CHAPTER- 1
1.0 Folklore and folk custom

A wider meaning of folklore covers the entire culture of a folk group, usually a rural group whose mode of life is rather different from that of its urban counterpart. The term folklore was first used by the English scholar William John Thoms on 22nd August 1846. The literary meaning of the term folklore is the wisdom of the people, the people's knowledge.

According to Aurelio M. Espinosa folklore consist of beliefs, customs, superstitions, proverbs myth, legends, ritualistic ceremonies, magic, witchcraft and all other manifestations and practices of the primitive and illiterate peoples and of the common people of civilized society.

Again R.M. Dorson placed the material of folklore into four large groups.

1. Oral literature
2. Physical folklife or material culture
3. Social folk custom
4. Performing folk art.

According to Collins Cobuild Essential English Dictionary custom is something that the people of a society always do in particular circumstances because it is regarded as the right thing to do.

Custom is a traditional practice, a mode of individual behaviour or a habit of social life transmitted by the word of mouth or imitation, than regrained by social pressure, common usages and parental or other authority.¹
Herbart Halpart classified custom as follows:

1. From birth to grave (rites of passage and related periods)
   a. Birth and childhood
   b. Courtship and marriage
   c. Death and burial

2. Calendar
   d. Survey and general collections
   e. Christmas cycle (including memmering related to Easter)
   f. Movable calendar customs
   g. Other calendric customs (by date through the year)

3. Other customs
   h. Household customs
   i. Occupational customs
   j. Social customs (Approval/disapproval hoaxes and practical jokes etc.)
   k. Adult games, dances, practices.

Besides these classifications the folk custom may be dividing into four broad sectors namely

1. Belief and Religion
2. Festival and ceremonies
3. Games and Recreation
4. Folk Medicine

The social folk custom is concerned with community and family observances such as rites of passages as birth initiation, marriage and death. Social folk custom with deeply held folk beliefs constitute a folklore genre and which have acquired considerable magical and sacred potency are known as rituals. The religious aspects cover the modes of worship. It may deal with indigenous deities or with folk interpretations of monotheistic religion. Festival and celebration
generally apply public performances and entertainments. Certain games and recreations are learned through traditions. Similarly the ritual and custom associated with festival form an important segment of social folk custom. Folk medicine deal with traditional treatments remedies and cures practice through inheritance of transferred powers.

1.1 Folk custom and the Bodos

The Bodos constitute a major ethnic community belonging to Mongolian stock. Linguistically the Bodos are included in the Tibeto-Burman group under the Sino-Tibetan language family. Now most of the Bodo people are inhabiting throughout the plains of Assam.

The Bodos are rich in their social folk custom. There are a large number of folk beliefs relating to the different activities among the Bodos, such as belief in witchcraft and magic. The Bodos believe that some individual have supernatural powers which may be used to do harm. The individual who are thought to possess the supernatural powers are known as Daina or Daini among the Bodos. Beside s witch they have also so many folk beliefs relating to the birds, animals, trees, days, months, weeks etc. Bathou is the chief god of the Bodos. Besides this they worship many gods and goddesses. When they worship the gods and goddesses they offer many things and sacrifice lives in front of the gods and goddesses. Their offerings and sacrifices consist of rice, fruits, rice beer, goats, pigs, cocks, pigeons, ducks etc. they observe many festivals related to their religion. The 'Kherai' and the 'Garja' puja are the most important religious festival of the Bodos.

The Bodos observe various agricultural and seasonal festival and ceremonies. They observe some important ceremonies relating to their agriculture from sowing seeds to harvesting. The most important and popular seasonal festival of the Bodos is 'Baisagu' the springtime festival. In Assamese it is called 'Bihu'. This springtime festival is famous for community singing and dancing. During this festival the people of the village specially the young boys and girls beg alms from
door to door singing and dancing then they arrange feasts with the goods they get as alms. The next popular festival is the 'Domashi' the harvest festival. This festival is famous for different types of foods and home made cakes.

The Bodos have their own social laws and customs observed with rituals in respect of birth, marriage and death. Marriage ceremony is one of the most important ceremonies in the life cycle of the Bodos. Marriage is called 'Haba' by the Bodos. There are six types of marriages prevalent among the Bodos. There are so many folk beliefs related to the selection of the bride and settlement of marriage. The Bodos observe so many ceremonies immediate dead of a person till to the 11th to 13th day from the dead of a person.

Folk medicine is still practiced among the Bodos. It has its own concepts about the causation of diseases, wrath of gods, evil spirit, magic, witchcraft etc. even today when the facilities of modern treatment have become more or less easily available in the villages, faith in the folk medicine is fairly widespread and very much deep rooted among the Bodos. The folk medicines are used in both good and bad ways. The witches and the black magician use folk medicine to harm the human being. It is believed by the Bodos that the diseases which are caused by folk medicine can only be prevented with the help of folk medicine.

The knowledge of the social folk custom has a great relevance in modern sociological studies. For this purpose this study is designed on the folk custom of the Bodos of Goalpara district of Assam.

1.1.1 Scope of the study

Goalpara district is a large administrative area in the lower part of Assam. It is an area where different tribal and non tribal communities speaking different languages live in harmony. Goalpara district is a part of Brahmaputra valley. The Bodo constitute the largest populated tribe of Assam. They are scattered in every districts of Assam. The Bodos not only constitute a demographically important tribal community in Assam, but also they have been able to conserve their rituals
and customs. The tribal societies of Assam have undergone social transformation and some of their cultural traits have disappeared due to changing phenomena of development activities. Yet in spite of these changes the Bodo people have managed to conserve and follow many of their old customs and traditions. Their acculturation and assimilation with the neighbouring communities have brought changes to their social life as well as in culture but they are still maintaining their core culture intact.

My subject of study is the social folk customs of the Bodos of Goalpara district. The Bodos of this area are known as Magra by the Bodos of other area. Their social habit and culture differ from the Bodos of northern part of the river Brahmaputra. Some research work has been done in this field taking the other part of Assam but significant research materials have been not available in published form of this area. So the scholar has to depend particularly and extensively on interviews and observation of the community members/elders in the rural areas of the study area.

It is seen that not much work has been done systematically in this line of research and a lot of research work is yet to be done on the folk customs of this area. The present study is therefore attempted to make a general survey on the folk customs of the Bodos of Goalpara district. The study is expected to bring into focus the dynamics of the tradition in the life of Bodos.

1.1.2 Aims and objectives of the study

There are some important aims and objectives of the present study. The study of the social folk custom of tribal communities has emerged as an important recent subject of research. The Bodos are the highest populated tribal group in Assam. They are scattered all over Assam almost in all the districts of the state. Their culture differs from place to place depending on influence of other culture. Available systematic study on the topic has still not been done. The main aims and objective of the research may be outlined as follows:
1. The research aims at making a systematic attempt to study the folk beliefs, practices, rituals and ceremonies observed by the Bodo people of Goalpara district.

2. To know about the folk customs of the Bodos.

3. The study also aims at documenting folk customs of the Bodos of Goalpara district.

4. The study aims at making a comparative assessment of the social folk custom of the Bodos of Goalpara district with those belonging to other districts.

5. The study attempts to highlight the dynamics of folk beliefs practices, ceremonies and festivals in the changing time.

There is no gainsaying the existence of some suitable ethnographic accounts of a number of tribal communities. But we rarely find a detail picture of a village community describing the interrelations between society and cultural activities. By dealing the village community and its culture as single side of activity, the researcher wishes to examine the features of rural life as a whole. For this occasion the researcher’s preference falls on Bodo tribe who represent a segment of the grand tribal community of Assam.

1.1.3 Methodology

Systematic investigation and analysis are followed in research work and their proper application is possible on the basis of scientific approach. In order to derive an empirical data, particular methods were used in this research work for collecting and analyzing field report.

There are three types of method for collecting folklore materials. These are:

1. Observation method
2. Interview method and
3. Questionnaire method.
However one cannot apply all these uniformity in every fieldwork. As for example the kind of methodology needed to collect folktales is different from studying a dance performance. Depending on the generic qualities of folklore item one aims to study, he/she has to adopt different methodology.

The customs of the tribes vary widely from place to place and tribe to tribe in North-East India. This project attempts to study and compile the folk customs of the Bodos with special reference to their religion, festivals and other aspects of folk custom of Goalpara district. To meet the objectives the researcher relied on both secondary and primary sources of data. For the secondary data books, articles in magazines and newspapers published, related to the socio-cultural matters and research work available about the people in this respect have been taken for help to understand the overall situation of this community.

Since adequate research materials are not available in published form, I have depended mainly on participation with the people. As I am a resident of Goalpara district especially belonging to the Bodo community, I got opportunity of coming into direct contact with the Bodo community concentrated in this area. The materials from the field study have been collected through interview method. For the purpose of research some Bodo villages of Goalpara district have been visited. I observed the festivals and ceremonies observed by the Bodo people. I interviewed a number of Bodo people and active bearers of various aspects of their social folk custom.

Questionnaires and schedules are prepared to collect data from the informants and information collected are checked and cross checked from various sources.

1.2 Land and people of the study area

The investigation of my research work is based on social folk custom and rituals and ceremonies observed by the Bodo people of Goalpara district. The Goalpara district is a part of Brahmaputra valley which is situated on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. The total area of the district is 1824 sq km. the four
The boundaries of the district are, Kamrup district on the east, Dhuburi district on the west, the river Brahmaputra on the north and West and East Garo Hill districts of Meghalaya on the south. The district has five revenue circles 1. Rangjuli 2. Dudhnoi 3. Matia 4. Balijana 5. Lakhipur. Besides these, there are eight rural development blocks in Goalpara district. These are 1. Rangjuli 2. Kusdhowa 3. Matia 4. Krishnai 5. Balijana 6. Kharmuza 7. Lakhipur 8. Jaleswar. The district has 829 revenue villages. The district network is 794 km and it is connected with NF Railway and National Highway viz-37, 51 and 62. The district head quarter situated at the west of the Guwahati city from a distance of 150 km.

According to a basic table the total population of Goalpara district is 1008989 persons out of which males are 514162 and females are 494797. The density of population is 553. Sex ratio is 962 females against 1000 males. The total literacy rate of the district is 68.67% (72.67% male and 64.53% female). The population of the district contributes 3.24% of the total population of Assam.²

The total tribal population of the district is 110696 persons out of which is 55344 males and 53352 females. Percentage of S.T. Population to the total population of the district is 12.23%.³

Out of the total population of the Goalpara district 86.31% lives in rural areas and 13.69% lives in urban areas.⁴ As most of the people lives in village areas, the economy of the district is primarily an agrarian. The cultivators produce rice, jute, black gram and wheat. They also produce horticultural products like banana, areca nut, jack fruit, orange, pine apple and other vegetables also. Keeping of livestock like cattle, goat, pig, fowls, ducks is common in most of the families.

The district is an important part of Brahmaputra valley. Before ruled by the British rulers Goalpara area was ruled by the Kosh kings. Now some area of the district falls under the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council.

The people of different communities and religion inhabits in this area. The main inhabitant of the district are the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Hajongs, the
Rajbanshis, the Garos, the Assamese, the Muslims, the Santals and the Nepalies etc. among the tribes the Bodos and the Rabhas are of high in population.

1.2.1 The Bodos

The Bodos are a race of the Mongolian people who are described to be the inhabitants of a country north of the Himalayas and west of China. This land is known as Bod. The word Bod is supposed to mean a homeland. It is also said that there were many part of the country known as Har Bod, Kur Bod etc. The inhabitants of Bod country are known as the Bodo-Ficha or Bodocha or Bodosa (Bodo mean land and Ficha means children, hence children of the Bod country). In course of time they come to be known as simply Boddo-Bodo-Boro.

The Bodos are known by different names in different areas. The Bodos of Kachar district call themselves Kacharis. Likely Bodos of the North Bengal and Jalpaiguri are known as Meches. On the other hand, the Bodos or Boros of the Brahmaputra valley, particularly of some districts like Kamrup, Sanitpur, Mangaldoi, Barpeta and Jalpaiguri of west Bengal are known as Bodo-Kacharis or Boro-Kachari, although all of now are popularly known as Bodos.

The Kacharis may perhaps be described as the aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. They are identical with the people called Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal. These are the names given to them by outsiders. In the Brahmaputra valley the Kacharis call themselves Bodo Fisa (sons of the Bodos). In the North Cachar hills they call themselves Dimasa, a corruption of Dima Fisa or “sons of the great river.” They were known to the Ahoms as Timisa, clearly a corruption of Dimasa, so that this name must have been in use when they were still in the Dhansiri valley.
The Bodos are scattered all over north east India as well as all over India. But the state of Assam is the main abode of the Bodos. In this present study an attempt is made to discuss about the Bando speaking people of the Brahmaputra valley particularly of Goalpara district of Assam. In Goalpara district the Bodo speaking people are mostly residing in the villages under the Rangjuli and Dudhnoi revenue circle.

1.2.1.1 Language

Researches on various aspects of Bodo studies conclusively proved that the Bodo language belonged to the Bodo-Naga group of Sino-Tibetan language family. The Bodo speech includes Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari and Tipera language. The Bodo language shares some common features in respect of vocabulary, phonology, morphology and syntax with the sister languages of the Bodo group. “The language however, does not preserve any written record of the glorious past of the race, which indicates that the language remained confined to its spoken form only until recent past. In the aftermath of socio political awakening and movement launched by the Bodo leaders, the language was introduced as the medium of instruction in schools in the Bodo-dominated areas of Assam in 1963.” The Bodo language has reached it peak and has been included in the 8th schedule by the Indian government. The Bodo language does not have any script of its own and So Devanagiti script has been accepted for writing the Bodo language.

The Bodos of this area are mostly bilingual. They speak Bodo and Assamese language for communicating with other people. The Bodo speakers of other area call them as Magra because their style and tone of speaking Bodo is slightly different from standard language. But it had been proved that the written literature of Bodo language had its origin in Goalpara district. The first book on Bodo language “Boroni Fisa O Aen (1915)” was written by Gangasaran Boro who was a resident of Dhupdhara area of Goalpara district.
"The Bodo language has no script of its own. It is not clear whether the Boros used independent scripts in the past. Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the famous artist and scholar of Assam, said that in the ancient time a kind of Deodhani script was prevalent among the Kacharies (Bodo and Dimasa). Rabha has gathered Deodhani alphabets from an informant of Dimapur area, which was noted for Kashari reign and remains representing the art and architecture." 10

1.2.1.2 Food and drink

The food of the Bodos is determined by the conditions in which they are living. The staple food of the Bodos is rice. Rice is taken with locally grown vegetables and meat and fish. Some pulses such as Sobai, Khulthi are also eaten by them.

1.2.1.2.1 Vegetables

The Bodos take rice along with curry prepared with a variety of vegetables. They cook the vegetables in many ways such as sernai (fry with mustard oil), runai (boil), eonai (fry without oil), khaonai (roasted), menai etc. besides vegetables they also use some locally grown leaves as curry. They cultivate different vegetables whole the year. Among the leaves Mwitha is most favourite of the Bodos especially of the womenfolk. The taste of the leave is sour. The Bodo people boil it with small fish and nafam (preserved paste of dry small dry fish). Anla khari is a special prepared by the Bodos. For the anla khari vegetables are boiled with powdered rice. kharoi (alkali) is an important ingredient to prepare this curry. Sometime fish and meat are also thrown in the curry.

1.2.1.2.2 Meat

The Bodo are fond of meat-specially pork. They are also fond of chicken, mutton and duck reared at home. Pigeon is not a favourite among them. Buffalo is taken by them when it is sacrificed in front of deities. Otherwise they
usually do not kill buffalo to eat. They also go for hunting animals like deer, mongoose, and jungle fowl, hare, fox for meat. The meats is prepared in many ways such as, fry using mustered oil, boil with vegetables and green leaves and roasted. The Bodos preserve meat for future use. The Bodos like to eat dry meat preparing with sobai pulse.

1.2.1.2.3 Fish

Fish is a favourite food item of the Bodo people. In village areas it is seen that the Bodo woman and girls go for fishing everyday. Usually the Bodo people do not fry fishes. Instead of frying they (fishes) are mostly roasted and boiled with other curry. Small fishes are mostly prepared with mwitha and vegetables. They preserve dry fishes for future. One special kind of preserving dry fish is called nafam by the Bodo people. For preparing nafam the dry fish is pounded in a uwal along with dudh kasu, gon kasu and bor kasu etc. and make a paste. Then the paste is put inside an Owa Hasung (bamboo pipe), turmeric powder is put at the top of the pipe then it is covered with plantain leave. After 5 or 6 days it is ready for use. This preparation is preserved for whole the year. It is then used when they do not get fresh fish or meat for their meal. Besides fish the Bodos also eat some insects like usring (cricket), khangkhrai (crab), Gangjima (a kind of water bettle), palu or endi worm, egg of jurima insect. Bathun is a special preparation made by the Bodos. Fish, vegetables, crabs are roasted or boiled and a paste is made by blending with chilies onions etc.

The Bodos not only preserve meat and fish but also other fruits and leafy vegetables which for the future. They preserve narji bilai (jute leaf) for future by drying it and sometimes the dried leaf is powdered and preserved for future. Mejenga leaves are also preserved in the same way. They boil it with small fish or sometimes dry fish and consume it along with rice. People also eat narji leaves with pork.
Owa mewa (bamboo shoot) is also a favourite curry of the Bodos. They make a paste of young bamboo shoot by pounding it and put it into a container by mixing a small amount of water and use it the whole year. The taste of owa mewa is sour. Basically they boil it with fish and meat specially pork and sometimes it is also boiled with powdered rice.

Basically the Bodos do not take tea and breakfast. Instead of it they take ongkham gwjang (cold rice) and na bathun or other bathun in morning. They roast vegetables like potato, brinjal and fish, crab etc and make a paste with onion, ginger and some local masala leaf this is a favourite of the Bodo people.

The Bodos prepare some special items from rice with sibing pulse and coconut, sugar, salt etc. on some special occasions and festivals, these are called Fitha. Most of the fitha are prepared with powdered sticky rice. The Bodos also prepare saurai (flattened rice) makhrai, laru etc.

The kharoi is a most important ingredient of preparing curry of the Bodo people. It is prepared from dry plantain tree. Instead of oil they use kharoi in most of the curries. It is added in curries to decrease the sharpness of sour and bitterness.

1.2.1.2.4 Drinks

The habit of drinking liquor is an age old characteristic of the Bodos. “The tribal people cultivate the habit of drinking liquor from their childhood and it is a must in all their social and religious gatherings.” It is called jou by the Bodos. Most of the old and young village people always consume jou a liquor brewed from rice. Besides rice, other tribes of Assam brew liquor from different fruits locally available. The Bodos produce two types of liquor viz., bokha jou or jou bidoi and phithikha jou or jou gwran. “This variety of liquor though intoxicating is nutritious also.” The Bodos use rice beer in case of urine problem and phithikha jou in case of dysentery and stomach problems.
The Bodo women are expert in preparing rice beer and wine. The Bodo women prepare *jou* at their own home. Cooked rice is spread on a *dhara* (bamboo mat) or plantain leaf. After cooling, *amao* (yeast cake) is powdered and mixed in adequate amount. Then it is put into a *jonga* (big mud pot) and covered with plantain leave for formation. It takes three to four nights for formation. The juice produce from the fermented rice is called *bokha jou* or *jou bidoi*. It is also distilled to produce *phithikha jou* or liquor.

To prepare yeast cake, rice is soaked in water for two to three hours. Then it is powdered by pounding along with sugar cane leave, pine apple leaf, *amao bilai* (a wild leaf), *sini bilai* (a kind of sweet leaf) and chili etc. to make a sticky paste the powder is mixed with adequate water. Then some amount of previously made *amao* which is called *bima* is powdered and mixed with the paste. Then small flattened cakes are prepared from the paste and are put on a *sandri* (a porous utensil made of bamboo split) and covered with straw and cloth, it is then dried on sunlight for several days.

The Bodo people consume rice beer and wine in every festive occasion. Alcohol is used not only for honouring distinguished guest but also for making guest feel welcomed. To offer rice beer to the deities is customary in Bodo society. In most of the religious functions Bodo people offer rice beer to the gods and goddesses.

The habit of drinking coffee and tea is a recent luxury among the Bodos. Nowadays in some families tea is used in breakfast. Water is the usual liquid used for questing thirst. The Bodos though not fond of milk, use it in preparing tea. It had been seen that some old people cannot withstand the smell of milk and have allergy on it. "The general masses were not habituated to take milk as a drink, but well to do class could afford it."
The Bodo people are addicted to chewing *goi phathoi* (areca nut and betel leaf) with *sunui* (lime) and *thangkhw* (tobacco). They also smoke *khasreng* or *biri* (tobacco rolled in dry *saal* leave or paper for smoking). To offer *goi phathoi* is considered a great honour to a person. The Bodo women always carry *goi phathoi* with them when they go for fishing or other job. Invitations on special occasions are made by *goi phathoi*. It is also offered to the deities in pujas.

But nowadays, the Boros have modified their food habit and menu of diet according to the food habit of the neighbourhood and other communities. Many of the animal meats have now been abandoned due to the influence of the Hindu religion among the Boros. These days they like to drink milk, eat curd, butter, ghee, sweets etc., though these items were not preferred by common folk in the past, even if they were available to them.  

1.2.1.3 Dress

The Bodo people wear traditional dress. The women wear *dokhona*, *fali* or *fasra* and *donga mekhela*. “The spinning and weaving is an indispensable part of every Boro family even today. The Boro women still wear their traditional dress *dokhona*, a home spinning product woven by women themselves. The size of the *dokhona* is about ten feet long and four and half feet wide. They warp *dokhona* around their body, leaving only the shoulder exposed, from above the breast down to ankles and tighten knots one above the bosom and other in the waistline. The *dokhona* has borders on both sides and it is designed with geometrical or floral or sometimes stripes running along its entire length.”

The *dokhona* is the traditional and main dress of a Bodo woman. It is wrapped tightly round the body from breast to ankle. *Dokhona* is made of different silks and threads. The clothes are of different colour (red, yellow, green, black and blue etc.) but the dominant colours are usually green and yellow. The *dokhona* is generally decorated with attractive artistic designs of flowers or other decorative arts of different colour. The designs are called *agar*. There are many types of *agar*
designed by the Bodo women. *Faro megon, khasi hathai, hajw agar* and *daothu godo* are some popular agars designed by the Bodos.

The *fali* is a thin material with a width about 1 to 2 feet, the length about 5 to 6 feet and is made of different silk and synthetic fibers. It is used on the upper part of the body. Both ends of the *fali* are embroidered breath-wise with designs of flower. “To cover the exposed portion of body they use smaller piece of cloth known as *sadri*. *Sadri* is also hand woven fabric in variety of colours with geometrical and floral designs.” 16 *Fali* is thrown over the shoulders covering the chest. It is not long but hangs till the body waist. Another garment worn by the Bodo woman is *donga mekhela*. It is almost same as the *mekhela* which is like a skirt, a lower garment used by the Assamese lady. “The *mekhela* is a sort of petticoat in the form of an elongated sack open at both ends. It is worn by adjusting it either above the breast or round the waist when adjusted round the waist of *mekhela* reaches to the ankles.”17 The *donga mekhela* used by the Bodo women are longer than the *mekhela* use by the Assamese women. The Bodo women wear the *donga mekhela* above the breast, tied up by a knot on the left above the breast. The *mekhela* used by the Bodo women are usually plain and of one colour. Embroidery or designs are not decorated on these clothes. The womenfolk use these garment when they are at home. They also use the blouse, petticoat and other garments that all other women wear. Nowadays the Bodo women wear *salwar kameez, mekhela sador, sari* and other garments usually worn by the women of other neighbouring society.

The male dresses of the Bodo are *gamsa, aronai* etc. The gamsa is a male’s lower garment worn bellow the waist. The *gamsa* is worn wrapped round the waist which hardly reaches below the knee. It is held tight at the waist by a griddle consisting two to three bands fastened together by means of a knot in the centre, just bellow the navel. Then one end of the *gamsa* is folded and hangs on the back of the waist. Which may help them totally cover the lower part as an under garment. *Fali* and *aronai* are cotton garment used to wrap around the neck as a muffler and sometime used on the waist of a man. It works as a belt when they work. The *gamsa*
Mewa gaja (Fish with bamboo shoot)

Indi worm rearing
Bodo girls in traditional Bodo dress

Aronai
Distilling rice liquor

Amao (yeast)
are of different colours. Geometrical designs are made by the help of different colours but usually no floral design of embroidery is made on gamsa. But the aronai is embroidered of different floral designs of different coloured threads. The embroidery is made on the whole body of an aronai.

The Bodo men and women both use scarf made of endi threads. endi is known as eri in Assamese. The eri cloth is of drab colour, and, though often course in texture is very durable. It is light but warm. The endi thread is produced from cocoons of endi worm. The Bodo women rear endi worm at their home and spin treads from the cocoons and the worm is also used for eating.

During the early days The Bodo women used to weave their dresses at their looms. But nowadays due to shortage of time they can not weave their clothes. As a result these cloths are easily available in the market in a machine made variety. The Bodo women use clothes of cotton and different synthetic fiber as well as the clothes of paat and muga. Among them paat and muga is highly valued in these days.

1.2.1.4 Economy

Like any other tribe of Assam agriculture is the main occupation and source of livelihood among the Bodos. Agriculture among them is a laborious intensive work and still primitive methods of cultivation are practiced among them. Men and women both work together in the field. Men involved in hard work like ploughing, digging, fencing and harvesting etc. and cleaning grasses, plantation of seedling, showing seeds, reaping of matured crops are usually done by the women folk. The major agricultural products of the Bodos are paddy, mustard, jute and local pulses. The Bodos also cultivate potato, tomato, chili, ginger, turmeric, cabbage, collie flower, pea and green vegetables for their home use as well as for sale also. People generally produce that much of crops only which are needed for their own consumption and whatever surplus food they produce, they sale it. The main implements of cultivation are primitive plough and harrow drawn by bullocks, sickle,
hoe and rake etc. As a result the cultivators can not producte crops beyond their need.

The Bodos also engage themselves in horticulture. Many Bodo people of the community use such products for personal benefits and commercial purposes. Mango, litchi, banana, ginger, areca nut, betel leave, coconuts are some products of horticulture. The fruit trees are familiar plantations in every homestead garden of Bodo family.

The Bodo women rear animals and birds for their commercial benefits. Pigs, goats and cows are commonly reared in most of the households. Besides these, fowl, duck and pigeon are also reared by the Bodos for their commercial benefits as well as for their home use. Basically the female members look after the reared animals and birds. Cattle are also reared for agricultural purposes and cows for the milk. They earn money from them and also help the family.

At present some Bodos have started doing small business of vegetables, fish, meat, food grains and agricultural products in the rural and urban markets. There was a time when the Bodo people did not sell fish and meat. Because there was custom among the Bodos that if someone sell fish in the market and cattle, then he have to purify himself in front of the society. Now they consider trade and business is the root of wealth and honour.

1.2.1.5 Nokhor (family)

The Nokhor is the primary unit of the individual life in the Bodo society. Their families consist of members like the father, the main member, his wife, unmarried daughters and sons. Joined families are also found in the Bodo villages. In these families brothers and their wives and children stay in the same compound. Usually girls leave their parental house after they get married. The sons stay with their parents till they attain maturity and are in their teen, after which, they get separated from the parental house to make their individual families. The sons may not separate from their parent immediately after marriage. To separate from
the parent after marriage is not mandatory. Among the sons one of them stay with their parent to look after them in old age, usually the oldest or the youngest son stay with their parent. And the son will be the owner of the property of the father’s share who stays with them till their death. The authority of a family is vested upon the eldest male member (father) and to the eldest son in the old age. In some cases such as death of the husband in young age, responsibility to the family is taken by the wife. At the time of separation of the sons from the parental roof the property is distributed, all the sons receive an equal share in the property of their father except one who stays with their parent to look after them in old age. The father also takes a share of property. The son gets the ownership of the share that stay with them to look after them.

1.2.1.6 Status of women

Among the Kacharis women do not perhaps occupy quite the same influential position as seems to be enjoyed by their sisters in the Khasi Hills, where something like a matriarchate apparently holds the field of social and domestic life. Still, among them the position of the wife and mother is far from being a degraded one. The Kachari husband and householder has neither sympathy with, nor tolerance for that degrading and demoralizing creed “which says that woman is but dust, a soul-less toy for tyrant’s lust.” On the contrary, he usually treats his wife with distinct respect, and regards her as an equal and a companion to an extent which can hardly be said to be the rule among many of the Indian peoples. Kachari women, both in early life and as matrons enjoy a large measure of freedom, a freedom which is very rarely abused for evil purposes. 19

The status of woman varies from society to society within a same place. The status and role of women in the Bodo society is governed by their own norms and values. “The Bodo women have been playing very significant role in the family, socio-economic life and also in religious function.” 20
Cultivation is the main economic source of the Bodos. The Bodo women carry out tasks confined both horticulture and agriculture. Their work in agriculture and horticulture is like, sowing seeds, planting, husking paddy and cleaning jungles etc. and their usual work or daily work is like fetching water, cooking, weaving and looking after the domestic animals and other household works.

Women can participate in all social and religious functions. In these functions they involve themselves in merrymaking, dancing, singing and share jokes. In cultural activities girls or women both participate in dancing and singing with men. Women usually sing and dance and men play musical instruments and enjoy together. Among the Bodos the working women are considered more dignified. They can choose any type of jobs as they like to do. Educated women are mostly involved or engaged in both government and private sector. Then the housewife or others who run shops, weaving, rear fowls, ducks, pigs, goats, cows have their income source to give economic support to the family.

As the Bodo society is patriarchal where the sons inherit the property. But in some cases women also inherit the patriarchal properties. If a girl marries with gwrjia labwnai system where instead of bride the groom come to stay in bride’s house than the father of the bride give a share of property to his daughter. Of course women also inherit some properties when the parent die and properties are shared among the members of the family. These are such as clothes, ornaments etc. If the mother had her land property then these are divided only among the girl child after dead of the mother.

Widow Remarriage is permissible in the Bodo society. Dongkha habnai is a marriage system prevalent among the Bodo society, where a man willingly leave his own home and come to stay with an widow by marrying her. In case of husband’s death a widow get the right over her husband’s both movable and immovable property till she is alive and if she willing to stay in the same family. If the family is a nuclear family than after the death of husband the wife acts as a guardian of the property and family and hand it over to her sons when they attain
adulthood. If she has only a girl child, then she continues to retain her control over the property till death and the girl child inherit the property after death of her mother. Then it continues to next generations the girl child of the family will inherit the property. Widows and divorcees are respectfully treated like the other women. In any affair like economic or other homely affairs they may give opinion and help in decision making. Equal importance is given for both son and daughter.

1.2.1.7 Administration of justice among the Bodos

There is a village council in every village, somewhere more than one village council is found. The head of the village council is the Hadungwra (village headman). Hadungwra is usually selected in full session of the council. The position of the Hadungwra is not hereditary. The main criterion for eligibility to become a Hadungwra is based on quality, knowledge and experience. There are some other portfolios in the council; these are such as Sarkar or the secretary, Farea (peon) etc.

The Bodos follow some custom which are passed by the Maad Afad. The Maad Afad is consisting of many villages of an area. And the Maad Afads are the member of the Goalpara Jilla Boro Barodol.

The improvements of communication, general mobility and intercourse with the people all around have brought some psychological and attitudinal change of all section of people. To meet this changing situation of life, necessity has arisen to frame some local laws on the basis of customs and traditions as prevailing in the society. Thus the locally confined customary usages and practices of the Bodo societies came to be followed after approval from the zonal council composed of adjacent villages. These zonal laws are known as Pandulipis, as they are manuscripts and hardly printed. Since these are not coordinated homogenous sets of laws, they differ in content and application from area to area. However the basic issues pertaining to inheritance of property, succession of office of socio-
religious and socio-political nature and liability of atonement on committing unnatural and unsocial offences are more or less identical.\textsuperscript{21}

The tribal communities of Assam including the Bodos have been retaining their self identities by practicing their customs, laws and institutions through the existence village council. Such practices are prevailing since time immemorial. Village councils are the supreme administrative agency of the village. The village council is known as \textit{giathi} among the Bodos. The \textit{giathi} can deliver a judgment from household disputes to inter village conflicts in both the civil and criminal cases. The judgment meeting of a \textit{giathi} is known as \textit{bisar}. The villagers usually the eldest male member of the family participate in the council meetings and discuss the matters publicly without any hesitation. The female members can participate in the meeting if she is called by the council. The village councils allow both the accused and the complainant to argue for themselves. The judgments are pronounced in accordance with the age old-traditions and customary laws after careful considerations of the divergent viewpoints. The discussion continues until the case is dismissed.

The \textit{Hadungwra} is the chief of the \textit{Giathi}. There may be more than one \textit{giathi} in a village, depending on the size of population of the concerned village. The \textit{hadungwra} is elected from among the villagers who have good knowledge and more experience in the customary laws and traditions. There are other functionaries such as \textit{sarkar} (secretary), \textit{farea} (peon), \textit{douri} (village priest), \textit{dhon bhorali} (treasurer) etc. who has some other responsibilities. Usually the terms of the portfolio of the village council are of two years but vary from area to area. All adult men are the primary members of a \textit{giathi}. The active members are selected out of the primary members. Usually the active members are elders, having experience and knowledge of the customary laws. Women are not a member of the village council. They only participate in the council’s session, if she is invited or summoned to give her opinion or evidence in need.
1.2.1.7.1 Function

The village council has the jurisdiction in all important matters affecting the village community. Their functions are manifold i.e., judicial, administrative and developmental. As the village council is responsible for maintaining the law and order situation of the village, a variety of cases or suits are tried by the council. If a plaintiff files a suit against somebody in front of the Hadungwra then a meeting of the giathi is immediately convened by the hadungwra. The farea invites all the members to participate in the bisar. The bisar are usually convened in a open field or village temple. The council summons the accused. The accused will have to be present before the council and explain the fault committed by him. If the accused denies his involvement in the case filed by plaintiff than he have to prove of his innocence through eyewitness or take oath in front of the council. If the eyewitness is not available or appeared to be reliable, circumstantial evidence may be considered. There is no problem of the accused confesses his/her guilt. After the judgments the council punishes the accused according to the nature of his guilt.

1.2.1.7.2 Punishment

The degree of punishment and its nature varies from crime to crime. Usually fines are imposed on the accused. The degree of punishment imposed by the customary laws among the Bodos is presented in a tabular form.
### Nature of Crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Crime</th>
<th>Punishment</th>
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| 1. theft                    | a. to confess and return the stolen articles or money as per the value of the article  
b. fine to be paid the council and  
c. oath to be taken in front of the council. |
| 2. practicing witchcraft     | a. fine to be paid the council  
b. temporarily or sometime permanently discharged from the society  
c. sometime exhausted from the village  
d. take oath in front of the god and the council not to do again the same guilty |
| 3. violence                 | a. fine to be paid the council |
| 4. seduction of a girl      | a. forced to marry  
b. fine to be paid the council and family |
| 5. rape                     | a. forced to marry in case of raping an unmarried girl  
b. huge amount of fine is imposed. |

There are also some crimes which are judged by the village council. In these crimes these are no plaintiff. There crimes are crime of breaking social laws prevailing in the society. In these cases the accused are think to be badua (impure) by the society. The accused is socially ostracized for a temporary period. The crimes are such as killing or injuring the cattle, eating of meats like dog, beef by the society, and beating of elders like father, mother, elder brother or sister and if wife beat her husband etc. in there cases the accused have to pay an amount as fine to the giathi and purify themselves in some customary way. This is called udar or parasit janai. "The Boro Kachari society prescribes atonement proceedings for purification of misdeeds. The Douri and assistant to the village priest (oja) usually conduct the atonement proceedings." 22
Besides *douri* including the *hadungwra* of the *giathi* of the accused, five *hadungwras* take part in the proceeding. Many religious rites are followed in the purification function. The accused arrange a feast with meat and liquor at the end of the function. After the *udar* the family can freely participate in social activities.

**1.2.1.8 Land holding system**

Like other tribal rural communities the Bodos are deeply attached to their land emotionally, economically and politically. The used land can be categorized as homestead land and wet land. People have the tenancy right, both permanent and temporary over land. Tenancy period is fined if it is someone else’s land. The Bodo people consider land as the capital source of their livelihood. The main occupation and source of livelihood of the Bodos are cultivation like any other tribes of Assam. The inheritance of land is patrilinial among the Bodo community. Landed properties are only heritable by the male children according to their customary law. They get an equal share. "All the male members of a family enjoy the coparcenarities right, unless one goes out of the family during the lifetime of his father with the intention of living separately from the bonds of the joint family. The eldest male member assumes the charge of the household on the death of the father and discharges his responsibilities in consultation with his mother. The family debt if any is dischargeable from the income of the income of the family and on the event of dissolution of the joint family, the unmarried brothers get double of the family property than the married brothers.” At the time of separation parent give equal share to all their sons and keep a share for them. The share of the parent goes to him, who stays with them to look after them at their old age.

Sometime a daughter can also get the share of property. A sonless father can give his property to a daughter and a son in law. There is a marriage system prevailing among the Bodos which is known as *gwrjia lakhinai*. In this marriage system instead of bride the groom leave his parental home after marriage and come to stay in the house of the bride. If this happens than the father of the bride give a
share of his property to his daughter. After this the share of the land inherits to the next generations as in matrilineal system. The daughter inherits exclusively the ornaments, female dresses and other female properties. Male children inherit the houses and land properties of their parent.

Among the Bodos property can be transferred by means of sale, gift and will, mortgage and lease, and debt and loan.

Both movable and immovable properties are saleble. Sale takes place by giving physical possession of the property. Land properties are sold only in front of the witness. The payment can be made both in full or parts and in cash or kind.

1.2.1.8.1 Gift and will

The custom of giving and taking gifts and wills are found among the Bodos. Gifts are movable properties. The will of both movable and immovable properties are done only in front of the village council or witness. Will is usually made orally.

1.2.1.8.2 Adhi or bhagua system

In this system the owner gives away his land to a cultivator temporarily and the product of the land is distributed into two shares between the owner and the cultivator.24

1.2.1.8.3 Sakhani or karali system

By this system the owner of the land enter into contract with the cultivator and the cultivator has to give a fixed quantity of product (paddy), to land owner, for each Bigha of the land he cultivates.25 The quantity is about three to five mon paddy in each Bigha.
1.2.1.8.4 Bandhak system (mortgage or lease)

Practice of mortgage and lease are prevalent among the Bodos from a long time. This system is called bandhak among the Bodos. It is an agreement which is done before some villagers as witness. Money is paid against land for specific period. In case of failing to pay mortgaged money within a specified period, interest can be imposed. The term and conditions and period for bandhak are finalized between the two parties.

1.2.1.8.5 Debt and loan

During any economical problem the Bodo people use to take and give loan to each other. Money and crops lending both is prevalent among them. They take or give loan against interest. The Bodos give or take paddy for a period of one year, where he has to pay double for the paddy on the next year. If a person takes money of half mon paddy then he should be return one mon paddy or money value of one moon, this system is called murimara system among the Bodos. Agreements are usually made orally in presence of witness. In case of non payment of the loan in specific period then interest can be imposed on him according to the condition laid down in the agreement.
References:


2. Director of Census Operations Assam: Census of India 2011

3. Director of Census Operations Assam: Census of India 2001

4. Director of Census Operations Assam: Census of India 2011


7. ibid, p. ii


12. ibid. p. 251

13. ibid. p. 251


15. ibid. p. 33

16. ibid. p. 33


22. ibid, p. 6

23. ibid, p. 6


25. ibid, p. 35