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The Traditional Housing System and Technology of the Bodos of Assam

Nijra Brahma

Ph. D Research Scholar, History Department, Bodoland University

Abstract: The Bodos are one of the major communities of Assam and they belong to the Indo- Mongoloid ethnic group of the Tibeto- Burman language family. They are one of the composite parts of the greater Assamese society and form a major tribe of Kokrajhar district. Bodos have their own rich culture, tradition, belief and customs. A traditional Bodo house is made with cane, bamboo, wood and other materials available naturally. Traditionally the Bodos construct three houses in different directions separated from each other but within a single campus. The three houses are known as *N'mano* (the principal house), *Bakhri* (the granary) and *Chhwrano* (the guest room). *N'mano* is constructed on the Northern side and is further divided into three parts, namely *Iching* (Kitchen), *Okhong* (Dining Hall) and *Khopra* (Master Bed Room). *Bakhri* is constructed on the Eastern side and *Bathou*, the traditional deity of the Bodos is placed in front of the *Bakhri*. *Chhwrano* is constructed in front of the homestead and the verandah of an *N'mano* is called *Khamchali*. The Bodos had certain rituals as well as processes of construction. This paper tries to explore about the traditional housing system of the Bodos, as well as rites and rituals related to their house building and the traditional housing technology of the Bodos.

Keywords: Housing, Bodos, Traditional, *Nomano*, *Ising*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bodos who are one of the sections of the Tibeto- Burman family are one of the earliest settlers in Assam. They are one of the important indigenous tribes of North- East India and they belong to a large ethnic group called Kacharies.ⁱ

Suniti Kumer Chatterji writes about them as...

*"The Bodos spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forms a solid bloc in North- eastern India were regarded as the most important Indo- Mongoloid in Eastern India and they at present forms one of the main bases of the present- day population of these tracts. Judging from the wide range of extension of their language, the Bodos appear first to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and extended west into North Bengal."*ⁱⁱ

The culture of the Bodos is rich and multifaceted. The Bodos follow certain rituals in connection to house building. Rev. Sidney Endle writes about the traditional houses of the Bodos as....

"The houses are of the usual type, one- storied only, the walls being of ekra reed or of split bamboo, and the roof of thatch fastened by cane. Each hut commonly contains two rooms, one for eating and the other for sleeping."

The houses of Bodo Kachari village were built closely together as seen by Rev. Sidney Endle and he gives vivid description.....

“A Street separates the two or more lines of houses which compose a village. One prominent feature in the typical Kachari village cannot fail to strike the attention of any casual visitor at first sight. Each house, with its granary and other outbuildings, is surrounded by a ditch and fence; the later usually made of ekra reeds, jungle grass or split bamboo etc. The ditch, some three or four feet in depth, surrounds the whole homestead, the earth taken from it being thrown up on the inner side, i.e., that nearest to the dwelling- house; and on the earth-works, some two or three feet in height, so thrown up firmly inserted the reeds or split bamboo work forming the fence itself, this latter often inclining outwards at a very obtuse angle; so that the ditch and fence are not easily surmounted from outside by would- be intruders. A Kachari village usually abounds in domestic live- stock of various kinds, e.g., ducks, fowls, goats, pigs, cattle etc. ; and it can hardly be doubted that fence and ditch above spoken of are largely intended to prevent the cattle, pigs etc from getting into the rice- fields at night, and so doing serious damage to the paddy and other crops.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The life style of the Bodos as well as their putting fences all around their homestead, which is a very common sight, speaks about their sense of privacy and esthetic beauty in putting up a residential house.^{iv}

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to study and document the traditional housing system and technology of the Bodos and to highlight the myths, beliefs and practices while building their houses and maintaining their homestead, as the traditional housing system and technology as well as, myths, beliefs and practices related to their housing system are at the verge of extinction.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out by conducting field survey by observing housing system and technology in the Bodo villages. People having knowledge about the traditional housing system and technology as well as rite and rituals related to the traditional housing system of the Bodos were consulted. And needed information was also collected from published works, journals and seminar papers.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Bodos follow certain myths, beliefs and practices while building their houses and maintaining their homestead.^v A traditional Bodo house is made with cane, bamboo, woods, mud, thatch and other naturally available materials.^{vi} In building houses the Bodos gives important to selecting plot and site for house building and construction.^{vii}

4.1 Selection of plot and site for the construction of a house: Bodos are very particular about selecting plot and site for construction of a house.

4.1.1 The Bodos have their own traditional ways to examine and select the plot of land-

In order to examine the plot of a particular land, the Bodos clean it with *khonta* (Spade), made of metallic blade with wooden or bamboo made handle. And the land is plastered with the mud and cow dung. After that , a glass of water taken in a brass glass, a pair of *tulsi belai* (Basil leaves), handful of rice

grains, pair of *goy* and *patai* (betel nut and leaves), flowers etc are placed on *thalir belai* (Banana leaf) and all these things are covered with a *don* (basket made of bamboo) and kept overnight. All the things are observed carefully next morning after removing the *don*. As far as the belief of the Bodos, if the things are found in the same position as they were left, then the plot of the land is considered suitable for building a house and if the things are found not in the same position as which they were left then the plot of the land is considered unsuitable for building a house. This system of plot selection is done particularly on Saturdays or Tuesdays.

Another method of selecting plot of land is through digging out the soil of that particular plot by about one yard deep and the soil is tested. The soil has to taste sweet and not bitter, salty or sour or else the plot of land is regarded as unsuitable for construction of a house.^{viii}

And again there is another system of selecting plot of land for construction of a house and this method of plot selection is done during winters. A Male person stands at the plot in the evening, and if he feels hot at that time, the plot is considered unsuitable for constructing houses.

4.1.2 The Bodos have their own traditional ways to examine and select site for construction of a house:

The Bodos are believers of certain myths, they also believe in some *mwdai lama* (God's way) which are unseen by normal human eyes. And they further believe blocking the ways of God and Goddess by constructing houses will make them angry. And this could lead to many problems in the family residing there like health issues, financial issues, unhappiness among the family members etc. Therefore, the Bodos seek the help of an *oja* (Chant man), whom they believe can see the *mwdai lama*, when taken to the site of selected plot of land. The *oja* then performs *puja* and select the place where houses can be built by demarcating with the help of *owa bera* (bamboo fence). The Bodos regarded building houses outside the demarcated *owa bera* as unsuitable. And the traditional houses are built in such a way, where the *n'mano* (principal house) stands in the north of the compound, *bakhri* (Granary) to the east and *chhwrano* (Guest room) to the west.^{ix}

4.2. Construction of the houses by the Bodos:

The Bodos have great artistic skill and that can be seen in the construction of their houses. The Bodos used cane, bamboo, wood, mud, thatch etc for constructing their houses. The typical Bodo traditional household generally consists of four houses, on four sides of *cisla* (inner yard) and *khanta* (front yard in front of the southern house) The Bodos built *bakhri*, *goli*, *n'mano*, *chhwrano*, *bathou* and other buildings etc.

4.2.1 Bakhri (Granary) and Goli (Cowshed)

The two most important houses of the Bodos are *bakhri* (Granary) and *goli* (Cowshed) constructed in the east and in the southeast corner respectively. The importance of the *bakhri* and the *goli* can be seen in a Bodo folk song:

Daokha habnai noawlai,

*Sila habnai noawlai,
Angkhau dabilai apha gosai,
Mai bakhri nunaiao,
Mosau goli nunaiao,
Angkhau bilaihor apha gosai,
Angkhau bilaihor apha gosai^x.*

In English translation: “Don’t give me in marriage to a house where the crows and kites can easily enter, O my father God; give me in marriage to a house where the granary and the cowshed are easily visible, O my father God.”

The Bodos construct *bakhri* in the form of *baisang*, having only one entrance without any windows. The platform of the *bakhri* is made of *oua* (bamboo) or *dongpang* (timber) which also protect paddies from floods and dampness and platform is three to four feet high above the level of the ground. The entrance of the *bakhri* is kept closed with knotted bamboo mat and it is kept lock with the support of a long bamboo pole, which is tied to the bamboo mat with the help of *raiding* (cane) or *theuol* (bamboo rope). If the size of the *bakhri* is small, the pillars of the *baisang* is made by placing *oua burka* (bamboo poles), where else bigger *bakhri* is made by placing *dongpang* (wood). The wall of the *bakhri* is made of split bamboo or reed, plastered with mud and cow dung, which the Bodos consider as sacred and to keep away the insects. The roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raidang* (cane) or *theuol* (rope made of split bamboo). The sides of the floor of the *bakhri* is extended in all directions and it is used for keeping household things such as, *kada* (bamboo basket), *sandri* (sieve made of bamboo), *songrai* (bamboo platform) etc and the extended part is called *bakhri danggur*. The Bodos use *bakhri* to store paddies and the lower part of the *bakhri* which is hollow is used by them to keep *bon* (fire wood), agricultural items like *nangal* (plough), *jungal*, *khodal* (digging hoe), *kontha* (spud), *dangan* (leveler) etc. The steps of the *bakhri* are made of *oua* (bamboo) or *dongpang* (wood) in the shape of ladder or sometimes the Bodos placed old *ural* (mortar) upside down where the Bodos steps on and go inside the *bakhri*.

Goli (cowshed) is constructed with wooden pillars, without wall and roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raiding* (cane) or *theuol* (rope made of split bamboo). The *goli* is kept open so that the sunlight can reach in every nook and corner, so to keep the *goli* clean and dry. The *goli* is cleaned every morning. To keep the *goli* free from mosquitoes to protect the cows, smoking system is arranged in the *goli* during the evening.^{xi}

The *bakhri* (granary) and the *goli* (cowshed) indicate the economic condition of the Bodo family.^{xii}

4.2.2. *N'mano* (The Principal house)

The Bodo traditional house is one- storied, with the walls being made of *ekra* reed or of split bamboo, plastered with mud and cow dang, and the roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raidang* (cane) or *theuol* (rope of bamboo split).^{xiii} The floor is plastered with mud and cow dang. *N'mano*

(Principal house) is built on the northern side of the homestead and it stretches from the west to the east. *N'mano* is divided into three parts namely, *iching* (Kitchen), *okhong* (Dining hall) and *khophra* (Master Bed room), with provision of a door facing to the south.^{xiv} The *n'mano* has only one main door and passage inside from one room to another.^{xv} The first room is called *khopra* and it is used for sleeping, the second room is called *akhong* and it is used for dining and *iching*, the third room is used for cooking.^{xvi} The door of the dwelling house is made of woven bamboo mat and the lock is made of *oua* (bamboo pole) called '*pala thokon*', which is tied to the woven bamboo mat with the help of *patw durung* (jute rope) and twisted from both inside and outside to lock.

There is a sense of holiness and sanctity attach to the *n'mano* as the altar of the chief God of the Bodos- *Bathou Borai* and *Mainao Buroi* are placed in the *ishing*.^{xvii} And the altar is prepared with earth in about two inches in height and one and half feet in length. The Bodos believe that any food before taken by them should be offered to the creator. So, they offer a little quantity of every item of their daily food to the *Bathou Borai* and *Mainao Buroi*. Near the altar of the *ishing*, the Bodos keep an earthen jar known as *maihando*, where they keep two pieces of round stones along with *mairong* (rice grain) as the symbols of *Bathou Borai* and *Bathou Burai* or *Mainao*, the Goddess of wealth. And the cook has to first acknowledge to the *maihando* by touching it before taking out the *mairong* (rice) for cooking. Anybody who is not the member of the family are not allowed entering into the *ishing* and people from different village or non- Bodos are not allowed to enter into the *n'mano*. Traditionally, the Bodos believe that the owner of the house is bound to offer a chicken to the *Bathou Borai*, if any outsiders happen to enter into the *n'mano*, and on not doing it, the Bodos belief that some calamity may occur to the owner of the house.^{xviii}

4.2.3. *Chhwrano* (Guest room)

Chhwrano, the guest house is built in front of the homestead^{xix} and the walls are made of *ekra* reed or of split bamboo, plastered with mud and cow dang, and the roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raidang* (cane)or *theuol* (rope of bamboo split)^{xx}. The floor of the house is plastered with mud and cow dang. This room is also used as dwelling house for young boys.^{xxi}

4.3. *Bathou* and other buildings

The traditional religion of the Bodos is *Bathou*, and the altar of about a foot high is built at the north- east corner of the *cisla* (courtyard), in front of the *bakhri* (granary) and parallel to the *ishing* (kitchen).^{xxii} The *Sijau* plant (Euphorbia Splenden) is planted at the altar and towards a little south of the *sijau* plant a *tulsi* plant (Basil) is planted. There is a fencing of narrow pieces of bamboo split with nine pairs of small bamboo posts around the altar. Again the narrow pieces of the bamboo split are twisted five times around the nine pieces of bamboo posts. The members of the Bodo family worship the *Bathou Borai* and the *Bathou Buroi* every evening by lighting *jewari* (earthen lamp) on the altar and

the this complete altar is called *Bathou*, where the *Bathou Borai* and *Bathou Buroi* is represented by the *sijau* plant and *tulsi* plant respectively.^{xxiii}

The Bodos domesticate live- stock of various kinds like ducks, goats, chicken, pigs, cows and buffalos, and they built *hangsw gogra*, *bwrma gogra*, *dao gogra*, *oma gondra*, *mwswo goli* and *mwisw goli* respectively to keep these animals but small in size. *Hangsw* (duck), *bwrma* (goat), *dao* (chicken), *oma* (pig) are kept near family dwelling- house but *mwswo* (cow) and *mwisw* (buffalo) are kept far away from family dwelling- house^{xxiv}. *Hangsw gogra*, *bwarma gogra* and *dao gogra* are built in *bwsang* form having only one entrance without any windows, one and half to two feet high above the level of ground. Both *dongpang* (timber) and *oua* (bamboo) are use in building *hangsw*, *bwarma* and *dao gogra*. The walls are made of *ekra* reed or of split bamboo, plastered with mud and cow dang, and the roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raidang* (cane) or *theuol* (rope of bamboo split). If the platform is made of split *oua* (bamboo), then it is plastered with mud and cow dang, but if the platform is made of *dongpang* (wood) then it is left as it is^{xxv}. *Oma* (pig) is rear by each and every Bodo family and pigs are treated to be important part of the Bodo society.^{xxvi} The Bodos built *oma gondra* with bamboo fence, where the bamboos are fastened to each other by *raidang* or *theuol* and the roof is made of *thuri jigab*, fastened by *raidang* or *theuol*. *Mwisw* (buffalo)*goli* is built by the Bodos in a similar way as they built their *mwswo goli* (cow shed), with wooden pillars, without wall and roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raiding* (cane) or *theuol* (rope made of split bamboo) and it is built without wall so that sunlight can reach every corner.

The Bodos also construct *bon* (fire wood) *dwingra* for the purpose of keeping fire woods. It is constructed in *bwsang* form, one and half to two feet in height above the level of ground with *oua* or *dongpang*, the roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raidang* (cane) or *theuol* (rope of bamboo split) and the platform is made of *oua* or *dongpang*.^{xxvii}

The weaving is an integral part of Bodo household. The *ishan* (The weaving loom) are installed either in the backyard or in the inner yard by the side of the verandah.^{xxviii} The *ishan* is built with pillars made of wood or bamboo or areca nut, without wall and roof is made of *thuri jigab* (thatch) fastened by *raiding* (cane) or *theuol* (rope made of split bamboo).

4.4. The Belief relating to the *cisla* (Courtyard)

The Bodos belief in keeping their *cisla* clean and pure and in maintaining the sacredness of the *cisla*, the Bodos follow certain restrictions such as:

- 4.4.1. A man must not cross the *cisla* with an axe, a spade and a bamboo on his shoulder and a woman must not cross the *cisla* with a pitcher full of water to avoid problems in the family.
- 4.4.2. A dog moving along by dragging its buttock in the middle of the *cisla* is believed to bring misfortune to the family.
- 4.4.3. When a *daoka* (Crow) and a *sigun* (Vulture) drop a piece of meat or bone of an animal in the *cisla*, it is believed to be a sign

misfortune and if a *sigun* vomits in the *cisla*, it is believed to be fortunate for the family.

4.4.4. When a fox cries in the *cisla*, then it is believed to bring some calamity in the family.

4.4.5. And if a male member of the family walks in the morning through the *cisla*, which has not, been broom yet, it is believed to shorten the life span of the person. So, in every Bodo household the female members clean the *cisla* with a broom in the morning before the male members of the family get up etc.^{xxix}

5. CONCLUSION

The Bodos have rich cultural heritage. They have their own culture, tradition, belief, practices and customs, which can also be seen in their construction of houses. Traditionally, the Bodos built their houses of cane, bamboo, wood, thatch and other naturally available materials and are of one- storied. A typical household of the Bodos consists of four houses, on four sides of *cisla*. The traditional Bodo housing system consist of *nomano* containing *khopra*, *okhong* and *ising*, *bakhri*, *chhwrano*, *hangsw gogra*, *bwrma gogra*, *dao gogra*, *oma gondra*, *mwswo goli* and *mwisw goli*, *bon dwingra*, *ishan*, *bathou* etc . The Bodos before the construction of the Houses gives important to plot selection and site selection. And the Bodos traditionally gives important to the position of the homestead and maintenances of the sanctity of the *cisla* for their own well being. But at present due to the impact of modernity the traditional housing system and technology of the Bodos and the myths, beliefs and practices while building their houses and maintaining their homestead, are at the verge of extinction. Hence, there is an urgent need to preserve the traditional housing system and technology of the Bodos and also to document the myths, beliefs and practices while building their houses and maintaining their homestead for a great interest.

End Notes

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^{vi} *Ibid*, p. 25.

^{vii} Brahma, Dr. Kameswar, 2009, *A Study in Cultural Heritage of the Boros*, Guwahati, Bina Library, pp. 40-41.

^{viii} Brahma, Dr. Kameswar, 2010, *A Study of Socio- Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos*, Kolkata, Panti Pustak, pp. 45-46.

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- ^{xii} Devi, Premalata, 2007, *Social and Religious Institutions of Bodos*, Guwahati, Geophil Publishing House, p. 81.
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- ^{xiv} Boro, Dr. Anil, 2010, *Folk Literature of Bodos*, Guwahati, N. I. Publications, p. 12.
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- ^{xvi} Brahma, Sekhar, *Op. cit*, p. 18.
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- ^{xix} Brahma, Sekhar, *Op. cit*, p. 18.
- ^{xx} Endle, Rev. Sidney, *op. cit*, p. 11.
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- ^{xxvii} Brahma, Bhanu Rani, *Op. cit*.
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