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**FOLK MUSIC AS A VOICE OF MARGINALIZED
SOCIETY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GOALPARIA
FOLK MUSIC OF ASSAM AND *PHLENG PHUE*
CHIWIIT OF THAILAND**

Folksongs identify itself with the people of the particular area and surroundings. They are verbally carried out through generations depicting the picture of a particular society and community. The colonial history of Western Assam had witnessed the political manipulation by the British authority, bifurcating the densely populated Rajbanshi territories to create Assam and Bengal. Koch-Rajbanshis are one of the major tribes of Assam and Bengal in India. After the territorial split, the Rajbanshis living in Bengal soon lost their language, culture as well as their civilizational roots. The condition of the Rajbanshis in the newly formed State of Assam was nothing better. Having lost their language, culture and identity, they soon got degenerated into an inferior community. At a juncture when the Koch Rajbanshis had to encounter a phase of crisis, Goalparia folk songs of Pratima Barua Pandey emerged as an instrument of effective intervention to usher in a path of hope for these people, who desperately needed a direction for possible redemption of their cultural, linguistic as well as social identity.

In a similar fashion, *Phleng phue chiwit* folksongs of Thailand reflects the marginalized people's lives of Thailand especially after 1930's (the period of 1930's marked by the political change from monarchy to constitutional monarchy). Some of the well known singers through this particular group of folksongs used to lay emphasis on the corrupt politicians and satirizing the corrupt officials of the time. In 1970's Carabao groups under the *Phleng Phue Chiwit* emphasized on peoples equal rights especially farmers, workers and labourers. Suntharee Wechanont in Northern Thailand, through her songs reflected the lives of the marginalized ethnic groups which provided them a sense of identity.

In this paper, an attempt is made to highlight the process of exclusion of Koch Rajbonshis in mainstream Assam and the marginalized groups in mainstream Thailand. It will also show how the folk songs of both the regions

have provided sanctity to the intimate cultural experiences of the existing groups to search for an identity. This paper stresses the significant role of music, art and literature play in identity assertion amidst the politics of exclusion and inclusion. The paper also aims at suggesting innovative strategies for peace building based on the tools of cultural markers.

Cecil Sharp, the famous folksong composer and singer, has explained folksongs as “the spontaneous music of the unspoiled, unlettered classes and created out of their pure natural instinct”.¹ Similarly, Hans Eisler has also reiterated, “Folk songs arise under primitive economic conditions, especially in agrarian economies...”² In fact, such songs are continuous, unwritten and are verbally carried out from generations to generations depicting the picture of a particular society or community. Folk songs are intrinsic to ways of life, day to day activities and festivities³. The languages of the folk songs are purely regional.

In this paper, an attempt is made to understand how the folk songs of both Assam (India) and Thailand have provided sanctity to the intimate cultural experiences of the existing groups to search for an identity.

Regional folk songs or “*Desi*” songs (as it is referred by the people of western Assam) have a special position in western Assam of undivided Goalpara District. Prior to 1958, Goalparia folk songs are known as ‘Desi’ songs or ‘*Bhawaiya Geet*’. In 1958, Pratima Barua Pandey and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika⁴ changed the name from ‘Desi’ to ‘Goalparia Lokageet’ or Goalparia folk songs⁵.

Before going into the details of Goalparia folksongs, it is important to discuss about the socio-political turmoil of the Koch Rajbanshis, whose civilisational roots were dwindled after the territorial split⁶.

The proposed study is an attempt to rediscover Pratima Barua Pandey and find the linkages she had established through her music with the greater discourse of culture, ethnicity, folk consciousness, history and identity. Her life and songs are the primary sources to evolve the foundation to take up this proposed work. She had, in fact, revived the songs of the people who themselves were oblivious of the potentiality of the songs in rebuilding the crumbling community consciousness, most of whom were the Koch Rajbanshis.

The study would make an attempt to make a deep enquiry into the socio-political history of the place and people in general and the Gauripur Raj Estate in particular to contextualize Pratima Barua Pandey and her songs from the perspective of their contemporary cultural and social significance. Songs sung by Pratima Barua Pandey would form one of the important components of the study. The songs would analyze genre wise in order to evaluate the thematic and emotive range of the songs which are essentially reflective of the ethos and the cultural nuances of the people traditionally

associated with the songs. Apart from the available literature, the study is based on the extensive field work and the manuscripts available mostly in the Royal library of Gauripur ⁷, personal interviews with the people intimately associated with Pratima Barua Pandey like her husband, Prof. G.S. Pandey, her cousin, Prabir Barua, her accompanying musicians like Kulu Ray, Sitanath Ray; eminent artists and scholars, cultural organisers, etc., who were specially associated with her or who did significant amount of work on Pratima Barua Pandey. As part of the methodology special questionnaires were designed to collect information pertinent to the focus of the present study like the unraveled details of her life, impact of her songs on the common people, importance of her songs in the formation of the growing national consciousness of the people in the adjuncts.

Koch-Rajbanshis are one of the major tribes of Assam and Bengal in India. Though a section of the Koch community call themselves Rajbanshis earlier the term 'Koch' was a comprehensive term to denote the entire community of Koch people. The period between the last part of the thirteenth century and till the mid fifteenth century was a time of political turmoil. Following the series of attacks by the Pathans⁸, the position of the Kamta king became rather unsteady. Between the 4th and the 15th century the Bengal of today was the part of the western district of the Kamrupa Kingdom. During the 13th and the 15th century the western district of Kamrupa was established as a separate kingdom called Kamatapur but was invaded from time to time by the Nawabs of Bengal⁹. The invasion of Hussain Shah, the nawab of Gaud, put Kamata kingdom at a state of extreme disaster when the individual feudal rulers of Kamata kingdom came together to form a united force against the invading Pathans from the foreign land. Haridas Mandal was one such feudal rulers who was made the leader of the group to fight against the pathans.¹⁰ His wife Hira gave birth to Bishu, who later proved himself to be a man of formidable power and went on to establish the Koch empire. The kingdom of Kamata Koch behar, which was established under Biswa Singha i.e., Bishu was later divided between his grandsons. However, never was the kingdom absolutely subdued. It retained its sovereignty until in 1773 when it became a semi autonomous kingdom under British India.¹¹

On attaining India's independence on 15 August in 1947 from the British rule, Maharaja Jagadwipendra Narayan, the last king of Kochbehar belonging to Bishwa Singha's dynasty, signed the treaty of accession with India on 20 August, 1948. Prior to the accession, His Majesty Maharaja Jagadwipendra Narayan had a meeting with Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, in London. In the meeting His Majesty had entrusted the responsibility of annexing the state of Koch behar either with Bengal or Assam taking into consideration the wishes of the people of Koch behar. This was reflective of the democratic temperament of the Maharaja. Soon after, in a public meeting in Calcutta, Mr. Nehru went on public to declare that the

annexation of Koch behar either with Bengal or Assam would be executed only as per the desire of the people of Kochbehar. But unfortunately what followed was exactly contradictory to what the Indian government committed to itself. The state of Koch behar was annexed to Bengal in absolute violation of the wishes of the people of Koch behar who had expressed their desire to have their state merged with Assam.¹²

Assam was keen to have the state of Kochbehar being merged with it. The then Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Gopinath Bordoloi came to Koch behar and interacted with the people there. The argument of Assam in favour of this mission was that since time immemorial the Kochbehar and Assam were inseparable in terms of cultural, historical, geographical and religious bondage. The soul of Assamese culture, Shankardeva, began his Neo-Vaishnavite movement under the patronage of the Kochbehar King. In fact Kochbehar was very much like the intellectual source of Assam. Hence, Kochbehar must be a part of Assam¹³. Immediately after this Jawaharlal Nehru declared in Calcutta that 'plebiscite will decide the fate of Kochbehar.' However, it remains a regretful event in history that despite the desire of the people of Kochbehar as well as the people of undivided Goalpara along with a strong argument of the then Governor General of Assam, Sir Akber Hyderi, Kochbehar was almost anachronistically annexed to Bengal.¹⁴

As a result of a series of politico-historical development, the densely populated Rajbanshi territories have bifurcated into two parts namely Assam and Bengal. Consequently, the Rajbanshis (of both the region) got separated from each other causing gradual rusting in their unity. Though the Rajbanshis should have been integrated as Assamese and Bengalis in the respective territories but such a situation never occurred for them.¹⁵ The Rajbanshis living in Bengal soon lost their language, culture as well as their civilizational roots. Despite their efforts to get interpolated into the fold of Bengali identity by accepting their language and culture, they failed miserably to have a respectful position in the mainstream of Bengal¹⁶. The condition of the Rajbanshis in the newly formed Assam state was no better. Having lost their language, culture and identity, they soon degenerated into an inferior community. The Rajbanshis living in Goalpara were defined in terms of the derogatory misnomer 'Goalparia Bengalis' by the mainstream in Assam. Moreover, after being annexed to Bengal, Kochbehar became a land unspeakable repression of Calcutta¹⁷.

Despite one's perfect mastery over the English language and the culture, an Indian would never be called an Englishman. Similarly in spite of the acceptance of orthodox Aryan Hindu culture and religion, acquiring of Assamese and Bengali language and culture in the respective states, the Koch Rajbanshis are never accepted as pure Assamese or pure Bengali. They are rather considered as people of lower caste strata. Charu Sanyal in his *Rajbanshis of North Bengal* writes:

Though the Rajbanshis of the modern time through their national mobilisation and various publications have been claiming themselves as Kshatriyas since the last century as well as till the beginning of this century, they have today become Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class. Their Kshatriyahood has not been able to become part of the Aryan Kshatriya.¹⁸

Pratima Barua Pandey emerged at a juncture when the Koch Rajbanshis had to encounter a phase of crisis. Her songs became instruments of effective intervention to usher in a path of hope for these people who desperately needed a direction for possible redemption of their cultural, linguistic as well as social identity. For the last three decades the very name Pratima Barua Pandey remained synonymous with the history of the growing cultural consciousness of West Assam. She has also been the cultural reference to the folk geo-cultural mores of the people of this region. This was Pratima Barua Pandey who had for the first time given due sanctity to the intimate cultural experiences of the people through her songs. The repertoire of her songs covered all possible nuances of human relationship that included intimacy in married couples, secluded romance of young lovers, passionate celebration of youthful desires, and poignant tales of the mahouts as well as the endless expanse of the wild landscape. Perhaps these songs might well have been relapsed into oblivion had Pratima Barua Pandey not brought out them onto the foreground new cultural platforms. The Koch Rajbanshis, despite being the original inhabitants of the region were consigned to the past and through Pratima's songs they have rejuvenated themselves.¹⁹

Pratima's songs, however, can be divided into seven broad heads,²⁰

1. Dehatatta (Materialistic Spiritualism) - These songs did not carry any particular religious ideology. These songs are based on the ancient ideals of devotion to '*Param tatta*' i.e., immortal soul which is in destructive. Human beings are mortal and short lived. We found full expression of human body, human life, wealth and property, relatives, friends, etc.
2. Biraha (Tragedy): When happiness ends tragedy begins. Goalparia folk songs are unparalleled with respect to revealing the feeling of tragedy. Expressions of painful separation of the wives from their husbands when husband moves out of home for business purposes are beautifully expressed in the sentimental feelings of women.
3. Prem (Love): Maximum numbers of Golaparia songs are based on the theme of 'love'. Love affairs in different stages of life are to be found in such songs. For instance, union, separation and extra marital affairs of a woman/man have been highlighted.
4. Mahut (Elephantman): Goalparia songs of Pratima Barua have also reflected the uncertainty of the life of elephantmen. The life of a *mahut* is not easy. They have to withstand sun and rain while driving

the elephant. He moves out of home, leaving their near and dear ones for the sake of livelihood.

5. Maishal (Buffalo man): Like elephantmen, the buffalomen are also have to undergo the same pain and agony for the sake of livelihood. In the time of loneliness, the only companion of a buffaloman is a flute and a *ditora* (double string musical instrument). The Goalparia songs have expressed the life of the buffalomen in a riverside who brave the natural disadvantages and inconveniences. Though in social strata, the elephantmen or the buffalomen never gets due recognition in Goalparia songs, they are placed with high esteem through the composer's imagination.
6. Songs related to Muslim community: It is found that the composer of the Goalparia folk songs tries to uphold the various aspects of the social characteristics of Muslim Community. The saree²¹, the vermilion²² and white bangles (made of conch) are also used by the women of Muslim community in some areas of Golapara (in Dhubri and Agomoni) like their Hindu counterparts. The Goalparia songs sung by Pratima Barua reflect the secular feelings of the society and give priority to livelihoods than the religion.
7. Kala (Black Mystic): There are many subjects touched upon by the Goalparia folk song, which is full of mysticism. In Goalparia folk songs Lord Krishna has been depicted as a 'lover' than a 'God'. This category of songs reveals the link of love between soul and almighty. For instance, Meera bai's²³ love for Krishna comes under this group. Composer of the Goalparia folk song has limited the divine love of Sri Krishna into material and physical limitations.
8. Miscellaneous songs: There are also some songs which have not been classified under any particular group as mentioned earlier. Some of them are related to social events or humorous songs or related to fishing. These songs reflect the sentiments of the rural life of Goalpara district²⁴.

The Rajbonshis of Assam have long been engaged in a search for a workable historical address informed by their shared emotional legacies. They were in a deep urge to emerge, imagined or otherwise as a nation across the geopolitical boundaries that have divided their cultural territory. Against such a backdrop, Pratima Barua emerged as a force to unify the fragmented self of the Rajbonshis in terms of their cultural and political existence.²⁵

Pratima Barua Pandey picked up the songs and music of the rural folk and presented them in the domain of mainstream cultural spaces. She was one of the first female artists to have taken the challenge to turn an essentially folk musical art into a vibrant and dynamic asset of people's cultural

heritage.²⁶ In fact she turned out to be a catalyst in the evolution of a strong community consciousness among the Koch-Rajbonshis.

The *desi* or the Goalparia songs were neither popular nor reached all sections of the people before 1937. However, through her consistent effort, Barua enhanced the position of Goalparia folk songs in the eyes of the whole India. Though she was born in an aristocratic family and could have easily entered in the glamorous world as an artist she was more interested to revive and retain the originality of the Goalparia folk song. Till the last day of her life, she dedicated herself to the folk song of the region.

There should be some national imperative to preserve the legacy of Pratima Barua Pandey. There has not been any significant attempt towards digital documentation of Pratima Barua's songs. Her music should be preserved in digital format to ensure due preservation of her legacy. Pratima Barua and the significance of her songs are not limited to Assam. Her significance pervaded beyond the boundaries of Assam. She was as much an icon of the masses in North Bengal where Rajbahsis are the majority community so was in Eastern Bihar and the South Nepal wherever the Rajbanshis formed the major community. The unprecedented and overwhelming response Pratima Barua received primarily because the people of these regions could immediately identify themselves with the songs and its language and the very fact of Pratima Barua's singing of the songs was easily seen as an act of royal endorsement to the language and culture of the community that was so far not been able to establish its cultural legitimacy with authentic articulations despite the fact that the songs remained a part of cultural expressions for the people. Pratima Barua's arrival was seen by the community as the formal claim for an extinct culture.

Coming to Thailand, songs are broadly divided into five categories:

1. Traditional Folksongs (*phleng phum ban*)
2. Patriotic songs
3. City songs (*Phleng luk grung*)
4. Country songs (*Phleng luk thung*)
5. Songs for better life (*Phleng phue chiwit*)²⁷

Similar to Goalparia songs, no one knows when *Phleng phue chiwit* songs actually started. However, these songs began to take shape after 1930's. During 1937-1947, songs sung by Saengnapha Bunrasri, Saneh Gomanrachu, Khambon Sampunanon, etc., covered various themes related to the lives of the common and the marginalized people. Carabao sang those songs in 1999. Some of the famous songs of those period were the smell of the mud and buffalo (*Klin khon sab khwai*), the mantra of politics (*Mon kan muang*), the garbage man, wandering vendors and so on. In 1970s, the songs for life came to a halt.

The singer writer, Jit Phumisak, was imprisoned but he continues to write reflecting the then sociopolitical life of the labourer, working class, farmers, etc. His poems were sung later by Nga Caravan during October uprising of 1973. These songs became the prototype of all songs for life afterward.

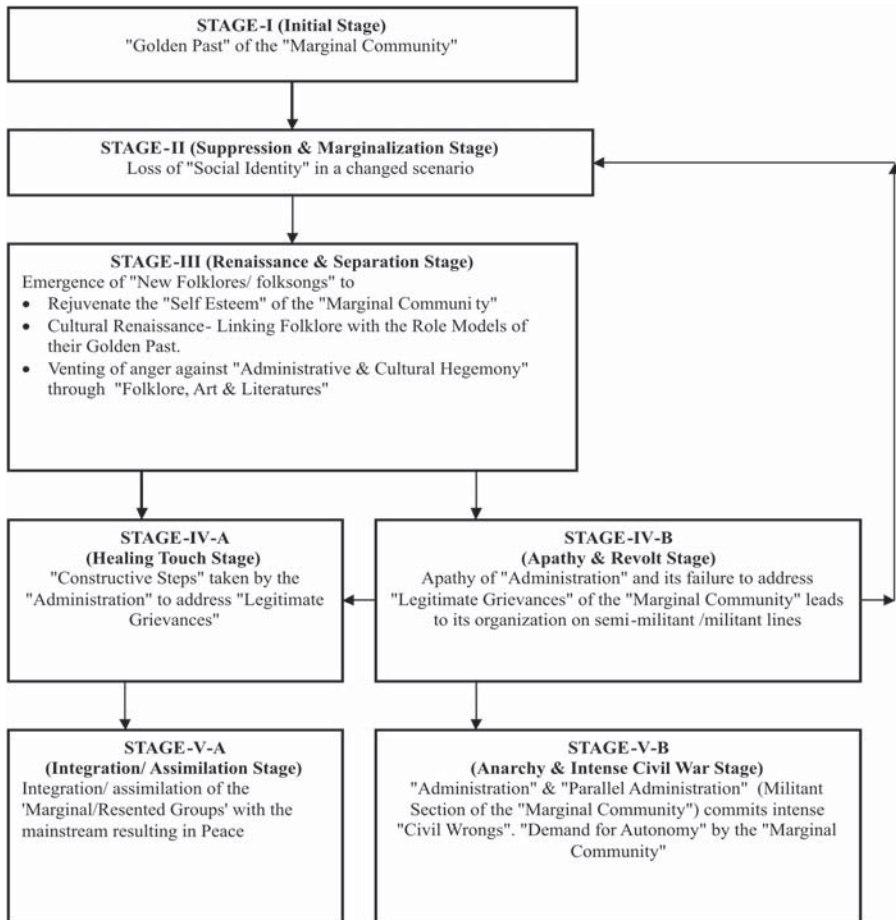
After the return of the exiled members in 1982, the songs like 'homebound' (*khuen rang*) marked the return of the songs for life. However, their return was marked by the gentle note as the singers had to survive in the entertainment business world. In fact, in those days many writers stopped political songs, but Carabao²⁸ songs continue to attack political injustice and to voice the marginalized, women and ethnic groups.

Suntharee Wechanon, a democratic artist from Chiang Mai met folk singer Jagan Manophet and gradually sang some of his songs such as *noi jaiya*, *motorcycle girl*, *sao chiang mai*, *kulab wiang ping*, etc, depicting the plight of the marginalized and their sociopolitical life. Suntharee later on became interested in politics by participating in Chiang Mai local awareness group with local monks, academic circle, and artists to promote local cultural awareness of the northern communities and started reflecting on the social realities of these groups. She in fact joined the protest of the bloody May of 1992 for justice and preservation of local cultural heritage such as night safari, monorail, Ping river dam project. Suntharee's life was threatened as she raised her voice against the Taksin regime. However, Suntharee's Phleng phue chiwit songs have always become the source of inspiration for the Carabaos.²⁹

Suntharee's songs, however, can be divided into following broad heads,

- (1) Region specific-example of such songs are '*A girl from Chainag Mai*' The song depicts how a lady from Chiangmai was being used by men folk around but refused to marry her. Ultimately a hill tribes man residing outside Chiangmai's married her.
- (2) Tragedy - The songs like '*Mamia*' depicts how a prince from a royal family falls in love with a local vendor from Myanmar when the prince went for studies to Malamaeng. The song depicts the social barrier due to the existing social hierarchy, somewhat similar to Indian caste system and finally the tragic partition of the paramours.
- (3) Tribal Rituals of Thailand- The song '*Mida*' tells us the rituals pertaining to *Akha* tribe and depicts the entire *Lan sao kod* rituals (where after the mountain clearing the virgin girl would embrace the young men before they get married).
- (4) Depicting the nature- Songs like '*The river Ping*' falls in this category, where Suntharee described the beautiful sceneries, flowers and trees in high mountains.

- (5) Present day unrest, political turmoil related- Most of the Phleng phue chiwit songs fall into this category. Some of the famous songs of this category are, *Amerikey* (Americans as exploiters), *Parachadip Patai* (longing for democracy), *Chao tak* (King from Tonburi reign), *wichha phae* (satire songs), *Chaang Hai* (crying elephant³⁰), *Long wat* (mised development), *Sa mak Khee pra thet Thai* (Unified Thailand), *Khwan Thai Jai Nueng Deo* (Thai Axe with one heart) etc. Some songs are indirectly related to 18 years of military coup and the sufferings of the common man. Suntharee’s songs followed by Carabao songs have in fact helped to raise consciousness of the common masses in Thailand for a more democratic solution of all the existing problems similar to the Rajbonshis of Assam.



Folk music as a tool to predict Peace / Civil War

Source: Developed by the authors on the basis of the field data

A. L. Lloyd in his pioneering book, *Folk Song in England* (1967)³¹, suggested that the aspiration to recover a folk community was a way of articulating political tension. Lloyd extended this response by questioning the association of 'folk' with the more or less mythical rural past. Against this backdrop one can make an effort to understand the significance of Suntharee's or Carabao or Pratima Barua's songs which do not have only socio-cultural dimensions but also potential historical-political connotations.

Using folk music as a tool, we have developed a model through which we can depict 'identity' consciousness of an 'alienated group' and eventually 'peace' or 'conflict' in any ethnically divided or fragmented society. In the context of Western Assam, the Koch Rajbonshi issue has already reached stage IV (B) with the birth of Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) in Bengal and Assam Koch Rajbonshi Students' Union (AKRASU) and is fast approaching towards V (B).³² In the context of Thailand, stage no V (B) has also become a reality. (Please see the diagram).

NOTES

1. Roy, Tapan Pradhan, *Abbasuddin*, Deep Publisher, Kolkatta, p. 57.
2. Eiser Hans, *A Rebel in Music*, Allen Williams book, Berlin, 1978, p. 19.
3. Bhattacharya, Annanya, *The Folk Artists and an experiment of their Livelihood programme* (URL [http:// mail.google.com/mail/](http://mail.google.com/mail/))
4. A renowned composer and a singer of Assam. He has received many prestigious awards for his contribution in the field of music.
5. *Ajir Axom*, 5 November, 1988.
6. Choudhury, Ambika Charan, *Koch Rajbonshi Jatir Itihash Aru sanskriti*, Bongaigaon: Ratnapith Prakash, 1969, p. 49.
7. Ancestral place of Pratima Barua in Goalpara district of Assam.
8. Representatives of the Mughal rulers in Bengal (earstwhile Gauda kingdom).
9. Barma, Dharmanarayan and Manta Dhaneswar, *Kkamrup Kamata Koch Bihar Rajjedr Itihash*, Kochbehar, Kochbehar, 2005, p. 220.
10. *Ibid*, p. 107.
11. *Op cit.*, Barma, *kamrup kamata...*, p. 220.
12. *Op. cit.*, Barman, p. 123.
13. Ray N. R. *Koch Rajbonshi and kamatapur* –The Truth Unveiled, Guwahati: Vicky publisher, 2007, p. 112.
14. J. P. Rajkhowa writes: In spite of this, the then Deputy Prime Minister of India, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, came under the influence of the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Sri Bidhan Ch. Ray, and also the West Bengal PCC (Pradesh Congress Committee) Chief, Sri Atulya Ghosh. As a consequence of such undue influence and intriguing politics, the state of Kochbehar was unilaterally annexed to West Bengal on 1st January, 1950 against the will of its people. Cited in Rajkhowa J.P., General Chilarai and His Times, Guwahati, 2003, pp. 216-217.

15. Ray NR, *Koch Rajbanshi and Kamatapur- The truth unjeiled*, Guwahati: Vicky publishers, 2007, pp. 112-118.
16. *Ibid*, p. 119.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
18. Sanyal, C. C., *The Rajbonshis of North Bengal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Kolkatta, 1965, p. 19.
19. Pegu, Jadav, *Reclaiming Identity- A Discourse on Bodo History*, Guwahati: Saraighat, 2004, p. 15.
20. Das, Dhiren, *Goalparia Lok sanskriti aru lokageet*, Guwahati; Chandra Prakash, 1998, pp. 130-272.
21. Indian dress worn by women.
22. A type of red coloured powder used by married Indain Hindu women as sign of their marriage.
23. A devotee of Lord Krishna.
24. Das, Dhiren, *Goalparia Lok sanskriti aru lokageet*, Guwahati; Chandra Prakash, 1998, pp. 283-97.
25. Surendra Basunia recorded two folk songs in the HMV for the first time.(unpublished work of Pratima Neogi).
26. Unpublished work of Pratima Neogi.
27. [www.londo.com /www.plangprachacon.com](http://www.londo.com/www.plangprachacon.com).
28. See note no. 29.
29. Carabao band was first originated in Philippines by students named Opakul and promsaka. In 1984, carabao was classed as the top range popular band with their historical fifth Album "*Made in Thailand*". The songs depicts the Thai baht devaluation of the government and government's policy to use Thai products. Infact, '*Made in Thailand*' easily brought back the Thai values to Thai society.
30. 'Elephant' symbolizes Thailand.
31. For more pl see, <http://cjt.icaap.org/content/25/v25art2.html>
32. Developed on the basis of field work by the authors.

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