

Chapter 5

Women Participation in Bodo Movement

Participation of women in movement is nothing new. Women continue to be a part of the resistance movement throughout the world. What is new is rediscovering their contribution to those movements. The foundation of political participation of women in India was laid during the Freedom movement. The selfless participation of large number of women had strengthened the movement. But gender equality was nowhere the agenda of Indian National movement. It was not the main thrust of the national movement. Either directly or indirectly large number of women participated in the freedom struggle. The contribution of women in getting freedom is noteworthy. They proved that women are capable of strengthening the political movement. The participation of women in freedom struggle had its impact on the society and family and on women themselves. Contemporary scholars are rewriting history of the past and searching for women's contribution to civilization. In the middle of 1960s, a few women of the United States drew attention of their friends and colleagues to the question of women's subordination. This opened a new space for women. At that time students of American universities were busy with many progressive movements: civil rights movements, protests against Vietnam War, agitation for equal opportunities for women and minorities, and against education policies. Many women participated in those movements and assisted their leaders/ husbands or colleagues and friends by collecting theoretical materials for their lectures and even drafting their lectures. This subordinate role of theirs made them radical in their ideology. In 1963 Betty Friedan published a book titled *The Feminine Mystique* which set in motion the second wave of feminism in the United States.

The American women's movement of 1960s was indebted to another writing on women, that is, Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which was published in 1949 and "considered to be the feminist canon".¹

This brought about two major contributions to academics:

- (i) it has emerged as a challenge to most established notions of the society, and
- (ii) it has drawn attention of many scholars to the need for relooking into the role of women in various historical events. From then onwards the scholars around the world felt the need for "women's studies" because it would help increase the knowledge on women.²

Existing literature on women suggest that women's conditions in the world are not similar. Studies on social movements show active participation of women right from 1789 when the French women demanded equal rights for women for the first time. During the period they hoped to bring about their own 'revolution' within the greater revolution by joining the struggle in the streets in Paris as well as in other places. This movement of the French women is described by Pollock as the first wave of feminism.

Women's participation in social movements in Asian and African countries is not embedded in Western feminism; it is instead linked with nationalist or socialist movements of those countries. Moreover, gender discrimination is neither the sole nor perhaps the primary focus of the oppression of the Third World women. The women activists of the Third World are more concerned with the problems of local people, racism, and economic exploitation. They are even critical of the term 'feminist' and use the word 'womanist'. Asian feminism, in particular, is an awareness about women's oppression and exploitation in family, at work and in society and conscious action by women (and men) to change the existing situation.³

Emancipation of Indian women begun with the Renaissance of Bengal. Indian women have also made substantial contribution to the freedom struggle of India. But in the list of women freedom fighters, tribal women of northeast India are rarely known. On the contrary, many tribal women were arrested during the Quit India Movement from the villages of Assam. The Tebhaga and Naxalite movements in Bengal, Sharecroppers' Movement in Assam, and various movements in other parts, of the region involved women but there are hardly any records of their participation. The few records that have begun to be known are found in Barthakur and Goswami, Devi, and Zehol.⁴ But it was due to the selfless participation of these invisible population these movements were successful.

Every human society is invariably characterized by social differentiations. Amongst such differentiations, gender based differentiation is one. This has been relatively more specific in earlier societies. Accordingly men and women were treated differently. They were assigned different roles and status. Men had the role of bread earning and protection of women and children. Women had the role of reproduction of heirs and home making. Historical records show that the position of Indian women varied through the ages. A historical understanding of status of women in early Indian society shows a declining trend in the position of women. The historical analysis of the position of women in ancient India shows that women did not share equal position with men. Women were recognized only as wives and mothers. Their position was as subordinate to men. The later movements like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism and Sikhism made certain efforts to improve the status of women. The Bhakti movement allowed women to undertake spiritual activities independently. It is the 18th century that is considered to be the darkest period in the status of women in India.

Educated women in America were largely successful in articulating the issue of inequality between men and women. This proliferated in later years and incorporated the

various experiences of women around the world. The struggle of feminists to bring changes in the position of women and their efforts to stop women's subordination and gender discrimination brought about significant changes. They, if anything, began reviewing and rewriting their contribution to historical events.

It was in Europe where Women's emancipation movements and women participation in class struggles started. It was due to that the concept of Liberation started in Europe. When the European women were enjoying the result of Liberal situation, their counterpart in Asia and Africa were still struggling to consolidate their position within the family itself. Maria Mies, writing on the activities of socialist women who participated in the French Revolution in 1789 and 1848, refers to the liberal feminists who wanted to bring change in women's position in the previous century. Mies has tried to understand the position of women after 200 years of their struggle for emancipation or liberation. It was believed that there was greater harmony of interests between proletarian men and proletarian women than between bourgeois women and proletarian women. This situation of socialist women is called 'conscious sacrifice', which created a point of ambiguity for the socialist women. Further the new left of 1960s, returned to the old questions which were asked by the socialist women one century back. The difference between the above two groups of activists is that the latter discovered that their individual problems had social causes and were shared by many other women. It was a new and liberating experience for them and they realized that they could have women as friends, whereas formerly, women were seen as potential competitors. The feminist movements in America, Holland, France, Belgium, and Germany brought about female solidarity, which was unknown to them before.

Namibian women too participated in the liberation struggle of Namibia since 1964. In the beginning it was very difficult for them to come out from home and maintain connection with other women. They were supposed to look after their children and domestic animals

besides cooking food. Many of them never visited the villages before the formation of South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) and its women's council. This organization brought significant changes in women's life. As a result, Namibian women were in diplomatic, military and political fronts. This movement made them conscious of their position in the society. They realized that they were oppressed both as 'Black' and as 'women'. Thus, they believed that the western women did not belong to the same status as they did and gave less stress on the 'agenda of equality of women with men', 'peace programmes' and 'women's development programme', of the feminists of Britain, West Germany and America. They offered such programmes in the International Congress of Women held at Copenhagen in 1980, not knowing the agenda of people's liberation struggle of third world countries.

The issues of women's emancipation in India under British colonial rule was, according to Jayawardena, closely linked with two important types of movements: one, the political movements to resist British rule, and the other, social reform movements. The people of all political ideologies participated in the freedom struggle of India. The women's wing of communists supplied food during the Bengal Famine and worked in different parts of Assam, present Bangladesh, Bihar and other places.

Mass participation of women in social movements in India was first noticed in 1905, when people of Bengal and other areas of India raised their voice against the division of Bengal. From that time onwards Indian women participated in several protest rallies, meetings and processions.⁵

From the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century a number of women's organizations were formed in India. Men established some of these organizations but they were a few in numbers. Most of the women's organizations like Bengal stree Mahamandal, National Council of Women in India, All India Women's Conference, etc. were dominated by rich and upper class women. These organizations took up issues of child

marriage, education for women, and Purdah. Some of the members of those organizations actively participated in the freedom movement. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani of Bharat Stree Mahamandal had regular connections with underground activists of Bengal and Bhikhaiji Rustom Cama was the first woman revolutionary to have regular connection with the revolutionaries of Paris. Bengal was the epicentre of armed struggles during independence movement in India. There were a number of organizations formed in the districts of undivided Bengal, which were run by women. Interviews, biographical notes and letters of many women show that many of them were followers of Gandhi and had participated in 'Satyagraha', and civil disobedience movements. Such women mostly came from the middle class background. Many female students of college and universities were attracted to armed revolution. Mandal has further observed that housewives from middle to old age also participated in Gandhi's non-violent movements. The underground women revolutionaries not only carried messages, arms and ammunitions from one place to another, provided money, food, shelter to the male revolutionaries, hid and smuggled weapons but also took part in direct action and for that some of them received trials/life term imprisonment. The in-depth study by Mandal shows that the status of armed women revolutionaries was lower than that of the women who participated in Gandhi's civil disobedience movements.

The Independence movement of India gave birth to many women leaders who participated in social reforms. According to Biswas most of them hailed from rich and famous families of India. Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani, Sarojini Naidu, Vijaylakshmi Pandit and Padmaja Naidu participated in the national politics in later years. Some European women also participated in the struggle for Indian Independence. They were Annie Besant, Mira Ben, Neli Sengupta, Sister Nivedita, etc.

The social reform movements of the nineteenth and the nationalist movement of the twentieth century emancipated women to some extent though the women of upper caste were

mostly benefited. The lower caste women who were marginalized due to caste bondage and gender specificities were less benefited from those movements.

Women of northeast India, specially tribal women of Manipur and Assam, have participated in the freedom struggle as well as in other movements.

A number of women's organizations were formed in Assam in post-independent India. These were: Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Mahila Sangha, Nari Mukti Sanstha, Sadau Asom Nari Sanstha, etc. These were associated either with leftist political parties or with other political parties. A large scale women's participation was noticed in the movement against illegal migrants in the state led by All Assam Student's Union in 1979. Women of all age groups and occupations went to the streets to protest against illegal migrants. But the women participants were later disillusioned as the leaders of this movement failed to solve their problems.

About women's movement in northeast India, a special mention must be made of the women of Manipur who organized themselves to protest against the consumption of country liquors and drugs. The role of women in social movements in Manipur can be traced back to the British period when Manipur was under monarchical system. Women's movements of Manipur are known as nupilan. It began in 1904. The second nupilan was held in 1939. The latter one was related to the scarcity of rice. The women revolted against the monarch and traders and petty women traders provided leadership. This movement was successful as the women activists compelled the monarch to change the policy of rice trading. In 1980s a woman's organization called *Meira Paibis* was formed in Manipur. The activities of this organization were different from the activities of the previous organization. Since 1970, some underground movements are also going on in Manipur. Many innocent youths suffered and got killed too. As a result the women of Manipur started to guard their sons and husbands from the harassment by the police and paramilitary forces. Side by side this organization

started handling the problems of liquor consumption and drug trafficking. In these movements the leadership came from urban women and from women traders but at present the women leadership is not necessarily confined to the women traders.

Assam is a land where women took part in every aspect of society - be it administration, cultural aspects since the ancient time. In the mediaeval period we seen woman like Phusehwarly Devi who took active part in Ahom politics and administration, princes Mulagbhoru, who fought with the Mughals for sovereignty of her country. In the same manner, the participation of woman in social and political movement is nothing new. Woman continues to be part of resistance movement throughout the world.

The participation of woman in socio political movements were restricted only some privileged section of society in early years. The social condition was not congenial for woman in general to take part in the political affairs of the society. Till the formation of 'All Assam Tribal Women Welfare Federation' (AATWWF), there was no organised platform for Bodo Woman participation in the socio political life. Before the formation of AATWWF, the Bodo woman had to participate under the banner of the Bodo Sahitya Shabha and All Bodo Students Union (ABSU).

But womens participation is not very easy to document for it is more often in disguised form. Be it in the field of economic activities or ethnic movements their participation is difficult to evaluate because the categories of evaluation are often male centric. In spite of all these limitations, I have travelled extensively in the Bodo dominated areas and interviewed a cross section of women participants. I, myself being a Bodo women, had the better access to the Bodo language and women who had participated in the movements could interpret their cause in better way than any other could have been done.

The AATWWF was formed in 1986 under the initiative of Sri Upendra Nath Brahma, the then president of ABSU. The main aims and objective of AATWWF was to form a

federation of the woman folk of all tribal group of entire Assam to unite in common platform through mutual understanding and common ideology. They aimed to stand and to ensure for rights and justice of tribal woman in spheres of socio-economic, political, educational, and cultural promotion and preservation for indigenous self identity. Thus, their participation in the in the Bodo Movement is not something unprecedented or unexpected. What is not known much before are the details of the nature and magnitude of their participation what follows is an attempt to fill up this gap.

Women's Participation

The Bodoland movement marked the beginning of a political awakening among the Bodo women. With the establishment of AATWWF, membership was open to all section of women. Large number of women from villages to towns had joined this organization as members. Pramila Rani Brahma was elected as the first president of AATWWF.

Prior to 1994 women's participation in the ABSU movement was negligible. It was more intense only after the movement for implementation of the Roman script launched in 1994. Alo (pseudo name), one of the prominent AATWWF members, was a close associate of Upendranath Brahma and took active part in mobilizing people on the foreigners' issue. At that time the latter was a university student and the former a student of Kokrajhar College. During the AASU movement and latter had a regular interaction with the student's union of the college. The students of this college were his close associates who later became active participants of the ABSU movement.

The ABSU movement exhibited two contradictory trends very clearly: non-violent protests through organizing mass rallies, processions, protest rallies, hunger strike, road blockade, etc. and the other trend was violent in nature. The ABSU established a military wing (ABSU VF) to conduct armed struggle. Dr. Phukan Chandra Bodo and, later Preamsingh

Bramha, were in-charge of this wing and were designated as 'chairman'. They were both former executive members of the ABSU. The Bodo Volunteer Force actively participated in the movement from the beginning. It worked as an underground wing of the ABSU. Its protests were violent in nature which included bomb blast at public places, dacoity to collect money and arms, firing on security personnel, etc. Its volunteers worked as soldiers for the Bodos during movement. In 1989, the ABSU and the VF leaders expressed the desire to train the women in arms. The women too wanted to join arms training and they did it. So, from 1989 onwards, women joined the Volunteer Force but they were not involved in 'direct action'. They were taught to use the rifle for their own safety. They were trained to carry messages and other necessary articles. Many girls from different areas received nursing training in the rural primary health centres. The idea of women joining the VF was not received well by some AATWWF members. This decision was criticized on the ground that they were doubtful about the marital future of such girls. Yet the ABSU and VF continued with their armed training to the women as well.⁶

The following organizations were formed in 1986 and 1988. The All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was a women's organization while the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) was the people's wing of the ABSU.

It was Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma who drew large number of women into the freedom struggle. In response to Upendra Nath Brahma's call large number of women joined in the movement. The AATWWF was formed under the direct initiative of the leaders like Upendranath Brahma, Sansuma Khungur Bwismithiary, Subhas Basumatary, and Deora Dekhereb Basumatary, of the ABSU. It is mentioned in the AATWWF's constitution: "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". The aims and objectives of the AATWWF were formulated. Accordingly, social ethnic and women issues of northeast Indian tribes were highlighted. But for the first six years it did not have its own programmes, instead it worked for the ABSU. One of the AATWWF members said: "We couldn't concentrate in the programmes of AATVVVVF only because we were busy solving more urgent problems of our country. The duty that was performed by us was more urgent".

The AATWWF changed its name to All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABVVVVF) in 1993. The new name was more acceptable to them as all its members belonged to the Bodo community. But this also meant it was not received very well by the women of other tribal communities in Assam.

The Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) was formed on the 8th November 1988 in Suryakhata, district Kokrajhar. In this Karendra Basumatary and Sansuma Khungur Bwismuthiary two former ABSU presidents were selected as Chairman and Chief Convener of the Committee. It was described as the people's wing of the ABSU (Moshahary 1993:9). The BPAC had village and village council level committee like the ABSU and AATWWF had. Those local committees played a significant role in inter-community affairs. Like the AATWWF the BPAC Central Committee worked hand in hand with the ABSU. Most of the BPAC central committee members were erstwhile executive members of the ABSU. The BPAC was finally dissolved after the formation of Bodo Autonomous Council.⁷

Women and Mobilization

Mobilization groups were formed on different levels, members of which were drawn also from the AATWWF. The ABSU did not have access to all areas. For mobilization in some such areas it was dependent on the members of AATWWF. The Mushalpur area of Nalbari was one such area. Upendranath Bramha considered foot march as the best way to mobilise people and in the beginning of the movement mobilization was done through this medium. Upendranath Bramha himself had covered a vast area of Kokrajhar on foot. In all such programmes the AATWWF members had played a significant role.

Women and Leadership

Not much is written on the leadership of the Bodo movement. Anil Boro writes that it is the movement of the middle class. It is observed that most of the leaders and activists of the BSS, ABSU, PTCA, PTCA(P), and the UTNLF belong to educated families.

They are teachers in schools and colleges, employees of government and semi-government organizations, banks, and private companies. Lawyers, artists, doctors, and naval officers were also found among the leaders.

Prior to the formation of the AATWWF there were hardly any women in leadership. The AATWWF was the first organization in which a large number of women participated. Among them were educated women in teaching profession.

The Bodo leaders came from different age groups. The leaders of organization like the PTCA, PTCA (P), BSS and the UTNLF were of middle or old age. Before 1987, very few women leaders were there in these organizations. Upendranath Bramha and Sansuma Khungur Bwismurthiary were among those leaders who felt the importance of women's participation. Bramha believed that a society cannot progress without the progress of women.

During 1970s Kanakeswar Narzary travelled the northeastern states extensively and met many tribal leaders. From the letters written by Upendranath Bramha to Kanakeswar Narzary it appears that the former had close relations with Kanakeswar Narzary and his wife Hirabai Narzary. Upendranath Bramha was the main source of inspiration for Hirabai Narzary to join the movement. Pramila Rani Bramha, the first Bodo woman leader, was also greatly influenced by Upendranath Bramha and had close relation with him. Most of the early executive members of AATVVVVF were either related or known to the ABSU, BPAC, and the BVF leaders.

Activities

Upendra Nath Brahma through his experiments with Satyagraha or the peaceful strike realized that women could equally participate together with men. His overpowering voice and his views on women influenced their position. His brand of politics mostly dharna and gherao allowed women to participate the women freely. For Upendra Nath Brahma statehood movement was not merely a political movement, it was also an economic and social reform movement. He said men and women are equal but not identical.

The most intense period of the Bodoland movement was for six years, from 3rd March 1987 to 20th February 1993. During this period of ABSU carried out numerous activities. It published books, leaflets, etc. and submitted memoranda. Its underground wing (BVF) also carried out innumerable violent activities. The movement was most intense in Kokrajhar. Many top leaders of the movement were from this district. The movement also had a strong base in Darrang. The intensity of the movement is believed to be more or less same in these two districts.

Women of different age groups participated in the ABSU movement on village council, district and state levels in the form of processions, dharnas, glteraos, rasta roko and

rail roko programmes. There also was organizational level participation of women. In this regard, Pramila Rani Bramha, the first woman leader of the Bodos, deserves a special mention. She started her political career as a close associate of Upendranath Bramha. She founded the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) just before the launching of the ABSU movement. Regarding the formation of AATWWF she said:

“I have seen many protest movements since childhood such as the Udyachal and script movements. I never participated in those movements. I have seen how people were exploited and betrayed by the PTCA leaders. But I did not know how to get rid of such a situation. During 1980 my husband and I rented a house in Kokrajhar town. Upendranath Bramha was my next door neighbour. I was disappointed with our leaders as the PTCA leaders compromised with the leaders of the ruling parties to fulfil their self-interest. Upendranath Bramha and I discussed the situation regularly. I felt the need to join those who were against their leaders. When the ABSU decided to launch a fresh movement in 1986, I was not sure what I should do. At that time I was requested to establish a women's welfare organization by Upendranath and Sansuma Khungur Bwismuthiary. Accordingly, on 14th July 1986, a meeting was convened at Deborgaon High School of Kokrajhar and the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation was established”.

In Bodoland movement, the women took part in processions, holding meetings, demonstrations and organizes strikes. The convener and founder secretary of AATWWF, Malati Rani Narzary, had joined various protest rallies, picketing, etc. since her teenage. She had also participated in the Udyachal movement. As an executive member of the ABSU she had also participated in the Roman Script Movement. According to her, growing atrocities on the Bodo women provoked her to establish a women's organization. Her brother, an executive member of the ABSU central committee from the beginning, told me that the Bodo women were not involved in any organizational activities earlier. Those who were

involved during college day, mostly discontinued afterwards. Malati Rani Narzary, who was a neighbour of Sansuma, was a different kind of person. She was a very courageous lady. She had participated in different activities of the PTCA, ABSU, PTCA (P) and the UTNLF and the BSS. She was also the founder secretary of the Plains Tribal Women's Welfare Association. She was requested by Sansuma to establish an active organization for women.⁸

The first meeting of the AATWWF was held on 14th July 1986. It was attended by women like Kamali Rani Basumatary of Darrang district, Latika Hajoary and Meera Basumatary of Goalpara district, Umarani Basumatary, Hira Rani Bramha, Supriya Rani Bramha, Malati Rani Narzary and many others from Kokrajhar district. They were all related to the ABSU leaders in one way or the other.

An executive member of the AATWWF Central Committee Malati Rani Narzary once said: *“All Assam Tribal Women’s Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was established in 1986. The initiative was taken by Upendranath Bramha and Sansuma Khungur Bwismuthiary. The women of Kokrajhar, Darrang and Goalpara districts were present in the meeting of 14th July 1986 where the AATWWF was formed. The aim of this Federation was to organize the tribal women for the welfare of the tribal people. Pramila Rani Bramha has made remarkable contribution towards this. She was the founder president of AATWWF. Malati Rani Narzary was Convener of that meeting. Ansula Gowda Bodoso, an active leader of the ABSU, took me to that meeting. He was from my district and knew me”.*⁹

To quote her further: *“I was assigned to form the Goalpara district committee of the AATWWF. So I called a meeting and invite the women of all tribal communities of the district. Mahat Chandra Hajoary, a retired head master of that school, helped me a lot. He inspired me to do this job. About two hundred women belonging to Garo, Boro, and Rabha communities attended the meeting. Anandibala Rabha, former MLA, was also invited to that*

meeting. In this meeting I was selected its president and Bishnupriya Khakhalary, its secretary”.

Kamali RaniBasumatary , one of the founder members of AATWWF and a resident of Darrang, adds: *"Before the establishment of AATWWF Darrang District Committee (AATWWF, DDC) a meeting was held in Khairabari School of Darrang on 20th August 1986 which continued till the next day. Prior to this meeting, Maheswar Basumatary, the then secretary of the ABSU, Darrang District Committee, had met me at home and requested me to attend this meeting. The necessity of a women's organization in the Bodo society was discussed then. Next morning the ABSU leader announced that they were launching a fresh movement for separate state and solicited women's participation. We, the educated ones, were especially requested to take charge of the rural women during the movement"*.

Abola Brahma of Khairabari, recalled: *"On the 20th August 1986, a meeting was held in Khairabari. Some of the women present there were: Pratima Kochary, Malati Doimary, Rita Basumatary, Junu Daimary, and Sunali Doimary. Late Tankeswar Boro, the brother of Baliram Boro, the MLA, and Nowa Narzary invited me to attend this meeting. The meeting started at 2 p.m. Maheswar Basumatary, Khagen Basumatary and Debnor Basumatary were the speakers. They highlighted the necessity of a women's organization. In their own words "Generally the Bodo women are backward. So, it is difficult to approach and organize them. This task has to be done by educated women. The leaders said that the ABSU movement would not be successful without the participation of women. They highlighted the importance of women in family and in society. I started thinking that I was also a responsible member of community. Being a woman I could not ignore the responsibilities of my society."*

Formation of the AATWWF was not smooth everywhere in the Bodo dominated areas. In Nalbari district, it took two years to be formed. It was established on 20th June 1988. On behalf of the ABSU Kamala Kanta Lahiri, Manoranjan Swargiary, and Girin Bramha of

Mushalpur are took initiative to inform the women of the area. The first meeting was held in Kumarikata village under Tamulpur. Sonaram Bagalary, an executive member of the ABSU Central Committee, attended that meeting. The following girls participated in this meeting, viz., Giribala Bramha, Guneswari Bramha, Joymoti Basumatary, Ila Basumatary, Anupama Gayary., Padma Basumatary, Manju Bramha, and Dulu Bramha. Giri Bramha of Pub Bangnabari was selected as its president and Gunewsari Bramha of Dihira village, Nikashi subdivision, as its secretary. Nikashi subdivision was a strong base of the ABSU since the beginning of the movement.¹⁰

Women's Organizational Role

Upendra Nath Brahma succeeded in galvinising the traditional housebound women as a powerful instrument of political action. Women's traditional capacity to sacrifice was especially emphasizes by Brahma in an effort to mobilize women. He argued that women's capacity to sacrifice her own personal interest for the family also held to extend the community and nation and this motivated the women to join the Bodoland movement. The AATWWF members had remarkable contribution to organizing the people during the movement. In the beginning the following issues were discussed: (i) health and hygiene, (ii) family planning, (iii) necessity of cleanliness, (iv) mother's role to keep babies clean and tidy, (v) mother's responsibility to educate children, (vi) problem of alcoholism in family and society, (vii) bad effects of polygamy, etc.

According to the AATWWF members there were some evil practices in their society which impeded to women's progress. One such practice was addiction of male to country liquor. Such addiction resulted in many unwanted incidents in villages. Wife beating was a regular phenomenon. Polygamy was also in practice. Before the ABSU movement second marriages by the men were not a social offence. Durga (pseudo name), an active founder

member of the AATWWF and a resident of Beltala, Guwahati, says that her father had five wives. His youngest wife belonged to the age group of his children. It was a normal practice of the rich men in those days.

The activities of educated women received wide appreciation of the rural people. They helped the rural women in many ways. A few experiences of the women participants are presented here which reflect the internal dynamics of the movement. Rupasi (pseudo name) and Sumita (pseudo name), two founder members of AATWWF, Kokrajhar District Committee, told me that in many villages and village councils the AATWWF members conducted meetings and formed committees.

According to Mili (pseudo name), "When the ABSU initiated the movement for a separate state, the PTCA supporters did not like it. So, Kokrajhar, Nalbari and Barpeta where PTCA supporters were numerous frequent clashes took place. The members of the AATWWF played mother's role at that time. According the Banani (pseudo name) and Mani (pseudo name) of Kokrajhar, the members of the AATWWF maintained peace during the clashes between the ABSU and the PTCA supporters. To quote her again: "We, the AATWWF members, wanted to stand as a guardian organization of the Bodo people. We wanted to stand united for the cause of our people. There were factions but we told our people that all activists were like our children. They were all demanding a state for our community. So, they are not committing any crime. They are sacrificing their life for us. So we have to help them".

During the movement the policemen and the army personnel entered villages in search of the ABSU activists, but they often targeted the women. According to the women activists, most policemen had the habit of stealing valuable things like watch, radio, torch light, etc. To stop such activities and to protect women from various atrocities, the AATWWF members took some measures. The village women were advised to stay in-groups during any police or army operations. They were told to follow the search parties boldly at each step and see that

nobody stole anything from the houses. They were trained to handle the cases of molestation or rape. They were told to bring victims to the nearest and reliable doctors for medical examination so that filing of the FIR would be easy. They were instructed not to put any medicine on any physical injury caused by the police or army personnel. At the same time they were asked not to hide such incidents of torture.

In the beginning of the ABSU movement Nalbari was in tumultuous situation. Incidents of arson and clashes between the PTCA and ABSU supporters were frequent in 1987-88. The Nalbari District Committee of AATWWF devoted much of their time to resolve the misunderstanding between two groups. Until then the ABSU supporters had no access to some of the places in this district where the AATWWF members came to the rescue of the ABSU.

During the movement, the AATWWF members were also assigned the job of supplying or cooking food for the ABSU members. The ABSU Volunteer Force members always moved in groups and never stayed in one place. It was the duty of the subdivision level members of the AATWWF to keep constant contact with them wherever they stayed for the night. However, staying in those camps during night was prohibited for the women. According to Binita, the ABSU members depended a lot on AATWWF members for organizing people and keeping communication between common people and the ABSU members.

The AATWWF members of all the three districts were aged around twenty years. Most of them were pre- university or college students and unmarried. Many of them were either sisters or relatives of the ABSU activists. They laid the foundation of mass participation of the women in the ABSU movement.

There was some difference in the age group of the district/subdivision level committee members and the central committee members. The formers were of early age group (18-25

years) and most of them were unmarried. Most of the central committee members were married and mothers of at least two to three children. Majority of them were teachers, too.

Complexity of Women's Participation

While some women delivered speeches in public meetings others were engaged in refreshment and reception committees arranging food, water, etc. Cooking food for the guests was one of their regular duties during the movement. Most of the women of Balagaon and Rangalikhata villages of Deborgaon did not get time to listen to their leaders due to such engagements. They had to perform such duties at the back side of the stage. Before any meeting at Deborgaon the ABSU instructed the Deborgaon village council Committee members of AATWWF to take care of everything. Their works ranged from collecting paddy, pulses and vegetables from each house, cleaning them. Cooking for participants as well as guests at home, who could be participating in such meetings, cooking for leaders like Premising Bramha and Upendranath Bramha.

Every AATWWF member made a monthly contribution of Rs. 5. Each village council committee collected Rs. 2000 every year and submitted it to its district committee. The AATWWF members also collected clothes and distributed them to the riot victims who took shelter in different camps. In the executive meeting of the DDC AATWWF, held on 20th July 1989, a decision was taken to distribute aronai to each member of the Bodo Volunteer Force. Accordingly, all village council committees of the AATWWF of Darrang district were directed to weave aronai for the male activists. This was according to an old custom of the Bodos, which desires that the Bodo men going to the war should wear aronai to protect themselves from all evils and to win the battle. The aronai which the Bodo soldiers wore in the battlefield were woven by a close relative such as sisters or wife. Furthermore, those aronais were woven on the night before they left for the battlefield. Preparation of threads,

patterns, and all other works related to weaving had to be done within a single night and the same was to be presented in a sacred function.

This custom was revived during the Bodo movement with slight modification. Instead of kin members village council committee members of the AATWWF wove the same. The women who wove it had to take bath first. According to the custom they did not even talk while weaving. It was presented to the ABSU activists (VF) at the Bathou Thansali (the altar of Bathou) of respective village councils.

The ritual was directed by the priest of respective Bathousali. All the activists took bath before going to Thansali and wore clean clothes. After that the women tugged the aronai around the waist of the male activists. This was how the AATWWF members also boosted up the morale of the ABSU VF members. The women members also did confidential errands, carried money and other things from one place to other. In case of sudden police/ army raids in any village they rushed to protect the innocent villagers. In case an innocent person was arrested they forced them to release him/ her. They were instrumental in minimising atrocities on women by armed forces. The Bhumka rape case of Kokrajhar was successfully handled by them and the culprits were punished. On 25th and 27th January 1988, the women of Bhumka area of Kokrajhar were raped repeatedly by the police force personnel. The AATWWF members came to know of that incident on 28th January and brought the victims to Kokrajhar district court where they registered their appeal and everybody in the court saw the condition of the victims. Their clothes were full of blood. Some of them had received bullet injuries. Moreover, the then government tried to suppress these news. They did not take action against the police. After learning about it, the then Chief Justice of the 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 the High Court. Many other women organizations like YWCA, Nari Mukti Sangathana, and Pradesh Mahila

Congress Samiti supported the AATWWF in organizing a protest rally at Guwahati judge field. On the basis of their appeal Mr. Justice G.M. Lodha and Mr. Justice J. Sangma jointly gave a 22 page judgment on 14.3.1988. AATWWF members handled such cases successfully in other districts as well.

Gherao/Dharna

The AATWWF members of Mushalpur, Nalbari district, organized a procession against the arrest of innocent people in the month of May 1989. Several gheraos were organized by them during 1989-91 (see Table 4.4). In all such cases they compelled the authorities to release those who were arrested from the villages during police raids. The women of Pub Bangnabari village went to the police station for the first time in May 1989 when Bagadhar Narzary was arrested. He was an ex-military personnel and a resident of Guwahati. He had gone to Pub Banglabari village to see his mother. On that particular day he gone to the local bank where he was arrested. The police department alleged that he was imparting military training to the members of the ABSU Volunteer Force. Hearing it some villager went to the police station but the policemen detained them too. At last the women of this village went there and gheraoed it. The police officer-in-charge was compelled to release him and other villagers. In August, 1989 they went to the police station once again to get one Charan Narzary of the same village released. He was a cultivator and resident of this village. These incidents took place before the formation of the AATWWF. Babli (pseudo name), an active member of Nalbari District Committee AATWWF, recalls that in June 1989 some Villagers of Shantipur, Mushalpur subdivision, were arrested following the bandh called by the ABSU. After this incident one part of this village was set ablaze and a camera was snatched from a journalist when he went to the village to cover the same. In June 1990 almost 1000 women gheraoed the Mushalpur and Borbori police stations for the release of eight

innocent villagers of pub Bangnabari. These women came from the villages like Kathailgaon, Choibari, Berlabari, Lamidara, Bathoupuri, Bwerimukh, Thakuchup, and Khwrabari of Mushalpur subdivision. At first they went to Mushalpur outpost where they compelled the policemen to release three villagers. After that they proceeded to Borbori police station which was eight kilometers away from Mushalpur. According to some women informants the Bodo men were targets of the armed forces. Under such situation, they acted as custodians of the villagers and their properties.¹¹

In 1989, one Vijan Narzary of Navingaon village, Kokrajhar district was standing in front of his house when some policemen went and arrested him. His family members and other villagers of this village gheraoed the police station and compelled the policemen there to release him.

According to Usha, the granddaughter of Gurudev Kalicharan Bramha, a few fishermen were arrested on May 12, 1988 from Jomduar village beside Sankosh river of Kokrajhar. That was a market day and the fishermen were taken to Saraibill police station. The news of their arrest quickly reached the Saraibill bazar. The people rushed to the police station to see whether the arrested persons were their family members or not. But the policemen opened fire and two women died on the spot. Some others were injured. Most of the victims were women. After this incident Usha organized the women and Anganwadi workers of nearby villages. They met the District Magistrate of Kokrajhar, submitted a memorandum to him and demand compensation of Rs. 1 lakh for deceased family and Rs. 50,000 for the injured persons.

Women in Bodo Volunteer Force

The Bodo Volunteer force was the military wing of the ABSU. This Force required messengers to carry secret messages. Many AATWWF members of different village councils and district committees were involved in this job. They were trained to perform this job. In

1989, one of the AATWWF members was sent by the ABSU President, Upendranath Bramha, to the ABSU VF chairman Premsing Bramha. She travelled all the way from Kokrajhar town by train and bus and reached a village situated in the border of West Bengal and Assam. She went back with a message from the ABSU-VF resident. Chairman and passed that to the ABSU president.¹²

Carrying money for ABSU was also a part of their job. A few girls of Nalbari district twice carried one lakh of rupees with them and handed the same to the ABSU members at a guest house located in Guwahati.

Sometimes they also had to accompany the ABSU leaders. Once Asha , Poli , and Nila of Baganbari village of then Barpeta District accompanied Urkhao Basumatory, a leader of the ABSU, from Pub Bangnabari to Salbari village of Barpeta. One member of that team was Chilagang Basumatory. It was a marriage season and they introduced themselves as members of a marriage party and Urkhao as the bridegroom to the policemen at the checkpoints.

Nursing Training

Some Bodo girls were given nursing training by doctors in different primary health centres. During 1989-90, not less than 30 to 40 girls from each village council received nursing training. Out of 170 informants, there were around twenty women who said that they received nursing training. The informants of Darrang district who received nursing training stayed at Kapurpura village of Darrang for three months in 1989. The training was based on courses, which are actually given to the nurses. The course was as follows:

- (i) First aid: learning to bandage on different parts of the body, stop bleeding, take out bullets from any parts of body, operation in case of bullet injuries.
- (ii) (ii) Pharmaceutical training was also provided. They were taught to identify the causes of disease, nature of treatment and the names of medicines used

for diseases like gastroenteritis, diarrhoea, fever, viral infection, acute allergy, bedsore, malaria, general weakness and jaundice.

- (iii) Training was given to handle the burn cases.
- (iv) Training was provided to manage the patients suffering from psychological disorders such as insomnia.
- (v) Advance first aid training was given on different types of bullet injuries and proper treatment of wounds in case of profuse bleeding, removal of bullets and treatment. The whole management of operation, treatment of old bullet injuries, fractures, sprain bleeding, unconsciousness, vomiting, acute pain, burning, muscular pain, glandularia, etc. was taught. Use and function of different surgical instruments, techniques of pushing saline water, etc. were also taught.
- (vi) Basic knowledge on human anatomy was also taught to them.

They held practical classes and they had to nurse a patient of acute burn and other patients during their stay at Kapurpura. The girls attended the classes regularly. The classes were held on topics like 'Women's Role in the Bodo National Movement', 'Aims and Objective of Bodo Movement', and 'Women Role in Different Phases of Movement'. They were taught to explain the ABSU's role to the children as well.

The aim of such training was to help the ABSU and ABSU VF activists in time of need. The trained girls were instructed that wherever and whenever they would come to know about injured persons and activists, they must nurse them. These girls proved very helpful during the movement. One of the AATWWF leaders, who was the head of a nursing team in Kokrajhar, told that during peak years of the movement (1989-1991) most doctors left their jobs and the primary health centres of Bodo dominated areas were deserted. Even medicine was not available. At that time the trained girls were helpful to the villagers. Apart from

nursing the activists they performed duties of doctors. In the village these girls were doctors cum pharmacists. Some of them showed considerable efficiency in nursing activities including operations.

From 1989 onwards girls began to receive training in the use of firearms. Such training was given in the remote villages of Bodo dominated areas. The aim of such training was to provide some measures for their safety. There was no plan to bring them to armed action. But they were told that if situation so demanded they would be called in.

Most of the times the ABSU VF members were on the move. Usually they moved in small groups. It was the duty of the AATWWF members to arrange food for them. Sometimes the AATWWF members went to hideouts to prepare food for them. The VF members entered villages during night. They spread themselves to various houses at the time of food for the advantage of logistics as well as to avoid being all arrested together.

Role of AATWWF in Dispute Resolution

The village political organization became defunct during the movement. The people consulted the ABSU and AATWWF members to solve any conflict in their villages. Most disputes were related to extra-marital affairs. One such case was between Daokha and Panilam of Deborgaon, Kokrajhar. Panilam married Daokha's wife's sister. His wife appeared to the AATWWF for justice. In the meeting held by the AATWWF to resolve this dispute the ABSU members were also present. The ABSU activists criticized Daokha and labelled her as a woman of 'corrupted moral character'. Rupasi (pseudo name), the president of AATWWF's Deborgaon Committee, criticized the comments of the ABSU activists and argued that Daokha might have been morally corrupt woman but by marrying her sister even Panilam showed a corrupt behaviour. Her argument disappointed the ABSU activists and Panilam was forced to give money to his wife. One other case was Sukur Sing Basumatary versus

Somaisree Mosahary of Kashikotra village, Kokrajhar. Somaisree was the fiancée of Sukursing. They were known to each other for many years. But when Sukur Singh married Kalyani Bramha, Somaisree sought to help of the AATWWF for justice. After a long discussion with the three persons involved and the neighbours, the AATVVVVF instructed Sukursing to give Rs. 20,000 as compensation or penalty to Somaisree.

According to Rapasi polygyny was not an offence in the Bodo society until recently. The AATWWF members vehemently opposed that practice and tried to eradicate it. For this the Bodo women are grateful to the AATWWF members.

Seminars

The AATWWF organized many seminars during the movement. They were mostly one-day seminars and the common theme was 'women'. A rough list of seminars organized by it is given in Table 4.5. Apart from the local educationists the executive members of AATWWF were regular speakers in such seminars, the programme of the seminar and the theme were planned by the central committee members. The lecturers were delivered in the Bodo language. The intensity of women's participation is understandable from the theme of seminars and speeches. None of the previous movements demanded women's participation so clearly and deliberately.

Literary Activities of Bodo Women during the Movement

Songdan, the first magazine of Bodo women by Bodo women and for Bodo women, was published in 1991 by the AATWWF. The magazine called Raikhrnuthi was published in the same year. These magazines were published once in a year and women related issues were of primary concern to them though they also published other writings of women. The editorial

board members were women though the writers were not necessarily women. Many renowned Bodo intellectuals, poets, ABSU activists, etc. wrote on women related issues in those magazines. Those articles discussed the contribution of women to upliftment of the Bodos, involvement of the Bodo women in politics, women's contribution to the development of Bodo society, etc. The second issue of Songdan published articles on Aung San Suu Kyi, the winner of the Nobel peace prize in 1991, and also on women's role in the French revolution.

Almost all the executive members of the AATWWF central committee wrote on various aspects during the movement. Special mention may here be made of Bina Bala Gayary of Subankhata village, who published a book of poems. Others are Romela Islary, the first editor of Raikhmuthi, Latika Hajoary, Mira Rani Basumatory, and so on. They all wrote in the Bodo language. There were some other women who wrote in Assamese or English. Anupama Basumatory is one such writer and her poetry collection Rupali Nadir Glzat (The ghat of silver river) received a lot of appreciation. A translation of one of her poems written during the movement is reproduced here:

"Oh my beloved friend;
you who share my sorrows
The companion of my search for beauty
And Worshipper of an afflicted heart;
Had you also stood
Like that pine tree
In the plains, of life-
Ignoring the chill of the snow
Transgressing the fury of the storm.
Bearing the agony of my injury
Remaining firm, tall, majestic and unruffled!"

(From the poem titled 'like a Pine tree' 1998-113)

Conventions and Conferences

The AATWWF organized some conferences and conventions periodically. The conferences were held in a gap of two years when new committee were formed. And conventions were held in alternate years. Reception committee was formed before holding conferences and conventions. Such committees were usually formed with the local members though some central committee members were also incorporated. The member of delegates and observers was decided by the members of both the reception committee and AATWWF members. 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 Bodos and non-Bodos whereas delegate sessions were closed door sessions and restricted to the delegates only.

The delegates selected the executive members of central committee in such sessions. The general secretaries of various sessions submitted annual reports in delegate sessions. Important resolutions adopted in the delegate sessions were read out in the open sessions. Usually conferences continued for 3 days. Scholars in different fields were invited to open sessions for delivering lectures. Cultural programmes were part of everyday programme. These conferences and conventions were mainly organised and participated by women.¹³

The AATWWF was renamed as All Bodo Women's Welfare federation (ABWWF) at the Tamulpur conference held in 1993. The delegates proposed the organisation's new name and it was accepted. Excerpts from the Interview with Pramila Rani Brahma:

“Which language will I speak in O.K., I will speak in Assamese. Apart from the Bodo language which is my mother tongue I can express myself comfortably in Assamese”.

“I was born in a village called Balagaon. I don't know the exact date of birth nor do my parents know. But they often tell a story about an earthquake from which I guess that I was born in 1950. Further, I guess that the month was March. My mother, Thageswari Barhma, was born in an adjacent village of Deborgaon. My grandfather Dilip Narayan Brahma, was an illiterate peasant. He thought that going to school was a wastage of time. My father never followed his father's ideas. He was a favourite student of one of his school teachers. I cannot remember that teachers' name at this moment. He took all responsibilities of my father's school education and as a result my father was able to study upto class X. when he was in class X, his mother fell seriously ill and she died after a few days. This incident stopped my father's study and he was asked to plough the fields. My father never liked ploughing. So he joined the police service which too was not the right choice for him. That was a period of freedom struggle. The freedom fighters were treated as enemies by the British and were badly beaten up by policemen. My father could not bear such brutal treatment by the policemen and soon he left the job”.

“I was a small child when he left his job. Our economic condition was better after he started timber business. Hence I did not have any experience of financial crisis during my school and college days though my elder brother and sisters faced it during their childhood. Among seven children, I am the fourth. My eldest brother is the headmaster in a lower primary school. The second, a sister, is a school teacher in a lower primary school. The brother, who is just elder to me, is an officer in the Education Department. Another brother, next to me, is a doctor. Next is a sister who is also a teacher of a high school and the youngest is a brother who is a businessman”.

“I received my primary education in Deborgaon Primary School. I studied there upto class VIII. Among his seven children I was the most favourite of my father. I started assisting my mother in household work at an early age. I used to work in our agricultural field too. I

did all kinds of works like sowing, harvesting, husking the paddy in dhenki (husking machine), cleaning and any other works related to jute cultivation. My father did not like my doing all this. So he took me to Kokrajhar and admitted me to a school there. I passed the school final in 2nd division. I wanted to join a college in Guwahati. But he did not approve it. He thought that I might be a bad girl if I live alone in Guwahati. At that time I was very young so he was over protective about me. I did my graduation with honours in Political Science from Kokrajhar College in 1972 and took admission to post-graduate class at Gauhati University. During my school and college days I was addicted to reading novels and historical writings. A novel was enough to engage me for a day I forgot every other work once I sat to read a novel. I read many Bengali novels as well. I had the habit of writing short stories. I also participated in the college sports regularly but my father never allowed me to participate in sports and games beyond the college campus. In college, I used to mix up with everybody. Among the friends there were more boys than girls. I got married just after my graduation. My husband was one year senior to me in college. Both of us liked reading novels. He also encouraged me to write short stories. I joined the post-graduate classes after my marriage. I attended classed for three months”.

“Unfortunately, I had to return home after three months because we were told to vacate hostels when the Assamese language movement started in 1972. I joined my parents-in-law after coming back. I felt that my in-laws were not interested in my higher studies. In 1973 I joined Symborgaon High School as an assistant teacher. This school was 12 kilometers from Kokrajhar town and I was there for one year only. Then I joined Kokrajhar High School”.

“I was involved in the works of AATWWF and ABSU when I was resident of Kokrajhar town and mother of three children. My husband always co-operated me. Earlier he was in service but at present he stays at home and looks after our children. He is also a

writer. My daily routine has thoroughly changed after 1986. For that I have full cooperation of my family members. My father was a supporter of the PTCA. He picked up a quarrel with me once when he came to know that I was working for AATWWF and ABSU. My mother supported me because I used to tell her many things. But I never discussed anything with my father, as he was a strong supporter of PTCA. I tried to convince him about the ABSU movement but he was unwilling to listen to me. Meanwhile he met Upendranath Brahma at my home. It was a conversation of half an hour after which he was thoroughly convinced”.

“In 1991, I contested for the post of Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) as an independent candidate. I was elected from Kokrajhar town constituency and in next assembly election I was re-elected from the same constituency. The decision of joining politics was not my personal decision. I never thought of it before, not even in my dreams. In 1993, the Bodo Autonomous Council was established. But the Council could not give any satisfaction to the people, leave alone the women. I joined with the idea that I would be able to do something for all of them.”¹⁴

The above account of Pramila Rani Brahma, one of the most notable Bodo women leader that the Bodo movement has produced, leaves certain lessons. One, the humble background of her family was no obstacle to her in the field of politics. Two, the patriarchy was quite intimidating for her but that could neither take her away from educational pursuits nor distract her from supporting an organization that was disliked by her father. Third, and perhaps most important, it shows the limitation as well as opportunities that a women normally encounters in her life, both before and after marriage.

The women participation in the Bodo movement should be appreciated keeping in mind cases such as the one discussed here. What the men expect of them or what they expect of themselves is rarely fulfilled because the society is not yet ready to concede them a corner of its public domain. Politics, governance, movement, etc. are men's domain in the worldview

of the Bodos as it is so with very 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 aronani and offering it to the males, nursing them if they are injured, and the like.

Impact of the Bodo Movement

All social movement aims to bring a change in the prevailing system. For that every social movement organizes itself as collective action under an organizational structure, with an ideology and set goals. While trying to achieve its specific goals, social movements leave powerful effects both within its organizational and support structure and on the larger society of which it is a part. The most glaring impact of the Bodo movement has been the redefining of the Assamese Identity. During; the Movement themselves as distinct ethno-linguistic community and tried to reverse Assamese formation. According to them Bodo speaking people cannot be Assamese¹⁵. This indeed was the first time when the Bodos clearly asserted their distinct ethnic identity to realize their political demand.

Although socio-economic and political processes in Assam in postIndependence years prepared the background of the Bodo hegemonic project, the immediate circumstances were provided mainly by two factors – a. the signing of Assam Accord and b. AGP politics and policies. During the initial stage of the Assam movement the Bodos had supported the Assamese cause. The issue of Bodo identity started taking serious turn only with the signing of Assam Accord. The question therefore arises as to why the Bodos suddenly started feeling insecure about losing their ethnic identity. It was due to the inclusion two controversial Clauses in Assam Accord Clause no 6 and 10 and the confusing intention behind the implementation of these clauses created a fear pshyche among the Bodos.. They feared that this Clause might give legitimacy to the imposition of Assamese language and culture on

them. Hence doubts surfaced and leading sections of the Bodo community conceded that without a separate state their language and identity would soon become extinct. Out of this apprehension the Bodos led by ABSU started a mass movement for the creation of a separate Bodo state during the first tenure of AGP, who came to power as result of the Assam Accord. And it became clear by then that the state's major tribal population (Bodos) was not willing to be identified as Assamese. Until then it had probably not crossed any of the signatory's mind that the term "Assamese people" would have meant anything other than the composite Assamese community.

This chapter will explore how the growth of Bodo politics of identity led to ethnicization of Assamese as well as the redefinition of the Assamese identity. Before that a brief insight into the historical process of formation of the Assamese identity is necessary.

The Assamese Community and Identity Formation Process

The formation of Assamese community and identity is related to the process of Aryanization as well as rise and consolidation of Ahom rule in "Brahmaputra Valley.

Since time immemorial people from Indian sub-continent as well as from the Far-East used to migrate to Assam. Various groups belonging to Mongoloid origin entered the Valley from different directions- China, Tibet and Burma. They were followed by Aryans from the Indian mainland. Around 1000 B. C. the Mongoloid ruling figures in Assam had come to the fold of Brahminical Hinduism with which the process of Aryanization commenced in the Brahmaputra valley.¹⁶ Although it was not as rigid as in some parts of India the caste system gradually took root with gradual growth of Hinduism. But the process of Hinduization in the valley was not complete since the tribes retained most of the aspects of their religion and culture in practice. It remained incomplete during the colonial period and post-colonial period as well. Even then the interaction, assimilation and integration of various cultures, religions,

racess and civilizations had produced distinctive syntheses among the people of Brahmaputra Valley and gave birth to a distinct community semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature. This unique community later came to be known as the Assamese.

This social process got further momentum with the advent of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century. Under Ahom system of centralized administration the various indigenous ethnic groups like Kacharis, Moran, Muttaks, Karbis, Chutias, Tiwas, Rabhas, Bodos, Mishings, Deuris and Koches all assimilated themselves into a single cultural community. The rise of Vaisnavism in the fifteenth century provided further impetus to this social process of assimilation in Brahmaputra Valley.

It is to be noted that the Assamese identity did not emerge before or during the Ahom rule nor did Assamese language and literature develop in its present form during that period. But it is a fact that the Assamese language developed locally, and expanded more through the cultural assimilation of myriad tongued peoples during the 600 year Ahom rule. They even gave up their Tai-Ahom language and adopted Assamese as the state language. In natural course events the language also spread to the areas of their influence. Further, the Assamese language, literature, dance and drama developed very significantly due to the endeavours of Vaishnava preachers or gurus.

Assam was even able successfully resist Mughal invasion mainly due to the unity and stability brought about by Ahom rule. This can be regarded as a sign of pre-national collectivity of the people of pre-colonial Brahmaputra valley. Ideally, this collectivity should have found expression in a single Assamese national identity, but this did not happen. The prevailing chaotic political situation in 17th century Assam led to British intervention and in 1826 Assam (Ahom territory) became part of the British Indian Empire. With it, the entire ongoing social processes in Brahmaputra Valley came to a halt, leaving fissures for future Assamese identity.

Assertion of Assamese Identity during British Period

As a social process identity formation involves close interaction between the individual, the society and history. Individual identity becomes collective or group identity when solidarities become organized for collective action and decision. This is how categories of persons transform to collective actors through organization and articulation of identity. The determination of such a collective action involves legitimating of its boundary in terms of psychic, social, cultural and sometimes in territorial domains. Therefore, identity formation should be seen as a process that takes place in time context and its coherence and intensity depends on the culmination of overlapping symbols of assimilation and inclusion essential in the formation of group consciousness.¹⁷

As early as 1837, the Colonial rulers had replaced Assamese with Bengali in the schools and courts of Assam. This decision came out of their concrete belief that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali language. This however, was not a sudden decision. Many British officials like John Peter Wade, Francis Hamilton who had the opportunity to come to Assam even prior to 1826 expressed that common people were familiar with Bengal. In fact Wade in the preface of his report commented upon the originality of the Assamese language that the original history of Assam exists in two distinct languages i.e. the Baloongh or Ahom (the language of the race of Swargadeo) and Bakha (Bassa) being a dialect of the Bengalee.¹⁸ Later David Scott also opined on the same line with Hamilton. Moreover, the Assamese language at that time was not in good shape nor was there any educational institution that was imparting education in Assamese in Assam. In comparison the Bengali language and literature had been far advanced than the Assamese language and already was widely accepted as an elite language in different parts of India.¹⁹

At the initial stage of British rule, the educated Assamese showed a strong desire to learn Bengali language. They were not concerned much about the status of their mother-

tongue. Bengali was introduced as court language in Assam following the Act XXIX of 1837 passed by the President of the Council of India on the 20th November 1837, which directed the vernacular language of a district to be used in the courts.²⁰ Immediately decision was taken to introduce Bengali since Assam was a part of the Presidency of Bengal. In fact for more than ten years after the annexation of Assam, Assamese was the court language in Assam and if the above Act was to implement fully Assamese should have remained as the court language. Presumably that Act was not implemented in all parts of India alike. With introduction of Bengali in courts and school in Assam the influence of both, the language and its speakers increased.

It is to be noted here that for the British colonizers Assam was merely an extension of Bengal and they showed no intention to establish schools and educate the Assamese people. Their main aim was to earn maximum profits by exploiting the resource of Assam. Therefore, the already surplus educated unemployed Bengalis were brought from Bengal to work as subordinates in Assam's administration.²¹ Under such circumstances, the Bengalis monopolized nearly all Government jobs in Assam. The Assamese people became a subordinate class socially with which the former fascination for Bengali language began to decrease. The educated Assamese elite like Aandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah and Hem Chandra Baruah endeavoured for development and reintroduction of Assamese language with the help of American Baptist Missionaries. Although the language developed to an extent, they failed to convince the British Government to change their decision.

By the last quarter of 19th century the forces of modern education led to the emergence of an Assamese intelligentsia with which the cry for Assamese identity also became intensified. They articulated the fear of the crisis of the Assamese identity and started pressing the British Government for restoration of Assamese language to its former position. This issue of restoration necessitated the establishment of the independent status of Assamese language.

This was followed by establishment of literary societies like the Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha in 1888 and by publishing journals like the Jonaki the intelligentsia carried on the fight for Assamese identity. Other middle class organization like the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, Assam Association and the Asom Sahitya Sabha continued to express and articulate the sentiments of Assamese identity. The efforts of this class bore fruit and, finally in 1873 Assamese was reintroduced in courts and schools in Assam.

As is usually the case, in Assam also the educated elite was the most articulated section of the Assamese society. They stressed on issues like the preservation and promotion of the Assamese language, jobs for the sons of the soil and the overall development of society. But, most of the issues that they raised were related basically to their own class interests. From the very beginning they had to face intense competition from the advance Bengali middle class, therefore all their rages were expressed against the Bengali speakers. They played a collaborative role with the Colonial government for a long time only to serve their own interest and for that same purpose the issue of Assamese identity found dominant place in their agenda and politics. Their endeavours for restoration of Assamese language definitely created a 'we' feeling among its speakers and under their hegemony, the Assamese language became the most important and sensitive symbol of Assamese identity.

It was only by 1920's, that the Assamese middle class was able to consolidate its position in Assam. Meanwhile, the growth of independence movement and popularity of Congress reshaped their agenda. They turned their attention to the ongoing Muslim immigration from East Bengal seriously. Conditions of land abundance, low population density, and Government revenue considerations led the British to encourage immigrants from East Bengal to settle in the wastelands of Assam. This offended the peasantry, both tribal and non-tribal, and their cause was articulated by the Assamese middle class.

The Congress leadership in Assam which was virtually dominated by the Assamese high Caste Hindus did not share the idea of a broader Assamese identity consisting of the different communities of the hills and plains. And they never tried to give Assamese identity a territorial limit. They rather adhered to the common perception of the time that Assamese identity was synonymous with the people living in Brahmaputra valley only, where natural assimilation had taken place for centuries. This is revealed in the election appeal of the Congress Party of 1946 that stated, "Unless the province be organized on the basis of the Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of Assamese nationality (identity) will be impossible." The influx of immigrants from East Bengal and the prospect of grouping Assam with Bengali Muslim dominated areas of Bengal forced the party to take up the issue of Assamese identity more seriously, The Assamese identity remained fluid. It had undergone many changes along with territorial and demographic changes initiated by the colonial regime. New elements were added to the Assamese identity in the form of new immigrant populations like Muslim Bengalis, Marwaris, Nepalese and tea industry labourers who accepted Assamese as the lingua franca and became part of the Assamese culture thereby making it more diverse. Even if no conscious attempt was made by the Assamese middle class to bring the hill tribes within the fold of Assamese identity, Assamese language continued to be the link language among them. In fact, the policy of segregation of the hills was to a large extent responsible for this. The hill tribes became politically conscious quite early and within a few years after independence got separated from Assam to form their own states.

It is evident from the above discussion that the Assamese identity had undergone a historical evolution and had reached a particular stage of its development with the emergence of educated elite and subsequently a middle class. This middle class in the process of achieving its own interests became aware of its identity and propagated this idea of Assamese identity partly in order to attain its own interests and partly in its sincere belief that such an

identity was necessary for the survival of any community. This idea of identity gradually began to permeate the whole Assamese society. Till the second and third decades of the twentieth century Assamese identity remained almost unchallenged because of the fact that other groups of the composite Assamese community had not reached that stage of maturity where an identity could emerge.

However, from the 1930s onwards the situation gradually began to change as other ethno-linguistic communities too began to develop elite class. Among those in the Assam Plains, the Bodos were the first to develop a small educated elite group. There were no apparent conflicts between the Assamese middle class and Bodo middle class in those days because their class interests hardly clashed with each other. It is a fact that during the colonial period the Bodos became aware about their distinct identity. But this identity was mostly taken up with the task of bringing social reforms in their own society rather than articulating identifiable identity issues like language, religion, culture etc. They considered themselves part of composite Assamese community which is evident from their following words that the Bodos can by no means call themselves other than Assamese²² and refused to be a part of Bengal due to cultural differences.

Rupnath Brahma in his Presidential Address of the History Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1956, talked about the contribution of the Bodo-Kacharis to the Assamese language among many other things. In fact, till a particular point of time after independence the issue of differentiation from Assamese identity was not at all emotional outpourings about tribal and non-tribal unity within the Assamese society, vanished with an almost continuous quest of the Assamese middle class to establish their hegemony over Assamese society.

Imposition of Assamese Identity And Assertion of Bodo Identity

During the post-independence period the projection of Assamese identity acquired a new dimension. The linguistic reorganization of States within the framework of the Indian nation-state necessitated this new projection of Assamese identity as the regional identity. Usually a group attaining or wishing to attain a hegemonic position uses identity as an organizing principle by which it tried to assimilate and alienate rival competitive groups. The quest for an Assamese identity in post-independence period is suggestive of this hegemonic project. It is interesting to note that Assamese speakers actually were a minority in colonial Assam, the second largest group after the Bengali speakers. Independence made the Assamese leaders tried to consolidate their position in the apex of socio-economic as well as political sphere of Assam by implementing some vigorous policies like language policy.

The first big step in that direction was made by passing the State Official Language Bill, 1960 in Assam Legislative Assembly which made Assamese the sole official language in Assam. They considered it necessary to bring a psychological unity among different people living in the Plains and Hills alike. It however, brought a major wedge between the Assamese speakers and other linguistic groups of the State. In 1972 Assamese language was made the medium in Universities of Assam. Various linguistic communities protested against it by stating it as a means to enhance Assamese dominance in Assam. And among the Plains Tribes the Bodo protest was the loudest.

During that period Assamese identity also developed as part of both its global and local concerns. As India pursued a voracious quest for global economic power, Assam's natural resources were exploited in a quasi-colonial manner but the Assamese got little benefit. Being situated at the periphery of modern state it had to reassert its identity in relation to the Powerful Central Indian State and other competing regional groups to get a legitimate share in allocation of resources and developmental benefits.

The language issue is the most sentimental issue of all community. It was on the issue of language that the tension between the tribals of Assam and the mainstream Assamese began. During the Assam Movement on foreign national issue both non-tribal and tribal segments of Assamese society stood together across class and caste lines. This unity did not last long. Soon the Bodos withdrew their support from the Movement. Their dismay grew along with the signing Assam Accord. The Assam movement reinforced Assamese middle class's desire for policies that would protect Assamese cultural identity. The AGP Government ushered in a new wave of enforcement of the domination of Assamese language in schools, universities, administrative offices and communication systems to demonstrate that the Assamese were the effective masters in their own house.²³ In doing so they paid little attention to the sentiments and fears of other linguistic groups. Different tribal communities of Brahmaputra valley and perhaps even a few hill tribes like the Karbis and Dimasas, in the natural course of events, would have probably integrated themselves with the Assamese identity but, the forceful imposition of the Assamese language created a sense of identity crisis among them and the process of construction as well as assertion of distinct identities gained momentum among them. According to U Mishra²⁴ the Assamese overzealousness in protecting their language has alienated the tribal communities of the Brahmaputra valley. For the same reason the Bodos started disowning themselves from the Assamese identity.

The growth of Bodo regionalism was the immediate after effect of the confusion generated by Clause 6 of that Accord. They were equally concerned about another Clause 10 of the Accord which promised evictions from reserved Government lands. While bringing it into action foreigners and indigenous people all were treated alike by the Government without considering the fact that a section of Bodo community still stuck to the traditional migratory habits. The issue of eviction of some Bodos provided the spark to the Bodo Movement that was launched during the first tenure of AGP Government. According to Sanjib Baruah the

failure on part of Assam Movement leaders to select sufficiently inclusionary historical and cultural symbols and in being insufficiently insensitive to “foreigners” and “indigenous” peoples alike led to ethnicization of Assamese.²⁵ On top of everything else this new Assamese leadership, politically secure, also tried to convert this security into economic security of their own community. And to a certain extent they neglected the interests of tribal population.

The indifference attitude shown by Assamese political leadership while crafting Assamese community, had distanced the tribal communities to be a part of the greater Assamese community. They never attempted to bring together the exclusive ethnic formations within one single political project by generating equal socio-economic developments among them. Rather they took it for granted that all sections would accept to be part of Assamese identity and culture since they had adopted Assamese as one of their own languages. Hence, the endeavour of Assamese leaders to equate the territorial identity of multi-ethnic Assam with the ethno-linguistic identity of Assamese speaking people of Brahmaputra valley led to assertion of a distinct Bodo identity.

We have observed earlier how Bodo politics over the years has evolved from tribal ethnicity to regionalism. The main theme of the Bodo state demand movement was the ethnic differentiation from the Assamese. The Bodo speaking people cannot be Assamese. For reasons of legitimacy of a distinct Bodo identity and political power the reversal of Assamization was but necessary. In this context history and language has played important roles.

Revival of Ancient Glory

As a result of creating a Pan-Bodo identity, the Bodos became eager to know their root and ancient glory. It has led them to reconstruct their ancient History on the basis of authentic source materials. A credible capacity to recall a community's early historical accomplishments

can offer valuable political capital for its political leaders. The Bodos have few comparisons here. They have presented a continuous history of amalgamated Bodo race as masters of the Brahmaputra valley under different names in different stages of history till 1854 when the last Bodo kingdom was captured by the imperial power.

They have made a study of their origin and history regarding Assam and based on historical authenticity claim that they were the original inhabitants of the land. They use the category 'artificial Assamese' to describe the present generation of Assamese ethno-nationals who represents the relatively upper formations of the Hindu caste structure. The latter's ancestry, according to Bodo leaders, can be traced to migrants from northern India.

The attitude of some of mainstream Assamese people towards the Bodo movement had widened the gulf between the two communities. Two major communities of Assam who were co-existing peacefully so far became hostile to each other. Politics of identities very rarely accepts homogenization. Recognition of differences in terms of ethnicity, language, religion is what strengthens identity politics. Since the relationship of power and subordination play central part in identity formation, identity tends to form boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Again all social relations can become the focus of antagonism in so far as they are constructed as relations of subordination. Many different forms of subordination can become the focus of antagonism in so far as they are constructed as relations of subordination. Many different forms of subordination can become the origin of conflict and struggle. There exists therefore in society a multiplicity of potential antagonisms and class antagonism is only one among many.²⁶ The ethnic rage in Bodo case was directed mainly towards Assamese assimilation and subordination. And the Bodos do not call themselves 'Assamese' as user of the language. Assamese belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of languages. Most of the tribal languages historically associated with Assam belong to the Tibeto-Burman cluster, which includes the Bodo group²⁷ Assamese language and literary

history bear close affinity to their counterparts in Bengal and further west the eastern Hindi area to lend credence to their indigenous pretensions. Given such a perception of the part of the Bodos, it is understandably why they want a division of Assam and a homeland free from Assamese political domination and exploitation connected with 'land, education, culture and job opportunities.

The Bodos had completely denounced the basic notion of Assamese community identity formed by great Vaishnava Preacher Sankardeva. The young genre of Bodo leaders started raising questions regarding Assamese identity and community even questioned, "What is the definition of Assamese?". According to them (ABSU) there is no clear cut accepted definition of Assamese. In practice one whose mother tongue is originally Assamese and not converted from non-Assamese speaking community is known as Assamese. As such Bodos are not Assamese. They showed total disregard for the ethnic process that had taken place historically in Assam which led to emergence of the Assamese community.

It is interesting that the process of Sanskritization that led to the birth first of Assamese community and later Assamese nationality was in fact geared up at the initiative of Bodo rulers. However it was not imposed on them without their will. Compared to the formation of Assamese community the formation of Assamese regional identity was of recent origin.

Any nation is "imagined because the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each other lives the image of their communion."²⁸ Therefore endurance of a nation is basically an emotional process. However, in post-independence years, the Assamese identity became more exclusive.

The Movement also popularized the learning to their pristine culture which could be noticed in their religious practices, death rituals, food habits, preference for Bodo names over

Assamese, use of Dokhona etc. It seems that for the Bodos of today, establishing a Bodo identity is more important than anything else. Bodos have attained something short of separate state in the form of BTAD and Bodo language is a schedule eight language at par with Assamese. Therefore it is natural that any reference today to the Bodos automatically invites attention to their position in the state vis-a-vis the Assamese. The Bodos seemed to have no objection to be called Assamese as long as the term means all indigenous people and Indian citizens living within geographic boundary of Assam. But they objected to be called Assamese in the sense of the speaker of the language. This indeed is a new development which the Assamese today have to digest with a grain of salt. However, the inadequate public recognition given to the Bodo language in Assam is both the result of the relative newness of the Bodo project of differentiation and the inevitable consequence of the very logic of language based sub-nationalisms and cultural grammar of the national-province of India.

The Bodoland movement brought about a new height of identity consciousness among the Bodos and also gave a new definition to the Assamese identity. Assamese identity could no longer be regarded as a monolithic identity. The linguistic chauvinism of the Assamese middle class severely affected the natural process of assimilation of different ethnic groups into emerging Assamese nationality. In fact the Bodos clearly rejected being part of it. Other tribes also want their respective identities to be preserved. In fact the Assamese nationality formation came to a halt.²⁹

The common Bodo people refused to identify themselves as a part of greater Assamese community of Assam. The movement had brought such a confidence among Bodo speakers that now there would be Bodo youths within the BTAD who do not prefer to speak or cannot speak Assamese. For example the students of 20 No. Boragari J B School situated in Kokrajhar revealed that they do not know Assamese. Bodo writer Bidya Sagar Narzary was selected for the Sahitya Academy Award for his work Birgwsrini Thungru in 2008. In

2005, Mangalsing Hazowary got the award for '*Jiuni Mwgthang Bisombi Arw Aroj*' a collection of Poetry and in 2007 Janil Kumar Brahma also got the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. Central Institute of Indian Languages, a Central Government organ, has also made provision to make interested people proficient in Bodo language through its ten month long training programme. Today, Bodo speakers proudly identify themselves as Bodo with their distinctive language, culture, rituals and history. Earlier knowledge of Assamese was important to avail of economic opportunities. Now, after the formation of the BTAD and political autonomy, this is no longer necessary.

The idea of Assamese identity is no longer relevant today. Lack of inclusionary historical elements to bind different social communities and the chauvinistic attitude of Assamese political mainstream to make Assam an Assamese speaking province proved detrimental to the unity and integrity of people living in Assam. In 2003 when the Bodos finally got the BTC, reluctant Assamese mainstream ultimately accepted the fact that Assam is a multi ethnic and multi-lingual state. To maintain the territorial oneness of Assam it has to be accepted anyway. The Assamese mainstream has accepted the multi-cultural nature of its identity which was reflected in representation of State's culture at the inaugural function of National Games held in Assam in 2006. Earlier, a Bodo cultural party which had won the first prize in a national competition held at Hyderabad and was selected for Festival of India in Moscow was dropped by the Assam Government and replaced by an Assamese Bihu Cultural Party. Bodo cultural programmes have been exhibited as Assamese Bodo dance in the Apna Utsav held in Delhi. The first Bodo documentary film *Daina* was also awarded as being an Assamese Bodo language film. Many other such instances are there.

The rising ethnic and linguistic aspirations of the very communities who were contributory to the formation of Assamese community have brought about a transformation to it.

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