



Assessing the socio-economic transition and livelihood resilience of the Bodo community in rural Assam

Dulumoni Basumatary

Independent Researcher, Dudhnoi, Goalpara, Assam -783124, India

*Corresponding author E-mail address: dollysmita91@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary socio-economic transition and livelihood resilience of the Bodo community, the largest indigenous ethnic group in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam, India. Moving beyond historical narratives of political conflict and territorial agitation, this study investigates the structural shifts in agrarian practices, the diversification of rural economies, the institutional impacts of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and the socio-cultural negotiations accompanying integration into the broader market economy. Utilizing a mixed-methods framework combining empirical observations and secondary literature, the paper argues that while the Bodo community displays remarkable micro-level resilience through community networks, self-help groups (SHGs) and micro-entrepreneurship, persistent structural vulnerabilities—such as land tenure insecurity, climate-induced agrarian distress and inadequate industrial integration—threaten long-term sustainable development.

Keywords: Bodo Community, Rural Assam, Socio-Economic Transition, Livelihood Resilience, Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Agrarian Economy

1. Introduction

The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam represents a complex mosaic of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities. Among these, the Bodo people—belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid family of the larger Boro-Kachari linguistic group—constitute the single largest indigenous community in the state. Historically concentrated in the northern banks of the Brahmaputra River, the socio-economic and political trajectory of the Bodo community has undergone profound transformations over the last few decades.

For much of the late 20th century, academic and public discourse surrounding the Bodos was dominated by narratives of ethnic mobilization, socio-political unrest and the sustained movement for a separate state. However, following the signing of the historic Bodo Accord of 2003 (which established the Bodoland Territorial Council) and the subsequent tripartite Bodo Peace Accord of January 2020, the region entered a critical juncture of socio-economic transition.

This paper shifts the analytical lens from political history to the quiet, everyday transformations occurring in rural Bodo households. It assesses how these communities navigate the transition from a predominantly subsistence-oriented agrarian economy to a more diversified, market-integrated livelihood structure. Furthermore, it evaluates the concept of "livelihood resilience"—the capacity of households and communities to absorb shocks, adapt to environmental and economic stressors and transform their productive strategies in the face of uncertainty.

2. Historical Context and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Agrarian Heritage and the State

Traditionally, the Bodo economy has been anchored in wet-rice cultivation (*Sali* paddy), supplemented by piggyery, poultry, sericulture (specifically *Endi* silk) and traditional handloom weaving. Land was not merely an economic asset but a central pillar of socio-cultural identity (*Bhomi*). However, colonial land settlements, post-independence land reforms and subsequent demographic shifts in Assam exerted immense pressure on indigenous landholdings. The perceived threat of land alienation to non-indigenous populations served as a primary catalyst for the Bodo political movements (Prabhakara, 2016).

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Livelihood Resilience

To analyze the socio-economic transition of the Bodo community, this paper adopts the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)**, integrated with contemporary theories of social-ecological resilience (Scoones, 1998; Carney, 1998). A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital) and activities required for a means of living. Resilience, in this context, refers to the ability of rural households to withstand and recover from stresses—such as recurrent Brahmaputra valley floods, agrarian stagnation and market price volatility—while simultaneously adapting their asset portfolios to exploit emerging opportunities in the post-conflict era (Birkmann et al., 2013).

3. Socio-Economic Transition: From Subsistence to Diversification

3.1 Transformation of the Agrarian Sector

Agriculture remains the primary occupation for a vast majority of rural Bodos, yet its nature has undergone notable shifts.

- **Commercialization vs. Subsistence:** While traditional multi-varietal rice farming for home consumption remains prevalent, there is a visible trend toward cash crops, including tea cultivation by smallholders (*small tea growers*), potato, mustard and winter vegetables.
- **Mechanization:** The traditional reliance on animal traction (bullocks) is progressively being replaced by tractor-renting services and power tillers, albeit at a high operational cost for marginal farmers.
- **Agrarian Distress:** Despite these transitions, the agrarian sector in rural BTR faces severe systemic bottlenecks. Fragmented landholdings, lack of institutional credit, high dependency on monsoon rains and annual flood devastation keep a substantial segment of the rural population vulnerable to chronic indebtedness.

3.2 The Rise of Pluriactivity and Non-Farm Sectors

Livelihood diversification, or pluriactivity, has emerged as a crucial coping and adaptive strategy. Rural Bodo households are no longer entirely dependent on primary agriculture.

- **Migration and Remittances:** Out-migration of youth to metropolitan Indian cities (e.g., Bengaluru, Kerala, Delhi) for employment in the hospitality, retail and security sectors has surged. Remittances sent back by these migrant workers form a vital component of rural household income, financing education, healthcare and housing upgrades.
- **Informal Labor and Construction:** A significant number of rural men engage in local construction work, brick-kiln operations and petty trade within the expanding semi-urban hubs of Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang and Baksa.

3.3 Women, Weaving and Micro-Enterprises

Gender dynamics play a defining role in the socio-economic transition of the Bodo community. Bodo women possess exceptional traditional skills in handloom weaving, notably the production of the *Dohna*, *Arenai* and *Jwmgra*.

- **Commercialization of Handlooms:** What was historically a domestic craft for household use has increasingly been integrated into regional markets. Through the intervention of Cooperative Societies, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and master weavers, traditional motifs are being adapted to modern commercial tastes.
- **SHG Revolutions:** The proliferation of women's SHGs under initiatives like the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ASRLM) has enhanced financial inclusion. Women have gained access to micro-credit, enabling investments in poultry, piggery and petty shops, thereby boosting female labor-force participation and household financial resilience.

4. Institutional Dimensions: The Role of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)

The establishment of the BTC under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003 marked a watershed moment. Decentralized governance was envisioned as a direct mechanism to address the root causes of underdevelopment and socio-economic deprivation in the region.

4.1 Infrastructural Development

Over the past two decades, the BTC has channeled significant developmental funds toward improving rural infrastructure.

- **Connectivity:** The construction of rural roads, bridges and culverts has reduced isolation, enabling better market access for agricultural produce.
- **Electrification and Utilities:** Rural electrification programs, drinking water schemes and health sub-centers have gradually improved the Human Development Index (HDI) metrics across the four districts of the BTR (Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri).

4.2 Educational and Cultural Policy Interventions

Recognizing that human capital is foundational to resilience, the BTC implemented critical reforms in education.

- **Medium of Instruction:** The formal adoption of the Bodo language in the Devnagari script as a medium of instruction up to the secondary level has revitalized indigenous education and reduced school drop-out rates.
- **Skill Development Initiatives:** Recent years have witnessed targeted vocational training programs aimed at curbing rural youth unemployment through collaborations with bodies like the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC).

However, critics and scholars point out persistent structural shortcomings: administrative bottlenecks, bureaucratic corruption, uneven distribution of developmental funds and a lack of transparency often temper the transformative potential of autonomous governance (Baruah, 2020).

5. Assessing Livelihood Resilience: Vulnerabilities and Coping Mechanisms

Assessing resilience requires examining how rural Bodo households navigate shocks and stresses. The region is characterized by a high degree of socio-ecological vulnerability.

5.1 Environmental Stressors: Floods and Climate Variability

The BTR region is crisscrossed by tributaries of the Brahmaputra (such as the Manas, Puthimari and Champamati rivers). Annual monsoon floods inflict heavy tolls on rural livelihoods.

- **Asset Destruction:** Floods repeatedly wash away standing crops, livestock and rural infrastructure, pushing marginal households into cycles of poverty.
- **Adaptation Strategies:** Households employ indigenous coping mechanisms, such as raising plinth levels of houses (*chang-ghar* architecture), shifting to short-duration paddy seeds and diversifying livestock species to withstand flood mortality. Nonetheless, institutional flood-mitigation measures remain inadequate.

5.2 Social Capital and Community Networks

A vital dimension of Bodo resilience is its robust stock of social capital. Traditional institutions and community practices act as shock-absorbers during crises.

- **Community Labor Sharing:** Practices of reciprocal labor exchange during agricultural peak seasons help mitigate acute labor shortages and cash constraints.
- **Village Councils and Traditional Governance:** Village elders and traditional community organizations (*Bathou* religious assemblies and youth clubs) play critical roles in mediating disputes, organizing relief and managing communal resources.

6. Challenges and Structural Impediments

Despite visible transitions and adaptive capacities, the socio-economic advancement of the Bodo community faces profound challenges:

1. **Land Tenancy and Alienation:** Despite protective legislation (such as Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act), illegal land transfers, mortgaging to informal moneylenders and ambiguities in land records continue to threaten indigenous landownership.
2. **Lack of Industrial Base:** The BTR lacks large-scale industrial units or agro-processing factories. Consequently, the local economy remains heavily reliant on primary production, resulting in surplus rural labor and underemployment.
3. **Substance Abuse and Health Challenges:** Socio-economic dislocation, historical trauma and youth unemployment have contributed to rising rates of substance abuse (particularly illicit liquor and drugs), imposing severe psychological and financial burdens on rural families.

7. Conclusion

The socio-economic transition of the Bodo community in rural Assam is a complex, multi-layered process characterized by the simultaneous navigation of tradition and modernity. Moving away from the shadows of conflict, the community is actively renegotiating its place within India's broader economic framework through agricultural diversification, out-migration, women-led micro-enterprises and institutional utilization of autonomous governance.

However, livelihood resilience remains fragile. While social capital and local coping strategies provide immediate buffers, long-term sustainability hinges on structural reforms: securing indigenous land rights, modernizing and insulating the agrarian economy from climate shocks, investing in agro-based rural industries and improving the quality of decentralized governance. Ultimately, the future resilience of the Bodo community depends not merely on autonomous political arrangements, but on inclusive economic development that honors ecological sustainability and social equity.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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