

Women's Participation in the Village level Politics of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) of Assam.

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Abstract

India is known as a Land of Villages. More than half of the population of India resides in rural area. The maximum villages are socially, economically and politically very backward in its nature since the beginning. Thus, the backwardness nature of the villages had been found as a great challenge in front of the newly Independent country in their rapid development processes. Therefore, the founder of the independent India and the framers of the constitution had a great discussion on the issues of rural development. Accordingly, the concept of rural development took place as a leading preference in the developmental programme and in the planning procedure of the Nation. Further, the idea of rural development had gained widespread support during the post independent age of India. As a consequence, popular appeal and demand for rural development were seen, the National Development Council (NDC) an agent of the Government of India had accepted the "Panchayati Raj Institutions" in October 1958, a system of Local Self Government, as per the recommendation of Balwant Rai Mehta committee (1957). But these acts have been excluded from all the autonomous areas under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India. Accordingly, the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) is out of the jurisdiction of this act. As a matter of fact, the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) are abolished from the BTAD, in their place, in response to the need of local level controlling governmental agency to fulfill the different problems and prospects of the area, the BTC has set up two tier local level institutions which are known as Territorial Constituency Level Co-ordination Committee (TCLCC) and Village Level Development Committee (VCDC). The present study is concerned with the administrative structures of Village Level governance and the political status of women in village level development committees mainly on Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) and Territorial Council Level Co- ordination Committee (TCLCC) of Udalguri district in BTAD.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study can be stated briefly as follows:

- i) To understand the administrative structures of local level governmental institutions of Udalguri district.
- ii) To highlight the present day status of women in politics at village level institutions such as VCDC and TCLCC in the district.

iii) To assess the role of different political parties towards the women's empowerment at grass root level politics.

iv) To examine the causes responsible for low level participation of women at village level politics of BTAD.

Key Words: *Rural development, Women's participation, Politics, BTAD,*

Introduction:

India is known as a Land of Villages. More than half of the population of India resides in rural area. The maximum villages are socially, economically and politically very backward in its nature since the beginning. Thus, the backwardness nature of the villages had been found as a great challenge in front of the newly Independent country in their rapid development processes. Therefore, the founder of the independent India and the framers of the constitution had a great discussion on the issues of rural development. Accordingly, the concept of rural development took place as a leading preference in the developmental programme and in the planning procedure of the Nation. However, the ideas of rural development are concerned with the improvement of the living standards of the rural citizens by providing basic needs to the rural inhabitants of the areas. It's always focused on equal facilities, distributive justice and popular participation of rural people in the decision making process in local or village level governmental Institutions and administrative organization as well.

Further, the idea of rural development had gained widespread support during the post independent age of India. As a consequence, popular appeal and demand for rural development were seen, the National Development Council (NDC) an agent of the Government of India had accepted the "Panchayati Raj Institutions" in October 1958, a system of Local Self Government, as per the recommendation of Balwant Rai Mehta committee (1957). The main motto of Panchayat Raj Institution is to offshoot all round development in all rural areas of the Country. However, the aims and objectives of PRIs shall be fulfill and success, when all the people, both male and female would be actively involved and participated at the aforesaid Local or Village level administration. In this respect of popular participation of women in local and village level governmental institutions, some special provisions have been incorporated in the system of PRIs through the 73rd amendment act.1992 of the constitution. The 73rd amendment act had made it compulsory for all the states to introduce PRIs. Accordingly, as a result of this act, Assam Panchayati act.1994, has introduced a three tier Panchayat systems comprising of Gaon Panchayat at village level, Ancholic Panchayat at block level and Zilla Panchayat at district level with some special reservation provision for SCs, STs and Women's (1/3rd of the elected seats in each Panchayat for women). These special provisions of reservation for women can be consider as golden opportunity for women, through which they can involve themselves into the open competition of Grass root politics and establish their status with full dignity. But these acts have been excluded from all the autonomous areas under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India. Accordingly, the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) is out of the jurisdiction of this act. As a matter of fact, the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) are abolished from the BTAD, in their place, in response to the need of local level controlling governmental agency to fulfill the different problems and prospects of the area, the BTC has set up two tier local level institutions which are known as Territorial Constituency Level Co-ordination Committee (TCLCC) and Village Level Development Committee (VCDC).

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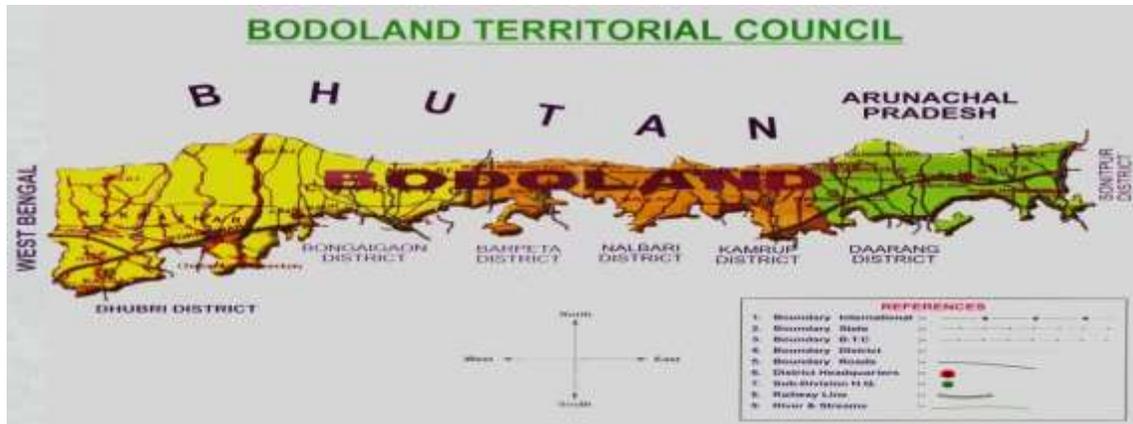
Area of the Study:

Before we go into the details on village level governance of BTAD, it is desirable to know about BTAD. Bodoland Territorial Area District is the result of a historical Accord signed by the Government of India, Government of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) on 10th February, 2003. The Bodos are the distinct racial community of greater Mongoloid ethnic Group of Assam. After the Independent of the country, some Bodo educated elite became united and started to think for preservation and development of their traditions, culture, language, etc. They have started a language movement, a medium movement and gradually they launched a political movement demanding separate state for Bodos. The strong agitation and long age struggle of Bodo people had compelled the government of state of Assam and Union of India to provide consignment for discussion on Bodo issues. As a result, a tripartite agreement had led to sign in Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on 10th February 2003 and the BTAD came into existence consisting of the four districts such as Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa & Udalguri.

Consequently, the study area Udalguri district was formally inaugurated as a district on 14th June, 2004 which is a multiethnic area with heterogeneous cultural background. The district has 2 sub-divisions with 6 developmental blocks and 800 villages. The total population is 8, 32,769 out of which 4, 23,617 are male and 4, 09,152 are female. As per 2011 census, 95.48 % population of Udalguri district lives in rural areas .The female percentage in rural areas is 49.32 and the sex ratio is 973. The total geographical area of this district is 1673.94 sq.km and extent of the district lies between 9208 E to 9515 E longitudes and 2646 N to 2777 N latitude.

MAP OF ASSAM





Source : Bodoland Diary 2019

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- iii) To assess the role of different political parties towards the women's empowerment at grass root level politics.
- iv) To examine the causes responsible for low level participation of women at village level politics of BTAD.

Methodology:

In order to examine the administrative structures of village level governmental institutions and the status of women in village level politics in Udalguri district of BTAD, Assam, the data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. An attempt has been made to collect the primary data and information through interview, observations, questionnaire from different categories of respondents of the study area. More importantly, the Chairman of TCLCC & VCDC, the members of local institutions, the Headmen of different villages, the political leaders, the elites and the members of different organizations- especially women's organization of different villages of the study area have consulted and collected data based on their experiences. For the purpose of the study 50 respondents were selected with the help of purposive sampling technique and interviewed with the help of structured interview schedule.

Secondary data and information have been collected from different statistical Handbook book of BTC, different books, journals, published research papers and articles, news paper, government record of the council and its village level institutions, official records of different local bodies and different websites.

Analyses of the study:

The aforementioned MoS of 10th February, 2003 for BTAD, clause 4.8 has clearly stated that Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) ceases to be enforced in the council area and the powers of the PRIs shall be conferred to the council of BTC. Accordingly, it has been clearly stated in the paragraph 2 of Sixth Schedule that the Constitution making power for the District Council and Regional Council shall be in the hand of the Governor and according to the sub paragraph 6 of the Schedule, the District Council may have the legal authority to form Sub-ordinate Local or Village Council and their procedure with the approval of the Governor.

As per the clause 4.8 of MoS , at the meantime, the system of Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) has been abolished from the BTAD, in their place, to deal with the needs of Local Level Controlling governmental agency and to fulfill its problems and prospects, the BTC has formed two tier Local Level Institutions, namely, Territorial Constituency Level Co-Ordination Committee (TCLCC) and Village Level Development Committee (VCDC). The BTC itself is a kind of decentralized governance. Wherein, BTC itself operates at the top in the district level, while TCLCC operates at the Block Level and the VCDC in the Village level. Thus, both TCLCC and VCDC are the local government body of BTC to carry on rural development on.

VCDC: It is a bottom level institution and about 6000 to 8000 people of rural areas are necessary to constitute a VCDC. Within one VCDC there may be one or more villages and minimum one member is nominated from each revenue village. There is no proper guideline on reservation of seats for grass-root women.

TCLCC: In each BTCLA constituency of BTAD, the TCLCC is a block level institution. Moreover, at least one member to the TCLCC has to be nominated by each and every VCDC and the Chairman, accordingly, is nominated by the authority of BTC. This committee has to distribute all the schemes approved by District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) under Panchayat and Rural Development Department (P&RD) of BTC. At least one woman member to be selected as per provision concerns. The Block Development Officer (BDO) is appointed as the member secretary to this committee as well.

Thus, the TCLCCs and VCDCs have found equivalent, former is to the Ancholic Panchayat and second is to the Village Panchayat. These two committee have been performing a very important and crucial role in planning and implementing the various governmental schemes to uplift the socio –economic and political conditions of the area. The desires empowerment and development of the area are completely depends on the aforesaid rural developmental committees because they are the authorized body of planning, organizing, selection and monitoring the

developmental schemes and its utilizations. Therefore, as a responsible governmental body the TCLCC and VCDC have a great responsibility for the empowerment of women's in every sphere of their life intend for proper rural development in the area. Women are potential contributors towards the development of social, cultural and political activities of the state .Women's participation in social ,economic and especially political activities at all level makes a system of governance more democratic. In this context, the objectives of the study were set to find out the women's participation and involvement in local grass root administration.

However, The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), itself is mechanism of the decentralization of political and economic power under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Bodoland Peoples Front (BPF), the most popular party in BTAD has become the single dominant party since the first election to the council is yet to organize properly in the sense of equal representation to the female section in its party structure .The following table shows the strength of women representation in the organizational structure of the party in 39No.Pasnwi Serfang Constituency

Table No-1
BPF, 39 No.Pasnwi Serfang BTCLA constituencies

Sl.No.	Name of Committee	Male Members	Female Members	Total Members
1	Pasnwi Serfang Block Committee	69	02	71
2	Phuluguri Primary Committee	31	00	31
3	Jagyapur Primary Committee	31	00	31
4	Mazbat Primary Committee	31	00	31
5	Habigaon Primary Committee	31	00	31
6	Orang Primary Committee	31	00	31
7	Rowta Bagan Primary Committee	31	00	31
8	Merabil(Adhoc) Primary Committee	31	00	31
9	Rowtagaon Primary Committee	31	00	31
10	Bahipukhuri Primary Committee	31	00	31
11	Lamabari Primary Committee	31	00	31
12	NauheruaPrimary Committee	31	00	31
13	Dhanseri Primary Committee	31	00	31

Source: Official Record, BPF, 39 Pasnwi Serfang Block Committi.2015

As per the organizational structure of BPF, the ruling party has to be provided equal opportunity to the rural women to take part in different bodies of the party. But from the above table No.1 it has clearly come to be seems that in 39 no. Pasnwi Serfang BTCLA constituency, the party has one block committee and twelve primary committees. Unfortunately out of 71 Members of the block committee only two are female and no single female member is found in another twelve primary committee. Therefore, in this constituency the party is holding injustice to the women of this area. As a result the rural women of this constituency have no word to say in the matter of the party decision and their status within the party become very low.

On the other hand, the national political party like Indian National Congress (INC) has been maintaining a reservation system for women in the organizational structure in each level. But in practice most of female members is inactive and voiceless. Even this oldest political party in India has also failed to give due space and representation to women in politics particularly in

BTAD. Though the INC has provided 33% reservation at the bottom level party organization, Most of female members of the party feel uncomfortable because the politics of BTAD has proved to be very inhospitable for women. The extreme gender discrimination makes it very difficult for women to establish a foothold without patronage from powerful man in the party. Particularly women is handicapped in the politics of BTAD. Thus rural women in BTAD are considered as the second citizen and their political aspirations are suppressed by the male dominated society. Besides, as it is previously mentioned that for the proper implementation of grass root level development programmes and all round development of rural areas, the authority of BTC has initiated a temporary system of two tier village level development committees namely VCDC and TCLCC. Besides, there are also two another small committee at every level of the party namely Youth Cell and Women Cell. The empowerment of rural women at the grass root development activities through the VCDC and TCLCC in Udalguri district of BTAD is still an illusion of reality.

The strength of women as a voter and their educational status in Udalguri district can be justified from the following tables-

Table No- 2
BTCLA Constituencies of Udalguri District

Sl. No	Name of BTCLA constituency	Male Population	Female Population	Total Population
1	31. Khwirabari (ST)	23489	22827	46316
2	32. Bhergaon (ST)	22708	22623	45331
3	33. Nonwi serfang (Non ST)	22168	20934	43102
4	34. Khalingduar (ST)	26266	24559	50825
5	35. Mwidwibari (Open)	27847	26352	54199
6	36. Harisinga (ST)	23799	22951	46750
7	37. Dwhwsri (ST)	27712	25672	53384
8	38. Bhairabkunda (ST)	26768	24645	51413
9.	39. Pasnwi serfang (Non ST)	26610	25466	52076
10	40. Rowta (ST)	26243	24972	51215
Total Population		253610	241001	494611

Source: <http://www.udalguri.gov.in.2010>.

From the table no- 2, it has been observed that the numbers of female voter in all the BTCLA constituencies of Udalguri district are less than male voter. It is also found that in all ten BTCLA constituencies, male voters are dominating factor in comparison to female. As a result, no female candidates are able to win over the last three BTCLA elections and Labita Das was found to be single candidate in Udalguri district in the last BTCLA election and Anima Bayan was only nominated woman member to the BTCLA from the district in 2006.

Table No- 3
Literacy Rate of Women in BTAD

Districts	Person		Male		Female	
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Kokrajhar	52.29	66.63	61.01	73.44	43.06	59.54
Chirang	52.61	64.71	61.82	71.35	42.87	57.87
Baksa	59.57	70.53	70.32	78.55	48.33	62.23
Udalguri	56.40	66.60	65.94	73.79	46.34	59.17
Total BTAD	55.21	67.11	64.77	74.28	45.15	59.70

Source: Provisional population census, 2011. Statistical Handbook of BTC, 2011 Page-7.

Table No- 3, Indicates that overall literacy rate of women of BTAD is not satisfactory and there is little growth in literacy rate of women in 2011 comparing to 2011. The female literacy rate in all the districts is too lower than male literacy rate. Hence, the lower literacy rate of women influences in their socio-political lives in the entire study area. According to 2011 census report, 95.48 percent people are living in the rural areas in Udalguri district and the educational status of women is more backward than male. Average literacy rate of female in rural areas of Udalguri district is 56.92% and male's percentage is 71.75 which is much higher than female. The female of the rural areas will not be active in village level politics until and unless they are equal to male in education.

Table No- 4 (A)

The present positions of women representation (as a member) in the VCDC of No. 35 Mwidwibari

SI No	Name of VCDC	Male	Female	Total Members
1	Kacharital VCDC	10	01	11
2	Balipara VCDC	10	01	11
3	Gerua VCDC	10	01	11
4	Chengapathar VCDC	10	01	11
5	Niz-Kalaigaon VCDC	10	01	11
6	Naptipara VCDC	10	01	11
7	Kalaigaon Town VCDC	10	01	11
8	Bhakatpara VCDC	10	01	11
9	Mwidwibari VCDC	10	01	11
Total		90	09	99

Source: Office of the Block Dev. Officer, Mazbat, 2014(Sept.)

Table No- 4 (B)

The present positions of women representation (as a member) in the VCDC of No.39. Pasnwi Serfang

SI No	Name of VCDC	Male	Female	Total Members
1	Majbat VCDC	11	01	12
2	Phulaguri	14	0	14
3	Bahipookri	11	01	12
4	Lamabari	13	0	13
5	64 Dhanseri	10	0	10
6	Nauherua	09	0	09
7	Rowta Bagan	15	0	15
8	Rowta Gaon	11	01	12
9	Merabil	16	01	17
10	Orang	15	01	16
11	Habigaon	15	0	15
12	Jagyapara	15	0	15
Total		155	05	160

Source: Office of the Block Dev. Officer, Mazbat, 2014(Sept.)

From the Table No- 4 (A) and 4 (B) it has been observed that the present positions of women representation in both the VCDC namely 35. No. Mwidwibari and No.39. Pasnwi Serfang BTCLA constituencies of Bhergaon and Udalguri Sub-Division under Udalguri district are very negligible. Out of 99 members only 9 are female in the 35 no Mwidwibari BTCLA constituencies and out of 160 members only 5 are female in 39 no. Pasnwi Serfang BTCLA

constituency. Moreover, the total number of members in TCLCC of both the BTCLA constituencies is 17 and 19 and only 2 members are female in each TCLCC. On the other hand, the total number of women members in all total 110 VCDC of Udalguri district were only 56 in 2008 and 84 in 2010 which was found to be disappointed. Therefore, it is clear that the women are speechless and they have nothing to say in the decision making process of these institutions due to their poor strength. In this way the political rights of women get systematically nullified by the male dominated authority.

Perhaps the negligence to women power in Udalguri district is the most significant factor of backwardness. Their rights have been violated very frequently by the male dominated society. It is rare to see that the women and their associations take major role in the decision making process of rural development. Only a few portions of women from rural areas are working as party member without having real decision making power. Even, the major political parties of this area are not fully interested to empower the grass root women. Different political parties and leaders are using the rural women as their permanent vote bank instead of giving their actual rights. On the contrary, it has been observed that the women are the main strength of the ruling party of BPF. The previous elections of BTAD, the different festivals of BTAD organized by the party, the different conferences of the party and the different meetings of the party have been seen succeeded only because of the marvelous participation of rural women only. But the sorry fact is that there is no any position of women in the internal organizational structure of the party, except in the departments of the government of BTC also. More importantly, the party has been utilizing the women's strength as their unanimous vote bank by providing them un refundable minimal amount of loans (group wise or self help group wise),IWY house, latrines, mosquito net and blank kept (athuwa and komball) etc. since from the beginning. Again, the role of women organizations likes Asom Mahila Samata Society (Udalguri Unit), Asom Mahila Ayog, All Bodo Women Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and different local NGO's are yet to be significant and positive.

Suggestions:

From the above facts it can be mentioned that there is a special need to empower women to enhance their participations at village level politics of BTAD. To promote women representation in village level institutions, the following suggestions can be considered. Such as-

- The members of all VCDC and TCLCC are rather nominated and the process of nomination has been politicized. Therefore, the members of such committees become the representative of a particular party or section that of the common people of rural areas. Hence, a periodic election system is the urgent need for the upliftment of all sections of the rural areas.
- The Assam Panchayat Act. 1994 has made specific reservation for women and it was 50 percent in last Panchayat election of Assam. This reservation system should be made applicable in all grass root level institutions of BTAD.
- Voluntary organization particularly women organizations and such other social organizations, print and electronic medias should be encouraged to work for political awareness of the rural women of BTAD.
- All political parties should provide equal opportunities to rural women in their organizational structure and maintain equal representation system at grass root level institutions. Thus, political parties should adopt a holistic approach to the women of rural areas.

- Both central as well as state government should initiate special educational policy and programmes for the women of remote rural areas of BTAD through which they may be aware of all rules and regulations of the society, plan and policies of the government and right and responsibilities etc.

Conclusion:

It is almost clear that development process in our state particularly in BTAD is not gender neutral and the rural women are bearing inferior status in grass-root politics as compared to the average women in India. We are one of the first democratic countries to give equal right to vote and right to participate to men and women. But the women in our country are still not free from discrimination and it is not to the level of satisfaction. There is still a major portion of women who belong to the category called “Below Poverty Line” is seen anywhere in the urban as well as rural institutions for development. Therefore it is the need of the time to change our attitude towards women power and should enhance their quality of participation especially at grass-root politics. For the success of the principle of grass-root democracy, both men and women should be treated as equal in policy formulation and implementation of rural development. Thus, it can be said that the imparting of proper education, political training and awareness enable the women to take active participation at various stages of political spheres.

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