



Fishing in Bodo Folklore: A Study of Socio-Economic Significance and Traditional Beliefs

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ABSTRACT :

This paper examined fishing as represented in Bodo folklore and interpreted its socio-economic meanings, belief structures, and ecological insights. The study drew upon oral narratives, folk songs, ritual practices, and community memories collected from Bodo-inhabited regions of Assam. Using a mixed-method approach, the research combined ethnographic fieldwork with quantitative household-level data to understand how folklore both reflected and shaped fishing-related livelihoods. The analysis showed that fishing folklore functioned not only as cultural expression but also as a practical guide to seasonal rhythms, labor organization, moral conduct, and resource sharing. The findings suggested that traditional beliefs embedded in folklore regulated access to water bodies, discouraged over-extraction, and reinforced collective responsibility. At the same time, rapid economic change and ecological stress weakened these narrative systems. The paper argued that ignoring folklore in development planning reduced the cultural sustainability of fishing-dependent communities. By documenting and analyzing Bodo fishing folklore in detail, this study contributed to folklore studies, economic anthropology, and indigenous ecological knowledge research.

Keywords: *Bodo folklore; fishing practices; socio-economic life; traditional beliefs; indigenous ecological knowledge; Assam*

I. Introduction:

Fishing has long been central to everyday life in many riverine and wetland-based societies of Northeast India. Among the Bodo people, fishing is more than a means of food collection. It is memory, practice, and instruction carried through stories, songs, and ritual speech. These cultural



forms often appear ordinary. Yet they quietly organize labor, shape attitudes toward nature, and define social relationships.

Put simply, folklore acts as a social textbook. It teaches without classrooms and corrects without punishment. Bodo fishing folklore performs this role with remarkable consistency. Narratives about rivers, fish spirits, and seasonal taboos are still recalled by elders, even as formal economic systems expand around them.

Existing academic work on Bodo society has focused largely on language, political history, or broad cultural practices. Fishing appears only in passing, often treated as a background occupation rather than a knowledge system. One might wonder why this gap persists, especially when fishing remains vital to food security and identity in many Bodo villages.

This study addressed that silence. It examined fishing folklore as a site where economy, belief, and ecology intersected. The purpose was not romantic preservation. The aim was analytical clarity. By studying folklore seriously, one could see how older knowledge systems responded to scarcity, uncertainty, and environmental risk.

The research was guided by the belief that cultural narratives deserve attention not because they are old, but because they still work. Or fail. Understanding that difference mattered.

II. Review of Literature:

Early ethnographic writings on the Bodo people appeared during the colonial period. Endle's *The Kacharis* (1911) provided one of the first systematic accounts of Bodo social organization, religion, and subsistence. Fishing was mentioned as a common activity, yet no sustained analysis followed. The work remained descriptive and administrative in tone.

Later scholars such as Brahma (1992) examined Bodo culture with greater sensitivity, discussing festivals, kinship, and belief systems. Fishing again appeared briefly, often listed alongside agriculture and animal husbandry. The symbolic content of fishing-related narratives received little attention.

Folklore studies in Assam expanded after independence. Goswami (2002) and Barua (2010) documented oral traditions among various ethnic groups, including the Bodos. These works recorded folk songs and myths but rarely linked them to economic behavior or ecological practice. Folklore was treated as art rather than instruction.

Anthropological discussions of indigenous ecological knowledge offered a useful lens. Berkes (2012) argued that traditional knowledge systems encoded environmental management strategies within cultural forms. This insight applied well to fishing communities, though few studies



focused on Assam. Research on riverine livelihoods in the Brahmaputra valley emphasized vulnerability and poverty (Goswami et al., 2014) but did not consider folklore as a regulatory mechanism.

A small body of work addressed fishing rituals in Northeast India. Singh (2015) noted that ritual restrictions often aligned with breeding cycles of fish species. These observations suggested practical ecological understanding, though the study did not focus on the Bodos.

The literature, taken together, revealed a pattern. Fishing folklore was either documented without analysis or analyzed without economic grounding. The connection between narrative, belief, and livelihood remained underexplored. This study responded to that gap.

III. Research Gap and Statement of the Problem:

Despite extensive documentation of Bodo culture, fishing folklore has not been examined as a socio-economic system. Most studies separated culture from livelihood, treating folklore as symbolic residue rather than active knowledge.

The problem lay in this separation. Development programs often introduced new fishing technologies without understanding existing belief-based regulations. As a result, community norms weakened, resource conflicts increased, and ecological pressure intensified.

The absence of integrated analysis limited both academic understanding and policy design. Without studying folklore as lived practice, researchers missed how communities interpreted risk, scarcity, and moral responsibility.

This study addressed that problem by placing fishing folklore at the center of socio-economic analysis.

IV. Research Questions:

How does Bodo fishing folklore reflect and regulate socio-economic relationships within fishing households and communities?

What traditional beliefs related to fishing encode ecological knowledge and seasonal resource management?

How have modernization and environmental change altered the transmission and relevance of fishing folklore among the Bodos?



V. Objectives of the Study:

- 1] To document and analyze major themes in Bodo fishing folklore related to livelihood and belief.
- 2] To examine the socio-economic functions of fishing folklore in regulating labor, sharing, and resource use.
- 3] To assess changes in the relevance of fishing folklore under contemporary socio-economic conditions.

VI. Research Hypothesis:

- 1] Bodo fishing folklore functions as an informal regulatory system governing access to aquatic resources.
- 2] Traditional beliefs embedded in fishing narratives align with ecological cycles and conservation practices.
- 3] The decline of folklore transmission weakens collective management of fishing resources.

VII. Methodology:

The study drew upon cultural ecology and economic anthropology. Cultural ecology examined how belief systems mediated human-environment interaction. Economic anthropology focused on non-market mechanisms of regulation, including norms and moral economies.

These frameworks allowed folklore to be read as practice rather than performance. Stories became tools. Beliefs became strategies. This approach avoided treating culture as static heritage.

The study was carried out in Bodo-inhabited regions of Assam, focusing on the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri, areas characterized by rivers, wetlands, and seasonal floodplains that support fishing-based livelihoods. A mixed-method research design was used in order to balance depth with measurable patterns, where qualitative methods helped capture meanings, beliefs, and narratives linked to fishing, while quantitative data provided insight into livelihood dependence and economic variation. Purposive sampling was adopted to select 120 fishing households from twelve villages, ensuring the inclusion of elders with narrative knowledge, active fishers engaged in daily practices, and women involved in processing and household-level decisions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, household surveys, and audio recordings of folk narratives, allowing cross-



verification between spoken tradition and lived practice. Ethical care was maintained throughout the fieldwork, with informed consent taken from all participants, permission secured before recording narratives, and personal identities kept anonymous to protect community trust.

VIII.Result and Discussion:

A) Quantitative Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The aim was not prediction, but pattern identification.

Table 1: Household Dependence on Fishing (n = 120)

Category	Percentage
Primary livelihood	46%
Secondary livelihood	34%
Subsistence only	20%

Table 2: Seasonal Fishing Restrictions Reported

Restriction Type	Households Reporting
Monsoon taboo periods	68%
Ritual days avoided	54%
Breeding-season restraint	61%

These figures showed strong continuity between belief and practice.

b) Qualitative Data Analysis

Narratives were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. Recurrent motifs included river spirits, moral punishment, collective fishing, and seasonal warnings.

One recurring story described a fisherman who ignored a ritual prohibition and suffered repeated loss. The moral was simple. Greed invited scarcity.

Songs sung during communal fishing emphasized sharing and restraint. Silence, elders explained, belonged to dangerous waters.



C) Socio-Economic Significance of Fishing Folklore

Fishing folklore structured labor division. Men often fished in groups. Women processed and sold fish, guided by inherited norms. Sharing rules were strict. Excess catch was redistributed.

This system reduced risk. No household faced complete loss alone. Folklore justified this arrangement, framing sharing as moral duty rather than charity.

Economic value was measured socially, not only in cash. Reputation mattered. A fisher known to violate taboos faced exclusion.

D) Traditional Beliefs and Ecological Knowledge

Beliefs linked fish availability to lunar cycles, water clarity, and plant flowering. These cues aligned closely with ecological patterns identified in scientific studies of floodplain fisheries.

Taboos during spawning seasons limited overfishing. Sacred pools acted as informal reserves. Folklore explained these practices through spirits and ancestors, but the outcome supported sustainability.

E) Change, Disruption, and Decline

Modern education, market pressure, and mechanized fishing altered these systems. Younger fishers often dismissed folklore as superstition. Elders expressed concern, not nostalgia.

Without shared narratives, collective restraint weakened. Conflicts increased. Wetlands shrank. Fish stocks declined.

The loss was practical, not sentimental.

F) Strategies and Recommendations

- Integrate folklore documentation into local development planning
- Include elders in fisheries governance
- Record and teach fishing narratives through community schools
- Design conservation programs aligned with traditional calendars

These strategies respected existing knowledge rather than replacing it.



IX. Conclusion:

Fishing folklore among the Bodos remains a living archive of socio-economic wisdom and ecological awareness. Treating it as irrelevant tradition overlooks its regulatory power. Recognizing its value offers pathways for culturally grounded sustainability. The future of fishing livelihoods may depend as much on remembered stories as on modern tools.

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