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Gastronomy and Ethnomusicological Factors: Cultural Sustenance in the Bodo Heritage through the *Whistles of the Siphong*

K. Deepika

*I MA English Literature
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore*

Abstract

Music and Food have always been one of the sources of cultural strength in ethnic groups. The novel Whistles of the Siphong by Rashmi Narzary is an embodiment of cultural values of one of the largest indigenous communities of Assam- the Bodos. Food and music play a very important role in preserving the culture and legacy as they play the role of the cultural signifiers. The paper is study on the gastronomical and ethnomusicological factors of the people of the Bodo community. Some of the main gastronomical and ethnomusicological elements in the novel include, the rice beer (jou), phali, pitha, napham, etc and the consistent use of the siphong, a flute made out of the bamboo plant. These elements become the sustenance of the community through times of sickness and health, wealth and poverty, etc. The tales are narrated orally from one generation to the next solely from memory. The paper also discusses how oral narration becomes a form of documentation of the culture and heritage of the tribe group and how culinary practices store within them, resilience and cultural identity. The theory used are Social Identity Theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to discuss how same food and music practices promote and preserve the Bodo culture.

Keywords: Bodos, Food, Music, Culture, Assertion, Gastronomy, Ethnomusicology

Introduction

The Whistles of the Sipoong written by Rashmi Narzary in 2024 is a rich source for studying about the Bodo community rather than just a work of fiction. The work serves as an embodiment of all the important factors of the community which includes the cultural, spiritual, religious and economic aspects as well. The author brings about the story of Ojhai, his family and friends from Assam's Bodo heartland. The book is a combination of both fictional and real time cultural elements that gives the readers, insights straight from the community.

The Bodos are indigenous and aboriginal group residing in the valleys of river Brahmaputra. They are known to be one of the earliest and largest inhabitants of the place. The population of the Bodos are scattered all over Assam, in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and in some parts of north and East

Bengal, and other neighbouring foreign countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. The clan is based on male lineage descent. Some of the clans include, Narzary, Musahahary, Basumatary, Daimary, Hainary, Hayenary, Hajowary, Doimary, Bwisumatary, Mochahari, Narjinary, Bwisumatary, Swargiary, Sainary, Mahilary, Lahary, Goyary, Islary, etc. The Indian constitution considers the Bodo community to be plain tribe as Plain Tribes in the sixth schedule (Daimary, 2017).

Gastronomy and Ethnomusicological factors often serve as a tool to preserve cultural heritage. It asserts the culture of the community and the individual features that makes the particular community one of its kinds. Gastronomy and gastronomical aspects of a particular community such preparation, eating, etc are not merely there consumption but also for aesthetic and ritualistic purposes (Hegarty, 2001). Food and new culinary experiences become elements that make people appreciate a particular culture. In the novel, inspired from the lives of the Bodos, fermented fish and rice beer play a very important role in the culture of the tribe group. The performance style of a cultural song “has a special cultural and social role to play among human communication systems” (Lomex, 1976).

Objectives

- To treat food and music as factors of cultural assertion
- To study the Bodo culture through the Whistles of the Siphong
- To examine the importance of oral and folk traditions
- To highlight the significance of documenting culture

Literature Review

In “Traditional Culture of Bodos and Its Changes”, Dr. Hemanta Mochahary (2019) discusses about the shift in the culture of the Bodos from the traditional to the modern times. The traditional elements are not completely wiped out of the face of earth, rather it is the conformity to western ideas of consuming factory produced products. It discusses the infamous ‘Jou’ or the rice beer, Napham, Khorai, etc; the traditional cloth of Dokhna, Jwmgra, Gamsha, Phali, Hishima etc and the religion of Bathouism and how the people started praying Shiv in addition to Sibri along the movements of Bhrama Dharma. It talks about the changes in parts of their culture that make it their own.

Kalpna Basumatary (2022) in the “Traditional Culture of the Bodo Community of Assam: A Study”, talks about different festivals, practices, etc that are followed in the tribe group. She talks about the preparation and significance of Jou or the rice beer. Despite of the stigma and health consequences of drinking beer in most parts of the subcontinent, drinking Jou in the Bodo community has been seen as a natural part of their lifestyle. She says how drinking Jou has become a mark of culture. The drink has traditionally and historically only prepared by women. It was prepared only for social drinking, religious festivities, family gatherings, etc but in the present times women have shifted it to commercial purposes wherein they sell the beer and earn money.

In the article “A Study of the Role of Folk Songs in Preserving the Culture and Heritage: A Case Study of Bodos” (2024) by Dr. Simani Boro, the importance of folk songs are very detailly mentioned. In the section where he discusses about the Kherai festival, the author clearly writes the ritualistic practices of the puja and how oral tradition and folk music invokes the deity and how in the doudini’s form offers advice to the pantheons. In the article different ‘methai’ are discussed and how they play a role in delivering the culture mostly through lores and not written literature. The folklores teach moral sayings and philosophies in the manner of songs and literature. Some of the famous musical instruments are Serja, Siphong, etc. The historical documentation has preserved years of Boro Heritage. In the article, poems of Dr. Anil Boro and Mohini Mohan Brahma who are well known poets of Bodo origin are discussed in detail.

Recently, The Geographical Indications Registry (2023) in Chennai has labelled the GI tag to 8 culinary products from Assam where the rice beers of Bodos and foods played a vital role in the convention. These include, Bodo Jou Gwran, Maibra Jou Bidwi, Bodo Jou GishiBodo Napham, Bodo Ondla., Bodo Gwkha, and Bodo Narzi. Tags such as the GI would take the richness of the Bodo culinary heritage on a global level. There is textile items labelled as well. The different variants of rice beer which are prominent to the Bodos are now known nationwide.

In an interview to My Kolkata, the author Rashmi Narzary talks about her inspirations to write her book the Whistles of the Siphong and dedicates her book to the “talebearers” of her community and true to it, in the book she accommodates story tellers of all kinds- spirits, shamans, songs, culture, etc. The chapter “Song of Spring” is one of the many tales of the book came from a real life Santhal family who lived opposite to the ancestral house of the author’s husband. She says she is born a storyteller because oral tradition of passing folklores down the generation is imbibed within her community. She says about her work, Asidouh Buri does not simply state facts about their ways and customs but also does them in a way narrating stories. Documentation was produced through word of mouth and not just literature or legal papers.

Methodology

The paper uses a qualitative analysis method to interpret how music and food act as cultural signifiers using the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital in the Bodo community. The lyrics and the verses within the story are analysed for its ethnographically musical elements and resonating gastronomy.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Identity Theory was proposed by Tajfel and Turner in 1974 and it posits that individuals acquire the concept of self-concept from how they act as members in a group. Social identity groups give individuals a sense of belonging, purpose, self-worth and identity. The theory talks about self-categorisation, social identification and social comparison. It also talks about how the in-group becomes “us” and out group “them”. In the novel, one understands the Bodo community as a distinct cultural or ethnic group. They have strong ethnic identities such as their language, rituals and other festivities. They speak the Bodo language and hold the same values for life despite the different clans within the same group. Being a strong ethnic group, it helps maintain a distinctive political position. The In-group distinctiveness is maintained through food and music. The most important examples include, naphang (fermented fish) and Jou (rice beer) when it comes to edibles and the use of siphong (flute). These are some cultural artifacts that remain exclusive to the Bodo community.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital talks about cultural capital in an embodied state. The sense of belonging in a social standard comes from conforming to the cultural practices. Now that serves a positive effect on protecting the traditions of the Bodo tribes. For example, the process of making the Jou or the rice beer or the commodity in itself becomes a cultural capital for the Bodo community. The kherai pooja, the festival of Bwisagu, etc become factors of cultural assertion and resilience. The food and music narrates culture and tradition and whatever foreign or western influences are encountered, these become a soft resilience against these.

Textual Analysis

The author Rashmi Narzary is well known for her Sahithya Akademi Award winning children’s book His Share of Sky. Tales from Assam’s Bodo Heartland- Whistles of the Siphong was published in 2024 and the book takes the reader to get a closer look at the Bodo culture and traditions. It describes the life of a common man in Assam and how he navigates through life’s happiness and sadness through simple food and good music.

As the author has mentioned the siphong becomes the protagonist of the play. The Siphong is the one true love of the protagonist Ojhai. The story of Ojhai is narrated through Asidoh Buri to the narrator. The tradition of narrating traditions rather than following it from learning it from written literature.

“Asidoh Buri was a living chronicle of the indigenous Bodos. She had nothing documented, yet everything was stowed in her unfazed memory in detail” (Whistles of the Siphong, Rashmi Narzary, 2024)

The tradition for oral literature was not just followed by Buri but it was exclusive to the Bodos in general. The stories and legacies of the Bodos were made to stay alive through songs, music and traditional food. She explains to the narrator that the method of brewing the Joubidei of the Bodos was never written down in paper but only through word of mouth. She talks about how hymns such as aroz methai are sung during poojas and rituals. She explains about the tradition through songs and lores and rhymes.

The importance of the Siphong (the flute) in the novel is foreshadowed in the Prelude chapter through Buri. The doudini is invoked through the Siphong and the voices of the heaven are heard. The next instruments she discusses is the ‘kham’ or the long drums where the plates are made of animal skin; ‘serja’ which is made of a thin strip of bamboo and a bunch of hair from a horse’s tail; ‘Jabkhring’, a crescent shaped oval instrument with holes and a metal disc. The very first few lines of the novel, talk about the immense and passionate feeling, Ojhai has about his siphong. “Ojhai drew his siphong, the flute, gently to his lips like he would his lover’s slender wrist” The first chapter or tale of the book talks enough about the “fatherly” love, Ojhai has for his siphong. Barter system is still prevalent and the author explains the barter of life through the siphong.

“Life is barter. Plant a bamboo and you get a flute in return. It’s all give and take, you see.” (Whistles of the Siphong, Rashmi Narzary, 2024)

“You part with a siphong and in return you get someone who spreads more flute-notes. Barter, isn’t it?” (Whistles of the Siphong, Rashmi Narzary, 2024)

As much as the siphong plays a role in their culture, the jou also has an equally important role in asserting the Bodo culture. Jou and the siphong both become elements of asserting culture in times of distress. The culture stays in the world through elements like this.

The Jobneel Fair is very popular but it does not promote any alien or foreign products, rather it puts down food products that symbolises the Bodo culture. “From dried ginger, fermented fish and roots to heal yellow fever and rejoin broken bones to yam, dried jackfruit seeds and sticky rice, sesame and jaggery. There’ll be duck and quail with their eggs.”. In the Jobneel Fair Ojhai barter one of his siphong to a little girl for nothing but her earnestness to play the flute. In a capitalistic and materialistic world, the protagonist chooses to be kind and hospitable which are major parts of a tradition. And the girl meets him after so many years and pays back the gratitude. For the same fair, Ojhai’s friends take food to barter with. They take with them, joha and sticky rice, crab and roselle curry, bananas and purple phali. Wedding feast included home-bred chicken cooked in gravy of rice flour and flavoured kharei.

Oja Bwari is the doudini of the community. It is believed that the Bathou comes down on to the body of Oja Bwari and gives advice to people in the name of divine sayings. The divine dawns upon the human only triggered through the music of the siphong. The rituals keep the culture alive but the main part of this are the traditional musical instruments that aid in the process. The siphong, the khams and the jothas are played by different people who do not charge for playing these instruments. The Bagurumba dance is accompanied for the traditional music of the Bodos. All these music and dance enhance the resilience of the culture. The music of the siphong even has the power to ward away evil spirits like the orbs of fire (haraibhankha) that jump from one tree top to the other.

Friendship and brotherhood stay alive through cooking and eating together. On their leisure, Ojhai and his two friends Daimalu and Birkhang roast fishes, sweet potato, yam and pieces of pork as the first one plays the siphong. During community fishing they sing songs about fun, frolic and food.

“We shall surely fill your khobai.

Jarou, keep ready the salt and chilli,

Joubidei and omakhasi.

We’ll fill your khobai with snail, phithikri,

For the feast of Magw Domasi!” (Whistles of the Siphong, Rashmi Narzary, 2024)

The Jou or the rice beer is very sweet and a beverage used in community gatherings and brings people further together. The rice beer is a very significant drink of the Bodos and it is very apparent in the novel because Ojhai gets happy with home brewed beer as much as he is happy with a siphong.

The novel gives clues about the timeline as the chapter “Song of the Spring” deals with the lock down during the pandemic of 2020. Even when Ojhai is restrained to his house and its four walls, he takes the company of his siphongs. That is when he encounters the neighbour boy, Jugnu who is a Santhal. Both these exchange food and other deep conversations. The Gwkha-gwkhei is made of 101 herbs and the Bodos believe that when they have it, they stay disease free for the rest of their life. This dish is given to Ojhai’s family by the Santhal boy’s mother. Food and music transgresses communities and keeps the relationship alive. The last chapter, “Escape” is perhaps the most powerful of all because, how the siphong plays a role in resilience is seen. At the time of the rebellion, when the military comes home in search of the men, Ojhai plays a few tunes in his siphong and the officers leave and Ojhai’s son and Thompson escape. The Siphong and other food indicate that these are the factors that keep the culture from decline.

Conclusion

With the backdrop set against the Bodo community of Assam, food and music are not just factors of sensory appeal but also they are carriers of culture and identity. Through the siphong, the author blows out the wind to lay out the rich cultural tapestry of the the Bodo tribes. The jou and other food items like omakashi, ondlā, etc and the use of siphong brings in a shared sense of belonging. The Whistles of the Siphong is an enigmatic illustration on how the Bodo community sticks to its culture in a world that is taking western and modern ideas for a lifestyle. Sticking to their traditional food and music preserves the heritage and legacies of the Bodos.

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