

Women in Bodo Society

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ABSTRACT: *Bodo is one of the ethnic groups of North East India with its distinct identity and rich cultural heritage. The social structure of Bodo is generally considered to be of patriarchy. But though often considered in this way it is not completely patriarchal in character. Socio-cultural life of the society is equally controlled by women, as by men, with their active participation in various fields of the society. The roles played by them in the society cannot be ignored rather highly acknowledgeable. Simply, it can be said that they are pure, brave, active, tolerance, free, faithful and affectionate. Glory of women goes on their status that gained by participating in various activities and confronting many difficulties and challenges come in their life. But they are not viewed in a practical way especially studying their status and position in the society. Therefore, this paper intends to provide an outlook regarding the role and status of women of Bodo society.*

KEY WORDS: *Bodo women, participation, role and status, ethnicity, etc.*

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I. Introduction

Bodos are one of the indigenous tribes of North East-India. In 1846, B.H. Hodgson for the first time used the term 'Bodo' to call this racial group. They constitute a very important section of ethnic groups of Assam and have their own identity regarding their language and culture. 1971 Census Report of India shows that Bodos are 8th largest tribe in India. Racially they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid and linguistically to the Tibeto-Burman group of Sino-Tibetan speech family. 1991 Census report of India says that there were 1.2 million Bodo speakers in Assam which makes for 5.3 of the total population in the state. They are lying scattered in different provinces especially in the north-eastern parts of the country and neighboring foreign countries like - Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal etc. Majority of them are mainly found in four districts of BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area Districts). Though Bodos do not have sufficient historical documents to tell their glory that they were master race in ancient time, it is certainly considered that Bodos were the first civilization in the north eastern part of ancient India. Because, historical monuments, name of rivers and places still show their glorious past that they had kings, kingdoms and they ruled the entire ancient Assam. Earlier historian, Sir Edward Gait who chronicled so many things about Assam in his writing 'A history of Assam' also rightly observed and put his comment that 'the wide extent and long duration of Bodo domination as shown by the frequent occurrence of the prefix di or ti, the Bodo word for water, in the river names of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining country to the west e.g. Dibru, dikhu, Dihing, Dihong, Disang, Dihang, Dimla etc.' [1] (Edward Gait, 2005). B.K. Barua, another renowned scholar of Assam also mentioned about the Bodos in his book entitled 'A Cultural History of Assam' in the same way that 'the Bodos built strong kingdoms and with various fortunes and under various tribal names-Chutiya, the Kachari, the koc, etc., held sway over one or another part of Assam during different historical times.' [2] (B.K. Barua, 2003).

Bodos are the largest and one of the oldest ethnic groups of North East India. They might have migrated thousands of years ago from Tibet via hu-wang-ho and yang-tsi-kiyang rivers to India in some period of B.C. Now they are recognized with various names viz. son of the soil, aborigine and indigenous people of North East India. They are very much simplicity and honesty in character.

II. Women And Their Participation

Bodo women have been playing crucial role to ensure sound society as equal as that of male counterpart. Their status in the society cannot be measured only from their work participations, but also it is interesting to take a look on that how they are praiseworthy for their honesty and ability in maintaining and running their family as well as society smoothly.

1. Social Life

The contribution made by Bodo women to social progress of their community is highly acknowledgeable. Since the time immemorial, they have been exhibiting their talent through work participation

in various fields of their socio-cultural life. Regarding the role of Tribal women, M. Hazowary, eminent scholar of Bodo literature rightly observed that the Tribal women always spend their daily life in busy. In fact, 'tribal women do not have any leisure since leaving her bed early in the morning and till going to bed at night' [3] (M. Hazowary, 2007). Bodo women are also not exception in this regard. They are required to prepare food, weave clothes for all members of the family, collect firewood and gather edible vegetables from nearby jungle. Moreover, their active participation in rites and rituals from child birth to cremation of death shows their talent, ability and value that they are contributing with sincere effort for the sweet composition of the society. They are always praiseworthy for their warm hospitality, sincerity, affectionate dealing with the people of the society. They are always helpful in distress and tragedy. If any member of the society is found to be in distress, they share their experiences and exchange their feelings with commitment of words. Straightly speaking, Bodo women never compromise themselves by denying their duty rather they courageously confront the challenges of life.

2. Economic Sphere

Father is the head and guardian of the family in Bodo society. But, women do not depend completely on their guardian economically. They engage themselves in various activities in order to make their livelihood easy and economically sound. For the smooth running of the family they help their husbands in agricultural fields too with utmost efforts. Animal husbandry is another source of income which is very familiar to them. They are very much engaged in rearing cattle, poultry, and piggery for economic purpose. As the urbanization and modernization have influenced the society to some extent, presently, Bodo women are seen engaged in some businesses as agent of some brands (companies) like Oriflamme, Amway, Tiens etc. where agent to consumer direct selling of the products is practiced. Some of them are now getting involved in various businesses like selling garments, green vegetables, fruits, phitha (cake made from rice powder), meat and fish etc. for the economic development of the family.

Women in Bodo society are socially allowed to form any kind of co-operative groups like club, self-help-group, NGO, Mahila Got (Committee) etc. to get themselves financially secured. Today, women in every villages of Bodo society have their mutual groups as well.

3. Educational Sphere

Education has played a very crucial role for the welfare of women in the Bodo society. With the advent of modernization and urbanization, most of the Bodo families are now aware of their right to education. They are conscious enough to send their daughters not only to school but also to attain higher education. Therefore we see a rise in the educational qualification of a number of Bodo women. A few of them are now seen engaged in various eminent fields like education, politics, mass communication etc. Education has played a vital role to provide employment and economic security and social status to Bodo women. Some of them are engaged in active working and creative writings not only for the empowerment of Bodo women but also for the overall development of the Bodo society. Their contribution to the literature of the society is praiseworthy. Remarkable point is that a few of them have earned their fame by achieving Sahitya Akademi Award too for their literary works done in various fields of literature.

Besides, they have some organizations like- AATWWF (All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation), ABWF (All Bodo Women Welfare Federation), BWJF (Bodo Women Justice Forum) which are formed for the welfare of the women as well as of their nation. Such organizations do not only work for the women, but also go for burning problems occurred in the society and take initiatives according to their capacity to solve the problems and difficulties as much as possible.

4. Religious practice

Bathou is the traditional religion which has been being worshipped by the society since immemorial past. Regarding this religion, Bodos perform many religious festivals throughout a year where female attendance is very essential. One of the most important religious festivals of Bodos is Kherai. Padmashree awardee Dr. K. Brahma has called 'Kherai the greatest festival of Bodos' [4] (Kameswar Brahma, 1989). In Kherai, a female priest called doudini plays central role. 'Doudini performs most of the essential rites during the Kherai worship with the help of oza and gidal' [5] (Anil Boro, 2001). Bodos perform four kinds of Kherai. These are (1) Darshan Kherai (held on in the month of September and October to propitiate Mainao, goddess of wealth), (2) Umrao Kherai (held on in the month of June-July for the welfare of villagers as well as of summer season crops), (3) Phalo Kherai (held on in month of January and February during bhogali bihu), (4) Nowaoni Kherai (occasionally held on in a family for the well being of the family). But in the absence of doudini (female priest) none of these Kherai can be performed. Apart from this, the Bodos believe in many Gods and Goddesses. That is why many Bodo women perform and participate in various Hindu puja, like Durga, Kali and Shiva etc. There is no any restriction for women in enjoying such festivals.

5. Agriculture and Kitchen Garden

Agriculture is the sole means as well as source of livelihood of Bodos. Various scholars opine that Bodos brought the art of cultivation with them while they migrated from Tibet in early age before the beginning

of historical era. With the proportionate effort of both men and women successful cultivation is performed. Without womenfolk cultivation is impossible for a Bodo family. They are mainly wet cultivators. Sali (Maisali), Asu (Ahu), Bao (Baowa), Maibra paddy are grown in their field. During cultivation, Bodos observe various ritual ceremonies where female guardian of a family plays main role. Gasa saonai (lighting festival), Mai naihwinai (visiting of the paddy), Mainao borainai (welcome of goddess of wealth) are such festivals which are performed by Bodo women in connection with cultivation. The main target and goal of the observation of such festival is to propitiate 'Mainao' Goddess of wealth and collect successful crops. When it is done, it is believed that Mainao (Lakshmi), Goddess of wealth gets satisfied and blesses the family in harvesting successful crops.

Apart from the above mentioned roles played by women, they also engage themselves in cultivation of vegetables. For collecting vegetables they do not depend on men. They cultivate varieties of vegetables in the front yard or backyard of the house which is popularly known as kitchen garden. Elderly women spend most of their time in making kitchen garden. They grow coriander, chilly, potato, brinjal of small kind, ginger, turmeric, garlic, gourd, bean, lady's finger, etc. which are generally required for domestic consumption. Straightly speaking, the vegetables grown in the kitchen garden supplement their requirement for domestic consumption to a considerable extent. Moreover, it is also observable that some Bodo women sell their vegetables grown in the garden in the nearby local bazaar. By doing this they reduce the difficulties and financial burden of the family to a lot.

6. Household and Cottage Industries

Weaving is the most popular household and cottage industry of Bodo women. They are born weaver and almost every house possesses loom. It is presumed that half of the clothes used in their day to day life are woven by the womenfolk. Dr. Mangalsing Hazoary also observed and said that 'there is no single woman or young girl who is not expert in weaving among the Boros as well as Mishings in Assam' [6] (M. hazoary, 2007). They are the symbol of handloom and art of spinning too. They rear silk worms i.e endi, muga etc. In the very beginning they collect the eggs and utmost care is taken for feeding the worms with a continuous supply of fresh endi leaves. They spin out the yarn (Golden cocoon) in their own 'thaokhri' (spinning machine) and weave to meet the requirement of clothes in the family. And they earn money selling the clothes woven by them at a reasonable price in the local market. In this way, Bodo women also help in family progress reducing financial burden to a great extent. It is not necessary to say that they have a great heritage of traditional skills in weaving. During Bwisagu festival (spring time festival) Bodo damsels present their Aronai (Roje phali) woven by themselves to their dear ones as a symbol of love.

In the society, it is generally believed that a girl who is not expert in weaving is not considered fit for a bride. She may not be selected for the marriage for not having this weaving skill. Hence, in order to get married every girl start learning to weave from very early age.

III. Marriage

Bodos' marriage system is well structured for women. Though Bodos have as many as six types of marriage, they formally prefer the arrange marriage most. Without consulting with the bride and taking consent from her, parent does not settle marriage for their daughter.

A lot of deadly attack and torture on women have taken place in different places in different periods of times across the country due to dowry system. It is deeply rooted in many Hindu societies. Many women still suffer from this system throughout the country. But there is no dowry system in Bodo society. No, single incident regarding dowry has taken place in the society till date. Bodo women can enjoy dowry free marriage. Rather, during early period exactly a century back from today there was a system of marriage where bride price had to be given by the groom. For this, groom was bound to give a sum of huge amount to the parent of bride if he wanted to get the bride as his wife. Rev. Sidney Endle also had mentioned clearly about this system of marriage that, in cases where the bridegroom or his parents are unable to pay the bride price demanded by the girl's parents, it is usual for the young man to give equivalent service in the house of bride's parents [7](Rev. S. Endle, 1997). From this point of view one can definitely say that women enjoy high status in Bodo society. Moreover, widow re-marriage is socially allowed and solemnized with great respect.

According to traditional marriage system, two young girls and two women are appointed as bairathi (female attendants). Their presence is essential in marriage. Especially married bairathi do not have any responsibilities except advising and guiding the bride in her activities. But two young bairathi are used for amusement. They need to bear all the jokes made to them in marriage. Their work in the marriage is to decorate bride with their traditional costume and distribute areca nut to the people and grace the occasion with warm hospitality.

IV. Conclusion

The role and status of Bodo women is easy to be measured from different angles of their social life. Their participation in various activities and social affairs shows that they enjoy high status in the society. They

are well equipped with skills for cultivation, cottage industry, animal husbandry. But they are very traditional in their way. Their attempt will turn into a great success if they are provided with scientific techniques of doing work in modern way. For this central and state government should come forward to make them more beneficial providing them training and financial help as required so that they get inspired more and more to engage in their activities and make themselves economically sound. This initiative if taken by the Government then that section of people will not only be benefitted but also it will be another source of income for the government.

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