



BETWEEN TRADITION AND TRANSITION: THE STATUS OF BODO WOMEN IN COLONIAL ASSAM

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Abstract:

This paper explores the socio-economic, educational, and political status of Bodo women in colonial Assam. Drawing on limited but valuable literary and historical records, it reconstructs the lives and contributions of Bodo women during a critical phase of regional transformation. Despite lacking a formal written history, Bodo women played an essential role in agriculture, weaving, and socio-political movements. Their relative freedom and active participation in society distinguished them from women in many other communities during the same period.

Key Words: Bodo Women, Socio-Economic Status, Society

Introduction:

The Bodos constitute one of the major ethnic groups of Assam and eastern India, distinguished by their unique cultural and linguistic traits. Racially, they belong to the Mongoloid stock of Indo-Mongoloids or Indo-Tibetans. They have been identified as the Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids by Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. According to him:

"The Bodos, who spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid block in North Eastern India, were the most important Indo-Mongoloid people in eastern India, and they form one of the main bases of the present-day population of these tracts."

This paper attempts to highlight the status of Bodo women in colonial Assam. However, it is important to note that the Bodos do not possess a written history of their own. Nevertheless, a few magazines, books, and literary genres published during the colonial period provide insights into the status of Bodo women. This paper briefly discusses their socio-economic, educational, political status and role in the freedom movement.

Social Status:

There is no doubt that the status of Bodo women in colonial Assam was relatively better than that of their non-tribal counterparts in many respects. They enjoyed considerable freedom in fields, farms, forests, etc. The sex ratio was favorable, and social evils like female infanticide and bride burning were absent. Men and women were treated equally, and Bodo women actively participated in rituals and family affairs. Practices such as child marriage, the purdah system, dowry, sati, and prohibition of widow remarriage were absent in Bodo society.

Jawaharlal Nehru once opined, "You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women." Among the Bodos, women held a dominant position in the socio-economic setup, often surpassing men, which elevated their social status above many other communities in India.

Literary evidence from colonial Bodo literature also suggests that Bodo women had the freedom to choose their spouses. The first Bodo short story, *Abari*, written by Late Ishan Muchahary in 1938, provides insights into women's status at that time. The protagonist, *Abari*, a physically handicapped girl, refused to marry a disabled boy despite family pressure, choosing instead to marry a man of her own choosing - a clear indication of her independence and confidence.

The Bodos practiced six types of marriage, the sixth being *Dongkha Habnai* or widow remarriage. Since ancient times, this practice has been prevalent among the Bodos. In his monograph *The Kacharis* (1911), Rev. Sidney Endle observed: "A widower may marry his deceased wife's younger sister, but not the elder, whom he regards conventionally in the light of a mother. Much the same principle holds in the case of the marriage of widows, which is freely permitted. The one limitation is that a widow may marry her deceased husband's younger brother, but not the elder."

Under customary law, the *dongkha* (groom) had no rights over the widow's property. However, he could enjoy certain rights based on mutual agreement. Additionally, he was expected to adopt the widow's religion, traditions, and lifestyle. Bodo men generally treated their wives with respect and regarded them as equal companions. Bodo women, both as girls and matrons, enjoyed significant freedom, which was rarely misused.

Economic Status:

Like other communities, the Bodos were liberal in their economic outlook. They had well-defined systems of work distribution, barter, and price regulation. Although agriculture was their primary occupation, other economic practices were also integral to their lifestyle. Each community developed unique methods for meeting basic needs, influenced by customs, traditions, and environmental conditions.

Bodo women played a vital role in the socio-economic, religious, and political spheres. In addition to working in agriculture, they collected firewood, vegetables, and roots, cared for livestock, and supplemented the family diet. Naturally hardworking, Bodo women actively supported their male counterparts and significantly contributed to the household economy.

Although direct historical data on the economic status of Bodo women is limited, scattered references allow us to construct a fairly accurate picture. The Bodos typically produced just enough crops for subsistence, bartering any surplus for goods they could not produce themselves. Women assisted in every stage of crop production- weeding, transplanting, reaping, threshing, and winnowing- sustaining their agro-based economy through traditional methods.

Wine production was another important economic activity. Poorer families often relied on it for income, with women playing the leading role and men assisting. However, this practice was frowned upon by educated Bodos and neighbouring

communities. In response, the third session of the Boro Mahasanmilani held in 1929 at Roumari village passed a resolution to stop liquor sales and consumption:

“It was resolved that the selling and consumption of liquor be stopped and volunteers would move from village to village to keep an eye on this, and even break the utensils used for making the country liquor.”

If categorized as a professional caste, Bodo women could be termed traditional weavers. Every girl was expected to learn the art of spinning and weaving, and her skills were judged by her proficiency in it. Bodo women were also adept in sericulture, dyeing, and producing yarn from silkworms. Rev. Sidney Endle noted in *The Kacharis*:

“A Kachari woman, if not greatly or frequently interrupted, can weave about half a yard each day; and as this ‘Eri’ cloth can fetch Rs. 2/- per yard, a good worker can make a substantial addition to the family income without neglecting domestic duties.”

Handlooms, bamboo crafts, and woodwork were time-consuming with low output due to the absence of modern technology and financial support. Despite this, the quality and design of their textiles had high market value.

In addition to weaving, Bodo women undertook most domestic responsibilities: husking paddy, fetching water, cleaning, cooking, nursing children and the sick, and caring for guests. They were also engaged in poultry, piggery, and animal farming, which had great potential during colonial times.

To strengthen the family economy, many Bodo girls worked as hired laborers, known as Bokhali or Ruathi (female servants), paid in money or paddy. However, slavery did not exist among the Bodos. A few also worked as daily wage laborers.

Political Status and Role in the Freedom Struggle:

There is no direct evidence of Bodo women actively participating in politics during colonial Assam. However, they extended moral and physical support as co-workers. During Gandhiji’s visits to Pandu and Rupchi, many Bodo women attended to show solidarity. Gandhiji visited Bodo villages in Rupchi (Dhubri) in 1934 after being impressed by their handicrafts and handlooms at the 1926 Pandu Congress Session.

Bodo people also participated in the Indian freedom struggle, and the contribution of Bodo women cannot be overlooked. They sheltered political leaders, protecting them from arrest and imprisonment. Without their support, the movement’s success in this region would have been uncertain.

Noted historian Mr. Bidyasagar Narzary’s book *Forgotten Heroes (Bodo Freedom Fighters)* documents several Bodo women freedom fighters whose contributions have been ignored by mainstream history. Some of these women include Ramani Bala Khakhalary (Goalpara), Gobhi Kachari and Lila Kachari (Kamrup), Bimala Boro, Janaki Kachari, Sunsini Boro, Swmshri Kachari (Darrang), and Rebati Sonowal (Lakhimpur). They were honored by the Government of Assam during the Quit India Movement celebration on 9th August 1993, a long-overdue recognition of their service.

Educational Status:

In colonial Assam, the educational status of Bodo women was extremely poor. Literacy among them was nearly non-existent, as agriculture was the community’s main occupation. Traditional farming methods using ploughs and bullocks were preferred over formal education, and children were expected to assist in the fields.

However, with the spread of education and political awareness, and the government’s policy of granting privileges to Scheduled Tribes, organizations like Boro Kachari ChatraSanmilani (1919) emerged. This followed a strong socio-cultural movement initiated in 1913 by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and other leaders, culminating in the first Bodo Mahasanmilani at Bhaoraguri (Goalpara).

On women’s education, the following resolutions were adopted:

- Action plans for the education of Bodo women would be taken up.
- Steps would be taken to establish primary and middle schools in Bodo-dominated areas, encouraging girls to pursue education.

The second Bodo Mahasanmilani, held in 1925 at Rangia (Kamrup), further resolved: “It was resolved that both boys and girls must be provided education equally; only then can the Bodo society progress.”

Thus, the Mahasanmilani contributed significantly to spreading education in Bodo society. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma played a vital role in eradicating social evils and promoting education. By establishing schools in remote areas and introducing vocational training, he empowered the marginalized to become educated and self-reliant.

Conclusion:

The colonial period in Assam marked a time of significant socio-political upheaval and transition, not only for the broader region but particularly for indigenous communities such as the Bodos. Within this shifting landscape, Bodo women occupied a unique position. Unlike their counterparts in many caste-bound Hindu and Muslim societies, Bodo women retained a comparatively egalitarian status in both private and public spheres. Their active role in agriculture, weaving, and traditional household economies made them indispensable to the sustenance of the community.

This paper has shown that Bodo women enjoyed social agency through practices such as widow remarriage, choice in marriage, and absence of regressive customs like dowry and sati. Such customs, as observed by colonial ethnographers like Endle (1911), reveal the deep-rooted cultural autonomy of the Bodo community, particularly in gender relations. These findings challenge the homogenized portrayal of Indian women during colonial rule as universally oppressed and confined to the domestic sphere.

Economically, Bodo women were not only contributors but sometimes leaders in cottage industries and agrarian practices. Their role in weaving-particularly the production of eri silk-was not merely economic but also cultural, transmitting heritage and identity across generations. The absence of institutionalized slavery and the presence of female laborers in both domestic and communal economies underscore the participatory ethos of Bodo society.

In the political and reformist sphere, although Bodo women did not often feature in formal political leadership, they were actively involved in local resistance and reform movements. Their participation in Gandhi’s visit and involvement in temperance campaigns initiated by the Bodo Mahasanmilani signify their silent yet powerful engagement with the nationalist movement.

Education, though limited during the colonial period, began to take shape through the efforts of social reformers like Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma. His vision, alongside that of organizations such as the Boro Kachari Chatra Sanmilani, initiated foundational steps towards gender-inclusive education. The articulation of equal education for boys and girls in organizational resolutions reflects an emerging consciousness about the transformative power of literacy and learning among the Bodos.

In conclusion, the status of Bodo women in colonial Assam reflects a complex intersection of tradition and transformation. While colonialism imposed certain structural limitations, indigenous institutions, cultural norms, and reformist impulses enabled Bodo women to retain and, in some cases, enhance their roles within society. Their story, often neglected in mainstream historical narratives, is crucial for a more inclusive understanding of women's experiences in colonial India. Future research may further enrich this field by examining oral histories, folk literature, and ethnographic evidence to better illuminate the voices and agency of Bodo women during this pivotal historical era.

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