



# From Marginalized To Mobilized: The Participation Of Bodo Women In Politics

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## Abstract

This paper explores the continuum journey of Bodo women in political participation, charting their progression from historical marginalization to active and influential roles in socio-political movements. Grounded in the broader framework of political engagement and India's democratic ideals, the study underscores the contributions of Bodo women to India's freedom struggle and the preservation of their cultural heritage. Their efforts are contextualized within the evolving aspirations of the Bodo community for autonomy and self-determination. It throws a light into the significant leadership roles of Bodo women, particularly through different organizations and analysis of its implications for women's empowerment. It further investigates grassroots initiatives aimed at addressing systemic social, economic, and cultural disparities while fostering educational and leadership opportunities for women. By situating Bodo women as catalysts for transformative change, this paper illuminates their indispensable role in advancing the socio-political aspirations of their community and shaping the broader political landscape of the region.

## Introduction

Political Participation alludes to the operation and involvement of individuals to impact and influence the decision-making process of the government. Political participation represents array of activities envisioned and intended to influence public policy at all levels and all forums voluntarily undertaken by the public. It includes a far-reaching behavior that allow people to express their outlook, prescribe for their interests, and behave responsible to the functioning of a political system. India, with its ancient roots and rich cultural heritage, stands as a relatively young republic in the modern world. As one of the largest democracies globally, it occupies a unique position. The Indian Constitution was crafted to incorporate and uphold the core principles of equality, liberty, and justice. These guiding principles were meant to create a society.

In the contemporary times, there has been growing recognition of the importance of women in effective political participation. James Mill said, "Condition of women in a society is an index of its place in civilization" and there is indeed no argument in his opinion even today. In the present-day context, the intercontinental arena is expected to focus and concentrate their efforts and resources in the challenges of the women with the intention of integrating in social, economic, political activities. Though women are almost half of the total population as well as workforce of the contemporary world, they are deprived of their legitimate rights in all respects like wages, education, political participation, socio-economic privileges, religious matters and in the worst cases even in respect of the occurrence of life and birth at the pretext of the biased perception that women are weak, inefficient and vulnerable sections of the society. Despite the ambitious vision of its core principles, the journey toward achieving true equality for women remains fragmented.

## Objectives of the Present Study:

The present study was conducted keeping the following objectives in view:

1. To examine the extent and nature of women's participation in Bodo politics.
2. To analyze the status and evolution of women's rights within the context of the changing social framework.
3. To assess the role of political parties in promoting and safeguarding women's rights.
4. To identify and explore the specific areas of women's political rights within the Bodoland Territorial Region.
5. To evaluate the impact of grassroots initiatives and civil society efforts on empowering Bodo women politically.
6. To explore the influence of cultural and traditional norms on the political participation of Bodo women.
7. To highlight success stories of Bodo women leaders as a source of inspiration and motivation for future participation.
8. To provide recommendations for fostering an inclusive and equitable political environment for Bodo women.

## Methodology

This analytical study adopts the descriptive method, utilizing secondary data as the primary source of information. The data and relevant details were gathered from various published books, academic journals, and reputable internet sources, regional magazines, published research papers and articles, etc.

## Historical Overview of Bodo Women in Politics

After the country gained independence, the Bodo community in Assam began to realize that autonomy for areas predominantly inhabited by Bodos was essential to preserving their distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Not only did they realize that having greater self-governance would not only safeguard their traditions but also foster the socio-economic development of their region. The demand for autonomy grew as they felt that administrative control over the Bodo dominated areas would enable them to illuminate on issues targeted to their community, leading to better opportunities for overall socio-economic progress.

Although their contributions are often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives, the Bodo community played a significant role in India's freedom struggle mainly as protestors, organizational leaders and social reformers etc. Their contributions—ranging from active participation in protests and movements like the Quit India Movement, to cultural defiance and silent yet powerful form of protests. The Bodos being forest-dwelling communities, strongly opposed the British colonial forest policies that restricted their traditional rights and access to forest resources, beyond that, resistance against colonial forest policies, participation in Satyagraha, Civil Disobedience, protests against British goods, etc., also were pivotal actions that galvanized the Bodo tribe and stirred into an action for the struggle for India's independence. Another significant form of resistance was 'the cultural defiance' by the Bodo tribe. They employed their indigenous art, literature, and folklore to safeguard their cultural heritage and counter colonial domination, thus indirectly fostering a wider anti-colonial movement. Their cultural practices became a subtle yet impactful and influential form of protest.

The Indian freedom struggle was defined not only by the prominent male leaders but also by the indomitable spirit of countless women who participated actively, often at great personal sacrifice. Among these unsung heroines, Bodo women played a paramount role in resisting British colonial rule and contributing to the broader national movement. While their stories often remain overshadowed by those of their male counterparts, their courage, resilience, and determination were pivotal in shaping the course of the freedom struggle in Assam and beyond. One such woman was **Bhadreswari Boro**, who hailed from Mogalbesha village in Chopai Mouza. She actively participated in the freedom struggle during the years 1930-1932. Another prominent figure was **Bimala Boro**, from Borongabari village. Bimala took part in the independence movement and later became known in the region for her contribution to the national struggle where her efforts were formally acknowledged by the Government of Assam, which honoured her on the occasion of the Quit India movement's anniversary on 9 August 1993. A further example of Bodo women's participation in the freedom movement is that of **Jaluki Kachari**, a courageous woman from Tezpur. Jaluki joined the Quit India movement of 1942, when India was in the midst of one of the most momentous and intense phases of its fight for independence. Tragically, during one of the protests, she was shot in the arm, an injury that crippled her for life. Despite the severe consequences of her participation, Jaluki's unwavering spirit became an embodiment of the sacrifices made by many women during the struggle. After independence, she was granted a pension in recognition of her sacrifice, and she breathed her last in 1964, leaving behind a legacy of resilience, courage, and patriotism.

## Bodo People's Struggle for Self-Determination

The Bodos, the aboriginal and one of the prominent tribes of North-East India, endured intense political, social, and cultural aggression throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. These struggles resulted in crisis of their survival of the tribe. Over time, it led to different phases of movements and struggle by the Bodos for their assertion to protect their rich culture, language, tradition, history and land. The Bodoland Movement, galvanized by the visionary Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma, gained significant momentum, eventually leading to the establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. While this marked a step forward, it fell short of fulfilling the Bodos' aspirations for complete autonomy and self-governance. As a result, the demand for the creation of a separate Bodoland state has remained a central focus for the Bodo people. This movement has persisted for over fifty years, with the Bodo community continuing to actively advocate for the establishment of a state that fully recognizes and safeguards their identity, rights, and development. The ongoing struggle reflects their unyielding commitment to securing a better future for themselves and their generations to come.

In the pre-Independence period, the Bodo community perceived itself as marginalized and deprived of equitable representation in administrative roles, access to privileges and other acquisition of rights under British governance. Before Independence, the Bodos were bereft of distinct and robust organizations, and like other tribal communities, they primarily struggled over shared socio-economic issues. In 1933, the tribal communities of the Assam plains collectively established the Tribal League, marking the first political organization for the region's tribes. During this period, there were no individual political bodies representing specific tribes; instead, all plains tribes worked in unison to protect their common socio-cultural, economic, and political interests. The Bodos pursued their struggles from this unified platform. However, post-Independence, numerous exclusive Bodo organizations emerged, independently championing the community's rights. In the interim phase around the independence, the Bodos remained peripheral, with sparse participation in the organized activities led by Assamese students. However, it was mostly after the 1950's to address their socio-economic stagnation and to assert their political rights, the tribe began to organize themselves both socially and politically. This growing consciousness among the educated elite of the community fostered a heightened awareness of their distinct identity, which eventually culminated in the establishment of various organizations.

In the post-Independence era, numerous Bodo organizations emerged, bringing their aspirations and grievances into the national spotlight through persistent activism and agitation. These entities became a conduit for articulating the Bodo community's demand for social, political, and economic empowerment. Early efforts were marked by the formation of bodies such as **the Assam Bodo Chatra Sanmilan (1918)**, **All Assam Plains Tribal League (1933)**, and **Bodo Sahitya Sabha (1952)** a literary organisation (also known as Boroni Tunlai Aphant) which is a Bodo Literary club, **founded by elites of the community**. After subsequent decades saw the rise of influential groups like the **All-Bodo Students' Union (1967)**, **Plains Tribal Council of Assam (1967)**, and more assertive factions such as **the Boro Security Force (1986)**, **Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (1993)**, **and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (1996)**, **Bodoland Demand Legislative Party (2001)** and so on. Through these organizations, the Bodos endeavoured to uphold their rights, often compelling national attention to their cause. The All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) is another important organisation among the Bodos, consistently leading and driving all major agitations spearheaded by the Bodos. It is an umbrella organization for Bodo students and youth, with a reach that spans across the globe, encompassing Bodo populations wherever they are found. These organizations have enabled the Bodo community to engage more actively in Assam's electoral politics. A central focus of these groups has been the demand for autonomy for the Bodos within Assam. As a result, understanding Bodo leadership and their participation in electoral politics is crucial to comprehending their political evolution. This chapter aims to analyse the involvement of the Bodos in the state's electoral politics and their leadership development, tracing this involvement from the colonial period to the present day. By examining these political movements, we can better understand the role of the Bodos in shaping Assam's political landscape and their ongoing struggle for autonomy and self-determination. Bodo women have equally borne social responsibilities in all aspects during the Bodoland Movement aspiring for social, economic and political identity. Even prior to the movement, Bodo women have been keeping up the huge challenges of preserving rich cultural heritage and tradition of the tribe and carrying forward the legacy of our proud fore-fathers with the past glory of rich and civilization and history.

## The Political Evolution of Bodo Women

Bodo women have traditionally been integral to agricultural labour, household management, and local economy, yet their involvement in political decision-making, particularly in village assemblies, has been largely absent. The political deliberation typically includes only men, and women participate only in specific circumstances, such as when they are directly involved in a dispute or called as witnesses in legal matters such as protests and rallies. Historically, the political and social roles of women in the Bodo community have been shaped by cultural norms that relegated women to domestic and economic responsibilities while keeping them at the periphery of formal governance. However, this dynamic began to shift significantly in the 1980s, spurred by changing socio-political movements and the emerging voice of women's advocacy within the Bodo community.

In 1986, a transformative event took place in the form of the founding of the All-Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF). This organization, though its name suggested a broader tribal focus, was largely influenced and dominated by Bodo women from its inception. The establishment of this federation marked the beginning of a more organized and vocal presence of women in social and political advocacy. The AATWWF sought to address various concerns, including the welfare of women, education, health, and legal rights, while also working to enhance their representation in political and social spheres. However, the political landscape for the Bodo community underwent significant changes in the early 1990s. In 1993, the signing of the Bodo Accord led to the establishment of the Bodoland Autonomous Council, which redefined the political boundaries and governance structures in the region. This shift had a direct impact on the status of women within the community. With the changing political environment, the AATWWF rebranded itself to become the All-Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in recognition of the new political realities. The formation of the ABWWF marked a critical moment in the empowerment of Bodo women. With the growing influence of Bodo women began to play a more active role in advocating for their rights, both within their community and in the larger political landscape of Assam.

On January 27, 2020, a peace accord was signed between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and key Bodo organizations, establishing the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) with greater executive and legislative powers. The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was expanded to 60 members and granted authority over Sixth Schedule areas. The BTR's boundaries redrawn to ensure a Bodo-speaking majority by adjusting districts. Bodoland also gained autonomous representation in national cultural and sports events, and the Bodo language, in Devanagari script, was made an associate official language of Assam. However, the efforts for Empowering Women in Bodoland Region in the urban and Grassroots level for Social and political change still continues. In the remotest corners of the region, dedicated efforts have been made to engage grassroots women from marginalized and downtrodden communities, including the Bodo and other tribal groups. These initiatives aim to create awareness about women's rights and foster their empowerment through meaningful programs that address a wide range of social, economic, and cultural issues.

One of the primary focuses of these programs is to highlight the importance of education in driving societal progress. Special attention is given to addressing social evils such as superstitious beliefs, witch-hunting, child marriage, school dropouts, child labour, and various forms of abuse. Awareness is also raised about the dangers of alcoholism, drug abuse, human trafficking, cybercrimes, domestic violence, and rape. These programs emphasize the urgent need to create a violence-free society by promoting work culture, employment generation, and economic development. They also seek to improve the socioeconomic conditions of poor tribal communities, fight corruption, and ensure that government welfare schemes reach the grassroots level. A critical aspect of these initiatives is educating indigenous tribes about their land rights under state land laws, ensuring their protection and preservation. Health-related issues are another significant focus area. Programs address maternal mortality, infant mortality, anaemia, malnutrition, and the importance of vaccination and healthy diets. They also highlight the necessity of maintaining hygiene among women and children, developing good physical and mental health, and ensuring access to clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. These health sensitization programs aim to empower women with knowledge to make informed decisions about their well-being. Furthermore, the awareness campaigns include discussions on key policies such as the Right to Information (RTI), Food Security, Right to Education (RTE), and Gender Equality. These discussions equip women with the tools to navigate legal frameworks and access resources for their welfare. Therefore, these initiatives extend beyond basic rights to encourage women to actively participate in preserving their language, literature, art, and culture. Women are ultimately motivated to engage in intellectual discourse, contribute to economic activities, and take up leadership roles in decision-making processes. By fostering women's participation in politics, these programs aim to empower them to assert their rights and become agents of change within their communities.

## Conclusion

Gender inequality refers to the systemic disparities and biases that result in unequal access to resources, opportunities, and rights based on gender. It manifests across various spheres, including education, employment, healthcare, and political participation, often marginalizing women and third gendered individuals. Rooted in cultural norms, historical prejudices, and institutional barriers, gender inequality perpetuates cycles of poverty, limits personal autonomy, and hinders societal progress. Despite significant strides in addressing this issue globally, achieving gender equality requires collective efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures, enact equitable policies, and promote a culture that values diversity and inclusion, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to thrive regardless of gender.

Patriarchal norms within tribal societies and external pressures and issues like exploitation, displacement, and lack of political representation hinder their progress. Addressing these challenges requires targeted initiatives to empower tribal women, ensuring their access to education, healthcare, and economic resources while safeguarding their rights and cultural identity in an evolving world.

Bodo women face significant hurdles in achieving meaningful political participation despite their vital roles in socio-political movements. Limited access to education, economic resources, and awareness of political rights further restricts their engagement. Structural barriers, such as underrepresentation in political institutions and inadequate government initiatives targeting women's empowerment, exacerbate these challenges. Additionally, cultural expectations and societal pressures discourage active involvement in politics. Overcoming these obstacles requires sustained efforts to promote gender equality, education, and grassroots initiatives that empower Bodo women to take on leadership roles and influence policy-making processes.

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