

Socio-Political Movements and Women's Empowerment in the Bodo Community

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Abstract : This paper intends to focus the influence of socio-political movements on women. It is already an accepted fact that such movements aim at reorganise, re-articulate life of people. In any such movements women are usually invisible mass as their contributions are measured in conventional scale that considers parameters like 'leadership', 'Power', 'ideology', etc. But in this paper women participation in socio-political movements is studied, in terms of their participation in 'other roles'. These 'other roles', which are essential to organise any movements usually receives less importance in academic discussions. The socially constructed concepts of division of labour and work participation of women vis-a-vis men already distinguished an women's world in family and society. Such distinctions are addressed through concepts like 'gender' 'development', etc. The main objectives of these concepts are to relocate men's and women's position in society. Side by side, socio-political movements, which are time specific, sudden and involve people for specific causes also may left impressions on people's life and on women.

The Background

The question of women's empowerment in the west is an outcome of several protest movements of women against discrimination. Such movements have given birth to a whole body of literature on gender. Before the emergence of the concept on 'women in development' (WID)¹ approach came into use in the early 1970's. This approach assured the institutionalization of the recognition that women's experience in development and social change differed from that of men. It legitimized a research focus on women's experiences and perspectives (Kannabiran 1998:19). Agenda of 'gender in development' (GID)² emerged in 1980's. Kannabiran (1998:20) feels that GID approach bridges the gap of modernization theorists by linking the relations of production to the relations of reproduction and takes into account all aspects of women's lives. The GID agenda stressed on the demand for a reconfiguration of gender roles as they are constructed in society. It is a call for re-allocation of duties and responsibilities between men and women, and an insistence on casting women in new gender roles within society (1997:WS-2). Feminist literature since 1940's and various activities of socialist feminists must have a persistent effect on women's empowerment, but perhaps the social movements, which occurred among different communities in Asia, Africa, and Latin American countries, have had direct influence on the women of those parts of the world. Some scholars (*see* Escobar 1992) argue that the social movements in those areas emerged out of the crisis of modernity.

Jain (1993:27-27) maintains that the members of Indian Women Association (IWA) submitted memorandum (1917) to the Montague Chelmsford Committee demanding inclusion of women in Home Rule League. Initially, the Committee declined their demands, so the IWA members proceeded to England (1919) to settle their demand in favour of women and succeeded. In continuation to that Alva (1993:82-98) points out that the scope of adult franchise under a democratic constitution had provided equal status to Indian men and women in political activities. Jayawardena (1986:) pronounces that two classes of Indian women were emancipated in the 19th century. The middle and upper middle class women, who came into direct contact of reform movements and rural women, who joined the Tea and Coffee plantations in India and other countries. But such emancipation process did not effect women of all

strata equally. In fact the Bodo women had taken a long time to break their silence. The tea industries in Bramhaputra valley effected the economy of Bodo Kachari in various ways⁴. Writings of Guha (1975, 1993) refers to the Kachari labourer's class struggle in tea industries of the 19th century. 'Bibar' (1924/25), the first periodical of the Bodo, recounts the activities of the educated class of Bodo of the first half of twentieth century. These literatures also provided some space to recount activities of Bodo Kachari women. Guha (Ibid), nevertheless, states that the women did not join tea gardens as labourers in nineteenth century. The young Bodo writers of the first generation are found committed to encourage the Bodo youths to have a progressive outlook in order to strengthen their community identity (see *Bibar* 1924/25). They viewed the domestic sphere as the source for better life and viewed women as the protector of it. These writers were critique of certain social customs and initiated steps to reform them⁵. The varied activities in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, indeed, created a space for women outside home by introducing facilities for women's education.

Socio-political processes and the Bodo women

Since the inception of Tribal League (1933), the Bodo leaders emphasized the need for preserving tribal unity. Post colonial struggles of the Bodo had laid stress on preservation and development of the Bodo language as they perceived 'language' as the core component of their community identity (Mosahary, Narzary 1993:7-17). The organized activities of Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) established the Bodo language as a Modern Indian Language (MIL), and the second state Language of Assam after the struggle for more than three decades.

The political demands of the Bodos were expressed through different organizations like the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), PTCA (Progressive), United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF), United Bodo Nationalist Liberation Front (UBNLF), and All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU), since 1967. Although none of them has so far elected a women President or Secretary or the executive member. This does not necessarily suggest that the Bodo women were invisible in every step of political activities. The Sharecropper's Movement of Assam during 1955 had the participation of a number of Bodo women (Basumatory 1994). The active women leaders of Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) founded 'Nari Mukti Sangathan' in some districts of Assam (Deka 1994:191-192). From 1974 onwards, the Bodo women participated in protest rallies, *gheraos*, etc in the language movement for Roman Script in a larger scale. The women leaders of the ABSU Movement (1987) were school going girls during the language movement and they consider that movement as the hallmark in the history of social movements among the Bodo. This BSS led and ABSU supported movements were really able to involve the mass people for the first time.

All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF), was established in 1986 under direct initiative of the then pioneer leaders of ABSU. It became a representative organization of the Bodo women. This sister organization of ABSU was able to make a mass base within a short period of time. This organization was formed at a crucial moment in the history of movements of Bodo people. In fact, the failure of political parties on the issue of a state for plains tribal of Assam, disenchanted the common people. AATWWF members did a crucial job since the establishment of their organization. They had repaired the damages that took place in the relationship of people with ABSU and PTCA. Since 1967, ABSU, PTCA and BSS worked together for overall development of the Bodo community and expressed their political aspiration by demanding the 'Udyachal' (Union Territory). But, frequent shifting in the demand for political boundary for the plains tribal, i.e. Mishing Bodo Land of PTCA(P), Tribal Land of U.T.N.L.F. and Bodo Land of UBNLF, diluted the whole issue in people's mind. ABSU's proposal for starting a movement for the homeland of Bodo people initially created a mixed reaction in their mind. In fact, the common people were not much confident on ABSU's decision. Pramila Rani Bramha the first women leader of the Bodo recalls :

"..... when the ABSU decided to launch a fresh movement in 1986, I was not sure what I should do. All that time I was requested to establish a Women's Welfare Organization by Upendranath Bramha and Sansuma Khungur Bwsmuthhiari". (Pramila, dtd. 8. 12. 97, M.L.A. Hostel, Dispur, Assam).

Apart from Pramila, some other women pioneer leaders like Malati, Rani Narzary, Hira Rani Narzary, Kamali Rani were also requested by the ABSU leaders to form a women organization. The leaders of the Bodo felt the necessity of women's participation in the movement for the first time during ABSU movement. The founder member of AATWWF in central and district committee's level were relatives or close associates of ABSU leaders. A few of them like Malati, Kamali, Romila, Islary, had joined various protest rallies picketing, etc. during Roman script movement. Some of them did not have any early experience in participation in the movements. Prior to the formation of AATWWF, there were hardly any women in leadership. The AATWWF was the first organization in which a large number of women joined and most of them were in teaching profession. The first meeting of AATWWF was held on 14th July, 1986 at Deborgaon High School of Kokrajhar, where the organization was established.

Bodo land movement of ABSU and women's experience

The most intense period of the Bodo land movement of ABSU was for six years, from 3rd March, 1987 to 20th February, 1993. During this period, the ABSU carried out numerous activities. It published books, leaflets, etc. and submitted memoranda. Its underground wing also carried out innumerable violent activities. There was organizational level participation of women. The initial response of those women was rather hesitant but they overcame. As one recounts :

"Generally the Bodo women are backward. So, it was felt difficult by the ABSU leaders to organize women for the movement. This task had been given to the educated Bodo women. The leaders said that the ABSU movement would not be successful without the participation of women. They highlighted the importance of women in family and society. I started thinking that I was also a responsible member of my community. Being a women, I could not ignore the responsibilities (political) of my society" (Ramala (pseudo name), January, 1996, Odalguri, Darrang).

This statement clearly indicates the Bodo women's initial reaction towards participation in the movement. Any way, ABSU's approach opened up a new space in the life of Bodo women, as the participation in political activities was prohibited for them, traditionally.

The AATWWF members had contributed effectively to organize people. In the first round mobilization meeting the following issues were discussed: (i) Health and hygiene, (ii) family planning, (iii) necessity of cleanliness, (iv) mother's role to keep babies clean and tidy, (v) mother's responsibility to educate children, (vi) problems of alcoholism in family and society, (vii) bad effect of polygamy, etc. The activities of educated women received wide appreciation of the rural people. They helped the rural people and specially women in many ways. A few experiences of the women participants are presented here which reflect the internal dynamics of the movement.

"When the ABSU initiated the movement for a separate state, the PTCA supporters did not like it. So, Kokrajhar, Nalbari and Borpeta where PTCA supporters were numerous frequent clashes took place. The members of the AATWWF played mother's role at that time... members of AATWWF wanted to stand as a guardian organization of the Bodo people during ABSU and PTCA clashes. We wanted to stand united for the cause of our people. There were factions but we told our people that all activists were like our children. So, they are not committing any crime. They are sacrificing their life for us. So we have to help them".

Foundation of AATWWF was not smooth every where, in fact it took several months or years to establish circle or village level bodies of AATWWF in PTCA dominated areas (Chaudhuri 1999:124-126). A larger section of women had participated in the movements. They performed different role. Different activities of the

respondent activists are mentioned in tabular form (Tables 1 and 2). These tables depict that the Bodo women participated in each and every aspect of the movement.

Participation of women in Voluntary Force (VF), the military wing of ABSU is very significant for two reasons. One is, the women leaders and others could be absolutely silent on this issue. Secondly, the women participants were very strong in their determination. Women had to perform the duties of messengers for this wing. Sometimes they had to carry arms and money for the members. Apart from that, women received arms training to protect self and other women and nursing training to help ABSU and VF activists at the time of need. The trained girls were instructed that wherever and whenever they would come to know about injured persons and activists, they must nurse them. These girls proved very helpful during the movement. During peak hours of movement, the trained girls were helpful to the villagers. Some of them showed considerable efficiency in nursing activities including surgical operations. Most of the ABSU, VF members were on the move, therefore it was the duty of the AATWWF members to arrange food for them and sometimes they had to supply food in hideouts.

Amongst all the roles performed by women, most crucial might be the jobs of mobilization of people and dispute resolution. The people consulted the ABSU and AATWWF members to solve any conflict in their villages. Women of AATWWF for the time being took part in dispute resolution at the village level during movement. They started imposing fine to the men involved in extra-marital affairs. Such actions of them made common people more confident on women. Even the women leaders were instrumental in peace accords. AATWWF organized many seminars during movement. These seminars found very helpful to mobilize and articulate educated people's voice in rural and suburban areas. The educated leaders of AATWWF were resource persons among others.

AATWWF members published the first magazines on Bodo women by Bodo women in 1991. The 'Songdan', was the Central Committee magazine and the 'Raikhmuthi', was the district committee magazine. Number of women feature writers, poets created a space for women writers in the literary world of the Bodo, through these magazines.

Table 1. *Different activities of the respondents*

Activities	Number of Respondents from the different districts (N=162)		
	Kokrajhar	Nalbari	Darrang
1. Taking part in the village based mobilization meeting	27	33	12
2. Taking part in the meeting outside village	21	10	12
3. Cooking food for ABSU VF, ABSU, AATWWF members at home	10	27	23
4. Providing shelter of those members	10	24	17
5. Carrying confidential messages, money or the other things for ABSU VF members	6	8	5
6. Nursing VF members	4	4	10
7. Organising <i>gherao/dharna</i> programmes	2	5	3
8. Taking part in <i>gherao</i> programme	2	27	3
9. Taking part in nursing training	4	5	6
10. Taking care of family members of the activists	-	7	5
11. Keeping regular communication with ABSU VF members who were arrested by Police/in jail/in hospital	5	5	4
12. Accompanying AATWWF members to the police station for any work related to release of arrested common people	4	27	4
13. Going to submit representation	19	12	3

Source : Fieldwork 1996.

Table 2. Role of participants in the meeting

Role of participants in meetings	Types of meetings	Participation of informants from studied districts		
		Kokrajhar	Nalbari	Darrang
01. Deliver speech	a. In village council meetings of AATWWF	12	6	5
	b. In village council meetings of ABSU	2	3	2
	c. In district level meetings of AATWWF	10	6	2
	d. In district level meetings of ABSU	2	2	2
	e. In central conference of AATWWF	6	2	2
	d. In the conference/Mass rally of ABSU	-	-	2
02. Work as Rapporteur		2	2	-
03. Mobilise people	a. As a member of AATWWF	8	6	5
	b. As member of joint Action Committee	5	5	3
04. Chair meetings	a. Village council meetings of AATWWF	8	6	1
	b. District Committee meetings of AATWWF	6	4	2
	c. Mass rally and central conference of AATWWF	3	3	1
05. Participate in the meeting held by ABSU VF	a. District level conference of AATWWF	12	7	1
	b. Central level conference of AATWWF	5	5	1
	c. ABSU meeting (district level)	5	6	2
	d. Central executive meeting of AATWWF	6	2	2
	e. Central executive meeting of ABSU	5	2	3
06. Participate in the meeting of ABSU VF		3	6	-
07. Do the job of volunteer in meetings		8	8	3
08. Member of reception committee		2	4	4
09. Member of refreshment committee		12	17	10
10. In Nursing team		1	-	2
11. Central Committee member		8	1	1
12. Organise people to attend meeting		10	4	4
13. Collect subscription		3	2	4
14. Collect <i>aronai</i> for the guests		4	2	1
15. Cook food for the delegates		15	5	9
16. Works as a member of audience in meetings	a. Village level meeting	37	40	31
	b. Village council level meeting	33	42	26
	c. District level meeting	17	42	23
	d. Mass rally	17	5	10

Source: Fieldwork, 1996.

The Bodo women and empowerment

The socio-religious movement in the beginning of twentieth century introduced women's education in the Bodo community. At present the Bodo women teachers are found in each and every school in Bodo dominated areas of Assam. Bodo women have substantial participation in the traditional production system. Women are the main labour force in agriculture within and outside home. The Bodo women are weavers of their society. In this patriarchal community, the women did not have accessibility in decision making in social sphere. The traditional political organizations of villages were men's domain before ABSU movement. The daughters in this society did not inherit father's property, customarily. The widow without a son could not inherit husband's property. Her role in the property maintenances was comparable to the job of a caretaker. Nevertheless, women held a respectable position in the family, where they were supposed to perform the job of cooking, cleaning, washing, baby care, and other duties for family members.

The exhortation of the Bodo women by ABSU leaders to participate in the Bodo movement was, first and foremost, something historic and unexpected. At the same time it provided an opportunity for them to enter into the political arena which was absolutely monopolized by male until then. The movement gave an opportunity to the women to test their leadership capabilities. In the traditional social set up, the Bodo women might have played an indirect role in decision making at family or village level. But such decision was pronounced always by their male counterparts. This unchallenged bastion of the males as decision-makers was challenged for the first time as a consequence of their women's participation in the movement.

One of the most important consequences of their participation in this movement is perhaps the widely shared sense of belonging to a category called 'women'. While they intended to play a supplementary role in the movement, they discovered themselves as a category apart from the men. The process of the spread of awareness regarding education, health, child rearing, etc. among the rural women had strengthen the unity of women.

CONCLUSION

The organized activities of AATWWF during Bodo land movement (1987-1993) authorized a large number of educated and grass root Bodo women into active decision making process. It is true that the Bodo women are struggling against many patriarchal values in family-level and community-level. Nonetheless, struggling position of women leaders, where they have "been patronized to become a woman leader", perceived as "woman first and leader later ... play second fiddle to their male counterparts" (Ete 2000:1), did not deter them. Perhaps, all these experiences are restructuring their perception which found expression in their demands for 30% reservation for women in Bodo Autonomous Council.

NOTES

1. Kannabiran (1998) says the question of women in development came into use in the early 1970's after Esther Boserup published *Women's Role in Economic Development*. This study was the first to demonstrate systematically on a global level the sexual division of labour in agrarian economics. WID was a term used in the United States as a strategy to bring Boserup's evidence before American policy makers.
2. 'Gender in Development' as a concept has developed a holistic perspective looking at the totality of social organization, economic and political life in order to understand the shaping of particular aspects of society.
3. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Virsalingam Pantulu, Mahadev Govind Ranade devoted their lives to fight against women's oppression in Hindu system.
4. Guha (1993:24) mentions that during 1859, a large number of tea garden labourers, among whom

the Bodo Kachari men represented the largest section, faced repression of British garden owners and organized labourers against low and irregular wages. In fact, these struggles were comparable with the struggles against imperialism on the issues like socio-economic exploitations and repression.

5. The early age at marriage and custom of high bride price were considered impediment to the high studies for men. The Bramha religion followers reduced high bride price.

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