

A Cultural Heritage of Muga and Silk of The Bodos: A Study

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Abstract: From the ancient times the Bodos are found to be one of the major aboriginal communities that settled early in the Assam in the northeastern part of India. Their language, custom, food habits, culture, religion, faith, dresses, etc. are somewhat different from that of other people live in that state. They are rich in tribal culture with different ethnic identity. Bodo people in Bodoland Territorial Region (Erstwhile BTC) speak the Bodo (Boro) language which is completely different not at all similar to the Assamese language. This language has Tibeto-Burmese origins and now it has become one of the official languages of Assam. The language has also an important root with the Sino-Tibetan language family which is now recognized as one of the Twenty-two scheduled languages in the Indian constitution. Bodo Sahitya Sabha, being an important literary organization has been working hard to protect and promote the Bodo customs, culture, language, and literature, etc in a wider perspective. As a result, after many struggles and agitations now the language has been recognized as a scheduled language. Bodo is one of the plain tribes living in Assam for a long time with a separate individuality, cultural identity, and linguistic differences with different dress habits. Muga and silk play very important role in their dress habits. This paper explores the importance of Muga and silk in their day to day life.

Introduction: The rearing of the Muga and Silk Cocoons for the manufacture of various Muga and Silk cloths seems to have been an indigenous culture of the Bodos, which had been beings maintained since the prehistoric time. Many centuries ago that the Vedic Aryans came to the North East India, the forefathers of the Bodos seemed to have been rearing Silk worms profoundly in this region. They used both kinds of threads, Silk and 'Eri' (fath O and Endi in Bodo respectively) for the manufacture of various cloths. The Bodos are very much fond of the Endis (Eris) and till now they use this cloth to a large extent. They rear the Silk worms on the Eri plants (the castor oil plants). It may be noted that the valley of the Brahmaputra of Assam was famous not for the Silken cloths primarily, but for the Eri cloths about 400 B.C.

Objectives of the study:

- To explore the roots of usage of Muga and Silk culture in Bodo dresses.
- To explain the importance of Muga and Silk in terms of Household economy.

Historical Overview:

Ancient Assam was known as early as the Ramayana and the Arthasastra for the art of Sericulture and the rearing of Silk Cocoons for the manufacture of Silk cloths. Assam was also known popularly as the exporting place of Silken cloths and Eri - cloths, as the inhabitants of this region produced sufficiently these cloths for

Commercial purpose and accordingly this region (Assam) was known as the 'Kosh-Karangam' or the Kosh-Karanbhumi; the land of the Silk and Eri production.

The feeding of the Silk worms on the castor oil plants is a tradition of the Bodos and they gave much importance on this industry in the ancient time when the varieties of cloths were not available as in the present time. They planted sufficient castor oil plants to feed the Silk worms and produced huge cocoons out of which Eri - threads were spun to weave their necessary cloths. This economic activity carried on by the Bodos and the art of sericulture most probably made the ancient Assam famous as the land of Eri and muga in the world.

Many of the distinguished writers are of the opinion that 'Pat' and 'Chinpatta' cloths were originated in China. W.I.I. Seoff also contends with such opinion that the Silk industry originated in China and later on extended to Assam and other parts of India. But it may be well inferred that before many centuries B.C. this vast area of the North East India with its some what name, like Pragiyotishpur, extended up to the valley of the Yang-tse-kiang and the Huang-Ho rivers of the North western China, which seemed to have been the original home of the Mongolian Kirata people. It is made a mentioned in the epic of Mahabharata that Bhagadatta (Brog Dao in Bodo) joined in the great war of Kurushetra with the Chinese soldiers. Those very Chinese soldiers of Bhagadatta in that epic - era might have been referred to the Bodo and other Maonglian people living in that aforementioned area. From these standpoints of view, pragjotishpur or its earlier Kirata-land was wide spread up to the valley of Yang-tse-kiang and Huang-ho rivers up to the epic era. Hence 'Pat' cloth or Silk cloth might have originated in that area of the Monglian people. Forming some of this tract as a centre of dispersion they began to spread into Indian and Tibat prior to 1000 B.C. The strain of the Mongolian Bodo is predominant in the valley of the Brahmaputra for which it has been called the reservoir of kirata or Mongoloid people in India. The most important Indo-Mongoloid people in Eastern India are the Bodos who form one of the mainbases of the present day population of these tracts and they mainly settled over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley extending westward into North Bengal districts of Koch Bihar, Rongpur and Dimapur. It is mentioned that India managed to have included this vast tract (now known as the North-Eastern region of India) peopled with the Bodos and other Mongolian people in its modern political boundary.

In fact, the Bodo and other groups of Mongolian people who originally manufactured the cloths of 'Pat' and Silk in the valley or the tract towards the North-Western China, introduced first in the valley of the Brahmaputra P.C. Choudhury is very correct in this matter as he writes- It is likely that the art of sericulture weaving, etc. was introduced into Assam at an early period by the pre-Aryans, Bodos and the allied tribes. Dr. Choudhury does not content that 'Pat' and Silk cloths were originated in China. Rather he contradicts "as the industry was mainly confined in the past to the Tibeto-Burman elements in Assam, it is not unlikely that along with their migration to Assam they introduced some idea from China, but the manufacture of Muga silk has been confined to Assam alone, and this land, like China, had a world wide reputation in the manufacture of varieties of Silk cloths, and had a profitable foreign trade in such articles. The names of the places, like Jonga, Donga etc. mentioned in the Arthasastra, associated with the industrial products of Kamrupa, which have a Bodo Origin, support this contention.

The Bodos used the 'Phath' (Jute, 'Marpat' in Assamese) and other tree-barkes as the threads to manufacture various cloths. The cloths made of 'Phata O' (Jute) were called 'Phath O si' by the Bodos. The word 'Pat' in Assamese and 'Patha' in Sanskrit may probably be derived from the Bodo word "Phath O si" or 'Phath O' (Phath O <Phath<Phat or Pat) meant not only the Jute product, but also other products of tree barks or fibers.

On the other hand, the word 'Pat' (tree leaves) as the worms are feed on tree leaves ('Pat' in Assamese) to have cocoons. but the fibers of cocoons seem like fabrics. The Bodos use to say any fiber of the fibrous barks of trees as 'Phath O' and its manufactured tread as 'Path O'- Khundaung' (Pat suta in Assamese) and its textured cloth as 'path O- Si (Path-Kapor in Assamese).

It appears; therefore, more authentic that the word 'pat' (Silk) has been derived from the Bodo word 'Phath O' and not from the Assamese word 'Path (leaves). The 'Phath O (Fibre) resembles to Silk. But the 'Pat' (leaves) does not carry such authentication.

hence, the phath O-cloth pat- cloth originated in ancient Assam like those 'Chinchi' or Silk, clothes of China. The classical writers, like of the Harsacharita and Arthasatra, etc., pointed out that the weavers of the ancient Assam had a reputation equal to those of China in the art of the rearing of ' Phath O' or Silk cocoons as well as in weaving of the finest phaths O or Silk textiles.

Qazim mentions that the Silk of ancient Assam was excellent which resembled to that of China.

On the other hand, S. G. Watt contends that the Silk originated in Manipur emphasizing that this place " was the home of the Silk-worms that the real mulberry Silk insect originated in Manipur and went from there into China:. In the words of Tavernier waters, the Silk of Assam was produced on trees and the staffs made of them were very brilliant.

The Bodos called the Silk cocoon 'Muga latha' and they fed the worms of 'Muga latha', in particular, on the leaves of castor oil-plants (Endi-Bilai in Bodo) and the art of rearing Endi - cocoons was much more earlier than to provide other Silk. The Bodos also fed the 'Muga - latha' (Muga - worms) on leaves of ' Miskuri' or Gongar - Thaishib' plant and 'Thasumbli" (a short plant having yarn which is taken by the Bodo and its leave resemple to simalu tree a Silk tree). Of course the Bodos use the yarn 'Phith O b' in case of the Endi - cocoon and its textured cloth as 'Endi - Si, which is usally white with a yellowish tinge, very warm. The mulberry silk cocoon and the silk cocoons fed on the leaves of 'Miskuri' or Gongar Thaisib' and ' Tha Sumli' plants have been known as 'Muga - Latha' among the Bodos. The 'Phith O b' (Endi- cocoon) is more soft and smaller in size tha Muga- Latha' (Muga cocoon). The latter is bit hard and rough, and obviouly the former is easier than that of the latter for spinning. The texture made of 'Muga Latha' is called 'Muga - Si (Muga - kapoor in Assamese, Muga - cloth) by the Bodos.

The word 'Muga' therefore, seems to have been derived from the Bodo word 'Muga - Latha'. From such analytical evidences, it proves that the manufacture of Endi (Eri) - cloth, Muga - cloth, and also the art of rearing of 'Endi cocoons and Muga, cocoons were the indigenous culture of the Bodos

and offer Mongolian groups of people, like Manipuris, Nagas, Khasis, etc. in ancient Assam.

To conclude it is wrong assumption that Assam is said to have borrowed ideas of manufacturing of Silk cloth and its industry from china, rather the manufacture of Muga - Silk has been confined to the former alone with a profitable foreign trade of the varieties of Muga - Silk cloths.

It is worth mentioned that the Arthasastra and the Harsacharitra give valuable evidence on the industry aspects of 'Endi' and 'Muga Silk' and their products in ancient Assam specially during the time of Bhashkara Varmana. Ancient Assam was, no doubt, an ancient commercial centre, which must have then contained a settlement of merchants who traded not only in Silk but also fabrics manufactured from fibers and fragrant substances. 21 In the words of R. M. Nath "it is they (Bodos) who first introduces the cultivation of Silk of different varieties in Assam in those ancient times, and Assam has, therefore, been famous for her Silk from time immemorial." 22 He also adds that "all the Hill Tribes of Assam are expert weavers of Silk of some form or other, and Muga and pat Silk are indigenous household arts in Assam" 23.

Conclusion: The king Bhaskaravarmana presented a cape called 'Ho-La-Li' made of course skin lined with soft down to the Chinese traveller Huen Tsang when the latter visited the palace of the former in Kamrupa 24 The word 'Ho- La-Li' or 'Halali' seems to have come from the Bodo word 'Hi (Cloth) and 'Lali'(Purple Tinged). Rajmahan Nath rightly remarks that 'Halali' is a Bodo word which means luster emitting and BhaskaraVarmana presented" a 'Halali' coat made with Bodo Silk" to Huen Tsang in the seventh century A. D. " 25.

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