

Oral Tradition and Oral Source to the Reconstruction of History of the Bodos

Dr. Oinam Ranjit Singh & Bidintha Narzary

Associate Professor of History , Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, BTC, Assam
Research scholar, Department of History, Bodoland University
(Corresponding author)

Abstract:

Oral tradition is a source that is transmitted orally from one generation to another in the form of folklore, legend, myth etc. Every culture has its own mythology and legends which reflected the cultural practices, values and traditions. It is used as an alternative source where there has been dearth of written documents, archaeological and other evidences. It basically gives an insight of the society during an early period, i.e. pre-literate period. The paper basically deals with the importance of oral tradition in reconstructing the history of the Bodo, who are considered one of the indigenous people of North East India. Oral tradition has been very instrumental in reconstructing Bodo history as the Bodos have reached treasures of Oral sources or Oral tradition.

Keywords: Folklore, Myths, Legends, Bodos

Introduction:

Jan Vansina denoted Oral sources as an “unwritten source that are transmitted orally, whose transmission depend on the power of the memory of successive generations.”¹ He further asserted that Oral traditions include all the oral testimonies from one person to another.² Paul Thompson in his book *The Voice of the Past* writes that “oral history is like a tape recorder which has radical implications for the future”. He describes Oral history itself as old as history, which was first kind of history.³ Kameshwar Brahma in his book *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos* states that the oral traditions of the Bodos include different types of songs and charms, which are sung on the occasions of religious festivals and ceremonies.⁴ The songs and the charms reveal some of the believes

and nature of the community. The elements of the practices also expose certain characteristic of the community.

Oral tradition is an important source for the reconstruction of the history of a particular community who have either written sources or unrecorded history. Oral tradition helps in re-writing the history of the communities, whose forefathers had not preserved their own history in the written form as those ancestors had been transmitted orally number of folksongs, folktales etc. to the generations which are preserved in many of the society of the world. There are various Bodo folklores that highlight the social and cultural life of the Bodos and many legendries have been proved heroic in various legends and the myths, that are related to the concept of universe and God as well as different aspect of the socio-economy, religious life of the Bodos. These testimonies however show the essence of the community and gives an insight to the nature of the community.

The tradition basically is the reflection of the community. The way people dress, speak and eat tells about certain nature of the community. Every community has their own way of greeting when they meet. It is interesting in the case of Bodos, the first question they ask when they meet someone is -what did you have in your meal? The question basically signifies the importance of food. It is more than just feeding the hungry stomach. Contended food signified contended life, which said it all. A well to do Bodo household would have granary a storehouse for grains and cowshed with many cows and buffaloes.

Angkham gufur thabla

Daokhani angkhal gwiya⁵

Free English translation: There is no shortage of crows when you have enough white rice.

The proverb indicates that when there are sufficient grains (or food) there is no shortage of anything. Grains indicated the richness of the family.

Significance of oral tradition:

Oral source as a tradition developed in the society which had no written documents or mere archaeological evidence. However, due to some reasons oral traditions are treated as a defective source, as the information being provided are in paucity and are not transmitted by live informants.⁶ Many scholars therefore find it difficult to rely on oral tradition. However, it could be considered reliable after cross checking it with other material evidences. Bernheim distinguishes between two types of narratives i.e. One, which is first hand, eyewitness report and second, hearsay reports of events, like legends, myths, rumors and so on. In order to know whether the oral tradition contains historical truth, it is necessary to discover the oldest attested form in which the tradition was handed down.⁷ Though the eye witness report may be considered as a reliable fact the other kind of narratives, i.e. the second hand narratives might have to go through the several process of evaluation. Therefore, it needs to be corroborated with other archaeological evidences or other datas. Feder in addition to Berheim's establishment states that the second hand tradition must be treated with greatest reserve. It is possible that the second hand narratives as it passes on to several generation or person, it might be subjected to changes in narration, resulting to distortion of fact.⁸ While Bauer on the other hand adds that rumor can be treated as a useful historical source if it corroborates with other source. The mode of transmission of sagas, legends and anecdotes must be examined and they must be rejected in case they contain internal contradictions or give accounts of events which do not accord with fact as otherwise established.⁹ Legends, myths, anecdotes, sagas etc. are the second hand narratives which has high possibility of carrying certain untrue narrations.¹⁰ So it is very important that these second hand narration go through the process of evaluation and cross examination with other kinds of sources. Robert H. Lowe in his paper *Oral tradition and History* published by the Journal of American Folklore, has mentioned that oral tradition is not completely worthless as it reveals the culture status of people who cherish them, whether as annals of incidents that once occurred or as purely literary products of imagination.¹¹ It is very important for certain community who lack with material evidence. Especially for the community like Bodo oral tradition has been of great

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help in reconstructing their history. According to Feder, the pre-literate people had handed down the memory in the form of rhyme or other formulae for linking the material together¹². There are various folk songs in Bodo culture made for various occasions and situations. Game song or *Gelenai methai* Bodo children sang melodious and rhyming game songs while playing various traditional games. For example

“Be ma ze?

Oma ze

Be ma ze?

Moi ze

Be ma ze?

Makra ze”¹³

Free English translation:

What net is it?

This is pig net

What net is it?

This is deer net

What net is it?

This is monkey net.¹⁴

The song certainly gives the historical glimpse of primitive habit of hunting by the Bodos. Net was the tool they must have hunted the wild animals.

There is a song dedicated to Musa Raja (tiger-god). The song goes:

*“Musa Raja ornai nonga, saima-ranga arnainonga jangno khinda horbla, mosau damra, bhera jagon, dambria joloi phehergon, laokhar gothojung, gumgon, beng gon, jungno khinda horbla”*¹⁵

Free English translation: The tiger king and the wild dogs would not attack the calves and the cattle if the owner of the cattle gives us alms. The calves and the cattle will be strong and will produce strong offspring. We shall take care of them and feed them in the grazing field, if we are given alms.

The song is being sung by the cowherd to the owner of the cattle demanding for alms in return of their service of looking after the herd and the cattle and taking care of them from the wild dogs and tigers. The song states that cattle were prone to be attacked by wild animals which suggests that the community dwelled very close to forest with a limited population and cattle was considered a very important form of the wealth or property during that period. As Kameshwar Brahma states that songs and charms also contribute to the oral traditions of the Bodos.¹⁶ There are several songs of religious and ritualistic significance and some songs which reflects the social life and practices of the Bodos.

Bodos were the agro-pastoral community. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people. The land suitable for cultivation or agriculture is called *Hamaha* (mother of all kinds of soil). Bodos were skilled in construction of irrigation and *bandw* (embankments)¹⁷. The land that was possible for cultivation with irrigational system is known as *Jamphwi-dariaha*.¹⁸ The other kind of land was *swrwb-darriah*, the kind of land which depended on monsoon for cultivation¹⁹. There is a folksong which implies the importance of selection of suitable plot of land for agriculture. The agricultural land is not selected in a proper place, it could be loss to the concerned person. The following song indicated improper selection of cultivable land:

“Ha ladangman agini khona,

Masau ladangman gong mena,

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jamphoi daria daria mai gai

Maia dao jalanbai oma

Jalangbai; makhou jabaono

*Anglai”.*²⁰

Free English translation: Land owned at the center of direction, a pair of bullock with curbed horns was purchased, paddy was planted at the plot of *jamphai-daria* land; birds and pigs have eaten all, nothing has been left for me.

Granary and cowshed was an important part of Bodo household. It determined the wealth of the family. There is a song that the bride to be would sing to her father. The song goes:

“Daoka habnai noaolai

Sila habnai noaolai

Angkhow dabilai apha gosai!

Angkhow dabilai apha gosai!

Mai bakri nunaiao

Mwsow goli nunaiao

Angkhow bilai hor apha!

*Angkhow bilai hor apha!”*²¹

Free English translation:

O my Godly father!

Don't send me to a house

Where crow and kite enters

Please marry me to a family

Where you find a granary full of grains

And a cowshed full of cows.²²

The song is being sung by the bride-to-be to her father. The song indicates about the economic condition of the family as the granary and cowshed determined the economy of the family of the Bodos. Hence, granary and cowshed in the song implies about the well to do condition of the family. In the belief system of the Bodos, entering of the crow and kite to the house implies the poor condition of the family.

It is evident that the Bodos are also highly influenced by their tradition. Their belief system, customs and the traditional practices shows it. They have been following the age old traditional religion called Bathou. The songs and the mantras chanted to the God shows how the community is still deep rooted to their customs and tradition. For every occasion, the God is being remembered in the good times as well as during the bad times. Bathou is the Chief God of the Bodos and there are several songs dedicated to him. One of the song goes:

"Oi phipa guru,

Anan gocay binan gocay nong

Ondo ondo nonni ogian boro

Picha phor khou ondo nono

Oi corzigiri non

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Nonno phothano nonno loy zahoyo

Nonni khurai dercin laocin

Raobo goila;

Oi, Bathoubo bandoba sijoubo

Goronba, Boroni raoabo phonba;

Bima phipa guru, binikhaino

Bathaou pathinanoi, sijou gainanoi;

Gaca gainanoi kham,jotha siphon

Lananoi non pipha khou oncayo;

Ondo apha pipha guru ondo,

Ondor cinao gogloiconanoi thanay,

Boro phica phorkhou ondo non;

Oi phipha guru, khomcini phray

Bokhonanoi cranao lando zonkhou

Corgoniphray bor carsrinanoi,

Hordo nono zon phicaphor no.²³

Free English translation: Oh our father protect your ignorant Bodo children. You are the creator, preserver and destroyer; there is no one greater than you. The altar of *Bathou* has five bamboo rings, the *Sijou* plant has five edges, so the Bodos have five principles. We plant *Sijou* on the alter and worship you

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whilst drums and flutes and cymbals play. Oh father have mercy on your Bodo children, steeped in darkness of ignorance; lift us to light from heaven and shower some blessings on us. The central idea of the free translation is borrowed from Dr. Kameshwar Brahma and he describe a good description on the subject concern. ²⁴

This source provides us information about the religious belief of the Bodos and its principles. The songs imply that *Bathou* the traditional God of Bodos is Supreme God who is responsible for the creation of the universe and can destroy it as well. The God is being remembered in case of catastrophe and help the people out of it.

The Bodos have maintained the tradition of narrating folktales, folksongs and passing them from one generation to another generation. The folktales and folksongs reflect the different cultural aspects of the Bodos. Oral tradition should not be regarded as an impossible means of transmitting truth. Though it is subjected to distortion and error, the importance of the oral source cannot be completely neglected. ²⁵ The process needs to be carefully scrutinized and see that it does not corrupt the main facts of the tradition. Henry Buckle's theory states that the art of writing injured the history. Man would preserve the story in the form of ballads and poetic forms in the memories and was responsible for rendering it carefully and accurately which was considered as professional pride²⁶. So, the introduction of writing led to mixture of the traditions. This was believed on the context that as long as people maintained the separate corpus of mythology and anecdote, the traditions remained steadfast, but when people read traditions about the other people their literature got mixed up eventually.²⁷ The community can best preserve their own traditions and its history. The community can and should be given the confidence to write its own history through oral history. The main aim of oral history is to build relationship between history and the community. It should not be one sided in direction, but a series of exchanges, dialectic, between information and interpretation.²⁸

Conclusion:

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There is very limited written source to reconstruct the history of the Bodos however there are available oral sources which contain lot of historical information. So, oral source plays a great role in contribution to the reconstruction of Bodo history. As, Jan Vansina states that where there is no historical writing or almost none, oral tradition must bear the brunt of historical reconstruction.²⁹ Oral tradition own its credit in contribution to the study of origin, antiquity, ethnology and anthropology like G.P. Singh says “folk-literature as a rich miniature representing the lives, joys and sorrows of village folk within a wide canvas.”³⁰

Notes and References:

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² Ibid., p.2

³ Thompson, Paul, *The Voice of the Past Oral History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p.22

⁴ Brahma, Dr., Kameswar, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos*, Punthi Pustak, Kolkata, 2015, p.215

⁵ Narzee Bhabendra, *Boro Kacharir Samaj aru Sanskriti*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 2015, p.45

⁶ Vansina, Jan, op.cit., p.2

⁷ Ibid., p.4

⁸ Ibid., p.4

⁹ Ibid., p.5

¹⁰ Ibid., p.6

¹¹ Lowe, H., Roberts, *Oral Tradition and History*, The Journal of American Folklore, Vol – XXX - No. CXVI, p.161

¹² Vansina, Jan, op.cit., p.6

¹³ Boro, Anil, *Folk Literature of Bodos*, N.L. Publication, 2001, p.37

¹⁴ Ibid., p.37

¹⁵ Brahma, Kameswar, *A Study in Cultural Heritage of the Boros*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 2009, p.51

¹⁶ Ibid., p.110

¹⁷ Endle, Sidney, *The Kacharis*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 2012 p.13

¹⁸ Brahma, Kameshwar, op. cit., p.111

¹⁹ Ibid., p.111

²⁰ Ibid., p.111

²¹ Narzee Bhabendra, op.cit., p.28

²² Ibid., p.28

²³ Brahma, Dr. Kameshwar, op.cit., p.210

²⁴ Ibid.,p.210

²⁵ Vincent, Martin, John, *Historical Research An Outline of Theory and Practice*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1911, p.142

²⁶ Ibid., p.143

²⁷ Ibid. p.145

²⁸ Thompson, Paul, op.cit., p.214

²⁹ Vansina, Jan, op.cit., p.24

³⁰ Singh G.P., *The Kiratas in Ancient India A Historical Study of their Life, Culture and Civilization*, Gian Publishing House, New Delhi, 1990, p.320