Tribal Feminism: Safekeeping Family and the Bodo Community During the Bodoland Movement in India

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Abstract: This article narrates the experiences of my mother, my family, and the Bodo community during the Bodoland Movement (1960–2003). My and my mother's journeys are that of a Bodo woman struggling to protect life, family, and the integrity of the Bodo community. Thousands were killed, tortured, and raped. Bodo men were persecuted as "rebels" by the state and were therefore nowhere to be seen in everyday society. Women became human shields, peace negotiators, safekeepers of family and community, and agents of social transformation in the face of violence. I reflect on my and my mother's experiences as a departure from mainstream feminism by tracing oppression and violence beyond the domain of men-women relationships, detailing how tribal feminism traces oppressive structures to ethnic biases/prejudices against a tribal community by dominant groups, and highlighting the agency of tribal feminism for survival, safekeeping of life and liberty, and rights of a community.

***Keywords*:** Bodo women, Bodo movement, tribal feminism, Assam, feminism

Introduction

On a recent drive to my office at Assam Don Bosco University in Guwahati, India, I saw a young Bodo woman clad in her colourful Bodo *bedun dokhna* (traditional wrap) riding a bicycle with her daughter dressed in a school uniform perched on the back of the bicycle. She was likely riding her daughter to a school in the heart of Guwahati city. I smiled. As a Bodo woman, seeing Bodo children traveling to schools either by walking or cycling with their mothers/fathers makes me very happy because these children have opportunities to learn and to achieve in relative peace. All my life, I have lived, believed, and seen that education has been a great force of liberation—the tool to liberate one from many socio-cultural and political oppressions that beset communities such as ours. The sight of the Bodo mother riding her daughter to school on her bicycle lingered on my thoughts for days, and I was compelled to reflect upon the journey of a Bodo woman, specifically my mother. These reflections also made me revisit my own life journey: the long road to reach where I am today and the journey my mother, like any other Bodo mother, had to undertake during the Bodoland Movement.

The Bodos are the Brahmaputra Valley's autochthones and are categorized as a Scheduled Tribe (see Bodhi & Darokar, 2023) in India. Presently, they also live in parts of India (Assam, West Bengal, and Nagaland), Bangladesh, and Nepal. The Bodoland Territorial Region carved out in 2003 is an autonomous region in Assam, Northeast India. It is made up of five districts, namely Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, Tamulpur and Udalguri, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River, below the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. As the Bodoland Territorial Region borders the state of West Bengal, it is also the gateway to Northeastern India. It is administered by an elected body known as the Bodoland Territorial Council. The region covers an area of over nine thousand square kilometers and is predominantly inhabited by the Bodo people and

other indigenous communities of Assam. As per the 2011 Census, its population is a little over three million (Owarie, n.d.).

There have previously been several initiatives to meet the sociopolitical and economic goals of the Bodos within the framework of the contemporary nation-state. The memorandum that Bodo social reformer Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma submitted to the Simon Commission in 1929 demonstrates how the Bodo leaders joined the fight for India's independence early on and expressed their political aspirations for autonomy in concrete terms (Kalita, 2019). The Bodos have traveled a distinctive route because of their unique social and cultural realities.

Large Bodo territories came under the jurisdiction of Assam after India gained independence from the British in 1947. Together with other tribal leaders, the Bodo leaders brought Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam, to enter into talks with them and agree to include Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1947 in order to safeguard their rights over land in independent India. Thus, the Tribal Belt and Blocks were demarcated for protection of the tribal lands. It may be mentioned here that these protective measures were well below the benchmark of protection the tribal leaders sought for. At that time, the tribal chiefs had demanded that the Plains Tribal Areas of Assam be added to the Indian Constitution's Sixth Schedule, which has stronger provisions for protection of tribal lands.

The promises for the protection of land and socio-cultural institutions within the newly formed India temporarily quieted the Bodos. However, they soon realized that the ruling elites of the Assam state did not have any sincerity in protecting the Tribal Belt and Block areas. Rather, these areas were utterly neglected and deprived of the benefits of development. It has already been well documented that thousands of acres of lands were alienated from the tribals and used for forests and resettlement of refugees from Bangladesh in the 1960s (Brahma, 2017; Daimary, 2012). This grievously hurt not only the resource-base of the tribals but were also seen as conspiracy by the Assam state to throw into disbalance the delicate demographic makeup of the contiguous Tribal areas. Further, there were both overt and covert moves by the Assam state to coerce Bodos into assimilating within the Assamese fold. For instance, The Assam Official Language Act 1960 purported to impose Assamese language upon the tribals and other linguistic minorities of Assam.

Thus, the Bodos, like other tribals/indigenous peoples of India, faced problems of land alienation, cultural assimilation, indebtedness, and impoverishment arising out of waves of colonialism both pre-and-post-independence India (see, for example, Xaxa, 2022). As such, the Bodoland Movement has largely been a peoples' movement for survival, dignity, and human rights of the Bodos and other communities residing in Assam. The movement began as a socio-religious reformation (early 1900s). It took shape as a political mobilization for the rights of the Plains Tribes of Assam in the 1930s. After India's independence in 1947, the largely non-violent mobilizations in the initial years for rights and social justice, language, and script movement (1950–1980s), became a violent struggle for a separate state with different ideological hues (1980s–2020). I will be particularizing this phase of the Bodoland Movement, as I was born and grew up in the period.

The Bodoland Movement

The Bodoland Movement was launched and spearheaded by a student organization, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), for the separate state in the year 1987. The movement for a separate Bodo state had its origins in the economic and socio-cultural aspirations of the Bodo people. The movement had its share of different phases. The first phase was the formal Movement, which was also termed the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF). Simultaneously, the Bodo Security Force was formed in 1986 and later renamed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), comprising a hardcore group engaged in extremist tactics to achieve the goal of Bodoland through the means of an armed revolution. In February of 1993, the First Bodo Accord was signed between the BVF (spearheaded by ABSU) and the Union Government, but a section of the BVF rejected the accord because they felt it did not fulfill the aspirations of the Bodos. That section formed the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) in 1996. On the 29th of March, 2000, the BLT signed a ceasefire agreement with the governments (Assam, Union, and Indian). As a result, an autonomous Bodo self-governing body was created on the 10th of February, 2003, when the Assam government, the Union government, and the BLTF signed the Memorandum of Settlement on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in New Delhi. Over the years, after undergoing severe sacrifices and loss of lives and property, the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) finally came to be. The new administration has brought in many reforms for the communities, from building basic infrastructure to implementing basic services. However, peace has remained elusive. After the recent Bodo Peace Accord (2020) signed by the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the Bodo leaders (all factions of the NDFB, the influential ABSU, and United Bodo People's Organization), there is now a possibility of peace and development in the region.

Locating "Myself"

I am a Bodo woman. Bodos are also known as the Kacharis. *Kachari* is a generic term for several groups speaking a more or less common dialect or language, or claiming a common ancestry as the aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants of Brahmaputra Valley—that is, the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal, and parts of Nepal and Bangladesh. Though spread in different parts of this region, as well as in the neighbouring countries, the majority of their population is found in Central Assam. The Bodos form the largest indigenous group in the present demography of the region. Linguistically the Garo, the Dimasa, the Hajong, the Sonowal, the Deori, the Rabha, the Tiwa, and the Borok of Twipra (Tripura), and many other cognate tribes are part of this great Bodo race. They take pride in calling themselves Bodo. They identify themselves as the *Boro-phisa*, meaning Children of the Boro race.

I was born in a remote village called Hatirtary in 1983. It is in the present-day Baksa district of Assam, but previously it was part of the undivided Nalbari district. My parents, Mr. Bhaben Swargiary and Ms. Arati Ramchiary, were both government teachers and could afford the wages of a dahwna (farmboy), bokhali (nanny), and ruwathi (housekeeper) in supporting the family and its agricultural work. Every evening, while my mother would nurse my baby brother, my father would cuddle me and my sister, one on his chest and the other at the back, and sing songs for us. He also told us one story after another on a never-ending note. Sometimes it could be a

walk around the courtyard and at other times it would be just sitting and listening to his stories on the verandah. Stories about the moon, the stars, the sparrow; why the snake had a long tail and the frog none; legends of Bodo freedom-fighters such as Birgwshri Sikhla and Gambari Sikhla, Jwhwlao Swmdwn and Basiram Jwhwlao.

While growing up, the community was my playground: romping in the paddy fields, swimming in the rivers, fishing with the jekhai (handled basket for catching) and the khobai (waist-basket for carrying), climbing trees, gathering greens from the community forests, going to the school, and playing hide and seek. We had nothing to worry about. It was a childhood filled with laughter, happiness, and joy. Our community was bound together with celebrations and community help-giving. I recall my introduction to the Baisagw celebrations of the Bodo New Year. These were filled with merry-making, singing, and dancing. Girls and boys of our age would sing and dance door to door, as we moved from one house to another in colourful dokhnas and sadri with the melodious reverberations of the kham (drum), siphung (five-holed flute), serja (stringed instrument made of the sijou plant), harmonium, and thorkha (bamboo clapper used to keep time).

Songs that resounded through the village were about thanksgiving and praise for the bounty of nature. These songs also celebrated the nature of men and women, and then there were the romantic love-songs of the festive Baisagw. Each household would give in kind or cash. These household gifts would then be used in throwing a community party at the end of Baisagw month. Even before becoming an adult, children participated in the saoris, a community service programme. It is customary for all families to provide freely rendered help to all members of the community. Young girls and boys involved merrily in saori activities during the harvest seasons. I participated with most gleeful spirit in community work ranging from transplanting to harvesting of paddy to serving during weddings. The boys and men got involved in ploughing with the bullocks, building houses, erecting fences, and constructing irrigation systems in the village.

During the harvest season, boys and girls together went for mai khonsai hwinai[1]. Post-harvest season, all grains collected would be dried and husked and kept for the festival of Magw[2]. I went for the narah hanai (leftover hay) for building the camp houses, collected firewood for the camps. While we went for cutting the narah, I also accompanied our boys for digging out the mice in our paddy fields and catching the grasshopper for making a special bathwn (chutney).

My family had the first television in the village. There was no electricity then, so we would watch the TV on batteries. A battery recharge point was two kilometers away, and the boys would take turns transporting the batteries for recharging. The whole village would flock to watch Bollywood movies, or the FIFA World Cups when the matches were aired live on the Door Darshaan in 1980s. During these evenings, the TV would be placed in our verandah on a table overlooking the courtyard. The courtyard would be filled with friends, aunties, uncles,

[1] Custom of collecting the left-over grains after harvest from the paddy fields.
[2] The thanksgiving month—mid-January to mid-February

grandmothers, and grandfathers all watching the TV together. At times, as many as five people occupied a single chair—sitting even on arms of the chair.

Life Interwoven with the Bodoland Movement

In 1987 the Bodoland Movement gained momentum, with the ABSU spearheading the movement. The slogans "Divide Assam fifty-fifty", "No Bodoland No Rest," and "Do or Die for Bodoland" resounded all around our villages. During the movement, the Bodo villages echoed with patriotic songs like Inkhilab Jindabad[3], Jwng Bima Rao Swlwngni[4], and the Akhaiao Bibar Lananwi[5]. The Assam Police and the Indian Army responded to the separatist movement by raiding villages and homes. My brother and I were sent to boarding school about 20 kilometers away from my home. In the school, visits from family were restricted to once a month. Suddenly, my father stopped visiting us. My mother and my grandma informed us that it was not safe anymore for Bodo men to travel. My mother also said that even for Bodo women, it was no safer; women were being molested, raped, and tortured everywhere. My grandma said,

> The army stares at us, checks all our bags to see if we were carrying guns, shakes our milk bottles [mom would carry milk for us every second Sunday], and opens your tiffin boxes [tiered lunchboxes]. We are also asked to shake our dokhna for them to be sure that we were not hiding anything [guns and bombs] inside.

I loved my dad and missed him dearly. I longed to see him and did not fully understand what was happening. When I returned home for summer vacation, life became even more restricted. I was told that it was no longer safe to run around the village, paddy-fields, and play hide and seek around the homestead. With constant raids by the Assam police and the Indian Army, the village became suddenly silent. Then it got worse. At night, the women and children moved into the community forest or the community cemetery to spend the nights while the men guarded the village. We were moved alternately—once in the community forest and on another day to the crematory ground. There, the skies became our roof, the thuri wild grass our natural mattress; the moon, the stars, and the fireflies provided us light. Even though we were afraid for our lives, women and children shared traditional food, blankets, and stories of their escapes from the atrocities. The nights were filled with fear but also laughter. Early morning, all of us returned to our homes.

Many men joined to form the now-disbanded Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) or join the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which opposed each other strongly. Many men disappeared or went missing. Whenever any man from the village was apprehended by the police, women would march directly to the police stations along with elder men and the village headman; women would stand guard and negotiate for the release of the captives with the darga babu (local police), keeping the men at the centre, lest the police take them too. Women stood

[3] Long live the revolution.
[4] Let us read in our mother-tongue. (The Bodos also launched a movement for introduction of Bodo language as a medium of instruction in school education in the place of Assamese language.)
[5] I await you with a garland in my hands oh my hero. (This was a popular song among the Bodos that portrayed the support and love of the Bodo girls and women for their men who were in the revolution.)

there as grieving witnesses to the crimes being committed against Bodo men. Often the women would be successful in bringing their men back to the village, while many times all did not go well for them. They were very often lathi-charged (baton-charged) and molested, and at times raped and tortured too. Despite this, they continued their negotiations fearlessly, even by seating themselves in protest all day and night in front of the police station with no food and water. Life of the Bodo women continued as usual sometimes, but at other times, especially during raids, all of us stayed together in the village aganwadi/balwadi centre for early childcare or the lower primary school houses. Educational institutions were considered a safe place, on the one hand, and also the only structures in the village that could hold all its women and children together in one enclosure.

Surviving as a Bodo

It became dangerous for my father since he was an active ABSU volunteer who long advocated for the socio-cultural and political rights of the Bodos. Frequently, along with other Bodo men, he was taken by the police or the Indian Army who raided the villages looking for men. During one such raid, I found that my aunts and my mother were wailing and screaming uncontrollably. Someone had informed them that my dad and two other uncles were picked up by the members of the NDFB for a dialogue. And that the talks were to take place in one of the houses which was at the end of the village and whence began our paddy fields. My father was a strong supporter of the then-BLTF. At that time, the NDFB and the BLTF were already at loggerheads due to their ideological differences in achieving Bodo statehood. I walked towards the house, as if guided by some deep and resolute force within me. Someone said to me, "Don't go, you will get killed!" I replied, "I am going anyway … I need to protect my father, my uncles, and my community." I soon realized that I was being closely followed by my mom, aunties, and grandmother. As I walked into the courtyard, I saw men in uniform with guns standing ready to shoot. My father and two uncles were sitting in chairs, discussing something. I stood there at the courtyard upon the verandah, towering over the men, and looked at my father. I cannot recall what they said, but my father and two uncles were released.

The difference of ideologies between the two Bodo revolutionary groups, the BLTF and NDFB, divided the Bodo community. The fight for Bodoland was both inter- and intra-community. Bodo men and women were not spared by the state forces nor by the other factional revolutionaries from the same community. Supporters of BLTF were attacked by NDFB and supporters of NDFB were attacked by BLTF. And in the process, all Bodo men and women were relegated to be rebels by the state forces. Men were no more seen in the social spaces of everyday life, and even if they were there, it was never safe for them. Hence, women had to take up more responsibilities amidst the prevailing situation of fear and uncertainty.

Since it was no longer safe for my father, the family decided that it was best for him to go undercover. He disappeared/went missing in the year 1996.

It is at this point where my childhood ended. My mother waited day in and day out for the return of my father. In fear, we moved our bedroom to the storeroom of our house because it had no direct door that could be accessed from the outside. While my siblings slept, I kept company

with my mother, sitting and waiting for my father to return, waiting for the dawn to arrive or waiting for a peaceful settlement of our revolution. None would happen for a long, long time.

I saw my father three times. One day while walking from the school to the convent where I was housed, I saw my father in a car that was passing by. I screamed at the top of my voice, "Baba! Baba!" But all he did was wave his hands at me. I was left heartbroken and cried like I had never done before as the car sped away and disappeared round a bend. The second time I saw him, I shouted again at the top of my voice. This time, the car stopped. My father just hugged me and assured me that he would be coming home soon. The third time I saw him, he was in a bus, and he waved at me. I never understood why my father would not stop the car or the bus to meet us. I wept. My father was alive, and he promised that he would return home, but it dawned on me that my father was in grave danger. My father returned home after the signing of the BTC accord in the year 2003. He had been missing for six long years.

My Mother: A Tribal Feminist

When I think of the term "feminist," my mother comes to mind. She has always followed her own path. She was a co-owner of her family homestead, and she never changed her surname to Swargiary, instead retaining her own surname Ramchiary after her marriage to my father. After leaving her home to go to my father's village, she was the only matriculate in the village. The community selected her to be the aganwadi worker when its aganwadi center was set up in the year 1985. A young mother of five children, she wrote her teaching exams and secured good marks. She also managed the house and the farmlands. Performing her tasks as an aganwadi worker, I would see her attending her teaching lessons and providing the boiled cereals to children and mothers at the centre. She counseled women on childcare and family. Community members came to her for medical help. Just prior to the start of the conflict, she resigned from the post of aganwadi worker and got the job of an assistant teacher at the lower primary school in our village. She was an active member of women's collective of the village and chief advocate for change. Addressing issues of domestic violence, alcoholism, health, and equal distribution of community resources was part of her life. Then, after my father went missing, she became the reservoir of strength and consistency for her five children in terms of providing a home and food, but also protecting us from the police, the army, and the warring Bodo groups.

The raids from the Assam Police/Indian Army became very frequent because they suspected families of helping and sheltering the rebels. A loud knock at the front door during the middle of the night sent shivers down our spine. My mother would say, "Don't fear, you little angels, as long as I am with you." She would open the door, holding us behind her, and provided answers to every question posed to her. Often slapped and pushed back with the gun, she would gather us all near her as the police personnel turned our entire house upside down searching for my father and non-existent guns, bullets, or contraband materials. I remember her gathering the community members, particularly women and children, and advising us always to be together, assemble together and move towards the aganwadi centre, or simply assemble together and be in one safe place, or assemble together and circle men in the centre so that security forces could not take them away.

Nonetheless, we lost our community activities. We stopped our television sessions, the saoris could no longer be organized, and this in turn affected our cultivation of crops, irrigation systems, and care for the poorer families of the village. On her end, my mother could not mobilise any help for upkeep of the activities that were once the bedrock of our community. We continued pursuing our studies and she continued juggling between her job, home, and the farmlands. The community named her "Manager." Yes, she was all in all an excellent Manager. However, she often avoided participating in the social and political gatherings. Maybe she kept herself away from all of these because she was a single mother, or wife of a revolutionary. During village council meetings (which were attended only by men and were held by night), she sent my brother—however, she always attended the women's council meetings.

During the different phases of the Bodoland Movement, the overall aim was greater autonomy of the Bodos by carving out a territory for them. Women were active in the movement by playing myriad of roles—information gatherers, carriers, advocators, revolutionaries, witnesses, conflict resolution agents, and peacemakers. Many Bodo women were imprisoned, molested, raped, and killed. Hundreds of women also disappeared and were killed alongside their men, or widowed (Goswami et al., 2005). During the movement, women organized the Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) which was later renamed as All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and came forward to participate at the movement as well as advocate for women's rights. However, with the subsequent formation of the BTAD under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, women had no role in the newly formed political institution. After decades of movement, the decision to govern the newly formed BTAD became an all-men institution. It negated the contributions of the likes of my mother, who single-handedly mobilized other women as agents to stand strong in the face of adversity. These women were pained much, sacrificing their whole to safe-keep life, family, and the community.

My mother's journey illustrates the journey of a Bodo woman's struggle to protect life, family, and the Bodo community, even when the efforts of women have not been politically recognized.

For me, this experience demonstrates that the roots of oppression and violence go beyond the domain of men-women relationship to the relationship between the state and the people. Tribal feminism thus spans the micro to the macro by tracing tribal womanhood in the face of oppressive structures beyond men-women relationship to ethnic biases and prejudices against a tribal community by the dominant groups. A modern state became the tool for oppression at the hands of the dominant. My mother's positioning, like that of many other women in my community, highlights the agency of tribal feminism for survival, safe-keeping of life and liberty, and rights of a community (women, men, and everybody else) as against the mainstream feminism expressed in terms of individualized conflict of power between men and women.

In My Mother's Footsteps…

In my quiet moments of solitude, or during loud and boisterous social work engagements, I must confess that my heart is deeply pained, and at the same time overflows with gratitude and thankfulness for the unfathomable strength and courage that my mother transmitted on to me and others over the years of her tribulations. I also remember with anguish and pride the

sacrifices my father had to endure for the survival and dignity of my community. I began my social work journey with a humble ambition to learn and grow personally and professionally, and to be brave and courageous like my mother has been. I had also one desire: to keep myself awake at all times and to put in my best to everything that came my way, so that my mother's sacrifices did not go in vain. I now realize that her energy has made me grow tremendously over the years, beyond my wildest dreams and imaginations.

Being a Bodo woman who has been brought up by a wonderful mother under very trying circumstances has given me the opportunity to explore, understand, and locate myself in the milieu of aspirations for a better tomorrow. It is this hope for a better future that embodies respect for life and dignity of all which puts me in good stead as a social work professional. I am blessed with the capacity to immediately empathize with all human and sentient beings. I have learnt to be kind and compassionate and to deal with my clients, students, colleagues, and people in a relational, respectful, and responsive manner. I have also learnt that it is possible to do good and remain dignified in the face of oppression, and to work towards change as a sure possibility no matter what. I believe that my mother's role as a tribal feminist has in turn imbued in me strength and character as a young mother to a son and a daughter. It has emboldened my belief and faith in goodness and strength of my clients, students, and colleagues alike. Like my mother, I stride onward with humility, grace, and courage come what may—in moments of consternation and in moments of triumphs.

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