CHAPTER V

PATRIARCHY AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF BODO WOMEN
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Women have remained virtually invisible in the political sphere. The public-private divide has been used to legitimize the exclusion of women from the public sphere. The invisibility or under-representation of women in the decision-making process reinforces their deprivation, leading to an unequal distribution of resources, neglect of their interests, needs and exclusion from policy making process. It is seen that the existing patriarchal norms and values in a society continue to hamper the enhancement of political empowerment of women leading to an unequal gendered society.

Empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. It also refers to increasing the strength of the individuals and communities. The empowerment of women refers to an all-round development, including their physical, economic and political development. It also refers to the protection of their rights, to enrich their quality of life and involve them in decision-making process at all levels. Further, empowerment of women in all spheres, in particular the political sphere is considered crucial for the advancement and establishment of a gender-equal society. Women’s political empowerment is primarily based on three principles-a) Equality between men and women; b) Women’s right to the full development of their

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potentials and c) Women’s right to self-representation and self-determination.\textsuperscript{268} However, patriarchy is seen as one of the factors affecting and challenging the political empowerment of women and her role in politics.

The social structure of the Bodo society is primarily patriarchal in nature. Like any other patriarchal society, in Bodo society father is the sole authority of the family. Lineage is drawn from the father. Father/husband in a family is regarded as the final decision maker.\textsuperscript{269} Traditionally, in Bodo society after father’s death his sons inherit the immovable property. Generally it is observed that the entire property of the family is distributed among the sons only.\textsuperscript{270} In some cases a portion of the property is given to the wife by her husband. After her death the property automatically goes to the possession of her sons. In case of marital separation, a wife has no right to claim a share in husbands’ property. Generally, a girl child does not have the right to father’s immovable property. Although, in recent times, in some cases daughters are being given a share of immovable property of father.\textsuperscript{271} These instances show that currently some flexibility has come in within the Bodo society. Decisions regarding children’s education and income is generally the responsibility of the father while mother’s responsibility is only limited to household activities like cooking, taking care of the children, house and the elders, entertaining guests, weaving, etc.\textsuperscript{272} Infact knowledge of these activities is a compulsion for women.\textsuperscript{273} A mother/wife or daughter has to obey the decisions of the male member in the family. In case of marriage, a daughter has to marry according to her father’s choice. Regarding education, priority is given

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\textsuperscript{268} Promilla kapur, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 223,224.
\textsuperscript{269} Chandana Bhattacharjee, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 35,36.
\textsuperscript{271} Interview with present general secretary, ABWWF on July 19, 2013 at Udalguri.
\textsuperscript{272} Interview with present executive members, ABWWF on July 22, 2013 at Udaguri.
\textsuperscript{273} Interview with ex-president, ABWWF on July 27, 2013 at Udalguri.
\end{flushleft}
to a son to pursue studies according to his will but in case of a daughter, less importance is given regarding her studies.\textsuperscript{274} In Bodo society, women are mostly expected to be engaged in the domestic activities like home management, entertainment of guests, weaving, keeping of domestic animals, etc. It is a compulsion for women to know all these activities and teach the same to their daughters from their early childhood whereas this is not the same in case of boys. Thus, they mostly have to drop their studies and engage themselves in household works whereas boys are sent to school and exempted from household works.\textsuperscript{275} Data collected from the respondents stated that in Bodo society generally a girl child has to help her mother at an early age regarding activities like looking after their younger siblings, cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, etc. They also assist their mother in agricultural activities, weaving, fishing, etc. This is common among the majority of the Bodo people, especially among the economically backward people. Further, it is a compulsion for girls to wear their traditional dress known as \textit{Dokhona}, whereas there is no such compulsion for boys. Thus, the patriarchal values which percolates the fabric of the Bodo society becomes a factor affecting the upliftment of women in private as well as in public spheres, irrespective of the class they belong to.

Further, \textbf{religion} plays an important role in Bodo society. The traditional religion of the Bodos is \textit{Bathouism}.\textsuperscript{276} They worship the Bathou Burai as Supreme God. All their religious functions, mainly the ritual part is performed by the village male elders known as \textit{Doeris}.\textsuperscript{277} Bathau religion of the Bodos again has two divisions namely \textit{Garja} and \textit{Kherai}. \textit{Garja} is a place of worship that has a separate place in

\textsuperscript{274} \textit{Interview} with ex-general secretary, ABWWF on August 23, 2013 at Rowta.
\textsuperscript{275} \textit{Interview} with present president, ABWWF on August 28, 2013 at Harisinga.
\textsuperscript{276} R.N. Mosahary, “Traditional Religion of the Bodos of Assam”, North-east India History Association, 8th Session, Kohima, NEIHA, 1988, p. 514.
\textsuperscript{277} \textit{ibid.}, p. 515.
every village. It is interesting to note that no woman is allowed to enter the Garja, and only male priests and male members of the village can perform the rituals.\textsuperscript{278} In kherai women are only allowed to become Doudini\textsuperscript{279}. However, all other rituals in the Kherai are performed by male priests. The Brahma religion which was a religious reformation also did not contribute much for the upliftment of the status of Bodo women. The rituals of Hom Sounai are performed by male priest. Women’s activity is limited only to the preparations of the puja. Hence, it is seen that even religious activities contributes towards gender division in Bodo society.

The introduction of Christianity about a century back did bring some changes in the society. The Christian missionaries basically worked for the upliftment of the Bodos in terms of religion, social reformation, education, health facilities, etc., however their contribution in terms of women’s status and position in the society is considered as marginal.\textsuperscript{280}

The patriarchal nature of the Bodo society can be understood further by looking at the traditional institutions which is an integral part of the Bodo society.\textsuperscript{281} The characteristics and structures of such institutions have been defined by some writers as ‘tribalistic’ in nature.\textsuperscript{282} The traditional institutions are known as raizani afat or raizani metheng.\textsuperscript{283} The members are comprised of village elders mostly men and the head is known as gaonbura. These institutions deals with the issues related to welfare of the village like construction of roads, bridges, community centres, schools,


\textsuperscript{279} Notes: doudini is a dance performed by girls during the occasion of Kherai puja of Bathao religion.

\textsuperscript{280} Interview with present president, ABWWF on February, 12, 2012 at Udalguri.

\textsuperscript{281} Bonny Narzary, History and Culture of the Bodos (ed.), Kolkata: Sailee Publications, 2001, p. 177.


\textsuperscript{283} ibid, p. 9.
etc. It also takes decisions regarding crisis confronting the village. Bodo women however cannot be a member of these institutions and thus has no say in the decision making process related to such important issues.\footnote{284}

Bodo society is basically an \textit{agricultural} society and \textit{economy} is based mostly on agriculture. Women too have to carry out work that requires extremely strenuous physical activity in the field like planting, weeding, hoeing, etc. However, their participation in the agricultural activities does not lead to their empowerment. It is seen that they also have to at the same time continue with the traditional roles they play within the household. Also they hardly have any control over their own produce.

As shown in \textbf{Fig. 5.1} fifty seven percent of the respondents stated that they are not allowed to sell their produce in the market independently. The remaining fourty three percent of the respondents stated that though they can sell their agricultural produce, they have no control over their incomes and they have to handover the income to their husband/father. Also, in some cases women have hardly any access to information regarding the income generated from their agricultural activities. This shows that be it in the social sphere or in the economy i.e, agricultural activities, women are always playing a secondary and marginal role and are mostly dominated by men directly or indirectly.

\footnote{284 \textit{Interview} with ex-executive member, ABWWF on September 23, 2014, at Kokrajhar.}
Thus, it is seen that in Bodo society considered as patriarchal society mostly men enjoy the privilege of taking decisions both in family and society. An assessment of an impact of patriarchy on Bodo women can be made in terms of their discrimination on the grounds of property, marriage, education, job, etc. Further, the customs and traditions in Bodo society have kept women within the private sphere. Women in Bodo society directly or indirectly continues to suffer because of the presence of patriarchal values and norms in the form of custom, tradition, family, society, religion, etc. Earlier, in Bodo society women had to confine herself within the domestic sphere. Women’s responsibility was limited only within the management of household activities. Decisions regarding family and children were taken mostly by male members. This division of labour between men and women contributed towards the decline of women’s overall development.
It is only in recent times, women’s position and status in society improved to a certain extent after the formation of AATWWF/ABWWF. The members of the Federation made women realize their socio-political and civil rights, and also made them realize that even they have the capability to contribute towards the development of the society and women as well. However inspite of all their efforts, even today we note that women’s position and status in Bodo society has improved only marginally as the presence of patriarchal values and ideologies continue to hamper women’s overall upliftment directly or indirectly. Thus, such values and more particularly the patriarchal mindset of the people continues to act as a hindrance towards women’s empowerment, especially political empowerment.

Data collected from women respondents reveals that sixty five percent (as shown in Fig. 5.2) of the respondents view that they face discrimination in Bodo society because of the presence of patriarchal values and norms in terms of property, marriage, education, job, etc.
Fig. 5.2: Respondents view on discrimination of women in Bodo society (in percentage):

Thus, we note that though a large percentage of respondents view that they face discrimination in the society because of the presence of patriarchal values and norms, however, a smaller group i.e, thirty five percent of the respondents were of the opinion that they never faced discrimination on such issues, as they consider the head of the family, i.e, the father has the right to take decisions regarding such matters. Thus, this shows the submissive nature of women.

As discussed earlier, in Bodo society a girl child is given less preference in education than boys. Mostly, a girl child has to drop her studies and help her mother in domestic activities, whereas there is no such compulsion for boys. Also, women face discrimination regarding property. In Bodo society, sons have the right to father’s property. Though some amount of movable property is given to daughters but mostly they cannot claim their right on their father’s property. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights to father’s property for both sons and daughters, it is seen that even today amongst the Bodos only some amount of share in father’s property is given to daughters, in some cases. Further, women also face
discrimination on the grounds of marriage and job. It is seen that in Bodo society girls generally cannot take decisions regarding their marriage. It’s the parents especially father who has the authority to take decisions regarding their daughter’s marriage. During my field work it was observed that a girl named Anjali (name changed) wanted to marry a boy of her choice, but her brothers compelled her to marry a boy of their choice as the boy whom she chose followed a different religion. Also, they cannot go for jobs of their own choice. In this context, it was observed (based on field work) that a girl named Kusum (name changed) from a village in Kokrajhar district wanted to pursue a career in airlines sector, but her parents did not allow her saying that career in such sector will bring shame to her family. She was made to drop her studies and was married off. Again, a girl named Ganga (name changed) wanted to pursue a career in hotel management, but even she was not allowed by her parents who made her study in a regular graduation course in a local college. These are only a few examples of many such examples that were narrated during my field work. Thus, it is seen that Bodo women face discrimination in the society because of the presence of patriarchal values in matters such as property, marriage, education, jobs, etc. It may be stated here that the patriarchal values, more particularly the patriarchal mindset of people in Bodo society continues to hamper women’s overall empowerment.

As shown in the earlier chapter prior to the formation of ABWWF women’s role in politics was negligible. However, with the formation of ABWWF, women for the first time participated in large numbers and played a significant role in Bodo politics with the objective of fighting for its community as well as for the overall upliftment and empowerment of Bodo women. The Bodoland struggle provided a much needed opportunity to women to participate in the struggle and thus they could
come out of their domestic sphere and enter into the public sphere. The process however was not without problems as they faced obstacles from their family and society for joining as members of the federation. Family and society is considered as the major challenge faced by women. Many women had to face opposition from their family for joining the struggle. Also, society with its patriarchal values and norms was not in favour of women coming out of the private sphere and entering the public sphere. Social stigma was attached to women entering into the political space as women are expected to remain within the domestic sphere. This patriarchal mindset of the Bodo people acted as a major hindrance towards women’s empowerment. But, inspite of such difficulties, women could come out of their domestic sphere and participated in the Bodoland struggle because of the support and strength imparted to them through the organization of ABWWF and also because of the requirement of strengthening the struggle.

Response from the survey as given in Fig.5.3 shows that seventy two percent of women who joined as members of ABWWF had to face obstacles for joining ABWWF. Thus, this shows that women in Bodo society had to face obstacles from their family and society for joining ABWWF, which indicates the presence of patriarchal mindset among the Bodo people regarding women’s interest in entering public space. However, the remaining thirty percent were ignorant towards the question or were not willing to answer.
ABWWF made Bodo women realize that participation in the struggle would give them an opportunity and platform to raise issues concerning women along with fighting for the cause of Bodoland. Women through ABWWF hoped that by participating in the Bodoland struggle they would contribute towards not only the welfare of the Bodo community in general but more specifically the overall upliftment of women. The ABWWF took various initiatives during the course of the struggle with the aim of empowering women, particularly political empowerment.

As shown in Fig. 5.4, fifteen percent of the respondents stated that the ABWWF sent women representatives to several meetings and conferences that were held during the course of the Bodoland struggle with the aim of empowering them. Also, ten percent of the respondents view that the Federation made women realize their socio-political rights through the various activities undertaken by the Federation during the course of the struggle. Nine percent and seven percent of the respondents opined that the ABWWF included women in rallies of political mobilization and gave
them chance to express their opinion in public meetings, respectively. However, **majority** of the respondents, that is, sixty six percent of women respondents stated that the ABWWF’s initiatives for Bodo women’s political empowerment during the course of the struggle included all of the above. The ABWWF sent representatives to the several meetings and conferences organized by the ABSU with the aim of empowering women politically. Also, they sent few members from the Federation during the course of the talk process between the state, centre and the leaders of the ABSU regarding the issue of Bodoland.

**Fig. 5.4 shows the respondents views regarding ABWWF’s initiatives for Bodo women’s political empowerment (in percentage).**

Note: a) sending representatives to several meetings and conferences held during the course of the struggle, b) made women realize their socio-political rights various activities, c) included women in rallies of political mobilization, d) gave women chance to express their opinion in public meetings, e) all of the above.

On 11 January, 1989, the government organized a tripartite talk between the ABSU, state and central government regarding the issue of Bodoland in New Delhi.
Again, on 28 August, 1989, there was another round of tripartite talk between the centre, state and the ABSU in New Delhi. The ABWWF sent their representatives to such meetings. The ABWWF in order to generate awareness among the Bodo women regarding their socio-political rights, organized various seminars and conferences during the course of the struggle (as discussed in Chapter 4). Through such seminars and conferences the ABWWF made women realize that by participating in the struggle even they could bring overall welfare for the community, and more particularly for women. Issues on women’s rights along with Bodo issue were discussed in those seminars. Also, the ABWWF encouraged women to participate in the political activities during the struggle period such as mass rallies, protests, demonstrations, rail roko programmes etc. organized by ABSU and ABWWF. Further, the ABWWF gave chance to women to express their opinion regarding various issue including women in the public gatherings and meetings that was held during the course of the struggle. Thus, it is seen that the initiatives taken by ABWWF laid the foundation for the process of political empowerment of Bodo women to a certain extent.

However, inspite of the increased participation of Bodo women in the struggle it is observed that women’s participation in the decision making process continued to be marginal and limited. Even during the course of the struggle, though ABSU leaders supported the formation of AATWWF/ABWWF it is seen that in the actual decision making level women’s representation and participation remained limited. ABWWF supported ABSU for the cause of Bodoland in terms of mobilization of people and other activities such as mass rallies, protests, demonstrations, road and rail blockades programmes, etc. However, in the actual decision making process women were
sidelined. It may be noted here that inspite of the efforts made by ABWWF for women’s empowerment, especially political empowerment, however, it is seen that very limited achievement could be made in terms of their participation and representation at the decision making level.

It is observed that even after the formation of Bodoland Autonomous Council in 1993 (also known as Bodo Accord), it was hoped that women’s position and status would improve in terms of their representation and participation in the decision making level. However, the Accord failed to accommodate women’s issues. Further, it was noted that there was no women’s representation in the executive council committee formed after the signing of the Accord.

Subsequently with the formation of The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), political empowerment of women did not take place which is evident from the fact that no women members were included as members in the Executive Council. Also the provisions of the BTC failed to highlight women’s issue specifically. Inspite of their significant role and contribution, Bodo women are marginally represented in leadership and decision making process which is evident from the fact that no woman was selected as member of executive council of BTC. Even the newly formed political party Bodoland Peoples’ Progressive Party (BPPF) failed to acknowledge Bodo women’s contribution. In 2005 Assam Assembly Elections also, we note that not a single woman candidate was included in the list of the 37 candidates announced by the party.285

As shown in Fig. 5.5 seventy two percent of the respondents stated that in terms of representational politics, Bodo women’s representation in leadership and decision-making process is limited. However, the rest twenty eight percent of the respondents either were not willing to respond to the question or had no knowledge regarding such issue. Thus we note that women failed to achieve empowerment particularly in the political sphere which is considered crucial for the advancement and establishment of a gender equal society; they failed to acquire any significant position in the political process inspite of the contributions and sacrifices made by them during the struggle.

**Fig 5.5 Respondents views regarding women’s limited representation in leadership and decision making post the formation of BTC (in percentage).**

However, inspite of the limited achievement of ABWWF in terms of representation in decision making and leadership, Bodo women still continue to regard the organization as a means for their empowerment. The ABWWF took initiatives not only to secure and preserve the Bodo identity struggle but also brought
changes in the lives of the women in terms of making them realize their socio-
political and civil rights. The participation in the Bodoland movement provided a
platform for women to collectively raise their voice regarding women’s issues as well
as the Bodo issue. As discussed earlier, the formation of ABWWF not only
couraged women to participate in the socio-political struggle of the Bodos but also
brought changes in the society through social reformation activities. The ABWWF
post the formation of BTC still continues to work for the development of women as
well as for the society as a whole.

Fig 5.6 shows that fifteen percent of the respondents stated that the ABWWF
should focus on the socio-political issues of Bodo women. Ten percent of the
respondents view that The Federation should work for the upliftment of women as
well as for the development of the community as a whole. Nine percent of the
respondents opined that the Federation should focus on the prohibition of consuming
of alcohol among the Bodo youths. Further, seven percent of the respondents stated
that the Federation should work on providing equal education for girls. However,
majority, that is, fifty nine percent of women respondents’ expectations from
ABWWF includes all of the above. They stated that the federation should not only
continue to focus on the socio-political issues of Bodo women but also work for the
overall upliftment of women as well as for the development of the whole community.
It may be mentioned here that the ABWWF prohibited the consumption of alcohol
among the Bodo youths which became acute during that period. Also the formation of
ABWWF helped improve women’s status in terms of education. The members of
ABWWF urged the parents of a girl child to send their daughter to school. It may be
noted here that they raise funds to support education for girls belonging to poor
Thus, it was expected that the ABWWF continues to work for the overall development of the society as well as for women.

**Fig. 5.6.** Respondents views regarding expectations from ABWWF (in percentage) post the formation of BTC in 2003.

Thus, it is seen that inspite of the initial encouragement by the ABSU leaders to women to join the struggle and various initiatives undertaken by ABWWF for political empowerment, the status and position of women in terms of leadership and increased role in decision making did not materialize. Thus, with the emergence of ABWWF it was hoped that the status and position of Bodo women would improve. However, it is noted that their role in the decision making process was minimal as is evident from the fact that in any of the important platforms like the tripartite talks between leaders of the struggle, state and central government, although women representatives were sent, they were however few in numbers, and they did not make

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286 Fig. 5.6 Note: a) should focus on the socio-political issue of Bodo women, b). work for the upliftment of women and for the development of Bodo community, c). should work for prohibition of consuming alcohol among the Bodo youths, d). should work on providing equal education for girls, e). all of the above.
any significant difference to the political empowerment of women in the real sense.\textsuperscript{287} Further, the formation of BAC and BTC also failed to accommodate women’s issues in their provisions respectively. Post-BTC also witnessed women’s marginal representation in terms of increased role in decision making and leadership. This is evident from the fact that only a single woman could achieve a position in political sphere.\textsuperscript{288} However, it is observed that after the formation of the BTC, as the struggle was assumed to come to an end, some women went back to their regular routine. Members of the ABWWF mostly who were teachers reassumed their jobs as teachers. Some continued with the Federation and are still engaged mostly in the socio-economic activities. The Federation continues to organize seminars and conferences post- BTC on issues such as domestic violence, health issues such as HIV-AIDS, evil practices like witch hunting, polygamy, alcoholism, adult education for women and girls, etc. Some members of ABWWF are also running an orphanage named Alayaran at Kokrajhar since 2003. Also, some members of ABWWF has established self-help groups and weaving centres in many parts of BTAD with the aim of empowering women.

Thus, we note that inspite of their contributory role in the Bodoland struggle, very less could be achieved in terms of improving women’s position and status in society. However, though women failed to achieve much in terms of increased role in decision making and leadership, still they continued to work for the overall empowerment of women.

\textsuperscript{287} \textit{Interview} with present president, ABWWF, on July 26, 2014, at Kokrajhar.

\textsuperscript{288} Pramila Rani Brahma, the first founder president of AATWWF/ABWWF, elected as a member of Legislative Assembly in 1991, 96, 2001 and elected as Minister for agriculture and forests in 2011 and 2016, respectively.