

Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos



Dr. K. Brahma

*ASPECTS OF SOCIAL CUSTOMS OF THE BODOS—
A book written by Dr. K. Brahma, Principal i/c of Gossaigaon College, Gossaigaon, Dist. Kokrajhar, Assam.*

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PREFACE

Tribal culture is a vast and interesting subject. The North Eastern Region is a very fertile place for the study of Tribal culture. Various ethnic groups of people having rich culture of their own still follow their traditional customs, beliefs and practices. The way of life of these various ethnic groups is still unknown and untraced.

The present work is an attempt to dive in to the depth of the social customs and traditions of the Bodos or Boros of the N.E. region, specially of Assam. However, it is a part of my Research topic—"A study of Socio-Religious beliefs, practices and ceremonies of the Bodos." Hence, it is an outcome of my extensive fieldworks relating to Research. Since I belong to the same community it was a great priviledge to me to collect necessary informations about the subject matter without much hindrance.

Besides meeting with individual informants, numerous published books and journals have been consulted for the datas. I shall remain grateful to all informants and authors of books and journals.

Truely speaking, it would not have been easy task on my part to get the work in the form of a book, had the T.R.I. of Assam not financed. I must be grateful to the Director, T.R.I., Assam, Mr. B. N. Bordoloi for his generous help to me.

I regret for the omissions which are left without correction in the book owing to some unavoidable circumstances. I do hope, readers will forgive me for any omission and commission of the book.

Gossaigaon
25th July, 1989.

Dr. K. Brahma

FOREWORD

Among the Plains Tribal Communities of Assam the Bodo-Kacharis are numerically the largest. Although there are several books on this community covering different aspects written in Assamese, English, Bodo with Devnageri as well as with Assamese scripts, nevertheless, literature based on indepth studies on specific aspects is far and few between.

Social customs and traditions play a very important role in the cultural life of any ethnic group. There are customs and traditions with core values which a tradition-bound society can hardly afford to do away with even under the most adverse situations. But the customs and traditions with superficial or periphery values are always subject to change since they can hardly stand the rapid changes specially brought about by modern scientific advancement. An insight knowledge of the social customs and traditions having core values of an ethnic group is a must for administrators as well as development personnel working in the tribal areas. Such knowledge is very much helpful to researchers and others with an inquisitive mind.

Dr. Kameswar Brahma, being a member of the Bodo-Kachari community itself, offers in this book an insider's presentation on the social customs of the Bodos. Dr. Brahma has presented here in four different chapters customs relating to birth, puberty, death, marriage, beliefs and pactices connected with agriculture and lastly the religious beliefs and medical Practices, based on his own knowledge, experiences and studies.

This is the second book for which financial assistance has been given to Dr. Brahma by the Tribal Research Institute, Assam, Guwahati, for publication of his manuscript under the scheme "Grants in aid for publication of literature on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes".

It is my earnest hope that this book which has brought to light some very interesting facts on the cultural aspects of the Bodos hitherto unknown to outside world will go a long way in understanding an important ethnic group of the state in its proper perspective.

B. N. Bordoloi

Director,

Guwahati,
31st March, 1989.

Tribal Research Institute, Assam
Beltola, Guwahati-781028

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THE BACKGROUND

I. Bodo : The Term.

(a) Generic Connotation :

The Bodos are a race of the Mongolian people who are described to be the inhabitants of a country north of the Himalayas and West of China. This land is known as *Bod*. The word *Bod* is supposed to mean a homeland. It is also said that there were many parts of the country known as *Hor Bod*, *Kur Bod*, etc.¹

The inhabitants of *Bod* country are known as the *Bodo-Ficha* or *Bodocha* or *Bodosa* (*Bodo* means land and *Ficha* or *Cha* means children, hence children of the *Bod* country). In course of time they come to be known as simply *Boddo-Bodo-Boro*.

According to R. M. Nath, when Buddhism spread into Bodo countries, specially the Southern part, inhabited by the Buddhist Lamas, was known as *Bsti* (Lamas), *Bod* and later on it transformed into *Bsti-Bod-Tibod-Tibbot-Tibet*.

Linguistically the Bodos include a large group of people who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman speeches of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma. They are the *Bodos* or *Boros* of the Brahmaputra valley, *Meches* of lower Assam and West Bengal, *Rabhas*, *Garos*, *Dimasas* and *Kacharis* of Cachar district, *Tipras*, *Lalungs*, *Sonowals*, *Hajangs*, *Mishings*, *Deuris*, *Chutias*, etc.

Hence, by the term *Bodo* in general which is a generic name of the people, it means all the Tibeto-Burman (*Bodo*) Speaking group of Sino-Tibeto origin.

(b) Specific Connotation :

(i) The Kacharis : The Eastern Bodos of Cachar (or Kachar) district, (specially North Cachar) call themselves Kacharis. According to S. K. Chattarjee, this group of Bodos assumed their name from the district of *Kachar*.² The meaning of *Kachar* is *lowlands* or *border lands*, and is originated from Sanskrit *Kaksa-vata-Kachada-Kachar*.

They are simply known as *Dimasa* (*Dima*=big water, i.e., Brahmaputra, *Sa* or *Cha*=Son or children, hence, *Dimasa*=Sons or children of the big water, Brahmaputra). The Kacharis are divided into several groups. They are the Sonowal Kacharis, (also known as Thengal Kacharis), Dimasa Kacharis, Lalung Kacharis and even the Rabhas.

On the other hand, the Bodos or Boros of the Brahmaputra valley, particularly of some districts like Kamrup, Sonitpur, Mangaldoi, Barpeta and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal are known as Bodo-Kacharis or Boro-Kachari, although all of now are popularly known as Bodos.

(ii) **The Mech or Meche** : The Bodos of the North Bengal and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal and Goalpara district of Assam are known as Mech or Meche, besides they also call themselves as *Bodo* and popularly known to their non-Bodo neighbours as Bodo. "They call themselves *Mech* because they settled in the banks of the river Mechi."³

In the present work, by the term *Bodo* an attempt is made to discuss about the Bodo speaking people of the Brahmaputra valley, Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal and particularly of North Goalpara (Present Kokrajhar district) of Assam. Other Bodo speaking groups like Garos, Rabhas, Dimasas, Tipras of Tripura, Lalungs, Sonowals, Hajongs, Deuris, Chutias, etc. are not covered by the term *Bodo* used here.

II. Origin and Affinity :

About the origin of the Bodo-Kacharis S. Endle says, "the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. As remarked above, in feature and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type, and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race."⁴

The Bodo-Kacharis living in the present North Bengal and in the Western part of Goalpara district are known as Mech'. The people of the other communities believe that the 'Mlecchas' of those periods, who are mentioned in the Epics and the 'Meches' are the same people. It is believed that the Bodo-Kacharis living by the bank of the river 'Michi' flowing through Nepal, call themselves 'Mech' or 'Meche'. So, it may be possible that the word 'Mech' or 'Meche' originated from the name of the river 'Michi'.

From the point of physical features, complexion and language, the Bodo-Kacharis have close affinities with the *Dimasas*, the *Tipras*, the *Lepsas* and the *Limboos*. The ancient Indian literatures specially the ancient Aryan Sanskrit literatures, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana describe the Indo-Mongolian and the Sino-Tibetan people as 'Kiratas'. The Kalika purana describes the Kiratas as having short stature, golden colour, shaven head, rough skin and addicted to meat and drink.

In the yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda there is mention of the 'Kiratas'.

III. Habitat and Identity :

The Bodos are numerically and sociologically one of the most important tribes of the North-Eastern India, particularly Assam. While they are spread all over the plains of lower Assam and contiguous areas of North Bengal, they have intimate family ties with many other tribes living in other parts

of Assam and also in Tripura. They belong to the Indo-Mongolian group of tribes who have been generally designated as *Kiratas*.

The generic name 'Bodo' was first applied by Hodgson⁵. The exact sound is better represented by spelling it Bada or Bara. Bodo or Bara is the name by which the *Mech* or *Mes* and the Kacharis call themselves. Like other Tribal names in Assam, the name probably once meant a male member of the tribe. In the closely allied Tripura language '*bara(k)*' still means '*a man*', and a *Kachari* or *Mech* will call himself a *Bara-Fisa*, a son of Baras, to distinguish him from say, a *Sim-sa*, that is, a Bhotiya, or *Chinf'sa*, a son of China. The Bara folks who live to the west of the Kamrup district are called *Mech* by the non-Bodo neighbours. This word is probably a corruption of the Sanskrit '*Mleccha*', which means a foreigner or a stranger. Those of the *Bara* who live in and to the east of the district of Kamrup are called *Kachari* (pronounced *Kosari*) by the non-Bodos.

It has been suggested that the word *Kosari* is derived from the *Kos-arui*, the sons of the *Kos* and that Hodgson might have called them, what some of the family still call themselves, namely Koch or Kos. The use of the word *Koch* to describe the *Bara* race is however, open, to the objection because the term *koch* has acquired a specific use, namely to describe a *Bara* who has become converted to Hinduism, and his descendants. In fact, *Koch* is already a recognised and important Hindu caste in Assam. The derivation of *Kochari* from *Kos-arui*, is moreover, nothing but a hypothesis, and cannot, as yet, be proved by any historical facts. Till these are forthcoming, the traditional connection of the word with *Cachar*, though not entirely satisfactory, must hold its ground.⁶

IV. Areas of Bodo Concentration (present habitat) :

Bodos are living in a scattered manner throughout the North-Eastern region of India. There are some small Bodo

pocket areas also outside India that is, in Burma, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sikkim and Bhutan.

The state of Assam is the main abode of the Bodos. Their main concentration is now on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra, starting from Dhubri and Kokrajhar district, Goalpara district in the west, to Dhemaji sub-division of Lakhimpur district to the east. This northern tract of Assam covers the following areas :

(a) North and Eastern parts of Dhubri Sub-division (now district) the whole of Kokrajhar district and northern most part of Goalpara district ;

(b) Northern parts of Barpeta and Nalbari sub-division and northernmost part of Gauhati sub-division in the district of Kamrup ;

(c) Northern part of Mongoldoi and Tezpur sub-division in the district of Darrang and ;

(d) Northern parts of North Lakhimpur and Dhemaji sub-division in the district of Lakhimpur.

The area of this northern tract of Assam will be about 10,000·00 (ten thousand) square miles of 640,000 (six hundred forty thousand) square Kms.

The region covers about 10 (ten) lakhs Bodo speaking population with a density of about 100 persons per square mile or per square kms.

Besides, there are some pocket areas of Bodo concentration in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra and these are as follows :

(a) Dudhnoi : Dhupdhara areas in the southern part of Goalpara district ;

(b) Dhupdhara-Boko-Chaygaon areas, Chaygaon-Rani areas, and South Gauhati-Sonapur-Khetri areas in the Southern part of Kamrup district ;

(c) Jagiroad-Morigaon areas and Rupohi-Dhing area of Nowgong district ;

- (d) Southern-most part of Sibsagar district ;
- (e) North-Eastern part of Dibrugarh district and ;
- (f) Howraghat-Langhin areas of Karbi-Anglong district.

Outside Assam there are some Bodo pocket areas in the neighbouring states and these are as follows :

- (a) Tikrikilla area of Garo Hills in the Meghalaya state ;
- (b) Dimapur area in the Nagaland state ; and
- (c) Northern part of Jalpaiguri district in the state of West Bengal. Among the areas of the northern tract of Assam ;

Kokrajhar is the highest Bodo concentrated sub-division on (now district) in the state of Assam.⁷

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THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER-I

Life Cycle : Customs, Relating to Birth Puberty, Death, Etc.

Life Cycle and Rites of Passage :

Life is full of transitions in cyclic order. In the language of Arnold Van Gennep, "the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginning. : birth ; social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined. Since the goal is the same, it follows of necessity that the ways of attaining it should be at least analogous if not identical in detail".¹

Thus we observe a general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies and funerals. Man's life resembles nature, from which neither the individual nor the society stands independent. The human activities are governed by celestial changes and periods of relative inactivity.

The life cycle consists of a series of rites of transition which have been called rites de passage. Rites de passage accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.

Birth is the first crucial transition of the human being. All sorts of rites, ceremonies, observances, taboos etc., associated with child-birth are rites de passage.

Baptism is a rites de passage. Ceremonies accompanying name giving, adoption, etc. are all transition rites. Puberty rite is another important ceremony of the human society. It is a symbolic practice which is observed in case of transition of a female member from childhood to womanhood.

Another important transition in the life and status of the individual is marriage. It is accompanied by different types of rites and ceremonies. Rites and ceremonies in connection with marriage include various observances to protect the new couple from evil spirits or the evil eyes, etc., to secure and enhance the safety and prosperity of the new couple.

Death is the last but great transition of the human life. Various rites are performed relating to death. Purification from contact with the dead body, purification of his belongings or the houses believed in, must be accomplished after death of a person. There are ceremonies which are performed to free the dying from sins, to disconnect the living ones from him, to show the path or road to the afterworld, to make his journey easy and free from danger, to ensure his non-return and to protect the living members from his evil motive.

The Rites of Passage of the Bodos :

The Bodo life-cycle more or less centres round the three most important rites of passage viz., birth, marriage and death. There are a few other ceremonies connected with different stages of life but they are clearly of lesser importance in comparison with the above three. In this chapter we propose to take up for discussion the various Bodo rites of passage including those concerned with birth, puberty, adoption and death. Marriage, which happens to have the greatest social and cultural significance for the

Bodo Society, has been kept apart for separate treatment in the succeeding chapter.

1. BIRTH

It is natural that every woman desires to have child after her marriage. In the Bodo society it is generally seen that a Bodo woman prefers to get a male child rather than a female child. It may be owing to the general psychology of the Bodo parents that to give daughters in marriage is a matter of great burden, while in the case of sons it is not so. Also, the Bodo society being patriarchal sons are the sole inheritors of the parents' property. Hence, sons are more desirable to the Bodo parents than daughters.

a) In respect of pregnancy rites following points may be noted :

i) Symptoms of Pregnancy :

Pregnancy is generally detected when menstruation discontinues. An expectant mother discloses this fact before her mother-in-law or any female member of the house. It is observed that every mother-in-law of a married woman is anxious about the information of the first pregnancy of her daughter-in-law (The husband, of course, is the first person to learn about it) The mother-in-law naturally becomes happy while she comes to learn about the first pregnancy of her daughter-in-law.^a There are special, rites or ceremonies connected with pregnancy in the Bodo society, while they are known to be observed in the Non-Bodo Hindu society.

ii) Carefulness and restrictions :

A pregnant woman has to be very careful for the whole period till the birth of the child. She is not allowed to do any hard work. There is also some restriction on her food. She is not allowed to go to the forest, the cremation ground, or to visit or touch any dead body.^a Her

movements are restricted as a precaution against any danger of accident or for the protection from evil spirits.

b) Child-birth and the traditional customs of the Bodos :

At the time of child-birth the Bodos of the rural areas follow some old and traditional customs. Since time immemorial the Bodo women have co-operated with each other at the time of child-birth. The elderly women of the Village perform the duties of midwife. When delivery takes place the woman (expectant mother) takes position on her knees supporting herself on an wooden mortar (*owal* in Bodo and *Ural* in Assamese.) No Separate hut is necessary for the purpose. The Bodos believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits. In order to keep away the evil spirits a piece of iron⁴ or a knife or a sickle is kept below the bed.⁵

A little while after the child is born the umbilical cord is cut with a sharp-edged slip of green bamboo skin (*owa themal* in Bodo) placing the cord (*uthumai*, in Bodo) a cotton or muga silk thread is tied around it. If the baby is male, the cord is tied five times and if female, it is tied six or seven times. The cord is cut by a woman whose hand is believed to be 'bitter'⁶, so that the cut-wound will dry soon. It is also believed that the cord which is cut by a woman whose hand is believed to be 'Sweet'⁷ one will not dry soon. No widow or widower is allowed to cut the cord. It is believed that the child may not have a long life if the cord is cut by a widow or widower. The after-birth is usually buried anywhere or at the front of the main house (*nomano*, in Bodo). Then the mother of the baby bathes the child with tepid water (*doi dungbrud*). If the mother is not able to bathe the baby, she simply starts and then one of the women present bathes the baby. Then the baby is sprinkled with holy water (*doi gothar*), mixed with some 'dub grass' (*dubri hagra*); a few holy basil leaves and a ring of gold. While sprinkling holy water the woman who performs this rite utters :

"*Oi gotha? nongba godo mamon, bangal na jungal,
Garo na Gangar, Harsha na Mephal mon? Dinoini
phrai Boro jabai.*"⁸

English rendering : Whoever you were, wheather you were a Muslim, a Garo, a Bhutia or a Non-Bodo (Harsha) or a Nepali, you have become a Bodo from to-day."

Usually no oil is smeared in the body of the baby. A mixture of dried earth or ash obtained from burnt straw and the remains of dead spiders (*bamblema goran*, in Bodo) is applied on the cut surface as an antiseptic. In earlier days the Bodos did not use any other medicine except this traditional one. Even then, death from child-birth or from navel sepsis was rare. The mother of the baby lies in a clean bed and the baby is placed by her side. No separate bed is kept for the new-born baby.

c) Restriction of food for the mother :

The Bodos believe that the usual food is harmful to the mother as well as to the new-born baby. So for the first few days the mother eats dry food, e.g., fried rice pounded with black pepper, finely cut ginger and salt. She takes usual food after a few days. It is observed that this restriction of food sometimes lingers for a period of a month.

d) Temporary transfer of the guardianship of the baby :

The Bodo parents who lose their children at a young age regularly, have a peculiar system of selling out the newly born baby temporarily to a woman of the same village and of buying it again from her at a very nominal price. The belief involved here is like this : The parents lose their children at the early age due to the "ill look" of the evil spirits. By the aforesaid transaction, it is believed, the "ill look" is averted and as such the evil spirits will not attack the baby and as such, parents will not lose their child. The "Purchased" child is believed to live long. The parents

give the child a name which denotes the value at which they had purchased it back from the buyer-woman (For example, for this purpose a ceremony is performed by the presents by offering rice-beer (*jau*, in Bodo) to the villagers who assemble at the house of the parents).⁹

e) Hair cutting ceremony :¹⁰

This ceremony is performed by the Bodos only in the case of a male child. Generally in the case of the first born male child the hair is allowed to grow long for a period of one or two years after which the hair is ceremonially cut. A day is fixed for the ceremony. The maternal uncle of the child is invited to cut the hair of his nephew in presence of the relatives and the villagers. On this occasion a feast is arranged, where a large quantities of rice-beer (*jau* or *Jumai*) pork, (*Oma bedor*) and rice are offered.

f) Name giving ceremony :

No specific name-giving ceremony is observed by the Bodos. Names are chosen in a peculiar manner. Children are given pet names associated with (i) the physical appearance of the baby, (ii) the name of the day on which the baby is born, and (iii) the affection or the love of the parents or relatives (endearing terms). For example, if a female child possesses a big nose, she is called by the name *Hongle* or *Topsi* (big nosed), and if the child is male, then he is called by the name *Hongla* or *Topsa* (big nosed). A female child of white and ruddy complexion is given the name *Jarau* or *Gaodang* (bright faced). Children are given endearingly such names like *Rani* (queen), *Raja* (king), *Babu* (gentleman), *Sona* (gold), *Rupa* (silver), etc. In the Bodo society formal names were normally not bothered about too much. Now a days formal names of the children are often given by the parents consulting the teacher of the Primary school at the time of admitting them into the schools. Sometimes it is observed that the school

teachers are fully authorised to select the names of the children according to their own choice. In the case of educated parents the formal names of their children are given by themselves without consulting others.

g) Ear perforation (for girls) :

The Bodo girls are very fond of ornaments. Even the house-wives or the elderly women of the Bodo society use ornaments regularly. A girl may start using ornaments on her ear at her early age. The ornament is called *Enti* a small ring made of brass or gold, which is generally used at a tender age. There is no big ceremony on the occasion of ear-perforation, but nonetheless some importance is attached to the act of ear perforation. Generally, an elderly woman is selected for the purpose. A young girl who possesses the requisite courage may also be allowed to perforate the ears of a girl. Sometimes it is seen that the mother of the girl also perforates the ear without asking for any body's help.

2. Puberty in the Bodo society :

As regards puberty of the girls no social observance is seen to be resorted to in the Bodo Society, Particularly in the Kokrajhar District area. It is generally observed that the mother of a girl is the only member of the family who has the information of attaining puberty by the daughter. It is also peculiar that the girl who attains puberty maintains secrecy about this important rite of passage. She performs all usual works at home and there is no restriction from the side of her parents. However, the girl who attains puberty is somehow restricted from mixing with the boys freely. She also changes her dress and put on a garment meant for a grown up female, known as *dokhna* in Bodo, which covers her body from the chest to the ankle. No special ceremony or function is held on the occasion of puberty in the Bodo society.

However, the Bodo-Kacharies of Dibrugarh district, especially those of Namrup area, observe a kind of ceremony on puberty. The parents of the girl arrange a feast and a ceremonial marriage of the girl with a banana plant is performed. Thus a public announcement is made that the girl has attained puberty.¹¹ Since this system is seen in the Hindu society in Assam, it is not unlikely that the Dibrugarh Bodos adopted it from the latter.

3. Ceremony relating to feeding the newly born child :

At the time of giving rice to the child for the first time at the age between five and seven months the Bodo parents follow some customary procedures. After the preparation of rice the parents first offer to their domestic-gods and goddesses, *Bathou Borai* and *Bathou Buri* or *Mainao*. This function is performed by a *Douri* or *Oja*. At the time of offering rice the *Douri* or *Oja* recites some *mantras* before *Bathou* and *Mainao* praying for the welfare of the child. Then the mother of the child, with the advice of the *Douri* or *Oja* feeds the child in the presence of relatives and friends.

The followers of Brahma Dharma feed the child after performance of a *Yajnahuti*. They pray to God through *Yajnahuti* for the welfare of the child and then the mother of the child feeds her child with the guidance of the *Purahita* or the 'Priest'.¹²

4. Adoption in Bodo Society :

Naturally every couple desires to have children. The custom of adopting a child by a childless couple is very widespread all over the world. (Adoption may sometimes be resorted to even when a couple or an individual is not childless.) The system of adoption is prevalent among the Bodos. If the couple is childless and has no hope of having the child in the predictable future, then the question of adoption comes. Children who are orphans or whose parents are not able to maintain them are generally adopted either by some related persons or even by absolute

strangers. The adopted children are treated as full members of the family. The wealthy persons who have no issue at all adopt the child of others with the purpose of preserving their properties after their death. In a Bodo family where there are both boys and girls, only the male children can inherit the property of the father. The female child is not entitled to inherit the property. But if a female child is adopted by a couple having no child of their own at all, then she can inherit the property of her foster father after his death. On the other hand, in the absence of male heirs in a family a daughter is entitled to inherit the property of her father.

5. DEATH :

a) Social customs of the Bodos relating to death :

Just after the confirmation of death the dead body is taken out from the house and kept in the middle of the court-yard. The place where the dead body is to be kept is cleaned with cowdung mixed with water. The dead body is then washed with water and a new cloth *gamcha* is tied on the body. The hair is combed after applying hair oil. In the case of female a new *dakhna* (a female dress) is tied on the body. The near and dear ones offer rice and some favourite foods of the dead person with water before taking the dead body to the cremation ground. In the performance of some major and minor rites in connection with the dead body the role of a *dauri* or *Oja* is important. The dead body is then placed on a *seren* or *sangra*, a kind of trellis made of a raw bamboo. The Projecting bamboo poles that rests on the shoulders of the pole bearers are called *bathi*. The pole bearers are called *Gothoi bangra*. Generally the sons and the relatives carry the dead body. Then the funeral procession with the dead body takes place towards the cremation ground. The procession is led by the *dauri* or *Oja*. On the way, from the house of the dead person to the cremation ground the *dauri* or *Oja* leaves back small pieces of yarn.¹³ It is believed that the soul of the dead can

go to the cremation ground from the house following the yarn. This custom is followed by the Deoris, Rabhas and Mising also.¹⁴ At least one male member of each family of the village is bound to go to the cremation ground with the dead body. The women and the children are not allowed to participate in the procession.

The Bodos follow both the burial and cremation systems of the disposal of the dead body. Earlier, the Bodos generally preferred burial to cremation. Even now some follow the practice of burying the dead. At the time of burial the dead body is covered with a white sheet of cloth and slowly lowered into the grave with the head to the south. A few coins and cowrie shells are also buried alongwith the dead body. It is believed that the soul of the dead may be required to cross a river on boat by paying the fare to the boat man or the soul may be required to purchase some foods on the journey. So, some coins are placed in the grave or beside the dead body. A small hole is kept in the earth over the nose of the dead body leading to up to the outside air. It is believed that by doing so the spirit of the dead entering the body is helped to breathe. A pitcherful of fresh water is placed on the grave as a drink for the dead. A little rice is also cooked on the spot of cremation and is left for the dead. It is believed that the soul of the dead may start its journey after taking rice.

Before the funeral pyre is lit some traditional customs are followed relating to the dead body. All the persons present at the cremation ground offer the dead body a little water with the help of the leaves of the Indian fig tree (*pakribilai*) and utter like this : *No longdo amokha, donoiniphrai nong ba nong, jong ba jong soi*. Its meaning is this "O, you take this water, From to-day you will remain as yourself, and we shall remain as ourselves." By doing this the mourners mean that they have separated their relationship with the dead person. After offering water, a piece of red thread is placed on the lips. The Bodos believe that as a result of placing a piece of red thread

on the lips the dead person will have red lips when the re-birth takes place. The use of the Indian fig tree leaves bears significance. The dead person will have a small and thin lips when the re-birth takes place. A branch of the Indian fig tree full of leaves is posted on the head of the grave or the cremation ground. This bears the significance that if the dead person is female then she will take re-birth with a huge quantity of hair. If the dead is male then it is believed that the soul of the dead person will take rest under the Indian fig tree until it attains salvation.¹⁵

While the dead body is to be burnt the pyre is arranged as the non-Bodo Hindus do it. A pair of chickens are taken to the cremation ground and one chicken is burnt alongwith the dead body and another is left free. There is the system of placing five or seven stacks of woods while the pyre is arranged. A torch is then lighted and the relatives and friends of the deceased pass round the funeral pile in procession, the men five times, the women seven, after which the torch is applied to the pyre. After the cremation is over the members of the funeral party take bath in the river or stream before returning to their respective houses. Just after bath every member of the funeral party chew a little quantity of dry leaves of the jute plant (*narzoi goran*). By doing so the Bodos believe that from that time the relation between the dead person and the members of the funeral party is over. After returning from the river or stream the persons of the funeral party purify themselves by sprinkling pure water on their bodies from a glass in which water is kept alongwith a ring of gold, some leaves of the basil plant and of the sacred dub plant. This sacred water is kept ready before the members of the funeral party return to their houses. Then they enter to their respective houses after bowing down before the altar of *Bathou*. The followers of the *Brahma Dharma* enter into their respective houses just after purifying themselves with the holy water, already kept ready in front of their houses.

All the members of the funeral party gather together at the house of the dead person after the cremation is over. Then they are entertained with *Jau* or *Jumai* (locally prepared rice-beer). If the family of the dead person is poor the villagers contribute something to enable the family to arrange the *Sharddha* ceremony.

b) The Shraddha ceremony :

On the thirteenth or the eleventh day from the day of the death of a person the *Saradu* or *Shraddha*¹⁶ ceremony is held. The *Shraddha* the mind-rite of orthodox Hindus, known as the *Shraddha* (Sanskrit, Srut, faith, trust, belief) is a mere highly developed from the primitive funeral feast and of the custom of feeding the dead¹⁷.

The followers of the traditional Boro faith perform the *Saradu* ceremony with prayer before the altar of the *Bathou* and then the villagers and relatives of the dead person are entertained with *Jhu* or rice-beer which is procured in abundance. Serving of meats common in the *Saradu* ceremony. At the end of entertainment of all present at the ceremony a custom of giving alms in the form of coins is followed. The coins are mixed with uncooked rice and these are thrown in the air at a large gathering of the small children. This ceremony is called in Bodo as *Dan sarnai*. Sometimes a bullock is set free in the name of the dead person and it is called in Bodo *Masau saran Hogarnai*, Which means to set a bullock free. The responsibility of conducting the whole function rests on the eldest son of the dead person. He has to perform some specific duties under the traditional customs. He has to carry the unclean leaf-plates left after the guests have eaten food in a basket on his head and throw them away in the field or at the public road side. It is called in Bodo *Sua Garnai*, which means removing of impurity. That way the impurity caused by death is ceremonially removed and the members of the family can perform all normal activities after this ceremonial cleaning. This function is

essential during the *Saradu* ceremony. None can avoid this traditional custom.

The followers of the *Brahma Dharma* perform *Ahuti* during the *Saradu* ceremony. After the *Ahuti* is over all the persons present are entertained with a common meal. The meal is generally vegetarian. The practice of serving *jau* or rice-beer is sometimes observed among the followers of the *Brahma Dharma*, just after the main function, including *suagarnai* is over, although it is restricted.

c) Daha Garnai :

One day ahead of the *Saradu* ceremony a *pre-saradu* ceremony is performed by the Bodos. This ceremony is called *Daha* or *Daha Garnai*, which means to give up grief. In Bodo *Daha* means grief, on the other hand, the non-Bodo Assamese people call it *Daha*. It may be pointed out here that in Bodo *Daha* means grief or sorrow. Accordingly to some people this word originates from the Sanskrit *dasaha* meaning ten, and it is being held on the tenth day of the death. This is probably a case of folk etymology.

This ceremony is performed simply by offering some favourite foods of the dead person. It is called *Gothoino baonai* or offering of foods or other things to the dead person. The whole ceremony is conducted by *Dauri* or *Oja* (Medicine man of a village), who chants the *mantra* in the half-sitting position facing to the south. The members of the family, specially sons of a dead person pray to him kneeling down on the ground appealing him to accept the offerings made by them.

Foot notes and references :

1. Gennep, A. V., The Rites of passage ; The University of Chicago Press ; pp. 2-4.
2. Shrimati Laishri Basumatary, age-75, village—Bhumka Kokrajhar District (an informant)
3. Smti. Dukheswari Brahma, age-65 ; vill.—Bhumka, Kokrajhar District (an informant)

4. Crooke, William ; *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, New Delhi, 1925 ; page 276 ; (Among substances which repel the evil Eye and the assaults of demons iron takes a leading place. Up to a few years ago the Keriya of choto Nagpur were in the habit of using axes and grubbers made of stone and some survivals point in the same direction, as when Kacharis and Khasis never use a steel implement in cutting the umbilical cord, employing hard, thin strips of bamboo for the purpose, and in Bengal to this day Hindus sever it with a piece of Bamboo or oyster shell, Musalmans with a sharp bit of silver.
5. Bhattacharya, Dr. P.C.; "Asomia Sanskritit Jana-Jatir Barangini"; *Asomia Sanskriti*, Assam Sahitya Sabha (Ed). by Hari prasad Neog and Lila Gogoi : (Birth, marriage and death,—these three are the great incidents in human life. In connection with these three incidents many regulations are followed. During child birth to protect the child bearing mother from the Evil spirits the Assamese Hindus used to keep *Siju* tree (the euphorbia) or the thorns of the plum (jujube) tree at the entrance of the house where the mother was staying ; this custom was originally prevalent among the Kirata people like Boro-Kacharis."
6. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti* 1966, P. 144 : 'A man or a woman 's called bitter handed', if the vegetables or the betel leaves cease to grow after the touch of that particular man or woman."
7. Narzi Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, 1966 ; P. 144 ; "Sweet hand" 'A person is called sweet handed if the rice-beer (*jau*) prepared by him or by her becomes of sweet taste ; 'Sour handed'—a person is called 'Sour-handed if the rice-beer prepared by him or by her becomes sour tasted.'
8. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti* 1966, P. 145.
9. Shri Danda Ram Brahma, age-85 ; of Bhumka village, Kokrajhar District ; he is an uncle of the present researcher, who informs that the present researcher also was sold temporarily and was purchased back at the price of Rs. 1.00 (One) only and was named after *Thaise* which means one rupee.
10. Dr. B. Dutta, G.U. : 'It is probable that this custom of the Bodos is somehow influenced by the Cudakarana rite of the Hindu societies.'
11. Informant : Shri Pradip Kr. Brahma, B.A., Namrup Dist. Dibrugarh (An employee of the UCO Bank)
12. Informant : Shri Binendra Nath Basumatary, age-65, of village—Binyakhata, Kokrajhar District.
13. Informant : Shri Biraj Basumatary, age-60 ; vill. Aflagaon, Kokrajhar District and ;
Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti* ; Gauhati, 1966 P. 150.
14. Goswami, Dr. Upendra ; "Deori-Chutia" '*Asomar Jana-jati*, Edited by Dr. P.C. Bhattacharya, 1962 ; P. 95-96.
15. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, 1966 ; P. 150.
16. Datta, Dr. B., G.U. : In Assamese it is called '*Saradh* ; in Bodo it is called '*Saradu-skt. Shraddha*. It is also practised by the Assamese Hindus.'
17. Hastings, James ; *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* Vol. I. P. 452.

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CHAPTER-II

Life Cycle : Customs Relating to Marriage

Introduction :

"Marriage has been defined as a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized legitimate offspring of both parents. Marriage creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between the spouses, between each and the kin of the other, and establishes what will be the rights and status of the children when they are born. Every society has recognized procedures for creating such relationships and rights, and for making it known that they have been created."¹

There are a few systems of marriage of the Aryans which are akin to the Bodo marriage system. These are the Asura marriage, Paisasa marriage and the Brahma marriage.

In the Asura marriage the bride-groom uses to get a bride by paying a reasonable price for her. The idea probably is that it would be disgraceful for a girl and her family if she is given in marriage for nothing. In earlier days, the bride price was said to be compulsory in the Bodo Society.

The Paisasa marriage, which is the most condemned Aryan system of marriage, is not totally absent in the Bodo society. In this marriage the bride is physically overpowered by the bride groom in order to make her yield to his passion.

The Brahma marriage is also akin to a Bodo marriage system in which the father of the bride selects his son-in-law and keeps him in his house. This system is called

Garjia Lakhinai in Bodo. The bridegroom is to stay in the family of his father-in-law even after his marriage.

The system of marriage of the Bodos :

As with many other societies the marriage ceremony is the most important ceremony in the life-cycle of the Bodos. Marriage is called *Haba*² by the Bodos. In Bodo *ha* means soil or earth and *ba* means to bear something on the back. So, *haba* means to bear the soil or the responsibility of the earth on the back. It is interesting to note that Sanskrit word for marriage *bivaha* also has a similar etymological meaning. Finally, after marriage a person enters into a circle of great responsibility. With the marriage ceremony the Bodos give the newly married couple a new lesson on life which is full of duties and responsibilities.

Different types of marriage :

The Bodos have as many as six different types of marriage. These are 1) *Sangnanoi lainai haba* (marriage according to standard practice), 2) *Gorjia Lakhinai haba*, 3) *Kharsonnai haba*, 4) *Bonanoi lainai haba*, 5) *Donkhar langnai haba* and 6) *Dongkha Habnai Haba*.

1) Sangnanoi lainai haba :

This marriage is solemnised according to the standard social customs. According to this system of marriage the bride is selected by the parents of the bridegroom and then the marriage is settled after negotiation. In earlier days this sort of marriage was solemnised at the house of the bridegroom only. Now-a-days, the marriage is solemnised at the house of the bride also. This type of marriage is regarded as a regular marriage. Bride-price was common in earlier days. In the present Bodo society it is not compulsory.

2) Gorjia lakhinai haba :

It is solemnised at the house of the bride. It may be called a marriage by service, because the bridegroom has to give his service at the house of the bride before the marriage. This system is in vogue among the non Bodos. In Assamese it is called *Ghorjia*. This type of marriage is regarded as an irregular marriage. This system of marriage is rare in the present Bodo society.

3) Kharsonnai haba :

In this marriage the bride enters into the house of the bride-groom before the settlement of the marriage. It is possible if there is mutual understanding between the bridegroom and the bride. The consent of the parents of the bride is not taken into consideration much. This is also an irregular marriage.

4) Bonanoi lainai haba :

According to this system of marriage the bride is forcefully taken away from the house of the bride to the house of the bridegroom and then the marriage is solemnised. This system of marriage was prevalent in the earlier days. It is not a socially approved system of marriage in the present Bodo society. It is almost similar to the Paisasa marriage of the Aryans.

5) Donkharlangnai haba :

Although not approved socially, sometimes this type of marriage takes place in the Bodo society. This is the marriage by elopement of both bride and bridegroom. This type of marriage is akin to the *Gandharva* system of marriage of the Aryans. The mutual understanding between the bride and bridegroom is enough for this type of marriage. This is also a kind of irregular marriage system.

6) Dongkha habnai :

This system of marriage is approved by the Bodo society. In this marriage the bride is a widow. If a man lives in the house of a widow as her husband then they are recognised as husband and wife by the society. However, they have to regularise their marriage according to the social customs called '*Dongkha Habnai*'. This type of marriage is very rare in the Bodo society.

Another irregular marriage, which is socially recognised is the *widow re-marriage*. A widow can re-marry any person who is not related to her. If she marries for the second time then she loses the authority on the property of her deceased husband. The male child is always entitled to get the property of his father. Sometimes, it is seen that the widow is allowed to take the female child of her deceased husband alongwith her to her new husband.

Although the widow re-marriage is allowed in the Bodo society, there are some restrictions which are followed strictly. A widower may re-marry his deceased wife's younger sister, but not the elder, whom he is obliged conventionally to regard in the light of a mother. Similarly, a widow may re-marry her deceased husband's younger brother, but she is not allowed to re-marry the elder brother of her deceased husband.

Selection of the bride and settlement of the marriage :

The party must consist either of five or three members only. The members of the bridegroom party carry a pair of silver bracelets (*Asan Shuri jorase*) a pair of silver one rupee coins, a pair of areca nuts, betel leaves and a pair of rice-beer bottles (*thakha gathang jorase, goijora, pathoi jora, jorase jau dingri*) to the house of the bride at the time of settlement. The members of the bridegroom party leave these things at the house of the bride. The parents of the bridegroom explain the purpose of the visit indirectly before the parents of the bride.

The stages of Bodo marriage :

The entire proceedings of a Bodo marriage can be divided into three stages : (1) The first is the pre-marriage preparations centring round the selection of the bride ; (2) The second is the marriage proper and (3) the third one is the post-marriage rites :

1. Pre-marriage preparations and selection of the bride :

When a boy becomes *marriage worthy* the parents have consultation with trusted relatives and friends and start preparations.

The most important part of the pre-marriage preparation is the selection of the bride the Bodo parents are very particular about making the right choice. After making preliminary inquiries about the prospective brides, a party sets out to the house of the girl with a view to finding out the suitability of both the bride and her house-hold.

In connection with the selection of the bride they are guided by some traditional beliefs about good and bad *signs*.

Bad signs :

(i) At the time of consultations about the selection of the bride if the members of the selection party hear the sound of thundering, then the prospects of the mission are believed to be unfavourable. The bride is believed to be of hot temper and it is believed that there is every possibility of quarrel between the husband and wife after the marriage, (ii) If one of the selection party meets with an obstruction while setting out, it is believed that the marriage would be unhappy. (iii) If a mongoose (*Neolai*, in Bodo and *Neol* in Assamese) is seen crossing the road from the right side to the left side of the party, it is believed that there may be a separation between husband and wife. (iv) If a snake runs across the way in front of the selection party from left to right side of the party then also it is believed that there may be separation between the husband and the

wife. (v) If the members of the selection party come across a dead body on the way, it is believed that either the husband or the wife may expire untimely, (vi) If the members of the selection party happen to witness the sight of cutting of bamboo or working in the field with a spade just after reaching the house of the bride, it is believed either the husband or the wife may die just after the marriage ceremony. (vii) It is also believed that if any widow or widower takes part in all the activities relating to a marriage, starting from selection of the bride to the end of the marriage ceremony, either the husband or the wife may expire untimely.⁵

Good signs :

(i) If the bride is seen drying or husking paddy at the courtyard at the time the selection party reaches the house of the bride, it is believed that the bride would be a fortunate one.

(ii) If the bride is seen by the members of the selection party cleaning or sweeping the court-yard or busy at combing her hair, it is believed that the bride would be of long life.

(iii) If the bride is seen entering into the main house (*Nomano*) by putting her left foot at the door, it is believed that the bride would be of auspicious nature bringing fortune to the family (*Lakhi*) and loyal to her husband.

Assessment of the character of the bride :

The Bodos believe that by observing the gestures and postures or the physical structure of a girl, her character and manners may be ascertained :

(i) If the bride walks by thrusting out her breast and if she produces noise with her toe while she walks, it is believed that the girl would be of a hot temper. (ii) If the bride possesses large breast and the hips and her waist are equal in girth to the size of her breasts, it is believed that the bride would be fickle-minded.

Physical beauty :

Physical beauty is also an important consideration in the matter of selection of a bride. The Bodo parents of a prospective bridegroom want to have such a girl as their daughter-in-law whose nose is pointed, eyes are bright, teeth are small, the fingers are well-shaped and the face is bright and who has a dark and thick lock of hair.

On the other hand, the parents of the girl also desire to have such a boy as their son-in-law, who has a strong and stout physique, sound health and who possesses a good moral character.

The physical attributes of the girl whom the young Bodo boys desire to have as a bride are brought out a folk-song popular among the young boys of the Goalpara and Kokrajhar (North-west Goalpara district) districts.

The parents of the proposed bride do not give their opinions at the single approach of the party of the bridegroom. Some times it is seen that the parents and the related persons of the bride refuse to accept the articles offered by the party of the bridegroom. The members of the bridegroom party along with the *Ghatok*⁵ (go-between) (in Bodo, *Gathakdar*), try to convince the parents of the bride. If within a week from the date of the first approach of the bridegroom party the parents of the bride return the silver bracelets (*Ashansuri*) to the house of the bridegroom, then it is understood by the parents of the bridegroom that the other side is not agreeable to the proposal. This is called *ashan phinnai* or returning the bracelets. Then the parents of the bridegroom approach the parents of the bride for the second time and even sometimes for the third time also. In earlier periods, there was the custom among the Bodos to give pressure on the parents of the bride and to compel them to give their consent to offer their daughter. On that day the village elderly persons were invited and the settlement of marriage

was made in presence of them. After getting consent of the parents of the bride the related persons of the bridegroom visited the house of the bride at least once in a month till the marriage took place.⁶

After the preliminary settlement the parents of the bride visit the house of the bridegroom. On this occasion the parents of the bridegroom entertain the guests with rice-beer, pork and areca-nuts and betel leaves (*Jau, Oma bedar aro goi pathoi*) in abundance. This ceremony is called *nonainai*.⁷ In earlier days the Bodo society observed this ceremony as a compulsory pre-marriage ceremony. The final settlement of the marriage depends on this ceremony *nonainai*. If the condition of the family of the bridegroom is not satisfactory then the final settlement of the marriage may be cancelled.

The economic condition of the family of the bridegroom is taken into consideration. Not only the parents of the bride take the landed property of the bridegroom into account before giving their daughter to a person in marriage, the bride also desires to get a bridegroom whose economic condition is sound. This is reflected in the folk-song popular in the Bodo-society.

After obtaining the final consent of the parents of the bride, the parents of the bridegroom formally enters into a new relationship with those of the bride. For this purpose a ceremony is held at the house of the bride. The parents of the bridegroom arrange a feast with pork (*Oma bedor*) or chicken (*dao bedor*), rice-beer (*jau*) and rice (*Engkham*) and entertain the members of the brides family alongwith the related persons. This ceremony is called (*Samanda Phirainai*, which means changing the "Relationship". The new relationship between the parents of the two families are known as *Bibai* and *Bijomaijo*.⁸ From this day and onward the new relationship between the two families will continue.

Another pre-marriage ceremony is the *Howa-godan nainai*⁹ literally meaning "the interview of the bridegroom".

After the final settlement, the bridegroom has to visit the house of the bride along with some of his friends. This system is still followed by the Bodos. The parents and the bride herself want to see the bridegroom before the marriage is held. There is a system of presentation of handkerchief or scarf by the bride to the bridegroom at the time of his visiting the house of the bride. It is also believed that if the bride abstains from presenting the *handkerchief* or scarf to the bridegroom then it is understood that the bride is not satisfied with the choice of the bridegroom. Sometimes it also happens that the bride does not appear before the bridegroom during his visit to her house to express her unwillingness to the settlement of the marriage. In such a circumstance, the settlement of marriage may be then cancelled.¹⁰

Goi khaonai (cutting of areca nuts) :

This is an important pre-marriage ceremony observed by the Bodos according to their traditional customs. After the final settlement, the members of the bridegroom's party go to the house of the bride with bundles of areca nuts and betel leaves. This ceremony is known as *Goikhaonai*. The villagers of the village of the bride are entertained with areca nuts and rice-beer (*jau*) in abundance. In earlier days, the bridegroom's party carried sufficient quantity of rice-beer (*jau* or *jumai*) to the house of the bride and entertained the parents of the bride, relatives and the villagers.

Gangkhan honai :

Another important pre-marriage ceremony is called *Gangkhan honai*. The parents of the bridegroom go to the house of the bride along with a pair of silver bracelets and leave them at the house of the bride. The Bodos of Kamrup and Darrang districts take two bottles of rice-beer (*jau*) and leave them at the house of the bride. This is done to show the desire of the parents of the bridegroom to get the girl of the house as a bride. This ceremony is

performed before the pre-marriage ceremony *Goikhaonai* and just before the final settlement is made.

Before the final settlement of marriage is made there is a custom in the Bodo society that the girl who is to be given in marriage advise her father not to give her in marriage to a very poor family. There is a folk-song about this custom.

Biban langnai (Barlangpha and bairathi) :

This pre-marriage ceremony is performed compulsorily by the bridegroom party. Areca nuts and betel leaves (*Goi aro pathoi*) are essential for this ceremony. Two earthen pitchers (*Hani thinkli gongnoi*) are carried to the house of the bride. On the body of the two pitchers the signs of the sun and the moon are painted. If the sign is detected to be wrong then the bride-party charges a fine from the parents of the bridegroom. The person who carries the two earthen pitchers is called *Barlangpha*.¹¹ The services of girls or ladies (*not widows*) are essential during the marriage ceremony, starting from the pre-marriage ceremony *Biban-langnai*. They are called *Bairathi jora*.¹² Their main function is to cut the areca nuts and distribute to the people of the bride's party. The parents of the bride also select the *Bairathi jora*, two girls or women during the marriage ceremony.

There are some strict rules for the selection of *Barlangpha* and *Bairathi*. A person to be selected as *Barlangpha* must be young, stout and jolly. If married, he must not be a widower. In selecting the *Bairathis* the same rules are followed. A girl or woman must be healthy strong and handsome. If married she must not be a widow. A widow or a widower is called *Khoro goja* or headless by the Bodos. No widow or widower is allowed to perform any auspicious work during the marriage ceremony.¹³

The *Biban* or the *bhar* (in Assamese) is placed by the *barlangpha* in front of the main house (*nomano*) and

other commodities are placed beside the *biban* or the *bhar*. The *biban guboi* consists of the two pitchers (which is known as *Ghaibhar* in Assamese). The *Biban* or the *bhar* consists of rice-beer (*jau*), pork (*Oma bedor*) areca nuts (*goy*) and betel leaves (*Patihoi*). On the occasion of the *biban* a pig is cut equally into two parts, of which one part is given to the parents of the bride and the other is kept in the house of the bridegroom. The divided pork is called *Omakhoptang*. This work is performed by the *Barlangpha*. The two *bairathis* cut the areca nuts and distribute them among the assembled people. Alongwith the areca nuts they also distribute *jau* or rice-beer to the people who attend *biban*. The areca nuts are distributed from three times to nine times, the custom varying from area to area. The pre-marriage ceremonies like *goy khaonai* and *Biban langnai* are repeatedly held at the house of the bride for several times till the proper marriage ceremony takes place. To carry the *Biban* or *bhar* of the commodities to the house of the bride is the essential duty of the parents of the bridegroom.

On the day of making the final settlement of the marriage the party of the bridegroom has to entertain the villagers of the bride's village with areca nuts, betel leaves and prok. After the ceremony is over the skins of the areca nuts are thrown on the roof of the main house *nomano*. This is known as the ceremony of *Gay-khithou garkhonai*. The skins of the areca nuts are to remain on the roof till the proper marriage ceremony is held. This practice is believed to bring good fortune.

The same two *bairathis* and one *barlangpha* who start the functions of the pre-marriage ceremonies have to perform all the functions till the end of the proper marriage. While the *Biban langnai* ceremonies are over another important pre-marriage ceremony *khabira langnai* is performed. The parents of the bridegroom alongwith some villagers (elderly persons) go to the house of the bride with areca nuts, betel leaves and rice-beer to get the confirmation of the

marriage and fix a suitable date of the proper marriage mutually. In fixing the date the consent of the parents of the bride is essential.

The Bodos of North Bengal and Goalpara district of Assam prefer the Assamese month of *phagun* for the marriage ceremony. They never solemnise the marriage ceremony in the month of *Chat* or *Chaitra*. There is a folk-song about the selection of the time for the marriage ceremony. The Bodo ladies sing the song and dance together :—*Haba junglab, junglab. Sanba golaoni dinao, Aioi sanba golaoni dinao*. The central idea of the song is that the enjoyable marriage *junglab* takes place during the period while the days are long—(during the month of *phagun*).

As they select the month so also the days are also selected for the marriage ceremony. They prefer the *Sunday* to be the best day for the marriage ceremony. On *Saturday* and *Tuesday* they never hold the marriage ceremony. Except these two days other days are regarded as medium for the ceremony.¹⁴

After fixation of the date between the two parties of the bride and bridegroom the proper marriage takes place. The parents of the bridegroom with the help of their villagers and relatives go to the house of the bride to bring her for marriage. This is known as *Hinjao godan laino thangnai* or to go to bring the new bride. If the house of the bride's parents is situated at a distant place, then the bridegroom party has to start to that place one day earlier of the particular date of marriage. The bridegroom party consists of *Barlangpha*, two *Bairathis*, few girls and women and some elderly persons. The *Biban* or the *bhar* is carried by *Barlangpha* and he was assisted by some young persons of the party. The *Biban*¹⁵ consists of the two jars of rice-beer (*jau*), one pig, areca nuts and betel leaves in abundance. The two *Bairathis* have to distribute the areca nuts to any person who wants from them, even on the way. Sometimes, the villagers obstruct on the way then the bridegroom party has to solve the problems by distri-

buting areca nuts and betel leaves. In early days, it also happened that the villagers on the way obstructed the bridegroom's party and demanded money from the bridegroom's party. On reaching the house of the bride the bridegroom's party has to entertain the villagers of the bride's village with the commodities they have carried with them. The *Bairathis* distribute areca nuts several times. The villagers enjoy very much attending the feast which is full of porks, rice-beer, areca nuts and betel leaves. Besides the young girls the elderly women also dance. *Barlangpha* and *Bairathis* take the main roll in the performance of dance before taking away the bride from the house of her parents. The two *Bairathis* are dressed in new traditional dresses (*dokhna thaosi*¹⁷) which are designed beautifully. They also use uniform scarfs (*Jumgra*). In the districts of Kamrup and Darrang the Bodos make the marriage ceremonies more festive with the help of the two *Barlangpha* and four *Bairathis*. Their main functions are to dance and distribute the rice-beer (*jau*) and areca nuts and betel leaves (*goi-pathoi*). They are engaged by the parents of the bridegroom. They perform dances at the house of the bride. While they dance, it is the custom of the Bodos of Kamrup and Darrang districts, a piece of soil (*turf*) is tied with the body of *Barlangpha*. A cut-off head of the pig is also given to *Barlangpha* to be tied on his back while he dances. In the district of Goalpara also there is a custom among the Bodos to tie a piece of earth (*turf*) to the body of *bairathis*, while they dance. They believe that by doing this the bridegroom and the bride are symbolically given the lesson that they have undertaken a great responsibility after the marriage.¹⁸

Next, they also believe that if the soil is given to *Bairathis* to be carried then the bride bears the child after marriage.

While the bride is about to be taken away from the house of her parents, the old women and related persons console the bride with folk-songs.

Thus the elderly women who are related with the parents of the bride advise the bride before she is taken away by the bridegroom's party. The bride is dressed up with the new *dokhna agar* (elaborately designed female garment) *Sona* (ear-ring), *ashan suri* (bracelets) which have been presented by the bridegroom. Then the bride is taken away from the house of her parents by the members of the bridegroom's party which is also joined by the bride's party. While the party starts moving from the house of the bride, the appointed persons of the bridegroom's party *barlangphas* and the *bairathis* are asked to dance. Here is a folk-song in which the request is made for the dance.

The bridegroom's party as well as the bride's party arrive at the house of the bridegroom along with the bride. As soon as the bride arrives with the party, she is welcomed by the members of the bridegroom's family and the villagers and after washing her feet with the water which is kept ready at the front gate of the house. Then the bride is led to the main house. In some areas of the Kamrup and Darrang districts even in the Goalpara district there is a custom of purifying the bride before she is led into the main house (*nomano*). She is purified with the holy water which is also kept ready by the *douri*.¹⁹ After purification she is asked to stepover a burning earthen lamp (*alaribathi*) breaking it with her feet into pieces. It is believed by the Bodo people that if the bride can break the earthen lamp into pieces then she will bear children after marriage and if she fails, then it is believed that she will be childless. This custom is not followed by the Bodos of the Goalpara and Kokrajhar districts as a regular practice.

At the house of the bridegroom a big feast is arranged on the occasion of the marriage. Among the items pork and rice-beer (*jau*) are supplied abundantly. A big pig is cut into two pieces equally. Out of these two pieces a piece is given to the bride's parents. The bride's parents and the members of the Bride's party leave the house of

the bridegroom just after the feast is over. They take along with them the half portion of the pig, two jars of rice-beer, areca nuts and betel leaves.

After returning to the house the parents of the bride arrange a feast for the villagers. The feast consists of porks, rice-beer and rice. The villagers consume rice-beer and pork to their hearts' content.

There is a custom of mutual help or co-operation among the Bodos. During the marriage ceremony the villagers co-operate with the parents of the bride or bridegroom by supplying rice-beer and vegetables (*jau*, *maigong*) for the feast. Thus after enjoying the feast at the house of the bride's parents the villagers go back to their respective home. The feast at the house of the bride's parents after leaving the bride at the house of the bridegroom is called *Agan gakhomarnai*²⁰ or "Rubbing of the foot-prints."

At the house of the bridegroom there is another pre-marriage function and it is called *Bewai bakhannai engkham* or "lifting the husband of the younger sister." This is also not so popular practice in the Goalpara and Kokrajhar districts. At this function, the elder sister of the bride jockingly lifts up the bridegroom on the back. The significance of this function is believed to be that the bridegroom is given awakening of his duty towards his new conjugal life, so that he may become aware of his responsibility.²¹

On the very day of arrival of the bride at the house of the bridegroom the proper marriage ceremony is held. The traditional marriage system of the Bodos is called *Hathasuni khurnai*. The Bodo believers of the traditional customs and practices perform the marriage according to the system of *Hathasuni khurnai*.

2. Marriage proper : the traditional system of marriage : *Hathasuni Khurnai* :

The earliest and traditional form of marriage is called *Hathasuni Khurnai*. This form of marriage is very simple.

At this marriage ceremony the bride offers meal to the bridegroom at a function. The meal consists of the rice and curry prepared with the broken rice and chicken without applying spices and colouring agents like turmeric. This is called in Bodo *ondlakhari*. After taking a little portion of the food the bridegroom rises from the seat. Then they pray to god *Bathou Borai* to grant them a peaceful conjugal life.

Before offering the meal to the bridegroom the bride offers a little portion of the meal to the god and goddess of the *Ishing* (innermost room of the main house, *nomano*). She kneels down before the altar of the deities and pray. The meal is placed on a banana leaf. While the bride prays a *deuri* chants the *Mantra* (formula), introducing the bride to the god and goddess.

At the end, after the advices have been given to the bride and bridegroom, the meal, which is prepared in the name of the *Hathasuni Khurnai*, is served to the villagers present. Before serving the villagers the bride serves the bridegroom first and then she serves each item of the meal to the villagers present at least once. Then the main function of the marriage *Hathasuni Khurnai* comes to end.

The feast of the marriage (*Hathasuni*) continues at least for three days. During these three days, rice-beer and pork are supplied in abundance. In earlier days, the feast is said to have continued for five to seven days. During the feast men and women, both young and old, dance together while the *serja* (a kind of four-stringed fiddle), the *Siphung* (flute) and *Gangana* (jew's harp) are played on. The merry-maker donot sleep during the night. They also perform *thakripalla* a competition of dance and song, amongst the participants in the marriage ceremony.

Importance of *jau* (rice-beer) and *Oma bedor* (Pork) was very great in the earlier period's marriage ceremony of the Bodos. A large quantity of *jau* or rice-beer is prepared and stored well a-head of the ceremony. A number of

earthenpitchers of big size (which the Bodo people call *Dabkha* or *Maldanga*) are used for storage of rice-beer.

During the marriage ceremony two healthy persons were engaged for mixing the rice-beer, to make it ready for use. These two persons are called *jau sirgra* or the persons who mix up the rice-beer with water. Before mixing the rice-beer is taken out from the *Dabkha* (earthen-pitcher) and is kept in a *Doongshu* (a wooden pot with three stands). For the purpose of mixing up the *jau* with water a bamboo stick which is called *Khadou* is essential. After mixing properly the *jau* is filtered with the help of a special strainer made of bamboo which is called *jantha*. Then the *filtered jau* is distributed by the persons called *jau rangra* among the consumers with the help of *laothai* an instrument made of bamboo stump with a handle. The juice of *jau* is taken in a pot, called *thona* which is made of the bark of the banana tree. At the time of taking meals during the ceremony they do not use dishes of high value, but they use the leaves of wild plants known as the *laihulai*.²²

The marriage ceremony of the Bodos is very festive one. It is, however, clearly understood from the following folk-song that the marriage of the earlier days was more festive than of to-day. This popular song brings out the splendour and abundance of the marriage ceremony of earlier days and also sadness at their disappearance to-day :

"Godoni dina bojong thango ?
Angkhamni ali, bedorni akhai,
Jauni phakhria goilialoi bajoi,
Gailia, gailia....."²³

English rendering of this song is as follows : "Where those days have gone, when there were ridges of cooked rice, abundant meat, just like the fried paddy, abundant rice-beer just like tankful water, all these things are no more, elder sister-in-law, no more to-day". The Bodo youngsters

sing this folk-song during the marriage ceremony. Musical instruments like *Serja* (a kind of violin), *siphung*, (flute) and *jotha* (cymbal), are played on during the marriage ceremony.

During the marriage ceremony the rice-beer (*jau*) is supplied abundantly. The elderly persons, particularly the elderly women jokingly try to find fault with the service of the bridegroom and his fellows who serve the people during the ceremony. For example, they complain that the rice-beer is not sufficient in quantity. The following popular folk-song sung by elderly women at a marriage ceremony expresses such a good-humoured complaint :

- (i) "*Ukhum beshani Shilimala,*
O aiyoi, shilimala,
Oi howa majang,
Nangni habani jaualai melema, melema,
O aiyoi, melema."²⁴

English rendering of the song is as follows :

"The cockroach of the roof,
O mother the cockroach,
O good bridegroom,
The rice-beer of your marriage is not sufficient,
O mother, not sufficient.

If the rice-beer is of sour taste then also the elderly women sing songs play attacking the bridegroom. Here is an example :

- (ii) "*Enjur khonani gamathing,*
O aiyoi gamathing,
Oi howa majang, nangni habani
Jaualai khoithing thing."²⁵

English rendering of the song is as follows : An insect (gamathing) of the corner of the wall, (O mother) an insect (*gamathing*) O good bridegroom, the rice-beer of your marriage is of sour taste, (O mother) of sour taste."

Like the bridegroom, the bride also has to pray before the gods and goddesses chanting the mantra or formula as follows :

(ii) *He, aphaphor aiphor khanasong khansong danai ang (amuk) gamini manao geder (amukhni) phisajla gider ba gibi manao geder (Umuk) khou ang haba labai ; bini thakhai apha Bathou raja nang Biphaya sakhi thada ; ai bima lakhi, ai bima sarasatia sakhi thabai, danai nangthang mankhaua aro munusu maya, thangphang laiphang, pakhi phodom pharkhouba sakhi danna-noi Bathou makhangao jannnoi Somai layo ang. Saithi Saithi tini Saithi sat balate prante marat, samai labai ang ; ang judi be hauajang haba lananoiba malai hawakhou barai-baobla angkhou jobra jantha khalamno hagon, khuria buthia khalamno hagon, ang thoisa thangsa be hawajangna raija jagan ang, khuluma, aiphor aphaphor.*²⁶

English rendering of the above mantra or formula is as follows :

"O, fathers and mothers you will please hear, To-day I have married Shri... so and so, eldest or youngest son of Shri so and so (name of the father of the bridegroom), of village, such and such (name of the village of the bridegroom), for this, you father *Bathou Raja*, ai (mother) Lakshmi, Saraswati, other gods and goddesses will stand as witness, keeping you all in my front, all the human beings birds and creatures, plants and trees as witnesses, sitting in front of the '*Bathou altar*' I promise that if I accept any other person than this husband, you will be able to charge me, curse me to be attacked by diseases like leprosy, etc. I will lead a conjugal life with this husband till death, I bow and salute you, mothers and fathers".

MARRIAGE ACCORDING TO THE BRAHMA DHARMA (BRAHMA RELIGION) :

The Bodos following the Brahma Dharma perform the wedding ceremony in a "reformed manner". Their

systems slightly differ from the traditional system of marriage. Of course, they have not given up all the traditional customs of marriage. In fact, many of the traditional customs associated with the pre-marriage ceremonies are followed by them. Only they have discouraged the use of rice-beer (*jau*) and pork (*Oma bedor*) during the ceremony. At present, tea has taken place of rice-beer (*jau*) and the use of pork (*Oma bedor*) is not compulsory. It is probably due to influence of Brahma Dharma.

Now-a-days, during the marriage procession the modern "Band party" is preferred to the traditional musical instruments like *Serja* (Four stringed musical instrument), *Siphung* (a long flute) and *jotha*. The use of *Dhula* or *Duhula* (Dhulia in Assamese) during the marriage ceremony is very rare at present.

They welcome the bridegroom party with the band-party, when the bridegroom approaches the house of the bride for the wedding. The bridegroom is welcomed ceremonially at the gate of the house. His feet are washed with water and sometimes he is bathed and after applying scented hair oil by the younger sister of the bride, combs his hair and helps him put on a new garment. Then he is blessed by the mother of the bride by applying a *tilak* on his forehead. During this brief ceremony the bridegroom stands on a wooden sitting tool called *Gambari Khamplai* (made of the gamari wood). Then the bridegroom is led to the main house (*nomano*) along with his party. During the proceedings of the marriage rites the members of the bridegroom's party have to sit at the courtyard on seats specially arranged for them. The sitting accommodation prepared for them called *affat* (Lit. a meeting place). At first they are served with the tea and puffed rice (*muri*). Some-times the members of the bridegroom's party are given dinner before the marriage takes place. The bride and bridegroom are not given any food before their marriage.

The bride and bridegroom are taken to the altar of the *Yajna* which is called *Mandap*. While they are led to

the *Mandap* or the altar of *Yajnahuti*, the young boys raise slogans like, "Glory, Glory to the new bride and bridegroom" (*jai hinjaw godan howa godanni jai*), the band is made to play and torches made of jute and a bamboo stick are also lighted. Both the bride and bridegroom are given seats in front of the fire of the *Yajna*, facing towards the east. The priest who is called *Purohit* starts the function of the wedding. At the outset the father of the bride prays to God standing before the blazing fire of *Yajnahuti* uttering the mantra of the *Brahma Gayatri*. The mantra or formula of welcome of the *Brahma Gayatri* is as follows :

"Om aiahi barde devi trayakshare
Brahma badini Gayatri Sandasung
Matoh Brahmajani nomohastyute".²⁷

English rendering of the above mantra is as follows :
"Oh mother of the Earth, you will come and stay at my heart, you are the Brahma, you are the Mother of the Earth, you have created this Universe ; I salute you.

The father of the bride repeats the above formula three times. The *Purohit* utters the formula first then he is followed by the father of the bride. Chanting the formula, he salutes the blazing fire of the *Yajna* every time while he finishes the formula. After the chanting of the formula is completed the father of the bride offers mixed corns, (rice, pulse, sugars, etc) to the fire. While doing so he has to chant the formula of *ahuti*. Which is as follows :

"Om Varde devi paramajyotih
Brahmane Svaha ;"

"Om charachar Brahmane Svaha

"Om purna Parabrahma jyotih Svarupayo Svaha"²⁸

English rendering of this formula is as follows :

"I offer this corn to you,
Who is the light of lights and
Who blesses us ;
To you, who is present
Every where with both movable

and immovable things,
who is the full Brahma
and who is visible
as the light."

Thus, after offering the corns to the fire the father of the bride prays, to God for blessings to the bride and bridegroom. He declares before all that he has offered (*sampradan*) his daughter to the bridegroom keeping the fire as witness.

Then the bride and bridegroom chant the '*Gayatrimantra*' separately and again jointly, under the guidance of *Purohit*. They also offer the mixed corns chanting the above mentioned '*Mantra of ahuti*'. Then they pray for the blessing of God.

After the prayer is over, there is a function which is called '*Ashirbad*' (Sanskrit, *asirvada* i.e. blessings). The relatives and friends of both the bride and bridegroom offer blessings in the form of presentations of articles, ornaments, or cash. At the very outset, the parents of the bride offer blessings, while they are followed by others. They also pray to God by offering mixed corns called '*Prasada*' to the fire for the peaceful conjugal life of the newly married couple. During the function of *ashirbada* the band plays a mild tune. The persons who are senior to the bride or bridegroom wave the *chalangi bathi*²⁹ over the heads of the bride and bridegroom. While the function of *Ashirbad* is over, the *Purohit* concludes the main function of the marriage with a few slogans in the name of the *Brahma* invoking blessings to the newly married couple.

The bride and bridegroom along with their friends and the two *Bairathis* who carry the *chalangibathi* walk round the fire three to seven times from right to left and they are led by the *Purohit* (the priest) after which they enter into the main house (*nomano*). Inside the main house (*nomano*) the '*Purohit*' and the elderly persons advise the bride and bridegroom for a while.

If the marriage is held at the house of the bride then the party of the bridegroom along with the bride leave for the house of the bridegroom early in the morning of the next day.

The members of the house of the bridegroom get ready to welcome the bride and the bridegroom.

Before entering the main gate of the house the bride and bridegroom are welcomed by the persons of the bridegroom with a band party and the two *Bairathi* with the *chlangi bathi* in their hands, while the youngsters dance and raise slogan like '*Jai, Jai hinjao godan, howa godanni jai*, (Glory, Glory to the new bride & bridegroom). Then the feet of the bride as well as of the bridegroom are washed by the younger sisters of the bridegroom and they are led to the main house (*nomano*). On the very day, the bride and bridegroom arrive after marriage, a big feast is arranged at the house of the bridegroom. All the relatives and friends of the bridegroom are invited to attend the feast. There is a provision of meat or fish in the feast, although it is not compulsory.³⁰ Such a feast is held on the day of marriage also if the marriage is held at the house of the bridegroom.

So, it is clear to understand that the Bodos of the Brahma Dharma perform the marriage ceremonies either at the house of the bride or the bridegroom. It is generally seen that the marriage is performed at the house of the bride if the economic condition of the parents of the bride is sound. However, it is said that the Bodos who are the followers of Brahma Dharma desire the marriage ceremony should be held at the house of the bridegroom. In earlier days, the Bodos performed the regular marriages at the house of the bridegroom.

Bride-Price and Dowry :

The system of realisation of bride-price has been customarily followed in the Bodo society. It is called *Phon* or *Phon thaka*³¹ in Bodo. In earlier days the realisation of the *phon taka* was compulsory in the Bodo society. The rate of the *phon-thaka* also was unlimited. It is said that it could even be more than rupees one thousand. Later, the rate was at rupees one hundred and five only. However, gradually, the *phon-thaka* (bride-price) began to be discouraged and in the present Bodo society it has become only nominal.

The system of offering the nominal *phon-thaka* is still prevalent among the followers of *Brahma Dharma*. While the *Affat* (sitting together) is going on, just before the marriage, the parents of the bridegroom offer the father of the bride a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves and two one rupee coins (*goijora, pathoijora aro Jorase Thakha Gothang*) on a leaf of the banana, after saluting him. The father of the bride accepts areca nuts, betel leaves only and returns the two coins. It means he has not accepted the *phonthakha* (bride-price).

MALSA : There is another system of collecting *Malsa* from the parents of the bridegroom. The rate of *Malsa* differs from area to area. In some villages *Malsa* is realised to the tune of Rs. 2.50 (Rupees two and fifty paise) and in some villages it is realised at Rs. 5.00 (Rupees five). At the time of collecting *Malsa* two classes (groups), *Sibingari* and *Sobaiari* get special consideration. If the bride belongs to *Sibingari* (Sesame), the amount of *Malsa*, would be less, and if she belongs to *Sobaiari* the amount would be double of the amount of *Sibingari*.

3. The important after-marriage ceremony of the Bodos is *Athmangal*.³² It is performed on the eighth day of the marriage ceremony at the house of the bride's parents. It is a very brief ceremony, and no big feast is arranged on the occasion. Only a few selected persons (generally relatives) are invited to the ceremony. After the ceremony the bride and bridegroom come back to the house of the bridegroom along with the articles of presentation which they received from their friends and relatives on the occasion of their marriage ceremony together with the articles presented by the parents of the bride.

DIVORCE : Divorce is allowed in the Bodo society. If both husband and wife desires divorce mutually then it is performed by tearing a betel leaf. This is called *Pathoi-lai bisinai* in Bodo. If the husband divorces his wife without any reasonable ground then he is to bear the res-

possibility of her livelihood for a certain period. Sometimes it is observed that the question of divorce is put up in a big gathering of the public which is called *Samaj* for the solution of the divorce case.

Here some formalities of the divorce as described by Endle may be mentioned. There are some formalities of divorce in the Bodo society. Divorce may take place by mutual consent of husband and wife. Both the man and wife appear before the elders of the village who gather together at the house of the village old man (*gaoburah*) to perform the divorce. In presence of the village elders a 'Pan-leaf' (betel leaf) is torn in two pieces, which is called in Bodo *Pathoi-lai bisinai or pan-cira* in Assamese. It is a symbolic act which indicates that the torn leaf can never reunite, so their married life is severed for ever. If the husband divorces his wife for some inadequate reasons and which are not satisfactory to the elders of the village, he forfeits all claims to re-imburement of his marriage expenses, and even when his divorce is approved by village panchayat, he must pay certain amount (Rs. 5/- to Rs. 10/-) for his freedom, the amount being divided between the village panchayat or *Gamini Samaj*, in Bodo, and the divorced woman. On the other hand, if the woman is divorced for some in-just and sufficient reasons, e.g. for unfaithfulness to her marriage obligations, the injured husband is entitled to recover the entire amount spent during his marriage, a sum of Rs. 140/- or Rs. 200/- from the parents of the woman. As soon as the amount is paid to the man, the woman is at liberty to live with a new husband.³³

The system of divorce of the Bodo society is also followed by the Rabha society almost in the same manner. The Rabhas also follow the *Panchira* or tearing of betel leaf system while divorce takes place mutually between the husband and wife.³⁴

The Bodos have some important post-marriage customs. The *kholar gothainai* and the *Mamai mara* are still observed by them.

(i) *Kholar gothainai* : There is a system of returning the bride to her parents at the sudden and untimely death of her husband. If the husband expires just after marriage, the bride returns to her parents' house and the amount of *Malsa* is given back to the parents, of the deceased husband by the parents of the bride. This is known as *Kholar gothainai*.

(ii) *Mamai mara* : If the bridegroom or the parents of the bridegroom had not paid the *phon-thakha* (bride-price) at the time of marriage and if the bride expires leaving female child behind, then the *phon-thakha* or the bride-price of the female child would go to her uncle at the time of her marriage. This system is known as *Mamai mara*.³⁵

Belief about female chastity in the Bodo Society : premarital and marital chastity :

As a rule the young people of the Bodo society specially in the villages, lead pure lives before the marriage. In cases where there are several girls in a family who are unmarried and one of them is suspected of having broken the law of chastity, the following plan for detecting the offender is sometimes adopted.

The whole family gathers in the evening around the sacred *Siju* tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) which is often to be seen growing in the court-yard, surrounding by a fence of split bamboo. At the foot of this revered tree a quantity of rice (uncooked), called *Mairang* is solemnly buried and allowed to remain there over night. Early next morning this rice is carefully disinterred, and a certain quantity given to each grown-up girl (*sikhla*) to be masticated. The offender, under the pressure of the fear of imminent detection, is unable to masticate her portion of rice, the faculty of recreating saliva failing her in her terror of discovery and disgrace.

She is then made to disclose the name of her paramour, whom kachari public opinion compels to marry his

victim forth with, the bride price (*Phon*) being in this case considerably enhanced as some slight compensation to the girl's parents for the injury done to the honour of the family. A similar procedure is sometimes resorted to in cases of suspected theft or other like misdemeanours in the family circle.

In some cases where the parents are unwilling to part with their daughter to a prospective son-in-law of some what objectionable character, the matter is referred for decision to the village elders, who impose a fine of Rs. 20.00 to Rs. 25.00 on the offender. But whenever pregnancy follows offences against the law of chastity, marriage becomes absolutely compulsory, and the reducer is made to feel that he has brought disgrace upon the village, and is distinctly under a clud. In this way a wholesome respect for chastity is maintained, and kachari domestic life is kept comparatively pure.

In addition to the above, it is also seen in the Bodo society that the reducers are made subject to some physical punishment at the time of the trial which generally takes place at the house of the village old man (gaonburah).³⁶

Notes and References :

1. Mair, Lucy ; *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Oxford University press ; 1972 ; pp. 90-91.
2. Haba=*Bia* or *Bibah* in Assamese.
3. The word *Dongkha* in Bodo is known as *Dhoka* in Assamese.
4. Narzi, Bhaben, *Boro Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, 1971, p. 89.
5. "Ghatak"—is the middleman whose service is required at the time of settlement of marriage. It is also seen that the non-Bodo Hindu Assamese society engage 'Ghatak' at the time of settlement of marriage.

6. Ramshiari, Shri Bali Charan ; *Bathou kherai puja Aru Borojati* Kasimpur, (Kamrup), 1977, p. 51.
7. *No nainai* : The parents of the bride observe the house of the bridegroom after the preliminary settlement of the marriage.
8. *Bibai* and '*Bijomaijo*'—The terms or relationship of the Bodo parents after the marriage of their children and these terms are called as *Bioi* and *Bioini* in Assamese.
9. *Howa godan nainai* : The bridegroom appears before the members of the bride's family before the marriage. This system is followed by the non-Bodo Hindu societies also.
10. Narzi, Bhaben, *Boro Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, 1971, p. 92.
11. In some areas of the Kamrup district two persons are engaged as *Barlangphas* while in the Goalpara district only one person is engaged to carry the bundle or two earthen-pitchers.
12. Four girls or women are selected as '*Bairathis*' who are called *Barjus* also in Kamrup and Darrang districts, while only two *Bairathis* are required in the Goalpara district.
13. Narzi, Bhaben, *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, Gauhati, 1971, p. 94.
14. Narzi, Bhaben, *Boro Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, Gauhati, 1971, p. 99.
15. In early days, it was the customs of the Bodos to solemnise the marriage at the house of the bridegroom after bringing the bride from her parents house.
16. Another *Biban* is called *Laokhar Biban* consisting of fish, rice, sugar etc.
17. The traditional female garment is called *Dokhna* and the *Dokhna thaosi* is specially made to be used in the ceremonious functions only.
18. As already explained, in Bodo *ha* means soil or earth and *ba* means to carry something on the back. So the

word *haba* (*ha+ba=haba*) or the marriage bears the meaning of carrying the soil on the back. It signifies that after the marriage a person bears a great social or earthly responsibility.

19. Ramsiari, Balicharan, '*Bathou Kherai Puja Aru Boro Jati*' Kashimpur, Kamrup, 1977 ; p. 52.
20. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti* 1971, p. 111.
21. Basumatary, Binen ; (informant), age-65, Suganhara (Gossaigaon).
22. Brahma, Haliram, age-72 ; (informant) vill. elderly person, Malaguri village, (Gossaigaon).
23. Narzi Bhaben ; *Boro Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, 1971, p. 107.
24. Narzi Bhaben ; "*Boro Kacharir Geet Mat*" Assam Prakasan Parishad, 1983, p. 44.
25. Narzi Bhaben ; "*Boro Kacharir Geet Mat*" Assam Prakasan Parishad, 1983, p. 45.
26. Basumatary, Jaynarayan ; *Boroni Bhathou Dharam Bijab*, Naigaen, 1385 (B), p. 56.
27. Chattapadhyay, Mahinimahan ; *Sarnitya Kriya*, Calcutta (W. B.) 1382 (Bengali) (Collection of advices of Paramhansa Sibnarayan Swami) ; p. 89.
28. Chattapadhyay, Mahinimahan ; *Sarnitya Kriya*, Calcutta (W. B) 1382 (Bengali) (Collection of advices of Paramhansa Sibnarayan Swami) ; p. 89.
29. In Goalpara District the system of using the earthen lamp placed in a cage covered by the barks of the banana, is prevalent among the non-Bodo Hindu people and it is called in the Goalpara district "*Chailan bati*".
30. In earlier days, the items of meats (pork) and rice-beer were common and compulsory, while in the present Bodo Society such items have become voluntary.

31. Phon Thakha : is called 'pon'—in west Goalpara district, which means bride price ; in Bengal 'Pan' means dowry to be given the bridegroom's family from the bride's family. While, the bride-price is the common practice among all tribal group in N. E. India, even among the non-Bodo or non-tribals also there is '*ga-dhan*' which is also a bride-price.
32. A Similar ceremony *Athmangla* is observed by the non-Bodo Hindu Societies of Assam.
33. Shri Binendra Nath Basumatary, age-60 years, Sagunhara, (Informant).
34. Das, Dr. B. M., "Rava" (article), *Asomar Janajati*, Ed. by S. Barkataki, Director, National Book Trust, India, New-Delhi, 1972.
35. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, Gauhati, 1971, p. 28.
36. Endle, S. ; *The Kacharis*, Cosmopolitan Publications, Delhi, 1911 pp. 30-31.

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CHAPTER-III

Seasonal and Agricultural Cycle : Connected Beliefs and Practices.

The Bihu festival is the most important and popular seasonal festival of the Assamese people. The word *Bihu* is believed to have originated from the Sanskrit word *Visuvat* (the equinox). It is observed during the spring season and for which it is also called the spring time festival. The Assamese people observe the spring time festival during the first week of the Assamese month of *Bohag*. So, it is also known as *Bohag Bihu*. During this season the people become joyful and gay. Because, they are free from any heavy work during this period. So, the festival they observe is also called *Rangali Bihu* or the festival of joy. It is a major festival of the Assamese people. They observe this festival by dancing, singing and merry-making, besides the connected ceremonial items like cattle rites, *husharis*, etc.

Besides *Rangali Bihu* there are two more seasonal festivals which are observed by the non-Bodo Assamese people. They are the *Kati Bihu* or *Kangali Bihu* and the *Magh Bihu* or the *Bhagali Bihu*. *Kati Bihu* is observed during the Assamese month *Kati*. During this period there is no scope of enjoyment. So, this festival is called as *Kangali Bihu*, or the festival of scarcity.

Another major seasonal festival is *Magh Bihu* or *Bhagali Bihu*. As it is observed during the Assamese month of *Magh*, it is known as *Magh Bihu*. It is also called *Bhagali Bihu* because it is observed at the time of harvesting season, and the people enjoy this Bihu festival by eating different types of cakes which the Assamese people

call *Pithas*. This festival is observed with merriment. Every Assamese family prepares different types of cakes or *Pithas* and invites relatives and friends to share the cakes. The fire-rites is an important part of this festival. Thus, the non-Bodo Assamese people observe the Bihu festival mainly on three occasions as discussed above throughout the whole year.

The Bodos have festivals akin to the three main Bihu festivals of the Assamese people which have already been discussed in the above.

The Bodos observe several major and minor festivals and ceremonies throughout the whole year. The festivals and ceremonies can be classified as follows : (a) Religious, (b) Seasonal and (c) Agricultural. In fact all the major festivals and ceremonies, including the religious and seasonal festivals are closely connected with agriculture.

Among the major religious festivals the *Kherai Puja* and the *Garja Puja* festivals are the most important ones. In this chapter the seasonal and agricultural festivals and ceremonies have been taken up for discussion.

Main Seasonal Festivals of the Bodos :

(a) Baisagu ; The Bodos of Kokrajhar area call their most popular seasonal festival as *Baisagu*, which means the start of the new year. According to Mr. Kamini Narzari¹. *Baisagu* is a Bodo word which has origin in the word *Baisa*, means year or age and *Agu* means start. Hence, *Baisa + Agu* Baisagu, or the starting of the year or age.

On the otherhand, this spring time festival is observed at the starting part of the Assamese month *Bohag*, which they call *Baisakh*. It may be stated that as it is observed

at the very early part of the first month of the year, it is called year, it is called as Baisakh + Agu *Baisagu*. The Bodos of Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam call this Baisagu as Bihu like their neighbouring non-Bodo Assamese people. According to Mr. Dhupa Ram Basumatari^a the word Bihu is a Bodo word. Bi means to beg something like alms and Hu means to give or to donate. Thus *Bihu* means to give what is begged. (*Bi + hu Bihu*).

During the *Baisagu* festival, the young boys and girls beg alms from door to door singing and dancing in tune of some traditional musical instruments. It is believed by the Bodos that the begging boys and girls should not be refused by any house holder. The young boys and girls arrange feasts with the goods they get as alms like rice, eggs, chickens, etc. from the house holders at the end of the *Baisagu* festival.

The *Baisagu* festival has some special features, the most important of which are classified as follows :

- 1) *Gokha-gokhoi* janai or eating bitter and sour tested wild vegetables on the day of *Sankranti* or the day before the first day of the new year, *Baisakh* or *Bohag*.
- 2) Cattle rites which the Bodos call *Masau Thukhoinai*.
- 3) Worshipping the gods and goddesses.
- 4) Remembering or recalling the ancestors and
- 5) Merry-making at the entrance of the New Year.

Sidney Endle gives the following description of the Bodo-Kachari festival as observed by him in the Darrang district.

"Among the Darrang Kacharis, this festival lasts for seven days, during which little or no work is done, the whole period being given upto merry-making, dancing, feasting, & c. As is the practice among their Hindu neighbours, on the opening day all cattle are taken to the nearest river or tank, and there formally bathed, and afterwards

sprinkled with a preparation compounded of rice-beer (zu), tomatoes ; and turmeric.

The horns are smeared with oil, and occasionally oil, ashes and pounded rice-flour are applied in patches to the bodies of the cattle. This duty discharged, the people abandon themselves to sheer merriment, the younger folks especially giving themselves up to dancing and singing, & c"^a

The verses recited by the Bodos, when the cattle are taken to their bathe are similar to those of their Hindu neighbours :

The verse in Bodo : *Lao ja Panthao ja,*

Basar basar er hanja hanja ;

Bimani khither, phiphani kither,

Nangsar jagan halua gidir ;

Bima gaide badi daja,

Phipha balad badi ja ;

Bari khanani embu bengala,

*Bibadi ja gidir jangala.*⁴

English rendering of the above verse is as follows :

Eat gourd, eat brinjal,

Grow up year to year ;

To spite your mother and your father,

You will be large bullocks ;

Do not be short statured like your mother,

Be large like your bull father,

Like the frog in the corner of the garden,

May you be sleek and long.

It is said that in former times, *Baisagu*, as observed by the Kacharis follows over seven days. The first day *Makhau* or *Mashau* meant for cattle ; the second day is Mansi meant for men, but starting with worship of their gods, the third

day is *Saima* meant for dogs, the fourth day is *Oma* meant for *swine*, the fifth day is *daoni*, meant for fowl; the sixth day is meant for ducks and other birds, the seventh day is meant for receiving relatives and friends. As it seems, their Hinduism allows them to pay respects to dogs, swine and fowl. But now a days, though *Bihu* lasts for seven days and on the seventh day they can clean the house ceremonially, take a purifying bath and seek apology from their elders for any omissions and commissions that may have been committed during the period of festival. Rituals meant for the propitiation of dogs, swine or fowls are rarely seen. House cleaning, cattle rites, worship of *Bathou* and offering of eatables to the ancestors, putting on of new and washed clothes, receiving and visiting, etc. may be said to constitute the formal part of the festival. Worship of *Bathou* is done on the second day, among other Hindu people congregational prayer offered to God characterises the third day, but on the second day, prayer is offered at the family shrine or chapel.

On the second day of their *Baisagu*, Kacharis offer worship to the siju plant, that is, *Bathou* or *Mahadeva*. The next stage is offering food and drink to their ancestors and recently deal relatives, the food being placed in a corner of the yard. There is also the ceremonial eating of fowl cooked with bitter herbs as *Khungkha* or other wild vegetables of different tastes, (*Gakha-gakhoi janai*). They offer it to the visitors also.

From next day dance and music become a regular feature, (*Rangjanai-bajanai*), and while young men play on the *shiphung* (Flute), the drum, the four stringed *serja*, and beat out rhythm with a piece of split bamboo (*Tharkha*) girls dance in hands and play on the jews harp *gongona* and small cymbales (*jotha*). The young boys and girls sing songs of love. There are various songs which are very popular among the Bodo boys and girls.

The Kacharis at Darangiri, in the Goalpara district and some sixty miles to the West of Gauhati, seem to possess certain local customs and traditions not found in northern Kamrup. On the cow Bihu day Darangiri Kacharis put leaves on the cane and the *dighalati*, and the flower of the *keturi* (a shrub similar to the turmeric) in the rathees of the roof on the fencing near the gate and in the well. Further, they sprinkle *phaku* or *abir* (coloured powder) on a sheaf of these three things and keep the sheaf planted upright in a corner of the yard. Next day, *Bathou* is worshipped in this place. The sheaf is thrown away after the seventh day of *Baisagu*. On the third *Baisagu* day young girls make ornaments of flowers and leaves and put them on the arms, necks, ears and feet of old women.

The kacharis of Darrang and Kamrup districts observe the *Bhatheli* festival, although they use only one bamboo. The *Bhatheli* festival is called *Bhasani* in the northern Goalpara. The people of Rangia area call the festival *Bhatheli* that which goes down streams. They make a small hut near the bamboo, offer eatables to all gods and goddesses, good and evil, also a black pigeon and black goat, and pray to these gods and goddesses to go down stream and not to give their village any mishap or disease. They symbolise the departing of the gods by putting the pigeon and the goat on a raft and casting this loose in the river. The ceremony seems to recall what J. C. Frazer describes as the public expulsion of evils, a general riddance of evil spirits at fixed times usually once a year, in order that the people may make a fresh start in life, free from all the malignant in difference which have been long accumulating about them. This festival is, of course, more religious than seasonal one. It is held during the period of *Baisagu* or in the month of *Bohag* or *Baisakh*.

Certain rites are performed on the occasion of the *Baisagu* festivals (a) To render unproductive the eggs of the snakes they produce a particular tune on the flute (*shiphung*)

the tune is called *Satravali*. The snake community is believed by the Bodos to be the foe of the human beings and all other creatures, and annihilation of snakes is considered an act of general welfare ; (b) perform pujas to the deities (c) worship to their ancestors, (d) bid farewell to the old year, (e) pay respect to the *Gurus* and elderly persons (f) Exchange love and affection, (g) dance and sing songs (h) worship the God (*Burah Bathou Maharaja*) with the hope of more and more production and growth of cultivation and (i) on the seventh day bid farewell to *Baisagu*.

Cattle rites during *Baisagu* : The last date of the month *Chaitra* is called by the Bodos as *Baisagu* for the cows or cattle. On that day not only the Bodos, every Assamese leads the cattle to the tank or the river for bathing. Before taking to the river or tank the cattles are offered paddy and horns and hooves are smeared with mustard oil (*thaogathang*). The body of the cow is spotted with black markings with a mixture prepared from black ashes and mustard oil, using the stem of the *Eri* tree as the marker. The cows are also garlanded with the garlands made of goured and brinjals. Before taking them off the cowshed the owner pays respects to them.

While leading the cows to the river for bathing the cowherds sing the songs beating them lightly with the *Dighalati* plant.

After taking away the cows from the cowshed the cowdungs are thrown away and the shed is cleaned. The old ropes (*phaga*) are replaced by new ones.

Cowdung is used by the Bodos for some sacred purposes. To purify the house and the place of worship the cowdung is used. The Bodo women pluster the houses with cowdung mixed with mud. After bathing in the river or in the tank the cows are led to the grazing field by the cowherds, and thus the first *Baisagu* which is meant for the cows ends.

The Bodos who reside in the forest villages go to the deep forest for hunting on the *Sankranti* day. In the evening they use to take some bitter tastes-vegetables collected from the forest. A special curry known as *Khaji* prepared with meats (porks) and wild vegetables of different tastes which the Bodos call *gakha-gakhoi maigang*. It signifies that the old year is bid farewell. Taking of rice-beer (*jumai*) starts from the day of *Sankranti* in every family. Both young and old consume rice-beer as much as they can.

The Bodos of traditional beliefs throw away their old earthen utensils of cooking on the first day of the new year, and replace them with the new ones. The members of the family offer prayers to the family deity *Burah-Bathou Maharaja* and *Aikamakhya* at the altar after making the house clean and after taking bath themselves. Welcoming the new year *Baisagu* men, women, young boys and girls exchange their mutual love. The juniors offer *gamasas* to the elders and take blessings from them. They forgive each other's misdeeds and exchange *gamasas* also. They pray to god for their wellbeing in the coming new year.

Special Beliefs and Observances :

There is a traditional belief among the Bodos that during the *Baisagu* no quarrel should take place. They believe that those who indulge in quarrels during these days would take birth as cows or dogs in the next life. So, they try to avoid any sort of quarrel during the time of the *Baisagu festival*.

The Bodos do not sit on the four-legged-tool, *Khamplai* or *pira* during the *Bihu* festival, as they believe that to sit on the four-legged tool means to sit on the head of the parents.⁶ The traditional belief of the Bodos signifies that the Bodos have real respect to the parents or the elderly persons.

The women folks of the Bodo family go to the house of the *Oja* or the medicine man with *jau* (rice-beer) and cocks as the

presentation on the first day of the new year. The *Oja* replaces the *tabij* or *kobos* (a-mulet) of the users for the new year. The married girls also pay respect to their father-in-laws and take blessings and also they visit their own parents to get blessings for the new year.⁶

From the second day of the *Baisagu* till the seventh day every family becomes the centre of merry making and all the members of a family forget themselves out of enjoyment. The young boys play on flutes (*Shiphung*), four stringed *Serja tharka*, *bingi* (are stringed instruments) while the young and old women folks play on the *gongana* or *gogana* (jew's harp), *batha bingbung* (a kind of instrument made of straw or thatch), *jatha* or cymbale, etc. and come out their houses and gather together to dance and sing at the open field or from house to house. The songs sung by the young boys and girls are mostly the songs of love.

Baisagu among the followers of Brahma Dharma :

The *Brahma dharma* followers Bodo people pray to god on the first day of *Bahag* or *Baisakh* by performing *Ahuti* jointly at their villages. Before *Ahuti* none is allowed to take *Jau* or rice-beer. After *Ahuti* the village elders sit together and discuss about the affairs of the village under the presidentship of *Gaonburah*, village elderly man. They also discuss about the annual accounts and liabilities of the villagers and solve any problem mutually. In the evening the villagers, both young and old enjoy by dancing and singing. They also consume rice-beer roaming from house to house in the village. It has been observed that some sections of *Brahma dharma* followers have given up the habits of taking rice-beer on the occasion of the *Baisagu festival*, as well as on other occasions also. They simply enjoy by singing and dancing together and the young boys and girls collect alms from door to door and arrange feasts with the articles they receive by singing and dancing. The begging of alms is called by the Bodos as *Mairang maginai*.

Domashi or Domahi :

The next popular seasonal festival is the *Domashi* or *Domahi*, the harvest festival. The word *domashi* or *domahi*, means the junction of two months. This festival is also known as *Bhagali bihu* in Assamese. The characteristics of this festival are to enjoy with different types of foods, like cakes or *pithas*, to entertain the friends and relatives with foods and drinks, and to enjoy singing and dancing.

The male members of the family tie cords around the fruits bearing trees of the house. The Bodos believe that the fruits bearing trees would bear more and more fruits if the trees are tied with cords of straw during the *Domashi*.

Along with the cakes of different types the women fry different pulses like *Sobai*, *Slbing* (Sesemum) mugu pulse, etc. eat them and splash them at the cowshed. The village elderly persons of the traditional beliefs sacrifice fowls to *Bathou Borai* and worship. The Bodo followers of *Brahma dharma* arrange *Ahuti* on the day of full moon of *Magha* month or *maghio purnima*, for the welfare in general.

The young boys construct the *Bilagur* or *Bhelaghar*, a high temple like structure with dried banana leaves and green bamboos. They also arrange a bon-fire (*argeng*) with the big pieces of fuel generally stolen and spend sleepless night, singing and dancing.

Bilagur or *Bhelaghar* construction on the occasion of the *Domashi* :

Bilagur is the Bodo way of pronouncing *bhela-ghar* in Assamese, which in turn may be a corruption from *bheraghar* (*Meshaghar*) recalling the ancient practice of *Meṣha daha*.⁹

The Bodo-kacharis consider the construction of *bhelaghar* or *bilagur* as they pronounce it, and setting fire to them to

be the special function of the *laokhar* (*Rakhal*) or cowherd boys. The boys burn the *bilagur* or *bhelaghar* before dawn, before the crows come out their nests. The chief cowherd, *laokher gahai* as he is known, while setting fire to the *bilagur* starts a prayer in this manner :

Jai, Jai Jai,

Jangni lagani jai,

Khalahani rag biadia khalaha

Thathang, sonabhani rag biadia

Sanabha thathang ;

Sahani rag biadia saha

Thathang ;

Sanjahani rag biadia

Sanjaha thathang ;

Jangni lagoa maini Daini

Jai jai mai mai jathang ;

Jangni lagani masaua gonda

Phisabadi sakhela bakhela gedet

Balagara jathang ; jaimansia

Jangni masaua mai jayablaba

Jadang hannanoi jangkhaui

Bukhrub Sukhrub khalamdang

Man, bi mansiha nidana

Din thangthang.⁸

English rendering of the song is as follows :

Glory, glory, glory, to our village, diseases of the south should remain in the south, disease of the West should remain in the West ; diseases of the north should remain in the north, diseases of the east should remain in the east, our village may be filled with paddy and riches ; our cattle may be large and strong like the rhinoceros and the elephant ; that those persons who had beaten us even though the cattle under our charge had not eaten up those persons' paddy may suffer long and much glory glory, glory, glory to our village.

Among the Boro-kacharis much of the merriment depends on the consumption of rice-beer. Rice-beer is necessary even in their rituals. This reminds one of the observations that the religion of this land is of kirata origin.

Katri-Gasa Saonai or Kati Bihu :

The *Katri-gasa saonai* is another seasonal festival of Assam. This festival is observed on the last day of the month *Ahin*. The Bodos call this festival as *Katri-gasa Saonai*. It is also called *kangali Bihu* (in Assamese) which means the *Bihu* of the crisis, for the villagers have nothing to eat during this festival. This festival is observed by the Bodos very simply, by burning *gasa*, or the earthen lamp at the paddy field, at the altar of the *Ba-thau*, at the cowshed, (*goli*) and at the granary (*Bakri*) in the evening of the last day of *Ahin* (Assamese month). The unmarried girls of the Bodo families go to the paddy field with a *sewari*, a long bamboo stick used in weaving, polished it with mustard oil and touch the paddy plants with the stick (*sewari*). By doing like this the Bodos believe that the paddy plants would bear large scale of paddy. In the Goalpara district, the non-Bodo Hindus also observe the *Kati Bihu* in the same manner which the Bodos follow in observing the *Katri-gasa saonai*.⁹

4. *Amthisua or Amati (Ambuvasi) :*

The *Amati* or *Ambuvasi* is called by the Bodos as *Amtisua*.¹⁰ This period falls by the month of *Ashara* or *Ahara*. This festival is not actually for merry-making. It is observed as a special occasion of holiness. Because, this period is believed by the Bodos to be the period of menstruation of the Mother-Earth. Within the period of a week the Bodos do not dig the soil, donot plough the land, donot cut the useful tree and donot enter the *bakhri* or

the granary (*bharalghar* in Assamese). The Bodo agriculturists do not plough the land, do not work in their field for a week and remain at home. They believe that if any green tree is cut during this period of *Amthisua* (unclean period) it can never grow more.

The young boys and girls observe this period by eating fruits like jack fruits, mango fruits, etc. On the seventh day the women folks throw away their old broom sticks and replace them by new ones. They pluster the floor and the wall of their house with mud. Thus the *Amthisua* or *Ambuvasi* ends on the seventh day.

It is observed that similar beliefs are found among the local non-Bodo Hindus. They also practise almost similar practices. A great *Ambuvasi Mela* is held at Kamakhya temple of Guwahati of Assam every year during the same period. It is believed by the Hindus of this region that the *Yani* symbol is said to be in a state of manstruation.

Putuli Haba (Doll Marriage) :

In some parts of Assam, specially in the district of Kamrup the Bodos perform a *putuli haba* (doll marriage) on the seventh day of the *Baisagu festival*. This festival is performed at the place of worship of the village jointly. They make dolls of straw in the name of *Diba Borai* and *Dibi Buroi* or *Raona* and *Raoni*, who are believed to be deities of wind and rain. So, they worship them with the hope of sufficient rain for cultivation. They believe that the deities of rain and wind like *Diba Borai* and *Dibi Buroi* become satisfied then there would be sufficient rain in the earth. The Bodos also believe that deities send *Bardoi Sikhla*, the symbolic girl of the wind and rain to the earth who brings rain with her and turns the earth fertile for cultivation.

There is a belief among the Bodos that if the heavenly deities *Raona* and *Raoni* become satisfied then the couple who have no child at all will get child in due course after the worship of the deities.¹¹

Moha Honai :

The Bodos of Kamrup and Darrang districts in particular and of the southern Goalpara observe this ceremony. This ceremony is held at the latter part of November or early part of December. It is generally observed by the young boys of the village. They drive the mosquitoes with the burning torches at their hands and walk from door to door singing songs and asking alms from the house owners of the village. They jointly arrange a feast with the articles they have received as alms from the house holders. The Bodos of the north-Goalpara and Kokrajhar district are not well acquainted with this festival.

Ceremonies Directly Relating to Agriculture :

Besides the major festivals like *Baisagu* the spring festival or *Rangali Bihu* (in Assamese) and *Domasi* or the harvest festivals the Bodos observe some minor ceremonies relating to agriculture. They cultivate paddy of different varieties with great care. So, during the period of paddy cultivation they perform several minor ceremonies, rites, and practices.

(a) *Khotia phonai* (in Assamese-Kathia) or sowing seeds of paddy : After making the field ready by ploughing the owner of the house offer a pair of areca nuts and bettle leaves (*Goi jora-Pathoi jora*) to the goddess *Mainao* or *Lakhi* and salutes towards the east after which he starts sowing the seeds of paddy.

(b) *Khotia phonai* (uprooting the seedling): At the time of uprooting the seedlings for transplantation also the Bodos follow some rites. When the seedlings become mature the female elderly member of the family offers a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves (*goijora-pathoi jora*) to the *Mainao* or *Lakhi* and then starts uprooting seedlings.

(c) *Mai gainai* (paddy plantation) : Though simple, *maigainai* or paddy plantation is performed with some rites.

The guardian of the family, generally the elderly female member offers a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves (*goijora-pathoiijora*) in the name of *Mainao* or the goddess of wealth and applying a little mustard oil on small quantity of seedlings the elderly female member salutes towards the east and then starts plantation. Then other members of the family start plantation all saluting to the east.

(d) *Mainao Lainai* or *Aglainai* : (Bringing *Mainao* or *Lokhi* from the paddy field to the house) : When the paddy becomes ripe and suitable for reaping the guardian (generally the male guardian) of the family brings a small quantity of paddy reaping with a sickle early in the morning preferably before the sunrise and after sprinkling holy water on it the small bundle of paddy is kept inside the *Bakhri* on the store house (granary) of paddy. This is called *Mainao lainai* or *Ag lainai*.

(e) *Engkham godan janai* or new rice-eating ceremony : This ceremony is held within the month of December after harvesting of the major rice crop of the year (*maisali*). On the occasion of the ceremony the new rice is taken inviting the neighbouring persons. Along with the new rice (*Engkham godan*) porks (*omabedor*) and rice-beer (*jau* or *jumai*) are also supplied in abundance. Before taking anything the Bodo followers or the traditional beliefs offer a little quantity of cooked-rice and curry of porks to the gods and goddesses, mainly to *Batcou Borai* and *Mainao* or *Bathou Buri*.

The followers of the *Brahma dharma* perform a *Yajnahuti* on the occasion of the festival and offer a little quantity of cooked new rice to the fire of '*Ahuti*' before they take anything. The *Ahuti* is attended by the neighbouring persons both adults and children. They pray before the *Ahuti* offering the mixed pulses (*Prasads*) to the fire in the name of the god for the better crops in the next year. At the end of the *Ahuti* all present at the ceremony are entertained with the new rice, porks, fish-curry etc.

Foot notes and references :

1. Shri Kamini Kumar Narzari, (Artist), a dance master ; Village-Bamankura, Gossaigaon, age, 62. (Informant)
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CHAPTER-IV

Religion and Magic of the Bodos :

1) *KHERAI PUJA*

2) *GARJA PUJA*

KHERAI PUJA

Kherai Puja is the greatest religious festival of the Bodos. It is a symbol of hope and desire, which has been prevailing among them since the time immemorial.

Purpose of the Puja : The main purpose of the *Kherai Puja* is welfare of both private and public lives. For the welfare of the private life, they perform *Kherai Puja* individually. On the otherhand, for the welfare of the villagers as a whole they perform *Kherai Puja* collectively once or twice in a year.

Besides welfare of both private and public lives, the *Kherai Puja* is performed for the good harvest of crops. The Bodos are generally dependent on agriculture. So, before and after cultivation, they perform *Kherai Puja* and propitiate different gods and goddesses for the success in cultivation. *Kherai Puja* is very expensive and elaborate too. Due to economic stringency the Bodos do not perform *Kherai Puja* frequently and regularly.

Origin of the *Kherai Puja* : It is difficult to ascertain the source from where the word '*Kherai*' originated. Different scholars and writers are of different opinions as regards the origin of the word *Kherai*. According to Dr. S. K. Chatterjee, there is similarity between the *Ker Puja* of the Tripuris and the *Kherai Puja* of the Bodos.¹

Bathou Borai, Chief of the Gods of the Bodos is also known as *Kharia Borai* or *Khuria Borai*, which means the latent old man. The Bodos believe *Kharia Borai* to be the latent entity endowed with all qualities. So, some believe that as the *Kherai Puja* is performed in his name, the words *Kharia Borai* might have got combined and got transformed into *Kherai*, (*Kharia Borai Khubrai Khurai Kherai*).

There is another explanation about the origin of the term *Kherai*.^{*} Sacrifice of animals and birds is essential for the *Kherai Puja*. The sound *Khe* is produced when a goat or a pig is sacrificed before *Bathou*, by cutting the neck of the sacrificial animals with a *dao* at a stroke. Some, worshippers of *Bathou* believe that the word *Kherai* originates from the sound *Khe* and with it is added the word *Rai* which means *Puja* or the chanting formula before the chief god *Bathou* (*Kharia Borai*). So, it is also believed that the word *Kherai* is derived from a combination like *Khe+rai Kherai*. However, such explanations seem to be the products of folk etymology. As there is similarity between the *Kherai Puja* of the Bodos and the *Ker puja* of the *Tipras* of Tripura, the *Khernang* of the Dimasas of North Cachar and the *Kheraima* of the Meches of Nepal,² no definite conclusion on the origin of the term *Kherai* can be taken without knowing more details about the beliefs and rituals connected with other ceremonies mentioned above.

Kinds of *Kherai Puja* : *Kherai Puja* is of four kinds; (i) *Darshan Kherai*, (ii) *Umrao Kherai*, (iii) *Phalo Kherai* and (iv) *Noaont Kherai* (family *Kherai*).

(i) ***Darshan Kherai* :** *Darshan Kherai* is performed during the first week of the Assamese month of *Kati* (September-October month). This *Kherai Puja* is meant for *Mainao* who is identified with *Laksmi* (from *Lakhi*), the goddess of wealth. So, it is also called as the *Lakhi Kherai*. It is also known as the *Sali Kherai*. The latter term clearly shows the association of this ceremony with the *Sali* or winter crop.

(ii) *Umrao Kherai* : It is held during the month of *Ashar*, at the end of the *Amthi Sua* (the unclean period) for the welfare of the villagers as well as of the crops. This *Kherai Puja* is also known as the *Ashu Kherai*, being connected with the *asu* or a summer-season crops.³

(iii) *Phalo Kherai* : During the month of *Magha* (an Assamese month) specially on the day of *Maghi Purnima* or the full-moon night of the month of *Magha*, the *Phalo Kherai* is performed. This *Kherai* is also known as the *Danshrang Kherai*, as it is performed during the full moon night of (*Danshrang* means the bright night of the full moon).

(iv) *Noaoni Kherai* (or family *Kherai*) : *No* means house or a family. So, if a *Kherai puja* is performed by a family, it is called *noaoni Kherai* or the family *Kherai*. This kind of *Kherai* is performed by a family whenever it deems necessary to wardoff evil or to ensure welfare. The Bodo people who believe in the traditional practices depend on the *Kherai Puja* and the *Garja Puja* for their welfare at all times. So, whenever they face any trouble, they perform the *Kherai Puja*.⁴

Gods and goddesses worshipped during *Kherai Puja* and the manners of their propitiation : The Bodos have many gods and goddesses who are worshipped during the *Kherai Pujas*. They possess different positions in the hierarchy of the Bodo pantheon and they are offered different kinds of sacrifices according to their positions.

1) *Bathou Borai* or *Kharia Borai* : He is the god in chief of the Bodos. He is given the highest position among the gods. Along with areca nuts and betel leaves a pig is sacrificed in his name. The head of the pig and a little quantity of the blood of the sacrificed pig are placed together on the altar.

2) *Aileng* : He is the body-guard of *Bathou Borai*. A cock is sacrificed to him.

3) *Agrang* : He is the general of the god-in-chief, a cock is sacrificed to him.

4) *Khoila* : He is the messenger of the god-in-chief, a cock is sacrificed to him.

5) *Karji* : He is the follower of the *Bura Bathou*, a goat is sacrificed to him.

6) *Rajkhandra* : He is also a follower of *Bura Bathou*, a pig is given to him.

7) *Sang Raja* : He is the owner of the wild animals and a follower of the *Bura Bathou*. The hunter propitiates him before entering in to the jungle for hunting. He is given a red cock. His consort is *Sang Rani*.

8) *Alai Khungri* : A princess goddess and she is a follower of the *Bathou Buri* or *Kharia Buri*. She is given a pig.

9) *Bhandari* : She is the owner of the store of the food-stuffs. She is given a cock.

10) *Ranchandri* or *Ran Phagli* : She is known as the goddess of war. Before starting for the Battle field she is believed to be propitiated with a sacrifice of the cocks.

11) *Bulli Buri* : She is regarded as the owner of the fish. She must be propitiated before starting for fishing. She is also regarded as the goddess of medicine and *mantras*. She is given a pig as sacrifice.

12) *Laokhar Gosai* : He is the god of the cowherds. He is also known as *Garakhia Gosai*. This god is identified as the Lord Krishna, A pair of pigeons are set free in the name of this god.

13) *Nowab Badsha* : (Muslim God), This god of the Muslim is also given a seat during the pujas. A cock is sacrificed in the name of this god. Some times the *Peer Saheb* is also given a seat during the pujas.

Preparation of the Kherai Puja Arena :

The Bodos have no temple or a fixed shrine of worship. They select any suitable place when they have to worship their gods and goddesses. An altar is prepared by the intending worshippers. The altar is a long one and divided into three parts. It starts from the south and ends in the northern end. Generally the grazing field is selected for making an altar for the Kherai puja. In the first part of the altar a piece of cloth is hung up above the ground. It indicates the formless existence of the Obanglaoree (the God.). In the middle part Bathou is symbolised by a planted Siju tree (*Euphorbia splendens*). The Siju tree is surrounded by a round fence of the small bamboo strips folded with five fastenings symbolising the religious and spiritual principles grouped in five. Under the Siju tree an alari batti (a sacred earthen lamp) is lighted. Five shares of areca nuts and betel leaves, green bananas and other sacred things are put on the five plaintain leaflets placed under the Siju tree. A pot filled with pure water is also installed there and top branches jatrasi or *tulsi* (basil) plants are kept in the pot for sprinkling the holy water from within the pot on the altar. As a symbol of creation an egg and as a symbol of truth a piece of stone are kept in front of the Bathou. From the middle part of the altar to the northern section some rows of Khangkhla (a kind of sacred plant) are planted leading to the northern end where Mainao, the goddess of wealth or of crops is installed. The northern part of the altar symbolises the beautiful and prosperous Mother Earth. Two holy persons, a dauri and a *doudini* remain as the holy custodians of the puja under the guidance of the Oja (a medicine man) and they perform all the religious rites. The surroundings of the entire altar are kept pure by burning aromatic articles like *dhub* sticks, *dhuna* and *chandan*. The puja continues for three days and nights. In earlier days the puja lasted for seven days and nights.

Significance of the Altar of the Kherai Puja : The whole lengthwise altar of the Kherai Puja has its significance. It is believed that the Altar symbolises a holy road from the Heaven, down to the earth, or from the earth to the Heaven. The ideal of the philosophy here indicates a holy link between the God of the Heaven and the human beings of the earth.

A piece of cotton yarn which is tied on the post of bamboo with green leaves is believed to signify the unending principle or the law of creation of the Creator. Thus the whole preparation of the altar of the Kherai Puja is believed to bear great philosophical significance.

Role of Doudini during the Kherai Puja : Throughout three days and nights Kherai dances are performed to please the holy Bathou Borai and other gods and goddesses. The Doudini is the key dancer during the Kherai puja.

In Kherai Puja the Doudini performs most of the essential rites with the help of the Oja and a githal or gidal. Besides, two drum (Kham) beaters, two players of the bamboo flutes (Siphung) and two players of Jotha (cymbals) are also essential to help the Doudini perform the Kherai puja. The first role of the Doudini is called *Doudini anshranai* or *Alongikhaugnai*.

From the starting of the puja Doudini is found to demonstrate three stages of activities. First, she is charmed by the formula of the Oja. This stage of the Doudini is called as *Alongikhangnai*. In the second stage she falls into a trance and in the third stage she converts into the spiritual being. In this stage she can tell the tales of the gods and goddesses in their voices. She moves round the Bathou and sprinkles holy water from a pot and dances while the drums (Khams), flutes and cymbals are played

on. The worshippers also may join in the circle of dancing with Doudini. While Doudini dances, she imitates the nature of gods and goddesses. She demonstrates as many as eighteen kinds of different dances. By this time also she changes her nature into three stages. First, she changes her mood, secondly, she assimilates her with gods and goddesses and thirdly, she imitates the nature of different gods and goddesses. Doudini holds a long sword (thungri) and a Dahal or a shield (which were used by the Bodos in the battle filed in earlier days), while she dances. After the dancing is over, she tells the fortune of the people, the good and bad days of the villagers, success and failure of cultivation and regarding the duties and responsibilities of the villagers for their safeguard from any danger in near future.

Description of the dances of the Doudini : During the Kherai Puja Doudini demonstrates different dances to propitiate the gods and goddesses. The following are the dances of Doudini, relating to different gods.

(1) **Bathou gidingnai :** Doudini moves round the altar of the Bathou for several times dancing slowly in the tune of the flutes (Siphung), associated by the Kham (drums) and Jotha (cymbals).

(2) **Chotrali :** Doudini dances holding a sword by her right hand and a shield by her left hand and moves dancing round the altar of the Bathou. She is believed to be demonstrating the war dance in the name of the goddess of war, Ranchandi or Ranphali.

(3) **Khapri Chipnai :** It is believed that the Doudini demonstrates tactics how a person can save him from the attack of the enemies in the battle field. This dance is related with the Bura Ailong, the bodyguard of the Bathou Maharaja. While she dances, she holds a sword and a shield by her hands.

(4) **Khoijama Phonai :** With this dance the Doudini demonstrates the tactics how to destroy the enemies in the battle field,

(5) **Gandoula bannai :** This dance is related with the Manasu or the Manas god. Here also the tactics of subjugating the enemies are shown by the Doudini through her dance.

(6) **Chagalaw banai :** Through this dance Doudini demonstrates the preparation of the battle. This dance is related to the god Aba Khungur, a very powerful god. Some persons compare this dance with the Samudra Manthan of the Mahabharata, although there is no any strong ground to believe this comparison.

(7) **Muphur gelenai :** This dance is performed by the Doudini in the nature of bear (Muphur). The god is believed to have a nature of a bear, or Muphur (in Bodo Muphur means a bear).

(8) **Nao bonai :** Laokhar Gosai is regarded as the deity of the cowherds (laokar) and who is identified as the *Lord Krishna*. This Nao Bonai dance is demonstrated by Doudini showing the greatness of the god.

(9) **Khamao Barkhonai :** Rajkhandra is the god who is related to this dance. He is the grand son of Bura Bathou Maharaja. At the time of propitiating this god Doudini performs this dance which is called Khamao Barkhonai. She climbs up the drum (Kham) and dances on it.

(10) **Dao thoi longnai :** While a chicken is sacrificed in the name of a god, Doudini takes the blood of the sacrificed in the cup (Khuroi) and dances in the tune of the flute and later, standing before the altar she drinks the blood from the cup.

(11) **Mashakhaori mashanai** : This dance related to God Khoila, the messenger of the Bathou Borai.

(12) **Maoji mengbrang gelenai** : (the spotted cat dance) : This dance is exhibited by the *Doudini* when the *Kherai puja* is performed by a family for the recovery of a patient of the family.

Besides the above dances, other dances like the *Jaraphagla*, *Thenthamali*, *Saraniata*, etc. are also demonstrated by the *Doudini* at the *Kherai puja*.

Materials essential for the Kherai Puja : In order to perform *Kherai puja* some essential materials must be collected by the villagers and without which no *Kherai puja* can be performed. The Materials are, (1) one *Sijau* tree, (*Euphorbia splendens*), (2) one *tulsasi* plant, (holy basil), (3) three pieces of the *bijuli* bamboo, (4) the dust of rice, (5) eighteen pairs of *kush* or *khungkhla* plant (a kind of sacred plant), (6) *Makhna* or *lakhna* trees (eighteen pairs); (7) four pieces of *jati* bamboo, (8) nine pieces of *dubri* plants (a kind of sacred grass); (9) a ring of gold; (10) *Plaintain* leaves; (11) *Banana* fruits; (12) *Areca* nuts; (13) *betel* leaves; (14) *Sindur* (vermilion); (15) *Dhub* sticks (aromatic stick); (16) *Dhuna* (a kind of resin); (17) *Guphur aowa khundung* (white rayon); (18) mustard oil; (19) earthen lamps (*jewari*); (20) rice (*mairong*); (21) rice-beer (*jau*); (22) a pair of *lotha* or *ghati* (a small water vessel made of brass); (23) one cup, made of brass or metal (*khuroi*); (24) some quantity of cotton (*khun*); (25) one stick of cane; (26) a piece of *gamari kham-phlai* (a low tool made of *gamari* wood), etc.⁷

The following musical instruments and weapons are essential during the *Kherai puja* without which no *Kherai puja* can be performed.

- Musical instruments :
- (1) *Kham* (drum)—one pair,
 - (2) *Jotha* (cymbal)—one pair
 - (3) *Siphung* (along flute of bamboo): one pair

Weapons : (4) *Thungri* (sword)—one or one pair and

(5) *Dahal* or *dhal* (Shield)—one or one pair

The Role of the Oja or the medicine man during the Kherai Puja :

The role of the *Oja* is of great importance during the *Kherai puja*. Like *Doudini*, he plays a great role during the *Kherai puja*. He instructs the worshippers and other co-workers of the *Kherai puja* like *Doudini* or *Githal* to help *Doudini* in performing the *Kherai puja* smoothly. The villagers are obliged to follow his advices when they arrange a *Kherai puja* or *Garja puja*. He is the person to chant the *mantras* or formulas at the time of *pujas*. It is believed that the *Oja* is able to understand the motives of gods all the time of the *pujas*. He enchants the *mantras* or formulas in such a way that the gods and goddesses become pleased easily. For an instance, the *Oja* enchants the formula or *mantra* of welcome to the gods and goddesses as mentioned here below :

The formula : (in Bodo) :

*Oi phiphaguri, Anangacay binangocay, nong ondo nongni ogian Boro phicaphorkhou ondo nongo ; Oi coraigiri nongo ; nongno phothango, nongno loy zahoyo, nongnikhuroi dercin laocin raobo goilia ; Oi, thaigirni khonga khongba, sigauni sira sirba, simphungni gudunga dungba, Bathouni bandoa bandoba, Boro Boraini rawa phongba ; Bima phipha guru binikhaino Bathou pathinanoi Sijau gainanoi, gaca gainanoi, kham, zotha, Siphung lananoi nong piphakhou oncayo, ondo apha piphaguru ondo ; ondor cingao gogloicananoi thanai Boro phicaphorkhou ondo nong, oi phiphaguru, khomsiniphay bokhonanoi erangao langdo zongkhon, corgongphray bor carcrinanoi hordo nongo zong phicaphorno.*⁸

Rough English rendering of the above formula is as follows :

O God, our father, protect your ignorant children, you are the Creator, preserver and destroyer, all in one,

you are peerless ; that the 'ou fruit (*dillenis indica*) has five rinds, the *Sijou* tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) has five ridges, the *Siphung* (a long bamboo flute) has five holes ; the *Bathou* has five knots, (of bamboo strips) and the *Boro Borai* (the Boro elderly persons) have five moral preachings ; We plant the *Sijau* on the altar and light the flame of oil and worship you, whilst drums, flutes and cymbals play ; Oh father merciful, have mercy on your Bodo sons, steeped in darkness of ignorance, light us father, from darkness lift us to light, from Heaven father, shower on us.

During the *Kherai puja* prayer is offered by the *Oja* to the gods and goddesses through the *Doudini*. Here in the above mentioned formula it is found that the prayer is offered by the *Oja* to the gods and goddesses through the *Doudini*.

At the time of enchanting the formula the *Oja* is found at a half-sitting position without using any tool or mate, while the *Douris* also follow his position. This half-sitting position is called *jaslang jonai* in Bodo.

Retrieving of Mainao, the goddess of crops from the earth (called in Bodo, *Mainao Bokhangnai*) :

At the conclusion of the '*Kherai Puja*' the Bodo worshippers symbolically retrieve *Mainao*; the goddess of crops from the earth through the *Doudini*.

The *Doudini* sits on the ground in front of the altar of the *Bathou Borai* without any movement. The worshippers, with the help of the *Oja* try to ascertain the reason of sitting of the '*Doudini*' in such a position. The *Oja* then declares that the *Doudini* has possessed the *Mainao*, (the goddess of wealth). So, to satisfy the goddess, a pig is sacrificed to the goddess of wealth. The body, head and the blood of the pig are placed together before the altar of *Mainao*, while the flute, (*Siphung*), the drums (*kham*) and the cymbals (*jarha*) are played on and produce melodious tune. The *Oja* chants the formula to propitiate *Mainao*.

The *Doudini*, who has been possessed by *Mainao* addresses the worshippers in the voice of *Mainao* in the following words : "*He Boro-phisaphor, nangsor angkhau mabeo langno ? nangsor angkhau dano langgon gabanna daioo phanse orao phanse khalamnanoi jagon : onagary hhalamnanoi jagan ; ang thangnainoga nangsar je lanajang phoidang be lamajang thangphin.*"

Rough English rendering of the above formula is as follows ;

"O Boro children, where you will take me ? if you take me to-day, you will spread me some quantity at water, some at fire, you will neglect me ; you will go back with the same way, with which you have come here."

Again the *Oja*, on behalf of the worshippers request the *Mainao* Praying as follows ;

"*Nang phoinanggao, Mainao Ai, nang nangabla jang barai thangnanoi thana ; nangna jangni jiw ; nangni annaiawna jeba jirat thangnanoi dang, Ai, nang nangable dandiseba thangna haya Ai ; nang phoitharnanggan ; nangabla phab nanggan, jangni kharani thai manlanggan ; dahai Ai, nang phoitharnanggan*".

English rendering of the above address is likely as follows : You must come, Mother *Mainao*, without you how we will survive, you are the soul (*jiw*) of us ; on your mercy every thing is lasting ; we cannot live alive for a little while in your absence ; if you do not come to our houses you will be sinner ; you will have to drink the blood of our heads ; O Mother you must come with us.

At the request of the worshippers the *Mainao* (the goddess of wealth) becomes satisfied and agrees to stay at the houses of the worshippers. She expresses her willingness to go with them on conditions. She says ;

Thau phisaphor, angkhau nangsar jathanoi lakhi ; angna samphramba phao phuja ha ; nangsini dahan daulatya dinoi eshe gaban eshe barailanggan ; angkhau nangsar majangoi samphramba khulum.

English rendering of the above address is as follows : "Let us go my dear childred, you will keep me with great care, I will stay at your houses ; you will worship me every day, your wealth will increase day by day".

After expressing her willingness to go *Daudini* stands up from her seat and starts to dance. The worshippers become very joyful for the reason that they have become successful in convincing the *Mainao* to stay in their houses. They also start to dance along with the *Daudini*. Their dance continues for a while at a moment the *Daudini* holds the two bamboo posts at the front of the altar of the *Bathou Borai* and suddenly she loses her sense. Then the *Oja* and all the worshippers raise a slogan in the name of the *Bathou Borai*; while the *Oja* to enable her regaining sense sprinkles holy water (*doi shanti*) on the head of the *Daudini*, as a result she regains her sense and the *Kherai puja* also comes to an end.

GARJA PUJA

The *Garja puja* is another important religious ceremony of the Bodos. The real or proper meaning of the word *Garja* is not yet found clearly. Some like to give the meaning of the word *Garja* as 'God'. But the gods are called in Bodo *Modai*. Again some Bodo Scholars define the meaning of word as a way of making one free from danger. In the words of Bhaben Narzi, a Bodo Scholar, *Garja* means *niskriti* in Assamese. This explanation of the word is also not clear to bear the actual meaning of the word *Garja*. It may be probable that the *Garja* word itself bears the meaning of expulsion; (*Garja* or *garjanai* or *garnai* means expulsion or discharging anything in Bodo) and during the *Garja Puja*, some evil gods are expelled or discharged from the area of a village. This system of *Garja Puja*, where the evil gods are expelled is called *bhasani* or *bhasainai* (floating away in the river or a stream). The Bodo word *bhasani* means to float away in the river or stream. It is also to be noted that all the gods and goddesses are not expelled publicly. Generally the harmful gods and goddesses who create diseases are expelled from a certain village or area by performing the '*Garja puja*'. It may be mentioned that among the non-Bodo neighbouring Hindu people a similar *puja* is performed and it is called by them the '*Dinga puja*'.

Why the Bodos perform the *Garja puja* :

The Bodos perform the *Garja puja* to purify themselves and the village after any seasonal festival like '*Baisagu*' etc. They believe that at the annual festivals the participants of the village become impure due to free mixing with each other eating, merry-making, walking, drinking rice-beer from one's house to another's house. So, in order to purify themselves they perform the *Garja puja* at the village. This belief is found not only among the Bodos, but also among the non-Bodo societies, who perform similar pujas occasionally. Such belief of the Bodos helps them in maintaining sacredness and purity among them.

If some epidemic appears in a family or in the village then the villagers perform the *Garja puja* to protect themselves from the evils. In case of wrong activity of some persons in the village, which they believe traditionally, the villagers compel the wrong doers to arrange the *Garja puja* to satisfy the gods and goddesses as well as to purify themselves.

The Bodo villagers use to examine the village whether it is alright or not. There is a procedure to examine the village as well as the villagers. The procedure is very easy. One night ahead of the proposed *Garja puja*, in the evening the altar of the *Garja puja* is made clean after washing it with holy water. A piece of the plaintain leaf is placed on the altar and on it a pair of holy basil leaves, nine grains of rice are placed together and then covers the articles with a bamboo basket (*don*). Next day, early in the morning, the articles are examined. If the articles are found alright, it is believed that the village or the villagers are alright and free from danger. But if the articles are found scattered or some of them are missing, then it is believed that the village and the villagers are not alright. The villagers suspect some persons to be involved in some illegal or immoral activities. The guilty persons are compelled to apologise before the gods of the *Garja puja*.

The Bodos believe that the flood also carries diseases from one place to another. So, in order to keep the village free from diseases they perform *Garja puja* and let the diseases or the evils floating away from the village.

Kinds of the Garja :

There are many *Garja* gods and goddesses who are regularly propitiated by the Bodos. Among them the important are 'Lakhi Garja' *Asu Garja*, *Sew Garja*, *Tulsing-Mulsing Garja*, *Dura Marai Garja*, *Dawng Garja*, *Sindur Garja*, *Thong-Thongali Garja*, *Thia Garja*, *Batho Garja*, *Gu-Garja*, *Borai Raja Garja*, *Dano Garja*, *Gala kata Garja*, and *Othoro Shanti Garja*.

Although it is not possible to identify all of the *Garja* the following are generally regarded as the benevolent *garja* gods. They are, (i) *Lakhi Garja* : For the welfare of the village as well as the villagers and for the successful crops the Bodos propitiate the goddess of wealth *Mainao*, who is also called as *Lakhi*.

(ii) *Asu Garja* : The Bodos cultivate two types of paddy crops in a year, the *Sali* or *Maisali* and *Asu mai*. In Bodo *Mai* means paddy. For the success of the *Asu* crop they perform the *Asu Garja* before harvesting the crop.

(iii) *Dhan or Dahan Kubir Garja* : The *Dhan Kubir Garja* is the god of wealth. But this god is regarded as a malevolent god. Hence, the Bodos propitiate this god to keep them safe.

(iv) *Borai Raja Garja* : The *bathau Borai* is also known as *Borai Raja*. For the general welfare of the village or of the family they propitiate the *Borai Raja*, the god-in-chief, occasionally.

Attendants of the Borai Raja :

The *Borai Raja* has many descendants who are also addressed during the time of *Garja puja*. They are *Borai*

Chaudri, *Nisan dhara*, *Phanka dhara*, *Mech-Mechani*, *Koch-Kochani*, *Rabha-Rabhani*, *Hira-Hirani*, *Gongar-Gongarni*, etc (the Bodos call the people of Bhutan and Sikim States as *Gongar-Gongarni*).

There are goddesses who are also addressed by the *Oja* at the *Garja puja* and they are regarded as *Kungris* or princess. They are *Alai khungri*, *Bilai Khungri*, *Ish khungri*, *Bish khungri*, *Maya khungri*, *Shaya khungri*, *Daisa khungri*, etc. (*Khungri* Assamese *Kumari*).

The following *Khubir* gods also get places at the *Garja puja* : *Ish khubir*, *Bish khubir*, *Akhla khubir*, *Batana khubir*, *Kal-khubir*, *Shaya khubir*, *Maya khubir*, *Makhana khubir*, *Langthia khubir* and *patal khubir*.

Harsa Garja gods : (non-Bodo *Garja* gods) ; side by side, along with Bodo gods, some non-Bodo *Garja* gods are given seats at the time of *Garja puja*. *Mahadeo* or *Mahadeva* is the chief non-Bodo *Garja* god. His followers are *Sila Rai*, *Rupa Rai*, *Bera Bhanga*, *Santha Mara*, *Dhamka Mara*, etc.

The followers of the *Bishahari* are *Ai Kali*, *Maya Kali*, *Shaya Kali*, *Ai Barmani*, etc.

The followers of the *Garakhia Gosai* or the *Laokhar Gosai* are *Madhab Gosai*, *Gadab Gosai*, *Baro Gopal*, *Baro Gapini*, *Langthia Gosai*, etc.

The followers of the *Chikana Raja* are *Nau Raja*, *Dighla Raja*, *Shai Raja*, *Bai Raja*, etc. The followers of the *Ai Thkurani*, goddess are *Ai Sati*, *Ai Parbati*, *Ai Durga*, *Shong Kali*, *Bishong kali*, *Dhao kali*, etc. The followers of the *Ganesh Thakur* are *Moider Akhanda*, *Moider Makhla*, *Moider Makhli*, etc.

The river gods and goddesses are also equally addressed during the *Garja puja*. All the rivers, both big and small, even the streams are addressed by the *Oja*. Rivers like *Manasu*, *Tharang*, *Champur*, *Gaurang*, *Samokha*, *Saral-bhanga*, *Sapkata*, *Tipkai*, *Gurubhasa*, *Malbhog*, *Janali*, *Dainamari*, *Jakhati*, *Sonkosh*, *Krishnai*, *Dudhnoi*, *Zinjiram*,

The Bodos believe that the flood also carries diseases from one place to another. So, in order to keep the village free from diseases they perform *Garja puja* and let the diseases or the evils floating away from the village.

Kinds of the Garja :

There are many *Garja* gods and goddesses who are regularly propitiated by the Bodos. Among them the important are '*Lakhi Garja*' *Asu Garja*, *Sew Garja*, *Tulsing-Mulsing Garja*, *Dura Marai Garja*, *Dawng Garja*, *Sindur Garja*, *Thong-Thongali Garja*, *Thia Garja*, *Batho Garja*, *Gu-Garja*, *Borai Raja Garja*, *Dano Garja*, *Gala kata Garja*, and *Othoro Shanti Garja*.

Although it is not possible to identify all of the *Garja* the following are generally regarded as the benevolent *garja* gods. They are, (i) *Lakhi Garja* : For the welfare of the village as well as the villagers and for the successful crops the Bodos propitiate the goddess of wealth *Mainao*, who is also called as *Lakhi*.

(ii) *Asu Garja* : The Bodos cultivate two types of paddy crops in a year, the *Sali* or *Maisali* and *Asu mai*. In Bodo *Mai* means paddy. For the success of the *Asu* crop they perform the *Asu Garja* before harvesting the crop.

(iii) *Dhan or Dahan Kubir Garja* : The *Dhan Kubir Garja* is the god of wealth. But this god is regarded as a malevolent god. Hence, the Bodos propitiate this god to keep them safe.

(iv) *Borai Raja Garja* : The *bathau Borai* is also known as *Borai Raja*. For the general welfare of the village or of the family they propitiate the *Borai Raja*, the god-in-chief, occasionally.

Attendants of the Borai Raja :

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Dhanshri, Lumshi, etc. are addressed by the *Oja* when the Bodo people of the Goalpara district perform *Garja puja* at any village.¹²

The names of the gods and goddesses differ from area to area. But the major gods and goddesses remain the same. A great difference is found among the river-gods of different areas in the same state and its reason is probably due to different names of the rivers.

Preparation of the Garja puja :

Salami : The pre-*Garja* arrangement is called *Salami*. It is performed one day ahead of the *Garja puja*. The *Douri* of the *Garja puja* cuts a chicken and offers in to the *Bura Bathou*, then he purifies every house of the village sprinkling holy water which is kept ready in a pot or *Lotha (Lota)*. In the night the villagers have to remain pure and neat for the *puja* to be solemnised the next day.

A lonely place of the grazing field which is covered with jungle, is selected for the *Garja puja* and the place of *puja* is called *Garja Sali*. They regard the bank of the river as the most suitable place for the *Garja puja*.

They clean the plot where the altar of the *puja* is to be made. A few small huts, which are called *Dera* in Bodo are built by the villages. Juice of rice-beer (*Jau*) is kept in the camp house of the *puja*. Some grains of rice, a pair of new *Dokhna* (a female garment of the Bodos) and ornaments are kept inside the temporary camp at night. It is peculiar that nobody dares to enter into the camp and steal the materials offered to the gods and goddesses. The camp house is kept unguarded for the night. This is called *Salami*. The next day morning the villagers clean their houses all the utensils, clothes, etc and get ready for the *puja*.

Time of the Garja puja :

Although the Bodos have no fixed date for the *Garja puja*, they generally perform it two times in a year. The

first *Garja puja* is performed during the Assamese months of 'Jeth and Ahar'. This *Garja* is known as *Phojaonai* or *Bhasanai Garja*. The non-Bodo neighbouring Hindu people call it as *Bhasani*, which means to let floating on the river. During this *Garja puja* the materials of sacrifice are kept on a *bhel* or *bhela* made of the plaintain trees and then let it floating. By doing this the worshippers believe that the diseases may leave the village after the evil-gods are being expelled from the village. The second *Garja* is performed during the months of *Kati* and *Aghana*. (Assamese months), and it is known as *Mainao doikhangnai* or lifting of the goddess of wealth (Assamese *Lakhimi*). So, this *Garja* is also known as *Lakhi Garja*. With the help of the *Garja puja* the Bodos welcome the goddess of wealth, *Mainao* to the village and worship her for their prosperity.

Place of gods and goddesses at the Garja puja :

A special seat is given to the *Barai Raja* at the *Garja Sali*. The worshippers build a special house, a temporary storied house which is called *Chang ghar* in Assamese, with small steps to climb up the house. Other minor gods are accommodated in the small houses built for them. Their seats are spread towards the left side of the seat of *Borai Raja*.

For the non-Bodo gods (*Harsa modai*), a small house is prepared at a place right side of the seats of the Bodo gods (*Bodo modai*).

For each god small parts of the plaintain leaves with a sign of vermilion on it, areca nuts and betel leaves are placed in side the small huts.

Offerings and sacrifices to the gods during the Garja puja :

For the *Borai Raja* a male pig and a chicken are sacrificed. In the name of *Mainao* (the goddess of wealth), a female pig is given. To the *Tulsing Mulsiag Garja* one male pig is sacrificed compulsorily. A female pig is sacrificed to the *Jaman Buri* and a male pig is sacrificed to the *Jaman Borai*.

A chicken is sacrificed to the *Patbira* and a white chicken is sacrificed to the Sun god. To the *Maut Borai* and *Maut Buri* a cock is cut and the head and blood are given. For the *Ganesh Thakur* a chicken sacrificed and to the *Chikhna Raja* a goat is sacrificed. To the *Bima Kali* or *Ai Kali* also a goat is compulsorily sacrificed. For the *Baro Gopal* and *Baro Gopinis* three pigeons are set free in the air. To the *Sanyasi Thakur*, another non-Bodo god a pigeon is given.

Besides sacrifices, for each god and goddess, a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves, a pair of banana fruits are essential.

From starting to the end of the *Garja puja* all the works are performed by the *Douri*, and he is guided by the *Oja* (medicine man). The *Douries* are of two classes. One *Douri* is for the Bodo gods called *Boro Douri* and the second *Douri* is for the *Harsa gods* or non-Bodo gods, who is called *Harsa Douri*. Another person is engaged to propitiate the Muslim god, *Peer Saheb* or *Nowab Badsha*.¹³

The *Oja* chants the *Mantra* or the formula while the sacrifices are made in the name of each god and goddess. The person who is engaged to propitiate the Muslim god '*peer Saheb* or *Nawab Badsha*' pronounces the word *Bismilla* at the time of sacrificing the cock in the name of the god. The word probably means the address in the name of god. The person engaged is also to keep the back-portion of his garment (locally called *lengthi*) loose at the time of sacrifice.

Notes and References :

1. Chatterjee, S. K. ; *Kirata Jana-kriti*, 1974 ; pp 128-130. (e.f. During the second half of the first millennium A.D. Comilla, as recent excavations in the lalmai mounds near Comilla town have shown, was the seat of an important Hindu Kingdom, that of 'Pattikera'.

There is the other East Bengal Kingdom of Harikela, mentioned in inscriptions (e.g., the Rampal plate of Sri Chandra, C. 11th-12th centuries). This Harikela has been identified with Dacca and East Maimansing districts : and again with sylhet. In either case, Harikela is a country or area close to, may be contiguous with, pattikera. The common element (Kela or Kera, Ker) in these two names is noticeable ; its meaning and affinity are not known. But there is an ancient Pre-Hindu religious rite among the Tipras which is known as Ker puja, which appears to be a ritual in honour of the Earth goddess and the creation. It is not unkindly that Kela, Kera, is connected with the Tipra word 'Ker' and may have some significance connected with the 'Earth'.

2. Informant : Shri M.M. Brahma, Kokrajhar.
3. Informant : Shri Bhaben Narzi, Kharghuli, Gauhati.
4. Informant : Shri Jaynarayan Basumatary, age 65 years ; Naigaon, Kokrajhar.
5. Informant : Bihari Prasad Basumatary ; Age-75 years ; (*Oja*), Aflagaon, Kokrajhar.
6. *Gital* or *Gidal* is a follower of the *Oja* who performs the duty as a helper of the *Oja* during the *Kherai puja*.
7. Informant : Bihari Prasad Basumatary ; age, 75 years (*Oja*), Aflagaon, Kokrajhar.
8. Informant : Shri Mahini Mohan Brahma.
9. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, 1971, PP.250-52.
10. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti* 1971, P.230.
11. Basumatary, Jaynarayan ; *Boroni Bathou Dharam Bijab* ; Aflagaon, Kokrajhar.
12. Informant : Bihari Prasad Basumatary ; (*Oja*) age-75 years, Aflagaon, Kokrajhar.
13. Narzi, Bhaben ; *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti* ; 1971, P. 232.

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Mother bathing her newly born baby



A Bodo grand mother at the loom



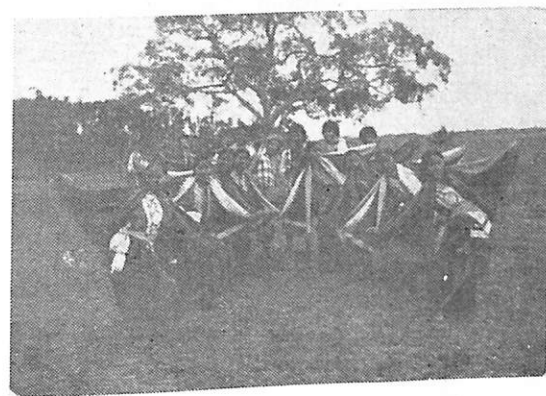
A *Bairathi* dancing with the marriage party



Bodo Girls busy at fishing with *Jekhai*



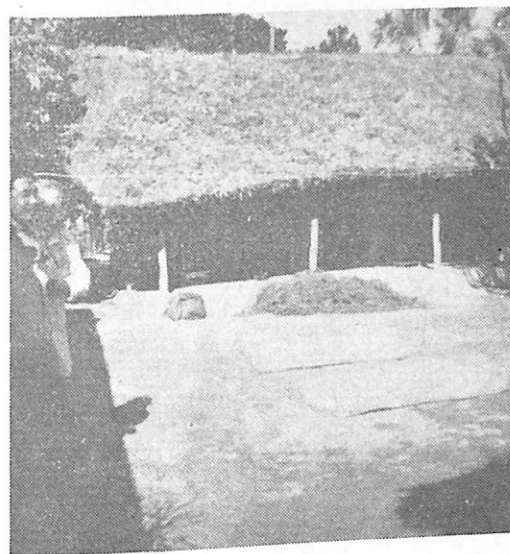
Old Bodo women dancing *Baisagu* dance



A scene of *Bagurumba* dance



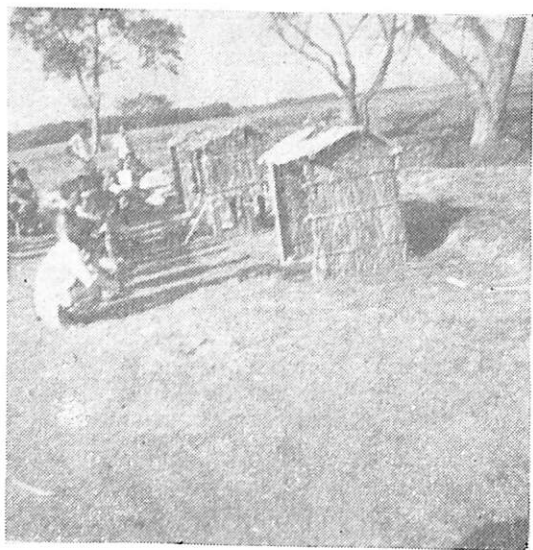
Bodo girls of Kokrajhar District



Front side of the *Nomano* (main house of the Bodo family)



Prayer—in front of the *Bathou*



A scene of *Garja Sali* (place of the *Garja Puja*)



Dr. K. Brahma

(Author)

Born in 1941, 1st July, at village Bhumka, under Gossaigaon Sub-Division of Kokrajhar District. His father was Late Gabinda Brahma and mother was Late Jaga Brahma.

Education : He started his primary education at his own village L.P. School, obtained the B.A. degree from Kokrajhar College and M.A. from the Gauhati University in 1968, in History.

Service : He served at Rupshi J.N. Academy of Dhubri District as a teacher till 1971 and at Dhubri Girls' College as a part-time lecturer till 1972, while he joined at Gossaigaon College as the Head of the Department of History. He was appointed as D.E.E.O. of Santipur District in 1985, and he has been appointed as Principal i/c of Gossaigaon College in 1985 after he left the post of the D.E.E.O.

Research works : He started Research works on the Tribal culture (Specially Socio-culture of the Bodos) in 1981, under the guidance of Dr. B.N. Datta, Prof. and Head of the Folklore Research Department of Gauhati University and a thesis of the subject "A study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and ceremonies of the Bodos (with special Reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District)" in January, 1988 and was awarded Ph.D. in February, 1989.

He attended seminar on significance and problems of Folklore studies in N.E. India sponsored by the U.G.C., organised by the Department of Folklore Research of G.U. in 1981 and read a paper on the Traditional Religion of the Bodos ; attended seminar and workshop on the "Research Methodology" organised by the N.E. India council for social science Research, Shillong in 1983 ; attended workshop on Folklore Theory and Methodology organised by the Folklore Research of G.U. in 1985 ; attended seminar on status of women in the plains Tribal Societies of Assam ; Tradition and change, organised by the Folklore Research Department G.U. in 1989 and read a paper on the "Status of Bodo Women in the Society."

His books published sofar :—

- i) "Bharatni Jarimin" a History of India in Bodo, 1974
- ii) গোসাইগাঁও চহৰৰ চমু ইতিবৃত্ত, ১৯৮৩
- iii) "Guru Dev Shrimot Kali Charan Brahma" (Life History) in Bodo, 1986
- iv) Boroni Harimoo, in Bodo, 1988
- v) Aspects of Social customs of the Bodos (English), 1989.