

The Role Of Women In Society: The Bodo Women

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Abstract

Throughout in the history, women have been made significant contribution towards the growth, development and sustainability of human society as a whole. Women constitute almost half of the population in the world. However, their enjoyment of rights equally with that of men is far from satisfactory. In every society from ancient to modern times, women are considered as the property of men to serve their interest in both society and domestic front. The position of women always plays a significant role in the growth and development of any society in the world. Assam is a land of numerous tribes having different ethnic and linguistic background since the time immemorial. Among them, the Bodo/Boro are numerically and sociologically one of the most important aboriginal tribes in Assam. Role of Bodo women were confined to her being a wife and a mother as has been depicted in the inscriptions. Yet the historiography on that period confined the study the Status of Bodo women in her society in a various concern areas. The paper is made a humble attempt to highlight the importance of the status of Bodo women or their normal position in the field of socio-cultural, economic, and religious perceptions in the society in the colonial period.

Keywords: Women, Social, Cultural, Religious, Economic, Rights, Discrimination.

Introduction

Normally in India the major portion of women population engaged in household activities which found absent the economic value. They faced discrimination everywhere as patriarchal social system prevalent in many of the Indian societies. Perhaps in some sort of period, Indian societies witness the maximum social activities with a major discrimination towards the womenfolk especially during the pre-colonial and post Mughal period in India. Amongst which the northern part of India was affected with such atrocities and crime against women and the cultural discrimination towards the female folks have been seen to such a great extent.¹ Assam is the hub of numerous communities with diverse language, cultures, religion as well as social system. Various tribes were migrated to the Brahmaputra valley and settled down permanently in different period of the history. The Bodo who is considered as the descendant of the Kiratas in the ancient Indian literature, whose physical features are akin to Mongoloids are sociologically one of the most important native populace of the North East India particularly in Assam.² No doubt, they are the indigenous ethnic linguistic communities of Tibeto-Burman language family. Racially they belong to the Mongoloids stocks or Indo-Mongoloids.³ Today the Bodos are widely spread in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, West Bengal, Nepal Bangladesh etc. They are called Bodo Kacharis or simply Boro. In others places like West Bengal, Nepal and Nagaland they are known as 'Meche' while in Tripura they are designated as 'Triperas or kokBorok'. The Bodos spread over the whole of Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal forming a solid block in north eastern India, were the most important Indo Mongoloids people in eastern India, and they formed one of the main base of the present day population of these tracts".⁴ Despite regarding the global scenario of the status society of tribal community comparing with those societies from different parts of India from the same period of time, the tribal group or the tribal community of North-East India, particularly the Bodo communities abstain from discrimination regarding the status of women in different field in the society. It is known from the very fact that the Bodos are the original and most indigenous tribe of Assam constituting the highest percentage amongst the major's tribal population in Assam. They have their own culture, traditions, languages, customs and beliefs and enjoyed a unique identity with their traditional attires. The Bodo Women enjoyed special status socially and economically and debarred from least discrimination since the time immemorial. The British administration, work of Christian missionaries and socio religious reform movement of the country molded the lives of people in general and women in particular. In Assam in the

nineteenth and twentieth century marked an era of important developments and in return impacted women's roles, privileges and gender relations in the Bodo society. Gender differentials have characterized almost all societies at all times. The economic and political institutions deny opportunities for women empowerment. The level and type of gender differences may vary from society to society and from time to time but they have been very systematically carried forward from one generation to other in all the societies.⁵

The social structure of the Bodos is patriarchal in character,⁶ where father is the sole authority in the family. Even though the social structure is of patriarchal system, the place of women in the society is high. In the Bodo society the women are assigned with specific roles in the social set up.⁷ Women were entitled activities like child caring, looking after kitchen stuffs, washing clothes, weaving, cleaning the house surrounding, caring the health of the family members, looking after household chores and looking after various agriculture and allied activities. While menfolk were expected to go for hunting, house building, for arrangement of family major needs and for agriculture activities. The division of labour on the basis of biological sex based on what a society expects a man and woman should do. The Bodo being intensively clannish people represented the basic features of a tribal society and economy of colonial Assam, where the Boro women played a dominant role. For an analysis of women's subordination and dominance in pre-colonial tribal society and economy, it is essential to understand the socio-economic conditions of the tribe at that time. Traditionally, a tribal society consisted of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious or blood ties with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader. Some tribes are particularly egalitarian and most of the tribes have a verge notion of private property. They have their own customary laws and a belief in common lineage.⁸ Significant contribution of the Bodo women could be seen in their skill of managing and conserving biodiversity. Women cooked food and also preserved different food items like meat, fish, beverage, vegetables etc. Bodo has a rich cultural and traditional festive season like *Bwisagu* (Bihu) where the main festive celebration is added by a drinks and merry making. Bodo women are busy in preparation of *Zumai* (rice beer) which the Bodo women are expert in making of this favorite item.⁹ They also possess different traditional medicinal knowledge to cure various diseases. Many of them are acted as midwives or nurses at the time of child birth even today where modern medical facilities are not so much available. Women do not lack behind every social functions including the religious. Six types of marriage system has been

practice in the Bodo society and some are arranged according to the situation of the girl's response in the family.¹⁰ There is no denying the fact that the Bodo girl who attained the age of puberty enjoys somewhat more freedom compared to the girls of other societies. They have the right of inheritance of the parental properties where there is no male child in the family.¹¹ They can enjoy such properties even after marriage. The female folk entrusted the responsibility of looking after the household's chores, articles and maintenance of properties in the family viz. on rearing pig, cattle's, rice, fowl etc. They are allowed to sell those things without the prior permission of their parents.¹² The Bodo women maintained a good profile and given a high respect in the society. Their position is never discarded in the society. They are kept in equal footing with that of their male counterpart.¹³ During her marriage she is allowed to have her all possession like gold, clothes, share of property whatever she wishes. In any social function they enjoyed equal participation to manhood as well. They performed and enjoy the liberty to participate in various religious rituals practices, in public singing, dances during festivals and in any merry making occasions.¹⁴ It is furnished that "The Bodos (Kachari) women both in early life and a matrons enjoyed a large measure of freedom, a freedom which is abstain from abused for evil purposes. Whenever the writer ask to the Kachari man then the common phrase of sentence will be "*BE ANGNI BURWT*" literally "this is my old women"¹⁵ But the words are not used jeeringly (flattering) at all but with much real respect and affection. The practice of widow remarriage system is also seen with a great honor among the Bodo women, this system is called "*DHOKA*". In this case a man comes to live with the widow in her first husband's establishment. Hence the widow becomes the sole authority of the family and accordingly the property descends to the children.¹⁶

The Bodo observed numbers of religious festivals and pujas. In the matter of religious ceremonies and festivals, the Bodo women are not merely excluded.¹⁷ When the religious fellowship or mass prayer gathering take place, the women play key role in the mass praying programmed. They also performed different religious dances and equally hold the responsibilities and involvement in various religious festivals like in *Kerai Puja* and *Kerai dance*¹⁸. The Bodo women implicated the main role in maintaining and practicing of various religious rituals daily offering a prayer in the morning or evening in front of "*SIJOU TANSHALP*". (an Altar of prayer).¹⁹

The Bodo women did not lack in the socio-economic status within the society. They possessed a high economic status. The Bodo women are also regarded as one of the most expert weavers among the tribes of North-Eastern. They engaged in different traditional activities and nowadays the impact of globalization is broadening it. The traditional activity like doing piggery, agriculture activities in the field, rearing various animals like poultry etc. provides financial needs in the family. In the cases when the male of the family is not earning, women take the imitative in looking after family.²⁰ The Bodo women are actively busy in her loom and carried on small business in weaving and rearing different animal. The Bodo women are also fond of wearing ornaments and in this connection basically in a middle classes of family, the entire girl child can have their own resources which reserved for buying ornaments. The most important is the weaving of the silk-eri clothes, which is great in demands in different parts of the world. The Bodo women are industrious in producing different items of handloom and handicrafts products. Apart from this fishing is another activity of the Bodo women. In the field of agricultural work the Bodo women are not totally excluded. Their active participation in the agriculture work proved that they are free to earn their livelihood as well as contribute a great in the economic development of the society. They are not behind the men in the productions activities. Transplantation, seedling are exclusively the work of women in the agricultural activities. It also may be pointed out that all female members of a family are often the owners of cattle, poultry, piggery, etc. even as of now. Bakri (granary) which is symbolized the economic condition of the family is kept under the custody of the wife or daughters till date.²¹ The father or any male members in the family has to take permission of female members before utilizing those things which are in the possession of the female members. From this, it is evidence that any male members in the family cannot exercise the veto power on the things which are under the control and custody of the women.²² Bodo women are expert in weaving, rearing, fishing etc. these activities kept Bodo women financially self-support on their own feet.²³ They earned by engaging in various economic activities which used to manage their required expenses for garments and to support over the family crises. In the early days the male members even used to barter with the female-owned goods.²⁴ It is, noticeable that most of the tribes of North-East India like *Karbi, Tiwa, Adi, and Nishi* etc spend their earned money to meet the family requirements. The produce articles of the women are sold in the markets by the male folk since the early days. Women were seldom taken on in business in market however in the present days

the women actively partake in the activities of the markets as supplier or retailer or wholesaler in both big and small business. Many of the markets are now filled by the women folk in carrying out merchandise activities. Despite the immense contribution of women towards the Bodo society and economy, yet in all spheres viz. household, social and economic, a little differentiation based on gender between men and women could be noticed in the Boro community in colonial Assam.

Conclusion

Overall analysis of the above discussion in brief shows that the civilization comes through the combined contribution of both men and women. However until the most recent past historians have depicted about the life and experiences of men only. The experiences of women and their contribution to the society have totally been neglected. Most of the time, the inscription only inform us about the queens and in some cases about the wives of the Brahmanas, the beneficiaries of land grant. Women in general were looked down upon in the society which was male oriented. The prevalence of the myth of equality of men and women in the Bodo society shows that such was not the case existed among the Bodo. The line of imbalance of the gender equality in the Bodo society was so thin that it cannot be picturised much difference between the men and the women however in certain cases inequality of the gender is also brought to the notice for the depth study. Women substantially contributed in the building of equal development in the society yet their status was not at par with the men in some sort of matter as well, because of the changing traditions influence by others dominant culture. Even the customary laws did not always conduce to the interest of women, baring a few cases. The system of sharing property, inheritance of heirlooms favored on men. However, the Boro society witnessed a process of transition in colonial period effected by various socio-economic forces. To some extent women became conscious about their capabilities, and even political awareness was noticeable among them. More importantly they became agent of socio-economic change. Gender differentiation widened in the society and the policies of the colonial Government slowly jeopardized the economic position of women and affected women's relation with the environment and social rights. But it is notably understood that the Bodo women enjoy some sort of equal status to men

folk in all aspects irrespective of in socio-cultural rights and position, in socio-religious position, in socio-economic rights and facilities.

Notes and References

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