



Natural Resource Management of the Bodo Women

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Abstract

The Bodo women have been taking a very important role in natural resource management and sustainable use of biological diversity. Most of the Bodo people are living in rural areas. They take shelter in forests or nearby forest areas and utilize a plethora of edible plants found in the natural environment. The Bodo women conserve different plants to use its leaves, stems and tubes for religious purposes. They also use some plants as medicinal use for different diseases. The Bodo women gathered their indigenous knowledge from generation to generation from grandmother to mother and from mother to daughter and so on. The knowledge of women particularly the Bodo women in biodiversity contains unique insights into local species and ecosystems gained from centuries of practical experiences. Their knowledge brings them in direct contact with the natural resources.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Management, Natural Resources and Challenges.

Introduction:

Natural resource management refers to the management of natural resources such as land, water, soil, plants and animals with a particular focus. Its productivity is prolonged and its relationship with the environment is protected. Women play a vital role in natural resource management and development. Women are considered the primary users of natural resources i.e., land, forest and water who gather food, fuel and fodder for the household chore and domestication. Women's perspectives and values for the environment are somehow different from men. Women give greater priority to protection and improving the capacity of nature, maintaining farm land, caring for nature and the environment's future.¹

India is the meeting ground of diverse races, cultures, civilization, religions, language, ethnic groups and societies. Streams of different human races like Austro-Asiatic, Negritos, Dravidians, Alpines, Indo-Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burma and Aryans penetrated in India at different periods through different routes. They migrated and settled in different parts of India making their own history, culture and civilization. The Tibeto- Burman people are predominant in the whole North Eastern region.

As the North Eastern part of India is one of the major spots of the world where diversity of flora and fauna are available and cultural diversity is very rich. In Assam the tribal women belonging to the Bodo communities contribute a lot to conserve biodiversity

of their own areas. Bodo's are the largest and one of the oldest ethnic groups of North East India. According to S. K. Chatterjee, 'The Bodo had migrated thousands of years ago from Tibet via Huang Ho and Yang-tzsi-Kiyang rivers to India.'² Now they are recognized with various names viz. son of soil, aboriginal and indigenous people of North East India. They live with much simplicity and honesty in character.³The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of lower Assam covered 3539.95 sq. km. Area of forest that is located along the international boundary with Bhutan. The entire Northern belt of the forest is situated in sub-Himalayan alluvial tract of typical formation known as Bhabar tract. The demography of BTR is dominated by Bodos and aboriginal ethnic communities of Assam having distinct culture and heritage.⁴ Since time immemorial, the Bodos maintained close acquaintance with traditional beliefs and knowledge about plants and forests. Bodos are forest dwellers who live in the midst of plants, trees, grass, birds and animals. They have seasonal songs and dances inspired by nature. The Bodo women carefully deal with nature for a sustainable source of livelihood patterned according to the environment.

Bodo women have been playing a crucial role in ensuring the Bodo society as equal to that of male counterpart. Their status in the society cannot be measured only from the perspective of their participation in work. It is interesting to take a look at the honesty and capability of Bodo women in their family maintenance as well as management of the environment for their daily life.⁵ As women spent most of their time in collecting and storing water, securing sources of food and fodder and managing land be it forest, wetlands or agriculture terrain. The kitchen garden became small laboratories where Bodo women tried out diverse wild plants and indigenous species. They acquired knowledge of herbal medicines out of wild plants for healing and caring of ailments. Forest provides a variety of products for both commercial use and household consumption that include wood, fuel, bamboo, thatch and cane, fruit, gum, resin, fiber and floss etc. They believe in coexistence with nature and other living creatures. The Bodos generally lived in and around forest and riverine. Women manage all kinds of domestic chores including drawing and carrying water from distant places. To procure water for their various domestic work, women trek several kilometers of distances. Women make use of stream rain water, wells, rivers etc., for domestic purposes. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Bodos and rearing of 'Endi' and 'Muga' are other traditional occupations. The Bodo women are skilled weavers who spend much of their leisure time weaving.⁶ They always follow the seasonal cropping and harvesting depending on nature. The economic condition of the Bodo is extremely low as a result they depend more on natural resources. By and large the Bodo women maintain close interaction with the environment. But most of the time, the traditional knowledge of rural women is being ignored by the policy makers to advocate policies for environmental protection and conservation. This topic is a modest attempt to highlight the role of the Bodo women in conservation of biodiversity.⁷

Natural Resource Management System of the Bodo Women in Day-to-Day Life:

Natural resource management deals with managing the way in which people and natural landscapes interact. It brings together land use planning, water management, biodiversity conservation, and the future sustainability of industries like agriculture, mining, tourism, fisheries and forestry. It recognized that for their livelihoods, people rely on the health

and the productivity of landscapes and their action as stewards of the land that play a critical role in maintaining health and productivity. Natural resource management specifically focuses on a scientific and technical understanding of resources, ecology and the life supporting capacity of resources. Environmental management is similar to natural resource management. In academic contexts, the sociology of natural resources is closely related to distinct natural resource management.⁸

It has long been recognized that women are the primary users and potential stewards of many natural resources that provide means of basic survival. Agriculture and allied activities are the predominant sector which provide means of livelihood to the rural people in India where women constitute a dependable work force in it. Except ploughing, women used to share all other activities with their male counterparts. Women take an active role in livestock production.

Throughout the centuries, the Bodos predominantly settled in the rural areas depending on typical agriculture and allied activities. The British officials and the American Missionaries, who worked along with them during the early 19th century have profusely praised their agricultural expertise. Capt. Butler in his sketch of Assam described them as the best cultivator. The women in the Bodo society play a crucial role in social, cultural, religious and economic spheres.⁹ The Bodo women have an immense contribution towards family management. From normal household work throughout the day women get engaged in other activities. The Bodoland movement inspired the Bodo women's working spirit to adopt certain traditional family activities in a commercial manner.¹⁰

Agriculture and Kitchen Garden:

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood of the Bodos.¹¹ Various scholars opined that the Bodo developed the art of cultivation which was brought along with them from where they migrated in early age before the inception of the historical era. Both men and women are involved in the performance of cultivation because without women folk cultivation is impossible. *Sali* (Maisali), *Asu* (Ahu), *Bao* (Baowa), *Maibra* (sticky rice) paddy are grown in the fields.¹² During cultivation, a ritual is performed by a female guardian of the family while planting paddy plants and another ritual is done by a young girl of the family for successful growth of the paddy and harvest. *Gasha Saonai* (lightning festival), *Mai Naihwinai* (visiting of the paddy), *Mainao Borainai* (welcome of goddess of wealth) are of such festivals which are performed by Bodo women in connection with cultivation. Again, a bundle of ripe paddy is brought to the house by the female guardian of the family which is called *Mainao Labwnai* or *Lwkhi* (goddess of wealth). When the paddy field is ripe, the "*Bakhri*" (granary) is built for storing rice grains where women play a significant role in preservation and storing.¹³

During the agriculture season, the entire household member is involved in agriculture. The Bodo women are by and large involved right from the selection of seeds to transplanting, weeding, threshing and winnowing. Apart from rice cultivation, they also engage in the cultivation of vegetables. Normally women do not depend on men for plucking the vegetables. They cultivate varieties of vegetables in front or backyard of the house which is popularly known as kitchen garden. Elderly women spent most of their time in the kitchen garden. They grow coriander, chili, potato, brinjal, a small kind, ginger, turmeric, garlic, gourd, bean, lady's finger, etc. which are generally required for

daily consumption. To a considerable extent, the vegetables grown in the kitchen garden supplement their domestic requirement for consumption. Moreover, it is observed that some of the Bodo women sell their vegetables grown in the garden in nearby local bazaars. By doing this they reduce the difficulties and financial burden of the family.¹⁴

Livestock Farming:

A traditional Bodo family involves rearing domestic animals to provide additional support to the economic condition of the family. Cattle, pigs and poultry are the common domesticated livestock breeds in almost every family of the Bodo community. These animals are mostly looked after by women folk of a family.¹⁵ In the past, rearing of pigs and poultry farming were exclusively meant for domestic consumption and killed during seasonal festivals, religious ceremonies as well as family ceremonial programmes like marriage, puja, *Bwisagu* (Bihu) and *Magw Domasi* (Magh Bihu) etc. Over time, these are now mostly used for commercial purposes where the Bodo women now began to venture out in the commercial line by rearing livestock to help their male counterparts to improve their family economy. The Bodo women help their family by selling poultry and eggs in the market and generate individual income as well. Cattle breeding, which is mainly for agricultural farming, is also one of the ways of earning income that supports it to a great extent. Apart from that, those women sell cattle whenever they are in need of certain circumstances.¹⁶

Castor Worms:

The culture of the castor worms among the Bodos is indigenous. They obtain a raw material popularly known as '*endi*' from the castor worms. The '*Eri*' and '*muga*' clothes produced by Bodo women are very popular to the non-Bodos. The active cultivation of castor worms (*endi*) and the manufacture of the *endi* cloth is one of the chief cottage industries of the Bodos. The *eri* cocoons, which are about 2 or 3 inch in length, may be seen suspended a few feet from the ground, in long festoons, a thin cord being passed through the cocoons for this purpose. It is said that one insect can on an average produce from eighty to a hundred eggs or even more.¹⁷ The processing of *eri* cocoons begins with preparation of small bundles of castor or mango leaves that are loosely tied together and placed within broad baskets or on bamboo platforms where insects were carefully placed within the bundles and under favourable conditions cocoons are carefully formed in about twenty-four hours. Before the formation of cocoons, insects do not eat food for a short time and turn into a light and brilliant colour. After being carefully cleaned in water and dried in the sun, the cocoons are usually stowed away in earthen vessels until a fitting time in the cold season which are normally worked by Bodo women and girls. They rear cocoons, spin the yarn and weave the cloth. The *Endi* (shawl) is a famous local product of the Bodos popularly known as '*Endisi*.' The castor worm is also a favourite dish of the Bodos.¹⁸ Rearing of *eri* cocoons is one of the professional women that supplies additional economic benefit to the Bodo women for maintaining their family needs.

Weaving:

Weaving is the most popular ordinary household duties amongst the Bodo women. In Bodo society weaving activities are mainly done by women. Almost every village woman in Bodo dominated areas knew how to weave traditional attire and possesses looms. It is presumed that half of the clothes used in their day-to-day life are woven by the

womenfolk. Dr. Mangalsing Hazoary has observed and said that 'there is not a single woman or young girl who is not expert in weaving among the Bodos as well as Mishings in Assam. The Bodo woman knew the art of making different colours from fruits, trees etc. They make black colour from a mixture of *silikha* (Myrobolan) and *thaisri* (Hog fruit), for the yellow colour the skin of jackfruit or kernel and *deoa* (a kind of tree jacks fruit family (Artocarpus)). After making different colours the Bodo women dry it under the sun and they weave beautiful designs. The Bodos are very expert in putting designs on their weaving clothes. Normally, women adopted the various designs from nature and put it on their colourful clothes e.g., *Aagor Bwrai* (old design), *Hajw Agor* (hill design), *Taigir Bibar* (elephant apple flower), *Maoji Agan* (cat's footprint), *Faro Megon* (pigeon's eye), *Mufur Afa* (bear's paw), *Daorai Mwkreb* (blinking of peacock) and *Lao Begor* (bottle gourd's seed) etc. Their weaving is replete with artistic sensibility and it includes not only cotton textile but also silk fabrics of the finest quality. Some of the weaving implements used by them include *Rasw*, *Makhu*, *Jenther*, *Garet*, *Hichhan*, *Swrkhi*, *Gandwi*, *Gorkha*, *Thakuri*, *Chanchali* etc. They earn money by selling woven clothes prepared by them at a reasonable price in the local market. In this way, the Bodo women help their family by reducing financial burden to a great extent. During *Bwisagu* festival (springtime festival) the Bodos themselves gift their *aronai* (Rojephali) woven by themselves to their dear ones as a symbol of love. It is generally believed that a girl who is not an expert in weaving is considered unfit for a bride; they are called *Aoluri* in the Bodo society. She may be selected for the marriage without having weaving skill. Hence, in order to get married every girl learns to weave from a very early age.

Nowadays the government has introduced various schemes to provide free grants to Tribal weavers in cash or kinds for opening of weaving centers or industry through Tribal Development Corporation, District Rural Development Agency, Bank, etc. Taking such assistance from the government, some Bodo women opened several weaving industries in various places of the district and supplied their products to the market. Thus, some Bodo women have become economically independent in the present Bodo society.¹⁹

Fishing:

Fishing is another activity of the Bodos. During the rainy season, the Bodo women used to go to the nearby rivers for fishing. They catch fish with the *Zekhai*²⁰ (conical triangle shaped artifact made of split bamboo fastened with cane) and after catching, fishes are usually kept in the *Khobai* which are tied and hung on the waist (pot made of split bamboo) called '*Na Gurnai*' in Bodo. These fishing instruments are very handy. This fishing method is generally used by the Bodo women but sometimes men also use it. While fishing in a group, the Bodo girls sing a song which is their favorite hobby or leisure time activity in a river or pond. Fish selling is almost exclusively the domain of women. With the help of fish sale, Bodo women fulfill their daily basic household requirements for which they hardly depend on men.²¹

Traditional Medicine or Folk Medicine:

The use of traditional medicines or treatment is a common phenomenon in Bodo society. The villagers hardly go to the physicians or medical stores for minor fever or sickness instead, they prefer to treat with traditional herbal medicine that is abundantly found in the forests or gardens. The Bodo women knew how to make juice leaves with honey for cough and cold; use of aloe vera to speed up healing and reducing the risk of infection for

minor cuts, wounds or burns; use of jasmine flower in fever; and use of *Centella Asiatica* to treat skin injuries are commonly included in their traditional medicine. Some villagers do not prefer to take Doctor's advice for some major diseases; instead, they call or visit an *Ojah* (traditional healer) for treatment.²² There are several Bodo women *Ojah* who treat certain kinds of diseases with herbal medicines collected from nature.

Seed Preservation:

The Bodo people use their indigenous technique to preserve the seeds for their future generation and use. Some of the Bodos keep seeds and grains in a long bamboo basket by covering with straws but most of them preserve it in granary. All the Bodo households in rural areas possess granaries which are built facing towards the eastern side. The seeds are also normally kept in a bamboo pipe, earthen pot or pitcher by covering its mouth with cloth or mud. Usually, pure seeds are preserved.

The Bodo women are experts in collecting vegetable and leafy vegetables from their nearby forest or open fields. They collect different kinds of edible plants and leafy vegetables in leisure times which are traditionally consumed from time immemorial. Besides, they preserve the vegetable seeds from their kitchen gardens such as radish, *lai* (mustard green), *lapha*, *mwitha* (roselle), chilly, etc. They preserve the seeds with a piece of cloth by air tight fastenings. In Bodo family seeds of pumpkin, cucumber, water gourd etc. are pasted on the mud wall and preserved properly.²³

Edible Wild Fruits and Vegetables:

Many areas of the Bodoland Territorial Region are covered with jungles where the Bodos closely live in the reserved or forest areas. Right in the morning getting out of the bed, people move to the fields for cultivation and collecting natural forest resources. Thus, women also participated with male counterparts who had gained better knowledge about forest from their regular hunting. The knowledge about edible fruits in the forests such as elephant's apple, wild banana, wild betel nuts, wood apple, mulberry etc., are identified from male counterparts.²⁴

The wild vegetables are also very popular among the Bodo women which are collected from forest resources. Many of the wild vegetables are highly nutritious and medicinal. They are *solanum indicum* (Kuntainara), *eryngium foetium* (Gongardundia), *lippia geminata* (Ontaibajab), *houltuynia cordata* (Maisundri), *coccinia indica* (Tainasi), *casearia glomerata* (Daopenda), *vitis repanda* (Dausrem), *prema herbacea* (Keradapini), *gmelina arborea* (Gambari), *murraya koenigii* (Nwrsing), *basella alba* (Mwifrai), *spilanthes paniculata* (Usumwi), *plectranthus tenuiflorus* (jwglaoi), *leucas aspera* (Kansingsa). By growing them, the local people can earn additional money for their livelihoods. Some of the Bodo women till date collect wild vegetables for domestic consumption and for sale to fulfill their basic needs.²⁵

Management Challenges of Continuation of Natural Resource:

There are many challenges especially for women including tenure security, socio-cultural issues and equitable access to land and other natural resources. Management means planning, organizing, staffing, leading and guiding, controlling and monitoring. Natural resource management is an important issue that affects all living organisms. Almost everyone directly depends on natural resources for wellbeing and livelihoods. The science of natural resource management is based on ecologically sound traditional wisdom of

farmers and its contribution towards augmenting productivity. Traditional values which are sustainable in nature need to be compared with values of modern systems.²⁶ Ecology is the study of the interaction between living organisms and their environment. In a real sense, every culture is the result of people's effort to survive and their attempts to optimize the use of available resources, i.e., soil, water and vegetation. There is much degradation of the resources and the environment has increasingly become the focus of attention because of their harmful impact on people's lives. Water scarcity, air pollution, energy scarcity, deforestation, soil-degradation are the attributes of natural resource degradation that hamper human's ability to earn a living and reduce the quality of their lives. Women's participation in natural resource management is necessary for environmental protection at the national level where the environment is highly decentralized, providing safe water, solar and other renewable energy. We can hope to save our natural resources for future generations and to achieve sustainable development.²⁷

Deforestation:

Deforestation is the major challenge for the human being, as removal of forest leads to several imbalances both ecologically and environmentally. Agricultural activities are one of the significant factors affecting massive deforestation. The expansion of agriculture causes around 80% of deforestation. Due to overgrowing demand for food products, a large number of trees are felled to grow crops. Besides, 33% of agriculture caused deforestation because of subsistence agriculture. Livestock is believed to be responsible for about 14% of global deforestation. Farmers often clear the land by cutting down the trees and burning them to raise livestock and grow food. Therefore, women often face the problem of collecting fodder for animal husbandry. They continue to use the property until the soil is completely degraded and the same technique is applied in new land as well. In the BTR area after the ABSU movement a large number of timbers are being chopped and supplied. Charcoal is an example of firewood being used as fuel. There are many illegal woods cutting and felling of the trees. Due to deforestation, many Bodo women who possessed vast knowledge of herbal medicines and vegetables of wild plants for healing and curing of ailments are intertwined with forest around them.²⁸

Water Resource Management:

Water is an essential commodity for survival. Generally, water is used for drinking, cooking, bathing, washing, irrigation and for many other purposes for daily life. Most of the rural Bodo women carry water from the rivers, lakes and ground water resources for household chores. Women take more responsibility for finding resources for their family to survive. Water is an extremely important natural resource essential for sustaining life on earth. Some of the rural areas are economically backward and majority of the people belonging to scheduled tribes do not have access to amenities of modern life including a safe supply of water.²⁹ In rural areas, the Bodo communities are facing challenges in water management. They use their traditional method of supplying water in the paddy field through artificial irrigation. The excavation, maintenance and utilization of reservoirs, canals and wells are still found in the Bodo villages of Assam. By making dams and canals from the lake or forest streams, irrigations were made to facilitate the paddy field. For irrigating the agricultural land, digging of *dongo* is executed by elevating *mathauris* (raised mud for water protection) on both sides. The *dongo* is also known as *Jhampwi*. The

following water of *dongo* is distributed to all the farmer's paddy fields. Dongs are man-made structures akin to canals, to route water from available water sources which are usually perennial to the paddy cultivating fields. Most of the villagers maintain rain water harvesting for domestic, agriculture, livestock and natural resource management. In some parts of the village area in BTR living near Bhutan, women took part in water preservation. Freshwater resources are declining due to environmental degradation and poor water management.³⁰

Soil Fertility Management:

Soil degradation is one of the foremost problems faced by the farmers. Earlier the Bodo women used only organic manures in land for growing crops and vegetables. Cow dung was the only fertilizer which was used to produce more crops. Each and every household possessed bullock and cows. The cattle are often kept in the agricultural fields to graze in the winter season. In the process of fertilizing the soil, women also take part with male; these are also challenges for women in continuation of resource management. In addition to manuring, preparation of the fields for the crop conglomerated ploughing, puddling of the fields, weeding, overturning the surface of soil and transplantation. But it is remarkable that the chemical fertilizers are tough and useful, too much use of inorganic manure causes loss of certain plant species and depletion of solid nutrients. It is observed that Bodo farmers dry ashes on brinjal and chili leaves in the cultivation season. This too is an insecticide, meant to protect the plants from insects and pests. Chemicals and pesticides were unknown to the traditional farmers. They found their own pesticides just as they selected the best fruit and preserved it for the next season.³¹

Land Resources:

Despite having abundant natural resources, possessing of land became another challenge for women. Land is the main economic asset for rural livelihoods which is intrinsically tied to culture, heritage, identity and community. Due to gender disparity, women in patriarchal society do not get land to cultivate in their own under the male domination. Providing an opportunity to improve access and increase formal recognition of women's property rights on equal terms with men. Women get customary access to agricultural land for food and cash crop production and forests for foraging and fuel collection. However, in a practical sense, women lacked legal tenure on land.

Land is directly linked to women's interest in natural resource management and has implications for tenure rights to other important resources such as agricultural crops, non-timber forest products or metals and minerals. Land rights and access are also tied to women's ability to productive use and development of natural resources.³²

Thus, Bodo women are as expert in everything as male counterparts. Moreover, their active participation in rites and rituals from child birth to cremation of death shows their talent, ability and value contributing with sincere effort for the peaceful composition of the society. They are always praiseworthy for their hospitality, sincerity, affectionate dealing with the people and with the environment. The Bodo women never compromise themselves with avoiding their duty rather they courageously confront the challenges of life.³³

Conclusion:

Thus, women have a big contribution in natural resource management. Natural resource management systems are localized systems, which form the basis for decision making by rural people. Both men and women are consumers, exploiters and managers of natural resources. Degradation of forests, watersheds, foreshores and agricultural land have a severe effect on women as they have a high degree of dependency on the natural resource to perform their daily household maintenance tasks. Most of the land-based productions in the villages are based on indigenous knowledge systems. The cultures and values have evolved but scientists and planners are striving to improve the conditions of the people in rural society. The Bodo women have played a crucial role in household maintenance along with male counterparts. The Bodo women also acquired traditional beliefs and knowledge about plants and forest. Women carry medicinal herbs, wild plants for healing and curing of ailments. They also believed in coexistence with nature. Women manage all kinds of domestic activities in the household. Women are responsible for maintaining cleanliness in the house on which the health and wealth of the family members depend. They also preserve seeds for future generations in their home and collect food and fodder from the forest for their daily needs. Practically being close to nature, women are relatively able to figure out environmental issues better than men. Since women are potential users of the facilities, it is necessary to consider their views in planning for saving the natural resources and implementing projects for the same. As the Bodo ancestors have carefully observed abstinence from complete destruction of nature, so the present generation people should do the same in preserving natural resources.

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