



RESPONSE OF BODO WOMEN IN BODOLAND MOVEMENT

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Prior to the establishment of British rule in India, the existence of the Bodo and other allied societies were on the verge of extinction. A social change was oriented to structural assimilation either to Hinduism or Islam. For centuries, tradition of structural assimilation as a process of social change remained as a popular tradition among the Bodo. The new condition initiated by British Government in India totally changed the traditional mindset of the people not only of the Bodo but also all sections of the people of India. Due to new liberal intellectual conditions set by the British rule, the Bodo people developed the sense of self-respect, identity consciousness of their society, pride and honour of their community and soon they reassert their community identities. They started to reassert their community identity by reviewing and restructuring their lost history, culture, tradition, custom and language etc.

Bodoland Movement:

The burden of leading the Bodo people towards a decisive stage in their quest for social, political, economic and cultural autonomy finally fell on the shoulder of young, dynamic and dedicated ABSU (All Bodo Students Union) leader, late Upendra Nath Brahma who is better known as '*Bodofa*' or '*Father of the Bodo*'. Under his leadership, the ABSU demanded Union Territory for the Bodo and other plains tribal on the northern part of Brahmaputra Valley. Thus in order to meet their legal demands the ABSU formally launched a vigorous movement on 2nd March 1987 for a separate state by holding mass rallies in all the district headquarters of the State¹⁰.

On 8th November, 1988 an umbrella organisation of the ABSU called Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) was formed to secure the support and participation of all sections of the Bodo society irrespective of their political affiliations. Other organisations that played significant roles during the Bodoland movement of the ABSU were the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AAWWF) which was later renamed as All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and the All Bodo Employees Federation (ABEF). Thus, ABSU-BPAC combined Bodo organisation received massive

support from every member of the Bodo community in the entire state. This movement continued for six years and came to an end formally with the signing of the Bodoland Accord on 20th February, 1993¹¹.

The decision of the ABSU to demand statehood in 1987 marked a new phase of the movement.. It was in this movement that a large number of Bodo women participated and acted in different capacities to meet the demand of the ABSU. According to them there were large number of protest rallies, meetings, dharna and strike by the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). But the movement of Roman script led by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had left the most enduring impression on the Bodo women. It was the first Bodo movement, in which the Bodo women, coming out from their homes, joined the script movement. The All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) leaders like Malati Rani Narzary, Hirabai Narzary, Supriya Basumatary, Mira Rani Basumatary and some others actively participated in the 'Roman script' movement led by the BSS and some them were arrested and punished by the Assam Police¹⁵.

Response of Bodo Women:

The participation of Bodo women in the earlier movement of the Bodos was very negligible. Bodo women's response was noticeable only from the movement for implementation of the Roman script launched by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in 1974. During the Bodoland movement of the ABSU, under the leadership of late Upendra Nath Brahma, the participation of the Bodo women became more prominent and it helped the movement in various ways.

As per the ABSU movement is concerned two trends noticeable: one trend is non violent protests through organising mass rallies, processions, protest rallies, hunger strike, road blocked, etc. and the other trend was violent in nature. All Bodo Students' Union established a military wing known as *Volunteer Force* to conduct armed struggle. It worked as an underground wing of the ABSU movement. Its activities were bomb blasts at public places, extortion of money, looting arms and ammunitions from armed forces and Police station, firing on security personnel etc. During the movement member of Volunteer Force worked as soldiers of the Bodos. The ABSU and BVF leaders felt it necessary to recruit women members in the VF to carry out the activities. The strong action was taken by the Government of Assam as well as the central Government against the members of the ABSU and BVF compelled to recruit women members. Since its inception, Bodo women were part and parcel of the movement. Therefore, they also felt it utmost necessary to help the activities of the ABSU and BVF for the cause of Bodos by joining armed struggle and accordingly joined in arms training. So from 1989 onwards, Bodo women joined in the Volunteers Force but they were not involved directly in action. They were given training for firing of rifles and pistols for their own safety. They were trained particularly to carry messages and other necessary articles. A sizable number of Bodo women from different areas in Assam received nursing training in the rural primary health centres for treatment of their members in case of emergency. But the recruitment of women in BVF was not consulted or informed by the BVF leaders. Therefore, some of the women leaders and members did not know the joining of Bodo women in BVF. So, the joining of Bodo women in the BVF was criticised by the AATWWF on the ground that the young Bodo girls in the BVF

might face problem in matter of their social marriage. In spite of criticism by the AATWWF, the BVF continued with their armed training to Bodo women¹⁶.

In 1986 under the initiative of the ABSU leaders like U.N. Brahma, S.K. Bwiswmutiari, Subash Basumatary and others, the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was formed. According to the constitution of the AATWWF, "It is considered expedient to form a federation of the women folk belonging to all tribal groups of entire Assam to unite themselves in a common platform through mutual understandings being imbibed in a common ideology with a view to fighting for ensuring rights and justice of the tribal women in the spheres of socio-economic, political, educational, cultural and for their emancipation from their socio-domestic drudgery and thereby to enable themselves in rendering services to the promotion welfare and preservation of the indigenous self identity of all tribal groups living in Assam"¹⁷.

As the time and situation changed, the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation also changed its name to All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in 1993. From its inception the ABWWF working towards the development of the Women folks and fully cooperated with the ABSU movement till the signing of Bodo accord. Till today the ABWWF is seriously working for the interest of women folks and particularly for the development of the social, economic, educational and cultural aspects to make the Bodo as a master race in the world. The new name of the organisation was more acceptable to them as its members belonged to the Bodo community. But it does not mean that they did not receive co-operation from the women of other tribal communities in Assam. The All Bodo Women Welfare Federation consisted of Central Committee, District Committee, Ancholik Committee and village council level Committee like ABSU. The Central Committee of ABWWF had very close co-ordination in order to carryout their activities throughout different parts of the state and accordingly cooperate the ABSU movement whole heartedly for the separate state of Bodoland¹⁸.

But due to strict action taken by the Government of Assam the ABSU leaders and its members did not have easy access to all the places of their mobilization. Therefore mobilization groups were formed at different levels and members were also taken from the ABWWF. Therefore, in areas where the members of the ABSU could not mobilise they became dependent on the members of ABWWF. According to U.N Brahma, foot march was the best way to mobilise people, and so in the beginning of the movement mobilization was done through foot march. He himself had covered a vast area of Kokrajhar, Chirang, and Bongaigaon etc. on foot. In such mobilization programmes the leaders and members of the ABWWF played a significant role in fulfilling the aims and objectives of the ABSU.

There were no any women leadership in the Bodo organisation prior to the formation of the All Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation (AATWWF) and All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF). The AATWWF was the first Bodo organisation in which a large number of women participated and most of them were educated.

Before 1987, hardly Bodo women leaders were there in any Bodo organisations. ABSU leader's like- U.N Brahma, S. K. Bwiswmutiary and few others were felt the needs and importance of women's

participation. U.N. Brahma had a strong belief that a society cannot develop without the progress of the women folk. In 1970s also a young dynamic PTCA leader Kanakeswar Narzary travelled extensively in north-east and met many tribal leaders and thereby felt the necessity of joining of women folks in the movement as well as in the organisation. Upendranath Brahma and Kanakeswar Narzary had very close relationship and due to their active initiation Bodo women organization formed in 1986 known as *the All Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation* (AATWWF). The first Bodo women leader, MLA and Minister of Government of Assam, Pramila Rani Brahma was also deeply influenced by Upendranath Brahma and had a close relationship with him. Till the signing of Bodoland accord she had dedicated her life in various ways for the cause of Bodoland movement launched by the ABSU. All the leaders and members of the AATWWF were directly or indirectly had a close relation with the ABSU, the BPAC and the BVF leaders as well as its members.

The most crucial period of Bodoland movement was started from 3rd March 1987 and lasted till 20th February 1993. During their six years movement period the ABSU along with its allied organizations carried out numerous activities throughout the state and the centre. In order to meet the demands of Bodo community Bodo women of different age groups also participated in the Bodoland movement. In the programme launched by the ABSU like mass rally, processions, dharna, picketing, rail and road roko etc. women of different age groups participated in huge number. At organizational level also the participation of women can be identified. Pramila Rani Brahma, the first leader of the Bodo women, deserves a special mention in this regard. Being a close associate of Upendranath Brahma, she was very much inspired by him and under his guidance she founded the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) just before the launching of Bodoland movement by the ABSU.

Regarding the formation of AATWWF, P.R. Brahma said, "I have seen many protest movements since childhood such as the Udayachal and script movements. I never participated in those movements. I have seen how people were exploited and betrayed by their leaders. At that time I was requested to form a women's welfare organization by dynamic leaders like Upendranath Brahma and Sansuma Khungur Bwiswmutiary. Accordingly, on 14th July 1986 the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation was founded"²⁰.

Malati Rani Narzary one of the top leader's of AATWWF had been participated in various protest rallies, picketing etc, organised by Bodo leaders. According to her, the growing atrocities on the Bodo women provoked her to establish a women organization through which the injustice done on the Bodo women can be protested on a large scale. Prior of the ABSU and the AATWWF the Bodo women were not involved in any organizational activities. Malati Rani Narzary was also a close associate with S. K. Bwiswmutiary and Upendranath Brahma; so she was inspired a lot by them in forming a women organization. She was a young, energetic, courageous lady and being an executive member of the ABSU, she had participated and co-operated in various ways. Besides, she was also the founder secretary of the Plains Tribal Women's Welfare Association.

In 14th July 1986, first general meeting of the AATWWF was held at Kokrajhar under the active initiation of ABSU top leaders like UN Brahma and SK Bwisumutiary. In the said meeting a large number of women folks of different districts irrespective of age groups, participated and an executive body was

also formed in order to carryout various activities of the AATWWF. Women leaders like Pramila Rani Brahma, Malati Rani Brahma, Supriya Rani Brahma, Hira Rani Brahma, Umarani Basumatary, Kamali Rani Basumatary, Latika Hajowary, Meera Basumatary, etc. were present. Thus the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation was established in 1986 under the initiative taken by the leading the ABSU leaders. The aim of this organization was to make aware the tribal women for the development and welfare of the tribal people. In this regards, the contribution of Pramila Rani Brahma as a founder president of the AATWWF is remarkable in bringing the backward tribal women in a single platform and maintaining one of the leading organisation of the tribal women²¹.

Thus, under the leadership of Pramila Rani Brahma the AATWWF mobilised one village to another to bring tribal women to a single platform to fight against the injustice as well as for the welfare of the Bodo people. In the beginning they mobilised the entire Kokrajhar district and founded district committee and Ancholic Committee in order to carryout their activities. According to the information given by some of the AATWWF leaders, in the initial stage the AATWWF did not get good response from the tribal women. But due to the frequent mobilization and hard work done by some of the central AATWWF leaders they were influenced and ultimately a large number of women belonging to Boro, Garo, and Rabha came forward to co-operate with the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF).

According to the information given by one of the founder member of the AATWWF Darrang district, before the establishment of the AATWWF, Darrang District a number of meeting and discussion was held in various areas of Darrang district. Thus, finally after long debate and discussion Darrang District AATWWF was founded in 20th August, 1986. Prior to the establishment of the AATWWF, Darrang district, some leaders of Darrang District ABSU mobilised for the formation of women organisation for the cause of Bodo society and for the upliftment of Bodo women. Besides the mobilisation along with the AATWWF central leader's one village after another, they met the Bodo women intellectuals and requested them to lead the organisation from the front for the cause of women welfare of the Bodo society. In the mean time the ABSU leader Upendranath Brahma announced that they were launching a fresh movement for separate state of Bodoland and solicited women's participation. According to their opinion most of the Bodo women are illiterate and backward so it was not easy to approach and bring them in such organization. Therefore this task was a challenging one and had to be done by educated women only. According to the AATWWF, the ABSU movement would not be successful without the active participation of women folks. The AATWWF leaders highlighted the importance of women in the family and in the society.

Organizational Role of Bodo Women:

The All Assam Tribal Women Welfare Fedaration (AATWWF), later changed to the All Bodo Women Welfare Fedaration (ABWWF) had remarkable contribution in organising the Bodo people as well as in taking care of the ABSU and the BVF members during the Bodoland movement. In the initial stage; as a women organisation they took up the issues of responsibility of mother in taking care and educating their children, family planning, health and hygiene, eradication of drink and drugs from the society, effect of polygamy etc ²⁴.

In the Bodo society, some evil practices existed which generally brought problems in the progress of women. One such practice was addiction of male member of the family to country liquor. Due to the addiction there are many unwanted problems take place in the families, in the villages and in the society. Therefore, beating wife was a regular nature of backward poor Bodo family. In the early part of their settlement polygamy was also prevalent in the society. It was a normal practice of the rich men marrying more than one wife in that period. Thus the activities of ABWWF received wide appreciation of the rural people. They tried to help the rural women in various ways. According to the information given by some of the core members of the AATWWF, they organised a number of meetings and formed committees in many areas of different part of Assam in order to bring awareness about the evil practices carried out by the Bodos and its impact on the Bodo society which hampered the progress of Bodo women.

During the ABSU movement, the Assam Police, CRPF and Army personnel raid the Bodo villages in search of the ABSU activists but they often targeted the innocent Bodo women. Besides that, most of the state police had the habit of stealing valuable items like ornaments made of gold and silver, money, watch, radio, tape recorder and torch light etc. To protect women from various atrocities made by police personnel, village women were advised to stay in groups during any police or army operation in their respective villages. They were trained by the AATWWF leaders to handle the cases even of molestation or rape. They were also instructed to bring the victims to the civil hospital and state dispensary for medical examination so that filing of the FIR would be convenient for them.

In the early period of the ABSU movement there was critical situation in various districts of Assam. Due to the different ideology between the supporters of the ABSU and the PTCA there were incidents of arson and clashes in different parts of the state in 1987- 88. Thus the AATWWF members devoted much of their time to resolve the misunderstandings between two rival groups. Due to the differences between two groups, the ABSU members and supporters had no access to some of the places in the state and in this situation the AATWWF members came forward to cooperate and to rescue the ABSU. Besides, the members of AATWWF were also assigned the job of supplier and cooks for the ABSU members. The ABSU and Volunteer Force members always moved in groups and never stayed in one particular place. It was the duty of the district and sub-division level members of the AATWWF to keep constant touch with them wherever they stayed for the night. However, staying in those camps during night was completely prohibited for women. In that way the members of the ABSU depended a lot on the AATWWF members for organising people and keeping communication between common people and the ABSU members for the cause of Bodoland.

In case of police or sudden army raids in any village, they rushed to protect the innocent villagers. In case of arrest of innocent person they forced them to release him or her. They were instrumental in minimising atrocities on women by armed forces. For example, the Bhumka rape case of Kokrajhar was successfully carried out by the AATWWF and the culprits were punished. On 25th and 27th January 1988, the women of Bhumka area of Kokrajhar were raped repeatedly by the Assam police personnel. The AATWWF came to know the incident on 28th January and brought the victims to Kokrajhar district court. But the then government tried to hide this heinous crime done by Assam police. The then government did not take action against the police who were involved with the incident though there was a hue and cry of

the AATWWF and ABSU. After sometimes, the then Chief justice of Guwahati High Court, G.M. Lodha invited the petitioners to submit an affidavit on the Bhumka rape case. On behalf of the victims the AATWWF took the initiative and submitted an affidavit to Guwahati High Court. Many other women organisations like YWCA, Nari Mukti Sangathan and Pradesh Mahila Congress Samiti supported the AATWWF in organising a protest rally at Guwahati Judge Field. On the basis of their appeal Mr. Justice G.M. Lodha and Justice J. Sangma jointly gave a 22 page judgment on 14/03/1088. Similarly, AATWWF members handled such cases successfully in other places well²⁶.

Bodo Volunteers Force and role of Bodo Women: -

In order to fulfil ABSU Bodoland movement number of organization of the Bodos came forward to cooperate the ABSU movement. Among them the Bodo Volunteers Force was one of the allied military wings of the ABSU. So in order to carryout their activities they need number of messengers to carry secret messages. A sizeable number of AATWWF members of different District Committees were involved in this service. The BVF specially trained them to perform their activities. Carrying special messages and money for ABSU and Volunteers Force were also a part of their service. Sometimes they had also to accompany the ABSU and VF leaders in their journey by train/ by bus in order to hide the suspects of the police or armed forces.

Nursing Training: -

A good number of Bodo women were given nursing training by doctors in different parts of the district in primary health centres. During 1989-90, not less then 50/60 girls from each district received nursing training. The raining was based on courses, which are actually given to the general nurses. Courses are as follows: It includes learning to bandage on different parts of the body, stop bleeding, take out bullets from any parts of the body etc. They were taught to identify the causes of disease, nature of treatment and the names of medicine used for diseases like - diarrhoea, fever, viral infections, allergy, malaria and jaundice etc. Training was given to handle the burnt cases, injuries, fractures, bleeding, unconsciousness, vomiting, acute pain, muscular pain. Use and function of different surgical instruments, techniques of pushing saline water, etc. were also taught²⁷.

The motive of such training was to help the ABSU and Bodo Volunteers Force activists in time emergency. The trained girls were instructed that whenever they would come to know about injured persons and activists, they must nurse them. These trained girls proved very affective during the long Bodoland movement by the ABSU. Some of the AATWWF leaders, who were the head of nursing team, told that during the peak years of the movement (1989-1991) most of the doctors left their jobs and the primary health centres of the Bodo dominated areas were running without doctor and medicine. At that time the trained girls were helpful to the poor common people. Apart from nursing the activists they performed duties of doctors.

By knowing the gravity of the movement, the leaders of the ABSU and the VF felt the need of arms training to the Bodo girls. Thus from 1989 onwards, girls began to receive training in the use of weapons. Such training was given in the remote places of Bodo dominated areas. The motive of weapon training to them was to provide measures for their safety. There was no immediate plan to bring them to action but they were trained in such a position that they can face to any situation.

In order to mobilise the common peoples, the ABSU and the BVF leaders were always on move from one place to another in different parts of Assam. Besides, in order to avoid the police and army personnel, they usually moved from one village to another village in small groups. Thus it was the responsibility of the AATWWF members to take care of and arrange food and shelter for them. Sometimes, the AATWWF members went to hideouts to prepare food for them. The Volunteers Force members entered villages during night time. They spread themselves to various houses at the time of food for the advantage of logistics as well as to avoid being arrested all together.

Various activities Organized by Bodo Women: -

The AATWWF organised number of seminars on the theme of '*Women*' during the Bodoland movement. Apart from the local educationists the executive members of the AATWWF were regular speakers in such seminars. The intensity of women's participation is understandable from the theme of seminars and speeches. It is believed that none of the previous movements demanded women's participation so clearly and deliberately.

Besides seminar, the AATWWF also organised some conferences and conventions. The conferences were held after two years when new committees were formed. The conventions were held in alternate years. Such committee was usually formed with the local members though some central committee members were also incorporated. There were two types of sessions in conferences and conventions. One was open session and the other was delegates' session. The open session was open to all Bodo and non-Bodo whereas delegates' sessions were closed door session and restricted to the delegates only. The delegate selected the executive members of central committee in such sessions. The general secretaries of various sessions submitted annual reports in delegates' sessions. Important resolutions adopted in the delegates' sessions were read out in the open session. Generally a conference was held for 3 days and Scholars in different fields were invited to open sessions for delivering lectures. Cultural programmes were also part of everyday programme. These conferences and conventions were mainly organised and participated by women.

Thus, the Bodo Women contributed in many ways during the Bodoland movement initiated by the ABSU in order to maintain unity and integrity, feelings of brotherhoods and co-operation not only among the Bodos but also among different castes, creeds, sexes, religions etc. living in Assam. Therefore, participation and contribution of Bodo women in the Bodoland movement should be appreciated and given important place in the history of Bodoland movement. Politics, governance, movements etc, are men's domain in the world view of the Bodos as it is so with many other communities in India. If the men need the women to participate in a movement it is still within the extended domestic domain which includes cooking food for the male activists, weaving *aronai* and offering it to the males, nursing them if they are injured and the like. But when it comes to position and honour in the society, they are always placed in the second line in the row. They also never demand any position and status or price for the services they have rendered. They have accepted their services as a service demanded by the society or by the community.

According to Swami Vivekananda, “There is no chance of welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly only on one wing.” We can examine this statement in Indian context, where almost 50% of population are women. Therefore, their socio-economic and political development can not be neglected.

The average representatives of women in politics all over the world are mere 12.5%. Even the advance countries like the US and the UK have not more than 6% women representatives. India the largest democracy in the world has mere 7% of women representation. Besides the demand of 33% reservation for women in parliament and state legislatures is yet to be fulfilled. In case of Bodoland also women are completely ignored in politics. In Bodoland, so far no record of women candidate participating for parliamentary election after six decades of Indian independence. In the Assam Assembly also we find only one Bodo women legislator during the ABSU Bodoland Movement. After the creation of BTC we find two legislators in the state Assembly and till today we have only two women legislators. In Bodoland Territorial Council Assembly, there are 46 member seats and so far two term of election have been held but surprisingly not a single woman has been elected or given party ticket by various political parties. From this it is understood that Bodo women are not getting due importance in Bodo politics. But if we look at the Bodoland movement, we find that the Bodo women played significant role and shared equal responsibilities with their male counterpart for the cause of Bodoland. But they have been completely ignored by their leaders as well as by their political parties in case of power, policies and decision making etc.

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