

THE ROLE OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN SOCIETY IN BODOLAND TERRITORIAL REGION: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Tribal constitutes one of the most integral parts of India's population. The tribal people generally suffered from manifold disadvantages, such as poverty, lack of education, health issues, malnutrition, geographical isolation, limited access to service and other resources, which made them the most downgraded and marginalized group in society. Whatever the rights the man exercised in societies, that could help us to understand the role of female counterparts. It is also stated that the way a society treats its women is the best indicator of its progress. In today's world, the role of tribal women has differed from tribes to tribes and from society to society. Several tribes, like Bodos, Rabhas, Garos and Sarania-Kachari live in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), a sixth schedule administrative areas of Assam. In their societies, since ages the women have played a vital role on the workforce and have contributed significantly to the family income compared to women in non-tribal societies. They were frequently engaged in hands-on work and primarily confined in fulfilling their basic economic needs. Despite, the women of this region normally enjoyed full autonomy and played an active role in significant economic activities. The study however, shows that the inferior status of tribal women is usually linked to the refusal to grant the property rights, access to resources and education as well as the restriction of certain occupations in the region. The paper thus intends to study various roles played by tribal women in their societies in the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam from historical point of view.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Role, Status, Society, BTR.

INTRODUCTION

India has the second higher number of tribal populations after African continent. As of the 1991 census, the tribal population of India constituted 8.1% of the total population, of which about 10.1% lived in rural areas, and 2.3% lived in urban areas. According to the 2001 census, the tribal population in India increased up to 8.2% of which about 10.4% lived in rural areas and only 2.4% lived in urban areas. Then as revealed in 2011 census, it constituted 8.6% of the India's total population of which 11.3% population lived in rural areas and only 2.8% in urban regions (Population Census 2011, India). The Northeastern states of India have a higher number of tribal populations. The stumbling-blocks in the path of tribes' growth and development generally lies in the geographical isolation of the regions, widespread poverty, lack of education, limited access to resources, and problems of integrating with main civilization, etc. (Tripathy, 2004: 106). In Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam, the role of tribal women was more

effective rather than women in non-tribal societies. In their societies, since women were more prone to live in villages, they usually liked to perform hands-on work and helped their parents in their farming in agricultural land. Before the formation of a sixth schedule BTC area on 2003, there had not been seen any sign of growth and development of the tribal people in the fields of social, economic and political. In this region, several tribal ethnic communities live, which include Bodos, Rabha, Sarania-Kachari, Modahi-Kachari, Mech-Kachari and Garo. Among them, the Bodos constitute the largest ethnic tribe in the region.

According to the 2001 census, total population of Assam was 2.59 % of India's population. In 2011 census, the figure was 2.58 %. However, Assam's Schedule tribe (ST) population was around 3.7 % of the India's total Schedule tribe (ST) population. Total population of Assam as per the 2011 census was about 3.12 crores, an increase from the figure of 2.67 crore in the 2001 census. According to the 2011 census, total BTC population was 3,151,047, an increase from the figure of 2,89,2997 in 2001 census and then only 3 % Schedule tribe population lived in urban areas as per the 2011 census (Population Census 2011, India & Assam). This shows that large number of tribal people live in rural areas of Bodoland Territorial Region which was once socially, economically and educationally backwards, and hence, some tribal people still suffered at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in rural areas.

BODOLAND TERRITORIAL REGION (BTR)

Bodoland Territorial Region (erstwhile BTC) is a self-governing administrative unit of Assam consisting of four districts, namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. The region is a sixth schedule area formed under the constitution of India which generally ranges from the north bank of Brahmaputra river bordering the south foothills of Bhutan kingdom and northwest of Arunachal Pradesh. Its geographical boundary lies between $26^{\circ} 7' 12''$ N to $26^{\circ} 47' 50''$ N Latitude and $89^{\circ} 47' 40''$ E to $92^{\circ} 18' 30''$ E Longitude which is in the northwestern part of Assam. The elected body, Bodoland Territorial Council mainly manages the region, which was formed in accordance with the terms of peace agreement signed on 2003. This agreement was again stretched by an agreement signed on 27th January, 2020 between the Govt. of India and the Govt. of Assam on one side, and the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and United Bodo People's Organisation on the other, with the enhanced executive and legislative powers. Total area of the region is $8,970 \text{ km}^2$ ($3,460 \text{ sq. mi}$) (Reference No.17). This area is mainly inhabited by several indigenous communities of Assam i.e., Bodos, Assamese, Bengali, Rabha, Koch-Rajbanshi, Sarania-Kachari, Muslim, Nepali and Garo, etc. Among these communities, Bodos, Rabha, Sarania-Kachari, Modahi-Kachari and Garos are tribals.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the role of tribal women in different fields-social, economic, religious and political.
2. To explore the women's role in forest and agriculture in tribal societies.
3. To study the tribal women and customary law in connection with domestic activities.

The paper intends to explain the different issues faced by the tribal women while working in society from historical perspective. The study will help us to understand various activities carried out by tribal women in different fields for the development of the society.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study for the present paper is descriptive, analytical and historical research. The relevant data is garnered from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are collected from the personal interviews taken from prominent social workers, elderly people and intellectuals. The published books, journals, web sources, etc., constitute of the secondary sources.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

TRIBAL WOMEN'S POSITION

In tribal societies, the position of women is mainly based on roles and that are understood through the rights and roles of the male counterparts only. Their position usually lies in social, individual behaviour and role implications. In most parts of Northeast India, since ages, the tribal women have normally enjoyed rather better status as compared to tribal women of the rest of India. This is clearly evident from their distinctive roles played in society, and was free from some social evil practices. This remained the same to tribal women of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), who played a more effective role on the workforce and contributed significantly to the family income. However, their role mostly affianced in hands-on work and primarily confined in fulfilling their basic economic needs. Thus, the tribal women's role in the region is very important for the growth and development of their society.

RESPECT TO A TRIBAL GIRL CHILD

In Bodoland Territorial Region, the tribal society is primarily based on patriarchal system and partly patrilocal. But it seems that there exist a few rudiments of matriarchal characteristics. Earlier, the position of tribal women in society was not lower to that of a man but the tribal family did not desire more the birth of a female child as much that of a male (Brahma, 1992: 34). Even, in their societies, there was no evidence of practice of female infanticide which was at that time, continued in different parts of India. But earlier, the tribal family primarily ignored girl's child education as compared to that of boys and engaged them as caretakers of their households only. It is stated that from the very childhood, the girls shared all types of the works at home and

agricultural doings along with their parents excluding schooling. Probably, before the beginning of 21st century, the tribal society in this region had a tradition that those girls who were not expert in weaving cloth and its designing, as well as household doings, became very difficult for them to get marriage. But currently, this tradition has undergone a great change due to the modernisation in society.

ROLE IN DECISION MAKING

In a patriarchal society, tribal women usually did not have particular role in decision-making but they shared only supportive role in society for ages. Their indirect role in decision-making in a family or village levels is highly praiseworthy. Since long past, the male member of a family generally took all major decisions inside and outside the family, and the female was just required to abide by the wishes and orders of their men folk. They had a belief that the main duty of a women was to perform the household activities and caring the family. But such belief has been changed as a result of modernization that, nowadays, many tribal women take part in some decision making at different fields-family, household and other activities, etc. Even, in absence of male person in a family, the women generally undertake all the decisions.

TRIBAL WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

In tribal societies of Bodoland Territorial Region, the girls usually remained under the care of their parents till their marriage. Traditionally, they had legal right to get marriage long after they had attained full puberty. From this, it may be summarised that the practice of child marriage was not known to them (Barua, 1951:133). The parents' consent in the marriage of daughter was mandatory. But it didn't mean that they had no any freedom to choose their husbands. In settling a marriage of either a son or a daughter, the opinion of mother and other female relative was also taken into consideration. If she did not agree the marriage, then there were chances that proposal might be cancelled. It was the father who approaches first for his daughter's marriage. Once a girl was married, she became to her husband's family and the children born of their marriage in all cases borne the surname of their father. Earlier, inter-caste marriage was strictly prohibited even with cognate tribes too. Though a section of the people of the tribes, like Bodos, Rabhas, Sarania-Kacharis came under the influence of Hinduism in the later parts of 19th century yet there was no report regarding the practice of dowry system and caste system in their society. However, there were a few references of the bride's parents who gave some valuable goods to their daughters, like furniture, gold ornaments, a plot of land according to their capacity and sweet will. But no demand for dowry either from the bridegroom or from bridegroom's family was reported among the tribes. (Brahma, 2006:24.) Widow remarriage was prevalent in the tribal society. Even, in case of dead of her husband the widow undertook the responsibility of the family if her child is not fully grown enough. They had also right to inherent the property of her dead husband.

PROPERTY RIGHTS

In Bodoland Territorial Region, the tribal society was primarily based on patriarchy. After the death of her husband, the mother held the responsibility for maintaining the family. In accordance with the customary law, the inheritance of property determined. The girls had property rights from the parents if no male child in a family. They had also right to enjoy such properties even after their marriage. The sons inherited the household property and only the ornaments of the mother went to their daughter. In the absence of any male in a family the daughter was the sole inheritor of all the household property of her parents. She might enter into marriage negotiation with any husband with the consent that the latter was required to take care of parents of his wife till their old age (Informant-9). Earlier, the land holding was generally registered in the name of the male head of the family and traditionally, the women had no any legal right on family land property. But nowadays, it has been changed that land holding registration is also made in the name of women.

The divorce women in tribal society had also some rights to inherit the property from her husband. The tribal society legally permitted divorce. But there must be a valid reason to satisfy the society. The tribal women had right to give divorce her husband if not satisfied. But in earlier times, the cases of divorce were very rare. However, both husband and wife could seek divorce mutually in the society if they wanted, and it was permissible with a certain social formality only. The social formality for divorce happened in the presence of village's elderly persons (Endle, 1990:31). There was no evidence of claiming a share of propriety of her husband during marital separation but she had the right to take her personal belongings, like ornaments, cloths, etc.

ROLE IN RELIGIOUS SPHERES

In tribal societies, the women played very significant role in performing of the religious rites and rituals. No religious rites, rituals and festivals could be performed without their presence in some particular religious festivals. In earlier times, tribal women were very expert in preparing the rice beer, distilled alcoholic spirit, which was very essential items for offering the deities during the religious festivals. It is also seen that some tribal women who became Sarania after having adopted '*Ek-saran nem*' dharma usually performed prayer in the *namghar* along with male persons. Besides, the tribal Christian women also attended in the church for prayer. For instances, *Kherai*, one of the greatest religious festivals of the traditional Bodo tribe, wherein a female shaman called '*Doudini*' performs various devotional dances to propitiate various gods and goddesses (Brahma, 2006:14). The female, irrespective of their age are free to take part in various religious festivals, such as *Kherai*, Bathou puja. It may thus be summarised that women's role in the religious rites and rituals is very important. Besides, in *Bathou* prayer songs, the Bodo women also actively take part. Thus, the tribal women played a significant role in all religious rites and rituals, and then also tried to develop their mind and spirituality.

ROLE IN POLITICAL AFFAIRS

In Bodoland Territorial Region, tribal women have played a very important role not only in the field of social, cultural, economic but also in the political affairs. Traditionally, administrative setup of the tribes did not allocate any place to the women in administrative affairs. It is orally known that in ancient times, though not specified, the Bodo women abetted the Bodo male fighters by giving the '*phali*' to wrap their waist to be fitted in fighting against the enemy, prayerful blessings from '*Bathou Bwrai*' the Almighty God.

In the 20th century, there are many tribal women who played a significant role in politics and various social works. Mention may be made, the name of Basanti Basumatary, Khope Basumatary, Rajni Swargiary, Ashwini Basumatary, who were once some active women members of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) of Assam, and accordingly, they also participated in the Sharecroppers' movement of Assam in 1950 (Chaudhuri, 2004: 58).

In Bodoland Territorial Region, the tribal women extensively took part in various social and political affairs, forming the different social organisations. The social organisations of tribal women include, All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) which was formed in 1986 and then rechristened as All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in 1993. It was due to the fact that the women of other tribal groups, other than the Bodos did not cooperate the organisation (Mosahari, 2011: 76). There is also another tribal women organisation called Boro Women's Justice Forum (BWJF). All these social organisations mainly aimed at uprooting the old habits, worked for the welfare of tribal women, and tried to bring an awareness about the role of women in a family and society including child rearing, health and hygiene, family planning and alcoholism, consequences of polygamy and children's education, etc. Besides, the members of both organizations also sometimes, settled the women related issues in their villages or regions. Since most of the tribal women were very illiterate or uneducated during that time, the organisations undertook several initiatives to cause an awareness regarding significance of education among the rural women. It is important to note that the members of these women's organisations actively participated in the Bodoland movement of All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), which started on 2nd March 1987 to demand statehood. Women of different age groups played an active role in this movement. They joined in the different form of programs, like processions, *dharnas*, gheraos in the district, state and national levels as well as road or rail blockade programs. Some Bodo women served as a helper or supplier for the Bodo volunteers force when the Bodo youths were not able to move out anywhere. In addition, there is also evidence that some women joined the volunteer force but were not directly involved in 'direct action'. They were specifically used to transport messages and other articles for the force.

There are many tribal women leaders, namely Promila Rani Brahma, first women Bodo tribal leader who once became Minister of Assam from Kokrajhar constituency, Kamali Basumatary MLA (four times) from Panery constituency, Malati Rani Narzary, Hirabai Narzary, Mira Rani Basumatary, Anjali Daimari and many others. It is mentionable that Malati Rani

Narzary, the founder secretary of AATWWF had participated in the Udyachal movement of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). Besides, she also joined in the Bodo Sahitya Sabha's Roman script movement in 1974. She was not only the founder secretary of the Plains Tribal Women's Welfare Association but also actively took part in different activities of the political and non-political organisations, like ABSU, PTCA(P) and UTNLF (Chaudhuri, 2004: 80) Thus, women in the region not only worked for the upliftment of status of one tribe's women but also of the tribal women of the whole Northeast India.

The figures of tribal women's participation in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Legislative Assembly constituencies are very few. In 2005, out of total 46 seats, there were only two female members, namely Anima Bayan from the district of Udalguri and Jamuna Rani Brahma from Gossaigaon, but they were nominated members. Not a single female candidate ever able to win in the first BTC Legislative Assembly election, except nominated during this time (Brahma, 2018: 868). However, nowadays, there is evidence of some tribal women who have become the political leaders in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). Presently, there is also one-woman MCLA named Ms Moon Moon Brahma from Parbatjora constituency in the Bodoland Territorial Council. In addition, there are also many tribal women who still worked as a leader or active member in local, regional and national political parties. Hence, it may be said that the tribal women in this region, have played a great role in the politics, and brought out the status upliftment of the tribal women in particular and women in general.

ROLE IN EDUCATION

The progress and development of any society depends upon the high level of literacy rate of women in society. So, the education of women is vital for the progress of the society. According to the census report of 2011, total literacy rate of Assam is 72.19 % where male and female literacy is 77.85 % and 66.27 % respectively (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam). Educationally, Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) is an underdeveloped and backward areas of Assam where the inhabitants are mostly tribals. In 2001 census, total literacy rate of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) area is 55.21 % and it slightly goes up to 67.11 % in 2011 census. As revealed in 2001 census report, the male literacy rate of BTC area is 64.77 % whereas female literacy is 45.15 %. In 2011 census, the total literacy rate of BTC area is 67.12 % where the male literacy rate is 74.28 % and the female's figure are 59.70 % (Statistical handbook, BTC & Assam). This infers that the rate of female literacy in BTC region is poor as seen into two census reports. This happened due to the majority of tribal populace in the region. The fact is that in earlier times, non-availability of schools and colleges within reasonable distance, and too late imparted of western education therein caused the tribal peasants that sending a child to the schools meant losing a working hand on agricultural land (Roy,1995:51). It was due to the reason that the parents did not favour a girl child education and consequently, most of the girl child were not sent to schools. This was the traditional life style of the tribes. In the beginning of 21st century, most of the tribal women were illiterate or uneducated in rural areas. School

result survey shows that the dropout rate of tribal girls studying in schools was very high. Earlier, most of the parents were illiterate or semi-literate and even the families and communities did not have the cultures to motivate children to go for higher education. But there was only a tradition that a tribal girl from the very early age would help her mother in her household chores, and would get marriage early. Also, the parents sent them as a caretaker of child at another's house, and in return they would take as wages. The parents were totally unaware of developing the human resources in their daughters, where education was completely neglected. As a result, the girl child grew up with a very limited resources, only physical labour, and that adversely affected the growth of tribal women itself in remote areas villages. Currently, this idea has been changed that, it was confined more or less to a certain backward area only. It can be said that an open-minded woman of the tribes was normally concerned about the progress and development of her society. But such woman was very peripheral and inadequate as revealed in ancient records. Educated woman in tribal villages thus, occupied more or less high status but their role in caring and giving proper education to their child is very praiseworthy nowadays.

ROLE IN FAMILY ECONOMY

The role of tribal women in the field of economy cannot be underrated in BTR. Since long past they have played a significant role in some economic activities along with their male counterpart. Right from the very childhood, they were overburdened with domestic duties and chores. Since rich resources of tribal woman for overall development of the society had not been utilized properly, their economic potential was not valued. In tribal societies, women had not only performed household duties but also worked and contributed a lot to production sections. The major portions of their agricultural activities included weeding, threshing, hoeing, harvesting and carrying away the paddy crops to their house along with their husband in addition to the ploughing. Despite, they remained economically dependent throughout their life. They maintained the family in the absence of their husband, nurtured and cared of their baby. Earlier, the sale of rice beer or distilled alcoholic spirit was a tradition of the tribes where women were mostly involved. They sustained the family by selling of rice beer illicitly to support the family economy. Nowadays, this tradition has become obsolete but still exists in remote area villages only with few in number.

In the last decade of 19th century, Udalguri-Tawang-Lhasa trade route was opened and accordingly, *Bhootea mela* held annually at Udalguri where barter trade on different commodities, like Chinese silk, ponies, musk-wax, rubber and gold dusts used to take place between Tawang hill traders and Assam plain traders, mainly tribals (Roy, 1995:22). The fact is that there were numerous passes and ways popularly known as *Duars* still exist between Assam and Tibet through Bhutan (Barua, 1951: 115). It is apparent that several tribal women carried out the border trade with Tawang hill tribes as the traces of relationship of the tribes with the Tibetan cannot be denied (Chaudhury, 2003: 195).

Weaving is one of the most important small incomes of a tribal family. So, in societies of the tribes-Bodos, Rabhas and Garos, there is reference of a woman who without the knowledge of weaving in earlier days, could be hardly given in marriage. Since all tribal woman were expert both in spinning and weaving, they normally interwove their own attires in their family looms which were of highly artistic and exceptional designs. For instance, each tribal woman prepared their own traditional dress, like *dokhna* of Bodos, *koum kontong* of Rabhas and *dakmanda* of Garos. Tribal women generally made *Eri* cloth specially prepared from the cocoons (Deuri, 2006:13). They also made dress for both male and female, as well as sometimes sold it in the open market which helped their family financially. Besides, at their own home they still reared different kinds of animals, such as fowls, ducks, pigs, goat, cow, etc. Currently, it is noticed that many tribal women are helping their family financially by opening shops, selling dresses, vegetables in the open market along with doing in Govt. jobs in Bodoland Territorial Region. Apart from this, there is evidence of some women migrated from their own region to another state with a view to getting jobs or employments regularly, and many of them are still working as labourers at various cities, Mumbai, Chennai, Pune and the cities of Kerala state to help their family financially.

ROLE IN COLLECTION OF FOREST MATERIALS

Since tribal people used to live nearby the forest, they played a very important role in collection of forest materials. Most of the tribal women used to collect many materials from the forest. In earlier days, they gathered firewood, thatch and wild vegetables which were normally brought in the market for sale to generate a small family income as well as for their home usage. And also, they went into the forest for fishing for the purpose of their consumption as well as for sale in the markets (Informant-8). As the BTR Govt. has already taken many steps for the protection of wild life in the forest, the tradition of fishing and collecting wild ingredients into the forest has been declined considerably. In recent time, most women have understood that going into the forest for collection of wild materials would not be beneficial for them and so, in its place, they are now busy in caring their childs to give them proper education. Earlier, in most tribal societies, the collection of household necessities, like fuel, fodder and water was usually left to women.

CONCLUSION

It may thus be concluded the tribal women of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam, played a very significant role at all the fields-social, political, cultural, economic and religious affairs. They performed all the activities within the limitations of their society's norms and values. In raising their socio-economic and political status, they usually faced many formidable glitches. Therefore, problems of women and their solutions need to be fashioned in the context of their respective cultures which can bring a catalytic change in their socio-economic conditions. Undeniably, the tribal women usually carried out a series of activities which ranges from child rearing to household activities, like collection of water, firewood and

fodder, and rearing of birds, fowls, goats and pigs, etc. This reveals that they worked very hard and more labourious than men. In tribal societies, the women's role in decision making regarding household resources is very exemplary but their influence and decision making in household affairs has been greatly affected owing to certain issues, like socio-cultural pressures and economic liberty, etc. Despite, some women nowadays, are seen to have played a vital role not only raising the quality of their life styles but also improving the socio-economic conditions of their families and villages. But such cases still remained a very few in backward areas of the region. Therefore, the social change with the adequate measures of health, education and moral competences as well as equal treatment, the tribal women should be allowed to use their bursting potential to raise the quality of their life in rural areas.

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