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Exploring Dance in the assertion of an Ethnic Identity: A Brief Overview of the Bodo Dance forms

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Introduction

Apart from the broad outlook that dance is a form of entertainment, we can find two opposing views in the dance forms of the Bodos. One outlook suggests that dance is often used for political purposes and the other is that dance is a purely religious symbol without which certain traditional rituals cannot be performed. Glasser states that “Dance cannot be studied in isolation. It has to be understood in relation to a broad view of culture” (Glasser, 1991: 114). But again as defined by Tylor (1871), culture is not only a set of symbols, values or beliefs of people; rather it is also a response to circumstances. These circumstances are developed over time. An eminent anthropologist Radcliffe Brown (1994) defines dance as a cultural practice and as a social ritual. According to some anthropologists dance is an activity which is constructed to convey various aspects of culture. These aspects of culture also take into account the human behaviour, by the manner of dancing practices done (Brown and Raginald, 1994). As such it is apparent that one needs to work, towards the deeper understanding of various attributes which are related to dancing. This has to be done before interpreting any dances.

Certain terminologies are used in the paper as it is a challenging task to discuss dance in isolation. Dance is mostly related to other forms of “cultural expression” (Glasser, 1996). The traditional dance forms and music are very much inter-related to each other. The term ‘traditional’ is being used here to refer to those kinds of Bodo dances and music which have their origin in the rituals and customs of the Bodo tribal people. Some of the dance forms in the present time have undergone change due to interactions with other communities and also due to the emergence of modernisation.

Earlmann (1982) studied some of the dance forms (e.g: Marabi, Iscathamlya) of the South Africans and termed them as political. Earlmann’s idea of “communicating ideologies and specific ideas” (Earlmann, 1982: 1) is used in the paper to understand dance as a political tool. But this aspect is only one of the many ways of looking at the particular dance forms. The dance forms also have their own functions like social bonding, recreation, enjoyment, rituals, entertainment and many more depending upon their place of performance and the space it receives.

The traditional dance forms of the Bodos are necessarily associated with cultural attire, and often the female body becomes the marker of dress and dance to define culture. In this study, using the dance forms of the Bodos, I plan to understand how the Bodos of Assam use dance as one of the tools in asserting their identity. The paper also traces how various dance forms were

reinvented to assert the cultural and political identity of the Bodos. The sociological conception of identity is of the notion that the base of identity is in the society itself (Buckingham, 2008). The identity reflects the nexus between the “inside” and “outside”. It takes its form by enabling one to distance oneself from the “other”. The process of identification through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities has become open-ended, variable and problematic. We make sense of our identity by the stories we tell of our lives. We are the subjects in other’s stories and others are the subjects in our stories (Ricoeur, 2004).

The articulation of the Bodo identity is seen to be undergoing many phases in the history of the Bodos (Deka, 2014). Since the 1980s period, identity has emerged as a result of conceptual shifts in the late modern or post-modern conception of the subjects. This articulation of identity has been gaining grounds in terms of its “cultural identity”. Cultural identities are not things we are born with but are transformed within and in relation to representation (Stuart, n.d). Identity-based politics in general, demands that communities take pride in history, culture, traditions, and heroes. The use of cultural symbols, though seemingly innocent, can be highly gendered. For example, on my various visits to field sites, I noticed that the majority of women wear the Dokhna in public spaces. If one visits Bodo towns today, pictures of Bodo women performing the Bodo dances can be seen around the town. These posters are intended to promote Bodo culture and mark their identity. Nevertheless, they also serve another purpose – the creation and propagation of the Bodos as a distinct community. These pictures mark the presence of the Bodos and their power in Bodoland. On the other hand, these cultural representations also exclude many communities who live in the territories considered as Bodoland and mark the “other” implicitly. Such exclusion has its own political implication.

Most studies usually tell the stories through the history of various political organizations. The Bodo dance forms are, therefore, not only the celebration of the distinct identity of the Bodos but also give us glimpses into the complex processes of standardisation, gendered scope and ethnocentrism. It might be instructive here to point out that, in Bodo music videos – which have mushroomed over past two decades – women were required to wear Dokhna, while men could wear non-traditional attire. Such investments normalize the sight of Dokhna wearing women in public.

Objectives:

- i. To explore the various forms of dance among the Bodos of Assam
- ii. To understand how dance can be used as a tool for articulating ethnic identity.

Method

The study carried out small ethnographies in various parts of BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council) and Bodo dominated villages outside BTC. The study was carried out especially during social, religious and political gatherings where Bodo dances were performed. The author also interviewed some Bagurumba dancers who were trained in camps established by Ustad Kamini Narzary. The study has extensively used available primary and secondary texts, such as memorandums, books, journals, pamphlets, news reports, and speeches.

Hypothesis:

- i. The daily life of some tribal societies are reflected in their traditional dance forms.

- ii. The emerging need to maintain one's ethnic identity has enabled people to start using their cultural elements as tools of assertion.

Dance and the Bodos

The life of the common Bodo people living in the rural areas is reflected in most of the traditional music and dance of the Bodos. Different scholars like Brahma (2003), Boro (2006) and many more have classified the Bodo dances into different types depending upon their nature of performance, place of performance and the symbiotic meaning that particular dance imparts. The observation of the studies done upon the Bodo dance signifies that the Bodo dances are intertwined with the lives and history of the Bodos. The dances are associated with their life cycle (Habajanai Mwsanai, Raijwjanai Mwsanai), seasonal and agricultural festivals (Bwisagu), religious festivals (Kherai) and other dance forms (Bagurumba, Mwsaglangnai, Thaokhri lunai and many more). The institution of Kherai dance and Bagurumba dance are taken up in the study to understand the importance of dance in maintaining the ethnic identity of the Bodos. A brief explanation of the preloaded values and meanings of the Bodo dances gives us the idea how Bodo dances depict the life of a Bodo commoner.

Dance among the Bodos continues to play a vital role in the people's religious festivals, rituals, and other ceremonies. The Bodos are generally agrarian in their economy. Most of Bodo festivals like Bwiasgu, Maagw, and Bathou Puja are therefore connected to the agrarian occupation. The Kherai dance stands as the ritual dancing of the Bodos. The myth associated with the origin of the Kherai dance reflects in it the devotion of the Bodos to the supreme force whom they call as *Bwrai Bathou*. Bathou is the traditional religion of the Bodos. The Bodos are traditionally agrarian in their economy. So there are different kinds of puja being observed in the Bathou religion according to different seasons and occasions. Most of the pumas are often related to their harvesting nature. The Kherai Puja or the Bathou puja is worth mentioning in the context of this paper. The paper discards to discuss about the bifurcation in the Bthou religion and sticks only to the Kherai dance in terms of understanding the Bodo religion. The Bathou puja is mostly accompanied with the Kherai dance. The Kherai songs and dances are being performed only by the women, and Kherai music by the men.

For three days and three nights, Bathou Bwrai is worshipped by its attendants in the Kherai or the Bathou puja. Earlier, in the Bathou puja or Kherai puja, two types of Kherai dances were generally performed—the primary Kherai and secondary Kherai dance. The primary Kherai dance had again 16 types of dance forms in it and the secondary Kherai dance has 18 types of dance forms in it. Apart from these two types of Kherai dances, other dances that are close to Bodo rituals are *Jara-fagla*, *lanthamali*, *saranslang*, *Neolai mwsanai*, *lantha gurji*, *Dawa-Buthuwa*, *Nangdor Babena*. Brahma (2010:77) argues that various ritual practices are associated with these different types of dance.

As we can see that dance is related to almost all the important rituals associated with a traditional Bodo life. This aspect of culture may not be the same for the Bodo people who have been converted to Christianity or got assimilated with the upper caste Hindu. But in every traditional Bathou believing household, the Bathou altar is found on the eastern side of the courtyard. This altar always faces towards the eastern side. The narratives of the Bodo movements for a separate state calls for the politics of establishing a distinct identity and the Bodo leaders have engaged dance as one aspect of culture to do so.

Recognition gives birth to Bagurumba

The Bagurumba dance of the Bodos was performed at India's independence parade for the first time on January 26, 1956. As per the reports it was appreciated by Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. Bagurumba thus became a cultural and political pride. This establishes the fact that the reconstruction and standardization of Bagurumba was an outcome of the cultural desire and political impulse of making the Bodos a distinct community. Bagurumba came to limelight among the Bodos after being accepted as one of the national dances of India. As such culture lovers like Ustad Kamini Narzary set up dance camps at various places of Assam with an attempt to formalize the Bagurumba dance. Thus, Bagurumba emerged as one of the tools to represent the identity of the Bodos. It is also imperative that a Bodo woman could be easily distinguished from others by the manner of tying her hair for the Bagurumba dance.

Many elements of the performing dance among the Bodos can be found in many ritual services, ceremonies and festivals across the regions, where the Bodos are spread over. These aspects of performing dance play an important part in the expression of a Bodo identity. The Bodo people host various political gatherings, apart from religious and social ones. And in every gathering, one can see different traditional Bodo dances being performed. These performances of traditional Bodo dances in different arena portray how history, religion, crafts industry and agriculture resources are fitted to design and signify cultural element to each community. Because the dances itself are grand and celestial nature, it is appealing which creatively portrays important attributes about Bodo community. In the context of the feasibility, and how easily it can be performed, some Bodo leaders are seen to be employing this form of art for a political purpose.

The content of any dance, be it traditional or non-traditional, changes with time. Along with the changes there occurs shift intentionally or unintentionally upon contexts related to past performances, history and also certain social dynamics that surround the present performance. My argument is that the performance of the traditional Bagurumba dance of the Bodos is based upon restored behaviour. This restored behaviour tries to signify the previous performances but itself occur in an evolved manner. The evolved version is seen to be bounded and ordered exactly like the previous performance. The changes occur in the content and arena of performance. The changes in it are but open-ended and fragmented from the older performances. The imprints of modernity as such; affect the customs and beliefs of the past that is no longer existent by bringing about changes in the name of strengthening the society that is perceived to be modern.

In the Bodo society, it is not only just dance repertoire that throws significance in a Bodo culture. The co-relation between the Bodo music and dance to which the Bodos are exposed emerge in their content from the Bodo society. The backdrop of securing a Bodo identity can widely be noticed in- the social function of dance, changes in the economy of politics and the history of the struggle before and after Indian independence for a separate homeland.

On October 20, 1987, processions were taken out in all important places throughout the State in which traditional musical instruments were exhibited. During the procession the Bodos tried to utilise every cultural artifacts that were linked with the Bodo identity. The motive behind such kind of representations calls for the assertion made by James Scott (1985) regarding the power-play that can be stirred by the public representation of cultural artifacts in this case the public display of the traditional musical instruments.

A trained dancer under Ustad Kamini, Kobita (name changed) from Baksa, is of the view that nowadays private dance groups have taken the form of cultural tourism industry. In order to attract the tourist the cultural tourism departments of BTC have signed contracts with some private

dance groups who would showcase the cultural dances whenever time demands. With the growing issues of the Bodo demands for a separate state and arising need to safeguarding their identity, dance evolved as a tool to promote culture.

The assumptions that one can catch up from the narratives over the practice of performing the traditional Bagurumba remain the same for any kind of settings- political or social. The contexts upon which the intentions and the motives of the performers, leader and sponsors of the dance shift imply inclination towards different aspects. The aspects that bring about shifts are normally seen pointing towards some personal interests, the political environment and the audience or spectator's values. The overall impression depicts that the defining the feature of tradition is not static. It is a dynamic continuity.

Thus, rather than operating outside of time and the cultural context, the performance of the traditional Bagurumba dance is rather a contemporary practice. This contemporary practice of the traditional Bodo dances is a result of continuous change and evolution in terms of the politics, performer's intentions and the manner how audience perceives the performance. The generalised presentation of the Bagurumba dance in public spheres however perceived by the spectator's demands and interest is lacking in any scholarly article so far. This results in exerting the leaders to choose to say, preferably only what they choose to say. Through the voices of the Bodo movements for separate state and the traditional Bagurumba dance are both touchy as well as patriotic. They contain meanings which are beyond the formal, aesthetics and the sequence of movement in performance. At the backdrop of the early associations of the Bagurumba performance culture has however guided the people to establish a claim upon their community and with indigenous culture. This also provided justification for securing their identification which was somehow getting assimilated with the Ruling Hindu elites.

Conclusion

The study uses two kinds of factual study for analysing the content- political academic tradition and the anthropological academic tradition. The political side consists of the analysis of different dance forms that are used as a tool for creating awareness about the various Bodo movements for a separate state. It examines the changes in different dance forms over time and the importance for the Bodo people. In doing so the study also expresses the importance of those dances in the religious and socio-political system. The study also contains a relatively traditional anthropological study of the Bodo dance forms. In an anthropological way, it analyses the ritual symbolism embodied in a dance. The religious themes in a dance are observed as they occur in a particular ritual. The significance of the study lies in the fact that the dominant mode of identity-based political mobilisation in the northeast has been the insistence on distinct culture.

The claim to unique culture inevitably calls for investment in territoriality, cultural attire, and cultural dance. Within the narratives of the Bodo origin, the occurrence of continuous struggle for space and security has been consistent. The emergence and perpetuation of a culture group reside in its attempt towards adhering to the certain notions of common beliefs and practices. This notion has become the benchmark for the assertion of group identity. Different dances of the Bodos act as a tool of interpersonal communication and have been used by the Bodos as a global commodity. Bodoland (the proposed state) today appears as a disputed proposed statehood between the Bodos and many other identity groups like the Koch Rajbanshi and the Bodos, the Santhals and the Bodos; in short between the Oboros and the Bodos. Thus, different narratives of the statehood demand present us with much-conflicting discourses upon the proposed statehood by the Bodos. The

proposed geographical area for Bodoland itself collides with the Koch-Rajbangsi demand for Kamatapur. The politics of identity among all these contestations of a separate statehood moreover towards different inventions of traditions like the commemorations of heroes, the birth of districts, reformation of the traditional religious belief and use of art and culture.

The Bodo movement for a separate state then is going through a different phase. Though the movements are peaceful initially, at various periods of time they take a turbulent turn. This turbulence occur mostly when accords are signed or new laws are passed, which failed to satisfy all section of the Bodo society. I would like to conclude by saying that while reconstruction of traditional dances been useful in the articulation of Bodo identity, it might be important for researchers to understand what such reconstruction has done to inter-ethnic politics, and more specifically, what it has done to intra-ethnic politics.

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