

# **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE BODO MOVEMENT**

By

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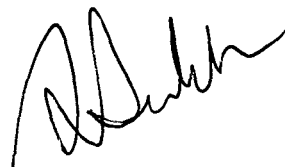
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## **LIST OF ABBRIVIATIONS**

AASU	: All Assam Students' Union
AATWWF	: All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation
ABEF	: All Bodo Employees' Federation
ABSU	: All Bodo Students' Union
ABSUVF	: All Bodo Students' Union Volunteer Force
ABWWF	: All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation
AC/AATWWF	: Anchalik Committee/All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation
BSS	: Bodo Sahitya Sabha
BPAC	: Bodo People Action Committee
BPP	: Bod Peoples' Party
CC/AATWWF	: Central Committee/All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation
CC/ABSU	: Central Committee of All Bodo Students' Union
DDC/AATWWF	: Darrang District Committee of AATWWF
DDC/ABSU	: Darrang District Committee of ABSU



Diss	: Dissertation
KDC/AATWWF	: Kokrajhar District Committee of AATWWF
KDC/ABSU	: Kokrajhar District Committee of ABSU
MARS	: Mahila Atmarakshma Samiti
NDC/AATWWF	: Nalbari District Committee of AATWWF
NDC/ABSU	: Nalbari District Committee of ABSU
PTCA	: Plains Tribal Council of Assam
PTCA(P)	: Plains Tribal Council of Assam (Progressive)
TS	: Type Script
RCP	: Revolutionary Communist Party
UBNLF	: United Bodo Nationalist Liberation Front
UINLF	: United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Women workers started the Russian Revolution.  
Women workers sparked the shipyard strikes in Poland.  
Women workers and housewives marched by the thousands  
to protest the inhumane, antiwoman repression in Iran.  
Women workers protested the sexist antiworker conditions in textile  
factories in Korea.  
Women militants fought the Kisaeng tourism/ prostitution in Korea.  
Women workers formed a 100-year marriage resistance in Kwantung,  
China.  
Women fighters, young and old, fought in liberation struggle in  
Vietnam, Nicaragua, Cuba, El Salvador, South Africa, Lebanon.  
Women workers are fighting to end nuclear testing in the Marshall  
Island”.

Nellie Wong 1991

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Participation of women in movement is nothing new. Women continue to be a part of the resistance movements throughout the world. What is new is rediscovering their contribution to those movements. Contemporary scholars are rewriting history of the past

and searching for women's contribution to civilization. In the middle of 1960s, a few women of the United States drew attention of their friends and colleagues to the question of women's subordination. This opened a new space for women. At that time students of American universities were busy with many progressive movements: civil rights movements, protests against Vietnam War, agitation for equal opportunities for women and minorities, and against education policies. Many women participated in those movements and assisted their leaders/husbands or colleagues and friends by collecting theoretical materials for their lectures and even drafting their lectures. This subordinate role of theirs made them radical in their ideology (Elliott 1986: 43). In 1963 Betty Frieden published a book titled The Feminine Mystique which set in motion the second wave of feminism in the United States (The Telegraph 7th March 1999:19). The American women's movement of 1960s was indebted to another writing on women, that is, Simon de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, which was published in 1949 and "considered to be the feminist canon" (ibid : 19 ).

This brought about two major contributions to academics:

- (i) it has emerged as a challenge to most established notions of the society, and
- (ii) it has drawn attention of many scholars to the need for relooking into the role of women in various historical events. From then onwards the scholars around the world felt the need for 'women's studies' because it would help increase the knowledge on women.

Existing literature on women suggest that women's conditions in the world are not similar. Studies on social movements show active participation of women right from 1789 when the French women demanded equal rights for women for the first time. During this period they hoped to bring about their own 'revolution' within the greater revolution by joining the struggle in the streets in Paris as well as in other places (Mies 1973 : 2221-2230). This movement of the French women is described by Pollock (1972 : 10) as the first wave of feminism.

Women's participation in social movements in Asian and African countries is not embedded in Western feminism; it is instead linked with nationalist or socialist movements of those countries (Jayawardena 1986 : 1-23, Wong 1991 : 288-296, Mariam 1994 : 44, Zerai 1994 : 57-62). Moreover, gender discrimination is neither the sole nor perhaps the primary focus of the oppression of the Third World women (Odim 1991 : 314 -327). The women activists of the Third World are more concerned with the problems of local people, racism, and economic exploitation. They are even critical of the term 'feminist' and use the word 'womanist' (Odim ibid : 315). Asian feminism, in particular, is an awareness about women's oppression and exploitation in family, at work and in society and conscious action by women (and men) to change the existing situation (Jayawardena 1986 : 2).

Emancipation of Indian women is connected with the Renaissance of Bengal (Basu and Ray 1990, Ali 1991). Indian women have also made substantial contribution to the freedom struggle of India (Chakraborty 1980, Jayawardena 1986, Basu and Ray 1990). But in the list of women freedom fighters, tribal women of northeast

India are rarely known. On the contrary, many tribal women were arrested during the Quit India Movement from the villages of Assam. The Tebhaga and Naxalite movements in Bengal, Sharecroppers' Movement in Assam, and various movements in other parts of the region involved women but there are hardly any records of their participation. The few records that have begun to be known are found in Barthakur and Goswami (1990), Devi (1998), and Zehol (1998).

It is to fill up this gap that the present study on the participation of women in the Bodo movement is taken up. This study is confined to the Bodo Autonomous Council area covering 5186 square kilometres with around 3000 villages falling in the districts of Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Lakhimpur of Assam.

### *Feminist movement in America and Europe*

Educated women in America were largely successful in articulating the issue of inequality between men and women. This proliferated in later years and incorporated the various experiences of women around the world. The struggle of feminists to bring changes

in the position of women and their efforts to stop women's subordination and gender discrimination brought about significant changes. They, if anything, began reviewing and rewriting their contribution to historical events.

Women's emancipation movements and women participation in class struggles in Europe and United States are quite old. Maria Mies (1973 : 2221 -2230), writing on the activities of socialist women who participated in the French Revolution in 1789 and 1848, refers to the liberal feminists who wanted to bring change in women's position in the previous century. Mies has tried to understand the position of women after 200 years of their struggle for emancipation or liberation. It was believed that there was greater harmony of interests between proletarian men and proletarian women than between bourgeois women and proletarian women. This situation of socialist women is called 'conscious sacrifice', which created a point of ambiguity for the socialist women. Further the new left of 1960s, returned to the old questions which were asked by the socialist women one century back. The difference between the above two groups of activists is that the latter discovered that their individual problems had



social causes and were shared by many other women. It was a new and liberating experience for them and they realized that they could have women as friends, whereas formerly, women were seen as potential competitors. The feminist movements in America, Holland, France, Belgium, and Germany brought about female solidarity, which was unknown to them before. The concept of 'feminism' itself proliferated into liberal feminism, radical feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, Marxist or socialist feminism, and postmodern feminism.

The radical feminists referred to men and women two sex-classes (Firestone 1992 : 282-287). To her the natural reproductive differences between the sexes led directly to the first division of labour. Liberal feminists experimented with the concept of 'separatism' which meant separation of women and men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefit of males or maintain male privilege (Frye 1992 : 288-295). They questioned the existing legal facilities and attacked the 'pornography culture' (Mackirnon 1992 : 295-308 ).

Women's universal mothering role was analyzed by feminist psychoanalysts like Chodorow (1992 : 310–324), and Spelman (1992: 322-330). This role was considered to be the most important cause of masculine and feminine personalities and the relative status of the sexes.

Socialist feminism hovers round the writings of Friedrich Engels (1884/1992 : 331-342). In The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Engels related the family with production. Hence, socialist feminists identified nuclear family as the root cause of women's bondage. They considered that the women were forced to play subordinate role in the family.

Thus, while socialist feminists relate the production system to the dependence of women on men radical feminists consider child birth, child rearing, etc. as the root causes of women's dependence on men.

Finally, the postmodernist feminists. They are critical about Plato, Aristotle, Montaigne, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and others. According to Annie Leclerc (1987/1992 : 362) they represent strong and have reduced the voice of women to silence. To her everything that exists as thought, language, word, etc. is nothing but the expression of men. So, if women want to liberate themselves, they have to raise their own voices, write and create new words for and by themselves.

Feminists in the second half of the twentieth century are greatly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, (1949). This book addresses many questions related to women. The first part of this book discusses the facts and myths about women. The biological and psychological characteristics of women are pointed out as main causes of women's subordination. Their status and position in nomadic and sedentary communities are discussed in terms of their contribution to the society. Further, she writes on women's contribution to the French Revolution, which constructs a different perspective of women's position. She has studied the women from

universal perspective (Mies 1973 : 2225). Though the work mainly relates to European women its influence is far wider.

*Women participation in Asian and African countries*

The history of African and Asian countries has a long colonial connection. A number of women activists from these continents came in touch with feminist ideologies and movements in different times. However, the nationalist movements have had more influence than the feminist movements on the women activists of these continents (Jayawardena 1986).

Soraya Antonius has published a note (1983 : 76-78) on the conversation between Palestinian women who participated in the national movement against Zionism. She writes that this movement distinguishes itself from the women's movements in western countries because the Palestinian women did not have any prior exposure. Moreover, these women came from grassroot level and were unaware of women's rights movements in the western countries. It was mostly the daughters or wives of male leaders and activists who joined the movement in the beginning. They had no difficulty in

joining the movement under the leadership of Yasser Arafat because they played the role of a 'mother'. They were such mothers for the Palestinian people who encouraged their sons to fight, mobilized people to join the movement, acted as couriers and collected money for the movement. They received training to handle weapons too. They worked in hospitals, baked several hundred breads for the fighters, and collected money for the party fund. This article describes the peripheral position of women in national movement. Their own experience is that the status and position of Palestinian women has not changed after the movement.

Jane Ngwenya (1983 : 78-83) describes the women who fought side by side with men in Zimbabwe's recent war of independence. This is based on an interview of a woman leader who was selected as a delegate to the Patriotic Front of Zimbabwe. This interview portrays women's position in Zimbabwe's traditional society. Like the women of many Asian and African countries the daughters in a Zimbabwe family enjoyed less privilege than the sons did. The married women's status was poorer than the daughters-in-law's families where she did not receive a status better than that of a

servant. In such a situation the Zimbabwe women came out of home and joined the struggle for freedom and went underground during the movement. They participated in armed struggle and stayed in camps. They mobilized other women to join the struggle. Such contribution of theirs to the struggle brought a change in the attitude of Zimbabwe men about their women.

Namibian women too participated in the liberation struggle of Namibia since 1964 (Musialela 1983: 83 - 89). In the beginning it was very difficult for them to come out from home and maintain connection with other women. They were supposed to look after their children and domestic animals besides cooking food. Many of them never visited the villages before the formation of South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) and its women's council. This organization brought significant changes in women's life. As a result, Namibian women were in diplomatic, military and political fronts. This movement made them conscious of their position in the society. They realized that they were oppressed both as 'Black' and as 'women'. Thus they believed that the western women did not belong to the same status as they did and gave less stress on the

‘agenda of equality of women with men’, ‘peace programmes’ and ‘women’s development programme’, of the feminists of Britain, West Germany and America. They offered such programmes in the International Congress of Women held at Copenhagen in 1980, not knowing the agenda of people’s liberation struggle of third world countries.

Miriam Galdemez (1983 : 89-95) describes the wretched condition of women in El Salvador. Despite such position in society the women there participated in the liberation movement of the late 60s and early 70s. They were closely linked with the guerrilla armies, popular organizations, and trade union struggles for housing and water. They stood on the street to protest repression, organized strikes for improved working and living conditions. The writer of this article who herself was a Salvadorian activist and member of a woman’s organization also sought support of the women’s organizations in Great Britain in the fight to stop the United States’ intervention in El Salvador.

Nyasha and Rose (1983 : 99-107) describe the experiences of armed struggle in Zimbabwe and women's participation in it. The Zimbabwean joined the armed struggle under the leadership of leftist leader Samora Machel of Mozambique. This has description of the guerrilla women who fought against Whites with simple weapons like sub-machine guns, rifles and anti-aircraft weapons. Women were assigned the same duties as their male comrades. They marched several hundreds of kilometres carrying weapons and used these weapons at the time of necessity.

Davis (1983 : 109-114) narrates the Eritrean people's struggle for independence from Ethiopia. The twenty years long struggle of theirs was organized by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Women of Eritrea had substantial contribution to family agricultural production and had decisive contribution to household works. The women workers got wages, which were less and almost half of the wages received by their male colleagues. Women labourers were exploited in the plantations and firms owned by foreigners. Yet they played an active role in the anti-feudal peasant uprising in Western Eritrea. They also played the role of mother by



supplying food to the activists and providing shelter to them. They took part in raising fund and establishing a woman's organization (The National Union of Eritrean Women - NUEW). The members of NUEW received armed training, fought in the forefront, and shared the experiences of the battlefield. This struggle of the oppressed masses brought a change in the status of women.

Women of Oman also participated in Oman's liberation struggle from the very beginning (Davis 1983 : 115-122). People of Oman started fighting against the British from the middle of the twentieth century. The longtime participation of women in the struggle eradicated traditional prejudices about women's inferiority. This liberation struggle also made them conscious of their oppression in society. Thus Omani Women's Organization (WOO) took up the fight against oppression in their society.

Feminism and Nationalism in Third World Countries by Kumari Jayawardena (1986) deals with the rise of early feminism and women's participation in political struggle in countries of the East. These are Egypt, Iran, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Korea,

Philippine, Vietnam and Indonesia. This study shows that feminism was not imposed on the Third World by the West but rather the historical circumstances in the East provided a fertile ground for the same. She shows that there were debates on women's rights and education in the nineteenth century China and there were movements to emancipate women in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The studies in other countries show that feminist struggles originated between 60 to 80 years ago in any countries of Asia. Such historical phenomena were hidden from history until recently. These show that the women of Asian countries struggled for their emancipation in the twentieth century. The weaker side of her study is that all the countries chosen by Jayawardena for her study were under colonial rule and had faced the brunt of foreign conquest.

The issues of women's emancipation in India under British colonial rule was, according to Jayawardena, closely linked with two important types of movements : one, the political movements to resist British rule, and the other, social reform movements. The people of all political ideologies participated in the freedom struggle of India. The women's wing of communists supplied food during the Bengal

Famine and worked in different parts of Assam, present Bangladesh, Bihar and other places.

### ✓ *Women's Participation in Social Movements in India*

Mass participation of women in social movements in India was first noticed in 1905, when people of Bengal and other areas of India raised their voice against the division of Bengal (Ali 1991 : 244-249). From that time onwards Indian women participated in several protest rallies, meetings and processions.

From the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century a number of women's organizations were formed in India. Men established some of these organizations but they were a few in numbers. Most of the women's organizations like Bengal Stree Mahamandal, National Council of Women in India, All India Women's Conference, etc. were dominated by rich and upper class women. These organizations took up issues of child marriage, education for women, and *Purdah* (Forbes 1998 : 64-91). Some of the members of those organizations actively participated in the freedom movement. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani of Bharat Stree Mahamandal

had regular connections with underground activists of Bengal and Bhikhaiji Rustom Cama (1861-1936) was the first woman revolutionary to have regular connection with the revolutionaries of Paris (Ali 1991 : 80-108). Bengal was the epicentre of armed struggles during independence movement in India. There were a number of organizations formed in the districts of undivided Bengal, which were runs by women (Mandal 1991 : 157-243, Forbes 1998 : 121-156). Interviews, biographical notes and letters of many women show that many of them were followers of Gandhi and had participated in 'Satyagraha', and civil disobedience movements. Such women mostly came from the middle class background. Many female students of college and universities were attracted to armed revolution. Mandal has further observed that housewives from middle to old age also participated in Gandhi's non-violent movements. The underground women revolutionaries not only carried messages, arms and ammunitions from one place to another, provided money, food, shelter to the male revolutionaries, hid and smuggled weapons but also took part in direct action and for that some of them received trials/life term imprisonment. The in-depth study by Mandal shows that the status of armed women revolutionaries was lower than that of

the women who participated in Gandhi's civil disobedience movements.

The Independence movement of India gave birth to many women leaders who participated in social reforms. According to Biswas (1987) most of them hailed from rich and famous families of India. Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalini, Sarojini Naidu, Vijaylakshmi Pandit and Padmaja Naidu participated in the national politics in later years. Some European women also participated in the struggle for Indian Independence. They were Annie Besant, Mira Ben, Neli Sengupta, Sister Nivedita, etc.

The social reform movements of the nineteenth and the nationalist movement of the twentieth century emancipated women to some extent though the women of upper caste were mostly benefitted.

✓ The lower caste women who were marginalized due to caste bondage and gender specificities were less benefitted from those movements (Jogdand 1995 : 11).

Kelker (1991) discusses the role of women in the traditional political organization of agriculturist-gatherer tribes. It is observed that the women of such communities do not have any customary role in any political organizations and they participate in village panchayats only when they are involved. At the time of rebellions they are used for various purposes but they never occupy the position of decision-makers. Recently a committee is formed by the women of the Munda and Santal communities called Jharkhand Mahila Mukti Samiti which is raising the question of women's property rights (Kelker 1991 : 150-157).

Kasturi (1991 : 65 - 80) observes that all the agrarian struggles in this century involved women. The rural women in these struggles disproved the belief that women could not be violent or armed fighters. Kasturi further shows that the contributions of women were highly spoken of and their participation was encouraged but at the same time they were not viewed as equal in terms of access to party organizations, leadership, training, political education, and decision making.

The Warli Revolt (1945-47) led by Kisan Sabha of the Communist Party of India (CPI) involved a large number of women (Saldanha 1986 : 41-52). Godovari Parulekar and her husband were the leaders of this revolt. The women were worst sufferers of class exploitation and gender oppression. They composed songs depicting their condition and led processions. They displayed great courage in front of policemen and landlords' musclemen, and hid the underground party members. They could pass messages even while policemen would surround them. Yet they were not members of the Kisan Sabha. Thus Saldanha rightly points out that the Communist Party of India did not have any programme for women.

The Communist- led agrarian struggles in Warli, Telengana, and Tebhaga were criticized by the feminist writers of late 80s and early 90s for their exclusion of women's issues. Further studies on these struggles (Stree Shakti Sangathana 1989, Custer 1985) reveal that these show women's contribution. However, the women are considered as a group and not as a separate category.

Biographical notes of at least seventy-one women activists of the Telengana movement brought out the same fact that they, although separated from their families, children and parents were seriously involved in the struggles but their contributions were perceived as supplementary. “The sheer will power, the mental and psychic strength of women who came, who persisted, and who worked in the face of this were sent back to their cooking and to sewing machines” (Stree Shakti Sangathana 1989 : 96-120). Further, these biographical notes show that all the women were involved one way or the other (Stree Shakti Sangathana, *ibid*, Kannabiran and Lalitha 1989 : 180-203).

✓ *Women Participation in People’s Struggle: North East Indian Scenario*

Women of northeast India, specially tribal women of Manipur and Assam, have participated in the freedom struggle as well as in other movements (Singh 1989 : 1-9, Borthakur and Goswami 1990 : 213 -228, Singh 1992 : 71-94, Devi 1998 : 75-81, Zehol 1998 : 67-74).



A number of women's organizations were formed in Assam in post-independent India. These were: Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Mahila Sangha, Nari Mukti Sanstha, Sadau Asom Nari Sanstha, etc. These were associated either with leftist political parties or with other political parties (Mahanta 1998 : 41 - 51). A large scale women's participation was noticed in the movement against illegal migrants in the state led by All Assam Students' Union in 1979 (Barthakur and Goswami 1990 : 213-228). Women of all age groups and occupations went to the streets to protest against illegal migrants. But the women participants were later disillusioned as the leaders of this movement failed to solve their problems.

About women's movement in northeast India, a special mention must be made of the women of Manipur who organized themselves to protest against the consumption of country liquors and drugs (Mahanta 1998 : 41-51). The role of women in social movements in Manipur can be traced back to the British period when Manipur was under monarchical system (Singh 1992 : 70-93, Devi 1998: 75-81). Women's movements of Manipur are known as *nupilan*. It began in 1904. The second *nupilan* was held in 1939. The latter one was

related to the scarcity of rice. The women revolted against the monarch and traders and petty women traders provided leadership. This movement was successful as the women activists compelled the monarch to change the policy of rice trading. In 1980s a woman's organization called *Meira Paibis* was formed in Manipur. The activities of this organization were different from the activists of the previous organization. Since 1970, some underground movements are also going on in Manipur. Many innocent youths suffered and got killed too. As a result the women of Manipur started to guard their sons and husbands from the harassment by the police and paramilitary forces. Side by side this organization started handling the problems of liquor consumption and drug trafficking. In these movements the leadership came from urban women and from women traders but at present the women leadership is not necessarily confined to the women traders.

### *Literature on the Bodo People*

Bodo is the name of a tribal community of the Assam plains (Endle 1911, Daimary 1987). This community, like other

communities of the region, are struggling for development of their language and for political autonomy (Bhattacharjee 1996).

The Bodos are concentrated in the five districts of Assam, viz., Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Nalbari, Lakhimpur, and Darrang. These districts are situated on the northern bank of Brahmaputra. They are found in other districts like Goalpara, Kamrup, Noagaon and even in neighbouring states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and West Bengal, and in Bangladesh.

The Bodos were earlier known as Kachari (Hunter 1879, Allen 1901, Gait 1905/1985, Endle 1911/1975, Bhuyan 1951). They are a Hinduised tribe of Tibeto - Mongoloid origin (Endle *ibid*, Mosahary 1989 : 165-169). Their language was identified as one of the major languages of Tibeto-Burman family (Grierson 1903). The other neighbouring communities who belong to the same linguistic family are Dimasha Kachari, Rabha, Tiwa, Tippera, Sonowal Kachari, Mishing etc. This is one of the oldest and most dominant communities of the Assam plains (Devi Lakshmi 1968, Gait 1905). This community stayed peacefully with the neighbouring Assamese

and non-Assamese communities and shared many cultural traits and behaviours (Bora 1990 : 36-41).

They came in contact with the European education in the beginning of twentieth century. In the second decade of the twentieth century a reformist movement took place among them (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1982 : 253-280). The educated Bodo youths of that time participated in that movement and devoted themselves to many such programmes. These youths published the first quaternary magazine called Bibar. It contained articles on their health, hygiene, and relationship with neighbouring communities (Basumatory 1924, 1925). The hegemonic overtures of the neighbouring community are traceable in these writings, which seem to have given birth to later political demands of this community. They tried to establish a separate identity since the third decade of the twentieth century and pleaded with the British for seat reservations. They gradually established their own organizations to achieve their goals.

During the second half of the twentieth century Bodo intellectuals and leaders felt the necessity to develop their language

(Mosahary 1993 : 15-31) and established an organization for that purpose. This organization, called the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, became the pathfinder for the Bodo people in subsequent years.

### *Objective<sup>s</sup> of the Study*

1. To reconstruct the historical background of the Bodos in Assam,
2. to study the antecedents of the Bodo movement,
- ✓ 3. to study the Bodo movement and women's participation in it, and
4. to analyse the impact of the movement on the Bodo women.

### *Methods of Study*

The present study is based primarily on fieldwork. The data on women's participation are collected from three districts of Assam, viz.

Kokrajhar, Nalbari, and Darrang. The selection of the villages was based on the following two considerations :

1. One village was decided to be selected from the epicentre of the Bodo movement.
2. Other two villages should be chosen keeping in mind the lateral distance from the epicentre to the easternmost extension of the boundary of Bodo Autonomous Council.

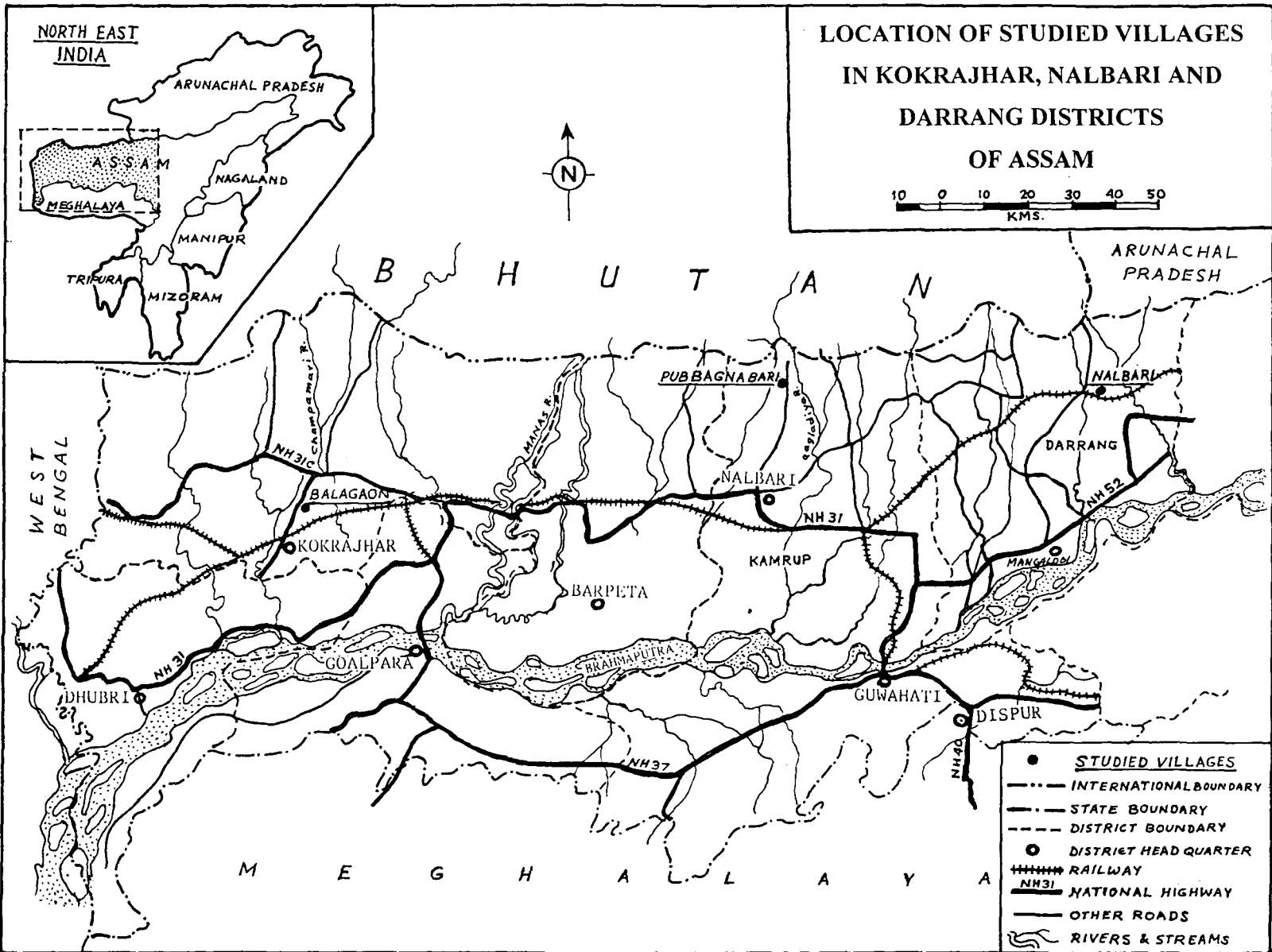
First a census of each household in the three villages was completed, followed by interviews of at least one woman from each household. A few males were also interviewed in each village. Case studies of 19 women leaders were also collected. The leaders were interviewed at their respective residences in the villages, in Kokrajhar town, or in Guwahati city.

### Selection of Villages ✓

Three villages were chosen from three Bodo dominated districts of Assam keeping in mind that they must be representative. In any social movement there are some pockets or epicentres where intensity of people's participation is maximum. In this movement too, Kokrajhar district was one such area where the movement was launched. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) had established its main office in a public library at Deborgaon of Kokrajhar district. Deborgaon is 9 kilometer from Kokrajhar town and on the road that connects Kokrajhar with Bongaigaon. The other two villages were chosen from Nalbari and Darrang districts. These three villages had experienced active participation of women. These villages were also exposed to different socio-economic and religious reforms from the beginning of the twentieth century itself.

### *Balagaon*

This village is under Deborgaon area of Kokrajhar district. It is surrounded by the Rangali Khata village on the west, Balajan river on the east, and Kokrajhar-Bongaigaon link road on the northern side. The *Gohain Kamal Ali* Road is on the northern side of the village.



29 a

MAP NO. 1



There is a higher secondary school for boys and girls and this is one of the oldest schools of the area. Kamakhya Prasad Bramha, father of the first woman leader Pramila Rani Bramha, had established this school in 1949. Pramila, the first Bodo woman leader, was born in this village. Balajan Primary health centre is situated in the eastern corner of this village. There was a library in this village about which the villagers were proud, but it was destroyed during the Bodo movement because <sup>the</sup> police forces raided this library frequently causing a lot of damage to the books.

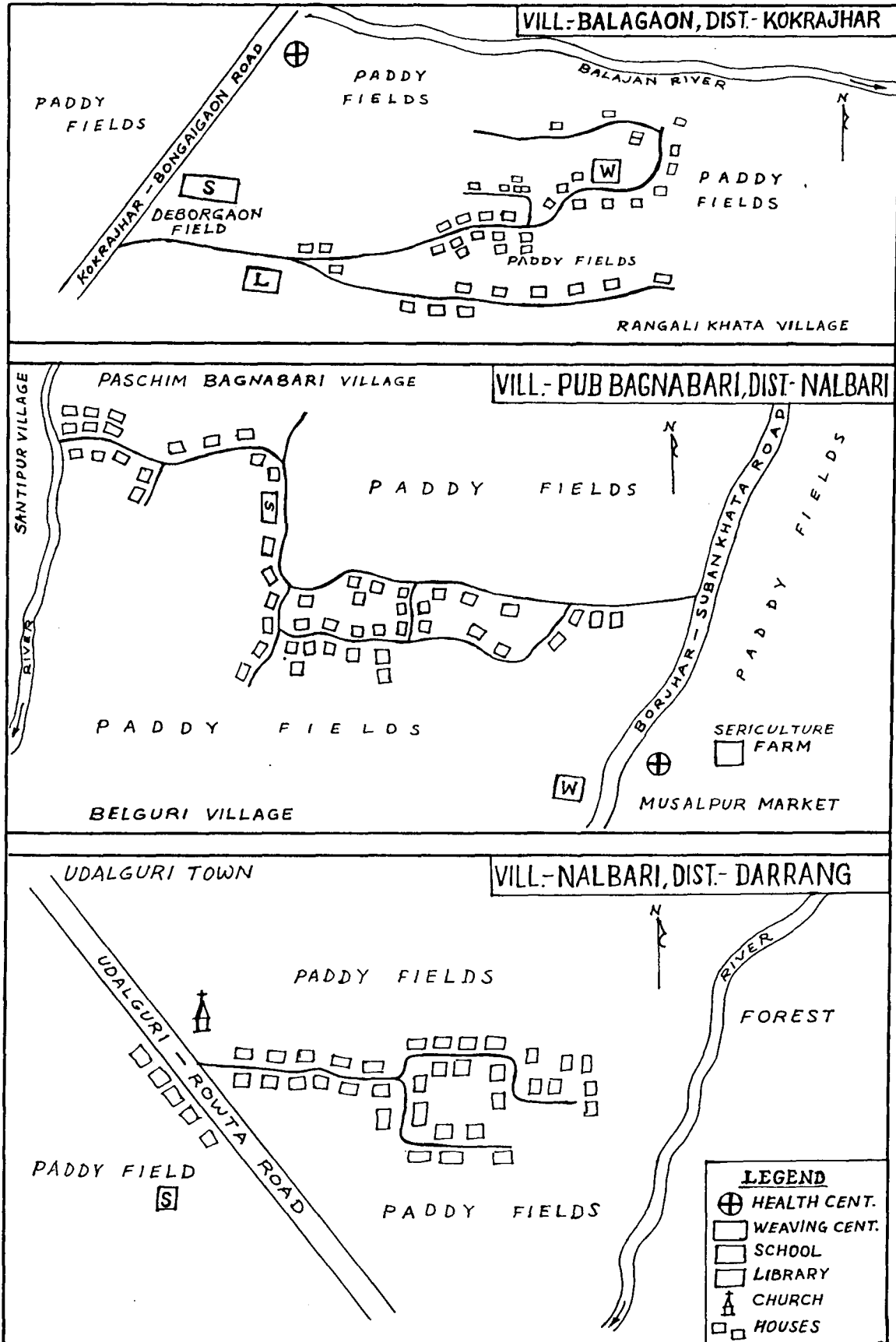
The villagers of Balagaon embraced the Bramha religion about 100 years back. Gurudeb Kalichran Bramha was a regular visitor to this village and he had some disciples and followers among the villagers. According to Sakuntala Basumatory, an inhabitant of this village and teacher by profession, said the following about a Bramha dominated village: “you can identify a Bramha dominated village from the food items which they will offer you. The Bramhas usually offer tea to their guests, whereas those who follow the traditional religion offer home made rice beer”.

Agriculture is the mainstay of this village, though they do not solely depend on it.

### *Pub Bangnabari*

Bangnabari is situated under Nalbari district. The old people of this village remember that their fathers had migrated to this area from the undivided Goalpara. Sital Chandra Basumatory (1994 : 13-14) writes that during 1929-30 some landless Bodos migrated to Baska Mouza from different areas of Goalpara. At that time Baska was full of forest. They migrated there following other Assamese. In the initiative of one Lakshmiram Mondal the forest areas of Baska came under land settlement. The entire area was divided into Dakhinbaska, Uttar Baska, Pub Baska, Paschim Baska, and Madhya Baska. The Mushalpur Block falls under Dakhin Baska and it was established during 1929-30. The villages like Amguri, Belguri, Pub Bangabari, and Paschim Bangnabari were also established during that time. Padmini Basumatory of this village remembers that the Bhutanese came to this village regularly for trade with the local people. The Bhutanese brought dry chillis, radish, winnowing fans, meat of deer, etc. and in exchange they collected rice.

**SKETCH MAP OF  
THE STUDIED VILLAGES**



MAP NO. 2

The people who migrated there took initiative to develop the area. As a result a dispensary was established in 1938. This dispensary is today upgraded to a 30-bed government hospital.

The Mushalpur High School was established in 1954. The sericulture farm and weaving production and training centre of Mushalpur were established in 1954.

More than half of the families (56.94) of this village are attached to cultivation. Among them, owner cultivators constitute 27.78 percent and non-cultivating owner 18.06 percent. People of this village are engaged in different occupations like teaching 9.72 percent, and service 21.5 percent. Some are engaged in petty trades like pulling carts, and selling betel nuts. A few are engaged in contract jobs.

The common species of paddy which are produced in this village are *Bor*, *Bora Joha*, *Phulpakhri*, etc. Green vegetables like cabbage, ladies finger, cauliflower, and mustard seeds are also

produced during winter. Agricultural activities in this village depend on women.

This village is a developed village. The literacy of women is very high (75.47) though the percentage of women who received education beyond secondary level is 12 percent only. A few women of this village are found in teaching profession (6.00). Most of them are attached with family level agricultural production and 22 percent of them work as agricultural labourer also.

### *Nalbari*

This village is situated on the eastern side of Odalguri town and is surrounded by forest on its northern and eastern sides. Mahendra Mohan Bramha, who is a resident of this village, and born in 1907 says that the Baptist Mission went to this village in 1918. This village has 50 Bodo christian families. Nalbari is a roadside village. A metal road connects Nalbari with Odalguri and Rowta. There is a roadside field in this village, where ABSU conducted a number of mass rallies or meetings during the Bodo movement.

The Bodos of this village have regular connection with the Nalbari Baptist Church. The ABSU, AATWWF and ABEF supporters and activists of this village were office-bearers in the church as well. For example, the pastor of the church is an ABEF executive committee member of Darrang district. This church has a separate pastor for women, who conducts prayer on every Friday. The Bodo women are regular visitors to the church on every Friday afternoon.

### *Plan of the Thesis*

There are six chapters including the chapter on introduction. Statement of the problem, survey of literature, and objectives of the study are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter II introduces the Bodos.

Chapter III discusses the antecedents of the Bodo movement.

Chapter IV is on the participation of women in the Bodo movement.

And Chapter V, the concluding chapter, summarizes the thesis, compares the Bodo movement with some similar movements, and analyses its impact on the women.

For real names no indication is given. Such indication is given in brackets only in respect of pseudo names.

## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCING THE BODOS

The first ethnographic account on the Bodos of Assam was published by Rev. Endle in 1911 in which they were referred to as 'Kachari'. They were recognized as a scheduled tribe after Independence. In the historical accounts of Ahoms called 'Buranjis', this community is referred to as 'Kachari' (Bhuyan 1951). It is the European scholars like Hodgson (1828) and Grierson (1903) who had used the terms 'Kachari' and 'Bodo' interchangeably to refer to this linguistic group of Assam. Grierson (1903) identified them as Indo-Mongoloid people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. He has further maintained that the generic name 'Bodo' was first used by Hodgson (1828) to refer a group of languages. According to Grierson (1903) the exact sound is better represented by spelling it  $\hat{B}\hat{a} \hat{d}\hat{a}$  or  $\hat{B}\hat{a} \hat{r}\hat{a}$ . This is a name which the Mech and the



Kachari used for themselves and in Tripuri language *Bara (K)* means a man (Grierson 1903 : 1-4). However, after Hodgson (1828) it is found that words 'Boro' and 'Bodo' have been synonymously used by both foreign and Indian writers. Hodgson, however, has not given any reason in support of the term 'Bodo' (Daimary 1987 : 528-532). At present the members of this community prefer to call themselves 'Boro' whereas those who are leading the present movement for their right of political self-determination prefer to use the term 'Bodo'.

On the basis of the available literature scholars are clearly divided into two groups, one arguing in favour of 'Bodo' and the other in favour of 'Boro'. The first group represented by R. M. Nath (1978) and Bhaben Narzi (1966) advocates that they came from the 'Bod' country or Tibet in central Asia and hence consider the use of the term 'Bodo' more appropriate. But R.N. Musahary (1986 : 273-282) does not agree with this view. Daimary (1987 : 528-532) adds that use of the term 'Bodo' by some European scholars suffers from some obscurities. The other camp is represented by Grierson (1903) and Bhattacharya (1977), who have advocated strongly in favour of the words 'Bara' or 'Boro' without denying the migration theory.

Hodgson (1828) was criticised by Grierson (1903) for using the word 'Bodo' for 'Bara'. On the other hand Chatterjee (1976) seems more inclined to use the term 'Kirata' to refer to this community. Dalton (1873/1960) tries to find the meaning of the word 'Boro' on the basis of a Boro saying, viz., "*Boro hary geder hary*" which literally means "Boro people great people". R.N. Mosahary (1986 : 273-282) supports such a usage as it reflects the people's own perception about the term Boro. Daimary (1987 : 528- 532) seeks reassessment of the migration theory and says that the word 'Bod' is an English translation of the Tibetan word 'Pö'. He further says that use of the term 'Bodo-Ficha' or 'Bodo-Cha' which means the children of the 'Bod' country is illogical (ibid).

While identifying Indian languages, Grierson (1903) incorporated Boro, Cachari, Tippera, Sonowal Kachari, Dimasa, Tiwa, Deori, Kok Borok, Mech and Hojai languages within the  $\hat{B}\hat{a}\hat{r}\hat{a}$  or  $\hat{B}\hat{o}\hat{d}\hat{o}$  group of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. In latter years, the founders of Bodo literature such as Satis Chandra Basumatary and Dwarendra Nath Rabha and other writers have gone closer to Grierson than Hodgson. These Bodo writers enriched the Bodo

literature by publishing Bibar in 1924 - 1925, Jenthaka in 1925, and Olumber in 1935. It is worth mentioning that they also used the word 'Boro' and 'Cachari' interchangeably (Bibar 1924/1925). Establishment of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in 1952 and all Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in 1967 clearly show their inclination towards use of the term 'Bodo'. In this regard the writing of Kanakeswar Narzary, the founder secretary of ABSU, Convener of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), Plains Tribal Council of Assam (Progressive) and United Tribal National Liberation Front (UTNLF), is important. He writes :

“in the line of making a strong English language by uniting Northumbrian, Cant, Anglo-Saxon etc. , combining all common words of Boro, Rabha, Garo, Dimasa, Hojai, Tiwa (Lalung), Deori, Kok-Borak, Mech into one and bring back the population of the Assamese speaking Bodos such as Soroniya Kacharis, Koch, Rajbangshis, Hajongs, Sonwals, Hindu Chutiyas, Tengal Kacharis, Moran Motok and also the Bengali speaking Burmans of Kachar by means of easy educational methods will contribute in making the Bodos a master race in near future” (Narzary 1993 : 1).

The historical accounts on 'Bodo Kachari' people show that between thirteenth and fifteenth centuries there were several chieftains who hailed from this community. The Ahoms invaded Assam in the thirteenth century. According to Lakshmi Devi (1968) Ahom Kings followed different policies for different communities like the Chutia, the Kachari, and the Koch. The Chutia kings lost their sovereignty after the advent of the Ahoms and the Kachari Kings were given the status of protected princes (*Thapita Sanchita*) by Ahom kings. The Ahom-Kachari political relations came to an end in the fifteenth century when Ahom Kings changed their policy and started occupying Kachari kingdoms of the Valley (Devi 1968 : 35). Mosahary (1989) mentions that when the Kachari kings were defeated by the Ahom Kings and left the Bramhaputra valley, the Bodo - Kachari people did not follow their kings and they became tenants of the Ahom kings (Mosahary 1989 : 167).

In the second half of the eighteenth century a rebellion took place in the Ahom state. This rebellion is usually referred to as 'Moamaria' rebellion (for details, see Chapter III). The Kacharis of

the Ahom state took part in this rebellion. After this the Ahom kings could not regain their political power (Datta 1985). The Moamarias were active upto the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gait (1905) has mentioned about one such incident of 1803. In Nagaon district, the Kachari king Krishna Chandra tried to regain his power by using the combined force of Kacharis and Moamarias. This force was initially beaten back by the Ahoms but later the Ahoms troops retreated to Guwahati after loosing a number of soldiers (Gait 1905 : 221). The Moamaria and Kachari rebels were powerful in other parts of the Ahom dynasty as well (Ibid : 222-225).

The Bodo villages are usually by the river side and are not big in size. Houses are constructed on both sides of a road. Each house has a courtyard. The kitchen and cowshed are usually placed on the northern side. The houses are constructed in such a manner that the doors of houses are not visible from road. An altar of *Bathou* is found on one side of the courtyard of every house. This altar is nothing but *Siju* (*Euphorbia splendens*) plant, which is surrounded by bamboo fencing. They consider the granary very sacred. The outsiders are

never allowed into that room. Even the family members do not enter that room with shoes on. The Bodo houses are similar with the houses of neighbouring communities. They keep their houses neat and clean.

There are some common plants and trees which are found in Bodo villages and are common all over Assam. Among these jackfruit , banana, myrobalan, wood apple, areca nut and betel leaves are common. Domestic birds like duck and hen are found in almost all Bodo houses and among animals cow, goat,etc. are found in many houses. They also rear oxen which are used for ploughing their agricultural fields. The follower of Brahma religion does not keep pig at home. Others keep it.

### *Social organization*

The Bodos are referred to as a 'tribe' by the British administrators and missionaries and designated as a scheduled tribe after Independence. The written documents on their social

organization, are available from the beginning of the twentieth century when the European missionaries and administrators began to write on them. In this context it is worth referring to Bibar, the first magazine of the Bodos. The first generation of Bodo writers wrote regularly on various aspects of the community in this magazine. The articles were written in the Bodo, Assamese and the Bengali languages. These helped us to understand their historical relationship with the neighbouring castes and communities.

The Bodos are divided into a number of 'sub-tribes' (Endle 1911 : 24 - 32) or 'social group' (Bramha 1992 : 34-35 ). These groups are exogamous and referred to as *Ari or Hari*. Endle mentions of hierarchy within these groups and one of them called *Swargiary* is referred to as 'heavenly folk' (ibid). Bramha (1992) has referred to this and one other called *Borgoyary* as a priestly group (*Deori*). There are about two dozen sub-tribes or social groups in the Bodo society. Some of these groups are totemistic in nature such as *Mosahary* (the tiger folk), *Khangkhlo arai or Khakhloary* (a certain jungle grass which is needed during religious ceremonies), *Sibing ari*

(sesame folk), *Gandrete ari* (leach), *Narzary* (jute folk), *Owary* (bamboo folk) and *Gayari* (areca nut folk), etc. *Basumatory*, the largest sub-tribe in the Bodo community, are also referred to as “the sons of the soil”. Endle (1911 : 24 - 32) mentions that the members of *Basumatory* clan enjoy a special privilege at the time of burying their dead bodies. There is a custom in the Bodo society according to which a Bodo has to purchase the land for burial with a token money from the *Basumatory* clan. But the members of the *Basumatory* clan do not have to do this. In earlier days the elderly members of this clan received a small amount of money as the revenue of that plot of land where a deceased person would have been buried or cremated (Bramha 1992 : 34 - 35 ).

The sub groups like *Ramchirary*, *Hajoari* and *Moamari* are named after the names of places. For example, *Ramsa* (place name) + *Ari* (suffix of clan name) = *Ramchirary* and *Hajo* (place name) + *Ari* = *Hajoari*. Some other groups like *Daimary* (the ‘fishermen folk’) and *Bibajari* or *Bibariari* (‘begging folk’) (Endle 1911 : 25 - 32, Bramha 1992 : 40) seem to be originally occupational categories. In



this regard, Bramha (1992: 40) says that *Bibajari* might be a group of ceremonial beggars who used to beg during festivals.

According to Bramha (1992 : 33-35) the first human being, Monsing Sing Burai, was the creator of all clans. The clans were created in a convention that continued for twelve years and was convened to save the custom and belief of the Bodos (ibid : 32).

#### *The role of women in the family*

The Bodos are patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. Nuclear families are common but extended families are also noticed. Nuclear families consist usually of parents and 4 to 6 children. Number of children is less in educated families. None of the women leaders has more than three children. According to my informants, the Bodos have no clear sex preference in case of new born babies but gender differences can be traced in child-rearing.

Bibar published a number of articles on education, health, and hygiene in which some of their old customs were criticised. To be more specific, some of their traditional practices like early marriage,

addiction to alcohol, etc. had received severe criticism. The writers like Karindra Narayan Bramha, Namal Chandra Boro, Rupnath Bramha and others gave special attention to education and national character formation. The early marriage of young boys was criticised by them vehemently and such practices were identified as causes of their back-wardness. So 'education' as a factor for development had received top priority from those writers. They were conscious about women's education also. The Bodo writers of early twentieth century suggested that mother's education was necessary for the benefit of children. So, women's education received attention of those Bodo educationists and writers.

They conceived of women's education as follows. Activities like home management, child care, care of the aged, cooking, entertainment of guests, weaving, embroidery, etc. received top priorities from them. They thought that the women must know all this and they must teach the same to the girls before marriage (Bramha 1924: 45).

On the basis of my fieldwork it is observed that a Bodo girl begins to help her mother at an early age. Her job as baby-sitter begins at 9 or 10 years. Works like washing utensils or cleaning courtyards are also part of her daily chores. The girls who are above ten years of age go to forest to collect leafy vegetables, roots, etc. They also go for fishing and taking part in agricultural works. Among these works transplanting the seedlings and harvesting are the main works which the Bodo girls start doing before they attain the teen age. Teenaged girls participate in cultivation as well. These girls also do weaving and cooking. They earn money by selling such private animals/birds and by selling their woven articles. Such income is contributed to the family income or utilized for buying articles of their wish such as bangles, make up kits, clothes and shoes.

There are no distinct household works which are performed by the Bodo boys. The boys get priority over the girls' in the field of education. Normally, the boys are sent to school and exempted from the household works whereas the girls<sup>have</sup> to stop their studies and start earning. This was more true of the poor than the rich families. Case studies are given here to substantiate this.

Rajni, 25, is an unmarried girl of Purani Garaimari village, Odalguri sub-division, Darrang district. In search of cultivable land her father moved from one place to another and finally settled in this village. A river destroyed their cultivable land and turned her parents landless when she was still a child. Since then her parents worked as agricultural labourer on other people's land. She lost her parents when she was about 9 years old. By then she had two younger brothers and her elder sisters were married. So she started working as a maid servant. She did not get chance to go to school. Her sisters took the responsibilities of her brothers and sent them to school. One of her brothers had completed his schooling when I met her. Her eldest brother left school after completing his primary education but the youngest brother continued to study, and completed pre-university course also. She was the guardian of her brothers when I met her. She spent her earnings to meet their expenses.

In 1992, she left her village and went to Shillong. She continued to work in Shillong even after her brothers completed their studies. Like her a number of Bodo girls are found in Shillong working as maids to earn money.

Ramilla, another girl from Purani Garaimari village of Darrang district, told me that she hailed from a cultivator's family and had three brothers. Whatever crops her father produced were used for their domestic consumption. Her brothers and she could not clear the state level secondary examination and that was the end of their formal education. She blamed her society for the poor educational status of Bodo women because the women were overloaded with household works since their childhood. She recalled her childhood experiences when she had to go for collecting firewood, leafy vegetables, crabs, roots, tubers and also for occasional fishing during holidays. Naturally such activities required a lot of time which ultimately reduced her study time.

#### *Inheritance of property*

According to Endle (1911) the laws of inheritance of property were patrilineal. He mentions that the eldest son inherited half a portion of father's property and the rest was distributed among other sons. In any case daughters were not entitled to the share of property. In absence of a son the eldest brother of the deceased would inherit

the property. In such a case the inheritor allots a portion of the land to the widow of his brother.

### *Economic organization*

Pemberton (1835/1966) has written about the trade between Bhutan and Assam. The exports from Assam were rice, lac, madder, silk, endi, dried fish, etc. In lieu of that they imported goods like woollen cloths, gold dust, salt, horses, cowries, Chinese silk, etc. He further writes that the trade suffered severely after the Burmese occupation of Assam in the eighteenth century (Pemberton 1835/1966: 83-84). Nag (1987) mentions that the Ahom kings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries organized a state militia comprising of the male population of the state who were above sixteen years old. These people were attached to the works of kings and served the state. This militia was employed to carry out public works, other than construction of roads, tanks, embankments, bridges, and canals. They were also employed to reclaim cultivable land from forests and swamps. An irrigation network was also constructed with the help of this militia. Hundreds of river embankments, crossed by highly raised pathways or walls, and joined by embankments

graduating down to the end of connecting villages and fields, formed a network that helped to keep out the water due to annual floods (Nag 1987 : 166 - 168). Each of the militia was known as *paik* and a unit of four *paiks* was called *got*. Each *paik* or *got* was assigned the duty to cultivate lands of three *paiks* of his own *got* when other three were supposed to render their service to the king. These *paiks* were assigned duties in rotation. In times of emergency they had to participate in the wars as soldiers (ibid : 166).

Assam was never an isolated place. The travelogue Tabkat-I-Nasiri quoted by Sen (1987 : 157-159) refers to the routes that connected Assam with the other regions of India. Ramkumar Vidyaratna (1885), a religious preacher of Sadharan Bramha Samaj, wrote a travelogue on Assam. All the districts situated on the bank of Bramhaputra River were travelled by him. This travelogue gives an idea of the people of Assam and their culture during the nineteenth century. A special mention is made here of the women. They are described as hard-working and taking part in agricultural activities. Weaving is mentioned as women's occupation (Vidyaratna 1885 : 99-101).

The Bodos are now found settled on the vast alluvial plains of the northern bank of river Brahmaputra. This community, was however famous for its migratory habits. For a Bodo necessary preconditions for their permanent settlement were a high land to construct the house, vast grazing field, cultivable land, availability of rivers/ ponds/rivulets or lakes, forest in nearby areas for collecting firewood, leafy vegetables, animals to hunt, etc.

In the Bodo language the best alluvial land is called *Hamaha*, which means 'the mother of the soil'. When land was abundant, they selected the plots on the basis of certain rituals. The ritual was like this. The person who wanted a plot of land went to that land before sun set and he stood there for sometime to feel the temperature of that land by his feet. If the land produced a lot of heat it was an indication of constant misfortune for the family who would occupy that land. Such land was treated unsuitable for the family. If the land did not produce much heat the person cleaned a portion of that land and watered it. He revisited that plot on Tuesday or Saturday evening. A piece of banana leaf would be kept on that patch of land and a pair of *tulsi* (basil) leaves would be placed on the banana leaf along with nine



unbroken and un-husked sticky rice. The whole thing was then covered by a bamboo basket the edges of which were properly sealed with mud. The person went back to that place again on the next day and removed the basket to see the condition of the rice and basil. If they were undisturbed it indicated that the site was suitable for settlement. Then a pit of about two feet deep would be dug. The person took a little soil from the bottom of the pit and tasted it. If the soil tasted 'bitter' or 'salty' it meant that the land was neither too good nor too bad but if it was 'sour' it meant that it was not suitable at all (Bramha 1992 : 45-48).

Now a days this process of selecting a land is no more in practice.

The Bodos have a clear idea about the different types of lands, flora and fauna. They have a plant called *dingdinga* in their language. If this plant grows abundantly on a land it indicated that the land did not have the capacity to retain water. This type of land was called *Khandianaha* and considered not suitable for cultivation.

*Jampi daria ha* or the irrigated land where paddy is cultivated is the costliest land today. There are three seasons for paddy cultivation. These are *Maisali* (winter rice) *Bawa* (rainy season) and *Ashu* (just after rainy season). The *Maisali* paddy seedlings are transplanted on low lands. *Bawa* species are broadcast on marshy land. The latter species has tall stems and grows in deep water. *Ashu* cultivation is done on highlands.

They also produce jute, mustard seeds, and various kinds of pulses. Each family grows fruit trees on homestead lands. Jackfruit trees, areca nut trees and betel leaves are also common. A cow shed near home is a symbol of prosperity. Everybody tries to keep cows and bullocks at home. Bullock is used for ploughing. Domestic animals like goat, pig, and birds like hen, and duck, are also found. Religion has a great influence on the practice of keeping domestic animals. Earlier a pig was an important domestic animal but followers of the Bramha religion usually oppose rearing pigs. This practice started in the beginning of the twentieth century when they adopted the Bramha religion.

Weaving is compulsory for young Bodo girls. They learn the techniques of weaving early in life. Traditionally they wove all the cloths required for a family like *dokhna*, *aronai*, *gamocha*, bed covers, etc. by themselves. Apart from that they also wove cloths for marriage. Even now weaving is common, more so during winter. But nowadays a lot of weaving takes place for commercial purposes.

Fishing is another important activity of the Bodo women. During the rainy season they go for fishing regularly. They catch fish with the help of *khaloi* (conical shaped artifact made of split bamboo) and keep the fish in the *jakhoi* (pot made of split bamboo). These instruments of fishing are handy. *Jakhoi* is a bamboo pot which is hung on their waist during fishing. This is a very favourite sport of the Bodo women. In the recent past husking mills are established in rural areas, which are of great help to the women. These mills have reduced the workload of women. During the Bodo movement many such mills were closed as the owners were non-Bodos and they were instructed to close them. In many cases mill owners were also the money lenders. But such a decision of activists disappointed some

young girls. Husking mills saved the time and labour of young women. They had more time in hand for study than before.

They rear domestic animals on *adhi* system, i.e., the owner gets half of the income from the animals/birds. In case of cows the person who looks after these gets the calf or heifer as the case may be whereas the owner gets a greater share of the milk.

Like other women of hill tribal communities, the Bodo women are not usually fond of trade and commerce. But they go to the local hats or markets to sell their home grown vegetables and other domestic products. At present many young girls have migrated to Guwahati and Shillong in search of job. These girls are mostly illiterate or primary school educated and a few have appeared school leaving examination. Many of them could not manage any other jobs except that of maid servant. They come from families, which do not have enough land for cultivation.

## *Religion*

In the present century religion has emerged as one of the most important catalysts of transformation in the Bodo community. The influence of the new religion called Bramha is deep. The followers of this religion are reformists and have brought significant cultural change in the society. The traditionalists worship the *Siju* plant (*Euphorbia splendens*) which is considered as the image of their supreme deity *Bathou*. They refer to themselves as *Bathou* as well as Hindu. The British missionaries described the traditional Bodo religion as 'animistic' religion. Christianity was introduced to this community only in the beginning of this century.

In the traditional religion, Bathou Borai is the chief of their gods. He is also known as *Kharia Borai* or *Khuria Borai* which means the old man (Mosahary 1993 : 1-16). *Ba* means five and *thou* means deep. Hence 'Bathou' means 'the five deep spiritual entity'. 'Five' is considered as the special numeral in the traditional Bodo religion. In this regard a Bodo verse is like this:

“Thaigirni Khonga Khongba,  
Sijauni Sira Sirba,  
Si phungni gudunga dungba,  
Bathouni bondoa bondoba ,  
Boro boraini raoa phongba. ”

(Bramha 1983 : 35).

In translation, *Owi* fruit (Dillenis indica) has five rinds, the *Siju* tree (Euphorbia Splenden) has five ridges, the *Siphung* (the long bamboo flute of the Bodos) has five holes, the *Bathou* has five knots (of bamboo strips) and the Boro Borai (the Bodo elders) have five moral preachings. Again, the Bodos have five principles on which their social customs are based. These are (1) *Agarbad* (2) *Phengslothbad* (3) *Daokhibad* (4) *Khoulobad*, and (5) *Kahaoalbad* (ibid : 35-36). No more illustrations are given by the writer on these five principles. There are many other god and goddesses besides the chief god, *Bura Bathou*. They are *Bura Ailong*, *Bura Kharji*, *Abla Khungur*, *Agrang Khoila*, *Rajphutur*, *Raj Khandra*, *Ali Bura*, *Aidi Baoli*, *Manasu Jaman*, *Baghrajaja*, *Basumati*, *Choudri*, etc. *Mainao* is the chief goddess and she is also the wife of *Bathou*. She is further known as

*Bathou Buroi, Bulli Buroi, Kharia Buroi, or Siw Buroi.* All these gods and goddesses occupy important positions in rituals related to life cycle, economy, and diseases (Bramha 1983 : 35 -36). *Kherai* is the greatest ritual of the Bodo people. It is expensive and elaborate. Bramha (1989: 62-74) has given a detailed description of the *Kherai* ritual according to which the goddess of wealth (*Lakhi*) is worshipped in this ritual. Along with the goddesses *Lakhi*, the previously mentioned god and goddess are also worshipped in this ritual. This ritual may be held in September-October (*Kati*), or July-August (*Ashar*) or in January-February (*Magha*). The name of the rituals changes according to time of observance. The *Kherai* festival is named as *Darshan Kherai, Umrao Kherai, Phalo Kherai* and *Noaoni Kherai*. The *Noaoni Kherai* is performed at the family level. There is no fixed time for this. Whenever a family wants to perform the *Kherai* ritual, can perform it.

The *Kherai* ritual is also performed on community basis. There are a lot of materials needed before performing this ritual at village level. Among other things some particular species of bamboo, herb

and leaves are needed. All the musical instruments, which are commonly used by them, are also needed.

*Kherai* puja involves many persons for the arrangement but for the worship only three persons are necessary. They are *Doudini* (the main worshipper of *Kherai* and she must be a lady), *ojha* or the instructor of worshippers, and one helper (*githal*).

The worship of *Kherai* continues for three days. There is no fixed place for this. The *Doudini* is the main dancer during this ritual. *Kherai* dances are performed to please the *Bathou Borai* and other gods and goddesses. She performs most of the essential rites with the help of an instructor (*ojha*) and a helper (*githal*). The performances are divided into three parts. The first part is called *Alongikhangnai*. The *ojha* gets the *Doudini* possessed by chanting hymns in the first stage. She falls into a trance in the second stage and converts herself into a spiritual being in the third stage. In this stage she tells the tales of the gods and goddesses. She demonstrates as many as eighteen different kind of dances. She dances with a shield and a sword in her hands. At the end of the worship she tells the future of the villagers,



their probable success and failure in cultivation and about their fortunes or misfortunes.

The *Garja puja* is another important religious ceremony of the Bodos. They perform *Garja puja* on many occasions. Usually this ritual is performed to protect the village from epidemics. If any person does any sinful act this ritual is performed to purify him or her. There are many *garja* gods and goddesses who are regularly propitiated by the Bodos. Bramha (1989 : 76) mentions the names of fifteen such deities who are worshipped in *Garja* ritual. He also mentions the names of a few non-Bodo *Garja* gods who are worshipped along with the Bodo gods and goddesses during *Garja puja*. These are *Mahadeo, Sila Rai, Rupa Rai, Ai Kali, Maya Kali*, etc. The river god and goddess are also addressed. There are about hundreds of gods and goddesses who are worshipped during *Kherai* and *Garja* festivals (Bramha 1989:1-80).

*Baisagu*, the new year festival, is celebrated in April. This is a popular festival among them. During this festival the boys and girls go around the village collecting rice, pulses, and money. They

continue this until they arrange a picnic. The other activities during this festival are: (1) *Gokha Gokhoi Janai* or eating bitter and sour tasting wild vegetables on the Sankranti day, (2) giving ritual bath to the cattle, and (3) remembering their ancestors.

*Domahi* is another popular festival which is observed after harvest. This festival is observed during December-January.

There are other festivals ~~those~~ are related with different seasons. A lot of similarities are found between the festivals of the Bodo and other Assamese on one hand and the Bengalees on the other. These similarities are about the time and ways these festivals are held.

The followers of Bramha religion observe many traditional rituals. Yet there are a lot of differences between the followers of Bramha and non-Bramha religion. The Bramhas are fire-worshippers and give *aluti* (offerings to the fire) in every worship. They avoid animal sacrifice and do not offer country liquor to guests during the festival.

Members of both the religious sects (Bathou and Bramha) have established organizations to protect their religious beliefs. For instance, the latter have established All Assam Bramha Dharma Parichalana Committee in 1974, at Mushalpur in Nalbari district. It has its branches in all the districts of Assam. The main objective of this organization is to bring uniformity in the religious observances. Since 1982, this organization has started priest-training programme. The first programme was attended by about 100 Bodos from different regions. This organization has also established schools at Bongaigaon of Kokrajhar district and Mushalpur of Nalbari district. These are English medium residential schools.

The followers of Bathou religion have also established a similar organization. Nowadays they offer flowers instead of sacrificing animals.

'Christianity' is also accepted by a section of them. The Christian Bodos are mostly found in the district of Darrang. The Bodos of different religious faiths have worked together during the

movement. However, the followers of the Bramha religion are more in leadership of the Bodo movement.

### *Political organization*

The village panchayats helped the Bodo movement in many ways. In the beginning of the movement the panchayat headman (*gaonbura*) and other members were contacted by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) leaders to communicate with the people about meetings, processions and other programmes. In many instances, panchayat members were taken in peace committees formed during the movement. These peace committees took initiative to maintain communal harmony. The elderly members of other communities were also inducted in such peace committees.

### *The Bodo Women*

According to Mohini Mohan Bramha (1977 : 15-18) there were two Bodo women queens named Wairangma and Wairanguri of Hidimbapur who fought against the Ahom soldiers and were slain. These two women are referred to as *Ranachandi* in the Bodo legends. Mention is also made of some other women like Tripura Sundari and

Bhanumati who accompanied their husbands to war (ibid 1977 : 15-18).

The women have various restrictions from the beginning of pregnancy. Restrictions are imposed on some foods as well as on physical movement. They cannot go to the forest and cremation ground. Childbirth is considered as a natural phenomenon and a few women of the village assist the mother. The midwife uses a new blade to cut the umbilical cord. Bramha (1992 : 66-67) mentions that cutting of the umbilical cord is followed by a ritual. In this ritual the cord is tied with a cotton or silk thread. If the baby is a boy the thread is tied five times and if the same is a girl it is tied seven times. The umbilical cord is cut by such a woman whose hands are considered as 'bitter'. It is believed that the cut will heal if done so. They believe that if the cord is cut by a widow the new born may be short lived.

The new born and the mother are given a hot bath soon after delivery. Dry foods are given to the mother for a few days. He or she is given a name just after the birth. The feeding ceremony is

observed in the fifth month. Hair cutting ceremony and ceremony of ear perforation for girls are observed after one year.

Adoption is popular. Usually a couple adopts a child if the wife does not conceive within two or three years. Both male and female children are equally preferred for adoption. Five of my informants had adopted female children. The adopted children receive equal treatment. Such children can also inherit their foster fathers' property.

In the beginning of this century marriage by elopement was common and known as *Doukharlangnai Haba* (Bramha 1992 : 77). This type of marriage was criticised by the educated Bodos (see 'Bibar') in the beginning of this century. Early marriage also received criticism because it was considered as an impediment to boys' education and progress. Gurudeb Kalicharan Bramha, the Bramha preacher, and his disciples took special initiatives to stop such marriage practices. Moreover they reduced the amount of bride price.

Marriage by negotiation is the standard practice. The negotiation is always initiated by the bridegroom's relatives and a bridegroom enjoys more freedom to choose his life partner than the bride does. Bride price is not common at present. The educated Bodos, specially the Bramhas, were against bride price from the beginning of this century. But now bride price has been replaced by dowry. Of course such cases are few and confined to the rich. Bramha (1992 : 76-78) writes that there were also other types of marriages like marriage by service and widow marriage.

In negotiated marriage selection of the bride not only depends on the beauty but also other factors. One such factor is the physique. The girl with large hip, breasts and waist is considered as fickle - minded. The girl who makes noise while walking is considered as hot-tempered. The girl with pointed nose, bright eyes, small teeth, well shaped fingers, bright face and dark thick hair is considered as most desirable as bride (ibid 1992 : 80-82). The desirable qualities of a Bodo bride are not confined to her physical attributes. The other quality considered desirable in an ideal bride is expertise in husking, weaving, cooking, etc.

The selection of a prospective bride indicates the status of women. It is obvious that brides have little or no say in her selection. She merely dreams of a house where there are granary and cowshed.

“Dāokhā hābnāi noāwlāi,  
Sitā hābnāi noāwlāi,  
Āngkhōu dābilāi āphā gosāi,  
Māi bākhri nunāiāo,  
Mosāu goli munāiāo,  
Āngkhōu bilāihor āphā gosāi,  
Āngkhōu bilāihor āphā gosāi”.  
(K. Bramha 1992 : 46).

It means “Do not give my marriage to a house where the crows and the kites have easy access, O my father God (*Gosai*), give my marriage to a house where the granary and cowshed are easily visible, O my father god”.

In any arranged marriage the villagers take all sorts of responsibilities. They prepare, rice beer, supply vegetables, and take part in various activities. It is also customary that all villagers are invited to a marriage. The village women assist the bride’s mother to



clean the house, rice and pulses, cut vegetables, cook and serve food to the guests.

### *Separation*

In the Bodo society separation takes place mainly for the following reasons. Extra marital affair is one of the most important causes of divorce. To be most specific, when a woman is involved in such an affair, it leads to separation but when a male is involved it leads to the second or the third marriage. This is because polygyny is socially sanctioned. But the members of present generation, specifically the women, have started protesting against polygyny. A few case studies are given in Chapter IV which show how the members of All Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation (AATWWF) penalised those men who were involved in extra-marital affairs.

According to Bodo customary laws, separation is permitted in case of barrenness or laziness of a woman to perform the household duties. The ritual which is performed at the time of separation is called *pathoi lai bisinai* (Bramha 1992 : 39). On this occasion all

elderly persons of the village meet the village headman. After the settlement of separation the headman takes a betel leaf and tears it into two pieces. This symbolises that the couple is now separated.

### *Death Rituals*

A dead body is kept at the courtyard. Before laying the body the courtyard is cleaned with water. After giving bath to the corpse new clothes are put on. His or her family members also offer food to the dead. After that the corpse is taken to the cremation ground on a bamboo stretcher or may be buried in one corner of the homestead.

They believe in rebirth. The rituals they perform before cremation or burial are related to rebirth. The last funeral rite is conducted by a priest (*Deori*). In this rite the role of male relatives and sons are more than that of female relative, wife and daughter. The dead body is carried by sons and male relatives. In the villages, at least one male member from each family is expected to go to the cremation ground where they offer water, food, coins and cowrie shells to the deceased person. According to their belief a deceased individual needs those things for her/his further journey. Those who

accompany the deceased person, to the cremation ground show their last respect by sprinkling a few drops of water on the dead body with the help of leaves of the fig tree. They separate their identity from the identity of the departed soul through this performance. The *Deori* puts a red thread on the lips of the deceased person so that she/he is re-born with red lips. Those who join the funeral procession take bath in the river before coming back home. They chew jute plant after reaching home. This indicates that the relationship with the deceased is totally cut off. Holy water is sprinkled upon them for purification. Finally they sit together in the deceased's house and take *jaw* or *Jumai*' (rice beer).

The last rites of the Bramhas and traditionalists are similar. Now some Bodos have started observing a funeral ceremony called *Shraddha* to show their respect to the departed soul. This ceremony is reported to be adapted from their neighboring Hindu communities. This is observed either on the eleventh or thirteenth day from the day of death. On this occasion, the followers of Bramha religion perform *yagya/ahuti* and entertain their relatives and friends with various foods.

## *Bodo Women and Performing Art*

The festivals and ceremonies of this community are full of music and dance. In any performance, the traditional instruments like *Khum* (elongated drum), *Sifung* (flute with five holes), *Jotha* (cymbal), *Sherja* (violin of four strings), and *Gogona* (jew's harp) are used. The Bodo music is classified into three sections. These are instrumental, vocal and dance. Most of their dances are group performances and performed by women in the open space. *Musanlangnai*, and *Bagarumba*, are dances performed to welcome any guest of honour in any function. Male members play their instruments. The colourful dresses of dancers and their rhythmic expressions matching with the tune of their instruments are very attractive. The performances attract people across the ethnic boundaries. On 28<sup>th</sup> September 1991, Darrang District Committee of All Bodo Students Union (DDC, ABSU) submitted a memorandum to the Three Members Expert Committee constituted by the Government of India to assess their demand. That memorandum includes a detailed description of their music, dances and their typologies (DDC, ABSU 1991 : 2-3). It says that their dances originated from *Kherai*. It is their main ritual in which the worship of

Lord Bathou is performed by *Deodini* (women who worship through dancing).

*Haba Janai* dances or the dances related to marriage incorporate some other types of dances. *Bagaroumba* is the most beautiful and attractive dance. This dance is called the dance of butterfly. *Bwisagu* dances are performed in the first month of the year, i.e., in *Baisakh* (April-May). Usually the young girls participate in such performances.

Different types of dances and participation of women in those performances reveal that singing, dancing and making different motifs while weaving are part of their life. They are very fond of weaving and embroidery. If a group of young girls assemble somewhere and gossip, it is sure that at least once they discuss about new motifs and designs of weaving. They use bright colours like yellow, green, and red in different shades. They usually keep their houses clean, and like to keep their furniture, artifacts and other things in order.

Besides all this, they participate in modern cultural activities as well. Deben Kochari (1996 : 65-71) writes that earlier the Bodo songs and dances were performed only during the religious festivals. But in 1950s the Bodos of north and south Goalpara started doing group performances on the stage. The first woman singer on the stage was Narmeswari Basumatory who presented a Bodo song at the conference of 'Baro dol' in 1891 at Goalpara. Aniram Basumatory, an active member of Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), took initiative to preserve the folk songs and dances. He and some other Bodos like Rameswar Boro, Kamaleswar Basumatory, and Prasanna Kumar Basumatory visited remote places to make their people aware of their cultural heritage (Bramha 1996 : 65-71). Even RCP members like Bishnu Prasad Rabha and his wife Mohini Rabha travelled to many villages of Nalbari and Kamrup districts and encouraged their people to sing mass songs. Aniram Basumatory was involved in theatre also. He wrote and directed Gambhari Chikhla, which is still a popular drama among them. He staged it at Dudhnoi of Goalpara district. In this play Bodo men and women performed together though inter-mixing was not allowed at that time. During the movement some ABSU activists also composed songs which were

very popular. After the attainment of Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) the urban Bodos are even organizing beauty contests for the Bodo girls.

Summing up this chapter, it may be stated that the Bodos, who are one of the largest plains tribes of Assam, are quite a heterogeneous group of people. The cultural heterogeneity has been further accentuated in the last couple of centuries as a result of exposure to various reform movements in the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, they share a lot of cultural traits with their neighbouring communities and it is sometimes difficult to separate a Bodo trait from the non-Bodo traits. This is despite the fact that efforts to consolidate themselves politically and culturally are almost one hundred years old now.

## CHAPTER III

*History of Assam  
The movement and the Bodo  
Part 1*

### ANTECEDENTS OF THE BODO MOVEMENT

*Part of the  
of Bodo  
in 19th century / history  
etc.*

This chapter discusses the participation of the Bodos in various movements that took place in the past. The history of Assam shows a rebellious character of them. They had protested against the monarchical repression of Ahom Kings (Gait 1905, Gurung 1994). This rebellion of the eighteenth century is known as 'Moamaria rebellion'. In the nineteenth century tea garden labourers' strike compelled the British owners to enhance the daily wage (Guha 1977 : 26). Guha mentions that the Kachari labourers constituted a substantial portion of tea garden labourers in the beginning of the nineteenth century and they had active participation in labourers' movement. The intensity of their participation is revealed from the comments of Genkin, quoted by Guha (1993 : 23-28) that, "I trust the event shows the necessity of making a provision by importing other



These were the  
part of  
movement  
in Assam etc

classes of labourers who could prove a check upon Cacharres". Other movements of the twentieth century include labourers' strikes at Dhubri Match Box Company in 1928-36 (Banerjee 1993 : 39-66) and Digboi Oil Company in 1939 (Saha 1993 : 15-22), sharecroppers' movement in 1950-55 (Deka 1994), etc. These movements are discussed here in chronological order and are compared with contemporary movements in others parts of India to get a better understanding of the Bodo movement.

*Sarania Movement*

Mediaeval India experienced Bhakti movements in different parts. The Brahmins of that period lost much of their spiritual authority which eventually passed on to the Vaisnavite saints or gurus, whose songs and biographies became scriptures for their followers. The devotional religion fostered the ideas of brotherhood and equality without challenging the Hindu social framework. This religion is referred to as "neo-Vaisnavism" (Neog 1965). Towards the last decades of the fifteenth century, the religious history of Tantric Assam moved towards a new direction. The neo - Vaisnavite

movement in Assam initiated by Sankaradeva did not differ in its essence from its counterparts elsewhere in India.

Sankaradeva introduced certain special techniques for preaching his religious faith. Devotional songs and dramas composed by him gained a lot of popularity (Neog 1965 : 362). Sankaradeva's vaishnavism is known as *Ek-Sarana Nama Dharma*. It has a strong sense of monotheism as its central doctrine (ibid : 363). Among his better known disciples were Madhavadeva, Govindadeva, Damodordeva, Harideva, Naranaraya Das Thakuria Ata, etc. His disciples and he established many religious institutions, which were known as *Satra* (religious institution). One of his more famous disciples called Gopaladeva had established twelve *satras* of which six were presided by lower caste (*Sudra Mahantas*) priests and six were by Brahmin priests. The *Sudra satras* (the institution of lower castes) were Mayamara, Banhbari or Dihing, Hala Dhiati, Gajala, Nagaria and Dalaipo (Datta 1989 : 183-193). Neog (1965) writes that Sankaradeva could not gain popularity among Kacharies in his own lifetime though he hailed from Kachari dominated area.

Madhavadeva, one of the disciples of Sankaradeva, took initiative to propagate *Ek-Sarania Nama-Dharma* among non-Assamese people and deputed his two disciples Govindadeva and Damodordeva to propagate this religion among other communities. Thus Khatara Satra of Darrang and Mayamara Satra of Lakhimpur were established (Neog *ibid* : 142, 151). Neog has given a biographical sketch of 25 disciples of Sankaradeva who were very constructive and active in later years. The Bhakti movement also influenced the cultural sphere of Assam. Some songs were written by Sankaradeva and those are maintained by his disciples till date. These are *Nama Kirtana* in *Ojapali* chorus and drama, *Bargit* lyrics, *Kirtan* lyrics, etc. Since the end of the sixteenth century Vaisnavism attracted people and infiltrated the neighbouring communities like Koch, Rabha and Boro. The devotees from those communities were referred to as *Sarania* by the Assamese Vaisnavites.

### *Moamaria Rebellion*

Moamaria rebellion occurred in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Moamaria is a Vaisnavite sect and the name is universally applied to refer the disciples of Mayamara Satra. The followers of

this sect belonged to different communities like the Morans, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Bihias, Ahoms and Kaivartas, and caste Hindus like Brahmin, Kalita and Kayasthas (Devi 1968 : 48-49). This is the first popular rebellion against the Ahom Government.

The first protest took place in 1769. The members of *Hatichung Khel* (elephant catcher by profession), who were all Morans, organized the protest and two women called Bhatuki and Bhabuli led the protest and declared that they were under their own king and minister (*Barbarua*). This was followed by another incident where two members of the same *Khel* were tortured by minister (*Barbarua*) when they went to him for usual supply of an elephant (Datta 1985 : 101-102). Whatever it might be, that incident is referred to as the 'immediate cause' of the movement (ibid : 101).

According to Datta (1985) the *Mahantas* of Mayamara Satra were disappointed with the Ahom king and government officials for their style of functioning. On the other hand government officials did not like the growing popularity and influence of the *Mahantas*. The democratic outlook of the Mayamara Satra appealed the tribesmen

who accepted it. Moreover, the Vaisnavite reformers were not merely disseminating religious ideas but also teaching certain crafts and cultivation to the tribal communities (Datta 1985 : 71-73).

To Gurung (1994) it is the economic policy (*Paik* System) of the Ahoms which disappointed the people. It appears that the Ahom rulers were isolated from public whereas the *Mahantas* had close interaction with the masses. In such a situation it was not difficult for the *Mahantas* to mobilise their disciples against Ahom rulers. It is mentioned that the women joined hands with men and inspired their sons and husbands to put an end to the rule of oppression, injustice and cruelty (Datta 1985 : 101).

The rebels had to face a lot of trouble after the uprising. The degree of torture was intensified by Ahom administration and sudden price hike of essential commodities forced them to leave Ahom state. But after the Moamaria rebellion the Ahom king could not restore his old position (Gurung 1994).

### *The Bramha Movement*

This movement started in the first decade of the twentieth century. Generally it is seen as a religious movement (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1982 : 253-280). Gurudev Kalicharan Bramha and his religion gained popularity among educated Bodo youths who initiated many reformist works in their community. The greatest contribution of the Bramha movement was in the field of education. He and his disciples established primary, M.E. schools, and technical schools (schools for weaving and carpentry). The Bramha Boarding House was established for the poor Bodo students in Dhubri (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1982 : 253-280). Besides spreading education within the Bodo community they started co-operative movement for community development and reduction in expenses on socio-religious observances. Prohibitions were imposed upon high bride price, brewing and consumption of liquor at home, dragging and stealing of girls for marriage, and marketing during non-Bodo festivals (Saikia 1982 : 245-247). Kalichran Bramha organized a few conferences (*Mahasannmilon*) in his lifetime. The resolution for social reform in the Bodo society was adopted in the first conference of 1925. In the

second conference of 1927 (*Mahasannemelon*), Kalicharan Bramha and his disciples adopted a resolution and sent a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara demanding the retention of Goalpara district within Assam. In 1929 the same committee submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in Shillong for the political right of the tribal people (Saikia *ibid* : 247). The disciples of Kalicharan Bramha wrote on various socio-economic problems of the Bodo community in Bihar, regularly. Among them Pramode Chandra Bramha did a remarkable work for the development of Bodo language.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a period of chaos and confusion in the religious affairs of the Bodos. Some of them already had adopted Ek-Sarania Nama Dharma, Christianity or Islam. Kalicharan Bramha introduced the new religion in order to stop the members of his own community from being converted to other religions (Bramha 1992 : 192-194). His religion gained a lot of popularity among his community members.

Here the Bodo situation may be compared with other parts of India. Gurudev Kalicharan Bramha started preaching his religion among the Bodos when several such religious movements were going on elsewhere such as the Bramha Samaj movement in Bengal and adjacent states, Prarthana Samaj movement in Bombay, Arya Samaj movement in Uttar Pradesh and Seng Khasi movement in the Khasi Hills (Nag 1965, Farquhar 1967, Bramha 1992). Kalicharan Bramha was an influential businessman in his early life and used to go to Calcutta. He was initiated to the Bramha religion in Calcutta by Shivnarayan Swami (Saikia 1982 : 247).

#### *Movement of Christian Missionaries*

The Christian missionaries were permitted to preach in the northeast India after the passage of Charter Act in 1813. Following that Lutheran missionaries in 1843, the Roman Catholic Missionary reached there in 1928, Scottish Presbyterian Church/ Anglican Church in 1960, and Australian Baptist Missionary Society in 1968 (Mosahary 1986: 273-278, Sangma 1987: 400 Mosahary 1996: 264-279). Christianity reached different pockets of Assam at different times. The first mission to evangelize the Bodos of Assam was



Baptist which had established its headquarters in Guwahati. The Catholic mission first established a church in the Bodo-dominated area of Darrang (Mosahary 1986 : 273-278). Aphinta, the first Bodo Christian missionary, had started evangelisation of the Bodos in 1849. The Lutheran Mission and its Bodo evangelists like Teklo Basumatory, Ratia Basumatory, Dabaru Bodo and others mainly worked in Goalpara (Mosahary 1986 : 273-278, Mosahary 1996 : 264-279). The Kachari women of that subdivision demanded a separate church for them in 1917 (Sangma 1987 : 129-132).

According to Sangma (1987) and Mosahary (1996) the Baptist and Catholic missions made remarkable progress among the Bodos of Darrang and Goalpara districts in the beginning of this century. Besides evangelisation these missions established schools, hospitals, and leprosy homes in Parkijuli and Shantipara of Nalbari district.

### *Tribal League and Tribal Sangha*

The first political organization for the plains tribals of Assam was established in 1933. Though it was named so the Bodos from the very beginning dominated Tribal League. On the basis of Assam

Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1880, this organization demanded a separate territory for the plains tribals of Assam. To protect the interest of the tribal people in general and Bodos in particular it supported the line system in 1938 because they wanted to stop the influx of land-hungry people, money lenders, and traders to their territory. Before independence the Tribal League extended its support to both the Congress and Muslim League ministries in 1938 and 1939 respectively. On the other hand the Tribal Sangha was established as a socio-cultural organization though in its conferences held in 1965 and 1966, it demanded report on the tribal belts and block inquiry sub-committee. The demands of the Tribal Sangh were incorporated in the memorandum of Plains Tribal Council of Assam and submitted to the Central Government in 1967 (Bhattacharjee 1996: 203 & 257).

#### *Participation in the Sharecroppers' Movement of Assam*

Both Tribal League and Tribal Sangh became popular among the Bodos. But some of them joined the sharecroppers' movement of Assam in 1950s (Deka 1994). According to Bhupen Boro (1994), all communities of Assam joined the Revolutionary Communist Party

(RCP) of Assam, which was established by Saumendranath Thakur and Pannalal Dasgupta. Among the young and dedicated RCP leaders of Assam were Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Aniram Basumatory, Bipin Daimary, Prakash Basumatory, Samar Bramha Chaudhury, Rati Swargiary, Balo Basumaroty, Rajni Rabha, Sarat Rabha, Mohini Bramha and Sital Chandra Basumatory (Boro 1994: 34).

The Sharecroppers' Movement of Assam had the participation of a number of Bodo women (Basumatory 1994). Basanti Basumatory, Khope Basumatory, Rajni Swargiary, Ashwini Basumatory were some of the active women members of the RCP. They formed Nari Mukti Sangathan in some districts like Nalbari and Kamrup (Deka 1994 : 191-192). The movement for equal share of production and cultivable lands for landless peasants created a sensation among the peasants of Assam. The other demands were implementation of the land ceiling law, sharecroppers' protection law, settlement of seven hundred sharecroppers' families in the professional grazing reserves at Baska Mouza etc. The Bodo peasants of Mushalpur of district Nalbari launched a movement to open grazing reserves in Nalbari (Jopadong area) for the landless peasants

(Basumatory 1994 : 49-95). Sital Chandra Basumaroty (1994), one of the activists of that movement, recalled that village to village campaign by RCP members, regular meeting and discussion of their problems made the people aware of their rights. During the movement the RCP members also protested against preparation and consumption of country liquor. They organized a conference in 1953, which was held at Basugaon of Kokrajhar district. They were divided into two camps after the conference: one joined the electoral politics and another continued with the militant ideology. The members of the second group were believers in armed struggle. After this movement organizational activity of the RCP diminished and many of the supporters subsequently joined the PTCA.

#### *The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS)*

The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) was established in 1952. The necessity of such an organization was felt by government officials, social workers, and political leaders of the community (Narzary 1993: 1-38). According to R. N. Mosahary (1993), the BSS was founded by a handful of elite working in the government offices in Dhubri in 1950. They were members of the Bodo Literary Club in that region.

The students' organization called Boroni Onsai Aphant of Dhubri and BSS and this organization sought to develop the Bodo language (Mosahary 1993 : 340-347). An All India Conference of the Bodo leaders was held in Basugaon of Kokrajhar district on 15th and 16<sup>th</sup> November 1952. Social worker and parliamentarian Dharanidhar Basumatory chaired that conference. Thus the Bodo Sahitya Sabha was formed. The first president and secretary of the BSS were Joybhadra Hagjer and Sonaram Thousen respectively. A founder member of the BSS, Maniram Mosahary writes that "a decision at the national level for the preservation and promotion of the languages encouraged the educated Bodo people and leaders to take a decision for the preservation and promotion of Bodo language and this gave birth to Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The identity question of the Bodo people was discussed in this meeting and the role of language and education were taken as main points to be emphasized for the preservation of ethnic identity" (1993 : 15-30). Henceforth the BSS became the main forum for preservation of the Bodo literature, language and culture.

According to Mosahary this organization had a mushroom growth (1993 : 340-347). It took special initiatives for the preservation and promotion of the Bodo language and in 1961 demanded that the Bodo language be recognized as the medium of instruction on the primary level education in the Bodo dominated areas. Accordingly, a memorandum was submitted to the Chaliha Government in the same year.

The Praja Socialist Party, which was the largest opposition party in the then Assam Assembly, supported the demand of the BSS but some Bodo government officials and leaders were themselves opposed to this demand (Mosahary 1993 : 340-347).

Hence the Assam Government conducted a survey of those who were in favour of the Assamese and those who were in favour of the Bodo language. About 35 Bodo leaders were brought to Shillong to know their opinion in this matter. At that time the BSS received support of Bodo students who took all pains to convince the political leaders to speak in favour of the Bodo language (Mosahary 1993 : 1-13). Introduction of the Bodo language on middle and secondary

levels took a lot of time. The BSS also carried out some agitational programmes like procession, meetings, etc. in Guwahati and Kokrajhar. In this connection the BSS called a bandh on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1968. The Assam Government accepted the proposal of the BSS to introduce the Bodo language as medium of instruction officially on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1968 (Basumatory 1976 : 2-7).

The Bodo script movement was one of the longest movements of the BSS, which came to an end in 1993 with the Bodo Autonomous Council accepting the Roman script. This movement had several phases. The first phase (1952 - 1965) received 'Roman' 'Assamese' and 'Bengali' scripts for the development of Bodo language and literature. Narzary (1993) mentions that the Bodo language was first written by Rev. S. Endle in 1884. He used the Roman script. The first Bodo primer Kachari Reader was also written in the Roman script. Till 1963 Kachari Reader was used as Bodo primer in 40 odd schools of Goalpara. The Primary Education Department of Assam formally introduced the Bodo medium in the L.P. schools and approved Mokhojenmai as a Bodo primer, which was written in Assamese script. In the 7<sup>th</sup> annual session of the BSS held in 1965 the

Bodo Script Sub-Committee, Bodo Text Book Sub-Committee and Roman Script Implementation Sub-Committee were formed to settle the issue of the Bodo script.

In 1969 those committees decided to have the feedback from the people. Educationists and intellectuals were invited to share their opinion on this issue. A meeting was conducted in Belguri village near Rupahi Railway Station which was attended by a large number of Bodos. A resolution was taken in this meeting in favour of the Roman script (Narzary 1993 : 7-17). The Bodo Textbook Sub-committee and Roman Script Implementation Committee submitted a joint report to the BSS in 1971. They recommended Roman alphabets alongwith certain sounds of the Bodo language. These committees incorporated the letters 'W' and 'NG' instead of 'O' and 'N' used in Kachari Readers (ibid : 49-52). The then chief minister of Assam refused to approve Bodo textbooks in the Roman script when a delegation met him on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1971. The BSS conducted meeting in Kokrajhar and decided to continue the movement for the Roman script. As a result two memoranda were submitted to the successive chief ministers Mohendra Mohan Chaudhury and Sarat Chandra Sinha in 1971 and 1972. Neither of the two approved the Roman script for the



Bodo language. On the other hand the BSS decided to implement the Roman script at its Salbari session held on 3. 3. 1973.

This is a significant movement in Bodo history prior to the ABSU movement. This movement successfully involved the common people. The Roman script was declared as the Bodo script at the 15<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the BSS held in Khelmari, near Tezpur on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1974. The alleged apathy of the Assam government towards implementation of the Roman script resulted in some violence. This phase of the movement is referred to as the 'third phase' (Daimary 1984). According to Daimary, this phase started on 27<sup>th</sup> September and ended on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1974. In this phase, the Bodo volunteers come out in thousands and demonstrated in front of the sub-divisional and district head quarters of Goalpara, Bijni, Sidly, Udalguri, Kokrajhar, Gosaingaon, Tangla, Rowta, etc. A number of girl students joined them too (Daimary 1984 : 204-218). Fifteen of volunteers died in police firing and many more were arrested. On the request of the Assam Government the BSS called off the movement on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1974 and agreed for a discussion. Ultimately this problem was referred to the Central Government, which offered the Devanagari script. This phase of the movement came to an end when

the BSS accepted the Devnagari script at the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference in 1975. This decision was not welcomed by many and Ramdas Basumatory and Thaneswar Boro were accused (Daimary 1984 : 204-218, Narzary 1993 : 1-38). The issue of script was reopened by Upendranath Bramha in his charter of 92 demands and submitted the memorandum to the Governor of Assam in 1987. And in 1993 they implemented the Roman script once again.

The relentless efforts of the BSS made it a modern Indian language (MIL). At present this language is taught at Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities and certificate courses are offered at the postgraduate level and it is accepted as the second state language of Assam. The BSS received help of All Bodo Student's Union and Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) from 1967.

#### *Plains Tribal Council of Assam*

It was formed on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1967 in Kokrajhar sub-division. Padmashree Modaram Bramha, an eminent writer, chaired the meeting. Members of All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) took initiative to form this organization. Many Bodo teachers of schools

and colleges joined it later. Samar Bramha Choudhury, an activist of the RCP, was the founder president of it (Boro 1994 : 34). Despite the dominance of the Bodos it was named the Council of Plains Tribal of Assam. According to the first memorandum submitted to the President of India on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1967, the plains tribes were divided into two groups : (a) The Bodo group, and (b) The Miri or Mishing group. The Bodo group comprised Bodo Kachari, Hojai, Kachari, Sonowal, Lalung (Tiwa), Mech, Rabha, Barman Kachari, Deori, etc. (Datta 1993 : 122).

This memorandum highlighted the problems related to land and languages of tribes for which full autonomy was demanded for the tribal dominated areas. This movement was known as Udyachal movement. The northern side of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts and all tribal blocks of plains areas were identified by them (ibid : 139). The demand for an autonomous region was upgraded to a demand for union territory in 1973. In 1977 the leaders of PTCA retracted on their demand. Alliance of the PTCA with the Janata Dal in 1977 and the decision of the former to stop the Udyachal movement disappointed many PTCA members.

In 1979 PTCA split into two and the PTCA (P) was formed. The PTCA (P) organization submitted its first memorandum to the Home Minister of India on 9<sup>th</sup> July 1980 (Narzary 1983, Datta 1993:17). It continued with the demands raised by the PTCA except the name of the proposed territory. The PTCA (P) preferred the word 'Mishing Bodoland' and dropped the word Udyachal (Narzary 1983: 2). This organization sent delegations to the President of India, Prime Minister and other cabinet ministers in 1980. Members of delegations also met governors and chief ministers of the eastern Indian states and leaders of national political parties like the Congress (I), Communist Party of India (M), and the Janata Dal.

PTCA (P) submitted its last memorandum in 1983 to the then Prime Minister of India. It was dissolved in 1984 and a new organization named the United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF) was formed. It continued the same practice of sending memoranda to prime ministers. The demand for a union territory remained as before.

This organization sent five memoranda to the then prime minister between 1984 and 1986. The first memorandum included the evaluation report titled “The working of the Gaon Panchayat Level Co-operative Societies in the Sub-Plan areas” prepared by Tribal Research Institute of Assam and the report titled “The study on the displacement of Tribal due to the installation of major irrigation projects : the case study of Dhansiri project in the district of Darrang Assam” prepared by Tribal Research Institute of Assam. Its activities stopped in 1987 following the submission of its fifth memorandum to the Government of India. In this memorandum it declared its support to the ABSU (Datta 1993 : 119-255).

#### *AASU Movement and Women's Participation*

The six year long (1979-84) students' movement in Assam is generally referred to in Assamese as *Gona Andolon* or 'People's Agitation'. This movement is popularly known as the AASU movement. This movement was led by university students. On the roots of this movement Deka writes: “on the one hand the employment of immigrants at a much cheaper rate in the agricultural

fields, mines, and plantations has been looked upon by the local people as an economic deprivation, while on the other hand there is a fear of a demographic imbalance, encouraged by political leaders to amass their vote banks, which could impinge on socio-cultural fields as well” (1998: 109).

All Assam Students Union (AASU) was formed in 1967. The AASU movement gained momentum with the mass rally of November 6, 1979 in Guwahati. This movement was remarkable for women’s participation. Women were the moving force behind this movement (Barthakur and Goswami 1990 : 218). Putuli Kayastha, one of the active women activists of this movement, remarked that AASU leaders received enormous response from women. In any mass rally, *dharna* and procession women participants would not be less than 80 percent of the total participants. She further pointed out that all organizations of women participated. Besides <sup>two</sup> women’s organizations were established during the movement. They are Jagrita Mahila Parishad and Mula Gabharu. Barthakur and Goswami (1990) describe a *dharna* at midnight in front of Oil India in Guwahati where about 1500 men and women picketed to prevent crude oil from being

pumped out of the Bongaigaon and Barauni refineries (Barthakur and Goswami 1990: 221-222).

The above account of the antecedents of the Bodo movement shows that the Bodos have been struggling against the state power for almost one century. The issues have been apparently different in each such struggle but there was an underlying structure in all of them, which was a desire to carve out a safe niche for themselves. They wanted recognition of that they wanted for themselves whether it was a matter of language, script, autonomy, or religion. In their century-long bargain with the state, their women have silently supported the men. In the more recent past, the women's participation has been more visible than earlier. Hence, a favourable discourse for a bloody movement such as the Bodo Movement has been already created, bit by bit, over the past many years.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BODO MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the Bodo Movement, the latest in the series of the Bodo struggle against the state of Assam, and the participation of women in it. Chapter III has shown that women have participated, with varying degree, in many of the previous struggles of the Bodo people. Thus, their participation in the Bodo Movement is not something unprecedented or unexpected. What is not known much before are the details of the nature and magnitude of their participation what follows is an attempt to fill up this gap.



### *The Bodo Movement*

On 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1987, the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) called for a mass meeting in Kokrajhar. In this meeting the ABSU President Upendranath Bramha announced that ABSU was going to demand a union territory for the Bodos and other plains tribals on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra river. That meeting was followed by mass demonstrations in front of the District Commissioner and Subdivisional Collector's offices in different districts and a mammoth rally at the Judge's Field in Guwahati. All this stopped on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1993 with the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) between the Centre, the State Government and the ABSU-BPAC in Guwahati. The MoS envisaged formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) on the northern bank of river Brahmaputra (Mosahary 1993 : 1 & 32). This six years long ABSU movement is usually referred as the Bodoland Movement.

This movement has been analysed from different angles. Bhattacharjee (1996 : 84-138) states that movement for autonomy of the Bodos started in 1933 under the aegis of the Tribal League. The formation of 'Tribal League' is described by her as a bold attempt of

the tribal population of the plains of Assam (ibid : 85-86). Chaudhury (1994 : 4) identifies 1967 as the year of emergence of this movement, following the formation of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in that year. According to him the first memorandum of the PTCA given to the Prime Minister of India in 1967 marks the beginning of the demand for autonomy though the degree of autonomy was left unspecified.

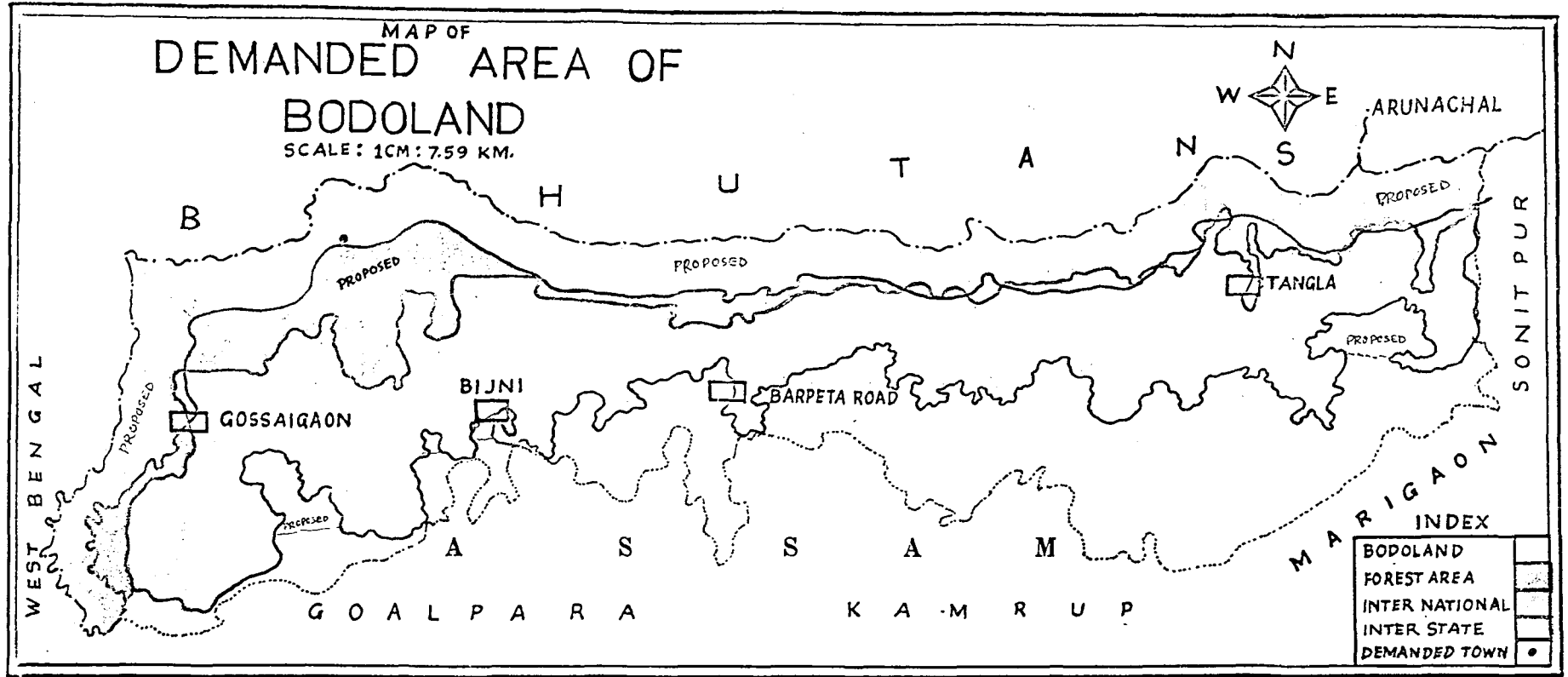
The decision of the ABSU to demand statehood in 1987 marked a new phase of the movement. The failures of the PTCA, PTCA (P) and UTNLF were recounted to justify its demand for Bodoland (ABSU 1987: 4-5). The women participants provided a different insight into the subject. According to them, there were a large number of protest rallies, meetings, *dharna* and *gheraos* by the PTCA, BSS and the ABSU. But the movement for the Roman script had left the most enduring impression on the women. That was the first time they came out of their homes and joined the movement. The All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) leaders like Malati Rani Narzary, Hirabari Narzary, Mira Rani Basumatory and some others actively participated in the BSS led movement for the

✓ 'Roman script' and some of them were arrested too. They were  
✓ school or college going students.

### *Nomenclature for the Homeland*

In the span of twenty years (1967-1987) the Bodo leaders proposed four different names for their state. They were; Udyachal, Mishong-Bodoland, Tribal Land, and Bodoland. According to Padmanath Bramha, an active member of BPAC and UTNLF, the name Udyachal was welcomed by the Bodo people but the PTCA (Progressive), which was formed in 1979, preferred the name 'Mishong-Bodoland'. According to Kanakeswar Narzary, the founder general secretary of ABSU, convener of the first meeting of the PTCA and the PTCA (P), and the present Chief Executive Member of Bodoland Autonomous Council the word 'Udyachal' is a 'false nomenclature' and did not represent the sentiment of the Mishong and Bodos.

With the coming of the UTNLF in 1984 a new name for their homeland called 'Tribal land' was suggested (ABSU 1987 : 18-19). But the ABSU discarded all the names and chose 'Bodoland'. This



MAP NO. 3

REPRODUCED FROM 'BOUNDARY PROBLEM OF BODOLAND AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL'  
PUBLISHED BY ABSU, 1996

was most acceptable to the people. Boundaries of their proposed homeland were Sankosh river on the west, Sadia on the east, Arunachal Pradesh on the north, and Brahmaputra river on the south covering a total area of 25,478 square kilometres (Paul 1989 : 61).

### *Issues of the Bodo Movement*

The issues raised in their first memorandum submitted to the President of India on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1967 were alienation, unemployment, exploitation, and preservation of tribal language, culture, customs, and traditions (Datta 1994 : 41-44). The memorandum contained seventeen chapters and eleven appendices. In its preface it is written: “The Plains Tribals Council of Assam, which has been constituted to secure justice on all matters, social, economic and political for the promotion and welfare of the scheduled tribes living in the plains districts of Assam” (see Bhattacharjee 1996 : 205 ).

Implementation of the Assamese language as the state language was opposed by the members of the PTCA who wanted Hindi to be implemented as their state language. Adequate facilities for

instruction in the mother tongue at the primary level of education were also demanded by them.

The failure of previous political organizations compelled the All Bodo Students' Union to take over the charge of the movement for separate state (ABSU 1987). It decided to launch a fresh movement at its 19<sup>th</sup> annual conference held in Rawta of Darrang district in 1986. This decision divided the ABSU into two groups. The ABSU (Upen) group led the ABSU movement while the ABSU (Ramchiary) group remained a PTCA supporter (Pathak 1995: 17-18). The ABSU (Upen) began its movement with the submission of a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1987. The issues of the 'Assamisation policy' of the Assam Government, anti-tribal attitude, repressive behaviour of the state government, exploitation by the non-tribal were raised in that memorandum. To justify the necessity of launching this movement it published two books. These are Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty (1987) and Why Separate State (1987). More than 50 questions are answered in the first book. The second book included 92 points of demands like technical institute, academic institute, medical institute, and solution of problems related to loans,

lands, grants, health, hygiene, electrification, communication, irrigation, poverty, etc. Other issues raised by it were identity crisis, nationality question of the Bodos, human rights, peace, and progress. Upendranath Bramha, the leader, told: "The problem of the Bodos and the demand and movement of the Bodos and other downtrodden plains tribal of Assam are nothing but a nationality issue" (ABSU 1987 : 59). There was no mention whatsoever of women's problem.

The Bodo movement was an organized movement from the beginning. The BSS worked in close collaboration with the ABSU and PTCA throughout the movement. All these organizations had units at various levels. The district and central level committees conducted their annual conferences. Such conferences were held in the Bodo dominated areas of Assam. Delegates elected all executive members of central committees including president and secretaries from the lower level units.

### *Women's Participation*

Prior to 1974 women's participation in the ABSU movement was negligible. It was more intense only after the movement for implementation of the Roman script launched in 1974.

Alo (pseudo name), one of the prominent AATWWF members, was a close associate of Upendranath Bramha and took active part in mobilizing people on the foreigners' issue. At that time the latter was a university student and the former a student of Kokrajhar college. During the AASU movement and latter had a regular interaction with the students' union of that college. The students of this college were his close associates who later became active participants of the ABSU movement.

The ABSU movement exhibited two contradictory trends very clearly: non-violent protests through organizing mass rallies, processions, protest rallies, hunger strike, road blockade, etc. and the other trend was violent in nature. The ABSU established a military wing (ABSU-VF) to conduct armed struggle. Dr. Phukan Chandra Bodo and, later Premsingh Bramha, were in-charge of this wing and



were designated as 'chairman'. They were both former executive members of the ABSU. The Bodo Volunteer Force actively participated in the movement from the beginning. It worked as an underground wing of the ABSU. Its protests were violent in nature which included bomb blasts at public places, dacoity to collect money and arms, firing on security personnel, etc. Its volunteers worked as soldiers for the Bodos during movement. In 1989, the ABSU and the VF leaders expressed the desire to train the women in arms. The women too wanted to join arms training and they did it. So, from 1989 onwards, women joined the Volunteer Force but they were not involved in 'direct action'. They were taught to use the rifle for their own safety. They were trained to carry messages and other necessary articles. Many girls from different areas received nursing training in the rural primary health centres. The idea of women joining the VF was not received well by some AATWWF members. This decision was criticized on the ground that they were doubtful about the marital future of such girls. Yet the ABSU and VF continued with their armed training to the women as well.

The following organizations were formed in 1986 and 1988. The All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was a women's organization while the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) was the people's wing of the ABSU (Mosahary 1993 : 1-13).

The AATWWF was formed under the direct initiative of the leaders like Upendranath Bramha, Sansuma Khungur Bwismithiary, Subhas Basumatary, and Deora Dekhereb Basumatary, of the ABSU. It is mentioned in the AATWWF's constitution: "It is considered expedient to form a federation of the women folk belonging to all tribal groups of entire Assam to unite themselves in a common platform through mutual understandings being imbibed in a common ideology with a view to fighting for ensuring rights and justice of the tribal women in the spheres of socio-economic, political, educational, cultural and for their emancipation from their socio-domestic drudgery and thereby to enable themselves in rendering services to the promotion welfare and preservation of the indigenous self identity of all tribal groups living in Assam" (AATWWF 1991 : 1). The aims and objectives of the AATWWF were formulated. Accordingly, social, ethnic and women issues of northeast Indian tribes were

highlighted (ibid : 6-9). But for the first six years it did not have its own programmes, instead it worked for the ABSU. One of the AATWWF members said: “We couldn’t concentrate in the programmes of AATWWF only because we were busy solving more urgent problems of our community. The duty that was performed by us was more urgent”.

The AATWWF changed its name to All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in 1993. The new name was more acceptable to them as all its members belonged to the Bodo community. But this also meant it was not received very well by the women of other tribal communities in Assam.

The Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC) was formed on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1988 in Suryakhata, district Kokrajhar. In this meeting Karendra Basumatary and Sansuma Khungur Bwismuthiary two former ABSU presidents were selected as Chairman and Chief Convener of the Committee. It was described as the people’s wing of the ABSU (Moshahary 1993 : 9). The BPAC had village and village council level committees like the ABSU and AATWWF had. Those

local committees played a significant role in inter-community affairs. Like the AATWWF, the BPAC Central Committee worked hand in hand with the ABSU. Most of the BPAC central committee members were erstwhile executive members of the ABSU. The BPAC was finally dissolved after the formation of Bodo Autonomous Council.

### *Women and Mobilization*

Mobilization groups were formed on different levels, members of which were drawn also from the AATWWF. The ABSU did not have access to all areas. For mobilization in some such areas it was dependent on the members of AATWWF. The Mushalpur area of Nalbari was one such area. Upendranath Bramha considered foot march as the best way to mobilise people and in the beginning of the movement mobilization was done through this medium. Upendranath Bramha himself had covered a vast area of Kokrajhar on foot. In all such programmes the AATWWF members had played a significant role.

### *Women and Leadership*

Not much is written on the leadership of the Bodo movement. Anil Boro writes that it is the movement of the middle class (1994 : 34-37). It is observed that most of the leaders and activists of the BSS, ABSU, PTCA, PTCA (P), and the UTNLF belong to educated families. They are teachers in schools and colleges, employees of government and semi-government organizations, banks, and private companies. Lawyers, artists, doctors, and naval officers were also found among the leaders.

Prior to the formation of the AATWWF there were hardly any women in leadership. The AATWWF was the first organization in which a large number of women participated. Among them were educated women in teaching profession.

The Bodo leaders came from different age groups. The leaders of organizations like the PTCA, PTCA (P), BSS and the UTNLF were of middle or old age. Before 1987, very few women leaders were there in these organizations. Upendranth Bramha and Sansuma Khungur Bwismuthiary were among those leaders who felt the

importance of women's participation. Bramha believed that a society cannot progress without the progress of women. During 1970s Kanakeswar Narzary travelled the northeastern states extensively and met many tribal leaders. From the letters written by Upendranath Bramha to Kanakeswar Narzary it appears that the former had close relations with Kanakeswar Narzary and his wife Hirabai Narzary. Upendranath Bramha was the main source of inspiration for Hirabai Narzary to join the movement. Pramila Rani Bramha, the first Bodo woman leader, was also greatly influenced by Upendranath Bramha and had close relation with him. Most of the early executive members of AATWWF were either related or known to the ABSU, BPAC, and the VF leaders.

### *Activities*

The most intense period of the Bodoland movement was for six years, from 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1987 to 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1993. During this period the ABSU carried out numerous activities. It published books, leaflets, etc. and submitted memoranda (Table 1). Its underground wing (VF) also carried out innumerable violent activities (Table 2). The movement was most intense in Kokrajhar. Many top leaders of

the movement were from this district. The movement also had a strong base in Darrang. The intensity of the movement is believed to be more or less same in these two districts (Mosahary 1993 :1-35).

Women of different age groups participated in the ABSU movement on village council, district and state levels in the form of processions, *dharnas*, *gheraos*, *rasta roko* and *rail roko* programmes. There also was organizational level participation of women. In this regard, Pramila Rani Bramha, the first woman leader of the Bodos, deserves a special mention. She started her political career as a close associate of Upendranath Bramha. She founded the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) just before the launching of the ABSU movement. Regarding the formation of AATWWF she said:

**Table 1 : Chronicle of Non-Violent Activities ( 1987-1993 )**

Sl. No.	Activities	Place of Occurrence	No. of hours
01.	Mass Rally	Kokrajhar, Guwahati, in all district head quarters and Sub-divisions	
02.	Mass Demonstration	Dispur, Guwahati, Delhi Boat Club	
03.	Protest Day	In Assam	48
04.	Mass religious prayer and oath taking	In all districts of Assam	
05.	Mass Hunger Strike	In all district head quarters and Dispur, Guwahati, Delhi	
07.	Tribal Area bandh	Tribal dominated areas of all districts of Assam	84
08.	District Bandh		36
09.	All Assam Bandh		1151 ( 1001 hrs bandh is not included here )
10.	Mass Crying for separate home land	Mushalur, Tamulpur, Odalguri, Kokrajhar, Pathakath	
11.	Rail Roko		48
12.	National Highway Bandh		48
13.	Cultural Rallies at Public Places	In all district headquarters and Deborgaon.	
14.	Meeting with the President of India	Delhi	
15.	Meeting with Prime Ministers of India	Delhi	
16.	Meeting with other Union Ministers	Do	
17.	Peace march on National highway	Kokrajhar, Nalbari.	
18.	Sending reports to Amnesty International on violation of human rights		
19.	Boycott of 42 <sup>nd</sup> Independent day	In the Bodo dominated areas	
20.	Press Conference	Guwahati, Delhi	
21.	Releasing books, leaflets, booklets, etc.	In Kokrajhar	
22.	Sitting for tripartite talk	Delhi, Guwahati.	
23.	All Party meeting	Guwahati	
24.	Organized workshop and exhibition	Deborgaon	
25.	Meeting with opposition leaders	Guwahati	
26.	Meeting with leaders of States	West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland, etc.	
27.	Organizing Seminars on Bodo problems	Deborgaon and in all other districts of Assam	
28.	Five days office Bandh		120
29.	Alternative 4 days bandh		1783

**Source:** A Chronology of Bodoland Movement, 1993



**Table 2 : Chronicling Violent Activities (1987-1993 )**

Sl. No.	Activities	Place of occurrence	Remarks
01.	Bomb blasts	In bus,train,police camp,villages, market place,cinema hall of Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Guwahati Railway Station,shops, etc.	83 times
02.	Killing of common People	Various places of Kokrajhar,Darrang, Nalbari,Barpeta	51 persons upto 9 <sup>th</sup> March, 1989
03.	Killing of security persons (Police, CRPF, etc.)	Various places of Kokrajhar,Darrang, Nalbari,Barpeta	40
04.	Killing of tea garden officials	In tea gardens	10
05.	Killing of teachers, leaders, professors, etc.	Kokrajhar and Darrang	07
06.	Decoity to collect money	Kokrajhar	03
07.	Burning	Buses,bridges , village houses, truck and Oil tankers in Kokrajhar,Darrang	79
08.	Bodo Volunteer Force members killed	Various places	74

**Source :** A Chronology of Bodoland Movement, 1993

“I have seen many protest movements since childhood such as the Udyachal and script movements. I never participated in those movements. I have seen how people were exploited and betrayed by the PTCA leaders. But I did not know how to get rid of such a situation. During 1980 my husband and I rented a house in Kokrajhar town. Upendranath Bramha was my next door neighbour. I was disappointed with our leaders as the PTCA leaders compromised

with the leaders of the ruling parties to fulfill their self-interest. Upendranath Bramha and I discussed the situation regularly. I felt the need to join those who were against their leaders. When the ABSU decided to launch a fresh movement in 1986 I was not sure what I should do. At that time I was requested to establish a women's welfare organization by Upendranath and Sansuma Khungur Bwismuthiary. Accordingly, on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1986, a meeting was convened at Deborgaon High School of Kokrajhar and the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation was established" (Pramila, dated 8.12.97, MLA Hostel, Dispur, Assam).

The convener and founder secretary of AATWWF, Malati Rani Narzary, had joined various protest rallies, picketing, etc. since her teenage. She had also participated in the Udyachal movement. As an executive member of the ABSU she had also participated in the Roman Script Movement. According to her, growing atrocities on the Bodo women provoked her to establish a women's organization. Her brother, an executive member of the ABSU central committee from the beginning, told me that the Bodo women were not involved in any organizational activities earlier. Those who were involved

during college days mostly discontinued afterwards. Malati Rani Narzary, who was a neighbour of Sansuma, was a different kind of person. She was a very courageous lady. She had participated in different activities of the PTCA, ABSU, PTCA (P) and the UTNLF and the BSS. She was also the founder secretary of the Plains Tribal Women's Welfare Association. She was requested by Sansuma to establish an active organization for women.

The first meeting of the AATWWF was held on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1996. It was attended by women like Kamali Rani Basumatory of Darrang district, Latika Hajoary and Meera Basumatory of Goalpara district, Umarani Basumatory, Hira Rani Bramha, Supriya Rani Bramha, Malati Rani Narzary and many others from Kokrajhar district. They were all related to the ABSU leaders in one way or the other.

An executive member of the ATTWWF Central Committee once said: "All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was established in 1986. The initiative was taken by Upendranath Bramha and Sansuma Khungur Bwismuthiary. The women of Kokrajhar, Darrang and Goalpara districts were present in

the meeting of 14<sup>th</sup> July 1986 where the AATWWF was formed. The aim of this Federation was to organize the tribal women for the welfare of the tribal people. Pramila Rani Bramha has made remarkable contribution towards this. She was the founder president of AATWWF. Maloti Rani Narzary was Convener of that meeting. Ansula Gowda Bodosa, an active leader of the ABSU, took me to that meeting. He was from my district and knew me” (Mili, (pseudo name) dated 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1997, Dudhnoi, Goalpara).

To quote her further: “I was assigned to form the Gopalpara district committee of the AATWWF. So I called a meeting at Dudhnoi High School, Dudhnoi, in August 1986. I was instructed to invite the women of all tribal communities of the district. Mahat Chandra Hajoary, a retired head master of that school, helped me a lot. He inspired me to do this job. About two hundred women belonging to Garo, Boro, and Rabha communities attended the meeting. Anandibala Rabha, former MLA, was also invited to that meeting. In this meeting I was selected its president and Bishnupriya Khakhalary, its secretary”.

Kamala (pseudo name), one of the founder members of AATWWF and a resident of Darrang, adds: “Before the establishment of AATWWF Darrang District Committee (AATWWF,DDC) a meeting was held in Khairabari School of Darrang on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1986 which continued till the next day. Prior to this meeting, Maheswar Basumatory, the then secretary of the ABSU, Darrang District Committee, had met me at home and requested me to attend this meeting. The necessity of a women’s organization in the Bodo society was discussed then. Next morning the ABSU leaders announced that they were launching a fresh movement for separate state and solicited women’s participation. We, the educated ones, were especially requested to take charge of the rural women during the movement”.

Ahana (pseudo name), another participant, recalled: “On the 20<sup>th</sup> August 1986, a meeting was held in Khairabari. Some of the women present there were: Pratima Kochary, Malati Doimary, Rita Basumatory, Junu Doimary, and Sunali Doimary. Late Tankeswar Boro, the brother of Baliram Boro, the MLA, and Nowa Narzary invited me to attend this meeting. The meeting started at 2 p. m.

Maheswar Basumatory, Khagen Basumatory and Debnor Basumatory were the speakers. They highlighted the necessity of a women's organization. In their own words "Generally the Bodo women are backward. So, it is difficult to approach and organize them. This task has to be done by educated 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 in society. I started thinking that I was also a responsible member of my community. Being a woman I could not ignore the responsibilities of my society. In this meeting Kamala (pseudo name) and Ramala (pseudo name) were selected as president and secretary respectively of the AATWWF-DDC."

Formation of the AATWWF was not smooth everywhere in the Bodo dominated areas. In Nalbari district, it took two years to be formed. It was established on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1988. On behalf of the ABSU Kamala Kanta Lahiri, Manoranjan Swargiary, and Girin Bramha of Mushalpur area took initiative to inform the women of the area. The first meeting was held in Kumarikata village under Tamulpur. Sonaram Bargalary, an executive member of the ABSU

Central Committee, attended that meeting. The following girls participated in this meeting, viz., Giribala Bramha, Guneswari Bramha, Joymoti Basumatory, Ila Basumatory, Anupama Gayary, Padma Basumatory, Manju Bramha, and Dulu Bramha. Giri Bramha of Pub Bangnabari was selected as its president and Guneswari Bramha of Dihira village, Nikashi subdivision, as its secretary. Nikashi subdivision was a strong base of the ABSU since the beginning of the movement.

#### *Women's Organizational Role*

The AATWWF members had remarkable contribution to organizing the people during the movement. In the beginning 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) problem of alcoholism in family and society (vii) bad effects of polygamy, etc.

According to the AATWWF members there were some evil practices in their society which impeded to women's progress. One

such practice was addiction of males to country liquor. Such addiction resulted in many unwanted incidents in villages. Wife beating was a regular phenomenon. Polygamy was also in practice. Before the ABSU movement second marriages by the men were not a social offence. Durga (pseudo name), an active founder member of the AATWWF and a resident of Beltala, Guwahati, says that her father had five wives. His youngest wife belonged to the age group of his children. It was a normal practice of the rich men in those days.

The activities of educated women received wide appreciation of the rural people. They helped the rural woman in many ways. A few experiences of the women participants are presented here which reflect the internal dynamics of the movement. Rupasi (pseudo name) and Sumita (pseudo name), two founder members of AATWWF, Kokrajhar District Committee, told me that in many villages and village councils the AATWWF members conducted meetings and formed committees.



According to Mili (pseudo name): “When the ABSU initiated the movement for a separate state, the PTCA supporters did not like it. So, Kokrajhar, Nalbari and Barpeta where PTCA supporters were numerous frequent clashes took place. The members of the AATWWF played mother’s role at that time. According to Banani (pseudo name) and Mani (pseudo name) of Kokrajhar, the members of the AATWWF maintained peace during the clashes between the ABSU and the PTCA supporters. To quote her again: “We, the AATWWF members, wanted to stand as a guardian organization of the Bodo people. 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. They were all demanding a state for our community. So, they are not committing any crime. They are sacrificing their life for us. So we have to help them”.

During the movement the policemen and the army personnel entered villages in search of the ABSU activists, but they often targeted the women. According to the women activists, most policemen had the habit of stealing valuable things like watch, radio, torch light, etc. To stop such activities and to protect women from

various atrocities, the AATWWF members took some measures. The village women were advised to stay in-groups during any police or army operations. They were told to follow the search parties boldly at each step and see that nobody stole anything from the houses. They were trained to handle the cases of molestation or rape. They were told to bring victims to the nearest and reliable doctors for medical examination so that filing of the FIR would be easy. They were instructed not to put any medicine on any physical injury caused by the police or army personnel. At the same time they were asked not to hide such incidents of torture.

In the beginning of the ABSU movement Nalbari was in tumultuous situation. Incidents of arson and clashes between the PTCA and ABSU supporters were frequent in 1987-88. The Nalbari District Committee of AATWWF devoted much of their time to resolve the misunderstanding between two groups. Until then the ABSU supporters had no access to some of the places in this district where the AATWWF members came to the rescue of the ABSU.

During the movement, the AATWWF members were also assigned the job of supplying or cooking food for the ABSU members. The ABSU Volunteer Force members always moved in groups and never stayed in one place. It was the duty of the subdivision level members of the AATWWF to keep constant contact with them wherever they stayed for the night. However, staying in those camps during night was prohibited for the women. According to Binita (pseudo name), the ABSU members depended a lot on AATWWF members for organizing people and keeping communication between common people and the ABSU members.

The AATWWF members of all the three districts were aged around twenty years. Most of them were pre-university or college students and unmarried. Many of them were either sisters or relatives of the ABSU activists. They laid the foundation of mass participation of the women in the ABSU movement.

There was some difference in the age group of the district/subdivision level committee members and the central committee members. The formers were of early age group (18-25 years) and

most of them were unmarried. Most of the central committee members were married and mothers of at least two to three children. Majority of them were teachers, too.

### *Complexity of Women's Participation*

While some women delivered speeches in public meetings others were engaged in refreshment and reception committees arranging food, water, etc. Cooking food for the guests was one of their regular duties during the movement. Most of the women of Balagaon and Rangalikhata villages of Deborgaon did not get time to listen to their leaders due to such engagements. They had to perform such duties at the back side of the stage. Before any meeting at Deborgaon the ABSU instructed the Deborgaon Village council Committee members of AATWWF to take care of everything. Their works ranged from collecting paddy, pulses and vegetables from each house, cleaning them, cooking for participants as well as guests at home, who could be participating in such meetings, cooking for leaders like Premsing Bramha and Upendranath Bramha.

**Table 3 : 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
	f. 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. Work 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.

Table 3 on the activities of women concerning meetings and the Table 4 on their other activities show that they worked side by side with the men activists during movement.

Every AATWWF member made a monthly contribution of Rs. 5/-. Each village council committee collected Rs. 2000/- every year and submitted <sup>it to</sup> its district committee. The AATWWF members also collected clothes and distributed them to the riot victims who took shelter in different camps. In the executive meeting of the DDC AATWWF, held on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1989, a decision was taken to distribute *aronai* to each member of the Bodo Volunteer Force. Accordingly, all village council committees of the AATWWF of Darrang district were directed to weave *aronai* for the male activists. This was according to an old custom of the Bodos, which desires that the Bodo men going to the war should wear *aronai* to protect themselves from all evils and to win the battle. The *aronai* which the Bodo soldiers wore in the battlefield were woven by a close relative such as sister or wife. Furthermore, those *aronais* were woven on the night before they left for the battlefield. Preparation of threads, patterns, and all

other works related to weaving had to be done within a single night and the same was to be presented in a sacred function.

**Table 4 : 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 gherao / Dharna programmes	2	5	3
8. Taking part in gherao 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 arrested by Police/in Jail /in hospital	5	5	4
12. Accompanying AATWWF members to the police station for any work related to arrest of common people	4	27	4
13. Going to submit representation	19	12	3

Source : Fieldwork 1996.

This custom was revived during the Bodo movement with slight modification. Instead of kin members village council committee members of the AATWWF wove the same. The women who wove it had to first take bath. According to the custom they did not even talk while weaving. It was presented to the ABSU activists (. VF) at the *Bathou Thangsali* (the altar for *Bathou*) of respective village councils.

The ritual was directed by the priest of respective *Bathousali*. All the activists took bath before going to *Thangsali* and wore clean clothes. After that the women tugged the *aronai* around the waist of the male activists. This was how the AATWWF members boosted up the morale of the ABSU (. VF) members. The women members also did confidential errands, carried money and other things from one place to other. In case of sudden police/army raids in any village they rushed to protect the innocent villagers. In case an innocent person was arrested they forced them to release him/her. They were instrumental in minimising atrocities on women by armed forces. The Bhumka rape case of Khokrajhar was successfully handled by them and the culprits were punished. On 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> January 1988, the women of Bhumka area of Kokrajhar were raped repeatedly by



the police force personnel. The AATWWF members came to know of that incident on 28<sup>th</sup> January and brought the victims to Kokrajhar district court where they registered their appeal and everybody in the court saw the condition of the victims. Their clothes were full of blood. Some of them had received bullet injuries. Moreover the then government tried to suppress these news. They did not take action against the police. After learning about it, the then Chief Justice of the Guwahati High Court, G. M. Lodha invited the petitioners to submit an affidavit on the Bhumka rape case. On behalf of the victims the AATWWF took the initiative and submitted an affidavit to the High Court. Many other women organizations like YWCA, Nari Mukti Sangathana, and Pradesh Mahila Congress Samiti supported the AATWWF in organizing a protest rally at Guwahati judge field. On the basis of their appeal Mr. Justice G. M. Lodha and Mr. Justice J. Sangma jointly gave a 22 page judgment on 14. 3. 1988. The AATWWF members handled such cases successfully in other districts as well.

### *Gherao/Dharna*

The AATWWF members of Mushalpur, Nalbari district, organized a procession against the arrest of innocent people in the month of May 1989. Several *gheraos* were organized by them during 1989-91 (see Table 4). In all such cases they compelled the authorities to release those who were arrested from the villages during police raids. The women of Pub Bangnabari village went to the police station for the first time in May 1989 when Bagadhar Narzary was arrested. He was an ex-military personnel and a resident of Guwahati. He had gone to Pub Bangnabari village to see his mother. On that particular day he went to the local bank where he was arrested. The police department alleged that he was imparting military training to the members of the ABSU Volunteer Force. Hearing it some villager went to the police station but the policemen detained them too. At last the women of this village went there and gheraoed it. The police officer-in-charge was compelled to release him and other other villagers. In August, 1989 they went to the police station once again to get one Charan Narzary of the same village released. He was a cultivator and resident of this village. These incidents took place before the formation of the AATWWF.

Babli (pseudo name), an active member of Nalbari District Committee AATWWF, recalls that in June 1989 some villagers of Shantipur, Mushalpur subdivision, were arrested following the bandh called by the ABSU. After this incident one part of this village was set ablaze and a camera was snatched from a journalist when he went to the village to cover the same. In June 1990 almost 1000 women gheraod the Mushalpur and Borbori police stations for the release of eight innocent villagers of Pub Bangnabari. These women came from the villages like Kathailgaon, Choibari, Berlabari, Lamidara, Bathoupuri, Bwerimukh, Thakuchup, and Khwrabari of Mushalpur subdivision. At first they went to Mushalpur outpost where they compelled the policemen to release three villagers. After that they proceeded to Borbori police station which was eight kilometres away from Mushalpur. According to some women informants the Bodo men were targets of the armed forces. Under such situation, they acted as custodians of the villagers and their properties.

In 1989, one Vijan Narzary of Navingaon village, Kokrajhar district was standing in front of his house when some policemen went and arrested him. His family members and other villagers of this

village gheraoed the police station and compelled the policemen there to release him.

According to Usha, the granddaughter of Gurudev Kalicharan Bramha, a few fishermen were arrested on May 12, 1988 from Jomduar village beside Sankosh river of Kokrajhar. That was a market day and the fishermen were taken to Saraibill police station. The news of their arrest quickly reached the Saraibill bazar. The people rushed to the police station to see whether the arrested persons were their family members or not. But the policemen opened fire and two women died on the spot. Some others were injured. Most of the victims were women. After this incident Usha organized the women and Anganwadi workers of nearby villages. They met the District Magistrate of Kokrajhar, submitted a memorandum to him and demanded compensation of Rs. 1 lakh for deceased family and Rs. 50,000 for the injured persons. ✓

#### *Women in Bodo Volunteer Force*

The Bodo Volunteer Force was the military wing of the ABSU. This Force required messengers to carry secret messages. Many

AATWWF members of different village councils and district committees were involved in this job. They were trained to perform this job. In 1989, one of the AATWWF members was sent by the ABSU President, Upendranath Bramha, to the ABSU VF chairman Premsing Bramha. She travelled all the way from Kokrajhar town by train and bus and reached a village situated in the border of West Bengal and Assam. She went back with a message from the ABSU-VF Chairman and passed that to the ABSU president.

Carrying money for ABSU was also a part of their job. A few girls of Nalbari district twice carried one lakh of rupees with them and handed the same to the ABSU members at a guest house located in Guwahati.

Sometimes they also had to accompany the ABSU leaders. Once Asha (pseudo name), Poli (pseudo name), and Nila (pseudo name) accompanied Urkhao Basumatory, a leader of the ABSU, from Pub Bangnabari to Salbari village of Barpeta. One member of that team was Chilagang Basumatory. It was a marriage season and they

introduced themselves as members of a marriage party and Urkhao as the bridegroom to the policemen at the checkpoints.

### *Nursing Training*

Some Bodo girls were given nursing training by doctors in different primary health centres. During 1989-90, not less than 30 to 40 girls from each village council received nursing training. Out of 170 informants, there were around twenty women who said that they received nursing training. The informants of Darrang district, who received nursing training stayed at Kapurpura village of Darrang for three months in 1989. The training was based on courses, which are actually given to the nurses. The course was as follows:

- (i) First aid : learning to the bandages on different parts of the body, stop bleeding, take out bullets from any parts of body, operation in case of bullet injuries.
- (ii) Pharmaceutical training was also provided. They were taught to identify the causes of disease, nature of treatment and the names of medicines used for diseases like gastroenteritis,

diahorrea, fever, viral infection, acute allergy, bedsore, malaria, general weakness, and jaundice.

- (iii) Training was given to handle the burn cases.
- (iv) Training was provided to manage the patients suffering from psychological disorders such as insomnia.
- (v) Advance first aid training was given on different types of bullet injuries and proper treatment of wounds in case of profuse bleeding, removal of bullets and treatment. The whole management of operation, treatment of old bullet injuries, fracture, sprain bleeding, unconsciousness, vomiting, acute pain, burning, muscular pain, glandularia, etc. was taught. Use and function of different surgical instruments, techniques of pushing saline water, etc. were also taught.
- (vi) Basic knowledge on human anatomy was also taught to them.

They held practical classes and they had to nurse a patient of acute burn and other patients during their stay at Kapurpura. The girls attended the classes regularly. The classes were held on topics like 'Women's Role in the Bodo National Movement', 'Aims and Objectives of Bodo Movement', and 'Women Roles in Different Phases of Movement'. They were taught to explain the ABSU's role to the children as well.

The aim of such a training was to help the ABSU and ABSU VF activists in 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. One of the AATWWF leaders, who was the head of a nursing team in Kokrajhar, told that during peak years of the movement (1989-1991) most doctors left their jobs and the primary health centres of Bodo dominated areas were deserted. Even medicine was not available. At that time the trained girls were helpful to the villagers. Apart from nursing the activists they performed duties of doctors. In the villages these girls were doctors



cum pharmacists. Some of them showed considerable efficiency in nursing activities including operations.

From 1989 onwards girls began to receive training in the use of firearms. Such training was given in the remote villages of Bodo dominated areas. The aim of such training was to provide some measures for their safety. There was no plan to bring them to armed action. But they were told that if situation so demanded they would be called in.

Most of the times the ABSU VF members were on the move. Usually they moved in small groups. It was the duty of the AATWWF members to arrange food for them. Sometimes the AATWWF members went to hideouts to prepare food for them. The VF members entered villages during night. They spread themselves to various houses at the time of food for the advantage of logistics as well as <sup>to</sup><sub>λ</sub> avoid being all arrested together.

### *Role of AATWWF in Dispute Resolution*

The village political organization became defunct during the movement. The people consulted the ABSU and AATWWF members to solve any conflict in their villages. Most disputes were related to extra-marital affairs. One such case was between Daokha and Panilam of Deborgaon, Kokrajhar. Panilam married Daokha's wife's sister. His wife appealed to the AATWWF for justice. In the meeting held by the AATWWF to resolve this dispute the ABSU members were also present. The ABSU activists criticized Daokha and labelled her as a woman of 'corrupted moral character'. Rapasi (pseudo name), the president of AATWWF's Deborgaon Committee, criticized the comments of the ABSU activists and argued that Daokha might have been morally corrupt woman but by marrying her sister even Panilam showed a corrupt behaviour. Her argument disappointed the ABSU activists and Panilam was forced to give money to his wife. One other case was Sukur Sing Basumatory versus Somaisree Mosahary of Kashikotra village, Kokrajhar. Somaisree was the fiancée of Sukursing. They were known to each other for many years. But when Sukur Singh married Kalyani Bramha, Somaisree sought the help of the AATWWF for justice.

After a long discussion with the three persons involved and the neighbours, the AATWWF instructed Sukursing to give Rs. 20,000/- as compensation or penalty to Somaisree.

According to Rapasi (pseudo name) polygyny was not an offense in the Bodo society until recently. The AATWWF members vehemently opposed this practice and tried to eradicate it. For this the Bodo women are grateful to the AATWWF members.

### *Seminars*

The AATWWF organized many seminars during the movement. They were mostly one-day seminars and the common theme was 'women'. A rough list of seminars organized by it is given in Table 5. Apart from the local educationists the executive members of AATWWF were regular speakers in such seminars. The programme of the seminar and the theme were planned by the central committee members. The lectures were delivered in the Bodo language.

**Table 5 : List of AATWWF Organised Seminars During the Bodo Movement**

Sl. No	Topic of the Seminar	Place	Date	Organised by
1.	The role of Bodo movement in building of Bodo nationality	Totlapara, Bhergaon of Darrang	04-12-89	DDC AATWWF
2.	The role of Bodo women in the Bodo movement	Khariabari, Arampara L. P. School of Darrang	18-10-91	DDC AATWWF
3.	The role of Bodo women in the Bodo movement	Bishnu Rabha High School field, Orang of Darrang	20-10-91	DDC AATWWF
4.	Awjou Maharini Jowgathini Bagdi Sawainay farbioi bihangmorono	Dihira village, Nikisha of Nalbari	27-10-91	NDC AATWWF

**Source:** Minutes of different executive meetings of DDC and NDC, AATWWF, 1989-91.

The intensity of women's participation is understandable from the theme of seminars and speeches (see Table 6). None of the previous movements demanded women's participation so clearly and deliberately.

**Table 6 : List of Speeches Delivered by AATWWF Activists in Different Seminars**

Sl. No.	Topics	Speakers	Place	Date
01.	The role of Bodo women in building a great Bodo nationality through long term struggle	Latika Hajoary, Executive Member of AATWWF	Khirabari Arampara L.P.School Darrang	18-10-91
02.	The role of Bodo women for long term struggle for the creation of the Bodo land	Kamali Basumatory, Executive member of AATWWF	-do-	-do-
03.	The role of Bodo women in social reform	Rishimon Boro, Head Master, Olumber High School Darrang	-do-	-do-
04.	Importance of social and formal higher education for women	Manturam Basumatory	Bishnu Rabha L.P. School Orang, Darrang	20-10-91
05.	The role of Bodo women in building great Bodo nationality through long term struggle	Supriya Rani Brahma, Executive Member of AATWWF	-do-	-do-
06.	The role of the Bodo women in social reform	Latika Hajoary	-do-	-do-
07.	The role of the Bodo women in the present movement	Kamali Rani Basumatory	Pakhribari L.P. School, Odalguri Darrang	31-10-91

**Source :** Minutes of the meeting DDC/AATWWF , 1989-91

### *Literary Activities of Bodo Women During the Movement*

Songdan, the first magazine of Bodo women by Bodo women and for Bodo women, was published in 1991 by the AATWWF. The magazine called Raikhmuthi was published in the same year. These magazines were published once in a year and women related issues were of primary concern to them though they also published other

writings of women. The editorial board members were mostly women though the writers were not necessarily women. Many renowned Bodo intellectuals, poets, ABSU activists, etc. wrote on women related issues in those magazines. Those articles discussed the contribution of women to upliftment of the Bodos, involvement of the Bodo women in politics, women's contribution to the development of Bodo society, etc. The second issue of Songdan published articles on Aung San Suu Kyi, the winner of the Nobel peace prize in 1991, and also on women's role in the French revolution.

Almost all the executive members of the AATWWF central committee wrote on various aspects during the movement. Special mention may here be made of Bina Bala Gayary of Subankhata village, who published a book of poems. Others are Romela Islary, the first editor of Raikhmuthi, Latika Hajary, Mira Rani Basumatory, and so on. They all wrote in the Bodo language. There were some other women who wrote in Assamese or English. Anupama Basumatory is one such writer and her poetry collection Rupali Nadir Ghat (The *ghat* of silver river) received a lot of

appreciation. A translation of one of her poems written during the movement is reproduced here:

"Oh my beloved friend;  
you who share my sorrows  
The companion of my search for beauty  
And worshiper of an afflicted heart;  
had you also stood  
Like that pine tree  
In the plains of life -  
Ignoring the chill of the snow  
Transgressing the fury of the storm.  
Bearing the agony of my injury  
Remaining firm, tall, majestic and unruffled!"

(From the poem titled 'like a Pine tree' 1998:113)

### *Conventions and Conferences*

The AATWWF organised some conferences and conventions which are shown in Table 7. The conferences were held in a gap of two years when new committees were formed. And conventions were held in alternate years. Reception committee was formed before holding conferences and conventions. Such committees were usually formed with the local members though some central committee

members were also incorporated. The number of delegates and observers was decided by the members of both the reception committee and AAWTTF members. There were two types of sessions in conferences and conventions. One was open session and the other was delegates' session. The open session was open to all Bodos and non-Bodos whereas delegate sessions were closed door sessions and restricted to the delegates only. The delegates selected the executive members of central committee in such sessions. The general secretaries of various sections submitted annual reports in delegate sessions. Important resolutions adopted in the delegate sessions were read out in the open sessions. Usually conferences continued for 3 days. Scholars in different fields were invited to open sessions or delivering lectures. Cultural programmes were part of everyday programme. These conferences and conventions were mainly organised and participated by women.



**Table 7 : List of Conferences and Conventions of AATWWF'**

Date	Place	Conferences	Conventions
12-02-87	Deborgaon H.S. School ,Kokrajhar		1 <sup>st</sup> Convention
27-02-88	Subaijhar High School,Bijni	1 <sup>st</sup> Conference	
29-12-88	Khara Club,Dudhnoi ,Goalpara		2 <sup>nd</sup> Convention
11-12-89	Deborgaon H.S. School,Kokrajhar		3 <sup>rd</sup> Convention
14-02-91	Langhin Tiniali Karbi Arlong	2 <sup>nd</sup> Conference	
07-07-91	Bansbari		Special Convention
18-10-92	Baghmara H.S. School,Nalbari		5 <sup>th</sup> Convention
06-11-93	Tamulpur H.S. School , Nalbari	3 <sup>rd</sup> Conference	
20-10-95	North Guwahati College,Guwahati	4 <sup>th</sup> Conference	

**Source :** Hirabai Narzary (Secretary ABWWF).

The AATWWF was renamed as All Bodo Women's Welfare federation (ABWWF) at the Tamulpur conference held in 1993. The delegates proposed the organisation's new name and it was accepted.

*Excerpts from the Interview with Pramila Rani Brahma*

"Which language will I speak in" O.K., I will speak in Assamese. Apart from the Bodo language which is my mother tongue I can express myself comfortably in Assamese.

"I was born in a village called Balagaon. I don't know the exact date of birth nor do my parents know. But they often tell a story about an earthquake from which I guess that I was born in 1950. Further, I guess that the month was March. My mother, Thageswari

Brahma, was born in an adjacent village of Deborgaon. My grand father Dilip Narayan Brahma, was an illiterate peasant. He thought that going to school was a wastage of time. My father never followed his father's ideas. He was a favourite student of one of his school teachers. I cannot remember that teacher's name at this moment. He took all responsibilities of my father's school education and as a result my father was able to study upto class X. When he was in class X, his mother fell seriously ill and she died after a few days. This incident stopped my father's study and he was asked to plough the fields. My father never liked ploughing. So he joined the police service which too was not the right choice for him. That was a period of freedom struggle. The freedom fighters were treated as enemies by the British and were badly beaten up by policemen. My father could not bear such brutal treatment by the policemen and soon he left the job".

"I was a small child when he left his job. Our economic condition was better after he started timber business. Hence I did not have any experience of financial crisis during my school and college days though my elder brother and sisters faced it during their

childhood. Among seven children I am the fourth. My eldest brother is the headmaster in a lower primary school. The second, a sister, is a school teacher in a lower primary school. The brother, who is just elder to me, is an officer in the Education Department. Another brother, next to me, is a doctor. Next is a sister who is also a teacher of a high school and the youngest is a brother who is a businessman”.

“I received my primary education in Deborgaon Primary School. I studied there upto class VIII. Among his seven children I was the most favourite of my father. I started assisting my mother in household work at an early age. I used to work in our agricultural field too. I did all kinds of works like sowing, harvesting, husking the paddy in *dhenki* (husking machine), cleaning and any other works related to jute cultivation. My father did not like my doing all this. So he took me to Kokrajhar and admitted me to a school there. I passed the school final in 2<sup>nd</sup> division. I wanted to join a college in Guwahati. But he did not approve it. He thought that I might be a bad girl if I live alone in Guwahati. At that time I was very young so he was over protective about me. I did my graduation with honours

in Political Science from Kokrajhar College in 1972 and took admission to post-graduate class at Gauhati University. During my school and college days I was addicted to reading novels and historical writings. A novel was enough to engage me for a day. I forgot every other work once I sat to read a novel. I read many Bengali novels as well. I had the habit of writing short stories. I also participated in the college sports regularly but my father never allowed me to participate in sports and games beyond the college campus. In college, I used to mix up with every body. Among the friends there were more boys than girls. I got married just after my graduation. My husband was one year senior to me in college. Both of us liked reading novels. He also encouraged me to write short stories. I joined the post-graduate classes after my marriage. I attended classes for three months. Unfortunately I had to return home after three months because we were told to vacate hostels when the Assamese language movement started in 1972. I joined my parents-in-law after coming back. I felt that my in-laws were not interested in my higher studies. In 1973 I joined Symborgaon High School as an assistant teacher. This school was 12 kilometres from

Kokrajhar town and I was there for one year only. Then I joined Kokrajhar High School”.

“I was involved in the works of AATWWF and ABSU when I was a resident of Kokrajhar town and mother of three children. My husband always co-operated me. Earlier he was in service but at present he stays at home and looks after our children. He is also a writer. My daily routine has thoroughly changed after 1986. For that I have full cooperation of my family members. My father was a supporter of the PTCA. He picked up a quarrel with me once when he came to know that I was working for AATWWF and ABSU. My mother supported me because I used to tell her many things. But I never discussed anything with my father, as he was a strong supporter of PTCA. I tried to convince him about the ABSU movement but he was unwilling to listen to me. Meanwhile he met Upendranath Brahma at my home. It was a conversation of half an hour after which he was thoroughly convinced”.

In 1991, I contested for the post of Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) as an independent candidate. I was elected from

Kokrajhar town constituency and in next assembly election I was re-elected from the same constituency. The decision of joining politics was not my personal decision. I never thought of it before, not even in my dreams. In 1993, the Bodo Autonomous Council was established. But the Council could not give any satisfaction to the people, leave alone the women. I joined with the idea that I would be able to do something for all of them.

The above account of Pramila Rani Brahma, one of the most notable Bodo women leader that the Bodo movement has produced, leaves certain lessons. One, the humble background of her family was no obstacle to her in the field of politics. Two, the patriarchy was quite intimidating for her but that could neither take her away from educational pursuits nor distract her from supporting an organization that was disliked by her father. Third, and perhaps most important, it shows the limitation as well as opportunities that a woman normally encounters in her life, both before and after marriage.

The women participation in the Bodo movement should be appreciated keeping in mind cases such as the one discussed here. What the men expect of them or what they expect of themselves is rarely fulfilled because the society is not yet ready to concede them a corner of its public domain. Politics, governance, movement, etc. are men's domain in the worldview of the Bodos as it is so with very many other communities in India. If the men need the women to participate in a movement it is still within the extended domestic domain which includes cooking food for the male activists, weaving *aronani* and offering it to the males, nursing them if they are injured, and the like.

## CONCLUSION

The Bodos constitute one of the largest tribal communities belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. They live along with the Assamese, Koch, Rabha, Chutia and the Bengalee communities. Their concentration is mostly found on the northern bank of the river Bramhaputra. In earlier literature this community was referred to as 'Kachari'. Grierson (1903: 1-2) has used the word 'Bodo' to refer to a linguistic group under Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and all the communities mentioned below were incorporated into that family. These are Borokachari, Sonowal Kachari, Tiwa, Rabha, Dimasa, and Tippera. The twentieth century literature has used the word 'Bodo' and 'Kachari' interchangeably and sometimes in conjunction as Bodo-Kachari. But now the literate members of this community use the word 'Bodo' to refer to their community.

This is a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal tribe. They mostly live in nuclear family though a few extended families are in



existence. Empirical evidences reveal that a normal Bodo family consists of parents and 4 to 6 children. The families belong to certain clans, which have the following characteristics:

- a) Some clans are totemistic in nature,
- b) Some clans show territorial origin, and
- c) Some clans suggest occupational categories.

This is an agricultural community spread over the plains of Assam. Their economy is dependent on forest and other natural resources. The women collect leafy vegetables, edible roots, and tubers from forests and fish from the river and marshy lands. The production organization of this community is highly dependent upon women. Except ploughing, the women participate in all agricultural works like sowing, transplantation, weeding, harvesting, carrying paddy, threshing, cleaning, and husking. During paddy cultivation the women get up early in the morning and cook food. Fishing is popular among them. During the rainy season they collect fish from the paddy fields too. Besides, they go to forest to collect firewood. Weaving is entirely their job which keeps them busy during winter.

The domestic works are mainly distributed among the women of different age groups. The household works prevent some of them from studying further and they drop out rather early in their life. Usually Bodo girls get married in teen age. The early literature says that 'marriage by capture' was a common practice among them. It was checked after the spread of the Bramha movement among them. Nowadays, except in cases of love marriage, the girl's family has to wait for a proposal from the bridegroom's family. So a girl may remain unmarried if she does not fall in love or receive any proposal. This has restricted their scope of getting married in time.

Since 1930, the educated Bodos who follow the Bramha religion have expressed the importance of participating in political activities to fight for their political rights. But the organizations like the Tribal League, Tribal Sangha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Plains Tribals Council of Assam and All Bodo Student's Union were completely dominated and represented by the men. They had no agenda for women nor did they involve women beyond a certain point. There was no dearth of educated women in Kokrajhar district but their

potential for contribution to the Bodo movement was not realized by the men leaders.

Upendranath Bramha, the leader of ABSU movement, perhaps was the first to realize this mistake and encouraged the educated Bodo women to join the Bodo movement. It was he who helped them to establish All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1986. This Federation was established with the following aims:

- a) to work for the welfare of tribal women, and
- b) to spread the aims and objectives of the ABSU movement to the rural areas, particularly among the illiterate Bodo women.

Women teachers actively participated in the activities of the Federation. Most of its central committee executive members were teachers only. It spread its activities in all the Bodo dominated areas within a span of four years (1986-1989), and established district and

village council level committees in Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Darrang, Borpeta, Nalbari, and Lakhimpur.

The AATWWF volunteers not only mobilised the Bodo women but also the elderly Bodo men. In this patriarchal community the elderly male members were the decision makers in their families. Hence their mobilisation was important but other organizations which were controlled mostly by youths, did not pay much attention to this aspect of their movement. The Federation also sought to spread awareness about:

1. the role of women in family and society, including child rearing, health and hygiene, family planning and alcoholism,
2. consequences of polygamy, and
3. children's education.

The activities of the Federation also included:

- i) Explaining the programmes of the ABSU to the people from time to time,

- ii) convincing people about the demands of the Bodos,
- iii) teaching people to remain alert about army and police raids,
- iv) selecting young girls for nursing training, and
- v) approaching people to help the ABSU and ABSU VF members with food and shelter.

Frequent meetings in the rural areas resulted in the unity of women for a common cause and they accepted the ABSU movement as their own movement. The ABSU activists were introduced to the rural women as their sons who are fighting for a homeland for the Bodos and the AATWWF was introduced as a mothers' organization set up to help their sons to achieve a state of their own. The Bodo women felt proud when they were told that the ABSU, through the movement, would make themselves known to the world. Such a participation raised their self-confidence and solidarity. They also took necessary measures for conflict resolution not only between ABSU and PTCA but also between the leaders of ABSU, BPAC and ABSU VF.

Different types of mobilisation programmes were tried by the Bodos. Foot march was considered as the most effective way to mobilize their people. Sometimes the ABSU, AATWWF, BPAC and ABSU VF members conducted their programmes jointly. The AATWWF members even travelled to Meghalaya, West Bengal and other states for such purposes.

The movement grew stronger from 1988. Both the ABSU and ABSU VF organized many protests against the state government. During then the AATWWF members played the role of protectors of villages. They resisted against frequent army and police raids in the villages. They protested arrests of innocent people and repression by the police and army personnel. They visited the villages after such raids and investigated the loss of properties. They trained the village women to tackle the situations created by the police and army personnel. The rural women adopted different devices to tackle such situations. They were requested to come forward whenever needed and be in touch with women of other villages. As a result, they came closer to each other.

Conducting meetings at village council, district and state levels was one of the important duties of the AATWWF. They also participated in the ABSU called meetings. Educated women played an important role during such meetings. They not only mobilized people but also delivered speeches. On the whole, their activities included informing people about the meetings, collecting subscription, collecting food grains for the guests, collecting *aronais*, cooking for the guests, etc.

The various seminars organized by the AATWWF mobilized the educated men and women. Women-centred topics created a different type of consciousness about women's role in the society. The AATWWF also published a magazine for women, which was the first of its kind in the Bodo society. A few women actually started their literary careers through this magazine.

This movement revived a few old cultural practices, too. Cultural use of *aronai* is one such instance. Earlier, the Bodo warriors wore *aronai* as waist band at the time of going to war. Mother, wife or sister of the warrior wove it either in one single night.

This custom had almost vanished until it was revived by the AATWWF during the movement. Some other customs that were revived included use of yellow and green colours in dress materials and wearing of traditional dresses by women.

### *Comparison with Similar Movements*

The Bodo movement is compared here with some similar contemporary tribal movements in eastern India. The Santals of Chotanagpur Plateau who launched the Jharkhand movement in 1970s, are one of the largest plains tribal communities of India. They established Adivasi Mahasabha, the first political organization of the Santals, in 1937 but subsequently, in 1949, changed its name to All India Jharkhand Party (AIJP). In later years the AIJP became the main political party in the Santal Parganas of Bihar and Santal dominated areas of West Bengal and Orissa (Panchbhai 1982: 34, Bhowmick 1982 : 53-65, Mahapatra 1982 : 67-85). Similar organizations were formed by the Bodos (Tribal League in 1933), Mizos (Mizo Union in 1946), and by the Karbis (Karbi-A-Darbar in 1946, Riso-A-Darbar in 1960s). (Pathak and Saha 1982 : 287-294, Goswami and Mukherjee 1982 : 129-150, Bhattacharjee 1996 : 76-



79). They all wanted political autonomy of one form or the other. The Bodo leaders also submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 highlighting their separate cultural identity and demanding political autonomy. The Khasi National Dorbar, the first political organization of the Khasis established in 1923 by Khasi chiefs, wanted independent status for the Khasi states. The proposal and acceptance of Assamese language as the state language in 1960 alienated many hill and plains tribes of Assam. The 'language policy' of Assam was an important issue of the Karbi, Mizo, Khasi, and the Garo movements. Members of the Tribal League established the Bodo Sahitya Sabha for the development of the Bodo language and Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), which spearhead the Udyachal movement, demanded union territory for the Bodos and other plains tribes of Assam in 1967. The Karbi-A-Darbar and Riso-A-Darbar led the Karbi movement for separate hill state in 1964 (ibid). The Mizo Nationalist Front (MNF) was established by some members of the Mizo Union in 1961 to launch the movement for a separate home land for the Mizos (Goswami and Mukherjee 1982: 129-150). The Naga Nationalist Council, formed in 1946, led the movement for independent Naga state (Das 1982: 39-49). The All

Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) was established by Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya to protest the language policy of the Assam government in 1960 (Sarkar 1982 : 215-228).

The APHLC, MNF, and Riso-A-Darbar leaders saw the language policy of the Assam government as a threat to their identities. They protested against the Assam government, which finally gave birth to Mizoram and Meghalaya, and a district council for the Karbis in 1972. The Nagas achieved full-fledged statehood in 1964.

The members of the plains and hill tribes indulged in both violent and non-violent forms of protests. Memoranda to the state and central governments, strike, *rasta roko* and *rail roko* were some non-violent types of protests which were often followed by violence. Gradually, most of these movements turned violent and some of them were declared illegal.

Some similarities in these movements are as follows:

- i) All these tribal movements originated in the second or third decade of the twentieth century. Panchbhai (1982 : 34) contends that the tribal leaders who were earlier engaged in social reform movements turned into political leaders and demanded various forms of political autonomy, particularly after “Home Rule” was introduced in 1930.
- ii) All these movements had nourished a sense of separate identity and a desire for political autonomy from the beginning of the present century itself. However, they all got intensified in the last three decades or so.
- iii) They all followed Roman Script for their languages and opposed other Indian scripts like Assamese or Devanagari.
- iv) The two plains tribes discussed above talked about the exploitative nature of their neighbouring communities and the problems of land alienation in their own areas. The Jharkhandis in particular launched a programme to recover alienated lands from money-lenders and big peasants in Chotanagpur.

- v) The plain tribals revived their traditional cultural practices during their movements. The Jharkhandis re-established their traditional *Baisi* (village assembly) to settle the disputes and the Bodos revived their traditional custom of offering *aronai* to their warriors.
- vi) Leaders of all these movements were educated, and many were Christian. The leadership of those movements was mostly confined to males.

The participation of women in these movements is not easily traceable from available literature. Some information is available on women's participation in Jharkhand movement (Kelker 1991 : 154). They participated in campaigns, reoccupied lands under the control of the moneylenders, and participated in village councils and village level discussions to mobilize other women. They took initiative to stop wife-beating and liquor consumption. The Jharkhand movement considered women's problems to be important and wanted to solve it for the upliftment of the Santal society.

### *The Bodo Movement and its Impact on Women*

In view of the fact that the Bodo movement is still an ongoing movement a proper assessment of the impact of this movement on the women is rather premature. However, preliminary indications of its impact on the Bodo women may be described here. Needless to mention that some such impact as mentioned below may either be aggravated or be dissipated in future.

The exhortation of the Bodo women by ABSU leaders to participate in the Bodo movement was, first and foremost, something new and unexpected. It threw a challenge to the women, as also it provided an opportunity for them to enter into the political arena which was absolutely monopolized by male until then. They responded hesitantly but positively. This response was initially from among the relatives and acquaintances of the ABSU leaders. They formed the nucleus of the women participants in the movement and they gradually brought other women, both illiterate and coming from the rural areas, into the movement. In other words, this nucleus of women drew the larger section of women out of their traditional, domestic sphere.

The movement gave an opportunity to the women to test their leadership capabilities. Some of the women proved themselves to be highly successful in this context. The very foundation of the AATWWF and its prominent role in the movement was a land mark not only in the history of the Bodo women but also of the Bodo society as a whole. The existence of women's organization in tribal societies of northeast or outside it is not new. But such an organization participating directly in the movement for a separate statehood under their own banner is unprecedented.

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 this movement. In issues relating to women the AATWWF leaders took over the authority to make decisions and even implement such decisions both at family and village levels.

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 also discovered themselves as a category apart from the men. This sense was further widened and consolidated in the process of the spread of awareness regarding education, health, child rearing, etc. among the rural women.

The Bodo society being patriarchal with no negative values against alcoholism, except among certain religious sects including the Christians, domestic violence in which the women are always in the receiving end was a part of their life. This is largely so even after a phase of women's active participation in the movement. However, a beginning has been made not to treat domestic violence as "given". The present thesis has described some cases of domestic violence in which the AATWWF leaders had intervened and settled the matter in favour of women.

At the beginning of the women's participation there was sense of cynicism as well as apprehension about the fall-out of the women's

participation. Such a feeling was found among both men and women. There was also a strong reservation against their active participation in the movement. Such a reservation was translated into resistance to their participation by both men and women in innumerable families. But such biases based on patriarchal values were not strong enough to stop the women from taking part in the movement. As a consequence while some women became prominent members of the society and earned a lot of respect there were many others who are not as fortunate. Such women so far have a perceived stigma of a possible loss of purity. The women were not prepared to counter such perceptions and therefore remained victims of such a discourse resulting in delayed marriages of many women.

Such a discourse did not exclude the clan, kinship or village relations. On the whole, such relatives were not favourably disposed to their participation and provided no particular support to the women. As a result the women participants were held responsible for any strain in their relationship with their siblings, spouses, parents, and relatives. The combined strength of this kinship network was often



enough to make them withdraw themselves either from participating actively or dampening their spirit to do so.

Despite such heavy odds against their active participation it was significant enough to create a niche in the socio-political processes of the Bodo society. In this process the women may not yet be equal partners, but the society can no longer ignore the women as they were before.

#### *Theoretical Implications of the Movement*

At the end of this concluding chapter, some theoretical implications of the present study may be discussed. The discussion here relates to contemporary discourses in anthropology, which have special relevance for the study of women.

To begin with, the discourse related with representation may be invoked here to make it answerable for its lapses. Anthropology by nature indulges in representing the lives and culture of people. Such representation has always been of the subordinate cultures by the dominant/western culture. Such a representation has also, until

recently, been male-centric. The women, as ethnographers or ethnographic objects constituted the Insignificant Other both in terms of statistics and influence. In such a scenario representing the women's participation in a political movement becomes problematic even for women. The difficulty arises primarily because the words, symbols, and other parameters of studying a movement are predominantly, if not exclusively, defined by men.

As a corollary of this, it is observed that the very epistemology of a movement is heavily biased in favour of men. The women in the epistemology of the movement is the Other of the Other. The dominant thinking in this epistemology is still skeptical about the extent to which women can lead, mobilize and organize a movement without the support of men. It conveniently ignores the support to male leaders received from their female counterparts. Therefore, an epistemology of movement where women's participation is relegated as secondary and dispensable cannot provide a strong theoretical ground for our study such as the one taken up here.

This takes us to another significant yet related field of discourse, i.e., gender discourse. Though the gender discourse is sometimes vitiated by certain genres of feminism, it must be accepted that patriarchy plays not only a political but also a symbolic role in marginalizing the women in the society. The issue of women themselves being a party to this discourse is sometimes blown out of proportion, not least realizing the fact that they are part of the same social system where patriarchal principles govern the relations not only between men and women but also between women themselves.

Let us now take the discussion to a different field, i.e., the field of space which assumes a centre-stage in theoretical discourses in anthropology, literature, architecture, and a host of other disciplines. The demarcation of space into domestic and public, and assigning the formal space to women has for long remained the dominant discourse. This discourse has not lost its striking power even in the so-called highly emancipated society in the west. Apparently, the occupation of different spaces is influenced by the roles that men and women have for themselves. However, it should be remembered that the roles are not assigned at the time of birth. As the child grows he or

she undergoes the process of socialization. This process involves inculcation of certain norms and values in the society that have continued from the past. In other words, patriarchal norms and values are responsible for the respective roles of men and women, which in turn influences the occupation of domestic and public spaces. The participation of the Bodo women in the movement did not challenge the boundaries between the two spaces. The graduation of the women from domestic to public space was also almost insignificant except in the case of some individual women. What was apparently a public space was merely an extension of the domestic sphere for majority of women participants.

Finally, it may be observed that the relationship between violence and state has an indirect consequence in marginalizing women's role in such movement. It may be remembered that movements all over world and irrespective of its labels are becoming more and more violent. This is because violence is found to be the most effective strategies of attracting the attention of the state. The state responds violently because most such movement cherishes interest which are not in favour of the state. As a consequence a

cycle of violence is created in which women find increasingly difficult to participate. The men often commit senseless crimes and the women have to bear the consequences; the men blow off the bridges and railways and the women have to answer why they do it; and while the men are finally, if at all, acclaimed for their martyrdom or heroism the women continue to do what they did before. The case of Bodo women is not much different from this.

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