

HERITAGE OF THE BODOS: RECALLING AND PRESERVING

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ABSTRACT

The Bodos, speaker of Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, are an important part of the family of great Mongoloid race. G.A. Grierson wrote "The generic name of Bodo was first applied by Hodgson to this group of languages. The exact sound is better represented by spelling it Bada or Bara. Bada or Bara is the name by which the mech or Mes and the Kacharis call themselves.and a Kachari or Mech will call himself as Boro-f'sa a son of Baras, to distinguish him from e.g. Sim-f'sa, that is a Bhotiyas, or Chi-f'sa, a son of China. The Bara folk who lived to the west of the Kamrup district are called Mech by their Hindu neighbours. The word is probably a corruption of the Sanskrit 'Mlechchha', which corresponds the original meaning of the word 'Welsh', i.e. foreign or stranger." ¹ The Bodos exercised great power and influence in the entire Assam and North East Bengal since long past till recent time is beyond doubt and ample evidences are there to establish the fact. The ethnic Bodos, also known as Boros, are called with different names in different regions. In Bengal they are called as Mech, in Nepal as Meche and in Assam as Kochari.

Keyword: Migration, Identity, Historical Legacy, Cultural Legacy, Performing Arts.

INTRODUCTION:

The cultural heritage of a race or linguistic group is greatly important for survival in civilised world. Without cultural heritage a community or tribe may lose their identity in the globalization process or find it difficult to go ahead. Every group of human being has peculiar culture blended by their history and geographical circumstances. Culture is the outcome of their attempt to accomplish a meaningful existence and repeated experiment to solve their failures for some hundreds of years and ultimately find a solution of their lives that flows through generations.

The topic heritage is a very vast and heterogeneous. The Cambridge English dictionary state as,- feature belonging to culture of a particular society, such as traditions, language or buildings that were created in the past and still have historical importance. Heritage can be expressed to the practice or characteristics of a nation, tribe or ethnic group that have passed down through ages from one generation to the next. Heritage also discusses cultural aspects, tradition and values that have been passed down through generations. In legal term heritage is property that one inherits from his predecessor by birth right. Heritage means what we inherit from our ancestor and from our past. Heritage of the people implanted in the socio-economic, cultural and political life of the people over a period of thousands of years. The two basic components of the heritage are human and geography. Heritage also means environment, periphery, inheritance, source of power related to man and land.

Every nation or society is proud of their own cultural heritage. History is recounted through the ages admiring the vigour of heroes, who saved our identity from the enemy and handed down remarkable heritage of socio-political culture. Throughout the country the nation has been trying for revival of cultural values and trying its best to preserve the cultural heritage to glorify the past. The rivers, forests, hills, atmosphere, etc. and various group of people play important role in moulding the cultural tradition of the people. When we speak about heritage of the Bodos it can be dealt specially into two broad ways- first, historical events which throw ample evidence of their domination in the entire region and secondly, cultural heritage, they have inherited from their ancestors like customary practice, performing arts, music, dance, folk items, belief and faith which still exist in the Bodo society.

DATE OF MIGRATION AND IDENTITY

There is controversy among the scholars regarding the date of migration of the mongoloid group of Bodo people to North East India. Suniti Kumar Chatterji said "*The History of Arrival into India of the various Mongoloid groups speaking dialects of the Sino Tibetan speech family is not known, nor have all various languages and dialects in the family been satisfactorily classified. It would appear that their presence in India was noted by the 10th century B.C., when Vedas books were compiled.*"² He also said, "*the original Sino Tibetan speech, which was ultimate source of ancient Chinese and variant form Tibetan and Burmese had taken its form at least 3,000 years before the Christ.*"³ The Bodo language was also a product of that process of variation. W.I. Singh opined that the Mongolian people entered India from eastern and southern Tibet mainly sub Himalayan region by several waves of migration in about second millennium BC.⁴ It might be before some century B.C. that this group of people started waves of migrating to North East India in several phases through the bank of Kochi River in the Eastern Nepal. Since time immemorial different groups of people like the Mongoloid, Austro-

Asiatic, the Dravidians, the Negritos, and the Aryans had been migrating to North East India. It becomes a hub of various ethnic groups and diverse socio-cultural heritage of different linguistic groups.⁵ Around 1,000 BC the Mongoloids had connection with the Aryans which is evident in the epic Mahabharata. The Physical feature of the Kiratas not only described in the *Mahabharata* but it can be found in the *Kalika Purana*, *Yogini Tantra*, *Yujurveda*, *Atharvaveda* and also in the epic *Ramayana*.⁶ So, it can be affirmed that the Bodos had migrated to this region much before the two thousand B.C. Many scholars are of the view that the original habitation of the Tibeto-Burman speaker of North East India was the region laying in between Hoang Ho and the Yang-tze-Kiang rivers of China. They came to India passing different regions making their settlement in Tibet and sub Himalayan region. The Bodos are considered to be the earliest inhabitants of this region is supported by many Schools of thought but date of their migration is still not apparent.

The Bodos of North East India have their distinct history since pre historic era. In the ancient literatures these people were described as Kiratas, Asuras, danavas, etc. Dr. Suniti Kuma Chatterjee wrote, "*The Kiratas with hair done is pointed top-knot pleasant to look upon, shining like gold, able to move under water, terrible, veritable tiger-man so are they framed.*"⁷ There is controversy among the scholars about the origin of *Kiratas*, however they have been specified as non-Aryan tribe of the Mongoloid origin of the Himalayas and the North East India who had connection with the Chinese Bhutias or the Tibetans and other Mongoloid sections.⁸ there are references about the *Kiratas* in *Yujurveda*, *Atharvaveda*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Kalika purana* and other ancient literature which indicate them none Aryan people of yellow colour, short stature, residing on hills, forest and caves of north east India.

The Mongoloid people are classified into three physical features like, the primitive long headed Mongoloids mainly found in the sub- Himalayan tract in Nepal and mostly in Assam; the less primitive and more advanced short headed Mongoloids who are the inhabitants of Burma, Arakan, Chittagong. Finally the Tibeto Mongoloids fairly tall and having lighter skin and appear to be most highly developed type of the Mongoloids who came to India.⁹

HISTORICAL LEGACY:

The Bodos had wide spread territories under different rulers since pre-historic age. Pragjyotisha was ruled by the Kings of non-Aryan tribes, who were descendent of Danavas and Asuras. Mahiranga Danava, the Mairang Raja in Bodo was sanskritised as Mhiranga, was considered to be the earliest ruler of this region. Mahiranga was succeeded by Hatakasura, Sambasura, Ratnasura and Ghatakasura. Ghatakasura was killed by Narakasura, who

established the capital of Pragjyotishpura at modern Guwahati. ¹⁰ Narakasura was succeeded by his son Bhagadutta, who took part in the Kurukshetra war on the side of Kaurava. Bhagadutta was succeeded by his son Vajradutta. Pragjyotish was ruled by the nineteen descendents of Naraka. Suhabu and Suparna were the last ruler of Pragjyotisha. ¹¹ S.K. Chatterjee remarks "*The Kirata or Mongoloid people were certainly very well known to the Vedic Aryans, and we find mention them in the Yujur and Atharva vadas. They started to come to Hindu Pale from the Late Vedic period, and the Bhagadutta with his Kirata and Cina or Chinese hosts participated in Mahabharata battle as an ally of the Kauravas.*"¹²

The kingdom of Pragjyotish comprised of greater part of Assam, districts like Jalpaiguri, Koch Behar, Rangpur, Bogra Mymensingh, Dacca from Bengal and some part of Pabna and eastern Nepal also included in the kingdom. According to Puranas the Boundary of Kamrup Kingdom was extended up to the Kortoya river in the western side; Dikhou river in the east; Kanjangiri mountain in the north; confluence of Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers in the south including Brahmaputra valley, Rangpur, Koch Behar north-west Mymensingh and Garo Hills. ¹³

Around 350 AD, Pushyavarma of Bhauma dynasty ascended the throne and the kingdom was renamed as Kamarupa and the dynasty ruled till the reign of BhaskarVarma up to 650 AD. During his reign Hiuen- Tsang visited Kamrupa and wrote an account about the land and people of Kampup that the climatic condition was soft and temperate and water led from rivers and lakes flowed surrounding the capital. Land was low laying but it is fertile and cultivated regularly. The men were of small stature and their complexion is dark yellow and their language was different from that of mid India. Bhaskarvarma died in 650 AD without heir.

After the death of Bhaskar varma throne of Kamrup was occupied Salsthamba who was the lord of *Mlechcha* family. Balavarman III transferred the capital of Kamrupa from Pragjyotishpura to Huruppesvara. Tyaga Singha was the last ruler of the family of Salastamba died without natural heir at about 990 AD. So the people elected Brahmapala as the King of Kamrupa, who was scion of Naraka.

Brahmapala was a Buddhist in faith therefore identified as of Pala dynasty. Brahmapala was succeeded by Ratnapala, who fortified the Pragjyotipura and renamed it as Sri Durjaya, which means unconquerable. Joy Pal who succeeded Dharampal and ruled around 1120-1142 AD was the last ruler of the dynasty. In about second half of 12th century AD Pala Kingdom was disintegrated and the governors of smaller region appointed by Pala kings claimed themselves lords of their own regions.

These none Aryan Tibeto-Burman speaking people of Bodo race contributed to build a distinct cultural identity in the entire North East India which was different from the mainland India. Though the impact of Brahmanical rites and system influenced the royal families the common people were free from it except a little inclination towards Hinduism till colonial period.

In about 1815 AD, Biswasingha from the lineage of Dambaru Mech and son of Haria Mech, a Bodo-Mech chieftain of Chiknajar, established the kingdom of Cooch Behar. The kings under this dynasty was called as Coch kings despite the fact that the king Biswa Singha and his successors were Bodo Mech kings, since the dynasty was ruling from the Cooch Behar . During the reign of Samudra Narayan , in the last quarter of eighteen century, with the help of Surjyakari Daivagya composed the *Darrang Rajvamsavali* drawing their geneology is a valuable records of history. The royal families were getting increasingly Hinduised but the common people kept the fundamental of their religion. The Koches are also Hiduised people among all Bodo tribes.

The extensive area at the foothills of Bhutan stretching from Tista river towards the west and in the east of Dhansiri river was called as Bhutan Duwars inhabited by Boro-Meches. At the different time these area was partly controlled by the Bhutan Government and partly by the Assam Government and ultimately annexed to the British India. The British Government then placed the area western part of Sankosh river within the territory of West Bengal while eastern portion of the area was annexed to Assam. After independence major portion of these areas was declared as tribal Belts and Blocks under the provision of **Assam Land Revenue Act, 1886**. In 2003 BTAD was created after the Bodo Accord to provide constitutional protection under Sixth Schedule and to fulfil economic, educational, linguistic aspiration and to preserve their land right, cultural and ethnic identity and to bring all round development.

CULTURAL LEGACY:

The Bodos have very rich cultural heritage of their forefathers which distinguish them from other communities. Till recent past their belief, customary practice, performing arts, narrative and history of the Bodos transmitted orally from one generation to another. The Bodos probably had no system of writing or recording their past account but the only way was the parents telling their children about their tradition, institutions and system, which they inherited from their forefathers. The Bodos are endogamous tribe and were fond of living isolated from other tribes with their own customs and tradition. Writing of traditional culture of Bodos has occurred in the much later time, since last few decades. They need to be analysed carefully to find the actual fact.

A major part of the Bodo population still worship the traditional Bathou religion they inherited from their forefathers since time immemorial. Bathou is the supreme god of Bodos and its worship is related origin and creation (*Ba* means five and *thou* means deep or profound, which denotes five philosophy of truth and creation). The Supreme god is also known as Sibrai (Siva in Hindu).

Undoubtedly, the Bodos have been worshipping Bathou Religion since time immemorial. It is not known, whether this religion originated in the soil of this sub-continent or the Bodos had brought it from their ancestral home, where from they migrated. But it is true that the traditional Bodo society and culture is woven with the fabrics of Bathou Religion. Beginning of their adore to this religion is beyond the reach of historical studies. Though Sydney Endle described bathou as animism wrote as "animist and its underlying principle is characteristically fear and dread".¹⁴ But most of the scholars in the later period including P.C. Bhattacharya rejected the view as the basic principle of the Bathou religion relates to origin and creation of mankind and cosmos. The supreme god Si-brai (Siva In Hindu), with the help of his spouse Si-brui created the universe and first man Monsinsin. But Monsinsin was celibate for life so, Sibrai and Sibrui created man Darimuba and woman Singrimuba for the propagation of mankind. The *Sijou* tree (Euphorbia Splenden) was created as a symbol to supreme god at his alter.¹⁵ Sibrai is also believed to be the creator of all form of dance, music, play and art. Sibrai in the form of Jarapagla performed gigantic dance for creation and promulgation dance form. He was also a expert dancer and singer.

The Bathou religion believes that everything has been created with five elements and the existence of five are felt everywhere. Universe is created with soil, water, air, fire and sky (eternity). The supreme god is called *Abonglaori* in Bodo language, which is a eternal form of *Si-brai* or *Bathou Brai*. *Si* means first or origin and *Brai* means old or source of wisdom. The Bodos believe that *Si-brai* is the first being, originated in the universe and protector of all human being. Si-brai or *Bathou brai* is alike to Hindu god Siva.

Abonglaori is a formless, invisible almighty god spreading to entire universe and regulating them. It is similar to *Paramatma* of the Hindus. *Sibrai* is the manifestation and physical appearance of Obonglaori. There is a saying in traditional Bodo society, '*Abonglaoria mulug Sangsarao Saglwbsarnanwi dong*'. The meaning is almighty god is covering the entire universe. Therefore, the Bodos never worship in the name of formless *Abonglaori* but they perform Garja Puja, Kherai Puja, Puja in the Bahou alter in the name of Supreme God *Sibrai* and other deities.

PERFORMING ARTS:

Bodos are rich in traditional performing arts like folk dance, music, theatrical performance like *gaon*, *yatra gan*, etc. These arts have been inherited from their ancestors but now they are threatened to be extinguished due to the impact of global culture. The legacy of the Bodos coming down even since the glorious past of the Bodos needs to be protected as cultural heritage of the nation. Because the new generation of the science and technology make little effort to learn them to pass over the folk performing arts to the next generation. The origin and progression of folk performing arts of the mankind is directly associated to the ancient ritual, belief, agricultural festivals and environment.

Folk drama is an important genre of folk performing arts, which is related with religion, rituals also associated with dance and music. It has charm to appeal all type of people literate or illiterate, young or old. "Folk dramas are most useful and effective in a village living because of these easily combine entertainment with instruction. It is one kind of audio-visual performance and at the same time their performances is much more economical. It costs almost nothing to visit a folk theatre in Indian villages and their set-up also does not require much expenditure."¹⁶ In 7th century AD the King of Pragjyotishpur Bhaskar Varman arrange a party of dance and music in honour of the Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsiung who visited kamrup on the request of the King.¹⁷

Gaown is the most significant theatrical performance among the Bodos, which is played in five episodes (*Angkas*) throughout the night and ended just before morning. Theme of the dramas are mostly about the Boro kings, queens and heroes of the ancient time with imaginary stories. *Gaown*, music, dance and other folk performances were the means of entertainment among the Boros since ancient time. In the later period the theme was also included the social lives of the Boros.

Thaokri Phalla is folk drama of the Bodos, where the performer move round in front of audience like spinning wheel and performs by telling story, singing, dancing and act with different humour and disposition of human divine and animal characters.

Solo Khintanai or traditional story telling of the Bodos contained dramatic elements, where *Serja bwrai* the story teller with a musical instrument *Serena* (traditional Boro violin) in his hand narrate story with symbolic hands, gestures, facial expression and dialogues.

Traditional Dance: *Khemta palla* was like *thaokri Palla* prevalent in south Goalpara was also ancient form of Bodo drama. *Khemtha Gaan* is performed in a troop consisting of a band of choral singer and dancers. The choral

singers sing playing musical instruments and dancers dance performing dramatic scenes depicting stories of rural life.

The Bodos have rich tradition of dance forms which is called *Mwsanai*; *Mwdwm* (body)+ *sanai* (twist).¹⁸ Liladhar Brahma in his book entitled *Religion and Dances of the Bodos* has classified into 5 kinds of Bodo dances. These are: 1. *Kherai dance*, 2. *Haba janai dance*, 3. *Bagaroumba*, 4. *Bwisagu* and 5. *Raijw janay mwsanai*. He again sub-divided Bodo dances under following the categories: 1. Dance associated with the religious festival 2. Dance associated with the seasonal and agricultural festival 3. Dance associated with the life cycle 4. Other dance forms.

Dance Associated with Bathou Religion: i) *Bathou gidingnai* ii) *Chotrali* iii) *Koijwma Fonai*, iv) *Gandola Bwnai* v) *Chagwlaobwnai*, vi) *Muphur gelenai* vii) *Nao bwnai*, viii) *Khamao barkhwnai*, ix) *Dao thwi lwngnai* x) *Mwsakhaori mwsanai* xi) *Maoji gelenai* xii) *Gorai dabrainai* xiii) *khopri sibnai* xiiii) *Phatali mwsanai* xiv) *Gwthwi Gwthang mwsanai* xv) *Bwr najaonai*. xv) *dahal thungri sibnai* xvi) *Thungri sayao ganai* xvii) *Mwisw gelenai* xviii) *Badali mwsanai*.

Dance associated with the seasonal and agricultural festival i) *Bwisagu mwsanai* ii) *Bardwisikla Mwsanai* iii) *Demsi Mwsanai*.

Dance associated with life cycle: i) *Haba Janai* ii) *Barlangpa Mwsanai* iii) *Bwirathi mwsanai*.

Dance associated with household: i) *Na gwrnai mwsanai* ii) *Mai gainai* iii) *Mai gainai* Iv) *Danai Lunai*.

Other Dance forms: i) *Bagurumba* ii) *Kophri Sibnai* iii) *Mwsaglanai*.¹⁹

Bagurumba and Kopri Sibnai are the most graceful and eye-catching dances perform by large number of women. Bagurumba dance was able to win Presidential award during republic day and occupied a prominent place among the folk dances of India.

There are eighteen forms of Kherai dances to propitiate eighteen deities. These dances are performed by *Daudini*, the female shaman moving round the Bathou alter after sprinkling holy water from the pot and with musical sound of *Kham* (big drum) *sifung* (flute) and *Serja* (bodo traditional violin) and *Jota* (Cymbal). The *Daudini* assimilates herself with gods and goddess and imitate the nature of different gods and goddess. The *kherai* dances are performed throughout the night during *Kherai puja*.²⁰

MONUMENT:

There are many historical remains of the Bodo rulers in the state of ruin or intact in Dimapur, Kashpur, Maibong, Tejpur, Sikhrajhar, Koch Behar, etc, which testify the glorious reign of the Bodo rulers since the pre-historic age to the recent past through the north east India.

SOCIAL CUSTOM:

The Bodos have their own customary laws since time immemorial, which regulates the fabrics of their family and society. But these customs have passed through a number of changes in some points of time due to force of environment. Some distinct Bodo customary laws on some aspects such as laws of inheritance of land property, bride price (*pon takha*), divorce (*pathoi lai bisinai*), widow remarriage system (*dongkha habnai*), and five laws of punishment for social offences are existed.

The traditional Bodo society before the coming of modern global culture, the customary laws had great values in the society, which obligated them to live in peace and harmony in civilized manner. They were not harmful to any other societies in coexisting with them. But some issues like infiltration of illegal migrants, alienation of land property and scarcity of land, due to subdivision and fragmentation of land, for the growing generation has brought lots of imbalances and unrest in the traditional Bodo society.

This rich heritage of the Bodos have been threatened to be disappeared in course of modern-age of science and technology and it would be in oblivion if proper measure is not taken for their protection.

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