

CORROSION OF TRIBAL SOCIAL CUSTOMS OWING TO ACCULTURATION: A STUDY OF BODOS IN INDIA

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Research Article

Corrosion Of Tribal Social Customs Owing To Acculturation: A Study Of Bodos In India

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Abstract

With fast changing scenario of human society in the light of advancement of technology, indigenous communities are observed to struggle for preserving the distinctive features of their culture and society. In their endeavour to keep pace with the modern civilisation, many of them are found to give up their original cultural traits and adopt traits of other culture. In this way, many indigenous communities have already gone extinct and some have ceased to exist as a distinct community. Backward societies fail to choose the necessary course of action in order to maintain their distinctive features, as a consequence, in many cases, they blindly imitate others. India is a treasure of indigenous communities, most of whom are educationally, socially and economically backward. These backward communities are named Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution of India. These tribes are seen to always play the role of recipient group in the process of acculturation. Sometimes the changes in different aspects of a culture may not be desirable as per their quest for stable, distinct and unperturbed society. With this view, this study has been made to know about social customary changes in the Bodo society, which is a society of a scheduled tribe community, called Bodo, of the Northeast India. The study shows that massive changes are occurring in the social customs of the Bodos. They have already lost many distinctive features of their social customs; some new customs adopted from other societies are on the process of incorporation to their society. The findings of the study lead to a conclusion that it is the high time for the Bodos to critically analyse regarding adoption of foreign social customs which would be positive or adaptive for them in relation to maintenance of distinctiveness of their society.

Key words: Acculturation, Bodos, Customs, Practice, Rites, Rituals, Society

1. Introduction

1.1 Social customs

The first law that binds the social animal man, according to social scientist Florence Howe Hall, are the ceremonies [1]. Accordingly, Herbert Spencer opined that the earliest kind of government was that of ceremonial institutions [2]. The ceremonies imparted control to men before religion and politics took to do so. Even the conduct of savage tribes without having religious and political regulations is found to be under ceremonial regulation to a considerable extent [3]. Ceremonies are conducted through manners and thus both the first and the last bondage of man is that of manner; in no way man can be set free from this manner. Men have travelled through ages maintaining manners in this pleasant earth, and along with their

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experiences on their way the manners they adopted have also gone a vast change. Gradual positive changes of manners have led man to the present form of civilized society. These manners are indeed prevailing customs of a society [4].

People had to leave in group in order to lead their lives in a convenient way. This group life of people had developed a sense of belongingness and cooperation among the members of the group. This resulted in human society. The members of a society, due to their persistent interactions, developed some common activities among them and repeatedly performed these activities in the same way, and in course of time these activities have become the characters of the members of the society. These common ways of performing acts in a society are then termed as customs of that society. Thus, customs of a society are the acts which have been adopted by, if not all, most of the people of the society. A custom may be viewed as a cultural idea describing a regular, patterned way of behaving which constitute characteristic of life in a social system [3].

Customs are seen as self-accepted rules of social life, and as such, they regulate our social life and remain to act as the effective means of social control [3]. They are automatically transmitted to succeeding generations and preserve the culture of the society. These are the customs which provide a sense of feeling security in society and add stability and certainty to the social life of the people of the society [ibid.].

Customs are found to be dominant in every well-organized society. Due to its dominance over life of people Francis Bacon considered it to be “the principal magistrate of man’s life” [5], while Shakespeare termed it a “tyrant”. People follow customs for two reasons- first, they are traditionally enforced, and second, they are mixed with people’s sentiments, feelings and personal obligations [6]. They are supportive of laws of political administration, without their support laws cannot succeed. For this reason, sometimes administrations adopt the customs of a society as administrative laws, terming them “customary laws”, in regard to governance of the people belonging to that particular society.

Customs of a society is a constituent of frames of references to guide the people in their social life. People manage their life style, work, business, profession and conduct with reference to the frames of references of their society. People of a society tend to live with a social identity. Social customs prevailing in a society facilitate people to maintain their social identity.

Customs constitute one of the core organs of a culture. Hence, an alteration in custom effects culture of that society. Undesired changes in customs and traditions may invite social upheavals.

Customs are maintained through rites and rituals of the society. Sometimes the terms rites and rituals are found to confuse us about their exact concepts. In order to avoid it we shall adopt the definitions of these two terms as below.

Rites: The ceremonies performed by a particular group of people, often for religious purposes.

Rituals: A series of actions that are always performed in the same way especially as part of a religious ceremony [7].

1.2 Tribal societies in India

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The term 'tribe' is usually used to connote an ethnic group which is geographically or partially isolated [8]. They follow a distinctive way of life that includes language, custom, religious practice, economy, polity and folk tradition and are identified with a distinct territory (ibid.). The notable features of tribal societies are-

- (i) Primitive or pre agricultural way of life
- (ii) Habitation in less accessible areas
- (iii) Low level of educational and technological development.

The most distinguishing character of a tribal community from elite societies is that it acquires a joint ownership of resources, principally forest and land, for generations (ibid.). In India, the term is used to mean the socially disadvantaged section of the population, and are called the scheduled tribes. The Scheduled Tribe communities in India are specified by the President of India by public notification under the Article 342(1) of the Constitution. The indispensable characteristics of a community to be considered as a tribal community in India are-

- (i) Primitive Traits
- (ii) Geographical isolation
- (iii) Distinct culture
- (iv) Shy of contact with community at large
- (v) Economically backward

India is an abode of tribal communities. Among twenty-nine States and nine Union Territories of India, there are only two states, viz. Punjab and Haryana and three Union Territories, viz. Delhi, Puducherry and Chandigarh, where there are no notified Scheduled Tribe community. According to Population Census of India 2011, there are as many as 705 Scheduled Tribe communities in India, distributed over different parts of the country, with a total population of 84,326,240, accounting 8.2 % of the total population of 1,028,737,436 of the country. Srivastava suggested that based on their historical and ethnical backgrounds and cultural relations, the tribal communities in India may be divided into following geographical zones (ibid.)-

- (i) North-eastern zone (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura, Manipur and Mizoram)
- (ii) Sub-Himalayan zone (Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Utrakhand and Sikkim)
- (iii) Western zone (Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra)
- (iv) Central zone (Jharkhand, Odissa, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh)
- (v) Southern zone (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu), and
- (vi) Islands of the Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep.

1.3 The Bodos

Bodo is a Scheduled Tribe of India mainly concentrated in the North-eastern zone and Central Zone as mentioned above. Though it is considered as a tribe, in veracity Bodo constitutes a race consisting tribes of Tibetan origin belonging to the great Indo-Mongoloid family of people [9]. They are the first aboriginal or the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley [10]. In ancient times they were known as Kiratas and spread over entire Himalayan foothills. Regarding this, Chaterji [11] says-

“Judging from the wide range of extension of their language, the Bodos appear first to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra valley, and extended west into North Bengal (in Koch Bihar, Rangpur and Dinajpur districts); they may have pushed into North Bihar also, and the Indo-Mongoloids who penetrated into North Bihar might equally have been either Bodos or ‘Himalayan’ tribes allied to the Newars.”

He further opines, “With the exception of the isolated Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the whole of Assam (barring the eastern parts inhabited by the Nagas and the south-eastern parts inhabited by the Kuki-Chins) and North and East Bengal was the country of the great Bodo people”.

They are spread over different states of Northeast India, namely, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura and the state of West Bengal of Indian Union. At present they are thickly populated in the contiguous region on the foothills of Bhutan kingdom constituted by parts from Indian states of Assam and the West Bengal, comprising the areas-

- i) From the river Sankosh in the west to Sadiya towards east in Assam, and
- ii) From Sankosh river in the east to the river Tista towards the west in the north eastern part of West Bengal.

Apart from India, Bodos are thinly found in the Chittagong Hills Tracts of Bangladesh and Jhapa district of Nepal and along the Indian Border of Bhutan Kingdom. Bodos constitute a distinct race and linguistic group.

2. Rationale of the study

In present times, acculturation is the chief agent of cultural change. Along with the advancement in communication means and the spread of education, societies have come into contact with other societies in a constant way. Different studies on tribal societies of India reveal that major changes are occurring in tribal societies as a result of this persistent contact [12, 13, 14, 15]. In a pertinent study by Basumatary et.al., it was observed that a significant shift is occurring in the religious philosophy of the traditional Bathou religion, mainly worshipped by the Bodos. a high degree of adoption of the beliefs and practices of other religions, especially the Hindu, with whom they have come into contact, is prominent among them [16].

Popular customs and practices have grown among the people and these have drawn intense attraction of the people. These popular customs and practices have posed a great challenge to the survival of folk customs and practices. Thus, it is pertinent to study the changes that have occurred in the field of social customs of the Bodo society in order to know its current state.

3. Aim and objectives of the study

The study aims at investigating the present social customs of the Bodos and to analyse the changes that have taken place there due to acculturation from the perspective of retention, adoption, modification and invention of the original social customs.

In order to pursue the aim, it is intended to analyse mainly the secondary sources of available literature and the first-hand knowledge of the researcher. In addition, in order to make the analysis a credible one, primary information obtained by dint of belongingness of the researcher to the target society have been incorporated in the analysis.

4. Review of literature

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The master work of Narzi [17] and the doctoral work of K. Brahma [18] constitute the base of literatures on Bodo culture, society and religion. Narzi thoroughly described the original social and religious beliefs and practices of the Bodos, their social customs, practices and traditions, different types of festivals, etc. On the other hand, Brahma founded the basis of methodological analysis of cultural and religious traits of the Bodos. Brahma was the first one to analyse the transition of culture and religion of the Bodos from the perspective of acculturation.

Brahma [19] discussed the Bodo culture in relation to Bwisagu festival. On the other hand, Basumatary [20] had thrown lights on the Bodo marriage. Narzary [21] elaborated about a religious practice called Mainao Borainai through his work. Recently, Mwsahary [22] had discussed on the aspects of the contemporary Bodo society through his work.

5. Method of study and materials used

Descriptive method has been adopted for the current study. Both complete participant and non-participant method have been employed for the purpose. The personal experiences of the researcher constitute the basis of the analysis, and as such, the study will be from emic perspective seeking investigation on social changes.

The literary works of Brahma [18] and Narzi [17] have constituted the base of the secondary sources, in addition to which different literatures on the related field have been considered for the purpose.

Tribal societies are treasures of customs and practices. Accordingly, Bodo society, being a tribal society, has abundant customs and practices. There is no scope of incorporating discussions on all customs and practices of the Bodos in this study. Therefore, only some significant customs have been taken up for analysis on their changes effected by acculturation.

6. Social customs of the Bodos and their transitions

6.1 Social groups of Bodos: A class free Bodo society

Through ages, Bodos have been living with an organised society. There never existed social classes in the Bodo society, all people, men and women, have the same social status. Rather the Bodos formed some social groups in order to perform different social and religious works in their daily lives. Each group was called “hari” (meaning a *clan*) → “ari”. Later on, based on this groups, Bodo clan names (name titles) were originated. Brahma [18] documented following social groups that were created in traditional Bodo society for social purposes.

A. Original Social Groups of the Bodos

Social group	Assigned work (connected/related to)	Corresponding clan name
Dwīma hari	River(≈dwi)	Daimari
Laifang hari	Plant(≈Laifang)	Laifangari
Sibing hari	Sesame (≈Sibing)	Sibingari
Sobai hari	Moong pulse(≈Sobai)	Sobaiari
Bibai hari	Collection(≈Bibai)	Bibaiari
Bingi hari	Bingi playing	Bingiari
Phadang hari	Phadang plant	Phadangari

Ganjler hari	Slug(≈Ganjler)	Ganjlerari
Bwrgab hari	Praying(≈Bwrgab)	Bwrgabari
Thalir hari	Banana(≈Thalir)	Thalirari
Bwiswmuthi hari	Soil(≈Bwiswmuthi)	Bwiswmuthiari
Goy hari	Areca nut (≈Goy)	Goyhari
Hajw hari	Hill(≈Hajw)	Hajwari
Ishhān hari	weaving(Ishhān≈loom)	Ishhānari
Islaru hari	Snacks(≈Islaru)	Islaruari
Khangkhla hari	Khangkhla plant	Khangkhleri
Lai hari	Leaves(≈Lai)	Laihari
Thuri hari	Thatch (≈Thuri)	Thuriari
Mwchha hari	Dance(≈Mwchha)	Mwchhahari
Narzi hari	Dry jute leaves(≈Narzi)	Narzihari
Owua hari	Bamboo(≈Owua)	Owuari
Ransār hari	Distribution(≈Ransār)	Ransārari
Songpra hari	Cooking(≈Songpra)	Songprahari
S̄wrḡw̄ hari	Death rituals (S̄wrḡw̄≈ heaven)	S̄wrḡw̄ari

Although there were division of social and religious works among different groups of the villagers, this never created a division among different groups. A societal work was expected to be done preferably by the people of assigned group, but it was not as rigid as in the case of Hindu society, according to which a work performed by a class of people could not be performed by another class. Division of work among the Bodos was purely in the line of distribution of works among different groups of volunteers in a programme, every people was entitled to do any work of the society as per his/her capacity.

These social groups of the Bodos were almost permanent, but memberships of these groups were purely temporary. These groups were periodically reshuffled based on the skills and capacity of the members of the society. Thus, if a person was working in a social group in a particular time, he could have been the member of another group in a later period of time.

Acculturation effect:

Although the name titles were originated in social groups created for different social purposes, later on, after coming into contact with other cultures some name titles were provided based on professions and religions of the people. Following are such clans.

B. Clans originated from profession

Profession	Corresponding clan name
Business on lease	Mahalari
Land demarcation	Mandal

C. Clans originated from religion

Religion	Corresponding clan name
Brahma (Hindu)	Brahma
Vaishnava	Sorōnia

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Apart from above professional based name titles, many titles belonged to other communities were adopted by the Bodos after they came into contact with other cultures. Following are such post name titles that are currently available among the Bodos-

Bormoholia, Bora, Chaudhury, Das, Deka, Hazarika, Saikia, Singha, Thakuria

6.2 Social offence (bād) system in Bodo society

Bodo society follows some strict principles of morality. This is known as the bād system. If a person commits offences in the society, particularly concerning moral turpitude, he is treated as a guilty person and is obliged to perform penance (*udrainai*) as per some strict social rules. Following were the rules to consider someone guilty of committing a social offence, if-

- a) he is engaged in illicit sexual relation with female relatives, such as mother in law, daughter in law, sister in law, younger sister, elder sister, niece, wife of younger brother, or any other close female relative.
- b) he touches the body of the wife of younger brother or the elder sister of his wife.
- c) he is involved in bestiality and has a sex relation with a bitch, a female pig or a cow.
- d) he had eaten forbidden food, such as food left half-eaten by his own wife.
- e) he is indulging in false accusation with the evil motive.

Above offences are divided into following respective five categories-

- 1) Agar bād,
- 2) Phongslath bād,
- 3) Daokhi bād,
- 4) Khawali bād, and
- 5) Khoulbwbd bād

Bodos led their social lives by obeying above five bāds and maintained discipline in the society. If someone was assumed to have committed an offence, a meeting of the villagers, under the village headman, called *gamibrai*, was first held at village level for his/her judgement. The village meeting judged the case taking all facts, evidences and testimonies into account. If a person was found guilty then a judgement was passed by the meeting. This judgment was constituted by following two components-

1. Punishment: this had following three sub-components-
 - i) financial, which was in terms of monetary value
 - ii) shameful activities, the social offender had to perform some undesirable activities, such as eating a slug, stools of some birds and animals, such as crow, vulture, dog, pig, walking across the village roads like a clown by painting the body in different colours, wearing footwear and other materials (such as *singkhai*, a traditional loop for carrying loads
 - iii) physical punishment, which was awarded in rare cases, especially when the offence was of too unsocial
2. Purification: the social offender had to do some penance and purify himself/herself according to fixed ways set for such offence. The meeting determined the social bād under which the offence may be placed as per the social bād system.

In case the village level meeting failed to come to a conclusion regarding the offence, a *samaj* meeting was arranged. The *samaj* was constituted by some neighbouring villages, in analogous to panchayat of the current Panchayati Raj System in India. Then it passes a verdict on the issue mentioning the means and ways for purification. The verdict of the *village sitting* or *samaj* was final and binding to all. If a guilty person did not follow the instruction of the village

sitting, then the family of the offence committer was excommunicated from the society. The socially excluded family was allowed neither to visit any family of the village nor to participate in any social occasion. At the same time, no villager used to visit the excommunicated family. This was called "*bwikhor kalamnai*" in their language.

The Bodo society was very much scrupulous in providing justice to its members. The village council tried its level best to deliver an acceptable or satisfactory judgement to all individuals. If somebody was not satisfied with the judgement of the village council, he/she had the option to appeal to the associated *samaj* for its review.

Acculturation effect:

In the modern times, Bodo people are observed not to adhere to this traditional social offence system. Meetings are still held in the village to judge the cases of social offences and judgements are passed. But the judgements are found almost aloof from the purification component of the traditional judgements. In most of the cases, avoiding categorization of offences as per the *bād* system of the society and without referring to any *bād* for the offence, penalty is imposed on the guilty person based on the gravity of the committed offence. Punishment and purification components are seen to rarely exist, being dominated by the financial component. The judgements are seen to follow almost the procedures of the legal court. When the offence is connected with the breach of religious beliefs, such as sexual relationship between two unmarried couples, then only the offender is compelled to purify by the means incorporated in the social system.

6.3 Customs relating to birth, marriage and death

Like other societies, Bodos also have a set of rites of passage relating to birth, marriage and death. Since customs and practices related to birth, marriage and death are closely associated with religious beliefs and practices, changes in the later bring about changes in the formers also. Study by Basumatary & Basumatary [16] revealed that notable changes have occurred in the religious beliefs and practices of the Bodos, which carried a notion that transition has occurred in the social customs of the Bodos relating to these three important stages of life too.

6.3.1 Customs relating to birth

In earlier times, at the time of child-birth, the Bodos followed some traditional customs. Bodo elderly women co-operated with each other at the time of delivery of the baby; they performed the duties of midwife of present times. The child was delivered at the home under their care and support. After a little while the child is born, the umbilical chord was cut with a sharp-edged slip of green bamboo skin (*ouwa dahar*), then it was coated with an antiseptic mixture prepared out of burnt straw ash and remains of the dried spider and then the cord was tied around by a cotton or muga silk. Then an induction ritual was performed to induct the new child into their community. The baby was sprinkled with mild hot holy water, mixed with some 'dubri grass' (carpet grass); a few holy basil leaves and a gold ring was immersed there.

After a few weeks of the birth of the baby, the family used to arrange a ceremony to offer gratitude to the villagers for their help and cooperation during the birth of the baby, and to beg the blessings of the elderly members for smooth life of the baby. This ceremony is called *Dwi Sharnai*. Mainly, the elderly women who rendered their service towards the delivery of the baby, and additionally, aged women villagers were invited in such ceremony. Participating elderly women together prayed to their God for a healthy, prosperous and happy life of the baby and

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offered their blessings too for the same purpose. A feast was offered to the participating members.

Acculturation effect:

With the modern health facilities becoming available and accessible to them, almost every child is given birth in hospitals, thus. the role of elderly women during the birth of a child being minimized to a great extent. Nowadays, a government health activist, called ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist), belonging to the village, bears the responsibility of taking the child giving mother to hospital and bringing her back to home. As a result of this, elderly women require neither to cut the biblical cord nor get an opportunity to do so. Still, few families perform the ritual of inducting the child into their community during the entry of the baby from the hospital.

Although the ritual of inducting the new baby into their community is disappearing, the ritual of *dwi sarnai* is still prevalent in Bodo society.

After the rites relating to birth, Bodos do not have any rite of passage until his/her marriage. Although the neighbouring societies to Bodos have rites relating to puberty, Bodos do not have such rites.

6.3.2 Customs relating to Marriage

The classless traditional Bodo society, which treat man and woman equally, used to more focus on the concerns of the girl during the time of marriage. Starting from approach by a party to its counterpart for the marriage up to finalisation of the marriage of a pair of girl and boy, the marriage system of the Bodos constitutes a long process. The customs related to the marriage in Bodo society may be divided into following three sets-

- A. Pre-marriage customs
- B. Main marriage customs, and
- C. Post marriage customs

The processes of performing pre-marriage customs constitutes a long series of phases. These phases may again be classified into three stages-

- 1) Initial stage,
- 2) Intermediate stage, and
- 3) Final stage.

Each stage involved some phases, each of them being associated with rituals.

A. Initial stage:

This stage was constituted by the following four phases.

1. *Ashan Thebnai*: The family of the boy approaches first the family of a girl for initiation of a process for marriage. During this first visit, after explaining the purpose of their visit to the girl's family, in presence of a few social representatives of the village, if the head representative of the boy's family finds the girl to be of their choice, as per the custom, the boy's party offered to leave a pack of different ritual materials together with *jorase ashan suri* (a pair of silver bracelets) at the girl's family. The girl party had the right to keep it or deny. If it was denied to keep the pack offered by the boy party, it was understood that the girl party has declined the proposal then and there. In case it was allowed to leave the pack it indicated that the girl party is ready to consider the proposal. Within one week from the first approach from the girl's family, if

the silver bracelets were not returned to the boy's family, then it was understood that the proposal was under active consideration of the girl's family, and as such the process may be continued further and the next step may be taken. On the other hand, if the pack was returned within a week, the process was to be stopped there, because it indicated that the groom party, after taking different considerations into account, has decided to decline the proposal. This negative step was called *ashan phinnai* (returning of bracelets).

2. *Khobira phwinai*: After getting yellow signal from the girl's family through *ashan thebnai*, the boy's family make preparation for the next approach. In this step, the boy's family used to send a team consisting a few representatives of the village. These representatives were called Khubira. They discussed with the girl's side about taking forward the initiated process of marriage.

Sending of such team were usually repeated for a number of times. During such period, both girl's and boy's sides used to collect information regarding the character, previous history, of the boy/girl, and the social and economic condition of the family. When the boy's side felt that the process may be taken forward further, then they invite girl's site to visit their home.

By this invitation, it was understood that the boy's family had made up their mind to arrange the marriage with the girl; now it was required only to obtain consent from the boy from their own side; on the other side, the approvals of the girl and her family, were still awaited. Further, this invitation opened the avenue of holding a ceremony in the boy's family with regard to the continued process of marriage.

3. *Houa Gwdanni no nainai*: Being invited, the elderly members of the girl's family, preferably the parents, visit the boy's family. The purpose of this visit is to confirm the existence of the boy and the family in that village and to take stock of the social and economic condition of the family.

After the girl's family had visited the boy's family, the later sends a proposal for a visit by the boy to the girl's family. If the girl's family was satisfied by different conditions of the boy and his family by dint of their earlier visit, they accepted the proposal.

4. *Houa Gwdan nainai*: Until this step, the boy and girl remained unknown and unseen to each other. As per the advice of the family, the boy visits girl's home with some friends and formally meets the girl. During this visit only he is first termed as *houa gwdan* (groom). The family members, relatives and villagers of girl's side look and study the boy. At last a ritual of exchanging traditional clothes between the girl and the boy was performed.

By this step, the process of seeing and meeting each other among the family members of both the sides got completed.

After this step, if the boy did not find the girl to be of his choice, the process was stopped there. The same conclusion was drawn when the girl or her family did not find the boy to be of their choice. On the other hand, if none of the parties gave negative indication, the process was continued to the next phase.

After this step, it was the time for both the families to give their final decision on the issue. In case there was affirmation from both parties, the process proceeded forward to the intermediate stage.

B. Intermediate Stage:

1. *Goi Khaonai*: After both sides agreed to arrange the marriage, a team from the groom's side had to go to the bride's family to offer *goi* (areca nut) with *pathwi* (betel leaf) to the relatives of the girl and the villagers of the girl's village. As per the custom, groom's party should include three distinctive members, two ladies and a gentleman, in their team, through whom the rituals

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associated with the occasion were required to be performed. They were supposed to be smart and jolly with good knowledge of their customary roles. The lady customary role bearers were called “*Bwirathi*” while the gent was called “*Barlangphā*”.

This phase of the marriage process was significant because of the appearance of the *Bwirathi* and *Barlangphā*. Starting from this phase, they had to perform different rituals during different phases of the marriage process, till its completion. Without them no Bodo marriage function was performed.

In this phase, *Bwirathi* and *Barlangphā* jointly performed the ritual of distributing areca nuts with betel leaves to the attending members of the ceremony for at least three times.

2. *Biban langnai*: Taking the process forward, the groom’s party performs this customary phase by taking two earthen pots containing ritual materials consisting areca nut, betel leaves, rice beer and pork. The pork is sent by the groom’s family as a mark of sharing the ritual food items in their possession. These earthen pots were wrapped by bamboo cords according to some rules and was carried by *Barlangphā* on his shoulder by hanging them on the two ends of a bamboo pole. The ritual of distributing areca nuts and betel leaves was associated with every phase of the marriage process. Chorus of entertainments emerged at the ceremony site.

After this phase, the marriage process was proceeded to the final stage.

C. Final stage

1. *Bibiyai khānai*: Through a series of previous phases both the parties become prepared for the final agreement for the marriage. Both the parties reveal their final decisions before the social representatives from both the villages. Presence of the headmen of the two villages are highly expected in this ceremony. Then the two parties arrive at an agreement for arranging the marriage. As soon as the marriage was finalised, the guardians from the two sides tie the new relationship between the two families. Usually, this ritual is expected to be performed between the parents of the bride and groom, that is why this ceremony is called *bibiyai khanai* (*entering into bibiyai relationship*), as the fathers of the husband and wife of a couple are called *bibiyai* to each other.

Sometimes, it might happen that the two families were maintaining some relationship before the marriage process. Then the relationship among the members of the two families were required to be altered due to the ensuing marriage. That is why, this occasion is called *swmwndw phirainai* (alteration of relationship) too. A feast is arranged on this occasion with ritual food items.

After this occasion, the issue of marriage goes to the hand of the society. No party was allowed to alter their decision. The alteration of decision by any party would have been treated as a breach of the social norms, which led to imposition of a big fine together with social actions to the breaching family.

After this phase if it was to be waited for long time up to finalisation of date for the marriage due to some reason, such as want of marriage season, the groom’s party had to send *Khubira* to the bride’s family at a regular interval. In relation to this repeated visits to the bride’s family by the groom’s party, there is a nice proverb among the Bodos, which goes to saying-

“*Hinjao gwdanni noni langgnani dubri hagrayanw dabwnwba dul-dul jayakwi, hinjaokhou danw bwrwi mwlangnw*”

[Carpet grasses of the bride’s premises are yet to wither (due to footsteps of the groom’s party), getting bride to the groom’s family is still a distant task]

2. Fixation of date for marriage and settlement of monetary issues: *Khalar Dannai*

At last the date for the main marriage ceremony is fixed. The date is fixed accommodating different beliefs and practices of the society and convenience of both the families. The season was the central consideration during the fixation of marriage date. On that day the marriage associated issues, such as how many members would come to bride's family and how many members would accompany the bride to groom's family, what materials are required to be brought by groom's party etc., were discussed in details.

No discussion was required to be held regarding the venue of the marriage ceremony; as per the custom it was always held at the groom's home.

The Bodo custom allowed the parents of the bride to charge a handsome price for their daughter. This was justified by the fact that till the marriage they had brought up their daughter with utmost care and she was going to be the wealth of the groom's family. This customary monetary item was known as *gaojwn*. The amount of the *gaojwn* was not fixed one, it could have been a nominal of rupees two or higher than hundreds. It depended upon the desire of the parents of the bride. This was settled on the day of fixation of date for marriage. But it was always guided by socially steered conscience. Acceptance of even a small amount of *gaojwn* would invite a sharp criticism from the society terming the action of the bride's parents as selling of their daughter for marriage in lieu of money.

Another monetary related customary item associated with marriage was settlement of *malsa*. Right from the beginning to the end of the marriage the society from both the sides render their service in order to get the marriage done. Therefore, the village society of the bride thought that a token amount should be paid to them acknowledging their service. Perhaps, this *malsa* was small and fixed, though it could have varied area wise. This could be paid by either of the party or both. This was also settled on the day of fixation of date for the marriage.

It is worth mentioning that apart from the visits by the groom's party during different customary phases, frequent informal visits were made by a communicator. He used to act like an interlocutor. Messages from one party was conveyed to the other party through him. He was termed *Deowani*.

After the fixation of date for the marriage, regular communication was made by groom's party through their representatives.

3. Main marriage customs

For the marriage ceremony, pendals were constructed in the courtyards of both the families following the prescribed customary rules. According to the rule, a banana plant was installed at the centre of the courtyard as the main post (called *miru*). Other posts were prepared from woods collected from the forest in their vicinity. Bamboo poles were placed in horizontal arrays in north-south and east-west directions, the trunk being toward north and west. The upper side of the pandal was covered by banana leaves placed over the bamboos following the same rule of placing bamboos. This pandal was called *sainashali*. Under this *sainashali*, it was mandatory to construct a pair of soil ovens, and jOu (rice beer) was to be prepared there and served to the attending members. This item was called *Juli Afad*. All marriage items were performed under this *sainashali*.

The groom's party, with a pair of *Bwirathi* and the *Barlangpha*, had to arrive bride's family in the evening of the day before the marriage day. Hospitality was provided to the groom's party by its counterpart.

In the morning of the marriage day, the bride's party had to be ready for departure. After performing some rituals, the bride's family, relatives and villagers bid farewell to the bride. On

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the initiatives of Bwirathi and Barlangpha, the groom's party took bride's party to their village. When the party arrived the village premises of the groom, they were welcomed by singing and dancing. The bride and female members of the bride's party were taken inside the northern house (*noma no*) while male members were given to sit under *sainashali*.

After completing all formalities, the bride's party had to leave the groom's home before holding the main marriage ritual. The custom, perhaps, permitted a girl friend to company the bride.

The Bodo customary marriage was known as *hathasuni*. It was performed in front of the Bathou.

After the marriage the bride had to distribute food items to a batch of marriage attending members. In that batch the groom had also to sit and eat marriage feast. The food items were distributed by taking these in a *hatha*, which was a traditional wooden domestic tool for carrying grain items.

C. Post marriage customs

There existed both mandatory and non-mandatory post marriage customs among the Bodos. Until these customs were performed, the marriage was treated as incomplete.

1. *Bishnasara hwinai*: After a week from the day of the marriage the new couple had to visit bride's family with at least two unmarried companions, one male and other female. They had to take with them a pair of cock and hen and a pair of rice bear. During this visit, unmarried girls of the village, who were once bride's friends, were invited to the bride's home and an entertaining party was offered. New couple had to pay a small amount to the village girl's as a mark of gratitude to them for sharing the happy and sorrow of the bride during her unmarried life in the village.

This was a mandatory post marriage custom. Until this ritual was performed, the marriage *sainashalis* of both bride and groom's home were not uninstalled.

2. *Bibiyaini no gajennai*: To know each other among the family members of the two sides and their relatives, a group of members consisting family members, relatives and near and dear of the bride's family used to pay the first visit to the groom's family. The groom's family also invited their relatives and near and dear to their home on the day. That was basically a get together of the members of the two families and their near and dears. That was not mandatory and time bound.

3. *Nirikh bosonai*: This mandatory post-marriage custom could be deemed as the transfer of full responsibility and authority of the bride to the groom's family. In order to make the bride feel herself free from the responsibility of her parents' family and to facilitate the groom's family feel the bride to be their integral part, this ritual was performed after the marriage at groom's family.

Sometimes, this ritual was performed during the time of *bibiyaini no gajennai* ritual. Otherwise, it was performed according to the convenience of the two families.

4. *Athimongla*: According to this custom groom's family had to arrange a feast at bride's family inviting all the relatives and family circles and the new couple begged blessings from them for their happy conjugal life. This was a non-mandatory post marriage custom.

With this customary ritual, the marriage process was considered to be over.

Acculturation effect:

Acculturation has affected the marriage customs in a great way. Firstly, the first procedural step of *Ashan Tebnai* has been totally disappeared from the Bodo society. Instead, the first approach is made through *Khobira*. The society has almost forgotten. Not to speak about common people, even the dictionary published by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, which is the oldest and authoritative literary body of the Bodos, the visit of *Khobira* has been mentioned as the initiating approach from the boy's family for the marriage. Other two customary marriage phases, *no nainai* and *houa gwdan nainai*, of the initial stage are also rarely performed in the present Bodo society.

Likewise, both the customary phases of *Goi Khaonai* and *Biban Langnai*, constituting the intermediate stage of the marriage process, have also almost disappeared, and as such, the marriage process used to directly jump to the final stage from the initial stage. Perhaps, the *Biban Langnai* custom is seen to be attached with the main marriage customs, the related rituals being performed by the groom's party during the time of visiting bride's home for bringing her to the groom's home for the marriage.

The two phases of final stage of marriage process are also seen to be clubbed together. The rituals connected with these two customary phases are now performed on the same day. Thus, *bibiyai khanai*, fixation of date and settlement of different monetary related issues are done on the same day nowadays.

Although, in earlier times, the date of marriage was fixed considering the season and household activities such as harvesting of food grains, the day was not a factor. But in the present times, except Christian Bodos, all sections of people of the society lay much emphasis on the date and day. The date of marriage, almost in all cases, is now fixed following the dates mentioned in the Hindu almanac to be auspicious for marriage. Following the same almanac, Bodos usually do not perform the marriage in the Bengali Calendar months of Bhadra and Chaitra.

A notable change may be observed in the construction of *sainashali* of the main marriage ceremony. Instead of bamboo and banana leaves, the *sainashali* is being constructed by tents and other clothes supplied by enterprises. In most of the cases, installation of the soil ovens is also avoided.

Another noteworthy change may be observed in the marriage ceremony of the Bodos of the current time. Earlier, when the marriage ritual was performed through *Hatashuni*, it was held at *Bathou* and immediately it was followed by a ceremonial feast. There was no room for presenting any gift to the newly married couple nor there was any provision for it. But nowadays, presenting and accepting gifts during marriage ceremony has become an integral part of the Bodo marriage. Gift presentation tables are seen to be installed in the *sainashali*. Further, during the time of preparation of food items and serving these to the attending members of the marriage, the villagers used to actively participate in the works of preparation of food items and serving these to the guests. But nowadays, instead of villagers, catering parties are found to be entrusted to perform these works.

The most undesirable change in regard to the marriage is performing the marriage rituals without *Bwirathi*. The *Barlangpha* had ceased to exist from the Bodo marriage long ago.

Brahma (1992) mentioned that Bodos did not consider Saturday and Tuesday for marriage as these days are treated as inauspicious for any holy function. That assertion may be supposed to be based on the contemporary practices, which is acculturated one. This may be asserted from the two points. Firstly, the almanac which the Bodos were following in

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contemporary times is not a Bodo almanac. From folk literature of the Bodos it comes to the light that in olden times Bodos had their own almanac, which was called *phanjamuthi*. So the name of the days themselves are not actually that of Bodos. It may be that due to the acculturation this *phanjamuthi* has been gradually replaced by the Hindu almanac in later times. Secondly, followers of Bathouism are not much concerned with the days, they are much concerned with the moon. Their different days for worshipping God were connected with different phases of the moon. Interestingly, in current times too, a section of Bathou followers treat Tuesday as the most sacred day of the week and prefer this day for performing different rites and rituals.

The *nirikh bosonai* was considered to be a serious issue by the society. Until it was executed, the right of the bride's family over bride used to sustain, and in case there was any kind of serious incidence that was harmful to the bride, her family was entitled to take her back taking divorce from the husband. Until the bride's family gained full confidence on the groom's family, conscious family did not execute the *nirikh bosonai*. This ritual might have acted as a deterrent to bride dowry. But in the present days, this ritual is considered only to be an old formality. It is executed on the day of the marriage, sometimes, even before the marriage, for the sake of formality.

One more transition in regard to the marriage rituals is about holding of *bishnasara* function after marriage. This ceremony has now been replaced by *athmongla*, Hindunising the ceremony itself. The first visit by the new married couple is now called *athmongla*, instead of *bishnasara*. Now it is interpreted that since the newly married couple visits the bride's family on the eight day, the ceremony is called *athmongla* (*ath* in Hindu counting system stands for *eight+mongol* in Aryan languages stands for welfare). But in earlier times, Bodos had no term to denote a number after seven [14]. These seven days constituted a *hathai*, called as *hathai kunse*. Higher numbers were counted in terms of group of four and group of twenty (ibid.). The term *mongol* has also got another meaning in Bodo; when a specie naturally having small size grows in a healthier way, it is called *bongla* or *mongla*, and persons having in family relationship are called *jati* or *giyati*. Thus it may be thought that Athimongla is a Bodo word combining the terms *ati* (from *jati* or *giyati*) and *mongla*, meaning a function held for the relatives of the bride. That is why, a feast is arranged for the relatives of the bride by the groom during that function. Thus, *bishnasara* and *athimongla* are different occasions; but these are treated to be the same nowadays. During the middle period, after coming into contact with Hindus, sometimes, the parents of the bride use to give some chattels, such as domestic appliance, domestic animal etc. as a mark of their best wishes for the happy married life their daughter after the feast. But this practice has also almost ceased in contemporary times.

6.2 Emerging new rites in between birth and marriage

Following rites and ceremonies have emerged among the Bodos in between the two passages of birth and marriage due to the influence of Hindus, principally after they accepted Brahmaism.

(a) Annaprasanna: - The Bodos, after five to seventh months of birth of a baby, used to arrange a nominal ceremony on the occasion of first rice feeding, during which prayer was conducted in front of Bathou worshipping the Bathou Bwrai, and then the baby was fed by the Oja, who performs the worship, in presence of family members and relatives. But nowadays, Bodos have

started to arrange a ceremony on the occasion of the first rice feeding to a new baby in the line of Hindu rituals, where maternal uncle of the baby is assigned the responsibility of first rice feeding to the baby; in such function which is called *annaprasanna* in Hindu culture, the well-wishers are formally invited to the ceremony. The invitees offer their best wishes to the baby, presents gift and join in a feast arranged by the family on the occasion.

(b) Churakaran: - Similarly, there was not any formality of cutting hair of a child in earlier times. It was cut taking the convenience of the child into account. However, in present days, sizeable Bodo families from both Bathouism and Brahmaism, keeps the hair of a baby unshaved for a particular period of time following Hindu culture, and then arrange a ceremony in connection with first head shaving. In such function also, the maternal uncle has to initiate the process of shaving. In this function too, the well-wishers are formally invited to the ceremony. The well-wishers offer their best wishes to the baby, presents gift and join in a feast arranged by the family on the occasion.

6.3 Customs relating to death

In earlier times, the Bodos used to perform a set of rituals on the death of a family member. After the death body was buried after performing some procedures, all the participants of the funeral ceremony had to take bath in a nearby river; then all of them had to chew a little quantity of dry leaves of jute plant, which was known as *narzi orgarnai*. Then few days later, a rite called *Daha Garnai* was performed with the help of the *Dauri* or *Oja*. The rituals connected with death was completed there.

Nowadays, following Hindu culture, a ceremony called *saradu* is arranged on the tenth day, and a feast is provided to the villagers who shared the grief of the family members by joining this ceremony. Following Hindu practices, Bodos now use to practise an ascetical austerities (*brata*) of a period of ten days' by avoiding non-vegetarian food as well as sitting on materials constructed without using nails only. Nowadays, this *Saradu ceremony* is conducted in a gorgeous way by inviting well-wishers of the family and the people who were directly or indirectly connected to the deceased. On the occasion of *Saradu*, the male family members use to shave their head. This has now almost transformed to a custom of the Bodos.

One important emerging customary practice among the Bodos is wearing white clothes by woman after the death of her husband. In earlier times, Bodos had no such customary practice, rather remarriage of widows was prevalent among them. This practice of widows has also come from the Hindu society. Remarriage of widows still exists in the Bodo society. Following their Hindu counterparts, on the way to the burial site, they now use to utter *Hari Bal*, whence Bodo never worshipped *Hari*.

7. Conclusion

Society may be thought as an organism [2]. Its change in a society with time is inevitable. We cannot obstruct the changes that take place in course of time, but it should be given a right direction by its members. In regard to changing scenario of Bodo society, it may be observed that some small but basic cultural traits are on the verge of disappearance. Disappearance of some customary items may close the door of imparting perception to the social members about the new responsibility and accountability that come along with passage of life. *Barlangpha* played an

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important role in imparting the concept of *haba* (the marriage) to the groom and others. During marriage he used to say to the groom-

“Oh dear son! This bride is your wife from today and you are her husband. From today onwards, you have to shoulder her responsibility forever like carrying this piece of soil. So, please carry it on your back” [23]

Notable changes have taken place in the social customs and practices of the Bodos. The most attention-grabbing transition in this regard is the one relating to marriage. Bodos have already suffered a great loss due to disappearance of some distinctive customs. One such custom was the role of *Barlangfa* in the Bodo marriage, who played an equivalent male role to his female counterpart *Bwirathi*, who is still in existence in the Bodo marriage, playing a vital role. Without *Bwirathi*, presently Bodo marriage cannot take place; Bodos cannot think of a *Bwirathiless* marriage. But from literatures, it is known that there was a time when Bodo marriage could not take place without *Barlangpha* (ibid.); and the hard reality is that Bodos have adjusted themselves with the lost charm of marriage due to absence of *Barlangpha*. If such unjustified customarily deductive change continues to take place, a day may come when Bodos will arrange the marriage without *Bwirathi* also, which will definitely impoverish the Bodo culture.

Some practices, such as *annaprasanna*, accepting gift during marriage ceremony, have taken to emerge as new custom of the Bodos. Care should be taken that due to induction of new practice some healthy old custom is not sacrificed.

Regarding the *bād system* of the Bodos, it would not difficult to predict that it would not take much long time to Bodo society for complete disappearance of the *bād system* from their custom, if existing situation of avoiding this system continues. This custom established the Bodo society as an organised society and was one of its distinctive features from other society. If it disappears, it would be difficult for the Bodos to conserve the distinctiveness of their society in coming days.

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