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Folk Beliefs of the Bodos: A Folkloristic Perspective

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Abstract-- Bodo is an aboriginal tribe of Assam. Folk beliefs are closely interlinked especially folklore finds expression in folk beliefs. Folk beliefs play pivotal role as far as 'folklore' of a locality is concerned. Hence, the Bodo folk beliefs may be considered as the culminating force in shaping the folklore of a group of people. The Bodo traditional knowledge of a group helps them to nourish their beliefs. Therefore, the Bodo folk beliefs form a large component of an emergent Bodo folk society. The four sectors of folklore like oral literature, material culture, social folk customs and folk performing art forms are the reflected of the Bodo folk beliefs of folk people which depict their tradition, culture and ancient heritage. The Beliefs belong to communities in two ways- conceptually and functionally. The conceptual aspect of Bodo folk beliefs may be seen in oral literature as it expresses social and religious elements. The verbal forms of expression like hymns, folk songs, folk legends, and proverbs etc., also deal with the conceptual aspect of folk beliefs. Other three sectors like material culture, social folk customs and folk performing art forms represent the functional aspects of folk beliefs. In this paper an attempt is made to analyze how the Bodo folk beliefs are closely associated with folklore of a Bodo folk people living in a locality and their current trend.

Keywords-- folklore, folk belief, Bodo, tradition, culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

The broad area of the proposed study is the Bodo culture. Bodo is a Schedule Tribe of India mainly concentrated in the North-eastern zone and Central zone. Though it is considered as a tribe, in veracity Bodo constitutes a race consisting tribes of Tibetan origin belonging to the great Indo-Mongoloid family of people [1]. They are the first aboriginal or the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley [2]. They are the largest tribal community in the northeast speaking a common language and practising common social norms. Like other tribal communities of the world, Bodo are also facing tough challenges in conserving their cultural traits and folk beliefs. The increasing contact of advanced communities with them has effected directional changes in their traditional culture and belief. Folk belief is an active component of folklore bound by tradition. Through it the rites and rituals, thinking and way of life get reflected. Folk belief has been preaching knowledge and experiences acquired through social life based on nature as advice and suggestions.

Passing down the generation without break, now it has acquired written form. Folk belief gets reflected in different parts of folklore through behaviour and expressions. According to the experts of Folklore is spread over all sections of the people being not limited among the unrelated, uneducated and non-enlightened people.

Folk beliefs are not evolved completely based on scientific facts. But these have been accepted as true by majority of the society. The function of folk belief is not to give factual information; influencing their behaviour through cautioning them about possible problems or concerns is its actual function.

Folk beliefs appear in Folklore in various forms. Some of them remain hidden, these spread among a particular section of the society. For example, there are some beliefs prevalent among married women, these remain hidden from others. On the other hand, most of the folk beliefs are secular, spread among all sections of the society.

Given the diversity and cross-cultural spread of folk belief, one of the central problems in the scholarship in this field is classification. Wayland D. Hand formulated a classification based on the cycle of life. According to this classification, folk belief can be divided into following categories:

1. Beliefs on birth, infancy, childhood
2. Beliefs on human body, folk medicine
3. Beliefs on home, domestic pursuits
4. Beliefs economic, social relationships
5. Beliefs on travel, communication
6. Beliefs on love, courtship, marriage
7. Beliefs on death and funeral customs
8. Beliefs on witchcraft, ghosts, magical practices
9. Beliefs on cosmic phenomena, times, numbers, seasons
10. Beliefs on weather
11. Beliefs on animals, animal husbandry,
12. Beliefs on Fishing and hunting
13. Beliefs on plants, plants husbandry
14. Miscellaneous.

These categories are divided into more specific topics for instance, the beliefs on economic, social relationships into following sub topics:

- (a) Prosperity, wealth
- (b) Works, trades, profession
- (c) Religion
- (d) Friends, enemies
- (e) Recreation, sports, games
- (f) Lying, thievery, legal guilt, murder etc.

The cycle of life classification is based on the concept of “the rite of passage” as formulated by Arnold van Gennep. Rites of passage takes place at various points in the life cycle where important transitions from one stage of life to another occur. Hand classified the folk beliefs based on three transitions located at birth, marriage and death. Folk belief is a part of human cultural activity and in many circumstances can only be understood as it relates to rituals. Based on findings of Gary R. Butler experts of folk belief have understood that folk belief is spread throughout various parts of Folklore [3].

II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This paper aims at studying the folk beliefs and practices of the Bodo and its current trend. The aim will be pursued by analysing primary and secondary information on following two points-

- a. Traditional folk beliefs and practices of the Bodo
- b. Impact of other cultural folk beliefs and practices of the Bodo.

III. METHOD OF STUDY AND MATERIALS USED

Descriptive method has been adopted for the current study. The study is mainly based on personal and first-hand experiences of the researcher. From the perspective of anthropology, the study will be from emic perspective, i.e., the researcher will be studying own culture and society. Thus, the analyses will be mainly an insider’s perception of socio-cultural reality. Since the researcher’s experience was felt inadequate to explicitly analyses the undergoing socio-cultural transitions of the Bodo, the method of non-participant observation was also employed in the study.

Primary data were collected through interviews of the experienced observers of the societal transitions of the Bodo. A few data were collected through schedule also. The secondary data of the study are collected from various books, magazines, journals and internet etc.

IV. BODO FOLK BELIEFS

These beliefs have occupied important places in different fields of Bodo culture. For instance, in Bodo society after dissecting the nerve of a new born baby it is buried along with the FLOWER below the drop of shade over veranda [4]. It is believed that if animals eat the placenta, the health of mother gets deteriorated; hence this ritual is followed so that the mother does not suffer during the next conception. In the same way, given black spots on forehead and parietal region so that bad eyes do not fall on new born baby, seeking protection by putting bracelets around hands are the instances of folk belief.

In the traditional Bodo marriage “Hathasuni” a couple of black chick and chicken are sacrificed in the altar of ‘Bathou’ with newlywed bride and groom seated by its side. Among the two birds sacrificed, if chicken breaths last before, it is believed that the female will die before or if the chick breaths last before it is believed that the male will die premature.

While proceeding for funeral, in the way a banana tree is cut instantly; if the cut banana tree grows again it is believed that the death had longing for a long life, if it does not grow again it is believed that the death had no such a desire. After dead body is lifted for funeral, the spot on which the death was placed is plastered with soil and clean water, kept covered with a basket. When the funeral party returns, it is uncovered and examined; if signs of footprint of an animal appears it is believed that the death has got rebirth in the form of surfaced animal.

In the same way, in the old tradition of Bodo society if someone languishes for long due to illness, and if could not be cured by doctor or oracles both it is believed that the God of House itself has put the pressure or bad air has got him/her or witch has acted upon it. An effort for curing the illness by observing “Kherai” placing offerings in front of ‘Bathou’ is a habit indicating the social belief.

Legend is a form of folk literature narrating the previous events related mainly to battles or war. The stories are created around the valour and charms of the legendary figure. Among the Bodo, through the ballad of Bashiram Jwhlwao the belief that battle could be won if soldiers could be armed with “Aronai” weaved overnight is highlighted.

The Bodo, on the first day of celebrating “Bwishagu” welcoming the new year with pomp and gay, observes the ritual of bathing the domestic cattle on the pond or rivers.

On that day, while taking the cattle for a bath, the cowboy and other persons accompanying him use to sing various songs. Following is the excerpts form one of them

“Digilithi laothi mwsouni muli
 Dudali jagwn gai khukhili
 Digilithi laothi khri-khri ganthi
 Jwngni mwsoua bolot jathi;
 Janai nonga gaide – thephra
 Markha jagwn phalwni behra [5].”

[Digilithi stick is cow’s medicine
 The milking cow shall become cow charming
 Digilithi stick has frequent joints
 Our cows shall turn to vibrant breed
 Shall not become lean and thin
 Markha shall become strong of the herd].

Through this song, folk belief on the medicinal effects of plants with seasons becomes apparent. As the Bodo believe, the “Digilithi” plant shows an effect during the winter season which cures diseases when touched on body of animals. With this belief in mind, the cattle are taken for bath chasing with Digilithi branches.

Folk beliefs of the Bodo also get highlighted through various proverbs. Proverbs like “Mwdwmnai bibarkhou hwxhmanw haya” (Bloomed flower cannot be hidden) is a very simple proverb. But through this, the ardent belief that facts cannot be kept hidden forever, once it will surface by any means become prominent. This has highlighted a belief of the Bodo which also is a belief of the whole human society.

The deep faith of the Bodo on God gets reflected through recitations in the worships. That there is an Almighty behind the human life whom the Bodo call “Bathou Bwrai” the desire for His kindness gets reflected in the following prayer

“Wi bipha guru
 Anan gosai binan gosai nwngw
 Ondw ondwnwngni ogian
 Boro phisaphwrkhrou ondwnw
 Wi swrjigiri nwngw
 Nwngnikhurwi dersin laosin raobw gwiliya
 Wi bathouabw bandwba sijouabw siriba
 Boroni raobw phongba”.

[Oh God, our father
 Protect your ignorant Bodo children
 You are the creator
 None in the world are greater than you
 Oh, Bathou has five rings, sijou has five edges
 So Bodos have five principles]

In the aspect of material culture too, it is seen that the Bodos, on the day of Piance, among other curries offered, serve Narzi curry. Besides this, when return from funeral, the inmates are made to sue dry Narzi leaves. Through this ritual, it is believed that the death has sacked all relations with the living ones. But during the following one year the family members avoid taking Narzi leaf [6]. Through that the wish that the death be not forgotten for good leaving aside all near and dears. Keeping tune with this belief, the Bodos think that if a guest is served with Narzi curry, the sweet relation gets soured.

Through the Social folk customs---In the Bodo society, “Kherai” is the oldest symbol for invisible human art. During the Kherai celebration performance of dances with 18 rhythms has turned into a religious habit. Amidst this, inquiry about future of the villagers during the ongoing year towards the last of the celebration indicates the deep-rooted folk belief.

V. CONCLUSION

In this scientific era, the folk beliefs of the Bodo are no longer maintained in the rituals and manners, yet these all have deep impact with regard to maintaining life avoiding troubles throughout. At present, folk belief is spreading fast among all people of all economic classes, educated sections, in the urban areas and in the field of technology even. It may be mentioned as an instance that folk belief is having influence in the activities which are considered to be most modern. Many modern individuals use to carry crystals in their purses with a view to help their fortune bloom. Human civilization has changed with time, with this the face of folk belief also undergoing changes. For this, the scope for research on folk beliefs with newer approach also always surfacing.

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