



A Study of the Role of Folk Songs in Preserving the Culture and Heritage: A Case Study of Bodos

Dr. Simani Boro

Asstt. Professor

Gossaigaon College, Gossaigaon, Assam
India

ABSTRACT

The folk song is an important element which is preserved the cultural heritage of the community that receipt from the ancestors and transformed it from one generation to another. It is the cultural source of the community standing on which a society can give their identity. The folk song plays an important role in narrating past social pictures and unwritten history of the society that are unknown by the people of present generation. In northeast India, the Bodos have their own distinct culture which gives their identity. The cultural elements of the community have been preserved in folk songs since immemorial period and reflected while these are sung in festivals and ceremonies. We know that through lyrical storytelling and symbolic imagery, folk songs offer insights into the customs, rituals, and folklore of the community, fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and intergenerational continuity. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study how folk songs play a role in repositioning culture and heritage, preservation of linguistic traditions, indigenous knowledges, and ancestral wisdoms.

Key Words: Culture and Heritage, Folk song, Preservation, Transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The oral or unwritten form of literature is the beginning of the present literary work. Like other communities, the history of Bodo literature is also found beginning with unwritten form and called the period of folk literature. The Bodos are very rich in folk culture and literature from the very beginning. It is seen that previous activities of the community and society are nicely stored in folk literature. The traditional cultural heritage of the community is still reflected in folk literature. Hence, we can understand its role and importance for a community and nation.

Folk literature includes many genres of unwritten forms of literature. The folk song is one of them. It has been playing an important role since the time of immemorial in preserving the traditional culture of the community and transforming it from one generation to another through lyrical verse. It is like the repository of culture and society that narrates all the ancient habits and rituals along with the feelings of past people. In the Bodo language, the folk song is called “*Khuga Methai*”, where ‘*khuga*’ means (here) oral and ‘*methai*’ means song. Hence ‘*khuga methai*’ means oral song sung by the illiterate village people in unmodified and traditional way. The folk song is also called ‘*subung methai*’. Here ‘*subung*’ means folk and ‘*methai*’ means song. So, ‘*subung methai*’ means the song sung by the village folk. These songs were composed by ancient illiterate people and sung in different occasions of the family and society and the same were transmitted orally from one generation to another. They sang it at various events, occasions, or at the work place to enjoy expressing their thoughts and feelings. They sang it at the time of paddy plantation, weaving cloth, fishing, picking vegetables, ploughing, cattle grazing in the field, marriage ceremony, social festivals and other ceremonies of the village. It was orally sung by the people playing traditional musical instrument or sometime without music.

The collection of Bodo folk songs and other oral traditions were started during the rule of British in Assam. It was firstly done by J. D. Anderson, then D.C. of Darrang district. ‘*A Collection of Kachari Folk-Tales and Rhymes*’ by J. D. Anderson published in the year 1895 is first book of collected Bodo folk songs. A few folk songs are also found in the book ‘*The Kacharies*’ by Reverend Sidney Endel published in 1911. After that some Assamese and Bodo people engaged in the collection task of Bodo folk song. In 1957 Dr. Pramod Ch. Bhattacharya collected some folk songs and published as book in written form and named it ‘*Bodo folk songs and Tales*’. In 1969 ‘*Boro khuga methai*’ (part-I) was published by Sukumar Basumatary. Another book of his ‘*Boro khuga methai*’ was published in the year 1975. ‘*Folk*

songs of the Bodos edited by Mohini Mohan Brahma (1960), and *'Boro-Kachari Solo'* edited by Profulla Ch. Goswami and Mohini Mohan Brahma (1972) are the valuable books of collected Bodo folk songs. Besides these Bhaben Narji also included some folk songs and tales in his monograph *'Boro Kacharir Somaj Aru Sanskriti'*, *'Boro-Kacharir Jana Sahitya'*, *'Boro-Kacharir gitmat'*. The folk songs of Bodos collected by different scholars are the valuable parts of folk literature in Bodo society.

1.1 Aims of the Study:

1. Tried to analyze the social picture of cultural heritage portrayed in different Bodo folk songs.
2. Tried to find out the role of folk songs in preserving the socio-culture of the community.
3. Tried to highlight the importance of oral literature.

1.2 Methodology and Data Collection:

This research aims to explore the role of Bodo folk songs in preserving culture and heritage of the community. In the methodology section outlines the approaches and methods used to gather and analyze data relevant to the study.

For the best report, required data are collected from primary and secondary sources. The primary data is collected visiting in different regions.

The secondary sources of data are taken from different books of anthropology, journal, magazine and web pages etc. Collected data are analyzed thoroughly and only required information are used in the writing.

1.3.1 Field Work:

Field work is conducted in different villages and regions known for rich tradition of folk songs. This is involved:

Participant observation: Observing and participating in cultural events, festivals, and gatherings where folk songs are performed.

Interviews: Conducting semi-structured interviews with village folk singers, cultural historians, and community elders to gather insights into the significance of folk songs in Bodo culture.

Focus Groups: Organizing focus group discussions with different community members to understand their perspectives on folk songs and their role in cultural preservation.

1.3.2 Data Analysis:

Thematic Analysis: Interview and focus group transcripts are analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the role of folk songs in cultural preservation.

Content Analysis: Folk song lyrics and performances is analysed to understand the cultural narratives and values they convey.

1.4 Discussion and Result:

Depending on theme and subject, folk songs of the Bodo's is classified into various genres. According to some writers and scholars, folk songs of the Bodo's can be classified as given in the following-

- i. Haba methai (marriage song),
- ii. Khamani methai (work song),
- iii. Bwisagu methai (Bihu song),
- iv. Laokhar methai (cowherd song),
- v. Gotho burkhainai methai (Nursery rhymes),
- vi. Gsw thwnai methai (love song),
- vii. Khela gelaiaio khonnai methai (Game song),
- viii. Zwhwlaio methai (Ballads),
- ix. Bwidachi Methai (Philosophical song) etc.

The real story and picture of the society are explained through folk songs, reflecting the socio-cultural and heritage of the community. Oral tradition, historical documentation, cultural identity, social cohesion, moral

instruction and artistic expression of the past people, etc. can be explored through the folk songs. In the following such exploration is tried to bring out.

1.4.1 Oral Tradition:

Folk songs are an important element of oral tradition, the practice of passing information, stories, and customs by oral transmission rather than written form. This kind of oral transmission is important, particularly in a society where people are mostly illiterate or written language is not predominant. Through oral tradition, folk songs ensure that knowledge is shared across generations. The younger generation people learn the songs from the elders of society and pass them on to the next creating an unbroken chain that stretches back centuries. This system helps in preserving the folk songs and the context in which they are performed, be it during rituals, celebrations or daily work.

1.4.2 Cultural identity of the community:

Folk songs are the cultural identity of the community. The unique characteristics of a culture, including its language, traditions, and values are reflected in folk songs. By singing and listening to these songs, individuals connect with their heritage and affirm their cultural identity. The folk song sung by a sister-in-law asking elder brother-in-law to bring a pair of beams and a shuttle of weaving for her whenever he goes to *Porbotjora* hill for cutting wood tells us about the culture of weaving tradition and habits of firewood collection from nearby hill or jungle. Besides, it tells about the dependent character of Bodo on nature, their habit of self-making the household instruments of their daily life from wood and bamboo, reflects the weaving culture of clothes of the Bodo girl. The song is as follows -

'Porbot zora porbot zora

Dongphang dannaw thangbwla

Sal zora, makhu zora

Labw, labw gumwi

Laru Bandaru'

(Boroni khuga methai- Mohini Mohan Brahma)

(English Rendering- O my elder brother-in-law, brings pair of beams and shuttles if you go to porbotjora hill to cut trees.)

The Bodos believe in religion and chastity. There is an altar of mother Laxmi (wealth deity) in the kitchen. So, purity is maintained in the kitchen and is not allowed to enter anybody other than family members even married daughters. Eating or consuming anything inside the kitchen is also considered as making pollutant, and so, such activities are restricted. If such activities are done knowingly or unknowingly, mother Laxmi (wealth deity) gets angry due to being a pollutant and goes away from the home as she cannot live in such a situation. In leaving her, wealth condition of the family becomes worse and turns into poor. Such belief is reflected in following folk song. -

"He dhohorom mawzi habbai ising ao

zase zananwi so kinanwi galangwbla

Hamnai nongade bauriphwr hamnai nongade

Mainao buria raga zwngwn, Bwrlu buria raga zwngwn

Lothong phothong zagwn zwnggha nokhora"

(Informant- Sukumar Boro)

(English Rendering- Oh God, the cat entered in the kitchen, it will be not good oh daughter-in-law if made stool after eating, not good oh daughter-in-law, if so, the wealth deity will get angry, and the family will be destroyed.)

1.4.3 Historical Documentation:

Folk songs work like historical records capturing the essence of particular events, eras and ways of life. It provides insights into the lives and experiences of ordinary people. The stories of love, struggle, work, and community, offer a more inclusive and nuanced view of history. Cultivation is the main livelihood of the Bodos. They moved from one place to another far places searching for new fertile land for cultivation. This habit is densely seen before the beginning of the 20th century. Both the male and female were engaged in cutting forest for new land for cultivation which is reflected in the following song-

Hinzao hwua boibw

Khwuse zananwi halao thuni

Ha-dankhwu sephaitharnangou

Aio maibra zwsa golai mwnder

Gasibw gaizwb tharnangwu

Aio gaizwb tharnangwu

(Folik Literature of Bodos- Dr. Anil Boro)

(English Rendering- Both men and women, let's work together, and plough the new plot of land, and plant summer crops like scented and sticky rice, plant all the varieties.)

The *zwhwlao methai* or Ballad recounts some heroic work of the heroes or heroines. In Assam in the foot hill of Bhutan once occurred a conflict between the Bodos and the *Bhutiyas* (Bhutanese). Hence, the people of the community asked the hero 'Basiram' to march riding on horse and fight against *Bhutiya* to defend themselves from entering into their region. The song is-

"Goraya dabraidw

Basiram zwhwlao

Gongar subaya phwilaigwu

Akhraya bugdao basiram zwhwlao

Lagama bwgdao basiram zwhwlao

Gongar subaya phwilaigwo"

(Folik Literature of Bodos- Dr. Anil Boro)

(English Rendering-Drive fast your steed, Basiram, A hero you are, The Bhutiya soldiers are marching. Tighten the rein and use your spur, drive your steed fast Basiram, Look, here they are coming.)

1.4.4 Moral Instruction:

In the early period, folk songs were used to teach moral lessons to the younger generation. It was used as a form of informal instruction through which tried to offer lessons on behaviors and explained social norms and community expectations. These may be in various aspects of society and human life. The marriage is a mentionable turning point of human life and Bodo performs it through various rituals. The new couple's life of young men and women is started after marriage. At the marriage, some valuable advice is given to the new bride and groom by elders telling them about how to lead their conjugal life smoothly and happily embracing together all the family members. Besides speeches of elders, such advice is given by folk songs sung during ceremonies as-

'Athing gazwb hathai orzwb

Akhaini phaoa zaya khwi

Athingni phaoa zaya khwi

Raizw phathalkhwi mwzangwi

zahwidw aiwi zahwidw'

(Folik Literature of Bodos- Dr. Anil Boro)

(English Rendering- Keep your feet steady and keep your teeth well. The pose of the hand and feet has not been proper, Go and partake of the life in proper way.)

The best moral instruction in Bodo folk song is found in the song of the *Kherai* festival. During *Kherai* worship, *Doudini* (prayer Dancer) gives some moralistic advice to the people so that they can lead their lives happily and peacefully. Through the song, she says that the truth is still there, God always embraces us and help us in times of need when we follow the path of truth and righteousness. But, if they become arrogant and evil, like the character of a pig and a dog, punishment will be given accordingly. Following folk song gives us such valuable advice-

'Daokhayalai phurakhwi, daoboalai swmakhwi

Sagorni dwiyalai dabwnw ulthawi bwhwiakhwi

Dongo phisaphwr dongo dongode...

Swithwalai dabwnw dongo

Sanzani humai sazjaha narthe

Swanabni humai swnab narthe

Sahani humai saha narthe

Khwlani humai khwlaha narthe

Khobordar phisaphwr raizwkhwlulai

Mwzangwi zadw nwnswr:

Omagari zabwla, swimagari zabwla

Swima hengali lagaigwn phisaphwr:

Khobordar khobordar de nwnswr

Nwu nwgwrni Boro phisaphwr

Khobordar khobordar khobordar'

(Boroni khuga methai- Mohini Mohan Brahma)

(English Rendering- Crows have not yet turned white, Cranes have not yet turned black. The waves of the ocean have never gone counter to their wont. Truth abides, Oh sons, truth abides even now. Dangers from the east, if there be, why, push them away further east, of the west further west and so with those from north and south. If you be arrogant, and unwise like the dog and the pig, I will set the tigers on you. Take heed, oh sons of the Bodos of Nwu nwgwr and be careful.

1.4.5 Artistic expression:

Folk songs are a form of artistic expression that preserves traditional music styles, melodies, rhythm, and instruments unique to a culture. They give a rich variety of sound and storytelling that contributes to the diversity of global music. By keeping these artistic traditions alive, folk songs ensure that the creative heritage of a culture is not lost. This is especially important in the face of globalization and cultural homogenization, where unique musical

traditions can be at risk of disappearing. In the folk song “*Bagurumba*” beauty of such expression preserving traditional and unique characteristics of Bodos’ culture can be found-

*“Bagurumba hai lwgwphwr bagurumba
zat nongamwnbla, khul nongamwnbla
Thabwrwm homnanwi, bamnanw lagwumwnkha
Hai lwgw lagwumwnkha
Thuribarinilai dawsen, zwngni lagwalai da zen
Gsw hwsar hwsar mwsade, baidemlai sidemlai mwsade
Hai mwsade, hai mwsade
Dwi ziri ziri samu khingkhiri
Sonani zinjiri hai zinziri
Hai zjinjiri, hai zinziri”*

1.4.6 Language Preservation:

Folk songs are a powerful tool for language preservation. The folk songs are mainly sung in regional dialects that may be at risk of extinction. For example, in Assamese, ‘*Goalparia Lokogeet*’ is a kind of folk song composed in the dialect of the Goalpara region where special words are found used by the people of that area than other regions. Its tune is also different from others. The dialects of the Bodo’s are also different from place to place. The dialect of a specific area is reflected in the folk songs composed in that area and thus preserved. As for example-

*‘Okhaphwr okhaphwr thalir thaise hor,
Thalir thaise nanga, thalir thainwi hor,
Thalir gwiabwla makhwu hornw anglai?
Dangsemani daokha zalangbai
Bwraiphwra phwinanwi zabai Omasi
Burwiphwra gandwng dokhona thausi’
(Boroni khuga methai- Mohini Mohan Brahma)*

(English Rendering- Oh moon, oh moon send me a banana or else send me two bananas, what should I send if there are no bananas, The old men came and got nothing, The old women has worn dhokhona thowsi)

It is a lullaby folk song. Here ‘*Okhaphwr*’ means moon. But in another lullaby folk song sung to lure the child given in the following, moon is indicated with the word ‘*du du*’. The song is as-

*‘Wi dudu phwi phwi
Wi dudu phwi
Nwng phwiabwla thalir thaise hor,
Thalir thaise horabwla thalir thainwi hor
Wi du du phwi phwi’
(Boroni khuga methai- Mohini Mohan Brahma)*

(English Rendering- Come down, oh moon, come down to us, or else send a banana or two, oh moon, come down to us)

The editor of the *Boroni khuga methai, Mohini Mohan Brahma* mentioned that both the songs are collected from different areas. The first one is from Tamulpur of Kamrup district and another is from Goalpara.

1.4.7 Brings social unity:

Folk songs play an important role in promoting social unity within communities. These are frequently performed in communal settings such as ceremonies, festivals, and celebrations bringing people together in shared experiences. This collective participation promotes social bonds and reinforces a sense of belonging and unity. They gathered collectively and worked together in the villages. They sing the songs at the work place or the ceremonies or festivals where people gathered collectively. There are so many folk songs in Bodos that encourage the people of the community to love and work for their birth place, nation, mother tongue, native culture, etc. The sense of some folk

songs brings the people together and inspires them to come out for the same. In the song of 'Jwhwlao Jalia Gothophwr Jwng' the patriotic sense of the younger generation and the vow to protect their birthplace is appeared. The song is-

*'zwhwlao zalia gothophwr zwng
zwnglai raokhwobw giya giya.
Dahal thungrianw zwngni gelegra muwa muwa.*

.....
*Swrba suthura gaglwb phwiba zwngni raizwao
Dangwn sugwn gaogwn
zwnglai raokhwobw giya giya.'*

(Boroni khuga methai- Mohini Mohan Brahma)

(English Rendering-We are young-star hero, we don't afraid anybody, the shield and sword are our playing object. If any enemy come to attack us, we will fight against them, we don't afraid anybody.)

The seasonal festival Bwisagu plays an important role in the life of Bodo society. This is a kind of festival where all section of people participates collectively forgetting their fault and guilt of previous if any. They get together, and visit door to door by feasting, singing and dancing which recount the peace and unity of the society. During this time, they sing such song where communal feeling is found -

*Bwisagu aiwi - - bwisagu
Bwisagu - - bwisagu
Bwthwr gwzama thanglaibai,
Bwthwr gwdana phwilaibai,
Bwisagu aiwi - - bwisagu.
Bwthwr gwdanni bar mwnnawi,
Dwisa dwikhua, bongphang laiphanga,
Daoma-daosaya,
Rongza khangbai honwi
Phwidw dinwi phwidw boibw
Bwrai burwi, sengra sikhla,
Gotho' gothai rongza dwini.
Bwisagu aiwi - - bwisagu - - bwisagu.
(Boroni Khuga methai, Mohini Mohan Brahma)*

(English Rendering -Oh mother dear Bwisagu has come, it is the Bwisagu, the old year has departed. Oh mother, our Bwisagu has come, the new wind of the new year has brought new life and hope. River and lakes, trees and creepers, birds and beasts, all life is dancing with joy. Let us come out too, young and old, men and women, boys and girls, let us congregate and rejoice.)

2. CONCLUSION

Folk songs are a crucial section of cultural heritage, serving multiple functions that contribute to the preservation and preparation of a community's identity, history, and values. The Bodos passed the traditional knowledge and customs across the generations through their oral tradition. As a historical document, the folk songs provide an inclusive record of the past. Reinforcing the cultural identity and preserving languages, they maintain the

unique characteristics of culture. They promote social unity and impart moral teachings, which also preserve artistic traditions. In this way folk songs ensure that cultural heritage is not only remembered but actively lived and appreciated by future generations.

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