



## LESSONS INSTEAD ARE IN NATURE STORED: A STUDY OF ETHNOBOTANY IN BODO ETHNICITY AS PORTRAYED IN RASHMI NARZARY'S *HIS SHARE OF SKY*

Gitanjali Baro

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Kokrajhar Government College

Kokrajhar, India

**Abstract :** Culture, a way of life is a well-defined set of social customs of a specific ethnic group of individuals at a certain time-period. It is an umbrella term and comprises the social conducts, dogmas, traditions, religions and festivals, languages, music and art, architectures, cuisines, histories, myths, legends, folktales etc. It acts as an epitome of an ethnicity in a certain ethnic group. The Bodos are one of the predominant ethnic groups in the North-Eastern part of India. They belong to the largest ethnolinguistic group in the state of Assam in India. The legacy of their traditional culture is rich and shares a sustainable relationship with the nature. In his article "Tradition Culture of Bodos and Its Changes" (2019), Hemanta Mochahary connotes that the "holistic cultural approach to reality finds its expression in the way of life of Bodos and their natural surroundings" and that the "idea of creation and its relation to man and nature is shown through their socio-religious life" (Mochahary, 2019, p. 9). The scientific study of the vegetation of a territory and its practical uses through the traditional knowledge of the territory's indigenous people and culture is known as Ethnobotany. In *Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany* (1996), Balick and Cox denote that the "study of interconnections between plants and people, including the influence of the plants on human culture, is the focus of the interdisciplinary field of ethnobotany" (Balick and Cox, 1996, i). Rashmi Narzary is a Sahitya Akademi Awardee author, columnist and a freelance editor. Her *His Share of Sky* (2012) is a collection of short stories. The narratives revolve around a ten-year-old boy named Barsau, set in a fictional Bodo village, Madlagami, situated on the banks of a river, Jwima, and located in the Kokrajhar district of Assam in India. This paper deconstructs Rashmi Narzary's *His Share of Sky* (2012) to analyse the sustainable relationship between the nature and the Bodo culture through the lens of Ethnobotany.

**Keywords:** Bodos, Ethnicity, Ethnic Group, Ethnobotany, Nature-culture.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Culture, a way of life is a well-defined set of social customs of a specific ethnic group of individuals at a certain time-period. It is an umbrella term and comprises the social conducts, dogmas, traditions, religions and festivals, languages, music and art, architectures, cuisines, histories, myths, legends, folktales, etc. It acts as an epitome of an ethnicity in a certain ethnic group. Bodo-Kacharis who are identified as Indo-Mongoloid race by S.K. Chatterjee in *Kirata-Jana Kriti, Indo Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India* (1974) are considered to have been migrated probably from the Central Asia some three thousand years ago. According to Rev. Sidney Endle "in feature and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type; and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race" (Endle, 1911, p.3). In his book, *The Background of Assamese Culture* (1948), R.M. Nath indicates that the Bodo-Kacharis migrated thousands of years ago from a country named 'Bod' meaning 'home' which was situated in the north of the Himalayas and west of China. He further denotes that "the inhabitants of various parts of the Bod country were known as *Bodo Ficha* or *Boddo cha*" (Nath, 1948, p.16). The words '*Ficha*' and '*cha*' are synonymous to the English word, 'children' and therefore, the words '*Bodo Ficha*' or '*Boddo cha*' can be translated as the children of the Bod country, "and were later known simply as the "*Boddo*" or the "*Bodo*" (Ibid).

Contemporarily, the Bodos are one of the predominant ethnic groups in the North-Eastern part of India. They are known with other names as well like Mech and Kachari. The legacy of their traditional culture is rich and shares a sustainable relationship with the nature. In his article “Tradition Culture of Bodos and Its Changes” (2019), Hemanta Mochahary connotes that the “holistic cultural approach to reality finds its expression in the way of life of Bodos and their natural surroundings” and that the “idea of creation and its relation to man and nature is shown through their socio-religious life” (Mochahary, 2019, p.9). This particular holistic cultural approach through liaison with nature in the ethnicity of the Bodo ethnic group is related to the paradigm of Ethnobotany. The scientific study of the vegetation of a territory and its practical uses through the traditional knowledge of the territory’s indigenous people and culture is known as Ethnobotany. In *Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany* (1996), Balick and Cox denote that the “study of interconnections between plants and people, including the influence of the plants on human culture, is the focus of the interdisciplinary field of ethnobotany” (Balick and Cox, 1996, p.i). The Nature-culture symbiosis in the cultural and socio-religious life of the Bodo people is represented in Rashmi Narzary’s *His Share of Sky* (2012), a collection of short stories. She is an eminent Sahitya Akademi Awardee author, columnist and a freelance editor. The narratives revolve around a ten-year-old boy named Barsau, set in a fictional Bodo village, Madlagami, situated on the banks of a river, Jwima, and located in the Kokrajhar district of Assam in India. Narzary exquisitely highlights the innocence of Barsau’s childhood in the form of episodes befalling throughout different seasons, starting cyclically from the winter to the monsoon season. As she narrates the incidents from Barsau’s childhood, the backdrop is painted with descriptions of the beauty of nature during different seasons. And with the vivid descriptions of the changes in nature during distinct seasons, she highlights the various nature-culture interactions in the traditional life of the Bodo people, which is also sometimes based on the transformation of seasons in nature. This paper, thus, deconstructs Rashmi Narzary’s *His Share of Sky* (2012) to analyse the sustainable relationship between the nature and culture of the Bodo people through the lens of Ethnobotany.

## II. ANALYSES OF THE TEXT *HIS SHARE OF SKY*

It is apparent that enthoagriculture is “intimately and inextricably linked with the society and livelihood of North East India” and it is intensely “interwoven with the tradition, culture and festivals of North East India” (Rai, 2018, p.35-36). The Bodos are traditionally dependent on their knowledge of the vegetation around them for various purposes like nutriment, religious, medicinal, apparel, fuel, habitation and numerous other prerequisites. Traditionally, they belong to an agrarian society and are largely dependent on the system of cultivation since time immemorial. The technique of agriculture is an age-old heritage of the Bodo people and it is believed that they “brought into North-East India, the technique of food production by plant cultivation, and domestication of animals” (Bordoloi et al., 1987, p.3). In *His Share of Sky* (2012), the family of Barsau belongs to an agrarian Bodo society. His family’s livelihood is totally dependent on the ethno-agricultural practice. In the chapter “His Share of Sky”, the narrator reveals that Jairam, Barsau’s father cultivated rice and “grew pumpkins and other vegetables, which Barsau sold by the highway, in the shade of a tamarind tree” (Narzary, 2012, p.106). The staple food of the Bodo people is *Awngkham* (steamed rice). Alongside steamed rice, other traditional food sources, which are also prepared from rice includes *jou* (a local rice-beer), *pitha* (a jaggery-laced rice cakes), *laru* (fritters made from sticky rice flour), *muri* (puffed rice), etc. In various episodes in *His Share of Sky* (2012), it is seen that Barsau and his family consumed steamed rice regularly indicating of the fact that the staple food of the Bodo people is the steamed rice. Sidney Endle, in his book, *The Kachari* (1911) mentions that agriculture “is the great industry” of the Bodo people and “the hot weather (*aus*) and the cold season (*sali*) varieties of rice” are being mainly cultivated (Endle, 2012, p.2). The narrator indicates that Barsau’s mother Onjaali would often roast small fishes and chillies, “grind them into a paste with salt and onion, to make a *bathwn* or chutney, which they would then have with rice for supper” (Narzary, 2012, p.26). In another occasion, it is seen that Barsau is “sent off to school, after a small meal of rice” by Onjaali (Narzary, 2012, p.58). When Barsau’s *Amai* (uncle) went to visit her daughter and son-in-law, he had taken a sack of rice as a token of love. To quote Narzary:

“Where are you taking the sack of rice, Amai?” “I am going to see my daughter and son-in-law, I can’t go empty handed can I?” (Narzary, 2012, p.9)<sup>[1]</sup>

And in return as a sign of gratitude his daughter had given him “two bottles of rice beer” along with other gifts (Narzary, 2012, p.21). The daily morning routine in Barsau’s home began by drinking salted tea with puffed rice. To quote Narzary:

“...Onjaali prepared her brew of tea and salt...to drink it along with the puffed rice which she set aside.” (Narzary, 2012, p.50)

And sometimes “when there was rice to spare, Onjaali made rice cakes for her sons” (Narzary, 2012, p.78). In rare days, she would buy some sesame and jaggery, “mix the two together and make fluffy, jaggery-laced rice cakes” (Ibid). Sidney Endle in his book, *The Kacharis* (1911), indicated that *jou*, rice-beer is the “national beverage” of the Bodo people. To quote Endle:

“Like many of the sub-Himalayan hill tribes, they undoubtedly have a certain weakness for what may be looked upon as their national beverage (Madh, *zu*), a form of rice-beer.” (Endle, 1911, p.2)

This rice-beer is a part and parcel of the Bodo socio-cultural life and it is consumed “especially at weddings, funerals” and on *Domasi* and *Bwisagu* festivals celebrated during the months of January and April respectively (Ibid). It is also consumed on “*awngkham gadan zanai*” celebration, which is termed as the “first eating of the new rice” by Endle, who also further indicated that it “usually takes place about the middle of December or a little earlier” (Ibid). *Jou*, rice-beer is fermented by using “the condiment known as *emao* which is composed of at least three and sometimes four, distinct elements” and one among them is “a jungle plant known as *bhetai*” (Endle, 2012, p.18). In *His Share of Sky* (2012), it is indicated that Barsau’s mother, Onjaali prepares *jou* at her home. The narrator denotes that on rare occasions, she fed her domesticated pig named, *Oma Gendra*, “the

leftover rice from which *jou*, rice beer, had been brewed and drained” (Narzary, 2012, p.117). Bodo people have many sources for nutriment, which they often collect directly from the vegetation surrounding their habitat, to name a few, like *dingkia* (shoots of fiddlehead fern), *meioyai* (bamboo shoots), *lai mwidru* (Chinese mustard), *maande* (water spinach), *lapha* (Chinese mallow), *thaso* and *tharun* (species of edible yam and arum), *thaso aathing* (colocasia stems), *fami bibar dalai* (water lily stems), *jwglowari* (*Blumea lanceolaria*), Indian rhododendron berries (thimfu), *mai jigab ni mwikhun* (rice-straw mushroom), etc. In the chapter “His Share of Sky”, it is seen that Onjaali collected vegetables like “arum stems, yam or whatever” she could find growing abundantly in her small yard (Narzary, 2012, p.117). In the same chapter, the narrator also mentions that one evening “the family sat down together to eat rice and fish”, which Onjaali had “cooked in a gravy of yam” (Narzary, 2012, p.126). The Bodo people also consume some wild plants like *usumai* (*Spilanthes paniculata*), *kanchincha* (*Leucas aspera*), *kuntainara* (*Solanum torvum*), *singri* (*Oxalis corniculata*), *maisundri* (*Houttuynia cordata*), etc., which consist ethnomedicinal properties. Ojha Bwrai, a Bodo shaman, often uses parts of such kinds of wild plants to make traditional medicines like *jarua muli*. Endle denotes that “Ojha or Ojha-Bura, who is generally armed with shell, cowries” is proficient “to deal with the ordinary ailments” (Endle, 1911, p.40). And therefore, it is seen that in *His Share of Sky* (2012) when Barsau suffered from high fever, someone “suggested an Ojha Bwrai”, a medicine man (Narzary, 2012, p.54).

Besides rice cultivation, the Bodo people also cultivate betel-nut and bamboo, which are consumed as well as used for different purposes and during various cultural and religious rituals. The narrator while describing one of the episodes about Barsau’s childhood innocence during monsoon season mentions about Rajen’s betel-nut grove. To quote Narzary:

“And they laughed out loud and hard all through the paddy fields and puddles and past Rajen’s

betel nut grove, until they reached home.” (Narzary, 2012, p.91)

In the story, the narrator points out that during the winter season, right after the time of harvesting was over, *jaatra-gaan*, a folk theatre of the Bodo people arrived at Madlagami village. It was staged at Barsau’s primary school and “along the back of the performing area, a barricade of dried betel-nut leaves, flung like clothes onto bamboo supports, was erected” (Narzary, 2012, p.42). The narrator also mentions that the theatrical group brought along the folk musical instruments like “the *siphung* and the *dhol*”, which is also known as *kham* among the Bodos (Ibid). All the eight folk musical instruments of the Bodos like “Kham”, “Siphung”, “Serja”, “Jotha”, “Jakhring”, “Gangona”, “Bingi” and “Thorkha” are used in various cultural and religious rites and “are made of bamboo or wooden materials” (Brahma et al., 2015, p.1). The *siphung* is a flute and it is “made from a particular bamboo called Owajlaw (*Bambusa pallida*) and Owathare (*Bambusa assamica*)” (Ibid). *Kham* is a drum and is made “from the trunk of *Alstonia scholaris*, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*, *Magnifera indica* or *Sterculia villosa*” (Brahma et al., 2015, p.2). They also use different species of wood and bamboo for making their houses, household tools, kitchenware, agricultural tools, hunting and fishing tools, weaving tools, to generate fuel, etc. One of the hunting devices known as *batul* (catapult), which is carved from a wood is mentioned in the chapter “Through Death and Back”. To quote Narzary:

“Barsau walked up behind Mergau and looked straight ahead through the V of the catapult.”

(Narzary 51)<sup>SEP</sup>

A traditional wooden stool of the Bodo people, which is known as *khamplai* usually made up of *gambari* wood (*Gmelina arborea*) is mentioned several times by the narrator. In the chapter “Ghost”, the narrator mentions that during winter seasons, Barsau’s grandfather “sat in the courtyard on his *khamplai*, a low wooden stool” by firewood to narrate oral legends and folklores to his grandchildren (Narzary, 2012, p.25). And while roasting small fish, potatoes, chillies and brinjals in the warm ashes, he would “narrate stories of his childhood and tell tales of creatures, real and mythical, spirits and men, as he gently stoked the fire” (Ibid). In another occasion, the narrator highlights that most of the Bodo people of Madlagami carried their “own stools and *khamplais* and sat in places that gave them a better view of the stage” of *jaatra-gaan* (Narzary, 2012, p.43). The narrator also has mentioned the traditional wooden weaving loom machine of the Bodo people. Barsau’s mother Onjaali weaves the traditional Bodo apparels like “*dokhnas* of bright yellow and red for herself and *phalis* of dark green for Barsau’s father, Jairam” at her home by using her weaving “loom, pulling the wooden shuttle in out of a layer of vertical yarns, once to her right and once to her left” (Narzary, 2012, p.78). The Bodo people construct houses “of the usual, type, one-storied only, the wall being of *ekra* reed or of split bamboo and the roof of thatch fastened by cane” (Endle, 2012, p.11). Each house consists of fence, “usually made of *ekra* reeds, jungle grass or split bamboo” (Ibid). The thatch roofing of the houses is made up of dry vegetation like the rice-straw. In the chapter, “Through Death and Back”, the narrator while mentioning about Barsau’s home, also highlighted “the smell of happy, sun-soaked, crisp thatch in winter” (Narzary, 2012, p.53). And in the chapter “His Share of Sky”, she explains that during monsoon season, the “drizzle fell through the opening in the thatch and landed, light yet cold, upon Barsau’s forehead, making him wake up and open his eyes” (Narzary, 2012, p.127). The narrator also mentions various other uses of the bamboo like “a foot-long bamboo wedge” was knotted at the end of the rope, whose other end was tied around the cow’s neck, and then it was “normally stuck into the ground while the cow grazed” (Narzary, 2012, p.93). In chapter, “Boil in the Butt”, Barsau’s *Anwi* (aunty) promises to give Barsau “a piece of bamboo stuffed with fermented fish” which is known as *napam* in Bodo language (Narzary, 2012, p.22). In “In the Well” chapter, it is seen that the well “stood just outside the bamboo gate leading to Barsau’s courtyard” (Narzary, 2012, p.98).

The ethnic religion of the Bodo people is *Bathou* and it has been “followed by the Bodos since antiquity” (Basumatary, 2018, p.93). Endle has denoted that *Bathou*, who is “pre- eminently the guardian of the family interests and family honour” and who is signified through “his living symbol, the *siju* (*hiju*) tree (*Euphorbia splendens*)”, which is often seen in the Bodo homestead “surrounded by a circular fence of the split bamboo” (Endle, 1911, p.36). The split bamboo is used to make *Bathou* altar. The *Bathou* followers in a village maintain “two *Bathou* altars, one in each family and the other at a conspicuous place for all the villagers” (Basumatary, 2018, p.100). And *Kherai Puja*, an important ritual related to *Bathou* is “performed at the *Bathou* altar of the village at least once in a year” (Ibid). The *Kherai sali* (area for the performance of *Kherai Puja*) includes the *Bathou* altar, which consists of *Sijou* tree planted right in the middle. There are various kinds of plants used during *Kherai Puja* and they are indispensable. Some of the important plants necessary during the ritual are “one *Sijou* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*), one *tulansi*

plant (*Ocimum sanctum*), three pieces of the *bijuli* bamboo with twig, on (rice powder), eighteen pairs of *Khankla* plant (a kind of sacred plant), eighteen pairs of *Mwkhna* or *Lwkhna* plant, four pieces of *Jati* bamboo, nine pieces of *Dubri* grass (a kind of sacred grass), a ring of gold, plantain leaves, two bunch of banana fruits, *goi phonaise* (areca nuts), *phatwi distase* (betel leaves)" and others (Singh et al., 2019, p.145). The folk musical instruments like *siphung* and *kham* along with *gambari khamplai* are also used during *Kherai puja*. In *His Share of Sky* (2012) in the chapter, "The Bald Little Toe", the narrator mentions that Barsau along with his friends went to "the *Kherai Puja* at Bhadiaguri village" (Narzary, 2012, p.60). In *The Background of the Assamese Culture* (1948), R.M. Nath denoted that it is the people belonging to Bodo ethnic group, "who first introduced 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" (Nath, 1948, p.15). Sericulture, thus, becomes an important ingredient for the ethnicity of the Bodo people. Bodo people are involved in the cultivation of silkworms, which are reared both in mulberry leaves (*Morus indica*) and castor leaves (*Ricinus communis*). The castor silkworm is "called 'eri' in Assamese, 'indi' in Bodo" (Boro, 2016, p.42). Endle in his book *The Kachari* (1911) mentions that the "fabric itself (eri cloth), so produced, is one of great value, especially for use in the cold season, being at once soft and warm as well as remarkably strong and durable" (Endle, 1911, p.22). In *His Share of Sky* (2012), the narrator mentions the *endi* shawls, especially while narrating episodes from the winter season. For instance, during winter, Barsau wrapped himself with "his soft, worn-out *endi* shawl, which his mother had woven" (Narzary, 2012, p.7).

### III. CONCLUSION

Bodo ethnic group shares a synergetic relationship with the nature. Their knowledge on the vegetation around their habitat is an essential part of their tradition. Their ethnobotanical knowledge also plays an important role in the process of the construction of their ethnicity. The culture of the Bodo ethnic group is rich, vibrant and multifaceted. The various cultural and religious practices of the Bodo people involve the elements of the nature, especially of the flora and its diversity. This nature-culture symbiosis in the tradition of the Bodo ethnic group has been signified in Rashmi Narzary's *His Share of Sky* (2012) in a very subtle way. She, by citing the minute details of Barsau's day-to-day experiences, has thrown light on the cultural and religious aspects integrated in the tradition of the Bodo ethnic group. And accordingly, she has also highlighted the ethnobotanical knowledge of the Bodo people and its application on their numerous socio-cultural and socio-religious practices. To quote Narzary:

"Lessons instead are in nature stored

You have to only know to take!" (Narzary, 2012, p.57)

### REFERENCES

- [1] Balick, Michael J. and Paul A. 2021. *Cox. Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- [2] Basumatary, Bakul C. 2018. *Bathou and Religious Transitions of the Bodos*. Kokrajhar: Words and Words.
- [3] Bordoloi B. N. et al. 1987. *Tribes of Assam: Part-I*. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute.
- [4] Boro, Indira. 2016. Sericulture and Weaving Industry of the Bodos: A Brief Discussion. *IMPACT:International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature*, 4(5):143-150. [SEP]
- [5] Brahma, Jahnovi et al. 2015. Traditional knowledge of musical instruments used by the Bodo tribes of Northeast India, BTC, Assam. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 5(5): 1-4.
- [6] Chatterjee, S.K. 1974. *Kirata-Jana Kriti, Indo Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society. [SEP]
- [7] Endle, Sidney. 1911. *The Kacharis*. London: Macmillan and Co. Limited.
- [8] Mochahary, Hemanta. 2019. Tradition Culture of Bodo and Its Changes. *Quest Journals: Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, 7(7): 9-13.
- [9] Narzary, Rashmi. 2012. *His Share of Sky*. Mumbai: Happy Squirrel.
- [10] Nath, R.M. 1948. *The Background of Assamese Culture* (1948). Shillong: A.K. Nath.
- [11] Rai, Prabat K. 2018. Ethnoagriculture in North-East India: Pros, Cons, and Eco-Sustainable Model. *Ethnobotany of India: North East India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands*. Eds. T. Pullaiahetal. U.S.A.: Apple Academic Press, 3: 35-54.
- [12] Singh, Oinam R. and Sushanta Narzary. 2019. Cultural and Village Life of the Bodos with Reference to Kherai Puja. *IMPACT:International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature*, 7(1): 143-150.