

Paradigm Shift of the Position of Women among the Bodos of Assam: A Historical Study from Colonial Period to Twenty-First Century

Abstract

The Bodos are one of the important tribal groups of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The establishment of the colonial rule in Assam and the growing relationship between the caste Hindus and the Bodos had its own effects on the traditional Bodo society. The developments had gradually made the position of women complicated in the Bodo society. A few social reformers and conscious individuals had tried to empower the women during the pre-independence period. It was only from the last quarter of the twentieth century that the position of Bodo women started to change.

Keywords: Bodo, Women, Empower, Colonial Authority, Assam.

Introduction

The Bodos of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam are belonged to the Tibeto-Burman Language family of Mongoloid race. The Bodo people mostly inhabit in the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh and scattered in small quantities in all over Assam and in West-Bengal, Tripura, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The Bodos occupy an important position in the socio-economic life of the greater Assamese society. The principal mode of livelihood of the Bodos is agriculture. Their social structure is primarily patriarchal. In spite of that like any other tribal groups of north-east India, the position of the Bodo women in the family as well as in the society is almost equal to that of the men¹ and enjoys equal freedom with their male counterpart in day-to-day life.² Their contribution in the economic field cannot be underestimated. In religious matter too, the Bodo women occupies an important place.³ At the dawn of the modern era in Assam, Brian Hodgson wrote, "Men's conduct to women is always one of the best tests of his manners: now the Bodo use their wives and daughters well; treating them with confidence and kindness... and they are consulted by their husbands as their safest advisers in all domestic concerns."⁴ The beginning of the colonial rule and its allied developments had its direct impact on the traditional Bodo society. The developments gradually jeopardized the liberal structure of the traditional Bodo society with its direct affect on the womenfolk. The discussion of the paper is mainly divided into two broad parts namely, pre-independence and post-independence period and then subdivided from 1947 to 1973 and from 1974 onwards for the convenience of the study.

Review of Literature

A good number of studies have been carried out on the position of women in global, national and regional level. Due to paucity of space a brief review of literature forwarded here. Moser (1993)⁵ dealt with interrelationship between gender and development, the formulation of gender policy and implementation of gender planning and practices. Mohapatra (2015)⁶ focused on status of women entangled from different directions in the Indian society from ancient days till date. It stressed on importance of society for the emancipation of women from male dominance and their oppression and suppression. Choudhury (2004)⁷ provides an illustrative explanation on the participation of Bodo women in the Bodo movement breaking the ice of social stagnation and its problems and prospects. Sarmah (2017)⁸ dealing with the development of education among the Bodos highlights on the women emancipation process observed by the Bodo society. Brahma (2005)⁹ focused on role of Bodo women in politics and gender inequality. Saha (2014)¹⁰ tried to make a detailed



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comparative study on the participation of tribal women in the state politics. Barua (2010)¹¹ provided an elaborate outline of tribal women entrepreneurship in the Udalguri district and its problems and prospects.

Problem of the Study

The colonial rule in Assam had its impact on the traditional Bodo social structure, especially on the position of women. While during pre-independence period, a few social reformers and individuals gave importance on women empowerment, in the post-independence period the Bodo leaders had completely ignored the cause of the womenfolk. It was only from the last part of the twentieth century and within a few decades the Bodo women have achieved a remarkable progress in all fields, become an example for other tribal groups of the region.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present study are: (i). To focus on the position of women in the traditional Bodo society; (ii) To focus on the social inequality, vulnerability and common social taboos in the Bodo society; (iii) To focus on the role of the Christian Missionaries, Kalicharan Brahma's socio-religious reform movement and the educated class of people for women's empowerment during the Colonial period and (vi). To find out the pros and cons that worked for emancipation of women in the post-independent period in Assam.

Methodology

The present study is based on historical methodology. It is an empirical study using both the primary and secondary sources.

Gender biasness is a debatable issue all over the globe. While the tribal women in north-east India in general and the Bodo women in particular enjoys a good deal of freedom in their social life, gender inequality is not irrelevant among them too. Elimination of such inequality and vulnerability is possible only through empowerment. One of the important tools of empowerment is education. It was first observed in America in the middle of the nineteenth century that educated women asked for equal rights. In the early part of the colonial rule in Assam, the progress of women's education was in lowest ebb because of the policy of the East India Company and failure of the traditional society to familiarise with the tools of modernity. Further, the prevailing social taboos created barrier on the education of the girl child. John M'Cosh mentioned in 1837 that the impact of education was not encouraging with the womenfolk of Assam. Women education was thought to be dangerous for the society as it might destabilize the social hierarchy. Even peoples mindset rounded with the thinking that no man would marry a girl if she could read and write.¹² In 1870, there were altogether 8 girls' schools in Assam, 5 in Kamrup and one each in Darrang, Nagaon and Lakhimpur district.¹³ Gait in his census report in 1891 mentions that women education was not developed in the state and only 0.13 percent were learning and 0.22 percent were literate.¹⁴

The women education scenario in the Bodo dominated areas was far behind the state scenario. From the middle of the nineteenth century, initiatives

were taken by Christian missionaries to open schools amongst the Bodos of Darrang. Sidney Endle from the 'Society for the Propagation of Gospel' (SPG) Mission first observed the impact. He found several Christian Bodo families teaching their women and girl child to read and write at their home. With the help of the local people and the government, Endle established a women school at Borigaon in the Mangaldai sub-division and another at Mohabhoirob in the Tezpur sub-division in 1870.¹⁵ It was the first recorded initiative for women education among the Bodos. But the success was very meagre. In 1927, the American Baptist missionaries had established one girls' school at Darrang¹⁶ and the same increased to three by 1941.¹⁷ Likewise, in Goalpara district only in 1937, one girls' dormitory was built in the Tukrajhar Mission school.¹⁸

From the early part of the twentieth century, scenario started to change with the spread of education and Western philosophy among the Bodos, particularly in the Goalpara district. The socio-religious reform movement initiated by Kalicharan Brahma under the banner of the *Brahma Dharma* had some positive impact on women's empowerment. Kalicharan Brahma and his followers had started to focus on the issues of the womenfolk as they believed that refinement process starts from home through mothers. Kalicharan Brahma with the active support from the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district Mr. A. J. Laine, established a good number of schools in Bodo villages of the district and the most important among them was the Tipkai Middle English and Technical School (1913) with two vocational sections of weaving and carpentry. This was the first government school with three faculties including vocational courses in Assam. In this school the Bodo girls were encouraged to join in the weaving section along with other courses. Few name enrolled in the first batch of weaving section are- Nalini Brahma, Chikribela Brahma, Rupeswari Brahma and Naleswari Brahma. Kalicharan Brahma encouraged the parents to send their girl child to school.¹⁹

Things went for a change with the establishment of the *Bodo Charta Sanmilani* in 1919. The *Bodo Charta Sanmilani* had emphasized on the spread of education and development of the Bodo language which they believed the key factors for the progress of the tribe. From 1924 to 1940, in the writings of *Bibar magazine* (the first Bodo magazine), the Bodo writers had shown much interest on the spread of education for all round development of the society. Special focus was made on women's education.²⁰ The *Bodo Chatra Sanmilani* took a significant decision to award one medal for the best girl student in Lower Primary section in order to encourage the women's education.²¹

Yet the progress of education during the colonial period was very negligible. While the activities of the Christian missionaries were looked by the traditional Bodo society with suspicion, the sphere of influence of the socio-religious reform movement of Kalicharan Brahma was confined among his followers particularly in Goalpara district. Bodo guardians were not in favour of the cause of women education, for

them it was useless and rather troublesome. The attachment of the female community to the household works was given much importance. It was viewed important primarily for two reasons – first, to make them expert in household work for future life and secondly, to take care of the juniors, household cattle and to extend a helping hand to their parents. The attitude of the society towards women education thwarted the intentions which the missionaries, reformers and the student body had shown.

Immediately after the independence of India, the position of women among the Bodos of Assam affected badly because of many ups and downs and emergence of new issues. The demise of Kalicharan Brahma in 1938, disbandment of their political platform namely the All Assam Plains Tribal League had jeopardise the issue. In 1952, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha emerged with new vision for development and protection of the Bodo language. In 1967, two parallel organisations of the Bodos emerged viz. the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) with principal aims of achieving political rights and to safeguard their ethnic interest.²² Unfortunately, all these organisations were characterised with male domination²³ and failed to focus on women issues till the ABSU movement for separate statehood for the Bodos of Assam with the slogan 'Divide Assam fifty-fifty'.

Though the national Government of independent India gave emphasis on the compulsory universal primary education, there were disparities in getting access to education in the rural and urban areas, for all genders as well as for different economic and linguistic classes.²⁴ To add the same, in contrast to the numbers of primary schools, the number of secondary schools was limited in the interior places of Assam. The condition in the Bodo dominated areas remained dismal for some internal and external reasons like, the social condition of the people, their economic standard, the geographical condition, lack of political will, language problem, availability of schools within reasonable distance, etc. In the case of the women education it was in a pathetic condition among the Bodos. In regards of internal issue, till the third quarter of the 20th century, Bodo people had failed to change their mindset on women education. The bias against female education was so marked that people's perceptions was still confined with "*Likha Parha Janile Charitra Beya Ho*" (the education spoils the morality of women) and "*Besike Parhile Biya Nahay*" (nobody would marry higher educated women), etc.²⁵ In regards of external issues, the non-availability of schools within their immediate reach, particularly the Middle English and High English schools, economic condition, the geographical barriers, lack of able personalities in the Bodo villages, the language barrier and others had its negative impact on it.²⁶

In 1961, out of total 345,983 Bodo people in Assam, 124,039 males and 153,335 females were recorded illiterate. The record tells that 41,401 males and 13,384 females were literate without any educational level, 10,888 males and 2,290 females were literate of primary or Junior Basic level and 587

males and 56 females were matriculate or above degree holder.²⁷ In 1961, against the male literacy rate of 29.88 percent, the female literacy rate among the Bodo in Assam was only 9.3 percent.²⁸ In 1966, the Report of the Study Team on Tribal Development Programme in Assam mentioned that "The Bodos, who constitute the largest single group of the plains tribes, accounting for as much as 39.29 percent of the population of the plains tribes, are educationally the most backward with 19.83 percent literacy."²⁹

In 1963, at the initiatives of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Bodo medium of education was introduced in the schools of Assam in primary level. In 1969, PTCA raised their demand for full autonomy and in October 1972, they reiterated their demand for the creation of a Union Territory in the nomenclature of *Udayachal*.³⁰ While these organisations fought for their rights with mass participation, sources do not support of any major initiative for the empowerment of women through education or entrepreneurship development and to make them an imperative part of their struggle for medium or autonomy.

The last quarter of the 20th Century is an important period for the Bodos of Assam in general and the Bodo womenfolk in particular. In 1974, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha started the Roman script movement for the Bodo medium. This was the first grand occasion that Bodo leaders who had realised the importance of womenfolk and mobilised them in the movement.³¹ The development opened the door for the womenfolk to fight shoulder to shoulder with their male counterpart for public causes. In 1987, ABSU started the movement for separate statehood of Bodoland. In 1986, to ensure active participation of women, ABSU had given birth of the first women organisation with the nomenclature of All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF). The ABSU leader Upendra Nath Brahma had realised that society cannot progress without the progress of women. It was a turning point in the history of the Bodos in the contemporary period. Prior to this, there were hardly any women that able to extend leadership. The emerging leaders were mostly from educated class. In this regard, Pramila Rani Brahma, the first women leader of the Bodos, deserves a special mention. In 1989, the ABSU and the Bodo Volunteer Force had decided to actively involve the members of the Women's Welfare Federation in the movement and started to train-up their members for different events.³² At the guidance of the ABSU, women of different age groups actively participated in the movement on village council, district and state level in the form of procession, dharnas, gheraos, rasta roko and rail roko programmes.³³ To make the people conscious on the role of women in social changes, the AATWWF had organised many seminars in different areas of Assam³⁴ and took initiatives to publish articles on women related issues. The AATWWF also published a magazine "SONGDAN" for women, which was the first of its kind in the Bodo society. A few Bodo women in fact started their literary career through this magazine. The active participation and involvement of women in the movement had raised their self-confidence and

solidarity. At the same time, it started to raise the position and importance of the womenfolk in the society. Coming out from the four walls of the house they started to realise the importance of education for them which the ABSU leaders had backed much. One of the major contributions of the ABSU movement was the spread of education in the Bodo dominated areas by establishing a good number of Bodo medium schools almost in all villages of Bodo inhabited areas of Assam. It had its direct impact on the spread of education among the Bodo women and a fast rise of percentage of women literacy rate. While education had developed their confidence level, the movement gave them an opportunity to test their leadership capacity. Some of them proved themselves to be highly successful in this context.³⁵

The ABSU movement and the spread of education had brought an unprecedented change in the political behaviour of the Bodo women in Assam. While the ABSU and the AATWWF carried forward the movement, the new generation women quickly picked up the new ideas injected by the powers behind the agitation. The below table can provide us the idea on increasing number of Bodo women's participation in active politics.

Assam Legislative Assembly Elections	Percentage of women voters	Percentage of women voters in the ST constituency	Number of Tribal women contestants
1972	74	52	Garos:1
1978	60.78	60.6	Rabha:1
1983 (period of Assam Agitation)	29.20	29.8	Garos:3
1985	78.40	77	Bodos:1; Garos:1; Rabha:1
1991	73	70	Bodos:2; Karbi: 1
1996	77.85	77	Bodos:3; Garos:1; Karbi:1; Rabha:1; Mishing: 1
2001	71.82	76	Bodos:4; Rabha:1; Mishing: 1
2006	74.89	75.77	Bodos:5; Mishing:2; Karbi: 1
2011	74	75	Bodos:10; Mishing:4; Garos: 1

[State Report on General Election, (1972-2011) to the 5th to 13th Legislative Assembly of Assam]

It is pertinent to mention here, in 2003 the Bodoland Liberation Tiger (BLT) signed the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with the Union Government and the Assam State Government to safeguard the rights of the Bodo tribal group of the area and to ensue their all round development.³⁶

Accordingly with Constitutional protection under the Sixth Schedule provision, an Autonomous Self Governing body was formed in the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD). For the same, BLT had floated one political party with the help of the ABSU called "Bodoland Peoples Front" and fight the Council Election for BTAD in December, 2003. The new political party had again neglected the cause of women in spite of remarkable contributions made by women cadre of the organisation and did not provide them any ticket in the election. Women force did not bow down before the male dominated party and a number of Bodo women contested the election as independent candidate.³⁷ Taking the note from this experience, in the next Assam Legislative Assembly election the party extended two seats for women and both won the election.

With the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council on 10th February, 2003 covering four district of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri, there are remarkable changes in all fields. During the last two decades, the people witnessed a speedy socio-economic, politico-cultural and infrastructural development in the council area. Establishment of a good number of schools, colleges, university, technical institutions help in the fast growth of literacy rate of both men and women. The female literacy rate in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri districts are 59.54, 57.87, 62.23 and 59.17 respectively as per 2011 census whereas as per 2001 census the literacy rates in these four districts were 43.06, 42.87, 48.33 and 46.34 respectively.³⁸

Mass Education and active participation in different movements had also played an important role on the life of the women in the Bodo community. The developments gradually started to remove age old practice of superstitious beliefs among the families, improving the health sector among the people. Women education is now regarded as essential as the male who plays the primary role in the family. At present preference is given to an educated girl in case of matrimonial relationship. Their opinions and ideas are being asked for which would indicate in clear terms about the importance that is being accorded to them. Women are engaged in every profession like politics, social activities, NGOs, government and private jobs, medical and engineering services, cooperative societies, business, sports, modelling, acting, writing and so many. In short it can be say that very few fields are left untouched by them. Bodo women are today working in different offices along with their male counterpart which were not acceptable in previous occasions. By being involved in NGOs, cooperative societies, self help groups, etc., the women are actively engaging themselves for their upliftment. They organizes different training programmes, like weaving, knitting and cutting, beauty parlour, doll and household item making, etc. At present, women organisations are active in the society and involve in social reform movements like anti-alcohol, anti witchcraft hunting, voice against women oppression, move for awakening consciousness for women education, etc. This type of participation has encouraged them to take to different

profession and entrepreneurship. With the financial help from different government agencies, like Khadi and Village Industries Commission, District Industry and Commerce Centre, Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, State Institute of Rural Development, Block Development Office, Textile and Handloom Department, Sericulture Department, and others along with their training facilities, many Bodo women entrepreneur are coming out.³⁹

Along with these different professions, the educated Bodo women have managed to contribute in the field of writings, sports and modeling too. A good number of Bodo women writers have come out and a few have even received national awards for their writings. Some of them are Anjali Daimary, Sahitya Academy award for translation in 2007, Sansumi Khunguri Basumatary, Juva Sahitya Academy award for novel in 2013, Rita Boro, Sahitya Academy award for novel in 2018. Besides the Sahitya Academy awardees, a good number of Bodo women have extended their literary contributions to their language and others. In sports Bodo women have able to attract the attention of the world. In boxing Jamuna Boro won gold in the Second National Cup International Sub-Junior Boxing Tournament, 2013 held at Serbia, Gohela Boro, won gold medal at Kerela National Games, 2015, National level archer Pwilao Basumatary won gold medal in the 5th AIBA National Cup, 2016 in Ruma, Serbia, Ankushita Boro won gold medal in the AIBA Youth World Boxing Championship, 2017, Kunjalata Boro bagged bronze medal in Asian Masters Athletics Meet, 2017 held in China, Pramial Daimary represented Indian women's archery team to Jakarta Asian Games, 2018. In 2017, Mrs. Kiron Boro was crowned as Mrs. Universe Exquisite, 2017. Earlier, she was also crowned Mrs. India Home Makers Classic 2017 and also represented India as West Asia Earth in Mrs. Earth Pageant 2017 in Las Vegas. She has also been nominated as India Ambassador of Elite Global Earth of Las Vegas to work against bullying of women and prevention of suicide.⁴⁰ Mrs. Nitu Basumatary is crowned with the tittle of "Mrs Diva of India International, 2018" held at Bhilwara, Rajasthan. Miss Daisy Basumatary is crowned with the second runner up title in the Sriya Miss India, 2018, held in Jaipur, Rajasthan⁴¹ and many more. All these have transformed the position of the Bodo women in the state as well as the nation and it had raised their status. The Bodo women of the state have performed their traditional dances in different corners of the world and able to collect worldwide appreciation.

Conclusion

Women Empowerment is an important issue closely associated with the resurgence of Bodo tribe in Assam. The emergence of the modern era and growing relationship between the caste Hindus and the tribe gradually created difference in the traditional Bodo social structure. The colonial rule had opened the door of Western education and new avenues of job for the people. The Western education created a new elite as well as conscious class of people. But the patriarchal society was not ready to open the door of modern amenities i.e, Western education and job

opportunities, for the women folk as they afraid of the end of male dominance on the society.

While the Christian Missionaries, Socio-religious reformers, newly emerged educated class and a few individuals, tried their best for empowering the women for social change during the colonial period, Bodo leaders immediately after the independence had failed to realise the importance of women. It was Upendra Nath Brahma, who had understood the importance of the role of women in social change. His initiative was the turning point for the revival of the Bodo community, who now feel proud to introduce themselves as Bodo to the world. Some important findings are mentioned below:

1. The traditional Bodo society is a patriarchal society with agriculture as the main source of livelihood.
2. Gender inequality is marginal in the traditional Bodo society and Bodo women enjoy much freedom in comparison to their caste Hindu counterpart.
3. The colonial rule, introduction of Western education, opportunities for new jobs and growing influence of Caste Hindus had its impact on the social structure of the traditional Bodo society.
4. The Christian Missionaries had played a major role in reviving the Bodo language by introducing its written form. Then again, the large scale conversion to Christianity made a section of people realise for the socio-religious reform to check the erosion.
5. The social reformers under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma gave importance on the empowerment of women for social change.
6. During the post-independence period, the Bodo leaders under the banner of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) fought a long struggle for the rights of Bodo people, yet they had failed to make the women a part of their struggle.
7. The year 1986 became a turning point for the Bodo women in Assam with the formation of the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF). Under the banner of the organisation, the Bodo women actively participated in the Bodo movement and make the people realise the importance of women in social change and progress. The development had destroyed the social stagnation of the Bodo society and opened the door of progress for Bodo women. Now, the Bodo women are become an example for other tribal groups of Assam lifting their position to a new height.

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