

**"EMPOWERING BODO WOMEN: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL,  
ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS IN THE BODOLAND TERRITORIAL  
REGION, ASSAM."**

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**Abstract:** This research delves into the multifaceted dimensions of Bodo women's lives in the Bodoland Territorial Region, Assam, examining their social, economic, and political status. Drawing on an extensive review of literature, the study investigates the pivotal roles played by Bodo women in cultural and religious practices, decision-making processes, and economic activities. Through quantitative analysis, it reveals a nuanced gender dynamic in economic participation, emphasizing the significance of Bodo women's contributions to various occupations. The political segment scrutinizes gender representation in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) elections, highlighting persistent disparities and suggesting recommendations for increased women's involvement. The findings underscore relative progress in social and economic domains while advocating for continued efforts to empower Bodo women, particularly in enhancing political participation. Overall, the study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the status of Bodo women, offering insights to inform policies promoting gender equality and inclusivity in the BTR.

**Keywords:** Bodo society, women, economic, social, political, status.

**Introduction:** In the vibrant Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam, a profound exploration unfolds, seeking to unravel the intricate dimensions of the lives led by Bodo women. Rooted in Mahatma Gandhi's timeless assertion, "To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman," this research embarks on a comprehensive journey guided by the belief in the strength, resilience, and transformative potential inherent in the stories of Bodo women.

Commencing with a thorough literature review, the inquiry draws inspiration from Gandhi's enduring emphasis on women's dignity and equality. Literature reflects the transformative potential that emerges when women support each other, emphasizing the active roles played by Bodo women in various facets of their society. Cultural celebrations become a canvas where Bodo women paint their significance, religious practices showcase their pivotal roles, and decision-

making processes underscore their agency in shaping communal life. The economic lens employed in this research captures the diverse and dynamic contributions of Bodo women to their households and communities. From actively participating in agricultural pursuits to demonstrating skilled craftsmanship in the art of weaving, Bodo women are integral threads in the intricate fabric of their livelihoods. This exploration aims to document, understand, and celebrate the richness of their economic engagements, shedding light on the often underestimated contributions of women's productive and reproductive work. As we navigate the political landscape, a stark gender disparity emerges from the analysis of BTR elections. Despite the region's administrative significance and the establishment of the BTR to address the concerns of marginalized communities, Bodo women face persistent underrepresentation. This discrepancy underscores the need for a closer examination of barriers hindering women's active participation in decision-making processes. The research does not merely seek to highlight this disparity but aspires to contribute substantively to the ongoing discourse on empowerment. By amplifying the roles of Bodo women within the dynamic mosaic of BTR society, we aim to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for their resilience and progress.

#### **Review of literature:**

Das (2014) examines the intersection of women's empowerment and grassroots political institutions. Drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on women's dignity and equality, Das underscores the transformative potential when women support each other. Gandhi's advocacy for women's political rights and their active involvement in decision-making processes further accentuates the integral role women play in shaping the political landscape. Brahma A's research paper (2018) on "A Study of Women's Human Rights in Bodoland Territorial Council, Assam" delves into the political realm, emphasizing the indispensable nature of women's participation in the political system. The paper argues that active engagement in local, regional, and national political activities is vital for strengthening India's democratic fabric. Despite recognizing women's involvement in various social and political initiatives in the BTAD region, the study sheds light on a stark gender disparity in political representation at the State's Legislative Assembly. Islary's study (2020) takes a historical perspective on Bodo women's economic activities, unveiling their pivotal role as agents of socio-economic change. The research underscores the commendable contributions of Bodo women to economic development, urging against the oversight of their economic endeavors when documenting the history of the Bodo society. Swargiary's study (2020) specifically focuses on the role of women in Bodo society, with a spotlight on the Udalguri district. The findings reveal a significant ascent of Bodo women in diverse fields, including politics, literature, sports, and more. The increasing presence and noteworthy contributions of Bodo women underscore their growing influence across various domains.

#### **Aims/objectives of the study:**

- 1) To examine and understand the social status of Bodo women within their society.
- 2) To investigate the economic standing and conditions of Bodo women.
- 3) To analyze the political representation and influence of Bodo women in the political sphere.

**Research questions:** the study also seeks to address the following research questions based on its objectives:

- 1) Is the social status of Bodo women deemed satisfactory within their society?
- 2) Do Bodo women possess an appropriate economic status?
- 3) To what extent are Bodo women politically aware and active?

**Methodology:** This study adopted a descriptive and analytical method which is based on secondary data sources. Secondary sources serve as the chief means of data collection. Data and information are drawn from various published materials, including books, journals, and internet sources, Election commission reports of Assam, the Statistical Handbook of BTR, as well as published research papers and articles.

**Area of study:** The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) as an autonomous division situated in Assam, India, and is proposed state in the northeastern region of the country. Comprising five districts namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River, it lies beneath the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Governance of this region is overseen by an elected body known as the Bodoland Territorial Council, which was established as part of a peace agreement in February 2003. The region autonomy was subsequently expanded through an agreement signed in January 2020. The region covers an area of over 9000 square kilometres and is predominantly inhabited by the Bodo people and other indigenous communities of Assam.

#### **Discussion:**

**Role of Bodo women in society-** In the intricate fabric of Bodo society, the pivotal role played by women is evident across various domains, contributing significantly to the cultural, religious, and decision-making facets of communal life.

Bodo women actively engage in religious practices and rituals, asserting their importance in cultural celebrations and ceremonies. The Kherai puja, a paramount religious festival, exemplifies the integral role of women, with the 'Doudini' assuming a central position as the key dancer and performer of all rituals. Despite the patriarchal structure, women contribute substantially to cultural activities, ensuring their active presence in festivals and ceremonies. This active involvement extends to marriage ceremonies, where Bodo women participate in rituals and even assume roles like 'Bwirathi' to assist priests, showcasing their indispensable contribution (Boro, 2016).

Contrary to some patriarchal norms, Bodo women enjoy a position in family and society akin to men, actively participating in decision-making processes. They wield significant influence in social and domestic matters, contributing directly or indirectly to decisions at the family or village

level. While the support from spouses is evident, Bodo women take an active part in decisions related to their children's education, future aspirations, and agricultural choices. Despite their considerable involvement, it's important to note that independent decision-making authority is not always entirely granted to Bodo women, who often make decisions jointly with their spouses (Devi, 2014).

In the harmonious structure of Bodo societies, both men and women enjoy equal status within predominantly conjugal family setups. The marriage system predominantly follows monogamy, but a nuanced recognition of polygamy and widow remarriage exists. The social life of the Bodo community adheres to specific rules and customs, with women experiencing no discrimination based on gender. Esteemed and honored, Bodo women stand on equal ground with men in all aspects of their society, fostering an environment of respect and equality (Boro, 2016; Swargiary, 2020).

In conclusion, Bodo women emerge as dynamic contributors to the multifaceted tapestry of their society, actively participating in religious traditions, decision-making processes, and family life. While challenges persist in achieving complete autonomy in decision-making, the evolving roles of Bodo women underscore a trajectory toward empowerment and equality in their unique cultural milieu.

**Economic participation of Bodo women-** The economic status of Bodo women is discerned through their engagement in various activities. While it is commonly believed that women in paid employment enjoy a higher status than those in unpaid or low-paid roles, the economic value of women's productive and reproductive work is often underestimated. A study conducted in a Bodo-dominated area aimed to shed light on the economic conditions of Bodo women. The findings revealed their involvement in diverse economic activities both within and outside the household, encompassing tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and agricultural work, including farming, poultry, and piggyery. Similar to rural Indian women, Bodo women typically handle household chores without hiring external assistance, making it challenging to quantify the economic value of these unpaid contributions. Agriculture serves as the primary livelihood in the Bodo society, with Bodo women actively participating in various agricultural tasks alongside men, including transportation, weeding, reaping, harvesting, and winnowing. Additionally, Bodo women are renowned for their weaving expertise, producing clothing for themselves and their families. Bodo women play a crucial role in generating household income, and their diverse contributions to various occupations are significant for economic development. Several studies have highlighted the different occupations practiced by Bodo women for income generation. According to Islary (2020), Bodo women engage in the following occupations: agriculture, sericulture and weaving, Production of rice beer.

**Table 1:** Economic Participation of Women in BTR

Districts	Main Workers			Marginal Workers		
	Total Population	Male Workers	Female Workers	Total Population	Male Workers	Female Workers

<b>Kokrajhar</b>	2,53,110	1,98,804	54,306	88,021	37,518	50,503
<b>Chirang</b>	1,39,027	1,06,201	32,826	54,867	22,561	32,306
<b>Baksa</b>	2,78,297	2,15,948	62,349	1,28, 59	50,908	55,944
<b>Udalguri</b>	2,53,178	1,94,782	58,396	91,852	35,908	55,944
<b>Total</b>	9,23,612	7,15,735	2,07,877	2,47,599	1,46,895	1,94,697

**Source:** Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2016 (Census, 2011)

The data from the provided table underscores a clear pattern of gender discrimination in economic participation. Across the four districts examined, the total count of female main workers stands at 207,877, notably lower than their male counterparts at 715,735. This substantial difference highlights a prevailing gender gap, favoring a higher number of male main workers. However, a distinct shift is observed among marginal workers, where the total count of female workers exceeds that of males- 1,94,697 compared to 146,895. This implies a nuanced gender dynamic within economic activities. In summary, across the Bodo community in all four BTR districts, a discernible gender disparity exists in economic engagement. This research sheds light on the multifaceted nature of gender roles in the examined region, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of economic dynamics and gender differentiation.

### **Political participation of Bodo women in BRT council elections\_**

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), established under the amended Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, holds administrative significance in Assam, particularly for the self-governance of the Bodo community. Comprising 46 Executive Members, each overseeing a designated 'Somisthi' area, the BTR was created in 2003 to address the concerns of marginalized communities and ensure their active participation in decision-making processes.

However, a detailed examination of BTR elections since 2005 unveils a consistent gender disparity. In 2005, only 4.54% of elected members were women, reflecting a stark underrepresentation. Subsequent years demonstrated marginal progress, with the 2015 elections indicating a modest rise to 12.19% female representation. The 2020 election, however, took a step back, witnessing no women winning and underlining the persistent challenge of integrating women into the political fabric of the BTR. Notably, the Executive Council, a pivotal governance body within the BTR, has failed to include any female members among its 12 representatives since 2005. This absence raises concerns about the exclusion of women from key decision-making processes, hindering a balanced and inclusive governance structure. The Executive Council, comparable to a state or central-level cabinet, plays a crucial role in shaping and implementing policies affecting the region.

Table 2: women participation in BTR election since 2005(including six nominated members)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total No. of Seats</b>	<b>No. of Male Elected/Nominated Members</b>	<b>No. of Female Elected/Nominated Members</b>	<b>(%) of Female Elected Members</b>
2005	46	44	02	04.54
2010	46	43	03	06.97
2015	46	41	05	12.19
2020	46	44	02	04.54
<b>Total</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>28.24</b>

**Source:** Bodoalnd.gov.in

### **Findings:**

#### **1) Social Status of Bodo Women:**

- Actively engaged in cultural and religious practices, showcasing significance in festivals like Kherai puja.
- Integral roles in decision-making processes, contributing to family and village-level decisions.
- Equal status with men in conjugal family setups, experiencing no gender discrimination.

#### **2) Economic Participation of Bodo Women:**

- Diverse contributions to household income through agricultural tasks, weaving, and other occupations.
- Notable engagement in farming, poultry, and piggy, with a primary focus on agriculture.
- Economic activities vary across districts, with a discernible gender gap in economic participation.

#### **3) Political Representation of Bodo Women:**

- Persistent gender disparity in BTR elections, with a historical underrepresentation of women.
- Varied female representation, reaching 12.19% in 2015 but regressing to 4.54% in 2020.
- Lack of female inclusion in the Executive Council raises concerns about balanced governance.

**Suggestions/recommendations:-**Based on the findings discussed earlier, the following recommendations can be put forward to further improve the status of Bodo women, particularly in Chirang districts:

- 1) **Empowerment and Independent Decision-Making:** While the participation of Bodo women in social life is satisfactory, there is a need to empower them to take independent decisions.

Efforts should be made to promote gender equality in decision-making processes at the family and community levels.

- 2) Promotion of Non-Agricultural Occupations: Encourage the expansion of textile industries and provide more opportunities for women weavers. Diversifying economic opportunities will contribute to the financial empowerment of Bodo women.
- 3) Skill-Based Vocational Courses: Introduce skill-based vocational courses in schools and colleges to attract youths, including girls, and increase their enrollment rates in educational institutions. Such initiatives will enhance their employability and career prospects.
- 4) Empowerment in Political Decision-Making: Ensure active participation of Bodo women in political decision-making. Encourage and support more women to contest in Assembly elections from every constituency and BTR elections, aiming to increase women's representation in politics.

### **Conclusion:**

The study offers valuable insights into the status of Bodo women in the Chirang district (BTR), Assam. It highlights that while a gender gap exists in Bodo society, Bodo women enjoy relatively favorable social, economic, and educational statuses compared to many women from other communities across India. This progress is a positive indicator of the development of Bodo society. The significant contributions of Bodo women to various aspects of life should be acknowledged and valued. However, it is essential to recognize that more efforts are needed to empower Bodo women further and eliminate gender disparities in all spheres, particularly in the political arena, where women's representation remains limited. Enhancing women's participation and decision-making roles in politics can foster greater inclusivity and progressive governance.

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