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Folk festivals of Bodos

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Abstract

The Bodos are one of the aboriginal or the earliest inhabitants of Assam. They are spread all over the Brahmaputra valley and the contiguous areas of North Bengal, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Nagaland. Since time immemorial, the Bodos have been maintaining a distinctive identity in terms of race, religion, and culture. The folklife of Bodos is arguably rich and multifaceted which can be seen in their day-to-day socio-cultural life. They have rich cultural traditions that flourished through generations. This paper attempts to explore the folk festivals of Bodos which they have practising invariably since time immemorial.

Keywords: Bodo, *Bwisagu*, *Domachi*, Assam

1. Introduction

The Bodos are traditionally a village-based agrarian society. As such they are well known for their festive celebrations. Every festival, be it social or religious is accompanied by feasting which primarily consists of rice beer (*jou*), meat and other traditional dishes. It has been observed that every festival described below is celebrated at the onset or the end of a particular agrarian stage. Apart from merry-making and joviality, the festivals of the Bodos are accompanied by a series of rites and rituals performed by the respective villages. Generally, every Bodo festival is a thanksgiving ceremony for the blessings received in the bygone days and a call for supplication to gods for good fortune. Given the above, the major festivals of the Bodos are summarised below:

1.1. *Bwisagu*

The *Bwisagu* is a springtime festival celebrated in the month of mid-April. It lasts for seven days beginning from the day of *Sankranti*, the last day of *Chaitra* (March-April) month. The term *Bwisagu* has been derived from the word *Bosor agu*, meaning New Year. As a customary convention, during this period, the normal domestic activities lie suspended being substituted by festivities in the midst of merriment, feasting, dancing and singing accompanied by playing of *kham* (drum), *siphung* (flute), *jota* (cymbals), *serja* (violin) and *thorka* (bamboo split instrument), (Mosahary 1986:250). The first day of *Bwisagu* is dedicated to the cattle, where the cowherds give them ritualistic baths. The horns are smeared with oil and ashes and gaily decked with garlands made of gourd and brinjal slices. Sometimes, the pounded rice flour is also applied in patches over the cattle's body. Finally, they are then led to the stream for the ceremonial wash. As the cowherds lead the way, they throw pieces of gourd and brinjal at the cattle, beckoning them to eat while simultaneously reciting the following rhymes:

Lao ja, panthao ja, bwswr bwswr er hanja hanja.
Bimani kiter, Phifani kiter, nwnswr jagwn halua gedir.
Bima gaide badi daja,
Phifa bolod badi ja.

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Bari khonayao dong embu bonggla, bi badi geder jangwla.

Translation:

Eat gourd, eat brinjal, let there be an increase in your herd in abundance, year after year.
In retrospect of your mother and father, let there be an increase in your herd.
Do not be like your mothers, who are stunted and short-statured,
Be like bull fathers, who are strong and mature.
Just like the frog lying in the homestead corner, may you be sleek and long.

Throughout the day, the cowherds spend playful time with the cattle. Moreover, the cattle are provided with new ropes to replace the old ones. Back home, the women busy themselves by washing clothes and utensils and cleansing their houses with cow dung emulsion. On the threshold of their houses, a bunch consisting of cane leaves and *katri* (zedoary) flower called *digoloati* etc., are tied on either side to ward off evil and misfortune during the coming year (ibid.:251). The first day of *Bwisagu* also marks the ceremonial eating of fowl meat cooked with bitter and sour leaves (called *gwka-gwkwi janai* in Bodo) collected from the forest. The eating of *gwka-gwkwi* symbolises the concept of one's severance with all the good and bad things of the passing year. The second day marks the worship dedicated to Lord *Bathou Bwrai* with necessary sacrifices in their respective homestead or collectively by the people. Special prayers like thanksgivings are offered to Lord *Bathou Bwrai* as well as seeking help and blessing for the forthcoming year. Some accounts suggest that the spirits of the ancestors are also propitiated with the offering of food and drinks in their respective names, being performed in the courtyard, in the south-facing direction.

Folklore reports suggest that towards the evening, the masses gather at the house of the village *douri* to worship Lord *Bathou Bwrai* and Goddess *Bathou Bwri* collectively, to bid farewell to the old year and welcome the New Year. After the propitiation of Lord *Bathou Bwrai* with sacrifices, the people dance and sing in circumambulation to the accompaniment of music, around the altar five times. Finally, the whole party divides itself into smaller groups where the young and old make separate groups. After that, each group goes from one house to another begging for *magon* (gifts) in cash or kind (Mosahary 1986:252-253). Henceforth, the festival enters into its usual bacchanalian theme, i.e., eating and drinking, singing and dancing accompanied by playing of *kham* (drum), *siphung* (flute), *jota* (cymbals), *serja* (violin) and *thorka* (bamboo split instrument).

The celebration of *Bwisagu* is extant with folk beliefs. For instance, they believe that those who indulge in quarrels and fights during *Bwisagu* would be reborn as cats and dogs. Secondly, they avoid sitting in the *kamplai* (four-legged stool) as they believe that it indicates sitting on the head of the parents. The *Bwisagu* festival enables the people to forget for a moment their hardship of pastoral life and live in a world of gaiety and fun, thereby refreshing themselves before the task ahead which is to be attended with renewed vigour and strength.

It has been observed that in some parts of Assam, the Bodos perform the *Putuli haba* (puppet marriage) on the seventh day. They make dolls of straw in the name of male and female mythical deities *Raona* and *Raoni*. The event symbolises the marriage of *Raona* and *Raoni*. This practice is based on the belief that if the couple is pleased with prayers and sacrifices, they shower blessings in the form of prosperous crops. Another extant belief among the Bodos is that, if these deities are honourably propitiated, even a childless couple may be blessed with children.

1.2. Domachi

One of the most popular festivals among the traditional Bodos is the *Domachi* (Maghw) festival celebrated in the month of mid-January. This festival corresponds with the Assamese *Magh Bihu*. This festival is as festive as *Bwisagu* and is celebrated with the consumption of Bodo cakes like *laru*, *pita*, and *shitao*, as well as drinking of rice beer to the heart's content. The significant characteristic of this festival is to enjoy the different types of cakes prepared by the Bodo people. Friends and relatives are welcomed and entertained by these traditional food items. The celebration is also marked by the tying of straw cords around the fruit trees to enable them to bear abundant fruits.

A distinctive feature of this festival is the construction of *bhela no* (house made of straw) on the river bank by the *Laokar* (cowherds), who spent the night there amidst merriment. Towards dawn, the cowherds set fire to the *bhela no*. The cowherds plunge into the water and subsequently warm themselves by standing on the side of the fire in their wet clothes and amidst much jubilation and dancing, chanting the following choruses (Narzary 2018:31):

Joi...joi...joi jwngni lagwni joi.
kwlani roga kwlaaha thangthwng,
swnapni roga swnapaha thangthwng,

*sahani roga saha thangthwng,
sanjani roga sanjaha thangthwng.
Joi, joi, joi jwngni lagwni joi.*

Translation:

Victory... victory...victory to our village.
Let the disease that comes from the south go back to the south,
Let the disease that comes from the West go back towards the West,
Let the disease that comes from the north heads back to the north and
Let the disease that comes from east go back again to the east.
Glory, glory, be to our village filled with abundance and prosperity.

In the relative past, the end of *Domachi*, marked the completion of the terms of service contracts between the cowherds and their masters. The cowherds retreat to their homes, while some others make overtures for new masters. Both the *Bwisagu* and *Domachi* festivals reflect the magnitude of importance accorded to cattle and cowherds in pastoral life.

1.3. Kati ghasa

This is another seasonal festival widely practised by the traditional Bodos. This festival is observed on the last day of the month of *Ahin* (Sep-Oct). In the evening, traditional lamps are made from the rinds of *thaigir* (*dillenia indica* fruit). The lamps are then lit in the paddy field, the altar of *Bathou*, the cowshed, and granary etc. The unmarried girls go around the paddy fields, striking the paddy softly with a *sewari* (a long bamboo split used in a weaving loom) stick polished with mustard oil. It signifies the yielding of bumper paddy crops.

1.4. Amtisua (Ambubachi in Hindu)

This is another ceremony performed by the traditional Bodos. The ceremony falls in the month of mid-June. Although it cannot be termed as a festival in the strict sense, nevertheless they observe it in dedication to Mother Earth (Goddess *Mainao*). The Bodos believe that *Amtisua* is a period of menstruation of Mother Earth hence they avoid activities connected with the earth. They believe that during these days Mother Earth menstruates in order to prepare herself for fertilising work. During this period, they do not dig, plough, cut trees and avoid entering the *bakri* (granary). For a week-long period, their agricultural activities remain suspended in honour of Mother Earth. Finally, on the last day, the women cleanse, and mud plasters their houses with cow dung emulsion. Moreover, it is seen that old brooms are thrown away, and new ones are used.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that folk festivals provide opportunities 'to perform the world' that is, to engage in sacred play or drama. By, their performance, involving community members, may provide or bring about social integration, making members known to one another, establishing social roles and publicising the benefits of living together harmoniously. The celebration of folk festivals reveals the cultural worldview and social psychology of the community regarding its indigenous knowledge and beliefs.

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