CHAPTER VI

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Women constitute nearly half of the population of almost every nation in the world, yet women’s presence in the political process and decision making is considered low and marginal. Women’s participation in politics as such and their representation in power structures over the decades has been an important factor determining their status and position in society. It is seen that inspite of the Constitutional provisions for gender equality in almost all nations in the world, yet only a few women have been able to make space for themselves in the decision making process and political empowerment.

The Bodos are an ethnic and linguistic community who were one of the earliest inhabitants of Assam. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid tribe and tibeto-Burman linguistic group and are considered as the largest community of the Plains’ tribe of Assam. The Bodo society generally is known to be a patriarchal society. The Bodo community generally is an agricultural community and their economy is based on agriculture, forests and other natural resources.

The genesis of the Bodoland struggle can be traced back to the pre-colonial period, that is, during 1930s with the growing political consciousness among the educated Bodo middle class. This section of people worked for the Bodos not only in terms of its efforts to regenerate traditional culture and literature, but also in securing their collective rights in the socio-political set up. Accordingly, the All Assan Tribal League was established in 1933 to safeguard and protect the interests and identity of the tribal people in general and Bodos in particular. Subsequently, with the formation of major Bodo organizations like Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), Plains’ Tribal Council of
Assam (PTCA) and All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU), the struggle for Bodoland went through various phases beginning from the preservation of self-identity on socio-religious grounds to the struggle for the preservation and self-determination of Bodo identity, ultimately leading towards the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003. It may be noted here that Bodo women for the first time participated in large numbers and played a contributory role in Bodo politics with the formation of All Assam Tribal Women’s Welfare Federation (AATWWF) in 1986, which later came to be known as the All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF). It may be stated here that the term Bodo politics in this research work has been defined in terms of the Bodoland struggle.

Thus, in the present study the role of women in Bodo politics has been examined by analyzing the role of ABWWF and the factors that influenced their role and political participation during the struggle. Further, the political empowerment of Bodo women if any as a result of such participation, in terms of leadership and decision-making has also been examined.

As discussed in the earlier chapters, patriarchy refers to manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society. Similar is the situation in Bodo society. In Bodo society, women are expected to confine herself only within the household activities. Decisions regarding matters of family and children are mostly by men. Thus, this shows the male dominance over women and children in the family. Bodo society being a patriarchal society did not encourage women to participate in the public sphere, and as such women’s participation in politics was negligible prior to the struggle for Bodoland. The study also highlights that the major Bodo
organizations formed during the course of the Bodoland struggle such as the Tribal League, Tribal Sangha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Plains’ Tribals Council of Assam and All Bodo Students Union were dominated and represented by men. They failed to include women in the decision making process. Thus, this shows the unequal gender relations in Bodo society where men can exercise greater power than women in almost all spheres of functioning leading towards the decline in women’s overall upliftment. Women had to face major challenges because of the presence of patriarchal values and norms and their role in decision making was secondary which acted as a hindrance towards women’s overall empowerment, especially political empowerment. It may be noted here that women faced obstacles even for joining as members of ABWWF.

The formation of AATWWF/ABWWF brought Bodo women under one umbrella organization for the first time in the history of Bodo politics, through which women collectively stood against the patriarchal mindset of the society and family, which is evident from the fact that they came out of their domestic sphere and participated in large numbers and played a significant role in the Bodoland struggle. The Federation made women realize that even they have the capability to contribute towards the overall development of the society and also women in particular. The study also shows that with the formation of All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF), the participation of women in the political space has comparatively increased.

The emergence of AATWWF and ABWWF during the period of the Bodoland struggle was with a view to not only take part in the struggle but also to look into the interests of the Bodo women, their economic problems, their overall development and
more importantly the civil and political rights to be enjoyed by them. The federation brought about political mobilization of the Bodo women in an organized way. It is seen that with the change in the nomenclature from AATWWF to ABWWF, membership to it was reserved only for Bodo women. Its objectives included fighting for equal rights, status, and honour of women in the social, political, economic, cultural and individual spheres and thereby seeking empowerment of women and enabling them to participate much more in the political process. They further sought to challenge the patriarchal and gendered mindset of the society which had been a limitation in women’s equal participation in the public and political sphere. Also, preservation and self-determination of the Bodo identity became one of their primary agenda.

The study observed that the nature of the role played by women in the struggle for Bodoland can be considered as progressive, forward looking and inclusive. The Federation was formed with the prospect of bringing not only betterment of women but also of the whole community. They aimed for the future overall development of women. The Federation included all Bodo women belonging to Bodo community.

The study shows that women were encouraged by the leaders of the ABSU to participate in the struggle for Bodoland which provided opportunities for them to enter into the political space. The ABWWF played an important role in awakening political consciousness among Bodo women and their involvement in the struggle. Women through the federation took active part in the processions, demonstrations, hunger strikes, mass gatherings, dharnas, gheraos, road blockades, rail blockades, etc. which enabled them to play a participatory role in the struggle for Bodoland. The struggle thus gave an opportunity to women to test their leadership capabilities.
Further the federation was committed to spread the aims and objectives of the ABSU movement to the rural areas, particularly among the illiterate Bodo women. Also, the ABSU directly depended on the members of ABWWF for mobilizing people in areas that they did not have access to. Several foot marches were carried out across the Bodo areas under the leadership of Upendranath Brahma, and in all such programmes the ABWWF had played a significant role. Thus, women by taking part in such activities got an opportunity to contribute towards the preservation and self-determination of their community. They also organized rehabilitation centres for the victims affected during the conflict between the Bodos and the Adivasis which occurred during the course of the Bodoland struggle.

The federation thus provided a platform for women to organize and take collective action not only to support the cause of Bodoland but also with the objective of highlighting the issues related to women.

The study attempts to highlight that the members of ABWWF of different village and district committees acted as informants and carried messages and letters from one place to another under the guidance of ABSU during the struggle period.

Women suffered various kinds of atrocities by police and para-military forces during the course of the struggle. The ABWWF vehemently opposed such excesses and they took up several measures to demand justice for such women, e.g. by staging demonstrations against the Bhumka rape case in 1987. In this case 6 police personnel were found guilty and were suspended from service. The ABWWF also protested against the molestations and physical harassment on women by the police forces during the struggle not only through demonstrations in front of the Guwahati High Court but also lodged cases in the court. They also organized several protest rallies
against police atrocities on Bodo youths who were killed in fake encounters. The Bodo women through ABWWF therefore tried to extend help to such victims and their families who otherwise may not have got justice for themselves. Thus, the ABWWF provided a platform for women and other sections of the society to seek redressal of their grievances.

Also, ABWWF stressed on the importance and spread of education among the Bodo women which they considered as essential for the upliftment of women. They organized various seminars, workshops and conferences on women related issues in order to generate awareness among the Bodo women regarding their socio-political rights. The federation also made efforts to spread information on various issues such as the protection and preservation of Bodo identity. The federation also looked into ill-practices such as molestation, rape, polygamy, alcoholism, domestic violence, witch hunting, etc. plaguing the Bodo society and took up several measures to help such victims.

As discussed in the earlier chapters, political participation is considered as a major path towards women’s empowerment. In other words, increased decision making power contributes towards greater ability to influence matters that affects the lives of women in private as well as in public sphere. Further, political participation of women refers to women’s ability to participate equally with men, at all levels, more particularly in decision making process. It is in this context we note that inspite of Bodo women’s active involvement in the Bodoland struggle, it is seen that their role was marginal when it came to leadership and decision-making process during the course of the struggle. This is clearly evident from the fact that during the tripartite talks between the leaders of the struggle, and centre and state government there were
just a few women members who were included. The study shows that a fairly high percentage of respondents (seventy two percent) claimed that women’s voice in decision-making in the political sphere is minimal as their representation at the level of decision making is negligible. However, the rest twenty eight percent of the respondents either ignored the question or were not willing to respond. Thus this shows that though a larger percentage of women respondents viewed women’s role in decision making process as limited, however, some section of women respondents ignored the question as they had no idea regarding such issues. This indicates the prevalence of lack of awareness, more particularly political awareness among Bodo women.

The study also attempts to show that inspite of the initial encouragement and support given to women by the BSS and ABSU for their activities, issues specifically related to women were sidelined suggesting that these organizations sought to use Bodo women more as an instrument in the political struggle, rather than enabling or empowering them. Also it was seen that demands related to women’s issues did not at any time form a part of their agenda.

Also, the formation of BAC failed to acknowledge women’s contribution and therefore the issues related to women got sidelined. Subsequently, after the formation of the BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council), the leadership further failed to acknowledge the role played by Bodo women in the struggle. It is seen that initially though women were encouraged to enter into the public space but when the time for recognition to women came they were sidelined. Thus, only few women could achieve recognition in the political sphere and the majority of the women continued to be marginalized and deprived of power. It may be stated here that in the provisions of
the BTC, women’s issues did not find a place. Further, the inclusion of women candidates in the elections that was held after the formation of BTC was negligible. 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 newly formed political party BPPF.

It may be noted here that Pramila Rani Brahma, the first President of AATWWF and the only Bodo woman who was elected as a member of Assam Legislative Assembly as an independent candidate from Kokrajhar constituency in the year 1991, 1996 and 2001 respectively. Again, in the year 2006, after the formation of BTC, she was elected in the Cabinet Ministry of Assam as Minister for Agriculture. Subsequently, in the 2016 elections, she was again re-elected as Minister for Forest and Environment. Thus, this shows inspite of a large number of women participating and playing a significant role in the struggle for Bodoland, only a single Bodo woman could hold a position in the mainstream politics. This cannot be therefore considered as actual political empowerment of Bodo women in general.

Thus, subsequent to the formation of BTC, their role in the political sphere remained marginal in terms of leadership and decision-making and as such limited their scope for political empowerment.

The study thus observes that women continue to face discrimination because of the continuance of patriarchal values and norms in the society in the form of customs, religion, tradition, family, etc. proving to be a hindrance towards the overall upliftment of women. The presence of such values and norms had been a challenge that most women faced even during the struggle and unfortunately more so even after the formation of BTC. It is noted that the federation could improve the socio-
economic status of women to a certain extent but they failed to achieve much in terms of political empowerment of women.

The study further shows that with the ABSU gradually losing its support and control and the rise of BPPF, the ABWWF also as an organization weakened to a great extent and the gains made by Bodo women during the struggle was once again reduced. However, inspite of their limited achievement, ABWWF continues to retain a fairly large number of members because women continue to see the organization as important for enabling and empowering them. According to the ex-president of ABWWF, many members after post-BTC have set up self-help groups such as Orchid, Jwanglaguri Mahila Samiti, etc. through which they are not only working for themselves but also contributing towards the development of the society. It is worth mentioning here that the members of ABWWF runs an orphanage named Alayaran in Kokrajhar since 2003. It is home to as many as 130 (approx.) children, most of them are victims of violence. The Federation also helped women to set up weaving centres at various places in BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Areas District).

Thus, it can be said that ABWWF has provided the much needed platform for the integration of previously excluded actors, especially women, by encouraging their participation in the struggle and making them realize that even they have the potential to contribute towards the upliftment of their society, especially women. Also, efforts made by the ABWWF such as bringing Bodo women to the public space and generating overall awareness, led to positive changes for Bodo women even though on a limited scale.