

Socio-Cultural and Religious Lifestyle of Bodo Tribes of Assam - A Review

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ABSTRACT: *The Bodo are the most ancient and predominant tribal population of the northeast India. They Bodo group comprises of several tribal population who are the bearers of the rich cultural heritage in the modern era. The current study thus aims to explore in-depth details related to the Bodo community of Assam. A greater knowledge related to their socio-cultural and religious lifestyle would allow people to know them better and would also in part facilitate to fathom their needs and scope to enhance the status of the Bodo people in all respect.*

KEYWORDS: *Bodos, Assam, religion, socio-cultural, festival, economic status, education, customs, tribes, marriage, ethnic*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The northeast India comprises of a large number of tribal population of which the Bodos or Boros or Kacharis forms the largest ethnic group. The name Bodo which refers to the Tibeto-Burmese language family was initially given by Hodgson. Originally the Bodos were presumed to inherit their culture from the Mongoloids, however, close analysis on their cultural development has revealed that their culture has been significantly influenced by the Aryan, the Austric and the Dravidian cultures in different ages of Indian history. The outcome of such intermixture is development of a heterogeneous cultural identity of the Bodo in the Indian subcontinent. In Assam, West Bengal the Bodo being the most prominent tribal population, their Indo-Mongoloid culture greatly influences the Indic culture of not only the state but also of the entire northeast India. A second school of thought however still believes the Mongoloids to be the ancestors of the Bodo. Justification for the same is derived from the fact that the Mongoloid have been the inhabitants of a mythical country Bod or Bada that existed in the north of the Himalayas and to the west of China. Further, the similarities in physical features such as square set face, projecting cheek-bones, almond-shaped eyes, scanty beard, almost non-existent moustache, and the general appearance among the Kacharis and the Nepalis or the Mongolians make some of the anthropologists to believe this myth. In spite of being culturally rich and diverse, the Bodo community has been highly neglected and also lacks an official script that gives recognition to their rich literature. With a predominance of 80% of the Scheduled Tribe's population in Assam, they still lack sufficient measures specifically crafted to ensure enhancement of their socio-economic conditions and educational status. The mainstay of the community has been agriculture and a large section of and about 40 percent of the Bodos are landless laborers. Additionally, awareness related to healthcare has also been very scanty among the Bodos (Singh and Basumatary, 2017; Brahma and Madapalli, 2017; Kachari and Maity, 2015). The current study thus aims to explore in-depth details related to the Bodo community of Assam. A greater knowledge related to their socio-cultural and religious lifestyle would allow people to know them better and would also in part facilitate to fathom their needs and scope for future development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic background of the Bodos: The Bodo group forms the most predominant tribal population of the state Assam. The group involves several tribes who reside not only in the hills parts but extend to the valleys ranging from Dhubri to Sadiya. History has revealed that they have been the most ancient tribal group who existed and established the Ahoms, the Kachari, and the Chutiya kingdoms. Individuals having a more or less common dialect and ones who also shared a common mythical ancestry, were considered under the Kachari group. Many believed the Kachari to be the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley, North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. Entire Assam was under their rule in the 12th century A.D. Post this era, with the aim to evade the Ahom, they moved to the western part of the Brahmaputra valley, North Cachar hills and the plains of Cachar in the 16th century A.D. However, with time, the group got dissolved and they got isolated and hence dispersed over a larger area. At present they constitute one of the most significant tribal populations of Assam with distinctive cultural and linguistic traits (Basumatary, 2017; Brahma and Madapalli, 2017). In spite of

several disputes regarding their ancestral origin and existence, in the recent times the Bodos have been considered as the aboriginal or the earliest inhabitants of Assam and its neighboring areas. Although, initially they occupied large areas of land in the south east of the Himalayas and west of China, at present they mainly are found in Assam. The origin of their ethnics and linguistics are Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman respectively. However, owing to the maximum similarity both in terms of appearance and physical structures, the Bodo community is often linked with the Sino-Tibetan origin of Mongoloid race (Singh and Basumatary, 2017). However, further development on this fact requires more data in favor of the observation. This also poses as one of the most researched topic among the scholars as well.

Struggle movements of Bodos: The Bodo community of Assam has been involved in large scale mass movements to highlight their needs and demands. One of the major demands on their part has been the call for a separate state in the north bank of river Brahmaputra under the leadership of All Bodo Students' Union and Bodo People's Action Committee (Singh and Mushahary, 2015). However, such movements were not a result of any spontaneous demands. Post the British era and with the independence in 1947, the Bodos lost their freedom, territories and sovereignty in the hands of dominant caste. No attempts have been made by the Hindu Assamese as well to uplift the status of the Bodo community. With no support from the government or the Hindu community of Assam, the socio economic status of the Bodo people deteriorated and they got deprived from majority of their social rights. Additionally, they experienced high degree of cultural and political uncertainties and became exposed to victimization such as forced assimilation, exploitation and subjugation (Kumar, 2016). No development led to the individuals of the Bodo community of Assam to remain backward in every sphere of life. The non-tribal population took advantage of the perks and benefits that actually belonged to the Bodo people. The non-tribal population not only stole the rights of these tribal people but also overexploited them. Threat to the existence of the Bodo community has been also experienced from the immigrant Muslims from Bangladesh. Despite the presence of separate tribal belt and blocks, uncontrolled immigration has led to large scale encroachment of the tribal land. A pressure over land leads to rise of ethnic and communal conflicts in the area which at time may cost life of several innocent people. Thus, to ensure protection of the community and preservation of their rights the Bodo community resorted to mass movements under the leadership of All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). The group has been striving hard since 1986 with the aim to preserve their socio-cultural identity. Success has been attained in part with the allocation of separate territorial arrangement named Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) in 2003. The BTAD comprised of four new districts. However, the individuals of the Bodo community still remain dissatisfied and now are advocating their voice for a separate state along the north bank of the Brahmaputra River which could be named as the 'Bodoland' (Kalita, 2016).

Overview of Culture, Religion and Customs of Bodos: The Bodos comprise of the largest tribal indigenous group of not only Assam but also the entire North-East India. The Bodo people being one of the oldest inhabitants of the northeast part of the country, they possess a rich cultural background. Racially they belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Indo-Mongoloid or Indo-Tibetans. However, in terms of language, it is supposed that they have inherited the same from Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibeto-Chinese family who belong to the Mongoloid group. Although, the Bodo people are mainly concentrated in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley, traces of their existence have also been reported in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. The richness of their culture ensures maintenance of healthy ecological balance in the society. The names of the individuals and social institutions, feasts and festivals, signs and symbols, rites and rituals in all reflect the cultural approach and heritage of the Bodo people. Their socio-religious life embarks the interconnection established between man and nature. In fact agriculture being their mainstay and the potent driver of economic growth also exhibits intricate correlation with nature (Mochahary et al., 2019). Fairs and festivals are essential aspects of cultural life of the people of any region. These fairs and festivals are socio-religious in content. Since the Bodos are agrarian, most of their festivals are connected to their occupation. The Bodo philosophy is unique and involves five holy sermons of the Bathou Borai or the five sacraments for all the Bodos. These are prayers to God, conversing religious and spiritual matters, being charitable to poor, love the community people and to be united. The five main gods of the Bodo community are Ailong, Agrang, Khoila, Sanja-Borli, and Raj Khungri (Devi, 2004; Xaxa, 2005). Religious belief among the Bodo population has been varied in the recent times. Owing to the increased practice of worshipping Hindu gods has led to predominance of Hinduism within the Bodo society. The Bodos are also known to profess animism. However, some Bodo people are now taking up Christianity as their religious faith. Observations have revealed that in the initial stage they remained radical until the dominant class appropriates them. The justification for the same could be either evolutionary or natural (Mochahary, 2019).

Climatic zone and prevailing weather conditions of an area are mainly instrumental in dictating the clothing pattern of the residing individuals of that area. In case of the Bodo community people who reside in the north east part of India mainly wear hand woven clothes. The clothes are characterized by presence of multiple colours. In addition the clothes are also stylish and attractive. Apart from the climatic favorability, the socio-cultural norms also dictate the clothing style of the people. The traditional attire are usually hand woven and

also serves as a testimony of the talent possessed by the Bodo women's in terms of weaving. The dresses wore by the women are known as Dokhona, Langa, Fasra, Jwmgra. Dohkona is wear into two folds, one part is to wrap on waist and the other part is to wrap on chest just to the lower part of the shoulder. The dress for the men is known as Gamosa. Both young and old men put on Gamosa which hangs down to the knees from the loins. All dresses both for men and women are hand woven. Aronai is a special attire common among the men and women (Brahma, 2014; Mochahary, 2019).

The study by Brahma et al., (2017) elaborated on the marriage rituals of the Bodo community. Marriage being a important institution in human society also holds significant importance with the Bodo community. With well established institutions of the marriage, the Bodo culture strictly prohibits polyandry form of marriage. Although marriages are predominantly monogamous, under certain exceptional conditions polygamy is reported with the Bodo society. The different types of marriage that prevail within the Bodo society are SwngnaiHaba(Arranged Marriage), KharonnaiHaba (Girl flee away), GwrjiyaLakhinaiHaba(Groom staying with Brides family in their house), DwnkharnaiHaba (Elopement) and DongkhaHabnaiHabameans (widow re-marriage). Marriage within the Bodo community remains associated with various rites and rituals that dates back to time immemorial.

A recent study by Mochahary, (2019) reported significant changes in the cultural heritage despite its inherent richness. In spite of the continuous attempt to preserve the community culture there has been external influence which has lead to some modification of the traditional cultural patterns both in terms of traditional beliefs and practices. Impact of such modification in the cultural patterns is reflected from the emergence of different sects of Hinduism within the Bodo society like Bathousm, Vaisvavism, Brahma Dharma and Christianity and Islam. Thus, on an attempt to adopt new faith the Bodo people have compromised on preservation of the old traditional cultural traits resulting in loss of many valuable rites and rituals from the society.

Economic and educational status of Bodos:Theeducational status of the Bodoshas been poor since the Ahom period. Initial attempt to restructure the education for the Bodo people initiated during the latter half of eighteenth century with the advent of British rule in Assam. With the aim to tame the wild and violent tribes, the then ruling government of Assam invited British and American Baptist Missionaries to preach the teaching of the Bible. Thereafter many missionary schools came up in different Bodo dominated pockets in the state to educate the people. However, post-independence there has been a significant lack in the attempt to implement policies and programs that aim to promote tribal education. There has been a wide gap in terms of planning and implementation as well as the implementing agencies and the beneficiaries considered (Nabarun and Karabi, 2018). The study by Talukdar, (2012) assessed the role of women education and economic development in the upliftment of the Bodo community of Assam. In this regard results revealed that education for women played a major role in advancement of the Bodo community. A distinct co-relation was reported between education and economic and social development of a society. Education for women opened avenues for enjoying government approved perks and benefits through bank, DRDA, panchayat and many other governmental organizations. Since the main contributor for economic development of the Bodo community is agriculture, involvement of women in additional activities such as weaving, poultry, pigery business, service, traditional industries and working as a wage labour would allow the Bodo families to enhance their income. This would in turn positively influence the economic structure of the Bodo community.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

The Bodos are the most predominant tribal population of the north east India. Owing to their origin and ancestry, they inherit and represent a rich cultural heritage. However, post-independence there has been little focus on their preservation of rights and cultural heritage. They have been deprived of many basic needs and access to formal education.

In spite of government attempts to enhance the educational status, there has been no significant result in this regard. Further, immigration of non-tribal people from other areas has threatened the very existence of the individuals belonging to the Bodo community. Thus in order to preserve the cultural heritage and basic rights to survive, the Bodo community have now resorted to mass movements in demand of a separate "Bodoland" that would secure their future existence.

IV.CONCLUSION:

The current study attempted to explore in depth the lifestyle, socio-cultural and socio- economic status of the Bodo Community. In this regard it has been observed that the Bodos of Assam embark a rich cultural heritage that reflects the ancient belief and practices of the north eastern region of India. However, lack of appropriate measures to preserve this cultural heritage has led to the loss of many traditions. Thus, there is a significant need for appropriate measures that would not only ensure preservation of the cultural heritage of the Bodo community but also would make attempt to enhance the status of the Bodo people in all respect.

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