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Women at the Crossroads: The Intersectional Dynamics of Women's Movements in Assam

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Abstract

The paper explores the mobilisation, interdependence, and organisation of the women's movement in Assam, locating it from the landmark events of the Assam Movement through a feminist lens. Instead of positioning women as passive recipients in Assam's conflict-ridden areas, it captures the feminist recovery in the state's men-led political movement. The study points out that while male leadership in Assam's movements often relied on women's involvement, women's specific demands were frequently overlooked, and their voices were marginalised. In response, women have sought to reclaim their agency and narrate an alternative history. However, the social basis of the women's movement is neither class nor ethnic minority but based on shared social circumstances. Therefore, studying the women's movement in Assam, this paper considered an essential concern of feminism: dissimilarities and contrasting factors among women, depicting that gender alone does not marginalise. With a focus on this research gap, this study underscores the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding the fractured solidarity within Assam's women's movement, addressing a significant gap in feminist writing.

Keywords: Women's Activism; Socio-Cultural Shifts; Intersectional Feminism; Assam; India

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Introduction

Representing women's roles in all their complexity and diversity is not an easy task. Various strands of discussion on the women's movement provide an ample number of alternative approaches to studying the women's movement in Assam. However, the core of this paper studies women's engagement and their role in social movement in Assam and sees how other factors like ethnicity and class backgrounds intervene in their day-to-day functioning. It accentuates, on the one hand, the kind of participation of women in the struggle to protect their ethnicity and identity and, on the other, their confrontation, resistance, and renegotiation of conventional nationalist endeavours. In this paper, the methodological approach is narrative and bound by an attempt towards the feminist recovery of women's voices and to recognise how differences and shared concerns among women impinge upon their expression and, consequently, their efforts to mobilise. Unlike written documents, oral history interview techniques allow us the convenience of repeated interviews and field cross-checking to ensure the verifiability of a particular event or the commonality of an event and its evaluation (Charlton et al., 2006). In our quest to highlight the so-called marginal voices buried within the statistical enumeration in most of the writings on the history of Northeast India, it is important to recognise variation not only in inexperience but also in the retrospective interpretation of that experience. This helps us broaden our reach across disciplinary lines and make history more meaningful and complete. Therefore, despite the invisible sources of women's history, they must be repossessed through various methods.

This study began by studying the women's movement amidst the backdrop of cultural enactment of the powerful student movements by locating an appropriate background. The narratives commenced with a discussion on the Assam Movement, the first student-led political movement in Assam that brought forward many women to participate in the movement, but later, the women realised that they were merely contributing in numbers and lacked a space of their own. The Bodoland Movement historically repeated the same to the tribal women in Assam. These are not simply allegations but an indication of shortcomings of youth politics, as there is a lack of proper representation within the organisation and, thus, a lack of heterogeneous insight into their demands and policies to date.

In Assam, it could be seen that the Bodoland Movement[1] was the outcome of the failure of the Assam Accord[2] of 1985, to be fair and just to the tribes of Assam. Seeing the Bodoland Movement dominating the tribal regions of Assam, other ethnic groups such as the Koch Rajbangsi, Mishing, and Karbi also began

[1] The Bodoland movement is a political and ethnic movement rooted in the demand for a separate territory called "Bodoland" to be carved out of the state of Assam in northeastern India. The Bodo community, an indigenous ethnic group of Assam, primarily led the movement. The main objectives of the Bodoland movement included preserving and promoting the cultural and political rights of the Bodo people, addressing economic development issues, and securing greater autonomy. The movement originated in the 1980s and has witnessed various phases of negotiations, agreements, and conflicts over the years. One of the notable developments in this movement was the signing of the "Bodo Accord" in January 2020, which led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) within Assam. The accord addressed the Bodo community's demands while preserving Assam's territorial integrity. It also provided greater political representation and socio-economic development in the Bodoland region.

[2] The Assam Accord of 1985 is an agreement signed between the Government of India and the leaders of the Assam Movement, a six-year-long agitation against illegal immigrants in Assam. The accord aimed to address the issue of undocumented immigrants, primarily from Bangladesh in Assam. Key points of the Assam Accord include the identification and deportation of illegal immigrants, the disenfranchisement of those who came to Assam after a specified cutoff date, and the preservation of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people. The accord also led to the creation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, aimed at identifying genuine Indian citizens and weeding out illegal immigrants. The Assam Accord remains a significant document in the context of immigration and citizenship issues, and it has had a lasting impact on Assam's political and social landscape (see Pisharoty, 2019).

mobilising the masses of their respective tribes for the cause of a separate homeland, where they dream of having a government run by their own people. Therefore, this paper, along with the fissured solidarity among the women's movement in Assam, also highlights the fractured political situation of Assam since the implementation of the Assam Accord of 1985 led to the beginning of a new era of a series of identity movements in Assam. Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty very diligently outlines the intricacies of Assam's history. She points out how Asom Gana Parishad, an offshoot of the Assam Movement, was launched overnight into Assam politics. She further mentions how the Assam Accord of 1985 establishes the pivotal moment from which the history of Assam radiates in all directions (Pisharoty, 2019).

Therefore, the first section of this paper depicts that the youth leaders, who were also the movement leaders, failed to be inclusive. The lacunae in youth politics that made women aware of their own space, a platform to articulate their opinions and raise their voices, have been explained through informal conversations, group discussions, and oral histories. Oral history helped include voices of women and student leaders, which had otherwise not been included in most accounts of the Assam Movement and the women's groups thereafter. The Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity (APMS) was the first organisational structure that provided women with a platform to voice their opinions and led to the rise of women as a 'category' in the political arena. These women have redefined those conventional standards that prove toxic to an individual's identity in both public and private domains through their voices of dissent and endurance. These resistances consist of tripartite sides—first, concerning the norms of patriarchy that regulate women. Secondly, the powers that impede their mobility in the public sphere, while the third note hints at the precepts of neo-colonisation in Northeast India at diverse times (Ahmed, 2017).

Correspondently, successive churnings within the women's movement have also alerted it to the political and ideological dangers of putting forward 'women' as a unified category (Bhattacharya, 2010). The struggles of women in their local conditions demarcate in precise terms the domain in which they could usher in changes and over which they could exercise control. Therefore, it can be seen that the women of Assam have enthusiastically participated in the movements for the sovereignty of their respective communities (Saikia, 2023). Additionally, the women of these communities have organised themselves in the form of organisations like the Karbi Progressive Women Association, Missing Women Association, Bodo Women Justice Forum, etc. These women are working for the rights and needs of the women and participating in the autonomy movement of their particular communities. The importance given by these women to their community and how women were implicated in it had significant implications for giving voice to women and for carving out a space for women's politics (Ardener, 1993).

Therefore, it was very important to deconstruct the notion of an abstract hegemonic woman as the 'universal feminist subject', as it makes noticeable the subsequent changes that initiated the recognition of a community among women with many differences (Barnes, 2015). This lays the foundation for an awareness of women's perspectives at intersections, encompassing their differences. Such awareness has indeed contributed to a sense of freedom, as changes and differences have been earmarked as a higher value, driving the women's movement forward. This has also been reflected in the different directions in which the women's movement has arisen, along with the problems that have taken precedence at particular moments. Within a plural society and the differential life experiences of women, spaces for women's politics emerge in dispersed locations and in response to diverse forms of oppression such as caste, class, religion, race, and the like. Addressing these differences in women's experiences in such a plural society, this paper specifically focuses on the issues within the women's organisation of Assam that have led to the subsequent fracturing of feminist solidarity through various other intersecting

identities. These developments did not let the women's movement progress as isolated. However, they kept it in an interlocking relationship of alliances with other social movements, where women are also important (Basu, 1995). Therefore, the second section of this paper enlightens those landmark events, moments, or conversations when intersectionality becomes critical within the women's group.

Assam had a total population of 26,655,528, of which 3,308,570 individuals were identified as Scheduled Tribes (STs), comprising 12.4% of the state's population. Assam is home to 23 officially recognised STs. The Boro tribe is the largest, constituting 40.9% of the ST population. Other major ST communities include the Miri (17.8%), Mikir (10.7%), Rabha (8.4%), Kachari (Sonowal Kachari) (7.1%), and Lalung (5.2%), collectively making up 90% of the ST population in the state. Additionally, the Dimasa and Deori tribes represent 3.4% and 1.2% of the ST population, respectively. The ST population in Assam is predominantly rural, with 95.3% residing in rural areas and only 4.7% in urban areas (Office of the Registrar General, India, 2011). Since Assam is a homeland to many tribes, this diversity has significantly influenced the formation and evolution of women's organisations in the state. The initial diversification within these organisations arose due to differing priorities between tribal and non-tribal issues. Even after establishing a separate tribal women's organisation, cultural differences among various tribes persisted, leading to sustained fissured solidarity.

Therefore, this paper approaches the study of women's movement from the theoretical paradigm of intersectionality. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework for research originated in the late 1970s, further fostered in the 1990s by the works of Crenshaw and Collins, who challenged and revealed the limitations of gender alone as a particular conceptual category for any partake in analysis of women's issues (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality underscores the multidimensionality of the marginalised subjects' lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Collins expands on intersectionality by proposing a matrix of domination, which refers to the interconnected systems of power that affect individuals differently based on their social identities. While referring to postcolonial intersectionality, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examine how colonial histories shape contemporary experiences of intersectional oppression significantly in this area by analysing how Western feminist discourses can marginalise women from the Global South. Intersectionality has become a crucial lens for understanding the complexities of identity and oppression, highlighting the need for nuanced and inclusive approaches to social justice (Crenshaw, 1991).

The needs and issues picked by the women of Assam differed from each other. Many women's organisation was formed to carry forward their ethnic agenda and the development of their community. Hence, intersectionality forms an important paradigm for studying these women's organisations. Intersectionality gives name to the value of justice and equality by understanding how different experiences and perspectives converge within the individuals who take to be an activist. As a theory, it attempts to explain the difficulty many other women face in standing up against injustice while still acknowledging the other forms of subjugation that people in different settings have to contend with simultaneously. Intersectional feminism raises concern about issues of women's rights but also considers the diverse complications confronted by distinctive groups of women rather than considering all women as one uniform group (Littlewood, 2017). Therefore, the Bodoland Movement and the Assam Movement have been taken as a reference point to explore this in-depth. Hence, the theoretical paradigm of intersectionality in this study not only helps to understand fractured solidarity among women's movements in Assam but also how it forms and creates new identity movements in Assam. In the next section, we discuss the methodology employed for this research.

Methodology

The study was conducted across four fieldwork locations in Assam: Barpeta, Golaghat, Kokrajhar, and Guwahati. These sites were strategically selected to capture a diverse range of perspectives from various regions of Assam, including the state capital and the lower and upper parts of the state. The objective was to examine how women's organisations in these areas perceive and strategise various issues, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of events and movements.

The fieldwork began in the Barpeta district, the first study site. This location was chosen because it houses several influential organisations, including the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity (APMS) - Barpeta branch and the district women's cell at the Barpeta Deputy Commissioner's office. These organisations are critical to the study, as they play significant roles in women's activism in the region. Given that this research also explores the women's movement in the context of youth politics, interviews were conducted with student leaders from three major student unions of Assam: the All Assam Student Union (AASU), the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), and the All Koch Rajbanshi Student Union (AKRSU). These student unions have historically been involved in various social and political movements in Assam, and their views on women's activism were integral to the study.

The second fieldwork site was the Golaghat district, located in Upper Assam. This region was chosen to provide insight into the operations of women's organisations in a different part of the state. The Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity (APMS)— Golaghat was a focal point of the study, allowing for a comparative analysis with its counterpart in Barpeta. During the field visit, interviews were conducted with members of the Golaghat Zila Parishad, St. Peter Church Mahila Samity, and youth leaders from AASU to explore the functioning and impact of voluntary women's organisations in Upper Assam.

The third fieldwork location was Kokrajhar, within the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts. Kokrajhar was selected due to its significance as the headquarters of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and as a majority Bodo region. The district is home to the All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) and the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), which are pivotal in understanding women's activism in the Bodo community. Additionally, Kokrajhar's fractured solidarity due to ethnic and political tensions made it an essential site for studying the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with women activists, providing a broader perspective on women's movements in the region.

Another fieldwork site was in Guwahati, where the North-East Network (NEN) was visited. NEN is a professional women's organisation that differs from traditional women's groups in its approach to welfare and advocacy. NEN is a women's rights organisation that catalyses with a special focus on human rights for women and ensures that conflict resolution issues are properly undertaken. In the first half of the 20th Century, the women of Assam organised themselves through women's organisations. Since 1970, there has been a proliferation of women's organisations in Assam, and the professionalisation of non-governmental organisations in Assam began in the 1990s. Not only did these groups fight for women's rights, but they also raised voices from a right-based viewpoint against different atrocities inflicted on women. Professional non-governmental organisations have offered avenues for the employability of women, thus beginning the growth of women's professionalisation in the NGO sector. The inclusion of NEN in the study aimed to contrast the strategies and frameworks of professional women's organisations with those of grassroots movements in other parts of Assam. Additional interviews were also conducted in Guwahati to follow up on the remaining discussions from Barpeta and Kokrajhar.

The study employed a combination of theoretical and empirical methodologies to analyse the data collected from these diverse field sites. This mixed-method approach comprehensively examined Assam's women's

organisations and movements across different cultural and political landscapes.

The Fault Lines in Youth Politics of Assam and the Rise of Women's Organisation

The values and biases that are built into the political society are those of the dominant majority students' associations, the dominant groups that consider themselves responsible for carrying forward the norms of their respective community. All Assam Students' Union (AASU), claiming to represent every community living in Assam, is entrusted by its advisers to take up agendas to reach the wider society. These unions are a result of societal influence them; at the same time, they are also instrumental in instilling values and norms among and at the same time, they are instrumental in instilling values and norms in society. Quite obviously, the AASU, even though it claims to represent all the communities living in Assam, only propagates the dominant ethnic Assamese values on all the communities (Deka, 1996). AASU rapidly rose its status as an influential and efficient body in Assam, expressing prominent student strength. The most significant accord of Assam was signed in 1985 to halt the AASU-led Assam agitation. This was eventually followed by the rise of Assam Gana Parishad (Baruah, 1999). They received massive support from the masses under the guise of regionalism and the protection of Assamese culture. The ethnic Assamese ruling class as a 'hegemonic class' came to predominance. Hence, when talking about the nationalist question in Assam and the history of the women's movement, one cannot ignore the contour of political movements in Assam.

Therefore, this section addresses the question of women's identity and autonomy in the backdrop of the enactment of youth politics through the voices from the field. It describes the fault lines in the student-led politics in Assam. They became dominant in the landscape of Assam as a self-asserted guardian, while the issues regarding women and gender never formed part of their agendas. This paper explains the rise of women's organisation from the faultiness within youth politics. In the 19th Century and early 20th Century, circumstances leading to the establishment of Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity have also been stated to present a historical interconnection to understand the rise of women's organisations in Assam.

The Assam Movement divided people along ethnic lines, forming various organisations based on tribes and clans. Although it was touted as a movement against immigrants, it was marked by a spirit of chauvinism. Despite their ethnic differences, the people of Assam united against Bengali-speaking individuals in what is known as the anti-Bangladeshi Movement. Amidst the Assam Movement, the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) quickly became an influential organisation representing significant student power in Assam. As already mentioned above, the most notable outcome was the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which aimed to end the AASU-led agitation. The present Assam State BJP Government, led by Himanta Biswa Sarma, even adopted the slogans *Jati, Mati, and Bheti* (rights of the indigenous) during their 2016 state election campaigns (Dutta, 2017).

Highlighting the social space that could produce feelings of sub-nationalism, the new politics of representation heralds a new cultural politics that depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 1995). The rise of Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), post the Assam movement that laid the rise of regional politics in Assam, led to the formation of a students' wing in Assam after each tribe maintained a distinct identity. The fear was regarding their socio-cultural identity being submerged in the dominant Assamese hegemony (Baruah, 1991).

There arises no interrogation regarding the Assam Movement's enormous potential to genuinely improve the overall development of the state. Nonetheless, contrary to the idyllic future envisioned by the popular leaders of the movement, they remained trapped within a relatively limited conception of Assamese nationality. Among all the reported activities, women's education has never been figured out in the activities and constitution of the youth leaders who were also the leaders of the

movement during the 1970s and 1980s. The primary concerns of the women were always side-lined. Despite their presence in the Assam Movement in large numbers, none of them could make it to the decision-making echelons of either AGP or AASU. They were kept outside the alleys of absolute power. Therefore, the problems and concerns that this study raises are related to the mass movements of Assam, where the women in large numbers were part of the movements. Realising the lapses and voids of the movement, these women have started raising their own voices to form an independent platform and started to organise themselves. Historically, the women of Dibrugarh, a district in the upper Assam, were the first to structure their samity. Its organisational network had spread to the provincial level by 1926 (Sharma, 1987). They contributed greatly to the freedom movement, either personally or through their political organisations. These women were from rural areas and mostly illiterate. They were also imprisoned during the freedom struggle movement, but their role was either entirely disregarded or overlooked. Sutputra Radheye, a prolific writer of Assam remarks that the authoritarian leadership of the Assam Movement imposed *mekhela chaddar* as a compulsory dress code on women students and teachers. Since many of the women at that time lacked a proper vision for gender equality and rights, everything AASU did was to fuel the broader meta-narrative of ethno-nationalism. These are not merely allegations but a hint of AASU's shortcomings as there is a lack of proper representation within the organisation from marginalised sections and, therefore, a lack of heterogeneous perspective in their demands and policies to date (Radheye, 2020)**.** There were also incidents where Assam Mahila Samity's acts led to massive public outrage. Medhi (2016) focuses on this critical perspective regarding the public outrages women's organisation face at times. For example, in Guwahati in 1934, the Assam Mahila Samity (AMS) interfered in a proposed marriage of a young girl to an older man. Samity's secretary, Rajabala Das, sent a legal notice to the groom, citing that this was five years after the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. This sparked a significant public outcry, prompting members of the local Congress party to intervene, eventually forcing the AMS to remove its notification. Despite this, the group organised a committee to mobilise people against child marriages, acquiring the moniker of 'biya bhanga' (marriage-breaking) samity. This case history opened up a new way of examining gendered legal subjects during the colonial period (Medhi, 2016). Medhi also mentions another incident that took place in 1934, in which a group of male professionals criticised the young women's performance of Atul Chandra Hazarika's play 'Kalyani' at the AMS annual conference held in March- April 1934. They chastised the samity for allowing young women to perform in front of a crowd of people from various walks of life. The male critics claimed that without a ticket system and an open setup, the performance by young women from respectable backgrounds aroused raucous applause and resulted in an uncontrollable scenario. The entire scenario was named as "fake modernity" by these men (Medhi, 2016). There arises no interrogation regarding the Assam Movement's enormous potential to improve the overall state growth genuinely. Nonetheless, contrary to the idyllic future envisioned by the popular leaders, the phenomenon remained trapped within a relatively limited conception of Assamese nationality. The collapse from which the state is now reeling (Dutta, 2012).

The political landscape in Assam is heavily influenced by dominant student associations, particularly the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU), which asserts its representation of all communities but predominantly promotes the values of the ethnic Assamese group. Despite claiming inclusivity, AASU's agenda tends to prioritise Assamese values, reflecting the hegemonic influence of the ethnic Assamese ruling class. This dominance of certain groups in youth politics has marginalised issues related to women and gender, prompting the emergence of women's organisations as a response to the neglect within mainstream political movements. The Assam Movement, characterised by ethnic divisions and a focus on countering Bengali-

speaking immigrants, further entrenched this dominant narrative. Although women participated significantly in these movements, they were systematically excluded from decision-making roles within organisations like AASU and Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), perpetuating their marginalisation. The lack of representation and attention to women's issues within these movements underscored the need for women to organise independently, as evidenced by the establishment of organisations like the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity in the early 20th century. Despite their contributions to the freedom movement and their imprisonment, women's roles were often disregarded or overlooked, exemplifying the entrenched gender biases within the political sphere. Criticism of AASU's leadership highlights its failure to adequately represent marginalised sections of society and address heterogeneous perspectives in its policies and demands. Moreover, the narrow focus on ethno-nationalism within movements like the Assam Movement has hindered broader visions for the state's growth and development, contributing to its current challenges. A different narrative in the history of Assam was established due to the vacillation and cunning games that politicians and parties played during the Assam Movement (Pisharoty, 2019).

Oral History: The Tribal Women in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) (1987-1993)

The participation of Bodo women in the Bodoland Movement was neither unprecedented nor unexpected. However, the nature and extent of their involvement are not widely known. Historically, women's issues were not prioritised in the movement's agendas, and the lack of female representation to articulate their concerns was a significant oversight. Women were deprived of basic rights, such as mobility and the ability to voice their agendas. Despite this, the Bodoland political movement for autonomy did not exclude women, recognising that they could play a crucial role in the welfare of Bodo society (Deka, 2013).

Bodo women of various age groups participated in the ABSU-led Bodoland Movement through processions, gatherings, and protest marches. A female activist from the BTC region highlighted the secondary, gender-biased roles women were often relegated to during the movement. While some women delivered public speeches, others were assigned to refreshment and reception committees, handling tasks like arranging food and water (personal interview[3], 19 December 2019). Many women from Balagaon and Rangalikhata villages in the Kokrajhar district of Assam were so occupied with these duties that they could not listen to their leaders' speeches as they worked behind the scenes. The Bodo Volunteer Force (VF), the military wing of the ABSU formed in 1988, needed messengers to carry secret messages. Members of the All-Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) were trained and involved in this task. Bodo women travelled long distances, sometimes from Kokrajhar to the Assam-West Bengal border, to participate. A Mishing youth leader stated that women were allowed to lead movements primarily for mass mobilisation, as they were more effective at this task (personal interview, March 12, 2020).

The political movements in Assam, including the Assam Movement and Bodoland Movement, did not address specific women's issues (Behera, 2017). Instead, these issues were subsumed under broader sub-nationalist concerns. In March 1983, when the Assam movement was going on, a women's magazine, *Aideur Jonaki Bar*, was published to raise women's consciousness and create a movement. The most important question that arose with the onset of separate women's organisations was, why do we need to think of women separately when the nation was at peril?(Mishra, 2011). Therefore, it could be seen that the members of the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) were often aggressive and dismissed the idea of separately addressing women's issues as offensive. History is a gendered discourse, and these women are rarely cared for and left to the back alleys of

[3] The name of the interviewee has not been revealed.

mainstream national history (Mishra, 2011). While women were allowed to hold protests, their concerns were reduced to the nation's rhetoric as a motherland. Khullar (2005) discusses the implications of this, noting that in anti-colonial movements, women were positioned as protectors of tradition and mother figures, hindering their equal recognition and inclusion in nation-building post-conflict. In a similar context, Goswami (2014) emphasises that women often became a site of contention during conflicts, with attempts to control their sexuality integrally linked to identity issues.

Despite being dominant in social movements, student unions in Assam failed to include gender campaigns or address gender issues, often acting as 'moral police' under the guise of culture and tradition (Banerjee, 2014). Evaluating the activities of ethnic-oriented organisations and their engagement with women's movements is crucial. The state's support of these associations at various times has not resulted in clear policies addressing the fundamental issues of the northeast's people. This neglect has created a situation where feelings of alienation among different groups could lay the groundwork for future insurrections.

Negotiating the Intersectional Infrangibility: 'Fractured Solidarity' in Women's Movement of Assam

Recognising the diversity of women's experiences has provided the women's movement with serious reflexivity, enhancing its pursuit of substantive equality (Waylen, 1997). The Asom Mahila Samity, later known as the Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samity, was founded by Chandraprabha Saikiani in 1926. Internal conflicts and complications among members led to the fragmentation of the larger group into various smaller groups, with the Tezpur District Mahila Samity remaining a core constituent. The All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was established in Kokrajhar on 14 July 1986. Bodo women began working exclusively for the movement as the Bodoland Movement progressed, distancing other women from the organisation. Consequently, the All-Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation was rebranded as the All-Bodo Women's Welfare Federation. This section, therefore, through the framework of intersectionality, highlights the fractured solidarity within the women's movement in Assam, highlighting inter-group dynamics and the interplay of power, class, and gender.

Rather than framing women's work and life as a dichotomy of liberation or oppression, the focus should be on what women themselves think about their gendered lives (Mohanty et al., 1991). This discussion zeroes in on the issues within women's organisations that have led to the fracturing of feminist solidarity across various intersecting identities. Throughout the 1980s, the politics of presence and identification became increasingly significant. Recognising that 'difference' forms significant axes around which women's experiences of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality exist has provided critical reflexivity to the women's movement, broadening its quest for substantive equality (Crenshaw, 1991).

The limited participation of women in mainstream politics has perpetuated tensions within the women's movement, posing challenges to their representation (Ahmed, 1999). It is unrealistic to expect allied women's movements to function effectively within ruling party paradigms or to succeed amid internal conflicts over their struggles' sense, form, and content. The expression and success of women's issues often depend on the political context in which a particular organisation operates. Women's experiences are frequently studied within a single-dimensional critical framework, making them indistinguishable in intersectional writings (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Women's personal and social functions are rarely considered, yet these factors significantly impact their life experiences. Increasing female participation in active politics can help reduce gender inequality (Hassan & Bezbaruah, 2023).

Intersectionality in women's and gender studies has shifted to multidimensional thinking, emphasising that gender is intrinsically interwoven with national politics and structures. Sen (2005) argues that neglecting differences in

gender studies risks being viewed as theoretically misguided. The term 'identity' in women and gender studies is often linked to politics, turning identity work into political work (Afshar, 1996). Debates over women's identity have been central to women and gender studies since its inception (Jamil, 2016). In the United States and Canada, second-wave activists defined the field around women as a site of political consciousness (Cole et al., 1988).

This discussion also explores intersectional feminism, which acknowledges the complexity of women's experiences shaped by multiple inequities. Women in Northeast India, where violence is part of everyday life, have played a constructive role (Kolas, 2017). However, women seldom document their perspectives on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure peace (Rai, 1996). Every woman in the study area has a story of inspiration and empathy. They have served as conduits between civil society and conflict groups, braving all odds to bring change. This observation bears resonance with the observations of Streijffert (1974).

Any theory section of feminist research must address the major conceptual, cultural, and historical foundations of feminist research. It must also acknowledge the rapidly evolving ways of thinking about and doing feminist research, transitioning from singular notions of feminist theory to multiple notions prioritising intersectionality. If we were inclined to speak for all women, it was always a shot to as a tossing call that was complicit in discarding the stands of some other women. This approach has brought silenced voices into academia and problematised feminist research, indicating that blind confidence in inclusive sisterhood ideology could not understand the women's movement. These discussions and arguments on feminist methodology often occur in tandem with the pervasive gendered nature of social relationships as intersectionality as subjectivity is instituted by reciprocally bolstering vectors of culture, gender, sexuality, class, and religion that shape both hegemony and exclusivity.

Landmarks of Intersectionality Being Critical Within the Women's Group in Assam

There were institutions of women's organisations to struggle against national structures of patriarchal dominance, first under colonial rule, and then under the independent state. If we inclined to speak for all women, it was always a shot to as a tossing call that was complicit in discarding the stands of some other women. Intersectionality provides a way to resolve the conflict of disagreement over multi-identity and the increasing need for community politics. Acknowledging the fact that identity politics exists on the web where intersecting categories seem more common than questioning the possibility of thinking about categories at all, we can better recognise the gaps between us through this awareness of intersectionality (Tungohan, 2015). Intersectionality shapes the experiences of different women in different ways as patterns of subordination intersect in the context of violence against women. Hence, different women express solidarity with violence contrarily. The major social structures – caste, class, gender and ethnicity always remain interconnected and describe the location of women within overlapping systems of subordination. The utmost essential need is to identify and recognise that women are not a uniform, harmonised group. Hence, looking through these elements helps reshape the epistemological position of the research agenda, further enabling a researcher to view women and their subjectivities with a critical socio-historical, economic and political lens.

Studying the women's movement in Assam, therefore, this section considered an essential concern of feminism: that of dissimilarities and contrasting factors among women, depicting that gender alone does not marginalise. It depicted how solidarities are constructed and shattered, too, and what constitutes being marginalised, therefore constitutes privilege and power. In Assam, the first set of differences among women is with the onset of Assamese hegemony. The issue differed in terms of tribal and non-tribal Assamese. Later on, after the

formation of a tribal women's organisation , there were cultural differences within the tribes, and the fissured solidarity was sustained. As mentioned above, Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity was the first organisation formed in Assam in 1926. Later on, this organisation organised itself into many smaller groups. Later, with the rise of the Bodo separatist movement, a tribal women's organisation was formed in 1986. The present section is carried forward from the onset of the Bodoland Movement. Oral history as an interview method has been used here.

The first phase of the split came with the Bodoland Movement in 1986. The Bodoland Movement, which gained impetus in the 1980s, also had a heavy presence of women, but history repeats itself as it was not given proper space and representation. As stated by the then advisor of All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation, the work related to women's welfare came to a halt, as the Bodo women had to play an active as well as passive role in the Bodoland Movement, while the other tribal women did not cooperate and alienated themselves.

It is mentioned in the AATWWF's constitution that 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 to fight 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. Therefore, it is essential to enable themselves to render services to promote the welfare and preserve the Indigenous self-identity of all tribal groups living in Assam. Accordingly, social, ethnic, and women's issues of Northeast Indian tribes were highlighted. AATWWF was later changed to All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in 1993, but its functions remain the same. AATWWF was renamed ABWWF, and the then Assam Minister of Forest, Environment, Soil Conservation, Mines, and Mineral Departments, Promila Rani Brahma, was its first president. The new name was more acceptable to them as all its members belonged to the Bodo community. This also meant it was not received very well by the women of other tribal communities in Assam. One such incident is the Bhumka gangrape case, where nine Bodo women were raped in No. 12 Bhumka Village in Kokrajhar in 1988 (Gohain, 1989). When these ten women were raped, it was seen that only Bodo women were at the forefront of protesting against these atrocities of these Bodo women. This was one significant incident that led to the splitting of the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) into ABWWF.

When queried about how far it matters to have an organisation based on their community and ethnicity, a member of the Mishing women's organisation conveyed that:

> we, as a Mishing woman in our organisation, reach out for any issues. We do not get together with all tribes. There is a discontentment among the women. The conflict between tribes has affected our morale (personal interview,12 December 2019).

When ABWWF members of Kokrajhar, a town in the Bodoland Territorial Region, were questioned about their association with All Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity (AAPMS) of the same state, they outrightly denied having any link with any women's organisation (personal interview with the members of ABWWF on November 27, 2018).

The authors have also questioned the members of St Peters Church Mahila Samity, a Christian organisation, most of whose members were the Adivasi people of Golaghat (a town of upper Assam). When asked why a separate Mahila Samity formation rather than working with the Golaghat Zila District Mahila Samity, she replied they were better heard and better represented within their own organisation (personal interview on 14 June 2018). Asked what it means for a women's movement to be diversified, the then cultural secretary of the All Koch Rajbonshi Student Union (AKRSU) of Kokrajhar district mentioned that the diversification within the

women's movement is due to the identity crisis. The male leaders of any movement in Assam did not cooperate with the women's issue. They were only using them to lead the movement in numbers. Women also lacked their own space, freedom, and identity. This led to the rise of separate women's organisations, and the lack of identity further limited women to their own ethnic background in Assam (Personal interview on 19 December 2019).

Another women activist of the Mishing community further mentions that the diversification of women was necessary as the root causes of each community are different, and one cannot better understand its community. The second thing she mentions is that women's representation increases when there are many women's organisations; otherwise, only a few sections of women take the larger hand. Some women's organisations also deal with their parental causes without having any women-specific issues (personal interview on 2 February 2020).

This paper has also paid attention, in particular, to how specific issues have emerged and sustained in the movement, the contests over new issues, the changes in the form, content, and course of the movement, and the solidarities that have been sought at its different layers. Biruabala Rabha deserves special recognition in this context as she formed an organisation only to fight against the most specific deadly societal scourge, witch-hunting. In 2006, Rabha joined the Assam Mahila Samata Society after having founded the Thakurvila Mahila Samity, a women's group that advocated against a number of societal evils, including witch-hunting in her hometown. Her non-profit organisation, Mission Birubala was established in 2011 and is composed of a network of social activists, lawyers, and survivors of witch-hunting (The Economist, 2024). Its goals are to protect and defend potential victims of witch hunts throughout the state of Assam, as well as to educate the public about the evils of witch hunting. Despite receiving mockery and abuse from people who support the belief in witches, she organised awareness camps and taught school lessons denouncing the practice. She has saved more than 35 women who had been accused of witchcraft. The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition Prevention and Protection) Act passed in 2015 was a result of her sheer efforts, which came into force in 2018. This law is widely regarded as the strongest anti-witch-hunting legislation in India, which increased the penalty for branding someone as a witch, which carries a significant fine and up to seven years in jail. It also increased the penalty for leading someone to commit suicide after accusing them of witchcraft to life in prison.

There also exist separate women's organisation within the same ethnic community. We can find that within the Bodo community, there are three separate women's forums. Apart from ABWWF, Bodo Women Justice Forum (BWJF) was founded by Anjali Daimary, an activist in the Udalguri district of BTR respectively. Bodoland People's Front Women Wing (BPFWW) is another Bodo women's organisation in the BTC region established in 2006. The organisation is a sub-organisation of Bodoland People's Front (BPF), the main political party, and the then congress government of the Assams' Alliance party. It was all related to the politics of power and opportunity within the same ethnicity (Hazarika, 2018). The patriarchal setup compels women to be subordinated, subservient, and dependent on men. It locks her in a daughter-wife-mother triangle without providing her access to any socially acceptable alternative as an independent individual. This can also be seen in their activism, as many women activists give up activism after marriage. In the final analysis, while movements may provide women access to institutional power, they are not all equally likely to contribute to women's empowerment. Thus, while movements of all kinds are likely to encourage women's activism, tensions around the relationship between gender, nationalism, class, caste, and ideological identifications within movements are likely to persist within institutions.

Conclusion

It could be seen that the history of women's movements in Northeast India, despite being

well-documented, has largely been interpreted within the context of movements for self-determination as manifestations of struggles for the assertion of community rights and claim of territorial autonomy within the apparatus of the state for the separate statehood. It has hardly been recognised as a movement with agendas of its own and significance in its own right. This paper on Northeast Indian women brings to the forefront the questions of methodology and issues of the premises on which theories of inclusion and empowerment of women in conflict areas are based. It studied the women's movement from the post-independent era of Assam Movement with a historical understanding of how women's movement started in Assam, that is, with the rise of Assam Mahila Samity in 1926. Given this context, this paper studied the women in Assam beyond their participation and essentialised gendered roles in the political movements of Assam. It has also been generally observed that in the history of Northeast India, the role of student and youth politics in Assam has evolved into a crucial platform for expressing the socio-cultural aspirations of the region's diverse ethnic groups. However, the efforts of political parties in addressing women's issues have been inconsistent, with a lack of systematic attention given to them regardless of women's involvement within or outside political organisations. This disparity is evident in the scant representation of women in the organisational structures of political parties, their minimal presence as candidates in elections, and their inadequate representation in parliament. However, post–independence, India witnessed few prominent women leaders, mostly notably Indira Gandhi, who became the first female Prime Minister in 1966. In the context of Assam, Syed Anwara Taimur has been the only female Chief Minister of Assam hitherto. The situation in Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) and Municipalities has been encouraging for women due to the 33% reservation. However, women merely serve as a rubber stamp for their husbands (Ghosh et al., 2015). While some women gained access to politics through familial connections, others entered through participation in student and civil rights campaigns or as a result of state initiatives aimed at increasing representation from marginalised communities. Against this backdrop, the recent passage of the Women's Reservation Act, providing 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, marks a significant milestone towards inclusive politics and stands as a notable achievement for the women's movement in India.

The findings of this study illustrate the ideological diversity within the women's movement in Assam and its persistent endeavor toward effecting societal change. Through interviews, oral history, details of experience, and case studies, it becomes evident that women in Assam are actively engaged across all aspects of society. These narratives are verified to be of paramount relevance to a reconstruction of the past and aid the utilisation of individual narratives as a uniquely invaluable source. It also shows the way youth leaders who were also the leaders of the movement failed to be inclusive in nature and the women had to negotiate for their own space leading to the formation of women's organisations. It illustrates how the women in Assam during the first half of the 20th Century organised themselves in the form of a women's organisation and tried to occupy both public as well as private spaces.

By focusing on the experiences of women historically overlooked in mainstream sociological and civil society literature, this research endeavoured to explore the positions of women volunteers and professionals through their subjective and personal perspectives. Furthermore, this study underscores that while the women's movement's initial focus was empowering women, the issues and concerns prioritised by various women in Assam vary significantly. Consequently, intersectionality emerged as a crucial framework for understanding these women's organisations. In conclusion, it is imperative to acknowledge that moving forward requires recognising the unique prerequisites based on individual experiences

and identities, irrespective of the shared identity of being a woman.

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Ethical Approval

We confirm that our manuscript was prepared following the ethical protocols outlined in the Helsinki Declaration. Our study did not require any exemptions from ethical approval.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or non-financial, in relation to the content of this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Bhanuprabha Brahma contributed to the data collection and methodology and finalised the manuscript. While Mofidul Hassan contributed to the conceptualisation, literature review, and data analysis.

Informed Consent

We obtained informed consent from all participants involved in the study and ensured that all ethical guidelines were followed during the research process.

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The data supporting the findings of this study will be made available upon request.