

RESEARCHES ON THE TRADITIONAL ART OF WEAVING AND SPINNING OF THE BODOS

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ABSTRACT

Assam a State of north-east India, has multiracial and linguistic groups of people with different cultures of whom the Bodo-Kacharies or the Bodos form a very important section of these groups and are believed to be among the earliest settlers of Assam. At one time they built a powerful kingdom with their capital at Dimapur and then at Maibong and Khaspur. They spread over the Brahmaputra valley, North Bengal, Nepal and Bangladesh and constitute a very important group of Indo-Mongoloid people of the East. They live in scattered hamlets along the foothills of the Himalayas in the North-East as well as in scattered areas of the Brahmaputra valley. They call themselves 'Boro' or 'Bodo' although they are otherwise known as 'Kacharis' in the Brahmaputra valley. In the Brahmaputra valley, the greatest concentration of this group is in the districts of erstwhile Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrange, and Nowgong.

Keyword: Weaving , spinning, Designs, Thaokhri, Implements

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the prime occupation of the Bodo people, but by no means had they lived only on agriculture. A considerably large portion of the people depended on indigenous cottage and village industries. One of the most important cottage industries is weaving and spinning.

WEAVING AND SPINNING:

Weaving is a traditional age old industry exclusively practiced by the Bodos. Next to agriculture, weaving is most prominent cottage industry comprising mainly cotton cloth, *endi* (*eri* in Assamese); *Muga* has been playing a vital role in the Bodo economy.

Handloom weaving of Bodos is characterized by its distinctiveness and although most of the products are of purely utility purposes, some of them which are used for certain occasions are of exquisite beauty, durable quality, delicate weave, dainty designs and delightful colours. The beautiful handloom fabrics show the creative genius of individual weavers. Handloom is in fact the symbol of the largest oldest cottage industry of the Bodos and there is hardly any family in the village with no looms. It is a folk art of the Bodos. In the opinion of M. C. Saikia, “In fact spinning industry and weaving is household industry and every Bodo Kachari women is expected to excel in the finer art of handloom craftsman.” (M. C. Saikia: 1987:19).

Regarding the weaving culture of Bodo women, Montgomery Martin also comments: “Every women weaves”. (Martin, M.:1976: 350). Bodo women are expert weavers and they have a great heritage of traditional skills of weaving. They are the symbol of weaving and art of spinning too. Every Bodo women has their own traditional loom. Women weave not only for themselves but for the members of the family. In the early times they weave to meet their household requirements only.

Weaving and spinning art is considered the most important part of girls’ education and “the maiden who is ignorant of these not only occurs the social odium, but also finds it difficult to get married”. (Brahma, M. M.:1960:175). It is usual practice in the society that Bodo mother who search bride for her marriageable son, she first enquire about the girl of her knowledge of spinning and weaving art by a question, “*danai lunai rwng-gou na rwnga?*, i.e., whether she is expert in the art of weaving (*danai*) and spinning (*lunai*) or not”. It may be mentioned that “a girl not having sufficient command in the art of weaving and spinning is nick named as “*auluri*” which means lack of substantial worth in contracting marriage negotiations”. (Sharma Thakur, G. C. & Saikia, M. C.:1984;12).

From an early age, girls begin to weave and by the time they attain puberty they become master of weaving. They are well versed in weaving their dreams through their looms. (Boro, A.:2001: 121). The weaver can express their artistic tendencies in their textile designs. Both floral and geometrical designs are popular among them. About the Bodo women design, P. Goswami remarks: “Kachari weaver are eager to learn how to make the design of butterfly on a flower”. (Goswami, P: 1983, 9). The term of design of cloth in Bodo is “*agor*”. In the design (*agor*) of Bodo cloth nature played an important role. It is true that the Bodos are fond of living amidst nature adorned by trees, forest and hills which are abodes of various kinds of birds and beasts. So the Bodos belli are charmed with the scenic beauty of nature and they express their pleasure and bliss by setting designs of leaves, flowers on their cloths. The print of paws of wild animals like bears, tigers and elephant are also imitated on their

cloths. Even the twinkling eyes of pea-cock and the colourful beauty of the neck of doves can not escape the crafty hands of Bodo weavers”. (Brahma, M. M.: 1992 :6).

In the former days, there were some important *agors* such as *Thaigir Bibar* (flower of acid fruit having five shells), *Fulmwbla* and *Derhasar Agor* which had significant place in Bodo cloths. “*Thaigir Bibar*” was one of the most popular designs woven on cloths and bamboo fans. “*Fulmwbla*” and “*Derhasar*” *agor* also were equally popular in those days. Once the Bodo youths felt proud to use the scarf of “*Fulmwbla*” design on their necks. A saying was there in those days that – *Gwdwnao Fulmwbla, Bodo sengraphra wjwng bla hojwng bla* – i.e., the Bodo youths roamed proudly here and there with scarf of *Fulmwbla* on their necks”. (Brahma, M. M.:1992:6).

DIFFERENT TYPES OF DESIGNS:

There are different types of designs called *agor* on clothes which may be classified on the pattern of nature on which the shape of design is created. This may be classified as follows:

1. Design on Plants
2. Design on Animals
3. Design of Birds
4. Design of Nature
5. Design of Ornaments
6. Design of Special Pattern
7. Design of General Pattern

1. Design on Plants:

- b) *Fulmwbla* – A variety of bloomed flowers.
- c) *Dinkhia Mohor* – A design of fern.
- d) *Singri Bibar* – A design of flower of *singri*.
- e) *Bwigri Bibar* – A design of flower of palm.
- f) *Gongar thaisib* – A design of fruit of Mulberry.
- g) *Thaigir Bibar* – The flower of acid fruit.
- h) *Singri Bilai* – The leave of *singri*.
- i) *Khwdwn Bibar* – The flower of *kwdwm*.
- j) *Lao Begor Agor* – Seed of bottle gourd.

- k) *Khangkhrikola Agor* – Design of *Khangkhrikola* fruit, *Bhat Kerela* in Assamese.
- l) *Halw Dwilw Agor*
- m) *Fulwmbra Agor*.

2. Design of Animals and Insects:

- a) *Maoji Afa* – Foot print of a cat.
- b) *Mufur Afa* – Foot print of a bear.
- c) *Gangu Godo* – Design of a mantis.
- d) *Jwrema Agor* – Design of a poisonous insect.
- e) *Mwsou Hathai Agor* – Design of cow teeth.
- f) *Gandoula Agor* – Design of dragonfly.
- g) *Thamphwi Agor* – Design of Mosquito.
- h) *Khaseo Bikha Agor* – Design of heart of tortoise.
- i) *Khankhrai Agor* – Design of crab.

3. Design of Birds:

- a) *Farou Megon* – Eye of pigeon.
- b) *Daosa Mwxhreb* – Winkle of chicken.
- c) *Daorai Mwxhreb* – Winkle of peacock.
- d) *Daokhi Agor* – A design like the stool of canker hen.
- e) *Daorai Agor* – A design of peacock.
- f) *Daobo Agor* – A design of crane.

4. Design of Nature:

- a) *Hajw Agor* – Design of the hill.
- b) *Hathorkhi Agor* – Design of the star.
- c) *Okhafwr Agor* – Design of moon.
- d) *Okhrang Agor* – Design of sky.

5. Design of Ornaments:

- a) *Chandi Agor* – Design of bangle.
- b) *Medel Agor* – Design of medal.
- c) *Jinjiri Agor* – Design of chain.
- d) *Kheru* or *khera Agor* – Design of ear ring.

6. Design of Special Pattern:

a) *Mokhordoma Agor* (Design of *mokhordoma*): - It is a unique pattern of design, generally a bit tough to weave for common girl. It may be mentioned that for weaving this particular design are given sufficient weightage and she is considered excel in weaving. It is believed that a man who use this cloth bearing the *mokhordoma* design at the time of law-suit become victory in the case and hence the name *mokhordoma* , i.e.,law-suit.

7. Design of General Pattern:

- a) *Gudam Agor* – Design of button.
- b) *Dola Agor* – Design of *Dola*, i.e., a design of palanquin.
- c) *Anarkoli Agor* – Design of *anarkoli*.
- d) *Manipuri Agor* – Design of Manipuri.
- e) *Gari Chakha Agor* – Design of car wheel.
- f) *Khasi Hathai Agor* – Design of sickle teeth.
- g) *Bwiragi Agor* – Design of *boiragi* (Saint)

The Bodo women weave different kinds of cloths for the use of household family members. These are female garments – *dokhona*, *Sadri* or *jwmgra*, *gamsa* (*gamsa*) for male garment, *phali* (towel), *sima* (a large size cloth), *endi si* (*eri* cloth), *muga si* (silk cloth), *aronai*, *fali*, *dril si*, *gandu si* (pillow cover) etc.

There is a separate place for setting up looms for weaving purpose. It is usually set up on a shady side of the dwelling house, or where this is impracticable, a rude structure of thatch and bamboo work is provided to shield the weaver from the sun. (Endle.,S.:1995:10-11).The structure is called “*ishan-sali*” or “*si-sshan sali*”. The actual work is always carried out either by the lady of the house, or by one of her grown up daughters; and it is in every way suitable to women workers, as it requires very little exertion of physical strength, but only a certain quickness and readiness of eye and hand. The conditions under which the industry is carried on are in all respects pleasing and satisfactory. (Endle, S.:1995:10-11). A Kachari women, if not greatly or frequently

interrupted in her work, can weave about half a yard each day; and, as this *eri* cloth, woven in long command a ready sale at about Rs. 2/- per yard, it will be at once evident that a good worker can in this way, without neglecting other urgent domestic duties, easily make a substantial addition to the family income". (**Endle, S.: 1995:21-22**).

THAOKHRI (DISTAFF):

Spinning of fiber is done with the help of *Thaokri*. It is made of a split bamboo stick carefully cleaned and made smooth. The upper end of the stick has a knots and a lump of earthen ball or skeleton of chest of the tortoise is fixed to the other end. A cotton or *eri* cocoon fibre is attached to the knots and the spindle quickly rotated by rubbing on the thigh and allowed to spin in the air and the cotton or *eri* cocoon fibre is spun into a fine thread. This thread is used for weaving cloths.

DYE:

Among the Bodos, the art of dying yearn and cloths were community secret. (**Sen Sipra: 1999:128**).It was an ancient practice in Assam; the thread were either dyed before their use in the loom to manufacture varying coloured cloths or the finished garments were dyed red, black, yellow, blue and the like. The materials were not only lac or indigo, called '*rumdye*' in Assam, but were also prepared from various roots, leaves and barks of trees, like *khoir* (acacia catechu), acanthaceae and other ingredients, which made fast and dazzling colours. The manufacture of coloured garments has a speciality with the tribes, and it is likely that the Assamese Hindus imitated their use from them. (**Choudhury, P. C:1987: 344**). P. C. Choudhury opines that, "In the manufacture of dyed cloths, The Bodos in general, had a great deal to contribute towards their development". (**Choudhury, P.C:1987: 344**). Important references to coloured cloths is made by Bana, who states that Bhaskara sent to Harsa variously coloured and painted cloths, and smooth as birch with the pattern of jasmine flowers. (**Choudhury, P.C:1987: 344**). Bharkara Varman was one of the most remarkable Bodo ruler of Kamarupa in the 7th century AD. (**Chatterji, S.:1998: 90**). Historian Tavernier, referring to the manufacture of lac in Assam, writes that the people produced sufficient shellac, of a red colour; with it they dyed their calicoes and other staffs and when they extracted the red colour, they used the lac to lacquer cabinets and other objects of the kind, and prepared wax from it. (**Choudhury, P. C:1987:344**).

SPINNING AND WEAVING IMPLEMENTS AND TERMS:

1. *Salkhuntha* – Post of wooden or Bamboo or Betel nut tree.
2. *Thad* – Loom
3. *Gandwi* – Beam
4. *Makhu* – Shuttle
5. *Seoari (Baleb)* – Lease rod
6. *Gonsa or Gonsi* – Cross bar of split bamboo.
7. *Bangwja or Banjabari* – the pole, on which a loom is hung; the horizontal pole at the top of a loom.
8. *Rasw* – Reed
9. *Gorkha* – Treadle
10. *Gorai* – Pulley
11. *Khilabari* – Pointed stick of bamboo split for fixing the loom from rotating.
12. *Putul* – Temple used for stretching the cloth of both end.
13. *Khaita* – Drawing hook
14. *Khadini* – It is used for drawing yarn while warping.
15. *Boudangi* – A long cross bar.
16. *Nw Hasung* – Heald pipe
17. *Nw* – A large thread used in heald.
18. *Nw Khonnai* – Heald
19. *Mushra* – pirn, generally made of reed.
20. *Khainai* – Drafting
21. *Danga-natha* – Reel (a reel for winding yarn)
22. *Swrkhi* – Swift
23. *Jenther* – spinning wheel
24. *Fogai* – A kind of pirn of large size.
25. *Khuntha* – Warping stick or post
26. *Si Swngnai* – Warping
27. *Si thwrnai* – Weft.
28. *Khundung* – yarn
29. *Khundung mutha (lesa)* – Hank
30. *Mushra Sanai* – Twist
31. *Sujubnai* – Lacing, i.e., to draw edges together.

32. *Maidi hwnai* – Sizing.
33. *Thaokhri* – Distaff.
34. *Thaokhri Akhai* – Handle of Distaff.
35. *Phaneo* – A kind of reel for winding *endi* or *eri* yarn.
36. *Kho* – Creel, (pirn keeping bamboo basket).

SERICULTURE:

The art of sericulture and the rearing of cocoons for the manufacture of various silk cloths are part of Bodo weaving culture since the time immemorial. P. C. Choudhury holds the view that “Whether in the art of weaving or in the rearing of silk worms and the manufacture of dyed cloths, the Bodos in general had a great deal to contribute towards their development. Even today they produce them in plenty and supply the needs of their neighbours”. (Choudhury, P.:1987: 344).

The silk-worms which the Bodo cultivate the most is *endi* worm and the other silk is called *Muga Latha* (*Muga* in Assamese), and is cultivated very less in comparison to the first. The worm of *Endi* is a favourite diet of the Bodos. So they prefer more to *endi* cultivation.

The *Endi* Culture (*Attacus Ricina*) One of the chief industries, a very profitable one among the Kacharis, is that of the culture of the silk-worm known as *eri*, and the manufacture of the *eri* cloth. (Endle, S.: 1995:19)

The *endi* worms are reared indoors and great care to be taken for cleanliness. For the purpose temporarily a separate house ‘*nosa*’ is constructed and a great care may be taken from the attack of rats and other insects. A number of the caterpillars are also destroyed in the more advanced stages by the sting of ‘*swima sikari*’ i.e., wasp.

For the purpose of breeding the Bodo women with thin cord is passed through the base of the cocoons which are about 2½ or 3 inches in length, and then suspended on the roof. In this condition the cocoons remain for some fifteen days at the end of which period the insects make their appearance in the butterfly stage, called ‘*sikhri*’. Before able to fly away, they are collected with care placed in a piece of cloth hung on the roof for the purpose of hatch, and at the end of 5 or 7 days eggs resembling sago-grains make their appearance in the great numbers. The processes of hatching eggs continue for 4 or 5 days. One insect on an average can produce eighty to one hundred such eggs or even more.

The eggs are then collected and it is wrapped loosely in a piece of cloth and keep it hung on the roof till a few begin to hatch.

In a further period of 8 or 10 days the eggs are duly hatched and the new born insects begin to come out. The colour of the new born insects is almost black. The insect of this stage is called '*akhai-miji*'. At this stage it is difficult to remove it with hand. Therefore, tender leaves of the castor i.e, '*endi bilai gwrlwi*' are placed besides the insects for feeding when they come over on the leave for food they are removed and placed on a '*songrai*' i.e., winnowing fan. In this stage frequent change of the winnowing fan is required for cleanliness purpose. After a few days the minor insects take the size of cooked rice and it is called '*wngkham-fram*', i.e, size of rice.

In the next stage the insects grew in the size of about one or two inches. In this stage the insect is called '*akhai-bima*'. In each stage the colour of insects from black it passes to brown, and finally to white, at intervals of three or four days; and at each change of colour the worm cast its skin in snake-like fashion. It is known as '*rungonai*'. During this stage the insects are placed in the three hanging bamboo bar which is about six inches distances at each other and covered with matured leave of castor for feeding. In this period the bundles of castor leave are to be placed for every 4 or 5 hours later for continue feeding. **(Brahma, A.: 2004:12-16).**

The last stage is reached about fifteen days after being hatched, and the insect may be expected to set about the formation of its cocoon. This stage is called '*empou gwmwn*', i.e., ripen. The actual formation of cocoon is preceded by certain signs, i.e., the insect itself refuses food for a short time beforehand and becomes of a light, brilliant colour; and on handling it gently, a soft, rustling sound, proceeding from the insect itself, can be distinctly heard. **(Endle, S.: 1995:20).**

To assist it in this stage of cocoon formation, small bundles of '*lwkhna bilai*' (a native plant) or other suitable leaves of branch such as '*kusumai*', plantain, mango leaves are loosely tied together and placed within broad basket or on bamboo platforms, and the insects are then carefully placed within these bundles; and under favourable conditions the cocoon will be formed fully in about twenty-four hours.

During the fifteen days preceding the formation of the cocoon, the insect quarters must be kept scrupulously clean, and the food carefully and regularly provided.

The most favourable food of this insect is castor leave. In the absence of this, sometimes '*thasumbli bilai*' (tapioca leaves) or '*gambari bilai*' (leaves of *gamari*) are fed.

When the formation of cocoon becomes complete, selection has been made for the next breed, and the remainders are made empty by removing the insects with hand. These insects are now ready for diet.

PROCESS OF REELING OF ENDI COCOONS:

After being carefully cleaned in water and dried in the sun, the cocoons are placed in an earthen vessel and put over a slow fire in the solution of '*khardwi*' (potus), until a fitting time, where by drawing of the silk is rendered easy; they are then removed and the water gently squeezed out. After this the cocoons are taken one by one and the silk placed within the thumb of the left hand or inserted it into the stick handle to both end, whilst the right hand is employed in drawing out the silk by rounding it over the distaff. Any inequalities that may exist are reduced by rubbing them down between the thumb and finger. This mode is also adopted for joining on new cocoons. The thread is allowed to accumulate in small quality on the stick of distaff. These are afterwards exposed to the sun or near a fire till dry, when they are wound up into skin, and the silk is then ready for the weaver.

Generally in the dry and cold season the process of reeling work of cocoons are carried out by women and girls. According to S. Endle, "a kachari, working steadily at his occupation, can on an average reel off some 250 or 200 cocoons in a day"(Endle, S.: 1995:20).

MUGA-LATHA (MUGA SILK):

Muga silk cloth which are produced by the Bodo people are basically for the use of family members only and seldom manufacture for sale. The cultivation of mulberry silk worms was a good subsidiary to those who cultivate it. As the Bodos were expert in the cultivation of silkworm, the Ahom king Shuteupha (A.D- 1268-1281), in order to increase the production of silks, such as mulberry silk, *Mejankari* and *Muga*, appointed one thousand *paiks* from the Chutia and Kachari community to rear silk moths. (Rajguru, S:294).

The common names of the mulberry silkworm (*bombyx textore*) and muga silk worm (*antherea assama*) in Bodo is called '*muga-latha*'. The kind of silk worms which are fed with the mulberry trees are cultivated more by the Bodos than the muga silk worm (*antherea assama*). The silk threads produced from the cocoons of mulberry silk worms are the finest of all "with a mixture of white yellowish tinge". The cultivation of worm is a long drawn process and need a great deal of care and attention. They are reared within doors. A separate hut is constructed with special care for the ventilation of air and for the protection from animals and insects. Such a hut is filled with bamboo stages, with a passage left all round, between them and outer wall.

The treatment of this description of silkworm is as follows: - The moths are tied on sticks, which are hung from the beams of the house; the eggs, when laid, are tied up in a cloth, and When hatched, the young worms are placed on round trays and fed upon mulberry leaves. This variety of silk worm is never put out on trees to feed, and the silk produced is of a much finer texture than that of the other kinds. The time for the worms arriving at maturity varies according to the season of the year.

When they arrive at maturity the worms are removed to branches of dry leaves suspended from the roof of the house, on which cocoons are formed. The Chrysalis is killed either by continuous exposure to the sun or by smoking over a grass fire. The cocoons are then boiled for about an hour in a solution of 'khardwi' (potus), after then they are taken out and laid in removed with the hand, and the cocoons are thrown into hot water.

PROCESS OF REELING THE SILK COCOONS:

For the purpose of winding off the silk, a thick bamboo about 3 feet long is split into and the pieces driven equally into the ground about 2 feet apart; over the interior projection of one of the knots is laid a stick, to which is fixed, a little in one side, a round piece of plank about a feet in diameter. The rotary motion is given by jerking this axel, on which the thread rolls itself; in front of the vessel holding the cocoons, a stick is placed horizontally for the thread travel upon. Two persons are employed for this purpose, one attends to the cocoons and the other jerks the axel with the right hand, a with the same hand directs the thread up the left for arm, so that it is twisted in coming down again towards the hand; the left hand directs the thread over the axel.² (Hunter, W: 140-141).

CONCLUSION:

The art of weaving of the Bodos are still prevalent in the rural areas though it is rare in the town and almost every household possesses one loom. Knowledge of weaving is considered as a qualification for the bride and the women feel ashamed of if they do not know the art of weaving. In fact, weaving and spinning craft are integral part of Bodo culture which ingrained so deeply in this art that it gives a unique identity to the Bodos of North-east

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