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Interlacing Culture: Traditional Weaving as a Vessel of Bodo Identity

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Abstract: Weaving is the art of interlacing yarn to create textiles, traditionally carried out on handlooms or through manual techniques. Among the Bodo community, weaving is more than a method of fabric production, it is a living tradition that embodies cultural memory, identity, and collective heritage. Bodo women, as the primary custodians of this craft, skillfully transform locally spun cotton into textiles adorned with intricate motifs and symbolic patterns. Natural dyes extracted from plants, fruits, roots, and leaves infuse these fabrics with vibrant colours that reflect a deep ecological knowledge. Beyond its utilitarian value, weaving functions as a cultural language transmitting traditional skills, values, and stories across generations. This paper seeks to explore Bodo weaving as both an artistic expression and a repository of indigenous knowledge, highlighting its enduring significance in shaping community identity.

Keywords: weaving, silkworm, dyeing, design

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INTRODUCTION

The Bodo people of Assam trace their ancestry to the Great Bodo Group of the Indo-Mongoloid language family, belonging to the Assam-Burmese linguistic branch. Widely regarded as one of the earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Bodos form the largest ethno-linguistic community in Assam. Over time, their presence has extended beyond the state, reaching the adjoining regions of North Bengal, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, reflecting their far-reaching cultural and historical influence.

Historically known as the Kacharis, the Bodos have a rich and layered past that is deeply intertwined with the history of Assam and Northeast India. They are believed to have been among the earliest rulers of the region, establishing powerful and organized kingdoms such as the Kachari, Dimasa, Koch, and Borahi kingdoms. Their prominence is also recorded in ancient Indian texts, where they are referred to as “Kiratas” in the *Mahabharata*, *Yajurveda* (XXX.16), and *Atharvaveda* (X-4-14). (Narzary, 2024). Described as cave dwellers and skilled food gatherers, they possessed deep ecological knowledge, particularly of forest resources and herbal medicines. Accounts of their golden complexion further suggest their Mongoloid origin and distinct cultural identity. (Narzary, 2024)

In the present day, Bodoland stands as an autonomous political and cultural landscape within Assam. The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), which includes Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri, Baksa, and Tamulpur districts, reflects both their historical legacy and contemporary identity. A majority of the Bodo

population continues to reside in rural areas where agriculture remains central to their livelihood. Complementing their agrarian lifestyle, weaving has long been an important cottage industry—an expression of tradition, skill, and community pride.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a few publications related to Bodo weaving or textiles.

‘The Kacharis’ (1911) by Rev. Sidney Endle talks about the weaving system of the Bodos.

‘Textile Designs of the Boros of Northeast India’ (2006), co-authored by Rani Kakati Hazarika and Kabita Boro, discusses the texture, designs, colours, and length of the Bodo textile in brief form.

Juri Gogoi Konwar, in her ‘Warp & Weft: Textile Tradition of the Bodos’ (2013), presents an account of the unique textile tradition of one of the major Bodo tribes of the state of Assam.

“Traditional Textiles of Ethnic Communities of Assam” (2021) by Rajashree Phukon gives a brief introduction of textile production by the Bodos.

“Traditional Knowledge System of the Bodos” (2014), edited by Yutika Narzary, writes about the traditional handloom and silkworm in brief.

Area of the Study

The Bodo people have a rich tradition of weaving and designing their own clothes. This study

focuses on how they use traditional looms, make different designs, and prepare natural dyes. It also looks at how these weaving practices are an important part of their traditional knowledge and daily life.

METHODOLOGY

For the study of this proposed topic, descriptive and observation methods have been applied. The information has been gathered through existing literature, visual references, and documented sources.

DISCUSSION

The Bodos are believed to be among the first people in Assam to rear silkworms and introduce rice cultivation. Weaving has always held a special place in their culture, with Bodo women known for their skill in creating beautiful silk fabrics, including those made from *indi* and *muga* silk. (Narzary, 2024). Almost every household traditionally owns at least one loom, and weaving is considered an essential part of daily life. (Endle, 1995).

Rev. Sidney Endle observed that a Kochari woman, if not interrupted, could weave about half a yard of cloth in a single day. Among the Bodos, weaving is more than just a craft it is also linked to social values and identity. Traditionally, knowing how to weave is seen as an important quality for a bride, and women take great pride in this skill.

Weaving

Weaving is a long-standing tradition among the Bodos. Traditionally, Bodo women would rear silkworms and spin the silk threads themselves. These threads were then dyed using natural colors extracted from fruits, roots, and leaves, giving each textile its unique vibrancy.

The tools used in weaving, such as *saal*, *roll*, *gandwi*, *rasw*, *gorkha*, *boudangi*, *sewari*, *baangwja*, *khaitha*, *khilabari*, and *saakhuntha*, were mostly made from bamboo and wood. Bodos use both waist-loom and shuttle-loom techniques, showing their versatility and skill.

Weaving is more than just a craft for the Bodos, it is a vital part of their culture. Each piece of fabric carries stories, symbols, and values that connect the community to its history. Bodo women are especially skilled in making a variety of traditional garments, including *dokhona*, *gamusa*, *sadri* or *fasra*, *aronai*, *fali*, *drill si*, *indi si*, and *sima si*, reflecting both artistry and cultural identity.

Silkworm Rearing

Silkworm rearing is deeply intertwined with the Bodo weaving tradition. The process begins with the female silk moth laying hundreds of eggs, which are carefully stored on a clean cloth. This step is essential for

producing raw silk, the foundation of many traditional Bodo textiles.

In the traditional method, *indi* cocoons are cylindrical, tapering, and measuring about 1½ to 3 inches and are placed on a bamboo tray for around 15 days to allow the emergence of butterflies. These butterflies are then collected and kept in wooden or bamboo containers, where they lay eggs after 3–4 days. The eggs are incubated by wrapping them in a clean white cloth and hatch after about 15 days. The newly hatched *indi* larvae feed voraciously on castor leaves and, through several molts, grow into mature worms. At this stage, they are transferred to a *ghora*, a wide-mouthed bamboo basket lined with dry banana leaves or paddy straw, where they spin their cocoons over 15 days. The mature worms become less active and their skin turns slightly yellowish and translucent, producing a soft rustling sound when touched. Once cocooning is complete, the cocoons are carefully collected and sun-dried for 4–7 days. Handmade *indi* cloth has long held cultural and practical importance, especially during winter. (Konwar, 2013). Bodo women, even those who were illiterate, possessed extensive knowledge of silkworm rearing and weaving. There is a traditional belief that regular use of *indi* cloth can prevent skin allergies, and in some cases, silkworms themselves were used for remedying minor skin ailments. This knowledge is an outcome of generations of observation and practice, reflecting the Bodos' close connection with their environment, their culture, and their traditional way of life.

Dyeing

Dyeing is the art of adding color to fibers, yarns, or fabrics, and among the Bodos, it is closely connected to their love of nature. Often called “children of nature,” the Bodos draw inspiration and materials directly from their surroundings. Their traditional dyeing process relies entirely on natural sources such as fruits, plants, roots, and leaves.

In the past, natural dyeing was practiced widely, though today it is done on a smaller scale. Common materials include star fruit for blue, sindur fruit (*Bixa orellana*) for golden yellow, turmeric for orange and red, silikha (black myrobalan) and amlai (Indian gooseberry) for black, among others. These ingredients are typically boiled in water, sometimes with additives, to enhance color and durability. The yarn is then immersed in the dye, boiled for a specific time, cooled, rinsed thoroughly, and finally dried, ready for weaving on traditional handlooms.

Despite being largely illiterate, Bodo women have mastered this process over generations. As Juri Gogoi Konwar observed, almost every Bodo woman possesses intimate knowledge of weaving and dyeing. Visitors to Bodo villages can witness the preparation of yarn, the rhythmic “click-clack” of the shuttle, and the crafting of homemade cloths, an enduring tradition that

gives Bodo textiles their unique character, setting them apart from garments produced by other communities. (Konwar, 2013).

Design

In Bodo weaving, design means 'agor'. It is rich in symbolism and often inspired by nature. These designs are passed down from generation to generation, including intricate patterns such as floral, animal, hill, wood-apple, plum, rose, and hibiscus, all of which are incorporated into the patterns. Animals like elephants, pigeons, peacocks, deer, and other creatures are commonly depicted. On the other hand, geometric patterns such as twill designs, diamond patterns, and other geometrical shapes are also used.

Designs of Floral Motifs:

1. *Bwigri bibar agor* – Plum flower
2. *Thaigir bibar agor* – Elephant apple
3. *Dalim begor agor* – Seeds of pomegranate

Designs of Animals:

1. *Farou megom* – eyes of pigeon
2. *Daorai Mwkhebb* – winkle of peacock
3. *Mwi agor* – Deer

Designs of Natural Objects:

1. *Hajw agor* – Hill
2. *Okhaphwr agor* – Moon

Geometrical Design (Numbers/Codes)

Different pattern of twilling

1. 1-2=4
2. 3-2=4
3. 1-2=1
4. 3-2=3
5. 1-2=3
6. 1-4=3
7. 3-4=3
8. 1-4=3
9. 3-4=4
10. 1-4=3
11. 1-2=2
12. 3-4=2
13. 3-4=2
14. 1-4=1
15. 1-2=2
16. 3-2=1

Woven method

1. 3-4=3
2. 1-4=3
3. 1-2=3
4. 2-3=3
5. 3-4=3
6. 1-4=3
7. 1-2=3
8. 2-3=3
9. 1-2=3

10. 2-3=3
11. 1-2=3
12. 1-4=3
13. 3-4=3
14. 1-4=3
15. 1-2=3
16. 3-2=3
17. 1-4=2
18. 1-4=2
19. 1-2=2
20. 3-2=1 (Boro, 2018)

FINDINGS

1. Bodo women are highly skilled in weaving.
2. They have traditional knowledge of their own, which is passed down from generation to generation.
3. The weaving system is a vital part of Bodo culture and identity.
4. Nature greatly influences Bodo weaving.
5. The knowledge of dyeing fabric is their own, and it is completely ecological.
6. In earlier times, Bodo women were completely illiterate, but their traditional skills are no less than modern technology.

CONCLUSION

Weaving has long been the heartbeat of Bodo culture, intertwining daily life, artistry, and tradition. For generations, Bodo women have preserved this age-old practice, creating textiles that reflect both utility and cultural identity.

Today, however, Bodo weaving faces challenges from globalization, with traditional designs at risk of being lost and silkworm rearing declining. Family looms, once central to daily life, are under threat, and the authenticity of traditional garments is increasingly compromised.

In the face of these changes, there is an urgent need to revive eco-friendly weaving practices and safeguard this cultural heritage. By promoting weaving in small-scale, community-driven forms, it is possible to preserve the originality of Bodo textiles while allowing them to adapt thoughtfully to modern influences. Protecting this tradition ensures that the stories, skills, and identity embedded in each thread continue to inspire future generations.

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