

## INSTITUTION OF VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION OF THE BODO: CHANGES AND CONTINUITY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A village is cluster of dwelling houses normally situated in the rural area with no specific numbers of houses that can be considered as village where population may be of minimum few hundred and maximum few thousands. It may be built in a location which is habitable for human beings as well as for other animals (domesticated) having more or less cultivable and uncultivable land around it. Usually, it may be situated in plain, hills and low areas in which water, plants, trees, grasses and other essential commodities are locally as well as easily available. So, it is normally a clustered of human settlement generally permanent in nature with dwelling houses, common grazing field, common pond, common play ground, etc.*

***Keywords:** Gami Bengiri, Lengyai Gami Bengiri, Gamini Dwori, Tandoi or Halmazi, traditional customary laws, etc.*

The Bodo village, in general was a loose unit in the early days. Each and every family or household had a freedom to remain in the village as long as they desired. In the past, the Bodo had the tendency of migration and to settle to the new place by leaving their original settlement. It was a common phenomenon that whenever they faced any trouble or difficulty in their respective villages, they were free to leave the said village and migrated to another place or they were free to search a new settlement which is known as *Hadan Nagirnai* even today. This word *Hadan Nagirnai* clearly indicated that the Bodo had the habit of migration. This migration was not only for the purpose of the settlement but also might be in search of fertile land. The different families or members of migrant when they settled down together in a particular place, that area emerged as village. The bond of unifying between the household in a village was very much unfastened. The member of the Bodo village owes strong allegiance to *Bahagi* (relative from father side) and *Kurma* (relatives from mother side) firstly and secondly to his village as the Bodo belief that their allegiance to the village was secondary one. When any dispute arose between

two different individuals, they used to seek help of their respective closest relatives whether it might be *Bahagi* or *Kurma* to sort out the matter. And dispute between the two individuals of the village was regarded to be the dispute of the respective *Bahagi* and the respective *Bahagi* tried to defend and protect their own person who belonged to the particular *Bahagi*.

Each and every Bodo village has been governed by their traditional customary laws and managed by village council. The Bodo called the village council as *Gami Dwiden Afad* or *Gamini Samlai Afad*. The traditional village administration formed a very important mechanism for the social control of the Bodo society which directly related to their socio-cultural and religious life. The traditional village council of the Bodo retained vast power to solve all types of cases, be it civil or criminal and settled the disputes under the rule of the customary laws. Any individual who intended to seek justice from *Gami Dwiden Afad* or *Gamini Samlai Afad* had to file their petition orally in the past but written application is at present. Before the knowledge of the use of money, the people might have been offered something whether it would be rice-beer or something else as a court fee. Afterward, when money came to be used in the society due to the advancement of civilization, a nominal fee in the form of money was most probably introduced as a court fee. The person who lodged the complaint against anyone has to pay a *Sabri* (Narzi, 2011:97) (complaint fee). The Bodo have their own unwritten constitution or customary laws since the ancient day which is popularly known as *Bad. Bad* or customary laws were composed orally and handed down from one generation to another generation. The polity was based on convention and nothing written laws belonged to ancient time (Mushahary,1986: 290-291). The primary objective of the *Gami Dwiden Afad* or *Gamini Samlai Afad* is to maintain peace and order and established harmony between the individuals, peaceful livelihood, justice, prosperity etc. in the village. The members of the village council discharged their duty sincerely. Justice is delivered quickly and it became inexpensive and free from complex procedural. Justice is given equally to everybody irrespective of sex and no difference between poor and rich and all are eligible to obtain justice as all are treated equally in the eyes of law. Even after having well established laws of the country, the Bodo still followed their traditional customary laws in many cases.

The traditional village council of the Bodo consisted of numbers of member to function the council effectively and properly. The village headman, popularly known as *Gami Bengiri* is assisted by his subordinate members namely *Lengyai Gami Bengiri* (assistant village head), *Gamini Dwori* (village priest) and *Tandoi* or *Halmazi* (village messenger). Village administrative system was based on gerontocracy in early days as the village elders took important role. This gerontocracy system is still found in village administration.

The village chief is called *Gami Bengiri*. He is supreme authority in almost all affairs of the Bodo village (Brahma, 2011:30). He is assisted by the members of the village council. Prosperity and development of the village depend upon the statesmanship of the concerned chief. The main function of the chief and his council of members are to protect the villagers, to look after their welfare and to make prosperity, to administer justice and to perform communal rites and rituals.

The eligibility to become *Gami Bengiri* should be that one should be old married man. Old married man should be one who possessed skill of administration, experience as well as well verse in the customary laws and practices. As per the tradition, unmarried old man even though he possessed the knowledge of customary laws is not entitled to the post of *Gami Bengiri*. There is no formal election for the post of *Gami Bengiri* but it is done on the basis of selection. The post is not hereditary and do not confine to any clan or social groups. Regarding the tenure of village chiefship, there is no fixed term. But tenure is varied from one place to another place ranging from two to five years or sometimes it depends on the will and wishes of the villagers. *Lengyai Gami Bengiri* is the assistant or deputy of village headman. In the absence of village headman or chief, he should act and takes decisions in consultation with other members of the village council. He plays an important role along with *Gami Bengiri* because they are working together for the general welfare of villagers. However, he has no power to over-rule *Gami Bengiri*.

The village priest is known as *Dwori* who is selected for the purpose of performance of rites, rituals and ceremonies of the village from time to time. He is the highest authority and adviser in the matter of religion (Devi, 1998:60). The village priest is very important as well as indispensable person whose religious service is required in social and individual life of villagers. His main duty is to perform all the rites, rituals and sacrifices for the safety of the village, to protect from any kind of natural calamities, evil spirit, protection of village from enemies, etc. and offering prayer for plentiful harvest. During the time of *Garja puja* and *Kherai Puja*, *Dwori* has to perform all the rituals including the sacrifices of livestock. He also performed *Hambai Hwnai* ritual along with villagers by offering and sacrificing goat or fowl or pig for appeasement of gods and goddesses and beasts and insects for plentiful harvest. All the rites and sacrifices are carried out by *Dwori* and no sacrifice can be performed without him.

Among the followers of the traditional *Bathwo* religion there should be a village priest in their respective villages. The process of selection of village priest is done after the end of *Kherai Puja* by *Doudini* (A woman shaman who dance in the *Kherai Puja*). In course of selection, *Doudini* dropped holy water of *Kherai Puja* on the head of the person who took part in *Kherai Puja*. The person on whom the water is dropped is selected as *Dwori*

of the village. In certain villages where *Kherai Puja* is absent or not performed, *Dwori* is selected during the time of *Garja Puja* (Narzi, 2011:92). Nowadays, in the process of selection of *Dwori*, dropping water on the head is disappeared in some areas and selection is done on rotation basis as per the convenience of the respective villages. Among the Bodo, there is no priestly class. The *Brahmans* are not employed in the religious ceremonies as it is performed by *Dwori* (Endle, 2010:39). The post of the priest is not hereditary; anyone who is living devout life could be a priest (Hodgson, 1847:176; Brahma, 2006:20). No remuneration is awarded to him.

The lowest post of village council is *Halmazi* or *Tandwi*. He is the messenger of village. The main function of *Halmazi* or *Tandwi* is to convey information and other news to the members of the village council or to the important officials of the village administration. In addition, village council used to send him to make notice to the public any news when needed. As and when the date of a meeting of the village committee is fixed, the *Halmazi* or *Tandwi* has to go from door to door to invite the people of the village for the meeting and also informed the venue of the meeting. The *Gami Bengiri* also ordered him to call in anybody of the village for consultation or discussion on any matter at any time. He is bound to carry out the command of *Gami Bengiri* of the village council (Narzi, 2011:92; Mushahary, 1986:290; Brahma, 2011:30). A *Halmazi* or *Tandwi*, it is said, should be very active in his service. He is selected by the villagers to acts as a messenger. He is entitled to receive remuneration.

Almost all the posts of the village administrative council are of honorary nature except *Halmazi*. No salary is paid to them. They are not entitled to enjoy salary for their service to village. Generally, the members including *Gami Bengiri* work on honorary capacity as a result they do not receive any salary or remuneration. However, it is reported that in ancient days they were entitled to get a portion of meat of animal sacrificed at ceremonies and festivals as well as privileged of getting a share of hunted wild animal's meat by his villagers. These privileges were given to them as a mark of obligation and respect to them (Narzi, 2011:92).

On the other hand, *Halmazi* (messenger) of the village used get salary from the village. He received two *don* (bamboo basket) of paddy from every household of the village annually as remuneration for his service (Narzi, 2011:93). The amount or salary which is supposed to be enjoyed by *Halmazi* is fixed in advance before the assignment of duty. His salary is collected from each and every household of the village including from *Gami Bengiri*. In early days his salary was paid in kind i.e. rice. But nowadays all the members of the village council who hold the important positions including *Halmazi* are entitled to enjoy certain amount of fixed remuneration which is paid in the form of cash or kind which depend on the capacity of respective family of the village. Generally, the residence of the chief is made as the court for minor cases. In case of major, administration of

justice is done in open fields or village playground or shade of big trees etc. In early days, meeting of village council was usually convened at nightfall because the villagers were free from doing agricultural works and other activities engaged by them by that time.

In past days, there was no professional or expert persons to deal with the cases of law of justice for civil and criminal law. Under the supervision of head of the council including his subordinate members of the council and along with the experience village elders who were versed in their customary laws and practices implemented the laws to bring proper justice. The administration of justice was done in accordance with the customary laws of the Bodo. The civil and criminal cases were governed by the customs and tradition practiced by the Bodo. The laws had social sanction behind and each and every villager was bound to follow. Even the *Gami Bengiri* and other members of the council were not above the law. Till now, the Bodo's customary laws is not codified but transmitted orally from one generation to another. The forms of punishment were various types which based on the degree of the crime or the nature of the dispute. At present also, the Bodo are governed by their traditional customary law and all the past practices are still found in the village administration with certain modification to suit the time.

The complaint which brought to the notice of village headman should be discussed in the open meeting. Both complainer and accused person are to be answered the queries of the village elders who are involved in discharging the duty of justice. In the procedure of administering of justice, the statement given by both parties are listen and carefully investigated and examined by the council. Certain methods like swearing of oaths by taking the name of god, touching the fire, water, earth, even the head of his or her children are followed to ascertain and to prove a person's culpability or the guilt or innocence of a person (Mushahary, 1986:290). The same procedures are also applied to the witness for verifying whether the statement given by him or her is authentic or false. If the accused is proved to be guilty, the council award punishment. The punishment is in the form of penance, fine or boycott which mainly depends on the nature of crime committed by the culprit. Imposition of fine is very common to wrong doer. In some cases, wrong doer is required to do penance or purification along with the payment of fine (Hodgson, 1847:122). In early days, fine was given in kind i.e. rice, livestock such as pig, cow, wine etc. Sometimes, physical punishment is also awarded to guilty person (Mushahary, 1986:290). In the customary laws of the Bodo, the severest and highest form of punishment is *Gaminiprai Arkonai* (social boycott) of the concerned culprit who repeatedly committed the crime. Capital punishment is rare and almost absent as we do not find any information in this regard so far. The decision of the council and village elders who are present in the meeting is final and required to be honoured the said decision by both the parties.

Thus, every Bodo village has independent unit with definite boundary and all the activities are confined to the village. The village administration contained the element of gerontocracy with democratic principle. The village headman or *Gamini Bengiri* discharged his duty with the advice and assistance of his subordinates namely *Lengyai Gami Bengiri* (assistant village head), *Gamini Dwori* (village priest) and *Halmazi* or *Tandwi* (village messenger). On top of it, the village elders also take a very important role for smooth functioning of the council and for providing good administration of justice. Under the traditional village administrative system of the Bodo, all and sundry in the village is equal.

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