

CHAPTER – II

BORO WOMEN IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

Pre-colonial Boro society means that stage where it stood as the representative of a purely tribal society with all its basic tribal characteristics. The features of a so-called 'tribal economy' was apparent in so far as Boro economy was concerned. However, it should be pointed out that the influence of Assamese Hindu culture in social norms, religious beliefs, social and religious rituals, agricultural rites and economic practices was very much evident in the Boro society of the time, though there were some distinguishing tribal features as well. The Boro social structure still is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. However, there are some matrilineal and matrilocal characteristics too, which makes the study on the social and economic role of Boro women in their tribal society all the more necessary. One of the most distinctive features of tribal economy is the role of women, who contribute substantially to their local economy.

The present chapter delves into the role of women in production and reproduction, the various functions discharged by women in the pre-colonial tribal society. It has been studied under three heads viz. Family responsibility, Social ceremonies and duties, and Religious rites. Secondly, the chapter analyses the hard and relentless work of women as a co-bearer of family economy with men. Here, reference has been made to their various skills in the economic sphere and how considerations regarding women shaped the pattern of constructing houses. The chapter also focuses on the women-nature bond and how women utilized their traditional wisdom in their social and economic performances. Thirdly, the chapter examines

privileges, rights and restrictions of women in relation to men in the Boro society and that Boro women were not at par with men in the pre-colonial era.

Boro society was egalitarian to a large extent wherein women made immense contribution. In fact in traditional societies, there was a clear division between family and the social spheres than in either caste or individual based societies. For e.g. in most tribal communities, the woman was in charge of the family: she controlled its decisions (with mutual consultation of the husband) and economy¹, besides discharging her natural function of procreation. Thus, even in a system of patriarchy, Boro women seem to have had considerable responsibility and power.

A Boro woman generally discharged all her family duties, which included raising children, taking care of the family members, cleaning the household, laundering etc. The mother was considered more responsible for the well being of her children than the father. Even young Boro girls were conscious of their responsibilities towards their families. While the mother was busy in helping her husband in the paddy field, she left the responsibility of the family to the eldest daughter. In the absence of mother, the daughter looked after her younger brothers and sisters and attended to their various needs.

The father was the sole authority, owner and controller of the family property. A typical unseparated Boro family was called *Jakhua* or *Jokhor* consisting of father, mother, sons, daughter, brothers and sisters and father's uncle and cousins. While *Nokhor* includes father, mother, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. According to the customary law, after the death of father, the mother took the

¹ Walter Fernandes and Geeta Menon: *Tribal Women and Forest Economy – Deforestation, Exploitation and Status Change*, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1987, pp.117-119.

entire responsibility of the family and property if the son was a minor. However, if the son was matured enough, she empowered the household responsibility and property to the eldest son. In decision of family matters the opinion of mother and wife was always taken into consideration.

Tribal women used to have a very close relation with their immediate environment as they draw most of their sustenance from natural resources. In all their activities whether domestic, social and economic, the close bond of Boro women with nature could be seen. By utilizing their indigenous knowledge women contributed effectively in biodiversity management and preservation which will be discussed in detail in Chapter IV. An important household duty of Boro women was the preparation of food for the family members. The Boros still today are non-vegetarian. Rice is the staple food. Boro women either grew vegetables in the family compound or gathered them from the neighboring villages. Being expert in fishing, the women used to catch fish and prepare indigenous dishes. Boro women cooked pork (*oma*), chicken, duck etc. The required firewood for the food was collected by the women from the neighboring forest. Regarding food, the Boros did not have any restriction as such, which speaks of their bodily strength in general and Boro women in particular, enabling her to carry out all domestic, social, religious and economic functions very smoothly and efficiently. Endle also observes that "...he (Boro) enjoys and practices a freedom in this (food) respect which no doubt goes far to account for his often magnificent physique." Endle enlists all kinds of meat except beef in the Boro diet² but Dalton points out that

² Sidney Endle: *The Kacharis*, Cosmo publication, 1975, Delhi p. 15.

oxen, dogs, cats, monkeys, bears etc. were prohibited.³ In earlier days milk was not considered as a food item. But Endle observed that milk formed an article of food. Thus most of the items of daily necessity were ordained by women from nature.

Boro women of the pre-colonial period had traditional knowledge in varied fields and it further speaks of women's knowledge about their eco system. They knew the art of preserving food. They could preserve meat and fish for a long period of time. The most popular technique of preserved fish was called *napham*. It was basically edible jelly made from fish. They used to add *napham* to their regular cooked vegetables particularly to the curry of dry jute leaves *mati-mahar dail* (black gram) and *kochu* (taro). Another curry of *napham* was by wrapping it in the banana leaf and cooking on fire. Besides women also preserved vegetables and bamboo shoots known as *khorisa*, jute leaf (*sokota*), and *kharoi* or *khar* in Assamese, produced from dried banana peels of a special kind (*Athia kal*). The preservation methods will be discussed in Chapter IV. Hence, by preserving the food items, the Boro women in a way prevented mendicancy, a practice which was looked down upon by the Boros. An old saying among the Boros was that those who are acquainted with the art of preservation will never have to beg.⁴

It is interesting that the women cultivated and cooked vegetables according to the seasons as in different seasons climatic conditions vary and so does the bodily requirements. For e.g. in summer they prepared sour curry from ripped *thekera* (*Garcinia mangostana*) to get some relief from the heat, in April-May tomato curry with dry fish or flesh etc. Even vegetables were grown in the household by

³ E.T Dalton.: *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Directorate of the Council of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1973, p. 87.

⁴ Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Thebleswari Basumatary, elderly woman, 57 years of age, Deborgaon, Kokrajhar, 2/11/10.

the women according to different seasons. For e.g. in rainy season they used to grow white *kumura*, *bhol*, *tenga mara*⁵, bean, chilies, brinjal, turmeric etc. in winter, cauliflower, cabbage, *olkobi* (turnip), potato, onion, garlic, tomato, brinjal, chilies, leafy vegetables etc. It is said that Boro women could prepare eighteen dishes (*atharo biji youngkhri*) and knew eighteen procedures of cooking (*atharo khauri aungkhan*), the prominent being *Aeophramnai* (fried food items), *Phram phram* (dried curry), *Sthev sthev* (gravy), *Jab-jab* (gravy curry of fish or meat), *Lao lao* (curry with water), *Menai* (curry prepared by wrapping in leaf).⁶ Mention may be made of a few popular dishes prepared by Boro women: *Oma Bedar* – *Oma* means pork. The meat was often dried under the sun for several days. It was fried, roasted or steamed. *Onla* was a gravy made of rice powder and slices of bamboo shoots. It was cooked lightly with *khardwi* (alkaline) and spices. Pork or chicken could be added. A bitter gravy prepared from dried jute was called *Narzi*. Fresh water fish or pork could be added.

Rice beer or *zu*, *zau*, *jumai* or *madh* still is a special beverage, a form of liquor produced by Boro women, to which the Boros were addicted. Endle calls it a “National Rice-Beer”.⁷ The rice beer, which only women could prepare, has great significance, even today, in the Boro social and religious life. It is considered ‘a privilege’ for the Boro women to welcome their guests by offering them with a cup of *zau* or *madh*, specially served with pork. The men are served the drink to relieve off their tiredness.⁸ What Brahma calls ‘a privilege’ for women is in reality, an act of servitude/ service to men.

⁵Kumara- Ash Gourd, Bhol- Ridge Gourd, Tenganara- a sour fruit.

⁶Bhaben Narzi : *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, Lawyer Book Stall, Guwahati, 1971, p. 21.

⁷ Sidney Endle: op.cit, p.50

⁸Kameswar Brahma: *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Bodos (with special reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District)*, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1992, pp.17-18.

The drink has medicinal qualities as well. Before undertaking any sacred rite or ritual in festivals and ceremonies of social, agricultural and religious importance, *zau* is offered to the gods and goddesses to get their blessings.

The preparation of rice-beer was a long process and Boro women took special care of cleanliness. Every mother taught her daughter to prepare *zau*, which had great significance in the tribal life of the Boros. The technique of preparing *zau* is still the same and has continued from generation to generation. The first requirement in its preparation is a locally made medicine called *amaw*, which women as a group produce from indigenous plants. It is mixed with cooked rice and sealed in the earthen pots for 3-4 days. The *zau* is thus ready for use but expires after a week. However, if *maibrai chawl* or *bora chawl* is used, the *zau* tastes better and remains for 2-3 months. It is important to note here that the practice of preparing rice-beer by women is also found among other tribes of North-east India. In Arunachal Pradesh rice-beer is called *poka* by *Adis* and *upong* by *Apatanis*, *zou* by Angami Nagas, *yu* by Meiteis of Manipur.

Women took special care of the courtyard, as it was considered sacred. There was a superstition that under no circumstance should a woman cross a courtyard with an earthen pot or jug filled with water, for it was believed to bring great misfortune or evil to the family. At dawn before the men woke up, the female members of a Boro family swept the courtyard as it was believed to shorten the life span of the male member, who may walk the unswept courtyard in the morning. Such superstitious beliefs are social taboos that underline male dominance in society.

Another important responsibility of women was to keep the health of family members intact. They had traditional medical knowledge of curing diseases,

although there was an *Oja* or medicine man who somewhat functioned as a doctor in curing the diseases of the villagers by providing traditional cure. To take care of the family health, Boro women maintained a garden of locally available medicinal herbs in the household compound and also prepared medicinal recipes to provide relief of some ailments. Narzi has given a detailed account in this regard.⁹ During winter season, the women collected a wild herb called *thuthuni* or in Assamese *thanithuni*, dried it under the sun and used the same in various dishes. To beat the heat of sun during summer, women used to put the leaves of *thunthuni* on the head of children after they were submerged in water for some time. When cooked, these leaves cured liver-related diseases and dehydration. Boro women also used dried *thekera* (*Garcinia mangostana*) to cook as its sour taste provide relief from heat of the sun during the summer days. *Thekera* (*Garcinia mangostana*) cooked with *goroi mas*, a kind of fish cures mucus. To cure cold and cough, Boro women prepared a dish of curry leaves and leaves of *durub* plant, a locally available wild plant. Varied types of *manimuni* (a wild herb) leaves were cooked to prolong the life expectancy. Raw turmeric was cooked with *puthi mas* (swam barb) to cure dysentery. Boro women prepared a dish of cock and black *tulsi* (holy basil) leaves to boost up the physical strength of the family members. Besides, the rice beer or *zau* which Boro women prepared was a medicine by itself. When the family members suffered from diseases like disorder of bowels, cholera, constipation, dysentery, urinal problems etc., rice beer was also offered as medicine. However, there were certain vegetables which a Boro mother would not cook in certain seasons of the year. In July and August (*bhada mah*), women never cooked white *kumura* (ash gourd), as it was believed that it was detrimental to the people who

⁹Bhaben Narzi: op.cit, pp.147-149.

were suffering from skin diseases, leprosy etc.¹⁰ This shows the prevalence of food prejudice or superstition in the Boro society.

Besides, there were other wild vegetables grown by Boro women in the household to use them as medicines for providing relief to their family members from various ailments. They were *Dous*, *Lapha saikho*, *Ungkham jajang* which are plants of sour taste, *Jaglauri* and *Anthabajab* which are vegetables with a flavor, *Sibru*, a kind of thorny plant used as vegetable, *Khungkha*, a plant of bitter taste, *Hangso ramai*, *Samlaothi* and *Kheradapini* are small plants used as vegetables etc.¹¹

To analyze the social role of Boro women, it is important to understand the Boro social structure and socio-cultural customs. Boro family though patriarchal, had a few matrilineal and matrilocal characteristics. Four such glaring examples being the *Dongkha* or *Dhoka* i.e. widow remarriage, *Garija Lakhinai haba* or marriage by servitude and the *Phon Thaka* or bride price and *malsa*. It is important to note here that most of the writers on Boro tribe refer to these characteristics as ‘matriarchal’ instead of matrilineal and matrilocal. A group of scholars have even put forward a theory that in earlier times the social structure of the Boros was matriarchal, which to some extent explains the existence of the matrilineal characteristics in the Boro tribal society. However, the theory of matriarchal social structure of the Boros has been rejected by most of the writers though they agree to the prevalence of matriarchal features in Boro society.

¹⁰ Shabnam Bormon, Personal Interview with Anjali Brahma, retired Principal of Gauripur Girls’ School, Gauripur, on 19/10/10.

¹¹ Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Harani Narzary, Common villager, 51 years of age, Bhumka village, 20/10/10.

Among the Boros the marriage is still called *Haba* i.e. *Ha+Ba*. While *Ha* means 'soil' or 'earth' or 'Mother Earth' and *Ba* denotes 'to bear something on the back'. Thus *Haba* means to bear the soil or earth on the back. In other words, the *Haba* or Boro marriage system confers on both the husband and wife to share the responsibility of the Mother Earth on their back i.e. to carry on the responsibilities together in the times to come. Here, one can see that the Boro marriage system recognizes particular responsibilities and the role that Boro women are expected to play in their married life along with their husband.

Just as most of the social customs of the Boros had many similarities with that of the Hindus, so also some Hindu pattern of marriage is seen in the Boro *Haba*. The Hindu *Dharmashastra* recognizes eight types of marriage system. Of them we can find five types in the Boro marriage system viz. *Brahma Vivaha*, *Asura Vivaha*, *Gandharva Vivaha*, *Rakshasa Vivaha* and *Paishacha vivaha*¹². The Boros in general had six types of marriage system or *Haba*. As a rule, the Boros were exogamous. One cannot marry a girl of the same cognate tribe. When we analyze the system of marriage, we find that there were certain cases where the women enjoyed some liberty. For instance, the *Garija Lakhinai haba* was a 'marriage by servitude'. Here, the marriage was solemnized at the house of the bride instead of the groom's place as followed in regular marriages. Secondly, the groom, who was selected by the bride's parents had to please her parents

¹² *Brahma Vivaha* - In this system of marriage, the sons and daughters are married under the guidance of their parents. It was considered the best of all types of marriages. *Asura Vivaha* - Under the marriage the bride was offered to groom in exchange for money-taken from the groom's party. *Gandharva Vivaha* - It was a type of love marriage where the bride and the groom would marry without the permission of their parents. *Rakshasa Vivaha* - Here the bride was snatched from her family and was forcibly married to the groom. *Paishacha vivaha* - It was considered the lowest kind of marriage. Sexual intercourse was made with a girl while in her sleep or while under influence of some intoxication and then forced into marriage.

to be worthy of marrying their daughter and be their son-in-law by rendering his services at the would be bride's house and performing all the activities meant for men for a stipulated period of one or two years, which, however, could be extended to four years. For his services, he was provided food and accommodation. After the marriage, the groom had to stay in the father-in-law's house, which in Assamese is called *Ghorjuwai* or a live-in-son-in-law. The husband also recognizes himself as the member of his wife's family. Thus, it is interesting that in the patriarchal Boro social system, the Boro women were given such privilege that the boy had to render his services to win the bride's hand and afterwards resided with her in her home. This is an example of the matrilineal and matrilocal characteristic in a patriarchal Boro society.

Widow Remarriage among the Boros also proves the existence of matrilineal feature. Boros called it *Dongkha Habnai Haba* and *Dhoka* in Assamese. In this type of marriage, the man had to cut off all his paternal relationship and live with the bride, who was a widow, in her dead husband's establishment¹³ or mostly in her maternal home. Moreover, the husband had to induct himself to the *ari* (clan) of the widow. The widow, however, lost all the authority on the property of her deceased husband. But, since male child was always entitled to get the paternal property, so if the widow undertook the responsibility of the children, preferably a boy child, then she was entitled to all the movable and immovable property of her dead husband even after she had been married off by the *Dongkha* or *Dhoka* system. It was an accepted fact that property would ultimately go to the male child of the widow's first husband. The daughter, however, was not entitled to any share of her paternal property. The widower, however, did not have any right over his

¹³ Bhaben Narzi: op.cit, p.22.

wife's property. The widow (now wife) became the sole authority of the family and property which she descended to the children.

However, a widow could remarry her deceased husband's younger brother but not the elder brother. Thus, junior levirate marriage was approved but the senior levirate marriage was strictly prohibited. Again the *Dongkha* or *Dhoka* and *Garija Lakhinai haba* practices could be viewed as a means to economically strengthen the father's family of the bride. After adapting to the *Dokha* marriage mostly the widow and her husband lived in her father's house while she was entitled to property of her deceased husband (in case of a male offspring). In both the forms of marriages the labour of the groom in various agricultural and other economic works became an additional source to the family. Nevertheless, in both the first two forms of marriages - the *Garija Lakhinai* and the *Dongkha* system, instead of the bride, the groom lived in the bride's house and recognized himself as a member of the wife's family, severing all ties with his own paternal family. This naturally proves the better position and the liberty enjoyed by the Boro women in the patriarchal Boro society.

Kharsonai Haba was 'love marriage' among the Boros. Here, the girl, by her own choice decided whom she would be married to and entered her beloved's house before the settlement of the marriage. The formal marriage took place after the settlement of the bride price. Here, we see the Boro girls used to decide and select their life partners. Another form of love marriage called *Dongkharlangnai Haba* or as 'marriage by elopement' was prevalent. As a matter of fact, love and elopement marriage is common among most of the tribes of North-east India like Manipur, tribes Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland etc. Similar form of such marriage is also found among the tribes of *Kota* (Karnataka), *Garasias* (Rajasthan), *Bonda Poraja*

(Orissa) etc. It was akin to the *Gandharva Vivaha* of the Aryans. Failing to get the consent for their marriage from the parents, the boy and the girl eloped to a distant place and lived together. *Sangnanoi Lainai Haba* was the most regular form of marriage and was akin to the *Brahma Vivaha* of the Aryans. In this marriage, the bride was selected by the groom's party. After the mutual consent and negotiation between the bride and the groom's party, the marriage was solemnized by following all social customs at the groom's place.

It does seem that Boro women indeed had a fairly high status so far as the system of marriage is concerned. In the *Garija Lakhinai* and the *Dhoka* systems of marriage women played a dominant role. However, this is only one side of the picture. There is another side too, where the Boro women were subjected to forcible marriage. It thoroughly degraded her social status. There was system of marriage which was not at all favourable to Boro women called the *Bonanoi Lainai Haba*. It was 'marriage by force' or 'marriage by abduction' and was akin to the *Paishacha* and *Rakshasa* marriage system of the Aryans. Here, despite her unwillingness to marry, the boy and his men forcibly took away the girl from her parent's house to his own house. Generally, the abduction was followed by *Gang Funai* or forced social intercourse or rape. The girl was thus forced to concede to marriage with the boy. This kind of marriages got approval in the Boro society, though was not a regular form of marriage. Another factor that reduced the status of women was the prevalence of the bigamous marriage was accepted in the Boro society. Here, a man could marry two, three or more wives. Zenab Banu observes that the tribals developed the notion that if they own more than one wife that is, they practice polygamy they will get more children. This will provide them more women's hands and hands of children to work in the field and thus the farm

produce will increase. Such a notion made polygamy a popular form of marriage among the tribals.¹⁴ However, polyandry was totally absent in the Boro society. On one side, marriage systems like *Garija Lakhinai* and the *Dongkha* systems, provided liberty and high status to Boro women, on the other *Hinjao Bonai Haba* and, bigamous marriage indicates the vulnerability of women in the Boro society.

A very important matrilineal characteristic to be found in the Boro society was the existence of the bride-price, *phon thaka* or *pong* in Boro, which indicates a dominant position enjoyed by the Boro women in their tribal society. This system of exchanging bride to the groom in return for money is akin to the *Asura Vivaha* of the Aryans. In Assamese society, the bride price is called *gadhan*. As its nomenclature suggests, this was the price paid by the groom's party to the bride at the time of marriage. In place of *phon*, one pair of silver coin along with a *gamucha* (towel) and a pair of beetle nut called *jora thokha khonnai* could be accepted. There is another traditional system of collecting money called *malsa* in the name of the bride from the family of the groom. It was not demanded by the bride's family but decided by the society or *samaj* of the girl. At the time of determining and collecting *malsa*, two groups got special consideration as to whether the bride belonged to *Chibinghari* or *Sibingari* (*til jati* i.e. sesame community) or *Chabaihari* or *Sohaihari* (*mati mah jati* i.e. black gram community). If the bride belonged to *Sibingari*, the amount of *malsa* would be less and if she belonged to *Sohaihari* the amount would be double the amount of *Sibingari*. These two groups according to Narzi are also the examples of matriarchal features in the patriarchal Boro society.¹⁵ However, if the bride unfortunately lost her husband just after the marriage, say within one week or so,

¹⁴ Zenab banu: *Tribal Women Empowerment and Gender Issues*, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, 2000, p.41.

¹⁵ Bhaben Narzi: op.cit, p. 21

then there was a system of returning the widow to her parents. In such cases, the *malsa* should be returned to her deceased husband's family by the parent of the bride, which was called by the Boros as *Kholar Gothainai*. In another case, if at the time of marriage the groom did not pay the *phon* and the bride died after leaving a girl child, then the maternal uncle of the baby was entitled to get the bride price of his niece at her marriage. The father of the child, however, did not have any claim on this bride price. It was a sort of compensation paid to the deceased bride's brother, who did not get bride price at time of his sister's marriage. This system was known as *Mamai Mara*.¹⁶

However, in one way, the practice of paying the bride price or *Phon Thaka* by the groom's parent seems to show the higher status of the Boro women in the tribal society, on the other hand bride price could be viewed not as a price paid for the bride, but mostly as compensation given to the bride's parent or family for the loss of a productive family member¹⁷ and partly as the cost of bringing up the girl, making her suitable for marriage and to carry on the workload as a worker. So, it was a sort of buying the bride by realizing her expenses to her parent. With this picture, it could hardly be justifiable to say that the Boro women enjoyed equal status as the men in the tribal society.

In a discussion of Boro marriage system, the role of Boro women cannot be overlooked. A typical Boro marriage had three stages: pre-marriage, marriage proper and post-marriage. All stages demanded active participation of Boro women. In the pre-marriage stage ceremonies like *Samanda Piharainai* (changing the "Relationship"), *Howagodan naina* (interview of the bridegroom), *Goi Khanai*

¹⁶ Ibid, p.107.

¹⁷Walter Fernandes and Geeta Menon: op.cit, pp.72-80.

(cutting of areca nuts) and *Biban Langnai* along with *Gay-Khithou garkhonai*, *Khabira Langnai*, *Hinjaro laino thangnai*. Rice-beer or *zau* prepared specifically by the women was the most important item offered by both the bride's and the groom's party. In fact it was quite impossible to imagine a typical Boro marriage without their favorite beverage of *zau*.

In the patriarchal social structure of the Boros, women had the liberty to interview her would be husband to judge him personally before marriage. The ceremony concerned was known as *Howa-godan naina* or interview of the bridegroom. After the fixation of the marriage, the boy along with friends had to visit the girl's house as a custom. As a rule, the girl presented a scarf or *gamocha* or handkerchief to the groom as a symbol of her consent for marriage. However, if the girl did not present the handkerchief or scarf, or did not appear in person before the groom, it was understood as the unwillingness of the girl to marry. Under such circumstances, the marriage might get cancelled. The consent of the girl was important for fixing the date for the solemnization of the marriage.¹⁸ Thus, the Boro society gave an opportunity to the girls to express their opinion regarding the marriage.

The pre-marriage ceremony was flagged off by the two selected Boro girls or ladies called *Bairathis* who belonged to the groom's side and were the prime performers in the Boro pre-marriage ceremonies and contributed wholeheartedly in the important ceremonies till the commencement of the marriage. It signifies predominant role of the women in the social life of the Boros. They were called the *Bairathi jora*. No male could ever replace them. However, there were some required qualities to be the *Bairathis* viz. they should be healthy and beautiful and

¹⁸ Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, p. 82.

Bairathi should not be a widow as a widow was called *Khora goja* or headless by the Boros.¹⁹ In fact, the widows were abstained from performing any auspicious work of the marriage. Sometimes the parent of the groom also selected the *Bairahti jora*. The duty of *Bairathis* was to cut and distribute the areca nuts (*goy*) to the bride' party at different functions of pre-marriage. In this task, they were accompanied by a male *Barlangpha*.

In the *Biban Langnai* pre-marriage ceremony, the *Bairathis* had a great role to play. In Assamese, *biban* means *bhar* which the groom's side presented to the bride's side. It was a very important ceremony of the Boros. Among the articles of *Biban*, one of the most important items was rice-beer or *zau*. The *Biban* was carried by *Barlangpha*. He kicked off the ceremony by placing the *Biban* along with other commodities in front of the main house (*nomano*) and cutting a pig into two equal halves called *Omakhoptang* or the divided pork. One part was kept in the groom's house and the other part was given to the bride's parents, which shows the Boros considered both the bride's and the groom's side at par. Thereafter the *Bairathis* started their function of cutting and distributing areca nuts, three to nine times to the people gathered. Along with it, they also served the rice-beer or *zau*. This ceremony was called *Goi Khanai* or cutting of areca nuts. Till the final commencement of the marriage, the *Bairathis*, who accompanied the *biban*, repeatedly went to the bride's house for the performance of ceremonies like *Biban Langnai* and *Goy Khanai*, which were held repeatedly.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.84.

Bairathis were also needed in the *Hinjao godan laina thangnai*.²⁰ Since the Boro marriage took place at the house of the bridegroom, a party consisting of the groom's parent, relatives, elderly persons, few girls and some villagers went to the bride's house to bring her to the groom's house for marriage after fixing the date for marriage. For the occasion, the two *Bairathis* dressed themselves in new and beautifully designed Boro dress called *dokhna thaosi* (it was particularly used in ceremonies) and *jumra* or scarf. *Barlangpha* was again entrusted with the *biban* or *bhar* consisting of two jars of rice-beer (*zau*), one pig, areca -nuts and betel leaves in abundance. In Goalpara region, there was a custom to tie a piece of soil (turf) to the body of the *Bairathis* and *Barlangpha* while dancing.²¹ It symbolically meant to take the responsibility of the earth as *Haba* (Boro marriage) means responsibility of the earth. It was believed that if the *Bairathis* carried the soil, the bride would expect baby soon.

The final stage, Marriage Proper was also marked by women participation. A Boro marriage performed with all customs and practices was called *Hathasuni Khurnai* or marriage proper. Before entering the kitchen of the main house *nomano*, the bride had to go through a sort of test to see her cooking skills. She had to offer a meal called *ondhakhari* to the groom and both prayed before *Bathou Borai* to bless their married life. It was followed by a grand feast lasting for five to seven days. Since rice-beer or *zau* happened to be one of the most important item in the feast. Boro women together prepared large quantity of rice-beer and stored in big earthen pots called *Dabkha* or *Maldenga* even before the ceremony got started. Throughout the marriage process starting from the pre-marriage ceremony, marriage proper to

²⁰ Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, pp. 82-85.

²¹ Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, p.86.

the after marriage ceremonies like *athmongla* etc., Boro women played a very important role by singing folk songs at various occasions of marriage. These songs were very entertaining as sometimes they even contain teasing songs called *Jora naam* in Assamese and kept the humor of Boro marriage.

Towards the society, women had yet another important function. **Ear-piercing of girls was performed by Boro women, who also served as midwives or nurses at the time of birth.** They were essentially the elderly women of the Boro society, though there was an *Oja* to attend complicated cases. Their duty was to conduct the birth of a baby safely for both the mother and the child. They used to tie a cotton or *muga* thread in the umbilical cord (*uthumai* in Boro) and made seven cuts in case of a girl while five for a boy, above the thread with a sharp-edged bamboo. However, the mother of the baby could also do this. The women cleaned and bathed the new born with tepid water and put the baby on clean cloth over a *kula* (winnowing fan) made of bamboo. As an antiseptic, a mixture of dried earth or ash of straw and remains of dead spiders was applied to the cut. As remuneration for the services of midwives the mother of the baby provided them a feast of rice, chicken and rice beer within one year.²² There were also some criteria to be a midwife to cut the naval chord. She should have children. Spinsters and widows were prohibited to perform such services.²³ Superstitions related to women were many.

²² Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Harani Narzari, 51 years, common villager, Bhumka Village, Kokrajhar, 19/10/10.

²³ It was a belief among the Boros that the woman, who had “bitter” hand was ideal to cut the naval chord as because of her bitter hand the wound would heal soon, though the baby would become short-tempered with a rude voice. On the other hand, if a “sour” or “sweet” handed lady cut the naval chord the baby would become rough spoken and sweet spoken respectively. Here, sweet hand stands for those women who were very good in their every sort of work while bitter or sour handed were those who were not good in cultivation and making of rice beer respectively. It was interesting that the behavior and language of a person was determined by the hand of a lady and the

Boro women played an important role in the religious sphere. Their religious fairs and festivals have close affinity with that of the Assamese culture. The traditional Boro religion is called *Bathou Dharma*. It is based on totemism, which is evident by the fact that among Boro clans like *Mosahari, Gandretari, Narzoari*, etc. are represented by their totemistic names. However, there is a controversy regarding the true nature of *Bathou Dharma*. Narzi opines that the traditional religion of Boro-Kacharis is *Shiva* worship, who is known by various names viz., *Bathou-Borai, Gila Dambra, Khorai Borai, Sibrai* etc.²⁴ Malini Mohan Brahma also supports that Saivism is the prominent feature of religion among the Boros, who is worshipped with rice-beer and flesh as their ancestral chief deity.²⁵ The whole religion centered on *Bathou Borai* or *Si Borai* i.e. Lord *Shiva*, the supreme God of the Boros' so it was and still now called as the *Bathou Dharma*.

However, G.C. Basumatary has brought forward an interesting fact relating to *Bathou* worship of the Boros. According to him, the early Boros worshipped Mother Goddess Earth and during that time their society was matriarchal. The supreme God of *Bathou* originally was identified as a Mother Goddess. Literally *Ba* meant 'Feminine Spirit' and *Thou* meant 'that prevailing in the basin-shaped valley of Assam' that was worshipped a *Bathou*, *Ba + Thou = 'Feminine spirit'*. This deity had no connection with Lord *Shiva* (*Bathou Borai* or *Sri-Borai*). In fact *Bathou Borai* at that time was considered as a consort of the mother Goddess *Bathou* and had no importance in the matriarchal society of the Boros. Earlier

"bitter" hand women were chose because fast healing would enable the mother to resume her various works immediately.

²⁴ Bhaben Narzi: op.cit, p. 163.

²⁵ Mohini Mohan Brahma: "The Boro-Kacharis of Assam: A Brief Introduction", in *Bulletin Vol-I : Number-1*, The Tribal research Institute, Assam : Guwahati, 1983, pp. 53-54.

Bathou Goddess was seen equivalent to the Goddess *Mahamaya* of the Hindus and later on came to be associated with *Khamkhi* or *Khammai-Khi* or *Ma Kamakhya* in Assamese. It was later with the passage of time and Boros' adaptation to the patriarchal society, the *Bathou* came to be viewed as a male God, identical to *Shiva*. Consequently, the concept of *Bathou* as a female Goddess lost its importance and she came to be worshipped as *Bathou Buri* or the consort of *Bathou* and both the deities came to be installed together.²⁶ Although the existence of matriarchal society has not been accepted by the anthropologists and sociologists yet it provides the ground for the very existence of matrilineal characteristics even at the present time in the Boro society and the comfortable position enjoyed by the Boro women in their tribal society and economy.

Jagat Swargiary²⁷ on the other hand, rejects both the claims of identifying *Bathou* either as Lord *Shiva* or Goddess *Kamakhya*. According to him paganistic practices influenced to a great extent in the origin of the Bathou worship, which was originally associated with nature. He even prefers to call it *Bathou Puja* rather than *Bathou Dharma*. Thus, the religion of the Boro people was animistic in nature. The identification of *Bathou* with Lord *Shiva* was a later addition probably due to the influence of Hinduism.²⁸ Mangalsing Hazowary²⁹ also holds the similar view and explains that originally *Bathou* was called by such names as *Borai Bathou*- *Borai* means supreme or matured or oldest i.e, supreme God, *Aham Guru*-

²⁶ G.C. Basumatary: "Growth and Development of Bathou (Siva) worship among the Bodos" in *Bodoland Movement*, <http://www.bodoland.org/culture2.htm>, Date of access – 14/06/09.

²⁷ A primary member of the *Bathou* center at Maligaon and Associate Professor in the Department of Education, Gauhati University.

²⁸ Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Jagat Swargiary, Associate Professor, Department of Education, Gauhati University, 15/06/2010.

²⁹ Adviser of *Dularai Bathou Afad (Hodou Bathou Mahasabha)*, a Sahitya Academy Awardee and Principal of Kokrajhar Government B.ed college.

Infinite god or Eternal, *Anand Gosai*- Greatest or *Anadi*, *Binan Gosai*- Endless or *Anant*, *Abang Gosai*- *A* means *Okhrang* (sky) and *Bang* (many) i.e, limitless and *Iwsar*- it signifies formless or *Nirakar*. Regarding emergence of *Bathou* as the chief god among the Boro people. He further adds that the word *Bathou* comprises of two words- *Ba* meaning ‘five’ and *Thou* meaning ‘deep’. *Bathou* religion thus is a religion of five deep meanings. In other words, *Bathou* represents five basic elements of creation viz. universe, air, sky, water and light which are known as *Panchbhut* in Hindu mythology. As a matter of fact, the numeral ‘five’ is associated with the traditional religion of the Boros in various manners. *Bathou* is attributed to be the source of five best qualities of truth, knowledge, power, beauty and goodness. Five-fold preachings of *Si Borai* are meditative prayer to God, conversing religious and spiritual matters, making charitable gifts to the poor, loving the fellow beings and doing things unitedly. There are also five senses of love- love to *Aham Guru* (Infinite god or Eternal), love to fellow beings, love to wife and children, love to other poor animals and objects of nature and love to one’s Mother land and the World. There are also five holy realizations, five hatred for sinners and so on. Thus, we find the association of the numeral five with *Bathou* worship in a number of ways.³⁰ *Bathou* is symbolized by *siju* plant (*euphorbia splendens*) which stands as an emblem of the Supreme God at the altar. Besides, *Bathou Borai* and *Bathou Buri* the Boros also worshipped various Gods and Goddess.

Daily rituals were conducted by women, though they had a regular priest called *Oja* or *Deori* for some special family and community festivals. As the women performed the daily worship the altar of the supreme God *Bathou Borai* and chief

³⁰ Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Mangalsing Hazowary, Advisor of *Dularai Bathou Afad (Hodou Bathou Mahasabha)* and a Sahitya Academy Awardee and Principal of Kokrajhar Government B.ed college, Kokrajhar, 16/10/10.

Goddess *Bathou Buri* or *Mainao Buri* was placed inside the kitchen (*ishing*), which was a domain of the women. However, the main altar called *Bathou Bedi* was installed in the courtyard and planted a *siju* plant (*euphorbia splendens*) representing *Bathou Borai* and a basil plant (*tulansi*) representing *Bathou Borai* to the south of the *siju* plant.

Rich and colorful Boro culture was well reflected in their varied festival, where the women had a great role to play. Boro festivals and its related rites and ceremonies can be broadly categorized under two heads, both connected to agriculture: Religious - *Kherai*, *Garja* and *Marai* and Seasonal - *Baisagu* (*Bihu* in Assamese) and *Domashi* (*Domahi*). In most of the religious occasions, the Boro women were active participants and performed beautiful dances.

Kherai Puja is still the supreme religious festival of the Boros. It is believed that the *Kherai Puja* is performed in the name of *Kherai Borai* (Lord Shiva). Different gods and goddesses were worshipped on the occasion like the *Bathou Borai*, *Bhandari*, *Ranachandri*, *Bulli Buri*, *Laokhar Gosai* etc. and even a Muslim God by the name of *Nawab Badshah*. *Kherai Puja* could be organized either for family (private) called *Noanoni Kherai* to ward off evil and ensure the wellbeing of the family or for the community (public) called *Darshan* or *Lakhi Kherai*, *Umao* or *Ashu Kherai* and *Phalo* or *Danhiong Kherai*. Agriculture being the main source of livelihood, *Kherai Puja* was performed for the good harvest of the crops, before and after cultivation.

However, the main centre of attraction in the *Kherai Puja* was the *Doudini* or *Deodhai* in Assamese, who gave a spectacular dance performance during the *puja*. In fact, without *Deodini*, there could be no *Kherai Puja*. A *Doudini* was always a

woman and could never be replaced by a man. Dalton also mentioned in his account' but he called the dancer *Deoda* and identified it as a male performer.³¹ But, it is beyond doubt that male participation in the *puja* was restricted only to the playing of musical instruments like *Kham* (drum), *Siphung* (flute), *Jotha* (cymbal) and *Seja* (a kind of stringent instrument). The whole festival and dance was commenced under the supervision of the priest called *Oja* and a *githal* or *gidal*. A *Doudini* was basically a female oracle or exorcist, the mediator between the god and the worshippers. The *Doudini* exhibited her activities in three stages viz. *Alongkhangana*i was the initial stage of the *Kherai Puja*, where the *Doudini* became enchanted by the charms of the *Oja*. In the second stage, she became somewhat unconscious as if under trance. In the third stage, the *Doudini* gained consciousness as noticed by the trembling and jerking of her body. This is the stage when *Doudini* became possessed by Mother *Kamakhya* and used to give three warnings: 'Beware'! 'Beware'! 'Beware'! Thereafter she gave one commandment:

Do not lead your life like a dog,
Do not lead your life like a pig'
If you lead your life like a dog
Being dependent on other,
If you lead your life like a pig
Being dependent on other,
I shall command the tiger to destroy you.³²

The *Doudini* then moves round the altar of the *Bathou*, seeking for his blessings and sprinkled holy water from a pot, followed by her dance with the playing of musical instruments like *kham*, flute, and cymbal. Worshippers could also join her

³¹ E.T Dalton: *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Directorate of the Council of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1973, p. 86.

³² Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, pp.179-180.

in the cycle of dance, during which the *Doudini* held a long sword (*thungri*) and a shield (*dahal*), used by the Boros in the battlefield. On the commencement of the dance, the *Doudini* being possessed by the God became an oracle and foretold the fortune of people, of villager's, success or failure of cultivation, and forewarn the village from an impending danger.

While worshipping different gods and goddesses, the dazzling performance of the *Doudini* could be seen in eighteen different dances to complete her full cycle of dance to the tune of the *Siphung* (flute), *Kham* (drums) and *Jotha* (cymbals)³³ viz. *Bathou Bonai*: *Kherai* dance was flagged off by this dance. It was like the checking stage, where *Doudini* scrutinizes the perfection of the preparation of the worship of the *Bathou* by showing banana dance movements i.e. dancing by counting the leaves of banana. *Bathou Gidingnai*: Thereafter, the *Doudini* welcomes all the gods and goddesses, placed in the altar of the *Bathou* by moving several times round the altar in slow dance movements and offered prayers to *Bathou*. This was the *Bathou* dance.

In *Chotrali* dance, the *Doudini* performs her dance vigorously by holding a sword in her right hand and a shield in her left hand round the altar of the *Bathou* in the name of the goddess of war, *Rannchandi* or *Ranphagli*. It was a war dance. In *Khapri chipnali* dance *Doudini* teaches and demonstrates the tactics of rescuing oneself from the attack of enemies in the battlefield while dancing with the sword and shield. This was associated with the *Bura Ailong*, the bodyguard of the *Bathou Maharaja*. It was a defending dance. In *Gandoula Bannai* , dance the *Doudini* demonstrates the tactic of destroying the enemies in the battlefield. It was a charge

³³Ibid, pp.180-182.

on the enemy dance. The dance was related to *Manasu* or *Manas* god. *Chanalaw Banai* dance is related to a very powerful god *Abla Khungar*, where *Doudini* demonstrates the preparation of the battle. This performance reveals the woman as the demonstrator of war defense and tactics.

Another dance is *Muphur Geleni*. In Boro, *Muphur* means a bear. *Doudini* performs her dance in the nature of a bear to please *Muphur* God or Bear God. In *Unao Bonai* dance, demonstrating the greatness of *Laokhar Gosai* or Lord *Krishna*, who was identified as the lord of cowherds or *laokhar* the *Doudini* performs the dance. In *Khanao Barkhanao* dance, while propitiating the God *Rajkhandra*, the grandson of *Bura Bathou Maharaja*, the *Doudini* ascends on a drum (*khum*) and performs her dance over it. In *Dao Thou Longnai* dance, as a symbol of power accumulation, the *Doudini* stands in front of the altar and drinks the blood of a chicken in a cup (*khuroi*), being sacrificed in the name of the god while she is in the dance movements. In *Mashakhaori Mahani*, *Doudini* dances in the name of the god *Khoila*, the messenger of the *Bathou Borai*. In *Jatha Hamma Machanai*, the *Doudini* moves the flag frantically while she is exhibiting dance movements.

The *Gandoula Bwnnai Machanai* dance is associated with the catching of dragonfly for sacrificing in the context of *Bathou* worship. In *Khwjwma Phonai or Hannai* dance, *Doudini* through her dance performance demonstrates the power of red ants. In *Gorai Dabrainai Machanai*, *Doudini* dances frantically in the movement of a horse rider. *Doudini* in her dance shows the movements of drawing a boat which is symbolically represented the life boat in the world, thereby teaches the people how to carry on their life in the *Naubwnnai Machanai* dance. In *Jaraphagla Machanai*, *Doudini* dances in the posture of the *Tandava Dance*. In

Mainaou Khunda Machanai dance, the *Doudini* welcomes *Mainao*, the Goddess of wealth and fortune while holding a basket of paddy as *Mainao* or Goddess *Lakhi* in Assamese is represented by paddy. However, when the *Kherai Puja* was organized by a family for the recovery of a sick family member, the *Doudini* performs her dance of *Maoji Mengbrang Gelenai*, where she performs in the movement of a spotted cat.³⁴

Thus, the *Doudini* dances to get the blessings of various gods and goddesses. The totemistic nature of the Boro tribe was also reflected in the dance performance of the *Doudini*, where she dances to the Boro musical instruments, exhibiting power of various animals. It is important to note that such kind of performance by woman illustrating and teaching the people through her dance performance to defend themselves from enemies, inspire them to adapt the various fighting skills of different animals and to lead a decent life is rarely found among other tribal communities of North-east India.

After worshipping various gods and goddesses in the *Kherai Puja*, the *Doudini*, being possessed by *Mainao* or the Goddess of wealth, acts as an oracle to the various questions of the villagers. A pig is sacrificed in honor of the goddess and the *Oja* or priest invokes the *Doudini*. It was the third and final stage of the *Doudini's* performance in the *Puja*. Conversation between the *Doudini* and the *Oja* as a representative of the villagers has been clearly depicted by Brahma:

He Boro-phi saphor, nangsor angkhou mabeo langno?

Nangsor angkhou dano langgon gabanna daiao phanse,

arao phanse khalamnanoi jagon;

³⁴ Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, p. 182.

Ang thangnainonga nangsar je lamajang phoidang be lamajang thangphin.³⁵

English meaning:

O Boro children, where you will take me?

You take me if today, you will spread me some quantity at water,

Some at fire, you will neglect me;

You will go back with the same way, with which you have come here.³⁶

At this, the *Oja* on behalf of the villagers begs the *Doudini*, possessed by *Mainao* to come to their homes or they would sacrifice their lives for her. Finally *Mainao* agrees to come to the houses of the villagers, being satisfied by their prayers. The worshippers, being delighted at the consent of *Mainao* to stay in their homes, joyfully joins the *Doudini* in her dance. After fulfilling the wishes of the people, the *Doudini* becomes unconscious but gains consciousness after the sprinkling of the holy water on her by the *Oja*. With this, the *Kherai puja* concludes. The *Kherai Puja* represents women as a symbol of power, signifying leadership, and an intermediary between the divine and the earthly bondage but which requires the intervention of the male *Oja* to bring her (*doudini*) to consciousness.

Unlike the *Kherai Puja*, where Boro women played a predominant part, the women participation in the *Garja Puja* is not that active. It is basically a purification ceremony, conducted by the villagers after the seasonal festivals like *Baisagu* etc. In Boro, *Garja* or *Garjani* or *Garnai* means expulsion or discharging i.e. to expel or discharge evil gods from the village area. Here, evil symbolizes misfortunes, misconduct and diseases. There were different types of *Garja Puja*, the chief being *Lakhi Garja*, *Asu Garja*, *Dhan or Dan Kuber Garja* and *Borai Raja Garja* where

³⁵ Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, pp.184.

³⁶ Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, pp.184-185.

various gods and goddesses were worshipped. In both the *Pujas*, rice-beer or *zau* formed an important article of offering to the various gods and goddesses and was also served to the people assembled.

It is important to note that gender differentiation could be seen even in the animals which were sacrificed to female and male deities. For example, to the male gods like *Borai Raj* and *Tulsing Mulsing*, a male pig and a male chicken were sacrificed respectively. While a female pig was sacrificed to the female deities like *Mainao* and *Jaman Buri*. The *Puja* was solemnized under the guidance of the priest or *Oja*. The women participation was mainly restricted to the cleaning of the household, preparation of the rice-beer (*juman*) and weaving of *Dokhna* (a female garment) needed in the pre-*Garja* ceremony called the *Salami*.

Among the Assamese, the biggest agriculture festival is *Bihu*, so is the case with Boros, whose main source of livelihood, was agriculture. The Boros call their seasonal festival as *Baisagu* i.e. starting of the New Year. It is still their main seasonal festival celebrated in the month of *Bohag* in Assamese or *Baisakh* i.e. mid-April. While the other two *Bihus* of the Boro's were *domashi* and *Katrigacha*. *Baisagu* is basically a merry making festival of boys and girls, celebrated for seven days, starting with *Makhou* or *Mashau* or *Goru Bihu* in Assamese, meant for the cattle. Boro women cleaned up their houses with cow dung, clothes, replaced the old earthen utensils by new ones and prepared rice beer (*zau*). On the first day of *Baisagu*, they went to the house of the *oja* or medicine man to offer him rice-beer and cocks, who in turn gave them the *tabij* or *kobos* (amulet) for the New Year. Being expert in cooking, the woman of the house cooked fowl with bitter herbs as *Khungkha* or a dish called *Khaji* made of pork with other wild vegetables for

ceremonial eating with their relatives and guests along with their favorite beverage of rice-beer. The Boro women wove beautiful *Gamosas* or towels meant for the festival, which were exchanged as a token of love by the young to the elders for their blessings. The married girls also visited their parent's home for blessings. The young Boro girls in their beautiful *Dokhnas* (female garment) performed the delightful *Bagorumba* or the 'butterfly dance' to the tunes of *siphung* (flutes), *serja* (stringed instrument) etc., played by the young boys. In the *Domashi* or *Domahi* or the *Bhogali Bihu* in Assamese, the Boro women prepared delicious foods like different types of cakes or *pithas*, a fried mixture of different pulses like *sobai*, *sibimg* (sesame), *mugu* etc. and rice-beer (*jau*). In the *Katri Gasa Saonai* or *Kati Bihu kangali Bihu* in Assamese, the womenfolk offered burning earthen lamp or *gasa* at the altar of the *Bathou*, cowshed (*goli*) and granary (*bakhri*), while men lit the lamps at the paddy field with the belief that there would be large amount of produce.

The Boros had firm faith in superstitions, spells and magic. Diseases and misfortunes were generally ascribed to witchcraft which was especially popular among Boro women. To ward off the evil influence of the spells of witchcraft, the Boro people worshipped the *Kubir* god. One of the popular witchcraft prevalent among the Boros was called the *Than-thin Daini*. She was believed to cast evil on people. To please the *Daini*, the people used to offer her vegetables, chicken etc. both cooked and raw.³⁷ Dalton in his account traces the origin of this practice as to "get rid of troublesome and ugly old women". A ritual was performed by the *Oja*, "with whose aid and that of a cane freely applied, the elders endeavour to extort

³⁷ Bhaben Narzi: op.cit, pp.242-244.

from the witch a confession of the fact and her motives”.³⁸ It’s a pity that the women were made responsible for things like diseases and misfortunes, on which they did not have any control. In the name of witchcraft, the woman who was declared as a *Daini* or witch was subjected to the beating of cane and sometimes even was banished from the area. Although, the Boro society held women in high esteem, yet such were instances where women were subjected to inequality and inhuman treatment, which questions the fact as to whether at all the Boro women were at par to their male counterpart.

Boro women of the pre-colonial era had contributions towards the local economy as well. The economic structure of the Boro people was eco-friendly where primitive methods of production and simple technology were adopted. Being a non-monetised economy, barter system or exchange of goods and articles was the medium of transaction. The gender differentiation was more visible in the economic sphere of the Boro tribe. There was a clear and organized division of labour between men and women in the family according to sex. While men were expected to go for hunting, house building and agricultural activities, Boro women concentrated on activities like weaving, collecting forest products, fishing, various agricultural and allied activities etc. Growing and collecting fruits, vegetables along with firewood was yet another contribution of Boro women to the tribal economy. Thus the economic activities of Boro women is an example of the effective use of natural resources in biodiversity management. It is interesting that generally the men never trespassed the women’s sphere but the women besides performing their domestic and social responsibilities, also helped the men in

³⁸ E.T. Dalton.: op.cit, p.86.

almost all the activities. This explains why women were being considered as an economic asset and hence the prevalence of bride-price custom in Boro society.

Agriculture mainly *jhoom*³⁹ and wet-rice subsistence agriculture was the main stay of the Boro people, where the women were active participants. Keeping in view the various considerations like suitability of land for cultivation, kind of grass grown, availability of irrigation facilities etc. the land for agriculture was selected. Mostly alluvial land called *hamaha* was preferred and paddy happened to be their primary cultivation. Among the three varieties of rice viz. *Maisali* (winter rice), *Bawa* (stemmed rice) and *Ashu* or *Ahu* (summer rice), the Boros' mostly preferred larger grains (*maima*) and smaller grains (*maisai*) of the *Maisali* rice or *Sali* in Assamese. All decisions regarding selection of land and type of crop to be sown were taken up by men in the Boro society. Thereafter, the labour of women was demanded in the cultivation work. In all the rituals and religious rites connected with cultivation and production, female members had significant functions. Infact almost every major step from sowing to harvesting of the crops and post-harvesting, was preceded by a rite or ritual which was specifically performed by the household woman and occasionally by a girl.

Besides these rituals, Boro women also used to labour arduously in the agricultural field. They assisted in levelling the land, cleaning and sowing of seeds, harvesting and post-harvesting activities like mixing of seeds, transplantation of seedlings, broadcasting, dibbling. Women's role in the post-harvest activities was quite exclusive: threshing of grains, winnowing, storage of grains for use and for seed

³⁹ A type of shifting cultivation in which slash and burn technique is used.

purposes, drying of grains, de-husking and cleaning of grains were the specific areas where the Boro women substantially worked in agricultural activities.

It is important to note that in all the agricultural rituals and ceremonies, *Mainao or Lakhi*, the Goddess of wealth was mainly worshipped. The role of women in this field was of great importance. She not only started the cultivation procedure but also accomplished it. She was the main performer in all the rituals relating to agriculture and her contribution in this field and in post-harvesting activities was no less laborious and important than men. Apart from this, it was also the responsibility of the wife to bring and provide food to her husband who was working along with her in the agricultural field. Endle also testifies the role of women in the agricultural field by stating that "...on the other hand, the wife of the proprietor of the rice-field is almost always present in person and busies herself in keeping ever ready an abundant supply of wholesome and highly appetising cooked food, to be eaten on the spot..."⁴⁰

At dawn, before coming to the field she cooks for her family members for the whole day and then assists her husband in the cultivation. It certainly gives us the impression that in agriculture and related activities, the Boro women had active role as they not only worked laboriously along with their men in the field and did most of the post-harvesting activities, at the same time domestic work was entirely on their shoulders and without any hesitation Boro women performed all their works and responsibilities.

The Boros being agriculturalists, animal husbandry was of great importance and it were the women of the family who predominantly managed the backyard poultry

⁴⁰ Sidney Endle: op.cit, pp. 13-14.

which had multiple roles. The Boro women (wife and daughters) used to be the master of the family's livestock like cowshed (*goli*), cattle, poultry, fowl etc. and granary (*bakhri*). Even the father, who was the head of the family, could not dispose any livestock or the stock of crops without the permission of the female members of the family. The women on the other hand could sell them without the permission of the male authority. Apart from livestock being an economic asset, there was another important reason for keeping them in the household. Boro women kept poultry, pigs etc. as they could use these animals as food and in the rituals whenever needed. Thus the granary and livestock, which revealed the economic condition of the family, remained under the custody of the Boro women and this signifies the power relations in the tribal economy.

While in hunting men had dominance, in fishing Boro women had expertise. Endle has given a detailed description of the fishing operations where women played the lead role.⁴¹ Fishing was done in groups. After fixing a date, women of a village or sometimes of a group of villages used to go for fishing. The number of rivers they fish depended on the number women and the availability of fish. Among the fishing implements women chiefly preferred *zakhai* (*jakoi* in Assamese). Sometimes the women also used *palha*, though it was chiefly preferred by men. Infact Boro women still use these fishing implements. All the implements were made of bamboo and fastened together with cane. *Palha* was a semi-circular bamboo basket with a small opening at the base of it to allow the admission of a hand. The technique of fishing is simple yet effective. The woman holding the handle of *zakhai* descends into the water and places it in an upside down position i.e., open-end side of *zakhai* faces upwards. She would drive the fish into her

⁴¹ Sidney Endle: op.cit, pp. 16-17.

basket by making a splash in water with her feet. On the other hand the *palha* used by women was smaller than that of men. After spotting the place for fishing, women used to put *palha* in an upside down position i.e., semi-circular side touching the ground and the base with its small opening facing upward, so that the fish could be confined within the basket. Women also used *khaloi* or *kuki*, made of bamboo to keep the caught fish in there. The women engaged in the fishing operation enjoy their catch by cracking jokes and laughing throughout. However, *Zakhai* was mostly preferred than *palha* as *zakhai* could be used to fish even in deep water but *palha* was best suited in shallow water as the ground was an essential requirement to cage the fishes from all sides. Thus by the application of traditional methods and tools women excelled themselves in fishing.

Weaving still is predominantly a women enterprise in the Boro economy. It has a social implication too as one of the unavoidable criteria for selecting a Boro girl for marriage was that she must be a weaver. In the traditional Boro society, a girl who does not know to weave is called *Aluri* i.e. one who does not know any work. It is also said that anybody who marries such a girl would fall into misfortune.⁴² Thus every mother used to teach her daughter to weave beautiful garments. Since early age Boro girls started to learn and by the time she gained maturity became an expert in weaving. Boro women used to weave not only for themselves but for all their family members. They mainly wove cotton and *eri* cloth. Female garments can be divided into two parts: *Dokhna* and *Alowan* or *Jumgra*.⁴³ *Dokhna* is tied around the chest and it hangs down to the ankles. It is about 10 feet long and four and a half feet wide. *Alowan* is a sort of scarf to cover the upper body, while

⁴² Bhaben Narzi: op.cit, p. 156.

⁴³ Boro women of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong districts wear *Mekhela* and *Sari* also and of West Bengal wear *Sari*.

Jumgra is a decorated scarf. *Dokhna* were made of varied colours and *Agor* or *phul* in Assamese and were named after their floral designs i.e. *agor*. They were of different types. Plain *dokhna* without any *agor* or floral designs was called *sala matha*. There were also ornamented *dokhnas*, popular being *dokhna thaws* or pure *dokhna* was essential during marriage ceremony. It was compulsorily worn by the bride and the two *Bairathis*. Another ornamented *dokhna* was *daothugod* which had designs of dove's neck, *phareo megan* had designs of pigeon eyes, *paharagor* had hill's scenery designs, *moider agan* with designs of elephant's foot prints etc. Orange, yellow and sky-blue happened to be their favourite colours, although they also weaved *dokhnas* of other colours. For male persons, women wove *gamcha*, which hangs from waist down to the knees and *jumgra*, made of *eri* thread and worn mostly in winter, sometimes in summer also to wrap around the body like a shawl. Men also wore a turban or *phali khaokhanai*, though not common to all.

Seeing this beautiful art of Boro women Lady Hydori, wife of the first Governor of Assam commented that she had travelled widely with her husband but had not seen a woman spin and weave the cloth for herself and for her children.⁴⁴ It indicates the weaving expertise and laborious nature of a Boro women. Endle also observes how a Boro mother devotes herself to weaving, performing all domestic work and taking care of the children at the same time.

It is to be mentioned that during the pre-colonial period, Boro women mostly wove cotton and *eri* cloth. They also reared *eri* cocoons to produce *eri* threads. The *eri* shawls, mufflers or *aranois* and other garments have a great demand in the market. The loom for the purpose was placed inside the household compound and a thatch

⁴⁴ Nirjay Kr. Brahma: *Socio-Political Institutions in Bodo Society*, Ph.D thesis, Gauhati University, 2008, p.163.

roof was provided to shield from sun and rain. Besides, the art of dyeing yarn with colours prepared from various roots leaves of trees was also known to them. They usually prepared dyes and various shades of blue and red.

In the pre-colonial Boro society barter was the mode of transaction and paddy was the medium of exchange in most cases. Though slavery was not prevalent, the Social Laws of Boro's called *Pandulipi* mentions the institution of female labour in the Boro society. They were the agricultural labour. The female labour called *Ruwati* was paid seven and a half mounds of paddy during the month of cultivation and six mounds for the months from September (*Aswin*) to March /April (*Chaitra*) in return of her services. On the other hand the male labour called *Dahona* was paid ten mounds of paddy during the season of cultivation and seven and a half mounds at the time of harvesting.⁴⁵ Thus, gender differentiation could also be seen in terms of payment between male and female workers in the Boro society. This institution continued during the colonial period as well.

Selling or bartering various articles at bi-weekly and weekly *haats* or local *bazars* was an important economic function of Boro women. They collected firewood, fruits and vegetables and sold it in the market in exchange of the goods they needed, mostly household products. Women also excelled in making beautiful articles and utensils of bamboo and cane. Mention may be made of the fishing implements like *Zakhai*, *khaloi* which were made entirely by the Boro women themselves. These bamboo products also formed an article of barter. Even the male members used to barter animals and other articles for these products at the *haats*.

⁴⁵ Sekhar Brahma: *Religion of the Bodos and their Socio- Cultural Transactions- A Historical Perspective*, D.V.S. Publications, Guwahati 2006, pp. 35-36.

Mention has to be made that even at the time of constructing a house, the varied duties of women were taken into consideration. The main house was called *nomano*. There were three divisions of *nomano* - *khopra*, *akhong* (middle room) and *ishing*. *Khopra* or the first room was meant for the eldest couple of the family. *Ishing* was the kitchen and *akhong* was used as the dining room. Even before constructing *nomano*, the granary or *bhakri* and cowshed or *goli* were built, which were under the responsibilities of *Boro* women. Granary was built towards the east of *nomano* and *goli* to the south-east corner of the household. The place reserved for weaving looms was either in the backyard or in the corner yard by the side of the verandah. These granary, *goli* and looms were under the authority of *Boro* women. So, they were also placed in such a way that the women while doing various household duties could get an easy access to these places. They took special care of the granary and the cowshed and never allowed any crow or kite to enter them, as *Mainao* or *Lakhi* in Assamese (goddess of wealth) resided there. Thus, these houses were considered as sacred.

To maintain the privacy and chastity of the women, a separate house called the *chourano* or *nosuna* (*choraghar* or *alohoghar* in Assamese) was built in the compound. This house was meant only for the bachelors. The main gate of the compound was also towards the *chourano* so that if an outsider or non-*Boro* or non-family member came, he might be allowed to rest in the *chourano* and not in the *nomano*, where the women resided.

However, it is to be mentioned that the *Boro* society, which was often described as egalitarian, democratic, and liberal society were not always applicable to the women. Although, *Boro* women had multiple roles towards their family and

society, they were subjected to many restriction. Being a patriarchal society the descent still is traced from the male line. Boro women worked all through their life on land but had no right in the entitlement of land. Nor the girls had any share on the paternal property which generally went to the boys. Although there were also certain peculiarities in special circumstances but by and large girls had no property rights. Generally the property of the family was divested on the sons, with certain alterations. During their maidenhood they enjoyed the liberty to participate in singing, dancing, and in festivals but once married, women generally refrained from such outdoor activities. Even the prevalence of matrilineal feature like bride-price or *Phon* could be viewed as a compensation given to the bride's parent or family for the loss of a productive family member. The *Dongkha* or widow remarriage and the practice of having a live-in-son-in-law or *Ghorjuwai* could be viewed as a means of utilizing their labour to boost up the economy of the bride's family. Besides, there was the practice of marrying more than one wife which was a disregard to women.

The inequality between men and women also existed in the Boro tribal economy. In the economic sphere, the homestead, agricultural implements, heirlooms etc were owned by the son. They also bartered goods mostly in return for various household necessities. Restriction was also imposed on women in agricultural fields. Though they worked arduously in the fields and had important contribution in crop production were not allowed to visit the field after plantation and till the harvesting. It was a tradition that the women may shout *Siyou* as a surprise of the growing paddy which would anger the *Mainao* (the Goddess of wealth) and would stop the growing of paddy crops.⁴⁶ Such psycho-social taboos were attached to

⁴⁶ Kameshwar Brahma: op.cit, p. 51.

women and this indicates her subordination in a patriarchal social framework. So far as the political field is concerned, the women were inconspicuous. An important traditional institution of the Boros was *Raijani Metheng* or the village *Panchayat* which acts as a safety valve of the community residing in a village. It deals with petty cases of thefts, assaults, quarrels, land partition, disputes, social crimes arising out of the disobedience to the customary rules and rituals. The participation of Boro women in village *Panchayat* or *Raijani Metheng* headed by a *Gaonburah*⁴⁷ was nominal. They were found to participate in village assemblies only when they were involved in the case or they were called as witnesses. It thus gives the impression that in the pre-colonial Boro tribal society and economy women were not at par with men. Thus, Boro women of the pre-colonial era performed sincerely all their domestic, social and economic duties and obligations. Although not equal with men yet Boro women enjoyed a considerable high and respectable status in the pre-colonial Boro tribal society and economy. However, the unfolding of subsequent developments in the colonial period in Assam brought about some changes affecting the role and status of Boro women and the gender differentiation as maintained in the tribal society and economy.

⁴⁷ The headman of a Boro village *Panchat* called *Raijani Metheng* was called *Gaonburah*. He was always a male.