

## **The Bodo Movement and Bodo Women : A case study of organising women within an ethnic movement**

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This paper attempts to discuss the processes of formation and activities of an women's organisation in the backdrop of the Bodo movement in Assam. There are further points that deserve attention that how political and social conditions have driven ABSU leaders to form an women organisation. The entire data of this paper was collected through field-work during 1995-96 in the districts of Kokrajhar, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Goalpara.

At the time of launching the movement for separate state the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) leader Upen Bramha wrote a book, entitled, 'Why a separate state' 1986. In this book he discussed about the activities of his predecessor Bodo leaders who organised Udyachal movement (1967) and Tribal land movement (1984). The contribution of ABSU in the formation of Bodo nationalism is also discussed by him thoroughly. His effort is referred to as a continuation of the previous movement though the line of action of plain Tribal Council of Assam (P.T.C.A.) leaders are criticised by him. Due to compromising attitude with the then Government the Bodo leadership was divided since 1977. The decision of postponement of Udyachal movement during the state of emergency in India (1975-77) and joining of P.T.C.A. leader to the Janata Government of Assam led to the formation of the P.T.C.A. (Progressive) in 1979 and United Tribal National Liberation Front (U.T.N.L.F). The decision of P.T.C.A. (p) for 'Mishing - Bodoland' movement and of U.T.N.L.F. for 'tribal land' movement failed to mobilize people and during 1983-84 ABSU decided to start a movement for the cause of Bodo nationalism. During this period ABSU and PTCA supporters attempted to force their hegemony upon each other which confused common people. Before the announcement of the Bodo movement ABSU took a number of steps to tackle this serious problem. The first one was to clarify its programme to men and women in village based meetings. Secondly, much emphasis was given towards the need of women participation in the movement what was important to note that since 1967 women were seen as passive secondary supportive mass in Udyachal movement. Amidst the tumultuous situation

ABSU wanted to use the collective force of women. Generally, social movement was viewed as a stimulant in the life of sufferer men and women and it instigated the common people to join in the protest for a better cause. But it will be improbable to see the participation of the Bodo women in the above context. In a historical moment the collective force of the Bodo women was Used by ABSU when Bodo people were divided into two groups following the rivalry of ABSU and PTCA.

### *The Bodo Women*

Like all Agriculturist communities of this region the Bodo women have a significant contribution in economic aspects and no participation in traditional political organisations. Women are found to participate in village assemblies only when they are parties to a case or called as witness. In this position in 1986 "All Assam Tribal Women's welfare Federation (AATWWF) was established in 1986. Though the word 'Tribe' is used in it's name but it is predominated by Bodo women right from the beginning. However, in 1993, after Bodo accord, this organisation changed its name into the All Bodo women welfare Federation (ABWWF).

### *The role of ABSU in the formation of AATWWF*

From 1984 onwards, the then ABSU leader Upen Bramha and his followers took up the mission to mobilise the educated Bodo women specially the teachers in joining women emancipation programme as an inseparable and effective part to arraign the emancipation of their society. This effort consequently became fruitful in forming an women's organisation. Pioneer Bodo women leaders of today like Hirabai Narzary, Romila Islary, Malati Rani Narzary, Pramila Rani Brahma, Mira Basumatory, Supriya Rani Bramha, Kamali Rani Basumatry, etc., have mentioned during interview that before launching Bodo movement for separate state, ABSU was mobilising people through village meetings, work-shops and seminars. During village campaign ABSU felt the need of women's organisation through which illiterate Bodo women can be communicated and further women will get a ready platform to organise themselves for the cause of the movements. Upen Bramha at the time of conversation with above mentioned ladies told that to establish a distinct Bodo nationality and to get recognition in the world as a civilised and advanced society, women's participation is a must in every sphere of life.

To raise consciousness among women at first, ABSU explained their objectives and analysed the expected role of women. The educated Bodo ladies and ex-women members of ABSU were communicated in this phase. Most of the founder members of AATWWF and founder secretary Ms. Malati Rani Narzary was the elder sister of the then ABSU leader Deora Dekhreb Basumatory and a close associate of Upen bramha. The AATWWF District Committee members were selected and invited by ABSU. Most of these lady members were teachers by profession. The district committees of kokrajhar, Darrang, and Goalpara were established in 1985 while Nalbari Barpeta were established in the year 1989 and 1988 respectively. The anchalik committee are formed by district committees of AATWWF and by the help of local ABSU leader while units and village committees were formed by anchalik and district committee members. The organisational structure of AATWWF has been at par with the organisational structure of ABSU. The first group of Central and district committee members were directly selected by ABSU. In later years the members of district committees and cultural committees are being selected from lower tiers.

*'The aims and objectives of AATWWF'*

The issues related to ethnic movement for sepa rate state were given top priority by the central committee members of AATWWF. In order to put this into practics, AATWWF outlined it's programme in tune with the current phase of the Bodo movement, though it was not mentioned in the aims and objectives of AATWWF constitution. As per constitution AATWWF wanted to work towards the fullfilment of the will and aspirations of the women folk belonging to different tribal groups and fight for equal rights, status and honour of tribal women "and it is mentioned in the constitution that" the very nature of the federation shall be non political, socio-economic, educational and cultural aiming at the best interest of realising the objectives for the alround welfare and security of Bodo tribal women folk in particular and that of all tribal groups living in Assam as a whole". (Bramha p & M. Basumatory 1987, p. 10).

Side by side with the women issues, this organisation desired to respond to other issues also and in its objective outlined that "AATWWF shall honour the genuine urge and aspirations of all tribal groups living in Assam in respect of preserving their distinct self identity and thereby paving

way to tie up them all with a common chain of unity and understanding” (Ibid p-9).

AATWWF members played a significant role during Bodo movement. The Bodo activists and Bodo women received special care and attention by the members of this organisation. Their activities made the Bodo women feel concerned about their rights in the society. To mobilise people the district level ABSU, AATWWF and Bodo Volunteer Force (armed wing of ABSU) members conducted joint meetings in the villages. In some areas where ABSU could not penetrate, it received help from AATWWF members. Central Committee members had direct communication with ABSU leaders and they conducted meetings with the Bodo people of other states to make them aware of the organisational activities as well as the objectives of the movement. Anchalik and Unit committee members kept direct communication with villagers. Specially the Anchalik committee members have substantial contribution to the movement. They act as the mediator between villagers and Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF) members. A few young women member are specially, trained to nurse villagers and underground activists. They are trained to handle burning cases and to extract bullets from the body. These nurses provided medical facilities to villagers as well as the underground activists. From the beginning of Bodo movement (1987-1993) AATWWF members performed the duties of carrying messages and other things for the activists. The messengers were also trained. The Anchalik level messengers worked within anchalik, and district level messengers worked within and outside districts. The nature of common people's participation is not uniform in all districts. People of kikrajhar and Darrang got experienced with the democratic form of movement by participating in meetings rallies etc. But people of Nalbari were introduced with the movement through B.V.F. members. In this phase AATWWF members played a remarkable role to make proper communication between villagers and BVF members. They made the objective and purpose of the activists understandable to the common people. As a result of which the BVF activists were supplied with food and shelter wherever and when ever needed. Common villagers were organised by AATWWF members to perform these jobs. A few special programmes have been taken for the protection of women which are as follows :

1. During police and military raids the women are trained to ask them about the reason of raids.
2. All women of villages are requested to stay together in common place of village along with their children.
3. In case of any sudden attack upon any woman they were trained to tackle the situation intelligently.

This training helped them to trace those security men involved in abusing them during raids.

iv. In case of arrests village women were instructed to gherao police station within a few hours. During this time any sort of arrest of innocent villagers by the police were protested by the women. AATWWF members used to take direct initiative to free the arrested persons and ABSU members also. AATWWF attracted people's attention through their protest against Bhumka gang rape of 1987 where police was accused of the crime. Legal action was taken against this incident. This organisation was, thus, able to create an overall impact upon women. During Bodo movement women were regular participants in all meetings, rallies, and protests. Among other progressive activities the AATWWF took a strong step against liquor addiction prevailing among the common people. The cases of polygamy were also handled by the women activists. At the height of the movement. When the traditional political organisation of Bodo villages became functionless, the common people preferred to consult AATWWF members in case of disputes.

#### *ABSU and AATWWF relation*

Since 1967, women have been looked at as a passive, secondary and supportive mass in Udyachal and other movements. It was only during 1985-86 in the wake of the tumultuous situation that ABSU started using the collective force of women and usurped their active role in the movement.

It is in this background that the AATWWF played a significant role and projected an image of mother's organisation, whose role is protective in all steps. ABSU is also the sole financier of AATWWF. In a few decisions AATWWF members differed from ABSU members. The question of

women's participation in armed struggle was such a decision which divided the AATWWF members. The unwilling members debated over the future of those women who would join in armed struggle. They were doubtful about the social acceptance of women who would join in underground activities. They did not admit the Camp life for women soldiers too.

### CONCLUSION

The organisational participation of women followed clear cut guidelines, which was given by ABSU. The substantive response of women to this new horizon is opening up new paths before them. During interview all Bodo women informants pointed out that the women had a little contact with outside world before the movement. Now alongwith other issues women's problems are getting attention of the people at large. Though no significant programme is given by AATWWF for the welfare of women but it is evident that the new role of women has raised their confidence and self respect. On the other hand women now have feeling that they are empowered to take part in effective discussions not only in the present socio-political crisis but also on more wider angles covering issues of development of their people at large.

### REFERENCES

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