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Threads of Change: Dahwna-Ruathi and Saori in the Evolving Labour Landscape of a Bodo Village in Assam

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The dominant narrative about Northeast India often frames tribe societies as inherently egalitarian, especially in gender and socio-economic terms. Recent scholarship, however, challenges this view by revealing complexities. Indeed, Tribe societies have seen positive transformation in their socio-economic outcomes over time with increased household incomes on average and reduced absolute poverty rates. This study focuses on the Bodo community, a prominent Scheduled Tribe, to examine how it has fared amid ongoing agrarian transformation. The persistence of semi-feudal labour arrangements like dahwna and ruathi within the Bodo community during a particular historical time challenge such conventional views. This paper examines the nature of agrarian labour contracts within a Bodo village, uncovering quite contrastingly, evidence of differentiated peasantry, informal tenancy, and feudal-like structures despite being categorized as a Scheduled Tribe in contemporary times. By analyzing under-reported and informal agrarian relationships, this paper situates Bodo society within the broader discourse on agrarian transformation, challenging the exceptionalist lens while highlighting its specificities. Given the internal differentiation within the Bodo peasantry, which strata emerge as employers of wage labour and who labours? Which segments of the Bodo population are most likely to engage in out-migration from the hinterland? Furthermore, despite observable processes of capital penetration in agriculture, what forms of labour contracts currently predominate in contemporary Bodo villages?

Keywords: Bodo village; Attach labour; Labour relations; Casualization of labour; Exchange labour; Petty commodity production; Labour transformation

Introduction

For a considerable period, Northeast India has been framed through a lens of exceptionalism—a narrative that continues to shape the popular imagination of the region[1]. This perspective has frequently been mobilized to emphasize a purportedly progressive and egalitarian social structures, particularly within Tribe societies. Therefore, that Tribe communities in the northeast are self-sufficient—that they live in harmony with nature which provides them devoid of any class formation; that the

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system of chieftainship within Sixth Schedule is democratic (Guite, 2019; Wahlang, 2015; Wouters, 2012).

There is other scholarship that challenges this narrative[2], suggesting that the region's socio-economic phenomena align more closely with country and broader global patterns, albeit with under-emphasized regional specificities. Daimari and Bedamatta (2021) find the existence of a differentiated peasantry within Bodo agrarian society. While their study does not conclusively establish the presence of a landlord class tied to specific Bodo clans, it opens up critical questions regarding the feasibility of such a class within the community. In other study, Khan (2023) acknowledges new landholding classes within Tribe societies in Tripura.

Complementary literature on Bodo Tribe points to the historical prevalence of feudal arrangements governing agrarian relations among the Bodos, informal tenancy, mortgage, and debt contracts (Brahma, 1986; Bordoloi, 1999). These reports have documented indigenous tenancy and labour arrangements akin to attached labour systems. Furthermore, certain affluent and influential Bodo individuals donated as an act of benevolence for social causes like building schools etc. (Daimary, 2013) while others may have had to relinquish land following the implementation of the Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956, implying the existence of landholding elites or at least a landlord-like class, albeit limited in number and scale. The question of whether these actors functioned as landlords comparable to traditional zamindars or rather as rich peasants remains open to debate.

These literatures highlight the under-reporting and informality of key agrarian relationships—particularly tenancy—within Tribe societies, aligning broader national trends. This paper seeks to examine the forms of agrarian labour contracts prevalent in the Bodo community, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of socio-economic stratification within the agrarian milieu of tribe society through a study in a Bodo dominant village.

Contractual Labour Arrangements: Trends and Trajectories in Existing Literature

The land lease market has long been central to studies on rural labour transformations in India. The persistence of landlordism, described by Thorner (1956) as a "depressor," remains a contentious issue in understanding agrarian structures (Bhaduri, 1973; Breman, 2007; Rawal, 2008; Ramachandran et al., 2010; Vakulabharanam et al., 2011). As tenancy relationships evolved through the decades in independent India, scholars saw change as a reflection of deepening capitalist dynamics in agriculture (Srivastava, 1989), while cautioning informal tenancy as a constraint on growth (Rawal, 2021).

Post-liberalization, informal tenancy has increased both in terms of households and land area, despite underreporting (Rawal, 2021; Basole, 2011). While reverse tenancy is acknowledged, its extent is unclear. The dominance of fixed-rent tenancy in contrast to sharecropping is interpreted as capital intensification. Yet, marginal tenants often lack the resources for fixed-rent arrangements, making sharecropping more common among this land class (Reddy and Shaw, 2012; 2013).

Labour transitions from agriculture to the rural non-farm sector have occurred in the absence of a successful Lewis model, with limited movement to urban industry (Lindberg, 2012). This has led to the casualization of labour—short-term, task-based employment—particularly among marginal farmers who increasingly rely on wage labour for subsistence (Lerche, Shah & Harriss, 2013; Harriss, 2023). The persistence of traditional agrarian labour forms, such as attached labour, in the decades following

the Green Revolution[3] challenges earlier expectations of their decline (Breman, 1974). Scholars responded to this continuity by reinterpreting attached labour as "privileged labour," serving supervisory roles and reinforcing class hierarchies (Bardhan, 1984). However, post-liberalization studies indicate a shift, with rural labour increasingly seeking employment beyond agriculture, often engaging in informal, insecure, and multi-occupational livelihoods (Jodhka, 1995; 2012; Lerche, 2010). Jodhka (2012) attributes the decline of attached labour to broader socio-economic changes, including mechanization and urban employment opportunities. The post-1980s period facilitated the penetration of new forms of capital into agriculture, notably through seed markets and mechanization.

Despite limited research on labour transitions in Northeast India, existing studies offer valuable insights. Goswami (1969) and Bhadra (1979) documented the effects of tenancy reforms and shifts in agrarian class structures in Assam, noting the rise of contractual labour, cash cropping, and circular migration. Agrarian relations in the plains were largely impersonal and devoid of feudal characteristics, contrasting with the experiences of Scheduled Tribe communities (Bhadra, 1979). This is quite contrary to other reports which suggest otherwise. For example, the prevalence of tenancy and parts of Assam being under the zamindari especially undivided Goalpara district, reports of *dadan* debt relationships and overall widespread agrarian indebtedness and incidences of land alienation. Among the Bodo community, land alienation and the shift from communal to private ownership have significantly shaped agrarian structures (Saikia, 2014; 2023). Historical accounts highlight land transfers due to indebtedness to non-tribal moneylenders (Brahma, 1986; Bordoloi, 1999). Recent research reveals peasant differentiation within Bodo society, though socio-economic status cannot be conclusively linked to surnames/clans (Daimari & Bedamatta, 2021). A study by Goswami & Bezbaruah, (2013) reaffirms the dominance of sharecropping among marginal and small farmers in Assam. In broader northeast India, accumulation is often driven by external capital flows rather than internal agrarian surplus (Harriss, Mishra & Upadhyay, 2021). These studies emphasize institutional hybridity and adaptability, arguing that the agrarian question remains relevant despite the incomplete transition to capitalism (Harriss, Mishra & Upadhyay, 2009).

In the post-liberalization era, declining state employment and rising migration to urban centres have altered labour dynamics. There is a notable increase in domestic work among Scheduled Tribes and evidence of informalisation and unequal employment outcomes across social groups in the region (Xaxa, 2019; Naik & Tagade, 2019). These trends suggest a transformation in labour relations, with feudal ties largely eroded, although land-labour linkages persist in hill areas.

The Assam Tenancy Act of 1971

Tenancy laws in India show wide variation across states. In several regions, agricultural tenancy has been prohibited altogether in an effort to protect cultivators, whereas other states permit tenancy but impose regulatory safeguards, particularly where tribal land rights are concerned (Haque, 2000). Assam restricts the transfer of tribal land but permits leasing arrangements under specified legal conditions.

Within Assam's Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), these protections are more distinct. Land owned by members of protected classes[4] cannot be transferred to non residents, although leasing is legally allowed. Under Assam's tenancy framework, tenants elsewhere in the state may acquire ownership of leased land after three years

of continuous cultivation. However, this provision does not extend to the BTC, where non residents are prohibited from acquiring ownership of land even after extended lease periods.

The legal foundations for these arrangements lie primarily in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886, and the Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act, 1971, which together govern land transfers, tenancy rights, rent regulation, and dispute resolution. Although the BTC has been administered under the Sixth Schedule[5] since 2003, tenancy contracts between protected classes and non residents are not explicitly prohibited. Instead, the law carefully distinguishes between leasing arrangements and permanent land transfers, regulating the latter to safeguard indigenous land rights.

Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 creates a differentiated legal regime within the Tribal Belts and Blocks by classifying landholders into protected classes—largely permanent tribal residents—and those lacking permanent resident status.[6] The positive discrimination on land holding and its transfers were preferred towards the protected permanent residents withing the Tribal Belts and Blocks of Assam. Since the 2003 Bodo Accord lacked retrospective effect, the ALRR Act 1886, including Chapter X, continues to govern land relations in the Bodoland Territorial Council, subject to the subsequent Sixth Schedule amendment[7] of that year.

Methodology and Choice of Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted in Majrabari, a Bodo-majority revenue village in Baksa district, Assam, selected for its historical and geographical relevance. The district, formerly part of undivided Kamrup, operated under the Ryotwari tenurial system during British rule. Majrabari's proximity to Barpeta, a known hub of non-tribal moneylenders and futures trading in paddy, makes it a strategic site for examining contractual labour arrangements. Its location near Manas National Park further situates it within a peripheral rural context, aligning with the study's focus on labour transformations in marginal regions.

We employed a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches. Structured, close-ended questionnaires were administered to Bodo peasant households to gather data on tenancy and labour market participation. A household listing survey using a two page questionnaire was conducted among 310 households. Subsequently, a sample survey employing a more detailed 15 page questionnaire was administered to 126 households. Complementary qualitative methods—including open-ended interviews, case studies and field observations—were used to capture subjective experiences and contextual nuances.

Findings and Discussion

Tenancy: Contractual Tenancy arrangements in Majrabari village

This section examines the prevalence of contractual tenancy arrangements in Majrabari village, located in Baksa district, Assam. Based on a sample survey covering 126 households, the study finds that 31.2% of households leased-in land, while 21.4% leased-out, with leased-in land accounting for 19.9% of total operational holdings. The average area leased-in per household (0.6 acres) was double that of leased-out land (0.3 acres), reflecting the socio-economic composition of tenants and lessors—75% of lessees were small and semi-medium farmers, whereas a little more than half of

lessors were marginal farmers (*See Table 1*). The capacity of a single farmer to lease-in was more than those who leased-out also highlighting the unviability of marginal farms in the presence of better non-farm opportunities and increasing input costs in agriculture. In this context, we refer to the Daimari and Bedamatta (2021) paper that reported 45.65% households with less than one acre land; 17.41% were without any cultivable land. most tenancy contracts in India are either between large landowning lessors and poor tenants, or, lateral tenancy contracts, in which land is leased out by a household to another with a similar socio-economic status.

Tenancy arrangements in the study area were predominantly sharecropping-based, with 59 households participating in such contracts, accounting for 77% of the total leased-in agricultural land (*See Table 2*). Despite the prevalence of sharecropping, fixed-rent tenancy was also present, with 14 households reporting such arrangements during the 2017–18 agricultural year. Fixed rents were paid either in cash ([1] 1500 per bigha) or kind (3–4 maunds of produce), and these contracts occurred on both community-owned and privately held land. This data contradicts national trends where fixed-rent tenancy has increased. It follows trends among eastern states like Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Jharkhand with dominant sharecropping contracts. One distinguishing factor among these states is that they are rain-fed agriculture and therefore risky. Sharecropping is also generally preferred by resource-poor and credit constraint tenants as obvious from the data we have from Majrabari with very few rich tenants.

Case study on changing labour forms in Majrabari village

This case study explores the evolving nature of labour and tenancy arrangements in Majrabari village, with a focus on sharecropping contracts and the socio-economic trajectories of tenant households. The example of Khampha Basumatari[8], the village's largest landowner with 13.53 acres of ownership holdings, illustrates the preference for sharecropping among known and trusted individuals. In the agricultural year 2017–18, Khampha entered into sharecropping agreements with three tenants, including Mufur Baro, a marginal farmer and former attached labourer (*dahwna*).

> *Ang Samthai lahanao sari bwswr thadwng, arw bini unao dongoparao sari bwswr. Ang saat bwswrni unao fwidwng ang. Je sian jabai afayabw thwibai. Aswl gami gobardhana kolbari. Ang baro bwswr na swidho bwswr dahwna thadwng. Iyaonw aath bwswr kha. Gobardhana yao kurma yaonw arw ek bwswr arw bini unao bwswr se arw inifrai Khunkhra ranjan (ranger) ni fiswola fwrniao nw ek bwswr. Bese jakhw? 8 eh tini 11 bwswr. Ei khinianw. Arw jwngna arw kurma niao bwswrseanw thaframdwng. 12 bwswr jabai. Ise halieobainw haywbanw mai monse ba dos parla mai. Thika system bw thayw arw erwihai, nwi Bargaon bwswrao 18 maund mwndwng mwn. Highest anw angina 18 maund bwswrao. Posasi bigha Samthai mwnhanw.*
> *Prai mwjang gwjamwn arw first ni second ao ang jainiao 4 bwswr dongmwn na, iyao dui bwswr swa khwb mwjang mwn, lastni bwswr nwiao ese khili mili jadwng mwn manw hwnba gannw mwna jwmnw mwna e rokhom jahwidwng isranao, thek jalangbaina idi jadwng. — Mufur Baro*

> Translation—From the age of seven onward, Mufur Baro engaged in continuous agrarian labour across multiple villages, working successively at Samthai's household for four years, at Dongopar and other nearby villages as attach labour for several more years,

> including periods at relatives' homes and at the household of a forest ranger's grandson, cumulatively amounting to approximately twelve years of service, during which remuneration varied between payments in kind—such as ten or more parlas[9] of paddy, fixed rents, or an annual maximum of eighteen maunds—for large landholdings. Although Mufur Baro considered them as humane employers, their fluctuating household economic conditions eventually made his labour increasingly arduous as pay dwindled.

Mufur Baro's labour history reflects a transition from pre-capitalist attached labour—characterized by long-term service in exchange for in-kind wages (e.g., 18 maunds of paddy annually)—to tenant farming. His experience as a *dahwna* spanned approximately 12 years, across multiple households in the region, including Gobardhana and Dongopar. The decline of attached labour in Majrabari can be attributed to broader socio-economic changes, including land redistribution and alternative employment opportunities in government service as his son did in this case.

By 2018–19, Mufur Baro opted out of tenancy due to improved household income, with his son's employed in government service. This shift emphasizes the role of intergenerational mobility and public sector employment in altering agrarian labour relationships. Khampha's other tenants, Hasung Basumatari and Nwzwr Basumatari, also reflect the importance of personal relationships and social networks in facilitating tenancy contracts, even across village boundaries. It is noteworthy that these men are all aged above 50 and never had a history of migration for work in industry. Those who migrated were mostly aged between 18-45 years. When asked why they would not migrate, their prompt reply was,

> *Hajwngnw unjidwng, hayaonw thwigwn.* — From dust we come, to dust we return.

Overall, the case of Majrabari illustrates the decline of feudal labour forms, the persistence of informal sharecropping, and the importance of social capital in shaping tenancy arrangements in peripheral agrarian settings. While overall independent India sought to modernize agriculture and increase agricultural production, it also sought to devolve greater freedoms to rural agricultural laborers through tenancy reforms.

Practice of attach labour among the Bodo community

Historically, the Bodo community practiced various forms of attached labour, which have now ceased to exist in contemporary agrarian settings. These pre-capitalist labour arrangements included dahwna, mwrkhiya, gurkhiya, and laokhar, each term

Table1. Distribution of tenancy, Majrabari, in acres, numbers and percentages

No. of household that leased in land	40
Acreage of leased in land (in acres)	69.3
Share in total operational area (in %)	19.9
Average area of leased in land (in acres)	0.6
No. of household that leased out land	27
Acreage of leased out land (in acres)	41.1
Share in total land under possession (in %)	17.7
Average area of leased out land (in acres)	0.3

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table2 Share of leased-in & leased-out households by land size category

Land size	Leased-in households (%)	Leased-out households (%)
Marginal	25	52
Small	45	22
Semi Medium	30	22
Medium	0	4
Total	100	100

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table3. Distribution of tenancy according to type of tenancy, Majrabari, in acres and percentages

	Fixed rent		Share rent	
	Acreage	Proportion	Acreage	Proportion
Leased in	15.8	22.9	53.5	77.1
Leased out	3.5	8.4	37.6	91.6

Source: Survey data, 2018

denoting specific roles within agricultural and domestic labour systems. Mwrkhiya and dahwna were often used interchangeably to refer to adult male labourers engaged in both agricultural and domestic tasks, while gurkhiya and laokhar referred to adolescent cowherds employed by wealthier peasant households with livestock. These labour forms were regionally specific, prevalent in Bodo-dominated areas of undivided Goalpara, Northern Kamrup, and undivided Darrang.

Compensation was typically provided in kind, with dahwnas receiving between seven to ten maunds annually, or 1.5 to two maunds monthly, while laokhars received around four maunds annually (Brahma, 1986). Gurkhiya and laokhar roles were compensated at lower rates compared to other attached labourers. A notable feature of attached labour was the advance borrowing of wages, which often led to labour repayment through service, reinforcing cycles of indebtedness and dependency. These arrangements reflect a semi-feudal labour structure, where labour was tied to landowners through long-term, non-contractual obligations.

The disappearance of these labour forms in villages like Majrabari signals a broader transition away from feudal labour relations, influenced by socio-economic changes, land redistribution, and alternative employment opportunities.

Gender Segregated System of Attach Labour

Attach labour among the Bodo community included both male and female workers, reflecting a gendered structure of agrarian labour. While male attached labourers were known as *dahwna*, female counterparts were referred to as *ruathi* (Brahma, 1986). *Ruathis* performed agricultural tasks such as rice transplantation and domestic duties like childcare, receiving in-kind wages—typically six maunds and ten kilograms of paddy, along with garments such as a *dokhona* and *phali*[10] . These arrangements were common in the 1980s and persisted even after land reforms, which aimed to liberate labour from feudal dependencies.

Despite the reforms, *dahwna* and *ruathi* systems continued among economically

vulnerable households, particularly the landless and marginal farmers. However, by the late 1990s, these forms of labour began to decline due to the increasing monetization of rural labour, the rise of wage-based employment, and growing rural outmigration. Labourers began seeking opportunities in urban and non-farm sectors, and landowners shifted to hiring paid labour. The case of Mufur Baro illustrates this transition, as he moved from attach labour to sharecropping. Overall, the decline of gendered attach labour reflects broader socio-economic changes in rural Bodo society, shaped by land reforms, liberalization, and evolving labour market dynamics.

The decline of attached labour in Majrabari village demonstrates broader agrarian transformations influenced by tenancy reforms, mechanization, and ecological shifts. Historically, adolescent labourers (*laokhar* and *gurkhia*) apprenticed under adult *dahwna* in a hierarchical system similar to palis in Haryana. However, reforms and the conversion of grazing lands to agriculture reduced livestock wealth, diminishing the demand for cowherds and domestic labour. Mechanization, especially the adoption of tractors in the 2000s, further displaced manual labour. The introduction of biochemical innovations like the Kokilabari Seed Farm, had some impact. Post-1990s liberalization and increased mobility led to the erosion of traditional labour systems, with former attach labourers transitioning to sharecropping or urban employment.

Non-farm activities at my field site

A wide range of non-farm activities is now evident, as occupational categories in Majrabari village have diversified significantly. This transition is not unique to this Tribe dominant village of Assam and aligns with agrarian transition trends elsewhere in the country. The list of non-farm activities are government school teachers, private school teachers, defence, venture school teachers, pharmacist, retail shop owners, cycle mechanic, tailor, xerox and printing shop in Mainao Bazaar,[11] owner of hair salon in Mainao Bazaar, meat shop owner in Mainao Bazaar, mustard oil shop, etc. For our study, we have divided the non-farm activities into non-agricultural labourers, skilled workers, traders or businesses and those involved in private/public salaried professionals. I first separated those that worked as salaried government employees and migrant families. I then categorized cultivators from those households that earned maximum from cultivation. Some of the households that have not been categorized as cultivator households also undertook cultivation activities. I based the rest of the categories on the most that they earned from their respective main occupations. Therefore, the categories cultivation, migrants and government salaried are not included within the rural non-farm category.

The combined share of the non-farm activities in Majrabari is 30.2 per cent of the entire occupational categories. Out of the non-farming category, non-agricultural labourers form the largest group at 21.4 per cent and as much as 16.7% were marginal farmers. Non-agricultural labourers were those families that lived on income generated from wages other than farming activities. They were usually called kamla[12] and usually resided within the village. However, in recent times they have started migrating as seasonal labourers outside the village for better employment opportunities or to supplement their meager incomes in Majrabari. They usually lacked specific skills but worked as casual labourers. They took up multifarious work such as labourers for some small construction projects in the village, working with masons and carpenters in the village as daily wagers or doing other casual work in the village. Many in this category were seasonal migrants for a few months at construction projects both within

and outside the state often under harsh conditions in the coal mines of Meghalaya, in the military construction projects Misamari or construction/manufacturing industries in Kerala, etc. These households also worked as wagers at agricultural fields during the agricultural season. The households in this category would also earn incomes from petty entrepreneurial activities like owners of shops, tea stalls etc. These shops were open during the evening hours when Mainao Bazaar bustles with people for their day-to-day needs.

Although, no on e identified as an agricultural labourer in Majrabari, this category was not non-existent because they were seasonal in nature (more detailed description in the later sections). Most of these labourers were employed on a seasonal basis during the peak season in agriculture. This category being seasonal in nature, became non-agricultural labour outside the peak agricultural season. Migrant households in Majrabari have a share of 17.5 per cent or 22 households. The members of such households work outside of the village either within or outside the state. They sent substantial share of their remuneration at home. They either work for wages or salary employed in manual or lower rank jobs such as in the construction sector, at factories, waiters at restaurants or as security at residential or company establishments, labourers in the mines of Meghalaya.[13] These households stay out from their homes at Majrabari for more than six months at a stretch and return for only a short duration when their employers grant them leave.

Skilled workers usually earned their income through the utilization of their specific skills such as masonry, weaving or other craftwork. In Majrabari among the sample households only those who earned through other specific skills such as carpentry or bamboo craftwork were five in number and four per cent.

In Majrabari, households also earned their income by engaging in business activities. The activities in this category were business entrepreneurs, log traders or other small business establishments such as shops at Mainao Bazaar. Among the sample households, there was only one log trader who worked together with his team of log cutters who earned wages.

The salaried private category were those households that engaged themselves with political parties or those that worked as private teachers in the private schools for a paltry sum of money. However, sometimes the households working with political parties could earn more through contracts although a monthly salary is insignificant or non-existent. The contracts were usually rare in Majrabari. The 13.5% of government salaried professionals were mostly in the teaching profession upto high school and lower ranking defence personnel (See Table 3).

Types of labour practiced in Majrabari

Agricultural Labour in Majrabari

In Majrabari, the decline of semi-feudal labour systems such as dahwna and ruathi has led to the reliance on casual labour, drawn from non-farm and migrant households, to meet agricultural labour demands. Paddy cultivation involves multiple labour-intensive stages—plot preparation, ploughing (via human or mechanized means), sowing, transplantation, and harvesting—necessitating both hired and family labour.

Paddy cultivation in Majrabari is highly labour-intensive, with approximately 78 households relying on hired casual labour—particularly during the peak periods of transplantation and harvest—alongside family labour. Peasant families engage in cultivation themselves with help from casual labour during the peak season. Data from

Table 4 Number and percentage of households under various occupational categories of sample survey schedule

Land size class	*Cultivation*	*Non-agricultural labourers*	*Skilled*	*Business/Trade*	*Private salaried*	*Migrant*	*Government job*	*Total*
Landless	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)	0	0	0	0	0	2 (1.6%)
Marginal	19 (15.1%)	21 (16.7%)	2 (1.6%)	2 (1.6%)	1 (0.8%)	16 (12.7%)	4 (3.2%)	66 (52.4%)
Small	15 (11.9%)	5 (4%)	3 (2.4%)	1 (0.8%)	0	5 (4%)	7 (5.6%)	36 (28.6%)
Semi medium	13 (10.3%)	0	0	0	2 (1.6%)	1 (0.8%)	6 (4.8%)	22 (17.5%)
Medium	1 (0.8%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.8%)
Total	49 (38.9%)	27 (21.4%)	5 (4%)	3 (2.4%)	3 (2.4%)	22 (17.5%)	17 (13.5%)	126 (100%)

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table 5 Number and share of households that hired labour in agriculture

Type of Labour	In percent (%)	No of Households
Both Casual Labour (and family labour)	61.9	78
Only Family Labour	19	24
No cultivation	19	24
Total	100	126

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table 6 Number and share of households that hired agricultural labour for various agricultural activities in Majrabari by land size

Land size	No of households that spent on Transplantation	No of households that spent on Plot preparation	No of households that spent on Harvest
Marginal	30 (40.5%)	10 (31.3%)	23 (35.4%)
Small	24 (32.4%)	8 (25%)	22 (33.8%)
Semi-medium	19 (25.7%)	13 (40.6%)	19 (29.2%)
Medium	1 (1.4%)	1 (3.1%)	1 (1.5%)
Out of 78 households	74 (100%)	32 (100%)	65 (100%)

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table 6 indicates that the majority of households in Majrabari engage as agricultural workers primarily during sowing and transplantation, followed by harvest and plot preparation. Sowing and transplantation and harvest are also the agricultural activities that require the most intensive labour during the process of paddy cultivation. As in other parts of India, most of the agricultural labourers belonged to the marginal agrarian class typically receiving employment for short durations on an average of 15 working days. Very few individuals work beyond a month in these activities, as the window of peak agricultural operations is usually brief. Plot preparation also involves limited employment, generally not exceeding 15 days. In contrast, harvest labour is compensated on a piece-rate basis—per plot or per bigha—thus not measured in terms of days worked.

In Majrabari, the draft of casual labour during peak agricultural periods—particularly for transplantation and harvesting—is informal and localized. Agricultural wage labour, though seasonal and limited, is typically sourced from within the village as all closed labour market system characterize. Landowners initiate the hiring process by directly approaching potential labourers at their homes or during informal interactions at the local market centre, Mainao Bazaar. Negotiations regarding availability and wage rates are conducted a day prior to the intended work. Casual labour for agricultural wage was rare because it was seasonal but not non-existent. Few went to work outside the revenue village, Majrabari, at Khokhlabari seed farm nearby. However, inter-hamlet movement of agricultural workers in Majrabari was prevalent. What this means is that agricultural labour travelled as availability of work overlapped across hamlets within the revenue village of Majrabari. As a result, agricultural labour moved freely between the eight hamlets under Majrabari.[14]

During peak agricultural activities in Majrabari, there was quantity rationing in the form of limited employment days for casual labourers. Despite high labour demand during transplantation and harvest, the short duration of these tasks and reliance on local labour restricts the number of workdays available, leading to involuntary unemployment or "forced leisure" during off-peak periods. While labourers in Majrabari seldom solicited work directly from employers or travelled to nearby villages for agricultural employment—except to the Koklabari seed farm—there was a discernible pattern of migration for non-agricultural work outside the village. During the slack period, those unable to find work, were left to accept ‘forced leisure’ or involuntary unemployment. Employers too mentioned inability to find labour at the right time. In contrast, those who remained in their villages were predominantly women, whose immobility was shaped less by choice than by social obligation. These women assumed primary responsibility for caregiving for elderly, infirm, and child members of non-migrating households, while also managing domestic work and tending to livestock. Their unpaid and largely invisible labour sustained household functioning, yet remained undervalued.

Gendered Agricultural wages

In Majrabari, agricultural labour was compensated through two primary wage systems—daily wages and harvest shares—with the daily wage system involving fixed working hours (typically 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. or until sunset) and pre-assigned tasks communicated in advance to the labourers.

In Majrabari, a standardized daily wage rate prevailed across agricultural tasks, irrespective of workers’ skill[15] informally regulated by village norms. Wage labour was

the dominant form of employment, supplemented occasionally by exchange labour known locally as *saori*. During the sowing season, two primary categories of work emerged: land preparation, including tilling and levelling—typically performed by male labourers—and sowing and transplantation, often undertaken by women. Tilling was conducted using wooden or iron ploughs or mechanized tools. Despite the availability of machinery, many households opted for partial mechanization due to the high cost of machine labour (Rs. 250 per round per bigha[16]) supervised by men, preferring traditional ploughing 'for better soil preparation' as claimed by small farmers.

Women were primarily responsible for transplantation activities, which were carried out using both wage and family labour. The wage structure varied based on the nature and location of the work. For plot preparation, labourers earned Rs. 250 without food or Rs. 200 with food. Transplantation within the village ranged between Rs. 130–150, while wages increased to Rs. 170 with lunch when performed in nearby villages. The highest wage rates were observed at Khoklabari Seed Farm, located approximately 7–8 km from Majrabari, where labourers earned Rs 250 without transportation provided and Rs. 220 with it. During peak sowing and transplantation periods, pick-up trucks were deployed to transport labourers to the farm, reflecting the seasonal intensification of labour demand and the spatial extension of the village's labour market. A significant aspect of wage differentiation in Majrabari was gender-based disparity. Women laborers consistently received lower wages than their male counterparts, even when performing similar tasks. However, exceptions occurred during high-demand agricultural activities such as transplantation, where women were occasionally paid above the standard wage to expedite task completion.

During the harvest season in Majrabari, a substantial volume of wage labour was employed, primarily organized in groups responsible for reaping and transporting paddy to the landowner's residence. Compensation was predominantly in kind, with labourers receiving 1.5 to two maunds of paddy for reaping alone and two to 2.5 maunds when the task included carrying the harvest. Threshing was conducted either through mechanized means, charged at Rs.250 per hour, or via animal labour, typically under exchange labour arrangements (*saori*) by men. The predominance of in-kind payments during harvest reflects traditional agrarian labour practices, while the coexistence of wage and exchange labour also underlines the hybrid nature of labour relations in the village's agricultural economy. Besides, it is often resource poor agricultural labourers who actively prefer such arrangements. Payment in kind offers them immediate food security and reduces exposure to volatile cash incomes.

Table 7 Households labouring-out in agriculture by type of agricultural work and by land size class.

Land size	Sowing & Transplanting		Plot preparation	Harvest
	No. of Households	No. of incidences		
Marginal	49	56	15	27
Small	28	40	5	13
Semi Medium	8	10	0	6
Medium	0	0	0	0

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table 8 No. of working days in sowing and transplantation activities and plot preparation by land size class

Land size	Sowing & Transplanting no. of population with no. of working days			Plot Preparation
	15 days	Thirty days	More than a month	
Marginal	34	18	4	Most worked for about 15 days or below
Small	26	12	2	
Semi Medium	8	2	0	
Medium	0	0	0	
All incidences	68	32	6	

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table 9 Wages for various type of agricultural work in Majrabari

Wage of various type of agricultural work		
Sowing & Transplanting	Plot Preparation	Harvest
Rs. 150 with food and in farm Rs. 220 with travel charge/ 240 without travel charge	250 rupees with food or 300 rupees without food	Usually paid in kind at 1.5 or 2 *maunds* per *bigha*. If harvested stalks of paddy are also required to be transported to the homestead, the charge by the harvest group is 2 *maunds* or 2.5 *maunds*. A group of harvesters consists of 5 or 6 members.

Source: Survey data, 2018

Despite the cyclical nature of agricultural activities, the standard wage exhibited minimal seasonal variation typically determined by village authorities. Notably, wage rigidity was more pronounced in the downward direction, especially during slack seasons when labor demand was low. This fixed wage system remained unchanged for three years prior to the agricultural year June 2017–July 2018, during which a revision of up to Rs.30 was anticipated. The stability of this wage rate reflected a customary rule adhered to by both employers and laborers.

Although task specificity introduced some potential for seasonal wage adjustments—such as higher payments for time-sensitive tasks like transplantation—the standard wage rarely changed. When changes did occur, they were more likely to reflect upward adjustments driven by urgent labor needs rather than downward revisions with reduced demand.

However, wage variability was observed in a nearby hamlet where biannual cultivation led to early transplantation activities. This agricultural scheduling enabled laborers to command higher wages, reaching Rs.180 per day. Despite the expectation that employers would adhere to the standard wage, transitional periods occasionally disrupted this norm. During such times, the standard wage became fluid, allowing for renegotiation. Landowners sometimes offered wages above the standard rate, particularly when tasks required urgent completion or involved travel over long distances.

No explicit or implicit collusion between employers or labourers
In Majrabari, there is no evidence of explicit or implicit collusion among either employers or laborers regarding wage-setting practices. Despite this, employer group consists largely of small and marginal farmers who prioritize timely task completion although standardized wage rates were determined by the village. During peak agricultural seasons or early sowing periods, some small farmers willingly offer higher wages to secure labor, reflecting individual rather than collective decision-making.
During the agricultural year from June 2017 to July 2018, there was minimal interlinkage between labor and credit or tenancy contracts in Majrabari. Inter-seasonal labor-tying arrangements were notably absent during the fieldwork period, although such practices had occurred in earlier times. This indicates a shift away from traditional labor-binding mechanisms toward more flexible and independent labor relations.

'Summoning' of community labour or saori
Saori, also known as *chaori*, is a reciprocal and sometimes obligatory form of community labor central to the socio-economic and cultural life of the Bodo community, fostering solidarity and collective identity. It is categorized into familial *saori*, which supports individual household tasks and involves kin-based labor networks, and corporate saori, which mobilizes labor for public works and enforces participation through fines and social sanctions. Historically, *saori* was an efficient and cost-effective alternative to colonial public works, exemplified by its use in constructing irrigation infrastructure. The institution of *saori* among the Bodo community exhibits complex socio-economic dimensions rather than being a straightforward indicator of socio-economic status. According to Dr. Shyam Basumatary, *saori* can be classified primarily into need-based and familial forms. Need-based *saori*, such as collective labor for house construction, compels community participation irrespective of kinship or status. Familial *saoris* involve immediate and extended kin but also extend to non-kin households with close socio-economic ties, such as tenants, thereby reflecting underlying socio-economic hierarchies where tenants perform extra-economic labor for landlords.

Regarding surnames and clan identity, Basumatary rejects equating Bodo surnames directly with clans. He assigns these surnames to be totemic—originating from animistic beliefs tied to tutelary spirits and deities (e.g., the Mushahari tiger worshippers)—they lack characteristic clannish features like exogamous marriage prohibitions. Ethnographic observations associating surnames with occupational roles or land rights are reinterpreted by Basumatary as symbolic or ritualistic rather than hierarchical or economic. For instance, nominal fees paid by Basumatari families for land rights are ritual tokens akin to village council charges, not indicators of socio-economic privilege. Furthermore, surnames often denote geographical dwelling patterns (e.g., Daimari near rivers, Wary among bamboo groves) or regional identities (Goalparia, Kamrupia, Sanjari), emphasizing spatial and cultural distinctions over occupational stratification. While Hindu influences may have shaped some surname forms (e.g., Basumatari from "Buhum," meaning earth), these existed prior to religious conversion, reinforcing the pre-Hindu, animistic roots of these identities.

Despite the absence of occupational hierarchy linked to surnames, intra-tribe social inequality is evident in the distribution of power and status, concentrated among rich peasants, *ozha* (medicine men), and *gaonbura/gambra* (village elders/governors). Rich peasants derive power from land ownership, whereas *ozhas* and *gaonburas* command respect and influence through knowledge and governance roles, not

necessarily linked to landholding. While this status confers authority, it does not automatically translate into material wealth accumulation, which manifests complex social dynamics within the tribe.

Field studies reveal transformations in labor relations. *Saori* is increasingly replaced by wage labor, especially during post-harvest activities, predominantly summoned by households with substantial landholdings extending beyond kinship networks. Familial *saori* tends to occur among households of similar socio-economic classes, while wealthy peasants may summon economically weaker peasants or laborers without reciprocal obligations. This evidences a class-based differentiation in labor mobilization and resource control within the Bodo community.

Sale from Crops

As we have seen that labour relations in Majrabari have been transformed considerably into casual labour, in this section we try to see if agriculture is for subsistence or for sales. If we take sales of crops as a variable to see if the households are making profit through actual sale of grains, we see a different trend.

Table 9 Average crop sales of grains in rupees per acre by household size

Land size		Grain sales (in Rs/acre)
Marginal	Average	444.9
	Min	0.0
	Max	9900.0
Small	Average	1185.5
	Min	0.0
	Max	16632.0
Semi Medium	Average	2462.1
	Min	0.0
	Max	24750.0
Medium	Average	6352.5
	Min	6352.5
	Max	6352.5
Average	Average	1048.6
	Min	0.0
	Max	24750.0

Source: Survey data, 2018

The average sales of marginal holders in rupees per acre is very less compared to medium holders. The average sales are Rs. 444.9 per acre for marginal holders, Rs. 1185.5 per acres for small holders, Rs. 2462.1 per acres for semi medium holders and Rs. 6352.5 per acres for medium holders. The small sales average suggests that majority of the output is kept for home consumption for marginal households. Although it cannot be ascertained if marginal households are profiting or not, the lower than average, average sales per acres suggest that surplus is less which therefore results in a lower sales average than other land classes.

Conclusion

The agrarian relations among the Bodo community have undergone considerable changes over the years. Literature suggests that Bodos have transitioned from a community centred land relations to a differentiated peasantry. Our study of Majrabari revenue village confirms the existence of a differentiated peasantry among the Bodo tribe. There have been agrarian market interactions in the Bodo areas manifested through feudal agrarian market relationships.

As the first objective of this study was to examine the nature of the land rental market prevalent in a Bodo village with two research questions, we establish that as sharecropping is the preferred form of tenancy, we find the prevalence of this feudal relationship in Majrabari. The predominant characteristics of agrarian structure in the village are the preponderance of smallholder agriculture. The land lease market operates primarily through horizontal contracts involving land lease-in and lease-out by small and marginal holders. They were more likely to migrate for other sources of employment too. Although there is co-existence of both fixed rent and sharecropping most contracts are sharecropping, this in spite of a higher yield per acre from fixed rent. Marginal holders tend to sharecrop more than other households. Landowners prefer to lease-out to tenants whom they have known and can trust as shown in the case study of a Basumatari household.

The study also reveals that the gradual dissolution of traditional labour relations has led to a notable rise in day-wage labour employment. Forms of pre-capitalist labour were present in Majrabari before my fieldwork but has been absent since 1990s, for eg. *Dahwna*, *ruathi*, *mwrkhia*, *laokhar* have all disappeared. There are three dominant forms of labour-use in agriculture of Majrabari. They are family labour, wage labour and *saori* or exchange labour. Although, casual labour was the predominant norm in the village, frequent saori summons were common. There are significant changes in the practice of *saori* in present times. Corporal *saori* summons is prevalent with no signs of change but familial *saori* manifests significant changes over the years. Familial *saori* is not restricted to kin groups today. *Saori* summons with rich peasants did not involve reciprocity of labour from the richer household. During harvest, labour is organised in groups, paid in kind on piece rate.

The question of the existence and role of a landlord class necessitates further investigation, best approached through the methodological framework proposed by Ramachandran et al. (2010).

Endnotes

[1] Such a narrative seeks to etch a distinct identity from mainland politics. This detachment is also sought in terms of its separate identity vis-à-vis its social structure, whether in socio-economic or gender relations.

[2] See Pathy (1982), Pathy et al. (1976), Shah (1979), Bose (1981) and Patel (1988), (Khan 2016), Baviskar (1995), Sundar (1997), Hebbar (2003) and Shah (2011) which questions the notion of the homogenous Tribe societies and cautions against romanticization of Tribes.

[3] For instance, the establishment of the Kokilabari Seed Farm in Assam exemplifies state-led efforts to modernize agricultural inputs as part of the Green Revolution package as capitalist relations in rural India hastened. Although, traditional labour forms were expected to disappear as a result, instead the class of traditional landlords further consolidated their power in the countryside post late 1960s thereby still reinforcing

traditional labour forms.

[4] These were the protected classes: Plains tribes, Hill tribes, Tea Garden tribes, Santhals, Nepali cultivator/grazers, Scheduled Castes.

[5] See Soereide (2018), states that the Sixth Schedule is a "special provision" that recognizes the idea that "Land belongs to the people" whereas in the rest of India it belongs to the state. "The people" here in the context of the Bodoland Territorial Council means the Scheduled Tribes.

[6] Section 164 of the Regulation provides that no land-holder shall transfer his land in a Belt or Block to : (a) any person not belonging to a class of people notified under Section 160; or (b) to any person who is not a permanent resident, in that tribal Belt or Block : provided further that no such land-holder shall transfer his land in a Belt or Block to any person who is a permanent resident in that Belt or Block who does not belong to a class of people notified under Section 160 except with the previous permission of the Deputy Commissioner : Provided also that in granting such permission the Deputy Commissioner shall have due regard to the interest of persons belonging to the classes notified as protected class (Government of BTC, 2026).

[7] Section 3 of the Sixth Schedule to The Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2003 that: "………nothing in such laws shall- (a) extinguish or modify the existing rights and privileges of any citizen in respect of his land at the date of commencement of this Act; and (b) disallow a citizen from acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement or any other way of transfer if such citizen is otherwise eligible for such acquisition of land within the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (Government of BTC, 2026).

[8] The names of all individual interviewees have been anonymised to conform with academic ethical standards.

[9] One parla=six kilograms

[10] *Dokhona* and *phali* are traditional attire worn by Bodo women for the lower and upper body respectively.

[11] A local daily market place located in the heart of Majrabari village.

[12] Saikia, 2014 mentions that the word *kamla* was used to denote Bengali labourers who worked on wage. In Majrabari any type of wage labour was termed as a kamla. Even Bodo worked as kamla in Majrabari.

[13] Coal fields in Meghalaya are known for rat-hole mining.

[14] These hamlets were: Khususrartari, Majrabari No. 2, Santipur, Nizwmphuri, Hahchara, Karebari, Bargaon, Baghmara and Majrabari. Majrabari village borders the revenue villages of Kumguri, Bhuyanpara, Korebari, Khusratari, Bargaon, Hachara and Ghoramara. Khusurartari, Hahchara, Karebari, Bargaon and Baghmara are also separate revenue villages based on Census 2011. However, parts of all the above revenue villages fall under Majrabari, which are categorised as separate hamlets.

[15] Even though there was division of work by gender, all agricultural male workers were paid wage Rs. 250/- while all women agricultural workers were paid between Rs 130-150/-.

[16] Usually tilling the land required three or four machine rounds of tilling per bigha. The main reason, however, lay in the high cost of tilling by machine labour. Tilling the land requires three or four rounds, using the machine for the rest of the purpose raises cost of cultivation which was Rupees 250.00 per round per bigha in the agricultural year June 2017-July 2018. Therefore, this could be the reason for some households reporting tilling land only once by machine.

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