

Chapter: VI

Economic Life of the Bodo

In early days, economic life of the Bodo was largely reliant on hunting-gathering, archaic system of agriculture, animal husbandry, handicrafts and other primitive economic practice. In due course of time, they abundant natural economy (hunting-gathering) and reached to the first stage of agriculture. Even during that period also they might be semi-nomadic, migrating from one place to another from time to time. Economic life of the Bodo was very much impact by their habit of frequent migration. They gave maximum importance to the sustenance of day to day needs in their life. In those days, they were self sufficient with some degree of necessities and led to a simple rural life without so much knowledge of earning and accumulating property. As a result of struggle for livelihood in later stages, they had undergone to various occupations.

The occupations of the Bodo can be discussed under the following:

- i. Agriculture
- ii. Domestication of Animals
- iii. Hunting
- iv. Fishing
- v. Handicraft
- vi. Spinning and Weaving and
- vii. Trade and Commerce

i. Agriculture:

Agriculture is the backbone of economic life of the Bodo since ancient days. However, a concrete evidence has not been found so far when the Bodo abandoned the practice of pre-agricultural activities, practice of *Jhum* cultivation and when they started agriculture with ploughshare and other agricultural implements. It is stated that when they proceeded and settled in the valley of Assam and some parts of North East India, they had crossed their earlier stages of life and became nomadic farmer¹. In fact, in early

period they adopted primitive form of cultivation and produced only for local consumption. The Bodo practiced *Jhum* and shifting cultivation as there were many uncultivated lands in the past².

Cutting of jungles, burning of trees and others, plantation of paddy and various vegetables were done by the Bodo in the process of cultivation. They had good knowledge of selecting site for agriculture and cultivation of vegetables. They did not cultivate the same field more than two year twice times and did not stay in the same location more than six years. Sometimes, they came back to the previous field after a gape of five years and if they found the said area was fertile and fit for agriculture purpose, they started cultivation. They might be cultivated the same field but did not be use the old houses or old location of the house which they used earlier considering that it would be misfortune. When they practiced *Jhum* or shifting cultivation they always tried to find out virgin land which could provide more productivity because of the fertile of land. It is said that as and when agricultural land was found to be unfertile, they deserted the place after harvesting was over in search of new fertile land³.

With the passage of time, the Bodo have no longer remained as a shifting or *Jhum* cultivation oriented community. They give up *Jhum* or shifting cultivation and started settled agriculture with ploughshare and other allied agricultural implements. They used to grow varieties of crops. Rice is staple food of the Bodo. For the cultivation of rice, they selected *Hama Ha* (alluvial land). Sufficient water whether it may from rain or irrigation or from any other source always required in cultivation⁴. So, they prepare embankment in their paddy field for the storage of rain water or water from any source⁵. This practice was also done in past days.

Two types of rice namely *Asu* and *Maisali* are grown by the Bodo since early days. Another rice known as *Baoa*, which fall under the category of *Maisali* has also been grown by the Bodo.

Asu Mai:

For the cultivation of *Asu* rice, land is required to be tilled first. After that seeds are shown on the land which they had already tilled. The seeds which are sown already are covered again with the help of harrow. The cultivation of *Asu* is done in the month of

February and March. Harvesting is normally done within two and half or three months from the date of sowing the seeds. Transplantation method is also adopted while cultivating *Asu* rice. In past days, transplantation method was not practice by the Bodo but this method begun to adopt in later stage. When the height of rice is about six inches, *Asu Beda Hwnai* is done in which an implement known as *Beda* is used to clean grasses which are grown along with rice in paddy field. It is done not only to clean unwanted grasses in the field but also to make the ground loose. By doing so, rice can grow in healthy condition and free from weeds⁶.

Maisali Mai:

In cultivation of *Maisali Mai*, two methods namely *Leosia* and *Kasia* are adopted.

Under *Leosia* method, the field is made muddy by tilling and properly leveled. The required seeds are put in a bag and tied it. The tied bag is put into water till the seeds are sprouted. When seeds are properly germinated, they are sown in the field which is made ready for the purpose. When saplings are enough mature for final transplantation, they are pulled out and transplanted in the paddy field.

Leosia and *Kasia* methods are almost same but in *Kasia* method transplantation is done twice time whereas one time is done in *Leosia*. In *Kasia* method also the paddy field is tilled to make mud and after producing mud, the field is properly level. In a bag seeds are put and is tied the bag. Afterward, it is put into water to soak the seeds properly till germinated. When seeds are germinated they are sown in paddy field to grow in nursery for about twenty-five (25) to thirty (30) days. When sapling reached at the stage for transplantation, they are pulled out and transplanted temporarily in the paddy field for twenty (20) to twenty-five (25) days. After temporary transplantation, they are again pulled out and cut upper parts of the foliage and re-transplantation is done in the paddy field. This method of cultivation is more productive than *Leosia*. The processes for cultivation of both *Leosia* and *Kasia* are started in the month of April and harvesting is done in the month of November or December⁷.

When paddies reached at the stage of harvesting, they are reaped with sickle and bound in bundle. The bundles of reaped paddy are kept on the ground to dry for two or three days. Sometimes, after cutting the paddy without leaving in paddy field, they are

directly brought to home. The sheaves are carried by women on their head. But, men carried the sheaves on their shoulder with the help of *Sulabari*. The use of bullocks for the purpose of carrying the sheaves was rare in early days but became common nowadays. When sheaves are brought to home they are separated from husk with the help of bullocks. While separating rice from husk, two or more bullocks are tied side by side and made them move round on sheaves which are spread on the ground⁸. Separated grains are stored in *Bakri* (granary) or *Duli* (bamboo rice container).

The Bodo mainly relied on monsoon rain for cultivation. Even though, they are constructed dam and canal for the purpose of irrigation as they have knowledge of constructing dams and canal. The Bodo are exhibited the skill of irrigation since early days⁹.

In addition to rice, varieties of crops are also grown by the Bodo. The major crops are mustard, tobacco, jute, cotton etc. and vegetables like potato, cabbage, cauliflower, radish, cucumber, gourd, green leaves, pulses, beans, small-beans, sweet potato, turmeric, pumpkin, melon, brinjal, etc. including varieties of spices like chilli, onion, garlic, coriander, ginger etc. Areca nuts trees and betel leaves are also grown in large scale which brings good economy to them. In absence of areca nuts and betel leaves, no religious as well as social ceremony can be conducted¹⁰.

Different kinds of agricultural tools are used by the Bodo in agricultural activities. The agricultural implements are made of bamboo and wood. However, some tools are made of bamboo or wood with iron. The following are the agricultural implements of the Bodo¹¹:

Bodo dialect	English Equivalent
i. <i>Nangwl</i>	Ploughshare
ii. <i>Jungal</i>	Yoke
iii. <i>Suken</i>	A kind of bamboo implement which used to separate the straw
iv. <i>Mwi</i>	Harrow
v. <i>Mwi Dangur</i>	A bamboo which used with Mwi to connect with the yoke
vi. <i>Hasini</i>	Rake

- vii. *Royna* A kind of implement for collecting seeds (A tool which made of bamboo and wood to make together the rice)
- viii. *Khasi* Sickle
- ix. *Khodal* Hoe
- x. *Beda* A piece of wood with spikes used for removing weeds
- xi. *Sulabari* A piece of split bamboo with pointed ends used to carry the stack of paddy on shoulder

As and when any farmer needs the help or assistance of villagers during the time of tilling of soil or transplantation of sapling or harvesting, farmer is made request other person in the village for extending their help in carrying out the tasks¹². When asked for helped, the villagers render voluntary service to the concerned person who requested to them. No wages are required to pay to those people who render their services to the farmer. However, the volunteers are offered meals, rice-beer, pork etc. for their voluntary service. The concerned farmer is also reciprocated his service to other villagers when they require the service.

ii. Domestication of Animals:

Next to agriculture, domestication or rearing of different animals is another important economic activity of the Bodo¹³. Pig, chicken, goat, cow, duck, etc. are regularly reared but no buffalo. Domesticated animals have an important place in socio-economic life of the Bodo. In some religious ceremonies, livestock like pig, goat, chicken, etc. are made compulsory to sacrifice. As a result of which domesticated livestock has a great religious significance in society. Except cow, all domesticated animals are consumed.

Among the Bodo, no group such as herdsman or shepherd or manufacturer or handicraft etc. is found¹⁴. Each and every family domesticates all kinds of livestock for consumption and socio-religious purposes¹⁵. Nurturing of domesticated livestock is generally done by female. They are considered as owner of those livestock.

iii. Hunting:

Bodo are fond of hunting right from ancient days. The term *Mwihur* denotes hunting and *Polan* is the word which refers to a person who engaged in hunting¹⁶. In short, a hunter is called *Polan*. Hunting is exclusively for man. Group hunting as well as individual hunting is very common. Regarding hunting of wild animals Rev. Sidney Endle¹⁷ highlighted that deer and wild pigs are very oftenly caught in hunting. Sometimes, they also used net for hunting wild animal and regular hunting parties are organized for hunting purpose. The practice of offering right leg of the trap animal to the owner of net is prevalent among the Bodo. Rest portion of meat are distributed among the villagers. Equal share of meat are entitled to get by the members who joined in hunting and half or less share of meat is received by the villagers who do not participate in hunting because of his engagement to village work. Widow and sick persons are also apportioned a little share of hunted meat¹⁸. The Bodo used different hunting devices which are listed below:

Bodo dialect	English Equivalent
i. <i>Bwrla</i>	Bow
ii. <i>Tir</i>	Arrow
iii. <i>Top</i>	Arrow(made of bamboo)
iv. <i>Jong</i>	Spear
v. <i>Je</i>	Net
vi. <i>Rua</i>	Axe
vii. <i>Sika</i>	Dao

At present, the practices of distribution of meat among the villagers who are not participated in hunting is seems to be discontinued.

iv. Fishing:

Fish constitutes an important food item of the Bodo. Generally, fishing is not considered as an occupation however, being an indispensable food item, the Bodo practiced fishing since ancient past. Fishing is their hobby. Fishing implement used by the Bodo are very simple. The fishing devices are made from the materials available in

their villages and technique of making the implements is indigenously developed¹⁹. Fishing is done by both man and woman. Most of the fishing implements are made of bamboo and cane. *Jekai* is the fishing implement which is used by female only but in some exception case male also used it. The fishing implement called *Jekai* is a triangular basket made of bamboo with open at one end and three triangular sides are closing with each other to the point and having a handle made of bamboo which is fixed to the whole body²⁰. The fishing devices of the Bodo are given below:

Bodo dialect	English Equivalent
i. <i>Jekai</i>	A fishing scoop
ii. <i>Kobai</i>	A scoop for keeping fish
iii. <i>Sen</i>	A kind of fish trap
iv. <i>Koka</i>	A kind fish trap
v. <i>Pholo</i>	A kind of fishing trap
vi. <i>Je</i>	Fishing net
vii. <i>Shaira</i>	A kind of fish trap

v. Handicraft:

The Bodo are expert in the field of handicraft as their ancestors were skill craftsman from whom they gain the knowledge of handicraft. The raw materials of the handicraft are collected from forest and different handicraft products are produced to meet the requirement in their day to day life. Almost all male members of the Bodo are talented craftsmen. The entire work of handicraft is confined to male members only. They build their houses. They also make their required implements from woods and cane. All the required things of the family are made by them²¹.

The Bodo do have many household utensils which are made of clay, bamboo, wood, cane, etc. Various household utensils are listed below²²:

Bodo dialect	English Equivalent
i. <i>Abwi Dangi</i>	Bamboo basket for keeping vegetables
ii. <i>Kamplai</i>	A low wooden seat

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| iii. | <i>Don</i> | Bamboo basket use for measuring grains |
| iv. | <i>Duli</i> | A large open mouthed bamboo basket for storing grains |
| v. | <i>Sandanga</i> | Large Sieve |
| vi. | <i>Darha</i> | Bamboo mate |
| vii. | <i>Kada</i> | Bamboo basket |
| viii. | <i>Songrai</i> | Winnowing fan |
| ix. | <i>Sandri</i> | Sieve |
| x. | <i>Sagong</i> | A kind of handmade grinder made of bamboo |
| xi. | <i>Uwal</i> | Wooden Mortar |
| xii. | <i>Gaihen</i> | Wooden pestle |
| xiii. | <i>Kadwou</i> | Wooden or bamboo ladle |
| xiv. | <i>Janta</i> | Wine-filter made of bamboo |
| xv. | <i>Laotai</i> | A bamboo implement for distributing wine |
| xvi. | <i>Dwihu</i> | Pitcher |
| xvii. | <i>Maldang</i> | Large earthen pot used for storing rice |
| xviii. | <i>Dabka</i> | Earthen pot used for storing fermented rice beer |
| xix. | <i>Mwkra Koro</i> | An earthen pot having some holes at the bottom which is used at the time of making distill wine |
| xx. | <i>Kopri</i> | Wicker hat |
| xxi. | <i>Goy-batha</i> | Small-tray on which betel-nuts are kept |
| xxii. | <i>Baoka</i> | A piece of split bamboo with pointed ends used for carrying loads by shouldering |
| xxiii. | <i>Singkhai</i> | A loop or string net suspended from rod used for carrying loads |
| xxiv. | <i>Kherkha</i> | A kind of basket used for washing rice before cook) |
| xxv. | <i>Dokha</i> | Rice cooker |

vi. Spinning and Weaving:

The Bodo have their own traditional dresses which produced by themselves since ancient days. They are expert in the art of weaving. Their artistic skill and sensibility is reflected in their traditional dresses like *Dokhna*, *Gwmgra*, *Phali*, *Aronai*, *Indi* etc. Each and every house of the Bodo has their own handloom for producing different cloths. Spinning and weaving are exclusively reserved for women. Males are excluded. Almost

all female acquire the knowledge of art of weaving. They rear silk-worm. From the cocoon of silk-worm, they produce various cloths for personal use and later on for business. *Muga* rearing is very important economic activity of the Bodo²³. It is true that woman produce cloths to meet the needs of their own family without charging anything for their services. However, it cannot be denied that their production of cloths for the family members can save expenditure of the family. It shows their active participation in the economic life. So far, we do not find complete information about the date of establishment of silk industry in Assam. It is said that silk industry was confined to Tibeto-Burman group who were inhabited in Assam. Assam was famous for the production of varieties of silk cloths like the China and trade in silk was very profitable²⁴. Spinning of yarn from raw cotton and cocoon is done by women. While spinning the yarn both from cocoon and cotton, they used a device called *Taokri*. The following are the traditional cloths²⁵:

- i. *Dokhona* (female dress) (*Dokhona Taosi, Daotu Godo, Parwo Megon, Salamata*, etc.
- ii. *Indi Si* (both for male and female)
- iii. *Aronai* (both for male and female)
- iv. *Jwmgra* (female dress)
- v. *Gamsa* (male dress)

Dyeing:

The Bodo have a very good conventional knowledge of producing varieties of colour. The yarn and thread are dyed with natural ingredients like cochineal, morinda, indigo, barks of various trees, roots, leaves, madder etc.²⁶. The art of dyeing is ancient practice among the Bodo. Dyeing is done in different way. As for example, to bring red colour, the yarn or thread or cloth are soaked with pounded *Baora* (*Terminalia bellerica*) leaves into water for about five days. After that it is required to be boiled to make red colour²⁷. Sometimes, garments or finished cloths or products are also dyed to make different colours. It is asserted that the Bodo were pioneer in the art of sericulture, weaving, dyeing etc. in the early days²⁸. However, nowadays due to modernization the past traditional methods of dyeing is absent in many places.

Traditional handloom implements are listed below:

Bodo dialect	English Equivalent
i. <i>Tadh</i>	Loom
ii. <i>Maku</i>	Shuttle
iii. <i>Gonsa</i>	An implement used in weaving
iv. <i>Sewari</i>	A flat stick used in weaving cloths
v. <i>Musra</i>	A piece of reed for weaving in which threads are winded
vi. <i>Gandwi</i>	One of the two beams of a handloom on which the yarns and woven cloths are rolled up
vii. <i>Gorka</i>	An implement used in the weaving
viii. <i>Bwodangi</i>	An implement using in weaving
ix. <i>Salkunta</i>	The four posts on which the loom is placed
x. <i>Jentwr</i>	Spinning Wheel
xi. <i>Swrki Pisa</i> (Small one)	An implement made of bamboo to twist tread
xii. <i>Swrki Gidir</i> one)	An implement made of bamboo to twist tread (Big one)
xiii. <i>Rasw</i>	Reed
xiv. <i>Taokri</i>	Reel for winding threads
xv. <i>Danganatha</i>	An implement made of bamboo to twist tread

vi. Trade and Commerce:

In true sense of term, the source materials for trade and commerce as well as money economy of the Bodo in early days are very limited. In ancient days, they were self-sufficient and self-dependent. The production was only for consumption purpose. Whatever they produced that were for their own. Like other ancient societies, the Bodo produced to meet their needs only. However, in due course of time, they begun to produce more food grains or other commodities than they required. The extra products were made exchange with the surplus products of others which led to the immergence of trade. Exchange of goods for goods was a common practice in the early days of their

economic life. No doubt, the economy of the Bodo in early days was substantive and production was not for profit motive.

In early days, activities of trade or business were not encouraged by the society. It was believed that trade or business involved telling untruth. Speaking lie was regarded as a great sin to them. So, they were not habituated to trade and business²⁹. It is asserted that a person who sold his cow within one year from the date of purchased with profit was required to do penance or to pay fine³⁰. It indicates discourage of trade in society. Selling of cow by making profit within unpermitted period proved that society was not so much encourage in earning of profit by means of trade and business. However, this is earlier concept. Today, many changes can be noticed in the economic life of the Bodo. The primitive economy system has been discarded totally or to a great extent and people started doing trade and commerce. Cottage industries, animal husbandry and other economic institutions are brought up-to-the-minute.

Economic activities of the Women:

Woman has been playing a very active role in economic activities since ancient days. It is true to say that all the facet of economic activities rest in the hand of woman. They engage various activities like household, agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry etc. Fetching of water for cooking and drinking, collection of firewood, edible items from forests or fields etc. are the main duties of each and every women in society. Transplantation of paddy is main duty of women folk right from ancient periods. They also used to render their services to help their male counterpart in harvesting, storing grains in granary and so on. Drying paddy in the sun light and husking or pounding dried up paddy are done by them even today. They also prepare rice-beer. They maintained their family in all aspect including cooking etc. The Bodo women rear different domestic animals for the purpose of consumption, socio-religious purposes and other economic purposes. Generally, they were the owner of domestic animals with the right to sell or purchased.

The Bodo women were very expert in the art of spinning, weaving and dyeing. Even today, they are number of good weavers who produce varieties of traditional garments for family as well as economic purpose. The knowledge of dyeing which

inherited from their forefather is still retained. Each and every family member in society is essential to possess knowledge of spinning, weaving and dyeing. Those who have a little knowledge or do not have the knowledge of spinning and weaving are considered as *Aouluri* (nothing for good)³¹. The Bodo women are very active in every field of economic activities. At present, they also started selling their products in markets which lead to the development of standard of living.

Endnotes

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