

CHAPTER - 4

Bodo Women in Work Force in Bodoland

It is well known fact that women occupy low status in society through the historical process of discrimination. There are several ways in which women are denied equal opportunities and one of them is denying girls their rightful access to education¹. In this chapter, an attempt is made to understand the nature of work that the Bodo women do and how it is valued. It is hoped that this understanding will help to give a high priority to the education of girls so that women's work does not continue to be devalued.

The contribution of Bodo women to household and community work as well as to the economy of the family and the society is very crucial and significant. However, policy makers and the male dominated society have consistently ignored this contribution over the years. "One important indicator of the economic growth of any country is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The GDP is the total output of goods and services for final use produced by an economy by both residents and non-residents. This output Goods (agricultural, manufacturing and cottage) and services (financial and insurance) are expressed in monetary terms. This figure is a good indicator about the state of any economy. However, since women's work is devalued, their contribution to the national economy and to the GDP has been consistently ignored and still does not find a place in the computing of national accounts in many countries."² Women, a weaker and oppressed section, are important segment of the Indian society. Although the neglect and discrimination of

women hardly exist in the Bodo society, it is very common to other Indian society in different parts of the states³.

As per the society of India is concerned, male superiority and female inferiority is more or less accepted norms. It is believed that women are physically weak, intellectually poor, mentally inconsistent, timid and irrational and psychologically unstable⁴. In the traditional Bodo society it is considered that a woman cannot exist without the protection and supervision of a man who is supposed to be physically strong, assertive, intelligent and calculative. Hence, it is often felt that marriage is the only option open to women. Within the marriage framework, the husband and his family control all outside relationships. Women are dependent on the goodwill of their husbands and most often they have no independent financial standing. But the fact is that, 'Women are the main providers for one-third of all families in the world and two thirds of the poorest. Three-fourths of the world's micro-entrepreneurs are women and in low income countries, women produce between sixty and eighty percent of the food for local consumption'.⁵

According to anthropologists and some historians, women are the major producers of food, textile and handicrafts throughout human history and continue to provide a major labour input where production is still in small scale subsistence sector. Most of the women's work is either not visible or is only partially accounted for in the data on workforce participation. The component of women's work includes housework, paid and unpaid work related to home based craft activities, family enterprise or business and paid work outside home. The kind of work women attend is determined by women's position in the society and family's location in the social hierarchy. Women's work also differ according to age, gender, income, occupational group, location (rural/urban), size and structure of the family.⁶ As women's work is

mostly for self consumption, much of the work that they do is not recognised as 'work' in the national income statistics. In the Bodo society Bodo women are engaged in cooking, housekeeping, child care, fetching fuel wood and water, collection of forest products, care of livestock, house repair and maintenance, storing grains, preparation and preservation of foods etc. Much of the work which is important for the maintenance of families is largely done by women in the Bodo society.⁷

To understand the nature and extent of Bodo women's work, it is important to make the distinction between the *productive work* (wage works) and *reproductive work* (the child-bearing and household works) that women do and the value that is assigned to each of these. It is observed that in ancient pre-historic societies the barter system was the norms, transactions took place on the basis of exchange value. But modernisation has led to a market economy in which cash transactions have assumed paramount importance and non-cash transactions have been devalued."⁸ Therefore in present world, greater value is given to *productive work* and if any product or service does not have cash value then it is valueless. Much of the work that women do is unpaid i.e. the *reproductive works* like that of childbearing and rearing, cleaning, washing, cooking, fetching water, collection of fire wood, collection of vegetables and fruits from forest, caring children, agriculture, feeding animals, handicrafts, preparation of rice beer etc. The fact that the work of Bodo women are sustaining and maintaining the human race is completely ignored and rendered valueless by the society.⁹

"Mr. Mayo goes to the doctor" a story goes like:

"What is your job?" Doctor asked.

"I am a farmer," replied Mr. Mayo.

"Have you any children?" The doctor asked.

"God has not been good to me. Out of 15 born, only 9 *alive*," Mayo answered.

"Does your wife work?"

"No she stays at home."

"I see. How does she spend her days?"

"Well, she gets up at four in the morning, fetches water and wood, makes the fire, cooks breakfast and cleans the homestead. Then she goes to the river and washes cloths. Once a week she walks to the grinding mill. After that she goes to the township with the two small children where she sells tomatoes by the road side while she knits. She buys what' she wants from the shops. Then she cooks the midday meal."

"Do you come home at midday?"

"No, she brings the meal to me about three kilometres away."

"And after that?"

"I go home for supper which my wife has prepared."

"Does she go to bed after supper?"

"No, she has thing to do around the house until 9 or 10."

"But I thought you said your wife doesn't work."

"Of course she doesn't work. I told you she stays at home."¹⁰

The devaluing of women's reproductive work has a bearing on the productive work that women do as the story of Dr. Mayo above shows. Let us try to understand how much women's productive labour is also devalued. A patriarchal society has not only identified the mode of behaviour that men and woman must conform by but has defined women's work roles as well. Similarly, in the handloom and weaving industry, women do all the work related to preparing yarn, while men are in charge of the actual weaving. This phenomenon, which has been defined by scholars as the gender division of labour, restricts and confines men and women within specific work roles and more importantly, ascribes greater value to the work that men do. It completely negates the fact that women work for longer hours since they bear the burden of both productive and reproductive work. Division of gender labour results in great wage differentials between men and women which regrettably the law and policy makers have done little to change.

The constitutional provision today makes it clear that women have equal rights with them in all spheres of life. The age old suppression of women by men has been put to an end at least constitutionally. Women are free like men to choose any form of education and training to equip them for a career. The constitution not only gives equality in education to women but it also assures equal opportunity to women in matters of public appointments. It says, "there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment and appointment to any office under the state and no citizen shall, on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, residence or any of these be ineligible for or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the state". Plans and programmes should be formulated not merely to educate women for new responsibilities and provide them with

opportunities for employment in public life but also to promote an entirely new set of attitudes and values concerning the role and status of women.¹¹

Present Indian society is a society dominated by values and agenda where women's labour has been viewed only as subsidiary labour a derivative of male labour. What is even of greater concern is that women's contributory role in society economy and polity have seldom been acknowledged by policy makers and social thinkers. In fact, since their inception, the social sciences have been dominated by men and as a logical extension have been equally dominated by the assumption of male supremacy as a social constant, a universal fact of psychological and biological life. It was almost forgotten that human being consisted of women too. History was written from the perspective of *mankind*. 'She' was sometimes glimpsed in some history text books, that too perhaps because her achievements were considered significant by male standards. Thus, women in history, have by and large remained invisible or have been added in but never be a part of theory construction or the historiography research agenda which has remained 'rational', 'scientific' and 'universal'.¹²

In Bodoland, sericulture sector has long been dominated by women and it has remained largely house hold based. In fact, the art of sericulture was known to Bodo women from the age of two epics and if not earlier. *Endi or Muga*, the golden yellow silk is mostly associated with Assam and it is in the weaving of this silk that the Bodo or Assamese women are renowned. "However it was Suaulkuchi, a village located on the northern bank of Brahmaputra that developed into an important silk weaving centre and came to be known as the '*Manchester of Assam*'. This industry is completely dominated by women folks for centuries.¹³

Apart from the appreciative references to the Bodo women's weaving silk, however, there has been little attempt till date to undertake studies in this sector that make women's role in this sector as their main concern. While the historians of this region mentioned that the Bodo (Assamese) women were skilled weavers, no attempt has been made to understand the women as socially productive workers. This is because an inherent gender bias exists regarding the concept of labour itself. Feminists feel that in order to understand women in their specific historical conditions, we must examine the kind of work they perform, the way in which labour is organised and the social relations that women form with others and with men as a result of their labour and its mode of organisation.¹⁴

Women are taking up jobs due to various reasons. A few women work as sole supporters of the family while others work as additional bread of the family. Generally women face lots of problems in seeking employment. The Report of National Committee on the Status of Women (1975)¹⁵, pointed out that the statutory provisions of maternity benefits and welfare facilities like crèches and separate sanitary conveniences constituted a negligible expenditure to the establishments. Similarly the private establishments by and large have stopped recruiting women as they argue that when there is a choice between an equally competent men and women, why not they should prefer a man who does not need maternity leave and would not present his employees with the above said problem.¹⁶

Studies have shown that many cities and a number of industrial organisations do advertise for the post or posts exclusively meant for male applicants. Studies have also shown that when women apply for traditionally male jobs, they tend to get rejected at the initial stage of selection by screening and short listing the job

applications. In case they are called for an interview either by mistake or otherwise, they in general tend to get lower evaluation in the selection process.¹⁷

In spite of these factors women are compelled to seek employment due to many reasons. The Ministry of Labour, Government of India has pointed out that whatsoever is the stage of economic or social development of a country, four factors which led women to join the work force prevail. They are: Inadequate income of the principal earner which forces women to work and supplement the income; mishaps such as incapacity of the bread – winner, death of the bread winner and a woman desires for economic independence or for securing a higher standard of living.¹⁸ There is also a desire on the part of the women to give expression to her talents and skills. Some other studies have brought to light the fact that loneliness is a powerful motive for women to seek employment outside their homes.

In BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council) also their importance as a work force has been either neglected or misrepresented. Many activities of Bodo women in economically gainful work are either given no recognition or not properly represented in the statistical data of traditional perception of male-female relationship. Even if they get employment after undergoing all the hurdles, they are made to abide by the traditional perception of male-female relationship. They find it difficult to interact as they have been trained to listen, obey and leave decision making to men in the family or in the business situation. It is also felt that they pose special problems to their employers because of their high absenteeism and turn over by rejecting promotions and resisting transfers etc.

In order to evaluate the value of Home Work, two methods of approach can be applied. The first method is the '*Opportunity Cost Approach*', which sets the value

of work done at home equal to the income the person could earn in the labour market. The second one is the '*Market Cost Approach*', which uses the cost of hiring some one to do the house work to determine its value. Women, who has been raised to consider a career unacceptable for a good wife and mother, she may chose to forgo high salary to be full time home maker. This doesn't necessarily mean that her work at home is worth as much as her work in the market would be.¹⁹ The value of house work done by the Bodo women cannot be exactly determined and cannot be accurately measured. As there is no time limit in the case of house work, so almost one-third of the day, women remain engaged in the family for the development and welfare of the family members. Bodo women help in running the family in a planed and systematic way. In the Bodo family, be it rich or poor, without women, a family can not be a complete family. So the importance of women in the family cannot be underestimated whether she is literate or illiterate.

We often observe in the labour market the value of per hour is calculated in their salary or wages but the society does not try to identify the value of work per hour at home. Because in case of home, no money is paid per hour. So in our eyes they are doing only their duties. It is exception in the case of self employed women who are doing different types of work sitting at home and they are getting their remuneration. The labour of Bodo women in their houses certainly enables men to produce more wealth than they could otherwise and in this way women are economic factors in the society. Women could become emancipated through participation in the labour market and we can put forward some arguments against the relation of the traditional family institution because of the way in which it exploited women. Women's work should be supported or respected as it is always an important standard of measurement of women's status, especially when their labour

is remunerated with wage and also, the presence of women in the paid labour force reflect the level of society's development.²⁰

In Bodo society, the participation of women in the labour force is not only desirable but also essential because it increase the level of food availability, nutrition, productivity and creates essential demands. Women's participation in the labour market also determines the structure of the household and the relationship within the family. It also results in the reduction in female fertility and improvement in the quality of lives. Thus, we can undoubtedly say that women's participation in labour force seems to lead to multidimensional utilities relating to personal, economic, social health and welfare sectors. The historical tracing of women's status has revealed that they had higher status in horticultural societies than in agricultural and industrial societies. With industrialization much productive activities were shifted from home to the factories and to the office.²¹

In rural and backward areas of Bodoland (BTC) majority of Bodo women are illiterate and women work forces were involved in agricultural and other unskilled activities. This is also true that in case of urban and developed areas, where the majority of women are engaged in unskilled labour, mostly involved in menial labour services and hence remain unskilled throughout their work lives. Increased work-participation of women is considered as one of the remedies to elevate their position in the society. The work participation rate decreases as the educational level at secondary level of education registers a sudden upward trend to graduation level and above. Inequality exists today because one gender has only one kind of responsibility and the other, another kind. Education still is considered as a major mechanism which can be used to transform social and economic status specially

that of women, who because of social sanctions are denied access to many spheres of work dominated by men.²²

Low literacy level among females even after more than six decades of independence and technological advancement in the world is another important phenomenon showing the poor status of women in the society. Education broadens one's outlook and a woman can better understand about her rights and positions in surrounding environment. According to former Secretary General, UNO, Boutros Boutros Ghali, "Without progress in the situation of women there can be no true social development. Human rights are not worthy of the name, if they exclude the female, half of humanity. The struggle for women's equality is part of the struggle for a better world for all human beings and all societies." Equality means equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities to men and women in all spheres of life. This can not be achieved until there are equal accessibilities for boys and girls of the education and development of their personal ambitions, interests and talents.²³

Due to the influence of education in Bodoland, Bodo women have started to break the shackles and those women who are economically hard pressed, get engaged in remunerative jobs and also those who wish to live a socially useful life and subsist on the family income, seek employment. They have now realised that work gives them better personal status and an independent social standing. Time has come now to recognise the untiring efforts put in by women folk in keeping the home front in better way, keeping in mind not only the present requirement of the home and society but also nurturing the children to grow as worthy citizens of the future world. Although in the Bodo society, families' money generally comes from the male members of the family, the contribution of the women of the family in enabling the men-folk to go outside for earning is significant and treated equal.²⁴

In recent time women, who were till then not in the employment market are exercising the second option of career, thus exchanging an absolute reliance on their spouses' earnings for a more diversified, personally and mutually enriched sharing of earning responsibilities. As for sharing of household responsibilities it cannot be categorically stated that it is always women's responsibility. In most cases of working women, they are the first generation earning members and there is adjustment by family members, though the extent of help and degree of adjustability are not uniform in all cases. The future generation of working women will gain much more supportive influence from the family once the working women concept becomes a *fait accompli*. Society is slow to accept women in the professional arena and it is 'lamented that norms have not changed' because of any changing attitudes of women to work. Much of the general viewpoint is that working outside home disturbs family life and gives rise to neglect of children and family responsibilities. But in most cases the cohesiveness of families and family values has been strengthened according to them. Career women add to domestic income and are more self confident than entirely domesticated women. Women with only domestic responsibilities, cannot add to income or bring the 'know how' of modern socio-economic institutional conditions outside the home.²⁵

Despite the spread of literacy and modernisation, all the women do not want to work. Mostly they depend on their individuality and family considerations get priority over a career. Personal aspirations, social conventions and economic circumstances appear to be and often conditioned to be mutually inter-dependent. A balancing of options of women is shape by family background and circumstances, age of children, employment opportunities and the overall cultural milieu.

The primary wave of social change of Bodoland is reflected in terms of the rising age of marriage, smaller families, urbanisation, migration, rising costs and standard of living. These act as very effective socio-economic factors, pushing women into the economic mainstream and changing and also extending their roles and responsibilities. The secondary wave of social change activities emerges from the increase in the proportion of women in the labour force, and because of such a wave, new social welfare services are called forth to deal with the management of home and children.²⁶

In India, women constitute 48.2% (33 cores out of 68.4 cores) of the total population, according to 1981 census. But the percentage of women in the total labour is only 20.8%, whereas in developed countries it ranges from 30 % to 45%. The work participation rate for females increased from 15.9% in 1971 to 23.09% in 1981 in the rural areas of the country thereby showing increasing participation of women in economic activities during the decade of 1971-1981. Roughly every fifth women is a worker as against every second man. The primary sector (farming, livestock, forestry, plantation, orchards etc.) provides work for about 83% of women and 46% of them work as agricultural labourers; 33% are cultivators.²⁷

Agriculture remains the major economic activities of the Bodo women in BTC as well as of the women of other parts of the country. According to census of 1971, 80.1% of women workers are found in agriculture. In rural areas they constitute 87% of the female work force. Next to agriculture, because of their labour intensive character, handlooms, handicrafts and rural industries play a vital role in providing work opportunities for women. The low literacy percentage (1981) of women at 22.88% as compared to 47% among men also contributes to the limited employment opportunities of the former. Lack of technical knowledge and skill limit

their participation to 16% in the tertiary sector (such as construction, trade and commerce, transportation and storage communication and other services). The participation rate of women in Khadi and village industries is around 45%. Their participation is significant especially in spinning of cotton, wool and silk, manufacturing of fancy and utility articles in fibre industry, cottage industries, processing of cereals and pulses, etc.²⁸

In Bodoland, rural sector is dominant with 90% of its population living in 3,000 villages. Out of total workers 77% are engaged in agriculture and its allied activities. Female population is a significant force in Bodoland. The long term trend in the economic activities of females in rural areas of Bodoland indicates that females continue to concentrate the primary sectors. The number of women workers is higher in agriculture than in other sectors of industry. In plantation and allied activities females work in the same capacity as that of males. The increase in the number of workers in agriculture as compared to non-agriculture is more marked in the case of females than that of male workers.

It is evident that Bodo women are losing their occupational participation in cottage industry and agriculture. One reason is that in the post independence period, there has been rapid growth in the modern and organised sector of the industry. The role of household industry declined rapidly. The household industry provided the biggest source of self employment to women and they are the greatest victims of the process of economic transformation. They had to face competition from the factory production. In such circumstances, it is necessary to train women for handling new technologies; demonstration cum training centres should be established in urban as well as rural areas to enable women entrepreneurs to learn simple technologies of their interest. This would not only promote self employment

among women, but would also generate employment opportunities for the entire female workforce who have been displaced in traditional agricultural employment due to mechanisation and improved economy.

In Bodoland, for rural Bodo women, therefore, new initiatives are particularly urgent in matters of agricultural production, cottage and small scale industry, credit, marketing, energy, technology, potable water supply, sanitation; non-agricultural occupations have assumed greater importance in acting as the main source of income. Moreover, rural women face problems in engaging in income generating activities because of their illiteracy or lack of modern education and training. In addition to this, their time consuming responsibilities within the household like the preparation of food, fetching of fuel and water, caring for animals, rearing of child, house keeping, etc. marginalised them even further from access to education and training.²⁹

Unfortunately, rural development still continues to be largely discussed in terms of agricultural development only. But it is obvious that rural industrial development equally deserves increased attention as being an important source of employment and income. Rural industries if promoted, could supply goods suitable to local market conditions, utilising locally available raw materials and skills. These industries would also provide opportunities to investing surplus rural labour together with satisfying and refining local entrepreneurial initiatives. When such varied activities are established closer to rural areas, rural-urban flow of migration would also increase substantially³⁰ Thus, economic independence of this nature would accelerate an improvement in the status of Bodo women in Bodoland.

The long term objective of the development programmes for women during the Seventh Five Year Plan was to raise their economic and social status in order to bring them into the mainstream of national development. The basic approach was to inculcate confidence among women and bring about awareness of their own potential. During the Eight Five Year Plan, programme designed to bring about improvement in the status of women comprised a condensed course of education for adult women and vocational training, support of training and employment programmes for women, setting up women's development corporations in states and the like.

The National Policy of Education adopted in 1986 devised various strategies for women's emancipation and bringing equality between sexes through education. It was proposed to encourage educational institutions to take up such programmes which directly benefit and give empowerment to women. For women, children are the greatest emotional liability, for the sake of whom they have to sacrifice their own advancement. Employment opportunities for women will be said to be negative if they cannot find a job of their own choices, merits and educational backgrounds at their own places, keeping the pace between the family and career advancement. As it has been said earlier, mere legislations and enacted laws cannot achieve the desired goal unless there is required environment and no gender bias.³¹ Family as well as society has to change their attitude towards girls and women and take care of their emotional, economic, social and other needs in addition to governmental efforts.³³

Ninth Plans intends to take special measures to improve human development. For this purpose, extension of education and health care to the weaker and underprivileged sections received special priority in the Ninth Plan. The under

privileged sections include women, schedule castes, schedule tribes and the like. 33% reservation for women in employment, which was announced by the Government of India recently, is considered a boon for their upliftment.³⁴ However, achievement expressed in terms of demographic and employment characteristics show the position of women to be unequal. This reflects the limitations of the law to bring about substantial change. The law assumes and reinforces the conventional notions of women as having a primary responsibility to the family and motherhood and the need to preserve these roles. Majority of men are even now not quite reconciled to women's working outside home and this is considered one of the reasons for women's slow progress. This may be because male vanity fed by centuries of tradition is not ready to accept a measure of financial independence and self assurance among women. But the old resistance to not letting women to work is being eroded by the economic imperatives of high standard of living. It has come to be realised that the working women are an asset to a middle class family without being a serious embarrassment, as long as she abides by the general decorum of the family.³⁵

In spite of initiatives taken by the Government of India, the position of Bodo women in labour market is not attractive in Bodoland. Bodo women feel that they are capable of discharging duties assigned to other kinds of jobs that are available. Further, majority of them feel that they are not only capable of doing things properly but also can perform the assigned work as good as men. They are not only confident about the performance and discharge of the assigned duties but they do want to have equal opportunities with men to prove their competence in all possible walks of life, in every profession and in all occupations.

Thus, it has to be recognised that Bodo women today can no longer be regarded as the weaker sex and discriminated as second grade citizens. To improve their status more, proper attention is needed to eradicate illiteracy among Bodo women. It is also equally important to motivate women to work as equal partners of economic development. For assuring equality, dignity, justice, prosperity and stability, the contribution of Bodo women has to be viewed in a wider perspective in Bodoland and particularly in the Bodo society.

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