

Cultural Symbiosis and its impact on the Bodo Women

Social Life of the Bodos:

From time immemorial the socio-culture of the Bodo was blessed by such virtues like honesty, truthfulness, and straight-forwardness and general trustworthiness as witnessed by Endle in his monumental work. But with the passage of time, things have somewhat changed bringing new complexities unknown or unheard before. The improvement of communication, general mobility and intercourse with the people all round have brought some psychological and attitudinal change of all section of people. To meet this changing situation of life, necessity has arisen to frame some local laws on the basis of customs and traditions that prevail in the society. Thus locally codified customary usages and practices of the Bodo society came to be followed after approval from zone council composed of adjacent villages. These local laws are known as '*Pandulipis*' as they are in manuscript forms and are hardly printed. Since these are not co-ordinated homogenous sets of laws, they differ in content and application from area to area. However, the basic issues pertaining to inheritance of property, succession to office of socio-religious and socio-political nature and liability of atonement on committing unnatural and unsocial offences are more or less identical.

The traditional Bodo society which came into contact with different culture and societies underwent great changes in the middle part of 20th Century. The change at different institutional levels have been taking place from time to time and these changes are visible in the traditional institutions like religion, marriage, economy, social customs and also in their position and status of men and women, food habit,

dress and other spheres of life. The changes are found in the form of Sanskritization, modernisation and also westernisation to some extent. The prime factors of these changes are certainly the influence of Hinduism, the spread of higher education among the Bodos and the development of science and technology. The upward movement in the traditional Bodo society has occurred without the loss of their basic values, norms and identity. The Bodo culture is a part and parcel of the Indo-Mongoloid culture. The Mongoloid Bodo Culture of Assam has, to some extent, influenced the Indic (Indo-Aryan) Assamese culture or vice-versa. The different Bodo culture which has influenced and contributed in the development of Assamese culture has been discussed and analysed by many scholars.¹

How the Bodos contributed in the evolution of the great Indian culture and the course of Indian history is a hidden part of the history of this land. In short it was a revolution of culture. Did the Brahmin priest play the main role in bringing this culture among the Bodos of Assam and Bengal? "But it was not a case of one sided influence or absorption. It was a case of Mongoloid speeches and ideologies, cult and customs being engrafted on the stock of Hindu (i.e. Indo-Aryan cum Austric and Dravidian) speech ideologies, cult and custom".²

The Bodo are referred to as a 'tribe' by the British administrators and missionaries and designated as a scheduled tribe after independence. The written documents on their social organisation are available from the beginning of the 12th century when the European missionaries and administrators began to write on them. In this context it is worth referring to '*Bibar*', the first magazine of the Bodo. The first generation of Bodo writers wrote regularly on various aspects of the community in the magazine. The articles were written in Bodo, Assamese and Bengali languages.

This helps us to understand their historical relationship with the neighbouring castes and communities.

The Bodos of entire Assam and Bengal have been in constant touch with Assamese people and Bengalis who are more advanced than the Bodos. The rituals, customs, living standard, food habit, dresses and other life habits of the Bodos are influenced by their neighbouring Aryans in many respects. A comparative study between pre-sanskritized Bodo society and present Bodo society shows two distinct features of the same society. So effort has been made to narrate and analyse both traditional and sanskritised form of the Bodo society.

Family Life:

The Bodo society is primarily patriarchal with few elements of matriarchal characteristics³. The family members live together at home called *Nokor* or family. A *Nokor* consists of father, mother, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters etc. Father is the head of the family, who is honoured and obeyed by other members of the family. All the male members of the family enjoy the coparcenaries rights, unless one goes out of family during the life time of his father with the intention of living separately from the bonds of the joint family. The eldest son of the family assumes the charge of the household on the death of the father or in absence of father and discharges his responsibilities in consultation of with his mother. There are both joint and nuclear families among the Bodos. The unmarried brothers get double of the family property than the married brothers. The eldest male member also gets a preferential share in view of his assumption of family liability and other social responsibilities⁴.

The mode of living of the Bodo society is in compact villages and putting barriers all around the homestead is a common sight to see. Rev. S. Endle on this account gives a vivid description, "One prominent feature in the typical Bodo village

can not fail to strike the attention of any casual visitor at first sight. Each house, with its granary and other buildings is surrounded by a ditch and fence; the latter usually made of ekra reeds, jungle grass or split bamboo etc. The ditch, some three and four feet in depth surrounds the whole homestead, the earth taken from its being thrown up on the inner side, i.e., that nearest to the dwelling house; and on the earth works some two or three feet in height, so thrown up are firmly inserted the reeds or split bamboo work forming the fence itself, this later often inclining outwards at a very obtuse angle; so that the ditch and fence are not easily surmounted from the outside by the intruders.”⁵

But due to the changing trends of the Bodo society such typical Bodo *Nokhor* (Family) is very rare at present, except in some interior village. With the conversion into Brahma religion by the Bodos, the use of *Noma No* and its importance has been changed as the follower of this cult neither set alter nor cook foods in the main house. They also do not build main house like traditional *Noma No*, which posses' only one door and a side corridor and a side corridor running into the interior rooms without any window. Rather they build houses for their conveniences like other Indians as there is no rigid rule for constructing houses among the Bodos of Brahma religion. Even at present, the followers of traditional Bathou dharma have extra kitchen house, as they do not prepare food in the main house. Thus with the changing trends of the Bodo society and with the advent of new architecture the construction of typical *Noma No* is gradually disappearing among the Bodo.

Inheritance of Property:

In Bodo traditional custom only sons are entitled to inherit the parental property, as daughters have to leave parents house after getting married. Every son gets equal share of land from their paternal property and one who looks after the

parents till death may get an additional share of land. The daughters, especially if married, can claim nothing. Parents can decide with whom they are going to live in their old age. In absence of son, daughters inherit the property of parents. If the person is childless the property goes to the nearest relatives after the death of both husband and wife. But if they adopt child then he or she can inherit the property. But sometimes, a rich father can give a portion of land to his daughter even in the presence of sons.⁶ According to Endle (1911) the law of inheritance of property were patrilineal. He mentions that the eldest son inherited half of father's property and the rest was distributed among other sons. In any case the daughters are not entitled to the share of property. In absence of a son the eldest brother of the deceased would inherit the property. In such case the inheritor allots a portion of the land to the widow of his brother.

Social Organization:

In the Bodo society, unlike other parts of India the caste system is unknown. Even the high caste Aryans living with Bodo have to become more liberal in their outlook and practice, in their religion. One of the important factors is the presence of vast majority of non-Aryan population who are ignorant of caste system. The Aryan had to give up some of their rigid customs to adjust themselves with the local inhabitants. They have become more liberal in their foods, drink, dress, customs and manners.

The social division among the Bodos in ancient times could be traced according to their occupation. The Bodos are divided into a number of 'sub-tribes' (Endle 1911:24-32) or 'social group' (Brahma 1992:34-35). These groups are exogamous and referred to as 'Ari' or 'Hari'.⁷ There are as many as 23 'Aris' or 'Haris' namely ---*Swargaiari, Basumatary, Mahilari, Mosari, Khaklari, Daimari,*

Narzari, Sibiziari, Ishari, Kachari, Oari, Hojoari, Bibaiari, Borgayari, Ramsiari, Kherketari, Supramhari, Gayari, Supramhari, Fadangari. The clan structures of the Bodos though essentially remind us about their traditional division of class, such divisions are no longer recognised in the present day society. Endle mentions of hierarchy within these groups and one of them called *Swargiari* is referred to as 'heavenly folk' (*swargo*-heaven, *ari*-folk) who are entrusted with the duty of worship; they were said to be top of all groups. As mentioned above there are more than two dozen sub-tribes or social groups in the society. Some of these groups are totemistic in nature such as *Basumatary* (*Basumata*-earth, *ari*-folk) the proprietor of the lands, *Narzary* (jute folk), *Mosahary* (the tiger folk), *Khakiary or Khangkhlo ari* (a certain jungle grass which is used during religious ceremonies and festivals), *Sibing ari* (sesame folk), *Gandled ari* (leach folk), *Daimari* (the river folk or fishermen folk), *Owary* (bamboo folk), *Gayari* (areca nut folk) etc. *Basumatary* the largest sub-tribes in the Bodo community, are also referred to as 'the son of the soil'.⁸ Endle (1911: 24-32) mentions that the members of *Basumatary* clan enjoy privilege at the time of burying their dead bodies. There is a custom in the Bodo society according to which a Bodo has to purchase the land for burial with a token money from the *Basumatary* clan. But the members of *Basumatary* clan do not have to do this. In earlier days the elderly members of this clan received a small amount of money as the revenue of that plot of land where a diseased person was buried or cremated.

Endle said about the traditional religion, "There is no authorised priestly caste among the Kocharis nor are Brahmans ever employed in their religious ceremonies". A village elder, having good knowledge about the religious rites and well versed in religious hymn or mantras, performs the religious ceremonies. The office of the

priesthood is not hereditary either in *Bathou* or *Brahma* religion. Any men living a pious life can become a priest in both the religion.⁹

But at present the Bodo society has become a multi-religious society. There are followers of traditional Bathou cult, the followers of Brahma cult, the followers of Saiva cult of Rupamani and the followers of Satsangha of Sri Sri Anukul Thakur and also believers of Christianity etc. All these religious cults, except that of Anukul Thakur and the Saivism of Rupamani, did not contribute to create hierarchy in the Bodo society. The Bodo priest s of Satsang cult is forming a purified class by giving up meat, fish, onion etc.¹⁰ Priest of high rank like Ritik, Prati-Ritwik observe strict formalities in their dietary habit and behaviours. In the Saivism cult of Rupamani the priestly class like Maha-Richis, Richis and Purahits become purely vegetarian and lead their lives like strict Brahmins and generally they do not take meal prepared by so called impure people. It seems that the Bodo society is leaning towards the formation of new caste system in the days to come.

System of Marriage:

Marriage is the social means to widen and strengthen the network of social relation in the society. It is one of the most important social institutions of all the societies of the world. Marriage is considered as sacred. Like other societies the marriage ceremony is very important ceremony in the life-cycle of the Bodos. In Bodo, 'Marriage' is called '*Haba*'.¹¹ The word '*ha*' means soil or earth and '*ba*' means to bear the soil or the responsibility of the earth on the back.

So far marriage is concerned monogamy is the prevalent system of marriage in the Bodo society. Only with some exceptional cases like when the first wife proves childless, the Bodo custom sanctions taking a second wife mainly with a view to begetting children and thereby handing down the father's name to posterity.

Marriage takes place after both sexes gain full maturity as a result of inclination of the families. The Bodos have very high regard for chastity and they live by it. In the words of Sydney Endle, "The standard of chastity among the Kocharis, both man and women, is by no means a low one. As a rule young people in the villages at least lead pure lives before marriage and faithful to their marriage vows (....)".¹² Adultery is considered as sin and serious offence and people committing adultery are inflicted with severe punishment according to social rules.

Traditionally the Bodos have as many as six types of marriage. These are –

1. *Swngnanwi Lainai Haba* (Arranged marriage):-This type of marriage is the most common socially accepted marriage of the Bodos. This type of marriage is held with mutual consent and agreement of both the parties and it is arranged by the social norms and customs. Therefore normally this type of marriage is celebrated with great solemnity and honour. Till the recent past, decision of parents or guardians was given priority than the choice of the boys and girls who were dependent on their parents.

2. *Gwrja Lakhinai Haba* (Obtaining groom by service):- This type of marriage is rather rare; however it does take place. This type of marriage is celebrated when in a family there are only daughters and there are no sons or male members to inherit the family property. In this type of marriage the bridegroom has to work at the house of bride before marriage. But this type of marriage is rarely seen in the present society.

3. *Kharsonnai Haba* (Girls flee away to boy's house):- This marriage takes place when there is a delay in the arrangement of the marriage or the parents are not happy with the bride. In this uncertain situation after a mutual agreement between the young boy and girl enters into the house of the boy. The consent of the

parents is not taken into consideration. The formal marriage takes place after the bride price is settled. This is an irregular form of marriage.

4. *Bwnanwi Lainai Haba* (Marriage by capture):- In this type of marriage the bride is forcefully taken away from the house of bride to the house of bridegroom and then the marriage takes place. This marriage is called marriage by capture or *Bwnanwi Lainai Haba*. This type of marriage was prevalent in the earlier days. But at present this type of marriage has been completely discarded from the Bodo society.

5. *Dwnkharlangnai Haba* (Elopement marriage):-This type of marriage is not socially recognised and yet it takes place in the Bodo society. The mutual understanding between the bride and bridegroom is enough for this type of marriage. It is also regarded as an irregular marriage by the Bodo society.

6. *Dongkha Habnai Haba* (Co-habitation marriage):- This system of marriage is approved by the Bodo society. If a man comes and live with a widow, and if the society recognises this co-habitation, then the man and woman should regularise the marriage according to the social custom called *Dongkha Habnai*.¹³ This system of marriage is very rare.

Widow Re-marriage:

In the Bodo society re-marriage is socially recognised as regular marriage. A widow can re-marry any person who is not related to her. However, 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 along to her new husband. A widower may remarry his deceased wife's younger sister, but not the elder, whom he is obliged conventionally to guard as mother. Similarly, a widow may re-marry her

deceased husband's younger brother, but she is not allowed to marry the elder brother of her deceased husband.

The Traditional System of Marriage or Hathasuni Khurnai:

The traditional system of marriage of the Bodo is called *Hathasuni Khurnai*. This form of marriage is very simple. In this system both the bride and the groom are seated in front of Bathou, the alter of Siva in the courtyard, and a Douri (priest) recites mantra invoking Siva and other deities and declares that the bride and bridegroom have been wedded to each other and from that day they are entitled to co-habit as husband and wife. As a ritual, the bride cooks rice and curry prepared with rice powder and chicken without applying spice or turmeric, which is called *Ondlakhari*. The bride offer a little portion of the meal to the household god and goddess of Ishing (the innermost room of the main house, *nomano*) on banana leaves and the Douri recites mantras introducing the bride to gods and goddesses. Then they pray to god Bathou Bwrai to grant them a peaceful conjugal life. The bride promises to lead a happy conjugal life by touching the rice kept in earthen container. Then the bride serves a little portion of rice and curry to the bridegroom and the villagers present. Then the Douri and village elders give advice to the new couple about the duties and responsibilities towards the family and society. Then the main function of the marriage or *Hathasuni Khurnai* comes to an end. The marriage function is followed by a grand feast, which was continued for seven days in earlier days. During those days rice-beer and pork are the most important items of the feast and they were supplied in abundance. During the feast, man and women, both young and old, enjoyed together by dancing, singing and playing traditional musical instruments in the marriage. The villagers irrespective of sex and age enjoyed by singing, dancing and playing traditional musical instruments in the marriage.¹⁴

Marriage according to the Brahma Dharma:

Since the first decade of 20th century thousands of Bodos embraced Brahma Dharma under the guidance of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma; consequently the new system of marriage came into existence in the society. The new religion has not only brought a great change in the pre and post marriage ceremony but it has also refined the old customs to suit the new religion. The use of rice-beer and pork on the day of wedding was totally discouraged and now the use of liquor has been replaced by tea. Tea becomes one of the most important items to entertain guests in the wedding ceremony, nowadays.

Unlike the traditional marriage there is no prevalence of dancing or singing in the Brahma marriage. Modern ban party has taken the place of traditional music.¹⁵ The bridegroom party is given a ceremonial welcome at the gate of the house along with the music of the ban party. The bridegroom stands on the *Gambari Khamplai* (a low sitting tool made of wooden plank of gambari wood) and the younger sister or cousin of the bride washes his feet and puts perfumed oil and cosmetics on bridegroom's hair and face and combs his hair. The bride groom, in return gives a small present to his new sister-in-law as a token of love.

The main function of the marriage is performed at night. In accordance with the Hindu calendar a *Subha logno* (sacred time) is fixed for the performance of *Yajnahuti* or *Ahuti*. The bride and bridegroom are taken from the main house to the Mandap (the place of yajna) by cheering and playing band. The main function of the wedding starts with the *Purohit* (priest) chanting *Gayatri Mantra*, facing eastward in front of the fire of the yajna; the mantra is followed by the father of the bride, the bridegroom and the bride.

Keeping the fire as witness, the father of the bride makes 'Ashirbad' (Sanskrit, asirvada i.e., blessing) on his daughter and bridegroom. And they pray for the blessing of god for the new couple.¹⁶ The relatives and friends of both the bride and bride groom 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. After *ashirbad* function is over, the purohit concludes the main function of the marriage with a few slogans in the name of Brahma invoking blessings to the newly married couple.

The follower of Brahma dharma introduced a new system of marriage in the Bodo society. At present this system of marriage is not confined only to the followers of Brahma Dharma but even the followers of the traditional Bathou dharma and other Hindu cult of Bodo perform yajnahuti in the matter of wedding.

Bride-Price and Dowry:

The system of realisation of bride price has been customarily followed in the Bodo society. It is called *Phon taka* (bride price) in Bodo language. Demand of phon taka (bride price) was compulsory tradition of the society. But in the present days bride price has almost disappeared; it is now practiced as ritual. In the prevailing customs, the father of the bride offers a nominal price of a pair of areca nuts, betel leaves and a pair of one rupee coins on a banana leaf to bride's father. The father of the bride accept the areca nuts, betel leaves only and returns the coins.¹⁷

Malsa:

There is another system of collecting *Malsa* from the parents of the bridegroom. The rates of *Malsa* differ from place to place.¹⁸ In some villages *Malsa* is realized to the tune of Rs.2.50 (Rupees two and fifty paise) and in some villages it is realized at 5.00 (Rupees five).

Kholar Gothainai:

In Bodo marriage custom, if the husband expires suddenly after the marriage, the bride returns to her parents and the amount of 'Malsa'(bride price) is given back to the parents of the deceased husband by the parents of bride. This act of returning of the bride and 'Malsa' is known as '*Kholar Gothainai*'.¹⁹

Mamai mara:

If the bride groom or the parents of the bridegroom had not paid the phon taka (bride price) at the time of marriage and if the bride had expired leaving female child behind, the phon taka or the bride price of the female would go to her uncle at the time of her marriage.²⁰ This system is known as *Mamai mara*.

Athmongal:

On the eight day from the day of marriage, the bride and bridegroom come to bride's house for the post marriage ceremony known as '*Athmongal*'. In the traditional society the bridegroom brings cocks, goat or pig in honour of his father-in-law's family and relatives. *Athmongal* is a very brief ceremony and limited feast is arranged on the occasion. Only a few selected friends and relatives are invited to the ceremony. After the ceremony the bride and bridegroom return home 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. The bride also takes away all her belongings from her parents' house.

Divorce:

In the Bodo society divorce is allowed. But there must be valid ground to satisfy the society for divorce. As per Bodo society is concerned divorce or separation is very rare. If both husband and wife desire to get divorce, they have to appear before the '*Bodo Samaj*' or *village headman* for their settlement. If both the couple desires to separate each other, then it is performed by tearing a betel leaf. This is called *Pathoi-lai bisinai*. The betel-leaf is kept in the presence of the village elders in the house of the 'Gaoburah' (village head man) and then betel-leaf is torn into two pieces. By this act the marriage bond of the couple comes to an end. Thus the couple can part from each other peacefully. It is a symbolic act which indicates that the torn leaf can never reunite, so their married life is severed for ever. But if the husband divorces his wife without valid ground, the husband has to bear the responsibility of her livelihood for a certain period of time and he must also pay certain amount of fine for his freedom to the divorced woman and the village committee. On the other hand, if divorce occurs due to unfaithfulness of the wife, the husband is entitled to recover the amount of money he spent for the marriage from the parents of the bride. When the amount is paid to the man, the woman is at liberty to live with a new husband.²¹

Female Chastity in the Bodo Society:

Pre-marital relationship is strictly prohibited in the Bodo society; female chastity is considered to be the major qualification for marriage. If one does indulge in pre-marital sex, she is subjected to physical punishment at the time of trial in the

village court. Then she is required to undergo ritual purification along with religious function. As such the young people of the society lead pure lives before marriage.

Food:

Rice is the main food stock of the Bodo along with the curry prepared with variety of vegetables, meat or fish. They are very fond of meat like pork, chicken, mutton, fish, and also meat of duck, pigeon which are domesticated by the women. Besides they also go for hunting animals, like deer, hare, wild buffalo, mongoose, tortoise, etc. They like all kinds of vegetables either sour or bitter available at home and in jungles. But they do not eat beef. Eating beef is considered as sin and a crime to Bodo society. The Bodos preserve dry meat and dry fish for future use; they are very favourite diet for them. They also know the art of preserving dry fish inside bamboo pipe by plastering the mouth of Bamboo pipe with mud. This food is called *nafam* that can be preserve for long time. The Bodo also use *Khardo* or *Kharoi* (alkali) in different curries to make it more tasty.

With changing trends of the society, the Bodo have modified their food habit and menu of diet. Many of the animal meats have now been abandoned. These days they like to drink milk, eat curd, butter, ghee, sweets etc. though these items were not prepared by common Bodo folks in the past. Edward Gait mentioned, "It is not their custom to eat ghee; even any food article flavour of ghee they will not eat it."²²

On special occasions they prepare some special items of food from different varieties of rice and takes as breakfast or tiffin. These are pitha (cake made of powdered rice with some ingredients like sugar, coconut, lit, till etc., *maibra sithao* (pan cake made of sticky rice powder and other ingredients), *chaurai* (flattened rice), *akai* (parched paddy free from husk), coconut *laru* etc. But this days they also

prepare *puri, luci, pokora, samosa*, etc. Bodo are fond of chewing areca nut and betel leaf with lime.²³

Drinks:

The Bodo have the habit of drinking liquor (*jou*), as it is a compulsory drink in the traditional social gathering or religious function. They are expert in preparing wine or beer from rice. They use two types of liquor viz., *jou bidoi* (rice beer), *jou gwran* (distilled liquor). The *jou bidoi* though intoxicating, is nutritious too.²⁴ The drink rice-beer after whole day hard work or after working in scorching sun. The rice-beer is consumed by man, woman and children, in the traditional society but they hardly get drunk. According to Hodgson (1850:150), "I see no reason to brand them with name of drunkards, though they certainly merry a cup in honour of the gods at the high festive of their religion. Among my servants, the Bodos have never been seen drunk, but the Muslim and Hindus drink excessively."

But after the conversion of Brahma Dharma, Satsang, Saivism etc. use of liquor has totally been wiped out in any social or religious functions. Instead of *jou* nowadays tea has become very popular among the Bodos. All sections of people in present Bodo society have adopted taking tea regularly and they entertain their visitors, friends and guests with a cup of tea. The tea has taken place of liquor on many occasions like community work, social gathering etc.

Dress and Ornament:

The spinning and weaving is an indispensable part of every Bodo family till today. The Bodo women wear their traditional dress *dokhana*, a home loom product woven by women themselves. The size of *dokhana* is about ten feet long and four and half feet wide. They wrap *dokhana* around their breast down to ankles and tighten knots one above the bosom and other in the waistline. The *dokhana* has

borders on both sides and it is designed with geometrical or floral or sometimes stripes running along its entire length. To cover the exposed portions of body they use smaller pieces of cloth known as *sadwr*. *Sadwr* is also hand-woven fabric in a variety of colours with geometrical and floral designs. The length and breadth of the fabric is two metres by a half metre. The use of blouse and petticoat was not known in ancient times.

The Bodo man wears hand-woven fabric called *gamsa*, by which they cover themselves from the waist down to the knees. They also use shirts, known as *gosla*. But the use of turban or phalli *khaokhanai* was not common to all. Bodo people wrap *eri* or *endi* shawl during the winter season to protect themselves from cold. In the olden days the Bodos used a kind of foot-war made of wood with jute lace known as *kurwm* or *poitha*.²⁵

But now with the development of modern industries different varieties of machines made dresses have become plenty in the market, they can be obtained without pain and at a cheap rate in no time. As such even the villagers now wear machine product shirts, pants, trousers, dhoti etc. The well-to-do or educated families wear western as well as Indian dresses like long pants, coat, suit, necktie, jeans, shoes or dhoti, Panjabi shirt etc.

The Bodo women of BTC area wear exclusively *dokhana*, though *mekhala* is also worn in other parts of Assam and outside. Nowadays they wear skirts, *shalwar kamis* and sometimes modern saris and jeans while they are on outings. The women mainly use the ornaments of gold and silver. They are very fond of ornaments like bracelets, necklace, earring, fingerings, etc. Though the nose ring was worn by Bodo women, they have almost given up the use of it. The ornaments have occupied a very important place in Bodo society. In the time of crisis they take loans from

mahajhans keeping the ornaments as security bond. Failure to give ornaments to a new bride in the marriage is looked as a sign of extreme poverty by the Bodos.²⁶ Thus ornaments are considered not only luxurious article for Bodo women, but also as a helper in the days of crisis or need.

Economic Organization:

Pemberton has written about the trade between Bhutan and Assam. The exports items from Assam were rice, lace, madder, silk, endi, dried fish, etc. In lieu of them they imported goods like woollen cloths, gold, dust, salt, horses, cowries, Chinese silk, etc. He further writes that the trade suffered severely after the Burmese occupation of Assam in the 18th century.²⁷ Nag (1987) mentions that the Ahom kings from 16th to 17th centuries organised a state militia comprising of the male population of the state who were about 16th years old. These people were attached to the works of the kings and serve the state. This militia was employed to carry out public work other than construction of roads, tanks, embankments, bridges and canals. They were also employed to reclaim cultivation land from forests and swamps. And irrigation network was also constructed with the help of this militia. Hundreds of river embankments crossed by highly raised pathways or walls and join by embankments graduating down to the end of connecting villages and fields formed a network that helped to keep out the water due to annual floods.²⁸ Each of the militia was known as *paik* and a unit of four *paiks* was called *got*. Each *paik* and *got* was assigned the duty to cultivate lands of three *paiks* of his own got when other three were supposed to render their services to the king. These *paiks* were assigned duties in rotation. In times of emergency they had to participate in the wars as soldiers.²⁹ Assam was never an isolated place. The travelogue *Tabkat-I-Nasiri* quoted by Sen. (1987: 157-159) refers to the routes that connected Assam with the

other regions of India. Ramkumar Vidyaratna (1885), a religious preacher of Sadharan Brahma Samaj, wrote a travelogue on Assam. All the area situated on the bank of the Brahmaputra River was travelled by him. This travelogue gives an idea of the people of Assam and their culture during the 19th century. A special mention is made here of the women.³⁰ They described as hard working and taking part in agricultural activities. Weaving is mentioned as women's occupation.

The Bodos are now found settled on the vast alluvial plains of the northern bank of river Brahmaputra. This community was, however, famous for its migratory habits. Since rice is the primary cultivation of the Bodos, they mostly prepared alluvial land called, *Hama ha*. For the establishment of village and homestead they select high land, where there are grazing field, river, lake for fishing, jungle and forest for hunting and fire wood.

There has been a striking change in the economy of the Bodos from the ancient time to the present. The change in the economic system has also contributed towards the development of present Bodo society and it has also helped to change the outlook of the Bodo people. Fertility of the land and monsoon rain made this region suitable for easy cultivation of various crops and vegetation. They mainly depend on the paddy cultivation. But they also cultivate cash crops such as mustard seed, tobacco, jute, varieties of pulse and vegetables like potato, cabbage, cauliflower, radish, carrot, cucumber, gourd, green leaves etc. These are cultivated partly for consumption and partly for selling in the market. They also cultivate varieties of spices, chilli, onion, garlic, coriander, ginger etc.

For paddy cultivation, they mainly depend on monsoon rain. They also construct artificial irrigation system to supply water in paddy field by erecting dam in the stream and by digging canal. Sarbeswar Rajguru quoted from W. Rabinson (A

descriptive Account of Assam: 1841), "The Kacharis along the northern frontier....about the Bhutan Dowers exhibit on exception to the general neglect of irrigation. They have the habit of extensively irrigating their rice from the small streams which intersect these districts."³¹

The Bodos have a clear idea about the different types of land for the production of various crops. *Jampwi daria ha* or irrigated land where paddy is cultivated is the costliest land today. There are three seasons for paddy cultivation.³² These are *Maisali* (winter season), *Bawa* (rainy season) and *Ashu* (just after rainy season). The *Maisali* paddy seedlings are transplanted on low lands. *Bawa* species are broad casted on marshy land. The latter species has tall stems and grows in deep water. *Ashu* cultivation is done on highlands.

They also produce jute, mustard seeds and various kinds of pulses. Each family grow fruits trees on homestead lands. Jackfruit trees, areca nut trees and betel leaves are also common.³³ A cow shed near home is a symbol of prosperity. Everybody tries to keep cows and bullocks at home. Bullocks are used for ploughing. Domestic animals like goat, pig and birds like hen and duck are also found.

Spinning and Weaving: - The rearing of *eri* and *muga* is another tradition of economic activity which were solely taken care by the Bodo women. The Bodos produced *muga* and *eri* clothes for their own use as well as for business purpose. But nowadays they have almost given up rearing *muga* or silk worms, as it is more laborious than the market price. At present they only produce *eri* clothes, which can be reared indoor.³⁴ One of the presents, the Kusuma Vastra sent by Bhaskar Varman to Harsha Vardhan as mentioned in Harsha Charitra is believed to be *eri* silk of Assam, whose colour is described as white with yellow tinge.

Spinning and weaving are women's activity among the Bodos. Weaving is compulsory for young Bodo girls. Endle remarked, "...a Kochari women if not greatly or frequently interrupted in her work can weave half a yard each day."³⁵ They learn the techniques of weaving early in life. Traditionally they wove all the clothes required for a family like- *dokhana*, *aronai*, *gamocho*, *sadwr*, bed cover, etc. by themselves. Apart from that they also wove cloths for marriage. A Bodo woman who does not know the art of spinning and weaving is regarded as *aouluri* (good for nothing) and neglected by the society. The Bodo women weave on the frame loom and produce their own requirement of fabrics in their spare of time. These hand woven fabrics are used by women, men and children on religious occasion or festivals, at the funeral for covering death body and also as bed sheet, furniture cover etc. They can depict different floral and geometrical designs on the fabrics.

Nowadays the government has various schemes to provide free grants to tribal weaver in cash or kinds, to open weaving centre or industry, through the Tribal Development Corporation, District Rural Development Agency, Bank, etc. Taking such assistance from the government some Bodo women have opened weaving industry in various places of the district and supplied their products to the market. Thus quite some Bodo women have become economically independent in the present Bodo society.

Fishing is also another important activity of the Bodo women. During the rainy season they go for fishing regularly. They catch fish with the help of *Jekai* (conical shaped artefact made of split bamboo) and keep the fish in the *Kobai* (pot made of spilt bamboo). These instruments of fishing are very handy. *Jekai* is a bamboo pot which is hung on their waist during fishing. This is a very favourite sport of the Bodo women. Now a days husking mills have been established in rural areas, which are of

great relief to the Bodo Women. Husking mills saves the time and labour of young women. They have got more time in hand for study than before.

Medium of Exchange:

Till the recent times barter system was prevalent among the Bodos. In the earlier times the business transaction and the value of the things were measured by the barter system.³⁶ The Bodos use paddy as a medium of exchange, as it is valuable and essential article for all families. Though money has taken its place, even today in Bodo villages, wages of agricultural labourers, *dahwna* (male worker) and *ruwati* (female worker) are paid in terms of paddy. As stated in the *pandulipi* (social laws) of the Bodo society, the wages of the agricultural labours are as follows:-

1. Dahwna (male labour):-is paid ten *monds* of paddy during the season of cultivation and seven and a half *monds* at the time of harvesting.
2. Ruwati (female labour) is paid seven and a half *monds* of paddy during the month of cultivation and six *monds* for the months from Aswin (September)to chaitra (March/April).

The urban people, whose occupation is non-agriculturist, pay the wages of servants in cash but the exact value of the paddy because contract is made in terms of paddy. Some elements of barter system still exist in some backward villages but it is very rare. In the traditional Bodo religion rice is considered as a form of *Lakhi* or *Mainao* (goddess of wealth), so the Bodos honour and accept it without hesitation.³⁷ But today, all societies are interdependent to each other in many affairs including economic activities for which barter system becomes convenient to be the medium of exchange and it is gradually disappearing from the Bodo society.

Religion, Fairs and Festivals:

The Bodos constitute an important element of the population of Assam and are known for their enchanting cultural peculiarities. They have their own language and literature; their own songs and dances; their own religious beliefs; their own customs and traditions and they have their own fairs and festivals.

Fairs and festivals are the essential aspects of the cultural life of the people and as a matter of fact these are the true mirror of the peoples' cultures. Peoples' cultures manifested in traditional fairs and festivals have socio-economic-religious bases and are interwoven-one cannot be separated from the other. The traditional Bodo culture is no exception and has undergone the process of evolution and growth. In Bodo fairs and festivals the following characteristics are predominantly noted. First, they are socio-religious in nature and content. There are no festivals which are exclusively called social or religious. Some festivals are predominantly social in their content, but their celebrations are performed under the umbrella of religious rites and practices. Similarly, there are fairs and festivals which are apparently religious in their content and purpose, yet, these are not entirely free from social elements including laws and customs. Secondly, most of the Bodo fairs and festivals have economic roots. Suffice to say that since agriculture is the mainstay of the people, the festivals celebrated by them are naturally closely connected with their occupation. Such festivals are celebrated on a larger scale for thanking the gods and goddesses for their providence and for saying a prayer for a bumper crop. Throughout the year, people celebrate one festival or other. Some of the important festivals are discussed below.

Religion in the present context has emerged as one of the most important catalysts of transformation in the Bodo community. The influence of the new religion

called Brahma dharma is deep in the society. The followers of this religion are reformists and have brought significant cultural change in the society. Traditionally the Bodo worshiped the *Sijou* plant (*Euphorbia*) which is considered as the image of their supreme deity *Bathau Bwrai*. The British missionaries described the traditional Bodo religion as 'animistic' religion. Christianity was introduced to this community only in the beginning of this century.

In the traditional religion, *Bathau Bwrai* is the chief of their gods. He is also known as *Khuria Bwrai* which means the old man (Moshahary 1993:1-6).³⁸ *Ba* means five and *thou* means deep. Hence '*Bathou*' means 'the five deep spiritual entities. 'Five' is considered as the special numerical in the traditional Bodo religion. In this regard a Bodo verse is like this:

“Thaigirni bikhonga khongba,
Sijouni siria siriba,
Siphungni gudunga dungba,
Bathouni bandua banduba,
Boro bwrai raoa phongba” (Brahma 1983: 35).³⁹

In translation, *Owi fruit* (*Dillenia indica*) has five rinds, the *Sijou* tree (*Euphorbia Splenden*) has five ridges, the *Siphung* (the long bamboo flute of the Bodos has five holes, the *Bathou* has five knots (of bamboo strips) and the *Boro Borai* (the Bodo elder) has five moral preaching. Again, the Bodos have five principles on which their social customs are based. These are 1. *Agarbad*, 2. *Phongslodbad*, 3. *Daokibad*, 4. *Khoulwbwdbad* and 5. *Khaoalibad*.

It is said that in ancient times the Bodos had five main gods, viz, 1. *Ailong* (the god of earth), 2. *Agrang* (the god of water), 3. *Khoila* (the god of air), 4. *Sanja Borli* (the goddess of light) and 5. *Rajkhungri* (the goddess of sky). (Brahma 1983: 35-

36).⁴⁰ Thus the *Bathou* religion and its philosophy are based on five principles, which upheld the whole fabrics, social customs, economic institution, beliefs and rites of the Bodo society.

Kherai Festival:

Kherai puja is believed to be the greatest religious festival of the Bodo. It is a symbol of hope and desire, that has been prevailing among them since time immemorial. The main purpose of the *Kherai puja* is welfare of both private and public lives. For the welfare of the private life, they performed *Kherai puja* individually. On the other hand, 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 performed *Kherai puja* and propitiate different gods and goddesses for the success in cultivation.

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 Tripurians and the *Kherai Puja* of the Bodo. Brahma (1989:62-74) has given a detailed description of the *Kherai* ritual according to which the goddess of wealth (Lokhi) is worshipped in this ritual. Along with the goddess other gods are also worshipped in this ritual. They perform this puja on some specific occasions.⁴¹ The *Kherai puja* is of four types, 1. *Darshan Kherai*, 2. *Umrao Kherai*, 3. *Phalo Kherai* and 4. *Noaouni Kherai (domestic Kherai)*

The *Darshan Kherai* is performed during the first week of the month of '*Kati*' or '*Kartik*'. The *kherai Puja* is meant for *Mainao* who is identified with '*Laksmi*', the

goddess of wealth and welfare. It is also called as '*Lokhi Kherai*'. *Umrao Kherai* is held during the month of '*Ashara*' at the end of the '*Amti Sua*' (unclean period) for the welfare of the villagers as well as of the crops. This puja is also known as the *Ashu Kherai*, being connected with the *asu* or a summer-season crop. *Phalo Kherai* is performed specially on the day of '*Maghi Purnima*' or the full moon of the month of '*Magha*'. This Kherai also known as *danswrang Kherai* as it is performed during the full moon of the month. The *Noaouni Kherai* (domestic or family Kherai) is performed by the family when it is deemed necessary. There is no fixed time for this *Kherai*. The Bodo family that believes in the traditional practices depends on the '*Kherai puja*' or '*Garja puja*' for their welfare at all times. So whenever they face any trouble they perform the *Kherai puja* for the welfare of their own family.⁵⁰

The *Kherai* ritual is also performed by the whole community. Among other things some particular species of bamboo, herb and leaves are needed. All the musical instruments which are commonly used by them are also needed. *Kherai puja* involves many persons for its arrangement but for the worship only three persons are necessary.⁴² They are *Doudini* (the main worshiper of the *Kherai* and she must be a lady), *Oja* or the instructor of the worshippers and one helper (*githal*). At the end of the worship she tells the future of the villagers, their probable success and failure in cultivation and about their fortunes or misfortunes.

Garja Festival:

The *Garja puja* or '*Garja Modai Hwnai*' as termed by the Bodos is another important traditional socio-religious festival of the people and is celebrated outdoor at the place permanently earmarked for the purpose. They perform *Garja puja* on many occasions. Usually this ritual is performed to protect the village from epidemics. If any person does any sinful act this ritual is performed to purify him or her. There are

many *Garja* gods and goddesses who are regularly propitiated by the Bodos.⁴³ Brahma (1989:76) mentions the names of fifteen such deities who are worshipped in *Garja ritual*. He also mentions the names of a few non-Bodo *Garja* gods who are worshipped along with the Bodo gods and goddesses during *Garja puja*. These are *Mahadeo, Sila Rai, Rupa Rai, Ai Kali, Maya Kali* etc. The river god and goddesses are also addressed. There are about hundreds of gods and goddess who are worshipped during *Kherai* and *Garja puja*.

Bwisagu:

The most important occasion of marry-making in the social life of the Bodo community is the celebration of '*Bwisagu*' in the month of *Baisakh* (Mid April). It is also known as '*Bihu*' in Assamese. This occasion is welcomed by each and every Bodo community as it is a spring time festival of the New Year.

'*Bwisagu*', a corruption of two formations "*Bwswrni Agu*" meaning "beginning of the year" or New Year is a great social festival and celebrated in the month of *Baisakh* (mid April) for seven days beginning from the day of *sanskranti* of Chaitra (last day of Chaitra which is also the last day of the passing year). According to Sydney Endle, "Among the Darang Kacharis (Bodo of Darrang district), this festivals lasts for seven days during which little or no work is done, the whole period being given up to merry-making, dancing, feasting etc. As is practiced 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 (Jou), tomatoes and turmeric etc. The horns are smeared with 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 etc."⁴⁴

The day ends with the ceremonial eating of chicken /fork meat cooked with bitter and sour leaves in the evening. This is called '*Gwka-Gwkwi Janai*'. The term '*Gwka-Gwkwi Janai*' is very often used as a phrase to convey the sense of severances of all connection or relationship with someone due to bad blood or misunderstanding. Keeping this meaning of the term in view, the Bodos eat bitter and sour leaves on the last day of the passing year to symbolise ones severance of all connecting with the passing year in a jolly mood of welcoming the New Year. The first day of the New Year is the second Bihu day which is set aside for the worship of Bathou in individual houses or jointly at the *Bathou Tansali* (permanent place of worship) of the villagers. At the dawn of the New Year, members of the family take ritual baths and propitiate '*Bathou*' and the spirits of ancestors with scarifies. In earlier days the rest of the days of Bwisagu were set aside for specific purposes. For instance, the third day of Bwisagu was set apart for feeding the dogs, the fourth day the swine, the fifth day the fowls and the sixth day the ducks and other birds. The seventh day is the last day of Bwisagu and is set aside for visiting and receiving the relatives and friends, exchanging gifts with the beloved ones, seeking apologies from the elders for acts of omission and commission during the year.

The Brahma dharma followers pray to god on the first day of *Bahag* or *Bwisakh* by performing *Ahuti* jointly in their village. Before *Ahuti* none is allowed to take jou or rice-beer. After *Ahuti* the villagers sit together and discuss the affairs of the village under the presidentship of *Gaoburah* or village headman. They also discuss the matter about 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 one house to another in the village. It has been observed that some sections of Brahma dharma

followers have given up the habit of taking rice beer on the occasion of the Bwisagu festival as well as on other occasions. 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.⁴⁵ The begging of alms is called by the Bodos as *Mairong maginai*.

Domachi:

Domachi is a post harvest festival corresponding to the Assamese Magh Bihu and is celebrated in the month of *Magh* (January-February). 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 tress of the house. The Bodos believe that the fruits bearing trees would bear more fruits if the trees are tied with cords of straw during *Domachi*.

Along with *pithas* (cake made of powder rice putting some ingredients like sugar, coconut, lit, sesame etc.) of different types the women fry different pulses like - Sobai, Sibing, pulses, *maibra sithao*, *chaura*, *akai*, coconut *laru*, etc. eat them and splash them at the cowshed. The elderly persons of the village traditionally sacrifice fowls to *Bathou Bwrai* and worship him. The followers of Brahma dharma arrange Ahuti on the day of full moon of *Magh month* or *Maghi Purnima* for the welfare of the villagers in general.

The Bodo Women:

According to Mohini Mahan Brahma, there were two Bodo women queens named Wairangma and Wairanguri of Hidimbapur who fought against the Ahom soldiers and were slain in the battle. These two women are referred to as Ranchandi

in the Bodo legends. Mention is also made of some other women like Sundari and Bhanumati who accompanied their husbands to war.⁴⁶

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 daughter to 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 inheritors of the parents' property. Hence sons are more desirable to the Bodo parents than daughters.

The Bodo women have various restrictions during pregnancy. Pregnancy is detected when the menstruation discontinues. An expectant mother discloses this fact before her mother-in-law or any female members of the family. It is observed that every mother-in-law of married women is anxious about the information of the first pregnancy of her daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law naturally becomes happy of her daughter-in-law. There are special rites or ceremonies connected with pregnancy in the Bodo society.⁴⁷ A pregnant woman has to be very careful during the whole period till the birth of the child. Restrictions are imposed on some foods as well as on physical movement. They can not go to the forest and cremation ground or to visit or touch any dead body.

At the time of child birth the Bodos of the rural areas follow certain old and traditional customs. Since time immemorial the Bodo women have co-operated one another at the time of child birth. The elderly women of the village perform the duties of midwife. *Brahma (1992: 66-67)* mentions that cutting of umbilical cord is followed by a ritual. A little while after the child is born the umbilical cord is cut with a sharp-edged slip of green bamboo skin placing the cord, a cotton or silk thread is tied

around it. If the baby is a boy the thread is tied five times and if female it is tied seven times. The cord is cut by such women whose hands are considered as 'bitter', so that the cut wound will dry soon. They believe that if the cord is cut by a widow the new born may be short lived. The new born baby and mother are given a hot bath soon after delivery. Then the baby is sprinkled with holy water and while sprinkling holy water the woman who performs this rite utters:-

“Oi gotho! Nwngba gwdw mamwn, Bangal na Jungal, Garo na Gangar, Harsa na Nephal mwn, Dinwinifrai Boro jabai.”

English rendering: - “Whoever you were, whether you were a Muslim, a Garo, a Bhutia or Non-Bodo or a Nepali, you have become a Bodo from today.”⁴⁸

The Bodos believe that the usual food is harmful to the mother as well as to the new-born baby. Therefore dry food is given to the mother for a few days. He or she is given name just after the birth. The feeding ceremony is observed in the fifth month. Hair cutting ceremony and ceremony of ear perforation for girls are observed after one year. At the time of feeding rice to the child for the first time at the age of five and seven months the Bodos follow some customary procedures. The followers of Brahma dharma feed the child after performance of a Yagyahuti. They pray to god through *Yagyahuti* 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.⁶³

In the beginning of this century marriage by elopement was common and known as Dwnkharlangnai Haba (Brahma 1992:77). This type of marriage was criticised by the educated Bodo in the beginning of this century. Early marriage was also received criticism because it was considered as an impediment to boy's education and progress. Marriage by negotiation is the standard practice. In negotiated marriage selection of the bride depends not only on the beauty but also

other factors. One such factor is the physique. The girl with large hip, breast and waist is considered as fickle-minded. The girl who makes noise while walking is considered as hot-tempered. The girl with pointed nose, bright eyes, small teeth, well shaped fingers, bright face and dark thick hair is considered as most desirable as bride (ibid., 1992:80-82).⁴⁹ The other qualities considered desirable in an ideal bride is expertise in husking weaving, cooking, etc.

In an arranged marriage the villagers take all sorts of responsibilities. They prepare rice beer, supply vegetables and take part in various activities. It is also customary that all villagers are invited to a marriage. The village women assist the bride's mother to clean the house, husk rice and pound pulses, cut vegetables, cook and serve food to the guests.

In the Bodo society separation takes place mainly for the following reasons. Extra marital affairs are one of the most important causes of divorce. To be most specific when a woman is involved in such an affair, it leads to separation, but when a male is involved it leads to the second or third marriage. This is because polygamy is socially sanctioned but it is very rare in the society. But the members of present generation, especially the women have started protesting against polygamy.

The festivals and ceremonies of the Bodo community are full of music and dance. In any performance, the traditional instruments like *Khum* (elongated drum), *Sifung* (flute with five holes), *Jotha* (cymbal), *Sherja* (violin of four strings) and *Gongona* (Jew's harp) are used. The Bodo music is classified into three sections. These are instrumental, vocal and dance. Most of their dances are group performances and performed by women in open space. Among them *Bagurumba* is one of the most popular, beautiful and attractive dances of Bodo women. *Bagurumba* dance is performed in all the festivals, meetings, Conferences, ceremonies as well

as to welcome the VIPs and guests to honour in any programme and function. It is said that their dances originated from *Kherai* festival.

Bodo Women have varieties of dances like *Bardwisikhla mwsanai*, *Haba janai mwsanai*, *Mwsaglangnai*, *Nagurnai mwsanai*, *Kherai mwsanai*, *Bwisagu mwsanai*, *Bagurumba mwsanai*, *Tungri sibnai mwsanai*, *Daothwi lwngnai mwsanait*, etc. Different types of dances and participation of women in those performances reveal that singing, dancing and making different motifs, while weaving, are part of their life. They are very fond of weaving and embroidery. If a group of young girls assemble somewhere and gossip, it is sure at least once they discuss about new motifs and designs of weaving. They use bright colours like yellow, green and red in different shades. They usually keep their houses clean and like to keep their furniture, artefacts and other things in order.⁵⁰

Besides that, they participate in modern cultural activities as well. Deben Kochari⁶⁸ writes that earlier the Bodo songs and dances were performed only during religious festivals. But in 1950s the Bodo of north and south Goalpara started doing group performances on the stage.⁵¹ The first women singer on the stage was *Narmeswari Basumatary* who presented a Bodo song at the conference of '*Boro dol*' in 1891 at Goalpara. Even during the Bodoland movement a number of ABSU and AAWWF members composed varieties of songs which are very popular. Besides, after the attainment of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BTC) beauty contest as well as Fashion show for the Bodo girls was organised in urban and rural areas in BTC.

Social customs of the Bodo relating to death:

Immediately after death, the dead body is washed with water and a new cloth *gamcha* is tied on the body. The hair is combed after applying oil. In case of female a new *dokhna* (a female dress) is tied on the body. Then the dead body is taken out

from the house and kept in the middle of the courtyard. The place where the dead body is to be kept is cleaned with cow dung mixed with water. A fowl or a pigeon/chicken is killed and from its flesh a curry is prepared with vegetables and condiments. The near and dear ones offer foods to the dead person with water before taking the dead body to the cremation ground. Then the dead body is covered with a new white cloth. Generally the dead body is carried by the sons and relatives. Then the funeral procession of the dead body takes place heading towards the cremation ground. At least one member of the family of the village is bound to go to the cremation ground with the dead body. The women and children are not allowed to participate in the procession.

The Bodos follow both the burial and cremation systems 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 keeping the head to the south. A few coins and cowries shells are also buried along with the dead body. It is belief that the soul of the dead may be required to cross a river by boat by paying the fare to the boat men 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 little rice also cooked on the spot of cremation and is left for the dead. It is belief that the soul of the dead may start its journey after taking the rice.⁵²

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 banyan tree (*Pakribilai*) and utter like this: "No lwngdw amwkha, dinwinifrai nwnng ba nwnng, jwnngba jwnng". Its meaning is this "O, you take this water, from today you will remain as yourself and we shall remain

as ourselves.” After offering water a piece of red thread is placed on the lips. The Bodo believed 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.

While the dead body to be burnt in the pyre is arranged as per the dead person. There is 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 move round the funeral pile in procession, for men five times and for women seven times after which the torch is applied to the pyre. A pair of chickens is taken to the cremation ground and one is burnt along with the dead body and the other is left free. 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 chews a little quantity of rice and dry leaves of jute plant (*narji gwan*). This indicates that the relationship with the deceased is totally cut off. Holy water is sprinkled upon them for purification before entering their respective house. Finally all the members of the funeral party sit together in the deceased's house and take *jou* or rice beer.⁵³

Daha Garnai: - One day ahead of the *Saradu* (Shraddha) ceremony, a pre-*saradu* ceremony is performed by the Bodos. This ceremony is called *Daha Garnai*, which means to give up grief or sorrow.

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

Saradu (Shraddha) ceremony:

On the eleventh or thirteenth day from the day of the death of a person the *Saradu* or *Shraddha* ceremony is held. The followers of the traditional believers perform the *Saradu* ceremony with prayer before the alter of Bathou and then the villagers and relatives of the dead person are entertained with jou or rice beer which is procured in abundance. At the end of the entertainment of all present at the ceremony a custom of giving alms in the form of coins is followed. The coins is mixed with uncooked rice and these are thrown in the air about a large gathering of the children. This ceremony is called *Dan sarnai*. Sometimes a bullock is set free in the name of the dead person and this is called in *Bodo* as *Mwsou saran hagarnai*. 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. It is called in *Bodo* *Sua Garnai*, which means removing of impurity. The 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 essentially very important as per the *Saradu* ceremony is concerned and none can avoid this traditional custom.

The followers of the *Brahma dharma* perform *Yagya*(*Ahuti*) during the *Saradu* or *Shraddha* 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 jou or rice beer is sometimes observed among the followers of the *Brahma dharma*, just after the function of *Saradu* although it is restricted.⁵⁴

Role of Bodo Women in the Family: - The Bodo social structure is strictly patriarchal though the women in the house are always accorded their due status and respect. In fact the Bodo society as is the case with most other tribal societies is extremely egalitarian. In any social function almost every adult is equally treated and age alone commands respect, not any financial or official status. In a Bodo house the master and the servant sit together at the same level and place to take meals or to share other occasions. In the Bodo society nuclear families are common but joint family are also noticed. Nuclear family consists usually of parents and 4 to 6 children. Number of children is less in educated families. Most of the educated women have more than three children in the family. Generally the Bodos have no clear sex preference in case of new born babies but gender differences can be traced in child rearing.

The *Bibar* published a number of articles on education, health and hygiene in which some of their old customs were criticised. To be more specific, some of their traditional practices like early marriage, addiction to alcohol etc. had received severe criticism. The writers like- Karendra Narayan Brahma, Namol Chandra Boro, Rupiah Brahma and others gave special attention to education and national character formation. The early marriage of young boys was criticised by them vehemently and such practices were identified as causes of their backwardness. So, 'education' as a factor for the development had received top priority from those writers. They were conscious about women's education also. The Bodo writers of early 20th century suggested that mother's education was necessary for the benefit of the children. So women education received the attention of those Bodo educationist writers. They conceived of women's education as follows: activities like home management, child care, care of the aged, cooking, entertainment of guests, weaving, embroidery etc.

received top priorities from them. They thought that women must know all this and they must teach the same to the girls before marriage.⁵⁵

On the basis of my field work it is observed that a Bodo girl begins to help her mother at an early age. Her job as baby-sitter begins within 9 to 10 years. Work like washing utensils or cleaning rooms and boundary is also part of her daily duty. The girls who are above ten years of age go to forest to collect leafy vegetables, roots, fire-wood etc. They also go for fishing and take part in agricultural works. Among these activities transplanting the seedlings and harvesting is the main work which the Bodo girls start doing before they attain the teen age. Teenage girls participate in cultivation as well. These girls also do weaving and cooking. But, there is no distinct household work which is performed by the Bodo boys. The boys get priority over the girls in the field of education. Normally the boys are sent to school and exempted from the household work whereas the girls have to stop their studies and start working. This is truer of the poor than the rich families.

Status of Bodo Women in the Society: - Though the processes of Indianisations of the Bodo started long back under the patronage of the Bodo rulers like, Krishna Chandra and Gabinda Chandra of Cachar, Siva Singha and Nara Narayan of Koch kingdom, the Bodo society was free from social evils of the Hindu society. Towards the last part of 19th century, Hindu society was engulfed by many social evils and practices. Though the Bodo society was intermingled with the mainstream of the Hindu Society, the system like *sati*, *dowry*, *child marriage*, *purdha system*, *child infanticide* etc. were completely unknown to the Bodos. The Bodo women have played very significant role in the family, socio-economic life and also in religious function. Though the overall condition of Bodo women till the beginning of

this century was not worth mentioning, from the time of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, a gradual change has been taking place as a result of the reformation movement let by him. Thus their condition is better than that of high caste Hindu women in some parts of India.

Before talking about the status of Bodo women we need to understand the meaning of the 'statuses' as a concept of social science. Generally we use the terms like status of women, status of Brahmin, status of Sudras, etc. in order to define the position of a particular segment of society. As indicated by the term itself, 'status' implies the position of a member or group in a given society in relation to others. Society is a web of relationship. Hence, 'social status' is a position of a member or a segment of members, in the network of social relationship in a society.⁵⁶

According to Ralf Linton "status are the polar positions...in patterns of reciprocal behaviour". A polar position comprises 'a collection of rights and duties'.⁵⁷ Thus he conceives of status as a position based on socially approved rights and duties. Members of a society confirm these rights and duties by performing certain roles. When a person, acting these rights and duties, he is said to be performing role of a status of a member of a society as defined by the society. In order to understand the status of a member or a segment of a society we must know the roles performed by that particular member or segment of society in relation to others.

According to Anthropologists there are three important criteria for understanding the 'social statuses' in simple society, i.e. sex, age and kinship. The Bodo women are a segment of the total population of the Bodo society and the status and role of the Bodo women can be explained in terms of age and kinship. The kinship system refers to a set of persons recognised as relatives either by virtue of blood or by virtue of marriage relationships that is through what is called affinity.

Kins are bound by virtue of blood relationship and marriage. As a member of a kins group, a person occupies a specific position in the society and his or her roles accordingly. Thus we may explain the status and role of women within the network of kinship relations frame works of '*Role Domain*' for explaining the status of a member or a segment of a society, i.e., Kinship domain, economic domain, political domain, and religious domain.⁵⁸ Thus his frame work '*roles domain*' provide a wider scope for understanding the status of a member or a segment of a society in general and the women in particular.

The roles of the Bodo women under '*kinship domain*' can be explained in two levels, i.e., pre-marital level and post marital level. Before the marriage, a woman is a member of a particular family of orientation. She acquires her membership either by birth or adaptation. The family is the basic unit of social structure of every society. Statuses in the society are determined by the internal organisation of family, its degree of autonomy, sanctions of taboo by which it is protected and perpetuated. The specific pattern of family life in any given social structure is the product of mores, and varies with time. Children either male or female are taught largely by their families to conform to socially approved pattern of behaviour. Family prepares the children for participation in the larger level and acquaint with larger culture. Individual personal identity is initially fixed by family membership by being born to give status and characteristic. The children take on the socio-economic class standing on the parents socio-economic positions in which they are born including its behavioural pattern and definition of reality. In addition to internalizing family attitudes and beliefs children are treated and defined by other extension of social identity of their parents.

Before the marriage, a Bodo woman is a daughter of a family. Father and mother, brother and sisters are her immediate kinsmen. Daughter is regarded as the transient or non-permanent member of the family. Her relations to parents and other elders are of love, mutual affection, respect and of obedience. Every member of a family has to play 'some ideally set roles' or normally expected roles, which are defined by social norms and value. She has to play different types of ideally set roles with different members of the family in different ways such as a daughter, sister, grand daughter, as niece, aunt, etc. Her role in the family is defined by her kinship relation. Her relationship to younger members of the family is of love and affectionate. Her role differentiations are extended to lineage and clan level. Whatever roles (services, duty and works) she plays with her kins in the parents' family are set all a sacrifice to the family.⁵⁹

The role of daughter in the Bodo society as kins member in the family is determined by the structure and economic condition of the family. In a poor family the role of a daughter is cooperative, contributory and substantive in terms of economy. In her early time of childhood she is to perform the role of baby sitter at home. A female child also performs as baby sitter in other family. She leads responsible and difficult life. Even now, in spite of government's policy of compulsory education for all children, the children from poor family in the rural areas hardly can avail her chance for education. They are too dropping out from schools due to poor economic condition of her family.

The culture of the Bodo society emphasizes the marriage of daughters. Earlier, the life was simple and the necessity of life was limited. The basic conditions of economic life have totally changed, the necessities of life have increased and society becomes complex. For economic uncertainty both boys and girls are not

interested in getting marriage. Marriage of a daughter constitutes a difficult problem for every parent these days and constitutes a major women issue in the Bodo society. Unmarried girls beyond age limit are neither desirable by parents nor individual girls concerned. For a father it is a burden and a state of dishonour and anxiety; they move to towns and cities and engage themselves as household workers and workers in small scale industries and start independent lives.⁶⁰ The attitudes of the parents towards girls are not fair when it is compared to boys. Boys are more preferred than the girls and options for higher and costlier education are more open for boys than the girls. Daughters do not enjoy the rights of property inheritance. This is the most important factor that attributes to economic uncertainty for unmarried girls.

After marriage a woman is incorporated into her husbands' family with different family structure and economic conditions and psychological background. The family structure and economic condition of the husbands' family determine the roles of the newly married bride. Her living in the new home is in a way conditional, depending on proper behaviour, efficiency in the household work, amicable relationship, service to the elder, pleasure to husband and gifts she brings at marriage. At the marriage rites, the couple promise to associate one another in all circumstances in pain and pleasure, prosperity and adversity till death. Her relation to husband is of love, friendly, mutual respect and affection and cooperation.⁶¹ Endle has stated that the position of Bodo women was sub-ordinate to her husband, but the direct observation of fact convinced that, the Bodo husband treated his wife with distinct respect, and regards her as an equal and a companion.

Stating the freedom enjoyed by the women in Assam, W. Robinson stated that, the women of Assam were beautiful to look and they go out in public without

any artificiality. Definitely Robinson indicated to the women folk beyond the caste-structured society of Assam.⁶² Her role to the father and mother in laws is of love, respect, obedience and servitude. She is subordinated to mother in-law in the management of household affairs. In the absence of mother in-law she manages the household affairs. She maintains avoidance relationship with the elder brother of her husband. Her relation to younger brother member of the family is love, affection, master and guide. Women in the family are regarded as '*Noni Mainao*' or *Lakshmi*. These are the 'ideally set roles', normally expected to be performed by a woman after marriage in husband's family.

There are lots of differences between the actual roles performed by a woman and ideally set roles of the women. According to Thakkar and Desai, women themselves sometimes become oppressed and oppressor.⁶³ There are instances of Bodo women of becoming oppressed particularly by husband in drunken stage. Barren women without child become subject to dishonour in the society. A woman may be ill treated or oppressed due to her miss-conduct and character. Sometimes, it is seen that, women herself usually become oppressor instead of being oppressed. Daughter in-laws with better economic background and modern outlook from wealth families married to a son working in government service created tensions in the family. She for one reason or the other used to come into conflict with other members of the family. In these conflicts ultimately the son takes side of his wife. When the husband is the only earner, she gradually begins to control the family affairs and tension in the family grows. And slowly the bride herself turns to an oppressor and she becomes the factor of anxiety for the members of the family.

Employed women, on the other hand put rational domination on the family. Due to her education and economic position she enjoys comfortable position in the

family as well as in the society. A few women with irresponsible, mischievous, quarrelsome, jealous, and envious, cruel in nature create tensions not only in the family but also outside the family. Such type of Bodo woman is referred to as 'Rangkhini, Khangkhini, Mwnsari, Fansari, etc. Such type of women is generally avoided by the people in the society. The society gives due value to the quality of women but not on beauty which is reflected by the Bodo proverb, "*Mohora mwjang akhola angjang*, the meaning is *beautiful in form but ugly in characters*."⁶⁴

In the words of Desai and Thakkar, "women's works is of tremendous value to family, society and state but it always remains invisible". According to them, "Women's contributions to economy remain hidden because their work especially in agriculture and in the unorganised sector remains unanimated."⁶⁵ The roles of Bodo women performed in the economic domain are in no way less than male counterparts. The Bodo society is a patriarchal society and so the contributions of the women are not duly recognised. "Men are bread winners, so, they, not the women, are head of the house hold."⁶⁶ But this statement is not appropriate in case of Bodo society. Because Bodo woman, leaving aside ploughing work in the agricultural land along with men. A woman produces her dresses and necessary cloths in the family by weaving. She helps the family economy by poultry farming, animal husbandry etc. Thus it is stated that from her minor age Bodo women play vital, effective and contributory roles to the family economy. Upala Baruah in her work on the economic life of the Karbi women remarks, "Daughters begin as soon as their strength permits to help their mother in all her works."⁶⁷ The poorer the household, the greater dependency on womens work for survival." Same is the case of Bodo women in poor families in rural areas. In newly settled poor families in reserved forest areas particularly in BTAD, the women play similar roles in survival

and continuity of the families. In traditional Bodo society agriculture is the primary and common occupation of all the families. There are instances of specialized occupations i.e. carpentry, bamboo crafts, pottery, weaving etc. In all the poor Bodo families of the society women play equal roles with male counterpart to the family economy. When a girl attains five or six year of age, she begins to play her roles as a baby sitter in the family. It is exception to only the families with wealth and property. She helps the families by moving light households articles from here and there as desired by the elder members of the families. With the increase of her ability and strength she begins to help her mother in all kinds of household works. Washing of pots and utensils, fetching of water from stream and well, brooming of floor and courtyard of the house, are her regular works. Her intention is towards becoming a 'good household worker'.

Traditional Bodo society is characterised by isolation, self sufficiency, self content economic life; distinctiveness and homogeneity, are the essential features of the little community as conceptualised by Robert Redfield. The introduction of new social structures or systems since the time of British rule in India has brought radical changes in structural and functional system of all traditional Indian societies. Changes have crept into the world views, mode of life, avenues of life, attitude of life, necessity of life, organisation and structure of society, material culture, value system, etc. of the society. Society is directed to new dimensions of social change i.e. development, welfare, progress, unity, peace etc. Indian societies have achieved a lot in general but the national policies for development has failed to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor, advance communities and backward communities; they have created a new situation attributing to socio-economic backwardness of the scheduled communities of India. On the other hand new modes of life enhance the

level of consumption at the individual and family life. Under the above circumstances, the life of the tribal people turns miserable. Growth of population put tremendous pressure on land. Alienation of land by non-tribal community, encroachment, illiteracy and many other social, economic and political factors make these people displaced from their homeland and compelled to settle in a new reserved forest areas. Thus their socio-economic conditions become bad to worse.⁶⁸

The deteriorating socio-economic conditions of the families degenerate the roles and statuses of the Bodo people in general and the Bodo women in particular, all these areas. Poor families in rural and forest reserve areas lead a very difficult life. Adult women support their family economy in different ways such as- animal husbandry, especially by poultry farming, piggery, silk rearing, weaving. Many women now adopt weaving as a profession. They take important roles in agriculture. Paddy plantations are completely done by women folk. They take care of vegetables garden in the family and also sell the domestic products in the market and they do shopping and marketing for daily consumption. The women of poor families, in order to meet the growing needs of the families of the time undertake the customary production of rice-beer for trade. The women from well to do families comparatively lead an easier life. They get their household works done by the maidservant. They take important role in the management of household works in the family and in taking care of their children.

At present Government of India provides to the people new domains of economic roles in the form of jobs in the public sector under different departments, in the private sector in different industries, entrepreneurs, and trade and business establishment etc. Educated Bodo women have also accepted these chances and got employed as government servants under different departments in the public or

private sectors. But the percentage of serving under government departments is less in comparison to the Bodo male counterparts. The status of employed Bodo women is better economically and socially than those who are engaged in agriculture. Employment is the symbol of economic status in itself and the sign of being educated.

In the Kachari history, the participation of queen Induprobha of Raja Gabinda Chandra indicated the participation of women in public affairs. Women played a very critical role as spies in the Kings' court. *Birgwshri* was an efficient woman who was appointed as a tax collector by *Jaolia Dewam* and she collected revenues from the people and paid it to the British government on behalf of the *Dewan*. *Gambari Shikla*, *Theng Pakri* and *Birgwshri* participated in the war against the British where they sacrificed their lives for the interest of the country, i.e., *Shikhnajhar*. *Bhaben Narzee* mentions two types of Councils: first one is '*Haden*' regional council consisting of twelve villages and '*Hasong*' the council of single village. The head of '*Haden*' is known as '*Hadung Gwra*' and the head of the village council '*Hasong*' is known as '*Hasung Gwra*'. No mention has been made about the participation of women in the affaire of the council. In the present village committee system also Bodo women have equal scope to play roles along with their male counterparts. In the real sense, women's participation in the public affairs was facilitated by the introduction of modern education. Educated Bodo women started to play their roles as well as a government employees i.e., teachers, clerks, officers, etc. Employment is indicative of ones education, economic position as well as of status and roles.⁶⁹ Higher the education, better the job, icome and status.

The formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and All Bodo Students' Union created a wide avenue enabling the mass people to interact with on important public

issues. A few educated women were incorporated as the members of executive committee of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the All Bodo Students' Union at different levels, and hundreds of others as supporters and general members. The educated women started taking part as writers, poets etc. During the time of Bodoland movement led by the ABSU, the allied organisations, the Bodo women's organisations ATWWF (All Assam Women Welfare Federation) and ABWWF (All Bodo women welfare Federation) came into existence. Through these organisations many Bodo women established their positions as leaders, social workers and politicians. So far two MLAs to Assam Legislative Assembly and one general council member to BTAD represent the ABWWF. The ABWWF, so far produced a number of prominent Bodo women leaders and social workers. This women organisation deals with important women issues in particular and also issues of common interest of the society. In apparent observation it seems that, ABWWF and other Bodo women organisations enjoy rights exercising their freedom given by the constitution of the country. But minute analysis of the activities of these women organisations shows that they are more or less dependent on men's organisation or parent organisations, and most of the time they are used by the parent organisations to execute their will. Recently only a few non-governments Bodo women's organisations and associations have emerged basically to exploit the benefits given by the state and central governments under various welfare schemes. But due to the illiteracy of the majority of the women of the society most of the beneficial schemes and policies are remain unused in the Bodo dominated areas. Therefore awareness campaign is very essential in the Bodoland areas in order to motivate the illiterate Bodo women about the policies and programme initiated by the central, state and the BTC government in Bodoland.

Majority of the Bodo people still practice their traditional religion, 'Bathou'. In this religion a number of deities are worshipped. Deities are divided into two categories i.e., household deities or '*Noni mwdai*' and village deities or '*Gamini mwdai*'. Village People often, very commonly, refer to another type of deities, which are known as '*Hagrani mwdai*'. In the propitiation of gods and goddesses, both man and women play very important roles. The priesthood is confined to male only. A priest does perform and initiates religious rites in community and family levels. In the propitiation of household deities' women take primary role. For the propitiation of household deities there are two types of altars '*bedi*' in every family, altar or '*bedi*' inside the '*Ishing* or '*Nomano* or main house, the house of the northern side. On altar of the '*Ishing*' '*Mainao* is propitiated by the women only. On the other hand another altar '*bedi*' is existed in the frontal side of courtyard of the house at the foot of the '*Sijou*' tree. Bamboo fencing is erected encircling the '*Sijou*' tree. The women everyday and regularly mop the altars with clean water and offer '*Gwthar dwi* or '*Santidwi*, light '*bati* 'or '*Alari*' and pay prayers to the deities. '*Mainao* or '*Lakshmi* is propitiated at the altar side the '*Ishing* and '*Bura Bathou*' is propitiated at the altar of the frontal side of the house.⁷⁰

Community rites are performed once or twice in a year. A priest performs and initiates rites. In these rites a selected woman performs the role of '*deodani*', which is considered as the symbol of spirit or deity. The '*douri* or priest by chanting mantras, sprinkle '*Santidwi* on the '*deodini* and transformed her into a spiritual entity. She moves rounds and rounds around the altar by dancing and singing for a long time about three to four hours and she worshipped all the eighteen Gods and goddess installed in front of the altar of '*Bahtou*'.

Similar type of community rites is observed at the time of famine, epidemic and other crises of the society. In community rites both men and woman participate. A smaller segment of the Bodo population follows a peculiar type of '*Bathou*' religion, which is known as '*Moni Bathou*'. The founder of this religion is a woman. This is a religion blending of indigenous traditions from ancestral religion, '*Bathou*' and Vedic traditions from Hinduism. This religion follows smaller type of rites and ritual activities that are practiced in Hinduism, viz, Yajnas, Ahuti, Karma, Dharma sanskara etc. Basic principles of this religion are derived from Hinduism. Some traditions of ancestral religion constitute an integral part of this religion. The position of priesthood in any levels of hierarchical arrangement is opened for both man and woman. Women can preach, perform religious rites as Purahitas. A woman may attain the highest position of the priesthood by dint of her perfection and purity of higher religiosity. Women of the family perform every domestic Puja and propitiation of God Shiva and other household deities.⁷¹

The Bodo society has been relatively free from many inhibitions' as found in many parts of India. Bodo women are known for the skill of weaving cloths not only for the members of the family but also for the community as a whole, and even these cloths have high demand in the market. The evil of dowry system has not plagued the society. However, recently the practice is now slowly trying to creep in the society. In Bodo society divorce is allowed and there is no restriction on widows as far as their food, dress, etc. as it is found in Hindu families in other parts of India. Women in Bodoland enjoy a higher status as compared to the greater Indian society; the caste-society of this region is devoid of practices like dowry, child-marriage and bride burning, that are rampant in most parts of India. The economic dependence of women on men is an acknowledged reason for the low status of women. Even

though the illiterate women have to work hard for a longer period, their work remains invisible and marginal. Women's physical labour which remains invisible is not counted as work. A majority of women work force in rural and urban is unorganised sector. Education is considered as a potent instrument through which the process of modernisation of the society could be affected. As most of women are illiterate and unskilled, they have options only to join informal sectors like handloom, handicrafts, bidi factory, construction work, garments and domestic work. Consequently they have to remain stagnant in their jobs and they are always uncertain of their services. New education policy gives importance to women literacy. Powerful effect of education can be observed very distinctly among the educated families. The rapid growth of English medium schools and also the increased number of students indicates clearly the concern of educator parents for better education of their children in Bodoland. The impact of education is seen in the life style and the size of the family. Generally, working parents prefer single family, willing to enjoy greater freedom of association and movement. Educated girls exposed to wider worlds are changing their view with regard to marriage and life style. The effect of modernisation has been evidenced in Bodo families also. Girls are generally married at a mature age and a sizeable number of educated girls are against arranged marriage and prefer to select their spouses.

It is a fact that the working women suffer from role conflict in a conservative society and in the traditional families. Some working women have to withstand unbearable burdens in the form of physical and mental strains in discharging their responsibilities in their families as well as in their jobs. Generally illiterate women are engaged in low skill, low wage, low productive and unsecured and unorganised sector which keeps them in the marginalisation of occupation. The National

Perspective Plan for Women has recognised eight employment areas for rural women in the state namely - agriculture, dairy, farming, cattle rearing, fishery, handlooms and also in handicrafts and sericulture. Supportive services and other programmes need to be provided to adult learners, working mothers and young girls.

The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000) recommends 30% reservation for women in legislature, other administrative bodies and positions of power as a temporary measure. Such a step will definitely encourage women to participate in diverse fields of activities and this will go a long way in accelerating the development process of women in Assam, particularly the Bodo women. As education and development of women are associated with joint endeavours of different agencies, maintenance of women's cell in every ministry and department with definite resources and targets for development of women would help in arranging training and education programmes and support services for women.

The supply of work effort by women in partnership with men has characterised the development of every society. Though the number of female workers has increased in Bodoland, the status of Bodo women has not changed to the desired extent. Technological advancement has not been able to diversify the work participation of women particularly among the uneducated and rural areas. In rural sector, though agriculture and allied activities account for the heaviest concentration of labour for both male and female workers, the proportion of the work force is much more for women than for men in this occupation. Women, particularly in rural workforce, have to be engaged in innumerable jobs like growing vegetables for home consumption, preparing fodder and rearing cattle, cooking and working in cottage industry together with extreme painstaking operations relating to crop production and processing like pre-harvest plantation and post-harvest operation of parboiling,

drying, de-husking, storage of paddy, preparation of seeds and the like. All the sweating jobs are done by the female workers, but the position of women would not change because men have the primary control of cash and income generating assets.

Though the Bodo women continue to be engaged in their traditional occupations in a changed market, still these women workers are ill-paid in almost all occupations. The poorest categories of working poor and low-paid wage earners are largely females. It is worthwhile to mention that women in poor peasant and labour families suffer a larger calorie deficiency than men not only because of lower food intake but also because of larger energy expenditure, mostly in domestic and gathering tasks like fetching water, fuel etc.

In Bodoland a large number of women are employed in the private sector. The number of women engaged in organised sector is reasonably high as compared to total number of women employed as compared to other states. Tea plantation is the single largest employer in the state providing employment to more than 40% women. Tea plantation is largely agro-based and labour intensive. The pattern of female employment in tea plantation obviously enhances the social and job security of the tea labourers working in Assam. After tea, factories constitute large segment of organised working population in Bodoland. Besides tea and factory, shops and establishment also constitute a good number of women workers.

Poverty and unemployment are two important economic problems in rural areas of Bodoland, as most of the people live in rural areas and the pressure of population on land is acute, the problem of finding jobs for surplus population has become difficult. Therefore the role of handloom and weaving to generate employment and their contribution to the rural family income is immensely important.

It is no denying the fact that from time immemorial the Handloom industry has been playing a vital role in the economy of the Bodo. The most important household industry run by the Bodo women is handloom and weaving. The traditional skill of handloom and weaving was not only a status symbol of women folk of the Bodos but also an indispensable aspect of the socio-economic life of the Bodo community.

Handloom and sericulture industries provide opportunities for employment to a large number of people, next to agriculture only. Thus a good number of Bodo women particularly in rural areas give the output of handloom products. In Bodo society weaving activities are mainly done by women, who offer helping hand to their male counterparts during the agricultural work. This state of affairs leads us to believe that weaving has not been adopted as commercial proposition and from that point, persons engaged in weaving operations may be designated as 'Kisans cum Weavers'. Only a few weavers particularly in the district head quarters have taken up weaving as a commercial proposition.

Endi is one of the important household industries for women in rural areas, while Muga and Silk industries are found in selected areas. As the demand for various products made from Endi, Muga and Silk are increasing, such industries should be revived or expanded by providing credit and marketing facilities and also technical guidance so that more and more Bodo women can join in weaving industries and be benefited from these factories. There is huge demand for muga sarees, muga shawls, endi shawls, silk sarees, pat sarees, etc. in the domestic as well as foreign markets. Besides, Bodo women in rural and urban areas have already taken up tailoring, embroidery and knitting professionally in many parts of the Bodoland. Therefore, it is the government of Assam and the government of BTC to provide financial as well as technical trainings to the Bodo women to be

professionally competent to face any kind of challenges or competitions. So that a large numbers of Bodo women's will be commercially well established in these activities.

With the gradual spread of education, the women of BTC and Assam in some urban areas have learned effectively to overcome the inhibitions they had so long and are now participating in all kinds of activities and competitions with their counterparts of other states and even countries. This is not only boosting up their self-confidence and morale but also inspiring a number of unemployed women of the state. Until and unless economic status of the rural women who constitute half of the population can be raised by providing more additional employment and income, it would be difficult to eliminate rural poverty in Bodoland (BTC). The rural women of Bodoland should be brought to participate in the main streams of development activities by initiating extension of education and training facilities in rural areas. Dr. Radhakrishnan says, "the most important role a woman plays and will continue to play, is that of home-maker, but this be done best only when she is educated". If these women are educated, they will be able to manage the economy of the family, educate and inculcate good morals in her children and maintain a healthy balance in all her relations in the society. Therefore the all round development in BTC (Bodoland) will be possible only if the income and standard of living of women, particularly in rural areas is developed.

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