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PRINT MEDIA AND FOLKLORE: A STUDY ON BODOS NATIONALISM OF ASSAM

Faguna Barmahalia

Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi

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ABSTRACT

The Bodos belong to Mongloid stock of Tibeto-Burman group and are one of the major tribes of Assam. Though they did not have written history they have folklore. Many historical and folklore materials are found from the writing of the eminent scholars like Rev.Sidney Endle, Suniti Kr.Chatterjee,Bishnu Presad Rabha,Promod Ch,Bhattacharjee and so on. Since the early part of the 20th century the educated Bodo youths started re-organizing their society and founded the nationalist organization with a view to re-unifying the scattered Bodos living different parts of Assam. As a result, the people came to know about their glorious past and tried to preserve and promote their language and folklore. Thereafter, they started collecting the Bodo folklore and publishing the Bodo magazines, books and even they wrote the script for drama on the Bodo legends, Kings and performed dramas in different places of Bodo dominated areas. Now they have revived their historical folksongs, folktales and legends, and reconstructed their history and politics only through the print medias. The paper tries to highlight the exploration of Bodo folklore through print media. Secondly, the role played by the print media in respect of the reconstruction of Bodo identity politics in the present times is to be studied.

Methodology: This is a textual study of print media texts like Assamese, English, Bodo books, magazines, newspapers and souvenirs, advertisements.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bodos are the son of the soil in Assam and one of the scheduled tribes in India. Actually, different names were designated to the Kachari (Bodo) in the history such as Kirata, Asura, Mlecha etc. in the ancient and in medieval history of Assam. In course of time, the Bodo people had to lose their kingdom due to certain reasons. However, before the establishment of British rule in India the existence of the Bodos and other tribal societies were on the verge of extinction. Frankly speaking, these people were quite unaware of their societal dignity, pride and honour. It can be said that the new conditions created by the British Government changed the traditional mindset of the people of the Bodos; it was not only among the Bodo but also of all sections of the people of India. In this regard, B.Brahma observes "Under new liberal intellectual conditions set by the British rule, the Bodo people developed the sense of self respect, identity consciousness of their society and soon they started to reassert their community identity movement. They started to reassert their identity by reviewing and reconstructing their lost history, culture,

tradition, custom, language etc." ¹ In fact, the Bodo people of Assam started taking education through either Assamese or Bengali medium schools. Thereafter, they came to know about their past history and became aware about their language, culture and folklore. It is certainly true that the role and contribution of the British and Missionaries had helped the Bodos to re-think and re-establish the dying society once again. Sankardeva was the first Hindu saint who tried to initiate all the people irrespective of caste, creed, sex, language in his Neo-Vaishnavism in the latter part of 15th century and early part of 16th century in Assam. Due to acceptance of Neo-Vaishnavism, the Bodos gave up their rich language, culture and some oral traditions and assimilated linguistically and culturally with the Assamese speaking Hindu society. Now, most of the converted Bodos of Assam identified themselves as the Koch. C.Sarmah says, "The process of assimilation though may not be harmful or the surface is not often beneficial. In the context of India, assimilation invariably means Aryanisation and in Assam it means transformation of the Bodo converts into Assamese speaking Hindus. Conversion to Hinduism and subsequent

¹ .Brahma,B.*Social Mobility from Tribalsim to Indianism*,2008,p.235

*Corresponding author: **Faguna Barmahalia**

Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi

assimilation had negative effects on the Bodo society. The most immediate was the disintegration of the Bodo people into a number of social castes like Koch, Saraniya, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari etc. In the Hindu hierarchy the Koch occupied the highest position among the Bodo converts and the rest at the first stage of the conversion. When conversion greatly reduced the Bodo population, it on the contrary helped the Assamese to increase their population by adding the Bodo converts into their fold. That is evident from the fact that the Hinduised Bodo people were presented as membership of the Assamese communities in the successive census reports. This was the great disadvantage for the Bodo people particularly in the field of politics.² There are also Brahma and Christianity people among the Bodos. But they did not assimilate linguistically and culturally like the Neo-Vaishnavite Bodo people. When the Brahma Dharma Movement was started by Kalicharan Brahma, the process of conversion to Neo-Vaishnavism was also going on. According to Chandan Sarmah "the emergence of Brahma movement took the Bodos farther away from Neo-Vaishnavism as it opened up an alternative route for the Bodos to enter into the fold of Hinduism."³ This movement gained a new dimension and developed identity consciousness among the Bodos of that time. The formation of the Bodo Satra Sanmilani in 1919 and the formation of Tribal league in 1933 and the origin of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in the year 1952 are landmarks in the history of the socio-cultural movement of the Bodo people. The language and literary movement launched by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Brahma Dharma movement created an identity consciousness and intellectual environment in which the All Bodo Students Union and Plain Tribal Council of Assam came into being in the year 1967. The present achievement of the Bodo society in the field of language, literature, education, culture, economics and politics is the result of relentless efforts of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, All Bodo Students Union and other allied organizations. The task of bringing awareness among the Bodo community by the Bodo nationalist organisations is commendable. The present Bodo society got reborn only for the role and contribution of several dedicated, self less persons of the nationalist organizations, otherwise the Bodos would have been completely assimilated to the Assamese society.

Before proceed to discuss about the printed folklore and Bodo identity politics, it is necessary to understand "What is folklore, how it is related to society, nationalism and politics". Folklore comprises traditional myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, folk customs, folk dances, folk arts, folk beliefs, folk medicines, folk instruments, folk music, folk songs, folk metaphor names, i.e. the nicknames and place names etc. Moreover, within the ambit of folklore falls games, gestures, symbols, political jokes, folk etymologies, folk recipes, embroidery, design, houses of traditional type, even the street vendors cries, sounds, lused to summon animals or give commands. These genres are the part and parcel and identity marker of the society.

I would like to draw kind attention in respect of using folklore as a tool in different ends including political purposes. During Chinese revolution and when African states were fighting for their political self determination folklore was systematically used to reconstruct their past history and mobilize the minds of the people. While conveying the aspirations for cultural independence, folklore has been instrumental in the establishment of modern nations in many European countries also. Since 19th century onwards folklore is being used for strengthening the ethnic and nationalistic ideas of the people. The relationship between culture and ethnic identity was always close and effective.

Role of Printed Folklore Towards Political Movement in the World At a Glance

Some leaders used the elements of folklore for better understanding of the people's life and their world view. Because it conveys messages, the information about events of the past, but the intention on them may not be directly historical. Myths and legends have been used to promote ethnic unity, regionalism, nationalism and anti-nationalism. The first national state to make political capital of folklore studies was the National Socialist Government of Hitler. During 1930's a massive literature of folklore was published in Germany, documenting the Nazi concept of a *Herrenvolk* united by mystical bonds of blood and tongue, culture and tradition.⁴ By the Nazi folklore was used to the fullest possible extent to serve the purpose of nationalism, politics and ideology, in that period folklore was the main means to restore the values of the traditional society. Hitler wanted to preserve their folklore with its widest possible meaning to serve the greatest end it itself. Folklore was re-shaped to adjust their national and political situations. In this regard Christa Kamenetsky's observes, "The Nazis' interest in folklore is well reflected in a number of publications sponsored by the Party between the years 1933 and 1945. Alfred Rosenberg's National Socialist Kulturgemeinde issued a flood of literature on Nordic-Germanic folklore and other related "folkish" issues. Its two major journals, *Kunst und Volk* and *Volkstum und Heimat* were primarily dedicated to traditional folk art, Nordic-Germanic symbols, and folklore derived from the German peasant ancestors. At the same time, both journals reflected the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, either by their peculiar interpretations of the subject, or by the insertion of comments or entire articles related to ideological issues. To what extent these journals reached the public may be gathered from the fact that by the end of 1936 *Kunst und Volk* already counted 15,000 subscribers.⁵ Shortly before the war, Rosenberg issued still another folklore journal, more or less as a rival to the professional *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* published by the German Folklore Association. In contrast to the increasingly shabby appearance of the professional journal, which had managed to save its integrity, Rosenberg's journal was printed on very expensive paper and could afford to make use of the

⁴ Ibid,p.16

⁵ . Quoted from Christa Kamenetsky's *Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany* , Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 85, No. 337 (Jul. - Sep., 1972), p.222

² Sarmah, C.*Religion and Social Change:Neo-Vaishnavism vis a vis the tribal Groups in the Assam Valley* in *Religion and Society in North East India*,ed.D.Nath,2011,p.130

³ Ibid,p.132

finest reproductions of pictorial materials.⁶ With the manipulation of multi party political system in Turkey in 1945, the moderate and secular era of Atatürk was slowly reversed. A small ivory of ultra-nationalist Islamic started influencing the folklore studies further. The folklore conferences became a part of political and ideological activities of the government. Folklore was manipulated for political and nationalistic purpose in Turkey. In Ireland the drive for cultural nationalism proceeded and fed the movement for political independence. Famous Irish literary personalities used folk traditions in poems and plays. They fought for the revival of the Gaelic tongue and heritage against the shifting cloak of English culture.

The role of print media towards nationalism cannot be ignored during the freedom movement in India. Many writers of the national revival were the collectors of folklore. It has to be said that during the Indian freedom movement the newspapers took a vital role in bringing awareness about their country to fight against the British. In this regard, A. Desai observes: "The printing press played a big role in the History of people in their national awakening, in their progressive ideas and in their being drawn as active forces into great social, political and cultural movements."⁷ The press published against the British administrative policies and cultural imperialism that were dangerous for surviving the Indian people. The British missionaries tried to preach Christianity among the Indian people disclosing different folk beliefs and ill practices prevalent in Indian society. But the Indian press wrote and published by appreciating Indian rich folklore and showed the need of the reformation of traditional evil social system like child marriage, untouchability, prostitutions, devdasi etc.

Growth and Development of the Bodo Print Media

Before the advent of printing technology all were transmitted orally. Oral culture was all that existed. After the advent of printing culture the world gets many advantages to put down their thinking, working, feeling and so on. Now, it has transformed from the spoken language to written words. It is very unfortunate to say you that the Bodo print media is of recent origin. The *Bibar* was published in 1920 as the mouthpiece of the Bodo Satra Sanmilon. Prior to this *Boroni Phisa O Aiyen*, (manuscript) a book on traditions and customary law was published in 1915, Habraghat Bodo Satra Sanmilon. Setting up of primary and middle schools in Bodo dominated areas, publication of Bodo magazine for the spread of knowledge and creative writings among the Bodo boys and girls were the adopted resolutions of the Bodo Maha Sanmiloni. It is to be mentioned here that the Bodos don't have their own script. So, the Bodo leaders had to think over the use of script during this period. The British and Missionaries used the Roman script to write the Bodo language. As the Bodo leaders took education through either Assamese or Bengali they experienced about using their scripts. It was hoped that they used Bengali and Assamese script in place of Roman in publishing *Bibar* magazine. Thereafter, the Bodo authors started writing with the Assamese script and later Assamese script had been used to write the language and continued till

1974. Since 1975, Devanagari script has been using to write the Bodo language.

During the pre-independence, there were few printed magazines and books such as *Boroni fisa o ayen* (manuscript), 1915, Habraghat Bodo Satra Sanmilon, under the editorship of Gangasaran (Das) Kachari, *Bibar* (manuscript) 1920, *Bibar*, 1924, 1925, (the mouthpiece of Bodo Satra Sanmilon), printed 6 issues only in tri-lingual-Bodo, Assamese and Bengali were published under the editorship of Satich Chandra Basumatary. After the independence the Bodo Sahitya Sabha was founded in 1952. There were few books and magazines that were published during this period. On other hand, medium of instruction was founded in 1963 at lower primary level, in 1968 at Secondary level, 1971 at High School level. So, they had to write and publish more books concerning to the curriculum.

All Bodo Students' Union and Plain Tribal Council of Assam were also formed in 1967. In respect of awaking the Bodos and tribals of the organization inspired their people to do for the development of their language, literature and culture. So, the leaders of that time published newspaper and books on Bodo languages focusing the importance of the exploration and preservation of their rich folklore. The *Bonjar*, (torch light) the ever first weekly newspaper of the Bodos, weekly newspaper was published in 1970 by Bihuram Boro who was a General Secretary of Bodo Sahitya Sabha but this news papers published but did not last long. A few anthologies of novel, short story, poem, biography were published. Thus, the print media play a very important role in the building of a society, but by and large all of them contributed to the Bodo society, language and culture.

In 1984, the Bodo language got the status of associated language specially in the Bodo dominated areas in Kokrajhar and Udalguri. After the Bodo land movement tremendous publications are found. In this phase, some books on novel, short story, essay and criticism, daily and weekly newspaper, newsletter, travelogue and so on were being published. Apart from these, there are some books on folklore were also being published. Magazine, News paper, Book, Souvenir, Leaflet, Poster are the main categories of the print media of the Bodos. With the emergence of ethnicity and identity political movement among the different ethnic groups in north east India including the Bodos, folklore has been used as an instrumental to mobilize the minds of the people and it has been playing a significant role in promoting the ethnic consciousness and in strengthening the sense of cohesion.

It is true to say that the tribal groups of Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto Burman origin have not been properly included in the written history of India. Most of the tribal people did not have scripts for writing their languages and run their daily life affairs by the oral word and action. They possess no written records and therefore do not qualify for the inclusion in history. It is only recently that reconstruction of the historical past of such peoples has become the concern of the historian in India. Like them the Bodos have no proper written history. The available history writing since the Ahom period and literary evidences such as Epics, Puranas and Royal genealogies contain some references to the Bodos who have been named to as Kirata, Asura, Danava, Mlecha and so on. The Bodo identify themselves with the Kachari kings who rules over the entire Kamrup or ancient Assam. According to scholars, folklore is

⁶ ibid p.222

⁷ Desai, A.R. 2011, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Prakashan Ltd; 6th edition, p.222

the potent sources of history as this contain unwritten messages preserved by generation to generation. It is on the basis of folklore that African people have constructed or reconstructed their history. Such construction or reconstructions are now being made possible with the help of folklore and the role of a folklorist particularly a specialist in oral history is becoming central in this endeavour. In respect of Bodos revival, C.K Sarmah writes thus—"The emerging class of litterateurs among the Bodos in the first quarter of twentieth century made attempt to infuse consciousness and confidence among the common Bodo in order to establish themselves as a homogenous group deserving sufficient attention. This was necessary as the Bodos living in different parts of Assam in the first half of the century were not conscious of their common ethnic and historical background despite the fact that they had their own kingdoms, ranged from the full statehood of the Dimacha Kachari to those confined to much smaller localities till 1850's. The attempt of the Bodo middle class to have employment and political power in the political set up of Assam inclined them to take recourse to traditional narratives like myths, folk songs, legends etc. These genres of Folklore were of tremendous use to construct their fragmented history and a rich legacy of heritage. And this in turn became helpful in assertion of their identity. The legendary heroes and heroines like *Ada Basiram*, *Daoharam Jwhwlao*, *Daimalu*, *Seubar*, *Jaoliya Dewan*, *Swmdwn*, *Tularam*, *Gambari Sikhla*, *Birgosri Sikhla* are very popular among the Bodos."⁸ In fact, the Bodos are also using their folklore items comprising their traditional costume, folk song, folk dance and oral literature like myths, legends and other forms of narratives are being used for supporting their movement. In this regard, Anil Boro says, "The elements of Bodo Folklore as well as their oral history embedded in the oral tradition have proved to be effective assets of the ethic and cultural identity of the Bodos. These assets have strengthened their nationalistic cause and prolonged demand for autonomy."⁹

There are some folk songs or narrative tales of the Bodos which include the stories of *Ada Bachiram*, *Daoharam*, *Jwhwlao Dwimalu*, *Cheobar*, *Swmdwn*, *Jaoliya Dewan*, *Gambari Sikhla* etc. These songs and narrative recount the history of the Bodos. Two examples are given in the following *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.*¹⁰

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 chuhang ada Bachiram
Akhra barini akhra bugdao ada
Hazo khoroao daoha nangnw
*Goraya mabar zwgdao.*¹¹

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)

Apart from the above folklore, many dramatists exploited many myth and legendary tales in their dramas. We are very aware that folk theatre played a great role in spreading the message of patriotism during the freedom movement. As folk theatre is also powerful means of communication man utilized this talent in folk arts and theatres not only as a mode of entertainment but also as a source of conveying information. For example, Jatra, a traditional theatre form in Bengal, was performed for making aware the people. Besides these, folk songs were composed and used to popularize Satyagraha and political message. Like them the Bodos also exploited many plots of dramas from myth and legend and performed it on the stage.

Folk theatre played a great role in spreading the message of patriotism during the freedom movement in India. Jatra, a traditional theatre form in Bengal, was performed for making aware the people. The Bodo leaders and writers had written a drama on Bodo legend and myths and performed on the stage like a Bengali Jatra gan to making aware the Bodo people. They undertook it as a means of bringing awareness among the illiterate Bodo society. The important legendary dramas are: Jwhwlao Dwimalu, Swmdwn, Raja Iragdao, Rani Laimuthi and so on

Endle's 'The Kacharis', S.K.Chattarjee's "The Kirata Jana Kiti", Bishnu Prasad Rabha's writings and other books on Bodo language and folklore influenced immensely towards nationalism among the Bodos. Apart from these, there are many books on Bodo Folk song and folk tales that were published by the British and Bodo authors. Folk songs and lyrics are powerful means of propagating the ideas and experiences of the wise and learned to village people who cannot read and write. *Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi started using folk music to invoke patriotic feelings.* The educated Bodos and scholars started collecting the folk songs and published it. The important books of folk songs are *Folk Songs of the Bodos (1964)*, *Boro Khuga methai arw subung solo*, *Khuga methay* etc. can be mentioned.

There are various river names in Assam which are associated with different myths and legends. Many scholars have put forward and agreed upon the fact that if the name of a river begins or ends with *ti* or *di* it was originally named by the Bodos. In this regards what Rev. S Endle says in his book "The Kacharis"

"It is indeed not all unlikely that the people known to us as Kacharis and to themselves as Bodo were in earlier days the dominant race in Assam; and as such they would seem to have left traces of this domination of the nomenclature of some of

⁸ . Source: wiki.indianfolklore.org/images/a/a4/If1

⁹ . The Flute and the Harp, p.83

¹⁰ Brahma, M.M. 1964, Folk Song of the Bodos, Guwahati: University Publication, p.2

¹¹ *ibid*, p.3

the physical features of the countryman, the Kachari word for water (*di,dwi*) was originally a Bodo name.”¹²

Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha is also agreed with Endle views. He had written and established giving logical description of the names of the rivers and places of Assam were of Bodo origin. By knowing these, the Bodos became aware about their lost and living history.

Religion plays pivotal role in building up and maintaining the identity of a group. *Bathou* is the indigenous religion of the Bodos. There are many books on Bodo written and published by different publishers about this religion. Bathouism is invariably linked up with and centred round the worship of *Bathoubwrai* or *Sibwrai*. i.e the supreme god of the Bodos. Hence, it is known as Bathou religion. In the Bodo language, *Ba* means five and *thou* means ‘deep philosophical thought’. These five elements are- *Bar* (Air), *San* (Sun), *Ha* (Earth), *Or* (Fire) and *Okhrang* (Sky). Hence, *Bathou* means five principle of deep philosophical principles and significances which are mysterious: not easy to understand and feel without meditation. Recently, the *Bathou* religion has been relegated to the reviving line. Subsequently, the worship of *Bathou* as the supreme god has been resurrected. This folk religion has now been playing a vital role in re-establishing the identity of the Bodos. The followers of Bathouism assume that the religious practices of other religions distorted the original myths and religion and marginalize their language, culture and tradition. The emergence of *Bathou* movement has created a reaction among the believers of traditional faith and practices as well as the follower of other religion in the Bodo society. Reviving and preaching this age-old religion is going on and spread to West Bengal, Meghalaya and foreign country like Nepal. It can be observed that the modified form of *Bathou* religion will continue to play significant role in reconstructing the identity of the Bodos. So, extensive modification of the Bathouism is going on among the Bodo society along with the literary works also. Many section of the Bodos intellectual started research on Bathouism and has written highly philosophical articles for exploring the hidden materials of Bathouism.

In the past, the Bodos thought themselves their religion was Hindu. By organizing seminar and workshops and studying religious philosophies of Hinduism and other religion they have come to know that Bathouism is different from Hinduism. So, they have started identifying themselves as Bathou. It is indeed to say that many new literatures on spiritualism and Bathouism are being born due to revivalism.

CONCLUSION

The Bodos didn't have written tradition before the 20th century; they started writing in the early part of 20th Century. If the folklore materials were not collected and published by the authors and the educated Bodo people of the 20th century would never been known about their tradition, culture, history, language and politics. *As folklore is the pulse of the people it can be used an effective means of communication in today's world. It not only helps connect people with their cultures but also revives the lost culture of the society. Because of this, the Bodo authors used to write prose aiming at awakening the Bodo people who were in deep slumber. Through literary write-up they tried to bring consciousness among the people. For the purpose, a few of them composed poem and hymns relating to their religious and social belief. They appealed to the Bodo fellows to try to keep abreast of the latest happenings throughout the world and broaden their knowledge. They tried to make them conscious about their glorious past and thus give moral boost to their fellows. The fact that they had own kings and kingdoms till recent past became an effective tool to raise political consciousness among them. It increases the nationalism in the Bodo society.*

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¹² .Endle, S. *The Kacharis*, p.16