



## An Outline Clan Of The Boros In Assam

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**ABSTRACT**

The clan is defined as the composition of a number of families, often bearing a common designation. In Assam, the Boros have several clans called as aris or maharis, which appear to be a sign of some sort of kinship. But their clan being a socio-family group usually derived from their traditional beliefs. The clan system of the Boros however, experienced both the continuity and change in their works in the social and religious spheres. Earlier, this system indicated their social hierarchy in accordance with the allotted works in the society. But in the recent past, the eroding of its significance is noticed

**KEYWORDS**

Clan, Derivation, Works, Boros

### Introduction

The Boros also popularly known as Bodo are one of the earliest and largest inhabitant tribes of the north-eastern India, particularly of Assam. They belong to a branch of the Tibeto-Burman family of language. Originally, the Boros were a ruling tribe. But due to a larger group of ethnicity, they are called as the Boro-Kachari or Bodo-Kachari in Assam. They are now widely scattered all over Assam, in some part of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Meghalaya and in some parts of the North and East Bengal, and other neighbouring foreign countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. The Boros have a number of clans. The clan called as 'ari' or 'ary' or 'mahari' 1 in Boro is primarily a socio-family group. The clan of the Boros is mainly based on a male lineage of descent. The clan relationship is usually found from the common lineage, straps of marriage and some socio-religious activities. Some of their clans or groups are identified in the terms of symbols referred to as a totemic, generally in the form of a particular animal, bird, fish, insect, plant, place or even an inanimate objects but the origin of the others may be traced to certain characteristics of their ancestors. There are also other clans which are opted from the spouses in accordance to prescribed rules. According to Davis Kingsley, theoretically the clan is an organized body of kinsmen descended from the same ancestor though actually many clans become so large that their common ancestor is either mythical or forgotten.<sup>2</sup> Each kin group thus obtains their membership first and foremost on being in the clan.

### Derivation of Boro clans and their works

In Boro society, there are several clans or social groups prevalently branded with 'ary'. They are Swargiary, Basumatary, Narzary, Musahary, Goyary, Daimary, Kherkhatary, Mahilary, Lahary, Hajowari, Islary, etc. The derivation of their clans mainly found from their traditional beliefs is very remarkable. For instance, the Swargiary clan seems to have been derived from the word 'swrgw' means heaven. It is alike to the heavenly-folk. The people of this group were originally a priestly clan but not considered like that of Brahmins of Hindu religion as the latter consists of a caste occupying high position in the society. Earlier, they became either Douri (priest) or Oja (man oracle) for performing the religious rites and rituals in their society. But in course of time, they were completely merged with the mass of cultivators, and took up cultivation and other professions also. Similarly, the Basumatary clan defined as the earth-folk is said to have been originated from the word 'Bwisumuti' meaning mother earth.<sup>3</sup> They were the landlords, and their main task was the distribution of lands among themselves. In earlier days, when the dead body of a person was to be buried or kept open by the Boro people in the field there was a tradition to purchase a grave or place for the dead person on the burial ground. That was done sym-

bolically by giving a few coins of rupees to a member of the Basumatary clan who then leaves it on the ground as an offering to it. In the course of time, this practice also became redundant but the system of purchasing a grave for the dead person is still practiced in the Boro society by offering the coin on the ground by any of the clan member themselves.

The Boro word 'narzwi' means dry leaf of jute plant and the clan which derived from it, is known as Narzary. The people of this clan or group known as jute-folk<sup>4</sup> are believed to have collected dry jute leaves called 'narzwi gwan' and supplied it formerly on some rites and rituals, especially on the occasions of burial of a dead body and during the observance of post funeral ceremony. The narzwi gwan has been one of the most favourite dishes in the Boro cuisine since long past. Although its taste is very bitter, it has still a very important place in the Boro society. The practice of chewing a small quantity of narzwi gwan is compulsory for every person attending at the funeral and post funeral ceremony in order to sever finally the relation with the dead. This practice is called 'narzwi orgarnai'. Likewise, the Musahary or Mwsahary clan is connected with the Boro word 'musa' meaning tiger. So, they are believed to have belonged to tiger-folk but they are sometimes known in earlier undivided Darrang district as Baglari.<sup>5</sup> Instead of Musahary, there are a considerable number of Boro people who still use to write the surname of Baglari. Actually, the word 'Bag' is not a Boro word but an Assamese word meaning tiger. The main reason behind this change was probably due to the influence of Assamese speaking community upon some Bodo inhabitants who were in close proximity with them. Majority of them having this title are now found in the districts of Nalbari, Udalguri and Baksa of Assam. In the district of Baksa, the Musahary clan is also called by the Boro villagers as 'musani bahagi' <sup>6</sup> meaning kinsfolk of the tiger. Earlier, they were hunters, but were not supposed to kill the tiger. It is believed that this group also kept alert for the safety of domestic animals from the attack of tigers. But if this group of people hear or get any information about killing or death of a tiger in the neighbourhood villages then all the members of a family observe a day of mourning for the dead tiger as if it belonged to their family. On this mourning day the floors and walls of each house are wipe-painted by the womenfolk with freshly prepared compost of mud and cow-dung. All articles, like cloths and household utensils made of brass are washed neatly in water and are also sprinkled by sacred water. This practice is still followed in interior Boro villages.

Apart from this, some of the clans which seem to have derived from the name of rivers, plants, insects, pulse, are Daimary, Khakhary, Sibingary, Ganjlerari or Ganlari, Sobaiairi, etc. However, the Bibaiari clan derived from the word 'bibai'

meaning begging, is described as begging folk<sup>7</sup>. But it needs to mention here that in their society, there is not a single reference of a beggar from amongst the members of the clan. The collectors of some materials during the time of Kherai and Garja festivals were probably named as Bibaiari.

Yet again, a few numbers of clans seem to have been originated from the name of their dwelling places. For example, the dwellers of plain area in Assam are known as Hainary or Hayenari originated from the word 'hayen' meaning plain area or valley. But the Hajowary clan was the hill-dwellers. The word 'hajow' or 'hajwu' means hills and in the past, the group of Boro people who once dwelled on the hills, were called as Hajowary.<sup>8</sup> The name of a place still had dominant influence of Boro language in the Kamrup district of Assam, and that place was known as 'Hajo' which was originally the Boro word 'hajwu' meaning hillock.

According to social position, the Kherkatary clan identified as the squirrel-folk by Endle<sup>9</sup> was considered to be the low caste people whose main work was cutting the horn of cattle and thatch in the jungle. But they were not like that of Shudra caste of Hindus as the latter consists of a caste occupying the lowest position in their society. The people of this title or clan were mostly found in erstwhile Kamrup district of Assam.

The derivation of Mahilary clan from the word 'mahal' or 'lease' identified themselves as fishery lessees and petty traders. In the past, the people of Goyari clan were also cultivators and traders of areca-nuts, betel-nuts. But the clan Ovary was planters and suppliers of bamboos in the Kherai festival (one of the national Boro festivals). Besides them, the Lahary clan was supposed to be the planters of banana tree<sup>10</sup> and provided banana leaves to be used as plates during the time of Kherai and Garja festivals. Thus, all these clans basically came from their specific occupations.

In common parlance, the Islary clan derives from the word 'iswr' meaning God. The people of this clan were believed to be the worshippers of God. In earlier times, members from Islary clan needed to make arrangement for the worship of Almighty God, Bathou Bwrai and Goddess, Bathou Burwi. They are found scattered in the different districts of Assam but very few in numbers. The Bargary clan is supposed to have been derived from the word 'bwr gabnai' meaning praying. Earlier, members of this clan were engaged as Douri or Oja and so were much similar to the Swrgary clan. There are some more clans, such as Bingiary, Ramchiary, Samphramary, Thalirary, Dangiary, Chwinary, Phadangary, etc., who are however found very few in numbers in their society. Some more clans or surnames are also found among the Boros of West Bengal state, such as Laoari, Aeophramari, Sangphathang, Katajari, Narziary, Bamuda, etc.<sup>11</sup> A considerable number of Boro people after converting to Hinduism assumed the different surnames, such as Thakuria, Deka, Sarania, Choudhury, Bharali, etc. Likewise, a section of Boro people after adopting the Brahma faith used to write the title 'Brahma.'<sup>12</sup> Later some Boro people also adopted other titles or surnames not conforming to their traditional customs, such as Boro, Borosa, Dewri, Mahalia, Barmahalia, etc. but they belonged to different groups or clans of their society. The office of the Douri (priest) is not hereditary. Even in case of Brahma dharma also, it appears the same as that purohit (priest) is selected from any social group.<sup>13</sup>

It may be referred that the clan system is widely prevalent among the Dimasa-Kachari of North-Cachar Hills and Barmans of Barak valley also who belong to the great Boro race. They have total eighty two clans of whom forty male clans called 'sengphong' and forty-two female clans called 'zaluk'.<sup>14</sup> Both the clans are exogamous and even the marriage cannot take place between the boys and girls of the same clan. However, the prevalent of Sengphong and Zuluk formerly amongst the Boros of Goalpara and North Bengal like the clan of Dimasa<sup>15</sup> on the word of K N Choudhury is a matter of in-depth study. In former times, the Boros were also strictly exogamous and no marriage in the same clan could take place. The wife assumes the surname of her husband after her marriage. It may be mentioned that till the middle part of the twentieth century some mother retained her own title without affecting her generations.<sup>16</sup> Even then, the practice was rare.

### Conclusion

By the clan system, the social hierarchy of the Boros was formerly stipulated in accordance with the assigned works in their socio-religious spheres, but in the course of time, it lost its originality. Despite of this, they are still rarely found in practice with exception to a few clans in some interior areas of Boro villages. Each clan has an equal position and status. In fact, no any political significance is seen in their clan system. The member of each clan in the family had surname according to their occupation. But the names of the clan are now used as the surnames or titles.

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