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A Study of Myth, Legend and Folk Songs of the Bodo Society: A Folkloristic Perspective

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Abstract: *One of the most important features of human culture is its mythology or belief system. It provides a rationale for the cultural identity of ethnic groups. Mythology traditionally revolves around stories about tales, religions, and legends. Mythology has been used in every form of popular culture of ethnic groups. Folklore is increasingly used as a key tool for studying the mythology of ethnic groups. This paper is mainly concerned with myths, songs, legends, and the religious belief system of the Bodo tribe. Folklore has been combined with myths and legends of the Bodo tribe. In our paper, an effort is made to study the folk culture of the Bodo people.*

Key words: *Belief system, Folklore, Folk-culture, Legends, Mythology.*

1.0 Introduction:

Folklore is one of the most important elements of culture which include both material and non-material aspects. Non-material aspects like belief, tales, proverbs, jokes, song, legend which are transmitted from one generation to another orally, and material aspects like handmade things use in people's day to day life are included in folklore. The word folklore is comprised of two words 'folk' and 'lore'. William John Thoms coined the term 'folklore' in an 1846 letter to The Athenaeum (a literary magazine) as a replacement of the term 'Popular Antiquities' or 'Popular Culture'. By the term folklore, Thoms means that the lore of the People includes the manners, customs, superstitions, observances, proverbs, ballads, etc. of the age-old time (Brunvand, 2006, p. 594).

So the word folklore means the lore of the common people which creates solidarity among people. However, myths and legends comprised important components of folklore. Myths are fictional stories, mainly concerning the early history of a group or community. The English

word myths are derived from the Greek word 'mythos' means story, fable, and speech'. Myths are stories of gods, heroes, and ghosts mainly told to create harmony and stability in society, these are like moral stories. We saw many myths in human life regarding the birth of people, regarding the Hindu god. According to Bascom, myths are stories that have happened in the ancient period and are now told to the people to be believed (Bascom, 1965,p.4). They are often sacred stories that serve to explain the acts of supernatural beings to create Earth and all the other aspects of nature including the creation of human beings, celestial objects, geographical objects, plants and animals, growth, and death. It also explains the social aspects of a culture such as morals, roles, customs. So it can be said that myths documents shared beliefs that help a community to maintain a common identity. On the other hand, legends have some relations with real life. It mainly explains the heroes and their heroic deeds for the good of the people. They are narratives of some heroes which people believe as true (Narzary, 2018, p.59).

Folklore is the mirror of society. Folklore is one of the vital aspects of the richness of historicity of a society (Das, 2017,p 20). Similarly, the concept of mythology has become the most constructive element of the folk culture of a society. However, the Folk culture of Assam is said to be extremely rich. Assam is very rich in a wide range of diversity of traditions, folk songs, and myths by the various tribes and ethnic groups. It is said that the Bodo tribal society is very rich in its cultural heritage. The Bodos are one of the earliest settlers of Assam especially lived in the plain area of Brahmaputra valley. They are Tibeto- Burman speaking, Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group (George, 1994,p.878), but based on their physical appearance some scholars prefer to refer to themselves as Indo-Tibetan. Bodos are mainly found in Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang, Baksa, Darrang, Sonitpur, Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, and Dhubri (Mochahary, 2019,p.p. 61-67). The word 'Bodo' is a generic term and used by B.H. Hodgson for the first time, to refer to the Meches. Since then the term has been used as a generic term to denote the different tribes, Kachari or Bodo, Lalung, Dimasa, Garo, Rabha, Tripuri (Kok-Borok), Koch, Chutiya (Deori), and Moran of the Bodo language group (Sarmah,2014,p.1335).

2.0 Review of Literature:

There is a dearth of literary works on the Bodo society of Assam. Brahma (1989, p.p. 1-81) in his book *Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos* describes socio-cultural aspects of the Bodo society. He has tried to analyze the customs, practices, and beliefs of the Bodo people. Similarly, Brahma (1960, p.p.1-194) in his work *Folk Song of the Bodos* gives a detailed account of the folk culture of the Bodo society from a wider perspective. He also emphasizes folk songs of the Bodo people and their importance as an agent of the socialization process of the Bodo society.

In this regard, *Folk Literature of the Bodos* by Anil Boro (2001, p.p. 1-326) is also significant. In this book, he attempts to find out the folk elements of the Bodos and also highlights the close nexus of history and culture of the Bodo society with oral narratives.

Similarly, Rampha Gorary (2019, p.p. 1-7) in his research paper *Folk song of the Bodos: A Brief Discussion* has made a modest attempt to highlight the various genres of folklore among the Bodo community.

But none of the literary works devoted solely to discuss the folklore aspect of the Bodo society as a reflection of their socio-cultural life. This is a research gap that the present work attempts to fill in.

3.0 Objectives:

By identifying a gap in the research, we have taken the following objectives:

1. To analyze the folk culture of the Bodo tribe of Assam.
2. To highlight the depiction of the religious belief system of the Bodo society.
3. To make a critical assessment of various traditional institutional levels like social customs, rites, marriage, tales, myths of the Bodo tribe of Assam.

4.0 Research Methodology:

Social science research methodology, mainly the historical and analytical methods are being used for collecting sources and for a proper analysis of them. However, the information has been collected from secondary sources. For identifying the relevant papers related to the folk literature of the Bodo tribe books, journals, papers, etc. were used as a source for this study.

5.0 Discussion and Findings :

The finding of the research is divided into two subheadings to discuss the folk culture of the Bodo society of Assam:

1. Introduction to the culture of the Bodo tribe and their folk-culture.
2. Myths of the Bodo society.
3. Legends of the Bodo society.
4. Folk Songs of the Bodo society.

5.1 Introduction to the culture of the Bodo tribe and their folk-culture

Like other communities, Bodos are also rich in culture. They have their folklore regarding their origin, heroes, religion, different instrument, and many more. Tales, legends, myths, songs play important roles in their life. Bodos mainly depend on agriculture for their livelihood. So many folksongs and myths are visible among them related to harvesting. Traditionally, Bodos had their dialect, the socio-religious reform movement introduced by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma led to written tradition among Bodos. The first literary Bodo magazine of the Bodo "Bibar" initiated the journey of Bodos writing (Narzari, 2018,p.13). Folklore is a wider concept and includes many elements, but in this article, only myths and legends of Bodos will be focused on.

5.2. Myths of the Bodo society

The Bodo ethnic term for myth is '*mith*' or '*gozam colo*' (Bodo). The myths of Bodos are mostly related to socio-religious aspects. Traditionally they believe in 'Bathou' religion. Many

myths of Bodos are related to the Bathou religion and rites and rituals, specially related with the origin of the world, human beings, and creation of nature, etc. Bodos have believed that they have been created by *God Ahom Guru* on the earth. The God Ahom Guru created two birds one male and one female and the female bird laid three eggs. But despite thousands of years sitting on the eggs, no sign of any birth was noticed. Therefore she broke an egg but that was empty then a voice from heavenly Ahom Guru asked her to not to broke the other eggs, otherwise the universe will be destroyed. The Bodos believe that all the evil spirits, ghosts, birds, plants were born from that egg and from the other two eggs Mwn-sin-sin Bwrai and Burai and Diba Bwrai and Dibi Burai were born and they desired to go to heaven. Ahom Guru fulfills their desire but warned them that during the journey if some look back to earth then he or she would fall. In the mid of their journey when they hear noises from the creatures born from broken egg Diba Bwrai and Dibi Burai look back and suddenly fall down. Later when the creatures prayed to the Ahom Guru for food, he replied that the children of Mwn-sin-sin Bwrai and Burai will come to earth and provide food for them (Basumatary, 2020,p.97).

Another myth related to the origin of Bodo community is that they are the descendant of 'Asur'. As mentioned by Kanery Basumatary in "Myth of Bodo Religion: an Analytical Study" the human being was created from God Anan Gosai (Anan Guru). One day when God Anan Gosai is in a fine mood he desired to take a form and lead a life form. Suddenly he uttered four words, 'laoba-lao-swm' (five organs of knowledge), khaoba-khaoswm' (five organs of action), Ada-gwswm (dignified elder brother), 'dwiao-barsum (jump to deep water). With this voice of Anan Gosai the first physical form of God 'Sibrai' formed and from his mouth, every creature and air, water, fire, sky, sun, moon, etc are formed. Sibrai created si-burwi and from them, the first man 'Mwn-sin-sin' was born (Narzary, 2018, p.p. 32-34).

There is another myth related to the formation of the earth. The story starts with the Ahom Guru, who send two fishes 'Magur-Maguri' to bring some soil from the bottom of the water, but they managed to collect only a small amount of soil because they were attacked by the guard of water and died. Then God Ahom Guru sends other creatures to find 'Magur-Maguri'. The crow was able to find them and inform God Ahom Guru then he created the earth with the small amount of soil collected from the head of Magur-Maguri. Therefore the Bodo people believed that the area of land is less than the area of water (Basumatary, 2020, p. 98).

The Bodos have a myth with their religious festival 'Kherai' also. As discussed by Basumatary (2020, p.99) in his article "Myth and Bathou Religion: An Analytical Study", in the past there was an old man who has five sons and everybody was married. When the old man found that it is difficult to maintain such a huge family he asked his sons to search for the fertile land. The old man loved his entire daughter-in-law like their father or guardian. But his love for the youngest is much because she is good at everything and therefore he cares for her very much. Seeing this kind of behavior from the old man the youngest daughter-in-law ran away

from home. So the old man searches from one place to another to find her, without food-rest, even forget to care about his outfits, so the people call him as 'phagla' (mad man). One day the old man dreamt a dream where a man appeared before him and asked him to perform 'Kherai puja' with the help of musical instruments like Siphung (flute), Serza (cerenda), kham (drum), and Zotha (cybal). Accordingly, the old man organized a grand Kherai puja with musical instruments and surprisingly a woman appeared and began to dance as the 'doudhini' (female shaman) with the music, that woman was not other than his younger daughter in law (Basumatary ,2020, p.99).

5.3 Legends of the Bodo society:

The legends of the Bodos are mostly related to the Bodo heroes and heroines of the earlier period and also teach us about the virtue of human life. The legends tell about the victory of Bodos, how some places were named etc. The brave work of their past generations inspired them to create legend so that they may transmit from one generation to another. Bodos have legends regarding the heroes who fight against the British and Mughal like Gambari Sikhla, Zaolia Dewan, and Birgwsari Sikhla. From these legends, we learn about love, patriotism, heroism, and respect for one own culture and race.

According to the legend of Birgwsari Sikhla, was a mauzadar during the British regime. At that time the mauzadars have to collect revenue and pay it to the British Government annually. But if the mauzadars fail to pay the revenue along with valuable goods then the British Government would impose penalties on them. But Birgwsari Sikhla was denied to pay revenue and she fight with the British soldiers. Later she had to hide in a hillock which is near to present Bongaigaon. But one day she was shot dead by the British soldiers. Now there is a temple in the memory of her. The sword used by her is placed at the temple with the belief that the sword belongs to some deity. Presently the temple is known as Bageswari Mandir. So there is a legend that the sword belongs to the Birgwsari Sikhla. There is another legend regarding Ada Bachiram and Daoharam. They were two Bodo heroes who fought against Bhutanese (Narzary, 2018, p.p. 47-52).

5.4 Folksongs of the Bodo society

Folksongs are another important elements of folklore. Like myths and legends, folksongs are also transmitted from one generation to another orally. It originates from the beliefs and customs of people where the day-to-day life of the people is reflected. In Bodo language, a folk song is called *Khuga Methai* (Hainary,2017,p. 163). Along with the song, the Bodo people use different kinds of musical instruments like siphung, kham, khawang, etc. It is believed that siphung is related with God Shiva, so they use it in all forms of rituals, festivals, etc. Bodo folksongs are found in aspects related to their day-to-day life. It reflects their language, culture, socio-cultural phenomena. The Bodo folksongs can be divided as:

Aroj Methais (Hymns): Bodos sing hymns to wipe out all sorts of miseries. Traditionally they believed in Bathou religion. They worshiped Bathou with many prayers.

Haba Methais (Marriage songs): Like other communities, Bodos also sang marriage songs which are transmitted orally. Some marriage songs are fun-poke songs. The Haba Khuga-Methai (marriage folk song) is still singing in the marriage ceremony of the Bodo society.

While the *Bwirathis* distribute the betel-nuts, the family of the Bride side insults them for delaying in distribution and sang the following folk song-

“Oi Bwirathi Lolia
Khaunw Babangshin
Goi Khaunaikhwu
Jwng Jalia...” (Brahma,1998,p.68)

The English translation of the above song is like that - “O’ lazy girl who is selected to cutting and distributing areca nuts, we shall not eat the areca nuts which have been cut by unmindfully” (Brahma, 1998, p. 68).

During marriage ceremony rice-beer(jau) is supplied abundantly. The following folk songs were sung by elderly women at a marriage ceremony:

“Ukhum beshani Shilimala,
O aiyoi, shilimala,
Oi howa majang,
Nangni habani jaualai melema, melema,
O aiyoi, melema ...” (Brahma,1998,p.81)

This folk song means- “the cockroach of the roof, O Mother cockroach,O cute bridegroom, Rice beer of your marriage is sufficient” (Brahma,1998,p. 81).

Goto Burkainai Methais (Lullaby): These songs are sung to make a child sleep. Girls learn it from their mother or grandmother. To stop the cry of the babies, mother, sister or grandmother sings folksongs. Also when a child is born the following charm is pronounced by the woman:

“Oi gotha?
Nongbagoda namwon,
Bangal na Jungal.
Garo na Gangar
Harsha nao Mephal mwn?
Dinoimi phrai Boro jabai..” (Dutta, 2017,p. 211 &Narzi ,1985,p.145).

This song means – “whoever you were? Whether you were a Muslim, a Garo , a Bhutia or a Non-Boro (Harsha) or a Nepali, you have become a Boro from today ?” (Dutta, 2017, p. 211).

Bwisagu Methais (Bihu songs): Bihu songs are related to Bawisagu, which is one of the largest festivals of Bodos, started at Bwisagu month. The Bwisagu songs are mainly related to harvesting, blissfulness, emotions, imagination, etc.

The Bodos have also folk songs related to the evil spirit that is 'Kuber devta'. To worship the 'Kuver devata' (Modai) the 'ojha' or 'ojha bura' (local medicine man) perform a ritual reciting the following charm and offer betel leaves and nut and sacrifice red hen.

"Oi aphaphor zolkhulir, dacha khubir,
Khala Khubir, dahala khubir
Dakhi amokhia udoi eananoi
Aykhon baykhan zabay bayhla
Bekhoi mozan khalamba
Zoy phathoi rana dekhra bono bonnanoi
Phao phuza hono honnanoi raithkhanaiya
Dinoi noncorno bonay zabay" (Dutta, 2017, p. 210).

This song means that the medicine man promised to sacrifice red hen and offer nut and betel leaves to get rid of evil practices (Dutta, 2017, p. 210).

Some folk songs or narrative tales, which include the stories of Bachiram, Dwimalu, Daoharam, Cheobar, Jaoliya Dewan recount the history of the Bodo people. Bachiram and Daoharam were two legendary figures of the Bodo society. They fought against the Bhutanese. The story of Bachiram has been depicted in the following way:

"Goraya dabraydw Bachiram Jwhwlaio
Gonggar chubaya phwilaygou."
(Brahma, 1964, p. 2 & Barmahlia, 2019, p. 33045).

This song also means- "Ride-on horse, Bachiram. Bhutiyas are coming in a body" (Brahma, 1964, p. 2 & Barmahlia, 2019, p. 33045).

No doubt, the folk song is something that plays a significant role to promote the culture and ethnic identity of the Bodo society. Moreover, folk songs are related to the daily life of the Bodo society. It is also interesting to note here that most of the folk songs portray the cultural and social life of the Bodo people.

6.0 Conclusion:

We may conclude from the above discussion that folklore is the expressive body of the culture and history of the Bodo people in Assam. They have their beliefs, myths, legends, and folk songs which are fairly old and perfectly fit in their social structure and tradition. However, this study helps one to understand the popularity of folk culture and also introduces us to many forgotten chapters of history regarding the Bodo tribal society. Similarly, the myths are a continuous process in the Bodo society and have passed from one generation to the next. But proper documentation of their folk culture is needed for concretizing new theories of the folklore. It is necessary to preserve the folktales, folk songs, and legends of the Bodo society. In this way, further, we can also conduct folklore research for the study of the construction of Bodo identity.

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