

Cultural and Material Changes of Bodos in 21st Century

Nripen Baro¹, Dr. Ranjita Boro²

¹Research Scholar, Centre for Language Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya; Assistant Professor, Dept. of Bodo, Tangla College, Tangla

²Assistant Professor, Dept. of Bodo, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

Abstract

The Bodos are one of India's earliest residents, mainly in Assam, with separate language, culture, identity, own religion, dwelling style, way of life, social conventions, beliefs, attire and ornamentation, furniture and utensils, eating habits, musical instruments, festivals, and more. However, traditional Bodo culture is gradually evolving as a result of modernity's impact throughout time. Changes have been observed in both material and non-material cultures. With the arrival of the nineteenth century, changes in the Bodos' societal attitude can be seen. The mindset, lifestyle, styles of behaviour, morals, values, beliefs, ideologies, politics, philosophies, economics, and so on are all slowly changing. Modernization has extended the Bodos' world and brought about fundamental changes in their economic and cultural lives. The Bodos' worldview and lifestyle are growing more sophisticated and worldwide. Today, a segment of the Bodos have converted to various religions. The Bodo people have evolved into a multi-religious culture that accepts the concept of pluralism. Thus, in Bodo civilisation, we have several surnames such as Brahma, Brahma Choudhuery, Patgiri, Thakhuria, Deuri, Lahary, and so on. Modern education, Bodo social organisations, Christianity, town and semi-town, science and technology, communication development, government agency development projects, and so forth are all possible causes of cultural changes. The study seeks to evaluate the effects of modernism on traditional Bodo culture. Furthermore, the study seeks to identify the sources and causes of cultural shifts.

Keywords: Bodos, Culture, Material, Impact, Modernization, Changes, Society.

1.1 Introduction

Traditional cultures have major social, cultural, and linguistic diversity, resulting in a historical pattern. Simple techniques, animal domestication, the utilisation of locally available raw materials, and the barter system are all important characteristics. While everyone acquires the culture of their birth, no two people have identical human contexts or life experiences. As a result, even if a culture or society creates identical products, they are not entirely uniform, and each individual has a distinct personality, acting and reacting in their own unique way.

Social change is an ongoing phenomenon in all communities and throughout history, albeit its rate varies. No society is static, and sociocultural change is a relative idea. Tribal cultures, for example, have gone through several periods in terms of social, economic, technological, and demographic development. Several factors influence the direction and rate of this transformation. Modernisation refers to the transition from a conventional to a more sophisticated, technologically advanced, and fast changing

lifestyle, rather than a conservative one. Social scientists acknowledge that modernisation is not always beneficial, as it combines traditional and innovative approaches. According to D. Roy, industrialisation has a unique impact that accelerates social transformation, particularly among tribal communities. Industrialisation not only forces tribals to adopt industrial cultural traits, but also requires significant structural and organisational changes. This includes abandoning traditional beliefs, values, and customs and adopting new socio-cultural elements, resulting in a shift in their cultural identity. It can also have an impact on tribal identification.

This research explores how societal developments in the Bodo region have significantly altered rural living over the past decade. Future developments and trends will distinguish rural living from its current state. About 30 years ago, people lacked access to autos, electricity, electronic communication, chemical fertilisers, and public education. Commercial commercials on radio and television create a need for new household products.

1.2 Review of Literature

Review of literature is an integral part of scientific research. As research becomes increasingly data-driven and more interdisciplinary across disciplines, the need for an accurate literature review is greater than ever.

Bhaben Narzee's 'Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti (1966) and Boro- Kacharir Geet Mat (1991) gives details the traditional Bodo culture and the folk songs that are prevalent in those periods. He writes the various aspects society and the culture, like housing, food habits, dress and ornaments, rites and rituals, as well as the religious offerings and mantras, folk healing, cultivation, hunting, fishing, family systems and social stratification.

Dhirendra N. Majumdar in his thesis entitled A Study of Cultural Change in two Garo Villages of Meghalaya (1980) studies the changes of culture Wajadagiri and Matchakolgiri of Meghalaya. In the thesis it is found the Garos, land and people, geographical profile, life cycles, story of Wajadagiri and Matchakolgiri, method of cultivation, family and household systems, change in socio-economic structure, property inheritance as well as administration system.

Dino Nath Basumatary studies the *Bodo* culture, history and the impact of Christian missionaries on *Bodo* culture in Assamese in his book '*Boro Jatir Itihas- Sanskriti Aru Kristian Missionari* (2011). He classifies the book into sixth parts. In second chapter he gives a brief introduction of the *Bodo* groups, in third chapter the history of arrival of Christian missionaries in India and their influences on *Bodo* culture. In the remaining chapters he discusses the society, culture and language of the *Bodos* and its relation to the languages of other tribes of North East India.

Rupashree Hazowary has recently studied the folk performing arts of the *Bodos*, in her thesis entitled (unpublished) *Folk Performing Arts of the Bodos: A Study in Kokrajhar District* (2016). In the thesis, she presents the history of performing art in world, performing art in India, North East of *Bodos* and ethnographic profile of the *Bodos*, the dance and genres, like folk dance of the *Bodos*, dances associated with religious festivals, agricultural festivals, life cycle etc, the folk music of the *Bodos* and its genres, folk dramas of the *Bodos*.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this research is to investigate Bodo artistic civilisation and the evolution of tradition and culture in the 21st century. Following are the objectives-

1. To highlight the traditional *Bodo* customs and material use changes and the impact of civilization in the modern society.
2. To examine the factors responsible for the *Bodo* culture and material use changes

1.4 Research Methodology

The study's technique is both comparative and analytical, with a focus on traditional and modern Bodo cultures. The study has incorporated both primary and secondary data. The primary data were gathered using structured surveys, event participation, observations, face-to-face contacts, and so forth. Secondary data were gathered from published books, journals, manuscripts, research articles, and government publications. The traditional ceremonies and rituals were studied first, and their structures and forms were compared to the current system. The examination of ancient and modern customs and rituals resulted in comparative research. Field research has been conducted, and various activities will be observed and participated in. As a result, both the participation and observation methods are limited. Again, the study technique incorporates geographical, discursive, deductive and inductive, cross-cultural, folk culture, and mass culture methods.

1.5 Analysis and Discussion

(a) Marriage and religious practices

Marriage was a social institution in Bodo society, with a serious religious ritual that was required for each marriage to be regarded valid. However, it has been seen that new marriage systems have emerged in Bodo community, including court marriage, church marriage, temple marriage, and love marriage. Furthermore, several modifications have been seen in the many aspects of Bodo marriage. Traditionally, marriage in Bodo society was a solemn religious institution. Six main types of marriage existed: *Swngnanwi Lainai Haba* (Arrange Marriage), *Gwrjia Habnai Haba* (Marriage by service), *Karsonnai Haba* (Entering the bride's house before settlement), *Bwnanwi Lainai Haba* (Marriage by capture), *Dwnkarlangnai Haba* (Marriage by elopement), and *Dongkha Habnai* (Marrying a widow by residing in her house). Contemporary Bodo society has seen the emergence of new marriage systems, including court marriage, church marriage, temple marriage, and love marriage. These modern forms coexist with traditional practices.

Traditionally, brides wore '*Dohkona thousi*' and '*Fasra*', while grooms wore '*Gamsa*'. However, modern weddings now incorporate diverse attire including dhoti, long pants, trousers, coats, crowns, gloves, skirts, blouses, neck-ties, belts, socks, and shoes, depending on religion and region. Marriage venues, once decorated with banana leaves, are now adorned with modern lighting systems from tent houses, thermocol, and balloons.

Modern furniture such as chairs, dining tables, and tea tables has largely replaced traditional items like jute sacks, bamboo mats, bamboo-made bedsteads, wooden bedsteads, and low wooden seats at Bodo marriage ceremonies. The food served has also expanded significantly beyond traditional rice, pork, and rice-beer, to include modern items like *luci*, *puri*, *souse*, *papads*, *paneer*, *pickles*, *soya beans*, *butter*, *wheat*, *barley*, *ghee*, *sweets*, and *fruits*. In addition to their traditional musical instruments like *Kham*, *Serja*, *Sifung*, *Jotha*, *Gonggona*, and *Thorkha*, Bodo marriage ceremonies now widely feature band parties, audio tapes, and musical bands for entertainment.

(b) Art and Craft

Folk art changes as society does. The Bodo people are becoming less dependent on their traditional craft

skills for a living as they become more involved in government, semi-government services, or business. Many have moved to suburban or metropolitan areas from rural villages, embracing contemporary lifestyles. In Bodo villages, the number of traditional handicrafts, such as basket makers, is declining; in certain areas, there are none at all. As villagers find more modern ways to meet their requirements, the market for traditional goods is also declining. Modern substitutes are replacing conventional materials and goods. For example, plastic containers are replacing bamboo baskets, and plastic rope is taking the place of jute rope for a variety of applications, such as building houses, raising cattle and raising pigs.

Traditionally, natural materials were used to decorate the entire wedding site. For example, banana trees were used as posts for the gates and altar. Banana leaves were utilised for covering roof and as fencing, bamboo were used as supporting posts, cross beams, cross bars etc. However, in order to maintain the standard standing in the community, most of the Bodo families utilise the expensive decoration brought from the tent home, lighting system in decoration with balloons and thermo cols, ready produced colourful colour papers etc. In addition, traditional furniture is being replaced by contemporary pieces like chairs, dining tables, tea or coffee tables, couches, almirah, cloth stands (alna), etc.

(c) *Costumes*

It has been noted that younger generations are embracing new styles, but older generations are not in favour of copying innovative designs and colours. In both rural and semi-urban areas, women's clothing is essentially the same. Young ladies occasionally dress in surridder, Bihari or Punjabi styles, and some married women wear Indian shari. Due to the influence of western culture, young girls today wear long pants, particularly jeans and occasionally half-pants, T-shirts, leggings, chemise, shirts, panties, etc. The Bodo women wore braces with blouses and petticoats with dokhnas when they went out. Additionally, they substituted jackets and sweaters for shawls. Sometimes a woollen cap is worn as a winter outfit. which the elderly women were unaware of.

The ancient wooden footwear known as "Phwitha" is now out of style, whereas sandals and shoes made of leather, plastic, rubber, and fabric have become popular. Motor tyre slippers are becoming less common and are mostly used by senior males. In a similar vein, ladies are seen wearing new jewellery or other contemporary, attractive ornaments that they can actually afford, despite the fact that the traditional type of ornaments is not as popular. The Bodo women no longer wear some of the traditional ornaments that are still common among the Kok Boroks and Dimasas, such as thalinglora or dwula (ear ornament), khebkhra (ear ornament), zibwu zinziri or hashili (neck ornament), phiushi (neck ornament), gol patha (neck ornament), abwi lw (neck ornament), and thakha mala or thankbha siri (neck ornament).

(d) *Cookery*

Rice has been and continues to be a staple or major cuisine of rural Assam. Villagers do not consume atta, maida, or suji; yet, these culinary products are popular among urban residents. Food habits are gradually spreading to villages as they become more modernised. Bodos, typically provide *zwu* or *zumai* (local rice bear) to guests, but also accept tea and milk like other Assamese communities. Bodos are less likely to prepare and consume conventional light or secondary foods. Today, popular dishes include *pitha* (cake), *shithao* (oily cake), *enthab* (plate cake), *mwider khwma*, *shobai gwan* (nonboiled fried sticky rice), fried sesame, and fried black pulse. However, the use of *shwurai*, *maibra homnai*, *dwini shithao*, and *mwshwu thaphli* (a cake made from rice powder and water) is declining. Bodo families are less likely to consume fried pulses, boiling arum, boiled green banana, boiled kheshari dali (green grass pea), or cooked green pea. Light foods such as *phitha*, *enthab*, and *shithao*, as well as *tha shumli* (boiled tapioca), have grown popular in markets and homes to this day.

Traditional Bodo cuisine includes *ondla* (rice powder curry), *narjwi* (curry made from bitter jute leaves), *shobai* (black lentil), *napham* (fish-flavored gelatin), and *wngkhwri gwbab* (vegetable alkalied slimy curry). Rural tribes and non-tribes cook and eat with traditional metal pots, dishes, and wooden utensils. The kitchen now includes Chinese clay and steel pots, cups, and dishes, as well as plastic bottles, containers, jars, buckets, mugs, and water-filled drums. Bodos and other groups in Assam rely heavily on firewood for cooking. Recently, some families have switched to using LPG burners and electric heaters. In metropolitan areas, some families rely only on fireplaces. Some individuals use pressure cookers and electronic cookers as cooking equipment.

(e) Weaving and Textile

Weaving (handloom and textile) is an important cottage industry in the Bodos region. They manufacture threads from *khun*, cotton, *muga*, and *endi* cocoons. Nowadays, thread manufacture from cotton and *muga* cocoon is rare among the Bodos.

The Bodos rely heavily on the profitable industry of *endi* silk worm culture and fabric production. The *endi* cloth fabric is highly valued for its softness, warmth, strength, and durability, making it ideal for cold weather use.

Previously, the Bodos dominated commercial production of silk and *endi* cocoons, as well as *endi* yarn-based items. Endi yarn spinning and weaving were a household enterprise, and Bodo women were expected to excel at handloom artistry. The production of *endi* threads from *endi* (cocoons) is dropping dramatically. They now buy their needed threads from the market. Bodos now use synthetic, polyester, and Rolex yarns, in addition to *endi*, pat, and *muga* materials.

There used to be no weaving center among the Bodos. The handloom was typically solely utilised at home. Every household had at least two or three handlooms. When weaving and textiles change, various NGOs play a significant role. They supported the weavers and other Bodo craftspeople. The Bodoland Regional Artisans and Weavers Federation, or BRAWFED, is one noteworthy NGO. This non-governmental organization is one of many that promotes and exposes Bodo textiles to government institutions and the global market.

(f) Change on cultivation methods and implements

Historically, the Bodos practiced rudimentary agriculture, clearing land by burning jungles, digging holes for seeds, and relying on monsoon rainfall. They favoured plain, alluvial soil and built artificial irrigation systems and embankments to control water in their paddy fields. Their traditional implements included the Nangwl (Plough), Jungal (Yoke), Mwi (Harrow), Khasi (Sickle), and Khada (Basket), and farming was mostly done with wooden ploughs drawn by bullocks or buffalos.

Transition to Modern Agriculture Practices- Bodo farming methods have steadily changed away from traditional approaches as a result of modernisation. Traditional methods were labour-intensive, time-consuming, and produced little crops. Modern farmers use scientific techniques and technologies including tractors, sprayers, dusters, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides to increase production. Hybrid seeds and sophisticated scientific methods have also gained popularity, replacing traditional manure such as cow dung with artificial fertilisers and pesticides. Paddy cultivation is their main agricultural focus.

(g) Change on Religion

Bathou is the traditional religion of the Bodos, and it has a profound influence on social norms and behaviour. However, in some locations, traditional customs and ideas about 'Bathou' have changed. It has also been observed that the lavish traditions of 'Bathou' are rapidly fading as a result of modernisation. Today, enlightened people do not practise animal sacrifice or consume alcohol during religious

ceremonies. Furthermore, some Bodos have converted to other religions. Some of them have followed various Hindu sects. On the other side, some of them have become Christians since their forefather's time. Thus, Bodo society has evolved into a multi-religious society. Because of the influence of modernity, Bodo society has evolved into a plural society, and they have learned to accept the pluralistic notion of society. Bodo society now includes people of various religions. People in Bodo civilisation practise *Bathou Dharma*, *Brahma Dharma*, *Christianity*, *Satsang*, and *Ek Saran Naam Dharma*, etc.

(h) Change on Festivals and celebrations

Bodos celebrates a variety of major and minor festivals. They hold religious, seasonal, and agricultural-related festivals and ceremonies. The primary seasonal celebrations are: *Baisagu*, *Domashi*, *Katri Gasa Saonai*, *Amthi Sua*, *Putuli Haba*, and *Moha Honai*. The major agricultural celebrations include *Khothia Phonai*, *Mai Gainai*, *Mainao Lainai*, and *Engkham Godan Janai*. The primary religious holidays are *Kherai Puja* and *Garja Puja*. However, it is seen that modern generations celebrate various festivals such as *Durgapuja*, *Lakshmipuja*, *Diwali*, *Shiv Ratri*, *Janamashtami*, *Raksha Bandan*, *Holi*, and so on. Furthermore, the new generation celebrates holidays such as *New Year*, *Christmas*, *Good Friday*, and *Easter*. The Bodos also celebrate Republic Day and Independence Day. These days *Valentine's Day* is also celebrated with tremendous fervour by the Bodo youth.

Changes have been seen in traditional rituals, decoration, attire and ornamentation, musical instruments, eating habits, furnishings, and other areas. The common factors that led to such shift and changes include-

- **Modern Education's Impact**

Modern education serves as a powerful agent of social and cultural transformation, fundamentally altering the traditional mindset and lifestyle of the Bodo people.

- **Brahma Religion's Influence**

The introduction of the Brahma religion, initiated by Guru Kalicharan Brahma, has been a major catalyst for change in traditional Bodo culture, leading to reforms across social, religious, political, economic, and educational spheres.

- **Role of Bodo Social Organizations**

Various Bodo social organizations have significantly contributed to cultural and societal changes through consistent mobilization and reform missions aimed at improving the socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-religious, and socio-political conditions of the Bodo community.

- **Christianity Effect**

The arrival of Christianity in the 20th century, propagated by missionaries such as the Australian Baptist Missionary Society, Anglican Church, and Lutheran Missionaries, brought about substantial changes in the outlook and institutions of the traditional Bodo society.

- **Urbanization and Mindset Shifts**

The development of new towns and semi-towns in Bodo-concentrated regions has a profound impact, changing the mindset and living styles of the Bodo people.

- **Modern Communication and Lifestyles**

Modern means of transport, communication, and electronic media have led to significant changes in the mindset and living styles of the Bodo people.

- **Role of Science and Technology**

The rise of science and technology has been crucial in transforming various aspects of traditional Bodo culture. *Bathou* is the traditional religion of the Bodo people, significantly influencing their social customs and behavior. However, certain aspects of *Bathou* customs and beliefs have been amended, with lavish

traditions gradually decreasing due to modern influences. Modernity has led to a decline in practices like animal sacrifice and consumption of liquor during religious ceremonies among enlightened Bodos. Additionally, a segment of the Bodo population has converted to other religions, including various Hindu sects and Christianity. This has transformed Bodo society into a multi-religious and pluralistic community, accepting diverse faiths such as *Bathou Dharma*, *Brahma Dharma*, *Christianity*, *Satsang*, and *Ek Saran Naam Dharma*.

1.6 Conclusion

The modernity has extended the Bodos' world and brought about fundamental changes in their social and cultural life. Changes have been seen in house planning and building, cultivation, religion, livelihood, traditional diet, dress and jewellery, festivals, and so on. Today, their residences are identical to those of other Indians. Farmers currently employ power tillers, tractors, chemical fertiliser, insecticides, and other agricultural tools to increase crop yield. Furthermore, they grow vegetables for both consumption and marketing. Modernity brings a variety of modern food staples such as tea, coffee, butter, wheat, barley, and ghee in Bodo culture.

Nonetheless, fast foods such as *-maggie* and noodles are popular in current Bodo society. Television, refrigerators, washing machines, computers, and other modern conveniences are commonly used in Bodo society. Modern and wealthy households frequently employ modern, comfortable furniture, equipment, and culinary supplies. Aside from their traditional garb, they have accepted factory-made clothing. Furthermore, modernity has introduced numerous religions into Bodo society. The Bodo people now practise multiple religions. Bodo society now includes people of various religions. However, it has been found that, despite being transformed to varying degrees, some people have managed to keep their ethnic identity.

The Bodos had a distinctive traditional lighting system in the past. In the past, people would pierce a few castor plant fruits, also known as *endi* and *enda*, into a bamboo pole and use it as a torch. To make torches, either jute or *batha* (reed grass) sticks were utilised. Later on, they also used battery torches and kerosene lamps. These days, electric lights, torches, and other devices are used in areas that have been electrified. However, electric and battery-operated torches are also widely used.

In order to preserve the age-old society's cultural heritage, tradition and beliefs, a holistic approach is a must from different sections of our modern society. Traditions are often passed down through families, with grandparents teaching children mantras, cooking, or specific cultural skills. Families maintain cultural connections by cooking traditional recipes, speaking native languages at home, and engaging in small routines like lighting *diyas*, telling stories from the *Ramayana*, or wearing traditional clothes during festivals. These practices, though seemingly minor, play a crucial role in keeping the culture alive.

Educational institutions are increasingly contributing to cultural preservation by offering classes in Indian classical music, crafts, and Sanskrit, and organizing cultural events like folk dance days and food festivals. Cities such as Jaipur, Mysuru, and Varanasi have launched programs to support artisans, providing sales platforms and funding to ensure traditional skills are taught to younger generations. In North-east India too Government departments, NGOs, student unions and volunteers have been engaged in preserving the primitive way of life, medicine, traditional clothing and dances, showcasing their originality overseas fashion shows and exhibition.

The National Education Policy 2020 encourages local language learning and traditional knowledge, which could significantly aid in cultural preservation if effectively implemented. The article concludes that

Indian traditions are not disappearing but evolving. While some aspects may fade, new forms emerge. The key is consistent effort, even in small ways, to carry forward India's rich and expansive culture.

References and Informants

1. Anil Kumar Boro, (2012). *History of Bodo Literature*, Kolkata:Sahitya Akademi
2. Binoy Kumar Brahma, (2008). *Social Mobility*, Kokrajhar: Onsumoi Laibrary
3. Brahma K., Aspect of Social Customs of the Bodos, Bina Library Guwahati, Assam, 2008, p. 76.
4. Brahma Dr. Kameswar, A study in Cultural Heritage of the Boros, Bina Library, Guwahati, Assam, 1998, p. 65.)
5. Boro Samajni Songbijid Arw Nemkhanti, op. cit., p. 7.
6. K. Brahma, (1995). *Aspects of social customs of the Bodos*, Gossaigaon, Kokrajhar: Chiranjib Brahma
7. Narzaree, Indramalati. *Laisini Bikhaaou Indramalati*. A.R.B. Road, Panbazar Guwahati-1 N.L. Publications, Second edition 2008.
8. Phukan Ch. Basumatary & Swarna Prabha Chainary, (2017). *Monograph of the Boros*, New Delhi: Lakshi Publishers & Distributors
9. Sekhar Brahma, (2011). *Religion of the Boros and their Socio-Cultural Transition*, Guwahati: DVS Publishers

List of Informants

1. Deben Boro, Age- 63, village- Batakuchi, occupation- cultivator and preacher of Bathou religion, Udalguri district.
2. Nirmol Boro, Age- 70, village- Dhubguri, Tangla, occupation- cultivator, advisor of Bathou religion, Tangla Anchalik
3. Rusel Basumatary, Village- Landa Chuburi, Harisingha, Brahma Religious leader.
4. Jawaharlal Brahma, Village- Bwigriguri, Udalguri, Occupation- Udalguri Brahma Dharma Pracharak.
5. Kamakhya Brahma, Age- 52, Occupation- Subject Teacher, Brahma samaj leader
6. Poten Basumatary, Age- 54, Occupation- Clerk in Agriculture Department, President in charge, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Udalguri district.
7. Jehiskel Daimari, Age-47, Occupation- Religious Preacher, Advisor of BBC, Udalguri.
8. Carlus Narzari, Age- 48, Occupation- Businessman, religious leader (General Secretary, Udalguri Town Mandali, Catholic Church).