

# The Harvesting Festival Magw of the Bodos: Cultural Significance and its Adaptation in Modern Society

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**Abstract**—The Bodo community, indigenous to the northeastern state of Assam in India, celebrates several traditional festivals, along with the harvesting festival, known as *Magw* or *Domasi*, being one of the most significant. *Magw*, marking the end of the harvest season and the onset of spring, serves as a vital expression of gratitude, community unity, and cultural identity for the Bodos. This paper explores the historical and cultural significance of *Magw*, examining its role in traditional Bodo society, and tried to investigate how the festival has adapted to modern societal changes. Historically, *Magw* or *Domasi* is a vibrant festival that incorporates various rituals, including the feasting, building *Belagur* and firing it etc. These activities are not merely celebratory but also serve to reinforce the Bodo community's connection to nature and their agrarian roots. The festival symbolizes the cyclical nature of agricultural life and the communal ethos that has traditionally defined Bodo social structures. In recent decades, however, the celebration of *Magw* has encountered the impacts of modernization, urbanization, and globalization. Urban migration has led to shifts in how the festival is observed, with traditional practices often being adapted or simplified in urban contexts. While urban celebrations may differ from rural ones, they still reflect a commitment to preserving cultural heritage amidst changing lifestyles. Additionally, the influence of global media and cultural exchanges has introduced new elements into *Magw* celebrations, contributing to a fusion of traditional and contemporary practices. Despite these transformations, *Magw* continues to serve as a crucial cultural marker for the Bodo people, reflecting their resilience and adaptability. The festival remains a powerful symbol of Bodo identity, demonstrating how traditional practices can evolve while maintaining their core cultural significance. This paper highlights the dynamic nature of *Magw* and its role in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, offering insights into how indigenous festivals navigate contemporary societal changes. Overall, the study underscores the importance of *Magw* in preserving Bodo cultural identity and adapting to the demands of a modernizing world,

illustrating the broader themes of cultural continuity and transformation.

**Index Terms**—*Magw*, Harvesting Festival, Tradition, Adaption, and Bodo Society

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Bodos, an indigenous ethnic group of the northeastern Indian state of Assam, have a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with their agricultural practices. Central to their cultural identity is the Harvesting Festival, known as *Magw*, or *Domasi* in Bodo. This festival marks the completion of the harvesting season and is celebrated with great emotion, reflecting the agrarian roots and the communal spirit of the Bodo community. Traditionally, *Magw* is more than a mere celebration of the harvest; it is a vibrant expression of the Bodo's spiritual beliefs, social structures, and communal bonds. The festival involves a series of rituals, and communal feasts that honour the house deities believed to safeguard the crops and ensure future prosperity.

The *Magw* festival of the Bodos started from the last day of Assamese month *Push* (mid-January), plays a crucial role in marking the end of the harvest season and fostering communal harmony. The main occupation of the Bodos is agriculture. Rice is the staple food of them. Traditionally they cultivate two kinds of paddy to product of rice, their staple food. These are known as *Sali* and *Asu* paddy. The cultivation of *Sali* paddy is done during summer season and harvest from the month of *Push*. The festival *Magw* is celebrated after harvesting the *Sali* paddy. Hence, it is also known as post harvesting festival of the Bodos. The festival begins on Push Sankranti. On that occasion every family of the village possess available rice grain in their granary. To celebrate *Magw*, the people get ready from ten to

fifteen days before the festival. They prepare different kinds of rice grains such as *matha*, *zwsa* (a kind of scented rice) and *maibra* (a kind of sticky rice) for cooking rice beer and baking rice cake. Traditionally, rice cake and rice beer are special dishes of the festival. The villagers make a variety of ethnic rice cakes and other meals for entertaining. *Homnai* (a kind of steaming cake), *enthab* (a kind of backing cake), *sithao* and *laru*, etc. are some types of traditional rice cakes prepared during this festival. People wear new dresses and visit door to door of the village and go to relatives' houses as guests. The friends, guests, and visitors are usually served with rice beer and rice cake. On the day of Push Sankranti, in the early morning, at the very beginning of the festival, every woman of the family cleansed all the houses and clothes.

In recent years, however, the *Magw* festival has undergone significant transformations. The pressures of modernization, urbanization, and globalization have introduced new dynamics into the traditional celebration. While the core elements of the festival remain intact, how the Bodos engage with and celebrate *Magw* has evolved. Contemporary influences have led to adaptations in ritualistic practices, cultural expressions, and community participation, reflecting broader shifts in societal values and lifestyles.

This research paper aims to explore the cultural significance of the Bodo's Harvesting Festival and examine its adaption in the changing contexts of modern society. By analysing historical and contemporary practices, we sought to understand how the festival serves as both a symbol of enduring traditions and a site of cultural negotiation. Through this exploration, we will uncover insights into the resilience of indigenous cultural practices in the face of modern challenges and how tradition and change coexist within the Bodo community. Festivals often serve as a reflection of the cultural identity and social values of a community.

## II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- Tried to find out its traditional form and cultural significance in the society.
- Tried to analyze about the main factors that affect the festival.

- Tried to depict the dropped-out rituals and its modified feature that recently added in the celebration of festival.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the cultural significance of the Harvesting Festival, "*Magw*" or "*Domasi*," and its adaptation in modern society. The qualitative approach is suitable for understanding complex cultural phenomena and their evolving meanings within contemporary contexts.

### A. Data Collection Methods:

The primary research is conducted in areas predominantly inhabited by the Bodo community, including both rural and urban locations to observe the celebration of the festival. It involves immersive observation to capture both distinct and subtle difference of the festival. Fieldwork is carried out in the period leading up to, during, and immediately after the festival to capture a comprehensive view of the event and its significance.

Interviews have been conducted with a range of participants including community elders, festival organizers, local cultural experts, and younger generations. A semi-structured guide was used to allow for both focused discussions on specific aspects of the festival and open-ended exploration of individual experiences and perceptions.

Separate focus groups were organized for different demographics, such as age groups and gender, to discuss the festival's cultural significance and modern adaptations. A facilitator was guided discussions to encourage interaction and extract deeper insights into collective views and changes over time.

Scholarly articles, books, and critical analyses on festivals of the Bodo's are taken as secondary sources. These sources have provided theoretical frameworks, comparative insights, and contextual information necessary for a comprehensive analysis.

### B. Document Analysis:

Examined the historical and ethnographic records related to the festival to understand its origins and traditional practices. Analysis of media coverage, as well as social media and news reports were included

to assess the transformation of festival in modern contexts.

### C. Data Analysis:

Data from interviews, observations, and focus groups are transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. Codes are developed inductively from the data. Key themes related to the cultural significance of the festival and its modern adaptations is identified and analysed for patterns and meanings. A comparative approach is used to contrast traditional practices with their modern adaptations, highlighting shifts in cultural significance and community values.

Participants are informed about the research objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written or verbal consent is obtained from all participants. Personal identifiers are removed from data to ensure participant anonymity. Data is securely stored and only accessible to the research team. The researcher approached the study with respect for Bodo cultural norms and practices, ensuring that findings are presented sensitively and accurately.

## IV. HISTORICAL CONTEST AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Bodo people are an ethnic group primarily residing in the Bodoland Territorial Region and some pocket areas of Assam, India. *Magw*, also referred to as *Domasi*, is a traditional festival that marks the end of the harvest season. Historically, *Magw* is a time of joy and feasting, characterized by rituals that celebrate nature's bounty and community solidarity.

The festival features various traditional activities, including the construction of *Belagur* (Meji in Assamese), communal feasting, offering at the *Bathou* altar, and performance of other rituals. Rituals and ceremonies during *Magw* are deeply rooted in the Bodo's agrarian lifestyle and spiritual beliefs, emphasizing themes of prosperity, fertility, and the interconnectedness of humans with nature. On the first day of this festival, the women grind rice powder in a large wooden mortar to bake rice cake. On the evening of the day start baking different kinds of rice cake. The young boys and cowherds of the village spend the nights near the *Belagur* arranging a community feast known as "*laokhar wngkham janai*". They build *Belagur* near the river or in any

other convenient place near the water source one or two weeks before the festival using green bamboo and straw or other dried leaves. A modest hut is also built near the *Belagur* to stay and feast at night. They enjoy whole the night by feasting and dancing. The next day, early in the morning they take a bath in the river before the sun rises and set fire on the *Belagur* and warm up their body with the fire of it. On this day all the men and women of the family wake up early in the morning and take a bath as a habitual ritual of the festival *Magw* or *Domasi*. It is believed that one should wake up and take a bath in the morning before the crow cry or else he will be birth as an animal in the next life. After bathing, the women of the family perform the ritual '*Gwbwr San Hwnai*'. It means sprinkling the cow dung mixing with water in the courtyard. The walls of every house and granary are marked with cow dung.

The cows and granaries have an important place in the agricultural life of Bodo society. The cow is regarded as *Laxmi* and the cow dung is assumed as a holy thing that is used to clean the impurities. Hence, before performing any religious rituals, they clean the house by using cow dung. The men or women who commit illegal sexual relations are purified by making a drink the water of cow dung.

In the Bodo community, the drawing or marking of a line on the wall of the granary is called '*Bakhri lirkhonnai*'. It is a kind of ritual in which a mark or line is drawn by hand on the walls of a granary with cow dung. The marking is applied around every house and granary moving in an anti-clock direction. From this day they do not enter into the granary until the end of the month *Magw*. This ritual has significant meaning in their agrarian life.

The tying cords on trees is also an important ritual of the festival traditionally performed by the community which has cultural significance. The straw or thatch cord is tied on the fruit-bearing trees of the garden wishing more fruit products of the plants. The areca nut, mango, jackfruit, coconut tree etc. are the main plants of the garden where they tie a cord of straw or thatch. In some places, it is done by carrying a child on the back wishing more fruits to the trees. Another mentionable ritual of this day is mixed vermilion with mustard oil and apply it to their loom. This ritual is done by the woman or young girl of the family after bathing. Women perform this ritual wishing expert weaver and designer as the weaving is their

traditional habit. The women who did not know the technique of weaving and designing had no value in ancient Bodo society. A girl without the knowledge of weaving and designing tasks, she faced in difficulty of getting married.

During this festival, they offer puja to their supreme God *Bathou Bwrai* wishing happiness for their whole family. After offering to *Bathou Bwrai*, offer a puja to their ancestral death towards the southern part of the courtyard giving the foods of the festival and dresses like *Dokhona*, *Gamsa* etc.

## V. MAGW IN MORDERN SOCIETY

Due to the influence of some factors like modernization, urbanization, and globalization, the *Magw* festival has undergone a significant change. The factors of changes and their implications are as follows.

### A. Urbanization and Cultural Shifts:

Urbanization has led to a shift in the Bodo community's lifestyle, with many individuals moving to cities for education and employment opportunities. It is the centre place of political, economic, industrial, educational and other activities. Individual's social behaviour is not governed by shared rules, conventions, traditions, religion, or group standards in an urban varied community. A town is a location where strangers meet. People from various castes, each with their own traditions, are assembled in one place to engage in various tasks such as government work, education, mechanical work, political work, commercial work, scientific work, artistic work, literary work, and so on. In such a setting, many cultures' thoughts, habits, behaviours, practices, religious beliefs, dietary habits, clothes, and so on come together. It creates a new environment and forms a new hybrid culture. In such settings, traditional rituals are modified or simplified due to logistical constraints. However, the *Magw or Domasi* festival is also celebrated in urban places where people of the Bodo community belong but with renewed vigor in cultural organizations and community gatherings, reflecting a hybridization of traditional and modern practices.

### B. Impact of Modernization:

Modernization has exerted its influence on many traditional characteristics of the village people. The attraction towards modern culture and lifestyle has diverted the people of the Bodo community from their traditional customs. Modernization has now touched every aspect of life. Consumption of cold drinks, factory-made wine in bars, and membership in clubs, among other activities, has become routine. Traditional garments have undergone various changes as a result of fashion.

All these have affected the rituals and habits of the festival *Magw or Domasi* along with food and dresses. Along with their traditional food rice cake, different new items which are coming from other communities are also prepared in modern form. Milk, curd and other sweets (which are not familiar to early Bodo society) of the market are also used as a part of festival food in modern society. Along with homemade rice beer the use of tea and others factory-made wine also become a common liquor of the festival.

### C. Globalization and Media Influence:

The advent of digital media has played a dual role in the transformation of traditional festivals like *Magw*. The media platforms have facilitated the global dissemination of *Magw* cultural elements, fostering a greater appreciation and understanding of Bodo traditions beyond their local context. On the other hand, the exposure to global cultural trends has introduced new influences that challenge traditional practices and values.

#### 1. Econpmic Changes and Festival Practices:

Economic changes also have an impacted on the celebration of festivals like *Magw*. With increased economic pressures, the scale and scope of festivities are altered. Traditional practices, such as elaborate community feasts and rituals etc. are scaled back or modified as per modern economic constraints. Conversely, there is also a growing trend towards the commercialization of festivals, with local businesses and tourism promotion the *Magw* as a cultural attraction.

#### 2. Identity and Resilience:

Despite these changes, *Magw* remains a potent symbol of Bodo identity and resilience. The festival provides a platform for the Bodo community to reaffirm their cultural heritage and values amidst the

pressures of modernity. Among the Bodos, through the changes and modification in many traditional rituals and customs, the *Magw* is still observed as the post-harvesting festival. They celebrate the festival with the rice grain gained after harvesting the crop. It is an indication of an agriculture-based community. Through community-led initiatives, cultural organizations, and educational programs, efforts are being made to preserve and promote traditional practices while embracing contemporary influence.

## VI. DISCUSSION

By the impact of the above-mentioned factors, the celebration of the *Magw* festival is transforming from traditional to modern. At present the original and traditional form of *Magw* celebration is modifying and many ancient rituals are dropping out in the society. The *belagur* and hut that were built for communal dining are found only in a few Bodo villages that are situated among the Assamese society. Nowadays, the habit of having a picnic of young boys and cowherds during the festival is fading away. This ritual has decreased in society due to the vanishing of the cowherd and the paid domestic labour system. Instead of the *Magw* festival, the villagers appreciate and celebrate the English New Year in January. They also arrange a party on the last day of the English calendar and spend the night sleepless on New Year's Eve so they can welcome it soon. In the name of the New Year, they gather, arrange a party, and go outside for a picnic in different places, but not in *Magw* as earlier.

Today, the early enthusiasm of the *Magw* festival has gone down. The custom of baking rice cake, which was a big part of the event, is also likely extinct in present society. Tea, milk, curd, and various types of sweets are typically used to greet festival guests instead of rice cake. Rice beer consumption has also been reduced as a result of this practice. The early morning bathing practice has been given up by the people. They have given up the sprinkling habit of mixed cow dung at the courtyard. The practice of drawing lines on the walls of houses and granaries, tying the cord to trees, putting oil and vermilion to the weaving loom, and so on are also vanishing from the society's culture.

The *Magw* festival encapsulates the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. While

modernization presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for cultural adaptation and revitalization. The Bodo community's response to these challenges highlights their commitment to preserving their cultural heritage while navigating the complexities of modern life.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Changes take place everywhere. It takes place in language, literature, culture even in taught and behaviour of the people. We know that *Magw* serves as a vital cultural practice for the Bodo people, and reflects the historical roots and contemporary realities of the society. This festival not only reinforces social cohesion and communal identity among the Bodos but also serves as a platform for the transmission of traditional values and practices to younger generations. The festival's adaptation to modern society enhances the resilience of the Bodo community in maintaining their cultural identity amidst external pressures. While integrating contemporary elements, the festival retains its core significance, celebrating the agrarian roots that sustain the community. As globalization continues to shape cultural outlook, the celebration of *Magw* stands as a demonstration of the enduring significance of traditional practices and their role in contemporary society.

Ultimately, the Harvesting Festival *Magw* reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, showcasing how cultural practices can evolve while remaining deeply anchored in their historical and social contexts. As the Bodos continue to navigate the challenges of modern society, *Magw* will undoubtedly remain a cornerstone of their cultural identity, offering a space for reflection, celebration, and continuity.

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