



CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS OF THE BODOS MARRIAGE: A NEW LIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The Bodos of North East India are considered as the first settlers of the Brahmaputra valley. They mostly inhabit in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley presently. They are very rich in their culture and tradition. Moreover, they possess a unique tradition and culture. Traditional marriage custom is one of the unique traditions and culture of the Bodos.

KEYWORDS: Swngnai Haba, Gwrjia lakhinai Haba, Kharsonnai Haba, Dongkha and Hinjao jora langnanoi hwnai Haba.

INTRODUCTION

The Bodos of North-east India constitute a very important section of the various races and ethnic groups of Assam with their distinctive cultural and linguistic traits. They have contributed immensely to the growth of the society and culture of Assam through the ages. Once they have built a powerful kingdom with their capital at Dimapur, then Maibong and then Khaspur. Racially, they belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Indo-Mongoloid group of Tibeto-Burman language family.

The Bodos of Assam primarily live in the rural areas and are basically farmers. Besides agriculture, their economy is supplemented by husbandry, fishing, hunting and indigenous cottage and village industries. The agrarian social life of the Bodos is closely compact and well organised one. They obey the certain strict rule in their social life. They observe strict social customs in their marriage system.

Marriage is a pre-condition for a normal state of life for every man and woman in the Bodo society; normal not only biologically but also ritually. Marriage is called *Haba* by the Bodos. In olden times in Bodo marriage there was a custom that a male dancer termed *Barjew* or *Barlangpha* has to accompany along with the team of groom's family to bring bride from her natal house. The *Barlangpha* has to dance with a load of sod or lump of earth which is hung on a sling on his back before the bride is taken out on her way to the groom's house. When the parties of bride and the bridegroom bring the bride to the groom's house, both bride and groom are allowed to sit together, and then the *Barlangpha* says to bridegroom, "Nwi apha! Be gwdan hinjaoa dinwiniprai nwngni bisi arw nwngw bini bisai. Dinwiniprai nwngw be hakhou badw". i.e., "Hey son! This new bride is your wife from to-day and you are husband of her. Now you have to bear this

earth or soil on your back." After this word *Barlangpha* unload the lump of earth from his back and place it before the groom. This is the tradition of Bodo marriage by which marriage is called *Haba*. The term *Haba* derives from the Bodo word *ha* means soil or earth and *ba* means to bear on the back. Therefore, *Haba* means to bear the lump of soil or earth on the back. Thus the bearing of earth or soil on the back in the marriage time signifies to bear the responsibility of worldly life (*Rabha*,



1984). This feature perhaps indicative of the agrarian nature of the society, as it has an important bearing on the whole affair in as much as the Bodo word for marriage itself is *Haba* i.e., earth carried on the back.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE

Regular Forms of Marriage:

The following forms of marriages are generally adopted and approved by the society as regular marriage:

Swngnai Haba (arranged marriage):

This is an ideal marriage represented by the arrangement of the parents or guardians of the bride and bridegroom. It is the most common socially accepted marriage and is celebrated with great solemnity and honour.

Gwrjia lakhinai Haba (marriage by probation):

The boy stays at the house of girl's father and works there as a labourer without wages for one or two years or more. On satisfaction of the girl's father with the service of the boy marriage is allowed. This marriage is generally celebrated in a family who has only one daughter and there are no sons to inherit the family property, then the guardian keeps the boy in his house to marry the daughter on that condition. However, the boy has to write a document that he does not belong to his natal family any more. In some cases when the bridegroom and his parents are unable to pay the bride price demanded by the girl's parents, it is usual for the young man to give the equivalent in personal service in the house of bride's parents. The period of service is a matter of arrangement between the parents of the parties concerned, and seems to vary greatly, i.e., from three or four to upwards of twelve or fifteen years. Cohabitation, however, is allowed after about twelve or eighteen month's service, and at the conclusion of full period, the young people are free to depart whatever they will (Endle, 1995). In this case also marriage ceremony is performed.

Kharsonnai Haba (marriage by intrusion):

The marriage of this form is still in vogue. In this system a marriageable girl goes herself without knowledge of her parent's to the house of her beloved one and surrenders her for marriage. But the marriage ceremony is performed only after receiving consent of the bride's father or guardian. This is also recognized by the society.

Dongkha or domkha Haba (marriage of widower):

This is a kind of marriage of a widower with a widow. It is effected on condition that the widower has to cut off all connection with his children by the first wife and forgo all properties there. But it is very much looked down upon and the '*Dongkha*' is used as derogatory epithets. This marriage is very rare in Bodo society.

Hinjao jora langnanoi hwnai Haba:

The practice of this form of marriage is very common among the poor peasant. This marriage is performed by the parents of the girl who is financially weak to afford the marriage ceremony. The parents of the bridegroom send two or four girls to the house of the bride to bring her in disguise of guests. Thereafter these girls also bring the bride to the house of the bridegroom as a guest. After keeping few days at the house of the boy, the parents of the girl is informed by the boy's parents about the date of marriage. On the day of marriage the elderly member of the village is invited to the house and it is performed as per the social customs.

Irregular Forms of Marriage:

The marriages which are not generally favoured and approved by the society but are accepted in exceptional cases are follows:

***Bwnai Haba* (marriage by capture or kidnapping of the bride):**

If a man fails to obtain the consent of the parents of the girl whom he has selected as his future wife, and if the woman is willing to marry him, he has only to find an opportunity of seizing her by the hand in the presence of witness and then the marriage is solemnized. (Hunter, 1998). Sometimes, though the girl is unwilling to marry, she is forcefully captured and taken to the house of bridegroom whereby he solemnized the marriage. This form of marriage is called *Bwnai haba*. This procedure is looked upon by the community as blameworthy and irregular, but not invalid. The bride's parents claim an immediate payment of Rs.5/- from the bridegroom, and also exact the bride-price at a higher rate than usual. (Endle, 1995). Marriage by capture though absolutely a thing of the past, but in modern times it is rapidly passing out of vogue. The Bodo Mahasanmelani, in its 1929 session clamped a ban on this practice.

***Dwnkharnai Haba* (marriage by elopement or self-arranged):**

Marriage of elopement, of course, is not uncommon in Bodo society. In rural society, when young people are allowed some freedom, some of them take advantage to make short-cut method to early union by elopement. This become possible when there is an advance mutual understanding between the bride and bridegroom. But elopement is generally discouraged. This type of marriage by carrying off is termed *Dwnkharnai haba*. The eloping couple is generally accepted in the boy's family after they formally beg pardon of society represented by village elders who after imposing a fine let them off.

***Man hanai Habai* (marriage after illicit connection):**

In the case of illicit sexual affairs if a grown up unmarried girl becomes pregnant marriage becomes absolutely compulsory.

These three forms of marriage are recognized by the society only after having received parent's or guardian's consent and on payment of fine levied by the *Samaj*. The fine symbolizes social disapproval. Both the bride and bridegroom are subject to purification ceremony before performance of marriage.

Modalities of Marriage:

Swngnai Haba is the arranged marriage. It is negotiated by either the father or guardian of the *Nokhor* of the boy and the girl. It is essentially a basis of the marriage for both boy and girl. Besides, the marriage is restricted to only virgin. In other words, a girl who already have become pregnant before marriage, or one who have eloped but unable to live with paramour subsequently or the one who may be an unmarried mother, can not have a *Swngnanwi lainai* marriage (Informant. Tillotoma Daimary). The parents of the boy and the girl do not allow their son or daughter to select their life partner. The Bodo parents believe that the eyes of boys and girls are like the flame emerging from the burning heap of dry paddy straws. The fact is that boys and girls on most of the occasions choose their partners or woo each other after having a little gleam of each other only.

The *swngnai* marriage involves a number of formalities. These are: Pre-nuptial formalities, Marriage formalities and Post-wedding formalities.

Pr-nuptial formalities also involve a number of stages. These are as follows:

***Hinjao Naigirnai* (Choosing of the bride):**

The search for a spouse is initiated by the boy's family and never by the girl's family, though they are also keen to have a good son-in-law. There is no problem to find out all about a bride because of the well-knit nature of the kinship and affinal ties of the Bodo society. Mutual friends frequently conduct the negotiations as middleman. They do not examine the horoscopes to decide the auspiciousness of the marriage ceremony of the girl and boy with the help of Jyatisis (astrologers).

The Bodo society is an agrarian society. Agriculture is their main livelihood and weaving is a part of their economic life. As such marriage has great economic importance for them. A married son does not establish a separate household after his marriage, so the marriage of a son brings in another member –a

daughter-in-law to the household's manpower which is important for the team work of agricultural activities. Therefore, a peasant parent of the boy is very particular about the making of right choice of bride. The girl who is excelled in all domestic work including art of weaving is their first preference. There is a common aphorism in regard to the choice of covetable bride :

*Bwswrse abad jawi khou dagab.
Hinjao haba rongwi khou gab*(Narzi, 1983).

(Do not weep for not yielding of good crops for one year, but for woman who is sheer ignorant of skill in work).

The next important aspect of choice of bride is the study of her physiognomy. The bride's health and beauty are the two important things carefully considered while selecting a Bodo bride. Popular maxims often guide one in the choice of a bride; for example:

*mwkhangao naibwla tharai lai agoi
gonthongao naibwla narengsu.
Khanaiao naibwla don khaorai
hathaiao naibwla akhai miji,
agoi jarou agoi fangdang* (Narzi, 1995).

In the imagination of the Bodo the ideal bride should have a face like the full moon, lips like the leaves of *tharai* (It grows in marshy land, its integument is used to tie the loads of reaped paddy for carrying the same home by the cultivators), the waist surple and pretty like that of a carpenter ant (*mwjlai janji*) i.e., the waist like that of *mwjlai* ant, eyes like those of pigeon and the nose akin to the shape of a thorn of a citrus fruit, who has a dark complexion, fine teeth, sharp finger, medium stature (*hailwlw*) and thick lock of hair. Fairness of skin is a decided boon as is also her general attractiveness of appearance. It is called *khantwi gwnang* in Bodo. On the other hand, the parents of the girl are also keen to have a good son-in-law, who is a strong and stout physique, and sound health with good moral character.

The third important aspect of the choice of the bride is girl's physical attributes. The family of the boy looks for attributes in the girl, her demeanour, and diligence are politely but firmly ascertained. For instances, (i) if the bride walks by impelling out her breast and makes cracking noise while walking, it is believed that the girl is ill-tempered; (ii) if the bride possesses bouncing breast and slim waisted body, it is considered to be a capricious-minded in nature.

HINJAO NAINAI:

The final session of matrimonial negotiations is preceded by elaborate ground work. The initiative may be taken by the family of would be groom and in most cases through a third party. Meanwhile someone close to the groom's family will unobtrusively see the girl and have a rough idea about her. They do not examine the horoscopes to decide the auspiciousness of the marriage ceremony of the girl and boy with the help of *Jyatisis* (astrologers).

There are some peculiar customs and beliefs which the Bodos religiously adhere to in respect of such auspicious celebrations. Whether to start matrimonial negotiations or for the actual marriage Sunday is considered the most auspicious day of the week, the most preferable month for the marriage celebration being the month of *Phalgun*.

At the start of the journey for negotiations some signs are considered auspicious and some others as inauspicious. When the team from the groom's family set out to the bride's house a sound of thunder should not be heard for it indicates that the bride they are going for will be bad-tempered and if married there is every possibilities of clashes between husband and wife. If any of the party gets hurt on his or her left leg on the way, it forebodes difficulties ahead. If a person sees some mongoose crossing the road from right to left,

or a snake from left to right, it portends separation after marriage. Seeing a dead body on the road, or sight of the someone hoeing in the field or cutting bamboo at the time of arrival in the bride's house also forebodes grim tragedy of the family, viz. sudden death of either the bride or the groom. Because of similar other forebodings in all wedding functions both widows and widowers are kept out from any activities till the end of the marriage celebration.

On the other hand, if the visitors on their arrival find the prospective bride spreading paddy in the Sun or busy in husking paddy with mortar (*ual*) and pestle (*gaihen*), it indicates bringing of good fortune to the family. Seeing a bride cleaning the courtyard or combing her hair is the sign of long span of life of the bride. The visitors also observe the bride about her entering into the *Noma no* i.e., main house. If she crosses the door first with her left foot, it is believed that bride would be a sign of good wealth and loyal to her husband.

Gongkhon hwnai (Formal Negotiations):

When a particular girl has been earmarked and selected, the father or father's brother of the boy with a team of five or three members visit her *Nokhor*. They take with them gift of a pair of silver bracelets (*Asan shuri jorase*), a pair of silver coins of one rupee (*Takha gothang jorase*), a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves (*goy jora-pathoi jora*) and a pair of rice-bear bottles (*jorase jou dingri*) to the house of the bride for negotiation. If the parents of the bride want to know the purpose of the visit of the guest, they indirectly explain it by saying a proverb: "*jerao thuri nuyw, beonw bathi garw. jerao jwn nuyw beonw goi kitou garw.*" i.e., a load carrier pole is thrown where there is thatch grass, the sheath of areca nut fruit is thrown where there is a coveted girl. The parents of the proposed bride are reluctant to give their consent at the single approach of groom's party. Even the parents of the bride and their relatives refused to accept the gifts offered by the visitors. Meanwhile the *Ghatkdar* i.e., middleman try to convince the bride's parents. The party of the bridegroom, however, leaves their gifts at the house of the bride. This is done to show the desire of the parents of the bridegroom to get the girl of the house as their bride. This ceremony is called *Gongkhon hwnai*.

On some occasion, if the bride's family refused to accept the gifts of groom's party, the team from the groom's family will leave the bangle tucked in the roof of the *Noma no* i.e., the big house of the bride's family before they leave. This custom is called *Asan thebnai*. However, they dislike it, custom demands that the bride's family can not show disrespect to the visitors nor can they simply throw away the bangle, for that will invite serious social consequences like excommunication by their co-villagers (Choudhury, 1988).

The bride's family may accept the gifts sent by the groom's family, but even then that accept in itself may not be an indication of their full and final consent. Whatever be their decision, favourable or not, the bride's side have to respond and send an intimation accordingly to the groom's family within seven days of the *Asan Thebnai* or *Asan Khebnai* i.e., tucking the bangle; asking them to take back the bangle if the proposal is not found acceptable, in which a case from the groom's side comes over to the house of the girl and takes back the bangle. This is called *Asan phinnai* or returning the bangle. Then the groom's parents approach the parents of the bride for the second time on which bride's parents will reply that *dubri hagraya dabwnw twiakhwi*, i.e., the *dhubba* grass not yet died on treading of visit of the groom's party. In this way several rounds of approach is made by the groom's party. On getting pressure from the groom's side, sometimes the parents of the bride invites the elderly person of the village to discuss the matter and the settlement of marriage is made in presence of them.

No nainai :

After the preliminary settlement the parents of the bride visit the house of the bride groom. On this occasion the parents of the bridegroom entertain the guests with plenty of rice-bear, pork and areca-nuts and betel leaves (*jou, oma bedor arw goy pathoi*). This ceremony is called *no nainai*. (Brahma, 1989) This ceremony is very significant part of the final settlement of the marriage because through this ceremony the parents of the bride will study the economic condition of the groom. Only after satisfaction of the economic

position of the groom he will give his final consent, or if he is unsatisfied then the marriage proposal may be cancelled.

Swmwndw phirainai :

In case the proposal is accepted by the bride's parents, the parents of the groom formally make a relationship with the bride's parents in presence of some elderly persons of both sides as witnesses. This ritual is done ceremonially at the house of the bride. On the occasion a feast with rice-bear, pork or chicken and rice is offered by the parents of the bride where the relatives of the bride also partake. This ceremony is known as '*swmwndw phirainai*' or *Swmwndw khanai*, which means changing the 'relationship'. From this day and onward the relations between the parents of the two families are known as *Bibiai* and *Bijwmaijw*.

Houa gwdan nainai :

After coming into relationship by the parents of both parties, the boy along with some of his friends goes to fiancée's house to enable members of the girl's family to see how he looks ; but in fact a chance is thus given to the boy and the girl to see each other. This pre-wedding ceremony is called '*houa gwdan nainai*' i.e., the interview of the bridegroom. The girl gives him presents of handkerchiefs and napkins she herself has woven and bows before him. If she does not do this, it is understood that she does not like the boy. The proposal is then dropped (Das, 1999).

Goy Khaonai (Serving of betel nut):

When the proposal finds favour with bride's parents, another consignment of betel nuts, leaves, lime and rice-bear etc. is brought from the groom's side to the house of the bride. This time the *Bairathis* (lady receptionist for marriage ceremony) also comes along and serve *goy-phatoi*, *sunoi* (a piece of chopped up areca nut with a betel leave and a little bit of lime taken together and chewed) to the people of bride's village who gather in her house for the occasion. This ceremony is termed *Goy Khaonai*. The parents, relatives and villagers of the bride are entertained with rice, rice-bear, and areca nuts in abundance.

On the day of *Bairathi's* serving of *goy-phatoi* to the bride's villagers, one of the parents or an elder member of the family of would be bride, takes out the bangles from the roof and hands it over to the groom's men finally indicating the whole hearted acceptance of the proposal.

Biban Langnai :

The custom of *Biban langnai* ceremony is compulsory pre-wedding formalities after *Goy Khaonai* ceremony among the Bodos. This ceremony is performed by the bridegroom's party in the house of the bride. For this ceremony areca nuts and betel leaves are essential. Besides, two earthen pitchers (*hani thikli gongnoi*) filled with rice-bear, of course, now-a-days, sugar and tea leaves are carried to the house of the bride. Thus the *Biban* consists of *jou* (rice-bear), *goy* (areca nuts) and *pahtoi* (betel leaves). In Bodo load is called *Biban* and carrying of such load is termed *Biban langnai*. It is a custom to put the sign of the Sun (*Shan*) in the outer part of the one pitcher and the sign of the moon (*Okhaphwr*) on the other pitcher with white lime (*sunoi*). While fastening much care is taken so that the pitcher with the Sun sign is tied on the side of trunk of bamboo pole and another pitcher of the moon sign is tied to the other end of the same bamboo pole. If any reverses of this sign is found, the bride party would impose fine on the parents of the bridegroom. The strings used for fastening the pitchers with the bamboo pole are nothing but tender split of bamboo called *teowl*. A particular technique also used while fastening. If a tied string is loosed then the entire round of fastening also loosed at a single stroke. The assigned male person who carries the two earthen pitchers on his shoulder is called *Barlangpha*. The services of two girls or ladies but not widows are indispensable part during the marriage ceremony, from the beginning of *Goy khaonai* ceremony to the end of the marriage. This two ladies receptionist for marriage ceremony of the bridegroom party is called "*Okhong Bairathi jora*" (Informant, Tillotoma Daimary). On the occasion of the marriage ceremony wearing of *Dokna Thaosi* by the *Bairathis* is compulsory. This dress is red in colour and artistically designed. Their

main duty is to chop up areca nut and distribute it with betel leave and lime to the people of the bride party. To assist the *Okhong Bairathis* in their services, the parents of the bride also employ a pair of *Bairathis* from their village. This *Bairathis* of the bride party is called *Ishing Bairathi*. In the case of selection of *Bairathi* and *Barlangpha* certain norms are strictly followed. A person to be selected as *Barlangpha* must be young, energetic, stout and jolly and handsome; and if married he must not be a *Balonda*, i.e., widower. In similar way, the would be *Bairathis* must be healthy, strong and beautiful, and if married she must not be a *Randi*, i.e., a widow. A widow or a widower is called *Khoro gojo* or headless by the Bodos. They are never allowed to perform any auspicious work during entire the marriage ceremony (Narzi, 1995). On the arrival of bride's house, the *Barlangpha* who carried the *Biban* i.e. load has to place it in front of the *Noma no* (main house) and other commodities are also placed beside the *Biban*. The two *Bairathis* slice up the areca nuts and serve it with betel leaves to the assembled people in the ceremony. They also distribute rice-bear to the people. In the olden days, the number of rounds of service of betel nuts and betel leaves may run till the marriage ceremony is performed. If the proposal is between rich families the service may run as many as seven rounds and in that case the celebration too will stretch over seven consecutive days. The marriage celebration of these days, however, is only a one day affair.

There is a custom on the day of the final settlement of the marriage that the remains of the sheaths of the betel nuts after entertaining the guests of the co-villagers of the bride party, they throw it to the roof of *Noma no* or main house of the bride. The sheaths of the betel nuts are to remain on the roof till the proper marriage is held. This ceremony is known as *Goy Kitou garkhwnai*. The custom is meant to bring good fortune.

In the concluding day of the final settlement of the marriage, before leaving the house of the bride, the party of the groom gives an extra consignment of the betel nuts and betel leaves to the family of the bride meant for the relatives of the bride. These betel nuts and betel leaves are distributed by the bride's family on a bamboo tray to the house of their relatives as a symbol of invitation in the marriage ceremony. This custom is served as the card of the invitation of the present day marriage ceremony. This convention is known as *Goytao*.

Oma Khobtang ceremony:

When the matter is finally settled, the parents of the bride may desire to be feted with a pig as it is they who gave birth to would be bride and also brought her up. Accordingly, any day before the actual marriage, the parents of would be bride call on the family of their prospective son-in-law where a pig is butchered for their entertainment. The pig is held with its face up and the neck is chopped off. The pig is then thoroughly singed over the fire to remove the furs and cut into two lengthwise i.e. retaining one eye, one ear and two legs in each of the two parts. The bride's parents consume one half in the house of their would be son-in-law and the other half is brought back home to fete their fellow villagers (Choudhury, 1988). The divided pork is called *Oma khoptang*. In the intermediate period, the *Barlangpha* (a go-between) keeps visiting would be bride's house to help both the parties to fix a convenient date for the marriage. There may be some death or birth in any of the families which may get in the way of the marriage or there may be some marriage in the village fixed earlier—it is the *Barlangpha* (or *Barju* if she is lady) who is keep both the families posted with all such information so that the marriage may be solemnised on a convenient that without any hindrance whatsoever to any of the families.

After the end of the *Biban langnai* ceremony another important pre-wedding ceremony is performed in the house of the bride. The parents of the groom along with some elderly members of the village visit the house of the bride with areca nuts, betel leaves and rice-bear to make mutual confirmation of the marriage and fix a convenient date of the proper marriage ceremony. In fixing the date the consent of the parents of both parties are essential. This ceremony is called *Khobira langnai*.

There are some peculiar customs and beliefs which the Bodos adhere to in respect of such auspicious celebrations. They never solemnise the marriage ceremony in the month of *Chaitra*. They consider Saturday and Tuesday also as inauspicious day for the celebration. For the actual marriage Sunday

is considered the most auspicious day of the week. A Bodo marriage is splendid in the month of *Phalgun* when days are considered to be long and free from rains. A marriage party moves in procession from the house of the bride to that of the bridegroom. The journey may be long one and such a long journey could be completed smoothly only when the day is long and not hindered by rains. In this connection a maiden who is soon going to be married out appeals to her mother to hold her marriage when the days are longer and such convenient days are found only in the month of *Phalgun*. There is a folk-song which reflect the expression of the girl runs thus : *Haba janglab janglab, sanba gwlaoni dinao ayoj, sanba gwlaod dinao* (Mosahary, 1994). (We have to walk a long way, Oh dearly mother, a long way. So let my marriage be held when the day is long, Oh dear when the day is long).

Rituals and Ceremonies in Marriage:

On the day of the marriage thus fixed, the party of the groom (except the groom himself) consisting of the parents of the groom, a few girls and women and some elderly persons along with the *Barlangpha* and two *Bairathis* go to the bride's house to bring the bride for marriage. This is known as *Hinjao gwdan lainw thangnai*. The *Biban* is carried by *Barlangpha* assisted by some young persons of the party. The *Biban* consists of two jars of rice-bear (*jou*), one pig, adequate quantity of areca nuts and betel leaves. Two earthen pitchers with the sign of Sun and the moon also carried as earlier of the *Biban Langnai*. Another most important item to be carried by the bridegroom party is new set of costumes, ornaments and minimum cosmetics for the bride. The bride just before departure of her natal house she has to put on all these item brought by the bridegroom party. Wearing of artistically ornamented new red dress called *Dokhona thaosi* is compulsory for the bride as well as the two *Okhong Bairathis* on the occasion. In some areas of Kokrajhar and Kamrup when the groom's party goes to bring the bride for the marriage ceremony at groom's house, they take along with them *Laokhar Biban* i.e. a load of fish and rice (or if fish is not available a pair of pigeons) in a bamboo-thread container fixed on one end of a pole to be counter poised with a lone white pumpkin on the other. The two *Okhong Bairathis* have to serve the areca nuts to any person who wants them, even on the way. Sometimes, on knowing about the bridegroom party's arrival some villagers obstruct the way which is then solved by distributing betel nuts and betel leaves. Sometimes, they also demand money from the party. The custom of such obstruction is known as *Hangra hwtenai*. On reaching the bride's house the *Okhong Bairathis* serves betel nuts several times to the bride's villagers and try to satisfy them with other edible items such as rice-bear, rice etc. The villagers participate fully in this festive mood of the families. Before taking out of the bride from her natal house the *Barlangphas* and *Okhong Bairathis* are engaged by the parents of the bride to perform dance. Accordingly they dances making the marriage ceremonies more festive where elderly women and sometimes male person also partake in the merry making. While dancing the elderly women also sing some folk-songs giving moral lessons to the bride for her future life. In some localities the *Barlangphas* have to dance with a load of sod of earth and a piece of head of the pig tied on their backs before the bride is taken out on her way to the groom's house. In some areas in the South Western part of Assam, this dance number is performed by married ladies but not widow. While dancing the ladies also carry a load of sod of earth hung on a sling on their back. The custom of bearing sod of soil on the back signifies the entering of bride into the worldly life. It also symbolically indicates that the bride would bear the child after her marriage.

When the team of the bridegroom is ready to take out the bride, the ambiance of ceremonies soon turn into tragic scenery as the bride and her mother begins to weep. At the moment, the close relatives and elderly women console and advise the bride through folk-songs. Then the bride is dressed up with new ornamented red *Dokhona thaosi*, *Sonani khera* (gold ear ring), *Asan suri* (bangles) which have been presented by bridegroom. On getting ready of bride's make up, the party of the bridegroom takes along with them the bride with the *Barlangphas* (generally two) singing and dancing all the way back to the groom's house where the actual marriage has to be performed.

When the bride's party has arrived in the groom's village they stop there. The party does not enter the house of the groom in the day time and they wait for the Sun set. In the evening when the time has

come then the drummers from the groom's village go there and escort the party to the front gate of the groom's house.

When the team is back to the gate along with the bride, the much waited parents of the groom and the villagers welcome the bride in the front gate of the house whereby the bride is allowed to stand on the *Gambary Khamplai* (a low sitting stool of gambari wood without nail), her feet is washed with water by the younger sister of the groom and then groom's mother waft an egg over the head of the bride seven times from left to right and throws it to the south side of the house. This practice is known as *daodwi neosinai*. The custom is meant for bearing the child by the new bride after marriage as the egg is believed as a symbol of creation or fertility. On the other hand, two separate *Ishing Bairathis* (inner female receptionists) with the *chalan bathi* in their hands welcome the bride and her party by waving bamboo fan of *thaigir bibar* (flower of dillenis indica) design over the *chalan bathi* toward the main house. Some other girl friends of the village by holding *don* (a bamboo measure basket) in their hands also welcome the bride and her party by showering uncooked rice and flowers toward the bride party. On the occasion young boys and girls also participate actively in rejoicing mood. Before entering the *Noma no* (main house), the bride is purified by sprinkling holy water on her by the *douri* and thereafter she is asked to step over a burning earthen lamp (*Alari bathi*) in order to break it into pieces. The breaking of earthen lamp into pieces signifies the bearing of child by the bride. If she failed it to break it indicates that the bride would be *Sang-grema* i.e. a barren.

There is another pre-wedding ceremonial function known as *Beowai Bokhangnai* at the house of the bridegroom. At this function, the elder sister of the bride jokingly lifts up the bridegroom on the back. The significance of the function as believed is that the bridegroom is given awakening of his duty of new conjugal life in order to make him aware of his responsibility.

There after it is time for another round of merriment and rejoicing with the crowded session of drinking and feasting in the house of the groom. In the feast rice, pork and rice-bear are supplied with abound.

The next round of ceremony is the most important part of marriage rituals called *Hathasuni Khurnai*, without which the marriage is incomplete and considered to be socially non-sanctioned.

On the day fixed for this very important ceremony one altar is created at the north eastern corner of the courtyard of the groom's house. Two burning *chakis* or *jeoari* (a small earthen container where mustard oil is put, a cotton wicker is dipped into the oil; one end of the wicker is lighted while the other is kept dipped into the oil) are placed on two sides of the altar; and in the front, on a plantain leaf, are offered boiled rice and prepared chicken separately in two ladles. The bride is asked to kneel down before the altar of the deities and to pray to the god and goddess. While the bride prays a *douri* chants the *Mantra* (charms), introducing the bride to the god and goddess. The groom, seated near the altar on a *Khamphly* i.e. low stool (made of *gambari* wood only), is offered meal by the bride. The groom takes a little rice and chicken from the ladle and gulps just a mouthful and goes back to his friends sitting nearby to partake the meal along with them. The curry served to groom is prepared with rice powder and chicken without any condiments and even colouring agents like turmeric. This preparation is called *Ondla khari*. Chicken is the only item of special dish allowed in that ceremony. The meal has to be served by the bride herself. Since she has not yet earned the right to go inside the kitchen, the rice and other cooked items are taken out from the kitchen either by the groom's mother or any unmarried girl of the household. It is only after the groom's friends have finished their meal that the bride is led into the *Ishing* i.e. kitchen. Once inside the kitchen she would first prostrate before the altar of the *Mainao Bindw* viz. Goddess Lakhshmi and later on touch it. This custom is called *maihung dw dangnai*. Then both bride and groom pray to god *Bathou Borai* at court yard to grant them a peaceful conjugal life. After that ceremony is over; she is now competent to enter the cooking place and to prepare food for the whole family. The ceremony of *Hathasuni Khurnai* can thus be called the grand finale of the marriage ceremony. The feast of marriage (*Hathasuni*) continues at least for three days.

During the marriage celebrations the bride's father (mother can not come in the ceremony) and her family kinsmen, sit on the eastern side of the courtyard called *Affat* (assembly) where the groom will offer presents and respects to them according to the seniority. While sitting on this *Affat* the parents of both the

party perform some other customs in presence of the public. There is a custom of realisation of *Phon thaka* i.e. bride-price just before taking out of the bride for ritual performance of marriage. The amount of *phon thaka* is fixed well advance during the first marriage negotiation. The body-price for the bride may be anything from Rs.100/- to Rs.1000/-. In the earlier days realisation of the *phon thaka* was compulsory in the society. But now realisation of this amount is discouraged and the customs only retained in the marriage ceremony. In the *Affat*, for the ceremony of bride-price realisation the parents of the groom offer the father of the bride two *dons* (a bamboo measure) placing it on the banana leave that spread on the advance plastered ground. The two *dons* contain uncooked rice, and one of the don consists of a pair of areca nuts, a pair of betel leaves, a *phali* (napkin) and over it a pair of *thaka gothang jorase* (silver coins). If the father of the bride picks up the two coins, then it is considered that he has accepted the *phon thaka* i.e. bride-price. It is called *jora thaka khonnai*. Usually the father of the bride returns the two coins and accepts only areca nuts and betel leaves.

There is another very nominal amount the groom's family has to pay to the village community of the bride. The highest amount is being never higher than two rupees and eight annas. Termed as *Malsa*, the amount goes to the community fund. However, the rate of *Malsa* differs from area to area. At the time of collecting *Malsa* two clans (groups), *Sibingari* and *Sabaiari* get special consideration. If the bride belongs to *Sibingari* (Sesame) clan, the amount of *Malsa* would be less, and if she belongs to *Sabaiari* clan, the amount would be double of the amount of *Sibingari*. Besides *Malsa*, the bridegroom family has to pay a nominal fee of Rs.2.50/- to the villagers of the bride. This is termed *Bari haga*. The significance of the payment of this amount is to get rid of the offence committed by the bride as she has used the field of others for call of nature while she was in the father's house.

The father of the bride performs a concluding ceremony at the house of the groom which is known as *Nirikh bosonai*. This is a symbolic ceremony for snapping of their relationship with the bride. On the occasion of this ceremony the groom's father has to offer a feast of two jar of rice-bear, two bottles of rice-bear, two cocks and a pig. The pig is cut equally into two parts, of which one part is given to the father of the bride and the other part is used in the feast. Soon after the end of this ceremony, both the bride and bridegroom are brought into the courtyard i.e. before *Affat* or assembly whereby they are asked to make obeisance to assembled company by kneeling down for their sanction and approval on entering upon the duties of married life. Then one of the village elders, especially *Gami borai* of the bride, acting as *Dauri* makes a short advises on the obligations of the married state to the bride and bridegroom, which ends with wishes and blessings to the newly wedded pair. Immediately, the whole assembly responds at end with one voice "*bebadinw Jathongsoi*" i.e. "so may it be." This short address to the new couple is called *hinjao gwdan-houa gwdan bujainai* in Bodo. After this all the party members of bride begin to leave the house of the groom before the rising of the Sun. The father of bride who has brought the half portion of the pig from the son-in-law to the home arranges a feast for the co-villagers. This ceremony is called *Agan gakhwmwrnai*, i.e. concluding ceremony of the bride's party.

The Post-Wedding Ceremony:

There is a post-wedding ceremony which is known as *Athimangal Siphainai* (Narzi, 1995) and is performed shortly after the eight days of wedding at the house of the bride's parents. In this ceremony, the groom and the bride together visit the bride's family (*Nokhor*) and take with them a bundle of areca nuts, betel leaves, a pig, two bottles of rice-bear, and a pair of earthen jar of rice-bear. During their stay the visiting couple is entertained by the father-in-law and other families (*Nokhor*) of the bride's lineage. On this occasion only few selected guests, especially relatives are invited. They stay in the bride's village for two to three days. The presents given by the guests belong to the bride and are sent along with her. The gifts given by the parents are also brought by them at the time of their return. The bride also brings the cattle or poultry reared by her in the father's house. But the bride does not bring any clothes belonging to her woven by herself during the time of return from *Athimangal* on the belief that she would become unskilled in

weaving in the next birth if she brings it. After the conclusion of this ceremony only the social marriage of the Bodos come to an end.

Besides the *Athimangal Sipainai*, the Bodos also have some important post-wedding customs. These customs are still observed and considered as essential components of the marriage. These are namely, *Kholar gothainai* and *Mamai mara*.

Kholar gothainai:

It is the marriage custom of the Bodos that if the husband expires suddenly after the marriage, the bride returns to her parents and the amount of *Malcha* (pride-price) is given back to the parents of the deceased husband by the parents of the bride. This act of returning of the bride and *Malcha* is known as *Kholar gothainai* (Narzi, 1995).

Mamai Mara: If so happens that sometimes the bridegroom or the parents of the bridegroom are not able to pay the *Phon thaka* i.e. bride-price at the time of marriage and if the bride expires a leaving female child behind, then the *Phon thaka* or the bride-price of the female child would go to her uncle at the time of her marriage. This system is known as *Mamai Mara* (Narzi, 1995).

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the Bodos have well established marriage institution which has included forms of marriage, ritual and ceremony etc. The existence of the institution of marriage signified that the society of the Bodos is well developed, rich in culture with abundant of social norms etc to regulate social life of the societal in all aspects of life. No doubt, the marriage of the Bodos is an institution with religious character.

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