

# Traditional Systems of the Bodo Community: Change and Continuity



Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture

**Published by:**  
The Secretary  
Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture  
M. G. Road Riverside, Uzan Bazar,  
Guwahati- 781001 (Assam)  
Phone: 0361-2510594  
E-mail: info@vkic.org  
Web: www.vkic.org

All Rights Reserved

First Edition : December, 2018

ISBN : 978-93-83079-25-4

Price : ₹ 300.00 only.

Printed at : Luit Offset  
Bamunimaidam, Guwahati-781 021  
Ph.: 98642 60800  
E-mail : luitoffsetghy@gmail.com

# Content

□ Village Organization and its Impact on Bodo Society	Dr. Nareswar Narzary	1
□ Family System and kinship terms of Bodo Society	Prof. Bhupen Narzaree	11
□ Indigenous Knowledge Related to the Rice Cultivation of the Bodos of Assam	Dr. Pranab Jyoti Narzary Dr. Purnima Boro	19
□ Gods and Goddesses in the Stream of Bodo Tradition	Dr. Liladhar Brahma	31
□ Bathwu Rituals under the theme of Traditional System of Bodo Community: Change and Continuity	Dr. Subung Basumatary	53
□ Marriage system of the Bodos	Dr. Tulan Mochahary	66
□ Seasonal Festivals of the Bodos	Taren Boro	77
□ Food Habits of the Bodos: A Study	Dr. Rahel Mochari Dr. Mallika Basumatary Dhananjoy Brahma	83
□ Spinning and Weaving of the Bodos	Rupali Swargiary	94
□ Traditional Healing : A peep into the Bodo Society with reference to Udalguri area of B.T.A.D. Assam	Dr. Nijwam Narzary	103
□ Role of Bamboo in Bodo Festivals	Gwgm Brahma Kochary	111
□ Valedictory Address	Nivedita Bhide	124
□ Photographs of the Seminar		

# Indigenous Knowledge Related to the Rice Cultivation of the Bodos of Assam

**Dr. Pranab Jyoti Narzary**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Bodo, Pandu College

**Dr. Purnima Boro**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Bodo, Pandu College

## **Introduction:**

The Bodos or the Bodo-Kacharis constitute a very important section of the different ethnic groups and races of Assam with their distinctive cultural and linguistic traits. S. K. Chatterji identified them as the Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids. About the Bodos he writes,

“...the Bodos, who spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid block in North-Eastern India, were the most important Indo- Mongoloid people in Eastern India, and they form one of the main basis of the present-day population of these tracts.” (Chatterji, 2007)

According to S.K. Chatterji, the term ‘Indo-Mongoloid’ is significant in so far as the term ‘defines at once their Indian connection and their place within the cultural milieu in which they found themselves, as well as their original racial affinity.’ Chatterji coined the term on the model of ‘Indo-European’,

'Indo-Aryan', 'Indo-Scythian' etc. and as an equivalent of the term Kirata. However, Matthias Hermanns coined the term 'Indo-Tibetans' to denote the Mongoloid people in Northern and North-Eastern India.

Commenting on the racial features of the Bodos Matthias Hermann says,

As is the case with the Mache (mech), so also with the Kachari (Bodo) – the Mongoloid features are very prominent: the strong cheek bones, slit eyes, a slight growth of hair on the body and scanty beard. They are shorter and scantier than the Indians of the north-east. (Ibid, 2007)

It must be admitted, however, that these Indo-Mongoloid people had close contacts with the Negritos, the Austro-Asiatic, the Nordic and Mediterranean races of India in different stages of its history and civilization. This aspect of their contact with other races has been identified as cultural assimilation and racial fusion by S. K. Chatterji.

The Bodos have distinct identities in terms of their culture, tradition, rituals, folk beliefs, dialects, languages etc. and the traditional knowledge always has very high relevance in their life. The routine for work like the complete cycle of agriculture from seed collection to its preservation, craft works, animal husbandry, cultural practices, rituals etc. are invariably associated with the traditional knowledge. The Bodos who have inhabited since the time immemorial in the region are endowed with unique exotic reservoir of rich natural resources. Instances of traditional eco-management practices, food processing and preservation, traditional uses of wild plants for food, judicious use of water and potential knowledge of constructing irrigation canals, earthwork embankment in the rice fields, organic agriculture technique are the part of their livelihood.

In the social context of the people of North East India, rice is still an integral part of the lives and well-being of people. The indigenous communities of Assam and North East India are engaged since very early times in agricultural activities with the local indigenous and traditional methods. In many tribal communities in North East India namely, the Bodos, Garos, Rabhas, Khasis, Missings, Karbis and the Dimasa Kacharis, rice constitutes an important component for various ceremonies and customs associated with them. For them, rice beer, rice flour is used in many of the ceremony related to the life cycle and the community rituals and festivals. During *Kherai Puja* and other ceremonies of the Bodos the paddy grain constitute an important item offered to the deities. In the marriage-ceremony known as *Hathasuni* or *Hatha Khurnai* a special item of curry made of rice powder and chicken is prepared by the bride for the groom as well as guests. Similarly, many rituals and ceremonies related to the paddy are performed by the Bodos.

### **Methodology:**

The present study is confined to the field study as well as the survey of printed sources. For the primary sources, most of the data were collected from the different Bodo dominated areas of the Sonitpur and Udalguri District of Assam. Most of the data were collected by observation, interview and questionnaire method from different active and passive bearers.

For the secondary sources library works were done. Different books, journals, research papers etc. of traditional knowledge were followed to give a final shape to the present study.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
DEPARTMENT OF CHEMISTRY  
5408 SOUTH DICKENS STREET  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637

RECEIVED  
JAN 15 1964  
FROM  
DR. J. H. GOLDSTEIN  
100 EAST 57TH STREET  
NEW YORK 22, N.Y.

Dear Dr. Goldstein:  
I have received your letter of January 14, 1964, regarding the manuscript on the synthesis of polyacetylene derivatives. The manuscript is being reviewed by the appropriate members of the Department of Chemistry. I will be in touch with you again once the review is complete.

Very truly yours,  
[Signature]

## Traditional Paddy lore of the Bodos:

Every society has its own heritage of traditional knowledge stored in its traditional culture in the form of belief, customs and rituals. Although they might appear to be nothing more than belief and rituals far removed from science; they form the basis of the later development in the field of knowledge system even in science and technology. Elements of Traditional Knowledge in science and technology are still relevant and useful to the modern society. It has been found that most traditional agricultural practices are eco friendly and sustainable in comparison to the destructive, non-sustainable modern agriculture. Modern agricultural scientists are now looking for rediscovery of traditional agricultural knowledge for sustainable development in the field of agriculture. When the modern chemical pest-management system proved futile, the traditional pest-management systems are on the way to be reinstated once again.

Since the dawn of human history, man has learnt to co-exist with nature. While there has been a constant attempt to unearth the mysteries of nature and unnatural phenomena, he also developed some sort of reverence for the celestial objects like sun and moon as the givers of light, energy and psychological support to perpetuate and continue life on this earth. In many festivals like *Pongal* in Tamil Nadu, *Onam* in Kerala, *Bihu* in Assam, *Bwisagu* among the Bodos rice constitutes an important component in the observance of rituals as well as in preparing various delicacies associated with it.

The communities of Assam and North East India use their traditional knowledge for selection of land and its irrigation and drainage, tillage and tilling implements, manures and maturing, cultivation of crops, sequence of cropping,

protection of crops from diseases and pests, agricultural meteorology, livestock in agriculture. However, the advancement in modern knowledge about scientific cultivation has certainly influenced a section of the so called progressive peasants. However, the traditional agricultural process still continues for the majority of the people engaged in paddy cultivation. For example in their harvesting process the indigenous people of Assam and NE India are still following the traditional practices for planting the paddy crops and harvesting. In it farmers bend to gather and slash stalks using razor-sharp sickles, some collect and tie the stalks while others thresh, by hitting the rice plant on a piece of wood and then the farmers winnow the paddy and let the trash blow away from it. The project endeavors to explore the contemporary relevance of paddy lore and indigenous knowledge of the Bodos and thereby understand the pivotal position occupied by rice in our lives and the societies in which we live, from fresh perspectives. (Baishya, 2009: 53)

Assam is a land of rice. Natives of Assam have been cultivating rice since time immemorial. It is said that Assam is the land where wet rice was first cultivated. The Bodo tribe of Assam probably first of all started the rice cultivation. (Baishya, 2009: 59) Ecologists opined that the traditional people of Assam developed a large number of rice species. Agriculture is the mainstay of the livelihood of Bodos. They mainly cultivate rice and depend mainly on wet rice cultivation once in a year. Nowadays double cropping at the same plot is also seen. The Bodos have a tradition of artistic craftsmanship, which manifests itself through the various products they produce for agricultural purposes. Bamboo and wooden instruments are widely used to cultivate agriculture, where traditional knowledge systems can be observed. Bodo people cultivated three types of agriculture. These are a. rice

and seasonal vegetables, during summer season, b. seasonal vegetables, during the winter and c. some permanent crops.

Since the time immemorial, rice is the main staple food of the Bodos and *Mainau Burwi* is worshipped as the Goddess of the wealth. She is believed to be the wife of *Bathwu Bwrai* the supreme God of the Bodos. She is given the position next to the supreme God and she is remembered in each and every performance relating to agriculture. Rice was cultivated during summer only at wet land paddy field. The Bodo people start their first plough only on Monday and Thursday because they believe that these days are good. On the first day of the plough they worship *Mainau Burwi* by worshipping and some offerings are given like areca nut and betel leaf. She is worshipped before the ploughing started at the paddy field by the senior woman member of the family where betterment of the crop during the year is prayed for.

### **Traditional Practices for Land Classification:**

The Bodos of Assam are considered to be the first ever agriculturist tribe of early Assam. Some historians opined that the Bodos are the premier agricultural tribe of India. They are regarded as the first cultivators of wet system of rice (*Sali Kheti*) cultivation in India. (Baishya, 2009: 69)

The Bodos first select a suitable land for good cultivation, and then only they settle near the land. They determine the quality of land by the following system of land identification.

- i. The Bodos traditionally identified a variety of herbs as the indicator of quality of land. This herb is widely known as *ding dinga* in Bodo and *moorphula* in Assamese. The land where this plant grows abundantly is not suitable for cultivation. Usually, this

herb grows in permanently wet and marshy land. Such a land is not good for rice cultivation. (Ibid: 69)

- ii. The sandy land which is nearer to a big river with a stiff bank is not considered as good land for cultivation. They believe that one who cultivates such a land dies out of starvation.
- iii. The Bodos consider a land as good for cultivation if it has proper irrigation facilities. And so, a piece of land which depends on rain water for cultivation is naturally not considered as good land. Obviously, a piece of land at the bank of a *dong* or a big drain is good for cultivation. (Narzi, 1966: 39)
- iv. The Bodos always select a land, situated at a down level near the homestead for cultivation. They know that the land at the down level near the homestead always receive the domestic sewage and cattle sewage, which adds to the fertility to the land. The plot of the land is scientifically prepared so that water level can be stable inside the paddy field. The paddy fields are barricaded with certain *alis*. The barricaded higher plots are followed by lower plots, because if it is done water is transferable from one plot to another.

There were three types of rice cultivation and these are still prevalent among the Bodos. These are *Sali*, *Ahu* and *Bao*. For certain crops, a major part of the growing period requires standing water in the field. The most important crop of this type cultivated by the Bodos is the *Sali* paddy or the transplanted paddy. Monsoon season is the usual season for the cultivation of this crop. For *Sali* paddy the land is prepared by ploughing at least five to six times. Ploughing usually starts immediately after the first monsoon shower in April-May. *Sali* paddy is usually transplanted to a previously readied puddle

field. Seedlings are raised in separate nurseries prepared on high land and transplanted to the puddle field depending on the favorable time. Standing water is necessary for Sali paddy and to hold water, 'bunds' are raised in the fields.

### **Fertilizer:**

Cow dung was the only fertilizer, which was used to produce more crops. Each and every household have bullocks and cows. They accumulate the cow dung near the cow-shed and later it is used as necessary.

### **Seed Preservation:**

The Bodo people use their indigenous technique to preserve the seeds. Most of the seeds and grains are kept in a porous bamboo basket with a straw cover. These are also kept in the bamboo pipe, earthen pot or pitcher by closing the mouth with cloth or earth properly and it is also kept in the granary. It is also mentionable that prior to the preservation of the seeds it has to be dried properly. The pure seeds are only preserved. If there is any other crops which grown by itself are separated before the preservation.

### **Cultural Practices for Pest Management:**

There is a traditional practice among the Bodos of burning the remaining stalks and stamps after each cultivation. This destroys all insect pests and rodents and prepares the field for the next crop. The light traps are used for control of paddy pests, especially stem borers, in the paddy fields, particularly during flowering and seed bearing time.

### **Irrigation:**

The Bodos are expert in irrigation system. Each and every paddy field has very good water supply and irrigation system which are constructed by the villagers themselves with their

indigenous knowledge. It is also said that they are the pioneer in construction of dam on river and supply it to the paddy field. The following are a few techniques or methods of water supply to the paddy field.

**a. Dongo:**

The excavation, maintenance and utilization of reservoirs, canals and wells are still found in the Bodo Villages of Assam. By making dams and canals from the lake or forest streams, irrigations were made to facilitate the paddy field. They themselves build the irrigation by using traditional instruments. If the water of river or lake is taken to the paddy field they dig *dongo* with *mathauris* on both the sides. The flowing water of *dongo* is distributed to all the farmers' paddy field.

**b. Lampha:**

To make the flow of the water stream of the *dongo* in a limited flow they build *lampha* where it is necessary. This is like passage kept in a dam to allow excess water. So the excess water goes to the outside of the paddy field. The *lampha* is made of bamboo. Bamboos are split and the scoop is paved so that water cannot erode the land.

**c. Naudra:**

To transfer the water from one highland to another highland or plot a *naudra* is prepared from bamboo or wood. It is like a pipe where a straight bamboo or wood is made like water pipe.

**d. Porcupine:**

The use of bamboo or woods as porcupine is also seen among the Bodos. It is used to prevent the erosion of river, lake, canal so on and so forth.

Some rituals are also observed during the community work of irrigation. When dam is prepared during winter season, on the first day of it the *Dwury* and the villagers worship *Khwinasanthi*, the Goddess of water and they sacrifice animals or birds like pigeon, hen, cock, duck etc. to protect the dam from collision.

### **Few Agricultural Implements of the Bodos:**

The wooden plough which is known as the *nangwl* is the basic implements in rural areas. The wooden plough is very simple in construction. It consists of an angled wooden body fitted with an iron point called the share (*phal*) for penetrating the soil, a grip (*muthi*) for guiding the plough and a wooden or bamboo beam (*dila*), to attach the plough to the yoke (*jungal*).

The most common type of drag harrow used is the *mwi*. It is simple in construction and is used for breaking clods, leveling the land after ploughing and for covering seed after sowing.

There is also an indigenous spike-tooth harrow called the *beda*. Its body is made of wood and the spikes are of bamboo. The beam is also of bamboo and is attached to the yoke drawn by a pair of bullocks.

The *khodal* (spade) is used for hoeing, weeding and earthing. The *hasi* (sickle) is the most common harvesting implement.

The paddy bundles are carried on shoulder by means of a bamboo shoulder rod with both ends pointed. This is called *baokha* or *hulabari*. Besides, there are number of implements for agricultural activities.

## Weather Forecast:

The Bodos have beliefs if a group of dragon flies come down and fly then rain will come and if a group of dragon flies go up then there will be drought. During drought, the Bodo people of Baksa, Udalguri and Sonitpur District steal the *dingkhi* (rice grinder) and keep it on the road to overcome the drought season. They also observe frog marriage to bring rain. This frog marriage is observed with certain marriage rituals. Where the *dwury* performs the ritual and marriage songs are sung by the villagers. If sunshine and rain comes together then Bodo people have a belief that the marriage of fox and vixen is going on.

## Rice Beer:

*Jumai* or *jau* is the traditionally prepared rice beer by the Bodo tribe. This country liquor made of *maibra* (sticky rice) is the favorite drink of the Bodos. Traditionally prepared 'emao' is essential for the preparation of *jumai*. It is made of uncooked rice, about twelve pieces of *mokhna* flowers, some leaves of jack fruit tree and pineapple plant, roots of *agarcitha* and the tender leaves of banana tree. All these are ground together and a paste of cake is made by adding required amount of water and on it powder of two pieces old *emao* is smeared which is known as *emao mwkhang*. After three or four days the raw *emao* cake is ready for use in preparation of rice beer. Sweet rice beer prepared with sticky rice can be kept for even two to three years and is a treasured drink of the Bodos. Rice-beer prepared by the Bodos both the fermented and distilled can be developed by the local government taking aid of Food Processing Ministry and brings good revenue to the region.

## Summing up:

From the above discussion, it is clear that food is an important item in a society. Rice is the staple food principally

eaten in NE region. Till today 80% of the Bodos are surviving out of the cultivation. So, the agricultural products coming out of cultivation is the main source of livelihood. Moreover, the alluvial soil of this region along with the temperate climate and summer rainfall also point to the favorable condition here for cultivation of rice. But the changing weather has largely affected the Bodo cultivators. It was also noted that recent changes in climate are affecting the use of traditional signs for forecasting the start of the rainy season. Hence, farmers would profit from weather forecasts provided by governmental institutions. This will enable farmers to make sound decisions on how to fully exploit the seasonal distribution of rainfall to improve and stabilize crop yields. Deforestations have brought erosions on the river banks. So, the cultivators cultivate other agricultural products like tea, rubber and areca nuts at the rice lands. On the other hand the invasion of modern science and technologies has been replacing the traditional knowledge of the Bodos.

#### References :

Baishya, Dinesh, 2009, *Traditional Science and Material Culture of Early Assam*, Guwahati: Eastern Book House.

Chatterjee, S.K., 2007, *Kirata Janakriti*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society.

Narzi Bhaben, 1966, *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, Guwahati: Bina Library

#### Informants:

Mr. Maheswar Boro (90), Rowta, Odalguri.

Dr. Tulan Mochahary (45), Kacharichan, Odalguri