CHAPTER IV
SOCIO-CULTURAL AND DOMESTIC LIFE OF THE BODO-KACHARIS

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In the present Chapter an attempt is made to deal with the socio-cultural and domestic life of the Bodo-Kacharis.

The social structure of the Bodo-Kacharis is patriarchal in character. However, the matriarchal element is not totally absent among them. According to Birinchi Kumar Baruah, a noted historian and litterateur of Assam, the social structure of the Bodo-Kacharis is considered to be matriarchal since they are of Mongoloid origin. He has cited the example of the Garos, a Mongoloid tribe, who are still matriarchal in character apparently due to the social impact of the Khasis and Jayantias as was noticed by Dr. S.K. Chatterjee. ¹

¹ Baruah, B.K., Asamiya Bhasa Aru Sanskriti, Gauhati, 1957.
In their domestic life, the Bodo-Kacharis do not differ very materially from their Hindu neighbours. As mentioned earlier, the most of the Bodo-Kacharis adopted some forms of Hinduism, and a considerable number of them were converted into Christianity, while a substantial section of them followed their primitive religion of Bathau.

The Bodo-Kacharis maintain certain definite rules in regard to construction of their houses and maintenance of the homestead. The houses are very simple in construction and one storeyed. The walls are made of "Ekra" (reed) or of split bamboos, and mud-plastered. The houses are not permanently constructed. They generally construct the main house to the northern side of the homestead and this stretches from west to the east. There are also three divisions of the main house with provision for a door facing to the south. The easternmost portion of the main house is meant for cooking and worship. The courtyard also accommodates the altar of "Bathau", the Supreme God, of whom a "Siju" tree is the emblem.

A Bodo-Kachari village is a compact one. The houses are built more closely together. There
are also a few fruit-bearing trees within the homestead. Each house has its own granary and outhouses, and all these are encompassed by a ditch and a fence of jungle grass or bamboo splits for security from outside intruders as well as to prevent the fowls, ducks, goats, pigs and other domestic cattle from straying into the fields and damaging the crops. They usually raise various kinds of livestock in their homestead.

The equipment used by the Bodo-Kachari householders for the purpose of domestic and field work are almost identical with those used by their Assamese neighbours. A large number of earthenware vessels are found in use in a Kachari house. Mention may be made of some such vessels that are used for the preparation and distribution of the much-prized rice-beer (Zo). Modern sophisticated equipment are not usually used by the Bodo-Kacharis in the village.

**FOOD:**

Rice is the principal food of the Bodo-Kacharis. They do not eat beef. Their favourite delicacy is pork. A large number of pigs are reared, bought and sold by the Bodo-Kacharis. Dried fish is
The favourite drink of the Bodo-Kacharis is rice-beer (Zo) which is prepared almost in every house. "Rice-beer is not used as a daily beverage, but is prepared as required, especially for use at marriages, funerals, harvest homes and other occasions that break the monotony of village life."  

**DRESSES:**

Like the Assamese, the male Bodo-Kachari uses "dhoti" and shirt and a "chadar". But the women have their own traditional dresses. They use

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3. Ibid., The Kacharis, 1975, p. 18.
"They make their own dress at home by weaving"

Photograph of a Bodo-Kachari girl working on a hand-loom; standing by is the present researcher. In the background is seen a part of the homestead.
MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE:

Originally, the Bodo-Kacharis were endogamous, but later on such restrictions were removed. Monogamy is the rule, and polyandry is strictly prohibited among the Bodo-Kacharis.

There are five types of marriages prevalent among the Bodo-Kacharis, namely:

(a) Marriage by social custom or negotiated marriage which is settled by mutual negotiation of the parties concerned;

(b) Marriage by residing at bride's place as "Ghar-Jowai" as a member of one's would-be father-in-law's family prior to marriage;

(c) Marriage by living with the woman as "Dhoka" or her paramour;

(d) Marriage by elopement; and,

(e) Marriage by abduction and force.

The last-mentioned type of marriage, that is to say, marriage by abduction and force, although prevalent among the Bodo-Kacharis, is not, however, socially recognised by the community.
The Bodo-Kachari custom sanctions a man to have a second wife with a view to handing down the father's name to posterity when the first wife proves herself childless.

"The marriage ceremony is said to consist of an interchange of the pan-leaf; at least this ceremony is performed by the Dhimals, who appear to be of the same family and are located with the Bodo. Now, this interchange of the pan-leaf is either borrowed from the Hindus, as another part of the ceremony, the anointing the bride and bridegroom with oil and turmeric undoubtedly is, or else the Kacharis, on ceasing to be a dominant race in Upper Assam, bequeathed it to the population there, as it is, amongst all the agricultural classes who do not care to follow strictly the Brahmanical ritual, the symbol of marriage, and the tearing of a pan-leaf by husband and wife a dissolution of tie." 4

In the Bodo-Kachari society a widow or a widower is allowed to give herself or himself in remarriage. "A widower may marry his deceased

wife's younger sister, but not the elder, whom he
is taught to regard conventionally in the light of
a mother. Much the same principle holds good in
the case of the remarriage of widows, which is
freely permitted, the one limitation being that a
widow may marry her deceased husband's younger
brother, but not the elder. 5

The widow marriage is of three types,
namely:

(a) The parents of a widow pay certain
amount of money to the village assembly
in the name of widow marriage and keep
aside some money for village feast (for
a community feast to the villagers);

(b) A man is accepted as "Ghar-Jowai" in
the parents' house of the widow for
about a year and then she is given in
marriage to him; and,

(c) A widow can marry her deceased husband's
relative if she has children.

Among the Bodo-Kacharis, divorce is allowed
by mutual consent. To get a divorce the couple have
to appear before the village elders and narrate their
case. They tear a pan-leaf into two pieces signifying
the dissolution of their conjugal life. If the village

elders feel that there are sufficient grounds and justification for the divorce, the injured husband can recover the marriage expenses. If they feel that there is no ground or justification, the divorcer husband is fined by the village assembly. The divorcee woman is at liberty to marry and live with any other person.

RELIGION:

The Bodo-Kacharis are converted into different religions. Most of them are converted into Hinduism and have adopted the customs of the Hindus.

The Bodo-Kacharis do not worship any image. They do not have temples like the Hindus. They believe that the earth, sky and air are pervaded by spirits known as "Modai" which always act against the interests of the mankind. This being so, these spirits are frequently propitiated by offerings of animals slaughtered in sacrifice, and grain.

"The Kachari deities fall into two different categories, viz., household gods and village gods. The household gods are worshipped in individual houses by
the family, while the village gods are worshipped outside at some central place in the village, often near a grove of bamboo trees. Among the household gods the most prominent is Bathau who looks after the interests of the family. He is represented by the Siju tree outside the house. Inside, an altar is made to Song Raja at which the women make offerings particularly during their menses period. These offerings are later laid by the root of the Siju tree. The Kacharis naturally treat this particular tree with reverence. Next to Bathau is his consort Mainao who is guardian of the rice fields. Since the Kacharis are primarily agriculturists she is very important to them, though unlike her husband she is not represented by any emblem. She is worshipped specially at the harvesting period, and receives offerings of large number of eggs. The other household deities are not of such importance. There is the Song Raja already mentioned, a favourite for worship by women, and Bura Bagh Raja — the name given to the tiger god, who is considered to be king of the woods, and feared as well as worshipped. The village gods are adopted from the Hindu ones. The main ones are Kubera, Mero Raja, Buragosain and Sila Rai. A number of pujas are offered to the village gods mainly to coincide with the harvestings of the three rice
crops. However these are not so much religious in nature as occasions of merrymaking with a lot of consumption of rice-beer and sacrifices of animals."\(^6\)

"The Kacharis, who still cling to their ancient religion, appear to have much the same notions on the subject as the Garos, under different names. They worship the 'starry host' and the most striking of the 'terrene elements', but the simplicity of their ideas on religion may be inferred from their having in their own language no words for sin, for piety, for prayer, for repentance."\(^7\)

Rev. S. Endle wrote about the religion of the Bodo-Kacharis in the following words: "The religion of the Kachari race is distinctly of the type commonly known as 'animistic', and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear or dread. The statement 'Timor fecit deos' certainly holds good of this people in its widest and strictest sense; and their religion thus stands in very marked, not to say violent, contrast with the teaching of the Faith in Christ. In the typical Kachari village as a rule neither idol nor place of worship is to be found;  

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but to the Kachari mind and imagination earth, air, and sky are alike peopled with a vast number of invisible spiritual beings known usually as 'Modai', all possessing powers and faculties far greater than those of man, and almost invariably inclined to use these powers for malignant and malevolent, rather than benevolent purposes. In a certain stage of moral and spiritual development men are undoubtedly influenced far more by what they fear than by what they love; and this truth certainly applies to the Kachari race in the most unqualified way. The Kachari Duars of this District (Darrang) were in earlier days looked upon as being especially unhealthy, and to some extent they retain that character still." 8

PRIESTHOOD:

The Bodo-Kacharis do not have any priestly class. Their religious activities are usually performed by the village elders known as 'Deuris'. A man who is efficient and prominent in the tribe may also be qualified as Deuri.

"The priesthood amongst the Bodo is not an hereditary office; any person possessing the necessary knowledge of the ritual and divinities, may take on himself the functions, and elders of the people may perform all sacred office without troubling the priests, who are called Deoshis. This is not unlike the name of the primitive priests of the Chutias, the 'Deoris', and, I think, I have heard the Kachari Priests called Deoris."  

Rev. S. Endle wrote in his book, "The Kacharis", about the priesthood of the Bodo-Kacharis: "There is no authorised priestly caste among the Kacharis, nor are Brahmins ever employed in their religious ceremonies, these latter indeed being generally of a special, and even festive, rather than a religious character. In Kamrup, however, one of the recognised sub-tribes is, or was, known as 'Brahmaroi', a name which seems to point to Brahmins as having a certain standing in the Bādā community. All religious offices are now discharged by Deoris or Deodāis, who are usually men of a certain age and recognised social position in the village community; village elders in fact. The office is not hereditary, and any one versed in

the usual forms of exorcism, &c., can discharge it. Another class of persons employed in religious ceremonies is known as the Ojhā or Ojha-Burā, who is generally armed with shells, cowries, &c., by the manipulation of which he professes to be able to foretell prosperity or the reverse to those who consult him. These officials are supposed to be competent to deal with the ordinary ailments of village life by indicating the appropriate method of propitiating the offended deity (Modai), whose anger is held to be the cause of all the ills that flesh is heir to. But in times of special emergency, e.g., plague, pestilence, famine, &c., the services of the 'possessed' woman, the 'Deodāni', are called into action for a special puja organised on a somewhat large scale. These gatherings are not very common, but when they do occur the order of the proceedings is something as follows, as occasionally witnessed by the writer. A piece of ground about fifteen or twenty yards square, usually on the bank of a running stream, is selected for the purpose. The surface of the soil is carefully removed, and a rude screen of cotton cloth some six or eight feet high erected on bamboos at the western side of the cleared ground. At the eastern side a slight earthwork embankment, some three or four inches high
and about a foot broad is thrown up; and on this a number of figures, usually seven or nine, but always an odd number, bearing a rude resemblance to the outlines of the human form, are placed in an upright position. These figures are roughly made of jungle grass twisted together, and are about one foot in height. Before each figure is placed a layer of the plantain tree with its concave side upwards, and in this are deposited the heads of slaughtered goats, pigeons, chickens, with salt, sugar-cane, plantains, gazi (a mixture of rice and pulse), &c., the whole being freely sprinkled with blood and pounded rice flour (Pithaguri). The Deodāni, a somewhat weird-looking figure, with dishevelled hair, and vermillion-stained forehead, wearing a long petticoat, dances up and down to and fro before these figures, keeping time roughly with the music of cymbals and tom-toms played by four or five men, who act as her assistants. The ceremony is a prolonged one, often extending over many hours: and the Deodāni, whose faculties are apparently quite absorbed in what she is doing and who seems for the time to be lifted above the world of time and sense, gradually works herself up to a state of excitement bordering on frenzy. At this stage, which is only slowly attained, a goat is brought forward and taken up before one of the
figures above mentioned, when the Deodāni, with one stroke of the long sacrificial sword, known as the imfi and reserved exclusively for such purposes, severs the victim's head from the body. Most of the blood is held to be offered in sacrifice to the Madai, before whose emblem the animal has been slaughtered; but some part is said to be sprinkled on the persons of the assembled worshippers. It is at this climax of the puja, i.e., at the sacrificial slaughtering of the goat, that the Deodāni is supposed to become possessed of the knowledge she is in search of, i.e., the name of the offended deity who has brought about the plague &c., and also the best method of propitiating his anger; which usually involves an offering of pigs, goats, &c., to the angered god, and the giving of a feast to the whole village community, the expense being defrayed by a general contribution."

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EXORCISM AND WITCHCRAFT:

The Bodo-Kacharis believe in exorcism. They are generally influenced by the act of exorcising or expelling evil spirits by certain ceremonies performed by exorcists. They believe that

a man can be cured not by medicine but by some exorcists. The exorcists are known as priests or ojhas, and they are regarded as the sole physicians. They believe that diseases are caused by some supernatural agency. "It often happens that sickness or other misfortune is ascribed to the spells of witchcraft rather than to the wrath of the deity, and then three ojhas are summoned, with whose aid, and that of a cane freely applied, the elders endeavour to extort from the witch a confession of the fact and her motives, and if condemned, she is expelled the district. A natural desire to get rid of troublesome and ugly old women was perhaps the origin of this custom." 11

FESTIVALS:

The religious festivals of the Bodo-Kacharis are different. Of course, the impact of the Hindu proselytisation is noticeable among them. Some of the Hindu gods and goddesses such as goddess Lakshmi or Kali, are believed by the Bodo-Kacharis. They worship Bathau or Siju who is looked upon as the tutelary deity of the house. This is commonly represented by a species of cactus which is generally

found in the courtyard of the Bodo-Kachari families. The Siju worship involves the slaughter of goats, chickens, etc., and at times eggs are also offered to the deity.

The Bodo-Kacharis have no religious festivals properly so called; Kherai puja, Habajanai, Natpuja, Bugrumba and Maigainai are some of their traditional festivals. The Deodhani dance is a common feature of the Kherai puja. Again large number of people gather at times about the end of November or beginning of December and again in April. These congregations are not for distinctly religious purposes but provide some occasions for merrymaking. Among the spirits which are believed by the Bodo-Kacharis mention must be made of Maina (the deity who provides food and drink), Knober (the deity of the paddy field), Hasung Madai (the god of the travellers), besides a host of others such as Dolah Gabang, Snarumaroi, Bura-Gosain, Hgrani Madai (god of woods) and Daini Madai (god of water). There are only a few festivals in which these spirits are propitiated.

"The three great festivals to the elemental gods are celebrated on some spot out of the village, generally on the banks of the river and the attendance
on them is therefore called 'going forth to worship'. The worship of the household gods is celebrated at home. One festival, called the Bamboo festival, recalls the bamboo shrines before every Garo's door. On this occasion thirteen men carry as many lofty bamboo poles decorated with clothing, and having a yak's tail at the head. It is very strange that the low Musalmans of Chota Nagpur called Jholahs, &c., have a festival which they celebrate in Chaith, the most singular part of which is the exhibition of long bamboo poles decorated in a precisely similar manner." 12

"There would seem to be no distinctively tribal festivals characteristic of the Kacharis of this district (Darrang), unless the January and April Bihus can be regarded as such. The origin of these two festivals is still somewhat obscure and uncertain, and further light on the subject is greatly to be desired. Certainly they are not exclusively Kachari festivals, for they are observed by the Hindus in this neighbourhood as well as by the Kacharis. Among the latter the January Bihu is usually celebrated about the 12th of that month.

For weeks previously the young people have been busy building 'Bihu Huts' of jungle thatch; also in erecting tall bamboos, sometimes surmounted by ragged flags, &c., while straw, thatch and other combustibles are piled up around these bamboos to the height of many feet. On the appointed Bihu night these sheds, &c., are all set fire to amid much rejoicing, dancing, singing, &c., and of course there is, as on all like occasions, a liberal consumption of the national rice-beer. For a month or two previously to this festival, the village boys and young people have had to guard the growing and ripening rice crops night and day; and in all likelihood this merry-making, which is very much of the nature of a 'Harvest home', is largely an expression of their joy and gladness at being relieved from this hard and irksome duty.

The April Bihu, the origin of which it is not so easy to account for, seem to be a 'Saturnalia' of much more objectionable character. The people abandon themselves freely both to drunkenness and other forms of licentiousness, and cases of serious assault and riot have been known to accompany and follow these gatherings. Among the Darrang Kacharis, this festival lasts for seven days, during which little or no work is done, the whole period being given up to merry-making, dancing, feasting, &c. As is the practice
among their Hindu neighbours, on the opening day all cattle are taken to the nearest river or tank, and there formally bathed, and afterwards sprinkled with a preparation compounded of rice-beer (Zu), tomatoes, and turmeric. The horns are smeared with oil and occasionally oil, ashes and pounded rice-flour are applied in patches to the bodies of the cattle."  

DEATH:

In the Bodo-Kachari family the deceased is disposed of by two recognised ways, namely, burial and cremation. Rev. S. Endle gives us an elaborate description about the death among the Bodo-Kacharis: "Immediately after death occurs, the corpse is carefully washed by the nearest relatives, the arms and legs straightened out, the head anointed with oil, and the hair reverently combed. A fowl or a pigeon is killed, and from its flesh a curry is prepared with vegetables and condiments. A portion of this food is then placed close by the deceased's head, and the act of feeding him with a little of it is carried out up to a certain point, though no food is as a matter of fact actually placed within his lips. This act is repeated some ten or twelve times, and what remains of the curry, &c., is then thrown away, no one being allowed to consume it. The dead

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man's body is then clothed with the best garments he owned in his life time, and the whole covered with a perfectly new cloth; and in this condition it is taken outside the homestead for final disposal. There are two recognised way of disposing of the dead, i.e., (1) Burial and (2) Cremation. The latter is looked upon as the more correct and respectable, though from motives of economy the former is by far the more common." 14

As pointed out by K.P. Bahadur, a minor difference is observed in the cremation of a man's body and a woman's body. In the case of a man's body, five layers of wood are placed, and in the woman's case, seven. Friends and relatives go round the pyre, seven times for a woman, and five times for a man. After cremation, the ashes are sheltered by four posts with a cloth roof, again, to protect the spirit. 15

It is needless to say that the socio-cultural and domestic life of the Bodo-Kacharis is almost identical with that of the Assamese people.