

Negotiating Identity and political participation of Bodo women in conflict affected areas of Bodoland Territorial Region: India's Northeast.

Maidang Khungree Basumatary

PHD (VIII semester)

CPS/SSS, JNU.

9654680263

maidang123@gmail.com

Abstract:

Bodos are the plain tribes of Assam comprising around 35.06% of the total ST population of Assam (census 2011). The Bodoland Territorial Region comprises of 5 districts namely Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri and the newly formed district Tamulpur. The Bodos comprises 30 percent of the total population in BTR and the remaining 70 percent comprises of Muslims, Adibasis, Koch Rajbongshis and people of other non-Bodo communities. In Bodo society while women's work is valued at home and outside but traditionally women are not given much opportunity at decision making at the community and political level. The individual identity of women remains submerged under the ages of male supervision in every aspect of life. Women have been important part of Bodoland movement that started in search for the identity of the Bodos but despite their enormous contribution very less opportunity has been given to women. It's been more than 20 years since the onset of Bodoland Territorial Council, until now only 2 women has been elected as members in a 46-member council. Women are confined only as party members and block level leaders while they are used during elections to mobilize large scale women voters. Women have taken roles in peace building and negotiation during various conflicts that the region has constantly faced but their role has been rarely recognized after the conflict. In the post-conflict times women are ideologically and violently pushed back to their original position despite their proven skills and leadership. The paper will seek to understand the conflicting identity and role of Bodo women (mothers and girl child) in Bodoland Territorial Region of India's northeast and understand whether women has not been given any opportunity or is it women who has not been able to negotiate their positions.

Keywords: Bodo Women, Identity, Political Participation.

Introduction.

It is generally believed that tribal women from northeast India enjoy a higher status as compared to other parts of the country. The societies in northeast are regarded as more egalitarian as there is no restriction on women's movement, food habits, pre-marital sex or the remarriage of widows. But this does not necessarily mean there is equality in society. There are many customary laws that puts men on higher status than women. The fact that women in northeast are not discriminated against in the same way like in other parts of the country does

not mean there is complete equality amongst men and women. Women still lag much behind in literacy rate, economic independence, and political participation. Similarly, in Bodoland Territorial Region, though there is no stringent discrimination between men and women, men are favoured more in most circumstances. We still find families who even after having 2-3 girl child, keep conceiving babies to try their luck on having a baby boy. In such trials, girl child gets less care and facilities to develop themselves. Such girls end up being school drop out and start working early to support their family. Higher status of women in northeast is basically an illusion, instead women of northeast face strong discrimination in the name of protecting customary laws or in the name of protecting the identity of a particular tribe. These laws are often used to maintain law and order or even to settle any disputes and rifts. The laws for marriage, inheritance of property, divorce, widow remarriage, council meetings, ability to contest elections are many at times discriminatory against women. Like any other community, even in Bodo community it is broadly accepted that certain responsibilities and roles are meant for women to do. Right from the very young age girls are forced into certain household responsibilities. Works like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, washing clothes are generally done by women. Women are generally considered as the primary homemakers and caregivers regardless of the extent of women emancipation and socio-economic development.

Bodoland Territorial Region has faced enormous number of conflicts, be it ethnic conflict among different groups residing in the region or the movement for separate state. Women in all situation has played important role but their contribution has been rarely recognized. Women have extensively participated in the Bodo movement which was started to safeguard the cultural and linguistic identity of Bodo Community. While there is no doubt that Bodo movement has given path to women to be politically conscious, but their contribution was rarely recognized. Despite of extensive participation and contribution very less opportunity was given to women politically. It is very thought provoking that in the last 18 years of politically active autonomous council only two women has been elected as member in 46-member autonomous council. It is problematic to ask whether women were not given an opportunity or is it women who could not negotiate their demands.

A careful look at the lives and struggles of women in Bodoland Territorial Region

makes it difficult to offer a conclusive answer to whether conflict is a setback or a ladder for women's emancipation. Some women are propelled into political activism and in the process their lives and identities as women are radically transformed. At the same time, while the escalation of a particular conflict can create new opportunities for some women, it may have great implications for the lives of the other women. Political violence in Bodoland Territorial Region has invariably destroyed the trust and cohesion within communities for both men and women. The experiences of women in Bodoland Territorial Region have differed and this difference have determined their positions in the aftermath of the conflict. Conflicts have opened intended and unintended spaces for women that have defined the gender realities. All women who have lived through conflict do not fall into a single group. No women live in single dimension of her sex. Not only their experiences differ but also their connections determine their position in the aftermath of conflict.

Identity of women in post-conflict times.

Gendered power shifts produced in the upheaval of conflict and the peace momentum open empowering possibilities for women as evidence-based research has established, but only too quickly, tail into patriarchal backlash. The conflict aftermath brings back the gendered public-private divide, pushing women ideologically violently back into the private sphere. Motherhood politics empowers women in conflict and disempowers them in peacetime. The contingent situation may be different in different parts of the country or state but the gendered politics of being instrumentalist in power narratives is the same across regions and cultures. When peace agreements or post conflict situation has arrived nobody ask women “What do you think” be it Taliban with its ideology of subjugating women or the so-called Northeast India where women are at a better place. In the recently concluded Peace accord 2020 of Bodoland Territorial Council in Assam between the Government of India, Government of Assam, and the National democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), saw many ex NDFB men members being part of the politics or having a say at the decision-making process of the government and the society. While there were many female ex NDFB members who has not been made a part of any big decisions, they are even deprived of the basic amenities. The top-down Indo-Naga framework Agreement (2015) was signed in 2015, but the Naga Mothers and other social collectiveness in the vanguard of peace movement were kept out. Most likely that the agreements provisions will follow the script of earlier accords around identity conflicts, guaranteeing the community’s customary laws, without reservation and ignoring norms of protection of women’s rights. How should women confront the multilayered sociocultural barriers that block their entry into public life to participate as equal citizens in rebuilding conflict affected societies and a stable and just peace?

Experience of Bodo women during conflict times.

It is true that no one can escape the devastating effects of war. For women, sometimes it can mark the no point of return, but it can also be a door to new opportunities. During conflicts, struggles and war women fight side by side men, they take on new roles that challenged gender and generational stereotypes. Many a times participation of women in conflicts free them from traditional roles. They come forward for many issues that sometimes lead to mobilizing themselves and form associations. For instance, ABWWF (All Bodo Women Welfare Federation) was formed. It has been an important part of Bodo movement.

During conflict times are thrown into confusion. All the affected families and communities remain in crisis. In such situation gender roles and expectations are under stress. Women take on new roles and responsibilities, in such situation it is important that post-conflict initiatives are taken in accordance with the new roles and respond to them in right way. The previously assigned roles of men and women may no longer hold. In the villages of BTR, many women had to cope up without their husbands or sons, some were killed while some had hidden themselves with the fear that they might be killed. During Bodoland movement, the arm forces and the police would enter any house without any warrant and would pick up the male member of the house with the suspicion that they could be spy of the extremist group or would be blamed for any unrest. So as soon as police enters any village, all male member would run

away from the backyard. Such was the horrific and torturous situation of common Bodo people during the times of movement. When men were away from homes women had to take varying roles. Along with the traditional roles like cooking, taking care of kids, washing dishes and cloths, dropping their children to school, fetching water etc., women had to take up roles like bringing firewood from forest, putting up tea stalls, going to the market, cultivating, going for village meetings etc. Apart from the Bodoland movement, the Bodos had to face many conflicts with other communities living in the same area like Adivasi and Muslim. In conflict times, women generally have to leave away from their husbands and big sons as in every BTR village, we observed that men are usually entrusted with guarding their own village in groups at night or even during the day in order to ensure that no one attacks their village or burn the houses. During this time women are kept in relief camps nearby their village or sometimes even in some faraway place. When I was on a field work, Suluna Basumatary (14 years) of Kochugow Baganpara, kokrajhar district have narrated stories on how she, her siblings and her mother would stay in the relief camps, and their father along with other men of the village would go to guard their village at night. She and her mother would spend sleepless nights with the fear that their father and his friends might be attacked. She said same was the condition with all women and daughters living in the relief camp as their fathers and brothers would go to guard their villages. Mausumi Narzary (17 years) of another village named Baganpara has shared a similar story of her father going to guard their village at night and the insecurity and fear that her mother would go through the whole night. This shows how women have to suffer from insecurity throughout the conflict, if her husband or son is killed, it is her who has to face the highest level of emotional trauma along with the added burden to earn and bring up the children. So, conflict and post-conflict scenario sometimes leads to unwilling change of roles and responsibilities. Such circumstances forces women to take up unwanted roles.

Democratization process are always applauded because they promise to guarantee equal status, accountability and grant all citizens the chance to participate in political life. During the post conflict reconstruction there is great hope that women will get great opportunities with the new social structures and roles. But practically if we observed such expectations and hopes often run with major obstacles. Women took a great role during the time of Bodoland movement; they were the leaders in dealing with many issues but after the movement until now we see very negligible opportunity given to women. During the time of movement if any leader was arrested unnecessarily women were the ones who would organize protest rallies, many women were put behind the bars for their actions. The conflicts that have arisen in BTR also saw large scale women participation and sacrifices. Despite their remarkable contribution and sacrifices during the conflict, they are expected to confine themselves within the four walls in the post conflict times. Some women who take up various social roles and activities many a times has to face various obstacles and social taboos. This shows how despite the proven talent and abilities women are looked down upon and not encourage to be the leaders. In many instances, the society, husband or male members of the village discourage or prohibit political participation.

In post conflict societies of BTR majority of women join the informal labor force. They are basically forced to work in new structures of society. After they are being displaced and

rehabilitated on new lands, they get very less land to be enough for cultivation, so they join the labor force. Women basically work as labor in construction sites like roads, buildings, as part time workers in neighboring villages. Girl child are trafficked to big cities for various purposes. Men go out to big cities to work as laborers in companies. The main occupation of Bodo people is and was cultivation. Labor was something that was not a part of life of Bodo people. But the displaced and conflict affected villages have all joined the labor force. Some women start small business-like tea stalls but these small enterprises are often constrained by a lack of capital. Moreover, Women's economic success would in many cases result in social stigmatization and exclusion, due to clashes with prevailing norms or jealousy.

The post-conflict societies generally experience high unemployment rate, and women are more marginalized when it comes to formal employment. This is due to the fact that women have poorer educational qualification due to discriminatory practices that has been prevalent in our societies since ages. There is no different situation in post-conflict villages of BTR. We see most of the literate people (graduates) from the villages are male and there are very rare highly qualified women. So whatever formal job opportunities come up are received by male and they tend to dominate the new social structures in post-conflict times. Many NGOs in BTR look out for employment for young educated people as field workers in their own villages. Most of them who gets the job are male. It is a fact that women continue to be discriminated in regard to educational opportunities in the new social structures of post-conflict societies. There is no doubt that women's needs and rights are increasingly recognized but they continue to be discriminated for various social and cultural factors. Health care and other facilities also remain inadequate, which does not only affect the health of women but also their ability to take part in various social, cultural and political activities. Women in many post-conflict societies make a major contribution to their rehabilitation like re-establishing primary education to children, providing primary health care, influencing socialization, social-economic assistance through self-help basis to people in crisis. While such activities are generally appreciated and welcomed but they are considered a natural extension of women's domestic obligations and hence are not enumerated or responded to with offers of training.

Role of Women Organization.

In Bodoland Territorial Region, there emerged strong women organizations like All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (A.B.W.W.F) and Bodo women Justice Forum that worked intensely for the welfare of women in these areas. The aim for both the organization was to work for the welfare of women for the whole of state. As mentioned by Mithinga Narzary, (20 March, 2022, interview by me) an active Bodo woman revolutionary since 1886 and the then secretary of A.B.W.W.F, with the rise of Bodoland movement, they had to shift their focus on the movement and the various issues underlying it. She said that they initially registered their organization as All Tribal Women's Welfare Federation and later changed it to All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation as their focus shifted from all tribal women in Assam to particularly Bodo women. Their organization has been running since 1986 and to talk about their experiences in dealing various women and social issues would need an entire book.

Talking about the conflicts that happened in Bodoland Territorial Area Districts, A.B.W.W.F has taken active role in every sphere. As mentioned by Mithinga Narzary, the then president of A.B.W.W.F, they have been the initiator for many peace negotiations in many conflicts that occurred in BTAD. She recalled an incident which happened in 2012 (Bodo-Muslim conflict) when with the help of administration and police they had gone to the relief camp of the Muslim community to talk to the victims and leaders to restore peace talks. While they reach the relief camp, many of the Muslim relief inmates were angered to see Bodo Women and had whispered among themselves to kill or slaughter them on the spot. Mithinga Narzary and other members of A.B.W.W.F were scared to death but with enough courage and strength they initiated talks with the leaders of other community and made them understand the fact that there's no point continuing this enmity because it is the common civilians of both the community who are suffering. Women organization like A.B.W.W.B and Bodo women Justice Forum has been active in almost every important sector, be it social, educational, economic and political.

In most post-conflict villages of BTR social problems like domestic violence, sex trafficking, child trafficking, abused and sexual violence against women are a common feature. Concerning domestic violence, it mostly happens when the man drinks and is frustrated about his life and inability to earn. The present president of A.B.W.W.B Biva Rani Narzary has told us that at one-point domestic violence by drunkard man was so high that they had to take up initiatives to control it. The president said that they had to visit all those homes in different villages where rice beer is sold and vandalized it many times. A.B.W.W.B got support from so many women all over for this action, as many women felt relief at the fact that their husband can't drink anymore and she will be saved from being beaten. A.B.W.W.B have also worked on issues like divorce and polygamy. Marrying two wives was common at one point of time with no security and safeguard for the first wife. In such cases A.B.W.W.B helped many women to file cases against the man who illegally married two women. But in solving such cases women activist had to suffer from certain dilemmas. Though they are always ready to help women to file cases against husband for marrying another woman, the first wife initially looks out for help to file case but slowly her mind changes and withdraws the case out of family pressure. In such instances it gets difficult to get justice, it also gets complicated for the organization to deal.

When asked about the political representation of women in the autonomous council, the present president of A.B.W.W.B has mentioned that they have been demanding for reservation of women seats in the council, but until now no such decision has been taken. They have given memorandum and applications for reservation of seats for women. Also, many of their old members have joined politics but they never got any opportunity to contest elections except for few countable numbers (not more than 10). They do provide assistance to women candidate's regardless of their political affiliations but most of the time they fail in their attempt as they rarely get any support from male members. In many constituencies, male representatives are not ready to hand over that seat to women, as they feel that a man would be able to run the constituency better than women. The present president of A.B.W.W.B mentioned that it is difficult to point out whether these women who joined politics cannot negotiate for their representation or is it the male dominated society that do not support women candidates.

When we look at the informal peace-building at the peak of atrocities, women are the most ardent participants. Yet, their role is rarely recognized after the conflict. In BTR region, similar kind of realities existed. Mithinga Narzary (50 years), an active Bodo woman revolutionary since 1886 and the then secretary of the All-Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (A.B.W.W.F) has narrated stories and problem they had to face while taking part in various movement and conflict related situation. While they have been active part of Bodo movement, their contribution has been very rarely recognized. During conflicts of 1996, 2008, 2012 they took up various peace initiatives by talking to the conflicting parties.

There exist some constraints and limitations of women organizations which undermine their achievements and performances. Many internal weaknesses like funding, social constrains, disabling environment in post-conflict societies are a hindrance to their performance. The low social and cultural status of women is the major hindrance. The members of the organization also suffer from their own personal hindrances from the family. I wish to mention that many top leaders from A.B.W.W.B have not married (they have asked not to mention the names). While working for the society, they have forgotten to focus on their personal life and some have willingly decided not to marry. Many have broken marriage as they could not bear with the demands of patriarchal set up where women are expected to take all the household responsibilities and not move out from the house much. Some of them were blamed for their children have become drugs addicted or doesn't go to school anymore. This is due to the fact that their husbands don't take the responsibility of the child when the mother is out for work. These shows how unsupportive our patriarchal society is towards women. Man, who works for the society or who is politician never has to suffer from such tragedies or hindrance in life because the women (wife) take the entire responsibility of home and children. But can't we expect the same from man if the wife is a social worker or a politician? Why has this society always put the burden on women? There is need for change in this system and mindset. While trying to change the system many women have sacrificed on their well-being and family. It is important we acknowledge such women.

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