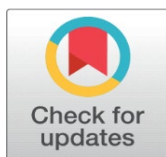
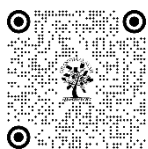


GENDERED HERITAGE: A STUDY OF BODO WOMEN'S ROLE IN PRESERVING CULTURAL TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Bodo are an ethnic and linguistic aboriginal tribe of Assam and have a unique culture and linguistic traits. The Bodo culture is multifaceted and has rich tangible and intangible heritage that are deeply rooted in their socio-cultural identity. Consequently, social norms and traditions are very important to the Bodo's way of life. Through intangible heritage like rituals, customs, beliefs, storytelling, and group activities Bodo women serve as stewards of their cultural legacy. It is therefore, Bodo women are seen as carrier and preserver of intangible heritage (cultural practices) from generation to generation. This paper examines how Bodo women fit themselves within the framework of cultural preservation, emphasizing their role in social gatherings, traditional events, and family systems (belief/customs). The study is descriptive and qualitative in type and approach. Data have been drawn from the Secondary sources.

Keywords: Intangible Heritage, Bodo Women, Culture, Social Customs, Traditions

1. INTRODUCTION

A community's cultural legacy consists in a great range of expressions, customs, and knowledge systems passed down over centuries that help to define its identity and way of life (Bera, 2006). Particularly intangible cultural legacy consists in customs, representations, expressions, knowledge, and abilities that people acknowledge as part of their cultural legacy (Filho & Rayman-Bacchus, 2019). Deeply entwined with the social fabric, these intangible components define the values, beliefs, and sense of belonging of a society by themselves (Chen, 2019). Analyzing the intangible cultural legacy of the Bodo people gives one a useful prism through which to view the roles, contributions, and experiences of Bodo women, therefore illuminating their social, economic, and cultural relevance inside the society.

Considered among the biggest plains tribes in Assam, the Bodo people have a rich and varied intangible cultural legacy reflecting their own history, customs, and way of life (Sarma, 2023). Originating from the local historical and cultural framework, Bodo, one of the first native communities in the Assam region of northeastern India, has a rich cultural history that includes both material (tangible) and immaterial (intangible) components. Folklore, oral traditions,

traditional knowledge, weaving techniques, and other aspects are the Bodo community's intangible cultural heritage, which are all preserved and passed down in large part by the women in particular.

Particularly important in helping to preserve and pass on intangible cultural legacy within the Bodo people are women. Ensuring its continuation and relevance in modern society, women typically are the main guardians of traditional knowledge, skills, and traditions (Latayan & Tan, 2020). The Bodos are renowned for their knowledge of silkworm farming and *eri* fabric weaving, both of which have great cultural and financial worth (George, 1994). By means of their participation in these events, women not only preserve and advance traditional skills and knowledge but also help to improve the financial situation of their families and communities. By passing on religious and spiritual ideas to future generations and preserving the social cohesiveness of the society, they actively participate in rites and ceremonies (Boruah et al., 2020). By actively engaging in many kinds of artistic expression—weaving, embroidery, pottery—Bodo women help to create culturally important objects. Moreover, women are very important in spreading oral traditions, folk songs, and stories, thereby guaranteeing that the history, values, and beliefs of the society are passed on through the next generation (Schiller, 2009).

Thus, Bodo women play an important role in cultural customs that sustain their society's social cohesion. Beyond their practical use, their abilities, particularly in weaving, have sociocultural significance that is highly symbolic. One essential art form for which Bodo women are renowned is weaving dokhona, traditional clothing, and other fabrics that represent their artistry and ties to their heritage. (Boro, 2020) Cultural transmission of Bodos is facilitated by the collective celebration of festivals like Bwisagu, and these events feature songs and dances that introduce the children to traditional music and dances and provide them with an immersive, engaging atmosphere in which to learn about their culture. (Deka 2018) Across generations, the communal aspect of these celebrations reinforces ethnic pride and social cohesiveness. Furthermore, Bodo women help to preserve their language, which is spoken orally, and they act as stewards of the oral traditions of the community, transferring them from one generation to the next through lullabies, folklore, and traditional storytelling. (Sarma, 2019)

UNESCO defines "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills" as intangible cultural resources, which are recognized by communities as a component of their cultural legacy. (UNESCO, 2003) Understanding these intricate ways in which the Bodo women balance their identity, tradition, and modernity is made easier by the study of intangible cultural assets. So, given the modern challenges and changing social and political situations in Assam, this paper highlights how Bodo women keep their identity through cultural traditions and sets the stage for a deeper look at their role in preserving cultural heritage and ensuring it continues.

2. WHO ARE BODOS?

The Bodos are an ethnic and linguistic aboriginal tribe of Assam. According to E. Gait, they were the first people to live in the Brahmaputra Valley. (Gait, 1967) Rev. Endle published the first ethnographic account of the Bodos of Assam in 1911, calling them "Kachari." (Chaudhuri, 2004) Suniti K. Chatterji identified them as the Kirats or Indo-Mongoloids in his book 'Kirata Jana Kriti.' The Bodos are the descendants of the Mongoloid race. They form a subsection of the Bodo-Naga section under Assam-Burma, a group of Tibeto-Burman branches of the Sino-Tibetan family. (Grierson, 1967) The British administration and the Christian missionaries, who initially started writing in the Bodo language, used the term "Kachari" as a racial name. (Mochari, 1997) The Bodos have their own unique social practices, festivals, language, religion, belief system, customary laws, traditional attire, folklore & folk literature, etc. They are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) under Article 342(1) of the Indian Constitution, and their language is included in the 8th Schedule to the Constitution of India by the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act 2003. (Basu, 2015) The Bodo language got the status of Associate Official Language in Assam under the Assam Official Languages (Amendment Bill) in 2020.

3. ROLE OF BODO WOMEN IN PRESERVING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

With various cultural expressions, including weaving, storytelling, and active participation in festivals and rituals, the Bodo women passed down the social practices and traditions within their communities, and they made sure that the next generation was aware of and respected the customs and cultural values that are exclusive to the Bodo people as a community. Storytelling and oral traditions are regarded as the two main ways through which the Bodo women contribute to the transmission of culture and pass it down to young family members and children.

4. LANGUAGE AND ORAL TRADITIONS

Language is a crucial component of intangible legacy; hence, it is essential for cultural preservation, and here the mothers and older women (grandmothers) play a keen role in teaching the Bodo language to their sons and daughters. Within the community, the Bodo women act as storytellers, transmitting oral history, myths, folklore, and folktales to the young generations. The traditional Bodo proverbs also impart historical information and moral lessons, which are preserved by Bodo women, and this offers insight into the Bodo philosophy and is transmitted to kids, and it helps in establishing cultural awareness at an early age.

One Proverbs:

“Bimaya Naiyw Muukhangao

Hinzaoa Naiyw Siphiyao

Phisaya Naiyw Monao” (Borgoayary, 2019)

(English: Mother observe the face, wife look at pocket, children checked the bag)

Meaning: The face is a human’s index. Therefore, one can tell someone’s face by looking at him. As a result, mother will first look at your face to see how you’re doing and whether anything has happened. Your wife, on the other hand will see your pocket whether you have money or not, because she is responsible for overseeing family finances and providing for their children’s food and son will see his father’s pocket whether he has brought something to eat.

5. TRADITIONAL WEAVING AND CRAFTS

Bodo women are experienced weavers and use handlooms to create traditional clothing like Gamosa (a handwoven cloth) and Dokhona (a garment worn by women). Though weaving craft can be seen as tangible, it can also be called intangible because the skills and experience (which are not physical in nature) are needed in weaving a colourful craft, and here the Bodo women preserve this knowledge and transfer it to the young generation for cultural preservation. For the Bodo community, weaving is not just an art; it is a cultural practice that represents continuity and identity, which has vivid patterns and colours. Women create elaborate patterns that are emblematic of their culture and customs, commonly known as Agor. These designs, known as Agor, draw inspiration from nature and symbolize various facets of nature, life, and the spiritual realm. The Bodo women also contribute economically to the household needs by weaving and selling traditional Bodo garments and crafts, as well as keeping cultural craftsmanship alive and relevant in modern contexts.

6. TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF MEDICINAL PLANTS AND CUISINE

The local herbs that are utilized for medicinal purposes are commonly known to Bodo women within the community. By using these plants as medicine for the treatment of various ailments and diseases, they are sharing their knowledge of the natural world and conventional medicinal methods, and this information aids in maintaining the ecological consciousness and biodiversity within the community.

Bodo women are the keepers of traditional cooking techniques, and food is a significant part of cultural identity. Using indigenous culinary techniques and locally sourced ingredients, they create and transmit dishes that are essential to Bodo festivities and everyday meals. Using recipes and methods handed down through the years, traditional dishes like Narzi Oma (pork cooked with dry jute leaves), Sobai & Dao (chicken cooked with roasted split black gram), Onla & Dao (chicken curry with rice powder), and Napam (a fermented fish dish) are prepared, maintaining the distinctive tastes and customs of Bodo cuisine.

7. RITUALS AND FESTIVALS

Bwisagu, a traditional event that commemorates the Bodo New Year and incorporates dancing, music, and prayer, is one of the festivals in which the Bodo women actively engage. During the celebration, they are responsible for the rites for worshiping cows and other animals that are revered. To maintain the continuity, conduct rites and rituals, which frequently require specialized training and expertise. In religious ceremonies, women lead and participate in prayers

and rituals that are essential to the Bodo spiritual system. This interaction offers a chance to transmit religious and spiritual ideals while also building cultural links.

8. SYMBOLISM IN WOMEN'S RITUAL ACTIVITIES

- **Rice and Betel Nut-** The Bodo women make these symbolic offerings, which stand for respect, fertility, and wealth.
- **Traditional Attire-** The dokhona, which is worn by women, is a clothing and a representation of Bodo identity. It is an integral part of most rites and rituals and is regarded as auspicious.

9. ROLE IN EDUCATING YOUNGER GENERATIONS

The Bodo women, by engaging them in traditional practices from a young age, serve as mentors to younger generations. They guarantee that intangible legacy is passed down, whether it is by learning to speak the Bodo language, weave, dance, or prepare traditional meals.

10. CHALLENGES OF BODO WOMEN IN PRESERVING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

In their attempts to conserve intangible cultural heritage, Bodo women encounter numerous obstacles, mostly brought on by modernity and socio-economic pressures. These difficulties affect their capacity to pass on cultural information, particularly as newer generations adopt modern values and abandon traditional ways of living.

One of the main issues is the intrusion of modernism, which affects the interest of the younger generation in customs. The young Bodo people are more inclined to seek employment and educational opportunities in cities for their better future, but this separates them from their roots and lessens the value of traditional skills in their daily life. (Boro, 2020) Therefore, the traditional family structure, which is the basis for cultural transmission, is upset by this urban migration, making it challenging for Bodo women to teach their children the culture, customs, and weaving techniques of the Bodos.

In addition, economic pressures are also making it difficult for the Bodo women within the community to preserve their traditional legacy. By prioritizing traditional crafts, which might not yield good financial support, it creates a problem for most of the Bodo families due to financial insecurity because weaving, for instance, takes a lot of time and frequently produces little profit. As a result, many Bodo women are turning away from traditional crafts and moving toward alternative revenue sources. (Deka, 2018)

11. STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES

The Bodo women use a range of tactics to preserve their intangible cultural legacy in spite of many obstacles, such as modifying customs, making use of social networks, and integrating contemporary platforms to highlight their culture. Innovation in traditional crafts like weaving helps the Bodo women deal with the problems of industrialization and the economy. Many women have begun to add new colours and designs to traditional motifs, increasing the fabric's appeal to urban and modern buyers. By expanding the market for Bodo textiles, this adaptation not only supports the economy but also protects the weaving craft. (Boro, 2020) Bodo women guarantee that their legacy is preserved for future generations by striking a balance between tradition and contemporary aesthetics.

Festivals and community events are also strategically used by Bodo women as venues for cultural transmission. Some Bodo women are also using digital media like YouTube to showcase the traditional attire and culture of Bodos, by which the young people who reside in cities get to know their culture and customs. Additionally, these digital platforms help the Bodo women to spread the knowledge and encourage support for their cultural preservation. (Goswami, 2021) These adaptable tactics demonstrate the Bodo women's tenacity as they maintain their cultural legacy for future generations by ingeniously striking a balance between tradition and modernity.

12. CONCLUSION

Looking at the role of Bodo women through the prism of intangible cultural heritage, it is found that they are critical in maintaining and passing on the Bodo community's rich cultural identity. Throughout the different phases, the Bodo

women have shown tenacity and inventiveness in maintaining their cultural customs in the face of several obstacles, including the economy, modernisation, etc. Bodo women, by means of their proficiency in weaving, dedication to oral storytelling, and enthusiastic involvement in local celebrations, manage to maintain both the customs and traditions in keeping with the times. In light of their contributions, we can conclude that the women play a crucial role in maintaining intangible cultural heritage, and their efforts should be acknowledged and supported in both local and larger cultural contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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