

CULTURAL AND VILLAGE LIFE OF THE BODOS WITH REFERENCE TO KHERAI FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

Kherai is one of the oldest religious festivals of the Bodo tribes. The Bodo tribe is considered as the earliest settlers of Assam. They inhabit mostly in the northern bank of the Brahmaputrariver. The worship of Kherai signifies the materialistic desire of the Bodo people. It is the source of hope and prospect of agricultural life of the community. Kherai is performed in the form of worship in conjunction with dance and songs with a view to propitiating Bathou Bwrai, Mainao, and other deities so that the agricultural life of the community may thrive and bring prosperity. The ceremonial side of the festival is but a dramatic in nature and the inner significance of the dramatic prayer is intimately connected with the materialistic philosophy of the pastoral Bodos.

KEYWORDS: *Kherai, Bodo, Bathou, Sijou, Doudini*

INTRODUCTION

The Bodo or the Bodo-Kachari constitute largest ethnic group among the various ethnic population of the present-day state of Assam. They have retained their cultural traditions to a large extent and are inspired by the legends of their past history. They have been practicing wet cultivation for a long period and are well known for their traditional skill in cultivating paddy by irrigation and also for sericulture of Endi and Muga of Assam. They also contributed to a large extent in the cultural and ethnic configuration of the Assam valley. (Mukherjee, S. K., 1999)

Religion has played a paramount role in the life of the Bodos since remote past. Religious influence is discernible in every important activity of the Bodo socio-economic and cultural life.

Kherai is regarded as the oldest and greatest religious annual festival of the Bodos and had been observing as a community festival for a pretty long time. The worship of *Kherai* signifies the materialistic desire of the Bodo people. It is the source of hope and prospect of agricultural life of the community.

Kherai is performed in the form of worship in conjunction with dance and songs with a view to propitiating *Bathou Bwrai, Mainao*, and other deities so that the agricultural life of the community may thrive and bring prosperity. The ceremonial side of the festival is but a dramatic in nature and the inner significance of the dramatic prayer is intimately connected with the materialistic philosophy of the pastoral Bodos. The main objects of the *Kherai* festival are found in two ways: (i) The festival intended to protect and promote fertility of agriculture. The Bodos aspire to live happily, they pray for food. Being dependent on agriculture they seek the help of god and goddesses to assist them in the promotion of

abundant harvest; (ii) It aims to protect the community from misfortune, i.e., from illness, famine, and natural calamities. The Bodos believe that the deities Called *Mwdai* are originators of these misfortunes. Therefore to propitiate the gods and goddesses they perform *Kherai* worship.

Origin of the Kherai

The origin of the *Kherai* is difficult to trace. Varied opinions have been given as regards the origin of the *Kherai*. In the words of Medini Choudhury, the term *Kherai* derived from the word *Kharnai*, i.e., *Khar* means to flee and *ai* means Goddess. (Choudhury, M., 1988:53). He pointed out a legend behind the genesis of the *Kherai* worship. The legend runs thus: "It says that there was in the olden days an old man named Jaraphagla. He was very fastidious about meals and was popularly known as Manamsu (Mwnamsu) brai i.e. one who does not take anything without first smelling it (Choudhury, M., 1988:53).

The old man had seven married sons and used to make passes to each of the seven daughters-in-law. They did not dare to protest. But the youngest daughter-in-law (i.e. the youngest son's wife) did not tolerate the advances of her father-in-law (i.e. the father-in-law) with equanimity and fled the house one day without anybody's knowledge.

Jaraphagla went in all directions in search of his daughter-in-law and having failed to trace her, arranged a *Kherai puja*. Originally the songs and dances that went with it aimed at exposing the vices and the outrageous behavior of old man.

In course of time, however, as is the usual pattern for all Bro-Kachari festivals, aspects of agricultural life of the community came to be pronounced in the features of *puja*. It has in this way grown into a religious festival aimed at enhancing the prospects of the crop"(Choudhury, M., 1988:53).

Forms of Kherai Worship

According to the nature of worship, the form of *Kherai* may be divided into four: (i) *Asu Kherai*, (ii) *Sali Kherai*, (iii) *Nokhor Kherai* (Family Kherai), (iv) *Phalw Kherai*.

- **Asu Kherai:** As the Bodos are entirely dependent on agriculture for their subsistence, they perform a *Kherai* during the month of *Ashar* or *Shaon* on the night of dark moon with the expectation of abundant harvest of *Asu* crops. Hence the term is *Asu Kherai*. This *Kherai* is also known as *Umrao Kherai*.
- **Sali Kherai:** The tradition of this *Kherai* worship is being carried on to seek help from God in order to protect and promote good harvest of *Sali (Maisali)* or winter crops. So it is called *Sali Kherai*. This *Kherai* is performed in the month of *Kartik* (September-October month) on the night of dark moon. *Sali Kherai* is meant for corn-mother *Mainao*. She is the goddess of fortune to the people of the agricultural economy and is also identified with paddy. She is also known as *Lwkhi* or *Lakshmi*. So this *Kherai* is also called *Lwkhi Kherai*. The common term of this *Kherai* is *Dwrshwn Kherai*.
- **Nokhor Kherai (Family Kherai):** This *Kherai* is performed for the well being of the family. So the *kherai* is called *Nokhor kherai* or family *Kherai*. The Bodos believed that due to the evil influence of god and goblins illness or misfortunes occurs in the family. So whenever they met such calamities they perform *Kherai* to propitiate the offended spirits.

- **Phalw Kherai:** *Phalw Kherai* is meant for the welfare of the whole community or village. In Bodo *Phalw* means gathering in great numbers and as the whole villagers gather in great numbers for this *Kherai* worship it is called *Phalw Kherai*. The Bodos, as has been explained already, worship numerous god and goddess whom they supposed to be propitiated in order to ward off evil spirit from the village and to ensure the welfare of its members. Therefore they perform this *Kherai* during the month of *Magh* particularly on the night of full moon called *Maghi Purnima*. Sometimes it is also called *Danshrang Kherai*, as has been performed in the bright night of the full moon (Brahma, K., 2010:175-6).

Deities of Kherai worship and Offerings

During *kherai* worship different gods and goddesses are worshipped along with *Batou Bwrai*, the chief of God and offering of sacrifices also differ depending on the nature of the god. *Bathou Bwrai*, the great God is offered the sacrificial head of the pig and its blood along with areca nuts and betel leaves. *Agrang* who is regarded as general of *Bathou Bwrai* is given a cock. *Khoila*, the messenger of god-in-chief is offered a cock. *Kaji*, minister of god-in-chief is given a goat. *Song Raja*, the custodian of the animals is offered a red cock whenever the hunters used to go for hunting in the jungle. *Rajkandra*, the grandson of god-in-chief is given the sacrificial head of a pig and its blood. *Aileng*, the bodyguard of god-in-chief is offered a cock. *Alai Khungri* and *Bilai Khungri* both princesses of Bathou Raja who are given pig. *Bhandari*, the goddess of the rivers and the custodian of fishes is worshipped by offering a cock. A cock is sacrificed to *Ronchandi* who is regarded as the goddess of war. *Bulli Buri* is regarded as the goddess of medicine and mantras and is given a pig. A Muslim god known as *Nawab Badsha* is offered a cock. For *Laokhar Gosai*, the god of cow herds is given a pair of the pigeon.

Essential Materials for Kherai Worship

To perform *Kherai* worship, collection of some materials are indispensable which are as follows : one *Sijou* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*), one *tulansi* plant (*Ocimum sanctum*), three pieces of the *bijuli* bamboo with twig, *On* (rice powder), eighteen pairs of *Khankla* plant (a kind of sacred plant), eighteen pairs of *Mwkhna* or *Lwkhna* plant, four pieces of *Jati* bamboo, nine pieces of *Dubri* grass (a kind of sacred grass), a ring of gold, plantain leaves, two bunch of banana fruits, *goi phonaise* (areca nuts 80 pieces), *phatwi distase* (betel leaves 20 x10 pieces), *Sindur* (vermilion), *Dhup* sticks (incense sticks), *Dhuna* (a kind of resin), *Guphur khundung aowa lemsase* (white cotton yarn), mustard oil, *Jeowari* (earthen lamps), *Aluwa mairong* (uncooked rice), *Jou* or *zumai dabkanwi* (two pot of rice-beer), *lota gubwi gongnwi* (a pair of water vessel of brass metal), *Khurwi gongse* (a bowl of brass), Some quantity of *khun* (cotton), a piece of *Gamari Khamplai* embedded with copper (a low stool made of *Gamari* wood).

Besides the above materials, other most essential items are a pair of pigeon, one chicken, a full grown cock, a swine, and a pair of egg (Narzi, B., 1995:182).

The musical instruments required for the performance of *Kherai* are : a pair of *Kham* (a kind of big and long wooden drum), a pair of *Siphung* (a long bamboo flute of five hole), a pair of *Jotha* (cymbal) and some weapons like one or one pair of *Thungri* (sword), one or one pair of *Dahal* or *Dhal* (shield) (Narzi, Bhaben, 1995:182).

Arrangement of Kherai Altar

There is no fixed shrine for *Kherai* ceremony. The ceremony is performed according to the convenience of

worshippers. It is usually choose an open space like the grazing field. In one corner of the plot of the field selected for the installation of the altar is cleaned first. The earth used for the altar is generally brought from the hill or high up-land. The altar of the earth is prepared in lengthwise starting from the south and ends in the north and divided into two parts. A white cloth is hung up on the first part of the altar. It symbolises the existence of infinite formless god *Obong laoree*. In the main part, a *Sijou* tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) is planted as symbolising *Bathou Bwrai*. The *Sijou* tree is encircled by around fence of five pairs of bamboo splits which is twisted five times on the eighteen pairs of bamboo post symbolysing the religious and spiritual principles of the *Bathou* philosophy grouped in five. Close to the *Sijou* tree a sapling of *jatrasi* on the north side and a *tulansi* (basil) on the southern side is planted. A pebble as a symbol of truth and an egg as a symbol of creation or fertility also placed beneath the *Sijou* tree. A *jeowari* (an earthen lamp) is lighted under the *Sijou* tree. A bamboo twig tied with a white cloth as a symbol of peace is planted on the altar. It is called *Jatha* in Bodo. Two more bamboo twigs are planted in the front door of the altar. To the north of the *Sijou* tree about size of 360 x 90 x 60 centimeter of the earth is raised in a line called *bwiswmatani ali*. In this raised earth from the main part of the altar to the northern portion some plant of *khankla* (a variety of sacred plant) are planted in rows leading to the northern end, where *Mainao*, goddess of wealth is benignly installed. This northern part of the altar symbolises the beautiful and prosperous Mother Earth. Five pieces of plantain leave are laid under *Sijou* tree as tray on which five shares of areca nut and betel leaves and other sacred things are placed. A brass pot called *lota gubwi* filled with pure water along with twigs of *jatrasi* or *tulansi* (basil) plant and a gold ring immersed on it is kept on the foot of the *Sijou*. This water is sprinkled as holy water on the altar. One or two swords and shields are also kept in the altar. The surrounding of the entire altar is kept pure by burning scented materials like *dhup* (incense sticks), *shal duna* (a kind of resin) and *chandan*. Two holy persons, a *Douri* (male) and a *Doudini* (female) remain as the holy custodians of the altar and they perform all the religious rites till the end of the ceremony. Though there is the *Douri* or *Oja* to conduct the worship (puja) it is the *Doudini* or female dancer who represents the various stages of the rituals. Her dress *dokhona* is red and she keeps her hair unbound. The *doudini* and *Oja* have to observe a fast for one day before the ceremony.

The entire process of preparation of the *Bathou* altar, right from the beginning till the end, is accompanied by ritualistic music.

The whole lengthwise altar symbolizes a holy road from the Earth to the Heaven, The ideal of the philosophy of here, indicates a holy link between the God of heaven and the human beings of earth created by him (Basumatry, Ramdas, 2011:198). A piece of cotton thread which is tied on the bamboo post with green leaves indicates the unending principle or the law of creation of the Creator.

The worship of *Kherai* continues for consecutive three days and nights. Two drummers beat two *Kham* (a kind of big and long drum) keeping the rhythm of the dance of the *Doudini*, two persons play on *Jotha* (cymbals) and two flutters play long flute *Siphung* maintaining the pace of different dances. In the whole exercise of the worship, *Doudini* perform the ritualistic '*Kherai* dances' (Prayer dances) demonstrating different forms of dances representing god and goddesses to the accompaniment of music. The *Doudini* is the key players among the dancing jesters of the *Kherai*.

Thus the *Bathou* altar is prepared and *Kherai* worship is carried on by the Bodo people.

Performance of Kherai

The formal procedure of *Kherai* performance embarks on getting ready of preparation of altar. On the *Kherai* day after sunset, the *Oja* kneeling on the backside of the *Doudini* starts chanting of *mantras*, while *doudini* (a female oracle practicing necromancy) sits on the *Gambari Khamplai* (a low stool of *gamari* wood) in the front of the *Bathou* altar till the prayer is over. While thus sitting *Doudini* enters the profession of the shaman on getting a supernatural call and starts shaking and she utters *Ehihiu, Ehihiu, Ehihiu* three times. This stage is called *Doudini onsrainai* or *wlwnghikhangnai*. As soon as she stands up and while the instrumental music with the deep sound of the *Kham* (a kind of big drum), the sweet wailing of the *Siphung* flute and the clangor of the *Jotha* (cymbals) create a mystic atmosphere, she begins her dance. She moves around the *Bathou altar* and sprinkles holy water all around from the pot and dances stooped forward, counter clock-wise, with a shuffle of the slow left foot and right foot, which is accompanied by music. As she goes on dancing a time comes when she falls into a trance and she is possessed by the gods and goddesses. In this stage, she acts as a medium of men and the gods or goddesses. By this time she has the power of foretelling the future and can uncover the hidden things. Now she dances vigorously accompanied by the music of drums, flute, and cymbals. The music varies keeping in tune with the various dances. If there is a mistake in the beat of the music the *Doudini* may stop and show irritation. She may be joined by other worshippers in a circle, but they should not touch her for it may interrupt the dance. As she dances the *Doudini* imitates the nature of the gods and goddesses. When she imitates *Ronchandi* she holds a sword and a shield in her hands. After the dancing is over she makes prophecies about the welfare of the people and the crops (Goswami, P.D., 1995:64-5).

While dancing *Doudini* demonstrates as many as eighteen kinds of dances. A few dance forms may be mentioned here. In the *Bathou Gidingnai*, the *Doudini* moves around the altar of *Bathou* dancing slowly to the music of drums, flute, and cymbals. In the *Chotrali* the *Doudini* dances with a sword and shield demonstrating war dance in honor of *Ronchandi*, the goddess of war. *Khwjwma phonai* is another war dance showing the tactics of annihilating the enemies. *Khopri Chipnai* is also a war dance demonstrating the technique of self -defence in the battlefield. In this dance *Doudini* holds a sword and a shield in her hands. *Gandoula bwnnai* dance presents the tactics of catching the enemy in the battlefield. *Shagwlaow bwnnai* dance exhibits preparation of warfare and the propitiation of god *Abla Khungur*. *Nao bwnnai* dance is in honor of *Laokha Gosain* or Lord Krishna which displays the greatness of the God. Through the *Khamo barkwnnai* dance the *Doudini* performs the form of propitiation to god *Rajkandra*, the grandson of *Bwrai Bathou Maharaja*. She climbs up the drum (*Kham*) while dancing it. In the *Dao thwi lwngnai* the *Doudini* takes the blood of a sacrificed cock in a cup and standing by the altar drinks it up. *Or mononai* is a dance where she puts the burning wick of light into her mouth. *Mwsa khaori* dance is performed to propitiate god *Khoila*, the messenger of *Bathou Bwrai* with sword and shield in her hands. It demonstrates the sentiment of satisfaction after the victory in the war. In *Maoji mengbrang gelenai* the *Doudini* demonstrates the playfulness of the spotted cat symbolizing the recovery of a patient in the family. This form of dance is performed especially in the family *Kherai*. There are more than a dozen of varieties dance such as *Mufur gelenai*, *Sha Gwlaow bwnnai*, *Jara pagl Mwsanai*, *Badali mwsanai*. There are some more dances like *Thentamali*, *Sara Nisla* which are not related directly to the religious context of the *Kherai* festival.

At the end of *Kherai* rituals, the worshippers symbolically retrieve *Mainao*, the goddess of wealth in the form of uncooked rice and paddy kept in two *dons* (bamboo basket) from the ground altar through *Doudini*. A pig is sacrificed to her with necessary *mantras*. Music goes on. The *Doudini*, who has been possessed by the goddess, addresses the people in

the voice of *Mainao*: ‘O Bodo children, where are you going to take me? If you take me today you will cast some quantity on water, some on fire, and you would neglect me. I would not go with you. You would go back the way you have come.’

Meanwhile, *Oja* requests for the favour of the worshippers and prays: “You must come to Mother *Mainao*; without you how can we survive? You are our life, on your mercy everything exists. We cannot leave for a while in your absence. If you do not visit our houses you will be touched by sin, for you will have to drink the blood of our heads. O mother, you must come to us.”

At the repeated request of the worshippers through the *Oja*, *Mainao*, the source of wealth, assures the people that she will not forsake them. She says: “Let us go dear children, and try to keep me at utmost care, I shall dwell in your houses, and worship me daily, for your wealth will go on ever increasing.”

As *Doudini* expresses eagerness to accompany, she stands up and starts to dance again. Soon after this the worshippers become delighted and dance with her. After a few moments *Doudini* holds on the two bamboo post in the front of the altar and she suddenly loses her sense. In such state of affairs, *Oja* and whole worshippers make an utterance glorifying on the name of the *Bathou Bwrai*. Afterwards, *Oja* sprinkles the holy water on the head of the *Doudini* on which she regains her sense. Soon after it *Kherai* worship also comes to an end.

CONCLUSIONS

It is to be remarked that the Bodos have traced their dance and music to *Bathou* or *Bathou Bwrai*. *Kherai* is the mainspring of varied forms of Bodo dances. The various artistic dances exhibited by the Bodo damsels and youths are emanated from the ritualistic dance of *Doudini* during the *Kherai* worship. The worship of *Kherai* is performed very seldom by the Bodos for two considerations. It is too extravagant affairs for the common people and for busy agrarian people it is a time-consuming activity. All these customs refer to the traditional religion only. In modern time a large sections of the Bodos have adopted a Vedic religion termed ‘*Brahma*’, while another section is converted into Christianity. The traditional religious rites are no longer in vogue among the Brahmas and the Christian converts of the Bodo community.

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