



The Unresolved Issues Of Women: A Study Of Socio-Economic And Political Status Of Boro Women Of Assam

Topu Choudhury, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Chilarai College, Golakganj, Dhubri, Assam.

Received: 21.5.2018

Article Revised:26.7.2018

Article Accepted:27.9.2018

Abstract:

The literary meaning of the term Status is state, condition or standing. In common parlance, status means position or rank in relation to others. It may also mean a rank in hierarchical order. Thus, status may have various meanings which may vary from country to country, individual to individual or ethnic groups to ethnic groups. The concept of status is used to determine the ordering individuals in terms of qualities or attributes of education, occupation, income etc. which varies from state to state. The position of women in home and outside is closely interlinked in the three domains of socio- economic and political status. Social status relates to a set duties, obligations, rights and privileges of women within social institutions like family, marriage, religion, culture in a society. Economic status denotes women's involvement in agriculture, allied activities, agro based and small scale industries, handloom weaving, sericulture etc. Political Participation of women is a prerequisite condition for establishing and maintaining equal status both for men and women in the society. In this perspective, the present paper attempts to study the socio-economic and political status of Boro women of Assam.

Keywords: Status; Quality; Attributes; Position; Women.

Introduction:

In every society, from time immemorial, women play a key role in determining the process of socio-economic transformation and well being of the people. However, the status of women has been continuously changing over time and in most of the cases, women and their activities determined the welfare of their family and the society, which remain invisible and unrecorded. Infact, inspite of women's active participation in the economy, they still had low status.

The question of socio-economic and political status of women is not a new issue of discussion in India and the debate regarding the socio-economic and political position and status of women and where they stands still continue. The Constitution of India guarantees equality of status , rights and opportunities to all irrespective of sex, caste, colour, religion, etc which implicit in the Preamble, The Fundamental Rights and the

Directive Principles of State Policy. But it has been found that women in India are not enjoying the rights and opportunities provided to them by the Constitution of India. There occurs discrimination and the women section is the ones who suffer the most from discrimination. Under this pretext of discrimination inflicted on women since ages, the present paper attempts to study the socio-economic and political status of Boro women of Assam.

To begin a discussion on the socio-economic and political status of women, it is imperative to study the originality of the Boros which would depict a clear picture on the understanding of the present study.

Originality of the Boros:

The Boros also known as Bodo, numerically or sociologically, they are one of the most important tribes of North-East India, particularly of Assam. The generic name of 'Bodo' was first given by Hodgson to this group of languages. The term 'Bodo' is originally a linguistic one but it is also used in ethnic sense too. Ethnologically, the term Bodo encompasses a number of tribes. Practically it covers the entire plain tribal population of Assam and its neighbouring states like the Bodo Kachari, Garo, Mech, Rabha, Lalung, Tripuri, Hajong, etc. They are found in almost the entire Brahmaputra valley with significant concentration in some areas. The Dimasas of North Cachar Hills are also Bodo speakers. They are not confined in Assam only. Besides, the Tripuri of Tripura, the Garo of Meghalaya are also Bodo speakers. Outside India, in places like Nepal and Bangladesh, there are also Bodo speaking people tribal population as well (S. Brahma, 2011: 8).

The Boros are the descendants of the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid race. The fact that the Boros once wielded great power and influence in the entire North-East is beyond doubt. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee writes "the whole of Assam (barring the eastern part inhabited by the Kuki Chins) and North and East of Bengal was the country of the great Boro people". The Boros are now spread all over Assam with main concentration in the north bank of the river Brahmaputra right up to the foothills along the northern boundary of Assam adjoining Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. They are mainly concentrated in the four districts of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC created in 10th February 2003) namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. They are also located in Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Nalbari, Barpeta, Kamrup, Sonitpur, Darrang and Dhemaji district of Assam. A sizeable section of the Boros is also located in the Karbi Anglong Hill district. The Boros are recognized as the Scheduled Tribe by the Constitution of India.

As per the Census Report of Assam, 2011, the total Bodo population in Assam is 14,50,000 out of which 7,54,761 are male and 6,95,239 are female. The Bodo population consists of 5% of total population of Assam as per Census Report of Assam, 2011. The Bodos are also considered as the largest plain tribe in Assam.

So far as the origin of the Boros is concerned, it is matter of utmost guessing and inference, as there is no authentic history on it. However, it is believed that the Boros are the earliest settlers of Assam. It is assumed that they had migrated to India from their original habitat Central Asia during the pre-historic era. Rev. Endle identifies trans-Himalayan region between Tibet and China as the original home of the Boros. S. K. Chatterjee is more specific when he suggests that the North-Western China between the head-waters of the Huang Ho and Yang-Tsze Kiang rivers was the early home of the Proto-Boros who migrated to eastern India in waves between the second millennium B.C. to the first millennium A.D. Sir E.A. Gait regarded the Boros as the earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. They occupied and ruled the plains of Assam for a very long time and constituted the majority of the population in Assam valley during the time of the Mahabharata war, or even earlier than it. B. Narzary observes that the migration of the Boro people to Assam started since 2000 B.C. Thus, depending on the above views, it can be conclusively stated that the Boros are one of the oldest inhabitants of Assam; as such they have come to be known as original autochthones of Assam.

Statement of the Problem:

Gender inequality is a serious global issue. The woman has to face the wrath of gender inequality or discrimination. The Boro women have been playing very significant role in the family, socio-economic life and also in the religious and cultural life. Though the Boro women enjoys equal rights to that of male members in the Boro society, the socio-economic and political status of Boro women seems to be quite similar with women of other communities. So, it is pertinent to study the existing socio-economic and political status of Boro women of Assam.

Review of Literature:

Brahmachary and Brahmachary (2018), in the article “Women Empowerment and Socio-economic Development: A Study on Urban Parts of Kokrajhar District of Assam” published in “Pratidhawani the Eco”, Vol-VII, Issue II argues that women are oppressed in social and economic spheres of life due to male dominance, lack of awareness and the poor implementation of government policies. They opined that without strengthening women, the pace of economic development cannot be augmented.

Basumatary (2017), conducted a study on Boro women in politics: Role of All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF). The study revealed that although Bodo women under the banner of ABWWF played a significant role in the Bodoland movement and in peace building initiatives, their role were not recognized and hence they were deprived from getting a space in the decision making bodies. But concerted efforts were being made by the ABWWF which helped in bringing Bodo women in public space. The ABWWF is still trying to improve the condition of women and children in the society in terms of contributing to sustainable peace through capacity building.

Swargiary (2016), conducted a study on political empowerment of Bodo women. The study revealed that during the language movement and Bodoland movement, Bodo women played a major role. Their participation marked as a significant step forward in women's political role but was never got a position or place in the decision making institutions.

Baro (2010) in the article "Emancipation and Empowerment among the Bodo Women with Reference to Socio- Cultural and Economic Aspects" published in the book "Women And Human Rights: The North East Indian Context" argues that Bodo women are assigned a much better position who exerts great influence in shaping the society. They enjoy quite independent status keeping equal footing with the man folk. Their participation in every activity, contribution towards the society and economy prove them as empowered and it also becomes clear that gender differentiation in recognizing different social and economic roles is rather cultural than biological.

Profile of the Study:

India is a patriarchal society in nature. In patriarchal societies, women have to play a silent and secondary role. In Indian society, women have seen many ups and downs in respect of their status. Boro society is also patriarchal in character but unlike the other patriarchal societies, Boro women enjoy a fairly high status and respect within their patriarchal society. They enjoy a large measure of freedom with the other male counterparts, which is very rare in most of the societies of India. The evils, which beset many parts of India and still continue like sati, dowry, child marriage, purdah system, infanticide and other forms of oppression, are almost alien to Boro women. The socio-economic and political status of Boro women of Assam is the central focus of this study.

Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives of this paper are:

1. To understand the socio-economic and political status of Boro women.
2. To highlight the unresolved issues of Boro women.

Research Question:

1. Is the socio-economic and political status of Boro women is equal to that of their male counterparts?

Methodology:

In this study data have been collected by using both primary and secondary sources. For collecting primary data, academicians and experts on women issues particularly on Boro women issues have been interviewed and election reports have been collected. Secondary data and information have been collected from different books, journals, internet sources, research papers and articles.

Social Status of Boro Women:

Women in Boro society enjoy a higher status as compared to the greater Indian society. The social evils like dowry, child marriage, bride burning are foreign to Boro women. In the Boro society, the status of mother, daughter-in-law and daughter varies from person to person. An expert in domestic affairs is regarded as a good mother or a good daughter-in-law or a good daughter. Boro women occupy an honourable position and influence greatly in their family or society. They have considerable control over economic resource and decision making power at the household level. The mobility of Boro women is far more compared to the Indian counterparts. This is may be due to the factors like absence of dowry, purdah system, absence of occupational caste groups resulting in caste flexibility and a long standing influence of the Boro society work pattern where the village economy also, at times revolves largely around women's labour and entrepreneurship. Division of works between husband and wife is based on the necessity and physical ability to support family life. The age old attitude towards women regarding them as "Second Sex" or "Second Class Citizen" is not applicable to Boro women. Unlike other societies, gender based discrimination is not much seen in the Boro society, rather daughter is considered as "Mainao" (Goddess of Wealth) in the family. "Ishing" (a room of mother house with kitchen) with an altar of "Mainao" and "Bakhri" (Granary) are exclusively under the care and control of Boro women. In the Boro family, the existence of granary symbolizes the sound economic condition which is kept under the full responsibility of the wife or daughter. The significance of granary and cowshed for a Boro family is illustrated in the following lines of a folk song sung by a marriageable girl to a father:

"Daaokhaa Haabnaai Noyaa
Sila Habnaai Noyaa
Aangkhau Daa Billai Aafaa Gosai"
Again
"Maayo Baathri Nu Noyaa
Mousou Goli Noyaa
Aangkhau Bilaai Habaa Aafaa Gosai"

Meaning-

"Oh my Godly Father
Don't arrange my marriage with a family
Having a house
Where crows and kites enter.
"Oh father
Arrange my marriage with a family
Where you find granary and cowshed.
(Thakur, 2007, 169-170)

The Boro society adopts quite liberal attitude towards Boro womenfolk. Boro women have considerable amount of freedom to choose their life partner. Needless to say that

dowry system is foreign to Boro society. The chief form of marriage is monogamy with some exceptional cases of polygamy. Adultery is considered as a sin and serious offence and inflicted severe punishment according to social rules. Widow remarriage is prevalent in Bodo society. Brahma (2011) observes that when a widow, having minor children, remarries a man her children also go to the house of her new husband. The children became step son or daughter to new father. And if the husband is also widower, having children from previous wife, the second mother becomes step mother of these children. In Boro society, a widow can remarry the younger brother of her former husband but cannot remarry with the elder brother of her former husband (pg: 29). In an interview with Poly Brahma, (Advocate, Gauhati High Court, Guwahati, Assam) says that "Women in Boro society are never discriminated for being borne as women at all walks of life in their society- this may be the reason of less percentage of divorce cases in Boro society". Though the Boro society is patriarchal in nature, the Boro women play a vital role in performing various cultural activities, rites or rituals. The performing of cultural activities or festivals is impossible without the active cooperation of the Boro women folk. Baisagu is the popular festival of the Boros which is celebrated by dancing, singing and feast. On the eve of such occasions, Boro women actively engage in preparing foods, rice cakes and rice bears. Kherai Puja is another important religious festival of the Boros where 'Doudini' a woman performs dance in preparation of various Gods. She moves round the altar of the 'Bathou" (the Chief God of the Boros) and yields a sword and a shield in her hands. The 'Doudini', who is believed to be possessed by the supreme deity and while she is in the state of trance tells the future condition of the people, plays a significant role during the puja (Boro, 2016).

In marriage ceremonies also, the Boro women plays an important role. They take active part in all the rituals of marriages. A notable feature practiced by the Boro women in marriages is that two young girls become "Bwirathi" to welcome the newly married couple. The Bwirathis also perform all the rituals of marriages with the priest.

The social status of men or women or any community largely depends within the ambit of education. Especially, education of women is the foremost requirement in improving the status of women in the society, as it arouses awareness about their rights and privileges which ultimately becomes a factor in deteriorating their social status (Goswami, 2010:117). The educational status of the Boro women is not satisfactory. The literacy rate of Bodo population, as per Census Report of Assam, 2011 is 56.99% compared to Assam's total literacy rate 73.18%. The literacy rate of Bodo male population is 64.28% compared to Assam's male population 78.81%. Whereas, the Bodo women literacy rate is only 49.70% compared to Assam's female population 67.27%. In other words, it can be argued that the educational status of the total Bodo population is not very high and thus it requires awareness campaign to increase the educational status specifically for the women.

Economic Status of Boro Women:

The economic status of Boro women is known by their work participation. Generally it is considered that the status of women in paid jobs is much better than the women in unpaid jobs or in low paid jobs. Women's productive and reproductive work is generally not assigned much economic value. The economic status of Boro women is not much different to that of other female counterparts. A study was conducted in the Boro dominated area to highlight the economic condition of the Boro women. The study revealed that the Boro women have been involved in various economic and productive activities in the household and outside household works like cooking, cleaning, washing and outside works mainly on agricultural farms, poultry and piggery. The Bodo women are not exception to rural Indian women who do not hire anyone for household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing, child care etc. These works are not paid for in terms of money, so it is not possible to know their proper economic value. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood in the Boro society. Leaving aside ploughing, Boro women engage in almost all works relating to agriculture such as transportation, weeding, reaping, harvesting, winnowing etc. along with men. Boro women are also famous as expert weavers and they produce their dresses and necessary cloths in the family by weaving.

Table: 1.1 Occupational Transformations of Boro Women

Sl.No	Name of the Sector	Present Occupation
1	Agriculture	55%
2	Business (Small Scale)	14%
3	Service	19 %
4	Others	12%
5	Total	100%

Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2011

The table clearly reveals that 55 % of Boro women are engaged in agricultural activities and 14% are in small scale industries. As agriculture is the main source of livelihood in Boro society, Boro women works equally in the agricultural fields along with the male counterparts. It is seen that 19% of Boro women are holding employment in government (Central or State) offices. There are educated Boro women who are working as Professors or Teachers in Universities, Colleges and Schools. A few educated women are also holding responsible positions as Civil Servants and at various sectors like medicals, banks, engineering, judicial etc. It is to be noted that with the creation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003, a territorial council in Assam State of India which have jurisdiction in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts consist of four districts namely- Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri, a few Boro women, who were the wives of martyrs of Bodoland movement, has been able to held jobs at the BTC secretariat. The other 12 % of Boro women are working in different Self Help Groups and members of different social and political organizations.

Brahma (2011) observes that government nowadays have various schemes to provide free grants, loans to tribal weaver in cash or kinds, to open weaving centre or industry, through the tribal Development Corporation, District rural Development Agency, Bank etc. taking such assistance from the government some Boro women have opened weaving industry in various places of the district and supply their product to the markets. Thus, quite a few Boro women have become economically independent in the present Boro society (28).

Political Status of Boro Women:

The essence of democracy is equal political participation and opportunities for both men and women. India as a democratic country was one of the first nation to grant women the right to vote. The Constitution of India guarantees equal political opportunities both for men and women. As women are equal citizens and therefore should share equally with men in decision making processes. The political participation, representation and share in public decision making determine the status of women in society. Though women constitute half of the population in India, the percentage of women in political participation and representation is very less compared to male. Undeniably, politics has been dominated by male since ages. The political status of Boro women is no different. The Boro women have been taking active role in various socio- political activities, but only a very few women have been able to penetrate in the mainstream of active political affairs and also elected to the State Legislative assembly. The representation of Boro women in Parliament (Lok Sabha & Rajya Sabha) and Assam State Legislative Assembly is very poor. No women from Boro community have been elected to the parliament till date. Moreover, in Assam State Legislative Assembly elections held from 1952-2016 (14 times) only two Boro women have been elected till now. The Boro society can never denied the role played by Boro women in the Bodoland Movement launched by All Bodo Students’ Union demanding for a separate state for the Boros. But still they have no space in formal politics and decision making bodies, even in areas, where Boro women have played a pivotal role in a combined struggle on any particular issue.

Table: 1.2 Boro Women of Assam in Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly Elections

Name of Elections	No. of elections	No. of elected men	No. of elected women	No. of elected Boro women
Lok Sabha Elections (from 1952 -2014)	15	194	16	0
Assam State Legislative Assembly (from 1952-2016)	14	1566	87	2

Source: Election Commission of India (2014 & 2016)

The Lok Sabha elections has been held for 15 times from the period 1952-2014, but no single Boro women from Assam were elected till now. Moreover, in the State legislative assembly elections which have been held for 14 times from the period 1952 to 2016, only two Boro women have been elected so far. Interestingly, Pramila Rani Brahma has been elected 6 times at a stretch to the legislative assembly from 1991 to 2016. The main factors attributed to low representation could be low percentage of reservation of seats in Lok Sabha and State Assembly. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act has introduced the reservation policy of women in Local self Government institutions, but no such attempt has been initiated in the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly elections, which has actually lessened the participation of women in active politics.

Table 1.3: Women Participation in Bodoland Territorial Council Legislative Assembly Election (BTCLA) (From 2005- 2015)

Year	Total No. of Seats	No. of Male elected members	No. of female elected members	No. of Boro elected women
2005	46	44	02	01
2010	46	43	03	00
2011	46	41	05	00

- Including Six Nominated Members of BTCLA source: Bodoland.gov.in

The above table clearly shows the poor representation of women, especially the Boro women. In 2005 out of total 46 seats only two women members were nominated as no single female candidates were able to win in the first BTC election. Anima Bayan from Udalguri and Jamuna Rani Brahma from Gossaigaon were the two nominated members in 2005. In 2010, Labita Das was the only single women elected member from Udalguri district. Shyamali Marak from Kokrajhar and Bipiri Ray from Bijni were the two nominated women members. Again in 2015 the third BTCLA election, Aparna Das from the Salakati Constituency under Kokrajhar district, was the only single women to be elected. However, there was little enlargement in the women nominated members which was increase to 4 out of total 6 nominated members. Remarkably, the four women nominated members to the BTCLA were nominated from the various communities which were not represented in the election which included Phuleswary Devi (Salakati), Purnima Chetry (Chirang), Sabita Rani Das (Bijni) and Gitima Das (Gossaigaon). It is important to state that since 2005, out of the 12 Executive Members, no single women were included in the BTC Executive Council.

There is no denying the fact that greater participation of women in the political process would be the precondition for their social and economic emancipation. But it has been observed that the Boro women as well as women from other communities are being

deprived of their political rights. The causes for low participation and representation of women in decision making would be the lack of political consciousness, gender inequalities, low level of illiteracy, socio- economic conditions and lack of willingness among political parties to give tickets to women. So, the women are speechless and they have nothing to say in the decision making process due to their poor strength of representation and participation either in the national, state or local level of politics.

The Unresolved Issues:

Like every society, Boro society is also patriarchal in nature. But, comparatively Boro women enjoy large measures of freedom with other male members, which is rare in Indian society. The social evils like child marriage, infanticide, dowry and other forms of oppression are almost unknown to Boro women. In family life also, the role of Boro women is important, as they are free to take some major part in household affairs which are higher as compared to their counterparts. But looking at the social front, Boro society too has bad effect as that of polygamy, making drinking as a custom or part of tradition which give rise to a lot of evils, where women are directly or indirectly the victims, superstition, murder, education for girl child is given less preference to that of boy child, birth of a daughter is not favoured as much that of a son, which is a common phenomenon in Indian society.

The Boro women also play significant roles in other fields of work such as agriculture mainly on farms, poultry and piggery, weaving, trade, education, etc. on which the economic strength and progress of the family and of the society depends. In spite of women's active participation in the economy, they still had low status. In a survey conducted with the members of Self Help Groups, some Boro women workers opined that they are the victims of discrimination by the authority. The same faith is not shown to the women workers as to a group which is dominated by male. Moreover, due to their less qualification, the Boro women are unaware of the Governmental planning and policies, consequently they lack behind in the economic development and the encouraging atmosphere for the Boro women in the growth of economy.

The Boro women though enjoy similar or kind of equal rights to that of male members, but like every women in patriarchal society, the Boro women are too left behind in political representation and in decision making. Political representation and participation of Boro women is seen less. This may be due to illiteracy, poverty, fear of violence in elections, language problem, reluctance of family members, etc. Those women who took up politics are generally belonged to politically background family. Moreover, the political parties are also reluctant to give party tickets to women which are a major problem in Indian politics. In a survey conducted with the male members of Boro society, they revealed that they did not support women working in political sphere but they did not mind working for the cause of socio- economic development. They strongly argued that women should look after the families and the politics is "man's job".

Conclusion:

The study depicts a glimpse of the socio-economic and political status of Boro women. Though Boro women enjoy equal status with that of male members in the society, they are lagging behind in some aspects. Boro women enjoy socio-economic status to a great extent unlike many women from other communities but their educational status is not satisfactory. Besides, Boro women are lagging far behind in political arena. There is a great need to provide Boro women with a free atmosphere and encouraging facilities to improve their status in society. There is also a great need to raise awareness among both educated and uneducated women regarding different types of Government plans and policies. Boro women have more change to improve their overall status in the society through education, more economic independence and active political participation.

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