

## **A Folkloristic Insight into the Change and Continuity in Bodo Folk Performing Arts**

-Rabiram Narzary, Ph.D.  
Independent Researcher, Assam, India

### **1.1 Introduction:**

The Bodos are one of the largest ethnic and linguistic groups of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Bodo is an indigenous tribe having its origin from the Mongolian race. They are the inhabitants of North Eastern part of India. Like other tribal groups, the Bodos have a rich culture of their own. They have their originality in all respects, thus exhibiting a separate cultural identity. Where there is a society there is a culture and folklore that are closely related with each other. If a society changes, culture and folklore are also bound to be changed. In fact, the society, culture and folklore are not static but dynamic. The Bodos have their own language, literature and culture. They have been celebrating the festivals since the time immemorial. Beside the seasonal festival they have been celebrating their daily life like marriage and ritual, family and public ceremony. They have their own musical instruments. The main instruments of them are Kham, Siphung, Jotha, Jabkhring, Serza and Gongona which they used to make themselves. They had been using these instruments in all festival like seasonal and ritual they celebrate. They followed some tradition in making instrument and according to that tradition they used to make the instrument. But today it has been influenced by so called civilized culture like western culture in the society. Earlier the Bodos used their traditional instruments in their ritual and marriage ceremony but today using of those instruments is going to vanish away and replaced by the influence of western culture. Bodos have embraced the western instruments and music in their ritual and marriage ceremony. Instead of the folk song they use modern and hi pop song. Some Bodos now perform the ritual, marriage and festival with the band party. The using of traditional instruments is rarely seen in elite Bodo society. They use the western instruments even in the folk song. They start adoring the guitar and harmonium but not the serza (harp) and kham (drum). They use the western instruments even in film and songs. They now don't know how to make their own traditional instruments.

The Bodos have had their past history and kingdom. Despite having their own political territory along with distinct language, culture and folklore they had to lose it. In the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century the few Bodo people engaged in working for the development of their people. At the same time it is also found that the Bodo people started taking education through either Assamese or Bengali medium schools. In course of time they became educated and came to know about their past history and became aware about their language and culture. It is certainly true that the role and contribution of the British administration and Missionaries had helped the Bodos to re-think and re-establish the dying society once again. In this regard P. Mochahari observes, "The changing trends in social outlook of the Bodos can be visualized with the emergence of the 19th century. At present, the modern outlook and scientific method of worshipping in Bathouism is observed on account of the demand of the age. The traditional near animistic belief that continued to guide the religious philosophy of the Bodo began to

change by the preaching's of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma who was inducted to the Brahma faith by Srimanth Paramhangsa Sibnarayan Swami of Calcutta. His conversion to the Brahma cult paved the way to bring the larger sections of his followers to the wider fold of the Vedic Sanatan Dharma and it was possible to carry out a social revolution among the Bodo residing in and around the district of Goalpara with epicentre at Kajigaon in Dhubri subdivision (Dhubri subdivision was then comprised of the present Kokrajhar district as well). The advantage of one condition of life over another is sufficient reason to account for change. Admittedly, each stage of society carries the seeds of invention for next stage." (Muchahary, 2008, p. 11). When the Brahma Dharma Movement was started by Kalicharan Brahma, the process of conversion to neo-vaishnavism was also going on. According to Chandan Sarmah "the emergence of Brahma movement took the Bodos farther away from neo-vaishnavism as it opened up an alternative route for the Bodos to enter into the fold of Hinduism. (Sarmah C. , 2011, p. 130). In its form and content the Brahma movement was more than a religious upheaval. It was a movement for total change of outlook in all fields, social religious, economic, political, education and also influenced in traditional like folk performing arts of the society. This movement gained a new dimension and developed identity consciousness among the Bodos of that time.

## **1.2 Changes in Dances:**

Folk performing arts of Bodos are mostly originated with the religious observation and agricultural activities. Among the worship, the Kherai is the most important and greatest religious worship of the Bodos. There are many dances associated with this worship that are performed by the Doudini and other assistants during the Kherai festival. Earlier, many animals were sacrificed in the name of different deities and still it is continued in some remote areas of Assam as well. It is very unfortunate that the Bathou followers have already given up their traditional ancestral worship as well as their traditional performing arts. Because of this some section of the Bodos are trying to preserve and promote their traditional dances. It is found that since 1992's some section of the educated Bodos have been trying to retain and revive their traditional religion Bathou. Due to modification made by All Bathou Mahasabha (Religious Union) that most of the dances have lost their original form. The origin of the Bodo dances can be traced from the Kherai dance. Regarding the changes and loses W. A. Haviland observes, "It is a process of substitution, which leads to change in cultural tradition when accepted by the members of society. Innovation involves cultural loss because the acceptance of a new innovation leads to the loss of an older one." (Haviland, 1990, p. 417). P. Mochahari says, "The traditional Bodo folk dances emerging on the basis of Kherai dances and also other folk dances with their different tune of music have been carrying the glorious beauty of the rich cultural heritage of the Bodos; and these are exactly given with full illustration of notations on tune of Siphung and rhythm of Kham in the aforementioned books. Khopri Chibnai (waving of wicker-hat), Bagurumba, Bardwi Sikhla, Na-gurnai (fishing) etc. are the most fascinating and beautiful Bodo folk dances which dare to focus a verdict of glorious Bodo folk music and dances." (Muchahary, 2008, p. 11) In respect of Bagurumba dance, Phanindra Brahma says, "There is nothing original form in the present Bagurumba dance. The community expert has changed its originality and given a new form. (Informant) It is fact that there is a great controversy between

the old and new Bodo scholars in respect of Bodo dances. The old ones don't want to agree the new one: on the other hand the new scholars try to give a new art form so as to make fantastic and enjoyable to the audiences.

The culture of the Bodo, especially their music and folk dances are getting codified form under the due care of "Dularai Boro Harimu Afad" (All Bodo Cultural Union). "Dengkhw Bidang" (Bunch of Tune) and "Dengkhw-mu" (Sangit, Music), music books of traditional Bodo instrumental Music and Dance, have been edited and composed under the chief editorship of Sri Rahendra Nath Bramha in 2003 and under the auspices of Dularai Boro Harimu Afad ( All Bodo Cultural Union) in January, 2006 respectively. Almost all traditional Bodo music for dances have been composed and arranged in both Hindustani and Western notations. But the Bodo musical book written well ahead of these two named 'Gwthang Dengkhw' by Sisir Kumar Suni and Baburam Boro in 1994 is ever mentionable worthy task. They have given the western notations of traditional Bodo tune to be played on Siphung (flute) and rhythmic notations to be played on Kham (big drum). There are other books and a number of articles written on notations of traditional Bodo music for tune and dances. The dances performed in Kherai worship by the Doudini are modernized basing on the Bodo folk tradition. The Bodo music has been introduced as a subject in the third-year degree courses and the concerned curriculum was already approved by the Gauhati University in 2003." (Muchahary, 2008, p. 11). The various cultures of Bodo including their livelihood pattern have undergone somewhat changing trends and diversification replacing, in most cases, the traditional one. But the problem of cultural development including livelihood of the indigenous tribal like Bodo people is more basic and comprises, apart from economic development, preservation of ethnic identity with language and culture, custom, mode of living and indigenous practices. After all it is true apparently that the process of socio-cultural change or development and also the pattern of modernization in the life style of Bodo people are tremendously intensified by the massive induction of administrative resources in the Bodo areas with distinct political identity and also with the fast coming up of education, occupation of various govt. service, better road and transform communication, technological environment, entering into avocations, reciprocity with the non-tribals, etc. unleashed by the present democratic system of the age. Their colourful and fascinating folk-dances seem mostly representing the origins of their respective socio-religious pattern of culture of their own." (Muchahary, 2008, pp. 9-10).

Since the establishment of Dularai Boro Harimu Afad (DBHA) it organizes workshop every year on the occasions of Anniversary day i.e. on 20<sup>th</sup> July. Now with the help of some experts appointed by Bodo Cultural Union, the experts made a certain grammar of these dances and improvised these dances so as to perform and attract the audience. Keeping the traditional elements of these dances they have given new form and meaning not only among the Bodos but also among the non Bodos. This organization is trying to introduce an institution so as to teach the Bodo dances in general. Moreover, it can be said that they have brought change in terms of music, dance. It is not wrong to say that due to giving new form the traditional or original tune of music and dance have lost. DBHA still organizes workshop, seminar, meeting to discuss about the Bodo dance and music to create something new keeping the traditional elements so as to make it an artistic form of performance.

The most interesting change in the Bodo performing arts is on the Bwisagu dance. The Bwisagu is the greatest seasonal and agricultural festival of Bodos. Like the Bodos, the Assamese people and other ethnic tribes of Assam still celebrated this festival with certain rite and rituals including cattle worships, community singing, dancing and merry making. In course of time the Bwisagu and Bihu of the Bodos has changed. In respect of Assamese people Anil Boro observes, “The Bihu has undergone transformation from a seasonal agricultural festival to a national festival and come to be identified as the symbol of cultural cohesiveness of the Assamese people. This national festival presents the binding together of heterogeneous elements among the indigenous communities. Bihu is celebrated now- a- days by organization public functions in huge pandals (bamboo structures with tent and clothes) in the urban and semi urban centers’. The Bihu pandals which evolve a cost of lacs of rupees have become a lively platform for Bihu song and dance performance.” (Muchahary, 2008, p. 112). Like the Assamese, the Bodo people also have started performing the Bwisagu festival. The traditional Bwisagu festival has transformed into the modern called geolang or jousang bwisagu. In Assamese it is called Mancha Bihu. It is not wrong to say that the stage Bwisagu can be said of the influence of Assamese Mancha bihu. Now, it is found that there are many organizations to hold it yearly. By setting up the big stage or Pandal every organizations have started celebrating Bwisagu festival and competition consecutively and here they invite Bwisagu parties from different areas to participate and make a grand success in the competition. In the competition the prize and cash money are also offered to the succeeded party. In the night there is a cultural programme in addition to the Bodo folk and modern songs, dance, Hindi and English songs and dances are performed on the stage. It is also seen that lots of audience irrespective of caste, language, religion etc. co-operate and participate in the programme. Whatever it may be, we know that the Bwisagu festival was originally a seasonal and agricultural festival and observed in the village with a view to entertaining and marry making with certain rites and rituals and dances. Still this tradition is going on in the rural Bodo society. But now due to making stage Bwisagu, the traditional performing arts of the Bodos like music, dance etc. are being changed from their original performing context and function and displayed or performed for the satisfaction of the viewers looking for beautiful presentation and entertainment.

Evidently, the major portion of the content of any culture is borrowed or absorbed from other culture. The process by which the achieved cultural elements are transmitted from one culture to another is known as cultural diffusion. (Channa, 1994, p. 35) Cultural diffusion mainly occurs for influx of population which was phenomenal in the entire history and prehistory of Assam. It may also take place between two neighbouring communities having two different cultures. However, a non- material aspect of culture is found to be impaired in the course of diffusion. (Sarmah N. C., 1995, pp. 23-24). Like diffusion, acculturation has also been found to be an important force influencing change in the tradition of Bwisagu festival. Acculturation is cultural transmission in progress; it occurs when groups of individuals having different culture come into intensive first hand contact; this results in massive changes in the original pattern of cultural tradition of one or the other groups. (Haviland, 1990, p. 418)

Besides the above mentioned dance and performance the Bodos folk performing arts have come into tremendous change. The modern artists have created modern dance borrowing from the folk elements of the traditional dances. Sometimes it is very difficult to identify whether these performances are folk or not. The All Bodo Student Union has started celebrating Bwisagu festival. Earlier the Bodo people converted to Christianity and other world religion were being stopped to perform this celebration. But now due to the establishment of national identity the people have come to know that the necessities of their traditional festival like Bwisagu is the most basic element.

### **1.3 Changes in performance:**

Since the foundation of Dularai Bodo Harimu Afad the traditional dance and song performances performed by Bodos in different areas of Assam have been trying to bring out uniformity. At the demand of the age the new performer is giving a new form in the traditional performances keeping the folk elements of the community. Though many private institutions and clubs do not follow their norms almost something is accepted by some artist. It is also seen sometimes that some artists of the traditional performing arts are becoming popular. They demand huge amount of money for singing a song on the stage. The religious and ritual dances are being performed on the stage; basically these dances and songs are performed on the auspicious occasion of conferences and celebrations.

Earlier during the Bwisagu festival the groups of young boys or girls used to enter every house hold of the village and enjoyed and begged things from them. And at the end of Bwisagu they brought all the collected things and cooked rice and meat and feasted in one place where they danced freely specially under the tree. Now this tradition is not found in the Bodo society. Now the Bwisagu dance is performed of the centre of the open playground. Only in some localities the traditional practices are still going on.

### **1.4 Changes in costume:**

Costume is also one of the most important parts of any kind of performing arts. Due to the influence of modernization and westernization many changes have been seen in respect of dress and make up. Some people related with the performing arts have brought and made certain uniformities in respect of costume and make up. The artists of traditional rituals, the performer of Kherai worship, Doudini also wears uniform dresses with yellow dokhona and red colour blouse: musical instruments players also wear white genji and green colour of gamcha (traditional male dress) also put uniform. Dularai Bathou Mohashaba also tried to bring uniformity in respect of dress during the worship of Bathou and Kherai festivals and their conferences as well. The dancers have to put on their costume and make up in every item of dances as suggested by the choreographer.

Earlier there was no sophisticated costume worn by the performers among the Bodos. They simply used to wear dokhona, phasra. But now the performers wear many items of costume and ornaments. Even the choreographers of the dances are trying to bring uniformity in the case of dress. Now the musical players have separate dress and wear green colour gamosha,

blue shirt, yellow wascot and aronai. Aronai is tied over the head. The male dancers wear gamosha, white genji and aronai and the female dancers wear dokhona, blouse, aronai etc.

### **1.5 Changes in Musical instruments:**

Musical instrument is one of the most important elements of folk performing arts. Without musical instrument the performing art is incomplete. Due to impact of modernization and westernization new current instruments are played by players. The traditional instruments like Kham, Siphung, Jotha, Jabkhring and Serza along with Harmonium, Casio etc in performing arts. In the drama section the Bodos use mostly Harmonium, Giter, Casio, and Pianno instead of their traditional musical instruments.

In Jatra gaan there is the direct influence of Bengali jatra gaan. In this theatre no traditional musical instruments are used. In case of folk song also now modern musical instruments are being used. Further, the performer of the Bwisagu are using according to group order. Some people enjoy only for own personal satisfaction and interest and they use readymade cassettes, band party etc. These have negative impression for society.

Due to modernization and impact of technology the audio-cassettes, C.Ds are available in the market. Few singers have composed and produced numbers of audio and video cassette. In the villages it is also seen that most of the dancers perform the Bwisagu dances with the readymade cassettes specially the youth boy and girls. On the other hand, the folk performing artists are becoming more professional and commercialized. Now, they perform only on the public demand. They have become stage performer and radio artists, T.V. artists. The modern songs are available in audio-cassettes, albums, videos and cinemas. For the demand of documentation and preservation and some scholars and performers are interested only in documentation and production. The only one party namely Ek thengiya group also produced VDC of traditional jatra gaan as well as ek thengiya performance. Folk artists and few singers have composed and produced numbers of audio and video cassette. The traditional prayer songs also composed and produced in the market place. At the same time, there are, we can receive a numbers of CDs of different religious group with different prayer songs.

### **1.6 Politicalisation:**

Folk performing arts have played a great role in spreading the message of patriotism and nationalism among the people of India during the freedom struggle movemnt. Jatra was one of the popular folk theatre forms in Bengal that was performed for making aware the people. Like that Paala and Ujapali, traditional form of ballad singing were also used for spreading awareness on different social issues. In addition to these art forms, folk songs were used to popularize Satyagraha and political message. The great men like Rabindranath Tagore advocated the use of Jatra and poet Subramanya Bharathi used folk songs in order to reach the rural masses and to invoke patriotic feelings.

Bodo Jatra Gan also played a major role among the Bodos in the early decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Bodos intellectual also tried to use the performing folk arts since the establishment of their organization and their meeting. During the period i.e. from 1925 to 1980 the Bodo folk music, dance and theatre contributed major role in respect of bringing great nationalism among the

Bodos. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma who preached Brahma religion among the Bodos in the second part of 20th century who advised his fellow to discard all the indigenous things. As suggested by him many traditional musical instruments were burnt and the Sijou tree (*Euphorbia splendora*) was also cut. But his disciple Fwrlang babaji strongly objected him in this respect and requested to keep certain traditional elements because of their cultural identity. Like the follower of Brahma, the Bodos converted to Brahma and Christianity did not use and perform the Bodo dances due to their religious beliefs and ethos. Now they have also started performing Bodo dances in their religious ceremonies. Now they have also started performing their traditional performances. All Bodo Students Union has declared Bwisagu as their national festival. For last seven years ABSU has started celebrating Bwisagu festival publicly irrespective of any religion and sex in every Bodo living areas. So, the role of folk performing arts cannot be ignored and is playing a vital role towards bringing unity and integrity in the Bodo society.

### **1.7 Commercialization:**

Commercialization is the process of introducing a new product or production method and commercially making it available in the market. In respect of Bagurumba dance, Phanindra Brahma says, the music and dance form of Bagurumba are not original and has been changed by modern so called trainer. We lost its original form due to commercialization. In India there are many examples of deteriorating of the folk dance due to commercialization. There are many choreographers that teach and earn money without having sound knowledge and experience on the folk performing arts. Many video cassettes on dance, music and drama have been produced and sold in the market. Like that many religious dances of Kherai worship are being performed on the stage. These modern day performances on the modern stage and virtual space have bad impacts on the nature of folk art forms. Young generation people now a day uploaded the CDS or live performance of traditional performance through blogs, you.tube or social media sites.

### **1.8 Role of Bodo Organisations towards bringing changes in Folk Performing Arts**

The role of Bodo organization towards bringing changes among the Bodos along with their folk performing arts is highly commendable. The language and literary movement launched by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Brahma Dharma movement created an identity consciousness and intellectual environment in which the All Bodo Students Union and Plain Tribal Council of Assam came into being in the year 1967. The present achievement of the Bodo society in the field of language, literature, education, culture, economics and politics is the result of relentless efforts of the Bodo. (Barmahalia, 2007, p. 175). It is true to say about the working for the upliftment of Bodo language and culture by the Bodo nationalist organizations is commendable. Since the set up of Socio-literary organization of the Bodos they tried to focus and explore their language and culture. The performance of the Bodo dance and music started demonstrating in their welcoming guests and open meeting. In this regard, freedom fighter and ex-president, Bodo Sahitya Sabha Jogendra Kumar Basumatary writes “few Bodo politicians opposed the introduction of medium of instruction by Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Among them the names of Dharanidhar Basumatary, MLA, Rupnath Brahma and minister could be mentioned. Later, Rupnath Brahma understood the problem and agreed with the decision taken by Bodo

Sahitya Sabha. The workers of Sahitya Sabha came into a conclusion as suggested by Rupnath Brahma that they would offer the position of the President of the open session to MLA Dharanidhar Basumatary for the kind approval of the resolutions adopted by Bodo Sahitya Sabha. As suggested by Rupnath Brahma he was welcome by the group of Bodo women folk with Bwirathi dance with the accompaniment of musical instruments like Kham, Siphung, Jotha and Serza. He was so happy that he delivered one hour lecture for the development of Bodo language and culture.” (Hazowary, 2002, p. 39). It is indeed to say that since then different kinds of dance, music and theatre started performing in different places of Bodo dominated areas in the auspicious conference of Bodo organization. The folk performing arts associated with religion and non religious were performed in the meeting and conferences of the said organizations.

### **1.9 Conclusion:**

Now a days it is a common sight to see cultural procession, group and individual singing and performance of songs and dances in any community function, conference, literary meet, political meet or cultural meet. Different cultural troupes with performing of traditional folk dances in their traditional dress are invited to perform. Independence day/Republic day celebration by government also invites such troupes. As a result, these troupes are in great demand now. Traditional folk musical instruments find a significant place in these public performances. They are also invited to perform in the public TV channels, very occasionally of common.

Another noteworthy change in the present Bodo society is that young generation people including the women and girls are coming forward to learn how to play these folk musical instruments. Some music schools have started giving training on folk music and musical instruments along with classical and western music instruments. Some short time workshops are also organized by Harimu Afad or students organizations to give training on Bodo musical instruments. Young enthusiasts will be certainly benefitted from these workshops.

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