

## **Surname and Clan Identity in Boro Society: Sociological and Sociolinguistic View point**

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**Abstract:** *In Boro society surnames are used as code of identity of the clan as well as cultural group of people. They share more or less similar way of living. Each of the surnames of the Boros demonstrates an oral tradition. The group of people or the particular clan group preserves their tradition of genealogy. Once a child is born she/he inherits arbitrarily the surnames from their paternal lineage. It does mean that the Boro society is practicing the paternal tradition. Surnames may be discussed from sociolinguistic point of view; and on the one hand it demonstrate ethno-historical heritage of clan groups of the Boros. These viewpoints are the principal aims of the paper.*

**Keywords:** *Genealogy, hierarchy, code of the clan, ethno-linguistic, sociological, hereditary.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Being a tribe the Mongolian Boros<sup>1</sup> are practicing their genealogical hierarchy. Now-a-day, this is to be observed that there is no more strict validity of clan tradition at all. Relatively it is still prevailing in other tribal society of the North East India. In Boro society, in ancient days every clan group or social group was designated by particular surnames; and it was conserved among the clan groups very firmly. Though now-a-day, clan system is not strictly followed among them there is group system that marks by using surnames. It may be assumed as the sign or relic of clan group. Each surname is a code of identity of particular cultural group. As myth recounts there were all total twelve (12) clan or social groups among the Boros. These were inherited and practiced very strictly among them. The myth of creation of clan groups is regarded as sacred as religion. Allegorically it hints the tradition of customary law that practicing since time immemorial among the social groups. Some of the surnames prevailing in contemporary age are derivative in nature. These may assume to derive from any of the mythical clan groups. It differs from region to region. Besides, in embryonic of some surnames sociological as well as historical background is resulting behind them. As a result many new surnames have been adapted from different cast inhabiting mutually in the periphery of the society. Particularly it may be observed in the context of Assam; and North-Bengal areas in the state of West Bengal.

### **II. OBJECTIVES**

Prior to this any of the researchers in the field of socio-linguistics or sociology has not been attempted technically to analyze about validation of surnames of the Boros. Keeping in view a sociolinguistic and sociological analysis will be done in this paper. What about the sociological as well as ethno-historical importance and how the surnames are conserving among the cultural groups will be taken into account in this analysis.

### **III. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

Needless to say that research and investigation are the most technical task. To collect data there needs to adopt scientific planning or methods. In this regard the investigator has gathered some data from an empirical field investigation. Being a native of this linguistic community the investigator is more or less familiar to the society and culture. Therefore it was easy to gather relevant data from own intuition as far as needed. Besides, many of the data have been extracted from published materials of culture and literature available in native language. Keeping in view many more data are collected from various sources to make the investigation scientific and authentic.

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<sup>1</sup> A tribe of North East India belonging to the great Mongolian race; linguistically they have mother tongue of Tibeto-Burman group of languages. A major portion of the populations inhabit in the state of Assam. They speak a native language known as Boro; it derives from the generic term Bodo which corresponds to the place name Bod or Tibot. Rajmohan Nath, in the monograph entitled **Background of Assamese Culture** (1978, second edition) commented minutely about the place name.

#### IV. POINTS OF DISCUSSION

To make clear the hypothetical statement as cited above the data collected from various sources may be divided in to three primary sub-categories: (a) Inherited surnames (b) Derivative/ adopted surnames and (c) Compound surnames. The surnames under category (a) are closely related to the myth of customary law and religious rituals. The surnames under category (b) have historical background to evolve from inherited as well as original surnames of other racial communities surrounded within the social context. The surnames of category (c) are composition of two different surnames. This is a kind of compounding in linguistic typology.

##### A. INHERITED SURNAMES: SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW POINT

In case of surnames, the term 'inherited' is used to define the genealogy of clan groups extant among the community. Its tradition and linearity has to be examined based on myth and rituals. As extant in the folk-society, the myth recounts that once a boy named 'Sikhrijwhlao' and a girl named 'Sikhrisikhla' mutually engaged in an incest relationship. This is guilty in the view of social taboo and customs. Therefore they have to purify with the performance of rituals. The supernatural human 'Mwnsingsing' has advised the person to organize a ritualistic purification. To perform the rituals people have been suggested and accordingly distributed their duties. Based on assigned duties they have been divided into twelve sub-groups. As mythical tale recounts the twelve (12) different types of surnames have originated from this ritualistic occurrence. Each of the surnames refers to the particular clan group. These are: Swargiari, Ramchiari, Basumatari, Daimari, Baglari, Mahilari, Goyari, Chainari, Khakhlari, Uari, Mochahari, Narzari.<sup>2</sup> As suggested by the super human being "Mwnsingsing", the assigned people of "Swargiari" group is honoured as man of knowledgeable person and has to take responsibility for judging guilty or misdeeds. The assigned person from "Ramchiari" sub-group will have to execute the suggestion given by the Swargiari. The person from the "Mahilari" group is the authority of collecting fee for judgment of dispute. The fourth person will have to play the role of selecting place for performance of rituals of purification of the two accused couple. The person is known as Basumatari. The fifth one who is to be known as "Khakhlari" will have to collect sacred grass KHANGKHLA. The person from the Uari/Wari/Hasungari group will have to collect bamboo and other things for erecting hut. The person from the group of Baglari will have to collect bark of banana and have to support in erecting the fence of hut. The other person from the group of "Bonbhagari" will have to collect grass and straw for the purpose of setting fire at the moment of rituals. This group is also known as "Mochahari/ Mochari". The person from the Dwimari group will have to collect water from rivulet or river for performance of rituals. The name of the clan group is derived from the word DWI (water). The "Narzari" group is assigned duty for collecting dry jute leaf. This is necessary for purification of accused persons while rituals are over. The group of people who involved in collection of jute leaves is known as "Narzari". The word NARZI means jute leaf; and the word ARI means man or people. Accordingly the name of clan group "Narzari" is derived from it. The super being Mwnsingsing told to a group of people that you have to play role of collector of areca-nut for the rituals. The word GOI refers to Betel-nut; the group of people who collected betel-nut for the rituals known as "Goyari". As suggested by the Mwnsingsing a group of people will have to take responsibility of cleanliness of the place of rituals. The place of rituals before or after completion of performance shall have to do clean and hygienic. This group of people is known "Chainari". The word seems to be derived from the word SWINAI means act of cleaning of place with the help of spade or tools like that. Etymologically it refers to a social group of people and the group was assigned duty for cleaning the place of worship. These are inherited surnames as recounts the myth. Besides, the tale describes and corresponds to the creation of customary law of the community. It evolves from the act of rituals performed for purification of two accused persons. That accused persons were involved in incest relationship which was found illegal in the eye of social taboo and custom. As traditional folk-philosophy and social attitude purity in relationship is strictly maintained among the social group. In this native language the group is called MAHARI. It is fairly articulated in a folksong. About twelve ethno-centric small social groups are described in the folk-song in which mythical motifs are observed. The twelve small ethno-centric groups are known BARO MAHARI. The song goes as follows:

Saboti megong singri daba  
Agwi lahari,  
Be songsarkhwu swr khunglaigwn  
Agwi baro mahari.  
Saboti megong singri daba  
Agwi lahari,  
Be dhwrwmkhwu swr swrjigwn

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<sup>2</sup> Dhuparam Basumatary, a native field worker in the area of culture has written a small monograph in Boro known as Boro-Kacharir Bathou Dharma Aru Samaj Sanskriti (1988) in which he has retold the story of mythical tale in connection with evolution of surnames.

Agwi baro mahari.  
Saboti megong singri daba  
Agwi lahori,  
Be megongkhwu swr khalaigwn  
Agwi baro mahari.<sup>3</sup>

**English rendering:**

(Oh my dear,  
As the vegetable Saboti and Singri  
The administrator of the world  
Will be the group of twelve clans  
Oh my dear,  
As the vegetables Saboti and Singri  
The creator of the religion  
Will be the group of twelve clans  
Oh my dear,  
The consumer of the vegetable Saboti and Singri  
Will be only the group of twelve clans)

The text of the mythical tale describes a mythical background of creation of clan group and their inherent ethno-centric group identity. On the one hand it describes about social structure and archetype of village council of the ancient Boro society. Thus the folk song has also sociological importance from the perspective of social history. Besides it reveals all about the social philosophy and cultural identity in particular.

**B. DERIVATIVE/ADOPTED SURNAMES: SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW POINT**

Derivative/adopted surnames are to some extent acquired due to process of social contact or mutual correspondence among other linguistic or racial communities within the geographical or social context. There are some reasons behind it; and to know the fact of history of this kind of surnames it is necessary to observe to the social history of Assam, a State of India. As social history recounts there may be two major factors which inspired this small linguistic community to adopt heterogeneous surnames. Of that kind one is acquired as result of early colonial period in this part of land. The surnames of this kind are few in number. Surnames like CHOUDHURI, PATGIRI are of this kind. The surname CHOUDHURI was assigned to the people of administration who acted as revenue collector of the specific area of land; which is called MOUZA, and the name of the person is popularly known MOUZADAR. Choudhuri is a title of honour. It derived from Sanskrit origin word. Thus Patgiri is also a title of honour who acted as Mauzadar in the District of Darrang in the early British period in Assam. Now-a-day it becomes a family title. Among the Boros these two family titles are also found, particularly among the Mauzadar family. The other factor is on socio-religious background that existing since the early decade of 16<sup>th</sup> century. The impact of Neo-Vaishnavism is one of the causes of existing family titles that were acquired from such kind of background. For instance the titles Das, Deka, Sarania, Thakuria, Uzir etc. are of this kind. The Guru of the religious preacher under the Satra institution inspired the Boro people who devoted to the Vaishnava religious philosophy in particular. Those who belonging to the Boros they aspired to accept these title. Some of the Boros assigned themselves with compound title like 'Das Boro' to remain ethnic identity along with acquired title. Scholars in this field have opinion that this group of people in known as Sarania Kachari. It means they are belonging to the Boros, a sub-branch of the Dimasas of Kachari dynasty popularly known as Dimaphur. Thus believers of Brahma religious philosophy, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, assigned themselves the 'Brahma' title as the surname as advocated by Kalicharan Brahma (later known him as Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma). This is a newly acquired surname that emerging among the Boro people in the western part of Assam. Kalicharan Mech was the initiator and preacher of Brahma religion in the Boro society. The Brahma title lately exists as the family title among the group of Brahma religious section. Thus similar phenomenon may be noticed among the people of the Boros (popularly known Mech/Meche in Govt. accounts) in the state of West Bengal, especially regarding the use of surnames or family title. For example, chiefly two kinds of titles may be mentioned for discussion. One is acquired based on religious background and the other is based on historical background. Saiba and Thakur both are derived from religious background; and Chuba, Gabur, Mondol, Karji, Katham, Ray these six titles are acquired as a result of historical background during the Koch dynasty. So far concerned and as available data the title 'Saiba' was derived from the religious background who devoted to the worship of Lord Siva during the Koch dynasty. Lately this group of people was known as the Saiba section. The title 'Saiba' exists as the family title. Thus the title 'Thakur' was also assigned to the group of people who devoted to the Anukul Guru. Regarding the existing of title 'Chuba' there is a

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<sup>3</sup> Opcit.,p.22

historical background. In the rule of Koch dynasty people are divided into sub-groups based on activity assigned for performance of works and responsibility to the kingdom. As available data it is known that an efficient person was assigned as the chief administrator of the province (comprising a few villages) for look after the people inhabiting surrounding the Buxa Duar; and assigned responsibility for protection of lives and wealth of people of that area. The person was entitled Chubadar (who look after people and their lives of the Chuba 'Province'); later it becomes as the surname of the family.<sup>4</sup> Thus the title 'Mondol' may be assumed to derive from the word of Bengali origin. In Boro the meaning of the title is owner of huge land. The title 'Karji' may be derived from the word of Urdu origin 'Karj' (loan / finance). The persons or family from whose the king family of the Koch dynasty taken financial assistance or borrowings was popularly known by Karji title. Later it becomes a family title. Thus the title 'Ray' is also a derivative surname. The Boro people under the Kalchini Block of North Bengal shifted to Bengali linguistic community; as a result they are known by 'Ray' title.<sup>5</sup>

### **C. COMPOUND SURNAMES**

There are chiefly two reasons in the formation of compound surnames in this society: (i) originated by marriage and (ii) due to impact of religion of other social group or linguistic community. Especially in Assam and West Bengal the impact of religious ideology or philosophical concept has a great significance in changing social structure as well as culture of the Boros. As a result the Boro people have shifted into other linguistic as well as cultural communities; and later have accepted new surnames borrowed from other caste along with inherited surname. In the context of Assam surname like Das Boro, Brahma Choudhuri, Brahma Patgiri etc. are compounded surname. Compound surnames are also acquired by marriage, specifically titled for married woman. This is to be seen among the educated couple not in the ancient society. A married woman, if wants to take her husband's surname along with her surname that acquired by inheritance, can be compounded for her marital identity. Supposed an woman inherited parental surname like 'Basumatari' and her husband's surname is "Kherkatari" then the compounding will be made of 'Basumatari Kherkarati'; on the other hand if an woman has married a man other than her racial community, the compounding will be made of two different surnames. The first title will be her parental surname and the second one will be taken from her husband, e.g. If a woman's surname is DAS and husband's surnames is NARZARI then it will be compounded for marital identity, e.g. DAS NARZARI.

### **V. SOCIOLINGUISTIC VIEW POINT OF SURNAMES**

Here twelve kinds of inherited surnames are mentioned in the above discussion. This is important to note that all of the words relating to the surnames demonstrate linguistic as well as sociolinguistic connotation. Each surname has its own linguistic typology. Linguistic typology of the surnames indicates culture of the community and socio-cultural context in which words relating to surnames come into existence. All of the inherited surnames as mentioned above are closely related to the mythical origin. Thus some of the derivative as well as acquired surnames may also be related to the social as well as ethno-history. From this perspective it may be observable that each of the surnames has its specific linguistic connotation from which a historical background may also be defined. This is important to the sociolinguistic view point of surnames. Some examples may be taken into account in this analysis. Let us take some examples,

1. SWRGW-ARI>SWRGIARI>SWARGIARI. This word is composed of two linguistic morphemes SWRGW and ARI. SWRGW refers to HEAVEN, semantically pious or sacred and ARI refers to HUMAN BEING. It means man of pious/ sacred who performed sacred works relating to purification of guilty activity done by human being. It has been described in the mythical tale as cited above sub-head (A). This is one of the surnames from which can easily be traced out semantics of cultural context. The initial word has its own lexical meaning and the final morphological unit is the absolute one; i.e ARI. In case of all surnames this kind of composition is noticeable. From a sociological view point the linguistic composition of the surnames may be taken as the sign of identity of ethno-linguistic group.
2. RAMCHIARI<RAISONG-ARI. This word is supposed to be composed of two morphological segments in which ARI is word ending morpheme. As myth recounts this group need to execute suggestion given by SWARGIARI. Semantically the name itself indicates status of the group.
3. Thus may be analyzed semantics of the surname BAGLA-ARI. This is composed of two morphological segments. The word BAGLA refers to bark of banana or trees and ARI refers to people. Semantically refers to its group identity. This group of people is entitled to collect bark of banana for erecting hut for the purpose of ritualistic performance.

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<sup>4</sup> This opinion has been extracted from the article "Phwler" written by Ramesh Chandra Chuba published in the Journal titled "Alaikhungri", January 2016 published by Jalpaiguri District Bodo sahitya Sabha.

<sup>5</sup> Ramesh Chandra Chuba, Phwler (Clan), *Alaikhungri (a journal of the Jalpaiguri District Bodo Sahitya Sabha)*, 2016, 30-31.

4. BASUMATARI<BWISWMUTHI-ARI. The word is derived from Sanskrit origin BASUMATI. The derivative formation in Boro language is BWISWMUTHIARI. BWISWMUTHI means the mother earth; it correspondence to BASUMATI. This group of people is entitled to select the place for performance of rituals.
5. NARZARI<NARZI-ARI. In this composition there are two different morphemes. The initial morpheme is unique in nature, which refers to jute leave and the final morpheme is a suffix used to refer to human being. The above mentioned myth narrates about the cultural group known as Narzari. They are entitled to collect jute leave for ritualistic purposes.
6. KHAKHLARY<KHANGKHLA-ARI. The initial word KHANGKHLA of the derived word KHAKHLARI refers to a kind of grass which is used in the ritualistic worship as the symbol of purity. This group of people is believed to be entitled as collector of grass for the ceremonial purposes.
7. UARI<OARI<OUARI. This composition seems to be derived from the word OUA (bamboo), which is narrated in the myth of origin of surname. Therefore it may be assumed to derive from the word relating to bamboo. As recount in myth they are entitled to collect bamboo for the purpose of rituals and worship.
8. GOIARI<GOYARI. Here the initial morpheme GOI is used to refer to areca nut. It indicates the group of people who are entitled to collect betel-nut for ritualistic performance.
9. DAIMARI. This word has also two morphemes, e.g. DAI and ARI. The initial word DAI refers to water. It means the group of people needs to collect sacred water for ritualistic purpose.
10. CHAINARI. The typology of the word has also two morphological segments. The word CHAI refers to cleaning of place of worship or rituals; and it hints the origin of surname from which the clan group CHAINARI is believed to be derived.
11. MAHILARI/ MAHALIA. As recounts the myth the word relating to the surname refers to the particular group of people who are suggested by the religious Guru Mwnsingsing to assemble the people and collect fee of judgment. Here the word MAHAL may be derivation from other linguistic sources. MAHILARY is seems to be derived from MAHALIA; may be the Urdu origin that refers to the wealthy person who collect and sale goods in huge amount.
12. MOCHAHARI/MOCHARI. The initial morphological segment of the word MOCHA refers to tiger. It means the group of people who are engaged by the Mwnsingsing Guru to keep protection the people from the tigers and other ferocious animals while go for performance of rituals near by the jungle.

The linguistic analysis of the words relating to surnames reveals information of the traditional society, structure and culture of the Boros. Typologically each of the surnames has sociological importance besides its linguistic significance.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis focuses tradition and social structure of the past era; and on the other hand linguistic significance of surnames. From this viewpoint it may be said that culture may also be observed based on typology of linguistic features of surnames. Each of the words relating to surnames has cultural background, and each word represents the small ethno group of the society which is to be called clan group. Genealogy of each clan group is being preserving in this society, though there are no strict validation of clan system among the Boros. Surnames may be treated as remnant of clan identity of the past, particularly in the Boro society.

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