

WEAVING HERITAGE: THE COMMERCIALISATION AND CONSERVATION OF BODO TEXTILE

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Abstract

Bodo are the earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley who have migrated from Tibet to the regions of north-eastern India in the foothills of the Himalayas. Textiles and weaving have a crucial role in the cultural fabric of the Bodo community, being an indispensable component of their cultural history. The hand-woven textile possesses inherent importance as a manifestation of cultural practices, as well as the traditional wisdom and values that are embedded in it. The Bodo textile was originally produced solely for personal consumption, but over time it evolved into a source of economic sustenance. The widespread availability of handloom products has received much acknowledgment, and the process of commercialisation has resulted in the creation of job prospects within the textile industry. However, the traditional handloom of the Bodo has undergone significant transformations, resulting in the emergence of cultural commodities. The method of creation of handwoven textiles is a concrete expression of their intangible heritage, hence highlighting the need for its preservation. The present work is grounded on cultural observation and attempts to examine the complex interplay between the preservation and commodification of Bodo's textile cultural heritage, providing insights into the deep importance of their weaving history.

Keywords: Bodo, Textile, Handloom, Commodification, Cultural Heritage, Preservation.

Introduction

The practice of weaving culture among the Bodo has a longstanding history, making it difficult to ascertain the precise origins and individuals responsible for its development. The patterns and designs created by Bodo women possess a distinctiveness that arises from their incorporation of many aspects derived from the physical environment, folktales, myths, legends, rites, cultural norms, and other sources. Hence, the patterns and methods are unique and endemic. Handloom items cater to the essential needs of rural weavers while also appealing to the refined preferences of the wealthier segment of society. Not only does it provide women with financial empowerment, but it also enhances their social standing. The handloom industry has gained significant recognition and has created a multitude of employment opportunities in the fields of spinning and weaving textiles. The *endi* (eri) silk produced in the region holds significant importance in the daily lives and economic activities of the local population. Textiles are fundamental artifacts of human cultural expression, with their patterns and styles serving as visual manifestations of historical

narratives, belief systems, and unique geographical contexts associated with specific cultures. The practice of handloom weaving was initially adopted by the community for domestic use, particularly by women. Over time, it has evolved into a sustainable livelihood option. In contemporary society, when financial wealth has become the primary determinant of social standing, handloom has emerged as a valuable asset that provides job opportunities for marginalized groups.

The weaving culture, like many other aspects of society, has undergone significant transformation due to the fast changes and consumerist culture that have emerged in recent times. The present evolution of the textile industry illustrates the inherent inclination of the weavers to establish economic sustainability while simultaneously preserving their cultural identity. Textiles have evolved to encompass both cultural symbolism and economic commodities. In the pre-commercialisation phase of handloom products, clothes were mostly manufactured for personal use by individuals and their families. However, when the handloom industry began to engage in commercial activities, production expanded in response to client needs and market dynamics. People's attitudes and approaches to culture and interaction with culture changed because of their aspirations for what is referred to as 'modern' life. Economically it has empowered them to become entrepreneurs by enabling them to commercially produce *dokhona* (traditional attire of women) and other clothes on their looms. There has been a cultural shift in the approach to preserving the weaving tradition.

The primary emphasis of this study will be traditional culture, which has exerted an effect on many items. This influence has been further accelerated by the processes of globalisation and the pervasive impact of modernisation, resulting in heightened commercial production. Undoubtedly, the impact of cultural commercialization has been observed in the Bodo textiles. However, it is noteworthy that this phenomenon has emerged as a viable strategy for the preservation and dissemination of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Bodo.

Methodology

The data-gathering method employed in this study was cultural observation, which entailed direct observation of the daily activities of the weavers. This approach allows us to get a better insight into the cultural dimension of handloom weaving that extends beyond technical consideration to recognise the cultural relevance of this age-old tradition. During the observation, an in-depth interview was also conducted with the weavers, handloom production centres, women entrepreneurs, and local handloom dealers.

Bodo and textile: The intricate relationship

In his study, Narzi (2003) conducted a historical analysis of the Mongoloids, focusing on their migration patterns from around 2000 B.C. onwards in the regions of Siberia and Mongolia. According to historical accounts, it has been suggested that individuals belonging to the

Mongoloid ethnic group from Tibet migrated to the regions of north-eastern India and Assam, mainly along the course of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries, for the purpose of engaging in silk trade. Bodo is an indigenous tribe that belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid family. They are the largest group of the Kachari¹ lineage, which may be attributed to the first settlers of the Brahmaputra valley spanning present-day Assam, North Bengal in India, and some parts of Bangladesh.

As the Bodo progressed in their societal development, they initiated the production of textiles within their cultural context. The weavers strive to include many expressions and features of the natural environment inside their design. The handloom tradition of the Bodo gave rise to a diverse range of styles. For instance, the subsequent entities may be cited: *hajw aagor* (design of a hill), *laihagar* (a design representing a leaf of a spinach), *muphur aapha* (a design representing footprints of a bear), *pharou megon* (wink of a peacock's eye) and *lao begor* (a design representing seed of a bitter gourd), etc. Threads were first produced utilising *thaokri* (drop spindle) as a manufacturing material. In contemporary times, there has been a shift from conventional modes of production to a more modernised approach, namely in the usage of equipment and cultivation of cotton and *endi* (eri)silk. It might be stated that they were the trailblazing folks in the northeastern region who have these unique characteristics of hand looming. In the present-day context, the Bodo community has undertaken the manufacturing of textile products with current approaches. The decline in cotton cultivation, as well as the production of cotton-based garments and the rearing of *endi*, can be ascribed to several reasons. In the past, the main raw materials utilised for weaving were cotton and *endi* yarn, with muga and other silk used on occasion. Nevertheless, the output of cotton proved to be inadequate in meeting the requirements for the mass manufacture of textiles, mostly due to natural issues such as recurrent floods and the challenges associated with resettlement, which rendered cotton farming unfavourable.

In the present day, the primary constituents use in the process of weaving encompass acrylic yarn, mill-made cotton yarn, and *endi* yarn. The transition to acrylic yarn may be attributed to the limited accessibility of high-quality cotton and the convenience it offers in terms of simplicity of use and its ability to maintain colour fastness even after repeated washing. The handloom weaving products of the Bodo community were traditionally focused on the production of dokhona, *jwmgra* (traditional stole for women) *gamsa* (traditional attire of men), *aronia* (traditional scarf), and *endi si* (eri fabric). Nevertheless, as a result of the influence of contemporary culture and the escalating needs of the market, there has been a substantial expansion in the variety of items available. The current assortment encompasses waistcoats designed for guys, scarves, pillow coverings, tablecloths, cushion covers, and an array of other diverse options.

Importance of textiles in Bodo society

The value and cultural identity of the Bodo textile have been challenged by globalisation and commodification. The importance of handloom textiles and weaving in the life of the Bodo weavers matter in two ways: at the local level an expression of local wisdom and tradition

embedded in their way of life and at the national level as evidence of a unique identity of community it belongs. Local knowledge about the process of weaving and spinning has been transmitted orally for generations. Bodo has a profound connection with textiles, which have significant importance in their daily lives and are actively encouraged among the younger generations of society. They view textiles in a number of ways, including the following:

A source of pride

Women weave garments for themselves and their families. They feel proud to wear the hand-woven cloth that is more than a textile; it embodies several complicated processes involving a great deal of hard work and local knowledge. This sense of pride is the inspiration for the Bodo weavers to pursue the art of weaving. The weaver attempts to merge their daily lives and display a unique spirit of harmony between nature and culture and art and life in their design. They believed that textiles should be displayed in the home to show pride and history. Weaving is a local custom and way of life for them; their culture's survival is dependent on it, so it is crucial to keep this practice alive. Bodo society is traditionally egalitarian without class stratification and social hierarchy. However, a change in attitude is seen among the women of Bodo society today where the rising middle class and silk are being used as a social marker among the affluent. This is more so in urban places and gatherings which indicates transforming Bodo society. Weavers from other states and non-tribal weavers are producing silk *dokhona* for the consumption of the affluent class and are marketed in the Bodoland Territorial Region. Looking at how Bodo women wear their artistic products in all social and public gatherings makes one wonder if such efforts are part of a greater social and political consciousness of the women to find a place for themselves in the collective (Narzary, 2021). The *dokhona*, worn by women, serves as a marker of community identification and is used by the community to assert its position as a distinct social and political entity in Assam.

A valuable memory

The Bodo has a long and glorious history of existence. It is believed that the ancestors of the Bodo traveled to the Brahmaputra valley to trade silk before settling down there. Since the dawn of their civilization, they have been familiar with sericulture, and eventually, the tradition of weaving various attributes of nature is crafted on hand-woven fabrics. The marriageable women used to weave their bridal attire in the past. The woman who is unable to spin and weave is characterized as *aoluri* (stupid, good for nothing) and the man who marries them is considered an unfortunate one. Weaving was the benchmark that describes the skill of the women in Bodo society. Through weaving, the Bodo people express the beauty and essence of women. It is the feature that people look at women for marriage. Young women who were unable to marry their lovers weaved a small piece of fabric or *anthwb* (handkerchief) with a leftover thread from the loom as a gesture of love and gifted it to that person. An intact value woman used to believe in expressing love and grief and hoping to meet again and continue to love. According to the

forefathers, a family survives on the harvest cultivated by men, and similarly, it is believed that with the domestic chores and skills of women wealth and happiness come to a family.

A significant element in ceremonies

In every cycle of their existence, the lives of the Bodo have been inextricably intertwined with textiles. The Bodo women have not given up wearing their traditional attire in everyday life and are equally committed to weaving these beautiful pieces amidst their daily chores. Traditional clothing is not worn by the current generation daily, although girls and women wore it in the past. Even the younger generation continues to wear it during rituals and celebrations, even though the practice is still alive and well. Traditional clothing serves as a symbol of a community's resistance to modernization's assault on indigenous values. Clothes are important elements in many events, including weddings. The traditional attire worn by the bride during marriage came from the groom's family, and the groom's mother used to weave and create the garments herself for this special occasion. *Bwirathi* (two married women) who are required to conduct the ceremony of welcoming the bride should also get another set of traditional garments from the groom's mother. *Aronai*, a hand-woven scarf that represents respect and dignity, is used to greet guests on any occasion. The scarf's unusual pattern *hajw agor* (a design of a hill) strongly connects to nature and habitats.

Textile: from cultural heritage to commodification

Commodification, in essence, refers to the process of turning something into a commercial commodity. The global formation of bureaucratic, political, and economic frameworks has facilitated an upward trajectory in the economic system, resulting in the proliferation of diverse product offerings. The impact on culture was inevitable, and in contemporary society, it has been heavily commodified. As argued by Sayer (1999), individuals increasingly relied on the economy and eventually discerned the potential of using culture as a valuable commercial asset. For example, the availability of handcrafted items offers a chance to foster cultural promotion within a specialised market segment in the realm of economics.

The handloom and textile of the Bodo community encompasses both tangible and intangible aspects. The tangible aspects are the *endi* including its distinctive fabric, while the intangible components include the local wisdom integrated into the production process, as well as the unique patterns and motifs that symbolise the harmonious relationship with the tribe's natural surroundings. In contemporary society, all facets of culture, whether they pertain to tangible goods or intangible aspects, have undergone a transformation into commodities. The relationship between culture and commerce is characterised by mutual interdependencies. The ability to practise commerce is facilitated by the existence of culture, and culture is also kept alive by commodification (Proschel, 2012). The modern values encouraged people to 'produce more and consume more'. These days, our perception of and connection to our surroundings on both a social and an individual level is significantly influenced by the products and services we consume.

It is worth noting that as society advances and grows acquainted with the evolving fashion trends. It is quite probable that the preferences, aesthetic sensibilities, and consumer aspirations of the contemporary generation will diverge from those of their predecessors. One potential approach involves integrating elements of traditional culture with high fashion or incorporating select modern design elements with the original cultural aesthetic. The efficacy of the indigenous manufacturing method will ultimately lead to the fulfilment of the demands of the next generation. However, the current state of the market exemplifies a harsh reality. Due to the prevailing need for high fashion, individuals are purchasing machine-produced fabric sourced from various regions and using it to create *dokhona* garments. The *dokhona*, which was fashioned from those particular textiles, did not exhibit any of the distinctive traditional characteristics. Instead, it may be perceived as a garment resembling a pseudo-saree. The tribe is widely recognised for their rich weaving heritage, and this specific product undermines the essence of this longstanding history. It is a known truth that non-tribal merchants control a bigger portion of the market in Kokrajhar, and it is obvious that if exported cloth takes over the function of *dokhona* plainly, these individuals will profit the most. The current state of market exchange, overseen by Bodo merchants, lacks organisation and standardisation in terms of commodity valuation, resulting in constant fluctuations. This practise has resulted in the recurring involvement of non-tribal traders and middleman.

The potential for cultural preservation in the case of the *endi* product can be exemplified by the recognition of its substantial demand and extensive exportation. The utilisation of *endi* product among the local populace is predominantly confined to occasions of festivity, celebration, or ceremonial gatherings. The intricate relationship between culture and economics is heavily influenced by the market-driven demand of consumers. The process of commodification necessitates mass manufacturing, which inherently precludes the manufacture of things of the highest quality. Certain clients express a preference for affordable ethnic items as souvenirs, but others prioritise authentic woven fabrics that utilise natural colours and adhere to traditional designs. Hence, it is imperative for weavers to adopt a strategy that involves manufacturing two distinct categories of products, based on consumer demand. This entails the creation of personalised items as well as products tailored specifically for customers or textile markets with an export focus. One such strategy involves streamlining the designs and limiting them to those that accurately represent cultural identity. Customers exhibit a heightened level of interest in the local production methods and utilisation of traditional dyeing materials, which contribute to the creation of visually pleasing products. Therefore, the streamlining of design will expedite mass manufacturing while preserving traditional practices. Given the Bodo women's inclination towards brilliant colours and their purchase of various coloured yarns from the market, it is plausible to categorise the former as textile goods intended for the export market, while the latter may be seen as enhanced items for personal use. The primary objective is to maximise economic revenue and ensure viability within the monetary system.

Discussion

Textiles and weaving hold significant cultural value within the Bodo community, being an integral aspect of the cultural heritage. It has intrinsic significance as a representation of the way of life as well as the local knowledge and values embedded in it. The study of the cultural commercialization of handloom items within the Bodo community has revealed the dual effects on their traditional heritage. The positive influence has resulted in the economic improvement of the weavers. The increase in economic status corresponds to the advancement of the socio-economic conditions experienced by the weavers. The production of textiles possesses the capacity to transform certain abilities into a valuable economic resource. This transformation not only addresses the increasing market wants and client requirements, but also helps to the augmented revenue generation for the weavers and the general advancement of their economy.

On the other side, there exists the potential risk of compromising the authenticity of the product. The concept of authenticity is closely linked to the genuineness of the source, and serves as a significant criterion for evaluating the significance of cultural legacy (Jokilehto, 2006). Genuine textiles are produced at a higher cost due to their inherent authenticity, which has emerged as a distinguishing factor enabling manufacturers to cater to a select and affluent clientele of discerning individuals (Moon, 2013). Undoubtedly, the advent of modernity has brought about a shift in the preferences and expectations of individuals, leading to a notable transformation in their tastes and standards. Hence, it is an indisputable fact that the present-day customer, particularly those in the younger demographic, actively pursues alterations in traditional products. In recent years, there has been a discernible surge in the demand for *dokhona* made from foreign textiles with fashionable designs. The art of traditional weaving, known for its exceptional skill and mostly utilised for domestic applications, faces an imminent threat. Therefore, preserving the tradition has become crucial for maintaining the cultural identity and uniqueness of the Bodo community.

Conclusion

The Bodo attempts to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between their economic pursuits and the preservation of their cultural heritage, in order to conserve and perpetuate their unique way of life in the face of the inexorable impacts of commercialisation. The preservation of textile manufacturing in the region may be achieved by the implementation of strategies such as raising public awareness, assuring custodianship, and developing a sustainable, self-sufficient economy. Public awareness would facilitate the exploration, preservation, and formulation of the craft's unique identity, as well as the global reach of its products to potential buyers. As the textile of Bodo is a paradigm for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage by transforming the textiles into a cultural product.

NOTES

1. The Bodo or the Bodo-Kachari are the most distinctive ethnic group residing in north-eastern India, mainly in the Brahmaputra valley. The name Kachari was initially adopted by Rev. Sidney Endle (1911) in his anthropological account of the Bodos and later after

independence, they were identified as ‘Scheduled Tribe’ by the constitution of India. Bordoloi et.al, (1987) assert that the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam represents a section of the larger Bodo Group within the Indo-Mongoloid family, particularly belonging to the Assam Burmese linguistic category. The identity of this ethnic group does not exhibit uniformity. In the regions of Bengal and the lower Himalayas, namely within the geographical boundaries of Nepal, the indigenous population is commonly referred to as Meches. They are referred to as Sonowal and Thengal Kachari in upper Assam, whereas they are more often known as Bodo Kachari in western Assam.

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