

Research Article

## The Bodos in the Brahmaputra Valley: People, Language, and Culture

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### ABSTRACT

The Boros of the Sino-Tibetan language family belong to the Mongoloid group of people, drawing their tribal element from the Bodo-Garo group forming distinct tribes of northeast India by themselves with different cultural traits. Of these tribal groups of people, Boro forms an important section of the population in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam whose identity and culture are little known to the outside people. If traced thoroughly, they are found within the entire states of the national boundary as well as across the state boundary such as Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. At present, the Bodo speakers are found in the Bodoland Territorial Region (henceforth BTR) of Assam. These groups of people call themselves Boro and are known as Kachari by outsiders. The article briefly presents Boros from an ethnolinguistic perspective focusing on the various aspects of Boro society such as people, language, culture, tradition, and so on.

**Keywords:** Boro, Sino-tibetan, Ethnolinguistic

### INTRODUCTION

Bodos/boroz are one of the linguistic and ethnic communities of Assam and its few adjoined areas. The word *bodo* denotes the language as well as the people. They are commonly known as Kacharis<sup>1</sup> to the neighbouring communities like Assamese and Bengali. Considered as the aborigines and the earliest known inhabitants of the

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<sup>1</sup>Kachari is a generic term for a number of languages or dialects claiming common ancestry such as Boro-Kachari, Dimasa-Kachari, Sonowal Kachary, Thengal Kachari, etc.

Brahmaputra valley, they call themselves as *boro* or *bodo fisa* or *bodosa* 'sons of the Bodo' (Gait, 1926, p. 299). There are only a few existing written histories of the Boros of the olden days. It is believed that they ruled the whole of Assam at some particular period of time under the generic term Kachari. In the course of time, they dispersed into the different parts of the state and neighbouring provinces and some of their groups became isolated from each other. We can trace their domination in the nomenclature of some of the river names in the entire valley, that is, the Kachari word for water *di* or *doi*<sup>2</sup> apparently forms the first syllable of the names of many of the chief rivers of the province, such as Diputa, Dihong, Dibong, Dibru, Dihing, Dimu, Desang, Diku (cf. khu Tista), etc. and to these may be added Dikrang, Diphu, Digaru, etc., all near Sadiya, the earliest known centre of Chutiya-Kachari power and civilisation (Endle, 2011, p. 4). The Census of India (1881) reported 12 subgroups of Bodo language, while Endle (2011, p. 5) listed 15 of them divided into the Northern and the Southern group, the Brahmaputra being taken roughly as the dividing line. Grierson (1903), on the other hand, identified nine communities as a member of the Bodo speaking group. Thus, the combined list of languages appears to be 18 in number viz. Bodo, Chutiya, Dhimal, Dimasa, Garo, Hajong, Hojai, Lalung (Tiwa), Madani, Mahalia, Mech, Moran, Phulgariya, Rabha, Rajbanshi or Koch, Saraniya, Solaimiya, Tippera (Kokborok). In recent years, however, some of them have mixed with the Aryan people of the Aryan community and they no longer identify themselves as Kacharis, rather Hinduism groups due to some or other reasons. Very few of them are still retaining their Kachari identity. The Kacharis are now represented by the Bodos in BTR regions of Assam, Dimasa<sup>3</sup> and Hojai in the North Cachar Hills, Sonowal and Thengal Kachari in the eastern part of Brahmaputra valley and Mech in West Bengal and Nepal. The subgroups such as Dhimal, Mahaliya, Solanimiya and Phulgariya could not be traced in the Census of India (1991). Thus, there are two major divisions of the Bodo people residing in India. The Bodo folk who live to the west of the Kamrup district are called Mech and those who live in and to the east of the District of Kamrup are called Kacharis by their Hindu neighbours (Grierson, 1903, p. 1).

## ORIGIN, DEMOGRAPHY, GEOGRAPHY, AND TOPOGRAPHY

The Bodos are considered as the earliest Indo-Mongoloid migrants to North-Eastern India, who subsequently spread across the entire region of North East India. The upper course of the Yangtze and the Hoang-Ho in North West China was the original home of the Tibeto-Burman races (Grierson, 1903). These people migrated to North East India

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<sup>2</sup>At present the Boro word for water is *dwi/doi*.

<sup>3</sup>At present day, the Dimasa has the status of being a separate language with multiple dialects. There are at least five different Dimasa dialects viz. Hasao, Dembrasa, Hawar, Dijuwa and Daononaya.

in the second millennium BC (Chatterji, 1951). That area was known as Bod. The meaning of *bod* as a Tibetan word is ‘the first dwelling place or homeland’. It is also said that there were at least two great immigrants from the north and northeast into the rich valley of the Brahmaputra, that is, one entering north-east Bengal and western Assam through the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sankosh, etc., and founding there what was formerly the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa; and the other making its way through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys into eastern Assam, where a branch of the widespread Kachari race, known as Chutiyas, undoubtedly held sway for a lengthened period (Endle, 2011, p. 4).

The Bodo speakers are now spread across the entire region in all the North-Eastern states including West Bengal and Sikkim (see statement 3, Census of India, 2011). They are primarily found in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam and its few adjacent areas. More specifically, the majority of the Bodo speakers are found primarily in the Bodoland Territorial Region<sup>4</sup> (BTR) of Assam. At present there are four districts in BTR, they are Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. Though the majority of the Bodo speakers are in the BTR region, many of them are scattered in and around the state boundary of Assam. There are Bodo speakers across the national boundary as well such as Nepal (Japa), Bhutan, and Bangladesh. The number of Bodo speakers (it includes Bodo, Kachari, Mech/Mechhia, and others) in India is around 14,82,929 (Census of India, 2011), which represents 0.12% of the total population of India.

The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is an autonomous council established in the state of Assam by curving out some areas of eight districts of Assam namely Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur within the state Assam. The area under the BTC jurisdiction is called the BTR. It is an autonomous administrative unit constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India covering an area of 8,795 square kilometres. The BTR consists of four contiguous districts namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. The geographical boundary of BTR lies between 26°72 123 N to 26°472 503 N latitude and 89°472 403 E to 92°182 303 E longitude and is in the north-west part of Assam. Located in the foothills of Bhutan and bordering North Bengal, BTR has more than one-third of its land covered by the huge forest area.

The **climate** of the BTC area is subtropical in nature with a warm and humid summer followed by cool and dry winter. The maximum and minimum temperature of the different

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<sup>4</sup>BTAD is an autonomous territorial council that was established in Assam (India) according to the memorandum of settlement of 10 February 2003. At present under the new accord signed on 27 January 2020, the BTAD is renamed as BTR, with more administrative power, legislative, executive and financial powers.

months of the year range from 20°C to 45°C and 4.4°C to 29°C, respectively, in different districts of BTR (Rao *et al.*, 2016). The relative humidity in different months varies from 50% to 98%. The BTR is a high rainfall area. The area normally receives 2% of rainfall in the winter season (January to February), 25% in the summer season (March to May) and 65% in the monsoon season (June to September), and 8% in the post-monsoon season (October to December) (Rao *et al.*, 2016).

## PEOPLE

As the Bodo people are descended from a Mongoloid group, they are **physically** short stature, mesencephalic head, broad nose, projecting cheekbones, oblique slit eyes, dark and straight hair, scant moustache, devoid of body hair and brownish-yellow skin. They are laborious and hardworking people. In terms of **moral** characteristics, they are generally simple, honest, truthful and straightforward. Infant marriage is unknown among them and the young people remain chaste before marriage and true to their marriage vows in after-life.

His innocence is the innocence of ignorance, not the innocence of experience: and he is as a rule free from certain forms of evil because in his village life he has never come under any temptation to indulge in them. When contaminated by civilization, e.g., when brought into contact with our civil and criminal courts, much of this innocence much inevitably disappear; and of this sad deterioration of character any man who has been in the country, and learned to know the people well, must have experienced many melancholy and painful illustrations. (Endle, 2011, p. 3)

Out of 13 outstanding characteristics of Mongoloid culture as enumerated (Smith, 1925; Bhattacharya, 1977, p. 18) presented five modified characteristics common to other Mongoloid Boro people namely (1) they have a habit of betel chewing, (2) they have aversion to milk as an article of diet, (3) they have simple weaving loom, (4) they have a large shield used in the war and (5) they often change their residence in isolated regions with a crude form of agriculture.

The internal tribal organisation based on the division into the septs, clans or gotras is a unique phenomenon of every tribal society in India, and the Bodo society is no exception to such division and is divided into a number of *maharis* ‘clans, septs, or gotras’. The Bodo clan system is based on totemism. It is a relation or a type of intimate association of various material objects or animals with social units like clans. Each clan bears the name of specific animals, trees, or some material objects, and the name of the totem is suffixed by *-aroi*, *-roi* or *-auri*. The origin of the Bodo clan system is under uncertainty as to the exact nature of such relationships of the people and with their respective totems cannot be traced due to the absence of written historical evidence. There are however oral traditions current among the people as regards its origin. These clans

were primarily created on the basis of certain specific responsibilities entrusted to the clans to perform certain functions by Mwnsing Sing Bwrai.<sup>5</sup> Endle (2011, pp. 24–27) listed out the following clans as listed below:

**Swarga-aroi** (swarga=heaven). The heaven folk. This sub-tribe is said to be the highest of all; none of its members ever worked as cultivators, for as a rule all deoris, ojhas and others who took a leading part in religious ceremonials, were chosen from this subdivision; and the offerings made by worshippers were held to be sufficient for their maintenance.

**Basumati-aroi** (basumati=earth). The earth folk. This clan has a certain privilege not possessed by any other, that is, its members can bury their dead without in any way purchasing ground for the grave or for the erection of the funeral pyre.

**Mosa-aroi** (mosa=tiger), otherwise known in Darrang as Bagh-l-aroi (Bagk-l-aroi, the l is probably inserted for reasons of euphony). The tiger folk. The members of this sub-tribe claim to be kindred with the tiger, and all the inhabitants of a village populated by them go into mourning on hearing that a tiger has died in the neighbourhood.

**Khangkhlo-aroi**. The Khangkhlo-folk. Khangkhlo is apparently the name of a certain jungle grass, used freely both at religious ceremonials and at festive gatherings and merry makings, of which the Kacharis are very fond.

**Sibing-aroi** (sibing=sesamum). The sesamum-folk. This sub-tribe is said to be the only one that in olden times was allowed to cultivate sesame plants, and its members still hold this plant in special honour.

**Gandret-aroi** (gandret=a leech or slug). The leech-folk. This sub-tribe holds the leech in high regard and cannot under ordinary circumstances kill it; though on occasions of certain religious ceremonials, for example, purification after a death in the family, its members were required to chew a leech with vegetables for a certain limited period, though apparently only once in a lifetime.

**Narze-aroi** (narze=jute). The jute-folk. This sub-tribe held jute in special honour, and on occasions of great religious ceremonials, its members were bound to chew a certain quantity of jute.

**Doima-roi** (doima=a large river) (cf. Dimasa [doima-sa], the usual designation of the people of the North Cachar Hills). The river-folk. These in olden time were the fisherman class, though its surviving members are now merged among the mass of ordinary cultivators.

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<sup>5</sup>Mwnsing Sing Bwrai is considered to be the first human being on the earth by the Bodo folks (Narzi, 1971). He descended from heaven and assigned a particular job to do to each clan.

**Bibiziya-aroi** (bibina=to beg). The begging-folk. Professional mendicants having no fixed home or regular occupation, much like the modern Fakirs, Vairagis, etc.

**Bing-bing-aroi** (bing-bing, probably an onomatopoeic word indicating a sound more or less musical). Itinerant musicians, subsisting on the voluntary offerings of those to whom they ministered. The writer has occasionally seen one or two members of this class in Kachari villages.

**Ding-aroi** (dinga=a bamboo water-vessel). The dinga-folk. The members of this sub-tribe are said to have formerly earned their livelihood by making these bamboo water vessels.

**Goi-bai-roi** (goi=the areca-palm). The areca-folk; formerly devoted to the cultivation of the areca, of which they perhaps held the monopoly.

**Ramsharoi**. Ramsha folk. Ramsha is said to be the name of a Mauza in Kamrup. It may be noted further that Ram-sa (? Ram's people) is the name by which the Kacharis living in the plains are known to their brethren in the North Cachar Hills.

**Brahm-aroi**. Brahma folk. Said to be a quasi-priestly class, found chiefly in Upper Assam. This name, like the preceding, is obviously of Hindu origin.

**Banhbara-roi**. Bamboo-grove folk. It is the sacred bamboo grove, found near many Kachari villages, where the worship of the gods is carried on at certain seasons.

**Dhekiabari-aroi**. (dhekia fern), the fern-folk. The totem of this sub-tribe was probably the fern, still sometimes used in the preparation of the fatika spirit.

**Maomara-roi**. The Mao-fish folk, perhaps originally the dwellers near the Moamari bil. (The Moamari or Maomari bil is said to have given its name to the Moamaria faction which gave so much trouble in the time of the Assamese king Graurinath Singha).

**Kherkhatha-roi** (Kerketua squirrel). The squirrel folk. Said to be a low caste and more or less criminal. One of their functions is to cut the horns of cattle.

**Fadam-aroi**. The fadam folk. The fadam is said to be identical to the tree known as sachi in Assamese.

**Mohila-roi**. Mohila folk. Mohila is a word of uncertain origin and meaning. It is said to be the equivalent of Mahaldar and to be applied to fishery lessees, and petty traders in areca-nut and betel-leaves and dried fish (na-gwran).

These clans subsequently underwent further division into sub-clans. There were as many as 80 clans and sub-clans including the previously listed clans, of whom 40 are

known as men's clans (*sengfang*) and 40 as women's (*zulu*) (Endle, 2011, p. 27). If we carefully observe the different kinds of clans in Bodo it is seen that the first two are obviously of Hindu origin, the Kachari affix *-aroi* (people, folk) being attached to the Sanskrit words Swarga and Basumati, respectively. Most of the designations applied to the other sub-tribes merely indicate the occupation, probably hereditary, by which the members of these sub-tribes obtained their livelihood. Note that the surname **Brahma** is a Hindu origin came after the implementation of Brahma (Hindu) religion by Kalicharan Mech in 1906.

Bodo society is **patriarchy** in nature. Father (*nophang*), as a rule, is the head of the family, sole authority in its management, possesses complete ownership of the family property and the vehicle through which the property descends to sons. By virtue of being the head of the family, he represents his family in the village council or any other social function at the community level. In the absence of a father rendered by death or any other circumstances like invalidity due to old age, the eldest son plays the exact role of the father. The mother, however, is not altogether a neglected figure in the family. She has her own place of importance. While the father is the head of the family management, the mother is the first woman in the family and is the supreme authority over the management of day-to-day domestic affairs. The **family property** is inherited by the legal sons and the daughters have no legal rights to inheritance. Adoption is a creditable job and the adopted child is as good as a legal one and is entitled to a portion of the family property. The Bodo **kinship** is bilateral. Individuals may be related through the father as well as the mother. The kin through the father constitute the primary kin group and are called *bahagi* and those related to the mother are called *khurma*. The matrikin though do not constitute a primary group are not in any way neglected but are treated with a due sense of respect, love and attachment.

The **childbirth** takes place at home and the expectant mother is attended on by the village old woman (midwife) who by their standard has necessary ideas of the postnatal care for the mother and the baby. In case of complications, ojhas are called in. In the olden days, there were no formal hospitals near the Bodo villages nor any medical institutions, as a result of this, most of the time a mother had to give natural birth with the help of midwives in the village itself. In the process, many mothers and children had to undergo discomfort which sometimes resulted in the death of either mother or child or both together. There were no formally recognised midwives, any respectable and competent matron being at liberty to give attendance and assistance to the patient in such cases. In cutting the umbilical cord no scissors, knife or another implement of steel is ever used, nor is the severance effected at one stroke, but in a succession of slight cuts, seven such cuts being made in the case of a girl, and only five in that of a

boy. The cutting instruments consist of thin hard strips of bamboo, shaped roughly into the form of a knife; and a separate bamboo knife must be used in making each slight cut, seven such knives being thus made use of for a female child and five for a male. The midwife receives no money for her services, but when the mother recovers, a feast is given at the parent's expense, in which pork and other flesh meat are always present in abundance (Endle, 2011, pp. 41–42). For about a month or 6 weeks, after giving birth to a child, the mother is held to be technically unclean, and is subjected to certain social and religious limitations; she may not approach the *dham* or domestic altar commonly found inside a Kacharis dwelling-house. This period of ceremonial uncleanness is usually terminated by the use of the water of peace (*dwi-santhi*). The *deori* freely sprinkles the mother as well as the house and its contents with this holy water, after which she is fully at liberty to resume social intercourse with her neighbours.

There seems to be no special principle underlying the giving of **names** to children, nor do such names, as a rule, resemble those of their fathers. Most of the time, the naming of a child is done randomly and spontaneously. Sometimes according to the **look** and **behaviour** or **temperament** of the child, resembling the natural objects that exist in the real world. Like some children often take the name of the **day** or the **month** or **festival** in which they were born. Hence we often find names such as Sombaru, Mangal, Budbari, Maghua, Phaguna, Domasi, etc. Sometimes, children are given **croops** names such as maibra, maisali, jwsa, asu, aloo, lapa, etc. There are some names that are obviously adopted from the Hindus, for example, Ganga Ram, Sathi Ram, etc., and from English, for example, Savio, Robert, etc. Others, again, were probably given by the mother in infancy, expressive of some peculiarity in the newborn child's mental or physical temperament. Of this type, probably, is a very common name, 'Khangkhua', that is, the 'voracious one' the 'great eater'. Another illustration is the name Gab-kho that is, the weeper, the crier, etc. In short, any unusually prominent physical peculiarity is often seized upon to become the name by which the child is known throughout his whole after-life.

In **marriage**, they were clan exogamous as well as clan endogamous depending on the tradition of a particular locality as suggested by the folk songs. There is no evidence to suggest that the clan exogamy and clan endogamy of marriage was practised side by side in the same locality in the past. Although monogamy form of marriage is the rule, polygamy is not absent altogether. In very few instances polygamy is also observable in the cases like a wife unable to give birth to a child, then her husband can remarry a new woman in order to extend their family to the next generation. Marriage by engagement, service, forcible intrusion of the girl, and adoption is the traditional and socially recognised systems of marriage. Besides, marriages used to be held by abduction, elopement and

purchases with cash that had no social sanction. Remarriage of the widow is permitted. Polyandry, child marriage, cross-cousin marriage has no place in society. The preferred **season** for the marriage is early spring, that is, the month of Phalgun (February to March) when the days are apart from being longer, unlikely to be rendered uncharitable by rains and storms. Besides, the agricultural crops which are just harvested and stored up in the granaries come in a big way to help meet the marriage expenses. Traditionally, Bodos practice six different types of marriages viz. **raizlainanui t<sup>h</sup>i k<sup>h</sup>alamnai haba** (arrange marriage), **dunk<sup>h</sup>arlagnai haba** (where boy and girl flee away), **k<sup>h</sup>arsonp<sup>h</sup>uinai haba** (where a girl comes to a boy's house), **bunanui lainai haba** (marriage by capture), **gurzija t<sup>h</sup>anai haba** (obtaining girl by giving service to in-laws) and **dongkha habnai haba** (widow/widower remarriage).

**raizlainanui t<sup>h</sup>i k<sup>h</sup>alamnai haba** or arrange marriage is one of the most common and socially accepted marriage practices of the Bodos. The bride/bridegroom is chosen by the parents of the bridegroom/bride. After a prolonged dialogue an agreement is set by both the parents and an appropriate marriage date and the venue is fixed. The marriage happens either at the bride's or bridegroom's house according to the agreement fixed earlier.

**dunk<sup>h</sup>arlagnai haba** is not a socially accepted form of marriage, happens occasionally where the bridegroom elopes the bride or vice versa.

**k<sup>h</sup>arsonp<sup>h</sup>uinai haba** happens when a girl/bride leaves her house (parental) permanently and comes to stay in her lover's house (in-laws) with/without anyone's (including her parents or bridegroom's parents or bridegroom himself) consent. As a result, no choice is left for the elders and parents in the family rather get them married.

**bunanui lainai haba** is not socially accepted, rather it's a barbaric and immoral act from the part of the bridegroom that existed in the olden days. In this practice, the bridegroom captures the bride of his choice and forcefully marries her.

**gurzija t<sup>h</sup>anai haba** is hardly seen in the present Bodo society. Earlier, in families where there was no son(s), a member in the society/community or a person who works in that family is asked to be a bridegroom with his agreement. The sole purpose of this marriage is to look after the bride's parents and their property after their deceased.

**dongk<sup>h</sup>a habnai haba** though, approved by the society yet seen occasionally with certain kinds of restriction. In this marriage, the bride/bridegroom is a widow/widower. A widow can only remarry the younger brother of her husband and similarly, a widower can remarry the younger sister of his wife.

**Divorce (phathwilai bisinai)** takes place by mutual consent by the husband and wife, with a certain formality. A man and wife appear before the village elders and state their case, concluding by tearing a *phathwi bilai* ‘betel leaf’ into two pieces, a symbolic act indicating that, as the sundered leaf can never be reunited again, so their own married life is disconnected forever.

When the divorce is approved, he must pay a certain small sum (Rs. 5/- to 10/-) for his freedom, the amount is divided between the village panchayat and the divorced woman. On the other hand, if the woman is divorced for just and sufficient reasons, e.g., for unfaithfulness to her marriage obligations, the injured husband is entitled to recover whatever he may have spent at his marriage, a sum amounting sometimes to Rs. 140/- or upwards to Rs. 200/-. The man who may afterward marry the divorced woman is held to be responsible for the payment of this money; and so long as this latter condition is duly fulfilled, the divorcee is fully at liberty to live with a second husband. (Endle, 2011, pp. 31–32)

Immediately after **death** occurs, the corpse is carefully washed by the nearest relatives, the arms and legs straightened out, the head anointed with oil and the hair reverently combed. A fowl or a pigeon is killed, and from its flesh, a curry is prepared with vegetables and condiments. A portion of this food is then placed close by the deceased’s head, and the act of feeding him with a little of it is carried out up to a certain point, though no food is as a matter of fact actually placed within his lips. This act is repeated some 10 or 12 times, and what remains of the curry, etc., is then thrown away, no one is allowed to consume it. The dead man’s body is then clothed with the best garments he owned in his lifetime and the whole covered with a perfectly new cloth and in this condition, it is taken outside the homestead for final disposal. There are two recognised ways of **disposing of a dead body**, that is, (1) Burial and (2) Cremation. The latter is looked upon as the more correct and respectable, though from motives of the economy the former is by far the more common. In case of unnatural death, burial is the only method of disposal.

## HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE AND VILLAGE

Though the **traditional Bodo houses** are simple and usual in look they have their own significance. People construct several houses surrounded by a fence made of either bamboo or stem of jute or other local shrubs. Each house is allocated for a certain kind of purpose. There are certain regulations for house-building and maintaining the homestead. The entrance of the house is called *duwari*<sup>6</sup> and just after *duwari* there is *dwikhor* ‘well’ in the south. The well is constructed just after the entrance so that when

<sup>6</sup>The entrance of Bodo traditional houses is located on the western side of the homestead.

people come from outside they can wash their feet, hands and faces. Once we enter the Bodo house compound we can see *bathwu* facing the west direction at the centre. There resides the *bathwu bwrai* whom the Bodo people worship. It is surrounded by a fence containing 16 small bamboo pillars and five bands. At the centre of the fence, there is *sijwu* tree a symbols of *bwrai bathwu* adjoined by the *tulsi* (north) and *jatراسي* plant (south) representing the symbols of *gwthar* 'pure' and *nisthar* 'pure', respectively. The 16 pillars represent different deities having different functions. The lower part of the *bathwu* is designed like *dauthu bikha* 'dove's hearth' at the entrance. There is another fence that covers the whole *bathwu* considered as outside layer. On the southern side of *bathwu*, there is *swura no* serves as a guest house. At the verandah of the *swura no*, the women folks keep the *Indi Emphwu* 'silk worm' hanging from the top of verandah. The verandah of *swura no* has an extension to the east where *mwsagalgab* 'weaving implements' are projected and fixed. In this place, Boro women spin the yarn and weave beautiful Bodo traditional dresses such as *dokhon*, *jwmgra*, *aronai*, *gamsa*, etc. On the southern side of the *swura no* there is *mwswu goli* 'a place where cattle are kept' and near *mwsuw goli maihung* 'heap of paddy straw' is placed so that cattle can have an easy access to the straws to eat. In the southern part of *bakhri* facing west, there is *daogondra* 'chicken coop' where poultry are kept. Just near the *daogondra* a big bunch of firewood are stored for cooking. In the eastern side of *bathwu*, there is *bakhri* 'granary' where paddy is stored. The outer elongated edge/surface of *bakhri* is called *bakhri agan*. Variety of essential stuffs are stored in the *bakhri agan*. Along with the *bakhri* attached, there is a place called *athal* where the variety of gadgets required for livelihood are stored. Some of these are as follows: *khoisar*, *roina*, *hasini mwi*, *dangkhur*, *songrai*, *sandri*, *khokha*, *hukhen*, *sen*, *beda*, *gorkha*, *silli*, *nanawl*, *sandanga*, *gaihen*, *uwal*, *baokha*, *jekhai*, *khobao*, *thangwn*, *jakhra*, *bwrla/bathul*, *khardwi*, *hathura*, *singkhai arw baokha*, *khophri*, *kherepha*, *mwigong khada*, *khasi*, *jantha*, *laothi*, *dirung*, *jolonga mona*, *dona*, *emao*, *maiqli*, *muphur khophri*, *don*, *narjwi*, *phathw sina*, etc. In the northern side of *bakhri*, there is *phokhri* 'pond'. It is placed in the north side so that it gets direct exposure to the sunlight which helps in fast growing of fishes. There is another deity called *bari bengra* 'biswahari' who looks after the people, household things and compounds, etc. placed in the north-eastern part of *bathwu* and eastern side of *noma no*. It is constructed in such a way that both *bathwu* and *bari bengra* can be visible from the place where they are placed. Bodo main house is built on the northern side of the homestead which stretches from the west to the east. There are three divisions of the main house with the provision of the door facing the south. A house is called *no* in Bodo. The *noma no* 'mother/main house' consists of three sections such as *ising* (easternmost portion), *okhong* (middle portion) and *kophra* (westernmost portion). *Kophra* is usually used as a sitting room, *Okhong* as a sleeping room, and *Ising* is kept

apart for the family deities such as *Mainao* alias *Bathwu Burwi* (the chief of the domestic female deity, guardian and the protector of the family wealth), song raja, buli buri, etc. Only the family members of the house can enter the *ising*. Even a married daughter of the house cannot enter the *ising* because they are no longer regarded as a family member. Just before the entrance of *noma no* there are two *sathi/bathi* 'diya' called *dahab bwrai* and *dahab burwi* who look after and shield the *noma no*. The name *dahab* itself suggests 'do not enter' in Boro. In the western part of the *bathwu*, there is *wngkham songra no* 'kitchen'. Inside the kitchen, there are two separate rooms one is called *dodab* 'cooking place' and the other is called *wngkham jagra* 'eating place'. In the north-western part of *bathwu* each family has an *oma gondra* where pigs are kept. The wooden pot where pigs eat food is called *naodra*. Note that all the houses of the compound are constructed in such a way that the entrance (door) of each house faces each other.

In their domestic life, the Bodos do not differ very significantly from their Hindu neighbours. The houses are of the usual type, one-storied only, the walls being of ekra reed or of split bamboo, and the roof of thatch fastened by a cane. Each hut commonly contains two rooms, one for eating, etc., and the other for sleeping. (Endle, 2011, p. 11)

The above description of the Bodo house is of the olden days, a so-called traditional house. At present, the Bodo people have adopted modern houses in place of traditional houses. A **Bodo village** is compact and full of vegetation flourish with areca nut trees, bamboo, mango, jackfruit, banana, litchi, etc. The houses being built more closely together, sometimes a street separates several houses which compose a village. Each house, with its granary and other outhouses, is surrounded by either a ditch or a fence, intended to prevent domestic livestock of various kinds such as ducks, fowls, goats, pigs, cattle, etc. Paddy fields are kept at a little far distance from main villages.

## CULTURE, RELIGION AND FESTIVAL

It is believed that the Bodos are great **food** lovers which are clearly visible in their day-to-day life eating habits. The traditional Bodo cuisine is less spicy and very unique in nature. A traditional meal of Bodo begins with *zwu* 'local made beverage' followed by the meal and concluded by *goi-phathwi* 'areca nut and leaf'. The main course includes varieties of food items such as meat, fish, vegetables, chutney, etc. The main course is served with plain rice basically. In the olden days, Bodos used to serve food in banana leaves and trunks. As regards his food, the Bodo is as a rule by no means limited and restricted, like Aryan neighbours. On the contrary, he enjoys freedom in this respect which no doubt goes far to account for his often magnificent physique. With the exception of beef, he denies himself almost nothing. His great delicacy is pork, and a Bodo village

is usually swarming with pigs in almost every possible stage of growth (Endle, 2011, p. 15). Let us discuss some of these food habits in more detail.

**Rice** is a common food among the Bodo people. They produce varieties of rice such as *zwsa*, *maibra*, *maima*, *maisa*, *maisali*, etc. Bodo also prepares *phitha* ‘rice cake’ made from ground rice. *Phitha* is not prepared very often rather occasionally. During Bwisagw, Magw (harvesting festival) and few special occasions *phitha* are prepared. These are prepared in different shapes and sizes with different names. Some of these are *laodum phitha*, *enthab*, *sithao*, etc. Bodo’s love for **meat** is inexplicable. They prepare meat almost with every meal. When some guest comes to visit someone’s house, it is essential to have meat at meal otherwise the meal is incomplete for both the host and the guest. Bodos eat varieties of meat items and pork is one of the most priced meat items. Some of the meat items of Bodos are pigs, ducks, chicken, mutton, etc. The Bodo people not only eat domesticated animals but also eat many wild animals such as deer, buffalo, tortoise, mongoose, rabbit, etc. If the amount of meat is abundant, they dry the meat in the sunlight and sometimes in the firewood. The dried meat is then stored in a container for a future feast. **Fish** is another Bodo delicacy that comes after the meat. Bodos consume almost every fish that is found in their locality. Almost all the household have their own ponds around their surroundings. The people catch those fishes from the river, lake, ponds, etc. in their localities. Bodo consumes three types of fish such as raw fish, dried fish and fermented fish also known as **napham**. **Napham** is an exotic food that each Bodo individual loves to have. It has a very strong smell for once it is cooked its smell will spread to every corner of the kitchen and its surroundings. The item is a combination of few natural ingredients such as dry fish, arum stem, *Euphorbia splendens* leaves, alkali, white guard, one bamboo tube and plantain leaves to cover the bamboo tube. First, the dry fish is washed nicely and then grounded in the *uwal* (pounding object). The groundfish is then mixed with all the other ingredients one after another and put in *uwal* to grind together. When they are properly crushed they are put into the bamboo tube and tightly covered by the plantain leaves, so that air can’t enter from outside. The prepared food item is kept for 3 or 4 months and is opened whenever they want to have it. The food item can be stored for more than a year. Apart from the above food items, Bodos eat snails, crabs, frogs, lizards, mongooses, insects, silkworms, etc. In their day-to-day life, Bodos collect different types of wild herbs and vegetables and cultivated vegetables for the preparation of daily food in different seasons. Among the **bathwn** (chutney) the following are common: *na bathwn*, *phanlu bathwn*, *ganjema bathwn*, etc. **Zwu** is a common and prized beverage among the Bodos. Some people call it *zwu* and some call it *zumai*. There are two varieties of *zwu*; one is called *zwu bidwi/gisi* (rice beer) and another is called *zwu gwrán* (distilled one). This liquor is prepared out of rice where *amao* (agent for fermentation) is sprinkled into the cooked rice and properly

mixed. This mixer is then put into the container covered by the plantain leaves. After 6–7 days, the *zvu* becomes ready to drink. Some people keep this for years and years for better taste. As the years pass by the *zvu* becomes tastier and prized. **Goi-Phathwi** has a very significant place in Bodo food habits. Almost every person in the society eats betel nut which is generally preferred after the meal. But it is seen that some older people don't have any timetable for eating betel nuts.

**Hunting and Fishing** are common cultural practices in Bodo society.<sup>7</sup> Deer and wild pigs are frequently caught, sometimes by the use of large nets, enclosing a considerable extent of grassland in which some keen eye has detected the presence of a much-prized game. The net is gradually contracted until the prey comes within the reach of some firm Bodo arm when blows from a stick or dao speedily bring its career to a close. In this, as in almost all else, the Bodo is clannish and gregarious in what he does; and regular hunting parties are duly organised to carry out the work in hand. Much the same system is observed in conducting the fishing operations, though here the leading part is commonly taken by the women. On certain prearranged dates, the women of a village, sometimes of a group of villages, will fish a certain stream or a number of streams, for a distance extending over several miles. The fishing implement used is of a very simple character and is commonly prepared from material found in almost every village. Nets are but rarely employed, as the water in these hill streams is in the cold weather, that is, the fishing season, usually very shallow, rarely exceeding two or three in depth. The implements commonly used are mainly two, that is, (1) the *zekhai* and (2) the *palha*, the former being employed chiefly, but not exclusively, by women; and the latter by men. Both the implements are made of split bamboo work fastened together with a cane. The *zekhai* is a triangular basket, open at one end, the three triangular sides closing to a point at the other. The whole is attached to a bamboo handle some 3 or 4 feet in length. A second popular method of catching fish is the use of the *palha*, which is not very unlike an ordinary circular hencoop. It is made of split bamboo fastened together by canework and is about 4 or 4.5 feet in height and about 3 feet in diameter at the base. The upper portion is drawn somewhat close together, leaving an open space at the top sufficient to allow the admission of a man's hand, the whole structure being quite light and easily manipulated by one hand. A third instrument used by Bodo in fish-catching is a small, pointed, metallic spearhead attached to a light bamboo. This is thrust rapidly and firmly into soft mud or other like places where eels, &a, are supposed to be concealed.

Bodos people do not miss any occasion for merry-making and dance, they are dance-loving people. The literary term for the Bodo **dance** is *muusanai* or *mosanai*, which is a

<sup>7</sup>Some people still do hunting practices.

combination of two words such as *modom* ‘body’ + *sanai* ‘twisting’ = *mosanai*<sup>8</sup> (Brahma, 2003). Thus, the word *mwsanai* in Bodo means twisting of the body in bewitching motions and waves. Boro (2006) has classified Bodo folk dance into five different kinds, which are subdivided into the following based on certain kinds of occasions and settings. For instance, **Kherai Mwsanai** is a dance associated with the religious festival, **Haba Janai Mwsanai** is a dance associated with the marriage, **Bwisagw Mwsanai** is a dance associated with the seasonal and agricultural festivals, **Raijw Janai Mwsanai** is a dance associated with the life cycle and **Miscellaneous Folk Dances** such as Bagurumba, Sikhiri Sikhwla, Thungri Sibnai, Bardwi Sikhwla, etc.

### **Bagurumba**

*Bagurumba hai Bagurumba*  
*Jat nongabwla khul nongabwla*  
*Thabwrwm bamnanwi homnanwi*  
*lagoumwnkha hai lagoumwn kha*  
*Thuribarini Daosen*  
*Jwng lagwa Dajen*  
*Gwsw hwsar hwsar mwsade*  
*Hailalai Huilalai mwsade hai mwsade*  
*Bagurum bagurum mwsa de hai mwsade.*  
*Dwi jiri jiri Samo khengkhir*  
*Sonani jinjiri hai jinjiri*

The Bagurumba is a Bodo Folk song and dance known as Bagurumba which signifies the singing and dancing of the Bodo damsels inside the confined grouped house of the village in ancient days, to express their willingness to marry, youths of their own relatives but there is a family obstruction in Bodo society to marry a relative. These songs and dances have never been performed in the open but cowherds witnessed through the small holes of the bamboo wall while performing at night.

—Padmashree Madaram Brahma.

Bodos have a number of **Traditional Musical Instruments** used for merrymaking dances. The following are some of the traditional musical instruments. **Kham** is a big and long musical drum. **Siphung** is a long flute having five holes in it. The length of the flute may vary from 25 inches to 30 inches. **Jotha** is a musical instrument trampled together in pairs. Both are equal in size and shape, used for authentic Indian music. **Serja** looks like a violin and has four strings, traditionally played by a small bow made

<sup>8</sup>People may not accept this definition of dance because the basic definition of dance is to move rhythmically to music, typically following a set sequence of steps not suffering from pain.

of bamboo strip. The bowstring is made of a small bunch of hairs of a horse's tail. The Sijou (*Euphorbia splendens*) log is best known for making Serja. **Gongwna** is like a Jew's harp, a small wind instrument used by the Bodos. It was made of bamboo till recent times and nowadays metallic Gonganas are also available. **Thorkha** is a clapping instrument made of bamboo which varies from 2<sup>1/2</sup> feet to 3 feet in length. It has two internodes and three nodes; the nodes are in the upper, middle and lower, respectively. The lower node saves it from being completely split away. **Japkhring** is made of wood in half moon style having some round suffocations on its body to adjust the metallic disc coins like by pins. These dies produce harmonious musical sound during the playing.

The Bodos have the unique **traditional clothes** of their own both for men and women separately. For Women, it is Dokhona and Phasra/Jwmgra and for men Gamsa and Aronai. **Aronai** is a small Scarf, used both by Men and Women. It is a sign of Bodo tradition, used for felicitation guests with honour or as a gift. In the ancient period, Bodo warriors used Aronai as a belt on the battlefield. At the time of the war, Bodo women would weave Aronai within a single night and present it to the warriors as they set out for the battlefield. **Dokhona** is the traditional dress of Bodo women. The length of the Dokhona is roughly 3 meters and the width is 1.5 meters. It is worn to cover the whole body from chest to legs by wrapping one round at a time over the waist. Varieties of Agor (design) and different types of colours are weaved for Dokhona. Bodo women use **Jwmgra** (Scarf) to cover the upper portion of the body, usually the chest and around (Length-around 2.5 meters, width-around 1 meter). They wear various colours of Jwmgra with varieties of Agor (design) to beautify themselves. The **Gamsa** is a Bodo male traditional attire. Generally, it is 2 meters in length and 1.2 meters in width. Bodo men use to cover the portion from waist to knee by tying it in the waist. Gamsa can be in different colours. Gamsa is compulsory to wear while worshipping the god and for Bodo bridegroom.

There are no **festivals** that may exclusively be called religious or social in character. The so-called religious festivals are social in character due to mass participation and lavish eating and drinking. Similarly, the so-called social festivals are religious in character due to the worship of deities with sacrifices. Kherai and Garja are the two great religious festivals. **Kherai** is annually celebrated en masse outside the village for about 7 days and 7 nights. A domestic Kherai may also be performed at a particular household as necessitated by the sick man's recovery. **Garja** is another community worship performed within the village for the purification of the entire village and community. Bodos primarily celebrate three social festivals such as Bwisagw, a New Year festival, Khati Gasa, a pre-harvest festival and Domasi, a post-harvest festival. The celebration of these festivals is marked by eating, drinking, songs and dance accompanied by musical instruments such as kham, jotha, serja, siphung, gongina, thorkha, etc. **Bwisagw** (bwsurni

agu=year's beginning) is a great social festival of Bodos. It is celebrated in the month of Baisakha (mid-April) for the period of 7 days, beginning from the last day of the last month of the year Chaitra. Apart from **buisagu** there are festivals like **domasi** (mid-January), **k<sup>h</sup>at<sup>h</sup>i gasa** (mid-October), etc. which are of great significance in the Bodo society.

The traditional **religion** of the people is Bathwu religion in which Bathwu Bwrai and Bathwu Burwi (Mainao) are worshipped as male and female deities, respectively. They attribute the creation of Obonglaori, a Supreme being, who manifested himself as Bathwu Bwrai and created the universe. They worshipped Sijwu (*Euphorbia Splendens*) plant which is the symbol of their Supreme God Bathwu Bwrai as we have discussed in 'Household structure and village' section. Besides, they worship a starry host of lesser divinities and propitiate them with blood sacrifices. They also believe in the existence of the evil spirit to whom they are attributed all sorts of misfortunes, calamities, sickness and propitiate them with sacrifices. They also worship the spirit of the ancestors and propitiate them with offerings of good items on all ceremonial occasions such as religious and social occasions. **Bathwu** (ba=five; thwu=deep) is the ethnic religion of the Bodo people. The sijwu tree (*euphorbia splendens*) is worshipped in this religion, encircled by 18 pairs of designed bamboo sticks horizontally and five pairs of ring of bamboo, designed like a dove heart in the front side of the sijwu. Bodos believe in (Bathou-God) five mighty elements of God such as land, water, air, fire and sky. The traditional Bodo religion Bathwu has the following five principles given below:

*Bathwuni bandwa bandwba,  
Sijwuni siria siriba,  
Thaigirni khonga khongba,  
Siphungni gudunga gudungba,  
Bwrai bathwuni raoabw phongba.*

The translation of the above lines is as follows:

*The fence (boundary) of Bathwu is of five,  
Siri (line) of Sijwu is of five twigs,  
Petals of elephant apple (*dillenia indica*) are of five  
Holes of Siphung (flute) are of five,  
Holy speeches of Bathwu are of five.*

Besides Bathwu, some Bodo people have adopted Hinduism followed by Christianity and a few other contemporary religions.

The Bodo **Economy** is primarily agricultural-based. Paddy is the major crop and source of income for many Bodos. Both the hot season *Asu* and cold season *Sali* are largely

cultivated. Besides paddy, they cultivate oil seeds, jute, betel nut, etc. Most of the Bodos prefer mutually working culture. The work is carried out with the help of neighbouring fellow people of their own community who also share the same village. The workers in return are not paid for their hard work, rather they are thrown a party once the work is over. The same thing happens to the other neighbours. Apart from agrarian culture Bodos do domestication of animals, hunting, fishing, handicraft, spinning and weaving, and trade and commerce on a few occasions for their living.

## LINGUISTIC AFFILIATION

Bodo belongs to the Bodo-Garo group of Tibeto-Burman language family of the greater Sino-Tibetan family. Bodo-Garo group is a sub-group of several languages. These are Kokborok (Hill Tippera), Dimasa (Hill Kachari), Tiwa, Garo, Kachari, Bodo, Rabha, Koch, and so on. The classification of Tibeto-Burman languages of North East India is under uncertainty but most scholars agree that the nearest relatives of Bodo-Garo are Konyak or Northern Naga languages of Nagaland and the Jinghpaw dialect chain of Northern Myanmar and Yunnan (Including Singpho of Assam). This classification is often known as Sal (Burling, 1983) or Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw (Burling, 2003). Figure 1 shows the linguistic affiliation of Boro language.

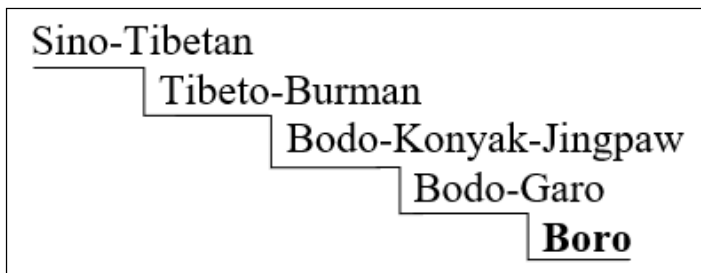


Figure 1: Classification of Boro

Till now, there is no proper study on Bodo **dialects**. Bhattacharya (1977, pp. 11–12) roughly classified Bodo Dialects into four divisions according to the distribution of the Bodo people across the state of Assam.

- a) The North-West dialect area covers the northern regions of Goalpara and Kamrup District.
- b) The South-West dialect area covers South Goalpara, Garo Hills and a few places of South Kamrup.
- c) The North Central Assam dialect area comprises the district of Darrang, Lakhimpur and a few places of North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA).

- d) The Southern Assam dialect is spoken in Nowgong, North Cachar and Mikir Hills, Cachar and adjacent areas.

However, this classification seems vague and incomplete as it is not able to comprehend the Bodo distribution areas and their variation entirely within and outside the state boundary. Kiryu (2008, pp. 2–3) classified Bodo dialects into western (Mech) and eastern dialects (Bodo). The western dialects are again subdivided into two: Jalpaiguri dialects (West Bengal) and Japa Dialect (Nepal). On the other hand, the eastern dialect has been subdivided into three such as Eastern Assam dialect, Western Assam dialect and Central Assam dialect. Basumatary (2014, p. 9) merges the above classification into the following as shown in Figure 2, giving a clearer picture to some extent even though it lacks to account for all the Bodo spoken regions.

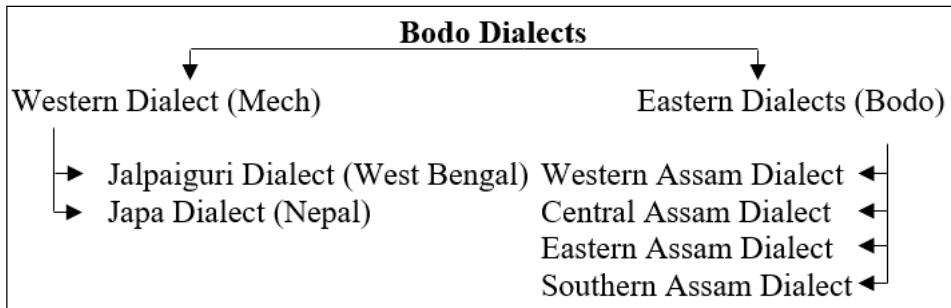


Figure 2: Bodo Dialects as spoken in Assam, West Bengal and Nepal

In Figure 2, the Eastern Bodo dialects have been sub-grouped as followings: West Assam dialect consists of Kokrajhar, Chirang and Bongaigaon districts; Central Assam dialect consists of Kamrup, Baksa and Udalguri districts; Southern Assam dialect consists of Goalpara, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts; and Eastern Assam dialect consists of Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts.

Before 1953, Bodo did not have a written **script**. Although, Roman script and Assamese/Bengali scripts were used in the past, recently, Bodos have adopted the Devanagari script. Some researchers claim that the language originally used a now-lost script called deodhai. Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha gathered a few specimens of the deodhai alphabet from an informant of Dimapur area which was noted for the Kachari region representing art and architecture. Bodo is the medium of instruction from the primary to the secondary level in the Bodo Medium schools of Assam. It was introduced as a medium of instruction at primary level in 1963 and then at the secondary level in 1968. It is taught as a Modern Indian Languages (MIL) subject up to the undergrad in colleges under Bodoland University, Dibrugarh University, Gauhati University and North Eastern Hills University (NEHU). The Bodo Departments in Bodoland University and Gauhati University offer

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in Bodo Language. Bodo has been included as a subject in the syllabi of All India Competitive Examination conducted by Union Public Service Commission, Assam Public Service Commission and University Grants Commission. Most of the Bodo medium schools are situated in the Bodo majority areas in, that is, BTAD. There are some Bodo medium schools outside the Bodo majority areas such as Karbi Anglong, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Goalpara, Kamrup (Metro) districts of Assam. Most of these schools are government and some are private. The Census of India (2001) reports 61.3% of Bodo people are literate out of which 71.4% are males and 51.1% are females.

The Bodo is **used** in Assam almost in every *domain*. The Bodo is an official language in the BTAD administration region and one of the associate state official languages of Assam. It is one of the 22 scheduled languages under eight Schedules to the Constitution of India. It is used in School, administration, office, media (newspapers, etc.), market and religious places. All the textbooks in Bodo medium schools are written in Bodo to the higher secondary level (till Class 12). Few regional newspapers in Bodo are found. The monthly magazine, souvenirs and annual mouthpieces in Bodo are also published quite frequently. There is a large amount of literature in the form of poetry, novels, drama, short stories, biographies, travelogues, children's literature and literary criticism. Daily radio programmes and television broadcasts are also regular. Even though the coverage of such programmes is limited.

For the **protection** of the ethnic identity of the Bodos, the Tribal League started a movement in the year 1933 and the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in the year 1967. On 16 November 1952 at Basugaon conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) took a resolution to get a Bodo language introduced as a medium of instruction. In the long run, the government had conceded the demand and accordingly Bodo was introduced as a medium of instruction from 1963 in primary school and 1968 in secondary schools. A movement for Roman Script for the Bodo language was started from 12 September 1974 to 12 February 1975 (BSS). After a bloody movement resulting in the loss of life of some promising Bodo youth, the BSS was forced to accept Devanagari script for the Bodo language in 1975. After independence, there were many students' organisations in different areas in the Goalpara district. A Bodo Students' Union with the name of North East India Bodo Kachari Students' Union was formed on 19 October 1963. On 19 February 1967, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed with the intention for the protection of Bodo identity.

Demand for a separate state Bodoland for the protection of Bodo language and Identity resulted in BTR after signing three consecutive accords with the government of India. The first accord with All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was signed on 20 February

1993 leading to the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council with limited political powers. The second one was with Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) on 10 February 2003 under which the BTC was established to administer four districts Chirang, Kokrajhar, Baksa, and Udalguri called Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) located on the northern banks of Brahmaputra. After several rounds of negotiations with the central government, four factions of NDFB and the ABSU, on 27 January 2020 signed another Bodo accord, the third one. At present under the new accord, the BTAD is renamed as BTR, with more administrative power, legislative, executive and financial powers.

## CONCLUSION

Through this article, we have briefly presented the Boros of Brahmaputra valley from an ethnolinguistic perspective focusing on the various aspects of their society such as people, language, culture, tradition, etc. Drawing their identity from Sino-Tibetan language family of the Boro-Garo group of languages, they form an integral part of the tribal population of north-east India. This section of people carries their identity in the form of language, culture and tradition in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Their language, culture and traditions make this group of people unique and attractive from the rest of the people of the valley.

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