

# Cultural Heritage and Linguistic Traditions of the Bodo Community in West Bengal

ASIT BARAN NARJARY<sup>1</sup>

## Community Background:

The Bodo community in West Bengal has traditionally been concentrated in the Terai and Dooars regions. They are ethnically Mongoloids, but have acquired different nomenclatures all over South Asia, reflecting their wide geographical dispersal. In Nepal, they are called *Meche*, the name having been derived from their settlement in early times along the Mechi River; in Bangladesh, as *Mech Bongshi*; in Assam, as *Boro Kochari* or *Boro*; in

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<sup>1</sup> General Secretary of the Pashchim Banga Bodo Sahitya Sabha.

Tripura, as *Tippara*; in Nagaland, as *Dimasa Kochari*; and in Jammu and Kashmir, as *Beda* or *Bodo*. The Bodo community of West Bengal is generally treated as a sub-group of the larger *Bodo* community. However, although the government records in West Bengal identify them as *Mech*, the community members are predominantly *Bodo*, whereby they self-identify in a way distinct from the Boro community in Assam. In West Bengal, the main concentration of this community can be found in the districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, and Darjeeling.

Historially, it is said that around five thousand years ago, five tribes, namely *Meche*, *Koche*, *Lapche*, *Limbu*, and *Rai*, migrated from the Bod regions of old Tibet to the Indian subcontinent, perhaps because of a famine in their homeland. Of these, the *Meches* first settled in the Mechi River regions of Nepal and afterwards in the West Bengal area through the Nathu-La

Pass, and it is also said that the name *Nathu-La* itself is of Bodo origins. The *Koche* tribe migrated towards the Assam region along the Sankosh River, while the *Lapchetribe* settled in the hilly areas and now identify themselves as Lepcha. Additionally, the “*Limbu* and *Rai* tribes migrated to the Kalimpong area.

### **Language and Identity:**

The Bodo community in West Bengal speaks the Mech language, which is officially recognized by the Government of India as the Boro language. Despite this recognition, notable differences exist between the Boro language as spoken in Assam and its variant spoken in West Bengal. These differences are primarily phonological, and the Mech language is generally regarded as a regional dialect of the Boro language of Assam. The linguistic distinction is also reflected in the terminology used by the communities themselves: the

Bodo community in Assam refers to their counterparts in West Bengal as *Bwrdownari*, meaning “Boro people from West Bengal,” while the Mech community in West Bengal refers to the Assamese Boros as *Sanjari*, signifying “Boro people from the east of West Bengal.”

In terms of settlement patterns, the Bodo community in West Bengal traditionally established their villages in forest-adjacent areas and regions characterized by extensive fertile agricultural land. Although they inhabit the Terai and Dooars regions, it is noteworthy that Bodo settlements are largely absent in the vicinity of tea gardens. During the British colonial period, the colonial administration was unable to recruit the Bodo population as laborers for tea plantation work. Consequently, the British were compelled to import laborers from distant regions such as Chhotanagpur. Oral histories and community narratives suggest that the Bodos valued personal autonomy and independence,

preferring self-directed agricultural and subsistence activities over wage labor under colonial authority.

### **Script and Transmission:**

Although the Government of India has recognized the Devanagari script for the Boro language, the Bodo community in West Bengal has adopted the use of the Bengali script to write in Boro. This has happened because there are no educational institutions in West Bengal where Boro language education is conducted in the Devanagari script. Bodo speaking communities in Assam are in the habit of using the Devanagari script to represent the Boro language in written form.

Over the years, there have been some efforts to encourage the Bodo community in West Bengal to adopt the Devanagari script. For the last three years, the organization *Pashchim Banga Bodo Sahitya Sabha* has

been active in making the Bodo community aware of reading and writing in the Devanagari script. This effort involves some publications in the form of books and magazines in the Devanagari script, as well as conducting seminars, workshops, and quiz competitions to ensure more awareness about the script among the Bodo community. Additionally, the organization has identified 138 primary schools across West Bengal where a significant number of students—approximately 20 to 25 in each school—belong to the Bodo community. In these schools, elementary-level instruction in the Boro language using the Devanagari script is provided for one hour before or after regular school hours. What is important to be noted here is that no external cost has been incurred by running these educational activities; rather, these activities are made possible by the contributions of the members of that organization.

### **Folk Songs:**

The Bodo people represent a rich and diverse folk music tradition, covering almost all the types of songs depicting their socio-economic life, cultural practices, and relations with nature. These folk songs incorporate agricultural or farmers' songs, ritualistic songs which are connected with religious and ceremonial performances, fishing songs, wedding songs, and representative songs voicing community identity. Seasonal songs and love songs no less form part of their important musical repertoire to express emotions, social values, and the cyclical rhythms of rural life.

#### **A) Religious Songs**

The religious practices entertained by the Bodo community revolve around the worship of *Bwathau*, which is the symbolic form of the five elements of nature. Here, *Bwa* means five, while *Thau* translates to elements. This aptly translates the religious nature of the

Bodo tribe, which lies in their reverence for the basic elements found in nature. *Sijou*, which is a cactus plant, symbolically represents *Bwathau*. This could mean that the plant symbolically represents the strength found with the Bodo tribe, given its ability to withstand different climatic elements.

The religious rituals related to the worship of *Bwathau* have a chief priest who conducts the rituals, and his religious chants are chanted in a song form and form a very important genre of religious folk songs. The worship of *Bwathau* marks a well-combined presentation of both *Methai* and *Moshanai*, which mean song and dance, respectively. In this worship, eighteen different types of *Moshanai*, collectively referred to as *Kherai*, are performed. The different types of *Moshanai* essentially depend upon the act of imitation of nature.

Next, after the completion of the principal puja, the *Kherai* dance is performed. For example, *Dausari*

*Moshanai*, whose name is derived from *Dausari*, a bird commonly known as the Indian Myna or *Shalikh*. This dance is an imitation of the actions of the bird, and *Bibaar Moshanai*, representing the blooming of flowers, is the manifestation of the prayer for happiness, as it is performed after the completion of the puja as a symbol of the blooming of flowers.

### B) Baishagu

Baishagu is one of the most important festivals of the Bodo community, which is intricately tied with the folk songs and dance of the community. Baishagu literally means “before all seasons,” as the word is made up of *Bai* (season) and *Agu* (before). Baishagu is the first day of the calendar year of the Bodo community, with the festivities commencing on the last day of the month of Chaitra, lasting for seven days. Baishagu is known by the fact that the festivities are continuous, with community dancing and collective merrymaking.

The songs linked with Baishagu are mainly romantic, and there is involvement of both men and women in singing and performing these dances. Usually, it is the women who sing and perform the Baishagu songs and dances, and they are accompanied by men who play traditional musical instruments. These musical instruments consist of five different kinds, which are *kham* (a drum, equivalent to *khol*), *jottha* (cymbals), *kholtop* (a percussion musical instrument made of a bamboo base), *sharinja* (a bowed string musical instrument, equivalent to a violin), and *shiphung* (a flute musical instrument). The festival starts with worshipping the cattle ritually, which is an act of agricultural prosperity, and has strong links to worshipping Bwathau.

Food has a prime importance during this festival, and an extensive range of traditional food items is prepared and served during this occasion. Among these,

*Petta*, which consists of sweet and steamed rice, has strong folklore and cultural importance.

### C) Agricultural Songs

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood of the Bodos, where rice, along with jute, mustard, and other crops, is cultivated. However, it may be stated here that the Bodos possess a vast amount of cultivated land, which is rich and fertile. Thus, the community places great importance on what is known as “independence” of labor. As such, there is no practice of tenant farming, which is, as a matter of fact, a common practice among many other communities, as the Bodos do not like to work as laborers on someone else’s farm. Instead, they prefer to work on each other’s farms based on what is known as *Shauri*, which is nothing but a practice of working together as a sign of friendship.

*Shauri* practices continue to be a significant social entity, and it has been identified with a corpus of

folk songs associated with agriculture. These songs can be jointly sung after different agricultural activities such as ploughing, growing, reaping, or winnowing crops. The songs have a multifaceted role as they help minimize fatigue, develop coordination between laborers, or create a mood of joy or social cohesion while working. But it has been observed that some members of the social group believe that the dominant emphasis on cooperative working or the associated social values of Shauri might have impacted the commercialization of agriculture. This has resulted in unexplored economic potential because of a large amount of fertile land available with members of the Bodo social group.

#### **D) Na Gurnaay (Fishing Song)**

Na Gurnaay refers to a genre of folk songs that relate to the fishing practices of the Bodo people, which mainly consist of women's choruses. It normally involves about

20 to 25 women singing these songs while jointly undertaking fishing and sometimes in conjunction with their regular activities, which include bathing in rivers. Besides, the Na Gurnaay folk song was specifically sung during the monsoons when water was in plenty and thus made common practice for joint fishing by many people.

The performance of Na Gurnaay has multiple tasks, which play a social as well as practical role for the communities it serves. Singing while fishing helps maintain the rhythm designed for collective labor, keeping the moods of the women elevated while minimizing physical fatigue associated with fishing activities. Na Gurnaay also encourages collective socialization of the women through its performance associated with subsistence aspects of Bodo society.

### **E) Habani (Wedding Songs)**

Habani is the corpus of folk songs associated with wedding rituals practiced by the Bodo community. These

songs depend on the different rituals in the marriage ceremony and follow rituals like the reception of the bride in the groom's household and saying farewell to the bride in her familial household. Every ritual situation is associated with specific songs, which convey the emotions of departure, happiness, and continuity.

One of the important cultural practices of Bodo families is the existence of the holy area called *Naw-Ma*, situated on the northern side of every Bodo household. In Bodo language, *Naw* represents house, while *Ma* represents mother, symbolically translating to the "mother of all houses." This holy area called the *Naw-Ma* is essentially the worship area of Bwathau and is considered the most sacred area in every Bodo household. Access to this area is entirely forbidden to strangers who come from other households or who are not members of Bodo society or religion. In fact, daughters who have married and become part of other

households also are forbidden to enter the *Naw-Ma* of their original household.

In the marriage ceremonies, the bride is placed inside *Naw-Ma* before proceeding to the groom's residence. It is at this point the women, named *Bairathi*, perform *Habani* songs that literally ask the bride to come out of this consecrated area before proceeding to her new home with her groom. The songs highlight how important this rite of passage is as far as a strong association between music, domestic space, and society is concerned in Bodo marriage rituals.

#### **F) Baguram-Ba (Traditional Dance Song)**

*Baguram-Ba* is deemed to be the best representation of the traditional dance song for the Bodo community and is a significant part of their identities as a community. Though there are different forms of *Baguram-Ba* songs, currently, there is an initiative to unify the nature of this song. This comes as a result of a seminar that has been

scheduled for discussion and adoption of a unified form of the song, indicating there is a desire by the community to showcase their unity in their musical traditions through this song. Essentially, *Baguram-Ba* is significant as not just a performance piece, but also as a representation of Bodo community continuity.

In addition to these broad folk-song types, there is a rich body of other traditional songs which are preserved by the Bodo community, such as **woodcutter's songs**, **Love Songs**, **Songs based on Daily Life**, and **Weaving Songs**. These songs demonstrate, further, the integration of music with working life as well as with society, which again emphasizes the Bodos' intimate relation to nature, occupation, and social life.

### **Folk Tales:**

The well-developed Bodo folk tale tradition is narrated during day-to-day activities in the fields by skilled storytellers among workers or agricultural laborers. It not only entertains them but also purifies their soul. Till today, over thirty folk tales have been preserved in the Bodo language, covering themes like love, heroism, and moral values.

Besides these shorter ones, there are very long folk tales that may be carried through a whole day of narration. Indeed, many such extended stories remain to be fully recorded, but some efforts are being made to preserve them for the future. One such is **Nijawm Phagla**-a story about a man who disguises himself as a madman and spies on a queen-and that too remains unfinished, and it is still being part of the living oral tradition.

### **Print and Media Presence**

The Bodo people of West Bengal represent a very slowly developing literary tradition over the last several decades. The first work of poetry, 'Bibaar', was published in 1964 in the Bodo language using the Bengali script. Thereafter, very little happened in terms of the literary production of the Bodo language due to limited readership. In recent years, however, organizations such as the *Pashchim Banga Bodo Sahitya Sabha* have rejuvenated literary production by compiling and publishing annual collections of poems written in the Bodo language. An important medium that showcases current Bodo poetry, the yearly anthology entitled 'Awraithai' (which means Recitation), has just released its latest edition containing sixty-three poems.

Apart from poetry, the community has published journals to reinforce literary interaction. The first monthly journal, 'Thungri', was published in 1996 but ceased after three years. At present, various journals are

circulating such as ‘Sanjarang’ (Rising of the Sun at Dawn), published from Alipurduar; ‘Lajjou’ (Young Banana Leaf), from Kolkata; and ‘Raidaushuli’ published from Terai and Dooars. The annual poetry journal ‘Awraithai’ is also circulated from Terai and Dooars region.

The Bodo community of West Bengal has produced several eminent intellectuals and literary figures who have made significant contributions to the study, preservation, and creative expression of Bodo history, culture, and language. Among them, Ramesh Chandra Suba stands out as a distinguished scholar and anthropologist who has worked tirelessly toward the documentation and preservation of Bodo culture and linguistic heritage.

Another notable figure is Satyendranath Mondal, whose scholarly work *Mech Somaj Ebong Sanskriti*, written in Bengali, offers an important historical and

cultural study of the Bodo (Mech) community and serves as a valuable resource for a wider readership.

In the field of creative literature, Bidyut Kumar Basumata has made significant contributions as a short story writer and poet writing in the Bodo language. His poetry collection *Gwdwi Gwkha Gwbab* (Sour, Hot and Sweet) has been included in the syllabus of the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies at Gauhati University, reflecting its academic and literary significance. Another of his poetry collections, *Dwbwi Finnai Dinga*, along with the former, has been published by the Pashchim Banga Bodo Sahitya Sabha.

Ajendra Nath Brahma, a poet and a West Bengal Civil Service (WBCS) officer, has also contributed to Bodo literature through his poetry collection *Sonani Lauthi* (The Golden Stick). Similarly, Dr. Nitai Kumar Karjee has enriched Bodo poetry with his collection

*Gwthar Mwdwm* (Concrete Body). In addition, Asit Baran Narjary is known for his poetry collection *Bibarni Motho* (Bud of a Flower), which further reflects the growing literary output of the Bodo community in West Bengal.

Apart from the literary contributions, the Bodo community is also carrying out technological and cultural endeavors to preserve and celebrate their culture. In the year 2025, a YouTube channel called 'Bodo Mech Time' was established in an endeavor to record and share the practices of the community through online platforms. Their cultural traditions and practices are also being encouraged through fashion shows, where the young generation is exposed to traditional garments, musical instruments, and household utensils. The women's and men's attires include the *Dokna*, *Aronai*, and *Gamchha*, respectively, dressed in a saree, dupatta, and dupatta manner, respectively.

**Preservation Efforts:**

This is in contrast to Assam, where the Boro community has seen many of its people discontinue the use of the Boro language. Yet in the state of West Bengal, even small Bodos have existed for generations in the practice of the Bodo language. In the recent past, however, the use of the Bodo language has slowly diminished in the younger community because of the prominence of the Bengali language in day-to-day activities and education.

Realizing this problem, some social organizations and language activists have begun programs in those villages to spread the importance of maintaining their mother tongue, besides learning Bengali and English. Parents have been motivated to spend at least an hour a day, for example, during lunch or dinner, speaking Bodo.

At the same time, the demographic problem has been raised by some activists, and it has been stressed that without adequate growth, this language will further decline, and they have spurred parents to have at least two children. There are also efforts being made to get official support from the state government. The activists have demanded that they be allowed to impart education in the Bodo language in primary schools, where at least 40% of the students belong to the Bodo community. This alone will greatly help in language preservation, as the members have already been able to translate some 4,000 textbooks up to class two, from Bengali to Bodo, through their own resource mobilization and support from the Bodo community in Assam. These books have been employed presently for teaching before or after school hours. Moreover, a pictorial Bodo dictionary is being worked upon, and three workshops have been conducted, and a total of seven workshops have been organized to bring it to completion. All these efforts put

together show that the Mech/Bodo language is being properly preserved for the coming generation.

*Based on a personal interview with Abhik Sarkar, conducted on 13 Jan. 2026 in Kolkata.*