

A Note on Bodo Politics and Problems of Women Adjustment in Governance (1987-2005)

Banabina Brahma

The political history of the Bodos in the post Bodoland movement era has been a turbulent one. The Bodoland movement and the subsequent formation of BAC and BTAD are the most conspicuous examples of this turbulence. Nevertheless, over the last 20 years the Bodo politics has made strides towards stability and peace. Recently, with the National Democratic Front of Boroland, (NDFB) declaring truce with the Indian Government, there has been overall a peaceful atmosphere in the entire Bodo inhabited areas. These are important steps forward for a region characterized by militancy and ethnic clashes.

Currently, the Bodos can boast of having much awaited self rule- (thanks to Sixth Schedule) and one recently established forty members elected BTAD council led by Sri Hagrama Mahilary, without single woman, which has pledged to re-store the democratic process and development in due course.

The significant aspect of Bodo politics so far is the decreasing women participation in the decision making or active politics.

The 'Bodoland Movement' started vigorously from 1987 under the banner of All Bodo Student Union (ABSU). The Bodo Women also took active part in the Movement under the banner of "All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federations" (ATWWF) and later on from 1993 onwards under the new name 'All Bodo Women Welfare Federation' (ABWWF). Yet, their participation in the decision making bodies and the subsequent governance of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) and Bodoland Territorial Area Dis-tricts (BTAD) is surprisingly unsatisfactory. It is perhaps due to the status being enjoyed by them in the society. With this background in view, an attempt is made in this short note to elucidate the role of women in politics among the Bodos. It also examines the reason why women have been participating unsatisfactorily in active politics and governance.

Bodo women's mass involvement in social change began with the Bodoland movement, where thousands of women joined men in action

that challenged the oppression of so called "Chauvinist Assamese" mentality. The womenfolk joined All Bodo Students Union with the famous slogan "Divide Assam fifty-fifty" for the protection of their identity; for the preservation and development of their culture, language and tradition. During that peak time of the movement there were problems and difficulties in maintaining law and order situation in the area. The innocent people specially the women and children were trapped between the law enforcing agencies and the revolutionary movement. At this juncture repressive measures of the Army and para-military forces increased enormously. Once again, the women were the easy victim. On 25th and 27th January, 1988, ten Bodo women from Bhumka village under Korkajhar district were gang raped by Assam Police. During the Bodoland Movement many innocent girls as well as women lost their chastity and some were even killed due to the widespread incidents of rape and sexual harassment by the Police force. Therefore, the ABWWF was born and came out to confront the army and police personnels against their actions. The ABWWF fought in Guwahati High Court against Assam police over the Bhumka gang rape and won remarkable victory making it a history. Since then, the ABWWF came forward to raise voice against the brutalities committed by the police forces. The organization had helped the victims regain their dignity and lead a normal life again. Thus, during the entire 'Bodoland Movement' the women played the role of information carrier, became martyrs, and even went to prison, thereby challenging gender stereotypes and demonstrating their ability to resist intimidation. In the subsequent periods, women took part in the tripartite talk between ABSU and the Central and State governments. As a result of the talks, Bodoland Autonomous Council was created under the leadership of S.K. Bwiswmuthiary in 1993. However, women were expected to relinquish their involvement in public activities. Only a few high profile women like Pramila Rani Brahma could successfully resist this assumption and held public office, but the majority complied.

In 1996, the Bodoland Movement started again due to the problem of demarcation of the Autonomous Council. It was alleged that both the central and state governments were not sincere to solve the problem. Instead, they were interested in keeping the problem alive to gain their political interest. The "Bodoland Movement" entered into a new phase this time with the popular militant organization called "Bodo Liberation Tigers" (known as BLT) holding the flagship of the movement. The formation of BLT was a reaction against the repressive policy of the

Government, which denied the Bodos their democratic way of movement terming it a law and order problem. Its ideology was to create a separate state for the Bodos remaining within the constitutional frame work of India. Once again the ABWWF gave their moral support to the militant organization. The BLT itself had women cadre. They played the most crucial role of information and arms carrier during the period of BLT's armed struggle. From May 2000 the BLT had started talks with the Central Government. As a result of the talks Bodoland Territorial Area District or shortly BTAD was created for the self-rule of Bodos under the provision of amended Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution on 10th February, 2003. Subsequently an interim council was formed on 6th December, 2003 without any women representative. The newly formed interim council was to hold election within a year for forty elected seats of the council. ABSU and BLT jointly floated a new political party called "Bodoland Peoples Progressive Front" (BpPF) to fight the elections. As it was Bodo peoples party, it was expected that BPPF would represent both the men and women of the society. But surprisingly, the BPPF stood out only as a 'Mens' organization, women were marginalized once again. They were not even considered for party tickets to fight the BTAD Council election inspite of strong representation of the women. A few brave women fought the election under independent banner but lost to their men counterpart.

Bodo society is formed with both men and women. It can be argued that without women participation, the society cannot progress culturally, socially, economically and politically. And yet, the statistics tell a different story. The vast majority of Bodo women are illiterate, in poor health, invisible in the system of decision making and suffers legal, political, economic and social discrimination in all walks of life. Bodo women have lowest rates (infact 'zero') of participation in their governance structure in comparison to the other communities in North-East India.

Decision making has traditionally been regarded as a male domain in the society. Often using customs, tradition and culture as a tool, women have been sidelined from most decision making processes. While the past few decades have witnessed an improvement in the status of women, in the whole of Asia, especially for the urban middle-class women who have a degree of freedom in making decision, but for the majority of Bodo Women such freedom remains an elusive dream. They cannot even wear the dress of their choice in the name of customs and traditions. This lack of liberty is a tradition that is deep rooted in home and the

community, where male members maintain strict control over decision-making process.

When we go back to the Bodoland movement period, we find that, though the Bodo women took active part in the whole process the womens organization was always a subordinate organization to 'MEN' organizations. It has often been charged that only a few leading members of the women organization have always determined the form and contend of the Bodo women and that their concerns do not represent the interests of the majority of women. It is observed that at the moment that women leadership is shifting their focus from the women related issues to some unrelated issues. Without improving the opportunity to participate in decision making forums, Bodo Women's concerns will always remain marginalized. This will keep away Bodo women and their organisation from taking part in the decision making of the society.