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Bwisagu: A Festival of the Bodos

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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. This occasion is welcomed 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 *Baisakh* (mid April) for seven days beginning from the day of *sanskranti* of Chaitra (last day of Chaitra which is also the last day of the passing year). According to Sydney Endle, "Among the Darang Kacharis (Bodo 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 practiced among their Hindu neighbours on the opening day, all cattle are taken to the nearest river or tank and there, formally bathed and afterwards 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.

Bwisagu is observed by the Bodo people over seven days. The first day Mwchau meant for cattle, the second day is mansi meant for men, the third is salma meant for dogs, the forth day is Oma meant for swine, the fifth day is dao, meant for fowl, the six day is meant for ducks and other birds and the last day is meant for receiving relatives and friends. Besides, cleaning house, worship of Bathou and offering of eatables to the ancestors, cattle's rites, putting new and washed cloths, receiving and visiting, etc may be

said to constitute the formal part of the Bwisagu. There is also the ceremonial eating of fowl cooked with bitter herbs as Khungkha or other wild vegetables of different tastes (Gwka –gwkwí janai).

During the time of Bwisagu dance and music become regular features of the Bodo community. The young men play shipung(flute),the drum, serja and beat out rhythms with a piece of split bamboo, girls dance with hands and play the Jews harp gongona and small cymbals (Jota). The young boys and girls sing songs of love. There are various songs of love during the time of Bwisagu which are vary popular among the Bodo youths.

The day ends with the ceremonial eating of chicken/fork meat cooked with bitter and sour leaves in the evening. This is called '*Gwka-Gwkwí Janai*'. The term '*Gwka-Gwkwí Janai*' is very often used as a phrase to convey the sense of severances of all connection or relationship with someone 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 symbolise 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 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.

Cowdung is also used by the Bodo people for some sacred purposes. To purify the house and the place of worship the cowdung is used. The Bodo women plaster the houses with cowdung mixed with mud. After bathing in the river or in the tank the cow as are led to the grazing field by the cowherds, and thus the first Bwisagu which is meant for the cows ends.

The Bodos throw away their old earthen utensils of cooking on the first day of the new year as far their traditional beliefs. The members of the family offer prayers to the family deity Bura-Bahtou and Aikamaikhya at the alter after making the house clean and after taking bath themselves. Welcoming the new year Bwisagu men, women, young boys and girls exchange their mutual love. The junior offer gamosas to the elders and take

blessings from them. They forgive each others misdeeds and exchange gamosas also. They pray to god for their wellbeing in the coming new year.

There is a traditional belief among the Bodos that during the Bwisagu no quarrel should take place. They believe that those indulge in quarrels during these days would take birth as cows or dogs in the next life. So, they try to avoid any sort of quarrel during the time of Bwisagu festival. The traditional belief of the Bodos signifies that the Bodos have real respect to the parents or the elderly persons. The women folks of the Bodo family go to the house of the Oja or the medicine man with jou(rice -beer) and cocks as the presentation on new years. The Oja replaces the tabij or kobos(a mulet) of the users for the new year. The married girls also pay respect to their fathers-in-laws and take blessings and also they visit their own parents to get blessing for the new year.

The followers of Brahma dharma pray to god on the first day of *Bahag* or *Bwisakh* by performing *Ahuti* jointly in their village. Before *Ahuti* none is allowed to take jou or rice-beer. After *Ahuti* the villagers sit together and discuss the affairs of the village under the president ship of *Gaoburah* or village headman. They also discuss the matter about 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 habit of taking rice beer on the occasion of the Bwisagu festival as well as on other occasions. 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*.

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