

CHAPTER-III

SOCIAL LIFE

The common parlance on a society among the folk is a collection of people who have this in common that they belong in some sense to one another. It is a mere collection of units or individuals and a collection where the units or individuals are related in terms of interaction. S.F. Nadel, an anthropologist defined society thus: “By society we can only mean an aggregate of human beings bound together in some unity, that is, acting in an integrated and regular manner, and possessed of some degree of permanence and stability”.¹ It is clear that the sociologist is concerned with collection of people who share certain kinds of knowledge. And this knowledge is that which a person has about other people’s behaviour. He knows what to expect of others and what other people expect of him. Now such knowledge of behaviour is possible because a very great deal of human behaviour is standardised and regular. Thus, the society is a group of people who is connected by interaction.

Human beings are social animals and rational by his nature who exist in groups, collectivities of people sharing interests, interaction and communication. The individual identifies with the group, influences it in some cases, and is influenced by it in others. The group itself exerts strong pressure to conform to the standards and behavioural patterns of the overall membership. In order to survive a man has to depend on society for protection, comfort, education, equipment, nurture, opportunity and aspirations which society can provide. There is an inseparable relationship between individual and society. Therefore, society is an organization of free individual conscious spirits, who live in co-operation with one another. And the family forms the fundamental unit of any society.

(A) Social Institution

(i) The Family:

The centre of life has been the family and almost everybody is born in a family. In fact, family is the basic and universal social institution of human society not only in rural

but in urban areas also. As an institution, family is regulated and governed by certain values, norms, roles and role expectations, etc. Besides, it is also a group in the sense of collectivity of members who are related with one another through both descent or lineage and conjugal ties. Thus the family is a universal social phenomenon. As Lowie writes, "It does not matter whether marital relations are permanent or temporary; whether there is a polygyny or polyandry or sexual licence; whether conditions are complicated by the addition of numbers not included in *our* family circle; the one fact stands out beyond all others that every where the husband, wife and immature children constitute a unit apart from the remainder of the community".² Thus, "the family as a social unit includes both parents and in a secondary sense the kindred on both sides".³ A family, as defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, "is technically as a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household, interacting with each other in their respective social positions of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, who share, create and maintain a common culture".⁴ In view of Maclver and Page, the family is "a group defined by a sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children", and "It may include collateral or subsidiary relationships, but it is constituted by the living together of mates, forming with their offspring a distinctive unity".⁵ All the altruistic attitudes of man could be traced to their roots in the family life; co-operation, self-sacrifice, service to humanity, universal brotherhood, love of living beings, have been traced back to their origins to co-operation in the family-life.⁶ The interaction of each of the members with others in the family has significant influence in determining the individual's mental attitudes and his behavior in society. Dr. Burgess, therefore, has rightly emphasized the importance of family as "a unity of interacting personalities"⁷ and Walter and Hill refer to it as "an arena of interacting personalities".⁸ In Bodo social structure, the domestic family is one of the most significant functional units. Their social structure is framed through the descent groups, viz., the clan and lineage. But it is the domestic family as a self-governing unit of the society which provides the basis for the crystallization of kinship interaction which is both intense and regular for its members. It is within the family that the children are born and come to maturity and learn cultural conceptions, values, norms and the rules of

Kinship. Each individual finds food and shelter within the domestic family. The domestic family appears to be a centre of resource holding, production and consumption group. To be born and to grow up in a particular family gives an individual the jural and social status, determined by his physical relationship which forms the basis of his domestic and extra domestic rights, duties and obligations. Indeed, in Bodo society an individual has no social existence if he is not a member of a domestic family because he attains his rightful place in the society through the domestic family alone. And it is also fact that any individual if he commits a wrongful act, it is treated merely an individual's private act but the blame and its correction are both allocated to his domestic family. It is therefore the family has the responsibility to redress the wrongs to the members of the society and to safeguard their interest. Thus, the concept of responsibility and accountability is familial, not an individual among the Bodos.

Family Concept in Bodos:

In Bodo family is called *nokhor* that connotes a family unit having a self-governing social, political, economical and ritual status with a common residence. So a *nokhor* means a set of family of the individual members of which is determined entirely on the basis of kinship and affinity. However, any other type of residential unit existed that are not based on the familial relationship, either conjugal or filial, is not considered a *nokhor*.

A Bodo deems of his *nokhor* to be his family and his home. A *nokhor* is not only judged a self-governing family group but it is also the most significant unit of the society as all individual are indispensable part of a *nokhor* in order to exist in the society.

Composition of the Family:

Family of the Bodos as a rule is a *bifa-gahai nokhor* or patriarchal household. Lineage is traced through the father's line. The fundamental rule on which the Bodo family is organized is based strictly on the principle of agnatic descent. They follow the rule of verilocal-patrilocal residence and hence the sons continue to live with their father after their marriage whereas the daughters have to leave their father's house on marriage and become members of their conjugal households. Thus, the foundation of the Bodo family is constituted by male agnatic kin, their wives and children.

The Bodo household ideally consists of a patrilineal joint family of three generations. Such a joint family comprises a man, his wife, unmarried children, their married sons and their wives including the grand children. A Bodo family, thus, consists of parents, their children and grand children. Father is the head of the family. He acts as guide of his children. All earning members of the family have to deposit their earnings with their father who bears all responsibilities for maintenance of the family. Married sons also live in the joint families with their parents. Of course, separation of sons who are married may take place even during the life time of father under certain reasons.⁹ A married daughter leaves her natal family and becomes a member of her husband's family. The unmarried daughters remain under the control of their parents till the marriage. The mother is more responsible of her daughter's well being than the father. However, the general responsibility of the entire family lies on the parents, who are the sole guardian of a family. After the death of the father the eldest son of the family bears the responsibility of the entire family. Of course, he is to be guided by his mother in important affairs of the family. However, the mother is to bear the responsibility of the family after the death of her husband if the son is minor.¹⁰ Father or the eldest son is the person who has right to hand over daughter or younger sister in marriage to bride groom.¹¹ The marriage of a son on the other hand, implies not only an addition of a new member to the family but also an expected change in the structure of the household by extending it lineally. The bride who comes to the family of the bridegroom through marriage is accepted as member entering into the agnatic lineage called *kulao habnai*.

In some rare cases a distant agnatic kin may also be a member of the family if the member has lost his parents to look after him. In a Bodo family, any other person, for instance, a wife's brother, or a son-in-law, or a sister's son, can not be a members of this domestic group because they are affine called *Kurma* and not *bahagi*, i.e., agnates of the male members of the household. An individual is incorporated in a Bodo family by the virtue of birth, marriage and adoption alone.

Marriage as the Basis of Recruitment to *Nokhor*:

Although the family structure of the Bodos is based on patrilineal system, a male person of outside filial ties may also be included in the Bodo family through the marriage

system. The marriage process which allows incorporating an individual in a Bodo family are *Gorjia lakhinai* and *Dongka habnai haba*. If there is a single female child in the family where there is no male child, in such a case the bridegroom is kept in the house of the bride after marriage. This is an accepted system of marriage in the Bodo society and is called *Gorjia lakhinai*.¹² However, when the boy leaves his parents and relatives he must leave some document to say that he does not belong to them any more. In the family of the bride, he is to write a document to inherit the family property. Thus he becomes totally a member of the bride's family.¹³ This system of marriage is rare in the present Bodo society. On the other hand, if a man lives in the house of a widow as her husband then they are recognized as husband and wife by the society. However, they have to regularize their marriage according to the social customs called *Donkha Habnai*. This type of marriage is very rare in the Bodo Society.¹⁴

Adoption as a Basis of Recruitment to *Nokhor*:

Gotho Khangnai or "adoption is common and creditable"¹⁵ among the Bodos and practice forms one of the modes of recruitment of a member in the *nokhor*. It also helps in enlarging the size of a *nokhor* to some extent. "Children, more especially orphans, are occasionally adopted, usually by relatives, but sometimes by absolute strangers. In such cases the children so adopted are treated as full members of the family, and the foster-parents are considered by the community to have done a highly meritorious act."¹⁶ In Bodo society, a widow if she so desires can adopt a child, but this adopted child must be a male and not a female. It is, however, advisable for the widow to adopt a child if she is issueless.¹⁷ It is a custom that the parents have the sole right to offer their children for adoption; relatives do not have such right to offer a child to others for adoption, even if the child is orphan. If the family has already a male child, then they can not adopt any more children.¹⁸ Female child also adopted by the parents who has only male child in family. The parents if they desire to have female child with due formality may incorporate in their *Kul* or lineage and the mode of adoption of female child is called *Khwrnia gotho khangnai* or *Khwrnia lakhinai*.

On adoption a simple ceremony is done called *Fwtharnai* or purification by sprinkling holy water on the body of new member to be adopted and then incorporated in

their *Kul* or lineage. In the process before the *Bathou*, i.e., their supreme god, they offer sacrifice of fowl and pray for incorporating of the new members and thereafter sprinkle the holy water on the new member and later on included in the *Kul* and the following words are uttered:

“Aham De! nwi afa Bathou bwrai,
Be gw dan gotokou dinwinifrai kulao swanwi labai,
Nokhorao houya arw hinjaokou banghwnanwi
Fwlerkou fehernaiyao go toa derlangtwng.”¹⁹

i.e., Oh God, the supreme almighty, now the new member is to be included in the *kul* today, and let males (or females) clan increase in numbers, so that the clan may become great, and respected and that the new members may spring up.

(ii) Kinship:

Kinship system provides the basis for social formation of every society. It is a pivot around which revolved a host of rights, duties, expectations, and action of the member in a family as well as in society. The basic character of kinship remains rooted in biology and it is this that gives it primacy of importance in almost all social organizations. It is a universal phenomenon that people are bound together in groups by various kinds of bonds and out of these bonds the most basic is the bond of reproduction. This urge for reproduction creates two kinds of bonds, viz, bond between spouses and their relations on either side what is common known as affinal kinship and the bond between the parents and their children and that siblings known as consanguineous kinship.

Kinship plays an important role both in the regulation of behavior between persons and in the formation of social groups. “The study of kinship”, observes Raymond Firth, “helps to measure the social relationship of a particular community. It is the rod on which one leans throughout life”.²⁰ Lowie calls it “veritable institution in most simple societies, for it is the regulator of behavior in innumerable situations”.²¹ The kinship system of the society lays down as to what should be the criterion of his dealings with his relatives both paternal and maternal

The Bodos are patrilineal people and strictly follow the rule of patrilineal descent. Every individual belongs to one descent group formed on the principle of patrifiliation. The

structural arrangement of Bodo society makes a clear distinction between kinship status and affinal status on the basis of exogamous dual division of their society. Patrilineation creates agnatic kins which are called *Bahagi* in Bodo, and matrilineation relatives are always categorized as affines, the term of which in Bodo is called *Kurma*. The members of male agnatic kins such as father, mother, father's father, father's brothers, father's brother's son, unmarried daughters, brothers and unmarried sisters, and brother's son are referred to his agnatic group or division by the kin term as *Bahagi*. Of course, in Bodo society, the children of the female agnates (sister's daughter) are treated as *Lal Bahagi* and not as *Bahagi* or agnatic kin. The Bodo women retain her mundane relationship with her agnatic group even after marriage, but at the ritual she completely severs her ties and is fully incorporated in her husband's family called *Kul*. The implication of this situation is that though a woman after her marriage maintains affective kinship ties with her agnates, her filial status and ritual bonds are terminated from them and now she comes under her husband's jural authority as the politico-jural bonds between women and her father and siblings are finally severed at marriage. This principle of course, indicates full incorporation of the woman in their husband's domestic group after marriage.

The ties among the members of the *Bahagi* kinship are permanent which bind them to a system of moral values of the society. The death of a person which takes place in the male agnatic family is also a ritual event. It pollutes the members of the all male agnatic family members of *Bahagi* during which they observe *Suwa* or uncleanness, i.e., they do not participate in any ceremony in the village nor do they engage themselves in any agricultural activity. Besides, they refrain from entering the house of the neighbours till the purification is done in the family of the death person by performing *Daha garnai* or *Kalai garnai*, i.e., throwing of uncleanness ceremony. The birth of a child in the household also observed as pollution. However, the ritual event of pollution is not affected in the case of the members of the *Lal Bahagi* and *Kurma*. The person belonging to a *Bahagi* have a closer kinship ties as compared to their relations with other members of the *Lal Bahagi*. On the other hand, the relation of a man with his wife's family members, younger brother's wives, their sons and daughters, brother-in-law of his sisters, father and mother-in-law are termed as *Kurma* (affines).

Besides kinship, there is a customs of ceremonial friendship and ceremonial fatherhood by which relationship are maintained with the members of the outside kin. They term of friendship is *Bisigi* in the case of male and they address *suke* each other and *Bilw gw* in the case of the female and their term of address is *lw gw*. In case of friendship, it has to be always confined to the same sex. Though generally limited within the community, there is no bar in establishing this sort of ceremonial bonds with persons even outside the community and it does not in any way minimize its purity and import. Marriage is prohibited between the families of such friends since the children of both the families behave as if they are cognates with one another.²²

(iii) Clan Organisation:

The Bodos were undoubtedly totemistic in their belief at one time and the remnants of that belief still exist in their clannish divisions in their present society. These separate clannish titles are still representing those totemistic divisions. It bears prefixing names of animals, trees, or some material objects, and is suffixed by *aroi*, *ari* or *arui*, the patronymic commonly used by them in naming their sects or clans.²³

A clan in the Bodo society constitutes the largest category of men and women who have descended patrilineally from a common ancestor. According to the legend, the founders of the clan are believed to be the first human being Monsing-sing-Borai. In the view of M.M. Brahma, “Monsing-sing Boarai who came down from Heaven with the help of a golden ladder to the earth and created the groups called *ari* or *hari* for the Bodos. They called it *Mahari*. In spite of different clans they have no class distinction in the social affairs and no bar in inter-marriage and inter-dinning”.²⁴ The Bodo clans have names which are used as the surnames by the members of the clan. The women, after marriage, use the husband’s clan name and not their natal clan name. The Bodo *Ari* or *Mahari* are based on specific work or duties. The *Ari* or *Mahari* seems to signify some kind of kinship. These clans or *Mahari* are: *Swargiari*, *Basumatari*, *Narzari*, *Musari* or *Musahari*, *Gayari*, *Khankhlari* or *Khangkhlahari*, *Daimari*, *Lahari*, *Hajoari*, *Kherkatari*, *Sibingari*, *Sabaiari*, *Bibariari*, *Bingiari* or *Bingbingari*, *Mahilari* or *Mahalari*, *Mao Marari* or *Mou Murari*, *Ramsiari* or *Ramsari*, *Sangphramari*, *Phadangari*, *Islary*, *Ganjlerari*, *Bargayari* or *Bargayari*, *Thailirari*,²⁵ and *Laoari*, *Baglari* etc.

The Bodos of Jalpaiguri and Coch Behar districts in West Bengal have twelve clans. Sush as 1. *Bamoda*, 2. *Basumata*, 3. *Chongphtang*, 4. *Chongphrang*, 5. *Israri*, 6. *Kutajari*, 7. *Masari*, 8. *Narzinari*, 9. *Nabaiyari*, 10. *Phadangari*, 11. *Sabayari*, and 12. *Sibingari*.²⁶ The significant of some of the Bodo totemic clans may be described as below:

(a) *Swargiari*

This clan is believed to be the descendent of the supreme God *Bathou Bwrai* and their position in the Bodo clans is claimed to be the highest. All religious ceremonies or offerings to god are to be performed by this clan only. It derives from the Bodo word *Swrgw* or *Swargo* means heaven, i.e., *Swargo* (heaven) + *ari* (folk or clan) = *Swargiari*. Hence they are known as *heavenly folk*.²⁷ As a rule the Bodo selects *douri* or *Oija's* basically from this clan in religious function. As a rule the members of this clan never worked as cultivators because the offerings made by the worshipers were held to be sufficient for their maintenance.

(b) *Baisumatari* or *Basumatari*

This folk are derived from the *Baiswmatari* as the meaning of *Baiswmata* is the 'Mother Earth'. *Basumata* or *Baiswmata* + *ari* = *Baiswmatari* > *Basumatari*. They are mainly involved in the agricultural activities and holding the lands. They are, therefore, known as the landlord class of the Bodos. According to Dr. C Sanyal they belong to the clan of the *Mother Earth Sect*.²⁸ In the view of K. Brahma, the word *Basumatari* is a Sanskritised form of *Baisamatari* (*Baiswmatari*). This group is entrusted with the responsibility of solving the land problem, distribution of land, settlement of any disputes relating to land holding.²⁹

(c) *Narzari* or *Narziari*

It is the clan of jute-folk whose function is to collect and distribute dry jute leaves called *Nazri gwrn* on the occasion of the post death ceremonies. It is a custom that the participants at cremation of death person on the spot has to chew some quantity of dry jute leaves after touching fire at fag end of the function along with slight quantity of uncooked rice which is supplied by the *Narzari* folk. Besides, on the ceremony of post cremation called *Saradu* where feasting is held the entire participants is served dry jute leaves or

curry prepared of it to consume as a mark of symbol of severing ties with the death person for permanent.

(d) Owari

This clan is related to the plantation of bamboo called *Owa* and during the time of celebration of *Kherai* worship they have to furnish as well as work out bamboo related duties. Therefore the clan names come from the *Owa+ ari = Owari*.

(e) Gayari

Gayari is regarded to be devoted to plantations of the *Gay* means betel nuts in Bodo clan. In the opinion of Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the *Gayari* clan or group originated from the people who served areca nuts or *gay* in the convention that was held under the presidentship of *Man-Sing-sing Borai* to resolve the matter relating to the illicit love affair between *Chikri Sengra* and *Chikri Sikhla*.³⁰

(f) Daimari

The main occupation of the Bodos is agriculture and the clans called *Daimari* is primarily engaged in the irrigation activities of the agricultural field by diverting water of big rivers through artificial channel in ancient times. The meaning of *Daima* is big river. Endle has held the view that they were the fisherman class in olden times.³¹

(g) Khankhlari

It is the clan who were mainly engaged in the plantation of native plant called *Khankhla* in religious ceremonies like *Kherai* worship. Therefore, this folk is known as *Khankhlari* (*Khankhla + ari = Khankhlari or Khakhlari*).

(h) Musari or Musahari

Musahari means the clan (*hari*) of *Musa* meaning tiger which must have had at one time been the totem of that clan. Killing of tiger is tabooed for this clan. Besides, on getting information of killing or death of tiger the members of this clan have to clean their house for purification and require observing morning for the same.

Thus the clan names among the Bodos were given according to their occupation. The clan's name, however, survived only as surnames instead of division of occupational clan among them. They write their surnames after their own clans and its use is hereditary. Some writes *Boro* while some others use *Brahma* according to their religion.

Customs of Joking and Avoidance:

Bodo customs regulate social behavior extensively. The conventional practices of joking and avoidance have appeared to be usages regulating the behavior of Bodo people related by kinship or marriages. To maintain the mutual respect necessary contact is restricted. In Bodo society there is a clear-cut code of conduct concerning the female relatives. One can frolic with a granny, or the elder brother's wife, or the wife's younger grown up sister. Frolic but not beyond, because fornication (or adultery) invites sanction. Outraging a girl's modesty is deemed to be a serious crime against the community. One has to keep oneself at a distance from the younger brother's wife, or the wife's elder sister. As for the aunts, all of them are treated like mothers.³²

In the family the hierarchical position is strictly observed so much so that grown up sons seldom speak freely to their father and seldom communicate even with each other. It is a custom that a wife should not use her husband's name or a word suggestive of his name.

Status of Women in the Society:

Bodo society is a patriarchal society. But the position of women in the Bodo society is very high. 'Women are held in high respect and are placed on an equal footing with the men in every respect. They eat and drink with men in public'.³³ The husband 'usually treats his wife with distinct respect and regards her as an equal and a companion to an extent which can hardly be said to be the rule among many of the Indian people'.³⁴ While addressing to his wife, the phrase most common is *Be ang-ni buri* literally (This (is) my old woman). The words are not used jeeringly at all, but with much real respect and affection.³⁵ Both in early life and as matrons enjoy a large measure of freedom, a freedom which is very rarely abused for evil purposes.³⁶ They are free from all out-door work whatever, and they are consulted by their husbands as their safest advisers in all domestic concerns, and in all others that women are supposed likely to understand.³⁷ During their maidenhood they enjoy the liberty to participate in singing, dancing and festivals, married women generally refrain from outdoor exhibition.³⁸ As a rule, teasing a girl is an offence. All respected women are treated like mothers. In the society there is unhesitating approval of female's taking part in outdoor economic activities. They take part in trading activities in open bazaars, work in fields, and distant *jhums*, fish in open pools and rivers, and collect

firewood and vegetables from forests. In household chores the female obviously dominates the scene but she cannot carry load on her shoulders, or climb on the roof of a house or a tree. Nor is she allowed to plough or ride an elephant. One who dares to do anything of the kind is looked down upon.³⁹ Rev. S. Endle was so fascinated by the pleasing features of the position of women in the Bodo society that he had no hesitation to remark, “It is probable for the most part far sounder and more wholesome than the life of great cities, whether in Asia and Europe ; and it is with no little dismay and sorrow that the writer would see any hasty ill-considered attempts made to supplant or override this simple, primitive, patriarchal life through the introduction of a one-sided, materialistic civilization”.⁴⁰

(B) SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF BODOS:

The Bodos have a democratic outlook in social structure. Although they belong to different clans, there is neither classification nor inequality of the status among them. Every clan has equal right and position in the society. Irrespective of clans and religions they live together in a village with a co-operative spirit.⁴¹ They never practice any differentiation in the matter of establishing social hierarchy. A feature of the village social life of the Bodos is the existence of the village institutions of elders which decides disputes of domestic or social questions; and a bigger organisation of sub-divisional level of elders which decides disputes between villagers, and discusses matters of common interest such as holding a festival and building a road, bridges or construction of agricultural canal.

(i) Village Organisation:

The most common institution in the Bodo villages is the village council. In every Bodo village there is a village head called *Gami borai* or *Gamibrai* who is termed *Gao Buda* in Assamese. An elderly person is unanimously chosen by the villagers as *Gami borai* on democratic basis. He is the supreme in all the matters within the village. Disputes and complains of any nature are brought to notice of *Gami borai* who delivers judgment and punishes the guilty. When any domestic or social question has to be settled, the *Gamibrai* or *Gami borai* convene a village meeting, or *mel* as it is termed. The *mels* meet at a given time and place, the arguments on both sides of the question are discussed and members disperse after giving their opinions on the subject. Though the *Gami borai* acts as the chairman yet the final verdict is given in conformity with the decision reached at gathering

of the village elders. Punishments vary according to nature of offence in form of fine. Physical thrashing was never inflicted on the offender in the past. Now-a-days this sort of punishments appears to be applied when necessary to make the offender to confess his guilt, but that also not in severe type. Physical torture is strictly prohibited on female offender, whatsoever the offence may be.

The major punishment may include excommunication of the offender in accordance with the nature and amount of crime. Immoral acts and incestuous offence are dealt with severity. In such cases fine is imposed and purification rite is imperative.⁴² Besides *Gami borai*, another person is also selected to assist him by the villagers. He is termed *Halmaji* (courier of errands). His duty is to serve notice and gathers villagers in the meeting and to inform villagers about the matter that appears to be important. The meeting is held in the public hall or in the outer yard of *Gami borai* or in the open field under a tree-shade. He is given a considerable amount of remuneration in the form of paddy from the village fund. But no pay or honorarium is given to *Gami borai*. However, in every case or complaint a meager honorarium is paid to him from fees collected from the complainant. For a marriage in the village, a fee of one rupee is also given to him by the guardian of the boy or the girl. This fee is called *Barihaga*. During the Zamindari system he was exempted from payment of land revenue up to the extent of ten *bighas*. In return he had to entertain the Zamindari officials with food drink when they visited.⁴³ Every Bodo villages have *Douri* (Dou+ari=Douari, i.e, feeder to God) who perform religious rites. The *Douri* besides presiding over the other religious rites also guides the atonement proceedings whenever so required. The Bodo society prescribes atonement proceedings for rectification of misdeeds. The *Douri* an assistant to the village priest *Oja* usually conducts the atonement proceedings. He is elected on the general consensus of all the villagers on the basis of his character and ability to guide socio-religious rites. The *Douri* and the village headman have a distinct place of honour in the estimation of the Bodo people.

(ii) Samaj:

Besides the village organisation, a bigger organization is formed *moujza* wise. This sort of organization also formed at sub-divisional level. This organization is termed as 'Samaj'. The *Samaj* also constituted purely on a democratic basis in the annual gathering

involving entire sub-division. Constitution of the society is framed by this organization. An executive body is constituted with several members who are elected in a general meeting. The executive body of the *Samaj* consists of one President, one Secretary, one cashier and several members. This body is the highest authority in all matters relating to social administration, social legislation, preparation and implementation of the schemes meant for development of the society.

All the matters that can not be talked by the village committee are brought to the notice of *Mouza* committee i.e. *Samaj*. The dispute or any matter involving more than one village is taken up by the *Samaj* whose decision is final and binding. Any offender or accused violating or disobeying the verdict given by the committee is excommunicated from the society. The social laws and rules are framed, discussed and passed by the *Samaj*.

In the eastern part of the old Goalpara district, southern part of the old Kamrup district, and in the Nagaon district, there are two important institutions in the spheres of customary laws, known as *Hadeng gora* and *Hachung gora*. While the *Hadeng gora* is akin to a judgeship having jurisdiction over 12 adjoining villages, a *Hachung gora* is established in each such 12 villages, as the subordinate institution to help the *Hadeng gora*. But all such institutions are controlled by the Regional Council or the Sub-area Council which is the sole authority in implementing the customary rules.

The Bodo court of law is convened in the form of meeting called *mel*. If the subject is a private dispute, the convener of the meeting has to deposit remuneration to the meeting i.e., *melkis* or assessors where it takes place. The deposited remuneration is termed *Shabri* or “*Habhauri*, in the shape of money, salt, and *pan* (betel leaves)”, but in social questions touching the community at large they give their services gratuitously. The prosecutor should also deposit double amount of the convener. Who so over is found guilty by the judges will not get back the deposited *Shabri* and has been punished by their law. In addition, if the nature of offence is incest, a guilty person becomes the subject of atonement and also has to bear the expenses of performing the atonement of the village community. The atonement is considered as religious penalty based on religion. After the end of the court meeting, the *Shabri* is divided into two parts. One part of the *Shabri* is distributed to

the public present there i.e., the assessors and the other half of the *Shabri* is kept for their village fund, which they generally spend for social institutions.

(iii) Co-operation among Villagers:

The most peculiar living principles of Bodo social life is the spirit of mutual help and co-operation. Their community in village is a well knit unit. Their livelihood pattern being characterised by preponderance of agricultural occupation, almost all types of people have to move round it. This is the main incentive for co-operation and good will among the villagers.

There are two very old and important institutions namely, *Saori* and *Gatha*. The former is still continued but the latter has become very rare at present among Bodo society. The recent diversification of economic pursuit is the main reason for it. The owner of the household summons his neighbours to help him when he has a big job in hand or has to do something in a hurry to meet a deadline. This institution of mutual help is termed *Saori* in Bodo. For instance, when somebody wants to construct his dwelling house before the rains or to complete transplantation of paddy on the last acre before it is too late he calls assistance of the villagers (women if it is a transplantation of paddy). The villagers come and collectively complete the job over a bout of drink, plus also a noon day meal if the job takes a full day. Money is not a consideration in any cases. Sometimes, the mutual co-operation is done in ploughing of their soil within a few limited family holders only instead of entire village community on a round basis of each participant. Such institution is termed *Gata* or *Gata janai*. In the whole transaction no money or any sort of feast is served. Their efforts in this direction are very largely aided by their clannish organization. Endle remarks, "This whole system of mutual help in time of pressure is a marked feature of *Kachari* social and domestic life, and tends in no small degree to develop and strengthen that clannish temperament of which it may be considered to be in some sense the natural outcome."⁴⁴

The villagers have co-operative land and build a stock of corns to help families in distress. The setting up of village granaries by the voluntary contribution of one's produce at specific rate is an instance of the spirit of co-operative living in village units. The youth

clubs formed village wise or area wise also help the villagers by making available funds created out of collective work or individual contributions.

(C) SOCIAL LAWS:

(i) Moral Codes of Bodos:

The life of each person of the Bodos is closely knit together with that of the community through their rule of conduct and their different rites and rituals. The Bodo laws, therefore, is extremely restricted within the same community. The conformity of laws and customs is frequently taken as a mark of group membership and makes the individual a member of the group. This custom and rule of conduct is the basis of fulfillment of some of the simplest moral injunction of life of the Bodos. Of course, they are influenced by the course of nature in their thoughts and nature as a symbol is interwoven in their socio-religious beliefs and rituals. Bodo people's life is not purely individualistic; their daily lives are necessarily involved with other members of the community. They needed to help each other with a common rule of conduct to lead discipline and undefiled life. Therefore they are prone to abide by the social laws prescribed for running their society in smooth, disciplined and orderly way. The social rule of conduct based on customs is known as *Achar* in Bodo. In the early days, "each village chooses a person called an *Achar*, who punishes all those who transgress established customs".⁴⁵ In Bodo language there is an old saying about the moral code of conduct:

"Bathou-a bandoba, Sijouni goronga gorongba, Chipungni gudunga gudungba, Boro boraini acharabo monba, Boroni batrabo phongba."

(English meaning: The altar of bathou has five bamboo rings, the plant *Sijou* has five ridges, the chipung (a long bamboo flute) has five holes, the old Bodo injunctions are also five-fold, the Bodo moral principles are also five-fold.)

The underlying meaning of the above verse is that the moral code of conduct of Bodos is laid on five principles and they have been following this since time immemorial. The five moral preachings of Bodos are - (a) *Agor-bad*, (b) *Phongslod-bad*, (c) *Daokhi-bad*, (d) *Khaowali-bad*, and (e) *Khoulobod-bad*.

The social nature of illicit act is termed *bad* in Bodo. Any individual of the society who involves in illicit act of any kind is treated as a guilty person and he is called *Badunga*

Janai or unclean, and “such a man is not allowed even to stay in the same village with others, till he has been purified.” Therefore the guilty person is obliged to perform penance with some strict social customs. The Bodo term for penance is *udrainai*. The Bodo social rule of conduct contains some strict principles of morality.

These moral principles are to be strictly followed by every member of the society. These may be summarized as follows:

- (a) A person is taken as morally guilty if (i) he is engaged in illicit sexual relation with female relatives, such as mother, daughter-in law, sister-in-law, younger sister, elder sister, niece, the wife of the younger brother or any other close female relatives; (ii) he touches the body of the wife of his younger brother or of the elder sister of his wife; (iii) he is involved in bestiality and has sex relation with a bitch, a female pig or a cow.
- (b) A man is also considered guilty if he is eating forbidden food, such as food left half-eaten by his own wife.
- (c) Indulging in false accusation with the evil motive is also considered a social offence.⁴⁶

And if some person does contrary to moral principles are then compel to be punished by invoking any of the moral codes of *bad* according to his nature of offence. The offender of social code of conducts of five categories is bound to perform penance i.e., *udrainai* according to the custom of *bad system*. The method of performance of penance as a charge of penalty is casting of *bows method*, and is called *borla gaogarnai*. In the rituals of *udrainai* the guilty person offers a chicken to *Bathou Boari*. From the body of the sacrificed chicken some pieces of meat are detached and thrown to the sky with the help of a bow and arrow. It is called *three bows method (tin dhanu parachit)*, if three pieces of meat of chicken are thrown to the sky for three times; and thus it is called *five bows method (pas dhanu parachit)*, while five pieces of meat of chicken are thrown to the sky five times; and *seven bows method (sat dhanu parachit)* while five pieces for seven times and *nine bows method (noi dhanu parachit)*, while nine pieces of meat are thrown for nine times.⁴⁷

The natures of social offence that are traditionally categorised into five *bads* are attributed as follows:

(a) Agor-bad

A person is considered guilty if he is involved any one of the offences mentioned below and he has to perform penance under *nine bows method* of the society.

- (a) Incest i.e. illicit sexual connection between related persons of mother or father;
- (b) battering of one's own mother, father, grand-mother or grand-father; (c) if a person kill a cow or accepting compensation for the killing of the cow by the owner; (d) Illicit sexual connection with a person of other religious community such as Christian or Muslim.

(b) Phongslod-bad

- (a) If somebody touches the body of a young girl who is not related to him;
- (b) If someone maims the body of the cow then the penance must be performed under the *seven bows method* of *Phongslod-bad*.

(c) Daokhi-bad

Under this *bad* a person is considered guilty (a) if some one consume the flesh left half-eaten by a vulture or a tiger; (b) if somebody exchanges his cow with goats, pigs, cocks and pigeons; (c) if some one eat beef; (d) receiving money by cutting somebody else's hair; (e) if somebody involves in business of earthen pot, skins of animals or fish; (f) if some one takes the food prepared by other community except the Hindu castes of *Brahman, Kalita, Baisya* and *Sudra*. The person found guilty of any one of these act is bound to perform penance under the *five bows method*.

(d) Khaowali-bad

A person has to perform penance of *Khaowali-bad* under the *three bows methods* if he is found guilty of following acts:

- (a) If he brings and uses the coins or utensils left with dead bodies; (b) if some one sells out the bulls or cow soon after the one year of his purchase.

(e) Khoulobod-bad

Under the penance system of *Khoulobod-bad*, bows methods are not applied. In principle a person is taken as morally guilty if some one deliberately accuses somebody and inflicts blames on others without any reason. For this act he is must to perform penance of *Khoulobod-bad* in a simple way.⁴⁸

Penance method of *Agor-bad*:

The traditional penance method called *udrainai* of any offence of *Agor-bad* is done under the following system. For the purpose a make shift house of thatch or dry plantain leaves is constructed near the river bank or a pond with a provision of one door facing towards the river. The guilty persons, both male and female are kept together in a naked condition in the make shift house with the door closed. There-after the house is set on fire in presence of the villagers, meanwhile the two guilty persons has to come out by breaking the temporary house and jump on in the river. Afterwards they are given clothes while they are in the river. With their wet dresses they come up to the bank and allowed to sit before an altar of the gods and goddesses which is already prepared by the villagers for the performance of their penance. *Bathou Borai* and *Bathou buroi* and other gods and goddesses are worshiped with the sacrifice of a chicken in the name of *Bathou Borai*, before whom the guilty persons kneel down in their wet dresses and pray for the sanction of forgiveness. Before performing their prayer to the *Bathou Boari*, the guilty persons are given to take a little quantity of mixture made of cowdung, human excreta and the stools of the pig that are kept ready.

During the performance of the rituals to the *Bathou Borai* the charms or mantras which are recited runs as follows:

Aham mahadeo Maha phwrbu! arw swr dongbaoyw, Aileng, Agrang, Khoila, Khaji, Rajphutur, Rajkhandra, Song Raja, Song rani, Burli Buri, Ai Manasu, Ai Dibaoli; Ishingao dongo Ai mainao, Maothansri dongbaoyw. Khwnasong Aiphwr Aphaphwr, nwnghang mwnha danilo mwdai nonga, orai dinni mwdai. Amwkhajwng amwkhijwng dai nangdwn gmwn, dinwi bininw udrainai jabai. Jerwi dai kalamdwn gmwn biswrw bibadinw sasthi hwnai jabai jwng. Orjwng saobai, mansi khi, mwsou khi, oma khini dwi lwnghwbai jwng biswrkou. Daini giri dai kalmbai Apha, nimahani giria nwnghswr. Mwidera gabw Odal gudiao, mansia gabw Mahadeo Mahaphwr buni khathiao. Nimaha hwdw Aiphwr Aphaphwr! Dinainiphrai dai daphwr dahomswi. Naha mwiha thangbla dwi dongo hwnnanwi nanan rwxhwm maya jananwi sigi sogo da khalamswi. Dohai de Aiphwr Aphaphwr; Manni debota manao thanang gou. Gole gole khulumw jwngw. (Gugurub khulumw).⁴⁹

English rendering: Oh Lord God Mahadeo, who are here on this side, *Aileng*, *Agrang*, *Khoila*, *Khaji*, *Rajphutur*, *Rajkhandra*, *Song Raja*, *Song rani*, *Burli Buri*, *Ai Manasu*, *Ai Dibaoli* are there; in the inner quarter *Ishing* Mother Goddess Lakhsmi (*Mainao*) is there. Please listen, oh you mothers and fathers, you are not deities of to-day, you are eternal ones. Here this man and woman are found guilty and for their offence penance is performed; they have been punished according to their offence. They have set on fire; they were coerced to take the mixture of cowdung, human excreta and the stools of the pig. They were to sin, yours to forgive him. The elephant whines in the *Odal* woods, man cries at the door of Lord *Mahadeo*, forgive them and make them pure to-day and henceforth, and when they go out to fish in water and to hunt in forest, do not threaten them in disguise, keep them safe from all harms. Oh you mothers and fathers, those of honour must continue to get it. We pray before you again and again. (All the present adore by kneeling).

At the end of the prayer the guilty persons are given holy water (*dwi gwthar*) to drink which is purified with nine pieces of dub grass, a twig of basil and gold-ring, and thereby they are purified. Afterwards the same water is sprinkled on every house of the village and this way the entire villagers also become purified. After few days the villagers arrange a *Garja puja* to keep the village safe from all dangers in the near future.

The penance method of *Agor-bad* which is performed by burning fire on the make shift house is done only in the case of illicit sexual relation between related persons of mothers and fathers. Sometimes a guilty man is charged fine ranging from Rs.25 to 100 under *Agor-bad* system. On the other hand, a guilty woman is fined half of the man.

The ritual performance of penance of different offences before the supreme deity *Bathou Borai* is same in all other *bads* as it is performed in the *Agor-bad* system.

The followers of *Brahma Dharma* also perform penances according to the *bad* system. However, they did not practice traditional *bows method* for penance. Instead of performing penances under different *bows methods*, they are charged different fines at different rates as penalty for different offences. For offences grouped under *Daokhi-bad* a penalty of rupees thirteen and fifty paise is charged and for offences grouped as *Agor-bad*, a penalty of rupees twenty-five and fifty paise is charged. Although all *Brahma* villages

have the system of charging penalty for any type of offence, the rate of penalty differs from village to village. Besides the payment of the penalty a guilty person has to perform *ahuti* at his house.⁵⁰ Thus the social customs of the Bodos called *Acchar* inflicted punishment to seducer. It is a sort of reformatory punishment. The theory of reformatory punishment reveals that a criminal should be punished adequately to vindicate the authority of the moral law. Punishment convinces them of the righteousness of punishment. It makes them repent of their misdeeds and reform themselves accordingly. It prevents them and others from the committing social crimes. Hunter writes: "Crime is not prevalent among them, and they appear to be of a naturally quite and disposition".⁵¹

(ii) Customary Laws of Bodos:

The Bodos are naturally peace-loving people. They maintain high reverence for their traditional customs, beliefs, rites and rituals. The bindings of their social laws and constitution help them to lead disciplined and undefiled life. According to B. H. Hogdson, "Those who offend against the customs of the Bodo - that is, their own customs - are admonished, fined, or excommunicated, according to the degree of the offence".⁵²

During the early part of nineteenth century, the social life of the Bodos was blessed by such virtues like honesty, truthfulness, straight-forwardness and general trust worthiness as witnessed by Rev. S. Endle in his monumental work "*The Kacharis*".⁵³ But with the passage of time, things have somewhat changed bringing new complexities unknown or unheard before. The improvement of communication, general mobility and intercourse with the people all around has brought some psychological and attitudinal change of all sections of people. To meet these changing situations of life, necessity has arisen to frame some local laws on the basis of customs and traditions as prevailing in the society. Thus, the locally codified customary usages and practices of the Bodo society came to be followed after approval from the zonal council composed of adjacent villages. These local laws are known as *Pandulipis* as they are in manuscripts and hardly printed. Since these are not coordinated homogenous sets of laws, they differ in content and application from area to area. However the basic issues pertaining to inheritance of property, succession to office socio-religious and socio-political nature and liability of atonement on committing unnatural and unsocial offences are more or less identical.

The laws of Bodos are framed for the welfare of the society. The Bodo society constitutes a committee (*Sanmellan*) to frame laws for the Bodo dominated areas of Assam. There are seven Bodo dominated areas where committee made laws for the welfare of the Bodo society. Out of the seven Bodo dominated areas, six are functionally demarcated for Brahmaputra valley alone, while one is demarcated for Cachar district. The seven law binding areas of *Pandulipis* are as follows:

1. The Manuscript Law of North Goalpara⁵⁴ (old Goalpara district of 1971 census). --
-The jurisdiction of the area covered by this law includes the Bodo dominated areas of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon district and Lakhimpur Thana area of Goalpara district.
2. The Manuscript Law of Northern Kamrup (northern bank of the old Kamrup district of 1971 census) - This law covers the part of northern part of Bodo dominated areas of Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup district.⁵⁵
3. The Manuscript Law of Guwahati Thana - It covers the Guwahati Police Thana area.
4. The Manuscript Law of Boko Thana Area - This manuscript law covers the areas of Bodo pockets of the Boko Police Station of Kamrup district. The area is situated in the south bank of the Brahmaputra River.
5. The Manuscript Law of Darrang District---All Bodo dominated areas of Sonitpur and Darrang district, Odalguri district falls under the jurisdiction of this law.⁵⁶
6. The Manuscript Law of Goalpara (old Goalpara district of 1971 census) - This law has been formed by *Boro-Barodol* in the form of manuscript. The eastern part of present Goalpara district has been ruled by this manuscript law.
7. The Manuscript Law of Cachar District - This manuscript law rules the *Dimasa-Kacharis* of Cachar district areas.

The earlier manuscripts or *pandulipis* of Bodos of the Brahmaputra valley were written both in Assamese and Bengali, while the manuscripts of *Dimasa-Kacharis* of Cachar district were written in Bengali only. The first printed book of Bodo customary laws is found in erstwhile South Goalpara District of Assam under the title of *Boroni Phisa O Ayen* in Bengali script. This book is first printed and published by *Habraghat Boro*

Sonmiloni in 1915. Similarly Kalicharan Brahma, the founder of *Brahma* religion among the Bodos, took initiative by organizing three meetings of Bodo educated persons of old Goalpara district to codify the Bodo social laws for the followers of the *Brahma* religion among the Bodos. The *Pandulipi* thus prepared was placed before the congregation of the fourth *Boro Mahasanmilani* held at Kajigaon of Tipkai in November 1934 and accordingly the *Pandulipi* was accepted in the meeting. The *Pandulipi* was published in the same year by the name *Goalpara Brahma Samajer Pandilpi Aiyen Gathan*” along with the Bodo title of *Boro Aiyen*. It is published in both Bodo and Assamese language in the Assamese script in the same copy. The laws of Bodos, now-a-days, have been written in their own Bodo language in *Devanagri* script.

The social Laws currently prevailing in undivided Kokrajhar sub-division is based on the published book of “*Boro Samajik Bidhan*” which was amended and enhanced in 1980. In this constitution as many as 47 sections are incorporated. Some of these salient points are enumerated below:

(a) In relation to marriage:

As a rule, endogamy is absent in Bodo society. One can not marry a girl from the cognate family. Although they are exogamous, marriage with a girl from outside Bodo community is not encouraged by the society. It is considered to be only a luxury. With regard to clan the Bodo appears to be both endogamous and exogamous. As for instance---a member of a *Basumatary* clan can marry a girl from a *Basumatary* family. Likewise, a boy from a *Basumatary* family is free to marry a girl from *Narzary* or any clan. Marriage between Hindu Bodo and Christian Bodo is also not strictly prohibited.⁵⁷ There is no bar in contacting a junior levirate marriage i.e. the younger brother marrying the wife of his elder brother on the event of his (elder brother's) death. But in no case senior levirate marriage can take place. Again, marriage under junior sorrorate system can take place but no senior sorrorate marriage, i.e. on the event of death of one's wife, the elder sister of the deceased wife (if not married till then) can not be taken as a wife.⁵⁸ Similarly cross-cousin marriage is strictly prohibited while parallel cousin marriage is not out of vogue. As there is no class or clan distinction among the Bodo society, the question of judging social status of the would be partner never arises. In other words hypergamy has no place in the Bodo society.

As a rule, the Bodos are monogamous, while polygamy is not encouraged. Polyandry is totally absent.

Section 1 of the Social laws:

- (a) Marriage between the Bodo families exclusive of the parental lines is entitled to get recognition of the society.
- (b) Marriage within the members of the families of consanguinity is strictly prohibited.
- (c) Marriage among the persons of post fifth generation in case of paternal lines and after three generations in case of maternal family is permissible.

Section 2:

- (a) The age of bride must attain 18 years and the age of bridegroom must be of at least 21 years.
- (b) A husband's age must not exceed to 20 years of his wife.

Section 3:

- (a) In the marriage father is the sole guardian. But in absence of him, his son is entitled to perform as guardian in marriage of younger sister.
- (b) In absence of father and sons, paternal uncle and his sons are entitled to act as guardian.

Section 4: Types of marriage:

The following forms of marriage are recognized by the society.

- (i) *Songnai Haba*: This type of marriage is arranged by the parents or guardians as per the social system.
- (ii) *Kharsonmay*: This form of marriage is performed when the bride goes to house of bridegroom and offers herself for marriage at her own accord. But the marriage ceremony is performed only after receiving consent of the bride's father or guardian.
- (iii) *Gorjia*: Under this system 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.

(iv) *Dongkha Habnay*: This is a kind of marriage of a widower with a widow. It is affected on condition that the widower has to cut off all with his children by the first wife and forgo all properties of there.

(v) *Gonkhon Haba*: Widow Marriage.

The following type of marriage may be recognized under certain conditions.

(i) *Donkhar nay*: marriage by elopement.

(ii) *Man hanay*: Marriage after secret illicit connection.

(iii) *Borai nay*: Marriage by enticement.

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 *Samaj*. Both the bride and bridegroom are subject to purification ceremony before performance of marriage.

If a man abducts a girl and marriage is operated by force it is termed *Raikhas Haba* meaning a demoniac marriage. This type of marriage is obsolete now. In those days the offender is fined up to the extent of one hundred rupees and his associates were fined fifty rupees each. The victimized girl either was to be returned to parents or she could marry the offender if so wished.⁵⁹

(b) Divorce:

It is observed that divorce occurs seldom in Bodo community. If any case of divorce is brought to the notice of the *Samaj*, the president of the *Samaj* summons a meeting wherein the case is disposed of after thorough discussion.

For divorce the following grounds are considered valid and responsible.

Section 11:

If husband or wife as the case may be suffers from diseases like leprosy, lunacy and mental imbalance etc. or if he or she is proved to be neuter, divorce is admissible.

- (a) If both husband and wife are mutually willing to end their marital connection, the *Samaj* admits their divorce.
- (b) If husband inflicts repeatedly intolerable hurt on the concealed part or on the person of wife, she can divorce him.
- (c) If husband is dacoit, thief, indifferent to wife and of loose character, wife can divorce her husband.

- (d) If wife is disobedient, dishonest, faithless, thief, treacherous and licentious and if she does anything that may lead to injury of husband's life, divorce from husband's side is considered legal and reasonable.

Divorce is recorded by the *Samaj*. Written documents from both sides are realized. To dispose of it in the traditional custom a piece of betel leaf is torn by the divorcees each holding one side of it. It is termed *Phathoi Lai Bisinai*. Both husband and wife have to pay divorce fee at twenty five rupees each to the *Samaj*.⁶⁰

(c) Section 12: Hereditary right.

“After death of father sons, adopted sons or grandsons inherit the property on hereditary right”.⁶¹

A man's property after his death is divided equally among his sons by virgin wives; or, if he has none such, among his sons by widowhood or unmarried concubines; but his brothers succeed in preference to his wives or daughters, who are left entirely at the mercy of the men. Sons by concubines, if there are sons by wives, receive nothing, except by will or donation.⁶² According to Endle, when a man dies without sons, the property usually passes to his eldest surviving brother, who generally makes some provision for the deceased man's widow and daughters.⁶³ The adopted children are accepted as full members of the family. As such the adopted son by the childless parents has the right to preserve the properties of the foster father. If a female child is adopted by a couple having no child of their own at all, then she can inherit the property of her foster father after his death.⁶⁴ Though female child is not entitled to inherit property, sometimes, in the absence of the male heirs in a family a daughter is also inherit the property of her father.⁶⁵

(d) Section 13: Adoption of child

- (i) By consensus of husband and wife a child from husband's clan can be adopted
- (ii) A child from wife's line also can be adopted.
- (iii) A child from outsiders also can be adopted if both husband and wife are agreeable.
- (iv) In absence of legal heir of husband, the widow can adopt a child from among the kindred of her deceased husband.

- (v) To adopt a child a grand feast with pork is entertained to the village people as witness of adoption. Rice feeding ceremony *Engkham Dounai (Anna prasana)* of the adopted child is also to be solemnized with religious rite. Otherwise, the adoption is treated as illegal and invalid. In such cases the adopted child is debarred from inheriting the property of the person concerned.⁶⁶

(e) Section 23: Punishment for immoral and illegal acts:

In the social laws of Bodos, section 23, 24, 25, 26 and 40 deals with the punishment for offender. If a person violate of any section of the social laws may, according to degree and nature of offence is subject to punishment under the five categories of traditional social laws of *bad* system such as (1) *Agor-bad*, (2) *Phongslod-bad*, (3) *Daokhi-bad*, (4) *Khaowali-bad*, (5) *Khoulobod-bad*. The aspect of the nature of crimes and penance method of these *bad* has already been dealt with in the subsequent chapter, especially in moral codes of Bodos. The major punishment to the offender may include expulsion from the society in accordance with the nature and amount of crime which is treated as the severe punishment of the highest degree by the Bodos. Immoral acts and incestuous offence are dealt with severity. In such cases social fine is imposed and purification of rite is imperative. A significant change is found in the codified social laws which abandoned the traditional practice of penance system of any kind of *bows method* that are performed under the traditional five *bad* systems.

(iii) Chastity in Bodo Society:

Chastity for both the sexes is held on a very high order as the code of morality in the Bodo society is very high. They have a very high regard and dignified concept of chastity and they live by it. For them “Chastity is esteemed a virtue.”⁶⁷ In the words of Sidney Endle, “The standard of chastity among the Kacharis, both men and women, is by no means a low one. As a rule the young people, in the villages at least, lead pure lives before marriage, and are faithful to their marriage vows in after life.”⁶⁸ Strict is the social custom related with the question of chastity for both the sex. The Bodo moral code *Agor-bad* and *Phongslod-bad* consider incest or illicit sexual connection a social offence. This sort of illicit connection is highly condemned and treated severely. The traditional belief is still prevalent in Bodo community that if such act is committed secretly, mis-happening must

occur in the family of wrong doer in various forms like sickness of family members, accidents, killing of cows by tiger, falling down of a tree or its branches and other ominous signs and occurrence of ill fate. Besides these, the concerning girl will have to suffer from fatal pain at the time of child delivery and there will be no parturition unless she confesses her secret act. The fear of this fatal consequence is perhaps one of the causes that make Bodo girls remain cautious and conscious to preserve their chastity.

For commission of the immoral acts of above nature fine is imposed on the wrong doers and purification is performed.⁶⁹ Any suspected person is made to confess his or her illicit connection before the *Bathou* altar by the member of the society. As Endle observes, “In cases where there are several unmarried girls in the family, and one of them is suspected of having broken law of chastity, the following plan for detecting the offender is sometimes adopted. The whole family gathers in the evening around the sacred *Siju* tree (*Euphorbia splendens*), which is often to be seen growing in the court-yard, surrounded by a fence of split bamboo. At the foot of this revered tree a quantity of rice (uncooked) is solemnly buried and allowed to remain there over night. Early next morning this rice is carefully disinterred, and a certain quantity given to each grown-up girl (*Sikla*) to be masticated. The offender, under the pressure of the fear of imminent detection, is unable to masticate her portion of rice, the faculty of secreting saliva failing her in her terror of discovery and disgrace. She is then made to disclose the name of her paramour, whom the *Kachari* public opinion compels to marry his victim forthwith.”⁷⁰

In some cases where the parents are unwilling to part with their daughter to a prospective son-in-law of somewhat objectionable character, the matter is referred for decision to the village elders, who impose fine on the offender. But whenever pregnancy follows offences against the law of chastity, marriage becomes absolutely compulsory. The seducer is made to feel that he has brought disgrace to upon the village, and is distinctly under a cloud. It is a sort of reformatory punishment. Thus, the strict social law of moral code could maintain the wholesome respect of chastity that kept the domestic life of Bodos comparatively pure. Still they are very strict in this regard. Endle writes: “The relation of the sexes are on the whole of a very sound and wholesome character, far more so probably than in many countries boasting of a higher civilization.”⁷¹

(D) SOCIAL CUSTOMS OF LIFE CYCLE:

The Birth Ceremony:

The birth of a child is a joyful event in a family, especially in a woman's life after marriage. From the time of pregnancy her health is carefully looked after by elderly women of the family. She is forbidden from hard manual work. During pregnancy, killing of animal or snakes either by wife or husband is banned. She is debarred either from looking or participating in any ceremonies of the death person. She is not allowed to stitch or weave the cloth, for the belief that there will be hurdle in delivery. She is restricted in her movement in order to protect her from evil spirit as well as from probable mischief.

During the time of delivery the family is helped by experienced women of village and elderly women of adept practitioners of the village perform as *dhais* or midwife. No separate house is used for the purpose.

Soon after the born of the child umbilical cord is tied with cotton or silk yarn and then the canal is cut above the knot by a sharp bamboo blade in the presence of family members. In the case of male cord is tied for six or seven rounds and for female is only five times. No *randi* (widow) or *balonda* (widower) or a person having no child is allowed to perform this act. Besides, the person to be engaged in cutting the cord must possess a 'bitter' hand. Bodos believed that there are three different types of hands viz, bitter, sweet and sour. It is believed that if some one with bitter hands plucks some vegetables or betel leaves, the growth of the plants would be ceased. Rice beer prepared by persons with sour hands becomes sour and plants they touch simply wither out.

It is believed that cutting of cord by sour handed person takes time to heal wound and may cause trouble to new born baby. A person of sweet-handed also not favoured, for it will not dry soon. So a bitter handed person is normally preferred for this particular work, so that healing process becomes faster. After cutting the cord the placenta is buried in front of the *Noma no* (main house) or labour house of the family. On the process of burial, the placenta is cautiously placed in the pit, for if it is thrown down hurriedly, they believe that it may cause shudder to the new born baby. The remaining portion of the cord when dried up and falls off it is potted in an empty *eri* (a kind of silk worm) cocoon and put it as a

talisman to the baby's neck. It is believed that it helps baby ward off any misfortune in future.

After the cord is cut, the new baby is washed with tepid water, wrapped it with dry cloths and placed on a bamboo winnow (*Songrai*) in an open space. One of the midwives collects nine *dubri* or *durba* grass, a branch of *tulsi* and a gold ring (if it is not available, a ring made of grass) are tied in a bundle which is dipped into water from a river and sprinkled over the new born and asked: " *Oi gotho? nwngha gw dw mamwn, bangal na jungal, Garo na Gongar, Harsha na mepal mwn ? Dinwinifrai Boro jabai.*"⁷² i.e., "O baby, what were you in your previous birth? Be a Bangal (Muslim) or a Garo or a Bhutia, a caste Hindu or a Nepali, whatever you were, from this day you have become a Bodo." The mother has to entertain the *dhai* and others who helped her to a feast within a year; not offering so is considered a great sin. This feast thrown to the helper is known as ' *Dwi Sarnai* ', i.e., sprinkling of water. A cock is offered to the god *Bathou Borai* for the welfare of the baby. No other ceremony is performed at all. There is no formal feeding of baby also. But when a boy is five years old, his maternal uncle comes and shaves off his head. This rite is suspected to be the influence of Aryan Hindus.

When children often die in a family, the Bodos follow an unusual custom to save the life of the new born baby. They believe that if the new born baby is given very odious name, evil spirit will not harm the life of the baby. So, the baby is given names like *Oma-khi* (excreta of pig), *Swima-khi* (excreta of dog), or, *Dao-khi* (excreta of fowl), etc.

In some cases, apart from giving such a disagreeable name, the child is also fed the leftover of a meal taken by a Bhutiya person. If the child does not survive inspite of such elaborate protective steps, the next issue, if it is a male child, is married to his mother and, if female, to her father as soon as it crosses three months. That is quite obviously a shame marriage without any significant consequences whatsoever.⁷³ They do it in the hope that it will give them a long lease of life.

In rarer cases, sometimes a father without luck will put his new-born child into a basket, carry the burden on his head and try to 'sell' it peddling from house to house; every door he approaches will express inability to 'buy' and direct him to the next door; thus 'unable to sell', he will come back to home and make an atonement, by throwing a feast to

the villagers, for dealing in human merchandise.⁷⁴ Theoretically to ‘sell’ a new-born baby for a nominal price is an errand of fake vending to protect the life of the baby in Bodo custom.

Naming of Children:

The Bodos do not observe any specific ceremony in connection with the naming of children. Among them it is allowed to name a child directly after birth, but it is more usually done in a week or a month later. In a curious manner names are given to the child. Children’s names are chosen in preference to their physical attributes, the day or the month in which they were born, sometimes fondness of parents and relatives of the children. For instances, a child who is long and tall is named *Laoga* (in masculine) or *Laogi* (in feminine); if the child is short stature is given the name *Haita* (in masculine) or, either *Haitu* or *Gaide* (in feminine); A child of wide nostril is called *Hongla* (in masculine) or *Hongle* (in feminine). The child who is born on the day of Monday i.e., *Sombar* in Bodo is named either *Sombar* or *Sombaru* (in masculine) or *Sombari* (in feminine); similarly, a child born on the day of Tuesday i.e., *Mongolbar* named *Mongol* (in masculine) or *Mongolti* (in feminine). Sometimes the parents or relatives choose the name of the child out of affection such as *Anjalu* (in masculine), *Anjali* (in feminine). Nowadays Hindu converted of *Brahma Dharma* and *Satsang* followers named their children in Hindu ways such as Ram, Krishna, Dharitri, Sabitri, etc. On the other hand, a section of Christian followers adopted Christian names e.g., Joseph, Solomon, Christina, Eva, etc.

THE MARRIAGE CUSTOMS:

Marriage is an important institution in most societies, and it has a decisive and far reaching effect on the life of many folk.⁷⁵ It is practiced universally in some form or other. The term ‘marriage’ has been often used to denote a social institution completely by itself.⁷⁶ But Sumner has drawn our attention to the fact that the word does not truly denote a perfect social institution. “Although we speak of marriage as an institution, it is only an imperfect one. It has no structure. The family is the institution, and it was antecedent to marriage. ‘Marriage’ has always been elastic and variable usage, as it now is. In fact the use of language reflects the vagueness of marriage, for we use the word ‘marriage’ for wedding, nuptials or matrimony (wedlock). Only the last can be an institution”.⁷⁷ Similar

considerations generally apply also to the discussion of the Hindu *Vivah* (marriage). For, the *vivah* is in essence a ritual and formality, of course, very important, through which an individual has to go, to be able to start his or her life in *Grihasthasrama* i.e. the householder's life. The meaning of *vivah* refers mainly to the ceremony of 'carrying away' the bride to the house of the bridegroom (*vi + vah*= to carry). But the term since long has come to be applied to the whole of the wedlock ceremony.⁷⁸

As a social institution, marriage has been defined by Westermarck "as a relation of one or more men to one or more women which is recognized by custom or law, and involves certain rights and duties both in the case of the parties entering the union and in the case of the children born of it".⁷⁹ Lewis Gillin, the famous social scientist opines that "Marriage is a socially recognized way of creating a family of procreation".⁸⁰ Sexual relationship and procreation are undoubtedly primary aims of marriage. It regulates relations of the mated pair to each other, their kinsmen, their off springs and society at large.⁸¹ Thus marriage may be defined as a means of uniting one male to one or more females and vice versa for the purpose of giving social sanction to progeny, satisfaction of biological and sociological needs and fulfillment of *dharma*.

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! Bi 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 beer 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 beer 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.⁸² 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.

A. FORMS OF MARRIAGES:

In the Bodo society there are as many as eight ways in which marriage may be concluded. These include both regular and irregular forms of marriages.

Regular Forms of Marriages:

These forms of marriages are generally adopted and approved by the society as regular marriage. These are—

1. *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.

2. *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.⁸³ In this case also marriage ceremony is performed.

3. *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.

4. *Dongkha or domkha Haba* (marriage of widower)

This is a kind of marriage of a widower with a widow. It is affected 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.

5. *Hinjao jora langnanoi hwnai Haba*.⁸⁴

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 are 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 Marriages:

There are marriages which are not generally favoured and approved by the society but are accepted exceptional cases. These are—

1. *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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ 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.

2. *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.

3. *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 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.⁸⁷ 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: 1. Pre-nuptial formalities, 2. Marriage formalities, and 3. Post-wedding formalities.

1. Pre-nuptial Formalities:

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

(i) 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.*⁸⁸ i.e., 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

*hathaiiao naibwla akhai miji,
agoi jarou agoi fangdang.*⁸⁹

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 (*hailwlv*) 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.

(ii) 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 some one 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 some one 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.

(a) 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-beer 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 away where there is thatch grass, the sheath of areca nut fruit is thrown out 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 *Ghatakdar* 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*. Howsoever, 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.⁹⁰

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.

(b) 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-beer, pork and areca-nuts and betel leaves (*jou, oma bedor arw goy pathoi*). This ceremony is called *no nainai*.⁹¹ 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.

(c) 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-beer, 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 *Bijwmai*.

(d) 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.⁹²

(e) Goy Khaonai (Serving of betel nut):

When the proposal finds favour with bride's parents, another consignment of betel nuts, leaves, lime and rice-beer etc. is brought from the groom's side to the house of the bride. This time the *Bairathi* (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-beer, 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.

(f) 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-beer, of course, now-a-days, sugar and tea leaves are carried to the house of the bride. Thus the *Biban* consists of *jou* (rice-beer), *goy* (areca nuts) and *pahto* (betel leaf). 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 are 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 *Goi khaonai* ceremony to the end of the marriage. These two lady receptionists for marriage ceremony of the bridegroom party is called "*Okhong Bairathi jora*".⁹³ 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 *Khorogjo* or headless by the Bodos. They are never allowed to perform any auspicious work during entire the marriage ceremony.⁹⁴ 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-beer 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*.

(g) 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.⁹⁵ The divided pork is called *Oma khobtang*. 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 date 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-beer 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 reflects the expression of the girl runs thus: *Haba janglab janglab, sanba gwlaoni dinao ayoi, sanba gwlaol dinao*.⁹⁶ (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.)

2. MARRIAGE FORMALITIES:

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-beer (*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 items 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-beer, 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-beer 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 these three days, rice-beer and pork are supplied in abundance. In earlier days, the feast is said to have continued for five to seven days. During feast men and women, both young and old, dance together while the traditional instruments *Serja* (a kind of four-stringed fiddle), the *Siphung* (flute), and *Gong-gwna* (Jew's herp) are played on. The merry-makers do not sleep during the night. They also perform *Thakripalla* a competition of dance and song at night.

During the marriage cooking is normally done in the open. The two men who decant the wine sit on a mortar and they are called *jou sirgra*. They pour out the undecant rice-beer first in a big *Dumshu* (a wooden pot with three legged stands) from *Dabkha* i.e. earthen jar of rice-beer. There after rice-beer is mixed with water with the help of a bamboo stick called *Khadou*. After proper mixing the *jou* or rice-beer is filtered with the help of a cylindrical bamboo strainer called *Jantha*. The filtered *jou* is distributed to the consumers with an indigenous servicing gear called *Laothai* made of bamboo stump with handle. The drinking cup is made of plantain sheath by folding which is fixed by pricking with bamboo pins. They called this *Thona*. The glass of bamboo is used for drinking water. They use either the leave of *Laihulai* a kind of wild plant or plantain sheath or leave as dish for eating rice. Water, as per custom, must not be fetched from a river, a well or a tank when the ceremony is in progress and hence water is collected well ahead of the ceremony and reserved in a dug-out canoe. Areca nut and betel leave will be offered to God on the prow of the canoe with a watchman keeping watch round the clock.⁹⁷ 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 *dons* 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-beer, two bottles of rice-beer, 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 *Douri* 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.

3. The Post-Wedding Ceremony:

There is a post-wedding ceremony which is known as *Athimangal Siphainai* 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-beer, and a pair of earthen jar of rice-beer. 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*.

(i) 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* 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*.⁹⁸

(ii) 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*.⁹⁹

Marriage in Brahma Followers:

There are fundamental ritualistic differences in solemnizing a marriage between the traditional Bodos and the followers of Brahmanism. In a Brahma marriage, there is no provision for a *Hathachuni* feast which is the primary requirement in a traditional Bodo-Kachary marriage. The *Yajna* is considered sufficient to solemnize the 'union' in a marriage. The father of a bride brings his daughter before the *Yajna-kunda* holding one of her hands and, in the presence of the priest and guests; he gives his daughter's hand to the groom. Thereafter, the priest ties the nuptial knot (*lagna ganthi*) between the bride and the groom and then oblations are made in the burning *Yajna-kunda*. The pair is then blessed by the guests who present their gifts. On completion of these formalities, the bride and the groom go round the *Yajna-kunda* seven times which is analogous to *saptapadi*. After this, the priest unties the nuptial knot. In a Hindu Vedic marriage, however, the nuptial knot is kept tied till the ceremony of *khoba-khubini* is over. At the time of the inauguration of the *hom-jajna*, the invocatory *stotra* or hymnical prayer is chanted first, followed by the

recitation of *ahuti mantram* (oblation stotra) in Sanskrit and then by the distribution of Prasad. Prayers are then offered in the Bodo language and, this being over, a pair of betel nuts and a leaf reverentially offer to the *Yajna-kunda* which is immediately followed by the sprinkling of *santi-jol* (sacred water) along with the pronouncement of ‘*om santi*’ three times. In the last stage, a paste is prepared from the ashes of the *Yajna-kunda* and is smeared on the foreheads of both the bride and the groom. This signifies the end of the ritualistic part of the marital proceedings. On the eighth day after the marriage and as part of the marital rites the groom along with his bride visits his father-in-law’s house. This is known as *athi mangal siphaynay* or *athmangla* in Assamese. The return journey marks the end of a marriage ceremony brought about by negotiation.¹⁰⁰

The followers of Brahma dharma thus have discarded most of the old Bodo customs and have adopted Brahmanical rites including performance of *Yajna*, abstinence of non-vegetarian food and drinks and from dance and merry making. They have a priest who is a Bodo too, and even the marriage is performed in the house of the bride as in the case of other Hindus. Traditionally realisation of the *phon thaka* i.e., bride-price ranging from Rs.100/- to Rs. 1000/- was compulsory in the Bodo society. But the followers of the Brahmaism reduced the exorbitant demand of bride-price to maximum of Rs. 51/-. Even the violation of this stipulation would be punished with a fine and the amount exceeding Rs. 51/- should be returned.¹⁰¹

Similarly the Christian convert Bodos also abandoned traditional marriage customs. The marriage ceremony of them is solemnised as per the Christian regulation in the Church. The custom of realisation of the *phon thaka* i.e., bride-price is uncommon in their society.

The economic condition of a household is an important criterion in the Bodo society for determining the mode of marriage they would choose for the sons and daughters of the *Nokhor*.

Arrange marriage, i.e., *Swngnai haba* is an expensive affair, if a *Nokhor* (family) is poor, it cannot afford a *Swngnai* marriage for its sons and daughters. On the other hand the parents of the girl of rich family usually unwilling to establish its affinal relationship with a boy of poor family. Besides, the parents of the girl may demand a high *phon thaka* i.e., bride-price which may be beyond his capacity to pay. As a counterpoise the boy’s part has

to resort to the marriage of capture (*Bwnai haba*). Similarly *Dwnkharnai Haba* or marriage by elopement and *Hinjao jora langnanoi hwnai Haba* are prevalent among the underprivileged classes.

DEATH CEREMONY:

The Bodo society follows a certain procedure in the funeral rites. The funeral rites is called *Gwthwi garnai*, i.e., to throw away the dead in Bodo. Among the Bodos all three customs are prevalent. Some of them buried their dead called *Gwthwi Pobnai* which is the most preferred tradition, some burnt them which they call *Gwthwi Saonai*; and a third section simply takes the dead to the burial ground and leaves them there which is termed *Landangwi garnai*, but this process is followed in rare cases and on certain situations. Almost villagers have a cremation ground for the disposal of dead which is called *Gwthwi-bary* at a considerable distance of village dwellings.

Soon after the death, the eye lids and mouth are shut, hands and legs are laid straight and the body is covered with a new cloth. In the meantime the news is circulated among the *Giyati* or relatives, both male and female, and then to the members of the village. The villagers stop all activities and gathers to the house of the victims. The body is washed with water by the nearest relatives, the head is smeared with oil and the hair is combed. After the wash a new cloth is wrapped over the body, if it is male with *Gamsa*, and if female with *Dokhona*. The family members prepare chicken curry with vegetables to feed the departed soul.

Meanwhile the villagers prepare a hearse called *Bwisang* to carry the body to the cremation ground. In preparation of *Bwisang* a single bamboo is to be used and it is cut into two pieces to make pole bearer about eight feet length, and laid it apart parallelly. The remaining portion of bamboo that split into seven or nine pieces which is about three and half feet breadths are then tied to the frame in cross-wise with bamboo strings and thus the platform is constructed. The court yard where the *Bwisang* or hearse is to be placed is newly plastered with cow dung mixed fresh earth and it is spread with five pieces of split plantain tree. Afterwards the *Bwisang* is placed length-wise to the north and south over which a new mat called *Dhara* is spread. The body is placed on the mat and the relatives put the new clothes near the dead body. The dead body is kept for a period of few hours till

the arrival of *Giyati* or relatives so that all the relatives of the deceased might have a glance of the departed ones. On their arrival, specially prepared foods are then feed to the deceased's mouth with left hand one by one by the relatives and villagers present there, and the act of feeding him is carried out up to a certain point. A white cloth is spread over the body completely covering it from the head to toe. Then the body is tied to the platform with bamboo strings called *Teoywl*.

After offering salutation to the deceased by the members present there, four persons who are belongs to the relatives to the deceased carry the platform to the burial ground. An elderly man belonging to *Narzary* clan, carrying a bamboo pipe filled with cow dung mixed water, fire of straw called *jigab buntani or*, gold or silver ring, nine pieces of *Dubri (Duba)* grass, a branch of basil, proceed to the funeral procession unwinding a spindle of cotton thread all the way from the house of the deceased to the disposal ground. It is believed that the soul can pass through this thread from house to the disposal ground. No women or children are allowed to participate in the process.

The ground decided to be buried is purchased first by throwing some coins on the spot from the deity or *mwdai* to whom it is supposed to belong and then the grave is dug out before arrival of the body. Just before the final disposal of the body, the people involved in the funeral procession make last offerings of water in peepul leaves and recite: "*No lwngdw amwka, dinwinifry nwngba nwngswi jwngba jwngswi*".¹⁰² i.e., O you (name of deceased) take this water, from to-day, you for yourself and we for ourselves. Afterwards a piece of red thread is put between the lips of the dead body, and then the body is placed in the grave facing the head to the south and the nearest relatives is proceeded to fill it with earth and others also follow him. But before placing the body in grave, the friends and relatives make a solemn procession around it, five times in the case of a man and seven in that of woman. The use of red thread indicates the lips of the dead person will be red and thin lips when re-birth takes place, i.e., a sign of beauty. A sheath of plantain leaf is placed from the nose of the dead body leading up to the surface of the earth as a means of breathing the soul of the deceased. While burying some coins and *cowrie* shells are also buried along with the body as a fare to be required to the soul to cross the river by boat or to buy some required food on the journey. It is usual that the materials used by the deceased

before the death, and a knife and other utensils needed in everyday life are left in the grave, it being supposed that the deceased may use these things till the getting of re-birth. A jar of full water and rice cooked on the spot are also left by the side of the grave. When an unmarried Bodo young man is dies, a banana tree is planted near his grave so that his life after death becomes more fruitful than has been the case hitherto. When a Bodo woman dies, a *pipal* branch is planted near the grave in the hope that in her re-birth she will be blessed with a luxuriant growth of hair.¹⁰³ Finally, a rough shed of thatch is put up by the grave to shelter the deceased's spirit from rain and sun.¹⁰⁴ In the case of cremation, funeral pyre is arranged similar to the non-Bodo Aryan-Hindus. The stacking of fire wood is arranged five or seven layers for the pyre. Before the placing the corpse therein, similar to that of burial, the friends and relatives make a procession round the pyre, five times for a man and seven times for a woman and then the body is laid on the pyre over which extra stack of fire wood is placed again. A torch is lighted and the relatives and friends of the deceased again make a procession around pyre similar to earlier and recite: "*Nwi amwka jwng nwngekou saonw swilwi*", i.e., O you (name of the deceased), here we are going to set you on fire and finally the torch is set on fire to pyre. A pair of chickens are taken to cremation ground and one chicken is burnt along with the body and another one is set free. On the next early morning a male person of the family visit the site of cremation and pour water of a full earthen jar to the ground of cremation. It is meant for making peace to the deceased person's spirit.

A curious custom exists among the Bodo people in connection with the cremation of the body. Before burning the whole body, the remains of the lungs is taken out by cutting with big knife, wrapped it in a plantain leaf and then put it inside the crab hole of the river bank or pond. The remaining part of incomplete body is then burnt again till it exhaust. At the end of cremation all the participants of the funeral rites take their bath in the river or stream, chew a little quantity of dry jute leaves i.e., *narzi* which is spit out again, touch the fire and finally *Dwi Shanti* or holy water is sprinkled on them by a *Douri* of *Narzari* clan who is waiting for the purpose near the river bank since the time of cremation and then the entire party return to their respective home. The custom of eating of dry jute leaves is known as *Narzi orgarnai* i.e., bite off of dry jute and it is an act of severing permanent ties

with the deceased. On their respective front of the court yard also laid a person with holy water called *Dwi Shanti* who sprinkle holy water on him as purification and then only he is free to enter the house.

At last all the members involved in the funeral party gather to the deceased's house where they entertain *zumai* or *jou* i.e., rice beer. In the case of poor family, the villagers provide helping hand to the family so that next ceremony of *Saradu* can be solemnized.

If a child person is dies, in general it is buried, not cremated. In case of death by snake-bite, the death body is floated in the river on a plantain raft. It is done on the prospect that the death person may revive again.

Daha Garnai:

The Bodos perform another ceremony called *Daha Garnai* after the ten days of funeral. The meaning of *Daha Garnai* is giving up of grief. This seems to be copied from Hindu customs. The traditional customs that followed after funeral is *Kalai Garnai*, i.e., throwing of unclean. This ceremony is celebrated in the next week on the same day of the death of the person. For instance, if a person dies on Monday, the ceremony of *Kalai Garnai* also celebrated on the Monday of next week. The significant of this ceremony is that from the day of death the family and their patrilineal members also become impure during the period of which they refrain from any social and religious functions. They even refrain from intercourse with other families.

On the day of *Kalai Garnai* variety of food items are prepared by the family members including rice beer meant for offering to the deceased person's spirit. It is also known as *Gwthwinw Baonai* or oblation to death person. In the process of oblation *Douri* or *Oja* (medicine man) chanted the mantras sitting by the hips while facing to the south. The *Giyati* or relatives of the deceased kneel down facing to the south and touches items of food with left hands in consonant with the mantras. No members of the family consume these viands and later on it is thrown out on the ground of disposal of death person. Afterwards all members of the participant of the deceased take bath and process of throwing uncleanness come to an end. From now and then all related members of the death person are free to join any social and religious functions including intercourse with other neighbours.

The Saradu Ceremony:

The custom of *Saradu* ceremony is performed next day of the *Kalai Garnai*, i.e., on the nine days after the death. But sometimes it depends on the convenient of the deceased family.

On the morning of the *Saradu* day, the members of the family and the *Giyati* offer a prayer to their family God *Bathou Borai*. And the feast as decided by the earlier is thrown to the village community. If *Saradu* is *Gwran* or dry, only pork and rice beer is given in abundant to the people. In the case of *Gisi* or wet *Saradu* cooked rice also served along with pork and rice beer. The celebration of *Saradu* ceremony is usually supported by the villagers in the form of providing sufficient quantity of rice beer or sometimes with pork.

There is a custom to left a little of each of the cooked food on the ground or near the rivulet, just before serving to the guests on the name of the god. While serving meal to the visitors, the male person who performed the *Saradu*, will wrap a long *pali* around his neck, an end of it will hang down to touch the ground as he moves on before the eating guests and then he would pay reverence to them by kneeling down in their front. As soon as the guest finishes their meal, he will collect the leftovers in a basket and carry it over his head and then throw it in the field or at river bank. This custom is called *Suwa Garnai*, i.e., throwing of impurity.

On the occasion of the ceremony visiting guests give alms in the form of coins on a laid *Don* i.e., bamboo basket where a few quantities of uncooked rice are also placed. The coins thus received are mixed with uncooked rice and these are tossed in all directions of the court yard at the large gathering of the children that are to be collected by them. This ceremony is known as *Dan Sarnai*. A well to do family, sometimes, set free a bullock on the name of the death person and is termed as *Mwsou Sarwn Hogarnai*.

Among the *Brahma Dharma* followers, they perform *Ahuti* on the ceremony of *Saradu* and after the end of the *Ahuti* all the members present there partake in the feast which is vegetarian food. Though use of rice beer is found on the occasion it is very limited in nature.

As a rule the cooking of the feast is never done inside the family house. It is to be made outside the house and no part of any articles related to *Saradu* is to be brought inside

the house. The ceremony programme must come to an end on the eve of Sunset. If any articles remain excess these are to be distributed to the villagers or to be thrown out.

A very curious form of belief in connection with *Gwthwi Garnai* or funeral rites is that the bamboo grove from where the bamboo pieces is used in making the hearse for carrying the corpse is considered impure and the bamboos of this grove will not be used in the construction of house and other religious functions. Another custom is that the plantain tree used for the purpose of funeral rites has to be chopped with just a single stroke.

From the foregoing discussion it would seem clear that the Bodos have a notion of future life that incarnate from the spirit of the death of early life. They believe in the existence in man of a spirit which after death according to his deed or sin in one life affects the form of incarnation in the next. "The Philosophy about death", remarks M.M. Brahma, an eminent Bodo scholar, "the Bodos believe that human beings cannot escape destiny. Destiny is subject to deed (Karma). They also believe in transmigration of soul. The soul of a dead person may enter into any body according to the Karma done in previous birth."¹⁰⁵

To ascertain the rebirth of a dead person a small part of the yard is rubbed with soft clay and covered with a winnowing fan while the dead body is being carried away to the cremation ground. When all return home from the creation ground the winnowing fan is removed to see what foot print is there on the clay. Another belief is that the soul of a dead person stays near the house till the *Shradha* (*Saradu*) ceremony (funeral feast) is held.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, post-funeral ceremony of *Saradu* is compulsory in Bodo customs in order to endow with salvation of the death person's soul.

In former days the persons who were killed by animals such as tiger or elephant or bear, etc. is considered to be killed by his crime or sin. The death body of such person is thrown away in the nearby jungles or in the open field. They belief that in this type of disposal the body of the deceased will be devoured by wild jackals and vultures in open fields, and then the soul of the death person is likely to attain salvation from the deeds of commissions and omissions done during her or his life time.

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