Bodo Traditional Beliefs and Environmental Concerns: An Ecocentric Approach

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Abstract: Bodos belong to the Indo-Mongolian tribe and they are described as one of the earliest inhabitants of Assam, India. The Bodo habitat is characterized by natural surroundings, rivers and streams, and forests and valleys. Bodos are forest dwellers who live in the midst of plants, trees, rocks, grass, birds and animals. They are invariably rich in flora and fauna with innumerable species of plants, birds, insects and animals. They have seasonal songs and dances inspired by nature. This symbiosis with nature is the motivational force preventing them from violating the law of nature. Thus, in this paper the main concern is to highlight Bodo people’s careful dealing with nature as their sustaining source of existence that are found in their socio-religious beliefs and practices and thereby create a sense of concern for environmental preservation among the young generation.

Key Words: Bodos, beliefs, festivals, nature, ecology, interdependence, socio-religious, worship.

Introduction

The Bodos have rich adaptive cultural mechanisms to ensure a healthy ecological balance. Their institutions like religious ceremonies, celebrations of festivals etc. provide the framework for defining acceptable resource use. These traditional practices ensure a rational use of natural resources for livelihood and thus, there is a philosophy of resource management, conservation, and environmental protection. Their way of life is patterned according to the environment. Their agricultural activities are coterminal with the life cycles of the season. Certain places are declared sacred either because they are deemed suitable for religious worship, or because of the belief that some beings that are more superior to humans reside there. These beliefs and norms maintain social pressures that control individual and group behavior. The collective responsibility is manifested in their life. The world-view of the Bodos provides an ecological framework for the concrete manifestation of environmental conservation and sustainability. The holistic and integrated approach to reality finds its expression in the way of life of Bodos and their natural surroundings, in their names and social institutions, in their feasts and festivals, signs and symbols, rites and rituals etc.

The Bodos: A Brief Identification

Among the important ethnic groups of Assam, India, Bodos are evidently the largest group. The exact origin of Bodos or the Boro-Kacharis is not known with certainty due to lack of unwritten resources and other authentic materials. It is obvious in the words of Sidney Endle- the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history (Endle, 1911). However, based on his observance on the appearance and physical features of Boros, Endle remarks that the Boros approximate very closely to the Mongolian type, and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as their original home of the race (Endle, 1911).

According to some scholars, Bodos have migrated from a place called “Bod”, which is located in the North of the Himalayas and West of China. The term “Bodo” (Boro), thus, is derived from the word “Bod”. The inhabitants of Bod country are known as the Bod-Ficha or Bodocha or Bodosa (Bodo means land and Ficha or Cha means children, hence children of the Bod country). In course of time they come to be known as simply Bodo-Boro (Brahma, 1995).

The Bodos have their own rich customs, traditions culture and other socio-religious practices by which they depict their own world view. The idea of creation and its relation to man and nature is shown through their socio-religious life. The economic life is centred around the agriculture for which they completely depend on the providence of mother earth and its creator. Therefore, the understanding of the divine providence through nature and mother earth inspire them to adore God in nature. There are many religious ceremonies and festivals through which Bodos show and express their gratitude to God. These ceremonies and festivals are very much linked with natural phenomena,
Ecology in the socio-religious life of the Bodos

1. Creation Story of the Bodos

Every culture of the world possesses their own creation myths and stories that tell something about the origin of the universe and God’s action involved in creation. Similar way, Bodos too have their own creation stories or myths that speak their worldview. They identify God the creator as Aham Guru who created two birds- one male and one female in the beginning. The female bird lays three eggs in which they believe that the whole universe is created out of these under the instructions of God. The myth highlights that the female bird was impatient to follow the voice of God and broke one egg out of curiosity from which i.e. broken pieces, were born evil spirits, ghost, various insects, plants and trees. This led to the creation of the earth. God felt the need of the earth and created it out of the soil brought from the bottom of the water by two old fish Magur and Maguri. Finally, the myth tells that the human beings are created from other two eggs after many years. From the first egg Man-Sin-Sin-Bwrai (male) and Man-Sin-Sin-Burwi (female) were born. Bodos believe that Man-Sin-Sin-Bwrai (male) and Man-Sin-Sin-Burwi (female) were the first human beings on earth and their children are the ancestors of different groups of peoples on earth. Bodos believe themselves as the descendants of the first human beings. The creation myth of the Bodos indicate the one common origin of both man and other living creatures. There is no doubt that the whole cosmos is created by one God and man has responsibility to take care of this cosmos (Brahma K., 1992).

2. Nature and sacred Forest

Nature and sacred forest are beautiful creation through which God reveals himself to us. The revelation of God in nature gives a sense of sacredness and a great reverence. The realization of God’s presence in nature inspired Bodos to forbid destroying the nature, trees and animals. They believe in the co-existence with nature and other living creatures. Bodos generally love to live in rural areas near a forest and a river. The location of the village highlights their interrelationship with surrounding environment (Brahma K., 1992). The cohabitation with nature has generated certain spiritual elements that control their social life. For example, worship of river gods and goddesses, the owners of the forest etc. The ethical life of Bodos is seen inclusive of God, man and nature. They believe that being cruelty to nature, plants and animals is not conducive to render their duty to God. They consider that both nature and forest are sacred and the dwelling place of gods. Khairai puja and Garja puja are being performed in the name of gods in nature for the welfare of the community as well as other living beings (Pullopullil, 1997). For them, god is present in trees and plants. For example, Siju plant (euphorbia splendens) represents Bathou Raja, the chief god of Bodos and Talsi (basil) plant represents Mainao or Bathou Burwi, goddess of wealth. These plants are planted in their place of worship called Bathou Salii. They also believe that the soul of death people and evil spirits dwell in the forest specially the graveyard forest which they call gwthwisali.

Bodos attribute a kind of soul to the phenomena of nature. They believe that all nature is alive and filled with innumerable spirits that animate her. They offer sacrifices to some of those spirits to propitiate them, and to free themselves from misfortune and illnesses (Vanlalnghak, 2005). They show due respect and honor to forest god through traditional rite before they clear up any forest for cultivation. Love and respect for nature is implicitly elaborated in folk literature of Bodos where many natural phenomena are depicted. Folk literature tells lots about the co-existence with nature and other living beings (Boro, 2001). They obey the rules derived from nature and respect her. They rule their social life by following some of these rules though they may be superstitious in nature (Pullopullil, 1997).

3. Role of Animals and Birds

Animals and Birds play very great role in the socio-religious life of Bodos. They have drawn certain spiritual values from them and shaped their understanding of gods and goddesses. The way they relate themselves with other creatures evoke them to consider some animals as sacred and so to pay due reverence. They are used as sacred objects for sacrifices in worship. Some birds are believed to be as astrologers or fortune tellers. Such birds influence their thoughts and interpretations of present and future happenings. They draw inspirations from the birds of the air and express in their songs and other social life. For example, the relationship between cock and the Bodo society. The cock is used as sacred object for sacrifice as well as other multiple roles in the society. It is a time keeper of Bodos from the early age. A cock and a hen are used as symbol of union in the traditional Bodo marriage called Hathasuni. They forbid harming cows and bulls by cutting. If anyone cuts a cow he or she incurs impurity and sinfulness and he/she needs to perform the...
traditional system of purification called Udrainai (purificatory act from sin) (Brahma L., 1985). Pig, goat, pigeon and chicks are also used as sacred objects of sacrifice in the name of god. They believe that different gods require different animals and birds to be sacrificed (Brahma K., Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, 1995).

Tiger is being worshiped by some Bodos to whom they identify as tiger-god. There is a popular story and folk song prevalent among the Bodos with regard to tiger worship. It tells about the origin of tiger worship (Brahma K., 1992). A group of Bodos who observe rites with regard to tiger worship is entitled as Mushahary. The term Musha means tiger and hari means clan so Mushahari means tiger clan. They are not to kill any tiger, and if they hear the death of a tiger they have to express their sorrow through fasting and cleansing their house. There is also a popular belief among the Bodos that some of these people have the magical power to transform in the form of a tiger, and attack the willed animals for the purpose of meat (Brahma B. K., 2009). Their beliefs, thinking patterns and assessment of future life are being influenced by birds and animals. These beliefs determine the interpretation of their future life. Consequently, this interpretation persuades them to adore and worship god in order to cancel the awaiting misfortune communicated by those birds (Brahma K., 1992).

4. Land and Agriculture

Like any other tribal people, Bodos too are agriculturists and therefore, land is the part of their identity. Both land and agriculture are closely related to the world view of Bodos. They consider land as a precious gift. Their love and concern for land made them to be averse to the use of scientific fertilizer and multi-cropping. Bodos have a firm belief that multi-cropping robs and exploit the fertility of the land. This attitude of preserving ecosystem and non-exploiting the mother earth inspires them to follow the natural process of fertilization (Roy, 1995). They depend on the providence of God, and seldom go for extra product and surplus saving for future. They believe that nature provides them with materials for their houses, crops and plants for their food and water for their drink. Everything that they need in their day to day existence is procured from nature (Mawrie, 2007). They always follow the seasonal cropping and harvesting depending on natural providence of rain water and certain irrigation, and leave the land free for grazing as well as to continue the natural process for fertilization. The attitude of protecting the mother earth and leaving the land for other animals to graze help them to remain consistent with mono-cropping. They trust in the sustaining power of God and the mother earth (Roy, 1995). Bodos, depending on land and its providence, were very much familiar with it. They knew the fertile and non-fertile land. They called alluvial land as hamaha or the smother of the soil (Brahma K., 1992). Most of the beliefs and practices of Bodos are related with agriculture. In fact, all the main festivals of Bodos, both religious and seasonal are closely connected with agriculture. Kherai puja and Garja puja are the major religious festivals. Such pujas are being performed for the good cultivation and at the same time to thank god for his providence (Brahma K., Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, 1995).

Mainao, the goddess of wealth, to whom Bodos consider as the guardian of paddy field and owner of the crops is given due respect and adoration next to Bathou Bwrai through various agricultural ceremonies (Endle, 1911). The ceremonies are mostly directed towards the worship of Mainao, the goddess of wealth, by offering goi jora, phathwi jora (a pair of areca nuts and beetle leaves) before seedling, uprooting, planting, harvesting and eating new rice (Brahma K., Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, 1995).

5. Nature Worship

The nature of worship of Bodos shows their way of relating God in the nature and surrounding environment. Traditional believers worship Bathou Bwrai to whom they believe as supreme god among all other gods. The highest form of worship is given to him. It is said that Bodos had five main gods in early time: Ailong (the god of earth), Agrang (the god of water), Khoila (god of air), Sanja borli (the goddess of light), and Raj Kungri (the goddess of sky) (Pullipopulil, 1997). Bodo deities are divided into household gods and village gods. The former deities are worshipped inside the house or at least in the homestead and the latter deities by the whole village outside the house. The traditional believers worship the gamini mwdai or village god near the sacred grove of trees or bamboos called thansali (Endle, 1911). No fixed date and prescribed form of religious worship are made, nonetheless they are socio-religious in nature. Therefore, the worship involves certain enjoyment and merry making that keep them away from certain worries, troubles, and struggles of the reality of life. Another form of traditional worship of Bodos is seeking god in trees and on the bank of a running streams. They place the offering of goats, or chickens at the foot of the trees. Such trees are usually old trees where they leave those offerings for their deities (Endle, 1911). All these facts show that Bodos live very much in harmony with trees, birds and animals and other creatures on earth.
6. Kherai Puja

*Kherai puja* is the greatest festival of the Bodos. It is more of religious in content and nature. The main purpose of the puja is the welfare of both public and private life. This is performed before and after the cultivation to propitiate different gods and goddesses for the success of cultivation. It is also consists of thanksgiving and praising god for his help and divine providence (Brahma K., Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, 1995).

During the festival, *Bathwu Bwrai* and *Bathwu Burwi* or *Mainao* are being worshiped through various sacrifices. They also offer sacrifices to other gods to whom they consider as the owners of different natural phenomena. Bodos do not have any fixed altar for worship except *Bathwu Sali*. The altar of the *Kherai Puja* is prepared in the open grazing field. The altar as a whole indicates the world view, perception of creation and mother earth. It symbolizes a holy road from the heaven to earth that links between the god of heaven and human beings on earth. The unending principle or law of creation of the creator is signified by a piece of cotton yarn tied on the post of bamboo with green leaves. An egg and a piece of stone are placed in front of *Bathou* as the symbols of creation and the truth (Brahma K., Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, 1995).

7. Garja Puja

*Garja puja* is the religious festival which is performed for the spiritual renewal of the villagers. Every house of the village is purified by sprinkling holy water before one day of the actual puja. The villagers are obliged to keep themselves pure and neat in the night for the solemnity of puja. This preparation is called *Salami*. The next day the villagers cleanse their houses and all utensils, cloths etc. The place of puja is selected in a lonely place of the grazing field which is covered with jungles and the bank of rivers (Brahma K., 1992). The main purpose of the puja is the purification and protection from some epidemic diseases caused by flood in the village. In addition, they also propitiate *Mainao*, for the good crops (Pullopullil, 1997).

8. Bwisagu

*Bwisagu* is a seasonal festival celebrated by Bodos during the spring time that signifies the beginning of a new year. In olden days the celebration lasted for seven days signifying the ecological concern and interrelationship with creation. The first day of the festive season is set for cattle, the second day for man and worship of *Bathwu Bwrai*, third day for dogs, the fourth day for pig/swine, the fifth day for fowls, the sixth day for ducks pigeons and other birds of the air and seventh day for relatives (Brahma L., 1985). During the festival, birds and animals are taken care and fed well according to assigned days of the celebration. Thus, they show their responsibilities to other creatures. Moreover, traditional believers in the early age were fully aware of the ecosystem and its harmonious functioning (Pullopullil, 1997).

9. Domashi

It is a harvest festival of Bodos and is popularly practiced till today. The festival consists of certain characteristic of ecological concern. The celebration is directed to the caring of the environment like that of the *Bwisagu*. For example, a male member of the family ties cords of straw around the fruit bearing trees during the festival to enhance the fruit bearing (Brahma K., Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, 1995). Birds, fish and animals are given food and fed well. The attitude of well-being of every creatures and sharing the fruits of the earth with other living beings is depicted during the festival. They also thank and worship *Bathwu Bwrai* to whom they consider as supreme God. Thus, the festival witnesses the worship of god and sharing his providence with other fellow living beings (Pullopullil, 1997).

10. Kati Gasa Saonai

It is a festival that does not involve in merry-making but more of prayerful festive to goddess of wealth, *Mainao*. The festival comes in the crisis period and directed towards the good product of the paddy. This is the time when the buds of paddy remain at the point of full bloom. The idea of tilling the earth and caring for its fruit bearing plants is implicitly brought out during the festival. The unmarried girls of the families go to the paddy field with *Sewari* (a long bamboo stick used for weaving) and touch the paddy plants with the stick. They believe that such act will enhance the paddy plants to bear large scale of paddy. They offer prayers to *Bathwu Bwrai* by burning earthen lamps at the altar, at the cowshed, at the granary as well as in the paddy field in the evening (Brahma B.K., 2009).

11. Amthisua

This festival is closely connected to the mother earth. The Bodos consider it as the menstruation period of mother earth. Therefore, for one week Bodos do not dig the soil, nor plough the land, nor cut the useful trees and jungles and also do not enter into the granary. They believe that if any green trees are cut during the menstruation period of mother earth the trees will not grow. In
other word, the mother earth will not produce further. Though the young boys and girls observe it by eating jack fruits, mangoes etc. they will not indulge in any act that will interfere with nature. The deep love and concern for the earth persuades them to remain aloof from interfering with nature for the period of one week (Brahma K., Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, 1995). Thus, they look forward indirectly to preserve the mother earth and its living forests. This is an act of abiding by the law of the nature and ecosystem of mother earth.

**Further Reflection**

Since centuries, the Bodos have developed cultural mechanism to ensure the continuity of natural resources. There is a tremendous sense of dependence on nature. The sense of conservation has grown out of the cumulative knowledge of the millions of timeless people and not from the observation of a few individuals. Their understanding of life is holistic viz. life is only possible if these resources continue to be available for human use. Conservation, values and practices come from social responsibility. The earth and humans are placed on the same level. The idea of interdependence and not of domination is what makes Bodos’ relationship with nature symbolic.

Bodos are sensitive to the spirit-presence in the world around them. Among Bodos, the divine is often seen as a pervasive, throughout the cosmos. In a particular way the divine manifests itself in natural phenomena- trees, rocks, mountains, rivers, thunder, lightning, storm etc. Most of the religious rituals are geared to pleasing or appeasing the spirits. The people are intent on attracting the blessings of good spirits and warding off destruction from evil spirits. Cosmic phenomena like eclipses and natural destructive phenomena like earthquakes and storms are given a moral meaning. They are often seen as punishment for encroaching the domain of the spirits by altering the natural world in a significant way. Even the very simple matter of cutting down a tree or building a house demands the appropriate rituals to recognize the rights of the spirit world.

This approach to the numinous world is also holistic. There is no cutting of the human from the natural world. Environment is not seen as raw material for human consumption to be manipulated in whatever way people choose. Rather it is filled with spirit presence and as such must be respected. The Bodo ecological concern can give elements for a contemporary ecological model of living in harmony with the natural world. It recognizes the importance of all life, including the life of all the organisms on the earth. Bodos have set example as model ecological citizens, holding values and beliefs that industrialized humans have long since sacrificed in the pursuit of progress and comfort. Their relationship with the natural world tend to preserve biological integrity with natural communities. These are engaged in relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity and caring with an urge to consider fellow beings as alive and self-conscious as human beings. Such relationships are reflected and perpetuated by cultural elements including religious belief and ceremonial rituals.

In the songs and the legends of Bodos it is apparent that land and her creatures are perceived as truly beautiful things. There is a sense of great wonder and of something which sparks a deep sensation of joyful celebration.

A very strong belief in the Bodo culture is that the earth is a living being that must be treated with respect and loving care. The Bodo tribe called the earth *Bwiswmuthi Bima* meaning the earth mother. As mother nurtures us, so also the earth gives us whatever is necessary for our livelihood. And as it is the responsibility of the sons and daughters to love and care their old mother, likewise it is their responsibility at par to care for the earth so that it can sustain the existence of life on earth. They believe that if they fail to care the *Bwiswmuthi Bima* curses will fall upon them. So they take it as their duty to care for the earth and whatever exists on it. They believe that earth is living being and so even they offer the edible things before they eat. Since they consider the earth as mother, they see themselves as part of the land as well as land to be part of them.

Some trees, animals and birds that had very great economic value for the community, are set apart for special protection. Such protection is ensured through myths built around them. Many of these species are presented in the myths as those from which the ancestors of the tribe have originated. The social customs are mainly around the use and distribution of the resources. Some species of trees, animals, birds are accorded special protection and cannot be destroyed except under very strict conditions. For example, pregnant animals can never be killed. This is to ensure that everyone’s needs are met and that no one destroys or misuse what is needed by the rest or for the conservation of the species that is for the future community.

**Moral Priority Towards Ecology**

In all relationships, it is not mastery or dominance but maturity and responsibility that we strive for. Growth does not involve dismissal of our initial intimacy with nature as irrelevant. As long as we pursue success and its intoxication rather than
maturity and its values, we will continue to change the world but lose the self. Instead of changing the world, we need to change our fragmented world view and ourselves. We shall rediscover the self in the company of other selves and in communion with all creation. There is no life which is not fellow living. We live in union with all other beings, whether living or nonliving. Everything has a fundamental right to exist. Nature, the interrelated web of life, is a sacred milieu of intrinsic worth. Our ecological responsibility is to acknowledge, preserve and promote the values of nature. This is our moral priority deemed towards ecological balance. Humanity has a future if only we build sustainable communities following the principles of ecology. An ecosystem is sustainable, because it maintains itself and evolves along the principles of interdependence, recycling, partnership, flexibility and diversity. This is the wisdom of nature we must learn and incorporate into everyday life for a sustainable human civilization. Some social laws may be broken with impunity but not natural laws. The survival of humanity depends on our ecological literacy, on our ability to understand these principles of ecology and to live accordingly.

Conclusion

Ecology reminds us that our environment and we combine to form a single system so that care for oneself must also extend to care for the environment. Each being is invested with finality of its own and as a steward of creation we contribute to realizing these finalities. Evidently the earth is not to be seen as a mere accumulation of organisms and environments. It is filled with interdependent entities which must maintain balance in their growth and development without undermining even the least. To use the environment as an instrument totally for the satisfaction of one’s immediate needs without reference to other persons or organisms is to demean them. Just as our ancestors have carefully observed not to unnecessarily destroy the nature in its abundance, so also the present generation people should think of preserving and promoting ecological balance taking into due consideration of the future generation and recent crises in the world environment.

References


