Women of Northeast India
Their Folklore and Folklife

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Edited by
Dr. Lalthakim Hmar
Dr. Abul Foyes Md Malik

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Editorial

Women do participate in the socio-cultural life of a human society. But, generally, their cultural participation is viewed at from the context of patriarchal culture and its norms. Women have been defined in terms of men. Men often undervalued and under-represented them and assigned them a role subordinate to their own thereby, failing to give a more complete view of the cultural participation of the womenfolk. One of the ways in which women are represented culturally is through the segregation of certain kinds of cultural practices to them, which are seen as both inferior and feminine. For instances, cultural practices like pottery-making is generally done by women and is subsequently considered to represent the delicacy and decorativeness of the feminine, and this can be contrasted with practices like net-making, which entails the same skills, but which is exclusively considered masculine. The male transmitters often overlooked or ignored the differentiable cultural performances that had flourished within the domain of women. Therefore, in the scholarly writings of such male transmitters, little is known about women's cultural performances.

Feminism had a transforming impact on Cultural Studies through the 1980s. In *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture* (1985), the editors, Rosan A. Jordan and Susan J. Kalchik argue that until recently, folklorists concentrated their attention only on males' cultural performances. In the process of exploring folklore and culture, those folklorists ignored or overlooked folklore and culture that had flourished within the domain of women. The genres that demonstrated women's unified culture were often considered 'minor genres' or 'just gossip'. It was only performances that were characteristic of men that had most interested folklorists as worthy of studies.

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In *The Subordinated Sex: A History of Attitudes towards Women* (1988), the writers, Vern L. Bullough, Brenda Shelton and Sarah Slavin reiterate the important position women occupy in the reproduction and the existence of humanity. But despite that, little is known about women in the past except that they were simply mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. The little knowledge we have had of them too, comes from male transmitters whose records, impressed with their own versions, imply that women were subordinate to them. This work implicitly suggests the need for a more comprehensive perspective to look into women's lives and their experiences in order to understand their inherent values.

In their introduction to *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies* (1991, 6), Franklin et al. has maintained, "*Women Take Issue* (Women's Studies Group 1978) was an early example of feminist work within cultural studies….Looking at questions of cultural reproduction as well as production, *Women Take Issue* highlighted the need for cultural studies to engage with the 'personal' dimensions of culture in the political context of a feminist analysis". The book enabled a shift from interest in issues concerning ideology and hegemony to those concerning identity and subjectivity

In the Chapter, "Strategies of Coding in Women's Culture" by Joan Radner and Susan Lancer in *Feminist Messages* (1993) by Joan Newlon Radner, the writers assert that sexual difference provides the foundation for women's culture and, sexual dominance makes women express themselves through coded means. By 'code', it means a set of signals – words, forms, behaviours, signifiers of some kind – that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages. This establishes a vantage-point that recognition of coding is a crucial aspect of the reinterpretation of the women's lives and cultures.

Fay Fransella and Kay Frost in their work, *On Being a Woman* (1997), undertake to study a woman as a subject – what she has to say for herself rather than what others say about her. In relation to the social definitions of a woman's place, they assert that in order to understand why people act as they do, we ought to know how they see themselves. They also maintain that what we do reflects our

lives and our experiences and, we organize, interpret and reinterpret ourselves on the basis of notions that we already have of what we are about.

In *Women in Culture* (1998), Lucinda J. Peach argues that biological differences are not inherently inferior or secondary, but are deemed to be so by cultural ascription or designation. Thus, contrary to essentialist understandings of gender as primarily determined by biological sex differences, she espouses the view that culture is the primary determinant of gender and gender identity.

Northeast India or North Eastern Region of India comprises eight States: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland and Sikkim with over 220 ethnic groups and an equal number of dialects and with diverse cultures. The themes and sub-themes of this book include all folklore and folklife items that flourish within the cultural domain of the gendered women of Northeast India. The book is intended to include research papers on items as are reflected in the different folklore and folklife categories like the Verbal Art, Social Folk Customs, Folk Performing Arts and Material Culture pertaining to the women of the region concerned. The purpose of the book, *Women of Northeast India: Their Folklore & Folklife* is to present a diverse but detailed picture of the traditional life of the women of Northeast India, irrespective of ethnic differences; their experience and their expressions of this experience in both verbal and non-verbal forms.

Editors,
Dr. Lalthakim Hmar
Dr. Abul Foyes Md Malik

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Sinaithi Chronicles: Life and Legends of the Bodo Women

Dr. Mallika A Nair

"The rich tapestry of Bodo culture is a wonderful melange of distinct ethnic tastes and unique influences surrounding the big-hearted Bodo people."

(Angelo Daimari, ARTEM 111)

Sinaithi in the Bodo language means "identity" and refers to the communal as well as personal identities of one of the most ancient tribes on earth. This indigenous ethnic group, often pronounced as Bo-Ros, is the earliest inhabitants of Assam. Sadly though, they seem to be rapidly disappearing from the vast annals of civilization. The Bodos consist of several ethnic tribes, the largest being the Kacharis.

Although the Bodo community has in the past decade witnessed political unrest and has been in strife with the ruling class time and again, one often wonders at the vibrant voices they represent. The strict adherence to their roots makes the Bodo quite conservative to all outside eyes. But the rights to hold on to what they consider their treasure trove of ancient legacy can only be seen as a step towards their own sustenance and survival.

Nestled between the majestic foothills of Bhutan and the lush green valleys of the Brahmaputra valley, the State of Assam cradles the Bodo tribe to her bosom. It is only through an in-depth enquiry

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in to the lives of their women and the legacies left through their legends and folklore that one arrives at the subtle permutations of identity formation within their innate being.

Anil Boro in his book, Folk Literature of the Bodos (2001) designates the ethnic term for myth in the Bodo language as *mith* or *gozam colo.* The Bodo proudly lays claim to a rich array of myths that reveal their great and significant evolution. For instance, the origin myth of kherai worship and dance takes us to the simple ways in which the Bodo women bonds with her natural surroundings. Kherai is a form of traditional dance which is performed during religious festivals or on some specific occasion in honor of the god and goddesses. Then there is the myth of origin of the musical instruments. As celebrations were an integral part of their social life, the Bodo tribes had specialized numbers for each separate occasion. There were pre-nuptial songs that celebrated fertility rites and marriage songs to mark the joyous occasion of love. There were rituals to mark the birth of a child and another one to bid a loved one adieu in death. The Bodo also possess their very own oral prose narratives or myths which are mostly associated with socio-religious beliefs and practices. These oral narratives may be classified as religious myths. They include stories about the creation of the universe, gods and goddesses, human beings, ghosts and spirits, natural objects, birds and animals and so on.

The ancient folklore of the Bodo community speaks of tales at the beginning of creation and the origin of man and the world. Most of these were transmitted from one generation to the next through oral traditions, the scripted versions of which would appear only a long time after. The most important among them happens to be the myth of the cosmos and all flora and fauna born into it. The legend also speaks of the emergence of Gods and Goddesses at the beginning of life and their varied manifestations in the human existence. They speaks of the God Aham Guru who created two birds, a male and a female. The female bird is said to have laid three eggs and the voice of God Aham Guru proclaims that the three eggs will give rise to three different forms of life. But thousands of years passed, and still no sign of birth was seen to emerge from the three

eggs. Therefore, out of curiosity the female bird broke one egg to see what was inside it, only to find it empty of any life. The voice of Aham Guru warned the bird against breaking the other two eggs, and if broken, decreed that the universe would be destroyed. The voice then advised the bird to spread its wings around the broken pieces, from whence emerged the evil spirits, ghosts, insects and plants. The myth of Aham Guru reminds human beings to obey the Supreme Omniscient Voice in order to keep the universe safe from troubles and tribulations.

The legend thus foregrounds the status of the mother-figure to that nearest to God in the process of birth, life and death. She gives sustenance to the family, often risking her own existence. The Bodo woman takes immense pride in her identity. She would always be referred to as Bodo rather than Assamese. The quintessential convolutions that shape a tribal identity exert its hold not only on the social manifestations of the individual but garner a deep-rooted sense of belongingness asserting her claims to selfhood within the inner psychological realm. These women lead simple lives and are kind and hardworking. While the tribe has seen its fair share of strife amidst a continuing struggle for statehood, the status of women and their socio-economic situation does not seem to have evolved over the last decade. The Bodos are predominantly an agrarian community and rear livestock for a living. The homestead holds the centre stage of a Bodo Woman's life. She extends her hands in the fields where rice and other crops are cultivated. She grows her own vegetables and rears pigs, cows and poultry. Native Bodo villages are set amidst lush green fields of rice, bordered by palm and coconut trees, painting the landscape with different hues of green. Most villages have orchards of litchi and mango trees. But of course, the most iconic of all vegetation are the young and old bamboo shoots that mark the Bodo villages. The bamboo in fact symbolizes the Bodo life more than any other tree. The women weave various kinds of baskets out of the bamboo shoots and carry them over their heads while working in the fields and gathering supplies for their homestead. The rough hilly terrain over which the Bodo women walk for long distances makes these bamboo baskets hung over their

foreheads, an inevitable personal companion.

L.P.Vidyarthi says that "Art plays an important role in man's life and society". (Vidyarthi 95)

Herbert Read, emphasizing the importance of art observes, "Our vitality as a people is intimately connected with the expression of the sense of beauty. A sense of beauty is nothing but a sense of quality…" (Elwin 14)

Thus, the quality of aesthetic sense that is innate within the Bodo woman is revealed through her skilled craftsmanship in weaving these bamboo baskets. The art of bamboo, cane and weaving is too ancient and might well be as old as the tribe itself. It is made by women with the raw materials found within her home and land. The availability of materials easily procurable is the source of great inspiration to the Bodo women. The art of bamboo and cane are executed in the making of baskets, mats, fishing trap, winnowing fan, sieve, walking stick, night lamps, chairs, cradles, and accessories like bangles, armlets and necklaces.

The participation of tribal women in the creation of these handicrafts operates as a benchmark of their socio-economic contribution to their community. These women engage themselves in the process of learning the skills from an early childhood as they observe their elders constantly at work and often join-in with them at home. Thus, initiation into the craft is a smooth process that happens without any conscious effort. The young girls within the Bodo communities are also engaged in weaving, fishing and agriculture thus preparing them for a productive and sustainable life in the future. But the situation is not without its glitches as women seldom get a chance at a proper education. Since women are found to be the main earning members within a family, it becomes impossible to detach them from their household roles. Thus, education is often given the back seat in a tribal woman's life.

It is indeed a most welcome and soothing sight to see whistling groves of bamboo trees swaying gracefully to sudden gusts of winds in the monsoons. The mellowing orange trees and the vast yellow fields of mustards are but archetypal portraits of Bodo villages

through various seasons. Tales about human creation, magical deities and kindred forest spirits abound in these villages. These patterns offer tangible evidence of legends that have been passed down orally in each tribe over centuries. It makes them truly significant in the study of the region's socio-cultural fabric.

The second part of the myth of Aham Guru narrates the creation of earth and natural phenomenon. It is said that the god Aham Guru felt the necessity to create the earth since he created the other objects. He sent two old fishes Magur-Maguri to the nether world to bring some soil. The two old fishes managed to get only a small quantity of soil because of the tough journey. With the quantity of soil thus collected god created the earth; therefore, the area of land is much less than the area of water covered on earth. (Narzari, 33)

After the creation of earth, God sent a small bird to ensure that the earth's crust had hardened, to which the bird informs that it was still quite soft. God then levels the earth, leaving portions of high and low on the earth. The legend reiterates that thus were formed on earth the hills, mountains, plains, rivers and streams, making the beautiful undulations pleasing to the eye.

The Bodo woman weaves similar geometrical pattern like hexagonal, octagonal, cone and circles through the fabric on her loom. The symbolic designs depict the topography of the land along with the cultural relationship within the tribal communities. Weaving is a vital part of the Bodo way of life and women take inspiration from their surroundings and the natural objects they perceive such as the mountains, sun, moon, stars, rivers, trees and flowers, Somewhere in the recent past, not too long ago, a locally crafted loom held the pride of place in every Bodo household. As the balmy morning sun greets a new day, one could hear the rhythmic motions of the loom, with the women folk diligently weaving the spindle and yarn into glorious tapestries of wondrous designs. The women spin the beautiful *dokhona* and the *aronai* in vibrant colours of yellow, red, pink, green and orange. While the *dokhona* is the traditional attire of the Bodo women, and is a long piece of fabric gracefully draped around the body, the *aronai* is a

scarf worn by both men and women. Thus, one comprehends the deep and inseparable bond between the myths and legends of the Bodo tribe that bear directly upon the lives of the individuals within the community. And women seem to thrive in its basking effect throughout their daily lives.

The myth of Aham Guru culminates with the birth of the human race. After a long and patient waiting through eons of time, human beings were said to have born from the other two eggs. From the first egg emerged the *Mansin-sin bwrai* (male) and *Mansin-sin burwi* (female) while from the second egg emerged *Diba bwrai* (male) and *Dibi burwi* (female). The myth claims that this marked the beginning of human beings on earth and the Bodos believe that they are the direct descendents of these primordial human beings. Myths therefore, are an active force of human civilization. (Narzari, 33)

The Bodo women mark their social occassions by paying obeisance to these mythical ancestors through dance and music. The *Bagurumba* is the traditional Bodo dance and is accompanied by a gentle lilting *Bagurumba* song. The melodious rendering is accompanied by a harmonious blend of the flute and various other percussions. The *Bagurumba* is performed during special celebrations such as weddings and the *Bwisagu* or the Spring Festival in April.

Myths and legends in Bodo tribes constitute an integral part of their folk literature. They play an important role in revealing the religious worships and dance of the Bodo community. The *kherai* is a dance performed by the Bodo women and is said to have originated from the myth of *Kherai.* The myth recounts how an old man goes in search of a most beloved daughter-in-law. Unable to find her, the distraught old man is visited by a sacred apparition in his dreams and is advised to conduct a ritualistic dance called the *Kherai* with the help of musical instruments like *kham* (drum), *siphung* (flute), *serza* (Bodo traditional violin) and *jotha* (cymbal). As the dance is performed on a full moon night and the musical percussion reaches its high, legend has it that a young woman joins in the festivities as a *doudini* or female shaman. (Narzari, 34)

Today, the ritualistic dance form of *Kherai* is performed within the Bodo communities as a fertility ritual, by a male priest and female shaman for the peace and prosperity of the community. Thus, no fiction is born out of vacuum. Oral narratives of the Bodo tribe play a vital role in recreating their historical past and reconstructing their ideals within their clan. These oral narratives and folklore act as storehouses of identity formation within a community. Women help strengthen the community by honing the subtle skills of fine artistry and passing them on to the next generation along with the rich cultural heritage they symbolize. The indigenous wisdom embedded within them might act as future pointers to a generation that despairs in this chaotic world in search of their personal identity.

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2

Woman, Marriage and Customs: A study of Hmar Women

Dr. Elma Lalramthar, Prof. M.C Arunkumar

Hmar

The Hmars are one of the indigenous ethnic tribes with distinct culture belonging to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo ethnic group of the Sino-Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongolian race. The Hmar tribe became a recognized Scheduled Tribe of the Government of India in 1956.The Hmar tradition takes that the original home of the Hmars is called 'Sinlung'. A number tales, songs and poems from before were found to be prevailing during the past and is passed on from one generation to another till today in the form of oral or written. The Hmar society is patriarchal, a male-dominated society where the male-head of family is the sole authority both in family and clan matters. This social system, no doubt, gives authority to males. In many of the Hmar clans, the youngest son inherits the father's property. There are many clans and hundreds of sub-clans in Hmar tribe. The traditional religion of the Hmars practiced during the past can be characterized as Animistic. There is an absence of any written scripture in Tribal religion and is the religion of oral traditions. They believed in the existence of a beneficent and Supreme Being, which they called God *(Pathien)*.The economy of traditional Hmar society was mainly based on land and forest.

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