

# Traditional knowledge of musical instruments used by the Bodo tribes of Northeast India, BTC, Assam.

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**Abstract-** *Bodos* have a rich, multi-faceted and distinct culture of their own. The agricultural practices, food habit and belief systems of the *Bodos* reflect a conglomeration of features from both the Aryan and Mongoloid culture. Folk music is a traditional music of unknown authorship, which is transmitted orally generation to generation from the beliefs, and customs of ordinary people of this community. “*Kham*”, “*Siphung*”, “*Serja*”, “*Jotha*”, “*Jabkhring*”, “*Gangona*”, “*Bingi*” and “*Thorkha*” are eight musical instruments used by the *Bodos* of Assam. All these instruments represent various forms of traditional songs accompanied by folk dance. The plants mostly used to make these musical instruments are *Bambusa assamica* Barooah & Borthakur (Poaceae), *Bambusa tulda* Roxb. (Poaceae), *Bambusa pallid* Munro (Poaceae), *Alstonia scholaris* L. (Apocynaceae), *Sterculia villosa* Roxb. (Sterculiaceae), *Sansevieria roxburghiana* Schult.f (Agavaceae) and *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam. (Moraceae). Detailed description of the instruments is given below as revealed by the *Bodo* tribes.

**Index Terms-** Musical instrument, *Bodos*, *Boisagu* and *Kherai*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Bodos* or the *Boros* are a race of Mongolian people who are described as the inhabitants of a country lying to the north of the Himalayas and in the Western belt of China. The word ‘Bod’ meaning a Homeland with the inhabitants known as *Bodo phicha* or *Bodosa* (Nath, 1978) includes a large group of people who are linguistically speakers of the Tibeto Burman speeches of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma. The word ‘Bodo’ is derived from *Bod*, which means Tibet. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, a well-known historian is of the view that they are the offspring of son of the Vishnu and Mother-Earth who were termed as ‘*Kiratas*’ during the Epic period that came to Assam in 2000 B.C. Traditionally this group of community is endowed with rich cultural heritage, diverse food habits, mythological faiths and socio-magico rituals. The festivals of the *Bodos* are closely related to music and dance. They perform music and dance in almost all the festivals for they are inseparable components of their rites. Thus, the musical instruments of these tribes play a very crucial role in shaping the cultural diversity of *Bodos*. Seasonal festivals like *Domashi*, *Boisagu*, *Kangali bihu* and other religious festivals like *Kherai* and the *Garja puja* are celebrated with pomp and show by using these traditional musical instruments (K Brahma,

1998). All these musical instruments are available in the society and are very uncommon in size and structure in comparison to the other Aryan musical instruments. There are lots of myths relating the origin of the various musical instruments of *Bodos*. The mythical tales relating to different musical instruments of the *Bodos* does not describe in detail how the musical instruments did originate, but contains clue as to how the instruments were first used by the *Bodos* in different festivals and ceremonies. All these instruments are made of bamboo or wooden materials and some of them were made of brass metal also. A good number of ethnobotanical works have been done on *Bodo* tribes of northeastern region including Brahma (1960), Narzi (1964), Baruah (1969), Boro (2001, 2004).

## II. METHODOLOGY

Field survey and interview of inhabitants associated with cultural organization were conducted in various *Bodo* villages. Those inhabitants that were primarily attached with cultural programmes having knowledge of indigenous musical instruments were consulted and information based on plants used in making these instruments was recorded. Voucher specimens of plants were collected and documented. The plant specimens were identified and herbarium was deposited for authenticity at the Department of Forestry, NERIST, Itanagar.

## III. DISCUSSION

A traditional music of unknown authorship, which is transmitted orally, is what one calls folk music. The origin of it is the beliefs and customs of ordinary people of a community. The *Bodo* community as such is very rich in folk culture and is enriched with the traditional folk music of the community. There are some musical instruments of these people, which represent all forms of the traditional songs of the community.

Various plants used in making these traditional musical instruments by the *Bodos* are –

“*Siphung*”: It is a long flute made from a particular bamboo called *Owajlaw* (*Bambusa pallida*) and *Owathare* (*Bambusa assamica*). It is 27-29 inches long with five holes for playing and one hole for blowing. It is played on occasions such as *Kherai puja*, *Garja puja*, *Boisagu* festival, *Domashi* festival and in marriage ceremony. It is ceremonially played on the first day of the *Boisagu* festival with the belief that

“*Serja*”: It is a harp like instrument having three strings made of *Alstonia scholaris* and *Artocarpus heterophyllus* wood.

The lower part of the body is hollow and a part of it is covered with the skin of goat or Maphou (*Iguana*) skin. It has four strings made of muga silk or barks of *Sterculia vilosa*. Its accessories consist of four puthis or tuning knobs, one ghora or bridge, one bow made of bamboo with its string made of horse tail hair or Odal (*Sterculia villosa*) bark or fibres obtained from *Sansevieria roxburghiana* leaves. This instrument is used in marriage ceremony, *Boisagu* and *Domashi* festivals.

**“Bingi”**: - It is a single one stringed blowing instrument. It has a wooden frame body made of bamboo (*Bambusa tulda*) with coconut shell attached at the bottom. The whole wooden or bamboo part called the trunk of the instrument is long at the beginning from the apex down to the coconut shell. The coconut shell is horizontally divided and the best portion which is little bigger than the half is taken for connecting it to the base. The whole face of the shell is covered by the leather of goat in such a manner that the trunk pierces out the shell. There is a small bridge on the leather below the string made of Muga threads wrapped each other firmly giving rise to a single thread like structure. The bridge is applied to make the string correct and comfortable during playing. The play is carried out by a bow made of bamboo piece.

**“Thorkha”**:- It is made from *Bambusa tulda*. Also called as bamboo clapper, it is made by splitting a piece of bamboo lengthwise in the middle and played by holding with both hands. Its size varies from 2-1/2 feet to 3 feet in length and it is largely used by the Bodo women during *Boisagu* and *Domashi* celebrations.

**“Kham”**: It is a big drum about 3<sup>1/2</sup> to 4 inches in length and about 2<sup>1/2</sup> to 3 inches in diameter. It is made from the trunk of *Alstonia scholaris*, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*, *Magnifera indica* or *Sterculia villosa*. The two sides of the wooden frame are covered with deer skin or goat skin while the braces are made of buffalo skin. This instrument is played on ceremonial occasions like *Kherai puja* and *Garja puja*.

**“Jotha”** (Cymbal):- The zotha is called cymbal in English. It is basin like musical instrument beaten together in pairs. It is equal in size and shape with those used by the musicians of authentic Indian music and is procured from the market. It is used to keep time with the music played on the occasions of *Kherai puja*, *Garja puja*, *Boisagu* and *Domashi* festivals.

**“Jab-khring”**:- It has an wooden frame on which are fitted small round pieces of metal sheet. When two wooden frame are struck on one another, the wood and the metal pieces produce a clapping and jingling sound. It is basically made from the woods of *Alstonia scholaris* or *Artocarpus heterophyllus* and is basically used in marriage ceremony, in *Boisagu* and *Domashi* festivals.

**“Gongona”**:- *Gongana* also called the Jew’s harp is a kind of wind instruments use by the Boros. It is made of bamboo (*Bambusa assamica*). It is flat having only one internodes, which varies from 6" to 7" in length, while ½" to ¾" in breath. The wider end has a ridge hook in the interior side to catch the same in between the lips in a balanced state. The opposite end is somehow tapering which is tightened by a very firm thread. It is

mostly played by the women and girls in the *Boisagu* and *Domasi* festivals.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Bodo tribes are conservative and reluctant to share their traditional knowledge. Ceremonies, traditions and rites are practiced with religious beliefs, which also involve worship of spirits, spirit beings and forces. It is the music that helps the people maintain a much cherished separate identity forming a link to the past and an assurance that the future will still incorporate a unique identity. The valuable and vast traditional knowledge of this community of the North-East India need to be documented, preserved, revitalized and spread throughout for the benefit of the human beings.

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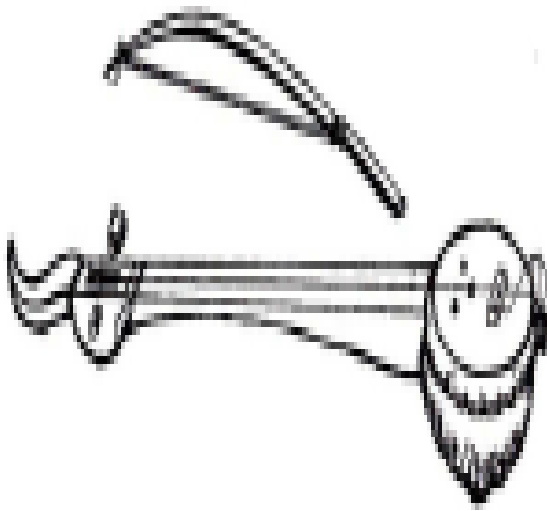
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i) *Sifung*



ii) *Serja*



iii) *Kham*



iv) *Thorkha*





v) *Jotha*



vi) *Jabkhring*



vii) *Gongona*