

Revisiting the Contribution of Women in the Bodo Movement in Assam: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The Bodo Movement in Assam was a significant struggle for identity and autonomy, not only within the state but also across India. Both men and women of this ethnic community equally participated in the movement to make it a successful one. The important participation of women in this movement was evident at the grassroots level, where they played a key role in mobilising people to actively engage in the pursuit of political autonomy, social justice and cultural rights of the community. Important to note that the Bodo women participated in the movement in a structured way under the banner All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF). The women of this community also supported the movement through various academic initiatives, such as organising seminars and awareness programmes. Interestingly, they also took up the profession of nursing to provide medical assistance to the rebels, while others acted as messengers, discreetly carrying confidential information to the members of All Bodo Students' Union Volunteers Force (ABSUVF). Thus, the success and sustainability of the Bodo movement was possible due to the

pivotal role played by women alongside men in both resistance and reconciliation processes.

Main Discussion

Introduction:

Women, the vital component of the society play a constructive role in shaping a prosperous nation and a flourishing community. P.C. Sikligar rightly mentions, “Women constitute half of the humanity despite being endowed with certain particular features- both physical and temperamental. Men and women are complementary to each other. Their diverse physical and temperamental qualities together form the complete race. Hence, logically both should have equal status.” (Sikligar, 2006, p.1) In the same way, it should also be acknowledged that the participation of women in any form of movement helps it to proceed towards its desired goal. For achieving success in nation building or in any collective effort, both man and woman should go hand in hand. If one section is ignored, the rest one can't play the constructive role alone. P.C. Sikligar again states, “Women and men both are the separate wheels of one cart which promotes human civilization on the earth. Without their biological and social coordination, the structure of society is not possible.” (Sikligar, 2006, p.4). The participation of women in different movements across Asia, Africa and Europe demonstrates that they have never kept themselves away from movements, whether it is a feminist, progressive, social or a freedom movement. (Sen Chauhdury, 2004, pp.2-5). The involvement of women in the freedom struggle of India undeniably played a vital role in securing independence from the clutch of the foreign dominion. Prominent women leaders such as Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu, Begam Hazrat Mahal, Annie Besant made selfless contributions to the freedom struggle of India. Likewise, the women of Assam also participated in the national movement with notable enthusiasm and courage. Kanaklata Boruah, a young girl of 17 years old sacrificed her life while attempting to hoist flag at the Gohpur police station in the erstwhile Darrang

District of Assam during the Quit India Movement. Other eminent women freedom fighters of Assam were BhogeswariPhukanani of Nagaon, Mungri alias Malati Mam of Lalmati in the district of Darrang, TileswariBarua of Dhekiajuli and ChandraprabhaSaikiani of Kamrup, whose spirited involvement became a lasting source of inspiration in the freedom struggle in Assam. Furthermore, it is also widely recognized that the post-independence period in Assam witnessed a large number of movements like, Assam Movement (1979-1985), Bodo Movement, movements of the Tea Garden LabourCommunity etc. In all such movements the participation of women remained spontaneous, commendable, and profoundly impactful.

Important to note that in the Bodo Movement in Assam, the equal participation of both men and women made the movement successful. The wholehearted and selfless involvement of women, standing shoulder to shoulder with men was the need of the hour. So, they performed their role with determination and purpose for contributing significantly to the realisation of the objectives of the movement.

Brief Sketch of Bodo Movement:

The Bodos in Assam were aware of their own socio-economic development since the time immemorial. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, the social reformer of the Bodos realised that education and the political rights would help the community to achieve their own rights and privileges and to attain this he along with a group of five intellectuals represented the Bodo community of Goalpara District of Assam to submit a memorandum to the Simon Commission demanding a separate representation in the Reformed Council, separate electorate in the Dhubri Local Board etc. on 4th January, 1929 (Das,2012,pp.5-7). Then as per the suggestion of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and others a common platform of all the plain tribes of Assam known as the Assam Backward Plains Tribal League was formed on 17th April 1933 for acquiring the political rights of these communities which was later known as Tribal League. This league also demanded that the reservation of seat for the tribal people in the state assembly would definitely help to keep their own identity and also to get required facilities (Das,2012,pp.10-11). Then the birth of

Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) on 16th November, 1952 at Basugaon in Kokrajhar district of Assam under the Presidentship of Joy Bhadra Hagjer led the movement of the Bodos in Assam to a new phase. The BSS realized that without own language their identity would be in threat and for this they demanded that Bodo language should be introduced in the primary schools of the Bodo dominated areas of Assam. In the meantime, the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 was enacted on 17th December, 1960 and this accelerated the Bodo language movement to a great extent making it more energetic than earlier (Trivedi,1995,P.139).Consequently, Bodo language was adopted as the medium of instruction in the primary schools in the Bodo dominated areas of Assam in 1963. Similarly, in 1968 the Bodo language was introduced in the classes up to VIII and then it was also introduced in the secondary level schools in 1971. This language was prescribed in the college level as MIL in 1977. (Das, 2014, pp.122-124 and Sonowal,2013,p.76)The script movement was also initiated by the BSS. Though the BSS recommended Roman script for writing the Bodo language, the Assam Govt. rejected this proposal and at last the Devnagari script was accepted by the BSS in March, 2020 (Sonowal,2013,p.76, pp.77-78). This may be noted that the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was constituted on 27th February, 1967 to organise movements for full autonomy for the plains tribals of Assam. The PTCA took part in the electoral contest in the Legislative Assembly of Kokrajhar East (ST) Constituency and won the seat in 1972. Mr.Charan Narzary was elected as MLA from this Constituency. Then the PTCA along with All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) initiated fresh movements for the proposed Union Territory named Unayachal. But due to some differences with ABSU, the movements for the Union Territory could not be advanced further (Das,2012, pp.35-38).

The participation of All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) also made the movements of the Bodos of Assam more courageous and energetic. On 15th February, 1967, the All Bodo Students' Union was formed at Kokrajhar Tribal Rest House for promoting the Bodo language, literature and culture and to materialise these objectives it organised democratic movements. Thus, the ABSU fought for self-determination and constitutional rights of the

Bodo people of Assam also demanded a separate state for them (Sonowal, 2013, pp. 51-52 and Narzary, 2007, pp. 69-70). It is also important that the formation and participation of Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) also led the Bodo movement towards a right direction (Sonowal, 2013, p. 82). Thus the united efforts of the Bodos of Assam brought fruitful result for this ethnic tribal community of Assam. After a series of movement, a long discussion was held and at last the historic Memorandum of Settlement was signed on 20th February, 1993 between the Central Government, Assam Government and representatives of ABSU and BPAC. As per the Memorandum, the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was formed (Das, 2012, pp. 138-139.). But the formation of BAC could not satisfy all the people of this community and it gave rise to a number of extremist groups in the state. Consequently, various unlawful activities like bomb blast, extortion, kidnapping etc. started particularly in the Bodo dominated areas of Assam. It may also be noted that that negotiations were also going on and at last a fresh Bodo Accord was signed between the Central Government and Bodo Liberation Tiger Force, a terrorist group and ABSU in 2003 and the Bodoland Territorial Council with four districts- Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri was formed (Sonowal, 2013, pp. 88-94).

Participation of Women:

The active participation of women in the Bodo movement in Assam ushered a new chapter in the history of the movement of this community. Although the women of this community initially participated in the movement under the banner of ABSU, the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was formed on 14th July, 1986 with Pramila Rani Brahma as its president, and thereafter the movements were carried out under the banner of AATWWF. The founding secretary of this organization was Malati Rani Narzary, who had also been an active participant in the Udayachal and script movements. Since the majority of AATWWF's members came from the Bodo community, the organization was renamed the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in 1993. It is significant to highlight that the establishment of a women's organization of the Bodo community of Assam stemmed from the progressive vision of ABSU President

Upendra Nath Brahma, along with other members such as Sansuma Khungur Biswamuthiary, Subhas Basumatary, Deora Dekhereb Basumatary and others. They realised the importance of creating a women's platform to ensure the organized participation of women in their movement, to lead it to its projected goal. (Sen Chauhdury, 2004, pp.72-74). It may also be noted that the members of the AATWWF were closely associated with ABSU and both the organisations unitedly organised various movements. The first meeting of the AATWWF were attended by Kamali Rani Basumatary from Darrang district, Latika Hajowary and Meera Basumatary from Goalpara district, Umarani Basumatary, Hira Rani Brahma, Supriya Rani Brahma, Malati Rani Narzary etc. from Kokrajhar district. For making the organisation strong, the district committees of AATWWF were formed in different districts like Goalpara, Darrang, Nalbari etc. Although the AATWWF actively collaborated with ABSU in the movements for a separate state, it also pursued certain distinct objectives of its own. The AATWWF worked heart and soul for uniting the tribal women of Assam under a same umbrella through mutual understanding to ensure their socio-economic, political, educational and cultural rights and justice. They also desired to empower themselves and to initiate necessary programmes for their welfare and also to preserve their indigenous self-identity under a common umbrella (Sen Chauhdury, 2004, pp.74.). Thus, the formation of the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) offered the Bodo women an important platform to collectively organise and mobilise people against any form of ill-treatment or injustice inflicted on the women of this community by the police or other forces.

This is to be noted that during the period of Bodo movement in Assam, atrocities on the Bodos were going on at the time police patrolling. In the midst of this situation, a heinous incident was taken place in the Bhumkha forest village in the Kokrajhar district of Assam where 10 (ten) teenage aged Bodo girls were gang raped by the Assam Police Task Force (APTF) on 25th and 27th January, 1988 at night. Immediately, protest movements started everywhere. Different organisations including AATWWF strongly condemned the incident and demanded justice for the victims. The AATWWF also took up the issue with the

central Govt. by submitting memorandums. In the memorandum submitted by All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation to the then Honourable President of India, Honourable Prime Minister of India and the Honourable Home Minister of India on 29th May, 1989, it was alleged that apart from the incident of Bhumkha, the incident of gang rapes by the APTF was recorded in some other villages of Kokrajhar District namely, Rupnathpur village under Kachugaon Police Station (on 4th March, 1989), Gambaribil village under the Gossaigaon Police Station etc. (Mosahari, 2021, pp.76-77; Memorandum submitted by AATWWF on 29th May, 1989, p.). To raise the issue of gang-rape at Bhumkha in a very strong manner, the AATWWF also organised a mass rally on 3rd February, 1988 at Kokrajhar and demanded that the guilty police personnel should be punished. On the same day after the rally, a meeting attended by thousands of women was convened in the field of Kokrajhar Higher Secondary School which was presided over by Sukhyati Narzary, the President of Kokrajhar district AATWWF Committee. The speaker, Kanika Basumatary and the President Promina Rani Brahma of the AATWWF were also present and strongly condemned the atrocities committed by the police force on the people of the Bodo community and demanded justice for the victims (Mosahari, 2021, p.77).

Significantly, the AATWWF also wanted to bring this heinous act against Bodo women to wider public attention by co-ordinating with other women's organizations of Assam and was able to secure support from them. This, in fact, played a significant role in strengthening the movement organised by the AATWWF. The AATWWF organised a mass rally on 23rd April, 1988, in collaboration with the Sodou Asom Nari Santha at Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Bhawan at Guwahati. The rally was joined by the Pradeshik Mahila Samittee, Y.W.C.A., Laupara Adibasi Makila Samittee, Sapekati Mohila Somittee, Kumarikata Nibonua Mohila Somittee, Janajati Mahila Somittee (Nagrijiuli) and Kumarikata Somaj Kalyan Mahila Somittee to demonstrate their strong protest against the atrocities committed against the women of the Bodo community. From the Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Bhawan the rally reached the Judges Field, where an open meeting was convened under the chairmanship of Pramila Rani Brahma. In the meeting

Dr. Basanti Raman from Kolkata delivered the speech of the Chief Guest and boldly condemned the incident of Bhumkha. All the women organisations participated in the mass rally and open meeting resolved to work unitedly for the all-round development of the women of Assam (Mosahari, 2021, pp.79-80).

As already noted, during the period of the movement, the AATWWF had the responsibility to mobilise people for participating in the movement. Side by side they also took up some social issues for discussion in the tribal society like family planning, the evils of alcoholism, responsibility of women in educating their children etc. (Sen Chauhdury, 2004, p.8) Interestingly, when movement was going on, the members of the AATWWF performed different activities to boost up the movement by helping the activists. They convened meetings, cooked food for the rebels, conveyed confidential messages to the members of All Bodo Student's Union Volunteers Force (ABSUVF), provided medical help to the rebels, organised dharna, took part in the nurse training programmes, took care of the family members of the activists, convened seminars and conferences, published books etc. (Sen Chauhdury, 2004, p.89)

It is important to note in this context that, the crucial role played by two courageous Bodo women namely, Gaide Basumatary of 32 years old and Helena Basumatary of 15 years old deserves special mention. The Bodo women were aware of the arrest of innocent Bodo youths during the Bodo movement and determined to secure their release from the police custody. On 12th May, 1988, such an incident was taken place when the Assam Police personals arrested several young boys from the villages of Gossaigaon sub-division in Kokrajhar district including Soraibil and attempted to take them to the police station. But when the news of this arrest spread, the men and women of the concerned villages gathered in a large number and tried to resist the police to take them away. Women, in particular, blocked the village roads to prevent the movement of the police vehicles and tried to release the arrested youths. In the move around 200 Bodo girls took part including the brave young women Gaide Basumatary and Helena Basumatary. Their main object was to prevent the police vehicles carrying the innocent Bodo youths. The resistance of the

women force was so strong that the police could not proceed further, even after attempting to change their route. Interestingly, during this movement, Gaide Basumatary and Helena Basumatary stood like pillars of strength and inspired others to continue the resistance with greater determination. In the midst of the protest, the police opened fire on the unarmed women killing the brave women Gaide Basumatary and Helena Basumatary. In honour of the fearlessness and courage of Gaide and Helena, 12th May is observed as Bodo Mothers' Day every year by the All-Bodo Women's Welfare Federation. (Wary and Brahma, 7 (6), 2025, pp.6-8; *The Sentinel*, 13th May, 2025).

It has been found that, the Bodo women took different measures to release the arrested persons of the Bodo community who were directly or indirectly involved in the movement. They also raised their voice against the activities initiated against the people of their community. The women of this community organised *gherao* and *dharna* to release the innocent people arrested by the police from different Bodo dominated villages of Nalbari, Kokrajhar and Darrang districts of Assam. As per the records of Sucheta Sen Chauhdury, 42 number of incidents of *dharna* and *gherao* were organised by the members of AATWWF. In the Nalbari district 27 such incidents were taken place to release the innocent people arrested by the police. In the month of May 1989, Bagadhar Narzary, ex-army personnel who resided in Guwahati went to Pub Bangnabari village of Nalbari to meet his mother and when he went to a local bank, he was arrested suspecting that he was involved in providing military training to the members of ABSUVF. But the members of AATWWF bound the police-in-charge to release him. Similarly, in the month of June 1990 about 1000 women under the leadership of AATWWF *gheraoed* the police stations of Pub Bangnabari and Borbori for the release of another eight innocent people of the Bodo community. In 1989 the family members of arrested Vijan Narzary of Navingaon village of Kokrajhar along with some local women leaders forced the police to release Vijan Narzary. In this way the women leaders of the Bodo movement played the role of local guardians when and where need arose. (Sen Chauhdury, 2004, p.92-93).

This may also be noted that during the period of the Bodo movement, the Bodo women secretly played the role of messengers and carried money from one place to another for the leaders of their movement. (SenChauhdury, 2004,p.93-94).Interestingly, the Bodo women performed some other crucial jobs to make their movement success. It was realised that providing medical treatment to the rebels was the vital requirement. So, nursing training was arranged for young girls in the primary health centres in which the girls from every village had to attend. The girls were kept ready to provide first aid and other primary medical services to the ABSU and ABSUVF activists. It is also noteworthy that during the Bodo movement, in times of medical emergencies, these trained village girls extended medical assistance both to the rebels and to the fellow villagers.The members of AATWWF also visited the hideouts for the preparation of food for the rebels. Besides these literary and academic activities were also performed by the Bodo women in the local areas under the guidance of AATWWF in Assam.Seminars were conducted to discuss the role and duties to be performed by Bodo women in their movements. Main objective of such discussions was to inspire women of this community to take active part in the socio-economic development of their community. (Sen Chauhdury, 2004,pp. 97-101)

Conclusion:

The contribution of women in the Bodo movement in Assam reflected both their courage and their commitment to the cause of identity, autonomy and political justice of their community. During the period of the movement, the Bodo women were not mere spectators; rather, they played significant roles-ranging from frontline agitators, organizers, and negotiators to providers of essential support such as shelter, food, and medical care to activists and villagers during the course of their movement. Their involvement not only strengthened the movement but also highlighted the indispensable role of women in socio-political struggles. At the same time, their active participation underscored the broader truth that no movement striving for justice and transformation can succeed without the equal contribution of women. In this way, the Bodo movement also became a platform for women to assert their voice, and resilience within a traditionally patriarchal society.

In fact, the active involvement of women in the Bodo movement strengthened the struggle and enabled the rebels to move forward their desired objectives. Their collective involvement, alongside men, contributed to the resilience and continuity of the movement, ultimately culminating in the signing of the historic Memorandum of Settlement on 20th February, 1993 with the objective of granting maximum autonomy in accordance with the Constitution of India to the Bodos for promoting social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement. This landmark agreement resulted in the formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC), marking a significant move toward political recognition and autonomy for the Bodo community in Assam (Mosahari, 2021, pp.182-183). Subsequently, on 10th February, 2003 another Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) for the formation of an autonomous self-governing body within the state of Assam entitled Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Scheduled of the Constitution of India was signed. The main objectives of signing this MoS were to fulfil the economic, educational and linguistic aspirations of the Bodos and also to preserve the land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of this ethnic community of Assam. The MoS further aimed to accelerate the infrastructural development in the BTC area. (Memorandum of Settlement, 10th February, 2003). Then, the Bodo Territorial Region (BTR) Accord was signed on 27 January 2020 between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the leaders of ABSU, four factions of NDFB, and the United Bodo People Organization of Assam (UBPOA) in New Delhi. As a result of this the present Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) has been renamed as Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) covering all four districts to facilitate the accelerated development of Bodo people of Assam (Memorandum of Settlement (BTR Accord), 27th January 2020).

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