

The Bodo Women in Society

Elijah Islary

Educational Higher Institute, Basugaon College, Chirang, Assam, India

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10200356>

Received: 12 February 2026; Accepted: 19 February 2026; Published: 10 March 2026

ABSTRACT

In every society, from ancient to modern times, women are considered the property of men to serve their interests in both society and the domestic front. The position of women always plays a significant role in the growth and development of any society in the world. Assam is a land of numerous tribes having different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds since time immemorial. Among them, the Bodo/Boro are numerically and sociologically one of the most important aboriginal tribes in Assam. The role of Bodo women was confined to being a wife and a mother, as has been depicted in the inscriptions. Yet the historiography of that period confined the study of the Status of Bodo women in her society in various concern areas. The paper makes a humble attempt to highlight the importance of the status of Bodo women or their normal position in the field of socio-cultural, economic, and religious perceptions in the society in the colonial period.

Keywords: Women, Status, Colonial, Social, Cultural, Religious, Economic, Rights, Discrimination, position and role.

INTRODUCTION

Normally in India, the major portion of the women's population is engaged in household activities, which is found absent the economic value. They faced discrimination everywhere as the patriarchal social system was prevalent in many Indian societies. Perhaps in some sort of period, Indian societies witness the maximum social activities with major discrimination towards the womenfolk, especially during the pre-colonial and post-Mughal period in India. Amongst which the northern part of India was affected by such atrocities and crimes against women and the cultural discrimination towards female folks has been seen to a great extent.¹ Assam is the hub of numerous communities with diverse languages, cultures, religions and social systems. Various tribes migrated to the Brahmaputra valley and settled down permanently in different periods of history. The Bodo/Boro, who are considered as the descendant of the Kiratas in ancient Indian literature, whose physical features are akin to Mongoloids are sociologically one of the most important native populations of North East India, particularly in Assam.² No doubt, they are the indigenous ethnic linguistic communities of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Racially, they belong to the Mongoloids stocks or Indo-Mongoloids.³ Today, the Bodos are widely spread in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, West Bengal, Nepal, Bangladesh, etc. They are called Bodo Kacharis or simply Boro. In other places like West Bengal, Nepal, and Nagaland, they are known as 'Meche', while in Tripura, they are designated as 'Triperas or Kokborok'. The Bodos spread over the whole of Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid block in northeastern India, were the most important Indo Mongoloids people in eastern India, and they formed one of the main bases of the present-day population of these tracts".⁴ Despite the global scenario of the status of tribal communities compared with those societies from different parts of India from the same period, the tribal group or the tribal community of North-East India, particularly the Bodo communities, abstain from such beliefs, practices, and discrimination regarding the status of women in different fields in society. It is known from the very fact that the Bodos are the original and most indigenous tribe of Assam, constituting the highest percentage amongst the major tribal population in Assam. They have their own culture, traditions, languages, customs and beliefs and enjoy a unique identity with their traditional attire. The Bodo Women enjoyed special status socially and economically and were debarred from the least discrimination since time immemorial. The British administration, the work of Christian missionaries and the socio-religious reform movement of the country molded the lives of people in general and women in particular. In Assam, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked an era of important developments

and, in return, impacted women's roles, privileges, and gender relations in the Bodo society. Gender differentials have characterized almost all societies at all times. The economic and political institutions deny opportunities for women's empowerment. The level and type of gender differences may vary from society to society and from time to time, but they have been very systematically carried forward from one generation to another in all societies.⁵

DISCUSSION

The social structure of the Bodos is patriarchal,⁶ where the father is the sole authority in the family. Even though the social structure is a patriarchal system, the place of women in society is high. In the Bodo society, women are assigned specific roles in the social setup.⁷ Women were entitled to activities like child caring, looking after kitchen stuff, washing clothes, weaving, cleaning the house surroundings, caring for the health of the family members, looking after household chores and looking after various agriculture and allied activities. While menfolk were expected to go for hunting, house building, the arrangement of the family's major needs and for agricultural activities. The division of labor based on biological sex is based on what society expects a man and a woman to do. The Bodos, being intensely clannish people, represented the basic features of a tribal society and economy of colonial Assam, where the Boro women played a dominant role. For an analysis of women's subordination and dominance in pre-colonial tribal society and economy, it is essential to understand the socio-economic conditions of the tribe at that time. Traditionally, a tribal society consisted of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader. Some tribes are particularly egalitarian and most of the tribes have a vague notion of private property. They have their customary laws and a belief in common lineage.⁸ A significant contribution of the Bodo women could be seen in their skill of managing and conserving biodiversity. Women cooked food and also preserved different food items like meat, fish, beverages, and vegetables etc. Bodos have a rich cultural and traditional festive season like *Bwisagu* (Bihu), where the main festive celebration is marked by a drink and merry-making. Bodo women are busy in preparation for *Zumai* (rice beer) which the Bodo women are experts in making of this favorite item.⁹ They also possess different traditional medicinal knowledge to cure various diseases. Many of them acted as midwives or nurses at the time of childbirth, even today, when modern medical facilities are not so much available. Women do not lag in every social function, including the religious. Six types of marriage systems have been practiced in the Bodo society and some are arranged according to the situation of the girl's response in the family.¹⁰ There is no denying the fact that the Bodo girl who attained the age of puberty enjoys somewhat less freedom compared to the girls of other societies. They have the right of inheritance of the parental properties where there is no male child in the family.¹¹ They can enjoy such properties even after marriage. The female folk was entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the household's chores, articles, and maintenance of properties in the family viz., rearing pigs, cattle, rice, fowl etc. They are allowed to sell those things without the prior permission of their parents.¹² The Bodos women maintained a good profile and were given high respect in society. Their position is never discarded in society. They are kept on equal footing with their male counterpart.¹³ During her marriage, she is allowed to have all possessions like gold, clothes, and a share of property, whatever she wishes. In any social function, they enjoyed equal participation in manhood as well. They performed and enjoyed the liberty to participate in various religious rituals and practices, in public singing, dances during festivals and in any merry-making occasions.¹⁴ It is furnished that "The Bodos (Kachari) women, both in early life and matrons, enjoyed a large measure of freedom, a freedom which is not abused for evil purposes. Whenever the writer asks the Kachari man, then the common phrase of the sentence will be "*BE ANGNI BURWI*," literally "this is my old woman,"¹⁵ But the words are not used jeeringly (flattering) at all, but with much real respect and affection. The practice of the widow remarriage system is also seen with great honor among the Bodo women; this system is called "*DHOKA*". In this case, a man comes to live with the widow in her first husband's establishment. Hence, the widow becomes the sole authority of the family and accordingly, the property descends to the children.¹⁶

The Bodos observed several religious festivals and pujas. In the matter of religious ceremonies and festivals, the Bodo women are not merely excluded.¹⁷ When the religious fellowship or mass prayer gathering takes place, the women play a key role in the mass prayer program. They also performed different religious dances and equally held the responsibilities and involvement in various religious festivals like *Kerai Puja* and *Kerai dance*.¹⁸ Bhatouism has been the main religion of Bodos since time immemorial. The Bodos women played the main role

in maintaining and practicing various religious rituals daily, offering a prayer in the morning or evening in front of “*SIJOU TANSHALI*”.(an Altar of prayer).¹⁹

The Kachari women did not lack in socio-economic status within the society. They possessed a high economic status. The Bodos women are also regarded as one of the most expert weavers among the tribes of North-Eastern. They engaged in different traditional activities and nowadays, the impact of globalization is broadening. A Traditional activity like doing piggery, agriculture activities in the field, rearing various animals like poultry, etc. provides financial needs for the family. In cases when the male of the family is not earning, women take the initiative in looking after the family.²⁰ The Bodo women are actively busy on their looms and carry on small businesses in weaving and rearing different animals. The Bodo women are also fond of wearing ornaments and in this connection, basically in the middle classes of the family, the entire girl child can have their resources reserved for buying ornaments. The most important is the weaving of silk-eri clothes, which is in great demand in different parts of the world. The Kachari women are industrious in producing different items of handloom and handicraft products. Apart from this, fishing is another activity of the Bodo women. In the field of agricultural work, the Bodo women are not excluded. Their active participation in agricultural work proved that they were free to earn their livelihood as well as contribute greatly to the economic development of the society. They are not behind the men in the production activities. Transplantation and seedlings are exclusively the work of women in agricultural activities. It may also be pointed out that all female members of a family are often the owners of cattle, poultry, piggery, etc., even as of now. Bakri (granary), which symbolizes the economic condition of the family, is kept under the custody of the wife or daughters to date.²¹ The father or any male member in the family has to obtain permission from female members before utilizing those things that are in the possession of the female members. From this, it is evident that any male members in the family cannot exercise veto power on the things that are under the control and custody of the women.²² Bodo women are experts in weaving, rearing, fishing, etc. These activities kept the Bodo women financially self-supported on their own feet.²³ They earned by engaging in various economic activities, which were used to manage their required expenses for garments and to support the family's crises. In the early days, the male members used to barter for the female-owned goods. It is noticeable that most of the tribes of North-East India, like *Karbi, Tiwa, Adi, and Nishi* etc spend their earned money to meet the family requirements. The produce articles of the women are sold in the markets by the male folk since the early days. Women were seldom taken on in business in the market; however, in the present day, women actively partake in the activities of the markets as suppliers, retailers, or wholesalers in both big and small businesses. Many of the markets are now filled by women in carrying out merchandise activities. Despite the immense contribution of women towards the Bodo society and economy, in all spheres viz. household, social, and economic, differentiation based on gender between men and women could be noticed in the Boro community in colonial Assam.

CONCLUSION

An overall analysis of the above discussion in brief shows that civilization comes through the combined contribution of both men and women. However, until the most recent past, historians have depicted the life and experiences of men only. The experiences of women and their contributions to society have been neglected. Most of the time, the inscription only informs us about the queens and, in some cases, about the wives of the Brahmanas, the beneficiaries of land grants. Women in general were looked down upon in a society that was male-oriented. The prevalence of the myth of equality of men and women in the Bodo society shows that such was not the case among the Bodo. The line of imbalance of gender equality in the Bodo society was so thin that it cannot be picturized as much difference between the men and the women; however, in certain cases, inequality of gender is also brought to the notice for the depth study. Women substantially contributed to the building of equal development in society, yet their status was not at par with the men in some sort of matter as well, because of the changing traditions influenced by other dominant cultures. Even the customary laws did not always conduce to the interest of women, barring a few cases. The system of sharing property and inheritance of heirlooms favored men. However, the Boro society witnessed a process of transition in the colonial period, affected by various socio-economic forces. To some extent, women became conscious of their capabilities, and even political awareness was noticeable among them. More importantly, they became an agent of socio-economic change. Gender differentiation widened in society and the policies of the colonial Government slowly jeopardized the economic position of women and affected women's relations with the environment and social

rights. But it is notably understood that the Bodo women enjoy some sort of equal status to menfolk in all aspects, irrespective of socio-cultural rights and position, in socio-religious position, in socio-economic rights and facilities.

ENDNOTES

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