

Tradition in Transition: A study on the Changing Dynamics of Traditional Attires among the Bodo-Kacharis of Pat Gaon Village, Kamrup Metropolitan District

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Abstract: Clothing is a multifaceted art form that engages our senses in ways similar to painting, sculpture, or music. Unlike other forms of art, clothing can be worn, transforming it into a unique expression of identity and culture—a form of wearable art. In India, a country celebrated for its immense diversity in people, cultures, religions, and castes, this diversity is vividly reflected in the array of regional costumes worn across different parts of the nation. Adornment and attire serve as powerful mediums for expressing distinction and identity, allowing individuals and communities to be recognized and understood based on their outward appearance. The Bodo-Kacharis, one of the most significant tribes of Assam, represent a branch of the larger Bodo group within the Indo-Mongoloid family, which is part of the Assam-Burmese linguistic section. This tribal group is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, and dress pattern plays a vital role as a symbol of traditional Bodo culture. Bodo women are particularly known for their weaving skills for countless generations. Traditional dresses are not just a wearable art among the tribe but plays a vital role in maintaining their identity among many other indigenous communities of the region. However, at present a significant impact of globalisation and modernity can be seen in the choices of attires among the tribe which may become a threat to maintain the cultural legacy of the tribe in the near future. This paper seeks to illuminate the importance, role, and evolving dynamics of traditional attire among the Bodo-Kacharis living in Patgaon village, Kamrup district, exploring how these garments continue to reflect and adapt to the changing socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords: Traditional dresses, Heritage, Bodo-Kachari, cultural identity.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Clothing is a multifaceted art form that engages our senses in ways similar to painting, sculpture, or music. Unlike other forms of art, clothing can be worn, transforming it into a unique expression of identity and culture—a form of wearable art. The concept of clothing has evolved significantly over time. Originally, attire was designed to protect the human body from environmental factors such as the sun and rain. However, as societies developed, clothing became more than just a necessity; it emerged as a symbol of civilization itself. The evolution of dress marks the progress of human societies from basic survival to complex cultural expressions. In India, a country celebrated for its immense diversity in people, cultures, religions, and castes, this diversity is vividly reflected in the array of regional costumes worn across different parts of the nation. Adornment and attire serve as powerful mediums for expressing distinction and identity, allowing individuals and communities to be recognized and understood based on their outward appearance (1). Factors such as ethnicity, occupation, social occasions, and socio-economic status heavily influence the patterns and styles of clothing adopted by men and women alike.

The Bodo-Kacharis, one of the most significant tribes of Assam, represent a branch of the larger Bodo group within the Indo-Mongoloid family, which is part of the Assam-Burmese linguistic section (1). The Bodo-Kacharis stand out in Assam due to their unique language, customs, culinary practices, culture, religion, beliefs, and dress patterns, all of which distinguish them from other ethnic groups in the state. This tribe is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, and dress pattern plays a vital role as a symbol of traditional Bodo culture. Bodo women are particularly known for wearing traditional garments such as the *dokhona*, *fali* or *fasra*, and *donga mekhela*, each piece reflecting the cultural identity of the tribe. The practices of spinning and weaving are deeply embedded in Bodo culture, with handloom weaving carrying

profound historical and cultural significance. For countless generations, this craft has not only been a source of economic sustenance but has also played a crucial role in maintaining the cultural fabric of the community (2). This paper seeks to illuminate the importance, role, and evolving dynamics of traditional attire among the Bodo-Kacharis living in Patgaon village, Kamrup district, exploring how these garments continue to reflect and adapt to the changing socio-cultural landscape.

2. STUDY AREA:

Pat Gaon village, located in the Azara subdivision of Kamrup Metropolitan district in Assam, presents a fascinating blend of cultural assimilation and preservation. Predominantly inhabited by the Bodo-Kachari community, the village is a testament to the enduring strength of indigenous traditions amidst the influence of broader Assamese culture. The village is situated around 3 km away from the sub-district headquarter Azara (tehsildar office) and it is 18 km away from district headquarter Guwahati. As per the census 2011, the village has a total population of 2,772 out of which male population is 1,732 and 1,040 are female. The total geographical area of the village is 238.25 hectares (<https://villageinfo.in>). Despite the adoption of broader Assamese norms and rituals in recent times, the villagers of Pat Gaon remain deeply connected to their ancestral roots. This cultural duality is particularly evident in their traditional attire and ornaments, which continue to distinguish them as a unique subset of the Bodo tribal people. During field observations, it became apparent that while the villagers have embraced many aspects of contemporary culture, they have not forgotten their own cultural identity. Instead, they have created a harmonious synthesis of old and new, reflecting a resilient cultural heritage that adapts while staying true to its origins. This unique cultural landscape makes Pat Gaon a valuable site for studying the dynamics of cultural integration and preservation in contemporary Assam.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

For the proper fulfilment of the study an intensive fieldwork has been done by the researcher in the Pat Gaon village to collect primary data. An extensive use of anthropological methods such as observation method, interview method, social survey method etc have been applied during primary data collection. Non-participant observation method has helped the researcher to note down and gain information on the events like the regular using dress pattern among the villagers, to identify different styles, and designs of clothing and to differentiate between traditional and modern attires. Structured and non-structured interview has helped the researcher to know about the villagers' view on their traditional dresses, different designs on the traditional attires and so on. The researcher has also conducted survey method in the village to know about the importance of handloom among the villagers and how many of them has handloom to ultimately gain insight on the weaving culture among the villagers. Secondary sources like books, theses, research articles etc. have been used throughout the study to gain better understanding on the study.

4. DISCUSSION:

The Bodo-Kacharis inhabiting the Pat Gaon village are rich in cultural heritage. Though it is observed that there is a gradual shift towards modernity at present, they are still rooted in their own traditions. Traditional attire plays a vital role in preserving the cultural identity of the Bodo-Kachari community. The village women predominantly wear the Dokhona, locally called *Langa*, a 2.5-meter-long and 1.5-meter-wide garment that covers the body from chest to legs. The Dokhona comes in various designs (*agor*) or plain styles (*matha* or *salmatha*), with yellow and orange being the most common colours. The plain dokhona is locally called *matha* or *salmatha* which is worn by women during ritualistic activities and during different festivals, and especially in marriage ceremonies, where the bride traditionally wears a plain yellow Dokhona. During the celebration of *Bohag-Bihu* (Assamese traditional festival) in the month of April, the village women wear Dokhona, reflecting a sense of respect towards Assamese culture. For the upper body, women pair the Dokhona with a blouse and a small scarf known as *Aronai*, which holds significant cultural value. The *Aronai* is also worn by the male members among the tribe. During the winter, villagers wear the *Jwmgra* or *Pasra*, a scarf to keep warm, and the *Endisi* or *Eri Sador*, a precious shawl made from silk, typically worn by wealthier women. Men traditionally wear the *Gamcha*, a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist, generally it is 2 meter in length and 1.2-meter width. Different colours of *gamcha* are woven by the village women but green colour is the most significant colour among all. Another traditional dress of the male members is the Bodo Jacket or locally called *Khotgosla*, a sleeveless jacket worn during festivals and cultural functions. These garments, woven with intricate designs, reflect the rich heritage of the community and continue to be a crucial aspect of their daily lives and special occasions, embodying the unique and enduring culture of Pat Gaon.



Fig 1. Bodo women in their daily attire showing blending of Bodo and Assamese culture

In recent years, the choice of attire among the villagers has evolved, reflecting a shift towards the broader Assamese culture while still retaining elements of their indigenous heritage. While *Sador-Mekhela* has become the everyday dress for most women in the village, particularly those who find its cotton fabric comfortable for daily wear, the elderly women continue to honour tradition by wearing the Dokhona, which they refer to as *Langa*. The blending of these cultural attires highlights the transition, with younger generations adopting more contemporary clothing such as salwar-kameez, t-shirts, and pants for practicality and comfort.

Men in the village have also embraced modern styles, with shirts, pants, and t-shirts becoming commonplace. However, traditional garments like the *Gamcha* and *Sadri* (a type of dupatta) are still worn, especially by older men and women who wish to preserve their cultural identity. This shift in clothing preferences underscores the villagers' adaptability and openness to change while maintaining a connection to their cultural roots. The adoption of new attire symbolizes the broader socio-cultural transformations occurring in Pat Gaon, as the villagers navigate the balance between tradition and modernity.



Fig 2: A village woman showing a *Sador* (a piece of Assamese traditional attire) woven with Bodo traditional designs on it.

The women of Pat Gaon are renowned for their exceptional weaving skills, which play a vital role in both preserving and expressing their cultural identity. Weaving is deeply embedded in their daily lives, with nearly every household possessing a loom. The traditional art of weaving, passed down through generations, continues to thrive in this village, contributing not only to their cultural heritage but also to their livelihoods. The intricate designs, known locally as *Agor* or *Phooltula*, are a testament to the village women's creativity and craftsmanship. Each design carries cultural significance, with specific motifs adorning different traditional garments. For example, *hajw agor*, also called *pahar agor*, symbolizes hills and is an essential design in the traditional *Aronai*. Another design called *bandhuram agor* is a special skilful design in their traditional dresses which is first designed by a village member named Bandhuram Kachari. *Muphur Apa*, representing bear footprints, and *Bwigiri Bibar*, depicting plum flowers, are among the more complex designs, showcasing the weavers' advanced skills. Other popular designs include *Phool Mwbla*, reflecting various blooming flowers, and *Daorai Mwkheeb*, inspired by the peacock's eye.



Fig 3: A village woman weaving their traditional attire, Dokhona.

The loom is central to the village's textile production, with most of the villagers' clothing being handmade. The tradition of weaving extends beyond mere clothing; it is an art form that encapsulates the villagers' cultural values, creativity, and connection to their heritage. The women of Pat Gaon, like many Bodo communities across the region, are among the finest weavers in Northeast India. However, despite their skill, the weaving sector faces challenges, particularly in terms of modernization and market access. Government efforts to support handloom initiatives have not yet fully materialized, highlighting the need for better-organized programs to uplift this traditional craft.

Weaving in Pat Gaon Village is more than just a means of producing attires; it is a cultural cornerstone that reflects the resilience, creativity, and dedication of the community in preserving their unique heritage in an ever-changing world. In Bodo society, weaving is a revered craft among women, essential to both domestic life and cultural identity. Traditionally, women who did not know how to weave faced difficulties in marriage prospects, as mastery in weaving was considered a fundamental skill (3). This highlights the significant role Bodo women have played in preserving the cultural traditions of their community (2). The loom is central to the village's textile production, with most of the villagers' clothing being handmade. The women of Pat Gaon, like many Bodo communities across the region, are among the finest weavers in Northeast India. In Pat Gaon, weaving has long been passed down from mothers to daughters. However, at present there is a declining inclination among the younger generation to continue this ethnic legacy, as modern machinery increasingly replaces traditional method of weaving. This shift poses challenges to preserving Bodo heritage, as many youths pursue higher education and live away from their homes, leading to a detachment from their traditional culture. In the future, this could threaten the ability of the community to retain its weaving skills.

The impact of globalisation on Bodo society has led to significant changes in lifestyles, as individuals adopt new perspectives and approaches to culture in pursuit of what is often termed 'modern life' (2). Despite these challenges, traditional styles of weaving are still preserved in rural areas. Although weavers face challenges in receiving fair wages due to market disparities, there is hope that they will eventually receive proper compensation for their craft (4).

Along with the evolving weaving traditions, the dress pattern of Patgaon villagers is increasingly influenced by modernity, as they now rely on both traditional and modern markets for clothing. The *xojon-para mongolboria* bazar, a weekly market, offers a wide range of essential items including traditional and modern attires. The researcher has explored the market extensively and found that the villagers are now blending traditional attire with contemporary clothing, such as shirt, pant, and kurtas, which is also visible in their day-to-day clothing pattern. Rani bazar, a larger market nearby the village, provides a wider array of goods, including daily wear, special occasional attire and so on. For more diverse and modern clothing options, wealthier families often shop in city markets like those in Guwahati and other urban centres. However, the majority of the population continues to rely on local village markets for their clothing needs. The village weavers also sell their weaving materials in the village markets. The shift towards purchasing ready-made garments illustrates the changing dynamics in Pat Gaon, where traditional practices coexist with modern influences, reflecting the evolving cultural and economic landscape of the village.



Fig 4: Traditional attires of the tribe, woven by village women; a snap from the village market.

5. CONCLUSION:

The traditional dress of the Bodo-Kacharis in Northeast India holds deep cultural significance, serving not only as a marker of identity but also as a symbol of the tribe's rich heritage. Like many other indigenous groups, among the Bodo-Kacharis, traditional dresses play a crucial role in distinguishing cultural belonging, alongside physical and cultural traits. Their traditional dress pattern reflects their distinct identity amidst the diverse indigenous groups of the region. The locals of the Pat Gaon are simple and innocent people who are deeply rooted in their traditions, striving to preserve their heritage while progressing into the future. In this case, the tribe faces the dual challenge of maintaining their traditional practices while adapting to the demands of modernity. The impact of globalisation and modern lifestyles is increasingly evident in the village where a blend of traditional and contemporary attire is commonly seen. Traditional attire is now largely reserved for special occasions such as festivals, weavings and rituals, indicating the gradual erosion of everyday cultural practices. While many women in the village still weave traditional attire at home, the younger generation's shift towards modern clothing and their migration for education and work have contributed to a gradual erosion of these cultural practices. Governmental support for the handloom sector has been insufficient and there is a pressing need for more organised initiatives to revitalise and sustain the traditional craft.

Maintaining the traditional dress pattern among the tribe is crucial for preserving the cultural diversity of the region, as it represents not only a link to the past but also a key aspect of the identity of the tribe. The role of the youth in this endeavour is especially significant, as their awareness and engagement are essential for the transmission of these cultural practices. By fostering a balance between tradition and modernity, and through initiatives and support for handloom industry, it is possible to safeguard the traditional dress of the Bodo-Kacharis ensuring that this inevitable heritage continues to be passed down through numerous generations.

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