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Bodo Women in Peace building: A Case Study of Kokrajhar District

Topu Choudhury

Asst. Prof. Dept. of Political Science, Chilarai College, Golakganj, Dhubri, Assam, India

Abstract

Peace is redefined to include in its fold the attempt by women to be a part of the peace making process, reworking the structural inequalities face by them and their struggle against all forms of oppression. In any conflict situation, women and children are directly or indirectly drawn into the vortex of the problem, and Assam, North-eastern India's largest state is no exception. Assam has been witness to violent insurrections for separate homelands, armed campaigns and bloody feuds between ethnic groups over territorial supremacy, sucking into the vortex of the conflicts women, children and innumerable other innocent people. It is not surprising to find trouble in Bodoland{Assam}, for the state, like other Indian North-eastern States, is an ethnic minefield, being home to diverse ethnic group communities. The study basically focuses on the involvement of Bodo women in the movement for Bodoland in the terms of their mobilization on the issue of Bodo Nationalism and participation. It also focuses Bodo women's involvement in solving the problems of conflict groups. In the light of the broader understanding of peace, the study looks into the activism of Bodo women both during the movement and beyond.

Keywords: Bodoland, Bodo women, Bodo nationalism, Peace, Conflict.

Introduction: In any conflict situation, women and children are directly or indirectly drawn into the vortex of the problem, and Assam, North- Eastern India's largest state is no exception. Assam has been witness to violent insurrections for separate homelands, armed campaigns by ragtag and bobtail rebel armies seeking either self-rule or maximum autonomy, and bloody feuds between ethnic groups over territorial supremacy. These have made the state one of South Asia's hottest trouble spots, sucking into the vortex of the conflicts women, children and innumerable other innocent people. It is not surprising to find trouble in Assam, for the state, like other North- Eastern Indian states, is an ethnic minefield, being home to diverse ethnic groups communities.

To begin a discussion on the contribution of Bodo women in peace building, it is imperative to emphasize the role of Bodo women during the Bodoland movement.

In the late 1980's, the Bodos under the banner of ABSU (All Bodo Students Union) started a massive agitation demanding the formation of a separate state known as 'Bodoland' in the north bank of the river Brahmaputra, comprising nearly half the total area of Assam. The ABSU formally declared the starting of a democratic and peaceful Gandhian mass movement on March 2nd 1987. The ABSU units in the schools and colleges were strengthened and geared up to spread the message of united non- violent struggle among the common masses. The agitational programmes of ABSU that followed evoked massive participation from the Bodos and support various organizations devoted to fight against "Assamese Chauvinism". The ABSU activities kept up the tempo of the movement since its inception and the Bodo masses responded enthusiastically as the movement intensified. Among those mass respondents in the Bodo movement, the Bodo women too responded enthusiastically. The Bodo women folk took active participation during the time of the movement and encourage the males to proceed in their struggle for a separate homeland.

Bodo women during the Bodoland Movement: In the long struggle for Bodoland movement, the Bodo women played a significant role. The Bodo women folk embarked upon the struggle for the cause of the community, fighting shoulder to shoulder with the men folk under the overall guidance of the ABSU. Women of all ages and walks of life including housewives, students, minor girls, actively joined in the movement.

It is worth mentioning here that when the demand for political autonomy for the Bodo people mooted by various Bodo intellectuals led by the ABSU began, it was felt by the ABSU and the senior citizens that the Bodo women should not be sidelined in the process as they could play a special contributory role to the overall welfare of the Boro Society. Accordingly, an organization in the name and style of All Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation was formed at Kokrajhar on 14 July 1986 with the objectives of establishing equity between man and women, addressing problems concerning women, traditional or otherwise and empowerment of weaker sections. Mrs. Promila Rani Brahma, the present Forest Minister of Assam, 2017 was the founder president of the organization. As the organization was formed in the years preceding the Bodo movement, it became actively involved with the movement, working as it did with ABSU so as to ensure that the movement took place democratically.

However, as the movement for Bodoland intensified, the organization increasingly came to be seen as one specifically set up for the Bodo community and their movement for autonomous Bodoland, owing to which the women folk from other tribes began to feel alienated and started distancing themselves from AATTWWF. As a consequence, the name of the organization subsequently changed from AATTWWF to All Bodo Women Welfare Federation {ABWWF} in the Third Annual Conference of the federation held at Tamulpur in 1993. In the words of Mrs. Kanan Basumatary, former President of the organization reveals that ABWWF was the First Bodo women organization of Assam and at the peaktime of the Bodoland movement, each and every Bodo women of Kokrajhar District were the members of the organization and the Bodo women folk under the banner of ABWWF did actually play a significant role in the struggle of the Bodoland movement.

During the time of agitation that followed in the heart of Bodoland {present}, men were driven away from the villages, wells were poisoned, glass particles were mixed in food grains and in the absence of the men folk, women were tortured and beaten up and there were frequent incidents of attempted rapes too by the security personals. The incident of Bhumka rape case under the Kokrajhar district that took place on 25th and 27th January, 1988 where 10 Bodo women aged group from 13 years to 50 years were raped by the Assam police and CRPF jawans were well known to all. Due to sudden village raid and combing operations in Bodo dominated areas by the police held every now and then, no male person could sit or sleep well at home except women and children and old. During that crucial period women took the sole responsibility to undertake every household and agricultural chore; many lost their chastity, some lost their husbands, sons, relatives. It is reported that during the time of the movement, many young Bodo girls aged group between 15 years to 30 years left their villages and recruited themselves as domestic help in the places like Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon etc, in fear of being raped by the security personnel's.

During the Bodoland movement, Bodo women of different villages of Kokrajhar district acted as informants and found themselves carrying messages and letters from one place to another at the instance of the ABSU. Some of them also received nursing training in first aid and in the treatment of minor illness. Sometimes, the women members made arrangements for food to the ABSU members on their mission. Accordingly, the role of women as mothers or nurturers was 'Stretched' as they emerged as agents of political resistance. The Bodo women, many times gheroad police vehicles, trying to save the people who were picked up by the police from their fields while they were ploughing in them or while on their way to the market. The women folk under the banner of ABWWF took to the streets in a democratic way whenever there occurred inhuman atrocities upon the people. In the process, many Bodo women sustained severe physical injuries, while some fell prey to police bullets. It is worth mentioning here that Helena Basumatary aged 15 years and Gaide Basumatary aged 32 years were the first Bodo women female martyrs of the Bodoland Movement. who were gunned down by the police on 12th May 1988 at Kokrajhar. The Bodo women folk visited from one village to another village, many a time without food and water, telling the people not to lose patience and to follow the democratic and peaceful path in the struggle for a separate state.

Contribution of Peace by Bodo Women: Contribution of peace by Bodo women from 1987 onwards till date can be talked about. In the struggle for Bodoland, the Bodo women played an active role through in a limited way at positive peace building during the movement. In 1989, from May 9 onwards all Bodo women, particularly from Kokrajhar district, were out of their homes at a stretch as part of the struggle. On the same date, five Bodo women cycled their way to Siliguri and finally reached Delhi to meet the then President R. Venkataraman and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, of India with a sole motive to bring peace in the Bodo areas. Even after the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council{BAC} disturbances loomed large. Widespread dissatisfaction prevailed with the

temporary political arrangements. Therefore, the political demands resurfaced even more rigorously. When the movement started again, the Bodo women under the aegis of ABWWF came forward once again to bring back peace. Without bothering the problems of their family members and without any fear, twenty two Bodo women visited to Delhi to meet Prime Minister and the then President of India. The Bodo women requested them for a permanent solution of the Bodoland movement so that permanent peace could prevail in the Bodo dominated areas. In this regard, I like to comment that the contribution of Bodo women in terms of sacrifice, efforts in building peace is immense and is similar to the role played by the Meira Peibis in Manipur and Naga Women Union in Nagaland during their struggle.

During the **Ethnic Clash** between the Bodos and Adivasis in 1996, the Bodo women particularly the members of the ABWWF visited the affected areas and the Adivasi relief camps. The Bodo women had a very tough time trying to bring back an atmosphere of peace. They could even go to the camps only with the help of police, because the Adivasis were armed with leap of bows and arrows and could have killed the Bodo women if they were not controlled by the police force. The Bodo women met all village mukhias to collect the statistics of damage and gathered a general idea and submitted memorandum to the district administrator and to the government of Assam. Efforts were also made by the Bodo women to secure compensation to the victims and at the same time trying to ensure that such incidents did not recur and misunderstandings could be avoided and peace maintained. In this regard, the Bodo women had to face a lot of hardships as vested interest sought to give it the colour of an ethnic clash. However, the Bodo women federation was able to prove it wrong on the ground that the clashes were confined only to Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts while in Upper Assam, Kamrup and Darrang districts, no such incident of violence took place although members of both the communities are spread across Assam.

While speaking on Bodo women's contribution to peace building, it is important to depict the role played by the Bodo women when the NDFB { National Democratic Front of Bodoland} raided Muslim villages in 1998. At that time, the Muslim people attacked any Bodo person they could get hold of anywhere. In the process, Muslim had killed 12 Bodo person {The Assam Tribune 28 feb, 1998}. During that critical phase, the Bodo women under the active guidance of ABBWF visited the Muslim areas and tried to make them realize that in every community one had bad element but for that one cannot brand the whole community as antisocial. But they would not understand, rather they threatened the Bodo women not to visit the Muslim areas any more or else they would be killed. But the Bodo women did not sit back in their homes. They tried their level best to bring back an atmosphere of peace. In the process, no doubt, the Bodo women had to face many problems but they have been successful to a certain extent in combating the Bodo- Muslim conflict.

At another level. The Bodo women under the banner of ABWWF are making conscious efforts at positive peace building, as it is evident from the fact that it has taken up a host of constructive programmes with a focus on capacity building, livelihood generation and economic empowerment such as weaving centres, imparting training in kitchen, gardening,

food processing, dairy farming, tailoring and carpet making in the areas of Kokrajhar, Chirang and various parts BTC. The Bodo women of the Kokrajhar district leave no stone unturned to prevent polygamy, drinking of liquor, killing of people in the name witch hunting and of course appealing the Bodo terrorist groups to maintain peace for the overall development of the Bodo community.

The Bodo women has worked for the welfare of the socio-economic development of the society. The women sections are coping up togetherly to fight against the evils like alcoholism, the practice of polygamy, superstitions, etc. In the field of economy, the bodo society is mainly based in agriculture where both men and women are actively engaged in cultivation. Bodo women have learnt about self employment like setting up of self help groups through weaving, farms, crafting skills which have showed the way for earning extra income and thereby making them self dependent. The Bodo women organizations like the ABWWF, Milijuli Bodo Mahila Samiti are playing an important role in encouraging girl child education particularly in remote areas of Kokrajhar district and in other parts of BTAD. In the fields of health of mother and child, pregnant women, pre and post natal care of mother are considered as most vital cases by the Bodo women. They held health awareness programmes and medical camps from time to time not only for mothers but also for the public health in general.

The Bodo women under the banner of ABWWF is running an orphanage named 'Alayaran' at Kokrajhar since August 14,2003. At present{2017} there are 120 children out of which 54 are girls. Caste is not a factor for the orphanage. These children have lost their parents either at the hands of security forces or due to the factional killings between rebel groups or whose parents have been killed in the name of witch hunting. The Bodo women federation has made provision for their schooling as well as for their recreation. Importantly enough, the Government of Assam or the BTC do not provide fund to the orphanage. It run by the donations of the common masses collected by the members of the federation.

Historically women are associated with non- violence and most people think that they are natural peace makers. Women are better equipped for peace work. Generally, they do not go with arms. During struggle, the Bodo women did not ally with people extreme views but encouraged democratic ways to resolve disputes. Even today most of the Bodo women do not approve of National Democratic Front of Bodoland's {NDFB} ideology of sovereign Bodo homeland by severing ties with India. The Bodo women organizations like the ABWWf, Boro women Justice Forum{ 1992} that have mushroomed with clear intentions to get involved in peace process has been insisting on the Government of India and Government of Assam to sit with NDFB across the table to discuss the issue and for the permanent solution of Bodoland.

Conclusion: The Bodo women have not only been a force fighting for a separate Bodoland but at the same time, it is the Bodo women who have taken initiative for peace building too. Indeed, the Bodo women under the banner and leadership of All Bodo Women Welfare Federation has made efforts, though in a limited way, at positive peace building. Though the

women federation have struggle right from the beginning of Bodoland movement, but their role is not known in the book as those of other women organizations. Moreover the media has never projected the story of the Bodoland movement at all ; media being a force of the state, the role of the Bodo women thus was never visible. As the organization is not known broadly, so their role in the society is also limited. The most common role for the organization is that they stand for women's problem be it family or in society. The Bodo women federation shall continue to raise voice for the women's right as human right and civil liberties of all down trodden, over exploited, oppressed, suppressed and depressed and the victimized in order to save prestige and status of women folk in particular and also the men folk, in general.

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