

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **The Bodos: The “Sons of the Soil”**

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## **CHAPTER- 2**

### **THE BODOS: THE “SONS OF THE SOIL”**

Assam is a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious state in the North-eastern region of India. It is a heterogeneous society, inhabited by a number of ethnic groups and tribes with rich and diverse cultural heritage. One of Assam’s inhabitant ethnic groups, Bodo, is known as the largest tribal communities of North-East region of India who are largely confined to Assam. It is known that, “The Bodos were earlier known as Bodo-Kacharis that constitute a very important section of the different ethnic groups and races who settled in the region, with their distinctive cultural and linguistic traits” (Boro 2001, 6). They are at present known by different names like Bodos, Kacharis and Mechs (Dikshit, 2013).

‘Bodo’ is pronounced as ‘Bo-ro’ and denotes both the name of the language and the name of the community. The Bodos are an ethnic and linguistic community and are well-known as one of the indigenous tribes of Assam. They are recognized as the plains tribe in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution having their own traditions, language, cultures, and historical and political identity. They live in different areas of Assam but majority of them resides in the districts namely- Udalguri, Kokrajhar, Baksa and Chirang. These four districts in 2003 have been declared by the government of India as the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts areas (BTAD). Since then, they have been administered by Bodoland Territorial Council.

#### **2.1 Origin and Settlement**

The origin and history of settlement of the Bodos are not easy to trace because written records are rarely found. Nevertheless, attempts have been made by different scholars in that line. Through some sources Bodos came to be known as one of the largest tribes of India which has a glorious past.

Bodo represents one of the largest of the 18 ethnic sub-groups within the Kachari group of Assam, first classified in the 19th century. In their writings, Basumatary (2005) and Boro (2010) mentioned that the term ‘Bodo’ appeared for the first time in 1847 in B. H.

Hodgson’s account on the indigenous population of Assam in which he differentiated “Kochs”, “Bodos”, and “Dhimals”. Therefore, in order to understand clearly about the Bodos, it is important to understand who are the Kacharis? According to Edward Gait (1926), ‘Kachari’ is a generic term for a number of groups speaking a more or less common dialect or language and claiming a common mythical ancestry. Goswami (2012) and many other scholars regard the Kacharis as aborigines, or the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley i.e, the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. Their rule was active in Assam up to the 12th century A.D. but later they moved to the western part of the Brahmaputra valley, North Cachar hills and the plains of Cachar in the 16th century A.D. to evade the Ahom onslaught. The eighteen sub-groups within the Kachari group classified during those period were- Bodo, Dimasa, Lalung, Madani, Mech, Rabha, Saraniya, Hojai, Garo, Koch or Rajbanshi, Chutiya, Moran, Hajong, Tippera, Mahalia, Dhimal, Solaimiya, Phulgariya.

The Kachari sub-groups have their own particular traditions, language, culture, custom and historical identity. Although there are certain differences in cultures, languages and social behavior of these tribes, a considerable resemblance and similarity can be seen in the complexion, physical appearances, and basis features of cultural, languages and the fundamental rituals of worship (Mondal, 2011). Boro has also mentioned in his book that, “historically Bodos include the people of the region who share some degree of cultural and linguistic heritage in a sense that the term ‘Bodo’ embraced many distinct ethnic groups” (Boro 2001, 6). So, the word ‘Bodo Kachari’ is merely a reference to the clannish division of a huge clan.

But Rev. Sidney Endle writes that, “The origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history” (Endle 1911, 3). The denotation of the Bodos as a community is originally enclosed under the umbrella term ‘Kachari’. For that matter, in contemporary period Bodo-Kacharis are known to be interchangeably used for the term ‘Bodo’. Some literatures and local people of Assam describe Bodo community as Bodo-Kachari.

K.R. Dikshit and Jutta K. Dikshit (2013) writes,

The population of North-East India is formed of several racial stocks, principally, the Mongoloids, the Indo-Aryans, the Australoids or Austric and the Dravidians, the last being a very minor group represented by some immigrant population. While the original settlers were the Mongoloids, the Indo-Aryan and other groups arrived later.

In features and general appearance the Bodos are assumed to be from the Mongolian race, and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race. According to Kameswar Brahma, “The Bodos are a race of the Mongolian people who are described to be the inhabitants of a country north of Himalayas and west of China.” (Brahma 1992). With the passage of time the ancient Mongolian group of people acquired and formed different identities and communities in Assam. They were shaped with different cultures, languages, religions, customs and traditions by the land and region where they settled down.

Belonging to Mongoloid group, the Bodos settled down mostly in different parts of North-eastern region of India and majority of them lives today in the state of Assam. Udalguri and Kokrajhar are considered as the nerve centers for Bodo inhabitants in Assam.

According to Anil Boro, the following are the areas of concentration of the Bodo people in Assam’s northern tract-

- a) Northern parts of North Lakhimpur and Dhemaji.
- b) The southern part of Sibsagar district.
- c) Areas in Howraghat and Langhin of Karbi-Anglong district.
- d) North-Eastern part of Dhemaji and Dibrugarh district.

And the areas of Bodo concentration in the southern tract of Assam are-

- a) North and Eastern parts of Dhuburi district
- b) Majority areas of Kokrajhar district

- c) Parts of Goalpara and Bongaigaon district (now Chirang district)
- d) Northern part of Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup districts (now Baksa district).
- e) Northern parts of Darrang district (now Udalguri district).
- f) North-eastern areas of Sonitpur district
- g) Dudhnoi and Dhupdhara areas in the southern parts of Goalpara district.
- h) Boko-Chaygaon and Rani areas in South Guwahati
- i) Sonapur area, in the southern part of Kamrup district.
- j) Jagiroad and Morigaon areas in the Morigaon district
- k) Rupahi and Dhing areas in the Nogaon district.

Again, the areas of Bodo settlement in the neighbouring states, according to him are-

- a) Tikrikilla area of Garo Hills in the state of Meghalaya.
- b) Dimapur area in Nagaland state.
- c) Northern part of Jalpaiguri in the state of West Bengal (Boro 2001, 89)

## **2.2 Population and Family Inheritance**

The Bodos represent one of the largest ethnic and linguistic groups of the North-East India. The 1971 national census report indicated that the Bodos were the 8th largest scheduled-tribe (ST) group in India with a total population of about 8, 67,017 in Assam (Pulloppillil, 1997). Then the population of Bodo community increased within ten years which is shown in the 1991 national census report as 1,184,569. It means that there were approximately 1.2 million Bodos in Assam which makes 5.3% of the total population in the state (Unni, 1991). Again, their population size was reported as about 1,352,771 in the 2001 national census report which constitutes 40.9% of the total Schedule Tribe population of Assam (Brahma, 2001:5). As per the recent national census report, 2011, the total population of Bodo people has increased to 1.6 million.

But, it is important to note that there is more difficulty in calculating the population size of a community than calculating the population size of a region or area. The exact population size of Bodo Community members that is declared in the national census report might be questioned in this regard as it is doubtful in its accuracy. It is particularly because:

1) The Bodos settled down in different districts of Assam and assimilated with different tribes and different racial groups which make it difficult to identify and calculate them easily.

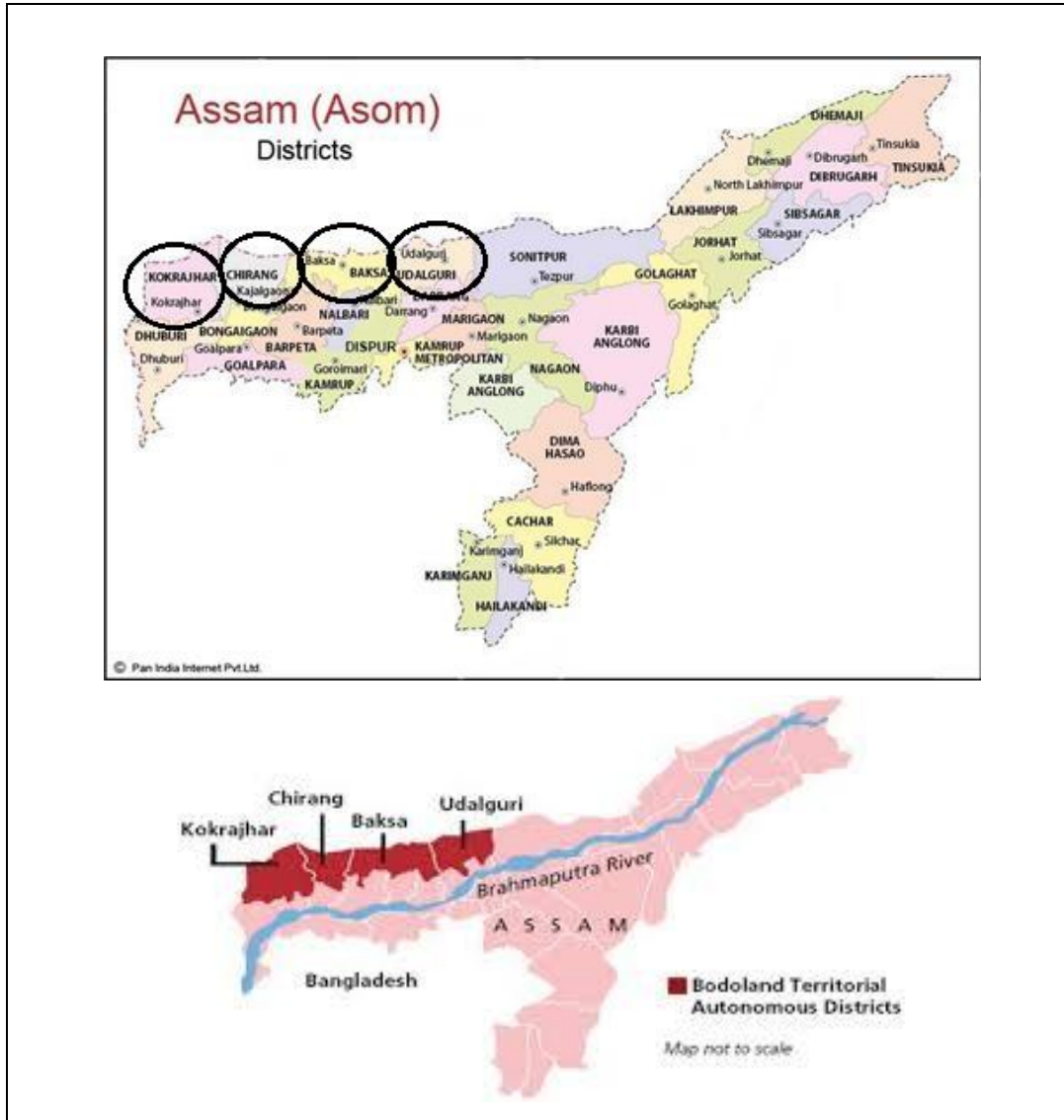
2) Some Bodos have already changed their surnames and in this regard it is difficult to identify whether he/she is Bodo.

3) The people residing in Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) areas are a mixture of Bodos and Non-Bodos. And the census report of population is generally inclusive of all the people of that area irrespective of caste, creed, sex, religion and community etc. So, it is difficult to calculate the Bodo population of India even if the area/village is considered as a basis for calculation. Because BTAD is the only area which is administered by the Bodoland Territorial Council but population size of the Bodos is still indefinite or doubtful in accuracy. For example, a table with reference to the national census report, 2011 is shown below:

**Table 1:** Table of population size of BTAD area (National Census Report, 2011)

Sl. no	Country/State/ District	Population (National Census Report, 2011)
1	India	1,21,05,69,573
2	Assam	3,12,05,576
3	Kokrajhar	8,87,142
4	Chirang	4,82,162
5	Udalguri	8,31,668
6	Baksa	9,50,075

Map 2: Maps of Assam, showing the BTAD areas



Regarding the family inheritance, it is important to mention that the Bodo society is patrilineal. Bhattacharjya (1977) also mentioned it in his writings about the Bodos. A Bodo family considers the father as the head of the family and all the household properties are entitled in his name. In absence of the father or at his death the mother or the son becomes the head and the paternal properties are transferred to the son's name. Only sons are entitled to inherit the paternal property, as daughters have to leave parent's house after getting married. If there is more than one son, every son of the family gets

equal share of land from his paternal property and one who looks after the parents till death may get an additional share of land. The parents can decide with whom they are going to live in their old age. In the absence of sons, daughters inherit the property and in absence of husband, the wife inherits the property if they have no sons. If the person is childless the property goes to the nearest relatives after the death of both husband and wife. But an adopted child is also entitled to inherit the property. Sometimes a rich father can give a portion of land to his daughter even in the presence of his sons. For that matter among the Bodos property basically means land and the products of their land.

There exists both joint and nuclear families among the Bodos. Most often when there are more than one or two sons, having been married they prefer to live in a joint family with their parents until they borne children. The fathers of most of the married sons later divide his property among sons and help them inherit for their future lineage. As a result a system of nuclear family is maintained later with a portion of inherited land even if they do not have extra source of income other than agriculture.

Again as the Bodo society is a patrilineal society, the new born child’s surname is named after the surname of the father and so the family and relatives are identified accordingly. It is based on totemistic clannish division. They have beliefs and faiths regarding certain objects of nature and they thus accept them as their own. For example- There is a clannish division in Bodo society like Mosahary (the tiger folk), where, ‘mosa’ means tiger and ‘hary’, ‘ari’ or ‘ary’ means ‘folk’. It goes on similar with the divisions like Owary (the bamboo folk), Swargiary (the heaven folk), Basumatary (the earth folk), Daimary (the water folk), Goyari (the areca nut folk), Hajoary (the hill folk), Narzary (the jute folk), Ishwary (the God folk) etc based on this totem (Brahma, 2011), which are in used as surnames or last names of the members of Bodo Community. But this was something that was practiced till the late twentieth century specifically till the 1980s. Some changes in clannish division and surnames have been experienced by the Bodos from the 1990s. They do not firmly follow the keeping of surnames that are related to totemistic objects. Surnames like Boro, Baro, Brahma and Mohilary etc got emerged in the family culture of the Bodos from the twentieth century. So, in the contemporary period, the common surnames of the Bodos are Owary, Swargiary, Brahma, Boro, Baro, Mohilary, Basumatary, Daimary, Goyary, Khakhlary, Mosahary, Narzary, Iswary, Islary,



Chamframary, Hajowary and so and so forth. These are not always related to natural objects and they do not practically accept any objects or totem as their own.

### **2.3 Religion**

According to Sindney Endle (2007), “the religion of the Kachari race is distinctly of the type commonly known as animistic and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear or dead”. Traditionally, all Bodos were followers of ‘*Bathou*’ their indigenous religion, which is at present categorized under Hindu religion because of its animistic characteristics of beliefs and practices. Dr. P. Bhattacharjee also stated that “The Bodos are worshippers of *Bathou*, the supreme God and they believe in Ghosts and Spirits also” (Bhattacharya, 1997). The *Bathou* religion incorporates rites, rituals, social norms, ethics and philosophy of the Bodos. Bhattacharjee opined that as per the belief of the Bodos, the supreme God of the Bodos, ‘*Bathoubwrai*’ who is also known as *Sibwrai* (Shiva in Hindu) created the Universe with the help of his wife *Siburwi*. The *siju* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) is taken as the symbol or created as an emblem of supreme god and the altar. This religion is based on the ‘philosophy of five’ or ‘the principle of five’. In the Bodo language ‘*Ba*’ means five and ‘*thou*’ means deep. Their philosophy is—“*Sijoua siriba, Bathoua bandwba*,” which means *Sijou* tree has five spines and *Bathou* has five ties. Five is a significant number in the *Bathou* religion which denotes the five spiritual elements viz.- *Ha, Bar, Dwi, Or* and *Okhrang* which are – earth, air, water, fire and sky respectively. *Bathou* believes in five principles. They believe that, though *Bathou* the creator is not visible, He can be realised by his five elements or virtues. Those five elements of earth and sky have been tied into five bond unions or principles (Brahma 2006:15). A clean surface at home or courtyard is considered as an ideal place for worship where a ‘*sijou*’ is planted with small bamboo wall surrounding the plant. While worshipping, a pair of arecanut called ‘*goi*’ and betel leaf called ‘*pathwi*’ is used as offering there. On some special occasion, offering includes rice, milk, and sugar.

**Fig. 1:** An altar with *Sijou* plant in traditional Bodo courtyard



Nevertheless, through the ages, a large number of Bodos have converted from *Bathou* religion to other institutionalized religions of the world. In recent decades or in the twentieth century, they have been influenced by social reforms under Brahma Dharma, Vaishnavism and Christianity. Today, there are a sizeable number of followers of Christianity among the Bodos. A large number of Bodos are also followers of Brahmo. One prominent change that happened among the Bodos is that, earlier, they worshipped only at home, there were no any worship place for large number of gathering, village/community worship. But by the influences of other institutionalized region, they also started to build and established community worship place called ‘*Bathousali*’ or ‘*thansali*’ in different villages where Bodo *Bathou* resides.

Brahma Dharma was introduced to the Bodos by Kalicharan Mech (1860-1938) who later changed his name to Kalicharan Brahma and is retrospectively also known as Gurudev. He was an immensely influential Bodo figure in the late colonial period, the most important religious and social Bodo reformer of colonial Goalpara, and later, during the pre-independence period, a significant political actor and Bodo advocate.

Kalicharan Brahma began to preach Brahma religion in a customized version since 1906 both in his native village and throughout Goalpara.

The Brahma religion is a monotheist Hindu interpretation that believes in the existence of an eternal almighty ‘*Brahma*’ to whom one should revert to by performing *Yajnas* (worships) in order to gain *Dharma* (morality), *Artha* (prosperity), *Kama* (desire), and *Makhsa* (enlightenment). Brahma Dharma does not involve sacrifice practices or caste differences and has comparably liberal views about the conduct of rites and rituals. Many Bodos who are *Brahma Dharma* followers changed their surname into “Brahma” (Narzary and Mitra 2004, 13-23; Brahma 2013: 65-72).

A long history of large-scale religious recruiting of Assamese aborigines by Hindu civilizations had preceded missionary activities since the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Fostered by the flexibility of the pre-colonial caste system, an assimilation process had taken place in which Bodos, at the price to abandon their language and original identity, gained acceptance in the dominant Hindu society through becoming members of a newly recognized transitory Hindu Koch-Caste after which they could possibly enter higher Assamese Vaishnava caste and began to deny connections with their tribal ancestors. But colonial economic and social transformations brought this conversion process to a gradual halt. Christianity became important alternatives to Vaishnavism whilst Western ideas of differentiation and nationalism inspired the small elite of remaining Bodos to revitalize and reform the traditional belief system of *Bathou* religion. At the crossroad of this identity and religious vacuum in the beginning of the 20th century which the missionaries were unable to fill satisfactorily, Brahma Dharma, a Hindu adoption that incorporated aspects of but largely rejected Bathouism, became a novel and influential creed. It led to the emergence of new circles of people since 1915 who, in turn, paved the way for first Bodo intellectual and literary platforms (Baruah 1999, 180-183; Brahma 2013, 65).

Christianity is an Abrahamic monotheist religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Christians believe that Jesus is the son of God and the savior of humanity. During the colonial period in India, Christian missionaries have converted a large number of Indians to Christianity. The system of conversion is still maintained by the

fellow Christians in the contemporary India. Christianity in the Northeast has spread mainly through the conversion of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) of the region. In Assam both the tribals and non-tribals accepted Christianity as their religion.

## **2.4 Folklore and Culture**

The culture of the Bodos is influenced by the land where they currently live in. The activities done by them for fulfillment of their daily needs had impacted their culture and lifestyle. Folklore includes four major classifications namely- oral literature, material culture, social folk customs and folk performing art, as defined by Richard M. Dorson (1982). The following is the discussion about these three classifications by skipping off the oral literature category.

### **2.4.1 Festivals**

The Bodos observe several major and minor festivals and ceremonies. These festivals may be broadly classified under two kinds: religious festivals and seasonal/agricultural festival. In fact, all the major festivals are closely connected to agriculture. *Kherai puja* and *Garja puja* are the major religious festivals and *Bwisagu* is the main seasonal festival.

*Baisagu* is the spring time festival which is known as one of the most cherished festivals of the Bodos. It is celebrated in the month of *Baisakh* (April) for seven days. *Baisakh* is the beginning of the year or New Year. It starts with the eating of 101 varieties of bitter and sour leafy vegetables, maintaining the cultural tradition of *Gwkha-Gwkhoi Janai* on the day of Sankranti or on the night before Assamese New Year. It is regarded as a sign of repenting/leaving every past wrong-doings and purifying one’s heart for the New Year to come. On the next day, that is on the start of their new year, activities like cattle rites, worshipping the Gods and Goddesses and remembering their ancestors are done by the Bodo men and women. It is celebrated as a festival of welcoming the agricultural season, and is celebrated by all the Bodos except Bodo Christians. For the Bodos who follow *Bathou*, on the first day of the New Year, during *Bwisagu*, the *sijou* is planted as *Bathou* in their courtyard and the *bera dumnai and Bathou gainai* ceremony is done in the presence of the head of the family and sometimes *ojah*. And for the Bodos who follow

Brahma religion, the ceremony or rituals of *Jaigo* is done on the first day of the *Bwisagu*. They worship the God of fire, placing an altar in their courtyard. The ceremony is led by the local priest known as *pujari* being invited for doing the rituals required for the well-being and success of the family and casting out the evil strength existed among the family members of the house.

*Kherai*, is a festival of the Bodos that represents the theosophical, ethical and religious perspective of their life, but it is celebrated only by a section of Bodos who still continue indigenous religion ‘*Bathou*’. This festival is celebrated anytime with different purposes whenever and whichever required. Generally, observance of *Kherai* is seen in the month of October- November and in the month of March-April, i.e- before starting agricultural works or before harvesting the agricultural products or just after completion of all plantation work. It is believed that this festival has some kind of relationship with the fertility cult. It is observed by praying and sacrificing goats, pigeons and chicks to ‘*Obonglaori*’ (Almighty) for the well being of the villagers and society as a whole. Though they worship other eighteen gods or goddesses or ‘*Mwdai-Daodai*’, they belief mainly centers on the Supreme Being– Almighty ‘*Siubwrai*’ or ‘*Bathou bwrai*’. During the *Kherai* festival, the *Ojha* (traditional healer and spiritual leader) plays the primary role of chanting mantras for praying to god and forwarding with necessary instructions for the purpose. *Douri* assists the *Ojah* while offering/praying, divinity and gets engaged in doing the ritualistic activities. *Doudioni* plays an important role in this festival. She is not only a dancing oracle but she also turns into another form of divinity who advices and forwards with instruction to the villagers with her power of foretelling. All of them must have to perform certain discipline concerning to sacred and purity during *Kherai Puja* (Brahma, 2011). The *Kherai puja* is observed in an open field, by the contribution and attainment of Bodo *Bathou* about five to ten villages.

The *Garja Puja* is another most important festival of the Bodos who follow *Bathou* as their religion. It is celebrated for the well-being of the village and their members. The fellow worshippers offer their harvest and sacrifice the chicks and pigeons in their village prayer house, *Garja*. A ceremony or ritual of *Hapsa Hatarnai* is included during this festival, where the chicks and pigeons are cut into pieces to sacrifice in the form of blood and life.

The Bodos have other minor but important festivals like *Domasi*, *Awnkham Gwrlwi Janai* and *Kati-gasa saonai*. The *Domasai* a festival is celebrated in the month of January, for seven days and it is a post harvest festival, thanking God for the agricultural products. It is a local form of celebrating Assamese *Magh Bihu*. It is a Bodo belief that, when one invites and treats the guest with new rice of the year/harvest, then blessings from God comes abundantly for the whole year. So, for that matter, *Awnkham Gwrlwi Janai* is organized as a feast of the first rice of their harvest by inviting relatives, friends and neighbours.

The Bodos who follow Brahma religion observes *kati-gasa* as their festival during *Kati Bihu*. When the time for harvest is about to start, this festival is celebrated. It is influenced by the mainstream Assamese and Hinduism. The rituals for this occasion includes- an altar is placed in the rice field, lighted with *alari-bathi* and submit some offerings and pray to their God for good/large agricultural products. The table below shows clearly the months for their celebration of traditional festivals.

**Table 2:** List of traditional festivals observed by the Bodos of Assam

Sl. No.	Traditional festivals of the Bodos of Assam	Celebration month
1	<i>Domasi</i>	January
2	<i>Bwisagu</i>	April
3	<i>Kherai puja</i>	March or October
4	<i>Garja Puja</i>	June, July or August
5	<i>Awnkham gwrlwi janai</i>	November or December
6	<i>Kati-Gasa</i>	October

#### 2.4.2 Dress

Their cultural traits are shaped by their worldview, and gradually acquire the status of cultural norm. There was a time when weaving was regarded a cultural norm for Bodo women. Weaving was seen as an integral part of Bodo culture. They make their own

traditional attire. Bodo girls learn to weave from a young age, and no Bodo courtyard is complete without a weaving loom. They weave their own traditional attire viz. - *dokhona*, *pharle* for female and *gamcha* for male section of the society.

**Fig. 2:** Weaving loom in Bodo courtyard



They earlier prepared their own raw materials for weaving. Many families rear silkworms, the cocoons of which are then spun into silk. In contemporary times, it is rarely seen in families but only in institutions and organizations. Weaving also has played an important role in the socio-economic and cultural identity aspects. Besides the weaving of traditional attires, some handicraft products like ‘*aronai*’ (muffler), purse and hand bag are weaved and sold in markets. In contemporary period the ‘*aronai*’ is most often used as an identity marker of the Bodo community. It is used for welcoming guest, felicitation in formal functions and as decorative items in the house. It has gained world-wide popularity because it has been used not only by the members of the community but both national and international individual irrespective of age, sex, caste, creed, language, religion and culture.

The Bodo textile is rich and unique in art. They have variety of handy work design known as *agor* which is given while weaving *Dokhona*, *Pharle* and *Aronai*. Most common *agor* they use are- *Gandeola agor*, *Daosa-mwkhreb*, *Daorai-mwkhreb*, *Bwigri Begor*, *Singri Bibar*, *Agor gidit*, *Gorkha-gongbrwi agor*, *Gongar thaisip*, *Muphur Apha*, *Daokhi agor*, *Thaigir Bibar*, *Maoji agan*, *Dinkhiya mohor*, *Khusli dentha*, *Gangu godo* and *Phool mwbla*.

### 2.4.3 Food

Rice is a staple of the Bodos and is often accompanied by a non vegetarian dish such as fish, chicken or pork. Traditionally Bodos are non-vegetarians. The traditional favourite drink of the Bodos is the rice beer prepared from sticky rice. It is called *Zu Mai* (*Zu*: wine; *Mai*: rice).

Black gram is one of the favourite dishes of the Bodos. It is seldom eaten as a vegetarian dish. Smoked pork and chicken cooked with black gram are delicacies for the Bodos. Black gram is roasted dry and crushed to remove the skin before cooking any dish. Together with the aroma of roasted black gram and smoked pork has this indigenous Bodo delicacy. Some of the foods that are regarded as special by the Bodos are mentioned below:

- 1) Napham: Napham is a unique dish in Bodo cuisine. It is made by grinding smoked fish, specific leafy vegetables, ground powder, and the mixture is allowed to age in a sealed bamboo cylinder. Thereafter, aged napham could be fried or used as is.
- 2) Onla: Onla is a gravy made from rice powder and slices of bamboo shoots cooked lightly with *khardwi* and spices. Chicken or pork can be added.
- 3) Ju Mai: It is the rice-beer or wine produced mainly during festivals like *Bwisagu* and *Domasi*. Jumai can be of two types, (A) *gishi* (wet) and (B) *gwrán* (dry). (A) *Gishi* is brewed by fermenting rice; when plum is added to the *gishi* mixture during fermentation, the product tastes like plum wine. (B) *Gwrán* is produced by distillation - it tastes like Japanese fermented liquor made from rice. The Bodos examine the strength of the wine by throwing a cup into the fire. A flash of fire indicates strong wine.
- 4) Narzi: A bitter gravy that is made from dried jute leaves. Pork or fresh water fish can be cooked together to generate a distinct taste. Narzi gravy tastes like Japanese sea weed soup. It is a unique dish which is also the favorite one among Bodos.



#### 2.4.4 Music and Dance

The traditional dance of the Bodo community is ‘*Bagurumba*’. Traditionally it is seen performed in the open field during festivals and community gatherings. Now-a-days it is most often seen performed by young village girls during cultural functions and evident in schools and colleges dominated by the Bodo community. It is traditionally performed by female (young/adult) group and accompanied by women folks singing the *Bagurumba* song and men folks playing the music with the *Bagurumba* song. The *Bagurumba* song goes like this:

*Bagurumba, Hai Bagurumba*

*Bagurumba, Hai aio Bagurumba*

*Jat nonga bwla khun nonga bwla*

*Thab brum homnanwi bamnanwi lagwmwn kha*

*Hai lwgw lagwmwn kha...*

**Fig.3:** The Bagurumba dance



‘*Kherai Dance*’ is a symbol of the artistic tradition of the Bodos. It is the symbol of arts which are originated from rituals and closely related festivals and ceremonies. There are altogether eighteen (18) different forms of *kherai* dance which the *Doudini* performs during *Kherai puja*. These dances are performed in the name of 18 different gods as per

the knowledge of the *Bathou* worshippers. The different dance forms are practiced by the other members of the Bodo society and performed during cultural functions by all the Bodos irrespective of age, sex and religion. Some of the names of different forms of *Kherai* dance which Brahma (2011) had also mentioned in his writings are:

1. A dance form with a metal bowl on hand is *Dao-thwi lwngnai*. It is a symbol of human power while drinking the blood of pigeon and chicks as a part of sacrificial ritual during *kherai puja*.
2. A dance of covering with white cloth and shield over head is a dance named *Mwsakhaori*.
3. A dance with shield and round ring of cane is *Dahal Sibnai*.
4. Dance form with two swords in hand is known as *Sotroli Thungri Sibnai*. It is performed in the name of god: *Agrang*. It represents the almighty god showing his power, strength and ability.
5. A dance on a long stretching cloth is *Sigang Ji- gwlaobonai*. This dance is an expression of endless human wants in the name of god: *Khoila*.
6. A dance *Unn Ji- gwlaobonai* in prayer of union with the truth forever. It is performed in the name of god: *Abla khungur*.
7. Dance taking sword in one hand and white cloth on the other hand with a piece of leaf in mouth surrounding a branch of tree is *khwijwma phunai*. It expresses the unity among all the members. It is performed in the name of god: *Khaji*.
8. First dance with round ring cane and chick, putting on the cane on the neck and biting the chick on two *kham*s is *Khamao Barkwnai*. It explains the control of human mind and performed in the name of god: *Raj khandra*.
9. Second same dance is known as *khamao barkwnai* which denotes the control of the five sense organs. It is performed in the name of god: *Rajphutur*.
10. The dance on two swords is known as *Thungriao Barkwnai*. It expresses and mean that if man follows the truth nobody can do harm.

Along with the songs, music is given equal importance while performing any forms of dance, be it *Bagurumba* or *Kherai*. Among many different musical instruments, the Bodos specifically use:

- 1) *Siphung*: It is a long bamboo flute having five sound holes rather than six as the north Indian *Bansuri* (flute) would have and is also much longer than it, producing a much lower tone. It is a unique Bodo flute and specific in respect of five sound holes and one air holes because of its relative meaning to the philosophy of ‘five’ of the Bodos. It is believed that five different sounds from five different holes means there are five different melody of life in human life-cycle, from *jwnwm janai* (birth) and *gwthar juli* (marriage) to *thwinai* (death).
- 2) *Serja*: It is a string musical instrument which is like a violin. But it has a round body and the scroll is bent forward.
- 3) *Tharkha*: It is a block of bamboo split into two halves for clapping.
- 4) *Kham*: It is a long drum made of wood and goat skin. It has a high base sound.
- 5) *Jotha*: It is a cymbal which is a smaller version of that being used in *Namghars*.

#### **2.4.5 Arts and crafts**

The Bodos are skilled in creating variety of colours from *Eri* and *Muga*. They bear knowledge of extracting colour from nature for dyeing different kinds of threads, clothes and fishing nets. These constitute the artistic heritage of the land of the Bodos. They can produce ink with a kind of jungle fruit known as ‘*thungkhu bergao*’ (Madustoma species) for writing and other colours for drawing pictures and different arts. These are the reflections of intrinsic love for the beauty of nature.

Besides farming, earlier Bodo men were expert craftsmen in bamboo products like *jekhai-khobai*, *Songrai*, *Khada*, *Sandrwi*, *Khophri* and *Gisip*. But in present day due to economic advancement and globalization there are some changes in their cultural activities. Some Bodo men got engaged in government or non-government jobs. Those Bodos who are not engaged in such jobs, they have taken up farming or bamboo craftsmanship.

#### **2.4.6 Marriage**

The Bodo word for marriage is ‘*juli*’ or ‘*haba*’. Being married in Bodo society is considered as getting into a marital bond and is found to bring together not just two

individuals but two families or even two villages. Traditionally the Bodos had six different types of marriages. They are-

- I. *Swngnanwi Lainai Haba*: This kind of marriage system is based on negotiation from the bride, the bridegroom and both their families. It is regarded as normal system of marriage. In contemporary times, the negotiated or arranged type of marriage is the most preferred among the Bodos. The bride is chosen by the parents of the bridegroom and then the marriage is finalized after negotiations between the guardians.
- II. *Garjia Lakhinai Haba*: It is a system of marriage where the bridegroom becomes a member of the bride’s family for several reasons. For example, if there are only daughters in the family and the parents have become old and need somebody to take care of their family responsibilities. Apart from that, in the ancient times when a bridegroom and his parents were unable to pay the bride price demand by the girl’s parents it was usual for the young man to give the equivalent in personal service in the house of the bride’s parents. The period of the service was of arrangement between the parents of the parties concerned. Co-habitation was allowed after the conclusion of the full period of service and the couples were also free to go wherever they wanted. But in most cases, the couples usually returned to the house of the bridegroom’s parents.
- III. *Dangoa Thanai or Dongkha Habnai Haba*: In this type of marriage, a man starts living with a widow or a woman deserted by her husband and the society recognized this cohabitation. This type of marriage system is approved in the Bodo society but is very rare in the present times. The man takes care of his wife’s family which may include children by her previous husband.
- IV. *Kharsonnai Haba*: This type of marriage system takes place when the boy and the girl are fond of each other and want to get married but there is a delay in the arrangement of the marriage or the peasants are unwilling to give their consent to the marriage due to some reasons. In this uncertain situation, the girl comes to the

boy’s house of her own accord and starts living with his family. After sometimes, the elders of the family fix a day and get the couple married.

- V. *Lanan Kharnai Haba*: This is known as marriage by elopement. In this type of marriage, the boy and girl want to get married but their families refuse to give their consent. The couples elope and stay for some time at a relatives or a friend’s place. Later, the parents reconcile, bring back the runaway couple and make arrangements for their wedding.
- VI. *Dwnsonnai Haba*: In this type of marriage the boy brings home the girl of his choice and gets married to her. This marriage usually takes places when the boy’s family is willing to accept the girl but the girls family is against the marriage.
- VII. *Homnanw Haba Khalamnai*: It is a kind of marriage system done by capture. At present this system is rarely seen but it was the most atrocious and abominable marriage custom prevalent among the ancient Bodos. In this type of marriage the girl was forcibly brought to the boy’s house and married. However, knowing about their daughter’s fate, the angry parents would rush to the boy’s house along with some elders of their village and justice. A meeting would be held and a fine imposed on the boy’s family.

The period of *Magh* and *Falgun* that falls in the months from February to March are considered to be the best period for marriages. Invitations for the marriage would be given from both sides to their relatives, friends and co-villagers by presenting each of them with a pair of betel leaves and areca-nuts. But in the present times they have been replaced by printed invitation cards. This is how the process of normal marriage is organized by the traditional Bodos basically the Bodo *Bathou*.

## **2.5 Status of Women**

The Bodo society is a patriarchal society. But it has been seen and understood that Bodo women do have the liberty to work in household works like cooking, fulfilling the needs

of family members, taking care of children’s educational, moral, economic, physical and mental development and so on and so forth. Moreover, extra work for additional income such as rearing of pigs, hens, goat and ducks is done by women, and the kitchen-garden owned by her in the house is often used as she wishes. So, the division of works between husband and housewife in a Bodo family is based on the necessity and physical capability to support family life. Anil Boro has also written in this line. He rightly observes that “The domestic life of the Bodos follows the patriarchal family pattern. The male member of the family is the head of the family and the owner of the family but of course the female members of the family are never kept under suppression and excessive male domination” (Boro 2001, 9)

The Bodos have a rich cultural heritage and an egalitarian society. They do not have any class or caste differences. In course of times, women are accorded their due status and respect. The Bodo woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic structure of her society. It can be said that the status of women in a particular society is a significant reflection of the social justice in the society. The Bodo society seldom witnesses such crimes as persecution or murder of wife by her husband or in laws.

Dowry system and divorce due to dowry are non-existent in Bodo society. The Bodos are at present monogamous although in the past polygamy was practiced. Polyandry is strictly prohibited.

Women are respected and valued in Bodo community. The ‘*Dongkha Haba*’ (*Dong* means possess, *kha* means ever or already) is a traditional widow remarriage system which has the significance of ensuring dignity and sanctity of the Bodo women. There is no bar in getting married with a widow. Even a widower or unmarried youth can enter in to such a marriage through mutual understanding of guardians concerned and the villagers.

A matrilocal characteristic is seen in Bodo society. The ‘*Gorjialakhinai*’ is a type of marriage where the bridegroom surrenders his right to property of his own family and lives in the house of bride. It is done by the consent of their family members and their villagers. After marriage he is entitled to get some portion of property of the bride’s family.

Bodo women has right to participate in the decision making of village council or ‘*Gamini Affat*’. Traditionally, the ‘*Ishing*’ (kitchen), ‘*Noma-no*’ (house with an altar of ‘*Bathou Borai*’ and ‘*Mainao*’) and ‘*Bakhri*’ (granary) are exclusively under the care and control of Bodo women (Brahma, 2011).

Again, it is seen that Bodo women are highly regarded for the traditional cultural practices of their society. During *Bwisagu*, *Kherai* and other festivals, Bodo women are very busy with their rituals and they are seen enthusiastic and energetic in terms of health and decision making. They weave their traditional attire; gift them to their fellow men-folks and start wearing their new weaved-dresses during *Bwisagu*, believing that *Bwisagu* is to begin with every new thing. In fact, most dances that are performed during the festivals demands greater involvement of women than their male counterparts.

## **2.6 Economic and Educational Background**

The traditional economic status of all the tribes in Assam or North East India is self-sufficient. Following Indian independence, the Bodos were given the opportunity to take advantage of scheduled tribe (ST) status. This process lead to the creation of tribal belts and blocks, protected lands meant for farming and grazing, specifically for the Bodo people. Their economic activities are based in agricultural field and household works that helps in fulfillment of their daily needs, always living in close proximity to nature. From the very early period, Bodos have lived by rice cultivation. They have traditionally been farmers, with a strong tradition of fishing, rearing poultry, piggery and silkworm rearing, cultivation of rice, jute, betel-nut, coconut, mustard and corn. Weaving of traditional attire and silkworm rearing are also their way for economic support. Recently, they have adopted plantation of tea and rubber in their agriculture. Although a few of the Bodos are motivated with the trend of change and modernity of the present day society, the majority of them are still dependent on traditional mode or style of living.

**Fig. 4:** A village house



**Fig. 5:** Kitchen shade



**Fig. 6:** Rice cultivation



**Fig. 7:** A granary



**Fig. 8:** Kitchen interior and materials used during cooking





**Fig. 9:** Agricultural products- betel nut, coconut and jute cultivation



**Fig. 10:** Piggery



**Fig. 11:** Poultry



Since the time of British Rule in India, Assam is known to produce oil, natural gas, and tea. Before independence North East India was geographically far remote from the rest of the country. Even after independence, for several decades, higher education was out of reach for most Bodos. Universities and higher educational institutes were located in far places from Bodo-areas such as Guwahati, Silchar or Dibrugarh. Moreover, year after year majority of the Bodo students missed out on the opportunity to learn in some of the best educational institutes of the state like Cotton College, Assam Medical College, Assam Agricultural University, Assam Engineering College and Gauhati University. In addition, even after obtaining an educational degree or diploma, Bodo youngsters had limited jobs or no job opportunities. These reasons fueled disappointments among many

Bodo students. Although, the Bodos were given ST quota, most of those jobs or opportunities often went unfilled. Creating easier educational and economic opportunities for Bodos became first goal for All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU). Despite the Bodo accord, neglect remains with no economic improvement being evident in Bodo dominated areas.

## **2.7 Language and Literature**

The Bodos belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family of Tibeto Burman stock of the Assam-Burmese group (Barmahalia, 2012). ‘Bodo’ as a language belongs to the branch of Barish section under Baric division of the Tibeto-Burman languages and spoken by the Bodo people of North Eastern India and Nepal. This language is one of the official languages of the Indian state of Assam, and is one of the 22 scheduled languages that are given a special constitutional status in India. It is the major language of the Bodo tribal group of Assam.

Bodo language is a rich and ancient language which is closely related to the Dimasa language of Assam and the Garo language of Meghalaya. It is also very closely related to the Kokborok language spoken in Tripura. The Bodo speaking areas of Assam stretch from Dhubri in the west to Sadiya in the east. The Bodo language of Assam has at least four clear-cut dialect-areas with a sufficient number of dialectal variations; these may be called North-eastern, South-western, North-central and southern dialect areas with phonological, morphological and glossarial differences. i.e.- (a) The South-western Bodo dialect (*Swnabari*), (b) The North-eastern Boro dialect (*Hazwari*) (c) The Southern Boro dialect (*Goalpara*) and (d) The North-central dialect (*Sanzari*).

Although the Bodo language is a rich and ancient language, it did not have any written literature until the nineteenth century. Bodo literature came up in written form in the early twentieth century which was in Bengali/Assamese script. Then, Christian missionaries, who entered the Bodo speaking areas with intent to preach their religion, published some books on religion, tales, rhymes and songs. Those missionaries also published some books on grammar and dictionary. Reverend Sidney Endle compiled *An Outline of The Kachari Grammar* in 1884. He also wrote an important monograph on the Bodos which is entitled *The Kacharis*. It was published in 1911 and it contains chapters

on social customs, agriculture practices, festivities, food habits, life cycle rituals, crafts and textiles of the Bodos. The book has also incorporated specimens of Bodo folktales, rhymes and grammars. J.D. Anderson’s *A Collection of Bodo Folktales and Rhymes* (1895) incorporated seventeen Bodo folktales translated in to English, besides the original versions in Bodo language.

Many Bodo writers struggled for adoption of Roman script in Bodo writings. But at present the Bodo language is officially written using the Devanagari script, although it also has a long history of using the Roman and Assamese script. Many Bodo intellectuals have suggested that the language originally used is now lost script called *Deodhai* (Baruah, 2007). The script has some similarity with Latin script and for evidence it can be seen in the historical remains of Kachari Kingdom at Dimapur, Nagaland. It is protected as an archaeological site by the Government of India. Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha, a renowned Assamese cultural icon, gathered a few specimen of the Deodhai alphabet from an informant of Dimapur area.

**Fig. 12:** Historical remains of the Kachari Kingdom, the entrance gate



**Fig. 13:** Historical remains of the Kachari Kingdom, the *Deodhai* script therein



In the aftermath of socio-political awakening and movement launched by the Bodo organizations since 1913, the language was introduced as the medium of instruction (1963) in the primary schools in Bodo dominated areas. Currently, the Bodo language serves as a medium of instruction up to the secondary level and an associated official language in the state of Assam. Also the language has attained a position of pride with the opening of the Graduate and Post-Graduate course in Bodo language and literature under the department of Modern Indian Languages in Gauhati University in 1996 and at present as major course in colleges under Gauhati University and Bodoland University. And from the year 2012, Bodo as a subject has been included in National Eligibility Test (NET) by the University Grants Commission (UGC).

## **2.8 Identity Movement and Political Autonomy**

Human beings love to identify themselves as a member of a society or a group. Since times immemorial people have been living by identifying which cultural group, ethnic group, religious group and linguistic group to regard as their own. In this case the Bodos are doing the same. They are proud of their ethnic identity. This pride has given rise to

political assertion in recent times. A sense of deprivation gradually deepened leading the Bodos on the path to an ethnic assertion. The Bodos led a struggle for self-determination in the late 1980s under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma, who is now regarded as the Father of the Bodos, *Bodofa*.

Sudhir Jacob George, in his article wrote that “the Bodo plains tribals who inhabit the north bank of the Brahmaputra River in Kokrajhar and Darrang districts of Assam launched a movement spearheaded by a student organization, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). From March 1987 to February 1993, the ABSU led the agitation for a separate homeland for the Bodos within the Indian Union that posed a major threat to the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government of Assam (1986-1991)” (George 1994, 878).

Brahma was a turning point in course of struggle of the Bodos for their survival with their own identity, language, literature and culture. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for the first time in North East India, a vigorous movement was launched demanding equality, economic and social justice, political and civil rights, and rights to land, language and culture. This struggle is known as Bodoland Movement (Brahma, 2001:1). At present the Bodoland Movement which was started by *Bodofa* is still active posthumously and the demand for a separate state called ‘Bodoland’ is also added to the movement. They are demanding for a separate state out of Assam by making the areas of Assam into 50-50 division.

Looking into the history of how and why the Bodoland movement started, it is important to understand the socio-religious movement among the Bodos. Kalicharan Brahma was the one who led the socio-religious movement. He gave a new developmental aspiration to the Bodos and influenced his religious teachings and showed a way to changed lifestyle. It was in the 1920s that the movement became prominent not only as the socio-religious movement but also as a political movement. Brahma (2015) has referred to Sekhar Brahma while stating that Kalicharan Brahma pioneered the political agenda of the Bodos by submitting a memorandum to the Simmon Commission on 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1929. The main objective of Simmon Commission was “to enquire into the system of Government, the growth of education and the development of representative institution in British India and the matter connected herewith” which was constituted in St. James

London on 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1927. The political sentiments and aspirations of the Bodos were reflected in the memorandum which had the following demands:

- Separate Electorate for the Bodo- Kacharis
- Creation of Bodo Regiment
- Reservation of one seat for the Bodos of Assam in the legislature
- Provision for Bodo Representative in the councils as well as Local Boards of Goalpara and Dhuburi
- Provision for free and compulsory primary education and scholarship for Bodo students
- Reservation of executive posts in provincial areas for educated Bodos

Brahma (2015) again mentioned that, in 1933, the formation of tribal league was the result of socio-economic and political revolution by Kalicharan Brahma. This tribal league was formed for socio-economic, educational and political upliftment of the tribals in general and for the Bodos in particular. In 1952, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) was formed by the Bodos, with an objective of preserving and developing the Bodo language, culture and literature.

The year 1967 was a landmark of social revolution of the Bodos as it witnessed three important events emerging out of the struggle of the Bodos for social and political identity which might be a reflection of their constant feeling that their society was on the verge of disintegration. The three important events were- 1) The then prime minister of India, Srimati Indira Gandhi, on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1967, announced the policy of reorganization of the state of Assam on the federal basis. 2) The Goalpara District Bodo Student’s union reacted to the prime minister’s policy proposal for reorganization of the state and ultimately, it led to the formation of All Bodo Student’s Union (ABSU) on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1967. And 3) finally on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1967, a new political party for plains tribals of Assam was created. It was named Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). On 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1967, the PTCA placed a demand to the then president of India, Dr. Zakhir Hussain regarding the formation of Union Territory called “Udayachal” for plains tribals. (Brahma 2015: 36). When the All Assam Students Union’s (AASU) agitation to drive out illegal immigrants (year 1979-85) was slowing down, the demand for a separate state

called the Bodoland was gaining momentum. The Bodos demanded equal rights for everyone as described in the constitution of India.

Later in 1984, after years of administration together, the PTCA got separated into two parties viz.- PTCA and PTCA (P). Then the PTCA (P) got dissolved and a new political party was formed which was named as United Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF) whose chairman was Mr. Binoy Khungur Basumatary. In 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 1986, Bodo Security Force (BSF), a terrorist outfit up under the leadership of Ranjan Daimary was formed in connection to demand for a separate state. On November 25, 1994, its name has changed to National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) (ibid, 37).

Upendra Nath Brahma, the then ABSU leader set a target in 1987, for achieving their goal of separate state as “Bodoland”. This is where the Bodoland movement started. Even after the death of Upendra Nath Brahma, different ABSU leaders at present organize rallies, protests, political gatherings and discuss about the demand of a separate state for the Bodos. Their common slogans are: “Divide Assam 50-50”, “NO Bodoland no Rest” and “Do or die”. And there are several phase of national highway blockade, rail blockade and bandhs in Assam at present.

Insurgency in the Bodo areas has also led to the displacement of over 70,000 people in the last three decades. All these are some of the reflections of the identity movement and question of political autonomy among the Bodos of Assam.

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