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## Bodo women and Economic Activities: A Study in Historical Perspective

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### Abstract

*Women have been made significant contributors towards the growth, development and sustainability of human society as a whole. Women constitute half of the population in the world. In every society from ancient to modern times, women are considered less competent with men in all the aspects of socio-cultural and economic life. So to say in the Economic aspects the position of women always plays a significant role in the society. 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 aboriginal tribes in Assam. Role of Bodo women in economic activities is not much discussed in her society and there is a lacking space to deal it. Therefore this paper is made a humble attempt to highlight the importance of Bodo women in the economic activities or their normal position in the field of socio-economic perceptions in the society, traditionally and the way forward.*

*Key words: Bodo, Women, Status, Social, Agriculture, Economic, Rights, Position, Role, Domestic.*

### Introduction

Women constitute an integral part of the society and actively participate in the socio-economic development and process of the society. It is very difficult to determine the economic contribution of women towards household activities. There are problems delineating works done by a woman as economic activity from the overall household activities. A household activity like cooking, fetching water or firewood collection or even caring of babies is the most common work to be done by the women in a family. Here the question arises whether these are economic activities or not? Similarly, the women's contribution to the normal economic activities of the family like cultivation, artisan works, family farming or even family business may not be recognized as women's economic activities while

calculating or recognizing the economic role of women. The situation is, the women are performing economic activities and yet they are counted as non-performer. In addition to the absence of a clear-cut distinction between the household works and economic activities of women, there is no sufficient economic data about the women work participation to arrive at a conclusion about the economic activities of women are at par with the man. Under the household activities like cooking, washing or looking after children, we can consider it in terms of time spent by the women but in any case it cannot be measured or even taken seriously as an economic activity. Then again, the contribution of women as workforce in the family agricultural activities is always remaining unrecognized although it contributes in a big way towards the total productivity of the family and national productivity.<sup>1</sup>

In such an instance since 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 role of Bodo women in her society in a various areas particularly in economic activities is so accountable.<sup>3</sup> The paper is made a humble attempt to highlight the importance of various economic activities of Bodo women on their normal position in the Bodo society traditionally.

### ***Discussion***

In a traditional Bodo family live stock includes the domestic animals, which are useful for the family, be it as a tool for the work force for domestic activities or as food item. Thus, in every family cattle, pigs and poultry are the most, common domesticated livestock found.<sup>4</sup> As family property, the Bodo women look after these animals and birds. At the same time, these were hardly considered as a way of income generation by itself but only as tools of agricultural activities or food item for the family. Rearing of pig by the Bodo women in every Bodo family is a common structure. Mostly the responsibility of taking care or rearing of animals in the family is done by the womenfolk. The pigs were mostly rear for two purposed that is for meat as and rearing of babies for commercial. Male pig for meat commercial and female pig for productions of babies for commercial purposed. But in a changing perspective of the family economy, the women have started these traditional activities in a commercial manner so that they achieve financial gains for the family and can get rid of dependency factor. A single woman use to rear up to 1or 2 pigs within the family, which is disposed off after 10 to 12 months, this does not require much of labour as the pigs are kept within the household and the waste of rice beer, food wastes, chaff are kept and used as food for the pigs. During the survey, it is also observed that the families, which have commercial approach in pig rearing, have equally the practice of rice beer business. The reason behind is the wastes of rice beer are used as food for the pigs.<sup>5</sup> Only a very few families in the eastern part of the village have pigs for commercial purpose. At the same time poultry farming such as chicken, duck, etc were also found that looking after these animals were also taken cared by the womenfolk. It is used as a delicacy in different occasions and also used in various socio-religious functions. But in recent times, they have taken up poultry farming as a commercial venture as because there is a good market of chicken and eggs and at the same time it is not

very time consuming activity. They use to build up poultry farming within the family without disturbing the daily routine work of the family life. Rearing of poultry was also a common activity of the Bodo women since the time immemorial.<sup>6</sup> Each and every female child in the family use to be a part of the owner of the chicken, here also the women took all the necessity measures and responsibility in looking after the rearing of chicken, specially in olden times it was basically done by the women folk in the family for two purposed that is to served guest whenever they come and another is for commercial mean so that a girl child can earn some money in order to buy her needs specially ornaments.<sup>7</sup> So to say while rearing a cow suppose a family has a good number of cows, a girl or women in the family take the responsibility to look after the cattle. The cow sometimes is considered as an honour that belongs to the girl child in the family. One thing it is significant to say that in rearing of all these domestic animals whatever it may be the maximum responsibility and authority upon such animals lies on them that is why, the prior concern and permission is required from them.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Agricultural activities and others***

In an agriculture activities the role of Bodo women include a huge part, since the Bodo society is a purely an agrarian society, in an agricultural activities that the women involve right from the beginning of cultivation of the rice till harvesting time. The women sing lullaby carrying babies on their back and managing all the food arrangements to the male folk who are in work. The whole plantation of paddy is done by them.<sup>9</sup> Cultivation like vegetable, food crops are also partly handled by them. And perhaps if a particular family is very poor who doesn't have cultivation land nor bullocks to cultivate, the Bodo women doesn't sit idle, she will go to the others family where she can get a daily labour wages and feed her family. The Bodo women is also seen fetching water from far off distance for drinking purposes since there was no available tube water nor well found available. So in a free off time she will accompany with her husband sometimes and collect fire wood from the jungles.<sup>10</sup>

It is known that the Bodo people are also fond of fishing, here in conducting fishing operations the leading part is taken by the women. They greatly take part in the fishing which they use fishing tool called zakkai (in Bodo). Besides this women are also partly involved in the hunting activities for different occasions.<sup>11</sup> The women has a great responsibility in the family as well, they have to look after the family, domestic arrangement, children, etc. The grinding of rice has to look after or done by the women. Sometimes collecting of food and firewood are also managed by the women.

### ***Weaving and sericulture***

It is an integral part of the women folk of the Bodo community. Every young woman knows the art of weaving, which they learn from the early childhood within the family. Traditionally, they weave all the required cloths for the family members, which include, 'dokhona', 'aronai', 'gamocha', 'eri chadar', 'sii-maa' (bed-sheet) etc. The 'eri' and 'muga' cloths produced by the Bodo women are very popular amongst the non-Bodos also. It is one of the chief industries amongst the Bodo culture, to work with such patience and intensively the Bodo women involved her to look after this

*Eri* Cocoons which takes nearly 15-20 days to get the cocoons.<sup>12</sup> It is said that a Bodo girl finds it difficult to get married if she does not know the art of weaving. It is also mentioned that Bodo women if not greatly or frequently interrupted in her work can weave about half yard each day.<sup>13</sup> The weaving activities is a great art of the Bodo women, the actual work is always carried out either by the lady of the house or by one of the grown up daughter. Indeed the Bodo women working placidly and contentedly at the eri loom singing quietly to herself in sheer happiness of heart. The 'eri' and 'muga' clothe. Even, it has good market, resulting in commercialization of the Bodo products, which is helping the domestic economy of the Bodos in a big way. It was also accepted as one of the way of income for the family and adopted commercial production of cloths. In this process, the women completely do the entire works right from the rearing of the silk worm at home to the final stage till it gets cocoons. Rarely, they take help from the men folk. Moreover, while doing this they never forget to do their normal household works. The women also have a great interest in rearing a silk eri muga for consumption purposes, as it was considered as one of the good delicacy of the Bodos cuisines. It is rightly to say that the Bodo women weave all the dresses and clothes necessary for the family, so in this aspect the burden has been taken by the women and save the economic expenses and also boost the economic credibility of the family. Poor family Sometimes borrow the thread from the others family and weave which is called *Addi*,<sup>14</sup> and in return a women will get some share for weaving, this was also seen major significant in the weaving cultures in the Bodo society. They are very much expert in the art of weaving, their main designed of the different clothes would be like nature related art and even the colours are also been extracted from the different nature plants which give vibrant colours. That's why the Bodo women are positioned in the forefront in the society that shares equity in the family in all aspects.

### ***Production of Rice beer***

Besides amongst all the economic activities of the Bodo women the activities of production of 'rice beer' known as (Zou)<sup>15</sup> are a normal household work to be done by the women in the family. As per traditional belief, it is the woman who is supposed to prepare the rice beer to meet the family requirement because she only knows the preparation technique. In fact, the Bodos traditionally believe rice beer (Zou) is a beneficial beverages. It is used for worshipping god, for receiving the near and dear ones, for simple merry making and celebration of different social festivals and even used as medicine for treatment of certain very common diseases like abdominal disorder.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is an indispensable part of the Bodo socio-cultural life. The women who normally prepared rice beer for family consumption have now adopted it as a commercial venture. Of course, the enlightened section of the society is neither engaged in it nor encourages this sort of activity to some extent, but at the same time they are not daring to stop another section of the society from earning from brewing especially where poverty is at large. During the survey it was seen that only the economically weak and educationally backward families are engaged in this activity of selling rice beer at present. During the interview it was revealed that they are aware of the fact that what they are doing is not a socially acceptable one, but they are doing this for securing livelihood. In fact, it has made their life financially comfortable. According to Jonaki Boro<sup>17</sup> in her seven-member family her husband the only earner prior to her adoption of this profession, who as a daily wage laborer earns only Rs.70.00, Now she earns daily Rs.100.00 to Rs.

130.00 a day by selling rice beer. Also she is rearing two pigs using the waste of the rice beer within the family. The women have developed a complete professional approach to this trade and improved their family economic condition. Woman like Rambha Boro<sup>18</sup> has acquired landed property in town areas purchased agricultural land in addition to the consumer durable goods like TV, refrigerator, music system, motorbike etc. and has given a different touch to her family. Dhireswary Boro<sup>19</sup> opines that she had contributed Rs.25, 000.00 in her daughter's marriage, spent around Rs.36, 000.00 for renovation of her residence, purchased bicycles for her school going son and daughter. Thus, out of this income they are not only managing the day-to-day household expenses but also creating permanent assets. Moreover, they have opened bank account also (Group Recurring Deposit scheme) where they deposit a fixed amount monthly. In the process, they themselves collect the raw materials from the market and they themselves also do disposal of finished products. In other words, they are now self- dependent, self-sufficient and no longer confined within the private domain. Rather, they have achieved a position to share in the decision-making process of the household affairs like purchasing land, marriage of family members, construction of house etc. Even, these family decisions, at times influence the social decision at the village level issues. During the survey, it is found that women in Kekohati, Bhatkuchi, Deulkuchi, Dholkuchi and Khundikar<sup>20</sup> villages have undertaken this venture but in Jhargaon village it is very rare and in Patkijuli village, it is not found at all. In Jhargaon,<sup>21</sup> it is gathered that that only a very few families practice this trade and that too in a very small scale. During survey, they did not admit their commercial involvement in rice beer trade. The women activities has been seen taking active role in maintain or running her family by involving these activities in the society.

### ***Self Help Group and the Bodo women***

So when we talked about women role in the economic prospect the women Empowerment is the vital step to be taken particularly in the context of Indian rural set up. Indian rural women are unorganized and powerless individual with the double burden of being women and also being poor.<sup>22</sup> They do not have access to property in most of the Indian cultural context. Therefore, without a change in these conditions of their life, empowerment of women is not possible in general. Since the early eighties, the Government of India and different NGOs have adopted various programmes towards women's development by eradicating poverty. Its aim is to raise the socio-economic status of women, particularly in the rural areas. In this direction, self help Group has emerged as a very successful strategy to look into the matter that the women are facing in the economic development. Today, SHG movement is being increasingly accepted as a tool for economic development leading to empowerment of women in rural India.<sup>23</sup> SHGs are voluntary associations of women or men residing in the same locality, formed democratically without any political association or affiliation. It is based on group approach, mutual trust, manageable small homogenous groups; spirit of thrift and need based lending with nominal interest rate, skill training, capacity building and empowerment. In this voluntary association members mutually agree to contribute to a common fund that can be lent to the members on need-based basis for productive purpose. Normally, a group is confined in 10-20 members. They have regular meetings where every member compulsorily remains present. Each group adopts certain activities considering the financial viability aspects. In many occasions one member becomes the member of different SHGs. Thus the SHGs can bring about



significant changes in the economic status of the participating members<sup>24</sup> Moreover, with the changes of economic status, the dependency factor diminishes and they can rise up to a status level of sharing in the decision making process in the family as well as in the society.

SHG activities are found very active in all the villages covered in the present study. The main economic programmes adopted by different SHGs in these areas are weaving and sericulture, poultry farming, pig rearing, honeybee farming and financing small business. But all these activities are not equally popular in all the villages. Weaving and sericulture is consistently remaining as the most popular way of earnings amongst all the SHGs in different villages whereas poultry and piggy has a low profile acceptance with different SHGs, although it is very commonly found in traditional Bodo society. According to the respondents, it is because of the emergence of these trades amongst the non-Bodo population even in very commercial manner, where small SHGs cannot stand as competitor. Nevertheless, it is an important indicator of economic awareness amongst the Bodo women, who are working as member of different SHGs. so in this new strategy of economic activities the Bodo women found actively involved and have been seen successful in handling this new strategy of economic activities in her society. But in some areas SHG is not found surviving and only the reasons lies behind is that they gave up or some members are shifted to the different places, and also due to the proper communications and dedication. They are conscious about earning of their own so that individual earning bring them an empowered status at per with the man folk in the family as well as social life. This so called new strategy of the Bodo women in the economic activities in which such result is found positive in building the greater economic interest of the Bodo women society.

### ***Male-headed family and the women role***

While discussing the economic role of Bodo women in the family life, according to the source, no female-headed family was found.<sup>25</sup> In a traditional Bodo society, the practice of female-headed family is not seen. As the customary law permits widow remarriage either with the brother of the deceased husband or with unmarried or married able person, the situation of a female-headed family normally does not come.<sup>26</sup> In the light of the changing perspective of economic role and activities of the Bodo women as mentioned, it is observed that the Bodo women have adopted a new role where they have been able to convert some of their traditional productive works to profitable commercial scheme. For this purpose, coming out of the household, they have formed certain socio-economic organization like the Self Help Groups as we have already discuss above, Vegetables vendors, small tea stall, hotel for fooding, meat vendors, sweet vendors etc, which they are actively doing the daily earning and bringing economic stability of the family,<sup>27</sup> but in doing so they have not disturbed their normal role of housewife but at the same time achieved a new status of earning member of the family. This enhanced them to rely on themselves economically without the support of their male counterpart. These factors have significantly contributed to the empowerment as well as present economic activities of the Bodo women in the society.

## Conclusions

Overall analysis of the above discussion in brief shows that the contribution of Bodo women in the process of economic prospect be it a traditional way or the contemporary strategy, has been greatly praiseworthy. The experiences of women and their contribution to the society have been still neglected notable. Women substantially contributed in the building of equal development in the society especially in the economic activities as per the paper is concerned yet their status was not at par with the men in some sort of matter. Even the customary laws did not always conduce to the interest of women, baring a few cases. However, the Bodo society witnessed a process of transition in colonial period effected by various socio-economic forces. To some extent Bodo women became conscious about their capabilities in a various ways which the major activities regarding the economic prospect which is seen in the Bodo society, and more importantly they became an agent of socio-economic change by involving themselves in exercising various economic activities. 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 for which that is why the Bodo women have the maximum activities performed by her in the family and shoulder the various economic prospect to bring a healthy family in traditional way of life. Therefore, the economic activities of the Bodo women cannot be left behind while building the history of Bodo society.

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Singh Nageswar Singh Shweta., *Women Empowerment and Globalization*, RBSA Publishers, Jaipur, 2013, pp.6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Bhattacharya P. C., *A Descriptive Analysis of the Boro Language*, Guwahati University, 1997, p.16.

<sup>3</sup> Khonglah, C., *Women in North-East India*, compiled and edited, Akansha Publishing, Delhi, 2008, article of Binoy Kumar Brahma, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Laithi Brahma age-60, Occupation-House wife, Vill- owabari, PO-Dist-Kokrajhar, Assam on 12-01-2020

<sup>5</sup> On Observaton by the researcher and since the researcher is also belonging to the same community which has vital knowledge on these issues, personal recorded.

<sup>6</sup> Endle.S., *The Kacharis*, Low Price Publications, Delhi, 1997,p.12.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Bisari Muchahary, Age-70, Occupation-Housewife, vill-angtihara, PO-Tetliguri, Dist- Kokrajhar, Assam, on 16-09-2019.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Endle S., *op. cit.*, pp.13-14.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Chidey Basumatary, age- 80, Occupation- Housewife, Vill- Chandana Borigaon, PO- Udaguri, Dist- Udalguri, Assam, on 23-03-2018

<sup>11</sup> Endle S., *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, P.19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>14</sup> Addi is a Bodo word which means –borrowing anything from someone and returning the same thing as a share with mutual understanding between them.

<sup>15</sup> Endle S., *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Narzi Bhaben, Boro kacharini somaj arw Harimu, Chirang Publication Board, Kajalgaon, 2006, p.181.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Jonaki Boro –age 45, Occupation-House-wife, Vill-Tengapara, PO-& Dist – Kokrajhar, Assam, on 26-10-2018

<sup>18</sup> Interview Rambha Boro, age 50, Occupation- Housewife one who sell Rice beer, Vill- Barama, PO- Barama, Dist- Baksa, Assam on 20-6-2017.

<sup>19</sup> Interview Dhireswar Boro, age 40, Occupation- Housewife, Vill-Romanpara, PO- Titaguri, Dist- Kokrajhar, Assam on 23-12-2018

<sup>20</sup> These Villages are found in the Baksa district under the Mushalpur sub-Division, Assam , observed and interview on 11-09-2015

<sup>21</sup> This Village is in Parkijuli, District Baksa, Assam observed and Interview on 11-09-2015

<sup>22</sup> Desai A.R.,*Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Prakashan pvt limited, Mumbai,reprint-2010,pp.256-257.

<sup>23</sup> Rao D. Pulla., *Gender Inequality and women's Empowerment*, Global research Publication, New Delhi, 2012,pp.254-256.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the Group members of the Self Help Group( Nerswn) located in Kokrajhar, Sudempuri, dist – Kokrajhar, Assam on 12-05-2019.

<sup>25</sup> Endle S.,op.,cit.,pp.11-14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,p.22.

<sup>27</sup> As i interview many vendors especially in the town of Kokrajhar, mostly vegetables vendors are run by the Bodo women.

