The Bodos are the major and the most noteworthy among the tribes of Assam. It is believed that they first came from South-West China through Tibet and Burman. The Bodo language belongs to the Tibeto Burmese linguistic family. There are many sub-classes of the Bodos namely Bodo, Rabha, Dimasa, Tiwa (Lalung), Tipra, Garo, Sonowal Kachari, Mech, Chutiya, Koch etc. They had once their kingdoms in the state of Tripura, at Dimapur and Maibong of Nagaland, and in the districts of Darrang, Nagaon, and Kamrup of Assam.

In Assam, The Bodos are the only tribe who demanded for the first time a separate political autonomy in the form of a state. The Bodo nationality formation cannot be analysed in isolation from the Assamese nationality formation.

Processes like Sanskritization or Brahmanization by the upper class Hindus or the Hindu priests who modified various myths, legends and rituals to create the genealogy of the tribal kings with Hindu gods and goddesses, were the first step to assimilate various tribes and non-tribes in Assam as well as in N.E.India. The second approach was the Neo-Vaishnavism, an egalitarian approach preached by saint Sankardeva and his earnest disciple Madhabdeva. There was a provision for the lower caste people or tribes to upgrade themselves by castes or to enter into the Hindu fold by taking initiation to a guru (prophet) and by reciting his holy name given by him. Consequently, a tribe caste continuum was formed. The Saraniyas are the initiated Vaishnavite who were Bodos out and out. The second approach was
quite liberal where most of the elements were borrowed from the tribes. Thus, the Bodos were incorporated to the cultural core of Assamese nationalism.

But there were some factors which compelled this tribe to struggle for a separate political autonomy in later days. Few reasons pointed out generally for a separate identity movement are -----

(i) Though there was a frequent voice of greater Assamese nationality in the pre-independent days, in practice, the caste Hindu leaders paid a deaf ear towards the socio-economic issues of the Bodos.

(ii) Despite of active involvement almost in every socio-economic issues, participation in the Congress ministry by the Bodo leaders was ornamental only. The congress was addressed as the League of Caste Hindus.

(iii) Towards the early part of twentieth century, Kalicharan Brahma preached the prevention of liquors etc. This Brahma movement augmented a wider horizon to the up growing Bodo-movement.

From the 1st part of the twentieth century upto these days, the Bodos have been continuing various processes and means to justify their distinct identity and revitalize their glorious past. Formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, adoption of devanagari script, recognition of Bodo language as M.I.L. in the university level, collection of folklore material, prevalence of traditional dresses among the Bodo people of all walks are the outcome of their identity movement. Bodo textile receives wider proliferation and marketization as a consequence of identity consciousness.

In this chapter, we focus on a few dominant genres of folklore relying on which the Bodo nationalism has sprung up heading towards a new horizon. Though the Bodos have an appreciable reservoir of oral literature and material culture right from the Vedic ages, yet a little bit has been unearthed in black and white. Lots of oral literatures were missed due to the loss of their script in the mythic past and they had to merge in intellectual darkness for a few centuries. After a few decades of debates and discussion, the Devanagri script has been adopted to express them. Yet very less has been done in the name of preservation and revitalization of their oral treasures and material culture.
BODO LEGENDARY FIGURES IN THEIR NATIONALITY FORMATION

The emerging class of litterateurs among the Bodos in the first quarter of the twentieth century mad attempt to infuse consciousness and confidence among the common Bodos in order to establish themselves as a homogenous group deserving sufficient attention. This was necessary as the Bodos living in different parts of Assam in the first half of the century were not conscious of their common ethnic and historical background despite the fact that they had their own kingdoms, ranged from the full statehood of the Dimasa – Kacharies to those confined to much smaller localities till 1850's. The attempt of the Bodo middle class to have employment and political power in the colonial political set up of Assam inclined them to tale recourse to traditional narratives like myths, folksongs, legends, etc. These genres of folklore were of tremendous use to construct their fragmented history and a rich legacy of heritage. And this in turn became helpful in assertion of their identity. The legendary heroes and heroines like Ada Basiram and his lieutenant Daoharam, Joholao Daimalu, Seubar, Jaolia Dewan, Soumdoun, Tularam Senapati, Gambari Sikhla, and Birgosri Sikhla are popular among the Bodos. There are various legends whether in verse or in prose depicting the valour and patriotism of the heroes and heroines in their fight against their traditional enemies mainly the Bhutanese.

(1) A STORY OF GAMBARI SIKHLA, A BODO HEROINE:

Gambari Sikhla was a queen of Bijni Estate. She was a Bodo heroine. Once, the king of Bijni had to pay tributes to the king of Bhutan. The king did not like to recognize the superiority in power of the king of Bhutan. She tried to bring the king of Bhutan under the control by any means. Ultimately she was believed to be a concubine of the king and tried to overpower him but failed. She fought with the king for a long time camping at a place near Gosaingaon town, where she dug a big tank popularly known as Padma Phakri. She lost her life in fighting with the king of Bhutan.
(2) BIRGASHRI SIKHLA (LEGENDARY HEROINE):

The area of the Bijni Estate is called BagDuar. It was during the British regime that the whole area was divided into several Talukas or Mauzas for the smooth administration. Every Taluka or Mouza placed under a person whose responsibility was to collect revenues from the tenants and deposit to the British India Government. The collector of revenue was called Mouzadar or Choudhuri. Birgashri Sikhla was a Mouzadar of the Bodo community. The area where Birgashri Sikhla lived was called Chaudhuripara and still the area is known as Chaudhuri para (in Assamese or Bodo para means village).

Birgashri Sikhla was also known as Theng phakhri. She was very courageous and straight forward lady. She remained spinster till her death. It was the system that the Mauzadars had to collect revenues and deposited the same to the British India Government along with other valuable goods annually as a token of presentation. Birgashri Sikhla had to engage as many as twelve Bodo youths of stout figure to carry the valuable goods to Goalpara. In case the Mauzadars failed to deposit the fixed amount of revenue and valuable goods regularly then the British India Government imposed penalties on them.

One Birgashri Sikhla determined that she would not pay the revenue and also would not deposit the valuable goods to the British India Government. Thus she was regarded defaulter and was pressed hard to pay the arrears. There was a clash between the young lady Mauzadar and the British India Government. The clash became more and more serious and ultimately she was compelled to fight with the British soldiers. Birgashri Sikhla was a good fighter and she could ride well. She fought with the British soldiers on the horse back and in the long run she had to flee. The British India Government declared her to be a great enemy of the government.

While fled away, Birgashri took rest at a small hillock near the present town of Bongaigaon. One day, while she felt thirsty Birgashri attempted to take water from a stream setting her horse free. Suddenly the British soldiers attacked
her and killed her with their guns. Birgashri died and her long sword was left by the
bank of the stream. One day the sword of Birgashri was seen by a certain saint who
took initiative to build a temple where the sword was placed with a belief that the sword
belonged to a goddess. At present the temple is known as Bogeswar Mandir. It is
believed by some people of the area that the sword might belong to Birgashri Sikhla,
the Bodo heroine, who was killed by the British soldiers. It might be possible that the
name of the temple originated from her name, Birgashri>Birgaswar>Bargeswar>Bageswar. The place around the temple is known as
Birjhara and which is believed to have origin in the name of Birgashri. The particular
area where Birgashri took rest for a while and was killed by the British Soldiers is now
called by the local people Birjhara which is believed to have been developed from
Birjiroa>Birjora>Birjhara.( Birjiroa means rest of Bir or Birgashri)

BODO FOLK SONGS

Ballads of heroes or narrative songs of the Bodos include the stories of Ada
Bachiram, Daoharam Jauhaulao, Daimalu, Cheobar, Soumdoun, Tularam Sednapati
(lieutenant), Jaoliya Dewan, Gambari sikhla etc. The depiction of the warfare between
the Kacharis and the Bhutiyas on the frontiers is frequently found in Bodo folksongs.

Basiram and Daoharam were two legendary Bodos who fought against the
Bhutanese.

Garaya Dabraydou Bachiram Jauhaulao

Ganggar Chubaya phailaygou
(Ride on horse, Bachiram,
Bhutiyas are coming in a body)

Bodo women took part in battles. These heroic souls could lay down their
lives for their motherland. In the following song, the heroic women are
encouraging Bachiram and Daoharam to fight against the enemies.

Phoi oj phicaphor noncoro phoi

Daoha nanno thandini

Dahal thungri lananoi bikha phorda nanoi

Ducmon phorkhou hocodini
Ada bahiram zoholao
Nonlay goraya dabray lando,
Akhra bugdao nanoi nono hoco lando
Naykor honoi nayhor ducmonphralay,
Haylado huilado phoilay gou.
Nana nana nanlaygon hazo gophayao
Thoya thoilay gon docmona,
Derha laygon zon Boro phora.
Dagi ada Baciram zoholao dagi nono,
Zoholaoni phica, birni phica nonlay uthri hagon
Ada Daoharam zoholao nonbo daoga lando,
Nonbo lamayao benco hoido.2

(Come, oh you sons of Bodos,
Come you out, sword and shield in hand
Let us go and rout the enemy
Brother Bachiram, ride forward,
Pursue the enemy hard,
See, there he comes in all strength.
Let the fight be in cave,
Kill the soldiers of the enemy
We, the Bodos will win the game.
Fear not, Bachiram, fear not,
You are born of heroic loins,
Victory will surely be yours
And you, brother Daoharam,
Go you forth on the elephant’s back,
Sword in hand to meet the foes on the way.)

When Bachiram started for the battle against the Bhutias, his wife sang farewell---

Danhan chuhan ada Baciram
Akhra barini akhra bugdao ada
Hazo khorao douha nanno
Goraya mabar zogdao,
Danhan cuhan, dauhan cuhan ada Bachiram can mokhan,
Thana thanlaigon hazo khorao daoha nanno,
Thoia thoilaigon hazokhoroni gongar cubaphor,
Danhan cuhan ada Baciram canmokhan

(Oh dear Bachiram
Get on to the saddle, (with) legs in the stirrups,
Put spurs to the horse
And march forward: (to battle)
The battle breaks with the Bhutias.
Let (if) Bhutia soldiers die,
That's no concern of mine.
Get on to the horseback,
Advance and climb the hill.)

Bodo damsel “Gambari” fought against the Muslim invaders riding on a horse
like the Queen of Jhansi, Lakshmibai.

Chourba bangal phaibay
Malayni deskhou sekhophoibai
Dagi dagi rouniyaphour
Dang jaunghabou gambari sikhla
Jenthra jaunghbou bisourja alamala
(Foreigner Muslims are invading our country.
Oh, valiant fighters don’t be afraid.
Damsel Gambari is with us.
We will not surrender so easily)

Again one patriotic Bodo song with natural beauty is—
Ayo angou habab
Daima daisa jiri
Bang phang laiphang sari sari
Samonang thau, naibay thathao
Again,

_Sourjigiri sourjinay_ ⁵

(Oh my native land,
you are adorned with the
god gifted streams and green flora.
My thirst will never be filled despite of
my constant drink of your beauty)

Another specimen of patriotism is ----

_Jaungni Asampuri_

_Ai oi, Jaungni jaunaum bima,
Goy khanthal ouwa thajou sari sari
Sakhathi phakhathi doima doisa jiri jiri
Jeroibou nuharjoubou hajouni mala
Nidan gaiya, thainay gaiya joungni raijouwa_

(Oh my motherland,
you are lovely with rows and rows of
betel nuts, jackfruits, mangoes, bamboos etc, and
ornamented with rivers and rivulets,
rows of mountains wherever you see.
No scarcity of people, no deathknel)

Again,

_Zoholao zalia gothofor zon
Zoholao zalia gothofor zon
Zonlay raokhoubo gia gia
Dahal thugriano zonni gelegra mua mua
Zoholao.... gia gia
Corba cuthura gaglab phobia zonni raijouao
Dangon cugon guagon
Zonlay raokhaubo gia gia⁶ (We are sons of heroes
We know not fear, we know not
The shield and the sword
are our play things-our toys.
Should any enemy invade our place?
He will be cut into pieces and be killed,
We have no fear and we do not pause)

The Bodo women took part in battles. These heroic souls could lay down their lives for their motherland. It can be perceived from the above examples that those ballads were strong testimonies of Bodo patriotism. Overcoming all prejudices and taboos, the womenfolk took equal share both in well and woe. Gambari Sikhla's fight with the Muslim invaders and Birgoshri's against the British soldiers compels us to think that patriotism deserved topmost priorities in this warrior community. The Bodos were frequently involved in battles with the Bhutiyas in the Northern frontier. The Bhutiyas entered in Bodo kingdoms through several gates (Assamese term 'Duwar') along the north boundary and involved in battle with the Bodos.

CONSCIOUSNESS TOWARDS MATERIAL CULTURE

Among the four categories of folklore, material culture too serves significant roles in the assertion of the identity of a community or in the nationality formation of that community or in the recovery of a nation from the grasp of foreign invaders. For example, we may cite the independent movement of India where bonfire of foreign clothes, wearing of khaddar (handmade cotton clothes), circulation of the spinning wheel etc. were unavoidable chapters led by M.K. Gandhi.

Folk costume is the visible, outward badge of folkgroup identity, worn consciously to express that identity. Nowadays, even earlier also, a particular folk costume of a particular community serves as an identity of nationality of the community. A costume is the expression of the folk ethics, imagery of the weaver's dream, strong means of status of the person and the community
concerned. A particular dress may signify a particular state of mind. In the present culture of Europe, local costumes expressed locality, region, or province. In the United States, the term folk costume can be used to describe the dress of all traditional, regional, ethnic, occupational, and sectarian groups. It identifies the wearer to the outside world as well as his own community, it is prescribed by the community and its form is dictated by the community's tradition. Don Yoder in his article "Folk costume" comments—

"Folk costume is that form of dress which (i) outwardly symbolizes the identity of a folk community and (ii) expresses the individual's manifold relationships to and within that community."

In the essay "Uncovering the Secret Vice: Toward an Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment", Ronald A. Schwarz says about few functions of folk costume. These are -

(i) Adornment: Evidence from the Apes and Archeologists.
(ii) Protection from environment
(iii) Protection from supernatural forces
(iv) The shame hypothesis

In Assam, lots of communities live side by side and usher a common greater Assamese nationality. As a result a particular folk costume has begun to represent the Assamese nationality. The Bodo is the major tribal group in Assam. Lately, they felt a sense of segregation from the mainstream and used to continue a series of movement to form a separate territorial council. So a few ingredients have come to the foreground to emphasize and represent their strong nationality. Folk costumes specially the dokhona, aronai have been embraced to gratify and accelerate their distinct nationality.

In Assam too, the floral towel "Gamocha" specially woven by the womenfolk to handover to the dearest one during the springtime is now-a-days exhibited in any part of the world to justify the skillful hands and artistic minds of the Assamese stock.

"..... Assamese hand-woven towel called gamosa, the Assamese tray called sarai have come to occupy special places as symbolizing
Assamese distinctiveness and are being dramatically displayed in public. The dresses used by the Bodo dancers are *Dokhona, Aronai, Regang, Janji Khanai fali* (wide belt made of cloth) blouse etc. Dokhona is the principal Bodo female dress worn from the breast up to ankle. This garment measuring about 1.5x3 metres is woven by the Bodo girls themselves. It is very hard to say about the source of the "dokhona". People have traced some sort of link with Buddhist synonym "drubkha" meaning Tibetan / Bhutia women's dress.

Bodo girls wear a shoulder scarf known as "Pasra" along with the *dokhona*. It is put on as a protection of the chest from cold weather also used as an ornament.

"Another manifestation of a semiotic expression of the problem of the Bodo identity can be found in the realm of dress. A national dress often becomes an important way of expressing the solidarity of the participants of a nationalist movement. Therefore, the leadership of such movements always tries to project a special dress as the national dress. For this, they either try to resurrect the dress that their predecessors used to wear, or even invent a new one."

Aronai is like that of an English neck-tie but more wide and equal throughout its length. *Regang* is the most beautiful and attractive scarf of the Bodos. It is not only a beautiful scarf but a symbol of skillful embroidery of Bodo females which is most probably never before witnessed by non-Bodos.

Among the other clothes woven by the Bodo damsels, the *Eri* shawl is noteworthy. It is made from the cocoon of caterpillars. It is soft, handy and has high quality of heat resistance. It has been acknowledged as a status symbol, a token respect by the old people.

Among all these clothes the Bodo *dokhona* is in an emerging trend for the emergence of various weaving centers with superior quality of thread. But the main driving force behind the reviving tendency is the assertion of identity.
“The Bodo dokhona, which was traditionally woven out of coarse yarn, are now-a-days woven with fine thread and even pat and muga. Besides, traditional dresses, fashionable jackets, shalwar, necktie, T.V and sofa cover and vanity bags are being produced by Bodowomen. The way aronai and other Bodo garments are being promoted and showcased in the present days ethnicity discourse testify the revival as well as the invention of tradition in the negotiation of identity.”

The Bodo women previously used to wear Riha-Mekhela, a popular Assamese dress. The Mekhela (worn in the lower part by women folk) and Riha (piece of cloth wrapped over the breast) are product of the Bodo women. It is said that the Riha is a variety of Phali donned by Bodo women. At present, it is very hard to find a Bodo woman in an Assamese dominated area wearing Assamese dress. Now, there has involved a standardized dress of Bodo women folk following a model of Kokrajhar area, the main power centre of Bodo-movement. This kind of change has mostly occurred in the post-1986 period in the wake of the ABSU-led separate statehood movement. The Bodo men folk are also no exception to this dress identity.

“The traditional Bodo scarf, Aronai, has now become a symbol of Bodo identity assertion. It is common sight to see invariably all the Bodo leaders, thousands of participants in the public rallies, functions, etc donning Aronai.”

This socio-political role of Dokhona-aronai can be equated with Gamocha (generally floral towel) of the Assamese people, which has been utilized as a costume of pride and artistic excellence of native weavers and as a special gift of auspicious occasions, now a days, come to be used to welcome political leaders and in other nationalistic issues. During the anti foreigners agitation in Assam, the local leaders of AASU (All Assam Students Union) used Gamocha to wrap around their necks.

There may be hundreds of means to express the nationalistic sentiment of a particular community. There may be language, culture and historical
background to be emphasized, may be violent liberation forces or anti-leagues to be arisen. But the costume of that particular community serves as an ideal and prosperous means of expression of identity consciousness or nationality.

A Costume is like a microcosm where one finds mirrored in their relative intensities the aesthetic, moral and nationalistic ideals of those who wear it.

Inferences can be definitely drawn that the Bodo Identity is synonymous with an aronai and a dokhona, particularly in public gatherings. Now, school and college going girls are bound to wear dokhona in the BTC area failing to which would lead them severe punishment. Imported clothes are to withdraw their already enjoyed status from their protected area. Soft and loin clothes with renewed designs and motifs are produced by the Bodo weavers to whom sophisticated technology and marketing provisions have been facilitated. In and outside Assam, affinity and attraction towards their folk costumes have been observed in the non Bodo section also. Financial soundness and ethnic identity have equally been attained by the circulation of the folk costume of the Bodos.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3 Ibid, 31-32

4. Kenkar Boro of Borigaon, Sonitpur (Assam) interviewed by Baijayanta Keot of Tezpur university on 14-05-205

5. M. M. Brahma, op.cit, 1

6. Ibid, 1

7 Birendranath Datta, *Folkloric Foragings in India's North East* (Guwahati: ABILAC, 1999), 18


10. Chandan Kumar Sharma, op.cit, 24