

# Ecological Themes in the Bodo Traditional Textile Designs

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Received: 15-11-2025, Accepted: 26-11-2025, Published: 31-12-2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18108188>

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the ecological themes in the traditional textile designs of the Bodos, an indigenous ethnic group from Northeast India. The intricate textiles of the Bodos highlight both their cultural richness and their enduring harmony with nature. This paper delves into the world of the Bodo traditional textile designs, exploring the intricate ecological themes woven into the fabric of their creations. Through descriptive-analytical methods, the study analyses the symbolism and motifs found in the Bodo traditional textiles, revealing a deep connection with nature. Remarkably, the Bodo traditional textile design is rooted in a deep understanding of ecological balance and harmony. The motifs and patterns often depict the rich diversity of the flora that is native to their homeland. In addition, this research also discusses the role these traditional designs play in conveying environmental values within the Bodo society. The Bodo culture has a rich background in textile production, and their traditional textile design embodies not only aesthetic beauty but also a profound traditional ecological knowledge system. The key objective of this study is to document and analyse these themes, providing insights into the intricate relationships between Bodo textiles and the natural environment. The study draws upon primary sources, including interviews with Bodo weavers and community elders, as well as a review of relevant literature, to understand the ecological significance embedded in the Bodo traditional textile designs.

**Keywords:** Bodos, Culture, Ecological theme, Flora, Natural environment, Traditional textile design.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Bodo people, indigenous to the North-eastern region of India, have a long-standing tradition of textile craftsmanship that is deeply rooted in their connection with nature. For centuries, the Bodo community has relied on the bounty of the natural world for sustenance and inspiration, and this symbiotic relationship is vividly reflected in their textile designs. From the motifs inspired by flora to the choice of natural dyes derived from locally available plants, every aspect of Bodo traditional textiles echoes a profound

reverence for the environment. However, at the heart of Bodo traditional textile design lies a deep understanding of ecological balance and harmony. The motifs and patterns found in Bodo traditional textiles often depict a rich diversity of native flora in their homeland, symbolizing the intimate relationship between the Bodo people and their surroundings. These motifs not only serve as decorative elements but also carry symbolic significance, conveying traditional knowledge, beliefs, and cultural identity. Furthermore, using natural dyes in Bodo textile traditions highlights a sustainable approach to craftsmanship that is increasingly relevant in today's world. By utilizing locally sourced materials for dyeings, such as turmeric, indigo, and madder root, Bodo artisans not only create vibrant colours but also minimize the environmental impact of their craft. This eco-conscious approach to textile production underscores the Bodo community's commitment to preserving their natural heritage for future generations.

## Research Objectives

- i. To explore the Bodo traditional textile designs and their connection to ecological themes.
- ii. To analyze the techniques, material used in Bodo traditional textiles, assessing their ecological significance and sustainability.
- iii. To examine the role of Bodo traditional textile design in promoting biodiversity conservation, ecological balance, and sustainable livelihoods.
- iv. To identify challenges and opportunities for the preservation and revitalization of Bodo traditional textile design practices in the face of modernization, globalization, and environmental change.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs descriptive-analytical research methods to analyze traditional Bodo textile designs, focusing on motifs and patterns that reflect ecological themes. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are acquired through field visits, interviews with local artisans and weavers, and a review of existing literature on Bodo textiles. Secondary sources, including academic

papers, books, and online resources about Bodo culture and textiles, were reviewed to contextualize and support the findings. The study examined a variety of textiles, including Dokhona<sup>1</sup>, Phasra<sup>2</sup>, and Aronai<sup>3</sup> to identify recurring ecological motifs.

### III. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Native flora plays a central role in Bodo traditional textile designs, showing their deep bond with culture and ecology. In their textile designs, flora such as flowers, leaves, and creepers are often depicted with intricate detail, showcasing the rich biodiversity of the region. These motifs not only adorn the fabric but also symbolize the close relationship between the Bodo community and the land they inhabit. The choice of specific plants may also carry cultural significance, representing traditional knowledge of medicinal plants or plants with symbolic importance in Bodo rituals and ceremonies.

#### Dingkhiyabilaiagor (Fern leaf design)

The fern leaf, commonly depicted in the traditional textile designs of the Bodos, represents an important ecological theme rooted in their deep connection with nature. Ferns are widely found in the forests, riverbanks, and hilly regions of Assam and Northeast India, where the Bodo people primarily reside. Ferns not only frequently appear as motifs in Bodo traditional textiles, but are deeply rooted in their cultural, ecological, and spiritual practices. However, ferns are often used in Bodo festivals, rituals, and ceremonies. They may be included in traditional decorations during celebrations like Kherai Phwr bw, which is dedicated to deities for blessings, reflecting a spiritual reverence for nature. Certain types of ferns are used in Bodo traditional medicine and cuisine. Some edible fern varieties are consumed as vegetables, while others have medicinal properties, demonstrating the Bodo people's deep botanical knowledge and reliance on nature for well-being. The presence of ferns in Bodo traditional textile design signifies more than just an artistic or aesthetic choice; it represents a profound ecological consciousness and cultural identity. The motif is usually woven using vibrant colours and intricate patterns, representing the lushness of the plant, and is incorporated into traditional garments such as Aronai,

Dokhona, Gamsa<sup>4</sup> etc. by reflecting the rich biodiversity of their homeland.



Figure 1. Fern leaf in natural habitat



Figure 2. Fern leaf design in Bodo cloth

#### Phamibibaragor (Lotus design)

Ecological themes are prominent in the artistic traditions of the Bodos, as they have historically lived in close harmony with their natural surroundings, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley, where rivers, wetlands, and flora like the lotus play a central role in their daily lives. The Brahmaputra floodplains are rich in wetland biodiversity, and the lotus is a common plant in this region. The prominence of this flower in Bodo traditional textile designs reflects their reliance on wetland ecosystems for sustenance,

<sup>1</sup>Dokhona- a traditional garment worn by the Bodo women.

<sup>2</sup>Phasra- a traditional scarf used by Bodo women to cover the shoulder and head.

<sup>3</sup>Aronai- a special cloth worn by the Bodo warriors at war.

<sup>4</sup>Gamsa- the male traditional costume of the Bodos used to cover the portion from waist to knee by tying it in the waist.

resources, and artistic inspiration. By incorporating the lotus in their designs, Bodo weavers acknowledge their environment and the resources it provides. Furthermore, in the Bodo culture, the lotus is a symbol of purity, beauty, and spiritual growth. It is often associated with resilience, as the flower blooms gracefully in muddy waters, signifying the emergence of beauty from adversity. This concept resonates with the Bodos' belief in balance between nature and life. It is worth mentioning that, by using the lotus motif, Bodo artisans not only beautify their textiles but also help conserve ecological knowledge and promote the importance of biodiversity. The lotus motif in Bodo traditional textile designs is more than just an aesthetic element; it is a reflection of the ecological consciousness that runs through Bodo culture and its intricate relationship with the natural world.



**Figure 1.** Lotus in a natural wetland



**Figure 2.** Lotus design in cloth

### **Lewaagor (Creepers design)**

The Bodo heartland, particularly the Brahmaputra valley and its foothills, is home to a diverse range of creepers, vines, and climbers that thrive in the humid, subtropical climate. Plants like Pothārikhānā (*Passiflora*), Bhetai-lātab (*Cissusquadrangularis*), and various wild creepers are commonly found in forests, homesteads, and agricultural landscapes. The natural abundance of these plants makes

them a familiar and integral part of daily life. This familiarity and admiration for nature have naturally influenced their artistic expressions, including their textiles. The predominance of creeper motifs in Bodo textile designs is a testament to their deep-rooted ecological consciousness and cultural heritage. These patterns not only beautify their garments but also serve as a visual representation of their respect for nature, sustainability, and traditional wisdom. Creepers in Bodo textile motifs symbolize growth, resilience, and continuity of all vital aspects of life and nature. It is worth mentioning that many creepers hold special significance in Bodo socio-cultural life, such as traditional healing practices, and rituals. Certain vines are believed to have medicinal properties, while others are associated with protection and prosperity. The use of creeper patterns in textiles might also reflect these cultural beliefs, serving as a means of preserving indigenous knowledge.



**Figure 1.** Creeper in natural habitat



**Figure 2.** Creeper design in Bodo cloth

### Native flora design with the seasonal theme

Many designs in Bodo textiles are inspired by the changing seasons or natural cycles. These designs often feature flowers, leaves, and other botanical elements that bloom or change with each season. In traditional textiles, such motifs symbolize the connection between nature and cultural heritage. For instance, spring designs may include fresh blossoms, while autumn themes might showcase falling leaves. Such patterns not only celebrate biodiversity but also convey the rhythm of life and the passage of time. This influence is evident in the traditional textile designs of the Bodos. In line with this, the following is a brief discussion on this theme, along with examples of seasonal flowering flora.

#### **Bwigribibaragor (Jujube flower design/ Ziziphusmauritiana)**

The Jujube flower (locally known as BwigriBibar) holds a prominent place, symbolizing ecological harmony and the rhythm of seasonal changes. In Bodo culture, the jujube flower is associated with early autumn, a time when nature rejuvenates and communities celebrate the abundance of life. This seasonal flower, with its delicate and intricate form, inspires the geometric patterns woven into the Dokhona (traditional attire for women) and Gamsa (a traditional handwoven cloth). The patterns not only capture the beauty of the flower but also emphasize its role as a herald of renewal and prosperity.

The ecological importance of the jujube tree extends beyond aesthetics. It provides nourishment to humans, sustenance to pollinators like bees, and shade to the ecosystem. By incorporating the flower motif in their textiles, the Bodos subtly express their respect for biodiversity and their reliance on nature's cycles for livelihood and culture.

Thus, the jujube flower in Bodo textile design is more than an artistic choice. It is a cultural narrative that interweaves environmental awareness, traditional craftsmanship, and the celebration of seasonal transitions, showcasing the community's profound respect for ecological harmony.



Figure 1. Jujube flower in natural habitat



Figure 2. Jujube flower design in Bodo cloth

#### **Thaigirbibaragor (Elephant apple flower design/ DilleniaIndica)**

This design is inspired by the flower of the elephant apple which is considered a symbol of unrequited love among the people of Bodo society. The Elephant apple flower might bloom during the summer season, making it a marker of time and environmental change. Its beautiful form inspires many Bodo youngsters to weave and create floral motifs. By integrating it into textile designs, the Bodos are preserving a cultural memory of their dependence on and harmony with nature's cycles. The use of motifs like the Elephant apple flower bridges the natural and cultural worlds, affirming their heritage and ecological wisdom. This connection to ecological themes reflects an implicit message of sustainability, emphasizing coexistence with nature rather than exploitation. The motif serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving the environment for future generations.

Besides, the elephant apple has been a staple in the traditional cuisine of the Bodos since ancient times and it is deeply related to the five principles of Bathouism. The same is stated in the Bathou<sup>5</sup> prayer as follows, "Sijousirisiriba, Thaigirkhongakhongba, Siphunggudunggudungba,

<sup>5</sup>Bathou- the traditional religion of the Bodo people of Assam, centered on the worship of the supreme deity BwraiBathou and based on the "Principle of Five" elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Sky.

Mwnsinsibwrainiraoaphongba; Subungniasarabwasarba,  
Aphanwngnibandwabwbandwba | l<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1. Elephant apple flower in natural habitat



Figure 2. Elephant apple flower in Bodo cloth

## Results

- i. Traditional Bodo textile designs feature motifs inspired by diverse local flora, symbolizing a deep connection with nature.
- ii. Certain motif designs have spiritual meanings linked to nature worship and environmental conservation practices among the Bodos.
- iii. The traditional textile of the Bodos uses eco-friendly methods with minimal environmental impact, preserving both nature and cultural heritage.

- iv. The choice of colours and motifs often aligns with seasonal cycles and ecological transitions.
- v. Their textile designs reinforce traditional ecological ethics and promote eco-friendly livelihoods, sustaining both the environment and local artisan communities.

## IV. CONSERVATION AND REVIVAL EFFORTS

Conservation and revival efforts focused on ecological themes in Bodo traditional textile designs reflect a growing recognition of the importance of indigenous knowledge and sustainable practices in preserving both cultural heritage and environmental integrity. It is noteworthy that, over the years, Bodo traditional textile designs have undergone significant transformation due to various socio-economic factors, including modernization, globalization, and environmental degradation. However, amidst these changes, there has been a renewed interest in reviving and preserving the ecological themes inherent in Bodo textiles.

One of the key aspects of conservation and revival efforts is the documentation and preservation of traditional knowledge related to textile production techniques and design motifs. This involves engaging with elders and artisans within the Bodo community to record their expertise in weaving, dyeing, and pattern-making. By documenting these practices, researchers and practitioners can ensure that valuable knowledge is passed down to future generations and not lost to time.

Furthermore, conservation efforts often involve promoting sustainable practices in textile production. This includes utilizing locally sourced and natural materials for dyeing, such as plant extracts and minerals, which not only preserve traditional techniques but also reduce the environmental impact of textile manufacturing. By embracing eco-friendly practices, Bodo artisans can contribute to the preservation of their cultural heritage while minimizing harm to the surrounding ecosystems.

## V. CONCLUSION

Bodo traditional textile designs are rich in ecological themes, reflecting the community's deep connection with nature. The production techniques are largely sustainable, utilizing locally sourced materials and natural dyes derived from plants. Traditional weaving practices are environmentally friendly, with minimal waste and energy consumption. The motifs often depict elements such as plants, animals, and natural landscapes, celebrating biodiversity and promoting environmental consciousness. This integration of ecological themes not only preserves cultural heritage but also supports sustainable practices, aligning with broader goals of environmental sustainability and cultural continuity.

In recent years, however, the traditional practices of Bodo textile design have faced numerous challenges, including

<sup>6</sup>Dularai Bathou Gautham, *Bathou Thandwi*. Guwahati: Boro Sahitya Sabha, Fifth Edition - January, 2020, p.53.

rapid industrialization, environmental degradation, and socio-economic changes. As modernization encroaches upon traditional ways of life, there is a pressing need to document, preserve, and promote Bodo textile traditions, not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a source of ecological wisdom in a rapidly changing world.

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### Informant

- [9]. Name- Mrs. Sabithri Goyary, Village- Gerua, Dist- Udalguri (BTC), Assam, Age: 78, Occupation: Traditional Weaver.