

The Status of Bodo Women in the Society: A Study on Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

Equal status of women in society has been gaining much importance in recent times. Bodos are one of the ethnic communities living mostly in Bodoland Territorial Region of the state Assam in India. The status of Bodo women in society like the women of other communities in India is questionable. The present study focuses on the social, economic, political and educational status of Bodo women. The study has been carried out in Baksa, Udalguri, Kokrajhar and Chirang districts of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam. Sex Ratio in BTR is quite satisfactory, the percentage of female population in BTR is not very low when compared to other parts of India. The Bodo society is a patriarchal society but the womenfolk play a key role in cultural activities, religious festivals, social functions and ceremonies equally with the males. Majority of Bodo women are economically independent. They have one means of earning while some of them have more than one means of occupation. Bodo women are expert weaver; they earn individually and extend their help in the process of family earning. Participation of women in BTC Legislative Assembly Election is not satisfactory at all. There was no single Bodo women candidate winning the BTC Legislative Assembly Election in three consecutive elections. The role of All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) is worth mentioning because under its banner women collectively stood against the patriarchal mindset of the society and family by coming out of their domestic sphere and participating in Bodoland struggle. Gender gap exists in literacy rate in all the four districts of BTR.

Keywords

Women, Bodo society, social status, economic status, political status, educational status

Introduction

“The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women. There is chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved.” – Swami Vivekananda.

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than male. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. (Shetter, 2015). The constitution of India guarantees equal rights and freedom to both men and women. Despite this, women are subject to discrimination.

Bodos are one of the ethnic communities living in Northeast India, residing mostly in Northern Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Bodos are one of the earliest inhabitants of Assam and the largest plain tribe of Assam included under the 6th schedule of Indian Constitution. Bodos are mainly agriculture-based society. From primitive age to present times, Bodo women have played a very important role in shaping the socio-cultural as well as the economic life of the Bodo people. In

this sense, Bodo women enjoy equal status. But in true sense, Bodo women are also no exception in terms of discrimination like the women of other communities in different parts of India. No doubt, in the Bodo socio-economic set up, it is the women who occupy dominant role rather than the men folk; thus, their social status is higher when compared to women in other communities. But their contribution towards the family and society is hardly recognized by the society. The role and responsibilities of Bodo women need not be limited only to the family but they must be equally participative in the social development process.

Review of Related literature:

Islary (2020), conducted a study on historical perspectives of Bodo women and economic activities. The study revealed that that the Bodo women are an important agent of socio-economic and their contribution in economic development is praiseworthy. Therefore, it is injustice to ignore their economic activities in building the history of Bodo society.

Swargiary (2020), conducted a study on role of women in Bodo society in Udalguri district. The

study concluded that at present Bodo women have come to focus in many fields such as politics, literature, sports, etc.

Tripathy (2020), conducted a study on different dimensions of Bodo community of Dalbari village in Barama block of Baksa district in Assam. The study revealed that in Bodo society women are treated equal as males and no social discrimination exist in the society.

Basumatary (2017), conducted a study on women in Bodo politics: Role of All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF). The study revealed that although Bodo women played a major role in Bodoland struggle, their role were not recognized and hence they remained deprived of power and recognition. But the efforts of ABWWF helped in bringing Bodo women to public space.

Swargiary, et. al. (2015), conducted a study on political empowerment of Bodo women in present day context. The study revealed that Bodo women played a significant role in Roman script movement and Bodoland movement. Their participation marked as a significant step forward in women's political role and decision making.

Devi (2014), conducted a study on status of women among the Boros and Garos of Kamrup district. The study revealed that both the tribal societies are not under total male domination and hence the status of women cannot be termed as bad. Garo women are ahead of Bodo women in terms of enjoying marital life, inheritance of property and education. But women of both societies can be seen equal economic status.

Talukdar (2012), conducted a study on women education and rural economic development in two districts of Assam. The study revealed that women engaged in service are not satisfactory but the comparative analysis of occupational structure of present generation with past generation reveals tremendous improvement. The education of Bodo women is not satisfactory due to many reasons like poor communication facilities in rural areas, drop out among female students, poverty, lack of strong motivation towards higher education, etc.

From the above review of related literature, it comes to light that a few researches have been done in the area of role and status of Bodo women. Further, many studies reported that empowerment of Bodo women is important in

order to bring development in different aspects of life like economic, political, educational, social etc. It has been observed that in Assam very few studies have been done based on the role and status of Bodo women. Despite their massive contribution there is no comprehensive study, looking into the social, political, educational and economic condition of the Bodo women. Therefore, it seems quite appropriate on the part of the investigators to conduct a study on the present condition of Bodo women.

Significance of the study:

Gender inequality is a major concern in many societies. Women are considered subordinate in many Indian societies. The existing condition of Bodo women seems to be similar with women of other societies. Less number of studies has been conducted on Bodo women and hence they are viewed similar as other Scheduled Tribe (ST) women. Though the Scheduled Tribe (ST) women are seen to be enjoying same status equal to men, but the same cannot be generalized in case of Bodo women. Therefore, the present study is undertaken to enquire the status of Bodo women in the society in order to bring in light their prevailing condition.

Statement of the problem:

Considering the significance of studying the prevailing condition of women in Bodo society, the present study is stated as 'The status of Bodo women in the society: A study on Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Assam, India'

Area of the study

The area for the present study is Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), located in northeastern state of Assam, India. The region comprises four districts located in the North Bank of the Brahmaputra valley. It spreads around 9,000sq km and mostly dominated by Bodo community and other indigenous communities.

Objectives of the study:

The objectives of the study are:

1. To study the social status of Bodo women in society.
2. To enquire the economic status of Bodo women.
3. To analyze the political status of Bodo women.

4. To examine the educational status of Bodo women.

Research questions:

Following are the research questions based on the objectives of the study:

1. Whether the social status of Bodo women is satisfactory?
2. Do Bodo women enjoy appropriate economic status?
3. Whether the Bodo women are politically aware?
4. Is the educational status of Bodo women satisfactory?

Delimitation of the study:

The study is delimited to the Bodo women of BTR, Assam.

Operational Definition of the terms used:

Scheduled Tribes (ST): Scheduled Tribe (ST) in the present study refers to the Bodo community, who are considered educationally and economically backward.

Social Status: Social status in the study refers to the social position of Bodo women in the society.

Economic Status: Economic status in the study refers to the economic position of the Bodo women in the society.

Educational status: Educational status in the study refers to the status of educational qualification of the Bodo women.

Methodology:

Method: Descriptive survey method is used in the study.

Population: The population of present study comprise of Bodo women of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam.

Sample: The sample of present study comprise of Bodo women residing in Baksa, Udalguri, Kokrajhar and Chirang districts

Tools used for data collection: The present study is based on secondary data. The data is collected from Statistical Handbook of Assam, Election Commission Reports of Assam, Official records and research articles.

Statistical techniques used: The data collected from the secondary sources are analyzed and presented in tabular form. The whole data is summarized, analyzed and presented through descriptive statistical methods. The discussion on

the objectives is done based on descriptive analysis.

Discussion and Findings:

Objective 1: To study the status of Bodo women in society:

The status of Bodo women in the society have been studied in relation to following parameters:

- Sex ratio
- Participation of women in Social institutions
- Role of women in decision making:
- Role of women in marriage and family life

1.1. Sex Ratio: Sex ratio is considered as of the most important demographic indicator as it indicates the presence of gender inequality in a particular area. It is positively correlated with women empowerment.

Table 1: Data showing District wise Male-Female Population of BTR

District	Male population	Female Population	Total Population	Percent age of Female population
Baksa	4,81,330	4,68,745	9,50,075	49.34
Kokrajhar	4,52,905	4,34,237	8,87,142	48.95
Udalguri	4,21,617	4,10,051	8,31,668	49.31
Chirang	2,44,860	2,37,302	4,82,162	49.22
Total	16,00,712	15,50,335	31,51,047	49.21

Source: Statistical Handbooks of Assam, 2019, Census 2011

The above data shows that the total population of BTR is 31,51,047 out of which male population is 16,00,712 and the female population is 15,50,335. The total percentage of female population is 49.21%. This shows that the percentage of female population is not very low in BTR when compared to other parts of India.

1.2. Participation of women in social institutions:

The participation of Bodo women in social institutions can mostly be seen in places of worship, festivals and marriage. In performing

religious rituals and rites, the women folk play an important role. There are different types of seasonal festivals which are practiced and celebrated by the Bodos. They are Kherai puja, Garja puja and the seasonal festivals of the Bodos like Bwisagu, Magw, etc. Among them Kherai puja is believed to be the greatest religious festivals of the Bodos, where ‘Doudini’ a woman dances to please the god and goddesses. She is the key dancer of the Kherai puja. Women play an important role in this puja as all the items of the Kherai puja are performed by ‘Doudini’. In the Bodo society, women are allowed to participate equally along with their male counterparts. (Boro, 2016).

The Bodo society is a patriarchal society but the womenfolk play a crucial role in cultural activities. Without womenfolk it is impossible to observe the cultural activities or festivals. (Swargiary, 2020). The Bodo women also play an important role in the marriage ceremonies. They take part in all the rituals of marriage. A noteworthy feature of the Bodo marriage is that two young girls become ‘Bwirathi’ to perform the pujas along with the priest. (Boro, 2016).

From the above discussion, it can be interpreted that the Bodo women play a key role in religious festivals, social functions and ceremonies equally with the male folk. Hence, it can be perceived that in the Bodo society women participation in social function and ceremonies is satisfactory.

1.3. Role of women in decision making:

The position of the women in the family as well as in the society is almost at par with men when compared to other women in the society. Women have considerable authority in certain social and domestic matters. Women play a direct or an indirect role in decision-making in a family or at the village level.

While carrying out household chores, large section of Bodo women receives their spouse’s help and support. Large sections of Bodo women participate in the decision-making process regarding their children’s education and future goals. Bodo women also take decisions in the field of agriculture, like selecting crops etc. They can also be seen helping their husbands in taking economic decisions. (Devi, 2014).

It can be observed that although Bodo women play a significant role in decision making when

compared to women in other patriarchal societies, their role in decision making is not satisfactory. Women in Bodo society lacks independent decision making, as they mostly take the decisions jointly along with their spouses.

1.4. Role of women in marriage and family life:

Women form an important part in Bodo societies. Both men and women have equal position in the family. The structure of a Bodo family is mostly conjugal system. Sometimes the structures of a Bodo family have been also seen as nuclear. The marriage system is monogamy but the polygamy and widow remarriage system are also recognized. (Swargiary, 2020)

It is seen that the social life of the Bodos is well organized as they have to follow certain rules and customs in their social life. Women enjoy an honored position in terms of the rules and customs of the society and family. In fact, Bodo women are never discriminated for being born as a female at all walks of life in their society. (Boro, 2016).

Objective 2: To study the occupational status of Bodo women

Regarding occupational status of Bodo, it may be mentioned that a good section of Bodo women has one means of earning while some of them have more than one means of occupation. Few Bodo women earn individually, while majority extend their help in the process of family earning. (Devi, 2014).

The occupational status of Bodo women can be further understood with the help of following discussion:

2.1. Economic Participation of Women:

Table 2: Data showing Economic Participation of Women in BTR

Distri cts	Main Workers			Marginal Workers		
	Total Popul ation	Male Wor kers	Fem ale Wor kers	Total Popul ation	Male Wor kers	Fem ale Wor kers
Kokr ajhar	2,53,1 10	1,98, 804	54,3 06	88,02 1	37,5 18	50,5 03
Chira ng	1,39,0 27	1,06, 201	32,8 26	54,86 7	22,5 61	32,3 06
Baksa	2,78,2 97	2,15, 948	62,3 49	1,28,4 59	50,9 08	55,9 44
Udal guri	2,53,1 78	1,94, 782	58,3 96	91,85 2	35,9 08	55,9 44
Total	9,23,6	7,15,	2,07,	3,63,1	1,46,	2,16,

	12	735	877	99	650	549
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Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2016 (Census, 2011)

From the above table, it is evident that gender discrimination exists in economic activities. In all four districts total number of female main workers are 2,07,877 whereas, the total number of male workers are 7,15,735. It indicates higher male main worker than female. In case of marginal workers, the number of total female worker is higher than the male workers i.e., 2,16,549 and 1,46,650 respectively. Thus, in all the four districts of BTR the number of male workers is higher than the female workers. Thus, in all the four districts of BTR the number of male workers is higher than female workers. Hence, it can be concluded that there exists gender differentiation regarding economic activities amongst the Bodo community.

2.2. Different occupations practiced by Bodo women:

The contribution of Bodo women in generating household income cannot be ignored. Different occupations are practiced by them for income generation.

Islary (2020), mentioned the following occupations adopted by Bodo women:

- Agriculture
- Sericulture and weaving
- Production of rice beer

Swargiary (2020), mentioned that women folk amongst Bodo play an important role in supporting their family economically. He mentioned the following as main sources of income of the Bodos

- Agriculture
- Horticulture
- Animal Husbandry
- Handloom and textiles

Das (2020) mentioned that rearing birds and animals, weaving, gathering firewood, etc. characterize the mode of living of Bodo society.

Bodos are agrarian society and hence, agriculture is their main source of income. Bodo women play an important role in agriculture. As agriculturist, they engage themselves in sowing, harvesting and weeding. Bodo women also generate income by selling homegrown vegetables and fruits. Seasonal vegetables and fruits are grown mostly in the

backyard of their houses. Besides agriculture, Bodo women rear cattle, hens and pigs mainly for commercial purpose. Production of rice beer by Bodo women for commercial purpose can also be seen in Bodo society.

Weaving is an integral part of Bodo culture and Bodo women are expert weavers. In the past Bodo women weaved the cloths only for wearing but at present they also weave the cloths for the purpose of business and it is a good sign for the economic progress. (Swargiary, 2020) Hence, it can be observed that Bodo women participate significantly in economic development of the family as well as the society.

In the past 76% women were involved in agriculture, but now the percentage of women involved in agriculture is 52%, a reduction of more than 20%. At present women are exploring other occupations for earning apart from agriculture. (Talukdar, 2012). Although the economy of the Bodos has been undergoing some changes from traditional farm activities to non-farm activities yet agriculture is regarded as main economic activity among Bodos. (Brahma, 2017).

Objective 3: To study the political status of Bodo women.

The political status of Bodo women is studied on the basis of following matters:

- Participation of Bodo women in Assam Legislative Assembly Election
- Participation of Bodo women in BTC Legislative Assembly Election
- Role of All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in political empowerment of women

3.1. Women participation in Assam Legislative Assembly Election

Table 3.1: Bodo women’s participation in Assam Legislative Assembly Election since 2006

Year	Total no. of seats	No. of Elected Bodo women	Percentage of Elected Bodo women
2006	12	02	16.66
2011	12	02	16.66
2016	12	02	16.66
Total	36	06	16.66

Source: Election Commission of India (eci.gov.in)

Assam has total 126 seats in Legislative Assembly Election out of which Bodoland Territorial Council has 12 seats. The Bodoland Territorial Council was established in the year 2003 and since then three Legislative Assembly Elections were held in Assam, i.e., 2006, 2011 and 2016 Assembly Elections. In all the three consecutive elections, only two Bodo women won the seats. Kamli Basumatary from Paneri constituency of Udalguri district and Pramila Rani Brahma from Kokrajhar East constituency of Kokrajhar district won the seats for all the three elections. Apart from them, no Bodo women won the Assembly election. From the above table, it is evident that Bodo women represented only 16.66% in Assembly Election of Assam and the percentage remain constant for the three consecutive elections. This shows that the participation of Bodo women as political decision makers of the state is not satisfactory.

3.2. Women participation in BTC Legislative Assembly Election

Table 3.2: Data showing women participation in BTC Legislative Assembly Election since 2005

Year	Total no. of seats	No. of Elected Bodo women
2005	40	Nil
2010	40	Nil
2015	40	Nil
2020	40	01

Source: 2020 Bodoland Territorial Council Election Wikipedia, 2015 Bodoland Territorial Council Election Wikipedia, bodoland.gov.in.

The above table shows that the participation of women in BTC Legislative Assembly Election is not satisfactory at all. There was no single Bodo women candidate winning the BTC Legislative Assembly Election in three consecutive elections, i.e., 2005, 2010 and 2010. It was only in BTC Legislative Assembly Election, 2020, Moon Moon Brahma a Bodo women was able to secure a seat from Parbatjhora constituency of Kokrajhar district by winning the election. This shows that the participation of women in BTC Assembly Election is very low and there is no sign of increase in number of Bodo women candidates in

future. This shows how women are missing as political decision makers.

3.3. Role of All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in political empowerment of women:

The All-Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation (AATWWF), later known as All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF) is worth mentioning while discussing about the role of Bodo women in politics. It was the first Bodo women’s organization where large numbers of women were seen actively participating.

The formation of ABWWF brought Bodo women under one umbrella organization for the first time in the history of Bodo politics, and increased the participation of women in political sphere. Women collectively stood against the patriarchal mindset of the society and family by coming out of their domestic sphere and participating in Bodoland struggle. (Basumatary, 2017). ABWWF has awakened the Bodo women in many aspects of their lives- socially, culturally, economically and politically. (Basumatary, 2019). Political awareness among women folk came to light with the formation of ABWWF.

The organizations in the initial period took up the issues like the responsibility of taking care of their children, educating them, family planning, health and hygiene and social issues. Later on, they participated in Bodoland Movement by supporting the All-Bodo Students Union (ABSU). During the Bodoland movement headed by ABSU more than thousands of Bodo women were victimized, killed and sacrificed themselves. The ABWWF played an important role in awakening political consciousness among Bodo women and involving them in the political struggle. Women under the banner of ABWWF took active part in the political processions, demonstrations, hunger strikes, mass gatherings, road blockades and rail blockades, etc. The struggle thus gave an opportunity to Bodo women to test their leadership capabilities. (Basumatary, 2017).

Objective 4: To study the educational status of Bodo women:

Education is an important agent of social change and development, and an important demographic indicator to study the status of women. The educational status of women in the study is

discussed in terms of literacy rate and enrolment rate of female students in BTR.

Table 4.1: District-wise Literacy Rate by Gender in BTR, Census 2011

District	Male	Female	Total
Kokrajhar	71.89	58.27	65.22
Chirang	70.24	56.65	63.55
Baksa	77.03	61.27	69.25
Udalguri	72.58	58.05	65.41
Total percentage	72.94	58.56	65.56

Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2019, Census 2011

The above table depicts that gender gap exist in literacy rate in all the four districts of BTR. There exists a gender gap of 14.38% in literacy rate in BTR. But it is not a huge gender gap and therefore, there is a possibility that it can be removed when more effort is given on women education.

Table 4.2: Enrolment of Girls in Schools at Different Educational Levels in BTR, in the year 2018-19

Educational levels	Percentage of Girls' Enrolment (comprising four districts of BTR)
Lower Primary (LP)	51.44
Upper Primary (UP)	52.16
High School	52.54
Higher Secondary	47.44
Junior College	46.91

Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2019

Table 4.2, reveal that the enrolment of female students in lower primary, upper primary and high school schools are higher than male students, i.e., 51.44%, 52.16% and 52.54% respectively. But the enrolment of female students in higher secondary schools and junior colleges is less than 50%, i.e., 47.44% and 46.91% respectively. However, this gender gap in enrolment is not very vast. These indicate that male students aspiring for higher education is more than the female students in spite of higher percentage of female enrolment in lower

primary, upper primary and high schools. This also indicates that maximum women receive the minimum level of education; but the percentage of women moving towards higher education is less. Hence, it can be interpreted that educational status of Bodo women is quite satisfactory.

Boro (2016), stated that both boys and girls are treated equally in terms of education among the Bodo community. The literacy rate of women has been improving in the present times and they are actively involved in various fields. This indicates that women in the Bodo society are empowered to some extent which is necessary for upbringing an educated future generation amongst the Bodos.

Recommendations:

Based on the above discussion, the following recommendations can be put forwarded to improve the status of women more particularly in Bodo society:

1. The participation of Bodo women in social life is satisfactory but they should be more empowered to take independent decisions.
2. It is a good sign that Bodo women have started exploring other occupations other than agriculture. As they are expert weavers, the textile industries should be expanded and more women weavers should be employed.
3. There is a need to introduce skill based vocational courses in the schools and colleges to attract the attention of the youths and increase the enrolment rate in the educational institutions.
4. Bodo women should be empowered to participate in political decision making. Every constituency should recommend at least one woman to contest in Assembly elections.
5. Percentage of enrollment of women in higher education should be increased and for that purpose special scholarships and free ships should be introduced for girls.

Conclusion:

The study provides a glimpse of the status of Bodo women in BTR. The study reveals that although gender gap exists in Bodo society, Bodo women enjoy social, economic and educational status to a great extent unlike many women from other communities in different parts of the country India. This is a good sign of development of Bodo society. And hence, their contribution towards the

society should not be ignored. More Bodo women need to be empowered for complete removal of gender gap in all spheres especially in political sphere as women representation in politics is very less.

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