Bhutan Government in the year of 1863 & 1864 for the settlement of issues leading to the conflicts between the two governments. But there was no any result of resettlement of their conflicts/clashes out of the British mission sent to the Bhutan. Rather the relations between the two governments were deteriorated which ultimately led to the breaking out of the Duars War in 1864-65 .These wars out of the attack and counter attack by both the Bhutanese and the British lasted for about two years which came to an end with the fall of Diwangiri to the hands of the British. After preliminary negotiations, a treaty was signed at Sinchula on 11th November 1865. By this treaty the Bhutanese government ceded to the British government both the Assam and Bengal Duars and in return of these Duars area the British government on its part agreed to pay to the Bhutan government an annual sum of 50,000/- rupees on every 10th January as compensation.16 Then again the British by the treaty of Baxa( Banska) of 1865 signed with the king of Bhutan further occupied and annexed the Kachari Duars to the British Empire in 1867 from Jaolia Dewan, the Bhutanese king’s subjugated Kachari Chieftain.

Not only that but the British invaded and annexed the Bodo kingdoms of the south Eastern parts of the then Assam on foul pretext. The independent territories of king Erakdao and General Tularam were annexed in 1832 and 1854 respectively by the policy of the Dontrone of Lapse. Thus all these Bodo dominated areas were colonized by the British during the 19th century.

It is quite interesting to note here that other than the Bodos, neither the British nor the Bhutanese were the inhabitants of the Duars area. But the British and the Bhutanese were fighting each other for their self interest in the Duars area. During their fighting the Bodos were nothing more than that of a subject submissive to both the Governments. They did not have anything to do with their fighting.

Thus, the overall fact was that the colonization of Bodo dominated areas of different parts by the different nations denied the Bodo people of their rights to freedom which subsequently resulted to deprivation of their right to freedom and marginalization.

“The history of Assam from 1250 to 1700 A.D. was to some extent the history of a struggle between the original Indo-Mongoloid inhabitants of the country, who were mostly Tibeto-Burman, Bodos and the new arrivals Sino- Siamese, Ahoms.”17 (Kirata Jana Krti P-102-103). Out of this struggle between the Tibeto-Burman Bodo and the Sino-Siamese or Thai Ahoms, the Ahoms emerged victorious. But it was a matter of regret for both the groups of people as they had almost lost their nerve as independent people because of long years of fighting between them. Taking advantage of the weakness of both the Tibeto-Burman Bodo and the Sino-Siamese Ahoms, the Aryan Assamese speaking people started influencing them. As a result, half of the Bodos and almost all the Ahoms had lost their language or were fairly advanced on the way to lose it. And ultimately they merged into a single Aryan Assamese speaking people in Assam.

In between the gap period of the final triumph of the Ahoms and the taking over of this part of the country by the British, the Tibeto- Burman people got dispersed in different directions. They scattered and most of them fled their original habitats looking for secluded and secured place where they can survive peacefully without being intruded by other communities.

When the British Colonial Power came, the north-eastern part of present Assam was on the way of disintegration and ultimately the region was taken over by the Colonial Power. During the several years of colonization there was an undercurrent of rampantly conversion and assimilation into higher Hindu Caste of the great Bodo people. The introduction of western education as well as the homogeneous administrative system enabled the Bodos to discover their social standing in the caste-ridden Hindu Society. When they saw themselves in the lowest rung of the society, they tried to solve this problem by getting assimilated into other communities who had better social recognition. This is how the population of the original Bodos of this region came down in a dramatic way to a minority in their own land. Thus the Bodos were out-numbered and out-witted as they proved to be far more backward than the aggressors in every sphere of life. It is to be observed that the Bodo kings themselves converted first into Hinduism and then the common Bodo people followed their food step. Mention may be made here that almost all the Bodo kings of different dynasties who ruled kamrupa embraced Hinduism and they encouraged their subjects to follow them too. Krishna Chandra, the Kacharis king and his brother Erakdao, got converted into Hinduism and adopted the Hindu names Krishna Chandra and Gobinda Chandra.

During the rule of the Koch dynasty also conversion into Hinduism started from the royal family. According to some authors, Koch had been in Assam since 1205 AD .It is said that they belonged to the great Bodo tribe who came to North Eastern Assam through Patkoi range along the Noa-Dihang river. The founder of the Koch dynasty was Haoria Mandal also known as Haridas Mech. He was the head of the Mech tribe of Goalpara –Assam ruling from the Mount Chikna (Chikhwna Jhar the present Ultapani near Kokrajhar town . Haoria Mandal married Hira and Jira two sisters from the Hajo who had two sons each. The era of the present Cooch Behar state started from Chandan , one of the sons of Jira in the year 1510 AD when he was proclaimed King of Chikna .Chandan ruled for thirteen years and after his death Hira’s younger son Bisu named afterwards Biswa Sinha became the king of Cooch Behar after being converted to Hinduism .Cooch Behar was occupied by them in the meantime. Some of the Historians are of the opinion that they were called Koch just after they started to rule from Cooch Behar as their capital was shifted from (Sikhwna Jhar) Chikna . Biswa Sinha (Hinduised name of Bisu) was the first Koch King to convert in to Hinduism in the history of Koch dynasty. Since then many Mech or Bodo subjects followed their ruler and converted in to Hinduism.18

Then during the last part of 17th century, many Bodo people, especially the people of present upper Assam converted into Sankari Vaisnabism. The interesting fact was that with the conversion of religion they were forced to give up their language, culture, customs and traditions. Religious conversion was used as the instrument to disintegrate the demographic strength of the indigenous Bodo people. Besides the religious conversion the pressure of the Aryan settlers and the encroachment of illegal migrants became a threat to the existence of the Bodos as a community.

They could not resist and withstand the aggression of the illegal migrants. migrants imposed their religion and culture on the indigenous Bodo people and forced them to get assimilated. As a result of the forced assimilation, the indigenous people lost their tradition and customs and their cultural heritage. In other words, they lost their distinct identity as a people. They became fragmented, disintegrated, marginalized and they were forced to lead a life of slavery in their own land.

However, a portion of Bodo people who are concentrated in some pocket areas of the Brahmaputra valley, especially the ones settling on the northern side preserved their language, customs, and culture. Their language and culture have served as a model for the reassertion of modern Bodo language and culture since the early part of the 20th century. But only problem was that the socio economic condition of the Bodo people was so deplorable that the leaders had to improve it through reformation. Bodo society was full of problems created by themselves. People were interested only in drinking Zou (rice beer) and making merriment out of the drunken state. This scene was specially seen in religious celebration and marriage ceremonies.

The complete picture of the distribution of present Bodo population in some scattered areas throughout Assam has been shown by Dr. Anil Boro in his book “The History of Bodo Literature”. For our information it would be better to have an idea about the areas of concentration of Bodo population in the northern tract as shown by Dr. Anil Boro:

a) North and Eastern parts of Dhubri District, the whole of Kokrajhar district and parts of Goalpara and Bongaigaon district (now Chirang district)

b) Northern parts of Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup district (now Bagsa district)

c) Northern parts of Darang and Sonitpur (Now Odalguri district)

d) Northern parts of North Lakhimpur and Dhemaji.

These areas of concentration in the northern tract cover an area of 10,000 sq.km. with about 10 lakhs of Bodo speaking people. The areas of Bodo concentration on the southern bank are:

1. Dhudnoi and Dhupdhara areas in the Goalpara district.
2. Boko-Chaygaon and Rani areas and south Guwahati-sonapur-Khetri areas in the southern parts of Kamrup district.
3. Jagirod–Morigaon areas in the Morigaon district and Rupahi dhing areas in the Nogaon district.
4. Most of the southern part of Sibsagar district.
5. Howrahghat-Langhing areas of Karbi Anglong district.
6. North-eastern part of Dibrugarh district.

Areas of Bodo settlement in the neighbouring states:

1. Tikrikella area of Garo Hills in the state of Meghalaya.
2. Dimapur area of Nagaland.
3. Northern part of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal.19

Almost all the Bodo people except very few were illiterate. The reason was that till the end of the 19th century, there was no school within the reach of Bodo dominated areas. Anyone who wanted to have education through proper schooling had to go far away on foot. Moreover, the roads of that time for communication were very bad and there was no safety to life from wild animals as they had to pass through thick jungles. Indeed, acquiring knowledge through proper education for the majority of people was out of imagination. So, the people in the society were to repeat the same activities everyday within their limited circle without going for any other work as lack of exposure made their capacities and ideas limited. The Bodo society naturally became bereft of fresh ideas and ventures; people met together without proper business. On the other hand the Bodo people in those days were not treated well; rather they were looked down upon by their neighbouring Hindu caste. This is how the Bodo people had to restart the process of their development in every sphere of their life despite their past glories.

It will be good to have a detailed knowledge about the background of the socio cultural life of the Bodos so that it may help us to study the developmental courses that took place from the beginning. The socio-cultural structure of the Bodos may differ slightly from place to place because of the influences from the neigbouring other communities. But the over all structure is almost the same. Give and take process in the field of language and culture without consciousness between the people of different communities is a regular feature of human society. Accepting of good practices from other society is the sign of development of that very society. It has been widely accepted that the Bodos constitute a very important section of the different ethic groups and races settling in Assam with their distinctive socio-cultural traits. The social systems and socio-cultural practices of the Bodos including the rites and rituals are unique in their form and they are traditional in character. A few practices might have changed but they have not replaced their own traditions, customs, and culture. That is why they are still recognized by other tribes by mere displaying their traditional culture and customs. The house construction, for example, displays their own traditional techniques that differ from the modern ones; they have been inherited from their ancestors. They never hire any one for their house construction. They construct their houses with the materials found available in their surroundings.

In the belief of the three stages of life cycle also they have got different practices, observations and celebrations meant for these three different passages i.e. Birth, Marriage and Death.

Since the Bodos are agriculturists by their profession, they have got some religious and social festivals in connection with their agricultural activities. Some of these segments of the socio-cultural institutions of the Bodo society will be discussed in the first chapter of the thesis in more elaborate way.

I believe the study of the background of the socio-cultural life of the Bodos will stand as a foundation for further study of the historical development of Bodo language and culture. From linguistic point of view, the Bodo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Tibeto Chinese family of languages. In this region of present Assam, the Bodo language is literally as old as the hills and valleys of Assam.20 The majority of the rivers of Assam are called by the words of Bodo origin such as Dikhou, Dibang, Dibru, Dhanshri etc. Similarly the names of some modern day districts, towns and villages are also of Bodo origin, which were modified slightly by the later settlers. In this connection Kaliram Medhis remarks:

“As the Kacharis and Chutias were once dominant races in Assam valley it is natural to expect that they would leave some permanent traces of their language in the geographical names of the places. As a matter of fact they have given their own names to some of the most prominent physical features of the community. Thus the names of some of the principal rivers and mountains of Assam as also some of the districts and villages bear traces of their language”.21

**Chapter – I**

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