

## **Women, Peace Accords and Social Reconstruction: Experiences from Conflict-Affected Bodoland Territorial Area Districts of Assam**

**Amrita Saikia**

### **Abstract**

Studies on peacebuilding and reconstruction rarely focus on the role of women as agents of peace and legitimate participants in negotiating peace accords. This paper documents women's experiences in Bodoland, Assam, after the signing of the Bodoland Territorial Council peace accord, 2003, and examines the provisions of the peace agreement signed in 2020. It argues that women's role in peacebuilding and social reconstruction is limited and influenced by their experiences of gender inequalities at different levels in the family and households and the replication of these in various forms in other social institutions such as the markets and the state. The argument and discussions are drawn from intergroup conflicts among Bodo, Bengali-speaking Muslim and Adivasi communities in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts. The paper also draws from qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with leaders of women's organizations and marginalized conflict-affected women from Assam.

### **Author Profiles**

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### **Introduction**

Two decades have passed since the United Nations Security Council (2000) adopted resolution S/RES/1325 or UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security. The resolution reiterated the important role that women can play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, in negotiating peace, peacebuilding, humanitarian actions and in post-conflict reconstruction. It emphasized the importance of women's equal participation and full involvement in maintaining and promoting peace and security. Scholars (Moola 2006; Hamilton 2000; Manchanda 2005) however point out that these ideas and policies have rarely translated into practice. Men largely dominate most of the post-conflict institutions. Women are typically relegated as victims and their voices confined to the margins.

This paper documents women's experiences in post-conflict situations in the Bodoland areas of India's Northeast after the signing of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Peace Accord in 2003. The paper also examines the provisions of the recent BTC peace agreement signed in 2020. A central question addressed here is how do these accords and agreements impact the lives of women.

The paper examines the situation of conflict-affected women of Bodo, Bengali-speaking Muslim and Adivasi communities in Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) region of Assam and identifies the obstacles women face in being involved in peacebuilding in the conflict-affected BTAD region. The paper argues that women's role in peacebuilding and social reconstruction is limited and influenced by what Kabeer (1999) calls the 'institutional construction of gender inequality'. Kabeer's (1999) framework of 'institutional construction of gender inequality' explains the underrepresentation of women at institutional levels. The framework posits that the gender inequalities that are present in the family and household are reproduced in the policy-making institutions, which are responsible for making gender-just policies. The framework takes into consideration four types of institutions — the state, the market, the community and the family. Kabeer argues that at each of these levels, inequalities based on gender are somewhat explicit and that while the different institutions operate in distinct ways, beliefs, norms and values are common to each, which results in the construction and reinforcement of certain inequalities.

The paper is partly based on qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with leaders of women's organizations and marginalized conflict-affected women in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts region of Assam. The interviews were conducted in the months of June and July in 2017 in Kokrajhar and the nearby conflict-affected villages. The duration of the interviews was between half an hour and one hour. The interviews led to an in-depth understanding of the lives of women in these communities, their struggles and difficulties post-accord, their apprehensions and aspirations, their experiences and memories of the ethnic conflicts and the

ways in which they strive for peace.

### **Women and Peace Accords: The Backdrop**

Recent studies have focused on the role and participation of women in peace negotiations. Krause, Krause and Bränfors (2018) emphasized (a) the role and participation of women as signatories in peace processes and peace accords, (b) the content of peace accords, and (c) the role and participation of women in the implementation of the provisions of the accords. They examined whether women's participation will have a durable impact on the peacebuilding process and argued that although women have participated or have been signatories in several peace agreements, the numbers are insignificant. Moreover, their participation does not necessarily lead to their inclusion in the actual decision-making process. Similarly, Chang et al. (2015) argued that mere presence of a woman at the negotiations table does not mean that women's issues will be raised and heard. Yet including women in formal peace processes could prove critical in getting women's issues being heeded to. Chang et al. (2015) further argued that women have greater participation in civil society. Hence, understanding how women in civil society influence peace processes could highlight whether their participation could make any difference in resolving conflicts. Stone's (2014) analysis of peace agreements demonstrated that although women do take part in peace processes in significant capacities, their significance does not always bear positive or long-term results. The study also revealed the increasing influence of women in durable peace processes when gender quotas are implemented in national legislatures. Similarly, Shair-Rosenfield and Wood (2017) argued that greater female representation in legislatures influences durable peace by influencing public spending patterns in post-conflict states and improving the public perceptions concerning the quality of governance.

Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that women's participation in peace negotiations may allow the scope of political reforms not because of women's inherent peaceful nature as some essentialists would argue, but perhaps because of the ability to influence decision making. O'Reilly, Súilleabháin, and Paffenholz (2015) argued that the participation of women's groups in peace processes is correlated with positive outcomes provided their influence on the process is strong. In cases where women's groups were included and were successful in influencing negotiations, peace agreements were almost reached. Women's participation hardly had any negative impact on peace processes. On the contrary, women's involvement resulted in attaining sustainable peace. Krause, Krause, and Bränfors (2018) also argued that although the number of women participating in actual peace accords has not increased over the decades, in those cases where women have participated, there is a higher likelihood that peace is durable. Moreover, in those cases, the rate of implementation of provisions in the peace agreements related to gender equality and women's security is relatively higher (Caprioli 2005).

In India's Northeast, women's civil society groups in some of the conflict-affected states have played a significant role in the initiation of peace processes. For example, the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) in Nagaland was involved in initiating the peace process to reduce violence in the state. Since its inception in the 1980s, the organization has been working towards establishing peaceful relations among different Naga groups. In 1994, NMA formed a peace team to address the increasing violence in the state (Banerjee 2001). The NMA made appeals to both the militant groups and the government to stop the killings in Nagaland. The association played

a significant role in trying to broker peace between the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) factions to bring an end to the conflicts (Choudhury 2016). Apart from peace-related activities, the NMA is also involved in addressing social evils in the Naga society because NMA believes that underdevelopment, social evils and conflict are deeply interrelated (Banerjee 2001).

However, it needs to be noted that despite these initiatives taken by the women's civil society groups, women in South Asia are often excluded from the actual peace process. Although there are studies that have focused on women and peacebuilding in the South Asian context (Kumudini 2006 and Manchanda 2017) and India's Northeast (Rajagopalan 2008 and Kolas 2017), studies concerning conflicts and peace accords in the BTAD region have rarely focused on the impact of these accords on the lives of women. This paper therefore makes a humble attempt to understand the provisions within these accords and their impact on the lives of women. The study draws empirical lessons from the BTAD region of Assam.

### Background to the Case Study

The Bodoland Territorial Area Districts region comprises four contiguous districts of Assam, namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri and Baksa. These districts are under the jurisdiction of the Bodoland Territorial Council. The four BTAD districts were carved out of Assam. The autonomous administrative unit was constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and covers an area of 8795 sq km.<sup>1</sup>

There are six civil subdivisions, 3082 villages, 2890 revenue villages, and 2272 tribal belt and block villages.<sup>2</sup> The combined population of the four districts is 3,151,047 persons as per the 2011 Census. The districts are inhabited by both tribal and non-tribal population — Bodo, Rabha, Garo, Koch-Rajbongshi, Nepali, Assamese, Santhal, Muslims etc. Although a large number of communities reside in the BTAD region, three communities — Bodos, Bengali-speaking Muslims and Adivasis — are the focus of this paper. Bodos comprise about 29 percent of the population.<sup>3</sup> Bodos trace their origins to the Kacharis.<sup>4</sup> Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants were brought to Assam by the British to cultivate the fallow lands in lower Assam and meet the scarcity of food production (Guha 1977). The Adivasis in Assam are divided into two large groups, the tea garden workers and the ex-tea garden workers, those who exited the tea gardens and settled in nearby areas. The Adivasis are further sub-divided into different subgroups like Oraons, Santhals, Mundas and others.

Bodoland Territorial Area Districts witnessed ethnic unrest and violence since the late 1980s. There have been contentions between the Bodos and the Bengali-speaking Muslims and the Bodos and the Adivasis within the Bodo territory. Consequently, conflicts between the Bodos

<sup>1</sup> Bodoland at a Glance. (<http://bodoland.in/index.php/2016-02-26-07-47-07/48-bodoland-at-a-glance>)

<sup>2</sup> <https://wptbc.assam.gov.in/portlets/bodoland-territorial-council#maintitle2>

<sup>3</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/a-distraught-tribal-the-musgenesis-of-assam-ethnic-violence/article-show/15458830.cms>

<sup>4</sup> Edward Gait (1906: 242) used the term Kacharis to describe the Bodos as the earliest settlers of Assam. The Kacharis may have their origins in Tibet and China based on their Mongoloid features (Endle 1911). According to Endle (1911), the Bodos may have migrated through two routes – through the valley of Tista Dharla, Sankosh River to Western Assam or through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valley to eastern Assam. The Kacharis were perhaps the dominant race in Assam in the earlier days, according to Endle. Also, the Kachari race was widely distributed and were found outside Assam, in North-east Bengal and Koch-Bihar (ibid.).

and the other groups erupted in BTAD. Large-scale violence between the Bodos and the Bengali-speaking Muslims took place in 1993, 1994, 2008 and 2012 and between the Bodos and the Adivasis in 1996, 1998 and 2014.

After a series of talks, the second peace accord was signed between the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), the government of Assam and the central government (Memorandum of Settlement 2003).<sup>5</sup> The accord led to the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (ibid.). However, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), another armed faction, continued its armed struggle for liberation in Bodoland. NDFB refused to accept the formation of an autonomous state within the territory of India and were demanding a separate state outside the Indian Union. Later on, NDFB was divided into several factions. In 2020, one of the pro-talk factions of NDFB negotiated and signed an accord with the government of India. It is however important to note that although the accords have been signed in BTAD, women have not directly participated in the high-level peace negotiations in 2003 and 2020 between the government actors and former armed militants. Moreover, a field visit to BTAD in the recent years revealed that the situation of women post-conflict has not altered much and women have not been able to occupy the space in peacebuilding that they are entitled to. What are the probable obstacles to women's direct participation as individuals and groups in the formal peace negotiations? Evidence shows that women's groups often work towards peace (e.g., Nagaland). However, in reality, they are often left out of the decision making process during the transition and post-conflict institution building. What explains the exclusion of women and gendered peacebuilding?

In order to address these questions, the paper examines the role of women's civil society groups in peacebuilding in BTAD and the content of the peace negotiations.

### **Women's Experiences of Conflict in BTAD**

Some of the lessons from the field about inter-group violence reveal that inter-group attacks in BTAD ensued without any warning. Some of the respondents narrated that the 1996 incident between the Bodos and the Adivasis occurred in the month of May, the 2012 incident between the Bodos and the Muslims also occurred in the month of May and the 2014 incident between the Adivasis and the Bodos took place in the month of December. While some people were caught up in the middle of their day-to-day activities, others were woken up by commotion in the wee hours of the morning while they were in deep sleep, still others were caught up while relaxing in the afternoon after a hectic day in the fields. Some people received calls on their mobile phones from their well-wishers minutes after the chaos that started in a marketplace but some were completely caught off-guard. The only option that the people had was to leave whatever they were doing and flee to save their lives.

One of the Bengali-Muslim respondents affected in the 2012 conflict said,

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<sup>5</sup> The first peace accord was signed on February 20, 1993, between the Government of India, Government of Assam, All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) and Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) to bring about 'an amicable solution to the problems of the Bodos and other Plains Tribals living in the north bank of river Brahmaputra within Assam' (Memorandum of Settlement 1993). An agreement was made for the formation of Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC). However, ambiguity in territorial limits led to confusion and conflicts ensued, which was then followed by a renewed demand for a sovereign Bodo state by the Bodos (Pathak 2012).

*Whenever I recall that day, I get goose bumps (she said pointing at her arms). It was in the morning. I was cooking. I received a call from a well-wisher that the village is being attacked and that I should flee immediately. There was news that some men in khaki dress entered the village and were attacking Muslims. I left everything behind, grabbed my son and ran.<sup>6</sup>*

Another Bengali-Muslim respondent affected in the 2012 conflict said,

*On that night of May 2012, around 2 a.m., there was a commotion. Entire village was in deep sleep. Suddenly, people started running from the other side in whatever clothes they were wearing. Our village was under attack by Bodo men. We do not know exactly how many Bodo men came but there were many. They had firearms and opened fire on the Muslim people. While parents grabbed their small children, sons carried their old parents on their backs. Empty handed, people fled their homes. Some were injured badly in the process of trying to reach a safer place in the wee hours of the morning.<sup>7</sup>*

In 1996, the Bodos attacked the Adivasis with deadly weapons. Many Adivasi people were chased and hacked to death by the Bodos. One of the Adivasi respondents affected in the 1996 conflict narrated the following incident,

*On the day of conflict, 19th May (Sunday), 1996, at 10.30 a.m., my husband went out to bring the cattle back. While I was waiting for him to return as it was past lunch time, a boy came running to me and asked, 'Aunty, what kind of clothes did Uncle wear today?' I could sense that something was wrong from his expression. I told him, 'He wore a white shirt and black pants.' The boy stood motionless. Sensing that something was terribly wrong, I persuaded the boy to tell me what happened. He then said that he saw Bodo men killing my husband and broke down. Hearing the news, I fainted. When I regained my consciousness, there were many people in my house. I cried inconsolably. My neighbours then accompanied me to the police station to identify the body. He was killed by Bodo militants. They had big 'khukri' (weapon) with which they cut him, I heard. A Bengali man was also killed with him. They were friends and went out together.<sup>8</sup>*

In one of the villages, during the incident between Bodos and Muslims in 2012, Bodo men clad in Khaki attire carried out the attack, claimed the respondents from that village. They carried weapons and chased Muslim people. In retaliation, Muslim men attacked Bodo people in the Dhubri district, where Bodos are a minority. In 2014, after Adivasis were killed in villages near the Bhutan border, Adivasi men attacked Bodo villages in Kokrajhar. When attacked, the Muslims headed towards the Muslim majority Dhubri district and the Bodos and the Adivasis took shelter in the nearby army camps or police stations. The government soon made arrangements in schools for the people to live. In certain places, temporary huts were constructed with bamboo and tarpaulin sheets for families to live in.

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted in Dotoma village, Kokrajhar, in July 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted in Duramari village, Kokrajhar, in July 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Interview conducted in Kochugaon village, Kokrajhar, in June 2017.

In December 2014, after Bodo militants killed Adivasis in Kokrajhar and Sonitpur districts, the Adivasis launched retaliatory attacks on Bodo villages in Kokrajhar. A Bodo woman affected in the violence narrated the following,

*It was the morning of 25th December, around 11 a.m. We were preparing for Christmas celebrations. Suddenly, there was some disturbance. All the people were running towards the SSB camp. We also ran. The Adivasi men attacked the village. We ran without taking anything with us. After all the Bodo people from the village gathered in the SSB camp, they were shifted to the relief camp. Around 44 Bodo families took shelter in the relief camp for a year because the Adivasis burnt down our houses, paddy and other agricultural produce.<sup>9</sup>*

Another Bodo respondent who was affected in the 2012 Bodo-Muslim conflict expressed the following,

*We used to live in Bilasipara (Raniganj) in Dhubri district till the conflict. Muslims dominated the village we lived in. We had 12 acres of land. We had our own house and also agricultural land. We sold that and bought 1 acre of land in Kokrajhar after the conflict. Since we lost the agricultural land, we had no means of livelihood. Hence, we opened the food stall. This land belongs to the Public Works Department. We don't have to pay any rent for using it. There are three more stalls run by people from our village.*

*Our relation with the Muslims was good prior to the conflict. But we don't know what happened that they suddenly attacked us. When we heard that they are burning down Bodo houses, we fled and took shelter in the Assamese community nearby and stayed for two days. Later, the army rescued us and brought us to Kokrajhar. Two Bodo women were harmed during the conflict. They were hospitalized.<sup>10</sup>*

The respondents added that the communities had no previous enmity. They lived in villages that were next to each other, carried out market transactions on a day-to-day basis and shared a harmonious relationship. The threat of attack by the 'other' community never existed in their minds. Hence, the attacks came as a surprise. They had no time to retaliate or urge for dialogue because they neither expected nor were prepared for such deadly attacks. When the Bodos attacked, the Muslims and Adivasis fled their villages and when the Muslims and Adivasis attacked, the Bodos fled their villages. A single incident was enough to make people, who were living in the region since ages, feel alienated.

The above narratives highlight the effects of large-scale violence on individual lives in BTAD. The stories can be located in the context of everyday lives of communities cohabiting the contiguous villages in BTAD. The narratives however raise important questions on gender-just outcomes after the large-scale violence took place and after women affected by the violence resettled in their own or different villages. The narratives are gendered as some of them primarily point towards fear and apprehension of being attacked in the future by the members

<sup>9</sup> Interview conducted in Kochugaon village, Kokrajhar, in June 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted in Kokrajhar town in June 2017.

of the ethnic ‘other’ and insecurity of marginalized women at a personal level. These narratives therefore raise important concerns on transitional justice of Bodo, Bengali-speaking Muslim and Adivasi women living in the interior villages of BTC.

It is therefore important to note that post the peace agreements, although the Bodos and non-Bodos including the Adivasis and the Bengali-speaking Muslim communities live in close proximity with each other, they live in fear of the ‘other’ since they lack inter-community trust. A study by Thakur (2019) reiterates this fact. Thakur wrote about the situation after the 2014 violence between Bodos and Adivasis in a village called Phulbari in Chirang district in which Bodo women, children, elderly and infirm gathered together at night while the men of the community guarded the perimeter of the village against the Adivasis.

After the large-scale violence, the affected people moved to places that they perceived as safe. Out of fear of the ‘other’ community, some of the Bodos who were living in the Muslim or Adivasi majority villages sold their lands at throwaway prices and moved to other places. Similarly, the Muslims and the Adivasis living in the Bodo majority villages sold their lands and moved to other places. Those who still hold land in the areas where the ‘other’ community is in majority are afraid to go back and claim their lands because they receive continuous threats from the ‘other’ community. As told by an Adivasi respondent who was affected in the 1996 violence, after the attacks, the Bodo people took advantage of the fact that the Adivasis were scared to return to their villages. Since many Adivasis continued to live in the relief camps, the Bodos occupied the Adivasi villages, the respondent said. Many Muslim families also sold off their lands and moved to Muslim majority areas. As a Muslim respondent put it, the Muslims feel that if the Muslims are together they will be able to fight back the Bodos. Similarly, Bodos living in Muslim- and Adivasi-majority areas relocated to Bodo-dominated areas after the violence.

Durable peacebuilding requires inclusive policy implementation of marginal groups such as women in BTAD. Post-conflict experiences of women on the ground reveal that marginalized women belonging to Bodo and non-Bodo communities continue to experience violence and insecurity in their everyday lives. Therefore, understanding the role of women in peace negotiations including from all the communities in the process of peace making, peacebuilding and reconstruction in the BTAD region is important.

### **Role of Civil Society Groups in Peacebuilding**

In the BTAD region, peacebuilding has been undertaken by women’s civil society organizations. Bodo women’s civil society groups emerged during the late 1980s and 1990s, the time when Bodo women actively participated in the Bodoland movement. Women’s groups were formed and members of these groups contributed towards resistance movements in multiple ways, although not as combatants. They took part in protests and raised their voices against rape by security personnel (Sen Chaudhuri 2004), which they continue to do even today. Women played active roles as messengers, cooks, and caretakers. Fighting against social evils, restoring justice and peace, addressing women’s issues were some of the important agendas of these groups. Two of the most important women’s organizations formed during the Bodoland movement and which continue to work in the region are the All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF)



and the Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF).

The All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) was formed by the All Bodo Students' Union, which decided to bring Bodo women to the forefront in order to contribute towards the upliftment of the Bodo society. An organization called the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was formed on July 14, 1986. Although the organization encompassed all the tribal women in the region, the focus only on the issue of a separate Bodoland distanced the women belonging to other tribal groups such as Koch, Rajbonshis, Tiwa, Karbi etc. Hence, from tribal women's welfare, it changed to Bodo women's welfare and it was renamed as the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF). The organization has a constitution of its own and decisions related to matters of the formation of the different committees, election of the president, vice president, secretary, etc. are taken in a democratic manner. The members of ABWWF consider themselves as social workers and address various issues prevailing in the Bodo society such as polygamy, alcoholism, witch hunting, etc. ABWWF members also intervene in rape and molestation cases. Preventing child marriage is also one of the agendas of ABWWF. A respondent, who is an active member of the ABWWF, shared how in 2016 they protested against the gang rape of a pregnant Bodo women by security forces in the Kochugaon area of Kokrajhar. ABWWF submitted a letter to the Government of Assam requesting immediate action against the perpetrators.

The Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF) is a Bodo women's organization that engages itself with issues of peace in the Bodoland region. It was formed in 1993 by Anjali Daimary, who is an iconic female figure in BTAD (Banerjee 2014). Since its inception, the group has initiated many meetings to discuss and deal with human rights issues. The members of the BWJF, all women, would go from one village to the other to spread awareness about the community's rights and mobilize people to be active participants. The forum was gaining prominence in the Bodo society, which was not received in a positive way by many. This was evident in the killing of the general secretary of BWJF, Golapi Basumatary, on 22nd December 1996, by unidentified gunmen. This incident depicted that it is unacceptable for women to raise their voice against injustice in the society and to occupy power spaces with men (ibid.). BWJF is another women's organization that raises its voice against injustices and violence against women and innocent people. The members of the organization have been working for two decades towards conflict resolution.

The women's organizations, ABWWF and BWJF, also took initiatives to bring peace to the region. For instance, ABWWF members were considered as mothers. As mothers, they felt the need to save their sons (the members of BLTF and NDFB). Since the BLTF and NDFB were involved in clashes and killings, the ABWWF members intervened to save their 'sons.' They tried to broker peace between the two groups by holding talks. These civil society groups also organized peace rallies to motivate people to maintain peace in the region.

The All Assam Adivasi Students' Association (AAASA) formed a women's wing called the All Assam Adivasi Women's Association (AAAWA). AAWA addresses issues such as domestic violence faced by Adivasi women, education of Adivasi children, low pay of Adivasi women in tea gardens etc. AAWA is however not actively involved in any major decision-making or active politics. Scarcity of funds, lack of education, low levels of income are some of the obstacles faced by AAWA to mobilize women for peacemaking.

It is however important to note that in spite of the presence of these civil society organizations, like ABWWF and BWJF, and their active involvement in peace making initiatives and reconstruction at the grassroots village level, they have not been involved in the formal process of peace in 1993, 2003 and 2020 when the BTC accords were signed in different phases. Women have not been able to occupy the political space in Bodoland Territorial Council as there are no reserved seats for women in the General Council. As per the 2003 Memorandum of Settlement, 40 members are elected to the General Council from 40 constituencies and 6 members from unrepresented communities, out of which 2 should be women nominated by the Governor of Assam.<sup>11</sup>

The government of Assam set up peace committees in the villages after each episode of violence but women were left out of such committees. Village defense parties were also set up after the conflict and women were not part of these parties either. Women have a low political representation in the BTAD region, especially of the ones belonging to the Bengali-speaking Muslim or the Adivasi communities. The General Council is a male-dominated body, indicated by the fact that it included only one woman out of the 40 elected members during 2017-18, the time when the fieldwork for this paper was conducted.<sup>12</sup> The low representation of women may be attributed to the fact that there are no reserved seats for women in the BTC.

### **An Assessment of the 2003 and 2020 Bodoland Peace Accords**

After a series of talks, which started in March 2000, a Memorandum of Settlement was signed on February 10, 2003, between the central government, the state government and the Bodo Liberation Tigers to resolve the conflict in Bodoland (Memorandum of Settlement 2003). The peace agreement provided the creation of a self-governing, elected body within Assam under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution comprising 3082 villages and areas to be notified by the state government (ibid.). The peace agreement was signed with the aim of fulfilling the aspirations of the Bodo people, relating to cultural identity of the Bodos, their native language, education and economic development (ibid.). As far as the political provisions are concerned, the accord provided for the creation of a self-governing council with up to 46 members, out of which 30 seats would be reserved for Scheduled Tribes and 5 seats would be reserved for non-tribal communities. Only 5 seats would be kept open for all communities where Bodos and non-Bodos could contest elections. Six seats would be kept for members from unrepresented communities in the BTC areas to be nominated by the Governor of Assam. Two out of these nominated members would be women.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note that women do not have special representation in the BTC. Seats have been reserved in the executive council for unreserved categories such as non-tribals. Women can also be nominated to these seats. However, this provision in the 2003 peace accord does not guarantee direct participation of women in the BTC, an important body entrusted with the task of building institutions, socio-economic development and overall reconstruction of the Bodo

<sup>11</sup> <https://wptbc.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/bodoland-territorial-council#maintitle2>

<sup>12</sup> Based on interviews and information available at <http://bodoland.gov.in/mcla.html>.

<sup>13</sup> At present, the Council remains dissolved as Bodoland is under the rule of the Governor of Assam. Fresh elections are being held to elect members to the Council.

society affected by years of violence. BTC accord does not provide for any special provisions in the form of reservations that would include women in the electoral process. During 2017-18, all the 14 members of the executive council were male.<sup>14</sup>

Bodo women's organizations provided the leadership to Bodo women during the statehood movement. They actively participated in the protest demonstrations in 1980s and 1990s. Women civil society organizations also acted as important mediators and their efforts yielded results in 2000s. Yet, they were not active participants on the negotiating table. Women are often non-combatants and therefore not considered as legitimate participants during peace agreements. The BTC accord was aimed at the creation of local institutions to govern the administrative units and villages under the jurisdiction of the Bodoland executive council. This was an important step in the process of reconstruction. The implementation of different provisions by the executive council meant reaching out to the local population at large. Women constitute a large section of the population. Any post-conflict reconstruction process would therefore mean reaching out to the women at the grassroots level not just in terms of meeting the provisions under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution under which the BTC accord was signed but also to provide transitional justice. Larger participation of women in the reconstruction phase would guarantee inclusion of women in politics, providing social justice and equal opportunities in BTC. In reality, female leadership in the reconstruction, as the paper shows, was limited due to the obstacles that women face in their day-to-day lives. One of the interview respondents, a leader of a women's civil society organization, expressed her views about women's decision-making power and representation in the following words, "I believe that till the Centre passes the women's reservation bill, nothing can happen here. The men will not leave seats for women until it becomes mandatory."<sup>15</sup>

A new Memorandum of Settlement was signed on January 27, 2020, at New Delhi between the central government, the state government and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) factions (Memorandum of Settlement 2020). Some of the objectives laid out by the Memorandum of Settlement are to (i) augment area and powers of BTC and streamline its functioning (ii) promote and protect social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities of Bodos (iii) provide legislative safeguards for land rights of tribals (iv) rehabilitate members of the NDFB. Under this Memorandum of Settlement, a Joint Monitoring Committee is proposed to be constituted with representatives from Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Assam, BTC and Bodo organizations. The Joint Monitoring Committee is to monitor and recommend the implementation of the recommendations such as inclusion of Bodo majority villages in BTAD, exclusion of villages with non-Bodo population, increase in constituencies of BTC up to 60 seats, and re-naming of BTAD to Bodoland Territorial Region. The Memorandum of Settlement also lays down the provisions for Bodos outside BTC; review of powers and functions of BTC; issues relating to identity, language, education; issues relating to land rights; settlement with NDFB factions and a number of development-related activities.

In 2017, a ten-member delegation team of Bodo Women for Peace Movement (BWPM) submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam seeking solutions for women-related issues, demanding peace initiatives and emphasizing the need for lasting and permanent peace

<sup>14</sup> <https://wptbc.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/bodoland-territorial-council#maintitle6>

<sup>15</sup> Interview conducted in Kokrajhar town in July 2017.

solution in Bodoland (*The Sentinel* 2017). BPWM is a Kokrajhar-based network of women's organizations working for peacebuilding and providing social, economic and political rights to indigenous tribes, particularly women. The memorandum stated that women's participation ends the cycle of marginalization and subjugation and women are better peacemakers (*ibid.*). BWPM urged the Chief Minister to initiate peace processes and provide reservations for women in different sectors and decision-making (*ibid.*).

However, as evident from the provisions of the 2020 Accord and the peace negotiation process, BWPM's plea was not heeded to. Similar to the 2003 Accord, the 2020 Memorandum of Settlement does not mention any provision specifically related to women-related issues, women-led peace initiatives or any activities aimed at their social, political or economic empowerment. The signing of the Memorandum of Settlement also lacked the presence of women delegates from civil society groups in BTC despite many women's civil society organizations working in the realm of peacebuilding since decades. The 2020 Memorandum of Settlement does not lay down any provision relating to peacebuilding or women's role in peacebuilding.

Therefore, these political arrangements are indicative of the male dominance in such institutions. Gender inequality is highly evident in the communities in BTAD region, especially in the political space. Women are rarely included in major decision-making groups, as is evident from their absence in the signing of the 2020 Memorandum of Settlement. The recurrent conflicts in the region also compound the problem. Women are merely perceived as victims of conflict. They are left out from playing any significant role in peacebuilding.

The effects of conflict and violence are damaging to the entire fabric of society. Women are deeply affected by the situation. Their physical, economic and social security are challenged in the post-conflict institutions that reinforce patriarchal norms and practices. Implementation of the 2003 accord reveals that a single political party led by Hagrama Mahilary has dominated the BTC executive body and women have not been able to make their way to the executive positions of the BTC. An analysis of the BTC accord 2020 shows that there is no such guarantee for women in the peace process. Reservation of seats for women would have been the first step towards procedural equality between male and female representation in the peace process. Seat reservation may not be sufficient but is necessary to work towards creating a gender balance in the reconstruction phase in BTC.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the role of women in peacebuilding in the conflict-affected Bodoland Territorial Area Districts region of Assam. The region has witnessed many conflicts in the past years. The focus of this paper is women of the conflicting communities — Bodo, Bengali-speaking Muslim and Adivasi. The societies in BTAD are patriarchal and women face domination at various levels — family, society and state. Women in BTAD have not been able to play a significant role in peacebuilding. Although the international community has emphasized that women's role in peacebuilding is invaluable, the administration of the conflict-affected BTAD region is yet to realize this.

The paper argued that women in the peacebuilding phase in the BTAD region face challenges of gender inequality. Conversations with various stakeholders, in-depth interviews with women in the villages and observations revealed the conditions of the ordinary women in the BTAD region.

Thus, for women to be able to play an important role in peacebuilding in BTAD, a lot of societal changes have to take place. Women will have to assert their political rights and demand reservation in the autonomous council. The women's organizations that are working towards peacebuilding have to build a strong network amongst them as well as outside the state. They should draw lessons from their counterparts in different conflict-affected states and implement them in the BTAD context. It is also important that the learned women in the BTAD understand the importance of existing policies, resolutions, and conventions that give power to women and push the autonomous government for their implementation. Overall, a change in mindset is required. The government has to stop seeing women in the BTAD region as mere victims. They should be recognized as negotiators of peace and political leaders, who can bring about change. It has to work towards creating gender-just policies for women, especially the vulnerable ones in the conflict-affected communities. Special policies have to be crafted to safeguard women in conflict zones.

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