



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## FAIRES AND FESTIVALS OF BODO

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The Bodos constitute an important element of the population of Assam and are known for their enchanting cultural peculiarities. They have their own language and literature; their own songs and dances; their own religious beliefs; their own customs and traditions and they have their own fairs and festivals. The life of the people, no doubt is vexed with problems and hardships, yet they cannot dampen their spirits for all times. In the midst of various predicaments they are retaining their rich culture and their continuous growth in keeping pace with other advanced cultures rates is very high. In the midst of various predicaments and hardships of life, the people live in their own world of merrymaking, fair and festivals songs and dances which make them shut their eyes from stern action realities of life and turn to its finer aspect for a moment.

Fairs and festivals are the essential aspects of the cultural life of the people of any region of the country and as a matter of fact these are the true mirror of the peoples' cultures. Peoples cultures manifested in traditional fairs and festivals have socio-economic-religious bases, interwoven; one cannot be separated from the other. The traditional Bodo culture is no exception and has undergone the process of evolution and growth. In Bodo fairs and festivals the following characteristics are predominantly noted. First, these are socio-religious in nature and content. There are no festivals which are exclusively called social or religious. Some festivals are predominantly social in their content, but their celebrations are performed under the umbrella of religious rites and practices. Similarly, there are fairs and festivals which are apparently religious in their content and purpose, yet, these are not entirely free from social elements including laws and customs. Secondly, most of the Bodo fairs and festivals have economic roots. Suffice to say that since agriculture is the mainstay of the people, the festivals celebrated by them are naturally closely connected with their occupation. Such festivals are celebrated at a larger scale for thanking the gods and goddesses for their providence and for saying a prayer for a bumper crop. Through out the year, people celebrate one festival or other. Some of the important festivals are discussed bellow.

Religion in the present context has emerged as one of the most important catalysts of transformation in the Bodo community. The influence of the new religion called Brahma is deep in the society. The followers of this religion are reformists and have brought significant cultural change in the society. The traditionalists worship the *Sijou* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) which is considered as the image of their supreme deity *Bathou*. The British missionaries described the traditional Bodo religion as ‘animistic’ religion. Christianity was introduced to this community only in the beginning of this century.

In the traditional religion, *Bathou Borai* is the chief of their gods. He is also known as *Khuria Borai* which means the old man (Moshahary 1993:1-6).<sup>46</sup> *Ba* means five and *thou* means deep. Hence ‘*Bathou*’ means ‘the five deep spiritual entities. ‘Five’ is considered as the special numerical in the traditional Bodo religion. In this regard a Bodo verse is like this:

“Thaigirni bikhonga khongba,

Sijouni siria siriba,

Siphungni gudunga dungba,

Bathouni bandua banduba,

Boro bwrairi raa phongba” (Brahma 1983: 35).

In translation, *Owi fruit* (*Dillenia indica*) has five rinds, the *Sijou* tree (*Euphorbia Splenden*) has five ridges, the *Siphung* (the long bamboo flute of the Bodos) has five holes, the *Bathou* has five knots (of bamboo strips) and the *Boro Borai* (the Bodo elders) has five moral preaching. Again, the Bodos have five principles on which their social customs are based. These are 1. *Agarbad*, 2. *Phongslodbad*, 3. *Daokibad*, 4. *Khoulwbwdbad* and 5. *Khaoalibad*.

It is said that in ancient times the Bodos had five main gods, viz, 1. *Ailong* (the god of earth), 2. *Agrang* (the god of water), 3. *Khoila* (the god of air), 4. *Sanja Borli* (the goddess of light) and 5. *Rajkhungri* (the goddess of sky). (Brahma 1983: 35-36). Thus the *Bathou* religion and its philosophy are based on five principles, which upheld the whole fabrics, social customs, economic institution, beliefs and rites of the Bodo society.

### **Kherai Festival:**

*Kherai puja* is belief to be the greatest religious festival of the Bodos. It is a symbol of hope and desire, which has been prevailing among them since time immemorial. The main purpose of the *Kherai puja* is welfare of both private and public lives. For the welfare of the private life, they performed *Kherai puja* individually. On the other hand for the welfare of the villagers as a whole they perform *Kherai puja* collectively once or twice in a year.

Besides welfare of both private and public lives, the *Kherai puja* is performed for the good harvest of crops. The Bodos are generally dependent on agriculture. So, before and after cultivation they performed *Kherai puja* and propitiate different god and goddesses for the success in cultivation. *Kherai puja* is very expensive and elaborate too. Due to economic stringency the Bodos do not perform *Kherai puja* frequently and regularly.

It is difficult to ascertain the source from where the word '*Kherai*' originated. Different scholars and writers are of different opinions as regards the origin of the word *Kherai*. According to Dr. S. K. Chatterjee there is similarity between the *Ker Puja* of the Tripurians and the *Kherai Puja* of the Bodos. Brahma (1989:62-74) has given a detailed description of the *Kherai* ritual according to which the goddess of wealth (Lokhi) is worshipped in this ritual. Along with the goddess are also worshipped in this ritual. They perform this puja on some specific occasions. The *Kherai puja* is of four types, 1. *Darshan Kherai*, 2. *Umrao Kherai*, 3. *Phalo Kherai* and 4. *Noaouni Kherai* (domestic *Kherai*).

The *Darshan Kherai* is performed during the first week of the month of '*Kati*' or '*Kartik*'. The *kherai Puja* is meant for *Mainao* who is identified with '*Laksmi*', the goddess of wealth and welfare. It is also called as '*Lokhi Kherai*'. *Umrao Kherai* is held during the month of '*Ashara*' at the end of the '*Amti Sua*' (unclean period) for the welfare of the villagers as well as of the crops. This puja is also known as the *Ashu Kherai*, being connected with the *asu* or a summer-season crops. *Phalo Kherai* was performed specially on the day of '*Maghi Purnima*' or the full moon of the month of '*Magha*'. This *Kherai* also known as *danswring Kherai* as it is performed during the full moon of the month. The *Noaouni Kherai* (domestic or family *Kherai*) is performed by the family when it deem necessary. There is no fixed time for this *Kherai*. The Bodo family who believe in the traditional practices depends on the '*Kherai puja*' or '*Garja puja*' for their welfare at all times. So whenever they face any trouble they performed the *Kherai puja* for the welfare of their own family.

The *Kherai* ritual is also performed on community. Among other things some particular species of bamboo, herb and leaves are needed. All the musical instruments which are commonly used by them are also needed. *Kherai puja* involves many persons for the arrangement but for the worship only three persons are necessary. They are *Doudini* (the main worshiper of the *Kherai* and she must be a lady), *Oja* or the instructor of the worshippers and one helper (*githal*).

The worship of *Kherai* continues for three days. There is no fixed place for this. The *Daoudini* is the main dancer during this ritual. *Kherai* dances are performed to please the *Bathou Borai* and other gods and goddesses. She performs most of the essential rites with the help of an instructor (*ojha*) and a helper (*githal*). The performances are divided into three parts. The first part is called *Alangikhangnai*. The *ojha* gets the *Doudini* possessed by chanting hymns in the first stage. She falls into a trance in the second stage and converts herself into a spiritual being in the third stage. In this stage she tells the tales of the gods and goddesses. She demonstrates as many as eighteen different kinds of dances. She dances with a shield and a

sword in her hands. At the end of the worship she tells the future of the villagers, their probable success and failure in cultivation and about their fortunes or misfortunes.

### **Garja Festival:**

The *Garja puja* or '*Garja Modai Hwnai*' as termed by the Bodos is another important traditional socio-religious festival of the people and is celebrated out doors at the place permanently earmarked for the purpose. They performed *Garja puja* on many occasions. Usually this ritual is performed to protect the village from epidemics. If any person does any sinful act this ritual is performed to purify him or her. There are many *Garja* gods and goddess who is regularly propitiated by the Bodos. Brahma (1989:76) mentions the names of fifteen such deities who are worshipped in *Garja ritual*. He also mentions the names of a few non-Bodo *Garja* gods who are worshipped along with the Bodo gods and goddesses during *Garja puja*. These are *Mahadeo*, *Sila Rai*, *Rupa Rai*, *Ai Kali*, *Maya Kali* etc. The river god and goddesses are also addressed. There are about hundreds of gods and goddess who are worshipped during *Kherai* and *Garja puja*.

The Bodos perform the *Garja puja* to purify themselves and the village after any seasonal festival like '*Baisagu*' etc. They believe that at the annual festivals the participants of the village become impure due to free mixing with each other eating, merry-making, walking, drinking rice-beer from one house to another house. So in order to purify themselves they perform the *Garja puja* at the village. Besides if epidemic appears in a family or in the village then the villagers perform the *Garja puja* to protect themselves from the evils. In case of wrong activity of some persons in the village, which they believe traditionally, the villagers compel the wrong doers to arrange the *Garja Puja* to satisfy the gods and goddesses as well as to purify themselves.

### **Bwisagu: -**

The most important occasion of marry-making in the social life of the Bodo community is the celebration of '*Bwisagu*' in the month of *Baisakh* (Mid April). It is also known as '*Bihu*' in Assamese. They celebrate two other '*Bihus*' known as '*Domashi*' (*Bhogali Bihu*) and '*Katrigacha*' (*Kangali Bihu*) but none of them are so important from the point of view of merriment than the one that comes on the last day of the month of *Chaitra*. This occasion is most welcome by each and every Bodo community as it is a spring time festival of the New Year.

'*Bwisagu*', a corruption of two formations "*Bwswrni Agu*" meaning "beginning of the year" or New Year is a great social festival and celebrated in the month of *Baisakha* (mid April) for seven days beginning from the day of *sankranti* of *Chaitra* (last day of *Chaitra* which also the last day of the passing year). The first day of this festival is consecrated to the cattle which include the decoration and ritual bathing of the cows. The main part of the ceremony is performed by the cowherds who also indulge in games, songs and dances.

According to Sydney Endle, “Among the Darang Kacharis (Bodos of Darrang district), this festivals lasts for seven days during which little or no work is done, the whole period being given up to merry-making, dancing, feasting etc. As is practice among their Hindu neighbours on the opening day all cattle are taken to the nearest river or tank and there formally bathed and after wards sprinkled with a preparation compounded of rice beer (Jou), tomatoes and turmeric etc. The horns are smeared with oil; ashes and pounded rice flour are applied in patches to the bodies of the cattle. This duty discharged the people abandon themselves to sheer merriment, the younger folks especially giving themselves up to dancing and singing etc.”

The verses recited by the Bodos when the cattle are taken to their bath are as: -

Lao ja Panthao ja,

Bwswr Bwswr ja hanja hanja,

Bimani khiter, bipani khiter,

Nwngswr jagwn halua gidir,

Bima gaide badi daja,

Bhipa balad badi ja,

Bari khanani embu bongla,

Bibadi ja gidir jangila.

English rendering of the above verse is as follows:-

Eat gourd, eat brinjal,

Grow up year to year,

To spite your mother and father,

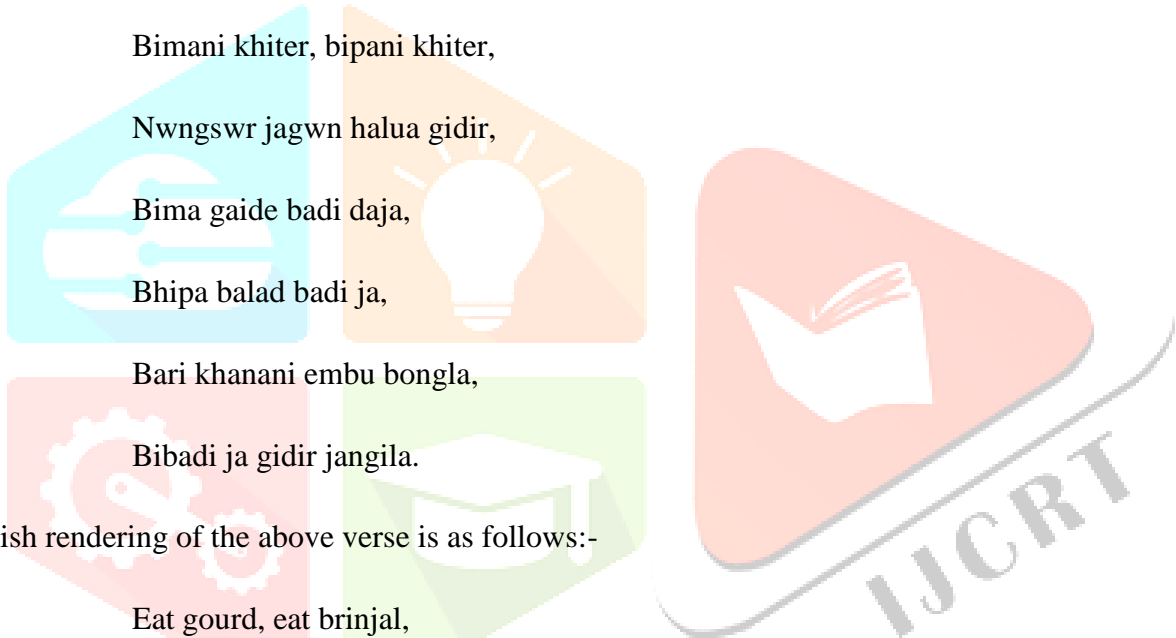
You will be large bullocks,

Do not be short statured like your mother,

Be large like your bull father,

Like the frog in the corner of the garden,

May you be sleek and long?



The day ends with the ceremonial eating of fowl meat cooked with bitter and sour leaves at evening time. This is called '*Gwka-Gwkwi Janai*'. The term '*Gwka-Gwkwi Janai*' is very often used as a phrase to convey the sense of severances of all connection or relationship with some one due to bad blood or misunderstanding. Keeping this meaning of the term in view the Bodos eat bitter and sour leaves on the last day of the passing year to symbolised ones severance of all connecting with the passing year in a jolly mood of welcoming the New Year. The first day of the New Year is the second Bihu day which is set aside for the worship of Bathou in individual houses or jointly at the *Bathou Tansali* (permanent place of worship) of the villagers. At the dawn of the New Year, members of the family take ritual baths and propitiate '*Bathou*' and the spirits of ancestors with scarifies. In earlier days the rest of the days of Bwisagu were set aside for specific purposes. For instance, the third day of Bwisagu was set apart for feeding of the dogs, the fourth day the swine, the fifth day the fowls and the sixth day the ducks and other birds. The seventh day is the last day of Bwisagu and is set aside for visiting and receiving the relatives and friends, exchanging gifts with the beloved ones, seeking apologies from the elders for acts of omission and commission during the year. On this day people perform "Putuli Haba" (puppet marriage between the male and female deities presenting them as young couples under the legendary names Raona and Raoni).

This practice is based on the traditional belief of the people that if these deities are pleased not only they cause rain and wind to soften the Mother Earth and make her laden with prosperous crops but also send '*Jwhwlaos*' (youthful men) and '*Bardwi-sikhwlas*' (soft and fickle minded youthful maidens) as matching partners and that if these deities are pleased even barren couples may be blessed with children. Besides, the unmarried young men and women in the midst of merry-making during the festivals indulge in romantic activities and courtship. Although the boys and girls are not allowed to mix liberally on other occasions they do so during the Bwisagu festivals without any strain or frown of their parents. This is what Bwisagu is and how it is celebrated.

During the Bwisagu festival the young boys and girls beg alms from door to door singing and dancing in tune of some traditional musical instruments. It is belief by the Bodos that the begging boys and girls should not be refused by any house holder. The young boys and girls arrange feasts with the goods they get as alms like rice, eggs, chickens etc. from the house holders at the end of the Bwisagu festival.

The Brahma dharma followers Bodo people pray to god on the first day of *Bahag* or *Bwisakh* by performing *Ahuti* jointly at their village. Before *Ahuti* none is allowed to take jou or rice-beer, After *Ahuti* the villagers sit together and discuss about the affairs of the village under the presidentship of Gaoburah or village headman. They also discuss about the annual accounts and liabilities of the villagers and solve any problem mutually. In the evening the villagers both young and old enjoy by dancing and singing. They also consume rice-beer roaming from one house to another in the village. It has been observed that some sections of Brahma dharma followers have given up the habits of taking rice beer on the occasion of the Bwisagu festival as well as on other occasions also. They simply enjoy by singing and dancing together

and the young boys and girls collect alms from door to door and arrange feasts with the articles they receive by singing and dancing. The begging of alms is called by the Bodos as *Mairong maginai*.

**Domachi:** *Domachi* is a post harvest festival corresponding to the Assamese Magh Bihu and is celebrated in the month of *Magha* (January -February). The characteristics of this festival are to enjoy with different types of foods like cakes or *pithas* to entertain the friends and relatives with foods and drinks and to enjoy singing and dancing. The male members of the family tie cords around the fruits bearing tress of the house. The Bodos believe that the fruits bearing trees would bear more and more fruits if they trees are tied with cords of straw during the *Domachi*.

Along with the *pithas* (cake made of powder rice putting some ingredients like sugar, coconut, lit, till etc.) of different types the women fry different pulses like - Sobai, Sibing, pulses, *maibra sithao*, *chaura*, *akai*, coconut *laru*, etc. eat them and splash them at the cowshed. The elder persons of the village traditionally beliefs sacrifice of fowls to *Bathou Borai* and worship. The Bodos followers of Brahma dharma arrange Ahuti on the day of full moon of *Magha month* or *Maghi Purnima*, for the welfare in general.

A special feature of the in the process of celebrating this festival has been the construction of '*Belaghar*', a high temple like structure with dried banana leaves and green bamboos on the river bank by the cowherds who spends the night in the *Belaghar* amidst much merriment. They also arrange a bone-fire with the big pieces of fuel generally stolen and spend sleepless night, singing and dancing. Towards the end of the night they usually have their dinner. With the dawn the cowherds set fire to the *Belaghar*, take bath in the river in the morning, warm up themselves standing by the side of the bone-fire and amidst much rejoicing and dancing, unmindful of the biting cold of winter, they sing and recite hymns and rhyme prayers for the well-being of their cattle and for the prosperity of their village.

In conclusion, it is difficult to say that most of the festivals, particularly the last two (*Bwisagu and Domachi*) are hardly distinguishable from the Assamese festivals in spirit, content and celebration. Many such socio-religious festivals observed by the Bodos and the Assamese brethren are so mixed up that it is difficult to identify which is the Bodo festival and which is the Assamese festival. It is due to the acculturation of the peoples in closer contact for the ages past.

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