

# Revisiting The Role Of All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (Abwwf) In Uplifting The Bodo Community Of Assam

Anjima Narzary , Kleophas Narzary

## ABSTRACT

The acronym ABWWF represents the organization known as the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation. Previously, the acronym ABWWF was referred to the organization known as the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF). The organization AATWWF now ABWWF has been playing a significant role since their inception. ABWWF is a prominent social reform organization among the Bodo community. The primary objective of this federation is to address various forms of gender-based violence and social issues, including polygamy, witch hunting, child marriage, alcoholism, dowry-related deaths, as well as sexual harassment such as rape, molestation, and domestic violence. Additionally, the federation aims to advocate for the welfare of Bodo women, addressing their economic challenges, promoting their holistic development, and safeguarding their civil and political rights. The individuals in question do research on various strategies in order to achieve their goals of advocating for gender equality and promoting the social, political, economic, and cultural rights and recognition of women. Additionally, the preservation and self-determination of the Bodo identity emerges as the central focus. The current paper is an attempt to revisit the role of ABWWF in overall upliftment of the Bodo community, with a special emphasis on the Bodoland Territorial Region, Assam.

Keywords: AATWWF, ABWWF, Bodo, Women, Culture, Upliftment.

## INTRODUCTION:

Women's organizations are a component of the civil society, which exists everywhere in the world. The development of knowledge, social awareness, and political awareness among women today has tremendously aided in their ability to organize themselves to work for the advancement of women specifically and society generally. Additionally, and perhaps most notably, the United

Nations Society Council resolution 1325, which was adopted on October 30, 2000, has significantly tended to protect women and children from the violence of armed conflicts as well as violence against women, and has encouraged more women to freely and actively participate in various social peace-making processes. In Assam, numerous women's organizations were founded at various points with the goal of improving women's conditions as well as societal harmony and peace in general. It is evident that our society exhibits a significant degree of variety in terms of language, culture, religion, and historical backgrounds, with each element being distinct from one another. It's a place where people from many different cultures and communities have been coexisting for centuries. Protracted conflicts include a wide variety of actors, including sub-national entities, municipalities, and even sub-national entities inside a state or central authority that want independence or autonomy. These problems, which are now widespread throughout the North Eastern states, including Assam, lead to widespread societal unrest. In addition, the lack of social disturbance now completely accounts for the pervasiveness of gender-based violence and discrimination. In this context, several women's groups are crucial in the fight to end discriminatory attitudes and practices. In North East India, we met women who are redefining peace in their region. The effects of conflict on women are not necessarily bad. In fact, this might be a moment of empowerment for certain women, as they take on roles that have historically been held by males.<sup>1</sup>

ABWWF was established on July 14, 1986 and has been playing a noteworthy role among many women's organizations of Assam. It is actually an organization for women with an ethnic focus. In most instances, they endeavor to enhance societal conditions and make valuable contributions across several domains. The consequences of this phenomenon are many, impacting both people and society as a whole. Since its inception, ABWWF has been a powerful voice in the fight against societal ills and gender-based violence such as witch hunts, polygamy, child marriage, dowry deaths, alcoholism, and several types of sexual assault, molestation, and abuse. The existing precarious socio-economic conditions in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) now BTR are further exacerbated by the efforts to resolve the continuing conflict between Bodo and non-Bodo people, Bodo

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<sup>1</sup> Champha Wangsu "All Bodo Women Welfare Federation and Its Role In Peace Making Process In Assam"

insurgent factions, and the central armed forces. As a result of this, they consistently engaged in proactive measures and shown a tendency to foster a sense of camaraderie and solidarity between the Bodo and non-Bodo communities, with the aim of enhancing social cohesion and tranquility within the BTAD region.

ABWWF as a social organization has been playing a crucial role in promoting social upliftment among the Bodo society, garnering substantial importance within the Bodo community. The ABWWF is classified as a non-governmental organization (NGO) that operates independently from government oversight, since it is not legally registered and does not fall under direct governmental supervision. As per the statements provided by the leaders of ABWWF, it has been indicated that the organization has not undergone registration with the government. The ABWWF, being a women's association, primarily focuses its efforts on addressing women's concerns and promoting awareness about gender equality within society.

The function of ABBWF's primary objective is to combat several detrimental social practices targeting women. These practices include polygamy, inter-caste marriage, witch-hunting, child marriage, as well as instances of sexual harassment such as rape, molestation, and domestic abuse. However, awareness of ABBWF's efforts remains limited to a select few individuals. The organization also places emphasis on providing education to both genders and promoting self-employment opportunities for women in order to empower them within the community. The organization uses several strategies in order to achieve their goals of advocating for gender equality, social standing, and ownership rights for women in the context of societal advancement. As such, this paper is a focus on comprehending and analyzing the function and strategies used by the ABWWF in promoting social progress within the Bodo community.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

- a. To study the organizational structure of ABWWF.
- b. To examine the role of ABWWF in social, education, economic and political upliftments of the present day Bodo Society.
- c. To examine the relevance of ABWWF in contemporary Bodo society.

#### **METHODOLOGY:**

The present study is analytical and will rely on qualitative method. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. In

order to collect Primary data, the former and present office bearers of ABWWF and ABSU have been interviewed by unstructured questionnaire.

Secondary data includes ABWWF's publication magazines i.e., Songdan, Laijou and office records from All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation and All Bodo Students Union as well as articles, books, magazines and Google sources and other depositories like Shodganga.

### **ORIGIN AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF ALL BODO WOMEN'S WELFARE FEDERATION (ABWWF):**

The participation of Bodo women for formation of ABWWF or building a society through reformation can be divided in to two phases.

**First phase:** The movement for social reformation of the Bodo women under the Leadership and guidance of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma.

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, an influential figure, had the twin role of advocating for the Brahma religion and offering philosophical guidance to the Bodos. His teachings aimed to uplift the Bodos from a condition of ignorance and obscurity, fostering their enlightenment and progress in all spheres of life. Gurudev might be considered a prominent person in the preservation and advancement of the Bodo Community.

During the period characterized by the influence of Gurudev, the condition of women within the Bodo tribe was profoundly disheartening. The aforementioned women were deprived of their rightful place in society, leading to an absence of both entitlements and equitable standing in comparison to their male counterparts. Undoubtedly, women residing in remote areas, much like their counterparts worldwide, encountered notable adversities, enduring inferior treatment relative to males. In a manner similar to women around the globe, Bodo women have also shown a sense of dignity in their conduct and have persevered through their situations while being subjected to male dominance. Gurudev has a full comprehension and has shown significant care over the socioeconomic status of this specific group, hence demonstrating a willingness to adopt proactive steps on their behalf. Gurudev Kalicharan saw that the insufficient transformation of Bodo society would endure until the enhancement of Bodo women was guaranteed. In order to foster the holistic welfare of society, it was imperative to guarantee the equitable allocation of people's rightful status and the provision of

respectful treatment. In this particular environment, women were systematically barred from the inheritance of familial property, pushed to enter into marriages against their will, and obligated to engage in substantial work irrespective of their individual inclinations, both inside their natal home and their matrimonial abode. Furthermore, it was incumbent upon them to manufacture and provide country spirits or rice beer to males at their demand, all the while enduring a persistent subordination in comparison to their male counterparts.

Gurudev's profound understanding of the challenges faced by women prompted him to see the need of implementing significant changes in order to attain the emancipation of Bodo women. Consequently, he conceived the notion of establishing a women's collective with the primary objective of advocating for women's interests and championing their rights. After formulating the strategy, Gurudev promptly began its implementation. The integration of women from regions mostly inhabited by the Bodo ethnic group into village life has been successfully achieved, thanks to the efforts of Mahila Samitis. The majority of towns established one of the aforementioned associations, whereby its members would convene periodically. The participants will participate in a discourse about the difficulties faced by women residing in the aforementioned small village, aiming to discern a feasible resolution.

The Mahila Samitis would convene an annual conference, whereby representatives from various villages would assemble to deliberate upon a wide range of women's concerns and advocate for women's progress in parallel with men, rather than lagging behind. Society as a whole could only progress under such circumstances. Women were encouraged to register their daughters and grand kids in educational institutions subsequent to being exposed to recurring mentions about the significance of this action. The progress of society would be incomplete and inefficient without ensuring literacy for women, who constitute half of the population. The organization placed significant focus on hygiene and cleanliness. In a bygone era, the Mahila Samiti orchestrated a substantial assembly in Molandubi, drawing the participation of several women hailing from various villages in Assam and West Bengal. The convention was under the auspices of Thapeswari Brahma, a resident of Patakhata village. The Mahila Samitis, similar to the Gramme Hiteshi Samiti, aimed to enhance the empowerment of Bodo women residing in Assam and West

Bengal by the establishment of weaving facilities that provided educational and training opportunities.

**Second Phase:** The Movement for women is Bodo Community under the leadership of Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma

The origin and the formation of the AATWWF now ABWWF can be traced to that period of the struggle when ABSU emerged as the major organization to lead the struggle (1985-87). It was during that period the ABSU leaders especially Upendra Nath Brahma encouraged women to participate in the struggle. He believed that even women could play a contributory role towards the development and welfare of the society. It is in this context that the AATWWF emerged with the initiative and support of the ABSU. The former agriculture minister of state government of Assam Pramila Rani Brahma was the first founding President of AATWWF. The AATWWF's constitution states: "It is considered expedient to form a federation of the women folk belonging to all tribal groups of entire Assam to unite themselves in a common platform through mutual understandings being imbibed in a common ideology, with a view to fighting for ensuring rights and justice of the tribal women in the spheres of socio- economic, political, educational, cultural and for their emancipation from their socio- domestic drudgery and thereby to enable themselves in rendering services to the promotion of the welfare and preservation of the indigenous self-identity of all tribal groups living in Assam".

They sought to look after the interests of the Bodo women, their economic problems, their overall development and more importantly the civil and political rights to be enjoyed by them. They also took up several measures to fulfil their objectives of fighting for equal rights, status and honour of women in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres, and thereby seeking to empower women and enable them to participate and much more in the political process. Also, preservation and self-determination of the Bodo identity became one of their primary agenda. It may be noted here that at the time of its formation, AATWWF encompassed women from the tribal groups such as the Bodo, Garo, Mising, Tiwa, Karbi, etc. Although this organization sought to speak for tribal women in general, their focus was primarily on Bodo women. As a result, women from other tribes began to feel alienated and started withdrawing from AATWWF membership. Therefore, the name of the organization was subsequently changed from AATWWF to All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in the Third Annual Conference of

the federation held at Tamulpur in 1993. It is seen that with the change in the nomenclature from AATWWF to ABWWF, membership is now reserved only for Bodo women. The objectives of ABWWF however remained the same. They sought to look for a democratic and peaceful solution to various problems in society. The primary factor behind the origin and emergence of ABWWF was to bring overall upliftment of socio-political, educational, cultural status along with fighting against various atrocities and ill practices against Bodo women in society.<sup>2</sup>

The ABWWF consists of five organizational levels:

1. Central committee
2. District committee,
3. Anchalik committee
4. Unit committee and
5. Village committee

The head office of the federation is in Kokrajhar district of Assam. The office bearers and executive committee manage and run the office. The committee at each level consists of president, secretary and executive members. The president presides over the executive committee meetings and is vested with executive powers. The general secretary carries out all correspondences under the directions of the president. The finance secretary cum treasurer is in charge of all transactions of the Union's Funds. Publicity secretary is responsible for media coverage and publications. Arts and Cultural secretary is responsible for the promotion and preservation of the inherent arts and cultures. The members of the Central Committee of ABWWF are selected from different District Committees at the end of each term. Further, the District Committee is constituted within a geopolitical district and is comprised of the members selected from different Anchalik committees.

ABWWF pledged to honour the genuine urge and aspirations of the Bodos with respect to the preservation of their distinct self-identity, apart from safeguarding the interests of Bodo women. It may be noted here that the ABWWF worked in collaboration with the ABSU in terms of the Bodo issue; however,

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<sup>2</sup> Importance of ABWWF in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Afterwards: published by Centralcommittee of ABWWF on 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> January in 2012 p74-76

regarding women's issues the federation was never guided by the dictum of any political organization or party which went against women's interests. Further, the federation possessed all rights to choose or change the nature of its organization and working strategies as and when the situation demanded.

### **ROLE OF ALL BODO WOMEN'S WELFARE FEDERATION (ABWWF) IN THE UPLIFTMENT OF BODO SOCIETY:**

#### **❖ Social Upliftment:**

The social structure system of the Bodo society is patriarchal in nature. Like other patriarchal society, in Bodo society father is the head of the family. Lineage is drawn from the father. Both Father and husband in a family is regarded as the final decision maker. After a father passes away in Bodo society, his sons typically inherit the real estate. The entire family's property is typically passed to the sons only, according to common observation. A piece of the property may occasionally be handed to the wife by the husband. When she passes away, her sons inherit her property by default. A wife does not have the right to inherit from her husband in the event of a divorce. Typically, a girl kid has no claim to her father's real estate. However, in more recent years, some fathers are giving their daughters a piece of the movable property. These incidents demonstrate how Bodo society has become more flexible recently. Fathers typically make decisions about children's education and finances, while mothers are only responsible for household tasks like cooking, caring for the house and elderly relatives, hosting visitors, weaving, etc. For women, understanding these activities is actually required.

In Bodo society, women are primarily expected to perform domestic tasks like home administration, visitor amusement, weaving, pet ownership, etc. It is a must need moms to be aware of all these activities and impart them to their daughters from unlike boys, who do not experience this in their early years. Consequently, they mostly to abandon their education and devote themselves to domestic duties, whereas boys are sent to school and excused from home duties.

The information collected from ABWWF's members and women stated that in the early Bodo community, a girl kid typically has to assist her mother at a young age with tasks like caring for their younger siblings, cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, etc. They also help their mother with her farming duties like fishing, weaving, and other activities. Most Bodo people share this trait, particularly among those who are economically underprivileged.



Additionally, it is required for females to wear the Dokhona, traditional attire, even though there is no such compulsion in boys. Therefore, the patriarchal values that seep into the fabric of the Bodo society becomes a factor impacting both the advancement of women in private and regardless of their class, in public spaces.

Thus, it is seen that the patriarchal values prevalent in the Bodo society become a hindrance towards the upliftment of women. But with the emergence of ABWWF it was hoped that the status and position of women would be improved.

#### ❖ **Education Upliftment:**

Education is the pathway leading the society to consciousness and awareness for the enlightenment and betterment of Community. Education gives us better insight and understanding of life in around us. We come in contact with the world and gain knowledge of great civilization, national and international issues and in the course we learn more about the importance of our history, ethnic identity, culture heritage, tradition and of course our environment around us which in the modern context needs our utmost care for our own survival.

In the field of literature, they organized various seminars, programmes, workshop and conference to bring awareness among women in the field of education sector in their society. They annually published magazines namely SONGDAN, Laijwo, Raikhmuthi etc, which contained articles on issues like the contribution of women for the upliftment of the society, importance of education, need of for the involvement of women in politics. The ABWWF members have adopted orphanage in Kokrajhar name as "ALAIARAON" since August 14th, 2003, to provide education to those children who have lost their parents belonging to different Bodo society. the society as well in the world<sup>3</sup>.

#### ❖ **Economic Upliftment:**

The Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) has been instrumental in improving the state of the Bodo women's economy. According to the survey results submitted by Bodo women, the economic situation of Bodo women was dire prior to the establishment of ABWWF. The economic situation of Bodo women was worse than that of women in other castes and tribes. While they are able to sell agricultural products, the money they earn belongs to their husbands or fathers and they have no say in

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with ex- gen.secretary of Central ABWWF and Present President of Udalguri District, ABWWF on 17th May 2022 at Tangla.

the matter. It's also very uncommon for women farmers to have limited access to data on the financial returns of their labour. This demonstrates how women are consistently relegated to a subordinate position in all areas of society and the economy, including agriculture.

The ABWWF held several events to educate the community on the benefits of poultry, duckery, goater, piggery, vending, weaving, tailoring, raising sericulture, etc. for economic development and family income. Weavers of silk are common among Bodo women. The Bodo women of the nation were the first to establish the sericulture practice of raising Indi silk. As a result of ABWWF's efforts to educate Bodo women on the topic of commercializing hand-loom production, several women in Bodo communities have begun selling marketable weaving materials.

Self-help groups have also been developed by ABWWF. Self-help organisations like Jwnglari, Mohila Samati, Orchid, etc. were founded by ABWWF back in the day. Together, the group of financially disadvantaged Bodo women created a bank account, pooled their resources, and made a deposit. The bank extended credit to the organisations. They obtained bank loans in order to fund new ventures including chicken farms, pig farms, goat farms, weaving studios and dairies economically.

#### ❖ **Political Upliftment:**

Women are primarily regarded either missing or hardly visible in politics, despite having made progress on several fronts. The emergence of ABWWF led to the political mobilization of the Bodo women in an organized way, and their role became noticeable. The ABWWF was formed during the period of struggle with a view to not only take part in the struggle but also to look after the interests of the Bodo women, their economic problems, their overall development and more importantly the civil and political rights to be enjoyed by women. The ABWWF played an important role in awakening political consciousness among Bodo women and their involvement in the struggle organization worked jointly with the ABSU and other Bodo ethnic organization and participated in various tripartite negotiations on Bodoland issue. It was also committed to spreading the aims and objectives of the ABSU movement to the rural areas, particularly among the illiterate Bodo women different age groups participated in the political struggle led by ABSU in village, district and state levels in the form of processions, dharnas, gheraos, rasta roko and rail roko programmes.

It is interesting to note that though the Bodo society

continued to remain primarily a patriarchal society, the ABSU encouraged women to take part directly in the struggle for Bodoland. Interestingly it was noted that the ABSU depended on the members of ABWWF for mobilizing people in areas that they did not have access to. Several foot marches were carried out across the Bodo areas under the leadership of Upendranath Brahma, and in all such programmes the ABWWF had played a significant role.

#### **RELEVANCE OF ABWWF IN PRESENT BODO SOCIETY:**

The overall motivational factors behind the origin of ABWWF were to generate all round upliftment like in socio- political, educational and cultural aspects along with to fight against some social evils practice against women in the society. Therefore, the range of their responsibilities extends beyond a single region to include other aspects of the socio-political environment. The decision of the ABSU to demand statehood in 1987 marked a new phase of the movement. It was in this movement that many Bodo women participated and acted in different capacities to meet the demand of the ABSU. According to them, there were large number of protest rallies, meetings, dharna and strikes by the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU). But the movement of Roman script led by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had left the most enduring impression on the Bodo women. It was the first Bodo movement, in which the Bodo women, coming out from their homes, joined the script movement. The All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) leaders like Malati Rani Narzary, Hirabai Narzary, Supriya Basumatary, Mira Rani Basumatary and some others actively participated in the 'Roman script' movement led by the BSS and some of them were arrested and punished by the Assam Police. They participated completely and enthusiastically in numerous tripartite negotiations on the Bodoland problem. We cannot say directly that the ABWWF is relevance or not in the present scenario but collected information from the women respondent's state that the role of ABWWF in new modern society is decreasing<sup>4</sup>.

#### **COCLUSION:**

All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and its function in Bodo society have been examined from a variety of angles in the debates above, using both primary and secondary sources. The ABWWF, which was founded as the AATWWF in 1986 and still

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Bodo women and ABSU'S Members.

exists today under a different name, played an important role in the Bodo society's economic, educational, and political spheres. In a patriarchal culture, they are the guardians of women's rights and equality. Since 1987, this group has been a symbol of the growing influence of women in society and has been recognized as one of the most influential tribal women's organisations. In addition, ABWWF is working to create a more disciplined and peaceful Bodo society by rooting out anti-social forces.

The prevalence of patriarchal ideas and rituals resulted in the devaluation of women's involvement in decision-making processes, hence creating a substantial obstacle to the empowerment of women. It is noteworthy to mention that the process of women gaining membership in ABWWF was not without difficulty. In a significant development within the historical context of the Bodo community, a pivotal moment emerged with the establishment of the All Bodo Tribal Women's Federation (AATWWF) and the All Bodo Women's Federation (ABWWF). This marked the first instance when the women of Bodo culture were collectively brought together under a unified organization. By means of these institutions, Bodo women demonstrated their resistance to the patriarchal ideology prevalent within Bodo culture and the familial structure. The Federation demonstrated to women that they had the capacity to effect positive change for the advancement of society and women globally. The study findings indicate that there has been a notable increase in women's involvement in the realm of social upliftment after the establishment of the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF).

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