CHAPTER – IV

ALIENATION, MARGINALIZATION AND WOMEN’S AGENCY

The life style of the tribal people is deeply conditioned by the eco-system of their land, and tribal women are generally known for their association with nature. Boro tribal women of Assam were not an exception to this. In the pre-colonial era land, forest and natural resources were the main sources of livelihood for the Boro community. Their lives revolved around the natural environment as all their social and economic functions were dependent directly or indirectly on the gifts of nature. Women who were a major contributor to the tribal society and economy had an access to land, forest and natural resources. They possessed invaluable traditional knowledge which they used in production and management of natural resources to sustain their family and thus lived with complete harmony in their immediate environment. However, this status quo was disturbed when the British rule was extended to Assam in 1826. As a matter of fact, the British rule brought about dramatic changes in the economy, polity and social life of the North-Eastern region by transforming it into an agricultural estate and moulding local traditional institutions to meet the colonial demands of exploitation.\(^1\) The annexation of Assam, followed by the introduction of British revenue rules, regulation of land rights and Forest Policy greatly impacted the tribal life and economy such as those of the Boros. One significant impact was land alienation, which had a great bearing on the dependence of women on nature for food, water, fuel and other resources of nature.

The present chapter focuses primarily on the economic, social and political impact on Boro women following the changes and reforms that the colonial Government brought about in the District of Goalpara and secondly, on how women reacted to the changes and reforms initiated by all the three socio-economic agencies of change, viz. the Christian Missionaries, the Brahma Movement and the British Government as duty-bearers. The chapter begins with the discussion on how Goalpara came under the British control and was incorporated as a district in the province of Assam. The chapter delves into the relationship women have with biodiversity, highlighting the ways women make use of it and how their roles in conservation and management were affected by the administrative changes and reforms initiated by the Government. These developments marginalized Boro women in the domestic and socio-economic arenas. Reformation in Boro society was a two-way process. The agencies attempted to bring reformation in the prevailing condition of Boro women and one of the direct outcomes of their activities was the emergence of women themselves as the fourth and an important agent of socio-economic change. The third part of the present chapter thus analyses how Boro women started becoming aware of their potentialities, and themselves contributed to the process of reforming society. Political consciousness among women was also an important impact of these colonial and native agencies and Boro women were found to be actively participating in the national movement of India. Goalpara came into prominence under the legendary Koch rulers like Biswa Singha and Nara Narayan in the sixteenth century but soon lost its glory subsequently. In 1663 Goalpara went under the Mughal administration and formed the eastern part of the Mughal kingdom. It was administered from Rangpur and as such, formed a part of the province of Bengal. When the British obtained the
Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by virtue of the Mughal Emperor’s Farman dated 12 August 1765, Goalpara also came under the administration of the East India Company. But under the provisions of Regulation X of 1822 it was cut off from Rangpur and was formed into a separate district with headquarters at Goalpara (town with the same name of the District) under a Judicial Commissioner. In 1825 David Scott was the first official entrusted with the charge. After the Anglo-Burmese war and the cessation of Assam to the British in 1826, Goalpara was immediately annexed to the new province. However, Goalpara was separated from the province of Assam and placed under the Commissionership of Koch Bihar in all matters by the provisions of Government notification dated 3 December, 1866. By the Bhutan war (1864-66) the British acquired the Bhutan Duars and a strip of it, known as Eastern Duars, was incorporated to Goalpara. For administrative convenience the civil and criminal jurisdiction of Goalpara was again transferred back to the Judicial Commissioner of Assam by a notification dated 10 August 1868. In 1874 Assam was made a separate administration and Eastern Duars were again transferred to Assam as Goalpara district. The headquarters of the district was also transferred to Dhubri in 1879.

In matters of revenue, Goalpara consisted of two distinct tracts viz.; permanently-settled areas covered by three thanas of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karaibari and

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temporarily-settled areas, viz. the Eastern Duars. For revenue purposes the Goalpara District was administered according to the Bengal Regulations till the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation was passed in 1886. There were altogether 19 permanently-settled estates in the Goalpara District, distributed among six landlord families. The temporarily settled eastern Duars comprised of five tracts or Duars in the north of the District viz. Bijni, Sidli, Chirang, Ripu and Guma lying between Manas and Sankosh rivers.\(^7\) The land revenue in the Eastern Duars was settled direct by the Government with the ryots. But the Rajas of Bijni and Sidli were entitled to settlement of estates in their respective Duars that bore their names as they held acquired rights over this land when under the Bhutan Government.\(^8\)

The colonial government initiated a process which interfered in the tribal practices and eroded their customary rights over land and forest, thereby, deteriorating the women-environment relationship. Vandana Shiva argues that violence against nature is intrinsic to the dominant industrial/developmental model, which she characterizes as a colonial imposition. While referring to Third World women Shiva observes that violence to nature is associated with violence to women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families, their societies. The destruction of nature with its resources is thus synonymous with destruction of women’s resources for livelihood.\(^9\) Modern reductionist science has been termed as “Maldevelopment” which is a patriarchal project of dominance and

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\(^8\) B. C. Allen *et al.*: *Gazetter of Bengal and North-East India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2001, p. 521.

subjugation of both women and nature. After the cessation of Assam in 1826, thus substantial alterations were made in the land system and management of forests to suit the requirements of the colonial government. Consequently Boro women were alienated from the use and management of land and natural resources over which they had traditional rights to use off and on. This separation from nature alienated women from their source of livelihood which in turn affected their multiple roles in domestic, economic and social spheres.

In the pre-colonial era the Boro economy was self-sufficient and mode of business was barter. They regulated land according to their traditional tenure and land -use system which, however, was a common feature of all tribal communities of North-Eastern region. Before proceeding further it is important to understand some of the basic features of tribal land tenure system of this part of India. To tribal people land is a gift of nature to humankind who can never survive without utilization of land and its products. The tribals consider that they exercise exclusive right of possession over their ancestral land. They have inherited it and will transmit the same to the descendants without any hindrance from any quarter. They sincerely hold that tribal lands, although without any cadastral survey map and without any demarcation of boundaries of different groups or individuals are not res nullius or without owners. The tribal individuals are the owners and they can put it to use with the cognizance and approval of the respective tribal authorities. Their firm conviction is that rights over land and its resources belong to the ancestrally held tribesmen. Forest or any resources including minerals rightfully belong to them.

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11 M. C. Goswami : “Traditional Land Tenure and Land Use Systems among the Tribal Communities” in Transfer and Alienation of Tribal land in Assam (with special reference to the Karbis of the Karbi Anglong District), published by B. N. Bordoloi, Director of Tribal Research Institute Assam, Guwahati, 1986, p. 40.
To them land can be obtained by fairly simple means of enjoying membership of a tribal group either by descent, kin group membership or residence in a village etc. but less frequently through contractual relationship such as purchase, pledge, loan, clientship or service.  

Another very outstanding and purely a tribal land tenure system is that the tribal people are wholly free from what is known as scarcity of land. Every tribal inhabitant is a land owner. As such they had a lack of interest in holding permanent and recorded land tenureship as there is no money-value attached to parcels of land when exposed to sale. Another interesting feature of tribal land system is that women generally do not own the land. However, they are given full liberty to use it for agricultural purposes and procuring various natural resources from the forests.

Given this scenario it can be said that the tribal concept of land tenure is primarily determined by their mode of earning a livelihood. The Boro tribal community which in the colonial period represented the typical tribal features thus enjoyed traditional territorial rights within which they had the liberty to utilize natural resources needed for their sustenance. Land was the least considered item as valuable property. They practised two methods of cultivation viz. wet-rice and shifting. Boros living in the plain region of Goalpara District preferred wet-rice cultivation while those belonging to hill areas of Eastern Duars were adapted to shifting cultivation where the plots of land were cultivated temporarily and then abandoned to regain its fertility. They were free to choose any plot of land for cultivation. As a rule every individual owner or possessor of fields took to cultivation with the help of his family members. Women of the Boro community

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12 Ibid, p. 41.
13 Loc. cit.
did not inherit or own land under general circumstances according to the customary laws. Yet they played an important role in agriculture as it was a largely household enterprise. They laboured hard equally with the men in the field and their work was specially called for in the post-harvest activities where women worked exclusively. Hunter observes that the women of Mech or Kachari performed greater portion of the toil necessary to support their family. They assisted in the field at seed-time and harvest, to husk the rice, carry water, and also weave cloth required for the household.\(^{14}\) Thus women’s contribution to the agricultural land was immense.

One noticeable feature in the Boro land tenure was that women could also be employed as agricultural labour who were called as Ruwati. It was a customary system of verbal contract with a poor village woman or girl. In accordance with agreement she had to stay in the house of the employer for doing all sorts of domestic work as well as in his paddy fields for a period of six months commencing from the month of Bohag (mid April) for a certain amount of paddy. The agreement could be extended to another six months on remuneration in the form of a pair of Dokhnas and a piece of scarf only.

Subsequent changes were introduced by the Colonial Government in the land tenure system in Assam which was quite contrary to the customary tribal rights of cultivation. In 1870 the Government declared that the right of periodic leaseholders would be hereditary and transferable. Further the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations of 1886 defined the rights of the tenants in precise terms. Since prior to the annexation of Assam, Goalpara was a part of Bengal Presidency, hence the British continued the Zamindari System of Revenue there even when brought

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\(^{14}\) W.W. Hunter: op.cit, p. 118.
under the administration of Assam in 1874. After the Permanent Settlement the Rajas and chiefs were locally called Zamindars and they had permanent, heritable and transferable rights over their lands including, mines, minerals, forests and fisheries. For instance, the Raja of Bijni and the five lesser chiefs of Goalpara viz. Gauripur, Parbotijoar, Chapor, Mechpara and Karaibari were required to pay the land revenue at the rate fixed in perpetuity but they could realize rent from tenants at whatever rates they liked. In the Assam Land and Revenue regulations 1886, they were put in the same class as the grantees of revenue-free land in the rest of Assam (i.e. Lakhirajdhars) and were called ‘proprietors’. This new system of regularizing the land rights was contrary to the tribal practice. The colonial government introduced the idea of private property or “proprietorship” which required written documents and signature called patta. As a result, Boro people lost their ancestral land since they were mostly illiterate. In the process Boro women, who were a major contributor to the family income through agriculture and various allied activities, became marginalized. They lost access to land which minimised their role in the tribal economy.

Colonial Goalpara also witnessed influx of immigrants which further accelerated the process of land alienation. In 1833 the British introduced the Wasteland Grant Rules. In fact, the Charter of 1833 which for the first time allowed the Europeans to hold land outside the Presidency towns on a long term or with free-hold rights paved for a colonial plantation economy. Consequently, by 1904 four tea gardens were established in the district. The plantation industry required large number of

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16 Amalendu Guha: op.cit, pp. 11-15.
labour but due to non-availability of local labour, the British tea planters brought tea garden labourers in large numbers from mainland India. Most of these labourers were from the tribal belts of Orissa, Madras Presidency, Bombay Presidency\textsuperscript{18} and Bengal. The Adivasis who had been brought to work in the tea gardens as tenants were settled in the District. The British also brought with them Marwari businessmen and usurers and English-educated Bengali clerks to man railway offices, post-offices and other administrative offices of the State.\textsuperscript{19} On the other hand, the missionaries in their endeavour to spread the gospel settled a Santal Christian colony in 1879 in the Guma Parganah. However, in the mid-nineteenth century the Santal Parganah of Bihar faced famine and a large number of Santals migrated to Goalpara and settled in Dingdinga\textsuperscript{20}, a village in present Kokrajhar District. Again the land hungry Muslim immigrants from the Mymensingh District of the then undivided Bengal had infiltrated into the plains districts of Assam, including the areas primarily inhabited by the tribal people.

The 1931 census reveals some interesting figures regarding the immigration episode in the District. In Goalpara District in 1911 the total Bengali population was 77,000 out of which Mymensingh immigrants were 34,000, their percentage being slightly more than being 44. In 1921 while Bengali-speaking population in the District was 151,000, the number of Mymensingh immigrants were 78,000 their percentage being 51. In 1931, while the total Bengali-speaking population of Goalpara District was 170,000, the Mymensingh immigrants were 80,000, their


percentage being 47.\textsuperscript{21} The non-tribal moneylenders also taking advantage of the mass illiteracy and ignorance of tribal people gradually grabbed tribal land through various methods.\textsuperscript{22} Since land was easily available the Boros did not put up physical resistance to the immigrants who occupied all the available virgin land hitherto unclaimed and uncultivated. These lands could have been owned by the tribal people had there been no influx of immigrants and women could have more accessibility to land.

Another intrusion into the women’s domain was the British Government’s Forest Policy which made women further alienated from nature. However, it is to be noted here the introduction of colonial forest administration as established in Assam like elsewhere in India was at the behest of military and engineering people who were looking for timber not only for their daily needs but also for military purposes.\textsuperscript{23} Nevertheless, the colonial policy of forest management had serious consequences on tribal women’s dependence on forest. The traditional tribal society had been dwelling in and around the forests and its economy was based on community resources meant to be used according to human needs as well as preserved for posterity, thus respecting the ecological ethos. The communal character was all pervasive including their land, forests and other natural resource management and also their social and political structures.\textsuperscript{24} The account of Hunter also testifies that in the District of Goalpara the tribes who live in hills like Mech,

\textsuperscript{22} B. N. Bordoloi : op.cit, p. Iv.
Kachari, Rabha, Garo etc. gained most of their subsistence by collecting and trading in jungle products and timber.\footnote{W.W. Hunter: op. cit, p. 26.}

Tribal women and men play important roles in biodiversity management, use and conservation through their different tasks and responsibilities in food production and provision. They play different roles in dealing with biodiversity resources since they perceive, use and manage these resources differently, and have different knowledge and skills in relation to resource management. Women’s perspective towards the importance of environment/nature is somewhat different than men. Tribal women in particular or women living in rural areas have special relationship with the environment. They are more close to nature than men and this very close relationship makes them perfect managers of an eco-system. Gender related differences in terms of labour, property rights and decision-making processes and perception also shape the knowledge systems, as a consequence of which men and women end up with varying form of expertise. For example, men may know a great deal about trees used for timber, while women are authorities on those providing fruits, medicine and fodder.\footnote{Bina Agarwal : \textit{Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women’s Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry}, Oxford University Press, pp. 9-15.}

Tribal women have traditionally contributed to forest preservation through sound management practices. Boro women had knowledge of the skills both for the use and protection of biodiversity resources. Natural resources were an integral part of Boro tribal household and women had rights to use minor forest products. They depended entirely on the forest to meet the daily needs such as – fire-wood, water, fuel, fodder, minor forest produce etc. for household use and marketing. Women of the Boro community had traditional knowledge of utilising natural resources. For
instance, they had special knowledge of various types of wild plants, shrubs, medicinal herbs, grass, kind of fuel-wood and various species of fodder plants. Their task in agriculture and animal husbandry as well as their central role in the household made them daily managers of living environment.

Women-nature bond could also be seen in women’s knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs. Boro women also maintained home-gardens within the homestead which not only served as a secondary source of food but also provided medicinal herbs for curing ailments of their family members. The application of traditional herbal knowledge was also noticed in cooking different food in accordance with different seasons for the upkeep of health of the family. Even the midwives were herbal specialists.

Forests provided a wide range of natural resources which were utilized by women for the sustenance of their family. These resources were either utilized directly or transformed them into processed items which could be used in the time of scarcity or unproductive seasons. Bahor gaaz (bamboo shoots), kachu (taro), fruits and leaves of various wild plants are directly consumed as cooked food, while women also preserve these forest products for future use as well. The traditional food preservation and processing techniques are still prevalent among the Boro people living in village areas. Since kitchen and food came under the domain of women, food processing was mainly done by them with occasional assistance from the men. They preserved meat, fish, vegetables and other items. While meat was procured either from domesticated animals or hunting, fish was available in water. The meat and fish are preserved by drying them in small pieces completely under the sun. Another method of preserving fish is called napham or Chidol. First they grind or pound the dried or smoked fish in ural along with kachur thari (taro stem)
and a little khar. For storing bamboo tubes were used. The mouth of the tube was tightly closed with banana leaf. Then they put some *tuh-guri* (paddy husk) and finally seal it by applying a layer of mud on the mouth over which a cotton cloth is tied tightly. What is interesting here was the method women employ to make bamboo tubes almost like air-tight container to store and preserve fish. It becomes ready to eat after two months. Like the Assamese women, Boro women also prepared *khar* (alkaline) through the traditional technique of filtering water through the ashes of banana tree. It is called *kola khar* as it made from banana or *kal*. Bamboo shoots are preserved through fermentation by putting the small pieces of bamboo shoots in bamboo tubes and sealing the mouth by the air-tight technique. *Sokota* is prepared with dry jute leaves, *mati mahar dail* (black gram) and *khar* (alkaline). *Thekera* (*Garcinia mangostana*) is also dried. Turmeric and red chillies are dried and converted into powdered form. The betel-nuts are stored either by covering them by a step-by-step method in a round hole on the ground or in a mud-pot filled with water and the mouth being tied with a cotton cloth. Thus with the help of their traditional knowledge of food preservation Boro women conserved biodiversity by transforming raw materials into preserved and processed products.

Another important processed item is the rice beer or *zu, zau, jumai* or *madh* a beverage produced by processing rice, prepared by women. The key element in its preparation is a locally made medicine called *amaw*. It is a mixture of rice and some wild herb collected by women from jungles. It is made with a definite proportion of uncooked rice, leaves of jackfruit tree (*kanthals*), some pieces of a wild flower (*kinthals*), roots of a local plant *agarcitha* and leaves of a local plant,

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27 Shabnam Bornm; Personal Interview with Brahma Anjali [retired Principal of Gauripur Girls’ School], Gauripur, 19/10/10.
bongphang nakeb. All these ingredients are then reduced to a powdered form by grinding them together in a dheki or urol and mixed with water to form thick round shaped cakes or disks, called amaw. To make the amaw ready for use the women sprinkle the powder of old amaw called amaw mokang to the new amaw and keeps for 3 to 4 days. In the final stage, the women mixes amaw with cooked rice and seals it in the earthen pots for 3-4 days. The zau is thus ready for use and it expires after a week. For the Boro people the rice-beer had cultural significance. Hunter even observes that the good physical constitution of the Meches or Kacharis had made them immune to malaria and he attributed its reason to the consumption of prophylactic effects of the liquor which they drank in large quantity. He stated that during the Bhutan campaign the military officers at the Duars wondered why the Kacharis or Meches, not only not succumbed to malaria, which proved so fatal for other men and horses from mainland India, but actually thrived under such unfavourable circumstances, and were a stout, athletic people. He believed that it was so because of the effect of ‘zau’.²⁸ It shows if rice-beer taken in pure form without adding any toxics it can serve as a health booster for it contains carbohydrates. The locals also believe that pure zau is curative of urinary problems and it provides relief in dysentery.

Women also used Pani Lao (Bottle Gourd) as container. The gourds were allowed to obtain a maximum maturity on the vine before harvest. After harvesting they were hung with ropes below a hot ceiling preferably above a Chauka or earthen fire place to quick up the process of drying the gourd. Dried gourds were then cleaned and the seeds were taken out to use as containers. Thus Boro women by

²⁸ W.W. Hunter: op.cit, p.119.
their indigenous wisdom converted the hard shelled gourd into an useful and
durable container. Another women’s task tied closely to biodiversity was fishing
from various beels or pukhuris i.e. swamps or ponds and other water resources.
They were proficient in fishing and generally fished in lakes and swamps, both
inside and outside the forests. Women used bamboo in making various tools and
implements for fishing, which will be discussed subsequently.

The production of raw materials for weaving of fabric was another example of
women’s crucial knowledge in biodiversity conservation. Boro women have not
only distinguished weaving skills but even the required raw material was produced
by them. The basic raw-material for sericulture is cotton, muga or silk. They are
reputed for producing eri garments. For the purpose they rear the cocoons in the
household compound itself. Era paat or wild castor or Ratanjyoti leaves are fed to
the polu or eri-worms. The yarn from cocoons is used to weave. The male helped
in feeding the cocoons, cleaning and taking out the threads from them. Women
were involved in making of thread, spinning of yarn as also weaving. Particularly
their eri garments were of very good quality as testified by Endle who praised the
eri cloth for its softness, warmth and durability. He mentioned about a piece of eri
cloth that after 12 or 15 years and being subjected to “many and frequent barbarous
washings” the fabric was in extremely good condition.29 In the colonial period to
colour the yarn natural dyes were also used which were prepared from various
roots leaves of trees. They usually prepared dyes of blue and various shades of red.
They could produce ink with a kind of jungle fruit known as thungkhu bergao
(Madustoma species) for writing and other colours for drawing pictures and

29Sidney Endle: The Kacharis, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1975, p. 22
different arts. The motifs of the garments woven by women were mainly inspired by nature.

Trees like bamboo and cane were also converted into artefacts by women. Although in the Boro community tools and implements were generally made by men, there were certain tools which women could also prepare like dala, zakhai, khaloi and bisani. The process of making and use of these traditional tools and implements remains the same till today. *Zakhai* is a fishing implement in the shape of triangular bamboo basket with one side open and attached by a bamboo handle and *khaloi* or *kuki* is a bamboo pot with a narrow neck and a larger base. Women tie the *khaloi* around their waist with a rope. With the right hand, she takes out the fish from the *zakhai* and put it in the *khaloi* or *kuki*. Thus fishing and storing them at the same time. *Bisani* and *Dala* are also made by women. *Bisani* is a hand-fan while *Dala* is basically a round bamboo tray prepared out of flexible bamboo slips in twilled design. Apart from domestic purposes *dala* is used for rearing silk worms and winnowing. It is important to note here that while women could use household tools used made by men, they were forbidden to use hunting and musical tools. Gender differentiation is apparent even in the usage of tools. Generally, the tools and utensils used by women both in domestic and agricultural activities like *bahar sunga* (bamboo tube or hallow), *Kula* (winnowing fan), *Chalani* (sieve), *Khorahi* or *Tukuri* (bamboo basket) and *Ural* or *Khundana* (wooden mortar and pestle) were either made of bamboo or wood and cane which were easily available in the forests.

30 Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Khuliram Narzary [Medicine man], Chakma village, 20/10/10.
31 Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Harani Narzary, Common villager, 57 years of age, Bhumka village, 20/10/10
Another utility of forest resources could be seen in weaving in which the women were expert. Boro girls and women in their traditional society were proficient craftswomen. They produced variety of cloths like Dokhna, Alowan or Jumgra, Aranoi etc. The eri shawls even today are known for their quality and durability.

Weaving tools included a loom with its accessories, spindle, spinning machine, warp-drum or pegs. Most of these tools were made of bamboo and sometimes of wood. Although a women enterprise, the tools and implements needed in weaving were made by men. Various roots and leaves of wild herbs was also utilised by women for dyeing garments. Some of the local species used for natural dyeing were- Gab Phitahai (a large tree), Thalit Moikhun (spadix of banana), Thunku Berguon (Melastoma species), Jetuka (Henna plant), Moiphral (Indian spinach), Daoa Begur (Bark of Artocurpus species), Sigun (Teak leaves ), Daogeny Jola (a green shrub), Jigab Gorani (old dry straw of paddy) etc.\(^{32}\)

Health care of both family members and domesticated animals came under the purview of women as they possessed traditional medicinal knowledge. For this purpose Boro women maintained a kitchen garden with vegetables and herbs beneficial for health. They also collected from jungles various wild herbs and leaves of different plants to cure the ailments of family members like Kharokha (Ranvolfia serpentine.), Bis Kantokhra or Bel in Assamese (stone apple). Khaya (Common Sedge), Heleka or Hilikha in Assamese (Black Myrobalan), Amlai phithai or Amlaki in Assamese , (Emblc myrobalan) , Or jumudoi or Dupar

\(^{32}\) Ibid
Tenga in Assamese (Bryophyllum species), Maoji khoma: - (Water Lettuce), Poddo Bibarni begor (seeds of lotus) etc.

Since in the Boro tribal society women were the owners of backyard poultry, they played multiple roles in animal husbandry. Additionally poultry manure contribute to soil fertility. Boro women were well aware of each animal’s behavior and production characteristics. In livestock management, milking, feeding and cleaning the animal shed etc. were mostly done by women while management of male animals and fodder production were affected by men. Thus, it is realized that most of the critical jobs like taking care of sick animals, care during pregnancy, newborn animal babies and administration of medicine were performed by women. They also collected wild herbs with medicinal qualities from forests and provided or applied home-made medicine to the sick animals.

Boro women played an important role in agriculture as it was largely a household enterprise. After the land being dug by men, women sow, weed, hoe and bind the stalks. Particularly in the post-harvest activities women played exclusive roles which included carrying crops from the field, threshing of grains, winnowing, storage of grains for use and for seed purposes, drying of grains, de-husking and cleaning of grains were the specific areas where the Boro women substantially worked in agricultural related activities.

The close ties between biodiversity conservation and spirituality could also be seen on auspicious days related to agriculture which were generally performed by the female-head of the family. It is to be mentioned that it was the woman of a Boro

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33 Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Rohima Musahary, Common villager, 48 years of age, Bhumka village, 5/11/10.
family who used to lead the way for cultivation. The wife or the elderly female member of a Boro family would initiate the ritual at the time of transplanting the seedlings. It was called *Khothia Phunia* or uprooting the seedlings. She began her ritual by offering a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves (*Goijara-pathoi*) in the honour of *Mainao or Lakhi*, the Goddess of wealth, asking for her blessings for the cultivation and starts uprooting of seedlings afterwards. Next stage was called *Maigainai* or plantation of paddy. Here, the household lady or the elderly woman flagged off the paddy cultivation. In the *ali* or small path of the agricultural field, she used to plant a *Kochu* (taro) plant and in front of it offered to the *Mainao* or *Lakhi* a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves (*Goijara-pathoi*), aroi chaul (not boiled rice), tulsi (holy basil) and dhup-dhuna (incense sticks) on a banana leaf or *agoli kalpaat* in Assamese. Thereafter saluting towards the east with a small quantity of seedlings rubbed in a little mustard oil in her hand, she started plantation and all other family members followed the suit. To celebrate the occasion, the household woman also cooked fish and *nal kochu* (taro). The last day of transplantation was called *nangoul jankha*. After the transplantation of seedlings was over, a feast was organized and she provided the neighbours and friends with cooked rice and *kochu* (taro) curry or bamboo shoots curry along with *zau* or rice-beer.\(^3^4\)

Another ritual was performed at the time of growth of paddy but only by a young girl of the family. With a weaving stick of bamboo called *goncha*, treated with mustard oil, she touched the top of standing paddy plants in the field wishing for the full growth and successful harvest of paddy. It is believed that if a maiden

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\(^{34}\) Bhaben Narzi: op.cit, p. 56.
touches the top of paddy plants there is a great hope of successful paddy. When the paddy was fully ripe and ideal for reaping, the household lady performed what was called the ritual of *Mainao Lainai* or *Aglainai*. It means bringing *Mainao* or *Lakhi* from the paddy field to the house. This ritual was performed early in the morning. The lady of the family went to the field, preferably before dawn and reaped a small quantity of paddy with the help of a sickle. She then sprinkled holy water on that small bundle of paddy and kept the sacred bundle inside the *bakhri* or granary. This welcoming of *Mainao* to the house was also attended by colourful dance performed the Boro women to the tune of *Serja*, *Siphung* and *Jotha*. In the *Engkham godan janai* or rice-eating ceremony, which was observed after the harvesting of the crop in the month of December, an offering was made to gods and goddesses. It was basically a feast prepared by the women of the family to celebrate the eating of the new rice by inviting the neighbours and friends. As cooked rice (*Engkham godan*) and pork curry (*Oma bedaor*) formed the main item of offering among the Boros, the household lady cooked and offered the same to their principal God *Bathou Borai* and Goddess *Mainao* along with other gods and goddesses. The women also prepared rice-beer or *zau* for the occasion. Thereafter, the food and *zau* was served to all the guests and the family members.

However, this relation of women and forest on which the survival of their community mostly depended, underwent dramatic changes under the colonial regime. After the coming of the British to India, efforts began to be made in the

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35 Kameswar Brahma: “Role and Status of Boro the Women in their Society through the Ages” in *Bullettin Vol:1 No.-XII*, Director of Assam Institute of Research for the Tribals and Scheduled Castes, 1999, Guwahati, p. 33.

direction of conservation of forests. The first Act to give effect to rules for the management and preservation of forests in Assam was passed in 1865 known as ‘The Bengal forest Act of 1865’. This act, however, was repealed and was replaced by a more comprehensive Act i.e. ‘The India Forest Act of 1878. In 1891 the ‘Assam Forest Regulation’ was introduced. Forests were divided into Protected Forests, Reserved Forests, Un-classed State Forest, and Village Forests. This was again replaced by a very comprehensive Act called the ‘Indian Forest Act, 1927’ which brought together all the major provisions of the earlier Acts. But it was in 1894 that the first Forest Policy was enunciated. It said that in almost all cases the conservation and preservation of forest involve, in greater or lesser degree, the regulation of rights and restriction of privileges of users in the forest area which may have been enjoyed by the inhabitants of its immediate neighborhood. Since the Goalpara forests had considerable commercial importance, a large portion of the land is covered as ‘Reserved Forests’. In 1877 the area under Reserved Forests in Goalpara District was 346 square miles which by 1888 increase to 625, approximately 16% of its total area. In 1903-04 the Government Reserves covered an area of 787 square miles. The principal forests were those of Ripu, Chirang, Bengtol and Bijni. Besides there were 558 square miles of ‘unclassed’ state forest, managed by the revenue officials. Some forests were also under the zamindars of the district. Most of the timber from the forests were purchased by Bengal where it was largely used for boat-making.

37 Arupjyoti Saikia: op.cit, pp. 67-100.
39 Arupjyoti Saikia: op.cit, pp. 72-73.
40 B.C.Allen, et al., op.cit, pp. 517-519.
In this way forest officials appeared on the scene and claimed authority to limit and regulate the tribal rights. Boro women whose life and daily activities were deeply connected with the forest resources received a set-back. The loss of accessibility to forests meant loss of its resources which women used both directly and indirectly. This in turn affected their economic contribution to the tribal society thereby making her position marginalized and vulnerable.

Another blow to the role of women in tribal economy came with British occupation of Eastern Duars. The Boro people had traditional border-trade relations with the Bhutias and Garos. In the Boro tribal community women could go to local markets or Haats where they bartered various articles. Even the male members bartered goods produced by women in these local bazaars. Trade relations existed between Goalpara and Bhutan and with Garo Hills. The trade with Bhutan was carried through the Eastern Duars and with Garos on border haats. The passes were called Duars i.e. Doors. Duars of Bijni, Sidli, Binga, Naduar, Charduar etc. were noteworthy. The chief articles of trade in the Duars were rice, paddy kalai, paddy of different sorts, jute, lac, eri and muga silk, pipi, or long paper wax, china, kaon, mustard seeds, ivory, oil, sal logs and other kinds of timber, castor oil seeds, til (sesame seeds), cane and rattan, molasses, tobacco, mats, earthen pots of various descriptions and bell-metal, cooking and household utensils, clarified butter, baskets dried fish, country-cloths, beads and other trinkets, paan, betel-nut, wooden furniture of country make, such as stools boxes etc., long country knives, vegetables and fruits, reeds, grass and bamboo, besides a

41 W. Robinson: A Descriptive Account of Assam: with a Sketch of the Local Geography and a Concise History of the Tea-Plant of Assam, to which is added a short Account of the Neighbouring Tribes, Exhibiting their History, Manners and Customs, Sanskaran Prakashak Delhi, 1975, p. 247.
considerable number of animals such as cows, bullocks, buffaloes, goats, sheep, pigs etc.\textsuperscript{42} Haats or periodical markets on the Garo frontier were held at Jira, Nibari, Damra, Porakasua, Dalo, Mahendraganj, Rakjabala and other places where trade transactions took place between the Boros and the Garos.\textsuperscript{43} The mode of transaction was through barter. On every market day dried fishes were either sold for cash or bartered for cotton, cloth and other commodities on the Garo Frontiers to the Garos.\textsuperscript{44} Cotton rice and chilies were the principal crops which were brought by the Garos down to the markets held near the borders to be exchange for salt, dried fish, tobacco, betel nuts etc.\textsuperscript{45}

However, as a result of the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1864-66 the British occupied the Bhutan Duars.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, the border trade also came under their control. Eastern Duars were added to Goalpara. Besides, local trade was principally in the hands of Marwari merchants from Rajputana or merchants from Bengal. It was carried on at permanent Bazars, weekly haats or markets and periodical fairs held on special occasions or religious festivals.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, loss of access to this traditional border trade jeopardised the economic contribution of women, leading to their marginalization within the household, as well as society.

In 1835 the British introduced uniform coinage throughout India and in 1861 the paper currency was introduced.\textsuperscript{48} The introduction of money economy had both

\textsuperscript{42} W.W. Hunter: op.cit, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, p.50.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, p.23.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p.35.
\textsuperscript{46} S. Barman: op.cit, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{47} B.C.Allen, \textit{et al}, op.cit, p. 519.
economic and social implications. Since Boro women who traded through barter mode and were mostly illiterate, found it difficult to cope up with these new developments. They became more dependent on men and the role of major contributor to the family income was now tilted towards the men. Money was needed not only in economic transactions but it also had a bearing on customary laws.

The money economy also had social implication for the tribal customary laws. In pre-colonial Boro society punishment was given mostly as penance. The Boro term for social offence is called bad. The offender is obliged to perform penance or udrainai with some strict social customs.\(^49\) It was basically a purification ceremony. Along with this the offender had to arrange a feast for the village or offer some articles and in extreme cases banishment from village was given. But the British brought with them the circulation of money and so fines began to be accepted as a part of punishment. For instance if a woman misbehaves, or disrespects or abuses her husband a fine of Re. 1 was imposed. If a woman beat her husband both had to undergo punishment in the form of providing 2½ Dhanu or bows Uddhar and a fine of Rs. 2 and 8 annas was charged.\(^50\) Again if two women engage in fighting and commit physical harm there would be a fine of Rs. 1. Should a woman kick a person, a fine of Re. 1 was imposed. The punishment for giving birth in a Rabha Village was 2½ Dhanu Uddhar and a fine decided by the villagers.\(^51\) However if both male and female were found guilty of a particular offence of serious nature, generally any illicit physical relations between related persons established consciously like with the sister-in-law, wife’s elder sister,

\(^{49}\) Kameswar Brahma: op.cit, p. 55.

\(^{50}\) Boronti Phisa O Ayen, translated by Prahlad kumar Brahma, Harishchandra Kachari and Madharam Kachari, Basumatary library, Dudhnoi, 2004, pp. 59-64.

\(^{51}\) Ibid, p. 69.
maternal uncle, paternal uncle, paternal aunt, extra-marital affair of a woman with her deceased husband’s relatives, mother-in-law or illicit relations among dharmar and adopted brother and sisters etc. The offenders had to undergo nine or five Dhanu (bows) Uddhar or penance and a fine determined by the Gaoburha on the basis of seriousness of the offence. The fine had to be paid equally by both.\textsuperscript{52}

Though customary laws such as these reveal gender equality to some extent, the fact remains that the women who have lost access to most of the economic activities had to rely on men to pay these penalties in cash, fixed generally by the male members of the villages.

Nevertheless, the colonial government had adopted some reforms for the promotion of education and health among the people in the Goalpara district which benefitted men and women of Boro community. However, the work of social reformation was already taken up by the Christian missionaries and further accelerated by the Brahma Dharma. After the annexation of Assam in 1826, the East India Company established ten schools in the District at Goalpara, Murnoi, Kamarpotah, Jogighopa, Lakhipur, Singimari, Kakripara, Bolasoopara, Dhubri, Garo School.\textsuperscript{53} In 1856 there were only 15 schools in the district attended by 194 students which by 1870 was increased to 31 schools with 862 pupils. Meanwhile the reforms of Sir G. Campbell extended the benefits of the grant-in-aid rules to the village schools or pathsalas which raised the total number of inspected schools in 1873 to 92 and of pupils to 2173.\textsuperscript{54} The number of pupils under instruction 1800-01, 1890-91, 1900-01 and


\textsuperscript{53} A.J. Moffat Mills: op.cit, p. 288.

\textsuperscript{54} Hunter: op.cit, p. 97-98.
1903-04 was 2922, 4931, 7241 and 6801 respectively. The chief educational establishment was the High-class English School at Dhubri. This school was formerly situated in the Goalpara but with the transfer of head-quarter it was shifted to Dhubri.

The Government also adopted special efforts to promote girls’ education by providing aid to primary vernacular schools. Between 1872-73 a total of 65 aided pathshals have been established, two being Girls’ pathshals. The two Girls’ pathshals have been attended by 21 girls and 63 schools for boys had 1321 on their rolls. Out of these numbers 151 comprised of Garos, Kacharis, Rabhas and other tribes. Besides there was an unaided girls school established by the Zamindar of Lakshmipur and was attended by 22 girls. An important aspect of education in the colonial rule was that in the schools along with academic teaching, arrangements were also made for students especially girls for training in sewing, knitting, drawing, drill, singing etc. to make them economically self-sufficient. Hence the emphasis on the so-called modern education for girls was restricted to the stereotyped role of women as ‘homemaker’. Moreover, in the census of 1901, 2.7 per cent of the population (4.9 males and 0.2 females) were returned as literates. In 1903-04 there were 215 primary and 18 secondary schools in the District. The enormous number of pupils under instruction were only in primary schools and the number of girls who had advanced beyond that stage was insignificant. Of the male population of school going age 14 percent are in the primary stage of instruction and of the

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55 B.C. Allen et al.: op.cit, p. 521.
female population of the same age less than one percent.\textsuperscript{58} Thus Government efforts could not make much headway in the direction of female education.

Health care was also given importance by the colonial government. It were the missionaries who initially opened up hospitals at Parkijuli, Santipr and Sevapur along with several dispensaries. Goalpara district was in fact considered to be unhealthy both for Europeans and natives, especially during rainy season. The whole town round Goalpara town was charged with malarious exhalations. The prevalent diseases were intermittent and remittent fevers, complicated with affection of the spleen, diarrhea, dysentery, rheumatism and chest infection. Epidemic outbreak of cholera were frequent and small-pox controlled through the process of inoculation. The statistics of 1881 registers death rate of 13.12 per thousand. Out of a total of 5855 deaths, 4840v were assigned to fever, 57 to cholera, 87 to small-pox, and 389 to bowel complaints.\textsuperscript{59} The District possessed 3 hospitals and 11 dispensaries, with accommodation for 59 patients. In 1904, the number of cases treated was 93,000 of 600 were in-patients and 1,400 surgeries were performed.\textsuperscript{60} However, the tribal people generally preferred their traditional treatment from Oja or the medicine man as the Civil Surgeon of Goalpara remarked:

\ldots the people of the neighborhood are timid, and preferred prolonged suffering to coming under the knife; even for the medical treatment they rarely go to hospital. The in-door patients consist chiefly of travelers and settlers from Behar.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} B.C. Allen \textit{et al.}: op.cit, p.522.  
\textsuperscript{59} W.W. Hunter: op.cit, p.10.  
\textsuperscript{60} B.C. Allen \textit{et al.}: op.cit, p.522.  
\textsuperscript{61} W.W. Hunter : op.cit, p.106.
Even today women of the Boro community prefer traditional treatment of medicine man or medicine woman. Specially in cases for ear or nose piercing, delivery and conceive of mother they visit medicine woman, generally an elderly lady of the village instead of a regular doctor.

Thus the colonial government became accountable towards women and by their reforms and measure also impacted the position of Boro women in both the society and economy, just as the Christian Missionaries and the Brahma Dharma who initiated a process of reformation to ameliorate the condition of Boro women as discussed in the previous chapter.

Having been influenced by these socio-economic and political agencies, Boro women reacted sharply and actively to these changes and some of them assumed a proactive role as ‘duty-bearers’ to bring awareness among the women. Women’s agency was thus a significant impact of colonialism itself. The missionaries no doubt played a remarkable role in the promotion of female education etc. Women of the Christian Boro community fed and looked after their babies well. Proper attention and care was taken to maintain cleanliness and hygiene in the household and community. The evil of exorcism and witchcraft was not encouraged although not much headway could be made in this regard. Even people were advised to give up the country liquor. When women realized the cause of diseases, they started giving up blind practices. Under the influence of missionaries they took up the responsibility of enlightening their people. Boro women started assisting the missionaries in educating the people for proper parenting, give up blind faith, maintain hygiene, eat healthy and clean food, to go for scientific treatment etc. Thus women themselves became instrumental in bringing reformation in the colonial
Boro society and discharged the duty of an effective socio-economic agent. At the same time it cannot be denied that in their bid to give up superstition and blind-faith women also gave up their traditional rites and festivals thereby alienating themselves from traditional practices where women’s contribution was significant.

Owing to the works of *Brahma Dharma*, Boro women took one more step to reform the then Boro society. Since improving the condition of women was one of the major concerns of the *Brahma* movement, many steps were taken for the eradication of certain traditional practices of the Boros like forced marriage, unhygienic lifestyle, pig-rearing, preparation and consumption of rice-beer (*zau*), high bride-price (*Phon*) etc. along with encouragement to weaving, equality of sexes, girl’s education etc. The ground was being prepared for the formation of women organizations i.e. *Mahila Samitis* or *Ajuw Affat* to bring in reformation in the society by ameliorating the conditions of women. These *Mahila Samitis* by periodically holding meetings and conventions, tried to bring awareness about the importance of girls education, need for hygiene and cleanliness, abolition of *Phon* etc., besides solving the immediate problems encountered by women.

The influence of the *Brahma Dharma*, propagated by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma on the society and economy is apparent. As has been discussed in the previous chapter that *Brahma* movement on the one hand was also instrumental in separating women from their involvement in the traditional social functions like rice-beer production, performance in *Kherai* and *Garja pujas* etc., on the other hand the movement adopted many reforms to improve the condition of
Boro women in the society. Prohibition on pig-rearing and selling of products in the haats or local markets jeopardized their economic contribution since sale of dried fish and pigs in the weekly haats was an essential part of earning so far as the women were concerned. But this impingement on women’s economic freedom was diverted through the movement’s effort to form women organizations i.e. Mahila Samitis or Ajuw Affat to look after their welfare and rights. An economic impact of the Mahila Samitis was that they gave a new orientation towards weaving with the available new technology and various weaving centres were established to train the Boro women of not only Assam but also of West Bengal in order to make them economically self-sufficient. The objectives of such women organization were mainly to obtain share from paternal property, abolition of bride-price, right to the property of husband after his death, prohibit production of zau (rice-beer).  

The next important work of the Mahila Samiti was to make women economically self-sufficient. In this task the Gram Hiteshi Samiti was formed with the objective of development in rural health, education and economy of the area comprising some villages. The organization ventured weaving centres in places employing weavers. One such big centre was established in village, Bonyaguri, where women were provided classes on commercialized weaving.

Boro women of the colonial period also began to showcase their handicrafts and culture in different occasions. At the forty-first session of the Indian National Congress held in Pandu in 1926 Boro women made such a great exhibition of their handloom that Gandhi who attended the session got interested in their

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weaving skills. Consequently Gandhi visited the Boro village of Rupsi where an exhibition was organized. Women from Maltijhora, Banyagury, Ouabari, and other nearby Boro villages took an active part. Here the women gave a live demonstration of their traditional knowledge of weaving. They also performed colourful traditional dances. Seeing the skills of Boro women Gandhi was full of admiration for the rich Boro culture.\textsuperscript{63} Women also began to display their culture outside Assam. On the occasion of Republic Day celebration of 1953, a small Boro dance group under the leadership of Satishchandra Basumatary also participated. Russian Deputy Minister of Culture and Soviet cultural leader N.N. Wechpalve who attended the celebration were highly impressed by \textit{Bagorumba} dance of the Boro women. In his speech the Russian Minister praised the rich Boro culture as -

\begin{quote}
It is to be witnessed that we have been overwhelmed by the music and dances exhibited us from the eastern-most states of India of which the various colourful Tribal communities were performed their respective folk dances and some of them are having some high classical forms and styles. The Bihu and the elegant Bodo dances, to say, most attractive and it may entitle [sic] to be a rare specimen of the Indian folk cultures and tradition….\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

Again in the 1957 Republic Day celebration, Boro women received appreciation from both the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and first President Rajendra Prasad. They were highly impressed to see the traditional \textit{Bagorumba} and \textit{Maigawnaw} dances. The dance was choreographed by Kamini Narzary. The group also won the second prize among all the Indian dances and

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, pp. 96-98.

thus first among the tribal dances. The performance was also praised by the National Daily paper *The Statesman* as

...the charm that these simple folk cast on the sensitive spectators is difficult to describe, surely, it was best expressed in their lovely dance of the maidens of the Bodo Tribe of Assam, a dance performed in the secrecy of the night that was possibly never before witnessed by the outsiders....

Thus, Boro women brought name and fame not only to Assam but to the entire North-East region.

Apart from performing the task of an active socio-economic agent of the colonial period, the impact of the three colonial agencies who acted as the duty-bearers viz. the Christian Missionaries, the *Brahma Dahrma* and the colonial Government could be seen in the political field as well. Women became aware of the prevailing grievances arising out of the colonial regime. They learnt that a popular reaction was mounting against the British. Consequently the Boro women did not lag behind and participated in the anti-British movements that were going on all over India.

One of the early woman *mouzadars* was Birgwsri Sikhla who stood against the colonial British rulers. The area where she lived was called Chaudhuripara of the then Bijni Estate. She was deputed by the British to collect revenue from the tenants. She was also known as *Then Phakri or Thengfakhri*. She was very courageous and brave. She remained a spinster till her death. As a *mouzadar* she collected revenue and deposited the same along with valuable goods like

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66 *Mouzadar* was a fiscal officer in charge of a *mouza*. In colonial period the *Mouzadar* collected tax in-charge of all the lands in the area and deposited the same to the Government treasury.
gold, silver etc. to the Government office at Goalpara. For carrying the valuables it is said Birgwsri had to engage as many as twelve Boro youths of stout figure to carry the goods. In case the mouzadar failed to deposit the fixed amount of revenue and valuables to the British Government, penalties were imposed on them. Birgwsri was determined not to pay the revenue. Consequently, she was regarded as defaulter and was hard-pressed to pay the arrears. She took up her sword fought bravely against the British tooth and nail. It is said that Birgwsri fought against the British soldiers on horse-back which indicates that she was a good fighter and could ride the horse. But in the long run, she had to flee to a small hillock near the present Bongaigaon town. It is said that one day while she went to drink water from a nearby stream the British soldiers mounted a sudden attack and killed her. Her long sword was found on the bank of the stream and people regarded it as sacred.  

However, regarding the heroic career and deeds of Birgwsri we do not have concrete evidence. Whatever information is available to us is derived from folk stories and some novels. But at the same time we cannot overlook some of the facts. For instance the name of the place Birjora is believed to have been derived from the name of Birgwsri. The legendary heroine is said to have taken rest in that place once. Assamese term Birjira means a place where a hero or heroine takes rest. The word Birjhora might have come from Bir-jiroa.  

Again on the approximate place where the sword of Birgwsri was found, a temple was built. The temple is known as Bageswri Mandir. It is believed by some people of the area that the sword belonged to Birgwsri Sikhla. However, Bagheshwari is the name of Hindu Goddess

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68 Kameswar Brahma: Loc .cit.
Ma Sherowali. Nevertheless, the name of the place and the temple where it is located is believed to have been derived from the name of the legendary Boro heroine – Birgwsri>Birgaswar>Bargeswar>Bageswar>Bageswari. Again the system of collecting revenue from peasants by mouzadars or choudhuries was a common feature of the Permanent Settlement and there are definite records that the entire Goalpara District was under the Permanent Zamindari System of revenue. Thus, if the legend of Birgwsri may be considered to be true, it can be said that Birgwsri was the first woman revenue collector under the colonial Government, who though initially served the British but later on revolted against them. The period of her anti-British activities approximate to the time of the Revolt of 1857 as suggested by Kameswar Brahma, President of Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The consciousness and awareness that led her to transform from a pro-British to an anti-British stand must have been a result of the influence of the agencies of the colonial period.

Boro women also participated in the freedom movement of India. Although many works have been done on the Boro community since colonial period both by the British and Indian writers, there are very few works on contributions made by the Boro freedom fighters, particularly that of women. Women participation in the national movement has been recorded only from the personal interviews taken by Bidyasagar Narzary who has documented the contribution of the Boro community as a whole to the freedom struggle of the country in his book Forgotten Heroes: Bodo Freedom Fighters.

69 Shabnam Bormon: Personal Interview with Kameswar Brahma, President of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Gossaingaon, Kokrajhar, 19/10/10.
When the freedom movement started, it soon engulfed the whole of Assam. The Boros also did not lag behind and opposed the new regime. The new administrative system followed by the annexation of Assam and introduction of British revenue rules, the introduction of cash currency instead of barter, the need to maintain every record in black and white, increased the burden of taxation and the replacement of Paik system or personal service by transaction slowly disintegrated the Khel system. It created apprehension in the minds of both Ahom nobility and masses. So far the Boros were concerned, the socio-economic agencies of the colonial period played a significant role and western education had opened up their minds.

Dhubri the head-quarter of Goalpara District became the earliest and foremost educational centre for the Boros. Particularly the Boro students of the Dhubri Government Higher Secondary School became enthusiastic and organized a students’ union known as Boro Chatra Sanmilini which had its first annual conference in 1919 in the premises of the Kokrajhar Upper Primary school. One of the main objectives of these meetings was to make the people aware of their glorious past. The educated Boro youth like Rupnath Brahma, Satish Ch. Brahma, Modaram Brahma, who received western education at Cotton College not only enrolled themselves in the freedom movement but also instigated the Boro community as a whole towards the national struggle. The Brahma movement of Kalicharan Brahma further made the people aware of their prevailing socio-economic conditions and ways for improvement.

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high rate of land revenue, money economy, burden of taxes, demarcation of reserved forests, loss of border trade etc. had also created bitterness against the British Government. During the period of 1930-39, the Boros drew their inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi and his novel way of fighting through non-violence attracted their attention. It is said that in 1940-43 even Boro men and women from villages participated in the movement against the British.\textsuperscript{72}

Among the women freedom fighters from Goalpara District mention has to be made of Ramani Bala Khakhlary. She was from Buraburi village near Rongjuli. Born in 1910, she was the daughter of Amar Sarkar and Jhalaiswari Sarkar. Her early education started in a private school of Bhalukjuli village. She passed her Lower Primary education in 1925. In 1928 she was married to Kamaleswar Khakhlary, a school teacher of Dhanubhangha Aomari village. During the Quit India movement she was the leader of women’s wing of the Congress and is said to have carried out a women’s procession numbering more than 400 women against the British Government from Gossaiburi village upto Dhanubhangha village. Responding to the call of Gandhi, she appealed to the people to boycott foreign goods and use \textit{Swadeshi} or home-spun cloth.\textsuperscript{73}

Binandi Daimary was another women fighter. She was from Moamary Village of Sarbasng. She participated in the Quit India movement of 1940-42.\textsuperscript{74}

Boro women from other districts, not included in the study area of this research, had also participated in the struggle for India. Mention may be made of

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\textsuperscript{72} Bidyasagar Narzary: op.cit, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, p. 22.
Sadhana Hazarika and Anandi Rabha were prominent female activists.\textsuperscript{75} From Barpeta District, the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-22 was participated by Ahina Kachari, Fadri Kachari, Faguni Kachari from Dholkusi, Gabhi Kachari, Lila Kachari, Lombha Swargiari and Udil or Jamli Kachari.\textsuperscript{76} Likewise Bhadreswari Boro, Bimala Boro Jaluki Kachari Samukhi Boro, Sunsuni Boro, Swmsri Kachari fought from Darrang.\textsuperscript{77} The women fighters from Lakhimpur included Rebati Sonowal and from Nowgong, Ambeswari Sonowal, Chandrabati Sonowal, FAthali Sonowal, Gereli Sonowal, Golapi Sonowal, Kachakoni Sonowal Lovita Sonowal, Madhabi Sonowal, Malati Sonowal, Samoli Sonowal became active. Many of them were arrested and put behind the bars.\textsuperscript{78}

Thus, the Colonial rule had both economic and social impact on the role and status of Boro women. The impoverishment of women during the colonial rule has been documented by Ester Boserup as the privatization of land for revenue generation displaced women more critically, eroding their traditional land use rights. The expansion of cash crops undermined food production, and women were often left with meager resources to feed and care for children, the aged and the infirm, when men migrated or were conscripted into forced labour by the colonizers.\textsuperscript{79} This has been particularly true of Boro women as land alienation deprived tribal people of their livelihood. The accessibility and control of women over land, forest and natural resources had also decreased.

\textsuperscript{75} Ajanta Brahma: \textit{The Kacharis of Assam in the Indian National Movement (1900-1947)}, Department of History, Gauhati University, 2010, pp. 102-103.
\textsuperscript{76} Bidyasagar Narzary: op.cit, pp. 43-62.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, pp. 65-74.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, pp. 82-90.
Prior to recognition of land-rights and reservation of forests people were free to choose their settlements and women could use natural resources according to their needs without any hindrance. This was abruptly eroded under colonial rule which jeopardised the contributions of women to tribal economy and thus alienated from the means of production.

The money economy which replaced the barter economy further made the condition of women vulnerable. They started depending more on men in economic matters who unlike women got alternative services provided both by the government and private individuals in the colonial period. It is true that land alienation arising out of the colonial policy, land-holding record Wasteland Rules, settlement of various immigrants and forest management affected the economic functions of both men and women of the Boro community yet women seem to suffer more. Boro men were readily employed in the military force by virtue of their physical strength and robust physique. To quote Hunter: “the Kacharis were strongly built, stout and bold and made good sepoys”.

Kalicharan Brahma whose movement aimed at the economic development of the Boro community established an association of Boro traders at Dhubri by the name of ‘Brahma Company’ in 1912. It dealt in timber business of valuable trees like saal and non-saal from the Parbatjowar estate having clearance of royalties to the government and supplied them to Calcutta, Decca and Bihar state.

Another organization founded by him was Gram Hitesi Samiti which was basically a kind of rural-cooperative bank apart from providing loan to the poor cultivators to adopt better methods of farming, seasonal cultivation etc. also

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80 W.W. Hunter: op.cit, p.35
purchased and stored agricultural products like rice, jutes, mustard seeds etc of
the neighboring villages and resell during high rates. The Rayat Sabhas formed
by the Gurudev with the objectives of uplifting the condition of agriculturalists
dealt with the problems of cultivation and marketing the products at a fair-
price.\textsuperscript{81} The management and organization of these institutions were in the
hands of Boro men and generally male workers were appointed. Men took
total decisions regarding which crops to be grown, mode of cultivation
cropping pattern, prices of produce etc. especially when the objective is for
market sale. It affected the economic contributions of women in agriculture.
The basic idea behind the formation of these organizations was to give a new
orientation to the Boro boys so that they could learn the tactics of trade and
commerce and at the same time become economically independent. However,
for Boro girls or women no such alternative job was availed to them besides
arrangement made by the government in schools to promote various skills in
girls and the Brahma movement also promoted weaving on a commercial scale.
But the goal to make women self-dependent could not be fully achieved in the
colonial period for three reasons. Firstly, the percentage of Boro school -going
girls was less and even those who went to schools, seldom continued their
studies beyond the primary stage. Secondly, the demand for hand-woven
garment as a commodity for the market declined during the colonial period.
Thirdly, the efforts of the Mahila Samitis to acquire a share in landed property
was never fully realized. Thus under the impact of both native and colonial
agencies, women being alienated from their traditional economic roles started

\textsuperscript{81}Manik Kr. Brahma: \textit{Gurudev Kalocharan Brahma- His Life and Deeds}, N.L. Publication,
losing their decision-making power both in the domestic and public life as they had to depend economically more on men.

At the same time the reforms and works of the Government to improve health and promote education was indeed helpful, and which in turn contributed in making women act as socio-economic agents to bring reformation and consciousness among the people. The ground was already made favourable by the endeavour and works of Christian missionaries and the Brahma Dharma movement of Kalicharan Brahma. As an impact of the effort and activity of these agencies in the colonial period, Boro women reciprocated very effectively and positively to become yet another agent of change. Their enthusiasm was reflected in varied fields viz. assisting missionaries, activity of Mahila Samitis, showcasing their culture and traditional skills in exhibitions and the like. Women also became politically aware of the national movement and seem to have actively participated in it and boldly withstood imprisonment. Thus, in the colonial period women played a dual role. Initially Boro women were rights-holder and later when they realised their rights and potentialities, they took upon themselves to become ‘duty-bearers’ and reform the Boro society as a whole.

It is to be noted that ‘alienation’ and ‘marginalization’ of women went hand in hand. In one way or other the colonial and native agencies were instrumental in alienating women from their source of livelihood, indigenous knowledge, traditional social functions and economic means of production making them vulnerable. While land revenue policy, immigration and settlement, forest management and money economy alienated Boro women from the management and control of land, water and forests, the Christian Missionaries separated women from their functions in the traditional festivals and primitive knowledge
system. *Brahma* Movement alienated women from both their domestic social and economic roles in their tribal society. Although in the colonial period various agencies which can be recognised as duty-bearers influenced Boro women to become important socio-economic agents of reformation, the alienation from the source of livelihood, indigenous wisdom and social roles in a tribal set up to which the women were subjected, seems to be a common outcome of these socio-religious-economic agencies. Especially when the economic functions of women were jeopardised and women suffered alienation from traditional means of production, they became more dependent on men and even lost the decision-making powers on the socio-economic front, the position of Boro women became marginal in the society as well as in the household.