

**BORO WOMEN IN THE TRIBAL SOCIETY AND  
ECONOMY OF COLONIAL ASSAM**

**ABSTRACT  
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**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:**

In tribal communities, women play an important role in society and substantially contribute towards the economy. Assam consists of diverse ethnic races and tribes, and of them the Boro tribal community is the most prominent. The Boro social structure is largely based on the patriarchal system but Boro society is often described as 'egalitarian and democratic' in most historical writings, where women are said to be at par with the men. However, the thesis for this research is to critique this viewpoint and emphasize the gender differentiation and power relations in Boro community during the colonial period.

The Boro tribe, with which the present study is concerned, is an important offshoot of the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock. There is a controversy regarding the nomenclature of the Boro tribe as they have been designated by various names in different parts of the state. In the thesis the term 'Boro' has been used to refer the tribe. Boro women played a dominant role in the tribal society and economy of colonial Assam. Regarding the social role of the Boro women in the colonial period, it can be studied under three heads viz. Family responsibility, Social rites and Festivals and Religious ceremonies. In the economic sphere also, the Boro women were the major driving force. Despite the immense contribution of women towards the tribal society and economy, yet gender differentiation existed in the Boro community.

The British colonial dominance of Assam from 1826 to 1947 impacted some changes in the power relations of Boro society. The Christian missionaries, the *Brahma Dharma* and the British Government were the three major agencies that brought about this change. The agencies had both positive and negative impact on Boro women of the time. One of the most important impact of these agencies was that women emerged as the fourth important agent of socio-economic change. However, in the process of this transition, women lost their importance in traditional social and economic roles and there began a process of alienation and marginalization of women. The 'gender differentiation' which existed in Boro society and economy became more deeper and wider. Thus, in colonial Assam, Boro women were not at par in the tribal society and economy with men. A myth has been created about the equal status enjoyed by Boro women with men of their

society. The present study attempts to critique this myth by bringing into focus gender differentiation as maintained in the Boro tribal society and economy of colonial Assam.

### **STUDY AREA:**

The study area of this research is geographically confined to present Kokrajhar District of undivided Goalpara of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As far as the time-period is concerned, the study will focus on the colonial period.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

The objectives of the thesis are to:

- Make an in-depth analysis of the various contribution of Boro women to society and economy.
- Emphasize different aspects of women-nature bond based on indigenous knowledge and their skills of managing and conserving biodiversity.
- Discern the agencies of the colonial period which worked towards bringing about changes in the social and economic activities of Boro women, and how in the process, they emerged as an important agent of change.
- Focus on the process of alienation and marginalization which began in the colonial period owing to the influence of various socio-economic agencies.
- Critique the myth of an equal status of Boro men and women which evolved over time, by highlighting gender differentiation in the tribal society and economy of the colonial period.

### **RATIONALE:**

Detailed researches and works have been done on the Boro tribe since the colonial times, However, a survey of existing literature reveals that there has been a general neglect of an analysis of Boro women's subordination and dominance in the tribal society and economy.

**HYPOTHESES:**

- Boro women of the colonial period played a significant role in their society and economy despite the prevalence of gender differentiation.
- Impacted by changes brought about by colonial agencies, women themselves became important agents of socio-economic change.
- The colonial period resulted in a process of alienation and marginalization of Boro women in society and economy.

**METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:**

This research work is a qualitative analysis based on a gender sensitive approach and a substantial critique of patriarchy. The study is based on Primary Data Collection and an analysis of Secondary sources. In an attempt to apply the Rights Based Approach (RBA) in understanding and analyzing data, it is found that the theory can be applied only in part to the present study. This approach mainly helps to identify the forms and causes of gender differentiation that existed in the colonial Boro society of Assam. The socio-religious and economic agencies which affected the roles of women can be identified as duty-bearers.

**CHAPTERIZATION:**

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter i.e. *Introduction* gives an overall idea about the work. It deals with the geographical location of the selected area along with definition of terms, survey of literature, objectives, hypotheses and methodology for the present study.

The second chapter entitled *Women in the Pre-colonial Era* focuses on the contribution of Boro women to production and reproduction. The chapter examines their multiple roles under three heads- domestic arena, towards society and economic sphere. The women-environment relationship has been emphasised. The chapter notes that although Boro women were largely responsible for reproduction, undertook domestic and social responsibilities and contributed to economic means of production and enjoyed predominance in certain traditional activities, yet they did not enjoy equal status in the tribal society as their male counterparts in the pre-colonial society.

The third chapter entitled *Socio-Economic Transition in the Colonial Period* shows the process of transition in the Boro society: why and how it was initiated, women's reaction towards it and the consequences of these changes on the lives of Boro women. The Christian Missionaries, the *Brahma Dharma* and the colonial government have been identified as the socio-religious agencies to improve the status of Boro women. Despite the noble attempts of these agencies in ameliorating the condition of women, the chapter concludes by outlining that the activities of missionaries initiated a process of alienating women from traditional social and economic roles making their position vulnerable.

In the fourth chapter *Alienation, Marginalization and Women's Agency* the focus is on how women were alienated from their traditional socio-economic roles. Here the impact of colonial administration on Boro women has been emphasized. With the introduction of various reforms and administrative changes women were alienated from their control over land and forest. Consequently, the women-nature bond was also eroded which in turn affected the significant role that women played in biodiversity management and preservation. The socio-economic agencies succeeded in bringing about political awareness among women to some extent, on one hand, but gender differentiation assumed greater dimensions affecting the alienation and marginalization of the women, on the other.

The fifth chapter forms the *Conclusion*. It is an over-all analysis of the preceding chapters and recapitulates the major findings of the study. It also highlights the prevalence of the myth of equality of men and women in the Boro tribal society. The study refutes this myth of gender equality by revealing the forms of gender differentiation between men and women that was practiced in the Boro tribal society and economy. Finally the chapter outlines that in the colonial period owing to the process of alienation and marginalization, Boro women suffered degradation in their access to various socio-economic resources and subsequently led to the predominance of male in the spheres, where they earlier held authority. Thus, Boro women were not at par with men in their tribal society and economy.

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

- **The study refutes the idea of earlier writers that the Boro tribal society represented ‘matriarchal’ features** and instead examines and identifies those features as matrilineal and matrilocal.
- **During the colonial period gender -based differentiation was maintained in all spheres, viz. household, social, economic, and particularly in the political sphere in the Boro community.** Various factors like patriarchal social structure, sexual division of labour, customary laws, social taboos and lack of awareness among the women contributed to gender differentiation.
- **Boro women’s contribution to production is central to biodiversity based on women’s indigenous knowledge. Health care of the family as well as the livestock** was another important area of the women’s contribution. They took care of reproduction **and served as midwives.**
- **Boro women made important economic contributions not only through reproduction but also in production.** They shouldered the work with their male counterparts in the agricultural field, had exclusive role in post-harvest activities, were proficient in fishing, weaving and bartered goods in local *bazaars*.
- The colonial era witnessed the **emergence of three agencies** viz., the Christian missionaries, the *Brahma Dharma* and the Colonial Government, which brought important changes in the socio-economic life of Boro women. Most importantly women were politically motivated to participate in the freedom struggle of the country. The emergence of women as an active agent of socio-economic change was one of the most important findings.
- Gender differences continued in the traditional Boro community as the structures of these agencies were also patriarchal in nature.
- As a result of the various policies of the Colonial Government, women lost their control over land and forest. **The special relationship of Boro women with the natural environment was disrupted.** Women’s traditional wisdom and contribution to biodiversity conservation were affected. **Consequently, they were alienated from the means of production as well as from production itself.**

- Customary laws were also altered in favour of patriarchal practices. .
- The study **explodes the long and protracted myth that there was gender equality in the so-called egalitarian Boro society**. As women were active participants in the process of production along with the entitlement of several social privileges, they indeed acquired an important status in the patriarchal Boro tribal society. Such practices reveal Boro society as ‘egalitarian’, though gender differentiation becomes apparent in the underlying layers of this patriarchal social structure. Boro women were thus not at par in the tribal society and economy with their male counterparts.