

BAGURUMBA DANCE OF THE BODO TRIBE: ITS CULTURAL IDENTITY, TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINUITY

Chandramukhi Boro

Research scholar

Dept. of Folklore research

Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract: Bagurumba is a folk dance of indigenous Bodo tribe in Assam, Northeast India. It is a traditional dance which is traditionally inherent to one generation to another generations. The Bagurumba dance of the Bodo tribe is one of the most expressive cultural forms of Northeast India, embodying the community's relationship with nature, spirituality, and identity. Traditionally performed by women, Bagurumba Dance is characterized by graceful movements that imitate the beauty of butterflies, birds, flowing rivers, and other elements of the natural world. More than an art form, the dance symbolizes the Bodos deep-rooted connection with their deity Bathou, agrarian life, and collective ethos. Historically, Bagurumba has been a vital part of Bwisagu and other communal festivals, serving as a medium of joy, prayer, and cultural preservation. Its recognition on the national stage during the Republic Day celebration of 1957 highlighted its aesthetic and symbolic richness, elevating it to a marker of Bodo cultural pride within the Indian context. In the contemporary era, However, with the advent of modernization, globalization, and increasing exposure to external cultural forms, the dance has undergone significant transformations. This paper explores how Bagurumba continues to serve as a living tradition, maintaining its core identity while adapting to the changing socio-cultural landscape. Through field-based observations and analysis of cultural trends, the study highlights how the dance acts as a bridge between the past and the present, reinforcing community values and cultural resilience..

Keywords: Bagurumba dance, Bodo culture, Identity, transformation, Continuity

1.0 Introduction:

The Bodo tribe, one of the earliest settlers of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, represents a significant cultural group among the Indo-Mongoloid races of Northeast India. Known for their rich oral traditions, folklore, music, rituals, and festivals, the Bodos have preserved a vibrant cultural identity despite centuries of socio-political upheavals. Among their many artistic forms, the Bagurumba dance stands out as an enduring symbol of collective identity, aesthetic grace, and spiritual depth. Bagurumba is not merely a performance; it is a lived tradition that embodies the Bodos interaction with their immediate natural and spiritual environment. Performed primarily by women during Bwisagu, the spring festival of the Bodos, the dance captures the rhythms of agrarian life and the celebration of seasonal renewal. With movements that mimic butterflies, flowing rivers, and trees swaying in the wind, Bagurumba visually narrates the Bodo philosophy of harmony with nature. It is a dance that simultaneously entertains, educates, and sacralizes. The study of Bagurumba is crucial for several reasons. First, it represents a cultural marker that distinguishes the Bodos from neighboring ethnic groups while also offering a lens into the shared heritage of Assam's folk traditions. Second, it reflects continuity in cultural practice, sustained across generations despite changes in political and social structures. Finally, it provides a rich case study of transformation under modern influences, including national recognition, globalization, and digital media.

Historically, Bagurumba gained national attention in 1957 when it was showcased during the Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi. The performance, led by the renowned Bodo artist Ostad Kamini Kr. Narzary, captivated audiences and positioned Bagurumba as one of India's national dances, a symbol of both ethnic pride and cultural diversity. Such recognition amplified its symbolic significance beyond the Bodo community, situating it within the larger narrative of India's plural cultural heritage. Yet, Bagurumba today faces challenges. While it thrives in cultural festivals and institutional platforms, questions arise about its authenticity, ritual associations, and adaptation to modern tastes. As an evolving tradition, it has been subject to reinterpretations that, while expanding its reach, also risk detaching it from its ritual-spiritual foundations.

This paper seeks to address these concerns by examining Bagurumba through three interlinked dimensions-

1. Cultural Identity – How Bagurumba embodies and expresses the values, beliefs, and aesthetics of the Bodo people.
2. Transformation – How modernization, globalization, and institutionalization have reshaped the performance, meaning, and practice of Bagurumba.
3. Continuity – How the dance continues to survive as a cultural heritage through preservation efforts, adaptation, and intergenerational transmission.

The study, therefore, contributes to broader discussions on folklore, cultural preservation, and identity politics in Northeast India. It also highlights the need for balancing authentic continuity with creative transformation to ensure that Bagurumba remains both a heritage practice and a living cultural form.

1.1 Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach, combining both primary and secondary sources to understand the cultural significance, transformation, and continuity of the Bagurumba dance.

Primary Sources:

1. Field observations were conducted in selected districts of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), particularly Udalguri, Kokrajhar, Baksa, and Chirang, where Bagurumba is actively performed during Bwisagu and other festivals.
2. Interviews and oral narratives were collected from dancers, elders, community leaders, and cultural activists to document lived experiences and interpretations of Bagurumba.
3. Participant observation was employed during local festivities, allowing for immersion in the performance contexts and community participation.

Secondary Sources:

1. Books, journals, and folklore archives on Bodo culture, religion, and performing arts were consulted.
2. Government and cultural institution reports were used to trace the recognition and promotion of Bagurumba at state and national levels.
3. Previous research studies provided analytical frameworks on cultural identity, folk traditions, and the impact of globalization.

1.2 Objectives:

1. To explore the cultural significance and symbolic meaning of Bagurumba as an expression of the Bodo community's identity, spirituality, and harmony with nature.
2. To trace the historical origin and evolution of Bagurumba, highlighting its role in traditional festivals and social life of the Bodos.
3. To analyze the transformation of Bagurumba in the context of modernization, globalization, and institutional promotion.
4. To examine the continuity and preservation efforts of Bagurumba through community participation, education, and cultural policies for safeguarding it as intangible heritage.

2.0 Discussion:

2.0.1 Historical Roots of Bagurumba:

Bagurumba is regarded as one of the most graceful dances of the Bodos, traditionally associated with merrymaking, gossip, and communal bonding, performed exclusively by women. Dancers hold the ends of the handwoven colored scarf called Rege-Regāng, spread around their neck, and move like fluttering butterflies. The choreography involves stepping forward with alternating feet and then receding backward, maintaining the rhythm of the self-sung songs. The dance usually begins in horizontal lines, gradually assumes circular patterns, and ends with fluid, wave-like movements.

A defining moment in its history was 1957, when Bagurumba was showcased at the Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi under the leadership of the eminent Bodo dancer Ostad Kamini Kr. Narzary. The performance, described as enchanting and unprecedented, introduced Bagurumba to a national audience for the first time. Contemporary reports noted: "A dance (Bagaroumba) performed in the secrecy of night, that was probably never before witnessed by outsiders" (Source statement, 29 January 1957, Republic Day publication, New Delhi). This event marked Bagurumba's transition from a localized ethnic performance to a recognized national dance, symbolizing both the uniqueness of the Bodo community and the inclusive diversity of India. Equally significant is the etymology of the term "Bagaroumbā." The word is a composite of four Bodo elements-

Ba – "to carry a responsibility"

Ega – "to come out"

Rou – "heaven, high place of God"

Ba – "five"

Thus, Bagurumba literally means "the dance created for the responsibility of carrying Bathou, the supreme God, who originates from the five spiritual elements of heaven." This spiritual interpretation underscores its cosmological foundation, connecting the dance to the Pancha Tattwa (five elements) of creation. Its Assamese counterpart is expressed as "Pancha tatwar ādi garākīr avātaran mitya." Hence, Bagurumba transcends entertainment and becomes a sacred embodiment of the Bodos' worldview, fusing spirituality, nature, and social identity.

2.0.1.1 Traditional attire used in Bagurumba Dance:

The dancers wear colourful traditional attire such as the dokhna, RegeRegang (jwmgra), and aronai.

- a) Gwmw Gabni Dokhna (yellow colour of Dokhna).
- b) Regeregang (Gwja Gabni hajw Agor Gwnang Fasra) (Red colour scarf with hill embroidery)
- c) Gwja Gabni blouse (Red colour blouse)
- d) Two Aronai (green colour and red colour) (honor scarf, neck tie but wider and length).

2.0.1.2 Musical Instruments used In Bagurumba Dance :-

Most of the traditional Bodo instruments are given below that are used to accompany the Bagurumba dances.

- a) Siphung – It means the long sized Bodo flute having five holes only. It's made of bamboo.
- b) Serja – It is a kind of violin used by the Bodos and have four strings and traditionally played by a small bow made of bamboo strip.
- c) Kham – It is the Bodo musical drum which is big and long in size.

- d) Jotha – It is Cymbal which 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.
- e) Gongana – Gongana is the Jew's harp and is a kind of small wind instrument used by the Bodos. It is made of bamboo till the recent time and now a days metallic Gongana's are available.
- f) Japkhiring – It may be called tambourine. It is made of wood in crescent shape having some oval holes penetrating completely on its body to adjust the metallic discs coins like by pins. These discs produce harmonious musical sound during the playing. More than one discs are adjusted in each hole because of which sound is produced as a result of friction made by each other.

2.0.1.3 Bagurumba (Bodo folk song):

Bagurumba hai bagurumba
Jat nongabwla, khul nongabwla
Thabwrwm homnanwi bamnanwi lagoumwn kha
Hai lwgw, lagou mwn kha

It translates as the girl saying to the boy you not been my relative, I would have married you. The playfulness of the words is matched by the simple rhythm of the music that often compels onlookers to join the dance.

Thuri bari ni lai daosen
Jwngni lagw aalai da jen
Gwsu hwsar hwsar mwsa de
Baidemglai gidinglai mwsa de

(Rhythm harmony) the meaning of this line is- we should not lose / no failure. We must won any games always. It's a confidential song of Boro women.

Bagurumba hai bagurumba
Bagurumba hai bagurumba
Dwi jiri jiri, samo khingkhiri
Sona ni jinjiri, hai jinjiri, hai jinjiri

The steps are easy to follow and draw on patterns found in the surrounding evergreen forests. For instance, the dance movements might be inspired by plants, animals, birds, butterflies, waves of flowing rivers or wind. Believed to be centuries old, Bagurumba honours the sense of love, attraction and belonging among young people. It honours human relationships as it does the relationship between humans and nature.

2.0.2 Bagurumba as Cultural Identity

Bagurumba embodies the ethnic distinctiveness of the Bodos, functioning as both a cultural marker and a medium of identity expression. The dance is intrinsically linked with:

1. Dress and ornamentation: Women wear the traditional dokhna (a handwoven wrap), jwmgra (scarf), and aronai (honor scarf), which symbolize dignity and ethnic pride. The attire reflects the Bodos' mastery in weaving and their preference for bright, natural colors.
2. Nature-inspired movements: The dance mimics butterflies (bagurumba itself is sometimes described as the "butterfly dance"), flowing water, swaying trees, and flying birds. This reflects the Bodos' agrarian life and their intimate relationship with the environment.
3. Community cohesion: Performed during Bwisagu and other communal celebrations, Bagurumba fosters social bonding and transmits cultural values across generations.
4. Ritual and spirituality: While largely recreational today, its roots lie in Bathou worship, reflecting the spiritual foundation of Bodo cultural practices.

Through these elements, Bagurumba signifies not only artistic expression but also collective memory and identity preservation.

2.0.3 Transformation in Contemporary Context:

While Bagurumba retains its cultural essence, it has also undergone transformations due to modernization, media, and cultural integration. Key aspects include:

1. From village to stage: Originally performed in open courtyards during festivals, Bagurumba is now staged in auditoriums, competitions, and cultural exhibitions, often with choreographic modifications.
2. Institutional recognition: Organizations such as the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) have played a key role in promoting Bagurumba through festivals, workshops, and publications.
3. Media and tourism: The proliferation of television, YouTube, and cultural tourism has made Bagurumba accessible to global audiences, but also subject to commercialization.
4. Hybrid forms: Choreographers sometimes blend Bagurumba with modern dance styles or use it in fusion performances to appeal to younger generations.

While these transformations expand Bagurumba's reach, they also raise concerns about authenticity and ritual detachment.

2.0.4 Continuity and Preservation:

Despite modernization and changing contexts, Bagurumba has demonstrated remarkable continuity as a living tradition. Several factors have contributed to its preservation:

1. **Community Transmission :** Bagurumba continues to be taught informally within families and villages, especially to young girls during Bwisagu. This oral and performative transmission ensures that the basic steps, songs, and meanings are not lost.
2. **Institutional Promotion:** Cultural organizations, including the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and Bodo Sahitya Sabha, have actively promoted Bagurumba through workshops, festivals, and competitions. Schools and colleges in the Bodoland Territorial Region often include Bagurumba performances in their cultural programs, strengthening intergenerational continuity.
3. **Government Recognition:** Bagurumba's performance at the Republic Day parade in 1957 established its national recognition. Subsequent inclusion in state-level cultural festivals and government-sponsored events has reinforced its symbolic status as part of India's intangible cultural heritage.
4. **Documentation and Media:** Scholars, folklorists, and cultural activists have documented Bagurumba through books, journal articles, and visual media. Platforms such as television, YouTube, and social media now play a crucial role in preserving performances and expanding awareness.
5. **Integration with Education:** In recent years, elements of Bodo dance and culture have been integrated into school curricula in Assam and BTR, exposing younger generations to traditional knowledge systems in a structured manner.

Through these channels, Bagurumba continues to thrive as both a heritage practice and a modern cultural symbol.

3.0 Challenges

Despite its continuity, Bagurumba faces several challenges in the modern era:

1. **Commercialization:** Stage adaptations often simplify or exaggerate movements for entertainment value, reducing the ritual and symbolic depth of the dance.
2. **Loss of Spiritual Context:** Originally linked with Bathou worship and agrarian rituals, the sacred dimensions of Bagurumba are gradually diminishing, with many performances now restricted to cultural shows.
3. **Generational Gap:** While young people appreciate Bagurumba as a cultural marker, they are more attracted to contemporary dance forms influenced by Bollywood and Western culture. This creates tension between traditional preservation and modern adaptation.
4. **Cultural Homogenization:** Globalization and mass media tend to promote homogenized cultural products, threatening the uniqueness of localized practices like Bagurumba.
5. **Language and Folklore Decline:** Since Bagurumba songs are composed and sung in Bodo, the declining use of the Bodo language among younger generations poses a threat to the authenticity of the tradition.

4.0 Findings:

Based on field observation, interviews, and textual analysis, the following findings have emerged from the study of Bagurumba Dance of the Bodo Tribe: Its Cultural Identity, Transformation and Continuity:

1. **Living Expression of Cultural Identity:** Bagurumba continues to serve as the most visible and emotionally resonant symbol of Bodo cultural identity. Through costume, music, and movement, it embodies the Bodo worldview that celebrates simplicity, beauty, and harmony with nature.
2. **Deep Connection with Nature and Spirituality:** The dance and its accompanying folk songs reflect the Bodos' intimate relationship with their environment. The motifs of butterflies, flowers, rivers, and birds symbolize fertility, renewal, and gratitude toward Bathou, the supreme deity.
3. **Women as Custodians of Tradition:** Bagurumba is primarily performed by women, who play a vital role in preserving and transmitting this art form. Their participation reinforces gendered expressions of beauty, creativity, and social belonging within the community.
4. **Transformation through Modernization:** With the spread of education, media, and tourism, Bagurumba has moved from the courtyard to the stage. Though it retains its essential form, choreographic modifications, costume stylization, and stage presentation have altered its traditional character.
5. **Institutional and Governmental Support:** The recognition of Bagurumba at the Republic Day celebration of 1957 and subsequent promotion by organizations like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and ABSU have played a key role in revitalizing and preserving the dance at regional and national levels.
6. **Challenges to Authenticity and Continuity:** Commercialization, the waning of ritual context, language decline, and generational disinterest pose serious challenges to the authenticity of Bagurumba. Despite these pressures, community efforts and educational initiatives continue to sustain its vitality.
7. **Resilience and Adaptation:** Bagurumba demonstrates remarkable adaptability. It has incorporated new forms of expression while preserving its cultural core, showing how traditional art can evolve without losing its essence.
8. **Transmission of Cultural Knowledge:** The oral and performative tradition of teaching Bagurumba ensures intergenerational continuity. Informal training within families and institutional programs both contribute to safeguarding it as intangible cultural heritage.

5.0 Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for the preservation, promotion, and sustainable transmission of Bagurumba, the traditional folk dance of the Bodo tribe:

1. **Documentation and Archiving:** There is an urgent need to record and digitally archive Bagurumba songs, choreography, and oral narratives to safeguard them from loss and distortion. Universities, cultural institutes, and local organizations should collaborate to build a comprehensive digital repository.

2. Community-Based Training Programs: Traditional practitioners and elders should be actively involved in teaching Bagurumba to younger generations through community workshops, school curricula, and cultural camps. This participatory approach ensures authenticity and intergenerational continuity.
3. Integration into Educational Curriculum: Folk culture, especially Bagurumba, should be introduced in regional education systems to instill cultural pride and awareness among students. This will also help preserve Bodo language, songs, and symbolism.
4. Promotion through Cultural Tourism: Ethically planned cultural tourism programs can provide new avenues for economic support and wider recognition of Bagurumba. However, such initiatives must respect cultural integrity and avoid commercial exploitation.
5. Encouraging Research and Academic Study: Academic institutions should promote interdisciplinary research on Bagurumba covering its music, dance, costume, and ecological symbolism to highlight its contribution to the larger corpus of Indian folk traditions.
6. Support from Government and NGOs: Continuous financial and institutional assistance from government bodies and NGOs is essential for organizing cultural festivals, competitions, and awareness campaigns that promote Bagurumba at local, national, and international levels.
7. Revival of Ritual and Ecological Context: To maintain the original essence, Bagurumba performances should occasionally return to their natural settings fields, courtyards, and village spaces where the dance was traditionally performed in harmony with nature.

These recommendations emphasize that Bagurumba should not only be preserved as a performance art but also as a living expression of Bodo identity, deeply rooted in ecology, spirituality, and community life. Collaborative efforts among communities, scholars, and policymakers can ensure that this folk tradition continues to flourish in the age of globalization.

6.0 Conclusion:

The Bagurumba dance of the Bodo tribe is more than a folk performance; it is a cultural emblem that encapsulates the community's philosophy, spirituality, and aesthetic sense. Rooted in agrarian rituals and Bathou worship, Bagurumba celebrates harmony with nature and fosters communal unity. Its recognition at the Republic Day parade of 1957 not only introduced it to a national audience but also reinforced its symbolic significance as a cultural identity marker of the Bodos within India's multicultural framework. Over the decades, Bagurumba has undergone transformations, adapting to new platforms such as stage shows, competitions, tourism, and digital media. While these changes have broadened its reach, they also pose challenges of authenticity, ritual detachment, and commercialization. Nevertheless, community efforts, institutional promotion, and educational initiatives have ensured its continuity, allowing it to survive as both a traditional heritage and a dynamic cultural form. In the face of globalization, the future of Bagurumba lies in striking a balance between preserving authenticity and embracing creative adaptation. As a living tradition, Bagurumba will continue to evolve, but its core essence as an expression of identity, spirituality, and aesthetic beauty remains vital to the cultural consciousness of the Bodo people.

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