

WOMEN IN BODOLAND CONFLICT: CONFLICT RESOLUTIONS AND PEACE-BUILDING IN BODOLAND**Poonam Boro* and Nibedita Paul**

Department of Social Work, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India 793101

***Corresponding author E-mail:** poonamboro044@gmail.com<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23153768>**ABSTRACT**

The empowerment of Bodo women within the context of conflict in Bodoland or Bodoland Territorial Region, Assam focuses on their historical context, societal status, political turmoil, conflict impacts, empowerment strategies, and progress. Indigenous communities have always been in center of political, social and economic debates as they struggle to protect their culture, land and identity, its emphasis on marginalized communities have navigated the states in recognizing indigenous rights with structural changes in the system. The article explores understanding the Bodo people's identity in Assam and their crises during the Bodoland Movement. It studies the societal standing and community-based resistance, especially of the Bodo women, and discusses their roles during the conflicts in the region. The focus of the article is on the conflicts in Bodoland from the self-autonomous movement by the insurgent groups to various peace accords signed between leaders. The region has witnessed numerous past ethnic conflicts over the decades; this have left grave damage to its people particularly women who have been severely affected by the violence, displacement and poverty as a consequence of the conflict. The article also argues that women's involvement in movement is not only a response to political conflict but also means of redefining their social and cultural identity. The Bodo women played a crucial role in peace building as mediator that focused on development of the community. It highlights the approaches for empowering women amid conflicts and post-conflict space and depicts the challenges the women in the region, particularly Bodo women, face in conflict zones.

Keywords: Conflict, Identity, Bodoland, AFSPA, Empowerment, Gender

INTRODUCTION

The Bodoland Movement is one of the oldest movements in the Northeast, starting in the pre-independence era. The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) area has witnessed many conflicts in the past in the form of secessionist movements or militancy. The main reasons for the agitations stem from the fact that the Bodos felt alienated by the domination of the Assamese caste Hindus, the encroachment of land by infiltrators and the immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh (Mahanta, N.G.2013). Assam, at some point, faced a severe political crisis and a polarised society largely due to insurgency crises. However, Assam might not see such a crisis soon, as argued by Sanjib Baruah (1994), due to various other uprising issues, which include the Bodo groups. The Bodo groups gradually ignited the agitation for Bodoland soon after the Assam Accord in 1985 when the Bodos felt left out of the agreement. For the Bodo people, the Bodoland Movement is a socio-economic movement. The share of development in Assam was uneven therefore, elite and educated Bodos expressed their frustration in the form of discontent, and peaceful and violent protests across the state (Das. K. 1994).

While this conflict was shaping the political and social position of the region, women were particularly affected by it. From violence to loss of homes and freedom, women in the conflict area suffered the most. The challenge was unique and difficult for these women. The protests and agitations soon turned into conflicts and violence in the region after the movement gained momentum. The killing of non-Bodos and clashes with the armed forces made the conflict violent. Women especially, Bodo, Adivasi women, and Bengali-speaking Muslim women largely bear the brunt of these conflicts. In every conflict, it is women who are violated and discriminated against at various levels of society and institutions. The article argues, how do the Bodo women in the Bodoland conflict resist abuse and contribute to the peacebuilding process? It attempts to understand the exploitations and struggles of these women in conflict-ridden areas. The kind of resistance these women have shown to such forces is an act of courage and resilience. Bodo women often have displayed tough resistance to the conflict, by holding protests and carrying out peace marches against insurgencies and ethnic conflicts.

The theoretical framework of many feminist scholars argues that conflicts are traditionally seen as a male domain and turn a blind eye to the roles of women who are mostly the victims and in some cases participants. This feminist framework is particularly relevant in the Bodoland conflict, in which Bodo women suffered and contributed to peace-building efforts. Conflicts can be resolved through women's and gender-sensitive perspectives which is important in conflict resolution. Historically, it has been assumed that men wage war and women manage the private affairs of the family and society. It excludes women from participation in conflicts and a clear-cut dichotomy exists where men are the protectors and women are seen as the victims. Many Feminist scholars have argued that personal matters are inherently political and consequential (Enolic. 2014). War can no longer be perceived as an interest-based conflict between states. War is now involving civilians and revolving around ethno-political questions of independence, self-determination, identity, and struggles for liberation. Women are not only victims in this situation, but they are also active agents, mixing both positive and negative conflict dynamics (Richter-Devroe, S. 2008).

When we look at the problems of the women from Bodoland in the context of multi-layered oppression due to their various identities, we understand how conflict and resilience for women have not changed in the broader cultural narrative. Feminism looks at the vulnerabilities of women from a specific angle of convenience by meeting the problems of more

privileged women. The Bodo women challenge the oppression of not only a patriarchal State and insurgents but also their own identity as women from a tribal community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

UNDERSTANDING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

Indigenous identities are often built constructively after vigorous political and social deviations. Their identities are not pre-determined nomenclature however it is moulded through interaction with settlers and modern states (Anderson, 1983; Hall, 1996). Early anthropologist described indigenous identity as culturally deep-rooted communities with traits like language, kinship, land-based practice but later scholars (Clifford, 2001; Li, 2000) reframed indigenous identity as interactive and strategic, emerging through denial, resistance and struggle rather than prevailing prior to it. This shift laid foundation for understanding identity as a site of series of confrontation rather than a stable legacy.

Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) and Merlan (2009) have claimed that term such as “indigenous” were often organized through legal, missionary, and administrative institution, fabricating identities for the political ends. However, indigenous communities remodelled this category as tools of self-assertion, particularly in the claims to land rights, and authority (Niezen, 2003). Similarly, Brysk (2000) and Yashar (2005) emphasized on how shared collective indigenous identity turned into a social movement that strategically pressurized the states for recognition, sovereignty, and resource control. This facilitated in building solidarity across otherwise diverse ethnic or linguistic groups. Many of these social movements became a conflict between states and indigenous communities. Gurr, (1993) emphasis on the grievance “conflict theory” of indigenous communities. According to him, conflicts doesn’t arise because indigenous are poor or powerless but when they realize exclusion, deprivation, marginalization from their land and resources.

The Bodo community in Assam is a tribal group and an integral part of India’s diverse background. India's diversity is so rich that it comprises various racial groups, including Austro-Asiatic, Negritos, Dravidians, Indo-Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burman, and Aryans, who migrated through different routes and settled in multiple regions. These groups have played a pivotal role in shaping the intricate fabric of Indian culture and civilization. The northeastern region of India is predominantly inhabited by Tibeto-Burman people, among whom the Bodo community is one of the largest tribal communities. The Bodo-speaking people refer to themselves as Boro/Bodo (Basumatary, B.K. 2021).

The Bodos have faced difficulties in the state of Assam and have felt exploited, neglected, discriminated against, and alienated for decades; as a result, militancy emerged, and demands for a separate Bodoland were raised. (Nath, M. K 2003). In the Bodoland movement, men and women actively participated in the agitation chalked out of the leadership (Sarmah, A.2010). The major conflict in the Bodoland area is the ethnic clash with the non-Bodos since pre-independence. The issues started with the Bangladeshis migration to Assam and eventually joining hands with the AASU¹, and the Assam agitation began. However, when the Assam Accord (1985) was signed, the Bodos felt left out due to major political power acquired by the Caste Assamese. It resulted in the creation of their own student body called ABSU. The ABSU²demanded that Bodo be made one of the official languages in Assam and that political access be given to Bodos (Basumatary, J. 2014). ABSU had hugely mobilized the people around the issues of Bodo identity, socioeconomic exploitation, unemployment, and political inequality in their demand for a separate homeland for the Bodos (Behera, A.2017).

In 2003, the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLT), after the long conflict of 6 years that resulted in the deaths of thousands, signed a peace accord with the Indian government. However, since 2003, when the BLT surrendered, the Bodoland autonomous council has been established, and the Bodos have been granted constitutional rights to self-administration (Nath, M. K 2003). There has been ongoing violence in the region as a whole because of the heavy-handed nature of the central forces. However, the right to self-assertion has been honoured with three Bodo accords (1993, 2003), the 2020 Bodo peace accord being the recent accord, eventually signed by the Indian government and the leaders of Bodoland.

WOMEN, CONFLICT AND PEACE-BUILDING IN BODOLAND

In 2020, the Bodo Peace Accord was signed for the third time and was seen as the final solution to the Bodoland conflict. The agreement was perceived as an end to the political crisis, which the Bodo women referred to as a “hush-hush affair,” but did not, however, inspire confidence. The All-India Tribal Welfare Federation (AITWWF), led by Pramila Rani Brahma³founded in 1986 and is an important organisation for the cause of Bodo women. This organization was pivotal in organizing social movements in Bodoland. As the Bodoland movement grew, the term “tribal” was replaced with “Bodo,” in the organisation’s name highlighting the role of Bodo women in the community. Bodo women have immensely suffered because of the conflicts in the region and experienced homelessness, lost their schooling, endured sexual assault⁴, fatalities,

¹AASU- All Assam Students' Union or AASU is an Assamese nationalist student organisation in Assam, India.

²The All-Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was founded on February 15, 1967, at Kokrajhar Tribal Rest House. It aimed to unite all students of the Bodo community worldwide and to work towards the goals outlined in the Union's Constitution.

³Formerly the Minister of Government of Assam and a prominent educator, and activist.

⁴The1988Bhumka gang rape case. The accused were the personnel of the Assam Rifles. They barged into the homes of villagers in Bhumka, Kokrajhar. It was reported that 11 women were sexually assaulted.

etc. The state and the insurgents, two strong-armed patriarchies, constantly dominated and mistreated women. The state armed forces used brutality against the vulnerable villagers during the movement. They sexually assaulted women, burned clothing and food, attacked communities, and imprisoned men (Saikia, A. 2024).

In the subsequent period of unrest in the region of Bodoland, men were forced to flee their villages, wells were poisoned, glass fragments were mixed in food grains, and women were subjected to abuse and assault, with security personnel frequently attempting to rape them. The police conducted operations in Bodo-dominated areas and abrupt village raids that prevented any male from sitting or sleeping soundly at home, except women, children, and the elderly. Women assumed full responsibility for all domestic and agricultural duties during that serious time; many women were sexually assaulted, and some lost husbands, sons, and family members. According to reports, several young Bodo females, between the ages of 15 and 30, fled their villages during the movement and signed up to work as domestic help in cities out of concern that security forces would sexually assault them (Choudhury, T. 2017).

Violence against women persisted for a long time in the region due to insurgency and militancy. Many cases of sexual violence and harassment were recorded during this conflict period. In the 1998 Bhumika gang rape case, security forces forced themselves on women after barging into their homes. It was one of the most shocking moments in the Bodoland conflict, and the people were angry with the offenders' punishment. While the survivors were poor tribal women, the culprits evaded governmental protection. Even though the incident occurred decades ago, the survivors' trauma remains very much present. The All-Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) lead the charge in advocating for these women's rights. The group had eight members, and they were modestly privileged women from the Bodo community. Most of them have volunteered with the ABWWF and are teachers by profession, and during the Bodoland movement, many Bodo women in the villages became part of the organization to mobilize people (Saikia, A. 2021). Similarly, The Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF) is a Bodo women's organisation that was founded by Dr. Anjali Daimary, an academician and an activist. It was formed in 1993 to help with human rights issues in the region. The BWJF members were vocal about the community's rights and mobilised the people to participate in the peace-building process in Bodoland. The group also faced setbacks when an unidentified gunman killed one of their members, this incident showed the world that it was unacceptable for society to see women occupying spaces and raising voices against injustice in society (Saikia A. 2024).

During times of conflict, the goal of sexual assault is to terrorize the people, especially women, declare victory, destroy families, and, in certain cases, alter the ethnic composition of the following generation. The prevalence of violence against women during conflicts has increased to pandemic levels, and in many cases, it is now an essential component of war crimes (Hague, G. 2016). Violence against Bodo women was perpetuated by two patriarchal institutions, the state and the insurgents in Bodoland. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958, was enforced by the Indian government specifically for northeastern India in response to the insurgency in the region. The act was brutal to the local people and inflicted more violence. It was in place for decades to reduce bloodshed and reintegrate young men into society. This law perpetuated massive sexual violence in the region. Women suffered during the operations and most rapes take place in the process of search and arrest operations. People are picked up for questioning irrespective of allegiance to insurgents or not and tortured for information (Roy, L. 2020).

Historically, women from all socio-economic classes were involved in civil conflicts or willingly entered the fight because they could not avoid it. Women do participate in conflicts in any area (Williams. 2022). The conflict around the world has become a common source of gender-based violence (GBV) (Garcia, C. 2022). In such a situation, it is becoming more and more evident that violence against women never ceases. There are numerous instances where women have suffered violence by insurgents in addition to acts of official violence against them. The fact that women joining militant groups has persisted over time. In Bodoland, many women were informants and/or cadres in militant organisations. In any outcome, the consequence is not pleasant as women cadres also get killed during military operations. The AFSPA has made the women in the region helpless and susceptible to violence. This statute gives the armed forces immunity from punishment and the freedom to search, arrest, and shoot whomever they see fit to maintain public order. The military's presence in the BTR, particularly in the relief camps, has resulted in multiple incidents of rape and sexual assault by forces against women and young girls (Dutta. 2018).

Nonetheless, it is evident throughout Bodoland that the women attempted to find a resolution to the dispute (especially after the 2012 violent clash¹). Women-led organisations like Bodo Women for Peace Movement (BWPM)² actively participated and urged the then-Chief Minister³ Sarbananda Sonowal to hold a political discussion on matters of women and other issues in Bodoland. In response to the need for long-term, permanent solutions to the Bodoland movement and other women's issues in Assam, the delegation issued a memorandum requesting peace measures. The group has been making a lot of effort to promote peace and has been trying to give marginalized indigenous tribes, particularly women, justice and social, economic, and political rights. Their distinct identity is derived from their practices and traditions, which prevent them from being readily assimilated into other forms of sociocultural aggression (The Sentinel 2017).

¹Conflicts between two groups- Bodo tribes' people and Muslim settlers in Assam.

²The delegation was led by convener Rangti Bargoyary and its advisor Pratibha Brahma.

³CM of Assam Sarbananda Sonowal (2016-2021).

Bodo women had to be included in the struggle for political autonomy for the Bodo people, as acknowledged by the All-Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and Bodo intellectuals who began the demand. From 1987 onward, Bodo women have been integral to peace-building, particularly during the Bodoland conflict¹. Building peace during Bodoland's crisis period was a serious challenge. Nonetheless, to measure the consequences of the disputes, Bodo women met with village elders and had dialogues with Adivasis and Muslims who were impacted by ethnic clashes. Bodo women have focussed on constructive peace-building through a range of programs, including economic empowerment, livelihood creation, and capacity building². To preserve peace for the community's overall development, they vehemently oppose social evils such as polygamy, alcoholism, witch-hunting, and violence. They also appealed to Bodo militant groups to resolve the crises. Bodo women are committed to their community's socioeconomic development and fight against social evils including alcoholism, polygamy, and superstitions as a group (Choudhury, T. 2017).

CONCLUSION

The Bodoland conflict manifests in two distinct ways: the struggle for a self-autonomous region and the violence perpetrated against its people, especially women. The experiences of Bodo women during the Bodoland conflict highlight the difficult relationship between gender and conflict. The conflict has been ongoing for a long time, and the efforts to resolve it, but achieving lasting peace remains challenging even after the three accords were signed. Bodo women have participated in the dialogues in many forms with organizations such as the AATWWF and BWPM. Traditionally, peace and conflict are viewed as the domain of men, which led to the marginalization of women from the dialogues and excluding them from gender issues. To be a stakeholder in a power structure that reeks of patriarchy within peace politics. Many women even consent to Men folk refraining from politics. However, whenever there is a prolonged conflict, women take up different roles based on their situations. In the process of taking up roles, women become militants, shelter providers, peace activists or victims (Bhattacharya, J. 2010).

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
2. Baruah, S. (1994). The State and Separatist Militancy in Assam: Winning a Battle and Losing the War? *Asian Survey*, 34(10), 863–877. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644966>
3. Basumatary, B.K. (2021). Marriage System of the Bodos. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 9(3), 894-896. <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2103165.pdf>
4. Basumatary, J. (2014). Quest for peace in Assam: A study of the Bodoland movement (Manekshaw Paper No. 44). Centre for Land Warfare Studies. https://www.claws.in/static/MP44_Quest-for-Peace-in-Assam-A-Study-of-the-Bodoland-Movement.pdf
5. Behera, A. (2017). The Majoritarian Way to Democracy: The Bodoland Conflict in Assam. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 42(3), 135–145. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26585103>
6. Bhattacharya, J. (2010). GENDER, PEACEMAKING AND THE CASE OF NORTHEAST INDIA. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 71(1), 233–239. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42748384>
7. Brysk, A. (2000). *From tribal village to global village: Indian rights and international relations in Latin America*. Stanford University Press.
8. Choudhury, T. (2021). Women in armed conflict: A study of Assam. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Studies*, 7(5), 133-148. <https://www.ijhss.com/files/17.-TOPU-CHOUDHURY.pdf>
9. Clifford, J. (2001). Indigenous articulations. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 13(2), 468–490.
10. Comaroff, J. L., & Comaroff, J. (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc*. University of Chicago Press.
11. Das, J. K. (1994). THE BODOLAND MOVEMENT IN LOCAL AND NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 55(4), 417–426. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855713>
12. Dutta, P. (2018). The journey of women from victim to peace-maker: Women, insurgency, and Northeast India. *Space and Culture, India*, 6(3), 46. <https://doi.org/10.20896/saci.v6i3.300>
13. Enloe, C. (2014). *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (2nd ed.). University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt6wqbn6>

¹On May 9, 1989, Bodo women from Kokrajhar district actively participated by leaving their homes to support the cause. Notably, five women cycled to Delhi to meet President R. Venkataraman and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, aiming to advocate for peace in the Bodo areas (Choudhury, T. 2017).

²They have established training centres for kitchen gardening, food processing, dairy farming, tailoring, and carpet making in Kokrajhar, Chirang, and other parts of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) region. (Choudhury, T. 2017).

14. Garcia, C. (2022). IGG-Geo News: Women, geography, and the global agenda. Retrieved June 24, 2024, from <https://igg-geo.org/?p=7549&lang=en>
15. Gurr, T. R. (1993). *Minorities at risk: A global view of ethnopolitical conflicts*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
16. Hague, G. (2016). *Violence against Women in War and Conflict*. Middle East Research Institute. Http
17. Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs 'identity'? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). Sage.
18. Li, T. M. (2000). Articulating indigenous identity in Indonesia: Resource politics and the "tribal slot." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42(1), 149–179.
19. Mahanta, N. G. (2013). Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(23), 49–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23527211>
20. Merlan, F. (2009). Indigeneity: Global and local. *Current Anthropology*, 50(3), 303–333.
21. Nath, M. K (2003). Bodo Insurgency in Assam: New Accord and New Problems. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 27(4), 165-180. <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/sa/v27i4/0000437.pdf>
22. Niezen, R. (2003). *The origins of indigenism: Human rights and the politics of identity*. University of California Press.
23. Richter-Devroe, S. (2008). Gender, Culture, and Conflict Resolution in Palestine. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 4(2), 30–59. <https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2008.4.2.30>
24. Roy, L. (2020). *Women in ethnic conflict situation: A study of the Bodo women in Kokrajhar district of Assam (Doctoral dissertation)*. Shodhganga. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/360025>
25. Saikia, A. (2024). Where are the women in Bodoland's peace process? *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/where-are-the-women-in-bodolands-peace-process/>
26. Saikia, A. (2021). Women, peace accords, and social reconstruction: Experiences from conflict-affected Bodoland Territorial Area Districts of Assam. *Peace Prints: South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 7(1), Summer. Available from www.wiscomp.org/peaceprints
27. Sarmah, A. (2010). POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: A case study of Bodo Women of Assam. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 71(3), 881–890. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42748417>
28. The Sentinel. (2017). Bodo women delegation meet CM, seeks resolution of Bodoland issue. *The Sentinel*. <https://www.sentinelassam.com/news/bodo-women-delegation-meet-cm-seeks-resolution-of-bodoland-issue>
29. Williams, E. (2022.). Emma Williams. *History Extra*. <https://www.historyextra.com/author/emmawilliams/>
30. Yashar, D. J. (2005). *Contesting citizenship in Latin America: The rise of indigenous movements and the postliberal challenge*. Cambridge University Press.