

Folk Media and Political Movement: A Case Study on the Bodos of North East India

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Abstract

Politics of ethnic identity in the north-east India is well-known phenomenon. The ethnic assertion in this region is mostly linguistic and cultural in nature. Consequently, the socio-cultural identity movement emerged among the Bodos since the 2nd decade of 20th century. The socio-political identity movement did not start before the independence it came after the independence. During the freedom movement of India, the Bodos of Assam also participated strongly and sacrificed their valuable lives for the sake of their motherland. After the independence of India, the Bodos started negotiating for the introduction of Bodo medium in the school and attained Bodo as their medium of instruction in 1963. As most of the Bodo leaders took education through the Assamese medium of instruction, many of them accepted Assamese script for writing and publishing the Bodo books to teach their students in the school but many leaders did not accept Assamese and submitted a memorandum for the use of Roman script in place of Assamese but the Assam government did not respond and accept it. Later, they decided to launch a democratic movement under the aegis of All Bodo Students Union in 1974. In this movement, 16th Bodo people were shot dead by the defense people. Yet, they didn't attain Roman as their script from the government of Assam. Since then, the Bodos of Assam felt that they are not safe and exploited by Assamese Hindu people and had been demanding for the creation of a separate state on the northern part of the mighty river Brahmaputra. In the name of the separate state, many people lost their valuable lives in the hands of defense people and fratricidal killing. Some women have lost their husband at the age of younger stage, their sons, parents, sisters, brothers and many of the children have become orphans. Despite signing two agreements namely Bodoland Autonomous Council was on 20th February 1993, and Bodoland Territorial Council on 10th February 2003, the expectation of the Bodos could not fulfill. The creation of a separate state movement is still going on under the aegis of different Bodo nationalists' organization. The main aims of this paper are: i. to focus on how the Bodos of Assam are using the folk media in their political movement and iii. to explore the role of folk media towards serving the ethnic unity and nationalism among the Bodos.

Methodology

This article was based on the primary and secondary sources. Interview and observation method was conducted for collecting the primary data. Some books, magazines and others materials published by the distinguished publishers and websites have been used as secondary source.

Keywords

Media, culture, nationalism, ethnicity, identity, politics

Introduction

Folk media is a means of expression for the general people and a way to get out of their emotions and feelings. No doubt, it is a powerful media that includes storytelling, puppetry, proverbs, visual art, drama, role-play, folk games, songs, proverbs, riddles, dance, drumming and so on. According to Parmar, "Folk media are tools of a special nature. Their special nature is derived from the fact that they have no grammar or literature, yet they are nurtured through oral and functional sources. In a total perspective, folk media provide channels for expressing socio-ritual, moral and emotional need of a society or sections to which they specially belong."¹ According to veteran folk media scholar Balwant Garhgi "Folk media represents the people in their natural habitat, with all their contradictions and multifarious activities. It gives a glimpse of their style of speech, music, dance, dress and wisdom. It contains a rich store of mythological heroes, medieval romances chivalric tales, social customs, beliefs and legends."² Madhu Malik classified the Traditional forms of communication in India into 5 categories such as-"Folk theatre, Folk songs, Predominantly narrative forms including ballads, folktales and other story-telling forms, Religious discourses, and Puppet shows."³ Folk medias are used for personal as well as group information sharing and discussion and draw their popularity from their entertaining nature. In modern times also few private organization are using this traditional media to mobilize their goals in India. In this regard, K.J.Kumar says, "the majority of private organization utilizing the folk and traditional media are 'social action group' (SAGs) owing allegiance to various political, social and religious bodies."⁴ Whatever it may be, folk media is not static but it is dynamic. Due to the impact of globalization folk medias have changed and is changing with the changing time and situation. It is sustaining by changing times. It is a spontaneous, personal, direct and flexible. In performance, it uses local language, styles, designs, costumes etc. By studying folk media we can trace the events of the past story of a particular community or a region. There is no doubt that folk media has a great potentiality in using various social awareness and developmental task.

Folk Media and Bodo Movement

The Bodos are the earliest inhabitant in Assam. They believed that they were the dynasty of the King Bhagadatta who was the father-in-law of Durjadhan, fought against the Pandav in favour of Kourav during the Kurushetra war. Once they ruled entire Assam but they could not

¹. Parmar, S., *Traditional Folk Media in India*, Goenka Books, New Delhi, 1975, p.7

². See <http://chandeshwar.blogspot.in/2009/02/folk-media-and-rural-development.html>

³. Malik, M. *Traditional forms of communication and Mass Media in India*, UNESCO, 1972, p.7

⁴. K.J.Kumar, *Mass Communication in India*, Jaico Publishing House, New Delhi, 2010, p.386

sustain longer in the hand of Ahom king. Whatever, it may be, in the course of time, the Bodos became weak and started converting to many sects of Hinduism and Christianity. Due to the conversion to Neo-Vaishnavism and Christianity the Bodos discarded their ancestral worship, cultural elements and performing arts and accepted the Neo-Vaishnavite and Christianity cultures. It is noteworthy to mention here that though many of the Bodos completely assimilated linguistically and culturally with the Assamese speaking Hindu society still majority of the Bodos are using many traditional musical instruments and handling their original ethnic identity in the face of Sanskritisation. It needs mentioning here that in the 2nd decades of 20th century, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma (Mech) who preached Brahma religion among the Bodo society in the undivided Goalpara District situated in lower Assam. The objectives of this religion were: to reform and educate the Bodo society. Within a short period of time, this religion became very popular among the Bodo society. Few sections of the Bodos accepted this religion. In 1928, under the leadership of Gurudev Kalicahran (Mech) Brahma, a delegation of educated Bodos met the Simon Commission and submitted a memorandum demanding reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly in Assam, to set up educational institution, to form a Bodo regiment etc. Consequently, they founded the Tribal League of Assam to raise voice for their Socio-Political rights of the 'plains tribes' in the 1930s. Another literary organization called the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), was formed to preserve and develop the Bodo language on 16th Nov, 1952, All Bodo Students' Union on 15th February, 1967 and Plains Tribal Council of Assam, 27th September, 1967 respectively. Constant immigration from Bangladesh completely changed the demography of Assam. The state government did not take any necessary measures to protect the encroachment of the tribal belts and blocks of Assam that created discontentment among the Bodos and other tribal as well. The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam (PTCA) started to launch a separate tribal state named *Udayachal* comprising Tribal belt and Blocks of the Northern Part of Assam for protecting their farming and grazing lands mainly from rich landlord and illegal immigrants.

But *Udayachal* movement came to an end due to the demand of DIVIDE ASSAM 50/50 i.e. Bodoland Movement launched by All Bodo Students Union in 1980s. In 1993, the government of India, Assam and ABSU signed an agreement named Bodoland Autonomous Council. But this Accord completely failed to fulfill the expectations of the Bodos and large-scale agitation started again, and another Accord was signed in 2003 with the Government of Assam, India and Bodoalnd Tiger Force, an Armed Force Group named Bodo Territorial Council creating new four districts in the Bodo dominated areas such as Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baga and Udalguri within Assam under Sixth Scheduled provision of Indian constitution. However, ABSU and the armed group like NDFB are not satisfied with this agreement. So, again they are demanding a separate state for the Bodos.

Every ethnic group of people of North East India has their own distinct language, tradition and culture. The uses of folk media in the case of North East specially the tribal people or ethnic group of people

are something different from other parts of India. They did not have written history but they have rich verities of folk media that are closely associated with their religious, seasonal and agricultural festivals. Language and culture is the main element of identity of a particular community of the people. Due to the impact of modernization and westernization many of the language and culture have already been extinct and few are rest and are trying to protect and promote their language and culture. Many of the marginalised ethnic tribal groups like Karbi, Dimasha, Rabhas, Mishing etc. are demanding self-autonomy so as to rule themselves for the preservation and promotion of their language and culture along with their politics, economics, and education. With the emergence of ethnicity and identity political movement among the different ethnic groups in North East India including the Bodos, the use of folk media as an instrument to make awakening the minds of the people can't be ignored. Folk media has been playing a significant role in promoting the ethnic consciousness and strengthening the sense of cohesion as well. Bodo movement can be classified as religious and social reform movements, language and cultural movement, political movement. In this, I would like to discuss only how folk media of the Bodos are contributing towards their separate movement till now.

Use of Folk Theatre

Folk theatre is one of most powerful means of audio-visual communication. It is mostly associated with the ritual and festival and even has seen close relation as well as affinities with music and dance. It emerged as a powerful agent of dissemination of knowledge in the traditional societies. It has played a significant role in informing, educating and entertaining the audience since times immemorial. During the freedom struggle, folk media played a great role in spreading the message of patriotism. *Jatra* a traditional theatre form in *Bengal*, was performed for making aware the people during the freedom struggle. Like that, in the forties of this century, IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) the cultural front of the communist party of India, successfully handled some of the highly popular regional theatre forms like the *Jatra* of Bengal, *Bhavai* of Gujarat, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra and *Burrakatha* of Andhra Pradesh to change to the face of India. In the same time, the Bodos of Assam started performing *Jatra gaan* for making aware the Bodo people since 2nd decades of 20th century. It needs mentioning here that the Bodos did not have their own *Jatra* party that was borrowed many elements from the Bengali *Jatra*. The Bodos specially the youth of Kokrajhar district learnt how to perform *Jatra Gaan* from the Bengali experts and then performed in the meeting of Bodo Satra Sanmilan, Tribal League, Bodo Sahitya Sabha and their conferences in different parts of Assam. Consequently, some leaders and artists undertook it as a means of information, entertainment, education and even it as a means of bringing awareness among the illiterate Bodo society. Within a short period of time *jatra gaan* became a very popular among the Bodos that helped to reform the Bodo society and uniting as well living in different parts of Assam and outside Assam.

Folk Story

Bodos myths and legends tell about the abode of the Bodos. Through some myths they can trace their migration, social history those strengthen social order and distinguish the tribe from other communities. They think that they received their traditions from their aged people. In addition to the myths, there are many legendary heroes and heroines such as *Daimalu Jwhalao, Seubar, Jaoliya Dewan, Swmdwn, Thengfakhri, Gambari Sikhla, Birgwsri Sikhla* etc. are very popular among the Bodos. Such kind of narratives helped and is still helping the emergence of national awakening among the Bodos

Folk Music

Folk Music is one of the most important genres of traditional media. It can touch the human hearts and propagate the ideas and experiences of us among the village people who cannot read and write. It can give a communication by which people can share their emotions, instinct, intentions, and meanings. Folk songs were also used to popularize *Satyagraha* and political message during the freedom movement. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, in his famous *Swadeshi Samaj* speech in July 1904 advocated the use of Jatra, festivals and songs in order to reach the rural masses. Likewise, the eminent Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi started using folk music to invoke patriotic feelings. As such, like other communities and races in the world, the Bodos have many folk songs. These songs and narrative recount the history of the Bodos. Bachiram and Daoharam were two legendary heroes of the Bodos who fought against the Bhutanese. The following lines are songs about Bachiram:

*Goraya dabraydw Bachiram Jwhwlao
Gonggar chubaya phwilaygou.⁵*

English rendering

Ride on horse, *Bachiram*, Bhutiyas are coming in a body

In Bodos society women also took part in the battles. These heroic souls could lay down their lives for their motherland. In the following song, the heroic women are encouraging *Bachiram* and *Daoharam* to fight against the enemies. When *Bachiram* started for the battle against the Bhutias, his wife sang farewell:

*Danghang Suhang ada Bachiram
Akhra barini akhra bugdao ada
Hajo khoroao daoha nangnw
Goraya mabar Jwgdao.⁶*

⁵ . B.Brahma, *The Folk Song of the Bodos*, Gauhati University Publication, Guwahati, 1960, p.2

⁶ . Ibid, p.6

English rendering:

Oh dear Bachiram, Get on the saddle, (with) legs in the stirrup, Get on the saddle, (with) legs in the stirrups, Put spurs to the horse, And march forward :(to battle)

As such, in the song “Own nation”, we can see the strong sense of love towards a nation in the following given folk songs:

Ayo angw hadab
Dwima dwisa jiri jiri
Banfang laifang sari sari
Swmwnangthao naybaythathao
Swrjigirini swrjinayao
Ayo angw hadab
Siri mwndiya bima dabwnw nwnw
Undulanghkw manw gwdw gwdw
Sikhangdw de siri mwndw
Hadwrkhough fwsabkhangdw
Ayo angw hadab.⁷
 “Oh’ my own nation,
 Rivers and streams flowing down
 Trees and plants all around in groves
 Wonderful and amazing worth seeing all the times
 Out of the creation of an Almighty,
 Oh’ my own nation
 Still you haven’t waken up mother,
 Why you slept in deep?
 Wake up and get refreshed,
 Clean the nation from evils,
 Oh’ my own nation.”

In this folk song, the strong sense of love towards the beautiful landscape of their motherland is strongly expressed. His nation is full of rivers and streams, trees and plants. That’s why through the song the asleep person has been appealed to wake up and work for their nation. Another one is *The name of “Hero Youths”* song also reflects the strong sense of love for a nation. The song signifies the following.

Jwhwlao jaliaya gothofwr jwnw

⁷. Ibid,p.173

Jwhwlao jaliya gothofwrjwng
Jwnglay raokhoubw giya giya
Dahal thungriya jwngni gelegra muwa muwa
Jwhwlao giya giya
Swrba suthura gaglwb fwiba jwngni rayjwao
Dangwn sugwn gaogwn
*Jwnglai raokhoubw giya giya.*⁸

“Hero youths are we,

Hero youths are we

We don't fear anyone doesn't fear.

Shield and sword are playing articles for us.

Hero ... don't fear don't fear.

If the alien enemy attacks our nation

Will stabbed, strike and shot

We don't fear anyone doesn't fear.”

This folk song is encouraging the youth of the present generation and will encourage the future generation. By listening to this song the Bodo could sacrifice their life for the cause of a nation. Youth power has been termed as the strongest of all powers in the world. This song encourages to save the motherland even at the cost of putting one's life at risk and it is reflective of this song. Like the above, another song can also be hinted as an example of such:

Swrba bangal fwibay
Malayni derakhou sekho fwibay
Dagi dagi rouniyafwr
Dong jwnghabw gambari sikhla
*jena jwngbw biswrjwng ala mala.*⁹

“Some Mughals came

Seized the home of others

Don't fear don't fear the soldiers

We also have *Gambari* Heroine

We will not be defeated with them helplessly.”

⁸ . Brahma.M.op.cit.,p.1

⁹ . Informant: Mohini Basumatari Rava,66,Tezpur

Like *Bashiram*, *Daoharam*, *Gambari Sikhla* as a song represents a Bodo fighting heroine at whose name the folk song has been depicted. Everyone loves their motherland. No one can tolerate silently when some alien forces attacks from outside. Similarly, when the alien Mughal rulers start attacking the Bodo nation from outside in-spite of the presence of strong heroine like *Gambari Sikhla*, we must not fear and stay back but faced the enemies and the soldiers must be encouraged to ever ready to move forward. These encouraging elements are reflected in this song or ballad.

Folk dance

Folk dance is the most popular verbal form of traditional communication that can create awareness in the society. It is a communication that is colorful, vibrant, melancholic, elegant, and graceful. They attract audience since the tunes are generally feet tapping and very well liked by the local crowd. In this regard it can be added

“Body movement is a social communication tool - complex, meaningful, continuously changing, in articulation with the individual that performs it. Even though cultural studies are focusing much more on text, object and visual studies, kinetic actions have their place in the same domain.”¹⁰ The traditional dances like *Rwnchwndri*, *Bagurumba*, (popularly known as butterfly dance) *Bardwisikhla* are very beautiful and attractive dances in the Bodo society. Generally, these dances are performed in the meeting and conference as a means of entertainment and merry making. The identity of the Bodo society can be seen through these dances. So, the Bodos used to do since last 50 years for bringing awareness about their culture. Besides these, there are many dances specially associated with the *Kherai* dances that are performed by the groups of dancers in the stage now. Earlier these dances were not performed by the Christianity and Neo-Vaishnavites Bodo people. But now, they have also started performing and the Bodos have taken these dances as a means of communicating with each other. Even many nationalist organizations of the Bodos are used as a means of identifying themselves and exploring their rich cultural heritage. All Bodo Students’ Union and other cease-fires Militant group of the Bodos are using in many traditional dances in their *Dharna* and other protest and agitation such as rail block, highway block in the name of the creation of the separate state “Bodoland”.

Festival and Celebration

This is the most important means of communication in the society. It is the meeting place of the people. During the festival, the people visit their home living in other places and abroad and exchange their views, feelings, and experience with their family members and relatives and villagers and enjoy together for a moment discarding all the weal and sorrow. In fact, this communicates our friends and love for others. Really, it is the best means of communication to meet each other people living in the country and abroad.

¹⁰ . Boyka Todorova Supervisor Bente Sundsvold.,2016, LIVING THE FOLKLORE. MEMORY, PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION:THE CASE OF EMPI ET RIAUME,Department of Visual Cultural Studies, master thesis, p.44

Today, we use modern means of communication such as mobile phone and internet to send messages to our friends and any birthday, anniversary greetings. This modern means of communication is somehow good easy to communicate and has become economy and time to consume by those we can talk to our parents, relatives, and friends living abroad by not visiting their home. So to speak, this modern system has broken our homely traditional relation in every society and created a modern sophisticated means of communication. Thus, communication through traditional media helps in building a good relation better than modern means of communication. Kristin Kuutuma, an Estonian scholar says in his article entitled “Festival as communicative performance and celebration of identity” states, “a festival provides opportunities to observe the communicative system of the culture, conveyed through semiotically complex performance events. Although a festival enfolds large-scale social units, there obviously occurs small-scale social interaction communication, performance which constitutes face-to-face interaction.”¹¹

Bwisagu festival is the agriculture and seasonal festival of the Bodos which is started from 14th /15th April. Traditionally it was observed for seven days in a village. Now it is hardly observed for 3 to 4 days only. For last few decades this festival has observed by many Bodo nationalists organization such as All Bodo Students’ Union and other organizations by inviting many cultural troupes in the village and town. Now, the *Bwisagu* festival has transformed and performed on the stage gorgeously by spending a huge amount of money. Earlier it was just performance at the village level where there are no any formalities now this festival is performed on the stage distinct dress and musical instruments. In modern times, the Bodo people living in the town and cities are also started celebrating the festivals with to meeting and communicating with each other. The Bodos living in *Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai etc.* are also celebrated now.

Religious Discourse

This is another most important folk media of the Bodos. The traditional religion of the Bodos is known as ‘*Bathou*’, it consists of two words, ‘*Ba*’ means ‘five’ and ‘*Thou*’ meaning ‘deep’. Hence, ‘*Bathou*’ means ‘composition of five philosophical deep thoughts’. This religion is based on the ‘philosophy of five elements or the ‘five principles’. The five elements are *Ha* (Earth), *Dwi* (Water), *Bar* (Air), *Or* (Fire) and *Okhwrang* (Sky). The Bodos worship *Bwrai Bathou* as the supreme god. The word ‘*Bwrai*’ indicates most elderly man possessing power and knowledge. Once some of the Bodos gave up their religious discourse due to certain technical reasons such as animal sacrifices in the name of different deities during the *Kherai* and *Garja puja* but now most of the

¹¹. See, Kristin Kuutma’s *FESTIVAL AS COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE AND CELEBRATION OF ETHNICITY* (<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol7/festiva.htm>)

educated Bodos have come up modifying their traditional religion by replacing flower and fruits instead of animals. The Bodos are preaching this religion among the Bodos by organizing seminar and workshops. They published many prayers and research books on Bathouism. Earlier, most of the Bodos identified themselves as Hindu but now they have started identifying as *Bathou*. In the age of science and technology the Bodos should have been completely assimilated linguistically, religiously and culturally with the developed religious community and culture but most of the Bodos do not want to do it. They are trying to protect and live as other communities unitedly by holding their language, culture and religion is a matter of great concern and proud for the Bodos.

Use of Musical Instruments

Like other communities of India, the Bodos also exploited lots of folklore material to bring emergence among the Bodos since last 60 years. The traditional musical instruments like *Kham*, *Sifung*, *Serja*, *Jotha*, *Thorkha* etc. were being obsolete among the followers of Brahma, Christianity and other sects of Hindu religion. According to Kalicharan Brahma, a preacher of Brahma religion among the Bodos, "God cannot be pleased and invoked with the help of the musical instruments; religion is a spiritual and mental state of affairs. We don't need such kinds of musical instruments to pray the God. Consequently, the converted Bodos totally discarded traditional musical instruments because these are used in traditional *Bathou* religion. But now due to the ethnic movement, they have understood the necessity and value of these musical instruments for their cultural and ethnic identity and have accepted and used in their socio-cultural festivals.

Dress has a separate specific role in the maintenance of the cultural and ethnic identity of a community. Until a few decades ago, the converted Bodo people used to dress like Assamese and Hindu people. Women folk used to weave and wear *Chador mekhela* (Muga pat) and men folk used to wear *dhuti* and *gamocha*. In respect of the revivalism in Bodo dress, the ethnic Bodo organizations played a great role. They urged upon the Bodos to wear the traditional dress called *Dokhona*. It is seen that women who disobeyed their instruction were castigated. Even the activists mutilated the dress of the women who used to wear the non-Bodo dress. Now the Bodo people have started dressing *dokhona*, *phali* and *aronai*. But that is not true that the Bodos have completely discarded the Assamese and other dress. People still use the Assamese and other ethnic costumes at home and social functions specially in Kamrup, Sonitpur, Darrang, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar. But on some specific occasions and public gatherings called by the Bodo organization, they wear Bodo dress like *Dokhona* and *aronai*.¹²

¹² . Barmahalia.F. *Folklore and Politics With special reference to the Bodo*, Golden Research Thought Research Journal, ISSN No-2231-5063 Vol.1, Issue.XI/May 2012,p.4

Conclusion

Folk medias are purely natural that are performed in a close range of public gathering. It can draw our attention. Folk media and modern mass media are either dealt with communication and working together for disseminating information or any other the developmental tasks. Even the print media is also printed in their magazines, newspapers and other medias. In modern times many nationalist organizations of India and abroad organize a festival for exploring their cultural artifacts. In this regards Sathana Naithani says, "Politics of local cultural organization to the participation in the construction of the nation at a global scale, traditional folklore and folk artists are negotiating a new identity for not only survival, but for identity in the modern world."¹³ It is a matter of great satisfaction to say that the government of India started using the traditional folk media to make aware people about their language, culture, economics and political right during the freedom movement and still, it is using as a means for spreading awareness on education, agriculture, health, environment and other social issues among the common people. Therefore, the govt. of India has established bodies like The Song and Drama Division, Sangeet Natak Akademy, Lalit Kala Academy, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts and Culture, Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity etc. for documentation and exploration of these medias. The Bodos are also using their folk media items comprising traditional costume, folk song, folk dance and oral literature like myths, legends and other forms of narratives are being used for making aware their people. These medias have made understand their cultural value, ethnic identity and helped to strengthen nationalistic feeling and political demands.

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